

Strategic Management Accounting and Sustainable Organizational Performance: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Strategic Management Accounting (SMA) has moved beyond its early emphasis on cost and competitor information towards a broader role in strategy, sustainability and digitally enabled decision-making. This study reviews the evolution of SMA and its contribution to sustainable organisational performance. A systematic literature review was conducted using a review period of 1980–2024, reflecting the emergence of SMA in the early 1980s and the subsequent development of sustainability and digital accounting research. The review followed the PRISMA 2020 reporting principles and synthesised 90 peer-reviewed studies identified through searches of major academic databases. The synthesis indicates three broad phases: an early cost and competitive-positioning phase; a strategic integration and performance-measurement phase; and a contemporary sustainability and digitalisation phase. Across these phases, SMA is associated with better strategic information, resource allocation, performance measurement and organisational adaptability. However, the evidence does not support a universal performance effect. Outcomes depend on organisational capabilities, leadership, information quality, technological readiness and the external institutional environment. The review integrates Contingency Theory, the Resource-Based View and Dynamic Capabilities Theory to explain these conditions. It contributes an integrated framework that treats SMA as a context-dependent strategic information capability rather than a fixed set of accounting techniques.

Keywords: Strategic Management Accounting; Sustainable Organisational Performance; Sustainability Accounting; Digitalisation; Dynamic Capabilities.

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INTRODUCTION

Organisations increasingly make strategic decisions in environments shaped by technological change, supply-chain disruption, regulatory pressure, climate and social expectations, and intensified competition. These conditions make it difficult to rely on accounting information designed mainly for internal cost control and short-term financial reporting. Managers also need information about competitors, customers, markets, value chains, risks and non-financial consequences of strategic choices. Strategic Management Accounting (SMA) emerged partly in response to this need. Simmonds (1981) positioned SMA as an externally oriented approach to management accounting in which information about the organisation and its competitors is used in developing and monitoring strategy. Bromwich (1990) subsequently emphasised product markets, competitors, costs and longer-term strategic considerations.

Over time, however, SMA has remained difficult to define as a single, stable package of techniques. The literature contains overlapping terms such as strategic costing, competitor accounting, customer accounting, strategic performance measurement and sustainability management accounting. Langfield-Smith (2008) observed that SMA had not been adopted or understood uniformly, while more recent reviews continue to identify fragmented definitions and uneven implementation (Abdullah et al., 2022; Rashid et al., 2020). This fragmentation is important because it makes simple claims that 'SMA improves performance' difficult to sustain. The evidence is better understood as showing that particular SMA practices create value when they fit organisational strategy, information needs and context.

The sustainability agenda has broadened this discussion. Management accounting is increasingly expected to help organisations measure environmental and social impacts alongside financial outcomes. A structured review by Ascani et al. (2021) shows that management accountants have an important role in sustainability accounting and reporting, although their involvement remains uneven. Schaltegger et al. (2022) further argue that sustainability management accounting should not be restricted to internal organisational boundaries because firms are embedded in wider social, ecological and institutional systems. This expands the strategic information role of SMA from 'how can we perform better?' to 'how can strategic decisions create durable value without transferring costs to stakeholders or the wider environment?'

Digitalisation adds another layer to this evolution. Enterprise systems, advanced analytics, cloud platforms and artificial intelligence can increase the speed and breadth of information available to managers. Yet digital technology does not automatically create strategic value. Recent research shows that technology is also changing the work, competencies and organisational position of management accountants (Arkhipova et al., 2024). The strategic value of digital SMA therefore depends on the ability to interpret data, connect it to organisational priorities and use it in decisions rather than merely automate reporting.

Existing reviews provide useful foundations, but an integrated explanation of the evolution of SMA, its sustainability implications and the conditions under which it creates organisational value remains needed. This study addresses that need through a systematic review of literature published from 1980 to 2024. The period begins with the early articulation of SMA and extends to the point at which sustainability, digitalisation and data-driven decision-making had become central themes in management accounting research. The study addresses three questions:

How has Strategic Management Accounting evolved from its early strategic-cost and competitor orientation to contemporary sustainability- and digitally enabled forms?

How does Strategic Management Accounting contribute to sustainable organisational performance?

What organisational and contextual conditions strengthen or weaken the contribution of Strategic Management Accounting?

The study contributes in three ways. First, it synthesises the literature around an evolutionary logic rather than treating SMA techniques as isolated practices. Second, it connects SMA to sustainability and digitalisation while recognising that these developments are mediated by organisational and institutional conditions. Third, it integrates Contingency Theory, the Resource-Based View (RBV) and Dynamic Capabilities Theory (DCT) into a single conceptual framework. The resulting argument is that SMA is most useful when it operates as a context-sensitive strategic information capability supported by organisational resources and the capacity to sense, seize and reconfigure in response to change.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Evolution and Meaning of SMA

SMA is better understood as a family of strategically oriented accounting practices than as a single accounting system. Its defining characteristics are an outward-looking orientation, a longer-term perspective, and the use of financial and non-financial information to support strategy (Abdullah et al., 2022; Langfield-Smith, 2008). Early work focused strongly on competitor information, strategic costing and market positioning. Bromwich (1990) argued that accounting information should help managers understand the economics of products and competitive markets, while Simmonds (1981) called attention to competitor analysis as a strategic role for management accountants.

Subsequent work shifted attention from individual techniques to the relationship between strategy and accounting systems. Cadez and Guilding (2008) found that strategy, market orientation and organisational characteristics influence the use of SMA. Their findings are consistent with a contingency view: there is no universally optimal SMA design. Later research similarly suggests that adoption differs across developed and developing economies and that benefits vary with organisational circumstances (Rashid et al., 2020).

The more recent literature extends SMA into sustainability and digitalisation. Sustainability-oriented accounting adds environmental and social information to strategic decisions, while digital technologies change how information is generated, analysed and communicated. Schaltegger et al. (2022) argue for a broader sustainability perspective that recognises meso- and macro-level influences, and Arkhipova et al. (2024) show that digitalisation is changing the boundaries between accounting, data analysis and managerial decision-making. The evolution of SMA is therefore not simply a chronological replacement of old techniques with new ones. It is a widening of the information domain and an increasing emphasis on integration, interpretation and adaptation.

Contingency Theory

Contingency Theory provides the first part of the theoretical explanation. Its central premise is that the effectiveness of organisational systems depends on their fit with relevant contextual conditions. In management accounting, this means that accounting and control systems should not be assumed to work equally well in every organisation. Otley (2016) shows that

management control arrangements develop as changing packages shaped by context rather than as a single optimal design. Cadez and Guilding (2008) provide a direct SMA application, showing that strategic choices, market orientation and organisational size affect SMA use and its relationship with performance.

Applied to the present review, Contingency Theory explains why SMA can produce different outcomes across firms. Environmental uncertainty may increase the value of external and forward-looking information. Strong leadership support may make it more likely that accounting information is used in strategic discussions. Digital maturity may determine whether sustainability and operational data can be integrated into decision-making. Institutional requirements may also influence which sustainability information organisations collect. The theoretical implication is important: SMA should be designed around information needs and organisational circumstances rather than adopted as a standard checklist of techniques.

Resource-Based View

The Resource-Based View complements the contingency perspective by shifting attention from environmental fit to the internal resources that enable organisations to create and sustain value. Barney (1991) argues that resources can contribute to sustained competitive advantage when they have characteristics that make them valuable and difficult for competitors to replicate. SMA is not automatically such a resource simply because a firm owns an accounting system. Its strategic value arises when the organisation combines high-quality information, skilled people, routines, technologies and managerial processes in ways that competitors cannot easily reproduce.

From an RBV perspective, SMA can be viewed as an information resource and organisational capability. Competitor analysis, customer profitability information, strategic costing and sustainability measures can improve managerial understanding. However, the resource becomes strategically valuable only when it is embedded in decision routines, supported by leadership and linked to organisational knowledge. This helps explain why two organisations using similar SMA tools can achieve different results.

Dynamic Capabilities Theory (DCT)

Dynamic Capabilities Theory adds the temporal dimension. Teece et al. (1997) describe dynamic capabilities as organisational processes through which firms renew and reconfigure resources in changing environments. Teece (2007) later elaborated the microfoundations of these capabilities around sensing, seizing and reconfiguring. This lens is particularly relevant to contemporary SMA because strategic information is valuable not only for measuring what has happened but also for detecting changes, evaluating opportunities and supporting adaptation.

Under DCT, SMA contributes to sensing by monitoring markets, competitors, customers, environmental indicators and emerging risks. It contributes to seizing by supporting the evaluation of strategic alternatives, investments and resource allocations. It contributes to reconfiguring by enabling organisations to review performance, learn from results and adjust resources and processes. Digitalisation can strengthen these processes by improving data availability and analytical speed, but the underlying capability remains organisational: people must interpret information and act on it.

Integrated Theoretical Argument

The three theories explain different parts of the same phenomenon. Contingency Theory explains why SMA effectiveness varies with context; RBV explains why internal information resources and organisational competencies can create value; and DCT explains how SMA can support adaptation as conditions change. The integration is therefore complementary rather than additive. The present study does not claim to create a new standalone theory. Instead, it extends the application of these established perspectives by positioning SMA at their intersection: SMA is a context-sensitive information capability whose strategic value depends on resources and on the organisation's capacity to adapt as presented in Figure 1.

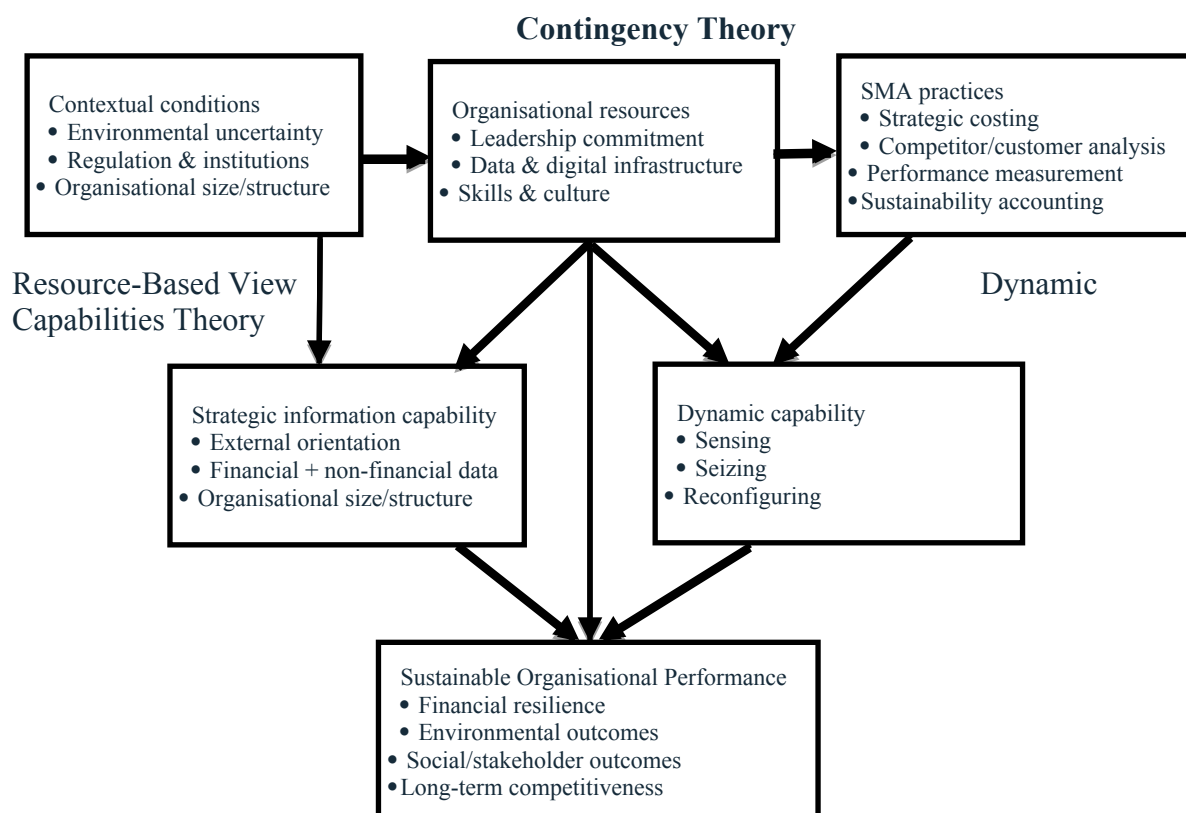


Figure 1. Integrated conceptual framework linking context, organisational resources, SMA practices and sustainable organisational performance.

Source: Authors-generated framework based on Contingency Theory, the Resource-Based View, and Dynamic Capabilities Theory.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Rationale for a Systematic Review

A systematic literature review was selected because the study addresses an accumulated and conceptually fragmented body of research rather than a single empirical setting. Systematic reviews use explicit procedures to identify, screen, assess and synthesise evidence, which improves transparency and reduces the risk that conclusions depend only on selectively remembered studies. PRISMA 2020 was used as the reporting framework because it provides updated guidance for transparent reporting of why a review was undertaken, how evidence was identified and selected, and what was ultimately included (Page et al., 2021).

Review Period

The review covers 1980–2024. The starting point was selected because the early 1980s mark the emergence of the SMA label and its explicit strategic orientation in the management accounting literature (Simmonds, 1981). The endpoint of 2024 captures the contemporary literature on sustainability, digitalisation, analytics, and changing management accounting roles. A long historical window is necessary to appreciate the evolution concerns. Besides, the review did not only cover recent publications which would have revealed current practices, but also old studies to adequately explain how those practices developed from earlier strategic-cost and competitor-oriented ideas.

Search Strategy and Information Sources

The original search covered Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, Taylor & Francis Online and Google Scholar. Search terms combined SMA with sustainability, organisational performance, digital transformation and emerging economies. Representative search strings included 'Strategic Management Accounting' AND 'Sustainable Performance', 'SMA' AND 'Digital Transformation', and 'Strategic Management Accounting' AND 'Emerging Economies'. The use of multiple databases was intended to reduce database-specific coverage bias.

Table 1 presents the eligibility criteria for the selection and included studies. It highlights the included and excluded criteria, the rationale for studies' selection.

Table 1: Eligibility Criteria for Studies' Selection

Included	Excluded	Rationale
Peer-reviewed journal articles, 1980–2024	Conference papers, dissertations, books, editorials and unpublished manuscripts	Maintain a peer-reviewed evidence base
English-language studies	Studies not available in English	Ensure consistent screening and coding
SMA practices, tools, frameworks or strategically oriented management accounting	Studies focused only on conventional, non-strategic management accounting	Maintain conceptual relevance
Studies addressing performance, sustainability, strategy or organisational outcomes	Studies with no relevant strategic or sustainability outcome	Align evidence with the research questions
Conceptual, empirical, case-based or review studies	Duplicate or inaccessible records	Avoid duplication and unverifiable evidence

Screening and Selection

The original search identified 467 records as indicated in Table 2. After removing duplicate records and unrelated publications, 289 records remained for title and abstract screening. Of these, 142 proceeded to full-text assessment, and 90 studies met the eligibility criteria and were retained for synthesis. The numbers are reproduced from the authors' original screening record.

Table 2: PRISMA Flow Table of Studies Screening and Selection

PRISMA stage	Records	Description
Identification	467	Records identified through database searching
Screening	289	Records remaining after duplicates and unrelated records were removed
Eligibility	142	Full-text records assessed for relevance, quality and theoretical fit
Included	90	Peer-reviewed studies retained for thematic synthesis

Source: Author-generated from the review record.

Data Extraction, Coding and Synthesis

For each included study, the review protocol specified extraction of author and year, research context, objective, method, theoretical perspective, SMA practice or tool, and principal findings relating to performance or sustainability. Descriptive coding was used to identify publication characteristics and methodological patterns. Thematic coding was then used to group evidence around the three research questions. The synthesis focused on relationships and contrasts across studies rather than a study-by-study catalogue. Quality assessment considered clarity of objectives, theoretical grounding, methodological transparency, evidence quality and relevance to SMA and sustainability.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The evolution of SMA: from competitive information to sustainability and digitalisation

The synthesis supports an evolutionary interpretation with three overlapping phases. The first, from the 1980s through the 1990s, was dominated by cost, competition and strategic positioning. Simmonds (1981) and Bromwich (1990) moved management accounting towards competitor, market and longer-term information. Strategic costing, benchmarking, competitor accounting and value-chain thinking became important because managers needed information that conventional internal cost reports did not provide.

The second phase, broadly from the 2000s into the 2010s, strengthened the connection between accounting information and strategy execution. The emphasis moved towards strategic performance measurement, organisational learning, customer value and the alignment of accounting systems with strategy. Langfield-Smith (2008) showed, however, that the diffusion of SMA remained uneven. Cadez and Guilding (2008) similarly demonstrated that the use and effectiveness of SMA depend on organisational and strategic conditions. Thus, the evolution was not a simple linear expansion of adoption; it involved experimentation and selective integration.

The third phase, particularly visible from the mid-2010s onwards, combines sustainability and digitalisation. Sustainability-oriented management accounting extends strategic information to environmental and social impacts (Ascani et al., 2021; Schaltegger et al., 2022). Digital technologies broaden the volume, speed and variety of information available to management accountants and managers (Arkipova et al., 2024). The implication is that contemporary SMA is increasingly a platform for combining financial, operational, market and sustainability information rather than a narrow collection of accounting techniques.

Importantly, the phases overlap. Traditional strategic costing remains relevant, while sustainability accounting and digital analytics do not replace competitive analysis or performance measurement. Instead, the information set becomes broader and the decision horizon becomes more forward-looking. This interpretation reconciles apparently different strands of SMA research and helps explain why the field continues to lack a single universally accepted definition.

SMA and sustainable organisational performance

The review indicates that SMA can contribute to sustainable organisational performance through four connected mechanisms. First, it improves strategic information by combining internal and external perspectives. Competitor, customer and market information can reduce informational blind spots and support more deliberate strategic choices (Bromwich, 1990; Abdullah et al., 2022). Second, SMA can strengthen resource allocation by connecting cost, performance and strategic priorities. Third, sustainability-oriented measures make environmental and social effects more visible in managerial decisions. Fourth, digitally enabled analytics can improve the timeliness and breadth of information available for planning and adaptation (Arkhipova et al., 2024).

The sustainability contribution is particularly important because financial performance alone can conceal longer-term risks. Environmental costs, supply-chain exposure, employee outcomes, stakeholder trust and regulatory changes may affect organisational resilience even when short-term financial indicators remain strong. Schaltegger et al. (2022) therefore challenge the assumption that sustainability management accounting should focus only on internal efficiency. Strategic decisions can have consequences across supply chains, communities and ecological systems, so the information used for strategic management may need to reflect those wider effects.

At the same time, the review does not justify a universal causal claim that SMA automatically improves sustainability performance. The evidence is heterogeneous. Adoption may be associated with stronger performance where information is credible, strategically aligned and actually used. Where SMA is introduced mainly for compliance, where data quality is weak, or where managers lack the authority or skills to act on the information, the expected benefits may not emerge. This interpretation is consistent with the contingency literature and with recent systematic reviews that identify variation in adoption and outcomes (Abdullah et al., 2022; Rashid et al., 2020).

Organisational Conditions: Leadership, Culture, Skills and Information Quality

The evidence suggests that leadership is important because senior managers determine whether SMA information is treated as a strategic input or as a reporting requirement. Leadership support can legitimise cross-functional information sharing, sustainability initiatives and investment in analytical capability. Culture matters for a similar reason: SMA requires managers and accountants to work across functional boundaries and to interpret information rather than simply report it. Recent research on management accountants shows that information-system quality and organisational culture shape the implementation of SMA practices (Hadid & Al-Sayed, 2021).

Skills are equally important. Digitalisation increases the need for management accountants who can work with data, understand technology and communicate implications to non-accounting managers. Arkhipova et al. (2024) show that digital technologies are reshaping the

tasks and organisational relationships of management accountants. The strategic role of SMA therefore depends partly on human capability: sophisticated tools cannot compensate for weak interpretation, poor judgement or an inability to connect information to decisions.

Information quality is another enabling condition. Sustainability and digital systems can produce large volumes of data, but more data does not necessarily mean better decisions. Managers need relevant, reliable, comparable and timely information. This reinforces the RBV argument: the strategic resource is not raw data but an organisational capacity to transform data into decision-relevant knowledge.

Institutional and Contextual Conditions

The external environment also shapes SMA. Regulation, professional standards, industry expectations and stakeholder pressure influence the sustainability information organisations are expected to monitor. Schaltegger et al. (2022) show that sustainability accounting is embedded in multi-level contexts that extend beyond the organisation. This supports a broader interpretation of contingency: context is not merely an external variable that changes the design of an accounting system; it can shape the very information that organisations consider strategically important.

These conditions are particularly relevant in emerging economies. The source review identifies recurring constraints such as limited digital infrastructure, shortages of specialised skills, data-quality challenges and institutional weaknesses. Rather than assuming that models developed in advanced economies can be transferred unchanged, the evidence suggests that SMA practices need to be adapted to local resource and institutional conditions. This finding also aligns with the broader review literature, which reports differences in SMA adoption and contingent factors between developed and developing economies.

Convergence and Divergence in the Literature

Three areas of convergence are clear. First, the literature consistently recognises that SMA has an external and strategic orientation. Second, there is growing agreement that sustainability information belongs within strategic management accounting rather than being treated as a separate reporting issue. Third, digitalisation is changing both the information available to managers and the role of management accountants (Abdullah et al., 2022; Arkhipova et al., 2024; Ascani et al., 2021).

However, important divergences remain. The literature differs on what counts as SMA, which techniques should be included, and how directly SMA affects organisational performance. Some studies treat SMA as a portfolio of techniques; others emphasise the role of management accountants and strategic processes. Performance findings also vary because studies use different outcomes, contexts and measures. These differences are not necessarily weaknesses to be eliminated. They suggest that SMA is a flexible organisational phenomenon whose meaning and effectiveness are partly constructed by context.

The synthesis therefore moves beyond the simple proposition that 'more SMA is better'. A more defensible proposition is that strategic accounting information creates value when there is fit between information needs, organisational resources and the capacity to act on changing conditions. This is the central theoretical contribution of the review.

Integrated Conceptual Interpretation

The conceptual framework in Figure 1 brings the findings together. Contextual conditions influence the design and use of SMA, consistent with Contingency Theory. Organisational resources such as leadership, skills, data infrastructure and culture determine whether SMA information can become a valuable capability, consistent with RBV. Finally, the use of SMA in sensing changes, evaluating opportunities and reconfiguring resources reflects Dynamic Capabilities Theory. Sustainable organisational performance is therefore treated as an outcome of an interacting system rather than the direct consequence of an accounting technique.

This interpretation also clarifies the role of sustainability and digitalisation. Sustainability expands the content of strategic information; digitalisation expands its speed, scale and analytical possibilities. Neither, however, replaces the organisational processes through which information becomes action. The practical value of SMA lies in the connection between information and decision-making.

Implications and Limitations

Managers should treat SMA as part of the strategic decision process rather than as an accounting department output. Implementation should begin with strategic information needs: competitive position, customer economics, cost drivers, sustainability impacts, risk and emerging opportunities. Organisations should then select tools and technologies that address those needs. Investment in digital systems should be accompanied by investment in analytical skills, cross-functional collaboration and data governance.

Policymakers and professional accounting bodies can support SMA by strengthening sustainability reporting guidance, digital-accounting competencies and access to professional development. In emerging economies, infrastructure and skills constraints mean that policy support may be as important as firm-level investment. Capacity-building initiatives should therefore connect accounting education, digital capability and sustainability measurement.

Future research should move beyond cross-sectional adoption surveys and examine how SMA capabilities develop over time. Longitudinal case studies can show how sustainability and digital technologies become embedded in decision processes. Mixed-method studies can also test whether the mechanisms identified in this review operate differently across industries, firm sizes and institutional environments. Research should pay particular attention to artificial intelligence, algorithmic decision support, sustainability data quality and the changing professional identity of management accountants.

The review has some limitations. First, the search was restricted to English-language peer-reviewed publications, which may exclude relevant evidence in other languages or professional sources. Second, the review period ends in 2024, so publications after that date are outside the evidence base. Third, the synthesis combines conceptual, empirical, case-based and review studies; these designs do not provide equivalent levels of causal evidence. The findings should therefore be interpreted as a synthesis of patterns in the literature rather than as a meta-analytic estimate of the effect of SMA on performance.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review shows that Strategic Management Accounting has evolved from a predominantly cost- and competitor-oriented approach into a broader strategic information capability that increasingly incorporates sustainability and digital technologies. The historical development is best understood as an expansion of scope rather than a replacement of earlier practices. Strategic costing, competitor analysis and performance measurement remain relevant, but they now operate alongside sustainability information, digital analytics and broader stakeholder considerations.

The review also shows why the relationship between SMA and sustainable organisational performance is not uniform. SMA is most likely to create strategic value when the information system fits the organisation's context, when the firm possesses the resources and skills needed to interpret information, and when managers have the dynamic capability to act on changing conditions. Contingency Theory, RBV and Dynamic Capabilities Theory therefore provide complementary explanations of SMA effectiveness.

The principal contribution of the review is to reposition SMA as a context-dependent capability rather than a fixed bundle of techniques. This perspective has practical significance for organisations seeking to combine financial discipline with sustainability and adaptability, particularly in emerging economies where institutional and digital constraints can shape implementation. Future research should test the framework longitudinally and examine how digitalisation, sustainability pressures and organisational learning jointly shape the next stage of SMA development.

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