Social Networking, and Firm Performance: Mediating Role of Comparative Advantage and Sustainable Supply Chain

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***Abstract*-The key objective of the current study is to examine the role of social networking in determining the firm performance of manufacturing firms. Addition to this the study has studied the mediating role of comparative advantage and sustainable supply chain in the relationship between the social networking and firm performance of manufacturing firms. The basic concern of this research is to examine the way in which performance is generated and achieve by firms. Several theoretical approaches have been used for analyzing the relation between existing resources and performance of a firm. The relation between entrepreneurial orientation and firm performance has been explained using RBV theory by incorporating moderator and mediator variables. The results were presented for the model using PLS because of its flexibility, validity, and estimation of complex models. PLS-SEM method is also known as second general approach of SEM. In this study, the response rate of 77.6% is sufficient because 30% response rate was regarded sufficient by Dikko [1] in survey studies. These positive influences of SCM capability are supported by social capital theory. Relational and structural capitals are accumulated through collaboration, information sharing, mutual trust, communication, and commitment among the partners in the supply chain. These create improvement in the performance of suppliers and buyers.**

Keywords: *Social networking, Supply chain, sustainable*

1. Background

Information network and social network (SNTW) are terms in entrepreneurship studies, which are used interchangeably [2]. The focus of the network concept is based on an individual having a relationship with ego. Therefore, this relationship between ego and alter(s) is directly or indirectly used by SNTW researchers. The term 'alters' is referred as friends, business contacts, relatives, and family members. In this dynamic and competitive business world, important resources can be secured by SME firms through use of a SNTW [3]. In the field of entrepreneurship, research has increased on the SNTW over the last thirty years. Moreover, it has become helpful in describing and explaining the process of entrepreneurship [4]. It has been found through an extensive literature review that SNTW is often used in place of entrepreneurial networks, networking or business networks. Based on the context of this research, the SNTW has been used with reference to networking activities and network structure of Nigerian SMEs.

A positive relationship has been identified by studies between performance and competitive advantage. It has been suggested by RBV that use of intangible, specific, and scare assets result in the achievement of competitive advantage [5]. It was confirmed by Kianto, Garanina [6] that the internal resource base of a firm determines the achievement of competitive advantage by small and medium firms. It has been confirmed by literature that performance and competitive advantage of a firm is largely influenced by the firm's entrepreneurial behavior [7, 8].

The basic concern of this research is to examine the way in which performance is generated and achieve by firms. Several theoretical approaches have been used for analyzing the relation between existing resources and performance of a firm. The relation between entrepreneurial orientation and firm performance has been explained using RBV theory by incorporating moderator and mediator variables [2]. Human capital has been used as a moderating variable and competitive advantage as a mediating variable. The study has adopted resource dependency theory and social capital theory to describe the association between social capital and firm performance. The underlying theories have been used as a base for this study. The theoretical underpinning of this research is based on SNTW Theory (SNT), Resource Dependency Theory (RDT), and Resource Based-View (RBV). RBV has been used as a theoretical base for analyzing the influence of SNTW, entrepreneurial orientation, competitive advantage, and human capital on the performance of an organization.

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Hypothesis Development

SNTW and Business Performance

A meta-analytic research study was conducted by Stam, Arzlanian [9] to analyze empirically the relation between the performance of small firms and entrepreneur's personal networks. The researchers employed 61 independent samples. The findings of the research showed a positive relationship between performance and social capital. Moreover, the researchers identified new moderating variables, which influence the association between SMEs performance and social capital. However, the results were confined to those firms, who were surviving, and failed firms were neglected. Cross-Sectional data analysis has been used by several studies, which did not rule out the possibility of reverse causality.

The degree to which commitment of project management stakeholders is influenced by SNTWs in Uganda was studied by Ahimbisibwe, Nangoli [10]. The researchers used a cross-sectional and quantitative research approach using a sample of 92 individual projects of Uganda Banks. It was revealed by results that there is a significant influence of SNTW elements, i.e. network transitivity and network degree on the commitment of stakeholders for the project.

However, the findings of the study cannot be generalized to every developing economy. This is because of various geographical, political, technological, economic, and social variances among regions. However, the study can be extended to analyze the relationship in any other developing economy. The relationship between networking gender differences and performance of a firm was analyzed. The researcher analyzed a sample of 181 female and 2919 male-owned SME over a period of three years.

It was found by results that there is a little difference in the networks, which are accessed by female and male-owned SMEs. It was also indicated by results that there is a positive relation of informal and formal networks with the survival of a firm. However, formal networks are linked with the growth of a firm. The study did not incorporate the dimensions such as industry, size, age, experience, ad education of the owners. A study was conducted by Priyanath and Buthsala [11] based on the influence of social, human, and financial capital on SMEs performance in South Africa. The performance was measured through subjective and objective methods. A self-administered questionnaire was used for data collection.

The research methodology was based on a primary approach, which may incur biasness. The research may have accessed SMEs, which were easier to contact and neglect others. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized in Port Elizabeth and King Williams Town in Easter Cape province of South Africa because of biasness.

A study was conducted by Boso, Adeleye [12] on the relation between ties of SNTW and development strategy of corporations among Russian and Chinese technology entrepreneurs. A positive relation was found between ties of the SNTW, sales performance, and strategy in high technology firms of Russia and China. The focus of the results was on high technology ventures of entrepreneurs, which cannot be generalized.

Moreover, the relation between performance and networking of SMEs was analyzed by using a sample based on 5027 Australian SMEs. The findings were mixed. It was indicated by a study that there is a significant positive relation between networking (size, industry, and age) and survival of a firm. Moreover, it was suggested by the findings that growth and survival could be achieved by devoting a specific optimum level of resources to networking. For increased productivity, the firm can access more than six networks in a year. Further, it was found that networks (formal and informal) are linked with the survival of a firm. However, formal networks are greatly associated with growth. Both formal and informal networks are not linked with ROE.

The research was conducted by Cooper on networks, and it was found that the level and number of SNTW ties is linked with the performance of a company [13]. The empirical findings are not clear about the influence of networks and resources of a firm on internal performance. Rubio-Aparicio, Núñez-Núñez [14] conducted a meta-analysis and found a positive association between the international performance of a company and SNTWs. Alternatively, a study was conducted by Masiello and Izzo [15] on the influence of the international network on performance and speed of internationalization of Czech SMEs. The study used a sample based on CEOs of SMEs in manufacturing industry. It was found by the study that a company's performance is deterred by regular dependent on individual contact. The respondent biasness could exist as the study is based on recollections of networking activities of entrepreneurs. Moreover, the sample of the study was restricted to the SMEs in the manufacturing sector of Czech. The influence of networking on SMEs performance was analyzed by Driver, Kharono [16] in the context of Iran. The sample was based on 227 CEOs of small information technology companies in Iran. The study adopted a dual methodology, which was not used previously. SNTW analysis and structural equation modeling were collectively used to test research hypotheses. The results reveal that entrepreneurial style, external networking behavior and network structure improves emotional intelligence.

Both external networking behavior and network structure influence SME performance. Moreover, it was found that there is no influence of entrepreneurial style on external networking. The following hypothesis has been developed based on the above arguments.

H1: SNTW Has significant impact on the FRMP

Significant competencies in a firm, which are not easy to imitate, are included in competitive advantage. When these competences are used, the firm is able to achieve higher performance [17]. Two main strengths of a firm including differentiated products and favorable costs determine competitive advantage [17]. Bashir and Verma [17] introduced value chain by looking deep into differentiation and cost strategy. Value chain was introduced as a way to evaluate all activities of a firm and the way they interact to give a broader aspect of achieving competitive advantage. In the long run, any weakness or strength of a firm is a function of its influence on differentiation or cost [17]. The construct of competitive advantage has been considered by several researchers in the context of competencies, competitors, customers, product offerings and other resources, which are attained from knowledge.

It was suggested by author that processes and resources of an organization can result in competitive advantage of a firm. The unique resources are used by a firm to create products with high value for the customers [18]. Sources of competitive advantage such as customer responsiveness, sensing, differentiation, and competitor responding are included in the development of market offerings. These resources could be used and improved through better knowledge and learning [18]. This research study has adopted competitive advantage construct proposed by [18].

The current structures, motivation, and relationships are better understood by organizations with successful market insights. Such organizations know about their past success [19]. Three converging and critical trends explain the significance of learning for marketers [19]. The first is the speed of change, second is available information, and third is the pro-activeness of the organization for timely development of coherent strategies in line with the market needs.

The proposition of competitive advantage was supported by Rahman, Im [20]. For offering a diagnosis framework for management, the current methods and approaches were evaluated by Rahman, Im [20] within an organizing framework, which clears the nature of competitive advantage through analysis of the following.

- The advantages of management judgments for strengths and weaknesses and the way in which measures of market share are compared
- Making comparison of the size of relative resource commitments
- Comparison of competitors by customers based on criteria for purchase

The study was confined to the human aspect of the project management through the development of the level with which commitment of stakeholders is influenced by networks. The influence of SNTW on the performance of manufacturing SMEs of Malaysia was investigated by Chimucheka, Chinyamurindi [21]. The researchers adopted a stratified sampling method based on 226 respondents of Malaysian manufacturing SMEs. The information was collected through use of questionnaires, which was sent via emails to the respondents. Mixed results were revealed by the research. It was found that there is a significant and positive influence of network centrality on business performance. The density of network and family members has a positive and insignificant influence on business performance. However, the study was limited to established manufacturing companies.

A study was conducted by Yang, Dess [22] market orientation, the performance of entrepreneurial firms, network ties, and entrepreneurial orientation, in a developing economy. Different entrepreneurial firms operating in Ghana were taken into a sample of 229. It was found by the study that the performance benefits are maximized by the business network ties and SNTW ties. Moreover, the development of a business network and SNTW relationship increases the influence of strategic orientation on the performance of an entrepreneurial organization in emerging economies. Interesting extensions have been offered by these findings to understand the literature studies on the SNTW.

H2: CMPA Has significant impact on the FRMP

H3: SNTW Has significant impact on the CMPA

H4: CMPA mediates the relationship between the SNTW and FRMP.

The RBV has been used in this study as a theoretical underpinning. Moreover, the concepts of absorptive capacity, dynamic capability theory, and social capital are used to focus on the competitive nature of sustainable SC management. It has been argued using RBV that the behaviors of firms different and so as their performance. This difference is because of their difference in using internal capabilities and resources, which are inimitable, rare, valuable, and non-substitutable [23]. The theory has been extended to define the way in which competitive advantage can be sustained by SCM. It was argued by Yu, Jacobs [24] that SC management capabilities and heterogeneous purchasing could be a resource, which can help firms in making accurate expectations for future value. Toyota and Wal-Mart are key examples. It was clarified by Wang, Huo [25] that internal resources of a firm could be extended to external ones including relational resources. This can provide good points for research on SCM. The social capital theory, relational view is quite similar to resource advantage theory. The critical capabilities and resources of a firm can extend across the boundaries of a firm. The ability of a firm to recognize, use, and assimilate external resources to integrate activities of SC are referred as SC capabilities. The organization can accumulate valuable resources and assets through effective SCM. Social capital or relational resources results in achievement of competitive advantage and superior performance by a firm [25]. The dynamic nature of SC capabilities has been emphasized by some recent studies.

From the aspect of supply network, dynamic capabilities are unique sets of routines, relationships, processes, special skills, and relationships within an organization. These skills are derived from the information and knowledge exchange between the partners in the SC. The alignment capability of supply management is related to the procurement ability to define the needs of an organization and ensuring communication with key suppliers [28]. The acquisition of SC information, assimilation of new product development, the transformation of SC, and use of information is referred as the absorptive capacity of SC. This is positively linked with the financial performance and network agility performance of a company. There are variations in SCs based on their competencies, such as innovation, learning, response to the changing market needs. These variations determine the performance of organizations. Some organizations outperform others because of differences in organizational resources [25]. It was reported by a recent preliminary survey that leading SCM scholars agree about the significance of resources possessed by a firm or its SC for effective SCM and improved performance. These arguments have been extended traditional SC capabilities to environmental and social dimensions. Therefore, three sustainable capabilities of SC have been proposed in this study. The first is economic SC capability, which is defined as a set of activities in the process of SC including sharing of information, collaboration, and development of inter-organizational relationships. It includes long-term relationship development and establishing mutual trust. Sharing of information is an important ability in the process and integration of SC [26, 27]. This enables suppliers and buyers to share and communicate performance and expectations. Therefore, partners in SC are encouraged to improve their capabilities [28]. There is direct interaction between suppliers and buyers along with integrated activities involved in a collaborative capability. These include collaborative practices of problem solving and technology co-development, which are important means to transfer organizational and operational knowledge to other partners in the SC. The ability of a firm to manage issues related to the environment in SC is referred as environment capability of SC. The Social capability of the SC is similar to environmental capability of SC. It was pointed out by Gold and Schleper [29] that most of the focus of sustainable SCM research is on the reduction of unsustainable SCs. The focus is not on harm elimination or zero emissions across the SC.

The ultimate goal of a sustainable SCM is to make its emissions zero or regenerate its impact on the environment and society. This process of zero emissions is based on several steps. The SC has to transform from unsustainable to less unsustainable and then move to a sustainable SC. Social and environmental capabilities of SC have been characterized in this study as the level of inter-organizational activities between suppliers and buyers to respond towards the issues of environment and society. The aim is to generate a positive influence on the environment and society while reducing the negative outcomes. The practices of monitoring include collection of information related to the supplier, development of assessment criteria for suppliers, and evaluating the social and environmental performance of partners in SC and related products. Auditing and development of a supplier code of conduct are the commonly adopted activities in terms of social capability of SC. A supplier code has been introduced by a number of global firms, which address the issues of forced labor, child labor, safety, and diversity of workforce. A number of suppliers have been witnessed to pursue certification for social or environmental responsibility such as Social Accountability (SA) 8000. The adoption of environmental procurement strategies is a common practice in terms of environmental capability of the SC. The selection processes of suppliers with effective environmental performance supports the communication between partners in the SC. Moreover, the SC responsiveness is increased towards issues of environment including climate change and ozone depletion. Environmental management systems have been implemented by suppliers and validate through international certifications, including the international standard of environmental management and ISO 14001 [30].

H5: SUSCC Has significant impact on the FRMP

H6: SNTW Has significant impact on the SUSCC.

H7: SUSCC mediates the relationship between the SNTW and FRMP.

2. Methodology

For analysis of data, Partial Least Squares method was used. The results were presented for the model using PLS because of its flexibility, validity, and estimation of complex models. PLS-SEM method is also known as second general approach of SEM [31]. Almost 421 questionnaires were distributed among respondents and 94 were incomplete. Therefore, these were eliminated from further analysis. A total of 327 questionnaires were subjected to further analysis. The valid response rate came out 77.6%. In this study, the response rate of 77.6% is sufficient because 30% response rate was regarded sufficient by Dikko [1] in survey studies.

3. Results

Two steps are involved in the estimation of any model using PLS-SEM. These steps include determination of outer and inner model, i.e. measurement and structural [32, 33]. This is similar to the Goodness of fit (GoF), covariance based structural equation modeling and Goodness of Measure (GoM) determination [34]. The outer model is referred as measurement model. The structural association between unobserved variables and their estimates is found

in the outer model [35]. For estimation of indicator loadings, composite reliability, cross-loadings, standard PLS algorithm, and AVE were determined using Smart PLS software 3.0 [36].

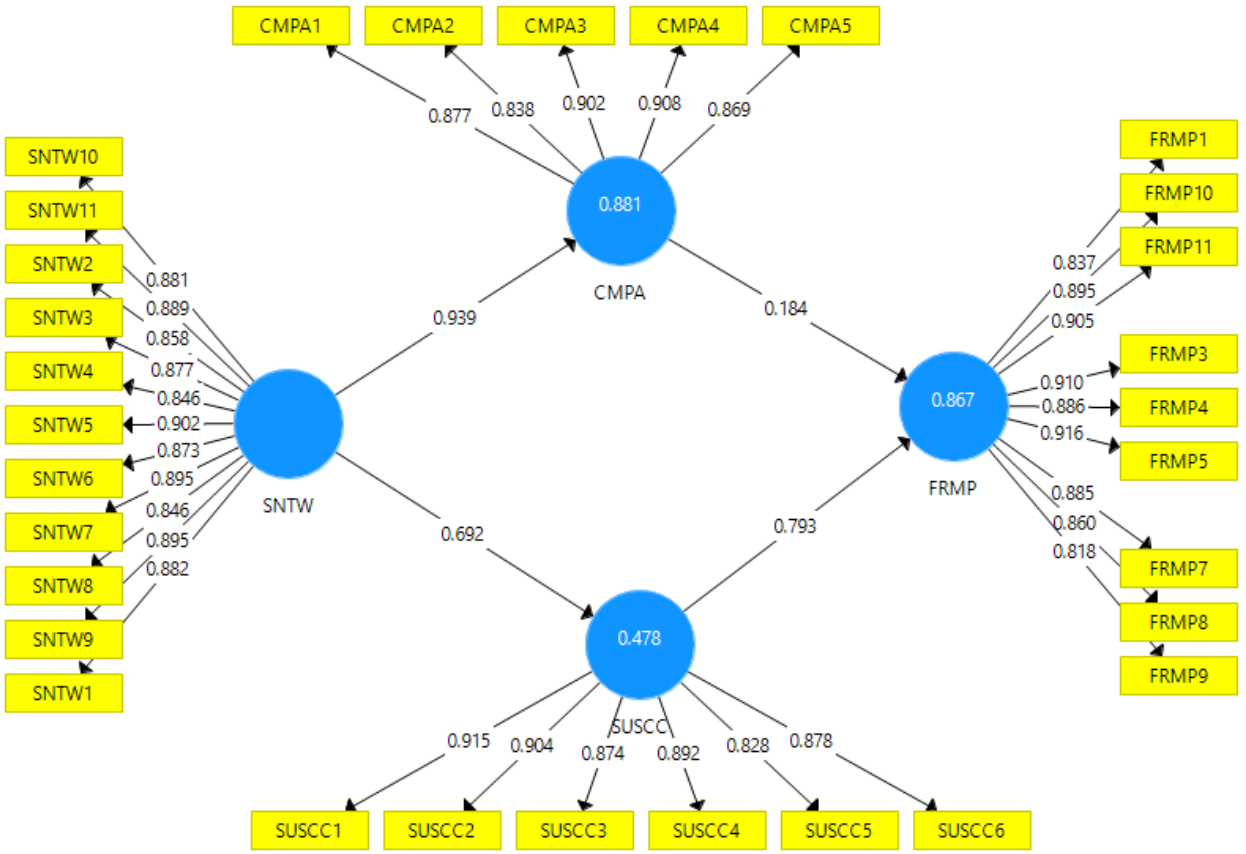

Figure 1: Measurement Model

In Smart PLS standard algorithm, composite reliability for every unobserved variable was determined. It was revealed that all the variables have values greater than 0.70 [32, 33].

Table 1: Outer Loadings

	CMPA	FRMP	SNTW	SUSCC
CMPA1	**0.877**			
CMPA2	**0.838**			
CMPA3	**0.902**			
CMPA4	**0.908**			
CMPA5	**0.869**			
FRMP1		**0.837**		
FRMP10		**0.895**		
FRMP11		**0.905**		
FRMP3		**0.910**		
FRMP4		**0.886**		
FRMP5		**0.916**		
FRMP7		**0.885**		
FRMP8		**0.860**		
FRMP9		**0.818**		
SNTW10			**0.881**	
SNTW11			**0.889**	
SNTW2			**0.858**	
SNTW3			**0.877**	
SNTW4			**0.846**	

SNTW5			**0.902**	
SNTW6			**0.873**	
SNTW7			**0.895**	
SNTW8			**0.846**	
SNTW9			**0.895**	
SUSCC1				**0.915**
SUSCC2				**0.904**
SUSCC3				**0.874**
SUSCC4				**0.892**
SUSCC5				**0.828**
SUSCC6				**0.878**
SNTW1			**0.882**	

It has been shown in Table 2 that the values of Cronbach Alpha and composite reliability have been determined. The value of composite reliability coefficient for every unobserved construct lay in range 0.89 and 0.957. All the values are greater than 0.70. The range of Cronbach Alpha is between 0.870 and 0.949.

Table 2: Reliability

	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	CR	(AVE)
CMPA	**0.926**	**0.927**	**0.944**	**0.773**
FRMP	**0.963**	**0.965**	**0.968**	**0.774**
SNTW	**0.970**	**0.970**	**0.973**	**0.769**
SUSCC	**0.943**	**0.944**	**0.955**	**0.778**

The criterion of Tzempelikos and Gounaris [37] was used to determine discriminant validity. It was shown by the researchers that AVE square root value for a variable must be greater than the value of correlation of that variable with another variable in the model.

Table 3: Validity

	CMPA	FRMP	SNTW	SUSCC
CMPA	0.879			
FRMP	0.740	0.880		
SNTW	0.739	0.714	0.877	
SUSCC	0.700	0.722	0.692	0.882

After the determination of measurement model successfully, the structural model is estimated. This is the second step in Smart PLS. the procedures, methods, and criteria have been described in this sector for determining the inner model. Using the statistical t-values, path coefficients and standard errors, the significance and relevance of structural model is determined.

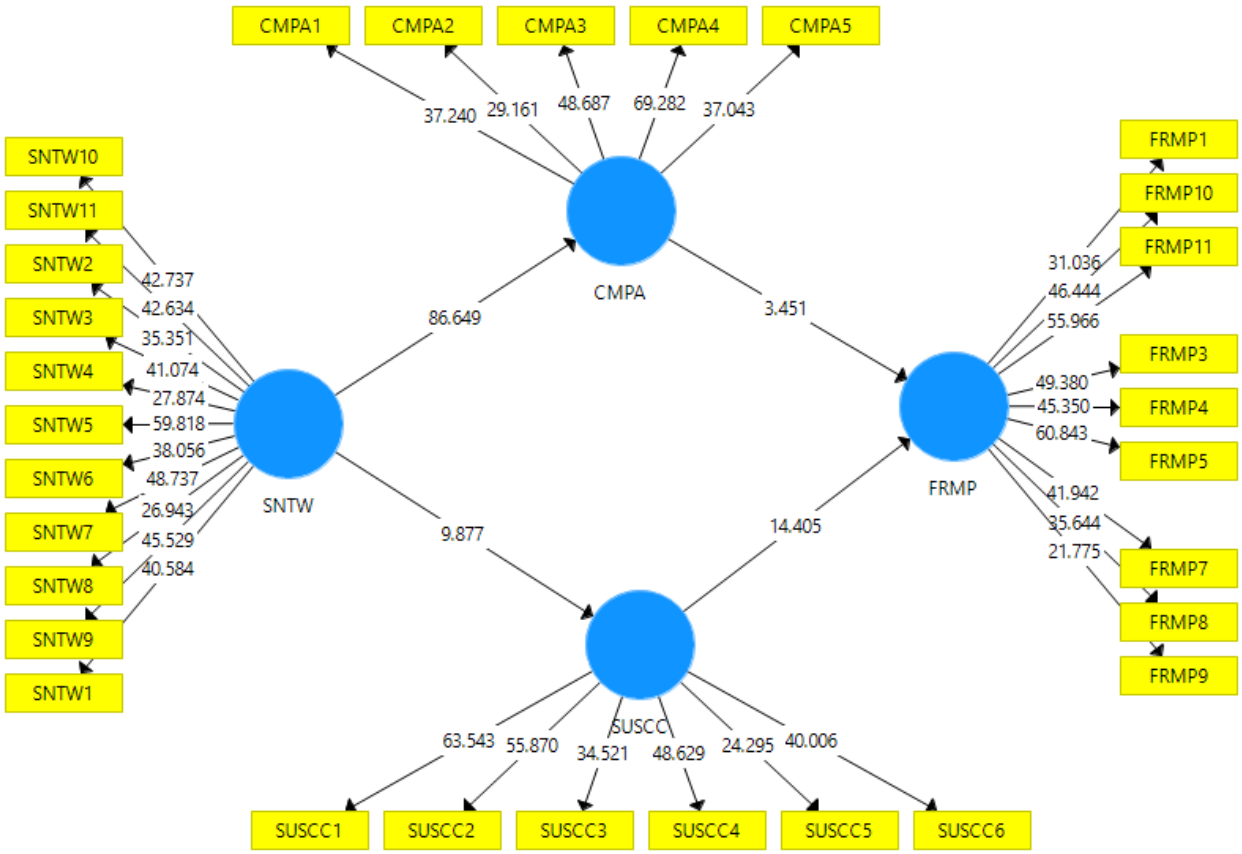

Figure 2: Structural Model

According to the study of Wong [33], the sample of bootstrapping is considered sufficient. In a similar way, the bootstrapping samples were set by Sarstedt, Mitchell [38] as 500. A sample of 5000 was also suggested by Hollingsworth, Randolph [39]. The study has not used a sample of 5000 because of failure to process by the computer. During the assessment of measurement model, standard PLS algorithm was calculated as well. Therefore, the causality of the relationship and path coefficients were found. The results of testing direct hypotheses have been shown in Table 4 and 5.

Table 4: Direct Relationships

	(O)	(M)	(STDEV)	T Statistics	P Values
CMPA -> FRMP	0.184	0.193	0.053	3.451	**0.000**
SNTW -> CMPA	0.939	0.939	0.011	86.649	**0.000**
SNTW -> FRMP	0.721	0.722	0.063	11.524	**0.000**
SNTW -> SUSCC	0.692	0.693	0.070	9.877	**0.000**
SUSCC -> FRMP	0.793	0.785	0.055	14.405	**0.000**

Table 5: Mediation

	(O)	(M)	(STDEV)	(|O/STDEV|)	P Values
SNTW -> CMPA -> FRMP	0.173	0.181	0.050	3.486	**0.000**
SNTW -> SUSCC -> FRMP	0.548	0.541	0.041	13.264	**0.000**

The variations in the endogenous variable explained by exogenous variables are determined by coefficient of determination (R2) [40]. The percentage variations in the dependent variable due to independent variable are shown by the value of R square. The quality of variables incorporated in the research model is also reflected by R square [39]. Thus, R square is an alternative way to determine the quality of structural model in variance based SEM method similar to goodness of fit in covariance based SEM.

Table 6: R-square

	R Square
CMPA	0.881
FRMP	0.867
SUSCC	0.478

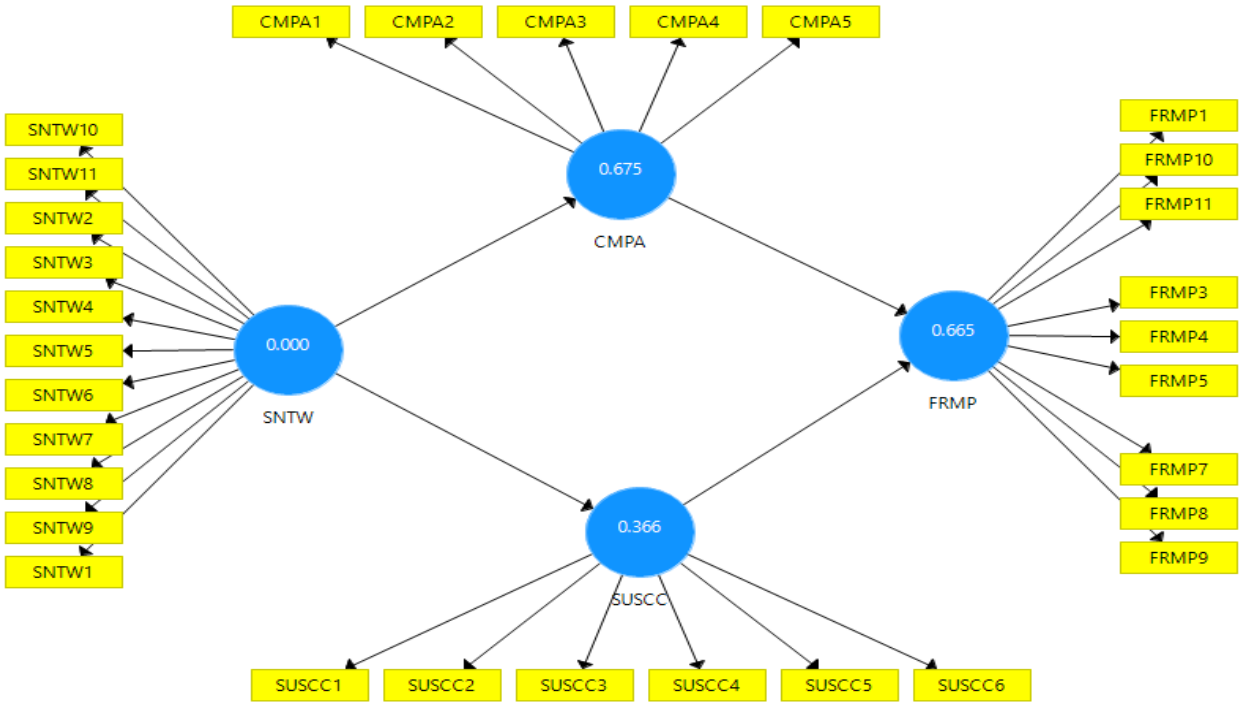

Figure 3: Blindfolding

It was recommended that the predictive relevance of a model should be examined using Q2 apart from determining the level of variations in the dependent variable for predictive accuracy. The re-estimation of model is allowed through the process of blindfolding by eliminating every data point [40]. The process is done for dependent reflective unobserved variable in the research model. When the Q2 value is greater than 0, it ensures predictive relevance of the model [39].

Table 7: Q-square

	SSO	SSE	Q^2 (=1-SSE/SSO)
CMPA	1085.000	353.110	0.675
FRMP	1953.000	654.719	0.665
SNTW	2387.000	2387.000	
SUSCC	1302.000	826.011	0.366

4. Conclusion

Firms can achieve competitive benefits through traditional SCM management capability, i.e. economic capability of SC. The performance of a firm can improve significantly by enhancing SCM capability. For instance, sharing of information with partners in the SC can reduce the uncertainty of demand, inventory level, cost incurred on demand and supply match in the SC [48]. Moreover, the organizational process is simplified by a seamless SC system, which reduced the lead-time with suppliers. These positive influences of SCM capability are supported by social capital theory. Moreover, relational and structural capital helps in reduction of lead time, improvements in product design, operational capability, and quality [41].

The performance of buyer firms and suppliers in the manufacturing sector is considered to be linked with the incorporated of environmental issues in SCM. Total quality management and practices of lean manufacturing are facilitated through effective and efficient use of inputs, reduction of pollution, waste, and controlling internal processes while improving environmental management [42]. This notion has been supported by a number of studies, which state that delivery performance improves, cost of products reduces, and net income improves with overall environmental improvements [43]. It is applicable

to SCs as green SCM positively influence the performance of suppliers and buyers. Particularly, advanced proactive environmental orientation represented by environmental collaboration supports the development of idiosyncratic interaction routines among the partners in the SC [44]. Therefore, innovations are rendered, and the accumulation of valuable assets is improved, which are inimitable, socially embedded, relationship-specific, and unique.

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