Food retailers' sustainable brand image
- exploring the barriers and challenges of implementing sustainability strategies in grocery stores

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Master's degree Project in Marketing and Consumption
Spring 2020
Graduate School
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Acknowledgement

First of all, we would like to express our sincere appreciation and thankfulness to our supervisor Lena Mossberg for her valuable dedication and input throughout this research. Moreover, we are extremely grateful to the participating case companies for providing us with information of significant importance for this article. Lastly, we are thankful to the opposition group for their constructive feedback that have played a significant role in strengthening the quality of this article.

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Göteborg 2020-06-05   Göteborg 2020-06-05

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Abstract

Food retailers and their local stores are considered to have an influential role in our society today, in terms of their impact in environmental and social issues. This qualitative case study aims to analyze the work of food retailers with sustainability, focusing on their processes of trying to make sustainable commitments reflect with consumers' perception of the corporate brand image. This analysis also attempts to distinguish the role of local grocery stores in this development. *The purpose* is to get a better understanding in the barriers and challenges for food retailers to implement corporate sustainable strategies in local grocery stores to strengthen and establish a consistent sustainable brand image. To fulfill the purpose, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five Swedish food retailers, together with secondary data from the organizations' sustainability reports. Interviews were conducted with store managers and representatives from headquarters in order to gain insights from both store-level as well as headquarter-level. The case companies were chosen based on their ranking on the Sustainable Brand Index 2019; examining consumers' perception of Swedish businesses' brand in relation to sustainability. The findings of this study indicate that the role of the local grocery stores is of great importance for food retailers, to visualize and demonstrate their commitments in sustainability. This is actualized through various in-store activities where consumers encounter information of sustainable initiatives or engage with other more tangible activities. There do however exist barriers and challenges for food retailers to implement certain sustainable strategies in stores. These challenges are perceived to in a great extent be affected by how well the organizations facilitate store managers and headquarters to communicate and cooperate with each other. Including, how food retailers manage to continuously work with sustainability strategies in accordance with the market's context. The consequence is believed to imply a lack of motivation and understanding among some store managers, as well as a difficulty among headquarters to adapt their strategies to the stores' local operations and demands. With potential inconsistencies in how local stores perceive and adopt sustainable strategies, it will most likely also affect the consistency in how sustainability is communicated towards consumers. Which evidently may also influence consumers' associations of the food retailers' sustainable brand image.

Keywords: *Sustainability, Brand Image, Food Retailing, Grocery Stores, Corporate Strategy Implementation, Strategic Activities, Motives, Challenges, Barriers*

Introduction

Over the years, we see the enormous role sustainability plays in our society. The concept of sustainability can be defined as "an approach to business that considers economic, environmental and social issues in balanced, holistic, and long-term ways that benefit current and future generations of concerned stakeholders" (De Lange et al., 2012, p. 151). Accordingly, this have further put pressure on organizations to consider these factors in their strategies in order to work towards sustainable development (De Lange et al., 2012; Bansal, 2005; Hoffman, 1999). But, also, to be able to display their commitments towards the public. The retailing industry is an industry suggested to have a significant impact on the environment, as a result of being considered as one of the most carbon-intensive industries (Reinvent, 2020). Physical stores within the industry are known for being energy intensive (Schönberger et al., 2013) and

answer for a large environmental footprint (ENDS Carbon - University of Edinburgh Business School, 2009, in Ferreira et al., 2019), making them stand out from other industries (Ferreira et al., 2019). As for the food industry specifically, they stand for 26% of the total global greenhouse gas emissions worldwide in 2018 (Our World in Data, 2019), which is an increase of six percentage since 2010 (Dupuis & Schweizer, 2019). From this, food retailers are considered to possess significant responsibility when seeking to reduce the global greenhouse gas emissions (Dupuis & Schweizer, 2009).

Food retailers' generally powerful position within the food industry empowers their way of controlling supply chains, as well as planning and implementing their own environmental standards (Vandenbergh, 2007). In this sense, food retailers are considered as influential in steering patterns of food production as they possess a vital role in influencing the consumption patterns among consumers (Dupuis & Schweizer, 2019). For example, food retailers' way of deciding what product assortment consumers should be exposed to in the grocery stores (ibid.). Accordingly, from food retailers' influential position, they become a strong alternative voice to the policymakers and the government (Mcmichael, 2009).

In regards of sustainable commitments, food retailers have various motives for implementing specifically sustainable strategies, such as profitability (Balabanis et al., 1998) and stakeholder pressures (Piacentini et al., 2000; Naidoo & Gasparatos, 2018). But, also, reinforcing a sustainable brand image, derived from a corporate identity (Chkanikova & Mont, 2015). However, according to literature within strategic management (Egels-Zandén & Rosén, 2015; Egels-Zandén, 2016), the integration of sustainability into corporate strategies can at times become more difficult than expected. This becomes evident when organizations intend to implement deliberate long-term strategies in relation to sustainability (ibid.). In terms of food retailing, this can be exemplified in the difficulties grocery stores may encounter when forced to meet the expectations from society of sustainable responsibility, while also considering consumer demands (Lehner, 2015). Additionally, a lack of financial resources, or a lack of knowledge in different sustainability issues, are also suggested to affect this process (Chkanikova & Mont, 2015). If sustainability strategies are poorly executed at store level, it can cause consumer confusion, mistrust and a negative assessment towards the retailer (Kumar & Polonsky, 2019). Some studies even suggest that sustainable efforts are perceived as subordinate to other brand associations (Bawa & Saha, 2016). Such circumstances portray a rather difficult position for food retailers to implement sustainability strategies throughout the organization down to local stores. Both in terms of choosing an appropriate strategic approach to adopt, as well as the effectiveness these initiatives actually may have on the corporate brand image, in relation to other types of brand associations.

Nevertheless, physical stores in retailing, from a general perspective, has come to embody a non-verbal communication towards consumers, conveying the identity of the corporate brand (Arrigo, 2018). From this, food retailers' stores are suggested to offer the possibility to communicate commitments the corporation is taking, to address issues of environmental and social sustainability. Providing an opportunity for the organization to strengthen their brand image (Jones et al., 2007). Lehner (2015) even suggests this as the most important outcome from engaging with and communicating sustainable commitments. In the Swedish market, the strength of corporations' sustainable brand image is yearly tested in the Sustainable Brand Index (SBI) (Sustainable Brand Index, 2019). What the index highlights, in terms of the food retailing industry, are significant differences between how well Swedish consumers perceive these brands' performances in regards of sustainable responsibility and commitments.

Several studies have analyzed the drivers and barriers for food retailers to integrate sustainability into their business (Piacentini et al., 2000; Chkanikova & Mont, 2015; Jones et al., 2005), and the course of actions to successfully implement such strategies (Egels-Zandén & Rosén, 2015; Egels-Zandén, 2016; Spicer & Hyatt, 2017), including the potential effects this may have on the brand image (Kennedy et al. 2016; Jones et al., 2007). This paper contributes to existing literature regarding sustainable brand image among food retailers, by examining how sustainability strategies *actually* are integrated from headquarters down to local stores, and the effects this may have in strengthening a sustainable brand image. Also, identifying the role of grocery stores in establishing a consistent sustainable brand image. Accordingly, *the purpose* of the research is to get a better understanding in the barriers and challenges for food retailers to implement corporate strategies regarding sustainability at local grocery stores to strengthen and establish a consistent sustainable brand image. This will be answered through the following *research questions*:

1. What role does grocery stores play in establishing a consistent sustainable corporate brand image?
2. What barriers and challenges exist for food retailers to implement corporate sustainability strategies in grocery stores to strengthen their sustainable brand image?

The implications of this research for practitioners does not only involve the integration of sustainability strategies, but also its possible impact on a sustainable brand image. The study consists of empirical evidence from food retailers, providing a systematic overview of potential discrepancies between strategies formulated by headquarters, and the way these are adopted by store managers at store-level. Also, it becomes important to highlight that the paper is delimited to only focus on food retailers that possess physical grocery stores. This is because the interest lays in examining the potential effects of in-store activities in regard to sustainability, rather than considering other store attributes related to online shopping.

Theoretical framework
The influence of local stores on corporate brand image
From a general perspective on the retail industry, Anselmsson et al. (2017) consider retailers' physical stores as a key aspect in their overall branding processes, since consumers gather much information of the brand by visiting stores. The physical stores are also of importance in regard to establishing a consistent corporate brand image (Verhoef et al., 2007). The notion of brand image is a concept which can defined as "the perception about a brand as reflected by the brand association evoked in the consumer memory" (Lee & Chen, 2019, p. 3). The identity of the brand, on the other hand, reflects how an organization intends their brand to be perceived (Aaker, 2010). It can therefore be argued that the identity of the brand constitutes as the core of the corporation, to guide organizations when working towards a certain brand image. Kennedy et al. (2016) argue that the retailer brand image becomes a central aspect to establish a competitive brand. A part of this process involves establishing a brand image among consumers that reflects the corporate identity (He & Mukherjee, 2009). Retailers' brand associations may involve e.g. perceptions of the service, store assortments and atmosphere, pricing policies. But, also, how a brand adopts certain sustainable initiatives (ibid.; Kremer & Viot, 2012). Such initiatives will further create expectations among consumers, of the commitments taken by retailers, that will be assessed and evaluated when encountered with their services (Cronin & Taylor, 1994; Kumar & Polonsky, 2019).

However, Bawa and Saha (2016) question the strength of sustainable corporate brand associations among the general public, suggesting that sustainability associations often are

perceived as subordinate to other brand image associations, e.g. products, services, leadership of the company etc. This due to a general lack of knowledge among many consumers (ibid.). While some companies may stand out with a strong green brand when being evaluated based solely on sustainability, the general perception may differ when evaluating activities related to the brand in general. Which may be explained in how consumers often will consider socially responsible brands only when functional needs are met (Devinney et al., 2006).

Within the food retailing industry specifically, the point-of-interaction between retailers and consumers is considered as an extension of the corporation, where sustainable consumption becomes understandable to consumers. But, also, central nodes for exchanging ideas to collectively define sustainable consumption (Lehner, 2015). Consumers are in this sense suggested to collect information of retailers both before and during a store visit, to assess and evaluate the interaction and credibility of the retailer (Kumar & Polonsky, 2019). However, in a study of food retailers in the UK, Jones et al. (2007) saw rather limited communication of sustainability themes throughout the stores, arguing that corporate aspirations were not always reflected in local stores. It was believed to be a consequence from a highly competitive marketplace (ibid.). This further highlights the uncertainty food retailers may perceive, whether sustainability indeed will positively influence consumer behavior and brand perception (Jones et al, 2007; Lavorata, 2014). Still, Jones et al. (2007) conclude that in-store communication of sustainable commitments can be of importance to strengthen the brand, as it allows consumers to engage with sustainability issues and connect with the brand.

Examples of in-store sustainable practices, apart from e.g. sourcing local, environmentally responsible, or fair-trade goods, involves designing stores to be energy efficient as well as adopting waste minimization programs (Lavorata, 2014; Kumar & Polonsky, 2019). Promoting sustainability commitments at store-level may also be performed through so called green advertisement (Raska et al., 2015), or with various sustainability campaigns, like supporting the local communities (Lavorata, 2014). Such activities, persistently and comprehensively communicated by the retailer, are suggested to demonstrate retailers' sustainability commitments and sustainable brand image (Kauppinen-Räisänen et al., 2014).

From their research on so called green food retailers, Kumar and Polonsky (2019) argue for the importance of in-store experiences among consumers, that shape the perceived credibility towards food retailers. Still, Oosterveer and Sonnenfeld (2012) argue that the configuration of sustainability programs has to fit consumers lifestyles and concerns. It therefore becomes vital that local stores' businesses are designed according to the positioning of the retailer, in order to effectively reinforce the expectations and experience from purchase visits. But, since the context of retailers entails multiple touchpoints, from product assortment to service of staff, managing the in-store experience can at times prove to be difficult (Fuentes & Fredriksson, 2016; Kumar & Polonsky, 2019). This exemplifies the struggle for many local stores; having to align their individual sense making of sustainability with the perception shared by their customers (Lehner, 2015). If food retailers position themselves as sustainably responsible, such message should be consistently transmitted throughout all touchpoints of the business (Kumar & Polonsky, 2019). Accordingly, in-store communication is considered as crucial to increase consumer awareness of retailers' sustainability initiatives (Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009). Failure of accomplishing this can cause consumer confusion, mistrust, and negative outcomes for food retailers' credibility and sales (Kumar & Polonsky, 2019).

Kumar and Polonsky (2019) further argues that food retailers should also establish brand images and awareness preceding to consumers' visits to the stores. The authors suggest that a

positive perception of retailers' sustainability commitments, shaped indirectly from sources like advertisement, word-of-mouth, or through prior store encounters, can create a more positive attitude towards in-store sustainability activities, while potential negative aspects may not even cause a bad reaction. This highlights the mediating effects that local stores have on the perceived credibility from retailers' sustainability claims. Why such positive prior perception could mitigate negative encounters with a certain grocery store (ibid.).

Implementing sustainability strategies: from headquarters to local stores
In a case study of an individual corporation, Egels-Zandén and Rosén (2015) study how sustainability strategies are formed and implemented in practice. The case illustrates how practitioners at various level of the corporation shape the strategy formation. Egels-Zandén and Rosén (2015) distinguish four types of strategic activities which covers how deliberate and emergent strategies mix to form sustainable strategies. First off are visionary activities, informing the strategy intentions from the headquarter. Second is called prescribed activities, meant to implement the strategy intentions downward throughout the organization. Third are autonomous activities, that neither resides from intentions nor intended to have strategic outcomes. These are mainly carried out by operational-level employees at the bottom of the hierarchy. Last out are evaluative activities, that both are informed by strategy intentions, but also inform about strategy intentions. Meaning, it usually takes place among middle management, such as the corporate staff members of a sustainability department, when redefining day-to-day work and reformulating strategy intentions (ibid.).

From their case study, Egels-Zandén and Rosén (2015) illustrate the difficulties of coping with sustainability issues when only depending on prescribed activities. One such reason can be due to a lack of understanding among staff for the motives of such strategies, perceiving it as more in line with external pressures than customer demands. Although, due to the ethical nature of sustainable strategies, it can still influence individual employees to perform autonomous activities based on own morals. Essentially, Egels-Zandén and Rosén (2015) suggest that top management should consider sustainability strategy formulation and implementation as an ongoing process, instead of a top-down sequence where visionary strategies simply get implemented through prescribed activities. Strategies should rather be considered as constantly being reshaped by combining intended and deliberate strategies with emergent autonomous activities. The evaluative activities are also central in this process to carry out the activities. But, also, to access autonomous activities that can be scaled to visionary activities. The opportunity to enable interactions across corporate levels are an important aspect, reducing the gap between intended strategies and actual implementation.

The motives for food retailers to adopt sustainability strategies
In the study by Chkanikova and Mont (2015), the authors discuss the various drivers food retailers encounter when seeking to incorporate sustainability strategies throughout their supply chains, with a particular focus on food retailers in Sweden. This type of information could help actors in their decision-making regarding investments for sustainability initiatives, as a result of obtaining the knowledge and awareness concerning the sustainability practices that will be of great importance in their supply chains (ibid.). The study further acknowledges the mediating and considerable role food retailers play in steering and encouraging sustainable consumption and production patterns on the global market (ibid.).

Piacentini et al. (2000) examine the motives behind food retailers' way of implementing sustainable strategies throughout their businesses. The study demonstrates that consumer pressures and expectations are considered as significant drivers for food retailers to adopt

sustainability initiatives (ibid.). Considering the social factor consumers' consumption patterns, Boström et al. (2005), suggests that political and moral responsibilities are two major factors consumers seek to demonstrate through their consumption. As a result, from consumer pressure, food retailers become motivated to encounter and manage arising issues in the field of sustainability, with the purpose of obtaining customer trust and loyalty (Chkanikova & Mont, 2015). On the other hand, Chkanikova and Mont (2015) consider governmental pressure as one of the more significant motivators. The pressure could result in both composed national legislations, as well as international regulations (ibid.). In addition to this, Chkanikova and Mont, (2015) highlight the power of industrial norms and agreements within the food retail sector, since these are significantly influential in how retailers behave and what kind of measure they implement throughout their supply chains.

Moreover, several studies consider economical gains as another driving factor for food retailers, when pursuing to implement corporate sustainable strategies (Chkanikova & Mont, 2015; Piacentini et al., 2000). From engaging in sustainability strategies, it will allow food retailers to reduce their operational costs (Chkanikova & Mont, 2015). However, Sirgy and Lee (1996) point to the importance for organizations to seek long-term customer satisfaction, which should be prioritized above short-term financial gains. Piacentini et al. (2000) further argue that food retailers need to balance the emerging societal pressures (to derive customer satisfaction), together with the economic gains obtained in the food retail stores.

Ferreira et al. (2019) argue that retailers (particularly in food retailing), involved in various sustainability commitments, generally are prone to demonstrate their actions towards stakeholders as it may entail profitability, differentiation and competitive advantage from other competing brands (Ferreira et al., 2019; Chkanikova & Mont, 2015; Girod & Michael, 2003). This as a result from strengthening the food retailers' trademark and reputation (Dijk, 2000; Chkanikova & Mont, 2015). Accordingly, Chkanikova and Mont (2015) highlight that investors are more prone to invest in food retailers where sustainability strategies permeate the entire supply chains.

The barriers and challenges for food retailers to adopt sustainability strategies
Several studies discuss the barriers and challenges organizations may face when seeking to implement corporate sustainable strategies (Abratt & Sacks, 1988; Balabanis et al., 1998; Jones et al., 2005; Chkanikova & Mont, 2015). In accordance with Oxford Learner's Dictionaries (n.d.), the concept of "barriers" is in this paper defined as a problem or situation that prevents something to be done, while "challenges" concern a difficult task that tests somebody's ability. Focusing on the food retailing industry, Chkanikova and Mont (2015) discuss various barriers and challenges food retailers encounter prior to implementing sustainable strategies in their supply chains. In regard to resources, this particular factor is demonstrated to divert food retailers from successfully implement sustainable strategies in their supply chains (Jones et al., 2005; Chkanikova & Mont, 2015). More specifically, the concerned areas regard deficiencies in food retailers' financial capital or expertise regarding implementing new sustainable strategies (Chkanikova & Mont, 2015). Several food retailers are reluctant towards implementing sustainability strategies, since the emerging costs for the entire supply chains are considered as too significant (ibid.). Furthermore, Chkanikova and Mont (2015) highlight how insufficient levels of knowledge and expertise in food production processes create barriers for food retailers to encounter and implement sustainability strategies in their supply chains. In addition to this, food retailers are required to deposit a lot of their time and engagement when developing new sustainability initiatives in collaboration with their suppliers, which discourage many food retailers to act in accordance with this path (ibid.). Several food retailers have

expressed difficulties in influencing the practices performed by their local and national suppliers, resulting in a lack of power to impact the suppliers, which creates a significant challenge for food retailers to encounter (ibid.).

Moreover, Chkanikova and Mont (2015) state that coercive legislation implied a decrease in food retailers' likelihood to innovate in sustainable strategies, because regulations were perceived as a constraint and not a motivator for innovation. On the contrary, Jones et al. (2005) suggest that government regulations and incentives worked as a source of motivation for UK food supermarkets, in regards of implementing sustainable strategies.

It becomes important to discuss the complexity of the current food retailing sector, as a consequence from consumers' desire to chase cheap and affordable food, which have resulted in major difficulties for food retailers in regard to successfully implementing sustainability practices throughout their supply chains (Chkanikova & Mont, 2015). Also, the strong competition among food retailers is another factor leaving supermarkets with difficulties in monitoring and implementing all the desired operation across the whole supply chains (Jones et al., 2005). The interviewed food retailers, in the study by Chkanikova and Mont (2015), encountered the challenge in terms of dealing with the majority of consumers prioritizing the price over sustainability aspects for food products. Inadequate knowledge and interest in regard to sustainability are considered as considerable obstacles in the retail industry, where even unsatisfactory involvement among "ethical" consumers can be found (Anstey, 2009).

Furthermore, it becomes relevant to mention the study by Balabanis et al. (1998), where the authors highlight the importance for companies to clearly demonstrate and communicate their corporate sustainable initiatives, if they seek to yield profitability and customer satisfaction. Abratt and Sacks (1988) deem that companies will encounter a perceptible challenge when seeking to implement sustainability activities simultaneously as striving to achieve financial objectives.

In the study by Egels-Zandén (2016), the author discusses challenges the clothing retailer Nudie Jeans encountered, in terms of practices and initiatives revolving sustainability. The author deems that several aspects, e.g. political considerations, traceability and trade-offs, are all necessary components describing the clothing retailer's sustainability commitments throughout its value chains, which further permeates the product development within the business (ibid.). Accordingly, Nudie's particular trade-off was considered to permeate the whole organization's way of committing to sustainability, and therefore only restricting the production of certain items to only European countries (ibid.). With this in mind, it is important to discuss the challenge concerning retailers' reluctance to invest in businesses with supply chains were the operations become more expensive (Chkanikova & Mont, 2015).

Methodology
Case study
A qualitative research approach was chosen, as the intentions were to gain deeper understanding of opinions and motivations held by individuals active within the industry; regarding sustainable strategies in food retailing in relation to a corporate sustainable brand image. Both from headquarters, whom are a part of formulating and communicating such strategies, as well as store managers in positions expected to understand and implement these strategies. This meant not having the intentions of quantifying the attitudes from a larger sample population. Food retailers are in this study considered to involve the whole organization, from headquarter down to local grocery stores. The choice of method was based

on theories by Bryman and Bell (2011), arguing that a qualitative research method focuses on a constantly shifting social reality held by participating individuals. Moreover, an extensive case study approach was adopted, with a multiple-case design, since the intentions were to study several cases from the Swedish food retail industry, to further compare the data from cases against each other. The chosen cases can thus be regarded as instruments to be compared and explore specific business-related phenomenon (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). With the aim to distinguish common patterns across several cases, described as cross-case analysis (Yin, 2014), it may provide better understanding in their different performances related to sustainable branding. Since the chosen case companies all engage with establishing a sustainable brand image, they were considered to fit the profile of the research.

Since new understandings may emerge during the process of studying several cases over a period of time (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015), an iterative research approach was used. This strategy means that during this process, researchers are allowed to go back and forth in sort of an interplay between data and theory (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015; Bryman & Bell, 2011). This means that the implications from an ongoing analysis would shape the forthcoming data collection, in accordance with what Bryman and Bell (2011) suggest. The empirical data were mainly collected through interviews, and further complemented with secondary data from sustainability reports of the case companies. Our choice to complement with secondary data was due to an inability to find respondents from one of the case company's headquarters.

Case companies
With a focus on Swedish food retailers, it was considered as relevant to study brands with various levels of sustainable recognition. It was believed such approach would allow comparisons to be made; whether any differences in sustainability strategies and implementation processes between retailers could explain why some brands are perceived as more sustainable than others. To be the least subjective in the process, the acknowledged Sustainable Brand Index 2019 (SBI) was used to give insights of how consumers rank these actors. The index measures the awareness and attitude among consumers towards Swedish companies; how much consumers know of each actor's sustainability responsibility, and how they value each actor's sustainability responsibility. By selecting companies that has managed to rank in the top of the index of 2019, it may allow us to study subjects that has managed to establish a strong sustainable brand image towards the public. The SBI is founded by SB Insight AB, which is an insight agency that has the aim to visualize the value of sustainable branding. The research itself, is the largest brand study (related to sustainability) performed by an independent third-party organization in Europe (Sustainable Brand Index, 2019).

Among the chosen case companies, Coop and ICA are found in the top of the national ranking (position 4 and 5). Another case company, Hemköp, are found in an upper mid-segment of the ranking (51), which implies a relatively high ranking in relation to total number of brands making the cut for the nation-wide list (with 355 brands in total). In addition to the nation-wide index, with brands from various industries across the Swedish market, industry-specific lists are also provided by SBI 2019. These rank the actors from a specific industry (Table 3 in appendix) in accordance with how they were ranked by consumers. The results from the 2019 survey presents the strength of individual brands when compared to other companies in the same industry. As for the food retailing industry, it further enabled to distinguish brands which were ranked in a lower segment of the index, not making the cut for the national index. Case companies chosen from this segment are Lidl and City Gross. Accordingly, the SBI 2019 presents how Swedish food retailers are perceived by consumers in regards of their sustainable responsibility. By choosing companies from different segments of the ranking, it allows to

make a comparison between these actors. This to distinguish whether differences in strategy implementation throughout their local grocery stores may explain why such disparities of brand image occur between the food retailers.

Eventually, five case companies chose to participate in the study. While the intentions were to include additional companies, it became evident that some were unwilling to participate due to a lack of time. This was a consequence of the prevailing Covid-19 pandemic, which had a significant effect on the workload for Swedish food retailers. Both at their headquarters and in grocery stores. Something which further had an effect on the number of store managers who were willing to participate. Why City Gross only is represented by representatives from their headquarter, while ICA only is represented by a store manager, can also be explained by the effects from the pandemic. Five cases were eventually considered as enough to make comparisons across several cases companies, with various proven success in establishing a sustainable brand image and provide with exhaustive data for the analysis. The choice of grocery stores is geographically limited to Gothenburg, Sweden. This for the convenience of the researchers, to have interview objects closer in distance. Representatives from the case companies' headquarters have positions such as sustainability manager and public relations manager, while representatives from local grocery stores are all store managers.

Interviews
The interviews were conducted with both food retailers' local grocery stores and their headquarters, to distinguish patterns across several cases that may explain their performances related to sustainable branding. This research was constituted by semi-structured interviews, where this kind of interview technique generally is characterized by possessing a degree of flexibility throughout the interview process, as the interviewer generally is overt for similar issues regarding the settled topic to emerge, which accordingly, causes the interviewer to obtain profound data (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Accordingly, in order to gather depth in the data, semi-structured interviews were chosen to constitute this particular study.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen over structured interviews, since the latter one is characterized by generally not leaving space for further elaborations and novel topics to emerge during the interview process, according to Bryman and Bell (2011). Consequently, as the emergence of additional viewpoints and topics were considered to be of importance in regards of obtaining a deeper understanding in the research, semi-structured interviews were chosen. Moreover, semi-structured interviews were chosen prior to the structured interviews due to the reason that unstructured interviews are characterized only by a few questions which could imply the respondent to steer the direction of discussions off-topic and cause irrelevant issues to emerge during the interview process. This could entail that theories found in the theoretical framework could be left out throughout the discussions (ibid.).

Moreover, semi-structured interviews are characterized by the researcher's way of forming questions prior to the interview occasion and in regard to a specific area of interest, which is generally referred as the interview guide (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Considering the questions, qualitative interviews are generally characterized by possessing open-ended and distinct questions (Doody & Noonan, 2013). Moreover, it is common for the researcher to start with the broad questions before going in-depth into the topic and continuing with the more delicate and difficult questions (Doody & Noonan, 2013; Bryman & Bell, 2011). Accordingly, this was taken into account before forming the questions. Also, since Bryman & Bell (2011) deem that the finalized interview guide needs to undergo several steps before being established, the interview questions were developed based on the particular area of interest, together with the

research questions. Later on, this became revised and reviewed in order to successfully produce a finalized interview guide (ibid.).

Prior to the interview process, an interview guide (see Table 2 in appendix) were constructed in accordance with seven themes; (1) Introduction, (2) Sustainable brand of the company, (3) Formulation of sustainable strategies, (4) Work and implementation of sustainable strategies, (5) The role of the store, (6) Challenges & barriers and (7) Other questions. The questions of the interview guide were based on existing research and the theoretical framework. The questions towards the food retailers started broadly in regard to their corporation's sustainability work, and then moved into in-depth issues regarding sustainability that required more effort to answer. The interviewers of this study did not interrupt the interviewee when going slightly off the intended topic, but rather encouraged this by carefully listening and adding follow-up questions in order to obtain depth in the data.

Bryman & Bell (2011) highlight various elements the researcher should carefully reflect upon before conducting the interviews, such as the location, kind of questions, recording, transcription and the way the interviewer chooses to carry out the interview, i.e. in terms of flexibility in the way of asking questions. All of these aspects play a vital role when it comes to conducting the interview in a successful manner, but also, to cover the specific topic (Doody & Noonan, 2013; Bryman & Bell, 2011). This was further taken into consideration, when planning and executing the interviews with the chosen case companies.

As Bryman and Bell (2011) stress the importance for interviews to be conducted in a quiet and relaxed setting with the respondent, in order to avoid potential interruptions by external circumstances, the chosen location for the interviews with the companies' headquarters were performed at the interviewers' homes. Also, Doody and Noonan (2013) argue for the importance of time and place in regard to the interview setting, implying these should be in accordance to the participant's convenience and available time frame. Based on this, the interviews were held over telephone, since all the case companies' headquarters are situated outside the city of Gothenburg, which is the current residence of the researchers of this study. However, telephone interviews may entail in less motivation among the respondent to engage in the subject, compared to the ones interviewed face-to-face, which could further entail in a lack of quality in the gathered material (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Another issue regards the interviewer's inability to discover facial expressions demonstrating uncertainty during the interview, which could leave the interviewer unable to understand the situation when a certain question should be rephrased, in order to be understood (ibid.). However, these issues were not evident during the interviews, at least from the perspective of the interviewers.

Moreover, the conducted interviews with the food retailers' store managers took place at each respective grocery store. All of these interviews took place at each store's back office, with the purpose of minimizing interaction with customers and other employees. In addition to this, these locations were selected due to the aspect of convenience, both for the store managers, but also the interviewee from respective headquarter, which goes in line with the recommendations from Bryman & Bell (2011) regarding the selection of a location that is convenient for both interview objects. All of the interview objects were asked about their consent to be recorded, due to an ethical implication, but also, to ease the researchers work to transcribe the material in a successful manner afterwards (ibid.).

Pseudonym	Position of the interviewees	Corporation	Business model
Anders	Store manager	Coop	Franchise
Brian	Store manager	Coop	Corporately owned
Carl	Headquarter	Coop	-
Denise	Store manager	Lidl	Corporately owned
Erica	Headquarter	Lidl	-
Fanny	Headquarter	City Gross	-
Glenn	Store manager	Hemköp	Corporately owned
Hanna	Headquarter	Hemköp	-
Ivan	Store manager	ICA	Franchise

Table 1: Interviewees

Data analysis method

After conducting the interviews, the recordings were transcribed to further be analyzed. In accordance with what Yin (2014) describes as an analysis strategy based on a case description, the coding of the empirical data involved finding themes, categories and patterns form the collected material. This was followed by an iterative approach, to review research questions and theoretical reflections. In line with suggestions by Eriksson and Kovalainen (2015), the analysis process began with analyzing each case separately, to later make a cross-case analysis; searching for similarities and differences between the cases and in relation to theory. When interpreting the data, connections could be drawn between the case companies and interviews, identifying certain themes that could be linked to the research questions. The themes describe common patterns from the material and were used to further organize and guide the analysis process. The first identified theme is (1) *The internal communication related to sustainability strategies within organizations*, mostly connected to the second research question, which covers the various processes of communication and implementation of sustainability strategies. Including sequences of (a) top-down communication, (b) down-down communication, (c) intermediate-top-down/down-top communication and (d) down-top communication. This was structured in relation to the theories presented by Egels-Zandén and Rosén (2015). The second identified theme is (2) *The role of local grocery stores to implement sustainability strategies and communicating a sustainable corporate brand image*, mostly related to the first research question, is constituted by; (a) in-store activities, (b) product assortment, (c) supporting the local communities and store-specific activities and (d) the store as a communication platform.

Quality of the research

Discussing the quality in researches, Eriksson and Kovalainen (2015) highlight the concepts of generalizability, validity and reliability, which are all considered as significant components. Particularly when evaluating the quality in business research. However, since researchers have encountered significant complications when adopting the classic evaluation criteria (ibid.), Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue for the adequacy of the concept trustworthiness when evaluating the quality in qualitative research, whereas this concept replace validity and reliability which otherwise are considered as traditional notions when assessing the quality in qualitative research. As Eriksson and Kovalainen (2015) claim that the prerequisite for replacing the traditional notions is based on the research' way of possessing relativist

ontological and subjectivist epistemological characteristics, we argue for this kind of adoption when evaluating the quality of our research. Our research grounds itself on relativist ontology based on the way of interpreting the interviewees and thereafter describing the reality (the food retailers' sustainability work), according to their subjective experience from it. Which accordingly gives rise to the existence of multiple realities which is fundamental for the relativist ontology perspective (ibid.). Moreover, this research depends on subjectivist epistemology since the respondents together with us as interviewers together produced an understanding and knowledge regarding the social world (how the case companies work with sustainability), caused by the interaction between us as actors throughout the interviews, which is an elemental characteristic for subjectivist epistemology.

The concept of trustworthiness involves the aspects of dependability, transferability, credibility and conformability (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). As dependability is concerned with the researchers' way of providing information regarding the research process, we can with certainty declare that this methodology chapter describe in a traceable and logic manner how this research was performed. Since the aim of transferability is to discover similarities between studies within the same field of research field (ibid.), we can state that this research demonstrates similarities with similar studies (found in the theoretical framework framework). Particularly with the study by Chkanikova and Mont (2015) describing the drivers and barriers food retailers encounter when seeking to incorporate sustainability strategies. Eriksson & Kovalainen (2015) suggest that credibility involves the likelihood of other researchers to end with relatively similar interpretations and findings with a particular research, we can argue that this research possesses a sufficient level of credibility, since strong connections exist between our findings and the reality, as well as the fact that other researchers would, based on our beliefs, come up with quite similar findings and claims after revising our collected data. Additionally, this study adopted methodological triangulation, by utilizing various data collection methods and empirical sources. These choices were made with the objective to integrate multiple perspectives and angles, together with the purpose to clarify gathered findings and enhance the emergence of new topics. Which works in accordance with the recommendations by Eriksson & Kovalainen (2015). Lastly, since conformability revolves around making understandable connections between the findings and interpretations (ibid.), by coherently demonstrating quotes and statements from the interviewees before making interpretations related to the outcomes of the study, it is considered that conformability apply for this particular research. Moreover, as Eriksson and Kovalainen (2015) argue that a study fulfils the requirements of trustworthiness if there has been an evaluation in the choice of cases to be included in the research, we can argue that our selected case companies were selected on the basis of the existing food retailers on the SBI, which accordingly, yields the research a sufficiently satisfactory extent of trustworthiness.

Ethical guidelines
The data were collected through phone interviews, with interviewees who were willing to participate, and gave their consent to record the interview for future analysis process. Additionally, they were all notified of the possibility to pull out from the research, suggested by Eriksson and Kovalainen (2015), to recognize further ethical aspects of participating in the study. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2015) also discuss the ethics of respecting the participants and the data, why all interviewees were ensured anonymity. The interviewees were in the start of the interview ensured that neither name nor position/store location were to be disclosed. Why only store manager, or headquarter, were used to describe their current working position to maintain the anonymity of the participants. For the convenience of the reader, to better distinguish the interviewees from each other, they were all given pseudonyms (see table 1). It

was however considered as important to acknowledge the organization each of the interviewees represented, to get a better understanding of potential patterns between headquarters and local stores, as well as in relation to their current position on SBI.

Empirical data and analysis

The empirical data will be discussed in the following section, in accordance with two emerging themes originated from the data analysis, *The internal communication related to sustainability strategies within organizations*, discuss how strategies were communicated across the organizations, covering the sub themes of (1) top-down communication, (2) down-down communication, (3) intermediate - top-down/down-top communication and (4) down-top communication. Also, *The role of local grocery stores to implement sustainability strategies and communicating a sustainable corporate brand image,* involving the sub themes of (1) in-store activities, (2) product assortment, (3) supporting the local communities and store-specific activities and (4) the store as a communication platform.

The internal communication related to sustainability strategies within organizations

All local grocery store managers expressed that the majority of their sustainability initiatives and strategies are implemented as a result of directives from their headquarter. However, after revising all the material, it was demonstrated that local sustainability initiatives and activities among grocery stores were communicated and implemented in slightly different ways between the food retailers. In this sense, we are allowed to draw parallels to the study by Egels-Zandén and Rosén (2015), where the authors explain how different activities could have a significant impact on businesses' sustainable strategies.

Top - down communication

All the case companies, both with franchise and/or corporately owned grocery stores, expressed that the majority of their sustainability activities and commitments were the result from the organization's vision, determined by the headquarter. Since the headquarters' sustainability strategies are based on the organization's vision, we can connect this with visionary activities, found in the study by Egels-Zandén and Rosén (2015). Here, the authors describe the emergence of these activities as a result of decision-making taking place at the top of the organizational hierarchy, which should go in line with particular vision (ibid.). To illustrate with an example, one interviewee expressed:

"Our sustainability strategies and commitments are developed and implemented as a result of the company's vision, but also, based on market demand" (Erica, Lidl headquarter).

Also, the importance of the long-term perspective became prominent regarding this issue. Egels-Zandén and Rosén (2015) deem that it becomes vital to consider inputs by external parties when organizations seek to develop their visionary activities. Having this in mind, another interviewee declared the following:

"Our sustainability strategies are developed based on a combination of company vision and market demand. The importance lays in having a long-term perspective when implementing sustainability strategies, and to listen to market demand and food panels that usually raise questions about sustainable and ecological products" (Carl, Coop headquarter).

The data demonstrate that all case companies work to inform the local grocery stores with relevant information needed in order to be able to implement certain sustainability initiatives in the stores. Processes when headquarters communicate what activities managers and

employees should take into account is referred to as prescribed activities (Egels-Zandén & Rosén, 2015), which was something prominent among the case companies. It was perceived to occur similarities between the food retailers in the internal communication between headquarters and the grocery stores. To illustrate, all case companies suggested that the majority of this communication goes from the headquarter to the department responsible for sustainability, or to a quality coordinator/district manager which later on extends the information to the grocery stores and the store managers. Also, all case companies argued that most of the communication went through an Intranet, e-mail or phone call. However, other food retailers, like Coop and ICA also used various online communities, such as Facebook groups. One interviewee described their internal communication as:

"Most of the information is shared and available through the Intranet. The headquarter conveys information regarding upcoming sustainability campaigns to regional managers, who further communicate the information to the affected store managers for each region" (Fanny, City Gross headquarter).

Occasionally, when information needs to be communicated quickly to the stores, the communication process can go directly from the headquarters to the local grocery stores, through telephone calls and/or mailings to the store manager. This was particularly prominent in connection to the arising Corona pandemic, where one interviewee declared:

"When the directives from the headquarter arrives, it is important to communicate the information directly to all the employees in the store. This is particularly important in regard to the coronavirus, as the directives concerning safety measures can change from one hour to another" (Denise, Lidl store manager).

However, Hanna (Hemköp headquarter) argued that their business model could be a disadvantage, since the organization possesses both corporately owned stores, as well as stores driven as franchise. Instead, Hanna argued it would be an advantage if all stores were run by the corporation, since there would be a higher likelihood that stores work more aligned with formulated sustainable strategies, which could further improve the communication of a more unitary perception of the corporate sustainable brand image. On the other hand, Denise (Lidl store manager) expressed a sense of constraint since all of their daily operations are controlled by the headquarter. Denise suggested that a greater extent of freedom would entail more flexibility when adapting certain strategies to the individual store, which could facilitate the particular store to implement operations related to sustainability in a manner that benefits the store in the most appropriate way. The results further demonstrate that sustainable strategies communicated from the headquarter were not always fully applicable, in terms of operational feasibility at stores. Here, it became evident that some top-down initiatives could be ignored, or not entirely considered, if they did not imply distinct benefits for the consumers and/or the store's profitability. Accordingly, this could imply that store managers would prioritize other aspects of their operations over sustainable strategies.

A barrier that was discussed by the interviewees involved the insufficient and unequal level of knowledge among staff across several stores. The case companies explained that the difficulties were believed to be caused by understanding the directives in different ways. This goes to a large extent in line with the study by Chkanikova and Mont (2015), where the authors state how deficiencies in knowledge among food retailers could result in difficulties in implementing new sustainability strategies throughout the supply chains. To illustrate, following interviewees from two separate headquarters mentioned:

"The difficulties with implementing new sustainability strategies in local stores occur when the store managers possess an uneven level of knowledge, because this entails in sustainability strategies being followed up in diverse ways throughout each separate store" (Erica, Lidl headquarter).

"Since the organization possesses many adolescents that work during their school holidays, it becomes difficult to have the time to always update these in regard to new sustainability labeling and commitments found in the stores" (Fanny, City Gross headquarter).

Several of the representatives at the case companies' headquarters shared this dilemma and considered it as a significant challenge in order to attain a unified brand image in relation to sustainability. In a similar scenario, Egels-Zandén and Rosén (2015) illustrate the potential challenges for corporations to successfully implement sustainable strategies when mainly relying on so called prescribed activities, which is caused by a lack of understanding among the staff behind the motives of such initiatives. Hanna (Hemköp headquarter) highlighted an existing inadequate internal communication between Hemköp's headquarter and the local stores. Hanna further argued that the headquarter needs to better explain the motives behind why store managers should engage with certain sustainability strategies and what environmental and social benefits they would entail from performing it. Accordingly, it was suggested a matter of being able to concretize solutions that store managers' find easy to comprehend and feasible to perform in the individual store, which was further believed to entail in an improved understand regarding why sustainability should be of a higher priority.

Down - down communication
All case companies imply that there is an encouragement from headquarters for local sustainability initiatives to emerge in the local grocery stores. Several interviewees expressed that the grocery stores themselves could perform activities and commitments integrated with sustainability. This complies with the description of so-called autonomous activities, which is described by Egels-Zandén and Rosén (2015) as activities that originate in the bottom hierarchy of the organization without necessarily having an intended strategic goal. The case companies explained how particular sustainability activities could emerge from the bottom of the organization, but in that case, they would have a strategic purpose for the organization. The strategic objective could, for example, include the reduction of food waste with the purpose of raising profitability for that particular store. To draw an example of a sustainability initiative from a local grocery store, Anders (Coop store manager) explained:

"One own initiative is about selling out store baked bread for 50% discount on the evening. Another one is about reducing the price one day earlier for fresh produced products that will reach its best before date, with the purpose to decrease the food waste. The guideline from the headquarter suggests a discount on these products two days before they reach their best before date, but we use three days in order to successfully address the food waste issue".

Moreover, the results demonstrate that local grocery stores cooperate and support each other throughout their daily tasks. Ivan (ICA store manager) highlighted that there exist some Facebook groups for the employees and managers of ICA's grocery stores, where the members are able to help each other when encountering challenges/uncertainties related to daily operations. For instance, members could simply ask questions regarding the packaging and labeling for the product assortment within the fruit section and are thereafter expected to receive feedback from other stores' staff within a couple of hours. But, also, questions or issues

regarding their sustainable initiatives and communication. In addition to this, Brian (Coop store manager) declared how the local grocery stores within the western region of Sweden possess a mutual forum on Facebook and email where the staff can encourage and support each other in producing feasible sustainability initiatives at store level. To illustrate, the Coop stores in the western Sweden are currently in the process of implementing an initiative that would only concern the stores in western Sweden, which is about introducing marked shelves where the store are able to sell their bread from yesterday.

Intermediate - top-down/down-top communication

Moving on, all the case companies expressed that they possess a department solely for sustainability matters, in which they communicate about upcoming sustainability projects and initiatives to the headquarter and the local grocery stores. This goes in line with the study by Egels-Zandén and Rosén (2015), where the authors describe how evaluate activities occur at the intermediate level of an organizational hierarchy and is further communicated to the top and/or bottom level of the hierarchy. The gathered material display that the case companies' intermediate departments consist of district managers, sustainability departments, committee members and quality coordinators that possess deep insights in the local grocery stores practical work, as a result from having scheduled meetings with the store manager. Accordingly, the interviewees' expressed that these departments gained sufficient knowledge to invent new sustainability initiatives and activities that could be presented to both the store managers, but also, the headquarters, which could further induce them to adjust their sustainability strategic intentions and objectives. This works in accordance with Egels-Zandén and Rosén (2015), where the authors explain the powerful force of evaluate activities in regard to steering the activities being performed at the bottom and/or top level of the organizational hierarchy. To draw an example, one interviewee expressed:

"Coop currently has 31 different associations. Each association possesses one quality coordinator working with relevant quality and sustainability issues. These individuals' carry great responsibility to communicate important information regarding these matters to the store managers, that could further perform this in practice." (Carl, Coop headquarter).

Moreover, it became evident that a couple of food retailers possess particular departments which have the purpose to control that certain parts of the sustainability work are followed at the store level. To illustrate, Anders (Coop store manager) highlighted that the business controller that is responsible for the stores situated in western of Sweden, inquires the store managers on a weekly basis in terms of how much food the stores have been forced to throw away. In addition to this, Erica (Lidl headquarter) declared that the local stores are investigated frequently by the organization's internal audit department, which has the task to examine how sustainability strategies are followed up in the stores. For instance, Erica deemed that the stores were examined in terms of the product assortments availability and freshness, but also, how much food each store throws away.

Down - top communication

Lastly, the gathered material demonstrates how local initiatives, if successfully implemented, have the ability to be scaled up and introduced to the headquarters, that could further decide to implement a particular activity throughout all stores in the country, in order to provide a consistent image of the brand. To illustrate with an example, one interviewee declared that:

"One Coop store in Kungälv wanted to introduce waste bags for their fruit and vegetables section, in order to decrease the usage of less sustainable bags in the stores. Thereafter, the

store manager forwarded this idea to the quality coordinator, responsible for the stores located in the west of Sweden. This individual encouraged the idea, and the initiative was then implemented among the stores in the region west. After the successful implementation, the headquarter of Coop was enlightened by the idea and worked thereafter to implement this initiative to the other grocery stores in the country." (Anders, Coop store manager).

Based on this, we are allowed to draw parallels with the study by Egels-Zandén and Rosén (2015), where the authors explain how autonomous activities have the potential to be broadened and incorporated to visionary activities. Which would affect how the prescribed activities are performed (ibid.), which refers to the headquarters signaling to the grocery stores in regard to implementing new sustainability initiatives. This could also be seen in another example, where the store manager of Hemköp explained how couple of stores started with waste bags for the fruit and vegetables section. Thereafter, it became an industry standard and implemented across all stores in the country. Also, Brian (Coop store manager) experienced a close cooperation between the store managers' and Coops different associations, which induced him to feel encouraged to elaborate upon potential sustainability strategies in consultation with the associations. In addition to this, Ivan (ICA store manager) expressed great satisfaction in terms of having his voice heard. This was a result of quickly receiving feedback through communities on social media from someone situated at the headquarter, which was further considered to be particularly eminent when sustainability issues emerged and needed to be dealt with at store level. By viewing these examples, we are able to discover how several food retailers facilitate clear interaction between the organizational hierarchies, which further enhances strategies and activities constantly being reshaped, as a result of an ongoing process, instead of solely viewing it as a top-down sequence. This goes in line with the study by Egels-Zandén and Rosén (2015), as the authors further explain that the importance with enabling interaction across corporate levels generally entail in sustainability strategies to be reshaped and new ones to emerge, which further reduces the gap between the intended strategies and the actual implementations.

The role of local grocery stores to implement sustainability strategies and communicating a sustainable corporate brand image
Physical stores are considered as a key aspect in retailers' process of establishing a consistent brand image (Anselmsson et al., 2017; Verhoef et al., 2007), where commitments in sustainability are considered as an important factor in creating a competitive brand image (Kennedy et al., 2016; Kremer & Viot, 2012; Kumar & Polonsky, 2019). All of the representatives from the case companies confirmed the importance of the local store to support the branding strategies regarding sustainability. However, formulated and implemented sustainability strategies in stores were described by interviewees as rather similar across all case companies. In fact, several interviewees even suggested that most food retailers in the Swedish market are in reality working with very similar activities (Hanna, Hemköp headquarter), imitating well-functioning initiatives of competitors (Glenn, Hemköp store manager). This was suggested a consequence of food retailers' reality of competing in a developed industry in terms of sustainability awareness and expectations, where current market demands among consumers expect sustainable responsibility while still get value for money from their purchases (Hanna, Hemköp headquarter). From the interviews, the following roles of local grocery stores could be distinguished, in relation to the case companies work with sustainable strategies and their corporate sustainable brands.

In-store activities
Perhaps the most evident role that was discussed among the interviewees revolved around the various activities performed in the stores, related to the corporate sustainable strategies. Such

strategies were described to most often be guided by a corporate vision, formulated by the headquarter, that would highlight tangible efforts and commitments which the store and the whole company was taking. A common activity described by the interviewees is the work towards the reduction of plastic bags in favor of paper or recycled plastic bags. All of the case companies were described to adopt such in-store activities, which in most cases were expressed to be included in the companies' goals to reduce the total use of plastic. Some case companies, like Coop, were suggested to go a bit further than other competitors, as their vision revolves around reducing the use of plastic in store as much as possible, where consumers would only be able to use paper bags, or purchase plastic bags made of biofuel. A strategy which eventually will phase out the use of all plastic bags (Anders, Coop store manager). These activities were described as a service for the customers, by only providing either paper bags or plastic bags made of recycled material (Carl, Coop headquarter).

Among the activities described by the interviewees, the focus on food waste management was particularly emphasized among the case companies. All of the store managers described this as a hands-on activity which not only may have a positive effect on the perception of the food retailer among consumers but will also enable the individual store to become more profitable. Glenn, store manager at Hemköp, explained their food waste management as:

"What perhaps makes the biggest difference is that we (the store) work to have the lowest levels of food waste as possible. Because then we save money and become more profitable, at the same time as we do not chuck out any food" (Glenn, Hemköp store manager).

Interviewees at headquarters confirmed the economic incentives for store managers to adopt some strategies specifically, such as food waste management programs. Ivan (ICA store manager) states that economic motives are derived from the work they do for the customer. Here, he believes that store managers are more motivated to adopt certain sustainable strategies when revolving mainly around the customer.

Case companies, such as Coop, ICA and Hemköp, described how some of their stores also had adopted the use of Karma; an app which allows consumers to buy selected products at a reduced price from the stores' assortment, which are soon to be expired (Carl, Coop headquarter). This portrayed another channel for local grocery stores to reach consumers and enable to reduce food waste. Additionally, food waste management was indicated as an important measurement by the headquarters since it accounts for a large share of the corporations' impact on the climate. According to Hanna (Hemköp headquarter), to reach the company's long-term goals, connected to EU's goal of making European countries climate neutral until 2050, the corporation needs to bisect their level of emissions every tenth year. Achieving such numbers will require to further bisect the current proportion of food waste until 2030. This was given as example why such food waste programs are not just important activities to present in stores towards consumers, but also for the whole organizations.

This leads us to the kind of activities which customers may not see in stores but are important for food retailers to reach set corporate targets in their sustainable strategies. ICA explains the importance of such activities, as the largest direct effect from the corporation on the climate comes from their stores. Why several initiatives are made to reduce the energy consumption, through e.g. energy-effective lighting or refrigerants (ICA Gruppen AB, 2019). Another activity described by the interviewees involved the work with recycling, to further decrease the climate impact of the individual store (Brian, Coop store manager; Glenn, Hemköp store manager). To reassure that certain measurements are taken, case companies like ICA and City

Gross use third-party certificates to measure that stores live up to certain criteria (Fanny, City Gross headquarter; ICA Gruppen AB, 2019). These kinds of activities were described as important in-store activities as they contribute to reach sustainable goals set by the organization, while also meeting expectations by consumers. Representing activities which can be used to confirm statements companies make in relation to their sustainable image (Hanna, Hemköp headquarter). However, several of the interviewees did raise the question of economic costs in relation to implementing sustainable initiatives.

"Another important factor involves the finances, since you are not always able to take too drastic arrangements and to readjust too much at any cost" (Brian, Coop store manager).

Pressured in other areas of the business as well, apart from directives regarding sustainability, store managers were portrayed to not always being able to comply with strategies communicated from the top of the organization. Being measured through several aspects, from financial concerns, staff procedures, customer satisfaction etc., sustainable initiatives were described to at times just may become another factor to take into account for the store managers (Hanna, Hemköp headquarter). Such challenges, where store managers are required to manage multiple touchpoints of the business, to positively influence the experience among consumer, are also described by previous research (Kumar & Polonsky, 2019; Fuentes & Fredriksson, 2016). Carl (Coop headquarter) explains the challenges of implementing sustainable in-store activities throughout their stores as:

"The difficulties really come down to their daily operations. The daily work has to continue to function […] Then, off course, are a flow of income always important. But is this something we can favor, by becoming more sustainable? […] It then becomes a challenge to draw trade-offs between the finances and the sustainability perspective".

Ivan (ICA store manager) explains that such hesitations, to indeed adopt certain sustainable commitments in their operations, are a consequence of an uncertainty; if the time, money and effort to implement some initiatives will actually be noticed by the consumer.

Product assortment
While the promotion of local grocery stores' product assortment can be argued as an in-store activity, this category alone was perceived to stand out due to its importance in the case companies' work with sustainable strategies, and how this were discussed to influence their sustainable brand image. Hanna (Hemköp headquarter), even described the store assortment as one the company's three main target areas, together with in-store activities and their social responsibility, as it communicates the view of the corporation on sustainability, and the direction taken from what offers that are provided to customers. This role of the store was explained to involve promoting which products to be included in the assortment, as well as which products to ban. Strategic policies that excluded certain products from the assortment included e.g. non-organic bananas, red-listed fishes, or non-Fairtrade roses. These kinds of initiatives were explained to be initiated as parts of corporate campaigns (Denise, Lidl store manager), or in response to expectations from consumers (Hanna, Hemköp headquarter).

The in-store work of promoting aspects of the assortment included e.g. the vegetarian and vegan product line (Anders, Coop store manager), or products produced in Sweden (Denise, Lidl store manager). However, one aspect which was significantly highlighted by all interviewees concerned the selection and promotion of eco-products. Interviewees at the case companies' headquarters did all highlight the importance of their eco-assortment, and the

ongoing work to increase the share of this assortment even further. Fanny (City Gross headquarter) stated that in all activities performed by local grocery stores, "it is important to push for the organic aspect in everything you do". The reason for this were explained to be from expectations by some consumers. Furthermore, Coop, ICA and Hemköp were all described to work towards developing the eco-assortment in their own store brand-lines. Especially interviewees from Coop highlighted this, as their own eco-brand Änglamark were described as the best Swedish brand in terms of organic and sustainable attributes.

"Above all, it is important to push for Änglamark, which is Coop's large brand associate with sustainability" (Carl, Coop headquarter).

Brian (Coop store manager) did however highlight a dilemma with eco-products. While these are suggested as among the best-selling products, eco-products are often more expensive than conventional ones. Chkanikova and Mont (2015) states that a challenge for most food retailers is how consumers can prioritize price over sustainability attributes in regards of food products. Only when functional needs are met, consumers may consider brand attributes related to sustainability (Devinney et al., 2006). Brian (Coop store manager) suggests this can become problematic for food retailers who wants to increase the eco assortment, as some customers cannot always afford such products and therefore may choose other stores.

Supporting the local communities and store-specific activities
Local initiatives that were adopted by individual stores were also a common feature, described to e.g. enhance the store's goodwill. Supporting local communities, as described by several interviewees, are exemplified as a role for local grocery stores to further demonstrate their sustainable commitments and sustainable brand image (Lavorata, 2014; Kauppinen-Räisänen et al., 2014). All case companies suggested that local initiatives were encouraged to some extent. Some companies, such as ICA, Coop and Hemköp, described a somewhat higher degree of freedom to adopt such initiatives, in contrast to for example Lidl, by more freely being able to choose which local projects to work with. Local initiatives were often described to involve the support to the deprived in society. This could be demonstrated by the donation of food, through associations like the Swedish church (Denise, Lidl store manager). Such activities were described to imply a social responsibility of the store. But also, as Hanna (Hemköp headquarter) suggests, involve solutions which will also help store managers to decrease the store's environmental impact from food waste. Other initiatives could imply the sponsoring local projects, like various associations or sports teams (Carl, Coop headquarter), describing initiatives which most often could be associated with highlighting the social responsibility of the stores.

"It (local initiatives) can be a lot about regional initiatives in the form of sponsorships and sustainable initiatives. In this sense, the stores have a certain degree of freedom to implement these commitments in the stores, and then share the results" (Carl, Coop headquarter).

Other store-specific activities were also described by some of the interviewees. Lehner (2015) describes how local circumstances of grocery stores will not only have an impact on consumer segment and preferences, but also on the understanding of what sustainable food consumption implies for the specific region. Initiatives described by interviewees were perceived to be influenced by corporate strategies but adopted and taken one step further than required by the headquarter. For example, cutting prices one day earlier than corporate directives (Anders, Coop store manager; Ivan, ICA store manager), as well as choosing local food suppliers, to support the local community (Glenn, Hemköp store manager).

The store as a communication platform

With most interviewees from the case companies describing the local grocery stores as the face of the brand, the role as a communication channel was perceived to be distinguished. Such understanding was expressed as several interviewees suggested that the main perception of the corporate sustainable brand was enhanced by consumers while visiting the stores. Some interviewees even argued that the stores are the sole point-of-interaction for consumers to indeed understand and further evaluate the extension and credibility for the measurements adopted by each food retailer. This confirms the theories by Lehner (2015) and Kumar and Polonsky (2019). While the work among the case companies, to promote a sustainable brand, also were suggested to involve marketing support from the headquarters, the local stores were still suggested as the key aspect to influence consumers' awareness and perception.

Promoting sustainable commitments at store-level are described by Raska et al. (2015) as green advertisement. Several interviewees exemplified similar activities, e.g. providing flyers to customers regarding certain campaigns, such as promoting eco-products or alternative proteins (Glenn, Hemköp store manager). Such campaigns do not necessarily have to be directives from the headquarter but can be initiatives from the individual store as well (Anders, Coop store manager). Also, several grocery stores are suggested to work with social media, to further promote certain campaigns and general work that can be associated with sustainability (Fanny, City Gross headquarter).

The usage of various signs of information in stores were furthermore described by several interviewees to be adopted. For example, to highlight and raise awareness of organic attributes of certain products, information about various certifications and labeling, or guiding the consumer in making more sustainable choices like purchasing vegetarian products instead of meat. Fanny (City Gross headquarter) suggests this role of the store is important, since it is a way to further demonstrate and consolidate the sustainable responsibility related to the corporate brand image, as well as the credibility of the individual store. City Gross together with Lidl further discussed the importance of promoting awards or certificates, e.g. when individual stores are certified with the environmental labelling Svanen.

However, some interviewees described various challenges with understanding how to best communicate the work in sustainability towards the consumers, to enhance a unitary sustainable brand image.

"I would like to improve the use of the store as a communication channel, since this is where we meet the customer. But it is not always easy. It is easier in e-commerce [...]. You search for eco and get the whole eco range, while in store so you may have to walk around a corner to find the eco option" (Hanna, Hemköp headquarter).

This describes the challenges to fully reach customers with in-store communication related to sustainability, as they already face a lot of other in-store information and promotion. For example, a challenge to elevate added value from eco-products, third-party certifications etc. (Hanna, Hemköp headquarter).

Discussion

Local grocery stores are described in the study as the face of the of the brand, by some interviewees even considered as the sole point of interaction in terms of communicating a sustainable brand image. Whether such arguments imply that all knowledge consumers form

in regards of companies' work with sustainability, proposed by several interviewees, is difficult to fully determine. Nevertheless, in relation to the theories presented by Jones et al. (2007), how in-store activities enable consumers to engage with aspects of sustainability and connect with the corporate brand, it is believed that the local grocery store will more effectively realize and visualize some of the commitments taken by the company. Making sustainable initiatives and the identity of the organization more palpable and not just empty words, in contrast to e.g. commercials or sustainability reports. An example of this is the work among the case companies towards lowering their levels of food waste, or the reduction of conventional plastic in stores. Those activities were perceived to create tangible touchpoints for consumers by making aspects of sustainability more prevalent and understandable. But, also, implementing activities where consumers can feel a sense of participation, in which their actions directly affect their environment. Arguably, this further allows consumers to connect with the brand, creating positive perceptions associated with the sustainable brand image. Another example involves the stores' product assortment, as it enables to follow market trends and consumer preferences, from which products to sell and what products to exclude. Such activities were perceived to create associations among consumers, similar to what Kremer and Viot (2012) suggest, which potentially would create positive perceptions linked to the store and corporate brand image, as described by Kumar and Polonsky (2019). Other in-store activities, e.g. recycling, were also considered as important features among the case companies; to lower the impact of the individual store and achieve their long-term sustainable goals in accordance with expectations and legislation in society, such as EU's climate goals for 2050 (European Commission, n.d.). This confirms the motivation national and international legislation (Chkanikova & Mont, 2015) has in food retailers' work with sustainability. To further communicate a responsible image of the individual store, local initiatives were commonly adopted among store managers, mainly to gain sustainable recognition and goodwill. With additional information and communication performed in stores, the intentions behind the activities resemble those described by Kauppinen-Räisänen et al. (2014), meant to demonstrate and further consolidate the sustainable brand image of the food retailers. Additionally, Kumar and Polonsky (2019) argue that prior positive perceptions among consumers can mitigate potential bad experiences with a certain brand. This further underline the importance of the physical store. Not just to communicate and strengthen the corporate brand, but also in terms of maintaining that positioning. Where positive prior experiences from specific stores can make up for occasional negative ones. However, this was perceived as widely adopted by neither of the case companies.

Much like Kremer and Viot (2012) view retailers' brand image as mainly constituted of consumers perception of e.g. store assortment or service, the case companies highlighted the importance of sustainability activities to be implemented in order to reflect their work towards a desired brand image. The study further confirms theories of Lehner (2015), arguing that food retailers' local grocery stores should be regarded as an extension of the organization and the natural point-of-interaction between the retailer and the consumer. A place where consumers will become aware and understand the sustainable commitments taken by the food retailer, to further assess the credibility of the food retailer brand through their activities (Kumar & Polonsky, 2019). As Kumar and Polonsky (2019) suggest, food retailers are required to work consistently across all areas of the business to follow the expectations held by the consumers. From this perspective, the activities performed at store level among the case companies describe the role of local grocery stores as a platform which communicates and visualizes the commitments of the organization, making the identity of these strategies more tangible for consumers, to further enhance the evaluation among consumers that will influence what they associate with the store and the corporate brand image. But, also, a way for food retailers to

understand what consumers expect of organizations' sustainable responsibility, through insights of current market trends or local consumer preferences.

While the case companies were indicated to communicate their sustainable strategies and brand image with different degrees of success, according to the SBI (2019), all of the interviewees at the headquarters stressed the importance of sustainable commitments in the organization. However, several of the store managers described a sense of uncertainty; whether such investments in the end would pay off, similar to how Bawa and Saha (2016) question the strength of sustainable commitments in relation to brand image. Certainly, adopting such strategies will most likely promote the corporate brand image. But how will it favor the individual store? Some of the interviewees described a challenging trade-off to be prevalent, between the difficulties of going further than what the market is ready for, while not wanting to fall behind competition in terms of being positioned as sustainably responsible. These uncertainties can primarily be linked to a skepticism among store managers of the actual economic gains from certain initiatives, or lack of understanding behind the motives of some sustainability strategies communicated from the headquarter. A context which suggests that local grocery stores and headquarters may have different priorities and objectives in their work, which can have the consequence that other parts of the business are prioritized by store managers if being perceived as more focused on the customer. With consumers' general focus on price, as Chkanikova and Mont (2015) suggest, it creates additional economic pressures on local store managers, when facing directives of sustainable responsibilities from the headquarter as well as demands from other external stakeholders. This is exemplified in the research how the headquarter is encouraging store managers to increase their assortment of eco-products, since it is considered as demanded by consumers in general and may further influence their perception of the organization's sustainable responsibility. However, since eco-products often are more expensive than conventional products, some store managers explained the hesitation towards this as they do not want to exclude those consumers which may not afford paying a premium price for certain products. This confirms the complexity many Swedish food retailers encounter in terms of following external pressures for increased sustainable development, while still meeting the ongoing needs on the market for the most affordable food. But, as Kumar and Polonsky (2019) suggest, if food retailers are to be positioned as sustainably responsible, it requires such commitments to be communicated throughout all touchpoints of the store. This may explain why some representatives from headquarters indicated to prefer more influential power on their stores, with the hopes of establishing a unified implementation of sustainability strategies across the organization, to further on, enhance a more unitary sustainable brand image perceived by consumers. On the other hand, most store managers instead argued to prefer a sense of freedom, in order to better adapt to their local market. Both in terms of explicit market demands of the particular region, as well as specific factors related to the operations of the individual store.

These challenges, where food retailers are portrayed to have difficulties in convincing or motivating local stores to adopt certain sustainability strategies, are considered to in a great extent be derived from how food retailers are working to communicate and implement sustainability strategies inside the organization. The case study describes several challenges food retailers may encounter when seeking to implement sustainable strategies in local grocery stores. To begin with, insufficient and unequal levels of knowledge among store managers result in further difficulties when local grocery stores pursue to implement sustainable strategies from the headquarter. This goes in line with the study by Chkanikova and Mont (2015), suggesting that insufficient knowledge levels among food retailers will complicate sustainability strategies to become implemented throughout the supply chains. It therefore

becomes vital to understand how to address this issue, both in terms of profitability, but also to establish a brand image that is perceived as consistent among consumers, as suggested by Balabanis et al. (1998). Egels-Zandén (2016) argues for the importance of managers to communicate a clear strategy that makes sense for practitioners to implement. This was considered as important among the store managers, e.g. when receiving information related to sustainability that could be concretized and feasible to adopt in reality. Arguably, deficiencies within this could result in insufficient expertise levels among store managers. This was discovered as something evident among some case companies, and particularly when the information sequence was top-down in the organizational hierarchy, e.g. Erica (Lidl headquarter) who believed that difficulties to implement sustainability initiatives at store level emerged as a result of inadequate and unequal knowledge levels across the corporation, and especially, the store managers across the stores. However, as Abratt and Sacks (1988) declare, that many organizations' encounter trade-offs when seeking to balance between implementing sustainability activities and being profitable, the study highlights how some store managers were reluctant to fully implement certain corporate sustainable initiatives, even though the communication sequence were considered to be clear from the headquarter, due to an uncertainty of the impact on brand image in relation to e.g. the store's profitability.

Moreover, as the study demonstrated that some case companies provide facilitations in the interaction across the organizational hierarchies, it further enables these particular food retailers to reshape and develop vital sustainability strategies as an ongoing process. For example, both Coop and ICA has various online forums where store managers are able to share their expertise, uncertainties and concerns related to daily operations with each other, it further enhances autonomous activities (at the bottom of the organization) to emerge. To illustrate, the introduction of waste bags originated in a single Coop store and later became an industry standard where all stores across the country incorporated this visionary activity. Accordingly, since the store managers at, for instance Coop, possess the kind of facilitation in their communication within the organization, they further become encouraged to implement sustainability strategies that emerge through quick consultation with other local stores. This particular process goes in line with the arguments by Egels-Zandén and Rosén (2015), in regards of how organizational hierarchies should facilitate interaction across the levels to simplify the process of sustainability strategies and initiatives to be implemented. Furthermore, such internal organizational communication also enabled responsible employees at the headquarters of ICA and Coop to take part of the discussions within the communities. Thus, allowing to quickly assist with information regarding certain issues discussed, or provide insights for headquarters in regard to adaptations of sustainability strategies demanded by store managers as well as potential ideas that perhaps could be developed into prescribed or visionary ones (at the top of the organization) at a corporate level. However, as the results demonstrate that a few case companies do not at the same extent undergo this particular process, it allows us to discuss whether this depend on potential deficiencies, and/or constraints, when it comes to integrating activities across the organizational hierarchy. Despite the fact that local sustainability initiatives were encouraged among all food retailers, the process of developing and implementing initiatives was considered as more difficult and time-demanding for the grocery stores where the organization is centrally controlled. For instance, Lidl's stores are strictly obligated to follow directives from the headquarter (i.e. the stores' interior), while at e.g. Coop, store managers have a greater level of freedom and could more easily adapt directives from the headquarter to the local context and cooperate with other grocery stores.

However, as Egels-Zandén and Rosén (2015) highlight the significant importance for activities to emerge and be reshaped across all organizational hierarchies, this study shows that some of

the case companies are less facilitated to further develop and reshape activities. This is considered to be a consequence from mainly incorporating and performing visionary activities, followed by a top-down communication sequence throughout the organization. Particularly prominent among the centrally controlled case companies, i.e. Lidl. As Chkanikova and Mont (2015) concluded that food retailers lack the power to influence the practices performed by their local/national suppliers, it allows us to draw parallels to our gathered material where centrally controlled food retailers' express constraints in influencing the operational practices related to sustainability at store level. Hence, it becomes of high importance to highlight whether less constraints in the organizational structure would more likely entail operational feasibility in practice at store level. In turn, this could encourage food retailers to realize the importance of the internal communication and further adjust their organizational structure in accordance to what is considered as most beneficial in terms of profitability. But also, practical feasibility when seeking to implement sustainability strategies at store-level. However, when the sequence also is encouraged and facilitated to emerge from an intermediate-top/down- and a down-top sequence, the enabled communication transmission between the hierarchies will have a positive impact on the disposition of knowledge and resources. This will in turn simplify and expedite the communication process between the hierarchies, which will further enable and encourage existing sustainability strategies to be reshaped. But, also, enabling new activities to be developed and implemented (Egels-Zandén & Rosén, 2015), seen among food retailers such as Coop and ICA. Accordingly, by viewing their superior position on the SBI, it allows us to argue that these two food retailers have incorporated the most appropriate internal communication process,, which in turn, have been a part of facilitating them to establish a more unitary development among local stores to adopt and communicate the sustainable responsibility and commitment of the food retailers. Leading to a greater ability of strengthening their sustainable brand image by overcoming the challenges of inadequate knowledge, motivation and understanding among store managers.

Why corporations like Coop and ICA has managed to establish a stronger sustainable brand image than other competitors are by several of the interviewees explained as a consequence of larger marketing budgets. This is obviously an aspect which has to be taken into account when analyzing the Swedish market. Then again, only pointing to this aspect are believed to not give a comprehensive image of sustainable branding among Swedish food retailers. Especially since Coop is managing to compete with ICA with less than a third of their market share (DLF, 2019). What is instead considered to differentiate the case companies comes to a large extent down to how well the organizations have succeeded in creating operations which encourages corporate strategies to be evaluated and constantly adapted according to local conditions and general changes in demands and preferences on the market. Similar to what previous theories suggest, the case companies have to handle several different touchpoints in the store (Fuentes & Fredriksson, 2016) while being expected of having sustainability to permeate their work (Kumar & Polonsky, 2019). However, as the local context were suggested by interviewees to influence e.g. the prioritization and promotion of local products, depending on consumer demands in that particular region, it would also require that store managers align their individual sense making of sustainable consumption with the perception shared by their customers, as suggested by Lehner (2015). Moreover, the geographical aspect was also suggested to imply differences in store managers' understanding of sustainability, and further affecting how sustainability was prioritized at store-level. Therefore, at case companies whom are perceived to not in the same extent enable communication and collaboration between the stores and with the headquarters, it is believed this may influence how store managers understand and succeed in adapting their work in accordance with corporate sustainability strategies and are further motivated to indeed make some required reorganizations or financial

investments. Egels-Zandén (2016) argues that certain trade-offs can be necessary to fully comply with the sustainable commitments envisioned by the organization and should involve the whole organization. From this perspective, with the headquarter pushing for several sustainability strategies, along with some hesitation among store managers, it could be argued that such circumstances can create a sort of barrier between headquarter and local stores regarding the visions of the headquarter and the operations in practice at store-level. This in accordance with theories of Egels-Zandén and Rosén (2015), arguing that prescribed activities from the headquarter can be perceived by staff at store level as not fully applicable with consumer demands or the local context. To conclude, this underlines the importance of the headquarter to make strategies and the communication as concrete as possible in order to overcome the trade-offs several grocery stores are perceived to encounter. The key to success entails organizations to consider the implementation of sustainability strategies as an ongoing process, guided by the corporate vision, but also connected with the operations from below in the organization (Egels-Zandén & Rosén, 2015). Interactions across organizational levels are thus essential to allow strategies to be reshaped in accordance with the market context. While sustainability strategies may not be prioritized by some store managers due to e.g. financial or organizational issues, such arguments would also indicate that inadequate organizational communication and cooperation may cause issues of prioritization as well. The consequences are believed to influence some stores' willingness to comply with the vision and strategies set by the headquarter, due to a lack of motivation and understanding. But, also, affecting the headquarters' ability to adapt its strategies to the stores' operations and demands. With potential inconsistencies in how local stores perceive and adopt sustainability strategies, as well as the ability for the organization to assist the adaptation in accordance with the context of the market, it will most likely also affect the consistency in how sustainability commitments are communicated towards the consumers. Which evidently may influence what consumers will associate in terms of the food retailers' sustainable brand image.

Conclusions

The findings of this study portray the role of local grocery stores as a platform for food retailers to communicate and visualize the commitments of the organization. This is actualized through various in-store activities, with the intentions of either informing consumers of the food retailers' commitments, or by allowing consumers to engage in certain activities themselves related to sustainability. From this, making the identity of their sustainable brand more tangible for consumers in order create positive associations. There do however exist barriers and challenges for food retailers when trying implement certain sustainability strategies in stores. These challenges are considered to highly depend on a general lack of knowledge, motivation and understanding among store managers; why and how certain initiatives should be carried out. Partly from a concern of whether it will be profitable and have the customer in focus, but also how comprehendible some strategies will be in reality according to local context and operations of the store. Such circumstances are regarded to create a barrier between headquarter and local stores regarding the visions of the headquarter and the actual feasibility of operations in practice at store-level.

The challenges are perceived to in a great extent be affected by how food retailers facilitate store managers and headquarters communication and cooperation with each other; to continuously work with sustainability strategies in accordance with the context of the market and individual stores. Apart from affecting the level of knowledge and understanding among store managers, it was also considered to affect headquarters ability to adapt its strategies to the stores' operations. The theoretical implications of this study thus highlight the relevance of incorporating aspects of internal strategic communication when studying the processes of

implementing sustainable strategies with the motives of strengthening a corporate sustainable brand image. This conclusion supports Egels-Zandén and Rosén's (2015) findings, as it becomes evident that food retailers will not be successful when trying to push sustainability strategies to be adopted across their grocery stores, but rather has to be connected with the work already performed at store-level. This was indicated to be differently performed among the case companies and could therefore explain the various performances of the organization's work with promoting a sustainable brand image. This study adds additional insights of the applicability of Egels-Zandén and Rosén's (2015) framework in relation to the food retailing industry and provide further understandings about strategic implementation in additional business models not covered in their framework, e.g. franchise organizations.

Essentially, when the communication sequence is encouraged and facilitated across the entire organizational hierarchy, it is considered to simplify and expedite the communication process across the organizational, as suggested by Egels-Zandén & Rosén (2015). Thus, allowing food retailers to work with sustainable strategies as an ongoing adaptation, through e.g. online communities, that allows for inter-store cooperation; to better manage questions or concerns and adapt certain sustainable strategies by inspiring and sharing knowledge regarding various autonomous activities. With responsible managers at headquarters also participating in these communities, it increases the ability for feedback, help and further adaptation from headquarters. These organizational structures are considered to create an environment where store managers are more understanding and willing to walk the extra mile to adopt certain corporate sustainability strategies, while also enabling headquarters to be more attending to the applicability of their visions, in accordance with the feedback given from their stores. This further encourages existing sustainability strategies to be reshaped and new activities to be developed, which further increase the likelihood of grocery stores and headquarter to work more aligned towards set sustainability strategies. Consequently, this may entail more consistent sustainability commitments across the organization, which further works towards the establishment and strengthening of the corporate sustainable brand image.

Managerial implications
The insights derived from this study are considered to have managerial implications for practitioners within the food retailing industry. Firstly, it is arguable that solely relying on the work of local stores, which most of the case companies described, are believed to imply an exposure for the organization. An aspect which indicates that food retailers should consider using other types of medias as well, such as commercial, social media etc. Not just for promoting the commercial side of business but also sustainability attributes of the brand. An increase of medias could increase the number of touchpoints for consumers. But also, in accordance with what Kumar and Polonsky (2019) suggest, create prior experiences of the brand which could help food retailers to mitigate and overcome individually negative consumer in-store experiences. Accordingly, not solely relying on that every store live up to the expectations held by consumers, in regard to sustainable responsibility.

Moreover, it becomes vital for practitioners in the industry to encourage the interaction across organizational hierarchies, for reshaping existing sustainability initiatives and adaptation when implementing new ones. To facilitate such communication processes, practitioners need to encourage communication through the organizational down-top and intermediate-top/down hierarchies. This is believed to simplify the process of implementing sustainable strategies coming from the headquarters, in accordance to theories by Egels-Zandén and Rosén (2015). Also, enabling the communication between departments, we believe it could reduce levels of unequal knowledge across the organization and motivate store managers to implement

sustainable strategies at store-level. In addition to this, we consider encouragements of autonomous initiatives that entail in visionary ones, to have a significant impact on the organization, but also, the entire food retailing industry. Specifically, this could steer competitors into moving in the same direction, and further, induce them reconsider their sustainability practices in order to establish a consistent sustainable corporate brand image.

Limitations and future research

With a case study focusing on the Swedish market, it could be argued that the study is limited since it does not include all food retailers on the market. While this is valid to consider, we still argue that with case companies of various rankings based on their sustainable brand image (SBI 2019), the results from the empirical data are considered as exhaustive and provides additional insights in explaining such differences in sustainable branding among food retailers. Nevertheless, taking into account online food retailers on the market is an interesting perspective to consider for future research. A field which may be studied individually, but also against food retailers with physical stores. This approach would provide more in-depth understandings in aspects focused on e.g. product assortment, such as the importance of product information in relation to its climate impact. Also, it becomes vital to highlight that this research has been affected by the prevailing pandemic of Covid-19. Since a number of food retailers rejected to participate in the research, we believe this could have affected the results of this study as additional perspectives of actors could not be reviewed.

While researches within sustainable branding in retailing has already been conducted from a consumer perspective, it is still considered as an important perspective for future research. Connecting to the study by Bawa and Saha (2016), by analyzing the general perception of Swedish food retailers held by consumers, not just specifically their sustainable brand based on the SBI, could provide knowledge in the actual effectiveness of sustainable branding strategies in the food retailing industry. Since the food retailing industry are suggested to be perceived as in the top of industries in regard to sustainability, it allows future researches to study the strength of sustainable associations in relation to other attributes of food retailers.

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Appendix

Table 2: Interview guide

Theme	Questions
Introduction	- Tell us about yourself and your position in the company. - Time at the company. - Franchise or corporately owned store?*
Sustainable brand of the company	- What characterizes X in regards of sustainability? - How does the company work to design a sustainable brand?
Formulation of sustainable strategies	- What are your strategies and commitments in sustainability based on? - Are local sustainable initiatives encouraged? - How do you work with local sustainability initiatives? - Developing sustainable strategies; market demands in contrast to corporate vision. - How do you formulate sustainable your strategies in sustainability?
Work and implementation of sustainable strategies	- Describe X work with sustainability. - What are the sustainable strategies of X that stores have to relate to? - What is X's overall aim with the work with sustainability? - To what extent does top management affect the work with sustainability in stores? Guidelines vs strict policies. - How does the type of ownership affect the implementation process? Franchise vs corporately owned. - How are stores provided with information and resources to work with sustainability? - How does HQ work to communicate sustainable strategies? - What incentives exists for stores to work according to set sustainable strategies?
The role of the store	- What is the role of the store to communicate the corporate sustainable brand? - What aspects of your sustainable strategies are emphasized in stores? - What responsibility does the individual store have to follow the corporate sustainable strategies? - What responsibility does the individual store have to maintain the corporate sustainable brand?
Challenges & barriers	- What are the potential challenges and/or barriers of implementing sustainable strategies in the organization? - How can the formulation and implementation of sustainable strategies be improved? - Potential trade-offs.
Other questions	- Position on SBI 2019. - Would you like to add anything?

Table 3: Sustainable Brand Index 2019 - Industry ranking of grocery stores

Position	Company
1	Coop
2	ICA
3	Systembolaget
4	Willys
5	Hemköp
6	Linas matkasse
7	City Gross
8	Axfood
9	Lidl
10	Mat.se
11	Mathem
12	Middagsfrid
13	Netto
14	Tempo

Sustainable Brand Index (2019)