Integration of sustainability marketing into business strategies: Challenges during adoption

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to investigate the challenges encountered by organisations when integrating sustainable marketing into their strategic strategies. The research adopted a qualitative research design. Participants were selected from a representative sample of Zimbabwean organisations from various industries that have incorporated sustainable practices into their marketing strategy. Purposive sampling was used to select businesses encompassing various industries, sizes, and degrees of sustainability integration. This study, grounded in stakeholder theory, unveils challenges in implementing sustainable marketing strategies, including consumer awareness, resource constraints, hesitancy from stakeholders, competition from alternatives, regulatory complexities and measurement difficulties, underscoring the critical role of stakeholder engagement in navigating these challenges. Organisations must strategically incorporate sustainable practices by optimising resources, reducing inefficiencies, and aligning with sustainability goals, promoting the connection between resource optimization and environmental preservation. Further, they have leverage partnerships with sustainable suppliers, NGOs, and stakeholders to enhance sustainability initiatives by pooling resources, sharing costs, and overcoming budget constraints. Further study could investigate effective strategies for overcoming stakeholder hesitancy and fostering greater stakeholder engagement in sustainability initiatives.

Introduction

The latest iteration of the international legal framework endeavours to offer more explicit and specific directions. The United Nations (UN, 2015b) has developed a comprehensive roadmap that guides all nations in formulating policies to achieve sustainable development by the year 2030. The United Nations Resolution established a comprehensive framework consisting of 17 sustainable development goals and 169 corresponding targets. These goals and targets are firmly rooted in the three pillars of sustainable development, namely the economic, social, and environmental aspects. The United Nations General Assembly, in the year 2015, officially endorsed the UN Resolution 70/1, bearing the title ‘Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’. The resolution, also known as the 2030 Agenda or the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), aims to serve as a comprehensive strategy including several aspects such as people, planet, and prosperity.

Businesses dedicated to stakeholder capitalism should prioritise their focus on all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, achieving the objectives of two specific SDGs has significant potential for enhancing economic performance. Sustainable Development Goal 9, titled "Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure," focuses on the promotion of sustainable industrialization, fostering innovation, and enhancing infrastructure development. The objectives encompass the promotion of inclusive and sustainable industrialisation, to substantially increase the industrial sector's contribution to employment and GDP by 2030 and double its share in the least developed countries (LDCs). Additional measures encompass enhancing the availability of financial services for small-scale firms, enhancing infrastructure, and implementing sustainable practices inside industries. Sustainable Development Goal 12, also known as SDG 12, pertains to the concept of responsible consumption and production. The objectives encompass the
attainment of sustainable resource management, optimal utilisation of natural resources, and the mitigation of waste creation. Additionally, the goals involve the implementation of ecologically responsible practices for chemical management, with a focus on minimising their release into the environment. The objective also promotes the adoption of sustainable practices and the incorporation of sustainability information into reporting cycles by firms, particularly those of significant size (UN, 2015).

The consideration of business size is seen crucial in the implementation of sustainability (Lee, 2019). It is often believed that larger corporations are adopting environmental and social practices as a means of fulfilling their corporate responsibility and addressing global sustainability concerns. Additionally, it may be argued that larger businesses possess better resources, engage in more robust research and development activities, have access to greater financial resources, have stronger marketing capabilities, and establish a more comprehensive social compact. These traits are leveraged by larger organisations to actively pursue sustainable performance. In comparison, small and medium-sized firms (SMEs) face resource constraints and encounter challenges in maintaining their operations, resulting in limited attention towards sustainability concerns (Li and Huang, 2017; Sancha et al., 2015; Walker et al., 2008; Walker and Jones, 2012). However, it is imperative to acknowledge the significant contribution of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the advancement of numerous rising economies.

Stakeholder theory forms the theoretical backbone of this study, connecting it to the broader context of sustainability (Dmytryev et al., 2021). By examining large corporations in Zimbabwe, the research explores how these entities navigate the complex terrain of sustainable marketing while considering the diverse interests of stakeholders. This connection underscores the study’s focus on corporate practices within the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their alignment with societal and environmental concerns. The examination of large businesses in Zimbabwe offers significant contributions to understanding how these entities are addressing the difficulties presented by the ailing Zimbabwean economy, all the while incorporating sustainable marketing strategies. Thus, the study seeks to investigate the challenges encountered by organisations when integrating sustainable marketing into their strategic strategies.

**Literature Review**

**Environmental Sustainability**

There is a growing trend among consumers to prioritise intent above profits when it comes to the brands they engage with. This includes the brands they work for, purchase from, invest in, and permit to operate within their communities. According to a study conducted by IBM (2021) on consumer behaviour, it was found that a significant proportion of consumers, 57%, expressed a willingness to modify their buying patterns in order to align with environmentally conscious practices. Additionally, a substantial majority of survey participants, almost 80%, emphasised the importance of sustainability (Haller, 2020). Hence, the concept of sustainability is deemed a crucial necessity for businesses. According to Kotler (2018), sustainable marketing refers to the notion that an organisation should satisfy the demands of its current consumers while ensuring that the capacity of future generations to meet their requirements is not compromised. Onuoha (2021) on the other hand indicated that, the products and services utilised in the present mustn't have detrimental effects on future users.

**Sustainable marketing**

Sustainable marketing integrates a sense of purpose into companies, products, and services that prioritise social consciousness. The field of marketing aims to establish a unique brand identity by emphasising its objective. Sustainable brands are characterised by their ability to establish a clear mission, fit with the values of consumers and relevant stakeholders, integrate their purpose into their strategic approach, and effectively communicate their commitment to sustainability through marketing efforts (Jung-Yong, and Chang-Hyun, 2019). This business strategy provides firms with a competitive advantage among consumers who prioritise brands that are in line with their values. Sustainable marketing is an approach that aims to simultaneously advance environmental preservation and economic interests through the creation and promotion of socially acceptable and ecologically compatible products and services that incorporate eco-friendly attributes (Lloveras et al., 2022). These favourable attributes contribute to the cultivation of brand loyalty and the promotion of optimal practices. Sustainable marketing encompasses the objectives of the entire organisation, rather than being confined to specific items or short-term promotional initiatives. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that there are instances where it may be advantageous to place particular emphasis on certain aspects of a business, although for a limited duration, to promote its distinctive selling characteristics (White et al., 2019).

The three fundamental components of sustainable marketing encompass environmental sustainability, social welfare, and economic profitability. The concept of “planet, people, and profits” encompasses the fundamental principles that underpin sustainable marketing (Onuoha, 2021). Business enterprises effectively address the demands of the market while ensuring the long-term sustainability of the global ecosystem. There is a growing trend among companies to adopt an environmental, social, and governance (ESG) strategy, wherein these three pillars serve as guiding principles for their operations. The subject matter beyond the concept of sustainability and encompasses the pursuit of socially and ethically responsible actions. Organisations disseminate their quantitative and qualitative outcomes through annual disclosures to communicate the effects of their environmental, social, and governance (ESG) initiatives (Haller, 2020).
The environmental aspect of corporate sustainability centers on mitigating a company's ecological footprint. One potential approach for organisations to mitigate their environmental footprint is the implementation of several strategies such as recycling, reusing materials, waste reduction, and enhancing energy efficiency. Stonyfield Organic has a strong dedication to the environmental aspect by setting forth a goal to reduce carbon emissions by 30 percent by 2030 (Olick, 2022). Furthermore, the company intends to prioritise energy saving, waste reduction, and the implementation of sustainable packaging and shipping strategies (Morgan, 2019). Furthermore, Subaru of Indiana Automotive maintains a production facility that follows a "green lean" approach, aiming to achieve zero landfill waste. According to Farzad (2011), Subaru engages in sustainable waste management practices by recycling or composting 98% of its manufacturing waste. The remaining 2% is disposed of through incineration as waste to fuel.

The social dimension encompasses the consideration of a company's consumers and employees, with the aim of fostering a more inclusive environment for the broader community. A significant portion of the efforts under the social pillar are dedicated to implementing responsive initiatives aimed at enhancing employee well-being. Nevertheless, organisations could extend their influence beyond their internal operations in order to make a positive impact on their surrounding communities.

Adobe is an exemplary illustration of a corporation that engages in both internal and external initiatives to bring about social transformation (Olick, 2022). This is achieved through collaborative efforts with local nonprofit organisations situated in the communities where its employees reside and operate. Adobe has implemented a comprehensive diversity, equity, and inclusion effort inside its organisational framework, which serves to empower and amplify a wide range of diverse viewpoints. One illustrative instance is Gen Create, which serves as a digital platform for a wide range of intellectuals and innovators to engage in collaborative efforts aimed at effecting positive global transformation. In pursuit of enhanced equity, Adobe extends access to its software to marginalised communities, irrespective of geographical constraints (Adobe, 2020).

The economic pillar, often known as the governance pillar, pertains to the aspects of sustainability that encompass profitability and corporate ethics. The profitability of businesses is a crucial sustainability performance metric, as it directly impacts their ability to achieve long-term viability. Companies can exhibit achievements in the economic domain by implementing effective governance frameworks, robust risk management practices, and adherence to regulatory compliance. The demonstration of effective governance in relation to voting, legal compliance, and accounting standards serves to indicate to individuals that corporations are fulfilling their respective responsibilities. The concept of governance encompasses various aspects such as company ethics, anticompetitive practices, and tax transparency. Ultimately, it is imperative to assess whether the corporation is acting in the best interest of its investors and all relevant stakeholders (Fortune, 2023).

Challenges of Sustainable Marketing

Organisations encounter a range of challenges when incorporating sustainability measures into their operations, as documented in scholarly research that includes industry-specific or country-specific investigations (Luthra et al., 2011; Moktadir et al., 2018; Al Zaabi et al., 2013). The barriers to implementing environmental sustainability practices in organisations encompass a range of factors. These include a lack of commitment from top management, challenges in aligning short-term and long-term plans, difficulties in changing company practises and policies, the need for significant financial investment, the absence of established environmental standards and regulations. These barriers can be classified into various categories such as internal and external, social, technological, financial, governmental, economic, and managerial, as discussed in the works of Moktadir et al. (2018), Murillo-Luna et al. (2011), Onuoha (2021), and Trianni et al. (2017).

Research and Methodology

The research adopted a qualitative research design. While certain scholars specialising in qualitative research tend to refrain from discussing the specific number of interviews required, there exists a range of recommendations regarding the minimal number. A substantial body of literature, comprising numerous articles, book chapters, and volumes, provides recommendations and proposes a
range of 5 to 50 participants as being sufficient (Dworkin, 2012). A non-probability sampling will be used to select five Zimbabwean organisations from various industries that have incorporated sustainable practices into their marketing strategy. The sample will be made up of businesses that encompass various industries, sizes, and degrees of sustainability integration. The study employed semi-structured interviews to thoroughly investigate the obstacles associated with the integration of sustainability. Participants had the opportunity to discuss their own experiences, offer valuable insights, and provide detailed explanations regarding their decision-making procedures. The interviews were captured using audio technology and afterwards converted into written form through transcription.

Data collected from interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. It was used to identify recurring themes, patterns, and insights within the interview transcripts. According to Rose and Johnson (2020), thematic analysis is a technique used to recognise, scrutinise, arrange, depict, and present themes that are present within a given set of data. According to Rose and Johnson (2020) and Nowell et al. (2017), the utilisation of thematic analysis offers a versatile method that can be adapted to suit various research requirements. This approach can furnish a comprehensive and intricate depiction of data. According to Nowell et al. (2017), the utilisation of thematic analysis in qualitative research presents an advantageous approach, as it provides a more comprehensible form of analysis and is also beneficial in condensing significant characteristics of an extensive dataset. Thematic analysis was deemed appropriate for this investigation, as it aimed to scrutinise diverse viewpoints of benefiting students and underscore the viewpoints of the staff in the development initiative. For confidentiality and protection of participants, pseudonyms were used, and permission was granted to perform the study.

Findings and Discussions

The incorporation of sustainability marketing into corporate plans signifies a vital measure in ensuring that businesses are in line with the changing expectations of ecologically and socially aware customers. The objective of this study was to investigate the challenges encountered by organisations when integrating sustainable marketing into their strategic strategies. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with important stakeholders representing many industries. These interviews unveiled several recurring themes that provide insights into the challenges and intricacies related with the process of integration. The following themes came from the Interviews:

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<td><strong>Key themes</strong></td>
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Theme 1: Lack of Awareness Consumer Awareness about Sustainable Marketing

Numerous organisations indicated that a primary obstacle they faced was the lack of consumer understanding regarding sustainable marketing. Participants observed that despite their diligent endeavours to implement sustainability measures, consumers frequently exhibited apathy or lack of awareness towards these programmes. This was a substantial obstacle in the promotion of sustainable products and services.

Participant A: “We observed that despite our diligent endeavours to implement sustainability measures, consumers frequently exhibited apathy or lack of awareness towards these programs. This was a substantial obstacle in the promotion of sustainable products and services.”

Participant B: “During our sustainability initiatives, we often found that consumers had limited awareness of what sustainable marketing meant. Despite our efforts to promote eco-friendly products and practices, it seemed like consumers weren’t fully informed or engaged with these concepts. This lack of awareness posed a challenge in convincing them to make sustainable choices.”

The results align with a survey conducted by BCG (2022) in which respondents expressed a lack of awareness regarding sustainable beverage options.

The efficacy of sustainable marketing relies on its adeptness in conveying the fundamental environmental and social principles to consumers. According to existing research, effectively communicating the concept of sustainability and its accompanying advantages to consumers might pose challenges for organisations, despite their diligent efforts. The lack of alignment between the complexities of sustainable practices and customer perceptions presents a notable obstacle to the smooth incorporation of sustainability into marketing strategy.
Theme 2: Measurement Difficulties

The issue of quantifying the concrete effects of sustainability marketing activities has proven to be a challenging undertaking for numerous organisations aiming to showcase the effectiveness of their initiatives. The participants emphasised the necessity of well-defined and uniform measures to assess the ecological and societal advantages of sustainable practices. Such metrics would not only facilitate the evaluation of advancements but also enhance the communication of these accomplishments. Organisations are currently confronted with escalating demands to disclose their sustainability performance transparently. However, it is worth noting that sustainability and climate statistics exhibit a certain level of variability and lack consistency.

Participant E: “Measurement difficulties have been a persistent challenge for us in sustainable marketing. Standardized metrics for gauging environmental and societal impacts would greatly enhance our efforts.”

Participant C: “Measurement difficulties have been a significant roadblock for us in sustainable marketing. While we’re committed to implementing eco-friendly practices, we’ve struggled to quantify the concrete impact of our sustainability initiatives. This becomes particularly challenging when we need to communicate our achievements transparently to stakeholders. We believe that having well-defined and standardized metrics to assess the environmental and social benefits of sustainable practices would greatly help us in this endeavour. Unfortunately, we’ve encountered variations and inconsistencies in sustainability and climate data, making it challenging to provide a clear and uniform picture of our sustainability performance.”

The evolution of reporting standards necessitates ongoing adaptation, and certain metrics devised by rating agencies may lack objectivity, leading companies to prioritise their scores over the imperative of implementing a comprehensive strategy that effectively integrates sustainability into their operations, products, and services (Santamarta et al., 2022).

According to Nduba-Banja and Butt (2022), it can be argued that ESG reporting is predominantly voluntary, leading to a lack of consistency in its implementation. The absence of a universally adopted reporting standard necessitates that corporations have the discretion to select from a range of metrics and third-party disclosure frameworks, such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) and Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (SASB), for reporting on environmental, social, and governance (ESG) factors. These standards can be utilised either independently or in conjunction with one another. For numerous organisations, this situation can frequently lead to confusion and financial burden. Quantifying the influence of sustainability on consumer behaviour, brand perception, and financial outcomes demands meticulous analysis and sophisticated methodologies. The dynamic and multi-faceted nature of marketing strategies further complicates the process of determining a direct cause-and-effect relationship between sustainability efforts and marketing outcomes. As a result, the challenge of measurement difficulties reverberates through organizational decision-making processes.

Theme 3: Resource Constraints for Implementing Sustainability-Focused Initiatives

The presence of resource constraints, encompassing both financial and human resources, proved to be a persistent obstacle. Organisations encountered challenges in effectively allocating adequate resources towards sustainability marketing initiatives, frequently encountering budgetary limitations and encountering issues in sourcing or developing individuals possessing the requisite knowledge.

Participant B: “Resource constraints, including budget limitations and difficulties in sourcing knowledgeable individuals, hindered our efforts to implement sustainability-focused initiatives.”

Participant D: “Budgetary limitations and resource allocation issues posed significant challenges in pursuing sustainability marketing initiatives.”

Participant E: “Sourcing individuals with the necessary expertise and allocating sufficient financial resources were ongoing challenges when implementing sustainability-focused initiatives.”

The results of (Chen et al., 2022) are consistent with the findings presented in this paper, suggesting that financial restrictions play a significant role in shaping both the implementation of environmentally sustainable practices by firms and their subsequent performance in this domain.

The need to include sustainability into marketing plans frequently encounters obstacles due to restrictions in resources, including financial constraints and staff capabilities. Dedication to sustainable practices requires investments in research, innovation, and communication efforts. Nevertheless, the presence of constrained financial resources presents a notable obstacle that could hinder the implementation of all-encompassing marketing strategies with a focus on sustainability. The requirement to distribute resources in a prudent manner introduces intricacy into the process of integration and emphasises the necessity for strategic prioritisation.

Theme 4: Opposition or Hesitancy from Stakeholders

The presence of internal resistance from many stakeholders within organisations presented a substantial obstacle to the successful integration of sustainable marketing. The participants noted that resistance to sustainability marketing frequently originated from executives, or shareholders who showed reluctance in adopting such practices due to perceiving them as disruptive or expensive. One participant emphasised that, “The success or failure of ESG projects is heavily influenced by the strong commitment exhibited...”
by top-level leadership. The presence of support from top-level management significantly impacts the outcome in a noticeable manner. According to the findings of Cuellar et al. (2022), a lack of strong commitment from top-level management is a significant obstacle to the implementation of sustainability marketing strategies. The lack of a robust, conspicuous, and unwavering dedication to the sustainability agenda by senior executives hampers their credibility among both internal and external stakeholders.

Previous research conducted by Al Zaabi et al. (2013), Gandhi et al. (2015), and Moktadir et al. (2018), among others, have similarly indicated that the decisions made by top-level executives are not conducive to the adoption of SSCM, or sustainable practices. The sustainability programme relies on the basic characteristics of commitment, willingness, and support from the top management of the companies. According to a study conducted on Indian manufacturers, it was found that executives face challenges in promoting the adoption of sustainable practices inside their organisations due to a lack of commitment towards sustainability vision and organisational objectives (Al Zaabi et al., 2013). According to Giunipero et al. (2012), there is a perception among certain individuals that sustainability initiatives could result in significant expenses and may not provide immediate financial gains, mostly due to the challenges associated with long-term planning beyond a five-year timeframe.

The issue of internal resistance sometimes arises as a significant obstacle that organisations commonly face when integrating sustainable practices into business marketing plans. Hesitation or opposition from employees and stakeholders may arise because of apprehensions over operational disruptions, conflicting priorities, or misunderstandings regarding the potential advantages of sustainable marketing. Successfully navigating this problem necessitates the implementation of robust change management methods, effective communication practices, and the cultivation of a collective comprehension about the value proposition that sustainable marketing presents to both the organisation and its stakeholders.

**Theme 5: Regulatory Complexities**

The presence of complex regulatory frameworks and the lack of clarity in the sustainability field were seen as substantial obstacles. Organisations have reported challenges in effectively navigating a dynamic regulatory environment, which occasionally impeded their efforts towards sustainability and imposed burdens connected to compliance. Participant C said, "Complex regulatory frameworks and the lack of clarity in the sustainability field posed substantial obstacles. Navigating a dynamic regulatory environment occasionally hindered our sustainability efforts and added compliance burdens." This is in line with the literature by (Giunipero et al., 2012; Oelze, 2017) which state that insufficient regulatory oversight and limited control mechanisms are a substantial impediment to the implementation of sustainability programmes.

Organisations engaged in the process of incorporating sustainable practices into their marketing strategies are confronted with the intricate challenges associated with compliance to sustainability-related legislation. The dynamic nature of regulatory frameworks, combined with variances across different geographic regions, present complexities that require ongoing attentiveness. The task of comprehending and adhering to sustainability norms, with the creation of persuasive marketing narratives, necessitates scrupulous scrutiny of legal and ethical factors.

**Theme 6: Balancing Competition with Non-Sustainable Alternatives in the Market**

Numerous organisations encountered the predicament of contending with non-sustainable alternatives that frequently presented themselves as more economically advantageous to consumers. The constant difficulty lies in achieving a balance between the commercial feasibility of sustainable products and their environmental and social benefits.

Participant B: "Balancing competition with non-sustainable alternatives proved challenging. Sustainable products often competed with more economically advantageous options, making it difficult to emphasize their environmental and social benefits while remaining commercially viable."

Participant E: "The struggle to balance competition with non-sustainable alternatives was a common challenge. We found it hard to promote the environmental and social benefits of sustainable products while facing the allure of more economically advantageous alternatives in the market."

The results are in line with the findings from a comprehensive survey conducted among 19,000 consumers in multiple countries including the US, Japan, Germany, France, Italy, China, India, and Brazil. It reveals that a significant proportion of consumers, approximately 80%, express concerns regarding sustainability. However, the study indicates that only a small percentage, ranging from 1% to 7%, have actually paid a premium for sustainable purchases. Nonetheless, the report suggests that a substantial portion, around 40%, of consumers could potentially be persuaded to make sustainable choices (BCG, 2022).

However, it is important to note that examining only these two ends of the spectrum, namely consumers who are willing to pay a higher price for sustainable products and services, and those who only express worry about sustainability, fails to provide a comprehensive understanding of consumers’ real-life actions.

The signals in question can be readily perceived as indicative of customer unpreparedness. However, it is imperative for enterprises to recognise that the full potential of sustainable products and services cannot be realised by solely targeting consumers who are willing to pay a higher price. There exists a considerable population of consumers who are in a transitional phase, poised to adopt sustainable products and services. The primary inquiry revolves around the methods employed to incentivize these consumers to act.
Conclusions

The challenges faced by businesses in Zimbabwe include consumer awareness, resource constraints, hesitancy from stakeholders, competition from alternatives, regulatory challenges and measurement difficulties. Considering stakeholder theory as the theoretical foundation of the study, these findings align with the central premise that businesses must navigate a complex web of stakeholder interests. The challenges identified, such as hesitancy from stakeholders and regulatory hurdles, emphasize the need for businesses to engage with and address the concerns of various stakeholders, including consumers, regulators, and competitors. Organizations should prioritize transparent communication and collaboration with stakeholders. This approach can build trust, address concerns, and actively involve stakeholders in sustainability initiatives, aligning with the principles of stakeholder theory. Cause-related marketing serves as a means to mobilize consumer engagement by forging meaningful connections between organizational objectives and societal improvement, enhancing brand reputation and encouraging consumer participation in sustainability initiatives. Additionally, resource constraints and measurement difficulties highlight the practical aspects of implementing sustainable marketing strategies while balancing stakeholder demands. There is a need to emphasize the importance of resource optimization and collaboration with stakeholders, NGOs, and sustainable suppliers to overcome resource constraints and advance sustainability goals. Additionally, data-driven decision-making is crucial for aligning sustainability objectives with profitability, ensuring that resources are effectively utilized. In essence, these challenges underscore the importance of stakeholder engagement and alignment with sustainability goals in the context of the study.

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References


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