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# **Beyond Win-Win: A Syncretic Theory on Corporate Stakeholder Engagement in Sustainable Development\***

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the concept of syncretism to articulate the construct of a novel theoretical approach that may help to accelerate progress in developing substantively more sustainable business activities. One reason why the integration of environmental and social responsibility in business has been so difficult to achieve in practice is that it is not just a battle of competing business logics, but a battle of faiths. The concept of syncretism, with its roots in religious synthesis, may be far more relevant and useful than conventional approaches to combining the two which rarely seem to rise above a ‘win-win’ appeal to logic. The connectionist logic of syncretism may show us a way beyond paradigmatic conformity in business sustainability research so that scholars with diverse theoretical backgrounds might have a common ground for discussion, find constructive connections, and engage in potentially more insightful and creative interactions to develop our understanding of corporate sustainability.

## **Keywords**

Business sustainability, paradigmatic change, win-win, syncretism.

## **Introduction: The Corporate Sustainability Challenge**

At the heart of the corporate sustainability agenda is the challenge of integrating and balancing the pursuit of economic prosperity with both social welfare and justice, and the maintenance of environmental quality. This challenge is frequently framed in terms of the technical and managerial issues involved in creating more ecologically efficient (and less socially exploitative) production and consumption systems that meet the needs of consumers more sustainably. At a more fundamental level however, Corporate Sustainability (CS) represents a challenge to how management practitioners and theorists think about business, society and the natural environment, and the inter-relationship among them. How we view this interrelationship is important because, as Marcus, Kurucz and Colbert (2010) argue, our conception of it will determine the research questions asked, the theories that are developed, and the prescriptions offered to both practitioners and policy makers to help them establish more sustainable business enterprises. However, as Joseph, Orlitzky, Gurd, Borland, and Lindgreen (2018); and Valente (2012) observe, theorising efforts have not yet been successful in providing organisations with effective prescriptions on how to generate and maintain sustainable societal and economic development. Management research has yet to rise to the challenge of finding new ways to identify barriers and bridges to integrate sustainability in business operations and what corporate policies, processes and practices are needed for a fundamental transition to sustainability (Garriga & Melé, 2004; Starik & Kanashiro, 2013).

The practical upshot of that lack of progress is:

‘Despite the growing consensus among scholars and managers on the need for paradigmatic change, there is little sign within the academic, practitioner, and public policy domains that such a shift is taking hold [...] A continual stream of evidence

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reveals devastating business practices that catastrophically undermine social and ecological integrity' (Valente, 2010, p. 440).

In an influential Academy of Management Review paper, Gladwin, Kennelly and Krause (1995) argue that conventional 'modern' management theory is constricted by a dominant social paradigm underpinned by a fractured epistemology which separates humanity from nature and truth from morality. In calling for a transformation of management theory and practice that contributes to sustainable development they outline for management theorists a two-fold reintegration challenge between objective (truth) and subjective (morality) and between human instrumentality and nature-centred altruistic ethics.

Gladwin, Kennelly and Krause (1995) frame the challenge of the pursuit of corporate sustainability in terms of three environmental paradigms: technocentrism, ecocentrism and sustaincentrism. The first two represents the conventional poles of the existing debate. The technocentric paradigm contends that humankind is separate from, and superior to, nature. In this paradigm the objectified natural world has only instrumental and typically monetarily quantifiable value as a commodity and supports the thesis of corporate managers as 'ruthlessly hard-driving, strictly top-down, command-and-control focused, shareholder-value-obsessed, win-at-any-cost business leaders' (Ghoshal, 2005, p. 85).. The ecocentric paradigm represents the antithesis of the technocentric, by treating nonhuman nature as having intrinsic value, independent of human values and human consciousness, which places limits on the extent of human prerogatives to use and alter it. Within the ecocentric paradigm corporate managers would therefore have a role as radically altruistic and environmental activist. The polarised nature of these two paradigms, and the lack of compatibility and common-ground between them, is viewed as an important factor in explaining the lack of

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progress towards more sustainable management theory and practice. As an alternative, Gladwin, Kennelly & Krause (1995) propose a 'third way', a new sustaincentric paradigm that rejects the moral monism of both instrumental (technocentrism) and altruistic (ecocentrism) paradigms in favour of moral pluralism. This paradigm assumes that economic and human activities are inextricably linked with natural systems. Despite its potential, the sustaincentric paradigm is mainly descriptive and still to be the subject of further theoretical grounding and empirical analysis. It falls short of bridging the gap between the normative and operational by conceptualising the mechanisms of integration of sustainability concerns into business operations. Therefore it has been largely left aside by sustainability research and criticised as an idealist construct inapplicable in the real world and lacking empirical evidence demonstrating its existence in practice, or as an ambiguously defined concept risking the co-option of ethics by business concerns (Banerjee, 2002; Valente, 2012). As a consequence, despite the substantial body of knowledge accumulated by CS literature, the challenge of reintegration identified by Gladwin, Kennelly & Krause is far from being resolved (Starik & Kanashiro, 2013; Valente, 2012).

The abiding question that hangs over the business and sustainability debate is how to achieve a paradigmatic shift and progress towards 'synthesis' and the pursuit of a sustaincentric approach to management thought and practice. As Valente (2010) notes, there is no shortage of scholarship arguing in favour of a paradigmatic shift, but there is a shortage of contributions that explain the barriers to such a shift taking place or proposing solutions as to what processes might promote it. A number of scholars before and after Valente (2010, 2012) have endeavoured to reconnect business and society using varied interpretative lenses (for examples, see Table 1). In spite of the growing volume of research on organisations and the environment and the progress that

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has been made in identifying the broad capabilities and resources that affect a firm's ability to simultaneously pursue financial, social and environmental success (Berchicci & King, 2007; Etzion, 2007; Hart & Dowell, 2011), economic growth continues to be privileged, except that it is now recast as sustainable growth, with conventional notions of capital, income and growth continuing to inform the sustainability 'paradigm' (Banerjee & Bonnefous, 2011; Newton, 2002; Valente, 2012).

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Insert Table 1 about here  
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This article builds upon the work of Martinez (2012, 2013) by refining the theoretical construct of syncretism in a way that more substantively entrenches it as a resource for scholars and practitioners to understand and pursue a paradigmatic shift toward sustaincentrism. The syncretic theory discussed here integrates insights from multiple disciplines (Whiteman, Walker, & Perego, 2013), with foundational ideas drawn from cultural, religious (the 'source domains' of syncretism) and corporate sustainability literature. In other words, we 'blend' the theory of syncretism by comparing dissimilar domains (i.e. culture, religion and business sustainability) on the basis of their similarities. This approach to organisational theory-building is known as anomalous reasoning (Oswick, Fleming, and Hanlon (2011). Referring to the criteria proposed by Corley and Gioia (2011) to evaluate an 'interesting' theory, the theoretical framework developed in this paper may be deemed interesting because it questions assumptions underlying the prevailing theory of business sustainability and transgresses paradigm-induced expectations. As such, we find a logical alignment of the syncretic theory with the cultural beliefs of the time and of the scholarly audience for the theory (DiMaggio, 1995). What is more, because the 'syncretic theory' crosses

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fields/disciplines, it arguably qualifies as a multi-level theory that has the potential to reconnect the objective/instrumental and subjective/ethical camps within the organisational sciences (Klein, Tosi, & Cannella, 1999).

## **What is syncretism?**

Syncretism originates from the earlier Greek term *symkrasis*: ‘a mixing together, compound’ (Stewart & Shaw, 1994, p. 3). It is traditionally defined as the production of modified and/or new religions-cultures emerging from a contact between, and interpenetration of, different belief/value systems<sup>1</sup> (Droogers & Greenfield, 2001). Indeed syncretism is a very ancient and multilayered concept that has varied meanings and uses in the literature; as a result the terminology used to describe syncretic patterns is not homogeneous (Stewart, 1999). This led anthropologists Stewart (1999) and Droogers (1989) to reflect on ‘the problem of definition of syncretism’. They identify four main uses of the term: syncretism as a process, syncretism as a state or condition, syncretism as a theory and syncretism as an (normative) ideal. In the first two, the term tends to be used in a descriptive fashion. Research using syncretism as a theory so far iterate between the descriptive and normative fashion (see for example: Berk & Galvan, 2009), while syncretism as an ideal model generally uses the term in a strictly normative fashion.

In anthropology and religion, the term syncretism is used to describe a process of change, a mixing of values and forms that happens – to different extents – when there is contact between different value systems. Syncretism is also used to define a state of

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<sup>1</sup> The notion of ‘value system’ is used throughout the paper to refer to a set of consistent personal and cultural values held within (and applied to) a community/group/society. For example, Gladwin et al. (1995) propose a set of values which support sustainable development: inclusiveness, connectivity, equity, prudence and security. For further discussion of value systems in companies, see Wenstøp and Myrmel (2006).

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reconciliation, integration or coexistence of conflicting values and meanings that happens as a consequence of the mixing process. Such state of syncretism can take different forms and degrees according to the cultural and historic context. The literature points to the idea that syncretic change is not always inevitable (Laibelman, 2004; Stewart, 1999). If it fails to be achieved, then either one of the value systems is obliterated or both drift apart leading to conflict and instability (Droogers, 1989). The theory of syncretism has been developed in cultural studies and sociology to explain why, how and to what extent syncretic patterns emerge and what influences the form and extent of the resulting reconciliation of value systems. In religious studies, the theory of syncretism is mainly concerned with the moral and doctrinarian consequences of syncretism – i.e. the normative debate identifying ‘pejorative’ and ‘non-pejorative’ syncretism. Finally, syncretism as a normative ideal is an aspirational model that explains how a community/group/society deals with clashes between value systems through reconciliation and alignment of values leading to a state of syncretism. It emphasizes the non-pejorative aspects of syncretism and seeks to achieve creative integration and synthesis of conflicting values through identification of commonalities (Stewart, 1999).

In relation to management scholarship and sustainability, Martinez (2012); and Berger, Cunningham, and Dumright (2007, pp. 143-144) refer to syncretism to evoke a ‘*combination of noneconomic and economic objectives*’ in the mainstreaming of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and its embedding in the day-to-day culture, processes and activities of a firm. They define it as a management philosophy, an overarching approach to business that mirrors a corporate effort to appreciate and respond to the often conflicting views and values of a diverse set of stakeholders (Berger et al., 2007). The concept of syncretism is however used by Berger et al. (2007)

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as one element in a multi-form framework for CSR mainstreaming, not as the central theme of analysis, and by Martinez (2012) as a way to describe the challenge of combining pragmatic and constructionist discourses in business, not as an integrative theory of business sustainability.

In the spirit of contributing to the development of the construct of a novel theoretical approach that promotes the integration of sustainability in business, this article adopts the aspirational ‘non-pejorative’ meaning of syncretism. Let us firstly examine the aspects of the relationship between business and sustainability that justify a syncretic perspective on business sustainability.

### **Reconciling Business & Sustainability: Can ‘Win-Win’ Win Out?**

The prevailing narrative in discussing the relationship between business and socio-environmental issues in the context of making progress towards sustainability has been the ‘win-win’ business case. It is commonly discussed through Elkington’s (1997) notion of a ‘triple bottom line’ defined as ‘focusing on economic prosperity, environmental quality and . . . social justice’ (p. 2). This embodies a logic that the (whole-hearted rather than instrumental) embracing of pro-sustainability measures within corporate strategies can pay economic, environmental and social dividends simultaneously. Central to this argument are beliefs that customers will discriminate in favour of more sustainable companies and products including paying a modest premium for more sustainable products, and that eco-efficiency strategies will remove costs related to waste, inefficient resource use and socio-environmental risks. The win-win argument was given early empirical weight by Porter and van der Linde’s (1995) study of chemical companies that showed the positive contribution to profits, innovation and competitiveness that investments in sustainability-oriented strategies

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generate. The appeal of this argument to business practitioners and policy makers was obvious in that it required no compromise on the part of consumers or investors, and it operated via market forces rather than through regulation. The win-win argument also recast the sustainability challenge to business theory and practice entirely within the existing and dominant technocentric paradigm by framing pro-sustainability strategies as one particular route towards increased efficiency, competitiveness and profit.

Although seductively appealing to business stakeholders and widely promoted by consultancies, environmental organisations, policy-makers and businesses (Salzmann, Ionescu-Somers, & Steger, 2005) the win-win argument has several substantial flaws. Firstly, it frames the interrelationship between business, society and the natural environment in terms of certain issues ‘overlapping’ in ways that can be synergistic and beneficial in relation to each agenda. This places it within the view of that relationship as one of ‘intersecting’ areas of common interest, rather than the ‘embedded’ relationship which Marcus, Kurucz and Colbert (2010) argue frames the relationship more realistically as business existing as a construct within society, that itself is embedded within, and dependent upon, nature.

Secondly, the notion of a ‘win’ also suggests a final resolution and an end point in some particular endeavour, but in the case of the relationship between businesses, society and the environment it is in reality an open-ended and constant process of strategic adjustment and negotiation.

Thirdly the appeal of the win-win argument, that there is no conflict between pro-sustainability strategies and conventional notions of competitiveness and profitability, and therefore no need for compromise between those agendas, is potentially overly simplistic and optimistic. Shelton’s (1994) study of companies who were amongst the early leaders in sustainability based competitiveness noted that they

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often struggled to retain the momentum of their sustainability strategies once the ‘low-hanging fruit’ of energy efficiencies and waste elimination had been picked. The allure of win-win benefits gave such sustainability strategies early momentum, but this was often lost once further sustainability-oriented improvements required more substantial levels of investment or organisational change. Finally, a key flaw in the win-win argument is that it relegates sustainability into a particular set of strategic challenges and opportunities for companies that may prove a source of differentiation and competitive advantage, rather than recognising it as a more fundamental challenge to the dominant management paradigm and as an alternative approach to management thought and practice.

From both a theoretical and a practical perspective, the business case for sustainability, and the win-win logic that underpins it, is problematic. The theoretical frameworks for the business case cope poorly with the complexity that firms confront in reality, and the empirical evidence that has been gathered to support it either consists of individual qualitative studies that are unrepresentative, or quantitative studies whose results are contradictory and/or inconclusive (Salzmann et al., 2005).

### **An Alternative Reintegration Agenda: Syncretism**

If an over-reliance on ‘win-win’ solutions is partly responsible for the lack of progress in developing substantively more sustainable business and production/consumption systems, then it suggests a need to explore other approaches to understanding the business and sustainability relationship. Scholarly contributions to the field of corporate sustainability have often placed an emphasis on the need to pursue negotiated agreements (e.g., Bailey & Rupp, 2006; Bressers & de Bruijn, 2005), trade-offs (Hahn,

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Figge, Pinkse, & Preuss, 2010) or ambidexterity (Hahn, Pinkse, Preuss, & Figge, 2016) without doing much to explicitly address the limitations of the win-win paradigm.

Religion has been one area that researchers have looked into as a source of value systems, moral-points-of-view, virtues and codes of conduct that can offer alternatives to conventional management wisdom generally imbued with materialism and individualism (see for example: Dyck & Schroeder, 2005; Lamberton, 2005). As a case in point, the sustaincentric paradigm is presented by Gladwin et al. to be inspired partly ‘from claims of the universalism of life and stewardship admonitions common to the major religions’ (1995, p. 890). Syncretism may represent an interesting avenue for theorists and researchers to explore since it explains how religious systems of belief have influenced, evolved and interacted with other value systems. The roots of syncretism are in cultural and religious studies, particularly in explaining the emergence of new/modified religions or cultures around the world (e.g., Maroney, 2006; Martin, 2006). For example, the entry of the proselytising Christianity into Africa (and other parts of the world) introduced new views of the universe, ritual behaviours and social practices (Droogers & Greenfield, 2001). The emergence of the Feast of Christmas may also be explained as a form of syncretism, one between pagan ideas and Christianity<sup>2</sup> (Schineller, 1992). Other examples include the Nigerian religion Chrislam which combines Christian and Islamic doctrines; and Universal Sufism that seeks the unity of all people and religions.

The concept of syncretism, and the ‘cultural mergings’ it seeks to explain, has the potential to be applied to other contexts including business. Berger et al.’s (2007) notion of ‘syncretic stewardship’ as a means of integrating environmental

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<sup>2</sup> Although the Feast of Christmas as the adaptation of a Pagan festival has prevailed, some Christians (especially in Nigeria) still see it as an ill-advised accommodation to Pagan ideas (Schineller, 1992).

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consciousness with a business's economic purpose to create a reintegrated business culture with a more holistic view of business sustainability is one example. Another comes from Handelman (2006) who applied it to consumers whose behaviours are influenced by multiple and often contradictory values. Handelman constructs a view of consumers as syncretic societal constituents (e.g. activists, non-profit organisations, minorities, and indigenous groups) who are not driven solely by the rational pursuit of economic self-interest. Instead, they struggle to balance and maintain conflicting philosophical and religious beliefs, values, and practices which ultimately determines their approach to consumption.

Some commentators specify that syncretism has a complex history (e.g., Hartney, 2001; Shaw & Stewart, 1994). It has been conceived of either as a politically dangerous and theologically disputed word with pejorative connotations (Baird, 1991; 1984; Hesselgrave & Rommen, 1989; Hiebert, 2006) or as an analytically and anthropologically instructive concept with non-pejorative connotations (Droogers, 1989, 2001; Shaw & Stewart, 1994).

In the religious context, syncretism is often regarded critically as a process which causes impurity in what is claimed to be an otherwise pure form of doctrine based on an impeccable revelation (Shaw & Stewart, 1994). It is often taken to imply the 'inauthentic' or 'contamination', the infiltration of a supposedly 'pure' tradition by symbols and meanings seen as belonging to other, incompatible traditions (Shaw & Stewart, 1994, p. 1) that threatens the purist nature of a religion. For such critics, the priority is to preserve the validity of a circle of faith, or of a 'traditional' way of thinking. Such a reaction to attempts to merge conventional business and sustainability agendas has been ostensible within the field of FairTrade, where efforts to further commercialise the concept in order to increase its market share (and thereby the

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sustainability benefits it generates) have been opposed by those who fear that this will dilute the FairTrade ideology and represent a selling of the movement's soul (Moore, 2004). A disintegrative form of syncretism between the commercialisation of the FairTrade concept and the maintenance of FairTrade principles is thus observed. In this (pejorative/pessimistic) sense, syncretism evokes a negative process of homogenisation that erases diversity and dilutes identity.

Writers who use the word syncretism more positively see it as an adaptation/coping mechanism that is inevitable, desirable and necessary when belief systems are in conflict and the persistence of conflict would harm society as a whole (Kirwen, 1988; Sanneh, 1989). Some praise the relevance of syncretism as a framework for understanding the creation and development of a new belief system (Droogers & Greenfield, 2001; Hartney, 2001) and analyse 'what has or has not been borrowed or blended, and what has or has not influenced specific religious thinkers at specific points in history' (Berling, 1980, p. 8). The non-pejorative, and often positive, significance of syncretism is particularly endorsed by postmodern anthropologists (Shaw & Stewart, 1994). They emphasise the influence of human factors in explaining the incoherencies in faith; the main premise being that people have different needs at particular periods and that syncretism responds to these needs (Hartney, 2001). Shaw and Stuart (1994, p. 20) write:

'Syncretism may be (or perhaps only looks like) a form of resistance, because hegemonic practices are never simply absorbed wholesale through passive 'acculturation'; at the very least, their incorporation involves some kind of transformation, some kind of deconstruction and reconstruction which converts to people's own meanings and projects.'

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In this (non-pejorative) sense therefore, syncretism reflects a positive process of transformation or progress towards unity, one in which the ‘dominant order’ is modified to reconcile with individual needs.

It is implied above that syncretism is deemed acceptable and non-pejorative when a demand, or a need, exists for the unity it promotes. In this paper, we contend that a syncretic transition in the practice of management, because it reflects an attempt at a synthesis from divergent theoretical positions (or competing faiths), is opportune to foster the necessary developments and adaptations that companies have to make to pursue a paradigmatic shift towards sustaincentrism.

## **Exploring the Theory and Construct of Syncretism**

The concept of syncretism has been used within many different institutional spheres of cultures in contact (Baron, 1977) to provide theoretical foundations for models of various forms of societal change. Although the tendency during most of the last century has been for syncretism studies to focus on the fusion of religious forms and beliefs (Wagner, 1975), syncretism as a theoretical framework re-emerged in social theory during the 1990s as part of studies attempting to understand the dynamics of institutional and cultural transformation during processes of globalization, transnational nationalism and diaspora communities (Stewart, 1999).

This newly reclaimed syncretic theory underpins the idea that all collective social constructions (such as belief systems, religions, culture and institutions) are porous and ‘composed of an indeterminate number of features which are decomposable and combinable in unpredictable ways’ (Berk & Galvan, 2009, p. 545). As a consequence they are open to intermixture, borrowing concepts and symbols while interpenetrating and hybridizing or blending with each other (Stewart, 1999). The

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varied terminologies used in the literature to describe a combination of socially constructed features (e.g. fusion, interpenetration, hybridizing, blending) may be taken to infer the existence of different levels/forms of syncretism<sup>3</sup>, notwithstanding the potential of this variety to create a sense of confusion. One way of clarifying these levels/forms (and the differences between them) is to explore the theory and construct of syncretism, beyond discussions of terminological nuances and differences.

The syncretic theory argues that the degree of combinability of features within collective social constructions depends on two elements: (i) the wider socio-political context and (ii) micro-level individual creativity and skills. On the one hand, historico-political events and circumstances may create critical junctures in which actors enjoy greater autonomy to deviate from path dependencies and select between alternative paths or create syncretic value systems (Stewart, 1999). On the other hand, the extent and form of syncretism is determined by the ability of individuals to identify vital common themes and correspondences between alternative paths, assess what elements among divergent idea systems are intrinsically incompatible and creatively find avenues through which the activities resulting from divergent idea systems can be made to cohere with each other (Laibelman, 2004; Shaw & Stewart, 1994). Therefore, the syncretic theory proposes that individual action in institutional contexts where divergent idea systems co-exist is ‘always potentially creative insofar as actors draw on

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<sup>3</sup> As a case in point, the studies of Stewart (1999) and Hiebert (2006) boil down to three levels/forms of syncretism: interpenetration, blending and hybridism. (i) Interpenetration occurs when idea systems penetrate each other, mutually, borrowing compatible ideas and forms, but each system retains its distinctive meaning with minor adaptations. (ii) In blending, one of the idea systems morphs into the other or is appropriated by the other. Here there is clearly a dominant system that retains its meaning and a dominated system that loses distinctive meaning. The dominant system can become substantially altered or corrupted by blending. (iii) Hybridisation is a type of blending when two systems merge into something that is new and recombines elements of the original system with a different innovative meaning.

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a wide variety of cultural and institutional resources to create novel combinations<sup>4</sup> (Berk & Galvan, 2009). Accordingly, the theory has focused on ‘determining the fit between the manifest content of idea systems and the ideological factors promoting or hindering the blending of trait complexes’ (Wagner, 1975, p. 164).

The theory has also identified a variety of patterns through which syncretism is achieved. When there is a fit between the contents of two colliding idea systems, and at least one of them has the ability to adapt and adopt new concepts, the blending of traits takes the form of transposition – i.e. ‘the translation of the arriving ideology to align it to the indigenous one in a meaningful and reinforcing way’ (Neylan, 2003, p. 113). For example, the similarities between the symbolism used in the cult of the Virgin Mary and the one used in the cult of the pre-conquest Goddess Toniantzin in Yucatan (Mexico) facilitated the acceptance of Christianity by permitting the dogma and ritual of Christianity to be interpreted within an indigenous worldview by Toniantzin worshipers. In turn, the imaginary of the Toniantzin Goddess was blended in the practice of the cult of Virgin Mary by parts of the indigenous population. This form of syncretism can be observed on iconic symbols in which the Virgin Mary is represented with the indigenous features and distinctive attributes of Toniantzin as well as in the contents of prayers to Virgin Mary intertwined with those from the Cult of the Goddess (Wagner, 1975).

Neylan (2003) who used the syncretic theory to study the emergence of ‘blending’ patterns within the Tsimshian communities in Western Canada during the nineteenth century provides another example. The Tsimshians actively reshaped European Christianity into modes that allowed the integration of Christian

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<sup>4</sup> An example of such ‘conscious syncretism’ can be found in the incorporation of Muslim practices by young, enterprising Giriama farmers in Coastal Kenya where claims to mix Muslim and traditional practices are made because of the locally perceived affliction by “Quranic” spirits.

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missionaries' social structure with pre-existing Tsimshian social structure. This deeper form of transposition was achieved by appropriation and falsification (i.e. instillation of new meanings) of Christian concepts. The Tsimshians adapted these concepts to their own spiritual traditions and power structures<sup>5</sup>. In doing so, they acted to trigger various forms of syncretism, including the interpretation and treatment of missionaries as chiefs and shamanic figures, the alignment of clan identity with denomination loyalty, and the incorporation of church processions and choirs to traditional winter festivals (re-named after Christian festivities).

The Tsimshians also used 'masking' as a form of syncretism through which symbols and modes of representation are borrowed from the imposed reality. Yet the essence of old practices is retained. Quite ostensibly, the Tsimshians built houses and churches with European facades but interiors laid out in Tsimshian custom. More subtly, in a mix of masking and integration, chiefly and shamanic figures moved into the roles of priests, evangelists, church administrators and nurses 'where they not infrequently startled the Euro-Canadians with the authority of their action and discourse' (Neylan, 2003, p. 205).

As a result, Tsimshian communities, despite professing Christian faith, developed a syncretic synthesis of spiritual beliefs and practices – some shamanic and some Christian – that become highly individualised within each member of the community. According to Neylan (2003), the syncretic synthesis sustained most of the traditional native social and cultural practices under Christianity (including some indigenous spiritual expressions) yet in altered or adapted forms. The synthesis was

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<sup>5</sup> Another interesting example is the Navajo Native Christian Church, which followed Christian Mass ritual but included traditional peyote ingestion as part of the ritual.

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facilitated by the relative geographical isolation and distance of the Tsimshians from the centres of missionary power (Neylan, 2003).

Theory and historical cases such as those discussed above allow us to distil the construct through which syncretism is achieved: a combination of the (subjective) freedom of agency and (objective) structural constraints (Droogers, 2001). Such a construct is arguably made clearer when a contrast is made between what Meyer (1992) terms syncretism ‘from below’ and syncretism ‘from above’.

Syncretism from below relates to subjective freedom of agency. It refers to micro-processes of development of religious synthesis by – often powerless – individuals who construct meanings for their own use out of contexts of cultural or political domination. Such syncretism typically occurs when a less powerful group is in contact with the religion of a more powerful group. In this circumstance, syncretism is a way of adaptation and survival. The less powerful group seeks commonalities between the religion of the powerful group and its own religion as a means of affirming traditional beliefs. The result is a belief system that recognises duality and embraces diversity (Lindenfeld, 2005). Both the case of the Tsimshians and the syncretic synthesis between the cult of the Virgin and the cult of Toniantzin are examples of syncretism from below.

Syncretism from above refers to the imposition of religious synthesis upon others by powerful representatives of institutions and organizations who claim to channel the instrumental demands of an (objective) ‘system’, entitled to define cultural meanings<sup>6</sup>. Perhaps one of the most accomplished and complex example of syncretism

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<sup>6</sup> Examples include: Christian missionaries ‘africanising’ their churches by baptising selected deities and renaming local practices as Christian rituals (Meyer, 1992, Lindenfeld 2005); Hindu nationalists claiming that Hinduism subsumes Islam (van der Veer, 1994); Romans incorporating the Gods of conquered nations (e.g. the Egyptian Goddess Isis, the Persian God Mithra) as secondary deities in the Roman Pantheon. (Baird, 1991)

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from above emanating from a church hierarchy is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which combines religious and secular idea systems. This combination is described by Kay and Brown as ‘a highly evolved syncretic creation. It emphasized Jewish prophecies to substantiate Christian doctrines. It incorporated American federal land allocation policies, including order and equality in land division, which themselves owe their visible landscape expression to ancient Mediterranean survey methods. Mormons elevated the medieval English system of agricultural villages with common lands to the status of biblical Christian communitarianism. They granted absolute authority over land use to a church hierarchy, while asserting the democratic ideal of equal access to resources’ (Kay & Brown, 1985, p. 265).

White (1999) provides a non-religious example of the opposition and potential complementarity between syncretism from below and syncretism from above through his studies of the rural practice of integrated Western and Chinese medicine in South West China. Local corporate and urban party ‘elites’ enacted processes of syncretism from above to force integration of Chinese and Western medical practices as sanctioned state policy. However, in stark contrast to other state policies, central authorities allowed individuals from local agencies and peasant communities to enact the process of syncretism from below by experimenting and making their own interpretation of how to shape integrated medicine as therapeutic practice.

### **Implications for the practice of sustainability in business**

A similar opposition between syncretism from below and syncretism from above may be captured in the practice of management and sustainability. Strategies of responsiveness to environmental issues can emerge from objective (or instrumental) thinking, which is essentially when economic returns are the main catalyst (Salim et al.,

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2018). They can also emerge from subjective motivations of business agents relating to their cognition, morality and sensibility to environmental issues (Bansal & Gao, 2006). The syncretic stewardship model introduced by Berger et al. (2007) implies that sustainability is framed by business agents in a broad fashion that works to simultaneously serve multiple diverse stakeholders. Syncretic stewards are constantly involved in negotiating, balancing, and integrating the often competing claims of varied stakeholders (Berger et al., 2007).

This raises questions of how syncretism might operate in the context of business attempts to address ‘wicked’ sustainability problems (Meckenstock, Barbosa-Póvoa, & Carvalho, 2016; Neugebauer, Figge, & Hahn, 2016). Strategic management thinkers have traditionally defined a coherent system in which top-down strategies reflect a descending approach to business development driven by top management initiatives in line with organizational goals and external factors such as market opportunities, regulation or shareholder pressures (Ansoff, 1979); while bottom-up strategies reflect an ascending (or emergent) approach driven by a set of individual values, deliberate choices, field experience, employee commitments and initiatives at the bottom of a firm’s hierarchical structure (Mintzberg, 1991). In this article, pressures to promote syncretism are conceptualised in terms of systemic pressures descending from above, and constructionist pressures ascending from below. In contrast to the traditional use of the metaphors ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ by strategic thinkers, the focus is on individual agents of management dealing with these pressures regardless of their position inside or outside a firm’s hierarchy or system of activities.

Syncretism from above is mainly concerned with the actions and decisions of the guardians of the financial welfare of the company (e.g., shareholders, top management executives). These ‘business agents’ generally operate in the midst of

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numerous interweaved institutional arrangements in the legal and economic system that influence stakeholders' salience and company power (Galanis, 2011). Syncretism from above can be conceived of as a firm's attempt to accommodate these 'arrangements' or external pressures (such as legislation, pressures from shareholders or market volatility) or as instrumental aspirations emerging from an organisation's leadership (Tseng, Lim, & Wu, 2018). The term 'above' essentially relates to the influence exercised by shareholders, corporate boards, CEOs (Chief Executive Officers), CFOs (Chief Financial Officers) and the upper echelon of business executives who act as 'the guardians of their companies' financial welfare and ultimately must bear responsibility for the impact of sustainability on the bottom line' (Carroll & Shabana, 2010, p. 92) on the decisions and actions of individual agents of management. Systemic pressures such as relentless and permanent competition, unforgiving market forces, regulations, industry norms and shareholder value realisation are forcing companies to be strongly efficiency-driven institutions (S. D. Cohen, 2007; Hofferberth, Bruhl, Burkart, Fey, & Peltner, 2011).

This perspective is visible in a range of research which converges on the idea that a firm's approach to sustainability is primarily driven by economic motives and freedom of agency within this context is substantially reduced (see for example, Berger et al., 2007; Husted & de Jesus Salazar, 2006; McWilliams, Siegel, & Wright, 2006; Pelozo, 2006; Windsor, 2006). The approach implies that sustainability is viable only to the extent that corporations are convinced that there is a 'payoff' to the investment (Devinney, 2009). It gives momentum to the idea that the often competing claims of varied stakeholders mean that pro-environmental business initiatives can require a trade-off in economic profitability (B. Cohen & Winn, 2007; Friedman, 1970; Winn & Kirchgeorg, 2005). In this context, syncretism fails to be achieved. Such a view roots

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corporate thinking and behaviour firmly within Gladwin, Kennelly & Krause's (1995) technocentric paradigm. We suggest that syncretic rehabilitations/readjustments emerging from below may open up the prospects for more sustainable corporate practices; and these take the form of Bottom-Up adaptation.

Syncretism from below is concerned with the actions and decisions of individuals within the wider stakeholder communities – i.e. those who may be affected by corporate sustainability issues and may not typically hold an influence on the strategic directions of the firm. It reflects the view that, despite the dominance of a system that essentially promotes economic drivers, sustainability integration can be driven by the creativity and commitment of a diversity of business stakeholders. Such stakeholders can include front-line workers, middle managers acting as sustainability 'champions', top managers enacting their own altruistic aspirations against instrumental corporate logic<sup>7</sup> or even external stakeholders (Hoppmann, Sakhel, & Richert, 2018). People at all levels within a firm's environment may have first-hand experience of, and perspectives on, a firm's environmental and social impact or performance. They will also learn about sustainability issues through their lives and experiences as citizens. Individual knowledge and perceptions represent a set of constructionist influences on the relationship between the firm and the environment. For example, individual voluntary citizenship initiatives in the workplace can play an essential role in improving the efficacy and efficiency of environmental management practices within organisations (Boiral, 2009). This is in line with Hofferberth et al.'s (2011) argument that a company's receptiveness to societal expectations is determined

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<sup>7</sup> We follow here Davies & Harré's (1990, 1999) positioning theory which argues that individuals make a choice of which institutional set of rules is more appropriate in accordance to the role they are playing at that moment. Thus managers acting as citizens may pursue actions that do not seem to follow corporate interests and forge explanations trying to make sense of their behaviour using the rhetoric of business.

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by constructionist drivers that may be very different to the systemic pressures experienced ‘from above’. As Robbins, Hintz and Moore (2010) note in discussing how to address the conceptual gap between nature and economy, ‘reconciling the material reality of the environment with the powerful social constructions that influence our thinking is a major challenge’ (Robbins et al., 2010, p. 132).

The unique and uncertain nature of the wicked problems that characterise sustainability (i.e., no right or wrong, unknown solutions) justifies that attention is drawn to the syncretic dynamics that take place between the firm and its stakeholders. Addressing wicked sustainability problems implies that business agents, who are viewed to represent the ‘dominant order’ (a terminology often used by ‘syncretism’ scholars to define an ‘ideology’ that dominates – in the case of management: ‘technocentrism’) and whose primary objective is to preserve the economic wealth of their organisation, are challenged to explore new ‘pastures’ by interacting with a wider set of stakeholders. The pattern of syncretism from below suggests that the interests and ideas of the stakeholders that are not directly (or conventionally) involved in a firm’s strategic decision-making process may somehow be accounted for. This operation is often viewed as complex and largely misunderstood (Hofferberth et al., 2011). Exploring it is nevertheless important when we consider that companies can substantially reduce their negative impacts on society by incorporating elements that are unknown to them yet critical to strategizing for sustainability. The syncretic theory entails that the search for a state of relative equilibrium between syncretism from above and syncretism from below is necessary in order to go into more depth and consider the details of a given problem (Martinez, 2012). Ecological and social issues involving firms often have local impacts and are easier to address if decision-making happens close to where the impacts are felt (Mintzberg, 1990) – i.e. not exclusively at top

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management level or at the centre of the firm's operations but inclusively at lower management echelons or at the periphery of the firm's operations.

We further anticipate that these processes can generate a variety of outcomes, according to whether elements of syncretism from below are integrated, borrowed or rejected. One argument is that the syncretic integration of elements emerging from above and from below may lead to cohesion when a consensus is forged between the dominant and 'oppressed' parties. The resulting syncretic balance between opposing forces might be assimilated with a 'sustaincentric' outcome in which competing demands from business and stakeholders are integrated (Hahn et al., 2010) and their economic and environmental concerns are juxtaposed and combined (Hahn, Figge, Pinkse, & Preuss, 2014). Whether syncretic equilibrium is reached or not, syncretism should not be assumed to yield fixed or permanent results. The elements that constitute the equilibrium remain 'alive' and are likely to be drawn apart at some point in the future. The uncertainty of wicked sustainability problems requires consistent attention to the syncretic dynamics at play. As adaptations stemming from either above or below become necessary, corporate actors and their wider stakeholder communities may be called upon to participate in syncretic dialogues. The syncretic perspective is in this sense a useful resource for directing attention towards the necessity of mobilising diverging interpretations and translations of sustainability (Meckenstock et al., 2016), as well as identifying catalysts for change and areas of improvement at all levels and by all entities concerned with sustainability issues, from global to local scales.

Considered by some as the grandest of challenges facing humanity (Wright & Nyberg, 2017), climate change is one area in which a better understanding of human potential for impactful decision-making and action-taking is required. The scale, scope and systemic uncertainty that are related to it demand a stronger harmony between

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natural and human systems (Winn, Kirchgeorg, Griffiths, Linnenluecke, & Günther, 2011). A syncretic perspective on the management of ‘climate change’ can increase our understanding of how a more harmonious human system might be developed. By bringing together systemic and constructionist drivers, syncretism may act to reduce reliance on business and market responses to the climate crisis (Wright & Nyberg, 2017). The potential of syncretism to shape non-conventional, ‘game-changing’ and long-lasting business-stakeholder relationships and dialogues is well documented in the religious and cultural literatures covered in this article. Syncretic equilibrium ought to translate into dynamic human systems that are better suited to address human vulnerability to the disruptions and uncertainties of natural systems. While analyses of the rhetorics (Wright & Nyberg, 2017) and symbols (Bowen, 2014) that are used by companies to frame their initial response to social and environmental challenges have demonstrated the importance of win-win references to define success, syncretism might be useful as a way to nuance the view of a final resolution to the corporate sustainability challenge. Actors in a syncretic field continuously integrate, borrow and/or reject elements of cultural systems as they strive to reduce environmental uncertainties and change for the better. As such the application of syncretism in management might usefully contribute to explain how new forms of management for sustainability might take shape. Trends towards open innovation (Bogers, Chesbrough, & Moedas, 2018), social entrepreneurship (Kuznecova & Cirule, 2015), sociocracy (Romme, 2017) might be taken to indicate that syncretic phenomena are currently taking place in business.

## **Conclusive thoughts**

The implications of the syncretic model discussed in this article is that a company’s ability to achieve cohesion between economic and socio-environmental responsibilities

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depends on the interplay between constructionist pressures for syncretism from below and the strategic response to systemic pressures represented by syncretism from above. Viewed from this perspective, syncretism has potential as a multi-level theory that ‘bridges the micro-macro divide, integrating the micro domain’s focus on individuals and groups with the macro domain’s focus on the organisation, environment and strategy’ (Klein et al., 1999, p. 243).

Postmodern anthropologists observe that syncretic processes are now considered basic not only to religion and ritual but also to the predicament of culture in general (Stewart & Shaw, 1994). Positive syncretism is facilitated by current trends in population growth, industrialisation and globalisation (Greenfield, 2001), and as it becomes more widely experienced and observed within society, so its applicability to management processes is more likely to be appreciated.

Anthropologists Droogers and S. M. Greenfield (2001) and management scholar Ghoshal (2005) converge on the idea that the discussion of theoretical perspectives has long suffered from oppositional thinking and a focus on one term in a pair of dichotomies – e.g. operational/normative, objectivism/subjectivism. The theory of syncretism should appeal to potential adopters as being significantly different from older, conventional management theories because it is integrative. As Pinto (1985, p. 22) explains: ‘at times syncretism may be even indispensable in the process of casting off the old and putting on the new’. The ‘old’ (traditional) company is independent, stable, efficient, risk-aware, controlled, self-focused, competitive, driven and quantifiable. But these attributes are no longer good enough on their own for a company operating in an environment that is increasingly and negatively impacted by business activities.

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It is perhaps the moral monism of traditional business models in which technocentric biases are concerned with the idea that the only responsibility of business is to make profits – in line with Friedman (1970) – that has a special interest in denying the possibility of syncretism. The position of Friedman and his followers induces the underestimation of sustainability interests while overestimating the social benefits of a market-free economy. In the religious context, negative syncretism is sometimes induced by underestimating the uniqueness of a particular faith while overestimating the validity of competing faiths (Hesselgrave, 2006). In the realm of business and management, negative syncretism may be taken to reflect the antagonism to paradigmatic synthesis shown by theorists or business practitioners concerned with the defence of ‘atomistic’ theories, ‘traditional’ management and business models (or conceptions of sustainability) and generally engaged in contrasting their favoured representations with those of other paradigms (Gioia & Pitre, 1990). It particularly captures the inhibitive function of enduring and outmoded mental models and ways of thinking on progress toward sustainability (Gladwin et al., 1995).

That paradigmatic change is difficult to achieve is widely recognised. Perhaps less widely recognised is that sustainability integration resembles a clash of beliefs and faiths as well as of ways of thinking. The technocentrists worship at the temple of the free market, embrace the doctrines of consumer sovereignty and shareholder value, and their faith is kept strong and pure by the expectations and exhortations from the High Priests to be found amongst the City Analysts, Management Consultancies, and Business Schools. The ecocentrists have an equally strong faith. Convinced of the moral justice and logical wisdom of protecting the planet, they have their own liturgy of criticisms of ‘big business’, want to take a stand against the evils of globalisation and are inspired by their own shamanic visionaries who have founded successful business

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that put socio-environmental principles before profit. One reason why sustainability integration has been so difficult to achieve in practice is that it is not just a battle of competing business logics, but a battle of faiths. As such the notion of syncretism with its roots in religious synthesis may be far more relevant and useful than conventional approaches to combining the two which rarely seem to rise above a ‘win-win’ appeal to logic.

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Table 1. Evaluating existing perspectives on business sustainability

Source	Perspective	Core argument	Limitation(s)
Valente (2010)	Complexity science	The examination of shifts in business paradigm should be accompanied by an appreciation of the interconnectedness of the private sector with a number of agents under a complex system.	Its emphasis on emerging crises in the existing technocentric paradigm as a driving force places an emphasis on the technical, rational and economic drivers of change and rather neglects some of the firm-level processes and human behavioural issues involved in the change that would occur within a particular business.
Starkey and Crane (2003)	Purposeful narrative	Using purposeful narratives within firms that aim to change the mental models applied by management will improve our understanding of sustainability oriented approaches.	Exactly how such narratives can gain credence and challenge the existing management paradigm remains under-explored.
Banerjee (2003)	Political economy	Sustainable development tends to promote the expansion of neo-colonial modes of development by obscuring significant differences in resource access and utilisation between countries.	Our ability to end the disruption of social system and ecosystem relations is limited to our understanding of how the power dynamics in this new era of globalisation and post-development, wherein the consumer is 'king' and technocentrism is the 'dominant' worldview, may change – a question raised, yet not resolved, in Banerjee's study.
Whiteman et al. (2013)	Ecology and social ecology	Sociological, institutional, and economic theories as foundations for research on corporate sustainability are incomplete without the integration of advancements in ecological knowledge, which together can form a multidisciplinary and ecologically-grounded foundation for sustainability. The scientific framework of Planetary Boundaries suggests that studies on corporate sustainability need a dual focus: on the firm (or the industry) and on the Earth system.	The quantitative approach of planetary boundaries as a means of 'measuring' sustainability excludes the consideration of constructivist influences such as culture and cognition. If, as the authors suggest, managerial intervention is necessary to steer our economic and environment systems away from catastrophe, a more holistic understanding of both pragmatic (or systemic) and subjective (or constructivist) challenges of managing a sustainable business, and how they can be made to cohere with each other, is arguably necessary.
Winn and Pogutz (2013)	Ecology and social ecology	Establishing business organisations as social-ecological systems provides a potentially solid framework for a managerial decision making respectful of the biophysical constraints of natural capital and opportunities resulting from more proactive approaches.	Considerations of individual and organisational factors (e.g. values) which fundamentally shape business strategies, innovations and organisation-nature interconnections are conspicuously absent from this study, so are considerations of the social dimension of sustainability.

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Newton (2002)	Interdependency network Actor-network theory	In looking at the normative rationale for a new ecological order and suggesting a de-centring of business and a focus on networks as a new research perspective, the author presupposes conjoint economic development and ecological capacity-building. He contends that operating with a 'minimum interdependency networks' involving human and non-human agency will help identify a desirable level of interconnectedness between physical and human management systems.	The study is presented as a critique of the theoretically constrained and hypothetical (Gladwin et al., 1995) worldviews of ecocentrism and deep ecology. However, the interdependency network perspective falls short of explaining how the theoretical and practical constraints of the well-established worldview of technocentrism influence existing power relations between 'human' and 'non-human' actors and contribute to the sustainability of current networks of environmental degradation.
Berchicci and King (2007)	Win-win	Firms can create lasting value through more strategic attention to their environmental and social impacts.	Because the study focuses on the evaluation and comparison of the effectiveness of various green investment options for both environmental and financial performance of the firm, it provides a narrow view of ESR as a means to economic performance only.
Etzion (2007)	Win-win	Argues that organisations often tend to see sustainability as a separate aspect of core strategy and acknowledges the necessity of bridging the normative and descriptive in research on organisations as part of the broader theme of sustainability and sustainable development.	The study corroborates the idea that two camps co-exists in business sustainability research: one that places emphasis on the relation between environmental and economic issues; the other where economic performance is not necessarily the central dependent variable examined. Etzion deplors the fact that attempts to engage in constructive dialogue between the two camps are rare. Related to this issue is the lack of theoretical support to bridging the ethical and instrumental camps in business and management research.

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