Presentation of a Structural Model for Assessing Supply Chain Capabilities in the Iranian Food Industry

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Objective: The purpose of this research was to investigate the supply chain capabilities in the food industries by using indicators of competitive advantage, financial performance, and shareholder value to improve supply chain capabilities and ultimately design an appropriate structural model.

Methodology: The present study is quantitative and descriptive-analytical in nature. The population of the study includes employees and experts in the food manufacturing industries, totaling 500 individuals. To determine the minimum sample size required, Morgan's table for limited populations was used, and ultimately, 217 completed questionnaires were returned and analyzed. The data collection tool was a researcher-made questionnaire. Data analysis was performed using structural equations and AMOS software.

Findings: The results indicated significant relationships and components of the presented model. Factor analysis results showed that the paths and causal relationships between external and internal constructs in the structural model were confirmed with 95 percent probability.

Conclusion: In general, initiatives based on cost reduction and productivity improvement are easier than others. For example, if an initiative focusing on reducing inventory levels leads to achieving previous sales levels, the benefits of this initiative are easily measurable. However, long-term growth requires an increase in revenue, and managers need to focus on all four methods mentioned above to enhance company value.

Keywords: *Structural model, Supply chain, Food industry, Competitive advantage, Financial performance, Shareholder value.*

1 Introduction

The 21st century is the era of changing patterns that govern traditional markets. The world that lies ahead for organizations is one filled with competition, signaling an era full of challenges where most paradigms of business influence are being questioned. Organizations are only able to manage a small portion of the vast and extensive factors

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influencing them, which both directly and indirectly affect their competitiveness (Almajali et al., 2012).

Today, with the development of global industries, product diversity has increased, and products have become more complex. Given the abundance of components in some of these products, there is a felt need to organize production and manufacturing processes. Internal manufacturing of all components presents significant challenges, the most crucial being the organization of human resources and the creation of additional resources during market and demand changes (Cachon & Fisher, 2000).

Supply chain management is a key factor in enhancing effectiveness and achieving organizational goals. Accordingly, supply chain management should be considered a critical area of organizational management, requiring constant monitoring, diagnostics, improvement, and ultimately, moving towards excellence. For gaining and strengthening competitive advantages, performance measurement, continuous improvement, and effective management are essential (Zhang et al., 2023).

The supply chain is regarded as one of the main factors in an organization's success or failure. It involves extensive organized networks that facilitate the holistic development of products and information between suppliers and customers at the lowest cost and highest speed to achieve customer satisfaction. The result of these factors is increased flexibility and responsiveness to unpredictable customer demands (4).

In today's era, different organizations, in response to market demand and customer needs, require collaboration with other elements of the supply chain; thus, an organization's performance is influenced by the activities of other chain members. Nowadays, competition among individual companies has given way to competition among supply chains; in fact, companies must focus not only on their resources and internal activities but also on integrating with suppliers and customers (Haleem et al., 2023).

If a company can design and create a supply chain that meets market demand, it can transform from a small company to a large market. For this purpose, in line with meeting market demand profitably, efficient supply chain operations play a pivotal role. A company must know where it performs well in the supply chain and then decide which activities to focus on to create more added value (Kamalipoor et al., 2023).

Supply chain management is a key factor in increasing effectiveness and achieving organizational goals. As such, it should be considered one of the vital areas of management

that, like other areas, requires monitoring, diagnostics, improvement, and ultimately, striving towards excellence. For gaining and strengthening competitive advantages, continuous performance measurement, improvement, and efficient and effective management are deemed necessary (Ivanov et al., 2021).

The primary goal of supply chain management systems is to ensure the visibility of information and to facilitate open and rapid communication and information sharing among supply chain members. Supply planning systems enable organizations to create demand forecasts for a product and develop sourcing and production plans for that product. Such systems help organizations make better operational decisions (Du, 2022; Habib et al., 2022).

Nowadays, organizations can no longer succeed as separate production or service units in achieving competitive advantages and market share, and they need a well-planned and principled partnership with suppliers and customers. This partnership requires precise and systematic oversight, without which an organization would decline and lose its competitive share to rivals or new industry entrants (Hosseini & Sheikhi, 2013).

Complexity and uncertainty in the environment are characteristics that businesses face, deeply impacting company activities, particularly the supply chain and financial performance. The topic of financial performance has always been a prominent issue in financial literature and a primary concern for business stakeholders in all types of organizations, as it indicates organizational health and ultimately ensures its survival (Qayyum et al., 2013).

Financial operations complement production operations; financing, production, and investment in new production processes, innovative products, and developing new markets also make distribution operations possible and guaranteed. Given that some financing methods come from sources of debt and common stock issuance, companies need to maintain a satisfactory financial state to attract investment groups (Karimi & Rafiee, 2014).

If a company is successful in creating value, not only investors and internal company members but also the broader society will benefit from the value created. Performance measurement in the decision-making process, considering the importance of the role of the capital market, is one of the most significant topics in financial economics. Therefore, the function of financial and economic metrics for evaluating company performance is essential (Almajali et al., 2012).

The main strategies for increasing shareholder value include operational, investment, and financial strategies. Operational strategy leads to improved economic efficiency, reduced operational costs, or through better use of resources, leading to improved profitability. Investment strategies, such as updating production capacity and technological processes, lead to an overall improvement in company performance. Financial strategies examine financing options, including issuing stock and debt (Karimi & Rafiee, 2014; Qayyum et al., 2013). If companies seek a sustainable competitive advantage in their environment, they must employ tools that allow them to execute an integrated and appropriate plan for the entire supply chain. These plans include optimal planning decisions in operational and financial areas, which are value-based. Shareholder value improves through maximizing company value. Laínez and colleagues consider shareholder value to depend on three factors: net income, invested capital, and debts (Cachon & Fisher, 2000; Gunasekaran et al., 2004).

Supply chain management is both a theory and a practice. It extends beyond a single organization and considers everything involved in the production and delivery of a product or service, connecting all elements in such a way that they function as an efficient, borderless team. This means that customers, suppliers, transport companies, and business competitors unite and form a network to make the best possible use of time and resources (Karimi & Rafiee, 2014; Ramezani, 2014).

Supply chain management enables companies to fully integrate internal operations and effectively collaborate with suppliers, consumers, and other companies in the supply chain to enhance their competitiveness. Organizations must change their structure and behavior to acquire and maintain necessary resources and create alliances that enhance mutual benefits. With increasing global competition, companies must reconsider the importance of supply chain integration (Almajali et al., 2012; Robinson & Malhotra, 2005).

Supply chain management is a blend of art and science used to improve access to raw materials, manufacture products or services, and deliver them to customers. Thus, supply chain management involves the integrated process of coordinating supply chain activities and the related information flows through improvement and synchronization of activities across the supply chain production and delivery (Sahafzadeh & Haghighi, 2023; Zhang et al., 2023).

The concept of value and value creation has transformed performance evaluation in companies. Accounting and financial metrics have given way to economic approaches. Shareholder value metrics are among the newest introduced with an economic approach, which can assist investors in selecting investments with better returns and also aid managers in understanding competitive strategies (Crisóstomo et al., 2020; Jafari et al., 2017).

The fundamental role of management in modern organizations is to create value for all individuals and entities that in some way find their existence within the organization. Shareholders, due to their central role in entrepreneurship and shaping the enterprise as well as accepting risk, hold a special position. Value for shareholders is practically created through generating value for other stakeholders, and the art of management involves integrating and balancing value creation for the entire set of stakeholders (García-Blandón et al., 2023; Hussain et al., 2023). The evolution of management shows that companies initially aim to cope with severe environmental changes and improve organizational performance and then strive for a larger market share, maximizing shareholder profits, and gaining a competitive edge by examining supply chain management. Success in an industrial cluster is dependent on various variables and factors. One of the main concepts worth exploring in this context is the concept of value from various aspects. The role of business units in the economic structure of countries is evident, and today, they utilize a significant amount of economic resources, which in turn plays a significant role in the development and progress of countries (Evers et al., 2012; Taghva et al., 2023).

Many organizations and companies in Iran have somewhat realized the importance of the role and position of supply chain management in the success of their business. In many cases, company managers undertake projects and studies to improve their supply chain management, whether through the use of information technology tools or by employing optimization techniques like inventory management, lean manufacturing, and other methods (21).

One of the most important goals for companies is to create and increase value for shareholders. Shareholders, being the primary owners of the business unit, are looking for a model that allows them to make decisions about buying, selling, and holding their stocks. The failure to use appropriate metrics to measure the performance and stocks of a company causes the value of the company to not move towards its true value (Crisóstomo et al., 2020; Guerrero et al., 2020).

In recent years, the food industry in Iran has become one of the leading industries in the country and holds a special

place in its development and growth. This industry, compared to other industries in the country, has a better competitive position. In this research, the position of various supply chain management operations on the financial performance and shareholder value of companies active in this industry is examined, and the main goal is to provide a clearer perspective on the role of different dimensions of supply chain management operations in improving the financial performance of the company and to present a conceptual framework to explain this topic. Therefore, the current research aims to present a structural model for assessing the capabilities of the supply chain in the food industries of Iran.

2 Methods and Materials

The present study is correlational. Additionally, since the researcher is examining the current situation, it is also descriptive and employs a survey approach. Because the study is conducted as a case study and the results are intended to be applied and utilized in the statistical population, the research is applied in nature.

The population of this research consists of managers and experts in the food manufacturing industries, totaling 500 individuals. To determine the minimum necessary sample size, Morgan's table for a limited population was used, resulting in a required sample size of 217 individuals. To ensure the return of a sufficient number of questionnaires, 300 questionnaires were distributed, and ultimately, 217 completed questionnaires were returned and analyzed. The tool of this research is a questionnaire developed based on the indices, components, concepts, and categories of the proposed model, consisting of 29 questions. The provided questionnaire uses a five-point Likert scale ranging from

very low (score 1), low (score 2), medium (score 3), high (score 4), to very high (score 5). The method of analysis in this research is conducted using measurement models of structural equation modeling under the evaluation of constructs by relevant indices, in other words, using confirmatory factor analysis to determine whether the designed questions can actually measure the intended construct and whether the questions and indices considered have the necessary validity. For this purpose, the software LISREL 8.80 is used. Structural equations belong to the family of multivariate regression that allows researchers to test a set of regression equations simultaneously.

3 Findings and Results

Initially, the research identified the indices and components of each of the factors "competitive advantage, financial performance, and shareholder value," and the proposed conceptual model of the research was formed. For the effectiveness of the components, confirmatory factor analysis was used.

To determine the validity of the supply chain capability variables, confirmatory factor analysis was employed. The output from the Amos software indicates that all factor loadings are above 0.4. The calculated value of df/2x is 3.5, and a df/2x less than 5 indicates a good fit of the model. Additionally, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) should be less than 0.08, which in the presented model is 0.045. The indices NNFI, AGFI, CFI, and NFI should also be more than 0.9, which in the model under review are above the determined amount. Therefore, the data of this research has an appropriate fit with the factorial structure of this scale, indicating that the questions align with the variables of supply chain capabilities.

Table 1

Fit Indices for Supply Chain Capability Variables

Index	Index Name	Abbreviation	Acceptable Fit	Index Value in Research
Absolute Fit	Degrees of Freedom	DF	-	234
	Significance Level	P	Less than 0.05	0.000
	Chi-Square to Degrees of Freedom Ratio	CMIN/DF	Between 1 and 5	1.73
	Chi-Square Coverage Level	Chi-Square	Greater than 5%	0.4
	Goodness of Fit	CFI	Greater than 0.9	0.934
	Analyzed Goodness of Fit	AGFI	Greater than 0.9	0.940
Comparative Fit	Unadjusted Fit	NNFI	Greater than 0.9	0.92
	Normalized Fit	NFI	Close to one	0.93
	Comparative Fit Index	CFI	Greater than 0.9	0.934
	Relative Fit	RFI	Greater than 0.5	0.64
	Incremental Fit	IFI	0-1	0.6
Parsimonious Fit	Normalized Parsimonious Fit	PNFI	Greater than 0.5	0.75

Parsimonious Comparative Fit		PGFI	Greater than 0.5	0.911
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation		RMSEA	Less than 0.1	0.045
Normalized Chi-Square		CMIN	Between 1 and 3	2.2

To determine the validity of competitive advantage, confirmatory factor analysis was utilized. All factor loadings are above 0.4. According to the output from AMOS, the calculated df/2x value is 4.5, and a df/2x smaller than 5 indicates a good model fit. Additionally, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) should be less than 0.08, which in the presented model is 0.057. The indices NNFI, AGFI, CFI, and NFI should also be more than 0.9, which in the model under review are above the determined level. Therefore, the data of this research has an appropriate fit with the factorial structure of this scale, indicating alignment of the questions with the variables of competitive advantage.

Table 2

Fit Indices for Competitive Advantage Variables

Index	Index Name	Abbreviation	Acceptable Fit	Index Value in Research
Absolute Fit	Degrees of Freedom	DF	-	251
	Significance Level	P	Less than 0.05	0.000
	Chi-Square to Degrees of Freedom Ratio	CMIN/DF	Between 1 and 5	1.58
	Chi-Square Coverage Level	Chi-Square	Greater than 5%	0.39
	Goodness of Fit	CFI	Greater than 0.9	0.981
	Analyzed Goodness of Fit	AGFI	Greater than 0.9	0.941
Comparative Fit	Unadjusted Fit	NNFI	Greater than 0.9	0.9
	Normalized Fit	NFI	Close to one	0.92
	Comparative Fit Index	CFI	Greater than 0.9	0.981
	Relative Fit	RFI	Greater than 0.5	0.58
	Incremental Fit	IFI	0-1	0.74
Parsimonious Fit	Normalized Parsimonious Fit	PNFI	Greater than 0.5	0.9
	Parsimonious Comparative Fit	PGFI	Greater than 0.5	0.941
	Root Mean Square Error of Approximation	RMSEA	Less than 0.1	0.055
	Normalized Chi-Square	CMIN	Between 1 and 3	1.8

Numbers on the paths are factor loadings; all factor loadings are above 0.4. According to the output from AMOS, the calculated df/2x value is 2.9, and a df/2x smaller than 5 indicates a good model fit. Additionally, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) should be less than 0.08, which in the presented model is 0.047. The indices NNFI, AGFI, CFI, and NFI should also be more than 0.9, which in the model under review are above the determined level. Therefore, the data of this research has an appropriate fit with the factorial structure of this scale, indicating alignment of the questions with the variables of financial performance.

Table 3

Fit Indices for Financial Performance Variables

Index	Index Name	Abbreviation	Acceptable Fit	Index Value in Research
Absolute Fit	Degrees of Freedom	DF	-	50
	Significance Level	P	Less than 0.05	0.000
	Chi-Square to Degrees of Freedom Ratio	CMIN/DF	Between 1 and 5	2.96
	Chi-Square Coverage Level	Chi-Square	Greater than 5%	0.14
	Goodness of Fit	CFI	Greater than 0.9	0.955
	Analyzed Goodness of Fit	AGFI	Greater than 0.9	0.941
Comparative Fit	Unadjusted Fit	NNFI	Greater than 0.9	0.9
	Normalized Fit	NFI	Close to one	0.99
	Comparative Fit Index	CFI	Greater than 0.9	0.955
	Relative Fit	RFI	Greater than 0.5	0.64
	Incremental Fit	IFI	0-1	0.59
Parsimonious Fit	Normalized Parsimonious Fit	PNFI	Greater than 0.5	0.99

Parsimonious Comparative Fit	PGFI	Greater than 0.5	0.901
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation	RMSEA	Less than 0.1	0.069
Normalized Chi-Square	CMIN	Between 1 and 3	1.9

To determine the validity of shareholder value factors, confirmatory factor analysis was utilized. Numbers on the paths are factor loadings, and all factor loadings are above 0.4. Findings related to the fit indices for shareholder value factors in Table 4 indicate that the indices NNFI, AGFI, CFI, and NFI are at an acceptable level, showing that the data in this research fit well with the factorial structure of this scale and indicate alignment of the questions with the construct of shareholder value factors.

Table 4

Fit Indices for Shareholder Value Factors

Index	Index Name	Abbreviation	Acceptable Fit	Index Value in Research
Absolute Fit	Degrees of Freedom	DF	-	24
	Significance Level	P	Less than 0.05	0.000
	Chi-Square to Degrees of Freedom Ratio	CMIN/DF	Between 1 and 5	1.91
	Chi-Square Coverage Level	Chi-Square	Greater than 5%	0.46
	Goodness of Fit	CFI	Greater than 0.9	0.930
	Analyzed Goodness of Fit	AGFI	Greater than 0.9	0.947
Comparative Fit	Unadjusted Fit	NNFI	Greater than 0.9	0.94
	Normalized Fit	NFI	Close to one	0.933
	Comparative Fit Index	CFI	Greater than 0.9	0.918
	Relative Fit	RFI	Greater than 0.5	0.74
	Incremental Fit	IFI	0-1	0.62
Parsimonious Fit	Normalized Parsimonious Fit	PNFI	Greater than 0.5	0.96
	Parsimonious Comparative Fit	PGFI	Greater than 0.5	0.930
	Root Mean Square Error of Approximation	RMSEA	Less than 0.1	0.071
	Normalized Chi-Square	CMIN	Between 1 and 3	2.3

Given the significant coefficients, since the Critical Ratio (CR) value must be greater than 1.96 or less than -1.96 for rejecting or confirming relationships, a parameter value between these ranges in the model is not considered significant. Moreover, values within these two thresholds indicate no significant difference between the calculated weights and zero at a 95% confidence level. The results of the model test are presented in Table 5:

Table 5

Results of the Structural Model Evaluation of Supply Chain Capabilities in the Iranian Food Industry

Relationships	Standard Estimate	Standard Error	Critical Ratio	Significance Level
Competitive Advantage → Structural Model Evaluation of Supply Chain Capabilities in the Iranian Food Industry	0.36	0.025	3.69	0.000
Financial Performance → Structural Model Evaluation of Supply Chain Capabilities in the Iranian Food Industry	0.29	0.036	4.12	0.010
Shareholder Value → Structural Model Evaluation of Supply Chain Capabilities in the Iranian Food Industry	0.42	0.036	14.26	0.000

Based on this, the research model was finally assessed using Amos software, and as observed, all relationships are confirmed at a 95% confidence level. The pattern related to the causal relationships in the structural model evaluating the supply chain capabilities in the Iranian food industry is presented in the above table. According to the results obtained, competitive advantage, financial performance, and shareholder value have been influential in the final model of the research.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

In recent years, supply chain management has garnered considerable attention from individuals in academic forums, scientific publications, conferences, business development

programs, and university courses. The conditions that have led to the definition and design of such an approach are the increasing competitiveness and the struggle for organizational survival, which has been made possible by closer communications and advancements in information technology. Organizations recognize that meeting customer needs is the key to this survival. Modern supply chain management has emerged from research conducted in the late 1950s about the transfer of inventory to and from the company. According to research findings, factors such as competitive advantage, financial performance, and shareholder value have been identified as influential in the food supply chain model.

Competitive advantage consists of a set of factors or capabilities that consistently enable a company to perform better than its competitors and occurs when a company achieves advancements and developments in one or more indicators that give it an advantage over competitors; for example, access to natural resources or highly specialized human resources, industrial or information technologies, etc. Competitive advantage is the degree to which a company's offerings are more attractive to customers compared to competitors and differ in features or dimensions that enable it to provide better services to customers, and overall, it is the value that an organization offers to its customers in a way that at that time this value is not offered by potential and actual competitors.

The financial performance of a company is a major concern for shareholders and managers of economic units, with managers using new methods to better manage the organization and deliver superior performance. Various factors influence the financial performance of companies, and each company tries to select a set of efficient and effective methods to improve its business processes and procedures. The level of development of countries, the acceptability of the method, the risk-taking of managers in selecting methods, and the existence of software that facilitates the use of these methods in organizations will lead to a superior advantage in selecting them. Financial performance is one of the most important topics discussed in management research and undoubtedly the most important criterion for measuring success in commercial companies.

With increasing global competition, business units have focused their efforts on creating value for shareholders. Therefore, it is important for commercial units to measure the value they create for their shareholders. The sustainability of the created value enables business units to assess past decisions annually and make decisions that improve value creation for shareholders. This perspective, that shareholders are the owners of the company and hence the business unit is accountable to them, is not new. The value of a company can be increased in four ways: increasing revenue, reducing operational costs, reducing working capital, and increasing asset productivity. Generally, initiatives based on cost reduction and productivity increase are easier than other measures. For example, if an initiative focused on reducing inventory levels results in achieving previous sales levels, the benefits of this initiative are easily measurable. However, long-term growth requires an increase in revenue, and managers need to focus on all four mentioned methods to enhance the company's value.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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