



Praxeological contextualization of Sustainability: A business framework for Third Wave Coffee

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ABSTRACT

The Third Wave Coffee movement emerges as a platform for ethical and sustainable transformation. While it contributes to broader social impact, a critical gap remains in understanding how sustainability motivations are formed and interpreted in real business contexts. Anchored in Mises' Praxeology, this study addresses the lacuna through an exploratory qualitative research design with heterogeneity sampling by examining, in a focus group discussion, the entrepreneurs' lived experiences and practices toward sustainability. The reflexive thematic analysis resulted in the articulation of a contextual sustainability business framework highlighting the role of personal value as human agency in mediating theory and practice. This framework does not claim universal prescription of applicability. Theoretically, this study contributes to the contemporary discourse by grounding sustainability in a praxeological interpretation, revealing that enacting sustainability is not purely a methodological or technical mechanism. Instead, it signals a deeper mind shift within actors, emphasizing the purposive decision-making aspect within project constraints.

Keywords: *Third wave coffee, praxeology, sustainability, sustainable project management, sustainable business framework*

INTRODUCTION

The Philippine Coffee Industry in the Global and Local Markets

The Philippine coffee industry presents a viable economic opportunity for the international and local markets supported by government initiatives. The Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), through the Export Marketing Bureau (EMB) and the Foreign Trade Service Corps (FTSC), has been in discussions since 2020 for trade partnerships in collaboration with the Denmark, Norway, and Sweden Embassies and the Philippine Coffee Board Inc. (DTI, 2020; Kite-Powell, 2020). Meanwhile, the Department of Agriculture (DA) recorded the country's bustling coffee productivity with Sultan Kudarat as the major producer of coffee beans yielding 21,442 metric tons, followed by Bukidnon with 9,042 metric tons and Cavite, with 8,190 metric tons (Tabiolo, 2024). Coffee bean farming was also supported in other regions, such as the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR), to promote inclusive business development and sustainability within the industry (DTI, 2021). On the global scale, the coffee industry continues to expand with a projected average annual growth rate of 4.85%, reaching an estimated market value of US\$186.37 billion by 2033 (Businesswire, 2025). This continually growing demand and increasing supply availability have created a straightforward business agenda – expansion and innovation for the coffee industry aligned with the sustainability agenda.

Although the Third Wave Coffee movement is characterized as an ethical enterprise and sustainable transformation, the expanding coffee landscape raises global concerns about its broader impacts. Ethical sourcing, energy efficiency, and digital transformation are among a few issues from a plethora of many others, that present gradually in the coffee community (Peluso, 2023). Consequently, the expected increase in production and consumption within the coffee industry becomes a relevant context for examining sustainability.

Discourse on Sustainability and Sustainable Project Management

The modern concept of sustainability from the Brundtland Report (1987) has since created a paradigm shift by integrating the Environmental, Social, and Economic (ESE) objectives across all activities and platforms including the dynamic environment of Project Management (PM) (Soares et al., 2024). As sustainability expanded beyond a concept, projects became a mechanism in transitioning forward to the sustainability landscape and meeting its objectives. This evolving sustainability paradigm utilizes projects, characterized as temporary endeavors that create long-term impact in the society (Magano et al., 2024). While PM is effective in ensuring the project's objectives are met, it was challenged for its pure emphasis on the methodological approach (Goel et al., 2019). Consequently, Sustainable Project Management (SPM) emerges integrating the principle of the Elkington's Triple Bottom Line (ESE) with the decision-making aspect in projects (Abraham, 2024; Kumar et al., 2023; Madureira et al., 2022). A new approach in PM which shifts the prioritization on balancing scope, cost, and time aspects from Barnes' Iron Triangle (1969) or the triple constraint theory to adopting sustainability objectives and its broader social impact in the decision-making and considerably, as the project's success (Silvius & Schipper, 2014; Tremblay, 2023). ESE dimensions were incorporated in the PM methodology such as the project lifecycle, as a technique, to ensure full adoption (Andersen et al., 2023; Armenia et al., 2019; Soares et al., 2024). However, this purely cross-cutting approach to PM was deemed insufficient to meet the greater sustainability objectives (de la Cruz López et al., 2021).

These limitations and varying interpretations have given rise to the contemporary discourse on the theory and practice of Sustainability and what mediates in between. Much of the

literature focused on developing new methodological tools, processes, and techniques on integrating the ESE dimensions, and less attention to the examination on the role of human agency. Within this context, this study frames its central question: What are the subjective motivations for Sustainability and how are these interpreted in the Third Wave Coffee? In addressing this critical lacuna, the following objectives were carried out for the study: (1) Analyze project leaders' perception on a project's methodological process, (2) Examine the translation of personal motivations into practices, (3) Assess the operational tensions and constraints during business projects, and (4) Articulate a contextualized Sustainability business framework grounded in the lived experiences and patterns of project leaders within the Third Wave Coffee.

The findings, hereafter, provided a significant contribution on the contemporary discourse by placing human agency that mediates the theory and practice of sustainability, and the Third Wave Coffee movement by contextualizing a sustainability business framework from the praxeological interpretation of the personal value and subjective motivations toward sustainability. Furthermore, this study is a response to United Nations call to action and the International Project Management Association to advocate for the integration of Sustainability within project environments (Ingason, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Ludwig von Mises' (1976) Praxeology from the Austrian School of Economics' which posits human action is purposeful, relative to the theory of human action from Kant's (Peña Gil, 2020; Rothbard, 2019). An action axiom that presupposes that, as humans consciously choose and act towards the intended goal, in contrast to reflexive action, where humans act as a response.

Praxeology derives from the Greek word *praxis*, meaning "doing", referring to the study of human action. In philosophical traditions, the terms praxeology and praxiology, is often used interchangeably, yet consistently refers to "action". In Aristotelian thought, *praxis* is one of the three human basic activities along with *theoria* (thinking) and *poiēsis* (making). In Kantian Philosophy, it refers to the application of an ethically significant thought grounded in experience, prioritizing practicality over theory (Blackburn, 1996). Makowski (2017) quoted Kotarbinski (1973) in his earlier discussion of praxeology as the science of efficient action, which, in reference to its characteristic, was unanimous with theory. Thus, returning to Mises' prior thought.

In essence, praxeology, the theory of action, provided a perspective on the pragmatic process of rationality in the context of business objectives. It aimed to investigate humans' multidimensional conditions that direct towards a purposeful decision-making process. Praxeology contrasts with behaviorism or reflexive action. The former emphasizes purposive action guided by internal reasoning, whereas the latter emphasizes responses to external stimuli. The motivation that influenced this pragmatic approach was intrinsic, which reflected the personal value of the doer onto the object as an action. This orientation provided a significant link between praxeology and sustainability, especially in the business context. Denis Goulet's Developmental Ethics similarly highlighted the need to align economic success with moral responsibility and human dignity (Marangos et al., 2021; Muldoon, 2024). Praxeology supports this perspective by placing the human agency at the center of interpreting sustainability principles into concrete action.

In entrepreneurial project formation, the praxeological perspective framed sustainability not as a methodological objective but as a personal value for project leaders in the decision-making process. Project sponsors, owners, and managers hold this subjective conviction within projects, which shapes how sustainability principles were implemented (PMI, n.d.).

From this standpoint, praxeology served as the interpretive foundation for this study. It shifted the focus of examining sustainability from assessing performance-based compliance or reporting systems to understanding how sustainability convictions come into practice. This examination of how Third Wave Coffee entrepreneurs interpreted sustainability in the context of coffee business formation positioned purposeful human action as the central core for mediating Sustainability theory into practice.

Review of Related Literature

The Three Coffee Waves of Coffee and the Sustainability Context

Coffee is the second most traded commodity in the world after crude oil (Argenti et al., 2020). This demand supplied a huge market that, over the years, continually evolved. It not only shifted the mode of coffee production but also shaped consumer preference and taste. Since the 1960s the coffee industry has gone through, what is referred now as, the Waves of Coffee. The first wave, spanning from the late 1960s to early 1980s, was characterized by limited competition due to the dominance of institutional roasters. The second wave (1980s-2000), led by individuals with strong business acumen, introduced espresso and expanded commercial coffee chains, positioning coffee as a symbol of social status. Around 1999, the same period the World Barista Championship commenced, was predicted by Timothy Castle and Christopher Lee, as the Third Wave, as a new generation of coffee shops offering specialty coffee, (Castle, 2016).

This shift in consumer preferences was not only notable in the artistry and craftsmanship in coffee production but also to a social trend emphasizing moral responsibility and an attitude towards Fair Trade Coffee (Arenas-Gaitán, J. et al., 2020; Jo, M. et al., 2023). Consumers were no longer bound to the behavioral control of the mass media. Their consumption, according to Aleksić et al. (2022), was based on an individual's perception of the social norms, sensory quality, and habits (2022). Despite consumer awareness, sustainability concerns and issues persisted (Fuly et al., 2022). Furthermore, consumers in Asia and Africa, do not appear to be fully aware about the standard practice for coffee traders which promote equality and fair trading among coffee producers and consumers (Jo et al., 2022). Despite the association of the Third Wave to ethical sourcing and Sustainability, there was still limited attention to understanding the motivations of business leaders towards the Third Wave movement.

Sustainability and the Evolution of Project Thinking

The modern conceptualization of sustainability and the introduction of Elkington's Triple Bottom Line, created a paradigm shift in project environments. Due to the projects' nature of generating long-term societal impacts and as a practical path in transitioning towards the sustainability landscape, organizations utilized project management to operationalize sustainability objectives (Magano et al., 2024). Yet the traditional approach to projects, which balanced the iron triangle, has been criticized for prioritizing operational efficiency over environmental and social considerations (De la Cruz López et al., 2021; Goel et al., 2019; Tremblay, 2023). In response, previous studies in the literature recommended embedding the triple bottom line throughout project processes (Kumar et al., 2023; Andersen et al., 2023). This paved to the emergence of sustainable project management (Silvius & Schipper, 2014). This mind shift went beyond the traditional approach, integrating ethical and moral considerations of sustainability and reframing project success to encompass broader societal objectives and impact (Madureira et al., 2022). Yet, integration of sustainability principles into current project management processes has been proven insufficient to meet sustainability agendas. Furthermore, these varying definitions suggested that the theoretical and practical interpretation of sustainability was still underexplored and required interpretive contextualization.

Within the project environment, Sustainability was perceived not as a competing aspect in regards to project objectives but as a decision-making aspect in placing priorities.

Sustainability motivations derived from subjective and objective dimensions were experienced as both personal and contextual. On the personal level, sustainability was formed from personal values, ethical commitment, responsibility, accountability, stewardship, and influence. While on the contextual level, stakeholder expectations, cost pressures, economic profitability, and market behavior.

In terms of project success, sustainability was attributed to social impact and economic performance. Participants described influence through awareness-building, brand identity, customer preference, and competitive advantage as external stimulus that formed the contextual judgments.

Despite the barriers, challenges, tensions expressed in the lived experiences and practice, the participants still expressed a forward-looking orientation toward sustainability. The mind shift from the leadership perspective and consumer behavior were perceived as a reinforcement of sustainability as a strategic trajectory in business instead of a temporary advocacy

DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Adaptive Purpose Formation in Project Establishment

Participants described managing projects as adhering to the specified timeline in meeting the identified objectives to balance financial risks, yet it was characterized by flexibility. Timely completion was consistently prioritized. Although demands on each phase were constantly changing. Project objectives for each phase were reevaluated in response, while remaining aligned with the original project goals, reinforcing the balancing of the iron triangle, where adaptability and flexibility was a demonstrated behavior. It was important to clarify that, in this study, project management was not treated as a technical discipline for evaluating or validating sustainability performance. Project establishment utilized projects as a mechanism to organize schedule of activities, deliverables, and financial resources. In this study, the discipline served as an empirical setting on a practical business environment where entrepreneurial decision-making was examined.

This study also significantly addressed the claims that traditional project management approaches were obsolete and irrelevant because they fail to address broader social and environmental concerns (de la Cruz López et al., 2021). The findings suggested a nuanced understanding of sustainability and project management. Participants did not defend the relevance of its methodologies, nor frame sustainability in replacement of project management techniques. Instead, considerations of the scope, time, and cost, surfaced as a practical approach in meeting the project's objectives. Accordingly, sustainability practices were not interpreted and enacted by abandoning the traditional approaches but through adaptive reasoning within existing constraints. The project's original goals remained stable and were achieved through flexible balancing of different constraints.

Theme 2: Sustainability as Value-Driven Commitment

The findings suggested that sustainability commitments were shaped by interrelated motivational orientations: personal value and stakeholder engagement. However, these were not explicitly experienced as opposing categories whether subjective or objective motivations. Rather, they were intertwined altogether where personal value emerged

as the primary interpretive anchor. Participants interpreted sustainability rooting from their ethical considerations, principles and convictions rather than compliance. This was aligned with Van der Sluijs and Silvius (2023), in response to Marnewick et al. (2019), who challenged the interpretation of sustainability as merely a "personal trait." Instead, they redefined it as a "personal value". A deeper personal commitment demonstrated through decision-making and behavior in entrepreneurial projects. This contextual definition was central to this study which emphasized sustainability as emerging from subjective motivations rather technical requirement. The participants' responses also articulated ethical considerations, accountability, stewardship and influence. As an example, one participant described Sustainability as an ethical obligation stating, "I am very critical about that issue. I would like my coffee shop to be sustainable. And I think that is a personal value. Today starts our future and a sustainable coffee shop is what we need today for the future. We need to do this so we can influence others." With this conviction, sustainability was not framed as a regulatory compliance, rather, as an ethical and moral stance. Emphasis on raising awareness also reflected Madureira et al. (2022) described as the need for practitioners to demonstrate authentic commitment to embedding sustainability across project activities. Conceptually, sustainability was interpreted as conviction before it was operationalized as practice.

At the same time, participants acknowledged that their sustainability commitments were shaped stakeholder expectations. As one participant explained, "I decided that it must be environment-friendly because customers are now starting to gain interest in these kind of coffee shop themes." This illustrated how sustainability decisions were influenced by consumer preferences within the business context. Wang et al. (2023) observed that regulatory demands, time constraints and cost constraints influenced decisions in projects. The findings suggested that participants are fully aware of these realities.

A reference to the sustainable development goals also appeared in participant responses: "I try to align my business with the sustainable development goals." Although it was an interpretation of a broad principle, there were no particular tools, metrics, or compliance systems mentioned in relation to it. Relative to Moutinho et al. (2025), who argue that achieving full integration of sustainability across project domains requires the development of more structured methods, tools, and techniques. While the literature called for methodological development, the present findings revealed that in the real business context, within entrepreneurial projects, sustainability was formed from value orientations rather than an operationalized mechanism.

Altogether, these findings suggested that sustainability motivations were not formed from purely intrinsic nor extrinsic stimuli. These were formed through the intersection between personal values and contextual realities. From a praxeological perspective, motivations towards sustainability were guided by a purposive end shaped external expectation. From a praxeological standpoint, sustainability did not function as technical requirement to be adhered to but as a purposive commitment mediated through personal value and stakeholder expectations.

Theme 3: Negotiating Economic Viability and Ethical Responsibility

The findings reveal that Sustainability was a negotiation between the realities of economic survival and ethical principles. This was interpreted as constituting with project success. Some participants perceived success in social and ethical terms. Influence, building awareness, and environmental impacts were also regarded as significant success in terms of sustainability despite limited economic returns. Empirically, sustainability extends beyond economic superiority. On a similar note, it functioned as a competitive advantage. Environmental

orientations were positioned as a differentiation in brand identity, customer retention, and even strategic expansion. Thus, economic viability and environmental orientation were not separate agendas but mutually reinforcing dimensions of success.

Operational constraints further complicated enactment. Despite an intention towards environmentally friendly adoption of materials, there were recognized limitations due to cost pressures. Compostable alternatives and eco-friendly materials were perceived as additional cost which consequently prompt concerns for customers. These findings aligned with Fuly et al. (2022), who acknowledged the reality that despite growing consumer awareness, sustainability concerns and issues persisted.

In this study, Sustainability was not abandoned in response to the cost constraints. Instead, participants compromised economic profitability in favor of ethical decisions as a trade-off driven by personal conviction. From a praxeological perspective, the means of choosing the chosen end showed that ethical convictions were always present despite market expectations and realities. Viewed through a praxeological lens, sustainability was not a rigid concept but a balancing of the practical realities with purposeful intent.

Theme 4: Anticipating Sustainability as Strategic Direction

Across all participants, they all expressed a sustainability-oriented future. While earlier themes revealed discussions on the tensions and constraints experienced in navigating towards sustainability practices, there was no conception of sustainability as a terminal agenda. Rather, it framed the future direction of entrepreneurship towards sustainability-driven objectives that all participants believed would shape their future decisions. One participant expressed hope for a transformative direction: “I hope more coffee shops can transition towards sustainability for environmental benefits and customers also realize its advantages.” Another participant reflected on the adoption of ethical practices as a business trajectory: “Hearing other coffee shop owners’ perspectives, I did not realize that environment-friendly themes can be integrated in coffee shops. A good investment for business and the environment.” The dialogue between peers and market observation also contributed to reframing the alignment of sustainability into business agendas.

This orientation aligned with Aleksić et al. (2022), who argued that social norms, sensory experience, and personal habits were derived from consumer perceptions rather than from mass media interventions. Hence, sustainability functioned as an anticipatory framework through which future opportunities and risks can be mediated.

Thus, from a praxeological perspective, this illustrated how entrepreneurial action was guided not only by present constraints but by expectations towards the future. Participants’ decisions were shaped by a positive perspective on the future of sustainability, focusing on environmental impact and economic performance.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how sustainability was interpreted and enacted by Third Wave Coffee entrepreneurs during the establishment of their business ventures. Anchored in Ludwig von Mises’ praxeological perspective, the research approached sustainability not as a technical tool to be measured, nor as a compliance mechanism to be evaluated. It interprets the practice of sustainability as a purposive action shaped by subjective values and contextual judgment. Through an exploratory qualitative design and reflexive thematic analysis from the data findings of focus group discussions, the study identified patterns of meaning that revealed how sustainability became embedded in entrepreneurial decision-making. The findings demonstrated that sustainability within Third Wave Coffee ventures was neither implemented through project

management methodology nor imposed through institutionalized reporting systems or regulatory compliance. Instead, it emerged through adaptive reasoning, value-driven commitment, economic negotiation, and forward-looking strategic interpretation. Sustainability was enacted through lived judgment rather than mechanical application.

First, entrepreneurs engaged in adaptive purpose formation during project establishment. While operational concerns such as schedule adherence and financial risks remained relevant, they were not perceived as rigid structures but as practical realities within which sustainability commitments were interpreted. Purpose and commitment remained constant anchored in motivation and conviction.

Second, sustainability commitments were formed through personal value orientations. These were shaped by ethical considerations and contextual judgments, including stakeholder awareness. Participants articulated sustainability as responsibility, accountability, stewardship, and influence. At the same time, consumer expectations and market positioning influenced economic decision-making. The practice of sustainability, therefore, was interpreted as an intersection of conviction and context. Emphasizing the praxeological perspective that actions were guided by a chosen end within perceived market realities.

Third, entrepreneurs balanced economic viability and ethical responsibility. Sustainability was navigated with social impact and competitive advantage despite practical tensions and constraints such as cost pressures, financial risks, and other uncertainties. Furthermore, the economic dimension remained a constant condition for business sustainability. Despite these realities, sustainability was not abandoned. Instead, it was still enforced under constraints.

Fourth, participants demonstrated strategic anticipation for sustainability. They expressed willingness to adapt and confidence that sustainability would shape the entrepreneurial practice. Sustainability, therefore, was not framed as a temporary advocacy program or branding mechanism. It was perceived as a developing principle aligned with the evolving consumer behavior and expectations, and industry norms.

The Sustainability Business Framework for Third Wave Coffee

The insights formed led to the articulation of a contextual sustainability business framework for Third Wave Coffee where purposive sustainability commitment was positioned at its core. It represents value-driven motivation on entrepreneurial decisions where sustainability was not treated as a performance evaluation; rather, it was understood as an intentional commitment shaped by personal conviction through contextual awareness.



Figure 2. Sustainability Business Framework for Third Wave Coffee

The framework positioned purposive sustainability commitment as the core driver of entrepreneurial action. Surrounding this core are four interpretive dimensions—adaptive purpose formation, value–stakeholder alignment, economic–ethical negotiation, and strategic anticipation—illustrating how sustainability was enacted through contextual judgment rather than standardized procedural compliance. It was significant to emphasize that these dimensions were not sequential phases or causal variables. They represented interpretive patterns through which sustainability was experienced and enacted. The framework does not propose a universal prescription. It synthesizes the lived patterns of entrepreneurial reasoning through a praxeological lens.

The contextual sustainability business framework proposed in this study should not be interpreted as a prescriptive universal model. Rather, it functions as a contextual framework grounded from patterns of entrepreneurial action observed among Third Wave Coffee project leaders. Its contribution was addressed in mediating the theory into practice of Sustainability and to provide insights in understanding how Sustainability was interpreted and enacted despite contextual dimensions. Theoretically, the study contributed to sustainability discourse by grounding sustainability in praxeological interpretation. It reinforced the understanding that practice of sustainability in business emerged from subjective motivation mediated by contextual constraint. Sustainability, from this perspective, was not a procedural integration but purposive action. In practice, the study determined that sustainability in small entrepreneurial contexts does not abandon methodological mechanisms or strictly follow formal systems. Instead, sustainability was embedded through adaptive judgment and flexibility, ethical commitment, and strategic anticipation on business trajectories. Conclusively, the practice of sustainability in Third Wave Coffee ventures was not incidental. Neither it was mechanically imposed. It was enacted through purposive action formed from the subjective motivation and personal value within the realities of ethical and economic realities and environment, and stakeholder consideration. Therefore, sustainability emerged not as a theoretical abstraction. It was expressed as a mediation of the values and strategic reasoning within the dynamic landscape of Third Wave Coffee.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study was designed as an exploratory qualitative inquiry grounded in a praxeological approach and therefore may have contextual limitations. First, the study focused on interpretive understanding rather than empirical measurement or validation. It aimed to examine how Sustainability was interpreted and enacted based on motivations. It did not include quantitative variables to measure environmental, social, or financial performance in relation with sustainability. It reflected the contextual interpretation toward sustainability on a praxeological approach. Second, participants were selected through purposive sampling, using the maximum variation. While this technique ensured the background of the participants was relative to a specific geographic and industry, the findings therefore reflected only a fraction of the experiences and cannot be generalized to the entire industry. Third, the study emphasized sustainability practice among entrepreneurs who were already in the coffee industry. It did not extensively explore the reluctance and other competing priorities that may discourage sustainability adoption. As a result, the analysis centered on motivation and value-driven orientation rather than the broader dynamics of the industry.

Future Directions

Future research may build upon this study through mixed-method or quantitative research that examine the measurable dimensions of sustainability commitments. This research could complement interpretive insights without diminishing the importance of subjective

motivation. Second, longitudinal research could uncover the scale of the sustainability commitments and motivations that had emerged over time. Third, comparative or cross-cultural studies may examine how sustainability was interpreted within various geographical settings and market conditions, considering the coffee industry is a global industry. Lastly, future studies may explore the opposing spectrum of entrepreneurs of business projects that deliberately deprioritize sustainability to identify a contextual understanding of this decision-making aspect.

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