

Article

The Role of Mimicry Isomorphism in Sustainable Development Operationalisation by SMEs in South Africa

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Abstract: The study surveyed 222 small and medium enterprises (SMEs) from the Limpopo province of South Africa on the impact of mimicry isomorphism in making sustainable development operational. The research made use of self-administered questionnaires which were distributed, and the convenience sampling technique was used. Data analysis primarily comprised of exploratory factor analysis (EFA) through SPSS software version 24 confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modelling (SEM) through AMOS software version 24. The SEM results revealed that all three measured dimensions of sustainable development—namely, economic, environmental, and social—were significantly influenced by mimicry isomorphism. As such, the implications of the study are that strong evidence exists pertaining to the operationalisation of sustainable development due to mimetic isomorphism.

Keywords: mimicry isomorphism; sustainable development; SMEs; South Africa; structural equation modelling

1. Introduction

Sustainable development has sprouted as a global agenda in the twenty first century [1]. Since the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE) in 1972, deliberate mitigating activities (such as recycling, waste management, eco-innovations or green innovations, and energy efficiency) have been increasing as it is reckoned that failure to do so means the earth will become uninhabitable [2,3]. Traced back to the 1987 Brundtland Commission report titled “Our Common Future”, sustainable development means that current development should not compromise future generations’ ability to meet their needs [2]. To replicate the unprecedented global seriousness and inescapability of sustainable development is the new Agenda 2030. On 1 January 2016, upon the expiry of the Millennium Development Goals, the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* officially became operational following its promulgation during a United Nations summit (25–27 September 2015) [4].

Studies have suggested that society and stakeholders have been increasingly patronising firms that utilise an active approach regarding the principles of sustainable development [5]. This is accomplished through new actions such as decreasing the firm’s carbon footprint or water usage, improving on education commitments, and community engagement [6]. Thus, firms should focus on transforming their activities across the whole organisation and find new means to produce value for both the firm and their proximal communities [6]. As far as the concept and phenomenon of sustainable development is concerned, many visions and deliberations from various spheres of life abound in this context [7]. However, operationalisation of sustainable development is vitally needed and calls are being made for businesses to go beyond visions and goals by considering actions and behaviours that transform

how firms interact with the outside world [5]. The major challenge is in implementing sustainable development, particularly with attention being provided to the three dimensions of sustainable development, namely, economic, social, and ecological [7–9].

In general, researchers call for more enquiries into the underpinning factors concerning the sustainable development phenomenon [10]. In this study, isomorphism is regarded in the sense that interaction with the environment, as well as interactions of small firms and other firms within an organisational field, brings sustainable development uniformity. Isomorphism is a concept that addresses how business organisations attain legitimacy by complying with social values and norms [11,12]. The concept of isomorphism focuses on the aspect of firm–environment interface and acknowledges that firms seldom exist in a vacuum. Congruently, isomorphism is a depiction of a complicated interaction between environmental selection and the readiness of a firm to adapt [13]. Thus, isomorphism describes the reasons for configurations that exist amongst organisations that are operating in a similar environmental setup [13].

As such, if firms are to survive and attain their objectives they need to adapt to their normative environments. This study holds that in the isomorphism context, as firms interact, they tend to influence each other's behaviours and practices within their social spheres. In line with this premise, firms have joined the sustainable development movement initially as a response to external pressures and criticisms from government entities and organisational civil societies that blamed businesses for environmental degradation [5]. The isomorphic process explains why eventually firms will transform towards similarity in behaviour and practices due to being communally intertwined [11]. Coherently, in response to social change in the society, social networks play a significant part in assessing, predicting, responding to, and adapting to global social and environmental change [14]. Of which, sustainable development is an example of such a global change.

2. Literature Review

The literature framework for this study is underpinned by two parental concepts, namely, isomorphism and sustainable development. Firstly, literature contextualises the concept of SMEs in South Africa. Defining SMEs is a daunting task as Mamman et al. [15] elucidate; firms that are considered to be small in one country may fall under the definition of medium or large firms in another country. For the purposes of this study, an SME is defined as a firm which is independently owned by owner/managers, employing not more than 200 full-time employees, with total annual turnover of less than R40 million, and with a total gross fixed assets value (fixed property excluded) of less than R15 million. This definition disregards the differences that apply in terms of the differences in industry, as outlined in the definition provided in the National Small Business Act no. 102 of South Africa 1996, as amended in 2003. The research was concerned with the behaviour of SMEs in general disregarding the specificities in terms of industry differences.

The concept of isomorphism provides the theoretical framework and is explained in literature by two theories, namely, institutional isomorphism theory and organisational ecology theory. Simplistically, the institutional theory upholds that organisations of all sorts adapt structures in line with the existence and operation of other institutions in their industry or country [14]. The institutional theory is propounded by Di Maggio and Powell (1983) and it relates that isomorphism or processes of homogenisation of organisational form in a certain field is a result of coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures [11,16,17]. The organisational ecology theory provides the theoretical lens of the concept of competitive isomorphism and it states that isomorphism is the sum of competitive pressures that compel organisations to display virtually identical features due to environmental pressures [17]. The underpinning argument for isomorphism is that the nature and behaviour of firms when faced with identical environmental constraints is to move towards homogeneity over time as a result of isomorphic pressures [16]. Isomorphism stipulates that there are certain forces, namely, isomorphic pressures that influence the shape of institutions in the society as well as the internal practices of firms within a given environment. Basically, each firm is dependent on both the internal and institutional

environments which are comprised of values, structures, systems, and processes that are conventional or traditional [10]. Also, firms are embedded in the external institutional environment, a milieu of other organisations.

In this study, the institutional theory guides the theoretical review as well as empirical enquiry into institutional isomorphism. The institutional theory of isomorphism relates that from a broader spectrum, institutions constitute cognitive, normative, and regulative structures and events that offer constancy and meaning to social behaviour [18]. Under institutional isomorphism—also called institutional similarity—coercive pressures are exerted on a firm by other organisations which they depend on. Coercive pressures refer to outlined regulative processes such as rule setting, monitoring, and sanctioning activities. These forces come from regulatory bodies and the prevalent rules and laws which determine the firms' behaviours in relation to a practice in the business environment, in this case sustainable development [11]. Normative pressures come as firms reinforce and spread norms of behaviour as they interact. Professionalisation is the main contributor of normative isomorphism. Professionalisation has been identified as “the collective struggle of members of an occupation to define the conditions and methods of their work as well as to establish a cognitive base and legitimisation for their occupational autonomy” [18]. Mimetic pressures emanate when a firm imitates the behaviour and practices of successful counterparts within the same industry. Through isomorphic pressures, one unit in a population conforms to other units in the population that deal with similar situations [11,12]. This study focuses on the mimetic pressures from the three isomorphism types.

2.1. Mimicry Isomorphism

Under the institutional organisation theory, mimicry, mimetic, or mimesis often constitutes the third mechanism that explains isomorphism from the institutional perspective. Mimetic isomorphism as a mechanism to respond to environmental uncertainties has received substantial exploration by scholars within the discourse of institutional theory [19,20]. Mimicry isomorphism holds that organisations often undertake courses of convergent transformations in order to look legitimated within their institutional spheres [21]. Based on mimetic processes, organisations will copy legitimated and/or prosperous counterparts in their business milieu so as to be legitimated as well, thereby resulting in institutional isomorphism [11,16,17].

Mimicry behaviour is also termed modelling (meaning firms modelling themselves after their counterparts) and occurs through various mechanisms. Amongst others, modelling occurs through a firm recruiting employees from other firms, through consultants, and taking part in industry associations [22]. Imitation for legitimation will only transpire if the imitated organisations are perceived to be significantly successful in line with the espoused values within the field [19]. Firms will mimic other organisations that fall within their industry [23]. However, the firms being imitated should be identical in complexity or the ones on the cutting edge. When the mimicking of firms—identical in complexity or those deemed to be on the cutting edge—occurs, a national culture is likely to emerge. In this regard, under mimicry isomorphism legitimacy is culturally guided [24].

Mimetic isomorphism entails that when a firm is faced with uncertainties it tends to imitate others in order to maintain competitiveness and avoid or minimise adverse and unexpected outcomes [25]. Mimetic isomorphism is in three forms, namely, frequency-based imitation, trait-based imitation, and outcome-based imitation [18,22,26]. Firstly, frequency-based imitation relates to the purest form of mimetic isomorphism. This occurs when a firm imitates or copies the practices and structures that have been embraced by the majority of firms within an industry [18,22].

Secondly, trait-based imitation involves high levels of selectivity when contrasted to frequency-based imitation. Trait-based imitation happens when a firm exclusively focuses on imitating the mannerisms of firms that have particular characteristics, such as size and centrality in the community [18,22,26]. The underlying belief that drives trait-based imitation is that decisions and practices utilised by organisations possessing certain traits are mostly desirable and likely going to have the same positive outcomes to the imitator [18]. Finally, outcome-based is almost similar

to trait-based imitation in that it involves selectively imitating decisions and practices that lead to prosperous results. Thus, outcome-based imitation is simply described as transpiring when actions that seem to be connected to success are copied [22]. More specifically, trait-based imitation is regarded as mimicking firms that have certain desirable features while outcome-based imitation is mimicking firms that portray certain desirable outcomes. Many studies within the institutional theory discourse concentrate on frequency- and trait-based imitations [22]. However, they observe that outcome-based imitation can be critical particularly in the initial stages of adopting a practice.

2.2. Sustainable Development

The second concept abounding in the literature framework is sustainable development, which incorporates the three pillars of sustainable development, namely, economic, social, and environmental. The following discussion provides an in-depth analysis of the three dimensions of sustainable development.

2.2.1. Environmental Sustainability

The dimension of environmental sustainability is prominently described by the principle of environmental integrity which requires that human activities need not erode the earth's land, air, and water resources. Ecosystems are regarded to be constrained in terms of regeneration capacity and potential [27]. Ecological sustainability by firms aims at reducing the size of their ecological footprint [28]. Each firm has an environmental impact, even simply by managing lighting of office buildings or, more pronounced, by reducing production wastes and emissions through three taxonomies, namely, pollution control, pollution prevention and product stewardship. Firstly, *pollution control* requires firms to adopt responsible waste disposal mechanisms, such as additions of physical equipment to filter toxins or outsourcing of waste removal services. Secondly, pollution prevention entails the reduction of waste through innovative processes or technologies utilised through the production system. Lastly, product stewardship focuses on designing products that use fewer resources and toxins, and recycle or reuse materials.

Ecological sustainability focuses on the well-being of the natural systems over time [29]. The European Commission identified that the most significant environmentally sustainable practices by firms pertain to the utilisation of materials and energy, and pollution and waste management, in an environmentally conscious manner [30]. Research on SMEs in Europe highlighted that environmentally conscious practices are broadly concerned with establishing environmentally friendly products as well as operational systems or being dynamically involved in recycling actions [31]. Danish SMEs revealed that environmentally oriented corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities had a positive impact on their business reputation, which in turn influenced their competitiveness [30].

2.2.2. Economic Sustainability

Economic sustainability is created by producing various goods and services in a responsible manner [28]. It entails producing products that are required by customers, lowering costs of inputs, or realising production efficiencies. Coherently, the dimension of economic sustainability comprises elements that include technology and innovation [32]. However, the pillar of economic sustainability seems to be the least documented of the three dimensions of sustainable development. There is a need for more literature to be structured and formulated around the concept of economic sustainability within the contemporary sustainable development context. For instance, high value creation is not always related to financial performance as market conditions or regulations through intense competition may minimise the firm's ability to capture value [33]. As such, there is a need for the different components of economic sustainable development to be researched and theorised.

This dimension results in economically sustainable systems that continually produce goods and services [34]. Economic sustainability entails sustaining manageable levels of government and external debt, while desisting from sectoral imbalances that destroy agricultural and industrial production.

Nowadays, long-term sustainable competitive advantage through any new products or ideas, quality, costs, or time is difficult to maintain. This is due to endless competitive cycles caused by reactive strategies, such as me-too products and differentiation strategies amongst rival firms which eventually are destructive [35]. The effects of the destructive nature of these reactive strategies are prone to be more pronounced when it comes to the SMEs considering their capacity and resources. In this regard, sustainable development implies an undertaking by firms to invest less for smaller, sooner profits, and invest more for greater future profits [33].

2.2.3. Social Sustainability

Social sustainability is a vital dimension for businesses, large and small, because they rely to a greater extent on the well-being, stability, and success of the societies where they are located. The status of a firm in the location of its operations, the manner in which it is perceived as an employer as well as a producer and participant in the local area definitely impact on its competitive position [36]. Furthermore, firms that are regarded as being socially active stand to experience an increase in their reputation from the public and business fraternity. In this case, this enhances the potential for firms to attract capital as well as increasing their competitive position [30]. SMEs are prominent in providing social support towards sporting activities in almost all the countries in Europe. Consistently, in Latin America, SMEs seem to be highly active in the areas of sports and health as well as cultural events [30].

Social sustainability involves three processes, namely, environmental assessment, stakeholder management, and social issues management [37]. Firstly, environmental assessment involves firms scanning socio-economic and environmental issues and responding appropriately. Secondly, in stakeholder management, firms respond to individuals outside organisations and the natural environments. It entails distribution of value created by firms equitably amongst the stakeholders. Lastly, social management addresses social issues, such as desisting from the use of child labour, not producing socially undesirable products, not participating in unethical matters [38,39]. Generally, social sustainable development manifests in important items such as demographics and inequalities in cultural differences [1].

3. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Formulation

As far as the concept and phenomenon of sustainable development is concerned, many visions and deliberations from various spheres of life abound in this context [7]. However, operationalisation of sustainable development is vitally needed, and calls are being made for businesses to go beyond visions and goals by considering actions and behaviours that transform how firms interact with the outside world [5]. The major challenge is in implementing sustainable development, particularly with attention being provided to the three dimensions of sustainable development, namely, economic, social, and ecological [7–9].

Several problematic issues that pertain to the implementation of sustainable development have been discovered in the current sustainable development literature and latent research. Past research has primarily adopted a disaggregated approach towards the three variables of sustainable development, namely, economic, environmental, and social [7]. Coherently, this alone represents a tremendous gap considering that sustainable development, by nature, imperatively purports an integrative approach towards economic, environmental, and social development issues. As such, decisive research of any nature, when it comes to operationalisation and assessment, ought to adopt an integrative approach within the context of sustainable development. To this end, few studies have attempted to entirely research all the dimensions of sustainable development practices. The literature review process identified a few examples of studies [5,7,27,40–42] that attempted considering the holistic approach to the concept of sustainable development.

In contrast to this study, how firms are practising sustainable development is not clearly articulated in these studies especially with reference to SMEs in South Africa. Most of the studies [43–45] considered the accounting perspective, the so-called sustainable reporting. Sustainable reporting

focuses on the end product of a firm's sustainability efforts rather than considering the sustainable processes and practices, which is a focus in the study at hand. In other words, the major difference lies in the fact that studies on sustainability reporting are concerned with whether the firms being investigated are reporting on sustainability issues [43–46]. Whereas, the study at hand is inspired to unearth whether or not the firms are practicing sustainability, and the embedding factors influencing sustainability practices, with particular reference to SMEs in South Africa. These two concepts constitute the two variables being investigated in this research. In this regard, the following hypotheses were postulated in relation to the above outlined research discussions.

Hypotheses 1(H1). *There is a significant positive relationship between perceived mimetic isomorphism and environmental sustainability practices of SMEs in South Africa.*

Hypotheses 2(H2). *There is a significant positive relationship between perceived mimetic isomorphism and economic sustainability practices of SMEs in South Africa.*

Hypotheses 3(H3). *There is a significant positive relationship between perceived mimetic isomorphism and social sustainability practices of SMEs in South Africa.*

Figure 1 below diagrammatically provides the depiction of the concepts under study within the SME context in South Africa.

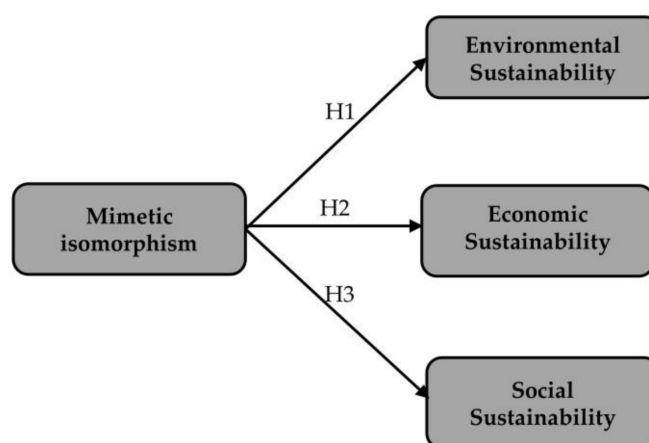


Figure 1. Proposed theoretical model.

4. Research Methodology

The study area for this study is the Capricorn District Municipality (CDM) which is located in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. The CDM comprises five local municipalities, namely, Aganang, Blouberg, Lepelle-Nkumpi, Molemole, and Polokwane. Polokwane is the largest city in the province and is the centre of economic activities and embraces a considerable number of small businesses [47]. The research on hand was conducted under the positivism epistemic stance. The positivism epistemological position supports the study at hand emanating from the fact that the social world is regarded to exist externally and as such, considered objectively [48].

A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed for the purpose of data collection and 246 were returned which represents a 61.5% response rate. After discarding questionnaires because of partial responses, 222 questionnaires were finally used, yielding an effective final survey response rate of 55.5%. As indicated in Table 1, the majority of the respondents were male (53%), between 31–40 years (40%), and owners (55%), while 45% were managers. Furthermore, most of the businesses represented in the survey employed between 6–20 employees (43%) and were located in the urban areas (80%).

Table 1. Demographic details and business profile.

Variables	Category	Frequency	Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	104	46.8
	Female	118	53.2
Age	Below 20 years	2	0.9
	20–30 years	75	33.8
	31–40 years	88	39.6
	41–50 years	46	20.7
	Above 50 years	11	5.0
Position in business	Owner	123	55.4
	Manager	99	44.6
Number of employees	5 and Below	79	35.6
	6–20	96	43.2
	21–50	39	17.6
	51–200	8	3.6
Location of business	Rural	45	20.3
	Urban	177	79.7

4.1. Research Design

Quantitative research was utilised and a cross-sectional research design underpins the study because longitudinal studies demand time, effort, and cost [49], and as such were not feasible for the study at hand. Quantitative research seeks to provide numerical and statistical compilations of specific behaviours, opinions, and attitudes as they pertain to the research objectives [50].

4.2. Data Collection

The survey technique was utilised in this study and self-administered questionnaires personally and electronically (e-mail) were distributed. The two techniques were chosen because of their convenience and effectiveness in communication. The questionnaire constituted 5-point Likert scale type of questions, operationalised based on former works (see Appendix A). Mimicry isomorphism was measured through adopted scales from previous studies [51,52]. Sustainable development was also measured through adopted scales developed [27,43,53,54]. The psychometric properties in these scales were deemed satisfactory as they were greater than the threshold of 0.6 and acceptable with Cronbach's alpha values ranging between 0.66 and 0.68.

The convenience and judgemental sampling techniques were selected for the purposes of this study, and the sample group comprised of SME owners and managers. Most SMEs in the study area are not formally registered, as such, this has adversely affected the prospects of obtaining a sample frame for this study for the purposes of probability sampling. The study was conducted in the province of Limpopo which is primarily bolstered by small businesses, with a relatively few large businesses found in the province. This is braced by the fact that Limpopo province is primarily rural with the majority (71%) of its population being in rural areas [55].

The Raosoft sample size calculator was used to calculate the sample size as follows: $N = 823$ SMEs, with a 5% margin of error as well as 95% confidence level. The calculation resultant sample size was 263. SEM requires at least 200 participants for the sample size to be effective. A sample size of 50–70 would be enough for a model involving 4 latent variables [56], while a sample size ranging from 30 (Simple CFA with four indicators and loadings around 0.80) up to 450 cases (mediation models) is required for SEM [55,57]. As such, taking into consideration the non-response rate in the calculator (50%), the sample size for the study was 400 SMEs.

4.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis stage followed a two-pronged approach, namely, descriptive and inferential analyses. Descriptive analysis for the whole sample was conducted using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 24. For hypothesis testing under inferential analysis, Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was conducted. SEM is a multivariate technique which is an alternative to multiple

regression analysis [58]. SEM is considered more superior since it is able to simultaneously test a series of dependence relationships between variables [59]. Since the scale used in the study is mostly adapted, a confirmatory factor analysis was also conducted utilising Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS Version 24.0) software (New York, NY, USA).

4.4. Reliability and Validity

The researchers made use of Cronbach's coefficient alpha (α) greater than 0.7, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) to ascertain reliability in the study. On the other hand, validity refers to the extent to which differences in observed scale scores reflect true differences between objects on the characteristics being measured, rather than systematic or random errors. It is divided into two: convergent and discriminant validity. In this study, convergent validity was measured using factor loadings and AVE values. On the other hand, discriminant validity was measured using AVE value versus Shared Variance and Inter-Construct Correlation Matrix.

4.5. Ethical Considerations

The respondents were informed about the rationale for the research. The researchers ensured that all the information provided pertaining to the research was kept under high levels of confidentiality. Participants were also made aware that the data was only to be used for academic and research purposes and was not to be given or sold to any third party. Furthermore, the sources of literature that were utilised in the study were duly acknowledged.

5. Results

Preliminary assessments involved screening for missing data and outliers as well as normality of data distribution through kurtosis and skewness measurements, which resulted in data validity since no significant anomalies were identified.

5.1. Measurement Model

Unidimensionality was ascertained through exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to determine factor loadings, and the results of factor loadings are presented in Table 2 with all items showing significantly high loadings of above 0.50 [60]. EFA is utilised when the researcher has some uncertainties pertaining to the dimensionality of a scale or they require identifying the minimum number of factors that observed variables are linked to [61]. To conduct EFA in this study, the principal component analysis was utilised as the extraction method and the Varimax rotation was used since the data was regarded to be orthogonal. Orthogonal rotation is utilised when factors are deemed to be uncorrelated and make use of a 90° rotation of factors from each other [59,62].

Table 2. Factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha, AVE, CR and R-squared.

Factor	Item	Factor Loading	Cronbach's α	AVE	CR	R-Squared
Mimetic	Mim1	0.907	0.930	0.727	0.929	–
	Mim2	0.923				
	Mim3	0.894				
	Mim4	0.760				
	Mim5	0.758				
Economic	Eco1	0.683	0.912	0.622	0.907	0.40
	Eco2	0.814				
	Eco3	0.877				
	Eco4	0.936				
	Eco5	0.763				
	Eco6	0.627				

Table 2. Cont.

Factor	Item	Factor Loading	Cronbach's α	AVE	CR	R-Squared
Environmental	Env1	0.867	0.946	0.873	0.937	0.42
	Env2	0.890				
	Env3	0.869				
	Env5	0.854				
	Env6	0.808				
	Env7	0.735				
	Env8	0.744				
	Social	Soc1				
Soc2		0.842				
Soc3		0.837				
Soc4		0.645				
Soc5		0.839				
Soc6		0.723				
Soc7		0.618				

Furthermore, Table 2 shows information on Cronbach's coefficient with values ranging between 0.903 and 0.946 which indicate significant reliability. For internal consistency of the constructs, the CR values exceeding 0.7 and preferably 0.8 and above, and AVE values exceeding 0.5, are regarded to be acceptable [60]. As shown in Table 2, all the CR and AVE values exceed the cut-off values depicting internal consistency. The assessment of convergent validity was ascertained through factor loadings of 0.50 and above, while those above 0.70 are preferred [60]. Consequently, all the standardised factor loadings were above the threshold of 0.50, thus, depicting excellent convergent validity (See Table 2). Discriminant validity was evaluated through inter-construct correlation coefficients as well as the square root of average variance extracted. As indicated in Table 3, all the interconstruct correlation coefficients were below the stipulated 0.80. Herein, discriminant validity is ascertained by the absence of high correlation amongst unique or distinctive theoretical operationalisations [63–65]. Furthermore, the square roots of AVE values for each construct presented along the diagonal (See Table 3) were all above their respective correlation coefficients, thus, satisfying internal consistency.

Table 3. Descriptive analysis, interconstruct correlations and discriminant analysis.

Factor/Item	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1 Mimicry isomorphism	2.982	0.233	0.852			
2 Environmental sustainability	3.825	0.042	0.62	0.826		
3 Economic sustainability	2.929	0.149	0.61	0.63	0.789	
4 Social sustainability	3.787	0.078	0.54	0.58	0.56	0.757

The measurement model developed through CFA attained acceptable fit (Chi-square = 304.305, $df = 78$, $p = 0.000$, $N = 222$ GFI = 0.942, NFI = 0.951, CFI = 0.963, TLI = 0.968, RFI = 0.945, AGFI = 0.863, RMR = 0.048, RMSEA.096, SRMR = 0.0456, and the Chi-square/ $df = 3.901$). The satisfactory fit was attained after dropping one item (ENV4) from the environmental sustainability construct because it had residuals of 3.016 and 2.666 which were above the recommended threshold of within ± 2.58 values [66].

5.2. Structural Equation Modelling

The SEM approach was used to examine the hypothesised relationships as outlined in the theoretical model. The structural model results showed satisfactory model fit regardless of the chi-square being significant (chi-square = 695.196, $df = 246$, $p = 0.000$, $N = 222$). As reviewed in literature, the chi-square is susceptible to large sample sizes of above 200 [64]. The other fit indices indicated acceptable model fitness, thus, GFI = 0.856, NFI = 0.939, CFI = 0.946, TLI = 0.923, AGFI = 0.783, RMR = 0.067, RMSEA.096, SRMR = 0.058, PNFI = 0.719, Chi-square/ $df = 2.826$. The R-squared values (see Figure 2) signify variance explained which represents the ability of the model to predict the latent variables. In the study, R^2 values of the endogenous latent variables, namely, economic sustainability,

environmental sustainability, and social sustainability of 0.40, 0.42, and 0.32 respectively, indicate adequacy of the predictive ability of the model.

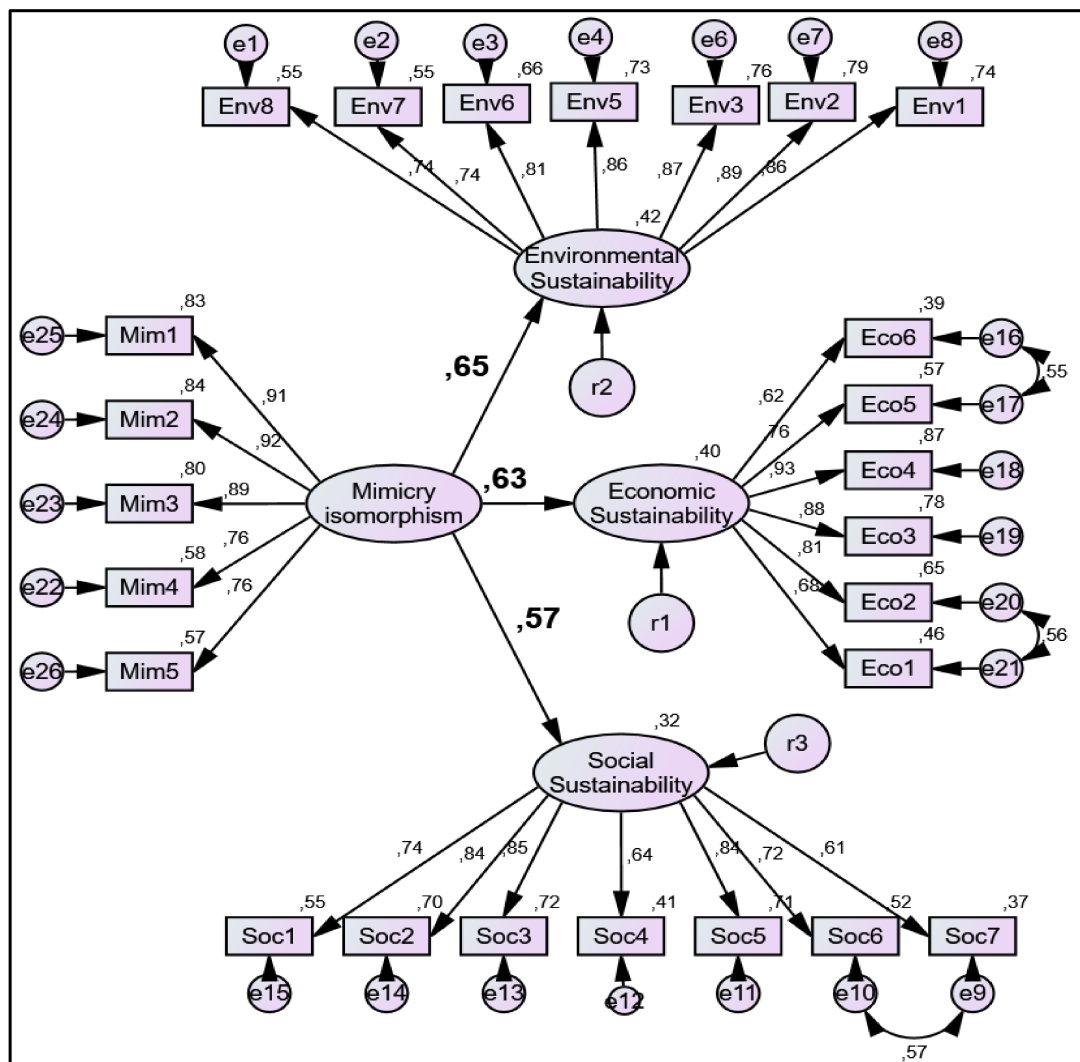


Figure 2. Diagram of Structural Model with standardized regression weightings presented in bold.

The results of the structural model are presented in Table 4 and illustrated in Figure 2. Using standardized regression weightings for path analysis, the results show that all the hypotheses postulated pertaining to the four latent variables were positive and significant in the structural model. Thus, all the types of sustainability practices were positively and significantly related to mimetic isomorphism. Thus, hypothesis H1 for mimetic isomorphism and environmental sustainability ($\beta = 0.65, p < 0.001$), H2 for mimetic isomorphism and economic sustainability ($\beta = 0.63, p < 0.001$), and H3 for mimetic isomorphism and social sustainability ($\beta = 0.57, p < 0.001$) were supported.

Table 4. Results of hypotheses testing using standardized estimates.

Hypothesised Relationship	β	S.E.	C.R.	p	Rejected or Supported
Mimetic→Environmental	0.646	0.082	8282	***	Supported
Mimetic→Economic	0.633	0.061	7270	***	Supported
Mimetic→Social	0.566	0.059	6595	***	Supported

β , standardized regression weight; S.E., standard error; C.R., critical ratio; p , probability value; ***, denotes $p < 0.001$.

6. Discussion

Pertaining to mimetic institutional isomorphism and sustainable development practices, the relationship between mimetic isomorphism and sustainable development was confirmed in this study. All the dimensions of sustainable development (economic, environmental, and social) were significantly related to mimetic isomorphism. More specifically, the path represented by H1 which pertained to mimetic isomorphism and environmental sustainability ($\beta = 0.65, p < 0.001$) was the strongest of the relationships. These results were in support of the hypothesis which stated that there is a significant positive relationship between perceived mimetic pressures and environmental sustainability practices of SMEs in South Africa. This means the null hypothesis, which implies no relationship, was rejected. This is followed by the relationship between mimetic isomorphism and economic sustainability which was represented by $\beta = 0.65$ and $p < 0.001$. Thus, H2 which tested a significant relationship between mimetic isomorphism and economic sustainability was also supported whereas the null was rejected.

Lastly, the relationship between mimicry isomorphism and social sustainability was at the lowest ($\beta = 0.57, p < 0.001$) although still significant and positive. This means that H3, which hypothesised a significant and positive relationship between perceived mimetic pressures and social sustainability, was supported as well leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. The results of this study contradict previous empirical evidence from studies [67,68] which suggested that mimetic isomorphism had no impact especially on environmental sustainability practices. However, the results are consistent with findings of a study which established a statistically significant relationship between mimetic isomorphism and sustainable development practices [8]. However, there is no latent literature that directly relates to mimetic isomorphism and sustainable development in relation to SMEs.

7. Conclusions

This study shows strong evidence that most of the environmental, economic, and social sustainability practises amongst SMEs are as a result of imitating their counterparts in the industry. Thus, the degree to which SMEs adopt sustainable development in their business practices depends to a larger extent on the mimetic pressures. Small businesses are possibly imitating large businesses and their successful counterparts on the issues of sustainability. The fear of demise and being secluded is one of the mimetic forces. Therefore, it follows that without SMEs copying their successful counterparts and large corporations they may be faced with legitimacy problems. However, there is a need to research the direction in which the isomorphism is strongest amongst the different categories of SMEs as well as contrasted large businesses.

The significant and positive relationships that were found with regards to all the three hypotheses postulated in the study have several implications. Broadly, the findings of this study will assist governments and other sustainability role players in formulating policies that encourage sustainable practices amongst SMEs. Policies on encouraging sustainability practices have increasingly been a subject of debate lately. Knowledge on the influence of mimicry in sustainable development practices can be utilised to formulate procedures and practices that indirectly encourage adoption of sustainability. For instance, governments across the globe can come up with programs that reward firms that are adopting sustainability. As portrayed by the findings of this research, SMEs are likely to copy such firms due to the strong forces of mimicry isomorphism. As such, there is a need to publicise the benefits and positive outcomes that are associated with SMEs that practice sustainability; this will automatically result in the spread of sustainability practices due to the availability of the underpinning forces of mimicry isomorphism.

Furthermore, the results reveal that the more mimetic pressures exist the more SMEs will be involved in sustainability practices. As such, structures, practices, strategies, and policies of SMEs are expected to exhibit homogeneity to some extent with severe consequences for non-conformers. For instance, the increasing severity of sustainability demands towards the business world, and the rules and regulations are continuously evolving. Thus, the mimetic isomorphism and sustainable

development model presented in this study can prove to be an instrumental competitive advantage and analytical tool. As such, SME owner/managers need to consider the two parental variables investigated in this study more proactively and avoid passive approaches to sustainability. For SME managers and owners, the findings of this study present a tremendous warning signal and demand more definite approaches and practices towards sustainability. Coupled with increasing calls for sustainability that have been echoed from various stakeholder spheres, the study unearthed that amongst SMEs themselves there is a great potency and shift towards sustainability. As such, individual firms need to monitor the sustainability dispensation and avoid being outpaced. Thus, the study established that there are two distinctive firms in the realm of mimicry isomorphism and sustainability. These are firms that are being imitated and those that are pacesetters. As such, firms that are not going to occupy any of these positions will find it hard as sustainability is redefining the rules of business.

Finally, through knowledge of the relationship between mimetic isomorphism and sustainable development, governments and policymakers, as well as other environmental role players, can facilitate policies and strategies that encourage the spread of sustainable development amongst SMEs. The instrumentality of SMEs, coupled with the renaissance of sustainability particularly in the developing world, makes SME knowledge crucial for economic growth. As such, the management and success of SMEs cannot be left to chance. As such, this study significantly contributes towards theory and knowledge of SMEs and sustainability practices which is really needed contemporarily. The theory of management is faced with a new platform demanding scrutiny and revision of the approaches and strategies to survival and growth of businesses. In the past, the economic goal of business has been to make profits, but findings from studies of this nature are proving there is a transition underneath the business world. Thus, this study contributes towards theory by reiterating that business strategies and practices need to be sustainable for SMEs to survive and grow in the contemporary business environments. However, there are still gaps in research that researchers still need to explore. It is recommended that future research should investigate the subsequent impact on the performance of SMEs due to this positive and significant relationship between mimetic isomorphism and sustainability practices. Also, this study focused on the Limpopo province, thus, the target area should be broadened to establish the findings in context. Lastly, another area of research pertains to the different types of mimicry isomorphism that have been identified in the study, namely, frequency-based imitation, trait-based imitation, and outcome-based imitation. Future research needs to establish how these different forms of mimetic isomorphism affect the different types of sustainability.

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Appendix A. Questionnaire Items

Indicate with an X to what extent do you agree to the following statements using the scale below where: 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree.

MIMETIC PRESSURES Our Sustainable Development Practice are Because ...					
... our main competitors that have used sustainable development benefited greatly.	1	2	3	4	5
... our main competitors that use sustainable development are perceived favourably by customers.	1	2	3	4	5
... our main competitors that use sustainable development are more competitive.	1	2	3	4	5
... we employ workers from competitors that are successful in sustainable development.	1	2	3	4	5
... we use the same consultants as our main competitors in sustainable development.	1	2	3	4	5
ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY Our Sustainable Business Practices ...					
... focus on environmental issues.	1	2	3	4	5
... make the most efficient use of the resources available in the environment.	1	2	3	4	5
... recycle, reuse or reduce waste.	1	2	3	4	5
... are increasing energy efficiency.	1	2	3	4	5
... emphasise use of renewable energy.	1	2	3	4	5
... make use of reduction/replacement of hazardous chemicals or materials (e.g., substituting hazardous chemicals with less hazardous alternatives).	1	2	3	4	5
... adhere to Environmental Protection Agency regulations on effluents/emissions/waste disposal.	1	2	3	4	5
ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY Our Sustainable Business Practices ...					
... rest on economic considerations such as efficiency and productivity.	1	2	3	4	5
... focus on survival in the marketplace.	1	2	3	4	5
... save money for the firm.	1	2	3	4	5
... meet tax obligations.	1	2	3	4	5
... provide products and services that are important for the community.	1	2	3	4	5
... focus on long-term profitability even if it means losses in the short-term.	1	2	3	4	5
SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY Our Sustainable Business Practices ...					
... take current activities in the community into account.	1	2	3	4	5
... consider the social well-being of society.	1	2	3	4	5
... Provide entitlements to workers.	1	2	3	4	5
... promote women to senior management positions.	1	2	3	4	5
... focus on equity and safety of the community.	1	2	3	4	5
... focus on improving the general education level.	1	2	3	4	5
... promote individual rights both civil and human rights.	1	2	3	4	5

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