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ENTREPRENEURIAL INNOVATIVENESS AND COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE OF MANUFACTURING STARTUPS IN RIVERS STATE NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of entrepreneurial innovativeness on the competitive advantage of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Rivers State. A cross-sectional survey research design was employed. Data were collected through a questionnaire survey, with management staff of SMEs serving as respondents. The study population consisted of 23 registered food product manufacturing SMEs in Rivers State. The collected data were analyzed using the Spearman Rank Order Correlation technique, and the three formulated hypotheses were tested using SPSS version 24.0. The results of the analyses indicate that entrepreneurial innovativeness significantly influences the attainment of competitive advantages, specifically in terms of cost advantage, quality advantage, and differentiation advantage. The significant relationship observed between entrepreneurial innovativeness and competitive advantages suggests that manufacturers who prioritize innovation are better positioned to reduce costs, enhance product quality, and differentiate their offerings from those of competitors.

KEYWORDS: ***Entrepreneurial Innovativeness, competitive advantage, cost advantage, quality advantage, differentiation advantage, Manufacturing SMEs.***

INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) involved in food product manufacturing in Nigeria's Rivers State. SMEs generally play a pivotal role in national development. In Nigeria, they contribute 46.31% to the National Gross Domestic Product, 6.21% to gross exports, and 96.9% to employment generation (SMEDAN 2021), cited in Abah (2022). Over the past decade, Nigeria's food manufacturing industry has experienced significant growth. In the current business landscape, the food industry faces numerous changes, including intense competition, rapid technological advancements, and evolving consumer consumption patterns and preferences. These factors pose challenges for enterprise managers. Many scholars argue that entrepreneurial innovativeness could be a key determinant of organizational performance and competitive positioning (Covin& Miles, 1999; Lumpkin &Dess, 1996). This is especially crucial in the manufacturing sector, where operational efficiency and product differentiation are paramount.

Entrepreneurial innovativeness is increasingly recognized as a crucial capability for achieving competitive advantage, particularly in the manufacturing sector. This concept is defined as a firm's inclination to engage in and support new ideas, novelty, experimentation, and creative processes, potentially leading to new products, services, or technological advancements (Lumpkin &Dess, 1996). It includes an organization's commitment to Research and Development (R&D), its openness to adopting new technologies, and its ability to introduce innovative solutions to market challenges (Rauch et al., 2009). The connection between entrepreneurial innovativeness and competitive advantage is especially significant in the food manufacturing industry, where consumer expectations for quality, variety, and value are increasing (Menrad 2004). In this context, entrepreneurial innovativeness can enable firms to develop proprietary technologies,

create unique product formulations, optimize production processes, and respond more effectively to market opportunities (Capitanio et al., 2009; Menrad, 2004).

Despite the growing recognition of entrepreneurial innovativeness as a driver of competitive advantage, there is a lack of empirical research examining this relationship in the Nigerian food manufacturing context. Most existing studies have focused on developed economies or explored these constructs in isolation (Rosenbusch et al., 2011). The unique characteristics of the Nigerian business environment, such as infrastructure challenges, regulatory complexities, and market dynamics, may influence how entrepreneurial innovativeness translates into a competitive advantage for food manufacturers. This study aims to fill this research gap by empirically investigating the impact of entrepreneurial innovativeness on the competitive advantage of food product manufacturers in Rivers State, Nigeria. Specifically, it explores how entrepreneurial innovativeness affects the cost, quality, and differentiation advantages of these firms. By focusing on a specific geographical and sectoral context, this study enhances the expanding body of knowledge on entrepreneurial innovation and competitive strategy, while also providing practical insights for industry practitioners and policymakers.

Conceptual Framework

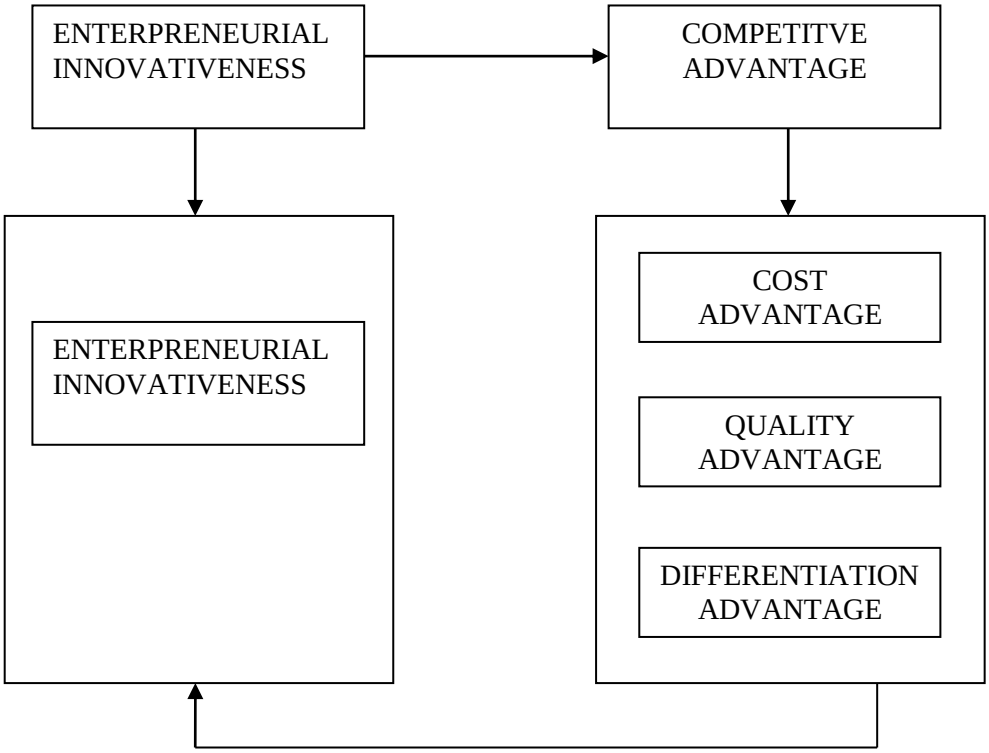

Fig 1.0 Conceptual Framework of Entrepreneurial Innovativeness and Competitive Advantage

Source:Adapted from Syarif et al.(2019) and Sachitra (2016) for the dimensions of Entrepreneurial Innovativeness and Thatte (2007) for the measures competitive advantage.

Entrepreneurial Innovativeness

Entrepreneurial Innovativeness is a fundamental aspect of Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO), reflecting a firm's inclination to embrace newness, foster novel ideas, and engage in creative experimentation (Lumpkin &Dess, 1996; Atuahene-Gima&Ko, 2001). This dimension involves the pursuit of innovative practices, such as the invention of new technologies, the implementation of

novel processes, and the development of new products (Lukas &Ferrel, 2000). Aigboje (2018) describes Entrepreneurial Innovativeness as the drive to seize opportunities through creativity and experimentation. Firms that prioritize innovation often maintain a steady influx of ideas, which enhances their processes and boosts efficiency and effectiveness. Innovativeness also encompasses investment in Research and Development (R&D) to introduce new products or services in emerging markets. Essentially, Innovativeness signifies a firm's readiness to transcend existing methods and explore new possibilities, aiming to launch innovative products into the market (Ojeaga & Owolabi, 2011). The Innovativeness of firms is evident in their approach to devising creative and exceptional solutions to business challenges. Additionally, Innovativeness involves a firm's strategic effort to access and integrate innovative technologies with robust operational systems. Innovative firms are typically eager to adopt new ideas and methods, consistently implementing their innovation strategies (Khandwalla, 1987, cited in Adim et al., 2018). Entrepreneurial Innovativeness is also viewed through the lens of organizational innovation culture, as innovative firms are generally open to new ideas (Hult et al., 2004).

Competitive Advantage

Competitive Advantage refers to the attributes or capabilities that enable a firm to outperform its competitors. Porter (1985) posits that competitive advantage arises when a company can deliver greater value to its customers or provide equivalent value at a lower cost. The ability to sustain a competitive edge is crucial for long-term sustainability and organizational success (Barney, 1991). Competitive advantage has been conceptualized from various perspectives. Porter (1985) defines it from a value-based perspective, emphasizing the value a firm creates for its customers that surpasses the cost of creating it. The focus is on ensuring that the products and services offered to customers are distinct in meaningful ways and that this distinctiveness is maintained over time. The sustainability of competitive advantage is vital, as temporary advantages that competitors can easily replicate do not constitute genuine competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Reed et al., 2000). Therefore, the inability of other organizations to replicate these benefits confirms that the organization possesses a sustainable competitive advantage.

The concept of competitive advantage has been extensively explored by scholars through a resource-based lens. This perspective asserts that firms can achieve superior performance by acquiring and effectively utilizing resources and capabilities that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (Barney, 1991; Wernerfelt, 1984). This approach shifts the focus from external market positioning to the internal strengths and resources of a firm as the key drivers of competitive advantage. In contrast, some researchers propose a synthesis of market-based and resource-based perspectives (Peteraf & Barney, 2003; Teece et al., 1997), contending that such an integrative approach yields a more nuanced understanding of competitive advantage. This study examines the dimensions of competitive advantage, specifically cost advantage, quality advantage, and differentiation advantage, which are further elaborated upon in the following sections.

Cost Advantage:

Achieving cost leadership involves becoming the industry's most cost-efficient producer while ensuring that product quality aligns with customer expectations (Porter, 1985; Allen & Helms, 2006). The primary goal of cost leadership is to produce and market products at a lower cost than competitors, thereby increasing the firm's market share (Morsi, 1998). Research suggests that firms focusing on cost leadership often make substantial investments in process innovations and technology to enhance operational efficiencies. Key elements contributing to cost advantage include economies of scale, streamlined operations, and effective supply chain management (Miller &Dess, 1996).

Quality Advantage

Quality advantage is characterized by a firm's ability to deliver products that exceed customer expectations in terms of performance, reliability, durability, and other quality-related attributes (Garvin, 1987; Reed et al., 2000). These attributes collectively influence the customer's overall perception of product quality and their willingness to pay premium prices for superior quality products (Zeithaml, 1988; Ramaswamy, 1996). Studies indicate that firms with a strong emphasis on quality often gain a competitive edge, as consumers increasingly prioritize high-quality offerings (Aaker, 1996).

Differentiation Advantage:

Differentiation advantage involves a firm's capacity to offer products or services perceived by customers as unique and valuable, allowing the firm to command premium prices or achieve higher customer loyalty (Porter, 1985; Sharp & Dawes, 2001). This aspect of competitive advantage focuses on creating distinctive value propositions that differentiate the firm's offerings from those of competitors (Miller &Dess, 1993). Firms can achieve differentiation through various strategies, such as innovative product design, superior customer service, and unique branding (Kotler& Keller, 2016).

Resource-Based Theory

The theoretical underpinning of this study is based on the Resource-Based Theory. The Resource-Based View (RBV) emphasizes the importance of a firm's resources in securing a competitive advantage and executing corporate strategies. This theory posits that for a firm to succeed, it must possess resources that are not only valuable but also rare, difficult for competitors to replicate, and hard to substitute (Barney, 1991). According to RBV, the assets, capabilities, organizational processes, characteristics, information, and knowledge controlled by a firm enable it to implement strategies that enhance both efficiency and effectiveness (Barney & Clark, 2007). In the context of manufacturing firms, competitive advantage is realized through the firm's ability to deliver products that provide superior customer value while maintaining cost efficiency (Hill, 1988; Miller & Dess, 1993). Consequently, applying the Resource-Based Theory in this research provides a robust theoretical framework for examining the impact of Entrepreneurial Innovativeness on the competitive advantage of manufacturing SMEs. By investigating how these SMEs leverage their resources and capabilities to generate superior value for their customers, researchers can identify the critical factors driving competitive advantage and assist managers in developing effective strategies to enhance their competitive position.

Empirical Review

A substantial body of empirical research has been conducted on Entrepreneurial Innovativeness, particularly as a key component of Entrepreneurial Marketing. This review examines several relevant studies. In Kogi State, Nigeria, Abah et al. (2022) investigated the link between innovation and the competitive advantage of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Utilizing data from a questionnaire survey of 255 SMEs, the study's multiple regression analysis revealed that both value capture innovation and value proposition innovation significantly contributed to the competitive advantage of these enterprises.

In Indonesia, Makmur et al. (2017) explored the impact of entrepreneurial marketing on competitive advantage through a survey of 34 participants. The findings from the regression analysis underscored the importance of innovativeness as a dimension of entrepreneurial marketing, which significantly enhances competitive advantage. Similarly, Olannye and Eromafuru (2016) analyzed the influence of entrepreneurial marketing on the performance of fast-food restaurants in Asaba, Delta State. Data from 160 staff and customers of selected restaurants

indicated that entrepreneurial innovation played a crucial role in the development of new markets, products, or processes, thereby conferring a competitive advantage. Ismail and Alam (2019) examined the effect of innovativeness on the competitive advantage of firms in the export market. Their analysis of data from 193 firms confirmed that innovativeness had a positive and significant impact on competitive advantage. Additionally, Bhandari and Amponstira (2021) investigated the mediating role of competitive advantage in the relationship between entrepreneurial orientation and the performance of women-owned enterprises. Their structural equation modeling analysis, based on a survey of 212 women-owned enterprises, identified innovativeness as a dimension of entrepreneurial orientation that positively influences competitive advantage.

Research Hypotheses

The study formulated and tested the following hypotheses:

H_{01}: There is no significant relationship between entrepreneurial innovativeness and the cost advantage of manufacturing SMEs in Rivers State.

H_{02}: There is no significant relationship between entrepreneurial innovativeness and the quality advantage of manufacturing SMEs in Rivers State.

H_{03}: There is no significant relationship between entrepreneurial innovativeness and the differentiation advantage of manufacturing SMEs in Rivers State.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a quantitative approach, utilizing a cross-sectional survey design. The study population consisted of 23 SMEs registered with the Port Harcourt Chamber of Commerce, Industry, and Tourism, specifically those engaged in food product manufacturing. Respondents included business owners, operations managers, technical/production managers, marketing/sales managers, and human resources managers from these SMEs in Rivers State. Due to the manageable population size, a census study was conducted. Data collection was facilitated through a questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The measurement scales were adapted from prior studies by Syarif et al. (2019), Sachitra (2016), and Thatte (2007). The instrument's reliability was evaluated using the Cronbach's alpha method, with coefficients surpassing the recommended minimum threshold of 0.7, as suggested byNunnally (1978). A total of 115 questionnaires were distributed, five to each of the 23 firms. Of these, 103 were returned, and 97 were deemed suitable for use in statistical analysis. The data were analyzed, and the hypotheses were tested using Spearman rank-order correlation analysis using SPSS, version 24. The results of these analyses are detailed below.

The Effect of Entrepreneurial Innovativeness on Cost Advantage

Hypothesis One:

$H_{01:}$ Entrepreneurial Innovativeness has no significant effect on Competitive advantage of firms in terms of cost advantage.

To test this hypothesis, Spearman Rank Order Correlation analysis was carried out on SPSS version 24 software. The results are shown below.

Table 1.0 Correlations between Entrepreneurial Innovativeness and cost Advantage

			ENT_INNOV	COST_ADVANT
Spearman's rho	ENT_INNOV	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.667**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	97	97
	COST_ADVANT	Correlation Coefficient	.667**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	97	97

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

qSource: SPSS Generated Output

From the values shown in Table 1.0 above, the result of the Spearman Rank Order correlation gave the value of the coefficient rho as **(0.667**).** This indicates that entrepreneurial innovation carried out by food product manufacturing firms has a strong positive influence on their cost advantage. The symbol **indicates that the correlation was significant at 0.01 level.

Decision

The outcome of the above analysis does not support Hypothesis one, and thus, the null hypothesis was rejected. Therefore, the study concludes that a positive and significant relationship exists between entrepreneurial innovativeness and competitive advantage in terms of cost advantage.

Hypothesis Two:

$H_{02:}$ Entrepreneurial Innovativeness of food products manufacturing firms has no significant effect on their Competitive advantage in terms of differentiation advantage.

Table 2.0 Correlations between Entrepreneurial Innovativeness and Differentiation Advantage

			ENT_INNOV	DIFF_ADVANT
Spearman's rho	ENT_INNOV	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.350**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	97	97
	DIFF_ADVANT	Correlation Coefficient	.350**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	97	97

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

Source: SPSS Generated Output

The correlation results shown in Table 2.0 are as follows: **(rho = 0.350, p=000<0.05).** This indicates a significant relationship between Entrepreneurial Innovativeness and Differentiation advantage of food product manufacturing firms in River state.

Decision
Based on the findings above, the study therefore rejects Null hypothesis Two (H_{02}) which states that firms' Entrepreneurial Innovativeness has no significant effect on their differentiation advantage. The study concludes that entrepreneurial innovativeness has a significantly positive effect on competitive advantage in terms of differentiation advantage.

Hypothesis Three:
$H_{03:}$ Entrepreneurial Innovativeness of food products manufacturing firms has no significant effect on their Competitive advantage in terms of Quality advantage.

Table 3.0 Correlations between Entrepreneurial Innovativeness and Quality Advantage

Correlations

			ENT_INNOV	QUAL_ADV
Spearman's rho	ENT_INNOV	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.531**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	97	97
	QUAL_ADV	Correlation Coefficient	.531**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	97	97

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

Source: SPSS Generated Output
The results of the Spearman rank order correlation are shown in Table 3.0, and the coefficient is **(rho = 0.531, p=0.000<0.05).** This value indicates a positive and significant correlation between Entrepreneurial Innovativeness and Quality advantage of the studied manufacturing firms.

Decision
Based on the results shown above, Null hypothesis Three (H_{03}) was not supported. The study concludes that entrepreneurial innovativeness has a significantly positive effect on competitive advantage in terms of Quality advantage.

Discussion of Findings
The findings of this study indicate a significant correlation between entrepreneurial innovativeness and competitive advantage among food product manufacturers in Nigeria. Specifically, the three dimensions of competitive advantage—cost, quality, and differentiation—demonstrated positive associations with entrepreneurial innovativeness. This section explores the implications of these findings in the context of existing literature.
In the first hypothesis, a significant positive relationship was identified between entrepreneurial innovativeness and cost advantage. This result supports Laforet's (2011) assertion that innovation enhances cost efficiency and operational benefits. Additionally, this finding is consistent with the

empirical studies by Rosenbusch et al. (2011) and Rubera and Kirca (2012), which reported positive relationship between innovation and firm performance in manufacturing settings.

For the second hypothesis, the analysis revealed a significant positive correlation between entrepreneurial innovativeness and quality advantage. Quality is paramount in the food industry, where consumer vigilance regarding product safety and quality standards is increasing due to heightened health awareness. The importance of this relationship in Nigeria is significant, given the rising consumer consciousness about food quality and safety in emerging markets (Akinboye&Adeyeye, 2016).

The third hypothesis confirmed a positive impact of entrepreneurial innovativeness on differentiation advantage. This conclusion aligns with the findings of Olannye and Eromafuru (2016), who observed that entrepreneurial innovation facilitated the development of new markets, products, and processes, thereby strengthening the competitive edge of fast-food establishments in Asaba, Delta State.

Overall, the study's outcomes align with previous research by Abah et al. (2022) on SMEs in Kogi State, Nigeria, Adim et al. (2018) on women entrepreneurs, and Makmur et al. (2017) in Indonesia. These findings carry significant implications for management practices in Nigeria's food manufacturing sector. It is imperative for food manufacturers to prioritize the cultivation of innovation capabilities as a cornerstone for achieving comprehensive competitive advantage. Furthermore, the findings suggest that entrepreneurial innovativeness should be regarded as a strategic necessity rather than an optional enhancement. Given the strong correlations across all the three competitive dimensions, firms that overlook innovation capabilities may face considerable disadvantages in multiple performance areas.

CONCLUSION

This research has empirically investigated the relationship between entrepreneurial innovativeness and competitive advantage among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) involved in the manufacturing of food products in Rivers State, Nigeria. Three hypotheses were formulated for this study. The Spearman rank-order correlation analyses conducted indicate that all three dimensions of competitive advantage—cost advantage, quality advantage, and differentiation advantage—are significantly correlated with entrepreneurial innovativeness. The observed significant relationship between innovative strategies and competitive advantages implies that manufacturers who emphasize innovation are more likely to achieve cost reductions, improve product quality, and distinguish their products from those of competitors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are made for food product manufacturers in Rivers State, Nigeria:

1. It is essential to allocate adequate resources to research and development (R&D) initiatives, as this can lead to the discovery of new processes and products, ultimately enhancing quality and reducing costs. This strategic focus enables firms to sustain a competitive edge. Implementing advanced technologies in production processes can greatly enhance efficiency and quality.
2. Manufacturers should consider adopting automation, digital marketing, and e-commerce platforms to effectively reach consumers and optimize operations.
3. Furthermore, manufacturers should foster an organizational culture that promotes creativity and risk-taking among employees. This can be achieved through training programs, workshops, and providing resources for R&D initiatives.

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