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SUPPLIER SUSTAINABILITY SIGNALS AND ORGANIZATIONAL BUYING DECISIONS A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW OF BUYER TRUST AND PROCUREMENT OUTCOMES

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Abstract
The concept of sustainability communication is a marketing activity that has implications for the evaluation and procurement of suppliers. This paper discusses the relationship between environmental and social signals and organizational buyer trust, supplier selection and organizational outcomes, and clarifies the differences among perceptions and behavior. A total of 201 records have been initially evaluated, 47 records have been taken to full-text evaluation and six reports have been included in a preliminary qualitative synthesis. The evidence that is available includes cross section surveys of buyers, purchasing scenarios and qualitative representations of supplier selection. It proposes that reliable sustainability information may be used to inform evaluation and relational responses, and that economic needs and the context of the decision limit the commercial implications. The statement of willingness to pay, the resulting price preferences in models and evidence of actual procurement processes have different implications. The proposed classification extends the concept of signal substantiation to the interpretation of the signals by buyers, the organizational needs they must meet, and the purchasing outcomes they can observe. It has never been tested with its propositions. The aim of the intended contribution is to provide a more accurate linkage of the evidence of sustainability marketing and procurement.

1. INTRODUCTION

Environmental responsibility can be expressed in a supplier's communication in the form of a product claim, a certification, a disclosure platform or in its overall market positioning. That information is up to the purchasing organization to determine its meaning for any specific relationship. While a good impression can get a supplier into the mix, they also need to be at the right price, have the capacity to deliver and have evidence to support the decision. The knowledge of the travel of sustainability communication through these stages is therefore a marketing question and can have a direct impact on purchasing management.

This is important for interpretation of research. When a buyer rates a current supplier as sustainable, he or she is evaluating an ongoing relationship. When a manager chooses from among the different experimental supplier

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profiles, he/she is responding to a made-up choice. Corrective Action prior to qualification is an account of a purchasing process. Both can shine a light on sustainability in the business markets, albeit answering different questions. Combining all three as observations supporting the idea that sustainability leads to sales would be misleading because of the different units of analysis and would also restrict the observation of limits to the approach.

This review will be directed towards the receiving end of supplier communication—the organizational buyer. It poses the question of how communicated environmental or social attributes come into evaluation, trust, selection and continuing exchange. It does not cover consumer responses, purely mathematical ranking proposals and supplier accounts of sales which do not have any evidence of a buyer outcome. This boundary helps to consider marketing constructs in parallel to procurement decisions, without making the assumption that an environmental claim means the same thing to everyone and at every point in time.

The proposed contribution is on the link between claims and decisions. Information differences between parties are already well accounted for by signalling theory (Connelly et al., 2011) and trust and commitment are well-known constructs in relationship marketing (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Perceived green marketing orientation is also specifically related to trust and commitment and relationship outcomes in recent research (Casidy and Papadas, 2026). It is not a new model and chain is not a new model in this article. Rather, it creates an evidence-driven model which outlines where a reported response ends and where additional observations are required to make an inference about procurement consequences.

The most recent reviewed synthesis was done by Vinayavekhin et al. (2026). The accepted manuscript reviews 133 papers in 25 selected O & S M journals, up to 2024 and identifies seven intertwined elements, including signalling process and outcome. Buyer interpretation, purchase responses and feedback are already in-built to that account. Therefore it is not theorised that these elements and their chronological order are original inventions of this review, nor that a buyer focus is in view. It proposes to contribute a focused empirical evaluation of supplier sustainability studies and their measurement of buyer response and enabling inferences for organizational decision making. The need to compare with other studies on greenwashing and green B2B marketing (Vangeli et al., 2023) and to complete screening still exists to be able to argue for a contribution.

2. Conceptual scope and review questions

2.1 Sustainability communication as a supplier signal

A broad communication boundary is used in the search: information a buyer can obtain regarding a supplier's environmental or social attributes such as claims, disclosure, certification, reputation and remedial action. These are not necessarily credible signals, but are signals to consider. Vinayavekhin et al. (2026) highlight observability, meaning and cost as considerations in justifying a signalling mechanism. Costs would relate to the costs of producing or maintaining evidence or consequences of misrepresentation, and do not simply result from the existence of a claim. The conceptual analysis consequently divides communicated information, independently substantiated attributes and perceived credibility of the buyer. The wide eligibility range is kept in order to be able to consider unsupported claims and greenwashing as well.

The starting point in analysing information asymmetry and receiver's interpretation of a signal is in signalling theory (Connelly et al., 2011). The relevant receiver, for the purpose of this review, is a buyer in an organization. The supplier might know more about his practices and the buyer determines the credibility and relevance of the information. Hence, supplier attribute, the communication and the buyer's perception are separated from each other in the analysis. The survey measure of perceived sustainability is in no way a measure of the supplier's sustainability performance.

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2.2 Trust and the organizational decision

Continued exchange can be explained with relationship marketing (Morgan and Hunt, 1994), as a complementary approach. In procurement, however, the confidence in a supplier and the authority to purchase are different. A Responder might have a preferred supplier but may have budget constraints, as well as a number of offers or qualification requirements. The framework created here will apply such needs as possible contingencies for the favorable response being translated into a buying decision. You can't take their activity for granted, it must be measured.

The analysis is structured around three review questions. RQ1 asks what supplier sustainability signals and outcomes for buyers are explored. RQ2 is about the linkage between credibility, trust and relationship processes and those outcomes (null or conditional findings). RQ3 examines the conclusions that can be drawn from the research designs regarding actual supplier selection, price payment and relationship continuation. The third question also focuses attention on individual respondent, buying organizations and transactions differences.

3. Review method

3.1 Protocol and reporting approach

A local protocol was documented following exploratory scoping and prior to structured retrieval on 23 October 2026. Did not get it pre-registered. Reporting is being facilitated with the reference of PRISMA 2020 and PRISMA-S (Page et al., 2021; Rethlefsen et al., 2021). PRISMA is a reporting guideline and the use of its headings does not indicate that screening was exhaustive or that the evidence is unbiased. The choice of current selection is definitely provisional.

The two amendments are kept with the protocol. The initial full-text searches in OpenAlex were very broad and generated a lot of incidental matches and were abandoned; the partial downloads of these searches are not included in the review counts. The structured search was limited to the title/abstract field. A second known-item check was performed and this identified that a number of relevant sustainability positioning and supplier-selection reports were not identified in the first 10 queries. Before the final screening, three more queries were added. Both amendments did not affect the eligibility criteria or the cut-off date for publication.

3.2 Sources and search strategy

The structured discovery source was OpenAlex. The title-and-abstract search was used to retrieve 13 queries to completion with an upper year limit of 2026 and no lower year limit. Retrieval was done without applying language or document-type filter. Request details and retrieval records and file hashes have been preserved. Scopus and web of science were not used to perform the search.

Identification and access were complemented by Exploratory SciSpace discovery, targeted web searches and reference checking. The activities are not considered as a second database that was searched to the end. They need to be reconciled individually prior to the final PRISMA flow. The publishers' pages and/or lawful institutional repositories provided the full texts, where available. Requests to authors for copy of inaccessible reports. The same goes for an inaccessible report—it can't be retrieved right now, and that doesn't mean it is excluded.

Vinayavekhin et al. (2026) accepted manuscript was provided by its author for conceptual comparison and selective reference checking on 23 October 2026. It is found in a record in the search corpus and is determined to be a review, outside the empirical synthesis.

3.3 Eligibility and selection

Eligible reports will be English-language, peer-reviewed, empirical journal articles published or made available online by the search boundary. They have to involve any of the following: organizational buyers, buying organizations, or explicit simulations of organizational buying. Evaluation, trust, willingness to pay for the environmental or social attribute, selection or continuation must be tied to the supplier's communicated environmental or social attribute. Both qualitative and quantitative designs can be considered. Student simulations

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are kept separate and are not considered to be real purchasing decisions.

Table 1: Eligibility and selection

Dimension	Include	Exclude
Population	Organizational buyers, buying firms and explicit buying simulations	Consumers only or supplier-only sales accounts
Exposure	Supplier environmental or social information, claims or evidenced actions	Generic green adoption without supplier evaluation
Outcome	Buyer evaluation, trust, preference, selection or continuation	Unseparated composite outcomes across unrelated business roles
Report	English empirical peer-reviewed journal article	Review, conceptual paper, thesis, conference report or purely mathematical ranking model

Deduplication was done based on OpenAlex identifier and normalized DOIs. Possible matching titles and versions were marked for manual resolution and these are still to be resolved. Records were ordered in the queue for inspection by a lexical relevance score but this did not exclude records. The abstracts were used to make initial decisions, and if abstracts were not available, uncertain records were sent to full text. The decision basis and exclusion reason is provided in the retained ledger.

3.4 Extraction appraisal and synthesis

Extraction records the report, country or setting, sample, design, sustainability signal, buyer outcome, decision stage, principal findings and source locations. It distinguishes perceptions, intentions, experimental choices, reported organizational processes and transaction observations. Evidence from an abstract alone is not used in the substantive synthesis. Possible multiple reports from one dataset are flagged, and participant counts are not added into a pooled total.

Appraisal uses explicit domains: sampling and selection, measurement, identification or confounding, transparency, buyer relevance and transferability. Qualitative triangulation and experimental contrasts are considered in relation to their respective questions; no numerical quality score is calculated. This is a bespoke descriptive appraisal, not a validated universal risk-of-bias instrument. The synthesis compares signals, mechanisms and outcomes across designs and retains unsupported paths alongside supported ones. No meta-analysis, new respondent-level analysis or SPSS analysis has been performed.

4. Interim results

4.1 Selection status

This 13 searches resulted in 12,475 returns and 9,999 unique OpenAlex identifiers. After removing three more exact-DOI duplicates, there were 9,996 records prior to processing for title and version. A total of 154 records were excluded and 47 advanced to full-text assessment of 201 initially assessed records. Of those, eight reports have been retrieved – six of which are provisionally eligible, one is excluded and one is awaiting a scope decision. There are still 9,795 records that have not had initial assessment. The newly received review is part of the 154 excluded records, which is one of the report types; this is not counted towards the 8 advanced reports retrieved, but is stored as background. These are NOT a complete PRISMA flow, but rather workflow counts.

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Table 2: Selection Status

Stage	Count	Interpretation
Structured search returns	12,475	Across 13 completed queries
Repeated identifier returns removed	2,476	Leaves 9,999 distinct OpenAlex identifiers
Additional exact DOI duplicates removed	3	Leaves 9,996 records
Initial assessments completed	201	154 exclude and 47 advance to full text
Initial assessments pending	9,795	No eligibility decision yet
Advanced reports retrieved	8	Six provisionally included, one excluded, one pending
Other advanced reports	39	Retrieval or access assessment remains open

This synthesis contains 6 reports: three cross-sectional surveys and two experimental research reports, as well as one qualitative case study. It is an easy-to-understand, priority list that does not represent the final literature. The numbers of publications, geographic prevalence and frequency of positive findings are therefore not estimated. It is unclear if there was any overlap between the Australian samples in Casidy and Yan (2022) who are also reported separately from the samples in Casidy and Lie (2023), and the reports are cited separately, but are not assumed to be independent samples. An initial decision was also overturned due to full-text assessment. Valero-Gil et al. (2024) assess the willingness to be engaged in various business roles, such as customer, supplier, acquisition and management relationship. A separately-reported buyer outcome does not exist in that aggregate, and so the report is not included in the core synthesis under the stated criterion. Pollard & Marzano (2023) is pending as the evidence from suppliers and the sustainability-signal boundary needs to be further evaluated for fit.

4.2 Characteristics of the provisionally eligible reports

Table 3: Characteristics

Report	Design and unit	Outcome and interpretative limit
Cole and Aitken 2019	Three UK buying firms and two intermediary cases; 31 interviews and 46 documents	Supplier preselection processes; contextual qualitative explanation
Zhan et al 2021	China; manager samples of 293 and 281, plus 283 students	Scenario evaluation and selection intention; no observed awards
Casidy and Yan 2022	389 Australian executives or managers; cross-sectional supplier perceptions	Trust and self-reported performance; temporal order unestablished
Casidy and Lie 2023	389 Australian executives; cross-sectional existing-supplier survey	Willingness-to-pay scale and switching intention; possible sample overlap
Vinayavekhin et al 2024	234 procurement-experienced respondents; discrete-choice experiment	Hypothetical supplier choices and derived willingness to pay

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Report	Design and unit	Outcome and interpretative limit
Casidy and Papadas 2026	388 US SME owner-managers; cross-sectional supplier survey	Trust, commitment and relational intentions; no observed retention

4.3 Signal evaluation and economic tradeoffs

The experimental reports demonstrate why it is important to deal with favourable evaluation and commercial value separately. Vinayavekhin et al. (2024) manipulate the disclosure attributes when making supplier decisions. Third-party verification was preferred more, but incremental willingness-to-pay differences between third-party and self-disclosure were not significant for product and process information. This does not imply that the verification is of no value or that the alternatives are equal. Zhan et al. (2021) explore communicated economic, social and environmental performance; in particular, the economic dimension is found relevant in the short relationships. Both reports refer to responses to given alternatives and not to actual contracts awarded.

This finding helps spur a measurement distinction. A rating is an assessment of the respondent towards a supplier; a choice shows a preference of the respondent towards the alternatives available to him/her while a monetary estimate is based on the task and the price structure. A procurement outcome additionally requires an authorized decision and implementation. Rather than giving all transitions a label, such as "purchase performance," researchers should determine which transition they are observing. The studies available do not provide a factor to convert a positive sustainability score into an actual price premium.

4.4 Trust and relationship responses

The buyer perceptions of existing supplier relationships are analysed in the survey reports. Casidy and Yan (2022) differentiate between competency and relational trust – only other paths related to trust supported, not the competency-trust path to financial performance. Casidy and Lie (2023) link sustainability positioning to commitment, willingness to pay, and switching intention and evidence a conditional moderation effect. Casidy and Papadas (2026) present pathways for trust and commitment such as a nonsignificant direct pathway from trust to willingness to pay. All this assessments signal that trust cannot be taken for granted as a mechanism that will automatically increase premiums.

Interpretation is also based on the direction of explanation. A positive pre-existing relationship can affect the perception of sustainability, and an unmeasured organizational attribute can affect both the perception of and the reported effects on sustainability. A strong indirect relationship in a cross-sectional model does not necessarily mean that the signal was before the trust, or that the trust resulted in a decision later. These studies can be used in the analysis of relational associations, but, if temporal claims are to be made, other designs are needed. It is also not the same as measuring a particular message or validating a particular supplier practice in and of itself.

4.5 Sustainability evidence within the selection process

Cole and Aitken (2019) give accounts of actual organizational processes based on interviews and documents. They tell their stories about social sustainability evidence and corrective action after economic screening and before selection. Intermediaries are instrumental in the collection of information and in improvement. A process explanation of how communicated commitments become qualification requirements is an input to this synthesis. The focus on exemplar organisations is purposive, so no claim could be made that this sequence is typical of all buyers; and no attempt is made to estimate a treatment level effect for the transactions.

This process view poses a unique marketing question. A supplier can further its consideration by demonstrating its efforts to resolve a documented concern even if the action

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taken does not benefit the supplier at an extra cost. Relevant response can be: Qualification, Continuation, or Permission to proceed. Future studies should thus distinguish between eligibility and progression through the procurement process on one hand, and final award on the other, and between eligibility and final award on one hand and price on the other. A signal might be important at one point in time and not so important at another.

5. Proposed framework and research propositions

The proposed framework classifies the evidence in the receiver, feedback and outcome relationships outlined by Vinayavekhin et al. (2026). They already make links across signal transmission, interpretation and response over time in their seven-element account. The four stages below translate that account for supplier sustainability evaluation, with an indication as to what is actually measured; communication, buyer interpretation, an authorized organizational decision or its implementation. This is a proposed evidence-classification framework and not a new signalling cycle or a validated causal model. Trust and commitment are still existing mechanisms. Its worth ought to be evaluated in regards to the completed empirical corpus and neighboring reviews.

Table 4: Proposed Framework

Stage	Constructs to distinguish	Evidence needed
Supplier communication	Claim content, source, scope, verification and correction history	The actual message and evidence available to the buyer
Buyer interpretation	Perceived credibility, relevance, competency trust and relational trust	Responses tied to a specific supplier and time
Organizational decision	Qualification, shortlist, selection and approved premium	Decision records plus relevant cost and delivery requirements
Implementation and continuation	Executed order, price paid, renewal and realized performance	Linked transactional or longitudinal relationship records

The stages do not have to be in a prescribed sequence. Previous experience could impact interpretation and an audit finding could reopen qualification. This is not proposed here as a new theoretical element in the signalling framework but it is already considered a part of it. The measurement question is if a study measures a private attitude, a stated choice, a communicated response or an implemented transaction. The positive survey response does not have to be seen by the supplier and is not automatically considered observed feedback. First-time selection and incumbent renewal also should be considered separately since the information history is different.

Proposition 1. The linkage between substantiated sustainability information and supplier selection will be linked to whether or not the supplier fulfils the buyer's critical economic and operational needs. This adds to the contextual difference proposed by the experiments and the case evidence an interaction that can be tested. An appropriate design would allow for separate substantiation and threshold compliance and it would also take into account decisions from the shortlist or award stage. It must allow for negative and null interactions, not presume that the more sustainable the better the delivery and cost was.

Proposition 2. A realized price premium will depend on the buyer's decision power and procurement restrictions, along with the buyer's trust. A willingness to pay scale which is based on trust does not directly measure that premium. The test of the proposition must be through independent measures of trust, authority and constraints, related to actual prices approved/paid. Where decision rules do not

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provide much discretion in pricing, a positive trust association with stated willingness can coexist with no premium.

Proposition 3. When the buyer has identified a deficiency that can be remedied, the evidence that a supplier has done so will be more closely aligned to qualification progression than a measure of sustainability positioning. This is a conditional research proposition which is based on the qualitative process account. It needs to be compared to other, similar suppliers and make sure that the timing and control is clear for the severity of the original deficiency. It is not to be interpreted as a recommendation to select a noncompliant supplier.

Proposition 4. The level of consistency between expressing sustainability preferences and a purchasing decision will depend on how similar the research task is to the actual purchasing situation. Some of the dimensions are budget responsibility, implementation alternatives and consequences. The methodological proposition needs to be linked observations on the same buyers or decisions. The comparison between the different non-related survey and transaction samples would not allow determining an individual intention–behaviour gap.

6. Discussion

6.1 Implications for marketing theory

The framework focuses on the impact or change a sustainability signal should trigger. Claims can be used to build awareness, credibility or relatability in the marketing process or eligibility, selection or retention in the procurement process. This should be linked to the outcomes by an explicit explanation and suitable evidence. This decreases the potentially of an attitudinal finding being tacitly transformed right into a sales, costs or operational performance conclusion.

Vinayavekhin et al. (2026) have already identified receiver interpretation, verification, signal scope and heterogeneous purchase responses. The proposed value contribution is more contained: determining if the proposed measures and designs in sustainability oriented empirical reports can corroborate the proposed procurement consequences. A valid claim for a single facility is not necessarily valid for an entire supply network. This is a picture and not the outcome of the synthesis. The line between perceived credibility and substantiation relevant to the decision can be made explicit by tying the scope of available evidence to the specific decision requirement.

The evidence distinctions call attention to timing and levels of analysis in the context of relationship marketing. Individual confidence, a buying team's agreement and the organization's authorized purchase are separate observations. Longitudinal research might focus on the persistence of a positive first impression with deliberation and implementation. This would leverage existing trust and commitment explanations and put to the test organizational conditions that are linked to procurement.

6.2 Implications for procurement practice

The review proposes a practical solution to structure the supplier communication for the evaluation. A procurement team can record the claim, scope, evidence and date and decision relevance for each material sustainability statement. This record assists in identification of product/process, facility or network of evidence. It also distinguishes a positive brand experience from the information that matters to a specific purchasing decision. Proposed applications of the framework, not validated performance improvement.

A more useful message for supplier marketing teams will be one that outlines what has been verified and what isn't. The corresponding task for the buyers is to identify what evidence is required at qualification, selection and renewal. If a generic request is made for a Sustainability profile it will be possible to get information that is appealing but hard to utilize. Decision-specific requests can help to explain the criteria by which competing suppliers will be evaluated, and provide a record for future consideration.

More study is needed to apply to Pakistani Universities and other public organizations. It does not determine effects on the basis of the provisionally included reports on this institutional context. The Research on the Evaluation of Information is a possible use of the

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proposed record structure at a university purchasing office, under the applicable procedures. Any recommendation for tender eligibility, scoring or treatment of suppliers would have to be consistent with those procedures and not deduced from foreign studies done in the private-sector solely.

6.3 Research agenda

There would be three designs that would relate to the central inference problem. Field studies can vary from the evidence submitted by suppliers, allow for consideration of competing bids and previous relationships, and link to qualification, award and renewal records. Second, experiments with purchasing professionals can isolate the two components of the signal substantiation and economic requirements. Using incentives or consequences decision helps to determine the real meaning of the stated preferences. Third, longitudinal buyer–supplier research can assess interpretations before decision making and performance after implementation with multiple informants, as needed.

Another crucial priority is to differentiate between "no effect" and "imprecise effect". If the results are no significant, intervals and explanation of effect being estimated should be included. Many times the verification can be a matter of credibility but not of price; other times, it could only be a factor when an alternative does not meet a requirement. Pre-specified studies may provide more informative conclusions than models where all the sustainability-related constructs are assumed to be positively associated with all the outcomes.

Another agenda for the present review is methodological: finalize the process of eligibility assessment, draw out possible commonality in the datasets and review reports that were inaccessible and test the validity of the categories proposed. The framework may change significantly due to greenwashing, negative information and institutional differences. Such challenges must be sought in the final analysis, not simply confirmed in the later retrieval in terms of the current interpretation.

7. Limitations

The main constraint is an incomplete nature. Of the 9,996 records, only 201 have been initially assessed and 207 possible title/version clusters have yet to be resolved. The retrieval and assessment of most advanced records is not yet completed. Therefore, it is not possible to determine how often the methods, countries and the findings are used in the target literature from the six-report synthesis. Themes are preliminary, it is not claimed that there is thematic saturation or exhaustive coverage.

It is limited to one structured discovery source, a title-and-abstract search and an eligibility limit to English language. Records that were not complete in terms of metadata, records with inconsistent terminology may have been missed. A final tally has yet to be made of supplementary searching. Reports that are openly accessible may be different from reports that are not, or are inaccessible, and it can be a selection risk. There was no formal evaluation of publication or reporting biases and the small and heterogeneous nature of the interim set precludes a meaningful funnel-plot analysis.

8. Conclusion

Supplier sustainability communication is linked to marketing and procurement via the interpretation and application of information by buyers. Based on the checked evidence, a provisional differentiation between favorable perceptions, stated buying responses, and reports of organizational selection processes is proposed. It is not a general rule that sustainability positioning or trust translates to price paid and/or contract award or retention. The proposed framework reflects those transitions in an explicit manner and specifies observations necessary to test those. Its practical use is to question what does the signal support and what decision is it a reasonable choice to inform. The systematic review needs to be completed and screening and retrieval, must be completed before this interpretation can be included as the conclusion of a completed systematic review.

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