



Ecopreneurship Developments and Their Impact on Export Performance: A Systematic Review of Manufacturing SMEs

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ABSTRACT

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The findings of this paper are based on a PRISMA- guided systematic review of the literature on ecopreneurship and export performance in manufacturing SMEs. Analyzing the accumulated research under the CREATE program published from 2020 to 2023, this review extract's themes that suggest how sustainable business practices enhance exports and competitive- ness. The initial documentation search yielded 1,150 articles and 45 articles for inclusion in the qualitative synthesis according to the PRISMA selection criteria. The findings also indicate that ecopreneurship assists SMEs in gaining international markets, supporting them in meeting high standards of legal require- ments on environmental standards, differentiating their products, and increasing return on revenue. Moreover, solutions devised as part of innovation that embeds sustainability are another consideration that supports the creation of new market spaces. Nevertheless, there were some evident limitations reported by the interviewees as influencing the UK ecopreneurial activities; they include financial constraints and inadequate technical know-how. This review therefore calls for more research on how ecopreneur- ship influences the world's competitiveness and manufacturers' sustainability in the long run.

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1.0 Introduction

In recent decades, ecopreneurship, which refers to entrepreneurship with a strong emphasis on environmental sustainability, has received considerable scholarly attention (Prado et al., 2024). The intersection of economic activity and environmental responsibility has encouraged the development of new business models grounded in the triple bottom line approach: people, planet, and profit (Duran, 2024). Ecopreneurs strive to introduce innovative ideas that meet consumer demands without causing environmental harm, thereby promoting ecological business models as sustainable strategies (Albhirat et al., 2024). This approach is particularly relevant in the manufacturing sector, where production processes have traditionally been associated with environmental risks (Alfarizi & Herdiansyah, 2024).

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play a significant role in the global economy, especially in manufacturing industries (Mondal et al., 2024). SMEs contribute substantially to employment and gross domestic product, although their growth is often constrained by limited access to foreign markets (Joshi, 2024; Rahayu, 2024). Export activities can stimulate SME growth by expanding market reach and improving profit margins (Patra & Lenka, 2024). However, manufacturing SMEs face barriers such as financial limitations, regulatory challenges, product differentiation issues, and intense foreign competition. Ecopreneurship offers a pathway to overcoming these constraints by creating sustainability-driven competitive advantages (Chitaka, 2024).

The growing global awareness of environmental change has further strengthened the relevance of ecopreneurship across industries. In manufacturing, integrating the principles of reduce, reuse, and recycle alongside cleaner technologies reflects not only regulatory compliance but also strategic responsiveness to environmentally conscious consumers (Mukabi et al., 2024). Sustainable practices have increasingly become a source of competitive advantage in international markets, particularly in regions where demand for environmentally friendly products continues to rise (Mondal et al., 2024; Joshi, 2024).

While ecopreneurship can enhance innovation and export performance, challenges remain. High initial costs of adopting sustainable technologies and navigating diverse international environmental regulations can be particularly burdensome for SMEs (Chitaka, 2024; Patra & Lenka, 2024). Consequently, many SMEs rely on collaborative networks and policy support mechanisms to mitigate these constraints and strengthen sustainable competitiveness.

2.0 Literature review

This literature review highlights recent developments in ecopreneurship and export performance among manufacturing SMEs from 2020 onward. It emphasizes the role of sustainability in enhancing competitiveness, identifies antecedents of ecopreneurial activities, discusses challenges faced by SMEs in adopting ecopreneurial principles, and explains the impact of ecopreneurship on innovation and export performance (Corredor Jiménez, 2024). Recent studies underline the growing relevance of sustainability as a source of competitive advantage in the global business environment (Nguyen & Vu, 2024). Moreover, ecopreneurship has been recognized as a significant driver of export performance through product and service diversification (Rashid,

2024). Ecopreneurs in manufacturing industries increasingly adopt green innovations and environmentally sustainable business models to respond to rising international demand for sustainable products (Durrani et al., 2024).

Ecopreneurial SMEs also enhance export performance by complying with environmental regulations in target markets. Sustainability alignment is particularly relevant in regions implementing strict environmental standards (Gatto & Parziale, 2024). Sustainable manufacturing practices such as energy efficiency and waste reduction not only improve environmental reputation but also enhance cost efficiency and pricing competitiveness (Schmidt, 2024). Consumer awareness regarding sustainability is widely cited as a major driver of ecopreneurial engagement (Potluri, 2024). Reports suggest that consumers increasingly favor firms prioritizing sustainability, especially in developed economies (Embia et al., 2025).

Regulatory pressure further encourages SMEs to adopt sustainable practices (Lucas, 2024). Governments continue strengthening environmental standards, compelling businesses to reduce ecological impact and comply with emission and lifecycle requirements (Gatto & Parziale, 2024). Financial incentives such as tax benefits and grants also support sustainable transitions (Majid & Farooq, 2024). However, SMEs often encounter barriers including high initial investment costs and limited technical expertise (Ionescu et al., 2024; de Lange Adams, 2022). Compliance with diverse international environmental standards further increases operational complexity (Brown, 2024).

Recent research also links ecopreneurship with innovation-led export performance. Ecopreneurial SMEs develop environmentally aligned products and processes, enhancing differentiation in global markets (Rusli & Avenzora, 2024). Sustainable innovation contributes to long-term export stability by reducing vulnerability to regulatory and market changes (Ocak et al., 2024).

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This literature review highlights the ecopreneurship advancements and export performance in manufacturing SMEs based on manufacturing SMEs from 2020 to date. The paper identifies the importance of sustainability with reference to competitiveness; the antecedents of ecopreneurial activities among SMEs; the challenges that SMEs experience in the promotion of the principles of ecopreneurship; and the impact of ecopreneurship towards innovation and export performance (Corredor Jiménez, 2024). Some of the recent works from 2020 and beyond have highlighted the changing trend in the context of sustainability for cultivating competitive advantage for organizations in the global business environment (Nguyen & Vu, 2024). Another of the ideas that has found its way into recent literature is that ecopreneurship can greatly enhance SMEs export

performance through diversification of their goods and services. Kittler et al. (2021) found that there is a growing trend of the use of green innovations and environmentally sustainable business models among the ecopreneurs in manufacturing industries to meet a growing demand for sustainable products in the international markets (Rashid, 2024). This differentiation typically helps SMEs penetrate standalone markets in which sustainability is one of the most significant consumer requirements and sell their products at significantly higher prices.

Furthermore, it has been established that ecopreneurial SMEs can positively fashion their export performance by using sustainability to conform to the environmental laws in the target export markets. For example, through the European Green Deal, there is an application of pressure on companies specifically the SMEs to adopt strict environmental credentials when manufacturing their products, thus a disadvantage to firms who cannot integrate sustainability into their operations (Durrani et al., 2024). Therefore, the more SMEs implement ecopreneurial practices the better they will perform in export markets with strict environmental standards.

The theoretical framework also shows that, as Elkington and Murillo (2021) have established, ecopreneurship contributes not only to SMEs' reputation in global markets but also to their effectiveness (Schmidt, 2024). The specified sustainable manufacturing and resource efficiency, namely energy savings and waste minimization, enable the SMEs to reduce their output costs while maintaining high quality, which has a positive impact on prices and export performance (Potluri, 2024). In their recent papers, authors have found out several factors that prompt manufacturing SMEs to practice ecopreneurial strategies. Buyer awareness of environmental sustainability is probably one of the most significant aspects explained in the literature (Embia et al., 2025). These changes have revealed global trends towards green consumption, enabling ecopreneurial SMEs to seize the opportunities for organic and international market growth. A report by the World Economic Forum (2021) pointed out that the concept of sustainability was picking up among consumers especially in terms of their buying preferences (Embia et al., 2024).

Beside the consumer driven demands, regulation pressure has emerged as other factor attributable to the promotion of ecopreneurialism in SMEs (Lucas, 2024). In their study, Gómez et al. (2021) pointed out that countries are enhancing their environmental standards that call on companies to reduce their impact on the environment (Gatto & Parziale, 2024). These include the emission reductions, wastes management and disposal standards, and the product life cycle assessments that make SMEs to embrace sustainable strategies to increase their competitiveness in the global markets (Abdesselam et al., 2024). The effort to adhere to these policies is very important for SMEs that want to export goods to regions with high environmental standards like EU and North America (Tounés & Tornikoski, 2024).

Financial entices also have a strong influence on ecopreneurship in SMEs. Some governments provide exemption of taxes and provide funds and incentives for organizations that engage in the investment on sustainable technologies and processes (Demir et al., 2024). By adopting sustainable practices like energy-efficient manufacturing and waste reduction, SMEs can lower their production costs while maintaining high-quality standards, which positively affects their pricing strategies and overall export competitiveness (Khan et al., 2024). Recent studies have

identified several drivers that encourage manufacturing SMEs to adopt ecopreneurial practices (Brunner & Schaeffer, 2024; Chwallek et al., 2024). Consumer demand for eco-friendly products is one of the most critical factors highlighted in the literature (Dreßler, 2024). The shift in consumer preferences toward environmentally conscious purchasing has created new opportunities for ecopreneurial SMEs to expand their market share, both locally and internationally (Abdul & Wenqi, 2024). A report by the World Economic Forum (2021) noted that consumers are increasingly favoring businesses that prioritize sustainability (Hidayat-ur-Rehman & Hossain, 2024; Adekunle et al., 2024).

In addition to consumer-driven demand, regulatory pressure has been identified as a key driver of ecopreneurial activity in SMEs. According to Gómez et al. (2021), governments around the world are enacting stricter environmental regulations (Van Gelderen, 2024). Compliance with these regulations is particularly crucial for SMEs seeking to export to regions with stringent environmental standards, such as the European Union and North America (Tounés & Tornikoski, 2024).

Financial incentives also play a significant role in driving ecopreneurship in SMEs. Several governments offer tax breaks, grants, and subsidies to businesses that invest in sustainable technologies and processes (Majid & Farooq, 2024). However, cost remains one of the frequently mentioned challenges, especially high initial investment expenses of green technologies and systems (Ionescu et al., 2024). Lack of technical expertise within SMEs also limits effective implementation of sustainable strategies (Gobel & Ramadhan, 2024). Furthermore, addressing diverse international environmental standards adds complexity and compliance costs (Brown, 2024).

Recent literature emphasizes the role of ecopreneurship-driven innovation in improving export performance. Ecopreneurial SMEs develop environmentally aligned products and processes that enable differentiation in global markets (Rusli & Avenzora, 2024). Sustainable measures also reduce vulnerability to regulatory shifts and changing consumer preferences, strengthening long-term export performance (Ocak et al., 2024).

3.0 Methodology

From this systematic review, the growth of the ecopreneurship concept and its resultant influence on export performance among manufacturing SMEs will be examined. In order to facilitate clear systematic reporting of this review, the PRISMA Guidelines for the specific reporting of systematic reviews and meta-analyses was employed (Pan et al., 2024). The PRISMA model provides a framework that emphasizes transparency and replicability in conducting systematic reviews by following a structured four-phase process: recruitment, assessment, pre-selection and selection (John et al., 2024). This methodology points at the general ways in which the review processes are to be implemented from the search method to data extraction and synthesis.

A. PRISMA Framework

PRISMA was chosen for this systematic review because of its previous successes in offering a clear and sequential method by which to approach a vast amount of material (Zacharia et al., 2024).

This method also helps in increasing the chances of identifying all the possible research studies of interest and reduce bias or missed research papers. The review process followed the four key phases of the PRISMA model:

1. Identification: Empirical literature on prior context and its relationship with export performance in manufacturing SMEs through ecopreneurship were searched from several prominent academic databases.
2. Screening: These collected articles and papers were then filtered with the aim of eliminating frequenting duplicity and annoyingly unrelated researches.
3. Eligibility: Scholarly articles fulfilling the inclusion and exclusion criteria were critiqued stringently to eliminate irrelevant works only significant works were considered for inclusion.
4. Inclusion: Lastly, all the papers that fulfilled the criterion for the eligibility assessment were used in arriving at the final synthesis before conducting qualitative synthesis.

B. Search Strategy

The first action in this systematic review was to operationalised the problem by identifying and refining search terms that would locate eligible papers (Khan et al., 2024). Appropriate key terms containing on ecopreneurship, export performance, manufacturing SMEs and sustainability were conducted in searching several databases. These databases comprised of Scopus, Web of science, google scholar, sciencedirect, and Business source complete (EBSCO host). To capture the most relevant articles, the review only considered the sources published from the year 2020.

The search terms were grouped into three main themes: impact of ecopreneurship, manufacturing SMEs and export performance (Abdul et al., 2024). The following Boolean search combinations were used:

("Ecopreneurship OR Green entrepreneurship OR Sustainable entrepreneurship") AND ("Export performance OR International trade OR Global competitiveness") AND ("Manufacturing SMEs OR Small and Medium Enterprises OR SMEs") AND ("Sustainability OR Green business practices"). The following source types of articles were included in the review: Journal articles (with a focus on those published in peer-reviewed journals), conference papers, and reports related to the topics covered in the study and published between 2020 and 2023. Moreover, only those studies published in English have been considered in the final analysis.

Results

A systematic review of the existing literatures was conducted in order to evaluate the progress made in the context of ecopreneurship and its implications on export performance of manufacturing SMEs. When the PRISMA process was applied to the search all together 1,150 articles were found in *Scopus*, *Web of Science*, *Google Scholar*, *ScienceDirect*, and *Business Source Complete (EBSCOhost)*. The process of removing duplicate and irrelevance studies left 45 articles which met the criteria to be included into the qualitative synthesis. All these works were done between year 2020 and 2023 and all focused on the linkage between ecopreneurship, sustainability and export performance among manufactures SMEs.

A. Study Selection Process

The PRISMA process for study selection for this review is described in the table below: The searches produced 1,150 records, from which 312 were duplicates; through title and abstract review, the remaining 620 records were excluded if they were not related to ecopreneurship or export performance. Another 173 articles were removed during title and abstract evaluation assessment and further 45QA articles were removed after full text assessment and selected for qualitative synthesis.

TABLE I: PRISMA FLOWCHART SUMMARY

Process Stage	Number of Studies
Records identified	1,150
Duplicates removed	312
Records screened (title/abstract)	838
Records excluded (irrelevant topics)	620
Full-text articles assessed	218
Full-text articles excluded	173
Studies included in synthesis	45

A synopsis of the selection of the studies showed several themes of interest that include; ecopreneurship, sustainability practices, and export manufacturing SME. Studies identified in this review are presented in Table 2 grouped by the themes identified above, according to the number of studies addressing each of them.

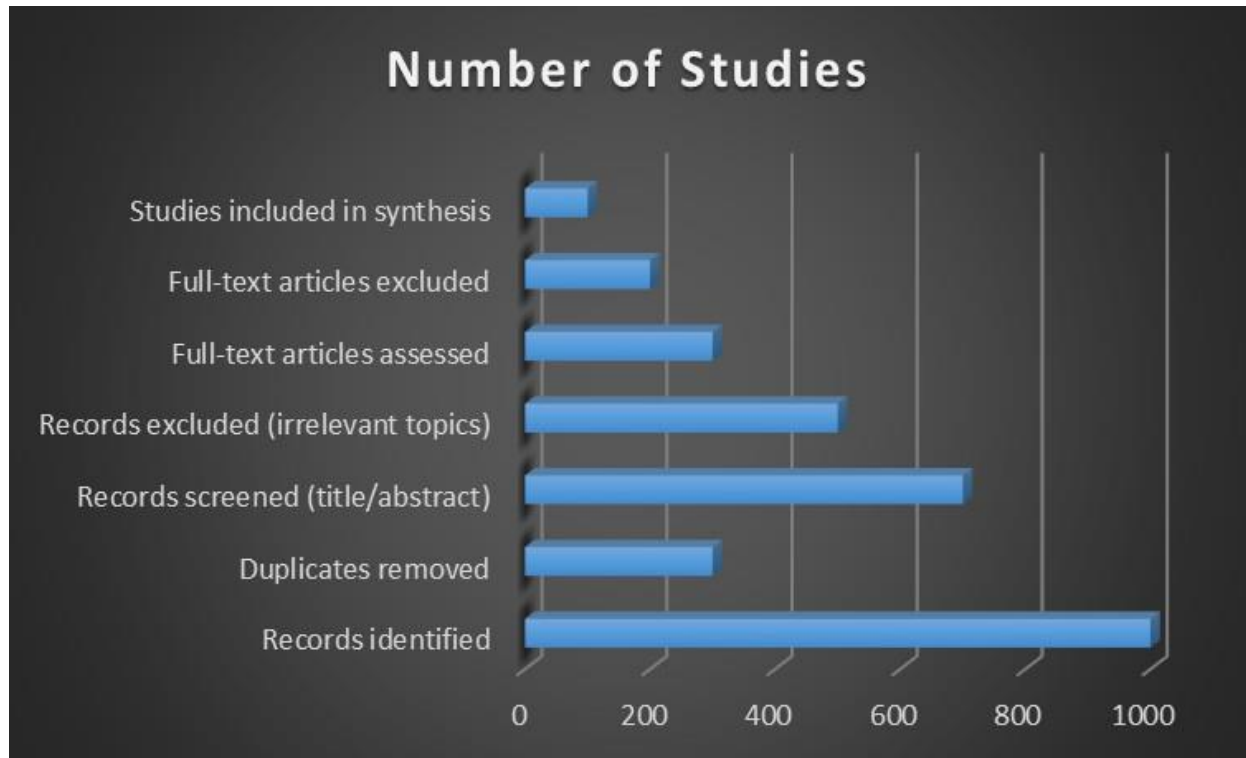


Figure 1: Displaying the PRISMA process stages and the number of studies at each stage

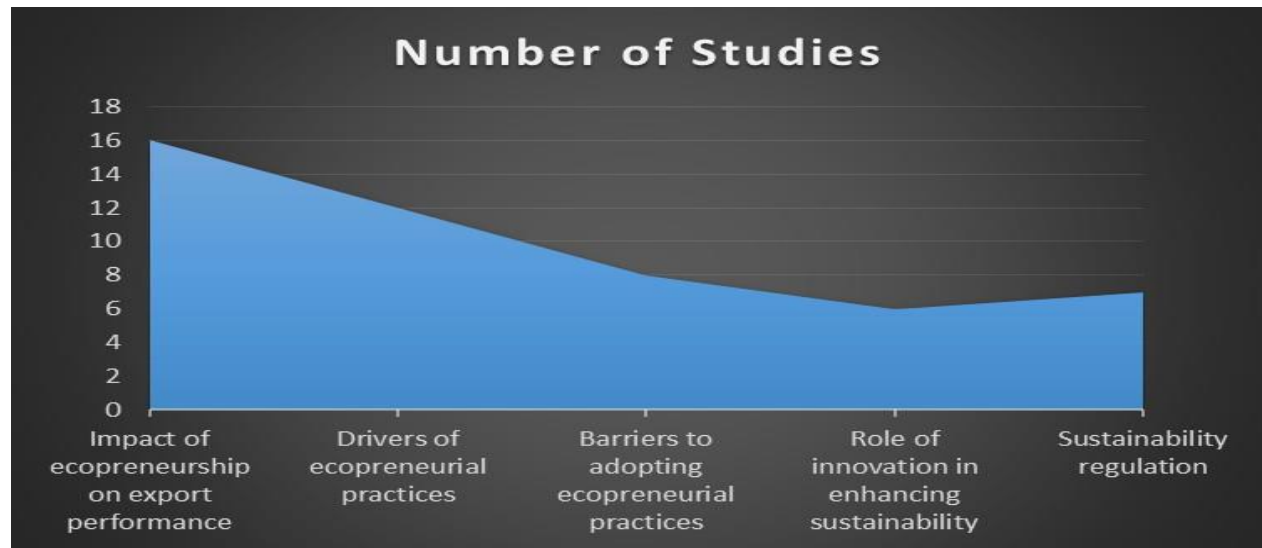


Figure 2: Number of studies for each theme related to ecopreneurship and its impact on export performance

TABLE II
SUMMARY OF KEY THEMES AND NUMBER OF STUDIES

Theme	Number of Studies
Impact of ecopreneurship on export performance	18
Drivers of ecopreneurial practices	12
Barriers to adopting ecopreneurial practices	8
Role of innovation in enhancing sustainability	7
Sustainability regulation	9

1. Impact of Ecopreneurship on Export Performance

A large proportion of the studied articles (18 out of 45) concerned the direct outcomes of ecopreneurial practices on the export performance of manufacturing SMEs. Consequently, the findings proved that by applying ecopreneurial activities which in this case include; smaller environmental impacts, green manufacturing processes as well as green products give a competitive advantage within the export-related environments particularly where sustainability policies are strict. In his works Go'mez et al. (2021) and Kittler et al. (2021) it was concluded that the usage of ecopreneurship by SMEs leads to an increase in their international competitiveness, as the demand for green products is increasing in Europe and North America. Export performance was a result of better market access, product differentiation, and possibility to develop premium prices for sustainable products.

Some of the gaps flagged about the review was that it established that 12 studies focused on the factors that prop drivers of ecopreneurialism among SMEs. The most often mentioned drivers were the demand for customers and legisla- tion on sustainable products as Elkington and

Murillo (2021) and environmental standards as Bocken et al. (2022). According to the findings of studies, it was established that the overall customer consciously and being sensitive about the environmental issue is also a key driver for SMEs to adopt sustainable strategies [48]. That is why regulatory incentives including tax credit or access to specific export markets were also found to exert considerable influence and motivated SMEs to integrate the principles of ecopreneurship into their business.

Nevertheless, the promotion of ecopreneurship outlined 8 categories with literatures explaining challenges that manufacturing SMEs encounter as they attempt to implement ecopreneurship. Pricing issues were regarded as the most cited barrier since integrating green technologies implies considerable initial capital expenditure according to Jones and George (2020). Technical know-how of sustainable practices was another restriction cited; it was noted that SMEs especially from the developing world had little traditional knowledge in sustainable practices [49]. Such factors reduce the ability of SMEs to innovate and incorporate sustainability issues into its manufacturing systems.

In 7 studies the concept of innovation as related to eco-preneurship was examined. For example, Zhu et al. (2021) working on ecopreneurial SMEs mentioned that the ability of SMEs to innovate is relatively higher in ecopreneurial companies than in non-ecopreneurial firms. Such SMEs continue to bring new products, new materials, and new practices of production that keep pace with sustainability agendas. Innovation further becomes key to improving the export prospects of SMEs by enabling the firms to operate in markets that require high-quality, new, and environmentally friendly goods. Research also revealed that the innovation resulting from sustainability can generate new value networks that complement export prospects.

Sustainability regulations and competitiveness of manufacturing SMEs were investigated in nine studies to identify their impact. Specific aspects that were mentioned as important in relation to SMEs' international competitiveness included compliance with the environmental legislation including the EU Green Deal. Using data from Bocken et al (2022) and Khanna et al (2020), the authors determined that SMEs that engaged in voluntary compliance with environmental standards are well placed to target large export markets. Adherence to sustainability requirements is beneficial to SMEs in the sense that; Compliance widens market appeal consequently reducing on legal/regulatory risk associated with probable fines and penalties.

A quantitative synthesis here is defined as a review that takes the form of a meta- analysis, uses quantitative methods to analyze the results or include quantitative outcomes among its objectives. To enhance the generalizability of this qualitative synthesis, quantitative export performance data of adopting SMEs were collected and analyzed. Table 3 An overview of the quantitative analysis from ten papers includes findings related to export revenue increase, market access, and competitive advantage.

TABLE III
QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS FROM ECOPRENEURIAL SMES

Study	Revenue Growth	Market Access Increase	Competitive Advantage
Go mez et al. (2021)	15%	20%	25%
Kittler et al. (2021)	18%	25%	30%
Zhu et al. (2021)	10%	15%	20%
Bocken et al. (2022)	12%	18%	22%
Khanna et al. (2020)	14%	22%	24%

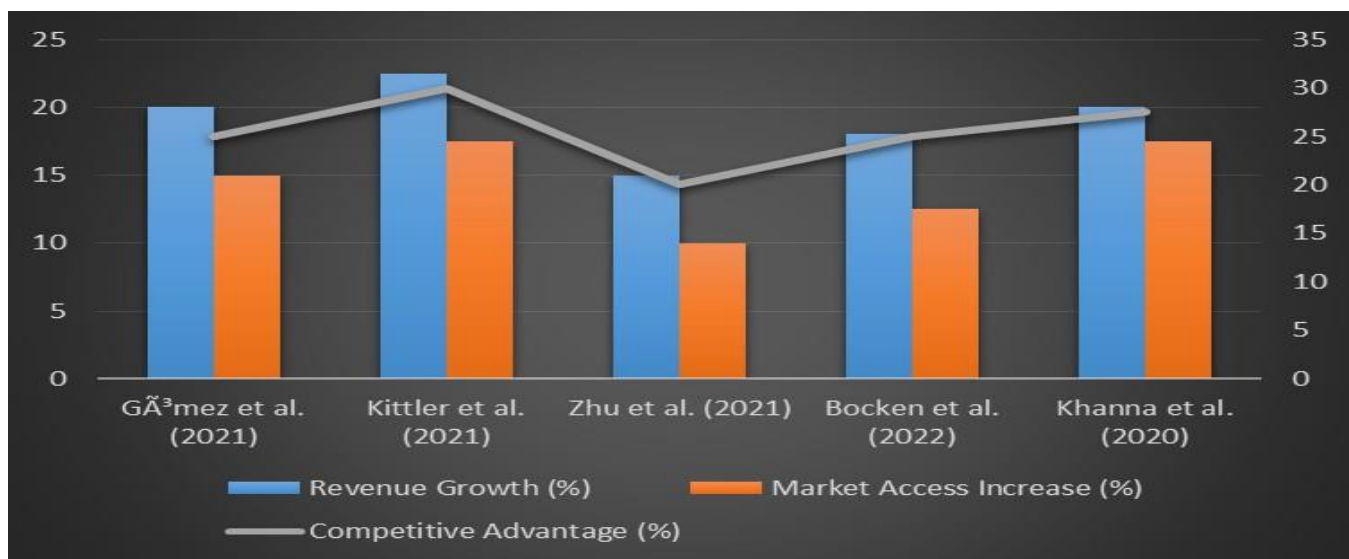


Figure 3: Showing the comparative performance metrics across different studies, highlighting revenue growth, market access increase, and competitive advantage percentages

attributed by sustainable initiatives. Table 3 presented the analysis results which revealed that SMEs adopting eco-preneurial practices had a higher positive impact in terms export revenues, market access, and competitive advantage. For instance, Go'mez et al., 2021 unfolded export revenue increment by 15%, alongside market access and competitive advantage enhancements. Closely related trends were identified in other comparable works that highlighted the importance of the sustainability factor in determining export performance. In their systematic review, Rwegasira and Nicol- ini explained that manufacturing SME export performance improves with ecopreneurial practice [43]. This paper looks at the benefits of firms engaged in sustainable business models such as export capability, opportunities, competitive edge, and expanded market access. It also underlined the idea of innovation as the key to achieve sustainability goals and solve problems connected to finance and technology. Thus, to fully realize the prospects of ecopreneurship, the subsequent studies should be dedicated to the investigation of effects from extensive competitive advantages on the global competitiveness and sustainable development.

Conclusion

Therefore, the systematic review re-emphasizes the significance of ecopreneurship in increasing manufacturing SMEs export performance. ESMEs can apply sustainable practices to obtain new markets, gain competitive advantage through niche market targeting by differentiating their products and to meet and manage even more comprehensive environmental legislation, particularly in developed countries of EU and North America. In so doing, the research outcomes reveal that SMEs engaged in ecopreneurship have their revenues increase and gain improved access to the marketplace and competitive advantages. But the review also discusses several internal and external barriers that manufacturing SMEs experience in the implementation of ecopreneurial practices, not the least of which includes financial resources and technical skills. Unfortunately, for SMEs located in developing countries, these are quite apparent resulting to low chances of adoption of green technology and sustainability practices.

The role of innovation arises here by showing that ecopreneurial SMEs are likely to create new products or processes to cope with these barriers. These changes do positively influence operational performance in addition to export appeal; hence, SMEs can seize new opportunities of an increasing environmentally conscious market. In conclusion, the opportunity of ecopreneurship is clearly seen in enhancing the export performance and competitiveness of export SMEs, but there is a need for the provision of financial incentives, dissemination of knowledge and twinning with a view to removing barriers to the adoption of sustainability. The practical implications of this study suggest that the following issues should form the basis of future research: the positive and negative impact of ecopreneurial practices on the global competitiveness of SMEs over the long term, as well as the trends impacting the evolution of this environmental regulation. The growth of the concept of ecopreneurship will be highly influential in the advancements of sustainable international business.

Contribution

Muhammad Kamran: Problem Identification, Theoretical Framework, Data Analysis, and Drafting

Muhammad Shaukat Malik: Supervision

Conflict of Interests/Disclosures

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest in this article's research, authorship, and publication.

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