

# MANAGERS' PERCEPTION OF SUSTAINABILITY – A DRIVER FOR SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP, INNOVATION, AND PERFORMANCE

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**Abstract:** Sustainability is a widely debated concept in specialized literature, being approached from the perspective of various fields. However, studies that assess in a congruent manner the managers' perception of sustainability are hard to find, because of the multiple layers of perception that managers can have upon this subject. Our paper, using a systematic literature review methodology has been able to identify five different aspects that can be used to properly organize the discussion around managers' perception regarding sustainability: Sustainability - an adequate framework for managing threats from the business environment; Sustainability and the development of sustainable leadership, Application of sustainability principles and risk management, The Sustainability framework - corporate social responsibility development, promotion of innovation and constant drive for performance, The approach to sustainability in the context of boosting the ability to learn and innovation of an organization. Taking different approaches from the point of view of managers' perception of sustainability allows us to highlight the very complex nature of this concept and also the importance that is given today in the light of the latest challenges imposed by the socio-economic environment – the post-pandemic world, military open conflict, energy crisis etc.

**Keywords:** *sustainability, managers perception, sustainable leadership, innovation, performance,*

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## **Introduction**

One of the main topics that characterize the complexity of the perceptions that managers can have regarding sustainability considers the importance of sustainable leadership. This concept has experienced continuous development since 2005 (Faber, Jorna, & Van Engelen, 2005) and happily completes the traditional area of action of sustainability because it highlights the natural ability of the managers to initiate, support, and develop activities that are part of the sustainable objectives of the organizations.

Perceptions regarding sustainability will also be anchored in the specific area of innovation. The innovation process is currently defining the ability of any organization to continuously adapt to the demands of the environment and to permanently find sources of competitive advantages.

Innovation, in its essential way, allows organizations to responsibly implement principles of sustainability that also require the allocation of strategic resources, the rigorous planning of their use, and the realization of a permanent audit of these processes.

An essential dimension of how sustainability can be perceived is closely related to corporate social responsibility and business strategies that focus on the specific values of such an approach. Involvement from a social point of view in the activities of local communities is a common desire for any organization that is guided by sustainable principles. In fact, in the opinion of many authors, the development of programs and strategies regarding corporate social responsibility is an expression of the very achievement of objectives of a sustainable nature. Affirming social responsibility for an organization is not only a pillar of the defining triad for sustainability - the economic, social, and environmental dimensions, but has deep and long-term implications on the management of one's staff, relations with clients, strategic partnerships or relations with the local or central administration.

Another important dimension of perceptions regarding sustainability considers the ability of sustainable organizations to successfully manage risk factors in the business environment in the medium and long term. The risk usually manifests itself through the action of unpredictable factors or processes determined by the company's lack of resources. The development and implementation of sustainable activities, strategies, or objectives imply adequate strategic planning and an ability to identify and rationally allocate resources, which implicitly ensures a greater ability to manage unpredictable factors or other sources of risk.

Adapting to the dynamics of the environment and to the current requirements of the markets on which the company is present at a given moment, requires from the management an approach oriented towards performance and the creation of competitive advantages. Innovation, the use of intellectual capital, and the involvement of motivated employees in this process of identifying new competitive advantages are ingredients that ensure long-term success, in a manner that is not unrelated to the implementation of specific sustainability principles.

The present article aims to clarify the aspects highlighted above, by introducing a number of 599 articles into the specific analysis of the systematic review of the specialized literature, so that at the end of the specific stages of selection and filtering, a number of 49 articles will result which were investigated in depth and based on which the bibliometric analysis and the content analysis were carried out, which highlighted the topics mentioned above.

## **Methodology of research**

The research methodology related to the article was based on the systematic literature review process. According to this, we have defined our research strategy, the selection process, and data extraction. Within our research strategy, the review was based on a search into electronic sources related to the Web of Science Database of scientific specialized papers that presents quantitative or qualitative research regarding perceptions of managers about sustainability, published in English between 2018-2022. The period has been chosen because papers published in the last 5 years have

been considered enough relevant from the perspective of the novelty of information and hypothesis analyzed. We developed a search strategy capable to identify within the above database relevant papers from the perspective of keywords (constructs) like: "*managers, sustainability, perceptions*". The search was based solely on online available sources, in the form of papers indexed in the above database.

The selection process was carried out in stages, applying a procedure that allowed the final selection of all relevant studies. In the first step, the search was carried out using the keywords "managers, sustainability, perceptions" within the topic addressed, and the filter related to the period: 2018 - 2022 was applied, resulting a number of 599 papers that can be taken into consideration.

In the second step, we applied the filter related to the type of the paper and the paper of type - article - and respectively those that fall into the open access category were selected, resulting in a number of 298 papers that can be taken into consideration. The third step implies using the filter related to the web of science categories, after this step the following categories are chosen: Environmental Science, Environmental Studies, Green sustainable science technology, respectively Management, and Business. After this filter, we have obtained a number of 201 papers relevant to be taken into consideration. The fourth step was dealing with the filter related to the country in which the research was carried after we have applied this filter, we have taken into consideration papers from - Spain, Portugal, Italy, Germany, Slovakia, Poland, France, Finland, Romania, Czech Republic, Denmark, Hungary, Austria, Belgium, Lithuania as being represented with the most studies done in the field (a minimum of 3 papers per country) The total number of papers remaining after this step was 104 papers relevant to be taken into consideration.

### Systematic review process

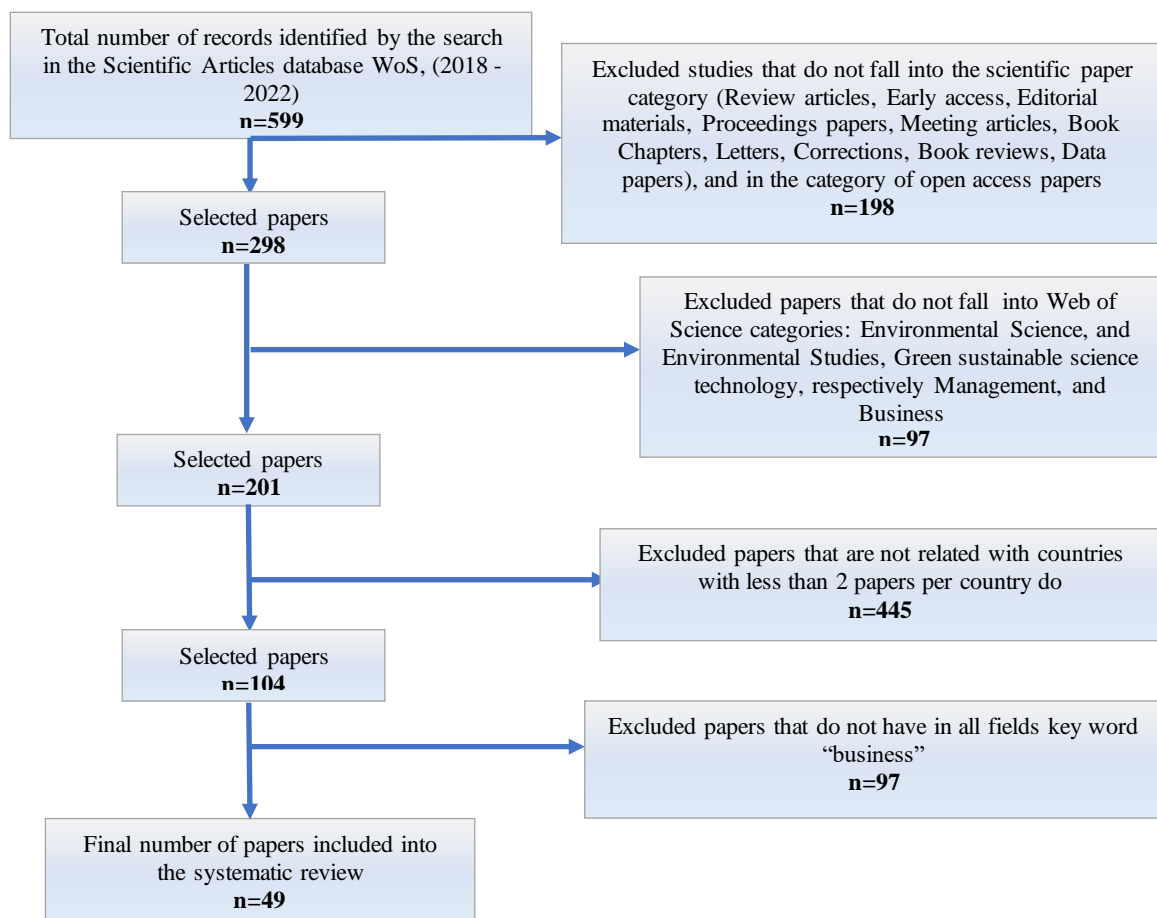


Fig no.1. The systematic review process diagram  
Source: own research

Finally, in the fifth step, we applied a final general filter for all the fields considered, the use of the keyword “Business”, to ensure that only articles that explicitly refer to the economic field are included in the database, resulting a number of 49 papers that have been analyzed for our further deeper conclusions.

### Results and discussion

The VOSviewer software, version 1.6.18, was used to interpret the results obtained from the analysis of the articles from the considered database, which allowed a complex bibliometric analysis of the articles.

Thus, in the first phase, the processing of the selected articles after applying the filters defined within the systematic review methodology was carried out starting from the average publication year that can be seen in the figure below:

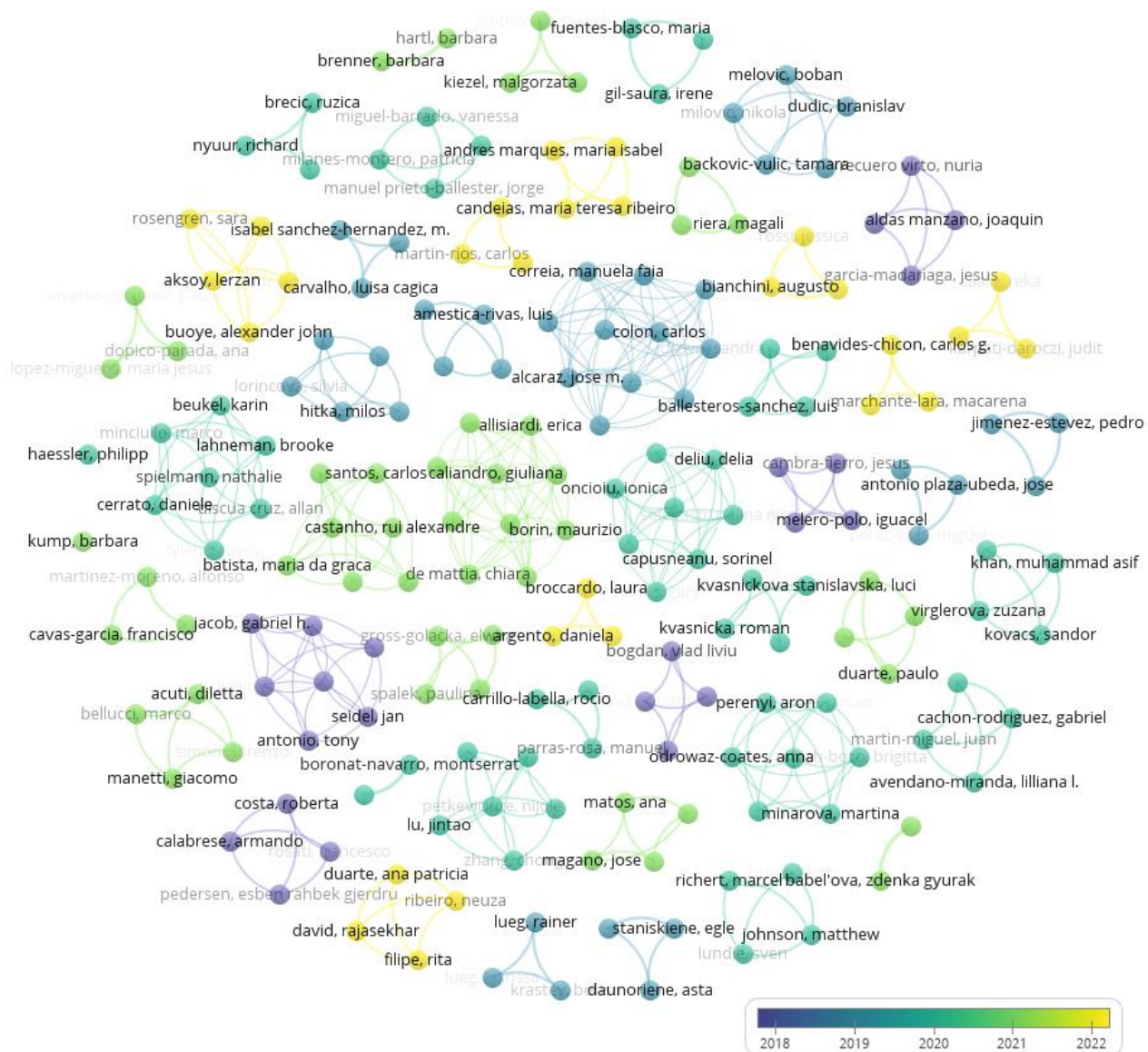


Fig. no. 2. Bibliometric analysis with VOSviewer\_1.6.18– the network of papers from the database according to the average year of publication

Source: own research

We can see a growing interest starting with 2019 for articles that address managers' perceptions of the complex concept of sustainability. Thus, in 2018 5 articles could be identified, in 2019 10 articles stand out, in 2020 14 articles, and 2021 13 articles. For the year 2022, only 7 articles were taken into account, with the caveat that for this year, we do not think that all the relevant articles were fully indexed until the moment when the analysis was carried out.

So, this topic has become more and more important in recent years, both from the perspective of the interest shown by researchers and from the perspective of political decision-makers or other categories of interested specialists.

Secondly, we employ with VOSviewer an analysis from the point of view of average citation number, obtaining a map for the analyzed papers that can be seen in figure no 3 below:

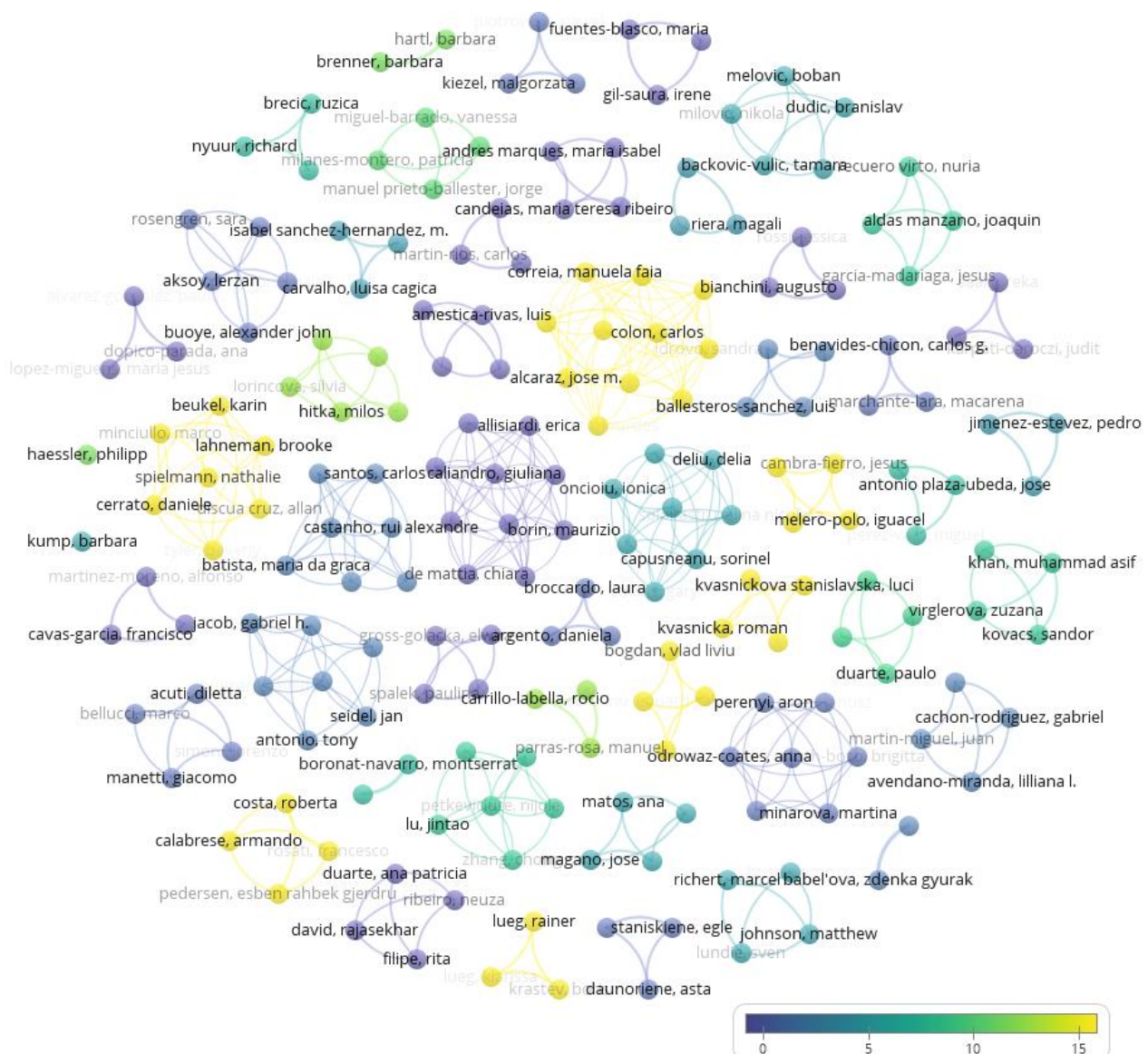


Fig. no. 3. Bibliometric analysis with VOSviewer\_1.6.18– the network of papers from the database according to average citations number

Source: own research



Within the figure, the clusters of articles made by authors can be highlighted, indicating by different colors the number of citations. Majoritatea articolelor care au peste 15 citari sunt articolele care au cercetari realizate pe esantioane cuprinzand respondenti din mai multe tari (Kvasničková Stanislavská et al., 2020; Tyler, et al., 2020; Alcaraz et al., 2019). We also found that the articles that have the most citations are the articles that addressed either directly or collaterally the CSR issue, highlighting the connection that exists between concerns regarding social responsibility, the implementation of specific sustainability principles, and/or innovation (Rosati, et al., 2018; López-Pérez, et al., 2018; Kvasničková Stanislavská et al., 2020; Alcaraz et al., 2019).

The analysis of the content of the articles selected from the database, which were subjected to the final analysis as having the highest degree of relevance concerning the purpose of the current research, indicated the highlighting of a number of 5 essential topics that eloquently capture the main coordinates of managers' perceptions about sustainability:

- Sustainability – an adequate framework for managing threats from the business environment;
- Sustainability and the development of sustainable leadership;
- Application of sustainability principles and risk management;
- The Sustainability framework - corporate social responsibility development, promotion of innovation, and constant drive for performance;
- The approach to sustainability in the context of boosting the learning and innovation capacity of an organization.

In the following we will present the results of the content analysis of the articles, detailed on the topics identified above.

### **Sustainability - an adequate framework for managing threats from the business environment**

In a qualitative research in the form of an in-depth interview, carried out on 21 managers from Croatia, the authors highlighted a sustainability implementation model which, in the perception of the interviewed managers, presents 3 different stages - the minimal response (the first stage in which sustainability is seen only as an effective framework to increase profitability and gain competitive advantages; the integration of sustainability into the company's organizational culture - the 2nd stage, and the transformation of sustainability into a real business model - the 3rd stage (Nyuur, Brečić, & Murphy, 2019). Along the same line referring to modern business environment threats, we can assess research carried out in the form of experimental studies aimed to investigate the relationship between sustainability and digitization. The degree of digitization influences the social, economic, and ecological dimensions of sustainability differently. Managers with a vocational background likely consider that digitization has important effects at the level of social sustainability (Brenner, & Hartl, 2021).

Kump (2021) analyses the topic from the point of view of the environment-related threats that may mobilize managers to implement sustainable changes. To this end, the author developed an environmental belief model. According to this model, managers initiate organizational change when: they believe their firms are susceptible to a climate-related threat; they perceive the threats "as serious for the company"; the perceived benefits of sustainable practice outcome the perceived barriers; there is an "external cue" to change (for example, media campaign).

In another line of research preoccupied to recognize the importance of tourism for territorial sustainability, Couto et al. (2021) assess the perceptions of the managers in this field operating in the Azores on the sustainability activity of Azorean tourism companies. While 66.7% of the managers surveyed believed that the goals of their companies are aligned with environmental sustainability goals, the percentage is lower when it comes to pursuing social sustainability goals (36.9%), and cultural sustainability (26.4%) (Couto et al., 2021).

From the directors' point of view, sustainability is relevant for the local community and the environment, while from the middle managers' perspective, sustainability is important because it is required by the market.

Managers are interpreting sustainability differently, on one hand, according to their role and position within the organization and on the other hand according to their background and personal preferences. The market can recognize the orientation toward sustainability of a company, but the internal contradictions regarding its implementation of it can give birth to an obstacle, besides the perception of sustainability as an "antidote" to business risks (Argento, Broccardo, and Truant, 2022).

Alcaraz et al. (2019) found that advanced companies are showing more commitment to sustainability as part of the organizational culture as results to a qualitative in-depth interviews research conducted on 28 organizations from Ibero-American countries. Authors are proposing a conceptual model capable to integrate orientation toward sustainability within the human resources management of companies that are embracing three essential dimensions: companies' priorities, communities flourishing, and ecosystem resilience. Companies can have an optimum development in the context defined by the possibility for local communities to develop within environment protection aiming to share value between principal actors. (Alcaraz, et al., 2019).

Sustainability associated with ISO 14001 standard is seen as a framework designed for the reduction of environmental impact. The qualitative research made by Carrillo-Labela et al, (2020), on managers from the olive food industry in Spain, revealed that formatives related to sustainability orientation are assimilated with an instrument that can lead to differentiation from competition and a better image and reputation of the company (Carrillo-Labela, Fort, & Parras-Rosa, 2020).

Another research conducted by Tyler et al. (2020) reveals that managers' perceptions regarding competitive pressure from the external business environment are related to the environmental practices of the companies and their relationship with financial performance. As a consequence of these perceptions, managers tend to adopt more practices that are dealing with the environment if they perceive a weaker competition pressure (Tyler, et al., 2020). When managers are considered that competition is boosting and the threats are growing, they do not feel comfortable with new practices (even the ones that are related to environmental preservation). Another angle is referring to the pressure given by the environmental practices of the competition, if there is a difference between the company and its competitors, managers tend to relate also their own company's financial performance to these environmental preservation practices.

In the same line of assessing the role of sustainability to ensure a superior adaptation capacity of organizations to the business environment challenges, we may consider the research made in the context of willingness to pay for sustainable tourism destinations that shows a relationship between environmental beliefs and willingness to pay mediated through Ecotour attitudes and sustainable consumption behavior. Managers in the field of sustainable tourism are developing strategies that rely on variables such as the ones above to develop a sustainable strategy for the adaptation of touristic companies to the business environment (de Araújo, et al., 2022).

Research suggests that managers have different instruments to comply with the requirements of the business environment. In the case of different types of producers, the sustainability of packaging for example is considered one of the most important functions that can build a reliable strategy adapted to the environment dynamic (Dopico-Parada, López-Miguens, & Álvarez-González, 2021).

Tick, Saáry, and Kárpáti-Daróczi (2022) investigate the relationship between digitalization and sustainability using a questionnaire survey among SME owners and managers in Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland, Serbia, and Bulgaria. Among other things, their results reveal that companies have different views regarding digitalization's impact on their sustainability. Under these conditions, the authors underline some "possible directions" for companies to benefit from digitalization and sustainability (Tick, Saáry, & Kárpáti-Daróczi, 2022).

The importance of personal values and individuals' sustainability conceptions for students' sustainability management orientation is pointed out by Seidel et al. (2018) that performed a survey among business students in Indonesia, Germany, and the USA. The role of individual characteristics is also highlighted by the work of Busch et al. (2020). According to their findings, individual characteristics can affect business response to climate change. From another perspective, Martín-Miguel et al. (2020) investigate determinants of reputation in the field of education, more precisely at private graduate online schools. Their results, based on a sample of 349 students, include the fact that sustainability has "a positive and significant influence on reputation". Therefore, this finding provides managers with useful indications on how to improve the competitive advantages of their organizations. Managerial capacity as a determinant in sustainability is approached, among others, by Améstica-Rivas et al. (2019), which analyse the specific case of families companies in Chile. Managers' perception of the transition towards a more sustainable agricultural system is investigated by De Marinis et al. (2021).

In many economic activities fields, being a part of an organized entity such as a form of partnership or an alliance represents a possible means to overcome difficulties related to business environment adaptation. Still, this issue becomes a complicated one when we talk about a sustainable-driven approach. Thus, the research carried out by Payán-Sánchez, Pérez-Valls, & Plaza-Úbeda (2019) on a sample of 252 air travel companies has shown that exists a strong and inverse relationship between environmental performance and belonging to an alliance. This means that relationships between companies have to be built on sustainable premises from the beginning to offer enough solid ground for adaptation.

The digitalization of many companies' activity is a new model of business that gains more and more importance in the modern business landscape. A sample of 401 companies interviewed by Cokins, et al. (2020), highlight the fact that the adoption of online accounting platforms has been influenced by performance expectancy, social influence, and perceived risk being considered a sustainable activity designed to improve the adaptability of the business environment.

Among the approaches considered suitable for the environment-sustainable adaptation of the companies, we may consider also the one referring to the circular economy model that can contribute to all three dimensions of sustainable development: environmental, economic, and social (Bianchini, Guarnieri, & Rossi, 2022). The research conducted in the field of Italian footwear luxury industry companies revealed that they have been measuring their capacity to develop sustainable practices. As regards the adaptation throughout the supply-delivery chain, the research carried out on 50 company managers from Panama revealed that sustainability and logistic value are important factors in achieving performance across the logistic value chain for ocean shipping companies (Justavino-Castillo, Gil-Saura, & Fuentes-Blasco, 2020). Supply chain management sustainability is a framework suited for adaptation to the business environment dynamic offering different types of stakeholders the necessary tools to integrate their decisions.

### **Sustainability and the development of sustainable leadership**

Lu, et al. (2020) explore the differences between male and female managers regarding their perceptions of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) implementation. The survey performed within the study deals with managers in Lithuanian Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). The study results confirm that male managers are less informed about CSR initiatives than their female counterparts. Besides, the companies represented by male managers are less involved in CSR initiatives.

Also, from the point of view of sustainable leadership, females give importance to sociality and global and holistic thinking while male managers are generally more skeptical about the benefits of CSR strategies and more reserved about sustainable leadership competencies.

Males consider that understanding the CSR strategy is the most important. In general, multiple studies confirmed that more female managers have implied themselves within the CSR initiatives than male managers (Lu, et al., 2020).



Sustainable leadership has a direct relationship with quality management and leadership style. An exploratory research made on 52 quality managers completed with a systematic literature review sustains the idea that the transformational leadership style can offer a development background necessary for quality management systems to acquire sustainable goals in the long run (Silva, et al., 2021).

From another perspective, qualitative research made on 14 multinational companies from chemical and automotive industries management representatives shows the main influential factors of sustainability of companies, into the perceptions of the interviewed managers. The results are showing factors that are influential on multiple layers like – organizational, top management, project team, and individual projects layer. The importance of the different influential factors is different from layer to layer and in the specific defined context – for example, corresponding to the organizational layer the financial situation of a company can be relevant if the company is acting in a very competitive market, and the influence of local regulation is different according to the geographic region involved and the management approach on corporate sustainability (Haessler, 2020).

Bulmer, Riera, and Rodríguez (2021) examine how female managers in the Spanish logistics industry perceive sustainable leadership. The study results suggest that "the logistics industry still has a considerable way to go concerning the implementation of sustainable leadership". Regarding the "quality" of sustainable leadership, Ribeiro, et al. (2021) develop research on 194 "leader-follower" dyads to assess the dimensions of authentic sustainable leadership. The framework of affective commitment of the employees and organizational citizenship behavior is developed in the conditions where authentic leaders favor the affective connections of employees concerning the organization and their tendency to get involved in organizational citizenship behaviors.

Not eventually, Perényi, et al. (2020) made quantitative research on 868 private and public sector managers from the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia about the importance of ethical values for valuable leadership. The results confirm a model in which personal qualities, managerial behaviors, environmental influences, organizational demands, and leadership excellence are all connected with ethical values. Thus, in the effort of achieving a sustainable model of leadership, managers have to start from a strong ethical foundation made to improve their capability in the long run.

### **Application of sustainability principles and risk management**

From the point of view of the perception of managers about the direct relationship that can be highlighted between sustainability and risk management, we can indicate the research carried out on 81 managers of non-profit organizations in Romania that revealed 5 essential conceptual areas for the conceptualization of sustainability in the context of this type of organization: people, business model, operations, strategy, and culture. The research revealed that managers who have failed in the past are oriented towards a future long-term, more strategic approach, with a clearer business model and a more intense concern for financial aspects, while managers who have been successful previously are tempted to approach things starting from a shorter term (Ceptureanu, et al., 2018). From the point of view of risks generated by the customers' perceptions of the companies' practices, we can ascertain also the importance of a sustainable approach. Thus, in the case of hotel managers and their development of a sustainable approach that can be directly perceived by consumers, research conducted by Boronat-Navarro and Pérez-Aranda (2020) shows that consumers that are aware of sustainable practices are more willing to pay a higher price for more sustainable hotels (Boronat-Navarro, & Pérez-Aranda, 2020). This conclusion means that the enhancement of customers' perception of sustainable practices of hotels can be translated to a better perception of the same practices from the point of view of managers. Thus, that can be a practical way to reduce the risk of losing customers in the long run.

The risk management for the companies can be improved if they are improving their sustainability reporting ability. Thus, a research carried out on 59 listed companies from South Africa shows that disclosure on social sustainability reduces systematic risks in subsequent periods. In the reverse direction, more systematic risk means a possible lower level of governance issues disclosure for companies (Lueg, Krastev, & Lueg, 2019). In a long run, applying sustainability principles and having transparent communication on these issues represents a viable strategy to maintain within the limits and control the exposure to risk from the environment.

To investigate the impact of the internationalization of SMEs on risk management, Virglerova et al. (2020) collected data through an online questionnaire in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland. Their research shows that companies with business on international markets "are more focused on methods of risk management which support sustainability". Bellucci et al. (2021) perform an experimental study on stakeholders' perceptions regarding the actions undertaken by companies in terms of sustainability reporting practices to handle reputational loss in the aftermath of a scandal. The authors reveal that companies admitting their responsibility are perceived as "less hypocritical and more legitimate", thus having the possibility to manage more efficiently the risks to which they are subjected from the perspective of altering the image on the market.

Research made by Rodríguez-Rivero, et al. (2020) on 29 Spanish project managers revealed that risk originating in the intercultural differences between companies within the business environment can be overcome with the help of a sustainable approach that emphasizes the individual competencies of the managers and their effort to find common ground.

### **The Sustainability framework - corporate social responsibility development, promotion of innovation, and constant drive for performance**

Research made on 75 villages from Spain representative for the main National Parks of the country revealed that the local administration is committed to social responsibility principles implementation through the development of sustainability of the analyzed areas referring to economic, development, social development, and quality of life of its people (Pérez-Calderón, et al., 2020). The quality of life and social development has a direct positive relationship with the perception of mayors from the analyzed areas, with social responsibility having an important role in assuring performance and superior results from the perspective of sustainable environmental management.

In another context, Rosati, Costa, Calabrese, and Pedersen (2018) examine employee corporate social responsibility (CSR) attitudes in the Italian banking system, mentioning the differences in terms of age, gender, and educational level. Differences regarding the trust, demandingness, and satisfaction related to corporate social responsibility among older and younger employees, males vs females, and graduates vs non-graduates are showing the potential of CSR to contribute to the sustainable performance of these employees and the degree of adaptability of the organization as a whole.

An important finding of López-Pérez et al. (2018), which explore sustainability in the SME sector, is that: "CSR and sustainability can be compatible with profitability and other business objectives". Also, Staniskiene, Stankeviciute, and Daunoriene (2019) reveal the customer perception of the supplier's CSR in the B2B context. They demonstrate that customers' perceptions of suppliers that incorporate in business decisions socially responsible practices are positively related to their trust in the supplier. The work of Kvasničková Stanislavská et al. (2020) compares how the term corporate social responsibility is perceived on Instagram in both developing and developed countries. Despite some common features, several differences were identified, including in the area of sustainability. While in developed countries the hashtag #sustainability was the second most frequently used hashtag, in developing countries it appears only in 11th place. Against the backdrop of sustainable development, Quintana-García, Marchante-Lara, and Benavides Chicón (2022) analyze how the reputation of a firm is impacted by environmental innovation (EI) and cleaner production (CP). By using panel data of European manufacturing companies, the authors provide evidence that corporate

reputation benefits from both EI and CP. Given the role of universities in the education of managers, Ruiz-Palomino, Martínez-Cañas, and Jiménez-Estévez (2019) examined the effectiveness of corporate social responsibility courses. To this end, they surveyed 97 undergraduate students in a Spanish state university. Their findings show that these courses have a positive impact on "students' ethical decision-making". Also in the university context, Kiezel, Piotrowski, and Wiechoczek (2021) explore the perception of social responsibility strategy in higher education in Poland.

Sánchez-Hernández, Carvalho, and Paiva (2019) have conducted a field survey based on a questionnaire on a sample of 122 managers from Guinea-Bissau and the Ivory Coast researching the managers' perception of Corporate Social Responsibility orientation economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Their findings suggest that the competitiveness of the companies can be improved over time with the help of innovation seen as a mediator between Corporate Social Responsibility orientation and firm performance. Managers are found to be responsible in this context for the promotion of a social innovation culture within their companies.

### **The approach to sustainability in the context of boosting the ability to learn and innovate of an organization.**

One of how sustainability orientations of modern organizations can express themselves is related to the effort to assess and measure their environmental, social, and governance activity of them. Social innovation can be perceived by customers through different channels, still, in the case of services, customers can perceive it with a certain delay and effort due to characteristics of services like intangibility, and heterogeneity. Also, if measurement techniques are designed mainly for managers and key decision-makers, the same techniques do not have the same transparency for customers (Aksoy, et al., 2022).

Adopting innovation that has sustainability potential is perceived by managers to be greater when is connected with new business interactions and new delivery systems. Research conducted on 104 companies in the wine industry by Pougnet et al. (2022) shows that managers are inclined to adopt sustainable technologies when these are connected with long-term benefits also in terms of customer purchase behavior, rising environmental awareness, and sustainable consumption (Pougnet, et al., 2022).

As regards the connection with intellectual capital, the research of Gross-Gołacka, et al. (2021), conducted among 1,067 enterprises operating in Poland, reveals that even if managers are aware of the importance of intellectual capital, the majority of them do not implement intellectual capital management strategies. Still, intellectual capital is considered one of the main drivers for sustainability, with different types of factors that can affect the relationship between intellectual capital and company sustainability like honesty, reliability, skills, and integrity. The research also revealed that the inclusion of environmental protection within the organizational culture improves their image and market position.

In the context of industrial enterprises from Slovakia research made by Babel'ová, and Stareček (2021) on 903 respondents shows that the level of development of new products or services alongside with quality of products or services is related to the sustainable performance of the enterprises with a special emphasis put on the innovation capacity and future profitability. In the same line of adjusting future positive results for the organization with the help of a sustainable approach, the research conducted by Lorincová, et al. (2019) on 3720 respondents highlights the important role of well-motivated managers in fostering the performance of the companies and sustainable growth over time. The results of the research also state significant differences in perception according to job categories and differences of opinions between genders within the blue-collar employees' category.

## Conclusions

The perception of managers over sustainability has a complex content due to the evolution of the concept itself and the various approaches at the level of practical activity within organizations. Our systematic review of the literature concerning this issue has revealed a strong interest in the topic regarding managers' perception of sustainability in the last few years. The more in-depth analysis of the selected articles after the successive application of the filters defined in the systematic literature review process has highlighted a series of defining elements for the current perception of managers from various organizations, elements that we can summarize in the following.

So, sustainability is perceived as a desirable outcome intrinsically linked to the application of Total Quality Management principles, with an emphasis on the idea of sustainable leadership. Sustainable leadership will be imposed naturally for all members of the organization in the context in which the values related to equity, equal treatment, ethics, and the ability to properly treat the environment are promoted. We also observe the perception of sustainability as an expression of authentic leadership that can make the connection between the emotional commitment of employees and their organizational behavior.

On another level, sustainability is seen from the perspective of the need to reduce risks from the business environment by optimizing the organizational structure. In this context, sustainability is seen as an element highlighted in the companies' effort to manage crisis situations, as a guarantor of their lack of hypocrisy and legitimization in the eyes of interest holders.

From the perspective of the relationship that can be drawn between corporate social responsibility and sustainability in the perception of managers, sustainability is perceived as the result of affirming CSR principles, disseminated at the level of all employees by optimizing the person-organization relationship (personal values - organizational values). In other words, innovation is a mediator between CSR practices and performance - elements that ensure sustainability. In fact, the learning capacity of an organization as well as that of innovation is the bases of sustainability.

Another interesting idea revealed in the analysis was that sustainability is directly linked to intellectual capital. The three dimensions of intellectual capital: human, structural, and relational capital are considered essential resources for achieving sustainability goals. In the perception of managers, sustainability is linked to the quality of human capital, as a guarantor for sustainable business development.

Our research has still its own limits like any other systematic review due to the limited amount of information taken into consideration only within the Web of Science Database and the specific time framework analyzed. The findings can be completed and detailed with the help of an exploratory qualitative type research conducted on managers from different areas of the economy, capable to test the five topics revealed within our analysis and highlighting eventual variables that can be used in another quantitative research to test a model that can depict different relationships between variables and a certain managerial behavior related with sustainability.

Undoubtedly, the analysis of managers' perceptions regarding sustainability is a complex approach that cannot be exhausted by a single research effort and that remains a topic permanently open to evaluation by the scientific community interested in this field.

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