



# The effects of B2B sustainable brand positioning on relationship outcomes

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## ABSTRACT

The global pandemic and the economic consequences that follow have impelled B2B firms to revisit their positioning strategy so as to emphasize sustainability. However, it is still unclear whether B2B firms would benefit from positioning themselves as sustainable organizations. Drawing upon social exchange theory, this study examines the role of commitment as the underlying mechanism whereby B2B sustainable brand positioning influences relationship outcomes. A study involving senior managers of Australian B2B firms revealed the critical role of calculative and affective commitment in mediating the relationship between B2B sustainable brand positioning on willingness-to-pay premium price (WTP) and switching intention. However, buyer-supplier value congruence influences the effects of sustainable brand positioning on calculative and affective commitment in the opposite direction. Specifically, value congruence positively moderates the effects of sustainable brand positioning on calculative commitment, but negatively moderates the effects of sustainable brand positioning on affective commitment. The findings provide empirical evidence supporting the benefits that B2B firms can obtain by adopting sustainable brand positioning.

## 1. Introduction

The global pandemic and its economic consequences have compelled firms to evaluate the way they conduct business so as to emphasize sustainability. Even before the pandemic, there was a growing demand for the evaluation of the non-financial (i.e. environmental and social) aspects of firm operations, driven by global consumers' increasing awareness of sustainability (Adams & Abhayawansa, 2022). A recent study found that about 90% of business executives believe that consumers would hold businesses responsible for their environmental impact (Environmental Defense Fund, 2019). This emphasis on sustainability has affected how firms choose their suppliers, indicated by an increasing number of international firms committing to work only with suppliers that adhere to a high level of environmental standards (Villena & Gioia, 2020). For example, in 2018, renowned multi-national corporations requested environmental information from approximately 5500 suppliers which led to a significant reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by 633 million metric tons (Forbes, 2019).

The conservation of environmental resources relies heavily on contributions and collaborative efforts from multiple stakeholders, including firms and consumers. Therefore, in recent years, firms have embraced sustainable brand positioning strategies in order to make

positive contributions to the environment (Casidy & Yan, 2022; Kapitan, Kennedy, & Berth, 2019). Prior researchers posit that the adoption of sustainable brand positioning offers several benefits to firms as it gives them opportunities to create unique product offerings (Centobelli, Cerchione, & Mittal, 2021) which in turn improves business performance (Lee & Park, 2016). However, although sustainability is becoming increasingly important in the B2B sector (McKinsey, 2022), few researchers have studied how sustainable positioning can help the B2B firms. For example, Casidy and Yan (2022) highlighted the lack of research on the marketing side of sustainability and pointed out how sustainable positioning can benefit B2B firms. Sheth and Sinha (2015, p. 87) called for research to “examine sustainability based B2B branding in the larger context of stakeholder marketing”. Andersen, Bujac, and Åberg (2021) requested a more integrated research effort on sustainable B2B branding. The present study addresses these research gaps by examining the effects of B2B sustainable brand positioning on willingness-to-pay premium price (hereafter WTP) as well as switching intention as important indicators of relationship outcomes (Mohan, Nyadzayo, & Casidy, 2021; Morgan & Rego, 2006; Nyadzayo, Mohan, & Casidy, 2020).

In this study, we adopted a customer-centered paradigm (Salunke, Weerawardena, & McColl-Kennedy, 2019; Shah, Rust, Parasuraman,

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Staelin, & Day, 2006) by examining suppliers' sustainable brand positioning from the perspective of the customers, in line with Casidy and Yan (2022). A customer-centered perspective in sustainability research is important as it allows suppliers to understand how customers' perceptions of the sustainable image of the supplier is related to important relationship outcomes. Underpinned by social exchange theory (SET; Bagozzi, 1975), the present study posits that B2B sustainable brand positioning influences WTP and switching intention via affective commitment and calculative commitment. However, prior research has suggested that value congruence may affect customers' willingness to commit to a relationship with a supplier (Zhang & Bloemer, 2008). Hence, we suggest that value congruence acts as a boundary condition on the relationship between B2B sustainable brand positioning and commitment.

We surveyed 389 senior managers of B2B firms in Australia and tested our predictions by means of a survey. Our study contributes to B2B literature on sustainability research and provides practical suggestions for B2B managers regarding the way they can achieve favorable relationship outcomes by leveraging their sustainable image and focusing on distinctive types of commitment (i.e. calculative vs. affective) in their relationship with buyers.

## 2. Review of literature

### 2.1. B2B sustainable brand positioning

Sustainability refers to a conscious effort to fulfill present needs while not jeopardizing the needs of future generations (United Nations, 1987). While B2C firms have generally incorporated sustainability into their strategy more so than their B2B counterparts (Chamorro, Rubio, & Miranda, 2009), B2B customers are generally more knowledgeable about sustainability because of their higher level of expertise (Cawsey & Rowley, 2016). Moreover, recent studies have found green environmental factors to be one of the critical determinants of purchase decision among B2B buyers (Quintana-García, Benavides-Chicón, & Marchante-Lara, 2021; Vesal, Siahtiri, & O'Cass, 2021). This recent trend towards green consumption has encouraged B2B firms to re-position themselves as sustainable businesses in order to gain customer trust, which in turn influences firms' performance (Casidy & Yan, 2022).

In order to influence buyer perception, suppliers need to clearly communicate the sustainable nature of their offerings and operations. Effective communication of the supplier's sustainability can shape customers' perceptions, which in turn drives purchase decisions (Cantele & Zardini, 2018). In this study, we focus on the environmental aspect of sustainability because of the increasing pressure imposed on firms to conform to stringent government regulations to reduce global warming (Sheth & Sinha, 2015). For instance, in April 2021, the European Climate Law was passed by the European Union (2022), setting a target of 55% reduction in emissions by 2030, which compelled European firms to engage in environmentally sustainable operations aligned with this target.

Prior studies have examined the impact of B2B sustainability on revenue and profitability (Aupperle, Carroll, & Hatfield, 1985; Choi & Ng, 2011). Furthermore, a recent study by Casidy and Yan (2022) found that relational and competency trust mediates the B2B sustainable brand positioning and buyer performance relationship. However, apart from Casidy and Yan (2022), few studies have examined the impact of B2B sustainable brand on relationship outcomes. The present study extends Casidy and Yan (2022) research by assessing the impact of sustainable brand positioning on relationship outcomes through the mediating role of commitment.

### 2.2. Social exchange theory

The social behavior between two parties in a dyadic exchange is underpinned by the social exchange theory (hereafter SET) (Bagozzi,

1975). In an inter-firm relationship, the quality of the relationship between two parties is contingent upon the actions of the parties. If both parties engage in actions that bring them mutual benefits, the relationship may generate positive outcomes such as loyalty and WTP (Blodgett, Bakir, & Rose, 2008). Because switching costs in B2B relationships are relatively higher than those in the B2C environment (Blut, Evanschitzky, Backhaus, Rudd, & Marck, 2016), B2B firms have a stronger motivation to maintain long-term relationships in order to maximize economic benefits compared to their B2C counterparts (Chang, Tsai, Chen, Huang, & Tseng, 2015).

The essence of SET is the concept of a reciprocal agreement. According to SET, relational exchanges generate not only economic value, but also emotional/affective value for each party (Luo & Donthu, 2007). The extrinsic and intrinsic value in SET translates to commitment, which reflects buyers' intention to maintain their relationship with their supplier. In this study, we utilized Moorman et al. (1992, p. 316) definition of commitment as "an enduring desire to maintain a valued relationship". In a committed relationship, both parties invest maximum efforts in maintaining their relationship because each is important to the other (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Most studies related to B2B have explored two dimensions of commitment, namely *affective* and *calculative commitment* (Casidy, Nyadzayo, & Mohan, 2020; Čater & Čater, 2010; Mohan et al., 2021). Affective commitment is the buyers' desire to build and maintain relationships with suppliers due to emotional attachment and a sense of belongingness (Čater & Zabkar, 2009), whereas calculative commitment reflects buyers' desire to maintain relationships with suppliers in order to receive economic benefits and/or avoid losses (Čater & Zabkar, 2009).

The effects of affective commitment on relationship outcomes have been firmly established in prior studies. However, the effects of calculative commitment on relationship outcomes tend to vary depending on the context. For example, Casidy et al. (2020) concluded that among Australian B2B purchasers, affective commitment with a particular supplier significantly influences their intention to adopt a new innovation offered by the supplier, while calculative commitments have no significant effects. Nyadzayo, Mohan, and Casidy (2020) found that calculative commitment significantly influences WTP of Chinese customers but has no effects on the WTP of Australian customers. More recently, Mohan et al. (2021) reported that calculative commitment does not influence WTP, but indirectly influences positive word-of-mouth behavior via customer identification. In this current study, we conduct a closer examination of the relational dynamics by taking into account the influence of affective and calculative commitment as an underlying mechanism whereby sustainable brand positioning influences relationship outcomes.

### 2.3. Value congruence

In an inter-firm relationship, each party may identify another party's values and compare them with its own. This identification process is referred to as 'value congruence', defined as "the extent to which partners have beliefs in common about what behaviors, goals and policies are important or unimportant, appropriate or inappropriate, and right or wrong" (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 25). Value alignment between partners in an inter-firm relationship leads to greater efficiency and productivity (Chatman & Barsade, 1995), less uncertainty, and increased confidence (Edwards & Cable, 2009), which may in turn strengthen commitment.

Value congruence has been studied in multiple domains including organizational behavior (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005), social psychology (Aron, Steele, Kashdan, & Perez, 2006), and marketing (MacMillan, Money, Money, & Downing, 2005; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Wang & Zhang, 2017). Specific to the B2B context, Wang and Zhang (2017) found that buyer-supplier value congruence has a positive effect on distribution performance due to an increase in information sharing and the ability to solve the problem together.

Furthermore, value congruence influences brand trust (Madhavaram & Hunt, 2017), word-of-mouth, the level of commitment held between two parties (Zhang & Bloemer, 2008), and value co-creation in B2B setting (He, Huang, & Wu, 2018).

Prior studies have examined the role of value congruence as a mediator across a diverse range of contexts. For example, in a study involving over 5000 social service workers, person – organization value congruence was found to mediate the effect of job resources on collective psychological ownership held by the social service workers (Liang, Su, & Wong, 2021). In a green consumption context, followers' value congruence with their leaders was found to mediate the relationship between green transformational leadership and employee green behavior (Wang, Zhou, & Liu, 2018). In the hospitality context, Chiang and Birtch (2010) found that employee–organization service value congruence mediates the effects of pay-for-performance and work attitudes among hotel service staff. Other studies have also examined the role of value congruence as a moderator in ethical contexts. For example, Cheng, Wei, and Lin (2019) found that leader-follower value congruence moderates the effect of responsible leadership on unethical pro-organizational behavior among salespeople. Similarly, Lee, Choi, Youn, and Chun (2017) found that value congruence moderates the effects of ethical leadership on moral efficacy in employee-supervisor relationship contexts.

Despite the recent findings discussed above, to the best of our knowledge, no studies have examined the role of value congruence in buyer-supplier relationships in the B2B marketing context. In this study, we theorize for the role of value congruence as a boundary condition on the relationship between sustainable brand positioning and commitment, which in turn influences relationship outcomes. On the basis of social exchange theory, we propose that when two parties within a supply chain have high value congruence, they will be able to work effectively and efficiently, due to an increase in information sharing and joint problem solving (Lee et al., 2017; Wang & Zhang, 2017). As such, the effects of sustainable brand positioning and relationship commitment should be strengthened when buyers and suppliers have a high level of value congruence.

#### 2.4. Relationship outcomes

Relationship quality is an important domain of research in B2B marketing (Zhang, Watson, Palmatier, & Dant, 2016). A high quality relationship between buyers and suppliers are likely to generate significant benefits such as higher commitment (Čater & Čater, 2010), lower switching intention (Casidy & Nyadzayo, 2019), and higher brand equity (Marquardt, 2013), which can lead to competitive advantage. Researchers have utilized various constructs to measure relationship outcomes, such as WTP (Casidy & Nyadzayo, 2019; Nyadzayo, Mohan, & Casidy, 2020), positive word-of-mouth (Mohan et al., 2021), innovation adoption (Casidy et al., 2020), and loyalty (Casidy & Nyadzayo, 2019).

Buyers' willingness-to-pay premium price to use the products/services offered by a supplier is an effective indicator of relationship outcomes that have been examined in prior B2B studies (Casidy & Nyadzayo, 2019; Nyadzayo, Mohan, & Casidy, 2020). For example, Casidy and Nyadzayo (2019) found that relationship quality positively influences WTP through the mediating role of relationship value. More recently, Nyadzayo, Mohan, and Casidy (2020) found that sustained competitive advantage influences WTP via the mediating role of relationship quality. Similarly, switching intention has also been used as a measure of relationship outcome in prior B2B studies (Blessley, Mir, Zacharia, & Aloysius, 2018; Faroughian, Kalafatis, Ledden, Samouel, & Tsogas, 2012). For example, Blessley et al. (2018) found that psychological contract violation mediates the effects of psychological breach attribution on supplier switching intention, while Faroughian et al. (2012) found that customers' perception of sacrifice and benefits have significant effects on switching intention via the mediating role of

satisfaction. Drawing upon these prior findings, in this study we adopted WTP (Casidy & Nyadzayo, 2019) and switching intention (Blessley et al., 2018) as a measure of relationship outcomes. We provide a full definition of our relationship outcome measures, along with other key constructs used in this study in Table 1.

### 3. Hypotheses development

Based on the preceding discussions, we propose that sustainable brand positioning would have positive effects on WTP, and negative effects on switching intention, respectively. Further, we posit that the effect of sustainable brand positioning on WTP and switching intention is mediated by calculative commitment and affective commitment. Moreover, prior research demonstrates that value congruence may change the extent to which customer firms are willing to commit to a supplier (Zhang & Bloemer, 2008). Therefore, we propose that value congruence could moderate the influence of sustainable brand positioning on calculative commitment and affective commitment. Our conceptual model is depicted in Fig. 1.

#### 3.1. B2B sustainable brand positioning on relationship outcomes

Engagement with a sustainable supplier can generate long-term benefits for customers, ranging from environmental protection to improved well-being (Savitz, 2013). Studies demonstrate that firms that source their materials from sustainable suppliers are perceived as superior by customers, resulting in enhanced firm performance (Kapitan et al., 2019). Driven by increasing pressure from customers and policymakers, firms have begun to evaluate their supply chains in order to improve their sustainable operations, and to pressure their suppliers to engage in environmentally-sustainable operations (Forbes, 2019). Consequently, more and more firms are attempting to re-position themselves as “sustainable” in order to attract more environmentally-conscious customers while strengthening the loyalty of their existing customers. For example, Amazon pledged \$2 billion for Climate Pledge Fund for firms that design products that “decarbonize” the earth, while Target has committed to reducing the landfill generated by its supply chains and stores by 75% through its recycling program (Forbes, 2020).

Because engagement with a sustainable supplier ultimately improves the reputation of the customer firms, B2B sustainable brand positioning would create value for buyers and suppliers alike within the supply chain. SET dictates that buyers are willing to pay more to a supplier if

**Table 1**  
Lists of constructs and definitions.

| Construct                        | Source                          | Definition  |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| Sustainable Brand Positioning    | Kapitan et al. (2019)           | Buyer perception of the extent to which the supplier engages in sustainable operations  |
| Value Congruence                 | Morgan and Hunt (1994, p. 25)   | “The extent to which partners have beliefs in common about what behaviors, goals and policies are important or unimportant, appropriate or inappropriate, and right or wrong”   |
| Calculative Commitment           | Čater and Zabkar (2009, p. 786) | The extent to which the buyer maintains a relationship with the supplier because of “the significant anticipated switching costs or lack of alternatives”                       |
| Affective Commitment             | Čater and Zabkar (2009, p. 786) | The extent to which the buyer maintains a relationship with the supplier “because they like their partner, enjoy the partnership and feel a sense of loyalty and belongingness” |
| Willingness-to-Pay Premium (WTP) | Casidy and Nyadzayo (2019)      | The extent to which the buyer is willing to pay a premium price to use the supplier's offerings.  |
| Switching Intention              | Blessley et al. (2018)          | Buyer's intention to switch to another supplier for the same products/services  |

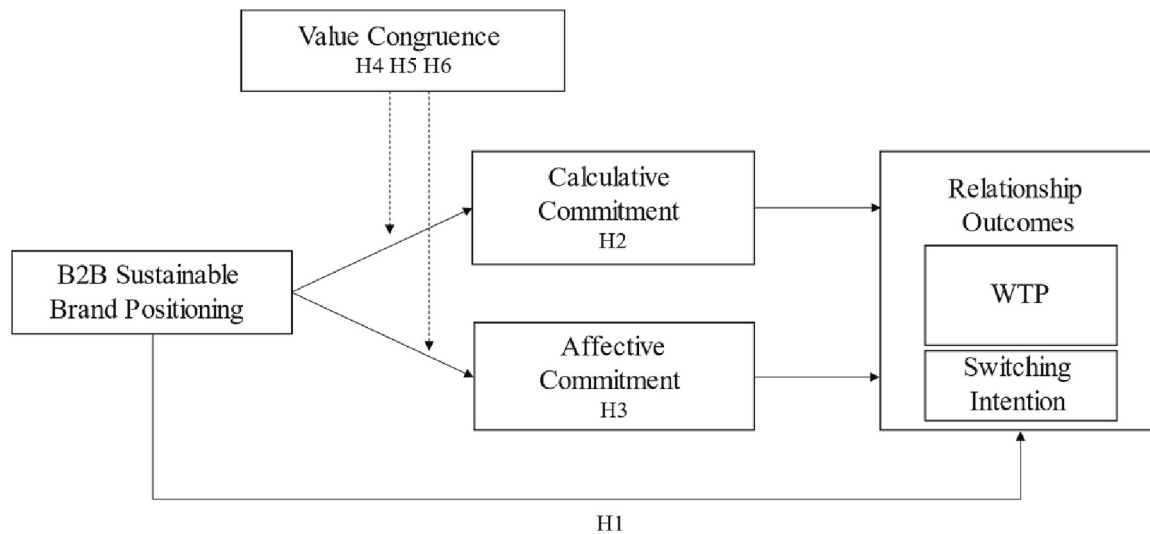


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

they perceive significant benefits associated with the offering (Casidy & Nyadzayo, 2019; Hald, Córdón, & Vollmann, 2009). Sustainable suppliers generate value for customers in regard to conserving resources and reducing the carbon footprint (Paulraj, 2011). Hence, we contend that buyers are willing to pay more to engage with a firm with strong sustainable brand positioning, as they anticipate significant benefits associated with their engagement with such firms. This leads us to the first hypothesis:

**H1a.** B2B sustainable brand positioning has positive effects on WTP.

In the B2B relationship, customers tend to stay with the same supplier for the long term, particularly when they are on good terms with that supplier (Casidy & Nyadzayo, 2019; Čater & Čater, 2010). Studies have found that suppliers that are perceived as having a sustainable image are likely to establish a strong, positive relationship with customers due to a stronger level of trust (Casidy & Yan, 2022). Hence, even though other suppliers may offer better promotional deals, buyers are likely to stay with a sustainable supplier because of the quality of their relationship. Therefore, we contend that B2B sustainable brand positioning would reduce the intention to switch to another supplier.

**H1b.** B2B sustainable brand positioning has a negative influence on switching intention.

### 3.2. The mediating role of commitment

Consistent with SET, a fruitful and successful relationship requires a high level of commitment. A committed relationship helps to reduce uncertainty between two parties and it helps each party achieve its own goals and objectives (Blau, 2017). In the present study, we postulate for the importance of commitment as a bridge between sustainable brand positioning and relationship outcomes.

Commitment's role in influencing relationship outcomes has been intensely studied in the literature (e.g., Casidy et al., 2020; Keh & Xie, 2009; Mohan et al., 2021; Nyadzayo, Mohan, & Casidy, 2020). SET generally distinguishes between economic-based and emotional-based commitment, which reflect the essence of calculative and affective commitment (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). In recent years, firms have come under increasing pressure to adhere to government regulations to reduce their carbon footprint (Vesal et al., 2021). Thus, suppliers exhibiting strong sustainable brand positioning are perceived as more valuable to buyers as they would help the latter to comply with government regulations. Further, as mentioned earlier, B2B buyers are increasingly looking for environmentally-friendly suppliers to build a

positive brand image in the eyes of the end-consumers (Kapitan et al., 2019). These perceived economic benefits are likely to strengthen calculative commitment, which in turn strengthens buyers' willingness to pay premium price to engage with sustainable suppliers (Keh & Xie, 2009). At the same time, SET dictates that a successful value proposition leads to a long-term relationship (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). This is particularly true for the B2B relationship where switching costs tend to be relatively high (Iankova, Davies, Archer-Brown, Marder, & Yau, 2019). Hence, we contend that sustainable brand positioning leads to stronger calculative commitment among buyers which then leads to greater WTP and less switching intention. Hence, we posit the following:

**H2a.** B2B sustainable brand positioning enhances WTP via calculative commitment.

**H2b.** B2B sustainable brand positioning reduces switching intention via calculative commitment.

Past research demonstrates that B2B sustainable brand positioning leads to relational trust among buyers which in turn leads to better firm performance (Casidy & Yan, 2022). A B2B relationship is a more personalized one, where there can be constant interaction and/or exchanges of information and resources relating to sustainability, which in turn develops into a longer-term partnership between two firms (Babu et al., 2020). This is further supported by SET, such that when one party obtains value or benefit from the relationship, the relationship tends to continue until such time as no benefit can be obtained. Therefore, we expect that in B2B buyer-supplier relationships, both parties would continue to exchange information and work together to achieve their goals, thus increasing affective commitment. Furthermore, consistent with Casidy and Yan (2022) finding, B2B sustainable brand positioning helps to foster a relationship between supplier and buyer through relational trust. Hence, in our study, it is proposed that B2B sustainable brand positioning results in a higher level of affective commitment, that further increases buyers' willingness to pay premium price to use the supplier (Nyadzayo, Mohan, & Casidy, 2020). An increase in the affective commitment also increases brand loyalty (Richard & Zhang, 2012), thereby reducing the intention to switch. Hence, we posit the following:

**H3a.** B2B sustainable brand positioning enhances WTP via affective commitment.

**H3b.** B2B sustainable brand positioning reduces switching intention via affective commitment.

### 3.3. The moderating role of value congruence

Value congruence is a fundamental element of inter-firm relationships that has attracted great interests from organizational researchers (Kalliath, Bluedorn, & Strube, 1999; Ostroff, Shin, & Kinicki, 2005). According to SET, value congruence plays a crucial role as a precursor to both trust and commitment in inter-firm relationships (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In the B2B literature, earlier studies have found that there are positive relationships between value congruence and relationship outcomes, including distributor (channel) performance (Wang & Zhang, 2017) and relationship quality (Pan, Zhang, Hu, & Liu, 2020).

While some firms may be motivated by reputational concerns to engage in sustainable initiatives, others may have genuine motives for engaging in sustainable operations which reflect their core values as sustainable firms (Kapitan et al., 2019). When both buyer and supplier firms have similar values relating to sustainability, both parties would be more committed to the environmental cause due to their common expectations and mutual understanding. Value congruence has also been shown to reduce uncertainties (Lusch & Brown, 1996), increase trust (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Yim, Tse, & Chan, 2008), and increase the sharing of information (Jia, Cai, & Xu, 2014; Wang & Zhang, 2017), all of which are key precursors to affective commitment. At the same time, value congruence also helps to build strong relationships between calculative commitment and sustainable brand positioning. As both parties are working together, they understand each other's needs and wants, which puts downward pressure on costs (Bunduchi, 2008).

Given extant literature on value congruence, the effect of sustainable brand positioning on affective and calculative commitment can be moderated by value congruence. In the higher value congruence setting, since they understand each other due to high level of beliefs and values, both parties should have less tensions, more focused and thus, increasing rapport between each other. Hence, the sustainability positioning should give a stronger message and lead to a higher level of calculative and affective commitments.

However, in the value incongruence setting, both parties tend to have significant differences in goals, beliefs, and values. Hence, consistent with prior literature (Lee et al., 2017), the effect of sustainable positioning on relational outcomes may be weakened when value congruence is low because firm positioning is inherently developed based on buyers' perception. If the buyer has little trust in the supplier, the positioning may weaken or may not have any effects on commitment. Hence, consistent with SET, we theorize that the effects of sustainable brand positioning on calculative commitment and affective commitment will be stronger when there is a strong level of value congruence between buyers and suppliers. Formally:

**H4a.** Value congruence positively moderates the effects of sustainable brand positioning on calculative commitment.

**H4b.** Value congruence positively moderates the effects of sustainable brand positioning on affective commitment.

As discussed in the preceding section, value congruence has been found to minimize uncertainties (Lusch & Brown, 1996) and increase trust (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Yim et al., 2008). Similarly, studies have found that value congruence is associated with stronger level of commitment. For example, Verquer, Beehr, and Wagner (2003) found that employee – organization value congruence is positively related to organizational commitment, whereas Zhang and Bloemer (2011) found that value congruence is positively related to affective commitment. Studies have also found that higher level of value congruence is positively related to WTP (Lei, Wang, Peng, & Guo, 2020) and negatively related to switching intention (Zhang & Bloemer, 2008). Drawing upon these findings, we hypothesize that value congruence would moderate the mediating effects of calculative and affective commitment on WTP and switching intention. Specifically, we theorize that sustainable brand

positioning would lead to stronger calculative and affective commitment among buyers who have congruent values with the suppliers. These higher level of commitment, in turns, would lead to stronger willingness to pay premium to purchase the goods/services offered by the supplier, and reduce the buyers' intention to switch to another provider. Formally:

**H5.** Value congruence (a) positively moderates the mediating effects of calculative commitment on WTP and (b) negatively moderates the mediating effects of calculative commitment on switching intention.

**H6.** Value congruence (a) positively moderates the mediating effects of affective commitment on WTP and (b) negatively moderates the mediating effects of affective commitment on switching intention.

## 4. Methods

### 4.1. Study design

We engaged a market research company to distribute our study invitations to a pool of potential respondents comprising senior managers and/or executives of Australian B2B firms. The data were collected throughout December 2020 – February 2021. The respondents were required to be in managerial and/or executive positions in B2B firms in Australia at the time of data collection.

Our survey design follows the procedure recommended by recent studies on relationship quality and outcomes (e.g., Mohan et al., 2021; Nyadzayo, Casidy, & Thaichon, 2020). At the beginning of the survey, respondents nominate a supplier firm with which they have worked closely. The supplier may be a company offering tangible goods or services. Out of an initial pool of 1000 respondents, we proceeded to exclude ineligible participants, including those who did not hold a senior managerial role at the time of the survey, and those who were unable to mention or nominate a regular supplier. In total, 389 respondents (42% Female;  $M_{age} = 40$ ) participated in the study. A detailed description of the firm characteristics, including firm size (number of employees), income, and industry sector is displayed in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
Firm characteristics.

|                          |                            | %    |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|------|
| Number of Employees      | 1–4                        | 23.4 |
|                          | 5–19                       | 13.6 |
|                          | 20–199                     | 27.2 |
|                          | 200 and more               | 35.7 |
| Annual Income            | Less than \$1,000,000      | 32.4 |
|                          | \$1,000,000 to \$5000,000  | 29.6 |
|                          | \$5000,000 to \$10,000,000 | 19.8 |
|                          | More than \$10,000,000     | 18.3 |
| Industry Sector          | Agriculture                | 2.3  |
|                          | Banking / Finance          | 18.5 |
|                          | Business Services          | 4.1  |
|                          | Communications             | 2.8  |
|                          | Construction               | 6.9  |
|                          | Consumer Services          | 2.8  |
|                          | Education                  | 4.6  |
|                          | Government                 | 4.1  |
|                          | Hospitality                | 3.3  |
|                          | Insurance                  | 0.5  |
|                          | Manufacturing              | 4.1  |
|                          | Mining                     | 2.3  |
|                          | Professional Services      | 12.6 |
|                          | Property                   | 1.5  |
|                          | Retail                     | 9.0  |
|                          | Transport                  | 3.3  |
| Utilities                | 0.8                        |      |
| Wholesale / Distribution | 2.8                        |      |
| Others                   | 13.4                       |      |

4.2. Measures

We adopted / adapted existing measurements from the literature (see Table 3) to operationalize our constructs, using 7-point Likert scales. Specifically, sustainable brand positioning scale was adapted from Kapitan et al. (2019), calculative commitment scale was adapted from Chang, Wang, Chih, and Tsai (2012) whereas affective commitment scale was adapted from Čater and Čater (2010). Our moderator, value congruence, is a single-item construct adopted from Wang and Zhang (2017). Finally, to measure relationship outcomes, we adopted WTP scale items from Casidy and Nyadzayo (2019) and switching intention items from Blessley et al. (2018).

4.3. Tests for common method bias (CMB) and non-response bias

In order to assess potential non-response bias, we conducted mean difference testing between early and late respondents with respondent characteristics as the variables of interests. Our analysis did not find any major differences in firm size ( $M_{early} = 3.03$ ,  $M_{late} = 3.21$ ,  $t(76) =$

Table 3

Measurement items.

| Construct (items)   | SFL   | Standard Errors | t     |
|---|-------|-----------------|-------|
| <b>Sustainable Brand Positioning</b>  |       |                 |       |
| Green words were used by the supplier firm to describe its practices.                           | 0.766 |                 |       |
| Because I use the supplier firm in my supply chain, I feel green.                               | 0.828 | 0.064           | 17.95 |
| I would cite the supplier firm as a good example of green behavior.                             | 0.887 | 0.061           | 19.58 |
| The supplier firm...  |       |                 |       |
| • uses sustainable actions in its practices.  | 0.849 | 0.056           | 18.57 |
| • has established processes that demonstrate sustainability.                                    | 0.864 | 0.057           | 18.93 |
| • has established business initiatives that demonstrate a focus on the environment.             | 0.877 | 0.055           | 19.35 |
| • considers the environment, society, and economics in its decisions.                           | 0.840 | 0.054           | 18.21 |
| • clearly positions itself as being sustainable.  | 0.879 | 0.056           | 19.26 |
| • is clearly a sustainable firm.  | 0.882 | 0.057           | 19.34 |
| • is known for being environmentally responsible.   | 0.839 | 0.061           | 18.22 |
| <b>Calculative Commitment</b>   |       |                 |       |
| It pays off economically to be a customer of this supplier.                                     | 0.872 |                 |       |
| I would suffer economically if the relationship were broken.                                    | 0.594 | 0.078           | 11.4  |
| This supplier has cost advantages versus other suppliers.                                       | 0.769 | 0.059           | 15.1  |
| <b>Affective Commitment</b>   |       |                 |       |
| We like being associated with [Supplier X].   | 0.805 |                 |       |
| We have positive feelings towards [Supplier X].   | 0.912 | 0.054           | 21.31 |
| We believe [Supplier X] is doing the right thing by us.   | 0.890 | 0.055           | 20.44 |
| <b>Willingness-to-Pay (WTP)</b>   |       |                 |       |
| We are willing to pay   |       |                 |       |
| • a higher service fee for [Supplier X] offerings over another supplier.                        | 0.949 |                 |       |
| • a lot more for [Supplier X] offerings than another supplier.                                  | 0.897 | 0.042           | 23.49 |
| • How much more are you willing to pay for [Supplier X] offerings compared to another supplier? | 0.668 | 0.043           | 15.74 |
| <b>Switching Intentions</b>   |       |                 |       |
| How likely are you to...  |       |                 |       |
| • maintain the relationship with [Supplier X] for your next purchase? (R)                       | 0.916 |                 |       |
| • continue using [Supplier X] services for your next purchase? (R)                              | 0.838 | 0.052           | 17.58 |
| <b>Value Congruence</b>   |       |                 |       |
| My firm and [Supplier X] have congruent values.   | N/A   |                 |       |

(R) = Reverse-Coded Items; SFL = Standardized Factor Loadings.

$-0.807$ ,  $p > .05$ ) and firm revenue ( $M_{early} = 5.41$ ,  $M_{late} = 5.54$ ,  $t(76) = -0.535$ ,  $p > .05$ ) between these two groups, thus indicating minimal non-response bias.

We acknowledge a potential issue regarding unobserved endogeneity because sustainable brand positioning might not be completely exogenous to WTP and switching intention (Goebel, Reuter, Pibernik, Sichtmann, & Bals, 2018). Specifically, buyers who are in long-term relationships with suppliers may have a greater understanding of those suppliers' sustainable reputation that may lead to stronger WTP and less switching intention. Consequently, we applied an instrumental variable technique to address issue. The key variable in our study was the relationship duration, which is significantly correlated with sustainable brand positioning ( $r = 0.133$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Our analysis found that the regression residuals of relationship duration on sustainable brand positioning were insignificant ( $F = 0.182$ ,  $p = .670$ ), indicating that sustainable brand positioning is exogenous.

Finally, we closely followed the suggestions offered by MacKenzie and Podsakoff (2012) for designing a survey that minimized common method bias (hereafter CMB). These included minimizing the length of the survey, asking respondents to focus on the current state of their relationship with a supplier to reduce memory retrieval effort, and emphasizing the importance of providing accurate responses by informing the respondents that the findings would help firms to improve their customer service. We also implemented two statistical procedures to address CMB. Firstly, the marker variable technique was applied, with the industrial sector being the unrelated variable supposed to be tested for CMB. We found no important variation in the correlation values among the key constructs with partialled correlations close to zero ( $r = 0.018$ ). Finally, we conducted a common method factor analysis by re-estimating the structural model whereby all indicators of the latent constructs were added to a "common method factor" in line with Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, and Podsakoff (2003). Our analysis suggests that the inter-construct relationships that were significant prior to the inclusion of the common method factor remained significant when we added the common method factor into the analysis. Overall, our analyses suggests that there are no significant CMB issues in the data.

4.4. Model fit and construct validity

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was employed to examine the fitness of our measurement model. The fit indices of the model were within the acceptable level ( $\chi^2 = 595.966$ ,  $df = 195$ ; Normed Chi-Square = 3.06; root mean square error of approximation = 0.073; comparative fit index = 0.945; and the Tucker-Lewis index = 0.935). We also found evidence for discriminant validity as the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratios analysis (HTMT) of the constructs are below the threshold value of 0.85 (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015), while the square root of the average variance extracted of individual constructs exceeds the inter-construct correlations (see Table 4).

5. Results

5.1. Main effects

The direct impact of sustainable brand positioning on relationship outcomes was tested by means of regression analyses. We included firm revenue and relationship duration as covariates in our analysis because high-income firms might be more inclined to pay premium prices and are more loyal to the suppliers as they can afford to do so (Nyadzayo, Casidy, & Thaichon, 2020), whereas those that have been with a supplier for a long period may be more reluctant to switch to another provider (Casidy & Nyadzayo, 2019). The results showed that sustainable brand positioning has positive impacts on WTP ( $B = 0.498$ ,  $p <$

**Table 4**  
Discriminant validity.

|                                  | $\alpha$ | AVE   | 1            | 2            | 3            | 4            | 5            | 6   |
|----------------------------------|----------|-------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|-----|
| 1. Sustainable Brand Positioning | 0.963    | 0.726 | <i>0.852</i> |              |              |              |              |     |
| 2. Calculative Commitment        | 0.794    | 0.568 | 0.553        | <i>0.754</i> |              |              |              |     |
|                                  |          |       | 0.544        |              |              |              |              |     |
| 3. Affective Commitment          | 0.903    | 0.757 | 0.628        | 0.699        | <i>0.870</i> |              |              |     |
|                                  |          |       | 0.639        | 0.685        |              |              |              |     |
| 4. Willingness-to-pay (WTP)      | 0.882    | 0.717 | 0.493        | 0.428        | 0.460        | <i>0.847</i> |              |     |
|                                  |          |       | 0.459        | 0.443        | 0.460        |              |              |     |
| 5. Switching Intention           | 0.870    | 0.771 | −0.334       | −0.531       | −0.711       | −0.189       | <i>0.878</i> |     |
|                                  |          |       | −0.329       | −0.515       | −0.711       | −0.165       |              |     |
| 6. Value Congruence <sup>1</sup> | N/A      |       | 0.597        | 0.515        | 0.631        | 0.476        | −0.410       | N/A |

Notes: The top value indicates inter-construct correlations, and HTMT ratio is displayed in the bottom value. All correlation scores are statistically significant at  $p < .001$  level. AVE stands for the Average of Variance Extracted.

Figures in diagonals and italics represents the square root of AVE. <sup>1</sup>Construct with one item only.

.001) and negative effects on switching intention ( $B = -0.285, p < .001$ ), thereby confirming H1a and H1b respectively. The results remained consistent without the inclusion of covariates in the model.<sup>1</sup>

We employed SPSS PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2018) to test for the mediating role of commitment in our model (H2 & H3). Table 5 reveals how sustainable brand positioning affects calculative commitment ( $B = 0.438, p < .001$ ), that in turns positively affects WTP ( $B = 0.218, p = .002$ ), and negatively affects switching intention ( $B = -0.125, p = .011$ ). Our analysis reveals important indirect effects of sustainable brand positioning on WTP ( $B_{\text{indirect}} = 0.096, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.019, 0.189]$ ) and switching intention ( $B_{\text{indirect}} = -0.055, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.098, -0.016]$ ) via calculative commitment, thus confirming H2a and H2b respectively. The results found a positive influence of sustainable brand positioning on affective commitment ( $B = 0.533, p < .001$ ), that positively affects WTP ( $B = 0.268, p = .001$ ) and negatively affects switching intention ( $B = -0.677, p < .001$ ). More importantly, the analysis reveals significant indirect effects of sustainable brand positioning on WTP ( $B_{\text{indirect}} = 0.143, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.031, 0.241]$ ) and switching intention ( $B_{\text{indirect}} = -0.361, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.449, -0.280]$ ) via affective commitment, thus confirming H3a and H3b respectively. Despite the exclusion of covariates (i.e., firm revenue and relationship duration) in the model, these direct and indirect effects remained consistent.

5.2. Test of moderation effects

Using SPSS PROCESS Model 7 (Hayes, 2018), we conducted moderated mediation analyses to test hypotheses H4 to H6. The independent variable in our study was sustainable brand positioning. Both calculative and affective commitments were included as parallel mediators, and value congruence was the moderator. In our analysis, WTP and switching intention, respectively, were included as dependent variables.

Our analysis showed that the relationship between sustainable brand positioning and calculative commitment is moderated positively by value congruence ( $B_{\text{interaction}} = 0.091, p = .002$ ). Specifically, using a floodlight analysis (Spiller, Fitzsimons, Lynch Jr, & McClelland, 2013), we found that sustainable brand positioning enhances calculative commitment at or above value congruence scores of 3.55 ( $B = 0.134, t(383) = 1.97, p = .05$ ; see Fig. 2). The index of moderated mediation is significant at 0.05 level ( $B = 0.020, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.001, 0.043]$ ). These results lend support for H4a, as sustainable brand positioning has stronger effects on calculative commitment when value congruence is high. Importantly, as shown in Table 6, we can assert that the effects of

<sup>1</sup> Firm revenue affects WTP ( $B = 0.251, p < .001$ ) and switching intention ( $B = 0.136, p = .008$ ). Relationship duration has significant negative effects on switching intention ( $B = -0.074, p = .021$ ) but no effects on WTP. Without covariates, the effects of sustainable brand positioning on WTP ( $B = 0.523, p < .001$ ) and switching intention ( $B = -0.286, p < .001$ ) remain consistent.

**Table 5**  
Mediation hypotheses tests.

| Panel A: Direct Effects |  | Estimates |        | Standard Errors | t       | p      |
|-------------------------|--|-----------|--------|-----------------|---------|--------|
|                         |  | $\beta$   | B      |                 |         |        |
|                         | Sustainable Brand Positioning → Calculative Commitment (CAL) | 0.467     | 0.438  | 0.043           | 10.246  | <0.001 |
|                         | Sustainable Brand Positioning → Affective Commitment (AC)    | 0.594     | 0.533  | 0.037           | 14.491  | <0.001 |
|                         | CAL → WTP  | 0.167     | 0.218  | 0.070           | 3.130   | 0.002  |
|                         | CAL → Switching Intention                                    | −0.122    | −0.125 | 0.049           | −2.560  | 0.011  |
|                         | AC → WTP   | 0.196     | 0.268  | 0.081           | 3.306   | 0.001  |
|                         | AC → Switching Intention                                     | −0.634    | −0.677 | 0.057           | −11.926 | <0.001 |
| H1a                     | Sustainable Brand Positioning → WTP                          | 0.498     | 0.406  | 0.056           | 8.879   | <0.001 |
| H1b                     | Sustainable Brand Positioning → Switching Intention          | −0.285    | −0.297 | 0.047           | −6.112  | <0.001 |

| Panel B: Indirect Effects |   | Estimates |        | SE    | 95CI LL | 95CI UL |
|---------------------------|---|-----------|--------|-------|---------|---------|
|                           |   | $\beta$   | B      |       |         |         |
| H2a                       | Sustainable Brand Positioning → CAL → WTP                 | 0.078     | 0.096  | 0.043 | 0.019   | 0.189   |
| H2b                       | Sustainable Brand Positioning → CAL → Switching Intention | −0.057    | −0.055 | 0.021 | −0.098  | −0.016  |
| H3a                       | Sustainable Brand Positioning → AC → WTP                  | 0.117     | 0.143  | 0.054 | 0.031   | 0.241   |
| H3b                       | Sustainable Brand Positioning → AC → Switching Intention  | −0.377    | −0.361 | 0.044 | −0.449  | −0.280  |

Notes:  $\beta$  represents standardized beta; B represents unstandardized beta; 95CI LL represents the lower-limit of 95% confidence interval; 95CI UL represents upper-limit of 95% confidence interval.

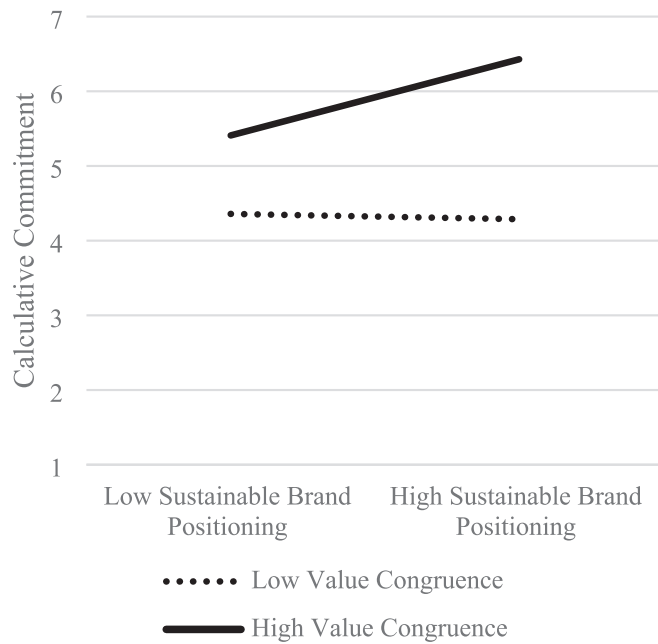


Fig. 2. The moderating role of value congruence on sustainable brand positioning - calculative commitment.

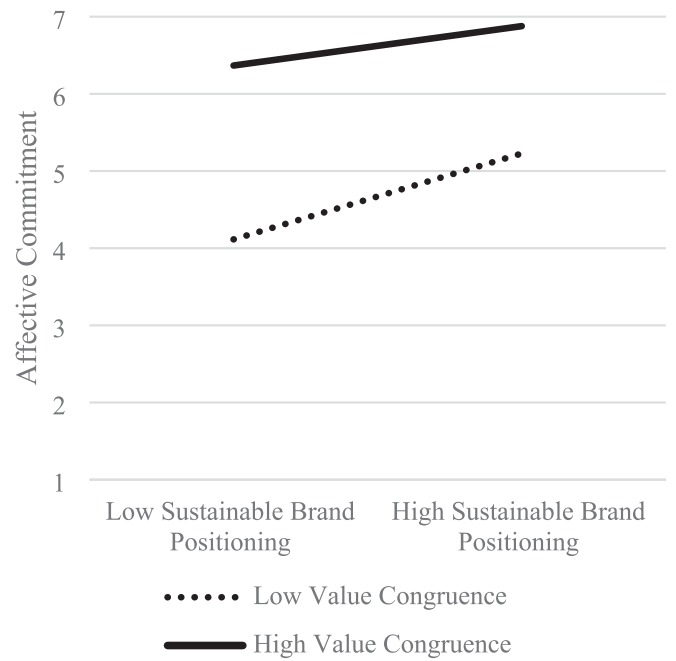


Fig. 3. The moderating role of value congruence on sustainable brand positioning - affective commitment.

Table 6  
Tests for moderated mediation.

| Hypotheses  | B      | SE    | 95CI<br>LL | 95CI<br>UL |
|---|--------|-------|------------|------------|
| H5a: Sustainable Brand Positioning → Calculative Commitment → WTP                 |        |       |            |            |
| Low Value Congruence  | 0.038  | 0.026 | 0.002      | 0.102      |
| High Value Congruence   | 0.078  | 0.034 | 0.017      | 0.152      |
| H5b: Sustainable Brand Positioning → Calculative Commitment → Switching Intention |        |       |            |            |
| Low Value Congruence  | -0.022 | 0.012 | -0.048     | -0.003     |
| High Value Congruence   | -0.045 | 0.020 | -0.089     | -0.010     |
| H6a: Sustainable Brand Positioning → Affective Commitment → WTP                   |        |       |            |            |
| Low Value Congruence  | 0.101  | 0.040 | 0.020      | 0.174      |
| High Value Congruence   | 0.087  | 0.034 | 0.017      | 0.147      |
| H6b: Sustainable Brand Positioning → Affective Commitment → Switching Intention   |        |       |            |            |
| Low Value Congruence  | -0.254 | 0.048 | -0.358     | -0.168     |
| High Value Congruence   | -0.186 | 0.037 | -0.264     | -0.121     |

Note: Unstandardized value is being reported in above tables.

sustainable brand positioning on relationship outcomes via calculative commitment diminishes when value congruence is low ( $B_{\text{indirect WTP}} = 0.038$ , 95% CI [0.002, 0.102];  $B_{\text{indirect switching intention}} = -0.022$ , 95% CI [-0.048, -0.003]) and increases when value congruence is high ( $B_{\text{indirect WTP}} = 0.078$ , 95% CI [0.017, 0.152];  $B_{\text{indirect switching intention}} = 0.045$ , 95% CI [-0.089, -0.010]). Thus, support was found for H5a and H5b.

Contrary to our hypothesized mechanism, it is found that value congruence negatively interacts with sustainable brand positioning in influencing affective commitment ( $B_{\text{interaction}} = -0.050$ ,  $p = .033$ ). A spotlight analysis shows that sustainable brand positioning enhances affective commitment when value congruence is low ( $B = 0.526$ ,  $t(383) = 4.98$ ,  $p < .001$ ) but weakens affective commitment when value congruence is high ( $B = 0.225$ ,  $t(383) = 3.82$ ,  $p < .001$ ; see Fig. 3), thereby failing to support H4b. The index of moderated mediation is not significant at 0.05 level ( $B = -0.013$ , 95% CI [-0.034, 0.001]). Table 6 shows that the indirect effect of sustainable brand positioning via affective commitment increases when value congruence is low ( $B_{\text{indirect WTP}} = 0.101$ , 95% CI [0.020, 0.174];  $B_{\text{indirect switching intention}} = -0.254$ , 95% CI [-0.358, -0.168]) but diminishes when value congruence is high ( $B_{\text{indirect WTP}} = 0.087$ , 95% CI [0.017, 0.147];  $B_{\text{indirect switching intention}} = -0.186$ , 95% CI [-0.264, -0.121]). Thus,

no support was found for H6a and H6b.

## 6. General discussions

This study demonstrates that the adoption of sustainable brand positioning is important for B2B firms. First, the study found direct positive effects of sustainable brand positioning on relationship outcomes of WTP and switching intention. Importantly, we demonstrated the distinctive role of calculative and affective commitments in bridging the links between B2B sustainable brand positioning and relationship outcomes, with buyer-supplier value congruence as a moderator. Specifically, our study found that when a buyer has a strong value congruence with a supplier, sustainable brand positioning has stronger indirect effects on relationship outcomes via calculative commitment. However, when buyer-supplier value congruence is low, sustainable brand positioning has stronger indirect effects on relationship outcomes via affective commitment.

While the results provide general support for our hypotheses, the negative moderating effect of value congruence on the link between sustainable brand positioning and affective commitment was rather unexpected. However, these findings can be explained in the light of self-congruence and customer identification theory, which posits that customers connect with suppliers who have similar values, which leads to stronger commitment and behavioral intention (Keh & Xie, 2009; Mohan et al., 2021). Our findings suggest that when customer firms have values similar to those of the supplier, the sustainable brand image of the supplier translates into stronger calculative commitment, as they anticipate receiving economic benefits from their engagement with a sustainable supplier. However, not all customers have values similar to those of their suppliers, particularly in relation to sustainability. Our findings suggest that even when customer firms do not share similar values with a supplier, the sustainable brand image of the supplier still translates into positive emotional benefits of engaging with the supplier, which in turns enhance WTP and reduce switching intentions. These findings provide useful insights for theory and practice.



### 6.1. Theoretical implications

This research contributes to the body of literature on sustainability in the B2B domain. First, given the lack of rigorous empirical evidence for the way that firm performance is influenced by sustainable brand positioning (Kapitan et al., 2019), our study gives empirical support for the effects of sustainable brand positioning on WTP and switching intention, which are regarded as important indicators of firm performance (Mohan et al., 2021; Morgan & Rego, 2006; Nyadzayo, Mohan, & Casidy, 2020). In doing so, our study adds to the growing amount of sustainability literature in B2B marketing, which has attracted increasing interests in recent years (Casidy & Yan, 2022; Kapitan et al., 2019; Sharma, 2020). Specifically, by examining the role of commitment as a key mediator of the link between sustainable brand positioning and relationship outcomes, the present study addresses Casidy and Yan (2022, p. 321) call for research to examine the cognitive and affective dimensions of relationship quality in order to better understand factors that influence the impact of B2B sustainable positioning on firm performance.

Second, this study examines the distinctive roles of commitment types in inter-firm relationships. Prior studies have yielded mixed findings on whether calculative commitment affects relationship outcomes, with some studies finding positive effects (Nyadzayo, Mohan, & Casidy, 2020) and indirect effects of calculative commitment on performance (Mohan et al., 2021), while others finding non-significant effects (Casidy et al., 2020), and even negative effects of calculative commitment on performance (Gounaris, 2005). In this study, we found evidence that calculative commitment positively mediates the effects of sustainable brand positioning on WTP and switching intention. However, we found that these mediating effects are conditional upon value congruence, in that the effects are significant only when buyers and suppliers share similar values. By examining how buyer-supplier relational outcomes are affected by calculative and affective commitments, this study has directly addressed the call for research to determine “the cognitive and affective mechanisms through which RQ [relationship quality] affects relational outcomes” (Casidy & Nyadzayo, 2019, p. 39).

Finally, by examining value congruence as a key boundary condition for the effects of sustainable brand positioning on relationship outcomes, we addressed Vesal et al. (2021, p. 330) call for research to “advance our understanding of boundary conditions that affect the outcomes of environmental sustainability practices”. Further, we extend Wang and Zhang (2017, p. 119) findings by providing further empirical evidence for “the significance of value congruence in channel relationships and their impact on channel performance”. Our findings suggest that value congruence positively interacts with sustainable brand positioning in influencing calculative commitment, but negatively interacts with sustainable brand positioning in influencing affective commitment. These imply that sustainable brand positioning plays a stronger role in driving affective commitment when customer firms do not have values similar to those of their suppliers. Given the lack of studies examining the moderating role of value congruence in B2B context, our findings contribute to SET by examining the importance of calculative and affective commitment under varying degree of value congruence. Furthermore, SET is largely determined by the effort of each party in the supply chain relationship. The moderating role of value congruence found in this study demonstrates the importance of mutually shared beliefs and values. Below, we elaborate on the significance of these findings for managerial practice.

### 6.2. Managerial contributions and implications

Our findings demonstrate the importance of sustainable brand positioning in influencing important outcomes in buyer-supplier relationships. Recent studies have found that B2B customers prefer to work with suppliers that engage in sustainable operations (Casidy & Yan, 2022; Kapitan et al., 2019). We examine these prior findings by

demonstrating the direct connection between the perceptions of B2B buyers of the sustainable brand positioning of a supplier firm with their willingness-to-pay more for the offerings of the supplier, and reduce their intention to switch to another supplier. Hence, it is important for B2B firms to revisit their current positioning strategy and consider integrating sustainability as a core element of their brand identity. This can be done by sponsoring various events or causes that promote environmental sustainability, and providing regular updates to customers regarding various initiatives that the firms have taken to make positive contributions to the environment. This also encourages firms and companies to obtain environmental certification from recognized agencies (e.g., the Carbon Trust Standard, Forest Stewardship Council, ISO 14001, and Eco-Management and Audit Scheme from the European Union). Furthermore, some companies also focus on being carbon neutral by purchasing carbon offsets or credits. These efforts would further enhance the supplier firm's sustainable image which can strengthen customers' commitment and reduce their switching intention.

One critical finding from our study is that the importance of calculative commitment and affective commitment in linking sustainable brand positioning and relationship outcomes varies according to the extent to which buyer-supplier values are congruent. Importantly, we conclude that affective commitment plays a more vital mediating role when buyers do not have the same values as their suppliers. These findings are an important consideration as suppliers tend to emphasize economic benefits when dealing with customers, which is likely to lead to calculative commitment. However, when interacting with customers who do not share similar values, suppliers should focus more on developing affective commitment by, for example, emphasizing the emotional benefits (i.e., the “feel good” factor) of engaging with a sustainable firm. For example, the supplier should highlight the benefits of ‘going green’ in their B2B transactions, which are to reduce wastage, preserve flora and fauna, and prevent global warming, thus allowing future generations to enjoy the resources that we have today.

Having said that, in the high value congruence environment, the opposite effect is observed, such that the calculative commitment has a stronger mediation than the affective commitment on the relationship of B2B sustainable positioning on relationship outcomes. This suggests that once the relationship develops further and both parties have mutual understanding, the focus of the supplier shift to the economic benefits and costs. The mutual understanding between two parties results in a higher trust level and increase customer dependency on the supplier (Chang et al., 2012). At this point, as customers have gained suppliers' trust, the focus will be on the potential costs and benefits. This results in calculative commitment. Hence, future transactions will be solely reviewed based on expected gains and losses than emotional purchases once the buyers and suppliers have similar objectives (Wetzels, De Ruyter, & Van Birgelen, 1998). They will continue to be in the relationship until there are no more benefits for both parties.

Finally, our findings suggest that economic benefits play a lesser importance in influencing B2B customers' WTP and switching intention if customers and suppliers do not share similar values. When dealing with customers that do not share similar beliefs and norms, suppliers should invest in building strong relationships with customers based on affective/emotional benefits instead of economic benefits/consequences. Some examples of increasing affective commitment include: (1) increasing suppliers' trustworthiness and credibility, such as disclosing information about the supplier and third-party validations and (2) frequent communication between buyers and suppliers to maintain stronger rapport. At the same time, suppliers should invest in strengthening their sustainability positioning, as it was found to directly influence relationship outcomes.

### 6.3. Limitations and future research directions

We recognize a number of methodological and conceptual

shortcomings of the current study that could be addressed in future research. First, despite our best attempt to reduce CMB, the use of a single-informant approach in our study design may induce perceptual bias and common method bias that could have affected our results. Although the utilization of single respondents is common in the field of B2B sustainable brand positioning (e.g., Casidy & Yan, 2022), future studies could further minimize CMB by assessing B2B sustainable brand positioning and its outcomes from multiple firm perspectives (e.g., business-owners and employees), and also from the suppliers' perspectives. These approaches could improve our understanding of the way that sustainable brand positioning influences relationship outcomes from the perspectives of a broader range of stakeholders, not just that of customer firms.

Second, while we focus on environmental sustainability in our paper, we recognize the importance of other sustainability dimensions, including social and economic sustainability (Elkington, 1998), that influence buyers' perceptions and intentions. For instance, Tura, Keränen, and Patala (2019) found that firms sometimes engage in economically-sustainable operations that have adverse impacts on environmental sustainability, which negatively influence buyers' perceptions. We suggest that future researchers incorporate a more diverse range of sustainability dimensions in their study design to further extend our knowledge of the extent to which each sustainability dimension influences relationship outcomes.

Third, we use social exchange theory as the theoretical anchor for our conceptualization, and focus on the role of commitment as the key mechanism underpinning our framework. However, we acknowledge that there are other alternative mechanisms through which sustainable brand positioning may influence relationship outcomes. For example, prior studies in the B2C context have revealed evidence of the effects of sustainable brand image on customer emotions (Birgit, 2019; Su, Huang, van der Veen, & Chen, 2014). Therefore, we join Mohan, Casidy, Thachon, and Nyadzayo (2022) in calling for further research to examine the role of positive and negative emotions in influencing relationship outcomes in the B2B sustainability context. Future studies could also examine perceived firms' motives in affecting relational outcomes. Some firms may be “forced” to engage in sustainable operations due to social pressure (Centobelli, Cerchione, Esposito, & Passaro, 2021) or fear of reprisals (Perc, 2012). In these situations, customers may be less willing to pay more for the firms' offerings despite their sustainable brand image, because they do not believe that the firms have genuine, altruistic motives for engaging in sustainable operations.

Finally, while our study examines the outcomes of sustainable brand positioning from customers' perspectives, few empirical studies have examined the factors influencing firms' decisions to adopt a sustainable brand positioning strategy. Thus, it is imperative to study the relevant drivers of, and impediments to, firms' decisions to adopt sustainable brand positioning. Given the extant gaps in sustainability research on B2B marketing, we anticipate that our study will encourage future work on this important area of research.

## Author notes

Professor Riza Casidy, PhD., is a Professor of Marketing at Macquarie University. His main research interest is on the effects of ideological beliefs on consumer behavior. His secondary research interest is on the study of consumer decision making in B2B context. He has published over 50 papers in leading journals, including *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Journal of Service Research*, *Industrial Marketing Management*, *Psychology & Marketing*, and *European Journal of Marketing*, amongst others.

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econometric and new machine learning methodologies to further both, theory and practice. Substantively, he works in problems relating to retail, pricing, segmentation optimization, sustainability, and employee-customer experiences. He has a successful grant from Marketing Science Institute (MSI) and Indonesia Small Business Association.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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