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Unraveling the Sustainability Components of Organizational Value Statements: A Q-Sort Methodology Approach

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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, which kind of values can be perceived as organizational orientations towards sustainability remains unknown. This study explores how the general public views the inclusion of sustainable components in value statements from 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 the internal operation of a company is an emerging idea in understanding corporate sustainability.

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



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1. Introduction

The global climate issue has alarmed human beings in recent decades, e.g., the World Health Organization has reported that there will be an exposure to ambient air pollution that will lead to 4.2 million deaths every year [1]. Moreover, global warming, climate change, greenhouse gases, Antarctic ice sheets melting and even environmental disasters have frequently become the headlines of many international news reports, which have forced different parties to increase awareness of these challenges and consider taking steps to mitigate their adverse impacts [2–4]. A remarkable project has been conducted by the United Nations (UN), introducing 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) and the 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 [5].

These initiatives of the UN have guided many countries in becoming aware and concerned with environmental and sustainability issues. Corporations are also experiencing emerging pressure from governments, peer groups, and customer demands to consider addressing these environmental and sustainability challenges [6,7]. They have to integrate their practices and policies to contribute to environmental and social needs, and not only consider economic performance [8,9]. Thereby, sustainability has become an important element in shaping organizations' strategic directions [10].

The World Commission on Environment and Development defined sustainability as actions or practices by corporations to “meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs” [11]. Thus, this may refer to the continuity, longevity, and capability of corporations in maintaining not only their

economic performance, but also dealing with stakeholders' concerns [12]. Previous research confirmed that organizations pursuing a sustainable approach would not adversely affect their financial performance but, in the long term, both corporate financial performance and benefits to the communities in which they operate would be improved [10,13].

To direct the business strategies and directions of organizations, certain values are widely adopted and believed to have a paramount role in organizational phenomena, including culture [14], socialization [15], identity [16], and person–organization fit [17]. Values can shape organizations and their members' attitudes, behaviors, preferences, and priorities [18]. 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 actions by these organizational members [19]. Bourne and Jenkins [20] claimed that these organizational values are related to a wide array of organizational practices, processes, strategies, and outcomes. These include the interpretation of strategic issues [21], selection of strategic choice [22] and strategic change [23], and decision making in management [24].

Substantial findings have suggested that values can guide firms to perform better [18,25]. Schein [14] suggests that values are critical to organizational success, and they can impact employee engagement, customer satisfaction and overall firm performance [26]. Moreover, previous research has shed light on how organizational values impact organizational change and innovation [27].

Until recent decades, the literature has begun to emphasize the increasing importance of aligning organizational values with sustainability goals [28] and shaping the ethical position of the organization [29]. Aguinis and Glavas [30] 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 in organizations. While recent literature has shown more attention to the broader realm of sustainability, Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG), or Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), there is still only a handful of studies that dissect 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 in the initiation and success of these CSR initiatives [31]. Moreover, Boakye et al. [32] have investigated the environmental practices of companies but did not explicitly connect these practices to the original 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 employees, therefore understanding how these deeply rooted organizational values drive sustainable initiatives is vital for senior management to design effective interventions and strategies. Consistent initiatives aligned with the core principles of the organization cannot be developed without a comprehensive understanding of the role of values, and this lack of concern hinders the long-term success of organizations potentially.

More importantly, a deeper exploration of organizational values can shed light on how they become facilitators or hindrances for employees who engage in sustainable behaviors [33]. With an understanding of organizational values, organizations can better tailor and design their value-driven strategies and practices to enhance sustainable initiatives among their employees.

To bridge this research gap and overcome the existing research weaknesses, the current study adopts Q-methodology to decipher the meaning of organizational values in relation to sustainability, with the aim of systematically identifying and exploring the diverse range of perceptions of value statements among the public to see whether they are relevant to sustainability by addressing the main research question: "What are the sustainable components perceived by the general public among the organizational value statements

presented by the companies?”. Q-sort methodology, which allows the participants to rank and order different value statements, can uncover a nuanced understanding and opinions about sustainability based on the value statements extracted from 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 their priorities and relevance to sustainability. In return, organizations can devise appropriate strategies and practices for achieving sustainable development.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Types of Organizational Values

Based on the strategic management literature, there are normally three types of explicit and stated statements for organizations, namely, mission, vision, and values [34]. They all serve distinctive functions in the strategic planning process of an organization [35]. The current study mainly focuses on values, which refers to the enduring beliefs which transcend specific situations and direct selection or behavior evaluation [36]. When values are taken to the organizational level, they embody general rules to guide employees in their selection and evaluation of behaviors. These organizational values may encompass the value system of an organization [20], representing an emphasis on certain aspects over others [37].

Organizational values can be of different forms, 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 offers sanctions [20]. As defined by Bansal [21], organizational values are “often stated explicitly in corporate documents” (p. 520). These values represent the value consensus among the senior managers of an organization [38].

Researchers generally support the idea that organizational values equate to those espoused by top management. Top management has been vested with the authority to manage the organizations and, thus, would use values to shape the behaviors of employees through social control to meet organizational objectives [22,39]. According to the upper echelons theory [40], organizations are the reflection of the values, cognitive styles and biases of the top management, and these values were introduced and imposed by leaders and top management and shown to have greater influence than the values of other organizational members [41,42]. These values espoused by top management can also enhance their power and influence within organizations [43].

The second form of organizational values consists of attributed values. While espoused values are those advocated by top management, attributed values refer to representatives of the organization from the perspectives of the organizational members [20]. This form of value has been adopted widely when examining the person–organization fit [44]. Attributed values have been evidenced by several definitions of organizational values defined by previous scholars. For instance, Balazs [45] reports that an organization’s values are something the employees “attribute to the firm” (p. 173), and Kalliath et al. [46] 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 overlap with espoused values imposed by the top management, but this is not always the case. Organizational members are able to attribute 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 a pattern and this history [20]. 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 [47].

Attributed values can equate to organizational values as these are based on repeated patterns and have a historical influence on actions and decisions among the employees. Employees can agree upon the attributed values more readily because they can identify and

describe them easily through daily interactions with routines and other members which have been influenced heavily by the attributed values. but they do not necessarily share them [20].

The third form is shared values, which refer to an aggregation of the values of the employees. Rokeach [48] and Schwartz [49] 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 fundamental organizational values, while variations from the mean reflect individual differences among members [20]. A similar description is suggested by Wiener [50], 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 [51] attraction-selection-attrition (ASA) model, members are drawn to, selected by, and separated from an organization based on their compatibility with their orientation and attributes during periods of relative stability. As orientation and attributes are expressed through individual members [49], 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 [44].

Finally, aspirational values refer to the beliefs held by the organizational members with regard to the values the organization ought to possess. Employees' personal values may be changed and reflected in aspirational values, due to a change in the trends of social life [20]. 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 their behavior 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 have in the future. In addition, aspirational values are similar to shared values but are different in the way that aspirational values emphasize what ought to be, instead of what is, regarding the organization [20].

2.2. Value Statements

Among the four forms of organizational values, the current study focuses on espoused values, and these values can be represented and documented via a written set of value statements. Value statements refer to the declarations regarding an organization's approaches to value or to serving their customers, suppliers, and community [35]. These value statements define employee attitudes and behaviors, and shape their decision-making process [52,53]. There are two major purposes for developing value statements, i.e., for the general public and for 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 [54]. For the internal stakeholders, value statements simply serve as a guide or reference for behaviors and decision-making [55–57]. By understanding the needs of stakeholders, companies are likely to adopt social and environmentally responsible strategies [58].

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 [59,60]. Value statements represent a channel for organizations to communicate and display their culture to stakeholders [61]. Thus, it is important to examine value statements in order to connect with the organizational culture, strategic management and strategic communication from organizations to internal and external stakeholders [62].

Previous research has paid very little attention to value statements as a construct but have examined their specific content and application [63]. For instance, Jaakson et al. [56] suggest that there are two types of value statement, namely, terminal and instrumental.

Terminal value statements focus on the end, while instrumental emphasize the means. Kaptein [64] found that only 49% of firms have codified their core values into value statements. Moreover, Anderson and Jamison [65] identified the top five words used in 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 [66]. 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 [35]. Due to the importance and emphasis placed on sustainability and green operations, many corporations have also integrated green components into their value statements.

2.3. Organizational Sustainability

Organizational sustainability can be referred to as “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” [67]. The notion of this definition has uncovered three dimensions of sustainability.

The first dimension is the economic perspective. This includes the 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 [68]. 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 [12]. Indeed, financial performance and their impact, long-term competitiveness, and organizational economic impact are the key economic issues regarding economic sustainability for the stakeholders [69]. Extending this notion, Choi and Ng [70] maintained that economic sustainability is essential not only for the external stakeholders, but also for the internal stakeholders, since 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 the social health of organizations, and this social health is related to the well-being of the employees [71]. Social sustainability has also posed a challenge for organizations to strike a balance between personal and societal needs [70]. In addition, this dimension should go beyond the bottom line of equity, but extend to philanthropy in the community and developing an organization’s public relations efforts [12].

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 are met [12]. Emissions, resource exploitation, and environmental damage have been thought to be the main environmental issues [69] and it is believed that organizations should impose an integrated approach via the inclusion of key values and mindsets to manage their practices purposefully for the benefit of the environment. Employees will be likely to become aware of the potential impacts of their decisions and actions on the environment.

3. Methods

To systematically understand the perspective of the general public on organizational values related to sustainability, we adopted Q-sort methodology, a technique quantitatively investigating people’s viewpoint, to cluster respondents’ ranking in terms of their relative importance, thereby identifying consensus and disagreement among respondents [72]. In essence, the subjectivity of respondents’ views on value statements, abstract narratives

of organizations' guiding principles, warranted the use of Q-sort methodology, which aims to capture collective voices [73]. Particularly, the results of Q-sort can help classify meaningful, value-based orientations for organizations to achieve sustainability. The focus of the present study is on value statements where value components, in essence, were positive and important, so forced response, the key feature of Q-sort administration, presents a distinctive advantage in terms of understanding the relative importance of the value statements. In addition, Q-sort methodology has been widely applied to understand perspectives on sustainability [74,75], business administration [76,77] and sustainable development practice [78–80] in previous studies.

3.1. Developing Concourse

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 [81]. The value statements were extracted from their official websites and the last annual report. Given that the targets of the present study were value statements instead of mere values (i.e., a single word to represent the values of the companies), which provided descriptions of values, companies without clear value statements were excluded, resulting in the final sample of 166 statements from 27 companies. These value statements were extracted from companies that explicitly demonstrated an awareness of environmental performance, so they were more likely to be representative and potentially relevant to developing sustainability. Despite relatively small samples of organizations, these extracted statements were sufficient for us to make saturated Q-sort statements for analysis, given that many duplicated statements with similar meanings were eventually combined or removed. Adding more organizations into the sample pool may not necessarily benefit concourse development.

3.2. Developing Q Sample

Value statements are abstract, with multiple components embedded in a sentence, including stakeholders, means, and desired outcomes. Each of these distinctively meaningful statements provide insights into what a company stresses regarding enhancing performance. To establish content validity, three professional raters in the field of sustainability and ESG were included to extract representative value statements. All raters agreed that 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 inconsistency and duplicated statements, the final Q set, consisting of 40 value statements, was constructed and is 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.

Table 1. Cont.

	Statements
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.

3.3. 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 be shared 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 sustainability issues, and thus help reflect a wide range of statements from different perspectives. In order to increase the diversity of the sample, we recruited more respondents than the suggested "1:3 ratio" (1 person for 3 statements), due to the fact that Q methodology has high tolerance of a range of sample size [82]. Thus, the number of respondents who participated in the Q-sorting

exercise is already far beyond the suggestion of a 1:3 ratio. The relatively larger numbers of students with diverse academic training can offer a new perspective in understanding sustainability, with the expectation of what kind of value statements they think are more related to sustainability. Moreover, almost half of the sample consisted of working adults, which can provide a balanced view in understanding sustainability with regard to the value statements.

3.4. 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 sorted them into three preliminary categories, “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 in achieving 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 supplied demographic information and were rewarded with a shopping voucher worth HK\$50 (approximate US\$6.4).

3.5. Performing Q-Sort Analysis

We analyzed the collected Q-sorts by using KADE (Ken-Q Analysis Desktop Edition), an open-source application specializing in conducting Q-sort data analysis with a graphical user interface [83]. Principal components analysis, a default means of KADE to perform factor extractions, where we can extract combinations from all the variance in Q-sorts, was conducted due to the exploratory nature (i.e., without predetermined numbers of factors) of the present study [84]. Considering eigenvalues greater than 1 and retaining the number of factors based on where the slope of the curve starts levelling off from the scree plot, three factors were selected for varimax rotation. Out of 30 respondents, 26 were classified into one of the factors. Specifically, three respondents were excluded by the auto-tagging function at the significance level 0.05, meaning that these three Q sorts did not uniquely load on any factor. Another respondent was excluded because of negative loading, with previous guidelines indicating that at least three positive Q sorts represent a factor [82].

4. Results

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 (<0.04), indicating that 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, which respondents in the particular factor shared. To summarize the distinctive viewpoints towards organizational values regarding sustainability, the 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	0.59	0.02	0.13
P4	F	22	Human Resources Management	Student	0.59	0.10	0.13
P3	F	21	General Business	Student	0.57	0.21	−0.14

Table 2. Cont.

No.	Sex	Age	Academic Background	Job	Factor Loading		
					F1	F2	F3
P10	M	26	Finance	Student	0.55	0.09	0.45
P6	F	18	General Business	Student	0.52	0.25	0.01
P24	M	29	Counselling	Administrative Officer	0.51	−0.06	0.04
P23	M	52	Accounting	Lecturer	0.47	0.40	−0.03
P14	F	22	Finance	Student	0.46	−0.16	−0.12
P21	F	38	Human Resources Management	Senior Administrative Assistant	0.40	−0.06	0.20
P15	M	23	Accounting	Student	0.39	0.33	0.03
P8	F	24	Human Resources	Student	0.39	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	0.64	−0.31
P26	M	43	Marketing	Senior Lecturer	0.39	0.58	−0.22
P9	F	23	Human Resources Management	Student	0.04	0.56	−0.00
P25	M	45	Finance	Senior Lecturer	−0.11	0.54	−0.16
P22	M	33	Engineering	Project Officer	0.20	0.52	0.09
P30	F	35	Marketing	Researcher	0.20	0.50	0.18
P13	F	24	Health Services Management	Student	0.01	0.44	0.09
P5	F	21	International Business	Student	−0.20	0.42	0.10
P16	F	23	Human Resources Management	Student	0.26	−0.13	0.74
P29	M	29	Social Sciences	Research Assistant	0.14	0.14	0.72
P17	M	21	Human Resources Management	Student	0.18	−0.34	0.69
P28	F	40	Management	Project Associate	0.36	0.15	0.66
P12	M	22	Human Resources Management	Student	−0.19	0.34	0.64
P20	M	36	Engineering	Senior Project Officer	−0.21	0.26	0.58
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	0.47
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 Sort Value
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

Table 3. *Cont.*

No.	Statements	Z-Scores	Q Sort Value
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

Table 4. Distinguishing Q Statements for Factor 2.

No.	Statements	Z-Scores	Q Sort Value
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 Sort Value
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

4.1. 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 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, gathering the strength and effort to achieve greater goals. People in Factor 1 had a positive attitude to 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 the statement: "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 opposition to 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 the fact that the excessive innovation may backfire; it is more suitable for an organization to advance some new practice, while retaining a certain amount of conventional practice that had been proved to function well.

Respondents classified into Factor 1 focused on improving operational management to excel in sustainability goals, but 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).

4.2. 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 the view that looking out from the customers’ point of view was the core, fundamental position in a customer-oriented approach to 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 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 to 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 that equipping members in organizations with professional knowledge was 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 products and services to customers. Allowing 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, the source of profit. However, they underplayed the importance of organizations’ impacts on 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 efforts 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.

4.3. 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 the 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 the 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 values linking 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 regarding 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 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).

5. 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 about sustainability or ESG to respond both to the damaged environment and the initiatives of the UN. The increasing popularity of sustainability and ESG has forced 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, the economic perspective, social perspective, and environmental perspective [12]. These three dimensions also echo the concept of the triple bottom line (TBL) [68,85–88], which puts emphasis on corporations maintaining three types of measurements in their performance, economic, environmental, and social performance.

Our findings concur with these ideas, confirming that the value statements of corporations consist of these three, as regarded by the participants in this study, particularly, Factor 2 (Empowering Customer-centric Excellence) and Factor 3 (Empowering Sustainable Progress), reflecting the dimensions of economic, environmental, and social performance. The value statements consist of a customer-oriented perspective that allows companies to produce and offer quality products and services to satisfy the needs of their customers. Understanding the concerns and satisfying the needs of customers permit companies to develop and grow continuously [89]. In addition, in the process of listening to the concerns of customers and meeting their needs, trust can be developed and long-term relationships between the companies and customers will emerge [90]. Specific to sustainable development, value co-creation with customers enhances sustainability awareness and innovation

practice, thus predicting a positive corporate image [91], demonstrating the importance of customer-oriented values.

In addition, employees' professional knowledge and skills are related to the credibility of the company. Customers notice the uniqueness of a company and develop loyalty [92]. Companies adopting a customer-centric attitude and commitment to excellence is related to the improvement of their economic performance. Profits can be increased, thereby satisfying shareholders' concerns. This factor ensures that organizations meet the bottom line, i.e., economic performance.

The findings also uncovered the third factor: Empowering Sustainable Progress, according to the opinions of the participants. This factor corresponds to the traditional environmental and social performance discussed in TBL [68,88] and conveys the notion that companies should continuously improve their sustainable development to contribute to society and to the earth so that long lasting impacts can result for the community. One of the participants has given a concluding opinion: if the actions of companies are not long lasting, how can this be claimed as sustainability? Thus, companies should develop shared values regarding their organization and the environment to ensure the positive impacts imposed.

To safeguard and benchmark the actions of the companies as sustainable, measurable and achievable targets should be in place to direct organizations' practices and developments. This allows employees' attention and decisions to be aligned with sustainable goals. As pointed out by one of the participants, companies pursuing bold actions may not mean that they are doing the right thing or following 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 companies demonstrate their economic, social, and environmental performance. Interestingly, our findings also uncover an additional aspect that TBL does not mention. Factor 1 emerged as Empowering Business Process Management. This refers to the internal processes and operation of the company, stating that, once these internal processes and operations function well, sustainable goals can also be achieved. Participants confirmed that companies should take care of the well-being of their employees, including safety and health issues. If companies care about their health, manpower will be strong and contribute to work performance and the driving force behind sustainability.

In addition, internal processes and operations also refer to the collaboration and communication between companies and employees. Participants believe that, without proper communication, employees are not sure whether they are on the right track and operations will be disturbed. Toseef et al. [93] found that inspirational leadership and innovative communication enhance employee engagement and commitment to the social perspective of sustainability via the mediating role of trust. This shows that employee collaboration and communication are essential to ensure the corporations are moving in the right direction in achieving sustainability.

Participants also perceived that innovation is one of the important components related to internal processes and operations. Previous studies have confirmed that innovation can challenge the status quo and encourage positive change [94]; thereby, it can also facilitate companies' sustainability when employees are willing to innovate via change in the existing practices, which may have not previously brought sustainable outcomes for the companies.

The existing literature on sustainability mainly focuses on the three major dimensions of the triple bottom line concept [68,88]. It can be concluded that all of the three dimensions refer to external perspectives and, although improved economic performance can result through the profits generated by the quality products and services offered by the companies, these should also be the outcomes of the good internal processes and operations of the companies. Without proper and sustainable internal processes and operations, manpower is adversely affected due to insufficient safety and healthcare, and companies will be

moving in the wrong direction because of miscommunication with 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, i.e., Q-methodology, to uncover different aspects and dimensions of sustainability via value statements. Prior research mainly relied on surveys, case studies, or interviews to understand value statements, but the actual dimensions of value statements related to sustainability were unknown. Moreover, with the understanding of the components of sustainability in these value statements, companies can revise their value statements in response to the need to align with their sustainable goals, in order to develop their value statements properly. In addition, appropriate green practices and strategies can be formulated, since values always direct strategy formulation and, as such, this can ensure the sustainable development of the organization.

6. Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has provided insights regarding the general public's perspectives in understanding the value statements of organizations related to sustainability. However, there are several limitations that we should be aware of. First, the general public includes students and working adults in this study and, although all of the student participants are studying business-related majors and have knowledge of sustainability, future research might split the samples into students and working adults. Working adults may have different views on sustainability and their understanding should also be taken account of. Moreover, the value statements in this study were collected from companies under the Carbon Footprint Repository for Listed Companies in Hong Kong [81], 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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