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STRATEGIC EVALUATION AND STRATEGIC COMPETITIVENESS OF AUTOMOBILE FIRMS IN RIVERS STATE

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Abstract
This study investigates the relationship between strategic evaluation and strategic competitiveness among automobile firms in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. Strategic evaluation was opereatonalized through employee performance, operational efficiency, and financial performance, and strategic competitiveness was assessed via service innovation, risk management, and technological leadership while technological advancement examined as a moderating variable. Data were collected from 37 respondents across 8 credible automobile firms using a structured questionnaire designed on a five-point Likert scale. The instrument demonstrated strong reliability with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.89. Data analysis was conducted using Spearman's Rank Order Correlation and partial correlation, with hypotheses tested at a 0.05 significance level. Findings revealed significant positive relationships: employee performance and service innovation ($r = 0.501$, $p = 0.000$), operational efficiency and risk management ($r = 0.505$, $p = 0.000$), and financial performance and technological leadership ($r = 0.602$, $p = 0.000$). Furthermore, technological advancement was found to significantly moderate the relationship between strategic evaluation and strategic competitiveness ($r = 0.517$, $p = 0.001$). The study concludes that strategic evaluation significantly influences competitiveness in the automobile sector, and that technological advancement strengthens this link. It recommends that automobile firms in Rivers State prioritize workforce development, operational improvements, and digital integration to sustain competitive advantage in a rapidly evolving industry.

Keywords: Strategic Evaluation, Employee Performance, Operational Efficiency, Financial Performance, Strategic Competitiveness, Service Innovation, Risk Management, Technological Leadership, Technological Advancement.

Background to the Study
Strategic competitiveness is essential for automobile firms in Rivers State as they navigate a dynamic and highly competitive market. Key measures such as service innovation, risk management, and technological leadership enable firms to differentiate their offerings, protect against operational threats, and lead market trends. Service innovation enhances customer satisfaction through improved value propositions, while effective risk management helps firms mitigate challenges like economic instability and regulatory shifts. Technological leadership further strengthens competitiveness by enabling the adoption of advanced systems such as electric vehicle technology and digital tools that enhance product and service quality (Ye, 2023; Sheng, 2024).
Strategic evaluation provides the foundation for assessing how well firms' strategies achieve desired outcomes, focusing on employee performance, operational efficiency, and financial performance. Strong employee performance drives innovation and customer satisfaction, while operational efficiency helps firms reduce waste and respond more effectively to market demands. Financial strength allows for reinvestment and long-term stability (Bajwa, 2025; Sheng, 2024). Technological advancements moderate the relationship between strategic evaluation and competitiveness by enabling firms to improve operations, support employee capabilities, and align with shifting market trends. However, a gap remains in understanding how these dimensions interact within the specific context of Rivers State's automobile industry, especially given challenges such as infrastructure

constraints and rising competition. This study therefore examines how strategic evaluation influences strategic competitiveness, with technological advancement as a moderating factor (Ye, 2023).

Statement of Problem

The automobile industry in Rivers State faces significant challenges such as intense competition, economic fluctuations, and rising technological demands which hinder strategic competitiveness, yet the role of strategic evaluation in addressing these issues remains underexplored. While prior studies have examined factors like customer satisfaction and operational excellence, limited research directly links strategic evaluation dimensions employee performance, operational efficiency, and financial performance to key measures of competitiveness, including service innovation, risk management, and technological leadership (Horsfall, 2020; Uwa & Johnson, 2023; Sheng, 2024; Ye, 2023). Additionally, although technological advancements such as electric vehicles and digital transformation are known to influence competitiveness, their moderating role within the strategic evaluation–competitiveness relationship in Rivers State has not been fully examined, as firms vary in their pace of technological adoption (Owonte & Uduak, 2022). This study therefore addresses the gap by investigating how strategic evaluation affects strategic competitiveness and how technological advancements moderate this relationship in the state's automobile sector.

Conceptual Framework

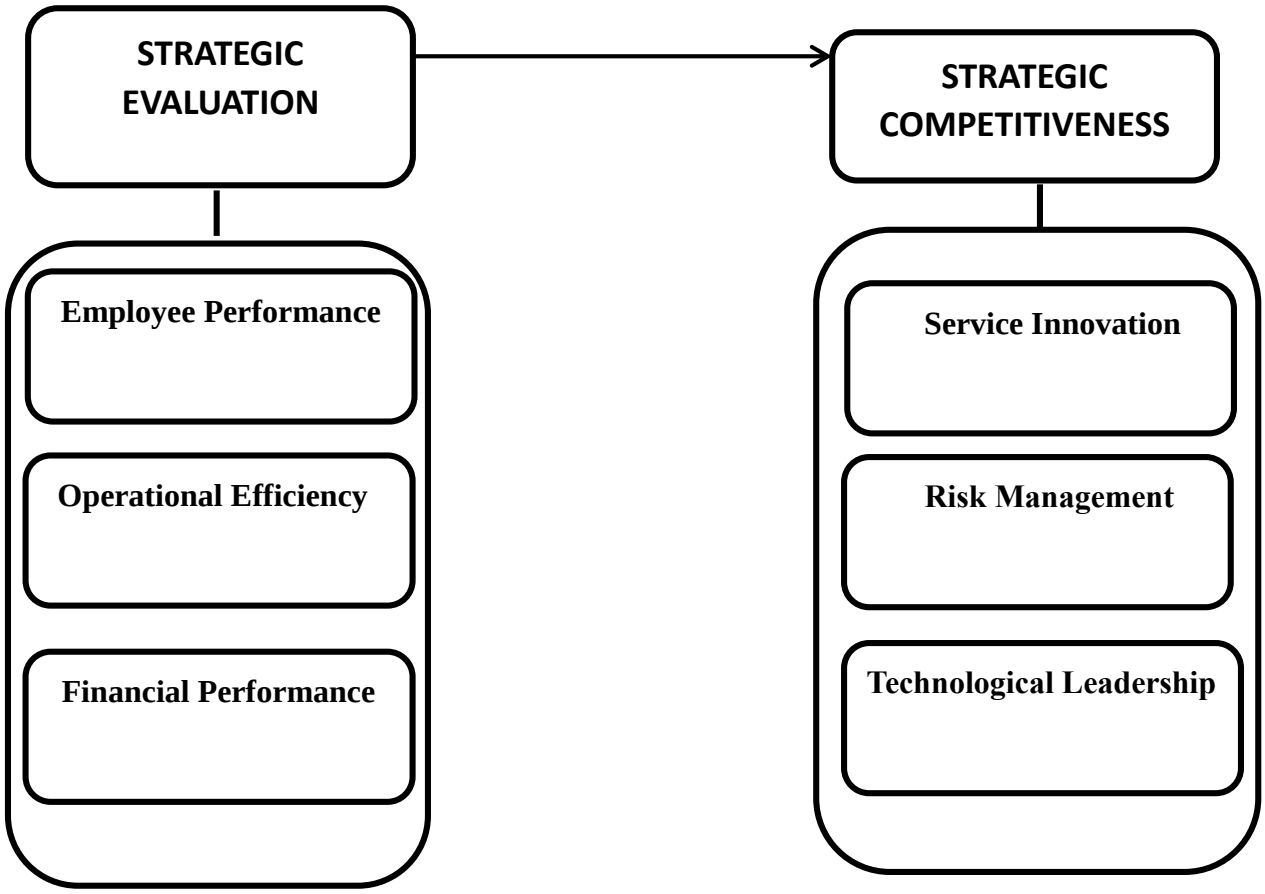

Figure 1.1: Conceptual Framework of strategic evaluation and strategic competitiveness of automobile firms in Rivers State
Source: (Tsai, 2020; Arnold et al., 2009 & moderated by researcher, 2025)

Aims and Objectives of the study

Following the articulation of our research problem, this study aims to explore the relationship between strategic evaluation and strategic competitiveness of automobile firms in Rivers State. In line with the conceptual framework specifically, this study has the following objectives:-

1. to examine the relationship between employee performance and service innovation of automobile firms in Rivers State.
2. to explore the relationship between operational efficiency and risk management of automobile firms in Rivers State.
3. to examine the relationship between financial performance and technological leadership of automobile firms in Rivers State.

Research Question

In view of the objective of this study, the following research questions will be posed for the study:-

1. What is the relationship between employee performance and service innovation of automobile firms in Rivers State?
2. What is the relationship between operational efficiency and risk management of automobile firms in Rivers State?
3. What is the relationship between financial performance and technological leadership of automobile firms in Rivers State?

Hypotheses

In order to be properly guided in the study, the following null hypotheses will be tested at 0.05 level of significance:

H01: There is no significant relationship between employee performance and service innovation of automobile firms in Rivers State.

H02: There is no significant relationship between operational efficiency and risk management of automobile firms in Rivers State.

H03: There is no significant relationship between financial performance and technological leadership of automobile firms in Rivers State.

Concept of Strategic Evaluation

Strategic evaluation is an essential process in strategic management, allowing organizations to assess the effectiveness of their strategies in achieving long-term objectives and maintaining competitive advantage. This process involves the analysis of the firm's performance and strategies to determine whether they align with the company's goals, market demands, and the ever-changing business environment. For firms operating in dynamic sectors such as the automobile industry, strategic evaluation is crucial in adapting to technological advancements, regulatory changes, and market fluctuations (Zahan et al., 2025). At its core, strategic evaluation is about assessing the outcomes of implemented strategies and determining their effectiveness in meeting the organization's objectives. It is an ongoing process that requires companies to continuously monitor internal and external factors that may influence the success of their strategies. The purpose of strategic evaluation is not only to measure success but also to provide insights for improvement and necessary adjustments to ensure continued growth and competitiveness (Rumelt, 1979).

Employee Performance: Employee performance is a critical dimension of strategic evaluation as it directly influences the ability of an organization to execute its strategies successfully. It encompasses the contribution of individual employees towards achieving organizational goals, including productivity, quality of work, innovation, and alignment with company values. In a highly competitive industry like the automobile sector, employee performance plays a vital role in

determining the operational success and overall competitiveness of the firm. Effective strategic evaluation of employee performance allows firms to identify strengths and weaknesses within the workforce. This can lead to targeted improvements through training, motivation, and proper performance management systems (Rumelt, 1979). For example, in the automobile industry, skilled employees are essential for innovation, whether in product design, production processes, or customer service. The alignment of employee capabilities with the company's strategic objectives enables firms to leverage their human capital for improved organizational performance and competitiveness (Phongpetra & Johri, 2011).

Operational Efficiency: Operational efficiency refers to the ability of an organization to deliver products or services in the most cost-effective manner without compromising on quality. As a dimension of strategic evaluation, it focuses on optimizing internal processes, reducing waste, and improving productivity. For automobile firms, operational efficiency is crucial because it directly affects cost management, profitability, and competitiveness. Efficient operations allow firms to respond quickly to market demands, lower production costs, and improve product quality. In the automobile industry, operational efficiency encompasses various factors, including supply chain management, manufacturing processes, resource utilization, and logistics. By evaluating these areas, firms can identify bottlenecks and inefficiencies that hinder performance. For instance, in regions like Rivers State, where infrastructure challenges may arise, operational efficiency becomes particularly important for reducing costs associated with transportation, inventory management, and production delays. Firms that focus on optimizing these processes can offer competitive prices, improve customer satisfaction, and achieve higher profitability (Singh & Khamba, 2019).

Financial Performance: Financial performance is a fundamental dimension of strategic evaluation that assesses the financial health and profitability of an organization. It involves analyzing key financial metrics, such as revenue growth, profit margins, return on investment (ROI), and cost efficiency. In the context of strategic evaluation, financial performance serves as a critical indicator of whether a firm's strategies are delivering the desired economic outcomes. For automobile firms, maintaining strong financial performance is essential for sustaining growth, investing in innovation, and weathering market fluctuations. In the automobile industry, financial performance is closely linked to both short-term survival and long-term success. Firms need to evaluate their financial standing to ensure they have the resources necessary for research and development (R&D), technological advancements, and expansion into new markets. By regularly assessing financial metrics, companies can make informed decisions about resource allocation, capital investment, and cost management (Phongpetra & Johri, 2011). For instance, if a firm's financial performance is weak, it may need to reallocate resources or reconsider its pricing strategy to improve profitability and competitiveness.

Concept of Strategic Competitiveness

In today's dynamic and globalized business environment, organizations must continuously adapt and innovate to remain relevant. This is particularly true for businesses operating in volatile markets, such as those in Rivers State, Nigeria. The concept of strategic competitiveness has emerged as a critical framework for understanding how firms can sustain long-term performance amidst challenges and uncertainties. It provides a foundation for identifying, developing, and deploying organizational resources and capabilities in a manner that delivers superior value to customers while maintaining a competitive position. Strategic competitiveness refers to a firm's capacity to implement strategies that enable it to outperform rivals over time by leveraging unique strengths and adapting to environmental changes. Liu, Lee, and Chang (2025) define strategic competitiveness as the result of aligning internal competencies such as intellectual capital and digital capabilities with external opportunities in the market. Rather than relying on temporary market

advantages, strategic competitiveness emphasizes sustainable performance achieved through innovation, adaptability, and effective strategic planning.

Service Innovation: Service innovation is increasingly recognized as a strategic lever that drives competitiveness in dynamic industries such as the automobile sector. It involves the development or enhancement of services in a way that adds value to customers, differentiates offerings, and creates new revenue streams. In the automotive context, this could include after-sales services, mobile diagnostics, pick-up/delivery maintenance services, or app-based customer service portals. Dhoska & Spaho (2025) argue that service innovation fosters customer loyalty and allows firms to reposition themselves in rapidly changing markets. For automobile businesses in Rivers State, where informal mechanics and imported vehicles dominate, innovation in service can offer a compelling edge. For example, formal service centers that incorporate digital booking systems, vehicle tracking for repairs, or warranty-backed services are likely to command higher trust and customer retention. Moreover, by co-creating services with customers such as maintenance subscriptions or loyalty programs firms can further embed their value in the daily lives of car users. Service innovation does not always require high investment but demands a shift in mindset from transactional relationships to long-term service partnerships.

Risk Management: Risk management is another critical pillar of strategic competitiveness, especially for firms operating in unstable economic and regulatory environments like Rivers State. In the automobile industry, firms face multiple risks ranging from currency fluctuations and supply chain disruptions to policy uncertainties and labor strikes. Effective risk management involves not only identifying and mitigating potential threats but also preparing contingency strategies to minimize business interruptions. Taghavi et al. (2025), informed that organizations that institutionalize risk management tend to respond faster and more effectively to crises, turning potential setbacks into opportunities. In Rivers State, where infrastructural challenges and security issues can disrupt business continuity, risk-aware firms will likely outperform their peers. For instance, auto dealers and repair shops can diversify suppliers to hedge against import delays, implement insurance schemes to cover asset risks, and train staff in safety protocols to protect against operational hazards. By formalizing risk management practices such as conducting SWOT analyses, establishing emergency response plans, and auditing compliance, automobile firms can build resilience and earn trust from both customers and investors.

Technological Leadership: Technological leadership plays a defining role in setting firms apart in competitive sectors. It refers to a company's ability to adopt, adapt, and lead in technological applications that improve operational efficiency and customer experience. In the auto industry, this can range from adopting diagnostic software and inventory management systems to integrating AI-powered customer support and predictive maintenance. In their 2025 study, Dhoska & Spaho highlight that technological leadership fosters strategic alignment between innovation and market expectations, allowing firms to lead rather than react to change. Automobile firms in Rivers State, many of which remain semi-formal or traditional, have a substantial opportunity to leap ahead by embracing basic technological tools. For example, auto workshops that use digital invoicing, customer CRM systems, or even WhatsApp business platforms to engage clients can enhance their operational transparency and responsiveness. Technological leadership also includes workforce upskilling ensuring that technicians are trained in hybrid/electric vehicle servicing or diagnostic technologies. As vehicle technologies evolve globally, Rivers-based firms that invest in tech-driven services and workforce readiness will be positioned as forward-thinking leaders capable of drawing larger and more quality-conscious clientele.

Theoretical Review

Resource-Based View (RBV) - Barney (1991)

The Resource-Based View (RBV), proposed by Barney (1991), suggests that an organization's competitive advantage is primarily derived from its resources and capabilities, which are unique, valuable, rare, and difficult to imitate. This view posits that firms can achieve sustained competitive advantage by leveraging their internal resources and capabilities, such as technological innovation, employee expertise, and effective management of operational processes. In the context of the automobile industry in Rivers State, the RBV theory supports the idea that the strategic competitiveness of automobile firms is influenced by their ability to harness and deploy resources effectively. For instance, the ability to innovate services (service innovation), manage risks effectively (risk management), and lead in technological advancements (technological leadership) are key resources that firms can use to differentiate themselves in a competitive market.

The assumptions of the RBV include the belief that the firm's resources must be valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN). The clear relevance of the RBV to this study lies in its emphasis on resources as a competitive advantage, specifically within strategic evaluation processes. By focusing on the internal resources of the firm such as employee performance, operational efficiency, and technological capabilities automobile firms can make strategic decisions that enhance their competitiveness. Therefore, the RBV is adopted in this study to examine how resources like service innovation, risk management, and technological leadership contribute to the strategic competitiveness of automobile firms in Rivers State.

Methodology

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to investigate the relationship between strategic evaluation and strategic competitiveness among automobile firms in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, with technological advancements as a moderating variable. The population comprised personnel from eight (8) credible firms, including Elizade (Toyota), Dana Motors (Kia), Coscharis, Stallion Hyundai, Innoson, Globe Motors, CFAO, and Mandilas, selected for their formal dealership status and strategic relevance. Using a census sampling technique, five strategic roles such as General Manager, Strategic Planning Manager, HR Manager, Service Operations Manager, and Finance Manager were surveyed in each firm, totaling 40 respondents. Data were collected via a structured questionnaire on a five-point Likert scale, covering strategic evaluation (employee performance, operational efficiency, financial performance), strategic competitiveness (service innovation, risk management, technological leadership), and technological advancement. The instrument was validated by experts and pretested with five respondents from a non-sampled firm. Cronbach's Alpha returned a reliability coefficient of 0.89. Of 40 questionnaires distributed, 37 were completed and valid (92.5% response rate). Data were analyzed using SPSS version 23.0, with descriptive statistics, Spearman's correlation, multiple regression, and hierarchical regression applied to test hypotheses at a 0.05 significance level.

Result/Finding

$H0_1$: There is no significant relationship between employee performance and service innovation of automobile firms in Rivers State.

Correlation

			Employee Performance	Service Innovation
Spearman's rho	Employee Performance	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.501
		Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
		N	40	40

	Service Innovation	Correlation Coefficient	.501	1.000
		Sig, (2-Tailed)	.000	
		N	40	40

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

SPSS output, 2025.

The analysis examined the relationship between employee performance and service innovation of automobile firms in Rivers State. The Spearman correlation coefficient (r = 0.501) indicates a very strong positive relationship between the two variables. The significance level (p = 0.000) is less than the 0.05 threshold, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. Therefore, the findings suggest that employee performance is significantly associated with service innovation of automobile firms in Rivers State (r = 0.501, p = 0.000 < 0.05).

$H0_2$: There is no significant relationship between operational efficiency and risk management of automobile firms in Rivers State.

Correlation

			Operational Efficiency	Risk Management
Spearman's rho	Operational Efficiency	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.505
		Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
		N	40	40
	Risk Management	Correlation Coefficient	.505	1.000
		Sig, (2-Tailed)	.000	
		N	40	40

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

SPSS output, 2025.

The analysis examined the relationship between operational efficiency and risk management of automobile firms in Rivers State. The Spearman correlation coefficient (r = 0.505) indicates a moderate positive relationship between the two variables. The significance level (p = 0.000) is less than the 0.05 threshold, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. Therefore, the findings suggest that operational efficiency is significantly associated with risk management of automobile firms in Rivers State (r = 0.505, N = 40, p = 0.000 < 0.05).

$H0_3$. There is no significant relationship between financial performance and technological leadership of automobile firms in Rivers State.

Correlation

			Financial performance	Technological leadership
Spearman's rho	Financial performance	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	602
		Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
		N	40	40
	Technological leadership	Correlation Coefficient	.602	1.000
		Sig, (2-Tailed)	.000	
		N	40	40

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

SPSS output, 2025.

The analysis examined the relationship between financial performance and technological leadership of automobile firms in Rivers State. The Spearman correlation coefficient ($r = 0.602$) indicates a strong positive relationship between the two variables. The significance level ($p = 0.000$) is less than the 0.05 threshold, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. Therefore, the findings suggest that financial performance is significantly associated with technological leadership of automobile firms in Rivers State ($r = 0.602$, $N = 40$, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$).

Discussion of Findings

The findings from the study on the relationships between strategic evaluation, strategic competitiveness, and the moderating effect of technological advancement among automobile firms in Port Harcourt provide important insights into how internal performance indicators shape competitiveness in this dynamic sector. The results from Spearman's rho and partial correlation analysis clearly demonstrate the significance of employee performance, operational efficiency, and financial performance in relation to service innovation, risk management, and technological leadership. Each hypothesis test yielded statistically significant results and aligns with both theoretical frameworks and prior empirical evidence in the field.

Employee Performance and Service Innovation

The first hypothesis tested the relationship between employee performance and service innovation. The Spearman's rho coefficient ($r = 0.501$) revealed a strong positive relationship between the two variables, with a significance level of $p = 0.000$. This finding supports the rejection of the null hypothesis, indicating that higher employee performance contributes significantly to enhanced service innovation. This is consistent with the work of Ye (2023), who found that empowered and skilled employees often drive new service delivery methods, enhancing customer experience. For automobile firms in Rivers State, this implies that investing in staff capacity can lead to innovative service models, such as digital diagnostics or customer loyalty systems.

Operational Efficiency and Risk Management

The second hypothesis examined the relationship between operational efficiency and risk management. The correlation result ($r = 0.505$, $p = 0.000$) suggests a moderate yet statistically significant relationship between the variables. This indicates that firms that streamline operations are more capable of identifying and managing business risks effectively. This aligns with the findings of Singh and Khamba (2019), who emphasized that efficient internal operations reduce exposure to disruptions and support proactive risk mitigation. In the automobile context, this includes managing supply delays, fluctuating import costs, and compliance with new safety regulations. Thus, operational efficiency serves not only cost-saving purposes but also strengthens a firm's strategic resilience.

Financial Performance and Technological Leadership

The third hypothesis tested the link between financial performance and technological leadership. The Spearman's rho value ($r = 0.602$, $p = 0.000$) indicates a strong positive and significant relationship, confirming that firms with strong financial outcomes are more likely to invest in and adopt advanced technologies. This supports the conclusion of Phongpetra and Johri (2011), who observed that financial strength enhances a firm's ability to lead in innovation and technology adoption. For automobile firms in Rivers State, this finding reinforces the importance of maintaining solid financial health in order to stay competitive through technological upgrades, such as advanced diagnostic tools, CRM platforms, or EV servicing infrastructure.

Conclusion

The study concludes that strategic evaluation through employee performance, operational efficiency, and financial performance plays a vital role in enhancing strategic competitiveness in the automobile sector, and that technological advancement further strengthens this relationship by enabling more effective strategy implementation. The findings emphasize the need for automobile firms in Rivers State to invest in staff development, streamline operations, maintain strong financial systems, and adopt emerging technologies to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage. Consistent with prior research, the results offer a practical roadmap for firms to improve their competitiveness amid growing market pressures and technological disruptions, urging decision-makers to prioritize digital tools, continuous employee training, and sound financial management in their strategic efforts.

Recommendations

1. Automobile firms should implement structured employee performance management systems that include regular training, performance appraisals, and incentive.
2. Firms should invest in continuous process improvement initiatives such as lean operations, supply chain optimization, and digital logistics solutions.
3. Financial performance should be strategically aligned with innovation goals.

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