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Activating Corporate Environmental Ethics on the Frontline: A Natural Resource-Based View

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Abstract

Corporate environmental ethics has moved from a niche issue within business strategy to a potential source of competitive advantage. Firms, however, are comprised of individuals who vary in their personal beliefs regarding environmental responsibility. Environmental stewards are those employees whose attitudes and actions reflect environmental concern. Top management can convey similar environmental values through the creation of eco-capabilities. Applying logic from the natural resource-based view of the firm, we build a model to test how the alignment of environmental values impacts multiple outcomes. We conduct a time-lagged examination using multi-level data from frontline employees, their managers, and their customers. We find that firms can 'activate' their corporate environmental ethics through eco-capabilities. Specifically, environmental stewards find more meaning in their work when managers perceive high levels of eco-capabilities within the firm. This meaningful work increases employee brand advocacy and customer satisfaction. Together, we demonstrate how corporate environmental ethics translates to the frontline and the customers they serve.

Keywords Environmental stewardship · Work meaningfulness · Eco-capabilities · Employee brand advocacy · Customer satisfaction

Introduction

Environmental responsibility has long been an important consideration in business ethics (e.g., DesJardins, 1998). In 2013, a global survey of over two hundred business ethics scholars predicted that "environmental issues" would be one of the most common issue faced by firms (Holland & Albrecht, 2013), and contemporary business ethics literature confirms that prediction (e.g., Albertini, 2019). Following this trend, corporate environmental ethics,[1] defined as "the

total ethical belief, value, and norm of environmental concerns within a company" (Chang, 2011, p. 364), has received attention in the literature (Han et al., 2019; Jahanshahi & Brem, 2018; Phillips, 2019; Rui & Lu, 2021; Singh et al., 2019).

Conservation of the natural environment is, then, a collective endeavor, requiring participation from the international community of businesses. However, environmental responsibility is also individual, consisting of personal attitudes and actions with each person playing a unique ecological role (Svendsen & Campbell, 2008). We call this environmental stewardship, defined as "various motivations and levels of capacity to protect, care for, or responsibly use the environment in pursuit of environmental and/or social outcomes in diverse social–ecological contexts" (Bennett et al., 2018, p. 597). In the workplace, environmental stewardship involves

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[1] We adhere to the literature that differentiates corporate environmental ethics from corporate environmentalism- i.e., "the organization-wide recognition of the legitimacy and importance of the biophysical environment in the formulation of organization strategy, and the integration of environmental issues into the strategic planning process" (Banerjee, 2002, p. 181). Both concepts are value-based, but the key difference is the normative component of corporate environmental ethics.

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decisions to preserve natural and business resources, coming up with solutions for customer problems that are best for the environment, and supporting the sustainability strategy of the organization.

At the same time, individuals now seek more meaning from their workplace (Aguinis & Glavas, 2019). Employees want more than a paycheck; they are driven by "purpose maximizing" instead of "profit maximizing" (Pink, 2011, p. 31). Firms that create this type of workplace simultaneously develop a more productive workforce and a more fulfilling life for employees. As such, meaningful work has emerged as a key objective of an ethical firm (Frieder et al., 2018; Mulki & Lassk, 2019), and we position the construct as the lynchpin in our model.

Environmental responsibility is another objective of ethical firms (e.g., DesJardins, 1998). More recently, corporate environmental ethics has moved from a moral imperative to a source of differentiation in the market (e.g., Chang, 2011; York, 2009). Accordingly, businesses have begun to integrate corporate environmental ethics into their strategic planning and corporate messaging to both internal and external stakeholders.

The Natural Resource-Based View (NRBV) could provide guidance on how to achieve both objectives. According to the NRBV (Hart, 1995), environmental resources can be leveraged to gain a competitive advantage (Hart, 1995). Hart and Dowell (2011) define a resource as "something that a firm possesses, which can include physical and financial assets as well as employees' skills and organizational (social) processes" (p. 1465). We extend employee skills to include employee behaviors, advancing environmental stewardship as an environmental resource that, if leveraged correctly, could create work meaning. Next, we suggest firms may produce this leverage through the adoption of eco-capabilities.

Eco-capabilities are well aligned within the NRBV framework. Gabler et al. (2015) define eco-capabilities as "a firm's capacity to deploy environmental human, business, and technology resources to enhance firm performance and conserve the natural environment" (p. 152). They represent a proactive ecological strategy that translates to a sustainable competitive advantage (Alt et al., 2015; Delgado-Ceballos et al., 2012; López-Gamero et al., 2008; Menguc et al., 2010). Firms, though, do not create strategies; individuals do. Thus, a firm-level strategy is the aggregate of attitudes and values of executives and management. For this reason, in our study, we utilize *managerial perceptions of eco-capabilities* (hereafter, eco-capabilities). There is evidence that employees find meaning in their work when working for environmentally-conscious managers (Aguinis & Glavas, 2019; Bansal, 2003), and thus, it is logical to examine the role of eco-capabilities as perceived by managers within an organization. In essence, eco-capabilities may nurture a conducive environment for corporate ethics by aligning stakeholder values to create meaningful work.

From the manager's perspective, the best employee serves as an advocate for the firm. Brand advocacy occurs when individuals are committed to or passionate about a brand (Keller, 2007). We apply this concept to employees who similarly endorse, support, or recommend their firm to others (Ind, 2007). As noted, organizational processes can be strategic resources under the NRBV (Hart & Dowell, 2011). We suggest that the development of employees into brand advocates may be one such process achieved by providing a meaningful work environment. We position brand advocacy as our first outcome, using the logic that by matching environmental values among managers and employees, firms may reap additional rewards to the creation of meaningful work.

Finally, as political and social pressure to embrace pro-environmental business grows, managers must consider how ecological attitudes influence not just internal stakeholders but external stakeholders as well (Gabler et al., 2015; Souza et al., 2017). Given the relevance of customer acquisition in the NRBV framework, we position customer satisfaction as the final outcome in our model. According to the NRBV, customer acquisition represents a means to competitive advantage, and firms can preempt the competition by showing commitment to their environmental cause (Hart, 1995). Keeping in mind that firms vigorously respond to external stakeholder pressure (Rui & Lu, 2021), effective customer relationships can actually enhance a firm's environmental responsibility (Jahanshahi & Brem, 2018). Because customer satisfaction leads to loyalty and, ultimately, financial performance (e.g., Schneider et al., 1992), we position it as an important outcome in our model. See Fig. 1 for our conceptual model.

Accordingly, this study has two related goals. First, we know that employee involvement in environmental strategy is beneficial to the firm, but we do not know how environmental stewards are influenced by eco-capabilities. We advance that environmental stewards will derive more meaning from their work when they perceive their values are being matched by their managers. This leads directly to our second goal, namely, how does more meaningful work—achieved through environmental value alignment—impact employee and customer-related outcomes? To date, most research has examined firm-level variables based on perceptions of managers and executives (Table 1). We tackle this gap in the literature by investigating employee brand advocacy and customer satisfaction. Brand advocacy determines if value alignment impacts a return on the internal stakeholder investment of creating a meaningful work environment. Customer satisfaction is an outward-facing outcome, which would highlight how external stakeholder interpret and respond to a visible alignment between manager and
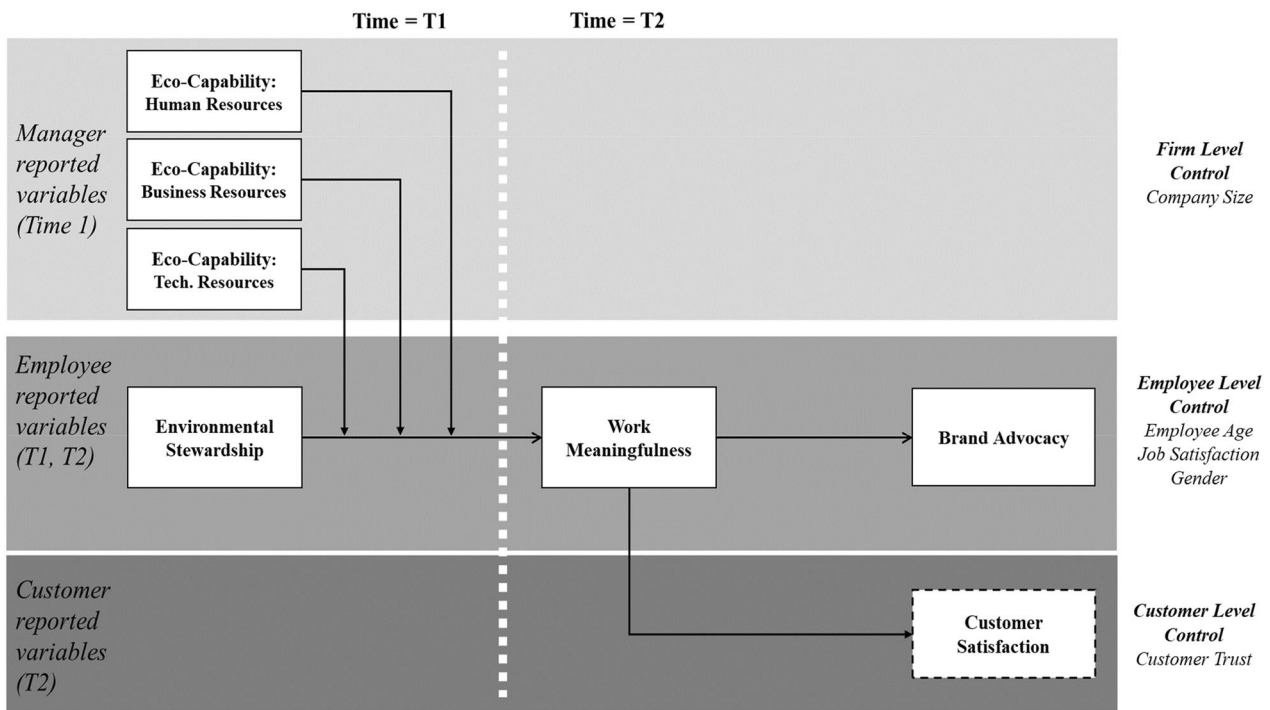
Fig. 1 Conceptual framework

employee environmental values. These goals lie at the intersection of three research domains, as seen in Fig. 2. Indeed, scholars have addressed corporate environmental ethics, NRBV, and customer/employee perspectives, but few studies have bridged these domains, as highlighted in the overlapping areas. The gap we intend to fill lies at the junction of all three. In addressing this gap and widening the stakeholder lens, we hope to reveal the true benefit of corporate environmental ethics on the frontline.

Conceptual Background

Environmental Stewardship

According to the Resource-Based View of the firm, the ability to bundle and leverage rare and valuable resources can provide a competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Werner-felt, 1984). The Natural Resource-Based View (NRBV) of the firm (Hart, 1995; Hart & Dowell, 2011) extends these resources to include those which relate to the natural environment. As firms embrace the environment as a key stakeholder, the NRBV has more meaning now than ever before (Gabler et al., 2020). As noted, employee skills and organizational processes are considered environmental resources (Hart & Dowell, 2011), and each has received some attention within the NRBV literature (Ab Wahab, 2021; Adomako et al., 2021; Albertini, 2019; Gabler et al., 2020). We expand

on 'skills' to include traits and behaviors, suggesting that environmental stewardship could be a resource under this framework.

Research shows that individuals gain satisfaction when they take actions to protect the environment (e.g., Bennett et al., 2018). Environmental stewardship stimulates this intrinsic motivation through three pillars: responsibility, alignment, and accountability (de Ruyter et al., 2009; Francoeur et al., 2017). An environmental steward takes responsibility for how her actions impact the planet, aligns those actions with environmental goals, and holds herself accountable by regularly assessing those goals and actions. Work for environmental stewards is therefore connected to the environment, but it is also connected to the community, emphasizing both social and environmental responsibilities over personal interests (de Ruyter et al., 2009; Hernandez, 2008). The goal is to strengthen the relationship between the planet and the people living on it (Bauman & Skitka, 2012; Grant, 2007; Rosso et al., 2010)—even as a part of their job function (Bennett et al., 2018; Enderle, 1997).

Environmental stewardship places equal importance on environmental responsibility and organizational profitability, meaning these goals are not opposed. For instance, an environmental steward would seek to find a customer solution that is simultaneously best for the individual and the environment. For this reason, there is a focus on long-term ecological goals, and employees are encouraged to be creative to satisfy multiple stakeholders (Chawla & Guda,

Table 1 Literature review and gap

Article	Study type	Main theory	Constructs explored	Sample	Main finding
Guo et al. (2020)	Empirical—quantitative	Resource-based view; Social Network theory	Corporate environmental ethics, green innovation; Firm economic performance; Business ties; Political ties	Managers	Business and political ties moderate the relationship between corporate environmental ethics and firm performance
Rui and Lu (2021)	Empirical—quantitative	Institutional theory and Leadership theory	Stakeholder regulatory pressure, normative pressure, imitative pressures; Responsible leadership; Corporate environmental ethics; Green innovation; Environmental awareness	Entrepreneurs and executives	Stakeholder pressure leads to green innovation, mediated by corporate environmental ethics. Entrepreneur leadership moderates te relationship between stakeholder pressure and corporate environmental ethics while entrepreneur environmental awareness moderates the influence of steakholder pressure on green innovation
Han et al. (2019)	Empirical—quantitative	N/A	Corporate environmental ethics; Green marketing programs; Closure mechanism	Managers and employees	Firms with high levels of environment ethics are more likely to implement green marketing programs, which improve performance. Closure mechanisms negatively moderate this relationship because they create a laack of trust and unwillingness to cooperate
Phillips (2019)	Conceptual	N/A	Corporate environmentalism; Ecofeminist Care-sensitive ethics; Crisis of capital, Rationality, and Instrumentality	N/A	"…a lack of meaningful response to ecological degradation and climate change is inevitable within a capitalist system underpinned by a logics of appropriation and an instrumental rationality that views the planet as a means to achieve economic ends." (p. 1151)
Singh et al. (2019)	Empirical—quantitative	Resource-based view; Dynamic Capabilities	Environmental ethics; Environmental performance, Competitive advantage; Environmental training	Middle managers	Firms with high levels of environmental ethics had higher levels of environmental training, environmental performance, and competitive advantage. Environmental training mediates the effects of environmental ethics on environmental performance and competitive advantage

Table 1 (continued)

Article	Study type	Main theory	Constructs explored	Sample	Main finding
Jahanshahi and Brem (2018)	Empirical—quantitative	N/A	Environmental collaboration; Environmental commitment; Customer capital	Managers	Firms committed to the environment achieve higher levels of customer capital than firms not committed to the environment. This capital enchances firm-customer environmental collaboration, which then increases the firm's environmental commitment
Abdelzaher and Abdelzaher (2017)	Qualitative	N/A	Pro-green organizational culture; Environmental ethics; Islam	N/A	The authors explain how eco-Islam phenomenon can be used as an effective and influential foundation for building organizational cultures with strong environmental ethics among small and medium enterprises
Wang and Young (2014)	Empirical—quantitative	N/A	Financial dissatisfaction; Environmental ethics; Collectivism	Top managers at the team and individual levels	Financial dissatisfaction of top management negatively affects their environmental ethics. High levels of collectivism among top management increases their environmental ethics and moderates the relationship between dissatisfaction and environmental ethics
Chen and Chang (2013)	Empirical—quantitative	N/A	Corporate environmental ethics; Green relationship learning; Green human capital; Green innovation performance	Chief executive officers and managers	Corporate environmental ethics positively affects green relationship learning and green innovation performance. Green human capital mediates the positive relationships between corporate environmental ethics and green relationship learning and innovation performance
Chang (2011)	Empirical—quantitative	N/A	Corporate environmental ethics; Green product innovation; Green process innovation; Competitive advantage	Chief executive officers and managers	Green Innovation mediates the relationship between corporate environmental ethics and competitive advantage

Table 1 (continued)

Article	Study type	Main theory	Constructs explored	Sample	Main finding
Chun (2009)	Empirical—quantitative	N/A	Economic citizenship; Legal citizenship; Ethical citizenship; Discretionary citizenship; Employee commitment; Conservatism; Self-enhancement; Self-transcendence; Openness to change; Environmental awareness; Environmental commitment	Employees	Employee values are positively correlated with attitudes toward the environment, which correlates with perceived corporate citizenship. Ownership type of firm significant influences corporate citizenship, employee values, and their attitudes toward environment
Guiltinan (2009)	Conceptual	N/A	Planned obsolescence; Environmental ethics; Corporate responsibility; Product innovation; Public policy	N/A	Planned obsolescence creates negative environmental consequences and raises ethical issues in marketing. Pro-environmental marketing practices and product design and government innovation policies may help alleviate the negative consequences of planned obsolescence
York (2009)	Conceptual	N/A	Pragmatic sustainability; Environmental ethics; Competitive advantage	N/A	The author proposes a business paradigm based on an ethical framework of classical American pragmatism that allows and enables the integration of environmental ethics into business decisions to create competitive advantage
Tilley (2000)	Conceptual	N/A	Environmental Ethics; Self-regulation; State-regulation	N/A	Institutional reform and restructuring of the economic system in the public domain are needed to build strong environmental cultures among small firms
Banerjee (2002)	Empirical—quantitative	Stakeholder theory	Environmental Orientation; Environmental Strategy Focus; Corporate Strategy Focus; Business/Functional Strategy Focus	Managers	Corporate Environmentalism is composed of two key antecedents: corporate environmental orientation and environmental strategy focus
Banerjee (2001)	Qualitative	N/A	Corporate environmental orientation; Environmental strategy focus; Internal and external environmental constituencies	Managers	The authors discuss managerial perceptions of corporate environmentalism and factors which may help translate into environmental strategy

Table 1 (continued)

| Article	Study type	Main theory	Constructs explored	Sample	Main finding
DesJardins (1998)	Conceptual	N/A	Corporate environmental responsibility; Sustainable development	N/A	The author argues that corporate social responsibility should be derived from sustainable economics rather than the typical neo-classical model of market economics
Menon and Menon (1997)	Conceptual	N/A	Enviropreneurial marketing strategy; Corporate regulation; Business performance; Polity; Economy; Corporate reputation; Industry reputation	Managers	The authors propose a testable model of entrepreneurial marketing which provides direction to future scholars
Current Study	Empirical—quantitative	Natural based resource view of the firm	Environmental stewardship; Hyman, Business, and Technology Eco-capabilies; Work meaningfulness; Brand advocacy; Customer satisfaction	Managers, Frontline employees, and customers	Frontline employees who are environmental stewards find more meaning in their work when their firm demonstrates corporate environmental ethics through eco-capabilities. Higher work meaningfulness translates to employee brand advocacy and customer satisfaction. This is the first study to simultaneously study how managers, employees, and customers interact with corporate environmental ethics
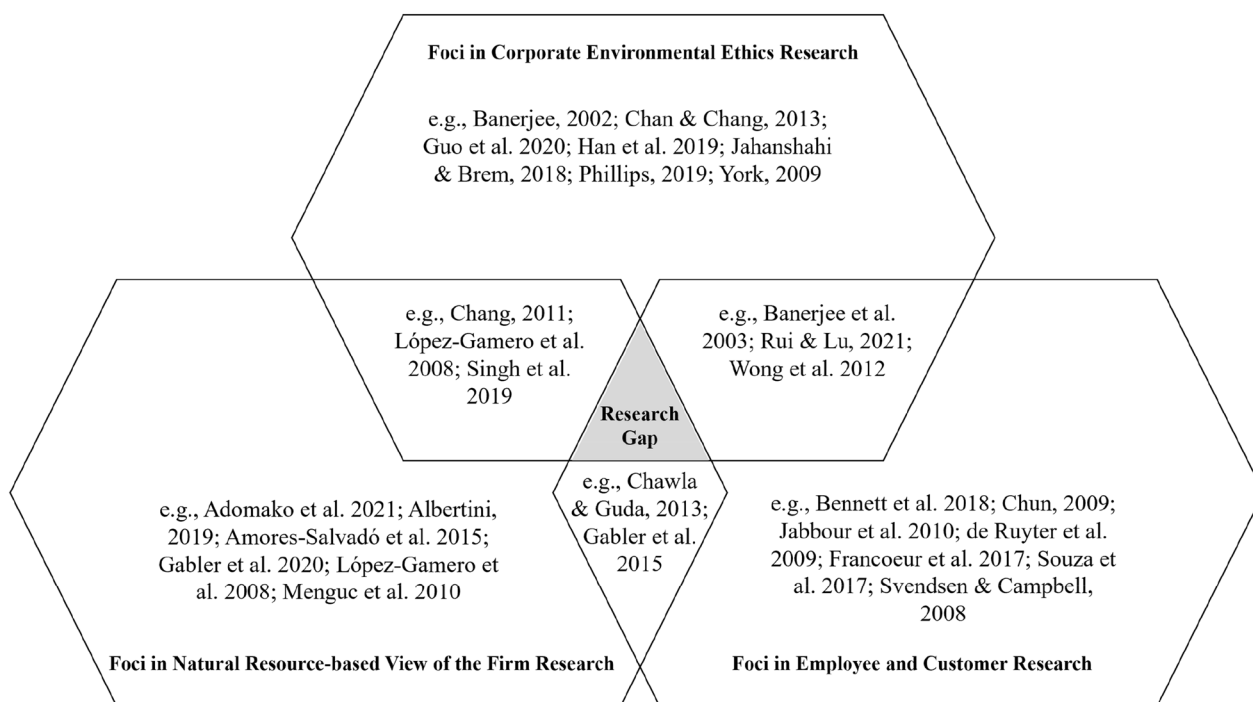
Fig. 2 Overview of existing research and research gap

2013). For frontline employees, stewardship is reflected in the strategies, procedures, and behaviors they utilize during customer interactions (de Ruyter et al., 2009). They not only take actions themselves to align with the environment, they encourage their customers to share their ecological beliefs and provide solutions shaped by that alignment. These employees believe that protecting the environment is a personal responsibility, but we advance that they would harvest more meaning from a workplace with eco-capabilities.

Managerial Perceptions of Eco-Capabilities

As per the NRBV, "the development and maintenance of unique and valuable environmental capabilities are the central elements allowing companies to gain financial benefit from their proactive environmental strategy" (Albertini, 2019, p. 1163). As more firms seek to gain a competitive advantage from environmental resources, perceptions of how these resources are acquired and applied to existing resources becomes critical (Chang, 2011; López-Gamero et al., 2008). To harvest benefits from its environmental programs and policies, research suggests that firms should not silo these resources, rather, combine them into eco-capabilities (Amores-Salvadó et al., 2015; Banerjee et al., 2003; Gabler et al., 2015).

In general, capabilities require more than the mere ownership of resources (Ngo & O'Cass, 2009), they represent the ability to apply and utilize a stock of resources for desired goals (Teece et al., 1997). Eco-capabilities create an advantage through the integration of business, human, and technology resources to overcome environmental challenges (Amui et al., 2017). Firms must possess and apply these resources to reduce the negative ecological impacts of their organizational operations (Banerjee et al., 2003), which improves the firm's performance metrics while reducing its negative impact on the environment (de Burgos Jiménez & Céspedes Lorente, 2001). In our study, we develop eco-capabilities as perceived by managers, positioning them in our model as a proxy for corporate environmental ethics. Keeping in mind the static nature of the construct (Banerjee, 2002), in a sense, our approach activates it, making the construct dynamic.

Deploying Business Resources

Business resources include a proactive environmental strategy, environmentally-friendly product offerings, and continuous benchmarking against competition. Managers must be willing to design—and redesign—based on participation from internal and external stakeholders, their business plans and operations, and conduct active research of environmental practices they could adopt (Gabler et al., 2015). These managers should be open to critical feedback about their eco-capabilities as well as suggestions to improve their firms' eco-friendly operations (Souza et al., 2017). Beyond feedback, these managers should actively seek out what

other firms are doing to learn from the successes and failures of their competitors. Indeed, managers should utilize best practices within their industry to build and refine their own environmental business resources. Further, these policies and plans should be integrated within each firm process along the value chain—not relegated to a single green silo (Cordano et al., 2010; Leonidou et al., 2017). Perhaps most importantly, these resources must be long-term focused. Well-executed environmental policies should be neither flash-in-the-pan nor 'knee-jerk' reactions, but rather a carefully calculated strategy implemented with future goals in mind. Together, business resources underscore how managers perceive the environmental planning that continually seeks to improve, responds to feedback, and conveys the importance to internal and external stakeholders.

Deploying Human Resources

The human resource dimension includes those stakeholders, or more specifically, supportive and committed top management, who share the organization's environmental initiatives and find a consensus on green initiatives across the organization (Gabler et al., 2015). There is also the need to align traditional human resource management practices, such as selection, training, evaluation, and bonuses, with environmental objectives (Jabbour et al., 2010). This perceived alignment creates an organizational culture that embraces environmental programs (e.g., Gupta & Kumar, 2013; Longoni et al., 2014). Human resource management allows organizations to implement their environmental initiatives (Renwick et al., 2013). Sharma et al. (2004) suggest that for organizations to better collect, manage, and use their resources to develop sustainable practices, they should nurture environmental values among employees. Top management commitment to environmental problems is required to develop an eco-capability (Banerjee et al., 2003; Pujari et al., 2004). Upper level management is responsible for creating the organizational culture, and for employees to witness and embrace it, the more committed management is to the environment, the more it should trickle down to employees (Souza et al., 2017).

In short, the human component of an eco-capability involves how managers perceive the exchange of internal and external information among stakeholders (Souza et al., 2017). Environmental initiatives must be coordinated inside the organization so that all employees understand and embrace its environmental initiatives (Banerjee et al., 2003). Interpersonal interactions enable real-time information sharing, consistent idea exchanges, as well as fostering a cooperative mentality which helps the organization discover opportunities and avoid threats associated with ecological problems (Stone & Wakefield, 2000).

Deploying Technology Resources

The same way business resources are rendered ineffective without support from human stakeholders, neither the human nor business aspects of eco-capabilities are truly effective if the focal firm doesn't adopt technology to support its initiatives. This final dimension assesses how well managers perceive their firm has implemented technology to track the performance of environmental initiatives, aid in communication efforts, and manage energy and inventory in an eco-friendly manner (Gabler et al., 2015). It is associated with the need to use clean technology resources advanced by NRBV to reach a proactive environmental strategy (Mishra & Yadav, 2021). Ecological processes for monitoring, minimizing, assessing environmental strategy and performances are also technological components (Souza et al., 2017). Because environmental initiatives require radical changes in tools and technologies, they are destined to fail if there is no support across the entire organization (Russo & Fouts, 1997). However, managers with the ability to rapidly adapt new eco-friendly technologies have less uncertainty around their environmentally-related investments. This translates to cost savings that cannot be achieved by rivals, eventually resulting in a competitive advantage (Sharma et al., 2007).

Like human resources, managers make assessments about both internal and external components of technology resources. Internally, firms can harvest savings through things like smart energy consumption, lighting systems designed to utilize off-peak electricity, and heating/cooling systems that optimize or even recycle power within the organization's physical location. Further, perceptions of inventory management (be it a separate warehouse or the main location) varies greatly, and to show internal stakeholders its commitment to the environment, strategies should be in place to minimize negative effects. These technology resources must also satisfy external stakeholders. For instance, if the business and human resources require long-term planning and consistent messaging, technology must be in place to accurately collect and assess the data and then provide performance feedback and recommendations.

Consistency across all three dimensions is required to fully leverage an eco-capability. Business resources are the static components, the tangible representations of a firm's eco-priorities. Human resources energize business resources through communication. Proper technology is what allows optimization of strategies and policies. An agile environmental strategy has been shown to lead to a competitive advantage and richer performance (Aragón-Correa & Sharma, 2003). We advance that eco-capabilities could also enrich the workplace for environmental stewards. In the next sections, we describe how employee-manager perceptual alignment fosters work meaningfulness, and how this meaning leads to both employee and customer outcomes.

Hypothesis Development

Environmental Stewardship Leads to Meaningful Work

In 2022 and beyond, firms must do more than pay competitive salaries. Employees expect a workplace that provides meaning (Jaramillo et al., 2013; Mulki & Lassk, 2019). In fact, according to Schawbel (2009), the current generation of employees would prefer meaning over salary, given the choice, a sentiment echoed by Aguinis and Glavas (2019). Achor et al. (2018) report a survey conducted by BetterUp showing 90% of employees were willing to forego 23% of their future earnings to have meaningful jobs. Our first hypothesis predicts a positive relationship between environmental stewardship and this meaningful work. We use the simple premise that individuals who are concerned with the environment gain more energy from work and feel more responsibility toward those external stakeholders impacted by firms (e.g., local communities, eco-systems) than those who do not. The defining characteristics of environmental stewardship are accountability, alignment, and responsibility (de Ruyter et al., 2009). Stewardship is reflected in the strategies, procedures, and behaviors utilized by frontline employees during their interaction with customers (de Ruyter et al., 2009). Environment stewards take actions to encourage sustainability and solve ecological issues based on set of values that puts the environment first. Environmental stewards believe that firms and customers are responsible for environmental degradation and should work to minimize that impact.

Work becomes meaningful when it allows employees to direct work-related activities to benefit others (Rosso et al., 2010). Work for environmental stewards is connected to life and community, specifically the environment. They consider their work to be a contribution to both society and the planet (Bauman & Skitka, 2012; Grant, 2007; Rosso et al., 2010). In a sense, work for environmental stewards energizes their desire to serve the public good, producing a sense of community with people and the environment (e.g., Neal, 2000). Environmental stewardship should increase the intrinsic motivation associated with green activities that bring personal satisfaction through the psychological need to protect the environment (e.g., Bennett et al., 2018). In sum, stewardship emphasizes social and environmental responsibility (de Ruyter et al., 2009; Hernandez, 2008), which should manifest in the workplace. Formally:

H1 Environmental stewardship is positively related to work meaningfulness.

Finding Meaningful Work Through Shared Environmental Ethical Values

The question of how and when employees find meaning in their work has been asked before (e.g., Rosso et al., 2010), and there is evidence that meaning is found when working for managers with environmental values (Aguinis & Glavas, 2019; Bansal, 2003). As noted, corporate environmental ethics is usually studied at the managerial level (see Table 1), but policies are often executed at the employee-level, especially on the frontline. We suggest that employees may have strong feelings about the environment, but this does little if they lack the support needed to convert that concern into meaningful actions.

Leveraging research within the NRBV domain (Rousseau, 2017), we offer that management needs to engage in environmental ethics to harvest the benefits of employee environmental stewardship. This involves 'buy-in' from the individuals within the organization who develop and drive these initiatives (e.g., Sayles & Baggio, 2017). We suggest that eco-capabilities are a tangible way for management to convey that environmental ethics is a top priority. In fact, perceptions of these capabilities could answer the call from Bennett et al. (2018) for the "need to better understand what factors or combinations of factors are enabling or inhibiting the success of environmental stewardship" (p. 608). Therefore, we predict eco-capabilities will also influence the meaning that employees garner from their work.

Eco-capabilities allow managers to use resources to reduce their environmental impact while increasing firm outcomes (Banerjee et al., 2003). Darnall et al. (2008) highlighted the importance of integrating eco-capabilities into an organization, and employee dispositions toward work are affected by organizational conditions (Frieder et al., 2018; Mulki & Lassk, 2019). Environmental stewards will consider their managers' eco-capabilities as direct support of their personal desire to help the environment, thus producing more meaningful employment. Essentially, the eco-capabilities act as a managerial complement to the employee attitude.

The logic that manager perceptions influence employee variables is not novel; the general idea has been utilized across the management domain. For example, Barrick et al. (2013) posited that work meaningfulness is affected by the interaction between personal employee factors and work conditions. Using the NRBV, we extend this logic to the environmental context, a relationship which several studies have hinted at but not directly tested. For example, Kim et al. (2017) found that employees are more likely to engage in green behavior at work when supported by leadership. In another study, manufacturers were more likely to reduce pollution when their suppliers employed eco-capabilities (Wong et al., 2012). This resulted in both process improvements

and financial gains. NRBV says that product stewardship lessens the firm's impact on the environment, resulting in a competitive advantage. We argue that this can be extended to employee stewardship, namely that eco-capabilities have a similar positive influence which could results in a competitive advantage via work meaningfulness.

Further, work meaningfulness is nurtured by managerial strategies that highlight the importance of their employees (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Managers that are vague or unclear in their environmental priorities may not be able to motivate employees in the same way (Gabler et al., 2015). With no clear direction, employees will lack tangible goals and specific direction required to underscore their importance to the firm. Alternatively, managers that integrate environmental values into their culture with a matching firm strategy provide clear direction and motivation (Fraj et al., 2013).

Finally, employees require feedback about their performance. Because they are perceived by top management, eco-capabilities hold every member of the firm accountable—which is important for conscientious employees (Frink & Ferris, 1999). If everyone embraces the eco-capability (i.e., human resources), there should be internal and external communication conveying this priority (i.e., business resources) with consistent assessments (i.e., technology resource). This three-pronged eco-capability, then, provides employees with feedback to improve their performance. Specifically, managers deploy resources which evaluate performance and communicate those evaluations to all levels of employees. This feedback not only ensures that environmental priorities are met, but for environmental stewards, we argue that eco-capabilities will motivate those environmental behaviors (Williamson et al., 2006), and in doing so, will provide meaningful work. Formally:

H2 Eco-capabilities including (a) business, (b) human, and (c) technology resources will interact with environmental stewardship to positively influence work meaningfulness.

Work Meaningfulness and Employee Brand Advocacy

Employee dignity is as much a moral obligation as environmentalism. Individuals seek employment that aligns with their values and beliefs while providing the means and opportunity to act on them. In short, they desire work meaningfulness (Renn & Vandenberg, 1995), or wanting to do "something that counts…in one's own system of values" (Hackman & Oldham, 1980, p. 73). Therefore, meaningfulness at work is a rallying force within a firm. It puts employees on the same page and guides them to accomplish a common objective (Jelinek & Ahearne, 2010). When employees believe their work serves a greater communal good, they are motivated to perform tasks that benefit the firm (e.g.,

Steger et al., 2012). As such, firms should consider employee behaviors as strategic resources to cultivate (Hart & Dowell, 2011). Barrick et al. (2013) says that "experienced meaningfulness triggers task-specific motivation processes that influence the attainment of work outcomes" (p. 132). Wang and Xu (2019) found work meaningfulness—driven by ethical leadership—increases job satisfaction and organizational commitment while reducing turnover intention.

This is particularly important among frontline employees. The boundary-spanning nature of the profession creates high levels of stress relative to other occupations (Lapidus et al., 1997; Mulki et al., 2012), and leads to high turnover levels (Jaramillo et al., 2013; Mulki & Lassk, 2019). Work meaningfulness helps on both fronts. As noted, it lessens turnover intention, but it also eases the job stress that leads to turnover intention while positively influencing performance (Jaramillo et al., 2013). Moreover, it is a strong predictor of work engagement (Kahn, 1990; May et al., 2004), which can lead to job satisfaction, commitment to the firm, and general well-being (Steger et al., 2012).

Work meaning has value for the firm's bottom line and the employee sense of self-worth, but we want to know if there are other, less obvious positive outcomes. We suggest that employees who discover meaning in their work may act as advocates for their brand, thus completing an 'organizational process' described by Hart and Dowell (2011) under the NRBV. Brand advocacy is often studied in the consumer behavior literature as a measure of passion and commitment one has for a brand (Keller, 2007). Consumers may identify or patronize a brand so much that they publicly recommend or support a company (Anderson, 1998). This goes beyond word-of-mouth, which may be in response to a query (e.g., "Would you recommend this restaurant?") to a proactive, unsolicited endorsement. These are sometimes referred to as brand champions or brand evangelists (Ind, 2007). Employees can also be advocates for their brand, particularly those on the frontline (Schepers & Nijssen, 2018). Firms utilize their frontline employees as advocates to help launch new products and reposition their brand (Miller et al., 2014), which makes sense as frontline employees engage in customer contact more than other employees. We define employee brand advocates as employees who make specific efforts to endorse and recommend their firm, and position it as an outcome in our model.

We know that the feeling of accomplishment associated with work meaningfulness motivates employee effort (e.g., Thakor & Joshi, 2005), but where they direct that effort could be shaped by how the employees arrive at those feelings of accomplishment. Gabler et al. (2014) found that when employees identify with an environmentally-oriented firm, they are more likely to participate in activities to strengthen the brand image. These employees embraced their firm's mission and took steps to improve it. Corporate social

responsibility is found to enhance brand equity through brand advocacy in industrial settings (Pai et al., 2015). To this end, we argue that employees experiencing meaningfulness at work through value alignment with the organization will exert more pro-behavior in favor of their organization. These behaviors could emerge as brand advocacy. Formally,

H3 Work meaningfulness is positively related to employee brand advocacy.

Work Meaningfulness and Customer Satisfaction

We propose that the positive benefits of work meaningfulness extend to the customer as well. In the NRBV context, meaningful work could lead to customer acquisition if it conveys a firm's commitment to the environment (Hart, 1995). Much research conceptualizes customer satisfaction as the frontline employee's perception of how pleased the customer is with the employee (e.g., Agnihotri et al., 2014; Gabler et al., 2017), however, we are interested in the customers themselves. Therefore, we define customer satisfaction as the customer's perception of both the performance of, and relationship with, the employee. This is a critical metric not just because firms want happy customers, but because customer satisfaction is associated with outcomes such as loyalty and profits (e.g., Schneider et al., 1992). We position it as the final outcome in our study to uncover how work meaning can provide indirect benefits to the firm.

Meaningfulness connects workers to the things perceived as not just important to a career but imperative to a fulfilling life (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003). One such imperative is social relationships. Job-induced psychological states, such as work meaningfulness, motivate employees to engage in customer-orientated behaviors (Thakor & Joshi, 2005). They also decrease the likelihood of engaging in activities that could potentially hurt the organization (Jelinek & Ahearne, 2010). A meaningful job encourages employees to go above and beyond, to think creatively and find customer solutions that transcend purely economic self-interests (Chawla & Guda, 2013). These employees are "motivated by jobs that have a positive and meaningful impact on other people, they work harder by exhibiting higher levels of effort" (Piccolo et al., 2010, p. 266). By putting forth more effort to these relationships, work meaningfulness eventually leads to better job performance (Jaramillo et al., 2013), which should logically extend to more satisfied customers.

Employees with meaningful work report greater job satisfaction as well (e.g., Kamdron, 2005). But where does that satisfaction come from? Certainly, individuals who perform at a high level will likely be more satisfied at work, but satisfaction may also be derived from better relationships. Meaningful work provides more than a steady income, rather it contributes to professional development, personal growth,

and physical and mental well-being (Mulki & Lassk, 2019). Employees of firms demonstrating environmental values may exert more effort toward customer-facing activities (Gabler et al., 2015). We propose that employees experiencing work meaningfulness are more likely to focus on customer interests and satisfy their needs. This creates the opportunity for more social interactions, which we argue leads to higher levels of customer satisfaction. Formally,

H4 Work meaningfulness is positively related to customer satisfaction.

Method

Sample

Time lagged (T1/T2) and multi-source data was collected from frontline employees, their managers, and their customers. We collaborated with a third-party market research provider that has access to a wide network of organizations from different industries in India. The service provider maintains a broad fieldwork capacity across markets and follows thorough quality control procedures. Possible respondents were randomly selected from industrial firms according to the following criteria: (1) the firm operates in a business-to-business market and (2) employees are required to develop and nurture long-standing customer relationships. The research firm secured manager approval with the understanding that we would share an executive summary of the results, and employees were provided a financial award for participation. To confirm face validity, the survey instruments were pretested, adjusted based on feedback, and revised by three experienced researchers.

The research firm solicited one customer for every employee who completed the survey, and this list was revised by managers to control for self-report bias. If the customer was unavailable, a new one was randomly chosen. Codes were assigned to the corresponding employee and customer surveys to allow the researchers to match the dyads. We followed the recommendation of Thakor and Joshi (2005), who suggest different data sources when studying work meaningfulness. Data were first collected from employees and managers (T1), and after a 3-month period, additional data was collected from employees and customers (T2). See Fig. 1. We received 104 completed responses matching each employee with his manager and one customer (employee-manager-customer). The sample size is in line with Cohen's power analysis criterion in partial least squares-structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) for a statistical power of 80% (Hair et al., 2016).

Complete confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed for participants. To alleviate concerns of customers'

Table 2 Correlation matrix

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Environmental stewardship	0.93						
2	Work meaningfulness	− 0.28**	0.79					
3	Eco-capability: business resources	0.51**	− 0.18	0.96				
4	Eco-capability: human resources	0.39**	− 0.21*	0.81**	0.87			
5	Eco-capability: technology resources	0.37**	− 0.12	0.75**	0.64**	0.85		
6	Employee brand advocacy	− 0.31**	0.45**	− 0.19*	− 0.21*	− 0.18	0.82	
7	Customer satisfaction	0.09	0.36**	0.05	0.05	0.08	0.29*	0.84
	Average	5.03	5.62	4.14	4.8	5.51	5.6	5.95
	Standard deviation	1.9	1.07	2.33	1.92	1.56	0.73	1.06

Significance level: *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; numbers across the diagonal are the square root average extracted

social desirability bias, we underscored that employees would not be assessed based on their answers. Male employees constitute 83.6% of the sample and the average age is 30.7 (STD = 7.34 years). The average number of employees in each firm is 111.5 (STD = 427.9) with the following industries represented: Pharmaceutical (14.42%), Marketing & Communication (7.69%), Healthcare (6.73%), FMCG (Fast-moving consumer goods) (4.81%), BFSI (Banking, Financial Services, and Insurance) (22.12%), Auto (16.35%), Textile (2.88%), Engineering/construction (3.85%), Information Technology (1.92%), and other (19.23%).

Measures

All measures were previously developed Likert scales adapted to fit our context. During T1, we collected employee environmental stewardship using a measure from de Ruyter et al. (2009). We also collected managerial perceptions of eco-capabilities data by adapting Gabler et al.'s (2015) scale which assesses how management perceives the environmental business resources, human resources, and technology resources in the organization.

In the second wave, of data collection (T2), employees shared their work meaningfulness using a measure adapted from Ashmos and Duchon (2000), and their brand advocacy via a measure adapted from Schepers and Nijssen (2018). Customers were asked to report their satisfaction with the employee using a measure adapted from Kalra et al. (2017). Consistent with prior studies, employee job satisfaction, age, and gender, company size (average number of employees), and customer trust were included as covariates because they can affect the endogenous variables in the model (e.g., Agnihotri et al., 2017; Bill et al., 2020; Itani & Chaker, 2021; Schepers & Nijssen, 2018). Table 2 includes correlations as well as descriptive statistics of the latent constructs. The measures are summarized in the "Appendix".

Results

Analysis

We utilized structural equation modeling to test the hypothesized relationships. Specifically, we followed the two-step criterion recommended by Anderson and Gerbing (1988). First, we assessed the measurement model, as well as the reliability and validity of the measures. In step 2, we estimated the structural model with PLS-SEM, which is appropriate when testing models with small sample sizes and complex relationships. This is the case with our model, which includes multiple moderating relationships (Chin et al., 2003).

Because all data were collected via surveys, we implemented several procedures from Podsakoff et al. (2003) to mitigate the potential of common method bias. Specifically, we collected the predictor, moderating, and outcome variables at different times (T1/T2). Moreover, the data was collected from three different sources and all measures were validated in prior studies. We then assessed the possible presence of common method bias by conducting a single-factor measurement model in an exploratory factor analysis. The single-factor model explained less than 30% of observed variance. In addition, we employed the latent-marker-variable method (Chin et al., 2013; Lindell & Whitney, 2001). Following Agnihotri et al. (2016), we included the employees' social media use for work because, theoretically, this variable is not related to the variables of interest. After adding the marker variable, and controlling for its effects on all endogenous variables, no significant changes were found (see Table 4), providing no support for the existence of common method bias in the data.

Measurement Model

Results of the measurement model demonstrated satisfactory fit. The confirmatory factor/composite analysis of the overall saturated model supported this conclusion (Benitez et al.,

Table 3 Quality of measures

Construct	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted	Fornell and larker criterion	Largest HTMT	Discriminant validity
Environmental stewardship	0.92	0.95	0.86	✓	0.75	✓
Work meaningfulness	0.77	0.83	0.63	✓	0.78	✓
Eco-capability: business resources	0.97	0.97	0.92	✓	0.81	✓
Eco-capability: human resources	0.87	0.90	0.76	✓	0.66	✓
Eco-capability: technology resources	0.84	0.89	0.73	✓	0.69	✓
Employee brand advocacy	0.71	0.80	0.67	✓	0.78	✓
Customer satisfaction	0.73	0.82	0.70	✓	0.78	✓

2020). The measure of fit (SRMR) was below the threshold value 0.08 (Hu et al., 1992) and less than the 95% quantile of its reference distribution (SRMR = 0.069, HI_{95} = 0.087). The test for overall model fit using d_ULS and d_G also supported the model fit: d_ULS = 1.85, HI_{95} = 3.05; and d_G = 1.08, HI_{95} = 1.69 (Benitez et al., 2020).

Internal consistency and reliability were checked using Cronbach's Alpha (cutoff level α = 0.7) and Composite Reliability (cutoff level CR = 0.8). Further, items loaded significantly on their intended factors with no cross loadings or other problems, which provides evidence of convergent validity. Three low loading items were dropped from the final analysis (see the Appendix). We used the "heterotrait–monotrait ratio" criterion (HTMT) to check for discriminant validity among constructs, finding the value less than 0.9 cutoff level for any pair (Henseler et al., 2015). Finally, we compared the square root of the average variance extracted of each construct with the correlations between constructs to ensure this was the case (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). A summary of the measures' quality is included in Table 3.

Structural Model

We used PLS-SEM to test the hypotheses. This technique implements nonparametric bootstrapping (5000 resamples), which is suitable for complicated models with multiple interactions and small sample sizes. In both models, all the endogenous variables, including work meaningfulness, employee brand advocacy, and customer satisfaction were added simultaneously. The results from both models are summarized in Table 4.

We analyzed both the direct effects of the moderating factors (managerial perceptions of business resources, human resources, technology resources) as well the interaction effects between environmental stewardship and these factors. In line with H1, we found that environmental stewardship has a positive effect on work meaningfulness (β = 0.45, p < 0.05). We also uncovered a significant positive

interaction between environmental stewardship and business resources (β = 0.49, p < 0.05; ΔR^2 = 0.06, p < 0.05) and technology resources (β = 0.31, p < 0.05; ΔR^2 = 0.03, p < 0.05) on work meaningfulness. Together, these moderating influences explained 39% of the work meaningfulness variance, supporting H2a and H2c, but not H2b. The interaction with human resources was not significant and is discussed in the next section.

To better understand the significant moderating effects, we followed Aiken et al. (1991), and plotted the interactions in Figs. 3 and 4. Each demonstrates how different components of eco-capabilities impact the relationship between environmental stewardship and work meaningfulness. Figure 3 shows that employees with high environmental stewardship find more meaning at work when the managers support their stewardship through high levels of business resources. For those with low-environmental stewardship, the presence of those same business resources does not contribute to meaningful work. Moving to Fig. 4, the presence of technology resources increases work meaningfulness for all employees—regardless of environmental stewardship. However, meaningful work is maximized for employees who report high levels of environmental stewardship. Together this highlights the importance of providing business and technological eco-capabilities to the workforce, and we discuss the implications in the next section.

Turning to our outcome variables, we revealed a positive effect from work meaningfulness to both employee brand advocacy (β = 0.42, p < 0.01) and customer satisfaction (β = 0.37, p < 0.01), providing support for H3 and H4. The variance explained is 25% for employee brand advocacy and 26% for customer satisfaction, which we investigate more in the discussion.

Based on the results from the PLS-SEM analysis, we conducted a post hoc analysis, which uncovered a significant indirect effect of environmental stewardship on employee brand advocacy (β = 0.2, p < 0.05) and customer satisfaction (β = 0.17, p < 0.05) through work meaningfulness. Finally, we conducted robustness checks by using hierarchical

Table 4 Results

	Direct effects	Hypothesized effects	Hypothesized effects with marker variable
DV: work meaningfulness	$R^2 = 0.17$	$R^2 = 0.39$	$R^2 = 0.39$
Environmental stewardship	-0.30^{**} $_{(0.09)}$	0.45^* $_{(0.21)}$	0.44^* $_{(0.19)}$
Eco-capability: business resources	–	-0.22 $_{(0.26)}$	-0.20 $_{(0.21)}$
Eco-capability: human resources	–	-0.27 $_{(0.31)}$	-0.25 $_{(0.27)}$
Eco-capability: technology resources	–	0.12 $_{(0.11)}$	0.11 $_{(0.11)}$
Interactions	–		
Eco-cap ability: business resources × environmental stewardship	–	0.49^* $_{(0.23)}$	0.5^* $_{(0.25)}$
Eco-capability: human resources × environmental stewardship	–	-0.03 $_{(0.18)}$	-0.06 $_{(0.15)}$
Eco-capability: technology resources × environmental stewardship	–	0.31^* $_{(0.14)}$	0.3^* $_{(0.13)}$
Covariates			
Age	0.26^* $_{(0.11)}$	0.19^* $_{(0.08)}$	0.2^* $_{(0.09)}$
Gender	-0.07 $_{(0.09)}$	-0.15 $_{(0.09)}$	-0.15 $_{(0.9)}$
Company size	-0.07 $_{(0.06)}$	0.01 $_{(0.07)}$	0.01 $_{(0.08)}$
Job satisfaction	0.03 $_{(0.15)}$	0.04 $_{(0.11)}$	0.0 $_{(0.13)}$
Customer trust	-0.01 $_{(0.19)}$	0.02 $_{(0.18)}$	0.02 $_{(0.18)}$
DV: employee brand advocacy	$R^2 = 0.25$	$R^2 = 0.25$	$R^2 = 0.26$
Work meaningfulness	0.42^{**} $_{(0.10)}$	0.42^{**} $_{(0.09)}$	0.41^{**} $_{(0.09)}$
Covariates			
Age	0.08 $_{(0.1)}$	0.08 $_{(0.1)}$	0.11 $_{(0.12)}$
Gender	0.11 $_{(0.09)}$	0.10 $_{(0.1)}$	0.08 $_{(0.09)}$
Company size	-0.13 $_{(0.09)}$	-0.13 $_{(0.09)}$	-0.13 $_{(0.08)}$
Job satisfaction	0.04 $_{(0.11)}$	0.05 $_{(0.1)}$	0.05 $_{(0.1)}$
Customer trust	0.06 $_{(0.12)}$	0.06 $_{(0.12)}$	0.08 $_{(0.12)}$
DV: customer satisfaction	$R^2 = 0.26$	$R^2 = 0.26$	$R^2 = 0.27$
Work meaningfulness	0.37^{**} $_{(0.13)}$	0.37^{**} $_{(0.12)}$	0.36^{**} $_{(0.11)}$
Covariates			
Age	-0.02 $_{(0.09)}$	-0.02 $_{(0.09)}$	-0.01 $_{(0.09)}$
Gender	-0.01 $_{(0.09)}$	-0.01 $_{(0.08)}$	-0.01 $_{(0.08)}$
Company size	-0.03 $_{(0.11)}$	-0.03 $_{(0.11)}$	-0.01 $_{(0.11)}$
Job satisfaction	0.10 $_{(0.14)}$	0.11 $_{(0.13)}$	0.1 $_{(0.13)}$
Customer trust	0.36^{**} $_{(0.13)}$	0.36^{**} $_{(0.12)}$	0.37^{**} $_{(0.12)}$

$N = 104$. Coefficient standard deviations are presented between parentheses. Two tailed statistical significance level $= ^*p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$

regression to reexamine the significant relationships, specifically the moderating relationships. We found results comparable to those reported using PLS-SEM. Thus, we can present our model results with additional confidence.

Discussion

More than ever, businesses—and individuals—are placing heightened importance on environmental ethics. Our results show that matching manager priorities with employee values in an environmental context can create a meaningful workplace, ultimately influencing outcomes across various stakeholders. The Natural Resource Based-View provides the theoretical framework to explore how corporate environmental ethics manifests on the frontline. We employ it here to suggest that employee behaviors and customer attitudes can be viewed as strategic resources, and like physical or financial resources, managers that properly leverage them will optimize their corporate environmental ethics. In doing so, we answer calls to explore ways for employees to find meaningfulness at work (e.g., Jaramillo et al., 2013; Wang & Xu, 2019). We also answer calls to help organizations integrate eco-capabilities into their business models (Amui et al., 2017). As such, we put forth two contributions from our model which extend the scope of NRBV in an environmental ethics context.

First, we show how environmental values impact both the frontline and the customers they serve. Specifically, environmental stewards find more meaning in their work, which

Fig. 3 Moderating effect of business resources

Moderating Effect of Business Resources

Fig. 4 Moderating effect of technology resources
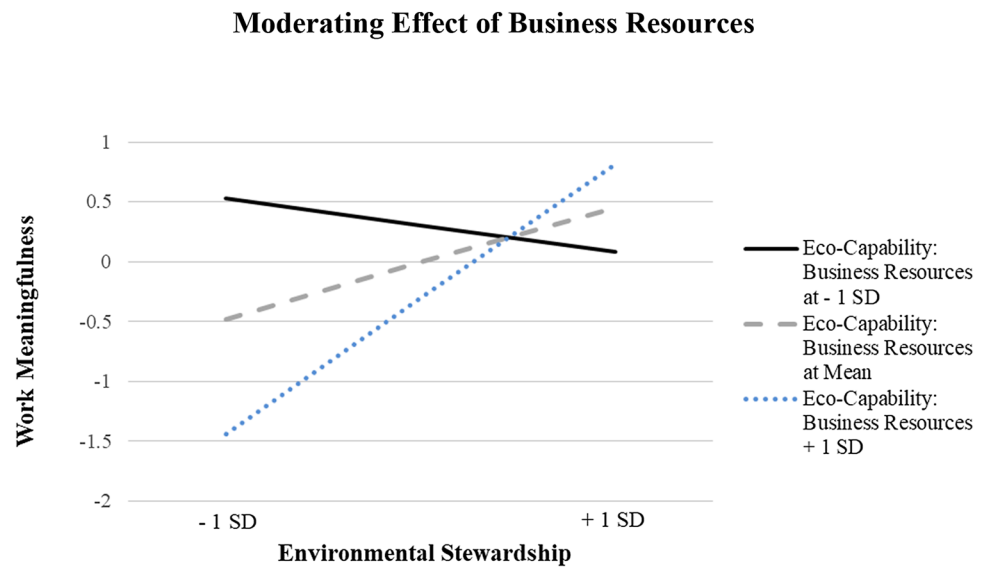
Moderating Effect of Technology Resources
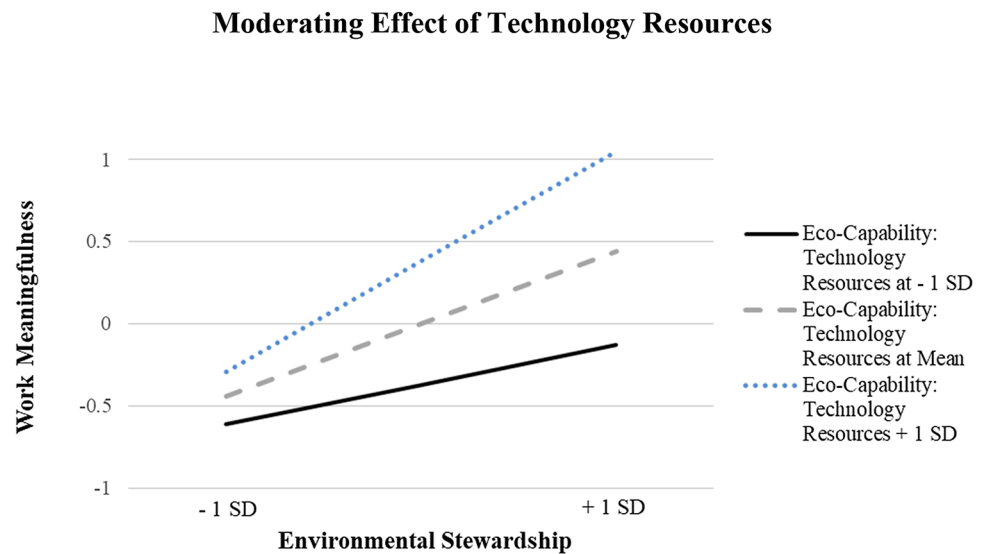
translates to employee brand advocates and more satisfied customers. Second, we model eco-capabilities perceived by managers as moderators which 'activate' corporate environmental ethics on the frontline. These capabilities ultimately increase work meaningfulness and the associated outcomes. Given their value, we offer specific examples of how firms can utilize these capabilities in their firm. Taken together, our multi-level model extends the corporate environmental ethics literature by examining employees, their managers, and their customers in the same study (See Table 1). We also answer calls to explore the antecedents and consequences of work meaningfulness (e.g., Bennett et al., 2018; Jaramillo et al., 2013; Rosso et al., 2010). Examining these resources within the NRBV framework, we advance the conversation on environmentalism as a core component of business ethics.

Theoretical Implications

Corporate environmental ethics is a firm-level strategic initiative, but those policies and procedures are often enacted on the frontline. This suggests that strategic resources are needed at the organizational- and employee-level (Hart & Dowell, 2011). For most individuals, work is not just a paycheck but a source of terminal value (Cherrington, 1980). Employees seek purpose as much as profit in today's business landscape (Pink, 2011), and previous research has shown that employees find more meaning when working for firms who adopt environmental values (Aguinis & Glavas, 2019; Bansal, 2003). Leveraging the NRBV, we show that individuals derive more value from work when they feel personal responsibility toward the environment, but that relationship is strengthened when managers convey a

similar corporate responsibility. The activation of environmental ethics through eco-capabilities extends the NRBV literature by uncovering the interactive effects of blending multi-level environmental resources and how they influence both internal and external stakeholders.

By using managerial perceptions of eco-capabilities as a proxy for corporate environmental ethics, we make a static construct dynamic, and setting our study on the frontline, we provide tangible directions for scholars wishing to make environmental ethics the status quo in business. Specifically, if managers can connect with the passions of their workforce (in this case, environmental concern), and align those values, it can enable and encourage their enthusiasm, which leads to higher levels of employee brand advocacy. This process may be viewed as a strategic resource under the NRBV (Hart & Dowell, 2011). It could also be extended to other contexts where interactions between personal dispositions and work conditions could predict work meaningfulness. Meaningful work also led to customer satisfaction. Hart (1995) suggested that the commitment of resources can lead to competitive advantage. In an NRBV context then, resource commitment would allow such firms to acquire and maintain customers more effectively than competitors. In our research, we position eco-capabilities as this resource commitment, which is visible to customers, and ultimately leads to higher satisfaction. Viewing these outcomes through an NRBV lens helped reveal why the relationships exist, and we suggest scholars take a similar approach with other employee and customer outcomes in an environmental ethics context.

Of note, while technology and business resources influenced levels of work meaning, human resources did not. We offer the following explanation for this occurrence. Greenwashing, or when firms make exaggerated or unsubstantiated claims about their environmental impact (e.g., Huang & Chen, 2015), has become commonplace in corporate environmental ethics (Berrone et al., 2017). Perhaps, then, it should not be surprising that employees respond to financial firm investments (technology and business resources) rather than corporate messaging[2] (human resources). Examining our items might provide evidence for this argument. For instance, "My company's top management fully supports our environmental initiatives" and "Our people generally embrace our environmental programs" are simple claims that do not require substance. More importantly, these human resources require little knowledge about the firm's environmental programs. Compare these with items from business and technology resources, respectively: "Redesigning processes or products to be more environmentally friendly has become a key part of our business plan" and "My company has implemented technology that helps with

energy management (e.g., lights, climate control)." Unlike the corporate messaging associated with human resources (e.g., "fully supports," "generally embrace"), these technology and business resources are tangible and visible, meaning employees bear witness—even use—them.

In essence, greenwashing may occur with human resources because they are easier to 'fake' than business and technology resources. There is literature to support that consumers can sense greenwashing (Szabo & Webster, 2021), and we argue that employees are even better judges of the green character of their firm. Importantly, we have no evidence that the managers in our dataset made 'exaggerated or unsubstantiated claims' about their environmental practices, and we do not suggest that they knowingly engaged in greenwashing. Rather, human resources are open to more interpretation, and thus, less reliable than business and technology resources. Therefore, human resources may be less likely to activate work meaning in environmental stewards because they are not as strong indicators of environmental values as technology and business resources.

Finally, meaningful work is an important goal by itself, but firms wish to receive a return on the investment of creating such a workplace. Our results show how a meaningful workplace leads to positive outcomes across three stakeholder groups. Specifically, meaningful work may indirectly benefit the focal firm through employee and customer outcomes. Here, the NRBV demonstrates the specific positive effects of leveraging environmental resources as a unifying force within a firm. When frontline employees look forward to coming to work and feel as if their job connects with their lives, they become brand advocates, publicly endorsing their company. Further, this employee advocacy is likely to generate more satisfied customers, meaning this alignment between firm and employee positively influences a third party: the customer. These indirect effects underscore the value of eco-capabilities, advancing the NRBV to show important non-financial outcomes of leveraging environmental resources. Finally, scholars seek to understand how employees react to organizational capabilities and sustainability initiatives (e.g., Clara da Cunha Bezerra et al. 2019), especially those firms operating in emerging economies (e.g., Amui et al., 2017). Our study provides a glimpse into potential outcomes of matching environmental ethics at the manager and employee level. Researchers, then, should be optimistic about the use of this logic to predict work meaning in other contexts.

Managerial Implications

While business ethics scholars seek to make environmental ethics the norm in the marketplace, business managers seek to gain a competitive advantage in that marketplace. Businesses have begun to integrate corporate environmental

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[2] We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for this insight.

ethics into their strategic plan to differentiate from competition (Rahman et al., 2021). Our managerial implications stem from the positive outcomes of activating corporate environmental ethics on the frontline. We offer ways to enhance work meaningfulness by matching environmental priorities across employees and managers. Our eco-capability construct was perceptual in nature, but it involves tangible resources. Therefore, the first question for managers is: what are eco-capabilities and how can I develop them in my firm?

We merge our findings with recent business trends to answer that question. Investments in green technology continue to rise across sectors (Investopedia, 2021; World Energy Investment, 2021). This technology has taken many forms. Consider two examples. The Swedish company, Parans, is developing a 'sunlight transport' technology, which uses fiber optic cables to channel light to different areas according to current illumination levels. An American company, LiveWall, constructs 'plant walls' for homes and businesses. These walls not only sequester carbon dioxide, but the vegetation acts as a built-in insulator, curbing energy costs for the building (Gonçalves, 2021). These examples illustrate how both high-tech and low-tech innovations can lead to eco-capabilities and market differentiation.

As our findings suggest, however, eco-capabilities require more than technology resources. These technologies are optimized when a part of an overarching strategic plan embraced by the entire value chain (Souza et al., 2017). This vision must be shared among employees to fully reap the benefits of environmental business strategy, and managers should be open to feedback to both benchmark against the competition and continuously improve its eco-friendly operations. Both websites (https://www.parans.com/, https://livewall.com/) prominently feature their long-term plans as well as consistent communication about those plans, which align with the business and human resource components of eco-capabilities in our model. We advance, then, that current best practices in eco-capability development and deployment mirror the constructs presented in this research. Firms can harness this synergy may be able to make the longest strides toward a competitive advantage in a 'greening' economy.

It is apparent that corporate environmental ethics involves multiple stakeholders—and employees are integral to a consistent message. Singh et al. (2019) found that training employees to be environmentally-friendly could translate environmental ethics into competitive advantage. Jahanshahi and Brem (2018) involved customers to show the importance of 'customer capital' in environmental commitment. In short, environmental ethics requires buy-in from people outside of the focal firm, and by examining all three stakeholders simultaneously, our study is the logical extension of this research.

Our next takeaway for managers can be looked at from two different angles, both of which hinge on the interactive effects of eco-capabilities and environmental stewardship. Specifically, we offer advice on how to approach two scenarios. If, on the one hand, your firm already has eco-capabilities in place, it makes sense to hire employees who care about the environment. This is the simpler of the two because it requires only that the firm uncover employee values toward the environment in the hiring process. It is becoming common practice to administer personality and social style assessments to applicants (e.g., Schermer & MacDougall, 2013), and we suggest a similar assessment can be given regarding personal convictions on environmental issues. One challenge would be inflated responses. For instance, an applicant to a 'green' company may bias her answers toward environmental concern in an attempt to gain favor with the hiring committee. For this reason, using the environmental stewardship scale is not our recommendation, rather the values could be teased out in the interview process, using open-ended questions to gauge the applicant's perception of their personal role in creating a sustainable future, as well as the role of business. Responses could then be coded to generate levels of environmental concern to optimize work meaning and beneficial outcomes. Once hired, firms should train employees to optimize those outcomes. The training should not involve ways to be more environmentally-conscious, instead, the goal should be that every employee is able to articulate the company's eco-capabilities. Firms could also revisit their reward system to account for environmental stewardship and related performance. This would need careful consideration and measurement techniques, but it could help motivate more environmental initiatives at the individual level.

On the other hand, imagine a firm with a workforce of environmental stewards that lacks any form of environmental strategy. This may seem like an uncommon occurrence, but consider an industry trending toward environmental initiatives but with companies playing 'catch-up' to industry norms (e.g., fashion retailing, airline, tourism, etc.). In this case, perhaps building an eco-capability makes sense. The industry may attract eco-minded employees who can help shape the company's values and even help build the eco-capabilities. This would not only optimize their work meaning but help keep pace with the competition. Here we suggest that employees start a dialogue about which eco-capabilities are most attainable and work to achieve those before moving toward more costly initiatives. For instance, it may be easier to research the environmental practices of other firms before creating a formal, long-term environmental business plan. Indeed, the former may inform the later.

Finally, while technology and business resources interacted with environmental stewardship to positively influence

work meaningfulness, human resources did not. For managers, this could mean one of two things. First, as discussed earlier, greenwashing continues to be prevalent (Berrone et al., 2017), and while most research examines customer perceptions (Szabo & Webster, 2021), it may exist among stakeholders within the focal organization. Employee-perceived greenwashing is an avenue of future research needed to better understand how employees consider and embrace manager-level eco-capabilities. This finding underscores that companies need to invest in green innovations and technologies to truly capitalize on them through a more energized workforce. Another possibility is that the corporate messaging of environmental efforts simply does not translate to terminal work value in the same way that tangible resources do. Consider an employee who utilizes climate-controlled inventory management technology versus one who reads a pro-environmental company newsletter. It reasons that the first employee might garner more meaning in her work because she sees the message in practice. The second firm might be just as eco-conscious, but the newsletter (human resource) is simply less salient than the climate-control technology. In either case, we suggest that managers 'walk the walk' if they are going to 'talk the talk'.

Limitations and Future Research

As research into corporate environmental ethics grows, studies usually conclude by posing more questions than answers, and ours is no different. Employee perceptions of greenwashing is just one. While we uncovered the positive impact of activating environmental stewards with eco-capabilities on certain outcomes, we did not include a host of others which may be important to firms. Brand advocacy and customer satisfaction are useful, but managers may wish to reveal how work meaning influences more tangible performance (e.g., sales quotas) and behavioral (e.g., turnover intent) outcomes. There are similarly many moderators which may impact the relationships explored here. Things such as personality traits, social style, confidence, trust in the firm, and self-efficacy may inflate or deflate how employees interact with environmental initiatives. Further, one could argue the directionality of the variables. Specifically, work meaningfulness could lead to environmental stewardship, with eco-capabilities moderating the relationship between environmental stewardship and our two outcomes. While our model is theoretically and empirically justified, scholars should pursue these alternative models.[3] Additionally, it would also help practitioners to have clear examples of eco-capabilities in practice. While our construct offers broad requirements to develop such a capability, providing specific ways to develop and employ them would have a greater impact.

Perhaps more crucially, the linear paths from work meaningfulness to our two outcomes may be impacted by internal or external factors. Internally, certain incentives, such as company reputation, work pride, or compensation structure (i.e., commission) may influence how a frontline employee performs. Externally, one could argue that industry plays a role in these relationships. As mentioned, issues of sustainability are more visibly relevant in certain industries (e.g., energy, airlines) than others (e.g., banking, telecommunications). Therefore, we suggest scholars collect sectoral data in follow-up studies. Similarly, future research could examine how the relationships explored here translate to the B2C context. For instance, while employee brand advocacy is beneficial, end-consumer brand advocates are valuable firm resources as well. Scholars should test this model in the B2C setting to uncover differences across product categories. Finally, as noted, human resources played less of a role than technology or business resources. While this was counter to our hypotheses, this relationship could be explored an a posteriori epistemological approach rooted in pragmatism (York, 2009). We strove for parsimony, but future scholars could include different constructs to provide managers a clearer sense of how corporate environmental ethics can be achieved through deployment of environmental resources.

Given the fact that corporate environmental ethics can lead to more meaningful work, the next immediate question may be about social justice. Specifically, if a shared sense of environmental responsibility leads to a more meaningful workplace and associated outcomes, would the same hold true for a shared sense of social responsibility? Too often in a triple bottom line or sustainability context, social responsibility takes a backseat to its environmental counterpart. But employees and managers can hold just as strong of values about doing good for society as they can about doing good for the planet. This opens the door to interesting research questions within the corporate ethics domain.

Appendix

Construct and items	Loading
Environmental stewardship	
I feel sense of ownership for the environment impact of our work	0.88
In addressing customer problems, I attempt to come up with solutions that are best for the environment	0.96
I believe that I need to play a role in the development of environmentally sustainable business	0.94
I help customers to maintain a green environment for future generations*	
Work meaningfulness	
My spirit is energized by work	0.78
Work is connected to what I think is important in life	0.83
I look forward to coming to work	0.76
I see a connection between my work and social good*	
Eco-capability: business resources	
We have a formal, long-term plan for environmental initiatives	0.98
We actively research the best environmental practices at other firms in our industry	0.97
Redesigning processes or products to be more environmentally friendly has become a key part of our business plan	0.93
Eco-capability: human resources	
My company's top management fully supports our environmental initiatives	0.81
There is a lot of written and oral communication in my company regarding environmental programs	0.89
Our people generally embrace our environmental programs	0.91
Eco-capability: technology resources	
My company has implemented technology that…	
…assesses the performance of our environmental initiatives	0.89
…helps with energy management (e.g., lights, climate control)	0.84
…helps manage inventory in an environmentally conscious way	0.83
Employee brand advocacy	
I talk up my (company brand) to people I know	0.88
In social situations, I often speak favorably about the (company brand) I work for	0.75
I bring up my company in a positive way in conversations I have*	
Customer satisfaction	
I have an extremely effective working relationship with this rep	0.91
The time and effort spent with this rep is worthwhile	0.75
Customer trust	
This rep never tries to mislead me	0.81
This rep is always honest in his/her dealings with me	0.79
Job satisfaction	
Generally speaking, I am very satisfied with my job	–

*Items were dropped

Declarations

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