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CALL FOR PAPERS

Special Issue of Journal of Cleaner Production

Assessing and forecasting the sustainability impact of new ventures

Theories, methods and empirical evidence

Submission period for full papers: 1 July to 31 August 2021

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Entrepreneurs and start-ups are key actors in implementing environmental innovation and new approaches in cleaner production (Henry et al., 2020). Thus, analyzing the impact of entrepreneurial ventures is central to cleaner production as well as entrepreneurship research (Davidsson, 2015). As such, we should examine “how, by whom, and with what effects opportunities to create future goods and services are discovered, evaluated, and exploited” (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000: 241). For entrepreneurship to foster sustainable development, it is key to understand how incumbent firms and newly emerging, young ventures create positive sustainability impact (Horne, 2019). No matter whether the entrepreneurial venture is for-profit or non-profit-oriented, ‘sustainability impact’ can be understood as a substantial contribution of entrepreneurial activity to achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN, 2015), including economic, social and ecological value creation (Schaltegger & Wagner, 2011). Thus, sustainability impact is a core topic of cleaner production and sustainable entrepreneurship research, the latter being a young and rapidly developing stream of entrepreneurship research (Binder & Belz, 2015; Dickel et al., 2018; Muñoz & Cohen, 2018). Sustainability impact can be created at different levels (Johnson & Schaltegger, 2020), the organizational, the meso-level of networks, professional organizations, standards, etc. and the macro-level of society (e.g. with regard to meeting UN SDGs) and the natural environment (e.g. with regard to planetary boundaries).

Sustainability impact assessment clearly goes beyond the measurement of business performance and includes the medium- and long-term transformative impacts on markets, society and the environment. It considers the “important role of entrepreneurs in developing non-economic gains to society” (Patzelt & Shepherd, 2011, p. 141) and the crucial role of entrepreneurs as catalysts to larger-scale socioeconomic structural transformations toward sustainability (Parrish, 2010; Volkmann et al., 2019).

The sustainability impact of incumbent firms and their products and services has been a key topic in business-related sustainability research for many years, in fields such as social and sustainability accounting and reporting and entrepreneurship research (Omri, 2018; Schaltegger et al., 2017). But the assessment of sustainability impacts of new ventures and start-ups, for example by means of life cycle assessment or social impact analysis, is a neglected area of research (Ramani et al., 2017). This is especially surprising given the fact that start-ups are essential change agents for radical innovations (Schneider & Veugelers, 2010) and key players in introducing radical environmental product and service innovations (Fichter & Clausen, 2016). Hockerts and Wüstenhagen (2010) suggest that ‘sustainable Davids’ (e.g. start-ups and niche actors) play a key role in emerging and early growth phases of market development, while ‘greening Goliaths’ (established companies of a larger size) take on a more important role in the growth and maturity phases of industries and markets.

With regard to their business characteristics, new ventures differ considerably from incumbents. For example, continually evolving business models lead to a lack of historical data based on which sustainability impact assessments can be carried out (Trautwein, 2020). Therefore, the assessment of sustainability impacts in the start-up or early venturing phase is much more a question of predictive, modelling-based, ex ante evaluation (forecasting) than of retrospective, experience-based, ex post evaluation like for established companies (Clarke-Sather et al., 2011; Hörisch et al., 2015). In early venturing phases, it seems more fruitful to assess the prospective and not only the current sustainability impacts of new ventures (Trautwein et al., 2018). This shift in focus is important as it increases the likelihood that not ‘any kind’ of entrepreneurial opportunity is exploited, but those opportunities that contribute to ecological and social value creation.

While in recent years an extensive portfolio of practical methods and tools for sustainability-oriented business model development (Boons & Lüdeke-Freund, 2013; Breuer, Fichter, Lüdeke-Freund, & Tiemann, 2018) and impact investing (Global Impact Investing Network & Impact Reporting and Investment Standards Initiative, 2011; Kurz & Kubek, 2016) has been developed, including approaches for sustainability impact assessment, there is very little knowledge about suitable theoretical foundations for a predictive impact assessment of new ventures. This is especially true for digital sustainability activities that facilitate impact scaling and thus require strong metrics (George et al., 2020). Yet, improved granularity in sustainability metrics and measurements are often facilitated by digital technologies that enable not only better environmental sensing (e.g. using satellites, drones, or citizen science), but also more effective and more efficient structuring of data that make new metrics and information available to decision-makers (Merrill, Schillebeeckx, & Blakstad, 2019). Furthermore, little empirical data and knowledge of the actual sustainability impacts of new ventures exist. This is true for both the negative footprint of new ventures as well as their positive handprint (Biemer, Dixon, & Blackburn, 2013). Against this backdrop, this Special Issue aims to contribute to a better understanding of how past, present and potential future sustainability impacts of new ventures can be properly assessed.

Research topics

Papers from all areas of sustainability, entrepreneurship and innovation research with a link to sustainable entrepreneurship, values-based innovation management, impact investment and sustainability-oriented business model development are welcome. Both original conceptual and empirical scholarly papers will be considered. Submissions can relate to for-profit, hybrid as well as to non-profit ventures and to different stages of the entrepreneurial lifecycle (pre-seed, seed, growth stage). Investigations may focus on the micro-level (single ventures), meso-level (support programs, clusters of start-ups) and/or macro-level (markets, environment, society). Regardless of the approach, submissions should seek to contribute to the collective understanding of ex ante or ex post impact assessment of new ventures through the development of new, generalizable knowledge. The list of topics includes (but is not limited to):

- Theoretical foundations (theory of change, causation theory, stakeholder theory, social value creation, theory of planned behavior etc.)
- Conceptual frameworks, e.g. for lean impact assessment
- Exclusion and inclusion criteria, principles/norms, and methods, e.g. randomized control trials, counterfactual analysis, monetization of outcomes
- Impact assessment as part of sustainability-oriented business model development
- Approaches of forecasting and measuring (facts) and interpreting (meaning) sustainability impacts
- Approaches of making sustainability impact data available within organizations or within markets
- Methods and tools for forecasting and ex ante assessments of the prospective positive and negative sustainability impacts of new ventures
- Methods and data for ex post assessment, e.g. considering burden of proof and levels of evidence
- Empirical evidence of actual sustainability impacts (incl. case studies, statistical analyses etc.)

Paper submission procedure

Submission period for **full papers**: 1 July 2021 until 31 August 2021. According to Journal of Cleaner Production (JCLP) standards, original research papers should be 6000-8000 words in length, 12.000 for review papers. For details check JPC's [Author Information Pack](#).

Full papers have to be submitted through the Editorial Manager of the JCLP.

The submission website is located at: <https://www.editorialmanager.com/jclepro/default.aspx>

To ensure that all manuscripts are correctly identified for inclusion into the Special Issue, it is important that authors select “**VSI: Impact of new ventures**” when they reach the “Article Type” step in the submission process.

For any questions regarding the Special Issue please contact the Managing Guest Editor Klaus Fichter: Klaus.fichter@uni-oldenburg.de

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