

THE STRATEGIC OPTIONS TO ENHANCE THE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE OF MALAYSIAN RESTAURANT SECTOR

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Abstract: High competition in the market makes competitive advantage one of the absolute options that companies must seek to build and maintain competition. Organizational capabilities form one of the inimitable sources of competitive advantage. Therefore, establishing organizational capabilities is recognized as antecedents of competitive advantage. To build up such capabilities, several strategies have been applied. Thus, this study aims to investigate the role of IMO to enhance and build up the organizational capabilities and the competitive advantage. Hence, the present study to examine the direct effect of IMO on competitive advantage, the mediating role of organizational capabilities between IMO and competitive advantage. To do so, managers of restaurant chains sector were selected as the respondents from which the necessary data were collected. Partial least square was the statistical approach to get the result. The obtained results supported all the proposed hypotheses. Therefore, IMO is considered as one of the strategic options that organizations can apply to enhance their competitive advantage. Further discussion and suggestions for future studies were presented in the last section of the paper.

Keywords: Internal Market Orientation, Organizational Capabilities, Competitive Advantage, Partial Least Square, Restaurant Sector

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INTRODUCTION

Restaurant industry in Malaysia is one of the promising industries expected to meet the level of the tourism sector's importance. However, this growth is restricted by many difficulties that restaurants need to overcome through the determination of best strategies (Matlovičová & Pompura, 2013). Among those difficulties is the high rate of turnover among the employees in the restaurant sector (Nasyira et al., 2014; Abdullah et al., 2009). Having such a problem indicates the presence of dissatisfaction and disloyalty problems among the restaurants' employees, which in turn, highlight the quality of the service offered by the restaurant sector in Malaysia and all other hidden costs of low satisfaction among the employees towards their company and jobs. The situation is compounded when the turnover includes efficient skilled employees as the cost of recruiting, training, and maintaining desired level of service quality will be high (Brown & Mitchell, 1993). Moreover, the competition pressure faced by tourism sector and restaurants industry in the current time surges them to offer enhanced service as this counts as one of the main sources of competitive advantage (Barzoki & Ghujali, 2013). Consequently, giving more attention to the human resource and their needs has become the basic requirement for overall success, especially in terms of the service sector. In other words, restaurants need to achieve several targets including job satisfaction, employees' loyalty, and service quality to build up organizational capabilities that help maintain their competitive advantage in the market (Papasolomous-Doukakis, 2002).

Such conclusion raises up the importance of adopting Internal Marketing Orientation (IMO) approach to achieve the desired level of organizational capabilities within the organization (Al-Hawary et al., 2013; Mishra, 2010). According to this approach (i.e., internal market orientation), firms will be able to perform well in the customer market if their internal customers (i.e., human resources) are satisfied and, in turn, loyal to their firm. This approach emphasizes on human resource of the organization as one of the most important and valuable resources of the firm that relates to the ability to make or break competitive advantage. In fact, each company deals with more than one market and viability is a matter of the firm's ability to manage the interrelationships between these markets (Piercy, 1995; Gounaris, 2008). These markets, further, can be categorized into two wide markets (i.e., external and internal markets) (Gounaris, 2008). External market comprising of customers while internal market constituting of employees (Gounaris, 2008). Thus, aligning the companies' processes to meet the requirements of both internal and external market is the key issue (Gounaris, 2008). Traditionally, the customers' needs and desires in the external market have gained the attention of marketing scholar since the 1990s, when the concept of market-orientation was introduced by Kohli and Jaworski. Introducing market orientation emphasizes on the prominence of responding to customers' needs before the competitors (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990). To do so, establishing specific system that links the company to the market was considered as an antecedent of effective marketing practices (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990). Towards the same direction, Piercy (1995) introduced symmetric system by which the success of marketing strategies and business performance result in companies' responsiveness to both its markets (i.e., internal and external).

Despite the important role of internal marketing orientation in enhancing the organizational capabilities and competitive advantage of the companies, there is lack of empirical studies in the literature dedicated to internal market orientation (Gounaris, 2008). Further, most of the previous studies were normative studies, with only few rigid empirical studies conducted (Lings, 2000; Lings & Greenley, 2005; Gounaris, 2008). Therefore, there is a need to conduct more studies to cover several sectors by which the generalizability of the previous results will be supported.

Restaurant chains sector as a food service sector is one of the sectors that have been ignored by the researches in this area. Moreover, there are scant studies that have been conducted in Malaysian context. Thus, this study answers the call for more research by achieving several goals and minimizing gaps in literature: first, the literature differentiates between market orientation and internal market orientation. Such differentiation restricts the role of IMO in the organization to be limited to job satisfaction, while IMO processes within organization can play a significant role that goes beyond job satisfaction to cover several organizational aspects. Therefore, the present study is an attempt to reduce the existing gap by introducing the concept of IMO extensively to cover some of the important aspects in organization internally and externally. The second gap which the current study tries to explore is the potential role of IMO in building the organizational capabilities. Accordingly, the potential direct role of IMO in supporting competitive advantage of restaurant sector is highly expected (Fang et al., 2014), and is investigated as the third target of this study. Lastly, this research goes beyond the direct relationship to explain the influential relationship between IMO and competitive advantage through organizational capabilities, and to do so, the mediating role of organizational capabilities between IMO and competitive advantage is tested.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: the summary of the literature review is presented followed by the main hypotheses, and finally, the empirical parts are discussed along with the main results.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As previously noted, the performance of the service sector is relayed significantly through employees' performance. Thus, the attention of the researchers and practitioners should be directed more towards internal market to determine the needs of the internal customer as the first step to meet the needs of their external counterparts. In 1990, market orientation notion was introduced by Kohli and Jaworski where they defined several processes by which the company can be classified as market oriented company. Being labeled as a market-oriented company is indicated by the company's abilities to catch the future trends in the markets along with its ability to take the appropriate action. In other words, market oriented companies are better than non-marketed oriented companies in maintaining their customers' satisfaction and loyalty (Agarwal et al., 2003). As an analogous approach of market orientation, internal market orientation is a process of generating/gaining, disseminating, and applying knowledge related to the employees' needs and desires (Ling & Greenley, 2005). Internal market orientation processes help to establish necessary database related to the employees' need within the company. This processes, furthermore, lead to enhance the employment procedures of the companies. However, organizations need to own related capabilities to build up internal market orientation. In this regards, the abilities to acquire the knowledge related to what labor market offers to the employees, the market's need, and the knowledge about the employees' need and wants is the first capability the company needs to obtain (Ling & Greenley, 2005). Accordingly, there are two types of information within the company (i.e., formal and informal information) (Ling & Greenley, 2005). Each types of information comes from different sources, the formal information is generated through using questionnaires, job satisfaction survey, and written complaints, whereas the informal information results of face-to-face interaction through interview, meeting, and appraisal (Ling & Greenley, 2005).

Despite of the importance of the formal sources of information, the informal sources play a more critical role in helping the company to detect latent information. Informal information is generated through close proximity of managers and their employees – an opportunity for face-to-face and day-to-day interaction. Such interaction

will provide the needed information regarding the employees' satisfaction towards the organizations' incentive system, salary structure, obstacles to do their tasks, their suggestions to improve the work. Consequently, these kinds of information can assist the decision makers to redesign the organization's structure of recruitment, which eventually will motivate and retain staff. To do so, disseminating the gained information appears here to be as the second critical processes of internal market orientation that leads to achieve targeted level of employees' satisfaction. The communication process between the managers and their employees within the organization often leads to organizational identification (Ling & Greenley, 2005). In another words, both sides need to disseminate the latent and explicit knowledge to attain both organization and employees' goals.

Although it is important to acquire and disseminate knowledge, this must be followed by responsive processes to that knowledge. Moreover, one of the main outcomes of internal market orientation is enhancing the ability of the company to design and redesign the job products that can fulfill employees' wants and needs through which their motivation and satisfaction will reach the desired level. Undoubtedly, all these processes and the attached cost will be justified by decreasing some aspects of the cost like training programs, recruiting new employees, reworks, and employees' turnover, which leads to reduction of the defective outcomes due to lack of experience.

IMO AND ORGANIZATIONAL CAPABILITIES

It is evident from the thorough literature review that most of the studies focus has been placed on the concept of IMO in achieving job satisfaction. Fang et al. (2014), however, considered IMO's processes as unique resources that can generate unique organizational capabilities. However, narrowing down these processes to focus on gathering related information to meet the employees' needs and wants only hinders the organization of its full utilization of them to create and build up distinguished capabilities that can support the competitive advantage of the firm. Moreover, according to absorptive capacity theory, the ability of the organization to absorb knowledge and information either internally or externally is the main antecedent that leads to building capabilities (Cohen & Leventhal, 1990). Furthermore, the literature on Resource-Based View (RBV) theory differentiates between resources and capabilities (Barney, 1991; Teece et al., 1997), where resources build capabilities into a special type of resources that the company might own. Capabilities are considered as non-transferable and embedded resources in the firms that reinforces its productivity of other resources (Lu et al., 2010).

In this context, internal market orientation is a process that produces resources (i.e., knowledge) that help to enhance internal capabilities by which the performance of the firms in the external market will be reinforced. In essence, it helps the organization not only to have satisfied, motivated and loyal employees, it could also generate other capabilities including learning capabilities, Research and Development (R&D), resource allocation, manufacturing, organizing, skillful and well trained employees. This could be another outcome of applying internal market orientation. Keeping updated database regarding the new trends in the market allows the company to predict the needed future skills and determine the suitable training program to provide it. Consequently, several aspects of internal processes will be improved in line with the changes in the market. This is expected as whatever internal processes are performed by human resources - in other words, to improve internal processes, companies need to start with the human capital they own. Therefore, internal market orientation concept needs to be extended to include building internal capabilities of the organization and not confining it to merely satisfying employees. In accordance, this paper proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: IMO processes have positive effect on organizational capabilities.

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPABILITIES AND COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

It was suggested by Teece et al. (1997) that firms need to focus more on building competitive resources that can support the competitive advantage of the company rather than possessing strategic resources only. Accordingly, having resources to create value is a part of the story; however, the most important part to compete and succeed in the market is the distinctive capabilities that the firms possess (Teece et al., 1997; Fang et al., 2014). In addition, Fang et al. (2014) clarified that the core differences between capabilities and resources is that capabilities help the firms to use resources more efficiently and effectively to create value. Consequently, how far the capabilities owned by our organization are distinctive will keep our firm ahead in the market compared to other competitors. As has been mentioned earlier, capabilities are the building blocks of the sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 1991), and the main reason behind this is the nature of the capabilities, which have been classified as intangible assets. Moreover, it is well-known that intangible assets are difficult to be imitated and copied by the competitors. In this regard, human beings have been classified as intellectual assets that discriminate certain company from others. Thus, in order to create special capabilities, companies need to pay more attention, among others, to their employees (i.e., internal customer). Especially considering employees who are motivated, satisfied, loyal, skillful, and service quality, learning capabilities and creative workforce are distinguished capabilities that can give competitive advantage to the companies. Beside the significant role of these capabilities in boosting the overall performance of the company, they are, undoubtedly, difficult to be imitated by competitors – making them more advantageous. Accordingly, having such capabilities is an antecedent of maintaining competitive advantage in any company. Therefore, this paper introduces the following hypothesis:

H2: Organizational capabilities have a positive effect on competitive advantage.

IMO AND COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

Applying internal market orientation, therefore, establishes different kinds of resources that build up and maintain organizational internal capabilities. IMO targets internal and external environments to predict changes and take the right responsive action. As mentioned earlier, gathering the information regarding the employees' needs and wants is the core of the IMO processes. However, the companies should not focus only on the internal sources of information, rather, outside sources need to be included to keep the cutting edge of the company's internal processes and capabilities. So, getting the information from environment is the first step. Thus, competitors, customers, suppliers, government regulations, among others, can be critical sources of IMO to decide which strategies need to be formed to maintain and upgrade human resources capabilities. The second step is to provide the acquired information in a suitable form to be used in decision-making – in this regard, clarity, accuracy, and accessibility are the main characteristics of the acquired information to be useful. Lastly, providing all needed facilities to take an action is most critical step in IMO. In fact, IMO is considered as a failed process if this last stage is not achieved, and, all related cost of the two first steps will be unjustified. Therefore, taking effective and efficient action (Kumar et al., 2011) to adjust the internal rules and regulations regarding processes, promotions, bonuses systems, recruitment policy, training program to provide the necessary skills and capabilities to do all needed processes to survive and all ultimate goals to be achieved, is the core of IMO processes. Hence, it could be concluded that companies that apply IMO will have certain distinguished capabilities (i.e., learning, manufacturing, marketing, R&D capabilities) that play an important role in enhancing the sustainability of the competitive advantage. Building on the above discussion this paper formulates the following hypothesis:

H3: IMO processes have positive effect on competitive advantage.

THE MEDIATING ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL CAPABILITIES

In addition to what has been discussed above, the influential role of IMO in enhancing competitive advantage could be explained more through the role of IMO in enhancing organizational capabilities. The main target of IMO is to provide the latest and updated knowledge regarding the external and internal environment. However, having such updated knowledge will not affect competitive advantage until the right action is taken. Such action leads to enhancing some aspects of organizations’ weakness and assist the company to grab opportunities. Strengthening the weakness of the organization is a process of building capabilities that keep the company advanced from competitors (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). This conclusion is supported by Baron and Kenny’s (1986) criteria, where statistically having established direct relationship among the three variables leads to introducing a mediating path (depending on the direction of the relationship). Accordingly, the present study postulates the following hypothesis:

H4: Organizational capabilities mediate the relationship between IMO and competitive advantage.

FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

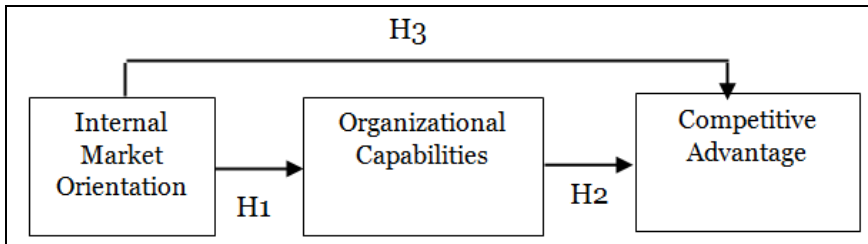


Figure 1. The Framework of the study

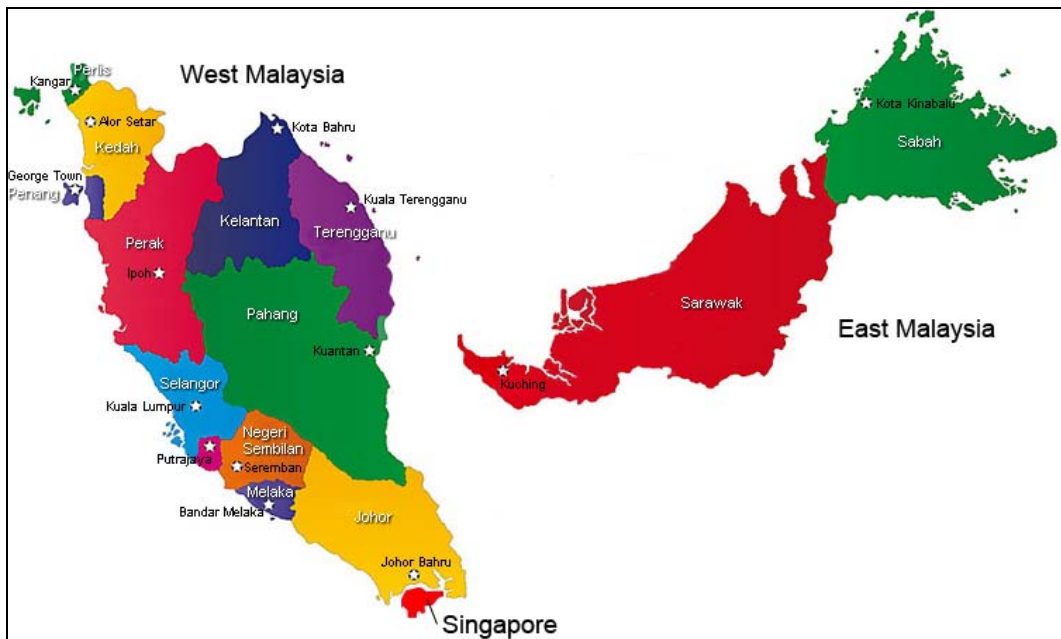


Figure 2. Location of the West Malaysia (Source: <http://himaustralia.org.au/malaysia-map-3/>)

Table 1. Result of Convergent Validity According to the Managers of the Restaurant Chains

Construct	Items	Factor Loading	Convergent validity		
			Internal reliability Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	Average Variance Extracted AVE
Internal Market Orientation	In our company, we meet with customers and employees at least once a year to find out what expectations they are looking for in the future.	0.773	0.932	0.941	0.501
	In our company, we have a system to regularly report back to our staff about issues that affect their working environment.	0.802	---	---	---
	In our company, when we find that there is need to modify a product, service, policy, procedures, etc., the departments involved make concerted efforts to do so	0.775	---	---	---
Organizational Capabilities	Our company considers employee learning capability as one of the key factors to improve the company's performance	0.703	0.884	0.910	0.591
	Our company has high sales-force efficiency	0.730	---	---	---
	Our company has good relationship with major customers	0.792	---	---	---
	Our company can flexibly adjust its structure in line with changing in the business environment	0.839	---	---	---
	Our company plans human resource in phases	0.744	---	---	---
	Our company has an effective communication among R&D staff	0.738	---	---	---
	Our company is highly adaptive to external environment	0.826	---	---	---
Competitive Advantage	Our company exploits all market opportunities that have been presented to our industry	0.811	0.887	0.917	0.688
	Our company fully exploits the market opportunities that have been presented to our industry	0.864	---	---	---
	Our company neutralizes all competitive threats from rival firms in our industry	0.858	---	---	---
	Our company fully neutralizes the competitive threats from rival firms in your industry	0.846	---	---	---

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The sampling frame of this study comprised of managers of the restaurant chains located in peninsular Malaysia (i.e., west Malaysia) as figure 2 shows. To test the proposed relationships, fourteen adapted items from past studies were the measurement tool (i.e., questionnaire) of the present study (Guan et al., 2006; Jaworski & Kohli, 1993; Lings & Greenley, 2005; Sigalas et al., 2013). Due to the nature of the study which relies on the perception of the respondents, likert-type scale

was used. Simple random sampling was the approach to collect that data. Out of 250 distributed questionnaires, only 120 were returned. After cleaning the obtained data and checking missing values only 116 questionnaires were found valid for final analysis. The obtained response rate was obviously low, therefore, as SmartPLS is software that is not affected by small sample size, this study used Partial Least Square PLS by running SmartPLS software to test the proposed hypotheses in the study (Hair et al., 2014; Henseler et al., 2009). Before testing the formulated hypotheses (i.e., structural model showed in figure 1) few steps were taken to confirm the validity and reliability of the measurement model. To achieve that, confirmatory factor analysis was run. This step entailed the examination of several measures such as Cronbach’s alpha (above 70%), composite reliability (more than 70%), Average Variance Extracted AVE (more than 50%), and factor loading (minimum 60%), along with cross loading of the items (Hair et al., 2014). The gained results show that all indicators of validity and reliability of the measurement – all recommended values were met (Henseler et al., 2009; Hair et al., 2014). Tables 1 and 2 illustrate the results.

Table 2. Result of Cross Loading According to the Managers of the Restaurant Chains

	IMO	OC	CA
IMO-1	0.773	---	---
IMO-2	0.802	---	---
IMO-3	0.775	---	---
OC-1	---	0.703	---
OC-2	---	0.730	---
OC-3	---	0.792	---
OC-4	---	0.839	---
OC-5	---	0.744	---
OC-6	---	0.738	---
OC-7	---	0.826	---
CA-1	---	---	0.811
CA-2	---	---	0.864
CA-3	---	---	0.858
CA-4	---	---	0.846

By having valid and reliable measurement model, the next step involves the testing of the suggested hypotheses (i.e., structural model). Table 3 shows the values of the path coefficients.

Table 3. The Path Coefficients According to the data obtained from Manager of Restaurant Chains

	Path coefficients	SD	T-Value	P-Value	Decision
OC -> CA	0.439	0.120	3.65**	0.000	Accepted
IMO -> OC	0.778	0.041	18.92**	0.000	Accepted
IMO -> CA	0.241	0.113	2.13*	0.017	Accepted
IMO->OC->CA	0.619	0.094	3.62**	0.000	Accepted

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.001

RESULT AND CONCLUSION

As Table 1 indicates, all the hypotheses were accepted. The obtained result, furthermore, falls in line with literature (Teece et al., 1997; Barney, 1991; Fang et al., 2014). Building competitive advantage is one of the main targets of companies in the current high competitive market and this holds true in the service sector because of the

intangible nature of their products. On the basis of the result of this research, organizational capabilities of a company significantly enhance the competitive advantage. Accordingly, more attention needs to be paid to maintain the organizational capabilities. However, building capabilities is not an easy task, and, it is compounded by the accompanied cost. Therefore, the main question that arises here is the kinds of capabilities the company needs to own, improve and maintain. IMO processes appear as antecedent processes that help decision makers to answer this question. Thus, IMO needs to be established within the company, not only to satisfy the employees but also to enhance the overall internal processes and to adapt to all the changes in the environment. In fact, IMO and market orientation should be combined to a single process to reinforce the overall performance of the organization internally and externally. Furthermore, any changes in the external environment must be followed by some changes in the internal processes and even the objectives of the company must be adjusted to keep abreast of and adapt with the changes in the external environment.

Therefore, it is recommended that decision makers use IMO processes as a tool to form their strategies and goals, particularly to pinpoint the necessary distinguished capabilities. In addition, the output of the current study confirms the mediating role of organizational capabilities - further analysis of Variance Accounted For (VAF) demonstrates that 74% of the influence of IMO on competitive advantage comes through organizational capabilities. This result indicates the importance of building organizational capabilities as output of IMO processes application to achieve the desired level of competitive advantage. Similar to other studies, the present study possesses some limitations, which future studies can address. One of these limitations is the small sample size due to low rate of cooperation showed by the respondents. Therefore, it could be useful to extend the sample size to cover the service sector in general. This study depends on the perspective of the managers of the restaurant chains, thus, it is suggested that future studies be conducted based on the employees' perspective. Finally, the mediating effect of organizational capabilities was tested in this study and from this direction, it is suggested that future studies further examine the moderating effect of organizational capabilities by which the direct relationship between IMO and competitive advantage will be understood.

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