

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

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Abstract

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The environmental sustainability has seen a growing trend as a competitive strategy in a recent year. Being 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's focus shifts to the Dominican Republic, comparing sustainability initiatives in Santo Domingo and Santiago. It aims to examine 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 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

Introduction

In recent years have seen 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 in a way that prevents environmental damage by reducing waste, conserving energy, and promoting environmental health. As it is 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, claim Cronin et al. (2011) and Amran et al. (2015). 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 actual 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 type of behavior. According to Rex and Baumann (2007), the goal of ecolabels is to empower customers to make educated decisions that have a positive impact on the environment and how products are produced. Ecolabelling has received a lot of attention, although studies have shown that ecolabelling companies do not necessarily influence consumers' decisions to buy sustainably (Thgersen, 2000; Leire & Thidell, 2005; Rex & Baumann, 2007; Grolleau et al., 2016). 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 & Mather, 1992, in Peattie, 1992) indicate that only about 10% of consumers truly 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 if it is relevant to talk about green customers, 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 greatly on the situation in which the purchase is made.

Environmental sustainability marketing has been shown to have good effects in the literature (Iles, 2008; Ottman, 2011), however it can also be detrimental to a company's bottom line because certain research indicate 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 ASW, 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 & Font, 2010).

Environmental sustainability marketing literature has mainly focused on 'environmental sustainability consumers' and market segments, segmented according to consumer ideals and demographic and psychographic characteristics (Ottman, 2003; Rex & Baumann, 2007; Rettie et al., 2014). Additionally, a lot of research, including sizable consumer market studies (National Marketing Institute, cited by Ottman, 2011), focuses on specific environmental practices rather than significant purchase decisions, such as recycling, using 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 Dominican Republic, Santo Domingo, and Santiago this work critically examines the idea that environmental sustainability initiatives are useful in making the purchasing decision creating a competitive advantage by encouraging efficiencies, attracting customers, and obtaining business. More particularly, we look at why costumers 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, generally, a competitive edge, leading to the formation of hypotheses for future testing.

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 more likely to have environmental policies in place. Stanwick and Stanwick (2000). Even though according to Liao et al. (2023) Environmental innovation can promote improvements in a firm's performance.

Numerous metrics have been used to gauge the competitive advantage brought about by 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 & 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 specifically with the product with which the company is aimed to differentiate from the offerings of competitors (Wagner, 2009; Roberts & Dowling, 2002). Financing options and insurance policies are examples of risk-related competitive advantages. Finally, profits, cost reductions, and other financial indicators are referred to as 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; Lee et al., 2017; Kong et al., 2020).

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, as well as new market opportunities. As a result, environmental innovations can assist businesses in achieving their environmental objectives in an economical manner. According to Porter and van der Linde (1995), the environment might be viewed as a chance for competition. They contend that businesses that establish themselves as leaders in emerging markets will reap the benefits of being first and enhance their brand, enabling them to demand greater prices for environmentally friendly goods. Environmental improvements can therefore be employed as a differentiating strategy that increases market share (Peattie, 2002; Ottaman et al., 2006), however, point out the risk of "green marketing myopia." They claim that many environmentally innovative products have failed because businesses have concentrated on making their products more environmentally friendly to meet increasing consumer expectations. Belz and Schmidt-Riediger (2010), who emphasize that the degree of engagement between environmental features and other buying factors, as well as 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 made aware of the conventional product's negative effects on the environment, their desire to pay for it declines.

The environmental management requires changes in routines and operations (Aragón-Correa et al., 2008) and is obviously an organizational competency (Christmann, 2000), and that result in reducing environmental impacts, if any, and concurrently maintain or increase organization's competitiveness (Tate & Bals, 2018). When organizations have environmental ethical policy play critical role in enhancing firms' environmental performance and competitive advantage directly and indirectly through developing employee's environmental capabilities – skills, knowledge, and attitudes – through environmental training Singh, Chen, Del Giudice,

and El-Kassar (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 in product differentiation. Pigors & Rockenbach (2016). In line with Bartling and Weber (2015) and demonstrates that market interaction does not lead to more immoral behavior per se (Falk & Szech, 2013). Yet, at the same time it becomes clear that a regulatory focus on the producers seems necessary to increase the overall level of social responsibility in production (Pigors & Rockenbach, 2016).

Consumers are impacted by green marketing elements, which help them become more environmentally conscious and increase their desire to buy green products. The impact of green trust on consumers' purchase intentions has been demonstrated, indicating that green trust has a beneficial impact on consumers' purchase intention (Tan, Sadiq, Bashir, Mahmood, & Rasool, 2022).

Relationship between socially conscious consumers' decision to buy or acquire something or choose a specific company. Social issues in general can be relevant for individuals, but there may be a misconception that business operations or long-term competitiveness are not materially impacted by them. The value chain's social impact, however, has an impact on daily corporate operations. In actuality, the social aspects of the competitive context are external environmental variables that have a substantial impact on the fundamental forces that drive competitiveness in the markets in which the company works (Porter & Kramer, 2006). On the other hand, business 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 as a result (Porter & Kramer, 2006).

Corporate social responsibility thus acts as a major driver that propels the growth of the business. Corporate social responsibility 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).

The use of sustainable development practices by retailers, along with perceived value, greatly contribute to the building of 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, 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, & Ameza-Xemalordzo, 2023).

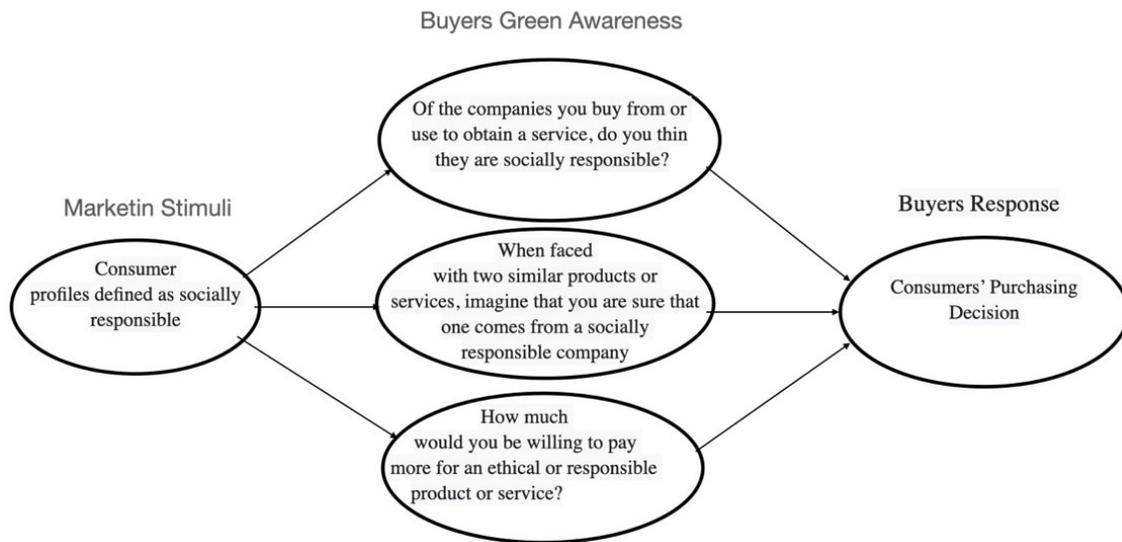


Figure 1. Research framework

Materials and Methods

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

Hypothesis 1. 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 purposes of the current investigation's quantitative evaluation, we considered estimating a sample size for the statistical demonstration, and 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 in accordance with the socioeconomic class criteria established in several studies. We use a distribution as a proportional affidavit for stratification purposes. (Sampieri, Fernandez, & 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, & 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 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	The 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. Level of confidence: 95% Margin of error: by 5%, Heterogeneity	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			Middle-High Strata: 17%, equivalent to 39.53% based on 43%	152 (51 in the Distrito Nacional y 101 in the Santo Domingo province)	152
		Metropolitan	481,289 *43%= 206,954		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

Source: Own elaboration

Table 2. Disaggregation: selection characteristics of subjects participating in the study and population quantities

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

Source: Own elaboration

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 that have been coded using the Likert scale and was created by Martn, Espinal, López, Maldonado, Mira, and Pertusa in 2011. Thanks to this scale, the impact of the CSR on the purchase decision was measured from both the CSR's conception and the demand analyst's perspective.

Table 3. Technique used and instrument configuration

Techniques applied	Questionary		Source
	Dimensions	Aspects questioned	
Questionary	General profile of the interviewer	gender 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	(Generic sociodemographic variables)

The socioeconomic segment	Average monthly income 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	UNDP: Human Development Index (2008)
Knowledge of CSR Concepts	Affiliation to Social Security Economic Responsibility Legal Responsibility Ethical Responsibility Philanthropic Responsibility	Aupperle et al., 1985. Carroll, 1979. Malignant, 2001. Wendlandt Amezaga et al., 2016
Perception of entities exercising CSR	Characteristics of a Responsible Company Behavior of a responsible company Identification of Dominican companies perceived as responsible. Reasons for this perception Understanding the need for business dialogue with customers	Martín, L., Espinal, M., López, S., Maldonado, R., Mira, L., & Pertusa, M. (2011)
Purchase Decision and CSR	Interest in the environmental situation 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

Date gathering

The survey method was employed in this study 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. as well as 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 the pilot plan was implemented, the survey script was enhanced and firmly used for analysis. The relevant authorization was kept for these reasons without containing any information about the citizens to protect the privacy of the persons' personal information.

Data analysis techniques

On the other hand, the results from the questionnaires that were applied to physical people were examined using the statistical package known as SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).

In addition to the descriptive data for the sample (medias 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 both the primary hypothesis, after the data been tested for the existence of a linear relationship between the dependent variable and the independent variable. The error component es normally distributed. There is no multicollinearity. There is no heteroskedasticity, the variance of the residual must be constant across the predicted values.

Results and Discussion

Table 4. The purchase decision and environmentally sustainable

Variables	Answer	Frequency	Percentage
31. Do you believe that 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 be willing to 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 that a logo, brand, or sign should be created, which is clearly identified on the products, so that consumers can distinguish that they come from companies that are responsible?	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

Table 5. 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 maca	13	1.6
The consumption of these products does not affect the environment, generating the least impact possible.	91	11.4
By the characteristics of the product: 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

H1: "There is a positive correlation between socially responsible consumer's purchase decision and CSR programs of the organisation"

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 be willing to 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

$$Y35 = 2.939 + 0.161X31 - 0.03X32 + 0.123X33$$

Discussion

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 advance around the understanding of the phenomenon studied. In fact, it is evidenced that we are moving away, although possibly slowly and associated with certain sociodemographic profiles, from the paradigm in which recognition towards 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 paradigm of profit maximization, the ultimate purpose of companies is to generate profits. Fortunately, we have been moving from this monetarist paradigm

to a socially responsible one. Gradually, and it is validated in the findings of this study, both 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 a 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 qualificators 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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