

Towards Sustainable Consumption: A Framework for Assessing Supplier's Commitment

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Abstract : Product consumption constitutes an important consideration for sustainable development. Seeing how product consumption could be highly unsustainable, coupled with how existing policies on corporate responsibility do not particularly address the consumption aspect of product lifecycle, conducting this research became necessary. The research makes an attempt to provide a framework by which to gauge corporate responsibility of product suppliers in terms of their commitment towards the sustainable consumption of their products. Through an exploration of relevant literature, independently established ideas with which to assess a given product supplier were galvanised into a four-criterion framework. The criteria are: (1) Embeddedness of consumption as a factor in corporate sustainability policy, (2) Level of understanding of consumption behaviour, (3) Breadth of behaviour-influencing strategies adopted, and (4) Inclusiveness for all main dimensions of sustainability. This resulting framework was then applied in a case study involving a UK-based furniture supplier where interviews and content analysis of corporate documents were used as the mode for primary data collection. From the case study, it was found that the supplier had performed to different levels across the four themes of the assessment. Two major areas for improvement were however identified - one is for the furniture supplier to focus more proactively on understanding consumption behaviour and, two is for it to widen the scope of its current strategies for enhancing sustainable consumption of supplied furniture. As a generalisation, the framework presented here makes it possible for companies to reflect with a sense of guidance, how they have demonstrated commitment towards sustainable consumption through their values, culture, and operations. It also provides a foundation for developing standardized assessment which the current widely used frameworks such as the GRI, the Global Compact, and others do not cover. While these popularly used frameworks mainly focus on sustainability of companies within the production and supply chain management contexts (i.e. mostly 'upstream'), the framework here provides an extension by bringing the 'downstream' or consumer bit into light.

Keywords : corporate sustainability, design for sustainable consumption, extended producer responsibility, sustainable consumer behaviour

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