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MANAGEMENT

Green Management Practices and Competitive Advantage among Small and Medium Enterprises in The Gambia: A Qualitative Study

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HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This paper aims to examine the green management practices adopted by small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in The Gambia and to analyze how these practices contribute to competitive advantage within a resource-constrained economic context.

Method: The study employs a qualitative documentary approach based on the analysis of secondary data drawn from government policies, reports issued by international agencies, and SME-related publications produced between 2018 and 2025. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, guided by the Resource-Based View and Institutional Theory.

Result: The findings reveal several common, although largely informal, green management practices among SMEs, primarily focused on energy conservation, basic waste management, and resource protection. These practices are predominantly cost-driven and reactive in nature. Nevertheless, they generate competitive advantages by lowering operational costs, strengthening organizational legitimacy, and enhancing business resilience. Their wider adoption, however, is constrained by limited financial capacity, weak regulatory enforcement, and insufficient strategic managerial awareness.

Practical Implications for Economic Growth and Development: The findings indicate that integrating sustainability into SME capacity-building programs is essential for strengthening long-term competitiveness and promoting employment generation. Policymakers and development partners should therefore reposition green practices as strategic investments in resilience by supporting them through financial incentives, practical implementation tools, and targeted training initiatives.

Originality/Value: This study provides one of the earliest firm-level qualitative examinations of the strategic adoption of green management practices by SMEs in The Gambia. In doing so, it addresses an important gap in the sustainability literature concerning small African economies.

Keywords: *Green Management Practices, Competitive Advantage, SMEs, Sustainability, The Gambia*

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INTRODUCTION

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) contribute significantly to economic development, employment creation, and income generation in developing economies. In The Gambia, SMEs dominate the private sector and make an important contribution to livelihoods, particularly in urban and peri-urban areas. Nevertheless, these businesses face acute challenges, including limited access to finance, inadequate infrastructure, high operating costs, and increasing vulnerability to environmental risks such as poor waste disposal, energy inefficiency, and climate-related disruptions (Mbedzi & Kapingura, 2023; Toor et al., 2025). In response to these local and global sustainability imperatives, green management practices may be understood as organizational strategies and activities aimed at reducing environmental degradation while enhancing business performance. Across the world, companies have increasingly adopted sustainable operations as a means of gaining competitive advantage, improving efficiency, and responding to stakeholder demands (Abu-Alhaija & Alsawaha, 2025). In the Gambian economic context, which is characterized as a small, open economy heavily dependent on imports, tourism, and agriculture, structural vulnerabilities include volatile energy prices, inadequate waste management systems, and the growing impacts of climate change (Omokaro et al., 2026). Within this setting, SMEs often face a recurring dilemma between short-term survival and long-term sustainability, usually with limited institutional support. It is against this backdrop that SME managers perceive, prioritize, and adopt green management practices (Vanpetch & Sattayathamrongthian, 2024).

Existing research on green management practices has predominantly focused on large corporations and developed economies. In developing regions, including Africa, scholarly attention has largely centered on environmental sustainability from macro-level policy, agricultural, or environmental science perspectives, with limited emphasis on managerial decision-making and firm-level strategy (Elemure et al., 2023; Liahuka & Piricz, 2025). Studies that do examine SMEs and sustainability often focus on larger emerging economies, leaving smaller West African nations such as The Gambia critically underrepresented in the literature (Li et al., 2026; Setlhatlhanyo et al., 2023). Moreover, where sustainability in SMEs has been studied, the emphasis has tended to be regulatory or environmental rather than strategic or managerial. This has created a significant gap in understanding how SMEs in resource-constrained, small economies strategically engage with green practices to achieve competitiveness. Theoretical frameworks such as the Resource-Based View (RBV) and Institutional Theory have been applied in other contexts to explain sustainable competitive advantage and organizational behaviour, but they have seen limited application to the distinctive institutional and economic realities of SMEs in countries such as The Gambia (White et al., 2026).

This research addresses these gaps by offering one of the first qualitative, management-focused explorations of green practices among Gambian SMEs. Its novelty is threefold. First, it shifts the discussion from a macro-policy or environmental compliance perspective to the firm level by examining how SME managers themselves conceptualize and operationalize green practices. Second, it deliberately focuses on a small and under-researched African economy, thereby contributing knowledge that is often overshadowed by studies of larger emerging markets. Third, it employs a qualitative document analysis methodology, which is particularly suitable in contexts where primary data collection is constrained, and draws empirical evidence from publicly accessible policy documents, institutional reports, and publications produced by development agencies. By integrating the Resource-Based View and Institutional Theory, this study advances a theoretical perspective that brings together internal resources and external institutional pressures in explaining the adoption and competitive implications of green management practices in a low-resource setting.

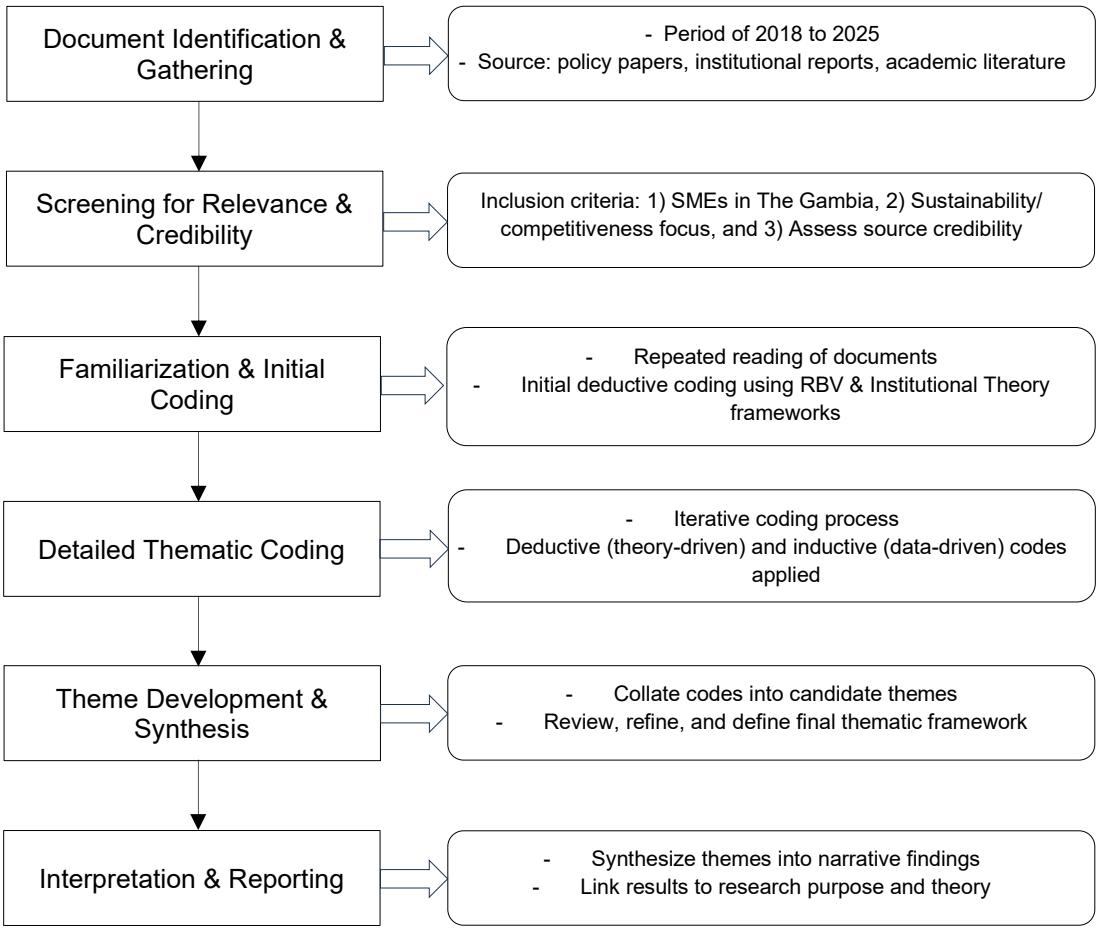
This study aims to qualitatively explore the nature and drivers of green management practices adopted by SMEs in The Gambia and to examine how these practices may contribute to competitive advantage. Specifically, the study seeks to identify the most common forms of green practices, understand the factors that facilitate or hinder their adoption, and assess how

they influence SME competitiveness within the particular institutional and economic constraints of The Gambia.

METHOD

The study design is qualitative because it involves documentary analysis to uncover green management practices and competitive advantage among SMEs in The Gambia. This approach was chosen because the research question is exploratory, and there is limited primary, firm-level empirical evidence available on The Gambia (Rajapakse et al., 2022). It enables a systematic analysis of available textual sources to generate insights into managerial practices and institutional processes. The research was based on secondary qualitative data drawn from publicly available documents. Data collection and analysis were conducted through a rigorous and transparent process consisting of several stages, as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Flowchart of the Documentary Analysis Process



Source: Developed by the authors (2025)

The process began with the identification and collection of relevant documents published between 2018 and 2025. These included national development plans (e.g., the *Gambia National Development Plan*), environmental and SME policy documents, reports from

international development organizations (e.g., UNDP and the World Bank), publications from Gambian SME support institutions, and academic and grey literature addressing sustainability and business in The Gambia. The second stage involved screening the documents for relevance and credibility. Documents were selected based on their explicit mention of SMEs, sustainability, environmental management, or business competitiveness in The Gambia. Only documents from credible institutional sources, such as government agencies, recognized NGOs, and reputable development partners, were included to ensure the trustworthiness of the data (Elsaesser et al., 2023).

The core of the analysis was thematic analysis, conducted using both deductive and inductive coding strategies (Sandhiya & Bhuvaneswari, 2024). First, an initial set of deductive codes was derived from the study's theoretical framework: the Resource-Based View, which focuses on internal capabilities and resources, and Institutional Theory, which emphasizes regulatory, normative, and cognitive pressures. The documents were then read repeatedly to apply these codes and identify new emergent (inductive) themes directly from the data, such as specific local practices or contextual barriers. Following coding, the analysis proceeded to theme development and synthesis. Codes were collated and grouped into candidate themes that captured significant patterns related to green practices and competitiveness. These themes were then reviewed, refined, and defined to ensure that they accurately represented the dataset and addressed the research purpose. The final stage involved interpretation and reporting, in which the thematic patterns were synthesized into the coherent findings presented in this paper, explaining how green practices are adopted and how they contribute to competitive advantage (Jashari Goga, 2025).

To enhance the credibility of the study, source triangulation was employed, whereby governmental, non-governmental, and international documents were analyzed. This enabled the cross-checking of facts and the incorporation of multiple perspectives on the phenomenon. In addition, the transparency of the coding process, together with its grounding in established theory, strengthens the credibility and reliability of the findings (Coombs & Bagley, 2024).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Predominance of Energy Efficiency as a Primary Green Practice

The most consistently reported green practice among Gambian SMEs is the adoption of energy-efficiency measures. Documented practices include the use of energy-saving light bulbs (LEDs), the maximization of natural lighting, and, where feasible, the partial integration of solar energy systems, particularly in sectors such as retail and agro-processing (de Andrade et al., 2025; Ngugi, 2024). The main driver of this adoption is almost uniformly identified as the high and volatile cost of grid electricity, which constitutes a significant operational burden. Policy papers and development agency reports note that reducing energy costs, rather than a dedicated environmental ethic, is the primary motivator.

This finding can be clearly interpreted through the Resource-Based View (RBV). Energy-efficiency practices, although sometimes simple, constitute important and valuable resources in an environment where energy insecurity and high costs prevail. They directly reduce the cost of doing business, thereby contributing to a firm's cost competitiveness, which is a cornerstone of competitive advantage. Such practices may also be imperfectly imitable, as their effective implementation requires firm-specific knowledge of local energy conditions and available solutions.

This finding highlights an important entry point for sustainability in The Gambia. The strategic significance of green practices is framed not in terms of benevolence, but in relation to stark economic realities. For SME owners, a solar panel or an LED bulb is, first and foremost, a tool for financial resilience. However, this practical foundation should not be dismissed. It demonstrates that green practices are more likely to gain traction when they are directly linked to immediate business survival needs. The challenge for policymakers and support institutions

is to build on this existing motivation—cost saving—to promote broader energy management and environmental awareness, thereby expanding the strategic perspective from mere cost reduction to a more comprehensive view of efficiency and sustainability.

Basic Waste Management and Situational Resource Conservation

SMEs, especially those in retail, food services, and small-scale manufacturing, engage in basic waste minimization and resource-conservation practices. These practices are often rudimentary and informal, including the reuse of packaging materials, efforts to reduce spoilage of perishable goods, and simple water-conservation techniques (Sooriyabandara & Kavirathna, 2025; Zheng et al., 2023). There is little evidence of formal recycling systems or advanced circular economy models. Like energy-related practices, these actions are deeply embedded in cost control and operational efficiency rather than arising from formal environmental policies.

Institutional Theory helps explain the informality of these practices. The absence of strong coercive regulatory pressure for sophisticated waste management means that SMEs are not institutionally compelled to develop formal systems. Instead, normative pressures from community expectations and cognitive pressures rooted in a general understanding of thriftiness and waste avoidance shape these basic behaviours. From an RBV perspective, these conservation habits represent lean operational capabilities that reduce input costs and waste-disposal expenses, thereby contributing to a subtle but often overlooked competitive advantage through margin preservation.

The situational character of these practices further reflects the adaptability of SMEs in a resource-constrained environment. Waste reduction is achieved not primarily because of regulation, but because of material costs and the everyday reality of scarcity. This creates a form of organic or implicit green management grounded in long-standing practices of resourcefulness. However, this informality is double-edged. It limits scalability, measurement, and the potential for these practices to evolve into more strategic and market-differentiating advantages. The gap between these informal measures and the formal sustainability standards expected by potential international partners or higher-value markets remains considerable, creating a significant constraint on the development of many Gambian SMEs.

The Informal, Reactive, and Managerially Dependent Nature of Adoption

A defining characteristic of green management in Gambian SMEs is its informal and unstructured implementation. Documents consistently highlight the absence of formal environmental policies, sustainability reports, or dedicated green budgets (Mishaal & Haw, 2023). The adoption of such practices is highly dependent on the discretion, awareness, and personal experience of the owner-manager. Decisions are often reactive, triggered by a spike in utility costs, a community complaint, or conditions attached to a development grant, rather than arising from proactive, long-term strategic planning (Mohammed & Bougatef, 2024).

This theme is effectively explained through the intersection of RBV and Institutional Theory. RBV emphasizes managerial capability as a key firm resource. Where managerial awareness of sustainability as a strategic tool is low, the firm's capacity to develop green resources remains underdeveloped. From an institutional perspective, a weak regulatory framework (coercive isomorphism) fails to standardize practices. Instead, firms tend to imitate the informal, reactive behaviours they observe within their immediate peer networks (mimetic isomorphism), resulting in a sector-wide pattern of ad hoc adoption. Normative pressure from professional management standards is also minimal.

This managerial dependency presents both a challenge and an opportunity. It is a challenge because progress in sustainability remains fragmented and unpredictable, tied to individual attitudes rather than sector-wide standards. However, it also represents a significant opportunity because it identifies the SME owner-manager as the most effective lever for

change. Interventions aimed at strengthening managerial acumen and shifting the cognitive frame from viewing green practices as a cost to recognizing them as a strategic investment for resilience and market access could yield disproportionate benefits. Training programs, peer-learning networks, and case studies from similar contexts may therefore be more effective than top-down regulations in transforming reactive actions into deliberate strategy.

The Centrality of Cost Drivers and the Weakness of Market/Ethical Pull

The analysis confirms that the dominant driver of green practice adoption in The Gambia is economic, namely the reduction of operational costs and the mitigation of resource-related risks (Bojang & Emang, 2025). In contrast, market-based drivers remain notably weak. Consumer demand for environmentally friendly products or services is reported to be very low, with purchasing decisions prioritizing price, availability, and basic quality over green credentials (Alsiehemy, 2025; Maglicic & Vasconcelos, 2025). Similarly, although some SMEs engaged with international partners or operating in the tourism sector experience normative pressure, an intrinsic environmental ethic is rarely cited as a primary motivator.

Institutional Theory helps clarify this dynamic. The cognitive institution, or the shared mindset of consumers, does not yet prioritize sustainability, thereby removing a key market incentive. Normative pressures from supply chains are selective and affect only a minority of SMEs connected to global networks. Consequently, the primary institutional push comes indirectly through economic instability and high costs rather than directly through social or regulatory demands. RBV complements this perspective by showing that firms invest in green capabilities primarily to protect and strengthen their most vulnerable resource: financial capital.

This creates a distinctive strategic environment. In The Gambia, the competitive advantage derived from green practices is mainly internal and operational, unlike in developed economies where green practices may generate brand premiums. As a result, this advantage is often less visible, though no less important. This suggests that advocacy and policy approaches need to be carefully adapted. Campaigns based solely on environmental awareness may have limited impact. Instead, a more persuasive approach would be to demonstrate tangible short-term financial returns, resilience benefits, such as the ability of solar power to keep businesses operating during blackouts, and improved access to finance from development partners concerned with sustainability. The key challenge is to strengthen the existing economic rationale while gradually fostering the market-based and ethical dimensions of sustainability.

Pathways to Competitive Advantage: Cost, Legitimacy, and Resilience

The reported outcomes of green practices among Gambian SMEs are consistent with three non-exclusive forms of competitive advantage. First, and most commonly, is cost leadership through reduced utility and input costs. Second, green practices can enhance organizational legitimacy, as SMEs that adopt visible green measures, such as proper waste management, are more likely to gain acceptance from local communities, authorities, and development partners (Mashingaidze et al., 2024). Third, they can strengthen resilience, because initiatives such as energy self-generation and resource conservation help cushion firms against external shocks, including fuel price increases, power outages, and water shortages (Bensouda et al., 2024; Musaeva et al., 2024).

The RBV explains all three pathways. Cost savings improve efficiency, which is a fundamental competitive resource. Legitimacy constitutes a valuable social resource that can facilitate operations and secure external support. Resilience, meanwhile, represents an increasingly important dynamic capability that enables a firm to survive and adapt in a volatile environment. Institutional Theory further explains the legitimacy dimension by showing how conformity to emerging normative expectations, such as those promoted by development partners and

ideals of being a “good corporate citizen,” can grant social licence to operate and unlock access to additional resources such as grants or technical support.

For Gambian SMEs, competitive advantage is not primarily about outperforming numerous rivals in a mature green market, but rather about achieving survival and stability in a challenging and resource-constrained environment. The benefits of green practices are therefore often preventive and structural. They enable firms to operate more efficiently, gain greater social acceptance, and become more resilient to shocks than firms that neglect such practices. This has important implications for both theory and policy. It suggests that in frontier economies, the principal value of green management may lie less in aggressive market differentiation and more in risk mitigation and institutional strengthening. From this perspective, SME sustainability is closely tied to economic stability and job security in the country. Stakeholders should therefore focus on strengthening these three pathways by making cost savings more accessible through green technology financing, enhancing legitimacy through recognition schemes, and explicitly incorporating resilience into business-support programs.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study aimed to understand the adoption and strategic significance of green management practices among small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in The Gambia. Using a documentary analysis approach, the research sought to identify the nature of these practices, examine their main drivers and barriers, and explore how they contribute to competitive advantage within the unique resource-constrained and institutionally complex environment of The Gambia.

The findings indicate that green management practices among Gambian SMEs are largely informal, reactive, and economically driven. Key results show a concentration on basic energy-efficiency and waste-reduction measures, motivated primarily by cost-cutting needs rather than by environmental ethics or regulatory pressure. The adoption of such practices is strongly shaped by managerial awareness and discretion. Although these practices remain informal, they contribute to competitive advantage in three main ways: (1) direct cost leadership through lower operational costs, (2) enhanced organizational legitimacy within communities and among development partners, and (3) greater resilience to external shocks, including energy instability and resource shortages.

The findings provide practical guidance for stakeholders seeking to promote sustainable economic development in The Gambia. For policymakers, the message is clear: environmental and SME development policies need to be aligned rather than pursued in isolation. Instead of imposing rigid regulations that small businesses may struggle to comply with, governments should prioritize practical mechanisms that make sustainability both feasible and attractive. Measures such as tax incentives for investment in solar panels or energy-efficient equipment, combined with technical support and clear guidelines, are more likely to gain traction among business owners already operating under significant constraints. For support institutions and development partners, the main opportunity lies in engaging directly with owner-managers to reshape their understanding of green practices. Many still view sustainability as an additional cost or a charitable concern, whereas it can instead function as a practical strategy for navigating difficult economic conditions. Training programs, peer-learning networks, and improved access to green finance could help shift this mindset and demonstrate that environmental protection and profitability are not mutually exclusive. For SME owners themselves, the research confirms that simple measures, such as reducing waste and improving energy efficiency, make sound business sense. These practices help control costs, reduce vulnerability to rising utility prices, and build a reputation that is valued by customers and communities alike.

Looking ahead, several directions for future research emerge from this study. Direct engagement with Gambian SME owners through interviews and focus groups would provide rich insights that documentary sources alone cannot capture. Hearing business owners

describe their own challenges, decisions, and motivations would deepen understanding and reveal nuances that policy documents may overlook. It would also be valuable to compare the adoption of green practices across different sectors, for example between tourism enterprises and agro-processors, or to compare The Gambia with neighbouring countries in West Africa. Such comparisons could help distinguish context-specific dynamics from patterns that may be transferable across settings. Another useful avenue would be longitudinal research that tracks businesses over time to examine whether sustainability practices deepen with experience or in response to new policy interventions. Finally, the development of a survey instrument to measure green practices and competitive performance across a larger sample of SMEs would enable researchers to test statistically whether the patterns identified in this study hold more broadly. Together, these directions would add further depth to a topic of significance not only for The Gambia, but also for small economies more generally as they seek to balance immediate survival with long-term sustainability.

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