

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Managing tensions in sustainable development in Chinese and New Zealand business partnerships: Integrative approaches

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Abstract

Existing research posits that there are tensions in addressing divergent sustainability issues which need to be managed and embraced by firms. However, if these tensions cannot be addressed adequately, it will not only have negative impacts on individuals' interests but also on the development of organisations and ultimately the prosperity of the society, ultimately resulting in unethical consequences. Hence, this paper empirically examines tensions in addressing divergent sustainability issues and how to manage them between Chinese and New Zealand firms in business partnerships. Guided by an interpretivist philosophy, this research adopts a qualitative and abductive approach as the preferred research method. In doing so, 33 in-depth individual interviews alongside one informal group discussion were carried out at 16 relatively large Chinese and New Zealand firms known for their commitment to sustainability that are in business partnerships. Interestingly, we find that these companies are faced with complex and multiple sustainability tensions. In order to better manage these tensions, we found that these firms adopt integrative approaches with opening, surfacing, collaborative and synergistic strategies which can help these companies to enhance their organisational ambidexterity.

KEYWORDS

ambidexterity, business partnerships, China, New Zealand, paradox, stakeholder engagement, sustainability, tensions

1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper empirically examines tensions in addressing divergent sustainability issues and how to manage them between Chinese and New Zealand firms in business partnerships. As Chinese and New Zealand firms continue to develop partnerships, major challenges

are anticipated around tensions in addressing sustainability issues. Accordingly, with the rise of organisations operating in global markets that explicitly address social and environmental problems (Govindan et al., 2021), they may have contradictory sustainability practices (Rodriguez et al., 2021).

However, if tensions cannot be understood and managed adequately by firms in business partnerships in addressing sustainability issues, then it will not only have a negative impact on their mutual financial profits but could also put business partnerships in danger or even have a detrimental impact on the whole society, ultimately

Abbreviations: IMT, identification of multiple tensions; MSTM, multiple strategies in tensions management; TBL, triple bottom line; WCED, World Commission on Environment and Development.

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resulting in unethical consequences (Hahn et al., 2015; Schad et al., 2016). For example, in 2008, due to having contradictory sustainability practices in addressing melamine contamination, the joint venture business partnership between the largest New Zealand dairy company Fonterra and its now defunct Chinese food company partner Sanlu collapsed (Hembry, 2009; Li & Liu, 2010). As a result, their irresponsible behaviour may lead to negative consequences such as sacrificing various stakeholder benefits (Eweje & Wu, 2010; Gebert et al., 2010), which then generate a vicious cycle (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009, 2010; Smith & Lewis, 2011) of organisational decline over time (Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003).

Further, tensions in sustainability is a relatively new area and is largely unexplored empirically in business contexts (Govindan et al., 2021; Hahn et al., 2016, 2018; Van der Byl & Slawinski, 2016). Joseph et al. (2018) asserted that empirical research on sustainability tensions is limited and thus requires future researchers to conduct more empirical studies in different industries and various contexts. Moreover, the majority of the prior literature has examined tensions in sustainability within firms, while the context of collaborative business partnerships between firms has received very little attention (Hahn et al., 2018; Li, 2016). Hence, the first research question is: *What are the pressing tensions related to sustainability that arise between, or within, Chinese and New Zealand business partnerships?*

In relation to strategies for managing the tensions, while a paradoxical approach has only recently emerged, research on it needs further investigation and it is still nascent (Ozanne et al., 2016; Somlai, 2022; Van der Byl & Slawinski, 2016), and there is still little research on the specific forms of paradoxical responses to tensions in sustainability (Edwards, 2021; Hahn et al., 2018; Hellemans et al., 2021). Moreover, the recent studies which examine the paradoxical approach in sustainability tension management mainly focused on conceptual development, while empirical work is still in its infancy (Brix-Asala et al., 2021; Hahn et al., 2015, 2016), particularly lacking investigation in specific contexts (Fontana et al., 2021; Smith & Tracey, 2016). Hence, the second research question is: *How do Chinese and New Zealand firms in business partnerships manage tensions, and their complex relationships, within a holistic sustainability agenda?*

Against the above background, it is timely and necessary to investigate tensions in addressing sustainability issues in the context of Chinese and New Zealand firms in business partnerships and how these companies manage/embrace the tensions. This paper contributes to scholarly understanding of identification of the tensions and the strategies for managing them. In addition, based on practitioners' interpretations and theoretically supported by literature, it is expected that this paper can improve firms' skills in better managing tensions by addressing divergent sustainability issues simultaneously.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows: the theoretical background conceptualising holistic sustainability is explored through literature that investigates tensions in sustainability in business contexts. Thereafter, this paper reviews organisational strategies, particularly on paradoxical approaches in managing tensions in sustainability,

drawing from paradox theory and organisational ambidexterity theory. Then, the empirical study's research design is described, and the results of this study are provided. The discussion section interprets our novel insights on tensions in sustainability and strategies in managing them. The paper concludes with limitations and suggests opportunities for future scholarly exploration of tensions in addressing sustainability issues in business contexts and better approaches to manage them.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Tensions in sustainability in business contexts

By reviewing the development of the sustainability concept, it is evident that there are two main streams of research which depict this term from two perspectives. On the one hand, some prior studies hold the view that sustainability is an integrated concept which requires three elements of environmental integrity, economic prosperity and social equity to be satisfied for both the present and future (Bansal, 2002; Barbier, 1987; Elkington, 1994; World Commission on Environment and Development [WCED], 1987). On the other hand, another stream of research has reached a consensus that sustainability should be regarded as a dynamic concept which denotes the relationships among environmental, social and economic performance, as managing one dimension well may transform another (Bansal, 2002; Gladwin et al., 1995; Hahn et al., 2015). By integrating these two streams, in this study, sustainability thus is conceptualised as a holistic concept that requires an integration of environmental integrity, economic prosperity and social equity to be satisfied simultaneously in both the present and future in a dynamic equilibrium (Bansal, 2002; Elkington, 1997; Hahn & Figge, 2011; WCED, 1987).

In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature on tensions in sustainability in business contexts (Chen et al., 2021; Fontana et al., 2021; Greer et al., 2021; Hasna, 2007; Hellemans et al., 2021), which can be illustrated from the following three sustainability areas: strategic, intertemporal, and instrumental and moral tensions.

First, Smith (2014) defined strategic tensions 'as contradictory, yet interrelated, demands embedded in an organization's goals' (p. 1592). According to Edwards (2021), most firms have experienced strategic tensions within their organisations, because decision-makers often have contradictory strategies in addressing environmental, social and economic performance. Hahn et al. (2018) further asserted that these kinds of tensions touch the very heart of sustainability, because they involve a diverse set of potentially competing sustainability issues, such as climate change, biodiversity conservation, poverty alleviation, public health and education. Similarly, Li (2016) proposed that tensions may exist in addressing environmental, economic and social objectives between firms. As he explained, while some companies may focus more on financial profits than social values, others may exclusively look at financial returns with no

concern or relatively little concern for social performance. For example, Rodriguez et al. (2021) revealed that tensions existed in the energy transition as the Swedish and Finnish companies have different perspectives on bioenergy with carbon capture and storage.

Second, as required by WCED (p. 43), firms should address short-term business targets and long-term societal goals at the same time. This indicates that the long-term nature of the benefits that a business provides to the society may be in conflict with short-term business benefits for organisations (Carollo & Guerci, 2017; Slawinski & Bansal, 2012, 2015). The short-term versus long-term tensions were named by Slawinski and Bansal (2015) as 'intertemporal tensions' (p. 531): when 'the demands of today differ from the needs for tomorrow' (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 389). For example, Slawinski and Bansal (2015) explored the short-term and long-term tensions in the case of the Alberta oil sands in Canada. They compared five firms operating in Alberta's oil sands and found that some companies have chosen to focus on immediate profits and to delay investments in GHG emissions reductions, while others have chosen to forgo some short-term profits to mitigate climate change in anticipation of future regulations and shifts in market demand.

Third, citing Margolis and Walsh (2003), Hahn et al. (2016) proposed that firms are faced with tensions in addressing instrumental and moral initiatives. They argued that firms focused on instrumental initiatives are essentially driven by organisational benefits, so social issues are only considered if they can bring organisations some economic benefits (McWilliams & Siegel, 2011). In contrast, firms which are driven by moral initiatives ensure that their organisational activities are based on the moral aim to 'do the right thing'. Firms thus 'rest upon fundamentally different and contradicting foundations—i.e. the business case and the moral case, respectively—which gives rise to considerable tensions' (Hahn et al., 2016, p. 214). Similarly, Ashforth and Reingen (2014) investigated the ideal and pragmatic tensions in a natural food corporation. They found tensions between two major informal groups whom they labelled 'idealists' and 'pragmatists' (p. 479). They found that 'idealists endorsed social idealism such as cooperative and environmental values more strongly than did pragmatists, whereas pragmatists endorsed financial viability more strongly than did idealists' (p. 479).

However, these studies have largely focused on conceptual interpretations (Hahn et al., 2016, 2018; Van der Byl & Slawinski, 2016), while empirical work is still lagging behind (Stål et al., 2022), particularly lacking investigation in the specific context between companies (Hahn et al., 2018; Li, 2016).

2.2 | Paradoxical approaches for managing tensions in sustainability

In recent years, some scholars in the sustainability research field have put forward paradoxical approaches which are built on two theories—paradox theory and organisational ambidexterity—to better manage tensions in sustainability for organisations as illustrated in the below sub-section. Before we illustrate paradoxical approaches in managing

sustainability tensions, it is useful to have a look at paradox theory and organisational ambidexterity theory and their implications for tensions management in sustainability.

2.2.1 | Paradox theory and its implications

A paradox is defined as 'alternatives that don't follow from each other; where choosing one alternative acts to negate the other' (Peters, 2012, p. 405). According to Schad et al. (2016), paradox theory is rooted in both Western and Eastern philosophy. In fact, Schad et al. (2016) defined paradox in management as 'persistent contradiction between interdependent elements' (p. 10). This definition clarifies two core characteristics of paradox: contradiction and interdependence (Derksen et al., 2019), as illustrated below.

Early scholars have attempted to argue that paradox denotes a contradictory perspective of diverse competing demands. Cameron and Quinn (1988) demonstrated that 'the key characteristic in paradox is the simultaneous presence of contradictory, even mutually exclusive elements' (p. 2). Likewise, Poole and Van de Ven (1989) described paradox as 'interesting tensions, oppositions, and contradictions between theories which create conceptual difficulties' (p. 564). Further, Lewis (2000) explained that organisational actors experience tensions because the conflicting demands 'seem logical in isolation but absurd and irrational when appearing simultaneously' (p. 760). These definitions indicate the contradictory characteristic of paradox.

However, other scholars asserted that paradoxes depict the complicated connections among opposing elements, highlighting their interdependent nature. Early scholars suggested these inextricable links between opposing elements. Cameron (1986) discovered that contradictory elements are able to operate at the same time, because there is no complete separation among the opposing elements. Similarly, Smith and Berg (1987) explained that 'the contradictions are bound together, the more that members seek to pull the contradictions apart, to separate them so that they will not be experienced as contradictory, the more enmeshed they become in the self-referential binds of paradox' (p. 14). In fact, these definitions express the co-existence of divergent competitive demands which emphasises their synergistic relationships.

Due to its uniqueness in viewing the relationship between two competing demands, numerous scholars have argued that paradox theory should be regarded as a meta-theory to explore organisational tensions and their management across multiple contexts and levels of analysis (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Lewis & Smith, 2014; Schad et al., 2016). In particular, paradox theory provides a better understanding of tensions in sustainability and their complex relationships and provides vital groundwork for better managing/embracing tensions in sustainability (Epstein et al., 2015; Hahn et al., 2018; Van der Byl & Slawinski, 2016). For example, Somlai (2022) suggested that a paradoxical approach for considering food supply chain demands and managers should encourage individuals and teams to learn and collaborate for business success. Hence, a paradoxical perspective on sustainability embraces 'tensions to simultaneously accommodate

competing yet interrelated economic, environmental, and social concerns that reside at different levels and operate in different logics and time frames and in different spatial scales' (p. 236).

2.2.2 | Organisational ambidexterity theory and its implications

Gibson and Julian (2004) demonstrated that organisational ambidexterity represents 'an organization's ability to pursue two disparate things at the same time' (p. 210). Cao et al. (2009) asserted that an ambidextrous firm is one that 'is capable of both exploiting existing competencies as well as exploring new opportunities, and also that achieving ambidexterity enables a firm to enhance its performance and competitiveness' (p. 781). At its heart, ambidexterity represents firms' capacity for managing diverse organisational tensions (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Duncan, 1976; Raisch et al., 2009).

Drawing from organisational ambidexterity theory, scholars in the sustainability research field argued that firms should have the capacity to manage and balance the contradictory yet interrelated sustainability dimensions simultaneously (Ciasullo et al., 2020; Peters & Buijs, 2021), which over time will promote a virtuous cycle of sustainability management (Hahn et al., 2018; Scherer et al., 2013). In order to achieve this, researchers have attempted to draw on structural and contextual ambidexterity to manage tensions in organisations. Structural ambidexterity refers to creating separate structures for different types of activities, which stresses using structure and strategy to enable differentiation (Tushman & O'Reilly, 1996). Gibson and Julian (2004) defined contextual ambidexterity as 'firms' behavioural capacity to simultaneously demonstrate alignment and adaptability across an entire business unit' (p. 209).

Based on the theory, only in recent years have researchers applied structural and contextual ambidexterity to managing tensions in the area of sustainability for firms through what they called a paradoxical approach (Brix-Asala et al., 2021; Hahn et al., 2015, 2016). For example, Hahn et al. (2015) argued that tensions between short-term and long-term goals in sustainability can be managed through resolution strategies. Firms can handle tensions by spatially

separating them as well as by creating a synthesis of the tensions. A spatial separation strategy is based on the notion that there is a difference between short-term and long-term orientations, which requires firms to attend to both orientations through their organisational practices. To pursue a synthesis strategy, firms could implement some alternative organisational practices which enable short-term and long-term orientations to meet, thus exploring the synthesis between the tensions.

Hence, built on paradox theory and organisational ambidexterity, Figure 1 shows that scholars have recommended paradoxical approaches to better manage sustainability tensions.

This paradoxical approach in managing tensions consists of circles. By drawing from paradox theory, the framework starts with the blue arrow that implies firms need to acknowledge tensions and understand them as paradoxical, that is, accommodating interrelated yet conflicting economic, environmental and social concerns with the objective of achieving superior business contributions to sustainable development, which provides vital groundwork. Then it turns to acceptance strategies with which firms are able to accept and embrace the tensions and acknowledge the need to combine different desirable but seemingly incompatible sustainability aspects without emphasising one aspect over others. This allows firms with divergent agendas to keep the paradox open and live with the tensions, facilitating an atmosphere of creativity and innovation.

Next, based on a blend of structural and contextual ambidexterity theory, it turns to resolution strategies. On the one hand, it is imperative for firms to implement a separation strategy which seeks valued differences between competing forces and can address the two poles of the tensions at different locations or at different points in time. On the other hand, firms should operate a synthesis strategy which identifies potential synergies and enables the discovery of new elements that link or accommodate both poles. In this way, tensions will be more acceptable to firms, enabling transference into a more managerial situation without necessarily eliminating the underlying tensions. Over time, firms can ensure environmental integrity, economic prosperity and social equity are satisfied simultaneously in both the present and future in a dynamic equilibrium, thus achieving holistic sustainability.

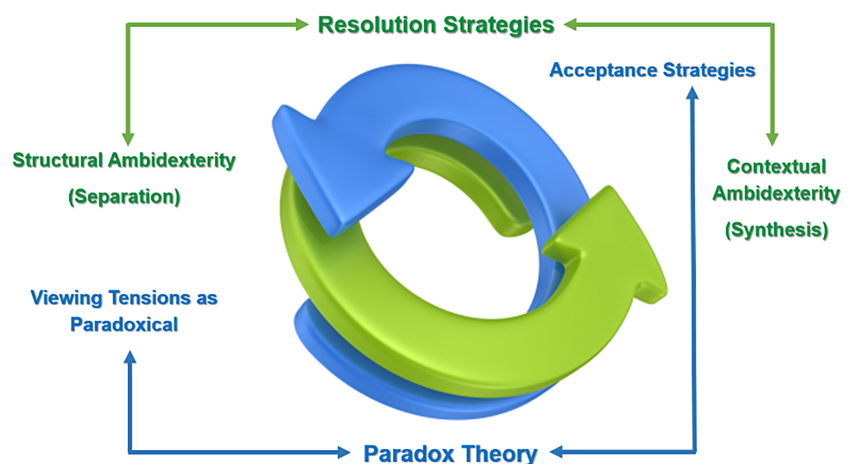


FIGURE 1 Paradoxical approaches for managing tensions in sustainability. Source: Based on Hahn et al. (2015) and Hahn et al. (2016)

3 | METHODOLOGY

3.1 | Research philosophy and methods

In order to empirically examine tensions in addressing divergent sustainability issues and how to manage them between Chinese and New Zealand firms in business partnerships, this paper was guided by an interpretivist philosophy and adopted a qualitative and abductive approach as the preferred research method as the results are based on managers' subjective experience, their own interpretations and perceptions as representatives of their firms (Bryman & Bell, 2003; Creswell, 2013).

In order to develop novel insights into tensions, this study followed an abductive reasoning approach. Throughout constant movements back and forth between theory and empirical data (Wodak, 2004), the abduction approach develops continuous dialogue between observation and the interpreter's pre-existing understanding (Hatch & Yanow, 2003) and thus is more likely to create a dynamic relationship between the existing theory of tensions and empirical data, ultimately providing more enriched perceptions of tensions in the sustainability research field.

Drawing from the traditions of qualitative research, this study utilises semi-structured in-depth interviews. For the present study, we employed semi-structured in-depth interviews because, first, they offer freedom and flexibility to examine exploratory inquiries about tensions in sustainability in Chinese and NZ firms in business partnerships. As Yin (2010) claimed, semi-structured interviews allow participants the freedom to express their views and perceptions in their own terms and provide the rigour and direction of questions especially developed for the research. In the present study, the researcher had a list of relevant questions known as an interview guide. Semi-structured in-depth interviews thus give a voice to participants to openly and freely respond to the questions based on their own experiences, values and knowledge (Maylor & Blackmon, 2005). In this way, it is more likely for the researcher to learn what is in participants' minds concerning the interpretation of tensions in their business partnerships, which fostered a better understanding of the topic in an exploratory way.

In addition, the flexibility of semi-structured interviews enables more probing opportunities for extending the answers to the questions (Patton, 1990). In this sense, semi-structured interviews were helpful for this study to gain a broader and more comprehensive picture of interpretations of tensions in sustainability. Further, semi-structured interviewing provides some degree of uniformity across the varied educational, professional and personal histories of the same group with a standardised interview schedule (Luo & Wildemuth, 2009). In other words, it is this equivalence of meaning that generates the same questions in the same order with every respondent, which indicates the differences can only exist in the answers. This helped the researcher to standardise the semi-structured interview and facilitate comparability, which ensures reliability and validity for this study (Denzin, 1989; Smith, 1975).

Additionally, the choice of semi-structured interviews was guided by recent empirical studies investigating tensions in sustainability (Carollo & Guerci, 2017). As such, Karhu and Ritala (2018) examined tensions in beverage companies in Austria by interviewing 18 managers about decision-making in allocating competing demands among financial and social alternatives. Sharma and Jaiswal (2018) empirically examined how the cognitive frames of individuals at different levels in organisations interact and what these interactions imply for managing sustainability tensions. Similarly, Joseph et al. (2018) explored how companies manage tensions in pursuit of sustainability through interviewing 32 corporate sustainability managers across 25 forestry and wood-products organisations in Australia.

3.2 | Research context and selection of participants

This paper focuses on what tensions occur in sustainability between relatively large Chinese and New Zealand companies across various industries and how these companies manage the tensions. Hence, we used purposeful sampling and snowballing techniques for identifying companies and potential participants (Mason, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994). This was also guided by some recent studies which explore tensions in sustainability within organisations. For example, Ozanne et al. (2016) applied purposeful sampling to select case organisations that were attempting to manage social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainability.

Based on the information provided by the New Zealand China Council (2015) and Statistics New Zealand via the Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment (2016), we found that the majority of Chinese and New Zealand firms in business partnerships are of a relatively large size. The next step was to ensure that selected companies have relatively mature sustainability strategies and implementations so that participating managers would be knowledgeable in the practice of sustainability. In doing so, we read relevant documents and archival records to find out if the selected firms have annual sustainability reports, and whether they provided information on sustainability activities on their websites and through social media. Then firms were approached by personal contacts through emails, LinkedIn and WeChat.

In terms of selection of participants, three criteria needed to be met for this study. First, all the interviews were conducted with participants whose main responsibilities lie in management, senior management and executive positions. The decision to interview people who are in management positions was also guided by the practice of the research area: in recent empirical studies of tensions in sustainability among organisations, the majority of data was collected through interviewing managers, senior managers and CEOs (Carollo & Guerci, 2017; Ferns et al., 2017; Iivonen, 2018). Second, we also made sure that the selected participants are directly involved in managing the business partnerships between their firms and their related partner firms and thus able to provide richer and deeper information on tensions. Third, in order to increase the credibility of findings in this

qualitative research, we also ensured that the informants come from a diverse range of industries such as health and safety, aviation, dairy, IT and technology and other areas. The informants also vary in years of experience in management, ranging from novices to those with more than 29 years of professional experience (Bryman & Bell, 2003; Sandelowski, 1995).

To further ensure that our sample included the most knowledgeable informants, we used a snowballing technique by asking the initial informants to recommend others within their firm or in their partner companies who could offer further insight regarding the research topic. Overall, Table 1 shows the empirical material was based on interviews with 34 respondents from 11 Chinese and New Zealand firms.

3.3 | Data analysis

This study followed the thematic analysis process in the four steps suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Braun and Clarke (2006). This is mainly because the thematic analysis method can deepen understanding and explanation of sustainability tensions and their strategies in managing them through constant comparisons (Braun et al., 2019; Miles & Huberman, 1994). In particular, we used the grounded theory coding technique advised by Corbin and Strauss (1990) to generate all the themes and sub-themes. As suggested by Waldman et al. (2019), qualitative research coding processes such as grounded theory and organisational discourse analysis provided a better way for us to explore tensions and how to manage them.

As a first step, we undertook data familiarisation, whereby all the interviews were transcribed word for word. Transcripts were read and re-read and notes taken to ensure data familiarisation and parts that seemed to be important through line-by-line reading were highlighted. Then, we went through data reduction: that is, coding and categorising in order to make sense of the data through the constant comparative method to find similarities and differences. For coding, we followed the three stages suggested by Corbin and Strauss (1998): open coding, axial coding and selective coding.

In the open coding, we went through the data, examining it, comparing one part with another and beginning to make categorisations. As described by Corbin and Strauss (1990), open codes are a group of incidents with conceptual labels, which are assigned to each phrase, sentence or paragraph. At this stage, we kept asking what was happening in the data and focused on the events, actions and interactions. In this way, 'conceptually similar events/actions/interactions' can be grouped together to form a conceptual category (p. 12). For example, in order to identify the tensions, we were looking for indicator terms described by informants such as 'problems', 'difficulty', 'challenging', 'tensions' and 'opposed/opposing' suggested by related empirical studies (Ferns et al., 2017; Slawinski & Bansal, 2015; Smith, 2014). As a result, sets of open codes were labelled as such, and over time, they were compared and grouped to formulate conceptual categories as shown in Appendix S1.

Once the conceptual codes began to accumulate, we started to categorise them by grouping them under more abstract explanatory terms as conceptual categories (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). In further analysis of the first-order codes, axial coding identified more theoretically informed second-order themes (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). In axial coding, the data were supposed to 'determine the conditions that gave rise to the work, the context in which it was carried out, the action/interactions through which it occurred, and its consequences' (p. 13). Accordingly, we identified a set of codes that were developed more fully as we moved through each additional interview and company. During axial coding, a set of conceptual categories was generated, as presented in Appendix S1.

The third coding step is selective coding which is the final part where the main themes are drawn; it is 'the process by which all categories are unified around a core category' (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 14). In this process, coding was delimited to sub-core categories which are related to the core category. The core category represents the central phenomenon of the study, and the sub-core categories need to stand in relationship to the core category as conditions, action/interactional strategies and/or consequences, where open, axial and selective coding overlap (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). As a result of selective coding, categories and their sub-core categories became more integrated and elaborate to build up the core category for this study; for details, see Appendix S1.

4 | FINDINGS

In this section, the main tensions experienced and the strategies used in managing the tensions are discussed. Table 2 illustrates the findings that multiple tensions in three sustainability areas—triple bottom line (TBL), temporal, and commercial and moral tensions—create more difficulty and challenges for these companies to manage simultaneously.

4.1 | Identification of multiple tensions (IMT)

4.1.1 | Financial dominance of TBL tensions

First, with comments from 15 participants, we identified TBL tensions between Chinese and New Zealand firms in business partnerships. As TBL requires firms to contribute to environmental, economic and social performance (Elkington, 1997), the TBL tensions between Chinese and New Zealand firms in business partnerships thus can be understood as these firms having contradictory strategies in addressing environmental protection, economic prosperity and social justice in their daily business activities. This finding reflects the strategic tensions which were mainly identified in recent studies from a conceptual perspective within firms (Hahn et al., 2015, 2018). With comments from 11 participants at 7 firms, the findings showed that

TABLE 1 Companies and participant profiles

No. of business partnerships	Labelled selected companies	Type of business partnerships	Time of partnership	Industry	No. of interviewed participants	Type of interviewing	Labelled interviewed participants	Titles of interviewed participants	Years of working experience of participants
Partnership 1	A: New Zealand	Joint venture business partnership	2 years	Farming	3	Telephone	A1	Director	Over 15 years
						Telephone	A2	Senior manager	Less than a year
Partnership 2	B: Chinese				2	Telephone	A3	Director	6 months
						Telephone	B1	Non-executive director	One and a half years
Partnership 3	C: New Zealand	Acquisition business partnership	6 years	Appliance manufacturing	2	Face-to-face	B2	Director	10 months
						Telephone	C1	Chief executive officer	29 years
Partnership 4	D: Chinese				2	Telephone	C2	Director	3.5 years
						Telephone	D1	Director	19 years
Partnership 5	E: New Zealand	Strategic business partnership	5 years	Telecommunications	8	Telephone	D2	Manager	11 years
						Face-to-face	E1	Manager	12 years
Partnership 6	F: Chinese				3	Face-to-face	E2	Manager	12 years
						Face-to-face	E3	Senior manager	About 12 years
Partnership 7	G: New Zealand	Joint venture business partnerships	15 years	Health and safety	2	Face-to-face	E4	Senior manager	5.5 years
						Face-to-face	E5	General manager	Nearly 23 years
Partnership 8	H: Chinese				0	Face-to-face	E6	Senior manager	15 years
						Face-to-face	E7	Manager	7.5 years
Partnership 9	I: New Zealand	Joint venture business partnership	2 years	Aviation	5	Telephone	E8	Manager	9 years
						Face-to-face	F1	Director	7 years
Partnership 10	J: Chinese				0	Face-to-face	F2	Director	11 years
						Face-to-face	F3	Manager	5 years
Partnership 11	K: New Zealand	Joint venture business partnership	4 years	Dairy	5	Telephone	G1	Director	Over 10 years
						Telephone	G2	Independent director	1.5 years
Partnership 12					0	Face-to-face	I1	Manager	3 years
						Face-to-face	I2	Senior manager	4 years
Partnership 13					0	Telephone	I3	Senior manager	5 years
						Face-to-face	I4	Manager	10 years
Partnership 14					0	Telephone	I5	Manager	2.5 years
						Face-to-face	K1	Director	9 years
Partnership 15					0	Face-to-face	K2	Manager	6.5 years
						Face-to-face	K3	Senior manager	7 years

TABLE 1 (Continued)

No. of business partnerships	Labelled selected companies	Type of business partnerships	Time of partnership	Industry	No. of interviewed participants	Type of interviewing	Labelled interviewed participants	Titles of interviewed participants	Years of working experience of participants
Partnership 7	L: Chinese M: New Zealand	Acquisition business partnership	4 years	Disposal	1	Telephone	K4	Senior manager	6 years
	N: Chinese				0	Face-to-face	K5	Director	15 years
Partnership 8	O: New Zealand P: Chinese	Acquisition business partnership	1 year	Health and safety	1	Telephone	M1	Chief executive officer	10 years
					0	Face-to-face	O1	Senior manager	Over 20 years

Chinese firms tended to pursue financial growth, while their New Zealand partner firms tended to achieve financial returns and environmental or social objectives. For example, director A1 clearly reported such tensions:

What I would say is that our Chinese partner firm has a big focus on the financial performance. I think their main driver is to return a dividend for their shareholders whereas we are focusing on returning a dividend for our shareholders and also maintaining sustainable farming such as setting goals around animal treatment and wastewater management. (Director A1)

Similarly, one non-executive director B1 asserted:

Honestly, we do not worry about sustainability issues. To us it is just about looking at whether business activities can meet financial goals or not. Our Chinese directors do not understand the business; they only can look at budgets and if the New Zealand partner firm does not meet the monthly budget, then there is something wrong. We believe that our New Zealand partner will look after the environment such as protecting waterways and animal welfare. (Non-Executive Director B1)

The above managers' comments suggested that company A tended to make sure that its financial growth is built on protecting the natural environment, while its Chinese partner company B tended to only look at how to get financial returns driven by shareholders' interests. This finding is consistent with the results of a recent empirical study by Ferns et al. (2017) who identified tensions between economic growth and environmental protection among the European supermajor oil companies such as BP, Shell and Total.

More evidence was also found in other business partnerships between firms. Three participants at company E mentioned the economic and social tensions (Howard & Jaffee, 2013; Sharma & Bansal, 2017) with their partner company F. While their firm tended to balance performance between financial and social development, their Chinese partner firm does not take the social aspect into consideration:

I think our Chinese partner company has a very strong business mind-set driven by financial performance such as looking at growth and market share. However, I think our company is trying to balance performance between financial and social development. (Senior Manager E6)

Another two informants from company E shared a similar view that their Chinese partner company F's business mind-set neglected the community, for example:

TABLE 2 Frequency of identification of multiple tensions (IMT)

Companies	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Participants	Total participants/ companies	
Identification of multiple tensions (IMT)																			
Financial dominance of triple bottom line tensions																			
Chinese firms: Economic performance versus	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	A1, B1, E1, E2, E6, G1, I1, K3, K4, K5, O1	11/7	
NZ partner firms: Economic and environmental/social performance																			
NZ firms: Economic performance versus																			
Chinese partner firms: Economic and environmental/social performance	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	C1, C2, D1, D2	4/2	
Financial tensions dominant addressing sustainability issues becomes secondary																			
Chinese partner firms: Economic and environmental/social performance	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	A1, A2, A3, B1, B2, E3, E4, E6, E7, E8, F3, G1, G2, I1, I2, I3, K1, K2, M1, O1	20/9	
Temporal tensions																			
Chinese firms: Today's business success versus	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	B1, E1, E2, E3, E4, E5, E6, F2, G1, G2, I1, I4, K3, K4, K5, M1, O1	17/8	
NZ partner firms: Tomorrow's business development and public welfare																			
NZ firms: Today's business success versus																			
Chinese partner firms: Tomorrow's business development and public welfare	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	C1, C2, D1, D2	4/2	
Insufficient commercial and moral tensions																			
Commercial imperatives versus	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	C1, K1, K3, K4, K5	5/2	
Moral imperatives																			
Hardly any commercial and moral tensions as both parties behave ethically according to the law																			
Commercial imperatives versus	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	A1, C1, D1, D2, E1, E2, E3, E4, E6, E7, E8, F1, F2, F3, I1, I2, I3, K5, M1	19/8	

Honestly, the social perspective is not engaged in our partner company. We told them about several great events, but they do not want to sponsor them. I have to say that our partner company has not contributed to the local community; from brand recognition, they are not socially responsible. (Manager E2)

The above participants' comments endorsed the view that while one firm takes addressing both financial and social goals seriously, another firm has an exclusive focus on financial profit with no concern for the social aspect (Li, 2016), thus highlighting tensions in this business partnership.

Interestingly, the findings also indicated that, although some participants reflected that Chinese and New Zealand firms in business partnerships had tensions in addressing these environmental, financial and social issues, the majority of tensions in their business partnerships are around commercial activities while how to deal with sustainability issues had not yet come up or had been relegated to an unimportant position. As evidence, one director at firm A stated:

I think it is quite early days for us and our Chinese partner to have some tensions in addressing environmental or social issues. As this partnership has lasted only about 2 years, the only tension we have come across was about economic goals. (Director A3)

Then this informant described the rationale for this; that is, the main reason this partnership was established was because it is a win-win joint venture partnership for both firms. As he continued:

We could see the benefits of this joint venture partnership. The reality was our company was carrying a lot of debts. At this time, forming this partnership helped us out of financial difficulty and also realised our ambition to grow exports into the Chinese market. While on the other side, it is also beneficial for our Chinese partner firm, because they can get sustainable food from us. (Director A3)

A similar opinion was also held on the partnership between New Zealand firm I and Chinese firm J. As one participant asserted:

We are in a joint venture partnership. Both of our companies work together and then split the revenue between us. Addressing sustainability issues is not part of the objectives of partnership with the Chinese firm, we are not signing up to agree with sustainability goals, we are here for business and we practise sustainability separately. (Senior Manager I3)

This statement was also affirmed by manager I1: 'What makes this partnership really attractive to us is because of the large Chinese market, so about 80% of the customers are Chinese, 20% are

New Zealanders'. The above three managers' comments indicated that the reason there is hardly any tension in addressing sustainability issues in this business partnership is because they only entered the partnership for financial gains. The above participants' comments suggested that major tensions occurred in addressing financial objectives between Chinese and New Zealand firms in business partnerships, thus leading to neglect of social and environmental issues. This reflects the view that although some companies promote sustainability practices, firms seem to have a traditional focus on financial performance (Epstein et al., 2015).

4.1.2 | Temporal tensions

The second tension is temporal as Chinese and New Zealand firms in business partnerships confront strategies for addressing today's business success and tomorrow's business development and public welfare, based on 21 participants' sentiments.

Interestingly, the findings also showed the differences between Chinese and New Zealand firms in addressing sustainability issues from a temporal perspective. With comments from 17 participants at 8 firms, the empirical analysis demonstrated that most New Zealand firms tended to have a sustainable business as well as being socially responsible, while their Chinese partner firms just wanted to achieve short-term business profits without thinking of long-term plans. For example, one senior manager at firm E clearly demonstrated this tension:

There are many short-term and long-term tensions in our business partnership. Our Chinese partner firm is like any company, which is driven by short-term profits and financial positions. They have targets and they have things to achieve for the financial year, so that drives them very heavily and it skews their decision-making. They will recommend to us and try to push us towards things that are commercially favourable for them. However, our firm on the other side probably will be more focusing on the long-term development. (Senior Manager E3)

This argument was also confirmed by another participant at firm E. According to this participant:

From my perspective, our Chinese partner firm does not play a long game. They play a short to medium-term game, because they do not think about what they are going to do next. However, we are looking at, for example, 25% to 30% less power consumption for the same output in our products. This has a big impact not only on business development but also for environmental protection, which means we can run some devices in cold temperatures with less carbon emissions. (Senior Manager E2)

The above two managers' comments indicated that, in comparison to the Chinese firm F, its New Zealand partner firm E tended to contribute to developing business and managing public goods that are 'non-excludable and nonrivalrous such as water and air' (Slawinski & Bansal, 2015, p. 533).

4.1.3 | Insignificant commercial and moral tensions

Third, the empirical analysis showed that only five participants reported commercial and moral tensions in their business partnerships. For instance, the CEO of company C reported the tensions with their Chinese partner company D in shutting down one important factory:

We shut an important factory only late last year. In fact, the decision was made locally and it did have a bad impact as a large number of people lost jobs. Before the final decision was made, there were some debates between our leadership team and our partner company. The Chinese team wanted to keep it open for longer because they did not want to see many people lose jobs, but we wanted to shut it down, as it was no longer financially profitable. (Chief Executive Officer C1)

From this perspective, it can be seen that tensions arose between New Zealand company C and its Chinese partner company D. While company C's action tended to be driven by commercial imperatives, company D cared more about moral responsibility by considering employee interests, and its potential impact on the local community. This finding is consistent with Hahn et al. (2016) who proposed that firms are faced with tensions in addressing instrumental and moral initiatives, thus highlighting firms confronting tensions 'resting upon [a] different, contradicting foundation, the business case and the moral case, respectively' (p. 215).

4.2 | Multiple strategies in tensions management (MSTM)

4.2.1 | Integrative approaches in tension management

Based on comments from participants, Table 3 shows the empirical analysis that the Chinese and New Zealand companies in business partnerships applied integrative approaches in tension management which can be achieved through four strategies: opening, surfacing, collaborative and synergistic.

The empirical analysis of this study showed that, first of all, it is important to apply opening strategies in managing sustainability tensions between Chinese and New Zealand companies in business partnerships, which is based on the comments from 11 participants at 7 companies. Opening strategies can be defined as, when it comes to managing the sustainability tensions, it is imperative for Chinese and

New Zealand companies in business partnerships to formulate initial open dialogue through talking through the sustainability tensions by being transparent and honest with each other instead of avoiding or being afraid of discussing them. For example, two informants at company E mentioned opening strategies in managing the temporal tensions in their business partnership. As one general manager demonstrated:

I think the first thing to deal with the temporal tensions with our Chinese partner company is to be talking together so that both parties can understand where the concerns or the issues might lie and then look at ways we can work together to get a good outcome that everyone is committed to. What I mean is both parties need to discuss the tensions openly first and then look at possible solutions, thereafter selecting a way forward that both parties agree and commit to. (General Manager E5)

Echoing this statement, another senior manager also noted that when it comes to managing the temporal tensions in their business partnerships, it is imperative for both parties to communicate by discussing the issues:

I think we cannot solve the tensions without open communication. Usually we would first arrange some joint meetings to discuss about these tensions. So we just simply talk through these things through sorts of open discussion. In a lot of cases we are in negotiation positions that we both talk about the issues. (Senior Manager E3)

The above two respondents' comments indicated that it is important for both companies to have open discussions regarding the temporal tensions they came across, thus highlighting that both companies should feel free to talk about the problems and issues, which provides a preliminary step towards managing them.

Similarly, two participants at company G mentioned their open dialogue and transparency in managing the temporal and TBL tensions with their Chinese partner company H. As one director at company G elaborated:

I think when it comes to the temporal tensions, both parties firstly just worked out through expressing our views transparently by having conversations. Normally, we would have a very open dialogue in that both parties are honest about each other. For example, previously we had lots of robust conversations around the tensions; from our perspective, we wanted to know our Chinese partner company's opinions and their concerns. On the other hand, they also wanted to know our view in relation to the tension. (Independent Director G2)

TABLE 3 Frequency of integrative approaches in tensions' management

Companies	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Participants	Total participants/ companies	
Multi-strategies in tensions management (MSTM)																			
Integrative approaches and their proactive outcomes																			
Opening strategies through formulating open dialogue and transparency			√	√	√		√		√		√		√				C1, D2, E1, E2, E3, E5, G1, G2, I1, K5, M1	11/7	
Surfacing strategies as a tool to generate creativity	√	√	√		√				√		√		√				A1, B2, C1, C2, E4, I1, K5, M1	8/7	
Collaborative strategies through working with partner companies and multiple stakeholders			√	√	√	√	√		√		√						C1, C2, D1, D2, E1, E3, E4, E5, E6, E8, F3, G2, I2, I5, K1, K4, K5	17/7	
Working collaboratively with partner companies			√	√	√	√	√				√						C1, C2, D2, E1, E3, E4, E5, E6, E8, F3, G2, K1, K5	13/7	
Working collaboratively with multiple stakeholders				√			√		√		√						D1, G2, I2, I5, K1, K4	6/4	
Synergistic strategies through building synergies between opposed sustainability demands	√		√	√	√		√		√		√						A1, C1, C2, D1, D2, E1, E2, E3, E4, E5, E8, G1, G2, I1, K5	15/7	

This sentiment was also supported by the CEO G1 who remarked on the importance of having open discussions in managing the TBL tensions with their Chinese partner company: 'when it comes to the solution to the TBL tensions, the first thing we would do is to have a robust discussion around the board table and not be afraid of talking through the issues'. The above two participants' quotations illustrated that having open dialogue is important in order for both parties to talk about the tensions. To achieve this, both parties tried to be honest with each other without being afraid of discussing the issues, thus highlighting the transparency of the conversation.

Apart from opening strategies as elaborated above, the empirical analysis also showed that some Chinese and New Zealand companies in business partnerships adopted surfacing strategies in managing sustainability tensions in their business partnerships. With comments from eight participants from seven companies, in this study, surfacing strategies can be defined as, after having open dialogue through talking through the tensions, instead of repressing sustainability tensions, the Chinese and New Zealand companies tended to encourage these tensions as a useful tool to foster an atmosphere of innovation and creativity. As evident in an example provided by one director at company A in managing the TBL tensions with their Chinese partner company B:

I think both parties encourage the tensions, because this provides diversity of sustainability practice which helped us to make better decision-making. I think some of the thinking that our Chinese partner company has brought to our business has certainly been beneficial to having a sustainable business. (Director A1)

The above director's comment indicated that instead of repressing the TBL tensions in their business partnerships, both companies promote and use them as a tool to foster diversity of sustainability ideas for better decision-making. This affirms the view that the companies like Nike, Procter and Gamble and Nissan North America tended to use the TBL tensions as a source of new ideas, innovation and creativity rather than seeing them as dilemmas hindering effective decision-making (Epstein et al., 2015).

This view was also supported by other participants at other companies. One senior manager at company E reported that to deal with the temporal tensions, their company and their Chinese partner company F both tended to encourage them as a strategy to bring creativity and innovation. As this participant announced:

To manage the temporal tensions, both parties treated them as healthy debates because we get more options, more things to think about, which means that we can have the benefits of more ideas in the pot to pick the best solution for everybody. It's a great way to work because different people have been brought up in different ways and they have different approaches to doing things and so you can generally get the best of all the ideas and make it positive for the organisations. (Senior Manager E4)

The above manager's statement signified that both companies in partnership made use of the temporal tensions as a way to generate more options in practising sustainability which allows them to select the better decisions. This confirms that accepting sustainability tensions creates 'a source of new ideas and innovation, rather than seeing them as impediments to effective decision-making' (Epstein et al., 2015, p. 42).

Apart from the above two strategies involved in integrative approaches, 17 informants at 7 Chinese and New Zealand firms in business partnerships also reported that they applied collaborative strategies to manage the tensions in their business partnerships. Based on the comments from participants, the collaborative strategies can be defined as integrating the creative ideas from both parties in a partnership, but also working with multiple stakeholders such as shareholders, staff, customers, independent organisations, government and NGOs which might be more professional in practising sustainability initiatives. These collaborative strategies can be explained from two perspectives—working collaboratively with partner companies and working collaboratively with multiple stakeholders—which will be elaborated in detail below.

Based on the comments of 13 participants at 7 companies, the empirical analysis showed that some New Zealand companies tended to work collaboratively with their partner Chinese companies through making joint efforts to address each side of the sustainability tensions in their business partnerships. This was most evident in the partnership between New Zealand company E and its Chinese partner company with comments from seven participants. In order to manage the temporal tensions, one general manager at company E mentioned working collaboratively with their Chinese partner company:

We have been working together for a shared vision to deal with the temporal tensions, because we believe good partnerships are formed and committed by two groups and work with each other to achieve a good outcome. That is two-way; both parties should have some responsibility to work through the tensions. (General Manager E5)

To better explain this statement, one senior manager at company E elaborated that in order to address the temporal tensions in their business partnership, it is important for both parties to work collaboratively through addressing each side of the tension:

Actually, both parties tried to work collaboratively as a partnership so that our Chinese partner company can contribute to work on achieving short-term financial goals and our company can make efforts to work towards our long-term strategic goals. Not always possible but often it is possible. In this way, we can ensure to achieve both short-term and long-term goals. (Senior Manager E3)

The above manager's comment indicated that the temporal tensions can be managed in a collaborative way through each company attending to one side of the tension. This endorsed the view that, by applying the structural ambidexterity theory, the short-term and long-term sustainability goals can be managed through a spatial separation strategy so that firms should attend to both short-term and long-term orientations through their organisational practices, thus highlighting their differentiation (Hahn et al., 2015).

However, it is not enough to manage the sustainability tensions through just working collaboratively with their partner companies. The empirical analysis also showed that some Chinese and New Zealand companies in business partnerships also choose to work with multiple stakeholders who may have more professional knowledge in addressing sustainability issues such as saving energy and reducing pollution. For instance, 'We had tensions with our Chinese partner company in how to reuse the leftover food. In order to manage this tension, we collaborated with local government and one NGO in developing better solutions to reduce cabin waste without comprising quarantine controls'. In this way, the companies were able to save money and reduce landfill use:

Eventually, we identified 40 products that were low risk which can be recycled for future use. To give you an example we load up to 1,000 cups, all items would be then sent to a landfill and they would be steamed, sterilised and then go out for deep burial. Since we started, the report showed we have covered 21 tonnes of product, 1.3 million units. It is an amazing initiative and it is a lot of hard work, but we are very excited to see it come to fruition. This approach helped us to achieve economic and environmental wins. (Senior Manager I2)

The above manager's comment signified that the environmental tensions between their company and their Chinese partner company can be managed through working with local government and NGOs where they can provide better solutions for managing them, thus helping both companies to achieve financial prosperity and environmental initiatives.

Similarly, another good example was illustrated in the business partnership of companies K and L. One manager in company K reported their company and their Chinese partner company experienced tension in how to address the environmental issue of getting natural energy such as gas and coal in the South Island:

For example, with coal in New Zealand, the reality is that there are no solutions for coal and natural gas in the South Island. In regard to this issue, our Chinese partner company had a solution that is opposed to ours. As a result, we have to work with an energy team which has been focused for decades around energy efficiency and we noticed incredible improvements in that area as we had a partnership with an energy company on biodiesel. Through this collaboration, we are amongst the most emissions efficient farming systems in the world so that we can provide sustainable nutrition to our consumers over time. At the same time, the companies can also make money. (Manager K2)

The above manager's statement implied that partnership with an energy company which is experienced in energy efficiency helped both companies in managing the environmental tensions in their business partnership, which helped them to achieve both financial profits and environmental improvements.

In addition, the empirical analysis showed that some Chinese and New Zealand companies in business partnerships tended to adopt synergistic strategies in managing sustainability tensions. Based on the comments from participants, in this study, synergistic strategies can be defined as the Chinese and New Zealand firms in business partnerships looking for synergies between the opposed sustainability demands to let the tensions meet/connect through linking mechanisms such as liaison people. In this way, sustainability tensions can be managed until consensus/shared values can be achieved for both parties involved. As one director at company D remarked in relation to how to manage the temporal tensions:

I think how to deal with the temporal tensions with our Chinese partner company is that, how to make the long-term and the short-term goals meet. That is very important. Luckily the board of directors from both parties understand the direction in order to make an alignment between these short-term and long-term goals. (Director D1)

The CEO of company C also expressed a similar view: 'Both companies are looking for synergies to make both short-term and long-term concerns meet. In fact, we are looking for connections between the tensions', as the CEO C1 remarked. The above two informants' comments indicated that, in order to manage the temporal tensions in their business partnership, both parties tended to search for connections or synergies between short-term business profits and long-term business and public welfare. This endorses the idea that 'building on the synergies can resolve perceived tensions between the elements of corporate sustainability' (Angus-Leppan et al., 2010, p. 243). In order to better search for the synergies and connections between the short-term and long-term tensions, one director at company C elaborated the importance of liaison people:

I think the liaison person's role is really important who helped both companies to be incredibly effective at helping building coalition and synergies. This is mainly because this liaison person understands what our company and our Chinese partner want and is interested in relation to addressing these sustainability goals and then navigating an outcome that is win-win for both sides. (Director C2)

The above director's comment signified that, in order to manage the temporal tensions, their company has used the liaison person as a linking mechanism to help both parties to explore the synergies between the short-term and long-term sustainability goals in order to make both meet. This reflected the view that, by applying contextual ambidexterity theory, firms can introduce linking mechanisms to make a connection or alignment between competitive demands in organisations (Cao et al., 2009; Kauppila, 2010; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2008; Tushman & O'Reilly, 1996).

5 | DISCUSSION

The first strategy identified in this paper under integrative approaches is 'opening strategies through formulating open dialogue and transparency'. The empirical analysis of this study showed that, when it comes to managing sustainability tensions, first of all, it is imperative for Chinese and NZ companies in business partnerships to formulate initial open dialogue through talking through the sustainability tensions by being transparent and honest with each other instead of avoiding or being afraid of discussing them. However, this finding is different from the arguments proposed in the theoretical framework of the paradoxical approach that acknowledging tensions and understanding them as paradoxical provides vital groundwork for managing them (Hahn et al., 2015, 2016). For instance, two participants at company E stated that, when it comes to the temporal tensions in their business partnership, both parties had open discussions and felt free to talk about the problems and issues, which provides a preliminary step towards managing them. Hence, the first proposition is made:

Proposition 1. Formulating open dialogue through transparency provides a preliminary step for Chinese and NZ companies to manage sustainability tensions in their business partnerships.

The third type of strategies under integrative approaches is 'collaborative strategies through working with partner companies and multiple stakeholders'. Based on the empirical findings, these collaborative strategies can be discussed from two perspectives: working collaboratively with partner companies and working collaboratively with multiple stakeholders. On the one hand, some participants reported that their companies tended to work collaboratively with their partner companies through making joint efforts to address each

side of the sustainability tensions in their business partnerships, thus highlighting their collaborative efforts. This finding is consistent with the paradoxical approach; by utilising the structural ambidexterity theory, sustainability tensions can be managed through a paradoxical approach of a spatial separation strategy (Hahn et al., 2015, 2016). As they asserted, it is necessary for firms to seek value differences between competing forces to address the two poles of the tensions at different locations or at different points in time. On the other hand, the empirical analysis also showed that some Chinese and NZ companies in business partnerships also choose to work with multiple stakeholders such as shareholders, staff, customers, independent organisations, government and NGOs, because these multiple stakeholders may have more professional knowledge in addressing sustainability issues such as saving energy and reducing pollution. In doing so, it is more likely for these companies to better manage the sustainability tensions in their business partnership, thus providing more opportunities to achieve sustainability holistically. From these findings and discussion, the following proposition can be made:

Proposition 2. In order to achieve holistic sustainability, it is not only important for the Chinese and NZ companies to work collaboratively by making joint efforts in managing each side of the competing sustainability demands: they should also work with multiple stakeholders such as shareholders, staff, customers, independent organisations, government and NGOs as they may have more professional knowledge of sustainability practice.

The fourth type of strategies under integrative approaches is 'synergistic strategies through building synergies between opposed sustainability demands'. The findings of the present study revealed that, when it comes to managing sustainability tensions, the Chinese and NZ firms in business partnerships look for synergies between the opposed sustainability demands to let the tensions meet/connect through linking mechanisms such as liaison people. As a result, consensus/shared values can be achieved for both parties involved. This finding affirms the arguments discussed in the proposed theoretical framework in Figure 1 that, by applying contextual ambidexterity theory, sustainability tensions can be managed through the paradoxical approach of a synthesis strategy through identifying potential synergies that enable the discovery of new elements that link or accommodate both poles. In doing so, tensions can be managed into a dynamic equilibrium (Hahn et al., 2015, 2016). In terms of linking mechanisms, recent studies suggested that firms could implement some alternative organisational practices which enable the competing sustainability demands to meet, thus exploring the synthesis between the tensions (Hahn et al., 2015, 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Interestingly, this study found that these companies used liaison people to help them to seek synergies and connections between the opposing sustainability demands to let them meet.

Proposition 3. With the help of the linking mechanism of liaison people, sustainability tensions between Chinese and NZ companies in business partnerships can be managed through synergistic strategies that look for synergies between the opposed sustainability demands in order to let them meet.

6 | THEORETICAL AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1 | Theoretical contribution

Through a qualitative method using an abductive approach, the findings of this research add value to the limited body of research that has investigated tensions in sustainability. This research fills some specific theoretical gaps in the literature and broadens understanding of paradox theory and organisational ambidexterity theory and their theoretical implications from the following perspectives.

First, this study has become one of the few studies to empirically apply paradox theory and organisational ambidexterity theory through investigating tensions in addressing sustainability issues in the specific context of Chinese and New Zealand business partnerships. As noted in the literature review, an increasing amount of recent studies examining tensions in sustainability in organisations and companies have largely focused on conceptual interpretations (Hahn et al., 2016, 2018; Van der Byl & Slawinski, 2016), while empirical studies are limited in different industries and various contexts (Joseph et al., 2018). This research heeds this call by empirically investigating how sustainability tensions are managed between Chinese and New Zealand firms in business partnerships.

Second, this study advances paradox theory by empirically investigating multiple sustainability tensions. Reviewing previous studies of tensions in sustainability, most recent studies tended to focus on one type of tension in addressing sustainability issues (Iivonen, 2018; Sharma & Bansal, 2017; Slawinski & Bansal, 2015). In contrast, the contribution of this study is identifying the existence of multiple tensions in three sustainability areas between Chinese and New Zealand business partnership firms. In particular, prior studies argued that short-term and long-term tensions have received relatively little attention in business sustainability research (Bansal & DesJardine, 2014; Ortiz-de-Mandojana & Bansal, 2016). Rather, temporal tensions were identified in this study in that the Chinese and New Zealand firms in business partnerships confront strategies in addressing today's business success and tomorrow's business development and public welfare. This finding confirms the short-term and long-term sustainability tensions in which 'the demands of today differ from the needs for tomorrow' (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 389). However, this finding is different from what Slawinski and Bansal (2015) called 'intertemporal tensions' (p. 531) which illustrates the tensions between short-term business profits and long-term societal development.

Third, existing literature that examined a paradoxical approach has recently emerged from conceptual development by drawing

from structural and contextual ambidexterity theory (Hahn et al., 2015, 2016); however, empirical work is still in its infancy and lacks investigation in specific contexts (Smith & Tracey, 2016). Furthermore, organisational ambidexterity theory has only recently emerged conceptually; hence, there are hardly any practical implications for tensions discussed in the sustainability management field (Hahn et al., 2015, 2016). However, this paper contributes to structural and contextual organisational ambidexterity theory in relation to the paradoxical approach of acceptance and resolution strategies by empirically investigating them in the specific context of Chinese and New Zealand business partnerships. In particular, this research develops the work of Hahn et al. (2015) and Hahn et al. (2016) by presenting integrative approaches with opening, surfacing, collaborative and synergistic strategies. The empirical findings of surfacing, collaborative and synergistic strategies confirm their work on acceptance and resolution strategies in paradoxical approaches. Rather, instead of interpreting tensions paradoxically, this paper found that engaging in transparent, open dialogue provides a preliminary step for Chinese and New Zealand companies to manage sustainability tensions in their business partnerships. In addition, this research highlighted that it is not only important for these companies to work collaboratively by making joint efforts in managing each side of the competing sustainability demands: they should also work with multiple stakeholders as they may have more professional knowledge of sustainability practice.

6.2 | Managerial implications

This paper has also underscored some practical implications for firms which face similar tensions in addressing sustainability issues in collaborative business partnerships. This is mainly because the findings of this study are based on the perceptions from participants who are in management, senior management and executive positions and are directly involved in managing the partnerships between their firms and their partner firms. Here, the first practical implications of this empirical study are illustrated in Figure 2, which provided practical strategies for Chinese and New Zealand companies in business partnerships on how to manage the tensions successfully in achieving sustainable development.

The framework illustrates integrative approaches in managing tensions through a virtuous circle. In particular, the framework highlights that when the companies adopt integrative approaches, their managers do not necessarily use paradoxical logic. This virtuous circle shows that, firstly, conducting open, transparent dialogue in order for Chinese and NZ companies to discuss the tensions provides a preliminary step. Then it turns to surfacing strategies in that these companies need to use sustainability tensions as a useful tool/opportunity in order to generate an atmosphere of creativity and innovation for better decision-making. Next, on the one hand, drawing from structural organisational ambidexterity theory, these companies should work collaboratively by making joint efforts in managing each side of the competing sustainability demands and should also work with multiple stakeholders. On the other hand, drawing from contextual



FIGURE 2 Integrative approaches: Managing tensions in sustainability

organisational ambidexterity theory, these companies can look for synergies between the opposed sustainability demands in order to let them meet by means of liaison people. As a result, proactive outcomes will help these companies to advance their sustainability practice through inter-organisational learning, enhance their mutual understanding and strengthen their business partnerships over time, thus achieving holistic sustainability. Once these companies can see these beneficial outcomes, then they are more likely to repeat these strategies.

Second, this paper can help the practitioners to recognise that they face multiple sustainability tensions to manage at the same time. This reminds the practitioners that it is difficult and challenging for them to manage the sustainability tensions simultaneously, because addressing one competing demand may affect another one. This paper also suggests that, instead of ignoring or neglecting sustainability tensions, it is imperative for practitioners to make use of the sustainability tensions as a useful tool to sustain their business partnerships and enhance their organisational ambidexterity and, consequently, achieve holistic sustainability.

Third, although the findings of this paper clearly identified multiple sustainability tensions between Chinese and New Zealand companies in business partnerships, most of these tensions have been relegated to unimportant positions or been neglected by these companies. For example, one of the important conceptual categories is 'financial dominance of triple bottom line tensions', which demonstrated that, although some participants reflected that their companies in business partnerships had tensions in addressing these environmental, financial and social issues, the majority of tensions are around commercial activities while how to deal with sustainability issues had not yet been raised or had been considered unimportant. Moreover, another conceptual category elaborated is 'insignificant commercial and moral tensions'. This revealed that, although a few participants reported these tensions, the majority of participants felt that there is hardly any such tension in their business partnerships, because these participants interpret following a moral rationale as just making sure their business obeys the laws and regulations, rather than going beyond this to look at the responsibility for doing the right thing for individuals and their related community. Hence, it can be suggested to the practitioners that Chinese and New Zealand companies lack awareness of the importance of these tensions by mainly setting financial goals, thus putting sustainability tensions into an unimportant position. This sheds new light on why tensions in addressing financial and social responsibilities of a firm are based on economics.

7 | LIMITATIONS, FUTURE RESEARCH AND CONCLUSION

Despite its contributions and implications, this research has some limitations that call for further investigation in future research. The first limitation for this research is about generalisability: this is mainly because data collection was restricted to a specific context between Chinese and New Zealand companies in business partnerships, which suggests that the findings of this research may not be applicable to

other contexts. Further, the unit of analysis in this research focused on a small sample of participants in Chinese and New Zealand companies in business partnerships. However, following abductive reasoning, the purpose and objective of this qualitative research is to gain a richer understanding of tensions in sustainability based on participants' real experience and subjective interpretations, which helped the researcher to achieve analytical generalisability instead of statistical generalisability. From this perspective, the researcher encourages future studies to extend this work by exploring the tensions in other empirical contexts through conducting more quantitative research.

In conclusion, this paper empirically investigated tensions in sustainability between Chinese and New Zealand firms in business partnerships through showing how tensions arise and are managed. In doing so, 33 in-depth individual interviews alongside one informal group discussion were carried out at 16 relatively large Chinese and New Zealand firms in business partnerships, with staff who are in management, senior management and executive positions, and directly managing their business partnerships. Based on the findings, alongside the support of paradox theory, organisational ambidexterity and related literature, a framework was established which provides integrative approaches for better managing tensions in sustainability. Accordingly, this paper demonstrates that Chinese and New Zealand firms in business partnerships are faced with complex and multiple sustainability tensions. However, these companies tended to ignore and neglect them by putting their main focus on financial issues. In order to better manage these tensions, it is recommended that these firms adopt integrative approaches with opening, surfacing, collaborative and synergistic strategies.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

All the authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

ETHICS STATEMENT

(Humans were only involved.) All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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