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PORTER'S GENERIC STRATEGIES AND COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE OF SMALL AND MEDIUM SCALE ENTERPRISES. A CRITICAL LITEATURE REVIEW

[1]Ayaga Mathew Ushie, [2]Ikyabo Anatasia Yinduwa, [3]Josiah Simon
[12]Department of Business Administration, Federal University Wukari, Taraba State
[3]Department of Business Administration, Taraba State University, Jalingo
[1]Ushie.ayaga@fuwukari.edu.ng, [2]Ikyaboay@fuwukari.edu.ng, [3]simonjosiah@tsuniversity.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

This study broadly review important and relevant existing evidence linking Porters generic strategies, such as cost leadership, differentiation, and focus to small and medium-sized businesses' competitive advantage. Employing the PRISMA 2020 framework, the review synthesizes evidence from 8 relevant studies published between 2015 and 2025, focusing on three Porters generic strategies which are cost leadership strategy, differentiation strategy and focus strategy. generic strategies, including as focus, differentiation, and cost leadership. The study's conclusions showed that small and medium-sized businesses' competitive advantage is significantly impacted by cost leadership; According to the eight research that were analyzed, differentiation has a substantial impact on small and medium-sized businesses' competitive advantage, as does focus. Given the study's results, the research report draws a conclusion that Porters generic strategies have significant impact on small and medium-sized businesses' ability to compete. The study recommended that the entrepreneurs and organizational management should study the three Porters generic strategies and blend the three instead of focusing on one of the strategy at a time to help them have an advantage over its competitors.

Keywords: Porter's general strategies, Cost leadership, Differentiation, Focus and competitive advantage

INTRODUCTION

The modern corporate world and Nigeria's business is situated in the midst of a challenging economic landscape and intense competition. Nigeria's business is situated in the midst of a challenging economic landscape and intense competition. The rising globalization, rapid technological development due to stronger competitive pressure, rapid changes in the market and more demanding customers, has made it much more difficult for small and medium scale enterprise (SME) to gain competitive advantage (Muzaffar, Muhammed, Rabia & Syad, 201)}. In order to be successful, make sound judgments, enhance, and maintain business success and market share, leaders are progressively looking for strategic options. Amid the various business approaches used by companies, Potters generic strategies have been shown to be a crucial instrument for any company to stay relevant in the industry and produce better results on a global scale. (Suzanne, Louis & David, 2006). A competitive advantage is an attribute that allows a company to outperform its competitors. This allows a company to achieve superior margins compared to its competitors and generates value for the company and its shareholders (Lorenzo, Rubio, & Garcés, 2018).

An overall strategy category featuring low cost, differentiation, and focus strategies was put forward by Porter (1985) for companies having generic strategies. Businesses that use one of these tactics create a system which offers them a competitive edge and fosters their expansion. In the realm of tactical management, these tactics are acknowledged as the norm (Vieira & Ferreira, 2020). One of the general strategies put forth by Michael Porter is the cost leadership strategy, which outlines multiple methods to manufacture and provide the item or service to the public at much cheaper rates than rivals in the market. The second approach, known as differentiation strategy, prioritizes making the company's goods and services stand out from its competitors. The focus strategy is one that uses uniqueness or price leadership to reach a certain industry target audience (Dixit, 2023). A company that doesn't use one of these strategies will stay in the middle and perform worse than companies that use generic methods, losing its

competitive edge and sustained success advantage (Porter, 1985). According to Sophia and Owuor (2014), a successful company plan leads to continuous expansion and prosperity, which enhances an entity's ability to compete.

It is impossible to overstate the significance of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMSEs) in the progress of a nation. It plays a crucial part in any country's economic development and progress. In Calabar and throughout Nigeria, businesses are excellent employers. It fosters the development of indigenous entrepreneurs and native technology. SMSEs constituted 90% of all Nigerian regulated businesses. Additionally, it provides over 50% of all job opportunities and over 90% of all commerce on other continents. In developing countries, SMEs amount to 40% of GDP (Bularafa and Adamu, 2020). Business academics are also eager to draw attention to the fact that SMSEs in Nigerian industrial companies have the potential to perform better but are having difficulty because they are using the wrong tactics. Many scholars that have written on potters generic strategies in Nigeria, Africa and beyond concentrated on impact or effect of potters generic strategies on performance while ignoring the relationship it has on competitive advantage of a firm. This study focus on reviewing related literatures on Porters general tactics and small and medium-sized businesses' competitive edge.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Porter's generic strategies were designed for industries with intense competition where superior value creation is required for survival with the aim to move beyond simply competing to create a sustainable competitive advantage that drives higher profitability. In recent time, most SMSEs are aiming to achieving industry wide low costs through optimized processes, supply chain efficiency and economies of scale (Cost Leadership), offering distinct products/services to command premium pricing and build strong brand loyalty (Differentiation) and catering to specializes customer needs better than broad-market rivals (Focus) for the purpose of avoiding being caught in the midst. Even if small and medium-sized businesses use Porter's generic methods, some SMSEs are still finding it difficult to survive in the competitive business world which could be linked to stuck in the middle trap, failure in strategy execution, misdiagnosis of market conditions, inadequate leadership and culture and over investing in specific strategies which has created a negative impact (unemployment, crime, poverty, etc) in the Nation's economy resulting from the closure of some businesses. The repeated closure of SMSEs businesses less than 10 years of its operations has become a very big problem in the world of business which has propel the researcher to review scholarly works on Porter's general tactics and the competitive edge of SMSEs from 2015 till date.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE/ RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This paper's primary goal is to examine significant and pertinent research that connects Porter's generic strategies to small and medium-sized businesses' competitive edge. To convey a clear empirical picture of the important connecting components of Porters generic strategies on competitive advantage, a descriptive technique was used. With this objective, the following research questions were constituted;

- Does cost leadership have substantial impact on small and medium-sized businesses' competitive advantage?
- Does Differentiation have substantial impact on small and medium-sized businesses' competitive advantage? Does focus have substantial impact on small and medium-sized businesses' competitive advantage?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The academic community will benefit from this study paper as it provides information on further studies on Porters generic strategies and competitive advantage for small and medium-sized businesses given the limitations of existing studied reviewed.

The paper uses empirical literature to provide a direction that will guide future researchers intending to use concrete proof to ascertain a causal connection connecting competitive advantage and Porter's generic strategies.

The report highlights how important Porter's generic techniques are for boosting market share..

The study will also provide industry with relevant recommendations about porters generic strategies and implementation that could be developed by business to improve organizational competitive advantage.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

There is very little moral concern with this investigation. This is due to the fact that, as a literature review, the investigation is predicated on already published works, including journal articles, policy papers, theses, and industry publications; hence, no human subjects are meant to be engaged. Issue of plagiarism and objectivity

in reporting and findings were properly acknowledged through in-text citations and reference listing in accordance with APA (7th edition) guidelines. The inclusion and exclusion of studies adhered to the PRISMA 2020 model in order to guarantee objectivity, fairness, and the prevention of bias.

LITERATURE REVIEW

PORTER'S GENERIC STRATEGIES

Cost leadership, differentiation, and focus are Porter's general strategies (Vieira & Ferreira, 2020; Ngo, 2023). According to Porter, a business that exploits one of these three tactics can gain a sizable competitive edge and generate results higher than the market standard. (Akan, Allen, Helms & Spralls, 2006).

Cost leadership

Cost leadership: A low-cost leadership approach is described as a company's attempt to acquire an advantage in the marketplace by cutting expenses relative to those of competitors (Islami, Topuzovska-Latkovikj, Drakulevski, & Borota-Popovska, 2020). However, David (2017) cautions that firms adopting this strategy need to secure their competitive edge in a way that makes it difficult for rivals to imitate. Furthermore, according to Hilman and Kaliappen (2014), attaining the entire affordable objective requires effective sizing standards, frequently requiring a large initial funding allocation, while also minimizing marginal user accounts and cutting expenses in a number of industry segments, including marketing, service excellence, and innovation. Tasks that frequently create significant barriers of entry, such as a large initial funding expense and protection from prospective competitors, are necessary to attain a cost leadership position (Waema, 2013).

Differentiation

Differentiation: According to the strategy literature, a differentiation strategy entails finding a novel approach to carrying out supply chain operations (David, 2017), offering a product/service in the market in a novel way (Islami et al., 2020), and developing a differentiated product/service based on consumers' specific needs (Thompson et al., 2018). By using the differentiation approach, an organization may generate, acquire, and sustain financial benefit (Islami et al., 2020). Islami, Islami, Topuzovska-Latkovikj and Mulloli (2019) add that differentiation increases firms' competitiveness and profitability. David (2017) identified differentiating activities on the value network that has the potential to produce a competitive edge over time.

Similar to cost leadership, differentiation as an approach seeks to establish a situation that can be defended against the five competing factors. If successful, Zekiri and Nedelea (2011) claim that it defends against buyer negotiations since buyers have fewer options, which reduce their power and makes them cheaper and less price reactive. Additionally, it guards off new competitors because the item or service's originality and client retention make it difficult to imitate. Due to a similar name and client fidelity, it offers protection against rivals and reduces price responsiveness. Increased margins from differentiation provide more freedom to handle supplier negotiations (Acquaah & Agyapong, 2013).

Focus

A business using a focus approach might not be able to attain cost leadership or differentiation in the open market overall, but it might be feasible in the particular specific market they find value in and believe has opportunity (Thompson & Strickland, 2012). The focus approach offers the same protection against the five competitive forces as the corresponding industry-wide cost leadership or differentiation approaches, regardless of the fact that a cost focus or differentiation focus is followed. According to Thompson, Strickland, Gamble and Peteraf (2018), companies can intentionally cater to a particular market segment by implementing a focus strategy. Research indicates that a focus approach is linked to an improved standing in the market (Islami et al., 2019). and innovation is arguably more prevalent within firms that emphasize focus-oriented strategies (David, 2017).

COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

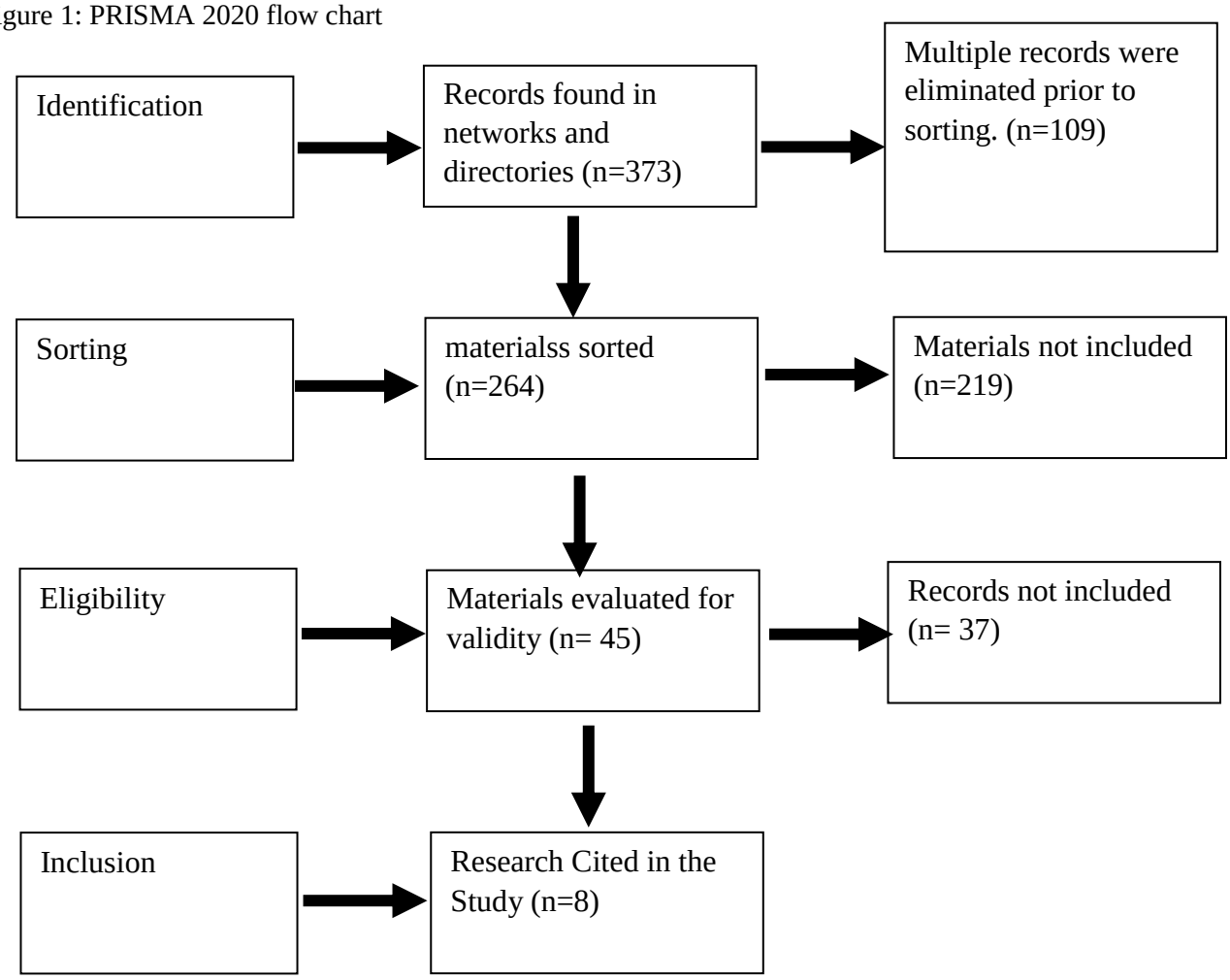
Dirisu, Iyiola, and Ibidunni (2013) state that an organization is said to possess a competitive edge when its current or potential rivals are unable to match its operations. This may be due to the competitor's incapacity or the excessive expense of the replica. To put it another way, academics like Zain, Hadiwidjojo, Rohman, and Maskie (2014) define competitive advantage as a circumstance in which a business has complete dominance over its rivals in a field or industry so that they maintain a greater market share and function as dominant players in the market. Porter contends that a company's effectiveness in a competitive setting is a result of its unrivaled competitive edge. He proposed three different approaches to obtain a competitive edge: differentiated advantage, low cost, and an effective focus technique. According to Porter (1980), competitive edge is the key to an organization's success in a competitive market. However, after decades of significant growth

and success, many businesses have forgotten about competitive advantage in their quest of even more expansion and diversification (Porter, 2003). He contends that the use of generating value leads to a competitive edge (Arbi, Bukhari & Saadat, 2017).

METHODOLOGY

The research paper employs the PRISMA 2020 model to conduct a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) (Page, Mckenzie, Bossuyt & Boutron, 2021) to identify, assess, and synthesize existing literature on Porters general tactics and small and medium-sized businesses' competitive edge. To capture both academic and grey literature like reports, dissertation, conference proceedings and government documents, notes, and data, a detailed examination of the literature from publications between 2015 and 2025 was carried out using a number of reliable databases and platforms, such as Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, AJOL (African Journals Online), Academia.edu, and Research Gate. The search strategy combined key terms and Boolean operators as in "AND", "OR" for 'Porters Generic Strategies' AND 'Competitive advantage'. The selection process followed the PRISMA flow chart steps of identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion. The initial database search yielded 373 records. After removing duplicates (n=109), 264 studies remained. Following a priority review of the titles and abstracts, 219 studies that do not meet the inclusion criteria were eliminated. The 45 studies were assessed, with 37 excluded for reasons such as empirical data or focus Large Scale Enterprises LSEs. Leaving the total of number of 8 studies that fulfilled the requirements listed in the last screening for acceptance.

Figure 1: PRISMA 2020 flow chart



Among the first 373 records identified through the systematic search, only 8 studies met the inclusion criteria for synthesis. These studies covered small and medium-sized businesses in Nigeria, Africa and beyond. Three Porter general tactics—cost leadership, differentiation, and focus—were the focal point of the thematic synthesis of the review literature. The names of the authors, the year of publication, the topic and study region, the methodology employed, the findings, and the information sources used are all recorded in each of the included studies.

Table 1 synthesized eligible studies included in the review

S/NO	Author(s) and year	Topic	Methodology	Finding(s)	Information Source
1	Ejikeme, E.I., Maria, O.I. & Robert, K.M. (2024)	Generic business strategies and competitiveness of SMEs in Nigeria	The study design employed was a descriptive cross-sectional poll.	According to the research, focus strategy and cost leadership approach have favorable relationship with SMEs competitiveness. While differentiation strategy was found to not have relationship with SMEs competitiveness	An International Business Journal of Global Competitiveness, 35 (1) 158-174
2	Uwasomba, C.E & Boniface, M.O. (2023)	Increasing Small and Medium-Sized Businesses' (SMSEs) Sales Volume: The Significance of Business Strategies	Survey research design was adopted	The study finds that the sales volume of the chosen SMSEs is significantly impacted by the three business and marketing strategies—low cost, market focus, and differentiation.	Nigerian Journal of Management Sciences, 24 (1) 22-33
3	Samuel, K.G. & Joyce, A. (2022)	Impact of Competitive Tactics on SMEs' Performance in Kenya's Kiambu County	Descriptive research designed was adopted	The study's conclusions showed that the performance of small and medium-sized businesses in Kiambu County is significantly impacted by differentiation, cost leadership, and focus strategies.	Journal of Business and Strategic Management, 8 (1) 69-87
4	Medubi, R.D., Ngugi, P.K. &George,	Factors Affecting Non-Indigenous Construction Companies'	A survey research design was employed.	The study found that the competitive strategies of cost leadership,	International Journal of Entrepreneurial Development, education and

	O.O. (2015)	Competitive Strategy for a Competitive Edge in North Central Nigeria		differentiation, and focus have an impact on the shifts in the competitive advantage of construction SMEs.	Science Research, 3 (2) 132-143
5	Ibrahim, B.H. (2020)	Competitive Approaches and Businesses' Performance: A Comparative Study of a Few Ilorin Telecommunications Companies	An explanatory research design was employed	The finding shows that firms in broadcasting industry in Ilorin that uses The competitive tactics of focus, differentiation, and cost leadership have a big influence on market share.	African Scholar Journal of Management Science and Entrepreneurship, 19 (7) 31-56
6	Dilli, R.S., Suredra, P.J. & Merika, S. (2025)	competitive Techniques for Improving Nepal's Small and Medium-Sized Businesses' Performance	Descriptive and causal research design was adopted	The results showed that while differentiation strategy has a marginally positive impact on performance, cost leadership and focus strategy have weak and negative effects.	Journal of Service, Innovation and Sustainable Development, 3 (1) 28-52
7	Solomon, K., Olalekan, S. & Ganiu, A. (2018)	Competitive strategies' impact on small and medium-sized businesses' corporate performance: a Nigerian example	Survey research design was adopted	According to the survey, small and medium-sized businesses can significantly reduce their costs by implementing a cost leadership strategy.	Agricultural and Resource Economics: International Scientific E-Journal, 4 (3) 15-33
8	Sidi, B.A & Abubakar, M. (2021)	The connection between manufacturing-based SMEs' performance and competitive strategies in Northwest Nigeria	The study employed survey design	The results of this study showed that the firm performance of manufacturing-based SMEs in the North-West of Nigeria is greatly influenced by cost leadership and strategy as well as	Journal of Research in Business management, 9 (8) 65-75

				differentiation strategy.	

RESULTS

In this research paper, a total numbers of 8 studies were reviewed all addressing the impact of Porter's general strategies—cost leadership, differentiation, and emphasis on small and medium-sized businesses' competitive edge throughout Nigeria, Africa, and beyond. The search process, selects studies from peer-review academic publications involving Porter's general tactics of concentration, differentiation, and cost leadership. The chosen studies looked at how Porter's generic approaches affected small and medium-sized businesses' ability to compete. The reviewed studies were considered eligible based on their direct focus on how Porters generic strategies affect competitive advantage. However, none-empirical papers, theoretical essays amongst those lacking clear data on competitive advantage were not included.

DISCUSSIONS

After the review of the included studies, the research paper found that;

The study discovered that small and medium-sized businesses' competitive edge is significantly impacted by cost leadership, differentiation, and focus strategies which agree with the work of Ejikeme, et al (2024) which says that that focus and cost leadership strategies provide positive relationship with SMEs competitiveness, the work of Medubi, et al (2015) which says that changes in competitive advantage of construction SMEs are influenced by competitive strategies of cost leadership, differentiation, and focus as well as Ibrahim's (2020) research, which demonstrates that companies in Ilorin's broadcasting sector that employ these strategies have a major impact on market position.

CONCLUSION

From the findings of this research paper based on studies reviewed, the research paper draw a conclusion that Porters generic strategies have significant impact on small and medium-sized businesses' ability to compete. Additionally, the study suggested that SMSEs should equally adopt hybrid strategies (consisting of blending cost leadership, differentiation and focus) rather than strict adherence to one of the strategies.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this research paper should be studied by entrepreneurs in order for them to know the kind of strategy to be adopted at one point in time so as to have competitive edge over rivals. The findings of this study should be examined by management of small and medium-sized businesses to enable them negotiate favorable terms with suppliers, optimizing logistics, and effectively managing inventory so as to incur less cost of production thereby offering the lowest cost for its product in an industry, identify and develop unique product features that address customer needs and preferences thereby satisfying the needs of the customers and focuses on providing unique or superior products within the niche thereby meeting the demands of a specific market segment.

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