

# Identifying factors needed for business actor engagement in sustainable development goal (SDG) initiatives

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to offer a mid-range theory conceptualization of factors central to understanding and facilitating business actor engagement (BAE). Reports on a study of real estate companies and their sustainable development goal (SDG) driven business initiatives. The aim is to identify the factors that need to be in place to facilitate positive engagement amongst actors in business-to-business (B2B) settings.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A case study of real estate companies (landlords of business premises) and their business customers (tenants of offices and warehouses) – comprising interviews and workshops – offer insights related to the factors that need to be in place to facilitate BAE types and outcomes.

**Findings** – The identified central factors of BAE – needed to understand and facilitate positive engagement to unfold – are the actors' perception of: willingness (to act), resourcefulness (to contribute and solve issues) and influence (to affect decisions) regarding solutions related to the business initiative at hand. Failing to facilitate these factors may result in negative outcomes of BAE where "engagement" merely constitutes perceived obligations and responsibilities.

**Research limitations/implications** – The study offers theoretical and managerial insights on how to manage the factors needed for BAE. It also sheds light on how actors can use SDG-driven business initiatives to achieve sustainability goals.

**Originality/value** – It contributes to the concept of BAE, by emphasizing the dynamics of engagement, from the motivational and behavioral dimensions specific to B2B settings. It offers insights how to managerially cogovern rather than control BAE. It presents central factors needed to include and capacitate customers, facilitating successful implementations of SDG-driven business initiatives to reduce absent or negative outcomes.

**Keywords** Business actor engagement, Sustainable development goals (SDGs), Business initiatives, Case study, Green lease

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

This article focuses on elaborating the concept of business actor engagement (BAE), which is a business-to-business (B2B) elaboration of the established concept of customer engagement, that predominantly was grounded in business-to-consumer (B2C) research. Within B2C research settings, engagement mainly refers to the means of which consumers (as social actors) contribute to a firm's (business actors) marketing function. In B2C markets, engagement often regards actions on platforms, such as social media or brand communities (i.e. enabling and enhancing business–consumer interactions in online settings) (Morgan-Thomas *et al.*, 2020). It stems from the consumers' motivationally driven interest to invest time and effort to get involved in brand or company activities (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2019). The noted studies have clarified the value of engagement as a central driver, inviting consumers to partake in processes previously confined to the firm. Studies show that engagement offers a sense of shared ownership (without responsibility), motivating further engagement by enabling personal augmentations and capacitating consumers to cocreate sociocultural benefits from the firm's value proposition (Røndell

*et al.*, 2016). However, studies on engagement in B2C markets typically use a given setting (e.g. social media) (Barger *et al.*, 2016) or activities related to a brand (Leckie *et al.*, 2016) from where the engagement unfolds.

Ekman *et al.* (2021) conceptualized how B2B actors' emotions and behaviors regarding an engagement initiative generate different types of engagement that varies in magnitude and valence. This relates to the primary antecedents for BAE and the engagement types, and to the involved actors' disposition and connectedness (cf. Brodie *et al.*, 2019). However, there remains a lack of clarity about the factors needed for engagement (e.g. the effect of the actors' capacities and the setting) and how actor engagement emerges or fails – a gap also identified in earlier actor engagement studies (Brodie *et al.*, 2019; Fehrer *et al.*, 2018;

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Hollebeek *et al.*, 2019; Alexander *et al.*, 2018; Storbacka *et al.*, 2016). This study strives to address this gap.

The study was conducted amid the context of recent year's increased business focus on social and environmental sustainability; that is, the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs). Researchers note the importance of learning more about how businesses address the SDGs, given global warming, geopolitical tensions and human inequality (Mio *et al.*, 2020). Thus, firms must drive sustainable practices to solve current challenges (Montiel *et al.*, 2021). Getting staff and partners engaged in relevant SDGs is vital to achieving sustainability effects, and firms must appreciate that their transition toward sustainable practices calls for investments to get the partner firms aboard (Dahlin *et al.*, 2021; Porter and Kramer, 2019). Thus, identifying the central factors needed for engagement will stipulate whether an actor is capacitated to act on the adopted SDG as a business initiative and, hence, if BAE among the involved firms will result in indented outcomes. Building on this challenge, this study aims to advance our understanding of BAE and offer a mid-range theory clarification of the factors needed for BAE in the sustainability context. Accordingly, we answer the following research questions:

*RQ1.* How are the factors needed for BAE manifested?

*RQ2.* How can the lack or absence of such factors be detected?

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the underpinning theories of actor engagement in business studies and presents an overview of the SDGs and related business research insights. Building on an abductive approach, Section 3 describes the research context (the commercial real estate industry) and a recent initiative (green leases) that addresses several of the SDGs for business actor (commercial tenant) engagement to succeed. Section 4 presents an illustrative case that highlights the factors needed for BAE and signs of failed BAE. Section 5 discusses the results, condensed into a model that highlights the factors needed (based on whether the actor is capacitated) for BAE and signs of failure (i.e. unfulfilled factors). Section 6 concludes the study, highlighting the importance of considering the factors needed for BAE from research, managerial and policy perspectives.

## 2. Theoretical foundation

This section reviews the extant research on customer engagement and lately BAE with a focus on how it relates to sustainability driven business initiatives, including a description of business-related SDGs. Extant studies on customer and actor engagement provide empirical and conceptual insights (Ekman *et al.*, 2021; Brodie *et al.*, 2019; Jaakkola and Aarikka-Stenroos, 2019).

### 2.1 Business actor engagement

Studies on the concept of engagement have gained momentum in the analysis of transcending issues of traditional business relationships (Kumar *et al.*, 2019; Harmeling *et al.*, 2017; Brodie *et al.*, 2011). A leading stream on engagement research is based on service-dominant (S-D) logic (Rodríguez *et al.*, 2022), highlighting value cocreation's role, where actors integrate resources outside their core organization (e.g. customers and suppliers) to facilitate value creation (Ekman *et al.*, 2021; Beckers *et al.*, 2018; Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014). This

engagement conceptualization stream assumes an actor-to-actor (A2A) perspective, extending beyond the traditional focus on merely studying consumer contexts to offer insights into other contexts, such as B2B settings (Jaakkola *et al.*, 2019). Engagement can generally be defined as efforts and resource contributions stretching beyond regular business transactions (Alexander *et al.*, 2018; Storbacka *et al.*, 2016).

This study adopts an S-D logic perspective (Vargo and Lusch, 2016), an inclusive approach where customers and providing firms directly (indirectly) engage in value cocreation and resource integration voluntarily (Ekman *et al.*, 2016). Engagement is a “multidimensional concept subject to a context [or] stakeholder-specific expression of relevant cognitive, emotional, [or] behavioral dimensions” (Brodie *et al.*, 2011, p. 260). Actor engagement is defined as “a dynamic and iterative process, reflecting actors' dispositions to invest resources in their interactions with other connected actors in a service system” (Brodie *et al.*, 2019, p. 183). Thus, engagement is behavioral investments “beyond purchase,” and situating such activity in a B2B setting means that this study defines BAE as a *dynamic and iterative process where actors invest resources in their interactions with other connected actors in a service system toward value propositions beyond the focal (business) exchange*. BAE is a process that involves multiple actors and unfolds around initiatives incorporated into the everyday business in a service ecosystem (e.g. toward an SDG-driven business initiative).

Brodie *et al.* (2019) suggest that researchers must extend the concept of engagement to various actors (e.g. business actors), where BAE adheres to a generic actor conceptualization that contributes dynamics and complexity to actor roles (Ekman *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, it acknowledges the particularities and commercial business interests of B2B actors in supplier–customer relations in a value cocreation context (Conduit *et al.*, 2019; Jaakkola *et al.*, 2019; Nyadzayo *et al.*, 2020). One antecedent to BAE is the actors' *engagement disposition*, which can be understood as the tendency or readiness to engage (i.e. an actor's inclination and ability to act on a value proposition) (Fehrer *et al.*, 2018). Engagement disposition can be considered a managerial extension within the engagement theory nomenclature, clarifying that firms must estimate whether customers are ready and can act on a value proposition (Ekman *et al.*, 2021). Another antecedent to BAE is *engagement connectedness*, i.e. the relational influence between actors in the service network (Ekman *et al.*, 2021; Brodie *et al.*, 2019; Fehrer *et al.*, 2018). For firms that embrace a sustainability business logic, it is vital to understand how they do so, and the two antecedents will impact their partners' engagement as this will govern the outcomes.

However, the engagement disposition and connectedness concepts typically focus on one actor (e.g. the customer) and how the actor reacts to an engagement initiative based on actor- or relationship-specific antecedents. They do not probe the prerequisites – i.e. factors that must be in place for engagement to emerge – that capacitate involved actors for BAE. Moreover, the engagement antecedents do not offer any guidance on how an actor's capacities can be understood or managed (to lay a foundation for engagement). For example, consumer engagement research (i.e. B2C studies) has typically been conducted in various brand communities where the factors needed for engagement are fulfilled (typically a digital platform), given that consumers do not enroll in communities they are not inclined to

be positively or negatively engaged in (see, e.g. Brodie *et al.*, 2013; Dessart *et al.*, 2016; Dessart and Pitardi, 2019). Thus, the factors needed for engagement in consumer settings are often set through a physical or digital artifact. However, the factors needed for BAE deviate from those studied in consumer settings (e.g. being engaged on social media or in a brand), as the object and boundaries of engagement are less associated with personal interests and instead linked to organizational considerations and structures (Kleinaltenkamp *et al.*, 2019). While consumer engagement is free of charge (though demanding of consumers' time), BAE may entail additional investments if the engagement renders actions beyond contracted obligations.

Recent studies on engagement in B2B settings describe BAE as multidimensional; even though primarily guided by the company's strategic and commercial interests, it also inhabits (nonbusiness relational) behavioral and emotional dimensions (Conduit *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, BAE includes aspects that transcend established B2B relationship dimensions – e.g. trust, commitment, economic rationality and interdependencies – regarding strategic and operative considerations (Ekman *et al.*, 2021). As engagement can be explored through actors' contribution of resources beyond traditional resource inputs of business actors (Storbacka *et al.*, 2016), identifying aspects related to involved actors' engagement (or lack thereof) may contribute insight into why some (seemingly similarly executed) business endeavors either flourish or fail to reach its intended potential. Furthermore, BAE studies may shed light on why companies choose to pursue long-term visionary initiatives, such as adopting a sustainable business logic despite the lack of short-term financial benefits (Dahlin *et al.*, 2021). Thus, identifying the factors needed for facilitating engagement behavior in B2B settings is crucial to deepen theoretical insight into the long-term business outcomes of BAE and how to manage it, by capacitating actors' engagement (Nyadzayo *et al.*, 2020; Conduit *et al.*, 2019; Jaakkola and Aarikka-Stenroos, 2019).

## 2.2 Engagement for sustainability

Engagement is especially vital for firms pursuing management practices that address “the grand challenges” of sustainability and climate change (George *et al.*, 2016). Solving these challenges requires the business community to “buy in” and drive much of the needed changes (Sachs *et al.*, 2019). It is a market-encompassing effort beyond the individual firm or organization, as “multi-stakeholder partnerships” are included in the 17th SDG (Agrawal *et al.*, 2022). Thus, responding to the SDGs highlights the need for mutual engagement from various actors to tackle sustainability challenges. It accords with the UN's global agenda that promotes a more sustainable path by fostering cooperation between actors, such as governments and firms (George *et al.*, 2016). The SDGs address challenges that must be pursued with a holistic multiactor approach. Thus, it is crucial to adopt a theoretical lens (and conceptual contribution) that acknowledges the importance of a perspective of multiple actors, beyond the focal (supplier) firm. It also indicates a need for a perspective where an organization is considered a function within a service ecosystem, as individual firms can only achieve so much. Hence, engagement studies which, for instance, focuses on studying actor collaborations addressing the SDGs in business initiatives, including resource contributions from a range of actors, serves as a suitable setting for understanding outcomes of BAE.

Business initiatives (e.g. value propositions) that focus on sustainability-driven activities commonly describe a need for the initiating firm to educate their partners, which includes finding ways to invite and enable actors to engage in a sustainable business logic (Hermelingmeier and von Wirth, 2021). For example, the adoption of one or several SDGs regarding different business areas cannot be solely planned and implemented by the focal firm's managers. Instead, it is a dynamic process of learning based on multiactor interactions (Vildåsen, 2018). Therefore, previous research suggests a need to identify how to capacitate customers (and other actors) to facilitate the cogovernance of practices (Røndell *et al.*, 2016). For firms that adopt a corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategy, more “profound” actor engagement with value cocreation has been recognized as a key aspect for achieving substantial sustainable outcomes (Dahlin *et al.*, 2021), while symbolic activities (and limited engagement) only yield superficial outcomes (Schons and Steinmeier, 2016). Hence, an SDG-driven business initiative serves as an excellent example and a suitable context to study BAE for tackling grand challenges.

## 2.3 Green leases as a vehicle for sustainable development goal engagement

An example of a recent business initiative that focuses on some of the SDGs and is dependent on BAE is the *green lease*, often constituting an addendum to regular leasing contracts used in the commercial real estate industry between landlords and their commercial tenants in which sustainability is formally recognized (Collins, 2019). A green lease is essentially a type of voluntary environmental agreement that includes sustainability practices to reduce a building's negative impact on the environment (Janda *et al.*, 2016). Thus, it is an initiative used solely in B2B markets. The green lease regards mainly four SDGs (Janda *et al.*, 2016): 6. Clean water and sanitation, 7. Affordable and clean energy, 11. Sustainable cities and communities and 12. Responsible consumption and production (see clarifications in Table 1, which presents the SDGs and the parts the green lease focuses on). Thus, the green lease regards sustainable urban development (cf. Cheah *et al.*, 2021), which is a suitable setting for exploring the factors needed for BAE.

Given that a green lease corresponds to several SDGs (Collins, 2019), it requires a multidimensional view of value beyond return on investments; it focuses on efficiency as a means to reduce environmental impacts (Young and Tilley, 2006). Green leases are set up between two parties to define shared efforts on the use and maintenance of facilities. Landlords can use the green lease as an extended business offer, a value proposition inviting tenants interested in sustainability. For firms, green leases are, thus, an SDG-driven business initiative and provide an example of if and how various actors choose to act on such value propositions through engagement.

Firms that add a green lease must estimate the involved actor's readiness and encourage them to embrace a more dynamic view of resources in terms of usage (Sheth *et al.*, 2011). Given that researchers stress the need to further understand how actors can collectively produce sustainable solutions (Abreu *et al.*, 2021) and engage their customers in sustainability activities to cocreate value (Lacoste, 2016; Aquilani *et al.*, 2018), the green lease can be considered a vehicle for a better understanding of what constitutes the baseline for BAE in a sustainability context. Thus, the green

**Table 1** The sustainable development goals (SDGs) and the green lease

#	SDG	Green lease
1	No poverty	
2	Zero hunger	
3	Good health and well-being	
4	Quality education	
5	Gender equality	
6	Clean water and sanitation	Increase water-use efficiency
7	Affordable and clean energy	Increase energy-use efficiency Increase share of renewable energy
8	Decent work and economic growth	
9	Industry, innovation and infrastructure	
10	Reduced inequality	
11	Sustainable cities and communities	Reduce waste generation Promote environmental travel Promote environmental procurement
12	Responsible consumption and production	
13	Climate action	
14	Life below water	
15	Life on land	
16	Peace and justice strong institutions	
17	Partnerships to achieve the goals	

Source: Authors' own work

lease regards several SDGs, it is designed to include multiple stakeholders and actors (i.e. the landlord, the commercial tenant and other users of the building), and it is a voluntary addendum to the regular leasing contract that requires involved partners to engage in the selected sustainability goals. Achieving engagement for such a cause has challenges (Narayan and Tidström, 2021) regarding the interdependencies that develop in a B2B setting. Thus, prior studies propose the need for (dyadic) goal alignment (Cuevas *et al.*, 2015), value alignment (Wang and Zhang, 2017) and like-mindedness (Abreu *et al.*, 2021). However, while such alignment and engagement disposition studies regard the antecedents of actor engagement (Ekman *et al.*, 2021), this study focuses on the factors needed for BAE in a sustainability context.

### 3. Research method

This study examined Swedish real estate firms (e.g. landlords renting out business facilities) and their business customers' adoption and subsequent use of green leases. It was conducted in collaboration with the Stockholm Forum on Sustainable Facilities for three years to access rich and representative data to expose the nuances of what constitutes the factors needed for BAE. The forum comprised over 20 large public and commercial landlords and their tenants and strived to encourage the use of green leases and increase the sustainability efforts landlords and commercial tenants engaged in. It used interviews and workshops with landlords and tenant representatives to extract various empirical descriptions of the need for green leases, the positive aspects of green leases and deficiencies in green lease situations that induced failure.

#### 3.1 Data collection

We collected data from multiple sources over three years, including participatory observations of five to six forum meetings per year, formal (semistructured) and informal (*ad hoc*) interviews

with landlords and tenants, two respective focus groups with public and commercial landlords and two respective focus groups with the public and tenants (i.e. firms that lease offices, schools, retail stores, museums and other commercial spaces). The study conducted complementary workshops and interviews with six selected firms for clarifications and member-checking at the end of the project. All focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim (see Table 2 for respondent data).

The organizations and respondents were anonymized, and formal titles were rarely used for confidentiality to encourage frank and open descriptions. The researchers also ensured that the shared results among participants did not reveal individual tenant or landlord opinions to ensure clear and honest answers from all participants. Landlords and tenants had separate focus groups, and the researchers did not reveal who was in the other group. The analysis did not find any significant gender, years of experience or type of firm (public or commercial) differences. The typical participant had a university degree in business administration, political science or engineering, with a focus on CSR. Landlord representatives comprised facility managers, chief technology officers and sustainability managers. Tenant representatives tend to hold positions in administration and were responsible for their respective firm's leasing contracts.

The workshop lasted for 50 + 50 min (i.e. 2 h with a break in the middle) with one researcher as the moderator and one to three other researchers as participating discussion partners. The workshops allowed each respondent to express their organization's view on the ongoing sustainability activities and on what comprises sustainability. Some respondents displayed a narrower view that only included energy use and waste managers; others had a broader understanding of sustainability that also included social aspects (e.g. equality and democracy). The workshops with landlords were dominated by topics on how to get the tenants on board and challenges with managing their engagement once a green lease was signed. Furthermore, the tenants elaborated on



Table 2 Respondents (collected data – recorded and transcribed interviews and workshops)

#	Organization	Type	Sex	Experience (years)	Industry	Interview	Workshop	Member checking
<b>Landlords</b>								
1	Alfa	Commercial	M	+30	Real estate	X	X	X
2	Beta	Commercial	F	+10	"	X	X	
3	Gamma	Commercial	F	+20	"	X	X	
4	Delta	Commercial	M	+20	"		X	
5	Epsilon	Commercial	F	+10	"	X	X	X
6	Zeta	Commercial	F	+10	"	X	X	X
7	Eta	Commercial	M	+20		X	X	
8	Theta	Public	M	+40	"		X	
9	Jota	Public	F	+10	"	X	X	X
10	"	Public	M	<10	"		X	
11	Kappa	Public	M	+20	"		X	X
12	"	Public	F	+10	"	X	X	X
13	Lambda	Public	F	<10	"	X	X	
<b>Tenants</b>								
1	My	Commercial	F	+30	Finance	X	X	X
2	Ny	Commercial	F	+20	Insurance		X	
3	Xi	Commercial	M	+30	Real estate		X	
4	Omikron	Commercial	M	+10	Consulting		X	
5	Pi	Commercial	M	+10	Finance	X	X	X
6	Rho	Commercial	F	+30	Consumer products	X	X	X
7	Sigma	Commercial	F	+20	Advertising	X		
8	Tau	Commercial	F	+30	Culture		X	
9	Ypsilon	Public	M	+30	Technical support		X	
10	Fi	Public	M	+20	Higher education	X	X	X
11	Chi	Public	M	+30	Culture		X	
12	Psi	Public	F	<10	Higher education		X	
13	Omega	Public	F	+10	Higher education		X	
14	Heta	Public	F	+20	Real estate		X	
15	San	Public	M	+40	Media	X		X

Source: Authors' own work

positive engagement experiences and failed initiatives. Both sides also addressed issues on the landlord–tenant relationship. Interviews that lasted 1–2 h complemented the workshops. They allowed respondents to speak more freely and clarify things they said in the workshops. The data collection was augmented with informant interviews that lasted between 15 min and 2 h (see Table 3), furnishing information that offered contextual clarity to the findings and how to verify some respondent renderings.

The study adopted an iterative structure, inspired by systematic combining (Dubois and Gadde, 2002), using theoretical preconceptions to guide the data collection as empirical discovery guides theoretical elaborations. The results and the first round of interpretations were used to clarify interviews with the next group of participating organizations iteratively (i.e. interviewing landlords, then tenants, then landlords again).

### 3.2 Analytical process

Figure 1 illustrates the process of the study's data collection, literature review and analysis. We began with a literature review along with observations from landlord activities and initial focus groups to understand the green lease context. The study engaged two researchers for participatory observations (Figure 1, arrow 1), member meetings and informal interviews, which

yielded extensive field notes. In-depth interviews (arrows 2a, b), facilitated by the initial data (McCracken, 1988), provided an initial landlord perspective on the sufficiency-driven green lease initiative. This approach extended to the first workshops (arrows 3a, b; 4a, b) formed as structured focus groups (Morgan, 1997). The workshops clarified how landlords and tenants viewed their facilities, the relationship between the facilities and sustainability and the landlord–tenant relationship. Relating the results from the first round of focus groups to extant literature helped guide the inquiry further.

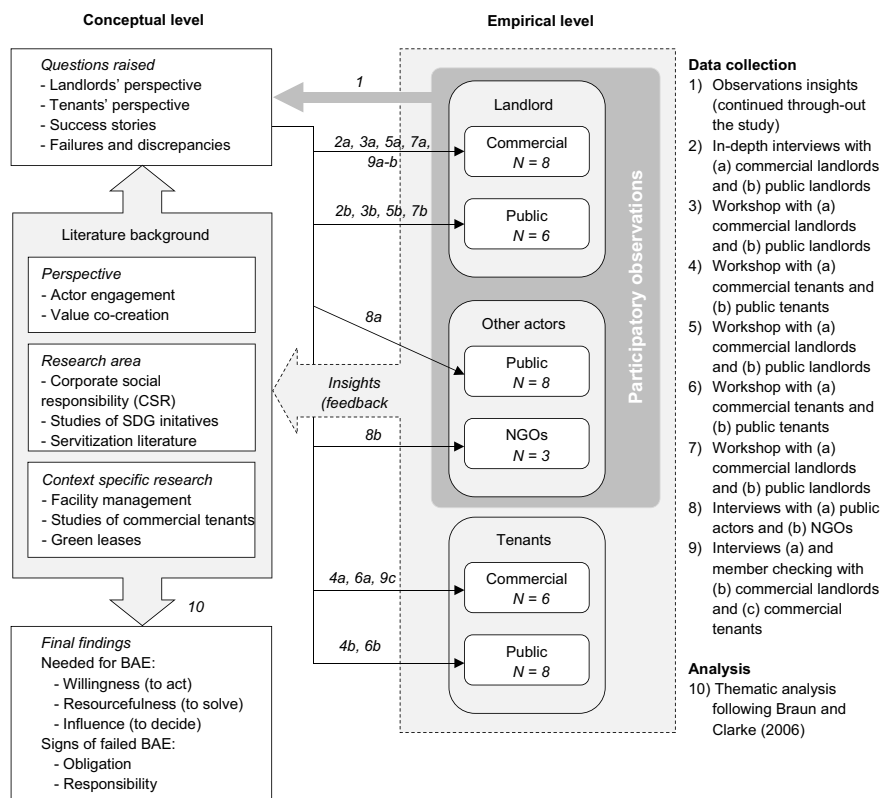
The second round of workshops (arrows 5a, b; 6a, b; 7a, b) allowed for followups, comparisons and clarifications. We used a third iteration where we visited municipal officials and NGOs (arrows 8a, b) to add an explanatory layer and confirm the findings. We conducted semistructured interviews with two landlords anxious to engage their tenants (arrow 9a) and follow up on their green lease experiences and an interview with a public tenant on the factors needed for BAE (arrow 9b) to strengthen the tenant perspective.

As the data collection progressed (arrow 10), two additional independent researchers used thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to search the texts for recurring patterns and differences in landlord and tenant BAE renderings regarding the

**Table 3** Informants (i.e., “other actors”—collected data documented in field notes)

#	Organization	Type	Organization/information offered
1	OA <sup>I</sup>	Commercial	Engineering firm; information about state-of-the-art installations
2	OA <sup>II</sup>	Commercial	IT firm; information about the adoption of facility management systems
3	OA <sup>III</sup>	Commercial	Solar photovoltaic supplier; information about landlord innovation ambitions
4	OA <sup>IV</sup>	Commercial	Consultant; information about the nature of construction projects
5	OA <sup>V</sup>	Commercial	Advertising agency; information about landlord communication strategies
6	OA <sup>VI</sup>	Public	Grant offering agency
7	OA <sup>VII</sup>	Commercial	Real estate firm that was not part of the project; clarified how real estate firms adhere to changes in regulations
8	OA <sup>VIII</sup>	Other	Research institute
9	OA <sup>IX</sup>	NGO	Interest group for real estate companies
10	OA <sup>X</sup>	NGO	Interest group focusing on efficient energy use in buildings
11	OA <sup>XI</sup>	NGO	Interest group that offers sustainability certificates

Source: Authors' own work

**Figure 1** The study approach

Source: Authors' own work

SDGs and green lease. Therefore, the analytical procedure followed the prescribed six phases. The two researchers that initiated the field study (collection 1–7) observed that the degree of agreement between landlords and their customers varied during the data collection. Similar insights were confirmed by the two researchers during phase 1 of the thematic analysis, where all researchers became familiar with the data and jotted “ideas and potential coding” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 86). Thus, all four researchers engaged in a thematic analysis of the transcriptions and field notes to appreciate which factors affected successful

(failed) value cocreation for sustainability. The findings followed phase 2's suggestion to create an “initial list of ideas about what is in the data and what is interesting about them” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 88).

When searching the data (using an iterative process) for clarifications on whether green leases were experienced as successful and beneficial from the involved actors' perspective, respondents from the landlord–tenant relationship frequently referenced “rådighet” – a Swedish concept with no direct English translation – as a crucial aspect. Therefore, phase 3, which:

Re-focuses the analysis at the broader level of themes, rather than codes, involves sorting the different codes into potential themes and collating all the relevant coded data extracts within the identified themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 89).

The concept “rådighet” indicated a central notion (when engagement was described) or an excuse (when there was a lack of engagement).

We selected a “set of candidate themes, and it involves the refinement of those themes” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 91), as per phase 4. We identified three prevailing aggregated themes – willingness, resourcefulness and influence – on positive engagement outcomes and, hence, the factors needed for BAE. We also identified two aggregated themes – obligations and responsibilities – that signaled failure (i.e. absent engagement where the tenants did not engage at all or even negative engagement when they expressed being reluctant toward the initiative). In this process, it was evident that the empirical clarifications of when the firms ended up with BAE were found at a paragraph level rather than in single sentences. Thus, we started to draft a narrative to explain the factors needed for BAE and how it was related to firms aiming to contribute to the SDGs.

Building on systematic combining (Dubois and Gadde, 2002), the process above also involved connecting the codes and aggregated themes to actor engagement theory. The emerging concepts were grounded in the empirical data and affected by the engagement nomenclature. Thus, phase 5, involving “defining and naming themes,” was influenced by the actor engagement nomenclature. The results were edited and classified as those that support BAE and those that signaled a negative or absent engagement outcome (arrow 10). Finally, in phase 6, we crafted this report to “tell the complicated story of your data in a way [that] convinces the reader of the merit and validity of your analysis” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 93). All in all, we condensed the data as an illustrative case that allows for identifying the nuances that make up the factors needed for understanding BAE. As stipulated by phase 6 (Braun and Clarke, 2006), all researchers participated in the member-checking (arrows 1, 8–9) to obtain clarifications and comments on the findings.

## 4. Results

The results identify central factors needed for a business practice relevant – mid-range theory – understanding of BAE. Below, we present the general findings related to the study of SDG-driven business initiative (i.e. value proposition) – the green lease – followed by a discussion of the mid-range theory conceptualization of central factors of BAE. Thus, what is needed to understand and facilitate positive outcomes of BAE is the actors’ perception of willingness (to act), resourcefulness (the cognitive and organizational ability to contribute and solve issues) and influence (the perceived empowerment to be able to affect decisions) regarding solutions outcomes of the business initiative at hand. Furthermore, failing to adhere to, and facilitate these factors of BAE, may result in absent positive (or even negative) outcomes of BAE. As such, engagement might instead generate a perceived obtrusive commitment constituted merely by nonbeneficial obligations and responsibilities. The results indicate signs of when there is a risk of absent or negative BAE, manifested in actor excuses that point to other actors’ obligations and responsibilities. Each factor and sign are discussed below.

### 4.1 Basis for successful green leases

The study indicates that green leases are, as argued by other researchers (Janda *et al.*, 2016), mostly landlord-led and in the form of an offer and value proposition to engage in some of the SDGs. Some participating landlords decided not to actively market and offer green leases. Few customers showed an active interest and instead perceived the green lease as a negative enforced commitment. Several landlords stated that many customers initially were interested in green leases given their increasing focus on sustainability. However, they became hesitant once they recognized the needed commitment. Landlord Alfa described green leases as still in their infancy, despite being around for several years:

The green lease is on the table. [However], it is hard for some customers—it seems like public tenants are better, given that they [the tenants] must report statistics. [Even so, the green lease] is on the rise. So, I believe there is a firm base for sustainability initiatives today, but it is still in its infancy.

Although customers recognized that they could benefit from the SDG-driven business initiative, several landlords described the green lease adoption as unsuccessful and stopped using them. Conversely, other landlords considered the SDG-driven business initiative to be positive, if not optimal, inducing them to incorporate the green lease’s most important clauses, such as renewable electricity, waste management and other resource uses, into their standard leasing agreements rather than using the green lease as a separate add-on.

Many landlords felt the decreasing frequency of landlord–tenant meetings could explain the relatively weak outcome of the green lease as interest declined over time. It was perceived as indicating the lack of lasting relevance of green leases. The green lease was reduced to being a ceremonial document primarily relevant to the initial contractual agreement, enabling the tenant to make strategic claims of “greenness.” Guided by the initial findings, the data analysis focused on factors that could shed light on the consequent aspects regarding the success or failure of using green leases. We identified three core factors or codified themes – willingness, resourcefulness and influence – needed for BAE and successful green lease outcomes.

#### 4.1.1 Willingness

A partner’s willingness to act affects whether an SDG-driven business initiative will induce a positive outcome. For example, several landlords noted that a major challenge in implementing and upholding the idea of continuous development initiatives of green leases was that the landlord and customer did not maintain the same level of interest in an ongoing dialog, once established. Thus, in hindsight, respondents could reflect on both partners’ willingness to act. Landlord Delta described one way to secure both partners’ willingness to act by identifying and framing sustainability challenges such that they are compelling for collaboration:

We need to find the common challenges with the tenants that are interesting enough to continue [working] together. There is a lot of potential for improvement there.

Several landlords described many customers wanting green leases when they signed their first lease. This situation was also reflected in some tenant interviews; for example, tenant Ny stressed that it was important:

[...] To have a good dialog with the landlord so that we can agree on how to share responsibility [and] work on improvements or minor changes. It may

be small things, but [...] both parties show interest in changing something. [It] is an important attitude; I think, [it] will [...] help with improvements.

Thus, landlords and tenants must be interested in action and collaboration. However, the willingness to fulfill the green lease requirements diminished rather quickly. Unfortunately, the landlords did not typically respond to this reduced willingness by providing additional support and engagement. Instead, the fading interest in the green lease engagements was mirrored by the landlord's side. Even so, some customers continued the engagement, as another tenant described:

It is important to think about energy and the environment. There are probably many different things to highlight within this [area], which would interest firms [i.e., tenants [...]]. What are your priorities? How can we help each other save? And what do you need to consider? I mean, it must be beneficial also for [my landlord] to assure that everything goes well. So, we get a good environment, clean air, and green energy.

The results show that the willingness factor is related to wanting to do something and subsequently acting on it. Therefore, it is insufficient to have a positive disposition toward something. The partners must also be prepared to actively engage in the matter. As described by a landlord Kappa:

One [must have] "rådighet." And let me make this clear. We take our responsibility [and] deliver [it] with [...] ambition. And then you, as tenants, also need to have some kind of [...] Make an effort to live up to [it].

A willingness to act is needed to yield positive value cocreation and sustainability outcomes. However, the initial period in a (landlord–tenant) business relation was positively oriented. The partners mainly focused on practical matters, such as the design of an office (new tenants often require retrofitting) and other forms of adaptations. The need to focus on such everyday practices meant that the sustainability dialog suffered, and so did the resulting willingness to act per the green lease. The findings show that when planning for an SDG-driven business initiative (e.g. in the early discussion stages), addressing and understanding whether both partners want to act in each area is important for the value proposition viability.

#### 4.1.2 Resourcefulness

The second coded theme regards expectations and responses of acting in a certain area, such as making the south-facing offices cooler and less bright and ensuring the actor has the resourcefulness to solve the problem. Landlords and their customers stated that reaching a common understanding of how to solve issues is vital to jointly identifying and developing sustainability solutions. For instance, tenants do not have the option of facility management as a core competency. Therefore, they need the landlord's experience to solve sustainability issues during facility use. Moreover, landlords highlighted that some ingenuity is needed to achieve substantial sustainability outcomes, which cannot be expected of tenants. It requires adopting a systems perspective with more actors (e.g. other service and consulting firms, contractors and energy companies) beyond merely viewing the green leases as a formal contract.

Tenants, by default, are disadvantaged with limited building knowledge, which limits their ingenuity potential. For example, a customer reflected upon how the landlord offered them various building and energy use information. Tenant Sigma noted that it was hard to interpret the offered numbers when she was not familiar with them:

[You can by analogy] think about banks. 0.5% in interest—is that a high or a low interest rate? I know a person who has experienced a 12% interest rate and thought that was low. And today, those buying [a house] think a 1.5% interest rate is too high! You leave it to the receiver [of the information] to interpret the information openly—and that goes as much for energy use as for bank interest rates.

Thus, the resourcefulness to solve a problem requires grasping a situation, making sense of opportunities and solving technological (e.g. improve the indoor climate), human (e.g. increase well-being), environmental (e.g. reduce greenhouse gases) or other (e.g. dealing with upcoming sustainability regulations) problems. If correctly planned and managed, an SDG-driven initiative can become a means to strengthen the resourcefulness (knowledge and ingeniousness of how to solve problems) primarily of the customer. As one tenant described:

[The landlord] understands this with maintenance and life cycle costs quite well. So, on their own initiative, they have also started to replace a lot of old lighting. [...] And they do it pretty well anyway. So that's a lot of lighting we've done with them. The property management has changed some systems for ventilation, heating, and cooling, which we pushed for a little extra (when we had the opportunity) that they needed to do [it].

While the tenant (customer) can be expected to have the least knowledge about the acquired resource of the two partners, from the example, acting in parallel with the landlord (supplier) gave the tenant (customer) a sense of resourcefulness that meant that they jointly made the lighting better and more energy efficient. Thus, an SDG-driven business initiative can empower customers if the interorganizational governance is supportive, something several landlords in this study strived for. The tenants became extra eager to engage by increasing their knowledge and ingenuity in coexisting with changing market needs. Landlord Theta notes:

These new regulatory requirements to report energy consumption [...] We see that many larger tenants need to know more about the energy consumption for the leased space, [...] what they can do about it, and what the landlord can do about it because they (tenants) must enter that [data] into a declaration of energy use.

Other landlords note that, by tradition, the transactional and contractual relationship between landlords and tenants could be a problem in encouraging the tenants to act and increase their competence in facility-related issues. Thus, resourcefulness, where all actors have basic knowledge and creativity about how to act on the SDG (i.e. ingenuity), is needed for BAE.

#### 4.1.3 Influence

The results also indicate that, for a successful SDG-driven business initiative, it is essential for the partners (i.e. the supplier and customer) to understand and potentially renegotiate their rights to decide. Therefore, it is important to clarify who has the influence to decide. Customers had no problem with having their landlord carry out energy optimization on the facility if it did not affect their well-being. However, they wished for the possibility to influence how and when it was done. Landlord Kappa described the concept of "rådighet" as entailing what an actor can influence, highlighting the importance of clarifying what can be influenced (rather than just clarifying contractual matters and obligations) in the green lease dialog.

Respondent descriptions indicated that the influence to decide had historically been closely related to various contractual addendums that specified the boundaries for who did what. For example, tenant Xi notes:



I think the demarcation form lists used are old-fashioned and counterproductive. No one will raise the question, “shall we share these products or these services” in a building. I mean, we are located together with 100 others [tenants] in our building—there are things we could share, things we could do together. [However], when you have a demarcation list, it becomes “this is mine, and this is your responsibility.”

Thus, the dominant view about the one with the influence to decide was strongly linked to the formal aspects of a leasing contract. At the same time, more relational-oriented landlords and their customers indicated a willingness to have a more dyadic view: “we are in this together.” Landlord Theta summarized the current situation:

I believe the real estate industry must do something they have not done before—be more active. Tenants do not know about [buildings]—they are engaged in their businesses of retailing or manufacturing, and they do their best to work with sustainability [in their core business]. We need to understand what they need, visualize it, and suggest what they can do. We are not used to this; we are a rather passive industry. If you look at the contracts, the tenants have a lot of responsibilities. And this is odd, given that all other industries include services and getting things that can be worked out [without further negotiation]; but [the real estate industry] is not like that.

The results show that influence is related to rights and the partners’ perception of room for action. Thus, the landlord or a third party might carry out an activity, but that activity can be envisioned and initiated by a customer (or vice versa). Central to this factor is that companies adopting SDG-driven business initiatives for use in their customer relationships must set up offerings such that there is scope for all actors (including the customer) to affect the design, implementation and outcomes related to the initiative. As described by a tenant:

Although we have the right according to the agreement, we do not [always] do so. Instead, we have this shared responsibility then, which is formulated so that you should work together. And as long as it doesn’t bother us, we let them optimize operations. But we know that if we think they have done too much, then we have the right to say, “Now you must pull back.”

The quote illustrates a tenant that feels secure in that the tenant has the “last say” on certain rights of the green lease, i.e. they are the ones that set the boundaries for action.

#### 4.2 Signal for green lease failure

Respondents used a different vocabulary when discussing the absence of desired outcomes, or even failure, of SDG-driven business initiatives due to a lack of willingness, resourcefulness or influence. Successful green leases, for example, yielded clear energy reductions and improved waste management practices. Even so, failures meant a lack of BAE, with limited incremental energy reductions (if any) and unchanged waste levels and procedures. A common experience among the landlords was summarized by one workshop respondent:

Many tenants don’t keep up with the green lease agreement. And it is not legally binding.

Two indicators of failed actor engagement emerged from discussions. Landlords and tenants described limited (or lack of) green lease effects as due to viewing the green lease as merely imposed obligations and responsibilities, rather than as an invitation to co-evolve through mutual willingness, resourcefulness or influence.

##### 4.2.1 Too much focus on obligations

Discussions on aspects regarding a partner’s obligations signal BAE failure. Descriptions of green lease failure were related to an increased focus on commitments and whether the other

party lived up to them. Another reason was when respondents had sustainability demands on the other party and felt the party was dependent on them to solve those problems. As described by a tenant regarding expected landlord stewardship:

[Their maintenance staff] must have the right mindset to help us [tenants make] improvements.

As illustrated by the quote, the tenant had large expectations regarding getting quick support from the landlord. Another tenant clarified that the landlord had the main obligation:

Then the energy supply [responsibility] is on the landlord when it comes to the facility. [...] they also have the ability to optimize operations, so to speak. Because [...] they [...] own those systems, we can only demand that they do not do too much, so to speak, that it comes under our [...] What the business requires [...] it’s this type of [...] discussion we have. [...] But it is still the property owner who owns the system, so we become more dependent for energy performance on them operating the facility in the way we wish.

Thus, most of the tenants seem to place a lot of obligations on the landlord, which partly pacified them and partly became a weak basis for engagement.

##### 4.2.2 Too much focus on responsibilities

Getting caught in clarifying who has the responsibility also signals BAE failure. For example, landlords and customers noted that focusing excessively on responsibility divisions was counterproductive to the collaboration on solving sustainability issues. In such cases, the focus was on obligations and responsibilities instead of the willingness to act, resourcefulness to solve problems and influence to decide on solutions. One example is tenant Zeta who had a clear focus on responsibilities:

In the agreement, you work with a division of [responsibility lists] so that it is the responsibility of [someone] or the other. [...] But are there any points that you can collaborate on? For example, changing the lighting. Maybe fixtures are owned by the landlord, and the bulb or tube itself is ours.

This heavy focus on the division of responsibilities was also confirmed by a landlord:

In most industries, the customer gets a lot of services and “add-ons” but our [the real estate industry’s] leasing agreements equally demand a lot from the tenants. [This has led to a situation] where large customers expect more from us.

Thus, business (landlord–tenant) relations dominated by frequent discussions regarding obligations or attribution of responsibility also suffer from absent BAE.

Costs associated with the initiatives were seldom mentioned in the workshops and interviews, likely because (in a sustainability context) tenants seemed to expect that they could not be bothered with more than minor costs, and the potential larger momentary cost was perceived by landlords as a long-term investment that would generate more revenue in the long run (e.g. through energy reduction innovations). Landlords also indicated that tenants expect them to handle most costs, a view the discussions in the tenant workshops confirmed. However, when customers wondered whose responsibility, it was to take things further; cost-related questions became relevant, resulting in potential conflicts regarding who benefited from the initiative the most and who should cover the cost. It was sometimes resolved by various ways of sharing the cost (typically having a part of the cost added to the leasing cost), which added an extra layer of complexity, highlighting the importance of managing the factors needed of BAE such that both parties felt it was a fair outcome. Thus, the cost from either expectation could create

problems to reach solutions and reduce the potential positive effect of the SDG-driven business initiative.

#### 4.3 Avoiding being dependent on SDG engagement

An in-depth analysis of the three factors needed for facilitating positive outcomes from BAE indicated that they have a hierarchal relation. BAE is dependent on actors that can decide on the rights and scope for action, being able to influence and cogovern the activities at hand. Once established, the actors need resourcefulness (i.e. knowledge and ingeniousness) to initiate and solve challenges. Finally, there must also be a willingness to act (i.e. to take active interest in action and collaboration). It may also be challenging to manage the factors needed for BAE when the involved actors get too involved in discussions on obligations and responsibilities.

One of the landlords opted to stop using the green lease as some of its content was part of established norms and standards and other parts were considered irrelevant to the tenants. The solution was to take some of the paragraphs in the green lease and put them in the regular (ordinary) leasing contract (i.e. it became a demand rather than a [voluntary] value proposition). The firm that took this decision was one of the leaders in the commercial real estate industry's transformation toward sustainable practices. Moreover, the formalization of some actions toward the SDGs meant that they reduced the need to establish joint engagement. Instead, sustainability became a contractual obligation that was independent of BAE with however limited results in terms of continuous future codevelopments and big-scale transformations.

### 5. Discussion

The findings on actor engagement in the context of an SDG-driven business initiative (the green lease) suggest that actors' (e.g. tenants) mere interest and good intentions are not enough. Instead, all three of the identified motivational-driven factors needs, in various scope and depth, to be considered in relation to (and with) the actor(s) at hand. The identified motivational-driven factors that are central to BAE are willingness, resourcefulness and influence, serving as foundation that identifies what is needed to enable and facilitate BAE. Thus, it is important to recognize that willingness is more than just a matter of interest and acceptance, resourcefulness and ability is more than just being knowledgeable and aware, and influence is more than just being passively involved. For these factors to evolve, a cogoverned approach (Røndell *et al.*, 2016) is recommended, where the initiating firm must secure that the involved actors are (or can become) capacitated, in terms of facilitating for motivational-driven factors of BAE to emerge. Furthermore, the results explain why value propositions (i.e. initiatives) that require BAE to generate desired outcomes instead might fail, due to actors limiting their engagement to mere obligation and responsibility discussions, which induces only limited or symbolic outcomes (Dahlin *et al.*, 2021; Schons and Steinmeier, 2016).

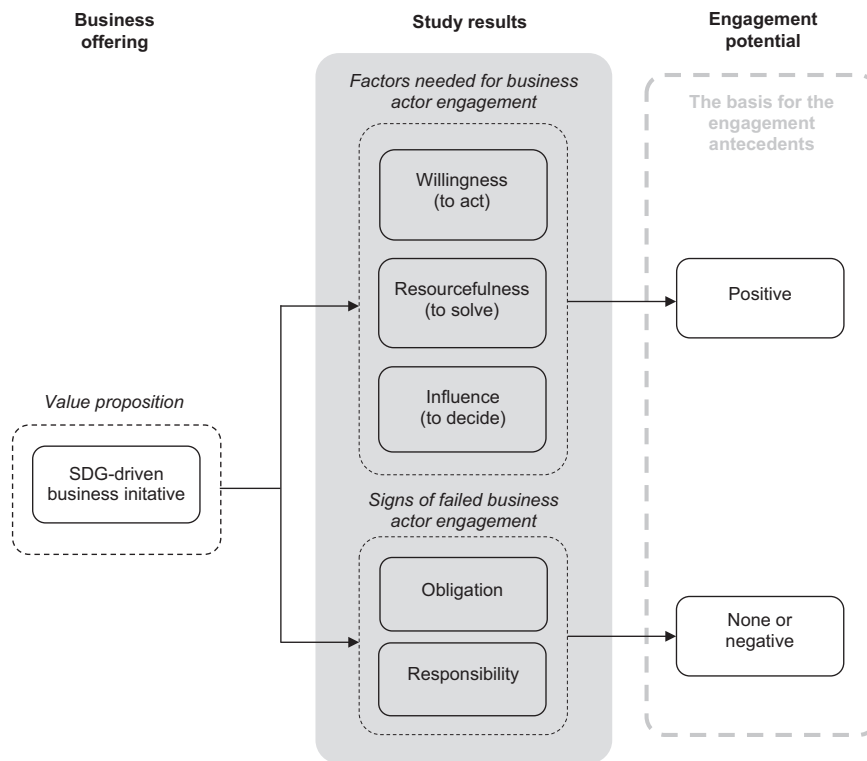
The results complement engagement theory by clarifying the factors needed for understanding actor engagement in a B2B setting – i.e. it adds further insights to the motivational and behavioral dimensions of the engagement concept specific to B2B settings. Hence, it offers mid-range theory developments on what

must be in place for BAE before the earlier identified antecedents to and (outcome) types of BAE (Ekman *et al.*, 2021). Evidently, suppliers and customers (and other relevant actors) must clarify and establish a common understanding of their respective willingness to act (not just showing “interest”), resourcefulness to solve problems (including organizational considerations) and perceived influence on designing and generating solutions to achieve positive outcomes. The conceptual model (Figure 2) shows this logic along with showing the signs of when the factors needed for engaging with the SDGs are not established, inducing failure (absent engagement). The factors needed for BAE are superordinate to the antecedents of BAE (i.e. engagement connectedness and disposition). The three factors are embedded in the motivational and behavioral dimensions of the engagement concept and constitute the factors needed for generating multiactor beneficial outcomes from BAE.

Furthermore, to achieve BAE that generates positive outcomes, the various actors must focus on identifying challenges that are manageable and generate relevant benefits for actors by addressing and enabling knowledge sharing from the supplier to the customer, strengthening the customer's abilities and capabilities. Engagement initiatives should not solely be based on the initiator's (e.g. supplier's) needs and wants, as it will risk limiting the development of additional benefits that go beyond the initiator's vision and perceived outcomes. The outcome of an initiative can also be a matter known by the receiving organization, such as the customer, which can create challenges or even induce failure if the receiving organization is experiencing the initiative as subpar.

This study's example of an SDG-driven business initiative has traditionally, as earlier identified, been mostly supplier-led (Janda *et al.*, 2016) given that most landlords outperform their tenants regarding knowledge and expertise about the facility. Therefore, other forms of engagement initiatives, such as those led by customers, must be further explored to consider whether the factors needed are the same for customer-led or fully bilateral relations. Furthermore, there were examples where tenants “demanded” a green lease to fulfill their own SDG goals (i.e. the customer was the initiating party) for benefits in the wider service ecosystem. But the process that followed (to achieve the outcomes) induced a decreasing engagement; thus, once initiated, the tenants handed over implementations and any developments to the landlord in the form obligations and responsibilities. The results indicate that full customer leadership may be rare, as the value propositions (e.g. regarding SDGs) seldom are the customer's primary goal and core competence. Thus, it is often hard to achieve and sustain bilateral BAE over time.

The results also include examples of when the initiative did not result in BAE, inducing symbolic outcomes in advertising or on Web pages. Such an outcome was typically exemplified by customers that initially considered the initiative as interesting. However, as the collaboration continued, they started to experience the needed engagement as a matter of obligations and responsibilities. Here, an SDG-driven business initiative is a special form of value proposition that invites actors to cocreate different benefits for a good cause. However, the needed actor engagement might pose conflicting perceptions of the motivational and behavioral dimensions of the engagement concept, as they only focus on what they “must do” to receive

**Figure 2** Conceptual model of the factors needed for business actor engagement

Source: Authors' own work

benefits rather than what benefits they might obtain from their engagement. This situation accords with prior research, where conflicts can be grounded in ill-defined and unfulfilled goal alignment (Cuevas *et al.*, 2015), value alignment (Wang and Zhang, 2017), like-mindedness (Abreu *et al.*, 2021) or weak engagement disposition (Ekman *et al.*, 2021). Such conflicts generate challenges that may reduce initiatives to mere symbolic acts.

Typically, discussions about obligations and responsibilities are warning signs of when an initiative will fail. The study suggests that there is a risk of getting caught in such discussions or merely using the "not my obligation or responsibility" as an excuse for lack of engagement when the factors needed for BAE are unfulfilled. Importantly, the results do not stipulate that discussing obligations and responsibilities should be avoided, especially when discussing contracts. However, being trapped in such discussions without elaborating on the influence, resourcefulness and willingness factors should be considered a warning sign. Initiatives based on sustainability harbor the risk that the actor will accept it, even if the resulting engagement disposition is low (Ekman *et al.*, 2021). This study contributes to such insights and adds the importance of having the factors needed for BAE for engagement to unfold. After all, SDG-driven business initiatives are a form of a value proposition upon which any involved actor must act. Having a (focused) sense of obligation reduces an initiative to being voluntary, but making sure that the actor wants and can act on it increases the chance of success.

The resulting conceptual model (Figure 2) offers managerial guidance for B2B firms that develops engagement initiatives; it complements prior studies on BAE antecedents and types (Ekman *et al.*, 2021) where the factors needed for BAE can explain less impactful types of or absence of engagement. It also offers insights to firms that strive to act on the SDGs (George *et al.*, 2016) and depend on other partners' active participation (Bocken *et al.*, 2014; Narayan and Tidström, 2021). As the model prescribes, firms that develop value propositions that require engagement (rather than just mere interest and acceptance) must build the foundation and probe whether their partners can influence the matter, whether they have the resourcefulness to engage in it and whether they are highly willing to act. Together, they set the factors needed for BAE.

The factors needed for BAE relate to the institutional logic at hand (Vargo and Lusch, 2016). Thus, a managerial implication is that engagement initiatives must be linked to the behaviors and emotions of the involved partners and institutional setting. First, the influence to decide closely relates to the selected issue's rules and regulations. Second, the resourcefulness to solve is closely related to the resources at hand (e.g. the partner's contribution to knowledge, time or finances). Finally, the willingness to act closely relates to the partners' current state of mind and norms and the right thing to do. Connecting these results to the BAE's antecedents (Ekman *et al.*, 2021), the first two can be expected to have a stronger connection to the BAE's behavioral dimension, and the last, the emotional dimension of BAE.

## 6. Conclusion

This study offers mid-range theory developments of the BAE concept (Brodie *et al.*, 2019) by suggesting factors – from the motivational and behavioral dimensions – needed for engagement in B2B settings. Clarifying signs that indicate a risk of BAE failure or absence complements the discussion. The factors and signs are relevant for an in-depth theoretical understanding and business implementation of actor engagement.

### 6.1 Theoretical implications

In response to the first research question, the results suggest three constituting factors that must be in place for (positive outcomes of) BAE to unfold: willingness, resourcefulness and influence. This study indicates that all three factors need to be addressed as foundations for engagement. Hence, the factors are needed (in varying scope and depth) for engagement to exist, setting the basis for actor engagement and its antecedents to emerge. Antecedents such as dispositions (Brodie *et al.*, 2019) affect the relationship (connectedness) and BAE outcomes (Ekman *et al.*, 2021). Even so, without the factors needed for BAE, the disposition and connectedness become irrelevant, given that the presence of the factors determines whether BAE and its related antecedents and outcomes will emerge. The integrated processual and structural complexity in business markets (e.g. interdependency between actors' activities) may explain why engagement in B2B settings requires factors that seem more related to pursuing long-term benefits than in B2C settings, where interdependencies between vendors and buyers are short termed (Beckers *et al.*, 2018; Kumar and Pansari, 2016).

In response to the second research question, the results noted that signs of when the factors are lacking included being trapped in discussions about obligations and responsibilities, which yields negative or absent BAE. Such problems become extra important when firms adopt SDG-driven business initiatives to act on the current environmental and social challenges, together with their partners. The results also offered one example where a firm abandoned the need for (joint and voluntary) BAE by including some sustainability aspects in the regular contract that made some collaborations mandatory. It was beyond this study to examine to what degree such a “hard” approach induced other outcomes, but it partly signals how challenging it is to manage the factors needed for BAE.

Summarizing the findings, we adopted an engagement perspective rooted in an S-D logic to understand what must be in place to get positive BAE outcomes (in the SDG-driven business initiative context). This approach offered a conceptualization of the factors needed for BAE and an identification of the signs that signal a lack of the factors. The resulting model offers guidance on how to plan and manage engagement initiatives for mutual benefits. Thus, the study offers complementary insights necessary for mid-range theory developments on BAE by combining theoretical refinements with business practice for a B2B and sustainability context. The results show that the engagement concept in B2B settings (unlike submissive loyalty and commitment toward a brand or product in B2C settings) must be understood as commonly guided by “a cause” or common goals, such as value cocreation for long-term sustainability (Dahlin *et al.*, 2021). By elaborating and developing capacities that support the

factors needed for BAE and by avoiding being trapped in discussions about responsibilities and obligations (of “who does what”), we get a better understanding of what is needed for engagement in B2B markets.

### 6.2 Managerial implications

For managers, the study shows that firms must further recognize the relational aspects of how customers perceive their role regarding what they are expected to know and do, what they are allowed to do and what they can do when introducing a business initiative that are dependent on actor engagement. Thus, the initiating firm must establish interorganizational cogovernance procedures (Røndell *et al.*, 2016) to ensure that the factors needed for BAE are mutually considered. The three factors of willingness, resourcefulness and influence are central to establishing engagement in the supplier–customer dyad and the service ecosystem. Maintaining continuous supplier–customer engagement is challenging. Therefore, managers should place themselves in the “shoes of the partner” such that they can relate to the potential challenges an initiative may cause from the customer's standpoint. Understanding of the relevant actors' perspective, such as the customer and supplier, means that the providing firm (i.e. initiator) can help them (i.e. the service ecosystem actors) discover and understand how they can choose to actively engage in the activities needed for the value cocreation process to unfold.

For sustainability initiatives regarding the SDGs, the results accord with prior research (Hermelingmeier and von Wirth, 2021), where educating partnering actors about sustainability issues enables them to become part of the solution. Even though it might not lead to all the factors needed for BAE being in place, it will shed light on the other actor's perspective and goals when they learn about the providing firm's aspirations, which are equally important for future interactions and approaches of engagement. Given the context of “the grand challenges” – i.e. the SDGs (George *et al.*, 2016) – customers may lack resources, such as time and knowledge to understand, accept and implement SDG-driven business initiatives in their everyday business.

Managers are advised to collaborate with policymakers, NGOs and national industry associations to standardize and incentivize the factors needed for BAE, i.e. facilitate the development of resources that offer more easy-accessed frameworks, tools, templates and guidelines on vital steps to fulfill SDGs through engagement. Thus, there is a need for tools and best practices such that SDGs can be easily adopted and diffused by various (firm) stakeholders per their capacity. Moreover, getting policymakers onboard can support platform building where firms can collaborate on their business initiatives with a broader network of actors and, thus, promote and facilitate the exchange and regeneration of existing intranetwork resources, especially when they are scarce. Extant research, for example, indicates various potential relationships between the 17 SDGs and areas of an extended value chain (Montiel *et al.*, 2021), viewing markets as horizontally integrated service ecosystems instead of vertical linear supply chains. Such insights should be complemented with the findings from this study to see how different SDGs relate to current standards and certificates, facilitating the diffusion of business initiatives.



For managers, clarifying the business implications of a firm initiative and relating them to standards and certificates through policy and managerial praxis, can accelerate the effects of the firm initiative. From a managerial standpoint, making a business initiative a standardized process improves the possibilities for having actors identify and fulfill the factors needed for BAE quicker and potentially benefit them by sharing resources in ways not considered. Some national industry associations are uniquely positioned to assist such developments given their broad reach and the breadth of existing guidelines and templates. By considering this study's findings, managers can guide their firms and collaborate with engaged peers on how to ground and fulfill the SDGs.

### 6.3 Limitations and future studies

A field study of the commercial real estate industry in a highly developed country like Sweden has limitations regarding empirical generalizations. This study does not allow for statistical or cross-industry generalizations. Even though cases might allow for theoretical generalizations, additional studies in different contexts and the development of variables for the three factors needed for BAE and the two aspects that signal the lack of BAE would allow for further theorization and subsequent testing. For example, future research can explore to what degree the factors needed for BAE affect the goal fulfillment of an engagement initiative. Future studies addressing the three factors can also shed light on how various parts of the 17 SDGs functions as elements for firms that strive to innovate for sustainability.

The study also indicates that the firm's aim to contribute to a greater cause, spanning multiple SDGs, (e.g. participating landlords often wished to position themselves as "urban developers," taking social and environmental stewardship) is a strategy that requires a systems perspective and simultaneously faces a broad span of institutional arrangements and logics (Vargo *et al.*, 2023; Ekman *et al.*, 2021; Michel *et al.*, 2019). Learning more about such stewardship firms requires that the perspective moves from the dyad to an ecosystem perspective. Future actor engagement studies will benefit from the broader perspective, allowing for the inclusion of additional new actors (e.g. a triad) using network or ecosystem perspectives. Such studies can also explore and clarify extended value cocreation and engagement possibilities regarding the SDGs and how the cocreated benefits and costs are managed by the involved actors. Future studies should also, even further, elaborate on viewing B2B contexts as "markets as ecosystems" by acknowledging a less dominant "from-to" perspective, and instead embrace a "with" perspective. As such, the understanding of BAE needs to also entail issues of how the "customer" perceives the "supplier" engagement and motivationally driven interest to generate intended long-term business market outcomes.

Finally, the three factors needed for BAE were explored in a context with limited examples of outcomes (e.g. reduced energy, water and waste or brighter and more ergonomic offices). Therefore, further studies can explore other forms of engagement initiatives and their outcomes, regarding how willingness, resourcefulness and influence may spur actions that contribute to the providing firm's aspirations for engagement in other industries. This study's model can be a valuable tool when continuing to explore engagement initiatives, as engagement is a basic aspect of

achieving system-wide transformations. Thus, willingness, resourcefulness, influence, obligations and responsibilities (failure) need further exploration via study replication in other industries and through scale development and testing.

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