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[Man Lung Jonathan Kwok](#)<sup>\*</sup>, [Raymond Kwong](#), Chun Hui, Ken H. K. Liu

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Article

# Value Statements and Sustainability: A Q-Sort Methodology Approach

Running Title: Q-Sort Methodology for Values Statements

Man Lung Jonathan Kwok <sup>1,\*</sup>, Raymond Kwong <sup>2</sup>, Chun Hui <sup>3</sup> and Ken H. K. Liu <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Professional Education and Executive Development, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

<sup>2</sup> Department of Social Sciences, School of Arts and Social Sciences, Hong Kong Metropolitan University; rk Wong@hkmu.edu.hk

<sup>3</sup> Faculty of Business and Economics, The University of Hong Kong; chunhui@hku.hk

<sup>4</sup> School of Professional Education and Employee Development, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University; kenhokanliu@gmail.com

\* Correspondence: jonathan.kwok@cpce-polyu.edu.hk

**Abstract:** Many corporations have now revised their value statements to showcase their commitment to sustainable development and green business due to the pressing issues of climate and environmental damage. Despite the importance of value statements that can direct companies to achieve sustainable goals, what kind of values can be perceived as organizational orientations to sustainability remains unknown. This study explores how the general public views the inclusion of sustainable components in value statements from the listed companies in Hong Kong by using Q-sort methodology ( $n = 30$ ). Analyzing the final sample of 40 value statements extracted from 27 listed companies, we identified three factors related to sustainability, namely, *Empowering business process management*, *Empowering customer-centric excellence*, and *Empowering sustainable progress*. This study provides an additional component to the traditional triple bottom line by suggesting that internal operation of a company is an emerging idea to understand corporate sustainability.

**Keywords:** value statements; sustainability; Q-sort methodology; triple bottom line; business strategy

The global climate issue has alarmed human beings in recent decades, for example, the World Health Organization has reported that there will be an exposure of ambient air pollution that will lead to 4.2 million deaths every year (WHO, 2022). Moreover, global warming, climate change, greenhouse gas, Antarctic ice sheets melting and even environmental disasters have frequently become the headlines of many international news report which have forced different parties to increase the awareness about these challenges and consider taking steps to mitigate their adverse impacts (BBC, 2021; Cankaya & Sezen, 2019; Khan et al., 2022). The remarkable movement has been conducted by the United Nations (UN) by introducing 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) and Ten Principles of the UN Global Compact. Moreover, the UN has held the annual Conference of the Parties (COP) to discuss and tackle global climate issues (Kwong et al., 2023).

Guided by the initiatives of the UN, many countries have become aware and concerned with environmental and sustainability issues, for example, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government has set out a vision to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050 and put this initiative in its Policy Address (HKSAR, 2021). Thus, corporations are experiencing the emerging pressure from the governments, peer groups, and customer demands to consider addressing the environmental and sustainability challenges so that carbon neutrality can be achieved (Morioka et al., 2017; Zollo et al., 2013). Corporations have to integrate their practices and policies to contribute to environmental and social needs, but not only consider economic performance (Boons et al., 2013; Vila & Bharadwaj,

2017). Thereby, sustainability has become an important element in shaping organizations' strategic directions (Galpin et al., 2013).

Similar terms with sustainability have emerged, for example, corporate social responsibility, corporate social performance, going green, and triple bottom line (Elkington, 1998). All these refer to a balanced approach that organizations should consider economic, environmental, and social dimensions in a comprehensive way (Florea et al., 2013). The World Commission on Environment and Development defined sustainability as the actions or practices by the corporations to "meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations Documents, 1987, no page). Thus, it may be referred to the continuity, longevity, and capability of the corporations to maintain not only their economic performance, but also the stakeholders' concerns (Florea et al., 2013). Previous research confirmed that organizations pursuing a sustainable approach would not adversely affect their financial performance but in the long term, both the corporate financial performance and benefits to the communities in which they operate would be improved (Tien et al., 2019; Galpin et al., 2013).

To direct the business strategies and directions of the organizations, values are widely adopted and believed to have their paramount role in the organizational phenomena, including culture (Schein, 1985), socialization (Dose, 1997), identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), and person-organization fit (Cable & Edwards, 2004). Values can shape the organizations and their members' attitudes, behaviors, preferences, and priorities (Dominick et al., 2021). Therefore, organizational values can be described as a set of beliefs brought by the founders and held by the organizational members that provide guidance and directions in the choice and evaluation of action for the organizational members (Van der Wal et al., 2008). Bourne and Jenkins (2013) claimed that these organizational values are related to a wide array of organizational practices, processes, strategies, and outcomes. These include the strategic issues interpretation (Bansal, 2003), selection of strategic choice (Pant & Lachman, 1998) and strategic change (Carlisle & Baden-Fuller, 2004), and decision making of the management (Liedtka, 1989).

Substantial findings suggest that values can guide the firms to perform better (Jin et al., 2013; Dominick et al., 2021). Schein (2010) suggests that values are critical to organizational success, and they can impact employee engagement, customer satisfaction and overall firm performance (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1996). Moreover, previous research has shed light on how organizational values impact organizational change and innovation (Cameron & Quinn, 2006).

Until recent decades, literature has begun to emphasize the increasing importance of aligning organizational values with sustainability goals (Klapper et al., 2020) and shaping the ethical position of the organization (Finegan & Theriault, 1997). Aguinis and Glavas (2012) also maintained that the business case for sustainability has underscored the need to integrate ethical and environmentally responsible practices into companies' values. However, a considerable research gap exists in the nuanced exploration of how organizational values specifically influence and shape sustainability of the organizations. While recent literature has put effort on the broader realm of sustainability, Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG), or Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), there is still a handful of studies that dissects the intricate connections between the deeply ingrained values within an organization and its commitment to sustainable or green practices.

For instance, CSR initiatives have been found to have an impact on organizational reputation but organizational values have not been examined for their role as a catalyst for the initiation and success of the CSR initiatives (Trivellas et al., 2019). Moreover, Boakye et al. (2020) have investigated the environmental practices of companies but did not explicitly connect these practices back to the organizational values which might facilitate them.

This research gap cannot be ignored due to the critical role of organizational values. As aforementioned, organizational values can shape the attitude and behaviors of the employees, thereby, understanding how these deeply rooted organizational values drive sustainable initiatives is vital for the senior management to design effective interventions and strategies. Consistent and aligned initiatives with the core principles of the organization cannot be developed without a

comprehensive understanding of the role of values, and thus, hindering the long-term success of the organizations potentially.

More importantly, a deeper exploration of the organizational values can shed light on how they become facilitators or hindrances for employees who engage in sustainable behaviors (Salvador & Burciaga, 2020). With the understanding of the organizational values, organizations can better tailor-made and design their value-driven strategies and practices to enhance sustainable initiatives among the employees.

To bridge the research gap and overcome the existing research weakness, the current study adopts Q methodology to decipher the meaning of organizational values in relation to sustainability, with the aim to identify and explore the diverse range of perceptions of the value statements systematically among the public to see whether they are relevant to sustainability. By allowing the participants to rank and order the different value statements, Q methodology uncovers the nuanced understanding and opinions towards sustainability based on the value statements extracted from the organizations. Moreover, this study provides different categories of sustainability from the different perspectives of the participants and offers recommendations to organizations in constructing their value statements based on the priorities and relevance to sustainability.

## Literature Review

### *Mission, Vision, and Values*

Based on the strategic management literature, there are normally three types of explicit and stated statements for the organizations, namely, mission, vision, and values (Mathis et al., 2017). They all serve distinctive functions for the strategic planning process of an organization (Tessema et al., 2019). A mission statement explains why the company exists and the criteria of a good mission statement should be clear, concise, and consistent to tell the public who you are and why you exist (Drucker, 2001). Bersin (2015) found that mission-driven companies can achieve innovation and retention rates by 30% and 40%, respectively. While mission statements concern the current and existing context, the vision statement provides a more future-oriented perspective for the organization, telling the employees where the company is headed (Welch & Welch, 2009).

Regarding values, they are the enduring beliefs which transcend specific situations and direct selection or behavior evaluation (Rokeach, 1973). When values are taken to the organizational level, they embody the general rules to guide employees in their selection and evaluation of behaviors. These organizational values may take up the value system of an organization (Bourne & Jenkins, 2013) representing the emphasis on certain aspects over another (Schwartz, 1992).

### *Types of Organizational Values*

There are different forms of organizational values, namely, espoused values, attributed values, shared values, and aspirational values. First of all, espoused values can be represented by the verbal or written statements and formal documents through which the top management sanctions (Bourne & Jenkins, 2013). As defined by Bansal (2003), organizational values are “often stated explicitly in corporate documents” (p. 520). These values represent the value consensus among the senior managers of an organization (Kabanoff et al., 1995).

Researchers generally support that organizational values equate those espoused by the top management. Top management has been vested with the authority to manage the organizations and thus, they would use values to shape the behaviors of the employees through social control to meet the organizational objectives (Pant & Lachman, 1998; Argandona, 2003). According to the upper echelons theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984), organizations are the reflection of the values, cognitive styles and biases of the top management, and these values were brought and imposed by the leaders and top management and shown to have greater influence than the values by other members (Hage & Dewar, 1973; Agle et al., 1999). These values espoused by their top management can also enhance their power and influence within the organizations (Enz, 1988).



However, Hofstede (1998) argues that although the espoused values may shape the organizational practices and become the basis for decisions and actions, this does not necessarily equate to organizational values as the employees “have to follow the practices if they want to remain members, but they do not have to confess to the values” (p. 483). In addition, Ashforth and Gibbs (1990) maintain that top management may espouse values because they want to project a certain image or impression to their stakeholders, including customers, shareholders, and financial institutions, even if the practices or structures have not been embedded into the values being espoused (Suchman, 1995).

The second form of organizational values is attributed values. While espoused values are those advocated by the top management, attributed values refer to those representative of the organization from the perspectives of the organizational members (Bourne & Jenkins, 2013). This form of value has been adopted widely when examining the person-organization fit (Kristof, 1996). Attributed values have been evidenced by several definitions of organizational values defined by previous scholars. For instance, Balazs (1990) describes that an organization’s values are something the employees “attribute to the firm” (p. 173), and Kalliath et al. (1999) define organizational values as “members’ judgment of the values of the organization as a whole” (p. 1185).

It is also noted that attributed values may have overlap with espoused values imposed by the top management, but this is not always the case. Organizational members are able to attribute the values to the organization as they have recognized a pattern of past decisions and developed such attributed values as the history of the organization evolves, however, espoused values may not always reflect such pattern and this history (Bourne & Jenkins, 2013). In addition, attributed values are distinct from shared values although the attributed values may be recognized by the organizational members as the characteristics of the organization, the members may not share these values (Hofstede, 1998).

Attributed values can equate with organizational values as these are based on the repeated patterns and they have the historical influence on actions and decisions among the employees. Employees can agree upon the attributed values more readily because they can identify and describe easily through daily interactions with the routines and other members which have been influenced heavily by the attributed values but they do not necessarily share them (Bourne & Jenkins, 2013). However, since attributed values represent the characteristics of the organizations and reflect the past patterns of decisions and actions, these may no longer characterize an organization due to the fast changing environment in which organization has to respond. Thus, attributed values only represent the history of the organization but not a future or intended state (Williams, 1960; Greenwood & Hinings, 1988).

The third form is shared values, which refer to an aggregation of the values of the employees. Rokeach (1979) and Schwartz (1999) suggest that individuals acquire socialization by being exposed to customs, norms, and practices, leading to the manifestation of societal, organizational, and group characteristics in their personal values. The consolidation of these values highlights the emphasis on collective enculturation and indicates the fundamental organizational values, while variations from the mean reflect individual differences among members (Bourne & Jenkins, 2013). Similar description is suggested by Wiener (1988) who states that the organizational value system is formed because of the shared values of the organizational members.

Shared values can be adopted to represent organizational values. In accordance with Schneider’s (1987) attraction-selection-attrition (ASA) model, which posits that members are drawn to, selected by, and separated from an organization based on their compatibility with the orientation and attributes during periods of relative stability. As orientation and attributes are expressed through individual members (Schwartz, 1999), alignment with the organization’s values equates to alignment with the predominant values of fellow members. This dynamic, occurring over time and in stable environments, results in an increasing homogeneity within the organization (Kristof, 1996).

The shared values form does not show whose personal values of more senior or centrally located members over the others have greater influence (Agle et al., 1999). The meaningfulness of the shared values is also limited by the size of the organization (Meglino & Ravlin, 1998); Roe & Ester, 1999).

Larger organizations may have infrequent interactions and even their members are geographically located which is hard to develop the shared values while smaller organizations are more likely to develop these values due to the proximity of the members and frequency of the interaction (Maierhofer et al., 2003).

Finally, the aspirational values refer to the beliefs held by the organizational members who regard the values the organization ought to possess. Employees' personal values may be changed and reflected in the aspirational values due to the change in the trends of social life (Bourne & Jenkins, 2013). Moreover, change in the aspirational values of the organizations may also come from new recruits, merger and acquisitions, or stakeholders' influence. Thereby, aspirational values may represent a range of beliefs held by the employees regarding the actions and behaviors they should base on.

Attributed values refer to the understanding of the organizational members regarding their existing preferences while aspirational values encompass the beliefs that the organization should be in the future. In addition, aspirational values are similar with shared values but are different in the way that aspirational values emphasize what ought to be, instead of what is, of the organizations (Bourne & Jenkins, 2013).

### *Value Statements*

Among the four forms of organizational values, the current study focuses on the espoused values form, and these values can be represented and documented via a written set of value statements. Value statements refer to the declarations regarding their approaches to value or serve their customers, suppliers, and community (Tessema et al., 2019). These value statements define the employee attitudes and behaviors, and shape their decision-making process (Arnold, 2012; Wenstop & Myrmel, 2006). There are two major purposes for developing the value statements, namely, for the general public and the internal stakeholders. First, in its most altruistic form, a public communication aims to ensure the organization's accountability to the public, while at its least favorable, it may serve as a tool for organizational impression management (Mohamed et al., 1999). For the internal stakeholders, the value statements simply serve as a guide or reference for behaviors and decision-making (Hill et al., 2015; Jaakson et al., 2008; Dolan & Richley, 2006). By understanding the needs of stakeholders, companies are likely to adopt social and environmentally responsible strategies (Camilleri, 2022).

Value statements can also allow the public to have a glimpse into organizational culture. Organizational values have been found to be an essential component of organizational culture (Schein, 1990; Sharma, 2017). Value statements represent a channel for the organizations to communicate and display their culture to the stakeholders (Guo et al., 2016). Thus, it is important to examine the value statements in order to connect with the organizational culture, strategic management and strategic communication from the organizations to the internal and external stakeholders (Matarazzo et al., 2024).

Previous research has paid very little attention to study value statements as a construct but examining their specific content and application (Allison, 2018). For instance, Jaakson et al. (2008) suggest that there are two types of value statements, namely, terminal and instrumental. Terminal value statements focus on the end while instrumental emphasizes on the means. Kaptein (2004) found that only 49 percent of the firms have codified their core values into the value statements. Moreover, Anderson and Jamison (2015) identified the top five words used in the value statements among the 100 largest US firms, and they are *integrity*, *respect*, *teamwork*, *innovation*, and *quality*.

Value statements can be generally related to customers, shareholders, and community (McNamara, 2014). Previous literature has tried to suggest different categories for value statements, including *commitment to customers*, *commitment to employees*, *commitment to shareholders*, *commitment to diversity*, *commitment to integrity*, *social responsibility*, and *entrepreneurship* (Tessema et al., 2019). Due to the importance and emphasis placed on sustainability and green operation, many corporations have also integrated green components into their value statements.

### *Organizational Sustainability*

Organizational sustainability can be referred to “meeting the needs of the firm’s direct and indirect stakeholders (such as shareholders, employees, clients, pressure groups, communities etc.), without compromising its ability to meet the needs of future stakeholders as well. Towards this goal, firms have to maintain and grow their economic, social and environmental capital base while actively contributing to sustainability in the political domain” (Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002, p. 131). The notion of this definition has uncovered three dimensions of sustainability.

The first one is the dimension of economic perspective. This includes financial performance and standing of the company and good products or services provided by the company, which can be referred to as the bottom-line (Elkington, 1998). The underlying assumption of this perspective has been that organizations, being thriving and financially strong, are likely to evolve over time through the pursuit of stakeholders’ concerns and the continual development of their relative advantages (Florea et al., 2013). Indeed, financial performance and their impact, long-term competitiveness, and organizational economic impact are the key economic issues of economic sustainability to the stakeholders (Steurer et al., 2005). Extending this notion, Choi and Ng (2011) maintained that the economic sustainability is essential for not only the external stakeholders, but also the internal stakeholders since the economically and financially strong companies can provide a good level of well-being and standard of living to their employees and external stakeholders, and vice versa.

The second dimension is social sustainability, which can be considered as the processes that generate social health of the organizations, and this social health is related to the well-being of the employees (Dillard et al., 2009). Social sustainability has also posed a challenge for the organizations to strike a balance between personal and societal needs (Choi & Ng, 2011). In addition, this dimension should be beyond the bottom line of equity, but extended to philanthropy in the community and develop an organization’s public relations efforts (Florea et al., 2013).

The last dimension is environmental integrity and protection, focusing on the commitment of the current generation to ensure the concerns and well-being of the future generations (Florea et al., 2013). Emissions, resource exploitation, and environmental damage have been thought to be the main environmental issues (Steurer et al., 2005) and it is believed that the organizations should impose an integrated approach via the inclusion of key values and mindsets to manage their practices purposefully for the environment. Employees will be likely to be aware of the potential impacts of their decisions and actions on the environment.

### **Methods**

To systematically understand the perspective of the general public on organizational values related to sustainability, we adopted Q-methodology technique, a technique quantitatively investigating people’s viewpoint, to cluster respondents’ ranking in terms of their relative importance, thereby identifying consensus and disagreement among respondents (Donner, 2001). The method has been widely applied to understand perspectives of sustainability (Barry & Proops, 1999; Sneegas et al., 2021), business administration (Bartlett & DeWeese, 2015; Peterson et al., 1999) and sustainable development practice (Payne & Shepardon, 2015).

### *Developing Concourse*

The listed companies in Hong Kong are the target samples. Due to the large number of listed companies and the research focus on sustainability, we strategically selected companies with public reporting of greenhouse gas emission in the online database, the Carbon Footprint Repository for Listed Companies in Hong Kong (Environment and Ecology Bureau, 2023). The value statements were extracted from their official website and the least annual report. Companies without stating value statements were excluded, resulting in the final sample of 166 statements from 27 companies.

Developing Q Sample

Value statements are abstract, with multiple components embedded in a sentence, including stakeholders, means, and desired outcomes. Each of those distinctively meaningful statements provide insight of what a company stresses on enhancing performance. To establish the content validity, three professional raters in the field of sustainability and ESG were included to extract representative value statements. All raters agreed that the company statements were categorized into four dimensions in terms of the question “who are the audiences of organizational value statements”: employees, citizens, customers and management. After discussion sessions among raters to resolve the inconsistency and duplicated statements, the final Q set, consisting of 40 value statements, was constructed and shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Q sample.

Statements	
1.	We appreciate and respect one another.
2.	We seek breakthroughs and innovations.
3.	We give back to society.
4.	We bring positive energy to all of our clients.
5.	We are equipped with professional knowledge.
6.	We act with a strong desire to achieve and succeed.
7.	We work hard to maintain our reputation as a local pioneer in business best practice.
8.	We customize each product to the unique characteristics of its location.
9.	We inspire confidence and trust among its customers.
10.	We value high standards of corporate governance, integrity and transparency.
11.	We focus on originality in products and services.
12.	We advocate active team communications and collaborations.
13.	We create shared value across the ecosystem.
14.	We offer our customers a unique breadth of opportunity.
15.	We provide young talent with platforms to fulfil their dreams.
16.	We recognize that our products and services are often essential to our customers.
17.	We recognize that our reputation is dependent on our compliance to the highest ethical standards.
18.	We are founded on the strength of different experiences, attributes and voices.
19.	We make strategic decisions for day-to-day interactions with customers.
20.	We listen carefully to customer needs.
21.	We engage with the ever-changing social and technological trends.
22.	We make clear choices and take bold actions.
23.	We take an international perspective.
24.	We value long-term relationships with our customers.
25.	We ensure the health and safety of our employees.
26.	We cooperate and achieve common goals together.
27.	We look to preserve and enhance natural resources.
28.	We operate with a customer-oriented attitude.
29.	We generate maximum and lasting returns for our shareholders.



30.

We value open and transparent communication with stakeholders.
31.

We support people’s advancement.
32.

We believe that sustainability is an ever-evolving journey.
33.

We build financial strength through proactively anticipating market shifts.
34.

We strive for high efficiency and high quality results for our customers.
35.

We make possible what we cannot do alone.
36.

We build lasting impacts for the community and environment.
37.

We introduce measurable targets for environmental performance.
38.

We establish long-term partnerships with customers.
39.

We encourage sharing of new thinking.
40.

We hold ourselves accountable for our business.

Selecting P Set

To understand how value statements link to sustainability in organizations, we recruited respondents whose academic background or job were related to business administration and management to capture the generic perception of this issue in business settings. As organizational value statements are supposed to share with the general public, opinions from respondents without rich corporate work experience were also considered. Different respondents with various backgrounds and levels of experience and expertise have their specialized knowledge and relevance to the sustainability issues, and thus help reflect the wide range of statements from different perspectives. In the present study, there were 30 respondents, which consisted of 17 students, 6 research assistants and 7 administrative or project staff members participating in the Q-sorting.

Conducting Q-Sorting

A list of 40 value statements, a supplementary pre-sorting sheet and a Q-sort grid sheet were provided. Respondents read all the statements and sort them into three preliminary categories, namely “not important”, “no strong feeling” and “important”. Based on the initial sorting, respondents were asked to sort each of the statement into a Q-grid signifying a forced, quasi-normal distribution, with 11 array positions ranging from least important (-5) to most important (+5), reflecting the extent to which each value statement is important for an organization to achieve sustainability. After completing the sorting, they were asked to write comments on the statements they thought were the most and the least important, respectively. Finally, they filled in the demographic information and were rewarded with a shopping voucher worth HK\$50 (approximate US\$6.4).

Results

We analyzed the collected Q-sorts by using KADE (Ken-Q Analysis Desktop Edition), an open-source application specialized to conduct Q-sort data analysis with the graphical user interface (Banasick, 2019). Principal components analysis was performance due to the exploratory nature in the present study. Considering eigenvalues greater than 1 and retaining the number of factors based on the level where the slope of the curve starts leveling off from scree plot, three factors were selected for varimax rotation. Out of 30 respondents, 26 were classified in one of the factors. Specifically, two respondents were excluded by auto-tagging function at the significance level 0.05, meaning that these two Q sorts did not uniquely load on any factor. Another one respondent was excluded because of its negative loading, with previous guideline indicating that at least three positive Q sorts represent a factor (Webler et al., 2009).

The demographic characteristics, factor loadings and relevant factor characteristics are shown in Table 2. The Z-score and Q sort value represent the relative importance of a statement. The correlation among factors was weak (< .04), indicating the factors were distinctive, such that they can

be independently interpreted. Relatedly, Tables 3–5 show the distinguished statements, including positive, neutral and negative statements respondents in the particular factor shared. To summarize the distinctive viewpoints towards organizational values of sustainability, terminologies (1) empowering business process management, (2) empowering customer-centric excellence, and (3) empowering sustainable progress were used. The post-Q sort comments were included to elaborate the representative statements.

**Table 2.** P Sample’s Demographic Characteristic and Factor Loading.

No.	Sex	Age	Academic Background	Job	Factor loading		
					F1	F2	F3
P18	F	24	Social Sciences	Research Assistant	<b>0.59</b>	0.02	0.13
P4	F	22	Human Resources Management	Student	<b>0.59</b>	0.10	0.13
P3	F	21	General Business	Student	<b>0.57</b>	0.21	-0.14
P10	M	26	Finance	Student	<b>0.55</b>	0.09	0.45
P6	F	18	General Business	Student	<b>0.52</b>	0.25	0.01
P24	M	29	Counselling	Administrative Officer	<b>0.51</b>	-0.06	0.04
P23	M	52	Accounting	Lecturer	<b>0.47</b>	0.40	-0.03
P14	F	22	Finance	Student	<b>0.46</b>	-0.16	-0.12
P21	F	38	Human Resources Management	Senior Administrative Assistant	<b>0.40</b>	-0.06	0.20
P15	M	23	Accounting	Student	<b>0.39</b>	0.33	0.03
P8	F	24	Human Resources	Student	<b>0.39</b>	0.08	0.14
P19	M	26	Social Sciences	Project Assistant	0.18	-0.07	0.17
P7	M	24	Operations and Supply Chain Management	Student	0.04	<b>0.64</b>	-0.31
P26	M	43	Marketing	Senior Lecturer	0.39	<b>0.58</b>	-0.22
P9	F	23	Human Resources Management	Student	0.04	<b>0.56</b>	-0.00
P25	M	45	Finance	Senior Lecturer	-0.11	<b>0.54</b>	-0.16
P22	M	33	Engineering	Project Officer	0.20	<b>0.52</b>	0.09
P30	F	35	Marketing	Researcher	0.20	<b>0.50</b>	0.18
P13	F	24	Health Services Management	Student	0.01	<b>0.44</b>	0.09
P5	F	21	International Business	Student	-0.20	<b>0.42</b>	0.10
P16	F	23	Human Resources Management	Student	0.26	-0.13	<b>0.74</b>
P29	M	29	Social Sciences	Research Assistant	0.14	0.14	<b>0.72</b>
P17	M	21	Human Resources Management	Student	0.18	-0.34	<b>0.69</b>

P28	F	40	Management	Project Associate	0.36	0.15	<b>0.66</b>
P12	M	22	Human Resources Management	Student	-0.19	0.34	<b>0.64</b>
P20	M	36	Engineering	Senior Project Officer	-0.21	0.26	<b>0.58</b>
P27	M	25	Government and Policy	Project Assistant	0.52	-0.17	0.53
P2	F	21	General Business	Student	0.26	0.15	-0.53
P11	F	21	Finance	Student	0.43	0.33	0.50
P1	M	22	Operations and Supply Chain Management	Student	0.34	-0.19	<b>0.47</b>
Eigenvalue					5.65	3.60	2.38
Explained Variance%					19	12	8
Number of Defining Variables					11	8	7
Composite Reliability					0.98	0.97	0.97
S.E. of Factor Z-scores					0.15	0.17	0.18
Correlation					F1		
					F2	0.28	
					F3	0.33	-0.04

Note. Bold values indicate significance at  $p < 0.05$ .

Table 3. Distinguishing Q Statements for Factor 1.

No.	Statements	Z-scores	Q Value	Sort
25	We ensure the health and safety of our employees.	2.05	+5	
12	We advocate active team communications and collaborations.	1.76	+5	
39	We encourage sharing of new thinking.	1.50	+4	
2	We seek breakthroughs and innovations.	0.85	+3	
40	We hold ourselves accountable for our business.	0.77	+3	
20	We listen carefully to customer needs.	0.73	+2	
36	We build lasting impacts for the community and environment.	0.69	+2	
5	We are equipped with professional knowledge.	0.42	+1	
34	We strive for high efficiency and high quality results for our customers.	0.42	+1	
38	We establish long-term partnerships with customers.	0.21	0	
32	We believe that sustainability is an ever-evolving journey.	0.16	0	
31	We support people’s advancement.	0.04	0	
22	We make clear choices and take bold actions.	0.01	0	
37	We introduce measurable targets for environmental performance.	-0.63	-1	
7	We work hard to maintain our reputation as a local pioneer in business best practice.	-1.02	-2	
19	We make strategic decisions for day-to-day interactions with customers.	-1.14	-3	

11	We focus on originality in products and services.	-1.49	-5
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Table 4. Distinguishing Q Statements for Factor 2.

No.	Statements	Z-scores	Q Value	Sort
20	We listen carefully to customer needs.	2.21	+5	
28	We operate with a customer-oriented attitude.	1.65	+5	
9	We inspire confidence and trust among its customers.	1.53	+4	
5	We are equipped with professional knowledge.	1.32	+4	
11	We focus on originality in products and services.	1.25	+3	
34	We strive for high efficiency and high quality results for our customers.	1.07	+3	
29	We generate maximum and lasting returns for our shareholders.	0.74	+2	
7	We work hard to maintain our reputation as a local pioneer in business best practice.	0.57	+1	
33	We build financial strength through proactively anticipating market shifts.	0.3	+1	
12	We advocate active team communications and collaborations.	-0.02	0	
8	We customize each product to the unique characteristics of its location.	-0.09	0	
17	We recognize that our reputation is dependent on our compliance to the highest ethical standards.	-0.23	0	
32	We believe that sustainability is an ever-evolving journey.	-0.39	-1	
22	We make clear choices and take bold actions.	-0.51	-1	
31	We support people’s advancement.	-0.63	-2	
36	We build lasting impacts for the community and environment.	-0.85	-3	
30	We value open and transparent communication with stakeholders.	-1.17	-4	
23	We take an international perspective.	-1.3	-4	
37	We introduce measurable targets for environmental performance.	-1.81	-5	

Table 5. Distinguishing Q Statements for Factor 3.

No.	Statements	Z-scores	Q Value	Sort
32	We believe that sustainability is an ever-evolving journey.	2.1	+5	
36	We build lasting impacts for the community and environment.	1.97	+5	
37	We introduce measurable targets for environmental performance.	1.72	+4	
27	We look to preserve and enhance natural resources.	1.68	+4	
21	We engage with the ever-changing social and technological trends.	1.67	+4	
13	We create shared value across the ecosystem.	1.45	+3	
31	We support people’s advancement.	0.52	+2	

20	We listen carefully to customer needs.	0.09	+1
34	We strive for high efficiency and high quality results for our customers.	-0.08	0
1	We appreciate and respect one another.	-0.28	0
7	We work hard to maintain our reputation as a local pioneer in business best practice.	-0.53	-1
12	We advocate active team communications and collaborations.	-0.55	-1
5	We are equipped with professional knowledge.	-0.62	-2
11	We focus on originality in products and services.	-0.86	-3
22	We make clear choices and take bold actions.	-1.46	-5

### *Factor 1: Empowering Business Process Management*

Factor 1, the dominant view, has an eigenvalue of 5.65 and explains 19% of the variance. Eleven respondents tend to think that organizations can achieve sustainability by focusing on the internal management.

To maintain an organization's functioning, the well-being of employees is fundamental. Supporters of Factor 1 strongly endorsed the importance of "the health and safety of employees" (S25: +5). When an organization cares about employees physical and mental health, staff members are more engaged in work and thus contributing more with better work performance. Respondents explained, "I recognize employees' health is the most important because they are the vital capital of a company" (P8) and "Our employees are our manpower, so caring about their health means sustaining the driving power of our company." (P4). It was also thought of as a strategy that can increase the performance of organizations: "It helps attract employees to stay and contribute more." (P18).

Collaboration helps make a company function cohesively, which gathers the strength and effort to achieve greater goals. People in Factor 1 had a positive attitude on the statement "We advocate active team communications and collaborations." (S12: +5), signifying the promotion of sustainability in team building; for example, "if the communication among members in an organization goes wrong, the operation will be disturbed." (P6) and "communication is always the key to success as it makes sure that all members are on the right track." (P24).

An organization should encourage innovation, such that creative members and management can challenge the status quo and create positive change. Respondents who endorsed Factor 1 agreed with statements "We encourage sharing of new thinking." (S39: +4), stating that "every employee should spend effort to think of their own perspective of what sustainability is and how we enhance it." (P18), "new thinking is important to create new ideas and encourage innovation." (P3), and "innovative new ideas have the power to change the world." (P14). However, they were aware of the danger of being innovative by showing the opposition of paying attention to originality in products and services (S11: -5). They pointed out that "originality often brings a sense of constant change, which causes confusion." (P14) and "efficiency is more important than originality." (P15). The responses reflected that the excessive innovation may backfire; it is more suitable for an organization to advance some new practice, while retaining a certain extent of conventional practices that had been well-functioned.

Respondents classified in Factor 1 focused on improving the operational management to excel the sustainability goals, but the motivation is not driven by dominating market share. They slightly opposed the statement "We work hard to maintain our reputation as a local pioneer in business best practice." (S7: -2). In addition, they did not think that sustainability should be actualized via intensive communication with external stakeholders, like customers (S19: -3). They explained, "Overload information will affect the customers' decision, and companies' decisions should not be related to the customer, but should be related to the company's development orientation." (P15).



### *Factor 2: Empowering Customer-Centric Excellence*

Factor 2 has an eigenvalue of 3.60 and explains 12% of the variance. Eight respondents believe that organizations can approach sustainability from a customer oriented perspective.

Customers are the targets on which an organization needs to focus. Generally speaking, they strongly agreed with the statement “We operate with a customer-oriented attitude. (S28: +5). A respondent in Factor 2, P9, stated that “meeting the needs of customers naturally leads to sustainability.”, which represented that standing from customers’ point of view was the core, fundamental position of customer-oriented approach in sustainability. To implement this approach, respondents in Factor 2 advocated the following strategic values. First, they viewed listening carefully to customer needs (S20: +5) as the most important action; P7 explained, “Only knowing customer needs can we provide targeted products.” Subsequently, they contended that organizations should inspire confidence and trust among its customers. (S9: +4). P25 and P13 suggested that “relationships are based on trust.” and “we can get more opportunities when customers trust our company because it means that the quality of what we offer is good.”, respectively. Furthermore, they had a positive attitude on the statement “We strive for high efficiency and high quality results for our customers.” (S34: +3), with P22 responding that “I think high efficiency and high quality can create a positive image to customers.” In addition, they found equipping members in organizations with professional knowledge important (S5: +4); P30 explained, “This value is important for the company to enhance credibility, and having professional knowledge and skills can help address sustainability challenges.” Contrary to Factor 1, which focuses on operational excellence, supporters of Factor 2 stressed the originality of what organizations offer (S11: +3), encouraging an organization to provide specialized product and service to customers. Letting customers notice the uniqueness of an organization can make it develop in the long run.

Supporters of Factor 2 placed an emphasis on customers, who buy organizations’ products and services, that is the source of profit. However, they underplayed the importance of organizations’ impacts to the environment, disregarding the statement “We introduce measurable targets for environmental performance.” (S37: -5). P26 claimed that “environmental performance does not directly affect the firm’s business.”, which showed that other external stakeholders did not affect the effort in promoting sustainability. As to the means of fulfilling the needs of customers, they did not affirm that organizations need to “take an international perspective” (S23: -4) and “value open and transparent communication with stakeholders” (S30: -4) to contribute to developing sustainability. P30 admitted that “It is hard to maintain truly open communication in a business setting.”; they acknowledged the difficulties in fulfilling the demands from all stakeholders.

### *Factor 3: Empowering Sustainable Progress*

Factor 3 has an eigenvalue of 2.38 and explains 8% of the variance. Seven respondents assert that the sustainability goal organizations need to achieve is to contribute to social good.

Preliminarily, advocates of Factor 3 have a disposition to believe that “sustainability is an ever-evolving journey” (S32: +5), emphasizing the continuity of development of organizations:

“Only by continuously improving sustainable development can we contribute to society and the earth.” (P17). In this long-term process, they strongly agreed with “building lasting impacts for the community and environment” (S36: +5). Supporters were concerned about the shared value of between organizations and the external environment; for example, P1 reflected that “it is beneficial for the society to have well-balanced development in the long term.” and P17 highlighted the interaction between humans and the environment: “Human behavior will directly affect society and the environment, which will affect the feasibility of sustainable development.” In terms of the continuous development of an organization, “building lasting impacts means long-term goals in community and environment.” (P16). One respondent analyzed the statement with the meaning of the key word by stating that this statement defines the term sustainability itself: “If the actions are not long lasting, how could it be called *sustainability*” (P29).

In practice, respondents in Factor 3 supported that companies should integrate the environmental issues into the organizations’ practice and development by introducing measurable

targets for environmental performance (S37: +4) as “measurable and achievable environment targets direct employees to build up a sustainable environment” (P28). One of the important values organizations should hold was to “look to preserve and enhance natural resources” (S27: +4) as “natural resources become very scarce now and organizations are responsible to preserve them.” (P29) and “natural resources are fundamental to sustainable development.” (P12). Moreover, organizations should “engage with the ever-changing social and technological trends” (S21: +4) as “synchronizing the frequent change of external environment can increase the adaptability and survivability.” (P1). With the spirit of togetherness, it is important for organizations to “create shared value across the ecosystem” (S13: +3). Despite the importance of promoting the welfare of the environment and society, respondents in Factor 3 did not think organizations need to “make clear choices and take bold actions” (S22: -5). After all, “taking bold actions does not mean doing the right thing.” (P28).

## Discussion

The current study aimed to elucidate the perspectives of the general public on organizational sustainability based on the publicized organizational value statements or their espoused values. Companies have now shown more concern on sustainability or ESG to respond to both the damaging environment and the initiatives of the UN. The increasing popularity of sustainability and ESG has forced the corporations to consider having green and sustainable components in their operations, policies, and practices, and scholars have examined these compelling issues. As aforementioned, the notion of sustainability is composed of three dimensions, namely, economic perspective, social perspective, and environmental perspective (Florea et al., 2013). These three dimensions also echo the concept of triple bottom line (TBL) (Chaharbaghi & Lynch, 1999; Batista & Francisco, 2018; Colbert & Kurucz, 2007; Elkington, 1998, 2013), which puts emphasis on the corporations to maintain three types of measurements in their performance, namely, economic performance, environmental performance, and social performance.

Our findings concur with these dimensions, supporting that the value statements of the corporations consist of these three components regarded by the participants in this study, particularly, Factor 2 (Empowering Customer-Centric Excellence) and Factor 3 (Empowering Sustainable Progress) reflect the dimensions of economic, environmental, and social performance. The value statements consist of the customer-oriented perspective that allows the companies to produce and offer quality products and services to satisfy the needs of the customers. Understanding the concerns and satisfying the needs of the customers permit the companies to develop and grow continuously (Suvanmanee et al., 2020). In addition, in the process of listening to the concerns of the customers and meeting their needs, trust can be developed and long-term relationships between the companies and customers will emerge (Hidayat & Idrus, 2023). Specific to sustainable development, value co-creation with customers enhances sustainability awareness and innovation practice, and thus predicting a positive corporate image (Huang & Liu, 2023), demonstrating the importance of customer oriented values.

Besides, employees possessing professional knowledge and skills are also related to the credibility of the company. Customers notice the uniqueness of the company and develop loyalty (Chiang et al., 2022). Companies adopting a customer-centric attitude and commitment to excellence is related to the improvement of their economic performance. Profits of the companies can be increased and thereby, satisfying the shareholders' concerns. This factor ensures the organizations meet the bottom line, that is, economic performance.

The findings also uncovered the third factor: Empowering Sustainable Progress from the opinions of the participants. This factor corresponds to the traditional environmental and social performance discussed in TBL (Elkington, 1998, 2013). This factor conveys the notion that companies should continuously improve their sustainable development to contribute to the society and the earth so that long lasting impacts can be resulted for the community. One of the participants has provided a concluding opinion that if the actions of the companies are not long lasting, how can it be claimed

as sustainability. Thus, companies should develop shared values between the organizations and the environment to ensure the positive impacts imposed on the environment.

To safeguard and benchmark the actions of the companies are sustainable, measurable and achievable targets should be in place to direct the organizations' practices and developments. This allows employees' attention and decision to be aligned with the sustainable goals. As pointed out by one of the participants, companies doing bold actions may not mean that they are doing the right thing or sustainable practices. Unless the actions meet the sustainable targets, they will not be sustainable practices.

The current study confirms that Factor 2 and Factor 3 correspond to the traditional TBL concept, in which the value statements of the companies show the economic, social, and environmental performance. Interestingly, our findings also uncover an additional aspect that TBL does not mention. Factor 1 emerged to be Empowering Business Process Management. This refers to the internal process and operation of the company, stating that once the internal process and operation functions well, sustainable goals can also be achieved. Participants confirmed that companies should take care of the well-being of the employees, including their safety and health issues. If the companies care about their health, manpower will be strong and contribute to the work performance and driving force of sustainability.

In addition, internal process and operation also refers to the collaboration and communication between the companies and employees. Participants believe that without proper communication, employees are not sure whether they are on the right track and operation will be disturbed. Toseef et al. (2022) found that inspirational leadership and innovative communication enhance employee engagement and commitment in the social perspective of sustainability via the mediating role of trust. It shows that employee collaboration and communication is essential to ensure the corporations are on the right direction in achieving sustainability.

Participants also perceived that innovation is one of the important components related to internal process and operation. Previous studies have confirmed that innovation can challenge the status quo and encourage positive change (Nguyen et al., 2021), thereby, it can also facilitate the companies to be more sustainable when employees are willing to innovate via the change of the existing practices which may not bring sustainable outcomes for the companies.

The existing literature on sustainability mainly focuses on the three major dimensions of the triple bottom line concept (Elkington, 1998, 2013). It can be concluded that all of the three dimensions refer to the external perspectives, although economic performance can be resulted through the profits generated by the quality products and services offered by the companies, these should also be the outcomes of the good internal process and operation of the companies. Without proper and sustainable internal process and operation, manpower is adversely affected due to insufficient safety and health care, companies will be in the wrong direction because of the miscommunication with the employees, and lack of continuous growth and development when no innovative ideas are generated.

The current study provides contributions to the organizational value literature by applying an innovative methodological approach, that is, Q-methodology, to uncover different aspects and dimensions of sustainability from the value statements. Prior research mainly relied on using surveys, case studies, or interviews to understand the value statements, but the actual dimensions of value statements related to sustainability are unknown. Moreover, with the understanding of the components of sustainability in the value statements, this allows the companies which would like to revise their value statements in response to the need to align with their sustainable goals to develop their value statements properly.

### **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

This study has provided insights regarding the general public's perspectives in understanding the value statements of the organizations related to sustainability. However, there are several limitations that it should be aware of. First, the general public includes students and working adults in this study, although all of the student participants are studying business-related majors and have knowledge about sustainability, future research may split the samples into students and working

adults. Working adults may have different views about sustainability and their understanding should also be taken account of. Moreover, the value statements in this study were collected from the companies under the Carbon Footprint Repository for Listed Companies in Hong Kong (Environment and Ecology Bureau, 2023), and all these companies are committed to pursuing sustainable goals in their operations. Other companies outside this database can also be investigated and their value statements can be examined to see if there are different perspectives in understanding sustainability.

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