Competitive intelligence practice in liquor retailing: Evidence from a longitudinal case analysis

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Abstract

Purpose – Competitive intelligence (CI) is a vital tool for any company to survive and remain competitive in today's hypercompetitive and uncertain business environment. The purpose of the current study is to investigate the use of competitive intelligence (CI) in liquor retailing in the USA.

Design/methodology/approach– An exploratory single longitudinal case study was performed through observation and semi-structured interviews plus examining documents from secondary sources in two phases. Content analysis was used for the data analysis.

Findings –Regardless of the small size of the company, the owner has an active attitude towards monitoring competition by using various sources of information and converting it into intelligence for making sound decisions for both short-term and long-term competitiveness. Also, the central role of the owner in the CI process has been verified.

Originality/value – This study responds to calls for more case studies in the field and is the first one to explore CI in the liquor retailing ecosystem by using a longitudinal case study. In general studies of CI in retailing are limited. It has clear value to CI practices for retailers in the US and in general.

Keywords Competitive Intelligence, Sources of information, Strategic decisions, Liquor retailing, USA, Case study.

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Competitive Intelligence (CI) is not a new concept. It can be traced back to Sun Tzu's seminal work "The Art of War" (Calof and Wright, 2008). In the modern business world, it appeared in the 1960s as part of marketing research (Prescot, 1995; Walle, 1999), while (Fourie, 1999) regards Porter's work (1980) as the premier kickoff of CI as an academic subject field. Since then it has evolved slowly and even today it is considered as a relatively new business research field (Bousquet *et al.*, 2011, du Toit, 2015) and du Plessis and Gulwa (2016) emphasize 'CI is one of the fastest growing fields in the business world' (p.3). Although CI can be an important factor for the competitiveness and survival of any company regardless of size and type (Koseoglu *et al.,* 2016; Priporas *et al.,* 2005), findings from empirical studies from various industries and counties report that only large-scale firms employ CI activities in a professional manner to be more competitive, while for the vast majority of companies, mainly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), it remains an unknown tool or is at an embryonic stage (Gatsoris *et al.,* 2015; Koseoglu *et al.,* 2016; Talaoui and Rabetino, 2017), or carried out informally, probably due to lack of trained personnel and financial resources (Muñoz-Cañavate, and Alves-Albero, 2017). Also, a reason that could explain this reality is the lack of formal education in CI (Blenkhorn and Fleisher 2010; Fleisher, 2004) or the high cost of professional training in CI by the specialty professional CI organizations.

Competitive Intelligence (CI) has been seen as a crucial tool that enables organizations to make beneficial strategic decisions (Samat *et al.,* 2018), since it helps them to detect the potential threats and opportunities in the market (Dishman and Calof, 2008; Muñoz-Cañavate, and Alves-Albero, 2017; Strauss and du Toit, 2010; Zha and Chen, 2009), and thus to have better performance than their competitors. Therefore, it becomes a necessity for the strategic management process and planning (Maritz and du Toit, 2018). Especially in today's globalized, dynamic, uncertain and vulnerable environment, well-planned and -executed CI can be the

differentiating factor in the marketplace (Johns and Van Doren, 2010; Talaoui and Rabetino, 2017).

In the retailing context, a limited number of studies have focused on CI applications at international level. Previous studies on CI in the retailing sector have focused on furniture retailers in Greece (Gatsoris, 2012), on a European multinational electronics retailer (Gatsoris *et al.,* 2015), as a decision support system for retail location (Hernandez, 2005, 2007), and on how two of the largest retailers in the world use social media analytics for CI (He *et al.,* 2015). Given that, the purpose of the study is to explore the use of CI in the retailing sector, where there is a dearth of studies on this topic, and particularly in beer, wine & liquor stores (liquor retailing). A qualitative exploratory case study was performed through observation and interviews to answer the following question: how do liquor retailers practice CI?

This study expands our knowledge of CI literature as it is one of the few at an international level to explore this issue in retailing. To our knowledge this is the first study to put an emphasis on liquor retailing and especially in the USA. In this sector 46,032 stores operate with sales amounting to about 54 billion U.S. dollars in 2017 and with 1.7 % annual growth (IBISWorld, 2017). The sector is competitive and is influenced by the state's policies and legislation. Secondly, for the study's purpose, a liquor store was used as an anecdotal case example by responding to a recent call by Soilen (2016) for publishing more case studies in the field. Diachronically, the literature shows a need for more case studies to be included in the research agenda for intelligence studies in business (see Dishman and Calof, 2008; Soilen, 2016; Wright, 2011). Finally, our findings could be of value to both researchers and practitioners and could serve as reference for future research on CI in retailing and other business sectors.

This paper is further organized as follows. The next section gives some theoretical literature background on CI while, section 3 describes the research method. Section 4 discusses

the results of our study. Finally, in the last section we present the main conclusions, limitations and implications of the study.

Literature Background

What is Competitive intelligence

The terms CI, business intelligence (BI) and others (i.e., competitor analysis) are all used interchangeably (Koseoglu *et al.,* 2016; Soilen, 2017), at various times to describe more or less the same concept (Venter and Tustin, 2009). Other scholars (i.e., Sauter, 2010) have seen CI as a subset of business intelligence (BI), while others distinguish the BI and CI (Tarek and Adel, 2016). Tarek and Adel (2016) assert that CI is a multidimensional concept broader and more globalizing in nature than BI.

Defining CI is a difficult issue (Toit, 2015). The extant literature in the field offers numerous definitions (see Koseoglu *et al.,* 2016; Pellissier and Nenzhelele, 2013), and despite the passage of years no universal definition has been accepted (Calof, 2017; Muñoz-Cañavate, and Alves-Albero, 2017; Pellissier and Nenzhelele 2013). All these definitions have information as their epicenter. Kahaner (1996) distinguishes information and intelligence. Information is factual (i.e. s numbers, statistics, scattered data about people and companies). Intelligence is information that has been filtered, distilled and analyzed and managers should rely on it to make decisions.

CI is formally defined by the Strategic and Competitive Intelligence Professionals (SCIP) as "*the process of legally and ethically gathering and analyzing information about competitors and the industries in which they operate in order to help your organization make better decisions and reach its goals*" (www.scip.org, 2017). Priporas et al. (2005), point out that CI can be defined both as a process and a product. As a process, CI is the set of legal and ethical methods for collecting, developing, analyzing and disseminating actionable information

pertaining to competitors, suppliers, customers, the organization itself and business environment (SCIP, 2009). The ethical issue is the key differentiating factor from industrial espionage, which is an illegal practice (Crane, 2005; Reinmoeller and Ansari, 2016). Reinmoeller and Ansari, (2016, p. 118) point out with emphasis, "investigating rivals and industrial espionage is clearly not the same thing". As a product, CI is actionable information about the present and future behavior of competitors, suppliers, customers, technologies, government, acquisitions, market and the general business environment (Muñoz-Cañavate, and Alves-Albero, 2017; Vedder and Guynes, 2000). Aspinall (2011) points out that there are two types of CI. Human intelligence (Humint), which is primary, publicly unavailable intelligence and can be obtained through discussions with experts, vendors, customers and so on, and public intelligence (Pubint) which is secondary, publicly available intelligence (i.e., industry reports, companies annual reports, etc.).

CI and Strategy

The goal of CI is to provide actionable intelligence which results from the strategic cycle of CI synthesis, analysis, evaluation, and conceptualization of information (Talaoui and Rabetino, 2017). Myburgh (2004) argues that the core objectives of CI are to: 1) manage and reduce risk, 2) make knowledge profitable, 3) avoid information overload, 4) ensure privacy and security of information, and 5) use corporate information strategically. Wright *et al.* (2009), argues that the overall goal of CI is to identify and act upon signals, events and discernable patterns which can inform and enhance the organization's decision doing activities. Pellissier and Nenzhelele (2013) assert that the main objectives of CI are to provide help in decision-making and to provide a company with a competitive advantage. Similarly, Lam (2015) claims that the objective of competitive intelligence is not only to help firms make sense of what their competitors do but also to take initiatives to preempt their competition.

McGonagle (2016) points out that there are multiple forms of CI depending on the focus such as competitor intelligence (focused only on competitors), strategic intelligence (supporting the development and execution of corporate strategy and strategic planning), marketing intelligence (supporting sales and marketing), environmental scanning (studying and interpreting, political, economic, social, and technological events/trends that influence a business, an industry or the market), technology intelligence or competitive technical intelligence (activities that allow a firm to respond to competitive challenges or identify and exploit opportunities resulting from technical and scientific change), and competitive benchmarking (techniques to benchmark a competitor, without its involvement).

Literature provides various classification of CI can be classified as personal versus technical, as active versus defensive, as tactical versus strategic and as formal versus informal (see Lam, 2015 for more details). In this case we will follow Murphy's (2005) categorization to strategic and tactical competitive intelligence. Dey et al (2011) analyzed these types of CI based on planning duration (long-term planning, short-term). Hence, strategic intelligence centers on long term issues that analyze a company's competitiveness over a specified period in the future. The actual time-line depends on the type of the industry. This type of analysis primarily involves identifying weaknesses and early warning signals within the organization. On the other hand, tactical intelligence focuses on providing information that can influence short-term decisions. This kind of intelligence directly affects the sales process of an organization. Tactical intelligence includes information regarding the market (i.e., market share of competitors); the prices of competitor products; the promotion strategies and promotional activities that are adopted by competitors; and other issues (i.e., organizational information such as work force structure) all contribute towards building a profile of competitors that can be useful to companies.

Previous studies (Bose, 2008, Calof *et al.,* 2018; Gatsoris, 2012; Viviers *et al.,* 2005) recognize the existence of a plethora of analytical strategic techniques and tools that are used in collecting information such as competitor's analysis, benchmarking, PEST analysis, SWOT analysis, Porter's five forces, industry analysis and many others depending on realistic and manageable objectives (Gatsoris, 2012). However, the more traditional forms of CI are based on the assessment of competitors' goals, financial results, successes and failures, as well as the competitors' assumptions about themselves and the industry (Sørensen, 2009).

Literature highlights numerous benefits associated with CI practices in an organization. Global Intelligence Alliance (2005) based on its own global study findings pointed out increased quality of information, increased awareness, improved dissemination, accelerated decision-making, improved systematicality, improved threat and opportunity as the most important benefits. For He et al. (2015), the most noteworthy ones are creating new growth opportunities, minimizing the impact of surprises, enabling faster responses to changes in the market place, improving the quality of strategic planning processes, identifying potential vulnerabilities, and providing early warning or alert for competitive threats.

However, the practice and success of CI are influenced by organizations' management style (Wright *et al.,* 2002), and culture (Rapp *et al.,* 2015). Rouach and Santi (2001) offered five attitude categories on how companies conduct and view CI namely warrior, assault, active, reactive, and sleepers. The status of intelligence tends from very proactive mentality (warriors) to no particular action (sleepers).

CI in Retailing

Although the retail industry is one of the most profitable industries worldwide, a handful of studies have investigated CI practices in the industry. Gatsoris (2012) investigated the CI practices of Greek furniture retailers through qualitative research with 15 senior managers of

equivalent companies. He found that these retailers use traditional effective marketing tools in monitoring the competition, and that pricing of the products is the most crucial information for designing their competitive strategy. Gatsoris et al. (2015), through a case study explored how a European multinational electronics retailer has organized its own CI department. He et al. (2015) explored through sentiment analysis how two of the largest retailers in the world in terms of revenues, Walmart and Costco, use social media analytics for CI and proposed a framework for social media CI. In the retail banking setting, Wright et al (2009), through a qualitative study with 23 executives from seven major banks, found that that banks regard CI as one of the underpinning factors of their business operations, especially in the degree to which they can make competitive offerings to customers. There was a clear recognition that a good CI system leads to increased revenues and profitability, and consequently to increased share value. Furthermore, previous studies (Theodoridis and Bennison, 2009; Wood and Reynolds, 2012) attempted to explore some principles of CI in strategic functions such as retail location strategy.

Methodology

In this study, a realist approach was adopted which suggests the existence of a single reality which is independent of the observer (Yin, 2014). As single case studies are high on realism (Maylor *et al.,* 2017), we conducted a longitudinal, exploratory single case study to gain insights on CI practices in liquor retailing (Yin, 2014). Case studies enable a systematic gathering of sufficient information about an organization to permit an effective understanding of how the subject under consideration operates or functions (Berg, 2004). The case study method provides a structured framework whereby the researchers have the opportunity to create a context based on all the sources of information that are available to them and where

the interviews will be the catalyst that produces new knowledge out of this process (Theodoridis, 2014).

As CI is a sensitive topic (Priporas *et al.,* 2015), and relatively new academic field (du Toit, 2015; and du Plessis and Gulwa (2016), the exploratory approach was chosen as it is "appropriate for understanding phenomena still in early stages of theory development" (Edmondson and McManus, 2007, p.1161). The longitudinal case design enables the investigation of a firm's CI practices and its evolution, encompassing the time aspect in the research process (Bryman and Bell, 2015; Pettigrew, 1990; Yin, 2014). Furthermore, the CI context is rich in data for studying and understanding the phenomenon under study and is well suited to a longitudinal case study (Ghauri, 2004; Siggelkow, 2007). Additionally, a longitudinal case study has the potential to increase the internal validity of results and alleviates the risk that participants do not recall relevant events or that their recollection is subject to bias (Leonard-Barton,1990; Trentin *et al.,* 2015). However, as longitudinal case studies are very time- and resource-consuming (Åhlström and Karlsson, 2009), a single case study seemed to be a necessity (Pettigrew, 1990).

The case was chosen on the precondition that insights could be gained to fit the purpose of the study (Merriam, 1998). The case studied was a family-owned liquor retailer (we named it A) in a town in a northeastern state in the United States. It was established in 2008 and run by the owner (husband) and he is assisted mainly by his wife and one part-time employee, which is more or less the typical structure of a store in liquor retailing. As the researcher knew the owner for many years, this helped in the initial approach and increased the owners' willingness to grand permission for using their business (store) as a case study research. For confidentiality purposes, we agreed with the owner not to reveal the business's name, and any sensitive product from the analysis of the case.

Data Collection

 The study was conducted over a period of two years (Summer 2016, December –January 2017-18). These periods were important for A as in the first period the direct competitor (B) was across the street, while in the second period the competitor (B) moved around 1,5 km down the road and a second competitor (C) opened at a close distance to A (around 800 meters). Even A had only started operating in this location in 2014. This created an interesting competitive setting, which favored the purpose of our study. Also, this new reality could be considered as important (critical) event (incident), due to its high relevancy to the issue under exploration (Bott and Tourish, 2016; Gremler, 2004), and its focus on reporting facts relating to behavior in specific incidents (Flanagan, 1954; Bitner *et al.,* 1994).

In this study the data was collected from multiple sources, primary and secondary, which allowed us to validate and triangulate emerging ideas and interpretations (Yin, 1994). On-site observations and semi-structured interviews with the owners and the employees were conducted in two phases, and industrial reports, strategic planning reports, annual reports, and other documents such as local newspapers and the internet complemented the study. During the observations field notes were kept, while each interview session lasted approximately 45 minutes and was recorded, and transcribed verbatim. In total five interviews took place. Two in the first period and three follow ups in the second period.

The transcripts from the interviews and the observations were content-analyzed (Kohlbacher, 2006). As suggested by Evans et al (2008) the content analysis involved the identification of key themes and the illustration of these through selected excerpts and quotations. A priori themes (sources of information and information use for decision making) were developed based on the literature (e.g. Calof *et al.,* 2018; Gatsoris, 2012; Köseoglu *et al.,* 2016; Priporas *et al.,* 2005) and the research question. An initial coding list was created and served as the foundation for the data analysis (Miles *et al.,* 2014; Ryan and Bernard 2003; Yin

2014). Our analysis and coding were an iterative process between the data and the literature. To reduce bias and ambiguity another researcher independently analyzed the data, and subsequently through discussion achieved consensus of findings (Creswell and Miller, 2000).

Findings

Respondents profile

Both owners had a university degree in business disciplines (business economics and accounting) and the husband held a postgraduate degree in finance. Both were in their mid-40s and had working experience in various industries. The 23-year-old male part-time employee had a university degree in non-business discipline and has been working in the store since 2016. Also, during the high seasons (i.e. Christmas) two more people assist them as seasonal staff.

Knowledge of CI

During the first phase of the research none of the respondents were aware of CI as a concept. This seems to be logical due to lack of formal education in CI (Blenkhorn and Fleisher 2010). Even today, no text books in marketing or in strategy (i.e. principles of marketing) dedicate a chapter to CI, although a few provide a definition, and a very small number of universities offer a course on CI. Based on their responses on what CI is, the understanding or focus was only to competitors' analysis which is in line with previous empirical studies (i.e. Köseoglu *et al.,* 2016).

In the follow-up interviews (period two), the main respondent (husband) was more confident with the CI concept. In particular, he stated: "*the idea of CI intrigued me so, I had to learn something more about CI…… in reality we have used many of these tools for immediate decision making……. it is very useful for us to survive*". This statement is in line with previous studies regarding the willingness of managers to learn more about CI (Gatsoris, 2012; Priporas

et al., 2005). However, it is interesting that A practices CI to a certain degree even without knowing it. This is typical for many small businesses (Gatsoris, 2012).

Source of information for competitors

Literature shows the existence of many sources of information and tools for acquiring information regarding monitoring competition (Calof *et al.,* 2018; Chawinga and Chipeta, 2017; Gatsoris, 2012). Depending on the companies' size and operations these vary from frequent visits to competitors' premises, to an organized CI department. In our case the main source of information in the first period was direct observation. The following statement was characteristic: "when my competitor B was literally across the street, I could monitor easily store's B traffic based on how many cars were parked. there Also, I could see B's window displays on special offers in terms of products and prices, as he could do the same for mine…". In the same vein the wife stated: "*the last period before B closed its operation, we knew that B had financial problems as for many hours one distributors truck was waiting in B's parking to unload the order, which means that B was on cash on delivery status. This happened quite a few times*".

Other sources of information in both phases were customers that many times gave information on products and prices such as "*I went to B's store and the prices were higher than yours*", or in the case of competitor C customers point out the lack of products, "*They do not have variety in wines*", "*They have very few brands of vodka and in particular .... they only have one flavor*", "*you have the cheapest prices...*" The importance of customers as a source of information for CI is supported by the literature (Calof *et al.,* 2018; Chawinga and Chipeta, 2017; Johns and Van Doren, 2010).

Distributors sales representatives and track drivers can be other sources of information on the industry's performance, trends and competitors (i.e. orders). For example, in a friendly

and informal discussion one driver said, "*I delivered to him [competitor B] 10 days ago*". However, many times the information validity is based on the good relationships between distributors sales representatives or track drivers with the liquor stores owners. Regarding this issue the husband stated, "*It takes time whom to trust as the sales representatives and track drivers of the same distributor can give you contradicting information*". Chawinga and Chipeta (2017) point out suppliers as one of the key sources of information for CI.

Additionally, mystery shoppers and receipts can be very valuable source of information. For example, the wife stated: "*When competitor C opened its store close to us, I visited the store as a 'customer' to monitor the traffic, the variety of the products and the prices*". Equally, the employee stated: "*I have visited the new store (C) quite a few times and bought some beers and seen from first-hand what was happening in this store and a gave a short of report to A's owner*". Also, regarding competitor B in the second phase, all reported that they drive by its store for a quick monitor on its patronage (i.e. how many cars are in its parking lots) and sales promotions and prices through the window displays.

An interesting source of information is the receipts from competitors' stores as they can show the number of customers and an approximate estimation of their revenues. As the A's owner explained "*…..every receipt has a serial number so, if you acquire a receipt let's say every week or two weeks for a month you will be able to estimate the patronage (number of customers) and the revenues approximately based on our average spending per customer by adding 20 to 30 percent more in case that competitors stores' area in square feet is bigger than ours*". This source provides A with significant information on competition and it is able to design its strategies not only to survive but also to stay competitive.

Finally, although social media (SM) and the internet have increased their importance as sources of information on competitors' products, promotions, prices and so on (Calof *et al*., 2018; Itani *et al*., 2017), their use by competitor A is rare and of a particular scope. They are

used for acquiring information on prices, new products and special promotions mostly during

public holidays periods (4th of July, Labor Day, etc.), of a large liquor retailing chain, which is

the indirect competitor. As the owner explained "*We rarely use the internet and SM since we*

know our main competition ……… we use them just to have some updates on pricing, new

products and special promotions mainly in public holidays periods of [name of the retailer] (a

large liquor retailing chain), which is our indirect competitor and tries to eliminate the

suppliers' power in long run".

Table I summarizes the source of information per phase.

Table I. Summary of sources of information for CI per phase

1st Phase	2nd phase
• Direct observation of store traffic and window promotional posters • Customers • Distributors Sales Representatives • Distributors Track Drivers	• Receipts • Mystery shopper • Customers • Distributors sales representatives • Distributors track drivers • Window promotional posters

Information use for decision making

The above sources of information help A to acquire information on competition and to monitor

it as well. From the interviews and field observations, it is clear that products' prices are the

most important piece of information followed by the products' variety and range. These factors

are important elements for customer store patronage as the literature suggests (i.e., Blut *et al.,*

2018; Goodman and Remaud, 2015; Theodoridis and Priporas, 2009) and consequently leads

to a company's survival, especially in today's very competitive business environment.

The information is converted to intelligence by the owner (husband). In the analysis

mostly common tools such as PEST, SWOT, marketing mix, are used (Adidam *et al.,* 2012;

Gatsoris 2012; Gatsoris *et al.,* 2015; Bose, 2008; Nasri, 2011) and with the assistance of the industry reports in order to have a more holistic approach and make more informed decisions. This analysis does not require much time and the decision is made very fast. Depending on the product and the financial state of the company the strategies can be aggressive and even retaliatory. For example, lowering prices with special attention not to go beyond the state minimum (the price per product that the state determines), is a very powerful weapon against the competition.

Additionally, investing in customer satisfaction by carrying specialty products for specific customers to meet their wants and demands, customer service and in-store sales promotions are parts of the strategy. The owner characteristically stated: "*Since my fixed cost is much lower than B and C, I can lower the price for the twelve pack of [name of the brand] beers by $1 …*". Also, during the observation it was evident the very professional effort made by the owner to help customers to meet their current needs by suggesting alternative solutions in terms of products and prices such as "*Instead of buying two six packs of [name of the brand] beer, buy a twelve pack and you will save $1.50*", or "*I do not carry this wine however, this [name of the brand] is very good wine and cheaper …. google it for consumers' reviews*".

To a question of how all these pieces of information assist in the store's competitive strategy, the owner replied *"…with all this information we can project the store traffic per week or per month with a very slight deviation and this way we can project our losses or gains during a month and/or annually and to design our strategy on products, prices…*". However, intelligence attributes, such as accuracy, objectivity, usability, relevance, readiness, and timeliness should be considered in measuring the performance of the CI activities (Bose, 2008).

Following Rouach and Santi's (2001) classification of companies, A could be more likely classified as 'active'. This is evident from the analysis, since A's owner continuously tries to monitor competition and make informed strategic and tactical decisions and compete

efficiently. The owner has the central role in the CI process from observing to making decisions which is in line with Gatsoris' (2012) findings for SMEs.

Discussion and conclusions

The current study was one of the very few to examine CI in the retailing sector and the first one focusing on the liquor retailing sector. The findings in this study support the key role of the owner- manager in the CI process (Gatsoris, 2012) as well as the intelligence which is gathered through informal human contacts (Cronin *et al.,* 1994), direct observations, the use of mystery shoppers and the acquisition of customers' receipts from competitors' stores on a quite regular basis. The latter can be a powerful source of information and a tool for projecting the store's traffic and designing the appropriate strategy. As the literature does not have any report on this simple and interesting technique of CI, this finding extends the literature on CI techniques.

Based on the results, it is evident that the information acquired from the competition plays a vital role in strategic planning. The information on competitors' pricing and product variety affects the company's pricing and product assortment strategy to a certain degree, as it is vital for the store's survival and growth to know the prices and product range from its competitors. Additionally, the study provided evidence that the case has an active attitude towards CI to remain competitive, without utilizing costly CI techniques (i.e. experts) by utilizing CI practices continuously for tactical and strategic purposes. This is in contrast to the literature (Gatsoris, 2012; Tarek and Adel, 2016) which suggests that the SMEs from various industries and countries are not that committed to CI practices due to their organizational and financial constraints. Also, another interesting finding is the rare use of the internet and social media as a source of information. Probably this is due to the firm's and its main competitors' small size. Although literature (Calof *et al.,* 2018; Itani *et al.,* 2017) highlights the increased

importance of SM in information gathering mainly from large-sized companies and sales personnel, previous studies on SM usage by SMEs show that firm innovativeness, firm size, manager's age and industry sector have a significant impact on SM adoption by SMEs (Wamba and Carter, 2014).

From a theoretical point of view, this study offers findings from an understudied sector; retailing and particularly liquor retailing. It verifies the crucial role of the entrepreneur in the CI process and the entrepreneur's insidiousness in gathering intelligence and shows the dynamic role of the CI as a process since companies can develop their own sets of processes based on their business needs. Moreover, it provides insight into CI practices in SMEs and especially in small family-owned firms, suggesting a pragmatic approach accordant with their business reality. These firms have limited resources, knowledge and business philosophy, in comparison with the large companies which mainly employ organized and sophisticated CI programs.

From a methodological stand point, the paper is the first one that employs a longitudinal case study on CI and on CI in retailing literatures specifically. The use of a longitudinal case study was deemed more appropriate because of the present lack of understanding of CI in retailing and specifically in liquor retailing and its relationship with strategic actions for enhancing competitiveness. Further, there was a gap in the literature regarding the examination of CI using case study methodology as suggested by Soilen (2016), as only a very limited number of previous empirical studies employed case study methodology as a research method in exploring the CI practices at firm level.

In practical terms, these results verify that regardless of the size of the company, "CI seems to be the key ingredient for success in today's uncertain business environment" (Priporas *et al.,* 2005, p. 665). Based on the industry and country and its business environment there might be tools and practices for CI beyond the reported ones that can assist any entrepreneur

to monitor the competition and make decisions for competitiveness success. However, the crucial issue remains the awareness of the role of CI in any company's performance and therefore, the entrepreneurs should develop a CI philosophy for themselves and in their companies to be competitive and grow.

Limitations and future research

This study has some unavoidable limitations that offer avenues for future research. First, this study adopted an exploratory single case study approach which inevitably requires caution concerning the generalizability of the findings (Maylor *et al.,* 2017). Although, single case studies can be powerful examples (Siggelkow, 2007), forthcoming research should include more case studies (liquor stores). Second, as this study is qualitative in nature, further studies should employ quantitative or mixed methods to confirm, replicate and extend the current findings. Third, this study was centered on a liquor store from a town in a northeastern state in the U.S. and, as such, replications from other U.S. states (i.e., New York, California) and other countries are needed. Finally, as this retailer was independent like the vast majority of the retailers operating in the industry, it would be essential to investigate the CI practices by the few liquor chains in various States to acquire a more holistic picture for the industry.

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