Research paper

When do high prices sell better for sustainable products in business-to-business markets? The role of price–sustainability fit

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ABSTRACT

Amid increasing economic pressures, business-to-business (B2B) buyers face intensified challenges in reconciling sustainability commitments with cost constraints, making price and sustainability two increasingly critical yet often conflicting priorities in purchasing decisions. As a result, effective pricing strategies have become essential for driving the adoption of sustainable products. Using a multimethod approach—combining qualitative expert interviews and a scenario-based experimental study—this research delineates two information-processing stages (inference-making and intention-forming) to examine how B2B buyers navigate price–sustainability trade-offs in product evaluations. Drawing upon expectancy-disconfirmation theory, we show that buyers' product inferences depend on the (dis)confirmation of their expected price–sustainability fit—an anticipated alignment between a product's price and its sustainability level. The study further identifies contingency factors at the individual (price consciousness and green consumption values) and organizational (the weight of price in incentive schemes and firm sustainability orientation) levels that shape buyer responses to sustainable products across the information-processing stages. The findings offer guidance for selling firms on pricing and sales strategies for sustainable products, and for buying firms on fostering buyer-level implementation of sustainable purchasing strategies.

1. Introduction

Sustainability has evolved from a regulatory obligation to a strategic imperative for manufacturing companies in business-to-business (B2B) markets (Johnstone & Tan, 2015). Heightened stakeholder pressure, rising investor expectations, and consumer demand for sustainable products prompt firms to adopt sustainable business practices such as eco-friendly production techniques and green raw material sourcing (Pinto, 2020).

However, transitioning to sustainable production often raises production costs and requires considerable financial investment (Zhu & He, 2017), compelling sellers to charge higher prices for sustainable products (Tura et al., 2019). At the same time, B2B buyers are becoming more price-sensitive amid recent macroeconomic volatility (Singer et al., 2024), making price premiums a major barrier to sustainable procurement (Giunipero et al., 2012). For example, in 2024, Coca-Cola

and Unilever postponed their sustainable packaging goals and revised targets for sourcing environmentally preferable plastic materials in response to shareholder pressure to control costs (Davies, 2024; Friedman, 2024).

These examples illustrate a broader tension in B2B buying: the need to reconcile sustainability commitments with economic constraints (Wu & Pagell, 2011). Price and sustainability have thus emerged as two of the most prominent—yet often conflicting—buyer priorities alongside quality (Bain & Company, 2024), adding complexity to established decision criteria such as technical performance and delivery (Ho et al., 2010).

Consequently, pricing sustainable offerings poses a unique challenge for sellers. Prices must account for the added costs of sustainability while remaining acceptable to increasingly price-sensitive buyers. Yet despite its growing strategic importance, academic research offers limited guidance on how to price sustainable products (Sharma, 2020). While

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value-based pricing perspectives suggest that firms may justify premium prices by signaling added value (Cressman, 2012), the literature remains scarce on whether and under what conditions B2B buyers perceive sustainability-related benefits as a source of value relative to price.

Specifically, extant research lacks insight into how B2B buyers evaluate sustainability in conjunction with price. Furthermore, while research shows that B2B buying decisions are shaped by factors at both the individual and organizational levels (Macdonald et al., 2016), insights into how these factors shape sustainability-related buyer evaluations remain scarce (see the review of literature). To address these gaps, this study investigates how buyers make trade-offs between price and sustainability and examines how both individual- and organizational-level factors influence buyers' inferences and intentions throughout the evaluation process. More specifically, the study examines the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1. How do B2B buyers weigh price and sustainability as product attributes when evaluating sustainable products?

RQ2. How do individual- and organizational-level factors affect buyers' evaluation of sustainable products?

To inform our conceptual model, we conducted a qualitative pre-study comprising 31 in-depth interviews with B2B informants, including buyers, salespeople, and experts in sustainability issues. Building on these insights, we address our research questions using a scenario-based experiment with 447 B2B buyers across industries.

Our findings advance prior work in two ways. First, we contribute to the understanding of B2B buyer behavior and pricing strategies for sustainable products by revealing how buyers navigate trade-offs between price and sustainability. While prior research has primarily examined price and sustainability in isolation (e.g., Casidy & Lie, 2023; Saab & Botelho, 2020), our findings show that buyer inferences about one product attribute (e.g., price) depend on the level of the other (e.g., sustainability), with high sustainability attenuating the unfavorable effects of price. Specifically, we show that high sustainability can buffer against buyers' price sensitivity, indicating that a perceived congruence between product attributes ("price–sustainability fit") can legitimize premium pricing. With these findings, we contribute to the emerging field of B2B sustainable pricing and address calls for research on B2B buyers' price sensitivity to sustainability (Sharma, 2020).

Second, we extend prior firm-level B2B sustainable purchasing research (e.g., Casidy & Lie, 2023; Yen & Yen, 2012) by shifting the focus to individual buyer behavior. Specifically, we uncover how individual- and organizational-level factors shape buyer-level product evaluations across stages of information processing, thereby addressing calls for greater attention to lower levels of analysis in organizational buying research (Tuncdogan et al., 2019; Yu et al., 2022). At the inference-making stage, buyers' price consciousness strengthens inferences about monetary sacrifice, increasing their price sensitivity, whereas green consumption values weaken such inferences, reducing their price sensitivity. At the intention-forming stage, firms' sustainability orientation increases buyers' inclination toward sustainable products, whereas price-focused incentive structures deter it. With these findings, we respond to recent calls for contingency-based approaches to understanding sales phenomena (Rapp & Habel, 2024).

From a managerial perspective, we offer actionable guidance for selling firms on enhancing the profitability of sustainable products through tailored pricing and sales approaches. For buying firms, we provide guidance on fostering sustainable purchasing practices, for example, by strengthening sustainability orientation and aligning incentive structures accordingly.

2. Review of literature

Our research is situated at the intersection of two complementary research streams: B2B pricing and B2B sustainable purchasing. We integrate these perspectives to examine how individual buyers navigate trade-offs between price and sustainability. Web Appendix A synthesizes representative studies across these research streams, positions our work within the existing literature, and clarifies the key research gaps our study addresses.

The B2B pricing literature has traditionally centered on cost-, competition-, and value-based pricing approaches, with limited attention to sustainability contexts (Bera et al., 2025; Kienzler & Kowalkowski, 2017). The scarce emerging work on sustainable pricing primarily adopts a seller perspective and relies on formal economic modeling, often assuming rational buyer responses to price and sustainability attributes (e.g., Parsaeifar et al., 2019; Taleizadeh et al., 2025). In contrast, buyer-centered perspectives on sustainability pricing remain scarce (Kienzler & Kowalkowski, 2017; Sharma, 2020).

Within the B2B pricing literature, value-based pricing, which suggests that buyers may accept premium prices if they perceive sufficient value (Hinterhuber, 2004), offers a promising yet underexplored lens in sustainability contexts (Sairanen et al., 2024). However, to date, no research has empirically examined how B2B buyers perceive sustainability as a value driver relative to price. Our study addresses these gaps by adopting a buyer perspective and providing empirical insights into buyer responses to sustainable pricing strategies.

The B2B sustainable purchasing literature spans multiple disciplines, including B2B marketing (e.g., Aksoy & Schnellbächer, 2025), management (e.g., Yen & Yen, 2012), and supply chain and procurement (e. g., Blome et al., 2014). However, only a small stream of research addresses how customers respond to sellers' sustainability performance and practices. Within this stream, most studies focus on firm-level responses, such as switching intentions (Casidy & Lie, 2023), customer loyalty (Homburg et al., 2013), or reactions to corporate-level signals, such as sustainable brand positioning (Casidy & Lie, 2023), corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices (Homburg et al., 2013; Tao et al., 2023), or compliance with the United Nations Global Compact (Goebel et al., 2018).

However, individual-level buyer responses to sustainable offerings, particularly in relation to pricing, remain underexplored. While recent studies acknowledge the need to examine individual buyer responses to sustainability (e.g., Aksoy & Schnellbächer, 2025; Han & Lee, 2021; see Web Appendix A), they often overlook the role of price. As such, knowledge of how price and sustainability information interact in shaping buyer evaluations remains scarce. This gap is noteworthy as insights from the B2C domain show that price and sustainability interact in shaping customer responses (e.g., Choi & Ng, 2011; Feuß et al., 2022; Schuitema & Groot, 2015). Yet, the transferability of these findings to B2B settings, where purchasing decisions are more structured and economically consequential (Grewal et al., 2022), is uncertain. Accordingly, a joint examination of price and sustainability as interdependent product attributes is essential to advance a more nuanced understanding of B2B buyer decision making in sustainability contexts.

In addition, research has called for a better understanding of how individual motivations and organizational factors influence buyer decision making in B2B sustainability contexts (Huang et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2022). While a few studies have explored self-enhancement values (Goebel et al., 2018) and pro-environmental values (Yu et al., 2022), the mechanisms through which such values shape buyers' decision-making remain unclear. At the organizational level, while firm-internal factors (e.g., firms' CSR orientation; Tao et al., 2023) have been shown to influence firm-level sustainable purchasing behavior, their influence on individual buyers' information processing and evaluation of sustainable products remains poorly understood.

Against this background, our study develops and tests a conceptual framework that explains how B2B buyers evaluate sustainable offerings in light of price (RQ1). Further, we identify how individual- and organizational-level factors moderate buyers' product evaluations across information-processing stages (RQ2).

3. Qualitative pre-study

To inform the development of our conceptual framework and ensure relevance to real-world decision making, we conducted a qualitative pre-study. In line with prior research (e.g., Spyropoulou et al., 2010; Tóth et al., 2022), this approach allows us to incorporate practitioner insights to enhance the managerial relevance of our subsequent main study.

3.1. Data collection and analysis approach

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 25 buyers across industries and hierarchical levels. To further broaden our understanding of sustainable sales practices, we conducted additional interviews with four salespeople and two sustainability professionals (i.e., internal managers or external consultants specializing in sustainability). We recruited participants via B2B social media platforms (LinkedIn, Xing), professional networks, and referrals. Using a theoretical sampling approach, we continued data collection until reaching theoretical saturation (Zeithaml et al., 2020), resulting in 31 analyzed interviews from the European Union ($n = 20$) and China ($n = 11$), thereby ensuring that our insights are applicable across markets.

The interviews aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the current role of sustainability in business practices, with a particular focus on B2B sustainable purchasing decisions. Specifically, the interviews centered on three key topics: (1) the relevance of sustainability in B2B markets, (2) buyers' trade-offs between price and sustainability in evaluating sustainable products, and (3) individual- and organizational-level contingencies shaping buyer-driven purchasing decisions. While these themes guided the interviews, we followed an open-ended approach to allow new insights to emerge (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Interview durations ranged from 22 to 65 min. Non-English interviews were translated into English prior to coding by bilingual researchers.

To analyze the data, we conducted a thematic analysis using an inductive coding process inspired by grounded theory coding procedures (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Drawing on grounded theory principles, data collection and analysis proceeded concurrently and iteratively, allowing emerging insights to inform subsequent interviews and refinements of the coding structure.

We began with open coding, conducting line-by-line analyses to generate first-order codes from in vivo excerpts. We then engaged in axial coding by grouping related first-order codes (e.g., investor pressure) into second-order categories (e.g., institutional motivations) and linking these categories to higher-order themes that capture recurring patterns across interviews (e.g., motivations for sustainable purchasing). Throughout this phase, we followed the constant-comparison principle, systematically contrasting insights across participants and refining the coding structure by consolidating, splitting, or eliminating categories as we collected additional data.

Finally, we conducted selective coding, integrating the identified categories into aggregate themes and examining their interrelationships to inform the development of the conceptual framework and the hypotheses tested in the main study. Two researchers collaboratively conducted the coding and discussed emerging interpretations throughout the process to ensure trustworthiness and conceptual rigor. Web Appendix B illustrates how in vivo excerpts were progressively abstracted into first-order codes, second-order categories, and aggregate themes. In addition, we conducted a between-region thematic comparison by contrasting interviews conducted in Europe and China using the final coding scheme to identify contextual commonalities and differences across regions (see Web Appendix C).

To ensure the validity of our interpretations, we conducted member checks with the interviewees, following established qualitative research practices (Davis et al., 2011). The participants confirmed that the summary we shared accurately reflected their perspectives and experiences.

3.2. Interview findings

One recurring theme across interviews was the growing strategic importance of sustainability in B2B markets. Reflecting this shift, participants across regions noted that sustainability has become an important consideration in firms' purchasing strategies. At the same time, they emphasized a persistent tension between sustainability objectives and financial constraints, highlighting a major challenge firms face in sustainable purchasing. While sustainable strategies can yield long-term competitive advantages (Kahupi et al., 2021), participants reported that short-term cost targets often hinder adoption, creating a dilemma for firms seeking to reconcile sustainability ambitions with cost pressures. These insights echo prior research and recent cross-industry reports identifying macro- and firm-level barriers to sustainable purchasing (EcoVadis & Accenture, 2024; Huang et al., 2022).

Interestingly, while the importance of sustainability and the associated economic tensions appear consistent across regions, our qualitative findings suggest that firms' motivations for engaging in sustainable purchasing differ to some extent. European firms more often frame sustainability as a value-driven consideration, grounded in shared stakeholder expectations and its perceived value-creating potential. In contrast, Chinese firms more frequently cite regulatory mandates, risk avoidance, and market access as the dominant motivations.

These firm-level motivations and tensions ultimately translate into concrete decision-making challenges for individual buyers, who serve as key actors in interpreting and enacting sustainability priorities within operational purchasing processes. Although B2B purchasing typically involves cross-functional buying centers (Monroe et al., 2015), respondents consistently emphasized the decisive role of individual buyers in determining the extent to which sustainability considerations are integrated into supplier selection. These insights reinforce the need for a buyer-centric perspective and motivate our focus on how individual buyers navigate trade-offs between price and sustainability when evaluating sustainable products.

3.2.1. Price–sustainability trade-offs in buyer evaluations

Regarding buyers' evaluation of sustainable products, our findings reveal that buyers rarely assess sustainability in isolation. Instead, they assess it in conjunction with price, with both attributes jointly shaping overall product perceptions. Specifically, interviewees frequently described having to weigh sustainability performance against cost constraints, making explicit trade-offs between the two (see Web Appendix D for illustrative quotes). Many participants noted that they typically perceive sustainable products as more expensive, identifying higher prices as a key barrier to adoption. Interestingly, however, lower prices do not automatically lead to more favorable attitudes. Several respondents associated unusually low prices with greenwashing attempts or compromised quality, which triggered caution and hesitation. This finding suggests that buyer responses are shaped by their expectations about the appropriate price for sustainable products—namely, that higher sustainability should come at a higher price. Deviations from these expectations can undermine credibility and deter adoption. A sales manager from a consumer goods company noted:

> They may ask themselves: "It's sustainable and it's that much cheaper?" They will be very cautious about why it is, and they probably will not believe it's a sustainable product.

3.2.2. Buyer roles and contingencies in organizational purchasing decisions

Our analysis reveals how individual buyers shape organizational purchasing decisions within cross-functional buying centers. Specifically, it emerged that buyers can shape collective purchasing decisions by acting in three roles within the decision-making unit: *gatekeeper* (e.g., filtering suppliers at early stages), *advocate* (e.g., promoting preferred suppliers during internal evaluations), and *decision-maker* (e.g., having the discretion to select suppliers, especially for smaller or non-strategic

purchases). Interviews revealed that buyers exercise discretion in each role, influenced by both individual factors and organizational contexts.

Regarding individual factors, buyers' personal values (e.g., toward sustainability) influence how they make trade-offs between product attributes, leading them to favor value-congruent suppliers in their role enactment. Such buyers are likely to filter out suppliers without visible sustainability efforts (gatekeeping), advocate for sustainable suppliers during internal discussions (advocacy), or award contracts to them directly for low-spend purchases (decision-making). As a buyer from a consumer goods company noted:

> If the buyer is not interested in sustainability, then nothing will happen. If the buyer doesn't find the right supplier in sourcing, doesn't involve them, introduce them internally and recommend them to others, it won't work. The buyer can always ensure that a supplier is swept under the carpet. However, the buyer can also ensure that the supplier, who is very sustainable, is in the right spotlight, that he is recommended, that he remains in the conversation, that he is continuously invited – in short, that he is given a presence.

Interestingly, while buyers across regions draw on personal sustainability considerations when enacting these roles, the ways in which such considerations are legitimized within buying centers vary. European buyers more often justify sustainability-oriented actions through their personal evaluative stance, whereas Chinese buyers are more likely to legitimize sustainability considerations by drawing on trusted relationships with salespeople or alignment with superiors' preferences.

While individual buyers exercise a degree of discretion in product evaluation across roles, our findings suggest that organizational factors often define the boundaries within which this discretion is exercised. In particular, they shape how personal preferences for sustainability translate into actual supplier choices. Two organizational factors emerged as especially influential: (1) firms' strategic orientation and (2) incentive structures.

With respect to firms' strategic orientation, interviewees revealed that corporate sustainability strategies and top management's pro-environmental values foster greater buyer intentions to adopt sustainable alternatives. These factors guide buyers to exercise their roles in favor of sustainability, reinforcing prior research on the importance of management support in advancing green supply chain initiatives (Hoejmose et al., 2012).

Regarding incentive structures, most buyers reported that their performance is primarily measured against cost-saving targets, with little or no consideration of sustainability. As such, cost-reduction goals often constrain buyers from acting on their preferences for sustainable products during supplier selection. Thus, incentive structures emerged

as a key organizational lever that can either support or hinder the integration of sustainability considerations into purchase decisions. For example, a buyer from a manufacturing company explained:

> We have not yet reached the point where we can set internal incentives for our purchasers to choose more sustainable products because we are under enormous cost pressure. So the opposite happens as long as savings and avoiding additional costs are most important.

4. Conceptual and theoretical background

4.1. Conceptual framework

Fig. 1 shows the conceptual framework of our main study, which outlines the stages, mechanisms, and contingency factors of buyer responses to sustainable products at different price levels. Given that environmental concerns are central in many corporate sustainability agendas (Yen & Yen, 2012), we emphasize the environmental dimension of sustainability and define environmentally sustainable products as those that reduce environmental impacts during manufacturing (Luchs et al., 2010).

In line with pre-study insights and prior research highlighting buyers' decisive role in driving corporate adoption of sustainable products (Aksoy & Schnellbächer, 2025), we select individual buyers as our unit of analysis. Importantly, although our qualitative findings suggest contextual differences in how sustainability considerations are legitimized and enacted within buying centers across regions, they do not indicate systematic differences in the underlying buyer-level evaluation mechanisms. Accordingly, we conceptualize a common framework capturing buyer evaluation mechanisms that emerge consistently across contexts.

We delineate two information-processing stages of buyer responses to sustainable products: inference-making and intention-forming. Insights from our qualitative pre-study indicate that buyers initially form supplier preferences by weighing price (monetary sacrifice) against sustainability (benefits), before translating these preferences into purchase intentions under the influence of organizational constraints. Our conceptual framework reflects this two-stage process, recognizing that while buyers' preferences may influence corporate purchase decisions, organizational-level enablers or constraints ultimately guide their behavioral intentions and may override initial preferences. The pre-study also informed the selection of constructs (e.g., incentive schemes serve as an organizational constraint and thus a moderator in the intention-forming stage) within the framework, ensuring its grounding in real-world B2B settings. Table 1 details the definitions of the key
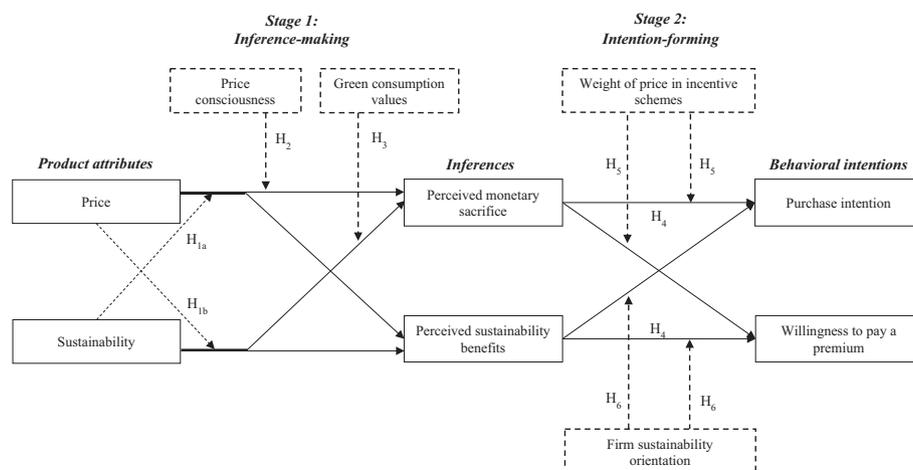

Fig. 1. Conceptual framework.

Table 1

Definitions of key variables.

Variable	Definition (Sources)
Perceived monetary sacrifice	The buyer's subjective perception of monetary losses in exchange for a product (Gao et al., 2017).
Perceived sustainability benefits	The buyer's judgment of a product's excellence or superiority with respect to its environmental sustainability (Zeithaml, 1988).
Purchase intention	The extent to which the buyer is willing to purchase the product (Dodds et al., 1991).
Willingness to pay a premium	The extent to which the buyer is willing to pay an additional amount of money for the product compared with common market alternatives (Casidy & Lie, 2023).
Price consciousness	The extent to which the buyer focuses on paying low prices in personal consumption decisions (Lichtenstein et al., 1993).
Green consumption values	The extent to which the buyer demonstrates commitment to environmental protection in personal consumption decisions (Haws et al., 2014).
Weight of price in incentive schemes	The relative importance of price-related performance targets in the buyer's incentive schemes.
Firm sustainability orientation	The extent to which the buyer firm demonstrates internal values, ethical standards, and commitment to ecological sustainability in its operations (Banerjee et al., 2003).

constructs.

In the inference-making stage, we conceptualize two inferences: perceived monetary sacrifice and perceived sustainability benefits. Reflecting the tension between financial and sustainability priorities in buyer decision making observed in our pre-study, and in line with B2C research on attribute interactions (e.g., Choi & Ng, 2011), we conceptualize an interdependence between price and sustainability in shaping these inferences.

Our framework further conceptualizes two individual-level contingency factors that moderate how buyers draw inferences from product price and sustainability: buyers' price consciousness and green consumption values. We ground these constructs in both our pre-study and prior consumer research. Specifically, price consciousness—reflecting sensitivity to cost—and green consumption values—denoting preferences for environmental sustainability (see Table 1)—are well-established determinants of consumer perceptions and decisions (e.g., Alford & Biswas, 2002; Haws et al., 2014). We propose that these consumption-related values offer an overlooked yet relevant lens for understanding buyers' product evaluations in a corporate context. This reasoning aligns with recent research positing that the boundaries between B2B and B2C decision making are increasingly blurred, as B2B buyers integrate personal consumption expectations into their professional roles (Mohan et al., 2022).

In the intention-forming stage, we examine how buyers translate the inferences from the inference-making stage into behavioral intentions under organizational constraints. We conceptualize that buyers rely on their inferences about monetary sacrifice (i.e., the negative component of the purchasing decision) and sustainability benefits (i.e., the positive component of the purchasing decision) to decide whether to buy the product (i.e., purchase intention) and whether to pay more for a sustainable option than a non-sustainable alternative (i.e., willingness to pay a premium). Building on insights from our qualitative pre-study, we conceptualize two organizational-level contingency factors that moderate how buyers translate their inferences into behavioral intentions: the weight of price in incentive schemes and firm sustainability orientation. This conceptualization is in line with prior management literature, which suggests that firms' ethical orientation and managerial incentives shape supply managers' ethical intentions (e.g., Dahlmann et al., 2017; Griffis et al., 2014).

4.2. Expectancy-disconfirmation theory

A central insight from the qualitative pre-study is that buyers evaluate sustainability relative to price-based expectations rather than as an isolated attribute. In particular, deviations from expected price–sustainability alignment (e.g., high sustainability at unexpectedly low prices) can trigger skepticism and unfavorable evaluations. To capture this expectation-based evaluation logic, we draw on expectancy–disconfirmation theory (EDT; Oliver, 1980, 2010) as the guiding theoretical lens.

EDT originates from customer satisfaction research and posits that

customers evaluate products by comparing product performance with prior expectations. When performance meets (confirmation) or exceeds (positive disconfirmation) expectations, satisfaction arises; conversely, dissatisfaction arises when performance falls short of expectations (negative disconfirmation). As such, EDT suggests that customers' evaluation of a product depends not only on its product attributes per se but also on their expectations.

Prior research has relied on alternative theoretical lenses to explain buyer responses to product attribute information, including signaling theory (Atkinson & Rosenthal, 2014), social cognitive theory (Yu et al., 2022), and value-based evaluation frameworks such as Zeithaml's (1988) means-end model. While these approaches explain how attribute information conveys quality or value, they do not explicitly account for how buyers evaluate combinations of attributes relative to prior expectations, nor how deviations from these expectations shape evaluative inferences. Accordingly, they are less suited to explain why comparable levels of sustainability may be evaluated differently depending on the associated price.

Thus, given the expectation-based pattern of buyers' evaluations, EDT offers an appropriate theoretical foundation for explaining B2B buyers' product evaluations. Traditionally applied in post-purchase evaluations in consumer settings (e.g., Darke et al., 2010; Gelbrich, 2011), EDT has also been extended to related research contexts. For instance, Homburg et al. (2002) applied EDT to the B2B domain to explain post-purchase satisfaction in buyer–supplier relationships. In addition, consumer research shows that the confirmation/disconfirmation process can occur during product evaluations *before* purchase (Evangelidis & Van Osselaer, 2017).

Building on these extensions to B2B contexts and pre-purchase evaluations, we apply EDT to explain how B2B buyers evaluate price–sustainability trade-offs prior to purchase. Embedded in our two-stage information-processing framework, EDT allows us to understand how price and sustainability interdependently shape buyers' inferences, and how individual- and organizational-level factors condition this expectation-based evaluation process.

5. Hypotheses

5.1. The interdependence of price and sustainability in buyer inferences

We propose that whether and to what extent buyers infer monetary sacrifice and sustainability benefits from a specific product in the inference-making stage is contingent on both its price and sustainability levels. We deduce this mutual interdependence from EDT.

In line with prior expectancy disconfirmation research suggesting that one attribute may be assessed in light of expectations derived from another (Evangelidis & Van Osselaer, 2017), we propose that the level of sustainability shapes buyers' expectations of price, and vice versa. Specifically, we hypothesize that buyers raise their price expectations for more sustainable products and lower price expectations for less sustainable ones. This assumption aligns with our pre-study and prior

research, which indicate that buyers expect greater product sustainability to come with higher costs (Kahupi et al., 2021).

In a similar vein, we expect buyers to form expectations about sustainability based on price, raising their sustainability expectations for high-priced products, while lowering them for low-priced products. The assumption is in line with prior research on the "you get what you pay for" heuristic, which suggests that higher prices set expectations for higher quality and greater overall product value (Kardes et al., 2004; Konya-Baumbach et al., 2019). As sustainability benefits constitute a key value dimension for buyers (Patala et al., 2016), we argue that buyers tend to expect higher-priced products to comply with or even exceed industry sustainability standards.

The mutual adjustment of expectations between price and sustainability leads to an expectation of a "price–sustainability fit," in which buyers expect the price to align with the product's sustainability level. In line with EDT, we propose that *confirmation* of this expected fit fosters favorable inferences from greater sustainability (i.e., higher sustainability benefits and lower monetary sacrifice) while mitigating unfavorable inferences associated with higher prices (i.e., lower sustainability benefits and higher monetary sacrifice).

Conversely, a misfit between price and sustainability results in either negative or positive disconfirmation of expectations. A *negative disconfirmation* occurs when the price exceeds what buyers expect based on its sustainability level. In line with EDT, this leads to unfavorable inferences: buyers infer lower sustainability benefits alongside higher monetary sacrifice.

A *positive disconfirmation* occurs when sustainability exceeds expectations given the price, which, according to EDT, should result in more favorable inferences compared to expectation-conforming sustainability levels. However, our pre-study suggests that in B2B settings, exceeding sustainability expectations may not necessarily lead to more favorable buyer inferences. Instead, buyers may become skeptical about the sustainability claims when encountering unexpectedly low prices for highly sustainable products. In such cases, they may engage in more extensive attributional processing to rationalize the unexpected positive disconfirmation and, in the absence of additional justifying information, may discount the attribute information (i.e., high sustainability) as unreliable (Taber et al., 2009). We argue that this caution arises from the deliberate, risk-averse nature of B2B buying decisions (Cooper et al., 2006), which contrasts with consumer decisions that often involve impulse buying driven by positive emotional reactions to perceived gains (Iyer et al., 2020).

In line with these rationales, we predict that higher prices induce unfavorable inferences for low-sustainability products due to the negative disconfirmation of buyers' expected price–sustainability fit, but not for high-sustainability products, as the expected fit restrains the unfavorable inferences. Likewise, we expect that sustainability induces favorable inferences for high-priced products (i.e., price–sustainability fit), but not for low-priced products, as the unexpected positive disconfirmation mitigates the favorable inferences. Thus:

H1a. High sustainability weakens the effects of price in buyers' inference-making. When sustainability is low, a higher price increases perceived monetary sacrifice and decreases perceived sustainability benefits. When sustainability is high, these effects are attenuated.

H1b. A low price weakens the effects of sustainability in buyers' inference-making. When the price is high, higher sustainability increases perceived sustainability benefits and reduces perceived monetary sacrifice. When the price is low, these effects are attenuated.

5.2. Individual-level contingencies in the inference-making stage

We propose that two individual-level characteristics—price consciousness and green consumption values—alter buyers' expectations of the price–sustainability fit, thus moderating how buyers assess the monetary sacrifice associated with a product. Price consciousness

reflects a buyer's strong focus on low prices (Lichtenstein et al., 1993; see Table 1). Prior consumer research indicates that price-conscious buyers tend to focus more on cost considerations (Alford & Biswas, 2002; Palazon & Delgado-Ballester, 2009). Integrating these insights with EDT, we argue that more price-conscious buyers are likely to hold lower price expectations for a given level of sustainability. Consequently, when products are offered at high prices, price-conscious buyers experience a larger discrepancy between expected and actual prices. As such, while higher prices may generally lead to higher perceived monetary sacrifice, we predict this effect to be even stronger for price-conscious buyers. Thus:

H2. The positive effect of price on perceived monetary sacrifice is stronger when price consciousness is high.

Next, we propose that buyers with strong green consumption values place greater importance on sustainability in product evaluations. This prediction is informed by prior B2C research showing that consumers with stronger green values evaluate sustainable products more favorably and perceive them as higher performing (Chernev & Blair, 2021; Haws et al., 2014). Integrating these insights with EDT, we predict that buyers with stronger green consumption values are likely to expect a higher price for a given level of sustainability, therefore perceiving a smaller discrepancy between expected and actual prices for sustainable products. As such, while greater sustainability may generally lead to lower perceived monetary sacrifice, we predict this effect to be even more pronounced for buyers with high green consumption values. Thus:

H3. The negative effect of sustainability on perceived monetary sacrifice is stronger when green consumption values are high.

5.3. The formation of behavioral intentions

We propose that buyers form purchase intentions and willingness to pay a premium based on perceived sustainability benefits and perceived monetary sacrifice. This prediction aligns with prior consumer research showing that purchase intentions depend on both perceived benefits and losses (Ariffin et al., 2018; Hartmann & Apaolaza-Ibáñez, 2012). Specifically, we propose that perceptions of monetary sacrifice reduce both buyers' willingness to purchase a product and their willingness to pay a premium over market alternatives. Conversely, perceived sustainability benefits should increase both buyers' purchase intention and their willingness to pay a premium. This prediction aligns with prior findings identifying perceived benefits as a major antecedent of individuals' willingness to pay for a product (Lopes & Galletta, 2006). Thus:

H4. Buyers' purchase intention and willingness to pay a premium decrease with higher perceived monetary sacrifice and increase with higher perceived sustainability benefits.

5.4. Organizational-level contingencies in the intention-forming stage

While individual buyers may have discretion in forming their own product inferences (e.g., about price or sustainability), the extent to which these inferences translate into actual purchase intentions is often shaped by organizational structures and expectations (see qualitative pre-study). Applying EDT to our study context, we argue that organizations establish performance expectations—such as cost targets or sustainability goals—that influence how buyers interpret and act on product inferences. Accordingly, we propose two organizational-level factors that moderate the relationship between buyers' inferences and their behavioral intentions: (1) the weight of price in incentive schemes and (2) firm sustainability orientation.

First, we predict that the weight of price-related performance targets in incentive schemes moderates how buyers' monetary sacrifice perceptions affect their purchase intention and willingness to pay a premium. This prediction aligns with prior management research showing that firms' incentive schemes shape employee motivations and behavior

(Ahammad et al., 2015; Fleischman et al., 2019). From an expectation perspective, we argue that stronger price-based incentives signal organizational expectations to prioritize cost control, thereby making perceived monetary sacrifice more salient in forming behavioral intentions. Therefore, we predict that buyers whose incentives depend substantially on cost-related performance targets are more likely to focus on monetary sacrifice perceptions when deciding whether to adopt or pay more for a product. Consequently, while perceptions of monetary sacrifice generally reduce purchase intentions, this effect should be stronger if the weight of price in incentive schemes is high. Thus:

H5. The negative effects of perceived monetary sacrifice on purchase intention and willingness to pay a premium are stronger when the weight of price in incentive schemes is high.

Second, we predict that a company's sustainability orientation positively moderates how buyers' perceptions of sustainability benefits affect their purchase intention and willingness to pay a premium. This assumption is in line with prior research suggesting that a company's environmental attitude or CSR culture positively promotes employees' pro-environmental behaviors at work (e.g., Al-Swidi et al., 2021; Pan et al., 2022). From an expectation perspective, we argue that firms' sustainability orientation reflects organizational norms that foster an implicit expectation that environmental performance should factor into decision making, thereby making sustainability-related inferences more relevant in forming behavioral intentions. Therefore, we predict that buyers operating within firms that prioritize sustainability are more likely to rely on perceived sustainability benefits when deciding to adopt a product or pay a price premium. Thus:

H6. The positive effects of perceived sustainability benefits on purchase intention and willingness to pay a premium are stronger when firm sustainability orientation is high.

6. Methodology

6.1. Data collection and sample

We conducted a scenario experiment using an online survey to test our hypotheses. This methodological choice responds to recent scholarly calls to adopt experimental methods in B2B research to uncover causal mechanisms in decision-making processes (Viglia et al., 2021). We

recruited B2B professionals with purchasing responsibilities at different management levels in the manufacturing sector via two international B2B online panels (see Table 2 for sample characteristics).

We collected data in Germany and China to ensure the applicability of the results across markets. The questionnaire was originally developed in English and then independently translated into German and Chinese by native-speaking researchers. We ensured accuracy and cultural relevance using a translation–back translation procedure (e.g., Bolton et al., 2010), followed by pre-tests with native speakers in both countries.

To assess response quality, we measured respondents' perceived competence ("I always felt competent when answering the questions") and attentiveness ("I completed the questionnaire very carefully") using 7-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). These indicators are commonly used in prior research to assess key informant quality (e.g., Hartmann et al., 2025; Homburg & Tischer, 2023). The results indicate high perceived competence ($M = 6.07$, SD = 0.94) and attentiveness ($M = 6.57$, SD = 0.68), supporting reliable key informant responses. We further took procedural and statistical measures to address potential sampling-related endogeneity concerns (see Web Appendix E for details). These trustworthiness tests indicate that sampling biases are unlikely to threaten the validity of our conclusions.

6.2. Experimental design

The study used a 2 (price: low vs. high) × 2 (sustainability: low vs. high) between-subjects design. We randomly assigned each respondent to one of the four experimental conditions, each of which included a purchasing scenario (see Web Appendix F). In line with recommendations for enhancing experimental realism and external validity (Viglia et al., 2021), we implemented several measures to strengthen contextual relevance and stimulate respondent engagement. We first asked the respondents to specify a B2B product with which they were familiar. We then showed them a purchasing scenario related to the product they indicated and instructed them to imagine processing an actual product proposal for their companies, as they would typically do in their professional roles. Across conditions, we stated that the product "meets all the contract's general technical and quality specifications," consistent with established scenario manipulations in B2B contexts (White & Cundiff, 1978). Moreover, we controlled for other relevant evaluation criteria in the experimental conditions by stating that the product's

Table 2
Sample composition.

Sample				
Position of Respondents			**Industry**	
Employee in operational/strategic purchasing	26%		Mechanical engineering industry	18%
Purchasing manager	27%		Food and stimulants industry	14%
Regional head of purchasing	11%		Electrical engineering industry	16%
Global head of purchasing	17%		Automotive industry	11%
General manager	15%		Metal production and processing industry	9%
Other positions with purchasing function	4%		Textile and clothing industry	9%
Gender			Chemical-pharmaceutical industry	7%
Male	68%		Plastics industry	4%
Female	32%		Printing and paper industry	4%
Age (years)			Other industries	9%
18–30	21%		**Number of Employees in Firm**	
31–40	36%		<200	20%
41–50	27%		200–499	22%
51–60	11%		500–999	19%
>60	4%		1000–4999	23%
B2B buying experience (years)			>5000	17%
0–4	28%		**Annual Revenue in Firm**	
5–10	45%		<€10 million	22%
>10	27%		€10 million–€100 million	30%
			€101 million–€500 million	20%
			€501 million–€1 billion	10%
			>€1 billion	19%

Note: $N = 447$; $n_{Germany} = 198$, $n_{China} = 249$.

functional performance, delivery, and service conditions are comparable to common alternatives on the market. This setup ensured a more realistic purchasing context involving typical evaluation criteria in the literature (Ho et al., 2010), while allowing us to isolate the effects of the two focal attributes—price and sustainability.

To manipulate product price, we followed the recommendation of White and Cundiff (1978) by first establishing a reference purchasing price before presenting participants with the experimental scenario. Specifically, we asked the respondents to specify a reasonable price for the product they indicated. Subsequently, we used an integrated function of the online survey tool to compute the high- and low-price levels based on the reference price. Specifically, we operationalized the high-price level as 15% above the respondents' reference price and the low-price condition at 15% below the respondents' stated reference price. This price variation reflects meaningful cost differences, as supported by recent industry reports revealing that many buyers are open to moderate premiums for sustainable products, often accepting premiums in the range of 10% and 20% (Bain & Company, 2024).

To manipulate environmental sustainability, we varied the reduction in environmental harm during the manufacturing process. We pretested different sustainability levels and selected a set in which the perceived difference between the high- and low-sustainability conditions was comparable to the perceived difference between the high- and low-price conditions ($M_{\text{high price – low price}} = 1.81$, SD = 1.10; $M_{\text{high sustainability – low sustainability}} = 1.87$, SD = 1.21; t(69) = 0.30, p = .77). Specifically, we operationalized the high-sustainability level as 35% and the low-sustainability level as 5% less environmental harm than other alternatives on the market.

6.3. Measures and measurement assessment

We measured all constructs in the conceptual framework using multi-item 7-point scales, except for the weight of price in incentive schemes, which we measured by asking respondents to indicate the extent to which their performance-based rewards depended on product price–related performance targets (e.g., cost savings), expressed as a percentage. We adapted established scales to our study context and drew on insights from expert interviews to ensure that the scale conceptualizations aligned with their operationalizations. When existing scales were unavailable or inapplicable, we developed new scales based on insights from the pre-study, as is common in established research (e.g., Fürst et al., 2017; Homburg et al., 2010). Web Appendix G outlines the scale items, the supporting literature, and the scale development process.

We performed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to assess the reliability and validity of all reflective constructs included in the conceptual framework. All constructs surpassed the recommended thresholds for Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted (AVE), indicating sufficient psychometric properties (Bagozzi & Yi, 2012). All indicator reliabilities were higher than the recommended threshold of 0.40 (Bagozzi & Yi, 2012). The CFA model with all reflective constructs achieved a good global fit: χ^2/df = 1.60, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.98, Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) = 0.98, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.04, and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = 0.03. The square root of the AVE of each multi-item construct exceeded the correlation with other constructs, suggesting discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) (see Web Appendix G2).

We applied a multigroup analysis to ensure the factor structure of the CFA model was equivalent across countries (Steenkamp & Baumgartner, 1998). We found metric invariance of our CFA model (χ^2 = 15.15, p > .05), indicating that the estimation of a joint model across countries is justifiable. To mitigate potential measurement errors, we employed both procedural approaches (e.g., minimizing potential comprehension problems through pretests) and statistical techniques (e.g., applying the common method factor technique to assess common method variance;

Podsakoff et al., 2003). Our analyses found no evidence that measurement errors distorted the results (see Web Appendix E for details).

7. Results

7.1. Model estimation

We applied covariance-based structural equation modeling (SEM) using maximum likelihood estimation to assess the relationships presented in our framework. We selected SEM due to its superiority to common regression analysis in estimating indirect effects with parallel mediators (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). We included country as a control variable to account for potential contextual effects while maintaining a common model of buyer-level evaluation mechanisms. In addition, we controlled for industry, buyers' purchasing experience, decision power, and organizational identification to account for their potential confounding effects. To estimate latent interaction effects, we followed prior B2B research (e.g., Behera & Bala, 2023; Chatzopoulou et al., 2022; Eisenberger et al., 2010) and applied the mean-centered unconstrained product indicator approach as proposed by Marsh et al. (2004). Specifically, we created product terms by multiplying the mean-centered indicators of the interacting latent constructs to form indicators for the latent interaction terms. This method uses each indicator of the latent variables only once to create the interaction terms, thereby avoiding introducing artificial correlations among product indicators and resulting in a less complex yet more precise estimation than the full indicator interaction method (Marsh et al., 2013). Table 3 summarizes the results of the hypothesized effects. The global fit indices suggest that our model fits the data well (CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.04, SRMR = 0.04).

To ensure the robustness and trustworthiness of our model estimations, we implemented both a priori measures and ex-post statistical analyses to address potential endogeneity concerns. For example, we tested alternative model specifications by incorporating different sets of control variables, applied Heckman's (1979) two-stage correction to account for potential sample selection bias, and employed Lewbel's (2012) heteroskedasticity-based approach to address omitted variable bias. These analyses consistently supported the validity of our conclusions while addressing various sources of endogeneity (see Web Appendix E for details).

7.2. Effects of price and sustainability in the inference-making stage

The main model reveals a positive relationship between price and perceived monetary sacrifice ($\gamma = 0.16$, $p < .001$) and a negative relationship between price and perceived sustainability benefits ($\gamma = -0.09$, $p < .05$). In addition, the model shows a positive effect of sustainability on perceived sustainability benefits ($\gamma = 0.09$, $p < .05$) and a negative effect of sustainability on perceived monetary sacrifice ($\gamma = -0.10$, $p < .05$).

To test for the effects predicted in H1a and H1b, we employed multigroup SEM, which allowed us to separately estimate (1) the effects of price on perceived monetary sacrifice and perceived sustainability benefits at different levels of sustainability and (2) the effects of sustainability on perceived monetary sacrifice and perceived sustainability benefits at different levels of price (Arnold, 1982). To test H1a, we estimated a model with sustainability as the grouping variable. We established measurement invariance and constrained all structural effects to be equal across the low- and high-sustainability groups, except for the effects of price on perceived monetary sacrifice and perceived sustainability. The specified model fits the data well (CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.05, SRMR = 0.07).

In support of H1a, the results show that high sustainability weakens the effects of price in buyers' inference-making. Specifically, when the sustainability level is low, price has a positive effect on perceived monetary sacrifice ($\gamma = 0.19$, $p < .01$) and a negative effect on perceived

sustainability benefits ($\gamma = -0.15$, $p < .01$). When the sustainability level is high, the results indicate no significant effects of price on perceived monetary sacrifice ($\gamma = 0.10$, $p = .14$) or perceived sustainability benefits ($\gamma = -0.08$, $p = .17$). These findings align with our model-free group comparisons, which show that under high sustainability conditions, the effects of price on both buyer inferences are attenuated (see Web Appendix H1).

Similarly, we estimated a model with price as the grouping variable to test H1b. Again, we established measurement invariance and constrained all structural effects to be equal across the low- and high-price groups except for the effects of sustainability on perceived monetary sacrifice and perceived sustainability benefits. The model fits the data well (CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.93, RMSEA = 0.06, SRMR = 0.07). Supporting H1b, the results show that low price weakens the effects of sustainability in buyers' inference-making. Specifically, when the price level is high, sustainability has a positive effect on perceived sustainability benefits ($\gamma = 0.12$, $p < .05$) and a negative effect on perceived monetary sacrifice ($\gamma = -0.16$, $p < .05$). When the price level is low, the results indicate no significant effects of sustainability on perceived sustainability benefits ($\gamma = 0.04$, $p = .53$) and perceived monetary sacrifice ($\gamma = -0.04$, $p = .54$). These findings align with our model-free group comparisons, which show that under low price conditions, the effects of sustainability on both buyer inferences are attenuated (see Web Appendix H2).

7.3. Moderation effects in the inference-making stage

The results confirm the predicted moderation effects of price

consciousness and green consumption values in the inference-making stage. In support of H2, price consciousness amplifies the positive effect of price on perceived monetary sacrifice ($\beta_{interaction} = 0.10$, $p < .05$). That is, buyers with higher price consciousness infer greater monetary sacrifice from price. A floodlight analysis indicates that price significantly increases perceived monetary sacrifice when price consciousness exceeds 4.62 on the 7-point scale, whereas the effect is not statistically significant below this threshold (see Web Appendix I1 for the Johnson–Neyman plot).

In support of H3, the results reveal that green consumption values strengthen the negative effect of sustainability on perceived monetary sacrifice ($\beta_{interaction} = -0.11$, $p < .05$). That is, while product sustainability leads buyers to infer lower monetary sacrifice, this effect is more pronounced for buyers high in green consumption values. A floodlight analysis indicates that sustainability significantly reduces perceived monetary sacrifice when green consumption values exceed 4.91, whereas the effect is not statistically significant below this threshold (see Web Appendix I2 for the Johnson–Neyman plot).

7.4. Direct effects in the intention-forming stage

Regarding H4, the results show that perceived monetary sacrifice is negatively related to purchase intention ($\gamma = -0.18$, $p < .001$), while perceived sustainability benefits are positively related to both purchase intention ($\gamma = 0.53$, $p < .001$) and willingness to pay a premium ($\gamma = 0.52$, $p < .001$). However, perceived monetary sacrifice does not significantly relate to willingness to pay a premium ($\gamma = 0.03$, $p = .46$).

Table 3
Overview of estimated structural relationship coefficients.

Structural paths	Hypotheses	Path coefficients	
Inference-Making Stage			
Main Effects of the Independent Variables			
Price → perceived monetary sacrifice	H1a	**Low sustainability: 0.19****	High sustainability: 0.10
Price → perceived sustainability benefits	H1a	**Low sustainability: −0.15****	High sustainability: −0.08
Sustainability → perceived monetary sacrifice	H1b	Low price: −0.04	**High price: −0.16***
Sustainability → perceived sustainability benefits	H1b	Low price: 0.04	**High price: 0.12***
Main Effects of the Moderators			
Price consciousness → perceived monetary sacrifice		0.15**	
Green consumption values → perceived monetary sacrifice		−0.19***	
Interaction Effects			
Price × price consciousness → perceived monetary sacrifice	H2	0.10*	
Sustainability × green consumption values → perceived monetary sacrifice	H3	−0.11*	
Intention-Forming Stage			
Main Effects of the Mediators			
Perceived monetary sacrifice → purchase intention	H4	−0.18***	
Perceived monetary sacrifice → willingness to pay a premium	H4	0.03	
Perceived sustainability benefits → purchase intention	H4	0.53***	
Perceived sustainability benefits → willingness to pay a premium	H4	0.52***	
Main Effects of the Moderators			
Weight of price in incentive schemes → purchase intention		0.05	
Weight of price in incentive schemes → willingness to pay a premium		0.02	
Firm sustainability orientation → purchase intention		0.32***	
Firm sustainability orientation → willingness to pay a premium		0.27***	
Interaction Effects			
Perceived monetary sacrifice × weight of price in incentive schemes → purchase intention	H5	−0.13***	
Perceived monetary sacrifice × weight of price in incentive schemes → willingness to pay a premium	H5	−0.13***	
Perceived sustainability benefits × firm sustainability orientation → purchase intention	H6	0.05	
Perceived sustainability benefits × firm sustainability orientation → willingness to pay a premium	H6	0.10**	

Control variables	→ perceived monetary sacrifice	→ perceived sustainability benefits	→ purchase intention	→ willingness to pay a premium
Country	0.15**	−0.09	0.11**	0.09*
Industry	−0.05	−0.05	0.01	−0.01
Purchasing experience	−0.13**	0.05	−0.06	−0.11**
Decision power	0.10*	−0.00	0.03	0.02
Organizational identification	0.10	0.14**	−0.00	0.07

*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

Note: The results are based on two-tailed tests. Standardized coefficients are reported. We report the path coefficients of multigroup SEM estimations for H1a and H1b.

These results suggest that buyers' willingness to pay a premium is driven more by the perceived sustainability benefits than by the perceived monetary sacrifice. Accordingly, the results offer partial support for H4 and align with prior research indicating that benefit perceptions are more influential than sacrifice perceptions in shaping buyers' product evaluations (Blut et al., 2022; Li et al., 2012).

7.5. Moderation effects in the intention-forming stage

In support of H5, the results reveal that the weight of price in incentive schemes strengthens the negative effect of perceived monetary sacrifice on purchase intention ($\beta_{interaction} = -0.13$, $p < .001$) and willingness to pay a premium ($\beta_{interaction} = -0.13$, $p < .001$). That is, for buyers whose incentives depend substantially on price-related performance targets, perceived monetary sacrifice reduces their purchase intention and willingness to pay a premium to a greater extent. Specifically, a floodlight analysis indicates that perceived monetary sacrifice does not significantly reduce purchase intention when the weight of price is below 9.3%, but the effect becomes significant above this threshold (see Web Appendix G3 for the Johnson–Neyman plot).

Notably, while the main model did not show the proposed significant, negative effect of perceived monetary sacrifice on buyers' willingness to pay a premium ($\beta = 0.03$, $p = .46$), the data reveal the proposed negative relationship for buyers with a high weight of price in their incentive schemes. A floodlight analysis indicates that the negative effect of perceived monetary sacrifice becomes significant when the weight of price exceeds 58.3% (see Web Appendix G4 for the Johnson–Neyman plot). Thus, when purchasing price is a major component of incentive schemes in firms, perceived monetary sacrifice is more likely to deter buyers from both purchasing and paying premiums for sustainable products.

Regarding H6, the results show that firm sustainability orientation positively moderates the effect of perceived sustainability benefits on willingness to pay a premium ($\beta_{interaction} = 0.10$, $p < .05$). This result suggests that buyers from firms with stronger sustainability orientation are more likely to pay premiums for sustainability benefits. A further floodlight analysis shows that perceived sustainability benefits significantly increase willingness to pay a premium when firm sustainability orientation exceeds 2.18, whereas the effect is not statistically significant below this threshold (see Web Appendix G5 for the Johnson–Neyman plot). We also observed a positive, but nonsignificant, moderating effect of firm sustainability orientation on purchase intention ($\beta_{interaction} = 0.05$, $p = .16$). Thus, H6 is partially supported.

8. Discussion

8.1. Research contributions

Our study makes three key contributions to the literature. First, we contribute to the B2B pricing and sustainable purchasing literature by examining pricing decisions in a sustainability context. We show that a product's sustainability level adjusts buyer expectations of its price, and vice versa. As a result, the inferences buyers draw from one attribute are contingent on the level of the other attribute, reflecting the confirmation or disconfirmation of their expected "price–sustainability fit." Specifically, higher prices are less likely to elicit unfavorable inferences when sustainability is high (perceived price–sustainability fit), whereas higher sustainability is less likely to elicit favorable inferences when the price is low (perceived misfit). With these insights, our study advances understanding of how individual B2B buyers evaluate sustainability and price as interdependent product attributes, thereby complementing prior work that has either focused on firm-level sustainability responses or treated price and sustainability in isolation (e.g., Casidy & Lie, 2023; Saab & Botelho, 2020). Future research could apply our theoretical framework to explore whether such interdependence also applies to other product attributes in buyers' product evaluations (e.g., price and

product innovativeness).

Second, our study advances EDT (Oliver, 1980, 2010) in the domain of organizational buying behavior in two ways. On the one hand, we extend EDT's application from post-purchase evaluations (e.g., Homburg et al., 2002) to the pre-purchase phase in B2B settings. Unlike consumers, whose decisions can sometimes be impulsive or rely on peripheral cues (Iyer et al., 2020), B2B buyers must align their decisions with organizational guidelines and long-term objectives (Yu et al., 2022), prompting more deliberate and thorough evaluation processes before purchase (Monroe et al., 2015). In line with this reasoning, our findings suggest that buyers' expectations of product attributes already shape their evaluations at the outset of the customer journey rather than solely after making a purchase decision. These insights broaden the scope of EDT by offering a novel perspective on how deliberate information processing influences buyers' product evaluations before purchase.

On the other hand, we add nuance to EDT by challenging its assumption that positive disconfirmation (e.g., high sustainability at a low price) universally leads to more favorable buyer responses than a confirmation (Oliver, 2010). Specifically, both our pre-study and main study imply that in B2B purchasing contexts, positive disconfirmation may provoke skepticism which undermines the typically more favorable responses observed in B2C contexts (Homburg et al., 2005). This skepticism may arise because buyers tend to approach purchase decisions with heightened caution and risk aversion (Cooper et al., 2006) and thus engage in extensive attributional processing when confronted with highly sustainable products at unexpectedly low prices. As such, our findings suggest that in B2B settings, exceeding buyer expectations may not always yield more positive returns for a seller. Rather, buyer reactions to positive disconfirmation appear context-dependent, requiring additional trust-building measures from sellers. Such measures might include providing credible explanations (e.g., justifying lower prices through upcycled materials) or enhancing information transparency (e.g., transparent pricing principles, environmental certificates; Kang & Hustvedt, 2014).

These insights open avenues for further exploration. For example, future research could examine whether B2B sellers can employ such trust-building measures to reduce buyers' concerns about untrustworthy sustainability claims or hidden costs (e.g., shortened product lifespan, increased maintenance needs), thereby mitigating skepticism and fostering more favorable inferences from positive disconfirmation. In addition, future research should extend our insights to examine consumer buying scenarios that involve similarly extensive attributional processing. For example, the information discounting effect we observed may also apply to high-involvement consumer decisions (e.g., buying premium electric vehicles), in which consumers are likely to scrutinize positive disconfirmation closely given the significant financial investment and long-term implications of the purchase (Pansari & Kumar, 2017).

Third, we contribute to the emerging stream of B2B buying literature examining individual buyer behavior (Keränen, Kienzler, et al., 2023; Mohan et al., 2022). Extending prior sustainable purchasing research focusing on firm-level adoption (e.g., Casidy & Lie, 2023; Yen & Yen, 2012), we shift the focus to individual buyers. Our findings reveal that buyers' personal values shape their product expectations and subsequently their inferences from sustainable products (i.e., in the inference-making stage), whereas company policies, reflecting firm-level expectations for supplier choices, guide buyers' ultimate decisions (i.e., in the intention-forming stage). These insights advance the limited understanding of how individual buyers evaluate products within organizational boundaries.

At the individual level, we show that buyers' price consciousness and green consumption values influence how they infer monetary sacrifice in the inference-making stage. Specifically, price consciousness strengthens inferences about monetary sacrifice, increasing buyers' price sensitivity. In contrast, buyers' green consumption values weaken

inferences about monetary sacrifice, reducing buyers' price sensitivity. As such, we demonstrate that buyer behavior reflects not only organizational considerations but also buyers' personal values. In doing so, our study contributes to the emerging body of research challenging the notion that B2B buyers act solely as rational agents driven exclusively by organizational guidelines (Kaufmann et al., 2017).

At the organizational level, we show that the weight of price in incentive schemes and firm sustainability orientation moderate how buyers translate their attribute inferences into purchase intentions. Our findings suggest that emphasizing price in buyers' incentive schemes amplifies the negative effects of buyers' perceived monetary sacrifice, discouraging them from adopting sustainable products and paying higher prices. In contrast, a strong firm sustainability orientation amplifies the positive effect of perceived sustainability benefits on willingness to pay a premium, allowing for higher prices for sustainable products. These insights reveal how managerial strategies can effectively steer buyer behavior by shifting the focus between cost (i.e., price) and benefit (i.e., sustainability) perspectives during the intention-forming stage. With this, we advance the limited understanding of how operational policies guide individual buyer decisions (Yu et al., 2022).

Building on these insights, our theoretical framework also invites future research on market-level contingencies shaping buyers' price–sustainability trade-offs. From an expectancy–disconfirmation perspective, factors such as market structure and power dynamics are likely to influence what buyers consider an "appropriate" combination of price and sustainability. For instance, in buyer-dominated markets with abundant sustainable alternatives, buyers may expect higher sustainability performance at a given price. Conversely, in seller-dominated markets with strong sustainability mandates, buyers' expectations regarding sustainability-related expenditure may increase. These shifting expectations are likely to influence the fit-constituting price and sustainability levels. Exploring these dynamics would advance understanding of the boundary conditions of buyers' price–sustainability trade-offs beyond individual- and firm-level factors. In addition, our qualitative pre-study points to promising avenues for future research on sustainability-oriented selling. Future studies could examine how different sales approaches enact sustainability considerations within buying centers across cultural contexts. For example, relationship-based selling grounded in trust and interpersonal ties (e.g., guanxi; Zhang et al., 2024) may enhance the credibility of sustainability claims in some cultures, whereas values-aligned sales communication approaches may be more effective in others.

8.2. Managerial implications

8.2.1. Implications for selling firms

Our findings provide valuable insights for selling firms to develop effective pricing and selling strategies for sustainable products in B2B markets. First, we demonstrate the feasibility of premium pricing for products that deliver high sustainability value, aligning with value-based pricing principles (Hinterhuber, 2004). Specifically, our findings suggest that high sustainability can buffer the negative perceptions typically associated with high prices, thereby reducing buyers' price sensitivity and creating leeway to charge price premiums. Thus, sustainability can serve as a viable lever to justify higher prices in B2B markets, where premium pricing is often constrained by intensifying cost pressures and prevailing price consciousness (Keränen, Totzek, et al., 2023). In this regard, adopting a premium pricing strategy allows selling firms to capitalize on buyers' willingness to pay a premium for sustainability and helps amortize the substantial investments required to develop and produce sustainable products (Kahupi et al., 2021).

For firms opting to sell sustainable products at low prices (e.g., to achieve faster market penetration upon market entry), our findings further suggest the importance of providing supportive information to help buyers reconcile a perceived mismatch between low price and high
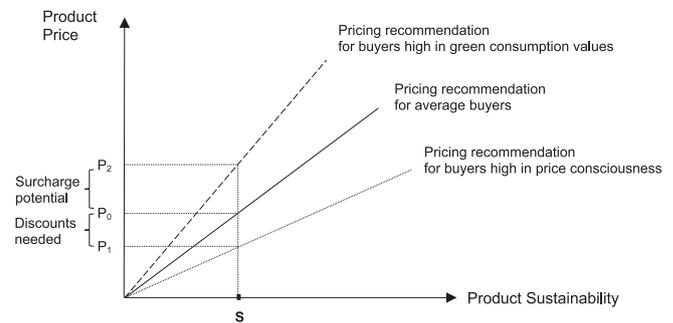
Fig. 2. Illustrative pricing recommendations for different buyer types based on the price–sustainability fit principle.
Note: This conceptual figure illustrates pricing recommendations for sustainable products, differentiated by three buyer types: average buyers (solid line), buyers with high price consciousness (dashed line), and buyers with strong green consumption values (dotted line). Each line reflects the representative price level at which the respective buyer group perceives a fit between price and sustainability across different levels of product sustainability. For any given level of sustainability S, the illustrative fit-consistent price levels are denoted as P_0 (average buyers), P_1 (buyers high in price consciousness), and P_2 (buyers high in green consumption values).

sustainability. In line with prior consumer research on information transparency (Wu et al., 2020), we recommend that sellers provide clear information on how the company achieves both affordability and sustainability, for example, through cost-efficient production processes.

Second, our findings underscore the importance of tailoring prices to buyers' individual-level characteristics, as these factors shape their perceptions of price–sustainability fit and, in turn, their price sensitivity. Fig. 2 provides an illustrative depiction of how price consciousness and green consumption values shift the price point at which buyers perceive a price–sustainability fit and provides pricing recommendations aligned with the price–sustainability fit principle. For a given level of sustainability (S), buyers with high price consciousness perceive a price–sustainability fit at a lower price (P_1) than the average buyer (P_0), suggesting that salespeople should offer a discount ($P_0 - P_1$) to motivate purchase. Conversely, buyers with strong green consumption values perceive a fit at a higher price (P_2), allowing salespeople to close deals even when applying a premium ($P_2 - P_0$).

These insights underscore the need for adaptive, buyer-targeted pricing strategies. To identify buyers' individual characteristics, salespeople can observe expressions and reactions during face-to-face conversations, analyze purchase histories in customer relationship management systems or text-based interactions, and use artificial intelligence–powered tools to predict buyers' price sensitivity (Frazzitta et al., 2024). Moreover, to facilitate tailored price-setting, firms should grant salespeople the authority to adjust prices within predefined ranges or offer customer-specific discounts. By doing so, firms can better leverage salespeople's role as boundary-spanners between the firm and buyers' preferences and needs (Sleep et al., 2015).

Third, our findings highlight that effective selling requires not only understanding individual buyer characteristics but also the organizational context—such as sustainability orientation and incentive schemes—that shapes buyers' organization-driven expectations. We recommend that salespeople tailor their communication strategies accordingly. For buying firms with a strong sustainability focus and less stringent cost targets, messaging should emphasize how the offering supports their sustainability goals through reduced greenhouse gas emissions or pollution levels. For buying firms with a lower sustainability orientation or tighter cost constraints, salespeople should instead highlight economic and operational priorities, emphasizing regulatory compliance and the potential economic returns of sustainable purchasing through reduced total cost of ownership, increased sales, or expanded market access (Laukkanen & Tura, 2022). Although

promising, such targeted communication remains underused, with only 35% of sales teams currently tailoring strategies to sustainability-conscious B2B customers (Bain & Company, 2024).

8.2.2. Implications for buying firms

For buying firms, we offer guidance on linking managerial measures to broader organizational objectives to better integrate sustainability into actual purchasing decisions. First, our findings suggest that buyers' personal values and traits, such as personal green consumption values, can shape their product evaluations. Companies should therefore systematically consider individual traits when recruiting and training purchasing professionals. By recruiting value-aligned talent or fostering alignment through training, firms can ensure that buyers' preferences and supplier choices are consistent with the organization's overarching sustainability agenda.

Second, our findings suggest that firms can foster the operational implementation of sustainable purchasing policies by aligning two firm-internal levers: firm sustainability orientation and incentive schemes. Our findings reveal that a strong firm sustainability orientation steers buyer decisions toward sustainable products. To support this, firms should clearly communicate their strategic objectives to individual buyers. For example, firms could integrate environmental issues into employee onboarding and conduct regular sustainability workshops (Liu et al., 2012; Pham et al., 2020)—an area in which 61% of executives acknowledge that current practices are inadequate (Economist Impact, 2024). From an incentive perspective, our findings indicate that when performance targets focus primarily on price, buyers tend to deprioritize sustainability in their decision making. Misaligned incentives can therefore undermine strategic sustainability efforts. Thus, we recommend that firms incorporate sustainability-related targets into buyer incentive systems—a practice that only 9% of companies currently implement or plan to adopt in the near future (EcoVadis & Accenture, 2024).

Overall, our study offers an information-processing-based framework for understanding how B2B buyers make trade-offs between price and sustainability in product evaluations. By underscoring the important role of price–sustainability fit, uncovering key contingencies, and providing actionable guidance for both selling and buying firms, we hope to foster the adoption of sustainable offerings in B2B markets and the development of more sustainable supply chains.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Guzi Huang: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Aline Isabelle Lanzrath:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Christian Homburg:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Conceptualization.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2026.02.012.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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