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## How to build a conscientious corporate brand together with business partners: A case study of Unilever

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### ABSTRACT

Although a few scholars have suggested that the strategic alignment of the corporate brand's business partner network is essential to bring the corporate brand conscience to life, there remains limited research about the process of creating a conscientious corporate brand together with such a business partner network. Thus, this paper aims to investigate how a conscientious corporate brand is built together with its business partners. To address this research objective, we conduct a single case study of Unilever, comprising interviews with its managers and business partners. Findings show how Unilever: drives business and business relationships around a corporate brand purpose; embraces balanced stakeholder and temporal perspectives; promotes strategic co-creation initiatives; and reinforces the strategic alignment of its ecosystem of business partners. The findings contribute to the literature by identifying the elements and describing the process of conscientious corporate brand building with business partners.

### 1. Introduction

Businesses and their corporate brands are under pressure from multiple stakeholders to embrace their broader responsibilities beyond profit (Chandy, Johar, Moorman, & Roberts, 2021). This has led to a reshaping of the competitive environment across industries including within business-to-business (B2B) contexts. There are four interconnected drivers that are promoting this change.

First, business customers are increasingly demanding more sustainable and responsible solutions, which include, for instance, the quest for more sustainable supply chains (Brindley & Oxborrow, 2014) and packaging (Keränen, Komulainen, Lehtimäki, & Ulkuniemi, 2021). Second, employees are pushing their own organizations to adopt more conscientious approaches to business (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016; Girschik, 2020). For example, in recent years, Google has had to confront mounting pressure from employees to address inequality, diversity and transparency. Third, many B2B start-ups are emerging which are disrupting the way traditional players operate by building value propositions which are grounded on ethics, sustainability and responsibility (Čorić, Lučić, Brečić, Šević, & Šević, 2020). Take for instance the

Swedish trucking start-up Einride, that has developed a transport-as-a service business model based on driver-less trucks, that aims at transforming its industry by pushing other companies to become more sustainable. Finally, there is an exponential growth of financial investments driven by ESG (Environmental, Social and Ethical Governance) criteria, which has increased tenfold since 2018 (Visram, 2021) and will continue to accelerate with assets in sustainable investment products expected to outnumber conventional funds in Europe by 2025.

During the last three decades, many corporate brands have tried to address their broader responsibilities beyond profit through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs. According to Vitell (2003), CSR is about engaging proactively in activities capable of delivering social benefit or public service, as well as voluntarily avoiding practices that might be harmful to society. Undoubtedly, CSR has helped many corporate brands to develop a more conscientious approach to business. However, in parallel, too many corporate brands have only embraced CSR as a reputation cleansing mechanism (Maxfield, 2008; Pope & Wæraas, 2016) or as a tactical tool to manage potential risks (Walsh & Beatty, 2007). This has led to increasing concerns about the corporate motivations behind CSR investments (Joyner & Payne, 2002).

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Additionally, research shows that most of the corporate brands that have embraced CSR from a more authentic perspective, have failed to integrate it into the core of their corporate brand identity and their business strategy (Golob & Podnar, 2019). Overall, on too many occasions, CSR activities are instrumental and/or tangential to the business (Pope & Wæraas, 2016).

These failings in the practice of CSR, together with the increasing pressure from the four interconnected forces discussed above, are leading to a tipping point in which brands will need to go beyond CSR. Unilever, the British multinational company which operates in the fast-moving consumer goods industry, has already made this choice. It has disbanded its CSR department and made social and environmental commitments core to its corporate brand identity and strategy, while also decentralizing its management and execution across the organization. This approach resonates with the proposals from an emerging stream of literature which advocates the need to build conscientious corporate brands (CCBs) (Hutchinson, Singh, Svensson, & Mysen, 2013; Iglesias & Ind, 2016, 2020; Ind & Ryder, 2011; Rindell, Svensson, Mysen, Billström, & Wilén, 2011). CCBs are brands driven by an internal moral compass, articulated through a corporate brand purpose and a set of core values (Iglesias & Ind, 2020), which aim at building a profitable business while at the same time tackling some of the pressing challenges that humanity is facing, such as climate change and growing inequalities among countries and within societies (Ind & Iglesias, 2022). CCBs critically consider the perspectives of all stakeholders (Rindell et al., 2011), promote the creation of shared value (Porter & Kramer, 2002) and are agents of transformative change (Ind & Ryder, 2011).

Interestingly, the literature suggests that CCBs will only be capable of serving their different stakeholders, in line with their purpose and values, if they manage to build a committed network of business partners (Rindell et al., 2011). This indicates the need to realise a high degree of strategic alignment of the business partners' network with the CCB identity and strategic objectives (Kapitan, Kennedy, & Berth, 2019; Sheth & Sinha, 2015). For instance, a CCB that is committed to sustainability needs business partners that are also committed to sustainability that, for example, can provide the CCB with more sustainable packaging or transportation solutions. Similarly, a CCB committed to inclusion, diversity and the promotion of human rights needs to promote a supportive network of business partners that is also fully committed to these same objectives. In recent years, leading corporate brands such as Nike<sup>1</sup> or Apple<sup>2</sup> have suffered relevant reputational crises because of failing to strategically align its respective networks of business partners around its purpose and values.

Nevertheless, given that CCBs are a nascent field of managerial practice and an emerging field of academic study, there is still very scarce empirical academic research in the area (Hutchinson et al., 2013; Kapitan, Kemper, Vredenburg, & Spry, 2022; Rindell et al., 2011) and most of the papers published on CCBs are conceptual (e.g., Biedenbach & Biedenbach, 2022; Iglesias & Ind, 2020; Iglesias, Ind, & Schultz, 2022; Vallaster & Lechner, 2022). This shows the need for more empirical, qualitative and exploratory studies aimed at theory building, which can help to better define the emerging phenomenon of CCBs. In line with this, the research objective of the present study is to explore how CCBs are built together with business partners through a single case study of the CCB, Unilever. We chose Unilever because it is widely recognized as a CCB, has made a strategic commitment to bring its corporate brand purpose and values to life, is highly rated in terms of social and environmental engagement, and has a large and complex ecosystem of business partners (Globescan, 2022; Sigwatch, 2019). Our findings show how Unilever: drives business and business relationships around a corporate brand purpose; embraces balanced stakeholder and temporal perspectives; promotes strategic co-creation initiatives; and reinforces

the strategic alignment of its ecosystem of business partners. The findings contribute to the literature by identifying the elements and describing the process of conscientious corporate brand building with business partners.

The remainder of the paper contains the theoretical background, the methodology and data analysis, the findings, and finally the discussion comprising theoretical contributions, managerial implications, limitations and future research opportunities.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Corporate branding in B2B contexts

Managers are increasingly investing in building strong B2B corporate brands. This can generate several benefits (Beverland, Napoli, & Lindgreen, 2007), including improved positioning (Koporcic & Halinen, 2018), greater credibility (Gustafson & Pomirleanu, 2021), and the opportunity to charge premium prices (Chang, Wang, & Arnett, 2018). Additionally, a strong B2B corporate brand can create higher repurchase intentions (Balmer, Lin, Chen, & He, 2020), more enduring relationships with business partners (Ozdemir, Gupta, Foroudi, Wright, & Eng, 2020), and heightened shareholder value (Guenther & Guenther, 2019).

B2B corporate brands are organic entities that are co-created together with manifold business partners, including suppliers, distributors, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and innovative start-ups (e.g., Iglesias, Landgraf, Ind, Markovic, & Koporcic, 2020). Empirical research underscores that B2B corporate brands are built through collaborative processes where a multiplicity of actors play a key role (Koporcic & Halinen, 2018; Mäläskä, Saraniemi, & Tähtinen, 2011). From this perspective, the role of the manager becomes that of a 'conductor' or 'conciliator' of a complex ecosystem of business partners (Michel, 2017), who need to be strategically aligned with the identity and strategy of the focal B2B corporate brand (Mingione & Abratt, 2022).

However, surprisingly, there is much less empirical research as to the role of business partners in building B2C corporate brands (Mingione & Leoni, 2020). One of the few streams of research in the area focuses on the role of service networks in building B2C corporate brands (e.g., Morgan, Deeter-Schmelz, & Moberg, 2007). Nevertheless, there is almost no research as to how a B2C corporate brand that manufactures and delivers goods should align its business partners to reinforce its corporate brand building process.

### 2.2. CSR vs CCBs

#### 2.2.1. Corporate brands and CSR: Benefits and drawbacks

Corporate brands are under increasing pressure from their internal and external stakeholders to embrace their broader responsibilities beyond profit and to contribute to the development of a better world (Chandy et al., 2021). The traditional response to these pressures has been to invest in corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives (Golob & Podnar, 2019). Corporate brands investing in CSR are committed to working for the social betterment (Frederick, 1986). Carroll (1991) claims that CSR involves four different but potentially interconnected types of responsibility. First, there is an economic responsibility which has to do with obtaining profits and improving the brand's competitive position. Second, there is a legal responsibility that is about complying with the law. Third, corporate brands should also embrace an ethical responsibility, which has to do with behaving fairly and morally. Finally, there is a philanthropic responsibility that should push brands to promote activities aimed at giving back to society. In essence, these diverse responsibilities should help corporate brands to positively impact the social ecosystems where they operate and where multiple stakeholders interact (Peloza & Shang, 2011). In turn, corporate brands engaging in CSR can obtain many positive outcomes, such as superior levels of customer trust and loyalty (Chomvilailuk & Butcher, 2014;

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/2d9d8c2a-958d-11e6-a80e-bcd69f323a8b>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/4444d5aa-5494-4fb0-8648-fbd303cc7981>

Iglesias, Markovic, Bagherzadeh, & Singh, 2020; Kang & Hustvedt, 2014), positive word of mouth (Markovic, Iglesias, Qiu, & Bagherzadeh, 2022), stronger brand equity (Markovic, Iglesias, Singh, & Sierra, 2018), more positive perceptions in the eyes of investment analysts (Ioannou & Serafeim, 2010), and higher levels of employee commitment (Skudiene & Auruskeviciene, 2012). However, in an ever more interconnected and transparent era, where stakeholders have increasing expectations, CSR has been criticized because of three important drawbacks.

First, too many corporate brands have embraced CSR from a purely instrumental perspective (Vaaland, Heide, & Grønhaug, 2008). In some cases, this is about using CSR as a tactical tool to burnish a damaged reputation (Maxfield, 2008). In some others, brands have invested in CSR only to manage and reduce potential risks (Walsh & Beatty, 2007). In the worst cases, corporate brands have engaged in CSR washing, conveying false claims to improve their competitive standing (Pope & Wæraas, 2016). Unfortunately, research shows that too many brands say one thing in the public arena, while they do the opposite (Lyon et al., 2018). This instrumental use of CSR, that considers it as a means to an end, which in many cases is to serve the interests of the shareholders (Jurgens, Berthon, Papania, & Shabbir, 2010), has spurred a legitimacy crisis (Joyner & Payne, 2002) and led to growing criticisms on social media platforms (Yang, Basile, & Letourneau, 2020).

Second, too often, CSR is tangential or completely disconnected from the core of corporate brand and business strategies (Maon, Swaen, & Lindgreen, 2017). According to Golob and Podnar (2019), most brands do not embed their CSR commitments into the core of their corporate brand positioning. Additionally, even if some consider CSR as a complement to their corporate brand positioning, only a minority place it at its core (Golob & Podnar, 2019) and consider it a key ingredient of the corporate brand strategy (Kitchin, 2003). In a similar vein, Freeman and Liedtka (1991) argue that CSR does not challenge the idea of a business as a profit maximizer, but rather just aims at alleviating some of the negative consequences of its actions. From this perspective, CSR is only a compensatory mechanism (Ind & Iglesias, 2022). The disconnection between CSR activities and the corporate brand and business strategies leads stakeholders to see CSR commitments as inauthentic and insincere (Mazutis & Slawinski, 2015).

Third, empirical research shows that many of the corporate brands that engage in CSR have failed to develop a deep society-centric approach, which involves the critical evaluation of the benefits for all stakeholders (Mazutis & Slawinski, 2015). Instead, corporate brands often see their shareholders as the main stakeholder to serve (Jurgens et al., 2010). This shareholder primacy (Friedman, 1970) tends to promote a short-term management approach to corporate brand building (Lodish & Mela, 2007), which is especially risky in B2B contexts where successful business depends on the generation of long-term relationships and the establishment of strong inter-organizational networks (Naudé & Sutton-Brady, 2019). Golob, Davies, Kernstock and Powell (2020, p.125) claim that ‘by addressing issues that matter to different stakeholders and people in general and which have the potential to change their daily lives, brand management research would be able to position itself more at the forefront of contemporary pressing problems faced by our global society’. Unfortunately, there is still very little research as to how different corporate brand stakeholders understand what value is and how to measure it (Harrison & Wicks, 2013).

Overall, there are significant drawbacks to the practice of CSR, which has led to a legitimacy crisis. This, together with increasing pressure from customers, employees, competitors, and investors on corporate brands to embrace more deeply and authentically their broader responsibilities, emphasizes the need to go beyond CSR.

### 2.2.2. The rise of CCBs

CCBs are an alternative to CSR. CCBs seek to integrate conscience and the importance of doing the right thing with building a profitable business (Iglesias & Ind, 2020; Ind & Iglesias, 2022). Such organizations adhere to the law and comply with their legal responsibilities (Carroll,

1991), but this is not what drives them. Instead, CCBs are driven by an internal organizational conscience - a deep sense of moral responsibility - that allows them to decide at each moment the right thing to do (Olsen & Peretz, 2011). From this perspective, the key driver of CCBs is not objective morality, which derives from legislative guidelines, but subjective morality - an organizational belief system (Joyner & Payne, 2002). This internal conscience, which can be understood as a moral compass (Porter & Kramer, 2002), is articulated through a corporate brand purpose and a set of corporate brand values (Ind & Iglesias, 2022). This underscores that even if CCBs are conscious of the external world, they are primarily co-created from the inside-out (Biedenbach & Biedenbach, 2022). From this perspective, the purpose provides an overarching framework which defines how the brand's business will contribute to the betterment of society and the planet (Hollensbe, Wookey, Hickey, & George, 2014). Of note, even if building and implementing a purpose has become a central concern in managerial practice, there is still very limited academic research in this area (Golob et al., 2020).

CCBs build their brand and business strategies around their internal conscience (Ind & Ryder, 2011). In contrast to a philanthropic perspective where good deeds are (Carroll, 1991), disconnected from business purpose (Freeman & Liedtka, 1991; Golob & Podnar, 2019), and are essentially a compensatory mechanism to give back to society (Ind & Iglesias, 2022), CCBs are deeply committed to spur positive transformative change through their core business (Iglesias & Ind, 2020). CCBs possess the features of moral agents that act intentionally and consistently (Sulmasy, 2008). This is a very different mindset than the more instrumental and superficial approaches to CSR (Ind & Ryder, 2011). Of course, this means that the organizational conscience needs to be embedded into the core of the corporate brand identity, the culture, and the practices of the organization (Rindell et al., 2011), instead of being confined to a department (Van Rekom, Berens, & van Halderen, 2013), as often happens with CSR. This highlights a key challenge for CCBs: how to ensure that conscience and identity is lived authentically (Vallaster & Lechner, 2022).

CCBs think issues through in a critical way and consider the perspectives of their diverse stakeholders (Ind & Ryder, 2011). This means that they are not only driven by the desire to create shareholder value, but also to create value together with their different stakeholders, such as employees, business partners, and society at large (Porter & Kramer, 2006). This means that CCBs aim at building a profitable business while balancing their own needs with those of their stakeholders (Snider, Hill, & Martin, 2003). Consequently, they need to balance their ethical and economic performances (Lantos, 2001; Schwartz & Carroll, 2003). However, this is not always easy, as different stakeholders might seek different, and sometimes contradictory utilities (Harrison & Wicks, 2013). Developing an authentic stakeholder perspective means embracing a more humanistic approach to management (Wilson & Morgan, 2011) that is rooted in fairness (Ind & Horlings, 2016). This also implies that strategic decisions can not only be taken by the board of directors, in isolation from salient stakeholders, and that managers cannot simply focus on shareholders and on short-term returns on investment (Mason & Simmons, 2014). Instead, CCBs need to open-up, in order to promote a strategic dialogue with their diverse stakeholders (Edinger-Schons, Lengler-Graiff, Scheidler, Mende, & Wieseke, 2020). This openness also requires higher degrees of transparency and self-disclosure (Hatch & Schultz, 2010). Overall, Iglesias et al. (2022) suggest that CCBs represent a paradigm shift in corporate branding.

### 2.3. How to build CCBs together with business partners

Bringing a CCB to life is only possible by building and nurturing a supportive collaborative network of business partners, as indicated by Rindell et al. (2011) in their analysis of large Nordic companies and Sheth and Sinha (2015) in their study of sustainability in emerging markets. As Kapitan et al. (2019) argue collaborative networks are

essential in reinforcing the ability to deliver on social and environmental claims. This requires CCBs to be active in pushing their partners to align with more conscientious approaches to business (Kapitan et al., 2022). Thus, building a supportive network demands the strategic alignment of business partners (Mingione & Leoni, 2020) around the CCB's purpose and strategy (Iglesias & Ind, 2020), the establishment of trusting relationships (Rindell et al., 2011) and the sharing of knowledge (Mingione & Leoni, 2020).

Additionally, this strategic alignment often requires the CCB to exert expert and reward power with its partners, especially the smaller ones (Harness, Ranaweera, Karjaluoto, & Jayawardhena, 2018). Similarly, strategic alignment also demands agreement on long-term shared goals, embedded in formal long-term oriented contracts, that are capable of reinforcing the business partners' willingness to nurture an enduring relationship over time (Gupta, Polonsky, & Lazaravic, 2019).

Quintana-García, Benavides-Chicón and Marchante-Lara (2021) suggest that strategic alignment can be fostered by a three-step

management process that starts with the selection of business partners based on an initial assessment of their social and environmental practices. Next, practices need to be carefully monitored and corrected or terminated, if business partners do not comply with the corporate brand's purpose and standards (Quintana-García, Benavides-Chicón, & Marchante-Lara, 2021).

2.4. Research gap and objective

During the last decade many academics have strongly criticized the many relevant limitations of CSR, and have expressed the need to build an alternative organizational model, capable of addressing the pressing challenges that humanity is facing (e.g., Golob & Podnar, 2019; Maon et al., 2017). CCBs are a potential alternative that could deliver a paradigm shift in corporate branding (Iglesias et al., 2022). Table 1 summarizes the key contributions to this emerging stream of literature on CCBs and highlights what has been studied/proposed in relation to

**Table 1**  
Positioning table.

Paper	Method	Key contributions	Key topics				
			Purpose	Balanced stakeholder perspective	Balanced temporal perspective	Co-creation	Role of business partners
Ind and Ryder (2011)	Conceptual	CCBs transcend classic CSR because CSR is not integrated into the fabric of the organization.		X	X	X	
Olsen and Peretz (2011)	Qualitative	CCBs pursue CSR activities for altruistic motives and see them as an end in itself.		X	x		Future research: What role does the value chain play in building CCBs?
Rindell et al. (2011)	Quantitative	CCBs represent those brands whose ethical values are embedded in their business strategy, but also in its supply chain.		X	X		Empirical evidence: The entire value and supply chain must cooperate to build a CCB.
Hutchinson et al. (2013)	Quantitative	This study validates the conceptual foundation for CCBs proposed by Rindell et al. (2011).		X	X		Empirical evidence: Ethical conscientiousness is an integral dimension in the manufacturer-supplier relationship.
Iglesias and Ind (2016)	Qualitative	CCBs are principles-driven, fair, responsible and open.		X	X	X	
Iglesias and Ind (2020)	Conceptual	CCBs go beyond CSR. CCBs are driven by an internal organizational conscience expressed by a purpose and driving principles. Co-creation is at the heart of CCBs.	X	X	X	X	Future research: What role do different stakeholders play in encouraging CCBs?
Kapitan et al. (2022)	Qualitative	CCBs conceive brand activism as an emerging strategy that is enacted by firms within their supply chains based on the firm's avowed social and political purpose and values.	X	X	X		Empirical evidence: Role of the supply chain and business partners in brand activism
Biedenbach and Biedenbach (2022)	Conceptual	CCBs are co-created inside-out through values-driven branding.	X	X	X	X	
Vallaster and Lechner (2022)	Conceptual	CCBs facilitate change towards a more sustainable society, while at the same time face considerable challenges related to authentically living their brand identity.	X	X	X	X	Theoretical proposition: CCBs put pressure on their stakeholders (including business partners) to also become more conscientious
Iglesias et al. (2022)	Conceptual	CCBs are driving a paradigm shift in corporate branding.	X	X	X	X	Future research: What the role of the different stakeholders can be in building CCBs?
Current study	Qualitative	CCBs do not only use their purpose as an internal driver, which influences their strategy and culture, but also as an external driver that shapes business relationships and strategically aligns business partners, encouraging them to adopt a balanced multi-stakeholder perspective and a balanced temporal perspective.	X	X	X	X	Empirical evidence: Business partners allow the CCB to develop new innovative capabilities or solutions, which can help the brand to become more conscientious and sustainable.

the role that business partners play in building CCBs. The last line in Table 1 presents the intended contribution of the current study.

Most of the early papers in the area (e.g., Hutchinson et al., 2013; Ind & Ryder, 2011; Olsen & Peretz, 2011; Rindell et al., 2011) focused on underscoring the need for CCBs to embrace and promote a deep and authentic multi-stakeholder perspective, while adopting a long-term strategic perspective. This was a reaction to the fact that, unfortunately, corporate branding and much CSR practice has been dominated by shareholder primacy (Jurgens et al., 2010) and its short-term temptations (Lodish & Mela, 2007).

Iglesias and Ind (2016), building on the initial suggestion by Ind and Ryder (2011), emphasized that CCBs should become more open, establish higher levels of engagement with their stakeholders and embrace co-creation as the means to better understand stakeholder expectations and to co-construct relevant solutions. Later on, other authors have also adhered to this perspective (e.g., Biedenbach & Biedenbach, 2022; Iglesias et al., 2022; Iglesias & Ind, 2020; Kapitan et al., 2022; Vallaster & Lechner, 2022). These more recent contributions have also claimed that CCBs need to be built around a transformative purpose, which defines how the corporate brand's business will contribute to the betterment of society (Hollensbe et al., 2014), while acting as an internal moral compass (Porter & Kramer, 2002). However, most of these recent works are still conceptual (Biedenbach & Biedenbach, 2022; Iglesias et al., 2022; Iglesias & Ind, 2020; Vallaster & Lechner, 2022) and only the study by Kapitan et al. (2022) is grounded on qualitative empirical work.

Three of the works in the area of CCBs have suggested that future research needs to examine what role business partners should play in building CCBs (Iglesias et al., 2022; Iglesias & Ind, 2020; Olsen & Peretz, 2011). Additionally, Vallaster and Lechner (2022) have advised that an integral role of CCBs should be to put pressure on stakeholders, including business partners, so that they embrace more conscientious approaches to business. Finally, three studies have empirically started to explore, at different levels and from different perspectives, what the role of business partners is in building CCBs. Rindell et al. (2011, p.713) tested a proposed CCB model “consisting of four components: (i) environmental impact, (ii) climate change, (iii) internal corporate codes of ethics and (iv) external corporate codes of ethics”. Their results show how ethical conscientiousness is not an add-on to the CCBs brand value proposition. Instead, it is an integral dimension of the buyer-seller B2B relationship. Hutchinson et al. (2013) validated the proposed model by Rindell et al. (2011) in the context of Canadian B2B brands. Finally, Kapitan et al. (2022) empirically examined the accelerators and decelerators that expedite adoption of B2B brand activism. The results of their study highlight that B2B brand activism is enacted by firms within their supply chains when it is aligned with the CCB's purpose.

Even if the three above mentioned empirical studies describe the key role that business partners might play in building CCBs (Hutchinson et al., 2013; Kapitan et al., 2022; Rindell et al., 2011), we still have a very limited understanding of how CCBs are built together with business partners. The studies by Hutchinson et al. (2013) and Rindell et al. (2011) show how in CCBs ethical conscience is embedded into the core of the business and business partners relationships, but they do not provide any empirical evidence regarding how this embedding is achieved. Interestingly, Kapitan et al. (2022) show the key role of brand purpose in enacting brand activism within a corporate brand's supply chain. However, they do not provide a holistic perspective as to how to build a CCB together with business partners and how to align around a corporate brand purpose.

The lack of research is especially relevant in the case of B2C corporate brands, as most of the research in the area has been conducted exploring the role of the business partners of B2B conscientious brands (Hutchinson et al., 2013; Kapitan et al., 2022; Rindell et al., 2011). However, as far as we are aware of, there is still no research regarding how B2C CCBs can be built together with their business partners and how to strategically align them (Mingione & Leoni, 2020). In line with

this, the research objective of the present study is to explore how CCBs are built together with business partners, through a single in-depth case study of a B2C CCB: Unilever.

### 3. Methodology and data analysis

For methodology and data analysis, we followed Gioia, Corley and Hamilton (2013) research process, by adhering to four steps: (1) research design; (2) data collection; (3) data analysis; and (4) grounded theory articulation (see Table 2).

#### 3.1. Research design

The research design started by selecting the phenomenon of interest (i.e., corporate brand consciousness). Then, an initial screening of the literature showed that: (1) CCBs are an emerging field of study which needs more empirical, qualitative and exploratory empirical research aimed at theory building (Hajdas & Kleczek, 2021; Sharma, 2020); and (2) CCBs need a supportive network of business partners, but there is a lack of empirical research on this. To address these research gaps, the objective of the present study is to empirically explore how a CCB is built together with its business partners by adopting a qualitative, single case study methodology, which allows to obtain a rich and thick description (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2016) of widely under-investigated topics and themes lacking robust theory (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

The chosen case (i.e., research setting) was Unilever, an international corporate brand that has operated in the fast-moving consumer goods industry since 1871. Unilever continuously creates, manages and maintains relationships with multiple business partners, such as suppliers (more than 60,000), distributors and retailers (small, medium and large corporations), start-ups (more than 10,000), NGOs (e.g., WWF, The Red Cross, UNICEF), and local authorities. The corporate brand, along with more than 400 product brands, focuses on three main markets: food and refreshments; home care; and beauty and personal care. Unilever was chosen as the unit of analysis for its exceptional commitment to strategies and actions that contribute to society and the planet. This implies an ongoing pledge on specific themes, such as climate change, waste, nutrition, health, human rights, living standards, equity,

**Table 2**

From research design to grounded theory: Key features per step.

Step	Key features
Research design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Phenomenon of interest: corporate brand consciousness</li> <li>- Initial screening of the literature</li> <li>- Research question: how a CCB is built together with its business partners</li> <li>- Identification and selection of a research setting in line with the aim: Unilever corporate brand</li> <li>- Identification of primary and secondary sources</li> </ul>
Data collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Primary sources - two main clusters of respondents: (1) internal stakeholders; (2) external stakeholders</li> <li>- Identification of two interview protocols</li> <li>- Performing semi-structured interviews</li> <li>- Transcript of interviews</li> </ul>
Data analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identification and selection of informant-centric data terms assembled in a compendium</li> <li>- Comparison of first-order concepts with current literature to generate second-order themes</li> <li>- Generation of aggregate dimensions stemming from second-order themes</li> <li>- Compendium including first-order concepts, second-order themes and aggregate dimensions, integrated with secondary sources</li> <li>- Data structure generation</li> </ul>
Grounded theory articulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identification of dynamic relationships among aggregate dimensions</li> <li>- Ground the dynamic relationships into a model</li> <li>- Refine the model by further comparison with literature</li> </ul>

diversity, and inclusion. In line with this, it is worth to note that Unilever in 2022 is the company most recognized for its sustainability leadership, followed by Patagonia and Natura&Co (Globescan, 2022). Moreover, Unilever was classified for the third time in a row as #1 among “Brands most Praised by Activist Groups”, a ranking by Sigwatch, which monitors and tracks how brands perform on sustainability-related issues (Sigwatch, 2019).

Thus, we believe that Unilever is an unusually revelatory and representative case, suitable for extending the currently limited knowledge on CCBs, and particularly their characteristics, conceptual boundaries, and interrelationships within the B2B network (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 1994). This instrumental case fulfils the criterion of maximization of what we can learn about such brands (Stake, 1995).

### 3.2. Data collection

This study collected two main sources of data, primary and secondary, with the first representing the leading source of information (Eisenhardt, 1989) and the latter helping to increase the trustworthiness and validity of our findings (Gibbert, Ruigrok, & Wicki, 2008).

To reduce potential bias and enhance the richness and thickness of our primary data, we have used a purposive sampling technique (Bryman, 2016), with various different informants who view the studied phenomenon from different perspectives (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Accordingly, we conducted interviews with 28 informants, 17 of which were internal stakeholders of Unilever (e.g., corporate marketing managers, corporate affairs directors, corporate communication managers, brand managers, sales managers), whilst the remaining 11 were external stakeholders (i.e., suppliers, associations, and external consultants). Internal interviewees were selected based on two criteria. First, we selected managers who had been involved in building a CCB. Second, we sought to find managers that are representative of Unilever, in terms of role/position diversity and seniority within the organization. Having interviewees with diverse roles/positions in Unilever enabled us to gather different perspectives on the development of corporate brand conscientiousness, from tactical to more strategic, and thus develop a broader understanding of the phenomenon under study. To further broaden our understanding of conscientiousness in Unilever and have a more holistic and encompassing view of the phenomenon, we have also chosen external interviewees with diverse profiles and level of engagement with Unilever. For instance, whilst suppliers are a quite engaged external stakeholder, associations or external consultants are less involved in Unilever’s daily routines and practices through which conscientiousness is built, but their influence is more strategic. Overall, having diverse internal and external informants enabled us to develop a better understanding of the observed patterns, enhancing our comprehension of the relationships among such patterns and allowing us to reach solid, well-informed findings (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Goulding, 2005). Table 3 shows the types and positions of the informants.

The primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews (i.e., from late 2020 to late 2022), based on two main protocols (Lindgreen, 2001), developed for both internal and external stakeholders. The interviews were conducted in English and lasted between 36 and 65 min, with an average duration of 46 min.

As in qualitative case studies the research process is often less transparent than in quantitative studies (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015), it is important to justify methodological choices and potential biases, and thereby evaluate methodological quality. First, to guarantee credibility, trustworthiness and validity of data, all interviews were recorded and transcribed (Easton, McComish, & Greenberg, 2000). Second, sufficient data were collected to support the findings and the generation of new insights. In particular, we fulfilled the saturation criterion after conducting 28 interviews (1320 min of audio recording), and thus we stopped collecting primary data (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Third, we adapted interview protocols during the interviews (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013; Lindgreen, 2001), by giving respondents the freedom to

**Table 3**  
Sample of informants.

Informant	Type	Position
I1	Internal	Vice President Communications Global Markets and External Affairs, EU
I2	Internal	Vice President Unilever & CEO Unilever FIMA
I3	Internal	Brand Manager, Dove
I4	Internal	Communications Director
I5	Internal	Impulse Channel Specialist
I6	Internal	Sustainable Business and Communications Director
I7	Internal	Head of Communications and Sustainability, Unilever Home Care
I8	Internal	Corporate Affairs Director
I9	Internal	Head of Finance, Ecuador
I10	Internal	Assistant Brand Manager, Dove
I11	Internal	General Manager, Unilever Spain
I12	Internal	Foods and Refreshment Vice President Unilever Spain
I13	Internal	Head of Communications and Sustainable Business, DACH region
I14	Internal	Sustainable Business Professional
I15	Internal	Head of Sales
I16	Internal	Global Marketing Manager, Vegetarian Butcher
I17	Internal	Communication Director
E1	External	Director of Strategy and Marketing, Supplier
E2	External	Director, Supplier
E3	External	Vice President of Logistics and Operations, Supplier
E4	External	Sustainability Director, Association
E5	External	Director, Association
E6	External	Director, Association
E7	External	Sustainability consultant
E8	External	Executive Strategy Director, Advertising Agency
E9	External	Founder and Director, NGO
E10	External	Coordinator of the Solidarity Alliances Department, NGO
E11	External	Director, NGO

freely speak and share their perspectives without restrictions (Polkinghorne, 2007). Fourth, we have collected secondary data (Gibbert et al., 2008), which include: the global virtual event on March 2021 “Unilever Compass: Our sustainable business strategy”; Unilever’s internal documents and reports; Unilever’s documents and reports available on Internet; Unilever’s and external partners’ websites; and press articles and press releases.

### 3.3. Data analysis

Using the NVivo 10 software, we conducted the data analysis in three stages: first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions (Gioia et al., 2013). First-order concepts have been identified via a line-by-line reading of our interview transcripts. At this stage, informant-centric data terms have been generated and assembled into a compendium. Then, first-order concepts have been compared with current literature to generate theory-centric concepts (i.e., second-order themes). This comparison also helped to ensure transferability, aiming to identify similarities and differences with previous studies on the topic, and thereby contribute to the development of theory on CCBs. It is important to note that our aim was not to replicate previous findings, but to look at how our findings build on them. Afterwards, building on second-order themes, we have generated aggregate dimensions, which have been assembled into a compendium along with first-order concepts, second-order themes and secondary data. Triangulation with secondary sources ensured trustworthiness of data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Importantly, in order to guarantee the rigor and credibility of our research, we have framed our data structure (see Fig. 1) into a “graphic representation of how the analysis progressed from raw data terms to themes and to dimensions when conducting the analyses” (Gioia, 2021, p. 26; Gioia et al., 2013).

To guarantee dependability and confirmability, we conducted an external auditing by attending research seminars and workshops, and presenting our research to colleagues who are experts in the ethics and corporate branding fields, but not involved in this paper. Their valuable

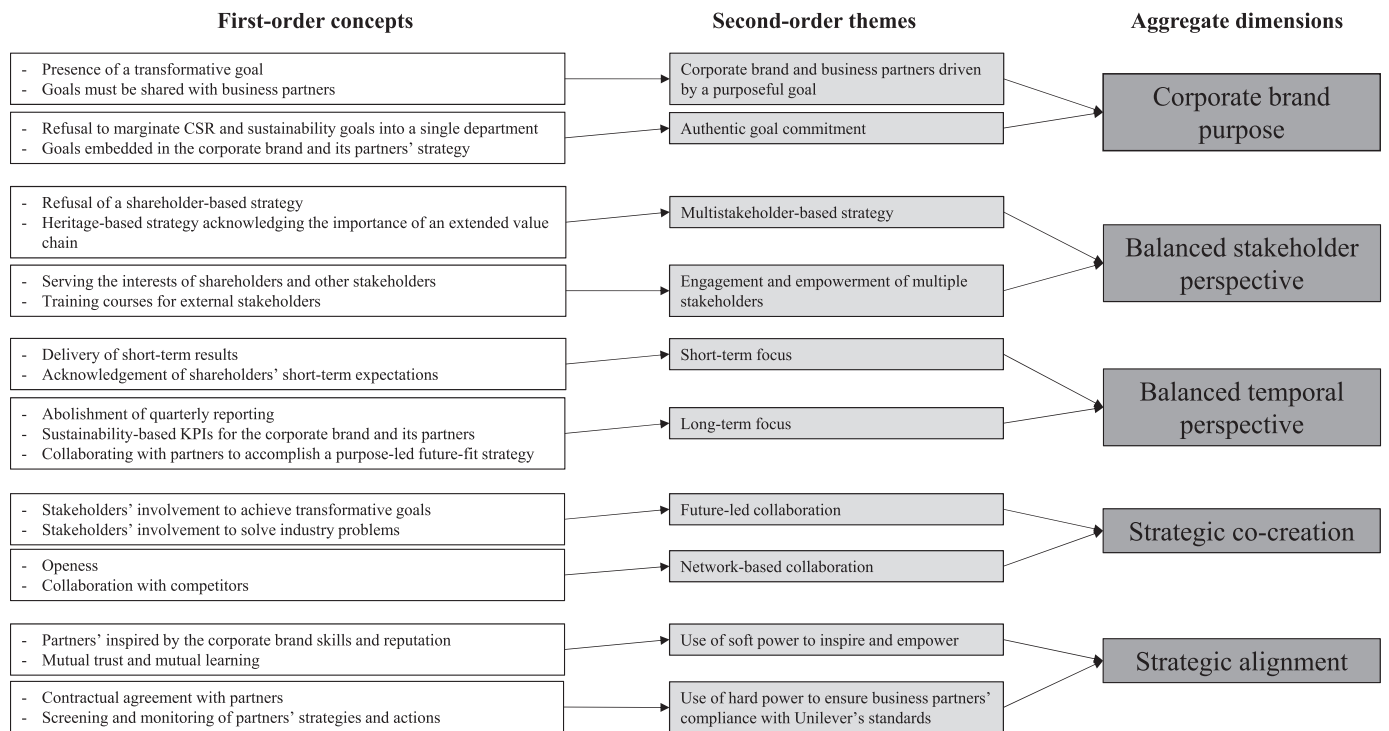


Fig. 1. Data structure.

feedback has helped us to better position our research and make adequate data analysis choices. This has enabled us to improve not only the quality but also the trustworthiness of our research. To further ensure confirmability, we have supported our analysis with data, rather than with our own interests. In addition, we have implemented researcher triangulation by interpreting the data in our team

individually, and then discussing the interpretations of each other, trying to be as objective as possible.

3.4. Grounded theory articulation

Finally, to articulate the grounded theory approach, and following

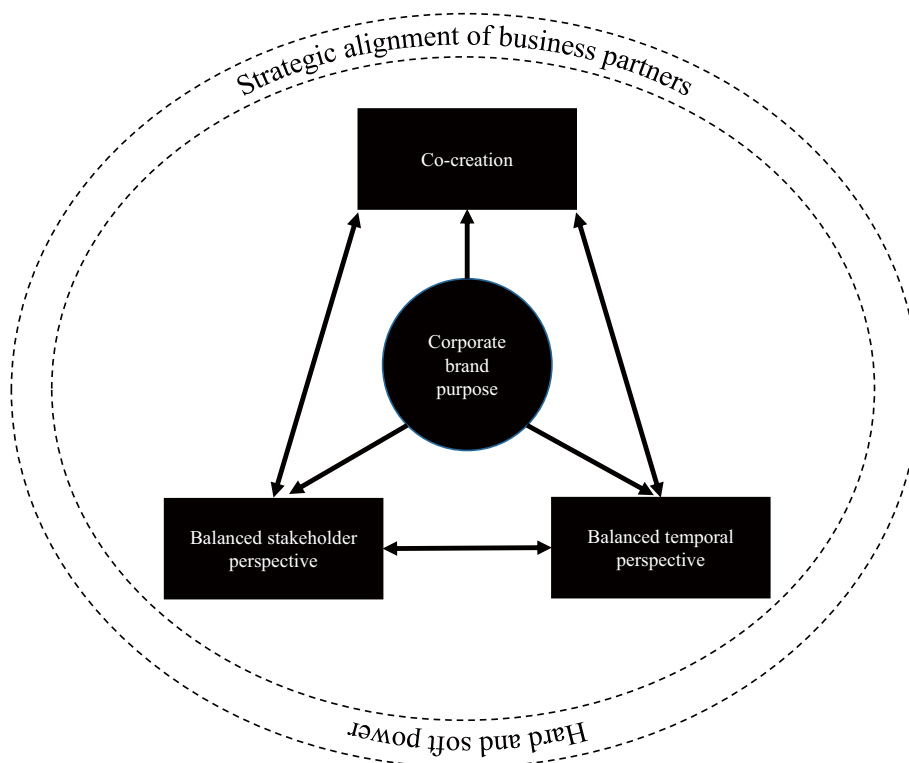


Fig. 2. Grounded theory articulation: A model on how to build a CCB together with business partners.

Gioia et al. (2013), we examined and characterized the aggregate dimensions and formulated dynamic relationships among them. This can be observed in the Findings and Discussion sections below and on Fig. 2.

#### 4. Findings

The results of the data analysis and interpretation show that Unilever acknowledges that it is not possible to build a CCB without business partners. Interviewees recognize the need to define and nurture a corporate brand purpose capable of driving the business strategy and the relationships with business partners. Additionally, the data analysis and interpretation show that Unilever embraces a balanced stakeholder perspective and a balanced temporal perspective, and that it also promotes both among its business partners. Moreover, Unilever promotes strategic co-creation initiatives and strategic alignment with its business partners.

##### 4.1. Driving strategy and aligning business partners around a corporate brand purpose

Unilever's purpose is to make sustainable living commonplace. This is about building a world where everybody can live with, rather than at the expense of, nature and the environment. From this perspective, a corporate brand purpose is an internal moral compass that defines why a CCB exists and what its intended transformational impact on the world is. The quotes from Unilever's employees illustrate this point:

“(Purpose) It gives us vision and our direction and our way of doing things. It's like our North star” (I3).

“Your purpose is why you exist [...] it does have to have a meaning beyond your internal drivers, it has to mean something in the world. For me, that therefore means it does have to have a social dimension, so to be social in nature” (I14).

Corporate brand purpose is key because it drives the business strategy and operations. At Unilever, corporate brand purpose “is incorporated into the business. [...] It's not just a commitment of a certain department. It is a commitment of everyone” (I4). This was a change fostered by Paul Polman, former Unilever CEO, who refused to confine social and environmental commitments within the CSR department. In the same vein, he didn't want CSR to be a compensatory mechanism for its business activities. At Unilever purpose is embedded into the strategy and into the way it does business.

“I think this is very important because usually in other companies... also in previous companies that I've worked for...you have this classic CSR department, don't get me wrong, they usually are responsible to plant some trees and make sure that the minimal requirements, as far as ecological businesses concerned are met. But no more than that. Whereas our purpose is an integral part of our company's strategy” (I13).

The following quote from Unilever's CEO indicates that the company recognizes that a CCB needs a supportive network of many diverse business partners who adhere to Unilever's purpose and are willing to work in the same strategic direction.

“We can't change the global food system alone so we're working with many partners [...] it is very much a, a point of working together with others to get that...it can be suppliers, can be other companies, a lot of small holder farming communities, let's say work with different companies. So, the more we align the interests within the industry, we align the interests among suppliers, we align the interests with governments, the more impact you can make [...] And we've also been very clear about our intentions that we want to do business with partners who are going in the same direction as us” (Secondary data, CEO).

This underscores Unilever's commitment to strategically align its business partners around its corporate brand purpose. Interestingly, Unilever's business partners seem to perceive that the corporate brand's commitment to bring its purpose to life is authentic. In fact, the business partners emphasize how the Unilever's purpose drives its business

relationships with them.

“They have this worry (sustainability) in their blood. It's always present in our conversations, in those meetings and in the papers that they send us, also in the documents that they send us...this is always present” (E2).

“Suppliers that do not align themselves with the (Unilever) company's goals are not contracted. That is because Unilever is determined to reach its sustainability goals right away, not by 2030 or 2050, which is what one sees in the market. There are waypoints and targets that have to be met covering things such as cutting water use and so on, but the key point is the company has decided that all its activities must be sustainable by 2030” (E7).

##### 4.2. Embracing and promoting a balanced stakeholder perspective

Unilever's CEO and employees acknowledge that becoming a CCB implies embracing a balanced stakeholder perspective, which is about serving the interests of the brand's diverse stakeholders and not only those of their shareholders and customers:

“We work to the benefit of all of our stakeholders, our people, consumers, and customers. Suppliers and business partners, millions of people who work in our extended value chain, society, the planet and shareholders” (secondary data, CEO).

“So, we are aware of the different stakeholders in our company and aim to build a model, which is serving all of them” (I13).

This does not imply an underestimation of shareholders. On the contrary, managers are fully aware of the role played by shareholders, who are more interested “on the financial side” pushing the company towards “improving performance; being a top line, being the bottom line, being the market share, being the exploration of new markets” (I13). However, Unilever aims at going beyond the trade-off between purpose and performance to cease the “false dichotomy to think that a sustainable business cannot be a profitable business” (I1), a “misperception which is damaging the progress that the world needs to make” (secondary data, CEO).

Our interviews also show that this focus on serving the brand's diverse stakeholders has been very much present at Unilever since its foundation. As the following quote suggests, Unilever's founder was for instance very much concerned about how to increase the well-being of its employees and business partners.

“Lord Leverhulme (Unilever's founder) was not only about you know, shareholder value, but really about stakeholder value and taking care of the employees, the value chain of the suppliers, of their health and wellbeing. For his time, he was already very progressive in terms of multi stakeholder elements” (I1).

Overall, this balanced stakeholder perspective seems to be very much ingrained into the organization. As the following quote shows, even when there have been relevant pressures from shareholders or investors, the employees and the top management have always attempted to preserve a balanced stakeholder perspective.

“A good example was when in 2017, there was a group of people with a lot of money led by Warren Buffett and Kraft Heinz. And they wanted to buy Unilever in February, and the immediate reaction of this company was ‘we don't want that because we don't think that will help our sustainability agenda’. So, we pushed back really, really hard. And the end result was that a short period later, they moved away from buying Unilever. I think that was the best example because that was purely a money shareholder driven thing of course. And the most important reason why our CEO at the time said this is not a good idea, was that he didn't believe that under a private equity reign Unilever would remain a multi-stakeholder sustainable growth company” (I8).

As we previously saw, this stakeholder perspective also allows Unilever to recognize the key role that its business partners play in bringing its corporate brand purpose to life and the need to devote significant resources to empower and upskill them. This is essential so that the business partners can develop the capabilities needed to better



contribute to bringing Unilever's corporate brand purpose to life across the entire value chain. The following quote illustrates the types of activities that Unilever is promoting to upskill the capabilities of its business partners.

"On Unilever's Vega del Gadiana estate (Spain), the company is teaching farmers to adopt a more sustainable form of agriculture. How is this done? The approach is a respectful one, the farmers take part in seminars and are given the financial help they need to buy the technology required to adopt these farming methods. The new methods make less use of water and pesticides. Such efforts both shrink farming's CO2 footprint and foster produce that is both healthier and more environmentally sustainable" (E7).

#### 4.3. Embracing and promoting a balanced temporal perspective

Unilever acknowledges that "in the system we live today, short term it's non-negotiable" (I12). However, in parallel, the interviews show how Unilever not only attempts to meet the short-term expectations of its shareholders and customers, but also to proactively promote a long-term business perspective, which is essential to serve its diverse stakeholders: "short-term is super important, because it allows you to build the long. Without short-term, you cannot build long-term good for the planet and company" (I11). To achieve this aim, the CEO at the time, Paul Polman, decided to stop quarterly reporting, which represented "a shift in mindset and a message to the markets as well. So, the message was that we were thinking of something else, not just doing the delivery of the short-term results, but also guaranteeing that we stay relevant and that we build something towards the future" (I4).

Unilever promotes a long-term business perspective called "purpose-led future-fit strategy". They acknowledge that in order to build a CCB they need to be capable of innovating and of developing new capabilities that will allow them to fulfill their social and environmental commitments.

"We have a long-term commitment. And when I say long-term, it's like in 10 years, we will do this, that. And we have a long-term vision. Change doesn't happen in like one day or one year" (I10).

"We have set ourselves even more ambitious targets. In October 2019, we announced an ambitious set of targets to build a circular economy and help end plastic waste. We have a target to achieve net zero by 2030" (Secondary data, CEO).

The generation of new capabilities and the development of innovative solutions require a significant and consistent investment over time and the establishment of long-term strategic collaborations with a wide ecosystem of business partners.

"With the long-term approach that we take and with the key actions that we propose and the strategy that we presented, we have stakeholders with us who understand that not everything is to be realized in a very short amount of time, but some of these things take longer" (I13).

"We have to transform [...] to source renewable, biodegradable and non-persistent low carbon ingredients and packaging. And that goes to all three divisions. So, of course, we can't do that without incredible partnerships. So, the existing suppliers we've got, who are also transforming to...to help us with new supplies for us and getting into spaces like biotech" (Secondary data, CEO).

This balanced temporal perspective also requires the development of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to measure how the company is fulfilling its purpose, beyond traditional short-term metrics which focus on financial performance. The internal document "Unilever sustainability performance data" provides extensive information about the evolution of KPIs related to the company's "Environmental Performance" (e.g., waste and effluence, water and energy consumption, ...) and "Social Performance" (e.g., community investment, occupational health, safety, ...). The document clearly shows how Unilever authentically embraces a balanced stakeholder and temporal perspective.

Additionally, it is worth noting that interviewees emphasize that what sets Unilever apart from other brands is that they are not only

establishing long-term KPIs for internal use, but also for their business partners by encouraging them to commit to long-term goals related to Unilever's corporate brand purpose and strategy and to build KPIs in a collaborative manner and track them carefully.

"I know that some of the companies are tracking their CO2 emission only for the steps in the value chain, which lie directly in their responsibility. So that is production, logistics, and then basically they don't care about the rest. Whereas Unilever says that our responsibility is the entire value chain" (I13).

"We must collaborate to improve all the common criteria of what we mean with social impact... Sorry, but they (corporations) do not have the know-how we have in terms of social impact" (E11).

#### 4.4. Promoting strategic co-creation initiatives

The interviews show that Unilever develops many co-creation projects in collaboration with different business partners, such as suppliers or retailers as a way to develop new innovative capabilities or solutions, which can help the brand to become more conscientious and sustainable.

"We work with our suppliers to improve our packaging material. So, for example, the packaging material of our in-home ice cream products, the tube is now fully recyclable. And those things are things that we work together with our suppliers" (I9).

"This is the beauty of co-construction. We cannot invent a world which only looks like we are. Co-construction, that's the future of our planet. [...] This is exactly the difference between Unilever and companies like that. [...] Now we clearly need to reinvent capitalism and reinventing capitalism can happen only along with co-creation" (I17).

In parallel, Unilever also establishes collaborations with many other stakeholders, such as NGOs, intergovernmental organizations and activists. Usually, these collaborations aim at developing joint marketing projects, which allow Unilever to bring its conscience and its multi-stakeholder perspective alive.

"We have a brand in France which is called Signal, which is a toothpaste. Since the beginning it has been a brand, which helps educating on tooth brushing. And we can see that there is a big issue, a big problem, which is dental health for people who are suffering poverty, because they have no money to go to the dentist. They don't have a good hygiene, so they need help. [...] we do a partnership with the Red Cross, for instance, to organize free tooth brushing, free dentist with the Red Cross for the communities who are suffering poverty" (I17).

Additionally, Unilever is becoming more open and now also incorporates competitors into some of these co-creation initiatives. The aim is to build multi-stakeholder collaborations with diverse partners, who can bring their expertise and capabilities to solve problems at speed and at scale, thus helping to transform the entire industry to become more sustainable.

"Unilever is a member of the Ellen MacArthur Foundation [...] and we are an active member participating in the discussions around how to improve the plastic network in packaging [...] and that includes competitors. Nestlé, for example, is a partner, customers such as Lidl for instance, is also a member, and NGOs as well and public entities [...] we are discussing ways to do business that improve the whole network. We share knowledge, we share the best practices and we try to do a joint work that is mediated through the institution or the organization that we are a member of" (I4).

"So they took very seriously engaging with other organizations to reach out people. For instance, they join, with P&G the Global Hand Washing Partnership, which I think is also a private-public partnership" (E8).

#### 4.5. Reinforcing the strategic alignment of the ecosystem of business partners

Unilever has developed a program called “Partner to win” which aims to strategically align its network of business partners. Once Unilever has identified a potentially interesting partner, the first step is to ensure that it complies with a set of criteria that assess its alignment with, and potential commitment to, Unilever’s purpose and values. These criteria are expressed in two documents. The first is The Responsible Business Partner Policy, which establishes a set of criteria to ensure that a partner’s business is run ethically and with integrity, respecting terms of employment and human rights, and in alignment with Unilever’s sustainability commitments. The second document, The Unilever Responsible Sourcing Policy, attempts to ensure that Unilever and its business partners build a profitable business while making a positive social impact on the lives of those in supply chains and communities, while reducing the environmental impact.

“Palm Oil producers are another example. They now have to meet much stricter standards than those currently found in the market. Unilever now only buys Palm Oil from wholly sustainable sources.” (E7).

“When we started we had to sign a partnership agreement to accomplish their targets and policies. They have many things in terms of transparency and quality management” (E11).

Once this initial assessment has been conducted and a business partner starts working together with Unilever, a continuous monitoring of the business partner activity is conducted to ensure its alignment with Unilever’s corporate brand purpose, values and strategic goals.

“So, also monitoring the way the suppliers do their own business is very important to make sure that what we are buying from them, complies with what they say that they are doing in terms of, for instance, deforestation; making sure that they are replanting the trees that they use in the harvest of the raw materials that the industry sources” (I4).

Whenever Unilever finds that a business partner it is not complying with its values and policies, they will ask the partner to take action, with the threat of a potential termination of the contract.

“So, we got aware that on a plantation there were serious human rights violation [...] So then we approached our supplier in order to take a stance on that. They then did a re-investigation on their own to make sure to understand better, first of all, what was the source of this human rights violation and how to prevent it in the future, and eliminate it in the present” (I13).

This monitoring is not only done by Unilever, but also by external organizations which conduct third-party independent verification audits, and through collaborations with companies that help to monitor the environmental impact of Unilever’s activity and that of business partners. The following quote describes a partnership with Google:

“So, I know for example, for sustainable soy or palm oil, for example, which is one of our ingredients, they do these air photos to make sure to see that there’s no deforestation happening from the places where we buy” (I16).

Unilever’s partnership with Google uses satellite photos, Google Earth’s capabilities and cloud computing to monitor the ecosystems connected to raw materials, such as palm oil or soy. This helps them to detect potential deforestation, leads to greater accountability in their supply chain, and allows the promotion of potential regeneration programmes.

Monitoring allows Unilever to identify non-compliance and to ask partners to take corrective actions. However, whenever a partner fails to address the issues raised by Unilever, the contractual relationship is terminated.

“The company sets this policy for its suppliers and those that fail to come up to standard are ditched. [...] In other words, suppliers that do not align themselves with the company’s goals are not contracted or kept” (E7).

However, Unilever not only exerts coercive measures to achieve the strategic alignment of its network of business partners, they also

leverage on their expertise and credibility in the sustainability domain to inspire, persuade, and empower business partners to transform their organizations and to develop the capabilities needed to become more conscientious and sustainable.

“What we do want to do and this part of our strategy and part of our mission that we basically start, you know, something like a movement or however you could say. So, by living, by leading by example, you try to convince others that that’s the right way to do business. And I think we prove right by our performance and by the results that we have and that’s how I think we inspire our suppliers to be with us on the way that we are” (I13).

Finally, there is also recognition that the business partner’s empowerment arises when there is mutual trust and institutions are deeply committed to learning together.

“So, it’s not only like signing a paper, but also knowing so well your supplier that you work with them in the same path that you’re having. So, it’s like being part of a formation (training) course. Like you work with your partners, suppliers in this case, so close that you work with them in the same things. So, whatever you’re doing in your company, you’re doing that with them as well. It’s not a question of auditing. It’s not a question of signing a paper. It’s the question of learning together” (E5).

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Theoretical contributions

This research contributes to the literature by shedding light on the emerging phenomenon of CCBs and more specifically on how CCBs are built together with business partners. Fig. 2 depicts the model that has emerged from our theory-building exploratory study, describing how CCBs are built together with business partners, and emphasizing the importance of strategically aligning such business partners through hard and soft power.

In line with previous research (Gartenberg, Prat, & Serafeim, 2019; Greyser & Urde, 2019) our results show how Unilever’s purpose is the cornerstone of the corporate brand and business strategies. However, our fieldwork also suggests that CCBs not only use their purpose as an internal driver, which influences their strategy (Porter & Kramer, 2002) and culture (Iglesias & Ind, 2020), but also as an external driver that shapes business relationships. This is why the corporate brand purpose is at the heart of our theoretical model. This is a key finding which resonates with the empirical study by Kapitan et al. (2022) and suggests that the corporate brand purpose is not only the cornerstone of strategy, but also the axis around which CCBs strategically align their business partners.

The corporate brand purpose forces corporate brands to think beyond shareholders and short-term objectives (Quinn & Thakor, 2018), and instead encourages them to adopt a balanced multi-stakeholder perspective and a balanced temporal perspective (see arrows in the model from the corporate brand purpose to the balanced temporal and stakeholder perspectives). Additionally, the corporate brand purpose also forces brands to think about how to better connect with various stakeholders (Iglesias & Ind, 2020) and co-develop the innovations to become more conscientious and sustainable (see the arrow in the model from the corporate brand purpose to co-creation). Furthermore, it is worth noting that the three central boxes of the model (balanced stakeholder perspective, balanced temporal perspective, and co-creation) are interconnected (see double direction arrows). This is because when a brand has a balanced stakeholder orientation, it is committed to understanding the needs, expectations and different temporal perspectives of all stakeholders. This orientation includes working together with business partners to jointly co-develop relevant solutions capable of creating shared value for different stakeholders (thus underscoring the need for co-creation).

Another key finding from our study is that CCBs not only internally

embrace co-creation strategies, together with a balanced stakeholder and temporal perspective, but they also proactively promote this approach to their business partners. This resonates with the theoretical proposals by Vallaster and Lechner (2022) who claim that CCBs should put pressure on stakeholders so that they also adopt more conscientious approaches to business. However, the scant empirical research (Hutchinson et al., 2013; Rindell et al., 2011), which shows that CCBs aim to embed their ethical conscience at the core of their business relationships, does not provide evidence as to how this embedment and strategic alignment of business partners is achieved. This underscores the need to better understand the key role that CCBs play as persuasive agents capable of strategically aligning diverse business partners (Mingione & Leoni, 2020) - even if, at times, they might seek different or even contradictory utilities (Harrison & Wicks, 2013). In this regard, our research is one of the first studies to provide empirical evidence as to how CCBs can promote the strategic alignment of business partners.

Our results show that business partner strategic alignment requires coercive or hard power (Nye Jr, 2004), through contractual agreements. In line with Quintana-García et al. (2021), our findings show that strategic alignment through hard power can be fostered by a three-step management process which starts by screening potential partners to ensure that they align with the corporate brand purpose and identity. Once a contractual agreement is signed, a CCB needs to establish protocols that will allow the monitoring of the business partner's practices and their adherence to the CCB's standards. Finally, a CCB also needs to ask business partners to correct their behavior when contractual agreements are not met, or indeed to terminate the contractual agreements when the business partner fails to demonstrate an authentic commitment.

However, our findings also suggest that coercive power alone is not enough. CCBs also need to inspire and empower their business partners. Inspiration involves persuading business partners to embrace the corporate brand's purpose and to align with its strategic goals. Empowerment helps partners to develop the capabilities that are essential to fulfill the corporate brand purpose. This soft power, which relies on trust and reciprocity, is based on non-mediated and non-punitive power and aims at aligning rather than enforcing interests (Van Bockhaven, Matthyssens, & Vandembemt, 2015). Soft power draws from referent or expertise power, rather than coercive or legal power (Ke, Liu, Wei, Gu, & Chen, 2009). Our empirical work shows that a CCB can exert soft power when it has a strong reputation for being a leading player in a certain field and for having cutting-edge expertise and capabilities. When this is the case, the corporate brand has the (soft) power to inspire and empower.

## 5.2. Managerial implications

Our research has relevant managerial implications because it offers corporate brands an alternative to the more traditional approach to CSR. Managers should take into account that CCBs have the potential to overcome some of the key limitations of CSR practice, such as its instrumental use, its disconnection from business and brand strategies, and the inability to develop an authentic engagement with the corporate brand's diverse stakeholders.

Additionally, the findings from our study also offer relevant implications for managers regarding how to build a CCB together with business partners. First, our results show that CCBs have a driving purpose, which helps to ensure that they meet the needs of different stakeholders in a balanced way while embracing and promoting long-term strategic co-creation initiatives with business partners. Overall, this highlights that CCBs need to transcend traditional charismatic leadership styles, which promote a unilateral and top-down approach to strategy. Instead, building and enacting a purpose is a collective endeavor (Fontán, Alloza, & Rey, 2019). Similarly, building shared value for a corporate brand's diverse stakeholders and promoting co-creation demands opening-up the organization and embracing collaboration (Markovic &

Bagherzadeh, 2018). Consequently, managers willing to build CCBs need to be capable of developing higher levels of social awareness and becoming more empathetic. In this regard, CCBs need to invest in fostering a servant leadership style more grounded in collaboration and participation.

Second, managers need to understand that strategic alignment can not only be achieved through contractual agreements and exerting coercive-hard power. CCBs need also to exert soft power. However, to be capable of influencing and inspiring business partners, CCBs need to lead, but also to communicate their purpose, strategic goals and achievements. Here, the key it is that the communication strategy needs to be authentic and the key messages backed-up with evidence (Ind & Iglesias, 2022). Additionally, soft power can also be exerted through training. On the one hand, CCBs need to train their business partners on *why* they should become more conscientious. This should be inspirational training aimed at awakening conscience and spurring the need to change. On the other hand, CCBs can also train the business partners on *how* to become more conscientious. This involves technical training aimed at empowerment and capabilities development, for instance in the field of sustainability. In parallel, CCBs can also empower business partners through strategic co-creation initiatives.

## 5.3. Limitations and future research

This research has several limitations, which trigger future research opportunities. First, and despite the fact that interviews are the primary data source in qualitative research methods (Eisenhardt, 1989), they make research subject to double hermeneutics (i.e., double process of interpretation), meaning that respondents first interpret reality within their social context and then, researchers interpret the interpretations of the respondents. This makes our study largely contingent on interpretations and, although we have applied researcher triangulation to analyze the data as objectively as possible, strictly speaking, our findings are inevitably subjective. Thus, future research should validate our findings using quantitative methods to enhance objectivity and generalizability.

Second, although adopting a single case study approach is suitable in emerging fields and has enabled us to obtain rich and thick insights on conscientious corporate branding, the generalizability of our findings is limited. This is not unexpected as the main objective of single case studies is particularization rather than generalization (Stake, 1995). However, to gain further insights, build on our findings and extend their external validity, we encourage future research to conduct multiple case studies on the topic. It would be especially interesting to do so across a variety of countries, and thereby analyze how cultural differences affect the understanding of conscientious corporate brands.

In addition to addressing the above-presented limitations, and given the importance of corporate culture and leadership for managing corporate brands (Iglesias & Ind, 2020), future research could also examine which identity traits and values, conscientious corporate brands from different sectors and countries share, and to derive best practices and guidelines for building such brands accordingly. Relatedly, it would be interesting to figure out what leadership style can best promote a conscientious corporate brand and boost its attractiveness as an employer brand. Taking care of employer branding is essential, as employees can 'make or break' the brand, regardless of its potential strategic positioning towards conscientiousness. In addition, future research could investigate whether, and how, conscientious corporate brands contribute differently to business and society compared with corporate brands that solely embrace CSR or sustainability practices. Examining this could show whether the conscientiousness approach is effective; whether conscientious corporate brands can really make a difference in improving not only the socioeconomic landscape but also in benefitting society at large.

## Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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