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Research paper

Brand affiliations toward business relationships, communication, and performance in B2B food SCM settings: Conceptualization and validation☆

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ABSTRACT

The food supply chain is a process that entails planning, managing, and optimizing the flow of food products from their origins to customers. This study examined the relationship between brand affiliations and business performance, mediated through business-to-business (B2B) relationships and communication in B2B food supply chain management (SCM) settings. A sample of 421 respondents was analyzed using the covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM) approach. The findings revealed that B2B relationships, particularly those such as buyer–supplier engagement and buyer–supplier commitment, serve as significant mediators between brand affiliations (specifically, brand affordability, brand parity, and brand loyalty) and buyer–supplier communication, as well as between brand affiliations and business performance, except for brand affect. This research contributes to the branding literature by introducing the concept of brand affiliation within the context of B2B small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). It also offers practical insights for B2B food supply chain firms, highlighting strategies to enhance business performance by fostering a strong brand affiliation in conjunction with a robust buyer–supplier relationship.

1. Introduction

The revenue in the food market has amounted to USD 9.43 trillion in 2025, and it is expected to grow annually by 6.41 % (Statista, 2025). In this regard, food supply chain management (SCM) plays a vital role in the food market. Food SCM includes a variety of processes and actions that guarantee that food is produced, processed, transported, and delivered efficiently and safely (Zhong et al., 2017). In addition, the SCM of food differs completely from other supply chains in terms of maintaining freshness, safety, quality of food, and timely delivery, all of which make food SCM a challenging task (Wu et al., 2016). Therefore, efficient food SCM is essential for maintaining a consistent, safe food supply, eliminating waste, and satisfying customer demands (Annosi et al., 2021; Perdana et al., 2022). Despite the importance of food SCM, the number of studies on this topic is still limited (e.g., Jamaluddin & Saibani, 2021), leaving a gap for further research.

Most suppliers and buyers in the B2B food supply chain are small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). For instance, in the EU (European Union), the food and drink industry comprises 290,000 SMEs (having less than 250 employees and 50 million euros yearly turnover), making up 99 % of the industry (Food Drink Europe, 2025). SMEs in India represent 95 % of the industry (Singh et al., 2019). SMEs are often vulnerable due to their lack of resources (e.g., technological, human, and financial resources) and imbalance of power among the suppliers and buyers (Zaman et al., 2021; Zimmermann et al., 2024). Zaman et al. (2021) showed how French restaurants struggled during COVID-19 and the role of third-party platforms and mobile apps in overcoming their lack of resources and facilitating their distribution. Most of the studies in food SCM either focus on waste management and sustainable performance (e.g., Bourlakis et al., 2014; Vo-Thanh et al., 2021) or on

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technology adoption (e.g., Singh et al., 2019; Zaman et al., 2021). However, according to our knowledge, no study has intended to understand the complex buyer-supplier relationship in food SMEs.

In addition, technological advancements have brought significant transformations in food production, preparation, and delivery services, making food business more accessible for individuals and startups (Hwang et al., 2019; Vo-Thanh et al., 2021; Zaman et al., 2021). For instance, the emergence of cloud kitchens has drastically changed the food industry (John, 2021; Sharma & Dey, 2021). Cloud kitchens, also known as virtual kitchens, ghost kitchens, or dark kitchens, are commercial cooking spaces with no in-person dining facilities. They provide takeaway services via online platforms or telephone (Kulshreshtha & Sharma, 2022). Cloud kitchens are often strategically located to optimize costs, such as low-rent areas to reduce costs or close to significant demand points to optimize delivery costs and time (Deepak et al., 2022). According to Globe Newswire (2024), the Indian cloud kitchen market was valued at USD 1.13 billion in 2024 and is expected to reach USD 2.84 billion by 2030, rising at a CAGR (Compound Annual Growth Rate) of 16.66 %. Although these kitchens do not offer any dining facilities, a significant amount of food can be produced in these central or bulk-production kitchens to accommodate a variety of menu options and catering needs (Hasnan & Ramli, 2020). Most cloud kitchens have 6 to 7 employees, putting them in the category of small enterprises. By considering the growth and market share of these new forms of caterers, we focused on the food supply chain in the context of cloud kitchens, bulk kitchens and canteen operators in India (cloud kitchens, bulk kitchens and canteen operators hereafter will be cited in the text as a caterer).

In SCM, strategic relationships between suppliers and buyers are vital in managing successful transactions (Krishnan et al., 2016). This relationship has therefore drawn significant attention in the literature (e.g., Agarwal et al., 2010; Krishnan et al., 2016; Schmidt et al., 2022). This has led firms to find ways to uplift their supply chains, particularly by systematically assessing the role that suppliers play in their operations. At the operational level, buyers who build close relationships with key suppliers enjoy improved quality, lower costs, or a combination of the two. At the strategic level, these relationships result in continuous growth in product quality and innovation, increased competition, and enhanced market share, which ultimately lead to better B2B performance (e.g., Mangla et al., 2021; Schmidt et al., 2022; Shamsollahi et al., 2020).

The extant literature on the buyer–supplier relationship emphasizes the advantages of close collaborations (Kim et al., 2010) and information sharing (Cheng, 2011) in B2B settings. However, many studies (e.g., Villena et al., 2021) have also claimed that these advantages are not always realized. The causes of the success or failure of strategic business relationships and business performance are still not completely clear in B2B food SCM settings (Agarwal et al., 2010; Faruquee et al., 2021; Mahroof et al., 2021). Prior studies (e.g., Chang et al., 2021; Leek & Christodoulides, 2011; Ndubisi & Nataraajan, 2016; Reijonen et al., 2015; Taiminen & Ranaweera, 2019) investigated B2B branding and relationship marketing in various contexts. However, research on the relationship between brand affiliation and buyer–supplier relationships in B2B food supply chain settings is scant (e.g., Jamaluddin & Saibani, 2021). Therefore, as explained in Appendix A, more research is required to understand the connection between this type of business relationship and performance measurement in these settings (Hald & Kinra, 2019; Shukla et al., 2022).

This study analyzed the buyer–supplier relationship by measuring the effects that brand affordability, brand affect, brand parity, and brand loyalty have on business performance. As mentioned in Appendix A, a few studies have partially measured the effects of these factors; however, to our knowledge, no study has measured this complex nexus among brand affiliations. Previous studies have analyzed the relationships among brand affect, brand trust, and the outcomes of brand performance, such as relative price and market share, to understand the role played by brand loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Hohenberg & Taylor, 2021; Rahman et al., 2023) between suppliers and caterers. However, the present study further assumed that when suppliers gain more knowledge about buyers' brand preferences (i.e., affordability, affect, parity, and loyalty), they can use that knowledge to provide enhanced services to buyers and develop improved buyer–supplier relationships, resulting in increased business performance (Jääskeläinen, 2021; Patrucco et al., 2021). Thus, the current study employed the previously mentioned variables (i.e., brand affordability, brand affect, brand parity, and brand loyalty) to measure whether buyer–supplier engagement, commitment, and communication lead to better business performance for suppliers and these food service operators.

Based on the above discussions and the extant literature (see Appendix A), this study addressed the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1. Do brand affiliations, such as brand affordability, brand affect, brand parity, and brand loyalty impact buyer–supplier relationships in B2B food supply chain settings?

RQ2. To what extent do buyer–supplier engagement and commitment mediate the relationship between brand affiliations and business performance in B2B food supply chains?

RQ3. What is the role of buyer–supplier communication in enhancing the link between B2B relationship quality and business performance in food supply chains?

The data were collected using a survey and were analyzed using covariance-based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM) to measure the relationships among the four dimensions of brand affiliation, B2B relationships, buyer–supplier communication, and business performance. This study contributes to the branding literature by addressing gaps related to the limited number of studies on the role of brand affiliation in business performance through B2B relationships and communication. In addition, the study describes the managerial implications for the stakeholders involved in the B2B food supply chain.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical development and underpinnings

Based on the extant literature that used multiple theories (e.g., Hosany et al., 2020; Zaman et al., 2025), we employed a multi-theoretical approach to comprehensively investigate the influence of brand affiliation on buyer–supplier relationships and subsequent business performance in the context of the B2B food supply chain. The study incorporated three major theories: brand relationship quality theory (Fournier, 1998). Commitment–trust theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), and social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976).

According to brand relationship quality theory, the customer–brand relationship possesses two dimensions, affective and cognitive elements, which influence brand loyalty (Fournier, 1998; Nyffenegger et al., 2015). It posits that customers form deep, enduring relationships with brands based on factors such as love/passion, trust, commitment, and self-connection. These dimensions collectively determine the quality of the brand–customer relationship, influencing loyalty and long-term engagement. Although originally developed in a B2C context, the theory has since been extended to B2B settings, where emotional and symbolic connections increasingly affect organizational purchasing decisions. High brand relationship quality leads to stronger relational outcomes, such as repeat purchases, advocacy, and resilience to competitive offerings (Albert et al., 2008; Fournier, 1998; Lim et al., 2025). In the context of our study, this theory allowed us to examine how cognitive elements (brand affordability and brand parity) and affective elements (brand affect and brand loyalty) impact buyer–supplier engagement, commitment, and communication, which ultimately influence business performance in the B2B food supply chain context.

Commitment–trust theory (CTT) by Morgan and Hunt (1994) posits

that trust and commitment are the two key mediators in successful, long-term marketing relationships. Trust refers to the belief that a partner is reliable and has integrity, while commitment reflects a partner's desire to maintain a valued relationship (Gansser et al., 2021; Paluri & Mishal, 2020). According to CTT, when both trust and commitment are present, firms are more likely to engage in cooperative behaviors, share information openly, and avoid short-term opportunism (Waerness et al., 2023). Over time, these conditions lead to increased relationship satisfaction, loyalty, and performance (Arthur et al., 2024; Paluri & Mishal, 2020). The theory has become foundational in B2B and supply chain contexts, where stable long-term partnerships are critical to operational success (Nguyen et al., 2025; Paluri & Mishal, 2020). In the context of our study, we argued that CTT allowed us to explain how trust and commitment mediate the impact of brand elements on communication and performance.

Social exchange theory (SET) posits that social behavior is the result of an exchange process in which individuals seek to maximize benefits and minimize costs in their relationships (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976; Lambert & Enz, 2012). In business contexts, especially in B2B relationships, firms evaluate interactions based on perceived rewards (e.g., reliability and support) and potential costs (e.g., risk and opportunism). For instance, Lambe et al. (2001) examined how SET has been extensively used to explain B2B relational exchanges, emphasizing the importance of trust and commitment in fostering cooperative behaviors. Similarly, Voss et al. (2019) integrated reciprocity into a social exchange model, highlighting that mutual benefits and the anticipation of future rewards influence interfirm relationships. The theory assumes that relationships are maintained when the perceived benefits outweigh the costs, thereby fostering trust, commitment, and cooperation. Over time, repeated positive exchanges strengthen the relational bond, leading to long-term engagement and loyalty (Koo & Lee, 2024). SET has been widely used to explain behaviors in interorganizational relationships, such as supplier–buyer cooperation, by emphasizing reciprocity, mutual dependence, and the norm of fairness (e.g., Nyadzayo et al., 2020; Tanskanen, 2015). In the context of our study, SET enabled us to explain how brand affiliations influence trust, reciprocity, and long-term business relationships. The study highlighted how perceived benefits drive engagement and performance in B2B food SCM.

2.2. Brand affiliations and the B2B relationship

B2B organizations must maintain healthy buyer–supplier relationships because they are crucial for success and growth. Brand affiliation serves as an indicator of a business's future operational performance and helps minimize the differences in information between buyers and sellers involved in businesses (Liu, Freybote, & Das, 2023). Brand affiliation refers to the cognitive connection that customers establish between a firm's brand and themselves. This association can be swiftly affirmative or adverse, and it significantly influences purchasing decisions. Brands must establish positive affiliations, ideally through straightforward, positive, and prompt brand affinities. If brand affiliations are positive, buyers will begin to shape relationships through their alliances with the firm. This study examined brand affiliations, which encompass four distinct dimensions: brand affordability, brand parity, brand affect, and brand loyalty. Businesses engaged in the food supply chain concentrate heavily on these four attributes, which strengthens B2B performance. Since the study targets B2B SMEs in the food supply chain, these four dimensions are considered important factors.

Brand affiliation in the B2B SCM context comprises four important subdimensions. Brand affordability refers to the perceived value of a brand; affordability impacts purchasing decisions throughout the supply chain. Brand affiliation refers to the emotional attachment and positive connections that people build with a brand; affiliation impacts supplier relationships. Brand parity refers to the perceived similarity in the quality and offerings of competing brands; parity can impact supplier choice. Brand loyalty in the B2B food sector refers to the commitment and recurring loyalty of buyers to preferred companies; loyalty builds lasting relationships (Sombultawee & Wattanatorn, 2022).

A recent study investigated how the buyer–supplier relationship can be nurtured from the cultural perspective of the Indian management style (Chatterjee et al., 2022). In the B2B context, the study found that customers' buying behaviors are induced by their purchase engagement, brand identification, and prestige sensitivity (Chatterjee et al., 2022). Sombultawee and Wattanatorn (2022) examined the creation of B2B customer brand engagement and intense customer–firm (buyer and supplier) relationships by considering social media as a selling platform. They found that virtual interaction, quality of information, and rewards affect business–customer brand engagement, which ultimately has a positive effect on the strength of the customer–firm relationship. The present research examined the relationships among brand affordability, brand affect, brand parity, and brand loyalty and determined brand affiliation and buyer–supplier engagement between suppliers and caterers. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was set as follows:

H1. *Brand affordability (H1a), brand affect (H1b), brand parity (H1c), and brand loyalty (H1d) toward B2B food SCM settings have a significant impact on buyer–supplier engagement.*

Earlier studies confirmed that customer behavior can be significantly influenced by the presence of relationship commitment and trust through CTT (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). CTT states that trust plays a significant role in maintaining the relationship between buyer and supplier. Geyskens et al. (1996) suggested that trust has a significant effect on relationship commitment. Similarly, Wang et al. (2020) found that the presence of relationship commitment and trust had a favorable impact on the collaborative development of brand value by customers in a social commerce setting. Commitment is defined as the desire to create a steady relationship, the willingness to make short-term sacrifices to maintain the relationship, and the investment of trust in the relationship's stability (Anderson & Weitz, 1992). In any buyer–supplier relationship, commitment involves developing successful cooperation between the parties (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), which facilitates achieving the goals of both participants in the supply chain (Anderson & Weitz, 1992; Gundlach et al., 1995; Hofenk et al., 2011). Business partners' commitment to performing their roles to sustain the relationship for long-term success is crucial (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Moreover, strong relationships lead to high cooperation in manufacturing and design between firms, thereby eliminating or reducing non-value–added activities (Li et al., 2007).

Leek and Christodoulides (2011) examined the process by which brand orientation influences relational performance in the context of B2B branding. The findings showed that relationship commitment is an important pathway by which a company's brand orientation can be translated into superior relational performance. Additionally, a positive impact was noticed when the supplier co-branded with its purchaser (Bengtsson & Servais, 2005; Leek & Christodoulides, 2012). Chang et al. (2021) further found that when suppliers are brand oriented, state-owned buyers create a more affective rather than rational commitment. The current study thus identified the relationships among brand affordability, brand affect, brand parity, and brand loyalty in a B2B food SCM and buyer–supplier commitment between suppliers and caterers (cloud kitchens, bulk kitchens, and canteen operators). Therefore, the following was proposed as Hypothesis 2:

H2. *Brand affordability (H2a), brand affect (H2b), brand parity (H2c), and brand loyalty (H2d) toward B2B food SCM settings have a significant impact on buyer–supplier commitment.*

2.3. B2B relationship and buyer–supplier communication

A B2B relationship is crucial for any successful SCM success (Lasrado et al., 2023; Lussier & Hall, 2018; Murphy & Sashi, 2018). Autry and Golicic (2009) evaluated the buyer–supplier relationship and provided

insights for enhancing supply chain outcomes by maintaining superior relationship management. Agarwal and Narayana (2020) investigated the influence of relational communications, such as information sharing and sharing frequency and information quality, on the buyer–supplier relationship using trust and commitment as mediating and moderating variables. Their results suggested a positive outcome between communication and relationships. Padgett et al. (2020) found that trust plays a significant role in moderating the relationship between commitment and dependency. However, the impact of trust on dependence varies depending on the type of commitment. Furthermore, industries have implemented technology to reshape the future buyer–supplier relationship (Veile et al., 2021). Similar to Agarwal and Narayana's (2020) study, wherein the buyer–supplier relationship is analyzed with relational communication between them, this current research investigates the relationship between buyer–supplier engagement and buyer–supplier communication with suppliers and caterers. Thus, it leads to the development of the following hypothesis:

H3. *Buyer–supplier engagement has a significant and positive impact on buyer–supplier communication.*

2.4. B2B commitment and buyer–supplier communication

As discussed in Section 2.2, commitment plays a vital role in building successful cooperation in the buyer–supplier relationship, and both parties must be invested to maintain the relationship for long-term success (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Furthermore, effective communication is a crucial factor in any successful transactional relationship. This was explored in a study conducted in Thailand focused on understanding how trust and knowledge sharing (communication) influence the buyer–supplier relationship (Rungsithong & Meyer, 2020). Some previous research has also investigated whether communication media influences the various stages of the relationship development process in different buying contexts (Ambrose et al., 2008). Following these studies, the current research considered buyer–supplier communication between suppliers and caterers, as well as B2B relationships, to determine whether there is a significant relationship between commitment and communication between the parties. Therefore, Hypothesis 4 was framed as follows:

H4. *Buyer–supplier commitment has a significant and positive impact on buyer–supplier communication.*

2.5. Buyer–supplier engagement and business performance

Companies have begun to recognize the need to manage the buyer–supplier relationship as part of their business strategy. They have discovered that both buyer and supplier selections are vital parts of an organization's success (see Appendix A). In particular, they see that building relationships leads to better firm performance. Supplier selection and buyer–supplier engagement have positive effects on both firm and relationship performance (Kannan & Choon Tan, 2006). Positive relationships also exist between information sharing and buyer–supplier relationships and between buyer–supplier relationships and performance (Hsu et al., 2008). In line with these earlier studies, the current research analyzed the relationship between buyer–supplier engagement and business performance in the B2B context of suppliers and caterers. Thus, the following was proposed as Hypothesis 5:

H5. *Buyer–supplier engagement has a significant and positive impact on business performance.*

2.6. Buyer–supplier commitment and business performance

A commitment between the buyer and the supplier yields long-term success for the firm. Firms, therefore, should understand the factors that drive the commitment between buyer and supplier and result in a healthy relationship, which leads to successful organizational performance. Several studies have supported the idea that buyer–supplier commitment leads to good business performance. For example, Skarmeas et al. (2002) analyzed the various drivers of commitment and its influence on performance in the buyer–seller relationship in a cross-cultural environment from the perspective of an importer. Adams et al. (2012) investigated the relationship between supplier and buyer specificity and the buyer–supplier relationship in the long term and the influence of this relationship on firm performance from the buyer's perspective. Following these studies, the present study investigated the relationship between buyer–supplier commitment and business performance from the B2B perspective of suppliers and caterers. Accordingly, Hypothesis 6 was derived as follows:

H6. *Buyer–supplier commitment has a significant and positive impact on business performance.*

2.7. Buyer–supplier communication and business performance

Interorganizational communication has been reported to be a critical factor in enhancing strategic collaboration among organizations. Paulraj et al. (2008) found that buyer–supplier performance outcomes are influenced by interorganizational communication. Cousins et al. (2008) claimed that the socialization mechanism plays a crucial role between supplier performance measures and performance outcomes. They showed that socializing completely mediates the impact of supplier performance on firm performance. Moreover, communication between sellers and buyers occurs via multiple channels, and a recent study explained how channel management and communication affect a firm's performance in a B2B sale (Günther, 2021). These research findings informed the present study, which identified the relationship between buyer–supplier communication and the business performance of suppliers and caterers (cloud kitchens, bulk kitchens, and canteen operators). This led to Hypothesis 7:

H7. *Buyer–supplier communication has a significant and positive impact on business performance.*

Based on the discussed literature and proposed hypotheses, Fig. 1 presents the resulting research model. With the aim of studying the relationship between the variables in the model, brand affiliation was considered an independent variable with four dimensions: brand affordability, brand affect, brand parity, and brand loyalty. Business performance acted as a dependent variable, and the mediating variables were the B2B relationship (buyer–supplier commitment and buyer–supplier engagement) and buyer–supplier communication.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data collection

Generally, the food supply chain includes suppliers of groceries, edible oils, vegetables, fruits, dairy products, meat, and seafood and food caterers. Our study measured the relationship between brand affiliations and business performance in the B2B food supply chain through a valid survey. We focused on the SMEs including small enterprises with turnovers of USD 5.8 million and medium enterprises with turnovers of USD 29.27 million (as of April 18, 2025) were considered for the study. The target respondents were B2B SME business owners, as well as purchase, inventory, and warehouse managers, and warehouse and receivable department employees.

To gather data from all stakeholders involved in the food supply chain, a survey approach was considered the most appropriate data collection method. A structured questionnaire was designed to collect the data. The respondents were selected through a purposive sampling technique, which is an effective method for studying a target audience with specific characteristics and meeting the required criteria (Etikan,

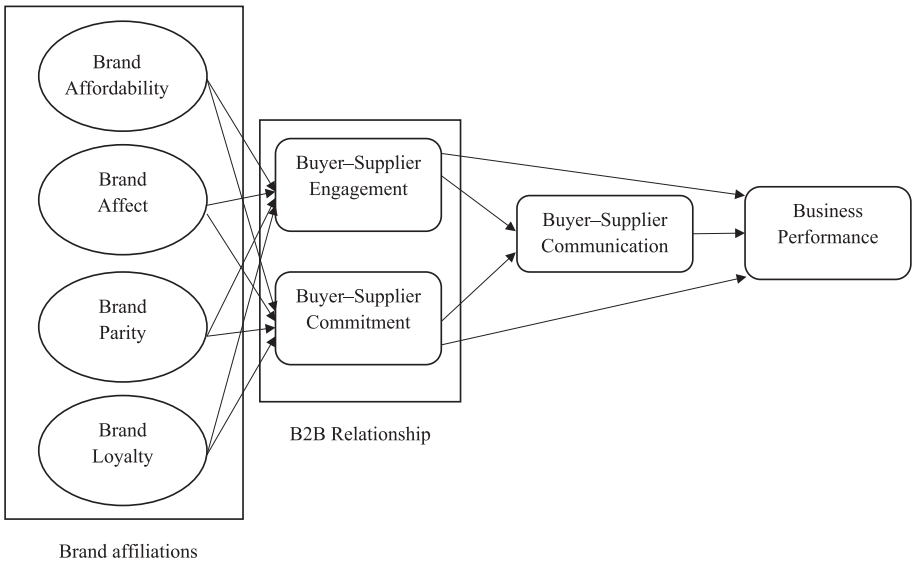

Fig. 1. Proposed research model.

2016). A dichotomous rating scale was used in the early stages to choose a probable respondent. Regarding their prior experience in the B2B food supply chain, the participants were asked "yes" or "no" questions. Only those respondents who selected "yes" were permitted to move on to the survey's subsequent section. The first section of the questionnaire gathered information regarding the respondents' demographic profiles. The second section included 36 questions designed to capture details related to each of the eight constructs considered for this study (i.e., brand affordability, brand affect, brand parity, brand loyalty, B2B buyer–supplier engagement, buyer–supplier commitment, buyer–supplier communication, and business performance). To measure all the items of the constructs, a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) was used. A total of 421 complete and valid responses were collected and considered for analysis.

3.2. Measures

The measurement items for all constructs were derived from existing validated scales through sources found in an extensive literature review (Table 1). This study focused on brand affiliation in food SCM. Accordingly, the three items for brand affordability were adapted from De Langhe et al. (2016). Brand affect was measured using three items adapted from Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001). Five items taken from Li (2010) were used to measure brand parity, and brand loyalty was measured using six items adapted from Van Riel et al. (2005). B2B buyer–supplier engagement was measured with seven items sourced from Kannan and Choon Tan (2006), and three items for buyer–supplier commitment were adapted from the scale developed by Morgan and Hunt (1994). Harcourt et al. (1991) and Del Bosque Rodríguez et al. (2006) contributed to the five items for buyer–supplier communication. Regarding the criterion variable, business performance was measured with four items taken from Naor et al. (2008).

3.3. Demographic profile

Table 2 contains descriptive statistics about the survey participants' demographic information. The majority of the respondents were male (73.9 %), aged between 36 and 45 years (40.6 %). About 44 % of the respondents had 5–10 years of experience in food SCM, followed by 36.8 % with less than 5 years of experience. With respect to the category of products, most of the respondents (44.7 %) were linked to groceries, 36.1 % to vegetables, and 8.8 % to fruits, followed by dairy products (6.2 %) and meat and seafood (4.3 %). Most of the respondents (55 %) belonged to medium-sized enterprises, followed by small enterprises (44.9 %) involved in the B2B food supply chain.

4. Data analysis and results

The study investigated the mediating (total, direct, and indirect) and serial parallel relationships among the constructs leading to brand affordability, brand affect, brand parity, and brand loyalty to measure buyer–supplier engagement, commitment, and communication (these lead to improved business performance for suppliers and caterers, cloud kitchens, bulk kitchens, and canteen operators). Modeling tools, such as CB-SEM, mediating analysis, and serial parallel relationship analysis, were used to examine the relationships among the constructs and items using SPSS Amos 20.0. The suggested model's various independent and dependent interactions were measured and estimated using CB-SEM (Hair Jr. et al., 1995). Model fit indices were better provided by CB-SEM than by PLS-SEM, whose fit indices are still being developed. Composite-based models produce outstanding results in PLS-SEM; however, factor-based models, such as ours, are better suited for CB-SEM models. With normal and continuous data, high sample sizes, simple models with few variables and indicators, reflective measurement, and evaluation of model fit and validity, CB-SEM is appropriate for testing theories and hypotheses. The required analysis was carried out using SPSS 22.0 and SPSS Amos 20.0.

4.1. Model fit

Table 3 outlines the model fit indices; statistically, all the values of the goodness of fit indices were satisfied according to the model fit prerequisites (Hair Jr. et al., 1995). The result obtained for CMIN was 0.001, which met the criteria of less than 0.05; the value of $\chi 2$ /df was 2.33, which was lower than the threshold limit of 3. Similarly, the other final fit value of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was also satisfactory: normed fit index = 1.21, adjusted goodness of fit index = 0.952, root mean square error of approximation = 0.67, and goodness of fit index = 0.957 (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2016; Sharma et al., 2005; Steiger, 1990; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

4.2. Validity and reliability measures

The validity of the items and components in our study's proposed measurement model was then tested using exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and CFA (the results are shown in Table 4). In the measurement

Table 1
Measures.

Constructs and Items		Sources
Brand Affordability		
1	Ingredients are affordable.	De Langhe et al. (2016)
2	Ingredients are expensive (reverse coded).	
3	Sales or special deals are available when ingredients are procured.	
Brand Affect		
1	I feel good when I use this brand.	Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001)
2	This brand makes me happy.	
3	This brand gives me pleasure.	
Brand Parity		
1	I can't think of any differences between the brands.	Li (2010)
2	To me, there are big differences between the various brands.	
3	The only difference between the major brands is price.	
4	A brand is a brand; most brands are basically the same.	
5	All major brands are the same.	
Brand Loyalty		
1	Overall, we are very satisfied with the product.	Van Riel et al. (2005)
2	Overall, we are very satisfied with the supplier/brand.	
3	If asked, we would recommend product.	
4	If asked, we would recommend the supplier/brand.	
5	We intend to use the products again in the future.	
6	We intend to do business again with the supplier/brand in the future.	
Buyer–Supplier Engagement		
1	Sourcing decisions	Kannan and Choon Tan (2006)
2	Informal information sharing	
3	Formal information sharing	
4	Supply chain integration	
5	Communicating future strategic needs	
6	Greater level of trust	
7	Communication between supplier and manufacturer	
Buyer–Supplier Commitment		
1	Long-term relationship with the suppliers	Morgan and Hunt (1994)
2	Suppliers consistently keeping their promises	
3	Suppliers' relationship based on trust	
Buyer–Supplier Communication		
1	Suppliers frequently communicate with us.	Del Bosque Rodríguez et al. (2006); Harcourt et al. (1991)
2	Suppliers always provide accurate and relevant information.	
3	Suppliers utilize the proper communication channels.	
4	Suppliers maintain an effective communication strategy.	
5	Suppliers share critical information.	
Business Performance		
1	Meet the quality requirements (product capability and performance and product specifications)	Naor et al. (2008)
2	Timely delivery (on time delivery performance and fast delivery)	
3	Flexibility (change product mix and change volume)	
4	Cost (inventory, cost of manufacturing, and cycle time)	

Table 2
Respondents' Demographic profile.

Demographic Profile		Frequency	%
Age (in years)	Less than 25	61	14.5
	25 to 35	122	29.0
	36 to 45	171	40.6
	46 to 55	46	10.9
	More than 55	21	5.0
Gender	Male	311	73.9
	Female	110	26.1
Years of experience	Less than 5 years	155	36.8
	5 to 10 years	188	44.7
	More than 10 years	78	18.5
Product category	Grocery	188	44.7
	Vegetables	152	36.1
	Fruits	37	8.8
	Dairy products	26	6.2
	Meat and seafood	18	4.3
Firm size	Small enterprises	189	44.9
	Medium enterprises	232	55.1
Total		**421**	**100**

Table 3
Model fit index.

Index	CMIN	χ2 /df	NFI	AGFI	RMSEA	GFI
Recommended Value	< 0.05	< 3	< 1	> 0.90	> 0.06 to 0.08	> 0.95
Output	0.001	2.33	1.21	0.952	0.67	0.957
Result	Very good	Good fit	Very good	Very good	Good fit	Very good

model, we used CFA to examine average factor loading and composite reliability. Other statistical criteria, such as convergent validity and discriminant validity, were used to validate the measurement model and the proposed model and instruments. Before conducting the mediating, moderating, and serial parallel analyses, a reliability test (Cronbach's alpha) was performed.

The CFA results revealed that all the items had a strong significant connection ($p < 0.001$) and a moderation and mediation impact with their established theoretical dimensions (Steiger, 2007). The EFA results for all items had factor loadings larger than 0.5, with average factor loadings greater than 0.7 (Malik et al., 2019). The composite values were determined to be larger than 0.60, and the AVE values for all items and constructs were likewise greater than 0.60 (Marsh et al., 2020). Table 4 shows the internal consistency of the items and constructs. The reliability test showed that Cronbach's alpha values were more than 0.70, indicating that the items and constructs in the measurement model were highly dependent. This meets and fulfills the measuring model's criteria (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). A correlation matrix was used to test the discriminating validity of the measurement model. Table 5 and Appendix B show that all of the results of the maximum shared variance were determined to be smaller than the AVE values (Hair et al., 2020).

4.3. Direct effect

SPSS Amos 20.0 was used to develop the structural model and test the direct effect of brand affiliations (i.e., brand affordability, brand affect, brand parity, and brand loyalty) on buyer–supplier commitment, engagement, communication, and business performance at a significance level of 0.05. For the first set of hypotheses (H1a to H1d), the results in Table 6 show that (with the exception of brand affect [$\beta = 0.14$, $t = 1.09$]), brand affordability ($\beta = 0.31$, $t = 2.44$), brand parity ($\beta = 0.38$, $t = 3.11$), and brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.26$, $t = 2.14$) had significant relationships with buyer–supplier engagement. Hence, Hypotheses H1a, H1c, and H1d are supported, and Hypothesis H1b is not supported (Table 6). The second set of hypotheses (H2a to H2d) yielded similar results: All dimensions of brand affiliations had a statistically significant

Table 4
Reliability and validity measures.

Item			EFA	CFA	Item Reliability	Error (Delta)	AVE	Sum of Estimate	Sum of Error (Delta)	CR	Cronbach's Alpha
BA: Brand Affordability											
BA1	←	BA	0.876	0.879	0.773	0.227					
BA2	←	BA	0.892	0.876	0.767	0.233	0.730	2.562	0.809	0.89	0.816
BA3	←	BA	0.822	0.807	0.651	0.349					
BAF: Brand Affect											
BAF1	←	BAF	0.827	0.811	0.658	0.342					
BAF2	←	BAF	0.922	0.845	0.714	0.286	0.689	2.489	0.934	0.869	0.854
BAF3	←	BAF	0.872	0.833	0.694	0.306					
BPA: Brand Parity											
BPA1	←	BPA	0.811	0.815	0.664	0.336					
BPA2	←	BPA	0.824	0.884	0.781	0.219					
BPA3	←	BPA	0.893	0.896	0.803	0.197	0.853	4.266	1.355	0.931	0.826
BPA4	←	BPA	0.804	0.855	0.731	0.269					
BPA5	←	BPA	0.821	0.816	0.666	0.334					
BL: Brand Loyalty											
BL1	←	BL	0.833	0.845	0.714	0.286					
BL2	←	BL	0.817	0.856	0.733	0.267					
BL3	←	BL	0.892	0.811	0.658	0.342	0.852	5.109	1.647	0.941	0.843
BL4	←	BL	0.834	0.855	0.731	0.269					
BL5	←	BL	0.811	0.865	0.748	0.252					
BL6	←	BL	0.832	0.877	0.769	0.231					
BSEN: Buyer–Supplier Engagement											
BSEN1	←	BSEN	0.865	0.854	0.729	0.271					
BSEN2	←	BSEN	0.843	0.826	0.682	0.318					
BSEN3	←	BSEN	0.821	0.884	0.781	0.219					
BSEN4	←	BSEN	0.877	0.814	0.663	0.337	0.851	5.958	1.920	0.949	0.898
BSEN5	←	BSEN	0.844	0.923	0.852	0.148					
BSEN6	←	BSEN	0.816	0.835	0.697	0.303					
BSEN7	←	BSEN	0.855	0.822	0.676	0.324					
BSCO: Buyer–Supplier Commitment											
BSCO1	←	BSCO	0.837	0.722	0.521	0.479					
BSCO2	←	BSCO	0.873	0.825	0.681	0.319	0.797	2.39	1.087	0.84	0.817
BSCO3	←	BSCO	0.904	0.843	0.711	0.289					
BSCT: Buyer–Supplier Communication											
BSCT1	←	BSCT	0.841	0.847	0.717	0.283					
BSCT2	←	BSCT	0.852	0.785	0.616	0.384					
BSCT3	←	BSCT	0.844	0.733	0.537	0.463	0.806	4.029	1.745	0.90	0.864
BSCT4	←	BSCT	0.816	0.833	0.694	0.306					
BSCT5	←	BSCT	0.894	0.831	0.691	0.309					
BP: Business Performance											
BP1	←	BP	0.815	0.822	0.676	0.324					
BP2	←	BP	0.813	0.872	0.760	0.240	0.834	3.337	1.214	0.90	0.875
BP3	←	BP	0.843	0.816	0.666	0.334					
BP4	←	BP	0.811	0.827	0.684	0.316					

Table 5
Discriminant validity.

Factors*	BA	BAF	BPA	BL	BSEN	BSCO	BSCT	BP
BA	0.85							
BAF	0.61	0.83						
BPA	0.54	0.57	0.92					
BL	0.51	0.56	0.65	0.92				
BSEN	0.65	0.58	0.65	0.68	0.92			
BSCO	0.25	0.52	0.68	0.66	0.62	0.89		
BSCT	0.67	0.51	0.69	0.54	0.66	0.68	0.90	
BP	0.64	0.65	0.56	0.54	0.66	0.69	0.61	0.91

* BA: Brand affordability; BAF: Brand affect; BPA: Brand parity; BL: Brand loyalty; BSEN: Buyer–supplier engagement; BSCO: Buyer–supplier commitment; BSCT: Buyer-supplier communication; BP: Business performance.

relationship with buyer–supplier commitment, except for brand affect ($\beta = 0.02$, $t = 0.89$). Therefore, Hypotheses H2a, H2c, and H2d were accepted; Hypothesis H2b was not accepted. Furthermore, the relationships among buyer–supplier engagement and buyer–supplier communication ($\beta = 0.27$, $t = 2.34$) and business performance ($\beta = 0.33$, $t = 3.36$) and the relationships among buyer–supplier commitment and buyer–supplier communication ($\beta = 0.36$, $t = 3.45$) and business performance ($\beta = 0.46$, $t = 4.41$) were positively significant. Similarly, buyer–supplier communication had a positive significant relationship with business performance ($\beta = 0.41$, $t = 4.38$). Therefore, Hypotheses H3, H4, H5, H6, and H7 were significant and empirically supported (see Table 6 and Appendix C).

Table 6
Hypothesis results.

Hypotheses	Relationship	β	*t*–statistic	Outcome
Direct effect				
H1a	Brand affordability→ Buyer–supplier engagement	0.31	2.44**	Supported
H1b	Brand affect→ Buyer–supplier engagement	0.14	1.09	Not supported
H1c	Brand parity→ Buyer–supplier engagement	0.38	3.11**	Supported
H1d	Brand loyalty→ Buyer–supplier engagement	0.26	2.14**	Supported
H2a	Brand affordability→ Buyer–supplier commitment	0.34	3.22**	Supported
H2b	Brand affect→ Buyer–supplier commitment	0.02	0.89	Not supported
H2c	Brand parity→ Buyer–supplier commitment	0.28	2.48**	Supported
H2d	Brand loyalty→ Buyer–supplier commitment	0.27	2.34**	Supported
H3	Buyer–supplier engagement→ Buyer–supplier communication	0.27	2.34**	Supported
H4	Buyer–supplier commitment→ Buyer–supplier communication	0.36	3.45**	Supported
H5	Buyer–supplier engagement→ Business performance	0.33	3.36**	Supported
H6	Buyer–supplier commitment→ Business performance	0.46	4.41**	Supported
H7	Buyer–supplier communication→ Business performance	0.41	4.38**	Supported
Serial parallel mediation effect				
H8a	Buyer–supplier engagement→ Buyer–supplier communication→ Business performance	0.48	4.88**	Supported
H8b	Buyer–supplier commitment→ Buyer–supplier communication→ Business performance	0.34	3.14**	Supported
H9a	Brand affordability→ Buyer–supplier engagement→ Buyer–supplier communication→ Business performance	0.51	5.16**	Supported
H9b	Brand affect→ Buyer–supplier engagement→ Buyer–supplier communication→ Business performance	0.02	0.87	Not supported
H9c	Brand parity→ Buyer–supplier engagement→ Buyer–supplier communication→ Business performance	0.63	6.13**	Supported
H9d	Brand loyalty→ Buyer–supplier engagement→ Buyer–supplier communication→ Business performance	0.36	3.42**	Supported
H10a	Brand affordability→ Buyer–supplier commitment→ Buyer–supplier communication→ Business performance	0.42	4.51**	Supported
H10b	Brand affect→ Buyer–supplier commitment→ Buyer–supplier communication→ Business performance	0.16	1.16	Not supported
H10c	Brand parity→ Buyer–supplier commitment→ Buyer–supplier communication→ Business performance	0.22	2.48**	Supported
H10d	Brand loyalty→ Buyer–supplier commitment→ Buyer–supplier communication→ Business performance	0.34	3.17**	Supported
Mediation effect				
H11a	Brand affordability→ Buyer–supplier engagement→ Business performance	0.25	2.48**	Supported
H11b	Brand affect→ Buyer–supplier engagement→ Business performance	0.15	1.08	Not supported
H11c	Brand parity→ Buyer–supplier engagement→ Business performance	0.33	3.19**	Supported
H11d	Brand loyalty→ Buyer–supplier engagement→ Business performance	0.36	3.27**	Supported
H12a	Brand affordability→ Buyer–supplier commitment→ Business performance	0.47	4.18**	Supported
H12b	Brand affect→ Buyer–supplier commitment→ Business performance	0.13	1.06	Not supported
H12c	Brand parity→ Buyer–supplier commitment→ Business performance	0.49	4.27**	Supported
H12d	Brand loyalty→ Buyer–supplier commitment→ Business performance	0.51	5.68**	Supported

4.4. Mediation

The study results demonstrate that all of the chosen items had highly significant associations ($p < 0.001$) with their confirmed theoretical components, implying a mediation role (Steiger, 2007). Furthermore, all items had high significance and confidence interval values. Bootstrapping was performed to achieve a bias-corrected percentile, which resulted in a substantial fit. Table 6 shows the standardized coefficient for mediation-related indirect effects. The mediation analysis revealed that all fit indices provided an excellent match for the final suggested model (Hair Jr. et al., 1995). There was a significant probability of error or common method bias because the data were obtained by survey questionnaires either online or in print form (Jordan & Troth, 2020).

The data were evaluated using Harman's test (Spector, 2006) to detect error variance and common method bias. The common method bias test findings were within the threshold limit, and the mediation analysis revealed that the independent and dependent variables were significantly related to the mediation factors. Consequently, the mediation research demonstrated that buyer–supplier engagement and buyer–supplier commitment were the primary mediators, or decision variables, for the business performance of caterers, cloud kitchens, bulk kitchens, and canteen operators. Thus, brand affordability, brand parity, and brand loyalty had a greater influence on the success of these food service operators' companies. The measuring model in Appendix 1 revealed that the suggested research model exhibits a high level of mediation, and the indirect measures have a strong effect on the relationship between buyer–supplier engagement and buyer–supplier commitment. Of note are the links among brand impact, brand parity, brand loyalty, and the food service operators' commercial performance. The current study, however, showed that brand affect had no association with commercial success. The study findings revealed that in the B2B setting, if the quality of the product is high and the price is affordable, the buyer is more likely to continue purchasing from these suppliers. Therefore, brand affect does not play a significant role in B2B businesses. Brand affect has only a major impact on customers who have emotional connections with products. This novel conclusion contradicts several previous investigations' findings, perhaps because the business performance of these food service operators differs compared with other goods or services investigated.

4.5. Serial parallel mediation

The final result of the serial parallel relationship is presented in Appendix 2 and shows, according to Hair Jr. et al. (1995), that all the indices confirmed an excellent fit for the final proposed model. A cross-sectional diagnostic test was performed to check the regression assumptions of the proposed research model. Table 6 presents the model predictors for the serial parallel relationship of variables (the business performance levels of caterers, cloud kitchens, bulk kitchens, and canteen operators) based on the residual factor and significant measures. Therefore, B2B business performance can be considered a key attribute of better buyer–supplier commitment and buyer–supplier engagement.

Multicollinearity was measured for the model predictors (i.e., brand affordability, brand affect, brand parity, and brand loyalty). The predictor variables were found to be highly correlated with the dependent predictor. In addition, no multicollinearity problems were observed with the selected items. The Durbin–Watson statistic, which totaled 2.755, indicates the assumption of independent errors or no serial parallel relationship, as Field (2009) proposed.

Buyer–supplier communication and business performance of caterers, cloud kitchens, bulk kitchens, and canteen operators did not have serial parallel relationships with brand affect. Moreover, any changes to buyer–supplier communication and the business performance of these food service operators would not have a direct or indirect impact on brand affect. With respect to the impact of these food services entities' business performance, the serial parallel relationship analysis's final result shows two major attributes: buyer–supplier commitment and buyer–supplier engagement. Furthermore, they have a higher serial parallel relationship with the perceived and expected business performance of these food service operators. Additionally, brand affordability, brand parity, and brand loyalty were found to have a stronger relationship with respect to these food service operators' business performances.

5. Discussion

Food SCM differs from other SCM because it must ensure food quality and safety (e.g., Vo-Thanh et al., 2021). In this study, we focused on the food B2B SMEs, which consist of cloud kitchens, bulk kitchens, and canteen operators. Although B2B SMEs represent most of the food market share, no research has been done to understand the complex relationship between buyers and suppliers. A brand's affordability plays a crucial role in determining buyers' and suppliers' levels of engagement and establishing long-term relationships (Anaza et al., 2023; Beristain & Zorrilla, 2011; Garner & Mady, 2023; Hingley et al., 2015). Furthermore, the relationship between brand affordability and buyer-supplier commitment in the food supply chain leads to improved performance. According to this study's findings, brand affordability has a positive relationship with buyer-supplier engagement and buyer-supplier commitment in food SCM.

Brand affect is an emotional attachment to a supplier's brand. Earlier studies found that a strong emotional connection to a brand motivates buyers to engage with suppliers to ensure consistent quality, availability, and other attributes associated with the brand (Chang et al., 2021). However, in the present study, we found that brand affect has no relationship with the buyer-supplier engagement or buyer-supplier commitment. Thus, brand affect does not play an important role in business performance in the B2B food SCM. When it comes to the caterers (cloud kitchens, bulk kitchens, and canteen operators), they often do not use any brand name and supply foods for other brands. In addition, most of the caterers are SMEs (for instance, the average number of employees for cloud kitchens is 6 to 7 people). Therefore, we argue that these Indian food B2B SMEs work more on trust-based personal relationships than the brand (e.g., Puthusserry et al., 2021).

Brand loyalty is associated with the long-term relationship between the buyer and the supplier in the food supply chain. Suppliers are more likely to invest in buyer–supplier engagement activities to maintain and strengthen this relationship, which leads to shared benefits and improved supply chain performance (Ozdemir et al., 2020; Saha et al., 2023; Wang, Craighead, & Li, 2014; Wang, Ye, & Tan, 2014). Earlier studies suggested that brand-loyal buyers are more committed and proactive in engaging with their suppliers, which in turn enhances cooperation between them. This study found that brand loyalty has a significant and positive relationship with buyer–supplier engagement and commitment.

Brand parity is another key factor that influences buyer–supplier engagement and commitment in the food supply chain (e.g., Chang et al., 2021; Huang, 2023). When buyers perceive even a small differentiation among competing brands, they may focus more on other factors, such as price, quality, and service, when selecting suppliers. This can lead to lower commitment and engagement with specific suppliers because buyers may view them as interchangeable. Thus, suppliers that effectively differentiate themselves are more likely to elicit commitment from buyers. In addition, this study showed that brand parity has a positive relationship with buyer–supplier engagement and commitment.

The serial parallel mediating analysis demonstrated that B2B relationships, such as buyer supplier engagement and commitment, significantly mediate the relationship between brand affiliations, such as brand affordability, brand parity, and brand loyalty, and buyer–supplier communication and business performance; however, this does not hold for brand affect. This supports Zaefarian et al. (2016), who found commitment mediates the relationship between organizational justice and firm performance, and Chang et al. (2019), Patrucco et al. (2020), and Um and Oh (2020), who highlighted that buyer–supplier commitment and engagement promotes communication and knowledge sharing. They further found that engaged buyers and suppliers collaborate to align the process, which can lead to improved business performance. Moreover, ongoing and effective communication enhances mutual understanding and alignment between buyers and suppliers and strengthens the buyer–supplier relationship. This study's results are in line with Matopoulos et al. (2019), who found that a strong commitment between buyer and supplier can have a significant impact on operational efficiency, cost reduction, product quality, customer satisfaction, and overall supply chain performance. Furthermore, this study supports Kannan and Choon Tan's (2006) finding that a successful buyer–supplier relationship has a positive impact on firm performance. Therefore, higher levels of buyer–supplier engagement, commitment, and communication in the food supply chain lead to improved business performance.

5.1. Theoretical contribution

The conceptualization and validation of the relationships among brand affiliations, B2B relationships, communication, and business performance in food SCM settings enable this study to contribute to the literature. First, this study attempted to empirically validate the relationships among various dimensions of brand affiliation (brand affordability, brand affect, brand parity, and brand loyalty) and business performance, which existing studies (Blengini & Das, 2021; Carvell et al., 2016; Liu, Long, et al., 2023) have only investigated to a limited extent. Therefore, it contributes to the understanding of how brand affiliations can affect the overall performance of businesses operating in the food supply chain sector. O'Neill and Xiao (2006) confirmed the importance of brand affiliation in strengthening the market value of hotels. Many earlier studies concentrated on brand equity (Syed Alwi et al., 2016), brand image (Vesal et al., 2021), brand trust, and brand performance (Anees-ur-Rehman et al., 2017); however, our study considered brand affect, brand parity, and brand affordability as important dimensions of brand affiliations.

Second, this study strengthens connections to the B2B marketing literature by exploring how brand affiliations influence business

relationships, communication, and performance in the B2B food supply chain. Strong brand associations enhance trust, credibility, and long-term partnerships, fostering collaborative engagement (e.g., Aslam et al., 2022; Sanchez et al., 2023). Effective communication plays a crucial role in maintaining transparency, reducing uncertainties, and improving operational efficiency. Brand-driven relationships contribute to higher performance by ensuring reliability, consistency, and competitive advantage. Integrating these factors provides valuable insights into optimizing B2B interactions within the food supply chain.

Third, this study assessed the serial parallel mediating role of B2B relationships, involving engagement and commitment, between brand affiliations and business performance. For instance, Chang et al. (2021) examined how brand orientation impacts relationship commitment and relational performance in B2B settings. However, their study did not fully explore how brand affect and brand loyalty contribute to performance. By introducing different variables, we explored the mechanism—the establishment of strong B2B relationships—through which brand affiliations influence business performance.

Fourth, this research proposes that buyer–supplier communication plays a mediating role between B2B relationships and business performance. Extant literature (e.g., Boscari et al., 2024; Li et al., 2023) found that buyer-supplier communication enhances business performance. This research study contributes to B2B food SCM marketing by illustrating the serial–parallel mediating relationship of buyer–supplier engagement and buyer–supplier commitment in the relationship between brand communications and business performance. In addition, Huang (2023) underlined that the role of emotional connections in supplier–brand affiliations required deeper investigation. By investigating how these relational factors impact the relationship of brand performance in B2B food SCM settings, the research study extends the understanding of the instruments that drive B2B business success. This enhances the existing literature by highlighting the significance of key mediators as relational dynamics in B2B food SCM brand strategies.

Finally, this study contributes to the literature by focusing on B2B food SMEs, especially cloud kitchens, bulk kitchens, and canteens. Huang (2023) called for more research to explicitly examine intermediary buyers such as caterers and cloud kitchens. This study fills this gap and contributes to the literature.

5.2. Practical implications

This study has several implications for the suppliers and buyers involved in food SCM. It provides a guide to establishing strong B2B relationships through brand affiliations to increase their performance. The study demonstrates that businesses involved in the food supply chain should focus on building trust and collaborating through effective communication, joint problem solving, and shared objectives, which can result in improved business performance. Both suppliers and buyers should develop clear, transparent communication channels that help enhance understanding, reduce conflict, and strengthen their relationships. Suppliers can offer unique value propositions, such as specialized and innovative products or superior services, which are more likely to attract committed buyers. Maintaining quality products and adopting better pricing tactics will enhance collaboration.

In the B2B context, establishing enduring relationships between suppliers and buyers is of the utmost significance. The role of brand affiliation in sustaining relationships is crucial in the food supply chain. B2B food suppliers can leverage their brand affiliations to enhance supplier commitment by fostering trust and credibility, maintaining fairness and transparency in supplier interactions, and offering growth and development prospects to suppliers. B2B relationships can be enhanced through consistent communication with suppliers, offering them assistance, and collaborating on the creation of backup strategies.

To establish strong brand connections with their suppliers, B2B food supply chains should create and execute effective brand management strategies. This can be achieved by allocating resources to marketing and advertising initiatives, establishing and upholding a robust online footprint, and delivering exceptional customer service. Additionally, it is imperative for buyers to cultivate strong and collaborative partnerships with their suppliers through regular communication, offering feedback, and including them in decision-making processes.

Trust plays a crucial role in buyer–supplier commitment, and suppliers who build and maintain trust can increase confidence among buyers and are more likely to secure commitments. The supplier can facilitate trust by offering quality materials, timely delivery, and reasonable prices, and can initiate innovative promotion activities to maintain long-term relationships with buyers. The buyer–supplier commitment can be implemented through standard procedures and requirements that can develop and maintain collaboration between buyers and suppliers. This commitment can be secured through contractual governance (i.e., all the terms and conditions clearly communicated between buyer and supplier), which would assure organizational justice while procuring and supplying products and services. Thus, both parties could avoid conflicts that could imperil their relationships.

6. Conclusions, limitations, and future research directions

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between brand affiliations and business performance (RQ1) with a mediating role in the buyer–supplier relationship. The statistical results suggest that brand affordability, brand parity, and brand loyalty have a significant relationship with business performance (RQ2). Our findings also confirm that buyer–supplier commitment, engagement, and communication act as significant mediators. The findings emphasize the importance of establishing strategic brand affiliations, nurturing B2B relationships, and adopting effective communication strategies to drive improved business performance. Overall, advancing the understanding of the relationship between buyer–supplier commitment and business performance in the food supply chain is crucial for enabling collaboration, enhancing performance, and achieving sustainable competitive advantages (RQ3).

This study considered the limited scope of Indian food supply chain industries, and we acknowledge that supply chain practices may vary from country to country. Future studies could conduct empirical studies across different countries, cultures, and types of food supply chains, which would provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationships involved and their nuances. In addition, exploring the role of technology, such as blockchains, the Internet of Things, and data analytics, in enhancing commitment and improving performance in the food supply chain could be an interesting research area. Further research could also examine the moderating effects of contextual factors, such as regulatory environments, sustainability requirements, and market volatility, on the buyer–supplier relationship and performance. The role of food supply chains differs in online and offline purchases; hence, future studies could focus from this perspective on the B2B context. In the future, the proposed SCM model could be investigated in other industries, such as pharmaceuticals, fashion, and automobiles. Finally, longitudinal studies that track commitment and performance over time might provide insights into the long-term impact of commitment on business outcomes in the food supply chain.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Riad Shams: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **K.Mohamed Jasim:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Software, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Mustafeed Zaman:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Rajibul Hasan:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Supervision,

Conceptualization. **Jean-François Lemoine:** Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Raouf Ahmad Rather:** Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Appendix A. Appendices

Appendix A
Selection of key sources/flagship studies and their contributions.

Study	Study Focus	Key Findings	Research Gaps
Panel 1. Brand affiliations			
Erevelles et al. (2008)	Investigated ingredient co-branding in B2B food marketing.	Co-branding influences supplier selection and long-term alliances in B2B markets. Shared brand equity benefits both upstream and downstream actors in the food chain.	This study was conceptual and lacked empirical validation with real B2B supply chain data. It did not focus specifically on emotional brand affiliations, such as loyalty or brand affect.
Chang et al. (2021)	Examined how brand orientation impacts relationship commitment and relational performance in B2B settings.	Brand orientation in B2B significantly enhances relational performance through the mediating role of relationship commitment. Co-branding between suppliers and buyers strengthens trust and relationship quality.	This study did not fully explore how brand affect and brand loyalty contribute to performance. It focused more on the buyer's perspective than on the mutual dynamics of brand affiliation.
Huang (2023)	Studied the impact of supply chain, CSR, and brand personality on restaurant brand equity.	Transparent supply chains and CSR enhance brand trust and loyalty; however, supply-side branding affects customer perception.	While B2B dynamics were considered, the primary lens was still customer-facing (B2C) brand equity. The role of emotional connections in supplier–brand affiliations required deeper investigation. In addition, this study did not explicitly examine intermediary buyers (such as caterers and cloud kitchens) in the food supply chain.
Jain et al. (2024)	Analyzed how green brand identity affects partner marketing behavior.	Strong brand governance enhances alignment across supply chain and improves brand credibility. The findings suggest that clear, consistent messaging strengthens brand affiliation and sustainable value co-creation.	This study was limited to green/sustainable branding and did not examine general brand dimensions, such as parity or loyalty. In addition, the findings were sector specific and may not be generalized across non-sustainability-driven supply chains.
Panel 2. B2B relationships			
Sanchez et al. (2023)	Examined supply relationship management (SRM) in Peruvian coffee supply chains.	Strong SRM processes improve cooperation, trust, and competitive performance.	This study only focused on the coffee sector, so it may not be generalized across diverse food sectors.
Bag et al. (2024)	Focused on buyer–supplier partnerships and circular economy performance in food supply chains.	B2B partnerships boost circular economy outcomes via commitment and innovation; trust is essential for collaboration.	This study was region-specific, limiting broader applicability across global food supply chains.
Boscari et al. (2024)	Examined buyer–supplier collaboration models for sustainability.	Finds that three collaboration types (bilateral, buyer-driven, supplier-driven) shape B2B sustainability strategies.	This study was context-specific and focused only on the Dutch food industry. The findings may not be generalized.
Polater et al. (2024)	Examined performance in geographical indication (GI) food supply chains from a B2B perspective.	Trust, mutual commitment, and social capital are critical for supply chain success in GI food networks. In addition, B2B brand and network orientation contribute to traceability, compliance, and performance.	Results were tightly linked to the regulatory and cultural setting of GI supply chains—limiting generalizability to conventional food chains.
Panel 3. Buyer–supplier engagement			
Cislaghi et al. (2023)	Examined governance in buyer–supplier relationships in organic food supply chains.	Finds that informal governance (e.g., trust, communication) outperforms formal structures in fostering collaboration.	This study was specific to organic short food supply chains, which may limit generalizability. Contextual factors, such as relationship duration and demand uncertainty, did not show significant influence, suggesting the need for further research.
Ahmadi-Gh and Bello-Pintado (2024)	Focused on the role of leadership in sustainable buyer–supplier relationships.	Supply chain leadership drives alignment and sustainability, and monitoring enhances supplier engagement.	This study focused on the influence of buying firms, potentially overlooking the perspectives of suppliers.
Poissonnier et al. (2024)	Examined motivators and hygiene factors in buyer–supplier collaboration.	Sharing risks/investments (motivators) and respecting agreements (hygiene) are key to sustainable engagement.	This study employed a qualitative exploratory methodology, which may limit the generalizability of findings. It focused on the element level of collaboration without extensive empirical validation.
Panel 4. Buyer–supplier commitment			
Nyaga and Whipple (2011)	Examined how trust, commitment, and satisfaction influence supply chain performance.	Trust and commitment positively impact operational performance and satisfaction.	Focused on U.S. manufacturing; may not generalize globally.
Aslam et al. (2022)	Examined the effects of psychological contract breaches on buyer–supplier commitment,	Findings provide insights into the dynamics of commitments, facilitating the creation of solutions	The study classified buyer–supplier relationships into collaborative vs. adversarial. Future studies may adopt a "neutral" approach.

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Appendix A (*continued*)

Study	Study Focus	Key Findings	Research Gaps
	emphasizing the unfavorable effects of interruptions caused by suppliers.	to sustain and repair buyer–supplier agreements in the face of disruptions.	
Uddin (2024)	Examined the impact of buyer–supplier relationship commitment on firm performance.	Three main relational elements were identified that favorably affect buyer–supplier relationships: stability, trust, and interdependence.	The study was conducted in the ready-made garment industry in Bangladesh, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other industries or countries with different supply chain dynamics and digital maturity levels.
Panel 5. Buyer–supplier communication			
Paulraj et al. (2008)	Extended the stream of research in SCM by systematically investigating the antecedents and performance outcomes of interorganizational communication.	Finds interorganizational communication to be a relational competency that enhances buyers' and suppliers' performance.	The study population was questionable, and the authors suggested that future research may include a mixed population of respondents from multiple sources, including service firms, as well as domestic and international companies.
Bag et al. (2024)	Examined buyer–supplier partnerships in the context of a circular economy.	The findings suggest that transparent communication supports innovation and strengthens relational contracts, boosting circular economy outcomes.	This was a cross-sectional study. Geographic and industry scope may limit broad applicability.
Boscari et al. (2024)	Examined the collaboration types in food networks.	Communication is essential across all collaboration types—bilateral, buyer-led, and supplier-led—for advancing sustainability.	Context-specific to the Dutch food industry; the findings may not be generalized.
Li et al. (2023)	Examined the impact of communication media on buyer–supplier performance.	The findings indicate that managers should place a higher priority on providing high-quality information to enhance performance and communication, especially in dynamic business contexts.	This study focused on Chinese manufacturing; food supply chain implications were not directly tested.
Panel 6. Business performance			
Hsu et al. (2008)	Examined the effects of information sharing capabilities on buyer–supplier relationships and firm performance.	The results demonstrate positive relationships between information sharing capability and buyer–supplier relationships, and between relationships and performance.	While this research highlighted the role of information sharing capabilities in driving performance, further study is required to fully capture their impact and to understand the implications for situational factors, such as industry sector and transaction type.
Flynn et al. (2010)	Examines the relationship between SCI (Supply Chain Integration) pattern and performance.	The findings of both the contingency and configuration approach indicated that SCI was related to both operational and business performance and indicated that internal and customer integration were more strongly related to improving performance than supplier integration.	Provides limited understanding, and future studies may consider the factors that influence the degree of customer, supplier and internal integration in SCI patterns. These factors may include factors such as the competitive environment, relationship commitment, trust, organizational characteristics, and national culture. Likewise, the relationship between SCI and competitive performance is another potentially interesting area for future study.
Hong et al. (2023)	Examined the connection between business practices, globalization orientation, and performance results in B2B manufacturing setups.	Suggests that integrated product development is a critical process that links the objectives of product innovation and strategic network coordination to enhanced manufacturing and business performance.	The small sample size from multiple countries was not sufficient to draw generalizable results for country-level analysis. Future research may focus on a single country or collect more data.
Panel 7. Brand affordability			
Saha et al. (2023)	Exemplified how B2C-related branding concepts can open new avenues for B2B research.	The findings suggest that B2B customers' preference for affordable prestige brands is shaped by factors such as affordable pricing, premium positioning, perceived status, sustained competitive advantage and symbolism.	This study used only one product and suggested that future studies must include more items from diverse B2B business categories, specifically, categories in which firms assume the role of buyers in the B2B setting and sellers in the B2C setting.
Jayawardena et al. (2024)	Examined the differential effects of printed advertisements with luxury and nonluxury brands on consumer brand attitude persuasion using a qualitative experimental approach.	The significance of affordability in the B2B context that can potentially influence favorable customer perceptions was asserted by this study. It also points out the ways in which brands can potentially use affordability factors to draw in customers who are sensitive to price.	Acknowledged that the scope of the study was limited and suggested that future studies must use additional variables and employ other methods to better understand the phenomenon.
Olivieri and Hu (2025)	Tested the methods for B2B high-tech firms to achieve brand affordability.	The findings point out that entrepreneurs develop their identities by using imaginative and economical branding techniques such as emotive content and storytelling.	Although technological startups are less affected by geographical limits than SMEs and traditional businesses in general, future studies could analyze the most effective branding strategies to adopt, depending on the cultural context in which the startup operates.
Panel 8. Brand affect			
Merz et al. (2009)	Examined the evolving brand logic in service-dominant contexts.	Discusses the shift from firm-centric to stakeholder-centric brand management, highlighting the	This study suggested that the relationships among the players in the brand value co-creation

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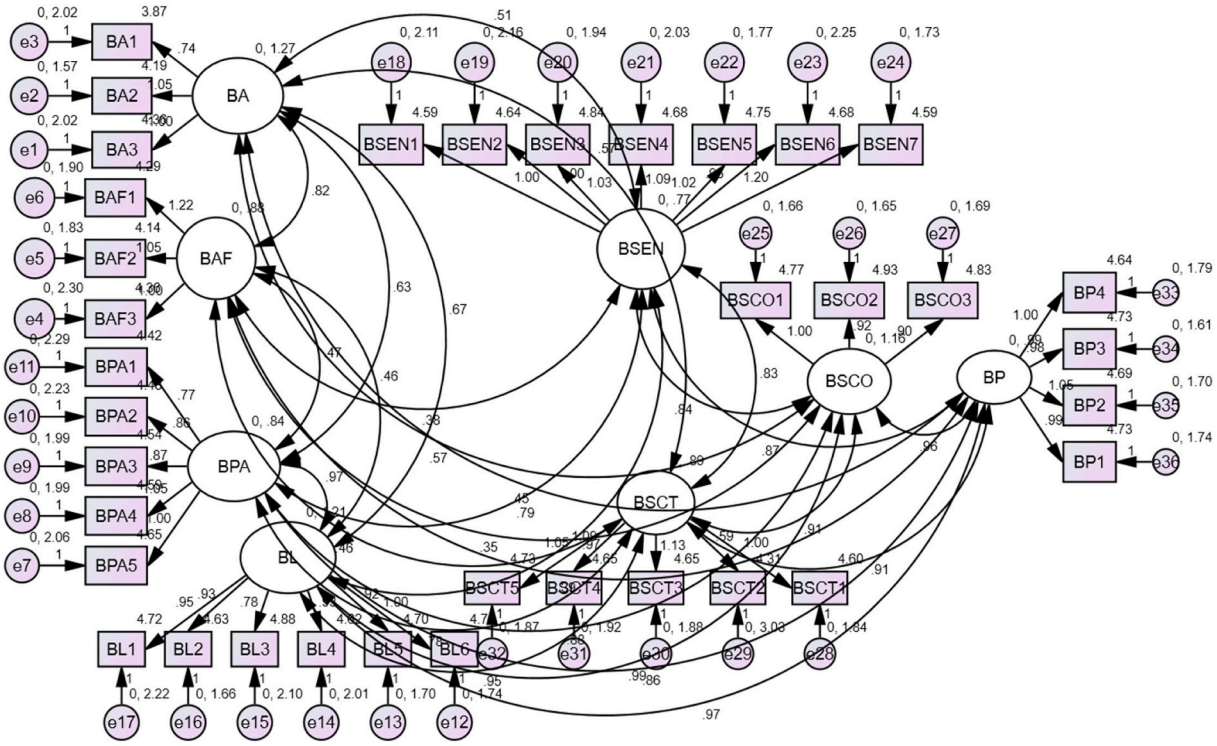
Appendix A (*continued*)

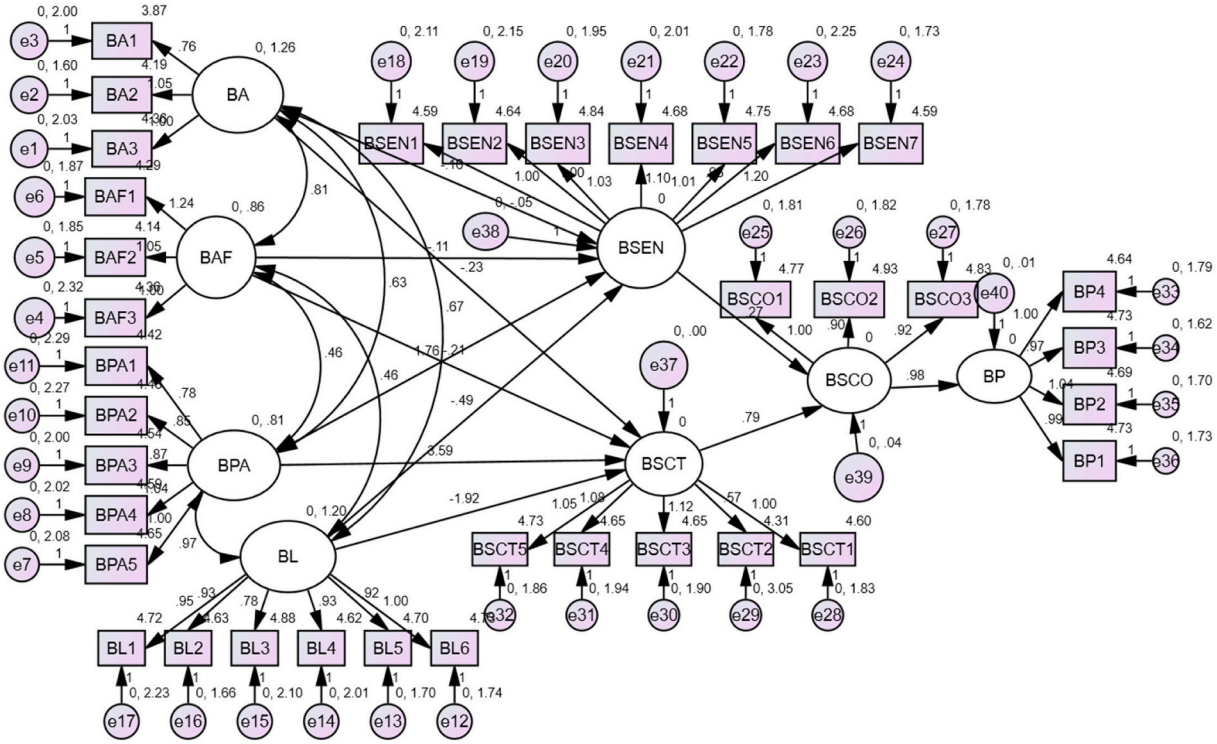
Study	Study Focus	Key Findings	Research Gaps
		importance of emotional connections in B2B branding.	processes (i.e., firms, including intermediaries, brands, and all stakeholders) warrant further exploration.
Guan et al. (2021)	Examined the relationships between customer experience and four key factors in brand building, i.e., brand loyalty, brand trust, brand affect, and brand involvement.	Finds that there is a chain effect from customer experience to brand trust and to brand affect, and then to brand loyalty. Brand involvement moderates relationships between customer experience and brand trust, and brand affect, but not brand loyalty.	This study tested the intermediary and moderate roles of brand trust, affect and involvement; however, other constructs, such as brand knowledge, brand personality, and brand identification, may also play key roles in the mechanism of customer experience and brand loyalty. An even more comprehensive study can be considered in the future.
Manansala et al. (2024)	Examined ethical practices in the banking sector by testing the relationships between customer perceptions of ethicality and brand attributes such as affect, image and equity.	The findings suggest that customers' perception of ethicality, brand image and affect are significantly associated with brand equity. In addition, brand image and affect significantly mediate the relationship between the customer's perceptions of ethicality and brand equity.	This study adopted a cross-sectional and quantitative approach. Future studies may use different methodologies to better understand the phenomenon. In addition, this study suggested that more empirical study is necessary in the service context.
Panel 9. Brand parity			
Rahman (2014)	Provided a theoretical explanation as to why brand parity/brand similarity occurs.	The findings suggest that branding strategy creates unique brand experiences to combat brand parity. Brand parity is the idea that different brands in a product category are very similar.	This study focused more on the conceptual framework than empirical testing.
Sloan et al. (2018)	Explored the effects of regional geographic brand congruency (GBC) on brand trust, brand parity, perceived value, brand honesty, and purchase intentions.		This study focused only on low-involvement food products and used fictitious brands. Further research is needed to strengthen the generalizability of these results across a broader range of product categories.
Balmer et al. (2020)	Examined the strategic significance of the B2B corporate brand image of global logistics corporate brand providers in China.	A positive industrial corporate brand image of logistics brands has a favorable impact on premium pricing and brand retention. Therefore, the research reveals how managers' selection of an industrial corporate brand is materially shaped by corporate brand image.	Focused on China and suggested that additional studies could ascertain the applicability of the research findings reported in that country to other transitional economies in Asia (e.g., India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, etc.). The authors also suggested testing alternative outcome variables.
Panel 10. Brand loyalty			
Kittur and Chatterjee (2021)	Examined the relative importance of the way people perceive a brand based on its products and services for customer loyalty.	The authors found that both good-based brand image (GBBI) and service-based brand image (SBBI) have positive relationships with B2B loyalty, with customer satisfaction being the mediator.	Although the study includes diverse industries, it does not analyze results across different industry types due to insufficient sample size per group. Future studies may overcome this lack by focusing on a specific sector.
Arthur et al. (2024)	Explored the role customer satisfaction plays in mediating the nexus between commitment, trust, relative dependence, and customer loyalty from an emerging market context under a business-to-business (B2B) setting.	A positive and significant relationship was found between B2B firms' satisfaction and loyalty. The results also indicate that customer satisfaction mediates the relationships among commitment, trust, relative dependence, and B2B loyalty.	This study suggested that it would be interesting and insightful for future researchers to split trust and commitment into different aspects.
Sethi et al. (2024)	Examined how relationships between customers can benefit online business communities.	The findings suggest that strong relationships, shared understanding, and trust can enhance customer conversations and lead to positive outcomes.	Future studies may consider different contexts and test other variables to better understand the phenomenon.

Appendix B. Measurement model



*BA: Brand affordability; BAF: Brand affect; BPA: Brand parity; BL: Brand loyalty; BSEN: Buyer–supplier engagement; BSCO: Buyer-supplier commitment; BSCT: Buyer–supplier communication; BP: Business performance.

Appendix C. Structural model



*BA: Brand affordability; BAF: Brand affect; BPA: Brand parity; BL: Brand loyalty; BSEN: Buyer–supplier engagement; BSCO: Buyer–supplier

commitment; BSCT: Buyer–supplier communication; BP: Business performance.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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