

STAKEHOLDER INTEGRATION IN SUSTAINABILITY-ORIENTED INNOVATION: AN APPROACH TO SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS MODEL IN SME WITHIN THE UK



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ABSTRACT

The sustainable business model (SBM) in the circular economy is significant to create business value and sustainability for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). However, it has still received limited scholarly attention, particularly, a potential gap within the context of food and beverage SMEs in the UK. Stakeholder integration may be an essential element of SBM, playing a vital role in sustainable value creation. However, research on stakeholder integration has been fragmented and not comprehensively examined. The study examines stakeholder integration strategies in sustainability-oriented innovation (SOI) and value creation for the SBM within food and beverage SMEs in the UK. The purpose of this research is to empirically investigate how external and internal forces, and stakeholder integration, affect SOI and value creation. The study employs a qualitative case study to explore the research questions, with 30 participants from 30 food and beverage SMEs involved in sustainable practices. Data are collected through in-depth interviews, with field notes and documents. The results show that 3 contextual factors, including internal constraints, internal facilitators, and external forces, influence SOI for the SBM. The significant findings indicate that stakeholder integration not only influences SOI but also is relevant to value creation. This study developed a conceptual framework that led to a theory usable in the research context. The findings of this study suggest that practitioners and SME managers will better understand the SBM process, thereby shaping a more holistic approach to SBM.

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INTRODUCTION

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are increasingly recognised as key contributors to economic, social, and environmental growth, in line with the long-term sustainability of SMEs in the circular economy (Boons & Ludeke-Freund, 2013). Conducting more research within SMEs is therefore significant, as they form large international groups and are embedded in institutional environments that influence practices and policies aimed at achieving sustainability (Magerakis & Habib, 2021). Sustainable development meets the demands of both existing and future generations (Adams et al., 2016; Fores & Fernandez-Yanez, 2023). SMEs are keen to integrate best practices to raise environmental awareness, maintain social well-being, and enhance the economic dimensions of their business strategies. This could be gained by incorporating a corporate sustainability approach into business strategy (Freudenreich, Lüdeke-Freund, & Schaltegger, 2020). Several studies have found that many organisations' sustainability initiatives focus on the operational level rather than integrating sustainability across all levels of the business (Magerakis & Habib, 2021), thereby failing to achieve the triple bottom line of sustainability. An increasing number of scholars have failed to integrate environmental, social, and economic dimensions into business strategy to achieve a sustainable business model (SBM) within the context of SMEs, particularly in the food and beverage sector. SBM is an entrepreneurial plan for making sustainable profit, focusing on protecting the environmental and social aspects across business operations, processes, and strategies. The purpose of SBM is to create a positive impact

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on the environment and people, and to support long-term sustainability goals. The SBM for sustainability is an emerging concept (Alhaddi, 2015; Haleem et al., 2022). Limited research has analysed SBM, focusing on environmental, social, and economic responsibility (Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002). However, there is no established literature on food and beverage SMEs in the UK.

Sustainability-oriented innovation (SOI) enables developing SBM to meet sustainability (Haleem et al., 2022; Fores & Fernandez-Yanez, 2023). Organisations develop SOI through enhancing stakeholder integration in the SBM process. The SBM is the process by which a business achieves mutual value with its stakeholders (Haleem et al., 2022). The entrepreneurial leaders are emphasising working with diverse stakeholders and experiencing external and internal pressure to achieve sustainability. A business's commitment is to develop SBM to foster sustainability by enhancing stakeholder engagement in SOI issues (Haleem et al., 2022). Thus, it is imperative to engage stakeholders in SBM (Attanasio et al., 2022). However, minimal empirical research has been conducted on stakeholder integration in SOI for the SBM (Hahn, 2013). There is no established research on stakeholder integration in SOI for SBM within the context of SMEs in the UK; therefore, this context is essential to the study. The objective of this research is to shed light on the broader contextual factors that affect SOI and its stakeholder integration strategy for value creation.

The study aims to assess the existing literature, identify a process of stakeholder integration in SOI for value creation in SBM, and subsequently develop a new conceptual framework based on the context and leading to the development of a new theory for use within the research context.

A case study was applied to explore research questions. The study used an inductive qualitative research approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, using various documents and field notes to understand the research aim and objectives. The study contextualises qualitative findings and identifies a new holistic approach to SBM within the SME context, based on 3 contextual factors, 6 stakeholder integration strategies, 3 SOI steps, and 3 dimensions of value creation; it then integrates these findings to develop a conceptual framework of SBM. This study conceptualised a new approach to stakeholder integration in SOI for value creation in SBM within the research context, which has never been addressed; consequently, this study contributes to the existing SMEs literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The integration of stakeholders into sustainability-oriented innovation (SOI) and value creation within SMEs is increasingly recognised. However, the evidence base remains fragmented. This study began with a literature review of stakeholders' integration in SOI for value creation. A literature review was also conducted to provide a comprehensive overview of the sustainable business model (SBM) within SMEs. The literature review was guided to identify existing knowledge and research gaps, develop research questions, and address the aim and objectives, as well as their context (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

SMEs and Sustainability

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are increasingly contributing to the sustainability of the circular economy (Boons & Ludeke-Freund, 2013). According to the World Bank (2022), SMEs account for more than 90% of global businesses and potentially generate 60–70% of employment. The SMEs in the circular economy, an organisation experiences a significant pressure to mitigate economic, social, and environmental responsibility, for example, reducing carbon footprint, mitigating impact on the landscape (Wijethilake, Munir, & Appuhami, 2017), preventing labor-abusive practices, and maintaining human rights standards (Bansal, 2005). Business developments in SMEs increasingly depend on independent, economic, and social expectations (Fores & Fernandez-Yanez, 2023). Apparently, many studies focused on institutional pressure for the triple bottom line of sustainability (Haleem et al., 2022).

Enterprises should ensure their future viability by maintaining their competitiveness in a dynamic economic, social, and environmental environment (Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002). Nevertheless, there is an unfolding story of SMEs' sustainability and practices, particularly in the UK context. Most research reviewed empirical literature of environmental sustainability (Hahn, 2013) with few social issues, and research hardly combined two or three dimensions of the triple bottom line (Haleem et al., 2022). Again, most research failed to integrate the environmental, social, and economic dimensions simultaneously to achieve SBM within the context of food and beverage SMEs in the UK. The SBM has the potential to impact environmental, social, and economic benefits for long-term sustainability; it is an emerging concept (Alhaddi, 2015; Haleem et al., 2022). Limited attention is paid to analysing SBM, considering three dimensions of sustainability (Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002). However, there is no established literature on SMEs in the UK.

Sustainability-Oriented Innovation (SOI)

Sustainability-oriented innovation (SOI) fosters the development of new products, practices, or processes to achieve distinct objectives, thereby creating environmental, social, and economic value. SOI enables meeting sustainability objectives and creating value for a broader range of stakeholders across environmental, social, and economic dimensions (Haleem et al., 2022; Fores & Fernandez-Yanez, 2023). Stakeholder interaction contributes to a sustainable value proposition, value creation, and value capture for SOI (Fores & Fernandez-Yanez, 2023). The literature review is intended to understand becoming and being sustainable through SOI. The existing literature paid little attention to the meaning of SOI or to its conceptualisation. After the Brundtland report in 1987, a debate emerged on eco-innovation and SOI regarding the integration of ecological and cleaner production into products, processes, and organisational structures (Johanna & Hansen, 2014). Prior research primarily focused on SOI in large firms. Over the last few years, research has begun to generate knowledge of SOI in SMEs, which has increasingly recognised and contributed to sustainable development. However, there is a knowledge gap due to the limited number of studies addressing SOI in SMEs.

Stakeholder Integration for Value Creation and SBM

Stakeholder integration is one of the most frequently applied theoretical approaches in the sustainability-oriented innovation (SOI) and value creation literature over the past few decades (Chang et al., 2017; Fores & Fernandez-Yanez, 2023). An organisation's ability to create value depends on successfully managing and balancing stakeholders' interests and expectations (Freeman, 2010; Freudenreich et al., 2020). Managing and balancing stakeholders is required for solving sustainability issues (Freudenreich et al., 2020). Such interaction could be in different modes (Freeman et al., 2017). Stakeholder integration in this context will be explored. Several studies address stakeholders' interaction in SOI as a precondition for value creation (Freudenreich et al., 2020; Fores & Fernandez-Yanez, 2023). The stakeholders' role in value creation challenges the prevailing paradigm in sustainable literature, warranting further study (Gray & Purdy, 2018; Fores & Fernandez-Yanez, 2023). There is no comprehensive picture of how this applies across all value-creation processes for sustainability. Therefore, SOI was criticized for failing to consider stakeholder interaction in value-creation processes, which may hinder potential contributions to sustainable development (Fores & Fernandez-Yanez, 2023), particularly in SMEs. In consequence, stakeholder interaction for the SBM remains unclear and is largely ignored in the SME literature. The objective is to provide a comprehensive overview of stakeholder interactions and how they can contribute to specific SBM to promote sustainability in SMEs.

A sustainable business model (SBM) enables entrepreneurs to achieve sustainability objectives and create value for stakeholders in the present and future by balancing economic, social, and environmental issues (Boons & Ludeke-Freund, 2013; Fores & Fernandez-Yanez, 2023). It is imperative to involve stakeholders in business practice and integrate them into SBM to reduce business risk and enhance value creation (Haleem et al., 2022; Fores & Fernandez-Yanez, 2023), to mitigate societal and environmental aspects (Fores & Fernandez-Yanez, 2023). Scholars (for example, Fiore et al., 2020; Attanasio et al., 2022; Fores & Fernandez-Yanez, 2023) highlighted the importance to integrate stakeholder in SBM and showed a knowledge gap of the stakeholders integration in SBM (Schneider & Clauss, 2020), and how to engage them to identify opportunities for value creation (Stubbs, 2017; Fores & Fernandez-Yanez, 2023). However, no established literature focuses on stakeholder integration in SOI for value creation in SBM, specifically within the contexts of SMEs in the UK. It is significant to investigate how to integrate stakeholders to create value and minimise the risk of stakeholder dissatisfaction. The literature review was used to develop the research questions below:

RQ1. What constitutes the SOI of SMEs?

RQ2. Why is the relevance of stakeholders in SMEs for value creation?

RQ3. How do SMEs integrate stakeholders in SOI for value creation?

RQ4. What and how did the external and internal forces influence the SOI processes?

RQ5. Based on the answer to the RQs 1, 2, 3, and 4, how do SMEs prepare for SBM?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sampling Method

A case study was used to explore research questions and aligns with the theoretical position, aim, and objectives of the study (Charmaz, 2024). The qualitative inductive approach was applied, as it aligns best with the case study's philosophical underpinnings (Mills et al., 2010; Simons, 2009). A pilot study was carried out, thereby confirming a more robust research method and focusing on identifying the most appropriate choice for the primary research (Begum, 2020). Purposive sampling was used for a single unique case as an example of food and beverage SME managers participating in the research. Respondents were chosen considering their practical experience and knowledge regarding the research questions, and those who wanted to participate in the interview, as well as those who were considered to be the best, providing significant insights about stakeholder integration in SOI and its relevant issues in the given situations (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The interview continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. 30 respondents were selected from 30 food and beverage SMEs in the UK; they were aged 35-55. The interviews started on 1 January 2024 and finished on 1 April 2024, and the sessions typically lasted 60-90 minutes. Initial contact with the respondents was made via email to arrange an interview time. The names of food and beverage SMEs were replaced with code numbers (E1-E30), and the respondents' names were replaced with code numbers (C1-C30).

Data Collection

Primary data were collected and used to explore multiple realities of stakeholder integration in SOI for value creation in SBM, providing evidence that facilitated more in-depth insight and validated the research data (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018; Charmaz, 2024). This study strictly adheres to ethical guidelines for primary data collection. Field notes were taken throughout the data collection period. The in-depth interview was chosen as a rigorous primary data source, comprising a mix of open-ended and semi-structured questions to elicit detailed descriptions of respondents' views on the research topic (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). The in-depth interview facilitated the exploration of meaningful insights and answers to the research questions (Charmaz, 2024). Interview questions were open-ended at the beginning, but as each interview progressed, they shifted from general to more specific and directive (semi-structured) to uncover rich, descriptive data. If necessary, the technical terms of the interview questions were clarified so that respondents could answer. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed so that the researcher could use them to analyse, improve, and validate data (Charmaz, 2024).

Different documents were used to understand better the themes and sub-themes related to the research topic and to validate interview data, which enriched the data analysis process (Simons, 2009), enriched the context, and contributed to the development of meaningful conclusions (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Appropriate databases, company annual reports, business

reports, and financial reports were used as rigorous data sources for management decisions. Company plans, policies, and procedures were also reviewed where available.

Field notes were used throughout the data collection process as the primary data capture record. Field notes enabled the identification of codes and themes throughout the research process. These provided a starting point for early analysis and interpretation, which can help analyse primary data more accurately and identify meaningful multiple realities and themes (Charmaz, 2024).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to explore patterns across the entire dataset, and data analysis was guided by the first research question: What constitutes SOI in SMEs? The study applied an inductive approach to answer the research question. During data analysis, read and re-read all data from the transcript and field notes to familiarise yourself with them. Line-by-line coding, in vivo coding, and descriptive coding emerged from the coding process and from labelling features of the data. Then the data are grouped, sorted, synthesised, and organised (Charmaz, 2024). Grouped codes into potential sub-themes and themes, and established and verified the relationships between themes and sub-themes through analytic memos, concept maps, a conditional relationship guide, and constant comparison to identify links between them (Simons, 2009). The themes are reviewed, refined, and checked against the coded data and the entire dataset, along with their relationships. Develop a detailed analysis for each theme, including defining and confirming the theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Themes and sub-themes were both descriptive and interpretive (Charmaz, 2024). Some codes emerged during the coding process as 'descriptive code,' but during subsequent data analysis, they were classified as themes. The themes and sub-themes emerged and were subsequently compared and contrasted with the existing literature. Figure 1.0 presents the conceptual framework for stakeholder integration in SOI to create value for the SBM through thematic data analysis.

RESULTS

The findings from the fieldwork phase of the research, themes, and sub-themes emerged from thematic data analysis. This study identified 13 themes and 52 sub-themes through thematic data analysis. The results supported by the existing literature allowed the aim and objectives of the research to be achieved.

Theme: Sustainability-Oriented Innovation (SOI)

The sustainability-oriented innovation (SOI) consists of 3 sub-themes, including SOI adoption, practice, and process, which emerged from participants' descriptions about SOI for achieving SBM. Participants stated that SOI evolved with a broader focus on the environment and a perspective on the economic and social dimensions. Most participants explained that value adoption, practice, and process become part of their SOI process of food and beverage SMEs.

Participant C5 stated that: *Sustainable innovation fosters and promotes a direction to follow, requires the deliberate management of environment and economic aspects, so that we become integrated into the new product, practices, and processes.*

Theme: Stakeholder Relevance for Value Creation

The 3 themes of stakeholder relevance for value creation emerged from the coding process: economic, social, and environmental dimensions.

Theme1: Economic dimension: The 6 sub-themes of economic dimension, including employment and efficiency, long-term viability, capital improvement, product stewardship, new product development, and continuous economic growth, all of which are stakeholder-relevant for value creation in food and beverage SMEs.

The economic dimension emerged from participants' responses; for example, participant C2 made the following observation in Table 1.

Table 1. Example of an interview statement, identified open codes, jotted down notes, and a theme

Case ID and quote	Open codes and jotted down	Theme
C2, Economic sustainability is not only a short-term benefit, but also ensures sustainable business value. It enables continuous long-term growth and utilises resources to minimise waste and maximise value. We have a glass bottle deposit system; in such cases, the deposit is paid when purchasing goods in a glass bottle. The deposit is refunded when the bottle is returned, ensuring the bottle can be recycled or reused.	Economic sustainability, Sustainable business value, Continuous growth in long, Utilising resources to minimise waste, Maximise value, Glass bottle deposit system, ensuring it is recycled or reused	Economic dimension

Theme 2 Social dimension: The 5 Sub-themes of social dimension, including social equity and inclusion, safety and wellbeing, compliance, customer service, and community engagement, all of which are relevant to stakeholders for value creation in SMEs. Participants explained that a broader range of stakeholders contributes to maximum value creation through social responsibility and social compliance by SMEs.

Codes were attached to almost every line in the interview transcripts to capture what was said (Table 2). For example, participants C3, C5, C6, and C7 made the following observation.

Table 2. Illustration of the development of codes, sub-themes, and themes from respondent quotes

[Case ID and Quote]	Codes (Line-by-line coding)	Sub-theme	Theme
C3, We are very keen to promote diversity and equal opportunity for all and to provide resources and services.	Promoting diversity, Promoting equal opportunity, Providing services for all	Social equity and inclusion	Social dimension
C5, Communicating with stakeholders to arrange and facilitate the inclusion programme and provide access to everyone receiving services for safety.	Facilitating inclusion programme, Promoting equal opportunity, Providing services for all	Social equity and inclusion	
C6, We comply with laws, regulations, and policies to avoid fines and damage to our business reputation.	Employ compliance, Ensuring laws, regulations, and policy	Compliance	Social dimension
C7: It is required to address business ethical issues to avoid fines and damage to a business's reputation.	Confirm business ethics, Avoiding fines and damage to business reputation	Compliance	

Theme 3: Environmental dimensions: The 4 Sub-themes of environmental dimensions, including greenhouse, renewable energy, recycling and waste reduction, and reduction of emissions, all of which are relevant to stakeholder value creation in SMEs. Participants stated that the environmental dimension is the cause of stakeholder value creation in SMEs.

Participant C16 stated that: *We are committed to maintaining waste reduction and ecological balance in the environment and to saving natural resources for future generations, specifically by reducing emissions as a determinant of a circular economy.*

Theme: Stakeholder Integration Strategy in SOI

The stakeholder integration strategy consists of 6 themes: identifying stakeholders, identifying interests and power, communication strategy, establishing mutual interest, identifying stakeholder engagement, and defining the role of each stakeholder identified through data analysis.

Theme 1: Identify stakeholders. It consists of 2 sub-themes: primary stakeholders (internal and external) and secondary stakeholders (external). Participants stated that food and beverage SMEs first need to identify stakeholders to ensure successful integration into the SOI process.

Respondent C25 reported that: *Our leaders and managers are keen to identify primary stakeholders, both external and internal, with a direct relationship and interest, and to integrate them into our sustainable business process. Stakeholders who are not directly engaged in the business process but can influence it are part of the secondary group.*

Theme 2: Identify interest and power consists of 4 sub-themes: high power and high interest, high power and low interest, high interest and low power, and low interest and low power. Participants stated that stakeholder involvement is needed for successful integration; therefore, SMEs need to identify stakeholders' interests and power to engage them in the SOI process. Respondent C26 reported that: *We are keen to identify different stakeholder levels and assess their power and interests in relation to our value creation project.*

Theme 3: Communication strategy consists of 2 sub-themes: direct and indirect communication. Participants stated that a stakeholder communication strategy is needed for the successful integration processes in SOI.

Respondent C11 reported that: *We primarily communicate with the internal stakeholder directly via email, phone, face-to-face meetings, or VLE meetings, but we communicate with the external stakeholder via seminars, conferences, and a VLE platform.*

Theme 4: Establish mutual interest consists of 4 sub-themes: business product, process, operation, and decision-making. The participants stated that mutual interest is required for the successful integration in SOI.

Respondent C28 reported that: *Entrepreneurs should be aware of the mutual interest to involve stakeholders in the sustainable business process.*

Theme 5: Identify stakeholder engagement consists of 5 sub-themes: negotiation and dialogue, knowledge exchange, partnership, Participation, and consultation. Participants stated that stakeholder engagement is needed for the successful stakeholder integration processes in the SOI of SMEs.

Respondent C21 reported that *Participation is imperative and that stakeholders should be integrated into SOI for value creation.*

Theme 6: Define the role of each stakeholder. It consists of 5 sub-themes: financial and non-financial support, collaboration, networking, accountability, and responsibility. Participants stated that the role of the stakeholder is needed for the successful integration in SOI.

Respondent C29 reported that: *The effective collaboration of stakeholders for sustainable business and value creation has significantly changed over the last few decades.*

Theme: Contextual Factors of SOI

The 3 themes of contextual factors, including internal constraints, internal facilitators, and external forces, influenced the sustainability-oriented innovation (SOI) process that emerged from data analysis.

Theme 1: The internal constraint: It consists of 4 sub-themes, including change resistance, inability to communicate the business value of sustainability, inability to translate strategy, and lack of clarity, all of which are potential constraints of SOI in food and beverage SMEs.

Respondent C22 reported that: *Our firm focuses on potential resistance to change rather than on an internal resource pool.*

Theme 2: The internal facilitators: It consists of 6 sub-themes, including integrated resources, executive support, employee commitment, leadership commitment, work climate and culture, and Technology, all of which are potentially facilitated by SOI. Participants explained that SMEs considered internal facilitators when working on SOI.

Respondent C27 stated that *Employee commitment and executive support affect sustainability and are beneficial to sustaining a business.*

Theme 3: The external forces: It consists of 7 sub-themes, including competitive intensity, regulation, consumer preference, disruptive digital technologies, stakeholder pressure, economic condition, and climate change, all of which potentially impact SOI. Participants explained that SMEs considered the external factors when working on SOI.

Respondent C28 reported that: *No doubt the economic condition, climate change, and consumer behaviour influence sustainability.*

The Integration of Sub-Themes into the Theme to Develop SBM

The themes and sub-themes emerged through the thematic data analysis process. The thematic data analysis process was applied to link themes and sub-themes in a set of relationships that explained the stakeholder integration strategy in SOI for value creation, as shown in Figure 1.0. A coding paradigm used to identify the connections and relationships among themes in terms of contextual factors, processes, and consequences. Finally, all the themes and sub-themes are linked through a set of relationships that describe the stakeholder integration strategy in SOI for value creation, and subsequently, an SBM is developed. The key theme and sub-themes were linked through the contextual relationship guide and compared and contrasted with the existing literature to develop the theory of SBM in SMEs (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

DISCUSSIONS

The discussion focused on developing a new conceptual framework and on comparing and contrasting it with the existing literature to develop an emergent theory of stakeholder integration in SOI for value creation in SBM within SMEs in the UK (Figure 1.0). Focusing on the research questions, the findings presented an in-depth understanding of the SBM approach within SMEs, thereby minimizing the research gap.

Focusing on RQ1, the results indicated that sustainability-oriented innovation (SOI) may be developed in terms of value adoption, value practice, and process with a broader focus on the environment, economic, and social dimensions. SOI is imperative to value adoption; value, practice, and process can be mapped for the SBM in SMEs. SOI involves changes to an organisation's values and to its products, processes, or practices to create and develop environmental, social, and economic value. In the 3 dimensions of economic, social, and environmental evolution in innovation research, the findings are similar to those of Johanna & Hansen (2014), which are part of the SOI process in SMEs. SOI describes a direction of sustainability; it is integrated into the design of new products, practices, and processes, which yield slightly different results from the existing literature (Fores & Fernandez-Yanez, 2023). The purpose of the study is to understand and identify the sustainability-oriented innovation process and provide initial guidance on how SOI promotes sustainability in SMEs. SOI creates value for a broader range of stakeholders across the economic, social, and environmental dimensions in SMEs; the findings are similar to the existing literature on large enterprises (Haleem et al., 2022; Fores & Fernandez-Yanez, 2023).

RQ2: The study identified 3 levels of stakeholder relevance for value creation in SMEs, including the economic, social, and environmental dimensions. The study found that stakeholders play a significant role in value creation to improve performance; the findings are similar to those of Cillo et al. (2019), who argued that SOI processes emphasize the relevance of stakeholders to value creation (Haleem et al., 2022). Stakeholder relevance for value creation is imperative for enhancing financial, social, and environmental value and ensuring the long-term sustainability of both stakeholders and the business. The findings are consistent with the literature (Stubbs, 2017; Freudenreich et al., 2020; Schneider & Clauss, 2020; Fores & Fernandez-Yanez, 2023). Thus, a wider range of stakeholders ought to be integrated into SBM to address potential risks, and involving them in decision-making and policy implementation would be beneficial. The results indicated that a broader range of stakeholders contribute to value creation in a sustainable business model (SBM); the findings are consistent with the different research context of Haleem et al. (2022).

RQ3: The study identified 6 steps of a stakeholder integration strategy in SOI for value creation in SMEs, including identifying stakeholders, analysing stakeholder interests and power, developing a communication strategy, establishing mutual interests, identifying stakeholder engagement, and defining the role of each stakeholder. The findings differ slightly from the existing literature (Freudenreich et al., 2020). A communication strategy and stakeholder engagement are needed for a successful integration process in SOI. This study suggested keeping stakeholders engaged in SOI processes through negotiation and dialogue, knowledge exchange, partnership, Participation, and consultation. The findings are similar to the research of Freudenreich et al. (2020), who suggested negotiation and dialogue; Fores & Fernandez-Yanez (2023), who suggested knowledge exchange; and Goni et al. (2021), who indicated partnership, Participation, communication, and consultation. Similarly, the roles of each stakeholder include financial and non-financial support, collaboration, networking, accountability and responsibility, all of which are important for the successful integration in SOI, the findings were slightly consistent with the existing research of Rathobei, Ranangen, & Lindman, (2023) that systemically reviewed the role of stakeholders in SBM, but no evidence in the empirical research. Evidently, identifying stakeholders, analysing stakeholder interests and power, and establishing mutual interests are needed for successful integration in SOI as a priority; the findings

were not reflected in the existing SME literature. The findings indicated how businesses can successfully integrate stakeholders into SOI, but the existing literature has not comprehensively explored this within SMEs.

The RQ4 findings indicated several contextual factors, including external forces, internal constraints, and internal facilitators, that influenced the SOI process and subsequently, value creation to attain SBM in SMEs. Internal constraints, including the inability to communicate the business value of sustainability, the inability to translate strategy, and a lack of clarity, can affect SOI. Similarly, the internal facilities, including integrated resources, executive support, employee commitment, leadership commitment, work climate, culture, and Technology, all of which influence SOI. The existing literature has not examined how these factors affect SOI for value creation in the SME context. The external forces, including competitive intensity, regulation, consumer preferences, disruptive digital technologies, stakeholder pressure, economic conditions, political conditions, and climate change, all of which potentially impact SOI and, subsequently, value creation for SBM; therefore, SMEs considered these factors when working on SOI. The contextual factors affect future challenges (Wijethilake, Munir, & Appuhami, 2017). However, the existing literature did not focus on SBM in UK SMEs.

The RQ5 focuses on developing a new conceptual framework of stakeholder integration in SOI for SBM in SMEs (Figure 1.0), which explains the constituents of SOI, the relevance of stakeholders to value creation, and how SMEs integrate stakeholders into the SBM process. The contextual factors influenced SOI and, subsequently, led to the development of a new conceptual framework for stakeholder integration in value creation in SBM. That in turn allowed the development of a context-specific theory and model within the SME context. The contextual factors that influenced the level of stakeholder integration in value creation have been confirmed. The 6 integrative strategies are also confirmed as potentially significant to the SOI process of SBM. The newly developed conceptual model and its associated findings emerged, which compared and contrasted with the existing SOI, stakeholder integration, and SBM theory, leading to the development of a new emergent substantive theory within the research context.

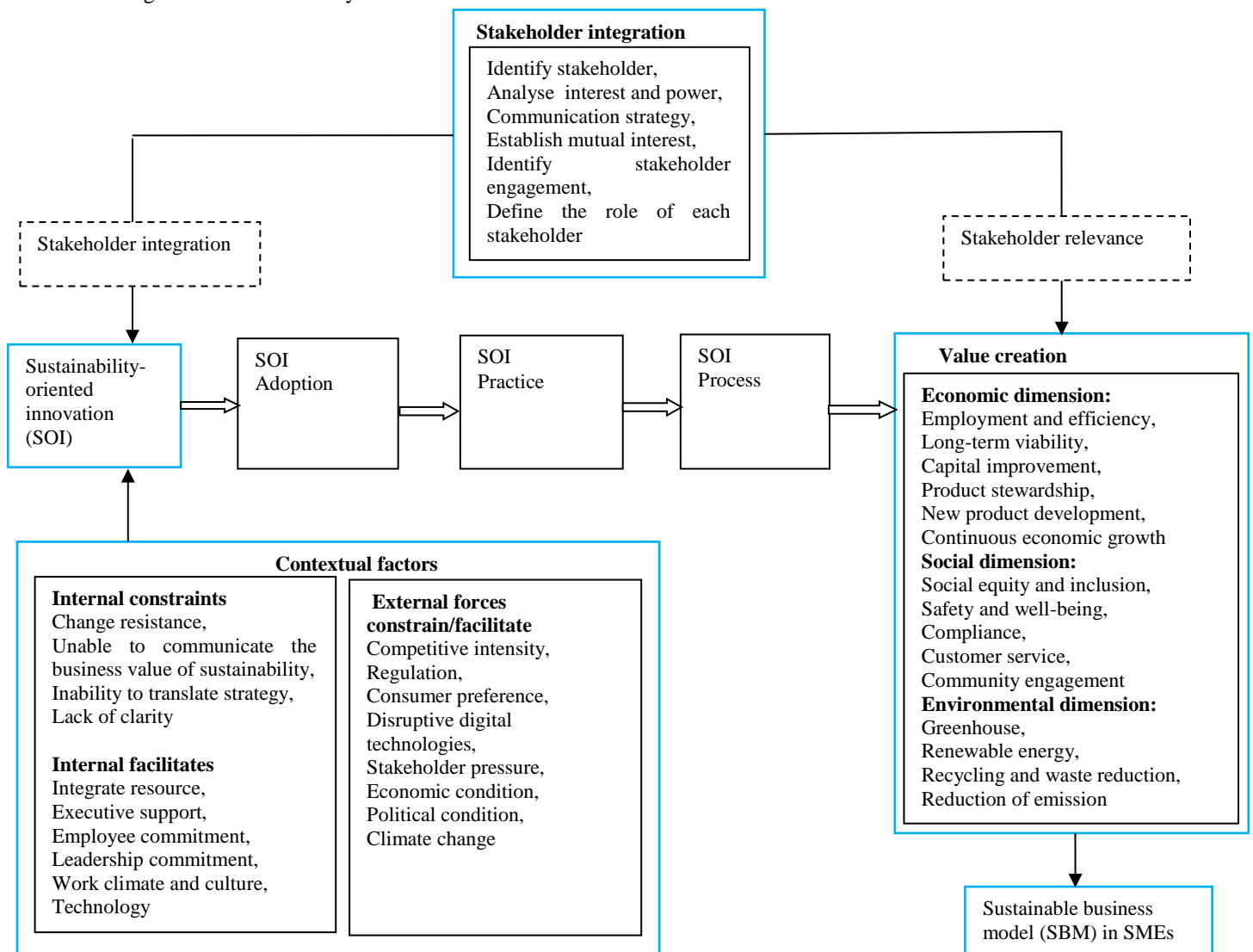


Figure 1. A new approach to developing an SBM in SMEs
Source: Author's Work

Theoretical Contributions and Implications

The study defined and conceptualised a new approach to integrating SOI with stakeholders to create value in sustainable business models (SBMs) within UK food and beverage SMEs. This issue has never been addressed. Thus, the main theoretical contribution lies in developing a conceptual framework for SOI in SBM for SMEs. Apparently, the identification of conceptual definition and additional constructs were added to the new conceptual framework that incorporated stakeholder integration in SOI, the relevance of stakeholders for value creation, and the contextual forces influenced the SBM through SOI. Subsequently, the development of SBM in food and beverage SMEs in UK, which added new abstracts and new additions to the existing knowledge, theory and practice.

The theoretical implication lies in identifying stakeholder integration in SBM, considering contextual forces that may facilitate or hinder SOI in achieving sustainability within SMEs. The study addressed the knowledge gap by providing practical guidelines to SMEs' business consultants, leaders, and practitioners on SBM, how to manage it, how to integrate stakeholders for value creation in the SOI process for SBM, and the consequences from a different lens, aimed at gaining social, economic, and environmental acceptance. This study enables practitioners to understand better how to develop SBM and the benefits that can be achieved through stakeholder interaction. The research provided companies and practitioners in that context with a unique model that offered practical benefits. The research bridges the gap and makes a significant theoretical and practical contribution.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to investigate empirically how the external and internal forces and the stakeholder integration affect SOI and value creation for SBM in food and beverage SMEs in the UK, and subsequently, develop a new conceptual framework based on the context, which led to the development of a new theory for use within the research context where research-based knowledge is limited. The sustainable approach to the conceptual model is developed and offers a new theory within the research context. The themes and sub-themes, in relation to contexts, contextual factors, processes, and consequences, that emerged from the thematic data analysis are added to a newly developed conceptual model. Subsequently, the research aims, objectives, and questions are achieved. The study's findings cannot claim generalisability, which needs to be empirically tested. However, generalisability is not a requirement of qualitative research. The new conceptual framework was developed in a specific research setting within the context of UK SMEs. This theory will be applicable within the research context. However, to validate and generalise the theory in another context, further research with a larger sample is needed. The study suggests future research to deepen the understanding of stakeholders' integration strategies for value creation in SBM, with a focus on digital leadership.

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