

BUSINESS OBJECTIVES AND SUSTAINABLE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE AMONG PLASTIC MANUFACTURING FIRMS IN RIVERS STATE**Dr. Agabe, N. A.¹ & Okonye, Ndudi Mavis²****¹Department of Management, ²Master Student, Department of Management
^{1&2}Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria**¹Email: agabenlemaa@gmail.com²Email: ndumarvoe4real@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

This study examined the relationship between business objectives and sustainable competitive advantage among plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers State. Objectives of the study were to examine how dimensions of business objectives such as strategic objectives and operational objectives relate with sustainable competitive advantage in terms of cost leadership and product differentiation. Using a correlational research design, data were collected from 39 respondents across 13 plastic manufacturing firms using structured questionnaires. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire designed in four point likert rating scale. In the course of administering the questionnaires, the researcher was able to retrieve 35 copies. Pearson Product Moment Correlation (r) was used for the test of hypotheses via SPSS Version 25.0. The findings revealed that there is a significant relationship between business objectives and sustainable competitive advantage among plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers State. The study concluded that business objectives enhance sustainable competitive advantage. Among others, the study recommends that plastic manufacturing firms should regularly conduct thorough market research to identify cost-saving opportunities and emerging customer preferences as such would enable them set clear goals focused on achieving cost leadership through efficiency.

Keywords: Business objectives, strategic objectives, operational objectives, sustainable competitive advantage, cost leadership and product differentiation.

INTRODUCTION**Background to the Study**

In "today's fast-changing and competitive business world, having a long-lasting advantage over competitors is very important for a company's success and survival (Gunawanabc et al., 2025; Abisuga & de Beer, 2023). Sustainable competitive advantage means a company can stay ahead of its competitors over time. This is especially important for plastic manufacturing firms, as it helps them stay strong in the market even when competition is tough. With a sustainable competitive advantage, these firms can grow, succeed, and perform better than their rivals in a changing market (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020). For this study, sustainable competitive advantage was measured using two main ideas: cost leadership and product differentiation.

Cost leadership means being the cheapest producer in the industry by making production more efficient, cutting waste, and taking advantage of economies of scale. This allows firms to offer lower prices, attract more customers, and gain a bigger share of the market. Product differentiation, on the other hand, means making products that are unique through innovation, high quality, or special features that competitors don't have (Alfawaire & Atan, 2021; Dey et al., 2024). This approach lets firms charge higher prices and build loyal customers. Using these strategies helps plastic manufacturers stay profitable, meet customer needs, and keep their edge in a competitive" industry. Manufacturing "firms must constantly adjust their business goals to match changes in the market to stay successful. Business objectives guide a company's activities and decisions, helping it focus on results like making profits, improving efficiency, leading the market, and keeping customers happy (Johnson et al., 2017). Strategic objectives are long-term goals that help the firm compete well in its industry, such as expanding the market, innovating, and building the brand (Hitt et al., 2017).

Operational objectives are short-term, measurable goals that support these bigger plans, like reducing costs, improving productivity, and streamlining daily operations (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020). When strategic and operational objectives work well together, a company can use its resources effectively and stay competitive both now and in the future.

For plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers State, it is very important to make sure their business goals match their long-term strategies. This is especially true because the industry faces tough challenges like rising production costs, changing prices of raw materials, and strict rules about managing plastic waste (Akinwale & Ogundele, 2019; Edeh, 2021). Even though it is important for businesses to link their goals to strategies that give them a lasting edge, many plastic manufacturers in Rivers State seem to struggle with putting this into practice. Most studies on Nigerian manufacturing focus on money matters, innovation, or how efficiently firms operate (Okpara, 2018; Nnabuiife, 2020), but few look at how business goals—both strategic and day-to-day—affect lasting advantages like low costs or unique products, especially for small and medium-sized plastic firms.

Also, some reports suggest that many plastic firms in Rivers State do not have clear long-term goals and mostly focus on short-term plans, reacting to market changes instead of planning ahead for long-term success (Adeleke & Ogundele, 2020). This mismatch can make it harder for them to build strong advantages in saving costs or creating new products. Because of this, it is important to study carefully how setting and following both strategic and operational business goals affects a company's ability to gain a lasting competitive edge. This study, therefore, looks at the relationship between business objectives and sustainable competitive advantage in plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers' State.

Statement of the Problem

In "today's highly competitive manufacturing environment, firms are increasingly challenged to achieve and sustain a competitive edge amidst volatile market conditions, rising operational costs, and shifting consumer preferences. For plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers State, it appears this challenge is intensified by economic instability, infrastructural decay, high production costs, and growing environmental concerns about plastic waste. To survive, these firms are expected to establish clear business objectives both strategic and operational that align with competitive strategies capable of ensuring long-term sustainability and profitability. However, it seems some plastic manufacturing firms operate without clearly articulated or effectively implemented strategic and operational objectives. Strategic objectives such as innovation, market expansion, and quality improvement are often poorly defined, while operational objectives such as cost efficiency and process optimization are inconsistently pursued. This lack of integration between strategic direction and day-to-day operations creates a gap between organizational goals and actual performance outcomes, weakening their ability to achieve sustainable competitive advantage.

Moreover, while some firms attempt to pursue cost leadership strategies through resource minimization and production efficiency, these efforts seem to be undermined by poor energy management, reliance on imported raw materials, and fluctuating exchange rates. Similarly, product differentiation strategies, which could enable firms to stand out through innovation, branding, or quality enhancement, appears to remain underdeveloped due to limited investment in research and development, weak technological capabilities, and a lack of customer-driven product innovation. More so, from the best of the researcher's knowledge, the relationship between business objectives and sustainable competitive advantage among plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers State is yet to be empirically examined. Therefore, this study examined the relationship between business objectives and sustainable competitive advantage among plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers' State.

Conceptual Framework

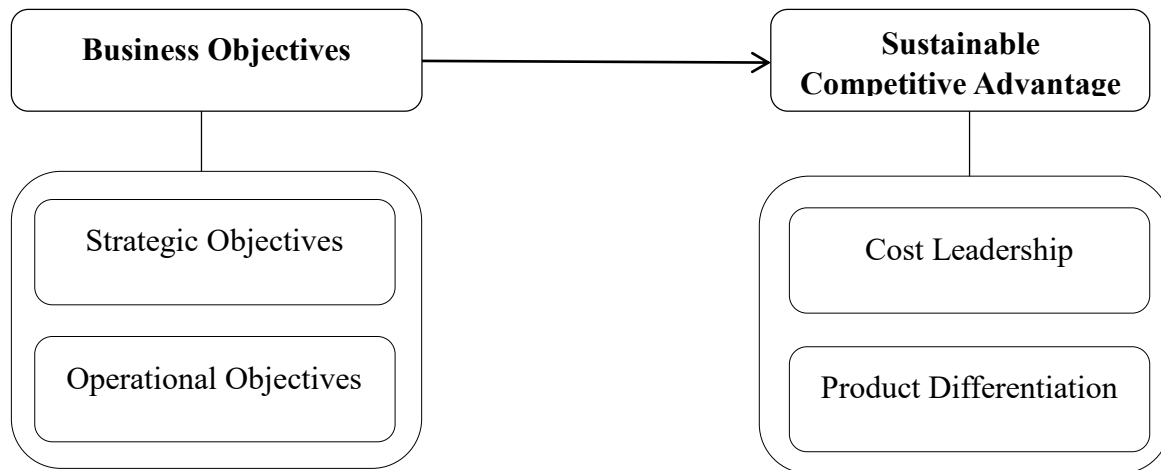


Fig. 1.1: Conceptual Framework Showing Relationship between Business Objectives and Sustainable Competitive Advantage.

Source: Adopted from Armstrong & Taylor, (2020), Hill, et al., (2014).

Aim and Objectives

The "aim of this study was to determine the relationship between business objectives and sustainable competitive advantage of plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers State. The specific objectives were to:

1. investigate the relationship between strategic objectives and cost leadership of Plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers State.
2. examine the relationship between strategic objectives and product differentiation of plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers State.
3. investigate the relationship between operational objectives and cost leadership of Plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers State.
4. examine the relationship between operational objectives and product differentiation of plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers" State.

Research Questions

1. What is the "relationship between strategic objectives and cost leadership of plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers State?
2. How does strategic objectives relate with product differentiation of plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers State?
3. What is the relationship between operational objectives and cost leadership of plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers State?
4. How does operational objectives relate with product differentiation of plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers" State?

Research Hypotheses

The "following null hypotheses were tested at a significance level of 0.01.

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between strategic objectives and cost leadership of plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers State.

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between strategic objectives and product differentiation of plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers State.

Ho₃: There is no significant relationship between operational objectives and cost leadership of plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers State.

Ho₄: There is no significant relationship between operational objectives and product differentiation of plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers State.

Review of Related Literature

Concept of Business Objectives

Business "objectives are the clearly defined goals or desired outcomes that an organization seeks to achieve within a specified timeframe. They serve as the foundation upon which strategic and operational plans are built, providing direction and purpose to organizational activities (Johnson et al., 2017). To Armstrong and Taylor (2020), business objectives represent the translation of an organization's vision and mission into measurable targets that guide performance and decision-making. These objectives enable firms to align their resources, coordinate efforts, and evaluate success based on set benchmarks. In the context of manufacturing firms, business objectives help organizations respond to dynamic market conditions, ensure resource efficiency, and maintain competitive relevance (Adeleke & Ogundele, 2020). They are often categorized into strategic objectives and operational objectives, which function at different levels but are complementary in achieving overall organizational performance and sustainability.

Strategic Objectives: Strategic objectives are specific, long-term goals that guide an organisation's overall direction and decision-making. They serve as a dimension of business objectives by translating the company's vision and mission into actionable targets. These objectives focus on areas such as market growth, competitive advantage, innovation, and operational efficiency. By setting clear strategic objectives, businesses align resources and efforts toward achieving sustainable success. They help measure progress and provide a framework for prioritising initiatives. Finally, strategic objectives ensure that all departments work cohesively to fulfil the organisation's broader aims (Hitt et al., 2017; Grant, 2019; Akinwale & Ogundele, 2019).

Operational Objectives: Operational objectives are short-term, specific targets that focus on the day-to-day activities needed to achieve broader business goals. As a dimension of business objectives, they translate strategic plans into actionable tasks related to production, quality, efficiency, and customer service. These objectives help ensure smooth business operations by setting clear performance standards for teams and processes. They are measurable and time-bound, allowing for regular monitoring and adjustment. Operational objectives support overall business success by driving consistent execution and improving resource management. In essence, they bridge the gap between strategy and daily business functions" (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020; Johnson et al., 2017; Adeleke & Ogundele, 2020).

Concept of Sustainable Competitive Advantage

Sustainable "Competitive Advantage (SCA) refers to a firm's ability to maintain a superior market position and performance over competitors for an extended period (Barney, 1991). It arises when a company develops unique resources, capabilities, or strategies that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (the VRIN framework). Porter (1985) emphasizes that sustainable competitive advantage is achieved through distinct positioning strategies that allow a firm to deliver greater value to customers or achieve lower costs than competitors.

In the manufacturing context, SCA can be derived from production efficiency, technological innovation, skilled human capital, and customer loyalty (Grant, 2019). For plastic manufacturing firms, achieving sustainability in competitive advantage involves creating cost efficiencies and product innovations that respond to customer needs while addressing environmental and regulatory

challenges (Edeh, 2021). In the light of the above, this study measured sustainable competitive advantage into cost leadership and product differentiation.

Cost Leadership: Cost leadership is a business strategy where a company aims to become the lowest-cost producer in its industry. Cost leadership enables plastic manufacturing firms to produce goods at lower costs than competitors. By optimizing production processes, reducing waste, and leveraging economies of scale, these firms can offer competitive pricing without sacrificing quality (Nwokah & Ahiauzu, 2019; Grant, 2019). This cost efficiency attracts price-sensitive customers and increases market share. Maintaining cost leadership also creates barriers to entry for new competitors and enhances profitability. Cost leadership supports long-term business sustainability by balancing cost control with customer value in a competitive industry.

Product Differentiation: Product differentiation is a business strategy where a company makes its products or services stand out from competitors by emphasizing unique features, quality, design or brand reputation. Product differentiation allows firms to stand out by offering unique features, superior quality, or innovative designs (Porter in Edeh, 2021). By developing specialized products that meet specific customer needs, these firms can command premium prices and build strong brand loyalty. Differentiation reduces direct price competition and attracts niche markets, enhancing customer satisfaction and retention. This strategy fosters innovation and continuous improvement, helping firms adapt to changing market demands. Finally, product differentiation strengthens market position and supports long-term profitability in a competitive plastic manufacturing industry.

Relationship between Business Objectives and Sustainable Competitive Advantage

Strategic objectives provide the long-term vision and direction, guiding firms to prioritize cost efficiency and innovation. For instance, a strategic objective might focus on achieving the lowest production costs in the industry or developing innovative plastic products that meet evolving customer needs. These high-level goals help align the organisation's resources, investments, and capabilities toward maintaining cost leadership by optimizing supply chains, adopting advanced manufacturing technologies, or expanding production capacity to benefit from economies of scale. At the same time, strategic objectives can drive product differentiation by encouraging research and development, quality improvement, and unique design features that set the firm's products apart from competitors (Hitt et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2017). Operational objectives translate these strategic goals into day-to-day actions, such as improving process efficiency, reducing waste, enhancing quality control, and ensuring timely delivery. These operational targets enable the firm to execute cost-saving measures consistently, lowering unit costs and enabling competitive pricing that attracts price-sensitive customers. Simultaneously, operational objectives ensure product innovation efforts are implemented effectively, maintaining high standards and responsiveness to market trends, which strengthens brand loyalty and market share. By integrating strategic foresight with effective operational execution, plastic manufacturing firms can sustain their competitive advantages (Nnabuife, 2020; Edeh, 2021). Cost leadership supported by operational efficiency secures market positioning through affordable pricing, while product differentiation driven by innovation and quality ensures distinctiveness.

Theoretical Review

The study theoretically anchored on generic strategies theory. The theory was propounded by Michael E. Porter in 1980. It assumes that firms can achieve competitive advantage by adopting one of three broad strategies: cost leadership, differentiation, or focus. The theory is based on the assumption that businesses must choose a clear strategic path to outperform rivals, as trying to combine strategies may lead to being stuck in the middle. Porter's framework emphasizes that competitive advantage stems from either offering the lowest cost or unique products tailored to specific market segments (Porter, 1980; Grant, 2019). Differentiation is driven by innovation, quality,

brand reputation, or customer service. Porter's theory links directly to the concept of sustainable competitive advantage since these strategies help firms defend their market positions over time. This theory implies that plastic manufacturing firms must align their business objectives with a clear competitive approach to achieve sustainable advantage. Strategic objectives guide the firm's overall direction, whether focusing on cost leadership or product differentiation, while operational objectives ensure effective execution of these strategies. Firms pursuing cost leadership must emphasize efficiency and cost reduction in daily operations, whereas those focusing on product differentiation prioritize innovation and quality. This alignment ensures resources are optimally utilized to maintain competitive positioning. Failure to clearly link business objectives with these generic strategies can result in unclear focus and reduced market performance.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the correlational research design. The population of the study was 13 plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers State. This was obtained Manufacturer Association of Nigeria (2025). A sample size of 39 managers (3 managers from each understudied plastic manufacturing firm) was purposefully drawn from the population. Data were collected through primary (questionnaire) and secondary (textbooks, journal articles and internet). A structured questionnaire titled Business Strategies and Sustainable Competitive Advantage Index (BSSCAI). The questionnaire was designed in four point likert rating scale format with the following response options: Strongly Agreed (SA) 4, Agreed (A) 3, Disagreed (D) 2, and Strongly Disagreed (DS) 1. The instrument was validated by two industrial relations experts and one measurement and evaluation expert. The reliability coefficient of the instrument (0.73) was elicited using Crombach Alpha. Pearson Product Moment Correlation (r) was used for the test of hypotheses. In the course of administering the questionnaires, the researcher was able to retrieve 35 (90%) copies. A bivariate analysis (test of hypothesis) was done using SPSS Version 25 at 0.01 level of significance.

Results

Ho₁: "There is no significant relationship between strategic objectives and cost leadership of plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers State.

Table 1 Correlation between Strategic Objectives and Cost Leadership

		Strategic Objectives	Cost Leadership
Strategic Objectives	Pearson Correlation	1	.889**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	35	35
Cost Leadership	Pearson Correlation	.889**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	35	35

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 1 above shows r value of 0.889 at a significance level of 0.00 which is less than the chosen alpha level of 0.01. Since the significance value 0.000 is less than the alpha level of 0.01, the null hypothesis (Ho₁) which states that there is no significant relationship between strategic objectives and cost leadership of plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers State was rejected and the alternate hypothesis accepted. This implies that there is a very strong significant relationship between strategic objectives and cost leadership of plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers State.

Ho₂: "There is no significant relationship between strategic objectives and product differentiation of plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers State.

Table 2 Correlation between Strategic Objectives and Product Differentiation

		Strategic Objectives	Product Differentiation
Strategic Objectives	Pearson Correlation	1	.741**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	35	35
Product Differentiation	Pearson Correlation	.741**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	35	35

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2 above shows r value of 0.741 at a significance level of 0.00 which is less than the chosen alpha level of 0.01. Since the significance value 0.000 is less than the alpha level of 0.01, the null hypothesis (Ho₂) which states that there is no significant relationship between strategic objectives and product differentiation of plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers State was rejected and the alternate hypothesis accepted. This implies that there is a strong significant relationship between strategic objectives and product differentiation of plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers" State.

Ho₃: "There is no significant relationship between operational objectives and cost leadership of plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers State.

Table 3 Correlation between Operational Objectives and Cost Leadership

		Operational Objectives	Cost Leadership
Operational Objectives	Pearson Correlation	1	.782**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	35	35
Cost Leadership	Pearson Correlation	.782**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	35	35

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3 above shows r value of 0.782 at a significance level of 0.00 which is less than the chosen alpha level of 0.01. Since the significance value 0.000 is less than the alpha level of 0.01, the null hypothesis (Ho₃) which states that there is no significant relationship between operational objectives and cost leadership of plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers State was rejected and the alternate hypothesis accepted. This implies that there is a strong significant relationship between operational objectives and cost leadership of plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers" State.

Ho₄: "There is no significant relationship between operational objectives and product differentiation of plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers State.

Table 4 Correlation between Operational Objectives and Product Differentiation

		Operational Objectives	Product Differentiation
Operational Objectives	Pearson Correlation	1	.770**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	35	35
Product Differentiation	Pearson Correlation	.770**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	35	35

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4 above shows r value of 0.770 at a significance level of 0.00 which is less than the chosen alpha level of 0.01. Since the significance value 0.000 is less than the alpha level of 0.01, the null hypothesis (H_{04}) which states that there is no significant relationship between operational objectives and product differentiation of plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers State was rejected and the alternate hypothesis accepted. This implies that there is a strong significant relationship between operational objectives and product differentiation of plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers" State.

Discussion of findings

The "findings of this study revealed significant positive relationships between business objectives and sustainable competitive advantage among plastic manufacturing firms in Rivers State. These findings are in line with the view of Adeleke and Ogundele (2020) and Nnabuife (2020) which assert that business objectives enhance sustainable competitive advantage of firms. In this light, strategic objectives provide the long-term vision and direction, guiding firms to prioritize cost efficiency and innovation. For instance, a strategic objective might focus on achieving the lowest production costs in the industry or developing innovative plastic products that meet evolving customer needs. These high-level goals help align the organisation's resources, investments, and capabilities toward maintaining cost leadership by optimizing supply chains, adopting advanced manufacturing technologies, or expanding production capacity to benefit from economies of scale. At the same time, strategic objectives can drive product differentiation by encouraging research and development, quality improvement, and unique design features that set the firm's products apart from competitors (Hitt et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2017).

Operational objectives translate these strategic goals into day-to-day actions, such as improving process efficiency, reducing waste, enhancing quality control, and ensuring timely delivery. These operational targets enable the firm to execute cost-saving measures consistently, lowering unit costs and enabling competitive pricing that attracts price-sensitive customers. Simultaneously, operational objectives ensure product innovation efforts are implemented effectively, maintaining high standards and responsiveness to market trends, which strengthens brand loyalty and market share (Okpara, 2018; Akinwale & Ogundele, 2019; Johnson et al., 2017). By integrating strategic foresight with effective operational execution, plastic manufacturing firms can sustain their competitive advantages (Nnabuife, 2020; Edeh, 2021). Cost leadership supported by operational efficiency secures market positioning through affordable pricing, while product differentiation driven by innovation and quality ensures" distinctiveness.

CONCLUSION

Plastic "manufacturing firms that clearly define and pursue strategic objectives tend to achieve stronger competitive positions, while effective operational objectives complement these efforts by enhancing cost control and production efficiency. This synergy between strategic planning and operational execution is essential for sustaining cost leadership and product differentiation advantages. Aligning business objectives with competitive strategy is critical for the long-term success and growth of plastic manufacturing firms in the region. Therefore, the study concluded business objectives enhance sustainable competitive advantage.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Plastic manufacturing firms should regularly conduct thorough market research to identify cost-saving opportunities and emerging customer preferences as such would enable them set clear goals focused on achieving cost leadership through efficiency.
2. Firms should include objectives that prioritize investment in advanced manufacturing technologies and research and development to drive process improvements and supports the creation of unique, high-quality products, thereby strengthening product differentiation.

3. Plastic manufacturing firms should set clear targets to streamline production processes, minimize material waste, and optimize resource use as such focus on operational efficiency supports cost leadership.
4. Plastic manufacturing firms should establish operational objectives that emphasize rigorous quality assurance and continuous improvement in product design as such would ensure consistent product differentiation through superior quality and innovative features, helping the firm maintain a competitive edge in the market.

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