GOVERNMENT MODERATING ROLE ON ECO-FRIENDLY FOOD SMES DEVELOPMENT: CONSUMERS PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the influence of government assistance on green growth of SMEs in the food sector in terms of production, price, and promotion. The research focuses on customers' attitudes toward green products in the food sector and fills a gap in the literature on green development implementation and consumer attitudes. In this regard, the study provides a research model to examine the link between production, pricing, and promotion, as well as sustainable development in the presence of government influence. The research approach was tested only by evaluating research hypotheses using data acquired from customers in Dubai. Unfortunately, time constraints and a small sample size made applying data validity and reliability methodologies challenging. The analysis's findings are reported. Several implications are examined. Despite the limitations, this study adds to the literature and provides useful data that highlight the significance of SMEs empowerment as a fundamental driver of green economic growth. It also improves our understanding of how consumers perceive the quality and value of green food production in comparison to their expectations of actual products in terms of attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Keywords: Government support, green products, green pricing, green marketing, green economic development.

INTRODUCTION

Governments all across the globe have included sustainability into their policies as a critical component of the future civilization (United Nations, 2015). The necessity to consider the three pillars of sustainability, namely society, economy, and environment, is at the heart of sustainable development. The partnership of social and economic well-being should thus be dependent on a healthy biosphere in which to survive (Strange & Bayley, 2008). Similarly, the UAE has demonstrated a strong commitment to sustainable growth in recent years, achieving 77 on the 2018 Environmental Performance Index (EPI) (Seretny, et al., 2019). The city of Dubai promoted the idea of sustainability, protection, and innovative plans domestically and internationally to gradually drive the economy to be green by encouraging government entities from various sectors such as energy, commodities, and mining to announce initiatives or

projects in the same scope (State of Green Economy, 2016). In terms of food and beverage (F&B), the government of Dubai has initiated and carried out numerous development initiatives to improve the industry, including the establishment of regulatory, policies, and industry bodies, industrial free zones, cities, and a dynamic transportation network that directly and indirectly supports the industrial and manufacturing base (Dubai SME, 2019).

Large, small, and medium-sized businesses are influenced by environmental challenges and hence affected by sustainable development, requiring them to take responsibility for the environment and society through their economic operations and interconnected repercussions (European Union, 2019). Because SMEs have substantial social and environmental implications, changes to their long-term goals should be explored in order to build diverse sustainable behaviors and processes that promote sustainability and green economic growth (Battistella, Cagnina, Cicero, & Preghenella, 2018).

In response to environmental concerns, Dubai has committed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with accomplishments expected by 2030, and has been a significant participant in the annual World Green Economy Summit for several years. The Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Global Initiative Foundation was established to promote the concept of global sustainability (State of Green Economy, 2016). Due to excellent interactions across various government bodies, Dubai has seen a succession of astonishing gains in sustainable development each year. Local firms, on the other hand, continue to struggle to provide sustainable solutions that are in accordance with the social, environmental, and economic obligations of the Triple Bottom Line of Sustainability (Seretny, et al., 2019).

Several food corporations have implemented green initiatives. For example, developing organic food alternatives and healthier options; focusing on removing hazardous ingredients and employing new techniques; using recycled or eco-friendly packaging materials; and using green distribution either through greener means or managing the frequency of traditional delivery. Such companies began to promote the reasoning behind green production using a variety of advertising tactics and social media in order to market the notion of removing hazardous ingredients from their products (Short, Bocken, Padmakshi, & Evans, 2014). Businesses began to incorporate these practices into their business models in order to satisfy the Triple Bottom Line of Sustainability for a green and sustainable economy. However, evolving customer demographics have led in shifts in their tastes and behavior toward food goods (Dubai SME, 2019). The rising demand for healthy and organic food items has compelled manufacturers to launch innovative manufacturing lines, convenience green food, and packaging in order to meet market demand and maintain their competitive edge.

There have been few studies on the impact of government support on green food production development in Dubai. As a result, this article bridges the gap by analyzing the performance of green food items from the consumer's perspective and investigating the impact of government assistance on SMEs' green development difficulties and possibilities. The purpose of this research is to examine the link between environmentally friendly food items, pricing, promotion, and government actions. The study's findings add to our understanding of the influence of a clear government green development strategy on SME production, pricing, and promotion processes in the food sector. These findings will be useful for the Dubai government and SMEs in the food industry in better integrating public and private advantages in terms of sustainability and green economy growth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Green food production, pricing, and promotion are modified versions of standard commercial functions. In addition to economic growth, the major aspect that distinguishes regular business activities from green functions is the inclusion of the value of environmental preservation in terms of production and consumption, social obligations, and building a brighter future for future generations. With this attitude, firms must consider the triple bottom line of sustainability while developing food goods, determining pricing, and designing marketing tactics, which may lead to increased consumer/society involvement and corporate improvement.

Products that are sustainable incorporate environmental, social, and economical considerations from manufacturing to consumption (Caputo, Ducoli, & Clementi , 2014). Greener, less harmful products should please customers in terms of purchase and consumption (Govindan, 2018). Buyers will always be concerned about ethical, high-quality, safe, and healthy manufacturing, as well as credible information and clear social compliance (Becot, Conner, Nelson, Buckwalter, & Erickson, 2014). As a result, the majority of businesses utilize eco-seals, as an indicator badge of environmental and social values, to obtain market credit for their green manufacturing operations (Darnall, 2008). A critical aspect here is to establish a strong value behind each sustainable food product; nevertheless, this is questionable given the availability of several alternatives.

Green products should be priced to include manufacturing and operations costs, financial costs, promotion costs, environmental costs, and social costs (Alvandi, Li, Schönemann, Kara, & Herrmann, 2016). The high prices of sustainable products limit the demand and create an economic interest conflict for manufacturers. Furthermore, high costs create a slew of impediments to the implementation of sustainable manufacturing (Garnett, 2013). While the majority of the papers focus on the discussion of green pricing components and the impact of high green pricing, this study emphasizes the importance of setting eco-friendly product pricing to minimize eco-business failure in maintaining the same level of turnout on their products. The perspective of consumers on this issue will be tested and explored further in the paper.

Green promotion entails advertising, sales promotion, customer promotion, and public relations, all of which necessitate the incorporation of the company's operations and environmental issues through one of the marketing channels (Murphy, 2005). It is not only about spreading good news about environmentally responsible activities (Peattie, 1995). Such long-term promotion and communication must provide information support for a variety of pollution prevention and resource recovery measures (Murphy, 2005). Much work remained to be done in terms of promoting sustainable food items and raising public awareness. Marketers believe they are dealing with a new and tough component that they are unsure how to deal with or capitalize on (Charter, Peattie, Ottman, & Polonsky, 2006). Firms that self-market their green products or build new green brands incur substantial costs, which may explain why many corporations fail to advertise their green goods and are perceived as less trustworthy since their messaging are slanted in favor of the company's perspective (Darnall, 2008). The study's findings seek to demonstrate that a well-structured promotion plan that meets all promotion pillars, focuses on green development, and is supported by government assistance will play a significant role in smoothing the process of green product merger in both domestic and foreign markets.

Government support

Many governments have recognized the problem and implemented various laws to promote green products (Cohen, Cui, & Gao, 2019). According to certain Malaysian views, SMEs developed their manufacturing methods after the government intervened and issued favorable policies (Murad & Thomson, 2011). As a result, government incentive laws are critical for increasing SMEs' commitment to green development (Lin & Ho, 2010). Looking at the function of government intermediation on green goods, pricing, and promotion processes from a controlling perspective is preferable to seeing it as an independent component influencing green development implementation.

Research framework and hypothesized

According to the previous literature analysis, the study framework encompasses green production, price, promotion, and government support. The suggested structure (Figure 1) shows the intersection of government Support with sustainable production, pricing, and promotion.

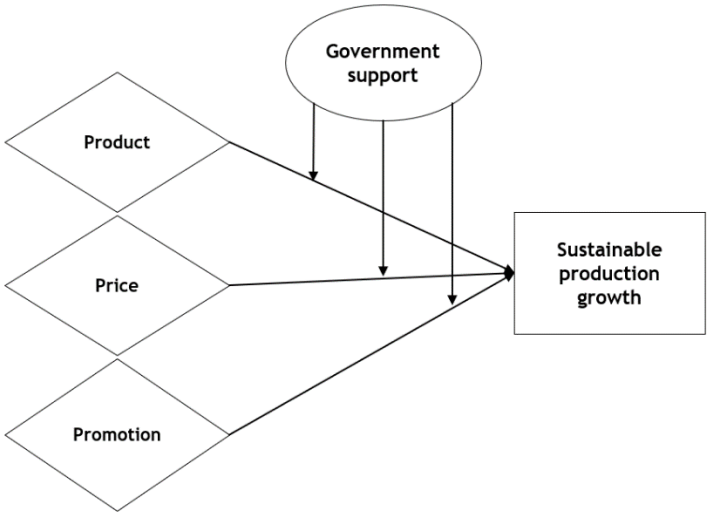

Figure 1- Research framework

3.1 Research questions and hypotheses

This research is aiming to answer the following questions:

RQ 1: Is the implemented production, pricing, and promotion activities by SMEs in the food industry satisfy the three pillar of sustainable development or they are simply conventional?

RQ 2: Does sustainable production growth differ if government support is part of the process or not?

Against the background of RQ2, the hypotheses postulated for this research are as follows.

- *H0*: Government support does not influence green production, pricing, promotion and enhance sustainable production growth
- *H1*: Government support positively influence green production, pricing, promotion and enhance sustainable production growth
    - *H1a*: Government support positively influence green production
    - *H1b*: Government support positively influence green pricing
    - *H1c*: Government support positively influence green promotion

METHODOLOGY

Survey questions are, "closed-ended" questions with ordered choices that make it easier to examine each response and analyze data (Glasow, 2005). Respondents were invited to compare their own ideas to the three independent variables (production, pricing, and promotion) as well as the moderator (government support).

The utilized rating scale is a 5-point Likert-type scale, with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree. The descriptive statistics for 149 items were computed and shown in Table 2. Previous research that employed comparable analytical measures yielded acceptable, trustworthy, and accurate results.

The survey questions are written in English. The phrasing of the questions is consistent with the educational level of the participants, straightforward, and represents just one topic (Glasow, 2005). Google Forms was used to build the survey. E-surveys allow researchers to contact a larger number of possible respondents rapidly and affordably (Reynolds, Woods, & Baker, 2007).

A number of Dubai residents were polled by sending the survey link via email and WhatsApp. For the purposes of this study, persons between the ages of 18 and 55 who live in Dubai are the target group. A standardized electronic questionnaire was distributed to collect data.

Due to time constraints, sample size was established by multiplying the number of questions by 10, therefore 140 completed, reliable and valid responses should be acquired as a minimum number of responses for 14 survey questions. The research sample was designed using convenience sampling (accidental sampling). The author was aware that convenience sampling was likely to be biased and that it was not the greatest way for presenting the population (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2015). However, in Dubai, this was the most appropriate method for data collection (Sohail, 2017).

Table 1 Respondents profile

Demographic	***N= 149***	**%**
Gender		
Male	79	53.0
Female	70	47.0
Age (years)		
18- 24	32	21.5
25- 34	80	53.7
35- 44	33	22.1
45 or above	4	2.7
Educational level		
High School	47	31.5
Bachelor's Degree	62	41.6
Master's Degree	32	21.5
PhD	1	0.7
Other	7	4.7
Monthly Income in Dirhams		
Under 5000	12	8.1
5000- 10,000	9	6.0
10,001- 20,000	57	38.3
20,001- 30,000	51	34.2
Over 30,000	20	13.4

Surrounding people; and their families and friends, work, and university colleagues; and their families and friends were targeted for data collection. Because of the limited time frame, this is the quickest approach to generate a reasonable quantity of answers. A 153 completed questionnaires notification received in Google forms. These completed surveys were then reviewed for inconsistencies in order to improve data accuracy. The data was then cleaned to remove irrelevant replies. The previous approach resulted in the removal of four responses, leaving 149 valid responses. The profile of responders is shown in Table 1.

Respondents profile

According to the demographic profile of respondents, 53 percent were men and the remaining 47 percent were females. In terms of age, the majority of responders (53.7%) are between the ages of 25 and 34. While 22.1 percent of respondents were between the ages of 35 and 44, and 21.5 percent were between the ages of 18 and 24. Only 2.7 percent were beyond the age of 45. When it comes to education, 41.6 percent of respondents have a bachelor's degree and 31.5 percent are undergraduate. The majority of responders earn between Dhs.10,000 and Dhs.20,000 per month. Although the sample size is small for greater generalizability, this sample distribution strives to be representative of Dubai's population.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics

Scale and data description (N= 149)	***Mean***	***SD***
Green product		
Firms produce food products taking into account their impact on the environment.	2.95	1.03
Firms produce good quality green products in term of ingredients, taste and presentation.	2.97	1.03
Firms uses recycled and green packaging for their products.	3.44	1.00
Firms designs products taking into account their impact on your health.	3.38	0.95
Firms produce and develop their food products to meet your satisfaction.	2.99	1.02
Environment friendly food products are easy to find.	2.85	1.04
Green price		
Green products prices are higher compared to non-green alternatives.	4.29	1.13
Firms inform you that they allocate an amount of dirhams in their products' price for society related initiative.	2.74	1.10
I am willing to pay more for green food products.	2.79	1.18
Green promotion		
Firms organize environment friendly food awareness campaigns frequently.	2.10	1.32
Firms provide you special promotions such as discount, coupons, offers when you buy their green products.	2.72	1.01
Government support		
Government support will improve green products production, quality, and safety.	4.19	1.15
Government support will help standardizing green product prices.	4.09	1.25
Government support will help green product producers in their awareness campaigns.	4.13	1.25

Measurement: Mean and Standard Deviation, Scale: 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Prior data analysis, data reliability, and validity are expected to be checked using the validity testing tools available. However, due to sample size, time, and other constraints, this was not viable to accomplish. The replies were evaluated using interrupting data means and standard deviations. The arithmetic means of the observations vary from 2.10 to 4.29. The data distribution was reported by standard deviations ranging from 0.95 to 1.32. This indicates a wide range of responses.

Although green food manufacturers care about using recycled and green packaging, the current green food items do not meet all of consumers' needs in terms of quality, flavor, and

appearance. The related mean values ranged from 2.95 to 3.44. Consumers' also claim that green food products are more difficult to locate compared to non-green alternatives. Green product availability is seen as a critical element influencing customers' decision to purchase environmentally friendly items (Zakowska-Biemans, 2011), and consumers find it challenging to find green products in markets (Pelsmacker, Driesen, & Rayp, 2003).

With a mean score of 4.29, respondents answered that green prices are higher than conventional food product prices. Consumers are dissatisfied with having to pay a premium to consume healthier and cleaner food. The findings on green prices corroborate previous research that looked at the relationship between green product costs and customers' desire to purchase these items. It also established that green product costs have a major influence on customer purchasing behavior (Sharaf & Perumal, 2018). According to (Sohail, 2017), buyers find it hard to accept that higher prices will increase the performance of green products.

Green manufacturers do not consider adopting a well-structured promotion plan according to the responses. The existing promotion strategies are ineffective in advertising product values and advantages, with a mean ranged from 2.10 to 2.72. According to a recent study, green food product producer's communication should prioritizes environmental and social concerns over its financial aspects (Kazibudzki & Trojanowski, 2020).

The arithmetic means and standard deviations were calculated to assess the moderating influence of government intervention on the link between sustainable production growth and green food product, green pricing, and green promotion. H0 proposed that government support has no effect on green production, price, or marketing, and does not promote sustainable production growth. The author rejects the null hypothesis (H0) since the alternative hypothesis (H1) asserts that government assistance influences green production, price, promotion, and sustainable production growth. H1a shows that government involvement is strongly and positively related with increased green food production, with a mean of 4.19. H1b investigated the assumption that government support have a significant impact on the cost of green food products. Green pricing standardization is favorably related with the implementation of government support with a mean of 4.09. H1c proved that government support has the potential to boost sustainable production growth by influencing green promotion. The related data mean is 4.13.

According to the findings, government support and laws foster healthy growth among green food manufacturing in Dubai. Government assistance moderates and strengthens the link between the independent factors (green production, price, and promotion) and the dependent variable (sustainable food production growth). Government assistance might take the form of specified training and workshops, as well as the assignment of specialists who will perform comprehensive studies to examine the entire growth process; and look into the connected elements to build a motivation scheme that can be shared with SMEs to encourage them to embrace environmental protection.

In general, good green food product, pricing, and marketing, in combination with government support, have a beneficial impact on the expansion of the green food market. The existing green food production might be improved further by focusing on food manufacturing techniques. Consumers want food that is healthy, safe, and convenient. As a result, collaboration between the food sector and the scientific community must satisfy consumer needs on a regular basis by creating new opportunities (Lange & Yves, 2003). In response, the following implications were proposed.

The Dubai government might speed the creation and marketing of green food items by encouraging green ideas, technology, and product refurbishment of SMEs in the food industry. Innovation is recognized as one of the most important aspects in improving both national and worldwide market competitiveness (Capitanio, Coppola, & Pascucci, 2010). The enormous effect of innovation in the food business encourages the adoption of new technology and the redesign of manufacturing processes to be more environmentally friendly (Acosta, Coronado, & Romero, 2015). Innovative solutions, whether for a product or a process, improve the firm's capacity to meet consumer expectations in terms of food quality, pricing, and security while adhering to the Triple Bottom Line of Sustainability.

Government policies and laws that promote green food production can play a critical role in environmental improvement. To better build supporting policies, careful consideration of available environmental technologies within the industry is essential. R&D assistance policies might be designed to assist enterprises with insufficient environmental technology to increase the environmental quality of their goods while lowering overall costs. While financial incentives are more efficient in increasing sales and market share for enterprises with better environmental solutions (Cohen, Cui, & Gao, 2019). Important government financial incentives might include tax credits, tax exemptions, and special loans that improve the economic performance of enterprises manufacturing green products (Guan & Yam, 2015).

CONCLUSION

Although this study produced intriguing claims and useful findings, the results should be interpreted with caution due to a number of limitations. Because this is a survey-based study, customer opinions and responses to survey questions may not accurately reflect their real purchasing behavior. Despite that, the study's conclusions are similar to earlier researches. Future researches can include more variables and expand their investigation of factors influencing the green development of food SMEs, such as innovative technological solutions. Researchers might also conduct a thorough examination of additional dimensions, linkages, or moderator effects. Addressing the significance of closing the gaps between SMEs' capacity, consumer demand, governmental policies, and industry growth is an interesting research subject that extends beyond the scope of this article. Consumer attitudes toward green food items require to be researched by including sensory evaluation of a certain product to examine and understand reactions to its qualities. Another topic of study is the impact of employing creativity and innovation in the food sector, particularly for green food items. Creating a theoretical model that improves the performance of SMEs in the food industry is a great chance for researchers to create complete constructs for evaluating potentials and obstacles. Finally, this study demonstrated the critical role of government in implementing efficient green manufacturing processes, establishing convenient green pricing, and improving green marketing tactics. The study also emphasizes primary results that indicate the role of SMEs empowerment as a key driver of green economic growth, and it encourages future research on environmentally friendly food production despite the strong competitiveness of alternative goods.

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