Strategic Supplier Partnership and Competitive Advantage of Bakery Firms in Rivers State

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Abstract
This study investigated strategic supplier partnership and competitive advantage of bakery firms in Rivers State. The study adopted a survey research design and collected data in a cross sectional survey. A sample size of 139 registered bakery firms in Rivers State was extracted for the study using convenient sampling technique. Data collected were analyzed using multiple regression analysis. Finding revealed that strategic supplier partnership has positive influence on competitive advantage of bakery firms in Rivers State. The study concluded that acceptable supplier partnership enhances firm's efforts in gaining competitive advantage. The study recommends that strategic supplier partnership should be continuously employed by bakery firms in Rivers State to enhanced service delivery, improved decision making, enhanced overall cost reduction and real time delivery of goods and services.

Introduction

The dynamic nature of today's business environment is filled with competition among businesses and any business with competitive advantage survives to make profit and grow. Rivalry among firms in the same industry and sometimes across industries is a common feature of the business landscape in any economy and as firms jostle for a share of consumers' wallet and mind, they undertake myriad activities, contrive and implement several strategies (Ateke & Elvis, 2013). Consequent upon this, only firms with reasonable marketing resources can survive. Every firm in Nigerian bakery industry seems to face a lot of threats from competitors. This scenario may have led to continuous search by both industrialists and academics for ways to overcome these threats through acquisition of distinctive capabilities and establishing defensible positions in their industries. To achieve this, firms that have common interest started to collaborate, cooperate and coordinate their activities and decision making with the ultimate goal of achieving some advantage by a way of consensus actions, thus the emergence of supply strategic supplier partnership.

Strategic Supplier Partnership is a long term relationship between organisation and its suppliers (Li et al., 2006). Such relationships are aimed at promoting mutual planning and joint problem solving between the partners (Gunasekaran, Patel & Tirtiroglu, 2001) and also to mutually benefit from the key strategic areas like technology, products and market. The target is to have few reliable suppliers carefully selected based on the priorities of the organisation instead of numerous suppliers that their processes cannot be predicted (Sukati et al., 2011). It could also help such organisations to work closely with few suppliers who show more interest in the success of the organisation. The idea of having few reliable suppliers could enable organisations have better focus on the areas of operations they need to strengthen to be able to compete better in the market. Tan, Lyman and Wisner (2002) note that suppliers that partner with organisations during their early stage of product design could help in selecting best components, technologies and also offer cost effective choices. Organisations involved in strategic partnership may share both reward and risk depending on their level of involvement, thus, firms are encouraged to take actions that are of mutual benefits. Strategic supplier partnership enables the participating organisation to benefit from both strategic and operational capabilities of participating organisations (Balsmeier & Voison 1996, Noble, 1997). In this case, some responsibilities could be passed to the supplier (Li et al., 2006) which may engender more commitment on the part of the suppliers. Organisations that are strategically aligned to its suppliers can also reduce time and effort wastage (Gunasekaran et. al., 2001), these are helpful in gaining competitive edge.

Competitive advantage is the degree to which an organisation has the ability to create a differential position over its rival in the market (Veerendrakumar & Shivashankar, 2015). Having competitive advantage suggests that a firm has one or more capabilities that are not available to its competitor(s) (Li et al., 2006). Competitions are no longer between companies but among supply chains (Li et al., 2006). Competitive advantage is important in bakery sector where such advantage seems difficult to achieve may be because of similarities of techniques and raw materials. The bakery industry in Rivers State shares the same history with others in Nigeria and in the problems bedevilling the bakery industry as well. Some of the problems as listed by Njoku & Kalu (2015) includes but not limited to low profit margin as a result of high cost of production, infrastructural deficit, high operation cost, exchange rate volatility and stiff competition. Increase in the price of wheat in the international market has also had adverse effect on bakery industry in Nigeria. Hence, having competitive advantage seems the only way to survive in the industry.

Strategic Supplier Partnership has been proved to be effective in achieving competitive advantage in many sectors of economies of different countries (Miguel & Brito, 2011; Bratic, 2011; Alipour & Mohammadi, 2011), and other sectors of Nigerian economy (Adebayor, 2012; Somuyiwa, Mcilt & Adebayor, 2013). This study is therefore imperative to understand Strategic Supplier Partnership and how its application can help the bakery firms in achieving competitive advantage.

Statement of the problem

It seems survival and growth in bakery industry is dependent on the ability of a firm to achieve some competitive advantage. Cost of operation is known to be high; there is lack of infrastructure and price of flour which is the major raw material for producing bakery products is highly volatile owing to foreign exchange instability. Absence of strategic partnership with suppliers may have contributed to increase in cost of production of some of the bakery firms since they hardly obtain first-hand information on changes and expected trends in the market. Failure to establish such partnership may have affected some of the firms in the industry negatively and may have resulted to closures of some since they are taken unawares without making necessary adjustments. The above issues seem to represent the situation in bakery firms in Rivers State, and it is against the same that this study has become imperative. Perhaps a strategic supplier partnership can foster a dependable delivery system and reduction on the cost of production which helps firms' competitive advantage.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine the relationship between strategic supplier partnership and competitive advantage. Other specific objectives include:

i. To determine the extent of the relationship between strategic supplier partnership and competitive advantage of bakery firms in Rivers State.
ii. To determine the extent of the relationship between strategic supplier partnership and delivery dependability of bakery firms in Rivers State.
iii. To determine the extent of the relationship between strategic supplier partnership and cost of production of bakery firms in Rivers State.

Research Hypotheses

The hypotheses are stated below:

H_{01}: There is no significant relationship between strategic supplier partnership and competitive advantage of bakery firms in Rivers State.

H_{02}: There is no significant relationship between strategic supplier partnership and delivery dependability of bakery firms in Rivers State.

H_{03}: There is no significant relationship between strategic supplier partnership and cost of production of bakery firms in Rivers State.

Conceptual Framework

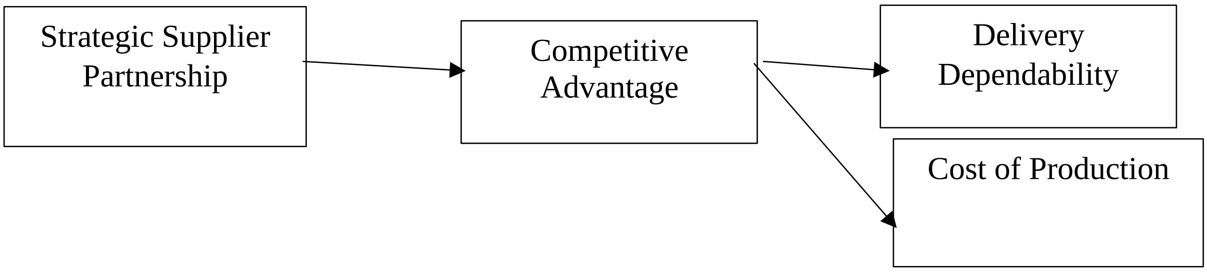

Fig: 1 Conceptual Framework for Strategic Supplier Partnership and competitive advantage

Review of Related Literature

We begin by introducing the theory that gives credence to the study and review of the various concepts of the study.

Resource Based View: The resource based view posits that firms consist of bundles of resources which are both tangible and non-tangible assets that are tied to the firm in relatively permanent fashion. Organizational resources cut across human, capital, physical and technology. The extent to which firms can build competitive advantage depends on the ability of the firm to control these resources that are valuable, unique, non – substitutable and inimitable. Organisations can assume a competitive position to the extent that their resources and processes are rare and cannot be easily copied by other firms (Liao et al., 2009). Based on the resource based view, the competitive advantage firms obtain in operational domains like manufacturing firms' results from hard-to-duplicate resources that firms build up through external and internal learning processes (Holweg & Pil, 2007). The resource based view as used in this study suggest that strategic partnership responsiveness becomes a resource when it possesses the ability to create organizational competitive advantage processes intended to facilitate supply chain relationship building. From this theoretical point of view strategic partnership as a valuable intangible asset enable firms to achieve their competitive priorities.

The concept of strategic supplier partnership

Strategic supplier partnership is defined as the long-term relationship between the company and its suppliers and it is designed to leverage the strategic and operational capabilities of individual participating companies to help them achieve significant emphasized benefits (Stuart, 1997; Balsmeier, 1996; Noble, 1997; Li et al., 2006). A strategic partnership emphasizes direct, long-term association and encourages mutual planning and problem solving efforts (Gunasekaran et al., 2001). Strategic supplier partnership enables companies to work more effectively with a few important suppliers who are willing to share responsibility for the success of the product. An effective supplier partnership can be a critical component of a leading edge supply chain (Noble, 1997).

The concept of Competitive Advantage

Competitive advantage refers to organisation's ability to create defensible position over its competitors (McGinnis & Vallopra, 1999). Newbert (2008) says it is the degree at which firms explores its opportunities, reduces costs of its operations and neutralizes threats. Competitive advantage is all about firm's capability to offer superior products and services compared to that of its competitors (Gosksoy, Vayvay & Ergeneli, 2013). Such advantage is achieved when an organisation acquires distinct capabilities that allow it to differentiate itself from other organisations in the same industry. Korsakienė (2012) argues that the competitive advantages include positional and performance advantage relative to competitors due to the business held and distributed resources and capabilities advantage. Therefore, the competitive advantage is defined as a significant advantage over competitors due to the cost allocation and the results of the operation of which depends on the positioning strategy.

Delivery Dependability

Delivery dependability is the ability of an organisation to provide the type and quantity of products required by customers on time consistently (Somuyiwa et al., 2012). Hill (2000) cited in Asha (2015), says continued failure to deliver at agreed time could not only lead to customers' stoppage of considering such firm as a potential supplier which leads to loss of market share, but also loss of the entire business. Thatte, et. al. (2009) observed that delivery dependability is a critical dimension of competitive advantage. One of the main parameter which defines the performance of a logistic system is its reliability (Blanchard, 2004). Delivery dependability is defined as number of products delivered on confirmed delivery date divided by number of products ordered ability of the company to deliver on or before the promised scheduled due date. A high standard of delivery dependability is crucial success factor in achieving customer satisfaction. According to Berry et al. (1991), delivery dependability is sometimes referred to as dependability or on-time delivery and concerns the ability to deliver according to a promised schedule or plan.

Cost of production

Cost of production means the total sum of money required for the production of a specific quantity of output. Such activities can easily be optimized when supply chain is effectively managed (Asha, 2015). If a firm's returns does not compare favourably with its peers in an industry, there is obvious need to adjust its strategy (Namu & Kaimba, 2014). Achieving competitive advantage most often centres around cost leadership or reduction. It is central to all activities in supply chain as every effort is geared towards providing greater value to the customer at a lower cost. The cost of performing a particular activity declines over time as company personnel gains more experience in that area (Namu & Kaimba, 2014), thus, emphasizing the role of company specific resources in cost reduction. Reducing cost of production seems the easiest way a firm can provide competitive pricing.

The relationship between Strategic supplier partnership and competitive advantage

Strategic supplier partnership enhances the capacity of individual participants and is important in aligning the firm towards the direction of realizing potential benefits (Kushwaha & Sharma, 2016). While encouraging problem solving and common strategic planning, strategic supplier partnerships allows the firm to focus on long-term objectives. They are based on sharing the contribution and responsibilities of each party thereby creating a more efficient environment.

Empirical studies related to strategic supplier partnerships and operational performance have been carried out in the past. Onyango, Kiruri, and Karanja (2015) conducted a study on the effect of strategic supplier relationship management on internal operational performance of manufacturing firms. The findings showed that the strategic supplier relationship management affected performance. Business-supplier communication and business-supplier joint decision making both individually and jointly have positive effect on internal operational performance. Mwangi (2019) researched on the influence of supply chain optimization on the performance of manufacturing firms in Kenya. The findings indicated that elements of supply chain optimization influenced manufacturing firms' performance. Specifically, the study revealed that the relationship between inventory controls, supplier management and procurement cost optimization, supply chain automation and performance of manufacturing firms was significant. Lau and Yam (2010) explored the effects of supplier and customer integration on product innovation and performance. The objective of the study was to examine how an organisation can achieve better product performance through innovation enhanced by supply chain integration. There was no direct relationship found between customer/supplier integration and product innovation. They recommended that extensive effort should be made to improve supplier and customer integration in order to augment product innovation and performance.

The relationship between Strategic supplier partnership and delivery dependability

Managing relations with suppliers is also important for supply chain, logistic processes management, quality management, risk management, and innovation management (Van Weele, 2014). Applying the idea of managing relations with suppliers gives the company new opportunities to shape competitiveness. Therefore, the process of shaping partnership relations with suppliers is important for the creation of a competitive enterprise system. Suppliers are necessary entities for the company and their influence on shaping its competitiveness is expressed primarily in creating the quality, timely delivery and price of the final product (Tyszkiewicz, 2017). Empirical studies related to strategic supplier partnerships and operational performance have been carried out in the past. Musau (2018) carried out a study on strategic supplier partnerships and organizational performance among textile manufacturing firms in Kenya. The findings of the study indicated supply chain information systems, inventory management, buyer-supplier relationship, transport management and warehouse management positively and significantly affect organizational performance. A study by Chesaro (2016) found that firms adopted SCM practices which enhanced service delivery, improved decision making, enhanced overall cost reduction and real time delivery of goods and services. Their study used a survey research design using a census approach of 45 firms in Nairobi. Results indicated that there was a significant relationship between SCM practices and operation performance. Delivery dependability in the supply chain of bakery firms' means products delivered on time at all levels of supply chain. For optimal performance of the bakery supply chain is very important that all logistics processes are harmonically synchronised because higher operating efficiency results in shorter lead time and improve on-time delivery performance that leads to decrease of delivery cost as well as total cost. According to Shang & Liu (2011) late deliveries frequently exist in many different industries and lead to a deteriorated delivery dependability to customers and will have a long-term negative effect on customers demand.

The relationship between Strategic supplier partnership and cost of production

Strategic supplier partnership involves the network of suppliers who move products through various steps to the final users. Supply chain management takes into account coordination of all the different parts of the chain as quickly as possible without losing any of the quality or customer satisfaction, while still keeping costs down (Alexander, Jonathan, & Emmanuel, 2013). Therefore, it is paramount to integrate the internal operations and effectively link them with the external operations by focusing on supply chain management practices. Eduardo, Jose and Alvarez (2014) noted that strategic supplier partnerships are key practice of supply chain management. Strategic supplier partnership enhances the capacity of individual participants and is important in aligning the firm towards the direction of realizing potential benefits (Kushwaha & Sharma, 2016). While encouraging problem solving and common strategic planning, strategic supplier partnerships allows the firm to focus on long-term objectives. They are based on sharing the contribution and responsibilities of each party thereby creating a more efficient environment.

Therefore, effective joint procurement planning is important for bakery firms as supply of inputs determine their operational performance. Kushwaha and Sharma (2016) opined that bakery firms are encountering competition and pressure to reduce lead times and product prices. The ever-changing markets demand more unique innovations with higher quality products and processes. As such, bakery firms need to improve supplier involvement in relation to product development processes. Collaboration between manufacturers and supply chain partners at the product development process contributes to production of products that best meet the customer needs at reduced cost (Naveed, 2016). This involvement also results into cost savings which is achieved in the integration of product design and supply chain processes.

Methodology

In this study, the cross sectional survey research design was adopted. The population of this study comprises of all 213 bakeries registered with the Rivers State ministry of commerce and industry, as documented in the Rivers State Yellow Pages Directory, 2013/2014 edition. In order to determine the sample size for the study, we will deploy the Taro Yamen formula. $n=N/1+N(e)^2$ which gave us 139 registered bakery firms in Rivers State. The 139 firms were selected from the population of 213 using convenient sampling technique which is a non-probability sampling technique and the researcher conveniently administered one (1) copy of questionnaire to management staff of each of the selected 139 bakery firms which served as our data base for analysis.

Analysis/Results

$CA = e_0 + e_1$ SSP…………………Model 1.

Table 1 Regression analysis showing the effects of strategic supplier partnership (SSP) on competitive advantage (CA)

Variables	Coeff.	t-cal	t-tab	Sig. t	r	R2	F-cal	F-tab	Sig.f
Constant	0.558	3.395	1.960	0.001	0.868	0.756	374.79	2.62	0.000
SSP	0.893	19.332		0.000					

Dependent Variable: competitive advantage (CA) **Source: SPSS Output**

CA = 0.558 + 0.893 SSP

This suggests that a positive relationship exist between strategic supplier partnership and competitive advantage. The coefficient of determination (R^2) is 0.756 which translates to 75.6% of variation in competitive advantage accounted for by strategic supplier partnership. The F–

statistics reveals F – cal value of 374.79 and F – tab value of 2.62. Since F– cal > F – tab we concluded that the model above can be used to predict competitive advantage of bakery firms in Rivers State. The p-value = 0.000 < 0.05 shows a significant effect and good model utility.

$DD = e_0 + e_1 SSP + e_3 IS$....................Model 2

Table 2 Regression Analysis Showing the Effect of strategic supplier partnership (SSP), on delivery dependability (DD).

Variables	Coeff.	t-cal	t-tab	Sig. t	r	R2	F-cal	F-tab	Sig.f
Constant	-0.002	-0.021	1.960	0.003	0.865	0.748	515.404	2.60	0.000
SSP	0.224	2.808		0.000					
IS	0.305	4.329		0.003					

Dependent Variable: Delivery dependability (DD) **Source: SPSS Output**

$DD = -0.002 + 0.224SSP + 0.305IS$

Shows a strong positive relationship between strategic supplier partnership (SSP) and delivery dependability. The coefficient of determination (R^2) = 0.748 shows that 74.8% variation in delivery dependability is accounted for by variation in the strategic supplier partnership. The F – statistics reveals F– cal = 515.404 > F-tab= 2.60. This shows good model utility, implying that model 2 is very useful in predicting delivery dependability of bakery firms in Rivers State. The test of significance conducted shows that strategic supplier partnership (SSP) has a significant effect on delivery dependability (DD) since t – cal = 2.808 > t – tab = 1.96.

$COP = \beta_0 + \beta_1 SSP + \beta_3 IS$.................Model 3

Table 3 Regression analysis showing the effect of strategic supplier partnership (SSP) on cost of production (COP).

Variables	Coeff.	t-cal	t-tab	Sig. t	r	R2	F-cal	F-tab	Sig.f
Constant	0.029	0.311	1.960	0.000	0.869	0.754	597.653	2.60	0.000
SSP	0.898	12.068		0.001					
IS	0.226	3.465		0.001					

Dependent Variable: Cost of production (COP) **Source: SPSS Output**

$COP= 0.029 + 0.898SSP + 0.226IS$

The coefficient of determination (R^2) = 0.754 shows that 75.4% of the variation in cost of production (COP) is accounted for by variation in the strategic supplier partnership (SSP). This reveals that more than half of all the variables constituting strategic supplier partnership can influence cost of production of bakery firms in Rivers State. The F – cal of 597.653 > F – tab of 2.60 and is significant at 0.000, we therefore conclude that there is a good model utility suggesting that our model 3 can be used to predict and forecast cost of production (COP). Strategic supplier partnership (SSP) has t – cal = 12.068 > t – tab = 1.960 revealing that it has a significant effect on cost of production.

Discussion of Findings

The effects of strategic supplier partnership (SSP) on competitive advantage (CA)

Table 1 illustrates the significant impact of strategic supplier partnership and competitive advantage. The findings in this study is in line with the research of Onyango, Kiruri, and

Karanja (2015) who affirmed a positive relationship between strategic supplier relationship and all operational performance used in the study (cost, quality, delivery and flexibility). Additionally, Mwangi (2019) observed that the relationship between inventory controls, supplier management, and procurement cost optimization, supply chain automation and performance of manufacturing firms was significant. Also, Lau and Yam (2010) explored the effects of supplier and customer integration on product innovation and performance; He concludes there was no direct relationship found between customer/supplier integration. This assertion is same in bakery industry.

The Effect of strategic supplier partnership (SSP), on delivery dependability (DD).

Table 2 reports a strong positive relationship between strategic supplier partnership (SSP) and delivery dependability. This result aligns with the findings of Shang & Liu (2011) who says, late deliveries frequently lead to a deteriorated delivery dependability to customers and have a long-term negative effect on customers demand. Moreover, Chesaro (2016) found that firms adopted SCM practices which enhanced service delivery, improved decision making, enhanced overall cost reduction and real time delivery of goods and services.

The effect of strategic supplier partnership (SSP) on cost of production (COP).

Table 3 illustrates the significant impact of strategic supplier partnership and cost of production. This finding is in line with the research of Kushwaha and Sharma (2016) opined that bakery firms are encountering competition and pressure to reduce lead times and product prices. Additionally, Naveed, (2016) observed that collaboration between manufacturers and supply chain partners at the product development process contributes to production of products that best meet the customer needs at reduced cost. As such, bakery firms need to improve supplier involvement in relation to product development processes. This involvement also results into cost savings which is achieved in the integration of product design and supply chain processes.

Conclusion

Strategic supplier partnership implies a long-term relationship between a company and its suppliers and vice-versa. This relationship is destined to influence operational and strategic capabilities of organizations in order to help them achieve competitive advantage. Furthermore, the strategic supplier partnerships enhance supplier involvement, which improves communication and help them to gain clear understanding of the business and enable them to meet their needs in a more effective manner. A significant positive relationship was observed between strategic supplier partnership and competitive advantage of bakery firms in Rivers State as improved supplier involvement will result to enhanced service delivery, improved decision making, enhanced overall cost reduction and real time delivery of goods and services.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following practical recommendations are put forth for consideration:

Prioritize strategic supplier partnership: Organizations in the bakery industry should prioritize investments in strategic partnership with suppliers, as this will result in timely delivery schedule and reduction in the cost of production which is a competitive advantage to the firm.

Encourage Collaboration: Promote collaboration between industry stakeholders, regulatory bodies, and research institutions to create an environment conducive for strategic partnership with suppliers and improved brand reputation.

Regular Monitoring: Establish mechanisms for regular monitoring of key metrics related to cost of production and delivery excellence. Utilize these metrics to gauge the effectiveness of implementing strategic partnership with suppliers.

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