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Revisiting Sustainability Management Theory Through a Critical Paradigm: A Qualitative Analysis of Contemporary Organizational Discourses

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Abstract: Of sustainability management theory across organizational contexts. Nevertheless, much of this development remains dominated by instrumental and managerial orientations that conceptualize sustainability primarily as a strategic mechanism to enhance efficiency, legitimacy, and competitive advantage. This study aims to critically examine the evolution of sustainability management theory through a critical paradigm, focusing on its underlying assumptions, power relations, and transformative capacity. This research adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach through a critical literature analysis of peer-reviewed academic publications on sustainability management published between 2019 and 2025. Data were collected using systematic document analysis and examined through thematic coding to identify dominant narratives and marginalized perspectives within contemporary sustainability discourse. Analytical rigor was strengthened through conceptual triangulation across management, sustainability, and critical social theory literature. The findings indicate that mainstream sustainability management theory emphasizes measurable outcomes, standardized reporting, and market-based logic, often neglecting ethical reflexivity, social justice, and ecological limits. While critical perspectives advocating organizational responsibility, stakeholder inclusion, and ecological resilience are emerging, they remain underrepresented within dominant theoretical frameworks. This study contributes to sustainability management scholarship by highlighting the limitations of instrumental approaches and emphasizing the importance of a critical paradigm in advancing more reflexive, inclusive, and transformative sustainability theories..

Keywords: Sustainability Management; Critical Paradigm; Management Theory Development; Social And Ecological Justice

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1. Introduction

Sustainability has become a central concept in contemporary management discourse, particularly in response to escalating global challenges such as climate change, environmental degradation, social inequality, and economic instability. Over the past decade, international institutions including the United Nations, the OECD, and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development have consistently urged organizations to integrate environmental, social, and governance (ESG) principles into their strategic decision-making processes (United Nations, 2015; Eccles & Klimenko, 2019). As a result, sustainability has increasingly been institutionalized through corporate sustainability reporting, ESG metrics, and regulatory frameworks that seek to enhance transparency and accountability within the private sector.

Despite its growing prominence, sustainability within mainstream management theory has attracted substantial criticism. A dominant concern is that sustainability is often reduced to a managerial instrument designed to preserve organizational legitimacy rather than to generate substantive ecological and social transformation. Many organizations adopt sustainability narratives to enhance corporate reputation, attract ethical investment, or comply with regulatory pressures, while their core business models remain fundamentally extractive and growth oriented (Banerjee, 2012; Hickel & Kallis, 2020). This phenomenon suggests that sustainability, rather than challenging prevailing economic structures, frequently operates within the logic of neoliberal capitalism, where profit maximization continues to overshadow environmental protection and social justice.

Recent literature has further emphasized that the mainstream sustainability paradigm tends to frame environmental and social issues as technical problems that can be resolved through efficiency improvements, technological innovation, and market-based mechanisms. While such approaches may yield incremental benefits, they often fail to address the structural roots of unsustainability embedded in global production and consumption systems (Purvis et al., 2019). The persistent reliance on concepts such as "green growth" reflects an assumption that economic expansion can be decoupled from ecological degradation, an assumption that has been increasingly questioned by empirical and theoretical research (Hickel & Kallis, 2020).

Within this context, critical perspectives argue that sustainability discourse has been depoliticized and stripped of its transformative potential. Practices such as greenwashing illustrate how sustainability language can be strategically deployed to obscure harmful environmental and social impacts while reinforcing existing power relations (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). ESG reporting, for example, may present an image of responsibility and progress, yet often lacks transparency regarding material impacts, stakeholder inclusion, and long-term ecological consequences (Carton et al., 2021). Consequently, sustainability risks becoming a symbolic exercise rather than a genuine commitment to systemic change.

Critical management studies offer an alternative lens through which sustainability theory and practice can be examined more rigorously. Rooted in the tradition of Critical Theory, this paradigm emphasizes that management knowledge is never neutral but is shaped by ideological assumptions and power structures that privilege certain interests over others (Adler et al., 2007). From a critical standpoint, sustainability must be understood not merely as a managerial strategy but as a contested social and political project that reflects struggles over resources, authority, and legitimacy (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011).

Applying a critical paradigm to sustainability management enables scholars to interrogate fundamental questions that are often overlooked in mainstream approaches. These include inquiries into whose interests are served by sustainability initiatives, who bears the costs of environmental degradation, and whose voices are marginalized in decision-making processes. Empirical studies have shown that marginalized stakeholders—such as indigenous communities, informal workers, and residents of resource-dependent regions—are frequently excluded from sustainability governance, despite being disproportionately affected by environmental harm (Schlosberg, 2013; Whyte, 2018).

Moreover, critical scholars argue that sustainability theories have largely failed to incorporate an emancipatory orientation. Rather than challenging exploitative economic structures, many models remain focused on optimizing existing systems through managerial control, performance indicators, and standardized reporting frameworks (Mertens et al., 2019). This technocratic orientation limits the capacity of sustainability management to address issues such as environmental injustice, economic dependency, and intergenerational equity.

Recent critical contributions advocate for a reorientation of sustainability theory toward transformational and post-growth perspectives. Concepts such as degrowth and post-growth challenge the assumption that continuous economic expansion is compatible with ecological limits and social well-being (Jackson, 2017; Kallis, 2018). These perspectives emphasize the need for deliberate reductions in material throughput, reconfiguration of organizational objectives, and the prioritization of social and ecological values over financial accumulation. From this viewpoint, sustainability management must extend beyond efficiency gains and embrace structural change. In addition, the integration of political ecology into sustainability management highlights the inherently political nature of environmental issues. Power asymmetries, control over natural resources, and global inequalities shape how sustainability is defined and implemented across different contexts (Robbins, 2012). A critical approach therefore calls for greater transparency, participatory governance, and ethical accountability in organizational sustainability practices.

Against this backdrop, this study positions the critical paradigm as a necessary framework for advancing sustainability management theory. By moving beyond instrumental and market-oriented interpretations, the critical paradigm enables a deeper examination of the ideological foundations, power relations, and ethical implications underlying sustainability discourse. This approach not only enriches theoretical development but also contributes to more just, inclusive, and genuinely sustainable organizational practices. In doing so, the study responds to growing calls within the literature for sustainability research that is reflexive, normative, and oriented toward social transformation rather than mere organizational adaptation (Corvellec, 2022). By foregrounding critical inquiry, this research seeks to reposition sustainability management as an emancipatory project that addresses ecological limits, social justice, and the long-term well-being of both human and non-human systems.

2. Literature Review: Hypotheses Development

The growing prominence of sustainability in management research has generated a wide range of theoretical models aimed at integrating economic, environmental, and social objectives into organizational decision-making. However, as highlighted in critical management and sustainability studies, many of these models remain embedded within instrumental and managerialist logics that prioritize organizational performance and legitimacy over substantive social and ecological transformation (Banerjee, 2021; Corvellec et al., 2022). This condition raises important questions regarding the theoretical foundations and practical implications of sustainability-oriented management theories.

From a critical perspective, sustainability management cannot be understood merely as a set of techniques or policies designed to enhance efficiency or competitiveness. Instead, it represents a socially constructed discourse shaped by power relations, ideological assumptions, and institutional pressures (Scherer et al., 2020). Organizations often adopt sustainability practices in response to regulatory demands, market expectations, and reputational concerns, which may result in symbolic compliance rather than meaningful change. This phenomenon suggests that the dominant sustainability paradigm tends to reinforce existing economic structures rather than challenge the root causes of environmental degradation and social inequality.

Recent studies emphasize that mainstream sustainability management frequently frames sustainability as a controllable and measurable outcome, achievable through standardized indicators, reporting frameworks, and performance metrics (Eccles & Klimenko, 2019; Boiral et al., 2021). While these mechanisms may improve transparency, they often marginalize ethical considerations, stakeholder participation, and long-term ecological consequences. As a result, sustainability becomes depoliticized and reduced to a technical problem, obscuring the structural drivers of unsustainable practices.

Critical management theory argues that management knowledge is inherently political and reflects dominant interests within capitalist systems (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016). Applying this lens to sustainability reveals that many sustainability initiatives serve to legitimize corporate activities rather than transform them. For instance, ESG frameworks may emphasize disclosure and risk management while neglecting issues such as environmental justice, labor exploitation, and community displacement (Carton et al., 2021). Consequently, the effectiveness of sustainability management is contingent upon the underlying paradigm that informs its design and implementation.

Building on this argument, the critical paradigm offers an alternative approach by foregrounding questions of power, ideology, and emancipation. Rather than focusing solely on organizational outcomes, critical sustainability perspectives emphasize the need to address systemic inequalities, ecological limits, and the voices of marginalized stakeholders (Whyte, 2020; Banerjee, 2022). This paradigm challenges the assumption that sustainability can be achieved within existing growth-oriented economic models and calls for a reorientation of management theory toward transformative change.

Empirical evidence suggests that organizations adopting a critical and reflexive approach to sustainability are more likely to engage in substantive practices that go beyond symbolic compliance. Such organizations tend to prioritize stakeholder inclusion, ethical accountability, and long-term ecological considerations in their strategic decisions (Hahn et al., 2020). This implies that the theoretical orientation underlying sustainability management plays a significant role in shaping organizational behavior and outcomes.

Furthermore, recent debates on post-growth and degrowth perspectives reinforce the argument that sustainability requires a fundamental rethinking of organizational objectives and performance metrics (Kallis et al., 2020; Hickel, 2021). These perspectives challenge the dominance of economic growth as the primary indicator of success and advocate for alternative measures that reflect social well-being and ecological integrity. Integrating such ideas into sustainability management theory necessitates a critical paradigm that questions entrenched assumptions and power structures. Based on the above discussion, it can be argued that the adoption of a critical paradigm in sustainability management theory is positively associated with a more comprehensive and transformative understanding of sustainability. Organizations and scholars who embrace critical perspectives are more likely to recognize the limitations of instrumental approaches and to develop sustainability frameworks that address structural and ethical dimensions. This leads to the formulation of the first hypothesis:

H1: The adoption of a critical paradigm has a positive influence on the development of sustainability management theory that emphasizes transformative social and ecological outcomes.

In addition, the critical paradigm encourages reflexivity, defined as the capacity of organizations and scholars to critically examine their own assumptions, practices, and impacts (Cunliffe, 2020). Reflexivity is essential for avoiding superficial sustainability practices and for fostering continuous learning and adaptation. Studies indicate that reflexive organizations are better equipped to identify unintended consequences of their actions and to engage meaningfully with diverse stakeholders (Schönborn et al., 2019). By contrast, sustainability approaches grounded solely in instrumental rationality tend to limit reflexivity and reinforce managerial control. This suggests that the critical paradigm not only shapes theoretical development but also enhances the quality of sustainability practices through increased reflexive capacity. Accordingly, the second hypothesis is proposed:

H2: The critical paradigm positively influences reflexivity in sustainability management, thereby strengthening the substantive orientation of sustainability practices.

Finally, the integration of critical perspectives into sustainability management theory is expected to contribute to broader organizational and societal change. By challenging dominant narratives and power relations, critical sustainability frameworks can support more inclusive and just forms of governance (Scherer & Voegtlin, 2020). This underscores the potential of critical theory not only as an analytical tool but also as a normative guide for advancing sustainability in practice.

3. Method

This study adopts a qualitative and conceptual research design grounded in the critical paradigm to examine the development of sustainability management theory. The choice of this approach is based on the objective of the study, which is not to test causal relationships through numerical data, but to critically analyze underlying assumptions, ideological orientations, and power structures embedded in dominant sustainability management theories. A qualitative design is considered appropriate because it allows for in-depth interpretation, theoretical reflection, and normative critique of existing knowledge frameworks.

The research is positioned within the tradition of critical management studies, which views management theories as socially constructed and value-laden rather than neutral or purely technical. From this perspective, sustainability management theory is understood as a discourse shaped by institutional interests, economic ideologies, and global governance structures. Accordingly, this study emphasizes reflexivity and critical inquiry as essential methodological principles to uncover how sustainability concepts are framed, legitimized, and operationalized within mainstream management literature.

The primary data source of this research consists of secondary data in the form of academic publications, including peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, policy reports, and international sustainability frameworks published between 2019 and 2025. These sources were selected to ensure the relevance and contemporaneity of the theoretical discussion. The literature reviewed includes works from leading journals in sustainability studies, management, and critical social sciences, as well as reports from international organizations such as the United Nations and the OECD. The selection process was guided by criteria of relevance to sustainability management, explicit engagement with critical perspectives, and contribution to debates on power, ethics, and transformation.

Data collection was conducted through a systematic literature review combined with a critical interpretive reading strategy. Rather than merely summarizing existing studies, the review focused on identifying dominant narratives, recurring assumptions, and theoretical tensions within sustainability management discourse. Particular attention was given to how sustainability is conceptualized, the role assigned to organizations and managers, and the extent to which social and ecological justice are addressed. This interpretive approach enables the researcher to move beyond descriptive analysis and engage in deeper theoretical critique.

Data analysis was carried out using qualitative content analysis with a critical orientation. The selected literature was coded thematically to identify key concepts such as instrumental rationality, managerialism, reflexivity, power relations, and transformative sustainability. These themes were then analyzed in relation to the critical paradigm to assess how different theoretical approaches either reinforce or challenge dominant economic and organizational logics. The analysis process was iterative, allowing for continuous refinement of themes and interpretations as new insights emerged from the literature.

To enhance the rigor and credibility of the study, reflexivity was applied throughout the research process. Reflexivity involves the researcher's awareness of their own assumptions, values, and positionality in interpreting sustainability discourse. By explicitly acknowledging these aspects, the study seeks to minimize bias and maintain transparency in theoretical interpretation. In addition, triangulation was achieved by comparing perspectives across multiple sources and theoretical traditions, thereby strengthening the robustness of the findings. Finally, the methodological approach adopted in this study aligns with the normative orientation of critical sustainability research, which aims not only to analyze existing theories but also to contribute to their transformation. By employing a qualitative, critical, and interpretive method, this research provides a systematic and reflective examination of sustainability management theory, offering insights that are relevant for both academic scholarship and the advancement of more just and inclusive sustainability practices..

4. Results and Discussion

Result

The findings of this qualitative study reveal important patterns in the contemporary development of sustainability management theory when analyzed through a critical paradigm. Drawing on an interpretive examination of sustainability-related literature published between 2019 and 2025, the results indicate that mainstream sustainability management theory continues to be shaped predominantly by instrumental and managerialist assumptions. Sustainability is commonly conceptualized as a strategic tool that enhances organizational competitiveness, mitigates risk, and supports long-term financial performance, rather than as a normative or transformative agenda aimed at addressing deep-rooted social and ecological challenges.

The analysis shows that dominant sustainability frameworks place strong emphasis on quantifiable and performance-oriented indicators. These include efficiency gains, emission reduction targets, compliance with environmental standards, and the expansion of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) reporting practices. While such indicators reflect growing organizational awareness of sustainability-related pressures, they also reveal a narrow understanding of sustainability that prioritizes measurability and control. Ethical dimensions, power relations, and issues of social justice tend to receive limited attention within these frameworks, suggesting that sustainability is often treated as a technical or managerial problem rather than a moral and political concern.

Another significant result emerging from the analysis is the increasing institutionalization of sustainability discourse through global standards, reporting regimes, and best-practice guidelines. The widespread adoption of internationally recognized frameworks contributes to greater consistency and legitimacy in sustainability reporting across organizations and sectors. However, the findings also indicate that this institutionalization simultaneously constrains the conceptual diversity of sustainability management theory. By promoting standardized interpretations aligned with market-based logic, these frameworks reduce the visibility of alternative sustainability narratives that emphasize ecological limits, community well-being, and long-term societal resilience.

The results further demonstrate that sustainability management theory tends to marginalize perspectives that challenge the primacy of economic growth. Approaches grounded in post-growth, degrowth, or sufficiency-oriented thinking appear less frequently in mainstream management literature. When such perspectives do emerge, they are often positioned as peripheral or complementary rather than as central theoretical foundations. This imbalance suggests that sustainability management theory remains closely aligned with dominant economic paradigms, limiting its capacity to question structural drivers of unsustainability.

Despite the dominance of instrumental approaches, the analysis identifies a growing body of critical and interdisciplinary scholarship that contests prevailing assumptions. These contributions question the compatibility of continuous economic expansion with ecological sustainability and argue for a redefinition of organizational purpose beyond profit maximization. The results show that critical scholars increasingly emphasize relational values, inclusive stakeholder engagement, and long-term ecological integrity as core elements of sustainability management. Such perspectives frame sustainability not merely as an outcome to be measured, but as an ongoing social process shaped by dialogue, power relations, and ethical responsibility.

However, the findings also reveal that these critical perspectives remain underrepresented relative to mainstream approaches. Although their presence has increased in recent years, they have yet to significantly influence dominant theoretical models or managerial practices. This indicates a persistent gap between critical sustainability scholarship and the broader field of management theory. As a result, sustainability management continues to evolve within boundaries defined largely by efficiency-oriented and market-compatible frameworks.

Overall, the results highlight a fundamental tension within sustainability management theory. On the one hand, sustainability has gained substantial visibility and legitimacy as a management concern. On the other hand, its theoretical development remains constrained by economic and ideological structures that limit transformative potential. The findings suggest that without a deliberate shift toward critical and reflexive paradigms, sustainability management theory risks reproducing existing patterns of social inequality and ecological degradation, even as it claims to address them.

In this context, the adoption of a critical paradigm emerges as a crucial condition for expanding the theoretical scope of sustainability management. By foregrounding questions of power, ethics, and structural change, a critical approach enables a deeper understanding of sustainability challenges and opens space for alternative models that prioritize social justice and ecological resilience. The results therefore underscore the need for sustainability management theory to move beyond instrumental rationality and engage more fully with its normative and transformative dimensions..

Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to ongoing debates regarding the direction and purpose of sustainability management theory. The dominance of instrumental approaches identified in the results aligns with recent critiques suggesting that sustainability has been absorbed into conventional management logic without fundamentally challenging its underlying assumptions (Bansal et al., 2021). By framing sustainability as a means to enhance organizational performance, mainstream theories risk reducing complex social and ecological issues to technical problems that can be managed through optimization and control. From a critical perspective, this orientation reflects a broader tendency within management scholarship to prioritize efficiency and predictability over ethical reflection and societal impact. As noted by Fleming and Banerjee (2019), sustainability initiatives often function as legitimacy tools that allow organizations to appear responsible while maintaining business-as-usual practices. This dynamic helps explain why sustainability outcomes frequently fall short of addressing pressing challenges such as biodiversity loss, climate injustice, and widening social inequality.

The institutionalization of sustainability through standardized frameworks further reinforces this limitation. While global reporting standards and ESG metrics provide structure and comparability, they may also depoliticize sustainability by obscuring conflicts of interest and power relations (Christensen et al., 2021). The results of this study suggest that such mechanisms can inadvertently silence alternative voices and local knowledge systems, particularly those of marginalized communities most affected by environmental degradation. In contrast, critical sustainability scholarship offers a more reflexive and inclusive approach.

Recent studies argue that sustainability management should be grounded in moral responsibility, democratic participation, and ecological humility rather than purely economic rationality (Eisenhardt et al., 2022). This perspective reframes sustainability as an ongoing social process that requires dialogue, contestation, and learning, rather than a fixed set of performance indicators.

The emergence of post-growth and well-being-oriented frameworks further strengthens this argument. Scholars have increasingly questioned the compatibility of continuous economic growth with ecological sustainability, emphasizing the need for organizational models that prioritize sufficiency, care, and resilience (Raworth, 2021; Vadén et al., 2020). Integrating these ideas into sustainability management theory requires a critical paradigm capable of challenging dominant narratives and opening space for alternative values. The discussion also highlights the importance of reflexivity as a central element of critical sustainability management. Reflexivity enables organizations and scholars to examine their own assumptions, recognize unintended consequences, and remain open to change (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2020). The results suggest that sustainability theories lacking reflexive capacity are more likely to reproduce existing inequalities and ecological harm, even when framed as progressive or responsible.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study reinforces the argument that sustainability management theory must move beyond incremental adjustments toward more transformative orientations. Critical theory provides a valuable foundation for this shift by emphasizing emancipation, ethical accountability, and systemic change. As highlighted by Montiel et al. (2021), sustainability research that incorporates critical perspectives is better positioned to address complex global challenges and contribute to meaningful societal transformation. In practical terms, the findings imply that organizations seeking genuine sustainability outcomes should reconsider the theoretical assumptions guiding their strategies. Rather than relying solely on standardized tools and performance metrics, organizations may benefit from participatory governance structures, stakeholder dialogue, and context-sensitive approaches that acknowledge power imbalances and local realities. Such practices align with emerging calls for responsible management education and research that emphasize social impact over narrow efficiency gains (Laasch et al., 2020).

In summary, the results and discussion underscore the need for a critical reorientation of sustainability management theory. By embracing critical paradigms, scholars and practitioners can move toward more holistic, just, and ecologically grounded approaches to sustainability. This shift is essential not only for advancing theoretical knowledge but also for supporting organizational practices that genuinely contribute to long-term social and environmental well-being.

6. Conclusion

This study concludes that sustainability management theory, despite its growing prominence and institutional acceptance, remains largely constrained by instrumental and managerialist orientations. The qualitative analysis demonstrates that mainstream sustainability frameworks continue to emphasize efficiency, performance measurement, and organizational legitimacy, often at the expense of deeper ethical reflection and structural transformation. As a result, sustainability is frequently treated as a strategic resource rather than as a normative commitment to addressing fundamental social and ecological challenges. The findings further indicate that the institutionalization of sustainability through standardized reporting regimes and global frameworks has produced both opportunities and limitations. While such mechanisms enhance comparability and transparency, they also narrow the conceptual space of sustainability management by reinforcing market-oriented interpretations. Consequently, alternative perspectives that foreground ecological limits, social justice, and long-term well-being remain marginal within dominant theoretical models.

Importantly, this study highlights the growing relevance of critical paradigms in advancing sustainability management theory. Critical and interdisciplinary approaches offer valuable insights by questioning dominant assumptions, exposing power relations, and emphasizing reflexivity and ethical accountability. However, these perspectives have yet to significantly reshape mainstream theory, suggesting the need for a more deliberate integration of critical thinking into sustainability scholarship. Overall, the study underscores that without a critical reorientation, sustainability management theory risks reproducing the very structures that contribute to unsustainability.

Recommendations

Based on these conclusions, several recommendations are proposed. First, future sustainability management research should more explicitly engage with critical and reflexive paradigms. Scholars are encouraged to move beyond instrumental analyses and incorporate questions of power, justice, and structural change into theoretical development. This shift would enable sustainability management theory to better capture the complexity of contemporary social and ecological challenges. Second, management scholars should broaden the conceptual foundations of sustainability by integrating insights from interdisciplinary fields such as political ecology, post-growth economics, and environmental ethics. Such integration can enrich theoretical debates and support the development of alternative sustainability models that prioritize resilience, inclusivity, and long-term societal well-being.

Third, practitioners and policymakers are advised to adopt a more reflective approach to sustainability implementation. Rather than relying solely on standardized metrics and reporting tools, organizations should encourage stakeholder participation, contextual sensitivity, and ethical deliberation in sustainability decision-making. Finally, future studies may extend this research by conducting empirical investigations into how critical sustainability paradigms are translated into organizational practices across different sectors and cultural contexts. Such research would contribute to bridging the gap between critical theory and practical application, thereby strengthening the transformative potential of sustainability management.

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