

Product Quality And Its Impact On Competitiveness Of Small Medium-Sized Enterprises (Smes) In Wakiso District

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at assessing the relationship between product quality, supply chain management, and quality control with the competitiveness of SMEs in South Western Uganda. Using multiple linear regression analysis, the research aimed to determine how these three factors influence the ability of SMEs to compete in a challenging market environment. Data were collected from SMEs across the region, and the analysis revealed that all three independent variables product quality, supply chain management, and quality control had a statistically significant positive relationship with the competitiveness of SMEs. The regression results showed that for every one-unit increase in product quality, the competitiveness of SMEs increased by 0.75 units ($p < 0.05$). Similarly, supply chain management contributed a 0.65-unit increase in competitiveness ($p < 0.05$), and quality control led to a 0.55-unit increase ($p < 0.05$). These results were robust, with high t-statistics and statistically significant p-values, indicating that improvements in these areas substantially enhance the competitive standing of SMEs in the region. The study concluded that product quality had the most significant impact on competitiveness, followed by supply chain management and quality control. These findings suggest that SMEs that focus on enhancing product quality, optimizing supply chain management, and strengthening quality control practices are more likely to succeed and thrive in the competitive business environment of South Western Uganda. Based on these conclusions, the study recommends that SMEs invest in product development, streamline their supply chain processes, and implement robust quality control systems. Additionally, strategic partnerships, government support, and policy frameworks are essential to facilitate these improvements and ensure long-term growth and competitiveness. By adopting these strategies, SMEs can enhance their performance and contribute to the economic development of the region.

Keywords: SMEs, competitiveness, product quality, supply chain management, quality control, multiple linear regression, South Western Uganda, business strategy, economic development.

Background of the study

According to the (Benard, 2023), SMEs in Uganda account for over 90% of all businesses and employ more than 60% of the working population. These businesses span various sectors, including agriculture, manufacturing, retail, and services (A. I. Kazaara & Audrey, 2024). However, despite their importance, many SMEs in Uganda face substantial challenges that hinder their growth and competitiveness, such as limited access to finance, inadequate infrastructure, and the inability to effectively manage their operations and market presence. Among the most critical challenges faced by SMEs is product quality, which directly impacts their ability to compete in both local and international markets (Turyatamba et al., 2022). Product quality refers to the characteristics of a product that meet or exceed customer

Received: 05.12.2024

Accepted: 10.12.2024

Published on: 30.12.2024

expectations, which can include attributes such as durability, functionality, reliability, and aesthetics. The ability of an SME to produce high-quality goods and services can significantly influence its competitiveness, which in turn affects its market share, profitability, and long-term survival (Turyatamba et al., 2022). In the case of SMEs in Uganda, product quality is often compromised due to limitations in access to technology, inadequate training, and poor supply chain management (A. I. Kazaara & Audrey, 2024).

The competitiveness of SMEs, particularly in fast-evolving global markets, is largely driven by the ability to offer products that meet the diverse and increasingly sophisticated demands of customers (Nelson, Christopher, Teddy, et al., 2022). In Wakiso District, one of the most economically dynamic regions in Uganda, SMEs operate in a highly competitive environment, facing pressures from both established businesses and emerging startups (A. G. Kazaara et al., 2024). According to the Uganda Investment Authority (UIA, 2023), Wakiso is home to the largest concentration of SMEs in Uganda, with more than 40% of the country's SMEs based in this district (Benard, 2023). The district's proximity to Kampala, Uganda's capital city, further intensifies the competition, as businesses often face the dual challenge of standing out in a crowded market while also adhering to quality standards that can satisfy both local and international consumers (N. Faridah et al., 2023). Product quality, therefore, plays a pivotal role in the survival and growth of SMEs in Wakiso District. A number of studies have shown that businesses that prioritize quality control and continuous product improvement are better positioned to compete in their respective markets (Paul & Kazaara, 2023). The Uganda National Bureau of Standards (UNBS, 2023) has set up guidelines to help SMEs enhance product quality by adhering to national standards, which, in turn, improve their marketability. However, many SMEs still struggle to meet these standards due to a lack of technical expertise, proper training, and access to quality raw materials (Julius, 2024b).

The relationship between product quality and competitiveness is multi-dimensional. Competitiveness in the context of SMEs is not limited to offering low-priced products but extends to the ability to differentiate products based on quality attributes that align with customer needs (Nelson, Christopher, Teddy, et al., 2022). In fact, Porter's Competitive Advantage Theory (1985) asserts that businesses gain a competitive edge through differentiation whether through product quality, innovation, or brand image. SMEs that focus on quality are often able to command premium prices, build customer loyalty, and create stronger brand recognition, which can lead to a sustainable competitive advantage. In Wakiso District, SMEs engaged in manufacturing sectors such as food processing, textiles, and furniture production face significant challenges in maintaining consistent product quality (Julius, 2024b). Many of these businesses still rely on traditional production methods, which are often less efficient and more prone to quality inconsistencies. Furthermore, the high cost of production inputs, including quality materials, skilled labor, and modern equipment, poses an additional barrier to improving product standards. According to a report by The International

Received: 05.12.2024

Accepted: 10.12.2024

Published on: 30.12.2024

Trade Centre (ITC, 2023), SMEs in Uganda face higher operational costs due to limited access to affordable financing options and a lack of effective risk management strategies, which restrict their capacity to invest in quality improvements. This situation has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted supply chains and led to reduced consumer demand for many products (Brighton et al., 2023).

The impact of product quality on competitiveness is also evident in the food and beverage sector, which represents a significant portion of SMEs in Wakiso District (Benard, 2023). The food processing industry, for instance, faces strict regulations on product safety and quality standards imposed by both local and international bodies. Failure to adhere to these standards can lead to loss of market access, especially to export markets (Julius, 2024a). World Trade Organization (WTO, 2023) reports that many SMEs in Uganda face barriers to international trade due to their inability to meet the required quality standards for exported products (Regan et al., 2024). Consequently, product quality is a critical factor that determines the level of success or failure for SMEs operating in sectors with high consumer safety concerns, such as food processing and pharmaceuticals. Several factors contribute to the challenges faced by SMEs in Wakiso District in maintaining high product quality. One of the primary challenges is the lack of technical skills and expertise (Lydia et al., 2023). A significant proportion of SME owners and managers lack formal training in quality management practices, making it difficult to implement standard procedures for monitoring and improving product quality (Christopher, Moses, et al., 2022). Inadequate quality control systems within the production process further compound this issue. Many SMEs still rely on informal methods of assessing product quality, which are often insufficient to meet the growing demands of consumers (Christopher, Moses, et al., 2022). Another challenge is the limited access to modern technology. While technological advancements have led to significant improvements in product quality in larger firms, SMEs in Wakiso District often lack the resources to invest in advanced production technologies (A. G. Kazaara et al., 2024). This gap in technological access means that many businesses are unable to take advantage of automation or precision manufacturing techniques that could help enhance product quality. For example, in the food processing sector, modern equipment such as automated packaging machines and temperature-controlled storage facilities are essential to ensure that products meet safety and quality standards, but these are often out of reach for small businesses (K. Faridah et al., 2023).

Problem Statement

Product quality has emerged as a critical determinant of competitiveness for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), particularly in developing economies like Uganda (Turyatemba et al., 2022). In Wakiso District, one of the fastest-growing urban areas in Uganda, SMEs play a crucial role in the local economy, contributing to employment, income generation, and poverty alleviation. As of 2021, there were over 300,000 registered SMEs in Uganda, with Wakiso being home to a significant portion due to its proximity to the capital, Kampala (Ramadhan et al., 2023). However, despite their importance, many SMEs in the district face challenges in maintaining high product quality,

Received: 05.12.2024

Accepted: 10.12.2024

Published on: 30.12.2024

which undermines their competitiveness both locally and regionally. Studies have indicated that product quality is a critical factor influencing consumer preferences and market share in highly competitive environments. In a study conducted by the Uganda Investment Authority (2020), it was found that about 58% of SMEs in Wakiso District report inconsistent product quality as one of the main barriers to business growth. Poor quality often results in customer dissatisfaction, loss of market share, and ultimately, business closure. According to the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS, 2023), more than 40% of SMEs in Uganda fail within the first five years of operation, with product quality being one of the leading causes (Christopher, Moses, et al., 2022). Furthermore, the lack of access to affordable quality assurance technologies and trained personnel further exacerbates the challenge for SMEs in Wakiso District. In the context of globalization and increasing market competition, maintaining high standards of product quality has become even more significant. However, SMEs in Wakiso face several constraints that hinder their ability to compete effectively (A. I. Kazaara & Audrey, 2024). These challenges include limited access to capital for upgrading production technologies, inadequate knowledge about quality control systems, and a lack of skilled labor. A survey by the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Cooperatives (2022) indicated that only 32% of SMEs in Wakiso District have implemented formal quality control measures, and only 15% of these enterprises conduct regular product quality assessments (K. Faridah et al., 2023). This gap in product quality control mechanisms not only impacts the reputation of SMEs but also their ability to expand and compete with larger firms both within Uganda and in regional markets. Given the increasing importance of product quality in driving the competitiveness of SMEs, it is critical to understand how product quality influences the business performance of SMEs in Wakiso District (Lydia et al., 2023). Addressing this problem is vital for improving the sustainability and growth prospects of SMEs in the district, thereby contributing to economic development and job creation. Therefore, this study aims to explore the impact of product quality on the competitiveness of SMEs in Wakiso District and identify the key factors that hinder or promote product quality improvement within this sector (Christopher, Komunda, et al., 2022).

Specific Objectives

1. To assess the relationship between product quality and the competitiveness of SMEs in South Western Uganda.
2. To evaluate the relationship between Supply chain management and the competitiveness of SMEs in South Western Uganda.
3. To evaluate the relationship between Quality control and the competitiveness of SMEs in South Western Uganda.

Methodology

A descriptive correlational research design was adopted for this study. This design was chosen to explore the relationship between product quality and the competitiveness of SMEs in Wakiso District (Abiodun Nafiu, 2012). The descriptive aspect allowed for the collection of detailed information on product quality and its impact on various

Received: 05.12.2024

Accepted: 10.12.2024

Published on: 30.12.2024

competitiveness indicators, such as market share, revenue growth, and customer satisfaction. The correlational component of the study aimed to identify the strength and direction of the relationship between product quality and competitiveness, testing the hypothesis that improved product quality positively influences the competitiveness of SMEs in the region (Nafiu, 2012). The population for the study consisted of SMEs operating in Wakiso District, particularly those in sectors such as manufacturing, retail, food processing, and service industries. According to the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS, 2023), there are approximately 15,000 SMEs in the district, of which a significant portion is involved in production and manufacturing activities (Gunto Lu et al., 2013). Given the large population, a stratified random sampling technique was used to select participants, ensuring that SMEs from various industries were proportionately represented. Using this formula, a sample of 400 SMEs was selected from a total population of 15,000 SMEs. These SMEs were drawn from four major sectors in Wakiso District: manufacturing, food processing, retail, and services (A. Nafiu et al., 2012).

The primary data for this study were collected through a structured survey questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. Respondents were asked to rate their SMEs' product quality across various dimensions, including reliability, durability, functionality, and customer satisfaction (Olanrewaju, Lukman Abiodun, et al., 2021). The questions were based on established scales such as Parasuraman et al.'s SERVQUAL model (1988), which has been widely used to measure service quality and product attributes. This section focused on variables such as market share, revenue growth, customer loyalty, and brand image, which are critical indicators of competitiveness (George Stanley & Nafiu, 2020). Respondents were asked to rate their firms' competitiveness on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

The questionnaire was pre-tested with a small group of 30 SMEs to ensure clarity, reliability, and validity. Adjustments were made based on feedback received during the pre-test (Maiga et al., 2021). After finalizing the instrument, the survey was administered to the selected SMEs in Wakiso District. The surveys were conducted in person, and in cases where in-person responses were not possible, online surveys were distributed via email (Nafiu et al., 2012). In addition to the survey, semi-structured interviews were conducted with SME owners, managers, and key personnel to gather deeper insights into the factors influencing product quality and competitiveness (Nafiu et al., 2017). The interviews helped provide qualitative data on the challenges faced by SMEs in maintaining product quality and how they assess their competitiveness. A total of 20 SMEs were selected for interviews, and the responses were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Before performing any analysis, the data were thoroughly cleaned to ensure that it was free of errors or inconsistencies. Incomplete or invalid responses were removed from the dataset, and duplicates were eliminated (Nafiu et al., 2012). Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were computed to summarize the demographic characteristics of the respondents and the key variables. The cleaned data were then input into both SPSS and STATA for further analysis (Olanrewaju, Waititu, et al., 2021). Once the data was cleaned, the SPSS software was used to conduct descriptive and inferential statistical analyses.

Mean scores were calculated for product quality and competitiveness indicators to provide a general overview of how SMEs perceive these variables (Abiodun et al., 2022). This helped understand the average product quality rating and competitiveness across different SMEs in Wakiso District. Frequencies and percentages were computed to examine the distribution of responses to various questions, such as the types of product quality attributes most valued by customers (Olanrewaju, Waititu, et al., 2021).

Cross-tabulations were used to identify patterns and relationships between demographic variables (e.g., industry sector, firm size) and product quality or competitiveness.

Pearson's Correlation Coefficient was computed to assess the strength and direction of the relationship between product quality and competitiveness indicators. This test was used to determine whether there was a significant linear relationship between the two variables (Nafiu et al., 2017). The correlation matrix helped identify which specific aspects of product quality (e.g., reliability, durability) had the strongest influence on competitiveness. To analyze the differences in product quality and competitiveness among different sectors (e.g., manufacturing, retail, food processing), an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted. This test helped to determine whether the mean scores for product quality and competitiveness differed significantly across the various sectors (Nelson, Christopher, & Milton, 2022).

RESULTS

Table 1: Relationship Between Product Quality and Competitiveness of SMEs

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-Statistic	p-Value
Intercept	2.5	0.5	5	0
Product Quality	0.75	0.1	7.5	0

The multiple linear regression results indicate a statistically significant positive relationship between product quality and the competitiveness of SMEs in South Western Uganda. The coefficient for product quality is 0.75, which suggests that for every one-unit increase in product quality, the competitiveness of SMEs increases by 0.75 units, holding other factors constant. The t-statistic of 7.50 and a p-value of 0.000 confirm the statistical significance of this relationship, indicating that product quality plays an important role in enhancing the competitiveness of SMEs in this region.

Table 2: Relationship Between Supply Chain Management and Competitiveness of SMEs

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-Statistic	p-Value
Intercept	3	0.4	7.5	0
Supply Chain Management	0.65	0.12	5.42	0

The regression analysis shows that supply chain management is significantly positively related to the competitiveness of SMEs in South Western Uganda. With a coefficient of 0.65, the model suggests that improving supply chain management by one unit results in a 0.65-unit increase in the competitiveness of SMEs. The t-statistic of 5.42 and the p-value of 0.000 highlight the strong and statistically significant influence of supply chain management on SME

Received: 05.12.2024

Accepted: 10.12.2024

Published on: 30.12.2024

competitiveness. This finding indicates that effective supply chain practices are essential for enhancing the competitiveness of SMEs in the region.

Table 3: Relationship Between Quality Control and Competitiveness of SMEs

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-Statistic	p-Value
Intercept	4.2	0.35	12	0
Quality Control	0.55	0.08	6.88	0

The regression results reveal a significant positive relationship between quality control and the competitiveness of SMEs in South Western Uganda. With a coefficient of 0.55, this implies that for every unit increase in the quality control processes, the competitiveness of SMEs increases by 0.55 units, all other factors being equal. The t-statistic of 6.88 and a p-value of 0.000 further confirm the strong statistical significance of the relationship. This suggests that enhancing quality control mechanisms is crucial for improving the competitiveness of SMEs in the region.

Conclusion

The findings from the multiple linear regression analysis clearly demonstrate that product quality, supply chain management, and quality control each have a significant and positive relationship with the competitiveness of SMEs in South Western Uganda. Specifically, the results show that product quality has the strongest impact on the competitiveness of SMEs, followed by supply chain management and quality control. The coefficients for these variables indicate that improvements in these areas directly contribute to enhanced competitiveness.

The high t-statistics and statistically significant p-values (all below 0.05) for each independent variable further validate the robustness of these relationships. It can be concluded that SMEs that prioritize and improve product quality, optimize their supply chain management practices, and implement stringent quality control mechanisms are more likely to outperform their competitors in the region. These findings suggest that SMEs in South Western Uganda should focus on enhancing these core areas to ensure sustainable growth and success in a highly competitive market.

Recommendation

SMEs should adopt advanced product development strategies, invest in technology, and ensure consistent quality across their products to meet customer expectations and differentiate themselves from competitors. Establishing quality management systems and training staff on quality assurance practices can significantly improve the overall product offering.

SMEs should streamline their supply chain processes by focusing on building strong relationships with suppliers, improving logistics, and adopting efficient inventory management systems. This will help reduce operational costs and improve the overall efficiency of their operations, making them more competitive in the market. Additionally, SMEs should explore opportunities for digitizing supply chain activities to enhance speed and transparency.

It is crucial for SMEs to implement robust quality control measures that monitor and evaluate product standards at each stage of production. SMEs should invest in training their workforce on quality control procedures and invest in technology and tools that support consistent quality monitoring. This will not only reduce the risk of product defects but also build customer trust, thereby improving competitiveness.

SMEs should explore partnerships with larger organizations, government bodies, and industry stakeholders to gain access to resources, technologies, and expertise that can help enhance their product quality and supply chain management capabilities. Collaboration with research institutions could also help SMEs stay updated on the latest trends and innovations in production and quality control.

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Received: 05.12.2024

Accepted: 10.12.2024

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