



Evaluating Starbucks' ESG Performance: Environmental, Social, and Governance Insights

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Abstract. This study provides an extensive Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) analysis of Starbucks corporation, addressing the environmental sustainability of the company's practices, the initiatives around social responsibility, and also its governance structure. Starbucks has shown leadership in environmental stewardship such as implementing goals like reducing carbon emissions, increasing the use of renewable energy, and ethically sourced coffee and other material goods. From a social perspective, Starbucks emphasizes employee welfare, diversity, and local communities, though unionizing issues indicate the need for improvement. Governance practices have been established to support transparency and accountability, while allowing for creating long-term value for shareholders and stakeholders alike. Against industry competitors, it appears Starbucks has a strong ESG performance, helping to develop brand loyalty and trust with consumers, and gives the company a sizable advantage as the sustainability market continues to expand. The essential insight from this study is that ESG integration is a part of Starbucks' strategic growth and development, and its ESG performance will likely develop industry benchmark standards.

Keywords: Starbucks, ESG, Environmental, Social, and Governance

1 Introduction

The quick-service food and beverage industry has experienced intensified scrutiny from governments, investors, and consumers to prioritize Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles. ESG, a set of principles focused on sustainability and ethics, is demonstrated through company strategies that show care for the environment, people, and operations. The demand for transparent, responsible business practices is strong. As the market for ethical and sustainable products grows, especially with Generation Z's environmental beliefs and online influence, Starbucks' economic power can disrupt traditional operations of quick-service food and beverage retailers. A global leader in ESG, Starbucks serves as a key case study, preferred by 55% of Gen Z over other coffee brands [1].

Since Starbucks engages with millions of customers daily, assessing its ESG performance provides insight into the extent that current globalized service industry commits to sustainable development. Starbucks has publicized ESG commitments, yet some

behavior reveals a value-action gap between Starbucks' pro-sustainability claims and its daily operations. This gap is widened by the complexities of global supply chains and internal labor relations, which can impact the brand's reputation, customer loyalty, and long-term growth. A critical question is therefore raised: How does Starbucks perform within the ESG framework it claims to follow, and to what extent do its ethical practices and global impact meet the expectations of modern stakeholders, particularly Generation Z consumers?

Although Starbucks demonstrates industry leadership in formal ESG structures, especially in environmental goal-setting and ethical sourcing frameworks, its performance is inconsistent. This critical analysis reveals an evident value-action gap, most noticeably in its labor relations and supply chain challenges, which threatens Starbucks' credibility with key stakeholders and reputation with customers. The case study therefore postulates that Starbucks' ESG performance is a dichotomy of promising public commitments and operational shortcomings. This leads to a conflict that defines Starbucks' current standing and future risks within the quick-service food and beverage industry.

2 Research Methodology

This case study utilizes mixed methods and develops its analysis on three theoretical frameworks. Both qualitative and quantitative methods are used to analyze Starbucks' ESG initiatives and their effects on brand, business operations, and investor perception. Three primary frameworks are used to structure the analysis

1. ESG Framework (Environmental, Social, Governance): Evaluates Starbucks' performance in sustainability, social responsibility, and governance.
2. Materiality Assessment Lens: Identifies and assesses the most relevant ESG issues for Starbucks and its stakeholders.
3. Triple Bottom Line (People, Planet, Profit): Analyzes the balance between Starbucks' social, environmental, and financial outcomes.

Data sources for this case study include Starbucks' Fiscal 2024 Annual Report [2], environmental and social impact statements, the 2023 Global Impact Report [3], Human Rights Impact Assessment [4], investor relations materials, and third-party ESG ratings. These frameworks and sources will enable a critical comparison between Starbucks' stated ESG commitments and actual practices, highlighting successful alignments or contradictions. Starbucks will also be compared to two competitors in the quick-service food and beverage sector to evaluate industry trends, risks, and opportunities.

3 Starbucks ESG Performance

This section examines performances of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) practices at Starbucks, highlighting the company's commitments to sustainability,

community engagement, and ethical governance, using the ESG Framework, Materiality Assessment Lens, and Triple Bottom Line approach.

3.1 Environmental Performance

Starbucks has committed to climate change, waste reduction, and circular packaging initiatives. The company promises to reduce landfill waste, water consumption, and carbon emissions all by 50% by 2030 [5]. Starbucks corporation website also identifies 5 areas of focus to achieve the 50% targets:

1. Expanding plant-based menu options
2. Shifting away from single use to reusable packaging
3. Investing in regenerative agriculture, reforestation, forest conservation and water replenishment in our supply chain
4. Working on better ways to manage our waste.
5. Innovating with more responsible stores, operations, manufacturing, and delivery

The environmental performance is evaluated in both the store operational process and the waste reduction and recycling process.

3.1.1 Greener Stores and Operational Efficiency. A major initiative is the Greener Stores framework, launched in 2018 [6], with over 6,000 certified stores. The

framework supports renewable energy, low-impact materials, and water-efficient technology. Starbucks also launched reusable cup programs in several markets, including the U.S., Canada, and parts of Europe, with plans to expand across Europe, the Middle East, and Africa by 2025 [7]. These efforts demonstrate Starbucks' strategies to protect resources critical to its supply chain while maintaining its reputation as an eco-conscious brand. Despite these changes, the effects of the reusable cup program remain marginal. In 2023, only 1.2% of Starbucks beverages in the U.S. and Canada were served in personal or reusable cups, which falls significantly short of the company's target and underscores the challenge of transforming consumer behaviors on a large scale [3].

3.1.2 Waste, Packaging, and the Circular Economy. Significant measures have been taken in circular food and beverage packaging designs to minimize product packaging. The U.S. hot cup design includes 30% post-consumer recycled fiber [8], with less paper and plastic in the liner. In Japan, eco-friendly napkins contain 70% post-consumer recycled milk-carton fiber and 30% FSC®-certified paper [9]. Additionally, Starbucks created straw-less lids and compostable, toxin-free packaging that break down into nutrient-dense compost [10]. They also established pilot programs that address circular economy solutions like cup-sharing and return systems, working toward its overall objective to reduce landfill waste by 50% by 2030 and meet sustainable packaging expectations [11]. Quantitatively, Starbucks' progress in waste reduction is mixed. The company reported a 4.6% reduction in carbon emissions per square foot since 2019, yet its

total carbon emissions have increased by 10% over the same period. This uncovers a direct consequence of store expansion outpacing gains in waste reduction [2].

3.2 Social Impact & Human Capital

Starbucks frames its social impact strategy around human capital development and community investment.

Initiatives include mental health resources through the meditation app Headspace, an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), and 20 free Lyra therapy sessions per year for U.S. employees [12]. Regarding physical health, Starbucks offers comprehensive medical, dental, and vision coverage, as well as gender-affirming medical benefits [13]. The Starbucks College Achievement Plan grants benefits-eligible employees the opportunity to receive 100% tuition coverage for a first-time bachelor's degree in over 100-degree programs through Arizona State University's online platform. U.S. veteran employees can extend this benefit to a family member [14]. These opportunities have supported over 400,000 employees in advancing both their personal well-being and professional development.

Starbucks has notably emphasized their dedication to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), increasing Black, Indigenous, and People of Color employees and leaders and releasing annual company diversity metrics [15]. They have committed over \$133 million to supporting youth and marginalized neighborhoods through programs addressing hunger relief, accessibility, child healthcare, and economic mobility through its Neighborhood Grants Program [16]. Starbucks' strategy nurtures employee loyalty and community investment to reinforce its reputation as a socially responsible employer, especially for customers who base their purchasing decisions on companies that reflect their core values and beliefs. These DEI commitments and their outcomes are reflected in data from 2023, where 77.5% of Starbucks' U.S. workforce and 53.5% of its U.S. senior leaders identified as women or racial and ethnic minorities [15]. However, the recent investor vote to remove DEI-specific executive incentives creates uncertainty about the company's future prioritization of these goals.

3.3 Governance, Ethics & Risk

The formal governance structure Starbucks maintains includes a Board of Directors and specialized committees for Audit & Compliance, Nominating & Corporate Governance, and Compensation & Management Development. This structure provides oversight, aligning corporate strategies with stakeholder interests. With over 45% of the Board identifying as female or from a racial minority, Starbucks demonstrates its commitment to inclusive governance and diverse leadership. In addition to its annual Global Environmental & Social Impact Report, Starbucks works to enhance its image as a transparent and ethical company. While the company previously linked executive salaries to sustainability and financial performance, investors voted in 2024 to remove DEI-specific incentives [17], opting instead to tie bonuses to broader ESG performance metrics and overall company results. Starbucks' governance model and the scaling back of previous priorities have faced criticism, particularly regarding discouraging union

formation and limiting worker representation. This highlights a governance risk where Board leadership may not fully consider or integrate employee perspectives. The Board's credibility and its commitment to social values could be undermined, leaving Starbucks vulnerable to reputational challenges and operational disputes.

Starbucks' supply chain has been linked to controversies involving child labor in Guatemala and unsafe working conditions in Brazil [18]. While Starbucks promotes 100% ethical sourcing through its Coffee and Farmer Equity (C.A.F.E.) Practices [19], enforcement of these standards has been questioned due to reports of labor abuse, violations in supply networks, and gaps in verification and audits [20]. Starbucks has been accused of not disclosing the number of suppliers who failed to meet standards, the frequency of re-verifications, or thresholds required to remain in the program. In response, Starbucks stated that C.A.F.E. is a verification program, not a guarantee [19], and has increased supplier audits and severed partnerships with non-compliant groups. They also denied any violations that reflect their sourcing policies and maintain the complaints are without merit [5]. Given the contradictions in the available information, it is impossible to verify the facts surrounding Starbucks' practices or assess the company's ethics [20].

3.4 Criticisms and Limitations of Starbucks' ESG Initiatives

While Starbucks offers comprehensive public reports on its ESG frameworks, these very frameworks face criticisms that highlight the limitations within the company's current approach. A central critique focuses on whether Starbucks' ethical sourcing claims are verifiable. It is stated that C.A.F.E. Practices cover 99% of Starbucks coffee, yet Starbucks has described this as a "verification program, not a guarantee" [19], drawing a clear distinction that critics argue creates a loophole for non-compliance and lack of accountability. Moreover, Starbucks' reluctance to respond to shareholder proposals for improved disclosure about the company's human rights performance [22] conflicts with its public claims of transparency. From a governance lens, the unionization issues and the decision to scale back on DEI executive compensation pose strategic limitations. They suggest that even though Starbucks promotes social goals publicly, these goals can be, and have been, internally deprioritized when they clash with traditional goals like revenue growth and expansion, underscoring fundamental challenges in the company's ESG model.

4 Peer Comparison (McDonald's, JDE Peet's, etc.)

A comparative analysis of ESG performance across leading global quick-service food and beverage companies provides insight into industry trends, competitive position, and areas for strategic improvement. As shown in Table 1, Starbucks aims for net-zero greenhouse emissions by 2050 and has achieved 100% renewable electricity in company-owned stores in the US, Canada, and the United Kingdom, reflecting a proactive approach to energy transition [3]. McDonald's has also committed to net-zero emissions by 2050, though its supply chain reduction target is slightly lower at 36% by 2030,

underscoring the difficulties of decarbonizing a highly distributed supplier network. McDonald's additionally set a goal to source 100% renewable energy for its restaurants and offices by 2030. JDE Peet's, which owns brands like Costa Coffee and Peet's Coffee, is pursuing a 25% reduction in greenhouse gas intensity per product by 2030, while developing renewable energy targets for its roasting plants.

Table 1. Peer Benchmarking (2025 ESG Comparison)

ESG Category	Starbucks	McDonalds	JDE Peet's (Costa, etc.)
Emissions Targets	Net-zero by 2050; 50% reduction in direct emissions by 2030	Net-zero by 2050; 36% reduction supply chain emission by 2030	Reduce Green House Gas intensity per product by 25% by 2030
Renewable Energy	100% renewable-electricity in company owned stores in US, Canada, UK	100% renewable energy goal for restaurants and offices by 2030	sourcing renewable energy in roasting plants; no 100% target yet
Labor Relations	Facing unionization push; mixed worker sentiment	Criticized for low wages, increasing focus on employee wellbeing	Limited data: some third-party factory labor concerns reported
Ethical Sourcing	99% of coffee ethically sourced through C.A.F.E. Practices	Claims 100% sustainable beef sourcing in 10 top markets	Working toward 100% responsibly sourced coffee by 2025
ESG Risk Rating	22.9 (Medium)	28.5 (Medium)	18 (Low)

Regarding labor relations, Starbucks is facing a push for unionization, while McDonald's is working to improve low-wages and employee well-being. JDE Peet's has faced third-party reports of concerns regarding factory labor. On ethical sourcing, Starbucks sources 99% of its coffee through its C.A.F.E. Practices [19], while McDonald's claims 100% sustainable beef sourcing in its top 10 markets. JDE Peet's is working towards 100% responsibly sourced coffee by 2025. These various approaches to ESG issues highlight each company's strategies and challenges, which contribute to their respective ESG risk ratings: Starbucks' 22.9, Medium Risk, McDonald's 28.5, Medium Risk, and JDE Peet's 18, Low Risk [21].

This comparison and analysis position Starbucks as a complex leader in the quick-service food and beverage industry. Starbucks outperforms McDonald's in its renewable energy integration for its direct operations and illustrates a more advanced ethical sourcing framework than JDE Peet's, which is still working toward its goal of 100% responsible coffee. Nonetheless, JDE Peet's lower ESG Risk Rating of 18 may reflect the company's smaller scale or different market priorities, helping it avoid the high-

profile labor and supply chain controversies that affect Starbucks and McDonald's. Starbucks' primary weakness lies in its social performance. Its highly visible, public unionization conflicts present a more immediate governance risk than the broader labor concerns of McDonald's. As such, while Starbucks leads in environmental efforts and sourcing practices, its social governance remains a major differentiator and liability.

5 ESG SWOT Analysis

5.1 Strengths

Starbucks' strongest ESG advantage lies in its long-standing ethical sourcing framework, particularly the C.A.F.E.

Practices program, which incorporates over 200 economic, social, and environmental indicators and mandates third-party verification to ensure sustainable coffee production [19]. The company has set ambitious goals, including reducing its carbon, water, and waste footprints by 50% by 2023 relative to a 2019 baseline [4]. In governance, Starbucks recently established an Environmental Partner and Community Impact board committee to improve ESG reporting and accountability. The 2023 Human Rights Impact Assessment reflects a commitment to transparency and responsible global operations [4]. These initiatives position Starbucks as a leader in integrating sustainability with corporate strategy.

5.2 Weaknesses

Despite these efforts, recent reports show that total greenhouse gas emissions and land-fill waste have increased since the 2019 baseline, suggesting that expansion may be outpacing mitigation efforts. Repeated allegations of forced and child labor within supplier farms in Brazil, Guatemala, and Kenya highlight weaknesses in Starbucks' supply chain monitoring [2]. On governance, several shareholder proposals for enhanced human rights and labor disclosures were rejected, indicating resistance to accountability measures [22]. These issues raise concerns about the company's ability to deliver on its ESG commitments.

5.3 Opportunities

Starbucks has multiple opportunities to reinforce its ESG leadership. The company could expand supplier remediation programs, strengthen auditing, and partner with international NGOs to address human rights challenges in high-risk regions. Leveraging technology such as blockchain and AI-driven analytics can enhance supply chain traceability and carbon monitoring, improving accountability and efficiency [3]. Starbucks can also innovate in sustainable packaging and circular waste systems, aligning with evolving consumer expectations and regulatory trends, to enhance its social impact and differentiate itself as an equitable employer [4].

5.4 Threats

The company faces growing threats from legal actions, regulatory scrutiny, and climate risks. Ongoing lawsuits alleging human rights violations and misleading “ethical sourcing” claims present significant legal and reputational risks [23]. Emerging ESG disclosure regulations in the US, Canada, and the EU may increase compliance costs. Climate change poses a structural threat to coffee production, with rising temperatures and droughts threatening key supply regions. Additionally, persistent accusations of “green-washing” could erode consumer trust and investor confidence, particularly if measurable ESG outcomes fail to match Starbucks’ public commitments [24].

6 Strategic Recommendations

As global awareness of environmental and social responsibilities intensifies it is critical for Starbucks to build on its commitment to sustainable and responsible business practices. Here are five distinct strategic recommendations that can advance and prioritize Starbucks’ ESG objectives.

6.1 Accelerate Carbon Neutrality

While Starbucks has committed to reducing emissions, the company could implement more aggressive decarbonization strategies. Recommendations include adopting science-based targets that expands their use of renewable energy for all stores and roasting facilities and incentivizing suppliers to adopt low-carbon practices. Additionally, Starbucks should integrate circular economy practices, such as packaging redesign and waste-to-energy initiatives to reduce operation carbon footprints [19].

6.2 Expanding Community and Employee Programs

Starbucks’ social initiatives can be strengthened by creating measurable impact programs for coffee - whether that is growing communities, including microfinance support, education scholarships, digital farming tools, etc. Internally Starbucks should expand employee well-being programs, including mental health support, skill development, and implement standardized metrics to track social impact across regions [4].

6.3 Strengthen Governance Practices Though Enhanced ESG Oversight

This could include improving the already established ESG oversight committee board level, integrating ESG-linked performance metrics into executive compensation, and publishing a comprehensive annual ESG score card. Ethical sourcing should be reinforced with third-party audits and supplier performance incentives to ensure compliance with Starbucks’ human rights and sustainability standards [25].

6.4 ESG-driven technology for Accountability

Starbucks can utilize advanced analytics, black chain, and AI tools to monitor supplier sustainability, track carbon emissions, and optimize resource use. Real-time dashboards for ESG performance could improve transparency and enable rapid correction action, while predictive analysis can guide strategic investments in sustainability initiatives [3].

6.5 Deepen Stakeholder Engagement

Through structured multi-stakeholder dialogue with customers, employees, suppliers, and local communities to create ESG initiatives, Starbucks can enhance transparency by publicly reporting progress against ESG targets and engaging in external benchmarking to identify best practices. Partnerships with NGOs, industry coalitions, and local governments can further enhance the credibility and impact of social and environmental initiatives [25].

7 Conclusion: key ESG highlights

Starbucks demonstrates a comparatively strong ESG performance, reflected in its ESG risk rating of 22.9, lower than McDonald's 28.5, and comparable to peers like JDE Peet's [21]. This rating signifies effective risk management and integration of sustainability into corporate strategy. Environmentally, Starbucks shows leadership through its commitment to net-zero emissions by 2050, a 50% reduction in direct emissions by 2030, and 100% renewable electricity in company-owned stores across North America and the UK [19]. The company's ethical sourcing framework under the C.A.F.E. Practices program reinforces its leadership in responsible procurement [4].

However, Starbucks faces labor and social challenges, particularly amid its shift toward a more unionized workforce. This underscores the need for further employee engagement and equitable workplace practices to strengthen its social responsibility [15]. A close analysis reveals a clear value-action gap in Starbucks ESG framework, most evident in the ongoing labor disputes and supply chain oversight problems. This gap presents a risk of damaging the company's credibility with key stakeholders and its conscious, aware, and eco-friendly reputation with consumers like Gen Z. Nonetheless, Starbucks' ESG initiatives generate competitive advantages, enhancing brand reputation, investor confidence, and long-term sustainability [21]. Compared with industry peers, Starbucks benchmarks favorably against McDonald's and JDE Peet's in environmental and social indicators, particularly in renewable energy integration and ethical supply chain management. To solidify its brand as an authentic ESG leader and bridge its value-action gap, Starbucks must transition from making promises to delivering verifiable results. Overall, Starbucks' current ESG strategy highlights the company's strong sustainability practices, while labor relations must be addressed and ameliorated. The strategic recommendations outlined, from advancing carbon neutrality with science-based targets, to improving stakeholder engagement to repair labor concerns, and making use of ESG technology for greater supply chain transparency, offer an

actionable pathway forward. Ultimately, Starbucks' long-term success and sustainability depend on its ability to align its internal operations with the ethical values it promotes with pride.

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