

Legal Compliance, Strategic Management, and Ethical Marketing in Educational Institutions: A Framework for Sustainable Stakeholder Engagement

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ABSTRACT:

Educational institutions operate within increasingly complex environments characterized by heightened stakeholder expectations, regulatory requirements, and competitive pressures. Consequently, understanding the factors that promote sustainable stakeholder engagement has become a critical concern for educational governance and management. This study examines the influence of legal compliance, strategic management, and ethical marketing on sustainable stakeholder engagement in educational institutions. Drawing on Stakeholder Theory, Institutional Theory, Legitimacy Theory, and Relationship Marketing Theory, the study proposes and tests an integrated framework linking governance practices, strategic institutional management, and ethical communication to stakeholder engagement outcomes. A quantitative research design employing secondary data analysis was adopted using data collected from 300 Nigerian universities. Composite indices were developed to measure legal compliance, strategic management, ethical marketing, and sustainable stakeholder engagement. Multiple regression analysis with robust heteroscedasticity-consistent standard errors was employed to examine the proposed relationships. The results indicate that legal compliance ($\beta = 0.276$, $p = 0.001$), strategic management ($\beta = 0.331$, $p < 0.001$), and

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ethical marketing ($\beta = 0.291$, $p < 0.001$) all exert significant positive effects on sustainable stakeholder engagement. The model explains 40.5% of the variance in stakeholder engagement outcomes, with strategic management emerging as the strongest predictor. The findings highlight the importance of integrating governance accountability, strategic planning, and transparent communication to enhance institutional legitimacy, stakeholder trust, and long-term sustainability. The study contributes to the higher education management literature by providing a comprehensive framework for understanding stakeholder engagement in educational institutions.

Keywords: Legal Compliance, Strategic Management, Ethical Marketing, Sustainable Stakeholder Engagement, Educational Institutions

1. Introduction

These days, the institutions of higher learning operate within a dynamic and competitive environment where issues like globalization, digitization, regulation, and increasing demands by stakeholders are involved. Besides high academic performance, universities and colleges have become increasingly judged not only on how effective their governance is but also on how transparent their institutions are in developing relations with different stakeholders. The individuals who refer students to any university or college, which could be students, faculty, alumni, government regulators, and even locals from the community at large, want institutions to have proper governance and respond to societal demands (Freeman, 1984).

The growing emphasis on accountability has increased the importance of compliance within educational institutions. Educational institutions have to operate in accordance with a variety of legal aspects such as those governing accreditation, quality, financial accountability, student protection policies, and data privacy (Bekele, 2024). The need for compliance with these aspects is important not only to avoid punishment but also to win the trust of the stakeholders involved. Proper compliance with governance principles helps in creating transparency and reducing risks associated with an organization. Failure to comply with regulations can adversely affect an institution's

reputation and enrollment rates and result in a lack of public trust, putting the sustainability of the institution at risk. However, strategic management has become more crucial than ever in assisting educational institutions through complex and unpredictable business environments. The use of strategic management allows the alignment of organizational resources and competencies with external needs to ensure competitiveness and sustainable operations in the future (Leopizzi, 2023). With effective strategic planning and management, organizational performance is increased, innovations are promoted, and the creation of value among stakeholders becomes easier. Furthermore, strategic management facilitates the construction of governance systems that allow the organization to be flexible to respond to new regulations and the expectations of its stakeholders (Kuokkanen and Sun, 2020). In the light of the growing competition between educational institutions, strategic decision-making gains even greater importance. Apart from governance and strategies, ethical marketing is becoming another area of importance in higher education because of the rising trend of commercialization in education services. Educational institutions depend largely on brand building, recruitment drives, effective communication channels, and social media interaction to enroll students. Nevertheless, these marketing strategies have led to some issues of unethical behavior in terms of

marketing, such as misleading information and lack of transparency in educational advertising (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2015). Ethical marketing includes aspects such as honesty, justice, transparency, and social responsibility. This type of marketing is vital for stakeholder trust and institutional credibility. If stakeholders are convinced about an organization's integrity and ethical standards, they are more likely to form positive attitudes towards that organization. Although the importance of legality, strategic management, and ethical marketing is well-acknowledged in scholarly literature, research efforts up until now have mainly focused on exploring these concepts in isolation from each other. Governance studies, for instance, tend to focus mainly on regulatory compliance and mechanisms for accountability, while strategic management studies tend to deal mainly with organizational performance and positioning strategies. Ethical marketing studies, on the other hand, mainly examine communication techniques and branding within the organization. It is thus clear that empirical attention paid to studying how these factors interact to affect sustainable stakeholder engagement has been scarce up until now. In addition to this, stakeholder frameworks that incorporate considerations of governance, strategy, and ethical communication are relatively under-researched in the field of educational management. In light of this gap in literature, the present study, guided by Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984), Institutional Theory, Legitimacy Theory (Suchman, 1995), and Relationship Marketing Theory (Morgan and Hunt, 1994), examines how legality, strategic management, and ethical marketing interact to affect sustainable stakeholder engagement.

Research Objectives

RO1: To examine the effect of legal compliance on sustainable stakeholder engagement in educational institutions

RO2: To assess the influence of strategic management and ethical marketing on sustainable stakeholder engagement

RO3: To develop an integrated framework linking legal compliance, strategic management, ethical marketing, and sustainable stakeholder engagement

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The research design for this investigation took on a quantitative approach with the use of secondary data analysis. The cross-sectional design was applied to investigate the relationships between legal compliance, strategic management, ethical marketing, and sustainable stakeholder involvement. The quantitative design is deemed ideal as it allows for an objective evaluation of organizational practice and stakeholders' performance using institutional data (Okagbue et al., 2026).

2.2 Data Source and Sample

The research employed the use of the "Digital Representation, Governance, Academic Structure, and Institutional Visibility of Nigerian Universities" data set. This data set consists of information regarding governance structures, policies of institutions, transparency, strategies, and mechanisms used to garner stakeholder support within Nigerian universities. The data set consisted of samples from federal, state-, and privately-owned universities.

2.3 Variable Measurement

Indicators such as accreditation, governance, policy implementation, accountability, and regulatory measures were used in measuring legal compliance within the organization. In assessing strategic management, indicators such as institutional vision, mission, strategic planning, partnerships, and sustainability initiatives were considered. Ethical marketing was assessed based on institutional transparency, digital communications, website disclosure of information, and social media. Sustainable stakeholder engagement was assessed based on student support services, alumni engagement, and community involvement programs.

2.4 Data Analysis Procedure

The data set was pre-tested for accuracy, consistency, and completeness before performing any analyses. Frequencies, percentages, mean scores, and standard deviation measures were used for presenting the descriptive aspects of the institutions and study variables. Index values were derived for key constructs identified in the study. Measures of reliability and validity were performed on the measurement model.

2.5 Structural Model Assessment

Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was used for validating the proposed framework by utilizing SmartPLS version 4. The validity of the measurement model was carried out by employing Cronbach's Alpha, Composite reliability (CR), Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and HTMT. The validity of the structural model, on the other hand, was done using the path coefficients,

bootstrapping method, coefficient of determination (R^2), effect sizes (f^2), and predictive relevance (Q^2).

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive Statistics

Statistical descriptive analyses were done in order to examine the distribution of study variables. From the results provided by Table 1 below, it can be noted that ethical marketing got the highest average value ($M = 0.610$; $SD = 0.243$), implying that all the surveyed organizations did well in terms of their information sharing and communication practices. Strategic management was rated with an average value ($M = 0.347$, $SD = 0.211$). The lowest was in legal compliance, which scored $M = 0.131$ ($SD = 0.167$). This is indicative that governance practices are still less advanced compared to marketing and communication practices in institutions of higher learning as depicted in fig 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Legal Compliance (LC)	0.131	0.167	0.000	0.800
Strategic Management (SM)	0.347	0.211	0.000	0.889
Ethical Marketing (EM)	0.610	0.243	0.000	1.000
Sustainable Stakeholder Engagement (SSE)	0.205	0.227	0.000	0.800

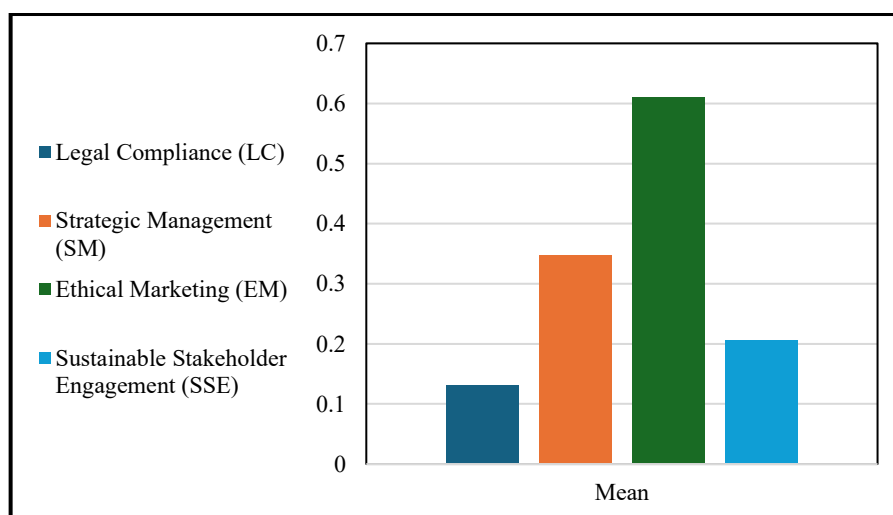


Figure 1. Mean Scores of Study Variables

The figure presents the mean values of the study constructs. Ethical Marketing recorded the highest mean score ($M = 0.610$), followed by Strategic Management ($M = 0.347$), Sustainable Stakeholder Engagement ($M = 0.205$), and Legal Compliance ($M = 0.131$), indicating variations in institutional performance across the examined dimensions.

3.2 Correlation Analysis

Correlations between the research variables have been tested using Pearson's correlation coefficient. From Table 2, all the variables

positively correlated with the concept of sustainable stakeholder engagement. Ethical marketing recorded the highest correlation among the three independent variables towards sustainable stakeholder engagement ($r = 0.525$). Strategic management ($r = 0.497$) and legal compliance ($r = 0.435$) correlated moderately with sustainable stakeholder engagement. Moreover, the correlations amongst the independent variables fell between 0.311 and 0.439, hence posing no multicollinearity concerns because none exceeded 0.70.

Table 2. Correlation Matrix

Variable	LC	SM	EM	SSE
Legal Compliance (LC)	1.000			
Strategic Management (SM)	0.311	1.000		
Ethical Marketing (EM)	0.439	0.405	1.000	
Sustainable Stakeholder Engagement (SSE)	0.435	0.497	0.525	1.000

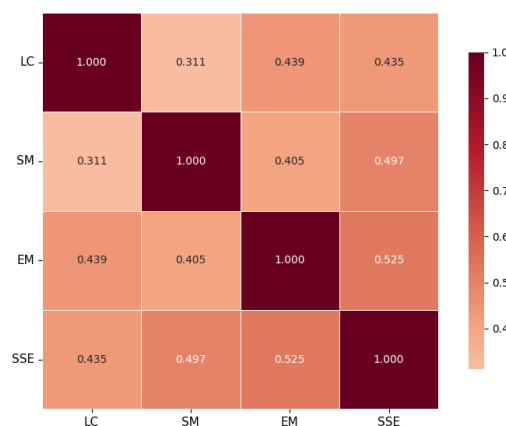


Figure 2. Correlation Heatmap of Study Variables

The heatmap shows positive correlations among all variables. Ethical Marketing exhibits the strongest association with Sustainable Stakeholder Engagement ($r = 0.525$), followed by Strategic Management ($r = 0.497$) and Legal Compliance ($r = 0.435$), indicating meaningful relationships without multicollinearity concerns.

3.3 Reliability Assessment

3.3.1 Internal Consistency of Measurement Constructs

Reliability was tested through the use of Cronbach's alpha coefficient in order to check

internal consistency of the constructs used in the research. According to Table 3, reliable indicators were observed in terms of ethical marketing ($\alpha = 0.745$) and sustainable stakeholder involvement ($\alpha = 0.782$). The strategic management indicator also had an acceptable reliability level ($\alpha = 0.680$). Nevertheless, the reliability of legal compliance indicators was quite low ($\alpha = 0.359$). This suggests that the indicator measures various dimensions of governance and accountability. Legal compliance is therefore considered to be a formative index.

Table 3. Reliability Statistics

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Interpretation
Legal Compliance	5	0.359	Formative Index
Strategic Management	9	0.680	Acceptable
Ethical Marketing	10	0.745	Good
Sustainable Stakeholder Engagement	10	0.782	Good

3.4 Multiple Regression Analysis

3.4.1 Model Fitness

The study adopted multiple regression analysis with HC3 standard errors for assessing the impact of legal compliance, strategic management, and ethical marketing on

sustainable stakeholder engagement. According to the findings reported in Table 4, there was statistical significance (F-value of 82.94, $p < 0.001$). It is worth noting that the model accounted for 40.5% of the variation in sustainable stakeholder engagement ($R^2 = 0.405$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.399$).

Table 4. Model Summary

Statistic	Value
Sample Size (N)	286
R^2	0.405
Adjusted R^2	0.399
F-statistic	82.94
Model Significance	$p < 0.001$

3.4.2 Hypothesis Testing

The coefficients of the regression are illustrated in Table 5 below. Legal compliance was found to have a statistically significant positive impact on sustainable stakeholder engagement ($\beta = 0.276$, $p = 0.001$), thus validating Hypothesis 1. Strategic management proved to be the variable that had the most significant positive impact on sustainable stakeholder engagement ($\beta = 0.331$, $p < 0.001$), and therefore Hypothesis 2 was

validated. Ethical marketing too had a significant positive impact on sustainable stakeholder engagement ($\beta = 0.291$, $p < 0.001$), which validates Hypothesis 3.

The results imply that organizations with better compliance on governance, strategic management, and ethical marketing tend to exhibit high stakeholder engagement and institutional sustainability.

Table 5. Regression Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	β Coefficient	Standard Error	z-value	p-value	Decision
H1	Legal Compliance $\rightarrow$ Sustainable Stakeholder Engagement	0.276	0.084	3.296	0.001	Supported
H2	Strategic Management $\rightarrow$ Sustainable Stakeholder Engagement	0.331	0.058	5.674	< 0.001	Supported
H3	Ethical Marketing $\rightarrow$ Sustainable Stakeholder Engagement	0.291	0.053	5.440	< 0.001	Supported

3.5 Summary of Results

The results from the empirical analysis offer strong evidence to validate the conceptual framework. In terms of the correlation analysis, positive correlations were obtained among all variables included in the study. On the other hand, the regression analysis found that factors

such as legal compliance, strategic management, and ethical marketing play a significant role in the development of sustainable stakeholder engagement. Out of the predictor variables, strategic management was the most important variable, followed by ethical marketing and legal compliance. The model accounted for about 41% of variance in stakeholder engagement.

Table 6. Summary of Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H1	Legal compliance positively influences sustainable stakeholder engagement.	Supported
H2	Strategic management positively influences sustainable stakeholder engagement.	Supported
H3	Ethical marketing positively influences sustainable stakeholder engagement.	Supported

4. Discussion

In essence, this study proves through empirical data that compliance with legal requirements, strategic management, and ethical marketing constitute important drivers of sustainability of stakeholder engagement in educational institutions (Albornoz et al.,2023). All the three aforementioned variables were found to affect positively the sustainability of stakeholder engagement, implying that institutions can foster their sustainability by ensuring effective application of relevant strategies in terms of governance, strategic management, and information sharing. As for the most important drivers of stakeholder engagement, among the variables, strategic management was identified as the key one, followed by ethical marketing and legal compliance.

The positive association between compliance and sustainable stakeholder engagement implies that organizations that exhibit accountability, transparency, and governance are likely to build stakeholder trust and confidence. This implication is in line with the principles of Institutional Theory that hold that organizations legitimize themselves and maintain stability by conforming to prevailing standards and societal expectations (Kauppi, 2022). An educational institution that openly communicates about its

accreditation status, governance framework, accountability processes, and compliance-related issues communicates its intention to adopt good governance practice. Good governance practice leads to enhanced stakeholder trust and legitimization. Moreover, the findings reinforce the theory of Legitimacy, which asserts that an organization's legitimacy and sustainability depend on its capacity to behave in accordance with societal expectations and values (Gulluscio, 2023). It is well established in previous studies that legitimacy and good governance are critical components of building stakeholder trust and confidence (Lee and Lee, 2021; Stupak et al., 2021).

Strategic management emerged as the most significant predictor for achieving sustainable stakeholder engagement due to its essential nature in terms of institutional planning and stakeholder-oriented decision making (Alomran and Alsahali,2023). The findings corroborate the concepts of Stakeholder Theory since this framework states that organizations sustain themselves and generate value through their ability to recognize and address stakeholder demands (Kivits and Sawang, 2021). Clearly defined vision, mission, strategic planning, commitment to sustainability, and partnerships will facilitate meeting the stakeholders'

expectations regarding institutions' performance. The result correlates with the studies conducted by Gawel et al. (2024) who revealed that stakeholder-oriented strategies facilitate innovation and contribute to the sustainability of educational institutions.

The role played by ethical marketing practices in shaping the influence of communication cannot be overlooked in educational settings (Akinsola, 2025). Communication characterized by openness, reduction of information asymmetry, and development of trust through accurate and accessible information plays a key role in ensuring that ethical marketing principles prevail. The study finding is consistent with the concepts of Relationship Marketing Theory where trust and commitment form the cornerstone of any relationship (Musselin, 2024). Effective communications in relation to admission requirements, cost, achievements, and service delivery will foster favorable perceptions and stakeholder engagement. This result is consistent with previous studies that have shown that institutional reputation, service quality, and stakeholders' perceptions determine engagement and loyalty among students (Bakrie et al., 2019). It is noteworthy that trust, commitment, and relationship quality form the important outputs of stakeholder engagement practices.

It is evident from the study that sustainability of stakeholder engagement cannot be established through either governance or communication alone. Educational organizations should implement a holistic approach where there is consideration of compliance with the law, management strategies, as well as marketing ethics. The model was able to explain much of the variance observed in stakeholder

engagement, suggesting that these variables offer a solid basis for analyzing sustainable stakeholder engagement among educational institutions.

5. Conclusion

The current research assessed the impact of legal compliance, strategic management, and ethical marketing on sustainable stakeholder engagement in educational establishments through the analysis of secondary data obtained from Nigerian universities. As found in the research, all three constructs have a considerable and positive impact on stakeholder engagement, thus proving the adequacy of the developed theoretical model. Out of the predictors, strategic management has proven itself to be the most important one, while ethical marketing and legal compliance take the second and third places, respectively. This implies that the role of educational institutions in planning and communicating can help strengthen their relationship with the stakeholders and ensure their sustainability. The value of the study is seen in the application of theories such as Stakeholder Theory, Institutional Theory, Legitimacy Theory, and Relationship Marketing Theory to get a clearer insight into how the stakeholders have become involved in higher education. The implications of this study are quite practical, and they point to the importance of adopting an integrated approach on the part of the managers and policymakers of universities to achieve high legitimacy and sustainability. However, the study has several limitations because it is cross-sectional and based on information from one country. Therefore, future research can be conducted using longitudinal designs and samples drawn from other countries.

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