

Role of Top & Middle Management Support and Strategic Purchasing In Gaining Competitive Advantage: Mediation of Internal Supply Chain Management

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Abstract- In modern globalized era with a lot of consistent fluctuations, the need for a unique and long terms competitive advantage (CA) has become crucial. In response to the need for researches on drivers of CA, the purpose of the present study is to investigate the impact of TMMS and purchasing strategy on the internal SCM of the firm and then the ultimate impact of internal SCM on competitive advantage of the firm. The study was performed quantitatively to analyze relationships and the relationships were supported through theory of SCM. The data for the current study was gathered from managerial level employees of firms included in the sample. The analysis revealed that strategic purchasing as well as TMMS has significant positive influence on the internal SCM. It is further revealed that the internal SCM plays a significant role of mediator between strategic purchasing and SCM and between TMMS and CA. These findings and discussion of the current study have important theoretical and practical contributions.

Keywords: *Internal supply chain management, top & middle management support, strategic purchasing, competitive advantage*

1. Introduction

The consistently changing business environment has created several challenges for businesses and supply chains to follow their goals and objectives and to operate their businesses in effective way [1]. The instabilities and fluctuations in such an open world put the firm and supply chains in a situation

where it becomes challenging to cope with such fluctuations [1-3]. In such condition, the need for gaining a sustainable competitive advantage (CA) is of great importance, which needs effective strategies and appropriate implementation. To cope with instabilities and fluctuations faced in supply chain and global market, a firm needs a sustainable competitive advantage which enables the company to maintain its unique position and market share in the market by encountering the challenges faced in those conditions [4, 5]. The competitive advantage of the firm makes it able to differentiate its offerings and its position from other market rivals however, creating and then sustaining competitive advantage is really a challenging job in modern globalized and consistently changing business environment. The studies found in literature suggest that the competitive advantage can be developed by the companies by capitalizing their internal capabilities and by making effective strategies [6-8]. For this purpose, the role of internal supply chain management (SCM) is incredible because the sustainable internal supply chain of firms provide the firms with a unique position and competitive advantage, which is very fruitful for them in such a highly competitive and fluctuating business environment. The firms that create competitive advantage based on their supply chain are in better position to cope with environmental instabilities because they come in position to deal with these challenges in better way through their sustainable SCM as compared to other firms [5, 9].

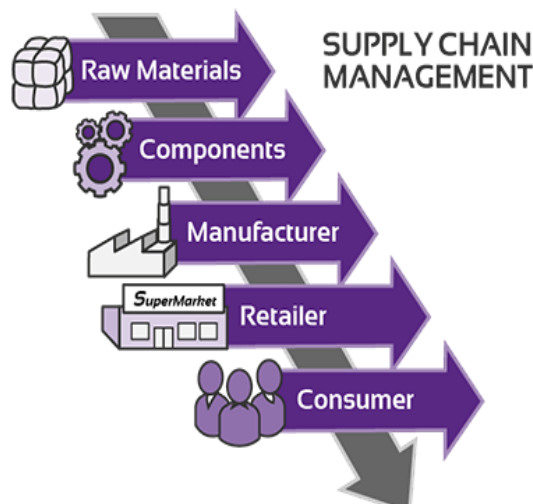


Figure 1. Key actors involved in SCM

It is embraced by numerous scholars that top and middle management of the firm has the crucial role in different internal functions and systems of the firm therefore, the role of management in the effectiveness of internal SCM is also supported by many studies e.g. [10-12] because the top and middle managements are expected to develop such strategies and practices related to SCM that enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of SCM which is ultimate source for the competitive advantage of the firm. The role of good purchasing strategy is also remarkable in this phenomenon because when a firm makes appropriate purchasing strategy according to the environmental and business conditions then the likelihood of the success and effectiveness of internal SCM enhances [13, 14]. However, it is found by reviewing the literature that role of purchasing strategies and support of middle and top management in enhancing the internal SCM has not been sufficiently researched in past. Furthermore, the researches on the incredible role of internal SCM in the competitive advantage of the firm are also scarce that create a gap in existing literature particularly related to the context of firms of Thailand. Therefore, the current study has the purpose to analyze the influence of purchasing strategy and support by middle and top management on the internal SCM of the firm. Furthermore, this research wants to assess the impact of internal SCM on the competitive advantage of firms in order to study the phenomenon through which the firm can build its competitive advantage based on its SCM (Olkiewicz, 2018).

2. Literature Review

The current study examines the strategic planning and “Top and Middle Management support” (TMMS) as significant predictors of internal supply

chain management of a firm, which ultimately contributes to the competitive advantage of the firm. The purchasing is a function of a firm, which is considered a strategic field and decision of the firm because it can influence various attributes of the firm. The right or wrong purchasing strategy can potentially support or damage the supply chain management of a firm respectively [14, 15]. The strategic purchasing is about a planning process of activities involved in purchasing for sake of finding best opportunities aligned with the capabilities of the firm in order to accomplish desired goals [4, 16]. Ref. [17] states that strategic purchasing is “centered on its ability to create collaborative relationships for firm advantage”. Strategic purchasing includes making close linkages with supply chain associates and cross functional management in order to incorporate and share the information and knowledge generated through different sources for enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of SCM [13]. The TMMS is about the support, protection and commitment provides by middle and top management of the firm to supply chain. It is about the degree to which the management of the firm aligns its goals, strategies and policies with the SCM in order enhance the sustainability and efficiency of SCM. This support of management (top and middle) of the firm is also aimed to create and augment the awareness about the sustainable production, consumption and supply [18, 19]. The internal supply chain management (ISCM) is actually the series of managerial functions involved in converting the raw material to the final distributed products [20]. According to the definition of SCM provided by Kemppainen and Vepsäläinen [21], “SCM is a strategic view of materials and distribution management that shows the benefits to the individual companies from the boost of performance of the supply chain as a whole through the lens of the business process across

functional and corporate borders". It means that the benefits of the effective SCM are not limited to the supply chain of the firm rather, its benefits go beyond the functional borders so, the SCM involves the cross functional involvement [3, 9, 22]. The SCM helps the company in building as well as sustaining competitive advantage. The competitive advantage is the attribute of a firm which makes it differentiated from other firms and which enables the firm to outperform other market rivals. The competitive advantage brings a firm at a position where it can enjoy a superior business position in the market due to its competitive edge [23, 24]. The current study has developed its framework with the support of "Supply chain management theory" i.e. SCM theory which provides enough support to the idea that the internal management of a firm and strategic purchasing can play significant role in the improvement of internal SCM which is the ultimate predictor of firm's success and performance [5].

2.1. Strategic Purchasing and internal SCM

The role of strategic purchasing in improving the internal SCM of the firm has been examined by some past researchers because it is suggested that the steps and significant functions involved in strategic purchasing enable the SCM to build close linkages with supply chain associates and to align the goals of supply chain with the firm's goals through effective strategic planning [16, 25]. It is suggested by scholars that strategic purchasing plays a predicting role in SCM because it is able to provide the framework for different practices related to SCM [26, 27]. It is also found in the literature that strategic purchasing needs the management to perform cross-functionally and to develop strong associations with supply chain

The support of management is always needed to develop a system in the firm and similar is the case with internal SCM. The literature about SCM provides strong insights that the management and its support as well as commitment are important predictors of SCM. It is due to the fact that if the top management supports the SCM practices and aligns the operations of the firm with SCM practices and interest then the SCM of the firm enhances because the adoption of SCM practices is supported by the management [36, 37]. The effective SCM requires for the adoption of practices related to SCM cross functionally so, the management plays a crucial role in supporting these practices and fulfilling these requirements. TMMS is basically the degree to which the supportive and committed role is played by top and middle management in achieving the goals and practices of SCM through assurance of alignment between the SCM strategies and firm's operations

associates so that, the performance and effectiveness of SCM can be improved through strong networks and cross functional management [28]. The research work and findings of ref. [29] also suggest that the strategic purchasing has an important role in the SCM of firm as it promotes the implementation of effective practices related to SCM that can add great shared value in SCM. In another research, it has been suggested that the strategic purchasing enhances the ability of the firm to develop social linkages with strategic partners and unique associations in supply chain that provide the source to achieve competitive advantage [17, 25]. It is found in literature that strategic purchasing is embraced as an important and strategic domain which has the potential to incorporate several benefits for the firm including enhanced quality, developed networks, market share, market growth and cost reduction. It is considered as an important driver of the SC performance due to its great potential to promote the SCM practices [30]. The activities involved in strategic purchasing revolve around the strategic planning, supplier selection, building linkages with supply partners, and supplier integration that help in finding the appropriate opportunities that suit with the firm's goals [31, 32]. The association of strategic purchasing with the SCM is also supported by Carr and Smeltzer [33], Paulraj, et al. [34] and Baier, et al. [35] who suggested that strategic purchasing has important role in enhancing SCM. Hence, the previous studies provide support to the current researcher to propose following hypothesis:

H1: "The strategic purchasing has a significant positive impact on internal supply chain management."

2.2. TMMS and internal SCM

[18]. It is suggested by several scholars that the top and middle management of firm has great potential to promote or suppress some system or function therefore, it is also embraced by several researchers that the support provided by top as well as middle management of the firm to the SCM practices and policies is an important predictor of internal SCM effectiveness because in this case, the SCM becomes able to implement its decisions and policies with more support and commitment as compared to the situation when there is no support and commitment shown by top and middle management [11, 38-43]. Hence, the literature provides enough support about the effect on internal SCM caused by the support and commitment of top and middle management. Therefore, the second hypothesis of the current study is:

H2: “The top and middle management support (TMMS) has a significant positive impact on internal supply chain management.”

2.3. Internal SCM and Competitive Advantage

The theory of SCM provides enough support to the idea that SCM can enhance the capability and potential of the firm to build and sustain competitive advantage because it develops the knowledge capacity as well as the beneficial networks of the firm. When a firm has implemented effective SCM practices then the chances of having enough knowledge and information about the important strategies associates also enhance so, the firm can make goals and strategies according to the healthy information available through SCM [44-46]. It is suggested by scholars that the firm having improved SCM is in better position to cope with changing market and business conditions because such firm has useful information, networks and sustainable edge as compared to other firms without SCM and these attributes provide the basis for a great competitive advantage to the firm in order to cope with business environment [47, 48]. There are several researchers who have embraced that SCM can be a significant predictor of the performance and competitive advantage of the firm. For example, a research conducted by Chiu and Hsieh [49] revealed that the practices of SCM have a positive impact on the performance of a firm. Furthermore, the research work by Choi and Hwang [50] provides insights that green SCM practices can bring a firm at great competitive edge as compared to their market rivals which ultimately contributes to their performance. Thatte, et al. [47] also revealed a significant positive impact of practices adopted in SCM on the

competitive advantage of the firm. It means that the past researchers provide enough support to the idea that SCM is a potential driver of competitive advantage. Based on strong theoretical insights, the current study hypothesizes that:

H3: “The internal supply chain management has a significant positive impact on competitive advantage of the firm.”

2.4. Mediating Role of Internal SCM

It is suggested that the sustainability in SCM can be achieved through proper purchasing strategies and support of management. The middle and top management have crucial role in this regard because they are involved in making such goals and strategies that tend to influence the internal supply chain management of the firm [36, 41]. The TMMS tends to be enhance the internal SCM practices’ adoptions and implementation because the supportive and committed top and middle management brings the SCM practices in line with strategies, goals and operations of the firm [18, 51]. Similarly, the practices involved in strategic purchasing are also very supportive for internal SCM because much of the requirements of strategic purchasing match with the SCM practices so, the TMMS and strategic pricing have potential to contribute towards the internal SCM positively that is ultimate predictor of competitive advantage in the firm [5, 44, 45, 47]. Therefore, the current study hypothesizes that:

H4: “The internal SCM plays the significant role of mediator between the strategic purchasing and competitive advantage.”

H5: “The internal SCM plays the significant role of mediator between the top and middle management support (TMMS) and competitive advantage.”

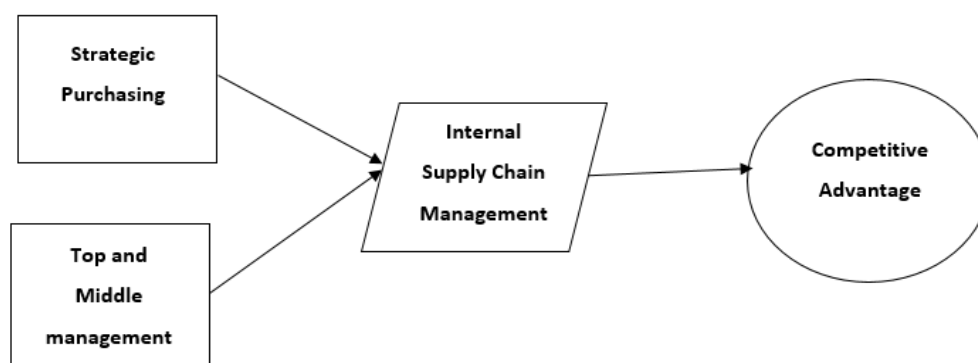


Figure 2. Research Model

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample, procedures and instrument of the study

The current study has been conducted in more than one sector because it has included the service (30%), industrial (60%), commerce (6%), mining (1.5 %), construction (0.6%) and agricultural (1.9%) sectors of Thailand in the sample because the purpose was to assess the role of purchasing strategy and TMMS in enhancing the SCM practices and competitive advantage of firms in Thailand ultimately. The data was collected through questionnaire based survey in which the data was gathered from top and middle management employees of the selected firms of Thailand through self-administered questionnaire. The Questionnaire was developed by using scales of previous researchers. The sample of the current study was decided through purposive sampling in which 250 top and middle managerial level employees of Thailand working in selected sectors were selected as sample of the current study (Fatula, 2018).

3.2. Definition and Measures of Variables

The current study includes the four key variables for examining their relationship. There are two independent variables named as “strategic purchasing” and “top and middle management support” while there is one dependent variable in the current study which is “Competitive advantage”. An important mediator has also been included in the current model which is “internal SCM”. All these variables have been measured using scale of past researchers. The respondents were asked to rate each item on five-point Likert scale. To measure competitive advantage, the scale previously used by Zhu, et al. [12] and Vargas, et al. [5] was used. To measure strategic purchasing as well as TMMS, the current study followed the Vargas, et al. [5]. The measurement of internal SCM was done by following the measurement performed by Wang and Dai [52] to measure the internal SCM.

4. Results and Analyses

To analysis of the demographics of respondents is in the following table as the sample size was 209. The demographic variables include gender, age, qualification and experience.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics

Name	Category	Frequency (N)	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	142	67.9
	Female	67	32.1
Age	20-25	113	54.1
	26-31	52	24.9
	32-37	33	15.8
	38 and above	11	5.3
Education	12 years	26	12.4
	14 years	37	17.7
	16 years	64	30.6
	18 years	42	20.1
	Other	40	19.1
Experience	Less than 1 year	28	13.4
	1-2 years	117	56.0
	2-4 years	15	7.2
	4-6 years	27	12.9
	7 years and above	22	10.5

The above-mentioned table 4.1 presented in the demographical profile of the respondents. The table shows that 142 male and 67 females participated in the study. The age of the respondent is 20-25 have a frequency of 113 respondents, 26-31 years range have 52 respondents, 32-37 range have 33 respondents and finding shows that 28 respondents have less than one-year experience, 117 respondent has 1-2 years' experience, 15 respondents have 2 to 4 years' experience 20 respondent have 4 to 6-year

experience and 22 respondents have 7 years or above experience.

4.1. Reliability

Cronbach alpha (α) is “calculated for checking the reliability of the data. The value of Cronbach alpha should be equivalent to 0.7 or greater than 0.7, in other words, we can say the threshold value of

Cronbach alpha is $\alpha \geq 0.7$ (Cronbach [53]."

Following table 2 shows the reliability of the data.

Table 2. Psychometric Properties

Latent Variables	No of items	α	Items Removed	α^*
TMMS	4	0.867	0	0.867
ISCM	4	0.743	0	0.743
SP	8	0.774	0	0.774
CA	6	0.871	0	0.871

The above-mentioned table 4.2 shows the reliability of each construct which is checked by running the test of Cronbach Alpha. Cronbach Alpha presents the internal consistency of each item for each construct. The Cronbach alpha value for all constructs is more than .70 which prove the reliability of the data.

4.2. Convergent and discriminant validity

Statistical tool packages used to identify the convergent and discriminant validity of the data finding are below in table;

Table 3. convergent and discriminant validity

	CR	AVE	MSV	CA	SP	TMMS	ISCM
CA	0.838	0.494	0.088	0.703			
SP	0.771	0.301	0.185	0.282	0.549		
TMMS	0.876	0.649	0.233	0.199	0.274	0.805	
ISCM	0.751	0.438	0.233	0.296	0.430	0.483	0.662

Value of composite reliability and average various expected confirm the issue of convergent validity whereas remaining column shows the discriminate validity of the data. composite reliability for each constructing has value more than .70 and value of MSV is less than AVE, so it proves the convergent validity and other remaining column shows that every construct has more value for itself rather than others which proved the discriminant validity of the data.

4.3. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

The test of confirmatory factor analysis is used to identify other model of this study is good fit or not. There are 4 to 5 indicators which proved the model fitness and their threshold and observed values are below;

Table 4. CFA

Indicators	CMIN/DF	GFI	IFI	CFI	RMESA
Threshold range	<3	>.80	>.90	>.90	<.08
Observed values	1.423	.890	.974	.974	.045

The results of above-mentioned table presenting that all values are under the threshold range, which means that the model of the study is good fit.

In order to test the study hypotheses structural equation modeling by using AMOS was performed, and results are presenting in below table;

4.4. Structural model Regression

Table 5. Structural equation Modeling

Total effect	SP	TMMS	CA
CA	.251**	.219**	.000
ISCM	.250**	.340**	.127
Direct effect	SP	TMMS	CA
CA	.251**	.219**	.000
ISCM	.218**	.312**	.127
Indirect effect	SP	TMMS	CA

Total effect	SP	TMMS	CA
CA	.000	.000	.000
ISCM	.032*	.028*	.000

Results of structural equation modeling showing that top and middle management support has 34.0% positive and significant impact on internal supply chain management. The total effect of strategic purchasing on internal supply chain management is 25%. The indirect effect of strategic

purchasing on internal supply chain management 3.2% whereas the indirect effect of top and management support on internal supply chain management via competitive advantage is 2.8%. these results prove all the hypothesis are accepted. Below picture is the screen shot of SEM;

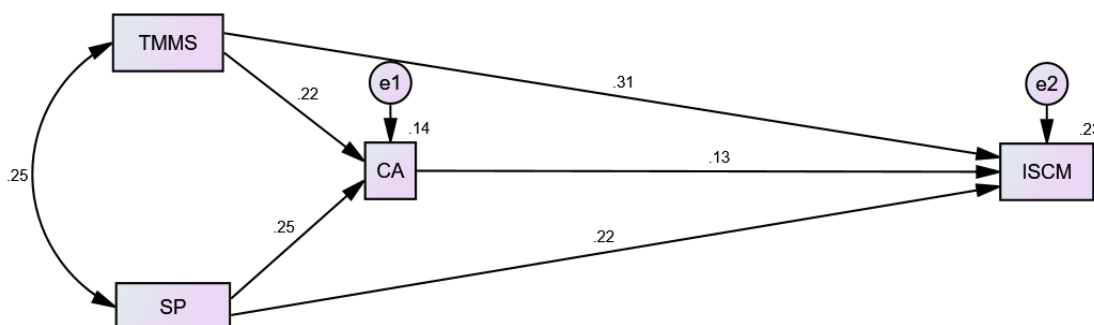


Figure 1. SEM

5. Discussion of Results

The current study had the purpose to assess the predicting role of purchasing strategy and TMMS in boosting internal SCM and the determining role of internal SCM for competitive advantage of the firm. For this purpose, the data was collected from middle and top managerial level employees of firms in Thailand to analyze the impact caused by purchasing strategy and TMMS on the internal SCM. In response to the hypotheses of the current study about the driving forces of internal SCM i.e. purchasing strategy and TMMS, the current results revealed that there is significant and positive impact caused by purchasing strategy on the internal SCM. Furthermore, it has been found that the TMMS has significant positive influence on internal SCM. These findings show that if the top and middle management supports the SCM practices then the chances of SCM development boost due to the alignment of management operations with SCM practices. These findings are in line with the research works and findings of previous researchers e.g. [18, 36, 41, 51]. The findings about the positive influence of purchasing strategy on internal SCM also reveal that the purchasing strategy has many of the functions aligned with SCM practices e.g. building close networks, gathering information etc. These functions and policies of strategic purchasing promote the adoption and execution of SCM practices and thus, internal SCM develops ultimately. These results are also in line with past

studies e.g. [4, 13, 17, 30, 31, 33, 35]. The hypotheses about the impact of internal SCM on competitive advantage and the mediating role of SCM in the association of strategic purchasing with CA and the association of TMMS with CA have also been accepted because they have been significantly supported through results. This is due to the phenomena that internal SCM practices brings the firm in better condition to cope with business and market environment and to outperform market rivals through a unique and developed SCM. These findings are also aligned and supported by several past studies e.g. [4, 44, 45, 47, 48, 54, 55]. Hence, all the current results are in line with and supported by existing literature.

6. Conclusion

The current study examined the role of purchasing strategy and TMMS in internal SCM and the role of internal SCM in achievement of competitive advantage in the firm. All hypotheses of the current study have been accepted and sufficiently supported through results as well as past researches. The current study has important contributions in the theory as well as practice because it is expected to enhance literature about the theory of SCM through empirical evidence. The strategy makers will find thus current study very beneficial in understanding the way they can capitalize the support and commitment of their management and strategic purchasing to develop internal SCM in the firm and ultimately to

accomplish CA. However, the current findings have limitations to limited sectors of Thailand i.e. service, industrial, commerce, mining, construction and agricultural sectors while other sectors have been ignored. It means that the findings may be dissimilar in different sectors (not included in the study) or even in the same sectors of another country. Furthermore, the sample was also not evenly selected from all these sectors. Therefore, the future researchers are suggested to check generalizability of this theory by conducting even cross-sector and cross-cultural studies. Furthermore, the currently used sample size was restricted due to the limited time and resources which may affect the authenticity of the results therefore, future researchers should check this theory by enhancing sample size for getting more authentic results.

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