ARTICLES

REFLECTIONS ON SUSTAINABILITY'S MEANING IN ORGANIZATIONS

Reflexões sobre o sentido de sustentabilidade em organizações

Reflexiones sobre el sentido de la sustentabilidad en las organizaciones

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ABSTRACT

Adopting an institutionalist perspective on the construction of the meaning(s) of sustainability for organizations, we argue that this polysemic concept is linguistically employed in diverse fields with the intent to provide legitimacy. We apply the semiotic model of the institutionalization process to the concept of sustainability, highlighting its linguistic-social construction in two ways: as denotation and connotation. We then discuss the departure from the objective nature of the concept to its mythical-rational nature in which the separation of doing, saying, and meaning transmute its semantic content. Sustainability is, then, understood as another institutional pressure to which organizations need to respond, and they usually do so strategically through acceptance, adaptation, or contestation. Thus, even if certain actors aim to institutionalize sustainability as a denotation, its connotation fluctuates due to convenience or lack of clarity on how to operationalize it in organizations.

Keywords: sustainability, construction of meanings, semiotics, institutional theory, (denotational and connotational) institutionalization.

RESUMO

Empreendemos uma reflexão institucionalista sobre a construção do(s) sentido(s) de sustentabilidade enquanto fator legitimador das organizações, argumentando que a construção polissêmica do conceito é linguisticamente operada intencionando legitimação em campos organizacionais heterogêneos. Aplicamos o modelo semiótico do processo de institucionalização ao conceito de sustentabilidade, evidenciando sua construção linguístico-social de duas formas – denotacional e conotacional –, discutindo a saída da natureza objetiva do conceito para sua natureza mítico-racional na qual a dissociação do fazer, dizer e significar transmuta seu conteúdo semântico. A sustentabilidade é, então, entendida como mais uma pressão institucional à qual as organizações precisam responder, e estas geralmente o fazem de maneira estratégica, mediante aceitação, adaptação ou contestação. Assim, ainda que determinados atores busquem institucionalizar a sustentabilidade denotacionalmente, seu sentido oscila conotacionalmente conforme é difundido, seja por conveniência ou falta de clareza sobre como operacionalizá-lo nas organizações.

Palavras-chave: *sustentabilidade, construção de sentidos, semiótica, teoria institucional, institucionalização (denotacional e conotacional).*

RESUMEN

Realizamos una reflexión institucionalista sobre la construcción del(de los) sentido(s) de la sustentabilidad como factor legitimador de las organizaciones, argumentando que la construcción polisémica del concepto es operada lingüísticamente pretendiendo legitimarse en campos organizacionales heterogéneos. Aplicamos el modelo semiótico del proceso de institucionalización al concepto de sustentabilidad, destacando su construcción lingüístico-social en dos sentidos –denotativo y connotativo–, discutiendo el paso de la naturaleza objetiva del concepto a su naturaleza mítico-racional en la que la disociación de hacer, decir y significar transmuta su contenido semántico. La sustentabilidad se entiende, entonces, como una presión institucional más a la que las organizaciones deben responder, y estas suelen hacerlo estratégicamente, a través de la aceptación, la adaptación o la contestación. Así, aunque ciertos actores busquen institucionalizar la sustentabilidad denotacionalmente, su sentido oscila connotacionalmente a medida que se difunde, ya sea por conveniencia o por falta de claridad sobre cómo operacionalizarla en las organizaciones.

Palabras clave: *sustentabilidad, construcción de significados, semiótica, teoría institucional, institucionalización (denotativa y connotativa).*

INTRODUCTION

When we seek to understand the term "sustainable development", we usually encounter the main ideas proposed at the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), which discussed the need to align economic and environmental interests, preserving nature for future generations. This understanding was spread among organizations and endorsed by institutions such as the United Nations, the Group of Seven (G7), and the European Economic Union, giving way to its interpretation as an institutionalized concept, i.e., socially accepted, resistant to change (Jennings & Zandbergen, 1995).

This article highlights the "language, vocabulary, metaphor, codification, and stories as the cognitive foundations" (Li, 2017, p. 530-531) that constitute the institutionalization process. Guided by discussions on sustainability, we depart from the semiotic groundwork discussed by Li (2017), who states that the sign "sustainability" is constituted from the correlation between referent (the actions related to "sustainability" that are performed in organizations), signifier (the acoustic image of the word "sustainability"), and signified (the meaning of "sustainability"),

This correlation results in two forms of institutionalization: denotational institutionalization and connotational institutionalization. In the former, referent, signifier, and signified are correlated homogeneously at a micro and individual level to diffuse the sign at a macro and collective level. In the latter, the sign is void of the original (first-order) signified; its meanings are socially constructed from a heterogeneous context in which new signs are incorporated into existing ones, making it a mythical-rational sign (Li, 2017).

Thus, although sustainability tends to be associated with biodiversity and climate change, its pre-established definitions and understandings show it is broader than it seems at first glance. The term carries a wide range of meanings discussed in global, fragmented, dynamic, and complex scenarios (Dovers, 1996; Scherer, Palazzo, & Seidl, 2013). In this theoretical essay, we employ Institutional Theory to better understand the meaning(s) of sustainability and its implications for organization legitimacy.

Since they are embedded in these scenarios and need to meet more than one demand, organizations discuss the concept amid complex and heterogeneous contexts, surrounded by diverse meanings constructed by various actors. Institutions like the State, large investors, and other actors relevant to organizational performance have the legitimacy to (try to) denotatively institutionalize the concept of sustainability, spreading it in search for validation of as many actors as possible (Haack & Rasche, 2021; Haack, Schilke, & Zucker, 2021). The control that arises from the legitimacy of these institutions occurs in different ways and can be explained by the three traditional pillars of Institutional Theory: (1) regulative (laws and coercion), (2) normative (values and norms that incite respect and honor), and (3) cultural-cognitive (symbols, meanings, and socially accepted standards) (Hoffman & Jennings, 2015).

These three pillars allow us to follow how definitions of sustainability are constructed, accepted, followed, or contested in institutions (Jennings & Zandbergen, 1995). To face legal demands or even challenge the idea of a consensus around sustainability, organizations employ

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strategic responses that aim to keep themselves legitimate, such as strategic manipulation, isomorphic adaptation, and moral discourse (Oliver, 1991; Scherer et al., 2013).

These responses arise from and are composed of structural elements, but they do not happen without human action. Social actors play an essential role in organizations, as they interact, form, and are formed by structures while constructing meanings. In this essay, actors are those who play an important role in trying to balance environmental, social, and economic debates, as well as those who can be unified through linguistic elements that are deemed essential in the process of socially constructing meaning in institutions (Chapman et al., 2020; Gümüsay, Claus, & Amis, 2020; Phillips & Malhotra, 2017) in order to question relevant issues, e.g., denotationally established macro-level meanings surrounding organizational sustainability (Haack et al., 2021).

Amidst varying interests and relevant discourses on economic representativeness before the society–and even the State–, organizations are also responsible for constructing, externalizing, objectifying, and internalizing the meaning of sustainability (Jennings & Hoffman, 2017). Although the term can be understood through decoupling and ceremonial practices (Parrique et al., 2019; Vadén et al., 2020), we propose an institutionalist reflection on the concept of sustainability that links it to the processes of constructing its possible meanings in a contemporary and heterogeneous context. We then indicate how these meanings are employed to legitimize organizational fields through linguistically operated strategic responses (discursive, narrative, rhetorical etc.).

Based on Chapman et al. (2020), we contribute to the discussion about the possibilities of thinking about the (mis)alignment between the use and understanding of a common language around sustainability that normalizes the concept in various fields, clarifying the relevance of the semiotic mechanisms that permeate this process (Li, 2017). From the perspective of connotational institutionalization, they open debate for enabling a polysemic construct, which hinders the articulations and justifications for action aimed at achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as well as other global efforts to unify the meaning of sustainability among organizations.

Furthermore, Institutional Theory can contribute to the discussion about sustainability as a legitimizing factor for organizations. It helps understand how the definitions of sustainability are linguistically created, accepted, and challenged inside and outside organizations. It can also contribute to theoretical discussions about organizational sustainability, mainly as an attempt to accept a validated understanding between environmental, social, and economic fields about a concept that is, in fact, socially constructed – i.e., subject to constant changes, depending on actors, discourses, and policies. Finally, we contribute to issues that reach practitioners by allowing them to see sustainability as an institutional matter that shapes organizations and organizational fields in increasingly significant ways (Gümüsay et al., 2020; Jennings & Hoffman, 2017; Jennings & Zandbergen, 1995; Lounsbury, Fairclough, & Lee, 2011; Scherer et al., 2013).

SUSTAINABILITY: AN INSTITUTIONAL PRESSURE

The meaning of sustainability developed over time essentially led to the emergence of two opposing perspectives: one from expansionist actors and another from ecological actors. The expansionist one can be considered weak regarding sustainability and advocates that organizations act inside economic systems independent from the ecological system. On the other hand, the environmentalist one takes a strong position concerning sustainability and emphasizes that organizations act in a dependent economic system and cause negative consequences to the ecological system (Gladwin, Kennelly, & Krause, 1995; Hopwood, Mellor, & O'Brien, 2005; Jennings & Zandbergen, 1995). Upon the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) declaration that human development by itself is unsustainable, there has been a trend to replace expansionist perspectives with others that tend toward a more mild understanding of the term (Scherer et al., 2013). The need for approaches that balance and align the interests of expansionists and ecologists favors changes in institutional logic (Gümüsay et al., 2020) and adds to the increasing pressures around the issue.

The names of the groups that fall somewhere between these two approaches and take a more balanced stance vary. The reformers, for example, suggest changing the resources used in production processes to solve the problems generated (Hopwood et al., 2005). Advocates of the sustaincentric paradigm discuss sustainability from the interdependence of social and environmental issues (Gladwin et al., 1995). Among other possible nomenclatures and examples, Jennings and Zandbergen (1995) also use the term "reformists" and highlight a stance towards sustainability that seeks to align ecological and social needs.

These groups reveal that the impact of the concept developed by WCED cannot be dismissed. The idea of balance still guides debates on the subject, especially when there is the need to avoid extreme positions. However, the definition, developed more than 30 years ago, has changed, as have the social and organizational contexts. The concept was based on finding consensus among different actors regarding sustainable development; it was based on a non-distinctive environmental logic between the history of nature and society. However, recognizing that every institutionalization process is complex and heterogeneous, we understand that different logics underpin the relationship between the signifier, the signified, and the referent of the term "sustainability" (Li, 2017; Lounsbury, Steele, Wang, & Toubiana, 2021).

On the debate around climate change, water scarcity, forest fires, etc., the discussion focuses on social structure failures (Hoffman & Jennings, 2015) and how the consequences of these cases have a worldwide impact on human life, fauna, flora, and even the economy, although with varying severity depending on the planet region. In this case, the common understandings of ecological and social problems tend to be favored. When dealing with the denotational institutionalization of the term, there is an attempt – and in some cases, a need – to align referent, signifier, and signified (Li, 2017). Thus, organizational practices tend to move toward common goals. Moreover, world conferences about the topic, the SDGs, and other objective metrics that direct practices and measure State and organizational sustainability daily are examples of

standardization and control that can be replicated globally, providing a possible way of aligning the sign from the perspective of the semiotic triangle.

However, adversities and regional specificities emerge as we look at local contexts. Jennings and Zandbergen (1995, p. 1043) point out that "different interpretations of sustainability will develop in each field, and the interpretations will be linked to local incentives to modify practices in the way that is best for that region". Sustainability goes far beyond environmental aspects and global effects; it also involves specific social, political, and ideological debates that change across countries and regions. Therefore, inside institutions, it can be considered a pressure anchored in different logics (Gümüsay et al., 2020; Lounsbury et al., 2021). The perspectives for understanding the term "sustainability" and how its meaning has been constructed change according to space-time, become more narrow and, consequently, transform the way of dealing with externalities generated by organizations (Dovers, 1996). In these cases, it is up to institutions that exert major influence on organizations, e.g., the State, to ensure formal control structures so sustainable measures can be adopted (Delmas & Toffel, 2011).

The authority of this institution, which is based on its regulative legitimacy, can be interpreted as an effective way to objectively institutionalize an understanding of sustainability (Lounsbury et al., 2011). Through legislation, the State can demand sustainable positions and practices from organizations. Thus, using coercive mechanisms and making rules mandatory, those who do not comply are (in)formally punished (Delmas & Toffel, 2011). Formal punishment can be associated with fines and legal sanctions; informal punishment, in turn, refers to cases in which organizations lose fiscal support, access to resources, and other State-provided resources.

However, this is just one example and does not diminish the importance of other actors in local, regional, or national contexts. Environmental movements, given their legitimacy in the field and their coercive capacity, can influence the perceptions of other relevant actors, since their principles and practices favor the monitoring and regulation of sustainable measures in organizations (Lounsbury et al., 2011). The increasing popularity of debates around sustainability and the strength of the normative pillar have given rise to civil society as a major player in endorsing the control of sustainable organizational practices. Moreover, through media advances, the relations between citizens and organizations have become closer, enabling greater participation, understanding, and the possibility of demanding measures that concomitantly respect the economy, the environment, and individuals (Jennings & Hoffman, 2017).

As institutional authorities capable of validating the legitimacy of organizations regarding sustainability (Haack et al., 2021), both the State and non-governmental organizations (representing environmental movements) and civil society can demand, supervise, punish, and construct meanings surrounding organizational actions, somewhat occupying a control position. However, these same social actors can assume a relationship of interdependence, i.e., exchanging benefits with the organizations. That shows how normative and cultural-cognitive pillars can sometimes overlap laws and regulations.

In this case, constructing the meaning of sustainability is a joint effort from the stakeholders. As the organization results from a social construction process, so is sustainability. Understood as a debate that starts from heterogeneous interpretations (Li, 2017) from various institutional constituents, sustainability is disseminated narratively and discursively by organizations and other relevant actors so that one can continue to support and safeguard the legitimacy of the other (Jennings & Hoffman, 2017). Therefore, such construction of meaning is linguistically operated.

LANGUAGE, LEGITIMACY, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING

Basing ourselves on the sociological strands of Institutional Theory, we are interested in understanding the organizational field beyond regulative aspects and encompassing social, symbolic, cultural aspects, etc. The constructionist emphasis adopted herein allows us to consider/discuss issues centered on language to explain the social (Phillips & Malhotra, 2017). According to Li's (2017) model, a potential path for this debate is semiotics. The author draws on the tradition of Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics to assert that every sign (i.e., entity that communicates meaning and carries a message or some fragment of it) corresponds to the correlation between three elements: referent (the object, material, or symbolic practice), signifier (the word), and signified (the concept) (Li, 2017), a model that also dialogues with the more contemporary view of communicational interactions, systems of significations, and sign production proposed by Umberto Eco. Figure 1 illustrates this triad, i.e., the semiotic triangle.

Figure 1. Semiotic Triangle
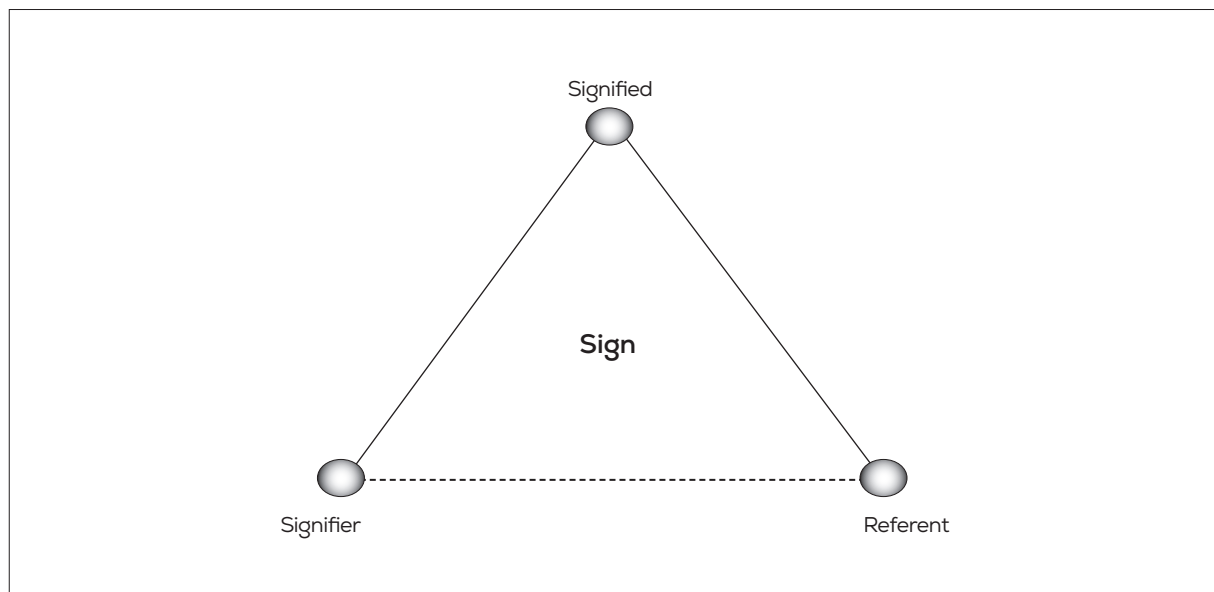
Source: Elaborated by the authors based on Li (2017, p. 525).

A brief historical review allows us to understand that, before the thinkers mentioned above, Aristotle highlighted the relevance of the relationship between symbols, words, and experiences. After that, St. Augustine reflected on the relationship between natural signs and language. In the 17th century, John Locke emphasized the discussion on verbal language and logic, which paved the way for linguistics and logic, later debated by Ferdinand de Saussure and Peirce (Cobley, 2016; Jensen, 2015). Saussure emphasized verbal language, laying the foundation for semiology, and sought to understand how communication regimes are supported by a bilateral perspective of signs, focusing on the arbitrary relationship (as he puts it) between the sound pattern (*signifiant*) and the concept (*signifié*). Between the late 1900s and early 2000s, Peirce emphasized that the relationship between the three elements takes place from an ongoing process of interpretation of reality that, in turn, plays a part in preserving and reproducing societal cultures (Jensen, 2015); as Cobley (2016, p. 3) states, "Peirce broke with this line of thought and insisted on a triadic sign" – referent, signifier, and signified.

Semiotics gained international relevance in the 1960s. Today, it can be understood as the study of the difference between illusion and reality, representing an enduring inquiry into the limits of that difference by questioning signs (Cobley, 2010). Defined as the general science of signs, it provides an interdisciplinary theory of sign and communication practices (verbal and nonverbal) of the human environment, particularly their social origins, uses, and consequences (Brannen, 2004; Jensen, 2015). In this article, our arguments are grounded on Li (2017) because her model enables a social view of semiotics in which context and interpretation are relevant to understand signs; in this perspective, they are not suprasubjective, but inextricably intertwine the users to the context in which they use the signs. This view brings Li (2017) closer to contemporary thinker Umberto Eco, who emphasizes that understanding the sign is not restricted solely to comprehending the codes but also the practices of human signification performed by communicators in each sociocultural context (Cobley, 2016). Table 1 below summarizes the contributions of each of these thinkers to the field of semiotics.

Table 1. Semiotic perspectives

	Elements / Understanding		
Aristotle	**Symbols**	**Words**	**Experiences**
	Words, whether spoken or written, are signs that reflect mental experiences.		
St. Augustine	**Natural Signs**	**Language**	
	Association between natural and verbal signs. Interpretation of nature and natural signs based on Christian values.		
John Locke	**Verbal Language**	**Logic**	
	First modern view on semiotics and signs. Restricted to what was most usual at the time, namely verbal language and logic.		

Continue

Table 1. Semiotic perspectives

Concludes

	Elements / Understanding		
Saussure	**Sound pattern (*signifiant*)**	**Concept (*signifié*)**	
	Lays the foundations for semiology of a glottocentric nature (i.e., speech-focused) and makes room for an anthropocentric approach. Based on the arbitrary relationship between the sound pattern (*signifiant*) and the concept (*signifié*).		
Peirce	**Referent**	**Significant**	**Signified**
	The theory of signs can mediate the relationship between objects and previously incorporated concepts. Human cognitive capacity enables understanding and interpreting reality, as well as preserving and reproducing cultures.		
Barthes	**Signs**	**Texts**	**Myths**
	Brings attention to the text, sustaining that a sentence consists of a set/sequence of signs, resulting in representations that do not reflect reality itself (nature) but history (social, cultural, ideological) based on the concept of myth.		
Eco	**Context**	**Interpretation**	
	The sign is not solely composed of codes; their understanding involves an interpretative chain in which the reader (user) and the context are relevant.		

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on Cobley (2010, 2016) and Jensen (2015).

We then turn to the discussion of legitimacy, explained from collective characteristics, and grounded in the social construction of meanings through language. Besides reflecting the need for "cultural alignment, normative support, or consonance with relevant rules or laws" (Deephouse, Bundy, Tost, & Suchman, 2017, p. 31), legitimacy is also a central construct of Institutional Theory. It involves the sociocognitive processes of creating and transmitting meaning through language (Phillips & Malhotra, 2017). Sometimes, this construct is also interpreted as a resource, property, or something that can be acquired. It is usually associated with reputation resulting from actions that impact the organization's image, such as wrongdoings or sustainability practices (Haack et al., 2021).

The different ways of interpreting legitimacy can be explained based on the classification of Suddaby, Bitektine and Haack (2017), who present it as property, process, or perception. The first form of interpretation, as property, assumes a relationship between the organization and the external environment and explains legitimacy as an operational resource. This dominant perspective reveals a scenario in which the organization gains legitimacy when it adopts legitimate practices and structures. The adoption usually comes from the need/obligation to yield to institutional pressures (Haack & Rasche, 2021).

When interpreted as a process, legitimacy involves constant social negotiations, emphasizing the actors' capacity for agency in constructing meanings in specific contexts. In this case, legitimacy corresponds to an organizational movement that takes place in translation, theorization, and categorization through language. When interpreted as perception, greater relevance is attributed

to the relationship between the collective and the individual, between macro and micro (Haack et al., 2021; Suddaby et al., 2017). Based on this, it is the actor's responsibility to construct their understandings and judgments about the legitimacy of organizations. However, organizations can affect the perceptions of their institutional constituents about the validity of what they report, whether it is about organizational performance or specific topics of interest, such as sustainability. However, validity is not necessarily synonymous with consensus. Regardless of what the organization conveys, the social interactions and institutional contexts in which they operate influence how individual external actors assess the legitimacy and may reveal dissonant perceptions (Haack et al., 2021).

The interaction between social actors occurs in a heterogeneous field, where there is an attempt to share common meanings about specific issues. The relations between these actors are often guided by their own profits, revealing that the perspective of legitimacy as property perseveres. Therefore, the interaction between the actors presupposes an ongoing relationship of control, supporting the idea that legitimacy is achieved when social expectations are met.

In parallel with attempts to align interests, organizational legitimacy can also be "disputed if social actors perceive a mismatch between the corporation's status-quo and societal expectations" (Scherer et al., 2013, p. 263). For example, in cases of organizational wrongdoing, where the legitimacy of already institutionalized issues may not be approved but instead questioned/ contested by external actors, potential supporters may be driven away (Haack et al., 2021). That tends to take the organization out of its comfort zone, adapting its discourse and, in some cases, its logic and practices.

However, the numerous structural adjustments resulting from institutional pressures and demands might demand so much time and investment that they are deemed unfeasible. This is when language comes into play as an essential tool to discuss sustainability in organizations since both language and "vocabulary, metaphor, codification, and stories" are "cognitive foundations on which institutions are constructed" (Li, 2017, p. 530-531). Institutional-level debates are essentially cognitive and linguistic, therefore making organizations spaces where logic, particular meanings, pre-established rules, values, and beliefs of individuals and organizations are the guiding practices and under constant transformations, enabling the (re)construction of meanings (Lounsbury et al., 2021; Phillips & Malhotra, 2017).

For this reason, some practices treated as legitimate are not necessarily adopted through institutional pressures but may be related to the recognition and competitive advantage inherent to the reliability that legitimacy attributes to the organization from the perceptions of actors in the field. Scherer et al. (2013) highlight three of the strategic responses employed by organizations reacting to pressures: isomorphic adaptation, strategic manipulation, and moral discourse. The first represents the ability of the organization to adapt to society's expectations to preserve its (cognitive) legitimacy, explained as something earned, which is related to the approval of an audience, survival, resource acquisition, and growth (Haack & Rasche, 2021). That can occur from the habit of following norms, mimicking other recognized organizations, or conforming to what is established by the state (Oliver, 1991). Moreover, in some cases, organizations may

change their practices to meet the interests of relevant actors that exert some power over them, such as facilitators of resource acquisition processes.

On the other hand, strategic manipulation involves an attempt to co-opt the organization under influential actors in the field. In this response, there is an intent to influence the modification of institutional values, criteria, and requirements. It is common for organizations not to modify "practices that some of their stakeholders criticize; instead, they manipulate the perception of those stakeholders in order to avoid the pressure" (Scherer et al., 2013, p. 266). Here, language attempts to alter or propose new meanings through advertising campaigns, business media, and other instruments that discursively convey alternatives to reach interest groups and impact the legitimacy of organizations. According to Scherer et al. (2013), the strategic moral discourse response reflects the search for a balance, either from an alignment between what is done, said, and meant (Li, 2017) or trying to balance the interests of relevant actors. The goal is to establish a possible consensus between practices and stakeholder expectations to validate and preserve legitimacy (Haack et al., 2021).

However, organizations will not always be able to manipulate public discourse while safeguarding their legitimacy (Scherer et al., 2013). When the scenario is reversed, and the organization's pursuit of benefits through manipulation is discovered, it may attempt to regain the approval of society and other stakeholders, leading to a change in its institutional logic (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Lounsbury et al., 2021). Other organizations might not wait for regulations or norms and instead voluntarily adhere to practices that may contribute to moral legitimacy, doing what is considered right based on data from media monitoring (Haack & Rasche, 2021), which may improve their legitimacy. Still, some organizations keep the belief that evading regulative and normative structures pays off.

CONSTRUCTING A MEANING OF SUSTAINABILITY IN ORGANIZATIONS

One of the main arguments for contesting institutional pressures and inconsistencies between organizational discourses and practices concerning sustainability is centered on the presumption that if some organizations were to internalize all the activities of social and ecological systems, their finances would fail (Jennings & Zandbergen, 1995). Embedded in a capitalist, profit-oriented system, the economic factor tends to outweigh other aspects. Thus, even when attempting to change expansionist perspectives to milder (or environmentally aware) ones, there is a tendency for organizations to discursively construct and spread meanings that are not aligned with their practices, i.e., that keeps the meaning of sustainability away from its referent. In doing so, there is an attempt to maintain operational and financial efficiency without compromising their legitimacy before other institutional constituents.

However, preserving or building this legitimacy is not only up to the organization. Legitimacy, when understood from the construction of meaning through language, as much as it interferes, it also suffers interference, and as much as it transforms, it is also transformed – not only by the

structures but also by the internal and external participants of organizations (Haack et al., 2021). In the case of sustainability, the joint construction and sharing of heterogeneous meanings affect the level of importance of the topic at organizational and institutional levels. Thus, sustainability is currently a legitimizing factor, an additional institutional pressure that organizations must/ need to respond to, to some extent. Therefore, regardless of questioning or reinforcing the positions adopted, organizations' responses to sustainability-related demands (from the State, environmental movements, or civil society) are the product of institutional pressures in the field and influence organizational legitimacy.

It is expected that organizations, through mimetic behaviors, seek to adopt practices disseminated as sustainable and that characterize other organizations in the same field as legitimate since this may represent a validation of what has been discussed and/or done in relation to the topic from other actors that are recognized as an authority on the subject (Haack et al., 2021). The translation of the meanings of legitimacy and sustainability from one organization to another can be explained with semiotics. The translation process reflects the idea of transforming meanings, which is unpredictable, never finished, and transitions an idea from one context to another. Whether the transition happens between institutions and organizations from different fields or the same, translation crosses time and space, and some of its inherent characteristics are (re)fitting, (re)construction, and (re)contextualization (Wæraas & Nielsen, 2016; Wedlin & Sahlin, 2017).

Multinationals, for example, are important transmitters of organizational technologies and behavioral patterns; thus, the logic that sustains them exerts relevant influence on debates about sustainable measures, influencing other players' understandings (Delmas & Toffel, 2011). Due to the need to meet heterogeneous expectations and comply with different laws when operating in several countries, these organizations end up associating sustainability with daily activities, aligning themselves to cultural values and specific economic and social characteristics of where they operate (Gümüsay et al., 2020). The more the concept is associated with everyday processes, i.e., the more the signified and the referent are associated, the more difficult it is to transfer meanings into other contexts (Jennings & Zandbergen, 1995; Li, 2017).

Regarding this difficulty in translating meanings, Bromley and Powell (2012) point out that decoupling is a pathology in international organizations because those who are most represented in the field deal with substantive values inherent to the topic of sustainability have an excessive focus on recognition, achieve good positions in rankings, and are awarded certifications, thus tending to divert attention from their ultimate goals (Haack & Rasche, 2021; Parrique et al., 2019; Vadén et al., 2020). This behavior can be explained beyond the more common understanding of decoupling (policy practice), which represents the lack of alignment between policies and practices via symbolic adoptions.

For instance, regarding multinationals, decoupling can be understood from the means-end perspective (Bromley & Powell, 2012), enabling the implementation of the required policies, since these organizations usually have favorable economic conditions. However, the goal of these organizations concerning sustainability might deviate during the process, thus resulting

in unclear effects. The deviations and new practices that occur in the attempt to become or appear sustainable to the stakeholders become normalized. Thus, the new meanings created or imagined by specific organizations can naturalize power and interests (Li, 2017).

That poses the question: do organizations that narrate their implementations of sustainable practices – whether through reports, rankings, news, media, etc. – intentionally focus on the process to divert attention from the final goal and purposely make it more opaque to other stakeholders? We understand that the excessive attempt to rationalize the issue in the organizational context through metrics goes against the political, ideological, and cultural aspects inherent to it (Gümüsay et al., 2020; Haack & Rasche, 2021). These aspects are not prone to objective measurings and ready-made definitions. They require more than financial investments, make the organizational environment a more complex space, and, consequently, favor the veiling of the ultimate goals these processes seek to achieve.

Thus, the relationship between the meaning of sustainability and the idea of gaining legitimacy is strongly impacted by the institutional context of the organization (Jennings & Hoffman, 2017). When the translation of these ideas takes on global proportions, cultural, political, and ideological factors affect how social pressure is exerted, laws are enforced, environmental movements are inspected, and other region-specific factors that impact organizational performance. Sustainability manifests as a global issue in different ways, depending on where it is discussed. Education, language, and cultural systems differ from region to region, manufacturing sector to manufacturing sector, etc., and consequently impact the diffusion and understanding of the term (Gümüsay et al., 2020).

The search for alignment between referent, signifier, and signified of sustainability endorsed by institutions such as the United Nations, the G7, and the European Economic Union sounds like an attempt to institutionalize a ready-made idea about sustainability and sustainable practices. However, if the context is complex, heterogeneous, and dynamic, is it possible to say that the term's meaning can be unique and hold the same definition regardless of who will use it? Is it possible to say that sustainability is a discussion already institutionalized in organizations? We believe not.

Li (2017) clarifies there are two forms of institutionalization: denotational and connotational. Denotational institutionalization is based on first-order signification, i.e., the construction of standardized, typified, and objectified meanings in which referent, signifier, and signified can be coupled/aligned. By interpreting the topic of sustainability through this form of institutionalization, the search for a generalist definition of the concept presupposes a good economic performance aligned with the preservation of nature. That, consequently, reverberates in the trust that other actors in the institutional field award the organization. Faced with a "ready-made" and specific concept, the validation of organizations that, initially, would be resistant to sustainable ideas and practices, may increase. Although this is not unanimous and may be a conformism, Hack et al. (2021) point out that the social (macro) perception of a specific topic can influence the individual (micro) perception around it, allowing the (re) elaboration of a sign.

Figure 2. Denotational institutionalization of the sign "sustainability" and its coupling
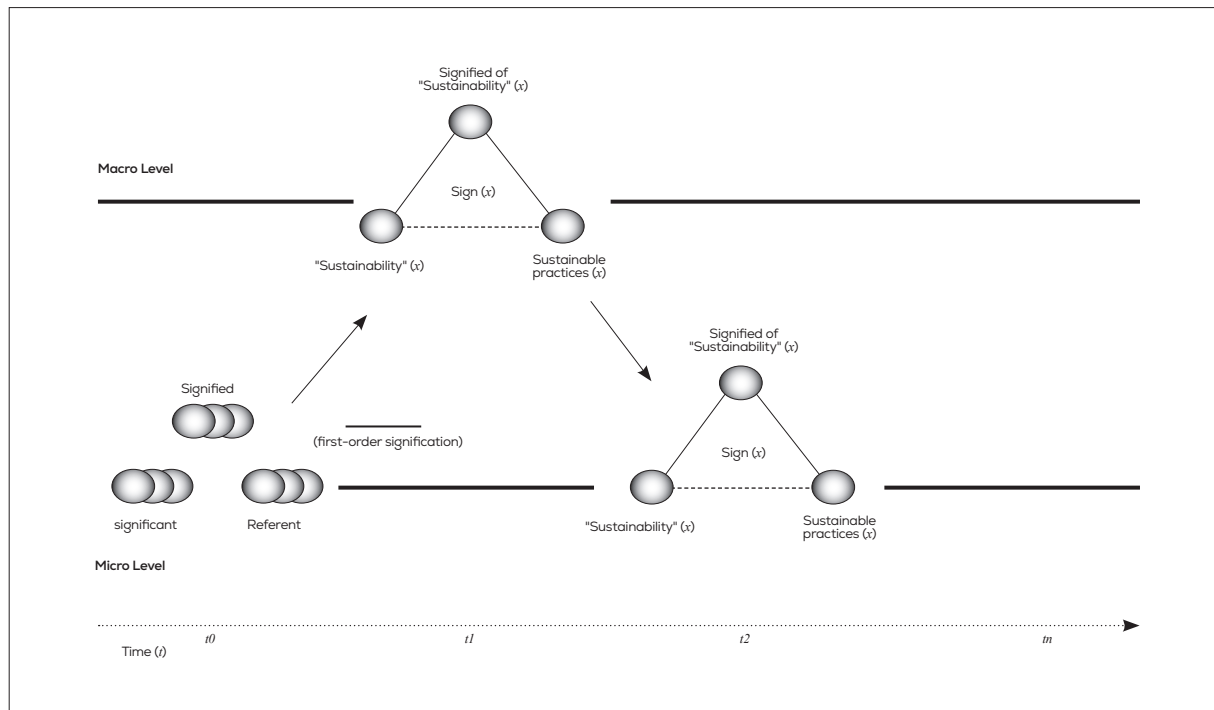
Source: Elaborated by the authors based on Li (2017, p. 528).

In this case, sustainability as a sign can be understood as a cohesive relationship between a material or symbolic practice (the referent), its word (the signifier), and its concept (the signified). When incorporated into institutional vocabularies, this view reflects the institutionalization of the term that transforms "microlevel actions and subjective intentions into macrolevel structures and objective meaning systems" (Li, 2017, p. 522) and makes it more widespread in the field as other organizations adopt it. In Figure 2, we indicate this by maintaining the symbol *x* in both the sign and its semiotic elements, not varying over time (*t*), in the micro-macro-micro dynamic.

The second form of institutionalization, the connotational, involves emptying the sign of the signified and its original meaning, thereby decoupling it from or maintaining a weak link with the perspectives sedimented at the macro level (Li, 2017). In the case of discussions about sustainability at the organizational level, this decoupling represents a second-order signification constructed by organizations based on their interests and culture but still aligned with the denotative definition of the term "sustainability" coming from legitimate institutions or world events, for example. The broad acceptance of a new sustainability sign, even if by specific actors, represents the possibility of it becoming mythical at the macro level – i.e., representing a (more) rational myth in contemporaneity –, sometimes based on imaginary meanings and their removal from the initial/original context. A myth can be used both as a justification and naturalization of a given social reality, enabling new meanings to emerge.

Figure 3. Connotational institutionalization of the sign "sustainability" and its decoupling
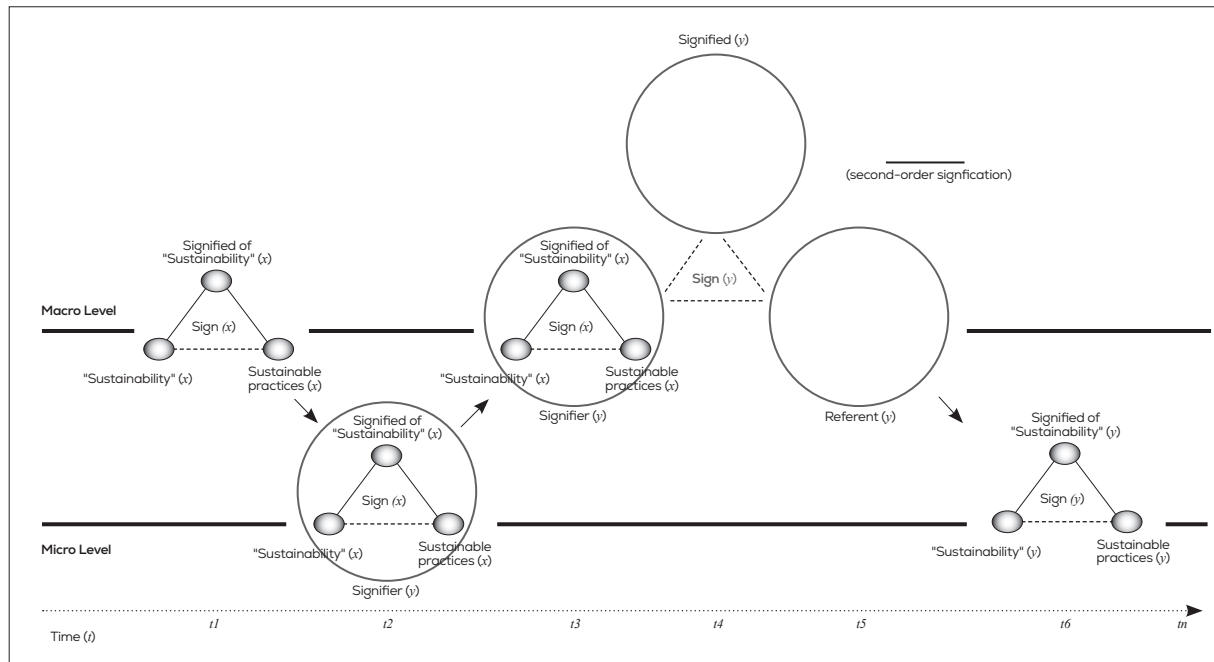
Source: Elaborated by the authors based on Li (2017, p. 533).

Connotational institutionalization (Figure 3) assumes the heterogeneity of the institutionalization process, in which new meanings attributed to a given sign (sustainability) are produced upon interaction with other signs in the context. Thus, through heterodox language use, new meanings are socially constructed and incorporated into existing ones, characterizing second-order signification. Thus, "when the new sign is widely accepted, it becomes a mythical sign at the macro level that is composed of a referent, a mythical signifier, and a connotative signified" (Li, 2017, p. 534). In Figure 3, we indicate this by the oscillation from symbol *x* to *y* in both the sign and its semiotic elements, which vary over time (*t*) in the micro-macro-micro dynamic.

Regarding the concept of sustainability, we suggest it is currently mythical, as per Li's semiotic model (2017). In this case, we elucidate that what social actors do is often not what they claim to do, thus decoupling the dimensions of doing, saying, and meaning in institutionalization processes that fix/stabilize the sign but with transmuted semantic content. Even so, we still find remnants and influences of standardized and objectified definitions, configuring organizational orientations that start from the denotative sense of the term. However, the concept undergoes constant changes, and its meaning is (re)interpreted in different ways according to context and time (Li, 2017).

Faced with the most diverse constructions of meanings possible, sustainability has been discussed from various strategic paths to institutionalize it in a heterogeneous organizational context and based on a (simplified) causal relationship, which aims only (or primarily) to promote the cognitive legitimacy of organizations. By understanding sustainability as a legitimizing factor

from the linguistic construction of its meaning(s), Figure 4 articulates the different forms of institutionalization presented by Li (2017) in relation to the strategic responses discussed by Scherer et al. (2013). In this case, moral discourse is a strategic response associated with the first phase of the institutionalization process of sustainability in organizations – denotational institutionalization.

Facing the interest of spreading the topic and conquering cognitive legitimacy (Haack & Rasche, 2021), there was an attempt to balance interests and validate the debates with institutions. The first debates on the topic were characterized by first-order signification in which referent, signifier, and signified were aligned, constituting the sign that needed to be widely spread at that moment. The conceptualizations were standardized and generalized and aimed at persuading players (the micro level) to adhere to sustainability based on the ideas of the sign spread in the organizational context. However, sustainability as a legitimizing factor, coming from macrolevel understandings, has weak support (Haack et al., 2021).

Figure 4. Strategic responses and the construction of a meaning of sustainability to seek legitimacy
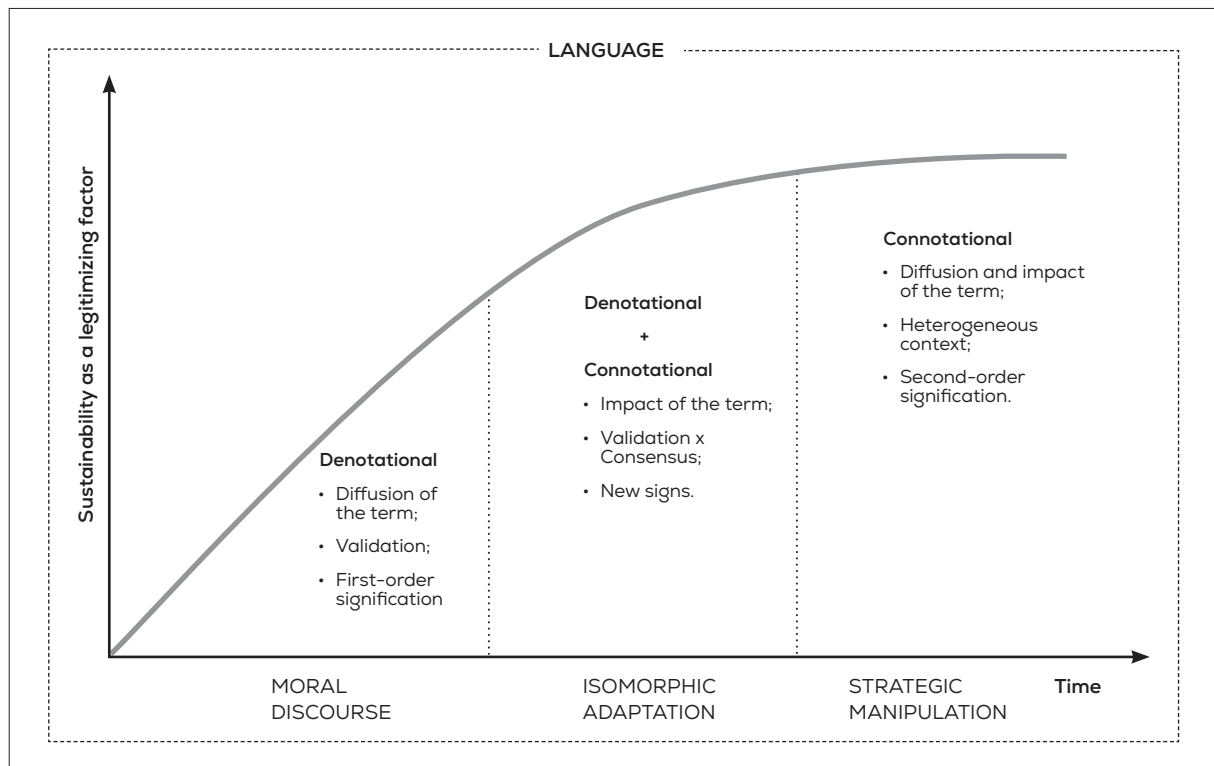
Source: Elaborated by the authors based on Haack & Rasche (2021, p. 8).

That reflects a scenario in which validity is not necessarily a consensus among the actors involved in the debate. Although the meaning of the term was more widespread when compared to the previous phase, the focus of this new phase is incorporating sustainability so that it became a topic of impact, increasing adherence to the proposed debates (Haack & Rasche, 2021). Thus, after the first-order significations of the term, the construction of meaning in organizations went through isomorphic adaptation and, concomitantly, denotational and connotational

institutionalizations. This is because, after sustainability had been defined by institutions with authority to do so, and after these and other institutions started monitoring practices, it would be up to organizations to integrate their discourses into their actions, thereby aligning – at least symbolically – referent, signifier, and signified in the most convenient way in order to gain not only cognitive but also moral legitimacy (Haack & Rasche, 2021; Li, 2017).

All organizations could follow the assumptions established by denotative institutionalization and align themselves with the new proposals, mimicking the practices and structures of organizations that have achieved good results. However, some could also translate the ideas available by developing new understandings and meanings for the term. This would be the beginning of a process of proposition and incorporation of new signs to existing ones, which would even motivate changes in institutional logic (Li, 2017). Moreover, the (re)significations could loosen the coupling established with the ready-made definitions of sustainability. That strategic response could then be associated with a form of means-end decoupling, enabling the (re)interpretations of the meanings of sustainability (when related to organizational legitimacy) and the symbolic implementation of sustainable practices (Bromley & Powell, 2012).

In the third strategic response – strategic manipulation – the possibility of meaning changing and decoupling what is said from what is done enables the connotational institutionalization of the concept of sustainability. In this sense, legitimacy depends on the demand for dissemination and the impact of sustainability. Amid a diverse context, the term is no longer just a sign but can be different in each specific organizational context where it is discussed. Looking at the macro level – in this case, at the denotative definitions institutionally established by the collective –, sustainability is a rational myth.

The so-called "original meaning" of the concept of sustainability exists and is available in several academic works and organizational sustainability reports. However, that very definition has been transformed so many times that it seems unviable to work with the term in its pure state, i.e., in which the components of its sign – the referent (the material object or the actual practice of sustainability), the signifier (the linguistic form or word used to describe the actual practice of sustainability), and the signified (the semantic content of what sustainability means) – are cohesively aligned and coupled. In this way, what is conveyed no longer has the same meaning it had for those who participated in its initial construction (Li, 2017).

Associating strategic responses, forms of institutionalization, and construction of meanings, we highlight the relevance of sustainability as a legitimizing factor for organizations. Historically, it is possible to interpret that the moral discourse of sustainability has been and still is part of the trajectory of organizations in general when denotative meanings and objective definitions try to be disseminated. However, the following stages – isomorphic adaptation and strategic manipulation –represent different behaviors that organizations can adopt or not, allowing them to respond in different ways regarding institutional pressure about sustainability when seeking legitimacy. Thus, the specific contexts can reveal to the organization the best meaning for it to attribute to the term in that space and time, directing it to behaviors of acceptance and adaptation or to the contestation of the meaning promoted among the institutional constituents that act as its immediate reference.

Beatriz Lima Zanoni | Samir Adamoglu de Oliveira

CONCLUSION

Though they have been going on for decades, the reflections on sustainability do not encompass all the forms of institutionalized discussions. The last two strategic responses discussed – isomorphic adaptation and strategic manipulation – also represent forms of connotational institutionalization and demonstrate that the process of constructing the concept of sustainability is not static nor finite but rather heterogeneous (Li, 2017). Still, the objectification of sustainable practices often reverberates in the objectification of the concept of organizational legitimacy.

However, even in the face of a formal objectification of legitimacy, when related to sustainability, it is polysemic. The various voices that construct its meanings and the words that describe the concept, practices, and meanings do not necessarily come from different actors and/or institutions. The fact that "new languages are invented to convey old ideas" (Li, 2017, p. 539) reflects the possibility of an opening of empirical agenda from the theoretical reflections proposed here. This is because the same actor may not be aligned in their ways of doing, speaking, and meaning; consequently, they might change the way they understand, convey, and enunciate sustainability over time, while their practices remain the same and, in some cases, become obsolete (Li, 2017). Based on the assumption that legitimacy is not perpetual and demands ongoing management, the longitudinal monitoring of organizations that treat sustainability as paramount for their legitimacy is relevant (Deephouse et al., 2017).

Moreover, sustainability continues to be discursively conveyed as a way to achieve the unachievable. Thus, another possible topic for empirical research involving a linguistic approach to sustainability is to study how organizations operate in developed and developing countries. The heterogeneous contexts (and institutional voids) may represent opportunities not to look for ready-made concepts on sustainability, thus enabling analyses of semantic variations, the possible decoupling practices attached to them, and their consequences for organizations and fields.

Finally, even if the idea (or concept) of sustainability is institutionalized in contemporary times as a sign, its semantic content (i.e., the meaning) is not, because it presents itself as variable, either by convenience or by the lack of understanding/clarity many organizations have on how to operate/realize sustainability effectively.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Beatriz Lima Zanoni: Project administration; Conceptualization; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing; Supervision; Validation.
Samir Adamoglu de Oliveira: Project administration; Formal Analysis; Conceituação;   Writing – original draft; Resources; Supervision; Validation