

Sustainable Marketing Practices and Ethical Operations in MTN Business Activities in Nigeria

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Abstract

The development of brands by business owners is primarily for the accomplishment of return on investable capital, but how firms' activities impinge on internal and external stakeholders is the exclusive prerogative of the organizations' management to decide. The aim of this research is to examine the effect of sustainable business ethical practices on the development of mobile telecommunication brands in Nigeria. The outstanding issues to be considered by this study include: unauthorized encroachment on customer privacy, manipulative avoidance of firms' financial responsibility and unwholesome advertorial etiquette. Basic concepts of business/marketing ethics, brand image and sustainable business social responsibility will be considered also, the theoretical basis of the study is the triple bottom line theory with empirical perception of the woven interaction between socio-economic and environmental variables in business operations. The methodological approach of this study examines both primary data (customers and other respondents on ethical breaches) and secondary data (journals, periodicals and workshops) that were collected and analyzed. The findings reveals systemic ethical deficiencies in Nigeria's mobile telecommunications industry, where inadequate regulatory frameworks enable privacy violations, financial exploitation, and deceptive marketing practices. These interconnected challenges contradict sustainable marketing principles and threaten consumer trust, indicating that without comprehensive reforms, the sector's contribution to Nigeria's development remains compromised. The study therefore recommends implementing the triple bottom line framework in business operations to effectively transform and reposition Nigeria's mobile telecommunications sector towards sustainable practices

Keywords: *Customer Satisfaction, Corporate Social Responsibility, Sustainability, MTN, Brand Image. Quality service, Business/Marketing ethics.*

Introduction

Business establishments fundamentally aim to provide goods and services while ensuring optimal returns on investible capital. However, Nigeria's business ecosystem faces a critical problem: increasing dishonest business operations across sectors (Ayuba & Aliyu, 2018), particularly acute in mobile telecommunications where unethical practices necessitate regulatory interventions and

judicial penalties. These fraudulent practices, including advance fee fraud and money laundering, have caused billions of Naira losses to individuals, corporations, and government agencies through tax avoidance, project abandonment, and substandard execution (Ribadu, 2003). COVID-19 pandemic further disrupted service delivery, exacerbating existing ethical challenges (Eshiett & Eshiett, 2021a).

Following Nigeria's 2001 telecommunication deregulation, providers like Airtel, MTN Nigeria, M-TELL, and Globacom received GSM licenses to enhance service quality and competitiveness. Despite Consumer Protection Council oversight, unethical practices persist sector-wide. Previous studies examined unethical practices in banking (Ayozie, 2013), construction (Oyewobi et al., 2011; Ameh & Odunsami, 2020; Abdul, 2008), business relationships (Johnny & Benjamin, 2013), and pharmaceuticals (Onwubiko, 2013), but telecommunications remains understudied. This study examines sustainable business ethics using MTN Nigeria, evaluating unauthorized privacy encroachment, manipulative financial avoidance including \$2 billion tax evasion and \$8.1 billion improper repatriation violating Triple Bottom Line principles, and unwholesome advertising practices eroding customer trust and loyalty through unsolicited social network invasion

Material and Methods

Concept of Ethics

Ethics, derived from Greek 'ēthikós' (ἠθικός), Latin 'ethic', and French 'éthique', originates from philosophy and denotes 'morals' and 'value systems.' It involves acknowledging human behavior by interpreting such behavior through morality as 'right' or 'wrong', 'good' or 'evil' (Martinez, 2019; Verst, et al, 2015). The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy identifies three basic areas: Meta-ethics, Normative-ethics, and Applied-ethics. Cambridge University Dictionary defines 'ethic' as often synonymous with 'morality' (Deigh, 1995). Paul & Elder (2006) describe ethics as precepts helping humanity determine actions supporting or destroying living beings. Ethics is often misinterpreted as religious dogma, necessitating inclusiveness leadership at all levels of management (Eshiett *et al.*, 2022).

Concept of Business Ethics

Business ethics applies moral standards in operations, originating from individuals, groups, or laws (Ferrel, 2016). It comprises normative (practitioner) and descriptive (academic) approaches. Adam Smith (1776) observed business collusion against public interest, requiring government regulation through laws and penalties. Modern firms now embrace ethical conduct in operations (Drucker (1981) argued ethics cannot be separated from business, with no specific moral codes needed. Friedman (1970) proposed firms should maximize profit while adhering to legal frameworks and societal customs. Ethical business conduct creates sustainable firm-customer-environment relationships, though empirical investigation of stakeholder perceptions remains needed.

The Concept of Marketing Ethics / Unethical Marketing

Marketing ethics emerged in the late 1990s, encompassing basic precepts, morals, and values expected from marketers. It involves promotional campaign propriety, trustworthiness, equitable pricing, and dependable delivery processes while avoiding exploitation of vulnerable groups. Conflicting empirical positions question whether marketing is inherently evil, given marketers'

exploitation of elderly and poor populations through deceitful programs. Unethical marketing practices require aggressive monitoring to prevent deviation from legal business operation standards. Nigeria's telecommunications sector, including MTN, cannot be exonerated from these sharp practices where firms illegally profit at end users' expense, revealing limited integration of digital ethics in sustainable business marketing frameworks.

Cconcept of Brand and Brand Identity

A brand comprises identifying features differentiating individuals or organizations from competitors, including titles, expressions, blueprints, signs, emblems, or other distinctive elements (American Marketing Association, 2012). Brands serve as selling tools for projecting business ideas, adapting marketing strategies, and communicating with customers through promotional tools. In 21st century marketplaces, branding represents a key strategic index for differentiating products/services from rivals). Accounting classifies brands as intangible assets with monetary value measuring brand equity (Eshiett & Eshiett, 2021). Brand identity encompasses differentiating features like fonts, formats, titles, and emblems (Kotler, 2019; Moriarty, 2009). Firm growth depends on conveying core (harmonious, sustainable relationships) and extended (complex awareness-creating features) brand identity to customers.

The Brand MTN



Brand Image Pictorials a) Top African Brand b) Rebrand to a full-tech company c) Brand Evolution Africa most valuable brand e) New brand campaign f) 5G Launch

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Theoretical Framework - Triple Bottom-Line Theory

The Triple Bottom Line (TBL), conceived by John Ekingthon (1974) in Harvard Business Review (2018), represents UN Sustainable Development Goals addressing economic, social and environmental elements (Anderson, et. al. 2022; Paul, et. al. 2015). Ekingthon (1999) emphasized sustainable capitalism incorporating environmental sustainability and social equity while maintaining profitability. Modern customers expect firm sustainability commitments (Tasdemir, et. al. 2020; Sandrin, et. al. 2018), particularly given business impacts in Nigeria and Sub-Saharan Africa (Singh, *et al.*, 2019; White, 2009). Firms must balance accountability for public health impacts (Schaltegger & Wagner 2017; Schaltegger & Buritt, 2017), societal benefits (Ramanathan, *et al.*, 2017), and ecosystem effects (Guest, 2010) without compromising shareholder wealth (Ahmad, et. al. 2021, Alicia, et. al. 2020; Rehman, et. al 2021).

Figure 2: The Theoretical Framework pf Sustainable Mobile Telecommunication Process

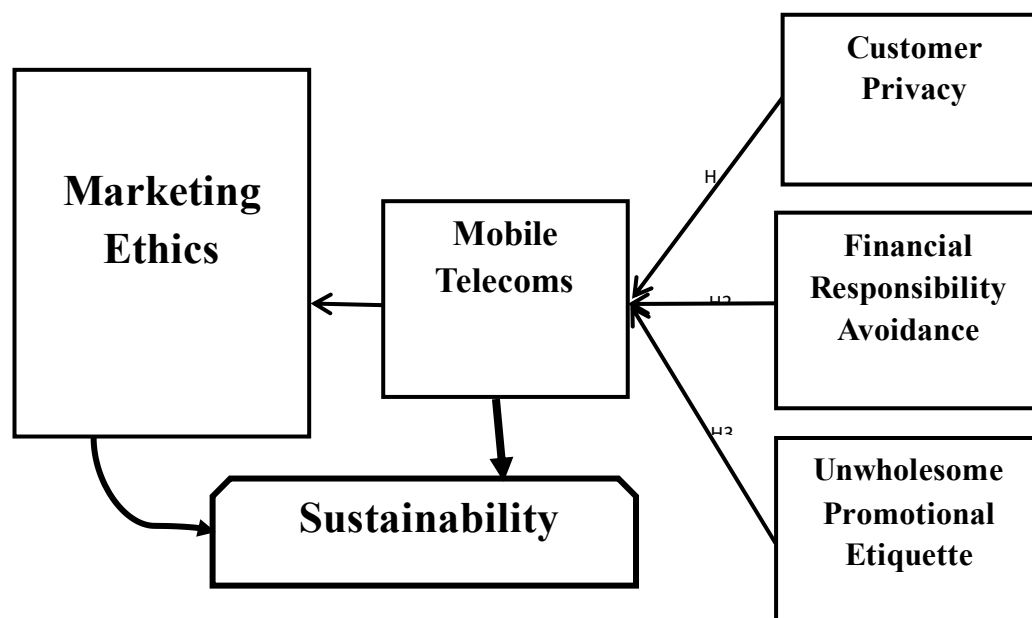


Figure 2. Shows the framework for sustainable mobile telecommunication process. Three issues are considered which include encroachment on customers' privacy, financial responsibility avoidance and unwholesome promotional practices in the industry, as comprehensively discussed thus;

Customer privacy breaches through unauthorized data encroachment (Shin, 2010) cause trust loss and brand commitment decline (Riquelme & Roman, 2014). Unethical practices include divulging customer information to third parties for monetary gain without authorization (OECD, 1980),

putting customers at risk (Eshiett & Eshiett, 2021). MTN Nigeria faces government accusations of \$2billion tax evasion (Ribadu, 2003) and improper fund repatriation, contradicting sustainable marketing principles (Nkiru, 2011; Ameh & Odusami, 2010) and Triple Bottom Line Theory requiring profit, society, government, and environmental responsibility (Anderson *et al.*, 2022; Paul *et al.*, 2015; Ekingthon, 1974). Unsolicited social network messages stem from mandatory registration information (Serenko *et al.*, 2021). Customers deserve value perception rather than unethical practices discouraging brand loyalty.

Methodology

The structured systematic review was adopted to examine sustainability adoption in business and marketing service delivery, and establishing future research direction in business ethics practices (Durach, *et al.* 2017; & Tranfield, *et al.* 2003), this is because of changing operational paradigm (increasing awareness of customers on firms' sustainability obligations) with regards to; systematic review on public health assessment (Whaley, *et al.* 2020), socio-environmental related systematic review issues (Gough, *et al.* 2017). The study painstakingly tried to adapt medically inclined conceptualization and generalizing it into sustainability environmental driven business and service marketing constructs (Bearman; & Dawson, 2013, Silva, *et al* 2012)

Review Framework

The review is based on Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) protocol, since it borders on various fields of study, it becomes necessary to establish a concrete conceptual basis with identified purpose of study (Tricco, *et al.* 2018) and the framework for preferred reporting protocol for systematic reviews (Moher, *et al.* 2015). In adapting PRISMA protocol to this study, partial adaptation was deployed to ensure consistency and reliability in multi-disciplinary (Rethlefsen, *et al.* 2021), evaluation of firms' financial dealings in line with the triple bottom line theory (Anderson, *et al.* 2022; & Paul, *et al.* 2015).

Adapting PRISMA protocol as standard, based on its pliability in accommodating the combination of myriads of methodologies for; identifying, screening and validity check (Bearman; & Dawson, 2013, Silva, *et al* 2012); on the methodologies adopted by various studies adapted to ensure consistency in the research process in line with business and marketing science methodological processes (Bearman; & Dawson, 2013, Silva, *et al* 2012;)

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Following PRISMA protocol, inclusion/exclusion boundaries screened data sources for unethical business/marketing practices using Triple Bottom Line theory. Excluded: deep sociological, philosophical, conceptual ethics issues, TBL accounting technicalities, telecommunications technology. Search focused on current, high-impact Google Scholar indexed publications to ensure consistency in specific constructs under study

Data Collection, Analysis and Synthesis

An in-depth content assessment procedure was adopted due to inter-disciplinary mode of methodologies adopted in the core social sciences (Martinez, 2019; & Verst, *et al.* 2015), and accounting (Anderson, *et al.* 2022; Paul, *et al.* 2015). The researchers agreed on the deployment of repetitive research implementation, encrypted into core concepts by making inferences based on the

study sample. This was to ensure that the sample had direct inclination with perceptions related to core business and marketing literature

Sample Size and Sampling Method

This study is based on samples collected from respondents in respect of Unethical business operational issues on a mobile communications Brand operator in Nigeria MTN, the study adopts the Triple Bottom Line Theory (TBL) to assess sustainability (Economic, Social and Environmental) in its operations within the framework of the period of this study. The study sample was 255 at 5% level of significance based on Yamane, (1974) table for determining sample size of population of seven hundred (700) persons. The stratified random sampling approach was adopted by dividing the population into relevant strata to enhance the process of selecting the sample from the sample frame, then (simple or systematic) is now adopted to draw from each of the subsets, the probabilistic nature of giving every member of the population a fair chance to be selected was very critical in achieving the research objectives (Saunders, *et. al.* 2016). The rationale for adopting this approach is the simplicity of the procedure in ensuring fair representation of responses. The demographic categorization of respondents was effectively sampled to represent; age group, employment status, marital status, educational level, income level and regional location. The goal of the interview was to obtain in-depth information about how the respondents perceived the firms' ethical standards in its operational activities.

Table 1: Questionnaire Administration schedule

Categories	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative
Unreturned questionnaire	8	3	3
Unusable questionnaires	17	6	9
Usable Questionnaires	255	91	100
Total	280	100	

Table 1 shows that the total number of questionnaire administered to the respondents was 280, out of that number, 8 questionnaires representing 3% were not returned at all, 17 questionnaires representing 6% were actually returned, but not usable for the research based and unnecessary cancellation that made it not useful for the research, 255 questionnaires representing 91% were returned and was valid for use in the study as the sample for the study. The data collected was analyzed and each of the null hypotheses were tested to affirm the relationship between the variables of the construct.

Results

Hypothesis One

Unauthorized encroachments on customer privacy have no relationship with unethical business operations by the brand MTN Nigeria.

Table 2 Correlations

			Unethical Business Operations	Unauthorized encroachments on customers' privacy
Spearman's rho	Unethical Business Operations	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.937**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	265	255
	Unauthorized encroachments on customers' privacy	Correlation Coefficient	.937**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	255	255

****.** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Df=112

Table 2 is the result of the correlation statistics which shows the significant relationship between unauthorized encroachment on customers' privacy and unethical business operations in Nigeria. The correlation index r level is 0.937, which shows a very high level of response by respondents on the inimical practice by firms on their personal information entrusted in their care, the sample N was 255 and the level of significance is lower than the 0.05 alpha level. Therefore, the null hypothesis is hereby rejected. This implies that unauthorized encroachment on customers' privacy has a greatly unethical business operations in Nigeria.

Hypothesis Two

Manipulative avoidance of firms' financial obligation has no relationship with unethical business operations by the brand MTN Nigeria

Table 3 Correlations

		Unethical Business Operations	Manipulative Avoidance of Firms Financial Obligations
Spearman's rho	Unethical Business Operations	Correlation Coefficient	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.
		N	255
	Manipulative Avoidance of Firms Financial Responsibilities	Correlation Coefficient	.915*
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
		N	255

****.** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Df=112

The Outcome emanating from Table 3 shows the Correlation statistics on the significant relationship between manipulative avoidance of firms' financial obligation and unethical business operations in Nigeria. The correlation index r level is 0.915, which shows a high level of response by respondents on macro-economic impact of avoiding legal obligations by firms. This could affect government capacity to provide enabling environment for the development of the sector, the sample N which represents the sample was 255, and the level of significance is lower than the 0.05 alpha level.

Therefore, the null hypothesis is hereby rejected. This implies that manipulative avoidance of firms' financial obligation has great effect on unethical business operations in Nigeria.

Hypothesis Three

Unwholesome advertorial etiquette has no relationship with unethical business operations by the brand MTN Nigeria.

Table 54 **Correlations**

			Unethical Business Operations	Unwholesome Advertorial Etiquette
Spearman's rho	Unethical Business Operations	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.727**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	255	255
	Unwholesome Advertorial Etiquette	Correlation Coefficient	.727**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	255	255

****.** *Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Df=112*

Table 4 is the result of the correlation statistics which shows the significant relationship between unwholesome advertorial etiquette and unethical business operations in Nigeria. The correlation index r level is 0.727, which shows a very high level of response on, the third-party access to customers account by unsolicited mails and advertorials, the sample N was 255 and the level of significance is lower than the 0.05 alpha level. Therefore, the null hypothesis is hereby rejected. This implies that unwholesome advertorial etiquette has great effect on unethical business operations in Nigeria.

Discussion

This study furnished a comprehensive theoretical understanding of the interacting effect between sustainable business operations (Schaltegger S., Wagner M. (2017), and TBL's economic, social and environmental variables (Anderson, *et. al.* 2022; Paul, *et. al.* 2015). This reveals that inasmuch as firms have to ensure their profit maximization drive, effort must also be made in balancing the societal and environmental maxim of the TBL trio dimension. For instance, Dell in effort to reduce its carbon footprint, Dell has made strategic effort to cut-back on the energy severity of the firms' product by 80% by 2030.. Hence, mobile telecommunications firms' its energy at all its base stations in the country, this further increases the firms' operational cost, which is incidentally borne by the customer, through increased service costs. It should also be noted that, government all over the world provides the basic human needs with taxes, and firms are socially obligated to meet their tax obligations, in the same weight as the economic drive to maximize profit and increase shareholders wealth. Ethical business operation means that mobile telecommunications firms in Nigeria are officially obligated to remit their taxes to the government, as and when due.

The unwholesome advertorial and unsolicited mails is an unethical practice that must be mitigated (Serenko, *et. al.* 2021), customers feel very much unsafe when third parties make unauthorized intrusion into their social network accounts. The onus lies on firm to smoothen their perceived relationship with customers to secure their perceived brand loyalty (Eshiett & Eshiett, 2022).

The findings entail warning to regulatory authorities to create an accounting process that recognizes income accruable to the government at source, if firms;’ are notified in advance of their tax liability prompt payment of such financial obligations could be achieved, for the development of the sector and the entire economy at large.

Research gaps and Implications:

The study identified the following gap and its implications are as follows: i) Limited integration of digital ethics in sustainable marketing frameworks, risking privacy violations and reduced consumer trust; ii) Insufficient stakeholder-specific research on diverse community needs, potentially creating one-size-fits-all strategies that worsen digital divides; iii) Lack of longitudinal studies on long-term market positioning, limiting justification for ethical investments; iv) Absence of standardized metrics for measuring sustainable marketing effectiveness, preventing accountability tracking; and v) Limited examination of Nigerian cultural norms' impact on ethical practices, risking Western-oriented frameworks that conflict with indigenous values and undermine sustainability program success

Conclusion

MTN Nigeria’s sustainable marketing practices and ethical operations were thoroughly assessed in this study, exposing serious issues that jeopardize the integrity of the telecommunications industry and erode consumer trust. The research identified three key ethical concerns: ongoing violations of customer privacy through unauthorized data collection and sharing, intentional evasion of financial obligations such as unresolved charges and insufficient compensation, and the use of misleading advertising and deceptive marketing techniques. These results reveal a stark disconnect between MTN’s claims of corporate social responsibility and its actual business behavior, indicating that the pursuit of profit often takes precedence over ethical standards and sustainable marketing values. The continued existence of these practices not only weakens consumer confidence but also casts doubt on the effectiveness of regulatory oversight and corporate accountability in Nigeria’s telecommunications sector. Additionally, the study underscores how these ethical deficiencies fuel wider industry challenges, fostering a culture where exploitative behaviors become routine and consumer rights are insufficiently safeguarded.

These findings reveal broader, systemic issues within Nigeria's telecommunications sector that go beyond MTN alone. The intrusion on privacy rights highlights the lack of robust data protection laws and ineffective enforcement, putting millions of subscribers at risk of exploitation. Financial misconduct, such as arbitrary charges, inadequate dispute resolution, and a reluctance to fulfill service obligations, points to a corporate culture focused more on profit than on consumer well-being or ethical responsibility. The widespread use of misleading advertisements and manipulative marketing further exposes weak regulatory controls and questions the industry's dedication to transparent operations. Together, these problems undermine the core tenets of sustainable marketing, which call for long-term value creation, social and environmental responsibility, and ethical practices. The research makes it clear that unless major reforms address these deep-rooted ethical issues, the telecommunications industry's role in advancing Nigeria's sustainable development goals will remain limited, and public trust will continue to diminish.

Drawing from these findings, this study advocates for thorough, multi-level interventions to address ethical challenges and support authentic sustainable marketing. Regulatory agencies, especially the

Nigerian Communications Commission, should tighten enforcement, impose significant penalties for privacy breaches and misleading practices, and build strong consumer protection systems with clear accountability. MTN and other telecom providers ought to focus on creating and enforcing transparent data management policies, forming independent ethics committees to monitor marketing, and providing comprehensive training on sustainable marketing and consumer rights. There is also an urgent need for improved consumer education programs to inform subscribers about their rights and available remedies. Adopting international standards for data privacy, financial transparency, and ethical marketing must become mandatory, not optional. Only with coordinated action from government regulators, industry stakeholders, civil society, and knowledgeable consumers can the telecommunications industry align with sustainable marketing, rebuild public trust, and make a meaningful contribution to Nigeria's socio-economic progress while upholding ethical business standards.

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Authors' contributions

All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Data availability

No datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable. This study did not involve human or animal subjects.

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