

Sustainable business model innovation. "Progetto Quid" as an exploratory case study¹

Received
10th March 2019

Revised
10th April 2019

Accepted
9th September 2019

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Abstract

Purpose of the paper: *The research aims to better comprehend the mechanisms that allow the generation and dissemination of sustainable value. In particular, assuming the business model as conceptual framework and as unit of analysis, the purpose of the study is to understand factors and processes able to orient the strategic conduct of a company towards sustainable innovation.*

Methodology: *The study adopts a research approach oriented to the discovery and it privileges the analysis of a business case with a high explanatory power.*

Findings: *In highlighting the drivers for the creation of sustainable value and sustainable innovation at the base of the analysed company business model, the research proposes a framework for the Sustainable Business Model Innovation (SBMI).*

Research limits: *The analysis of a single case study, although explanatory, does not allow to reach a generalization of the results.*

Practical implications: *The study offers a contribution to the development of managerial theories on innovation with reference to business models oriented to sustainability. The case analyzed is also a best practice that could guide managers and entrepreneurs to plan innovation and sustainability-driven business models already in the start-up phase.*

Originality of the paper: *In response to a gap in the literature, the study proposal is focused on how companies should incorporate the logic of sustainable development and innovation into their business models at a strategic and holistic level.*

Key words: value strategies; sustainable value creation; value dissemination; sustainable innovation development; fashion business

1. Introduction

Today's dynamic, hypercompetitive markets mandate new ways to create integrated value (Elkington and Hartigan, 2008) in which the economic, social and environmental dimensions are closely interlinked.

The past decade has seen growing consensus in the management literature that increasing market success depends on being able to generate sustainability-oriented innovation, linked with new and improved goods and services, organizational processes and business practices that will prevent or reduce negative environmental and societal impacts (Schaltegger and Wagner, 2011). Accordingly, to integrate the social and environmental

¹ The article is the outcome of a joint effort of the Authors. However, § 1, 4.7, 5 can be attributed to Paola Castellani; § 2, 4.2, 4.4 to Maria V. Ciasullo; § 3, 4, 4.1, 4.3, 7 to Chiara Rossato; § 4.5, 4.6, 6 to Orlando Troisi.

dimensions of sustainability into their business logic, companies must turn to innovative business models (Pencarelli *et al.*, 2019).

Although, from a theoretical viewpoint, possible archetypes of sustainability-oriented business models have been proposed, an analysis of the literature reveals a lack of holistic vision, with the focus more on the social dimension and corporate social responsibility (CSR), and a reductionist vision, in which the relationships between sustainability objectives and corporate performance are empirically analyzed (Wood, 2010; Glavas and Mish, 2015) from a quantitative perspective.

Based on the literature gap, this research aims to improve understanding of the mechanisms to generate sustainable value, using a qualitative approach and the business model as a conceptual framework and unit of analysis (Zott *et al.*, 2011). These theoretical concepts are examined in depth with reference to fashion, a critical sector in terms of sustainability on both the demand and the supply sides (Fletcher and Grose, 2012; Ciasullo *et al.*, 2017; Polese *et al.*, 2018), where the need for companies to adopt innovative business models is all the more urgent (Beh *et al.*, 2016; Lueg *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, the questions we propose to answer are:

RQ1: What are the main drivers for creating innovation in sustainable business models?

RQ2: How can the value creation, dissemination and capture process be managed?

Overall, this study contributes to a framework to guide managers and entrepreneurs in designing innovation-oriented sustainable business models (SBMs) in the start-up stage. Structurally, the paper first presents a review of the literature on business models focused on integrated value creation. A description of the research methodology used in the qualitative exploratory investigation follows. The results are then analyzed and discussed, and the theoretical and managerial implications highlighted. The final section offers some concluding reflections, along with the research limitations.

2. Literature analysis

Increasing attention to the concept of sustainability in management studies (Carroll, 1999; Elkington, 1997) poses the challenge of formulating integrated business models that can combine economic objectives with the multiple interests of an increasingly demanding society aware of social and environmental needs that require benefits that lead to community development (Barile *et al.*, 2015).

Therefore, producing an SBM (Nidumolu *et al.*, 2009; Bocken *et al.*, 2014) requires a focus on both competitiveness and economic and socio-environmental success (Schaltegger *et al.*, 2016).

Some researchers have taken up the challenge of integrating traditional business model drivers within a sustainable strategy that reconsiders the strategic profile (Hansen 2010; Stead and Stead, 2008; Wagner, 2007).

Specifically, to evaluate SBMs, Stubbs and Cocklin (2008) have proposed a systemic approach that mediates between structural attributes (organizational structure, processes, practices and organizational policies aimed at achieving sustainable outcomes) and cultural attributes (norms, values, behaviours and attitudes that increase stakeholder engagement).

In this approach, particular emphasis is placed on the human and cultural dimensions. Sustainable leaders incorporate sustainability principles in the organizational culture by establishing a cohesive set of values in the minds of key stakeholders (Bansal, 2002).

Adopting a comprehensive view, Bocken *et al.* (2014) understand SBMs as the outcome of a strategy that pursues the triple bottom line (TBL) and a diverse set of stakeholders with a wide range of economic and social interests. According to the authors, the strategic inclusion of sustainability within business models can act as a driver for competitive advantage and innovation development (Yip and Bocken, 2018).

Schaltegger *et al.* (2016) have emphasised the need to reformulate the business model for value proposition and dissemination, linking the sustainable strategy with the innovative practices and processes actually implemented. Following this reasoning, conducting eco-sustainable activities is insufficient; there is an urgent need to develop proactive, flexible managerial behaviour, aimed at confronting and managing risks dynamically and able to leverage skills and efficient information management to increase the likelihood of value creation. The critical dimensions of allocation and exchange of optimal resources and of knowledge and information management are thus introduced.

Viewing the business model as a framework that synthesizes a set of multi-stakeholder processes focused on long-term value creation, Geissdoerfer *et al.* (2018) have conceptualized Sustainable Business Model Innovation (SBMI) as an adaptation of the TBL business model by implementing proactive management principles aimed at stimulating the creation and spread of knowledge and new value (Boons and Ludeke-Freund, 2013; Bocken *et al.*, 2014; Geissdoerfer *et al.*, 2016; Schaltegger *et al.*, 2016).

Despite the different approaches in the literature, a conceptualization of categories of analysis (Bocken *et al.*, 2014; Schaltegger and Wagner, 2011; Stubbs and Cocklin, 2008) that orient SBMs towards innovation appears to be missing.

To meet this need for categorization, the present study, following on from that of Geissdoerfer *et al.* (2018), proposes a rereading of the classic business models based on sustainability principles, to identify the drivers of value creation and co-creation, and thus sustainable innovation.

Therefore, starting with the conception of sustainability as a strategic component to be synergistically amalgamated upstream of business models, and as a driving force and not a "mere" outcome of the business processes, the creation of new value, and thus sustainable innovation, is characterized as the outcome of dynamic, circular mechanisms for value generation and dissemination.

The value-based approach is integrated with the SBMI principles through a summary vision. From a cyclical perspective, new value

generation, dissemination and creation are to be managed through “apposite” co-creation strategies leading to innovative social, economic and environmental outcomes that can target development and sustainable growth precisely because they are consciously supported by and aligned with a coherent, cohesive organizational culture.

From a perspective focused on developing the human component (internal and external organizational skills, interpersonal skills, managerial skills and proactive leadership) in spreading this culture, the preliminary step for a truly sustainable business is to incorporate sustainability principles within the company’s strategies and core values. The culture must be constantly renewed, creating a unique and thus inimitable value, deriving from the unique synergy induced by the exchange of resources among the multiple stakeholders, who share their skills, experience and creativity, stimulating ongoing, long-term and thus sustainable innovation (Sciarelli and Tani, 2015).

Within the perspective adopted in this study, the main dimensions to support the emergence of value in the SBMIs discussed in the literature are presented in Table 1. These variables are the reference topics for the empirical investigation.

Tab. 1: Summary of the main dimensions of SBMI and related/its value strategies

Dimensions	Value strategies	Sources
Strategy	Value proposition	Geissdoerfer <i>et al.</i> (2018); Bocken <i>et al.</i> , (2014)
Culture	Dissemination of a proactive culture aimed at sustainability	Geissdoerfer <i>et al.</i> (2016); Schaltegger <i>et al.</i> (2016); Bocken <i>et al.</i> , (2014); Boons and Ludeke-Freund (2013)
Resources	Exchange and combining of value	Geissdoerfer <i>et al.</i> (2018); Sciarelli and Tani (2015)
Partnerships	Creation and co-creation of social, environmental and economic value	Schaltegger <i>et al.</i> (2016); Bocken <i>et al.</i> (2014); Stubbs and Cocklin (2008)
Leadership	Harmonization of the exchanges and potential value renewal	Yip and Bocken (2018); Geissdoerfer <i>et al.</i> , (2018); Bocken <i>et al.</i> , (2014); Bansal (2002)

Source: Authors’ elaboration

Specifically, based on the literature review and in line with the proposed synthesis approach, the dimensions (or drivers) that act as catalysts of social change and sustainability-oriented innovation are (1) strategy, (2) culture, (3) resources, (4) partnerships and (5) leadership. The synthesis approach first proposes that sustainable objectives be included in the company’s overall strategies, so they align with processes and operating practices (Rosemann and Von Brocke, 2015). The fit between strategy and tactics can be improved by creating a cohesive culture that activates resource exchange between consonant individuals with complementary skills and competences, which, when appropriately and dynamically combined, can generate new sustainable value.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Research strategy

To investigate the factors and mechanisms enabling sustainable value creation, an exploratory approach was required. The aim of the first research question (RQ1) was to determine the critical factors (in terms of organizational strategies, culture and capacity, resources, partnerships and leadership) required to support a business model for sustainable innovation. For the second research question (RQ2), the intention was to reconstruct the process of new value creation, dissemination and capture by hypothesizing that it would intersect with the various areas, potentially creating a cycle of sustainable value creation. Specifically, we adopted a discovery-oriented approach (Wells, 1993), privileging a qualitative analysis to achieve a better understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. To that end, we chose a case study methodology, which enables investigation of the how and the why of a phenomenon in its natural context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly distinguishable (Yin, 2015).

The case studied is “Progetto Quid”, an Italian firm in the women’s fashion sector that combines innovation and sustainability. This is illustrated in the company’s mission “to combine the beauty of fashion with ethical fashion: from surplus textile production to social value creation”, through continuous investment in research and development (R&D), and a strong social, environmental and economic sustainability orientation. For these reasons, Progetto Quid provides an excellent empirical context for addressing the research questions.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

Secondary sources such as the corporate website and business documents provided general information about the company. The data collection also involved a series of in-depth interviews conducted between December 2018 and July 2019, in which the respondents identified what was relevant to the research objective (Alvesson, 2003). The interviewees included the vice president, the managing director, and managers and employees from administration and personnel, commercial and retail sales, institutional relations, digital and communications, and procurement and logistics. Selection was determined by the respondents’ ability to holistically explain the processes underlying the business model. The face-to-face interviews, conducted at the company’s head office, for about 50 minutes each, were based on a survey with open-ended questions posed to 10 participants.

In line with the research questions and the critical dimensions of the identified SBMIs (see Table 1), an interview guide was prepared (see Appendix).

Regarding the dimensions of “strategy”, “culture”, “resources”, “partnerships” and “leadership” drawn from the literature review, the dimension “sustainable innovation development” was introduced (Topic 7 in the Appendix), understood as the outcome of the entire process

enabled by the antecedents relating to the dimensions in Topics 2 to 6. In other words, the sustainable innovation strategies were deduced from the analysis of the other variables using specific guiding questions aimed at detecting how much sustainable innovation was strategically pursued and continued over an extended period.

The guide therefore represented a list of macro areas examined in depth during the interview (Bichi, 2002), in a flexible manner, respecting the personal inclinations and profiles of the individuals investigated, so that the themes emerged as spontaneously as possible from the words of the respondents themselves. In this way, intervention of the interviewer, who played a strategic, interpretive role focused on listening to avoid potential distortion, was reduced to a minimum.

For the data analysis, a preliminary step was to design a research protocol for organizing and interpreting the data obtained gradually; the data were then classified into homogeneous categories to increase the overall reliability of the research (Yin, 2015). The iterative coding process was based on classifying, testing and redefining the data gathered.

4. Results

The analysis results were classified according to the subdivisions of the main drivers of the business models for sustainable innovation adopted as guidelines for drafting the interview.

Accordingly, for each of the variables in the interviews, the following subsections present (1) the key factors of Quid's innovation-oriented sustainable business model (RQ1); and (2) the strategies and main outcomes of sustainable value (RQ2) expected to emerge across the different business dimensions.

4.1 Company overview: Main activities and sales network

Progetto Quid was founded in 2012 in Verona as an organization for social advancement, through the initiative of five young Veronese friends who share a passion for fashion and a strong social conscience. Their experience in the world of economics and international cooperation has led them progressively to embrace the great challenge of creating an entrepreneurial project that combines ethical fashion, solidarity and sustainability.

Currently, the company produces limited-edition garments and accessories, using almost exclusively high-quality surplus fabric and textile elements (i.e. zippers, buttons, ribbons, etc.) donated by prestigious companies from the fashion and textile sectors. According to the procurement manager, "Often they are too small for large production or are no longer in use because of trends or technical characteristics of the fabric".

The head of institutional relations emphasized that "Quid aims to offer something more, in terms of both uniqueness and its contribution to resolving urgent social issues such as the protection and economic growth

of disadvantaged population groups, providing equal working conditions for women and valorizing cultural diversity”. Moreover, the acronym Quid stands for the following: “Q’ means qualcosa in più [something more], ‘U’ is for unicità [uniqueness], ‘I’ for innovazione [innovation] and ‘D’ refers to donne [women], one of the main stakeholders”.

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The above statements highlight the steadfast willingness to pursue the economic and social objectives of the company’s vision and mission. In fact, the sustainable principles appear to be closely linked to the constant pursuit of innovation. This is confirmed by one of the firm’s priority objectives: “to create added value for the community, customers and partners, with a strong awareness of social and environmental problems”.

Tables 2 and 3, drawn from the intersection of the interviews and the secondary data processing, highlight the company’s development trends in terms of performance, relational networks and production capacity.

Tab. 2: Progetto Quid’s development trends 2013–2019

Year	Turnover (million €)	Personnel	Women	Age (years)	Nationalities	B2B clients	Suppliers
2019	3.2	125	80%	19–67	15	10	42
2018	2.8	114	80%	19–67	15	10	40
2017	1.943	88	80.88%	19–67	13	10	17
2016	1.054	60	55.56%	18–65	11	8	7
2015	0.493	17	90.9%	27–61	3	4	ND
2014	0.290	5	80%	26–55	Italian	3	ND
2013	0.090	2	50%	25–31	Italian	2	ND

Source: Authors’ elaboration from data collected through interviews and secondary sources

Tab. 3: Progetto Quid’s production sites 2013–2019

Year	Production sites
2019	Production site in Avesa (Verona, Italy), and design workshops in the men’s and women’s sections of the Verona prison
2018	Renovation of the new production site in Avesa. Design workshop in the women’s section of the Verona prison and opening of design workshop in the men’s section of the Verona prison
2017	New production site in Avesa to be renovated. Design workshop in the women’s section of the Verona prison.
2016	Production site in Avesa and design workshop in the women’s section of the Verona prison
2015	Opening of a new production area in Avesa. Opening of a design workshop in the women’s section of the Verona prison
2014	Opening of the first managed workshop
2013	Production outsourcing to 3 local cooperatives

Source: Authors’ elaboration from data collected through interviews and secondary sources

Since the opening of its first pop-up shop in the summer of 2014, Quid has developed a path of constant growth with an annual increase in turnover and personnel, in 2019 reporting a turnover of about 3 million euro and 120 employees. In terms of the sales network, the company distributes its garments through six single-brand stores (in Verona, Vallesè

[Verona], Mestre, Bassano del Grappa, Cadriano [Bologna] and Milan), two of which are located inside outlets; 80 multi-brand stores in Italy; and e-commerce through progettoquid.it/e-shop/. Quid also permanently collaborates with internationally renowned fashion and lifestyle brands to create lines dedicated to ethical accessories.

4.2 Strategy

Quid's *raison d'être* is a special interest in social challenges, such as inclusion, socio-economic development of disadvantaged population groups, and valorizing women's role. Therefore, social sustainability appears to be pivotal upstream of the company strategies, which consist of a preliminary set of core values aimed at spreading and promoting a culture oriented towards sustainable innovation.

Regarding the protection of women's work, the head of institutional relations emphasized, among the key values, the promotion of "work reintegration for people in difficult conditions, especially women, through their employment in productive activities that respond to market logic and stimulate active participation in beauty and creativity". Therefore, the company is committed to personnel development, particularly women who embody reliability and awareness.

The company's eye to the future is supported by a proactive leadership in constant pursuit of social change and advancement, and a fit between the sustainable strategies and the tactics and operational processes actually implemented.

Strategic planning for constant discussion of ideas, opportunities, proposals, criticalities, requirements and feedback develops a more efficient and effective collective thinking and commitment, and contributes to the spread of sustainable culture and rooting the company vision within the community: "When customers are informed about the ethical, social and environmental aims behind the product, they are even more willing to buy it. We want them to be attracted by its beauty and uniqueness". Table 4 summarizes the main results regarding the strategic variables.

Tab. 4: Main results for the "strategy" dimension

Main drivers (RQ1)	Strategies for managing drivers	Strategies for managing sustainable value creation (RQ2)	Main outcomes for innovation development
Sustainable orientation	Creation of a cohesive set of values to be disseminated to stakeholders based on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • social inclusion • uniqueness • ethical values • pursuit of social challenges and economic recovery 	Designing a sustainable value proposition	Addressing social challenges such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • social inclusion • protection of disadvantaged segments • women's employment development • creation of added value for the community
Leadership (innovative, proactive)	Reinforcement of shared vision (internal engagement)	Anticipation of environmental changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • social change • creativity
Strategic planning for occasions for sharing	Translating vision into operational terms	Processes for aligning the company's sustainable strategy with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • implemented tactics • consumers' ethical values 	Fit and cultural alignment

Source: Authors' elaboration

4.3 Culture

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Quid disseminates its key sustainable culture values by promoting numerous social projects thanks to funds raised through participating in calls for proposals, competitions, and local and international prizes for social innovation and territorial development. This active engagement allows the company to carry on offering job placement support services, creating a genuine welfare system that includes a digital literacy course for all company staff. A project to measure the impact of social innovation initiatives has also been launched.

The push towards a new welfare system is also supported, from a more strictly cultural point of view, by institutionalizing new social norms, behaviours and lifestyles (see Table 5).

Tab. 5: Main results for the "culture" dimension

Main drivers (RQ1)	Strategies for managing drivers	Strategies for managing sustainable value creation (RQ2)	Main outcomes for innovation development
Sustainable collective culture	Provision of job placement support services	Dissemination of a cohesive culture based on shared sustainable values	Awareness of social issues, and of economic and environmental development
Development of social projects Institutionalization of culture through new social practices	Fundraising activities through participation in calls for proposals, competitions and prizes Development and transfer of the value of the garments' uniqueness	Creation of social value in the form of norms, practices, behaviours and attitudes	New welfare system New ethical lifestyle New way of experiencing fashion and new sustainable status symbol

Source: Authors' elaboration

As affirmed by Quid's head of industrial relations, "Our customers and partners are experiencing a new way of dressing. The consumers are the voice of a new lifestyle based on the need to own modern, unusual, exclusive garments accompanied by an awareness that what they are wearing is 'clean'".

Therefore, promulgating Quid's values means guiding the various individuals involved towards a new "clean" and ethical conception of fashion intended to convey a sense of uniqueness as well as responsibility; in other words, "to give a sense of prestige to the garments of our consumers, who don't wear mere clothes but wear true status because today fashion is no longer elitist but popular, and even if it aims for a unique style, it is done without compromising the material's quality or risking future generations' development".

4.4 Resources

The company has an extensive supply network that the vice president describes as a chain of solidarity between suppliers that directs and supports Quid in establishing new contacts. She emphasized that "the desire to put the fabric at the service of a social project is an important motivator for

the textile manufacturers to participate in the project". Consequently, the company prolongs the fabrics' life cycle through ongoing recovery and recycling, thereby reducing their carbon footprint through less resource and energy waste.

Alongside the resource allocation strategies, Quid uses strategies for value creation and exchange based on two main drivers (see Table 6): (1) organizational learning focused on the active exchange of knowledge and incentive logic for ongoing learning; (2) management of information processes and transparent communication through the synergic and efficient use of new technologies that also help to increase engagement.

Regarding the first aspect, the company is constantly redefining the skills of its employees and management, whose know-how linked to implementing sustainable practices is continually stimulated. Learning is intended as a key lever for capturing "weak signals" both within the organization for any emergence of organizational creativity and outside to intercept consumers' changing and emerging needs.

As reported by the vice president, "Since the birth of the company, more than 600, 000 euros have been raised from local and international foundations that support strategic investments and training courses". Ongoing learning is also stimulated through training projects, aimed at work placement and inclusion. The vice president clarified: "We work intensively on a leadership model and inclusive training, to protect and valorize linguistic, generational, cultural and skills diversity. We train people, who in turn supervise and train the company's human resources, using a pedagogical approach that can develop skills to explain concepts; to deal with overcoming errors (especially in the presence of people who have experienced traumatic violence); and to face linguistic and sensory barriers (for example, interacting without verbal language in the presence of deaf-mute people). We also invest in intercultural skills training".

Regarding the second aspect, the company's environmental, economic and social sustainability practices are supported, with the intention of creating engagement, at a strategic and operational level through interactive communication processes developed on social platforms and the institutional portal. Therefore, a sustainable infrastructure based on integrated technological tools not only improves information flow and harmonizes relationships but also continuously collects customer feedback through shops, agents, e-commerce, social media and customer care service, to capture continuous innovative ideas. As the communication manager explained, "Appreciation is expressed on social media; we receive a good response on Facebook and Instagram. Customers comment on the collection, express their satisfaction level and offer suggestions about our projects. All comments, statements and suggestions are continuously transmitted to the style office".

The main technological tools used are (1) computerized management systems for customer relationship management (CRM) and (2) social networks.

The head of R&D stated that the company has "integrated its own CRM with software for managing production processes (ERP, [enterprise resource planning]) specific to the fashion industry. An investment aimed

at reducing margins of error, monitoring consumption and costs, and making production more efficient”. The company thus appears strongly oriented towards consolidating investments in network infrastructures and digitization projects, to efficiently and effectively support the implementation of their social and business initiatives.

The social networking strategy is carefully designed. Through Facebook and Instagram, the company communicates the social project themes and the value aspect of its offering, respectively. Social channels are useful for fuelling and raising the engagement level. Through Instagram, as reported by the digital and communications manager, “The company develops its own research in the style and design domain with the support of the communication team to internalize the evolution of ethical fashion in the proposed models in terms of styles, trends and demands”. In this sense, stimuli and input contribute to formulating the product concept, the collection’s narrative path, the photo shoot location choice and the ways to display the clothing.

In addition, the company has recently restructured its e-commerce portal to activate “a more user-friendly platform with a younger, fresh, immediate, intuitive and aesthetically more functional interface”. The institutional website has also been equipped with an easier interface, and more importantly, it is also available in English, which is fundamental in light of Quid’s strong international profile.

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Tab. 6: Main results for the “resources” dimension

Main drivers (RQ1)	Strategies for managing drivers	Strategies for managing sustainable value creation (RQ2)	Main outcomes for innovation development
Development of supply chain and sustainable value chain	Creation of network for supply and distribution of “clean” raw material products	Allocation and management of renewable resources Emissions reduction	Tax benefits Reduction of fabric waste and increased production efficiency Building social recognition of the project
Organizational learning	Development of highly qualified skills through interfunctional integration of competences	Ongoing training activities Psychological and practical support service for staff	Updating of company skills Proactive management Creativity immersion
Digitization of business processes Information management Communication flow management	Investment in digital communication platforms: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • e-commerce portals • institutional website • customer relationship management • social networks 	Sustainable infrastructure integrated for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • support in formulating new product concepts • harmonizing of reporting • information flow management • data collection and creative stimuli (feedback) for co-innovation 	Greater ability to “capture” the expressed and unexpressed needs of customers and stakeholders (feedback collection)

Source: Authors’ elaboration

The “partnerships” variable refers to a complex relationship network created through involvement of a varied set of stakeholders, comprising (1) internal staff, (2) potential collaborators outside the organization, (3) suppliers, (4) for-profit companies, (5) non-profit organizations and (6) customers.

In terms of the internal profile, Quid’s human resources comprise a cohesive team of designers, stylists, pattern-makers and sewing staff. The organization also has recourse to highly qualified professional figures distinguished by their teamwork and initiative. The teams in charge of fashion and social project development work closely together, and they are promptly and continually updated.

The staff have a strong sense of belonging to the company community. The vice president maintains that an important shift towards internal integration is taking shape, evidenced by the numerous photos frequently posted by employees with their colleagues and by their active participation in the monthly meetings arranged in house with a psychologist (who has a stress thermometer), as well as the various social occasions organized over the year, at Christmas, in the summer...

Regarding potential employee recruitment, in the second half of 2018 a new CSR was launched with the aim of strengthening inclusion through work. The intervention areas are diversity valorization, migrant integration and women’s leadership valorization. “In the last five years”, the managing director reported, “Quid has made significant investments in production capacity by hiring an increasing number of disadvantaged women workers”. He added, “For the years 2019–2021, the company has set itself the objective of strengthening the range and depth of its social impact”.

With respect to suppliers, as indicated by the head of institutional relations, Quid “has consolidated its partnerships over the years with 40 suppliers among the main European and international producers of fine fabrics”.

Collaborations have also been established with non-profit organizations and for-profit companies. Co-design projects to create lines dedicated to ethical accessories in the fashion, textile and home sector are conducted in partnership with internationally renowned brands. In this context, long-term agreements have also been developed referring to Article 14 of the Biagi law on the employment of protected categories. These partnerships, in the vice president’s vision, “are invaluable for entrenching the idea that the product codesigned and produced by Quid really does have ‘something more’, achieving greater social recognition of the project, supporting the targeted placement of personnel, recovering cost-free fabric inventories, obtaining physical spaces for production activities or pop-up shops, providing services such as shared values promotion and marketing, and distributing products made in the network”.

The vice president also reported that nurturing relationships with important national and international organizations is also fundamental in three respects: “They enable Quid to be economically sustainable, because they help to fund projects that can generate well-being and not just profit;

they enable us to critically reflect on our projects, since we often interface with people for whom philanthropy is a job, and an area of research and personal interest, and who therefore contribute valuable observations and constructive comments. They enable us to activate contacts, by being included in a national and international network where like-minded people generate other contacts. They enable us to engage with smaller social fashion enterprises where tutoring or mentoring activities contribute to catalysing the impact”.

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These partnerships and collaborations have also prompted Quid to think differently about its networking methods.

Finally, Quid’s key stakeholders are both business and consumer clients. The latter are mainly women between 30 and 65, with moderate spending power; the former are boutiques, often family-run shops located mainly in northern and central Italy, and agents, who manage the boutiques by geographical area. Client relationships are based on trust, sharing and co-creation of value. In particular, the company is able to increase their engagement through constant peer-to-peer dialogue and an understanding of their needs. “Our project”, explained the vice president, “works well if the customer is on our side. We are interested in selling, but our foremost goal is to explain why our products are not always perfect, so they are motivated to continue buying our clothes for the values they symbolize. It’s important to communicate the social mission, the effort, what we are doing. We must be able to maintain a relationship that communicates meaning in the purchase that goes beyond ‘I like the style’ and ‘The shape is nice’”.

As highlighted by the head of commercial and retail sales, Quid has introduced a business model that is “collaborative based on open innovation, that is, innovation created from the bottom up that not only aims to identify and respond to the community’s needs but enables us to predict their needs and to contribute to their enrichment, by guiding them towards sustainability”. Table 7 summarizes the main stakeholders in the network created by Quid.

Tab. 7: Main results for the “partnership” dimension

Main drivers (RQ1)	Strategies for managing drivers	Strategies for managing sustainable value creation (RQ2)	Main outcomes for innovation development
Network of relationships with stakeholders and strategic partners	Collaborations and development of relationships with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • internal staff • potential external collaborators • suppliers/distributors • non-profit organizations • for-profit enterprises • consumers 	Creation and sharing of sustainable culture for a sustainable innovation-oriented network Involvement of a varied set of stakeholders in the co-creation of value	Social inclusion Product development and service aimed at eco-sustainability Tactical flexibility based on established strategies

Source: Authors’ elaboration

4.6 Leadership

Quid’s management has developed a series of dynamic capabilities and organizational skills that enable the company to acquire, combine and transform tangible and intangible resources in different ways, to

continuously address environmental change conditions, strengthen competitive capacity, improve performance and offer sustainable value. The company's leadership works tirelessly to harmoniously orchestrate relationships, company processes and the fit between strategies and tactics (see Table 8).

As highlighted by the head of human resources, "Central is the entrepreneurship role represented in the company by a young, multifaceted woman, whose ability to lead is perceived by the company's internal and external communities as versatile, adaptive and proactive". Her direct collaborators describe her as a person who is "constantly involved in the activities to be carried out, engaged, focused on sharing strategies and knowledge, open to discussion and dialogue, innovation oriented, and focused on encouraging internal connection/cohesion. She expresses a visionary leadership and relies on it to develop the skills of others".

Therefore, tactical flexibility and proactive redesigning of the business model in the constant pursuit of sustainable strategies are the key capabilities that support the people at Quid's helm. In addition, management's lean green manufacturing skills are key levers for creating a sustainable offering. However, "mere" know-how about eco-sustainable practices is not enough. Indeed, Quid's founder and president has a solid managerial economics background, is an expert in international relations and specializes in women's empowerment. As the head of institutional relations stated, "Before founding Quid at the age of 25 she gained experience working in international cooperation in India and Haiti, and in 2018 she was a finalist in the EU Prize for Women Innovators". The management comprises 90% women aged between 25 and 40: apprentices and professionals who, after training abroad in leading fashion companies, have chosen to put their talent at the service of social entrepreneurship. The vice president also pointed out that "Quid intends to continue to support an internal leadership model, built from below. How we want to be, how we want to behave, how we want to organize ourselves, the importance we give to the limitations that each of us brings to the workplace, the extent to which we can ask a colleague to do more and the extent to which we want to personally intervene, including in cultural and intercultural issues".

Strong organizational skills accompany the development of projects from the conception phase to the implementation phase. Each project is directed by a specially created team and strategic planning activity fuelled by continuous moments of sharing aimed at strengthening internal engagement. Operating at the same location, or in adjacent locations, leads to constant, timely updating. A human resources employee stated, "We hold a coordination meeting every Monday morning attended by all team representatives and vice representatives, and we plan dedicated meetings between closely collaborating teams".

Ultimately, thanks to skilful mediation between strategies and tactics and between implementation of sustainable culture and extensive feedback collection, the leadership stimulates and develops constant renewal of new sustainable values co-created inside and outside the organization, aiming to increase well-being in terms of continual, long-term social, economic and environmental production.

Tab. 8: Main results for the “leadership” dimension

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Main drivers (RQ1)	Strategies for managing drivers	Strategies for managing sustainable value creation (RQ2)	Main outcomes for innovation development
Leadership with proactive managerial skills and sustainable know-how	Ability to recognize the cost and opportunity benefits of social projects launched on behalf of staff Harmonization of company processes and relations	New value creation and renewal through institutionalization Continuous, long-term value regeneration through circular processes of knowledge exchange	Well-being and shared growth Multiple community benefits (environmental, social, economic)

Source: Authors' elaboration

4.7 Development of sustainable innovation

Strategic management of the analyzed business dimensions (strategy, culture, resource, partnerships and leadership) and their synergistic combination lead to co-creation of renewed sustainable value. Quid's business model tirelessly pursues generation of economic, social and environmental outcomes, achieved through constant nurturing of relationships with a variety of stakeholders who share ethical values and are proactively involved. The triple objective of sustainability cuts across all business processes, which are firmly linked to the strategies of sustainable value development and creation, leading to innovative technological, process and product/service profiles.

Quid's business model has been recognized at the European level as a sustainable model aimed at environmental innovation; in particular, for the activities of “recovery of a large amount of fabric waste, thus avoiding disposal to landfills, which are prone to producing a powerful greenhouse gas, methane”. This result is also supported by its waste disposal practices and reduced environmental emissions: “Energy consumption associated with waste disposal is also reduced, with a knock-on effect of cost savings. During the first four years of operation, Quid reduced its carbon dioxide emissions by around 18, 000 tonnes”. Moreover, in the social sphere, its innovative business approach has been recognized by the European Economic and Social Committee with the Civil Society Prize. The GreenItaly 2017 report cited Quid for best practice, and at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change events “Momentum for Change” and “From Waste to Wow”, the company stood out for its commitment to protecting the environment and fighting against gender inequalities. Finally, in 2018 it won the “Best Wworkers” award, according to the head of digital and communications, for “its ability to combine social value and attention to environmental impact with the opportunities offered by the web and by digitization”. Ongoing participation in national and international events, awards and competitions provides an important platform to transmit the business model concept behind Progetto Quid as well as its positive, hopeful narrative. As the vice president indicated,

“They are an important visibility showcase, they are moments when we can collect many contact opportunities and business cards, and they are a starting point for many partnerships”.

Finally, the company offers support and mentoring to start-up companies in terms of training (resources), development of human resources (people), and creation of a network of social and sustainable partners, “thus extending those that can benefit from the sustainable circular economy methods developed by Quid”.

Table 9 classifies the different types of value outcomes of Quid’s sustainable innovations.

Tab. 9: Main results for the “sustainable innovation development” dimension

Main innovative outcomes	Sustainable value achieved	Type of value co-created
”From Waste to Wow” (UNFCCC), winner of the European Social Innovation Competition 2014	Waste management Reduced environmental emissions Energy conservation Cost reduction Women’s social inclusion Reinterpretation of Made in Italy Combating climate change Combating gender inequalities	Environmental Social Economic
Civil Society Prize	Social inclusion Fostering economic development for migrants	Social Economic
GreenItaly 2017	Development of human resources Creation of a network of social and sustainable partners Circular economy models	Social Economic
”Momentum for Change” (UNFCCC)	Health of the planet and climate neutrality Valorization of women’s work pro the environment ”Climate friendly” investments	Environmental Social Economic
Best Wworkers 2018	Reduced environmental impact Valorization of Made in Italy and artisan production Exploiting the potential of new technologies	Environmental Social

Source: Authors’ elaboration

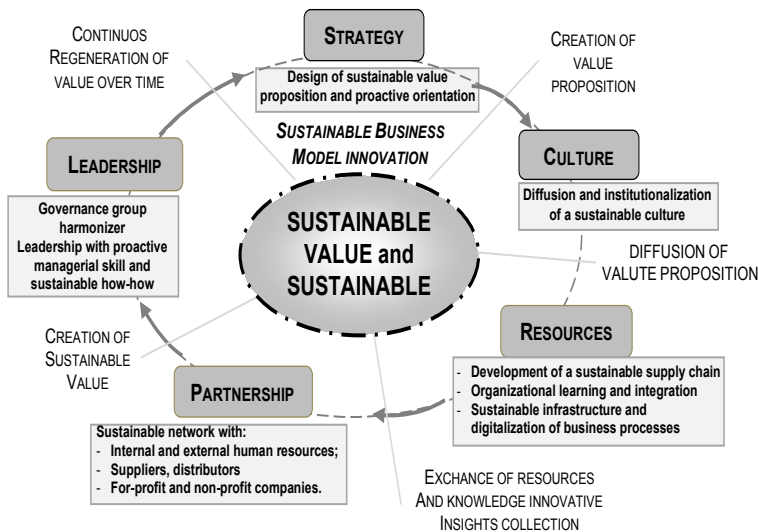
5. Discussion

The study results enable us to answer the research questions. In particular, the main critical success factors for creating an SBMI (strategies, culture, human resources, partnership and leadership) were found to be present within Quid’s activities and processes, as described by the interviewees. In addition, strategies that cut across the process management of the above dimensions (RQ1) were identified. It was also possible to reconstruct for each dimension the process of new value creation, diffusion and capture (RQ2), which was confirmed as “intersecting” along the various areas, creating a perpetual cycle of sustainable value creation underlying the overall business processes.

Finally, it was found that the triple objective of sustainability is pursued by Quid in all its business initiatives and innovative practices. Therefore, it has adopted a conscious innovation strategy by creating a cohesive culture, stakeholder engagement and a leadership aimed at optimizing the key drivers to generate social, environmental and economic innovation. Sustainable value creation is the result of a crucial strategic focus. The basic concept is that the company's survival is linked, on the one hand, to its ability to attract the best resources through its overall supply system to guarantee continuity and development of its activities, and on the other, to its ability to respond to its stakeholders' expectations in a coherent and conscious manner, building and strengthening relationships of mutual trust. The Quid microcosm is animated by co-participative and co-creative collaborations at a strategic level.

The Quid case study enables further specification of the macro dimensions of the SBMs identified in the literature review. To this end, a framework for the SBMI is proposed (see Figure 1).

Fig. 1: The SBMI framework



Source: Authors' elaboration

The first dimension (strategy) is implemented through dissemination of a sustainability orientation, as evidenced by the management's continuous focus on environmental protection, energy conservation and minimizing the impacts associated with the transformation, production and consumption cycles, and the conscious use of resources to promote responsible, sustainable development of the territory in which the company operates.

Two main drivers disseminate this orientation: (1) a proactive, synergistic leadership; and (2) mechanisms for sharing and aligning strategies and objectives.

In the first case, there is a need for “socially minded leadership” aimed at innovation and social control of production methods and value distribution, balancing private interests with social interests, and reconciling shareholders’ expectations with enduring development of natural, human and social resources (Arru and Ruggeri, 2016). This organizational ability supports the conception and implementation of value propositions that meet the customers’ expressed or unexpressed needs, and the implementation of technological investments for production processes to improve their efficiency.

In the second case, the sharing mechanisms provide for constant alignment of the emerging strategy with the tactics, the company’s operations and the consumers’ individual ethical values.

The sustainable orientation is translated into a shared vision within the company’s community (culture) by company members transmitting and internalizing sustainable principles. An indicator that an effective sustainable culture has been created is the proposal of new social norms (in this case, a new welfare system) and new attitudes, customs or practices (a new lifestyle and way of understanding fashion).

A sustainable company not only has the task of identifying resources in line with its sustainable strategy (resources), it must also redefine the supply chain management with sustainable standards and aim for continuous renewal of internal skills able to support, in all company processes, the drive for economic, social and environmental innovation.

To support the resource allocation strategies, an efficient SBM should include the following subdimensions: (1) organizational learning based on active knowledge exchange; and (2) management of information processes and transparent communication through synergic and efficient use of new technologies that also help to increase engagement (Pencarelli *et al.*, 2019).

Organizational learning refers to the acquisition of knowledge and skills used in decision-making processes, in performing specialist activities and in distributing resources to support the management of sustainable practices. In this context, ongoing training is essential to understand the complexity and dynamism associated with these processes and to internalize a proactive, responsible sustainability mindset. The complexity, dynamism and investment required to design and implement business processes point to the need for interfunctional integration (Stone *et al.*, 2004), which the company conveys in the form of intense interaction between employees in different functional areas. Moreover, the process of exchanging resources and the efficient management of information and feedback received from users is harmonized by a sustainable technological platform that supports the business through the digitization of processes (Pencarelli *et al.*, 2019) with tools such as computerized management systems of CRM or social networks.

The partnerships variable is configured as a set of activities to identify and engage a varied set of stakeholders with whom the company has generated a relationship network. Networking with suppliers, business clients, consumers, public and private bodies and institutions, as well as internal staff, is an organizational ability that facilitates information

exchange, knowledge sharing and long-term collaboration, ensuring that relationships are based on co-evolution logic and are innovation oriented.

Ultimately, new value creation can be optimized and practised sustainably over time through the key mediation role of a leadership that ensures harmonization between strategies and business tactics and between sustainable culture implementation and the constant collection of feedback from users to share and intercept new requirements. In this way, by stimulating and developing perpetual renewal of the new sustainable values co-created within and outside the organization, the triple objective of sustainable innovation is achieved, bringing with it an increase in well-being and production of long-term social, economic and environmental development.

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6. Theoretical and managerial implications

Overall, the study has increased understanding of the drivers and the consequent mechanisms through which a company can promote integrated value creation, thus contributing to management theory and practice.

First, starting from the lack of empirical studies that explain the processes and outcomes through which a business model can develop sustainability-oriented innovation (Thompson and MacMillan, 2010; Evans *et al.*, 2017), and considering sustainability a component to be amalgamated synergistically within the innovation-generating strategies and upstream of the business model, the in-depth study has led to a proposed framework that conceptualizes the categories of analysis that point towards an SBMI. It offers a summary vision of the drivers of the creation and co-creation of sustainable value and sustainable innovation, integrating the value-based approach with the principles of SBMI.

In the developed framework, sustainability is not "simply" an outcome of business processes, but assumes the role of a driving force for the development of sustainable innovation emerging from dynamic and circular value proposition mechanisms. The result is systemic management of the processes of new value generation and dissemination through specific co-creation strategies to create innovative social, economic and environmental outcomes aimed at contributing to sustainable development and growth as supported by and aligned with a sustainable organizational culture. The outcome of the process is new mutual and integrated value. Sustainable innovation can therefore be generated through the dynamic and "unique" combination of values, which emerges when a new value is created, a synergistic effect of the interrelationships between the knowledge of the members of an organization or network of organizations. It does not derive from the simple summation of these skills but from a "relational" plus.

Second, the proposed framework can support management in acquiring greater awareness of the opportunities and criticalities of implementing and managing an SBM oriented to the development of innovative practices (Maiolini *et al.*, 2018).

Further, at a broader level, the study provides a categorization of strategies and tools that policymakers can use to better understand the

business areas they should focus on to promote the adoption of sustainable policies (Tencati and Pogutz, 2015), from sustainable education programmes to specific welfare systems, taxation and incentives, from actions affecting the reduction of harmful emissions along the supply chain, to initiatives to raise awareness and spread the culture of sustainability.

Identifying the most appropriate steps for achieving an SBM can lead companies to experiment with such models through empirical research, simulations and scenario analysis. Reproducing human behaviour and business decision-making processes, the model can be validated through techniques such as fuzzy logic, scenario analysis or agent-based models (Zhang and Zhang, 2007; Vanhaverbeke and Macharis, 2011).

One of the main consequences of today's complex market is the uncertainty about the actual sustainability of company members' behaviour and their economic, social and environmental impact. It follows that being able to simulate this process can help companies to understand how sustainable their activities are and to identify the value created and detect its impact on performance and opportunities for development and innovation. Since business model innovations are considered value catalysts (Grieco and Cerruti, 2018), according to the SBMI model introduced, identifying drivers for sustainable practices can lead to development of indicators to assess the impact of and measure the value created.

Given the current lack of a measurement framework with a certain degree of consensus or clear and defined measurement procedures and items (Lee et al., 2016), identifying potential outcomes in the economic, social and environmental spheres points towards the creation of a multidimensional model, based on the TBL, for measuring sustainable value objectives, performance and creation. For example, according to the dimensions proposed, the social sphere can include the key elements indicating partnerships and culture, the economic sphere can refer to resources and the environmental sphere to leadership.

7. Conclusions and research limitations

"Progetto Quid" has revealed an ability to propose and disseminate sustainable value that is deeply rooted in its strategic orientation and company culture. The business model, with characteristics of innovation and sustainability, is based on a holistic vision of all the factors suitable to ensure a skilful, continuous link between sustainable business strategies and the company's tactics, practices and processes, and between a sustainable organizational culture and the individual ethical values of the customers, whose feedback it is important to collect in order to intercept new needs and demands. The constant commitment to align and renew the values generated and shared within and outside the organization needs to be supported by the relationships and interactions that enable value creation and co-creation.

Although the study as a whole offers interesting points for reflection, it does have some limitations.

First, the analysis of a single company from the fashion industry does not allow generalization of the results. This research should be supported by a wider sample of companies operating in different businesses and representing business experiences with strong explanatory power, able to combine innovation and sustainability in the process of value generation and dissemination.

Second, the study was conducted from the company's perspective and does not take into account the viewpoint of the other players in its relationship system, with regard to which the processes of value co-creation were analysed to identify strategies for their effective management and the outcomes pursued in terms of sustainable innovation. Therefore, the study identifies the main phases that management could pursue at a strategic level for implementing an SBMI, in which, for example, the role of consumers is all pervasive in each phase, both because-as stated by the managers included in the sample-they are actively involved in each step, and because the company consciously modulates strategy, culture and selection of resources, partnerships and leadership in each business area and according to the other stakeholders.

Future studies could analyze consumer perception and practices through qualitative (in-depth interviews, focus groups) or quantitative (survey) techniques, specifically applying the proposed framework. Therefore, a future direction for the research, to explore the process of sustainable value creation and value capture more deeply, would be to extend the analysis to businesses other than fashion and to involve important actors such as partners, customers and consumers in order to understand operationally how the mechanisms through which sustainability-oriented innovation is generated are configured.

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Appendix: Interview guide

Topic 1 – General information about the company

- What is your company's mission?
- What are the main production and distribution options and how is the commercial network composed?

Topic 2 – Strategy

- What key values does your company pursue? How are they proposed and disseminated?
- What strategy and future plans guide the company?

Topic 3 – Culture

- Are the principles of sustainability and social change incorporated upstream of the company culture?
- Are there any activities aimed at disseminating the key values of sustainable culture?

Topic 4 – Resources

- What are the main resources required to create sustainable value?
- Are there strategies to regulate the exchange of resources?
- What role does the use of specific digital technologies play in your company?
- What is the role of digital technologies in innovation processes?

Topic 5 – Partnerships

- What are the main partnerships and collaborations activated by your company?
- Are there any training strategies oriented towards sustainability and aimed at internal and external members of the organization?

Topic 6 – Leadership

- What are the skills used to manage resources and partnerships in a logic of sustainable value?
- Are there any strategies for managing relations with partners?
- Are the values generated renewed over time through comparisons with users and partners and the exchange of resources?

Topic 7 – Sustainable innovation development

- What does sustainable innovation mean for your company?
- What have been and what are the main sustainable objectives pursued through innovation development?

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italian journal of management

ISSN 0393-5108

DOI 10.7433/s109.2019.11

pp. 213-237



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