

**How to enhance sustainability goals implementation in the business behavior: A  
lesson from the discussions of Japanese Small and Medium sized Enterprises**

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**Abstract**

**Purpose:** This study aims to explore the Japanese SME owners' perspectives of entrepreneurial values which lead Japanese SMEs sustainable business behavior and aims to develop a conceptual framework with key themes how to enhance sustainability goals implementation in the businesses.

**Design/methodology/approach:** A qualitative study was applied using semi-structured interview method. The interviews were conducted with the 24 SME owners in Japan and the data were analysed using a thematic approach. The five entrepreneurial orientation (EO)

dimensions were used as an analytical framework to reveal the Japanese unique values underpinning their sustainable business behavior.

**Findings:** The results suggest that Japanese SME owners have unique business values in addition to the five established EO dimensions. First, two new revealed dimensions ‘Co-value creation’ and ‘Contribution to the communities’ have been found to support their clear intention of implementation of sustainability goals in the business behavior. Second, from the interview process, three more values have been depicted as the underlying their sustainable business behavior, which we named ‘driving forces’ for implementing sustainability goals: ‘Emotional attachment,’ ‘Pride,’ and ‘Non- economic values with *Sanpo-yoshi*’.

**Limitations:** We acknowledge that the dataset should be expanded to develop more robust implications which can be verified with other businesses in different markets. A quantitative approach also should be conducted to validate the model and measurements to enhance the applicability and usability of the developed model.

**Contributions:** This study has developed implications for the businesses how to implement sustainability goals with what kind of business values embedded in the SME owners’ mindset. The research outcome demonstrates the key values which support sustainability goals implementation: SDG 8, 9, 11, and 12. The study aimed to share further knowledge on sustainability theory and practices by addressing the unique underpinning

values encouraging the businesses to the sustainable directions, and course of research that provides insights for researchers and practitioners.

**Keywords** sustainability goals implementation, business values, entrepreneurial orientation, Japan, small medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)

## INTRODUCTION

In the social science fields, CSR and the sustainability theory and practices have been gaining interest (Ahmad et al., 2020; Gelbmann, 2010; Morsing, M., & Perrini, 2009).

However, in the context of sustaining social business perspectives, the viewpoints should be enhancing more with actionable recommendations under the pressure of sustainability goals implementations (Grimstad, et al., 2020; Looser et al., 2020).

Pastrana & Sriramesh (2013) suggested that the socio-cultural factors are inevitable for the sustainability research as the country context influences the SME behaviour: The SME owners perceived that customers, employees, and shareholders are the most critical stakeholders and this formed the basis for their CSR activities. Moreover, they found that interpersonal relationships are the key to the success of SME businesses. Lee *et al.* (2015) also studied the CSR activities of Swedish SMEs, which were narrowed down into the related perspectives.

There is another theoretical framework for the SME study, which are five dimensions of entrepreneurial Orientation (EO) dimensions, which have been applied to the various study to reveal the impact of EO on the business behaviour (e.g., Acosta et al., 2018; Dai et al., 2014; Wales et al., 2019).

However, the discussions of EO dimensions have centred around the topic of how to enhance the internationalisation or how to enable businesses profitable by acquiring new customers and market, therefore, how to encourage the sustainability goals implementations has not yet investigated fully (Oe & Yamaoka, 2016). Moreover, the main research interests have not targeted exploration a specific cultural context, nor impact on enhancing the sustainability. Yamamoto and Kan (2018) pointed out the Japanese SMEs' entrepreneurial business behavior remains poorly explored in both the Japanese and English academic literature.

To fill the gap, this study aims to explore the Japanese SME owners' perspectives towards the entrepreneurial perspectives and from there, the underpinning values for sustainability goals implementation was explored and revealed.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

To reveal hidden/embedded Japanese business values from SME owners to propose a conceptual framework with key factors which have supported Japanese SMEs business

behavior:

### ***EO dimensions and sustainability goals implementation***

In this section, SME entrepreneurial behaviors are explored in the context of the sustainability goals implementations: In doing so, critical factors to enhance their business performance in line with the SDG context can be revealed. To overview and prepare an analytical framework for the study, the EO dimensions is applied as a discussion framework to examine Japanese business values of SME owners; i) autonomy (to bring forth new ideas, judge and act on your own decision), ii) risk-taking (to take action rather than being cautious), iii) innovativeness (to openminded with new ideas to be creative), iv) proactiveness (to act positively seeking future opportunities rather than sticking to the experiences and existing ideas), and v) competitive aggressiveness (to act challengingly to compete with rivals) (Lumpkin & Dess, 1996). Researchers have been analysing the impact of EO dimensions on SME business performance within specific business themes mainly in the Western context (Dai *et al.*, 2014; Deligianni *et al.*, 2016). Some scholars have been investigating the pathways to support SMEs performance by using EO as a proxy to develop actionable implications for the SMEs' sustainable behavior (Andersén & Samuelsson 2016). Interestingly, existing evidence on the relationship between EO and business performance is inconclusive, as it is context specific (Oe, 2008; Zahra and Covin, 1995; Zhangg et al., 2020). Moreover, EO dimensions could be the analytical tool to

investigate into the unique business behavior such as how to implement sustainability goals in the business conduct, which can reveal relationships between EO dimensions and sustainable business behaviour.

Even though, as Dai et al. (2014) suggested that the role of EO can be different in the international scope, the Japanese EO dimensions have not been investigated to develop implications for the practices (Oe and Yamaoka, 2016; 2017). Similarly, as Yamamoto and Kan (2018) concluded, the entrepreneurial business behaviour of Japanese SMEs remains poorly investigated in both the Japanese and English academic literature, therefore, it should be important for conduct the study to develop actionable implications for both academics and practitioners.

The established dimensions are acknowledged as the solid analytical framework as given (Oe et al., 2016). Oe and Yamaoka (2017) conducted an in-depth research on Japanese SME owners' views on five EO dimensions, which implied that 'proactiveness', 'autonomy' with top managers' leadership, and 'risk taking' are acknowledged as the company's direction which the business should aim, whereas, two more dimensions 'innovativeness' and 'competitive aggressiveness' are acknowledged as the 'business system' which should be embedded in the organisational culture (Oe and Yamaoka, 2017; Yamaoka, 2018). However, none of these studies have developed comparative insights in the international scope.

### ***Japanese business behavior and implementing sustainability goals***

Of all Japanese enterprises, 99.5% are SMEs, whose labor dominates 75.5% of the market, indicating that SMEs are a driving force for the Japanese economy (Small & Medium Enterprise Agency, 2017). Given the recent recessions, methods of revitalizing SMEs have been at the top of the political agenda for the public sector as well (Cabinet Office Japan, 2015). Table 1 furnishes some key numbers about SMEs in Japan.

**Insert “Table 1 Japanese SME Statistics (Small Medium Enterprises Agency, 2017)”**

**here**

Entrepreneurship can be assimilated to a psychological process, as it generates strong emotions, for instance, when entrepreneurs face difficulties, obstacles, and personal consequences regarding their businesses (Cardon *et al.*, 2012). Cardon *et al.* (2012) argued that entrepreneurial emotion refers to the effects, emotions, moods, and/or feelings that are antecedent to the business behavior of entrepreneurs.

Then here the key theme emerged: What are the relationships between Japanese business people’s entrepreneurial orientation and the sustainability goals implementation behaviour. There have been research focusing on the Japanese companies’ CSR behavior,

for instance, Eweje & Sakaki (2015) analysed the managers' perspectives into CSR to demonstrate that CSR is integral to their business strategy and have some initiatives to contribute to the society. One typical example they emphasised was that Japanese companies collaborated to support Tsunami victimised citizens during the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake on 11 March 2011 by putting the resources to contribute to the evacuation centres. Goto and Sueyhoshi (2020) focused on the environmental protection as an emerged as an important business theme to measure the CSR effort by socially responsible investment (SRI) index to provide a proxy of Japanese companies' CSR behaviour. Although there have been discussions of a variety of ethical business performance with the societal impact from them, the logic and underlying business values which have fostered those ethical behaviour have not yet formulated as a logical framework.

Especially in the Japanese SMEs scope, although some studies have focussed on the origins of Japan's substantial business success (e.g., Whitehill & Takezawa, 1976; Bowen, 1977; Rehder, 1978; Hall & Leidecker, 1981; Gregory, 1985; Aoki *et al.*, 1994), which have been enhanced into the discussions in the transition phase of the SME business models in the digitalised era (Barber *et al.*, 2020; Chirapanda, 2019), a widely shared and agreed-upon framework has not been formulated.

However, the discussions exploring into the underlying business values and rationale for the ethical performance has lacked the depth, which results in scarcity of the theoretical



contributions.

***Developing an analytical framework with key questions for the study***

As noted, there have been limited contributions from Japanese business studies to the both entrepreneurial and sustainable business behavior field of study. To address this lack, the present study now aims to reinvestigate the concept of Japanese business values in greater depth, looking further into the mindset of Japanese businesspeople to reveal underlying business values Japanese sustainable business behaviour.

This study explores Japanese business people's perspectives based on the paradigm of EO dimensions and explore unknown values embedded in SME owners' mind-sets: And to understand further the Japanese business values which foster implementations of sustainability goals.

In line with this aim and potential contribution to the field of study, an original conceptual framework is developed as in Figure 1. This framework is designed based on the established five EO dimensions with four new potential Japanese business values which were discussed from literature review: Mutual trust (e.g., Drucker 1971; Fukuyama,1995); Consensus in the organization (e.g., Chirapanda, 2019; Goto and Sueyoshi, 2020; Matsumae et al., 2020); Trust-building atmosphere (e.g., Crossman & Noma, 2012; Shimada, 2020); Family concept (e.g., Chirapanda, 2019; Wang, 2009). The established

five EO dimensions are rearranged with two sub-themes, the Direction comprises of three dimensions (e.g., proactiveness, autonomy, and risk-taking) and the business system comprises of two dimensions (e.g., innovativeness and competitive aggressiveness). These five dimensions are supported by four Japanese unique business ethos which have been developed from literature review (e.g., Mutual trust, Consensus in the organisation, Trust building atmosphere, Family concept). The mechanism of Japanese sustainable behaviour was explored with the primary data in the next section.

**Insert 'Figure 1 Theoretical framework for this study' here**

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study utilized an interpretive paradigm, as it aimed to understand Japanese SME business people's perspectives and actions (Saunders *et al.*, 2009; Bryman and Bell, 2015).

An inductive approach is the most appropriate for a qualitative study (Lancaster, 2007), as it enables researchers to investigate the 'feel' of the situation and to better understand the nature of the study's theme (Saunders *et al.*, 2009). It was essential for the authors to obtain holistic viewpoints with richly associated qualitative data that took human interpretation into account (Matthews & Ross, 2010).

The interviews were conducted with 24 SME owners based on the semi-structured

interview questionnaire. The number of the interviewees was decided based on the saturation criteria to confirm the reasonable data source and size (Morse et al., 2002; Fusch and Ness, 2015 : p.1408). This process allowed the researchers to collect sufficient data to reveal SME owners' thoughts and behaviour (Sounders et al., 2018). Guest et al. (2006) suggested that 12 participants constitute an adequate size for a qualitative, in-depth interview study. To satisfy this benchmark, the number of informants was set at 24, with various Japanese manufacturing industrial categorizations included. By applying the semi-structured interviews, it could be reasonably expected that the in-depth insights and perspectives of these owners could contribute to the development of profound implications for designing the conceptual model, which is the central theme of this study (Schultze and Avital, 2011).

To choose the participants, the authors first consulted with the government officials who are from Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry and consultants of Japan Productivity centre who had conducted public surveys with SMEs in Japan. Table 2 below describes the 24 interviewed companies. These manufacturers were chosen using the Japanese industrial codes (METI: Ministry of Economy Trade and Industry, 2017) and cover a balanced range of manufacturing sectors along with a variety of products. Out of 24 participants, 11 were micro-firms, 10 were small firms, and the remaining three firms were medium-sized. The ratio of the clusters is relevant to the proportion of 'micro, small,

medium enterprises (MSMEs)' in Japanese statistics (METI, 2017; SMEA: Small and Medium Enterprise Agency, 2017). As Table 2 indicates, the location-wise, the participants are well distributed over the regions, also the industrial categories varied, food, appliances, furniture, clothing, commodities and others, covering 12 sectors. The establishment years are from the 1800s to the early 2000s.

**Insert “Table 2 Outline of interviewees” here**

All recorded interviews were transcribed and then coded. The coding process enabled the researchers to identify patterns and themes of the interviewees' perspectives (Auerbach and Silverstein 2003). The analysis was supported with the text mining software NVivo 11 to produce word trees and explore the structures of their comments. This can provide the researchers with a visualised mind map outlining the essential factors of their narratives. Using the NVivo 11 software increased the efficiency of analysis and improved the accuracy of the process (Jackson and Bazeley, 2019). A list of codes developed and used to categorising the dataset also contributed to the process of identifying key themes and the links between the codes which was also comparatively discussed with the context of literature. From the analysis, the developed findings with key themes and elements were summarised as a revised conceptual framework with recommendations for the relevant practitioners and researchers.

The present research targeted on Japanese business people, but the questionnaire was written in both English and Japanese. As Japan is not an English-speaking country, so the process of translation should be conducted to keep the data reliability (Brislin, 1980). Brislin (1980) also suggested several key translation techniques, for example, one-way translations, back-translations, bilingual techniques.

A few stages were undertaken for the translation procedures of the study:

1. The authors translated the interview guide from English into Japanese,
2. The authors gave both interview questions to five bilingual experts (professors, senior lectures, business practitioners who lived in the UK for longer than ten years to check if the translation was correct and the authors made changes to make it accurate after receiving their feedbacks (Miles and Huberman, 1994).
3. The authors applied the back-translation approach by giving the questionnaire (Japanese version) to two independent translators to translate back from Japanese into English in order to check the content and meaning of the research scope. This is a suggested measure by Brislin (1980), who proposed the back-translation method requires a minimum of two independent translators.
4. The back translated version was checked again by the five bilinguals to ensure that the final version of the translation was correct (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

The attained interview data in Japanese was also translated into English. In extracting the quotes in Japanese as findings in the study, it was critical to check the reliability of the translation to maintain the quality of the analysis. As Larkin et al. (2007) suggested, the traditional methods of forward and backward translation have been criticized for weak conceptual equivalence, and crucial issues have been acknowledged with multiple language interview and verbatim methods are used. The authors conducted the content analysis with a support of NVivo software.

## **FINDINGS**

This section discusses the outcome of the content analysis of the interview data referring to the relevant literature to respond to the research questions. First, the keywords in the interview data are introduced. This finding is followed by the discussion of the interviewees' thoughts regarding the established five EO dimensions with newly revealed two dimensions. To do so, how the original themes were identified is discussed and evaluated with academic sources. Finally, the driving forces for the Japanese SME owners' business behavior which are revealed as business virtues rooted in their mindset are presented and discussed.

### ***Outline of the text mining outcome***

NVivo 11 was used to assist with understanding the original statements and the frequency

of the words used. There were 1430 words mentioned throughout all the interviews after excluding general adjectives and adverbs (e.g., 'maybe,' 'well,' and 'rather'); out of these, the top 35 words were found to comprise 33% of all words mentioned. Table 3 shows the top 35 words that were revealed.

**Insert “Table 3 Words frequently used by all firms” here**

**Insert “Table 4 Words frequently used by micro-firms and small/medium firms” here**

### ***Five established EO dimensions***

The findings reveal that three dimensions are perceived with unique values by all of the interviewees (Autonomy, Innovativeness, and Risk-taking), whereas, the Proactiveness and Aggressive competitiveness have been obviously mentioned by around half or less of the participants (16 for Pro-activeness; nine for Competitive aggressiveness). Pro-activeness was mentioned sometimes with the context of innovativeness as both factors are critical for being active to respond to the market needs, without which businesses cannot be sustainable; Competitive aggressiveness was found to be perceived in a different context of traditional understanding of the relevant dimension in the western context. In the next section, each dimension was verified and discussed with primary quotes obtained

from the interviews.

### ***Findings in line with the EO dimensions***

#### *Autonomy*

This dimension reflects the propensity to act independently) which was mentioned by all interviewees. Below, we present some relevant comments made by some of them as examples.

*"The culture of my company is 'do whatever you want to try in the first place,' which I believe to be different from others." (Interviewee 15)*

*"It is sometimes lonely to do what we have to do. Before us, nobody has given us a guidance to follow as a role model." (Interviewee 8)*

*"We have to build our original tradition; it is not interesting to follow the existing pathway." (Interviewee 1)*

*"When we started our business, we were the only one in the industry with a clear mission and vision. We want to create a new trend in the athletes' world." (Interviewee 16)*

From the quotes above, it seems that Japanese owners of SMEs acknowledge the



dimension of autonomy as the traditional EO framework, especially Interviewee 1 emphasised the factor of autonomy should be the basis for their business behaviour, which is in line with the discussion by Lumpkin and Dess (1996).

### *Innovativeness*

This dimension reflects the firms' tendency to engage in innovation and also this dimension was stated by all interviewees.

*"Getting patent rights is part of our corporate culture." (Interviewee 15)*

*"The collaboration between tradition and modernity is the key concept  
for our innovation." (Interviewee 11)*

*"We understand that the term 'innovation' does not always mean 'some  
technique based new things; instead we are innovating the lifestyle of  
customers with various thoughts and ideas." (Interviewee 13)*

Moreover, contrasting sentiments were also heard, e.g., those mentioned by following companies.:

*"... sometimes somebody needs to keep and maintain the old-fashioned  
traditions, as they are the evidences of a long history our culture which has*

*been loved by the people for such a long time! We need to respect the tradition as it is.” (Interviewee 17)*

*“We should not make excuses that our sector is less technology-oriented. Wherever we go, there are spaces for us to innovate to achieve our business goals. It is essential for us to learn continuously to find more options for business expansion!” (Interviewee 6)*

From the relevant quotes above, it has been acknowledged that Japanese SME owners also perceived the dimension of innovativeness as one of the EOs, and this finding supports the discussion presented by IsmailInves and Alam (2019) who investigated into the SEMs value perspectives in the South East Asia.

### *Risk-taking*

This dimension reflects the degree to which owners are willing to make significant and risky resource commitments (Miller & Friesen, 1978) and this dimension was also mentioned by all interviewees.

*“I have not thought about any risks while deciding what to do next. We have our basis for our business, which we are specialized in.”*

*(Interviewee 2)*

*“we are just the type of businesspeople who can enjoy rare opportunities,*

*which is fun for us!” (Interviewee 20)*

*“We love to learn every day. Learning, reviewing and changing by adding*

*new values to our business is the core element of our business!”*

*(Interviewee 3)*

From these quotes, it has been acknowledged that Japanese SME owners also perceived the dimension of risk-taking as one of the EOs. However, their perspective of this dimension is slightly different from the Western context as Japanese SME owners take a risk without thinking it could be a negative impact on their businesses as the actual challenging process to evolve their businesses based on learning and reviewing, adding some more new values to their organizations in the process. And interestingly, more or less half of the interviewees (12) stated this dimension with the positive impact of innovativeness, this finding supports the discussions presented by Dodgson and Gann (2020).

#### *Pro-activeness*

This dimension reflects the ability to anticipate market trends and act as a pioneer in the market but only 16 interviewees out of 24 obviously stated obviously this dimension.

Interestingly, Pro-activeness was mentioned sometimes with the context of innovativeness and they stated both are important attitudes to make their businesses sustainable.

*"We are pro-active in our business sector. We lead the industry, not only in business strategies but also in the industrial statistics of our firm."*

*(Interviewee 15)*

*"We were given an award by the central government and local council for the best performance in the industry. This is evidence that we are pro-active as a business leader." (Interviewee 15)*

*"I want to be seen as different from other people. I want my company different from others. Because this is 'My Company. I challenge, I change, and I enjoy my business.' (Interviewee 14)*

*"Human capital, the collaboration of different skills and materials... without this good balance of resources, it is not easy for us to be pro-active in the business world." (Interviewee 4)*

*"Pro-active or not pro-active, we are not sure, but at least we can state that we are the ones who love tatami mats and designs and create and propose the unique and attractive usage of tatami mats to the world!" (Interviewee*

*"As one of the local traditional confectionary companies, we have been trying to be pro-active in restructuring the products line and producing methods.*

*For instance, the sugar content in 'X' (the name of the top product) has been reduced to respond to the consumers' voices." (Interviewee 23)*

As shown above, it can be deduced that Japanese SME owners also perceived the dimension of pro-activeness as one of the EOs. Some interviewees also mentioned this dimension in line with their innovativeness.

*"We do not say we are pro-active, but at least we can say that we are innovative to respond to our customers' needs" (Interviewee 2)*

*"Being pro-active could be a good thing, but I am not sure it is good to self-promote by saying we are pro-active! I am not comfortable to say that...rather I am confident to say we are innovative!" (Interviewee 4)*

This finding may imply that cultural aspect of Japanese business people. For instance, Confucian ethics and values are also embedded in Japanese people lifestyle (Ornatowski, 1996), who feel not comfortable to self-promote and show-off what we have achieved in public (Lam, 2003). Confucian ethics could restrain from Japanese business

people to state they are 'better' than others using the term 'pro-active', rather they are reserved and not to mention what they have done so far. This finding is compatible with the discussion based on the research from another East Asian country, (Park et al., 2005) who revealed the influence of Confucian ethics with the Asian collectivism on business performance. According to the two interviewees (Interviewee 2 and 4), they would prefer to say 'we are innovative' which may reduce their guilty feeling to state they are superior than others, but they can contribute to the industry and society via their innovative business behavior.

#### *Competitive aggressiveness*

This dimension reflects the firm's propensity to outperform its competitors in the marketplace. In line with the finding regarding the dimension of Pro-activeness, Competitive aggressiveness was also found to be differently perceived by Japanese business people from our traditional understanding of the EO dimensions. Nine stated this dimension differently from the Western context. Here are some examples of their statements.

*"It is sometimes quite a lonely thing to be the top manufacturer of paper slide doors in Japan. I want to compete with other Japanese firms in the market." (Interviewee 15)*

*"As regards the fabric weaving and dyeing industry, we know our 'vulnerable' position given our Westernized lifestyles, so maybe we are comrades in the same boat." (Interviewee 8)*

*"Rather than competing with rivals, we would like to collaborate with them to expand our market as a whole." (Interviewee 21)*

*"The whole traditional confectionery sector has been facing difficulties, we gather, discuss, and share any views and ideas simply support all of us!" (Interviewee 18)*

From these quotes, we can infer that Japanese SME owners also perceived the dimension of Competitive aggressiveness as one of the EOs. However, the perspective of owners seems to be different from that of Western perspectives. They mostly talked some more along the theme of collaboration when discussing this dimension in line with the prospect of cooperation, even with their competitors. Jiang *et al.* (2018) discussed the impact of shaping the relationship between EO and network resource acquisition, which is also compatible with the findings of this study; they imply that collaboration with even with the competitors could enable SMEs to acquire useful resources which could not be attained without the cooperation.

Up till this point, the five EO dimensions have been validated with the primary

interview data of quotes from the interviewees. From the interviews, some unique statements have been obtained regarding 'risk-taking' and 'competitive aggressiveness', which seem to be differently perceived by the Japanese SME owners. Their comments suggest that they would cooperate even with the competitors as a group of the 'comrades', and they also perceive some risks and challenging situations as opportunities to evolve their businesses further. In line with this evaluation of the five EO dimensions, some other unexpected factors were developed, which are discussed and evaluated in the next section.

### *Unique perspective revealed from thematic analysis*

In addition to the evaluated five dimensions as discussed above, there were two more specific values commonly emerged from the content analysis by the interviewees; 'value co-creation' and 'contribution to the communities,' and also three more new themes which are categorised as driving forces of Japanese SMEs' entrepreneurial business behavior.

#### *Value co-creation*

It has been found that the interviewees think even with the competitors in the sector, it is inevitable for them to collaborate to aim the shared value to sustain the sector together. Interviewee 20 used the expression 'we are in the same boat rather than compete with competitors' to describe the thoughts. (*Interviewee 1, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 23, and 24*). From the



statements, it has been found that the concept of co-value creation is in line with their perspective of competitiveness; in other words, they prioritize the harmonized business behavior even with the competitors from a higher perspective to sustain the business sector as a team. Moreover, some interviewees (*Interviewee 18, 19, 21, 23, and 24*) stated that they have found it valuable to cooperate with firms from different categories, such as co-sponsored the regional product exhibition at a department store in a bigger city, the seminars launched by chambers of commerce to share the ideas how to enhance sales channels, and the opportunities to exchange opinions on product development and how to share the experiences of consumer data analysis. Here are two examples of statements made, both owners emphasised the relational stakeholders not only B2C but also B2B perspectives to sustain their businesses through co-value creation.

*“Cross sector learning opportunities have ben helpful for us to develop new ideas for our products and process of design thinking within the organisations”*

*(Interviewee 6)*

*“Communication with other stakeholders and customers is the key. I think we all are the team members to create new value” (Interviewee 24)*

*“To contribute to the sector reverses back to my company, mano-a-mano, we are sustaining with each other” (Interviewee 18)*

The newly developed theme of 'value co-creation' can also be discussed in the context of Confucian values with the Asian collectivism on business performance (Sison and Redín, 2019). They empirically examined the impact of Confucian perspectives on SMEs performance, discussing its positive acceleration of creating value. The found dimension of 'value co-creation' can be one of the Japanese unique dimensions to support the business performance, which is one of the core values to engage them in the sustainable behavior.

#### *Contribution to the communities*

This theme was mainly apparent in the comments of the older firms, who have been attracting their customers by responding to the markets and other stakeholders. A content analysis also revealed that relatively older firms' owners stated this point (those who were established 1850s-1960s). In doing so, their business activities have enabled them to resonate with customers and acquire their empathy (*Interviewee 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 18, 20, 21, 23, and 24*).

Correctly, Interviewee 23 put the local name *Hakata* on its main products, and also, they advertise that their ingredients are mostly from the local community (such as strawberries, sweet potatoes, and sugar). Moreover, *Interviewee 24* emphasized several

times their long history – from the *Edo* Era (1603–1868) – as the leading company in the feudal clan of *Satsuma* (current Kagoshima Prefecture) with the responsibility of supporting local people through its business. Similarly, *Interviewee 18* has been producing their representative sweets named after the local community iconic monument, located fifty meters away from the shop. The owner stated:

*“The name of our main product was named after the community asset near us and could not have survived without its name which enables our customers to remember our community surrounding the local university just a few steps away from us. We like our local culture, area, history, and people.”*

Therefore, two new dimensions are proposed in addition to the established five EO dimensions to form a conceptual framework based on the perspectives of Japanese SME owners. The newly developed two dimensions are also supported by recent academic discussions mainly developed after the 2011 eastern Japan great earthquake disaster (Norio et al., 2011). Fukumoto (2019) discussed the corporate contributions to community, implying that after a big disaster, companies have perceived the role as a societal member to support the community. Shaw (2018) discussed the pathway how private sectors have been aiming to contribute in disaster risk management as a community member. The

interviewees are sharing the social values who should contribute back to the communities where their businesses are rooted. Pret and Carter (2017) entailed the business behaviour focusing on the collaboration enhancing the social value creation in line with the community norms and opportunities.

***Driving forces for their business behavior: Philosophical, emotional, and non-economic values***

At the end of each interview, we asked the interviewees to talk freely relating to their business perspectives. From there, some additional unexpected values were commonly mentioned by them. These newly found values are shared by the interviewees and can be defined as three embedded driving forces behind their entrepreneurial behavior.

It is critical for the researchers to reveal such driving forces. The researchers have not focused on the hidden factors enhancing Japanese SME entrepreneurial behaviour so far. Such driving forces must be critical and differed in the market contexts with different values. Therefore, without revealing these driving forces and lack of deep understanding of the rooted driving forces which should be differentiated among the different cultural values, business analysis cannot develop actionable implications for the stakeholders.

These three driving forces are above the business standpoints, rather the Japanese culture and spirit inherited in the Japanese people's identity as our virtue.

*Driving force 1: Emotional attachment/cohesion the communities*

The first driving force is related to the SME owners' status as community members who are embedded in community networks. They stated their emotional attachment has been the motivation for the business behavior (*Interviewee 5, 7, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, and 24*):

*"We are embedded in the social fabric of the community." (Interviewee 5)*

*"Our company is a member of the community" (Interviewee 18)*

*"As social actors in the community, we are in the same boat. Rather than compete with competitors in the sector, as a sector as a whole, we should compete with obstacles for us to enhance our businesses opportunities."*

*(Interviewee 20)*

*"I am proud of my business, as it is embedded in the local culture and supports the tradition of the area. I feel social community bonding*

*every day..." (Interviewee 21)*

The emotional attachment to the local community has been discussed as a source of sustainable collaboration among the local stakeholders which leads to the positive outcome (e.g., Scannell and Gifford, 2017; Briggs et al., 2019; Hosany et al., 2020). As Interviewee 5 mentioned, as a societal member embedder in the local community,

attachment can be a positive driving force for them to business activities (Zietsma and Toubiana, 2019).

### *Driving force 2: Pride*

The second driving force is related to the SME owners' mentality and passion as a leader of the business sector. Also some interviewees stated the responsibility in 'looking after' the business groups as a 'patriarch.' (Interviewee 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 15, 16, 17, 20, 21, 22, and 24) .

*"Even as a small firm, we have passion and pride as a leader in the sector. Put simply; we like our businesses. We are proud of our businesses."*

*(Interviewee 2).*

*"It cannot be counted on an economic scale. Social value should be aimed for and achieved." (Interviewee 16)*

*"Over the long term, we should support and maintain our business history and community. We are proud of ourselves." (Interviewee 22)*

Ng et al. (2019) discussed the organizational behavior is supported by the

employees' pride, embeddedness. In line with this discussion, Gordon et al. (2019) suggested the role of pride contributes to building sustainable community and its identity; the second driving force can enhance the business behavior in local community.

One of the interviewees stressed the importance of the well-balanced work environment as the basis for the good business performance:

*“...Good work place atmosphere, work-life balance, then we can work happily, the we can contribute to the economy.” (Interviewee 4)*

*Driving force 3: Non-economic values ‘Sanpo-yoshi (Good in three directions: suppliers, customers, and community)’*

The third driving force revealed is that they perceive their businesses should produce non-economic value as well as economic value. Moreover, they are willing to contribute to the business from a long-term perspective (*Interviewee 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 16, and 23*). Some of the interviewees stated ‘*Sanpo-yoshi*’ (good in three directions: suppliers, customers, and community).

*"Business is not only about earning money on a financial basis. Without contributing to others and society, businesses cannot be sustainable."*

*(Interviewee 4)*

*“As embedded social actors in the society, we should look after society as well as buyers and sellers.” (Interviewee 23)*

*“Japanese business value has been a pillar for businesses for such a long time; there is a well-known phrase ‘Sanpo-yoshi (good in three directions).” (Interviewee 19)*

Economic value can be measurable and has been applied to the business study as useful scale (Porter and Kramer, 2019). However, in the current business requirement for the sustainability, social value and social impact of the businesses has been acknowledged as one of the business responsibilities (Spieth et al., 2019). A key term ‘*Sanpo-yoshi*’ has been discussed by some scholars so far as unique Japanese business ethics (e.g., Fiorini, 2019; Park and Hong, 2019): they consider this ethical notion is the basis for the driving force and supportive factor for the Japanese businesses. Mizuo (2016) discussed Japanese business moral and performance focusing on ‘*Sanpo-yoshi*’ as the management philosophy which has enabled Japanese longevity firms. This key term ‘*Sanpo-yoshi*’ is also compatible with the discussion of the Confucian values which are rooted in a Japanese social and economic system: where Confucianism is a pragmatic moral foundation (Bouterfas, 2019). She suggested that Japanese ethical behavior of Japanese firms should be investigated from a theme ‘haromonization’ of relational stakeholders in the



communities. Kuroda and Ishida (2017) suggested the philosophy of 'Sanpo-yoshi' should be applied to the relationships of supply chain management, that is supported by a statement of one interviewee as below.

*“We need to be responsible for all supply chain members to secure good ethical behavior, this is a core philosophy of sanpo-yhoshi” (Interviewee 7).*

As discussed above, three driving forces have been revealed which support Japanese SMEs business profile. As García-Villaverde *et al.* (2018) presented, the moderating role of social capital within the organizations and relational actors should be explored further in the context of this newly found driving forces. These quotes imply that Japanese SME owners acknowledge their responsibility of contributing to the communities.

### ***Development of the conceptual framework***

#### *Development of the conceptual model from this study*

Figure 2 shows the conceptual model designed from the verified findings of this study. In line with the five established EO dimensions, 'value co-creation' and 'contribution to the communities' were verified as two unique Japanese dimensions. This finding is supported

by the discussion of the ‘virtuous circle’ presented by Porter & Kramer (2011, p. 67), hence, the new seven EO dimensions are proposed as a new conceptualized framework developed from this study based on the Japanese SME owners’ perspectives in enhancing implementation of sustainability goals.

Figure 2 presents unique Japanese EO paradigm with two new Japanese unique dimensions (‘value co-creation’ and ‘contribution to the community’) and demonstrates the Japanese EO values are enhanced by three more newly revealed driving forces underlying business values enhancing the implementation of sustainability goals (‘Emotional attachment to the community’, ‘Pride’, and ‘Non-economic value’).

**Insert ‘Figure 2 A flowchart of theoretical development of underlining business values for implementation of sustainability goals’ here**

The research outcome indicates new directions of sustainable business study: As noted above, Japanese SME owners perceive the established five EO dimensions but not only that, they also perceive two more dimensions ‘value co-creation’ and ‘contribution to the community’ (Japanese business ethos). A unique dimension ‘contribution to the community’ indicates that the new finding can suggest a discussion direction which are in line with the requirements of sustainability as a global standard in the UN Sustainable

Development Goals (SDGs) era (SDG 8 Decent work and economic growth; SDG 9 Industry, innovation, and infrastructure; SDG 11 Sustainable cities and communities; SDG 12 Responsible consumption and production. SDG 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns) (UN 2018).

This proposed model can be used as a discussion guide and analytical tool for SMEs business behavior for further research.

### ***Research implications and future research areas***

The results suggest that Japanese SME owners have unique business values in addition to the five established EO dimensions. First, two new revealed dimensions ‘Co-value creation’ and ‘Contribution to the communities’ have been found to support their clear intention of implementation of sustainability goals in the business behavior. Second, from the interview process, three more values have been depicted as the underlying their sustainable business behavior, which we named ‘driving forces’ for implementing sustainability goals: ‘Emotional attachment,’ ‘Pride,’ and ‘Non- economic values with *Sanpo-yoshi (being good in three directions)*).

This study has developed implications for the businesses how to implement sustainability goals with what kind of business values embedded in the SME owners’ mindset. The research outcome demonstrates the key values which support sustainability

goals implementation: SDG 8, 9, 11, and 12. The study aimed to share further knowledge on sustainability theory and practices by addressing the unique underpinning values encouraging the businesses to the sustainable directions, and course of research that provides insights for researchers and practitioners.

There are certain limitations to our study. First, we conducted interviews with 24 manufacturers in various sectors of the industry. We acknowledge that the research cases should be expanded so that we can generalize the model, which could thus have more robust implications for both practitioners and researchers. Second, the two newly identified EO dimensions and three hidden driving forces are deeply reliant on Japanese culture and history which are underlying the sustainable behaviour of Japanese businesses. The business values supporting the sustainable business behaviour could differ from area to area. Therefore, to establish a more robust paradigm for future research, the research targets should be expanded into various regions of global markets with different cultures and values.

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