Exploring the soft shades of sustainability: evidence from Italian companies

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Abstract

Purpose – Sustainability is increasingly at the forefront of the public debate in Europe and the world. However, despite this increased interest, research seems to have partially ignored the importance of its social dimension and the issues related to social equity, people care, protection and personal development at all stages of society and, consequently, of business. Accordingly, this paper aims at investigating the "soft" dimensions of sustainability, integrating its mainstream "technical storyline" with a "human/social storyline".

Design/methodology/approach – In this paper a taxonomy of the main key drivers of the soft dimension of sustainability is proposed and tested on a sample of Italian companies. Through interviews with their managers, actions and needs in terms of sustainability soft drivers are identified.

Findings – The achieved results demonstrated that the case companies differently integrated the soft dimensions of sustainability within their companies. All the sample companies are aware of the role of social sustainability. According to the proposed taxonomy, the systemic drivers of soft sustainability are the main shared ones.

Originality/value – The paper provides new insights into the essence of the organizational soft dimensions and their centrality in the overall achievement of sustainability for companies. It also offers managerial insights into how to effectively manage these dimensions and policy implications about the need for clearer consideration.

Keywords Sustainability, Sustainable development, Soft dimension, Social sustainability, Drivers

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Nowadays, sustainability is increasingly at the forefront of the international public debate because of its imperative role in ensuring the well-being and viability of the socioeconomic system (Whal, 2019). This is especially due to the need for facing the extraordinary health and well-being issues, which the Covid-19 pandemic made even more complicated (Hilton and McCann, 2022). To challenge these issues, the assumption of a sustainable approach to business and society can lead to the rising of a virtuous cycle able to contribute to "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Bruntland, Report, 1987, p. 8). In doing so institutions, business organizations and people

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should be willing to balance "the needs of people today with the future needs of our children and the natural systems that sustain all life" (Hilton and McCann, 2022, p. 172). However, it is worth noting that balancing sociocultural and biophysical dimensions typical of values and material conditions of sustainability is not an easy task, because they highly vary in time and space as well as according to the interrelations existing between them (Ostrom, 2009; Scholz, 2011; Di Paola *et al.*, 2019). To challenge this issue, policymakers, scholars and practitioners are debating the importance of renewing the approach to sustainability, promoting a culture of cooperation and the exploitation of human resources and human capital (Singh, 2013; Pellegrini *et al.*, 2018; Sheh *et al.*, 2020). It follows that to achieve this goal future-oriented strategies, based on the coexistence and the harmonization of values and material conditions (Huutoniemi, 2014) related to economic, environmental and societal spheres (Elkington, 1997; Murphy, 2012a, b; Trudeau, 2018), are even more essential *for ensuring long-term wellbeing*. Unfortunately, it is worth noting that research and policies related to sustainability remain mostly focused on its hard dimensions (e.g. techniques, technology, policy, strategy, etc.) with little attention to soft ones (Cosimato and Vona, 2021; Mudulli *et al.*, 2021). This major focus on the "hard" dimensions of sustainability underlines the poor attention dedicated to its social dimension and the related issues mainly dealing with social equity, people care protection and personal development at all stages of society and, consequently, of business (Shah *et al.*, 2022). It follows that the material implications of a sustainable approach to policy, business and the environment through a "technical storyline", lacking any references to the importance of human contribution, is no more sufficient for a comprehensive approach to sustainably grand challenges.

Drawing on these considerations, this contribution aims at contributing to fill this gap, investigating the "soft" side of sustainability and integrating the aforementioned mainstream "technical storyline" with a "human storyline", which approaches sustainability as "an outcome of human activity grounded in institutions, policies, culture, and power" and as an "interface" (Röling, 1997, p. 250) between anthropic action, human evolution and the biosphere. In doing so, the following two main inquiries inspired this work:

RQ1. Do Italian companies recognize the importance of the soft dimension of sustainability?

RQ2. Which are the main *determinants/drivers* at the core of the soft dimension of sustainability?

To address these inquires, some key drivers of the soft side of sustainability will be defined, discussed and applied to a sample of Italian companies to grasp their eventual approach to this specific dimension of sustainability. In doing so, the managers of some Italian companies were interviewed to identify their actions and needs in terms of soft drivers to add sustainability to their companies.

The paper is organized as follows. After this introduction, Section 2 presents an overview of research on hard and soft dimensions of sustainability and proposes a taxonomy of the possible key drivers of social sustainability. Section 3 describes the research approach and the adopted methodology. Section 4 illustrates the main findings of our research. Section 5 is dedicated to discussions and implications. Finally, section 6 provides concluding remarks, limitations and future research.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Hard versus soft dimension of sustainability

Over the last decades, the debate around sustainability has grown more and more, emphasizing the negative influence of organizational and societal needs on resources' finiteness (Meadows *et al.*, 1972; Dempsey *et al.*, 2011).

The literature on the topic considers Thomas Robert Malthus (1766–1834) the first economist to foresee the limits to growth due to resource scarcity. However, over the last two centuries, "the global economy has shown incredible growth, transforming the character of the planet and especially of human life" (Mebratu, 1998, p. 496).

The relevance of environmental issues, also perceived by international institutions following the birth of the first environmentalist movements, led to a series of international conferences aimed at defining shared policies on issues related to sustainability. The first step was taken in 1968 when UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) organized the intergovernmental conference of experts on the scientific basis for the rational use and conservation of the resources of the biosphere, in which the concept of ecologically sustainable development was affirmed for the first time. This conference laid the foundations for the birth of the intergovernmental program MAB (Man And Biosphere), which would unite scientists from all over the world with the task of examining man's influence on changes in the biosphere. Resources use and its related issues were also the basis of the disruptive report on the limits to growth published in 1972 and commissioned to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology by the club of Rome, which highlighted the impossibility of unlimited growth in the long term due to limited resource availability and environmental deterioration (Meawdos *et al.*, 1972). In the same year, 1972, in response to growing social concerns about environmental deterioration, the United Nations conference on the human environment, also known as the Stockholm Conference, was held, marking the beginning of the era of awareness of sustainable development seen as the only alternative for the well-being of present and future generations, recognizing the "importance of environmental management and the use of environmental assessment as a management tool" (DuBose *et al.*, 1995). Even though during this conference "the link between environmental and developmental issues did not emerge strongly" (Mebratu, 1998, p. 500), it contributed to taking a major step forward in the conceptualization of sustainable development.

It was, then, in 1978 with the UN (United Nations) environment program review that the terms "ecology" and "development" appeared together (also in the form of "eco-development"), supported by other important concepts such as development without destruction and environmentally sound development. However, as stated, a punctual conceptualization of sustainable development is due to the aforementioned Brundtland Report produced by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), according to which sustainable development aims at meeting "the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987, p. 37). This Report officially introduced the concept of sustainable development and set the minimum standards necessary to safeguard the resources on which development itself depends, also in the wake of environmental disasters that occurred in the 1980s. In 1992, the United Nations General Assembly convened the International Conference on Environment and Development, known as the Earth Summit or Rio Conference, attended by delegates from 178 nations, 107 heads of state and 2,400 representatives of nongovernmental organizations. The most important agreement among those reached was agenda 21, which represents a sort of track for achieving sustainable development in the social, cultural, environmental and economic fields. Later on, important milestones were the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, a legally nonbinding document that, although not setting binding limits, aimed to reduce the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere to avoid harmful consequences for the world's climate system; and the 2002 Monterrey Conference on Financing for Development and the 2002 Johannesburg Conference on Sustainable Development. A significant turning point came in 2000 with the Millennium Declaration, which introduced the Millennium Development Goals, in which 189 UN member states committed themselves to eight goals by 2015, to enable the industrialized countries to

achieve these goals, they committed themselves to fostering international cooperation and to undertaking public policies geared towards the development of the least developed countries. Following the review of the successes achieved with the MDGs (Millenium Development Goals), and faced with the need to propose a new path for those issues on which significant results had not yet been achieved, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, also known as the Rio+20 Conference, was held in 2012. On 25 September 2015, the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit unanimously approved the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, a document that purports to guide the implementation of national policies aimed at achieving sustainability. It includes 17 goals to which 169 targets are linked, to make its content clearer. Agenda 2030, in its goals, brings together the social, economic and environmental dimensions. The document offers companies tools to align their strategies with the sustainable development goals (SDGs) and also to measure and manage their participation in achieving them.

Even though, as said, the Brundtland Report "Our Common Future" (WCED, 1987) conventionally represent the starting point of sustainability and sustainable development debate, these concepts were and remain embedded into some essential challenges such as the growth of population, the degradation and depletion of resources, the change of societies and the technological development (Meadows *et al.*, 1992).

The embedded connectedness between the dimensions of sustainability and socioeconomic spheres and consequences has progressively involved different scientific fields, going beyond the initially prevailing environmental perspective and increasingly including social and economic dimensions (Gallopìn, 2003; Barile *et al.*, 2014; Sala *et al.*, 2015).

The adoption of a systemic approach to sustainability is understood as the analysis of the effects resulting from the synergic and simultaneous consideration of the instances arising from each of the three dimensions that traditionally define sustainability (e.g, environmental, social, economic) and the main changes that also have impacts on society on a broader scale (Dyball and Newell, 2014; Farioli *et al.*, 2018).

The adoption of a systemic approach to sustainability, and of the interactions that exist between its three dimensions, finds in the systems paradigm valid interpretative support, as it allows us to highlight critical issues and guidelines that can be useful in orienting the decisions and behavior of organizations (Scalia *et al.*, 2018). This shift implies the abandonment of a reductionist view, which is geared towards focusing on individual areas, in favor of a view that considers all processes involving the three dimensions, thus integrating them and exploring how, as mentioned, they are subjectively perceived by the actors observing them (Barbier and Burgess, 2017). This view implies that to implement a process leading to the recovery or attainment of conditions for sustainability, it is necessary to imagine that the three areas can substantially contribute to the development of a single evolutionary process and that the criterion for the sustainability check must be applied only to this process.

Moving from this seminal conceptualization, Pinkard (1995) emphasized the importance of social practice for sustainable development, because they "make sense to their participants and how certain ways in which they make sense to them is necessary for those participants to sustain those practices rationally" (p. 57). This has contributed to moving the focus also on the traditionally neglected social dimension of sustainability, remembering that sustainable development can be achieved "simultaneously delivering economic, social and environmental performance" (Jabbour and Renwick, 2018, p. 624). This is possible by implementing and exploiting their "hard" (or technological) dimension and "soft" (or human) one (Wehrmeyer, 2017). It is worth noting that most of the traditional research on sustainability is mainly focused on the first and hard dimensions (e.g. technology, policy, strategy, etc.), while research on the soft one remains scarce. This was mainly due to the attention that scholars

and practitioners paid especially to the implementation of sustainability, which was approached as a top-down process, in which companies try to challenge the growing social pressure by incorporating sustainability into their strategies and operationalizing it through technologies (Van Tulder *et al.*, 2013; Silvius and Schipper, 2020).

The transition towards sustainability of economy, society and environment represents one of the most critical global challenges, which implies "the need to adjust to planetary limits, but also by opportunities presented by an evolving global economic system that is highly sensitive to disruptive social dynamics" (Throop and Mayberry, 2017). This transition calls for new competencies and behaviors that are at the core of the so-called soft side of business organization (McGregor, 1966), a topic strictly related to the rising of the total quality management (TQM) approach (Porter and Parker, 1993; Martínez-Lorente *et al.*, 1998; Tata and Prasad, 1998). Over the years, it became popular also when applied to business organizations' transition toward societal and environmental sustainability (Renwick *et al.*, 2016; Jabbour and Renwick, 2018; Basile *et al.*, 2021).

The soft dimension of sustainability lies in its foundations in human and psychological activities, such as sustainability training and knowledge, which affects both institutions and business organizations' sustainable performance (Chams and García-Blandón, 2019).

Because sustainability can be considered a socially constructed paradigm, its soft dimension shed further light on it "as learned, negotiated and agreed upon" (Röling, 1997, p. 250) or as an "an outcome of human activity grounded in institutions, policies, culture, and power" (Röling, 1997, p. 251). In this sense, business organizations can bring sustainability a step forward also investing in human resources management, development and, therefore, in the promotion of personal and social well-being (Rodriguez Martinez *et al.*, 2021a). Drawing on these considerations, another important step forward in the exploitation of sustainability soft dimensions comes from the attention paid to the global challenges related to human activities, which led to the conceptualization and the operationalization of green human resource management (GHRM) and sustainable human resource management (SHRM). In particular, GHRM has been inspired by the umbrella concept of SHRM; thus, the first one focuses on the environmental dimension of sustainability, and it is built upon "policies, philosophies, and practices to promote sustainable use of business resources and the wart any untoward harm arising from environmental concerns in organizations" (Ahmad, 2015, p. 2). GHRM is a recent concept, inspired by the global growing awareness of environmental burden and the growing environmental regulations (Renwick *et al.*, 2013). It is worth noting that GHRM plays a significative role both in environmental management and in SHRM; thus, the latter represents a bridge between human resource management (HRM) and sustainability, pointing to achieving "financial, social, and ecological goals, with an impact inside and outside of the organization and over a long-term time horizon while controlling for unintended side effects and negative feedback" (Ehnert *et al.*, 2016, p. 90). Moreover, SHRM represents a recent example of how sustainability can be operationalized into business applications. It follows that both GHRM and SHRM highly contribute to the ongoing development of individuals' soft skills, which stem from competencies related to (1) knowledge (aptitudes and technical skills), (2) knowing how to do things (e.g. work processes' methods), (3) knowing how to be present (individual and collective behaviors) and (4) knowing how to be (organization and interactions) (Rodríguez Martínez *et al.*, 2020) became ever more essential. Recently, the literature on sociotechnical sustainability transitions (ONeill and Gibbs, 2014; Geels, 2018; Bögel *et al.*, 2019) has called for further research on the balancing of the two dimensions (hard and soft) of sustainability, considering them as rising from the "the co-evolution of technology and society, and to the networks, seamless webs and complex multi-actor processes that may carry a sustainability transition forward" (Paredis, 2011, p. 200).

2.2 A taxonomy of possible key drivers of sustainability soft side

Drawing on the consideration that the soft side of sustainability is related to the human and/or humanistic dimension of the society and organizations, the alignment of cultural practices and policies, human resources as well as individuals' empowerment with the SDGs is even more essential (Renwick *et al.*, 2013; Jabbour and Renwick, 2018; Jabbour *et al.*, 2019). This shifted the focus from tangible to intangible assets, considered a major input or driver for challenging the complexity of sustainability and for bringing the transition towards sustainability a step forward. This change was due to the rising of the knowledge economy and its transformative potential, essential for creating value for individuals, organizations and society (Rezgui *et al.*, 2010; Unger, 2019) as well as for nurturing the three main spheres of sustainability. Thus, the soft dimension of sustainability (e.g. individual skills and convictions, ethical commitment, future expectations, etc.), together with the hard one plays an essential role in addressing the intricate issues related to sustainability, sustainable development, the following achievement of SDGs and, at the micro-level, to companies' sustainable performance (Silvius and de Graaf, 2019; Muduli *et al.*, 2021; Sciarelli *et al.*, 2021).

A way to challenge the inner complexity of sustainability, due to the interplay of its three systems (economy, society and environment), comes from system thinking (Holling, 2001). Thus, its application contributes to "identifying the points at which a system is capable of accepting positive change and the points where it is vulnerable" (Holling, 2001, p. 392). It follows that approaching sustainability issues according to systems thinking makes it possible to holistically manage the dynamic interconnections between the networked actors who populate social, economic and ecological systems (Davis *et al.*, 2009; Barile and Saviano, 2018; Iandolo *et al.*, 2021). More in detail, a system approach to sustainability makes it possible to manage the interconnections between existing organizations and the environment (Metcalf and Benn, 2013), which lie upon organizations' dependence on natural resources (which are finite) for inputs as well as upon the impact of organizational actions on the environment through feedback loops (Williams *et al.*, 2017). It follows that the key protagonists of sustainable development should "accept new responsibilities, as are congruent with an expanded understanding of the impact of organizational actions on a systemically interconnected world" (Gregory and Miller, 2014, p. 315).

Approaching the interconnections at the core of sustainability according to a system perspective lead also to a better understanding of its holistic and cross-sectional nature. Thus, even though the persisting gap in sustainability operationalization, it is nowadays clear that it affects not only different business sectors but also different social areas in different ways (Dong and Burritt, 2010). Focusing on business scenarios, it is worth noting that they are even more demanding more industry-specific sustainability strategies to assist companies in making more informed business decisions (Ong *et al.*, 2016). However, this implies the search for balancing the hard and soft dimensions of sustainability, because they are similarly important for the progress of one sector to advance in another (Gray and Bebbington, 2000). This is due to business activity's general dependence on both hard and soft resources and skills to achieve competitiveness in the short-term, and sustainability in the long (Herbert and Graham, 2019). However, it is worth noting that current research on the antecedents and outcomes of the soft side of sustainability is still in its infancy; thus, few authors identified some of the possible drivers at the core of this dimension. Chams and García-Blandón (2019) underlined the importance of individual values and sustainable learning or training for achieving sustainability goals and sustainable performance. Other scholars (Colantonio, 2009; Landorf, 2011) pointed out the importance of the soft dimension of sustainability of some general themes mainly related to basic needs, social equity and justice, such as demographic change, education, employment, empowerment and participation, social

cohesion, human rights, identity, health and safety, quality of life. Most of these themes explicitly or implicitly highlight the influence that all stakeholders' groups can have on sustainability the soft dimension of sustainability (Staniškienė and Stankevičiūtė, 2018). Drawing on the extant literature (Colantonio, 2009; Landorf, 2011; Staniškienė and Stankevičiūtė, 2018; Chams and García-Blandón, 2019; Rodríguez Martínez *et al.*, 2021b) some drivers of sustainability soft dimension have been recognized and classified (Table 1). In doing so, three main categories have been applied (1) instrumental, (2) personal and (3) systemic (Rodríguez Martínez *et al.*, 2021b).

Instrumental drivers are related to specific and professional competencies and skills, strictly related to the other two (personal and systemic) because they boost their exploitation and practical application. These drivers are mainly related to the ability that an organization or a company demonstrated in terms of organization and planning, related to proactivity as well as to problem-solving and decision-making ability, but also to its communicative abilities and disposition towards technology (Rodríguez Martínez *et al.*, 2021b). Personal drivers are related to individual and cognitive characteristics, abilities and dispositions that support individuals in approaching and managing issues related to sustainability and social sustainability. Finally, systemic competencies are related to the way individuals, organizations, institutions and other social agents "participate" in social processes and actions, which influence their contribution to sustainability.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research approach

This study has been based on the implementation of a qualitative methodology, aimed at grasping broad and relevant information about Italian companies' disposition towards the soft dimension of sustainability as well as on the related drivers they mostly implement. To this end, some semistructured interviews were administered for gathering information about the aforementioned under-investigated phenomenon (Bertrand and Hughes, 2005). Interviews provide "opportunities for interviewees to respond in their terms, through their linguistic structures; further, verbal answers can be longer and more complex, and so richer and more interesting, than written answers" (Potter, 2018, p. 161).

A specific interview protocol was developed following the insights gained from the theoretical analysis; thus, the 15 drivers defined in the theoretical sections served as interview items, arranged into specific domains or main themes. Moreover, the analysis has been based on a descriptive approach, which supports a better comprehension and presentation of the inner meaning of the collected data, especially when related to personal judgments, values, beliefs, opinions and information about a specific phenomenon (Barriball and While, 1994).

Instrumental drivers	Personal drivers	Systemic drivers
- Organization and planning	- (Interdisciplinary) teamworking	- Social equity and justice
- Communication	- Intra and interpersonal skill	- Education system
- Technology knowledge	- Education	- Environmental consciousness
	- Creativity and Critical thinking	- Employment rate
	- Ethical commitment	- Diversity
		- Human rights
		- Health and safety

Source(s): Authors elaboration

Table 1. Instrumental, personal and systemic drivers of sustainability soft dimension

3.2 Selection criteria and interview protocol design

To better understand if and how Italian companies approach the soft dimension of sustainability, a specific interview protocol has been developed and administered to a sample of these companies. Due to the number and the generic nature of the selected population, its accessibility and the *criticality* of the investigated phenomenon, a non-probability sampling technique was implemented to individually select the unit of the population under investigation (Etikan *et al.*, 2016). This method was implemented because it is well suited for exploratory research which aims at offering new insight that will be systematically tested later (Alvi, 2016). Therefore, the companies involved in this study were selected through the nonprobability technique typical of convenience sampling. Thus, a representative sample was extracted from the entire population of Italian innovative start-ups and SMEs (small and medium enterprises), which amount to 12.805 companies, registered into the national start-ups register and into the national database named *Registro Imprese e start-up* [1]. In particular, dealing with start-ups they have been selected according to definition provided by national authority (D.L. 179/2012, art.25, c.2), according to which they are young and high-tech companies with a great growth potential and which, for this reason, represent one of key points of Italian industrial policy [2]. Moreover, SMEs have been selected according to definition provided by the EU (European Union), which considers them as "The category of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is made up of enterprises which employ fewer than 250 persons and which have an annual turnover not exceeding 50 million euros, and/or an annual balance sheet total not exceeding 43 million Euro" (Extract of Article 2 of the Annex of Recommendation, 2003/361/EC) and which improve access to capital and encourage innovation and R&D.

Considering the whole population of companies registered into the national database *Registro Imprese e start-up* (12.805) a representative sample has been calculated considering a confidence level of 80 and an error margin of 5. This also make possible to generalize the results of the analysis. It follows that the sample size is 162 companies. Of these companies, 70 are start-ups and the remaining 92 are SMEs. A convenience sampling strategy was implemented choosing to involve in the analysis just the 92 SMEs, which were contacted via email and invited to be interviewed. The criteria for selecting the sample companies were (1) coming from different sectors, (2) being based in Italy, (3) having hands-on experience in social sustainability activities and (4) the publication of sustainability reports.

Of the 95 innovative SMEs, 50 companies did not respond to the invitation, 32 did not accept the interview (mainly because of lack of time), and the remaining 18 were interviewed. The participant SMEs were labeled with a progressive number (from 1 to 18) to ensure their anonymity (Table 2).

The interviews were administered during October 2021 and their average duration was 20 min. The key informants were SMEs managers (owners, CEOs and senior managers), marketing department personnel or employees delegated by the owners/managers to be interviewed.

As stated, the drivers presented in the theoretical section served as interview items and they were arranged into specific domains or main themes. Thus, the questionnaire included the 15 drivers/items defined in the theoretical section, which were formulated as direct questions and organized into 3 main categories, the first one related to the experiences, processes and practices implemented to nourish the soft side of sustainability, the second one related to the individual perception of sustainability soft side and the influence that people can have on it, the last and third one related to the external context and its influence on sustainability soft side. These were labeled with the same names of the categories (Instrumental, personal and systemic drivers) defined in Table 1.

Company	Local area	Industry	Age of Birth	Employees (n.)	Annual turnover	Innovation criteria[1]	Diversity criteria[2]
Company #1	North of Italy	Production (Cosmetic wellness)	19/10/1990	20–49	5–10 M euro	R&D, Intellectual property	No
Company #2	North of Italy	Production (Electronic tools)	25/05/2005	0–4	1–2 M euro	Qualified team, Intellectual property	No
Company #3	North of Italy	Service (Biotech R&D)	31/07/1995	20–49	5–10 M euro	Qualified team, Intellectual property	No
Company #4	Center of Italy	Service (Data computing)	24/06/2015	0–4	1–100 K euro	R&D, Qualified team	No
Company #5	Center of Italy	Service (Technical consulting)	08/01/2020	0–4	1–100 K euro	R&D, Qualified team	No
Company #6	South of Italy	Service (software development)	16/01/2017	5–9	1–2 M euro	R&D, Qualified team	No
Company #7	South of Italy	Production (product for construction)	07/01/1983	10–19	1–2 M euro	R&D, Intellectual property	No
Company #8	North of Italy	Production (fashion)	13/09/2013	0–4	1–100 K euro	R&D, Intellectual property	No
Company #9	Center of Italy	Service (Technical consulting)	15/06/2007	5–9	1–2 M euro	R&D, Qualified team	No
Company #10	Center of Italy	Service (Engineering and environmental research)	30/06/2015	0–4	100–500 K euro	R&D, Qualified team, Intellectual property	No
Company #11	North of Italy	Production (automotive)	05/12/1985	50–249	10–50 M euro	R&D, Qualified team, Intellectual property	No
Company #12	North of Italy	Production (automotive)	22/05/2012	5–9	1–2 M euro	R&D, Intellectual property	No
Company #13	North of Italy	Service (software development)	26/03/2001	50–249	10–50 M euro	R&D, Qualified team, Intellectual property	No
Company #14	North of Italy	Service (Biotech R&D)	18/07/2013	50–249	5–10 M euro	R&D, Qualified team, Intellectual property	No
Company #15	North of Italy	Service (Biotech R&D)	15/05/2001	5–9	500K-1 M euro	R&D, Qualified team	No
Company #16	Center of Italy	Service (software development)	28/06/2001	20–49	2–5 M euro	R&D, Qualified team, Intellectual property	No

(*continued*)

Table 2. Sample description

Company	Local area	Industry	Age of Birth	Employees (n.)	Annual turnover	Innovation criteria[1]	Diversity criteria[2]
Company #17	South of Italy	Service (software development)	18/10/2001	20–49	5–10 M euro	R&D, Qualified team	No
Company #18	South of Italy	Production (Hardware and microelectronic production)	09/08/2013	50–249	5–10 M euro	R&D, Intellectual property	No

Note(s): [1]Italian classification is organized into three categories (1) R&D, (2) qualified team and (3) intellectual property, see https://startup.registroimprese.it/isin/home
[2]Italian classification is organized into the following categories (1) female presence, (2) young presence and (3) foreign presence, see https://startup.registroimprese.it/isin/home
Source(s): Authors elaboration

Table 2.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

As stated, information was gathered by administering a semistructured interview with key informants of the respondents' Italian SMEs. The interview protocol consists of three phases, (1) research presentation, (2) demographic/structural data collection and (3) questions about the drivers of sustainability soft side.

Interviews were imported into *Google Sheets* and organized for each unit of analysis/respondent, according to a specific research protocol agreed upon and designed at the beginning of the research.

Interviews were analytically and separately analyzed by two researchers according to some coding categories (or themes) derived from the 15 drivers defined in the theoretical sections. Using these coding categories researchers extracted, edited, grouped, summarized and synthesized/interpreted the achieved findings through a thematic analysis. A second coding step involved an independent researcher, who read the study reports alongside the topic groupings identified in the first coding step to check category validity. This led to identifying further 3 topic grouping related to the soft skill types, (1) instrumental, (2) personal and (3) systemic (see Table 4).

Thus, the collected evidence was classified in the afore-mentioned categories to be lately critically analyzed. A research report was organized, in which, after the tabulation of the descriptive statistics, the findings for each interviewed SME (Small and Medium Enterprises) were presented and compared.

4. Findings

Table 3 depicts the sample composition in terms of structural characteristics. Thus, most of the interviewed innovative SMEs are in the North of Italy (9) and active in some different service sectors (11). More in detail, 4 companies were active in software development, 3 in biotech research, one in engineering and environmental research, one in technical consulting, and one in business consulting. Dealing with production, companies presented less subsectorial homogeneity; thus, 2 were active in automotive, one in cosmetics and wellness, one in electronic tools production, one in construction, one in fashion design and one in hardware and microelectronic production.

In terms of maturity, most companies have been founded between 2010 and 2021 (9), 7 between 2000 and 2010, and 3 between 1983 and 1995. Five companies have between 0 and 4 employees and therefore can be classified as microenterprises as well as other five between

Local area	
North	9
Center	5
South	4
Industry	
Production	7
Service	11
Age of Birth	
1983–1995	3
2000–2010	7
2010–2021	9
Employees (n.)	
0–4	5
5–9	3
10–19	1
20–49	4
50–249	5
Annual turnover (€)	
1–100 K	1
100–500 K	3
500K-1 M	1
1–2 M	5
2–5 M	1
5–10 M	5
10–50 M	2
Diversity criteria	
Yes	0
No	18

Source(s): Authors elaboration

Table 3. Sample structural characteristics

50 and 249 and can be classified as medium enterprise. Moreover, they mostly have an annual turnover of 1–2 M euro (5) and 5–10 M euro (5). Finally, in terms of diversity criteria all the respondent SMEs did not report any information about diversity, in terms of gender, youngness and nationality, while in terms of innovation criteria most of them declared to meet 2 criteria over 3.

4.1 Instrumental drivers

Focusing on instrumental drivers, the sample companies demonstrated a quite different approach; thus, "organization and planning" is considered a key element for sustainability, because it deals with the way companies approach sustainable actions and their management in terms of problem-solving and decision-making. However, not all the respondents recognized its importance; thus, 6 respondents – 3 belonging to production sectors (electronic tools, products for construction, and hardware and microelectronic production) and 3 to service (biotech R&D, engineering and environmental research, technical consulting) maintained that they approached sustainability organization and planning as a section of their corporate and business strategies. A company #18 senior manager reported:

Table 4.
Soft side sustainability most agreed drivers

Categories	Main aims	Most shared drivers	Company sectors	Local area	Managerial implication
Instrumental	Boosting a sustainable and proactive corporate organization and planning (decision making and problem solving)	- Technologies knowledge (14) - Communication (14)	- All service subsector[1], automotive, fashion, and cosmetics - All service subsector, fashion, and cosmetics	North and Center of Italy	Technologies knowledge supports managers in using advanced tools as well as in accessing and sharing information essential for challenging emerging problems (Fiorini *et al.*, 2018). Technologies and their knowledge can also help managers to be more informed and sensible in taking decisions about operational and strategic activities (Fullan and Smith, 1999) or, in other words, to make decision-making processes as agile as possible. Finally, they can support manager in enacting more effective communication and disclosure processes, assuming a proactive approach to the management of social, ethical and environmental issues as well as to the related risks (Walker *et al.*, 2007)

(*continued*)

Categories	Main aims	Most shared drivers	Company sectors	Local area	Managerial implication
Personal	Boosting individual and cognitive abilities and dispositions towards sustainability issues	- Intra and interpersonal skills (16) - Education and learning (13) - Ethical commitment (18)	- All service subsector, cosmetics and wellness, fashion, hardware and microelectronic production - All analyzed sectors - All analyzed sectors	North, Center, and South Italy	Soft factors, such as personal skills (e.g. education), psychological traits and ethical commitment boost managers disposition in facing different and often unexpected sustainability issues (Silvius and de Graaf, 2019). In this sense, the ongoing knowledge and competence exploitation – especially through experiential learning (Kolb, 1984; Baden and Parkes, 2013) – commit them towards sustainability, inspiring decision-making and corporate strategies (Haney *et al.*, 2020). In this way they can better challenge the increasing complexity of the current socioeconomic and environmental scenarios (Barth and Michelsen, 2013; Savage *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, exploiting their personal traits and skills, managers can better and quickly deal with social dimension of interactions, communication and cooperation typical of societally situated contexts (Illeris, 2007).

(*continued*)

Table 4.

Table 4.

Categories	Main aims	Most shared drivers	Company sectors	Local area	Managerial implication
Systemic	Boosting individuals, organizations, institutions, and other social agents' participation to social processes and actions related to sustainable issues	- Social equity and justice (18) - Environmental consciousness (18) - Employment policies (18) - Human rights (18) - Health and safety (18)	All analyzed sectors	North, Center, and South Italy	A major focus on sustainability soft side can support organizations in surviving and even in be successful also thanks to their ability in committing other social agents (e.g. institutions, organizations, citizens, etc.) (Hooghiemstra, 2000). This happens when companies are legitimated to operate thorough a social contract or a social license (Dowling and Pfeffer, 1975; Deegan, 2002). This legitimation is essential to make companies able to face systemic changes, thanks to its main characteristics such as a strong sense of community, informed and inclusive leadership, widespread understanding, and education. This characteristic support policymakers and managers in addressing the systemic challenges that sustainability poses in terms of long-terms system transformations (Sharp, 2002)

Note(s): [1]Biotech R&D, Technical consulting, software development, engineering and environmental research, software development, Data computing
Source(s): Authors elaboration

> Organization and planning are strategically important because they contribute to shaping a potentially successful corporate organization. I think that approaching these in a strategic way these issues can lead to better management negotiations, changes, communication, and in general our decision-making.

In terms of technological knowledge, almost all respondents (14 SMEs over 18) considered it essential for supporting their path towards sustainability, especially in terms of the development and implementation of green technologies intended to add sustainability (mainly ecological) to corporate processes and activities. Respondents who emphasized the importance of technological knowledge were mainly active in all the analyzed service subsectors (11) as well as in hardware and microelectronic production (1) and automotive (2). Moreover, this driver is strictly related to other personal drivers (intra and interpersonal skills, education) and the systemic driver named "education system". Thus, technology knowledge can be considered as one of the components of intra and interpersonal skills, which can be exploited through educational/learning activities, often organized into a corporate education system. A company #1 CEO (Chief Executive Officer) reported:

> Knowledge is one of our strategic assets. We try to always create new knowledge, especially when related to advanced techniques and technologies, which are essential for the growth and the competitiveness of our company. Recently, technology knowledge has assumed a new and important significance for our path towards greenness.

Finally, 14 respondents considered communication over 18 – belonging to all service subsectors and fashion and cosmetics – a significant element of their path towards sustainability. Thus, the sample considered communication and its related tools traditional or not (e.g. social media, websites, apps, etc.) even more important for "educating" employees and other stakeholders on sustainable practices. Consequently, some respondents also demonstrated a proactive approach and a clear engagement in transparent sustainability communication. In this sense, a company #13 senior manager reported:

> We consider communication not a mere way to provide information about our activities, but it is rather a way to contribute to societal transformation, managing all stakeholders' expectations in terms of business and societal goals.

4.2 Personal drivers

Drawing on personal drivers, respondents considered "interdisciplinary team working" as a personal skill essential for making individuals able to face sustainability challenges. Thus, 13 of the respondent SMEs considered (interdisciplinary) teamwork and the subsequent cooperation among individuals (employees and other stakeholders) with different abilities and vertical skills essential for promoting as well as for improving the overall corporate approach to sustainability and the related practices. These respondents were active in the following service subsector, software development, biotech R&D, engineering and environmental research, data computing, and the following production subsectors, cosmetic wellness, and 2 of the 3 SMEs active in automotive. Thus, Company #1 CEO reported:

> Due to the nature of our company, interdisciplinary team working is important because paves the way for efficiently and effectively approaching our R&D and production processes. We try to encourage it sharing of expertise, knowledge, and skills among our departments.

15 of the respondent SMEs considered intra and interpersonal skills essential for their sustainability strategies. Thus, it plays a certain influence on the previous driver

(Interdisciplinary teamwork), because good intra and interpersonal skills encourage teamwork. According to the 15 respondents (active in software development, technical consulting, business consulting, data computing, cosmetic wellness, fashion, hardware and microelectronic production), these are among the most important soft skills to develop, promote and engage people (employees and stakeholders) with sustainable policy and practices. This personal driver is also strictly related to the following one (education) because 10 respondents over 18 (active in biotech R&D, software development, engineering and environmental research, technical consulting, business consulting, data computing, cosmetic wellness, electronic tools, fashion, automotive, hardware and microelectronic production) considered education and learning programs essential for company growth also when related to sustainability issues. Moreover, 9 SMEs (active in software development, engineering and environmental research, data computing, fashion) declared to have enacted education/learning programs for sustainability, to make people able to make an informed decision in terms of sustainability practices.

Even though creativity is one of the essential "ingredients" for innovating, respondents did not consider it so important for sustainability. Only 9 respondents (active in software development, engineering and environmental research, data computing, electronic tools, hardware and microelectronic production) approached creativity as a soft skill able to trigger innovative processes often essential to promote a corporate sustainable orientation. In this sense, company #10 owner reported:

> We are a research company; thus, creativity is our DNA. However, defining creativity is not easy, but I can say that it is something like an attitude toward life and imagining future, different, or even alternative scenarios. Creativity is a matter of ability in search of new and better solutions to current problems.

Dealing with the driver named "ethical commitment", all respondents recognized its importance for sustainability. Thus, all the interviewed Italian SMEs (18) reported their ethical effort, considering it essential for orienting decision-making to sustainability principles and for inspiring personnel and stakeholders towards responsible and ethical conduct. A company #14 senior manager reported:

> For us, ethics is a guideline. We try to inspire all our actions and future project to an ethical approach to business. This emerges from our ethical code, in which we have stated and reported our commitment to collective actions and the respect for human rights and diversity. It is about equity, democracy, and justice.

4.3 Systemic drivers

Finally, in terms of systemic drivers, all respondents approached social equity and justice as a corporate core value, the remaining affirmed that they incorporated it into their ethical code. In this sense, Company #8 owner reported:

> Equity and justice represent two important social challenges. Even though we have reported them into our ethical code, no specific actions have been done in this sense, because we consider social equity and justice as something embedded into our daily conduct.

Drawing on the following driver "education system" 16 respondents (active in biotech R&D, software development, engineering and environmental research, technical consulting, business consulting, data computing, cosmetic wellness, electronic tools, fashion, automotive, hardware and microelectronic production) considered it essential for their growth as well as for the social advancement of the local area in which they operate.

Thus, company #16 CEO reported:

> Education is one of our pillars. Since our company was born, we dedicated great attention to human resources lifelong learning and education. In doing so over the years we have developed a lot of educational initiatives, which were often enacted together with some institutional partners, mainly coming from Academia. In this way, we have promoted both personal growth and the ongoing valorization and growth of our intellectual capital.

All 18 respondent SMEs declared to have developed an environmental consciousness over time, which led almost all sample companies to approach operations as well as service development according to the main principle of sustainable development. Thus, a company #1 senior manager reported:

> Environment and its protection are among our core values. In fact, over the last decade, our commitment to environmental sustainability is constantly grown. We have rethought our production processes, trying to make them as environmentally friendly as possible, thanks to the use of natural components and secondary raw material, the implementation of innovative product lines, and making our packaging completely recyclable. Finally, since 2014 we're a Benefit Corporation.

In terms also of "employment politics", all respondents declared to pay great attention to this issue considering the acquisition and exploitation of intellectual capital essential for innovation development, one of their essential competitive leverages. Dealing with employment politics, company #6 owner stated:

> We are a young and still small company, but with an interesting growth perspective. Thus, even though we currently have less than 10 employees, our market position is getting stronger thanks to some important projects that shortly will make us able to grow also in terms of quality and number of available human resources.

Even though secondary data retrieved from the "Registro Nazionale delle Imprese" (https://startup.registroimprese.it/isin/home) demonstrated that none of the sample companies has enacted any initiative in terms of diversity, 10 respondents (active in biotech R&D, engineering and environmental research, software development, fashion, cosmetic and wellness) reported about their effort in developing and sharing a diversity culture. In this sense, a company #15 senior manager stated:

> We have always believed in the importance of diversity. So, over the years we have promoted a real culture of diversity and inclusion, balancing and varying our human resources in terms of sex, nationality, and age. I'm sure that the enactment of diversity management strategies and policies is positively affecting on work climate and human resources commitment toward our long-term goals.

Finally, all 18 respondents reported their plans and actions pointing to safeguarding human rights in each activity they do as well as about their attention to individuals (e.g. employees, customers and even citizens) health and safety, an element considered essential for socioeconomic growth and for nourishing the social side of sustainability.

Dealing with human rights, a company #7 senior manager affirmed:

> We are among those (maybe still few) entrepreneurs who firmly believe that in business there is a place for human rights. For this reason, we have embedded it into our strategies, even sustainable ones.

Focusing on "health and safety", company #3 CEO maintained:

> Due to our core business, the number of labs and chemicals that our researchers everyday use, individuals' health, and well-being, as well as the safety of our workspace, are one of our main concerns. Therefore, from the beginning of our activity, we are used to paying attention to these issues, enacting an internal monitoring system, and respecting all related European and national laws, regulations, and standards.

5. Discussions and implications

As argued in the conceptual section, the soft dimension of sustainability is difficult to define, being related to individual and humanistic dimensions of society, organizations and individuals (Jabbour *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, this study has tried to identify those drivers that positively affect the corporate approach to sustainability and its' soft side.

The achieved findings suggested that almost all the interviewed companies were aware of the importance of intangible assets as well as soft skills not only for corporate competitiveness but also for sustainability (Putra *et al.*, 2020). As stated, findings have been clustered into the three main categories that Rodríguez Martínez *et al.* (2021b) defined, (1) instrumental, (2) personal and (3) systemic.

The attention and sustainability-oriented efforts of sample companies mainly converged on systemic drivers; thus, all the 18 interviewed Italian SMEs reported their attitude towards and effort for the implementation and the enhancement of shared principles such as social equity and justice, environmental consciousness, employment rate, human rights and health and safety. Dealing with personal drivers of sustainability soft side, all the sample companies converged just on one driver, ethical commitment, positively reporting about their attention and effort in terms of Interdisciplinary team working and Intra and interpersonal skills.

Finally, focusing on the first category of drivers (instrumental drivers), it is worth noting that all the sample companies never converged on one or more of these. However, except for organization and planning, 14 respondents reported their effort in terms of technology knowledge and communication.

These findings demonstrated a certain sensitivity of the sample companies towards sustainability and its soft side, which they differently declined. The variations are mainly related to the sector they are serving; thus, in almost all cases service companies demonstrated a higher sensitivity, commitment and even proactivity towards the soft dimensions of sustainability. The affirmations of these companies (mostly younger than the others belonging to different production sectors) showed a higher awareness of the need for implementing, managing and enhancing the different drivers or elements of sustainability soft side (Table 4).

A general trend observed in the analysis was the stronger presence of systemic drivers in the affirmations of all the case companies. In line with the extant research, this demonstrates that sample companies (and especially those active ins service domains) have a good understanding of sustainability soft dimensions and a good disposition in connecting them with their strategic focus (Ali *et al.*, 2019) for leveraging the system effect that this side of sustainability can have. This seems to be mainly due to the growing importance that policymakers, scholars, and practitioners have attached to sustainability grand challenges over the years if compared with that dedicated to its practice and operationalization (Barile *et al.*, 2018; Van der Byl *et al.*, 2020). This also emerges from the limited attention that the sample companies demonstrated towards instrumental drivers, which are those related to professional, specialistic and vertical competencies and skills essential for starting and managing formalized organization and operation processes inspired by sustainability and sustainable development principles. This finding can be also interpreted following the research stream that highlights the inspiring force of system changes for a radical and sustainability-oriented organizational transformation (Bertassini *et al.*, 2021). In this sense, it is worth noting that most recurrent and agreed drivers are closer to the idea of social values, which cannot be developed and applied in isolation, as they are often related to others. This shed light on the intertwined and complex nature of sustainability and its soft dimension, which can inspire and drive the strategic management of sustainability via instrumental, personal and systemic abilities and skills. This implies that even though the debate about the soft side of sustainability and its implications for an organizational transformation is still in its infancy, managers' commitment toward strategies and policies pointing to adopting and

always enhancing the humanistic and social competencies can contribute to sustainability soft side practical development and enhancement.

6. Conclusions and future research

This study aimed to contribute to the extant research on the soft side of sustainability, its strategic potential, and the subsequent operationalization (Muduli *et al.*, 2021), based on the growing interest that the soft and human side of sustainability is attracting among a wide range of disciplines (e.g. strategic management, sustainability management, total quality management, etc.).

Firstly, the achieved results contributed to further exploiting sustainability research contributing to the definition of its "human/social storyline" and integrating it with the more traditional and accepted sustainability "technical storyline" mainly built upon the ecological dimension of sustainability (Röling, 1997). In doing so, the alignment and the merging of corporate strategies, personal characteristics and disposition, as well as social values, seems to be essential for the definition of the "human/social storyline" at the core of the sustainability soft side (Renwick *et al.*, 2016; Jabbour and Renwick, 2018). Further contributions derive from the results in terms of managerial implications for companies wishing to adopt strategies and behaviors in line with sustainability. In particular, the categories defined as instrumental, which mainly aim at improving the proactive strategic behaviors of companies have returned a profound focus on technology, which allows information and decisions to be implemented more effectively and thus support strategic and decision-making processes in general. This implies that managers can no longer underestimate the growing supporting role that technology is taking on in organizational processes, both strategic and operational.

Concerning the more strictly personal categories, the results point out the centrality of the soft factors' role, typically linked to the individual, psychological and personal propensity spheres. This opens to some theoretical implications. First, in line with the extant research, this work emphasizes the absolute centrality of respecting and enhancing these "soft" dimensions essential to promote an organizational transformation and/or transition to a sustainability-oriented approach (Asswad *et al.*, 2016). This will also contribute to enforce the overall ability of companies to achieve sustainability goals also innovating organizational processes and, consequently, improving their competitiveness.

Second, the result of this analysis emphasizes the systemic nature of sustainability and the close interconnection that exists between its three dimensions. In particular, the latter emphasizes the dimension of society, its individuals and, above all, the role that their attitude and characteristics have in determining the success or failure of companies' strategies also in terms of sustainability. This is also inherent to sustainability dominant storyline, which predominantly human and environmental oriented as the seminal "limits to growth" demonstrates, proposing ideas about a secure future for individuals, society, and the surrounding environment. This has been also based on a new approach to the social relationship with nature (McManus, 1996). Third, this research has confirmed the extent to which the enhancement of the individual components of organizations is an indispensable element for their success and viability.

However, this research is not limitless. The first limitation of this research is the number of interviews that make up the sample which could be increased to a greater number of companies. Furthermore, the sample could also be foreign to innovative start-ups, initially excluded from convenience sampling, for a comparison between probable different approaches followed by the two types of companies.

The second limitation is related to the technique used to collect and analyze the data. To integrate the methodology proposed here, a complementary quantitative approach could be

useful, such as a correlation between SMEs' disposition towards the soft dimension of sustainability and the industry they belong to. Furthermore, it would be of great interest to extend the analysis in a diachronic sense to the possible changes over time in the phenomena analyzed. This could be particularly useful for knowing if and how the soft dimension of sustainability changes from a management perspective. Finally, further future research could analyze how the soft dimension of sustainability affects the corporate performance that includes it, thus also contributing to enhancing in economic and market terms an imperative that will increasingly characterize the future of all organizations.

Notes

1. See https://startup.registroimprese.it/isin/home
2. See Startup innovative (mise.gov.it)

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(The Appendix follows overleaf)

Appendix
Interview protocol

General information

Foundation year as B-corp:_____

Location:_____

Number of employees:_____

Number of employed women:_____

Number of under 30 employees:_____

Number of employees belonging to protect categories:_____

Number of Female executives:_____

Sector/Industry:_____

Total annual turnover:_____

Instrumental drivers

1) What were the main reasons that led your company to change the statute and to set up as a benefit company?

2) What is the mission of your company and how do you communicate it?

3) Has the assessment of social and environmental impact of business activities been integrated into corporate strategies?

4) How your company approach organization and planning? Which are the main initiatives dedicated to these activities?

5) Do you think that technology literacy is important for a B-corp? If yes, why?

6) Which are the main technological skills that your company has developed over the time?

7) Has your company implemented initiatives to communicate its social and environmental commitment? If yes, which ones?

8) What are the main reports that your company periodically publishes?

Personal drivers

9) Is knowledge creation and management strategically approached in your company?

10) Does your company organize staff training projects/sessions? If yes, what are the main topics?

11) Does your company organize training sessions to improve understanding of sustainability issues?

12) Has your company adopted a code of ethics?

13) How interdisciplinary has considered and approached in your company?

14) Please, could you briefly report some interdisciplinary activities?

15) Has your company defined CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility)/sustainability requirements for its suppliers? If yes, which ones?

16) Is your company open to creativity? If yes, human resources share a real creativity culture?

Systemic drivers

17) Does your company organize initiatives aimed at developing/enhancing the community in which it is located? If yes, which ones?

18) Has your company implemented energy efficiency-oriented initiatives and projects? If yes, which ones?

19) Does your company use renewable energy sources? If yes, which ones?

20) Does your company use secondary raw materials? If yes, which ones?

21) Has your company implemented waste/waste reuse/recycling processes? If yes, which ones?

22) Does your company use specific tools for analyzing consumption and emissions? If so, what are the main ones?

23) Does your company enact some strategies and/or policy for boosting gender equity and inclusiveness?

24) Do your company aim at growing in number of employees?

25) How your company approach business ethics?

26) Does your company enact specific programs for ensuring people health and safety?

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