Sustainability in retail services: a transformative service research (TSR) perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – Retail organizations that consider a service ecosystems view of sustainability focused on transformation have the potential to contribute to the wellbeing of individuals, business and society. The purpose of this paper is to explore the transformative nature of sustainable retail fashion organizations and their impact on wellbeing within a sustainable retail service ecosystem.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative in-depth case study research design was implemented using four sustainable fashion brands. Data were collected from multiple sources including secondary data from company websites and publicly available reports and interviews with founders and/or high-ranking managers within the organization.

Findings – Three overarching themes critical to transformation in sustainable retail service ecosystems were identified: (1) embedded core purpose or ethos, (2) relevance of fit and (3) breadth and depth of message. Corresponding wellbeing elements were found within the three themes – community and society wellbeing, environmental wellbeing, business strategy wellbeing, consumer wellbeing, leadership wellbeing, employee wellbeing, stakeholder and value chain wellbeing and brand wellbeing.

Research limitations/implications – Future research offers an important opportunity to further explore the relationships between sustainability, TSR and wellbeing in other service contexts.

Originality/value – The paper contributes to transformative service research literature by conceptualizing a sustainable retail service wellbeing ecosystem framework.

Keywords Sustainability, Transformative service research (TSR), Wellbeing, Sustainable fashion retail

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The world continues to be plagued by grand challenges that are complex and diverse, calling for systemic change via a coordinated and collaborative effort to enable "true" individual, community and societal transformation (George *et al.*, 2016). Urgent 21st century grand challenges such as environmental degradation, climate change, poverty and more recently the pandemic, require various stakeholders – consumers, business, organizations and governments – to respond and rethink a way forward (George *et al.*, 2016). Alongside these challenges, sustainability has risen as a research priority and been highlighted as a potential solution to some of the world's problems (Fuchs and Boll, 2018). Specifically, sustainable business practices are needed in consumption, production and associated services allowing for a greater transformative shift toward sustainable and just futures, and individual, community, business and societal wellbeing (Moore and Milkoreit, 2020; White *et al.*, 2019). Organizations that prioritize sustainable strategies support the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Agenda 2030 (Grainger-Brown and Malekpour, 2019) by placing an emphasis on people, prosperity, planet, partnership and peace.

More recently, sustainability has grown as an important consideration in the retail sector (Kim and Seock, 2019; Kumar *et al.*, 2021; Ruiz-Real *et al.*, 2019) where a sustainable orientation has the potential to transform the retail experience (Grewal and Roggeveen, 2020), retail service market (Simões and Sebastiani, 2017) and retail ecosystems

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(Gardiazabal and Bianchi, 2021). Importantly, retail firms with sustainability embedded as a core value, have the capacity to intentionally enhance the wellbeing of all stakeholders in the retail ecosystem (for example, consumers, employees, suppliers and competitors) and to contribute to broader impacts on society (Finsterwalder and Kuppelwieser, 2020b). In this sense, a sustainable retail firm could be considered a transformative service, in that they not only provide value to key stakeholders by offering sustainable products that render a "service" to various actors through resource integration and service systems (Vargo and Lusch, 2008, 2011), but they ultimately offer a "service" to society in terms of mitigating some contemporary grand challenges. Sustainable fashion (SF) retail firms in particular have been touted as a panacea for the ills of fast fashion – considered one of the largest unsustainable industries (Bly *et al.*, 2015; Boström and Micheletti, 2016; Park and Lin, 2018). Most SF research has focused either on sustainable consumption from a consumer behavior perspective or on sustainable production and supply chains from a management viewpoint (Palakshappa and Dodds, 2020). What is missing in the extant literature is an examination of how SF retail firms can co-create value with actors in the retail ecosystem and consequently be a conduit for consumer, business and societal transformation by having a positive impact on the wellbeing of these actors – consumers, employees, suppliers, competitors and community at large. Therefore, researching SF retail brands from a transformative service research (TSR) perspective offers new insights into the potentiality of SF retail to co-create value through "service" (i.e. resource integration, knowledge sharing and collaboration) (Biggemann *et al.*, 2014) to enhance wellbeing, transform lives and literally help save the planet.

TSR explores the nexus between service and wellbeing by considering the contribution of services to improving the lives of individuals, families, communities and society (Anderson *et al.*, 2013). Although TSR has gained traction in the service literature (see Corus and Saatcioglu, 2015; Dietrich *et al.*, 2017; Hepi *et al.*, 2017; Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2011) very few studies focus on TSR in a retail context except for financial services (Le *et al.*, 2021), shopping malls (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2016) and supermarket retailing (Gardiazabal and Bianchi, 2021). The majority of TSR literature has primarily focused on healthcare, non-for-profit and social services that have wellbeing as a primary concern and outcome for all actors involved (Parkinson *et al.*, 2019). There is a dearth of research that examines sustainability as a prospective transformative tool in service management.

Although research has considered how sustainable businesses can transcend goods-based business logic by (co)creating value for actors in the service ecosystem (Brodie *et al.*, 2021) and developing sustainability for society, research on the transformative potential of retail firms within the retail service ecosystem is needed (Enquist *et al.*, 2015; Gardiazabal and Bianchi, 2021; Leo *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, the potential of service research to contribute to the global challenge of sustainability is evident and research that considers a service ecosystems view of sustainability focused on transformation and wellbeing at various levels is paramount to sustainable development (Field *et al.*, 2021; Rahman, 2021; Saviano *et al.*, 2017). The overall purpose of this study is to explore from a TSR perspective the transformational nature SF retail firms and determine the types of wellbeing elements that exist within a sustainable retail service ecosystem. We pose the following research question: How do SF retail firms provide impetus for consumer, business and societal transformation within the retail service ecosystem?

This research contributes to service theory and practice in three important ways. First, our study furthers TSR literature by extending understanding of how sustainable practices in retail service ecosystems can motivate holistic multi-level transformation. Second, we propose a sustainable retail service wellbeing ecosystem framework and build on important work examining wellbeing and wellbeing service systems (Leo *et al.*, 2019; Rahman, 2021) by providing a more nuanced view of what it takes to unleash the transformative potential of

retail services to generate wellbeing. Third, we provide important managerial implications. Specifically, we consider how a purpose-led approach provides greater possibility of creating transformation and wellbeing at all levels of the ecosystem, including broader implications for community, society and the environment.

Literature

Sustainability

Sustainability and sustainable practices have become increasingly relevant as the impact of business and their actions on society become apparent (Marcus, 2012). Society's awareness of limited resources and quest to minimize negative externalities of production and consumption has increased. An initial focus on the environment and conservation (Sharma *et al.*, 2010) morphed into a wider concern for sustainability encompassing environment, social and economic dimensions. Described as "the triple bottom line" (Elkington, 1997) or "people, planet and prosperity" (Lelieveld, 2012; Placet *et al.*, 2005), commitment to sustainability may provide businesses with a means to demonstrate corporate social responsibility to stakeholders while also achieving competitive advantage and financial improvements (Carroll, 2015; Sharma *et al.*, 2010). However, to work toward the United Nations SDGs and Agenda 2030, the success or failure of implementing sustainability cannot just be measured in financial terms but must consider the wellbeing of people and the planet (Elkington, 2018).

Scholarship and practice have highlighted different definitions and measures of sustainability (Springett, 2003; Tregidga *et al.*, 2018). Sidiropoulos (2014) suggests an individual, organization or groups interpretation is ultimately influenced by their own value lens. Even the commonly accepted Brundtland Commission definition of sustainable development as that "which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland, 1987, p. 8) is not without debate, given the subjectivity and challenges around how different stakeholders may define and interpret "needs" (Sidiropoulos, 2014).

The balance between social, environmental and economic dimensions of sustainability will not always be equal. Rather, their respective influence and interactions between them will vary depending on the context and focus of the situation (Tregidga *et al.*, 2018). Adopting sustainability through strategy signifies the importance placed on an organization's commitment to sustainability, but this commitment is insufficient to ensure sustainable practices are implemented and desired outcomes are achieved (Biloslavo *et al.*, 2018). According to Lozano (2015) key sustainability drivers for organizations seeking to become sustainable are pro-active leaderships, business case, reputation, consumer demands and expectations and regulation and legislation. Another key driver is the potential source for leverage of sustainable competitive advantage (Geissdoerfer *et al.*, 2018; Shakeel *et al.*, 2020). Fundamentally, organizations that seek to achieve integrated sustainable value (co) creation for multiple stakeholders (Ordonez-Ponce *et al.*, 2021) need to holistically embed sustainable practices into the core of the organization and adopt a sustainable business model (SBM) and service ecosystems approach (Lozano, 2012; Shakeel *et al.*, 2020).

Sustainable business models, value co-creation and service ecosystem

Sustainable firms or those that have adopted a SBM often follow a goods-dominant logic that predominantly focuses on aspects such as production standards, supply chain logistics and sustainability product labeling (Rex and Baumann, 2007). However, there is a movement towards a Service-Dominant (S-D logic) whereby firms share, combine and renew resources and capabilities to co-create value through "service" for key stakeholders and actors within

the service ecosystem (Vargo *et al.*, 2008; Vargo and Lusch, 2017). Value co-creation processes therefore focus on the entire value chain, integrating different stakeholders (including consumers) to foster sustainable development through the transformation of the various actors (Saviano *et al.*, 2017).

Co-creating value to achieve sustainable outcomes through an organization's processes and activities may be espoused and enacted through strategic adoption of SBM and/or embedding sustainable practices, such as, offering sustainable products/services, ensuring a responsible and transparent supply chain and actively promoting sustainable consumption (Dentoni *et al.*, 2020; Palakshappa and Dodds, 2020). The underlying intent of a SBM is to transform the typically economic focused business model into a sustainable ecosystem where monetary and non-monetary value is created, delivered and captured for the benefit of multiple stakeholders across an extended period (Shakeel *et al.*, 2020). Traditional business models are explicitly or implicitly market oriented, giving little to no consideration of the interactions between business, society, and nature (Biloslavo *et al.*, 2018). SBMs are more multi-faceted than traditional business models (Goni *et al.*, 2020) and "entail a logic of not only creating economic value for organizations, but also social and ecological value for society and the natural environment" (Ordonez-Ponce *et al.*, 2021, p. 2).

Although SBMs require the organization to look beyond itself as an entity (Goni *et al.*, 2020), strategies within the model are typically anchored at an organizational (micro) level but target sustainability challenges manifest across meso and macro levels of society (Ordonez-Ponce *et al.*, 2021). In functioning across multiple levels of society collaboration is considered a key pathway to sustainability and sustainable societies (Lozano, 2007). Collaborative partnerships between organizations and across sectors may begin to extend sustainable practice and actions to a societal level, however Ordoenz-Ponce *et al.* (2021) suggests misalignment between societal challenges faced and the resulting organizational response may constrain the ability of SBMs to achieve transformative sustainable outcomes. Shakeel *et al.* (2020) suggests that to be transformative, SBM must include innovation. SBM innovation brings opportunities to challenge business logics and normative influences dominated by economic concerns (Morioka *et al.*, 2017). An SBM focus moves away from being solely profit driven, to a context where success is directly linked to the wellbeing of multiple stakeholders – inclusive of the environment (Elkington, 2018; Lüdeke-Freundand and Dembek, 2017; Biloslavo *et al.*, 2018).

Transformative service research perspective

TSR is concerned with moving the spotlight off service outcomes such as efficiency, profit and customer satisfaction and placing it on wellbeing outcomes (Anderson *et al.*, 2013). Akin with sustainability, TSR also considers broader wellbeing outcomes, such as societal welfare, including individual wellbeing (mental, emotional and physical), family and community wellbeing, to aspects such as inclusion and diversity, and on a larger scale, the wellbeing of nations and the globe (Anderson and Ostrom, 2015; Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2011). Anderson *et al.* (2013) offer a TSR framework that provides four dimensions for future research including – service entities, consumer entities, the macro environment and wellbeing outcomes – that speak to the holistic nature of TSR. In this sense, a TSR perspective can take a broader view that is multi-dimensional and involves various interactions with a variety of actors contributing to individual, community and societal wellbeing (Finsterwalder *et al.*, 2017; Leo *et al.*, 2019).

Significantly, a recent systematic review of TSR literature has identified five major sources of wellbeing including – organizations, individuals, collective, service systems and situation driven sources (Rahman, 2021). Of particular importance to this research are organizations, collective and service system sources. Organizations were found to be the largest sources of wellbeing and included aspects such as sharing information and resources, instigating social support, using servicescape design, integrating technology and

implementing wellbeing practices. Collective and service system sources involved integrating and accessing resources in social networks and service systems, respectively. Rahman (2021) analysis provides important insights into the potential drivers of transformation, particularly from organizations, by developing a framework that shows the relationship between wellbeing sources and wellbeing outcomes for individuals (for example, improved capacity and functioning and enhanced subjective wellbeing). However, further research is needed that explores wellbeing sources and wellbeing outcomes more holistically.

Research in TSR has begun to explore the idea of service system wellbeing that takes a holistic and multi-stakeholder approach (see Finsterwalder and Kuppelwieser, 2020a, b; Gardiazabal and Bianchi, 2021; Leo *et al.*, 2019). Finsterwalder and Kuppelwieser (2020a) explore service ecosystem wellbeing at the macro, meso and micro level and argue the importance of understanding the "dynamic interplay of actors" across the system. These authors also conceptually explore the (un)intended effects of co-creating wellbeing within healthcare concluding that actors in service ecosystems need to be cognizant of the (un) intended consequences of their efforts (Finsterwalder and Kuppelwieser, 2020b). Leo *et al.* (2019) develop and conceptualize the notion of service system wellbeing and propose ten wellbeing domains at the macro, meso and micro levels. At the macro level are – strategic wellbeing, governance wellbeing, leadership wellbeing and resource wellbeing. At the meso level are community wellbeing, social wellbeing, collaborative wellbeing, cultural and at the micro level is – existential wellbeing and transformational wellbeing. This work arguably is the first to posit a service system wellbeing framework that has multiple wellbeing domains. Gardiazabal and Bianchi (2021) explore wellbeing from a TSR perspective in a retail ecosystem (supermarket) by investigating how value co-creation activities within the system affect wellbeing at the micro and meso level. They propose value co-creation practices and activities among actors in the retail ecosystem that can enhance wellbeing outcomes and argue that retail ecosystems (even those without transformative goals) can impact on societal wellbeing.

We use the collective work on wellbeing sources and service system wellbeing together with what we see as drivers of SBMs (namely, to ensure social, environmental, and economic wellbeing for individuals, community, society and the planet) as a platform to explore transformation and wellbeing in a SF retail context.

Sustainable fashion retail

The fashion industry (aka fast fashion) is accused of being one of the largest polluters and unsustainable industries primarily due to issues relating to supply chains such as unsustainable sources of raw materials, waste in the manufacturing process and workers conditions and rights (Todeschini *et al.*, 2017). However, just as critical is the promotion of a consumerist "throw-away" culture resulting in large-scale garment disposal (Ozdamar Ertekin and Atik, 2015). This consumption of "disposable" fashion garments is having a negative impact on both environmental and social sustainability (Todeschini *et al.*, 2017). Throughout a garment's life from raw materials to manufacturing and then garment disposal, there are potential environmental costs as well as social implications that impact on societal wellbeing (Roos *et al.*, 2017; Strähle and Müller, 2017). The detrimental impact of fast fashion has driven SF and consequently a SF retail industry (Henninger *et al.*, 2016; Mukendi *et al.*, 2020).

The retail sector *per se* recognizes sustainability as an important opportunity for growth, competition and innovation in their business (Ruiz-Real *et al.*, 2019). Fashion retailers have started to implement sustainability practices into their business strategies with many seeing sustainability as a strong competitive advantage and essential given consumers' concerns about current global environmental and social issues (Strähle and Müller, 2017;

Yang *et al.*, 2017). Current literature on SF is relatively disparate across management, marketing and retail disciplines, however, Mukendi *et al.* (2020, p. 2874) offer a definition of SF that provides a useful starting point – "the variety of means by which a fashion item or behavior could be perceived to be more sustainable, including (but not limited to) environmental, social, slow fashion, reuse, recycling, cruelty-free and anticonsumption and production practices." Furthermore, Mukendi *et al.* (2020) categorize research in SF into two broad approaches – those focusing on "pragmatic change" (i.e. incremental and practical change to mainstream fashion retail) and research that looks at "radical change" (i.e. examines novel ways SF can create value for individuals, society and business). Our research fits in the later in that we focus on SF retail brands that are purpose-driven (concerned about social and environmental impacts at every level of the retail ecosystem) and have embedded sustainability at the heart of their business structure.

SF retail brands that have sustainability at the core (i.e. not just a token gesture) are now making headway to not only mitigate the issues associated with fast fashion but to forge "real" transformation within the system (Bly *et al.*, 2015; Boström and Micheletti, 2016; Park and Lin, 2018; Simões and Sebastiani, 2017). In fashion retail there is still ambiguity about how SF business models should be designed and operationalized because research about the inner workings of successful SBMs in this context is scant (Todeschini *et al.*, 2017). Research that has focused on SBM in fashion (see Beh *et al.*, 2016; Kozlowski *et al.*, 2015; Lueg *et al.*, 2015) tends to lack a holistic perspective and fail to consider either the transformative nature of these businesses or multiple stakeholder wellbeing.

We propose a working definition of SF retail services – *fashion retail businesses that have sustainability at the core of their business ethos and implement sustainable practices that actively (co)create transformation throughout the retail service ecosystem, including, creating and offering sustainable products, ensuring ethical and transparent supply chains, collaborating with suppliers and competitors and actively promoting sustainable practices and behavior with stakeholders*. This definition guides our research methodology and subsequent case selection.

Methodology

Qualitative methods supported our search for a holistic understanding of the process and context by which SF brands may create consumer, business and societal wellbeing leading to transformation. In-depth case study analysis allowed us to gain insights into this multi-level phenomenon (Yin, 2018). The unit of analysis is the firm, as extant research indicates SBM approaches and transformative service ideals are embedded in the values and practices of an organization (Ordonez-Ponce *et al.*, 2021).

Data collection

Using our definition of SF as a guide, we undertook a purposeful sampling process to identify case study firms. First, we reviewed the landing pages and "our values/mission" pages of known New Zealand SF retailers' websites to identify organizations demonstrating sustainability at the *core of their business ethos* (i.e. sustainability was embedded in the organization's values). Second, we selected firms with other key SF characteristics identified in the literature that were apparent on the organizations' websites specifically: promotion of sustainable products (for example, environmental-friendly material, packaging, multi-purpose garments, slow fashion/traditional designs, etc.), documentation of ethical/transparent value chain practices, illustration of supplier and/or competitor collaboration and evidence of sustainable practices and communication internally (for example, retail servicescape design, repair/replace/recycle programs) and/or externally (stakeholder

engagement, industry leaders, education, etc.). Four firms met the SF definition criteria and collectively they represent a variety of ages, sizes and target markets as illustrated in Table 1.

In line with in-depth case analysis, multiple sources of data were collected and used including secondary data from company websites and publicly available reports and interviews with either the founder or high-ranking managers within the organization as the main source of data. It is important to note that for two of the cases (a key manager in one case and the founder in another), we also attended and recorded sessions in a public forum.

Recruitment involved approaching key people within each organization via email, whereby they were invited to participate in our study and asked to either participate themselves or recommend appropriate people for us to talk to. In total, across the four cases, six people participated. In three of our cases, key managers were interviewed including a chief executive officer (CEO), a managing director, and in one case a marketing manager and sales manager. In the fourth case we interviewed the founder and marketing manager together. Interviews were conducted in various locations – for two cases interviews were conducted onsite and included a tour of their premises (i.e. design studio, retail stores and in one case their production site). In one case the interview was conducted offsite but face to face and for the other case the interview was held online via Zoom due to their location. The names of interviewees are withheld for confidentiality.

The first two authors participated in each of the interviews. In-depth "narrative" conversational style interviews were held with managers/founders. Interviewees were asked to tell their own story of what led them to where they are and to talk candidly about their journey within the organization. We specifically asked interviewees to provide us deeper insights that could not be found in secondary information sources (i.e. organization's website). The interviews lasted between an hour and two hours, with the interviews onsite taking longer. Along with the onsite interviews, the authors also observed and took notes during the site tour. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Data analysis involved two stages. In the first stage of analysis the third author conducted content analysis of the four SF retail organization's websites, relevant publicly available reports and the interview transcripts to produce detailed individual case studies. This step allowed for an independent interpretation of the data, increasing reliability and avoiding potential interview biases. The case study methodology and analysis follows a historical retrospective approach, that is, the data collected is historical and researchers have access to both first-person accounts and secondary data (Mills *et al.*, 2010). Data analysis at this stage involved organizing key information into headings relating to sustainability and sustainable practices including – sustainable business ethos, sustainable product design, ethical/transparent value chain, collaboration in the retail service ecosystem and sustainable practices/behaviors – to provide a complete picture of each organization.

The second stage of analysis included an iterative thematic analysis that involved an inductive and deductive process respectively, whereby the authors analyzed the case study data independently and then cross-checked for inter-coder agreement (Corbin and Strauss, 1990).

Code	Year	Headquarters	Material base	Sourced	Manufacturing	No countries
UT	1995	Christchurch, NZ	Merino Wool	NZ	New Zealand	49
IB	1995	Auckland, NZ	Merino Wool	NZ	China, Vietnam	47
WR	2006	Auckland, NZ	Organic Cotton	USA	Indonesia	2
KT	2006	Wellington, NZ	Organic Cotton	India	India	11

Table 1. Overview of the case studies

First, we began inductively with a close interpretative reading of the cases (interviews and detailed case descriptions) where broad initial responses to the data were recorded by annotating in one margin. Second, these initial notes were translated into emergent themes at one higher level of abstraction and recorded in the other margin. In these two phases loosely derived first order themes around key drivers of transformation and sustainability in SF and aspects of wellbeing were identified. Third, themes were then related back to literature on sustainability drivers and TSR/wellbeing and cross-checked to make connections between both the literature and the emergent themes. We did this by coming together to discuss patterns and insights, creating second order themes centered around three broad first order themes – embedded core purpose or ethos, aligning with value/fit and breath/depth of brand messages. During this step, themes relating to SF retail wellbeing ecosystem were finalized, for example, societal wellbeing at the macro level, stakeholder and value chain wellbeing at the meso level, and consumer wellbeing at the micro level. In the final stage, we went back through the transcripts to find relevant illustrative quotes for each theme substantiating the final themes identified.

A brief description of each individual case is given in the next section to provide an overview of the organization's sustainability ethos and practices relevant to our paper. This is followed by the cross-case analysis in the findings section that brings together sustainability, TSR and wellbeing.

Case descriptions

Each case is described using five descriptors that were identified in the sustainability and SBM literature as being critical to a sustainable retail service ecosystem. The descriptors include sustainable business ethos (Lozano, 2012; Shakeel *et al.*, 2020), ethical/transparent supply chain practices (Dentoni *et al.*, 2020; Saviano *et al.*, 2017), collaboration in the retail service ecosystem (Lozano, 2007, 2015; Ordonez-Ponce *et al.*, 2021), and sustainable practices and communication (Goni *et al.*, 2020; Palakshappa and Dodds, 2020).

Untouched World (UT)

UT is a premium lifestyle brand with a full range of women, men and children's clothing produced primarily using ZQ certified merino wool. UT takes pride in having 96% of their production based in New Zealand and is sold in 49 countries (Untouched World, 2021a).

Sustainable business ethos. UT was established to disrupt the clothing industry, as a direct rejection of fast fashion and a step toward regenerative fashion. The inspiration behind UT came when founder, Peri Drysdale, recognized no one in the clothing industry was discussing environmental or social impact (Allott, 2021). Drysdale had started her New Zealand knitwear business, Snowy Peak Ltd, in 1981 and had grown it into a global success. However, in 1995, she took the radical step and relaunched as UT, a certificated organic wool clothing company.

> I had become extremely concerned about the trajectory the planet was on. I could see environmental degradation going on, with governments and businesses talking only of GDP and the financial bottom line. I wanted a brand that would model a new way of doing business, that would highlight that style and quality could be achieved without pollution to water and air and filling landfills. Peri Drysdale, UT founder (Gulcher, 2018)

Sustainable product design. UT follows a "slow fashion" model, introducing only two collections annually in order to minimize production and waste (Untouched World, 2021a). UT intentionally creates quality, classic garments and aspire to have their products last multiple seasons, years and even generations.

> Being sustainable means cultivating a community that cares for each other and the deeper world around us [. . .] for us, business has never just been about making a profit, but about making a

> positive difference in the world. People and the planet have always been at the forefront of what we do, creating mindful fashion for the future that does not compromise on quality or style. (Untouched World, 2021a)

Ethical/transparent value chain practices. UT are transparency advocates, recently trialing a supply chain tracking system to encourage better practices in the fashion industry (Untouched World, 2021b). In 2007, UT became the first fashion company to be recognized for sustainability by the United Nations and in 2021, UT received B Corp certification (Untouched World, 2021a).

Collaboration in the retail service ecosystem. UT sources only ZQ accredited merino wool, a certification which ensures strict animal welfare, social and economic standards. UT is also a supporter of the ZQRX standards that recognize growers who implement regenerative farming practices (Untouched World, 2021c).

Sustainable practices and communication. The UT foundation supports sustainability training for New Zealand youth and is working together with the Mahatma Ghandi Institute and UNESCO to introduce the program to India (Gulcher, 2018). The sustainability work of their foundation is an integral part of the business model that aims to influence change in the entire clothing industry.

> It is a lot of work, but I always reflect that that is what we set out to do, to reach the ears and eyes of people who could effect change. Peri Drysdale. UT founder (Gulcher, 2018)

What the UT founder articulates is a view, that sending a message out to people who are influential in promoting change is an important aspect of an organization's communication.

Icebreaker (IB)

IB pioneered the use of merino wool for high quality, outdoor activewear in 1994 when founder, Jeremy Moon, identified the fabric's international market potential. At the time, most outdoor clothing was manufactured from synthetic material. Moon saw the disconnect between enjoying nature and wearing "a plastic bag" (Icebreaker, 2021a). In 2018, IB was purchased by VF Corporation for NZ$288 million (Pavarini, 2021). As of 2020, IB has 45 dedicated retail stores, is sold through 4,500 retail outlets in seven countries and has 400 employees globally (Icebreaker, 2021b).

Sustainable business ethos. Since inception, IB has incorporated sustainable practices into all aspects of their business model. IB's "ecosystem" business model is based on three principles: adaptation, symbiosis and sustainability. IB recognizes that sustainability needs to be innate and permeate the entire business (Icebreaker, 2021c).

> We believe there is a better way. And nature has the answers. Sustainability is not just a feature of our products, it's in the values and design of our business. (Icebreaker, 2021c)

> My biggest shift in awareness came when I started seeing Icebreaker as a business model. We call our model ecosystem, because it balances ecology, economy and resources. Our objective is profitable sustainability." Jeremy Moon, IB founder (Chopra, 2010, p. 192)

Sustainable product design. IB designs products with longevity a higher priority than current fashion trends. Although IB's main collection is outdoor clothing, their recent focus is towards creating versatile products to be daily choices. This shift is seen as another step toward sustainability as consumers purchase fewer items because they can wear them on more occasions.

> We want consumers to wear what's in their closet in more moments and more occasions allowing them to consume less [. . .] our responsibility as a brand is to give you versatile clothing to be used in different occasions. So, you're not buying five different pieces but one to be worn in different occasions [. . .] Van Mossevelde, IB CEO, 2021 (Pavarini, 2021)

> Icebreaker is not a fashion company [. . .] Icebreaker is the polar opposite of fast fashion. Through high quality performance our goal is to thrive in your wardrobe and during your activities for many seasons. (Icebreaker, 2021d).

Ethical/transparent value chain practices. Since 2017, IB has produced annual transparency reports which detail the company's manufacturing, retail, and sustainability practices. IB aspires to be "Plastic Free by 2023". To accomplish this big, audacious goal, IB has removed over 59 styles (representing US$7.9 million) due to plastic content (Icebreaker, 2021b).

Collaboration in the retail service ecosystem. IB and the wool producers co-created strict environmental and animal welfare standards (Deavoll, 2017). To provide price certainty and stability, IB pioneered long-term purchase contracts. In 1997, these were 3-year contracts; in 2017, they became 10-year contracts. The impact of long-term contracts was monumental as they provided growers with the capital and confidence to invest in the health of their sheep and the greater environment (Ross, 2017).

Sustainable practices and communication. IB has developed an inclusive and interdependent approach to operations which recognizes success as a collective ambition. They work with 120 factories in 19 countries, each of these factories follow strict environmental and human ethics standards. IB neither use agents nor outsourcing, and takes responsibility for supervising the entire manufacturing process (Icebreaker, 2021e). IB is working alongside other merino wool brands and New Zealand wool growers to launch ZQRX, a platform to educate, communicate and highlight regenerative agricultural practices (Pavarini, 2021). Through a strong commitment to sustainable practices and desire to communicate the benefits of sustainability, IB has won innovation awards, engages with global leaders in sustainable manufacturing practices and embraces symbiotic relationships with other organizations, working together for mutual benefit.

WE'AR (WR)

Unable to find the type of yoga clothing she wanted, Joyti Morningstar founded her clothing company in 2006. WR manufactures their fabrics and clothing in Bali, Indonesia. WR opened their first retail store in 2009 and have two dedicated retail outlets in New Zealand and three in Bali (WE'AR, 2021a).

Sustainable business ethos. Sustainability is at the heart of WR, as their name "we are" suggests. WR's core principles include a desire to empower individuals thus enabling families to thrive, to consciously collaborate and reinvest profits thus enabling community growth and to create products in harmony with the planet (WE'AR, 2021b).

> Our purpose is to bring people home to themselves. We believe that connection starts with one's inner self so our clothes are designed to bring the wearer into connection with herself and from there into connection with tribe and the earth systems that support us. Joyti Morningstar, WR founder (Enting, 2018)

Sustainable product design. Morningstar, an experienced yoga instructor, set out to design sustainable alternatives to the synthetic materials from which most yoga clothing was made (FashioNZ, 2016). Most garments in their collection are made from organic cotton although bamboo and wood pulp also feature (WE'AR, 2021b). WR has expanded beyond yoga clothing into lifestyle clothing. The collections are designed to be classic pieces that will be worn in many seasons.

> More than an individual item I'm all about investing in classic pieces made in beautiful unprinted textiles that can travel through multiple seasons [. . .] Joyti Morningstar, WR founder (FashioNZ, 2016)

Ethical/transparent value chain practices. When starting the business, Morningstar sought to find a suitable manufacturing location in which she could build long-term relationships with a

network of skilled artisans, home-based workshops and independent producers. WR aspires to empower local communities through creating business opportunities and conscious collaborations. All WR supply chain partners agree to follow a 12-point "code of ethics", to host periodic assessments and to work toward continual improvement (WE'AR, 2021b).

Collaboration in the retail service ecosystem. In addition of working closely with their suppliers, WR partners with other organizations that are working together for positive change and is a certified B Corporation (WE'AR, 2021c).

> [My hope is] [. . .] that continued consumer interest in mindfully made product leads a supply chain transformation that offers fair renumeration for farmers to play a determinative role in cleaning up soil and water quality globally. As people continue to express what they care about by shopping sustainable brands they are voting with their dollars for fair wages that can alleviate poverty and dramatically contribute to a tide of health and wellbeing for people, community and planet. Joyti Morningstar, WR founder (Enting, 2018)

Sustainable practices and communication. Through their social profit policy, WR provides clothing, financial grants and employee volunteer efforts for other organizations engaged in community growth initiatives. They are an accredited living wage employer and are committed to creating positive change in the community through appropriate brand messaging.

> Our goal is to create a ripple effect of authenticity, to action and inspire more and more positive change in our local and global communities. (WE'AR, 2021b)

Kowtow (KT)

KT is a New Zealand women's sustainable clothing brand and an advocate for change. When Gosia Piatek, founded KT in 2006, creating a fashion brand was not her focus. Rather, she wanted to make a difference and to "save the world".

> As a human, you have three basic needs: food, shelter and clothing. We can live off the land and grow organic food, and we build with natural materials, so what was stopping us from achieving the same for what we put on our bodies? The more I looked into it, the more I knew I had to do something. Gosia Piatek, KT founder (Overton, 2019)

As of 2021, KT clothing are sold through 250 retailers globally operate two dedicated retail outlets in New Zealand and employs 36 staff (Herdman, 2020).

Sustainable business ethos. Piatek's focus on creating a business that respected nature inspired her choice of names. Kowtow (pronounced 'cow-tau) is a traditional Chinese word representing the custom of kneeling and bowing so that your forehead touches the ground-the ultimate sign of respect (Overton, 2019). KT's core value is to leave the planet better than it is now by creating ethically made products using sustainable fabrics with a circular design focus (Kowtow, 2021a).

> I started the brand 15 years ago with this idea; how cool would it be to know where a garment comes from, how it's made and how it ends up in the customers' hands? It was a bit radical at the time. Gosia Piatek, KT founder (Green, 2021)

Sustainable product design. KT's engages with a "slow production chain" taking their time to create sustainable and ethical clothing.

> As designers, we strongly believe we are responsible for what we produce and that it does not end up as waste. We design with the entire lifecycle in mind and are working on closing the loop to attain full circularity. We consider every detail of a garment and whether it sits within our values, and only use materials and trims that are responsibly sourced and use them mindfully. We believe the simplicity and strong minimal identity of our clothing are the first steps toward circularity. (Kowtow, 2021a)

KT only uses sustainable and ethically sourced component parts (and thus, no zippers), minimizes packaging and ships via sea-freight (Green, 2021; Overton, 2019).

Ethical/transparent value chain practices. KT oversees the cultivation of organic, fair trade cotton seeds for their garments. Their cotton is certified by the Fairtrade Labeling Organization (FLO); their manufactures are SA8000 certified by Social Accountability Accreditation Services (SAAS). Both organizations provide international verification that workers receive fair, equitable payment and working conditions meet international standards (Kowtow, 2021b).

Collaboration in the retail service ecosystem. KT work closely with their suppliers to ensure workers' rights and environmental protection. They have also consciously created retail stores that use traceable and sustainable materials to ensure the consumers experience is uplifting and relaxing.

Sustainable practices and communication. The focus on circularity has always been a core part of KT's business model and, as such, they offer complimentary repairs for minor damage such as small holes, lost buttons and broken stitching. KT offers larger repairs for a small fee. In addition, KT supports a "take back" program (Kowtow, 2021a), collecting their used products to avoid them going into landfill and is exploring innovative recycling and repurposing options. Their commitment to circularity is demonstrated in messaging designed to create awareness around conscious consumption.

Findings

The following section discusses the findings from our analysis of interviews with key managers and/or founders and secondary data gathered on each SF retail brand related to key elements of a "sustainable retail wellbeing ecosystem" leading to transformation. Our case descriptors (sustainable business ethos, sustainable product design, ethical/transparent value chain practices, collaboration and sustainable practices and communication) provided a focus for our subsequent cross-case analysis. Using the rich case content and our interview data we identified three overarching themes critical to transformation in sustainable retail service ecosystems, including: embedded core purpose or ethos, relevance of fit (or alignment of values), and breadth and depth of message. Within the three broad themes we identified eight wellbeing elements stemming from each. Our findings are supported with relevant literature and illustrated with quotes from our data. Refer to Table 2 for an overview of the case descriptors, broad transformation themes and subsequent wellbeing elements with illustrative quotes. In the table, dotted lines are used intentionally around each of the case descriptors to denote fluidity in terms of how they informed the broader transformation themes and consequent wellbeing elements.

Transformation through embedded core purpose or ethos

One of the most profound insights that we gained through our case analysis reflected the place and space of sustainability within an organization. In short, *"sustainability is innate (IB)"*. Viewed from a holistic perspective, sustainability is not seen as a department rather it is "*inherent to core ethos*". Placing sustainability at the heart of an organizations' operation creates a purpose-led rather than a consumer-led momentum – our cases were purpose-led. Purpose-led in this context looks beyond financial goals and organizational boundaries toward societal transformation (Shakeel *et al.*, 2020). This purpose-led ethos speaks to a SBM approach that is not solely profit driven but motivated by wellbeing consequences that affect the entire ecosystem (Lozano, 2012; Ordonez-Ponce *et al.*, 2021). Significantly, at the broadest macro level, all the cases began with a desire to save the planet and the people in it (Lüdeke-Freund and Dembek, 2017; Biloslavo *et al.*, 2018).

Case Descriptors	Broad transformation themes	Wellbeing elements	Wellbeing description	Illustrative quotes
Sustainable business ethos / Sustainable product design	Transformation through embedded core purpose or ethos	Society and Community Wellbeing	Broader consideration of the impacts a sustainable retail services ecosystem has on the wider community and society at large	"…we are a seed concept, so we come from this idea of oneness, that everything's a part of that whole." (WR) "…[We] try and reach as many people as possible with the safety of this fashion brand, with these ethical and sustainable basis..." (KT) "Sustainability is first and foremost. We look at the whole picture, so it's not just environmentally sustainability, we look at social sustainability as well and financial sustainability of course to be here for years to come." (UT) …doing what's right for the community or for society at larger… he [founder] wanted the business to be purpose-led." (IB)
		Environmental Wellbeing	Broader consideration of the impacts a sustainable retail service ecosystem has on the natural environment	"...we're about relationships, we're about people, we're about kinship with nature, and we think nature's the hero, not us." (IB) "...with the circularity that we're working on, is looking at how we could be better as a country in offering avenues on how to deal with either waste through manufacturing, or the end of life of your garment". (UT) "To us there's an equality around the environment, the environmental issues around the materials… we've recently done something about plastics in the ocean... we're actually working on carbon emissions at the moment" (KT) "…macro plastics are the biggest source of pollution in the ocean… we've got a 90% solution for this problem" (WR)
		Business Strategy Wellbeing	An organization that has a strong vision for transformation that influences strategic decision making within a sustainable retail service ecosystem	"…the whole business has really been formed around [sustainable] principles… it's been far clearer, the need to be able to lead, decide and direct the shape of the company" (WR) "We always look at our vision-'to be doing for people and planet'-So everything we do...comes into it." (UT) "...it's about every single choice we make needs to relate back to what's a sustainable choice within our organization." (IB) "So traditionally the fashion industry has been very much work in your own silo- don't talk to competitors - really keep all of your information to yourself. What we're realizing is actually if we need to move forward...we need to work together." (UT) "[Founder] started the business because she wanted to create a sustainable and ethical business." (KT)
Ethical/transparent value chain practices / Collaboration in the retail service ecosystem	Transformation through relevance of fit	Stakeholder and Value Chain Wellbeing	Extent to which an organization and sustainable retail service ecosystem can impact on stakeholders' transformation within the value chain in terms of collaboration and collective wellbeing	"... we've put a lot of effort in the personal relationships we have with the people at the factory, not just the owners, but people at the different levels… we have a robust supply chain" (KT) " ... we'd ideate solutions [with suppliers] on how we could be better together.… And it was inspiring for people and they actually felt that it would make their company stronger..." (IB) "I hoped to find a way to work with people who got to either make whole garments, or at least in a very small group of people making the whole garments as a group where they could socialize as they made them. And share their stories, and work and, stay human..."(WR) "...we make sure that they [suppliers] meet with our standards around the way in which their factory operates. And that comes down to how, primarily how the people are treated, the hours they work, the working conditions..." (UT) "... that's a key sort of part for us around sustainability, having sustainable relationships with our suppliers that enables a win/win. That's a big part of Icebreaker." (IB)
		Leadership Wellbeing	A leader or leadership team that can move beyond their own success and can motivate and inspire others in the sustainable retail service ecosystem	"It's always been the goal to be the sustainable ethical leader in fashion...we keep on shifting the goalpost, because we never feel like we've got there." (KT) " I suppose that's the thing for us is that the sustainability is not a department, it goes into how we think about making our product right from the start... And so that gives us, in our mind, some credibility to be part of leading, as opposed to just following." (IB) "[Finding] where we could [manufacture] in a way that would allow me to explore these kinds of very high-minded principles...that I wouldn't necessarily get pushed, and squeezed, and bullied into doing things in a way that I didn't want to." (WR) "...we want to be the ones who are forging ahead. And to bring the smaller companies up, is one way that we're looking at this disruptive conversation piece which is around what other brands do we love that are doing a great job that we could partner with to help raise awareness towards..." (IB)
		Employee Wellbeing	Extent to which an organization and sustainable retail service ecosystem can impact on consumer transformation through a sense of belonging, social connectedness, and inclusiveness.	"... my view about sustainability is investing in people....It's about people, if you don't have people who invest in what you're doing, it doesn't matter what message you're sending, they're never gonna pick it up..." (UT) ... we have quite a flat management structure... what I've really liked about the culture here, it's not a blame culture... And I think that creates an ethos of people taking on responsibility." (KT) " Our shepherd' [initiative] is an employee-led movement which is a re-imagination of health and safety… inclusion, diversity, gender, free to be yourself… that's the achiever part of our values." (IB) "…for me personally, my goal, and it always has been, is to keep Kiwis in jobs. And I think that's sustainable for New Zealand and the other thing is, it's about treating people, and as a company we do treat people really well...it's about making staff feel valued." (UT) "…we help the staff here…that's really important that they're made to feel part of the team." (UW)
Sustainable practices and communication	Transformation through breadth and depth of message	Consumer Wellbeing	Extent to which the sustainable retail service ecosystem impacts on consumer transformation through alignment of sustainable values and opportunities to learn	"[We] tell the stories which are meaningful out of conscious choice and empowerment so that people can make better decisions… [but still] enjoy their garments… it's extremely exciting and validating, and beautiful for people, its sensuous…" (WR) "It's about really connecting with our core consumer in the outdoors...wearing nature…[and] having customers know where your clothes are from, what fibers are used, who your suppliers are, how people are treated, how the animals are treated, what goes in the farms, how its shipped… (IB) "But we really want them [customers] to just love the product and then it's like 'Oh, wow, that's amazing that extra stuff comes along with it?', is great." (KT) "But when you actually do talk to people and tell them how the whole company runs as a company, how involved we are with the staff. They actually get the value behind the brand and what we're doing...." (UT)
		Brand wellbeing	The strength and power of the brand to transform and enact change through messaging	...even [with] COVID, we've had substantial growth from our customers.… [we've] got a sustainable company and people are wanting sustainable product… We do take our message to the market quite clearly." (UT) "… because she [founder] really wanted to have these values around ethics, and the supply chain, she thought Fair Trade was a really great organization for her to partner with [although] slightly unusual to be involved with as a fashion brand, because they generally deal with bananas, coffee beans." (KT) "...Originally the whole understanding around wearing nature...was kind of the foundation for that sustainability, before sustainability was a word....you don't see anything about sustainability in our original marketing, it wasn't about that." (IB) "Doing things the way we're doing using inspiring language, and language which really invites people to be part of the [brand] story " (WR)

Table 2.
Case descriptors, transformation themes and wellbeing elements

Our first two wellbeing elements speak to this "people and planet" sentiment – ***societal and community wellbeing*** and ***environmental wellbeing***. The consequence of a strong ethos and being purpose driven was a retail service scope that extended well beyond taking an exemplary product to market. IB regards itself as a *"societal changemaker"*, commenting that *"IB had the potential to make a broader change to not only just the community, but to society" (p. 14)*, WR have grown from the "*seed concept of oneness as an organizing principle"* and UT considers *"what they can do for the planet"*. For WR, *oneness* created a powerful connection to both the land and the people – this was central in ensuring that the organization served the people within their own cultural context. Such holistic and high-minded meta-narratives are cornerstones in creating real transformational shifts in wellbeing that extend beyond the consumer to the wider community Finsterwalder and Kuppelwieser (2020a).

The significance of a sustainability-centered approach was demonstrated on multiple levels. Clear sight of a core purpose promoted a strong vision for transformation in each of our organizations, leading to overall ***business strategy wellbeing***. Similar to Leo *et al.*'s (2019) notions of strategic and resource wellbeing, business strategy wellbeing enables various actors within the service system to achieve their goals and obtain appropriate resources. This supports the idea that organizations are the largest sources of wellbeing particularly with regards to sharing information and resources (Rahman, 2021). In a SF service ecosystem we see *business strategy wellbeing* operating at the meso level and being primarily driven by the SF organization by adopting a sustainability-centered approach. A sustainability-centered approach enabled a decision-making philosophy that was informed by the core purpose of the organization – in such an organizational framework no compromise is required (Castellas *et al.*, 2019). Each decision is held up against the purpose to ascertain alignment – a lack of alignment results in a "no-go decision" regardless of whether it is in relation to supply chain sources, supporting the competition or concerned with market entry. For example, in following a path of oneness, WR would equate this to an association or disassociation from the guiding principles of the community within which they are embedded – *" . . . there is never really a compromise, if it does not fit within [our] organizing principles . . . it does become quite easy when you've got a [clear] line . . . (WR)"*. Alternatively, being true to purpose may also require support of competitors – *"if you want to be true to our purpose, leading a global movement . . .. we support anybody who is trying to do better (IB)"*. In adopting a sustainability-centered approach to decision making, our case organizations were able to ensure that their philosophy extended to their key competitors with regards to creating a more collaborative environment (McGrath *et al.*, 2019).

Transformation through relevance of fit

Our understanding of *fit* begins with what we comprehend as strength and dynamism in aligning with core values around sustainability through ***leadership wellbeing*** within these organizations and the SF retail ecosystem. ***Leadership wellbeing*** relates to the personal values and awareness of broader societal challenges in the fashion sector demonstrated by the "leaders" in our cases who provided a platform from which organizational integrity could be built and strengthened (Rahman, 2021). Leadership wellbeing represents a leader or leadership team that can motivate and inspire others in the system (Leo *et al.*, 2019). In this sense, pro-active leadership is an important driver in sustainability led organizations (Lozano, 2015). Respondents voiced a motivation that *"moved beyond being driven by their own success to being motivated by the success of others (IB)"* and a passion underpinned by *"awareness of resources used . . . (KT)"*. In protecting a concerted effort to maintain *fit,* we saw these organizations employ people who responded to their core ethos. This conscientious employment strategy was often coupled with a relatively

flat organizational structure, promoting further onus on the employee to take on responsibility for upholding the core ethos leading to ***employee wellbeing***. Creating workspace environments that enable connection and transparency such as *"little circular open communicative space . . . where everybody kind of knows what we're [all] working on (WR)"* was important. Specifically, we found evidence of the importance of employee wellbeing that related to a sense of belonging and social connectedness through shared values. Fundamentally, employee wellbeing resolves around an ethic of care, responsibility and social inclusion (Marcus, 2012).

The leadership of these organizations was also significant for ***stakeholder and value chain wellbeing***, particularly given that transparency was critical to their overall vision. Working alongside those with a shared vision extended beyond employees to encompass stakeholders in the value chain. Constraints and tension are essentially created when a strategy does not align with the organizing principle or core ethos – for instance, *" . . . a desire to help and support [other businesses] may not work alongside . . . a high need for commercial return . . . (WR)"*. Balancing competing goals of profit, growth and scale were also guided by the extent to which core principles could be upheld enabling SF organization's to *"maintain [their] essence . . . DNA of the business, whilst scaling (IB)"* often creating a tension between upholding their core values versus economic aspirations (Cipriani *et al.*, 2020). Similarly, decisions around who to collaborate with are based on shared values and visions. This was a particularly pertinent issue regarding value chain transparency and materials sourcing for all four organizations in our research, a concern that was compounded over the past few months during the COVID-19 pandemic. In such an environment, people across the value chain are part of the meta narrative and *"workspaces are an enabler for social connection"*, reflecting a focus on greater inclusiveness and collective wellbeing through *"empower[ing] the good stuff that [people] are doing (WR)"*.

A collective approach was also visible at an industry level with a focus on what might be achieved if a sector-based approach was adopted to tackle criticism commonly leveled at fashion. Collaboration among industry leaders has resulted in the creation of forums and local platforms that enable fashion organizations to work outside of silos, particularly important for broader goals of circularity and end-of-life that require concentrated resources. Such a focus is aligned with a strong purpose and design-led industry concentrated on the wellbeing for the collective (Montgomery *et al.*, 2012; Jeong *et al.*, 2020).

Transformation through breadth and depth of message

Transformation through breadth and depth of message relates to informing and engaging with consumers through brand stories and messaging about sustainability. Understood in this way, being a purpose-led organization was seen as enabling a far greater focus on overall ***consumer wellbeing***. Consumer wellbeing relates to Leo *et al.*'s (2019) notion of existential wellbeing – where an organization provides the consumer with a strong sense of purpose through alignment of values, and transformational wellbeing – where an organization provides actors with an opportunity to learn, in this case about sustainability and implementing sustainable behaviors into their own lives that positively impact on consumer wellbeing (White *et al.*, 2019). In unpacking ***consumer wellbeing*** we were able to understand the importance of SF retail firms encouraging consumer engagement and participation with sustainability to enhance wellbeing (Xie *et al.*, 2020). Interestingly, we were also able to gauge the depth of conviction our firms articulated – being consumer-led resulted in making decisions about the future based on *"what the consumer knows today"*, a system that then perpetuates extant socio-ecological paradigms. Interestingly, being consumer-led often detracts from a core purpose that is design-led which holds more promise of innovation with subsequent positive impacts for consumer wellbeing. A design-led focus was particularly pertinent for organizations such as IB and UT who are striving to replicate

properties of the natural world to the extent that they see their consumers as *"wearing nature"* – a position on sustainability starting with the fiber rather than the finished product and upholding internal values that encourage behavior seen as part of the *"solution"* rather than the problem.

A common thread was visible across the cases – an articulation of how the brand and product were first and foremost viewed as a vehicle to enact change. This finding corresponds to previous work on the power of the brand to co-create sustainability (Palakshappa and Dodds, 2020). In this sense, a brand that grows awareness of messages around sustainability that are aligned to the organizations core purpose, and therefore acts as a tool for transformation relates to ***brand wellbeing***. This central tenet enables the furthering of the organizations central purpose, in doing so achieving higher-level aspirations. Interestingly, we noted a strong desire to ensure that messaging started from a place of positivity as opposed to a "negative angle such as global warming", creating stories of collective hope for the future. This aligns with White *et al.* (2019) who propose that brand messaging and marketing activity can encourage more sustainable consumer behaviors.

Messaging and storytelling were supported by a robust focus on a broad spectrum of marketing and retail related activities spanning production to consumption (Biggemann *et al.*, 2014). One key aspect of the marketing efforts undertaken by these organizations was the largely absent conversations around sustainability. This was in keeping with a view that *"sustainability … should be the right of entry industry standard (IB)"*. The "clothes are a vehicle to build awareness" was not seen as a compromise on quality, design or delivery. KT for instance, with the goal of becoming a global leader in ethical fashion, embed principles of sustainability and ethics at each stage of the value chain – design to delivery.

Strong brands and logos are also designed to support clarity of messaging. At the further end of the value chain, the retail interface becomes an important consideration. Whilst COVID-19 interrupted instore retail, this switch was not seen by our respondents as indicative of a long-term vision for their service operations. Retail was seen as an important aspect of their drive to spread the message contained in their core purpose. Real-life exchange enabled *"conversation"* and *"education"*. In a society that is still defined by ideals of *"what we wear and where we shop"*, retail spaces are likened to art galleries – *"an experience that brings people together to share ideas, ideals and conversation"*. This speaks to the transformational nature of the retail experience (Grewal and Roggeveen, 2020).

Overall, the organizations that we studied saw the challenge of solving problems facing retail fashion as being on the supply side – the business. However, what was required is a re-orientation at the demand-side. Consumers, many of whom are *a generation used to "fast" fashion*, need to understand the pressures of retail when working on "slow" processes.

Theoretical implications

This research adopts a TSR perspective and explores the nexus between sustainability, wellbeing and service systems with the overall purpose of determining the transformational nature of SF retail firms and identifying the types of wellbeing elements that exist within sustainable retail service ecosystems. In doing so, we develop a "sustainable retail service wellbeing ecosystem" framework (Figure 1) that provides a nuanced view of what it takes to unleash the transformative potential of retail service ecosystems to generate wellbeing of key actors, including the environment (i.e. wellbeing of the planet). Our framework provides a reference point for macro, meso and micro level sustainability and identifies the wellbeing elements that fit in each.

Positioned at the *macro level* lies societal and community wellbeing and environmental wellbeing, denoting the importance of these broader global and societal issues to a sustainable retail service ecosystem. The ultimate driver for actors in the system, especially

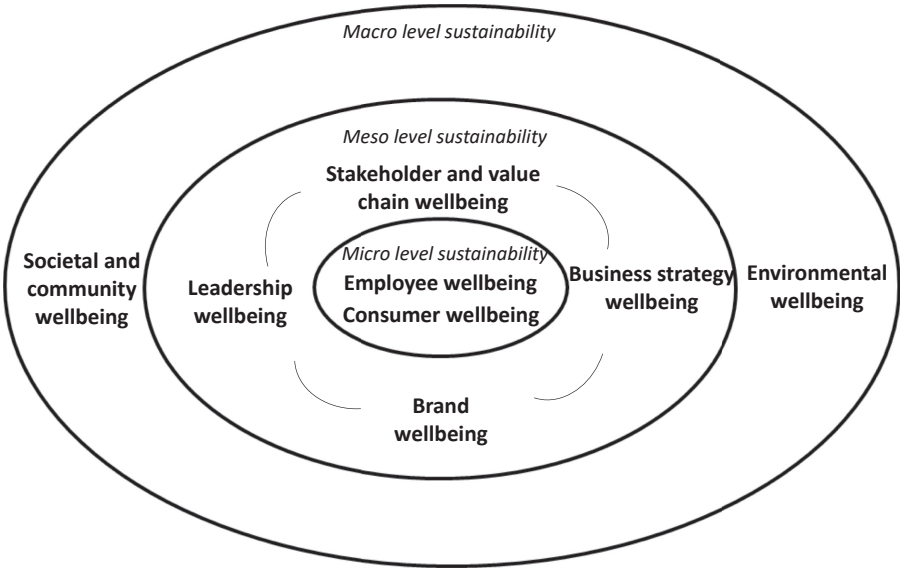

Figure 1.
Sustainable retail service wellbeing ecosystem framework

the focal organization (in this case SF firms) is wellbeing for people and the planet (Biloslavo *et al.*, 2018; Lüdeke-Freundand and Dembek, 2017). At the *meso level*, a sustainability driven retail service ecosystem is concerned with wellbeing relating to key actors, such as, organizational leaders and stakeholders (suppliers, manufacturers and retailers); and the wellbeing of business practice including business strategy wellbeing and brand wellbeing. These four wellbeing elements speak to the importance of meso level sustainability drivers relating to overall organizational and system wellbeing including, innovative and visionary leadership (Lozano, 2015), transparent and collaborative value chains, value co-creation through resource and knowledge sharing and an ability to communicate core values (Palakshappa and Dodds, 2020; Rahman, 2021). Finally, at the *micro level* are individual actors – employees and consumers – who are fundamental to sustainable values, practices and behaviors being (co) created within the system (Vargo and Lusch, 2017).

Our work contributes to theoretical knowledge of TSR in the retail domain by extending understanding of how SF organizations operating within a sustainable retail service ecosystem can motivate holistic multi-level transformation. Importantly, we build on Leo *et al.* (2019) conceptualization of service system wellbeing, Gardiazabal and Bianchi (2021) work on value co-creation in retail ecosystems that impact on wellbeing, and Rahman's (2021) notions of organizational and system wellbeing sources by overlaying a sustainability lens and identifying eight key wellbeing elements that are crucial for transformation in a sustainable retail service ecosystem. Significantly, findings from this study demonstrate the importance of adopting an approach that embeds sustainability at the core of the retail service ecosystem if "real" transformation is to be achieved. In our cases a purpose-led organization often provided the impetus required for such a view begins with a SBM but then extends across the value chain from producer to consumer, encompassing all actors. Decisions are made "intentionally" within a frame of reference guided by the core ethos.

If sustainability is innate, transformation and wellbeing become possible. Significantly, any move toward sustainable transformation will need to consider how such change reconnects and re-creates the meanings of relationships between people, and between people

and the ecosystems in which they are rooted (Finsterwalder and Kuppelwieser, 2020b). Specifically, what is essential is a shift in the practices and processes that reflect and reproduce those systems (Haxeltine *et al.*, 2017) and the values and beliefs that reinforce those systems and processes (Antadze and McGowan, 2017; Lozano, 2012).

Managerial implications

The study has important implications for service system management and provides insights for SF organizations operating within a sustainable retail service ecosystem. First, and most importantly, managers need to consider their purpose or reason for being – the WHY. Purpose is also crucial in that it facilitates a focus on the drivers of SBMs designed to ensure social, economic and environmental wellbeing for all. Such a focus ensures retail service organizations are aligned with the needs and wellbeing of both business and society. A purpose-led approach provides greater possibility of creating multi-level transformation and wellbeing at all levels. Managers with a sustainability-centered purpose have a focused goal that creates less tension in important strategic and operational decisions such as who to collaborate with, what fibers to use or even where to sell. Our cases highlighted the "no compromise" stance that this core ethos enabled. For example, our cases (IB and UT in particular) demonstrated the depth of their conviction by being design-led rather than consumer trend driven as might be the case in a fast fashion environment.

Second, embedding TSR within a sustainable retail service system such as SF retail requires a holistic approach. Guided by their core ethos, our cases were all engaged with actors along their value chain – everyone played a role in creating a platform for transformation. This suggests the importance of giving attention to the actions of all from producer through to consumer. For example, a key implication for managers at the *meso level* of the retail service ecosystem is to collaborate, integrate resources and share capabilities to co-create value for key stakeholders and actors within the retail service ecosystem (Vargo and Lusch, 2017). Of critical importance is that management (key leaders) is pro-active and has the resources and capacity to forge sustainable relationships with other stakeholders. At the *micro level*, managers need to ensure employees take on the core values of the organization by creating an environment that enables a sense of belonging and social connectedness through shared values. Organizations are also responsible for instilling consumers with a strong sense of purpose through alignment of values, an opportunity to learn about sustainability and by encouraging sustainable behaviors into their own lives.

Finally, if SF retail organizations are to be used as a vehicle to enact transformation for community, society and the environment at the *macro level*, sustainability practices throughout the retail service ecosystem need to be holistic, transparent, authentic, and designed to educate. For example, our cases demonstrate the "ethics of care" in ensuring their sustainability ethos and practices emanated from a place of positivity to generate a sense of collective hope and wellbeing. Fundamentally, sustainable retail service ecosystems need to align with the United Nations SDG's and be working toward Agenda 2030.

Future research and limitations

This exploratory work offers a number of avenues for future research. Our four in-depth cases studies provided deep insights on an under-examined area. However, these initial findings now need to be teased out further using a broader set of organizations. Organizations that are varied in type, scale or purpose can be used to develop a more nuanced appreciation of how sustainability and TSR functions to create wellbeing in a SF context. Our sustainable retail service ecosystems framework can be used as a platform for

future research – each wellbeing element and the sustainability *micro, meso and macro levels* identified need to be further developed and explained. Additionally, sustainability and TSR can be employed as a lens to examine other service contexts, such as, healthcare, tourism and hospitality to design sustainable service ecosystems. Sustainability within service ecosystems and its relationship to wellbeing in the service literature to date is sparse (Field *et al.*, 2021). Finally, our work suggests that the achievement of wellbeing requires a holistic approach – this study focused on the case organizations as the focal site. Future research needs to consider and examine all those actors encompassed within the multi-level service system.

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