

Advancing Sustainable Development through SME Engagement: An Empirical Approach

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ABSTRACT:

This study contributes to the business field by operationalizing the components of sustainable marketing and examining their application in SMEs. This study addresses a gap in the literature by conducting a comparative, cross-cultural analysis of sustainable marketing practices in B2B and B2C firms. The focus is on Pakistan, China, and Malaysia, each representing different socio-economic development tiers. Adopting a quantitative research design, data were collected through structured questionnaires from selected organizations in these countries. The findings reveal a consistently positive relationship between sustainable products and sustainable processes. This study also highlights the growing awareness among Pakistani manufacturers regarding sustainable pricing. It also confirms that Chinese consumers are more willing to pay a premium for eco-friendly products. Sustainable distribution practices are emerging in all the three countries, reflecting a shift toward green brands. A key contribution of this study is the development of a conceptual framework based on the 5Ps of the sustainable marketing mix. These findings highlight the growing influence of social and environmental awareness in business strategies and consumer behaviour in Asian markets. This study is offering valuable insights for academia and practice.

Keywords: Asia, Malaysia; Pakistan; SMEs; Sustainable Development; Sustainable Product; Sustainable Price; Sustainable Place; Sustainable Personnel; Sustainable Process

1. Introduction

Dynamic and versatile changes are taking place in the modern business world, where new trends are emerging every day. The new trends are not only related to the most researched conventional areas but have also expanded to new technologies, sustainability, pollution, and the deterioration of the natural environment and resources. Countries and businesses are facing new challenges. Modern enterprises need to counter social and environmental issues that are affecting business trends. Researchers worldwide have accepted that the success of a business should be targeted over the long term. Such success can be achieved through sustainable development that involves economic, social, and environmental concerns. Enterprises that carry out wholesome sustainability practices can send strong messages to their competitors about their commitment to important social and environmental concerns. To comply with sustainable practices, businesses need to rethink their operational strategies, specifically their marketing strategies. Sustainable marketing practices have immense value, as these practices have been accused of convincing consumers to buy unsustainable products ([Hurth et al., 2015](#); [McDonagh & Prothero, 2014](#); [Papadas et al., 2017](#)). Incorporating such practices into the practices of marketing has become a necessity to win the competitive advantage in the long run. It has further been argued by [Kumar \(2016\)](#) that merging of the sustainable practices with the

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marketing discipline is relatively new, as this concept was previously related to the economic perspective. Marketing involves strategic decision-making at the organizational level. Sustainable practices should be incorporated when devising the marketing objectives of the company. The approach of sustainability is evident in the definition proposed by the American Marketing Association: “*Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large*”. This definition goes beyond conventional marketing by stating that societal contributions are also an important aspect of marketing.

According to [McDonagh and Prothero \(2014\)](#), the definition extended by AMA does not address the issues of sustainability and does not necessitate achieving the value of customers while keeping in the consideration the social and environmental aspects. The approach of sustainable marketing practices suggests that the decision-making authority should take marketing programs that are compliant with social, economic, and environmental goals ([Belz & Binder, 2014](#); [Kumar, 2016](#)). These practices are not only important for large companies but are equally important for small and medium-sized enterprises. Various researchers have established the importance of sustainability practices for large firms; however, these practices are equally important for small and medium-sized firms ([Ferro et al., 2017](#)).

Although small and medium-sized enterprises contribute significantly to the economic development of a country, research on their practices is quite limited. According to the Asian Development Bank in the Pacific region, almost 60% of the labour is employed in small and medium-sized firms. The small firms have employees up to 10-99; however, the 50-300 employees work in a medium-sized enterprise. Small and medium-sized enterprises need particular attention to the development of sustainability ([Loucks et al., 2010](#)). Furthermore, according to the suggestions of a few other researchers ([Shields & Shelleman, 2015](#)), small and medium-sized firms implement these practices at a slow and steady pace, as the sustainable marketing practices are not deeply rooted in such firms. It is further stressed in the literature ([Hughes & Troy, 2017](#)) that such firms are less willing to adopt sustainable practices than larger firms. Contrarily, it has been observed and reported by the researchers that the larger-sized firms usually incorporate sustainable practices as a continuous part of their business scenario.

Given the overall impact of small and medium-sized companies on the total economy in Asia, these firms alone have a major stake in the environment of those regions. This is very difficult to achieve sustainable practices by the firms which lack resources. According to [Sloan et al. \(2013\)](#), it is also justified that such firms do not have the structure that easily accommodates integrating sustainability practices. Unlike large-scale firms, SMEs have fewer stakeholders and hold a flatter structure, so for them, adopting the implementation of sustainable marketing goals becomes difficult. For small and medium-sized enterprises, one of the main structural barriers preventing them from being sustainable is insufficient resources. While large corporations are better equipped with departments to handle sustainability and instruments of green financing, SMEs operate on thin margins. This creates a limitation on their ability to invest in cleaner technologies, certification of sustainability, or professional consultancy ([Ageron et al., 2012](#); [Hossain et al., 2023](#)). Additionally, [Zhang et al. \(2021\)](#) state that it is the “hard for ease” accessibility of government grants, or climate and sustainability funds/loans, which further leads SMEs

to financial exclusion. Therefore, such firms may be conscious of the long-term sustainability gains associated with sustainable activities. They are often dissuaded by short-term financial considerations if they transition towards more sustainable operations.

Even if funding is available, small and medium-sized companies are constrained by regulatory and institutional barriers when it comes to transitioning toward sustainability. Most of the policy frameworks on environmental regulations are developed for large firms, and they do not always consider small businesses in light of resource constraints and operational structures ([Amoah et al., 2021](#); [Johnson & Schaltegger, 2016](#)). A lack of trained staff and institutional support to understand or adhere to complex reporting standards, such as ESG disclosures or environmental impact assessments, can present a significant barrier for many SMEs. In addition, discrepancies in terms of what is enforced across regions are creating the notion that sustainability is a bureaucratic headache rather than an area for competitive advantage ([Del Baldo, 2023](#)). As a result, such firms are less well represented in national sustainability agendas that nevertheless tend to focus on large companies, i.e. the largest emitters of rubbish, effluent and greenhouse gas emissions.

A more fundamental barrier is the lack of internal resources in small and medium-sized companies to plan and deliver sustainable marketing strategies. Most employees do not have specific functions or expertise when it comes to sustainability issues due to flatter organizational hierarchies and multi-tasking roles ([Hossain et al., 2023](#)). Thus, a lack of innovative capabilities affects the institutionalization of eco-innovation or green branding strategies required for sustainable competitiveness. Further, most of the SMEs do not have formalized sustainability education or training programs, which indeed hinder long-term vision and resistance to change ([Tripathi et al., 2024](#)). Collaborative platforms, government-backed incubators, and targeted knowledge-transfer programs could bridge this gap by equipping such firms with the skills, tools, and frameworks necessary for sustainable transformation ([Ortiz et al., 2024](#)).

The ambiguous knowledge possessed by small and medium-sized companies regarding sustainable marketing practices also tends to limit the potential of these firms to adopt the initiatives of sustainable marketing practices ([Shields & Shelleman, 2015](#)). As mentioned in the discussion above, it is supposed that the size of the company can largely impact the practices of sustainable marketing in the organizations, as larger firms own more resources, and they are prone to greater social and marketing challenges as compared to the SMEs. According to the findings of [Wang and Kuah \(2018\)](#), personnel working in firms of various organizational sizes tend to adopt different sustainable marketing approaches. Hence, it can be established from the debate that organizations of different sizes possess different scopes of sustainable marketing practices, and the selection of marketing tools also differs.

Past studies have established that the concept of sustainable marketing has been studied mainly on a theoretical basis rather than an empirical basis ([Crittenden et al., 2011](#); [Mitchell & Ramey, 2011](#)). According to [Loucks et al. \(2010\)](#), empirical investigations of SMEs' sustainable marketing practices are relatively unexplored. The idea of sustainable marketing practices is relatively new in the literature. The concept has mushroomed in recent years, as scarcity regarding this topic exists in the literature. This study focuses on the food and drink industry in Asia. The food and drink sector has been chosen for the study because it is large in Asia. The Asian share in the food and drink industry is

approximately 6% of the global food and drink industry. The food industry is also responsible for major environmental impacts, including pollution and gas emissions of various forms.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Sustainability Practices in B2B Context

In the contemporary world, firms face increased ambiguity and complexity. The tricks and techniques of doing business have also changed with the changing scenario. The most frequent challenges faced by modern firms include limited resources, increased food safety, and pollution concerns. According to the studies ([Chakraborty & Mandal, 2014](#); [Hurth et al., 2015](#)), most social and environmental changes occur due to negligent business practices followed by firms. Such irresponsible practices are usually driven by the desire for short-term gains and profits or the urge for short-term satisfaction. To survive in a competitive world, firms must comply with environmental practices and ensure business success. A mere focus on profit maximization and the provision of financial benefits to the stakeholders of the company is no longer the art of the game. According to some other studies ([Kumar, 2016](#); [Svensson et al., 2016](#)), businesses are facing the increased haggling power of stakeholders nowadays. Customers around the globe are becoming aware of sustainable marketing practices around the globe, and at the same time, they are becoming less tolerant of business practices that are harmful to the environment or society.

The apprehension regarding the impact of enterprises on society and the environment has been marked out in the past few years; however, attention towards sustainable marketing practices has been scarce ([Blenkhorn & MacKenzie, 2017](#); [Eltantawy, 2016](#)). The evolution of the concept of sustainability dates to the 1980s. The concept was considered vital because it discussed matters regarding nature, as well as societal and environmental problems. Owing to its applicability to business practices, the economy, and society, the concept was received quite well. The notion of sustainability marketing emerged in 1980 with a good reception from scholars due to its applicability to the natural environment, society, and economy. The importance of this idea is evident at both the local and global levels. The merger of three important concepts, namely environmental, economic, and social, is necessary. The merger of these concepts necessitates a holistic and cohesive approach. The execution of such idea can occur at both the country and regional levels. Furthermore, it can be applied to other sectors and organizations. According to the literature ([Whiteman et al., 2013](#)), a connection exists between the macro and micro levels of sustainability. Organizations in this modern century need to respond to the necessary demands of the society in which they are operating ([Varadarajan & Venkatachalam, 2016](#)) and ([Hogevold & Svensson, 2012](#)) further stress that the progression towards societal and environmental sustainability is a combined responsibility of consumers, organizations, government, and all other stakeholders. The concept of sustainable marketing practices in organizational strategies positively influences profit levels and financial outcomes ([Burhan & Rahmanti, 2012](#); [Dixon-Fowler et al., 2013](#)).

To internalise sustainable marketing, a crucial starting point lies in leadership commitment and vision alignment at the top management level. Organizational change toward sustainability is rarely achieved without the active participation of senior leaders

who set strategic priorities and embed sustainability into the company's mission, policies, and decision-making processes ([Ageron et al., 2012](#); [Epstein, 2018](#)). Leaders play a catalytic role by establishing sustainability as a core business value and communicating this through formal strategies and informal behaviour. When it becomes part of the leadership agenda, it permeates across functions, including marketing, ensuring alignment between ethical imperatives and business operations. This top-down influence facilitates a shift from short-term profit orientation to a broader focus on long-term stakeholder value and environmental stewardship ([Lozano, 2015](#)). Another key mechanism for internalising sustainable marketing practices is organizational capacity building, especially through staff training and cross-functional learning. The effectiveness of sustainable marketing depends not only on strategy but on people who understand and implement it. Firms that provide ongoing training programs, workshops, and role-specific education are more likely to successfully align marketing actions with environmental and social objectives ([De Grosbois, 2012](#); [Yafi et al., 2021](#)). Marketing teams need upskilling in areas such as life cycle analysis, ethical branding, and transparent communication. Additionally, sustainability champions or cross-departmental “green teams” can foster a culture of innovation by sharing knowledge, identifying opportunities, and building employee engagement around such goals ([Marshall et al., 2005](#)).

2.2 Implementation of Sustainability in the Marketing Context

It has been explained in the literature that marketing and sustainability are two unrelated concepts. It is perceived that marketing encourages consumers to buy products that are not necessary, but on the flip side, sustainability promotes the notion of practices that provide a long-term benefit to the environment. Similarly, certain promotional activities have been critiqued by researchers that bogus claims regarding the performance of the product. Taking into consideration the notion of sustainability, it is related to the ethical standing with a sheer focus on the long-term values. This concept possesses numerous challenges that organizations might face. The intersection of marketing and sustainability would be a new step in delivering and communicating to the public regarding how to deal with consumers as well as suppliers. The interrelationship of marketing and sustainability also educates regarding the implications and applications of marketing functions. The marketing activities can act as the major drivers for the commitment of an organization to the sustainability goals ([Peattie, 2001](#)).

The practices of sustainability are no longer a second option for companies, as they have become an obligation for enterprises. According to the findings from the literature ([Lim, 2016](#)), the practices of sustainable marketing are viewed as part of corporate philosophy. The company, which is oriented on the concepts of sustainability, functions on the principles of eco-friendly strategies such as waste reduction and energy conservation. The efforts of marketing create a strong linkage between the company and its environment. Sustainability should be the focus of the pursuit of success for the company. The concept of marketing not only entails the essence of sustainability, but it also supports economic well-being ([Hunt, 2017](#)). Such practices should be within the values, beliefs, and norms of the organization. Incorporating the practices of sustainability with the efforts of marketing can enhance the innovation abilities.

Beyond training and leadership, organizational values alignment is fundamental for embedding sustainable marketing into a firm's culture. This alignment involves revisiting internal belief systems, reward mechanisms, and communication channels to reflect sustainability as a guiding principle ([Klettner et al., 2014](#)). Companies with strong internal values related to environmental integrity and social responsibility are more likely to adopt authentic marketing strategies instead of greenwashing tactics. Embedding sustainability into organizational norms, such as supplier selection, product development, and brand storytelling, strengthens the coherence between internal operations and external messaging ([González-Benito & González-Benito, 2006](#)). Thus, sustainable marketing becomes not just a tactic but a manifestation of the organization's deeper purpose and identity.

2.3 Sustainable Marketing Mix

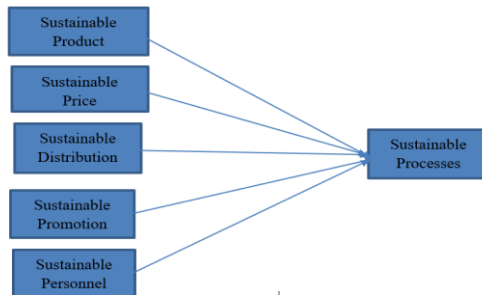
A sustainable product is the physical manifestation of the brand promise. Eco-conscious design choices such as plant-based materials or modular construction are not only selling points but operational directives that demand greener manufacturing processes. Marketing a product's recyclability or ethical sourcing compels an organization to re-engineer supply chains, quality controls, and after-sales programs to uphold these sustainability claims. This alignment between product positioning and operational processes ensures that these promise in the market is authentic, measurable, and defensible ([Wang et al., 2024](#)).

Similarly, price serves as a strategic lever that can fund and reinforce sustainable processes. Premium pricing for organic or ethically produced goods signals exclusivity and purpose, enabling the brand to invest in cleaner production technologies. Conversely, competitive sustainable pricing challenges firms to streamline processes to minimize waste and maximize efficiency without compromising ethical standards. By tying pricing strategy directly to sustainability messaging, marketers ensure that operational processes deliver consistent value to both customers and the planet ([Feldhütter et al., 2024](#)).

In sustainable marketing, distribution is both a functional necessity and a storytelling opportunity. Marketing campaigns that highlight green delivery systems or plastic-free packaging directly shape operational processes from supplier selection to last-mile delivery partners. When brands commit to reducing transportation. In marketing, sustainable processes are the operational backbone that validates every brand promise made through the marketing mix. They ensure that a product's eco-friendly image is real, that a price premium reflects genuine ethical investment, that green distribution claims are logistically sound, and that verifiable data back promotional transparency. Processes are therefore the dependent variable shaped, reinforced, and continually improved through strategic choices in product, price, place, promotion, and people. By embedding sustainability across the marketing mix, brands create a process ecosystem that is not only operationally efficient but also market-differentiating. These operational changes not only improve environmental performance but also reinforce brand positioning as a sustainability leader ([Danciu, 2013](#); [Sadiq et al., 2024](#)).

Sustainable promotion is not just about persuasion, it's about proof. Campaigns built around sustainability must be underpinned by accurate data collection, third-party verification, and transparent reporting. For example, a social media campaign on ethical

sourcing compels supply chain processes to provide traceability and compliance documentation. In this way, marketing promotion shapes the rigor and transparency of internal processes, ensuring that brand promises resonate as both authentic and actionable ([Cheng et al., 2011](#); [Din et al., 2022](#)). The idea of sustainable personnel revolves around the human link between the sustainability promise and the customer's perception. Frontline staff trained in eco-knowledge can confidently explain product benefits, while back-end employees implement process improvements that align with the brand's sustainable positioning. Their behaviour, decisions, and advocacy feed directly into the credibility of marketing claims. Thus, sustainable personnel not only execute but also co-create the processes that deliver sustainable outcomes ([Kuźniarska, 2018](#)).



3. Methods

By studying the related literature, the gap has been identified regarding the interlink between sustainability and marketing. First, this study provides important information on B2C companies. Research on sustainable marketing practices also needs to be expanded to enrich the literature. The study also provides evidence regarding how organizations utilize the marketing mix for sustainable practices. This study attempts to determine the extent to which organizations B2C sector implement the goals of sustainable marketing. The analysis of the study was carried out by considering small- and medium-sized enterprises. Previous studies have usually been carried out on large firms, and less focus has been given to small and medium-sized firms. According to the study ([Papadas et al., 2017](#)), research on large firms usually affects the generalizability of the outcomes. Similarly, previous studies (e.g., [Loucks et al., 2010](#)) reports that strategic differences exist among small or medium-sized firms. Firms with greater magnitude possess larger resources, and such firms are usually researched. Small and medium-sized firms have been less researched in terms of their sustainable marketing practices. Small-scale organizations are more flexible, which makes them fit for environmental changes and challenges. The magnitude of sustainability practices differs between large and small-scale firms owing to internal resource differences ([Johnson et al., 2016](#)).

3.1 Sample and Data Collection

This research has a quantitative design, and data have been collected from three Asian markets, namely, Pakistan, China, and Malaysia. The three Asian countries selected for this study have different socioeconomic development tiers. China is one of the

countries that has recently taken over the world with its economic activities. Malaysia is rapidly developing its economy among Asian nations. Pakistan is among those countries that are subject to various turmoil, and the economy of the country is continuously in a state of fluctuation. A comparison of the sustainable marketing practices of SMEs in these three countries can provide useful insights. According to Farid (2016), “*small and medium-sized companies account for 99 percent of over 3.2 million business enterprises in Pakistan and have 35 percent share in value addition; Pakistan’s SMEs undoubtedly have the potential to contribute considerably more than their current share*”. In China, it has been reported that there are almost 38 million small and medium-sized enterprises, and every year, 5 million industries are added, which undoubtedly makes it a strong economy. There are 907065 SME industries in Malaysia. To obtain a sample of enterprises for the study, a stratified random sampling technique was applied. The respondents from all three countries were stratified. Thirty small- and medium-sized enterprises were selected from each country, achieving a total of 90 firms. The sample firms are dependent on their size. The firms are divided into micro, small, and medium-sized firms. Micro enterprises constitute companies with up to 10 employees. The medium-sized firms are the ones for which the number of employees is 11-50. The number of employees in the medium-sized firms is around 51-250. A sample of 300 employees from every country from each organization was selected. A questionnaire was distributed among the respondents regarding the implementation of sustainable practices.

Table 1: Detail of Selected Companies

Country	No of companies
Pakistan	30
China	30
Malaysia	30
Company Size	
Micro	Pakistan= 13 China= 12 Malaysia= 12
Small	Pakistan= 10 China= 12 Malaysia= 11
Medium	Pakistan= 7 China= 6 Malaysia= 8

The data were mainly collected from managers and marketing executives. Data were also collected from employees regarding the implementation of sustainability practices in the firm. The analysis was performed to check the sustainable marketing mix. Questions were asked regarding the implementation of sustainable practices in the respondents’ organizations in the selected countries. The data was also strengthened by

using information from the annual reports of the companies. During the initial phase of the study, a questionnaire was created to check for the reliability and validity of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was translated into the local languages also in order make it even understandable. The reliability analysis of the questionnaire shows that the constructs are suitable for further analysis.

Table 2: Reliability Coefficient

Sustainable Product (SPro)	0.83
Sustainable Price (SPri)	0.78
Sustainable Distribution (SDis)	0.72
Sustainable Promotion (SProm)	0.80
Sustainable Personnel (SPer)	0.70

3.3 Pakistan

The collected data from Pakistan was analyzed using SPSS. The results are within the bracket of the acceptability range. The model summary shows the strength of the variables of the framework with the dependent variable. The results show that according to the value of R, 80.4% of the strength exists between the dependent variable and the rest of the constructs. Furthermore, the value of R^2 shows the coefficient of determination. The output shows that 70.1% of the variation in the model is caused by the dependent variable, which is the sustainable process.

Table 3: Model Summary

Model	R	R Squared	Adjusted R square	Std Error	Model
1	0.804	0.701	0.698	0.075	1

Table 4 shows the ANOVA output which reflects the degree to which the independent variables predict the criterion variable. The level of significance is less than 0.05 which reflects that overall, the regression model is statistically significant, and it predicts the outcome variable.

Table 4: ANOVA

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig Value	Model
1	Regression	13.634	5	2.809	12.93	0.000	1
	Residual	51.935	246	0.211			
	Total	65.499	251				

The results of the hypotheses are presented in Table 5. Sustainable products produced by companies have a significant positive relationship with the sustainable

processes of the company ($p= 3.286$; $t= 0.001$). Similarly, sustainable pricing, which is another important aspect of the sustainable marketing mix, shows a significantly positive relationship with sustainable company operations ($p= 2.485$; $t= 0.008$). The distribution of goods produced by the company also reveals that the processes in the company are sustainable. The outcomes support the hypothesis ($p= 3.339$; $t= 0.001$). Similar significantly positive results are shown by sustainable promotion ($p= 2.707$; $t= 0.006$) and sustainable personnel ($p=2.757$; $t=0.006$) with sustainable processes.

Table 5: Regression Output-Pakistan

Model	Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized Coefficient	t	Sig.
	B	Std Error	Beta		
Sustainable Product (SPro)	0.134	0.040	0.103	1.607	0.078
Sustainable Price (SPri)	0.182	0.005	0.100	2.485	0.008
Sustainable Distribution (SDis)	0.175	0.063	0.0232	3.339	0.001
Sustainable Promotion (SProm)	0.137	0.080	0.189	2.707	0.006
Sustainable Personnel (SPer)	0.143	0.052	0.188	2.757	0.006

3.4 China

China is a country with high manufacturing capacity. Most manufacturing industries are moving towards China because of its business-friendly environment. Increased manufacturing has led to discussions on environmental hazards, which ultimately lead to sustainable processes. It can be inferred from the results that sustainable products ($t= 3.122$; $p= 0.003$) and sustainable price ($t= 3.485$; $p= 0.002$) have a positive and significant impact on sustainable organizational processes. On similar fronts, sustainable distribution ($t= 3.122$; $p= 0.003$), promotion ($t= 3.122$; $p= 0.003$), and personnel ($t= 3.122$; $p= 0.003$). All aspects of the sustainable marketing mix showed a significantly positive relationship with sustainable processes. It can be inferred from the outcomes that the sustainability aspects of products, pricing, distribution, promotion, and personnel all add to the sustainable process of companies in China.

Table 6: Regression Output-China

Model	Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized Coefficient	t	Sig.
	B	Std Error	Beta		
Sustainable Product (SPro)	0.155	0.026	0.043	3.122	0.003
Sustainable Price (SPri)	0.168	0.034	0.100	3.485	0.002

Sustainable Distribution (SDis)	0.188	0.063	0.023	3.339	0.001
Sustainable Promotion (SProm)	0.196	0.070	0.022	3.707	0.001
Sustainable Personnel (SPer)	0.184	0.062	0.021	2.757	0.004

3.5 Malaysia

The model has also been checked in the context of Malaysia. Malaysia has also embarked on an industrialization journey. The concept of sustainability has also gained popularity in the Malaysian sector. Since the study aims to be cross-cultural, data were also collected from Malaysia. The output shows that product sustainability (SPro) has a significantly positive relationship with sustainable processes ($t= 2.632$; $p= 0.008$). Further, sustainable pricing of products showed a positive relationship with sustainable processes ($t= 2.632$; $p=0.008$). On a similar basis, sustainable distribution ($t= 4.339$; $p=0.000$), promotion ($t= 4.339$; $p= 0.000$), and personnel ($t= 3.544$; $p= 0.001$) also show a positive relationship with the sustainable process.

Table 7: Regression Output-China

Model	Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized Coefficient	t	Sig.
	B	Std Error	Beta		
Sustainable Product (SPro)	0.084	0.031	0.120	2.632	0.008
Sustainable Price (SPri)	0.143	0.042	0.154	3.322	0.001
Sustainable Distribution (SDis)	0.079	0.063	0.205	4.339	0.000
Sustainable Promotion (SProm)	0.176	0.075	0.163	2.325	0.021
Sustainable Personnel (SPer)	0.244	0.062	0.021	3.544	0.001

4. Discussion

Sustainable processes have been studied in different organizations in Pakistan, Malaysia, and China, and data were collected using questionnaires. The relationship between sustainable products and sustainable processes is significantly positive in all three countries; however, the relationship is weak in Pakistan. Awareness of sustainability in Pakistan is at an infancy level. Literature ([Akbar et al., 2021](#)) confirms that there is a lack of awareness in Pakistani firms. However, consumers and manufacturers are well aware of sustainable products and processes in Malaysia ([Abdul-Rashid et al., 2017](#); [Ngu et al., 2020](#)) and China ([Chu, 2018](#); [Sheng et al., 2022](#)). In case of Pakistan, the manufacturers have started gaining awareness regarding the sustainable pricing of the products ([Shabbir & Kassim, 2018](#)). With a big social push for environmental awareness, many organizations

are pushing for eco-friendly practices and adopting sustainable ways to run their businesses in the country. As far as sustainable pricing in Malaysia is concerned, the results coincide with those ([Polas et al., 2019](#)). China is becoming one of the world's business hubs, where sustainable products and processes are gaining popularity ([Li et al., 2022](#)). The studies confirm that Chinese consumers are willing to pay more for sustainable and environment-friendly products ([Lu et al., 2022](#); [Yin et al., 2022](#)).

Sustainable distribution refers to the allocation of resources, such as goods, services, and fees, with an integration of sustainability issues. Sustainable distribution is becoming a rising concept in Pakistan, Malaysia, and China. A general perception is that compromising environmental costs also compromises the sustainability image of the organization, posing a challenge to the ([Javeed et al., 2022](#); [Naseer et al., 2019](#); [Shahid et al., 2020](#); [Shan et al., 2020](#); [Wong et al., 2020](#)). Sustainable marketing involves the advertising of socially responsible products, practices, and brand beliefs. The sustainable marketing of an organization portrays its sustainable processes. Sustainable marketing practices are being carried out in Pakistan, China, and Malaysia as well to portray the green image of the company. The positive impact of sustainable marketing on sustainable organizational processes can be related to ([Ghazali et al., 2021](#); [Tanveer et al., 2021](#); [Wang et al., 2021](#)). Further, sustainable personnel refer to the people who know and comprehend the concept and principles of sustainability. The rising debate regarding making the company processes sustainable is prevalent in Pakistan, China as well Malaysia. Sustainable personnel refer to individuals who understand the concept of resource sustainability and apply its principles to sustainable development in their work. A sustainable person is supposed to show sensitivity to ecological and social dilemmas in the international economy. Green personnel have been studied by ([bin Abdul Lasi & Man, 2020](#); [Hayat et al., 2019](#); [Khan et al., 2020](#); [Othman et al., 2019](#); [Zhu & Sarkis, 2016](#)).

4.1 Theoretical Implications

This article conceptualizes the framework of the sustainable marketing mix in small and medium-sized enterprises. The framework focuses on the approach of the 5P's. The usage of a sustainable marketing mix can be considered an important contribution to literature. The development of the conceptual framework can also encourage the development of sustainable marketing tools. Previous studies have mainly focused on large-scale organizations; however, this study considers small and medium-sized enterprises. Comparative analyses among countries also provide interesting insights into literature.

4.2 Practical Implications

The current businesses are focusing on social and environment-friendly strategies. The rising awareness of consumers motivates organizations to include sustainability in their marketing practices and operations. This study can inspire managers struggling to incorporate such practices into their businesses.

4.3 Practical Implications for Asian Businesses

The findings of this study offer several critical practical implications for businesses across Asian economies, particularly SMEs in Pakistan, China, and Malaysia. As

sustainability increasingly becomes a core consideration in global commerce, integrating sustainable marketing practices is no longer optional for businesses striving to remain competitive, especially in dynamic and developing Asian markets such as India. First, this study provides actionable insights into how the components of sustainable marketing mix product, price, distribution (place), promotion, and personnel affect sustainable business processes. For practitioners in SMEs, this framework can serve as a diagnostic and strategic tool to assess current sustainability alignment and identify areas for improvement. For example, sustainable product development in China and Malaysia showed strong correlations with sustainable processes, indicating that product innovation with ecological considerations can drive broader sustainability outcomes. Pakistani businesses, while lagging, can use this insight to strengthen product-related sustainable practices, starting with eco-friendly packaging, clean materials, and reduced waste in manufacturing processes. While the positive relationship between sustainable product innovation and business processes in China and Malaysia aligns with the broader global literature, differences emerge when these patterns are compared with those in more developed economies. In regions such as Western Europe and North America, sustainable product development is often driven by strong regulatory frameworks, consumer pressure, and environmental awareness ([Geissdoerfer et al., 2017](#); [Peattie & Belz, 2010](#)). Conversely, in many Asian economies especially Pakistan sustainability adoption is at a nascent stage, with firms still navigating early awareness and institutional support. This divergence highlights a contextual gap that underscores the need for localized approaches to sustainable strategies. While global literature supports the idea that green product development drives financial and reputational outcomes [Delmas and Burbano \(2011\)](#), our findings suggest that such benefits are less pronounced or slower to materialize in economies where sustainability is not yet embedded in consumer behaviour or industrial policy.

The findings also showed a trend of increasing consumer awareness of sustainable features, with consumers in markets such as China and Malaysia among the most willing to pay a premium for sustainably priced goods. Given this pattern, it is evident that marketing managers operating in these areas will have a signal to adopt transparent pricing strategies for supply and production. Castaldo et al. He says this could be a chance for Pakistani companies to earn the goodwill of consumers by slowly implementing sustainable pricing and running campaigns to promote environmentally friendly products instead of their regular offerings. This idea has gained popularity worldwide, especially in European economies, where more than 70% of consumers are willing to pay more for organically labelled or socially responsible products ([Cerulli-Harms et al., 2018](#)). The results from China and Malaysia correspond with a similar worldwide consumer trend toward the acceptance of ethical responsibility. In contrast, Pakistan bucks this trend, as high price sensitivity and low public discourse on environmental issues limit the willingness to pay for sustainable goods ([Fatima et al., 2024](#)). This disconnect between the global and local signals suggests that there are some markets in Asia where this is happening. Asia is following the trend of evolving market behaviours, but many other Asian markets possibly need policy reforms and awareness programs to promote similar consumer attitudes. Therefore, the results help reinforce and expand global knowledge of sustainable pricing strategies in emerging economies ([Bibi et al., 2024](#)).

The second important consequence is the increasing importance of sustainable transport systems. It is always advisable to save costs and be closer to the ground or focus on local distribution models, such as green logistics, supply chain within the state (state-source-state model), and energy-efficient transportation, which are basic requirements in the case of SME landscapes, as they have scarce resources, limited logistical solutions, and weightage on other priorities over carbon footprint impact. This is essential, especially in a market like Pakistan, where infrastructural and regulatory challenges can hamper the efficacy of sustainability efforts. Similarly, Chinese businesses can leverage their already improved logistical framework to further optimize their distribution systems for carbon reduction, and Malaysian SMEs can benefit from existing green government initiatives. Sustainable promotion plays a significant role. Marketing executives should be reminded that sustainability is more than the inside of what we do; it is based on old values but market trends. Articulating a clear commitment to social and environmental issues can yield dividends. Businesses across all three countries can use digital marketing, storytelling on social media, or eco-labelling to gain a higher market share. This addition also adds to brand equity, meets consumer demands, and facilitates linkages to the international market, especially in export-oriented sectors.

The study also underscores the importance of sustainable staffing to ensure that sustainability is implemented in all parts of the organization. This makes it more important for Asian firms to train and equip their employees, who are seen as the linchpins of sustainable practices, with relevant knowledge. Chinese and Malaysian firms seem to have done this, while Pakistani enterprises need to focus on investing in developing human capacity if they are to begin closing the awareness and skills gap. Colleges and industry-academia collaborations could also help in this regard to develop a sustainability-aware workforce. The comparative design of the study highlights that sustainability cannot be dealt with following a one-size-fits-all approach. The socio-economic context, regulatory environment, and cultural expectations differ widely even among countries in Asia, making it highly imperative to adapt strategies to suit local realities. While China can scale sustainability through innovation and infrastructure, Pakistan needs to focus on awareness-building and institutional support. A well-balanced use of public policy and consumer engagement will help Malaysian companies maintain good sustainable practices.

Finally, policymakers and trade bodies seeking to create conditions for sustainable business, can obtain useful insights from this study. On the other hand, these insights can give rise to interventions such as encouraging platforms for knowledge sharing, providing tax incentives on green investments, and creating sustainability programs that are catered towards SMEs. In sum, this study offers a contemporary and operationally useful roadmap for sustainability marketing integration among Asian small and medium-sized companies. On the other hand, the adoption of a sustainable marketing mix allows businesses to deliver on new mores while simultaneously engaging in resource parsimony and garnering social licenses with land that is increasingly environmentally aware. The worldwide adoption of sustainability in SME operations is increasingly seen as sustainable long-term throughput and brand resilience ([Kotler, 2011](#)). The obstacles for change in Asian SMEs in this case, Pakistan parallel those of every other part of the developing world (like Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa); there, resource constraints, poor institutional infrastructure, and lacklustre enforcement tendencies hinder sustainability transitions

([Kumar et al., 2023](#)). Nonetheless, countries such as China are showing the potential to converge towards international sustainability standards in areas such as green logistics, sustainable certification schemes, and eco-innovation frameworks ([Zhu & Hua, 2017](#)). Thus, the focus of this study is comparatively significant as it helps relate sustainability adoption across a wide range of Asian economic institutions with varying levels of organizational structures and consumer orientation in a larger context that can reflect the general global literature.

Fifth, while the 5Ps of sustainability provide a common currency for sustainable marketing, it is important to acknowledge that sectoral differences influence how small and medium-sized companies implement sustainable marketing. For example, agriculture-based SMEs, especially in countries such as Pakistan and rural Malaysia, are under immense pressure to become sustainable, given their significantly visible contribution to land use, water resources, and biodiversity ([Naseer et al., 2019](#); [Varadarajan & Venkatachalam, 2016](#)). Similarly, sustainable product design in this sector covers organic cultivation methods, reduced pesticide levels, and post-harvest wastage reduction. Sustainable pricing is constrained by seasonal yields and market volatility, pushing firms toward cooperative pricing and community-supported agriculture models. Distribution challenges, such as poor cold-chain logistics, make sustainable placement strategies a pressing issue. These businesses may benefit most from government-backed green financing and public-private partnerships to address specific sustainability burdens ([Lu et al., 2022](#)).

In contrast, retail-focused SMEs, especially in urban China and Malaysia, are primarily influenced by consumer-driven sustainability pressures, such as the demand for ethically sourced, low-waste, and energy-efficient products ([Chu, 2018](#)). Sustainable promotion is becoming increasingly relevant, with brands fighting to prove transparency, traceability, and eco-branding. This includes training the salesforce to sell ethically by aligning with CSR and engaging green customers. In addition, retail distribution processes typically require the selection of suppliers or logistics partners that meet sustainability standards. The more adaptable business model of retail SMEs to changing product mix and pricing mechanisms contrasts with agriculture, although retail faces stiff competition for green credibility in an environment that is sensitive to greenwashing ([Delmas & Burbano, 2011](#)).

Manufacturing firms, particularly in China, face different types of sustainability pressure regulatory and industrial compliance, especially in pollution-intensive subsectors such as textiles or food processing ([Shan et al., 2020](#); [Sheng et al., 2023](#)). These firms must focus on sustainable production systems such as reducing energy consumption, minimizing material waste, and deploying closed-loop systems. Sustainable personnel in this context include not only frontline workers but also supply chain coordinators who manage resource efficiency and compliance reporting. Product-based sustainability is achieved through process innovation, whereas distribution strategies emphasize carbon footprint reduction via optimized logistics or decentralized warehousing ([Zhu & Hua, 2017](#)). Thus, sectoral variation requires SME managers to customize their sustainability mix to respond to both consumer expectations and institutional mandates.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The concept of sustainability provides organizations with incredible opportunities while posing challenges at the same time. Organizations are recommended to adopt broader tactics for the application of sustainability practices by improving the sustainable image of the brand. Over time, environmental sustainability and its prime importance to business functions have taken the form of a kindled debate. The functional area of marketing, in highlighting the vitality of sustainability, plays a major role in boosting the image of corporations. Considering the marketing aspect, this study contributes in various ways. First, this study conceptualizes the traditional marketing mix from the perspective of sustainability. Second, this study considers SMEs working in the consumer sector in three countries, Pakistan, Malaysia, and China, which provides a cross-cultural comparison of the situation. Most previous research has been conducted with large corporations. Creating suitable marketing strategies with age-old traditional green trends emerging again. This can be considered an opportunity for further research in the field of sustainability marketing.

Focusing on sustainability in scholarly and policy debates is increasing; however, SMEs are exposed to a variety of impediments to incorporating sustainable marketing practices beyond ad hoc short-term perspectives. Lack of financial resources, technical knowledge, staff training, and access to support infrastructure ([Hossain et al., 2023](#); [Johnson et al., 2016](#)). Compared to large firms, small and medium-sized firms generally function as thin organizations with lower profit margins; therefore, sustainability often appears to be a low priority next to strategic operation (Agyemang et al., 2019). In addition, many regulatory frameworks are so elaborate or not communicated that SME do not have clear guidelines as to what is requested of them in terms of compliance and incentives. However, organizational inertia and reluctance to the cost-benefit trade-offs of sustainability can cause additional delays to change ([Revell et al., 2010](#)). This makes considering such adoptions as an either/or equation less relevant and more like a sustainability journey.

Realizing these structural and cultural constraints, scholars have convincingly advocated for phased adoption strategies attuned to SMEs. The 5Ps of sustainable marketing provide a practical approach to your sustainable marketing strategy you can work on one aspect first and not adopt all the practices at once

([Barakat et al., 2023](#)). Over time, this adds up to create internal momentum, provides evidence-based value, and helps mitigate resistance to change. Focusing on the latter, SMEs can also be recommended to target sustainability domains most related to their sector; for example, agri-firms should concentrate on sustainable packaging and water use, while retail firms could focus on ethical sourcing and customer education ([Lu et al., 2022](#)). This stepwise approach ensures that sustainability transitions are practical and robust, even in the face of limited resource availability.

Multi-stakeholder Collaboration and Capacity Creation: Multi-stakeholder collaboration in SMEs is an essential enabler of sustainability. Connecting with NGOs, universities, government institutions, and more upstream actors in the supply chain can provide SMEs with access to know-how, market intelligence, and potentially finance ([Lozano, 2015](#)). Involving internal stakeholders (employees and others) in planning sustainability can also help create ownership and build an organizational culture ([Marshall et al., 2005](#)). Working collaboratively with such firms through education, knowledge-

sharing networks, and government green incubators are some of the most efficient mechanisms to ensure that capabilities can be established. In addition, including sustainability requirements in supplier contracts, employee KPIs, or marketing communications can help change individual commitments into a company-wide mindset. By seeing sustainability as a value, not just compliance, SMEs take on more competitiveness, resilience, and social legitimacy in the long run. A more in-depth investigation of institutional barriers or resource gaps might enhance its practical relevance and generalizability, considering the various environments in which small and medium-sized companies operate.

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