

Article

Are customers' purchasing decisions influenced by environmentally responsible business practices in emerging nations?

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Abstract: Environmental sustainability has grown as a competitive strategy in recent years. Ecological sustainability can prevent environmental damage through waste reduction, energy conservation, and promoting environmental health. Despite a traditional focus on profits, environmental sustainability marketing has become a strategic tool to differentiate goods and services, build trust with eco-conscious clients, and position businesses in the market. The research delves into the relationship between environmental sustainability marketing and competitive advantages, emphasizing various dimensions of advantage such as marketing, image, risk, and efficiency. The study compares Santo Domingo and Santiago sustainability initiatives in the Dominican Republic. It examines whether environmental sustainability initiatives contribute to purchasing decisions, efficiency, customer attraction, and business success. The methodology involves a quantitative study using questionnaires to gather data on consumers' preferences, perceptions, and willingness to pay more for socially responsible products. The results suggest that consumers recognize socially responsible companies and consider ethical, social, and environmental criteria in their purchase decisions. However, these considerations are still evolving and are not necessarily the sole determinants of buying choices. The study concludes that socially responsible practices positively influence purchase decisions but do not dominate consumer preferences entirely.

Keywords: Business performance, consumer behavior, environmental sustainability, purchase decision.

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a rise in the use of environmental sustainability as a strategy for gaining a competitive edge (Falkenberg & Brunsael, 2011; Gerstlberger et al., 2014). Being ecologically sustainable is defined by Rahman et al. (2012) as conducting business to prevent environmental damage by reducing waste, conserving energy, and promoting environmental health. As commonly understood, brand distinction through marketing prioritizes generating profits for owners and shareholders over upholding social responsibility (Kärnä et al., 2003). According to Kasim (2006), Graci and Dodds (2009), and Rettie et al. (2014), environmental sustainability marketing has been seen as a strategic tool for positioning businesses in the market, differentiating goods and services, and building trust with environmental stakeholders like eco-conscious clients.

Businesses are under increasing pressure from the public to adopt environmental sustainability initiatives, as Cronin et al. (2011) and Amran et al. (2015) claim. Additionally, these companies assert that adhering to the triple bottom line can boost customer demand. Between 15 and 46% of consumers were identified by Roper ASW (2002) as potential target customers who might be persuaded to make sustainable purchase decisions. Although the market for environmentally friendly goods and services has been extensively studied, the demand has been substantially lower than predicted. Regulations or standards like ISO 14001 or ecolabels (Ottman, 2003) have

been brought into the marketplace in reaction to this behavior. According to Rex and Baumann (2007), ecolabels aim to empower customers to make educated decisions that positively impact the environment and how products are produced. Ecolabelling has received much attention, although studies have shown that ecolabelling companies do not necessarily influence consumers' decisions to buy sustainably (Grolleau et al., 2016; Leire & Thidell, 2005; Thgersen, 2000; Rex & Baumann, 2007). According to Arimura et al. (2016), ISO 14001's efficacy in mitigating environmental consequences is still debatable.

It has been questioned whether there is even a market for sustainable products because of the problems around consumer demand. Older studies (Ogilvy and Mather, 1992 in Peattie, 1992) indicate that only about 10% of consumers genuinely care about sustainability. Both conventional marketing and environmental sustainability marketing presuppose that there is a market sector for environmental sustainability consumers and that products must be tailored to this niche market. Some may, therefore, wonder whether it is advantageous for businesses to brand themselves as "green," "eco," or "environmentally sustainable" or to gain a designation or ecolabel. It has been questioned whether talking about green customers is relevant, as Rex and Baumann (2007) theorize. It is stated that being green is not a consumer's default personality. Whether or not consumers choose the green option depends significantly on the situation in which the purchase is made.

Environmental sustainability marketing has been shown to have sound effects in the literature (Iles, 2008; Ottman, 2011). However, it can also harm a company's bottom line because specific research indicates that it may not be as effective as expected. According to a poll conducted in 2002, 41% of consumers claimed they avoided purchasing ecologically friendly products because of concern that the quality of the eco-friendly versions would suffer (Roper, 2002). Environmental "sustainability" may not be as effective as it could be because consumers are skeptical about whether the products, they buy are sustainable or because some manufacturers occasionally label falsely false products or services as "environmentally sustainable" (Dief et al., 2010, page number).

Environmental sustainability marketing literature has focused on 'environmental sustainability consumers' and market segments, segmented according to consumer ideals and demographic and psychographic characteristics (Ottman, 2003; Rettie et al., 2014; Rex & Baumann, 2007). Much research, including sizable consumer market studies (National Marketing Institute cited by Ottman, 2011), also focuses on specific environmental practices rather than significant purchase decisions, such as recycling, reusable shopping bags, and walking or cycling instead of driving.

As a result of comparing the strategic intent and implementation of sustainability initiatives across the two major metropolitan areas in the Dominican Republic, Santo Domingo and Santiago, this work critically examines the idea that environmental sustainability initiatives help make purchasing decisions, create a competitive advantage by encouraging efficiencies, attracting customers, and obtaining business. More particularly, we look at why customers of the upper and middle classes make their buying decisions. This article is broken into several sections moving forward. The first looks at the literature on how sustainability policies might give businesses a competitive edge, leading to the formation of hypotheses for future testing.

2. Literature Review

There is little evidence of a positive linear association between environmental innovation and competitiveness as assessed by company success (Russo & Fouts, 1997; Chen et al., 2006; Wagner et al., 2009). Nevertheless, several research cite the possibility of a non-linear relationship. According to Morhardt (2009), businesses without environmental policies were among the worst financial performers, whereas businesses with average financial performance were likelier to have environmental policies in place. Stanwick and Stanwick (2000). According to Liao, Z. et al. (2023), Environmental innovation can improve a firm's performance.

Numerous metrics have been used to gauge the competitive advantage of environmental innovation. Wagner et al. (2009) divided the variables into four categories of competitive advantages: advantages relating to marketing, image, risk, and efficiency. Sales, new market possibilities, and market share are all examples of competitive advantage in market conditions. (Bonifant et al., 1995; Porter and van der Linde, 1995; Peattie, 2001; Thornhill, 2006; Mansury & Love, 2008). In this category, for instance, the corporate image, the competitive advantage related to the image refers to that in which it is precisely with the product with which the company is aimed to differentiate from the offerings of competitors. Wagner (2009); Roberts and Dowling (2002). Financing options and insurance policies are examples of risk-related competitive advantages. Finally, profits, cost reductions, and other financial indicators are called efficiency-based competitive advantage. Bonifant, et al 1995; Wagner, et al 2009. On the other hand, all these competitive advantages should eventually result in improved business performance. Furthermore, the willingness to invest in CSR shows that it can be more than just a cost, a constraint, or the right thing to do (Jamali et al., 2008; Kong et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2017).

Triebswetter and Wackerbauer (2008) pointed out two contradicting features of earlier literature: conventional and revisionist viewpoints about the relationship between competitiveness and environmental performance. According to conventional wisdom, increases in environmental performance will lead to increased

expenses and capital requirements as well as greater risk, which would harm the financial performance of green entrepreneurs. The revisionist point of view refutes these claims by arguing that increased environmental performance will result in competitive advantages through more productive and productive processes and new market opportunities. As a result, environmental innovations can assist businesses in economically achieving their environmental objectives. According to Porter and van der Linde (1995), the environment might be considered a chance for competition. They contend that businesses that establish themselves as leaders in emerging markets will reap the benefits of being first and enhancing their brand, enabling them to demand more excellent prices for environmentally friendly goods. Environmental improvements can, therefore, be employed as a differentiating strategy that increases market share. (2002) (Peattie). However, Ottaman et al. (2006) point out the risk of "green marketing myopia." They claim that many environmentally innovative products have failed because businesses have concentrated on making them more environmentally friendly to meet increasing consumer expectations. Belz and Schmidt-Riediger (2010) emphasize that the degree of engagement between environmental features and other buying factors and the benefits consumers perceive are related to customers' propensity to purchase organic products. On the other hand, Michaud and Llerena (2011) discovered that once consumers are aware of the negative environmental effects of conventional products, their desire to pay for them declines.

Environmental management requires changes in routines and operations (Aragón-Correa et al., 2008). It is an organizational competency (Christmann, 2000) that reduces environmental impacts, if any, and concurrently maintains or increases the organization's competitiveness (Tate & Bals, 2018). When organizations have environmental and ethical policies, they play a critical role in enhancing firms' environmental performance and competitive advantage directly and indirectly by developing employees' environmental capabilities—skills, knowledge, and attitudes—through environmental training (Singh et al., 2019).

A firm can significantly increase its profit if it offers a product with a higher level of social responsibility than the competitor, as long the price premium is not too high. Thus, social responsibility can be used as a profit-enhancing means of product differentiation. Pigors, M., & Rockenbach, B. (2016). This aligns with Bartling and Weber (2015), who demonstrate that market interaction does not lead to more immoral behavior per se (Falk & Szech, 2013). Yet, simultaneously, it becomes clear that a regulatory focus on the producers seems necessary to increase the overall level of social responsibility in production. Pigors, M., & Rockenbach, B. (2016).

Green marketing elements impact consumers, helping them become more environmentally conscious and increasing their desire to buy green products. Green trust has been demonstrated to have a beneficial impact on consumers' purchase intentions. Tan, Z., Sadiq, B., Bashir, T., Mahmood, H., & Rasool, Y. (2022).

Relationship between socially conscious consumers' decision to buy, acquire, or choose a specific company.

Social issues can be relevant for individuals, but there may be a misconception that they do not materially impact business operations or long-term competitiveness. The value chain's social impact, however, impacts daily corporate operations. In actuality, the social aspects of the competitive context are external environmental variables that substantially impact the fundamental forces that drive competitiveness in the markets in which the company works. Porter, M. E., & Kramer, M. R. (2006). On the other hand, businesses will need to act very differently if social responsibility is seen as creating a shared benefit rather than as damage control or as a public relations effort. There is a perception that corporate social responsibility will become more crucial for competitive success (Porter & Kramer, 2006).

Corporate social responsibility thus acts as a major driver that propels the growth of the business. It is one of the many variables that influence business growth because it benefits every initiative that is developed within the organization, helps to position its brand, eliminates the corporate image, attracts customers' preference and loyalty, and creates the ideal harmony between the business and the community in which it operates. (Aguilera, Patricia, Becerra, 2012).

Using sustainable development practices by retailers and perceived value significantly contributes to building shop equity, which explains consumer loyalty and, eventually, positive word-of-mouth marketing. However, the shoppers who care the most about ethical issues place less importance on the retailer's efforts to promote sustainability. Sánchez-González, I., et al. (2020). Manufacturing companies benefit from corporate social responsibility because it gives them a competitive edge and, in the end, enhances their reputation, especially when it is recognized. In light of this, businesses should be more proactive in winning the CSR engagement race since social investment improves company performance while helping to create and shape a positive brand image. Ledi, K. K., & Ameza-Xemalordzo, E. (2023).

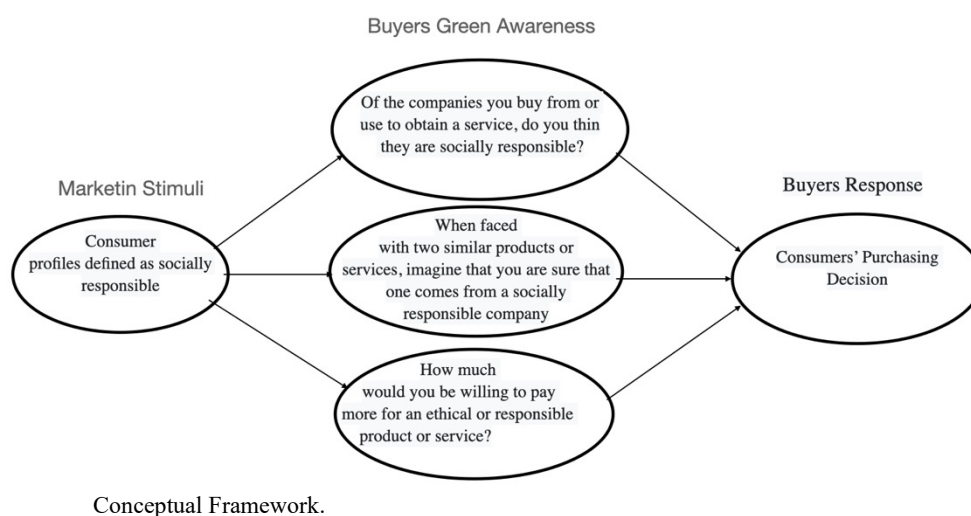


Figure 1.

3. Material and Methods

The primary research hypothesis will hopefully be verified. In the bibliographic review, which the writers reviewed and argued,

H1: “Attending to the consumer profiles defined as socially responsible, there is a positive correlation between the customer’s purchase decision and the execution of CSR programs by the companies supplying the products or services to be purchased.”

Population

The study's target population is made up of people living in the metropolitan areas of Santiago and Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic who are classified as belonging to socioeconomic levels A, B, and C. Using as a starting point the results of the 2011 National Family Population Census, Obtaining the samples: For the current investigation's quantitative evaluation, we considered estimating sample size for the statistical demonstration. We calculated the statistical demonstration using the parameters typically used in this kind of demonstration (95% confidence interval, 5% margin of error, and 50% heterogeneity).

The amount measured was adjusted by the socioeconomic class criteria established in several studies. We use a distribution as a proportional affidavit for stratification purposes. (Sampieri, Fernandez, and Baptista, 2010).

Regarding the classification of the societal population of citizens and taking into account the socioeconomic group to which they belong, many standards were established According to parameters used by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the World Bank, and numerous authors (including Ferreira, Messina, Rigolini, López-Calva, Lugo, and Vakis, 2013), factors like a person's level of income, their ability to repay debt, where they live, what kind and how they maintain their home, their level of education, and their access to basic services all play a role.

Table No. 1. Obtaining the stratified sample according to the subjects of study, Localization and population numbers

Population	Subject to be addressed	Location / Place of Residence	Number of Population	Type of sample	sample quota	Stratification	Stratified proportion by locality	
							Santo Domingo	Santiago
citizens	Individuals, Dominicans, and adults.	Distrito Nacional	664,027 *43%= 285,532	Probabilistic. The finite universe.	384	High level: 6%, equivalent to 13.95% based on 435.	54 (18 in the Distrito Nacional y 36 in the Santo Domingo province)	54
		Santo Domingo province	1,306,876 *43%= 561,957			Level of confidence: 95%	Middle-High Strata: 17%, equivalent to 39.53% based on 43%	152 (51 in the Distrito Nacional y 101 in the Santo Domingo province)

Metropolitan	481,289 *43%= 206,954	Margin of error: by 5%, Heterogeneity	384	Middle-Low Strata: 20%, equivalent to 46.52% based on 43%	178 (60 in the Distrito Nacional y 118 in the Santo Domingo province)	178
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Source: Own elaboration from the from the sources above

Table of No. 2. Disaggregation: selection characteristics of subjects participating in the study and population quantities

Population	Characteristics	Subject to be addressed	Location	Population Number
	Dominicans belonging to the socioeconomic levels A, B, and C.		Distrito Nacional	Total: 664,027 Population stratum: 664,027
Citizens	Residents in the metropolitan areas of Santo Domingo and Santiago, in the Dominican Republic.	Individuals, Dominicans, and adults.	Santo Domingo Province	Total: 1,502,156 Urban Zone /Metropolitan: (1,502,156*87%) = Population stratum: 1,306,876
			metropolitan area Santiago,	Total: 641,718 Urban Zone /Metropolitan: (641,718*75%) = Population stratum: 481,289

Source: Own elaboration from the sources above

Techniques for data collection and the shaping of the tools used.

In terms of physical people, the technique used in this study's data collection on citizens in the metropolitan areas of Santiago and Santo Domingo that fall under socioeconomic levels A, B, and C was an inquisition. In this sense, the tool being used is an adaptation of the CSR measurement proposal made by Wendlandt, Alvarez Medina, Nuez, and Valdez in 2016.

Questions relating to the person-buying criteria were added to the instrument model proposed by the researchers Wendlandt et al. (2016). This addition to the instrument has responses coded using the Likert scale created by Marin, et al (2011). Thanks to this scale, the impact of CSR on purchase decisions was measured from both the CSR's conception and the demand analyst's perspective.

Table of No. 3. Technique used and instrument configuration.

Techniques applied	Dimensions	Questionary Aspects questioned	Source
Questionary	General profile of the interviewer	gender	(Generic sociodemographic variables)
		age	
		Place of Residence	
		Last completed academic degree	
		The Civil State	
		Number of persons directly dependent on you (Children and children and grandchildren)	
Occupation of the respondent			

The socioeconomic segment	Average monthly income	UNDP: Human Development Index (2008)
	Type of Housing	
	Quality of housing	
	Installation of electrodes in the home	
	Provision of means of transport for personal use.	
	Access to health services	
	Access to drinking water.	
	Access to electricity	
	Availability of a mobile phone with Internet	
	Affiliation to Social Security	
Knowledge of CSR Concepts	Economic Responsibility	Aupperle et al., 1985. Carroll, (1979). Malignant, 2001. Wendlandt Amezaga et al., 2016
	Legal Responsibility	
	Ethical Responsibility	
	Philanthropic Responsibility	
	Characteristics of a Responsible Company	
Perception of entities exercising CSR	Behavior of a responsible company	Martín, L., Espinal, M., López, S., Maldonado, R., Mira, L., & Pertusa, M. (2011)
	Identification of Dominican companies perceived as responsible.	
	Reasons for this perception	
	Understanding the need for business dialogue with customers	
	Interest in the environmental situation	
Purchase Decision and CSR	Identification with social causes	
	Information about socially responsible companies	
	Associativity to Community Social Groups	
	Preference of a product or service if it is understood that it is of a socially responsible company	

Source: Own elaboration from the sources above

Date gathering.

This study employed the survey method to collect data from people living in the Santiago and Santo Domingo metropolitan areas who belonged to socioeconomic categories A, B, and C. The instrument used is a variation of the one recommended by Wendlandt et al. (2016) to measure RSC and inquiries about your purchasing criteria, with answers encoded using a Likert scale. This scale assessed the influence of CSR on purchasing decisions from both the demand side and the conceptualization of CSR perspectives. This survey has been used repeatedly to evaluate corporate social responsibility.

After implementing the pilot plan, the survey script was enhanced and firmly used for analysis. For these reasons, the relevant authorization was kept without containing any information about the citizens to protect the privacy of their personal information.

Data analysis techniques

On the other hand, the results from the questionnaires applied to physical people were examined using the statistical package SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). In addition to the descriptive data for the sample (media and standard deviations, to name a few), SPSS was used to calculate reliability coefficients (Alfa of Cronbach), correlation coefficients, and other metrics. Additionally, linear regressions were proposed to explain the primary hypothesis after testing the data for a linear relationship between the dependent and independent variables. The error component is normally distributed. There is no multicollinearity. There is no heteroskedasticity; the residual variance must be constant across the predicted values.

4. Results

Table No. 4. The purchase decision and environmentally sustainable

Variables	Answer	Frequency	Percentage
31. Do you believe the companies you buy or use to get a service are socially responsible?	Yes.	605	75.6
32. In the face of two similar products or services, imagine that you have the assurance that one comes from a socially responsible company and the other knows nothing about this. Under which of the following conditions would the most responsible buy? Specifically.	Always, even if it is more expensive.	443	55.4
	Both cost the same.	214	26.8
33. How much would you pay more for an ethical or responsible product or service?	A little above the price.	214	26.8
	Somewhat above the price	307	38.4
34. Do you think a logo, brand, or sign should be created, which is clearly identified on the products, so that consumers can distinguish that they come from responsible companies?	Yes.	731	91.4
35. Do you consider ethical, corporate social and environmental responsibility criteria when making your purchases?	Never	244	30.5

Source: Own elaboration from the data collected and processed

Table No. 5. 36. If the previous answer was positive (all alternative responses except one): What are the ethical, social, and environmental criteria you use when making your purchases?

Answer	Frequency	Percentage
That the company/product is a balance between price and quality	47	5.9
That the company/product be a recognized marca	13	1.6
The consumption of these products does not affect the environment, generating the least impact possible.	91	11.4
By the product's characteristics: expiration date, toxicity, certifications, hygiene, packaging, etc.	238	29.8
The product includes promotions.	1	.1
I don't know not answer	410	51.2
Total	800	100

Source: Own elaboration from the data collected and processed

H1:

“There is a positive correlation between socially responsible consumer's purchase decision and CSR programs of the organization”

And being:

Y: Consumer purchase decision, dependent variable, reflected in the following questionnaire indicators:

Ask me no. 35: (Y35)

Do you consider ethical, corporate social and environmental responsibility criteria when making your purchases?

X, independent variables, reflected in the following questionnaire indicators:

Ask me no. 31: (X31)

Of the companies you buy or use to obtain a service, do you think they are socially responsible?

Question is no. 32: (X32)

In the face of two similar products or services, imagine that you have the assurance that one comes from a socially responsible company and the other knows nothing about this. Under which of the following conditions would the most responsible buy?

Question is no. 33: (X33)

How much would you pay more for an ethical or responsible product or service?

Results of the regression:

Model Summary							
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics		
					R Square Change	F Change	df1
1	.241 ^a	0.058	0.054	1.39082	0.058	16.332	3

$$Y35 = 2.939 + 0.161X31 - 0.03X32 + 0.123X3$$

The interpretation:

Both X31 and X33 positively influence the value of Y35. Meanwhile, X32 negatively influences, though also with a weak impact, the value of Y35 and is not significant.

Indeed, in the results obtained from the linear regression carried out, it is validated that the identification elements of whether an undertaking carries out actions related to corporate social responsibility generally have a weak positive influence on the purchase decision of the final consumers, in this case, those surveyed in this study. This influence detected in linear regression implies an advanced understanding of the phenomenon studied. It is evidenced that we are moving away, although possibly slowly and associated with specific sociodemographic profiles, from the paradigm in which recognition of the tasks of a socially responsible company ceased to be constitutive elements of the purchase decision.

The results of the regression partnership provide evidence that respondents would be slightly inclined to choose companies that are certain to take actions aimed at a healthy exercise of corporate social responsibility, even when this product costs more. However, before two similar products, one theoretically from a responsible entity and another offered by a company not perceived as socially responsible, the influence on purchasing power is slightly negative. This demonstration opens a challenge for companies: if we rely on the profit maximization paradigm, companies' ultimate purpose is to generate profits. Fortunately, we have been moving from this monetarist paradigm to a socially responsible one. Gradually, and it is validated in this study's findings, citizens and entrepreneurs, although with slightly different nuances, identify the elements of responsible management.

Responsible management generates several costs, programs, and budgets. They must be integrated into the total cost of the product but having done socially responsible management is not yet profiled as a factor of definitive purchase decision by the customer, but rather of possible consideration at the time of choosing. In terms of qualifiers and generators of orders (Hill 1995) exercising programs of corporate social responsibility names the company in question as a possible purchase option, but they will possibly be other variables that, – in the face of a company that does not develop a socially responsible management – will influence in a determining way the ultimate decision of the consumer.

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