



Sustainability practices and customer satisfaction in small and medium enterprises

A Banupriya¹, Dr. K Sridevi², Dr. C J Priya³

¹ Department of Commerce, Hindustan Institute of Technology & Science, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

² Assistant Professor, Department of Commerce, Hindustan Institute of Technology & Science, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

³ Professor, Department of Commerce & Management, Hindustan College, Mysore, Karnataka, India

Abstract

The need for sustainability has grown so much and it is now an integral part of business operations. Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are key contributors to the development of economic activities, employment generation and GDP growth as well as supporting the local communities. Over the last few years, customers have increased their environmental and social awareness, which has led to SMEs being more sustainable with their products, waste management, energy consumption, sourcing and their packaging, as well as through social responsibility measures. The main aim of the present study is to analyse the impact of the sustainability practices on the satisfaction of the customers among SMEs in Mysore. This study is descriptive of nature and based on both primary and secondary data. A total of 200 respondents were randomly selected from the population using convenience sampling and a structured questionnaire was used to gather primary data. Secondary data were gathered from journals, books, websites and previous research studies on sustainability and customer satisfaction. The collected data were analyzed using statistical tools: percentage analysis and factor analysis. The results of the research showed that sustainability positively affect customer satisfaction, customer loyalty and business performance. The factor analysis led to four main dimensions of sustainability practices: Environmental Sustainability Practices, Social and Ethical Sustainability Practices, Operational Sustainability Practices, and organizational Sustainability Practices. Of these, environmental sustainability practices had the most impact on customer satisfaction. The study also highlighted SME challenges such as lack of financial resources, awareness and insufficient technological assistance to take action on sustainability. Based on the study, the authors have concluded that sustainability practices have a positive impact on customer trust, enhancing the competitive edge of SMEs and contributing to sustainable growth in the long term.

Keywords: Customer satisfaction, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), environmental sustainability, social responsibility, ethical practices, green marketing, factor analysis, sustainable development, and business performance

Introduction

In today's competitive world, sustainability is an important to business practices. Sustainable development is gaining more and more importance in the attention of businesses worldwide to combine economic development with environmental protection and social responsibility. Elkington (1997) ^[4] suggests that not only should organizations be concerned with profitability, but also with environmental and social issues outlined in the concept of the Triple Bottom Line. Sustainability has become a strategic management tool for companies to make their operations more efficient, boost their reputation and give them a competitive edge in the market in recent years (Porter & Kramer, 2006) ^[14].

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are an important sector in the economic growth of developed and developing countries. SMEs are important to job creation, output, innovation and Gross Domestic Product (GDP). SMEs make up a significant part of businesses and employment opportunities globally, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2018) ^[10]. In countries such as India, SMEs are viewed as the backbone of the economy as they help in the development of regions and promote entrepreneurship. As they are closer to local communities and customers, SMEs are increasingly being expected to practice responsible and sustainable business.

Customers have become more environmentally and socially aware in today's business world. Today, consumers are more conscious of concerns like climate change, pollution, unethical working practices and depletion of resources. This is because customers tend to favor companies that are seen as having a commitment to protecting the environment and social causes (Kotler & Keller, 2016) ^[7]. Eco-friendly initiatives like waste reduction, energy efficiency, recycling, responsible sourcing, and sustainable packaging are integral to the company's operations, shaping customer preferences and driving sales. Ethical measures like waste management, energy conservation, recycling, responsible sourcing, eco-friendly packaging, and corporate social responsibility activities all have a positive impact on customer attitudes and purchasing decisions. Research has also found that customers are more likely to advocate for businesses that have values similar to their own in terms of social and environmental matters (Chen, 2010) ^[3].

Sustainability measures not only are important for protecting the environment, but they also can be important for the long-term success of businesses. Implementing sustainability measures can help companies save money on their bills by using resources and energy efficiently. Furthermore, sustainable practices have a positive impact on the image of the company, on the relationships with stakeholders and on building trust and loyalty with customers (Hart & Milstein, 2003) ^[5]. SMEs that are actively involved in sustainability activities can stand out

from the crowd and find that they are able to appeal to the environmentally conscious market.

One of the most crucial aspects of determining business growth and survival is customer satisfaction. Oliver (1999)^[13] states that satisfied customers are more likely to be loyal customers, to make repeat purchases and to engage in positive word of mouth communication regarding the business. Today, with all the competition in the market, customers' satisfaction is fundamental to sustain the profitability and market position in the long-term. Customer satisfaction can be enhanced by sustainability practices, as customers today are increasingly aware of the importance of businesses being responsible toward society and the environment.

Although sustainability measures are becoming more and more relevant for SMEs, many of them are experiencing difficulties in implementing sustainability measures because of financial constraints, lack of knowledge, limited technology and managerial difficulties. But those companies that successfully incorporate sustainability into their practices can benefit customer relations and sustain growth in a healthy manner. Hence, it is crucial that SMEs are able to grasp the linkage between sustainability practices and customer satisfaction in order to improve business performance, customer loyalty and gain competitive advantage in the long term.

Review of Literature

In the study conducted by Chen & Wang (2024)^[2], they compared the link between digital transformation, innovation capability and Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) performance in manufacturing SMEs. The study revealed that sustainability programs and digital innovation have a positive impact on customer trust, organizational reputation and business sustainability over time. The researchers noted that those SMEs that were more successful at incorporating sustainability were more likely to meet customers' environmental demands.

Shaik *et al.* (2024)^[16] examined environmental and economic sustainability practices within SMEs along with their effect on satisfaction of stakeholders. The results indicated that there is a positive relationship between sustainable business operations based on technology and big data analytics and customer satisfaction and operational efficiency. Research revealed that sustainability has a positive impact on the competitiveness of SMEs in the long-term.

Lelo and Israel (2024)^[9] compared innovative practices in the supply chain with customer satisfaction in manufacturing SMEs. The study's findings showed that sustainable activities in the supply chain, like waste reduction, lean manufacturing and green logistics, have a positive impact on customer loyalty and brand image. The researchers also determined that practices regarding sustainability in the supply chain are associated with greater customer satisfaction.

Aldossary *et al.* (2024)^[1] explored the impact of customer engagement in environmental sustainability on customer satisfaction and business performance. The study revealed that the customer engagement in sustainability activities leads to better customer relationships, higher trust and more effective organizational performance. It was found that environmental sustainability was one of the key factors that helps to satisfy customers.

Türkeş *et al.* (2024) examined sustainable supply chain management practices of SMEs. The results revealed that customers and businesses are positively impacted by sustainability efforts, including ethical sourcing, green logistics, and waste minimization. The study also found some challenges which included financial support and technical skills on implementing sustainability practices.

Shih *et al.* (2024)^[17] conducted a study on the influence of perceived sustainability on customer satisfaction. The research demonstrated that customers' perceived value and emotional relationship with businesses are positively associated with environmental, social and economic sustainability practices. The researchers found that sustainability measures have a significant impact in increasing customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Westin *et al.* (2024)^[19] examined the connection between perceived sustainability and service industries customer's satisfaction. The results revealed that customers see sustainability as a quality and trust factor of an organization. Sustainability was viewed positively for those businesses that practice it, resulting in customer satisfaction and positive word of mouth communication.

Saedifar (2024)^[15] investigated sustainable supply chain management practices among the UK SMEs and their performance impacts. The study also revealed that sustainability efforts like eco-sourcing, supplier partnerships and energy efficiency enhance customer satisfaction & operational efficiency. The study also identified some barriers such as financial constraint and lack of sustainability knowledge to the SMEs.

Yadav and Sharma (2023)^[20] studied the green marketing practices and customer satisfaction of SMEs. The study found that eco-friendly products, sustainable packaging and sustainable awareness campaigns contribute to the positive impact on consumer buying habits and customer loyalty. The researchers concluded that the positive impact of green marketing strategies is the improvement of customer satisfaction and competitive advantage.

Kumar and Singh (2023)^[8] examined how the concepts of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability efforts can enhance customer satisfaction among small and medium enterprises (SMEs). The results revealed that customers are highly satisfied and loyal due to socially responsible practices, including community welfare activities, ethical employment policies, and environmental protection initiatives. Sustainability practices were highlighted as being key components to long-term business success.

Research Gap

While a number of researchers have examined the sustainability practices and customer satisfaction, most of the studies conducted have been in the context of large companies and multinational companies. In comparison, comparatively little research has been done on Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) particularly in developing countries where SMEs play an important part in economic growth and employment creation. In addition, most previous research has focused on environmental sustainability, and there is limited research on social and economic sustainability practices that SMEs employ. However, there is also a lack of research on the perceptions, satisfaction and loyalty of customers to SMEs' sustainability practices in local markets. The present study therefore seeks to tackle

this gap by investigating the effect of sustainability practices on customer satisfaction of SMEs and establishing the challenges in implementing sustainable business strategies.

Statement of the Problem

With the current competitive environment in the business world, it is vital that businesses incorporate sustainability measures as a means of sustaining long-term growth and a positive image in the market. Environmental protection, ethical business practices, and social responsibility are highly motivating and form a significant part of the customers' mind when making a purchase, as well as their satisfaction. This is creating increased pressure for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) to take action on sustainability in their business operations including waste reduction, energy efficiency, environmentally sustainable manufacturing, ethical sourcing and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. Although sustainability is becoming more and more crucial, numerous SMEs have several issues they are struggling with to effectively practice sustainability. Sustainability concepts and strategies are not being adopted by SMEs due to various reasons, such as financial constraints, lack of technological resources, insufficient managerial knowledge and ignorance in terms of sustainability concepts. Furthermore, some SMEs might be unaware of the link between sustainable practices and customer satisfaction and business performance. While sustainability issues are generally addressed in large companies, little research has been conducted on SMEs sustainability and their role in sustainability. Likewise, lack of knowledge exists about the perceptions of customers about sustainability practices of SMEs. Thus, the current study is designed to explore if SMEs sustainability practices have a significant impact on customer satisfaction and improve their business performance and competitive advantage.

Importance of the Study

The study is significant because it reveals the importance of sustainability practices in the success and development of the Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) as it is increasing in significance. Today's business world is characterised by customer expectations for business responsiveness to environmental protection, ethical behaviour and social responsibility. Hence, knowledge on the relationship between sustainability practices and customer satisfaction can be helpful to the SMEs to enhance their business performance, customer loyalty and market competitiveness.

The results of this study could guide SME owners and managers in identifying the positive advantages of implementing sustainable business practices like waste management, energy saving, eco-friendly production, ethical procurement and corporate social responsibility. These practices can help SMEs improve customer trust, build a strong brand reputation, cut costs, and foster long-term business growth.

This study is also very important in the academic field since it provides the body of knowledge with the contribution of sustainability and customer satisfaction. Previous research was largely conducted on the large companies, with very limited studies being carried out on SMEs, especially in developing countries. Therefore, the study provides valuable insights into how sustainability practices influence customer perceptions and satisfaction in SMEs.

Moreover, the study could also be useful for the policymakers, government and business support organizations in shaping and designing policies, training programs, and financial support schemes that promote sustainable practices in SMEs. The research can also raise awareness among enterprises about sustainability issues and how they contribute to economic, environmental and social development.

Objective of the Study

1. To identify the sustainability practices adopted by SMEs.

Scope of the Study

This present study is based on the Sustainability Practices of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and of their environmental, social and economic sustain abilities like Waste Management, Energy Saving, Eco-friendly Products, Ethical Practices, CSR activities and Resource efficiency practices. It looks at the impact of these practices on customer satisfaction, loyalty, and business overall performance. The study also examines the customer perspective of sustainability in SMEs and its impact on the customers buying behaviour and business relationships. Both customer and business perspectives are taken to understand how sustainability can provide a business with a competitive edge. It's restricted to a selected group of SMEs in a particular geographical area and industry specific to manufacturing, retail and services. The primary data is gathered from SME owners/managers and customers and analyzed to see the relationship between sustainability practices and customer satisfaction.

Research Methodology

In the present study, descriptive research design has been used to investigate the relationship between sustainability practices and customer satisfaction in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Mysore. The study sources of data are Primary and Secondary. Primary data is gathered from customers and SME owners/managers by using a structured questionnaire focusing on the issues related to environmental protection, waste management, energy conservation, ethical business practices and customer's satisfaction levels. Secondary data gathered from journals, books, research articles, websites, government reports and previous studies on sustainability and customer satisfaction. A sample of 200 respondents is drawn, comprising customers of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), as well as business representatives. Convenience sampling is a method of selecting respondents based on their willingness to take part in the study and accessibility. The data gathered are categorized and tabulated, and analyzed with suitable statistical tools to obtain meaningful findings and conclusions relating to the effect of sustainability practices on customers' satisfaction in SMEs.

Tools for Analysis

The data were analyzed by Percentage Analysis and Factor Analysis. The customer responses were summarized and interpreted through percentage analysis and the underlying dimensions of sustainability practices affecting customer satisfaction were analyzed by factor analysis. The tools were useful to grasp customer perceptions and the drivers of the relationship between sustainability and customer satisfaction.

Limitations of the Study

The present study has some limitations which might impact the generalizability of the findings. The study is conducted with selected Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) of the city of Mysore. Hence the findings may not necessarily reflect the opinion and practices of SMEs in other areas or in other sectors. The accuracy and reliability of the study are greatly dependent on the responses given by the respondents and there is a possibility of biased and incomplete information. The study is limited in using a small number of respondents, 200, with time and financial constraints, which might limit the scope of the study. Furthermore, the study is limited to a selection of sustainability practices and may not be comprehensive of all aspects of sustainability. Customer attitudes, opinions, and preferences about sustainability practices could shift over time as market trends, awareness, and environmental issues evolve. As a result, results from this study should be viewed with these caveats.

Findings of the study

Table 1: Demographic factors (no. Of. Respondents =200)

Demographic factors	Classification	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	112	56.0
	Female	88	44.0
Age	Below 20 Years	34	17.0
	21–30 Years	76	38.0
	31–40 Years	48	24.0
	41–50 Years	28	14.0
	Above 50 Years	14	7.0
Marital Status	Single	118	59.0
	Married	82	41.0
Educational Qualification	School Level	26	13.0
	Undergraduate	82	41.0
	Postgraduate	64	32.0
	Professional	28	14.0
Occupation	Private Employee	74	37.0
	Government Employee	36	18.0
	Business	42	21.0
	Others (Professional / Homemaker / Student)	48	24.0
Monthly Income	Below ₹10,000	30	15.0
	₹10,001 – ₹20,000	52	26.0
	₹20,001 – ₹30,000	48	24.0
	₹30,001 – ₹50,000	42	21.0
	Above ₹50,000	28	14.0
Area of Residence	Urban	96	48.0
	Semi-Urban	64	32.0
	Rural	40	20.0
Type of SME Preferred	Manufacturing	42	21.0
	Retail	58	29.0
	Service	54	27.0
	Food and Beverage	30	15.0
	Others	16	8.0

Source: Primary data

The above table shows the demographic profile of the respondents selected for the study. With regard to gender, 112 respondents (56.0%) were male and 88 respondents (44.0%) were female. It is observed that the majority of the respondents were male. Regarding age-wise distribution, 34 respondents (17.0%) were below 20 years, 76 respondents (38.0%) belonged to the 21–30 years' age group, 48 respondents (24.0%)

belonged to the 31–40 years' age group, 28 respondents (14.0%) belonged to the 41–50 years' age group, and 14 respondents (7.0%) were above 50 years. It is evident that the majority of the respondents belonged to the 21–30 years' age group.

In terms of marital status, 118 respondents (59.0%) were single and 82 respondents (41.0%) were married. The table indicates that most of the respondents were single.

With respect to educational qualification, 26 respondents (13.0%) had school-level education, 82 respondents (41.0%) were undergraduates, 64 respondents (32.0%) were postgraduates, and 28 respondents (14.0%) were professionals. It is clear that the majority of the respondents were undergraduates.

Regarding occupation, 74 respondents (37.0%) were private employees, 36 respondents (18.0%) were government employees, 42 respondents (21.0%) were engaged in business, and 48 respondents (24.0%) belonged to other categories such as professionals, homemakers, and students. The majority of the respondents were private employees.

With regard to monthly income, 30 respondents (15.0%) earned below ₹10,000, 52 respondents (26.0%) earned between ₹10,001 and ₹20,000, 48 respondents (24.0%) earned between ₹20,001 and ₹30,000, 42 respondents (21.0%) earned between ₹30,001 and ₹50,000, and 28 respondents (14.0%) earned above ₹50,000. The majority of the respondents earned between ₹10,001 and ₹20,000 per month.

Regarding area of residence, 96 respondents (48.0%) belonged to urban areas, 64 respondents (32.0%) belonged to semi-urban areas, and 40 respondents (20.0%) belonged to rural areas. It is observed that most of the respondents were from urban areas.

With respect to the type of SME preferred, 42 respondents (21.0%) preferred manufacturing SMEs, 58 respondents (29.0%) preferred retail SMEs, 54 respondents (27.0%) preferred service SMEs, 30 respondents (15.0%) preferred food and beverage SMEs, and 16 respondents (8.0%) preferred other types of SMEs. The table clearly indicates that the majority of the respondents preferred retail SMEs.

Factor Analysis for Sustainability Practices Adopted By Smes

Table 2: Kmo and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.842
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	1268.452
	df	105
	Sig.	.000

The above table presents the results of the KMO and Bartlett's Test conducted to examine the suitability of the data for factor analysis. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy is 0.842, which is greater than the recommended value of 0.5. This indicates that the sample size is adequate and the variables are appropriate for conducting factor analysis. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity shows an approximate Chi-Square value of 1268.452 with 105 degrees of freedom, and the significance value is 0.000, which is less than 0.05. This indicates that there is a significant relationship among the variables and the correlation matrix is not an identity matrix. Therefore, the data are suitable for applying factor analysis.

Table 3: Rotated Component Matrix

Sustainability Practices	Component			
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
Eco-friendly Products	0.812			
Waste Management	0.786			
Energy Conservation	0.764			
Sustainable Packaging	0.741			
Pollution Control	0.708			
Ethical Practices		0.824		
Social Responsibility		0.801		
Environmental Awareness		0.776		
Green Initiatives		0.742		
Regulatory Compliance		0.706		
Digitalization			0.812	
Responsible Sourcing			0.786	
Community Support			0.744	
Sustainable Improvement				0.834
Overall Sustainability				0.806
Total	4.862	3.214	2.108	1.436
% Variance	32.413	21.426	14.054	9.571
Cumulative %	32.413	53.839	67.893	77.464

Table 3 presents the Rotated Component Matrix of sustainability practices adopted by SMEs. The factor analysis extracted four major factors with eigenvalues greater than 1. These four factors together explain 77.464% of the total variance, indicating that the variables included in the study adequately represent the sustainability practices adopted by SMEs.

Factor 1 includes Eco-friendly Products (0.812), Waste Management (0.786), Energy Conservation (0.764), Sustainable Packaging (0.741), and Pollution Control (0.708). This factor accounts for 32.413% of the total variance and represents environmental sustainability practices followed by SMEs.

Factor 2 consists of Ethical Practices (0.824), Social Responsibility (0.801), Environmental Awareness (0.776), Green Initiatives (0.742), and Regulatory Compliance (0.706). This factor explains 21.426% of the variance and reflects social and ethical sustainability practices.

Factor 3 includes Digitalization (0.812), Responsible Sourcing (0.786), and Community Support (0.744). This factor contributes 14.054% of the variance and indicates operational sustainability practices adopted by SMEs.

Factor 4 contains Sustainable Improvement (0.834) and Overall Sustainability (0.806). This factor explains 9.571% of the total variance and represents organizational sustainability practices. Among all the extracted factors, Factor 1 has the highest eigenvalue of 4.862 and explains the highest percentage of variance, indicating that environmental sustainability practices are the most significant sustainability initiatives adopted by SMEs. Overall, the analysis shows that sustainability practices are multidimensional and play an important role in SME development and customer satisfaction.

Suggestions of the Study

Based on the analysis and findings of the study, the following suggestions are offered to improve sustainability practices and customer satisfaction among Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs):

1. SMEs should give greater importance to environmental sustainability practices such as eco-friendly products, waste management, energy conservation, and pollution

control, as these factors showed the highest influence in the factor analysis.

2. SME owners should increase awareness regarding sustainability practices among employees and customers through training programs, workshops, and awareness campaigns.
3. Businesses should adopt sustainable packaging methods and responsible sourcing practices to enhance customer trust and improve brand image.
4. SMEs should strengthen ethical business practices and social responsibility activities, as these practices positively influence customer satisfaction and loyalty.
5. Government agencies and financial institutions should provide financial assistance, subsidies, and incentives to SMEs for implementing sustainability initiatives and green technologies.
6. SMEs should make use of digitalization and modern technologies to reduce operational waste, improve efficiency, and support sustainable business operations.
7. Continuous monitoring and improvement of sustainability practices should be encouraged to maintain long-term business growth and competitive advantage.
8. SMEs should actively engage with local communities through community development and environmental protection programs to build positive customer relationships.
9. Policymakers should develop supportive policies and regulations that encourage sustainable business practices among SMEs.
10. SMEs should regularly evaluate customer opinions and feedback regarding sustainability initiatives to improve customer satisfaction and strengthen customer loyalty.

Conclusion

The present study examined the relationship between sustainability practices and customer satisfaction in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). The findings of the study revealed that sustainability practices play a significant role in influencing customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and overall business performance. The analysis showed that environmental sustainability practices such as eco-friendly products, waste management, energy conservation, sustainable packaging, and pollution control are the most important sustainability initiatives adopted by SMEs.

The study also identified that social responsibility, ethical practices, environmental awareness, digitalization, responsible sourcing, and continuous sustainability improvement positively contribute to organizational sustainability and customer perception. Customers increasingly prefer businesses that demonstrate concern for environmental protection and social well-being, which ultimately enhances trust and satisfaction levels.

Despite the growing importance of sustainability, SMEs continue to face challenges such as financial constraints, lack of awareness, and limited technological support in implementing sustainable practices effectively. However, the study highlights that adopting sustainability practices can help SMEs improve their competitive advantage, strengthen customer relationships, and achieve long-term business growth.

Overall, the study concludes that sustainability practices are essential for the success and development of SMEs in the

modern business environment. Therefore, SMEs should focus on integrating sustainability into their business operations to enhance customer satisfaction and ensure sustainable organizational development.

Scope for Further Research

The present study focuses on sustainability practices and customer satisfaction among Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Mysore. Future research may be extended to other geographical regions and different industrial sectors to obtain broader and more generalized findings. Comparative studies can also be conducted between rural and urban SMEs or between manufacturing and service sectors to understand differences in sustainability practices and customer perceptions. Further studies may include a larger sample size and adopt advanced statistical techniques for deeper analysis. Researchers can also examine the impact of specific sustainability dimensions such as environmental sustainability, social responsibility, green marketing, and digital sustainability on customer loyalty and organizational performance.

Future research may additionally explore the role of government policies, technological innovation, and employee involvement in promoting sustainability practices among SMEs. Longitudinal studies can also be conducted to analyse changes in customer attitudes and sustainability practices over time. Thus, there is considerable scope for future research in the area of sustainability and customer satisfaction in SMEs.

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