
Guest editorial: Reinterpreting competitive strategies in turbulent scenarios

Guest editorial

277

The unpredictable evolution of the economic and business environment, also with reference to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, has continuously been forcing entrepreneurs, managers and professionals to deal with innovative paradigms, approaches and solutions to satisfy customers and differentiate themselves from their competitors (Vrontis and Christofi, 2019). In this ferment, the impact of the technological system (with the Internet of Things, for example, Del Giudice, 2016) and the social system (with consumerism, for example, Pedrini and Ferri, 2014) has been tremendous and long-standing, requiring, respectively, major focus on intangible assets (servitization through digitalization: Tronvoll *et al.*, 2020) and sustainable assets (responsibility and commitment: Saeidi *et al.*, 2015). Consequently, business strategies, ever more oriented to shared values (Porter and Kramer, 2019), must take into huge consideration structures, behaviours, resources and knowledge emerging from the economic, human, and territorial milieu (Festa *et al.*, 2020).

Traditional competitive strategies about strategic management (cost leadership, differentiation and focus, as per the well-known classification by Michael Porter) require continuous adaptations, interpretations and innovations for shedding light onto ever more complex economic scenarios, so to provide support for the organizations that are engaged at individual or aggregate level (Festa *et al.*, 2017) in local, international and/or global business competition (Rossi *et al.*, 2014). The originality of studies adopting this perspective is assumed to rely on the capacity of providing examples, case studies, practices and models for reinterpreting, revising and innovating the theoretical and managerial framework about competitive strategies.

In this vein, the main intention of this special issue is to become a point of reference for academics, scientists and practitioners as concerns the redefinition of the concepts and the applications of the business competitive strategies. Highlighting its research interest on analysing, planning, implementing and controlling the generation of sustainable competitive advantage (SCA) through innovation, this special issue has asked for research that would have been constructed as business oriented, theoretically solid and practically usable, involving scientific papers adopting qualitative and quantitative methodologies, with a strong focus on competitive strategies for building innovation, sustainability and long-range competition.

The major themes in this respect are mainly related to strategic management and more specifically to competitive strategies for creating SCAs. The most investigated topics, among others, have regarded the definition and the conceptual framework of competitive strategies, competitive strategies and business outcomes, competitive strategies and territorial outcomes, the impact of territorial competitiveness on business competitiveness, the managerial good practices for creating SCAs, the strategic innovation and the financial performance, competitive strategies in international and global marketing, open innovation for competitive strategies, public–private partnerships for stimulating competitiveness and so on.

More in details, the article by Hani El Chaarani, Demetris Vrontis, Sam El Nemar and Zouhour El Abiad (“The impact of strategic competitive innovation on the financial performance of SMEs during COVID-19 pandemic period”) is about the combination of the



economic crisis and the COVID-19 crisis, which have made the economic situation very difficult and challenging, especially for SMEs. The first objective of this study is to explore the impact of competitive innovation on the financial performance of Lebanese SMEs. The second objective of this research is to reveal the impact of the different competitive innovation types on the profitability of SMEs in Lebanon. The importance of the second objective is to guide managers and owners of SMEs during a crisis period. The results of this research confirm that strategic competitive innovation is a key source for financial performance of SMEs during such periods. Therefore, if SMEs are looking to grow and survive, they must be very dynamic and must implement a suitable innovation culture. The findings of this study support the claim that the type of strategic competitive innovation has a significant effect on the nature of the relationship between innovation and financial performance. Marketing innovation and process innovation have a positive and significant effect on the financial performance of SMEs, whereas organisational innovation and product innovation have no impact on the financial performance of SMEs. Thus, it is deduced that the higher the support of SMEs to renewing marketing and processes practices, the more the levels of financial resistance and performance that are attained.

The article by John Sorros, Petros Lois, Melita Charitou, Alkiviadis Theofanis Karagiorgos and Nicholas Belesis (“Improving competitiveness in education institutes – ABC’s neglected potential”) is about the adoption, for measuring competitiveness, of activity-based costing (ABC) as a strategic tool to identify administrative and operational factors that support or hinder its implementation in educational institutions as a predictor of competitiveness. Investigating 417 Greek education institutes, a theoretical model has been developed, with subsequent test through structural equation modelling, finding that an accounting strategy could be very impactful on the competitiveness of these organizations. The research highlights ABC’s limited implementation in the Greek education sector, assuming that major focus on such approach could be very fruitful as institutional, organisational and social level.

The article by Jamel Chouaibi, Matteo Rossi and Nouha Abdessamed (“The effect of corporate social responsibility practices on tax avoidance: an empirical study in the French context”) investigates the potential negative effect that the adoption of initiatives concerning corporate social responsibility (CSR), business ethics and responsible corporate governance may exert on tax avoidance. The research, using a linear regression on data extracted from the Thomson Reuters ASSET4 database (119 French companies, from 2010 to 2019), shows that companies that do not adopt such initiatives are more aggressive towards tax avoidance, with consequent relevant implications concerning governments, investors and other partners.

The article by Maria Papadopoulou, Ioanna Papasolomou and Alkis Thrassou (“Exploring the level of sustainability awareness among consumers within the fast-fashion clothing industry: a dual business and consumer perspective”) explores the effectiveness of sustainability and environmental protection orientation as business competitive strategies in the light of social changes impacting the fast-fashion clothing industry. The study examines the implementation of environmental protection and sustainability initiatives within this sector from the perspectives of Generation X and Y consumers, investigating whether consumers’ level of environmental consciousness impacts their purchase decisions and consumption behaviour and the consequent strategic competitiveness effects on businesses. Although European fashion manufacturers invest in sustainability and engage in environmental protection, their marketing efforts need to be more effectively targeted because the level of engagement and sensitivity towards sustainability of each generational group is shaped by distinct characteristics, which impact their purchase decisions and consumption patterns.

The article by Olga Rauhut Kompaniets (“Sustainable competitive advantages for a nascent wine country: an example from southern Sweden”) discusses the challenges and opportunities to develop the wine sector in a nascent wine country as well as the sources needed to create SCA. Generally, previous research concentrates on the SCA in the established wine countries, whereas the focus of this study is on the SCA in Sweden, a country without any traditions in wine growing and production. A conceptual framework for SCA for the wine sector has been created using the different approaches dominating in SCA research as well as the special characteristics in the wine sector, and, based on this conceptual framework, the study presents a SWOT analysis of the wine sector in Sweden, linking four major research approaches in SCA created with wine sector specific sources. In Sweden, factors such as climate or technical issues regarding wine production are important for SCA but not problematic. The structural challenges are more crucial. The alcohol monopoly retail market, legal regulations and restrictions, lack of marketing and promotion capabilities, limited viticulture knowledge and cooperation with local enterprises lead to a relatively limited demand for Swedish wine. In this context, a marketing management approach becomes a key factor. It is important to provide potential markets and consumers with relevant marketing information about the nascent wine country and its products. Furthermore, the remaining state alcohol retail monopoly in Sweden provides not just challenges but also opportunities for the wine sector development. These findings are valid not only for Sweden but also for other nascent wine countries.

The article by Annesofie Lindskov (“Hypercompetition: a review and agenda for future research”) provides a systematic literature review, on 131 conceptual and empirical studies in the past 25 years, focusing on definitions, causes and consequences (or presumed effects) of hypercompetition. Several methods to assess the impact of hypercompetition on firms, industries and individuals have been adopted, although there is not a clear definition on how to directly measure this construct, with three main managerial implications, concerning action-based strategy, hypercompetition’s determinants, and the importance of accurately establishing the firm’s competitive situation. From a theoretical point of view, promising opportunities and challenges about research on hypercompetition have been highlighted.

The article by Francesco Maurizio Garraffo and Suzanna Lamria Siregar (“Competition among competitors in global industries: drivers that lead to competitive agreements”) focuses on a growing strategic approach in global industries. Cooperation among competitors is a strategic guideline in many global industries affected by technological innovation. Empirical data from five global competitive contexts have been analysed (car industry, telecommunication industry, air transportation industry, bank industry and computer programming services industry). The authors have developed a framework on firm, inter-firm and industry level drivers on the likelihood of each competitor to establish competitive agreements in global industries. Using an event history analysis, the results offer a promising explanation of a strategic approach experienced by firms in turbulent global environments.

The article by Marina Mattera, Carmen Alba Ruiz-Morales, Luana Gava and Federico Soto (“Sustainable business models to create sustainable competitive advantages: strategic approach to overcoming COVID-19 crisis and improve financial performance”) aims to understand if the adoption of sustainable initiatives and behaviours may help business facing more effectively and efficiently a crisis period, for example, the COVID-19 pandemic. Adopting a triple bottom line approach, the research investigates the creation of value through solid CSR strategies, United Nations (UN) Global Compact’s business model proposals and Global Reporting Initiative’s reporting scheme. Analysing several data from the FTSE-MIB (the leading index of the Italian Stock Exchange), the findings show that the

adoption of such initiatives and behaviours may concretely support businesses in periods of crisis, providing better understanding of stakeholders' needs, consumer profiling and value creation.

The article by Aluisius Hery Pratono ("The strategic innovation under information technological turbulence: the role of organisational resilience in competitive advantage") develops a structural model, which is based on five constructs (organisational resilience, marketing communication, product development, competitive advantage and information technological turbulence). The study has investigated 582 data that represents various enterprises in the Indonesian context, providing four scenarios of strategic innovation. The main evidence of the research is that product development seems less effective to firm competitive advantage during the high information technological turbulence than during low information technological turbulence, with specific reference to the dynamic technological change during COVID-19.

The article by Alhamzah Alnoor, Hadi Al-Abrow, Hussam Al Halbusi, Khai Wah Khaw, XinYing Chew, Marwa Al-Maatoq and Raed Khamis Alharbi ("Uncovering the antecedents of trust in social commerce: an application of the non-linear artificial neural network approach") analyses the potential effect of trust on mobile social commerce. Investigating 340 social commerce customers in Malaysia, the study develops an integrated model, in which main novelty is because of the adoption of a non-linear artificial neural network approach. The results of the investigation highlight various advantages and contributions to predicting consumer behaviour in mobile social commerce, with relevant theoretical and practical implications.

As emerged from the overview of the various articles, competitive strategies are vital instruments for the survival and the success of modern institutions, enterprises and organizations, providing traditional and/or innovative design, at scientific and managerial level, to overcome turbulent scenarios. The recent events in the world have showed that uncertainty is the only certainty, and in this vein, all the players of the environment must be prepared to continuously face unpredictable changes, because of strong interconnection among economies, and in this respect competitive strategies, with careful understanding and adaptation, are ever more necessary for the governance and management of economic initiatives, projects and trajectories.

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