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# Exploring Management Perceptions of Competitive versus Transient Advantage

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### ABSTRACT

Creating a Sustainable Competitive Advantage (SCA) is regarded as the central principle of strategy. Yet, scholarly and practical debates require the ability to pursue a SCA as an organisational purpose. With contemporary environmental pressures, it is uncertain whether organisations practically have the ability to succeed in creating and sustaining a Competitive Advantage (CA). On the contrary, the concept of transient advantage (TA) shows an increasing prevalence and synergy towards dynamic environments. Despite this, several organisations indicate the retention of CA as focus. This research confirms that many decision-makers fail to understand the concepts and their applicability in business. The authors of this study address the limited academic attention to the understanding, relevance and differentiation of competitive and TA at practical level. The findings of exploratory research with senior-level managers point to business executives misapprehending other terms for CA, one being TA. Transient advantage appears to be deemed more prevalent, due to contemporary environmental pressures as well as volatile regulatory requirements. The pursuance of sustainability appears problematic. The study contributes practically in that TA can be intentionally pursued through the business model flexibility to improve organisational performance.

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### Key phrases

CA; transient advantage; relevance; new competitive landscape; qualitative study

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Globally, achieving an SCA is the central tenet of strategy thinking for survival of every organisation. SCA broadly refers to company assets, attributes, or capabilities that are difficult to duplicate or exceed; and provide a superior or favourable long-term position over competitors. Given the modern, turbulent business environment, Cegliński (2016:58) questions whether most organisations truly hold the ability to succeed in sustaining a CA. The new volatile competitive landscape, involving accelerated globalisation, transparency, networked environments, industry convergence and technological advances, is not only coercing organisations to incessantly adapt to erratic market demands, but also constitutes a challenge in sustaining a CA (Larawan 2016; Reeves & Deimler 2011:136). Disruption is the order of the day (McGrath 2019), while D'Aveni (2018:vii, xxi) opens his book with terms like 'coming upheaval' and 'revolution'. Recognising these new associated environmental demands, McGrath (2013b:62) confirms CA as being 'rare'. This raises the question why most organisations claim to have a CA, if CA is so rare? In the light of the above, this study questions the sustainability of any claimed CA, and suggests that if it exists it may be increasingly threatened or changed in its characteristics. There is a call for increased resilience in ventures to face the associated risks with flexibility.

Meanwhile, recent studies present the concept of TA in organisations (Cegliński 2016:65; Hawkins & Fryling 2017:46-47; Leavy 2016:35). The TA perspective seems to shed new light on how CA is interpreted. Studies show that TA may be exceedingly synergistic and applicable in the face of fierce competition and turbulent environments (Madhok & Marques 2014:78), due the nature of the value-creating strategy that continually develops diverse and new advantages, "trying not to stay with the same pursued CA for too long because it will become exhausted" (McGrath 2013a:xviii). Consequently, anecdotal and empirical research studies regarding the shift towards TA are flourishing (Thomas & D'Aveni 2009:388). Despite TAs being deemed to be better fitting in the countless industries undergoing unremitting changes, CA remains a popular notion that has hitherto been excessively cited; yet the term may be becoming obsolete (Madhok & Marques 2014:77).

While CA is a well-established concept in the literature, this study aimed to better understand the apparent '[non]understanding' and potential misapprehension of the CA notion in practice. This potential [mis]understanding of CA among business practitioners has been 'abductively' observed by the authors and triggered this research to explore the determination of CA and TA relevance among business practitioners and seek scientific substance. The purpose of the current article is three-fold: it explores the understanding and perceived relevance of CA among business executives, including the potential

misapprehension of TA for CA among the participating business executives; it aims to determine whether executives may misapprehend other organisational concepts for the term CA; and it investigates whether TA may have an increased relevance in practice.

The understanding of SCA was measured against the popular definition developed by Barney (1991:102), which states it as a value creating strategy that is not being concurrently implemented by any potential or existing competitors. For it to remain competitive, the competitors should not be enabled to duplicate the benefits through alternative strategies.

The following research questions guided this study:

- How do business practitioners define CA?
- Do participants believe that they possess a CA and can they motivate why?
- Are business practitioners aware of the TA concept?
- Is TA misapprehended for CA?
- To what extent is TA perceived to be present in these organisations?

This study seeks contributions to both the academic and practical fields. It contributes value to the academic field by reducing the academic knowledge gap pertaining to the understanding and relevance of competitive and transient advantage by practitioners. The study also provides more conclusive findings as to whether TA or any other concepts are being misapprehended as CA. The findings contribute practical value to business executives as the study poses the potential to emphasise the increasing relevance of TA, making it applicable to be intentionally pursued through business model flexibility to improve organisational performance (Madhok & Marques 2014:77).

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Competitive Advantage defined**

A prevailing and dominant theory central to strategy research is that “to outperform the competition, firms need to create and sustain CA” (Ghamari 2008:1). Porter’s (1985) fundamental work states that CA grows out of the value a firm is able to create for its buyers that exceeds the firm’s cost of creating it. Value is what buyers are willing to pay, and superior value stems from offering lower prices than competitors for equivalent benefits or providing unique benefits that more than offset a higher price.

CA is therefore assumed to be fundamental to superior organisational performance and thus helps organisations to create and sustain an advantage to secure success and superior profit earnings over competitors (Cegliński 2016:58; Wang 2014:33). While Porter (1996)

purports that a company can outperform its rivals only if it can establish a difference that it can preserve, a generally agreed-upon definition of CA is somewhat elusive and unchallenged, as only a limited scholarly consensus exists (Maximova 2017:27; Meihami & Meihami 2014:87; Sigalas 2015:2004). Barney's (1991:102-106) description of CA is one of the most cited descriptions to date (Arbi, Bukhari & Saadat 2017:49) and will also be adopted as the definition for this study: CA is defined as a value strategy that is not concurrently being "implemented by any current or potential competitors" and these competitors or other firms "are unable to duplicate the benefits of this strategy".

The above-mentioned explanations indicate that the vital aspect of CA is sustainability. With various industries undergoing unremitting changes, sustainability constitutes a challenge (Madhok & Marques 2014:77), and meeting the prescribed standard of being more profitable than competitors alone is arduous (Huff, Floyd & Sherman 2009:140). Nevertheless, CA is still widely accepted within the world of business science (Cegliński 2016:59), especially from the resource-based view (RBV) of an organisation, which has proved to be the most dominant framework (Delery & Roumpi 2017:1; Gupta, Tan, Ee & Phang 2018:1; Nason & Wiklund 2015:3).

Smith and Flanagan (2006:1) indicate that numerous organisations believe that they have acquired a CA, when in reality that might not be a fact. Congruent with their study, Flint reported that only two CEOs out of 1000 were able to define the organisation's CA. CA has become a mere resonating tautology and is "the most overworked and least understood catch-phrase" (Flint 2000:121).

### **3. UNDERSTANDING COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE**

#### **3.1 Confusion regarding competitive advantage**

Despite the fact that CA is one of the most cited concepts within the academic and practical fields of business, it remains poorly understood and operationalised (Sigalas & Pekka Economou 2013:73). Consequently, studies show the lack of accurate identifying and defining of CA by the business executives in the current organisational scene (Alessandra 2018; Sigalas 2015:2004; Smith & Flanagan 2006:1).

Most organisations devise strategies as a means for victory in competition with other organisations (Speculand 2014:29), and it is deemed nonsensical to engage in any form of action by which the organisation gains little or even no edge (Rumelt 2011:85). Despite this, a mere 35% of organisations adhere to strategies that possess the potential to offer crucial advantages that would provide benefit over the competitors (Bradley, Bryan & Smit

2012:50). It is not uncommon for organisations to possess formulated strategies that remain unimplemented (Zeps & Ribickis 2015:932). Considering the accumulated critiques towards the common formulation of substandard strategy and poor implementation, what is the likelihood that all organisations will develop and implement strategies that will result in a CA to disrupt competitors?

Numerous organisations still claim the possession of a CA holding (Smith & Flanagan 2006:1). Flint (2000:121) asserts that several business executives are confident in the existence of a CA in the organisation, yet aligned findings indicate that several “managers are ‘walking in darkness’ regarding their endeavours of finding and developing CA” (Sigalas 2015:2006).

CA has become a buzzword that is often interchangeably used for other concepts such as financial performance or strategic thinking; irrespective of the fact that the concepts possess different meanings in different contexts (O’Shannassy 2008:169). Many business executives believe that the value and meaning of CA is self-evident and is thus taken for granted (Pilinkienė, Kurschus & Auškalnytė 2013:77). The resonating overuse of CA may cause academics and business executives to lose sight of the extraordinary potential value of possessing a CA (Pilinkienė *et al.* 2013:80), which is very commendable but has become the exception (McGrath 2013a:63).

### **3.1.1 Common competitive advantage claims**

Organisations that impetuously resort to statements such as “our CA is offering better quality”, “we offer better services” or even “employees are our CA”, seemingly lack the understanding of CA (Alessandra 2018; Madigan 2018). These overworked descriptions of advantage have become mere catchphrases that do not possess any customer retention qualities, owing to the imitating culture followed by the majority of competitors claiming to comprehend the same advantage (Alessandra 2018). This results in ignoring the prescribed standard of a CA being inimitable (Barney 1991:105-106). While capitalising on organisational strengths is deemed logical, Magretta (2011:188) asserts that far too often organisations overestimate their strengths, impetuously claiming them to be CAs. The study does not disregard the organisations that possess any potential to offer superior quality or services over their competitors. In such cases, the organisation must demonstrate the superior quality provided to the customers and should define how the products or the services differ from those of the competitors; the differentiation should benefit the organisation.

### **3.1.2 Potential academic pressure**

CA is the heart of strategy (Al Shobaki & Naser 2017:145) and has contributed towards the development of countless empirical and theoretical discussions (Sigalas & Pekka Economou 2013:73). CA is commonly cited in academic materials, and Klein (2002:317) describes it as “nothing more than a tautology”. Business executives are often presented with academic materials that illustrate methods that aid in the achievement of CA or materials showcasing the ‘trendy’ CA; for instance, “people are the new CA” (Franke 2017:93), or “green is the new CA” (Vorster 2015:12). These make it seem fashionable to have these CAs.

Since CA is excessively cited in academic materials (Madhok & Marques 2014:77), there is a possibility that business executives believe that having a CA is necessary for organisational success. Contrary to the common belief, CA is not a necessity for successful organisational performance (Sigalas & Papadakis 2018:104). It is speculated that the excessive attention placed on CA by academic materials may be one of the grounds why business executives naïvely claim to have a CA, believing that if they do not have a CA their organisation will be prone to failure, which is not true.

Change is happening faster than ever. Dobbs, Manyika & Woetzel (2015:1) estimate that within the electronics industry, “change is happening ten times faster and at 300 times the scale, or roughly 3000 times the impact”. Organisations and industries are undergoing rapid changes, which is illustrated through historical context: the radio achieved 50 million users in a period of 38 years. Television, later released, achieved the same number of users in 13 years.

### **3.2 The near end of sustainability**

Several authors have contended for the end of SCA (D’Aveni, Dagnino & Smith 2010:1371; Gupta *et al.* 2018:5; McGrath 2013a:18), since it is deemed to be no longer synergistic with the current turbulent environment (Madhok & Marques 2014:77). The continual effort in attempting to create a sustainable CA “creates a bias toward stability that can be deadly” (McGrath 2013a:7). Strategy needs to become less about the attempt to create positions of sustained advantages and more about incorporating responsiveness and flexibility into business models to capture successive temporary advantages (Cegliński 2016:65). D’Aveni (2018:1) describes many cases where liabilities now exist based on a previously held CA, such as a retail special dominance versus digital access to the same products. The detail is however beyond this study.

### 3.3 The relevance of transient advantage

Anecdotal and empirical studies are flourishing regarding the relevance of TA and its linkage to external environments (D'Aveni *et al.* 2010:1371). Competitive strategies of the future will be based on incessant organisational renewal, which may necessitate organisations redefining their sensing and functioning to establish new markets that will be shaped by changed forms of differentiation as well as non-linear, discontinuous innovation processes (Wójcik 2015:84).

Business models should support dynamic capabilities and improved speed of responses through business model flexibility (Cegliński 2016:61). The tension between stability and agility must be managed through continuous organisational morphing, instead of extreme and abrupt changes that induce internal uncertainty and change-resistant employees. Organisations must have stable internal, social structures to reduce employee uncertainty and mitigate the effects of being change resistant. Organisational stability also expedites a robust culture through which the strong corporate culture with constant support facilitates reconfiguration processes (Osner 2017:18).

There is an increased emergence of responsive business models to satisfy the growing demand for differentiated services (De Groen, Lenaerts, Bosc & Paquier 2017:29). An organisation's capability to efficiently change direction is underscored by insights relating to customers, competitors and the market (Hawkins & Fryling 2017:48). According to McGrath (2013a:62), TA has become the new "normal".

Anecdotally, Blockbuster, a once-renowned video-rental organisation, filed for bankruptcy in 2010 (Acar, Bakirlioğlu, Kaya & Türk 2016:12). It is asserted that the organisation's downfall was predictable business practices designed in lieu of CA (McGrath 2013a:5). Blockbuster's ingrained structures designed to support its CA resulted in predictable, inflexible practices which were difficult to maintain in a volatile market (McGrath 2013a:5). In agreement with Baskin (2013), "the internet didn't kill Blockbuster, the company did it to itself". If organisations want to survive, they must ensure relevance, which necessitates the need to do things differently (McGrath 2013a:5).

## 4. METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Research design

To investigate the perceptions of competitive and TA held by executives, a qualitative research design was used. The design permitted the collection of rich information and the subsequent thematic analysis thereof (Polit & Beck 2012:516). In addition, the generic

design is most suitable when the researcher has a body of previous knowledge pertaining to the phenomenon under investigation (Percy, Kostere & Kostere 2015:78). Relying on the studied literature and accompanied with the experience from consulting interventions, the research questions were pursued. The phenomenon investigated was the understanding of both competitive and TA.

## **4.2 The Sample**

The units of observation comprised senior-level managers respective to each participating organisation.

Competitive and TAs are not restricted or exclusive to any specific industry. Accordingly, the scope of the study was not industry specific. Participants were identified through mining the researchers' networks and thereafter pursuing snowball sampling irrespective of industry. As the research was aimed at improved understanding, we assumed that approximately twelve interviews would lead to saturation. Eventually fourteen senior-level managers from organisations were sampled, classified as eight small organisations and six large organisations based on the guidelines of the National Small Business Act 102 of 1996 (Department of Trade and Industry 1996:15-16).

One senior-level manager was interviewed per participating organisation, and the expected data saturation was achieved after 11 interviews, when no new themes were identified during the final phases of data collection (Merriam & Tisdell 2015:101). Of the final fourteen participants, two were female, and twelve were male; nine were CEOs, and there were four business owners, and one managing director. Ages ranged between 21 and 60 years, with an average of 32.35 years. The fourteen participants represented twelve different industries.

## **4.3 Data collection and analysis**

The study made use of semi-structured face-to-face interviews that enabled the collection of in-depth information from the participants (Rowley 2012:260-161). With the proposition that competitive and TA is poorly understood and complex in nature, the interviews facilitated the precision of the desired information and mitigated participant confusion by allowing for clarification of misunderstood questions and other concepts (Creswell 2012:218; Persaud 2010:636).

A pilot test was conducted with two participants that fitted the target population criteria of the study (Turner 2010:757). The pilot test elicited the information the study was aiming to collect and a debriefing was inaugurated.



All of the participants agreed to the extensive ethical requirement of the research institution. All granted permission to audio record the interview. The discussion guide, comprising open-ended questions, had the ability to yield in-depth responses that were unbiased by researcher conceptions (Creswell 2012:226). The data, comprising verbatim quotes, therefore had sufficient context to be interpretable (Patton 2015:4).

All of the audio recordings were transcribed shortly after each interview. The collected data underwent a familiarisation process through which the transcriptions and interview recordings were re-analysed to ensure holistic understandings of the data. The data were coded and analysed using thematic analysis, which allowed us to identify the emerging themes and also to synthesise and interpret large volumes of data in a meaningful way (Lapadat 2010:926). Supplemented with *a-priori* codes, a few inductive codes were generated in a coding programme (Atlas TI) to formulate a master code list.

## 5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section commences with a structured overview of the study's research questions linked to the main themes identified during the data analysis (see Table 1). Thereafter, the main themes and corresponding sub-themes are discussed in further detail, which is bolstered with descriptive quotations and linkages to the literature.

**Table 1: Summary of research questions and related themes derived**

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	How do South African business practitioners define competitive advantage?	Do participants believe that they possess a competitive advantage and can motivate why?	Are business practitioners aware of the transient advantage concept?	Is transient advantage misapprehended for competitive advantage?	To what extent is transient advantage perceived to be present in these organisations?
THEMES	Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3	Theme 4	Theme 5
	CA understanding	CA relevance	Transient advantage understanding	Concept misapprehension	Transient advantage relevance

	Degree of competitive advantage belief	Sustainability pressures	Unknown concept	Competitive advantage is poorly understood	Evidence of transient advantage
<b>SUB-THEMES</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Common use of loose tautology</li> <li>• Quick to claim holding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economy, competitor, economic, innovation and regulatory pressures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TA was unknown</li> <li>• Practical and theoretical gap</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confusing the concept</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Short-lived advantages</li> <li>• Capture new advantages</li> <li>• Increased relevance</li> </ul>
	<b>Effects of not having a competitive advantage</b>	<b>Focus shifted towards relevance</b>		<b>Misapprehension exists of:</b>	<b>Triggers for transient advantage</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negative effect</li> <li>• No business</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decreased CA relevance</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organisational strengths</li> <li>• Market position</li> <li>• TA</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sustainability pressures</li> </ul>

Source: Designed by the Researcher

### 5.1 Understanding of competitive advantage

All of the participants were able to provide a generic definition of CA. These descriptions portrayed a common theme of the critical nature of an organisation's internal environment as a driver for CA. It is important to note that one participant admitted to conducting prior research on the concept before the commencement of the interview. There are suspicions that the other participants may have acted similarly, since interview observations indicated that some of the responses seemed recited. Despite this, the contradictory replies from the participants throughout the interviews, as well as the inability to describe specific CA holdings, confirm that CA appeared poorly understood and operationalised in accordance with the views of Sigalas & Pekka Economou (2013:73).

When the participants were asked to describe their specific advantage holding, clear demonstrations of loose definitions appeared, by which eleven out of fourteen participants were unable to clearly describe the CA. The inability to provide specific CA descriptions is illustrated by the following quotes:

*"I cannot say what it means to me... If I say the best, it is quality, service, everything. Is that about right?" (P1)*

*“Well... well... it depends (stutter). So, you know in the past we had one product ... Now there are all sorts of different things. But, uhm you know, I would say the CA that we have is, I think uhm... it is super hard to get into because the costs are high”. (P4)*

*“Because uhm...we have learnt how to do things... Wait... let me just think, the question is?” (P5)*

The other three participants initially provided a concise description of their advantage but later responses revealed that participants misapprehended another term for CA (see later discussion). Subsequently, it appeared that certain CA claims have become fashionable catch phrases. More specifically, it was revealed that up to six participants made some form of reference to quality being a source of CA. Similarly, six participants proclaimed their expertise to be a form of CA. The aforementioned finding is aligned with the literature, which asserts that most CA claims appear overworked (Alessandra 2018).

Nevertheless, all of the participants, except one, did not hesitate to claim holding a CA, in line with Smith and Flanagan (2006:1) and Flint (2000:121), who assert that several business executives are confident in their CA's existence, yet aligned findings indicate that several “managers are walking in darkness regarding their endeavours of finding and developing CA” (Sigalas 2015:2006). The one participant that discounted the CA claim believes that the respective industry environment does not require the need for competition, since the sales are solely dictated by the law of supply and demand, and any differentiation act will not provide an edge to any organisation within that industry. This may be regarded as an exclusive case.

During the initial phase of the interview, all of the participants believed that the inability to hold a CA would result in damaging effects for an organisation by means of losing market share. Six participants clearly stated that without a CA, an organisation would not exist. This is exemplified by the following quotes:

*“If you don't have a CA, you don't have a company.” (P13)*

*“I think we are operating in a global economy and if you can't identify what gives you the advantage against the organisations you compete with and you can't capitalise on it, you won't survive in business.” (P7)*

*“I don't think they've got right to exist. Not in the competitive environment where we live in.” (P9)*

The general belief that having a CA is necessary for organisational success could be the reason why numerous business executives claim to have a CA. Contrary to this common

belief, CA is not a necessity for successful performance (Sigalas & Papadakis 2018:104). On this point, there was an observable absence of the use of the word 'sustainable' during the conversations.

## 5.2 Reduced competitive advantage relevance

Ultimately, all of the participants agreed that having a CA is difficult in today's business environment. The turbulent environment and new competitive landscape are impacting on the sustainability of all the participants' advantages. The most frequent environmental pressures mentioned are incessant technological advances (eleven participants), Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) (eight participants), regulatory pressures (seven participants) and unpredictable economic conditions (seven participants). The various pressures faced by these organisations cause heightened difficulties in holding a CA for a sustained period of time. Supportive quotes include:

*"Definitely. The internet has changed the way we do business and huge changes. Some companies had to close their doors". (P5)*

*"We were talking about the digitalisation of mines. So, even the mining industry is disrupted." (P3)*

Thirteen of the fourteen participants reported repeatedly experiencing acts by which the competitors attempted to replicate their CAs. The other participant claims the competitive edge to be protected by a patent, which naturally assumes a limited lifespan. Advances in the environment and improved accessibility to information have heightened imitation acts, which are aligned with the literature (Damian & Jones 2016:193). As a result, the difficulty of possessing a rare and inimitable competency has risen. This also includes organisations operating in more 'stable industries' experience challenges in sustaining advantages, since the increased rate of convergence among industries facilitates the entry of new competitors, along with new substitutes and an imminent contest for customer interest (Kim, Lee, Kim, Lee & Suh 2015:1745). Supportive quotes include:

*"So, any CA whether it is new technology or a new way of doing things, is going to be copied." (P8)*

*"I believe everything can be replicated but it is a question of how long can you keep that CA." (P13)*

Participants also underscored the importance of continuous innovation and avoiding resting on their laurels. There is a general shift of focus towards staying relevant in the market, by which there is an increased effort to incorporate responsiveness and flexibility into business models (Cegliński 2016:65). The participants agreed that the

environment requires transformation. Otherwise, the lifespans of organisations may shrink if organisations are unable to adequately transform and evolve to survive in turbulent markets (Hawkins & Fryling 2017:46). Supportive quotes include:

*"Your ability to be agile, flexible and to continually pick up different changes in the environment, market and consumer and continue to flex as you need to. This is far more important than saying "I am a green pen and this is what I look like. This is how I must stay forever and I am going to protect looking like this" (P12)*

*"Being relevant in today's market doesn't mean you're going to be relevant in tomorrow's market. So, if you're not looking ahead, you've got a problem." (P8)*

All the participants agreed that having a SCA is indeed an exception in today's environment. Consequently, the relevance of sustained CAs has reduced. Most of the organisations cannot protect the CA from being inimitable and non-substitutable in addition to being rare and valuable. Nevertheless, all the participants, besides one, were initially quick to claim to possess a CA, in line with O'Shannassy (2008:169), who claims that many business executives believe that the value and meaning of CA is self-evident and is thus taken for granted (Pilinkienė *et al.* 2013:77).

### 5.3 Understanding of transient advantage

The notion of TA was a novel term to all of the participants. After we had shared a detailed description with the participants, the existence of a theoretical and practical knowledge gap was found. While the participants were initially unaware of the term, ten of the participants confessed that capturing TAs is common in the South African practice field. Supportive quotes include:

*"I think CA is exactly like that. I don't think there is a CA that exists forever. It doesn't. It can always be copied, it can always be replaced. I don't think a SCA exists." (P12)*

*"I think that applies in many places, to most industries, most businesses, in that there's shelf-life or lifespan to a lot of products and service and unless you're going to try to improve on that product's usage and value, or the service ... one day, it's going to be redundant." (P14)*

### 5.4 Concept misapprehension

While capitalising on organisational strengths is deemed logical, Magretta (2011:188) asserts that far too often organisations overestimate their strengths and claim them to be CAs. Similarly, it appears that six of the fourteen participants overestimated their strengths. On being asked to describe their specific CA, the participants had impetuously listed a wide

range of organisational strengths that derive across all business units. Supportive quotes include:

*“First of all, the technology and investment into research and development. 30 years’ experience in the industry bodes us very well from both a local and international market perspective. Our people in the organisation. I truly value human capital. And the way we deliver our service, the way we execute it and the way we engage with our customers. I think the product, the quality of the product. But most important is our user interface and user experience and the way we engage from a customer-centric perspective.” (P10)*

Market positioning was also misapprehended for the notion of CA, with four participants confusing the terms. While an organisation may, for example, operate within the market position of selling high-quality products at higher prices that does not necessarily grant a CA despite its being pursued. Rather than resorting to market position descriptions when defining a CA, executives should seek to describe a value strategy that generates superior profit earnings and is not being concurrently “implemented by any current or *potential* competitors and when these other firms are unable to duplicate the benefits of this strategy” (Barney 1991:102). Supportive quotes include:

*“You can have a CA like XYZ [pseudonym]; very expensive but exclusive or you can have a CA of a very cheap product ... at low-cost.” (P13)*

There is an existence of a principal misapprehension between the notions of CA and TA. Before the notion of TA was introduced and described in the interviews, ten participants described CA in a context that was more appropriate to the description of TA. These participants initially described CA to be subjected to a time limit and consequently short-lived. In addition, twelve of the participants asserted that CAs should undergo regular renewal. These descriptions are aligned with the notion of TA rather than CA, since TA is a value strategy that continually develops disparate and innovative advantages, “trying not to stay with the same one for too long because it will become exhausted” (McGrath 2013a:xviii). Consequently, a misapprehension seems generic. Supportive quotes include:

*“You can only have a CA for a certain period. Then, you have to strategise to ... change that and go to the market with the next thing.” (P3)*

*“I think CA changes continually.” (P8)*

The above mentioned aspects are aligned with the literature asserting that CA is often interchangeably used for other concepts, irrespective of the concepts possessing different meanings in different contexts (O'Shannassy 2008:169).

## 5.5 Transient advantage relevancy

Corresponding to the literature underscoring the increased relevance of TA in organisations, (D'Aveni *et al.* 2010:1371), twelve out of the fourteen participants experienced advantages that were short-lived and thus attempted to capture new and different forms of advantages on a regular basis.

The external environment necessitates that organisations redefine strategies and forms of differentiation, since incessant environmental changes contribute to the diminishment of a CA lifespan - thus it is more about the sustainability component. This often requires more frequent organisational renewal, as well as the capture of new advantages. The relevance of TA is evident through the increased acts of capturing new advantages and accepting that those advantages are short-lived:

*"I remember we once had exclusivity on a product. No one else who could quote on that product ... and then we didn't expect that they would appoint a second distributor. Our CA just disappeared." (P5)*

*"Your business models have to continuously change." (P2)*

*"They may not copy you exactly, they may do better. I have seen parts in our businesses where the competition actually copied and did better. I've also seen parts where they copy but then everybody just flattens out because no one has a competitive edge anymore." (P12)*

Twelve of the fourteen participants were in alignment with the literature, as they expressed the need for having ubiquitous and responsive business models to satisfy the demand for differentiated services (De Groen *et al.* 2017:29). Besides the pressures of advanced technological landscapes and increased demands for differentiated services shared worldwide, the study discovered two contextually unique triggers that may cause local executives to consider the notion of TA, namely: a volatile political environment and BEE regulations. Briefly, they have to do with firstly the current global and African political landscape that appears relatively more uncertain and volatile, which forces organisations to continually adapt and utilise new advantage for the survival of their business. Incessant changes to regulatory requirements in South Africa were reported by nine of the participants who experienced their advantages as short-lived.

The capture of the next advantage sometimes requires re-engineering of the business model. BEE aims to "redress the imbalances of the past by seeking to substantially and equitably transfer and confer the ownership, management and control of South Africa's financial and economic resources to the majority of its citizens". This form of compliance

may be wrongly construed as CA, as it coerces compliance and reaps preferential procurement. As a result, nine of the participants had to respond and transform their organisation to capture the BEE advantage. In practice, one should be mindful that compliance does not fit the reality of the concept of TA.

Eleven participants clearly stated that TA has greater relevance than having a sustained CA. This is supported by the following extracts:

*“TA is the only form of advantage. There is no other way to look at it. Everything changes in the end, one way or another.” (P4)*

*“All CAs are ultimately transient.” (P8)*

*“When I talk about my company, I think I adopt to a large extent this TA without knowing it.” (P2)*

## **5.6 Difference in findings between small and large organisations**

Upon the analysis of data, only one incremental difference was presented. It appears that most small companies experience BEE to be a challenge in sustaining CAs. Consequently, these organisations regard BEE as a trigger to initiate TA acts. To illustrate this finding more specifically; six out of the eight small organisations mentioned BEE as a trigger to TA. Only one large organisation mentioned the pressures faced in becoming BEE compliant.

No major differences were present during the data analysis between the small and large organisations. Hence, the understanding of competitive and TA is not restricted or exclusive to certain industries or years' experience within an industry.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

### **6.1 Summary of findings**

The purpose of the current research article was three-fold. It set out by exploring the understanding and perceived relevance of CA among South African business executives. The findings of the examinations and analyses indicate that though the participants claimed to hold a CA, it remains poorly operationalised. On being asked to describe their specific advantage holding, clear demonstrations of loose definitions and superfluity appeared. There is a general belief that possessing a CA is necessary for organisational success, which may be a reason why numerous business executives claim to have a CA. All of the participants agreed, however, that the relevance of an SCA is decreasing due to rapid environmental changes and the impact of the new competitive landscape. Consequently, during the



interviews, all of the participants shifted their initial belief of the importance of possessing an SCA and agreed that an SCA is indeed an exception in today's environment.

The study further aimed to determine whether the executives misapprehended TA for CA. The findings indicate that CA was misapprehended in the case of three concepts: organisational strengths, marketing position and TA. Six of the fourteen participants impulsively listed a wide range of organisational strengths when attempting to describe their CA. Four participants described their marketing position in an attempt to define their CA. It was found that the principal misapprehension exists between the notions of CA and TA, by which ten of the participants described CA in a context that was more appropriate to the description of TA.

The final purpose of the study was to determine if TA has an elevated level of relevance in the sample organisations. It was revealed that eleven participants clearly stated that TA has an impeccable relevance in comparison to having a SCA. In addition, twelve participants expressed TA evidence through the experience of advantages being short-lived, with the attempt to capture new and different forms of advantages on a regular basis.

## **6.2 Theoretical implications and author observations**

The current study supplements the existing academic literature by filling the academic knowledge gap pertaining to the understanding and relevance of competitive and TA. The study has also contributed valuable insights into the misapprehension of the terms: organisational strengths, market positioning and TA for a CA.

In addition, the findings also corroborate the literature which suggests a poor understanding of CA. It appears that possessing sustainability is considered rare in contemporary markets (McGrath 2013a:62). Nevertheless, the business executives were initially quick to claim the possession of CA. In accordance with the current study, a possible reason for the overuse of the CA notion is because the concept is not well understood among business executives and CA is confused with other terms (O'Shannassy 2008:169), one being TA. Aligned with the literature, it is therefore confirmed that TA is increasingly relevant, more so than CA (McGrath 2013a:62). The authors finally observe and proposition that the controlling insight from this research is as follows:

P1: Advantage remains core to being competitive, but pursuing sustainability thereof has become almost impossible and therefore requires pursuing the transient nature of advantages.

P2: While SCA tends to focus on a single advantage, TA tends to focus on several advantages with short life spans. These require different philosophies associated with paradoxes of stability versus agility, initiative versus responsiveness, and potentially being competitive versus 'collective'.

## 7. MANAGERIAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Contemporary environments are increasingly undergoing definite changes and various alterations. Considering the culture of changing environments, the digital evolution, customer value changes, competitor access to information, volatile political landscapes and so forth, it may be increasingly futile to pursue sustainability. Subsequently, the findings of the current study have developed the following managerial recommendations.

- The findings indicate that SCA has a reduced relevance. Yet, the business executives expeditiously claimed that their organisations possessed a CA. It is advised that executives contemplate their arguments applicable to pertaining terms in different contexts. While it is deemed rare, the current study does not disregard the organisations that may have the potential to attain sustainability. In such cases, the organisation must demonstrate the advantage and should define how the advantage differs from that of the competitors for a sustained period of time.
- The capturing of TA is more relevant due to additional global pressures, the uncertain political and regulatory environments and technological changes. Business executives should intentionally pursue TA through the business model flexibility to improve organisational performance (Madhok & Marques 2014:77).
- By its pursuing TA, there is an assurance of the organisation's performance boost since the business model will be based on continual utilisation of new and different advantages that emerge from the market. In agreement with McGrath (2013a:7), the continual effort in attempting to create SCA "creates a bias toward stability that can be deadly". Strategy needs to become less about the attempt to create positions of sustained advantages and more about incorporating agility, responsiveness and flexibility into business models to capture successive temporary advantages (Cegliński 2016:65).

## 8. LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite contributing to the academic knowledge on the understanding as well as the relevance of CA and TA, the current study has possessed three limitations that may trigger future research.

The sampling techniques used in the study allowed amenity in selecting the participants, which enabled the use of established social networks to grant all of the interviews. Subsequently, there is an inherent bias of demographic characteristics since individuals will often recruit or refer other participants that have similar values or are within the same socioeconomic group (Sadler, Lee, Lim & Fullerton 2010:372). It would be beneficial for future research to sample participants that are not associated with a researcher's social network to avoid biases and confirm the findings of this study..

The study considered only external environmental pressures that may onset the increased relevance of TA and reduce the relevance of CA. It would be interesting to investigate the internal moderating factors of organisations that may contend for TA, such as the role of organisational structure and leadership styles.

One participant admitted to conducting prior research on the concept of CA before the commencement of the interview. There are suspicions that the other participants may have acted similarly. To improve the study's credibility of granting true reflections and understandings from the participants, future research should ensure a broader letter of introduction to the participants to reduce prior research implementations.

An additional improvement to incite further research is to study the relationship between emergent strategies and TA. Both of the concepts possess stark similarities within their frameworks, and it would be interesting to recognise whether organisations that primarily make use of emergent strategies also experience a high capitalisation of TAs.

It is important for future researchers to note that there is a limitation posed in attaining the precise definition of CA, thereby making the concept elusive. The limitation may cause academics to biasedly use any definition of CA to support their studies. The possible limitation is clearly underscored by Arbi *et al.* (2017:49), "we see in the literature that each author has used the CA term in his/her own perspective fulfilling his/her own scholastic needs".

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