Conceptual Skills and Sustainable Competitive Advantage of Small and Medium Food Manufacturing Enterprises in Kenya

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Abstract

Economists, policy makers and business experts agree that the role of SMEs in the economy cannot be underestimated. However, SMEs face various challenges and constraints that inhibit or constraint their sustainability. Researchers have identified conceptual skills among the missing link to successful entrepreneurship. This study sought to establish the effect of conceptual skills on sustainable competitive advantage of food manufacturing SMEs in Kenya. The study used descriptive design that applied systematic and controlled collection of cross sectional data. Quantitative primary data was collected from 106 owners of 123 SMEs firms registered by the Kenya Association of Manufacturers in the food and beverage sub-sector giving a response rate of 86%. The findings showed 5.4% of Sustainable Competitive Advantage of SMEs in food manufacturing in Kenya is attributed to Conceptual Skills with a unit increase in Conceptual Skills increasing Sustainable Competitive Advantage of SMEs in food manufacturing in Kenya by 0. 283. This study established conceptual skills as a contributor to sustainable competitive advantage of SMEs in food and beverage sector in Kenya. The study therefore recommends that SMEs owners and managers should develop and utilize strategies to enhance their conceptual skills in order to achieve sustainable competitive advantage of the firms.

Keywords: Manufacturing Enterprises, Conceptual Skills, Small and Medium Enterprises, Sustainable Competitive Advantage

Introduction and Background of the Study

SMEs have continued to play a very vital role in the growth of nations globally. Governments and other agencies have continued to focus on the increasing role played by SMEs in economic growth (Association of Chartered Certified Accountants, 2010). SMEs in developing countries account for over 95% of private enterprises, but contribution to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is on average just over 30%. On the contrary, in high income countries SMEs contribution to GDP is more than 65%. In Kenya, SMEs are considered as a major driver for economic growth. They are found in all sectors of the economy including food manufacturing and sustain many households (Association of Chartered Certified Accountants, 2010).

Food manufacturing enterprise in the world over have been found to provide jobs for about 75% of the workforce of any country. Additionally, by working closely with large enterprises, these firms can develop a new customer base that may be difficult to obtain from the ordinary

distribution networks of these enterprises (Phapruke, 2012). In both developed and developing countries of the world, Food manufacturing companies plays a great role in employment creation and to the gross domestic product, yet their full potential remains untapped (Phapruke, 2012).

Kalane (2015) argues that one of the major causes of failure of South African small businesses is ineffective management abilities of the managers. Mxunyelwa and Vallabh (2017) affirms that the absence of managerial skills and training is a vital reason for small business failure and the lack of experience and an authoritative culture greatly hinder the development of SMEs in South Africa. In Kenya, the workforce in food manufacturing industries reduced by approximately 2% (ROK, 2012). If allowed to continue, low firm performance may increase the country's vulnerability to international market price fluctuations (Onjala, 2010).

Manufacturing sector plays a leading role in the economic growth, modernization, skilled job creation, and therefore is the foundation for industrialization (Libanio & Moro, 2007). Manufacturing is a key sector in Kenya economy, aligned with the economic pillar and expected to contribute 25% of the GDP with the aim of achieving the Vision 2030. Currently it accounts for only 10% of the GDP (GOK, 2013). The share of agriculture, service and informal in GDP has increased from approximately 87.81% to 89.76% in the last three decades while the share of manufacturing has decreased from 12.19% to 10.31% in the same period. Further, the current growth rate of manufacturing industry at 4.98% annually is way below Vision 2030 target of 25% needed to attain economic growth of 10% for Kenya to achieve its goal of industrialization (Kenya Vision 2030).

Food production remains the most dominant manufacturing activity with figures from the KNBS in 2017 showing that two in five shillings that the industry contributes to GDP is from the food, beverage and tobacco subsector. Food and beverage manufacturing and service sectors usually involves activities like production, packaging and processing, storage, transportation and many more (Unnevehr,2017). This industry plays a crucial role in achieving economic opportunities and hence the need for them to be sustainable (Pfitzer & Krishnaswamy, 2007). However, the sector posted a discouraging marginal growth of 0.2 per cent in 2017 compared to 2.7 per cent the previous year. Over 70% of the firms in food production are SMES in primary production (Bigsten et al.2010).

In an industry, conceptual skills help in developing plans, strategizing and organizing resources effectively (Armigiani & Mitchell, 2010). Conceptual skills involve the ability to see the enterprise as a whole and ability to analyze and diagnose the situation, to distinguish between cause and effect (Mullins, 2002). According to Bird (2005) conceptual skills enables a business to cope with uncertainty.

Conceptual skills enables the entrepreneur to see the enterprise as a whole to be able to diagnose situations and to distinguish between cause and effect (Daft, 1994). Conceptual skills represent one of the three skill sets identified by Robert Katz (2009) as critical to success of an organization. While there exists, different entrepreneurial skill set useful in different circumstances, conceptual skills tend to be most relevant in top level thinking and is useful when making broad strategic situations. As a result, conceptual skills are often viewed as critical success factors of small and medium business enterprises. Past research indicates that success and sustainable competitiveness of an SME is heavily dependent on the competencies of the entrepreneur ,conceptual skills being one of those competencies (Li & Liu, 2014).Conceptual skills is conceptualized as risk taking contacting and strategic skills

Alvaro, et al (2007) argued that the entrepreneur in small and medium enterprises performs functions that requires them to have conceptual skills. SMEs tend to venture into high risk projects in pursuing profit and sustainability and hence, effective risk management skills are required. Risk control abilities help entrepreneurs to identify and manage high risk opportunities facing their businesses and in doing so, increase the likelihood of successfully achieving the business growth objective and obtain in sustainable competitive advantage.

The ultimate goal of any business including SMEs is to generate a sustainable competitive advantage, with a yield greater than the companies competing with it (Halawi, Aronson, & McCarthy, 2005). An entrepreneur with sufficient, conceptual skills plays an appropriate and effective role in creating a successful organizational environment (Afshari, 2010). According to the suggestions of Gising and Guyster (2008) for entrepreneurs to obtain continuous successes and to tap into new opportunities they must look for research and information through use of the entrepreneurs conceptual skills.

Despite the importance of the conceptual skills on the growth and sustainability of an industry, past studies focused on technical skills rather than on conceptual skills (Ntale, Anampiu & Gathaiya, 2015). In addition, previous studies have endeavored to explore the implementation of strategies in entire manufacturing sector but not for any particular subsector of the

manufacturing industry (Waweru, 2008). There is a contextual gap in determining the relationship between conceptual skills and sustainable competitive advantage of SMEs.

This research has mainly focused on the effect of conceptual skills an important entrepreneurial competency on sustainable competitive advantage of small and medium food manufacturing enterprises in Kenya. The independent variable consists of conceptual skills while the dependent variable consists of sustainable competitive advantage of food manufacturing enterprise in Kenya. The hypothesis; *H_{01}: Conceptual Skills has no significant effect on sustainable competitive advantage of Small and Medium food manufacturing enterprises in Kenya.*

Justification of the Study

This study focused on the SMEs in the manufacturing sector in Kenya due to their significant role in employment creation, economic sustainability, and achievement of the vision 2030. Increased output from manufacturing as a share of GDP forms the basis for structural economic transformation, this especially so when manufacturing output commands highest % share (Thirlwall & López, 2013). Unfortunately, the manufacturing sector in Kenya contributes to only 10% of the GDP (GOK, 2013) with a growth rate of 4.98% annually which is way below Vision 2030 target of 25% (Kenya Vision 2030). This study increases understanding regarding the importance of conceptual skills in enhancing sustainability for SMEs owners which in turn will have an impact on the growth of economy of the country.

2.0 Literature Review

Upper Echelons Theory

This theory suggested that the managerial skills situation partly influence the organization results, strategic decisions as well as level of performance. Remarkably, senior executive experience, core values, personality traits structure their interpretation of the positions they face, influence their business choices (Hambrick, 2007). The theory further argues that decisions made at strategic levels progresses to play major roles in promoting organizational effectiveness (Hambrick, 2007). Strategic and risk taking skills of the entrepreneurs are intended to perfect key task through delivering sustainable entrepreneurship. This can be used in predicting and explaining why certain enterprises and not others can gain competitive edge in and obtain superior profits (Hooi, Ahmad, Amran & Rahman, 2016).

The upper echelon theory (UET) argues that enterprise top managerial officials play significant roles in evaluating organizational efficiency (Bonelli, 2014). The upper echelon tasks have a positive effect on organizational sustainability and, as such, contribute to the future sustainable growth of small and medium sized enterprises (Tacheva, Simpson & Ivanov, 2020). Further, the managerial officials play a critical role on the development and implementation of the conceptual skills in an industry including the strategic skills, the contracting skills and the risk management skills.

Conceptual Framework

This framework is developed based on a broad literature review to identify conceptual skills that are significant in influencing sustainable competitive advantage of SMEs. The literature review identifies three key conceptual skills that may influence the sustainable competitive advantage of SMEs, (1) Strategic skills, (2) Contracting skills (3) Risk Management skills.

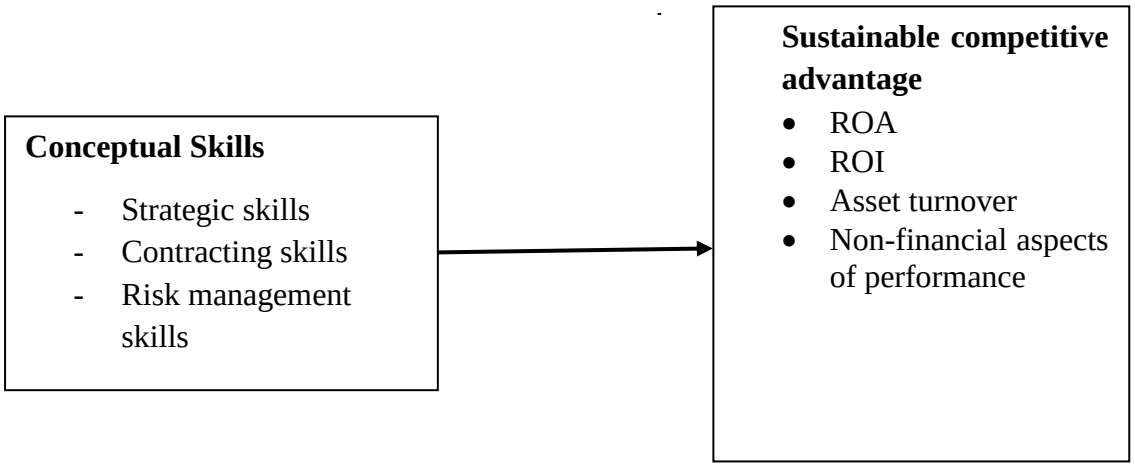

Figure 2.1: Conceptual Framework

Conceptual skills were operationalized as strategic skills, risk taking and contracting skills. The skills also have to do with creativity (Weber, Finlay & Crawford, 2009). This competency enables the entrepreneur to recognize how various functions in the Organizations depend on one another so as to meet the firm's capabilities (Katz, 2009). Sustainable competitive advantage was operationalized based on financial and non-financial performance suggested by the balanced score card approach which can be achieved by sound policies (Kwun & Oh, 2004). The balanced scorecard approach is a reliable method used to measure sustainable competitive

advantage. It emphasizes the maintenance of causal relationships between financial and non-financial measures, internal and external performance prospects (Hakkak & Ghodsi, 2015). According to Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart and Wright (2017), achieving a competitive advantage position and enhancing firm performance relative to their competitors are the main objectives that business organizations, in particular, should strive to attain.

Empirical Literature Review

According to Man, Lau & Chan (2002) strategic, social and communication skills are important conceptual skills. A strategy moves the Organization (Mujtaba & Kaifi, 2011). A concept is an idea while a skill is an ability. Conceptual skills are more of critical thinking competencies. Further, Agbim (2013) identified the planning and budgeting skills, detecting changes, maintaining good customer relations and ensuring maintaining of correct financial records as the managerial skills related to SMEs. Seven specific managerial skills may be drawn from these four management functions: Establishing goal, allocating resources, managing conflict, communication skill, measuring performance, taking action and self-control.

Shehu, *et al.* (2013) examined the relationship of owner/manager knowledge, competitive intensity, complexity of marketing, technical competence, firm size with the mediation of advisory services on the performance, using structured questionnaire on 198 manufacturing SMEs operating in Kano State. The regression result indicated significant relationship between owner/manager knowledge and performance. This study established relationship between owner/manager knowledge and SMEs performance but did not pay attention to the skill or performance level.

Considerable research on competitive advantage of SMEs is well documented in the literature. A majority of them focus on strategy (Ledwith & O'Dwyer, 2008; Verbees & Meulenberg, 2004); innovation (Withers *et al.,* 2011; Rosenbusch *et al.,* 2011; Cakar & Erturk, 2010); human resources, (Kula & Tatoglu 2006; Al-Madhoun, 2003; Gadenne & Sharma, 2009); total quality management (Valmohammadi, 2011; Demirbag *et al.,* 2006; Huarng & Chen, 2002) and customer satisfaction (Williams & Nauman, 2011; Dotson & Allenby, 2010). Market-based learning has been recognized as an important source of sustainable competitive advantage. Effective people or human resources can help SMEs gain competitive advantage. This is because they will be willing to go the extra mile for the organization. Learning is also key in competitive advantage. Entrepreneurs should endeavour to gain new skills so as to be

able to compete effectively in the market. Intellectual capital is an asset to SMEs gaining superior performance (Lubit, 2001).

Firm's Capability View is one of the most vibrant approaches to strategic management. It indicates that a firm performs well when it has unique capabilities. This view lacks proper supporting theory (Vogel & Guttel, 2013). It is unable to explain changes that occur in a firm. Some of the collected data lacks depth and breadth. More research should be done to shed light on these issues and to support this theory on how conceptual skills may give the firm a competitive edge. This will help people understand SMEs better. There are very few studies to show how SMEs firms develop conceptual skills essential in developing plans, strategizing and organizing resources effectively (Armigiani & Mitchell, 2010).

3.0 Research Methodology

This study adopted the positivistic philosophical approach. According to Orucho (2014) the positivistic philosophical approach is quantitative and dominated by the process of hypothesis testing. It is based on objectivity, neutrality, measurement and validity of results. Positivist is characterized by a belief in theory before research and statistical justification of conclusion from empirically testable hypotheses, the core of tenets of social sciences (Cooper & Schindler, 2011).

This study utilized descriptive research design that applied systematic and controlled collection of cross-sectional data. This research design was chosen by the study since the aim of the study is to examine the existence and magnitude of causal effects of independent variables upon a dependent variable of interest at a given point in time (Dasgupta & Singh, 2006).

The study was done on 123 SMEs food manufacturers registered with Kenya Association of Manufacturers (KAM) as per the KAM Directory 2017. The unit of analysis was food and beverages manufacturing firms, while the unit of observation was SMEs owners in these firms. The food and beverage subsector was chosen because it has the most number of firms in the manufacturing sector in Kenya with a minimal contribution to GDP of 3.5 % compared to other subsectors in manufacturing segment (KAM, 2018).

Sampling Techniques and Sample Size

The study involved the use of census since the population was not large (Kothari, 2004). The distribution was as presented in table 1.

Table 1: Sampling Table

Target Population	Number of Firms	Percentage %
Nairobi	62	50
Mombasa	12	9
Thika	10	8
Kisumu	6	5
Nakuru	6	5
Eldoret	5	4
Kericho	4	3
Ruiru	3	2
Nyeri	3	2
Towns with < 3	11	12
Total	**123**	**100**

Data Collection and Analysis

This study used likert scale questionnaire to capture relevant information from the SMEs in food manufacturing. The likert scale questions are easier to complete and so the respondent may not get tired quickly (Polkinghorne, 2005:1). The questionnaires were designed based on the constructs of both independent and dependent variables and sent to all the SMEs in food and beverage subsector registered by KAM. The collected data were imported to SPSS, codded and analyzed to test the research hypothesis.

4.0 Results and Findings

Response Rate, Factor analysis and Descriptive Statistics

The cleaned data used in the analysis was 106 out of 123 target respondents giving a response rate of 87% which was adequate for the analysis. The factor analysis showed, the conceptual skills had one component extracted with stronger Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin and Bartlett's test; (.891, X^2 (45) = 458.831, p<.05) and each question had a factor loading of >.5 which was strong hence all the questions were retrained for analysis. The descriptive statistics result showed three question on conceptual skills had a mean value of 6 (M=6, zero decimal place) and seven had a mean value of 7 (M=7, zero decimal place). The standard deviation ranged from .557 to .827 depicting a high level of consensus on the respondents. This shows respondents 'slightly agreed' (M=6) and 'strongly agreed' (M=7) that conceptual skills lead to competitive advantage of manufacturing SMEs. The results of the component matrix and descriptive statistics are presented in table 1.

Table 4. 1: Component Matrix and Descriptive Statistics of Conceptual Skills

	Component matrix	N	Mean	SD
Strategic Skills				

We analyze, evaluate and make decisions about market opportunities intuitively and quickly without going through many logical steps	.554	105	6.38	.641
Our business is able to comprehend relations between different departments, link them to the functioning of the entire company, and optimize how these elements interact	.657	106	6.51	.636
We constantly identify needs for organizational improvement	.755	106	6.46	.604
Contracting Skills				
Our firm collaborate with other manufacturing firms to market products	.716	106	6.42	.827
The company has established contracts with suppliers of raw materials	.721	105	6.50	.574
The company has established contracts with other service providers to survive in the changing market	.731	105	6.50	.557
Our Company has established contracts with county government and agencies to supply our food products for certain period of years/months	.764	103	6.43	.695
Risk taking Skills				
Our organization analyses the risks before entering the market	.730	105	6.53	.589
We evaluate the risk associated with utilizing new business capabilities	.741	105	6.47	.636
We assess the risk associated with using different ways of getting resources	.752	105	6.52	.666
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis a. 1 components extracted.				

Hypothesis Testing

To determine the suitability of Ordinary Least Square (OLS) regression model, diagnostic test was conducted. These tests checked on the assumption of regression model and the result showed that data was normally distributed, there was linear relation between the sustainable competitive advantage and conceptual skills and they were not multicollerated. From these results, the OLS models were used since to test the hypothesis and the results were as follows:

H_{01}: Conceptual skills has no significant effect on sustainable competitive advantage of small and medium food manufacturing enterprises in Kenya.

The study derived the model for CS and SCA based on simple regression model:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_{ii}x_{ii} + \varepsilon$$

Where;
Y =SCA;

β_0 = Constant;
β_{ii} = CS and
ε= Error term.
Y= 1.880 + .283X

Table 2 shows the model summary results. The result shows that the influence of CS on SCA is statistically significant, R^2 = 0.054 F (1, 104) =6.988, p-value <.05. This shows 5.4% of SCA of SMEs in food manufacturing in Kenya attributed to CS while the remaining 94.6% can be attributed to other factors not included in the study and the error term.

Table 2: Model Summary of CS on SCA

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.251[a]	.063	.054	.56350	.063	6.988	1	104	.009

a. Predictors: (Constant), Conceptual Skills

Table 3 shows the Regression ANOVA. The output indicates that CS had a significant influence on SCA *F* (1, 104) = 6.988, *p*<.05). This shows the regression model used was suitable for predicting the outcome variable on influence of CS on SCA of SMEs in food manufacturing in Kenya.

Table 3: Regression ANOVA of CS on SCA

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	2.219	1	2.219	6.988	.009[b]
	Residual	33.023	104	.318		
	Total	35.242	105			

a. Dependent Variable: Sustainable Competitive Advantage
b. Predictors: (Constant), Conceptual Skills

Table 4 shows the results of the regression coefficient of the CS on SCA. The output shows CS as component of EC had significant influence on the SCA of food manufacturing in Kenya (*β* = .283 *t* = 2.643, *p*<.05). This shows a unit increase in CS increases SCA of SMEs in food manufacturing in Kenya by 0.283.

Table 4: Coefficients of CS on SCA

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.880	.693		2.712	.008
	Conceptual Skills	.283	.107	.251	2.643	.009

a. Dependent Variable: Sustainable Competitive Advantage

The regression model showed the CS significantly predicted the SCA of SMEs in food manufacturing in Kenya (β = .283 t = 2.643, p<.05). This shows a unit increase in CS increases SCA of food manufacturing in Kenya by 0.283. From this, the alternate hypothesis of the study was accepted; H_{12}: Conceptual skills has a positive effect on sustainable competitive advantage of SMEs in food manufacturing in Kenya.

These results are in agreement with research conducted by Man, Lau & Chan (2002) strategic, social and communication skills are important conceptual skills that has an effect on the SCA. This has been explained on the basis of a concept as an idea and a skill as an ability and both forms the contracting skills which moves the organization performance. The contracting skills is a key sub-variable that informed the conceptual skills in this study hence informs the SCA of institutions (Mujtaba & Kaifi, 2011). For any organization to attain competitive advantage, the ideas must relate and inform the decision making and the skills of the team should be competitive for the effective implementation which informs the SCA of food manufacturing in Kenya.

Further, the conceptual skills are also related with the entrepreneur's ability to establish, evaluate and execute the strategies for the firm. The strategic skills are key component of the competitive advantage and its presence has an impact on the SCA of a firm (Hakkak & Ghodsi, 2015). In a manufacturing firm, the result showed the managers agreed on the importance of conceptual skills which is in line with studies that shows the modern managers must have these skills for the firm to gain competitive advantage. A study done in Afghanistan showed that there are over 30 million people with different capabilities in different industries. Though the men scored highly on technical and human skills, the women scored highly on conceptual skills (Mujtaba & Kaifi, 2011a) this shows the blend of technical and conceptual skills required by managers for attainment of the conceptual skills required to attain the SCA of firms.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In the study, respondents 'slightly agreed' (M=6) and 'strongly agreed' (M=7) that conceptual skills lead to competitive advantage of manufacturing SMEs. On the ordinary regression, conceptual skills have a significant effect on sustainable advantage of SMEs in the food manufacturing enterprises in Kenya (β=0.283, p<0.05) The study also reveals that 5.4% of

sustainable competitive advantage of SMEs is attributed to conceptual skills with a unit increase in conceptual increasing the sustainable competitive advantage of SMEs in food manufacturing in Kenya by 0.283. This study has therefore established that conceptual skills influence the sustainable competitive advantage of SMEs.

This study therefore recommends that SMEs owners and managers should develop and utilize strategies to enhance their conceptual skills in order to achieve sustainable competitive advantage of the firms. The study also recommends the need for government and other policy makers to facilitate SMEs conceptual skills through providing platforms through which SMEs can be trained and mentored to develop this competency. The study also recommends the need for policy makers to formulate appropriate proactive future oriented policies that enhance conceptual skills of SMEs owners and managers.

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