

# Corporate Sustainability Strategy from Definitional Ambiguity towards Conceptual Clarification

Jennifer Adolph - Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg

Markus Beckmann - Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg

Corporations are under pressure to consider sustainability aspects in their operations. Accordingly, researchers and practitioners acknowledge the necessity to incorporate such sustainability aspects into business (e.g. Fowler & Hope, 2007; Porter & Kramer, 2006; Dyllick and Hockerts, 2002; Christmann, 2000; McGee, 1998; Porter & van der Linde, 1995). To manage and communicate their efforts more systematically, corporations adopt (new) corporate sustainability strategies (CSS) to further underline their commitment.

A growing body of scholarship reflects the increasing importance of CSS (Engert, Rauter, & Baumgartner, 2016). However, the literature is surprisingly heterogeneous and lacks a common understanding of what a corporate sustainability strategy actually is, and which aspects are relevant for it. In fact, the term CSS is used to discuss differences between alternative strategy types (e.g. Burritt, Christ, Rammal, & Schaltegger, 2020; Neugebauer, Figge, & Hahn, 2016; Baumgartner, 2005; Schaltegger & Dyllick, 2002; Hardtke & Prehn, 2001; Dyllick, 2000), maturity levels (e.g. Baumgartner & Ebner, 2010), elements (e.g. Kashmanian, Wells, & Keenan, 2011), standards (e.g. Hahn, 2013) and management tools (e.g. Balanced Score Card, see Hahn & Figge, 2018; Hansen & Schaltegger, 2016) to facilitate the strategy implementation, among others.

While each of these contributions provides valuable insights, the lack of a common understanding and shared conceptual framework hinders the integration of extant scholarship. Such a synthesis is needed to better analyze how a CSS can be successful, what drives and hinders its implementation and execution in practice as well as its embeddedness in the overall business strategy. Therefore, this paper analyzes how the understanding of a corporate sustainability strategy differs in literature and how these findings can be integrated.

Building on literature review, this paper contributes to research of CSS by systematically consolidating and classifying the existing knowledge of CSS. Based on the analytical distinction of the conceptual dimensions according to which scholarly CSS notions differ, a conceptual model is developed as a synthesis that analyzes what factors influence each identified strategy dimension. By using a shared terminology to distinguish different types, levels, and contingency factors of CSS, this framework adds clarity and provides guidance for practitioners and future research.