

The Impact of Strategic supplier partnership on Low-cost advantage in the Syrian Food Products Sector

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Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the impact of strategic supplier partnership on low-cost advantage in the Syrian Food Products Sector. In addition, it aims to assessing the level of awareness and understanding the concepts of supply chain management and competitive advantage in the Syrian context. The research methodology involved the adoption of a survey as a research strategy and quantitative approach, utilized a self-administered questionnaire, to arrive at the major findings of the study. The type of research is a single cross-sectional design in which the collection of data from the respondents was carried out only once. Data was analyzed using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS). The paper revealed that there is an impact of strategic supplier partnership on low-cost advantage in the Syrian Food Products Sector. It also revealed that there is a high level of awareness among the respondents about the concepts of supply chain management and competitive advantage. As far as the researcher is aware, this paper is the first to investigate the impact of strategic supplier partnership on low-cost advantage in the Syrian food products sector; thus its finding will be an original contribution to the field of supply chain management and competitive advantage. In addition, as there has been a shortage of research in the field of supply chain management, generally in the Middle East countries, the researcher hopes that this paper will establish a foundation for further research in the region.

Keywords. Strategic supplier partnership, Supply chain management (SCM), Low-cost advantage, Competitive Advantage, Syrian Food Products Sector

1. Introduction:

The world is witnessing many challenges, represented by intensive competition, lack of available resources, increasing societal needs. Which requires dynamic changes in all aspects of the organization to ensure survival and continuity in the light of these rapid changes. Therefore, the organization has to continuously explore and identify the potential markets for its products, obtaining a distinct competitive position, expanding its market share, and accessing geographical places far from the organization's location whether within the borders of the country or outside.

Hence comes the importance of supply chain management, which has become a bond, linking the production sites with market and consumption sites, which is why the management of supply chains is considered as one of the vital factors in achieving the competitive advantage of the organization.

Based on the above, the need for supply chain management emerged, due to its ability to enable the organization to achieve competitive advantages, through its role in the relationships between the organization, suppliers and customers. The supply chain management represents a mixture of science and art to improve the ways how the organization obtains the raw materials needed to provide the service, produce the products and deliver or ship it to customers, which achieves the continuity and distinction for the organization in the market.

2. Research Problem & Question:

The problem of the study goes back to the fact that industry in Syria are affected by many challenges, and the great damage in the Food Products sector which has been affected by political and economic factors in Syria and the region.

As most organizations operate in a work environment characterized by intensive competition, change in the needs and desires of customers and changing market conditions, Therefore the organization is required to build strong relationships with suppliers and customers through efficient and effective management of the supply chain, and work to secure the best types of support to achieve the set goals.

In light of the above, the problem of research can be identified by the following main question:

To what extent does strategic supplier partnership affect the low-cost advantage in the Syrian food products sector?

3. Literature Review

3.1 Evolution of Supply Chain Management

In the 1950s and 1960s, most manufacturers emphasized mass production to minimize unit production cost as the primary operations strategy, with little product or process flexibility. New product development was slow and relied exclusively on in-house technology and capacity. Bottleneck operations were cushioned with inventory to maintain a balanced line flow, resulting in huge investment in work in process (WIP) inventory. Sharing technology and expertise with customers or suppliers was considered too risky and unacceptable and little emphasis appears to have been placed on cooperative and strategic buyer supplier partnership. The purchasing function was generally regarded as being a service to production, and managers paid limited attention to issues concerned with purchasing. In the 1970s, Manufacturing Resource Planning was introduced and managers realized the impact of huge WIP on manufacturing cost, quality, and new product development and delivery lead-time. Manufacturers resorted to new materials management concepts to improve performance within the “four walls” of the company (Tan, 2001, p.39).

The evolution of supply chain management continued into the 1990s accompanied by increasing logistics and inventory costs and the trend toward market globalization, the challenges associated with improving quality, manufacturing efficiency, customer service, and new product design and development also increased. To deal with these challenges, manufacturers began purchasing from a selected number of certified, high- quality suppliers with excellent service reputations and involved these suppliers in their new product design and development activities as well as in cost, quality, and service improvement initiatives. This is done so by reducing the supply base as much as a single supplier and enter in to a long term agreement as strategic alliance in doing their business. As companies began implementing supply chain management initiatives, they began to understand the necessity of integrating all

key business processes among the supply chain participants enabling the supply chain to act and react as one entity. (Ensermu, 2013, p.54)

3.2 Supply Chain Management Definitions

The Council of Supply Chain Management Professionals (CSCMP) (2004), a leading professional organization promoting SCM practice, education, and development, defines SCM as:

SCM encompasses the planning and management of all activities involved in sourcing and procurement, conversion, and all logistics management activities, including coordination and collaboration with suppliers, intermediaries, third-party service providers, and customers. Thus, the supply chain encompasses all activities involved in the production and delivery of a final product or service, from the supplier's supplier to the customer's customer.

In essence, supply chain management integrates supply and demand management within and across companies (www.cscmp.org), CSCMP emphasizes that SCM encompasses the management of supply and demand, sourcing of raw materials and parts, manufacturing and assembly, warehousing and inventory tracking, order entry and order management, and distribution and delivery to the customer.

Cooper et al. (2007) define SCM as the management and integration of the entire set of business processes that provides products, services and information that add value for customers. (Cooper et al., 2007, p.14)

Several authors have defined supply chain management, Christopher (2003), New and Payne (1995), and Simchi-Levi et al. (2000) define supply chain management as “the integration of key business processes among a network of interdependent suppliers, manufacturers, distribution centers, and retailers in order to improve the flow of goods, services, and information from original suppliers to final customers, with the objectives of reducing system-wide costs while maintaining required service levels” (Stapleton et al., 2006, p.108).

The Global Supply Chain Forum (GSCF) defines supply chain management as “the integration of key business processes from end user through original suppliers, that provides products, services, and information that adds value for customers and other stakeholders” (Lambert et al., 1998, p.1).

The APICS dictionary (1995) describes SCM as – “the processes from initial raw materials to the ultimate consumption of the finished product, linking across supplier-user companies”. (Green et al., 2008, p.317)

A supply chain is a network of organizations performing various processes and activities to produce value in the form of products and services for the end customer. (Christopher, 2003, p34)

SCM concerns the integrated and process-oriented approach to the design, management and control of the supply chain, with the aim of producing value for the end customer, by both improving customer service and lowering cost. (Giannoccaro & Pontrandolfo, 2002, p.153)

Lummus and Vokurka (1999) summarize SCM as “all the activities involved in delivering a product from raw material through to the customer, including sourcing raw materials and parts, manufacturing and assembly, warehousing and inventory tracking, order entry and order management, distribution across all channels, delivery to the customer, and the information systems necessary to monitor all of these activities”. (Lummus & Vokurka, 1999, p.13)

According to Li et al. (2006) the dual purpose of SCM is to improve the performance of an individual organization as well as that of the entire supply chain. (Li et al., 2006, p.124)

CLM definitions clearly establish that SCM is more broadly conceived than merely "logistics outside the firm". (Lambert, 2004, p.18).

Recent research supports this conception, portraying SCM as a strategic level concept (Stank et al., 2005, p.27).

3.3 Strategic Supplier Partnership

Is defined as "the long term relationship between the organization and its suppliers. It is designed to leverage the strategic and operational capabilities of individual participating organizations to help them achieve significant ongoing benefits" (Li et al., 2006, p.109).

Gunasekaran et al. (2001) assert that a strategic partnership emphasizes long-term relationship between trading partners and "promotes mutual planning and problem solving efforts". (Gunasekaran et al., 2001, p.71).

Strategic partnerships between organizations promote shared benefits and ongoing collaboration in key strategic areas like technology, products, and markets (Yoshino & Rangan, 1995, p.79).

Strategic partnerships with suppliers facilitate organizations to work closely and effectively with a few suppliers rather than many suppliers that have been selected solely on the basis of cost. Some of the advantages of including suppliers early in the product-design process as mentioned by Tan (2001) are that suppliers can offer cost effective design alternatives, assist in selecting better components and technologies, and aid in design assessment. (Tan, 2001, p.51)

Porter (1985) suggested that co-operation could enable partners to achieve a stronger position together than they can alone. (Porter, 1985, p.13)

Globalization (includes global sourcing) has forced companies to manage their supply, manufacturing, and logistics more effectively. Mentzer et al. (2001) suggests that the key to effective management in the global environment is to have closer relationships with suppliers; cooperation among the supply chain members is required for effective SCM. (Mentzer et al., 2001, p.27)

The past two decades have seen an increasing trend in long term, collaborative relationships by organizations with a few trusted suppliers. (Sheth & Sharma, 1997, p.91)

Kalwani and Narayandas, (1995) add that firms are moving from the traditional approach of a one-time cost based relationship with many suppliers to long term relationships with a few good suppliers. (Kalwani & Narayandas, 1995, p.16)

Tomkins (2001) explored the role of trust and information sharing in inter-organizational relationships. (Tomkins, 2001, p.91)

The role of "commitment" and "trust" in relationship marketing and inter-organizational collaboration has been widely talked about since the late 80s. (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p.20)

The purpose of strategic partnerships is to enable enhanced coordination in operations, R & D, product launching, and the like, between partners. (Fulconis & Paché, 2005, p.92)

There has been abundant literature since the 1990s on strategic supplier partnership in strategy literature, In some industries, startups and partnership changes are expensive and time consuming and long-term contracts are preferred (Mason et al., 2002, p.10).

Tracey et al. (1999) conducted a research study on the impact of supplier selection and involvement on manufacturing performance. They concluded that the level of supplier involvement in continuous improvement activities and in product development efforts is low in North American supply chains. Although many managers acknowledge the need for enhanced relationships in the channel, it is not being implemented consistently in the manufacturing

sector. They also conclude that increased company/supplier involvement may have significant impact on supply chain performance. (Tracey et al., 1999, p.411)

Immediate supplier relationship activities play a vital role in developing effective SCM strategies. Long-term relationship does not refer to any specific period, but rather, to the intention that the arrangement is not going to be temporary. Through close relationships supply chain partners are willing to (1) share risks and reward, (2) maintain the relationship on a long-term basis (Wisner, 2003, p.26).

Furthermore, a considerable amount has been written documenting the integration of suppliers in the new product development process. (Shin et al., 2000, p.317)

De Toni and Nassimbeni (1999) found that a long-term perspective between the buyer and supplier increases the intensity of buyer–supplier coordination. (De Toni & Nassimbeni, 1999, p.597)

The Japanese supplier partnership system is widely discussed in the literature, Japanese companies in electronics, automobiles, and machinery industries began involving their suppliers in joint design with their customers. (Nishiguchi & Brookfield, 1997, p.97)

To create a competitive advantage, SCM is increasingly emphasizing Interorganizational co-ordination of activities. (Ballou et al., 2000, p.7)

3.4 Definitions of Competitive Advantage

Competitive advantage is defined as the “capability of an organization to create a defensible position over its competitors” (Li et al., 2006, p.111).

Tracey et al. (1999) argues that competitive advantage comprises of distinctive competencies that sets an organization apart from competitors, thus giving them an edge in the marketplace. They further add that it is an outcome of critical management decisions. (Tracey et al., 1999, p.412)

Competitive advantage traditionally involved the choice regarding the markets in which a firm would compete, defending market share in clearly defined segments using price and product performance attributes. (Day, 2000, p.24)

Today, however, competition is considered a “war of movement” that depends on anticipating and quickly responding to changing market needs (Stalk et al., 1992, p.65).

Competitive advantage emerges from the creation of superior competencies that are leveraged to create customer value and achieve cost and/or differentiation advantages, resulting in market share and profitability performance. Sustaining competitive advantage requires that firms set up barriers that make imitation difficult through continual investment to improve the advantage, making this a long-run cyclical process. (Day, 2000, p.26)

Porter's approach to competitive advantage centers on a firm's ability to be a low cost producer in its industry, or to be unique in its industry in some aspects that are popularly valued by customers. (Porter, 1991, p.95)

Most managers agree that cost and quality will continue to remain the competitive advantage dimensions of a firm. (D' Souza and Williams, 2000, p.579)

Wheelwright (1978) suggests cost, quality, dependability and speed of delivery as some of the critical competitive priorities for manufacturing. (Wheelwright, 1978, p.57)

There is widespread acceptance of time to market as a source of competitive advantage (Holweg, 2005, p.99).

Price/cost, quality, delivery dependability, and time to market have been consistently identified as important competitive capabilities (Vokurka et al., 2002, p.14).

‘Time’ has been argued to be a dimension of competitive advantage in other research contributions. (Zhang, 2001, p.13)

In a research framework, Koufteros et al. (2002) describe the following five dimensions of competitive capabilities: competitive pricing, premium pricing, value-to-customer quality, dependable delivery, and product innovation. These dimensions were further described and utilized in other contributions as well (Li et al. 2006). Based on these studies, the five dimensions of competitive advantage construct used in this study are price/cost, quality, and time to market. (Koufteros et al., 2002, p.256)

Competitive advantage has been operationalized in the existing literature and the measures have been adopted in this study with minor modifications. (Zhang, 2001, p.15)

3.5 Low-Cost as a Dimension of the Competitive advantage

Low-cost advantage: “The ability of an organization to compete against major competitors based on low price”. (Li et al., 2006, p. 120)

For every company, the selling price of a product not only serves as a determinant of the amount of sales and profits, but also plays an important role in building competitive power with other companies. Therefore, in determining product prices, in addition to paying attention to the cost of product procurement, companies also should not ignore the consequences of costs incurred by the procurement of something else to meet customer satisfaction. Besides that, companies are also required to pay attention to price competition factors prevailing in the market. (Li et al., 2006, p. 121)

4. Research Hypothesis, Variables & Model:

In light of the research problem and its question, the hypothesis is formulated as follows:

Hypothesis H1:

"There is a statistically significant impact of strategic supplier partnership on low-cost advantage at the level of significance ($\alpha \leq 0.05$)".

The present study relied on strategic supplier partnership as an independent variable (X), and on low-cost advantage as a dependent variable (Y).

In light of the above, the model of the study will be as follows:

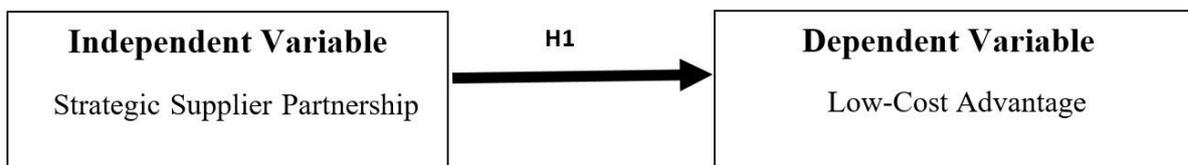


Fig 1: Research Model

5. Research Methodology:

5.1 Study Population and Sample:

The population of this study is the food products sector in Syria, Aldurra Company as a case study.

About Aldurra Company:

AL DURRA INTERNATIONAL FOR FOOD PRODUCTS CO .LTD

The history of the company goes back to the 1940’s and began with one product Kamardene (apricot sheets) which were all handmade it wasn’t until 1979 the company began to introduce different products in which to satisfy the local market, as it realized that the consumer had changed their eating habits and were ready for something The Al-Durra factory now occupies 15.000 sq mt which includes our laboratory fully new equipped with the latest technology to meet with food standards and holds all the necessary certificates including haccp ISO 22000 and the ISO 9001 certificates. Al-Durra remained and will remain the leader of food products

industry and recently opened new factories in the Middle East equipped with the latest technology.

The volume of the sample was determined by using the form of Krejcie & Morgan as the following (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970, p.607):

$$n = \frac{p(1-p)}{\frac{p(1-p)}{N} + \frac{E^2}{SD^2}}$$

n: sample volume.

N: community volume.

P: 0.5 E: 5% SD: 1.96

Since N=93 which is the total number of the workers in Aldurra Company, so by using the above formula we find that n=75.

The questionnaire had been administrated personally, (90) questionnaires were distributed, (75) returned and analyzed with a (84%) response rate.

5.2 Instrument Validity and Reliability:

Validity: The questionnaire was reviewed by four experts from the Faculty of Economics at Damascus University, whose knowledge and experiences were sufficient in this scope and to make sure that each item is measuring exactly what is intended to be measured. Furthermore, a pilot study was conducted on 30 respondents to test the research instrument before distributing it to the whole sample. Upon the feedback of the experts and the pilot study the questionnaire had been amended taking into consideration their suggestions, comments, and directions to achieve the validity of the instrument.

Reliability: Reliability is the extent to which a variable (or set of variables) is persistent in what is intended to measure (Hair et al., 2005). The Cronbach's Alpha value used to test the reliability of the items measuring each variable. A reliability measure coefficient reflects how well items in a set are positively correlated to one another. Accordingly, the internal consistency method was used in this study to examine the reliability of each variable. Table 1 below shows that all the values of alpha are above 0.60, which are considered to be acceptable.

Components	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
Strategic supplier partnership	0.807	4
Low-cost advantage	0.728	4
Total	0.835	8

Table 1: Summary of Reliability Analysis

5.3 Pearson Correlation:

5.3.1 for Strategic Supplier Partnership:

Sentences	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)
The company seeks to build long relationships with its suppliers	.808**	.001
The company involves its suppliers in planning and development	.859**	.001

The relationships with the suppliers is based on trust, commitment and mutual benefits	.881**	.001
The company continuously measures and evaluates the suppliers satisfaction	.882**	.001

Table 2: Pearson Correlation for Strategic supplier partnership

The Pearson Correlation value for all sentences are more than 0.5, which can be considered moderately correlated.

5.3.2 for Low-Cost Advantage:

Sentences	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)
The cost of products provided by the company are less expensive than the competitors	.829**	.001
Our company uses research and development to reduce the cost of products	.809**	.001
The company receives discounts as a result of purchasing raw materials in large quantities	.781**	.001
Our company strives to constantly reduce maintenance costs	.865**	.001

Table 3: Pearson Correlation for Low-cost advantage

The Pearson Correlation value for all sentences are more than 0.5, which can be considered moderately correlated.

5.4 Test of Normality:

Based on table 5 we find that **Sig** for all variables is more than (0.05), so all data are subject to normal distribution.

Statistics		Strategic supplier partnership	Low-cost advantage
N	Valid	75	75
	Missing	0	0
Mean		3.8533	3.7289
Std. Deviation		.95741	1.08039
Skewness		-1.389	-.845
Std. Error of Skewness		.277	.277
Kurtosis		1.732	-.048
Std. Error of Kurtosis		.548	.548

Table 4: Test of Normality for the variables

5.5 Descriptive Statistics of the Data:

5.5.1 Strategic supplier partnership:

Table 5 below depicts the Mean and Standard Deviation for strategic supplier partnership, the values were calculated based on the answers from the respondents.

Strategic supplier partnership	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Test Value = 3		
				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
The company seeks to build long relationships with its suppliers	75	3.8400	1.12754	6.452	74	0.000
The company involves its suppliers in planning and development	75	3.8267	1.10739	6.465	74	0.000
The relationships with the suppliers is based on trust, commitment and mutual benefits	75	3.8233	1.10659	6.452	74	0.000
The company continuously measures and evaluates the suppliers satisfaction	75	3.899	1.10521	6.219	74	0.000
Strategic supplier partnership	75	3.8533	0.95741	7.719	74	0.000

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics of the Data for Strategic supplier partnership

Based on the data collected from the respondents the mean of the data after the calculation was 3.8533, which is more than 3.4 and less than 4.2, and Sig is 0.000 less than 0.05, so the workers agree to the content of the sentences.

This means the respondents demonstrate optimal level of attitude towards strategic supplier partnership. In other words, the respondents show positive attitude towards strategic supplier partnership.

5.5.2 Low-cost advantage:

Table 6 below depicts the Mean and Standard Deviation for low-cost advantage, the values were calculated based on the answers from the respondents.

Low-cost advantage	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Test Value = 3		
				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
The cost of products provided by the company are less expensive than the competitors	75	3.7333	1.25562	5.058	74	0.000
Our company uses research and development to reduce the cost of products	75	3.7733	1.36137	4.919	74	0.000
The company receives discounts as a result of purchasing raw materials in large quantities	75	3.6800	1.40616	4.188	74	0.000
Our company strives to constantly reduce maintenance costs	75	3.5432	1.42154	4.195	74	0.000
Low-cost advantage	75	3.7289	1.08039	5.843	74	0.000

Table 6: Descriptive Statistics of the Data for Low-cost advantage

Based on the data collected from the respondents the mean of the data after the calculation was 3.7289, which is more than 3.4 and less than 4.2, and Sig is 0.000 less than 0.05, so the workers agree to the content of the sentences.

This means the respondents demonstrate optimal level of attitude towards low-cost advantage. In other words, the respondents show positive attitude towards low-cost advantage.

6. Hypotheses Tests:

Main Hypothesis H1:

"There is a statistically significant impact of strategic supplier partnership on low-cost advantage at the level of significance ($\alpha \leq 0.05$)".

Table 7 below explains the impact of strategic supplier partnership on low-cost advantage, the correlation coefficient (R) is 0.453, which is greater than zero, that indicates to a positive relationship between strategic supplier partnership and low-cost advantage.

The square of the correlation (R Square value) is 0.205, which indicated that 20.5 % of the volatility and variability in low-cost advantage is explained by strategic supplier partnership.

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.453 ^a	.205	.194	.96621

Table 7: Model Summary

Table 8 below indicates that calculated F is 18.828 with Sig 0.000, which is less than 0.05, that means that there is a significant impact of strategic supplier partnership on low-cost advantage.

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 Regression	17.577	1	17.577	18.828	.000 ^b
Residual	68.150	74	.934		
Total	85.727	75			

Table 8: ANOVA^b

Table 9 below shows that Beta is 0.531, meaning that any increase in strategic supplier partnership will cause an increase the low-cost advantage multiplied by 0.531.

The Regression model can be formulated as the following:

$$\text{low-cost advantage} = 1.750 + 0.531 (\text{strategic supplier partnership})$$

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	1.750	.477		3.667	.000
strategic supplier partnership	.531	.122	.453	4.339	.000

Table 9: Coefficients^a

Based on the above tables, we find that:

"There is a statistically significant impact of strategic supplier partnership on low-cost advantage at the level of significance ($\alpha \leq 0.05$)".

7. Conclusion:

The correlation analysis and regression analysis show a significant positive correlation between strategic supplier partnership and Low-cost advantage, meaning that there is a statistically significant impact of strategic supplier partnership on low-cost advantage at the level of significance ($\alpha \leq 0.05$).

The workers of Aldurra Company demonstrate optimal level of attitude (positive) towards strategic supplier partnership.

However, additional tests and data collections will be needed to come to a more conclusive result as to whether strategic supplier partnership is an important factor in analyzing low-cost advantage.

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