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Triple Bottom Line's Elements, Sustainability and Growth of Small Manufacturing Enterprises in an Emerging Economy

Authors:

Nkosinathi Prince Jali (223153150@stu.ukzn.ac.za)
School of Accounting, Economics and Finance
University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Mishelle Doorasamy (Doorasamym@ukzn.ac.za)
School of Accounting, Economics and Finance
University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Vanessa Gregory (Gregoryv@ukzn.ac.za)
School of Accounting, Economics and Finance
University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Abstract:

The Triple bottom line (TBL) framework integrates economic, environmental and social dimensions to measure the sustainability and ethical impact of business activities. Small manufacturing enterprises play a significant role in the country's workforce, gross domestic product (GDP) and tax revenue. This study investigates the TBL framework in the Durban area, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. From a target population of 1 050 small manufacturing enterprises, a stratified sample of 450 enterprises was selected, yielding 380 valid responses, a strong response rate that enhances the reliability of the findings. The study found that small manufacturing enterprises face several important hurdles when trying to put the TBL framework into practice. Many simply don't fully understand what the TBL framework involves, and financial problems often make it difficult to get sustainable projects off the ground. To help with this, there really needs to be simpler regulations, practical training that speaks to the real needs of these businesses, and easier access to resources. Without these, it's difficult for small manufacturing enterprises in South Africa to fully commit to sustainability.

Keywords:

Economic Sustainability, Environmental Sustainability, Social Sustainability

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Introduction

Sustainability-driven innovation in South African small manufacturing enterprises is crucial for economic growth and social development (Wentzel et al., 2022). Small manufacturing enterprises play a significant role in the country's workforce, gross domestic product (GDP) and tax revenue. Small manufacturing enterprises play a pivotal role in the development of the country's workforce, contributing significantly to its composition, skill development, and economic mobility (Kalidas et al., 2020; Dlamini, 2021; World Bank, 2024). Initially, small manufacturing enterprises are widely recognized for their significant role in generating employment, especially in economies like South Africa where extensive job opportunities on a large scale are often scarce (Kalidas et al., 2020). These enterprises provide employment opportunities for a diverse range of individuals, including skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled workers, thereby bolstering workforce participation and reducing unemployment rates (Álvarez Jaramillo et al., 2019). However, many small manufacturing enterprises struggle to survive due to various challenges. Research has shown that small manufacturing enterprises are more likely to fail compared to larger businesses, with issues like financial mismanagement and market volatility being significant contributing factors (Goh, 2018). Additionally, studies have highlighted the impact of taxation policies on small manufacturing enterprises, revealing how excessive tax burdens can impede their growth and competitiveness (Wentzel et al., 2022). Furthermore, Thulo (2020) has emphasized the importance of technology for small manufacturing enterprises, pointing out the barriers they face in accessing and leveraging technology to their advantage. There is a growing emphasis on sustainability in business operations, driven by environmental and social considerations. The Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework, which evaluates economic, environmental, and social impacts, has gained prominence as a guiding principle for sustainable development (Álvarez Jaramillo et al., 2019). In the context of small manufacturing enterprises in South Africa, the TBL framework is essential for assessing their sustainability and expansion. By adopting a holistic approach that considers social, environment, and economic pillars of TBL framework, small manufacturing enterprises can enhance their competitiveness and promote sustainable growth. Conducting further research on sustainable innovation in the context of TBL framework for small manufacturing enterprises is imperative to address their sustainability challenges and foster economic resilience (Ashman and Newman, 2018).

South African small manufacturing enterprises make substantial contributions to the country 's economy, with approximately 50% of the workforce employed by these entities (Wentzel et al., 2022). The aforementioned authors add that, small manufacturing enterprises contribute approximately 20% of the GDP, reflecting their significant role in driving economic output and growth. Moreover, these enterprises contribute approximately 6% of the total corporate tax revenue collected, underscoring their importance in generating government revenue (Wentzel et al., 2022). According to Thulo (2020), small manufacturing enterprises play an integral role towards the attainment of the National Development Plan

2030 which advocates for employment creation and driving economic growth. Small manufacturing enterprises are often responsible for the introduction of innovative products and services which create jobs and increase the standard of living of the people due to their multiplier effect of creating more jobs and increasing consumption in their communities (Wiese, 2014; Ayandibu et al., 2019). It should be noted that the magnitude of the impact that small manufacturing enterprises make, vary from country to country depending on the context in which they are operating and the underlying dynamics.

However, many of these small manufacturing enterprises do not survive beyond the first year of their incorporation (Van Scheers, 2011). The factors that lead to small manufacturing enterprises' failure have been pointed out by many studies and these include but are not limited to inadequate managerial knowledge and business acumen to plan, lead and control the activities of the business, lack of experience in the industry, talent acquisition and retention issues, limited financial resources as well as insufficient digital technologies and infrastructure (Mofokeng, 2013; Aigbavboa, 2014; Bécan et al., 2014; Ramukumba, 2014; Du Plessis et al., 2015; Eke et al., 2015; Aigbavboa et al., 2016; EU SME Centre, 2018; Bushe, 2019; Ngibe et al., 2019; Prasanna et al., 2019; Thulo, 2020).

Moreover, the growing interest in sustainability has led to many large organisations investing more towards the implementation of sustainable business practices and has also been exacerbated by pressure from various stakeholders (Álvarez Jaramillo et al., 2019). Consequently, there has been a growing recognition of the significance of business sustainability and environmental considerations in recent years, urging organisations to optimise the use of natural resources. Nevertheless, the adoption of sustainable business practices is not occurring on a sufficiently broad scale to make a substantial impact; often due to constraints faced by small medium enterprises (including small manufacturing enterprises) who constitute the majority of the workforce (Kalidas et al., 2020; Dlamini, 2021; World Bank, 2024).

Nonetheless, the study argues that small manufacturing enterprises cannot afford to continue to operate in an unsustainable manner because the current competitive markets demands organisations to be environmentally and socially conscious in their business activities so as to safeguard their reputation and remain in business (Álvarez Jaramillo et al., 2019). In this regard, the effective utilisation of scarce resources has encouraged businesses to engage in sustainable operations that do not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own requirements (Goh, 2018). The framework of the TBL has, in the last two decades, been embraced and extensively applied in accounting as a sustainability framework using the social, environmental and economic pillars to evaluate the performance of various enterprises within their respective contexts (Ashman & Newman, 2018).

Furthermore, the growing need for organisations to become sustainable in their business operations has made TBL the appropriate reporting framework to use (Aubuchon, 2014; Okanga & Groenewald, 2017; Muñoz-Pascual et al., 2019; Edeigba & Arasanmi, 2022b). As such, the TBL is a proven and well-

founded guiding principle for sustainability that redefines traditional ways of assessing organisational success and has evolved for nearly three decades (Elkington, 2018). Moreover, it has three pillars which are economic, environmental and social that it utilises to balance the need for organisational profitability and the need for the organisation to operate in an ethical and environmentally friendly manner (Kenton, 2023).

Aim:

To assess whether are there any challenges in using the TBL framework as a tool for ensuring sustainability among small manufacturing enterprises in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. This study seeks to explore whether the TBL approach is contextually relevant and practically applicable within the constraints faced by small manufacturing enterprises in an emerging economy.

Research Question:

What are the key challenges small manufacturing enterprises in KwaZulu-Natal encounter when applying the TBL framework to achieve sustainability?

Literature Review

This research study focused on the TBL framework as a tool to measure the sustainability of the small manufacturing enterprises in KwaZulu-Natal. TBL seeks to create a balance between competing priorities of economic, environmental and social factors that influence the sustainability of doing business (Elkington & Rowlands 1999; Johnson & Nica 2021; Wallace & Lăzăroiu 2021). It embraces the spirit of sustainable development with a forward thinking approach to sustainability that can be achieved through progressive transformation of the economy and society for the upcoming and future generations (Scuri et al., 2022). Furthermore, consumers are increasingly becoming more conscious of sustainability when making their purchasing decisions and they are therefore more likely to buy from an organisation or brand that sells ethical and clean products (Grădinaru et al., 2022). It is therefore in the interest of small manufacturing enterprises to invest in making their business operations sustainable in order to have a chance to compete in the business world. In view of this, the triple bottom line framework becomes an important instrument in achieving this goal. Yet still, the TBL framework is a widely accepted by many organisations as it is useful in helping them to conduct sustainable business practices through incorporating economic, social and environmental performance metrics (Goel 2010; Garcia et al., 2016 and Joyce & Paquin, 2016).

The economic pillar is more than just the profitability of the organisation but also includes human capital, accountability and innovativeness that helps to keep the organisation competitive in the long run (Elkington & Rowlands, 1999). Mihăilă & Branişte (2021) and Bruckmeier (2020) are of the opinion that sustainable economic performance means that organisations act in a responsible manner by taking into consideration how their actions impact the society and the environment at large. This is likely to lead

organisations to achieve win-win scenarios in which they can achieve positive economic outcomes whilst preserving the environment (Porter & Kramer, 2011; Willard, 2012 and Nishitani & Kokubu, 2020). In view of this, innovative SMEs was conducting sustainable business practices are more likely to outlast those who do not.

The social pillar has been neglected for several years due to organisations focusing more on the economic pillar (Eizenberg & Jabareen, 2017; Lourenço & Júnior 2021; Hereu-Morales & Valderrama, 2022). However, the social pillar looks into what the organisation are doing for its stakeholders which may include but not limited to neighbouring communities, employees and costumers (Grădinaru et al., 2022). It is therefore more related to the political, social and ethical issues that influence the operations of the organisation (Elkington & Rowlands, 1999). Moreover, the social pillar seeks to achieve social justice in the framework of health and safety rules, human rights and dignity and the development of social and human capital in an effort to reduce social sustainability (Eizenberg & Jabareen, 2017 and Nursimloo, Ramdhony & Mooneeapen, 2020). However, Schönborn et al., (2019) points that many organisation including SMEs do not have a proactive corporate social sustainability culture and/or strategies in place to address the need for social sustainability.

The environmental pillar looks into how the activities of an organisation is impacting the environment. According to Elkington & Rowlands (1999) and Vătămănescu et al., (2021), preserving the natural capital is an important thing that each and every organisation should endeavour to do to ensure continuance of human survival. In this regard, all organisations including small manufacturing enterprises should utilise natural resources responsibly and should ensure that their activities protect the environment and its ecosystem such that future generations can experience quality of life (Grădinaru et al., 2022).

In the context of small manufacturing enterprises in South Africa and the KwaZulu-Natal province, the social pillar of the TBL looks into whether these small manufacturing enterprises are operating in an equitable and socially responsible manner in order to meet their organisational goals. In light of this, the social dimension examines and assesses whether the workplace culture, labour practices and human resources management strategies, utilised by small manufacturing enterprises in the KwaZulu-Natal province, prioritise the well-being and interests of the employees. On the other hand, the environmental pillar of the TBL looks into whether small manufacturing enterprises in the KwaZulu-Natal province are conducting their business in a manner that preserves and protects the environment from the devasting impact of climate change and also in a manner that reduces pollution and environmental degradation. In this regard, the environmental pillar helps to reposition the organisational strategies of these small manufacturing enterprises to be aligned with environmental stewardship that leads to a healthier living environments and long-term sustainable growth. The economic pillar of the TBL however redefines the traditional view of profit maximisation even at the expense of people and the planet to a more equitable, ethical and inclusive modern view. It therefore emphasises that profitability can still be achieved in

harmony with ethical and sustainable practices as these can also lead to enhanced operational efficiency and effectiveness (Nichols et al., 2023).

Considering this, it would be valuable to examine the influence of the economic, environmental, and social aspects on the sustainability and expansion of small manufacturing enterprises in the manufacturing sector of South Africa, specifically in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. Additionally, the adoption of the TBL holistic approach by small manufacturing enterprises in the KwaZulu-Natal province, which encompasses considerations for people, planet, and profit, has the potential to transform South African small manufacturing enterprises. This shift could challenge the perception that small manufacturing enterprises neglect corporate social responsibility, positioning them as entities capable of promoting sustainable and inclusive growth comparable to larger multinational organizations. Ultimately, this study aims to demonstrate that the TBL is not merely a theoretical framework but a practical framework applicable to the small manufacturing enterprises industry, facilitating successful implementation for sustainable development and growth. In this regard, it is important to conduct this study because South African small manufacturing enterprises are significant contributors to the economy yet face high failure rates. Limited literature addresses their sustainability challenges, especially regarding the TBL framework, which evaluates economic, environmental, and social impacts. Implementing the TBL could enhance small manufacturing enterprises sustainability and competitiveness, aligning with global trends toward responsible business practices.

Theoretical Framework

There is general mixed feelings about the contribution that SMEs bring to the three dimensions of sustainable development (i.e., economic, environmental and social) that are outlined by the TBL (Rishi, Jauhari & Joshi, 2015). However, the importance of SMEs in the development of economic has been widely acknowledged and the future of developing countries including South Africa largely depends on them (Asamoah, 2014 and Masocha & Fatoki, 2018). In this regard, the sustainability of SMEs has gained attention and is attracting more research interest. Yet still, the trade barriers that over the years have traditionally protected small manufacturing enterprises from the effect of globalisation are no longer there. In view of this, small manufacturing enterprises are forced to become more efficient and effective in their operations so as to be able to compete locally and internationally. Firms that conduct sustainable business practices in this modern marketplace tend to benefit from enhanced brand recognition and improved competitive edge (Sy, 2016 & Masocha 2018). As a result, the performance of a firm is no longer determined from the economic perspective alone but also from the environmental and social perspective as well. In light of this, financial and non-financial measures shall be utilised to measure firm performance in the context of the TBL. In the past, firm performance largely centred on satisfying the needs of shareholders through increasing the economic value of the firm but now there is a need to

incorporate the satisfaction of various stakeholders of firm such as the customers, employees, suppliers and society in the determination of firm performance (Masocha 2019).

Justification of the Study

This study is significant in several ways. Firstly, the research has the potential to contribute to the body of knowledge of sustainable business practices of small manufacturing enterprises. Current literature is predominantly from the developed markets (Depken and Zeman 2018; Liang *et al.* 2018; Muñoz-Pascual, Curado and Galende 2019; Jayashree *et al.* 2021; Edeigba and Arasanmi 2022; Hilman *et al.* 2023). This research will be conducted with the aim to add value regarding highlighting new debates in the discourse of sustainability of SMEs, particularly in the manufacturing sectors of KZN in South Africa. Secondly, the findings might highlight on how to improve the operationalisation of manufacturing SMEs in South Africa. Thirdly, the study might provide insights in the extent to which TBL framework is used as a tool to measure sustainability of manufacturing SMEs, to raise lessons on how to avert manufacturing SMEs' failures and enable decision makers and practitioners to measure their sustainability. Lastly, this study may generate important insights on the concept of sustainability from the context of SMEs in the manufacturing industry which may be useful to management personnel and policymakers.

Methods and Data

The study used the stratified probability sampling method to select small manufacturing enterprises from the population that participated in this study. Firstly, the sample was divided into four strata based on four manufacturing clusters which are: i) chemical manufacturing stratum, ii) clothing and textiles manufacturing stratum, iii) furniture manufacturing stratum and iv) automotive manufacturing stratum (Globa Africa Network, 2023). Lastly, from each of these four strata small manufacturing enterprises was selected using simple random sampling so as to give a diversified overall sample selection. Consequently, all small manufacturing enterprises within a particular stratum would have an equal chance of being selected. Moreover, the database for the small manufacturing enterprises was obtained from the Economic Development Programme Department within the eThekwini Municipality.

The population size used in the sample size calculation was estimated specifically for the KwaZulu-Natal province, focusing on various manufacturing sectors within this province. The population size of 1050 encompasses manufacturing establishments across different sectors in KwaZulu-Natal, including chemical manufacturing, clothing and textiles manufacturing, furniture manufacturing, and automotive manufacturing. This study's sample size was calculated, and the study resulted in 450 sample size from a target population of 1050 from various small manufacturing enterprises across KwaZulu-Natal under the Durban Chamber of Commerce and Industry NPC. Nonetheless, in the context of the desired total

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sample size of 450 participants, the actual response rate was approximately 84.4% (380/450). This exceeded the 80% threshold considered acceptable in quantitative research.

Data were collected using self-administered questionnaires distributed to SME managers and owners in the manufacturing sector of KwaZulu Natal. The researcher provided the Google form link of an online questionnaire, providing ease of access and completion. The questionnaire assessed various constructs, including attitudes towards the TBL concept, opportunities and challenges, TBL reporting importance, critical success factors in TBL implementation and perceived TBL adoption benefits. SPSS version 29.0 was used for analyzing the data, after it was entered into an EXCELTM spreadsheet. This study used descriptive statistical analysis, which included cross-tabulations, graphs, tables, and figures, to analyze the data collected from the respondents. The ethical considerations include voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, potential for harm, and results communication (Babbie, 2017). This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Respondents received all the information needed to understand the study. Respondents were requested to sign the informed consent form, which ensured voluntary participation. Johnston (2017) defines data processing as the process of transforming raw data into meaningful information. Brink, Van Der Walt, & Van Rensburg (2012) argue that the choice of questionnaire administration is crucial to the overall success of the study. Gatekeepers' permission from the Durban Chamber of Commerce and Industry NPC to collect data from SMEs under this chamber.

Results

This section explores the barriers and potential benefits faced by SMEs in KwaZulu-Natal when implementing the TBL framework. It delves into issues such as limited resources, stakeholder resistance, and regulatory complexities, while also highlighting opportunities like improved resilience, access to funding, and enhanced sustainability practices. This dual perspective provides a comprehensive understanding of how SMEs can navigate the adoption of the TBL framework to achieve sustainable growth. This section highlights key obstacles such as limited awareness, financial constraints, stakeholder resistance, and regulatory complexities. Understanding these challenges is critical for identifying strategies to support SMEs in integrating TBL principles into their operations effectively.

The table below summarises the scoring patterns.

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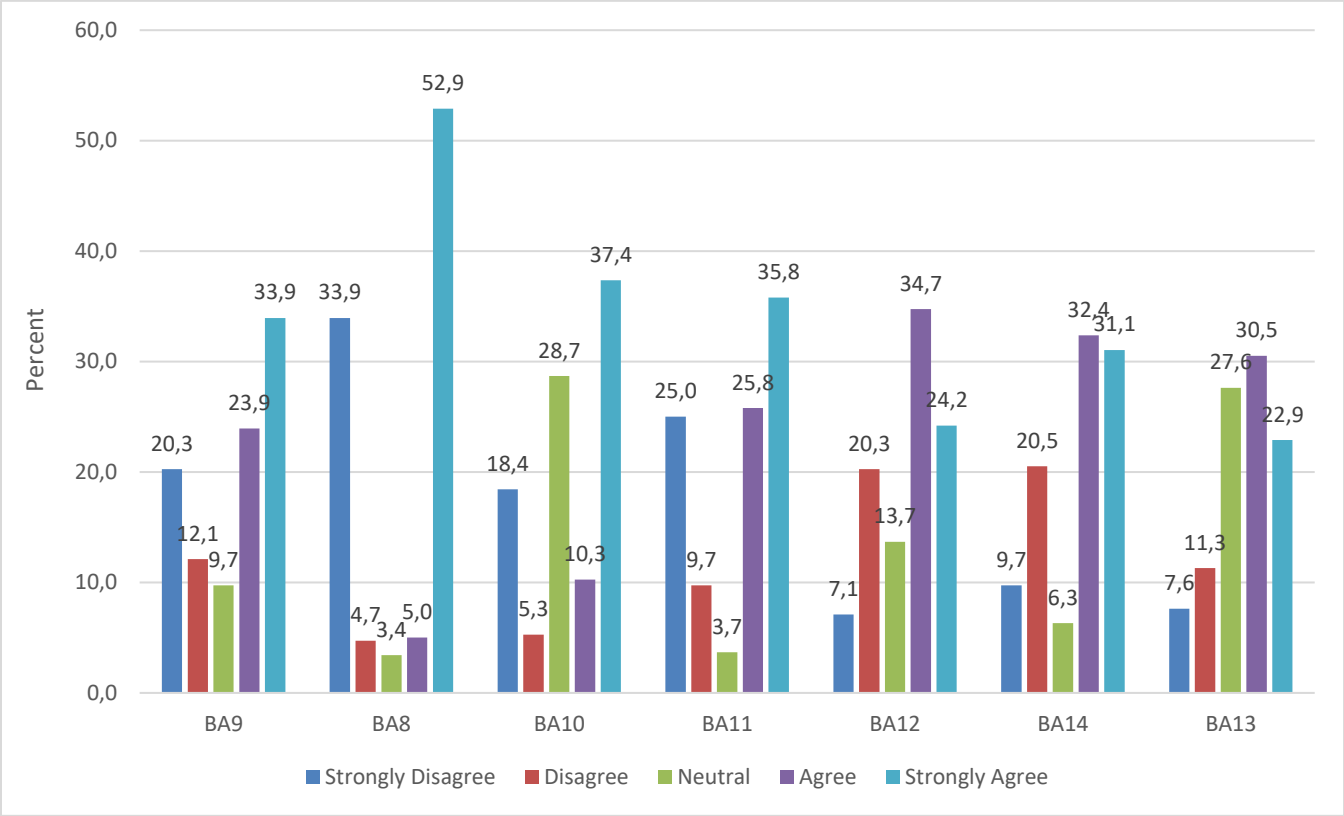
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		Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral		Agree		Strongly Agree		Chi Square p-value
		Count	Row N	Count	Row N	Count	Row N	Count	Row N	Count	Row N	
Limited awareness about TBL principles hinders their adoption among SMEs	BA9	77	20.3%	46	12.1%	37	9.7%	91	23.9%	129	33.9%	< 0.001
Implementing TBL initiatives poses financial burdens on SMEs	BA8	129	33.9%	18	4.7%	13	3.4%	19	5.0%	201	52.9%	< 0.001
Resistance from stakeholders (employees, suppliers, etc) impedes the integration of TBL practices	BA10	70	18.4%	20	5.3%	109	28.7%	39	10.3%	142	37.4%	< 0.001
Insufficient expertise in sustainability management poses challenges to implementing TBL in SMEs	BA11	95	25.0%	37	9.7%	14	3.7%	98	25.8%	136	35.8%	< 0.001
Limited access to sustainable technologies inhibits the adoption of TBL practices	BA12	27	7.1%	77	20.3%	52	13.7%	132	34.7%	92	24.2%	< 0.001
Balancing short-term profitability with long-term sustainability goals is challenging for SMEs under the TBL framework	BA14	37	9.7%	78	20.5%	24	6.3%	123	32.4%	118	31.1%	< 0.001
Regulatory complexities make it difficult for SMEs to comply with TBL requirements	BA13	29	7.6%	43	11.3%	105	27.6%	116	30.5%	87	22.9%	< 0.001

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The patterns emerging from the analysis reveal three key themes aligned with the factor analysis results:

Component 1: **Awareness, Financial, and Stakeholder Barriers**

- A significant portion of respondents agree or strongly agree that limited awareness about TBL principles (57.8%) and financial burdens of TBL initiatives (52.9%) hinder adoption, highlighting the need for increased education and financial support.
- Stakeholder resistance also poses challenges, with 47.7% of respondents acknowledging its impact, indicating the importance of fostering collaboration and buy-in from employees and suppliers.

Component 2: **Skills and Technology Limitations**

- The lack of expertise in sustainability management (61.6% agree/strongly agree) and limited access to sustainable technologies (58.9% agree/strongly agree) were identified as major barriers. These findings underscore the importance of providing training and technological resources to SMEs.

Component 3: **Profitability and Compliance Constraints**

- Over half of respondents report that balancing short-term profitability with long-term sustainability goals (63.5% agree/strongly agree) and regulatory complexities (53.4% agree/strongly agree) are significant challenges. This highlights the need for clearer

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regulations and support mechanisms to help SMEs navigate compliance requirements effectively.

The chi-square p-values (< 0.001**)** across all variables confirm that the observed patterns are statistically significant, reinforcing the reliability of these findings. This analysis demonstrates the multifaceted nature of challenges SMEs face in adopting the TBL framework and emphasises the need for targeted interventions to address these barriers.

Discussion

The empirical findings from this study explain the complex and interconnected challenges encountered by SMEs in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, in their pursuit of sustainability through the adoption of the TBL framework. The analysis reveals a pronounced tension between the theoretical appeal of TBL and its practical implementation within the resource-constrained environments typical of emerging economies. The discussion is structured around three interrelated themes derived from both the factor analysis and response patterns, each offering insights into the prevailing dynamics influencing sustainability transitions among SMEs.

Component 1: Awareness, Financial, and Stakeholder Barriers

The data strongly suggest that limited awareness of TBL principles significantly hinders their adoption. With nearly 58% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with this sentiment, it is evident that many SME operators may lack foundational knowledge regarding the environmental, social, and economic pillars of sustainability. This knowledge gap poses a fundamental obstacle, as the success of TBL integration is contingent upon a sound understanding of its core tenets. This aligns with existing scholarship that argues for the centrality of awareness and capacity-building in facilitating sustainable business practices in developing contexts (Santos & Moreira, 2023).

Financial constraints emerged as an even more pressing barrier, with over half of the respondents (52.9%) acknowledging the significant cost implications associated with implementing TBL initiatives. This finding is particularly salient within the South African context, where small enterprises often operate under conditions of limited capital and constrained access to financial instruments. These constraints are exacerbated by systemic challenges such as market volatility, limited state support, and inconsistent policy environments. Thus, while sustainability may be conceptually embraced, the material capacity to actualise such ambitions remains largely aspirational for many SMEs in KwaZulu-Natal.

Stakeholder resistance, particularly from employees and suppliers, further complicates implementation efforts. Approximately 47.7% of respondents identified this factor as a considerable impediment. Resistance may stem from a lack of understanding, entrenched operational cultures, or perceived threats to existing routines and profitability. These findings reinforce the necessity of stakeholder engagement strategies that not only inform but also empower all parties involved in the value chain, fostering collective ownership of sustainability transitions.

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Component 2: Skills and Technological Limitations

The integration of sustainability practices also appears to be significantly undermined by a deficit in technical skills and access to enabling technologies. An overwhelming 61.6% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that a lack of expertise in sustainability management presented a serious obstacle. This shortfall is likely reflective of broader systemic issues within the education and training ecosystems in South Africa, where environmental and sustainability competencies are still emergent within vocational and entrepreneurial training curricula.

Moreover, limited access to sustainable technologies was cited by 58.9% of respondents as a key constraint. In the manufacturing sector, where innovation and equipment upgrades are essential to environmental efficiency, the absence of affordable, scalable technologies curtails the practical feasibility of TBL adoption. This technological lag not only stifles potential gains in energy efficiency and resource use but also reduces the competitiveness of SMEs operating in increasingly sustainability-conscious markets.

Component 3: Profitability and Compliance Constraints

The balancing act between short-term profitability and long-term sustainability goals was a recurring concern among participants, with 63.5% acknowledging this tension. SMEs, by their very nature, are under constant pressure to maintain cash flow and financial viability. As such, initiatives that do not yield immediate returns are often deprioritised. This pragmatic orientation may limit investments in social and environmental dimensions of TBL, even when such investments are known to generate long-term value. The challenge, then, is to develop models that demonstrate how sustainability can be profitably integrated into core business functions without compromising immediate operational imperatives.

Regulatory complexity also emerged as a significant barrier, as reported by 53.4% of respondents. Many SMEs perceive regulatory requirements as ambiguous, burdensome, and not tailored to the realities of small-scale enterprises. This finding echoes broader critiques of regulatory frameworks in South Africa, which often lack coherence and fail to provide SMEs with the necessary guidance, incentives, and enforcement consistency. Simplified, sector-specific regulatory guidance and enhanced communication between regulators and small business owners may alleviate this burden and facilitate greater compliance.

Statistical Significance and Implications

The statistical robustness of these findings is underscored by chi-square tests yielding p-values below 0.001 across all examined variables. These results confirm the non-randomness of the observed associations and lend empirical weight to the thematic interpretations. The patterns observed are not merely anecdotal but reflect systematic challenges faced by SMEs operating within the unique socio-economic landscape of KwaZulu-Natal.

Taken together, the findings suggest that while the TBL framework offers a promising pathway toward sustainable growth, its implementation within small manufacturing enterprises in emerging economies requires a deliberate, context-sensitive approach. Capacity-building, financial support mechanisms, stakeholder alignment, regulatory reform, and technological facilitation must be simultaneously pursued to create an ecosystem conducive to sustainability.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the extent to which elements of the TBL influence sustainability and growth among small manufacturing enterprises in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Drawing from empirical data, it is evident that while the conceptual value of the TBL framework is widely acknowledged, its practical application within the SME landscape is riddled with multifaceted challenges. The findings bring to the fore critical barriers, ranging from limited awareness and financial constraints to stakeholder resistance, skills shortages, and regulatory burdens, that collectively hinder the successful adoption of TBL practices. Notably, the study confirms that many small enterprises in emerging economies like South Africa remain trapped in a cycle of short-term survival, making it difficult for them to prioritise long-term sustainability objectives. Despite this, there is a growing recognition among SME operators of the strategic relevance of environmental and social considerations, especially as global supply chains and consumer preferences continue to shift toward sustainable standards. The research also reinforces the importance of context-sensitive interventions. Generic policy prescriptions may prove inadequate unless grounded in the lived realities of small business operators who navigate resource constraints daily. To this end, tailored support mechanisms, such as subsidised access to sustainable technologies, targeted training on sustainability management, simplified regulatory frameworks, and inclusive stakeholder engagement platforms, are essential. In conclusion, the study contributes valuable insights into the systemic obstacles confronting SMEs in the sustainability transition. More importantly, it offers a foundation upon which policymakers, development agencies, and industry stakeholders can build responsive strategies aimed at fostering not just the survival, but the sustainable growth of small enterprises. The ultimate implication is clear: for TBL principles to take root and flourish in the SME sector of emerging economies, structural reforms, capacity-building initiatives, and collaborative action are not optional, they are imperative.

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