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Sustainability through Branding

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ABSTRACT

The current study explores and understands sustainability and branding strategies in the food industry. Using semi-structured interviews, data were collected from five managers of different restaurants located in Peshawar, all of which are actively engaged in sustainability initiatives. The triple-bottom-line theory is used as the theoretical underpinning for this study. Themes were developed from patterns that emerged from the qualitative data, thus adding knowledge to the field of strategic management in high-pressure, consumer-facing industries. The findings have practical insights for integrating sustainability with brand strategy.

Keywords*: sustainability, green-minded, branding strategies, qualitative study, restaurant industry*

INTRODUCTION

The current study has made an effort to bridge the gap by integrating the sustainable practices into the food businesses' core operations, green marketing, and branding narratives. The result of this research is strengthening the brand image of the restaurant, attracting a pool of environmentally sensitive customers, and also minimizing the operational cost by using resource optimization.

The food sector is facing a major challenge for integrating sustainability into daily operations because consumers are becoming more conscious of environmental hazards and prefer to support eco-friendly businesses (Kim & Hall, 2020; De Moraes & Pinto, 2024). The authors confirm a complex relationship between sustainable practices and branding strategy. Sustainability has moved from a specialized area of an important element to strategic management. Espinoza et al. (2024) have emphasized the integration of economic, environmental, and social sustainability practices into the daily operations of restaurants and branding for competitive advantage and to satisfy stakeholder demand. The current study examines how managers effectively convey these initiatives and establish a connection between a restaurant's financial achievement and its adoption of sustainable practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Environmental Sustainability in the Restaurant Industry

Environmental sustainability in this industry covers efforts like reducing waste, conserving resources, and minimizing the overall negative impact of the restaurant industry on the environment. Studying sustainability in this industry relates to impacting the earth as minimally as possible through responsible food consumption (Cantele & Cassia, 2020). Creating strategies

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for efficient food preparation and reduction of food waste can aid in minimizing such negative effects (Principato et al., 2018). It is evident that the food industry is one of the main contributors to environmental degradation, use of water resources, and significant greenhouse gas emissions. According to the FAO report (2020), the food industry is responsible for one quarter of the entire greenhouse gas emissions. This requires urgent attention for a sustainable solution, lower food wastage, conservation of scarce resources, and preservation of environmental sustainability in the restaurant industry.

Social Sustainability in the Restaurant Industry

The restaurants are key players in the communities by taking multiple initiatives, such as sourcing ingredients from local suppliers, taking part in and supporting different community events, and taking part in charitable events (Chen et al., 2019). These initiatives help the restaurant to develop a strong bond with the local communities, which provides impetus to social cohesion (Toshmirzaev et al., 2022). The restaurants also play a role in promoting healthy eating habits by offering nutritious and inexpensive food menus and making partnerships with food suppliers and multiple community organizations to implement actions for reducing food waste (Kim & Hwang, 2021).

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) plays a vital role in the business strategy of the restaurant industry by focusing on social issues, ensuring ethical business conduct, and promoting community engagement (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2016). It is evident that consumers are more willing to pay more for food and beverages in socially responsible restaurants, which engage in CSR activities (Arli et al., 2018). Restaurants should therefore invest in CSR to compete in the socially conscious marketplace to continue their sustainability.

Economic Sustainability in the Restaurant Industry

Restaurants should adopt sustainable economic practices to remain competitive, adapt to the market dynamics, and achieve long-term success in the highly competitive restaurant industry (Ko, 2019). There are multiple factors that impact the financial performance of the restaurants, such as efficient cost management, pricing strategies, revenue diversification, and operational efficiency (Chen & Woods, 2019). There are several cost-cutting measures through which efficiency can be increased, such as streamlining the supply chain processes, lean management practices, and the adoption and implementation of energy-saving measures (Zhang et al., 2021).

Restaurants are trying to adopt various practices such as local sourcing, waste reduction, packaging optimization, and transportation efficiency to improve sustainability practices throughout their supply chains (Chen & Lin, 2021). There is a significant impact of government policies and industry regulations on the economic sustainability of the restaurant industry.

Importance of Branding in the Restaurant Industry

Branding is a key pillar for any business, as it captures consumer perception regarding a product or service. Recent works highlight brand storytelling and experiential marketing in creating memorable dining experiences (Hassan et al., 2023). The attention of consumers is more towards environmental issues, and consumers expect that food and restaurant brands must adopt sustainable practices. Kumar and Paul (2020) highlighted the consumers' perception and

gave more attention to sustainable brands as more trustworthy, which gives an edge to sustainable brands, and ultimately, the purchase willingness of the consumer is high.

Intersection of Sustainability and Branding Strategies

Businesses can better position themselves in the market by adopting sustainable practices and incorporating them in their branding strategies. Businesses that effectively communicate their sustainability efforts using different strategies like storytelling, eco-labeling, and digital platforms can enhance their brand reputation and customer loyalty (Kim & Han, 2023). Sustainable strategies have a close association with product innovation and development for eco-friendly and socially responsible outcomes. Literature confirms the importance of engaging all stakeholders in sustainability efforts to help build a brand's resilience and long-term value (Dangelico & Pujari, 2023).

Barriers for Sustainability in the Restaurant Industry

One of the major threats to restaurants for smooth and effective implementation of sustainable practices is the challenge of supply chain management. According to Chen et al. (2021), the government can be a critical player in this game by regulating the company's sustainability activities. The non-existent or underdeveloped waste management infrastructure and recycling processes have posed a serious threat to sustainable practices.

Triple-Bottom-Line (TBL) Theory

The TBL theory proposes branding to be a deliberate representation of a firm’s overall commitment to the principles of TBL rather than just a marketing tool. The theory assumes that organizations need to have initiatives in place for their corporate social, environmental, and financial sustainability (Elkington, 1994).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Approach

A qualitative design was used for this study to explore and investigate the restaurants' integration of sustainability into their branding strategies. This design was particularly suitable to identify key challenges facing the restaurants in adopting sustainable practices.

Data Collection Methods

Sample

Participants were carefully selected using purposeful sampling technique. The sample comprised five managers and owners from five different leading restaurants located in Peshawar, Pakistan. The selection criteria for the participants were based on individuals who were actively involved in management activities and who were either implementing or planning to implement sustainability initiatives within their restaurants. This approach was used for collection of rich data that directly addressed the research objectives**.**

For a comprehensive analysis, the study has employed a dual method of data collection. The primary data was collected from restaurant managers via semi-structured interviews. Data were also collected from secondary sources, such as published sustainability reports, marketing materials, and companies' official websites. Secondary data was needed to validate the findings of primary data.

Expert sampling was used to collect data from information-rich cases. The selection of participants was based on their degree of involvement in management activities and responsibilities in sustainability initiatives within their companies. This sampling technique ensured that the data was sought from those who have firsthand knowledge of adopting and implementing sustainability practices.

Ethical Considerations

Several ethical protocols were followed to protect the participants and ensure the integrity of the research. At the beginning of the interview, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study and data collection. Verbal consent was sought from all participants. The participants were further informed about their right to withdraw from the interview at any time.

Although the findings explicitly reveal the names of the restaurants, this was done with the permission of the managers/participants. The participants were provided the opportunity to review their interview transcripts to ensure conformability in the analysis. Last but not least, the proprietary information or commercially sensitive information was safely guarded.

Analysis and Findings

Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed using a six-step thematic analysis approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This framework provides a systemic analysis yielding a robust interpretation of the data:

All interviews were audio recordings and transcribed verbatim. The researchers read the transcripts multiple times to find patterns.

All the transcripts were systematically coded. Segments of the data that had relevance with the research questions were carefully coded. For example, phrases related to "cost of solar panels" or "customer preferences for eco-friendly packaging" were coded as 'High Initial Cost' and 'Customer Eco-Awareness.'

This was followed by organizing initial codes into potential themes based on some sort of patterns. For example, codes like 'High Initial Cost' and 'Supplier Inconsistency' were grouped under a broader theme of 'Hurdles in Implementation.'

The themes generated were later reviewed and refined by continuously comparing them with the coded data extracts to ensure credibility.

Three themes emerged from the analysis: (1) Sustainable practices in Peshawar restaurants: environmental, social, and economic; (2) Opportunities and challenges in using sustainable practices; and (3) Sustainability initiatives and branding strategies in harmony.

Finally, the findings were converted into a narrative that was supported by excerpts from the interviews. The findings were organized around the TBL framework.

1. Sustainable Practices in Peshawar Restaurants: Environmental, Social, and Economic

Sustainability conceptualization. The participants frequently talked about the fundamental role of sustainability role in business operations. Managers acknowledge the importance of integration sustainability as an integrated strategy that covers social efforts, environmental preservation, and economic viability rather than as a stand-alone strategy.

***Practices for environmental sustainability*.** Although sustainability practices vary in scope and level, however most restaurants are committed to environmental initiatives of lower carbon emissions. KFC valued optimization of supply chain and energy-efficient equipment. McDonald's is committed to achieve zero carbon emissions by 2050 and have plans of recycling packaging materials. Mr. Cod also emphasized the company's devotion to environmentally friendly practices, such as benchmarking waste management systems and sustainable seafood sourcing. Additionally, the Chief restaurant reported active conservation of resources and switching to eco-friendly packaging.

***Practices of social sustainability*.** The focus of social sustainability initiatives was on community involvement, customer satisfaction, and high-quality service. To enhance brand image through customer satisfaction, Cheezius Restaurant placed a strong emphasis on using premium ingredients and maintaining quality standards in preparing meals. However, with only one female employee across 15 branches, gender imbalance was quite evident. The respondents attributed this discrepancy to socio-cultural norms rather than a company's hiring policy.

Practices of economic sustainability. Restaurants are using sustainability as an economic tool to improve customer loyalty and value proposition. Discount packages and family-friendly prices are used by KFC and others to boost sales. A number of restaurants participated in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs: R Rancher's weekly donates food to the needy, and one international brand incorporates donation options into its payment systems. McDonald's makes a clear connection between sustainability and premium pricing, acknowledging that consumers value eco-friendly services, which enhances the company's brand image.

2. Opportunities and Challenges in Using Sustainable Practices

A number of opportunities were identified by managers as a result of adopting sustainability initiatives, which include enhanced brand image, customer attraction and retention, regulatory compliance, and cost reduction through waste management and solar energy efficiencies. However, some challenges also surfaced, such as high upfront costs, particularly for the adoption of technologies like solar panels, and the continuing costs related to sustainable sourcing and staff training. Moreover, some operational challenges were also frequently reported, such as preserving consistency and employees' resistance to change.

Barriers to Implementation

a. *Restrictions in the Supply Chain.* The region's inadequate supply chain infrastructure was a key obstacle. McDonald's and Mr. Cod both mentioned the challenge of consistently finding sustainable ingredients. McDonald's adopted an initiative by offering organic fries but was limited in its operations due to inadequate suppliers in the region, which shows the impact of infrastructure limitations on the sustainability goals of restaurants.

b. *Training and Engagement.* The main issues that were identified by the respondents were resistance to change and lack of training. The managers of both Mr. Cod and Cheezius narrated resistance from employees to adopt new waste management procedures. It was further noted by the participants that strong leadership is the key to switching from traditional methods to sustainable practices.

c. *Financial and Technological Obstacles.* Technologies that are energy efficient are necessary for sustainability, but these technologies are expensive, thus adding to upfront costs. The manager of Mr. Cod accepted the long-term benefits of these investments, but their financial health was creating problems for their implementation. Technological adoption was also hindered by the staff's inadequate know-how of the latest tools and techniques.

3. Sustainability Initiatives and Branding Strategies in Harmony

Restaurants are keen to adopt strategies that could reinforce their brand image through sustainability. Cheezius evaluated the effectiveness of its sustainability initiatives by gauging their sales metrics, customer satisfaction, and sentiment analysis scores. The respondents agreed to the vital role of consistency in communication across menus, marketing collateral, and community involvement for transactions towards sustainable practices. McDonald used customer endorsements and storytelling to inform people about their sustainability initiatives and humanize them. The restaurants believe in maintaining credibility through transparency and avoiding greenwashing.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study portray the integration of sustainable initiatives with their branding strategies by restaurants in Peshawar. This is an opportunity for restaurants to make a positive impact on the environment and their customers while struggling with the challenges of operational and financial difficulties. The businesses are making an effort to make sustainability a part of their overall strategy that covers all three aspects: social, environmental, and economic. To achieve their objectives, restaurants know the importance of communication to their customers about their sustainability initiatives. These restaurants are utilizing the platforms of social media, the company's newsletters, and internal communication channels to ensure consistent messages to the people about their sustainability narratives and practices. Some restaurants charge premium products for value proposition to their customers. This strategy may have some quick outcomes; however, it can raise questions about economic viability in the long term. Customers usually opt for restaurants that engage in environmentally friendly practices. The CHAMPS framework (Cleanliness, Hospitality, Accuracy, Maintenance, Product quality, and Speed) of service) can help restaurants meet their sustainability efforts successfully.

To measure the success of the integration and alignment of sustainability initiatives with their branding strategies, restaurants can resort to regular customer feedback. Restaurants can also use social media monitoring, trends, and sentiment analysis. Updating menu options and examination of customers' responses are also vital to ensure alignment with branding strategies. In short, integrating sustainability and branding is a process that requires continuous adaptation. Sincere operational practices are the basis for narratives that will have a sound impact on strategic and economic outcomes.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings have both theoretical and practical implications. The findings from our empirical data from an emerging market highlight the importance of the integration of branding strategies with sustainability practices. It shows the importance of the TBL framework for restaurant businesses to boost their brand image. The findings also identified a gap in the presence of indigenous theories that can better capture the local context for better comprehension of the challenges and adoption of sustainability narratives. Moreover, effective leadership, effective communication channels, qualified staff, and strong measurement systems are all foundations of achieving sustainability objectives. A participative approach can further facilitate this process.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that sustainability practices are no longer optional but mandatory for the survival of restaurants. The implementation of sustainable practices is not without challenges and requires operational excellence, economic viability, and effective communication channels. Sustainability is a mixed bag of opportunities and costs. Restaurants must utilize digital technology to keep themselves updated about the latest developments to convert marketing slogans into a core value that guarantees a sustained competitive edge in an ever more aware market.

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