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Audit Committee Characteristics and Sustainable Growth Among Selected Listed Non-Financial Firms in Nigeria

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Abstract

Sustainable growth involves a situation where growth is witnessed with no increase in assets, equity issuance and liabilities. An effective corporate governance mechanism, especially the audit committee, is needed to achieve an optimum sustainable growth rate. The influence of audit committee characteristics on the manufacturing firms' sustainable growth during the financial crisis cannot be overemphasized. Hence, this study was carried out to investigate the influence of audit committee characteristics on the sustainable growth rate of non-financial firms in Nigeria. The study population was listed as manufacturing companies on the Nigerian Stock Exchange (NSE). A sample size of 60 manufacturing firms was selected using a purposive sampling technique and content analysis, covering ten financial years (2011 to 2020). The results showed that audit committee size, audit committee independence and audit committee financial expertise were positively and significantly associated with sustainable growth rate. The study was anchored on agency theory because it showed that effective audit committee characteristics greatly contributed to the overall companies' goal congruence. From the foregoing, the study recommended that an audit committee should be large, with a great sense of independence and professionalism to make non-financial companies attain sustainable growth.

Keywords:
Audit Committee, Audit Committee Meeting, Audit Committee Size, Sustainable Growth

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1. Introduction

The business environment all over the world is fragile and prone to uncertainties. These uncertainties are caused by the happenings like the global economic meltdown of 2008, the Covid-19 pandemic of 2019, the climate change, and the present tussle between Russia and Ukraine. During these periods of uncertainties, businesses find it difficult to get more patronage, sales expansion and access to external sources of finance. Why? Whenever there is uncertainty, investors' confidence is washed away; people purchasing power is affected negatively. Despite all these odds, companies must strive for survival because they are expected to operate perpetually. Sustainable growth is required to bail firms out of these problems. Corporate sustainable growth is the paramount stage at which a company can boost its revenue without degradation its financial ability (Nor et al., 2020; Adebayo et al., 2021). Companies are faced with serious problems like difficulty in raising additional funds through the issuance of shares and low accessibility to debts during periods of uncertainty. Sustainable growth aids the companies to be able to managing their internal resources to run their operational affairs smoothly.

Adebayo et al. (2021) posited that good corporate governance is responsible for making a sound policy relating to a business's long-term growth. This implies that sustainable growth cannot be achieved without the intervention of corporate governance mechanisms, especially audit committee effectiveness. Audit committee features are regarded as the most important corporate governance characteristics (ElHawary, 2021) simply because of their roles after the demise of Enron, Worldcom, Tyco, and Toshiba. It is widely believed that the firms' sudden death resulted from the audit committee's ineffectiveness (Bajra and Cadez, 2018). The shattered/shredded confidence of the investors can be restored and protected by the effectiveness of audit committee qualities. In restoring and protecting the confidentiality of the investors, companies will be able to expand in their sustainable performance, in the sense that if it is not possible to gain more investors during the hard times, they will be able to retain the old ones. Like Badawy (2020), a study has established that effective audit committee qualities promote firms' sustainability growth.

Studies have been carried out linking corporate governance with corporate sustainability growth. Badawy (2020) investigated the link between audit committee effectiveness and corporate sustainable growth; Adebayo et al. (2021) assessed the link between board characteristics, ownership concentration and corporate sustainability growth. The previous findings on corporate governance and sustainable growth are scanty, and it shows an absence of findings in this area. Hence, the objective of this study is to investigate whether audit committee characteristics exert any influence on the sustainable growth of listed non-financial firms in Nigeria. The justification for this study is that non-financial firms' contribution to the economic growth of Nigeria is enormous. In terms of employment opportunities, corporate social responsibility and revenue generation for the government, they are always in front. These firms must not go into liquidation. They have to be enlightened on how to use their internal sources of funds to shoulder their operational activities whenever there is a problem accessing the external sources of funds.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Concept of Sustainable Growth

Corporate sustainable growth is a concept coined to explain the optimal growth of quoted firms. A company's growth has to be moderate; it must not be too enormous and at the same time, it must not be deficient. The sustainable growth rate is the term used to measure the sustainable growth of firms. According to Higgins (1977), Mukherjee and Sen (2019), and Adebayo et al. (2021), a sustainable growth rate is a long-run growth attained by a company by using its internal sources of finance in the period when there is a scarcity of external sources of finance. Higgins's (1977) model is adopted in this study to calculate the sustainable growth rate of sampled non-financial firms because it incorporates return on equity and retention ratio into the formula of its model. These two elements – return on equity and retained earnings – basically deal with the internal source of finance. The importance of a sustainable growth rate is tremendous and gaining more popularity because it combines firms' operating and financial aspects. This fact has made it a reliable financial performance measurement tool (Rahim, 2017).

There are four (4) determinants of sustainable growth rate: the margin of profit, the turnover of net assets, the policy relating to finance, and the dividend decision (Amouzesh, Moenifar and Mousavi, 2011). Enhancing these four (4) factors improves the sustainable growth rate by accumulating internal sources of finance accrued to a firm.

2.2. Audit Committee Characteristics

The audit committee is a subcommittee of the board of directors, runs by a certain number of people elected by the board of directors. This committee plays a critical role in putting the company's performance in good shape via its monitoring function. The audit committee (AC) is a set of people required to be organized by amended provision S359 of the Company and Allied Matter Acts (CAMA, 2020). In addition to the act, the Nigerian Corporate Governance Code (2018) also made it mandatory for firms to have an audit committee. The committee is referred to a set of people in an organization selected to discharge an oversight function on the company's accounting and internal control processes. Its establishment aims to help the Board of Directors and the company owners discharge their responsibilities for oversight of the internal control system, risk management, statutory audit function and financial reporting (Krishnan, 2005). The act stipulates that the composition of AC should be of an equal number of directors and representatives of the company’s shareholders. The external auditors must report to them, and the committee is responsible for reviewing the submitted reports and making any necessary recommendations to the stakeholders at the Annual General Meeting (AGM).

AC characteristics include AC size, independence, diversity, experience, meeting, and AC meeting (Alqatamin, 2018; Badawy, 2020). Also, according to Mohiuddin and Karbhari (2010), for AC to positively influence a company's financial statements and simultaneously execute its duty of agency, it must portray some traits: independence, experience relating to finance, membership diversity, size and meeting frequency. The effectiveness of AC, proxied by its characteristics, will, without any doubt, have a positive effect on the company’s sustainable growth by elevating the level of the firm’s responsibility to its host environment and improvement on the extent of transparency as an outcome of the soundness in the internal control together with the internal audit.

2.2.1. Audit committee size

The AC size in Nigeria is specified to be five (5) members (CAMA, 2020). The Act does not state the committee members’ minimum size. Nevertheless, previous studies hammered on a minimum of three (3) members (Al-Sa’eed and Al-Mahamid, 2011; Badawy, 2020). Some reasons are attached to advocating for a larger committee size, as posited by previous studies like Bedard, Chtourou and Courteau (2004) and Karamanou and Vafeas (2005). One, a large AC can perform an effective oversight function. Two, when the AC size is large, management will not be able to override it. In the Nigerian context, the committee members should represent the management and owners equally. However, the larger size of the AC is prone to communication setbacks, which can let it to lose its focus and consequently reduce its quality (Alqatamin, 2018; Tai, Lai and Yang, 2018).

Despite this defect, which the larger size AC suffers from, it is preferable to the smaller size because the latter is confronted with the problem of non-availability of expertise, which will disturb it from discharging its duty with the utmost good faith (Ayemere and Elijah, 2015; Alqatamin, 2018). Meanwhile, the size of AC is expected to positively influence long-term growth due to its ability to deliver on the oversight functions at its disposal in both internal control and internal audit. This is supported by the resource dependency theory, which states that a larger AC improves the audit committee's effectiveness due to the abundance of expertise in the committee.

2.2.2. Audit committee independence

AC independence is a concept used to explain a condition whereby any member of AC is not found performing the duty of executive director. AC independence is the non-existence of any association with an organization that may tamper with the pursuit of their freedom from both the management and the company (Blue Ribbon Committee, 1999). To carry out its role effectively, the independence of AC members is mandatory. This will allow the committee to be unbiased in paying attention to the financial reporting process. AC objectivity will drastically minimize the agency face-off between the shareholders and the executives (Alqatamin, 2018; Badawy, 2020). In addition, being independent will help the AC committee to alleviate the extent of abnormal accruals, which will prevent manipulation and errors of management (Klein, 2002); enhance internal control and internal audit quality (Krishnan, 2005; Zaman and Saren, 2013), and the disclosure of corporate social responsibility, which will aid a company to maintain its sustainable growth through gaining a good reputation (Appuhami and Tashakor, 2017).

Moreover, AC’s independence gives more power to audit committee formation, which will aid it in addressing the problem of the agency and the possibility of an insider’s expropriation (Yeh, Chung and Lie, 2011; Hamid, Othaman and Rahim, 2015). The audit committee's ability to address the agency's problem and insiders' expropriation is due to its independence, which prevents the committee from exerting any influence over management. In that regard, the positive influence of AC on firm performance is expected because independence is the bedrock of AC effectiveness (Kallamu and Saat, 2015).

2.2.3. Audit committee financial expertise

AC members must have experience and expertise in accounting and auditing problems. This will help members become more familiar with financial and operating reports and efficiently carry out their oversight duties (Ayemere and Elijah, 2015). It is generally welcome and very obvious that the outstanding role of AC is to review financial records to enhance their quality. It is necessary, from this perspective, for some of the AC members, if possible, to have accounting and auditing-related skills to boost their performance. Statutorily, at least one member of the AC must be a financial guru (NSE Code, 2011). According to Hamid and Aziz (2012) and Ojeka, Iyoha and Obigbemi (2014), having members that have accounting and financial experience in AC will positively influence financial performance. Previous studies have established that the professionalism of AC members is a determining factor in its effectiveness (Abernathy et al., 2015; Badolato, Donelson and Ege, 2014; Albring, Robinson and Robinson, 2014). The professionalism of AC members gives them the ability to resolve the controversy between the management and the statutory auditor due to their familiarity with the audit process. It also professionalizes them and responds promptly to company changes and innovation (Badolato, Donelson and Ege 2014).

2.2.4. Frequency of audit committee meetings

Among the most critical features of corporate governance implementation is an oversight. In most cases, according to the agency theory, agents are restrained from being involved in opportunistic behaviour due to adequate monitoring. The oversight function of AC can only be achieved through frequent meetings of the AC. In the countries that have adopted the Anglo-Saxon system of corporate governance, Great Britain and the United States, in particular, the number of meetings is about four (4) to six (6) times per year (Chariri and Januarati, 2017). Furthermore, in Nigeria, AC meetings are scheduled to be held three (3) times a year, as required by the business code of governance. Regular meetings of AC allow it to oversee the control system and the reporting process. This is by the works of Karamanou and Vafeas (2005), Hoque, Rabiul-Islam and Azam (2013). Proper monitoring is accomplished through regular AC meetings, which prevent managers from engaging in opportunistic actions, institute a sound control system, and assists a company in achieving sustainable growth.

2.2.5. Theoretical framework

Agency theory is an outstanding bedrock foundation of corporate governance (Badawy, 2020). Agency rivalry arises in a corporate setting when hired managers neglect the principals' interest in making a corporate decision. The solution to this problem rests with strengthening the monitoring duty of the Audit Committee and the ownership structure (Fama and Jensen, 1983; Badawy, 2020). From this point of view, this study was anchored on agency theory. According to this theory, the Audit Committee, being an essential component of corporate governance, is a strong monitoring mechanism that bridges various actors involved in the financial reporting system. The stakeholders expect that the monitoring and oversight functions of the Audit Committee will provide strong protection to the interests of the various stakeholders.

2.3. Empirical review

In 2020, Badawy found a link between audit committee features and the sustainable growth rate of non-financial companies quoted in Egypt between 2015 and 2019. The data was analysed using a multiple regression approach. The findings revealed a negative association between audit committee size and sustainable growth. The findings also demonstrated a non-negativity significant association between audit committee meetings, independence, and sustainable growth rate. Furthermore, Adegboye et al. (2020) studied the effect of audit committee features on the sustainability of 10 Nigerian quoted banks. The regression method was applied to analyse the data over the sampled period of 2014 to 2016. The results showed that AC's independence and gender diversity had a significant non-negativity influence on the sustainability of the banks. Elhawary (2021) examined the influence of audit committee qualities on firms' performance in Egypt from 2016 to 2018. A multiple regression model was adopted to analyse the data, and the study's outcome was that audit committee size and financial skill were positively and significantly associated with firm performance.

3. Research Methodology

This study covered non-financial quoted companies in Nigeria and cut across eight (8) sectors, namely consumer goods, industrial goods, healthcare, agriculture, oil and gas, conglomerate, service, and natural resources. The total number of non-financial listed companies was one hundred and sixteen as of 2019. The sample size of 65 non-financial quoted companies that covered the eight (8) sectors was purposively selected. The purposive sampling technique was employed to pick companies listed as of 2011 and was still in existence as of December 2020 based on the availability of published financial data.

Table 1. The Summary of Literature Review

S/N	Author and Year	Country of Study	Purpose of Study	Methodology	Findings
1	Li, Liu and Ren (2015)	China	Investigated the interrelationship between board features and sustainable growth	Multiple regression	The study documented that all the board characteristics except board size were positively and significantly associated with sustainable growth.
2	Mukherjee and Sen (2019)	India	Influence of corporate governance on sustainable growth	Multiple regression	It was documented that board size and board independence positively influenced sustainable growth.
3	Zare, Moeinadin and Heyrani (2014)	Iran	Association between board characteristics and sustainable development	Multiple regression	No association between board features and sustainable growth
4	Sulaiman, Suleiman and Mijinyawa (2017)	Nigeria	Examined the relationship between board characteristics and firm performance	Multiple regression	Board independence and board gender diversity were positively correlated with firm performance, while the size was inversely correlated with firm performance.
5	Ain et al. (2021)	China	Assessment of the influence of the board gender diversity on sustainable growth.	Multiple regression	The female directorship had a positive influence on sustainable growth.
6	Badawy (2020)	Egypt	Investigation of association between audit committee features and sustainable growth rate	Multiple regression	It was recorded that audit committee features except size were positively correlated with sustainable growth rate.
7	Adegboye et al (2020)	Nigeria	Assessment of the influence of audit features on business sustainability disclosure	Regression analysis	Audit committee independence and gender diversity positively and significantly influenced business sustainability, while audit committee magnitude did not.
8	Rahim (2017)	Malaysia	Determination of the association between sustainable growth and firm performance.	Descriptive statistics and multiple regression	It was established that there was a positive relationship between sustainable growth and firm performance.
9	Vasiu and Ilie (2018)	Romania	Determinants of sustainable growth of firms	Descriptive statistics and ratio analysis	It was revealed that the retention ratio greatly impacted sustainable growth.
10	Mukherjee and Sen (2019)	India	Examination of the association between liquidity, profitability, leverage and sustainable growth	Pooled OLS regression analysis	There was a significant positive relationship among the variables.
11	Alhassan and Mamuda (2020)	Nigeria	Ascertainment of a link between ownership concentration and firm financial performance	Multiple regression	There was a positive and significant relationship between ownership concentration and financial performance.

12	Elhawary (2021)	Egypt	Investigation of audit committee qualities on firm performance	Regression analysis	Audit committee size and expertise are positively and significantly associated with firm performance. While other audit committee qualities like independence, the diversity of gender and meeting were impactless on firm performance.

Source: Authors' Compilation (2022)

The outcomes of prior empirical studies such as Amouzesh, Moenifar and Mousavi (2011), Fonseka, Ramos and Tian (2012), Li, Liu and Ren (2015), Mukherjee and Sen (2019) and Nastiti *et al*. (2019) were used to inform the selection of variables. The Board of the Securities and Exchange Commission and the Corporate Affairs Commission advocated a number of corporate governance measures in their 2003 code of best practices, including board composition, the board size, board gender diversity, and ownership concentration (Adebayo et al., 2021). The aforementioned corporate governance procedures were the proxies for measuring corporate governance as the major independent variable.

Table 2. The Measurement of Variables

Dependent Variables	Measurement	Expected Sign
Corporate Sustainable Growth (CSG)	ROE x b/ 1 - (ROE x b) Where, ROE (Return on Equity) = Net Profit/ Total Equity b (Retention Ratio) = PAT - Current Year Dividend/PAT	+
Independent Variables		
AC Expertise	Percentage of audit committee members with finance or accounting qualification	+
AC Meeting	Total number of AC meetings held in a year	+
AC Size	Total number of AC member	+
AC Independence	Number of non-executive directors on the AC	+

Source: Authors' Computation (2022)

3.1. Model specification

Influence of AC attributes on the attainment of sustainable growth

Panel data methodology was used to examine the influence of AC attributes on the attainment of sustainable growth. The model of this objective was adapted from Badawy's (2020) study. The model of the objective is thus:

SG = β0 + β1ACMEETINGit + β2ACSIZEit + β3ACIit + β4ACFEit + β5LEVRit β6FSIZEit+Uit…………3.3

A priori expectation = β1, β2, β3, β4, β5 > 0

4. Result and Discussion of Findings

4.1. Influence of audit committee attributes on the attainment of sustainable growth

Table 3 let us know that the AC meeting (ACMT) and the size of AC (ACSIZE) had a positive relationship with the other independent variables (audit committee financial expertise, audit committee independence, leverage and firm size). Audit committee financial expertise, audit committee independence and firm size were negatively correlated with leverage. The variables did not violate the multicollinearity rule because none of the correlation coefficients was above the 0.8 benchmarks (Rahim, 2017).

Table 3. The Pairwise Correlation Analysis of the variables

Covariance Analysis: Ordinary							
Correlation							
Probability	**CSG**	**ACMT**	**ACSIZE**	**ACFE**	**ACI**	**LEVR**	**FSIZE**
CSG	1.000						

ACMT	-0.013	1.000					
	0.768	-----					
ACSIZE	-0.011	0.535	1.000				
	0.795	0.000	-----				
ACFE	-0.018	0.391	0.382	1.000			
	0.676	0.000	0.000	-----			
ACI	-0.012	0.437	0.507	0.562	1.000		
	0.766	0.000	0.000	0.000	-----		
LEVR	-0.005	0.087	0.0715	-0.246	-0.262	1.000	
	0.897	0.041	0.096	0.000	0.000	-----	
FSIZE	0.051	0.161	0.336	0.179	0.089	-0.166	1.000
	0.234	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.037	0.000	-----

Source: Authors' Computation (2022).

4.2. Regression estimate of influence of audit committee attributes on sustainable growth

Based on the results of the diagnostics test of the Hausman Test and Breusch-Pagan Lagrange multiplier test, it was discovered that the best fit model was the random effect model, as presented in Table 4 because their probability values were greater than 0.05 and less than 0.05 respectively (p-value = 0.997 and 0.009 respectively). Meanwhile, the null hypothesis was accepted, while the alternative hypothesis was rejected at a 5% significance level. The overall model was free from violating the rules of heteroskedasticity and serial correlation because the results of the Heteroskedasticity LR test and Arellano-Bond Serial Correlation test presented p-values that were greater than 0.05. Furthermore, the Table showed the F-stat value of 39.352 with a p-value of 0.05. This result implied that stimulus variables jointly and significantly explained variations in sustainable growth. The Table further showed the R-square value as 0.654 and adjusted R-square of 0.597, indicating that the independent variables jointly accounted for about 59.7 percent variation in sustainable growth.

Moreover, Table 4 showed that the audit committee's size, independence, financial professionalism and leverage did not only show a positive relationship with sustainable growth but were also significant. Audit committee meetings and firm size exhibited a positive but insignificant relationship with sustainable growth. There was a positive significant relationship between audit committee size and sustainable growth rate ($\beta = 0.046$; t-value = 2.464; p-value < 0.05). The coefficient value indicated that a unit increase in audit committee size would lead to a 5% increase in sustainable growth. This buttress the assumption of resource dependency theory that a larger size of the audit committee will create a chance for a different calibre of people with different backgrounds to be included in the committee formation. The larger the audit committee size, the better the company performance proxied by sustainable growth (Rezaei and Abbasi, 2015; Kallamu and Saat, 2016; Alqatamin, 2018; Orjinta and Evelyn, 2018; Zraiq and Fadzil, 2018; Elhawary, 2021). The result also supported Badawy's (2020) study, but the positive relationship between audit committee size and sustainable growth rate was not significant.

Table 4 also showed that there was a significant positive relationship between audit committee independence (ACI) and sustainable growth rate (β = 0.0775; p-value < 0.05). The implication is that a 1% increase in audit committee independence will lead to about an 8% increase in the sustainable growth of non-financial firms in Nigeria (Kallamu and Saat, 2016; Orjinta and Evelyn, 2018; Badawy, 2020). Regarding the association between audit committee meetings (ACMT) and sustainable growth rate, the former had a positive but insignificant influence on the latter (β = 0.008; p-value > 0.05). The number of meetings the sampled non-financial firms held varied; some companies' audit committees held their meetings three times in a financial year, some held four, and some held six. The insignificant positive relationship between audit committee meetings and sustainable growth showed that the number of meetings held did not matter. What matters most is the committee's ability to make good decisions during a few meetings. In Nigeria, some happenings disturbed the frequent holding of the audit committee and other meetings. For instance, the petroleum products' subsidy removal crisis of 2011, the EndSars protest of 2021 and the Covid-19 safety precaution protocols affected the frequent meetings.

Moreover, audit committee financial expertise (ACFE) positively associated with sustainable growth rate in a significant way (β = 0.141; p-value < 0.05). A financial expert on a board of audit committees aids financial decisions and deters the management from making a decision that will impair the performance of their firms. Regarding the control variables – leverage and firm size, the former association with sustainable growth was positive and significant (β = 0.007; p-value < 0.05) while the latter relationship with sustainable growth was positive but insignificant (β = 0.119; p-value > 0.05). The effectiveness of the audit committee qualities employed in this study was able to help the sampled non-financial firms use their debts judiciously to sustain their growth. This outcome supported the findings of Elhawary (2021) but was inconsistent with the findings of Alqatamin (2018).

Table 4. The Random Effect Regression Result

Variables	Random Effect Model	
	Coefficient (β)	t-value
ACMT	0.008	1.089
ACSIZE	0.046	2.464*
ACI	0.078	2.191*
ACFE	0.141	2.399*
LEVR	0.007	2.107*
FSIZE	0.119	1.332
C	-0.542	-0.843
Hausman Test (p-value)	0.997	
Breusch-Pagan LM Test (p-value)	0.009	
Heteroskedasticity LR Test (p-value)	0.984	
Arellano-Bond Serial Correlation Test (p-value)	0.377	
R-squared	0.654	
Adj. R-Squared	0.597	
f-value	39.352	
P(f-value)	0.000	

Note: * significant at 5% level of significance Source: Authors' Computation (2022)

5. Conclusion

This research was carried out to investigate the influence of audit committee characteristics (meeting, size, independence and financial expertise) on the sustainable growth of listed firms that are not financial in Nigeria. The study showed that all the proxies of audit committee characteristics – meeting, independence, size and professionalism – were crucial and germane to the long-term viability of non-financial companies in Nigeria. They were all positively associated with the sustainable growth of the sampled firms. Their association with the growth were also almost significant. The result confirmed the *a priori* expectation of a positive association between the AC and sustainable growth. The study's outcome indicated that audit committee characteristics had a positive and significant relationship with Nigeria's sustainable growth of the selected listed non-financial firms. The results of the finding imply that whenever a company is confronted with hardship conditions caused by the global financial crisis of 2008, covid-19 pandemic and climate change problem, effective audit committee characteristics are the major elements that can help the company attain long-term sustainable advancement. When the audit committee is of sound quality, it will be able to challenge the board of management to act in the firm's best interest. In addition, the size of the audit committee helps firms sustain their optimum growth because it allows people of diverse backgrounds and intellectual resources to be included on the board. AC independence is also a key to achieving an optimal growth level. If AC is independent, they will not be subjected to management encroachment in their decision-making. At least a member of AC has to be a financial expert because the financial statement is a medium of reporting the company's activities to the public. The financial statement is also an instrument of decision-making.

There was also a positive but insignificant association between the size of the sampled firms and their sustainable growth. The implication of this is that bigness or smallness of a company cannot alone determine a company's long-term growth without the aid of good audit committee characteristics.

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