

## The Effect of Co-creation on Competitive Advantage in Processing and Service Companies in the Littoral Region of Cameroon



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### Article's History

**Submitted:** 29<sup>th</sup> April 2024

**Accepted:** 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2024

**Published:** 24<sup>th</sup> May 2024

### Abstract

**Aim:** The current customer is more informed and educated, more selective and has a higher capacity of choice hence demands a more significant value generation from firms. The co-creation remains a vehicle for competitiveness and business growth but without co-creation, business tends to stagnate and eventually fail. This study aims to examine the effect of co-creation on competitive advantage in the processing and service firms of the Littoral Region in Cameroon.

**Methods:** The research adapts a correlational research design with a sample size of 500 companies from the processing and service sectors. The research applied a deductive approach. Data collection was through the use of a questionnaire and data analysis using the pairwise correlation analyses.

**Results:** The results revealed a strong correlation structure between the items as the KMO measure of sampling adequacy was supportive and significant as well as Bartlett's test of sphericity.

**Conclusion:** The study reaffirms the positive significant effect of co-creation on the competitive advantage of processing and service firms in the Littoral Region of Cameroon.

**Recommendation:** Management needs to adapt co-creation with customers to improve their products and services and to engage further with customers for innovation, customization and collaboration.

**Keywords:** *Brand loyalty, co-creation, competitive advantage, customer value.*

## INTRODUCTION

Businesses cannot prosper because of intensified competitive pressures unless they are concerned with their customers' actual requirements. A dynamic and hypercompetitive global economy, technological advances, unpredictable customers and competitors, growing customers' expectations and blurring industry boundaries, have compelled businesses and marketers to evolve into customer centric marketing companies (Masood et al., 2021). As it becomes increasingly difficult for individual firms to identify and respond to external competitive challenges and changes independently, new organisational perspectives are to look for strategies to survive in the presence of these forces. New economic concerns like the revolution in information and communications technologies pose new threats to break down the bonds of customers' loyalty further (Ilenia, 2023).

Customer trust is essential to forming and fostering long-term relationships with core audience. It enables organisations to deliver better experiences and retain more customers (Masood et al., 2021); consumer confidence expresses the opinions and attitudes of consumers about the current and future trends of the economy, so when there is trust and confidence, loyalty can be fostered (Galbraith, 2011). Loyal customers are more likely to make repeated purchases and they tend to spend more money per transactions. In order to build the trust in customers minds, marketing strategies have been increasingly used in research and practice to highlight the interdependencies between companies and strategies, providing a renewed way of thinking about marketing strategies like co-creation, integrated customer relationship management and the internal integration of employees in order to create a competitive advantage (Ilenia, 2023).

The increasing and growing interest and effort towards personalisation in business practices has also led to the intensive and continuous examination of these approaches in the research and academic world (Carmen, 2016). At the beginning of the 1980s, the marketing approach was concerned with the understanding of production and continued with the understanding of products and sales over time. Focus was on the products and on how to sell the products to the consumers. With the advent of new technologies in the world, production has evolved and many brands have emerged creating market saturation. This has brought about consumer exigencies in terms of demands and needs. Therefore, there is rush for best marketing strategies by marketers in order to acquire and retain customers in the market place to gain a competitive advantage.

The traditional marketing strategies, which comprised of advertising and sales promotion, no longer lead to a competitive advantage. Because of intense competition in the market place, these strategies have run short. Every business searches for the most appropriate marketing strategies that can lead to high level of customers' acquisition and a sustainable competitive advantage. Marketers have been in quest for framework of the modern marketing approaches that can be accepted as imperative for businesses to survive in an increasingly competitive environment. As a result, more marketing managers are becoming more customer focused than being product focused.

The very competitive market requires that companies resort to new approaches of product development or innovation in order to survive and grow. The investment in a broader range of offerings is becoming less able to guarantee differentiation (Panwar et al., 2021). These authors (Panwar et al., 2021) also advanced that the company's failure to in assessing and meeting its own customers' needs is one of the main reasons for the unsuccessful penetration of a new product in the market. To address this problematic issue, a solution resides in entailing the concept of open marketing strategies, particularly co-creation, in the new product development process. To be a successful, sustained and sustainable business in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, an

organisation should have a co-creation capability and structure. Businesses have to adopt a customer oriented or, a customer centric marketing approach and carry out all marketing activities within the framework to keep their existing customers, get new customers and achieve a competitive advantage (Barney, 2005).

In this light, the product centric marketing approach, which focused to sell a product to the market according to its characteristics, has become limited. Thus, businesses now focus on customer centric approach to market products in accordance with the customers' needs. Hence, a co-creation strategy focuses more on development of customer when designing and formulating its marketing plans. By monitoring the evolution of customer needs, it can decide which customer groups and needs are most important to serve. It can then focus its resources on delivering superior value to the target audience as well (Armstrong et al., 2018). Building a co-creation strategy is essential for long-term success in today's competitive business landscape. Creating brand awareness, customer learning, brand loyalty, and enhancing brand communities can be accomplished by understanding and meeting customers' needs and preferences (Ilenia, 2023). Therefore, companies should aim to design and communicate value propositions in order to generate memorable experiences

Studies by Ramazan, 2021; Horst, 2021; Bentzen, 2021; Hamidi & Gharneh, 2017; and Lamberti, 2013 linking co-creation to organisational performance are many most especially in North Africa, Europe and North America. However, most of these studies fell short to examine the effect of co-creation on competitive advantage. More so, many studies have not measured the effects of co-creation, which has a direct impact on an organization's competitive advantage. In addition, these studies were conducted on large companies and in different contexts. Hence the results emanating from these studies could be different in the context of Cameroon, which is characterised by the proliferation of small and medium size enterprises. Apart from that, the cultural, social and economic realities that prevail in Cameroon differ from those of the American and European contexts.

In Cameroon, the perception of marketing by companies is still rooted on mere advertisement and sales promotion (Takwi & Atingwa, 2020). Meanwhile marketing strategies are evolving from product-based to customer-based and now beyond customer-based to partner. Customers hold the power in their relationships with business operators. They are more connected, vocal and on the lookout for stronger relationships than ever before. They do not just want a place to buy but also want to be understood as people. It is much easier for customers to switch from one brand or use multiple brands for their transactions than it was in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Kotler & Armstrong, 2011). These famous marketing strategies (advertising, sales promotion, mass distribution) hinder the companies strive for a competitive advantage.

Despite the gradual shift from classical marketing strategies like product innovation to customer centric marketing strategies like co-creation in North African and European contexts, there exist little empirical understanding on how co-creation strategy can help to boost the firm's competitive advantage of firms in Cameroon. In fact, little is known about the possible effects of co-creation on competitive advantage of firms. From this observation the following research question is posed; what is the effect of co-creation on competitive advantage in the processing and service companies in the Littoral Region of Cameroon? Thus, the main objective of this paper was to examine the effect of co-creation on competitive advantage in the processing and service companies in the Littoral Region of Cameroon.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Conceptual Literature**

Customer-centric marketing is an overarching strategy that focuses on the needs of the customers and takes their experiences of the product, brand, and all promotional messages into account. The goal of this strategy is to tailor every brand interaction to fit the customer's needs or interests to understand why a product or service is important to them and make sure it is fulfilling that purpose and fostering a healthy customer relationship. Marketing strategy is the process of profitable growth of marketing functions for sales level (Borden, 2014). According to Bentzen, 2021, 'It is the customer who determines what a business is, what it produces and whether it will prosper'. Customer centricity is often conceptualized as being the opposite of product centricity (Galbraith, 2011). While product centric organisations are highly internally oriented and focus on manufacturing and selling superior products efficiently, rather than on its purchasers and users, customer centric organisations focus on customer value creation from a very specific angle. The value perception of the customer is placed at the heart of key business and organisational processes. Co-creation is one of the component of customer centric marketing strategy.

Co-creation is defined as developing new products and services in a quicker more relevant and innovative way than traditional processes which brings about an opportunity for continued interaction between the firm and its customers and the firm willing to work with external stakeholders (Lamberti, 2013). Each value creation process (customer and provider) developed during the direct interaction merge into one integrated dialogical process in which both parties operate within the processes of the other and have an opportunity to be active, coordinate actions and learn from each other. This eventually leads into direct influence from each party on the other (Ind and Coates 2013). The models of co-creation proposed by Ghazawneh (2008) include mass collaboration which entails involving customers to do some of the roles that firms traditionally did themselves.

Co-creation starts by identifying the main goal that the company wants to achieve and how it wants to meet the needs of the targeted consumers they are pursuing. As consumers benefit from better personalization, customization and value through co-creation, companies on the other hand, can shape a competitive advantage by directing "Just-in-time" knowledge from co-creating consumers into "Just-in-time" learning for their company (Lamberti, 2013). According to Haro et al. (2014) and Ilenia, (2023), co-creation has four major operational indicators and each indicator has sub indicators namely: brand awareness, customer learning, brand loyalty, brand communities, exchange practices, collaborative practices, supplier relationship experience, and organizational learning.

Competitive advantage, as the name implies, is an advantage that a company or a market participant has over other competitors in a given market or industry (Vilniaus, 2018). Plainly stated, it concerns the ability of a company to better provide a value proposition to consumers than competitors who provide the same or a similar value proposition. Some companies in the market do not have a competitive advantage that improves a rapidly changing business environment and globalisation in order to increase profit and customer loyalty and end up closing their operations. Each company seeks to attract new customers, to retain them and to look for ways to better adapt to consumer needs and satisfy them.

### **Theoretical Literature**

Resource based theory (RBT) provides a framework to highlight and predict the fundamentals of organisation performance and competitive advantage (Helfat, 2007). This theory aims to

elaborate on imperfectly imitable firm resources that could potentially become the source of sustained competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). The resource-based logic suggests that if few firms are able to control resources potentially to generate a sustained competitive advantage, it implies that the firms possess valuable resources (Barney, 1991). Valuable resources are resources that are costly and difficult to imitate. Therefore, these firms can achieve an advantage by continually recombining or reconfiguring diverse types of resources and by creating new applications to meet market demand (Helfat, 2007).

In RBT, resources refer to assets, business processes, capabilities, the firm's attributes, knowledge, information controlled by a company to comprehend and implement (Barney, 1991). The source of firm resources can vary, coming from both within and outside the organisation. Internal resources are, for example, R&D capabilities, logistics, brand management, and low-cost processes (Klaus, 2014); while external resources are for instance: the role of suppliers (Vilniaus, 2018), customer demand, technology change (Vilniaus, 2018). The adoption of the RBT model has been used to support the study on marketing innovation through diverse market-based resources, such as technology and innovation, to sensing the changes in the business environment and responding to them (Klaus, 2014).

### **Empirical Literature**

In Asia, Chong et al. (2022) conducted a study in Malaysia on co-creation and competitive advantage in small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). Their work was focused on businesses drawing the attention of consumers as a potent way of determining firms' competitive advantage through conversation, involvement and engagement in order to give value-added services. The research examined co-creation among SME consumers of service industries. The study was meant to examine whether co-creating customer value could increase brand equity in SMEs. The authors found an insignificant effect of co-creating customer value on brand equity.

Still with the context of SMEs Stefan (2017) examined the relationship between co-creation and competitive advantage, but instead emphasised on product innovation by carrying out an investigation on co-creation product innovation in SMEs in Australia. The study was carried out in SANO Transportgeraete GmbH Company. The result revealed that a product can be adjusted to different customer needs most especially due to small sizes of the companies. A similar study was conducted by Hamidi and Gharneh (2017) but they focused their analysis on large companies. The authors examined the role of co-creation on the influences of innovation capability and firm performance in 500 Iranian large Enterprises selected from the ranking account of industrial management. The relationship between co-creation and innovation capability was found to be positive, the relationship between innovation and firm performance was also found to be positive. The relationship between co-creation and firm performance was also found to be positive. The impact of co-creation on firm performance was found to be greater than its impact on innovation capability.

Lamberti (2013) examined the effect of customer centric marketing strategies on organizational performance in the United States of America. The variables, which were measured, consists of co-creation, interactive customer relationship management, internal integration. The study revealed that, over thirty percent of Fortune 500 firms, including Intel, Dell, IBM and American Express have placed customer centricity at the center of their business practices as a way to achieve an edge over the competition, therefore, the result revealed a positive significant relationship between co-creation and organisational performance. This approach known as customer centricity is increasingly being seen as a source of sustainable competitive advantage.



Most of the studies examined the relationship between co-creation and the performance of firms (Lamberti, 2013; Hamidi & Gharneh, 2017) but the current study emphasises on firms' competitive advantage. Studies by (Chong et al., 2022 & Stefan, 2017) concentrated on co-creation and competitive advantage in other contexts and their units of analysis were SMEs.

## METHODOLOGY

The study sought to explore the processing and service companies in the Littoral region of Cameroon, especially in the city of Douala because it has more than eighty percent of the total number of companies in Cameroon. The target population were processing and service companies which constituted a sample of 500 companies operating in the Littoral region. Questionnaires with Likert scale were administered to operations managers, financial managers and customer care representatives in some companies to find out how they implement co-creation to have a competitive advantage. The multiple regression analysis was used to test the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable via STATA and SPSS 20 version. Considering research questions and objectives, this study applied the correlational research design. This study followed a deductive approach and a positivist epistemological stand as it involves the test of hypothesis and the application of statistical tools to arrive at results.

### Model Specification

To analyse the effect of co-creation on competitive advantages of processing and service companies, the model were specified as follows.

$CA = f(COC)$

$$CA = \alpha_1 BRA_i + \alpha_1 BL_i + \alpha_1 CL_i + \mu_i \dots\dots\dots 3.1$$

$$CA = \alpha_1 COC_i + \alpha_1 Male_i + \alpha_1 Sedu_i + \alpha_1 Tedu_i + \alpha_1 Senior_i + \alpha_1 Middle_i + \mu_i \dots\dots\dots 3.2$$

Equation 3.1 shows the contribution of brand awareness (BRA), brand loyalty (BL) and customer loyalty (CL) on competitive advantages of companies. The model was estimated using maximum likelihood estimation technique of structural equation modelling. Equation 3.2 on the other hand was set to document the effect of co-creation on competitive advantages of companies in Douala. The parameters in equation 3.1 and 3.2 were estimated simultaneous using structural equation modelling. CA stands for competitive advantages and is an index computed using PCA; co-creation (COC), represents the exogenous latent variable of co-creation and vector of covariates observed in Table 1.

**Table 1: Measurability of the variables**

Variable	Code	Description	Expected apriority
Dependent Variable			
Competitive Advantages Index	CA	Continuous	N/A
Independent Variable			
Co-creation Index	COC	Continuous	+
Control Variables			
Gender(1 if male, 0 other)	Male	Binary	+/-
Education(I if primary education, 0 other)	Pedu	Binary	+/-
Education(1 if secondary education, 0 other)	Sedu	Binary	+/-
Education(1 if tertiary education, 0 other)	Tedu	Binary	+/-
Management Level( 1 if lower level, 0 other)	Lower	Binary	+/-
Management level(1 if senior level, 0 other)	Senior	Binary	+/-

Management level(1 if middle level, 0 other)	Middle	Binary	+/-
Manifest Variable of Co-creation			
Brand Awareness	BRA	Continuous	+
Brand Loyalty	BL	Continuous	+
Customer Loyalty	CL	Continuous	+

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the result of this study, discuss eventually in relation to the literature. The results of the descriptive statistics are presented and followed suit by the results of the test of the effect of Co-creation on competitive advantage.

**Table 2: Descriptive statistics**

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
CA	486	.533	.284	0	1
COC	486	.642	.238	0	1
Male	486	.434	.496	0	1
Sedu	486	.025	.155	0	1
Tedu	486	.436	.496	0	1
Senior	486	.564	.496	0	1
Middle	486	.412	.493	0	1

**Source:** Author using STATA Version 14

The result in Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics. They reveal that total observations in the sample was 486. The result indicates that competitive advantage (ca) has a mean of 53.3% and a standard deviation of 0.284. The value of the variable competitive advantage (ca) was normalized between 0 and 1 to get rid of negative values, which poses some interpretations difficulties. The value of co-creation was also normalized between 0 and 1. Co-creation has a mean of 64.2% and a standard deviation of 0.238. While all control binary variables show a satisfactory level of variability in the scores. The data was further subjected to correlation analysis in order to tract the level of association between the variables.

**Table 3: Pairwise correlations**

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
(1) CA	1.000						
(2) COC	0.217* (0.000)	1.000					
(3) Male	0.069* (0.131)	0.047* (0.305)	1.000				
(4) Sedu	0.129* (0.004)	0.069* (0.127)	0.021 (0.642)	1.000			
(5) Tedu	-0.039* (0.390)	-0.043* (0.345)	0.117* (0.010)	-0.140* (0.002)	1.000		
(6) Senior	-0.075* (0.098)	-0.058* (0.201)	-0.050* (0.272)	-0.074* (0.104)	0.121* (0.008)	1.000	
(7) Middle	0.105* (0.020)	0.084* (0.065)	0.044* (0.337)	0.082* (0.069)	-0.103* (0.023)	-0.951* (0.000)	1.000

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.1$

**Source:** Author using STATA Version 14

Table 3 shows the result of the correlation between the variables in the model in objective one of the study. The result revealed a significant positive relationship between co-creation and competitive advantage. Male, middle level management and having attended secondary education was also found to be significant and having a positive effect on competitive advantage while being in the senior level of management and having tertiary education was also significant but negatively association with competitive advantage. There was no evidence to suspect the model for the problem of multicollinearity as the correlation coefficient was well below 0.5 which most studies considered as moderate.

**Table 4: Effect of co-creation on competitive advantage**

	Baseline Model	Robust Check Model	Parsimonious Model
VARIABLES	ML-SEM CA	OLS CA	OLS CA
COC	1.594*** (0.370)	0.232*** (0.0645)	--
BRA	--	--	-7.66e-05 (0.00698)
CL	--	--	0.0107* (0.00587)
BL	--	--	0.0116* (0.00628)
Male	-0.426*** (0.133)	0.0334 (0.0248)	0.0125 (0.0249)
Sedu	0.325 (0.392)	0.191*** (0.0360)	0.187*** (0.0367)
Tedu	-0.034 (0.122)	-0.0115 (0.0256)	-0.00573 (0.0259)
Senior	--	0.126 (0.107)	0.251** (0.109)
Middle	0.880*** (0.163)	0.164 (0.107)	0.299*** (0.109)
Constant	--	0.231** (0.112)	-0.116 (0.176)
Observations	486	486	447
R-squared	0.074	0.074	0.066
Mean VIF	--	4.20	--
Ramsey Reset	--	2.83 [0.0379]	--

Robust standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

**Source:** Author using AMOS version 23 and STATA Version 14

The result reveals that co-creation has a significant positive effect on competitive advantage using maximum likelihood estimation of structural equation model and the ordinary least square estimation technique. The result also shows that brand loyalty and community loyalty were significant predictor of competitive advantage of processing and service companies in the Littoral region. The OLS was used to check the robustness of the finding using ML of structural



equation. The result shows evidence of robustness as the direction did not change but the magnitude of the estimated coefficient vary. The significant of the effect of co-creation on competitive advantage permit us to reject the null hypothesis one in the study which state that co-creation does not have a significant positive effect on competitive advantage. The level of senior management was constrained in the structural equation modelling for identification purpose and also for the model to converge towards an optimal solution.

This result corroborates with those of Lamberti (2013) and Kumar et al. (2020) This implies that when the customer is viewed by the company as member of a decision making process in the development of products, the customer feels valued by the organisation hence such a customer will be loyal to the product of the company given that he participated in the decision making process of the product. Apart from that, co-creation via brand community is highly used by enterprises in Cameroon especially in the service industry given that it is the latest evolutionary step in supporting marketing. Strong brand communities can bring significant economic and social value by increasing consumer loyalty to their brands as highlighted by Chung and Tan (2022).

This result also shows that the involvement of some companies in community development is done with the intention to portray a good image in the said community in order to reap the fruit of collective self-esteem, which is considered as a leading factor in the customer-brand relationship structure as indicated by the commitment and words of mouth (Chung and Tan. 2022). This further explains why some companies in Cameroon are strongly engaged in corporate social responsibility activities such MTN Cameroon, *Les Boissons du Cameroun*, Orange Cameroon. They have got customers' success plans which constitutes a blueprint for customers' successful journey with their companies. This helps them and their customers to define a guide for engagement throughout the customers' lifecycles.

## CONCLUSION

The goal of this research was to examine the effect of co-creation on the competitive advantage of processing and service companies in the Littoral region of Cameroon. In order to achieve the aim of this study, we adopted a quantitative research strategy and a deductive approach given that the answer to our research question was to be achieved via the test of three hypotheses developed from literature review. The correlation analysis between customer centric marketing strategies and competitive advantage was observed through the impact of co-creation, on competitive advantage. The Pairwise correlations reveals that co-creation measured via brand loyalty and community loyalty has a significant effect on competitive advantage. Implying that a good number of companies in Cameroon are resolutely engaged with their customers and have realigned marketing strategies to study the shifts in preferences in customer's needs.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century highly competitive business environment, companies are continuously searching for ways to maintain their competitiveness. Based on the foregoing findings, the study recommends the following. Firstly, since a strong significant relationship exists between co-creation and competitive advantage, this study recommend that companies should lay more emphasis on co-creation strategy such as growing brand awareness. Brand awareness will generate more leads, improve conversion rates which will drive more sales and develop stronger relationships with stakeholders. These mutual relationships will enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty. That is, companies can survive in the long run once their marketing strategies are customer centric rather than mere advertising. That management needs to adapt to co-creation

with customers to improve their products and services and to engage further with customers for innovation, customization and collaboration.

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