Strategic Alliances And Competitiveness Of Paint Distribution Companies In Rivers State

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Abstract
This study investigatded the relationship between Strategic alliances and competitiveness in paint distribution companies in Rivers State. The study adopted the cross-sectional survey research design. The study was anchored on relational view theory The population of this study comprised 20 selected paint distribution firms in Rivers State. However, taking into cognizance that the selected population was not large but rather manageable, the researchers adopted a census method to arrive at the total number of respondents. Hence, 3 copies of the instrument were given to each of the 20 thereby given a total of 60 respondents. The hypotheses were tested using Spearman Rank Order correlation Coefficient with the aid of the Statistical Tool for Social Science (SPSS Version 22). The study revealed that strategic alliances has positive and very strong relationship with competitiveness in paint distribution companies in Rivers State. The study recommends that paint companies undertake good strategic alliances that can propel healthy competitive profile in the paint industry and the likes

Keywords: *Strategic Alliance, Competitiveness, Customer Satisfaction, Paint Distribution Companies, Rivers State*

Introduction

Strategic alliances can significantly impact the competitiveness of paint distribution companies. A strategic alliance is a cooperative arrangement between two or more companies to achieve common objectives while remaining independent entities. In the context of paint distribution companies, forming strategic alliances can bring about several benefits and enhance their overall competitiveness in the market. According to Day (2000) as cited in Mendonca, Moreira, Camargo, and El-Faro (2014) every channel partnership is a process in which exchange occurs, that is, value is received and sent. These changes evolve from a simple transactional exchange to a collaborative exchange.

On their part, Hunt and Spew (2002) as cited in Mendonca et al. (2014) are of the view that "transactional exchange is focused on the negotiation of standardized product and with competitive prices, while in the collaborative exchange is emphasized the search for a joint solution and an expectation of commitment and long-term benefit."

On their part, Mendonca et al. (2014) citing Rosenbloom (2002) highlighted three categories of programs that "are meant to offer support to the members of the channel, which can be divided into cooperation, partnership or strategic alliance and distribution. O'Toole and Donaldson (2002) as cited in Akman and Yorur (2012) state that closer and stronger interactions between manufacturing firms and their suppliers are becoming a critical component to achieving competitive advantage. In other words, the purchasing and supply function is fast becoming a strategic tool for firms to achieve competitive advantage and also a strategic part of creating value for their customers. Skarmeas et al. (2008) are of the view that stronger ties between suppliers enable manufacturing firms to achieve sustainability in the supply of products, minimize risks associated with new exchanges, and help to reduce the inventory level and inventory cost. This line of thinking is akin to that echoed by an earlier scholar Minahan (1998) when he stated that a closer relationship with a supplier by manufacturers can lead to shorter product cycle time, fewer quality defects, reduces cost, and streamline processes. This indicates that manufacturers are aware of the power of the customers, as the customers are the very essence of why the businesses exist in the first instance. Thus, channel collaboration with each other enhances productivity and profitability. This view is akin to earlier scholars like Sanchez *et al.* (2005) who argued that manufacturer- supplier relationships are more and more important for manufacturers to be competitive, productive, and profitable. Consequently, they opined that proper management of supplier relationships comprises one key element of supply chain success and by extension, the organization achieving its objective. Paint distribution firms in Rivers State are keen to meet and even exceed the demands of their customers. The activities of the competition and the constant changes in the preferences of the customers are other pointers as to why the paint distribution firms need to collaborate closely with their manufacturers and channel partners in ensuring that they can achieve their stated objectives.

Paint distribution firms compete among themselves for the attention and patronage of the customers. The customers are also, well-informed and very fickle as they are quick to switch to any firm they feel is offering a better deal. To this end, each paint distribution firm seeks for strategies to ensure that they cannot only win the attention of the target but convert them to customers and possibly retain them. One of the possible strategies is a collaboration with the manufacturer, and other channel partners to ensure that the product is readily available, at the most convenient place for the customer, and the most affordable price for the customer. Scholars have alluded to the fact that "closer relationship within supplier and even with manufactures can lead to shorter product cycle time, fewer quality defects, reduction of transportation cost and streamlining of processes to ensure efficiency in delivery time.

Streams of studies have attempted to examine the impact of collaboration on customer satisfaction. For example, Mendonca *et al.* (2014) analyzed the relationship of Business-to- Business (B2B) channels in Brazilian agribusiness companies. However, none of this study has been conducted to examine the impact of strategic alliances in paint manufacturing firms in Port Harcourt. To fill this gap, this study seeks to examine the impact of collaboration on the competitiveness of paint manufacturing firms in Port Harcourt.

Study Variables and Research Framework

This study has two major variables**:** Strategic alliances which is the independent variable is treated as a single-item variable, and Competitiveness is the dependent variable with customer satisfaction as its measure

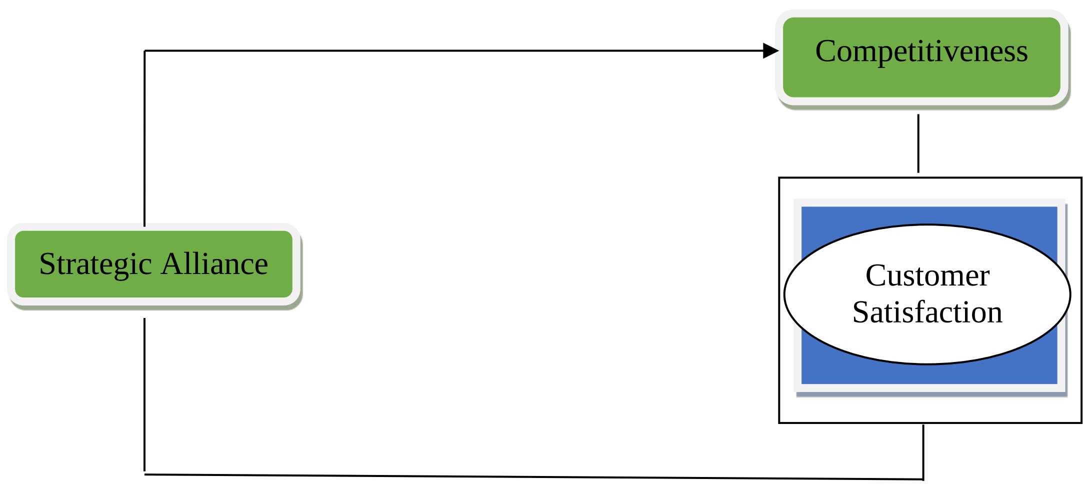

Fig 1: Conceptual framework for Strategic Alliance and Competitiveness of paint distribution firms.
Desk: ((Dimension was adapted from Mendonca, Moreira, Camargo, and El-Faro 2014; Scholten and Schilder 2015).

Figure 1 above shows collaboration as the independent variable. While competitiveness is indicated as the dependent variable. The dependent variable has one measure: Customer satisfaction. Indicating that if, channel members collaborate they can achieve positive customer satisfaction which is reflected by the customers remaining loyal to the firm and staying in the firm.

The following hypotheses stated in the null form were developed to guide the study:
H0: There is no significant relationship between collaboration and customer satisfaction in the paint distribution firm in Rivers State

Theoretical Foundation

Relational View Theory

This study is domiciled in Relational View Theory. The relational view by Dyer and Singh (1998) has its roots primarily in the Resource-Based View (RBV) Theory by Barney (1991) and Wernerfelt (1984). But it is also inspired by Cook's (1977) paper that underlines the advantages of exchange in networks of inter-organizational relations. The Resource-Based View Theory has substantially contributed to the field of competitive advantages at the firm level. According to the theory, firms that can accumulate resources and capabilities that are rare, valuable, non-substitutable, and not easily imitable, will achieve a competitive advantage over competing firms. Firm heterogeneity is a critical condition in achieving differentiated firm performance (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984; Rumelt, 1997).

However, the resource-based theory was incapable of explaining how finns gain competitive advantage in networked environments where firms maintain frequent and multiple collaborative relationships with alliance partners (Lavie, 2006). It is more than likely that a part of the competitive advantage achieved through differentiated performance by the individual firm is derived from the advantages of the network of relationships in which the firm is embedded. Lavie (2006) confirms this constraint by analyzing the limitations of the RBV in explaining competitive advantage in networked environments. He acknowledged that the relational view is complementary to the RBV because it could eliminate the barriers that the RBV could not reach.

The Relational View by Dyer and Singh was one of these theories that emerged in this period due to the popularity of alliance relationships. By changing the unit of analysis from the Resource-Based View Theory from individual firms to the network of firms, their findings appealed to a wide range of industries, because it had more explanatory power than theories such as Barney's (1991) Resource-Based View or Porter's (1980) Industry Structure View, for networked firms. Despite the different applicability between the Relational View and Resource-Based View, both theories state that idiosyncratic capabilities (also in the form of inter-firm linkages) increase the barriers for competitors to duplicate these competencies, thus giving an advantage over competitors in the form of differentiation. The Relational View should therefore not be seen as a substitute for the Resource-Based View but rather as a complementary extension of this view.

The Concept of Strategic Alliances

Strategic alliances is the working of two or more companies collectively to run supply chain operations and have better results as compared to when these firms work individually. On their part, Simatupang, Wright, and Sridharan (2002) established that collaboration is "the joint working among two or more firms through a supply chain to meet end customers satisfaction and the basic purpose of the collaboration is to optimize profit, for all chain partners and create a competitive edge". Also, collaboration has been defined as a "relational system in the common pool of resources; every member can use these resources to facilitate group or individual goals and was noted to be a key element of effective service, and it reduces the costs of entering the market and obtaining technological knowledge" (Friedman, Reynolds, Quan, Crusto & Kaufman, 2007).

Empirical research indicates that collaboration between partners is affected by the performance between focal firms and their manufacturers. Between inter-firms, collaboration can be defined as "a process in which organizations exchange information, alter activities, share resources, and enhance each other's capacity for mutual benefit and a common purpose by sharing risks, responsibilities, and rewards" (Horvath 2001). Collaboration starts "from the shallow transaction and ends with the responsive integrated relationship, and collaborative relationship lies on sharing of information and distribution of risk among the partners".

On his part, Horvath (2001) explains collaboration as two or more firms sharing the responsibility of exchanging management, planning, execution, and performance measurement information, and acting as the driving force behind SCM. Collaboration can be seen as "a means by which companies involved in the supply chain are responsively working together to achieve common objectives, and this is possible by sharing knowledge, information, profits, and risk, and Collaboration is a mutual objective that is more than a written contract". For earlier scholars like Morgan and Hunt (1994), collaboration among partners is critical to achieving common goals. According to these studies, manufacturers are increasingly "engaging in value-enhancing collective efforts, such as the exchange of best practices, joint product development, and adjusting marketing strategies to increase market shares".

Strategic alliances is a relationship between inter-organizations by which all members collaborate to share resources, achieve the goal, share information, rewards, and responsibilities, and jointly solve problems (Barratt, & Oliveira 2001; Phillips, Moon, Rizvi, & Rauss, 2000). According to Hogarth-Scott (1999), collaboration is basically openness, sharing risks and rewards that improve performance, which is not possible without collaboration. According to Spekman, Kamauff, and Myhr (1998), collaboration is the alliance among organizations formed for sharing large investment costs.

The Concept of Competitiveness

In the academic literature, the term "firm competitiveness" has been defined in several ways. Porter (1990) defines competitiveness "as the ability of a given firm to successfully compete in a given business environment". Lall (2001) defines firm competitiveness "as the ability of a firm to do better than benchmark companies in terms of profitability, sales, or market share". Similarly, Buckley, Pass, and Prescott (1998) consider "competitiveness to be synonymous with a firm's long-run profit performance, its ability to compensate employees and generate superior returns for shareholders".

According to Edmonds, Jarvis, and McGinness (2000), competitiveness means producing a good product and providing a good quality service at the right price at the right time. Going from the plethora of descriptions, we can see that there is no generally accepted and comprehensive definition of corporate competitiveness. This can be attributed to rapid changes around the world, thus, competition is intensifying more than ever, and new dimensions of competitiveness are emerging, giving increased importance to their research on a theoretical and practical level.

Empirical studies mostly define firm competitiveness based on market performance and productivity (Oral, Cinar, & Chabchoub, 1999; Wu, Wang, Zhang, Li, & O'Brien, 2013; Akben-Selcuk, 2016; Machek & KubIcek, 2018), in an attempt to capture the ability of the company to earn returns on investments and to stay in business in the long run.

However, scholars (Aiginger & Vogel, 2015) argue that competitiveness is more than just an accounting result comparing costs and revenues at a point in time it includes all sources of competitiveness and their prospects. Therefore, competitiveness should be analyzed from multiple angles to capture the contribution of different resources and capabilities.

According to Dvoulety and Blazkova (2020), the operationalization of firm competitiveness is a very challenging issue. It is considered "multi-faceted" in nature and several variables should be jointly merged to capture the overall complexity of the firm performance. Previous reviews of the empirical literature (Chaudhuri & Ray, 1997; Ajitabh & Momaya, 2004) indicate that scholars approximate firm competitiveness by different profitability, productivity and market performance indicators or they come up with their indices of firm competitiveness. Sipa et a!. (2015) argue that some factors of competitiveness are the result of a regional environment, on which the firm does not usually have influence; the firm competitiveness potential depends on the decisions taken inside the company.

Measures of Competitiveness

Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is defined by Hill and Alexander (2000) as how well a service or a product satisfies the needs and expectations a customer has. Scholars like Kim, Jeong, Park, Kim, and Kim (2007) are of the view that satisfaction refers to a positive state that resulted from appraising all the factors of a firm working relationship with another firm. This implies that customer satisfaction can be viewed as the total appraisal the customer has on the performance of the supplier. In the case where the supplier exceeds his appraisal, the customer is said to be satisfied. Meanwhile, in the case where the customer is not pleased with the evaluation, the customer is dissatisfied. Scholars are in consensus that customer satisfaction with supplier relationships can be viewed as a positive opinion emanating from the evaluation of all aspects of a firm's working relationship with suppliers.

However, for several supplier firms, creating and sustaining long-term associations with satisfied buyers is key and important for survival in the long run. In many channel partnership studies, many authors have attempted to show the existence of a connection between satisfaction and loyalty.

Anderson and Skalsky (2017) citing Heskett, Jones, Loveman, Sasser, and Schlesinger (1994) stated that customer satisfaction is an important aspect that helps to create a long-term relationship, as well as customer loyalty. They assert that satisfied customers are more likely to become loyal customers, which means they will continue to purchase the same brand the next time they are going to buy the product. Some scholars argue that customer satisfaction is a condition in the customer's head that arises from his/her experience with the provided service/product.

Furthermore, customer satisfaction can be divided into two different parts, economic satisfaction, and psychosocial satisfaction. According to Andersson and Skalsky (2017), economic satisfaction is the economic benefits a customer gets from buying a product or a service. While psychosocial satisfaction is the different psychosocial benefits, a customer gets from buying the products or service; such as the location of the shop or how well they are treated while consuming the product or service.

Empirical Review (Concept of Strategic Alliances and Competiveness)
Kumar, Banerjee, Meena, and Ganguly (2017) examined how joint planning aids problems solving in supply chain collaboration. The purpose of the study was to evaluate how joint planning act as a tool for solving collaborative issues. The findings revealed that joint planning aids problem-solving and enhances organizational performance.
Ramanathan and Gunasekaran (2014) conducted a study on supply chain collaboration. The purpose was to examine the impact of the supply chain on the success of long-term partnerships. The findings revealed that collaboration had a positive impact on the success of partners in the supply chain.

Kumar and Banerjee (2012) investigated the implementation strategy for collaboration in the supply chain. The purpose was to unravel how collaborative strategy enhances supply chain performance. The findings show that strategic alliances is a precursor for organizational effectiveness.
Cao and Zhang (2011) conducted a study on supply chain collaboration: Impact on collaborative advantage and firm performance. The objective of the study is to uncover the nature of supply chain collaboration and explore its impact on firm performance based on a paradigm of collaborative advantage. The results indicate that supply chain collaboration improves collaborative advantage and indeed has a bottom-line influence on firm performance, and collaborative advantage is an intermediate variable that enables supply chain partners to achieve synergies and create superior performance.

Kohli and Jensen (2010) empirically examined supply chain collaboration: When is it effective? The purpose of the study was to examine the extent to which information sharing, joint planning, goal congruence, personal interaction, and trust between supply chain partners and manager perception on the effectiveness of the collaborative relationship. The results confirm that extensively sharing information, joint planning, and using information systems collaboratively tend to increase the perceived value of collaboration.

Methodology
The research approach adopted in this study is the non- experimental research type and it was designed based on the cross-sectional survey method which offers a wide coverage and permits generalizability of research findings. The population of this study comprised 20 selected paint distribution firms in Rivers State. However, taking into cognizance that the selected population was not large but rather manageable, the researchers adopted a census method to arrive at the total number of respondents. Hence, 3 copies of the instrument were given to each of the 20 thereby given a total of 60 respondents.

The researcher used the Cronbach's Alpha analysis to ascertain the reliability and internal consistency of the measurement instrument while the Spearman Rank Correlation was used in testing the relationship between collaboration and competitiveness of paint distribution companies in Rivers State.

Table1: Reliability Coefficient of Strategic alliances and the attributes of competitiveness.

S/No	Dimension/Measures of the study variables	Number of Item	Number of Cases	Cronbarch's Alpha
1	Collaboration	3	52	0.815
2	Competitiveness	3	52	0.802
3	Customer satisfaction	3	52	0.876

Source : SPSS output 2023.

Table 1 showed different Cronbach's Alpha value for the 3 constructs of the scaled questionnaire which were all considered sufficiently adequate for the study. Over all, this indicated that there was internal consistency of the variables scaled and that variables construct exhibited strong internal reliability. Notably, the results therefore confirmed that the instrument we used for this study had satisfactory construct reliability.

Test of Hypotheses, Result and Discussion of Findings.

Univariate Data Analyses

Univarate analysis is basically the process of describing individual variables in a study. According to Sullivan (2001), univariate statistics are used to describe the distribution of a single variable through the use of simple frequency tables. According to Saunders et al (2003), commencing initial analysis is best done by looking at individual variables and their respective components. Earlier in this study, we clearly delineated our study variables as collaboration - predictor variable; and competitiveness as the criterion variable.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Strategic alliances

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Collaboration	52	1.80	5.00	4.1	.8322
Valid N(List wise)	**52**				

Source: SPSS Output 2023

Table 2, above illustrates the descriptive statistics for collaboration. The mean score of 4.1 depicts that the variable is highly predominant and practiced in the firms that constituted the study population.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for the attributes of Competitiveness

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Customer Satisfaction	52	1.80	5.00	4.0	.75401
Valid N(List wise)	**52**				

Source: SPSS Output 2023

Table 3, above illustrates the descriptive statistics for competitiveness which. The high mean value suggests that the variables are predominantly practiced in the firms that constituted our study population.

Bivariate Analysis

In a bivariate analysis, two variables that are associated or correlated is been evaluated to ascertain the magnitude of relationship that exist between them. This section depicts the test of hypotheses and the Spearman Rank Order Correlation is considered appropriate and was used to test the hypothesized relationships in our study. The study hypotheses and analysis are presented as follows:

H01: There is no significant relationship between collaboration and customer satisfaction of paint distribution companies in Rivers State.

Table 4: Correlation for Strategic alliances and measure of Competitiveness

		Collaboration	Customer Satisfaction
Spearman's rho	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.803
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	52	52

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Source: SPSS Output 2023

H0: There is no significant relationship between collaboration and customer satisfaction of paint distribution companies in Rivers State

From the result as depicted in table 4, the correlation coefficient shows that there is a positive relationship between supplier integration and operational effectiveness. The correlation coefficient 0.803 confirms the magnitude and strength of this relationship and it is statistically significant at p 0.000

Discussion of Findings

Relationship between Strategic alliances and Competitiveness

The tests of hypotheses as evidenced in Table 4, revealed that there is a significant positive relationship between collaboration and competitiveness of paint distribution companies in Rivers State. This finding agrees with the assertions Ramanathan and Gunasekaran (2014) who reported that collaboration had a positive impact on the success of partners in the supply chain. Also, the study revealed that collaboration significantly impacts the success of long-term partnerships. Furthermore, this finding aligns with the position of Cao and Zhang (2011) who reported that supply chain collaboration improves collaborative advantage and indeed has a bottom-line influence on firm performance

Conclusion
Based on the findings of this study, the study concludes that strategic alliances has positive relationship with competiveness in paint distribution companies.

Recommendation
The study therefore recommends that paint companies undertake good strategic alliances that can propel healthy competitive profile in the paint industry and the likes.

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