



# **Management students' engagement in CSR : the influence of sensemaking factors.**

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## **Résumé :**

In this paper, we mobilize Sensemaking theory and cognitive categorization theory to understand how students engaged in the creation of an associative structure integrate sustainable initiatives during its design and implementation. We explore how they engage - or not - in CSR, the sensemaking factors that influence their strategic interpretations of CSR engagement and explain the different types of engagement. The results show that the ambiguous frame of reference related to CSR discourages the engagement in its activities, and that the business case viewpoint dominates when the reasons for engagement are in competition. Ultimately, the engagement in CSR depends on the disruption related to the sensemaking process, which shifts students' viewpoint from the organizational to the individual level. Finally, this research shows that the younger generation struggles with the ambiguity of CSR and shows that programs in higher education should introduce CSR-related notions as early as possible to avoid this ambiguity from taking hold or turning into reluctance to engage.

**Mots-clés :** CSR ; Strategy; Management Students; Engagement; Sensemaking



# **Management students' engagement in CSR : the influence of sensemaking factors.**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Faced with the societal problems which we encounter today, social pressures have been activated for organizations to become more committed to addressing the negative externalities of their activities by adhering to social responsibilities (Jackson & Rathert, 2016), as well-formulated CSR policies and practices play an essential role in supporting sustainable development (McWilliams et al, 2006). According to Khan (2018), this strategic shift has forced organizations to devote their attention and resources to meeting the expectations of their key stakeholders and engage further in CSR. Literature suggests that the reasons why organizations engage in CSR are multiple and can range from the personal characteristics of individuals to the characteristics of the company or the market or institutional pressures (Campbell, 2007). But these studies tend to overlook how these factors combine with each other to explain this engagement to CSR (Saridakis et al., 2020).

Moreover, literature shows that engaging in CSR is a complex enterprise, as adopting sustainable initiatives requires companies to simultaneously address economic, environmental, and social outcomes, creating a variety of desirable but mutually dependent goals (Hahn et al., 2015), and in this way creating ambiguity and complexity. This ambiguity stems primarily from the level of integration or separation of multiple objectives in organizational activities and companies engaged in CSR which must manage an assemblage of organizational actors and different interests (Battilana & Lee, 2014). Thus, CSR ambiguity can significantly restrict organizational actors' engagement in it. Further, attention to the business case for CSR has gained prominence. Lee (2008, p. 53) observes a trend in the evolution of CSR theories that reveals "a closer coupling between CSR and the financial goals of organizations», in this way shifting the focus of CSR theories from an ethical orientation to a performance orientation. A recent article from Barnett and al. (2021) affirmed that decision-makers within organizations adopt sustainable initiatives a priori only when they can build a business case that emphasizes profit, thus reinforcing profit maximization as the primary objective, with environmental or social dimensions only taken into account if companies are



first able to develop a desirable financial gain for themselves. Thus, a focus on the economic side of CSR persists, limiting the integration of the other two dimensions and its societal benefits.

Literature on CSR having focused for a long time on organizational drivers and economic performance (Margolis & Walsh, 2003), research then began to explore more and more individual drivers and processes which could explain differences in the implementation of CSR initiatives. The study of the evaluation and reactions of CSR processes are part of the line of research named the microfoundations of CSR which concerns the study of how CSR affects individuals (Rupp & Mallory, 2015). More particularly, it concerns the framing of CSR perceptions, causal attributions and sensemaking processes (Gond et al., 2017). In our research, we focus on CSR sensemaking as it may provide a rich description of the engagement in CSR and how to deal with its ambiguity and complexity, through the study of the mental frameworks and sensemaking factors in which it is embedded (Basu and Palazzo, 2008). Notably, within the Sensemaking perspective, CSR is seen as resulting from cognitive and linguistic processes as, ultimately, decisions about CSR activities are made by individuals and derive from their mental models. The diagnosis of these mental frameworks can, in this perspective, explain why some companies engage differently from others. Thus, rather than analysing CSR by focusing on the content of CSR activities, the process view argues for a deeper examination of the cognitive processes (Basu and Palazzo, 2008).

In this way, using sensemaking theory, in this article we seek to understand how individuals form judgments relatively to CSR and how this affects their psychological and/or behavioural engagement in it, during the designing and implementation of an associative project. We therefore first explore the way in which the individuals in the sample are engaged, and then we study the sensemaking factors at the roots of the different types of engagement. We chose to focus on students for two reasons. First, they are part of Generation Z, the new generation that is entering or will soon enter the workforce, which can be potentially instructive on how CSR will be addressed in the near future. Second, the individuals comprising this generation are said to be sensitive to environmental issues and responsibility. They are reportedly very concerned about environmental issues and have a high sense of responsibility for natural resources (Mihelich, in Singh & Dangmei, 2017), and we are interested in whether and how this characteristic influences their engagement in CSR.

Thus, through our research objective to better understand the sensemaking factors that influence engagement in CSR, we also want to understand 1) whether young people's



sensitivity to sustainability influences their engagement, and 2) whether this sensitivity might influence the vision of the business case by rebalancing sustainable goals with economic goals, suggesting that sustainable initiatives would be on the verge of developing and growing. This means that we are attentive to how the economic dimension of CSR is valued or prioritized in the design of the project strategy among the individuals in the study.

With this research, we want to contribute to the microfoundations of CSR and more specifically to research concerned with CSR sensemaking. This article provides theoretical contributions as it empirically describes the sensemaking processes prior to the engagement in CSR of young individuals, and as we compare between several profiles of engagement, reveal the cognitive differences concerning what prompts the engagement or, on the contrary, what processes lead to the failure of the sensemaking processes and failure of the engagement.

## **1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **1.1 CSR AND CSR ENGAGEMENT**

CSR has been defined as corporate behavior that voluntarily integrates social and environmental concerns into business operations and core strategies to interact with their stakeholders (European Commission, 2019, p.3). Many previous studies consider CSR to have five main dimensions: diversity, employee relations, product, environment, and community (Saridakis et al., 2020). Empirically, these dimensions reflect a company's overall position on a range of societal concerns (Saridakis et al., 2020; Graves & Waddock, 1999).

Organizations' engagement to CSR can take different forms. They can prioritize different CSR activities by deciding, for example, which stakeholder expectations to meet, in what order and to what extent (Van Beurden & Gössling, 2008). Companies may also choose to focus their efforts on specific activities, while devoting less effort to others. These variations in engagement can be shaped in response to the different organizational, strategic, and institutional pressures that firms face (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006). Thus, the level of commitment to CSR, too, can vary from low to high levels of involvement. The authors agree that a high level of engagement is generally linked to better societal and corporate performance outcomes (Martinet & Payaud, 2007). For Godfrey et al (2009), the involvement of companies in CSR initiatives increases as the respective activities gain in quality and become more numerous.

The decision of companies to engage in CSR activities may depend on the personal characteristics of decision makers, or even on contextual factors. Regarding personal factors,



studies have shown that gender may influence differently the engagement, as men and women form different ethical judgments (Brammer et al., 2007). For example, female CEOs were found to have stronger ethical views and more positive attitudes toward CSR than male CEOs (Harjoto & Fabrizio, 2019). Another characteristic that may influence CSR engagement is seniority (e.g., Finkelstein et al., 2009). Indeed, recently appointed CEOs compared to experienced CEOs were found to be more attuned to the external environment and less resistant to strategic change. In addition, age could be another characteristic influencing commitment, as age reflects the individual's overall business experience. For example, Kets de Vries & Miller (1984) showed that, from the perspective of moral reasoning, older CEOs are expected to have a greater moral capacity to support responsible corporate actions.

Other than personal characteristics, other types of market, policy, institutional and firm characteristics may also influence CSR engagement. Many studies indicate, for example, that large firms are often more willing to engage in CSR than small firms (Berger-Douce, 2011). Other research has shown that a firm's financial margin as well as its size can explain its engagement in CSR activities (Gupta et al., 2017). Other research has also demonstrated the importance of different institutional cues in explaining decisions to engage in CSR (Walker et al., 2019), for example, through isomorphism mechanisms within an industry (Strang & Soule, 1998). In addition to these drivers of CSR engagement, CSR evaluations can also play an important role. Indeed, previous research suggests that senior managers act on the basis of their personal interpretations of the strategic situation (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). These interpretations are typically formed by their personal experiences, values and personalities. Thus, organizational outcomes are, in part, a reflection of the decision makers' cognitive frameworks (Mischel, 1977).

Thus, in light of these studies regarding CSR engagement, we have chosen in this article to focus on young adults studying management and involved in the creation of an associative project. These young adults, identified as the Z generation, are said to be sensitive to environmental causes and responsibilities. Here, personal characteristics such as their age as well as contextual factors such as the availability of important informational content on societal issues in the media are explored, in order to understand their influence on their commitment to CSR through the analysis of their interpretations as well as the processes which enable or disable the decision to engage.

## **1.2 CSR SENSEMAKING AND STRATEGIC ISSUES**



The basic cognitive processes of CSR policy makers have not been studied extensively (Gond et al., 2017). Yet, studying processes involved in CSR engagement decision-making is a critical prerequisite for understanding how individuals and firms differ in their CSR-related responses (Wang et al., 2017). In this context, increasingly sophisticated research explores the framework of individual perceptions of CSR, or the type of heuristics that individuals mobilize to categorize CSR-related information (Gond et al., 2017). Emerging research suggests expanding the conceptualization of CSR evaluations to include the cognitive processes by which individuals "make sense" of CSR (Athanasopoulou & Selsky, 2015; Gond et al., 2017). And in this vein, Rupp and Mallory (2015) suggest extending the boundaries of micro-CSR to any individual member of stakeholder groups, inside or outside the organization (Gond et al., 2017).

The sensemaking perspective has already been used to study the relationships between individuals and different aspects of sustainability. For example, Hahn et al. (2014) draw on the notion of paradox to describe how cognitive frameworks can help decision makers address complex sustainability issues. Epstein et al. (2015) empirically demonstrated that managers' perceptions of tensions influence their commitment to corporate sustainability, and Hockerts (2015) highlighted that cognitive frameworks can help decision makers address complex sustainability issues. Angus-Leppan et al. (2010) also identified important differences in how different stakeholders interpret sustainability-related concepts. According to Gond et al. (2017), efforts should be continued to empirically assess individual cognitive differences in sustainability and CSR-related judgments through the lens of sensemaking.

Sensemaking theory allows for the study of sensemaking by organizational actors. Sensemaking is the process by which individuals work to interpret new, unexpected or confusing events. Following an "interruption", the actor is led to retrospectively revise the meaning he or she gives to a situation, as well as the justification for his or her actions, and to do so, he or she relies on what he or she knows or has experienced before. Authors explain that sensemaking is closely linked to sensegiving, which is the attempt to influence the sensemaking of others in a particular direction (Bartunek, et al., 2006). The Sensegiving stage is symbolic because it shows the completion phase of sensemaking and marks the shift to an active attitude of willingness to speak out as a result of the sensemaking that has occurred. Sensemaking occurs as a sequence of three basic processes: scanning, interpretation, and response (Thomas et al, 1993). "Scanning involves the gathering of information; it is generally considered antecedent to interpretation and action" (Thomas et al., 1993: 240).



Decision-makers scan information according to the relevance they attribute to it on the basis of their cognitive frameworks. Important aspects of scanning refer to the depth and breadth of information managers collect on sustainability issues (Mazutis, 2013). When people evaluate CSR initiatives, they engage in a set of cognitive and affective processes that we call individual CSR evaluations.

To make sense of a complex situation (Mervis & Rosch, 1981), and according to cognitive categorization theory, individuals use cognitive heuristics. Decision makers "label" their issues (Jackson & Dutton, 1988) and thus initiate a categorization process that affects the decision maker's motivations and cognitions. Two particularly salient labels used to identify strategic problems are "opportunity" and "threat" (Dutton & Duncan, 1987). A threat interpretation can alter the information process (Smart & Vertinsky, 1977), generating conditions associated with restricted action (Starbuck & Hedberg, 1977), and cause rigidity in the decision-making process (Staw et al., 1981).

Strategic issues labelled as opportunities are usually associated with positive outcomes (Jackson & Dutton, 1988). Thus, since interruption has direct consequences on the interpretation of strategic issues, which in turn have a direct influence on strategy implementation, we propose to identify the processes of interruption and interpretation of the strategic issue of engaging or not in CSR.

Thus, perceptual research suggests that individuals interpret and make sense of ambiguous and complex signals by labelling objects and situations (Weick, 1979). Thus, organizational scholars have been interested in ambivalent interpretations of strategic issues. While univalent interpretations indicate that an issue is clearly positive or negative, ambivalent interpretations attach competing values to strategic issues (Plambeck & Weber, 2010). In parallel, a new body of work has drawn attention to cases of categories that survive and thrive even though no dominant framework emerges as they mature (Pontikes, 2012). In these cases, stakeholders continue to use multiple frames, giving the category multiple meanings. Examples of ambiguous categories are numerous and include, but are not limited to, "sustainable development," (Moore, 2011). Ambiguity in a category can lead to undesirable outcomes, such as a lack of common standards or a decrease in the value of products in the category. Others have suggested that there may be benefits associated with a category that remains ambiguous, such as opening spaces for creativity (Santos & Eisenhardt, 2009).





Thus, in order to comprehensively study the sensemaking process of students in terms of engagement in CSR, this research will study the categorization of interpretations of societal issues in the sensemaking process.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1 BACKGROUND AND SAMPLE SELECTION**

In this paper we study 21 students in their first, second and third year of higher education in Management. Thus, we chose students involved in the creation and development of an associative project because it is for them the opportunity to be in a process of decision-making within a project which is important to them. This project might ultimately turn into a firm, if economically viable. As soon as the school year begins and their idea is accepted by the school's jury, the students must develop their idea, form a team, find resources, establish bylaws, contact banks and plan the implementation of the project.

### **2.2 EXPLORATORY STUDY**

An exploratory study to study the sample beforehand was carried out in order to find out if the students we wanted to analyse were more or less sensitive to and committed to sustainability from a personal point of view. A questionnaire was prepared and sent to 120 students on campus. We received 73 responses. Descriptively, the results are as follows: 92% of the sample said they were sensitive to sustainable development; the students' entourage appeared to be relatively unaware of the issues of sustainable development; 90% of our sample felt concerned by the subject and 83% had already modified their behavior from a personal point of view; 11% perceived sustainable development as a threat and 40% as an opportunity for their professional future, leaving 50% rather undecided. These results confirm the data we observed and raise the interest in relation to our research question of whether their personal commitment extends to their association projects and whether this sensitivity can counterbalance the observed focus on economic objectives in organizations.

### **2.3 EMPIRICAL STUDY AND DATA COLLECTION**

Our research, which is exploratory in nature, uses a qualitative methodology based on the principles of content analysis (Bardin, 2013). Data were collected through semi-directive interviews by videoconference: 21 interviews were conducted. These interviews, lasting an average of 35 to 70 minutes, were recorded and transcribed. The interview guide focused on CSR and the perception of its dimensions by the students in relation to their associative





project. Follow-up interviews were realised a year later with each group, lasting between 15 to 20 mins. For the purpose of data triangulation (Mucchielli, 2004), internal documentation related to the students' various projects (video), as well as micro-stories on this theme from a knowledge test were also collected and analyzed in order to control interpretations and levels of commitment. An observation grid was created to study the videos, in order to verify whether the statements concerning the associative project reflected the results of the interviews.

## 2.4 CODING PROCESS

A thematic analysis of the data based on abductive reasoning, consisting of back and forth between literature and empirical material, was carried out. The data were analyzed using a theoretical framework based on Sensemaking theory and interpretation of strategic issues, and we specifically studied how students paid attention to societal issues, and if so, what interpretations they made of them and what the consequences were in terms of psychological and behavioural commitment to their associative project. This content analysis was conducted using QDA Miner software.

Thus, the thematic coding allowed us to determine the levels of engagement of the students, taking into account 1) at the *scanning* level, the types and variety of information related to CSR as well as the identification of business opportunities, 2) the interpretations (*enactment*): the nature, valence, and intensity related to societal issues and business opportunities, and 3) the behavioural response with regard to the search for information and the exploitation of a business opportunity (*responding*)

## 3. RESULTS: SENSEMAKING FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE ENGAGEMENT IN CSR

During the analysis, it quickly became apparent that some students were already psychologically and/or behaviourally involved in CSR through their association project, while others were not, or not yet. It also appeared that the ambiguity linked to the nature of CSR leaves room for a great deal of interpretation on the part of the individuals on these societal issues.

We now present the identified profiles.

### 3.1 IDENTIFIED PROFILES



The analyses allow us to identify 4 different profiles of students according to the way they are psychologically and/or behaviourally engaged in CSR.

### 3.1.1 Profile n°1: “Actively engaged”

The first group is composed of 8 students, who are psychologically and behaviourally engaged in CSR as they already integrate societal initiatives in their associative project. More precisely, in terms of psychological commitment, the analysis of the scanning phase of sensemaking shows that they pay increased attention to societal issues (scandals, events involving pollution or sustainable alternatives...). Their explanations are distinguished by their quality (precision, details, names of the companies involved...) and the diversity of the information provided. For example, they are able to give several examples to illustrate an issue. They often have identified business opportunities, which are linked to market failures or societal issues they know about, such as polluting materials or over-consumption.

In terms of interpretations, the valence related to the decision to integrate sustainable initiatives into their associative project is positive, and unambiguous. According to the students in this group, it is necessary to act quickly. This valence is often accompanied by emotional intensity, related to emotions such as fear or guilt. Some feel threatened by societal issues and also feel an urgency to act. The interpretation of the engagement in CSR is related to a felt threat of a possible deterioration of health or loss of identity. Their knowledge of societal issues is abundant. An ambiguity persists though regarding the meaning of sustainable development and CSR. Nevertheless, the attitude reflects a clear categorization in relation to the question of whether or not to engage in a responsible associative project. Their interpretations do not show opposing economic, environmental, and social logics.

In terms of behavioural engagement, they are active in researching information. Relatively to CSR dimensions engagement, they have already made decisions related to the type of product (e.g. low tech made of recycled materials), the environment (e.g. the project mission is creating more oxygen) and the community (e.g. fighting social environmental problems and respecting people) and are in the process of exploiting opportunities: *"I founded the association x, which is focused on everything related to ecology, sustainable development and thus preservation of future generations"* (Etu\_2). Most of the students in this group have started a sensegiving process, thus demonstrating that the sensemaking process is almost complete: *"what I would also like to do is to make the big brands understand (...) to ally*



*myself with them a little and make them understand, to make them change, that what they are doing is not good..."*.

### 3.1.2 Profile n°2 : « Status quo »

This second profile includes students (*N* 4) who are not yet behaviourally engaged in CSR but are psychologically engaged. More particularly, in terms of scanning, they are similar to the first group in identifying societal issues as well as sustainable business opportunities. This suggests a similar level of concern: they are preoccupied by societal issues and think about them regularly. The analysis of their verbatims also shows the quality and diversity of the concepts mobilized.

But differences are identified in the interpretations analysis. The decision to take with regard to the integration of sustainable initiatives is more ambivalent and the "yes" and the "no" confront each other. The interpretations are interpreted both as a possible threat and a possible opportunity. It is seen as an opportunity if it can allow them to have sponsors for example, but it is also seen as a threat if it requires too many resources. This shows that the ambiguity related to the different concepts of sustainability prevents students from selecting the "yes". *"I think that we would like to do both (take into account the environment as well as the social) but I have the impression that it will be complicated, but I think that it will be more one than the other and given that we are just starting out, I think that we will not put up too many barriers in relation to all that is respectful of the environment and French we will perhaps do more of one and when we are more launched and we know how to do it...then concentrate on the 2..."*.

Different positions compete with each other, linked to contradictory information, for example, or to unresolved questions about the effectiveness of environmental policies. An economic logic appears insofar as the students think that integrating sustainable initiatives could prevent or slow down the realization of their project. In this sense, engaging in CSR is not excluded, but is considered for later. According to the information they have, sustainability may represent a threat to economic activities, as it can require more resources and to focus on certain customers which could restrict their profits. They seem to be in a rational place, where alternatives are considered. Their interpretations of the engagement are sometimes instrumental, in the sense that they explain that engaging in CSR could be a business opportunity insofar as, for example, sponsors would be more inclined to help them if they take sustainable development aspects into account in their project



The ambiguity surrounding the concept thus concerns the way in which CSR aspects are relayed in the media. These ambiguities visibly prevent them from moving forward. There is no real driving force, and a direction is not determined, unlike the first group.

### **3.1.3 Profile n°3 : “Passively engaged”**

This third profile includes students (N5) who are involved "in spite of themselves" in a project integrating sustainable initiatives. In terms of scanning, they know societal issues and are able to provide a few examples. In terms of interpretations, there is no valence or intensity expressed, and the nature of these are not sufficiently elaborate so that we could affirm there are seen as opportunities or threats. Thus, in terms of behavioural engagement, although they support the project and exploit it, they do not initiate the exploitation of opportunities. Their engagement may be random to the extent that, in this area, they will follow others, whether they take sustainable initiatives or not.

### **3.1.4 Profile n°4 : “Reluctant”**

The fourth profile (N4) is made up of students who do not feel concerned about the subject even though they are aware of today's societal issues and hear about them regularly. In terms of scanning, they are not able to cite examples of societal issues, or only briefly, with a deficit in terms of quality and diversity of vocabulary. In terms of interpretations, there is no elaborate thoughts on the subject, and thus, no identifiable valence, intensity and there are not seen as either opportunities or threats. They have not yet thought about the possible integration of sustainable initiatives in their associative projects but remain open to eventualities. *"(...) afterwards it's true that it's not the thing we think about the most, the thing we think about the most is managing the budget..."*. The reasons why they are not interested yet refer to the fact that the concept of CSR is too vague and ambiguous, and the way to contribute to it is even more so. Faced with this challenge, some in this group think that it is "not for them" at the moment.

Finally, these results show that a certain number of students are already engaged in a process of taking societal issues into account and that the engagement process is complex. First, the scanning phase shows a different level of attention to societal issues and identification of opportunities. Secondly, the interpretations linked to the decision to engage or not in a sustainable project are not homogeneous.



### **3.2 SENSEMAKING FACTORS INVOLVED IN STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT IN CSR**

The interviews with the students shed light on the influence of 3 Sensemaking factors playing a role in the students' engagement in CSR during the creation of their project. Thus, it appears that 1) the manifestation of an interruption following an environmental shock leads to 2) a consequence on the intensity and direction of interpretations as well as their categorization and that 3) emotions also play an important role.

#### **3.2.1 The sensemaking interruption**

The most important factors that separate students who decide to engage in CSR, is the way they categorize interpretations about societal issues, and these interpretations are different depending on whether they felt an interruption or not during the information scanning phase. More specifically, an event interrupted them in the course of their lives by referring to 1) their identity 2) their personal interests, or 3) their sense of security. This interruption changed the framing of the issues, from relatively important to very important as it was now connected to their self.

For example, in terms of feeling safe, one student told us that one event in particular changed her view of CSR when she learned that a friend of someone close to her had become ill from a chemical cosmetic. Two other students also told us that images from a news report on particular issues related to their own interests (hobbies, aspirations...) had shocked them and that from that moment on they had changed their attitude and were looking for ways to act, including in their association project.

#### **3.2.2 Interpretations and categorization in the face of ambiguity**

For profiles 1 and 4, the ambiguity surrounding the concept of CSR had such an impact that it caused them to exit or enter the engagement. In the case of profile 1, the ambiguity left room and availability for unlabelled categories, and sensemaking was able to take place. Once sensemaking occurred, the ambiguity about whether they would engage or not in CSR dissipated even though the ambiguity about the concept of CSR (what it was exactly, how they should operationalize it) was still present and sustainable initiatives were still not seen as controllable. But following the interruption, these students sought information that would allow them to align their project with the identified problematic in a way that would be connected to either feel security, restore or maintain identity or contribute to their personal interests. In case of profile n°4, the sensemaking processes did not have time to emerge and



the categorization took place before and in a prohibitive way. Too many inconsistencies related to CSR led to the abandonment of the search for solutions for the time being.

Thus, here the ambiguity seems to have led to undesirable results, related to a loss of credibility of the category, insofar as some students encounter often contradictory information on the subject of sustainability, maintaining an ambiguous frame of reference. However, if those belonging to profile n° 2 are still ambiguous and present multiple interpretations regarding the evaluation of societal issues and regarding the decision to engage or not, those concerning the students of profile n° 4 lead to a decrease in value due to a lack of credibility of CSR. Ambiguity thus persists when the CSR concept is not linked to the "self" as its nature is subject to contradictory information. In our study, the students in profile n°4 manage to doubt the effectiveness of their own actions because contrary information circulates on the subject of CSR : for example, greenwashing destabilizes them: several students cited the case of electric cars whose ecological advantages are touted. But the students also know that their ecological level is quite low, and this paradox leaves them in a state of ambiguity.

We thus find that a condition that increases the likelihood that ambiguity will dissipate is the value given to a category and this occurs when it is connected to the "self" through a sensemaking process. Indeed, the interruption, which invites the individual to focus on an aspect that is important to him or her, gives value to the category, either at the level of identity, personal interests or felt security. From profile n°1 and 2, we can see that the interruption changed the framing of the engagement in changing the interpretation but not from threat to opportunity but from threat *for the organization* to threat *to themselves*. Looking more closely to this change of point of view, we acknowledged that associated with it were responsible boundaries to the project, a more thoughtful vision of the mission and a more detailed project relatively, for example, to the resources to use.

Secondly, the search for information linked to the interruption phase gives rise to a search for information that supports the basic interpretation linked to the cause of the interruption and stimulates a convergence of the framework used for the enaction and therefore for the action. Aspects of the project become related to the vision of the decision-maker.

### **3.2.3 Emotions and intensity of interpretations**

Profile n°1 is the one within which we find the most intensity. More precisely, emotions and feelings accompany the interruption. It is indeed accompanied, depending on the case, by fear or guilt feelings. These negative emotions seem to be useful because they motivate the



individuals interviewed to take action first in terms of seeking information in order to imagine how to act in the face of this ambiguity. They give rise to a feeling of determination in a second phase, which we can identify from expressions such as *"We're getting into the swing of things for the moment, we don't really know, but what we do know is that we started with a motto at the beginning... we agreed on the values of our ambitions etc... and what we know 100% is that even if we know, for example, that by importing products from China, I say at random, which will be cheaper but which do not fit in with our values at all, we will not do it"*. We did not identify any specific emotions or feelings regarding the other profiles.

*Table 1 Sensemaking factors involved in CSR engagement (Weick, 1995)*

<b>Interruption due to an event that created an environmental shock during the scanning phase</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Shock affects identity</li><li>• Shock affects personal interests</li><li>• Shock affects sense of security</li></ul>	Problems related to the "self": influence the direction of the interpretation	
<b>Enactment (interpretation et categorization)</b>		
<i>Categorisation of societal issues</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Categorization of issues as they need to be addressed now</li></ul>	Dispels ambiguity about how to act, psychological and behavioural commitments (Profile n°1)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Undefined categorization, ambiguity persists and dominates.</li></ul>	No choice in how to act (non-action) (profiles n°2 and n°3)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Abandonment of initiatives with a sustainable focus as a result of a loss of value in the category</li></ul>	Choice not to integrate, for the moment, sustainable initiatives within their project (profile n° 4)	
<b>Emotions (profile n°1)</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Fear</li><li>• Guilt</li></ul>	Intensity : motivates commitment by seeking to align the associative project with the identified problem	

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this paper was to inform the line of research concerned with the antecedents of CSR engagement, and more particularly the evaluations of the engagement in CSR as a





strategic issue, among a group of management students. On the secondary level, personal and contextual characteristics' influence on these evaluations and ultimately on their engagement in CSR, were also considered. Notably, the said sensibility of this generation towards the protection of the environment, the early structure of their association formation and the ambiguity surrounding the concept of CSR. On a third level, we also wanted to acknowledge the presence or absence of the business case vision of CSR within this community.

Primarily, with this research, we add to the line of research interested in describing and exploring the interpretation of strategic issues and sensemaking processes (Dutton & Jackson, 1997). The results show that the engagement of the students in the study is primarily influenced by the sensemaking factor of interruption. Here, interruption is enabled by two elements : available information about societal issues on the one hand, and idiosyncratic characteristics of individuals, such as interests, identity or experience. In addition, we describe how this interruption allows for the connection between the societal issue and the "self" following an environmental shock that disrupts the student's identity, sense of security, or coincides with interests. This interruption does not change the nature of the interpretations to which it applies. Rather, if we look at profiles 1 and 2, the difference is that students in profile n°2 see engagement in CSR as a potential threat to their activities, while students in profile n°1 interpret the non-engagement in CSR as a threat to themselves, showing that sensemaking has created a shift in the object concerned by the threat of engaging or not in CSR. In this way, this research details the processes of sensemaking of the students who did experience an interruption compared to others who did not.

As a contribution to sensemaking theory, this research shows that other than an identity threat as a cause for sensemaking interruption, we add that personnel interests and a feeling of security can be too. According to Maitlis and Christianson (2014), apart from trauma and loss researchers, such challenges to identity have less been explored in an organizational context. For example, some research has examined the sensemaking that is triggered by an experience or event that undermines people's ability to do work that is central to their identity (Maitlis, 2009). With our research, we document this sensemaking process by giving an empirical example. Moreover, we add to this line of research, by adding an example related to the perceived feeling of security and personal interest as triggers of sensemaking.

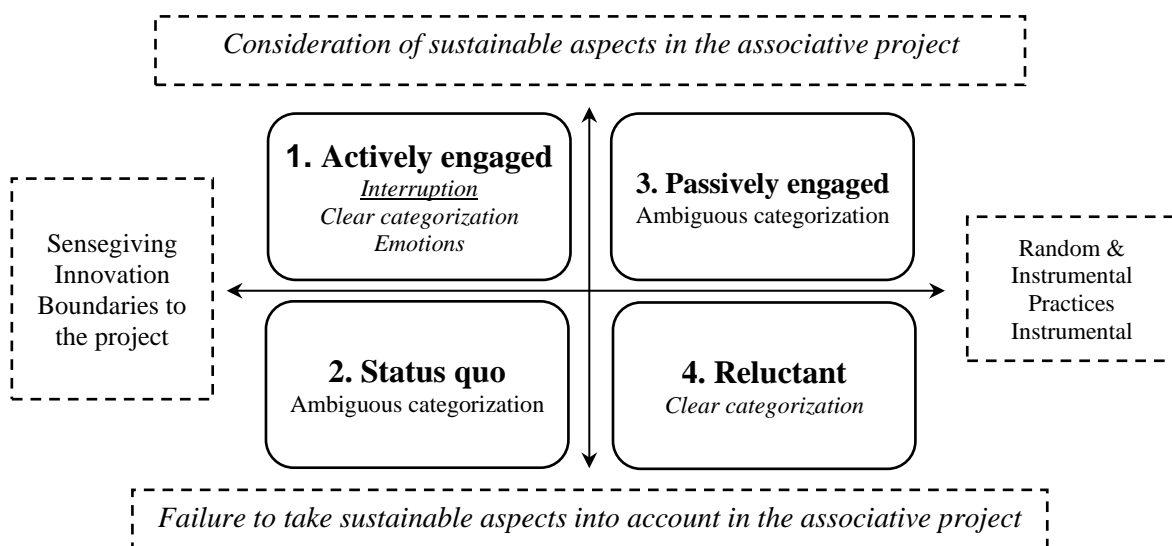
In sensemaking theory, emotions are increasingly understood to be a part of the sensemaking process, influencing for example whether sensemaking occurs, or what it accomplishes, but the empirical work in this line of research is still quite scarce (Maitlis, Christianson, 2014).



And as authors call for further research in this area, with this research we empirically show that fear and guilt can be triggers of sensemaking, prompting the need to find solutions by integrating CSR initiatives.

The business case vision is still the predominant mindset in firms today (Barnett et al., 2021). And even if this means that the sustainable initiatives have grown in number, this does not mean that they are significant. Rather, reports show that even although sustainable initiatives are on the rise, sustainable aspects are still deteriorating, as their scale remains small, and this seems to be directly related to the business case vision. Indeed, it only allows the integration of sustainable initiatives if they align with the economic dimensions. In this context, one goal of this research was to investigate if the new generation would be in the same state of mind, given that it is said to be informed and sensible to the subject. This research shows that as long as the project does not make sense on a personal level for the decision-maker, then the engagement might still be seen as an opportunity or threat or both, and this seems to be directly linked to the ambiguity of CSR. In the end, results show that the more students know about CSR, the more they want to engage into it and the less interpretations compete.

Figure 1. CSR Engagement profiles



Our research has some limitations that should be presented.

Future research is needed to consolidate these results. Indeed, our study is based on a sample of first, second- and third-year bachelor students. It would be appropriate to consolidate the



results by collecting more data from students at different levels, on a larger scale and from other locations.

### *Conclusion*

The purpose of this research was to understand the sensemaking factors that influence the engagement in CSR of students involved in the creation of an associative project. The results show that the majority of students in our study are psychologically and/or behaviourally committed to CSR. The research provides a novel typology that reveals sensemaking patterns of CSR engagement, combining multiple factors influencing the evaluations of CSR. The main contribution resides in empirically showing the central role of the sensemaking interruption and related emotions in CSR engagement. In this way, this research enhances our understanding of antecedents of CSR engagement as well as cognitive processes shaping evaluations of CSR. The results show that ambiguous frame of reference concerning CSR discourages engagement in its activities, and that the business case view dominates when reasons to engage are in competition. Ultimately, CSR engagement depends on the sensemaking interruption felt by the students, which changes the point of view of the decision-maker, from an organizational level to an individual one. Finally, this research shows how the young generation deals with CSR ambiguity how it affects their engagement in CSR.



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