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EFFECT OF PRODUCT MIX FLEXIBILITY ON COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE AMONG KENYAN SMALL-SCALE IMPORTERS WITHIN GIKOMBA MARKET, NAIROBI COUNTY KENYA

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ABSTRACT

The objective of the study was to examine the effect of product mix flexibility on competitive advantage among small-scale importers in Gikomba Market, Nairobi County. The study adopted a descriptive research design. The target population for this study comprised 1,500 licensed small-scale importers at Gikomba Market, and the sampling frame was obtained from The Nairobi Importers and Small Traders Association (NISTA). The sampling technique used was stratified sampling, selecting 316 importers. Primary data was collected using a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire contained closed-ended questions, scored and rated on a five-point Likert scale. Data cleaning and analysis were performed using SPSS Version 25.0 software, and descriptive and inferential statistics were generated. The descriptive results included means and standard deviations, while the regression results were based on the Pearson correlation coefficient and simple linear regression models. Finally, the output of the analysis was expressed as frequencies and percentages, with the results presented in tables and charts. Results indicated that providing options such as electronics, clothing, and accessories helps meet diverse customer needs (mean = 3.83). However, participants were neutral on quickly introducing trending items or innovative solutions to meet customer needs. Pearson correlational analysis revealed a significant positive correlation ($n=242$, $r = .780^{**}$, $p<0.05$) between product mix flexibility and competitive advantage. The regression model explained 60.8% of the variance in competitive advantage ($R = .780$, $R^2 = .608$, $p < 0.05$), with the F value (372.258, $p < 0.05$) confirming the model's suitability. The regression coefficients highlighted a strong effect of product mix flexibility on competitive advantage, with a standardized coefficient (Beta) of .774, implying that a unit increase in product mix flexibility leads to a 0.794 unit increase in competitive advantage. The study customizing products to meet niche market needs by offering tailored items or unique functionalities for specific customers. Further studies could investigate the effect of supplier switching costs.

Key Words: *Product Mix, Imports Business, Business Flexibility*

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INTRODUCTION

The global turbulence including the war in Ukraine, Houthis attacks, and the Middle East instability are causing challenges in the supply sources and the main sea transportation routes (Pratono, 2024). The global supply chain has been exposed to unprecedented shocks, leaving it more exposed and threatening its agility and flexibility (Alhitmi & Ndambuki, 2023). For instance, trade between the EU27 and the rest of the world had not fully recovered from the covid-19. Trade by air and sea has been affected, with the European Union experiencing decreases in both exports and imports (Srai, Graham, Van Hoek, Joglekar, & Lorentz, 2023). In addition, the immediate impact of the Red Sea crisis which accounts to a third of global logistics is evident in disrupted supply chains, soaring transportation costs, and port congestion, which could jeopardize the affordability and availability of essential goods worldwide (Nair, 2024).

Disruptions of COVID-19 pandemic exposed the critical role of supply chain flexibility in responding to changes in consumer behavior, market dynamics, and disruptions (Farida & Setiawan, 2021). The American companies are focusing on adjusting production, distribution, and sourcing strategies quickly to meet demand and maintain customer satisfaction (Siagian & Tarigan, Jie, 2021). The central issues in supply chain flexibility (SCF) such as lack of flexibility measures and the significant impact of information sharing among supply chain members have become evident (Farida & Setiawan, 2022). Mello et al. (2019) argued that the absence of flexibility measures hampers external flexibility, particularly in planning and control activities. Importantly, dynamic capabilities, logistics integration, and digital capabilities play crucial roles in enhancing competitive advantage through effective import strategies, supply chain management practices, and multiple supplier relationships (Tukamuhabwa et al., 2023;).

Al Azzani and Jusoh (2024) argue that supply chain flexibility (SCF) significantly influences SMEs' performance and customer responsiveness. Additionally, customer responsiveness significantly influences SMEs' performance, and it plays a complementary partial mediating role in the relationship between SCF and SME performance in Oman. Baziedy et al. (2023) notes that SCF positively affects SCA and SMEs' performance. Additionally, SCA is identified as an essential predictor of SMEs' performance and mediates the effect of SCF on SMEs' performance in Sleman Regency, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Ismail et al. (2017) contend that rust is significantly related to commitment and export performance among, while commitment positively influences competitive advantage but not export performance. Trust indirectly affects competitive advantage through commitment, and the impact of commitment on export performance is mediated by competitive advantage.

For international traders, entering the African market poses several challenges. Infrastructure improvements have been made, but reaching lower-tier cities and rural markets remains difficult (Sakketa, 2023). The vast distances between African commercial centers increase costs and hinder economies of scale. In addition, Kuteyi and Winkler (2022) observed that the modern trade is still in early stages, and reaching traditional outlets is challenging and costly. The traders in the region are also struggling with finding suitable distributors, limited access to capital, political risks, technological limitations, electricity challenges, lack of supply chain visibility, unorganized logistics, inadequate incentives, warehouse issues, and counterfeit products (Luke & Walters, 2023).

Gikomba Market in Nairobi, known for its vibrant trade, faces challenges like infrastructural deficiencies and foreign competition, particularly from Chinese traders. The influx of Chinese traders, with their advanced strategies including financial, marketing and supply chain competencies, poses a threat to local traders, leading to concerns about a possible takeover (Newcomb, 2020). Additionally, the import of cheaper Chinese fish has affected local fish traders. Despite these challenges, Gikomba Market plays a crucial role in Nairobi's economy, offering affordable goods and employment. However, frequent fires and current rains have disrupted activities, highlighting the need for better infrastructure and support to protect traders' livelihoods.

Problem Statement

Supply chain flexibility plays a critical role in enhancing competitive advantage in the import retail business. Several studies have shown the significant relationship between supply chain management (SCM) practices and competitive advantage. For instance, Baqleh and Alateeq (2023) found that supply chain practices such as information quality and sharing significantly influence competitive advantage. In the food processing industry, Habtemariyam and Kero (2022) also demonstrated that supply chain responsiveness positively impacts competitive advantage. However, challenges persist in understanding how different dimensions of supply chain flexibility-sourcing, product mix, and volume flexibility affect small-scale importers.

In Gikomba Market, small-scale traders in the market are grappling with challenges stemming from sub-standard Chinese imports and the implementation of the Kenya Revenue Authority's new tax plan, impacting over 7,500 traders at Gikomba market. This tax directive imposes substantial financial burdens, including $1,000 container deposits and $2 per kilogram of cargo (Kitimo, 2023). Moreover, on average, supply chain disruptions result in a 3-5% increase in expenses and a 7% decrease in sales. The existing studies, such as by Okello and Were (2014), acknowledge that SCM practices contribute to profitability, yet these do not address the specific issues faced by small-scale importers. Supply chain issues like sub-standard imports, inconsistent shipping schedules due to global events, and new tax regulations, have further exacerbated the problem, leading to inefficiencies in trade practices (Chacha, Kirui, & Wiedemann, 2024). Despite research into COVID-19 impacts on Eastleigh Market (Doll & Golole, 2023), there remains a gap in studies addressing supply chain flexibility strategies for small-scale importers in Gikomba.

The delays in deliveries, fluctuations in shipping costs, difficulty in inventory management, and evolving customer preferences remain largely understudied in the context of local informal markets. The limited capital capabilities, difficulty in integrating digital solutions, and weak strategic orientation have been cited as barriers in navigating volatile supply chain environments (Al Azzani & Jusoh, 2024). As outlined by Mutuku (2021), logistics play a crucial role in determining competitive advantage, but small traders may not benefit from these practices, leading to diminished market presence. Therefore, further investigation was required to understand product mix flexibility affect competitive advantage in this unique retail context.

Objective of the Study

The objective of the study was to examine effect of product mix flexibility on competitive advantage among Kenyan small-scale importers within Gikomba market, Nairobi County Kenya.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Product Mix Flexibility and Competitive Advantage Among Small Scale Importers

The review of empirical studies focused on product variety, allowing importers to meet diverse customer needs and reduce dependence on limited product lines. Additionally, product innovation enables importers to introduce new and improved offerings, staying ahead in the market. Finally, product customization enhances competitiveness by tailoring products to specific customer preferences, fostering loyalty and differentiation in the marketplace.

Import Consignment

Al-Haddad, Chuman, and Kouki (2021) investigated the clearance process and its impact on supply chain performance in Jeddah Port, Saudi Arabia. The study employed a qualitative research design. The study population included businesses involved in import and export activities through Jeddah Port, with a sample comprising two firms: IKEA and Al-Dawliya Watches & Jewellery. Analysis of data was performed through thematic content analysis and results revealed that inefficient customs clearance procedures significantly bottleneck international trade, leading to increased lead times, decreased product availability, and diminished customer service levels. However, the study did not adequately address the specific effects of supply chain

disruptions caused by geopolitical factors or how technological advancements could mitigate these disruptions for SME importers.

Sarker (2014) examined consignment stocking policy models within supply chain systems, providing a comprehensive review of existing models and their operational frameworks. The study applied a descriptive research design, categorizing various consignment models based on structural configurations, operational policies, and performance metrics. The results revealed that consignment stocking models can optimize inventory management and enhance vendor-retailer relationships. However, the study did not sufficiently consider the impact of supply chain disruptions, such as unexpected delays or changes in demand, which could significantly affect the effectiveness of these consignment models for SME importers.

Product Variety

Product mix flexibility refers to an importer's ability to adjust the range and types of products they offer in response to market demands and consumer preferences (Jasmani & Sunars, 2020). Product variety, an essential aspect of this flexibility, allows small-scale importers to cater to a broad spectrum of customer needs and preferences (Zhang & Zheng, 2021). Therefore, offering a diverse range of products, importers can attract a wider customer base and reduce the risk associated with depending on a limited product line. This variety helps in capturing different market segments and enhances competitive advantage by meeting diverse consumer demands more effectively.

In another study, Trattner (2019) addressed the challenge of coping with increasing product variety in process industry companies, which are characterized by large, expensive, and automated equipment designed for mass production of a narrow product range. The thesis presented several studies examining the relationship between product variety and operational performance, including a systematic literature review, quantitative regression techniques, and case studies at process industry manufacturers. The findings highlighted that increasing product variety is related to increased costs, reduced time performance, and slightly reduced quality and delivery performance. The thesis also presented methods to better manage product variety without compromising operational and financial performance, including production planning methods and a product portfolio optimization tool.

Nguyen, Nguyen, and Vu (2023) studied product mix adjustments and import competition in Vietnam's manufacturing industries. The objective was to analyze how import competition influences product selection and mix in manufacturing firms in Vietnam. Using annual enterprise surveys, they examined firms' responses to imports from free trade partners. Methodology involved statistical analysis controlling for firm and industry characteristics. Findings showed firms narrowing product scope and focusing on high-selling items due to import competition, suggesting quality improvement. Critically, these findings highlight strategies for SMEs in developing countries to adapt product offerings to compete effectively in global markets.

Product Innovation

Product innovation involves the introduction of new and improved products to the market (Şeker, Ulu, & Delgado, 2024). For small-scale importers, continuous product innovation can differentiate them from competitors and keep their offerings fresh and appealing to customers. As Kawira (2022) notes, staying ahead of market trends and technological advancements, importers can offer innovative products that address evolving consumer needs, thereby enhancing customer loyalty and securing a competitive edge in the market. Innovation helps in building a reputation for being forward-thinking and customer-centric.

Farsi and Erkoyuncu (2020) developed an agent-based model to simulate flexible customization in Product-Service Systems (PSS). Their study focused on integrating service and product requirements to optimize PSS contracts. The research emphasized the impact of uncertainties, such as product failure rates and service costs, on profitability and customer satisfaction. This model serves as a quantitative tool for enhancing PSS customization strategies, particularly in industries requiring high-value asset maintenance.

Kim et al. (2023) investigated the impact of innovation on supply chain strategic fit (SCSF) and business performance of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). They found that both process and product innovations positively influenced SCSF, which in turn, enhanced SME performance. Interestingly, environmental uncertainty had a non-monotonic effect, strengthening the positive impact of process innovation but weakening the effect of product innovation on SCSF. In different context, Hayat and Siddiqui (2023) explored the relationship between supply chain quality management (SCQM), organizational learning capacity (OLC), and product innovation performance (PIP) in Pakistani SMEs. Self-administered structured questionnaires were used to collect 310 valid responses from small and medium-sized enterprises (SMMEs) in Pakistan. The participants were located in Pakistan. They discovered positive associations between SCQM, OLC, and PIP, with OLC acting as a partial mediator. These findings suggest that considering the company's context is crucial for determining beneficial practices.

Product Customization

Product customization, the ability to tailor products to specific customer preferences, further enhances product mix flexibility (Hildebrand, Häubl, & Herrmann, 2014). Sudirjo (2023) asserts that product customization is a strategy that adjusts and modifies a company's existing product to the target market's expectations and requirements. For small-scale importers, offering customized products can significantly boost their competitive advantage by providing unique value to customers. Varl, Duhovnik, and Tavčar (2022) further contend that customization allows importers to cater to niche markets and individual customer requirements, creating a more personalized shopping experience. This ability to offer bespoke products not only differentiates importers from mass-market competitors but also fosters customer loyalty and increases the likelihood of repeat business, thereby strengthening their market position.

Stojanova, Gecevska, Anisic, and Mancev (2022) explored the implementation of mass customization strategies for individualized products. They emphasized the shift from mass production to mass customization in response to market dynamics and customer preferences. The study highlighted the role of IT tools in facilitating product customization and improving customer satisfaction. This research underscores the importance of flexibility in manufacturing systems to offer customized products profitably. Zhang and Zheng (2021) investigated optimal customization strategies for firms in different channels (online vs. offline). They analyzed pricing decisions, profitability, and consumer welfare implications of customization strategies. The study found that while customization can enhance profitability through increased consumer satisfaction, strategic decisions on product variety and pricing are critical in achieving competitive advantage. This research provides insights into managing the trade-offs between customization costs and market reach in retail environments.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a descriptive research design to systematically describe the characteristics and impacts of sourcing flexibility on competitive advantage among small-scale importers in Gikomba Market, Nairobi County. The target population for this study included 1,500 licensed small-scale importers at Gikomba Market.

The study determined the sample size using Yamane's (1967) formula. This approach is commonly used for calculating sample sizes in a finite population. Therefore, given a population of 1,500 and a margin of error (e) of 0.05, the formula was:

$$n = N/(1+N(e)2$$

where:

N = population size

e= margin of error

n = sample size

1,500/(1+1,500(0.05)^2
1,500/4.75

Thus, the sample size for the study were 316 small scale importers. The study used both primary and secondary data. Data collection was undertaken using a structured questionnaire that contained close-ended questions.

Data analysis entailed assessing the effect of sourcing flexibility on competitive advantage among small-scale importers. The responses were then entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software, version 25, to retrieve the results.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Product Mix Flexibility on Competitive Advantage among Small Scale Importers

Rating of Product Mix Flexibility and Competitive Advantage

Product Variety

Forty five percent (45%) of participants agreed that providing options like electronics, clothing, and accessories helps meet diverse customer needs. This implies that product variety directly enhances customer satisfaction and drives sales for small-scale importers (mean = 3.83). However, (24%) of participants were neutral on adding new categories like seasonal or specialty items to stand out. This shows hesitation in diversifying due to market or resource constraints (mean = 3.81). The study attained a composite mean of 3.78 and a standard deviation of 1.02, demonstrating a strong focus on product mix flexibility as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Rating for Product Variety

Product Variety	SD (%)	D (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	Mean	Std Dev
1. By offering items such as gadgets, apparel, and home goods, I can attract different customer groups and boost sales.	3	10	23	40	24	3.73	1.01
2. Providing options like electronics, clothing, and accessories helps me meet diverse customer needs and preferences.	3	4	18	45	30	3.83	0.93
3. Adding new categories like seasonal products or specialty items helps my business stand out from competitors.	4	7	24	40	25	3.81	1.05
4. Offering unique items or limited-edition products enables me to tap into current market trends and opportunities.	4	12	19	38	27	3.73	1.09
Composite Mean						**3.78**	**1.02**

Product Innovation

Thirty nine percent (39%) of participants agreed that launching new designs or technologies keeps their product range exciting and appealing. This implies that product innovation enhances customer interest and competitive advantage for small-scale importers (mean = 3.64). However, (31%) of participants were neutral on quickly introducing trending items or innovative solutions to meet customer needs. This shows challenges in adapting rapidly to market trends due to resource or logistical constraints (mean = 3.37). The study attained a composite mean of 3.51 and a standard deviation of 1.11, indicating moderate emphasis on product innovation. The findings are revealed in Table 2.

Table 2: Rating for Product Innovation

Product Innovation	SD (%)	D (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	Mean	Std Dev
5. Launching new designs or technologies keeps my product range exciting and appealing to customers.	5	9	26	39	21	3.64	1.05
6. New product features or updates give me an edge over competitors by making my offerings unique.	5	11	25	35	24	3.61	1.12
7. Quickly introducing trending items or innovative solutions allows me to meet evolving customer needs effectively.	7	13	31	33	16	3.37	1.11
8. Offering cutting-edge products helps build a loyal customer base and supports long-term business growth.	7	15	26	34	18	3.42	1.15
Composite Mean						**3.51**	**1.11**

Product Customization

Forty percent (40%) of participants agreed that the ability to adjust products to fit niche markets, including custom-fit items or unique functionalities, enhances their competitive position. This implies that product customization strengthens market differentiation for small-scale importers (mean = 3.73). However, (34%) of participants were neutral on adapting products based on feedback, such as modifying features or designs. This shows limited responsiveness due to potential resource or capability constraints (mean = 3.74). The study attained a composite mean of 3.67 and a standard deviation of 1.01, demonstrating a strong focus on product customization.

Table 3: Rating for Product Customization

Product Customization	SD *(%)	D (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	Mean	Std Dev
9. Tailoring products to specific customer requests increases satisfaction and repeat business.	7	11	28	34	20	3.50	1.12
10. Providing options such as custom colors or sizes distinguishes my business from others and adds value.	4	9	24	38	25	3.70	1.06
11. The ability to adjust products to fit niche markets, like custom-fit items or unique functionalities, enhances my competitive position.	1	11	25	40	23	3.73	0.96
12. Adapting products based on feedback, such as modifying features or adjusting designs, improves my responsiveness to customer needs.	0	7	34	36	23	3.74	0.91
Composite Mean						**3.67**	**1.01**

Pearson Correlation between Product Mix Flexibility and Competitive Advantage

Pearson correlational analysis showed a significant positive correlation (n=242, r = .780**, p<0.05) between the product mix flexibility and competitive advantage. The results indicate that diverse and adaptable product range, enabling better market responsiveness, customer customization, and risk mitigation can predict better competitiveness among small scale importers. Therefore, as product mix flexibility rises, competitive advnatge improves as well. This relationship is shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Pearson Correlation between Product Mix Flexibility and Competitive Advantage

		Product_Mix_Flexibility	Competitive_Advantage
Product_Mix_Flexibility	Pearson Correlation	1	.780**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	242	242
Competitive_Advantage	Pearson Correlation	.780**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	242	242

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Regression Analysis between Product Mix Flexibility and Competitive Advantage

The regression model summary for product mix flexibility and competitive advantage shows a significant relationship (R = .780, R Square = .608, Adjusted R Square = .606, $p < .05$). The model explains 60.8% of the variance in competitive advantage whereas the remaining 39.2% could be explained by other factors not captured in the model. The findings are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Model Summary between Product Mix Flexibility and Competitive Advantage

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.780[a]	.608	.606	.50261

a. Predictors: (Constant), Product_Mix_Flexibility

The results of the study show that the F value at 372.258 is high hence the model used in the study was suitable. The significance value, P value is <0.05. Therefore, the relationship between product mix flexibility and competitive advantage is significant. The findings are shown in Table 6.

Table 6: ANOVA between Product Mix Flexibility and Competitive Advantage

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	94.037	1	94.037	372.258	.000[b]
	Residual	60.627	240	.253		
	Total	154.664	241			

a. Dependent Variable: Competitive_Advantage

b. Predictors: (Constant), Product_Mix_Flexibility

The regression coefficients for sourcing flexibility revealed the constant of .802 ($p < .05$), and the coefficient for product mix flexibility is .794 ($p < .001$). The standardized coefficient (Beta) is .774, implying a strong effect. The regression equation is:

$$Competitive\ advantage = 0.802 + 0.794 * Product\ Mix\ Flexibility$$

The findings imply that a unit increase in product mix flexibility attracts 0.794 unit increase in competitive advantage among the small-scale traders. The results are shown in Table 7.

Table 7: Regression Coefficients between Product Flexibility and Competitive Advantage

		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	.802	.145		5.518	.000
	Product_Mix_Flexibility	.794	.041	.780	19.294	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Competitive_Advantage

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of the study established that product variety positively influences customer satisfaction and drives sales. This finding aligns with Zhang and Zheng (2021), who suggest that offering a broad product range helps businesses cater to diverse customer needs. Similarly, Trattner (2019) supports this by noting that managing a varied product mix can improve market positioning. The study further agrees with Jasmani and Sunars (2020), who argue that product flexibility enhances competitive advantage by attracting different customer groups. Thus, small-scale importers benefit from a diversified product offering in maintaining customer interest.

The study found that participants were neutral about introducing new categories like seasonal or specialty items. This result is consistent with Al-Haddad, Chuman, and Kouki (2021), who noted that market constraints often hinder businesses from diversifying. Similarly, Sarker (2014) highlighted that logistical challenges and cost limitations are major deterrents for small businesses expanding their product categories. The hesitation to diversify reflects a practical concern as importers struggle with market or resource limitations. These challenges support the claim that market uncertainties limit the ability of SMEs to diversify effectively.

Participants also agreed that product innovation, such as new designs or technologies, keeps the product range exciting. This finding supports Alessandria et al. (2023), who showed that innovation drives customer interest and competitiveness. Sarker (2014) concurs, noting that technological advancements improve market responsiveness and customer satisfaction. Additionally, Zhang and Zheng (2021) emphasize that product innovation differentiates firms in the market and creates a competitive edge. Therefore, the results indicate that innovation enhances customer loyalty and helps firms stay ahead of market trends.

The study's results also indicated some neutrality about quickly introducing trending items. This reflects the challenges SMEs face in adapting to rapid market changes, a concern echoed by Bräuer, Mertens, and Slavtchev (2023). Their research showed that logistical constraints and delayed market response negatively impact small businesses' ability to quickly capitalize on trends. Similarly, Al-Haddad, Chuman, and Kouki (2021) found that inefficient customs and clearance procedures slow down the introduction of new products. These studies suggest that SMEs struggle with maintaining innovation speed due to operational and resource-related barriers.

The results further demonstrated that participants believed customization could enhance competitive position. This aligns with Trattner (2019), who argued that tailoring products to customer needs enhances differentiation. In line with Zhang and Zheng (2021), product customization strengthens market position and fosters customer loyalty. Sarker (2014) also supports this, noting that businesses able to adapt their products to niche markets can create strong brand identity. Thus, the study reinforces the idea that product customization provides significant strategic advantages for small-scale importers.

Additionally, participants felt that adapting products based on customer feedback could improve responsiveness. This resonates with Alessandria et al. (2023), who suggested that businesses should adjust their offerings to align with evolving consumer demands. Trattner (2019) agrees, noting that businesses in dynamic sectors benefit from adjusting their products based on real-time feedback. Similarly, Sarker (2014) emphasized the importance of maintaining flexibility in product offerings to adapt to market shifts. The results support the argument that customer-centric product development enhances a firm’s competitive edge.

A strong and significant positive correlation was found between product mix flexibility and competitive advantage. This is in agreement with Zhang and Zheng (2021), who observed that businesses with flexible product offerings enjoy enhanced market responsiveness. Similarly, Bräuer, Mertens, and Slavtchev (2023) found that firms with adaptable product ranges perform better in competitive markets. Trattner (2019) also highlighted that flexibility in product mix allows firms to maintain their position in volatile market conditions. This study confirms that flexibility in product offerings strengthens firms' competitive advantage.

The regression analysis also showed that product mix flexibility significantly predicted competitive advantage. This finding aligns with Trattner (2019), who found that firms with a flexible product mix are better positioned for long-term success. Similarly, Alessandria et al. (2023) supported this by demonstrating how adaptive strategies contribute to improved firm performance. However, Zhang and Zheng (2021) noted that external factors such as market trends also influence the success of flexible product strategies. The findings indicate that enhancing product flexibility can lead to substantial improvements in competitive positioning for small-scale importers.

The study revealed that participants perceived product variety and customization positively but noted some challenges in innovation and market adaptation. These results differ from studies like Bräuer, Mertens, and Slavtchev (2023), who found stronger effects of competition on productivity. Alessandria et al. (2023) also observed significant disruptions in global supply chains, which SMEs could not always manage. Additionally, Al-Haddad, Chuman, and Kouki (2021) identified logistical constraints that limit product innovation. These contrasting results highlight the varied factors affecting small-scale importers' ability to leverage product variety and innovation effectively.

Product Mix Flexibility on Competitive Advantage among Small Scale Importers

The study concludes that product variety significantly enhances customer satisfaction and drives sales. It further concludes that there is hesitation in diversifying due to market or resource constraints. The study also concludes that product innovation helps maintain customer interest but faces challenges in adapting quickly to market trends. It further concludes that product customization strengthens market differentiation and competitiveness. The study also concludes that product mix flexibility positively correlates with competitive advantage. It further concludes that increasing product mix flexibility improves competitive advantage for small-scale importers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To begin with, to enhance product variety, small-scale importers should expand their product offerings by introducing categories like electronics, apparel, or seasonal items. Furthermore, diversify the product range by including both trending and unique products to attract different customer groups. In addition, innovate by launching new designs or technologies to maintain customer interest and stay ahead of competitors. Moreover, regularly introduce trending items by monitoring market shifts and responding with timely innovations. Additionally, customize products to meet niche market needs by offering tailored items or unique functionalities for specific customers. Finally, adapt products based on customer feedback by modifying features or designs to improve satisfaction and loyalty.

Recommendation for Further Studies

Lead time reduction strategies and their connection to pricing competitiveness should be examined. Moreover, product mix flexibility and its role in driving customer satisfaction could offer valuable insights.

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