Green business practices and sustainability of small and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs) in a Ghanaian Municipality: A global south context

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Accra, Business, Enterprises, Green, Practices, Sustainability

Abstract

This study examined the influence of green business practices on the sustainability of small and medium-scale enterprises. A quantitative research approach and a survey design were deployed. A structured questionnaire was administered to 150 SME owners and managers across various sectors, including retail, services, and manufacturing. The data was analyzed using SPSS version 29. The findings show that green business practices had a positive impact on SME sustainability, with enhanced operational efficiency and market competitiveness observed. Key benefits of green business practices included enhanced brand image, compliance with regulations, increased customer loyalty, and cost savings. The findings underscore the relevance of the Natural Resource-Based Theory (NRBT), which emphasises pollution prevention, product stewardship, and sustainable development as strategic capabilities for long-term success. Furthermore, the findings showed a relatively high rate of adoption of green business practices; however, this adoption is primarily limited to basic and easily implementable practices such as waste reduction and the use of eco-friendly products. While overall awareness of green business concepts remains moderate, some SMEs may engage in these practices out of perceived benefits like cost savings, compliance with regulations rather than a deep understanding of sustainability principles. It also emerged that ethical considerations and the desire to enhance corporate reputation are among the most influential drivers of green business practice adoption. Financial constraints, lack of institutional support, and technical knowledge are the most significant barriers. Organising regular capacity-building programmes and awareness campaigns targeting SME owners and managers would contribute to improving their understanding of sustainable business practices. Financial institutions and government bodies should create tailored support to reduce the cost burden of sustainability investments. Support mechanisms, such as free audit tools or partnerships with environmental consultants should be promoted.

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Introduction

According to Awotide et al. (2020), small and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs) constitute a driving force in the economic growth of countries, especially in developing countries such as those in West Africa.

In Ghana, SMEs play an important role in the employment rate, the creation of income, and the overall economic growth of the nation. Stasiak (2024) stated that in the continued evolution of corporate social responsibility, green business practices have transitioned from being optional to becoming the norm. Enterprises understand that being eco-friendly is not only something that environmentally conscious consumers expect, but it can also help in the long run. It is not simply about implementing practices imposed by authorities, but a proactive, strategic choice to future-proof operations and maintain a business intended to be viable in a growing eco-world. Green business practices include methods that are environmentally friendly, such as waste reduction, eco-friendly product designs, sustainable sourcing, energy-efficient technologies, and reducing carbon emissions (Dangelico & Pujari, 2010).

In Ghana, SMEs account for around 90% of all businesses and employ more than 70% of the workforce (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021). Notwithstanding their large share, a great deal of these companies still cling to traditional methods of business, and as a result, they often neglect the issue of environmental sustainability. The transition to green business practices is often impeded by challenges such as limited access to green technology, lack of awareness, and inadequate government incentives (Oduro & Badu, 2020). However, empirical studies focusing on the specific challenges and opportunities Ghanaian SMEs face in adopting these practices are scarce (Afum et al., 2020).

In the La Nkwantanang Municipality, these challenges are even more pronounced due to the predominance of informal businesses, limited municipal support for green innovation, and minimal enforcement of environmental standards. While research has broadly highlighted these issues at national and regional levels, there is a noticeable gap in empirical studies that focus on specific, local-level challenges and opportunities in transitioning SMEs to green practices in Ghana. The main aim of the study was to investigate the influence of green business practices on the sustainability of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in the La-Nkwantanang Municipality. Specifically, the study sought to achieve the following objectives: examine the extent to which SMEs in La Nkwantanang Municipality have adopted green business practices; investigate the drivers that motivate SMEs to adopt green business initiatives; examine the barriers to SMEs adopting green business practices; and evaluate the impact of green business practices on the sustainability of SMEs.

Literature review

Theoretical review

The Natural Resource-Based Theory (NRBT), developed by Hart (1995), provides a framework for understanding how businesses can achieve sustainable competitive advantage by integrating environmental sustainability into their strategies. According to NRBT, a firm's ability to develop unique capabilities based on ecological sustainability—such as pollution prevention, product stewardship, and sustainable development—can drive long-term competitive success. Russo and Fouts (1997) contend that firms embracing stewardship are better positioned to meet regulatory standards and raise consumer expectations for environmentally friendly products. The Natural Resource-Based Theory framework is particularly relevant to understanding the relationship between green business practices and the sustainable growth of SMEs in La-Nkwantanang Municipality.

Empirical review

According to Ahinful (2018), there exists a positive and significant overall relationship between the implementation of environmental management practices (EMPs) and the financial performance (FP) of SMEs. Energy efficiency, water, waste, and material management significantly improved financial performance. A study by Yacob, Wong, and Khor (2013) investigated the adoption of green initiatives by manufacturing SMEs in Malaysia. The results showed that businesses that embraced environmental practices, such as energy efficiency, waste management, and sustainable sourcing, experienced improved

financial performance. The study also indicated that adopting green technologies helped reduce operational costs, thereby enhancing profitability. These findings align with similar studies conducted in developed economies, which highlight the cost-saving benefits of resource efficiency (Walker et al., 2008).

Similarly, Brammer et al. (2012) found that SMEs in the UK that adopted environmentally friendly practices experienced increased demand from environmentally conscious consumers. The study also revealed that green business practices allowed SMEs to secure contracts with larger corporations that prioritized sustainability in their supply chains. This empirical evidence suggests that green business practices can serve as a competitive differentiator, enabling SMEs to capture new market segments and expand their operations.

Amoah and Amoah (2018) examine the role of Micro, Small, and medium-scale enterprises in employment in Ghana. They argued that despite their smaller size, they employ a larger percentage of the working population compared to small and medium-scale enterprises. But then a significant portion of the employment offered by Micro, Small, and Medium-Scale Enterprises (MSMEs) is temporary, indicating a need for greater job security.

Hilson (2017) explored the role of green practices in the sustainability of mining-related SMEs and found that businesses that adopted eco-friendly mining techniques experienced greater long-term viability than those that did not. These SMEs were better able to manage environmental risks and maintain good relationships with local communities, which were crucial for their continued operations.

These existing studies on green business practices and SME sustainability have been conducted in developed economies like the UK (Holt & Ghobadian, 2009; Brammer et al., 2012) or in emerging economies outside Ghana, such as Malaysia (Yacob et al., 2013). Few studies have focused specifically on SMEs within Ghana, particularly in local municipalities like La-Nkwantanang Madina. Although studies like Mensah and Acquah (2015) have explored environmental practices among SMEs in Ghana, they focused mainly on larger urban centers like Accra.

Research methodology

This study adopts a quantitative research approach, which is appropriate for examining the linkage between green business practices and the sustainability of SMEs in the La-Nkwantanang Municipality. Using this design, the study employed structured questionnaires to collect standardized, measurable data from SME owners and managers.

The target population involved Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs) in the La-Nkwantanang Municipality, whose activities are under manufacturing, retail, and services. A sample size of one hundred and fifty (150) owners from various Small and Medium Scale Enterprises (SMEs) in the La-Nkwantanang municipality was targeted for this study. This sample size was deemed appropriate for a quantitative study of this nature, providing a robust and representative data set for meaningful statistical analysis. According to Saunders et al. (2016), a sample size of at least 100 is generally sufficient for quantitative research to ensure data reliability and validity. The research employed a purposive sampling technique, also known as judgmental sampling, which allowed the researchers to select participants based on specific characteristics that are relevant to the study (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016).

In this case, the sample included SME owners and managers who were directly involved in the decision-making processes regarding business operations and the implementation of green business practices. The purposive sampling technique was chosen because it enabled green business practices, which is central to the study's aim of assessing the impact of these practices on sustainability. Through this approach, the research ensured that the sample is representative of the target population in terms of industry diversity and business size, helping to generate findings that can inform broader discussions on green business practices and sustainability in the SME sector.

The study relied on primary data, which was collected through the administration of structured questionnaires. The primary data was collected from the targeted population using closed-ended questionnaires, with clear instructions, designed to solicit and gather the necessary information needed for the research. The rationale behind providing clear instructions and assuring information confidentiality was based on the fact that it significantly reduces the likelihood of biased responses (Sekeran,2003). Distribution of the questionnaires to SME owners and managers within the La-Nkwantanang Municipality was done through both online and physical distribution methods to maximize participation.

The data collected from the questionnaires was analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 29 (SPSS) and Microsoft Excel. These tools enabled the researchers to perform various statistical analyses, including descriptive statistics (mean, Standard deviations, frequency, and percentages). The questionnaire underwent a pre-testing phase. A small sample of respondents was asked to complete the questionnaire twice within a short interval. The results of the two sets of responses were compared to assess the consistency of their answers over time. Cronbach's Alpha was used to assess the internal reliability of the questionnaire. Cronbach's Alpha value was 0.919, which is generally considered acceptable for research purposes.

The study adhered to ethical guidelines as outlined by the University of Professional Studies, Accra. Before data collection, the researchers obtained permission from SME owners and managers to conduct the study within their organizations. The consent of all respondents was obtained before administering the questionnaire, ensuring they understood the purpose of the research and their voluntary participation. No personally identifiable information was included in the final report, and the data collected are securely stored, accessible only to the researchers, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity of respondents. These measures are consistent with standard research ethics in social sciences (Bell, Bryman, & Harley, 2018).

Results

Demographic profile

The demographic profile (Table 1) reveals a balanced gender representation among SME respondents, with females at 52% and males at 48%.

Category		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	72	48
	Female	78	52
	Total	**150**	**100%**
Age Group	18–25 years	63	42
	26–35 years	45	30
	36–45 years	30	20
	46 years and above	12	8
	Total	**150**	**100**
Education Level	Basic	15	10
	SHS	45	30
	Diploma	24	16
	Degree	63	42
	Masters	3	2
	Total	**150**	**100**
Years of Operation	Less than 1 year	32	21.3
	1-3 years	51	34
	4-6 years	39	26
	More than 6 years	28	18.7
	Total	**150**	**100**
Nature of business	Manufacturing	32	21.3
	Retail	53	35.3
	Services	59	39.4
	Others	6	4
	Total	**150**	**100%**

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics
Source: Primary data (SPSS version 29)

The Awareness and Adoption of Green Business Practices

Table 2 shows that the awareness levels vary, with only 12% being "very aware" and a marginal 2% "extremely aware," suggesting that while adoption is moderately high, awareness is not deeply rooted across the board. The results show a relatively high adoption rate of green business practices, with 76.7% of SMEs reporting they had adopted green practices (Table 2).

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Awareness of Green Business Practices		
Not aware	24	16
Slightly aware	48	32
Moderately aware	57	38
Very aware	18	12
Extremely aware	3	2
Total	**150**	**100**
Adoption of Green Business Practices		
Yes	115	76.7
No	35	23.3
Total	**150**	**100**

Table 2: Green Business Practices (GBP) Awareness and adoption rate

Regarding the specific green practices adopted, "Table 3" reveals that waste reduction strategies (36%) and use of eco-friendly products (21.3%) were the most commonly adopted green business practices, with sustainable sourcing of materials (10.7%) being the least frequently adopted. These findings are further contextualized (Table 4).

	Responses	
	Frequency	**Percentage (%)**
Waste reduction strategies	105	70.0
Use of eco-friendly products/services	62	41.3
Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities	48	32.0
Energy-efficient operations	45	30.0
Sustainable sourcing of materials	31	10.7

Table 3: Adopted Green Practices

Table 4 shows a detailed breakdown of how SMEs rate the extent of their adoption of green practices, based on a 1-5 Likert scale from "Low" to "High". For ease of analysis, the scale was merged into two categories: 'low' (combining 'very low' and 'low') and 'High' (combining 'high' and 'very high'), where Low (Limited or initial level of adoption), Moderate (noticeable effort toward adoption), High (a high commitment to green business implementation).

	Frequency			
	Low	**Moderate**	**High**	**Total**
Waste reduction strategies	9	69	27	105
Use of eco-friendly products/services	5	39	18	62
Corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities	3	26	19	48
Energy-efficient operations	5	25	15	45
Sustainable sourcing of materials	2	17	12	31

Table 4: Adoption level

A further breakdown of the adoption level shows that the majority of SMEs demonstrate a moderate adoption level of waste reduction strategies (69 out of 105). Eco-friendly product use and CSR activities are moderately adopted (39 and 26, respectively), with Energy-efficient operations and sustainable sourcing of materials ranking least, though moderately adopted. The data suggests that while green practices are present, their depth of integration varies.

Despite moderate adoption levels, the frequency of green business activities remains inconsistent. The study identifies that while 31.3% of SMEs frequently engage in green initiatives, 48% do so only occasionally, and 12% never engage in such practices (Table 5). This suggests that although SMEs recognise the importance of sustainability, implementation remains inconsistent, mirroring findings by Mensah and Acquah (2015) that SMEs in developing economies face adoption barriers such as financial constraints and a lack of technical expertise. This inconsistent commitment highlights a gap between initial adoption and sustained implementation.

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Never	18	12
Occasionally	72	48
Frequently	47	31.3
Always	13	8.7
Total	150	100

Table 5: The frequency of Green Business Activities

Furthermore, from the gathered data, 32.7% of businesses had adopted green practices for less than a year, while a moderate proportion (20.7%) had practiced green initiatives for 3–5 years, whereas only 6.7% had maintained such practices for more than five years. These findings suggest that green business adoptions are still in a period of growth among SMEs, with only a few businesses demonstrating long-term commitment.

The issue of funding, presented in Table 6, reveals that up to 66% of SMEs rely on internal funds for green initiatives, with only 6% receiving government support.

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Internal business funds	99	66.0
Government grants or subsidies	9	6.0
Loans from financial institutions	22	14.7
Donations or partnerships	8	5.3
Total	**150**	**100%**

Table 6: Sources of Green Initiative Funding

Green training plays a critical role in ensuring SMEs have the necessary skills and knowledge to implement sustainable practices effectively. However, the study reveals that 66% (99 out of 150) of SMEs in La-Nkwantanang Municipality have not participated in any green training programmes, limiting their ability to optimize green business initiatives. Without proper training, SMEs may struggle to integrate sustainability into their operations efficiently, reducing the long-term impact of green practices. Whereas 31.3% (47 out of 150) reported that they had integrated sustainability into their operations.

Furthermore, there is a lack of regular environmental audits; 39.3% (59) of businesses conduct regular environmental audits to assess their environmental impact. However, 32% (48) do not perform audits. Highlighting gaps in capacity-building and environmental assessment practices, and this underscores the knowledge and technical barriers mentioned by Ullah et al. (2023). Anticipating future developments, over half (55.3%) of SMEs intend to expand their green initiatives. Despite high adoption levels, 66% of SMEs had not received green training, and only 39.3% conducted environmental audits. This differs from studies in developed contexts (e.g., Yacob et al., 2013), where adoption is often accompanied by structured training and formal environmental assessments.

The Drivers and Barriers of Green Business Practices

The findings, as presented in Table 7, reflect the average mean scores and standard deviations for the various drivers and barriers identified. It is based on a Likert scale (1 to 5, where 1 is "Not Significant" and 5 is "Highly Significant"). Likewise, a Mean closer to 1.0 indicates low significance, 3.0 reflects moderate significance, and 5.0 indicates high significance. This analysis provides insight into the motivating factors, along with the challenges faced by SMEs in the La-Nkwantanang Municipality regarding the adoption of green business practices.

	Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation
Drivers of Green Business Practice (GBP)	Cost savings	3.23	1.285
	Compliance with regulations	3.45	1.398
	Customer demand for eco-friendly products/services	3.34	1.223
	Competitive advantage	3.16	1.320
	Corporate reputation/image	3.52	1.315
	Ethical or environmental concerns	**3.58**	**1.456**
Grand mean & std.		**3.38**	**1.333**
Barriers of Green Business Practices	Financial constraints	**3.79**	**1.293**
	Lack of technical knowledge	3.39	1.302
	Limited access to green technology	3.62	1.285
	Lack of government or institutional support	3.59	1.329
	Perception that green practices are unnecessary	2.74	1.300
Grand mean & std.		**3.426**	**1.302**

Table 7: Descriptive Average Mean Score
Source: SPSS version 29

Regarding the Drivers of Green Practice Adoption (Table 7), the overall mean score for drivers of green business practice (GBP) is 3.38 (SD = 1.333), indicating a moderate level of agreement among respondents on the factors driving green business adoption. Ethical/environmental concerns (mean = 3.58), corporate reputation (3.52), and compliance with regulations (3.45) are the strongest motivators for adopting green practices. Cost savings had a moderate influence (M = 3.23, SD = 1.285), aligning with prior studies (Stasiak, 2024) that highlight financial efficiency as a benefit of green business strategies. Furthermore, the study identifies that the most influential barrier to green business adoption are financial constraints (M = 3.79, SD = 1.293), followed by limited access to green technology (M = 3.62, SD = 1.285), Lack of technical knowledge (M = 3.39, SD = 1.302), and the perception that green practices are unnecessary (M = 2.74, SD = 1.300), which scored lowest. As shown in Table 7. Financial and technological limitations emerged as key barriers to green business practice adoption.

Impact of Green Business Practices on Sustainability

The analysis drew on the responses presented in Tables 8 and 9. These tables highlight the benefits of adopting green initiatives, as well as the reported levels of impact on the economic, environmental, and social dimensions of sustainability respectively. The discussion interprets these results to evaluate how

the adoption of green practices contributes to the overall sustainability of SMEs within the La-Nkwantanang Municipality.

The most cited benefits of the green initiative were, by ranking, enhanced brand image with 94 (62.7%), followed by compliance with regulations (52.7%), and the least ranked was improved employee morale (32%) (Table 8). The findings show that SMEs recognise multiple advantages of green business practices, particularly in brand reputation and meeting regulatory standards.

	Responses	
	N	Percentage (%)
Increased customer loyalty	76	50.7
Improved employee morale	48	32.0
Enhanced brand image	94	62.7
Cost Savings	69	46.0
Compliance with regulations	79	52.7

Table 8: Benefits of adopting green business Practices

The impact of green business practices on sustainability was assessed across economic, environmental, and social dimensions. The evaluation employed a Likert scale of 1-5 (where "1 Very Low" to "5 Very High").

For ease of analysis, the scale was merged into two categories: 'low' (combining 'very low' and 'low') and 'High' (combining 'high' and 'very high'), where 'low ' means little to no noticeable impact, moderate ' means noticeable impact, high means there is a significant impact. The results are shown in Table 9.

	Frequency and percentage (%)			
Impact	**Low**	**Moderate**	**High**	**Total**
Economic sustainability	21 (14%)	**54 (36%)**	**74 (49.3%)**	150
Environmental sustainability	25 (16.67)	**40 (26.67)**	**82 (54.7)**	150
Social sustainability	24 (16%)	**44 (29.3%)**	**81 (54%)**	150

Table 9: Perceived Impact of Green Business on Sustainability

In terms of economic sustainability, a significant, 49.3% (74 out of 150) of respondents rated the impact as high. This indicates that nearly half of the SMEs owners or managers believed that green practices directly contribute to their financial viability and operational efficiency. For environmental sustainability, the perception is even stronger, with 54.7% (82 respondents) rating the impact as high. This suggests that majority of respondents from the SMEs recognise clear environmental benefits resulting from their green initiatives. Regarding social sustainability, 54% of the respondents also rated the impact as high, while 29.3% rated it moderate. These outcomes are in line with Ahinful's (2018) findings that environmental management practices significantly enhance the financial performance of SMEs.

Discussions and Conclusions

While literature (Mensah & Acquah, 2015; Quartey et al., 2017) frequently points to limited awareness and high costs as deterrents to green adoption in Ghana, the data in this study suggest that SMEs may adopt green initiatives even with low-to-moderate awareness. These results suggest that SMEs in La-Nkwantanang prioritise cost-effective and easily implementable green strategies. According to Brammer et al. (2012), SMEs tend to adopt green business practices that offer immediate financial benefits, such as waste reduction and energy efficiency, which can lower operational costs. Overall, most adoption levels fall within the "moderate" rather than the "High" category. This complements the assertion by Stasiak (2024), that while green thinking is spreading, deeper integration still requires stronger structural support and strategic alignment.

The use of internal funds for green initiatives reflects challenges highlighted by Holt and Ghobadian (2009) and Lamoureux et al. (2019), who noted that SMEs in developing economies struggle with limited access to institutional funding. There is also a general perception that green initiatives are expensive (Quartey et al., 2017), which explains why most SMEs gravitate toward low-cost practices such as waste reduction.

In relation to drivers of green business practice adoption, the findings echo the Natural Resource-Based Theory (Hart, 1995), which suggests that companies adopt environmentally sustainable practices as a strategic resource to build competitive advantage. Cost savings had a moderate influence (M = 3.23, SD = 1.285), aligning with prior studies (Stasiak, 2024) that highlight financial efficiency as a benefit of green business strategies, and Brammer et al. (2012) also found that ethical concerns and corporate reputation play a major role in GBP adoption.

Financial constraint emerged as the most significant barrier, confirming that lack of funds is a major obstacle to adopting green initiatives. These findings align with Mensah and Acquah (2015) and Quartey et al. (2017), who identified financial constraints and lack of institutional support as major challenges for Ghanaian SMEs. Holt and Ghobadian (2009) found that in developed economies, government incentives encourage Green Business Practice (GBP) adoption. The study highlights financial and technological limitations as key barriers.

Regarding the impact of green business practices on sustainability, Brammer et al. (2012) noted that SMEs leveraging green practices often gain competitive advantages by appealing to environmentally conscious consumers and aligning with regulatory requirements. Additionally, the positive impact of green practices on economic, environmental, and social sustainability (Table 9) shows that sustainability initiatives not only benefit the environment but also enhance long-term business performance. This serves as evidence to encourage more SMEs to invest in sustainability, as it can lead to improved brand image, customer loyalty, and cost savings (Table 8). It also reinforces the Natural Resource-Based Theory, which suggests that sustainable practices can become a source of long-term competitive advantage.

The implications of these findings are significant. While SMEs in La-Nkwantanang are making progress toward adopting green practices, the inconsistency in implementation suggests that financial and technical support is needed to sustain these efforts. Government policies and financial incentives could help bridge the gap between awareness and long-term commitment to sustainability. Additionally, providing SMEs with access to training and knowledge-sharing opportunities could enhance their ability to implement effective green practices, ultimately improving their competitiveness and long-term sustainability.

The study underscores the transformative potential of green business practices (GBPs) in driving sustainability among SMEs in La-Nkwantanang Municipality.

Limited financial resources and a lack of access to training continue to hinder comprehensive awareness and the adoption of more advanced green initiatives. Strengthening support systems and

providing targeted incentives could significantly enhance both awareness and the quality of green business adoption among SMEs.

Ethical considerations and the desire to enhance corporate reputation are among the most influential motivators of green business practices. These factors not only encourage sustainable practices but also contribute to significant cost reductions and strengthen long-term financial resilience, making them essential for driving green business adoption.

Financial constraints, lack of institutional support, and lack of technological knowledge are the most significant barriers, confirming that lack of funds is a major obstacle to adopting green business practices since most funds are generated internally. Also, lack of technical knowledge, which is another significant barrier, highlights the need for targeted training and support programs to enhance SMEs' capacity to implement green practices.

Aligning with Hart's (1995) Natural Resource-Based Theory. Green business practices positively impact economic, environmental, and social sustainability, enhancing brand image, customer loyalty, and long-term resilience. Institutional support remains crucial for consistent engagement of the Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in the La-Nkwantanang Municipality.

Limitations and direction of future research

The study used a small sample size, which calls for caution when generalising to a larger population. The study relied on responses from SME owners and managers, which may be influenced by personal opinions, exaggeration, or recall bias. The following future studies can be considered: A study to analyze how government policies, incentives, and regulations influence SMEs' adoption of green practices.

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