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OPERATIONS, INFORMATION & TECHNOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Operations management impact on achieving strategic fit: A case from the retail sector in Zimbabwe

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Abstract: For a long time, Zimbabwe's retail industry has been operating in a very "hostile business environment", due to the country's economic instability and uncertainty associated with it. The adoption of the green back has attracted foreign investors mainly from Nigeria, South Africa and China who have since opened their retail outlets in the country and fuelled more competition in the sector which resulted in some local operators closing their businesses but XYZ Zimbabwe has survived. This study makes an assessment of achievements and obstacles in using operations management to achieve strategic fit by the selected case study. The main objectives of the study are; to explore competitive strategies, examine supply chain strategies and provide solution-based strategies that helped the case study achieve strategic fit. Through an empirical approach, the study finds that XYZ Zimbabwe differentiated itself in the market by branding, positioning its stores conveniently to customers, offering variety of products at low prices to the customers and the company's supply chain management hinges on the demand and supply integration to gain competitive advantage.

Subjects: Economics, Finance, Business & Industry; Information Science; Social Sciences

Keywords: operations management; African operations management; retail operations; supply chain management; strategic fit; African management; operations strategy

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

A business organization may fail because of lack of strategic fit or because its processes and resources do not provide the capabilities to execute the desired strategy. This study guides firms to build a dynamic strategy of using operations management to achieve strategic fit in the retail sector with particular focus at XYZ Zimbabwe. The data were collected from a retail services company operating in Zimbabwe. The findings showed that quality of research and development (R&D) activities as well as the involvement of operations managers in activities which create and sustain the business's competitive advantages were critical factors to gain strategic fit. In fact, the results implied that retail firms cannot succeed without operations management involvement and proper investment in research and development. In sum, retail practices require continuous learning and development. The findings could help policy-makers and strategists in retail sector to develop sound policies to better compete in marketplaces.

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1. Introduction

Several related researsch studies were done on the theory of creating strategic fit and how strategic alignment can help achieve competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Chorn, 1991; Das & Teng, 2000; Elmuti, Abou-Zaid, & Jia, 2012). These studies were outside the context of an economically constrained economy like Zimbabwe's economy. Positive impact was established in these previous studies; however, the question was whether this also applies to Zimbabwe's retail sector which is affected by stiff competition and hostile operating environment. The retail industry in Zimbabwe was composed of operators that include XYZ Zimbabwe, Clicks, Spar, TM, Meikles, Town and County supermarkets and others. Before and after the period from 2000 to 2008 when the country experienced hard economic downfall, some retail industry operators posted stable profits. XYZ Zimbabwe dominated the sector with a market share of 35%. However, after the government introduced the US Dollar as the main legal tender in 2009, new retail players such as Pick & Pay and other small, medium and large retail players joined the sector in search of cash liquidity, and some retail shops such as: Clicks, Meikles, TM and Town and County were faced with decreased turnover and closed their retail businesses. However, inspired by the continued expansion and growth of XYZ Zimbabwe, the interest of this study is to establish the role of operations management in achieving strategic fit in retail industry. The retailer serves thousands of customers every month and has continued to grow and attract more business opportunities despite the political and economic challenges faced by the country. Many people prefer to buy at XYZ Zimbabwe shops mainly because they are conveniently located to the customers and their prices are low as compared to other retailers.

XYZ Zimbabwe has successfully distinguished itself through its remarkable consistency across all grocery, hardware and kitchen utensil products. The business strongly promotes fast services, convenience of buying more goods under one roof and low prices and the company's business motto reads "shop at [XYZ] where the nation shops and saves". The interest of the research is to establish the company's secret of success by carrying out this study. The study is going to benefit retail operators in refining and developing business processes in their journeys towards the route for achieving strategic fit. The study is designed to open doors of opportunity for more empirical studies to be carried out in establishing the role of operations management in achieving strategic fit in retail sector. The organization under the case study is also going to benefit immensely from new discoveries of ideas and business insights which are going to be gathered and created during the research process. The research is further going to explore on how the company managed to successfully maintain its competitive strategy, its supply chain strategy and all the functions within the value chain which support the competitive advantage. The study contributes in the development of theory of using operations management in activities that create value for customers.

1.1. The problem

The retail industry in Zimbabwe was faced with stiff competition and a hostile economic operating environment but XYZ Zimbabwe still dominated the market. In light of this issue, theorists suggest that effective strategies aligned with the firm's resources can help achieve competitive advantage (Das & Teng, 2000; Elmuti et al., 2012). Furthermore, Schniederjans and Cao (2009, p. 2535) state that "alignment of business strategies can bring positive contribution to the performance of the organizations and misalignment contributes negatively to the performance of the organization". However, there is not enough information on how operations management can help achieve strategic fit in retail business sector. Thus, the interest of this research study shall establish the role of operations management in achieving strategic fit in retail business sector, with a particular focus on XYZ Zimbabwe Limited.

The aim of this study was to establish the role of operations management in achieving strategic fit and attempt to provide solution-based strategies to gain competitive advantage in retail industry. The study shall evaluate how successful are the operations processes of XYZ Zimbabwe and also attempt to devise best possible strategies to achieve competitive advantage. According to Lillis and Sweeney (2013, p. 569), "the concept of establishing strategic fit requires a procedure that helps the managers to understand their organization's current internal fit". The results from this research will

be expected to contribute to the on-going efforts to develop theory of using operations management in activities which add value to products and sustain the organization's competitive advantage. Supply chain management (SCM) in retail sector attempts to control inventory levels, quality of the products, operational costs and lead times. Christopher and Gattorna (2005, p. 118) state that "a clear supply chain strategy with differentiated service offerings and delivery terms is essential to optimizing the balance of costs and required customer service". The results from this research can greatly help in establishing an integrated approach which considers retail business activities such as: supply, operations, transportation, services and production which are crucial in the designing of the retail business's most competitive supply chain concept.

This study is necessited by the fact that there is not enough information on how operations management can help achieve strategic fit in the retail business sector. Furthermore, previous studies known to the researcher were not with the context of an African economy. The importance of this research study is that it evaluates how successful are the operations processes and obstacles in retailing and attempt to devise best possible strategies to achieve competitive advantage. Sheth, Sethia, and Srinivas (2011) contend that retailing is regarded as a pillar of the country's economy in countries such as in India. According to Fisher (2013, p. 757) "the retail operation is a very important field to which academia has so much to contribute to". The study is going to bring close attention to the retail operators, operations managers and business leaders on how to refine business processes and embark on their journeys towards the route for achieving strategic fit. Thus, the study is going to enlighten retail industry strategists on possible operation management strategies that can be considered to achieve competitive advantage.

2. Literature review

2.1. Strategic fit

Slack and Lewis (2012, p. 281) coined that "strategic fit is concerned with the alignment of the organization's market requirements and the operations capabilities". Schniederjans and Cao (2009) classified strategic fit into two categories which are: external fit and internal fit. External fit deals with the need for aligning the company's operation strategy with the business strategy while the internal fit literature comprises the consistency among the company's tasks, practices and policies (Skinner, 1969, 1974). This study will attempt to examine how operations management can help achieve both internal and external fits in retail business sector. In the related article, Liedtka (1996) holds that cross business strategic fit can be established and exists at any function along the value chain.

Strategic fit can have a positive impact on the organizational performance (Chorn, 1991). Furthermore, Miles and Snow (1978) contend that strategic fit is a fundamental concept in the normative models of strategy formulation; they suggest that the quest of it in business is conventionally regarded as having required performance effects. According to Das and Teng (2000, p. 21), "Strategic fit is measured in terms of its market relatedness or fit which is necessary to exploit the economies of scope". This study fills the gap by presenting an outline of using managerial assessment approach to measure and evaluate the effects of relatedness of strategic fit and effectiveness of operations management within the value chain in quest of achieving the retail business's competitive advantage. The notion of strategic fit is constructed on the contingency perspectives simplified by great pioneers in the operations and strategic management studies. Zeithaml, "Rajan" Varadarajan, and Zeithaml (1988) contend that the concept of strategic fit mirrors on the approach of open systems, which perceives business "organizations as set of interdependent parts that form a whole, which in turn is interdependent with large environments". In the article, Chorn (1991) contends that strategic fit is concerned with the degree of alignment which exists between organizational culture, competitive situation, leadership and the business strategy. He further states that (p. 20) "alignment refers to 'appropriateness' of various elements to one another". According to Owen, Mundy, Guild, and Guild (2001, p. 10), "the organization's long term success is determined by its ability to sustain the delivery of quality products and services in the market". Furthermore, they suggest that the

organization's ability to meet the market requirements is a learnable organizational competency. The aim of this study was to establish the role of operations management in achieving strategic fit in retail business sector. The study shall examine the effectiveness of operations management at each function within the retail value chain in order to ascertain if there is a perfect alignment between the business's operation strategy and the requirements in the market.

The main goal of every business is "to achieve strategic fit" (Venkatraman & Camillus, 1984). However, Lillis and Sweeney (2013, p. 564) state that "many services organizations experience the difficulty of managing the fit between competitive and operations strategy". Barney (1991) contends that competitive pressures that change over and over again and the increase of competitors in the market may result in an increased emphasis on the variety of products to be at reasonable prices. Elmuti et al. (2012) hold that the birth of online shops which offer variety of products in the market may adversely affect traditional retailers from attaining sustainable competitive advantage. The study attempts to provide solution-based strategies on achieving strategic fit in retail industry.

2.2. Competitive strategies for achieving strategic fit

According to Daniela (2014, p. 530), "many companies are forced to adopt strategies which shape their business's future and ultimately achieve competitive advantages in order to survive in the market". Cruceru and Radulescu (2012) hold that business strategy is all about competitive advantage, they suggest that the main concern of leaders with strategic focus is to identify and develop unique core competencies and be able to give value to consumers by differentiating their products from those offered by their competitors in the market. Chopra and Meindl (2012, p. 21) state that "the business must be made to balance its efficiency and responsiveness in order to achieve competitive advantage". According to Christopher (2012, p. 5), "competitive advantage stems from many discreet activities which the business organization performs, which contribute to the organization's relative cost position and create a basis for differentiation". Cruceru and Radulescu (2012) contend that adoption of strategies without taking into consideration the account of fundamental components such as customers and competitors in defining the direction of business strategies is such a big mistake. Mintzberg (1987) suggests that the right choice of business strategies depend on contingency variables such as; size and age of the organization and the power of key decision-makers. Venkatraman and Camillus (1984) hold that effective strategy implementation depends on managerial processes not only on the fit between the strategy and the structure. The following sections discuss the strategies for achieving competitive advantage with a particular focus on the retail sector.

Michael Porter introduced the "5 forces-elements of industry structure" with the purpose of analysing and defining the competition rules in any industry structure. The concerned elements of the structure are; bargaining power of buyers, bargaining power of suppliers, threat of entry, availability of substitutes and industry players jockeying for positions in the industry (Porter, 1988). Schniederjans and Cao (2009, p. 2547) state that; "the 'industry structure' determines who gets the advantages of grasping the value in the industry". "The 'five-forces' model framework is influenced by the business's strategies and highlights what is important, and directs management towards those aspects that are important for the firm's long term advantages" (Porter, 1988, p. 46). However, Coyne and Subramaniam (1996) criticized Porter's 5 forces-elements of industry structure arguing that suppliers, competitors and buyers do not interact and they don't collude. In the article, Venkatraman (1989, p. 952) states that, "many studies carried out in strategic management show the importance of strategies in successfully managing businesses". Furthermore, the author states that "business organizations require strategies in order to effectively manage and allocate resources to gain competitive advantage" (p. 953). Porter (1988) holds that an organization which is able to create value for its customers will eventually achieve competitive advantage.

The main idea behind Michael Porter's approach upon the strategies of achieving competitive advantages called Porter's Matrix of strategies is to reduce costs of the business to a rate which is lower than the competitors. Porter (1988, p. 50) stresses an idea that his "generic strategies" "are

important for the business and they are work efficiency". According to Christopher (2012, p. 5), "the implication of Porter's idea enables the company to look at each business activity within the value chain and assess whether they have real competitive advantage in that particular area". Furthermore, Porter (1988, p. 52) states that his strategy "provides advantages of the level economy by producing more goods of a good quality and standard". However, in the article entitled "The generic strategic trap", Miller (1992) criticises Porter's matrix strategy claiming that (p. 38) "there is viable middle ground between the strategies". Porter (1988) holds that the goal of business strategies is to achieve sustainable competitive advantage. He however defended his matrix strategy arguing that the generic strategy can be applied in any service industry and at any size of the organization. Thompson, Strickland, and Gamble (2005) suggest that Porter's matrix of strategies requires the organization to continue researching for ways to lower down the costs and it require the business to always maintain its presence in the market.

2.3. Retail supply chain management

SCM is an integral part of the organization's value chains and critical for the company's performance, (Flynn, Huo, & Zhao, 2010; Ketchen & Hult, 2007). Chen and Paulraj (2004) hold that SCM involves a complex array of business processes, such as procurement or sourcing, product design and development, collaborative planning, forecasting, and replenishment and distribution. This study is going to examine the SCM processes within the retail's value chain. In the article Davis (1993) compares the traditional supply chain systems and other value chain processes in the organizations and concludes that SCM processes are unique because of their inter-organizational, cross-functional and global in nature. Bowersox, Closs, and Cooper (2012) suggest that SCM processes are mission critical in organizations which are involved in the production, marketing, distribution and sales functions related to products. Gunasekaran, Patel, and McGaughey (2004) contend that supply chain at global level has become very dynamic and complex, this has created too much competition in the industry and retailers are now faced with no option but to find innovative means that can improve the quality of their products, lower logistics costs and also reduce their lead times.

Datta and Christopher (2011, p. 766) state that "supply chain operators need to employ coordination mechanisms and effective information sharing tools in order to reduce uncertainty". They further suggest that successful actions made will add an impact in the proper performance of supply chain operations. In relation to the above-stated issues, Christopher (2012) contends that the arena of competition in business environment is now moving from 'organization to supply chain'. Chae, Olson, and Sheu (2014, p. 4698) state that "the survival of any business today is no longer solely dependent on its own ability to compete but rather on the ability to cooperate within the supply chain". The seemingly independent relationships between the organizations supply chains are becoming more interdependent. It is for this reason on the need for competitive supply chain management why Chae et al. (2014, p. 4699) further state that "the business may 'sink or swim with supply on chain'". Chopra and Meindl (2012, p. 19) state that "an organization's competitive strategy clearly defines all sets of requirements in the market which it seeks to satisfy through its goods and services". They gave an example of "Wal-Mart", a retail giant in the USA whose main aim is to sell almost everything from kitchen utensils to groceries at a low price. According to Datta and Christopher (2011, p. 767), "competitive supply chain systems are simple in operation but, rapid in action and responsive in detail". They further point out that supply chain operation must be able to be adjusted and capable of satisfying the fluctuating market demands.

Nowadays, organizations are facing too many challenges and they experience too much pressure in trying to improve their supply chain performance. High increase of competition and uncertainty in the market are some of the major challenges. In the manufacturing sector they have adopted variety of innovative technologies and process-based solutions in order to gain competitive advantage over their competitors (Chae et al., 2014). For this reason, Chen and Paulraj (2004) contend that supply chain performance can determine the winner and measuring it can facilitate the improvement of the overall value chain's performance. Chopra and Meindl (2012) contend that supply chain can be very successful when its operation strategy is clearly defined. They point out that no function

in the value chain can be successful without another; therefore, they suggest that to be successful all functions in the value chain must be made to support the business's competitive advantage. There is growing demand of supply chain analytics (SCA) in retail business, as operators try to improve efficiencies and increase operational effectiveness. "Supply Chain Analytics (SCA) are the use of quantitative tools, data and techniques in improving operational performance which is often indicated in terms of metrics such as flexibility and order fulfillment" (Davenport & Harris, 2007, p. 58).

Davenport and O'dwyer (2011) contend that success in the implementation of SCA such as data and analytical Information Technology tools can significantly improve supply chain operational efficiency in retail industry. Davenport and Harris (2007) contend that retail giants Wal-Mart and Procter and Gamble have utilized the same applications in their supply chain systems in order to develop their wide networks. According to the literature, supply chain can be very successful when its operation strategy is clearly defined. Safety stock is the amount of goods (inventory) which is kept in the reserve as a buffer for the reason of protecting the business against the time mismatch between the business supply and demand. Safety stock can also be held to protect against variability which exists whether in supply or in demand, (Smith, Watson, Baker, & Pokorski II, 2007). According to Desmet, Aghezzaf, and Vanmaele (2010, p. 5768) there are many different methods and approaches in determining safety stock under different situations. Furthermore, (p. 5769) they presented an approximation model for safety stock in a multi-distribution network. In their model they tried to incorporate variances of retailers and the central storage facility in the replenishment lead time. The model takes into account the variance of the service time orders at the storage facility as it has a significant effect on the system's lead time variance. The buffer of safety stock is used as a trade-off between service level and inventory cost, the study views safety stock models as a very efficient method of replenishment in retail business sector. Gunasekaran et al. (2004, p. 335) state that "the use of vendor management inventory (VMI) in retail sector can increase efficiency and responsiveness in the market". In relation to this literature, the study recommends the application of efficient safety stock models and VMI in retail sector in order to reduce uncertainty in demand and replenishment lead time.

2.4. Operations strategy in retail sector

In order to get a better understanding of how a business organization's operation strategy changes over and over again, Slack and Lewis (2012) suggest that it is best to know how the business views its markets, and also how it sees the role of its operations resources. The study aims to present an outline of how retail business organizations can achieve an alignment between the market and their operations strategy. Daniela (2014) contends that, it is the common goal of any business function to create a sustainable alignment between the business and the markets it is serving. Chopra and Meindl (2012) suggest that the first step of the journey on the road to achieving strategic fit is to map the needs of the customers, supply chain capabilities as well as the attributes of the goods and services on the implied uncertainty spectrum. A strategic line of fit between the organization's resources and demands of the market multi-thronged approach is meant to provide the value to the customers. According to Slack and Lewis (2012, p. 282), "fit defines an organization's alignment between its operations and the market requirements". Slack and Lewis further contend that the perfect alignment can establish the company's exact position and its ability to make a favorable balance between the required performance in the market and its actual performance. Chopra and Meindl (2012, p. 18) state that "a line of fit must be able to be traced along the two strategic variables of market requirements and the organization's operations". Fisher (1997, p. 113) states that "a wide variance between the two strategic variables is a sign that the business is experiencing some challenges".

Retailers need to avoid conflicting of priorities between stakeholders' objectives and the decision-making process of the operations strategy, it is very important to clearly understand the objectives of the stakeholders. According to Slack and Lewis (2012, p. 47), "any operation requires more tightly defined set of objectives". They mentioned: quality, speed, dependability, flexibility and cost as the five generic 'performance objectives'. Daniela (2014) contends that in today's competitive business

environment, the market requirements and the operations resource perspectives are always changing to the heights where many players find it difficult to reach. Sometimes, the market requirements can be seen dominating and then, the operations resources are made to fit in any situations which is dictated by the market (Chorn, 1991). According to Lebas (1995, p. 23) "the detailed performance measures show crystal links of the organization's activities, which include the actual breakdown of the key targets of the workforce". Slack and Lewis (2012, p. 41) further contend that performance of operations is also measured in terms of what they called generic "performance objectives". The day-to-day operation activities performed by members of an organization must be made to support the specific strategic objectives of the organization. It is in these business activities where the organization's competitiveness can be realized (Christopher, 2012). This study classified the retail operation strategies for achieving strategic fit in four main constructs as discussed in the following sections: pricing strategy, product/goods variety strategy, customer-focused strategy and staff strategy and training. Operations management is central to the business organization. In their article Slack and Lewis (2012) suggest that, one of the major roles of operations management is to understand the needs of the business and develop clear visions and establish directions of how the operations should help the organization to achieve both short term goals (tactics) and long term goals. Slack, Chambers, and Johnston (2001) articulated the three core functions which move the business as discussed in the following section: development function, operations function and marketing function. Nowadays, retail operators are facing lots of challenges that range from competition in the market to demand uncertainty. Li, Choi, Rabinovich, and Crawford (2013) contend that some retail operators make mistakes by setting variables such as: inventory levels, prices and product assortment to maximize gross margins which is subject to major constraints as limited budget, and space for purchasing and displaying their goods in the store. According to Boyd and Bresser (2008, p. 1077), "the timing of competitive actions in retail is such a key management concern that has important performance consequences".

The other issue which affects the performance of retailers is the "failure to correctly forecast demand". Fisher (2013, p. 755) states that "the limitation of human judgment in the forecasting of demand of new products in retail sector has been confirmed by many industry experts as a major cause for concern". In light of the above-stated issues, the purpose of this study was to explore on the challenges faced by retailers in achieving strategic fit and provide best possible methods which improve operational efficiency in retail sector. Retailers are forced to adopt and devise innovative strategies to achieve and consolidate competitive advantage. Liu (2013, p. 2821) states that "the future competitiveness of operations under dynamic and complex business situations relies on forward-thinking strategies". In a related article, Daniela (2014, p. 524) states that "the ability to demonstrate the capacity to adapt to changes in the business environment is very important to maintain the company's directed positions for sustainable development". This study intends to fill the gap by examining the strategies employed by retail operators to achieve competitive advantage and give recommendations on best solutions for sustainable development. Hart and Milstein (2003) contend that sustainable strategies in retailing can increase the value of the business; while Hampl and Loock (2013, p. 203) state that "there is no empirical evidence on the question of sustainability in the retail context". Ganesan, George, Jap, Palmatier, and Weitz (2009) hold that the customer perceptions related to sustainability may influence the corporate image and more particularly the retailer patronage. In a related article, Sheth et al. (2011) contend that pursuing sustainability in retailing requires a customer-centric approach. To help support their notation, (p. 24) they state that, "sustainable customer-centric is the consumption-mediated impact of marketing actions on personal, environmental and economic well-being of the consumer".

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research approach
Kothari (2004, p. 19) state that, "research methodology is the systematic way of solving research problem". Madan, Paliwal, and Bhardwaj (2011) contend that the aim of research methodology is to describe and analyse the resources to be used in the study by clarifying their consequences,

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limitations and presumptions. This study is going to combine both qualitative and quantitative research methods using a case study approach. According to Hashemi and Babaii (2013, p. 831), "several researchers have considered the validity issues of mixed methods through evaluations and presentations of validity frameworks". Edmondson and McManus (2007) contend that the decision to approach a study qualitatively or quantitatively is influenced by the researcher's planned research design, the desired contributions which the researcher intends to make and the research questions which are driving the study. Parylo (2012) suggests that the research strategy should seek to result in sufficient data repository enough to answer the questions posed by the study.

The research strategy adopted in this study needs to support the theme on how operations management can help achieve strategic fit in retail sector. According to Merriam (2009, p. 170), "qualitative data collection and data analysis is done simultaneously depending on the type of data collected and the findings of the research". Creswell (2009, p. 173) state that "a qualitative procedure employs different philosophical assumptions, strategies of inquiry, and the methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation". Thus, the major aim of using qualitative approach into this research study is to enable the researcher to take full advantages of its strengths in establishing answers to the research questions and choosing among the best methods to achieve competitive advantage in retail sector. Ghauri, Granhaug, and Kristianslund (1995, p. 76) contend that the process of measuring variables of the study is crucial to the quantitative research approach, "because it provides the fundamental connection between empirical observation and mathematical expression of quantitative relationships". In this particular study, the quantitative data are going to be collected using the closed-ended survey questions necessary to answer the questions posed by the research study. The major advantage of using the quantitative approach into this study is that it enables the researcher to know exactly in advance what he is looking for in the study on how operations management can help achieve strategic fit in retail sector.

Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson (2012, p. 56) state that "research design is a plan and procedure for research that spans the decisions from broad assumptions to detailed methods of data collection and analysis". Creswell and Plano (2007, p. 58) state that "mixed methods is an approach of inquiry that associates or combines both qualitative and quantitative forms". Yin (2009, p. 23) articulates "that a case study approach is an empirical inquiry that investigates contemporary phenomenon". However, in this particular study, series of texts and numbers are going to be presented in tables and other forms of statistics and texts to present data in response to the research questions relevant to the study, thus both qualitative and quantitative research designs are going to be used with a case study.

3.2. Data collection method and questionnaire design

The questionnaire survey research strategy is going to be adopted as the main method of collecting primary data focusing on different functional areas of the organization under the case study. According to Yin (2009, p. 48), "a single source of primary data is warranted or appropriate on the basis that the case is revelatory". This strategy has been chosen mainly because it requires less time and financial expenses given that it is possible to focus on a particular focus group. Yin (2009) suggests that, a survey can promote greater accuracy of information obtained and allows the researcher to obtain information of high quality because it measures the state of affairs that occur at a particular time and the opinions of all the informants are successfully compared. The survey questionnaire is going to be designed, consisting of closed-ended questions for demographic data, Likert-type scale and open-ended questions. These are going to be used for participants (XYZ Zimbabwe managers) from different functional areas. The closed-ended questionnaire is easy to complete and does not take much time of the participants, it is either provided with a choice of responses such as Yes or No or multiple choice selections. The section areas of the survey questionnaire instrument of this study are discussed in detail in the following sections:

- **Section One:** Demographic data: Demographic data are going to be collected using 'closed-ended questions', through the following factors: (Gender, Age, Education level, Service Experience, Years of Working in Retail Sector and Job Titles).
- **Section Two:** Strategic fit/Competitive strategies: This section measures strategic fit and competitive strategies using (4) items on a Likert-type scale.
- **Section Three:** Supply Chain Strategies: This section measures supply chain strategies using (3) items on a Likert-type scale.
- **Section Four:** Operations Strategy: This section measures the Operations strategy using (2) open-ended questions and (5) items on a Likert-type scale.

3.3. Research population and sample

Research Population is the set of elements of interests under consideration for a particular study (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). "The population is the group of interest to the researcher" (Kothari, 2004, p. 34). It is upon this group that the researcher is going to generalize the results of the study. The population of this study includes all the individuals whom this research is interested in obtaining enough information and making inferences on. The study is going to consider top and middle management personnel at XYZ Zimbabwe. These respondents possess valuable information pertaining to the study at hand; they are located in two business locations in Harare, Zimbabwe. The target population for this study will consist of 50 managers from different functional areas as follows: section heads, operations and supply chain, customer services, shop floor managers, branch managers, finance and human resources managers who are going to be purposefully selected voluntarily.

According to Patton (2002, p. 40), "the goal of data analysis is to uncover emerging patterns, insights, themes, concepts, and understanding of the research study". Ross and Onwuegbuzie (2014) suggest that, the first step in the data analysis process in a mixed method is to critically examine the assembled data. In this particular study, data collection is going to be done using survey questionnaires. The quantitative results collected, will be analysed using the "Survey monkey" web-based application software which produce statistical computing and graphics. Web application tool involves statistical analysis and implementation of graphs in a written code to import data, to analyse it and compile a final report. Qualitative data collected from "open ended questions", will be coded and analysed to reproduce text research themes. "Thematic analysis" will be used "to capture complex meanings in textual data-set" (Ryan & Bernard, 2000; cited in Denzin and Lincoln, p. 769). The relationships and patterns found under these qualitative research themes will be the basis of the research's final report, (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The study is also going to employ comparative analysis in an effort to justify the case under study and to examine the practical relevance of developed theories which form the methodological and philosophical foundations of the study.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Results

Table 1 shows the response rate of the study. A total of 100 survey questionnaires were sent to purposefully selected participants. 96 responses were collected from top and middle managers at XYZ Zimbabwe. The overall response rate was 96%. Top management participants recorded an 80% response rate whilst middle management participants recorded 100% response rate. These results show that middle

Table 1. Response rate						
	N	*n*	Response rate		Non response rate	
Top management	32	20	16	80%	4	20%
Middle management	104	80	80	100%	0	0%
Total	136	100	96	96%	4	4%

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management respondents were more committed in responding. The major reason was because middle management respondents were not very busy compared to top management who were having busy schedules due to the demanding nature of their responsibilities. Saunders et al. (2009) contend that in a sample size of 100 and below, response rate above 80% should be considered ideal.

4.2. Demographic profile and general information

Table 2 presents the Demographic and General Information of respondents.

The findings demonstrate that out of 96 respondents males accounted for 54% whilst 46% were females. The study was mainly composed of those aged 41–50 as they were 42%. This was followed by those aged between 30 and 40 years as they were 29%. Those aged above 50 years were 25% and those aged 29 and below were 25%. XYZ's top and middle management respondents possessing a Master's Qualification were 67%. Further, 33% of respondents possessed Bachelor's degrees. Also, the results showed that those having experience of over 16 years were 44%. Those possessing 11–15 years experiences were 39%, whilst those possessing 6–10 years experience were 17%. Those having 6–10 years work experience at XYZ were 48% whilst those having 5 years and below experience were 25%. Just 27% of respondents had work experience between 11 and 15 years.

Respondents adding up to 91.7% strongly agreed that XYZ provides customers with products and services that are broader in scope. This was supported by 8.3% of respondents. These results show that the company was offering a wide range of products. While the majority of respondents (85.4%) strongly agreed that XYZ Zimbabwe was proactively responding to customer needs. An additional 4.2% of respondents agreed and 8.3% of respondents were neutral. When respondents were asked if the company is maintaining market dominance, the majority (87.3%) strongly agreed that XYZ's image was favourable and dominant in the retail market. This was also supported by 8.5% of respondents who agreed. A relatively small per cent of 2.1% were either neutral or disagreed that XYZ's image was dominant at the market place. Also, the results shows that majority of respondents (85.4%) strongly agreed XYZ was competitive on price. An additional 8.3% of respondents agreed as well. However, 4.2% of respondents disagreed with another 2.1% of respondents being neutral (Table 3).

Table 2. Demographic profile of the study (*n* = 96)			
Demographic variables		**Frequencies**	**Percentage**
Gender	Female	44	46
	Male	52	54
Age	29 or younger	4	4
	30–40 years	28	29
	41–50	40	42
	51 or more	24	25
Highest academic class attained	Some college but no degree	0	0
	Bachelor's degree	32	33
	Master's/MBA degree	64	67
	PhD degree	0	0
Years of experience in the retail sector	5 years and below	0	0
	6–10 years	16	17
	11–15 years	38	39
	16 years and above	42	44
Work experience at XYZ	5 years and below	24	25
	6–10 years	46	48
	11–15 years	26	27

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Table 3. Operation strategies survey questions' responses		Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
7	The services that our organization provides to the customers are characterized as broader in scope and of quality	91.7	8.3	0	0	0
8	The increase in demand of products our company experienced was due to the practice of responding to immediate marketplace needs	85.4	4.2	8.3	0	2.1
9	The image that our company has in the marketplace is the one which maintains its dominant position in the marketplace	87.3	8.5	2.1	2.1	0
10	My company tries to be cost leader in the market. Thus, being the cheapest in the retail industry	85.4	8.3	2.1	0	4.2

About 98% of the respondents strongly agreed that XYZ Zimbabwe's supply chain operation was responsive in detail and was also flexible to meet the unique supply chain needs of the market; however, 2.1% of respondents were neutral to show that there were some areas within the company's supply chain operation which needs some improvements. 93.6% of respondents strongly agreed that value stream mapping tools were used in the company's supply chain management strategy. A significant number of respondents at 4.3% were neutral whilst 2.1% agreed. The majority of respondents at 87.3% strongly agreed that XYZ Zimbabwe's retail outlets were automated enough to effectively serve customers and also manage inventory. This was also supported by 10.6% of respondents who agreed that the company had automated its outlets. Just 2.1% of respondents were neural (Table 4).

The majority of the respondents at 89.4% were of the view that XYZ Zimbabwe was forecasting in the management of demand and supply. This was also supported by 10.6% of respondents who agreed. Majority of respondents at 91.5% strongly agreed that XYZ Zimbabwe had a service quality culture and thrives on operational excellence. This was also supported by another 8.5% of respondents who agreed. Majority of respondents at 97.6% strongly agreed that the company was aligning its market requirements and operational capabilities. This was also supported by 2.4% of respondents who agreed. The results shows that 84.6% of respondents strongly agreed and believed that the company had innovative technology inspired by the customer's needs and market demands while, 12.8% agreed and 2.6% were neutral. The results show that 90.0% of respondents strongly agreed and believed that XYZ Zimbabwe had the organization power to control, manage and provide access to global actionable information to its internal and external stakeholders. Whilst 7.5% of respondents also agreed and 2.5% were neutral.

A total number of 96 respondents into this study have highlighted that the organization must improve its forecasting techniques in order to improve its competitive advantage. The respondents also mentioned that there is a need for the organization to keep monitoring the changes and trends in the marketplace which will give the organization a competitive urge in the market. The retail market place is always changing and the consumers keep demanding more value for goods and services in exchange with their hard earned money. A total number of 96 respondents into this study have all highlighted that the organization encourages employees to work in a team setting environment. Respondents have also mentioned that the organization offer rewards to the best-performing individuals or groups who meet or achieve the targets set, which is a successful motivating theory (Table 5).

The results from the survey proved that XYZ Zimbabwe retains the best staff by filling vacancies arisen from within the organization with top performing individuals as method of motivation.

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Table 4. Supply chain strategy survey questions' responses		Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
11	XYZ Zimbabwe's supply chain operation is responsive and flexible in detail to meet the changes of demand and supply in the market	97.9	0	2.1	0	0
12	XYZ Zimbabwe uses Value Stream Mapping (VSM) tools to add value and increase customer satisfaction	93.6	2.1	4.3	0	0
13	XYZ Zimbabwe's retail outlets are automated enough to effectively serve customers, manage inventory and manage relationships with both upstream and downstream suppliers	87.3	10.6	2.1	0	0

3. Discussion

The study concludes that operations management can help achieve strategic fit. The study denotes that XYZ Zimbabwe has achieved strategic fit by aligning its operations strategies and the market demands and offered wide range of products at the right price to the customers. The group's financial position was greatly boosted by a wide product assortment and range of products. In the related article Daniela (2014) contends that, it is an "essential business ingredient" to provide total customer satisfaction in order to remain competitive in business.

The company was also in strategic partnerships with mobile telecommunication companies such as Telecel, Net One, Econet and Zimbabwe Electricity Supply Authority among others, where customers transfer or receive money and conveniently purchase their groceries under one roof. The wide lines of doing business together with synergies were enabling the company to achieve a strategic fit in the retail sector. Further, the company was proactively responding to customer needs. The study finds that XYZ Zimbabwe had a very powerful "supply chain road map"; Perez (2013) suggests that, the most important benefit of a "supply chain road map" is found when it successfully helps in demystifying the supply chain strategy formulation process. The study finds that XYZ Zimbabwe's supply chain processes were built on the following "distinctive capabilities" which made the company capable of responding to the unique needs of the market's demands:

- **Agility:** The Company had sophisticated technology and infrastructure processes capable of bringing agility to its supply chain and hence the ability to respond to any situation in the market.
- **Transparency:** The Company was able to make the decision of order fulfilment at the time when the order was made.

Table 5. Competitive strategies survey questions' responses		Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
14	XYZ Zimbabwe uses forecasting techniques to predict, estimate and project demand and supply in the market	89.4	10.6	0	0	0
15	The company has a service quality culture and strives on operational excellence	91.5	8.5	0	0	0
16	XYZ Zimbabwe aligns its market requirements and operational capabilities to achieve strategic fit	97.6	2.4	0	0	0
17	Our company finds cognitive solutions by the use of innovative information technology	84.6	12.8	2.6	0	0
18	XYZ Zimbabwe provides access to global actionable information to its internal and external stakeholders	90.0	7.5	2.5	0	0

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- **Collaboration:** The Company was in partnership with manufacturers, distributors and suppliers who were strategically positioned and committed to execute the company's market demands.
- **Responsiveness:** The Company had supply chain processes capable of meeting supply with demands at the right time.

The findings of the study revealed that XYZ Zimbabwe was using forecasting techniques to predict, estimate and project future demand and supply of products in ensuring a strategic fit at the market. The company had a service quality culture and thriving on operational excellence. Following the direction of these findings, Slack et al. (2001) contend that service culture and operational excellence are critical ingredients for organizational success. The study was to give recommendations on operations management strategies to be considered by XYZ Zimbabwe to improve competitive advantage. The findings of the study reveal that the success in retail operations still depends on core principles. The activities which add little value to the products and services can satisfy the customers and ultimately increase the company's competitive advantage. Despite the fact that XYZ Zimbabwe was dominating in the market, part of this study recommends that the company should bring customers closer by introducing customer driven promotions. In other regions, retailers of the same size as XYZ Zimbabwe try to stay in touch with their customers by providing smart coupons with the idea of offering their customers what they actually buy from the shop.

The findings obtained from the study concludes that the company was engaging in research activities to identify customer needs and means to fulfil those needs. The company's competitive position was boosted by offering wide product range, responsiveness to customer needs and favourable image. In a related article, Cruceru and Radulescu (2012) contend that corporate image, wide product range, quality products and responsiveness to customer needs greatly influence company's competitive position. The findings of the study concluded that the supply chain operations of XYZ Zimbabwe was rapid in responding to the business needs, simple in operations and flexible enough to meet the fluctuating demands in the market. Following the direction of these findings, theorists such as Slack et al. (2001) coined that supply chain operations must be flexible to support the changing demands of the business, responsive enough to meet the unique needs of the business and must be simple in its operation. The study concluded that XYZ Zimbabwe had a very effective supply chain system necessary to meet the business needs. This study has concluded that XYZ Zimbabwe's organizational processes were developed with the idea of achieving both short- and long-term goals. The company's operations management was actively involved in the business activities which contribute in the creation of value to the customers products. Furthermore, Christopher (2012) coined that the firm's ability to effectively respond to the business's requirements lies on how it aligns the four key enablers namely: organizational infrastructure, human resources management, technology and strategic alliances. The findings of the study concluded that, although XYZ Zimbabwe has dominating the market over the years, it still needed to know its customers a lot more. The is a need for all employees in all levels to understand how customers react to combo-offers or which goods in the market are more price elastic and also they need to "create spot-on cross-selling campaigns, by doing these little actionable intelligence can empower them to build competitive advantage and grow their market share" (Fisher, 2013, p. 758). The study recommends that the company should try to adopt vertical integration strategy for some fast moving consumer goods by controlling raw materials which produce finished goods which they sell in their retail outlets to control and manage the entire supply chain.

5. Conclusions

The study concludes that operations management can indeed help achieve strategic fit when the company's core strategies are aligned with the market requirements. XYZ Zimbabwe was able to respond to immediate market requirements and offered product variety at the right price to the customers and achieved competitive advantage. The company has also managed to realize opportunities for growths which emanated from increased disposable incomes and economic recovery. After its recapitalization process, the company went into the position of increasing its trading capacity to gain its market share. The image painted by the company in the marketplace was favourable

and dominant in the retail industry. The supply chain strategies used by XYZ Zimbabwe to realize strategic fit were considered to be "customer-centric". The company had good technology and infrastructure processes that enabled it to bring agility into its supply chain. The company's supply chain processes were highly responsive and easily adaptable to meet the unique needs of the business, it was also demand driven supported by the company's dynamic partnership with suppliers, distributors and manufacturers to attain competitive advantage.

The above-mentioned customer-centric activities have enabled the company to create value to the customers by differentiating itself from its competitors who did not meet the same market requirements. Operations strategies used by XYZ Zimbabwe to attain strategic fit included forecasting for future demand and supply of products. The company had a service quality culture and thriving on operational excellence. XYZ Zimbabwe's retail outlets were automated to effectively serve customers, manage inventories and relationships with both upstream and downstream suppliers to give the company competitiveness advantage. The company's operation managers were actively involved in the business activities which create value and sustainable competitive advantage.

5.1. Recommendations

This section of the research covers the recommendations. These recommendations are based on the issues raised in research objectives, research questions, literature review in part 2 and findings of the study in part 4. The study observed that there was room for improvement in some features of products and services offered by XYZ Zimbabwe. Thus, the study recommends that the company should continue with expansion of projects and upgrade its stores to increase brand loyalty, improve customer convenience and also keep on implementing strategies necessary to increase market share while containing the costs in order to grow and maintain the values of both customers and shareholders. To overcome some of the challenges faced by the operators in the retail industry such as demand uncertainty, competition and ever-rising cost of wholesale goods. The study recommends the following two constructs: (1) the study concluded that all parties within the retail value chain should aim to achieve the objectives or goals set for achieving competitive advantage. It is for this reason that, the study recommends collaborations or strategic alliances between retailers and producers of raw materials, wholesalers or distributors to reduce lead times and demand uncertainty in the market. (2) This study observed that in order to successfully meet the needs of the customers, business organizations must identify what their customers need and how much they are willing to pay at each product segment they are serving. The study also observed that XYZ Zimbabwe was relatively less expensive than its direct competitors like Food Word. Thus, the study recommends XYZ Zimbabwe to continue benchmarking on its prices. However, a thorough value chain analysis is needed to establish areas were costs can be further minimized and identify cheap sources of supply so as to continue being competitive on prices. The study also recommends the need to increase Master Card, Visa or local Zimswitch point of sale and till operators in retail shops so as to reduce queues and as well as source quality products.

5.2. Research limitations and suggested future research

The study was conducted at XYZ Zimbabwe Head offices and at the main branch based in Harare, Zimbabwe. The study considered 100 personnel on managerial level from middle to top management. In that respect, the results of the research study may not reflect experiences, perceptions and opinions of the whole XYZ Zimbabwe staff hierarchy. However, management respondents were seen as the key informants as they are involved in the formulation of the company's operations strategy and the implementation framework. This study has considered the period from 2009 to 2014. This period was seen as stable enough to avoid other extraneous variables such as Zimbabwe's hyperinflation of 2000–2008 affecting the study.

The study recommends that further researches should be carried out to all other industry players. The present study only focused on XYZ Zimbabwe, hence findings may not be generalized to other industry players. Future related research studies may consider comparative analysis of retail giants and survival strategies of small to medium operators in the retail sector.

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