

# Product Positioning Strategy and Sustainability: A Systematic Literature Review of Theoretical Foundations, Empirical Evidence, and Future Research Directions



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## Abstract

**Background:** Product positioning strategy is a central element of marketing because it enables firms to create a distinctive place for their products and brands in the minds of target consumers. However, increasing environmental awareness and responsible consumption have made sustainability an important strategic dimension in positioning decisions.

**Objective:** This study aims to systematically review and integrate literature on traditional product positioning and sustainability-based positioning. Specifically, it identifies major positioning frameworks, examines empirical evidence on positioning effectiveness, and highlights research gaps and future research directions.

**Method:** A systematic literature review approach was adopted using PRISMA-based screening. Relevant studies were searched through major academic databases, including Web of Science, Scopus, ScienceDirect, Springer, and Google Scholar. After screening and eligibility assessment, 14 freely available full-text studies were selected for detailed synthesis. The selected studies were analyzed according to theoretical framework, research context, methodology, key findings, sustainability contribution, limitations, and future research implications.

**Results:** The review identifies four dominant traditional positioning frameworks: differentiation-based positioning, perception-based positioning, competitive positioning, and resource-based positioning. Sustainability-based positioning emerges as a fifth framework that integrates environmental value, green brand identity, ethical responsibility, and sustainable consumption into positioning strategy. Findings show that sustainability positioning influences consumer outcomes through attitude formation, self-image congruence, functional congruence, brand trust, and dual cognitive–affective processing.

**Conclusion:** Sustainability has evolved from a peripheral product attribute to a central strategic positioning dimension. The review contributes by integrating traditional and sustainability-based positioning literature and showing that effective sustainable positioning requires both functional credibility and emotional resonance.

**Keywords:** product positioning; brand positioning; green brand positioning; sustainability positioning; systematic literature review; sustainable marketing.

## 1. Introduction

Product positioning is a crucial aspect of marketing strategy due to the fact that it allows a company to design, communicate and maintain a unique position of its product or brand in an eye of a target consumer. Positioning assists firms to define their value proposition in increasingly competitive markets, differentiate their offering from the competition and sway consumer preference (Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2010; Moore & Pareek, 2009). Early positioning research focused on product attributes, consumer perceptions and consumer purchases. For example, PERCEPTOR model has shown that product positioning has been associated with consumer preference, consumer trial, repurchase and estimation of market shares (Urban, 1975).

Likewise, the segmentation–targeting–positioning tradition indicated that positioning was more effective when it was linked to segments and market types (DeSarbo et al., 2009). The existing literature on positioning concentrates on four fundamental

approaches: differentiation-based positioning, perception-based positioning, competitive positioning and resource-based positioning. Differentiation-based positioning involves making a product or service attribute, benefit or value proposition that is different from the other options available to the consumer (Della et al., 2016; Gwin & Gwin, 2003). Perception-based positioning is the way in which consumers mentally evaluate brands based on cognitive evaluations, product attributes and perceptual maps (Najafizadeh et al., 2012; Manhas, 2010).

Competitive positioning deals with the ability of the firms to occupy favourable positions against the opposition and the possibility of repositioning the firm to make it more competitive (Cristea, 2014; Song, 2018). Resource based positioning is a positioning that is related to the effectiveness of positioning and the capabilities of the organization, the resources used and the processes of managing the brand (Garachkovska et al., 2021; Iyer et al., 2019). These views suggest that positioning isn't

simply a marketing promo, but additionally a strategic exercise that requires consumer insights, competitive analysis, and aligning internal capabilities. Sustainability is an emerging marketing strategy topic in recent years. Businesses are increasingly aware of the impact they have on the environment, sensitive to ethical consumption and are increasingly pressured to include sustainability in their positioning. The positioning a brand can achieve in the green value matrix can help firms differentiate their products and services by environmental attributes, ecological value, and sustainability-oriented brand meanings, which can boost consumer attitudes, perceived value, green trust, and purchase intention (Chen, 2010; Chen & Chang, 2012).

Emotional benefits, environmental self-expression, brand trust and perceived congruence with personal values are factors that can drive consumer response to sustainability positioning, in addition to functional environmental benefits (Montoro Rios et al., 2006; Wang et al., 2022). The relevance of eco-positioning has also expanded to other sectors, including the fashion, cosmetics, FMCG, hospitality, airlines, real estate and sustainable consumer goods sectors (Gomes et al. 2023; Zhang et al. 2024).

The concept of sustainability-based positioning is an extension of the classical concept of positioning that has been enriched with the aspects of environmental and social responsibility in the value proposition of the brand. The essence of functional green positioning is the environmental benefits that can be measured, like recyclability, energy efficiency, lower emission and eco friendly manufacturing processes. Emotional green positioning, on the other hand, focuses on psychological advantages of green positioning like moral satisfaction, nature connectedness, and expression of environmental identity (Hartmann et al. 2005; Peverelli et al. 2021). Based on empirical studies, it can be concluded that green positioning has a positive effect on attitude toward green brand, purchase intention, repurchase intention, willingness to pay, and sustainable consumption behavior (Setiyarini et al., 2022; Situmarang et al., 2021). However, these effects are explained by various mechanisms, including attitude formation, self-image congruence, functional congruence, brand trust and dual cognitive-affective processing (Huang et al. 2014; Dewanti et al. 2024). Although sustainability has become more and more relevant in marketing, the concept of traditional positioning and the concept of sustainability positioning have been studied separately. Past studies have mainly been related to product attributes, perceptual mapping, competitive advantage, repositioning, and brand performance (Hou & Mieghem, 2021; Lee et al., 2018). While research on sustainability marketing has concentrated on green brand knowledge,

environmental attitudes, purchase intention, sustainable purchasing, and eco-conscious consumer behavior (Goestiawan et al., 2024; Lin et al., 2020), these studies have centered solely on the marketing perspective of the company.

There is limited theoretical integration between positioning strategy and sustainability marketing from this separation. It is yet to be established whether sustainability is a positioning principle with its own mechanisms and managerial implications, or a differentiating principle. So, there is a need to synthesize these two streams of research and to understand the impact of sustainability on product and brand positioning strategy, which is provided by a systematic literature review.

The review can help to structure the dispersed evidence, compare positioning mechanisms (traditional and sustainability), and unveil research gaps. This is because sustainability positioning has come to be associated with a consumer's identity, trust, authenticity, and competitive advantages, in addition to just green features of a product (Hartmann et al., 2005; Peverelli et al., 2021). It also has practical relevance, as managers would benefit from greater clarity on the need for focus on functional sustainability claims or emotional sustainability narratives, or a balance of both. To this end, this article reviews the literature on product positioning strategy and sustainability positioning to create a holistic view of the shift of sustainability in positioning theory and practice. The study aims at three objectives: identifying and incorporating the prevailing theories in traditional positioning and sustainability positioning, synthesizing empirical findings of the impact of positioning on consumers' attitudes, purchase intentions, brand trust, and sustainable consumption results, and identifying research gaps and future research directions for further development of integrated positioning theory and sustainable marketing practice.

The study has three main objectives:

1. To identify and integrate the dominant theoretical frameworks in traditional product positioning and sustainability-based positioning
2. To synthesize empirical evidence on how positioning strategies influence consumer attitudes, purchase intentions, brand trust, and sustainable consumption outcomes
3. To identify research gaps and future directions for advancing integrated positioning theory and sustainable marketing practice

## 2. Methodology

A systematic literature review methodology was used to investigate the product positioning strategy-sustainability based positioning relationship. The review was conducted according to a PRISMA-based

screening process that would ensure transparency, replicability and methodological rigor. The methodology was structured in six steps: research questions, search strategy, inclusion/exclusion criteria, process of selecting studies, quality assessment and data extraction.

### 2.1 Research Questions

The review was guided by five research questions:

**RQ1:** What are the dominant theoretical frameworks used in product positioning strategy research?

**RQ2:** How has sustainability been integrated into product and brand positioning strategies?

**RQ3:** What empirical evidence exists regarding the effectiveness of sustainability-based positioning?

**RQ4:** What mechanisms mediate the relationship between green positioning and consumer outcomes?

**RQ5:** What research gaps and future research directions emerge from the existing literature?

### 2.2 Search Strategy

A well-planned literature search was carried out in major academic databases like Web of Science, Scopus, ScienceDirect, Springer and Google Scholar. Studies up to December 2024 were included in the search. Two sets of keywords were employed to be sure to cover the breadth of material. The first group dealt with traditional positioning and comprised of "product positioning strategy," "brand positioning," "positioning effectiveness," "competitive positioning" and "perceptual positioning." The second type of group was dedicated to sustainability related positioning and comprised of "green brand positioning," "sustainable positioning," "eco-positioning," "environmental positioning," and "sustainable marketing strategy." Search terms were used with boolean operators (AND, OR) to narrow down the search and combine search terms.

In order to find the studies relevant to both traditional and sustainability-based positioning, combinations like "product positioning" AND "sustainability," "brand positioning" AND "green marketing" and "eco-positioning" OR "sustainable positioning" were employed. The search was aimed at capturing the theoretical, empirical and methodological studies on product positioning, brand positioning, green positioning, and sustainable marketing strategy.

### 2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were selected, and included if they: concerned product or brand positioning strategy, addressed sustainability, green, eco or

environmental positioning, made theoretical, empirical or methodological contributions, were published in peer-reviewed journal, conference proceedings or academic books, and were published in English or with English abstracts.

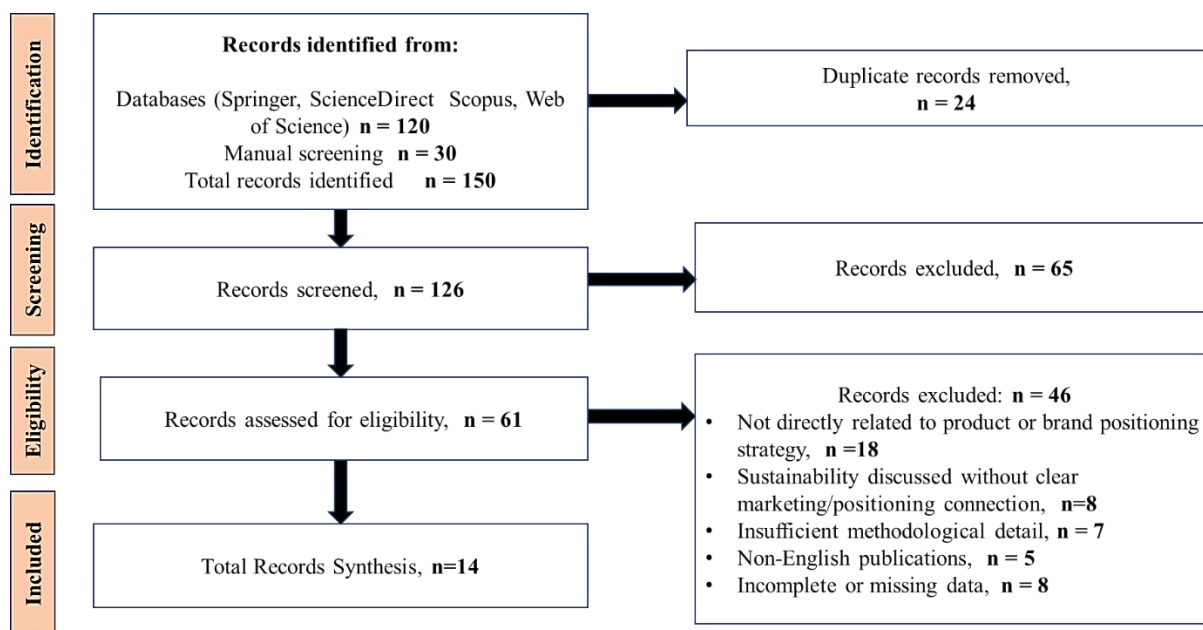
Studies were eliminated from the sample if they were not related to positioning strategy, if sustainability was not discussed in a marketing or positioning context, if they were opinion pieces or non-academic sources, or if they lacked sufficient methodological or theoretical detail, lacked an English abstract in case they were written in another language, had incomplete data, or were duplicate records.

### 2.4 Study Selection Process

The process of studying selection was carried out through the PRISMA framework consisting of four stages: identification, screening, eligibility assessment and inclusion in the study. At the identification stage, records were retrieved from Web of Science, Scopus, ScienceDirect, Springer and Google Scholar with the identified terms as "product positioning; brand positioning; green brand positioning; sustainability positioning; eco-positioning; sustainable marketing strategy". Any duplicate records were eliminated after the initial search. All other records were then filtered by title and abstract to identify the relevance of the records to the goals of the review.

Studies that were not related to product or brand positioning, or that did not cover sustainability or green marketing in a positioning context were excluded in this step. Articles were included in the eligibility stage based on the pre-defined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Articles were rejected if they were not methodologically clear, were not sufficiently theoretically relevant, included content on sustainability not related to positioning strategy, or there was insufficient information for in-depth analysis.

Lastly, 14 open-access, full-text studies were chosen for a detailed synthesis and critical analysis. Fourteen studies were selected as final samples in that they contained enough information to examine the theoretical frameworks, the research methods, the significant results, the importance of the study for sustainability, the limitations, and the future implications of the research in the selected articles. The limitation of freely available full-text studies might reduce the range of studies reviewed, but made the review process more transparent, consistent and reliable as all the studies included could be analyzed in full.



**3.5 Quality Assessment**

The evaluation of the selected studies was carried out based on six quality criteria: clarity of research objectives, research relevance to product positioning and/or sustainability positioning, depth of the theoretical foundations, appropriateness of the methodology, validity and reliability of the results, contribution of the research to the positioning theory or practice. Studies that were conceptually well-informed, had adequate empirical research, and directly addressed the research questions were given priority.

**2.6 Data Extraction**

Structured data extraction framework used for consistency. Data gathered from each study consisted of information about the author(s), year of publication, source of publication, country or research context, nature of positioning studied, theoretical approach, research method, main results, contributions to sustainability, limitations, and suggestions for future research. This process allowed for a systematic comparison of these two types of positioning studies, traditional positioning and sustainability-positioning studies, and key themes, mechanisms, gaps and future research opportunities were identified.

**3. Results**

**3.1 Overview of Selected Studies**

Fourteen full-text studies freely available were selected for the final synthesis based on screening using the PRISMA approach. The studies were divided into two main categories: Traditional product/brand positioning studies and Sustainability based/Green positioning studies. The stream of traditional positioning emphasis was on positioning models, perceptual mapping, segmentation, targeting, positioning (STP), repositioning, competitive differentiation and strategic brand management.

The sustainability positioning stream was directed towards green brand positioning, eco positioning, attitude of consumers, purchase intention, repurchase intention, brand stereotypes, self image congruence, functional congruence and sustainable consumption. The selected studies indicate that positioning has gone beyond the strategy of market differentiation and management of positioning perceptions and become a more comprehensive tool, accompanied by the creation of a sense of positioning sustainability, environmental responsibility, consumer identity and trust-based communication. The final studies used to create the synthesis are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1: Overview of Final Studies Included in the Detailed Synthesis**

Study	Research Stream	Methodological Focus	Main Contribution
Urban, 1975	Traditional positioning	Product positioning model	Developed PERCEPTOR as a model for product positioning and market-share estimation.

DeSarbo et al., 2009	Traditional positioning	Spatial methodology	STP	Proposed simultaneous segmentation, targeting, and positioning analysis.
Manhas, 2010	Traditional positioning	Cognitive and conative analysis		Linked consumer perception and purchase intention in brand positioning.
Najafizadeh et al., 2012	Traditional positioning	Perceptual mapping		Used factor analysis and perceptual maps for competitive brand positioning.
Cristea, 2014	Traditional positioning	Conceptual analysis	strategy	Discussed positioning strategies for competitive advantage.
Song, 2018	Traditional positioning	Repositioning map and AHP		Demonstrated repositioning effectiveness in the low-cost cosmetics market.
Garachkovska et al., 2021	Traditional positioning	Strategic management algorithm		Proposed an applied framework for managing brand positioning.
Hartmann et al., 2005	Sustainability positioning	Experimental study		Compared functional and emotional green positioning strategies.
Situmorang et al., 2021	Sustainability positioning	SEM		Examined green brand positioning, attitude, and repurchase intention.
Peeverelli et al., 2021	Sustainability positioning	Experimental studies		Explained green positioning through warmth and competence stereotypes.
Mehraj & Qureshi, 2022	Sustainability positioning	Mediation–moderation model		Linked green brand positioning, attitude, willingness to pay, and purchase intention.
Setiyarini et al., 2022	Sustainability positioning	Quantitative survey		Studied green positioning, green knowledge, attitude, and purchase intention.
Wang et al. (2022)	Sustainability positioning	SEM and mediation analysis		Examined self-image congruence and functional congruence as mediators.
Gomes et al. 2023	Sustainability positioning	Online experiment		Investigated eco-positioning effects in sustainable fashion consumption.

### 3.2 Theoretical Frameworks in Product Positioning

Four traditional positioning frameworks were identified as dominating, and one emerging sustainability-oriented framework. Firstly, the key of differentiation-based positioning is to create unique

attributes, benefits or value propositions that set a brand apart from its competitors. This continues to be an important aspect of strategic positioning as it enables the firm to be a relevant and protected position in the consumer's mind (Cristea, 2014; Najafizadeh et al., 2012).

Second, perception-based positioning emphasizes cognitive placement of brands in the consumers' perception vis-à-vis the other brands in the competitive landscape (Anwar et al., 2024). This approach is perceptual mapping, multidimensional scaling and evaluation of attributes through consumers.

Urban (1975) developed the model called PERCEPTOR which was important for pointing out the need to correlate physical product attributes and psychological attributes with consumer preference and market-share results. In the same way, DeSarbo et al. proposed an innovative approach for spatial classification based on the combination of segmentation, targeting and positioning in a single analytical framework (DeSarbo et al., 2009).

Third, the competitive positioning is a position of a brand in relation to other brands. But research in this stream reveals that the question of positioning is not just about internal branding, it's about the

brand positioning in the market, in response to the competition and the strategies they adopted (Cristea, 2014; Manhas, 2010).

Fourth, positioning relates resource positioning to the capabilities of the firm, managerial resources and positioning execution. It has been argued that the positioning process is a successful one when there is a match between the market opportunity and the organization's capabilities (Garachkovska et al., 2021). Positioning based on sustainability is the fifth and new positioning.

This framework takes environmental responsibility, green value, eco-friendly attributes and sustainability communication into the very core of the brand positioning strategy. Unlike the traditional positioning, sustainability positioning does not just depend on the functional differentiation, it also includes emotional, ethical, symbolic and identity-based positioning appeals (Hartmann et al., 2005; Mehraj & Qureshi, 2022; Peverelli et al., 2021).

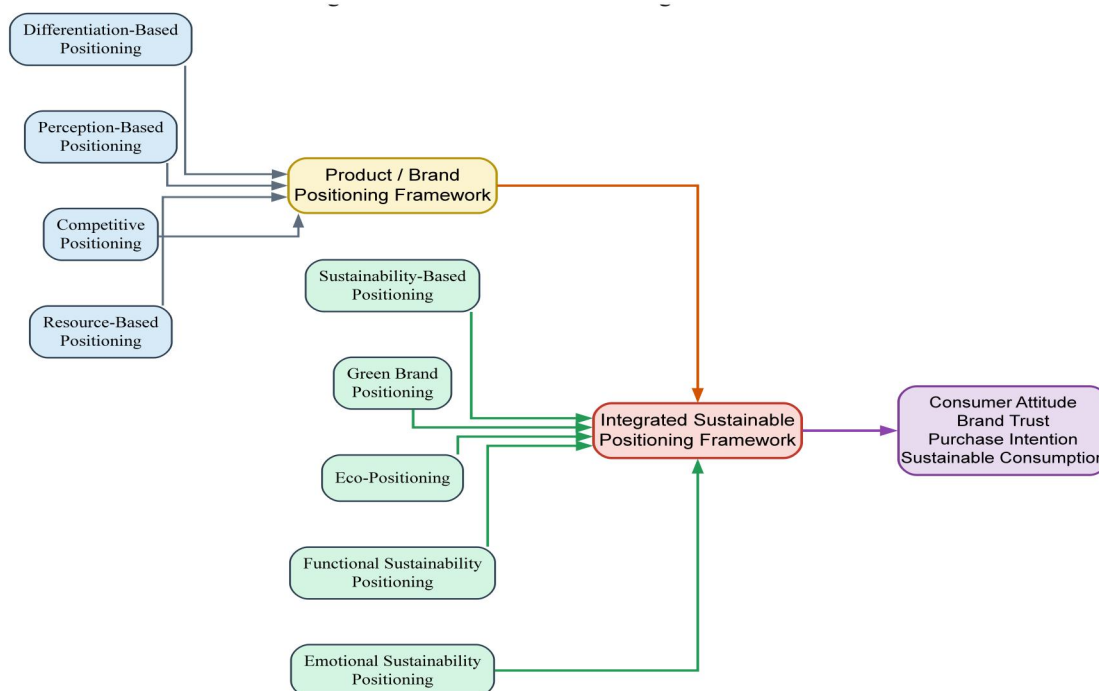


Figure 1: Evolution of Positioning Frameworks

### 3.3 Empirical Evidence on Traditional Positioning

The positioning studies done in the traditional way have ample evidence to suggest that positioning strategy is important for brand evaluation, competitive advantage and market performance. Consumption of positioning was measured by means of a model developed by Urban (1975) which he called PERCEPTOR. This model explains that product attributes can be treated as a structured decision process in which the perception of product attributes results in product trial, repeat purchase and long-term market share. This discovery brought

positioning to prominence as a concept and a quantitative marketing metric.

DeSarbo et al. advanced this approach for analysis with the suggestion of a simultaneous STP method. Their research found that the effectiveness of positioning decision was better when it is coupled with segmentation and targeting and not stand-alone brand decisions (DeSarbo et al., 2009). This is crucial as it will help you to know not only where a brand is being positioned but which consumers are appreciating the positioning. In addition, perceptual mapping studies were conducted, which supported the notion that positioning should be done according to consumer perceptions of the competing

brands. Najafizadeh et al. (2012) showed that factor analysis and perceptual maps can be used to determine the most influential attributes that affect the competitive position in the hygienic products market.

Likewise, Manhas revealed that cognitive perceptions and conative purchase intentions can be compared to gain insights into if a brand's perceived position relates to consumer action (Manhas, 2010). Positioning the evidence also helps with the strategic importance of positioning. Song discovered that systematic repositioning in the low cost

cosmetics market led to a rise in the market share for MISSHA from 20.2% to 27.76% (Song, 2018) which is equivalent to a 7.56% improvement. This means that if companies see that their competitive benchmark is stronger they may be able to re-position by tweaking the brand attributes in favour of the competitive benchmark. Re-positioning does, however, need to be done with strategic consistency and careful allocation of resources – inconsistencies in the repositioning strategy can do harm to solid brand connections.

**Table 2: Key Findings from Traditional Positioning Studies**

Theme	Evidence from Reviewed Studies	Interpretation
Positioning models	PERCEPTOR links product attributes with trial, repeat purchase, and market share (Urban, 1975).	Positioning can be modeled as a measurable strategic process.
STP integration	Spatial methodology combines segmentation, targeting, and positioning (DeSarbo et al., 2009).	Positioning is stronger when connected to target-segment analysis.
Perceptual mapping	Consumer perceptions identify competitive strengths and weaknesses (Najafizadeh et al., 2012).	Positioning should be based on consumer mental maps.
Cognitive–conative alignment	Cognitive perceptions and purchase intentions reveal brand leadership potential (Manhas, 2010).	Effective positioning must move from perception to behavioral intention.
Repositioning	Market share increased by 7.56% after repositioning in cosmetics (Song, 2018).	Strategic repositioning can improve market performance.

**3.4 Empirical Evidence on Sustainability Positioning**

The sustainability-positioning studies demonstrate that being positioned as sustainable has a positive effect on consumer attitudes, purchase intentions, repurchase intentions, willingness to pay and sustainable consumption behavior. According to Hartmann et al. (2005), green positioning has a positive impact on brand attitude and a functional/emotional positioning has a greater perceptual impact than a functional positioning. This result is significant because it indicates that consumers are not only reacting to the environmental attributes of the product, but also its emotional and symbolic benefits for sustainability. Situmorang et al. (2021) proved that the green brand positioning has a significant role in the repurchase intention and attitude towards green brands was a mediator.

Likewise, Mehraj and Qureshi identified that the attitudes towards green brands result from green brand positioning and green brand knowledge,

which in turn impacts green purchase intention. They also found that the attitude–purchase intention relationship is moderated by willingness to pay a premium (Mehraj & Qureshi, 2022). Further evidence confirms that a positive association between green brand positioning and purchase responses of consumers exists. Huang et al. (2014) demonstrated the relationship between green brand positioning, green brand knowledge and attitude toward green brands, and the effect of attitude toward green brands on green purchase intention. In the same way, Wang et al. (2022) concluded that green brand positioning and green customer value have positive impacts on green purchase intention, where attitude toward green brand and green trust are significant mediating and moderating factors. Additionally, green brand image, green satisfaction and green trust were proved to be important factors in creating green brand equity by Chen (2010), and Chen and Chang (2012) found that green perceived value and green trust improves green purchase intention and mitigates green perceived risk. In the

context of the FMCG market in Indonesia, the results of the study by Setiyarini et al. (2022) indicate that the ability to position a brand as green, to create green brand knowledge and green brand attitude positively influence green product purchase intention.

The results of the study conducted by Chan revealed that green brand positioning effects on the purchase intention mediated by two variables, namely self-image congruence and functional congruence as presented by Wang et al. 2022 and Chen & Chang 2012. Jian and Zhong furthered this proof by finding

that eco-positioning has a significant positive impact on brand evaluation, willingness to pay and sustainable consumption intention, particularly when the consumers are familiar with the brand (Gomes et al. 2023; Zhang et al. 2024). Studies carried out to assess and determine the markets to enter into are also valuable in the identification of the target markets and the development of a marketing plan for a particular local or cooperative product, particularly if the company is interested in entering a new geographic market (Diaz Diaz & Sepulveda Marquez, 2006).

**Table 3: Key Findings from Sustainability Positioning Studies**

Study	Main Relationship Tested	Key Finding
Hartmann et al., 2005	Green positioning → brand attitude	Functional and emotional green positioning positively shape brand attitude.
Situmorang et al., 2021	Green positioning → attitude → repurchase intention	Attitude mediates the effect of green positioning on repurchase intention.
Mehraj & Qureshi, 2022	GBP, GBK, ATGB, WTP, GPI	Green positioning influences attitude and purchase intention; willingness to pay strengthens the relationship.
Setiyarini et al., 2022	GBP, GBK, ATGB → purchase intention	Green positioning and attitude positively influence green purchase intention.
Wang et al. (2022); Chen & Chang (2012)	GBP → self-image/functional congruence → purchase intention	Self-image and functional congruence mediate green positioning effectiveness.
Gomes et al. 2023; Zhang et al. 2024	Eco-positioning → brand evaluation/WTP/consumption intention	Eco-positioning improves sustainable fashion responses; brand familiarity strengthens effects.
Peeverelli et al., 2021	Green positioning → stereotypes → consumer response	Emotional positioning activates warmth; functional positioning activates competence.

**3.5 Mechanisms of Sustainability Positioning**

The synthesis identified five major mechanisms through which sustainability positioning affects consumer outcomes.

**3.5.1 Attitude Formation**

Green brand positioning influences consumer attitudes by conveying the message of environment, responsible business and sustainable value propositions. There are a few studies that reveal attitude towards green brands as a mediator between green positioning and purchase intention/repurchase intention (Mehraj & Qureshi, 2022; Setiyarini et al., 2022). This aligns with the findings of Montoro Rios et al., 2006, Huang et al., 2014 that environmental brand associations and green brand positioning can have a positive impact on consumer attitudes toward green brands and increase the likelihood of purchasing such brands.

This implies that the important first step in making a change in the behavioral intention is to establish a positive evaluation of sustainability claims.

**3.5.2 Self-Image Congruence**

Self-image congruence helps to understand consumers' positive reaction towards green brands when the green identity of the brand aligns with their own self-concept. Based on the research findings, the self-image congruence was found to partially mediate the self-image congruence between green brand positioning and purchase intention (Wang et al. 2022; Chen & Chang 2012). This mechanism is especially crucial for the consumers who see it as part of their identity to take care of the environment.

**3.5.3 Functional Congruence**

Functional congruence is the consumer's perception of a sustainable product's functionality that is equal to conventional products. This study revealed that functional congruence has significant mediation effects between green brand positioning and purchase intention (Wang et al. 2022; Chen & Chang 2012). This discovery is crucial since the green positioning can be unsuccessful if consumers think that the environmental advantages are achieved at the cost of the product's quality, durability or usefulness.

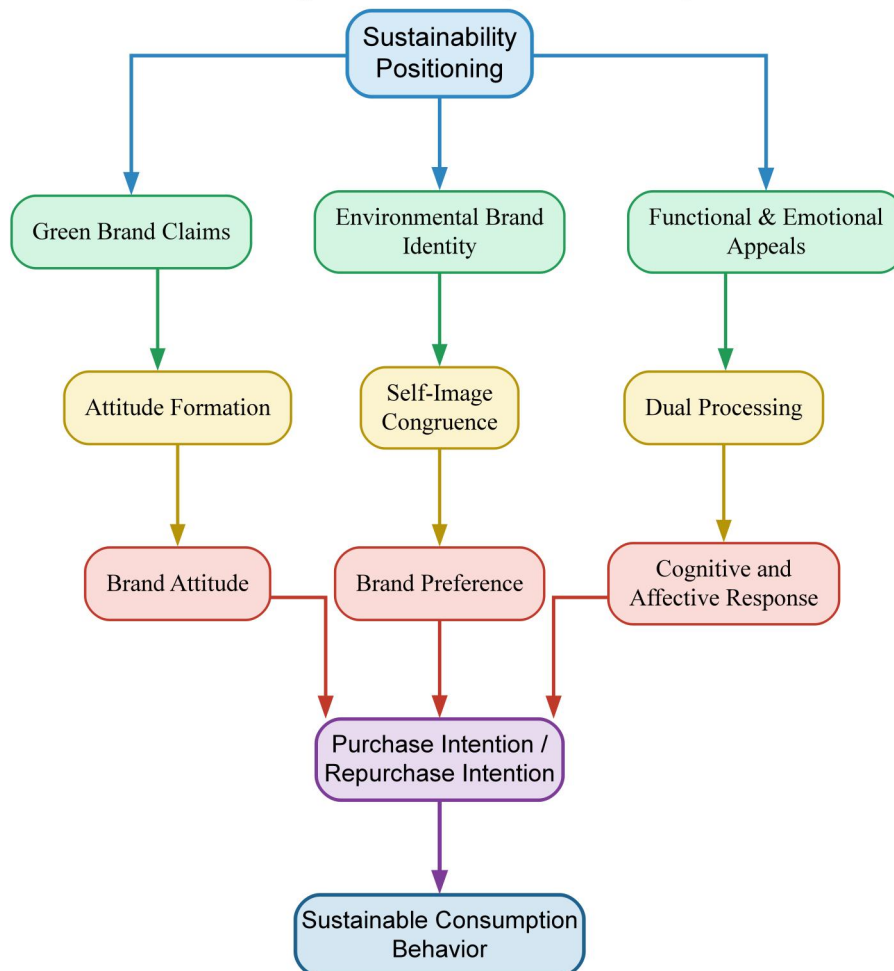
**3.5.4 Brand Trust**

Consumer scepticism that environmental claims are real is at the heart of sustainability positioning through brands. Research shows that trust can enhance consumers' reaction to green positioning, as it diminishes skeptical attitudes and boosts consumers' confidence in the green positioning

claims of the brand (Mehraj & Qureshi, 2022; Setiyarini et al., 2022). Thus, sustainability positioning needs to be backed up by believable communication and clear assertions and brand conduct.

**3.5.5 Dual Processing**

There are two pathways of sustainability positioning: cognitive and affective. The functional green positioning triggers cognitive assessment of the environmental attributes of the product, whereas the emotional green positioning triggers affective responses like warmth, moral satisfaction and nature related emotional benefits (Hartmann et al., 2005; Peverelli et al., 2021). According to Peverelli et al., (2021), emotional green positioning is primarily related to warmth while functional green positioning is primarily related to competence.



**Figure 2: Mechanisms Linking Sustainability Positioning to Consumer Outcomes**

Other recent evidence also shows that the results of diverse green advertising appeals and message types vary significantly in terms of purchase intention, suggesting that the effectiveness of sustainability positioning varies depending on the message type (functional and emotional), which is

also reflected in the findings of this study (Zhang et al., 2024).

**3.6 Contextual and Industry-Specific Findings**

The review demonstrates that sustainability positioning is not homogenous in all situations. Its

effectiveness depends on the type of product, level of consumer involvement, cultural context and the industry context in which it is used. Firstly, product category has an impact on the way that consumers read sustainability claims. In high involvement products, consumers will look at how well the product works, and whether they match up with the brand. Keeping the self-image congruence important when deciding on green technology products reinforces product involvement's influence, as found by Chan (2022) and Chen & Chang (2012). For consumer goods that are bought on a more regular basis, however, brand knowledge, familiarity, and trust might be more important (Setiyarini et al., 2022; Situmorang et al., 2021).

Second, positioning results can be influenced by the industry context. In fashion, eco-positioning is directly related to brand perception, willingness to pay, and sustainable consumption intention, where the process-related eco-positioning has more significant impact than the general sustainability aspects (Gomes et al. 2023; Zhang et al. 2024). In cosmetics, the evidence of green positioning on

repurchasing intention shows that customer attitude toward green positioning is the key factor that influences purchase intention (Situmorang et al., 2021), and in traditional approach, the evidence of repositioning in cosmetics shows that repositioning can help their competitive market share (Song, 2018).

In FMCG, green brand knowledge and attitude are important factors that influence the purchase intention (Setiyarini et al., 2022). Thirdly, cultural context and markets affect the meaning of sustainability positioning. Previous research in Indonesia (Situmorang et al., 2021), India (Mehraj & Qureshi, 2022), China (Wang et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2024) and the United States (Chern & Chang, 2012; Gomes et al., 2023) reveals that the sustainability positioning is influenced by consumer values, environmental awareness, purchasing power, and trust in green claims in local markets. So sustainability positioning ought not to be considered as a general approach, but rather one that is tailored to the market, consumer segment, product category and culture.

**Table 4: Contextual and Industry-Specific Patterns in Positioning Effectiveness**

Context	Relevant Studies	Main Finding
Cosmetics	Song, 2018; Situmorang et al., 2021	Positioning and repositioning influence market share and repurchase intention.
FMCG	Setiyarini et al., 2022	Green positioning, knowledge, and attitude support green purchase intention.
Fashion	Gomes et al. 2023; Zhang et al. 2024	Eco-positioning increases brand evaluation, willingness to pay, and sustainable consumption intention.
Technology products	Wang et al. (2022); Chen & Chang (2012)	Self-image and functional congruence explain green purchase intention.
General green branding	Hartmann et al., 2005; Peverelli et al., 2021	Functional and emotional green positioning influence attitude and consumer response.
Emerging markets	Mehraj & Qureshi, 2022; Situmorang et al., 2021; Setiyarini et al., 2022	Attitude, knowledge, and willingness to pay shape green purchase behavior.

The characteristics of the consumer segment also play a role. For instance, there is a certain level of willingness to pay a higher price for green products that is influenced by environmental concern, perceived value, and green consumption attitudes (Gomes et al., 2023), with younger consumers showing varying degrees of willingness to pay more for green products, depending on their attitudes and concern for the environment. Overall, the results indicate that traditional positioning is mainly based on differentiation, perception, competition and market performance while sustainability positioning

is based on a wider range of mechanisms related to attitude, identity, trust, functionality and emotional responses. This means sustainability positioning needs to be regarded not as a sideline branding exercise but as a positioning framework that is part and parcel of the strategic position.

#### 4. Discussion

The results of this review suggest that sustainability positioning is a modification of the concept of positioning, moving it from product attributes and consumer perceptions to the environmental value,

ethical meaning and identity-based consumer response. Differentiation, perceptual mapping, segmentation and competitive advantage are the main elements of classical positioning research that aim at securing a unique, valuable and meaningful position in the consumers' mind (Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2010; Manhas, 2010). While these foundations are still applicable, sustainability positioning extends the strategic framework by providing a linkage between meaning of brands and ecological responsibility, green value, and consumer self-concept (Lin et al., 2020; Mehraj & Qureshi, 2022). Thus, sustainability should not be seen as an extra selling point of the product. Rather, it serves as a focal positioning element which affects consumer perception of brand authenticity, functional performance, emotional value and social responsibility (Peverelli et al. 2021; Gomes et al. 2023; Zhang et al. 2024). Traditional positioning conceptual frameworks consist of perceived differentiation, product attributes, comparative with competitors and market performance (Gwin & Gwin, 2003; Najafizadeh et al., 2012). Positioning, on the other hand, for sustainability is more complicated in terms of psychological and behavioral.

Based on the previous literature, there are attitudes, congruence of self-image, congruence of functions, brand trust and dual processing routes that can be influenced by green brand positioning (Situmorang et al. 2022; Wang et al. 2022; Chen & Chang 2012). This means that the sustainable brands are not assessed by consumers just on the basis of rational assessment of environmental claims. They also answer inquiries regarding the brand's identity with their environmental identity, the functionality of the product compared to conventional products, and the credibility of the claim (Peverelli et al., 2021; Chen 2010). In this regard, sustainability positioning can be seen as a combination of differentiation-based positioning, perception-based positioning, resource-based positioning, values-based branding and identity-based branding (DeSarbo et al., 2009; Wang et al. 2022; Chen & Chang 2012).

One of the main implications; emotional sustainability positioning can outperform a functional green positioning as it creates a symbolic and affective value along with a cognitive evaluation. Emotional positioning is related to the feelings of responsibility, moral satisfaction, attachment to nature and self-expression due to the environmental benefits communicated by the brand, while functional positioning refers to the real benefits that the environment provides, such as recyclability, lower emissions, or less ecological damage (Hartmann et al., 2005).

The findings of the green branding studies indicated that emotional appeals can trigger warm perceptions, while functional appeals can trigger competence perceptions (Peverelli et al., 2021).

Likewise, eco-positioning in fashion suggests that the effectiveness of fashion communication is increased if the consumers perceive the meaning of the environment and themselves (Gomes et al. 2023; Zhang et al. 2024). But it is not enough if the consumers feel the company's product is not performing well in terms of functionality or feel that the product is greenwashing. Therefore, there is a need to strike a balance between emotional appeal and functional positioning of sustainability.

Authenticity, trust and credibility are also emphasized in the review. Unlike positioning claims, sustainability claims are likely to be more scrutinised by consumers, who may suspect environmental communication is a form of promotional opportunism and not a sign of a company's commitment to sustainability (Mehraj & Qureshi, 2022; Wang et al. 2022). Consumers' purchase intention is, therefore, strongly dependent on brand trust as a mediator between green positioning and purchase intention. All these aspects need to be supported by the firm with a transparent communication, credible evidence, third-party certifications, consistent product performances, and congruence between brand identity and operations (Lin et al., 2020; Setiyarini et al., 2022; Goestiawan et al., 2024).

Managerially, it's the firms' responsibility to ensure that sustainability is not simply a marketing ploy. Rather, sustainability needs to be part of the brand's value proposition, product design, communication and competitive positioning in the long term (Cristea, 2014; Iyer et al., 2019). Although these contributions have been made, there are still some missing bits. First, a lot of the evidence for sustainability positioning is cross-sectional, which does not allow for understanding of sustainability positioning effects over time (Anwar et al., 2024).

Secondly, although the studies conducted in India, Indonesia, China, Pakistan and other countries have indicated that attitudes toward the environment and green purchasing behavior are different in markets (Setiyarini et al., 2022; Mehraj & Qureshi, 2022), the cross-cultural validation has been limited.

Third, there is limited research on the link between sustainability positioning and financial performance. The studies in traditional positioning research have traditionally more directly examined the performance of the market, brand performance, and outcomes of repositioning (Iyer et al., 2019; Perez et al., 2020), and the research on green positioning remains largely focused on attitude, intention, and willingness to pay (Gomes et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2024).

Fourth, there is limited research on the competitive aspects; in fact, strategies taken by more firms will cause a decrease in differentiation and a standardization of sustainability claims (Hou & Mieghem, 2021; Peverelli et al., 2021). Fifth, there is

an increasing need for additional data from emerging markets and from industries outside the fashion, cosmetics, FMCG, hospitality, airlines and real estate sectors (Mayer, 2013; Gomes et al., 2023). This review should also be considered as having a few drawbacks. The review is partial because of the choice of databases, the language (English) of publications and the availability of free full-text studies. It also uses published academic literature (may result in publication bias). Furthermore, the reviewed studies were varied as to their methodology, sample, region or country and method of measurement, which makes direct comparisons difficult. No metaanalysis of effect sizes was completed, thus the results must be considered as a qualitative synthesis of the results, not as a statistical estimation of positioning effectiveness.

Further studies are needed to create integrated frameworks that integrate traditional positioning theory with sustainability marketing, to run longitudinal studies, to compare cultural contexts, to investigate the relationship between sustainability positioning and sales, profitability, market share and brand equity, and to analyze consumer skepticism, authenticity, greenwashing and consumer trust. Additionally, comparisons of emotional and functional sustainability positioning between different industries and research on the effectiveness of positioning and the influence of digital platforms and social media on positioning are recommended for future research.

## 5. Conclusion

This systematic literature review is based on examining the product positioning strategy and sustainability-based positioning and aimed to synthesize the selected studies from the traditional literature on positioning and green marketing. The purpose of this review was to clarify the development of positioning theory, the integration of sustainability as a positioning element in brand and product positioning and the theoretical, empirical and managerial implications of this integration. The results indicate that the four classic frameworks of product positioning research are based on differentiation, perception, competitive positioning, and resource positioning. These frameworks provide understanding with respect to how firms develop unique meanings for their brands, how consumers interpret brands, how they react to their competitors, and how positioning decisions are aligned with internal capabilities. But sustainability-based positioning is also identified as an emerging fifth positioning framework during the review. This framework is built on the traditional positioning, adding the dimension of sustainability, green value, ethical identity and sustainable consumption to the positioning strategy. The review also shows that positioning for sustainability works in several ways

through the consumers' response. Green positioning affects the attitude of consumers towards the brands, enhances their congruence of self-image with the brand, if it is consistent with the environmental identity, and boosts functional congruence if a sustainable product can function well. Additionally, brand trust is central because consumers' purchase intentions are influenced prior to the assessment of the credibility of environmental claims. Another aspect of sustainability positioning is dual processing: a functional evaluation, along with a cognitive evaluation, is paired with emotional and affective. One of the findings of this review is that sustainability is no longer a side feature or a 'marketing pitch'. It has been identified as a key dimension of strategic positioning which can impact brand differentiation, consumer trust, purchase intent, and sustainable consumer behavior. Managers should be mindful that sustainability positioning should be genuine, substantiated, emotionally resonant and, importantly, sustainable in terms of product function. There is a need to carry on with future studies to explore the development of integrated positioning frameworks, longitudinal studies, cross-cultural studies, and financial performance effects, brand equity, and competitive advantage of sustainability positioning. In general, this review adds to the body of theory by demonstrating that sustainability has become a strategic basis on which to position a brand in today's context and a key avenue for future marketing practice.

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