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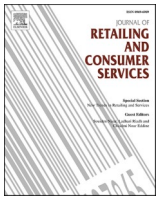

Is doing right all that matters in sustainability marketing? The role of fit in sustainable marketing strategies☆

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ABSTRACT

As firms seek to compete in an ever-changing environmental landscape, they are increasingly focusing their efforts on corporate social responsibility, in particular sustainable marketing strategies. The present research utilizes contingency theory to examine sustainable marketing strategies as they relate to consumer perceptions of fit. Multiple methods are used to examine consumer perceptions of sustainability fit. First, a qualitative pretest of 88 MBA students is conducted, followed by a scenario-based survey via an online panel of 546 participants. Additionally, an experiment consisting of 185 consumers provides further evidence of support for the impact of sustainability fit on consumer perceptions and firm performance. Collectively, the results suggest that consumer perceptions of fit are an important antecedent of organizational outcomes.

1. Introduction

The evolution of the marketing perspective has made it essential for firms wanting to differentiate themselves in the marketplace to stand out from the competition. Given the desire by many to consume in a more socially or environmentally friendly manner, firms are engaging in corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategies as a way to meet this call from consumers (Russo-Spena et al., 2018; White et al., 2019). In particular, sustainability efforts are increasing to meet regulatory and consumer expectations. Firms are not only offering sustainable products; they are enacting sustainable marketing strategies to help enhance the firm's image. However, the strategies enacted by firms have been met with varying degrees of success. For example, the retailer H&M is rated as one of the most sustainable firms by experts, yet rarely is viewed in that light by consumers (Todd, 2020). The fast fashion offerings of the retailer H&M are often viewed by consumers to be very unsustainable, however it is viewed differently by the experts. Conversely, a retailer like Patagonia receives praise from consumers and experts for its sustainability efforts. While the efforts of both companies are lauded by experts, if consumers do not perceive the sustainability actions to be noteworthy or appropriate, the efforts are not likely to have the positive impact firms are expecting.

Thus, the purpose of the current research is to examine consumer perceptions of fit between a firm and its sustainability strategies, and subsequent impact on consumer attitudes and intentions. Despite the prevalence of research on sustainability, research examining consumer perceptions of fit toward the sustainable marketing strategies of firms is lacking. While fit or congruence has been examined in the context of cause-related marketing (Pracejus and Olsen, 2004; Zdravkovic et al., 2010), previous research suggests that fit may be extended to the sustainability initiatives implemented by a firm (Cronin et al., 2011; Gilal et al., 2021).

As organizations seek ways to stand out from the competition, they are relying more on strategies focused on sustainability. However, many organizations are not considering the role that fit plays with regard to consumer perceptions of the firm. Fit is the congruence between the socially responsible initiatives of a firm and synergies in firm activities (Cronin et al., 2011; Ellen et al., 2006). Importantly, what works for one firm may not work for another in the same industry. Consumers evaluate the sustainable marketing strategies of a firm based on their knowledge of the firm. It is then up to the firm to ensure it understands consumer expectations and develops an appropriate strategy. For example, the

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food service retailer Chipotle has recently introduced its Real Foodprint campaign where the sustainability of the foods used are presented in a more transparent manner to consumers. However, providing information on the supply chain may not fit with what consumers are expecting from Chipotle. Consumers may be more interested in how Chipotle is encouraging recycling or eliminating waste in the stores, efforts that may be more consumer facing and recognizable. The supply chain sustainability efforts of Chipotle may be impressive, however if those efforts are not aligned with consumer expectations, they may not be well received. Firms operating under the belief that more sustainability strategies are better may be misguided. A greater number of sustainability initiatives does not necessarily lead to enhanced perceptions of fit, especially if they do not align with consumer expectations and are met with skepticism (Chen and Chang, 2013).

The theoretical and practical implications for the research are numerous. Given the increase in sustainability efforts by firms, coupled with consumers' interest in protecting the planet, the need to understand consumer perceptions of sustainability strategies persists. Thus, the present research seeks to accomplish three objectives. First, it seeks to expand the application of contingency theory, in particular the role of sustainability fit, with regard to consumer perceptions of firm initiatives. Additionally, through multiple methods we empirically illustrate the impact of sustainability fit on consumer perceptions and purchase intentions. Lastly, we seek to provide managerially relevant insights practitioners can use as they attempt to meet the needs of consumers seeking sustainable offerings.

2. Background

Research on sustainability continues to be prominent within marketing. Sustainable consumption and production are often considered through a "top down" or "bottom up" approach (Tseng et al., 2016). In the "top down" approach, policymakers hold the responsibility of designing appropriate policies for increasing sustainable consumption and production (Schroeder, 2014). Whereas, in the "bottom up" approach, companies initiate sustainable consumption and production practices. Recently, scholars have examined the perception of consumers on "top down" actors, such as the government, policy makers and the media (Gleim et al., 2019; Sreen et al., 2020). However, scant research examines consumers' perceptions of sustainable marketing strategies adopted by the "bottom up" actors (i.e., organizations; Tsai et al., 2020).

Additionally, there is a dearth of research that examines the role of fit and the sustainable marketing strategies utilized by firms (Gilal et al., 2021). Fit has traditionally been examined in the context of cause-related marketing, however research on its impact on sustainable marketing strategies is lacking. Within the context of cause-related marketing, research suggests that the fit between the brand and cause can increase the value of the donation (Pracejus and Olsen, 2004), increase purchase and donation intention for consumers (Barone et al., 2007; Huertas-García et al., 2017), and increase brand meaning and relationships (Becker-Olsen and Hill, 2006). Conversely, low levels of fit have resulted in negative consumer responses. Not only decreased donation intent and amount for cause-related marketing efforts (e.g., Barone et al., 2007; Pracejus and Olsen, 2004), but in other contexts as well. Poor fit between an influencer and the promotion of luxury brands results in dilution of the brand and reduced purchase intentions (Qian and Park, 2021), while poor fit results in negative consumer responses when brand extensions and the parent brand are poorly aligned (Dens and De Pelsmacker, 2016). Higher levels of fit between a brand and the associated cause have shown positive results, while lower levels have shown to be detrimental, however the impact of fit regarding the sustainability efforts of a firm and consumer perceptions is lacking.

Further, the credibility and motives of the firm have been found to attenuate the relationship, suggesting the relationship between fit and sustainability strategies may not be as straightforward as expected (Koschate-Fischer et al., 2012; Moosmayer and Fuljahn, 2013). Recent research examining fit in a broader sustainability context suggests that it can impact brand passion when customer-company identification is high (Gilal et al., 2021). Further, research suggests that fit impacts perceptions of CSR authenticity (Alhouti et al., 2016; Joo et al., 2019). Firms run the risk of being viewed as "greenwashing" when they appear inauthentic in their attempts to financially capitalize on the sustainability efforts (Gleim et al., 2013; Szabo and Webster, 2021). In addition, the CSR reputation of the firm has been shown to impact sales of new sustainable products, suggesting that sustainability fit leads to an enhanced CSR reputation for a firm (van Doorn et al., 2021). Interestingly, enhanced firm reputation may help to reduce perceptions of greenwashing as consumers are more likely to believe the claims of a sustainably reputable firm (van Doorn et al., 2021). In the following section, theory and previous research are integrated to examine the role of sustainability fit, firm sustainability, and perceived organizational effectiveness on consumer attitudes.

3. Conceptual development

3.1. Contingency theory

Contingency theory argues that a fit between organizational effectiveness and contingencies increases organizational performance (Wright and Ashill, 1998). Contingencies moderate the relationship between organizational characteristics and organizational performance (Donaldson, 2001). Various scholars have applied contingency theory to examine the fit between internal organizational characteristics and external contingencies, such as the fit between organizational structure and enterprise resource planning (Morton and Hu, 2008), contingencies and the design of service recovery systems (Smith et al., 2019), and the influence of organizational strategy and structure on servant leadership and organizational performance (Eva et al., 2018).

Marketing scholars have applied a contingency framework to study the fit between organizational strategies and consumer perceptions of those strategies. For instance, Tellis and Fornell (1988) apply contingency theory to examine consumers' perceptions of product quality from advertising strategies. Cui and Choudhury (2003) apply contingency theory to examine consumer perceptions of organizational marketing ethics. Research has also utilized contingency theory when examining the sustainable exporting strategies for international firms in relation to strategic fit and firm performance (Zeriti et al., 2014). Contingency theory has been shown to be an important theoretical lens by which research on CSR can be examined. Thus, contingency theory, and the role of fit, provides a useful foundation for the present research to build upon (Ellen et al., 2006; Gilal et al., 2021).

Early research contends that there is a single best way for all firms to act, however contingency theory suggests the marketing environment and context matter. Contingency theory suggests that there is no perfect way of doing things for every firm, and as such, each firm should decide what works best for itself (Ruekert et al., 1985). Currently, many firms implement sustainability strategies that are utilized by competing firms, or firms in other industries, or without regard for how to truly capitalize on the market opportunity. This "copycat" strategy is likely efficient on the developmental end of the process; however, it leaves consumers puzzled due to the disconnect between the sustainability actions of the firm and corporate associations (Brown and Dacin, 1997). Firms may be operating under the misperception that offering multiple sustainable marketing strategies will yield positive results, however it is clear from previous research that fit is an important criterion in consumers evaluations of service providers and retailers. To ensure the strategies are met with the appropriate response by consumers, it is imperative that firms ensure the strategies fit with consumer expectations.

3.2. Sustainability fit

Through associative learning consumers make choices based in part on the cause-company fit (Shimp et al., 1991; Till and Nowak, 2000). Consumers are armed with information about a brand or product and that knowledge is used to evaluate offerings. When fit is high, consumers tend to respond favorably to the cognitive consistency between a company and its actions (Keller and Aaker, 1992; Speed and Thompson, 2000). Thus, when fit is high between a retailer (e.g., Patagonia) and its actions (e.g., offering a selection of discounted Patagonia clothes through its Worn Wear site to keep them out of landfills), consumers tend to respond favorably to those efforts. A high fit relationship between a firm and its actions, or causes, is shown to reduce suspicion and lead to more favorable perceptions of the firm (Ellen et al., 2006; Gilal et al., 2021). Thus, as perceptions of fit increase, it stands to reason that organizational trust would increase and the actions of the firm would be viewed as more authentic (Alhouti et al., 2016).

Conversely, when fit is low, consumers tend to experience cognitive inconsistency and make negative attributions toward the firm (Porter and Kramer, 2002; Speed and Thompson, 2000). Because individuals value consistency, the inconsistent thoughts result in negative reactions, which attenuate their attitude toward the firm and ultimately purchase intentions (Meyers-Levy and Tybout, 1989). For example, Amazon has been touting the use of electric vans to make deliveries, however most consumers still receive their packages via UPS or USPS (Palmer, 2020). The use of electric vans may be environmentally advantageous, however most consumers have yet to see them in action. Additionally, while product transport is important, the waste generated from product packaging may be more concerning to consumers as recent reports suggest that 599 million pounds of plastic waste were attributed to Amazon in 2020, up 29% from the previous year (Spolarich and Baxter, 2021). Thus, it stands to reason that as consumers observe the sustainability strategies of a firm, the fit between what is known about the company and the sustainability strategy will impact the attitude toward the firm. The following hypothesis is offered to denote the proposed relationships in the research model.

H1. Perceptions of sustainability fit has a positive relationship with attitude toward the firm.

3.3. Attitude toward the firm, purchase intentions, and price premium

Gaining a favorable attitude toward the firm will provide little benefit unless that favorable attitude translates into greater market share or profitability. Organizations strive to maximize their revenues, be it through capturing a greater percent of the market, selling products at a premium price, or reducing costs. Thus, research examining environmentally friendly marketing strategies suggests that a favorable attitude toward a company leads to financial gains and market share (Menguc and Ozanne, 2005), as well as increased firm performance and loyalty (Lin et al., 2017; Pujari et al., 2003). Similarly, as consumers hold a favorable attitude toward the company due to the socially responsible initiatives, it is likely to translate into greater purchase intentions (Jaiswal and Kant, 2018; Lichtenstein et al., 2004). In addition, the sustainable initiatives employed by firms often benefit the bottom line by saving firms valuable resources, thus helping to reduce costs (Lash and Wellington, 2007).

Similarly, attracting consumers willing to pay a price premium for sustainable products, or products offered by a sustainable firm, is also important to the success of an organization (Meise et al., 2014). Research suggests that consumers are willing to pay more for products when they have a favorable attitude toward the company due to the socially responsible actions of the firm (Balderjahn, 1988; Parsa et al., 2015). It is also likely the financial gains of firms that are environmentally friendly may be attributed to price premiums (e.g., Menguc and Ozanne, 2005). Not only are consumers more likely to purchase products from socially responsible firms, but they also pay more for those products. The following hypotheses denote the relationships identified in the research model.

H2. Attitude toward the firm has a positive relationship with purchase intentions.

H3. Attitude toward the firm has a positive relationship with willingness to pay a price premium.

H4. Purchase intentions has a positive relationship with willingness to pay a price premium.

H5. Attitude toward the firm mediates the relationship between perceptions of sustainability fit and purchase intentions.

H6. Attitude toward the firm mediates the relationship between perceptions of sustainability fit and willingness to pay a price premium.

4. Study 1

4.1. Qualitative pretest

An initial qualitative pretest of 88 MBA students was conducted to identify consumer perceptions of firms. We sought to identify firms that consumers recognized as very sustainable and not sustainable. The participants were asked to name a company they perceived as being sustainable and explain why that was the case. They were also asked to name a company that they thought was not sustainable, and again explain why they felt that way. Not surprisingly, many companies that were noted as being very sustainable by participants, were also noted as being not sustainable by others. This lack of agreement further illustrates the impact that consumer perceptions have on evaluations of a firm.

Two graduate students acting as independent coders categorized the responses. Discrepancies in coding were discussed between the coders and if a resolution was not reached, the response was counted against the reliability assessment (Kassarjian, 1977). Inter-coder reliability was over 98 percent. The goal was to understand consumer perceptions of firms in order to incorporate actual companies into the quantitative study described below. Firms listed by separate respondents as being either very sustainable, or not sustainable, were examined for inclusion in the quantitative study. Further, companies noted numerous times by respondents were also considered for inclusion. Identifying organizations that consumers believe to be sustainable, as well the actions of those firms, was important for the development of the scenarios utilized in the quantitative study.

Upon examination of the responses from the qualitative study, the results identify a diverse group of companies for which consumers have unique perceptions. In particular, when asked to name the company they thought was the most sustainable, the only service company noted was Waste Management. The remaining companies identified were all manufacturers or retailers. In addition, Exxon Mobil and General Motors dominated the least sustainable company list. Overall, the results provide interesting insights, albeit limited, regarding perceptions of sustainable and non-sustainable companies. The list and ranking of the top six companies from each category are found in Table 1, while the demographic characteristics of participants in the qualitative study are

Table 1
Commonly noted companies in the qualitative study.

Most Sustainable Company	# Reported	Least Sustainable Company	# Reported
Timberland	11	Exxon	16
Waste Management	8	General Motors	10
Whole Foods	7	General Electric	7
Honda	6	Dow Chemical	6
Nike	5	Nintendo	3

found in Table 3.

4.2. PLS-SEM study

To test the validity of the model, a large-scale data collection was undertaken via a structured survey. The following sub-sections outline the administration and validation procedure that was employed.

4.2.1. Scenario

Each participant was assigned one of ten different companies and information regarding the actual sustainable marketing efforts of the firm. A total of eight genuine, and two fictitious, firms were utilized to ensure a wide range of retailers, service providers and manufacturers were captured. Firms that were identified in the initial qualitative study were considered for inclusion, as well as a fictitious company in each a retailing and service industry. All the companies utilized in the retailing scenarios were noted in the qualitative study, however due to the lack of service firms identified in the qualitative study, a diverse group was selected. Based on previous research, and a desire to have established firms with broad application, two airlines and two hotel brands were utilized (Goldstein et al., 2008; Sultan and Simpson, 2000). The list of companies used can be found in Table 2.

The information presented to the participants was taken directly from company websites. Minor editing was done to ensure that a comparable amount of information was presented for each firm. Two experts knowledgeable in the topical area reviewed the companies and information provided and agreed regarding the content presented. The use of fictitious companies allowed for more control, while using genuine companies provided a realism that would otherwise be lacking if only fictitious companies were used. Following a brief set of instructions, participants were provided the scenario (see Appendix), followed by the survey questions.

4.2.2. Measures

The survey instrument included measures to assess the following constructs: (1) perceptions of sustainability fit (Keller and Aaker, 1992), (2) attitude toward the firm (Pham, 1996), (3) purchase intentions (Mano and Oliver, 1993), and (4) willingness to pay a price premium (Zeithaml et al., 1996). In addition, familiarity with the firm was used as a control variable (Oliver and Bearden, 1985). The sales were modified to fit the context when necessary (see Appendix). The scales were incorporated into an online survey instrument where the item sets were presented in random order to reduce the likelihood of method variance. The dependent variables (i.e., attitude toward the firm, purchase intentions and price premium) were also separated spatially from the independent variable by inserting intermediate questions between the two areas.

4.2.3. Survey administration

The data for empirical assessment were collected using a standard survey administration technique (Dillman, 1978) incorporating practices noted as beneficial in increasing the effective response rate. First, potential respondents were identified from a stratified random sample generated from a panel of general consumers maintained within the United States. In all, 2000 potential survey participants were delivered an electronic link via email and 591 were returned (29.6 percent response rate). Of those completed, responses were eliminated in cases where data were missing or incomplete. This procedure resulted in a final, useable sample of 546, which equates to an effective response rate of 27.3 percent. A-priori sample size calculation with anticipated effect size of 0.3 (small effect size-0.1; medium effect size-0.3; large effect size-0.5), statistical power of 0.80 and eight latent constructs, recommends a sample size of 177 to detect effect. Thus, the current useable sample size of 546 can suitably represent the population. Characteristics of the participants are reported in Table 3. Additionally, a test for non-response bias was conducted in accordance with standard practices (Armstrong and Overton, 1977) with no differences observed between early and late responders.

Table 2
Scenario Based companies.

	Manufacturer/Retailer	Service Provider
Genuine	Timberland	Southwest Airlines
	Nike	Delta Airlines
	Honda	Hyatt Hotels
	General Motors	Wyndham Hotels
Fictitious	Tedsson Apparel	Smithfield Hotels

Table 3
Participant demographics.

Demographic	Qualitative Study Percent	Quantitative Study Percent
Sex		
Male	72.7	49.9
Female	27.3	50.1
Ethnicity		
African American	6.8	5.0
Asian	4.5	1.4
Caucasian	79.5	79.3
Hispanic	8.0	11.4
Native American	0	0.7
Other	1.1	2.1
Education		
High School Diploma	–	6.4
Some College	–	31.6
Bachelor's Degree	78.4	40.3
Master's Degree	15.9	19.8
Terminal Degree	5.7	2.0
Household Income		
< $50,000	6.8	29.2
$50,001 - $100,00	9.1	29.1
$100,001 - $150,00	32.9	12.1
> $150,000	37.5	12.8
NA	12.5	16.8
Mean Age	34.2	38.3

4.2.4. Analytical procedure

A partial least square structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) is utilized, as it is better suited than co-variance based structural equation modelling (CB-SEM) for examining novel theories and associations (Chatterjee et al., 2021). The aim of the theoretical model in this study is to examine the maximum variance in the focal dependent variables (i.e., purchase intentions and price premium). Furthermore, PLS-SEM is less strictive regarding normality assumptions (Hair et al., 2019). As a result, normality issues that may arise in CB-SEM may not possess serious problems for the current study.

As all constructs were adapted from existing scales, the psychometric properties were analyzed through a comprehensive confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) followed by the estimation of the associated structural model (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988). All items were initially tested simultaneously where each item was constrained to load on the intended construct. The factor loading score of each item was greater than 0.70. Reliability was assessed via the composite reliability (Fornell and Larcker, 1981) with results indicating the constructs were reliable (see Table 4) as each exceeded the recommended rule of thumb of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978).

Table 4
Measurement model results.

	Composite Reliability	AVE	HTMT			
			(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
(1) Sustainability Fit	.91	.85	**.92**			
(2) Attitude Toward Firm	.98	.92	.57	**.96**		
(3) PI	.97	.92	.34	.60	**.96**	
(4) Price Premium	.92	.85	.29	.47	.65	**.92**

Note: Values bolded on the diagonal represent the square root of AVE and values below are the correlations between constructs.

To assess convergent validity, the CFA results were utilized to calculate the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct using the threshold of 0.5 as the criteria against which scales were judged (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). As illustrated in Table 4, all constructs had AVE numbers exceeding the recommended cutoff. Discriminant validity was assessed by computing HTMT values. HTMT values were less than the critical value of 0.85 (see Table 4); hence, the constructs are discriminant. Furthermore, inner VIF values were calculated for independent constructs. VIF values were less than the threshold value of 5 indicating no multicollinearity issues in the model. Once the measurement model was used to validate the constructs, a structural model was estimated in accordance with Anderson and Gerbing's (1988) two-step procedure.

4.2.5. Results

The results of the structural analysis indicate that our proposed model provides sound explanatory power of the endogenous constructs as indicated by the variance explained for attitude toward the firm ($R^2 = 0.33$), purchase intentions ($R^2 = 0.35$), and willingness to pay a price premium ($R^2 = 0.43$). We find support for H1 as perceptions of sustainable fit has a significant and positive relationship with attitude toward the firm ($\beta = 0.57$, $p < .001$) (see Fig. 1). In addition, we find attitude toward the firm has a significant and positive relationship with purchase intentions ($\beta = 0.51$, $p < .001$) and willingness to pay a price premium ($\beta = 0.12$, $p < .05$), thus providing evidence of support for H2 and H3. Purchase intentions has a significant impact on willingness to pay a price premium (H4: $\beta = 0.52$, $p < .001$), which provides evidence of support for H4.

Mediation effects were analyzed in PLS-SEM by first establishing direct effects and then assessing indirect effects with the mediator included within the model (Baron and Kenny, 1986; Chatterjee et al., 2021). Thus, sub-models were created to test the mediation effects (Sreen et al., 2020) where the direct effect of the independent variable was tested with the dependent variable. Once the significance of the direct effect was established, the mediator was introduced, and the significant effect of the mediator was tested on the dependent variable. The analyses show that attitude toward the firm fully mediates the relationship between sustainability fit and purchase intention (direct effect without mediator: $\beta = 0.32$, $p < .01$; direct effect with mediator: $\beta = 0.004$, $p > .05$; Indirect effect: $\beta = 0.31$, $p < .01$), thus providing evidence of support for H5. In addition, we find that attitude toward the firm fully mediates the relationship between sustainability fit and willingness to pay premium (direct effect without mediator: $\beta = 0.25$, $p < .01$; direct effect with mediator: $\beta = 0.03$ $p > .05$; indirect effect: $\beta = 0.22$, $p < .01$), supporting H6. Thus, as illustrated in Table 5, our mediation analyses show that attitude toward the firm mediates the relationship between sustainability fit and purchase intentions and willingness to pay a price premium.

In addition to our variables of interest, the model controlled for familiarity with the firm as participants likely have varying levels of familiarity with the real service providers and retailers utilized in the study. We also controlled for the different groups shown to participants, service provider or retailer, to account for the potential influence that the type of industry could have on the participants. Familiarity has a significant positive association with attitude toward the firm ($\beta = 0.13$, $p < .05$) and purchase intentions ($\beta = 0.34$, $p < .05$). Industry type (service provider or retailer) has a significant negative association with willingness to pay price premium ($\beta = -0.11$, $p < .05$). The control variables were insignificant on the other variables under examination.

4.3. Discussion

The results from Study 1 provide interesting insights into consumer perceptions of the sustainable marketing strategies used by firms and the subsequent impact on attitude toward the firm. While past research suggests that fit impacts perceptions of CSR authenticity (Alhouti et al., 2016), cause-related marketing efforts (e.g., Pracejus and Olsen, 2004), and firm performance (Wright and Ashill, 1998), an understanding of the impact of a firm's sustainability initiatives on consumer perceptions is lacking (Gilal et al., 2021). Study 1 provides evidence that merely having a sustainability strategy is not enough, but rather it needs to be aligned with consumer expectations. The findings suggest that a "bottom up" approach, whereby the firm develops and implements sustainability initiatives on its own (Tseng et al., 2016), will likely result in greater acceptance when there is a higher fit. Overall, the results support the use of contingency theory as the findings suggest that understanding consumer perceptions of a firm's sustainable activities is critical when seeking an appropriate sustainable marketing strategy.

5. Study 2

Building on the results of Study 1, whereby consumer perceptions of sustainability fit were found to have a significant relationship with attitude toward the firm, and subsequently purchase intentions and willingness to pay a price premium, we next seek to examine the role of fit experimentally. Thus, Study 2 experimentally tests our findings, examining the mediating role of attitude towards the firm on the relationship between perceived sustainability fit and purchase intentions (H5) and willingness to pay a price premium (H6). To test our hypotheses, Study 2 assesses the recent sustainability action taken by the retailers to increase the use of bicycles and employees traveling on foot to deliver packages to customers.

5.1. Design, participants, and procedure

Study 2 is a two condition (perceived sustainability fit: high-fit, low-fit) between-subjects design. One hundred and eighty-eight participants were recruited from Prolific (n = 188) to participate in this study. Three participants were removed for not correctly completing the attention check (final sample: $n = 185$: 61% female, M age = 38). After indicating their mood, participants were told they would review a recent sustainability initiative taken by a retail brand and were then randomly assigned to a sustainability fit condition.[1] The sustainability initiative consisted of the brands Amazon (high-fit) or Walmart (low-fit) utilizing employees to deliver packages on bicycles or on foot (full scenario for both conditions is contained within the Appendix). The scenario read:

Transportation is a major component of Amazon's (Walmart's) business operations, and a key part of Amazon's (Walmart's) plan to reach net-zero carbon by 2040 is to transform their transportation network through efficiency enhancements. To implement decarbonization strategies, Amazon (Walmart) will deliver more packages by bicycle and on foot, using push walkers. Amazon's (Walmart's) bicycle fleet includes traditional bicycles and pedal-assist electric bikes connected to cargo trailers that can carry up to 45 packages.

[1] Prior to analyses, the sustainability fit stimulus was tested to ensure the conditions were perceived as a high (MHigh-Fit = 4.4) or low-fit sustainability initiative (MLow-Fit = 3.8; $t = 2.3$, $p < .05$).

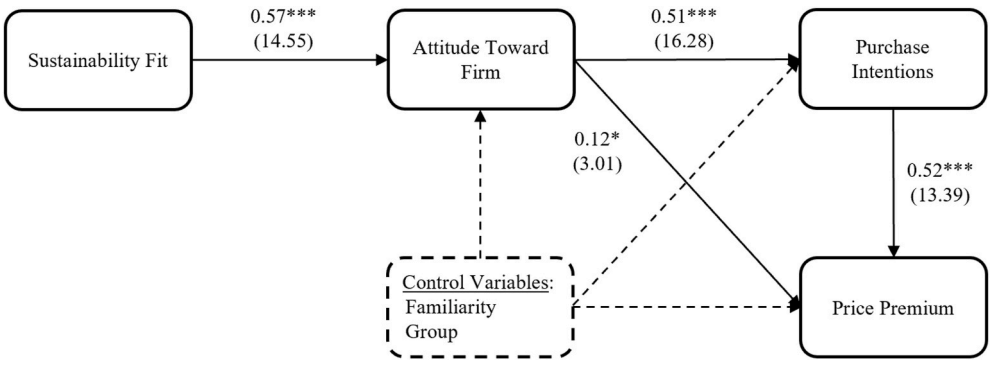

Fig. 1. Structural model results.
Path coefficients are standardized estimates with t-values listed in parentheses. ***p < .001, *p < .05.

Table 5
Mediation analysis results.

Model	Relationships	Without Mediator	With Mediator	Mediation Result
SF-ATF-PI	Indirect Effect		0.31**	Full Mediation
	Direct Effect	0.32**	.004	
SF-ATF-WTPP	Indirect Effect		0.22**	Full Mediation
	Direct Effect	0.25**	0.03	

SF = Sustainability Fit, ATF = Attitude Toward the Firm, WTPP = Willingness to Pay Premium. **p < .01.

After reviewing the initiative, participants were asked to evaluate the perceived fit between the retailer and the sustainability initiative (α = 0.89), attitude towards the firm (α = 0.98), likelihood to purchase, and willingness to pay a price premium (r_{xy} = 0.66). Participants then completed the study's control measures which included age, gender, household income, and mood (α = 0.94). As with Study 1, previously validated scales were used to ensure scale reliability and discriminant validity (see Appendix for all scale measures).

5.2. Results

Main Effect. One-way ANOVAs show that, as predicted, perceived sustainability fit had a significant effect on attitude toward the firm (F(1, 184) = 59.3, $p < .001$), purchase intentions (F(1, 184) = 23.3, p < .001), and willingness to pay a price premium (F(1, 184) = 37.3, p < .001). Thus, consistent with Study 1, those who perceived a higher fit between the retailer brand and the sustainability initiative reported significantly more positive attitudes toward the retailer (H1), purchase intentions (H2), and willingness to pay a price premium (H3).

Mediation Analysis. Hypotheses were tested using the Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro (Model 4) with bias-corrected CIs based on 10,000 bootstrap resamples (see Tables 6–8 below). To assess the potential impact of individual difference variables (such as age, gender, household income, and mood) on study results, we ran a second model that included these variables as controls. Gender and household income were not statistically significant ($p > .10$) and are therefore excluded from the model. We ran two separate analyses to account for both dependent variables (purchase intentions and premium price), with perceived sustainability fit as the independent variable and attitude towards the firm as the mediator. In support of H4, the indirect effect of perceived sustainability fit on purchase intentions via attitude toward the firm was significant ($\beta = 0.52$, 95% CI = 0.3336 to 0.7277), and the direct effect of sustainability fit was not significant ($\beta = -0.03$, 95% CI = −0.2100 to 0.1530).

Using the same approach to test H5, the indirect effect of perceived sustainability fit on price premium via attitude towards the firm was also significant ($\beta = 0.42$, 95% CI = 0.2493 to 0.6107), and the direct effect of sustainability fit was again not significant ($\beta = 0.17$, 95% CI = −0.0267 to 0.3676). As shown in Fig. 2, these findings indicate that attitude towards the firm fully mediates the relationship between perceived sustainability fit and purchase intentions, as well as the relationship between perceived fit and price premium.

Table 6
Effect of perceived sustainability fit on attitude towards the firm.

Variable	Coefficient	*SE*	*t*-value	*p*-value	*LLCI*	*ULCI*
Constant	.0470	.4904	.0958	.9238	−.9207	1.0146
Sustainability Fit	.4594	.0566	8.1225	.0000	.3478	.5710
Mood	.3164	.0793	3.9904	.0001	.1600	.4729
Age	.0267	.0071	3.7874	.0002	.0128	.0407

Overall Model: $p < .0000$; $R^2 = 0.38$.

Table 7
Effect of attitude towards the firm on purchase intentions.

Variable	Coefficient	*SE*	*t*-value	*p*-value	*LLCI*	*ULCI*
Constant	3.2690	.6829	4.7870	.0000	1.9215	4.6165
Sustainability Fit	−.0285	.0920	−.3099	.7570	−.2100	.1530
Attitude Towards the Firm	1.1365	.1035	10.9811	.0000	.9323	1.3408
Mood	.0546	.1152	.4743	.6359	−.1726	.2819
Age	.0064	.0102	.6278	.5309	−.0137	.0266

Overall Model: $p < .0000$; $R^2 = 0.53$.

Table 8
Effect of attitude towards the firm on price premium.

Variable	Coefficient	*SE*	*t*-value	*p*-value	*LLCI*	*ULCI*
Constant	.5891	.7418	.7942	.4281	−.8746	2.0528
Sustainability Fit	.1704	.0999	1.7056	.0898	−.0267	.3676
Attitude Towards the Firm	.9056	.1124	8.0550	.0000	.6837	1.1274
Mood	.1278	.1251	1.0214	.3085	−.1191	.3746
Age	−.0100	.0111	−.9038	.3673	−.0319	.0119

Overall Model: $p < .0000$; $R^2 = 0.43$.

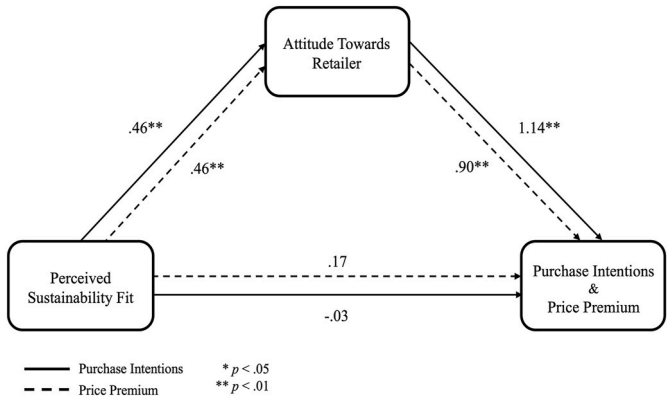

Fig. 2. Indirect effect of perceived sustainability fit on purchase intentions and willingness to pay a price premium.

5.3. Discussion

Study 2 demonstrates that the effect of perceived sustainability fit on purchase intentions and price premium is mediated by attitude towards the firm. Thus, Study 2 experimentally replicates the findings in Study 1, in that sustainability fit is shown to positively impact consumer attitudes and intentions. The same strategy presented for Walmart and Amazon yield significantly different results due to varying perceptions of fit by consumers. As noted above, too often retailers and service providers opt to offer sustainability strategies without fully grasping how consumers will evaluate them. Additionally, the results offer further support for the use of contingency theory as it is evident that one strategy is not best for all retailers or service providers.

6. General discussion

6.1. Theoretical implications

From a theoretical standpoint, this is the first research to examine sustainable marketing strategies as they relate to consumer perceptions of fit using contingency theory. Contingency theory has been used in other research related to CSR (e.g., Cui and Choudhury, 2003; Zeriti et al., 2014) and firm performance (e.g., Morton and Hu, 2008; Smith et al., 2019), however its impact on consumer perceptions of sustainable marketing strategies has largely been unexamined. Antecedents that impact consumer perceptions are examined, and the results suggest the important role contingency theory has in developing sustainable strategies. Often, contingency theory is used purely within an organization and does not consider consumer perceptions (e.g., Ruekert et al., 1985). Therefore, the present research extends the use of contingency theory by noting the impact it has on helping to develop sustainable strategies and the impact such strategies have on consumer perceptions.

Additionally, the impact of fit on consumer perceptions of sustainable strategies is lacking within marketing. Research examining the impact of fit is more prevalent within cause related marketing (e.g., Ellen et al., 2006; Pracejus and Olsen, 2004; Zdravkovic et al., 2010), however its impact on perceptions of sustainable strategies is largely absent. Thus, the present research extends the use of fit to suggest that it should be considered when examining the impact of sustainability strategies on consumers. By examining the impact of fit, and applying contingency theory to the research, we seek to improve our understanding of factors that may increase consumer acceptance of sustainable products (Gleim and Lawson, 2014). Further, despite positive attitudes and intentions toward sustainable products, sales have not shown the growth one would expect (Dhir et al., 2021; Dong et al., 2022). Commonly, this trend is known as the attitude-behavior gap. To that end, the present research suggests that sustainability fit is a conceptually important variable for researchers and firms to consider when seeking to positively impact attitude towards the firm. Joo et al. (2019) note a difference in perceptions of fit for CSR initiatives, however the present research extends that by illustrating the impact of fit perceptions on purchase intentions.

6.2. Managerial implications

The present research suggests that consumer perceptions of fit regarding the sustainable actions of a company are important in forming an individual's attitude toward the sustainable actions of a firm. Firms need to be thoughtful in the sustainability initiatives they implement to ensure they align with what consumers expect. For retailers, a sustainability strategy that works for Amazon may not work for Target or Walmart due to how consumers perceive each retailer and the strategy implemented. One firm may be better suited to promote efforts to reduce packaging, while another may be positioned to reduce carbon emissions in the supply chain. The CSR reputation a firm has, largely based on perceptions of fit, impacts consumption behavior (van Doorn et al., 2021). Consumers have knowledge, experience and expectations for most retailers they are considering patronizing, and it is important that retailers take that into consideration when developing sustainability initiatives. If consumers fail to perceive a positive fit association between the sustainability strategy and firm, it will likely negatively impact attitude toward the firm and ultimately purchase intentions.

The perceptions of sustainability fit for service providers are also important. Given the high amount of customer interaction with most service providers, fit could be more important for them. For example, most hotel chains have a strategy aimed at reducing the number of times towels are laundered. This has a positive environmental impact, but also saves hotels money. However, that strategy is likely not appropriate for all hotel brands. More premium hotel chains like the Ritz-Carlton or Four Seasons may be perceived as offering a lower quality service if they opt to reduce the number of times they launder towels. The sustainability strategy might be appreciated by some guests, but it does not fit with what consumers expect from such high-end hotels. Premium hotel brands might be better suited to focus on reducing food waste or electricity consumption as those efforts will likely not impact guests directly. Other hotel brands may be well suited to offer reduced laundry for towels without negatively impacting consumer perceptions of the brand. Each service provider is known for something different, thus it is important that the sustainability strategy fit with consumer expectations in order to achieve the positive outcomes they are seeking.

Thus, it is important for firms to recognize that there is no singular best strategy, but rather each firm needs to understand customer expectations. Given the favorable outcomes of a positive attitude toward the firm, greater purchase intentions, and willingness to pay a price premium, are all impacted by consumer perceptions of the sustainable marketing strategies of an organization, it is of paramount importance for firms to consider fit when developing sustainable marketing strategies.

6.3. Limitations and future research

As with all research, this effort is not without limitations. One important limitation is the use of a single respondent to answer the questionnaire used for the structural equation analysis and experimental study. The use of single respondents increases the possibility that there is common method variance (CMV) induced in the model results. Thus, care was taken to attempt to eliminate the potential for CMV via the arrangement of the survey constructs as well as other recommendations made in the literature (e.g., ensuring anonymity, spatially separating independent and dependent variables) (Lindell and Whitney, 2001; Podsakoff et al., 2003). We also conducted the Harman one-factor and the Lindell and Whitney (2001) tests to check for the effects of CMV with results suggesting it is not an issue. There is no universally accepted method to address the potential of CMV, so we firmly acknowledge this

as a limitation.

Another potential limitation stems from the use of genuine and fictitious companies in the scenarios that were read by the respondents. The information presented to the respondents was genuine information that was taken from the website of the company used. The fictitious firms utilized information that was from a real company's website with a different logo and heading. To minimize the impact of familiarity, it was used as a control variable in the model to help ensure the effects were minimal. Also, the use of fictitious firms helps to ensure that experience and familiarity were not an issue. The information presented was of comparable length, thus the effects of fatigue are similar across the participants.

To our knowledge, this is one of the first empirical examinations to investigate consumer perceptions of sustainable fit on attitude toward the firm and behavioral intentions. While we are not able to prescribe sustainable marketing strategies for firms given that each firm is viewed uniquely by consumers, future research should seek to examine strategies aimed at creating sustainable fit. For example, this could be done by industry type, product type offered, or based on the sustainability strategies employed by firms. In addition, examining demographic variables may prove beneficial to understand how segments of consumers are impacted by perceptions of fit. Similarly, multi-country studies on the topic can help answer how consumers in different cultures are impacted by sustainable marketing strategies (Sreen et al., 2018). An examination of acceptable levels of perceived tradeoff may be examined to see how much organizational effectiveness consumers are willing to sacrifice to support a sustainable company. We hope the present research will help stimulate additional research as we seek to increase the sustainable consumption behavior of consumers.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2022.103124.

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