

Absorptive Capacity and Competitive Advantage in Disruptive Business Environment

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ABSTRACT

In today's rapidly evolving and disruptive business environment, organizations are increasingly challenged to generate and maintain competitive advantage. This study presents a comprehensive literature review about absorptive capacity—defined as a firm's ability to acquire and assimilate external knowledge, as potential absorptive capacity, to transform and exploit new knowledge, as realized absorptive capacity—related to competitive advantage, by synthesizing prior research from strategic knowledge management perspectives. The review identifies key themes, theoretical foundations, and empirical findings that link absorptive capacity to competitive advantage. The study explores how firms leverage absorptive capacity to adapt to disruptions, foster and improve competitive performance of firm. It highlights the relationship between knowledge acquisition processes and organizational performance, emphasizing that firms with strong absorptive capacity are better positioned to anticipate changes and respond effectively. The study also discusses key determinants of absorptive capacity, including organizational learning, prior knowledge, and knowledge-sharing mechanisms. Findings suggest that absorptive capacity strengthens resilience and long-term competitiveness in uncertain environments. The paper concludes by offering managerial implications for building and sustaining absorptive capacity as a strategic asset in the context of disruptive business environment.

Keywords: Absorptive capacity, Knowledge acquisition, Knowledge assimilation, Knowledge transformation, Knowledge exploitation, Competitive advantage.

INTRODUCTION

Recently, the organizational environment has been experiencing numerous changes, including advancements in technology, shifts in social dynamics, political developments, legal reforms, and economic transformations (Renteria, 2025). It is important for organizations to examine and comprehend the trend of these changes. It is crucial to understand these changes in order to effectively manage any type of organization, whether it is governmental or business. Every organization interacts with a dynamic environment as part of their daily activities. In order to survive and stay ahead in a constantly changing business environment, organizations need to enhance their strategic capabilities. The capability of organizations to face and adjust to a constantly disruptive and competitive environment will impact their ability to achieve and sustain their competitiveness (Bungnasaeng et al., 2020).

Basil (2018) defines the organizational environment as the resources that surround an organization. Additionally, Fabac (2010) characterize the organizational environment as a complex, disruptive, and unpredictable system. Atuahene et al. (2023) see the organization as a system that is adaptively rational but constrained by environmental uncertainty, multiple goals and interests, and limitations in information processing capabilities.

Balak (2025) emphasizes the importance of organizations adapting to their evolving environment, while Atuahene et al. (2023) asserts that every organization interacts with other constituents of its environment. Organizations seek to reduce uncertainty by concentrating on the immediate future and trying to manage the

surroundings (Ejdys, 2013). Neglecting to address significant environmental shifts can have a detrimental impact on companies' success, as noted by (Kelliher & Henderson, 2006).

The organization's existence in dealing with uncertain and disruptive environment is linked to various paradigms (Limone & Marinovic, 2013), such as Porter's industrial organization paradigm, Shapiro's strategic conflict paradigm, Wernfelt's resource-based view paradigm, Teece's dynamic capabilities paradigm, and Senge's learning paradigm. In general, those paradigms aim to address strategic management questions such as the distinctions between successful and unsuccessful organizations.

In terms of strategy, this ever-changing environment is connected to how organizations maximize their strengths, assess their weaknesses, take advantage of opportunities, and evaluate threats. The presence of these factors is a result of the interconnection between organizations and the business environment.

Improving the ability to learn has been recognized as a crucial factor for organizations to maintain their competitive edge in the increasingly strong competition. The ability of generating quality of learning is a major factor for organizations in maintaining competitiveness and enhancing sustainability in today's competitive environment (Kelliher & Henderson, 2006). Less quality of learning can cause less competitiveness, and vice versa. A learning organization has developed the continuous capacity to adapt and change and allow an organization to develop knowledge.

Lo (2017) defines the learning organization as a group of people working together collectively to enhance their capacities to create results they really care about. In many organizations, the responsibility for learning belongs to a specialized group known as training and development practitioners, who are regarded as experts in the design, and presentation of training program. Moreover, as a strategic action of organization, learning is one of the organizational strategic discussing the organizational ability to routinely improve their learning efforts in facing the dynamical environment of the organization.

The success of the organization applying learning ability will depend on the ability of the four factors as leverage factors of learning, referring to absorptive capacity, namely knowledge acquisition, knowledge assimilation, knowledge transformation and knowledge exploitation (Lewandowska, 2015; Bosch et al., 2003). Knowledge acquisition is an ability of the firm to acquire knowledge from and about the customer via multiple channels, knowledge assimilation is an ability to interpret the knowledge based on the previous customer-related knowledge structures, knowledge transformation is an ability to integrate the knowledge within the firm so that new value creating offerings to the customer can be developed, and knowledge exploitation is an ability to develop own internal competencies based on the new customer-related knowledge and ability to provide added value to the customer (Aqdas et al., 2019).

Those four factors of absorptive capacity have considerable impact on organizational competitiveness. Many studies about absorptive capacity tend to explore the relationship between absorptive capacity such as, performance, capability, profitability, new product development and innovation. There have been few studies about absorptive capacity and organizational competitiveness, in the context of facing disruptive organizational environment. This limitation calls for a more integrative perspective that links absorptive capacity processes with the evolution of competitive performance over time. Therefore, how organizations keep their existence during higher competitiveness by optimizing their absorptive capacity to generate and maintain their competitiveness in disruptive environment is figured out in this study, by analyzing factors of acquiring knowledge, assimilating knowledge, as a potential absorptive capacity, and transforming knowledge, and exploiting knowledge, as a realized absorptive capacity, known as absorptive capacity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Business Environment

The phenomenon of disruption is not new, but this term is closely related to the dynamics of technological developments that result in increasing uncertainty in the business environment. Business does not operate in isolation but dynamically affected by internal and external factors. These internal and external factors

collectively constitute the business environment (Albort-Morant et al., 2018). Internal environmental factors are within the control of business, whereas external factors are beyond the control of business. Business and its environment are closely inter-related and mutually interdependent. The success of business lies in understanding the environmental changes and adapting its business policies accordingly.

It can be defined that an organization's business environment refers to all external factors that influence how a business operates, are mostly beyond the control of the company, and are disruptive. Every organization is influenced by its environment, and this influence affects the organization's goals and functioning. The environment in which an organization exists is made up of all the actions, conditions, events, and influences that surround and impact the organization (Atuahene et al., 2023).

Macdonald (2013) categorizes the organizational environment into two types: specific environment and general environment. The specific environment includes external forces that significantly impact to the achievement of organizations' goals, such as customers, suppliers, and competitors. General environment includes the economic, political, socio-cultural, demographic, technological and global conditions that affect organizations' goal. The aspects of business environment also are as follows; internal and external environment, micro and macro environment, controllable and uncontrollable environment, as well.

The business environment plays a crucial role in creating and maintaining the success and sustainability of organizations. It helps in identifying business opportunities, allowing firms to gain competitive advantage by carefully analyzing all opportunities in the surroundings. It also ensures the optimum utilization of resources such as raw materials, labor, and capital, which are provided by the environment with an expectation of value in return (Kelliher & Henderson, 2006).

By continuously analyzing and adapting to uncertain environment, businesses can identify potential threats and opportunities, finding new solutions to survive and thrive, and enabling them to take proactive to improve their competitiveness (Çakmak, 2023). Furthermore, understanding the dynamic nature of the environment helps firms cope with all dynamic changes and respond effectively to evolving customer needs. It also supports firms in responding competition by analyzing competitors' strategies. In addition, the business environment assists in identifying a firm's strengths and weaknesses in term of technological changes. Overall, it plays a vital role in planning and policy formulation by providing insights into both opportunities and challenges, thereby guiding better decision-making. (Macdonald, 2013).

Competitiveness and Competitive Advantage

Competitiveness today is as prominent as globalization, described as a complex and disruptive subject, mainly driven by technological changes, and affect in delivering a competitive advantage to a firm (Bhawsar & Chattopadhyay, 2015). To compete successfully, integration of firm's internal function is required with the external functions. Therefore, in such conditions organizations must always look for new sources of competitive (Bhawsar & Chattopadhyay, 2015).

Competitiveness is a complex aspect that had called the attention of firms due to the importance for survival to changeable environments and highly competition. Although it is complex, Medeiros et al. (2019) argued that competitiveness is important because it is positively related to long-term economic growth of firms. It mostly affected by internal and mostly external factors, based on the fact that firms are a part of an industry and operates on different environments (Çakmak, 2023). External variables may influence the competitive position of a firm. Internal factors refer to processes, systems, human capital, structure, performance and organizational practices of every firm. Internal factors form an interaction with external variables with the objective of being competitive through obtaining superior performance and sustainable competitive advantages.

Compared to competitive advantage, competitiveness is a concept with more comprehensive domain. Competitiveness emphasizes not only macro environments but micro environments, implying the competition among the firms within an industry which is leading to their competitive advantage. Competitiveness focuses on competition among the companies in an industry, whereas competitive advantage focusses on the value created for customer in comparison with competitors (Bhawsar & Chattopadhyay, 2015).

Competitive advantage is an important source of organizing human and non-human resources working in the company through time management and the nature of activities to reach a high return on investment (Yuleva-Chuchulayna & Emilova Yuleva, 2019). In the field of strategic management, competitive advantage has been defined as a firm consistently earning a higher rate of return than its competitors. Competitive advantage also is obtained by organizations when they can develop a set of attributes that allow it to outperform their competitors (Zuñiga-Collazos et al., 2019).

Moreover, (Barney Jay B. & Hesterly William S., 2019) said that a firm is said to have a competitive advantage when it is implementing a value creating strategy not simultaneously being implemented by any current or potential competitors. Also, firms are said to have a sustained competitive advantage when it is implementing a value creating strategy not simultaneously being implemented by any current or potential competitors and when these other firms are unable to duplicate the benefits of this strategy (Bhawsar & Chattopadhyay, 2015).

The various notions of competitiveness and considered the many factors can provide competitive advantage of firms. The analysis of competitiveness thus needs to consider the diversity of factors that are capable of generating competitive advantages—such as sales efforts, training for production, access to sources of raw materials, and access to suppliers. Competitiveness is manifested through competitive advantages. It is considered that this relationship between these categories is causal and that competitiveness is reflected in the manifestation of the competitive advantage. (Yuleva-Chuchulayna & Emilova Yuleva, 2019)

Absorptive Capacity

Now, companies need to absorb new knowledge from external sources to handle dynamic environmental issues. However, the internal mechanisms through which external knowledge is turned into green innovations remain scarcely addressed (Albort-Morant et al., 2018).

Absorptive capacity is one of the concepts explaining how companies build up their abilities to learn from external partners and use the new knowledge to innovate and grow. It is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct that creates innovation-related value for the organization, including a set of (Bosch et al., 2003). Two types of absorptive capacity are potential absorptive capacity, including knowledge acquisition and assimilation and realized absorptive capacity, including encompassing knowledge transformation and exploitation (Lis & Sudolska, 2015). The two first constitute an organization's potential absorptive capacity, and the other two dimensions constitute an organization's realized absorptive capacity represents its combination, utilization and application, and potential absorptive capacity embodies the integration of external knowledge within a firm's knowledge repository.

Absorptive capacity is defined as the ability to recognize the value of new external knowledge, assimilate it, and apply it to commercial ends. Key antecedents discerned influencing absorptive capacity are both prior related knowledge (including basic skills and learning experience) and organizational factors, such as the structure of communication and distribution of knowledge (Bosch et al., 2003), enabling firms to adjust to a rapidly changing environment and achieve sustained competitive advantage (Lewandowska, 2015).

More clearly, Albort-Morant et al., (2018), describe that the first concept of absorptive capacity is acquisition capacity referring to the firms' capacity to identify and acquire of valuable external knowledges, through a process of identification and evaluation of external knowledge. This is how firms evaluate and utilize all previous knowledge, identify, assimilate and apply new information value. The second is assimilation capacity, that is about firm's habits, methods, and routines that lead them to effective assessment, process, understanding all external sources of information, process. This capability is deeply rooted in the individual's understanding and knowledge interpretation. Whereas, the third is transformation capacity referring to the combination of the newly acquired external knowledge and the firm's prior related knowledge. In this step, firms should develop and refine the routines to combine existing knowledge and the newly acquired and assimilated knowledge". This phase is considered to be the most relevant. Lastly, exploitation capacity is defined as a routine of firms' capability that need firms to refine, extend, and leverage existing competencies or to create new ones by combining acquired knowledge and transform it into firms' activities. All the other phases thus should lead to knowledge exploitation.

DISCUSSION

As said before, absorptive capacity is generally understood as firm's ability to recognize the value of new external knowledge. Based on this approach, this study would like to focus and explain about absorptive capacity and competitive advantage related to dynamic business environment. By combining these two aspects leads to the insight into the role of absorptive capacity in gaining competitive advantage of a firm facing disruptive environment.

The disruption of the business environment has ensured focused attention on organizational knowledge as a dominant source of competitive advantage. To survive this pressure, firms need to apply knowledge management strategy, like absorptive capacity has emerged as an underlying theme in strategy and organization research (Jansen et al., 2005), which is defined the ability of a firm to acquire the value of new external knowledge, assimilate it, transform it and assimilate it to commercial ends (Bosch et al., 2003). First introduced by Cohen and Levinthal, absorptive capacity refers to an organization's ability to recognize the value of external knowledge, assimilate it, and apply it for commercial purposes (Albort-Morant et al., 2018)

In business practice, competitiveness leads to the increase of organization's sustainable competitive advantage and the need to interact with its dynamic environment in more open ways. Therefore, to increase competitiveness, firms have to open up their processes and apply knowledge from outside sources. There are many factors that can be considered in a company's efforts to achieve competitiveness, one approach is that absorptive capacity, as a higher-level dynamic capability, conceptualized as a multidimensional construct that creates organizational knowledge, consisting of four lower-level capabilities; namely, acquisition, assimilation, transformation and exploitation (Arndt et al., 2023).

According to Albort-Morant et al., (2018), absorptive capacity could be seen as playing a key role in inducing a firm's intention to implement competitiveness practices, because it applies new knowledge for the attainment of products, innovations, services or processes that involve significant improvements with respect to existing ones. Moreover, Jansen et al., (2005) argue that firms need to manage dimensions of absorptive capacity successfully to obtain superior performance. Many studies predict stronger effects of absorptive capacity on firms' competitiveness. As stated by Arndt et al., (2023) that absorptive capacity provides firms' competitive advantage in terms of decision-making.

There are two aspects of absorptive capacity, namely, potential absorptive capacity and realized absorptive capacity. Potential and realized capacity are different concepts that involve very different strategies and structures. While potential absorptive capacity requires change, flexibility and creativity, realized capacity requires control and stability. Firms focusing on acquisition and assimilation of new external knowledge, as potential absorptive capacity, are able to continually renew their knowledge stock, but they may suffer from the costs of acquisition without gaining benefits from exploitation. Conversely, firms focusing on transformation and exploitation, as realized absorptive capacity, may achieve short-term profits through exploitation but fall into a competence trap and may not be able to respond to environmental changes (Bosch et al., 2003).

Following the reasoning about the firms' ability to continually evaluate the level of internal knowledge and utilize outside knowledge is largely a function of the level of firms' competitiveness. Therefore, this describes that firms' competitiveness deals with an organization's capability of identifying and acquiring external environmental knowledge that is critical to its competitiveness. As a part of potential absorptive capacity, this phase of knowledge acquisition has a significant effect on competitive advantage (Akram et al., 2022). This involves scanning the environment, investing in research and development, and maintaining relationships with external partners. Firms that are strong in acquisition are better at recognizing important trends and opportunities before their competitors.

As an equal part of potential absorptive capacity, knowledge assimilation is composed of the firm's routines and processes, also allowing firms' competitiveness by analyzing, interpreting, and understanding the knowledge obtained from external sources (Bahlawan, 2023). This dimension of absorptive capacity also consists of the interpretation and understanding of individuals' knowledge. This stage approaches the individual level more than the collective one. Specially, knowledge assimilation describes the capacity of understanding new external

knowledge and linking it with the prior environmental knowledge base. As an example by Waldemar & Maciej (2016), in terms of technological advancement and dynamic change, an important success factor in the process of technology transfer appears to be, therefore, the company's ability to assimilate it. Thus, these two factors of potential absorptive capacity, acquisition and assimilation capabilities utilize external environment knowledge.

Furthermore, it can be explained that realized absorptive capacity plays a mediator role between potential absorptive capacity and organizational competitiveness. It means that firms cannot exploit external knowledge without previously having acquired and assimilated it. With a higher interpreting new knowledge, firms will be more proactive in the exploitation of new external opportunities that arise in the organization's environment. Therefore, acquisition and assimilation can also provide an incentive for increasing transformation and exploitation (Bosch et al., 2003).

Obtaining external knowledge does not guarantee the operation of the same. Therefore, transformation and exploitation phases are required, forming the realized absorptive capacity dimension, which serves to reflect previously acquired environmental knowledge. The knowledge transformation is the stage at which this knowledge is incorporated into the firm's existing knowledge, and the knowledge exploitation uses the newly amalgamated knowledge, in conjunction with the firm's existing knowledge, for commercial goals.

Transformation involves combining newly acquired knowledge with existing knowledge within the organization. This transformative process is the stage at which the knowledge is incorporated into the firms' existing knowledge (Arndt et al., 2023). It is also crucial because it allows firms to refine, adapt, and reconfigure knowledge to fit their specific context. Through transformation, organizations generate new insights and innovative ideas.

The final stage, called exploitation, is the exploitative process, uses the newly amalgamated knowledge, in conjunction with the firm's existing knowledge, for commercial ends (Arndt et al., 2023). This last phase comprises an organization's capability to refine, extend or leverage its existing competencies, or to create new ones by incorporating acquired and transformed knowledge into its operations and procedures. Exploitation directly affects and contributes to firm performance, as it turns knowledge into new knowledge generating tangible outcomes that support competitive advantage. Effective knowledge exploitation requires recognizing the organizational knowledge needs and the relevant organizational knowledge sources.

The intersection between absorptive capacity and competitive advantage lies in an organization's ability to transform external knowledge into sustainable competitive advantage. Absorptive capacity, a concept introduced by Cohen and Levinthal, refers to a firm's capability to recognize and acquire the value of new external knowledge, assimilate it, and apply it for gaining competitive advantage. Clearly, it plays an important role in shaping how effectively firms can innovate and adapt within a disruptive competitive environment. In term of absorptive capacity, competitive advantage of the firm, on the other hand, is achieved when a firm is able to create more value than its competitors, either through potential absorptive capacity or realized absorptive capacity. The link between these two concepts emerges when absorptive capacity enables firms to continuously acquire and utilize knowledge in ways that enhance their strategic position. Firms with applying strong absorptive capacity are better equipped to gain and maintain competitive advantage in disruptive business environment.

CONCLUSION

Disruptive environment forces and drives for firms' capability to recognize, understand, and internalize valuable external knowledge, which is further enhanced by combining and applying all new knowledge to competitive advantage.

Absorptive capacity is a major element of strategy that enhances organizations' sustainability and success in today's disruptive environment. By applying absorptive capacity, organizations can successfully enhance their knowledge in generating and maintain competitive advantage. This study reveals that firms tend to adopt absorptive capacity that strengthen explorative and exploit knowledge in dynamic environments, which is a

pathway to improving competitive capability. Firms with high absorptive capacity are more effective at enhancing knowledge in response to environmental dynamism, thereby improving competitive performance.

This study suggest that if firms detect changes in external environments and adopt a high absorptive capacity are likely to have no difficulty in implementing strategy successfully. Additionally, firms with high potential absorptive capacity that successfully cultivate an knowledge capability may still fail to achieve competitive advantage if they lack a strong realized absorptive capacity. Therefore, it is important to underscore the importance of cultivating and harmonizing a diverse role of potential and realized capacities to help firms respond more effectively to dynamic environments and improve competitive performance.

Limitations Of This Study

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. This study adopts a literature review methodology, relying entirely on previously published studies. As such, it does not provide yet empirical result about relationships between absorptive capacity and competitive advantage. The findings are therefore interpretive in nature and depend heavily on the quality, scope, and consistency of the references.

Additionally, differences in theoretical perspectives and methodologies across the reviewed studies may lead to inconsistencies in conclusions, which are not fully controlled within this study.

The study does not focus yet on a particular industry, or type of organization. Given that absorptive capacity and competitive advantage can vary significantly across sectors and environments, Therefore, this limits the generalizability and practical applicability to specific.

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