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The complexity of communicating sustainability in a co-creative context

A case study of a co-creative incubator

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ABSTRACT

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Title

The complexity of communicating sustainability in a co-creative context. A case study of a co-creative incubator

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Abstract

This thesis is concerned with the complexity of communicating sustainability in a co-creative context. Sustainability is seen as three dimension, namely economic sustainability, social sustainability and environmental sustainability. This thesis includes all three dimensions in the sustainability communication.

The purpose is to investigate how sustainability can be understood and explained in a co-creative incubator. Since the research of sustainability communication within the co-creative literature is relatively undiscovered this thesis makes an attempt to conceptualise the sustainability communication. The context of the study is a single case study of an incubator with a co-creative approach. The research took an abductive approach with the method of a qualitative empirical collection. The empirical data collection consists of semistructured interviews with actors in the co-creative incubator, namely top management, business designers and startups.

Findings reveal that the sustainability communication can be understood and explained through a challenge based view. Every startup face different challenges and sustainability is communicated accordingly. However, the communication of economic sustainability is more direct than the other two dimensions. Additionally, the complex communication in the co-creative incubator shed new lights on the concept of trust within co-creation. The intensity of sustainability communication implies to be dependent on trust between incubator and startups.

This thesis adds original insights to the field of combining co-creation and incubators, specifically factors that influence the sustainability communication in the co-creative incubator.

Keywords

Incubator, Co-creation, Sustainability, Communication, Trust

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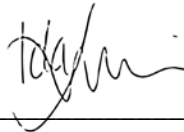
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1 INTRODUCTION

Ever since the Brundtland Commission (WCED, 1987) was published in 1987, sustainability and the aim for sustainable development has been apparent for all nations involved. Sustainable development was then defined as “*development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*” (WCED, 1987, p. 41). The definition still withstands when the Sustainable Development Goals (*SDGs*) 2030 were laid out by the UN (*Appendix 1*) (General Assembly, 2015). These goals, although not legally binding, put pressure on nations to reform their sustainability policies. The *SDGs* Agenda emphasises partnership between government, business and society for the collective achievement of the 2030 agenda. Especially companies have a great responsibility to achieve these goals. CEOs of large companies as Alibaba group and Unilever act as advocates for the Sustainable Development Goals (General Assembly, 2015).

Sachs (2015) states that sustainable development is feasible and affordable when design and studies regarding new technology and sustainable business practices are implemented in the equation. Research shows that especially entrepreneurs, have an advantage in implementing sustainability in the beginning of their journey (Freimann, Marxen, & Schick, 2016). Anderson and Leal (1997) argue that startups have not yet developed an organisational culture, which shows that a clear aim for ecological and social solutions will increase profitability, therefore it lies in the interest to investigate how startups implement sustainability. However, startups face issues such as lack of knowledge and financial capital. To achieve growth and survival for startups, a nurturing environment where knowledge and learning increases is needed. Incubators offer the acceleration of business development (Peters, Rice, & Sundararajan, 2004), provide the support system of business consulting (Allen & Rehman, 1985) and transfer adequate knowledge (Aernoudt, 2004).

In light of the *SDGs*, sustainable development and partnership, a new kind of incubator arise, namely the *co-creative incubator* (Eriksson, Vilhunen, & Voutilainen, 2014). The co-creative incubator offers nurturing and acceleration possibilities for startups and add

the partnership factor. As mentioned above, partnership contributes to a more efficient sustainable development (General Assembly, 2015). The co-creative model changes the traditional incubator model of consulting startups, towards co-create development and catalyst acceleration. The co-creative model begins within the organisation of an incubator. Ramaswamy (2009) stresses the interaction-centrality to constitute a co-creative environment, which Ehlen et al. (2017) express as the need to migrate towards an open and trustful environment in the incubator.

Wagner and Svensson (2014) stress that for development to be accomplished organisations must collaborate across borders. The role of the incubator in the co-creative environment is to create incentives for startups to open up the organisation. Co-creation implies value to be created in the interaction between two parties (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Therefore, both parties must be willing to engage in interactions. Incubators and startups interact by a challenge based approach. Startups approach incubators to overcome barriers in order to develop their businesses. Barriers such as lack of knowledge and lack of capital are common in the startup process (Schick, Marxen, & Freimann, 2002). The co-creative approach implies that the incubator and startup together create value by overcoming barriers in the startup process.

As both businesses and organisations face pressure from society to be more sustainable (Larson, 2009), especially in the light of the SDGs, we argue, it is of importance for incubators to provide startups with essential communication of sustainability in order to accelerate and meet society's expectations. However, co-creation constitutes reciprocal agreement between two parties. Therefore, we find it interesting to understand how sustainability communication can be understood and explained in a co-creative incubator.

This thesis attempts to close the gap of understanding and explaining what implications a co-creative environment have on the sustainability communication towards startups. The thesis takes a qualitative approach of in-depth interviews with three different actors in the incubator, namely top management, business designers (*the employees of the incubator*) and startups. The in-depth interviews attempt to create an understanding and explanation of how sustainability is communicated between the actors. The thesis is based on a single case study of a co-creative incubator in Kristianstad, named Krinova.

The incubator has implemented the co-creative approach since 2013. The findings implicate that trust and startups starting point lead to different communication of sustainability.

1.1 PROBLEMATISATION

After the UN laid out the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 the aim for more sustainable business practices became crucial (General Assembly, 2015). The *SDGs* put pressure on businesses, as society want to know how companies strive for sustainable development (Larson, 2009, p. 29). Nevertheless, O’Riordan (2000) argues that there is no clear agreement of what sustainable development really is. Elkington (1997) constitutes the triple bottom line, namely economic, social and environmental sustainability to be interdependent for sustainable development. Literature and practice shed light on how entrepreneurs and startups have an advantage in sustainable innovations (Freimann, Marxen, & Schick, 2016), and the importance of sustainable development and firms chance of competitive advantage through environmental consideration (Melnyk, Sroufe, & Calantone, 2003). However, Schick, Marxen and Freimann (2002) stress, among others, lack of information and financial issues to be barriers of sustainability in the startup process. In order for entrepreneurs and startups to have support in the embryonic and the start-up phase, incubators with business tools becomes the accelerator for them (Allen & Rehman, 1985). The incubator constitutes a nurturing and developing environment for startups (Mian, 1996) and has been well researched prior to this thesis. In light of the *SDGs*, numerous partnerships have been established and incubators have not been late to collaborate with different stakeholders (Macchi, Rizzo, & Ramaciotti, 2014).

The collaborative approach can be found in the Service Domain (S-D) logic, where collaboration is defined as co-creation between customers and firm (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Therefore, we use the terminology of a co-creative incubator in this thesis (Eriksson, Vilhunen, & Voutilainen, 2014). The concept of co-creation as incubation has received less attention in literature, as most literature regarding collaborations use the concept of open innovation (Chesbrough, 2003). The co-creative incubators’ antecedents are the networking incubator (Bøllingtoft & Ulhøi, 2005) and co-producing incubator (Rice, 2002). The co-creative incubator generates value together with startups by being

challenge based and collaborate. The essential of co-creation are the change of value creation being firm-centric towards value being created through the interactions between firm and customer (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Therefore, interactions between actors in the co-creative process is essential for the value creation. As mentioned before, startups struggle to survive because of the barriers of the startup process. We argue for the co-creative incubator to consider that value might depend on the survival of the startup.

Additionally, trust is an important factor when two parties co-create (Erikson et al., 2014). It is therefore interesting to investigate how co-creation and trust affect sustainability communication. Prior literature of incubators have focused on the recruitment of sustainable startups (Bank & Kanda, 2016; Fonseca & Chiapetta Jabbour, 2012), how managers of incubator constitute a co-creative environment (Eriksson et al., 2014), internal communication & cooperation between incubated companies of incubators (Schwartz & Hornych, 2010) and how entrepreneurs should take advantage of their stakeholder network in order to co-create (Shams Riad & Ruediger Kaufmann, 2016). Prior literature has not yet discovered how sustainability is communicated when the startups are incubated. Therefore, it is of interest to further examine the phenomenon.

As sustainable development and sustainability is highlighted of partnership (General Assembly, 2015) and in times of pressure towards sustainable development, we find it interesting to examine how a co-creative environment communicates sustainability towards startups. According to literature (Freimann, Marxen, & Schick, 2016), startups have an advantage in implementing sustainability, which further reinforce the argument of examining startups in the incubator. To the best of our knowledge, we have not found prior literature that cover the area of how sustainability communication can be understood and explained in a co-creative incubator. Therefore, this thesis makes the first attempt to close this gap.

1.2 RESEARCH PURPOSE

The purpose of this thesis is an attempt to display how sustainability communication can be understood and explained in a co-creative environment, specifically in an incubator context.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTION

How can sustainability communication be understood and explained in a co-creative environment?

1.4 DISPOSITION

Chapter 1 covers the introduction and problematisation, the chapter intends to create an understanding of why the research purpose is of interest. In *chapter 2* the readers understand how the theoretical knowledge is gathered by the authors. The chapter takes into account the epistemological considerations that relates to the research philosophy. *Chapter 3* begins with a literature review of what has been done in the discipline of incubators prior to this thesis. Further, the chapter introduce the concepts used in the thesis. The chapter concludes with a research model that has been used in the empirical findings. *Chapter 4* covers the empirical methodology that has been used in the data collection. *Chapter 5* presents the findings from the data collection, this chapter also analyse the findings in order to reinforce previous literature and highlight new insights. The chapter concludes with an extended research model. *Chapter 6* begins with a short summary of the thesis, secondly, conclusions from the empirical findings are presented and lastly, theoretical and practical implications for further research are presented.

2 THEORETICAL METHODOLOGY

As research philosophy and approach need to be aligned with the aim of the thesis this chapter explains and argues for how our epistemological view strengthens and flatter the research purpose of the thesis. The chapter further explain the approach we have taken in the research and lastly, the chapter shows our choice of theories.

2.1 RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY

The epistemological discipline focuses on how a researcher acquire knowledge and how a human view the world (Bryman & Bell, 2015). There are three different philosophies in the epistemological discipline, namely *positivism*, *interpretivism* and *realism*.

Positivism has a distinctive link between natural science and social sciences. In the positivistic philosophy the world is seen as objective and therefore it can be studied scientifically and as such be quantified and controlled (Dencsombe, 2016). The *realistic* approach of philosophy shares some ideas with positivism, for example that natural and social sciences should be studied in the same manner. Additionally, the world can be quantified and explained objectively. Further scholars of realism argue that reality can be understood if the right methods are used, meaning that reality can be explained. The advocates of *interpretivism* argue that all beings are part of the reality studied, making the nature of world complex (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Therefore, it is not possible to study a phenomenon objectively, there will always be some kind of subjectivity in the interpretation of phenomenon's (Dencsombe, 2016).

This thesis assumes that sustainability communication exists in the incubator, and the communication takes on a different approach because of co-creation. To explain how sustainability communicates in the co-creative incubator we need to understand the interactions in the environment. Since we examine interactions between actors, the philosophy most aligned with these assumptions is interpretivist, which argues for a deeper understanding of the sustainability communication examined. The interpretative philosophy focuses on how the social construct is established and how one can understand a specific context (Dencsombe, 2016). From an interpretivist perspective, it

is of importance that we as researchers understand that the phenomenon we examine may be biased as we are part of the information gathering (Dencsombe, 2016). As the research is based on interviews and dialogue of the research phenomenon, subjectivity may occur (Dencsombe, 2016). The interpretative philosophy encouraged the research to be partly subjective as the researchers build an own understanding of how the sustainability is communicated.

2.2 RESEARCH APPROACH

There are three different ways to collect data, namely *inductive*, *deductive* and *abductive* approaches. An *inductive* research approach generates from empirical findings being able to generalise theoretical concepts. The theory is the outcome of the research and infers the implication of the findings. The inductive approach is generally linked with a qualitative data collection. *Deductive* approach is generally the most common view of the relationship between theory and research. A deductive approach is based from general theories and the researcher then build hypotheses around an empirical context. The hypotheses need to include concepts that can be translated to research, meaning that the concepts have a relation to the collected data (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The *abductive* approach can be seen as the field between the inductive and deductive approach; the researcher moves between theory and empiricism. It can be understood as through the empirical collection, the researchers' moves from theory to empiricism and back again to explain the phenomenon (Alvehus, 2013).

It seems like the research approach most appropriate for this thesis is inductive, as we aim to understand a phenomenon not earlier researched, namely the sustainability communication between actors within the co-creative incubator. However, the inductive approach is highly empirical with no pre-theoretical background which makes it insufficient for this thesis. As we already have a pre-understanding of the theories of incubators, sustainability, co-creation and communication, the research approach chosen is abductive. This gives us space to alternate between theories and empirical findings to find connections and differences (Alvehus, 2013). The thesis builds the conclusions based on the empirical findings and theories and aims to reveal new perspectives of the interactions in the incubator.

2.3 INFORMATION COLLECTION

Primary- and secondary data are gathered in this research. Primary data refers to data that is collected by the authors of the thesis. In this case, the primary data is collected by semistructured interviews. The interviews are arranged face-to-face and recorded with a dictaphone. In addition, secondary data such as literature, scientific articles and the incubator's homepage are the foundation for the secondary data collection.

2.4 CHOICE OF THEORY

The highlighted theories in this thesis consist of the service dominant logic where co-creation between actors is emphasised (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). The use of service dominant logic in the incubator process derives from incubators offering services as advisory, network sharing and knowledge sharing. Also, theories deriving from the incubator discipline is used in order to understand the development of incubators, from being facilitators of space (Allen & Rehman, 1985) to nowadays sharing knowledge and co-creating solutions for startups (Eriksson, Vilhunen, & Voutilainen, 2014). Further, as the research area of sustainability communication in the co-creative incubator is rather unexplored we must borrow literature from the sustainability discipline to understand what sustainability is (Elkington, 1997) and what implications it has on businesses (Naser, Appelbaum, Walker, Ramadan, & Sodeyi, 2014).

3 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This chapter will introduce the concepts of sustainable development, entrepreneurship, incubator and the top management within an organisation, and lastly how communication is vital in the transfer of sustainable standards.

3.1 SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND THE NEED FOR PARTNERSHIP

Sustainable development has been defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987). Sustainable development for businesses was introduced as “*the Triple Bottom Line*” by Elkington (1997). The triple bottom line constitutes an interdependency between the three dimensions of sustainability, namely economic, social and environmental. The three dimensions are equally important for sustainable development. However, O’Riordan (2000) argues that there is no clear agreement of what sustainable development really is. In year 2015, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (*SDGs*) 2030 was signed and agreed among the member nations of the UN. The member nations of the UN agreed that sustainability; economic, social and environmental sustainability, is no longer just a value-creating concern but an essential need for all nations, regions and organisations (General Assembly, 2015). Although the *SDGs* are not a legally binding contract between the UN and its member nations, nations are expected to take ownership for the goals and create frameworks to attain the 2030 agenda. After the 2015 agreement of the *SDGs* (General Assembly, 2015), the concern for businesses to create sustainable development grew. Society nowadays not only want to know if businesses have a sustainable agenda, but how businesses actively strive for sustainable development (Larson, 2009, p. 41). According to Sachs (2015), management needs to operate with transparency, responsiveness, accountability and according to the law in order to enhance the global path to achieve sustainable development.

Implementation of and success of the *SDGs* and hence sustainable development, will mainly derive from nations’ own policies, plans and programmes (General Assembly, 2015). As development generally originates from innovation (Chesbrough, 2003), and the creation of solutions, we can assume that sustainable development is based on

problem solving. This requires involvement from every nation to engage in brainstorming and to create innovations to enhance sustainable growth and reach the SDG goals (Sachs, 2015). Innovation derives from businesses (Chesbrough, 2003), therefore, our assumption is that businesses play an important role in the achievement of sustainable development. The question is whether organisations are a part of the problem or a part of the solution, meaning if organisations attempt to tackle climate change, fight inequalities and end poverty or focus solely on capitalising. However, as Nidumolu, Prahalad and Rangaswami (2009) argue, the key driver for innovation is now sustainability as innovations may increase both the bottom-line of sustainability and generate cost-effective solutions as less input is needed.

Sustainable development requires a fundamental change in organisational structure. Furthermore, sustainability can now not only be an “add-on” in the business plan but must be incremented in the mission and vision of organisations. Naser et al., (2014) explain the organisational change as, from “*doing*” sustainability to “*being*” sustainability. (van Egmond, et al., 2016) argue that sustainable development and sustainable business growth are so interdependent that it will require a collaborative approach between actors to deliver both successfully. Wagner and Svensson (2014) stress that the ability to collaborate across organisational borders is essential in development of creative solutions. Therefore, we argue that the need to integrate collaboration in businesses is crucial to generate development in sustainability. In order to catalyse sustainable development the need for creative minds increase. “*To think outside the box*” is generally aligned with entrepreneurs and startups.

3.1.1 SUSTAINABILITY IN STARTUPS

Entrepreneurs have an advantage in implementing sustainable foundations in startups (Freimann, Marxen, & Schick, 2016), which may lead to “*being*” sustainable (Naser et al., 2014). Schumpeter (1934) defines an entrepreneur as an individual that carries out a new combination. The decision of an entrepreneur to develop a new business is the most obvious form of entrepreneurship (Schick, Marxen, & Freimann, 2002). Scholars stress that young firms have advantage in generating radical innovations that may have positive effects on sustainability (Keskin, Diehl, & Molenaar, 2012). However, Schick, Marxen and Freimann (2002) present several barriers for sustainability in the start-up process,

these consists of the lack of information about adopting more sustainable business practices, the level of knowledge that business advisors possess and lastly, the financial issue. Schaltegger and Wagner (2011) further stress the financial issue for startups, they argue that entrepreneurs exploit market opportunities in order to generate profit, leading to trade-offs between the business and sustainability. In light of the abovementioned, Hansen et al. (2000) raise the importance of incubators transfer adequate support, especially in terms of business allies that support new ventures in the leveraging and learning process. Furthermore we argue that incubators and their network have the optimal opportunity to translate information into applicable knowledge.

3.2 WHAT IS AN INCUBATOR?

Patton and Marlow (2011) argue that incubators offer learning approaches that helps young firms to grow and develop competitive advantages. Allen and Rehman (1985) define a business incubator as a support system which provides office space, rental services and business consulting. The authors also claim that the purpose of an incubator is to increase the survival possibility for an embryonic venture and, indeed, enhance innovation (Allen & Rehman, 1985). Additionally, for a business incubator to motivate and develop successful entrepreneurs and startups, managerial, knowledge, legal and financial support are needed (Aernoudt, 2004). Therefore one can say that an incubator provides a nurturing and developing environment for business start-ups (Mian, 1996). This feature is supported by Peters, Rice and Sundararajan, (2004), as they define the incubator as an organisational form that accelerates the entrepreneurial development.

For incubators to position themselves, there are numerous amount of concepts that explain the orientation. The term incubator can be seen as an umbrella concept with branches of different incubators that specialise themselves in the services provided. The classical models of incubators are the for-profit and non-profit incubators (Barbero & Casillas, 2014). Literature states different characteristics within these dichotomies, such as academic/university incubators (Grimaldi & Grandi, 2005; Von Zedwitz, 2003; Von Zedwitz & Grimaldi, 2006; Allen & McCluskey, 1990), technology intensive (Aernoudt, 2004; Becker & Gassmann, 2006) and sustainability driven incubators (Bank & Kanda, 2016; Fonseca & Chiapetta Jabbour, 2012). Shown by literature, the sustainable incubators have similar characteristics as the conventional but they focus on sustainable

entrepreneurship. Therefore, this thesis does not focus solely on the sustainability driven incubator, as the focus on recruiting sustainable entrepreneurs is not aligned with the research question. Instead focus is on a new kind of incubator that is on the up rise, the co-creative incubator.

However, as mentioned before, the sustainable development goals present a new kind of partnership between companies, society and institutions. Especially, incubator support has gone from mainly facilitating startups towards generating innovations in collaborations. The partnership and collaboration are mentioned in the innovation literature as co-creation and, as incubators house a large amount of knowledge intensive startups, together with an external network, we argue that co-creation is a new paradigm of incubator. The concept of co-creation also implies that it is not a question about consultancy but instead collaboration in the development process with startups. As co-creation is defined as value creation between two parties (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), we further elaborate that co-creation in an incubator generates sustainable development through collaboration.

3.2.1 CO-PRODUCTION, THE ANTECEDENT OF CO-CREATION IN THE INCUBATOR CONEXT

To understand the co-creative environment in the incubator we first need to examine the antecedent, co-production. Co-production evolves through an interdependency between two parts, without input from both parts the interdependent relationship fails (Rice, 2002; Branstad & Saetre, 2016; Parks, et al., 1981). In the context of incubators, where the incubator is the “producer” and the incubated company is the “consumer”, the output of co-production is business assistance. Further, the outcome of the co-production can only exist if the “consumer” act as a “producer consumer” meaning that the two parties jointly produce an outcome (Rice, 2002). Therefore, the motivational factor of actually wanting to communicate and collaborating is essential for co-production (Bøllingtoft, 2012). Rice (2002) also argues for the readiness of managers and entrepreneurs within the incubator, to contribute to efficient co-production. The readiness of the incubator manager involves the allocation of time while the readiness of the entrepreneurs involve the awareness, recognition and willingness of receiving assistance from the incubator. In the incubator

process co-creation takes into account the implementation of co-production (Rice, 2002) but also accounts for co-design, meaning jointly defining a challenge and a solution.

3.3 CO-CREATION AS INCUBATION

First of, co-creation derives from the service-dominant logic of marketing where the interactions between a firm and its customers should generate value (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Co-creation is defined as a service-for-service-exchange (Vargo & Lusch, 2011), as compared to the goods-for-money-exchange. The new paradigm in the marketing literature changes the way value is created for firms. Before the service-dominant logic, value was created by the firm itself and then transferred to a customer, one-way creation of value. In the co-creation literature however, value is co-created between the actors of the network, and most important, value is created when resources are used (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), meaning that value creation is a process instead of an output, two-way value creation. The firm can only make a value proposition for the customer, as value is perceived individually. However, we shall not assume that all interactions lead to the value co-creation. Plé and Cáceres (2010) raise the logical argument, that if value can be co-created, then value can also be co-destructed. Co-destruction of value occurs when one party accidentally or intentionally misuse resources used in co-creation.

The terminology of co-creation has been adapted to other perspectives, such as in hospitality management (Shaw, Bailey, & Williams, 2011), information technology (Yan, Ye, Wang, & Hua, 2010) and in the business-to-business marketing (Vargo & Lusch, 2011) among others. In the service dominant logic, all providers are service providers (Edvardsson, Tronvoll, & Gruber, 2011). This calls for the incubator, as a provider of facilities and growth for startups, being a service provider. This thesis attempts to put co-creation in the context of incubators, which points toward a more dynamic creation of value (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Eriksson, et al. (2014) make an attempt to conceptualise how incubator managers' orchestrates value creation for companies' customers by collective processes in the incubator. Even though the research focus on mature SMEs, it gives valuable insights on how incubator managers may increase co-creation. Erikson, et al. (2014) stress that managers in the co-creation incubator facilitates a joint sphere where interactions and mutual influence from actors

are catalysed. On the other hand, Shams Riad and Ruediger Kaufmann (2016) raise the importance of entrepreneurs taking advantage of their stakeholder network, thus co-create solutions. The authors stress the importance of further examine the entrepreneurial co-creation. As this thesis focuses on how sustainability communication can be understood and explained in the co-creative incubator we make use of the insights from Eriksson et al. (2014) and Shams Riad and Ruediger Kaufmann (2016) in order to understand the reciprocal interactions within the incubator. Both parties must engage in the interaction for sustainability communication to be value-created. To understand interactions we must take a minor side step into the relationship building.

3.3.1 RELATIONSHIP AND TRUST IN INCUBATORS

For companies to open up the organisation, trust and transparency are vital factors between the actors, therefore, the incubator needs to develop a relationship with the incubated company. The factor of trust tends to make groups more productive in the co-creative atmosphere (Ind & Coates, 2013). The relationship in the value creation between actors is, as earlier mentioned important as the actors interact with each other in order to create value. If we complement the co-creative concept with co-production, von Krogh, Ichijo and Nonaka. (2000) stress that high-quality relationships accelerate the incentive to collaborate and co-produce through a shared environment of learning and creation. Krogh et al., (2000) define the knowledge sharing and relationship building not forcefully being vis-à-vis, as communication can be made over e-mail, letters among others. Therefore, the communication style may differ if the outcome provides a relationship between the two parties and in extension the process of co-production. Additionally, as the enabling context of co-production is crucial in the knowledge creation and in extension the relationship building the incubator manager need to provide an open environment where autonomy and acceleration are emphasised (Von Krogh, Ichijo, & Nonaka, 2000).

Redondo and Camarero (2018) argue that the social capital raised in the incubator process have positive influence on the business performance of incubatees. Additionally, the scholars put emphasis on further research needs to be done to understand the incubator managers' role in developing a thriving environment. The thriving environment within the incubator should encourage the use of internal and external

networks. These findings build the emphasis on how incubator managers transfer knowledge within the incubator. Without trust and motivation for incubated companies to network and gather experience within the incubator, business opportunities might be lost (Rendondo & Camarero, 2018). Since aim of this thesis is to understand and explain the communication between incubator and startup we need to keep in mind that the internal network, between employees and startups, is emphasised. Therefore, we turn to the management of the incubator to understand how they create an environment of trust in the incubator.

3.3.2 ESTABLISHING TRUST IN THE CO-CREATIVE ENVIRONMENT

Top managers can contribute to team effectiveness through inducement of trust and facilitation of knowledge sharing (Lee, Gillespie, Mann, & Wearing, 2010). A definition of trust is the willingness to take risks (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995) and the willingness to be vulnerable to others (Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007). Knowledge sharing is defined as “*the exchange of explicit and tacit knowledge relevant to the team task*” (Lee, Gillespie, Mann, & Wearing, 2010). A positive relation between trust and knowledge-sharing within an organisation exists (Renzl, 2008), and mutual trust can furthermore increase the organisational performance (Mishra & Mishra, 1994). Previous research regarding interpersonal trust stress the fundamental need of the concept in organizations (Mahajan, Bishop, & Scott, 2012; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007). As Dirks (1999) state, most research regarding trust-relations show that trust has a direct effect on work group process and performance, and that the concept has dominated the literature. Nevertheless, the author stress, that we should not assume that employees are more productive based on the level of trust. Additional research shows an indirect relation between trust and its influence on group processes and performance but a direct relation between trust and the translation of motivation to the group process and performance (Dirks, 1999). Richtnér & Åhlström (2010) stress that the top management has an essential role in encouraging innovation in businesses. Despite this important role, top management struggles to balance management between control and the ability to grant a flexible, innovative and knowledge generating environment. Furthermore, a very strong system of control hinder development of trust (Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007).

To constitute the creation of trust, the incubator managers' role in the co-creative environment is to act as a catalyst for the interactions between actors (Eriksson, Vilhunen, & Voutilainen, 2014). Studies find that the incubator manager facilitates co-creation through micro processes, as meetings, informal daily discussions among others (Ahmad & Ingle, 2011). The quality of the micro processes is what explains the trust creation between the actors. Ehlen, et al. (2017) emphasise team leaders (the incubator management) to be the most important actor in the co-creation. The team leader provides an open and trustful environment where knowledge sharing and learning is of importance. The authors also emphasise that, in good teams, the roles of a team leader can be performed by team members. Ramaswamy (2009) argues for management to migrate towards a co-creative organisation, interactions between actors constitute the central vision.

In order to communicate, Men (2015) find that CEOs most frequently used emails and face-to-face communication with employees. The study also highlights that the quality of communication affects the effectiveness of the message. With a warm and friendly communication style the employee-organisation relationship increases (Men, 2015). Also, Stegaroiu and Talal (2014) argue that face-to-face communication is the most preferred communication style in organisations because of it improves the chance of the message being understood. A misaligned internal communication strategy risk leaving employees uninformed and making poor judgements (Stegaroiu & Talal, 2014).

3.4 SYNTHESIS AND RESEARCH MODEL

The literature review implies that for companies to develop in the co-creative environment, the relationship building is necessary, which in extension according to our understanding can be applied to growth and sustainability of the startup. Nevertheless, as mentioned before startups struggle with barriers, for example knowledge and financial issues (Freimann, Marxen, & Schick, 2016). The barriers implies that the value for startups may be something else than the development of all three dimension of sustainability. Therefore, the thesis aim to understand how sustainability is communicated in the incubator, as sustainable development is the global goal of society (General Assembly, 2015). We base this argument on the pressure from society, that society nowadays demand sustainable businesses (Larson, 2009), that startups have an

advantage in developing sustainable practices (Freimann, Marxen, & Schick, 2016) and that collaboration between organisational border is essential in the sustainable development (Wagner & Svensson, 2014). We make an attempt to conceptualise a model from our literature review, the model shows the two main actors in the co-creative context, namely the incubator and the startup. In the intra-organisational box of the incubator we implement the employees of the incubator. This is to show that there is interactions between employee and top management in the co-creation of value within the organisation. As mentioned in the theoretical background the establishment of trust is of importance in co-creation. Therefore, we include the factor of trust in the model. Further, the model displays the interactions between startup and incubator and that value must be created through these interactions. Further, as the incubator's primary purpose is to accelerate development and mitigate lacking capabilities we decided to use the concept of knowledge sharing in the model. This implies that the interactions between the actors generate knowledge to be shared.

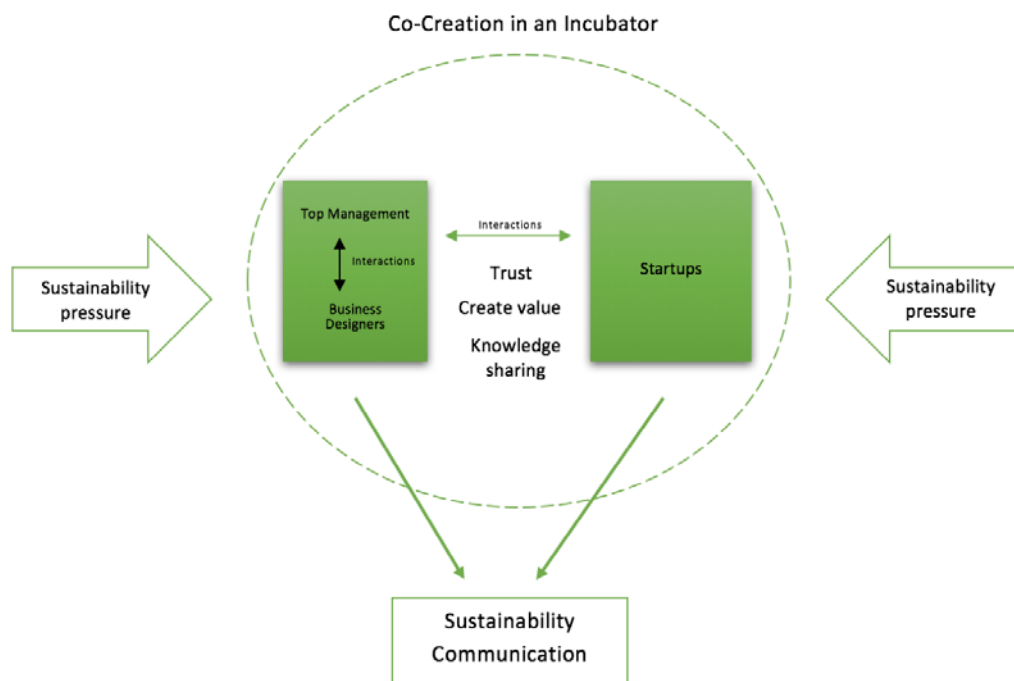


Figure 1 Research Model for Empirical Analysis

4 EMPIRICAL METHOD

This chapter presents the methods used to collect the empirical data. As the design of the thesis is based on a single case study, a short presentation of the context is provided in the chapter. The chapter further discuss how the collected data was analysed.

4.1 RESEARCH METHOD

There are two main types of methods used in research, namely qualitative and quantitative methods, when describing, explaining and interpreting data. Qualitative and quantitative research are applied and well-known within social sciences (Dencsombe, 2016). The quantitative research method (Dencsombe, 2016) is based on quantity measurements (Kothari, 2004) and is, therefore suitable for statistical techniques based on probabilities and mathematical principles. Furthermore the method is more based on an objective view rather than researchers' subjectivity, and is associated with strategies such as surveys and experiments, and tools like questionnaires and observations. It is also possible to use interviews and documents for quantitative research (Dencsombe, 2016). Criticism to quantitative research is most often that the research derives from the natural science, that the social world is measurable. Quantitative research does not consider social interactions and the complexity of a social context (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

Qualitative research is generally described as the meaning of words (Dencsombe, 2016). Also Bryman and Bell (2011) emphasise the use of word in the data collection and analysis of qualitative research. Since the aim of the thesis is to build an understanding of how sustainability is communicated in a co-creative environment, it called for a qualitative research. Further, as a qualitative research strategy aims to understand, interpret and examine (Bryman & Bell, 2015) it is aligned with our research purpose. The qualitative approach is therefore useful in research concerning behavioural science; such as motivation research and attitude or opinion research that investigate various factors that motivate and affect people (Kothari, 2004). The qualitative research is related to the complexity of interactions between actors in a social context, where beliefs and values are analysed (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The method is mainly associated with case

studies, grounded theories, ethnographies and phenomenology strategies and interviews, documents and observation methods. Surveys with open end questions can also generate in-depth responses suitable for qualitative research (Dencsombe, 2016).

4.2 RESEARCH STRATEGY

This thesis is based on the assumptions that individuals interact and communicate within the incubator. To understand the behaviours and perceptions, we conducted semistructured interviews with actors within the incubator. In order to understand the phenomenon a close distance is required (Creswell, 2012), the distance between the researcher and the research lessen through interviews. The actors interviewed were top management (CEO and department managers) of the incubator, four employees (Business Designers and Communicator) and four incubated startups. The different levels gave us a comprehensive understanding of the information flow within the organisation.

Semistructured interviews are useful to investigate attitudes and questions in detail. We chose semistructured interviews based on the ability to generate in-depth answers and great detail (Dencsombe, 2016). For the semistructured interviews we used an interview guide (*see Appendix 2, 3 and 4*) with questions on fairly specific topics, but there was room for the interviewee to give a wider response. The fairly specific topics allowed the interviewees to develop their ideas and viewpoints in a more open and flexible approach. Aspects the interviewees saw as relevant and important were brought forward. We also asked further questions based on the interviewees' answers to receive a more detailed picture (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

One disadvantage of interviews is interviewer bias. The flexibility associated with semistructured interviews facilitates the interviewer's personal opinions to shine through (Nachmias & Nachmias, 1996). In order to prevent this bias, we tried to avoid asking leading questions and assent.

4.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

We chose a case study design because we saw the co-creative environment as being unique compared to other incubators. A case study is often associated with a single organization, a single location, a person or an event. (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The case

study is efficient for this research paper to gain an in-depth understanding regarding the context and the process (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007), within the incubator. The single case took place within the incubator along with top management, business designers and startups. The case study of an organisation allowed us to study certain administrative systems of the organisation and how communication operated. Furthermore, the case study method is a beneficial technique to investigate motivation, behavior, attitudes and relationships within an organisational environment (Berg & Lune, 2012), which is suitable for this research.

The incubator was chosen from a revelatory stance (Yin, 2009), since we wanted to examine the unique co-creative incubator. Krinova does not operate accordingly to traditional incubators. The co-creative environment that is established at Krinova differs from traditional incubators which lead to the revelatory aspects. To the best of our knowledge, we could not identify another co-creative incubator nationally. As stated by Yin (1984), the revelatory case exists ‘*when an investigator has an opportunity to observe and analyse a phenomenon previously inaccessible to scientific investigation*’ (p. 40). However, Bryman and Bell (2015) argues that most single case studies derives from a revelatory approach. This means that our research paper has the revelatory case approach based on the uniqueness of the incubator. Furthermore, Stake (1995) divides case studies into three types of classifications namely intrinsic, instrumental and collective case studies. This research had an intrinsic classification of research purpose. Based on the intrinsic type, we strived to understand a particular case. We did not try to test an abstract theory on the case, instead, the intention was to recognize the intrinsic part of the organisation.

There are several overarching purposes of case study designs called exploratory, explanatory and descriptive case studies (Berg & Lune, 2012). *Exploratory* case study design is a design that explores the phenomenon in-depth through different levels (Zainal, 2007). The *explanatory* case study generally derives from a pilot study of an unfamiliar problem, and aims to answer questions such as “how” and “why”. Lastly, the *descriptive* case study aims to find particular aspects of a phenomenon and gather specific information (Krishnaswami & Satyaprasad, 2010).

In this thesis explanatory and descriptive case study were carried out. As the thesis aims to investigate how sustainability is communicated in the incubator, the explanatory study aimed to investigate the “how” and “why”, to understand how sustainability is communicated. The descriptive study of the case was made in order to explain how sustainability was communicated.

4.4 CASE PRESENTATION – KRINOVA SCIENCE PARK AND INCUBATOR

Krinova is an incubator and science park located in Kristianstad, Skåne. The science park was established 1999 by Kristianstad University, Kristianstad municipality and “*Teknikbrostiftelsen i Lund*” (Innovation Bridge South) (Krinova AB, 2018). The organisation is a member of Swedish Incubators and Science Parks (SISP) and was awarded most innovative incubator in 2017 (Swedish Incubators and Science Parks, 2018). The organisation has a cross-cluster profile area within health, food and environment. These areas are seen as characteristic parts of the University of Kristianstad and the industry of Kristianstad. The organisation operates projects in the cross-cluster profile area and the projects are a mean to increase development and employment in the north-east of Skåne (Krinova AB, 2018).

The organisation is divided into three parts; a meeting spot for humans, businesses and ideas, an innovation-arena for knowledge intensive companies (formerly known as the incubator) and a platform for development and innovation projects within the above mentioned profile areas. The main facility of Krinova house approximately 100 companies, both startups and incumbents. Additionally, the organisation also offers services to companies that are not stationed at the facility. The incubator has numerous collaborative partners, both nationally and internationally. Krinovas’ core lies in being a catalyst for innovations as companies nowadays need to open up the organisation and acquire new competencies to generate faster commercialised innovations. Krinova acts as a node for growth in the region of Kristianstad, the co-creative environment at Krinova encourage partnership between actors within the organisation and in extension the external networks (Krinova AB, 2018).

The co-creative environment of Krinova derives from partnership to generate growth in society. Krinova operates through open innovation and partnership between companies and the organisation to tackle challenges and initiate innovation. The innovation philosophy is based on open and challenge driven innovation, and is grounded in design thinking and the three phases of co-learn, co-design and co-effectuate (Chesbrough, 2003). The philosophy flatter the co-creative environment that Krinova has established. This means that Krinovas' Business Designers, in comparison to traditional advisors, together with startups co-create solutions from challenges. The incubator has taken into account the climate of innovations and inclusiveness, meaning innovation derives from diversity (Krinova AB, 2018).

The centre of the incubator is the core values, which encourage Joy, Openness and Teamwork in all operations of the incubator. The core values implicate employees to have social abilities, passion for development and to be service minded. Additionally, the core values mirror the co-creative approach; to be listening, brave, curious, active and co-thinking. The diverse range of competences that the employees have are beneficial in terms of complementing each other and therefore, be able to match the right competence with the right challenge (Krinova AB, 2018).

The organisation explains co-creation to be a matter of customisation. Every challenge is different and therefore the incubator must customise the tools, support and competences transferred. However, all operations derive from the innovation philosophy; co-learn, co-design and co-effectuate. Co-learn is the identification of what challenge a startup face. Co-design is the phase where ideas for solutions generates and the design of the implementation begins. The last part, co-effectuate, is the implementation of the solution (Krinova AB, 2018).

4.5 VALIDITY

Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are four standards to accomplish validity of the research (Bryman & Bell, 2015). *Credibility* needs to be achieved on one hand towards the interviewees and on the other hand towards the public. We strengthened our credibility towards the interviewees by providing a detailed summary of the background, purpose and course of action to the CEO, whom further

communicated the research to affected executives within the organisation. Preparatory to the interviews, the participants were informed regarding the background, purpose, interview setting and rights to cancel without reason. To protect the integrity of the respondent, we chose to process all data collection confidentially. Therefore, we constructed a written consent for both parties to sign (*Appendix 5*). After the data collection, the interview guides were delivered to the top management to increase the transparency of the research. We have in detail provided our findings in chapter 5 to achieve a high transparency and credibility towards the public.

Transferability in the qualitative studies are generally aligned with thick description (Bryman & Bell, 2015), meaning that the researcher provides thorough descriptions of the findings and methods used. Thick descriptions allow the reader to use the research as a database to make their own judgements of the transferability to other contexts (Bryman and Bell, 2015). In this thesis thick descriptions of the data collection were provided for favouring transferability.

Dependability of research is aligned with keeping track of the data collection and handling the information with care (Bryman and Bell, 2015). We have taken into account that all information needs to be safely stored and backed-up on an external hard drive.

The last standard, *confirmability*, consists of the researchers not depending on their personal values. The researchers also need to act in good faith (Bryman & Bell, 2015). As we conducted semistructured interviews and transcribed the material we made sure that the participant's opinions were presented. However, since we translated the material from Swedish to English there might be some errors in the choice of words, as sentences are built differently in the languages.

4.6 GENERALISABILITY

The *generalisability* of a case study is usually argued to be difficult (Dencsombe, 2016). However, as the case study in this thesis is not aimed to understand a population but instead analysing the context, and from that draw similarities and differences to prior theory. (Dencsombe, 2016). The findings do not attempt to draw universal conclusions but instead to understand the specific context of a unique incubator and provide valuable insights for the incubator literature and future research. Further, as the research consists

of a co-creative environment, the transferability to other areas is highly encouraged to examine how sustainability may increase in other co-creative areas.

4.7 EMPIRICAL DATA COLLECTION

The following sections explain the different types of data collection that was made during the thesis. As mentioned in the research strategy, data collection was gathered through semistructured interviews with top management, business designers and lastly start-ups in the incubator. As the thesis is qualitative some precautions were made to decrease the subjectivity of the researchers.

4.7.1 ROLE OF RESEARCHERS IN THE EMPIRICAL DATA COLLECTION

The researchers' role in the interviews can not be said to be entirely objective, as a semi structured interview might lead to the researcher wanting to elaborate some definitions and some concepts the interviewee says (Dencsombe, 2016). However, the researchers avoided asking direct questions and instead focused on open ended questions. This gave the interviewee room to make their own interpretation of the question and therefore not answering biased towards the researchers. Two researchers can decrease the subjectivity of the research and strive towards objectivity.

4.7.2 SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

Since the thesis is based on a single case study, the participants chosen are actors within the incubator. The sample universe (Robinson, 2013) was therefore limited to the particular incubator and everything outside the incubator is irrelevant for this specific study. The top management such as the CEO and two division managers, three business designers, one communicator and lastly four startups were gathered for this research. The CEO, division managers, business designers and startups were interviewed with semistructured interviews. The different levels gave us a nuanced perspective of the sustainability communication within the incubator. The top management and the business designers contributed to a deeper understanding of how sustainability is communicated within the organisation and how the organisation further communicate sustainability to the startups. The interview with startups was made to give an additional perspective of how sustainability from the incubator is communicated.

The qualitative research method are covered by purposeful sampling. Creswell (2012)

defines purposeful sampling to be linked with qualitative research. In relation to the interviews, the scholar describes qualitative research by stating that “the intent is not to generalize to a population, but to develop an in- depth exploration of a central phenomenon”. Thus, to best understand this phenomenon, the qualitative researcher purposefully or intentionally selects individuals and sites”. In other words, qualitative sampling such as purposeful sampling, selects people who has the best opportunity to facilitate a more detailed understanding of the certain phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). Furthermore, Denscombe (2016) state that the subjective sampling, which consciously handpick relevant people for the subject, is suitable because of its explanatory sampling character. Therefore, we chose to gather the sample through purposeful sampling, since the participants were selected within a specific incubator to generate relevant information.

The sample size vary between qualitative research, but the typical is to study a few individuals in order for the researchers to provide an in-depth picture (Creswell, 2012). We based the sample size on Denscombe’s (2016) course of action, called cumulative approach. This approach is associated with small scaled qualitative research and allowed us to expand the size until the sample contributed enough information and there was no more contribution of new individuals. Based on our research design of a single case study, we have gathered enough participants to base our research on relevant data.

The selection of site for the interviews was made according to the interviewees’ “*natural*” environment. Therefore, the interviews was conducted in their working environment, at Krinova. The selection of conducting the interviews in the interviewees working environment was made to ensure that the interviewee was comfortable.

4.7.3 INTERVIEWS

As recommended by Yin (2009) a pilot interview was conducted prior to the main data collection to refine the interview guide. The interview guide was tested before the initial interviews with a participant from Krinova in order to check the feasibility (Denscombe, 2016) of the interview structure and questions in relation to our research question. The pilot interview additionally allowed us to test our interview skills, technical equipment and to stay within the time constraint (Dalen, 2007). However, the pilot interview gave valuable insights about the incubator and the communication of sustainability. Therefore,

we have chosen to use the pilot interview in the analysis. The pilot interview was conducted with Respondent 3 from Top Management.

The interviews were separated into three different sections. The first group of executives consisted of the CEO and two additional members of the top management. The second group contained three business designers and one communicator. Lastly, the third group consisted of four startups. During the interviews, notes were taken and the interviews were recorded and later on transcribed. The interviews for the top management and the business designers contributed to an overarching and an in-depth understanding of the organisation and the communication of sustainability. The top management and the business designer interviews had two purposes. It was partly a primary data source for the advancement of the research and partly a foundation to the interview questions that were created for the startups. The startup interviews gave an additional perspective on the communication and interpretation of sustainability from the startups perspective and contributed to the total understanding of the organisation.

4.7.3.1 TOP MANAGEMENT INTERVIEWS

The top management was approached through semistructured interviews (*Appendix 2*). The interview focused on the sustainability of the incubator and what approach the management has when it comes to sustainability within the incubator and its tenants and lastly on the communication of such. As recommended by Bryman and Bell (2015) the semistructure questions were placed in an order to facilitate a reasonable flow and gave the ability to alter the order to create flexibility in the interviews. All interviews were slightly different, as the researchers allowed the interviewee to elaborate on especially interesting topics.

The operation of interviews were conducted with one of the researchers acting as a moderator while the other one observed, took notes and asked follow up questions. Field notes contribute to complementary information regarding setting, behaviour and topics (Denscombe, 2016). The interviews took approximately 30 min - 1 hour and covered mainly four different topics, namely communication, the incubator, sustainability within the incubator and communication towards start-ups. The interviewee was placed opposite

the researchers and this is according to Bryman and Bell (2015) not desirable. However, the researchers did not want to intervene in the seating to make it more satisfactory for the interviewee.

The interviews began with a written consent (*Appendix 5*), allowing the recording of the interview and ensure confidential administration of materials, followed by a presentation about the general research purpose. Further, small talk was introduced to make the interviewee calm, the interview proceeded with some general questions as name and age followed by more specific questions that asks for the position in the incubator, years in the incubator, work tasks and academic background. Further, the researchers allowed the interviewee to draw an organisational scheme and explain their position in the organisation and also who they communicate with. The interviews were conducted in Swedish and later transcribed to analyse the replies. The quotes are translated into English as the written language in this thesis is English. The first interview was conducted 26th of March, the second 16th of April and the third 18th of April.

Table 1 Interview Participants, Top Management

| Nr | Title | Interview Date | Type of interview | City | Length of interview | Years in incubator |
|-----------|----------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|--------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 | Top Management | 18 th of April | Face-to-face | Kristianstad | 37 min | 7 years |
| 2 | Top Management (Pilot Interview) | 16 th of April | Face-to-face | Kristianstad | 42 min | 5 years |
| 3 | Top Management | 26 th of March | Face-to-face | Kristianstad | 52 min | 5 years |

4.7.3.2 INTERVIEWS WITH BUSINESS DESIGNERS

The focus regarding business designers has been placed on their perception of sustainability and how it is communicated within the incubator and later on in the process of intervening with startups. The business designers were asked to draw an organisational scheme to make us understand the interactions between the employees. As mentioned in previous paragraph, the semistructured interview guide (*Appendix 3*) allowed flexibility which, in turn, led to a favourable flow. The interviewee was able to elaborate and put forward interesting knowledge. One interview was conducted over the telephone due to distance circumstances. To have the interview over the telephone was not optimal for the

research as we wanted to interact with the respondent. However, the telephone interview may have reduced the interview bias because of the non face-to-face interaction (Krishnaswami & Satyaprasad, 2010). The interviews were conducted between the 17th and 18th of April and took approximately 30 min – 1 hour.

Table 2 Interview Participants, Business Designers/Communicator

| Nr | Title | Interview Date | Type of interview | City | Length of interview | Years in incubator |
|-----------|-------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|--------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| 4 | Business Designer | 17 th of April | Face-to-face | Kristianstad | 52 min | 1 year |
| 5 | Business Designer | 17 th of April | Face-to-face | Kristianstad | 42 min | 1 year |
| 6 | Business Designer | 18 th of April | Phone | Kristianstad | 38 min | 3 years |
| 7 | Communicator | 17 th of April | Face-to-face | Kristianstad | 42 min | 6 years |

4.7.3.3 INTERVIEWS WITH STARTUPS

The interviews with startups were conducted at Krinova, the interview guide (*Appendix 4*) was based mainly of the interviews with top management and business designers to create an overarching understanding of the communication. The interview guide focused on co-creation within the incubator and five open questions were covered. The topics consisted of why the startup came in contact with Krinova, what impacts Krinova had on the startup, what challenges the startup and Krinova worked with, if the incubation had developed sustainability in the startup and lastly, the core values of the startups. These topics were covered to grasp the values of the startups and how sustainability is communicated within the incubator. One interview was made over telephone due to the same circumstances as mentioned above.

Table 3 Interview Participants, Startups

| Nr | Title | Interview Date | Type of interview | City | Length of interview | Year of establishment | Industry sector of startup |
|----|---------|-------------------------|-------------------|--------------|---------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| 8 | Startup | 9 th of May | Face-to-face | Kristianstad | 33 min | 2016 | Merchandise |
| 9 | Startup | 8 th of May | Face-to-face | Kristianstad | 32 min | 2015 | Food |
| 10 | Startup | 9 th of May | Face-to-face | Kristianstad | 27 min | 2014 | Market research/Consultancy |
| 11 | Startup | 14 th of May | Phone | Kristianstad | 15 min | 2013 | Agriculture |

4.8 DATA ANALYSIS

The primary data collection from interviews were gathered within a single case study and further analysed. As recommended by Bryman and Bell (2011), data has been transcribed continuously during the interview process and further precautions have been taken to decrease organisational influence of the research focus. We interpreted the underlying patterns and regularity of social phenomenon gathered from the data (Denscombe, 2014) in relation to the communication of sustainability of the incubator. Because of the qualitative research dominance in this thesis, the analysis was based mainly on words and visual pictures that contributed to a holistic perspective (Denscombe, 2014). We asked the respondents to visually show how they perceived the organisational structure in order for us to understand the interactions between actors.

4.8.1 ANALYSIS OF EACH LEVEL INTERVIEWS

Firstly, the transcribed material was read by us individually in order to grasp the meaning of the data on our own. Secondly, we read the transcript together and rejected the parts of the interviews that did not contribute to our research question. Thirdly, the three participation groups were analysed separately in order to understand the top management, the business designers and startups view on communication of sustainability in the incubator, and further compared.

The initial exploration of the data included notes of typical repetitive themes and generated ideas about the case, for example words like *collaboration*, *discussion* and *teamwork* were linked to co-creation. The notes in the margins were made to explore the

data and locate key concepts that occurred (Creswell, 2012), the notes were made individually. This procedure led to the actual analysis and the coding of the data. The coding of the data was divided into five head titles, namely what the interviewee said, description of what the interviewee meant in relation to the context of question asked, coding of the meaning, overarching theme and lastly connections between quotes from participants.

Table 4 Coding of the Empirical Data, Example

| Respondent | Meaning Unit | Condensed Meaning Unit | Code | Theme | Link to other interviews |
|-------------------|--|---|--------------------------------|-------------------|--|
| Business Designer | If I know something about something, well of course I am going to share that knowledge | Open environment where knowledge sharing is encouraged | Open environment | Knowledge sharing | Link with Top Management about knowledge sharing |
| Top Management | So, for me if I would point at what everyone should do, I would not use their intelligence | Trust the employees to do their work. Autonomy contingent of responsibility. | Trusting environment | Trust | Link with Business Designer about trust |
| Startups | Without the first aspect [of sustainability], the two others don't not work. So, financials are fundamental if you even are going to talk about the other two aspects. | Economic sustainability is a pre-requisite for environmental and social sustainability. | Pre-requisite, sustainability. | Sustainability | |

The first head title was made in vivo (Creswell, 2012), hence that we used the exact words the interviewee used. The second head title, description of what the interviewee meant, was put in relation to our interpretation of what the in vivo sentence actually described. Thirdly, coding of the description was made. At this stage we categorised the second head title to a code, for example, when explaining the responsibilities for the CEO, it was coded responsibility. Fourthly, to be able to alternate between theories and empirical findings relations to key concept was established when deciding the overarching theme. Lastly, connections between interesting quotes were made in order to link similar responses between the different levels of interviews.

All codes were put under four different themes, namely the knowledge sharing, trust, co-creation and sustainability. New information that we had not expected in advance was noted and further investigated according to theory (Creswell, 2012).

5 ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the analysis of the empirical findings. The chapter divides the analysis in four different sub-titles. Firstly, a display of the dynamic interplay between the actors of the incubator is presented. Secondly, the importance of trust is discussed. Thirdly, presentation of the complex sustainability is made. Lastly, the outcome of sustainability communication is provided. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the analysis and attempt to provide an extended research model.

5.1 THE DYNAMIC INTERPLAY BETWEEN THE ACTORS

Firstly, the empirical findings show that there is an interplay between the actors in the incubator. The findings reveal that Krinova as an organisation derives from collective decisions and dialogue between its members. The findings reinforce prior literature that face-to-face communication is the most preferred communication style in organisations (Stegaroiu & Talal, 2014). Further, as Erikson et al. (2014) found, the manager of the incubator acts as a catalyst for interactions in the co-creative environment. The findings show there is no formal top management directing the daily operations of the organisation and all employees of the organisation are encouraged to take responsibility of their way of working.

“We discuss a lot to reach collective solutions, which sometimes can be difficult and challenging but this leads to innovative solutions. Disagreements may of course occur, but we respect each other’s opinions”

-Top Management, Respondent 1

“Because it's a different approach, for example we do not have any executives as such, we have a formal CEO but that's about it.”

-Top Management, Respondent 2

“I believe that everyone feels that they are a co-creator. That you are a part of creating the way you work”

-Top Management, Respondent 1

The mentioned quotes above derive from top management’s understanding and explanation of the interplay internally. Top management further explains that the

managing of the incubator lies in reaching reciprocal core values that affect behaviours and mind-set, not directing every move of the employees. The core values are updated every quarter of the year in order to update employees and steer the organisation in the right direction. Additionally, we also found evidence from business designers that the *organisational environment* facilitates interplay between the members. The findings reinforce Ramaswamy's (2009) emphasis, that co-creation begins intra-organisational.

"...informal... feels like it's very easy to talk to people and it's no hierarchies. That it is a flat and decentralised organisation"

-Business Designer, Respondent 6

"I don't think we are one of those hierarchical organisations... We are very intertwined and work together. We are a very flat organisation."

-Communicator, Respondent 7

"...we maybe try to have a strong team connection, to not exclude".

-Communicator, Respondent 7

The findings show that the organisation is decentralised and all actors operate together. The internal interplay between the employees encourage the *co-creation* towards startups.

Secondly, the co-creative process implies that the business designers do not define themselves as consultants or advisors, they are co-creators in the development process of startups. These findings reinforce the co-creative environment, where trust and relationship building is vital. The findings coincide with Vargo and Lusch's (2011) reasoning; that co-creation is not unilateral, as in the consultant position, but rather bilateral, as collaboration between parties.

"Co-creation means that we work together, we are not advisors, we are not consultants, we are not coaches, we are co-creators"

-Top Management, Respondent 2

The role of being a co-creator shows that business designers do not approach startups with set solutions. The mission of the business designers is instead to present alternative solutions to the challenges occurring. Shams Riad and Ruediger Kaufmann (2005) find the joint accountability to be crucial in the co-creative environment. The joint

accountability seems important for the incubator, as they expect each other to take responsibility for the provided task. The respondents use the phrase “*not moralising*” sustainability towards the startups when they emphasise their role as co-creators.

“We do not come in and educate them in any parts, it’s super important that you are not allowed to be an advisor here. So that is a little bit different than compared to other incubators. We are much more like a collaborating partner to them.”

-Top Management, Respondent 1

“We call ourselves business designers because we want to be a part and co-create instead of saying this is right or wrong”

-Business Designer, Respondent 5

However, the dynamic interplay between the incubator and the startups indicates the importance of both parties engaging in co-creation. One respondent explains, that the co-creation process is reciprocal, both parties must engage. The findings connect to Bøllingtoft’s (2012) concept “willingness-to-act”. In order to collaborate and co-create, the incubator encourages interactions between the startups and the incubator. Without incentives from startups the co-creation becomes difficult.

“And then the co-creation builds on their free will, or their energy... but we try to support in the process, we do not do the whole work, it’s more like we transfer knowledge of how to do it. If we notice that the company does not supply energy themselves is it impossible for us to supply energy as well... The more energy the company brings in the more energy we can supply.”

-Business Designer, Respondent 6

One possible interpretation of “*the energy*”, mentioned by the business designer, is that both parties need to interact in a dialogue and take responsibility in the co-creation. As one respondent of the startups explain, the co-creation process mean that it is “*a lot of own responsibility actually*” and not just Krinova providing them with solutions.

The interplay between actors shows there is a two-way communication between the actors. The two-way communication is found in the co-production literature (Rice, 2002) and also in the co-creative literature (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). The two-way communication and interplay between the actors constitutes the “*co*” in prior literature,

that the dyadic relationship is crucial to collaboration. The findings show the importance of willingness to interact in the organisational environment.

5.2 THE ROLE OF TRUST IN THE CO-CREATIVE ENVIRONMENT

As mentioned before, the members of Krinova stress the informal and decentralised organisation. This implies, if co-creation should be functional, there is need for establishing *trust* between the actors. The respondents emphasise trust in order to nurture knowledge sharing and the co-creative environment. The positive relation between trust and knowledge sharing is mentioned in the literature by Renzl (2008). It is shown through the findings that top management strives for the development of trust in the organization, as Mayer, Davis and Schoorman (1995) explain trust is explained as the level of vulnerability towards others.

“Development is built on teamwork, and in order to have an adequate teamwork you need to trust each other”

-Top Management, Respondent 2

Top management trust the employees of the organisation firstly from the recruitment. Top management strives to recruit intelligent people with diverse competencies.

“We recruit intelligent and thinking people”.

-Top Management, Respondent 1

“So that’s a very important component for us in the interviews with new colleagues”

-Top Management, Respondent 2

Further, one respondent points out that these *“intelligent people”* need autonomy, because otherwise the organisation would not take advantage of their competence.

“So for me, I would not take advantage of their intelligence if i pointed at what people shall do”

-Top Management, Respondent 1

The replies, mentioned above, show how the organisation is built on a trustful environment, and all members are encouraged to take ownership of their work. One respondent reinforces the importance of trust in a flat organisation.

“That an organisation that is informal creates greater responsibility for the members. Those responsibilities are highly connected to creating trust and teamwork”

-Top Management, Respondent 2

The trustful atmosphere of Krinova is essential in the co-creative context, that to create development through co-creation the actors within the context need to trust each other.

“It’s important with this openness and listen to each other, that there is an open atmosphere where everyone feels like they can contribute from their perspective and references. That’s the pretty much the core I would say, the essence of Krinova”

-Communicator, Respondent 7

Further, in the context of incubator towards startups, the respondents of Krinova emphasise, for them to be able to work with the startups they need to develop trust. Which implies that trust is a crucial factor of operating co-creation. Based on the findings, trust gets enacted in three ways. Firstly, being a good listener, which can be found in Stegariu and Talal’s (2014) study where face-to-face communication enhance the likelihood of the message to be understood. In this context, the attribute of being a good listener reinforce the second finding of trust. Secondly, understand the real challenge of the startup. The findings highly emphasis the value creation in the co-creative literature (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). If the value creation to be adequate for the startups, the incubator need to understand the real challenge of the company. Thirdly, to show that they are on the same level as the startups.

“To be able to be a good listener”

-Top Management, Respondent 1

“But we operate from the starting point with the company’s challenge”

-Business Designer, Respondent 4

“It’s very classic, with co-creation, we don’t take any side or so. It’s a undertone we have, where we want to show them that I am human just like you. And that is somewhat co-creating, take it down a notch and actually just be humble”

-Business Designer, Respondent 5

“We need to come in and have trust to be able to work with them”

-Top Management, Respondent 1

On the other hand in the interplay between the actors, startups express the trust factor more subtle. Instead of using words like *trustful* or *trusting* they talk about the organisation being flexible, helpful and reliable. Startups emphasise the incubator to allocate time for them in order to strengthen the relationship. The allocation of time is aligned with Rice's (2002) argument of the readiness of the incubator.

“It's an open environment. It's not weird to ask a question to anyone. They are there and very helpful, open and if they do not know the answer they find someone that knows it.”

-Startup, Respondent 8

“At the same time I know that when I call I get help from the business designers or by the CEO herself. So it works great. I would say that they are very flexible in their way of working”

-Startup, Respondent 11

The findings show that the premises for operating co-creation in the incubator context mainly derives from the interplay between the actors. Further, the interplay between the actors highly relies on the creation of trust. The findings imply that the co-creative environment, the different way of operating and that Krinova does “*not moralise*” or take decisions for the startup influence the sustainability communication.

5.3 THE COMPLEX COMMUNICATION OF SUSTAINABILITY

The findings reveal that all respondent find the three dimension of sustainability as being equally important in the development of businesses. The findings also reveal the interdependence between the three dimensions of sustainability, the triple bottom line (Elkington, 1994), should not be neglected.

“It's a question of survival, so what I mean is that sustainability is not something that you can reject, you can not do that today”

-Top Management, Respondent 2

“To have a startup company that work against the strong trends is not sustainable per say.... it is difficult to start a business today that is not sustainable”

-Top Management, Respondent 1

“We can’t create companies that is a liability to society, that is not sustainable at all”

-Top Management, Respondent 3

“To be able to manage a company today you need to be pretty aware of environmental sustainability and do things that are ethically okay. So I believe, that more often than not is it implemented and it is difficult for us to affect and say that this is right, this is how you should do. It feels like companies need to have it in their core values... I believe that if you lack in one of the three dimensions, everything else falls apart in my eyes. So I think that you must consider all three dimension to make it good”

-Business designer, Respondent 6

One respondent stresses that even though sustainability is important for businesses in today's society, some companies that do not have a high level of sustainability still survives. The respondent expresses his concern about this.

“Some companies that lacks in sustainability still have an ability to survive. We need to change that”

-Top Management, Respondent 3

According to the findings, we can conclude that employees of the organisation find sustainability crucial in the development of businesses. The findings reinforce our research model, that pressure from society about sustainability is present. Interesting findings however, is that even though there is a comprehensive agreement in the incubator about the importance about sustainability, there is no evident direct communication of sustainability.

5.3.1 THE COMPLEX COMMUNICATION OF SUSTAINABILITY TO KNOWLEDGEABLE EMPLOYEES

Some respondents from business designers do not perceive the sustainability communication internally in the organisation to be formal or direct.

“Not that I have experienced it as something formal, not really”

-Business Designer, Respondent 6

“But internally, I don’t really know”

-Business Designer, Respondent 6

“I perceive it as no systematic way of getting information about [sustainability]”

-Business Designer, Respondent 5

And top management agrees with the informal communication.

“The sustainability perspective is an area that is upcoming, but it’s not like we have a course in sustainability”

-Top Management, Respondent 2

However, the findings reveal that sustainability is highly present in the atmosphere of the organisation, as Naser et al. (2014) express it, “being” sustainability. Firstly, top management explains it as following the macro environment, what trends are upcoming and also what the region offers in education and lectures.

“We looked at innovation support linked with agenda 2030 that, centre of entrepreneurship in Lund offered in a couple of weeks. And then we checked if anyone from our organisation wants to attend. So we are trying to scan and keep up with what universities, the region and the municipalities offer and be a part of as much as possible.”

-Top Management, Respondent 1

Secondly, top management and business designers explain sustainability as something that is intrinsic in the organisation, they do not attempt to transfer more knowledge about sustainability because it always derives from the projects the incubator handles. Krinova as an organisation is highly sustainable because of the projects and focus they have. For example, the organisation is focused on food, and top management and business

designers explain that food and sustainability are aligned. Therefore, the organisation use knowledge and input from projects to raise awareness of sustainability.

“One food-project that we have every year is about healthy food companies, so that is sustainable for the future, so I believe that all these development project that we work with have sustainability intrinsic.... it’s about the way we think when we start a new development project or initiative or environmental, that is always with us, in the core”

-Top Management, Respondent 3

“But when we work with companies I would say that we steer against the projects where sustainability is intrinsic. We always search for these kind of projects... so then we have a conscious strategy that we actively search projects with sustainability, so in that way we have a sustainability strategy I would say”

-Business Designer, Respondent 4

“I know that in some project that handles health if about achieving 20-30 goals on agenda 2030 and show in what way the project achieves these goals. So in that way it’s very obvious before you begin working”

-Business Designer, Respondent 4

Thirdly, members of the organisation express that they absorb information about sustainability on a daily basis.

“It is more about bits and pieces that you notice, from different reports or yeah, from society”

-Business Designer, Respondent 6

“So it [sustainability] is a part of the discussion in society,... it derives from a lot of sources... the political debate is an important part for me”

-Communicator, Respondent 7

“I get newsletters, I have a lot of friends in the area and I follow groups that’s about sustainability”

-Business Designer, Respondent 5

Lastly, one respondent used a metaphor to explain the *atmosphere of sustainability* within the organisation.

“It [Sustainability] is something that is just there as a fuzzy sheet...”

-Business Designer, Respondent 6

Everyone is aware of sustainability but it does not have to be explicitly communicated, employees catch up pieces of sustainability by being around and being informed of the projects. Respondents from top management answered the questions about awareness of sustainability in the organisation as:

“What I think about is that in the best of worlds every employee on Krinova think about sustainability when they wake up. And then I would say that they do that a lot here, because the organisation consists of people with good values and when you work in an organisation as this you think a lot about doing good for the society”

-Top Management, Respondent 3

“Yeah, you can say that the sustainability mind-set always been there in some way. Especially regarding the design thinking we have as foundation for our innovation method, process and so on. It originates from creating value, and value or utility can be measured in different aspects, social, economic and ecological.”

-Top Management, Respondent 2

We conclude, the internal communication of sustainability is based on every members own motivation to gain knowledge. Top management does not force sustainability education or communication on employees but instead spread information about available knowledge to gain. This might implicate that there is some kind of pull-approach that is aligned with the sustainability communication. However, as this thesis does not cover the perspective of pull marketing we will not further elaborate on the concept. Nevertheless, the concept might be of interest in further research.

Additionally, as the organisation takes on projects with high sustainable agendas, sustainability flows in the organisation. Sustainability is not a explicit knowledge, but intrinsic and tacit within the members. We interpret the communication of sustainability to be more complex than what we initially thought. To explain sustainability communication in the incubator, the respondents perceive sustainability to be a common mind-set and the organisation’s core values are based on a sustainability aspect. Communication about sustainability is also complex towards startups, because of the co-creative approach, that the organisation does not make decisions or try to change the startups.

5.3.2 THE INTRICACY OF COMMUNICATING SUSTAINABILITY TOWARDS STARTUPS

As mentioned before, *co-creation* is defined in the incubator as an interplay between the actors (i.e. Top Management, Business Designers and Startups). The actors need to have motivation to collaborate. As defined in the literature, mutual value is a process of co-creation (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). The findings from our data collection reveal that the communication of sustainability towards startups is more complex than initially assumed, as employees of Krinova stress, they do not systematically communicate sustainability toward startups.

“So in some way, to measure if they are sustainable or not, that is not our job, or my job so to speak Who am I to decide what's right or wrong?”

-Business Designer, Respondent 5

“The companies are their own individuals and make their own decisions”

-Top Management, Respondent 3

“... because we don't tell you what to do, it becomes very evident that we are with you... We can't push anything, we do not want to change them”

-Business Designer, Respondent 5

The findings shed light on the complexity of sustainability communication and the trust relation between incubator and startup. The respondents emphasise that all startups are their own individuals with their own intentions of the development of their businesses. Therefore, we emphasise the final decision making for the startups is always made by the entrepreneur behind the startup. This finding implicates that even though there might be a solution that increases the sustainability in the startup the decision to implement the solution is always contingent of the individual's' decision.

“We call ourselves business designers because we want to be a part and co-create instead of saying this is right or wrong... Tips, thoughts, and of course information and facts if I can. But much more listening, we do not tell anyone, we help.”

-Business Designer, Respondent 5

“It’s about finding the tone in the companies, so we don’t go in and master them or moralise over them. Because we need to come in and have trust to be able to work with them. That is very important. And yeah, sometimes we may be more passionate about it [sustainability] but it needs to be in phase with the companies”

-Top Management, Respondent 1

“Here [at Krinova] you are passionate about establishing and developing companies, so it’s difficult to do it if sustainability is not... it’s more about that sometimes we can’t go in and master the companies. You know that you might want to push the company a certain direction faster than the company has abilities and capacity and will to, so sometime we need to tone down ourselves.”

-Top Management, Respondent 1

As shown by the quotes the philosophy of co-creation is not about a one-way communication where Krinova makes decision for the startups. Earlier mentioned, about the interplay between the actors stress that for co-creation to be functional both parties need to be motivated to interact (Bøllingtoft, 2012), and motivation derives from what the startups perceive as important. Krinova needs to understand what the startup perceives as valuable for the development of the company. The findings reveal that the actors must have a reciprocal agreement of what challenge startups face in order to allocate adequate support. The findings is congruent with Hansen et al, (2000) finding of incubators being business allies in the leveraging process. The findings implicate that the incubator provides the nurturing environment Mian (1996) argues for. The members of the organisation stress the importance of emanate from the real challenge of the startups.

“Always customise the support for the companies, it’s no real fixed process, you try to take it from the challenge they have. So there is always a pressure or challenge for us to help the companies regardless how much or how little sustainable they are.”

-Business Designer, Respondent 6

“Sustainable development is an important factor for us, we can influence it but we can’t demand it of them. It must come from themselves, as long as it’s aligned with laws and rules it must be their own decision. The companies are their own individuals and make their own decisions, we are with them to create and contribute, and coach and so on”

-Communicator, Respondent 7

One respondent expressed the communication of sustainability as being part of a challenge.

“When the challenge consists of sustainability, we work actively with sustainability”

-Business Designer, Respondent 4

The same respondent also explains that sustainability might not be a hype amongst companies yet but it is on the up rise. This is an interesting remark, as prior literature highlights the advantage for startups to implement sustainability in the core value (Freimann, Marxen, & Schick, 2016). Further, in the light of the SDGs, that sustainable development is the global goal of society (General Assembly, 2015). The findings imply that there is a pressure from society of sustainability, but the pressure on startups might be less intense than on Krinova. As Krinova is publicly owned the pressure to be sustainable might be more intense than the individual startup.

“So there is some kind of awareness but it is not a hype yet... so if we would invite to a big seminar about sustainability people would not wait in line for hours to get in”

-Business Designer, Respondent 4

The respondents stress the idea of sustainability being important for startups, but the understanding of what it actually means to operationalise sustainability in the business might be difficult. This finding reinforce the findings of O’Riordan (2000), that there is not a clear agreement to what sustainable development is. The respondents stress that it is important for the incubator to translate sustainability into business language, in order to make sustainability applicable to businesses. One respondent explains the translation to business language with the metaphor of a lecturer teaching student’s math and how the lecturer need to explain the reasons behind the calculation.

“When it comes to sustainability. It’s about take it and translate it to business language otherwise nobody would attend the meetings and nobody would go home and do something about it, because nobody would feel that these questions [about sustainability]. Like, how do I get affected by this?”

-Top Management, Respondent 3

“...if you stand by the blackboard in a classroom and you can point and say that two plus two is four. But if the students sitting there don’t understand this and yeah, you just point at two plus two being four as some kind of fact. And not get

them to understand why two plus two is four and the reason behind it and how you reach the conclusion.”

-Top Management, Respondent 2

According to the Business Designers the way of communicating sustainability is dependent of when it fits in the development process and when implementation of sustainability can contribute to making better business.

“We bring in sustainability when it’s a fit in their process of development, that is how we work with sustainability”

-Business Designer, Respondent 4

“It’s not a fixed strategy, it’s a part of making better business. That is how we see it.”

-Business Designer, Respondent 4

Accordingly, as mentioned before the communication of sustainability is complex and there is not a straight path that the business designers walk down. We can conclude the following, that firstly, for the incubator to be able to co-create development together with the startup trust needs to be established. Secondly, the business designers need to operate from the real challenge of the startup. Thirdly, sustainability is communicated when it fits in the process of development. Lastly, sustainability needs to be translated to business language for the startups in order to be effective and applicable. Our interpretation further, is that sustainability communication must be customised towards every startup, that sustainability communication is context dependant.

“It’s not definite answer that they give us, because they can’t do that. It’s more about notions and what direction the trends point at, what is more maybe and what is less maybe”

-Startup, Respondent 10

The reply from the startup reinforced our interpretation that the sustainability communication is complex. Another aspect of the complexity is that top management perceives sustainability to be a natural part of startups, which further flatter the advantage of startups in implementing sustainability from the beginning (Freimann, Marxen, & Schick, 2016).

“[Sustainability] is more a natural part in startups I would say”

-Top Management, Respondent 1

“Then we have other companies that just started and understands that sustainability is important. But I don’t think that you define it as sitting around and talking about sustainability, it is more like a part of a management system”

-Top Management, Respondent 3

“A lot of times is it young people that starts businesses, and then it’s [sustainability] natural to have it. You don’t have to convince them that much, because the sustainable mindset is already there”

-Top Management, Respondent 3

Further, the majority of the respondents stress that the economic sustainability is vital for the startups. This is something that has been shown in studies by Schick, Marxen and Freimann (2002) , whom argue for financial issues being an obstacle in the startup process. Therefore, naturally the business designers and top management explain that the challenge for most startups that approach the incubator are to be financially viable.

“Sorry to say, but a lot of people coming in with an idea of something that you want to do may not really have the economic sustainable mind-set incorporated, you have a passion for something and then you might not have the initial thought of how it should actually sustain.”

-Business Designer, Respondent 6

The findings reveal that business designers and startups focus on the economic sustainability when co-creating solutions.

5.4 THE OUTCOME OF SUSTAINABILITY COMMUNICATION IN A CO-CREATIVE ENVIRONMENT

Startups express the challenge of creating financially stable companies, their first challenge when approaching the incubator was to decide whether the business would be able to function properly. Also, as co-creation is based on mutual mind-set between the two parties the incubator can not decide the agenda of development. The business designers stress that for them to help startups they need to focus on the core challenge. Therefore, social and environmental sustainability might be set aside. The economic sustainability becomes more understandable for the startups since they need capital to survive. The trade-offs between the dimensions are evident.

“We sat down and declared how I should structure my company and how much do I have to earn to survive... Income needs to generated to get food on the table”

-Startup, Respondent 9

“We have had many questions, from the start it was questions about the financials”

-Startup, Respondent 10

“My challenge was go-to market and how it should be financed”

-Startup, Respondent 8

“What I had most help with is the financial part, and they [Krinova] have a network that I don't have... I'm trying to think about a specific occasion with Krinova apart from the financial where they have helped with. But it's mainly that [financial] for my part”

-Startup, Respondent 8

“So if I talk about the three dimensions, I believe that if you do not have the first one [economic sustainability] the other two don't function [social and ecological sustainability]... and for many small companies such as us, we can't put it as a priority without having a financial sustainability to survive 3-5 years.”

-Startup, Respondent 10

Two respondents from the startups further elaborate that the core of the company derives from ecological sustainability and therefore the challenge has not been to be more sustainable in that dimension. One respondent even said that their company might even know more about ecological sustainability than Krinova, which according to employees at Krinova is more a normality than a surprise, since the incubator does not characterise themselves as experts of sustainability.

“Me myself have been pretty clear from the beginning [about sustainability] so they [Krinova] didn't have to open up that path for me, because my core is environmental sustainability.”

-Startup, Respondent 8

“I know a lot about sustainability and ecology so I had pretty good knowledge about it. Maybe even more than Krinova”

-Startup, Respondent 11

The business designers also express the financial sustainability to be the explicit sustainability dimension. This because they operate according to the challenge that startups face and emphasise that they need to understand what the startups value in the *co-creation*. Additionally, the business designers explain that as startups nowadays usually implement sustainability in all three dimensions from the beginning, Krinova does not need to assist as much regarding the sustainability development of the startups. However, from our interpretation we do not suggest that Krinova does not emphasise all three dimensions of sustainability, because the empirical findings reveal sustainability to be in the atmosphere of Krinova as an organisation. What we found was that because of the co-creative environment, where *trust* is a vital part, the organisation need to create a relationship with the startups where they together co-create development. The co-creative environment implies that Krinova together with the startups focus on the real challenge, to develop the startups to become viable companies.

5.5 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND DEVELOPMENT OF RESEARCH MODEL

The foundation of this thesis lies in the Sustainable Development Goals and entrepreneurs advantage in implementing sustainability in the startup process. The pressure from society on businesses and organisations to operate sustainable (Larson, 2009) and the paradigm of “doing” sustainability to “being” sustainability (Naser, et al., 2014) seems to be protocol rather than the exception. In light of this our findings reveal that all actors within the incubator feel the pressure of sustainability and sustainable development, the incubator has pressure from investors and startups have pressure from customers. The pressure can be seen in the research model.

Sustainability communication within the co-creative incubator is complex. There is no direct communication of sustainability, however the findings imply economic sustainability to be more explicit in the communication compared to the social and environmental sustainability. The intensity of sustainability communication is contingent of the challenge the startups face, co-creation is customised to the individual startup. The customisation of value is generalised in the co-creation literature (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), as every individual perceives value differently. Therefore, we can understand and explain

the communication of sustainability to be customised in every co-creation process. Further, we can see a pattern of economic sustainability communication to be of importance in the incubation of startups. The findings complement prior literature of incubators increase the possibility of survival for startups.

Nevertheless, the findings highlights trust as an important factor in the understanding of how sustainability communicates. We shed new light on the creation of trust within co-creative incubators. In the co-creative literature, facilitation of a trustful environment is emphasised (Ind & Coates, 2013). However, our findings implicate that the facilitation of trust is three-dimensional. Firstly, the trustful environment within the incubator facilitates co-creation (Erikson, et al., 2014) Secondly, startups must trust the incubator to operate for the startups best interest, meaning having a shared vision of the value co-creation for the startups (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Thirdly, where we make our contribution, the essential factor of trust implicates that startups understands that they are independent. The incubator acts as the helping hand towards sustainability, not moralising, but instead plants seeds in the head of the individual behind the startup. The creation of trust implies the incubator to intentionally show startups that their company is their own, that the incubator trust the startup to make adequate decisions of their own. In the process of developing startups the incubator must consider how much sustainability that can be pushed towards the startups. Too much push towards sustainability seems to imply that the trust will decrease. It further seems like a balanced communication of sustainability creates a sense of control for startups.

We extend our research model by moving trust towards the atmosphere of co-creation, trust seems to be the most important factor of co-creation in the incubator context. Further, we change the sustainability communication to being two-dimensional. The straight arrow towards economic sustainability implicates the more direct communication of financials from the incubator towards startups. The dotted line towards social and environmental sustainability communication shows that, if it creates value for the startup, it is communicated. Therefore, sustainability communication can be explained as contingent on the challenge the startups face.

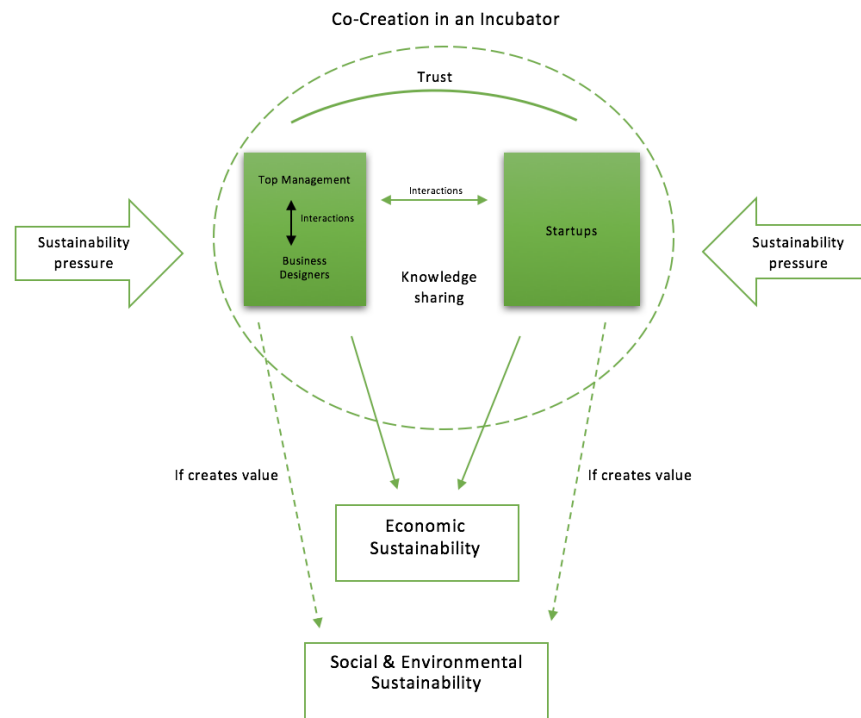


Figure 2 Extended Research Model based on findings

Nevertheless, when analysing the findings reflections upon how the importance of trust in co-creation might prevent the social and environmental aspects of sustainability to be communicated arises. The co-creative environment might hinder the employees' competence to flourish and to take advantage of the expertise they possess. As mentioned in the quotes, that the incubator might tone down their passion for sustainability in order to maintain trust. The intensity to create value and to customise the support for the startups might decrease the communication of social and environmental sustainability. We think of this as the downside of co-creation, that the creation of trust overrule the need to create *sustainable* development. This reflection does not consider that the startups in the incubator already is highly sustainable. Further research should be encouraged to examine whether the importance of trust in a co-creative environment.

6 CONCLUSION

Chapter 6 begins with a summary of the thesis where the highlighted findings are presented. The chapter moves on to theoretical and practical implications of the findings. Lastly, the chapter displays the limitations of the thesis and suggestions for future research.

6.1 SUMMARY OF THE THESIS

The thesis explored how sustainability communication can be understood and explained in a co-creative environment. The thesis shed light on factors that might influence the communication of sustainability in the co-creative incubator Krinova. Since the area of sustainability communication in a co-creative environment is relatively unexplored a qualitative approach was chosen for the in-depth understanding of the context. Semistructured interviews were made in order to understand how the actors within the incubator communicates sustainability. The interviews were conducted with three levels of the incubator, namely top management, business designers and startups in order to get a comprehensive understanding of the communication flow. Previous research of *co-creation, sustainability and incubators* laid the foundation of the research model used in the qualitative data collection. The findings revealed that communication of sustainability in the co-creative incubator is complex and customised. According to the findings, the economic sustainability aspect has a stronger presence due to its influence on survival for the startups. As previous literature and our findings present, the startups greatest concern is to survive in the short run in order to develop a lasting business (Schick, Marxen, & Freimann, 2002). It is therefore desirable for the startups to target the aspects that contribute to economic sustainability. Social and environmental sustainability communication are contingent on the startups perception of value. Meaning, when social and environmental sustainability fits the process of development in startups, it is communicated. Therefore, social and environmental sustainability communication is based on the value it creates for the startups.

The findings also shed new light on the emphasis on trust in the co-creative environment. Trust is seen as three dimensional in the co-creative incubator. Firstly, the trustful

environment within the incubator facilitates co-creation (Erikson, et al., 2014) Secondly, startups must trust the incubator to operate for the startups best interest, meaning having a shared vision of the value co-creation for the startups (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Thirdly, where we make our contribution, the essential factor of trust implicates that startups understands that they are independent. The incubator acts as the helping hand towards sustainability, not moralising, but instead plants seeds in the head of the individual behind the startup.

6.2 THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

From a theoretical perspective this thesis contribute with insights of sustainable development of startups in the co-creative literature. As co-creative foundations focus on the mutual benefit and mutual collaboration the incentives to pressure sustainability on startups may be misaligned with the core purpose. The thesis showed that sustainability mainly derives from the financial situation, as startups struggle with the financials in the startup phase. Although this conclusion already been found in prior literature the thesis contributes with insights of how incubators can emphasise sustainability in the development process. Sustainable ideas derives from asking questions and share knowledge. Therefore, contributions of this thesis are that sustainability and sustainable development derives from motivational factors of the entrepreneur behind the startup companies.

Further, the thesis sheds new light on the concept of trust in the co-creation literature. In the incubator context trust is essential in order to operate co-creation. Trust is three-dimensional, meaning that the incubator firstly facilitates a trustful environment. Secondly, startups trust the incubator to operate for the startups best interest. And thirdly, the essential factor of trust implicates that startups understands that they are independent. The incubator acts as the helping hand towards sustainability, not moralising, but instead plants seeds in the head of the individual behind the startup.

6.3 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Through the case study, the thesis contributes with insights of the incubator's role in sustainable development in a co-creative context. As most businesses face pressure from society regarding sustainable development, the thesis contributes with the complexity of

pushing sustainability on to startups. For incubator managers and incubators as an institution, the research highlights the indirect communication of planting seeds to catalyse sustainable thoughts in startups. Incubator managers can learn from the research that trust building is important.

6.4 LIMITATIONS

The thesis includes a few limitations of different nature. Firstly, the interviews were conducted from a limited participation selection which may have affected the results based on this data. Secondly, as the research was made on a single case study the generalisation of results might be decreased. Therefore we suggest further empirical research needs to be emphasised on comparison between different incubators with co-creation as innovation tools. Thirdly, the distinction between top management and business designers were vague in the sample process. In other words, top management participants also qualified as business designers. Lastly, as to the best of our knowledge research of sustainability communication in a co-creative environment have not been done earlier. Therefore, we encourage that more research needs to be done to understand the phenomenon.

6.5 FUTURE RESEARCH

As the research is based on one incubator, future research should emphasise the comparison of different incubators to investigate whether the findings can be generalised. As the co-creative environment is on the up rise more research needs to be done to understand how incubators can develop sustainable practices for incubated companies, especially since prior findings highlight the financial part for startup companies. Therefore, we suggest three areas of research to understand the co-creative environment.

- Measure how co-creation lead to sustainable business ideas, by making a longitude study of startups process through the incubation. The research is encouraged to measure how the trustful environment contributes to the sustainability communication.
- It is encouraged by the authors of this thesis to investigate how the co-creative environment affects the communication of social and environmental

sustainability. This could be made through observation of the interactions between startups and employees.

- As the research accounted for startups, it would be of interest to investigate whether co-creative incubators communicates social and environmental sustainability in a more direct approach towards incumbent companies. Especially, since the more mature companies may not face the barriers of financials as the startups do.

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APPENDIX 1 – THE UN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



APPENDIX 2 – INTERVIEW GUIDE TOP MANAGEMENT

Öppnande Frågor

1. Berätta om värdegrunden för Krinova, hur kommuniceras den?
2. Kan du rita upp ett organisationsschema för Krinova och förklara var du befinner dig i det?

Involvering i interaktionen med Startups

3. Är du involverad i rekryteringen av Startups?
 - a. Om nej, har du någon vetskap om hur rekryteringen går till?
 - b. Om ja → Hur rekryterar ni Startups till er? Finns det kriterier som måste bli uppfyllda?
 - c. Anser du att det är viktigt att startups i inkubatorn är hållbara; socialt, ekonomiskt och ekologiskt?
4. Hur mycket är du involverad i startups?
 - a. Vad är skillnaden mellan dig och Business Designers i involveringen med startups?
 - b. Hur stor andel av företagen i inkubatorn är startups?
5. Vad förväntar ni er av startups när dem väl är i inkubatorn?

Kommunikationen i inkubatorn – Både internt och med Startups

6. Hur fungerar kommunikationen på Krinova internt?
 - a. Vilka kommunikationskanaler används?
 - b. Vilka kommunicerar du med?
 - c. Hur kommunicerar ni?
 - d. Är kommunikationen formell eller informell?
7. Hur kommunicerar du med startups?
 - a. Vilka kommunikationskanaler används?
 - b. Hur kommunicerar ni?
 - c. Är kommunikationen formell eller informell?

Hållbarhet

8. Vad är hållbarhet för dig?
 - a. Är det någon hållbarhetsaspekt som är viktigare än någon annan?
 - b. Hur arbetar du med hållbarhet?
 - c. Hur viktigt är hållbarhet för Krinova som organisation?
9. Hur kommuniceras hållbarhet, internt och externt?
 - a. Finns det någon utbildning i hållbarhet på Krinova?
 - b. Hur viktigt är hållbarhet för Krinova som organisation?

APPENDIX 3 – INTERVIEW GUIDE BUSINESS DESIGNERS

Öppnande frågor

1. Kan du berätta om värdegrunden för Krinova, hur kommuniceras den?
2. Kan du rita upp ett organisationsschema för Krinova och förklara var du befinner dig i det?

Startups

3. Vilken kunskap om hållbarhet har startups som kommer in på Krinova?
 - a. Är det en viktig fråga för startups?
 - b. Om nej → hur hjälper ni dem att bli mer hållbara?
 - c. Om ja → Sätter startups press på er inom hållbarhet?
4. Vad förväntar ni er av startups som är inom inkubatorn?
 - a. Förväntar du dig en utveckling i de hållbara aspekterna?
5. Kan du beskriva en medskapande process du har varit med om?
 - a. Hur ofta kommunicerade du med företaget du samarbetade med?
 - b. Vilka verktyg försåg du företaget med?
 - c. Hur följer du upp utvecklingen av företaget?
6. Väljer du företag att medskapa med själv?

Kommunikation – både externt och internt

7. Hur fungerar kommunikationen på Krinova?
 - a. Vilka kommunikationskanaler används?
 - b. Vilka kommunicerar du med?
 - c. Hur kommunicerar du?
 - d. Skulle du säga att kommunikationen är formell eller informell?

Hållbarhet

8. Vad betyder hållbarhet för dig?
 - a. Är någon hållbarhetsaspekt viktigare än en annan?
 - b. Vilka aspekter av hållbarhet tror du är viktig för andra medarbetare på Krinova?
9. Hur får du information om hållbarhet?
 - a. Vilken information får du från ledningen gällande hållbarhet?
 - b. Finns det utbildning om hållbarhet på Krinova?
10. Hur kommunicerar du hållbarhet till startups?

APPENDIX 4 – INTERVIEW GUIDE STARTUPS

Öppnande frågor

1. Berätta om ditt företag
 - a. Vad är kärnan i din affärsidé?
 - b. Hur länge har du varit verksam?
 - c. Vad såg du som saknades på marknaden?

Frågor angående medskapande med Krinova

2. Hur har du arbetat med Krinova?
 - a. Vilken frågeställning/utmaning har ni tillsammans arbetat med?
3. Hur har frågeställningen utvecklat ditt företag?
 - a. Vad betyder Krinova för utvecklingen av ditt företag?
4. Har du tagit del av föreläsningar, events m.m. som Krinova erbjuder?

Frågor angående hållbarhet

5. Vad betyder hållbarhet för dig?
 - a. Vad betyder hållbarhet för ditt företag?
6. Har du fått en djupare förståelse/kunskap om hållbarhet genom samverkan med Krinova?

APPENDIX 5 – CONFIDENTIAL AGREEMENT

Informationsbrev om medverkan i en intervjustudie, med titeln; Sustainability communication in the Incubator environment

Vi heter Sandra Lipic Persson & Ida Lundin och skriver för tillfället kandidatuppsats inom ekonomiprogrammet med inriktning internationellt företagande & marknadsföring vid Högskolan Kristianstad. I utbildningen ingår att genomföra en studie, som kommer att presenteras i en skriftlig rapport vid högskolan.

Studiens syfte är att undersöka kommunikation och hållbarhet inom inkubatorer.

Deltagandet i studien innebär att en intervju kommer att genomföras individuellt med olika representanter från inkubatorn. Intervjun beräknas ta omkring 60 minuter. Hela intervjun kommer att spelas in på band och transkriberas efteråt. Intervjuerna kommer att behandlas konfidentiellt. Din medverkan är frivillig och kan när som helst avbrytas.

Hälsningar,

Ida Lundin

Sandra Lipic Persson

Högskolan Kristianstad

Handledare: Christian Koch

Sektionen för Hälsa och Samhälle

Högskolan Kristianstad

Skriftligt, informerat samtycke till medverkan i intervjustudien med titeln; Sustainability communication in the Incubator environment

Jag har informerats om studiens syfte, om hur informationen samlas in, bearbetas och handhas. Jag har även informerats om att mitt deltagande är frivilligt och att jag, när jag vill, kan avbryta min medverkan i studien utan att ange orsak. Jag samtycker härmed till att medverka i denna intervjustudie som handlar om kommunikation av hållbarhet i inkubatorer.