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## Developing and deploying marketing agility in an emerging economy: The case of Blue Skies

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose** - In almost every large business, there is a growing recognition of the importance of organisational agility in improving their marketing responsiveness and business survival. However, limited insights have been offered by scholars on multinational enterprises and their marketing agility in emerging markets context. This paper examines the various manifestations of agility and the various strategies adopted to sustain agility by an emerging economy multinational enterprise (EMNE) which started in the late 1990s as a small firm operating within the fresh fruit and juice industry in Africa.

**Design/methodology/approach** - We utilised empirical qualitative data from an emerging African economy to develop a three stage model of how agility manifest overtime.

**Findings** - We find that successful development and deployment of international marketing agility strategy adopted by an EMNE from emerging markets hinge on building relationships, being socially responsible and being innovative in standardisation and adaptation in response to, and in anticipation of the rapidly changing business environment.

**Research limitations/implications** - This research is based on data from one organisation. Future research can consider using multiple cases from different countries to further understand marketing agility in emerging markets and when such firms internalize into developed markets.

**Originality/value** - This paper extends research on standardisation/adaptation debate and research on agility, to address the gap on international marketing agility. Hitherto, there was no significant research on marketing agility in emerging markets which focused on highly perishable products such as fruits. This research provides unique insight into how marketing agility could be developed, deployed and sustained in emerging African markets.

**Keywords:** marketing agility; agility; strategic marketing; standardisation; adaptation, EMNEs; Africa.

## **Introduction**

In the pre-market liberalisation waves of the 1970s and 1980s, organisations based in emerging and developing economies faced limited competitions and could survive without or limited agility (cf. Doganis, 2006). In today's globalised era characterised by intense competition, it has become increasingly untenable for firms to overlook agility initiatives and thrive (e.g., Brannen and Doz, 2012; Weber and Tarba, 2014). Accordingly, many organisations in both developed and industrializing nations have gravitated towards organisational agility to equip them for market competition (Brannen and Doz, 2012; Gligor and Holcomb, 2012a; Junni, Sarala, Tarba, and Weber, 2015). Previous research has identified that agility have positive effects on organisational performance (Bernardes and Hanna, 2009; Gligor, Holcomb and Stank, 2013). Indeed, some scholars contend that strategic agility is one of the principal determinants of a firm's success (e.g. Gligor and Holcomb, 2012a; Weber and Tarba, 2014). In recent times, many pioneering firms have also adopted some aspects of organisational agility to enhance their market responsiveness (e.g., Teece *et al.*, 2016).

When the agility and strategy literature is considered, there are strong evidence to indicate that agile organisations are equipped to minimize misallocation of resources, respond to threats in timely manner and ability to outwit rivals in their industries (Doz and Kosonen, 2008, 2010; Gligor and Holcomb, 2012b; Weber and Tarba, 2014). There is growing body of research which indicates that successful strategic agility is also predicated on an effective alignment of the firms' collective capabilities to identify and respond to threats to the business (Gligor and Holcomb, 2012a), yet, manifestation of agility in new and emerging organisations, particularly those based in emerging markets require further scholarly attention. Despite the progress made so far on this topic, studies are rare which have examined how strategic agility is manifested as a process. This article aims to address this theoretical deficit by examining the manifestations of agility and strategies to sustain agility in emerging markets context.

The article makes two key contributions to the literature. First, although research has grown exponentially on agility, a closer look at the literature reveals a limited focus on businesses in the emerging and developing economies. In an effort to overcome this shortcoming in the current literature, we developed a model to articulate how agility can manifest overtime in emerging market context. Drawing on a dynamic capabilities perspective (Teece, Pisano and Shuen, 1997; Pisano, 2017) and empirical data from an emerging economy, we demonstrate how agility manifest overtime. In addition, despite the growing importance of international marketing agility (Barkema, Baum, and Mannix, 2002; Grewal and Thansuhaj, 2001), few studies have focused on emerging firms in the context of emerging economies (see Gomes, Weber, Brown and Tarba, 2011). In this direction, our focus on emerging economies helps to deepen our understanding of knowledge utilisation as basis for achieving agility. Our study also responds to recent calls for more scholarly and insightful works that explore the dynamics of business strategy, human resources and marketing practices in the African context (Amankwah-Amoah, Boso, and Debrah, 2018; Kamoche, 2011; Kamoche, Chizema, Mellahi and Newenham-Kahindi, 2012). Such lines of inquiry on how organisations improve their competitiveness could enrich our understanding of the business environment in Africa (Adeleye *et al.*, 2018). Thus, this research also contributes in answering recent calls to test or apply business models in African context (Amankwah-Amoah, 2016b; Damoah *et al.*, 2018; Gomes *et al.*, 2018; Liou and Rao-Nicholson, 2017; Angwin *et al.*, 2016).

The remainder of the paper is organized along the following lines. Section 2 presents a review of the literature on marketing agility. This is followed by detailed explanation of the research design. We then set out the key findings. The concluding sections present the contributions to theory and practice.

### **Conceptual background: Strategic agility and marketing**

Organisational agility refers to firms' ability to mobilise firm resources and expertise "to adapt or react to changes in the business environment to exploit market opportunities in timely manner

(Junni *et al.*, 2015; Swafford, Ghosh and Murthy, 2006). Agile organisations are characterized by their unique abilities to mobilise and utilise scarce managerial resources, technology and employees in timely manner to respond to business environmental changes and uncertainties (Bernardes and Hanna, 2009; Christopher and Towill, 2001; Sambamurthy, Bharadwaj and Grover, 2003; Shenkar, 2010). It has been suggested as one of the key dynamic capability of the firm (e.g., Brannen and Doz, 2012; Teece *et al.*, 2016). According to Teece *et al.*, (2016), agility is viewed as the flexibility and adaptability of organisations in being responsive to preferred consumer choices and additionally supplying the products timely.

A number of studies have demonstrated that such organisations are flexible in mobilizing their resources and capabilities to undertake unplanned activities and respond to unforeseen circumstance (Narasimhan, Swink and Kim, 2006). Doz and Kosonen (2010, p. 371) make reference to three key factors which need to be present for organisations to demonstrate agility: strategic sensitivity, leadership unity and fluidity of resources. Their definitions of the three factors include strategic sensitivity – the sharpness of perception of, and the intensity of awareness and attention to, strategic developments – leadership unity: the ability of the top team to make bold, fast decisions, without being bogged down in top-level ‘win-lose’ politics, and resource fluidity: the internal capability to reconfigure capabilities and redeploy resources rapidly (Doz and Kosonen, 2010, p. 371)

Providing robust leadership and deploring resources in a timely fashion are essential for organisations to demonstrate nimbleness and flexibility in the ever-changing business environment such as those observed in emerging markets (e.g., Hoskisson *et al.*, 2000). These markets have been characterised by institutional voids (Khanna and Palepu, 1997; Mair *et al.*, 2012), thus developing marketing agility can be vital for firms based in emerging markets in order to navigate institutional voids. Contextually, managing businesses in Africa, including Ghana, is associated with institutional paradoxes created by domestic cultures as well as nuances of cultures transferred by the

different multinational companies increasingly investing in the continent (Cunha *et al.*, 2016). Dexterity in leadership and strategy is therefore required in managing successful operation in that complex environment. In this regard, studies have identified inhibiting forces for organisational agility to include lack of managerial expertise, cross functional teams, organisational culture, structure and processes (see Gligor and Holcomb, 2012b). Firms are hesitant to implement agility due to the associated high costs, as organisational agility comes at a cost. Organisational flexibility and adaptability is critical for business sustainability (Teece *et al.*, 2016), and without the firms' ability to timely prepare, detect, and respond to changes within its uncertain and risk environment, organisational sustainability could be at jeopardy. Besides the challenges of instituting measures to create an agile organisation, lack of knowledge and strategic attentiveness can curtail organisational actions. Owing to the lack of skilled individuals to identify looming issues and threats, many organisations falter in quest for agility. Past studies indicate that external knowledge and expertise acquisition can equip firms to navigate the business environment in uncertain times (Lichtenthaler, 2005).

Dynamic capabilities represent “the firm’s ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competences to address rapidly changing environments” (Teece *et al.*, 1997, p. 516). Dynamic capabilities can be extremely important in emerging markets as companies can rapidly respond to changing customers’ requirements and manage business downturns which can arise due to institutional voids. Firms need to possess both resources and capabilities in order to effectively compete in highly dynamic business environments and develop competitive advantage (cf. Barney, 1991; Grant, 1996). Resources broadly refers to the “stocks of available factors that are owned or controlled by the firm” whilst capabilities are “a firm’s capacity to deploy resources, usually in combination, using organisational processes, to effect a desired end” (Amit and Schoemaker, 1993, p. 35). Within the agility literature, it is not just the possession of resources and capabilities but rather the ability to mobilise and utilise them with alertness, decisiveness, swiftness and flexibility

in ability to access relevant data to design and implement decisions or strategy with speed and precision (Doz and Kosonen, 2008; Gligor and Holcomb, 2012b; Freeman *et al.*, 2012; Gligor *et al.*, 2013).

Consistent with the dynamic capabilities perspective (Teece *et al.*, 1997, Pisano, 2017), strategic agility requires inventive capacity to develop delivery system characterized by flexibility and speed rather than merely rearranging old products (Weber and Tarba, 2014). By inventive capacity, we are referring to a focal firm's ability to internally explore and generate knowledge within the organisation (Lichtenthaler and Lichtenthaler, 2009).

Stemming from this theoretical lens, agility can be construed as unique capability of firms in dynamic environments (Doz and Kosonen, 2010; Junni *et al.*, 2015; Weber and Tarba, 2014), and due to its role in effectively managing business operations and meeting changing customer demand, it has been suggested as a meta capability of the firm (cf. Doz and Kosonen, 2008). To respond to the rapidly changing business environments, for instance those observed in emerging markets, firms require high level of organisational agility to improve their survival chances (Amankwah-Amoah, 2016a). Thus, organisational agility as a capability may entail sensing and responding to environmental threats (Park, El Sawy and Fiss, 2017; Weber and Tarba, 2014). By developing high level of organisational agility, firms are able to modify their resources, approaches and routines in a timely manner to respond to looming environment threats such as new sources of competition and government regulation (Park *et al.*, 2017), including changing customers demand. Developing agility can be important as through the deployment of this capability firms will have a higher level of customer satisfaction by meeting the changing needs of their customers with different or unique product/service offerings in a timely manner. Accordingly, developing and deploying international marketing agility require fast decisions and unique ability to mobilise firms marketing resources to neutralise or stem threats to the business (Freeman *et al.*, 2012). The ability to mobilise such resources in emerging markets not only depend on the firm's in-house tangible resources, but also



on social capital which can be obtained from informal and formal relationships as evident in committed reciprocity in high culture context (Yang, 2014).

In sum, past studies have examined the concept of agility extensively in many different contexts such as strategic and organisational agility and firm performance (Ivory and Brooks, 2018; Arbussa *et al.*, 2017; Carmeli and Dothan, 2017; Cegarra-Navarro *et al.*, 2016; Felipe *et al.*, 2016; Junni *et al.*, 2015; Brueller *et al.*, 2014; Fourné *et al.*, 2014; Weber and Tarba, 2014; Brannen and Doz, 2012; Doz and Kosonen, 2008, 2010), human resource management for strategic agility (Dyer and Ericksen, 2005; Shafer *et al.*, 2001), supply chain supplier relationship to achieve agility (Carmeli *et al.*, 2017; Lin *et al.*, 2006), agile innovation (Wilson and Doz, 2011), developing infrastructure, including information technology, for agility (Ravichandran, 2018; Lu and Ramamurthy, 2011; Tallon and Pinsonneault, 2011; Weill *et al.*, 2002), leadership agility (Cunha *et al.*, 2016; Lewis *et al.*, 2014; McKenzie and Aitken, 2012). However, none of the above pieces of research specifically focuses on marketing agility within the food industry in emerging markets. Cadogan *et al.* (2012) examined marketing agility/flexibility but mainly in terms of its relationship with export performance. Besides, contextually, there is limited focus on Africa (Gomes *et al.*, 2018). To address this gap, we take a first step forward by examining the manifestations of agility in MNE in emerging African markets, not only in terms of how they compete through the export market but the overall effectively managing business in a domestic market.

### **Research methods and context**

We used qualitative approach for this research, as the study is exploratory in nature, in order to provide a more detailed understanding of the phenomenon presented (Ghauri *et al.*, 2014). Our main objectives for this study are two-pronged – to evaluate various manifestations of agility and to understand the various strategies to sustain agility within the fresh fruit and juice industry in emerging markets. The longitudinal qualitative case study methodology was used for this study, focusing on Blue Skies Company Limited. This approach is appropriate because it has been

identified as powerful and well-used method in management research (Bryman and Bell, 2015; Yin, 2014; Birkinshaw *et al.*, 2011; Poolton *et al.*, 2006).

Additionally, it has been argued that longitudinal qualitative case study methodology as adopted in this study is more suited when investigating the firm and the macro environment, while involving individuals with detailed views and opinions of the phenomena under study (Mathieu and Chen, 2011). Single case study research is common (Yin, 2018), and it has been effectively used in similar studies (Arbussa *et al.*, 2017), providing further justification for our choice of research approach. The study involved data collection from multiple sources between 2011 and 2017 in order to fully understand possible changes in response to agility over the period. The sources of data collection ranged from visit to the company's factory in Ghana and conducted semi-structured interviews. The data were obtained through interaction with managerial and non-managerial staff on a number of closely related topics, including stakeholder relationships, fruit processing, exports, motivation, and support for employees, farmers and communities. The interviews were recorded in the form of field notes which were subsequently transcribed. Additionally, email correspondence was exchanged with the founder and chairman of the company who provided data on key challenges the company was facing such as strategy, vision, and how the company responds to opportunities and threats. This is consistent with Nemkova (2017) regarding the need for case study data collection to include data from key decision-makers. Data from this correspondence included detailed answers to specific questions asked in the email. Obtaining data from key informants of different hierarchical levels and operational functions of the organisation is useful as recommended by Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007). This is because such an approach provides a more holistic picture of what the organisation represents since key informants are the most knowledgeable people within the organization.

Besides, two telephone interviews were conducted, one with a non-executive director and another with the communications manager, who also led the tour of the factory in Ghana and provided additional answers to questions which were not adequately covered in the face-to-face

interview, as well as additional questions generated as a result of the visit. Apart from formally interviewing senior members of staff, the visit to the factory enabled one of the authors to elicit views of 15 members of staff, including the communications manager, at convenient locations including the library, the health centre, the factory, retail stand and at processing and packaging department. The author also had the opportunity to taste some of the products at the retail stand. These experiences provided useful field note on staff experience. We also supplemented interviews data with other sources such as information obtained from the company’s website and independent publications. This covered issues on company history, products, subsidiaries, strategies and key initiatives, which impact on the business. In a nutshell, the interviews with staff in managerial positions confirmed the strategic direction of the organisation and communication with non-managerial staff highlighted how staff respond to the directions of the organisation as a result of how they are treated and managed. The table 1 provides a summary of our methodological approach:

**Table 1: Methodological summary**

<b>Dimensions</b>	<b>Features</b>
Data collection period:	Between 2011 and 2017
Instrument used:	Semi-structured interviews, factory visit, emails, field note
Informant selection criteria:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Based on information sought on marketing agility of the firm.</li> <li>- Core founder, non-executive director and communications manager gave insight into company strategy and vision, while obtaining non-managerial staff's views on day to day company operations and work environment was important</li> </ul>
Roles of informants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Chairman/founder.</li> <li>- Non-executive director.</li> <li>- Communications manager.</li> <li>- Non-managerial staff.</li> </ul>
Main topics of interviews:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Company history</li> <li>- Experiences of working for Blue Skies Co Ltd</li> <li>- Company strategy</li> <li>- Relationships with stakeholders</li> <li>- Company vision</li> <li>- Fruit processing</li> <li>- Opportunities and threats</li> <li>- The export market processes and procedures</li> <li>- How they respond to challenges</li> <li>- Staff motivational systems in place</li> <li>- Support needed for the firm</li> <li>- Staff support structures</li> <li>- Farmers and community support</li> <li>- Joint Effort Enterprise (JEE)</li> </ul>
Interviews mode:	Face to face and telephone.
Secondary sources of	company publications such as the Pelican News and other documents accessible from the

information:	company's website; independent publications,
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### **Case history: background and history**

Blue Skies (BS) specialises in the production of quality prepared fresh fruits and freshly squeezed juice, made at source. The company has relatively short but interesting and successful history, which has demonstrated various examples of marketing agility over the years. It was founded in 1997 by Anthony Pile, a British entrepreneur, who was still the chairman of the company at the time of data collection. The company has its headquarters in England. The company was founded mainly because the founder failed to implement his vision in his previous company, where he was the Managing Director. He had expressed his view to the board that their fruits would be fresher and taste better if they located the fruit processing factory closer to the source of the fruits so that they could be processed and packed fresh and ready to be delivered to the supermarkets in the UK within 36 hours of harvest.

However, the board disagreed and advised Anthony to go away and do some “blue sky thinking”, hence the name of the company. Therefore, the best way to implement the founder’s vision was to set up his own business using high involving strategy of wholly owned subsidiary to offer the flexibility needed to make changes if needed, in order to remain relevant to the vision and mission of the company. Though Anthony and his previous employers may have disagreed on a fundamental principle of location of processing plant, the BS success story is consistent with Freeman *et al.* (2012) in their observation that location of a firm can have significant impact on export success.

Agility enabled BS to seize the opportunity to innovatively and efficiently produce, and timely supply product offerings to the local and international markets (Li *et al.*, 2016; Aitken *et al.*, 2002). The choice of BS for this study is significant because it provides an example of the opportunity in the emerging African markets, despite the common challenges associated with doing

business in the continent, if marketing agility principles (Poolten *et al.*, 2006) are deployed with determination, conviction and belief in others (Blue Skies, 2017). The company has experienced tremendous growth and success, since its inception in 1997; three months after the founder left his previous place of employment to pursue his vision. From its first factory in Ghana with 35 employees, the company currently has subsidiaries in other emerging markets such as South Africa, Egypt and Brazil with over 4000 employees across Africa, Europe and Latin America. It also has packaging houses in Senegal and Gambia to respond to changing needs for fruits. The company has also expanded its product range from fresh cut fruits, mainly for export, to different types of fresh juice for the host markets. The types of fruits have also increased from exporting pineapples to Sainsbury's in the UK in 1998, to exporting a variety of processed fruits including pineapple, mango, papaya, coconut, melon and pomegranate to over 13 major retailers in European countries such as the UK (Marks and Spencer, Asda, Waitrose, McDonalds), Netherlands (Albert Heijn) and France (Carrefour).

Blue Skies has been recognised for various prestigious awards over the years for their performance in their core business activities as well as their contribution in their host countries, through the award-winning Joint Effort Enterprise (JEE) framework. These include Queen's Award for Enterprise (Sustainable Development) in 2008, 2011 and 2015, and the supermarket supplier of the year award in 2017. The founder has also been presented with various awards in recognition for his contribution in Ghana including the GUBA Black Star Award in 2015. They have also had high profile visitations from the UK to their factory in Ghana, including the Foreign Secretary in 2017, Mr Boris Johnson and the UK High Commissioner to Ghana, Mr Jon Benjamin, as well as current and past political leaders from Africa and Europe (Pullman, 2017; Blue Skies, 2016a).

By way of describing JEE model, it is built on three key principles: diversity (recruiting the right calibre of staff from diverse backgrounds to generate and implement robust ideas); respect (respecting the environment and staff to ensure sustainability), and profitability (the need to be

profitable in order to generate the required funds to survive and ultimately grow as a business). “Diversity” is the “Joint” component of JEE. Effort and Enterprise signify the commitment required from the diverse staff to ensure profitability and survival. As JEE is central to the BS approach to business, we provide further detail about the framework. BS describe JEE as a virtuous circle and blueprint for sustainable business (Blue Skies, 2014a, 2014b). Therefore, JEE is a continuous process, which enables the company to stay ahead of competition, respond to competition and maintain growth (Blue Skies, 2015). The application of the framework has wider theoretical implications because it reveals elements of robustness, responsiveness and proactiveness (Poolton et al., 2006.) The following quotation from the company’s documentation (Blue Skies, 2014a) summarises the manifestation of agility as indicated in the three elements listed above:

*“The JEE has been necessary for Blue Skies to respond effectively to actual and immediate challenges, and to be innovative and profitable in a highly competitive market”.*

In this regard, though JEE is proactive in predicting challenges and opportunities through collaboration with relevant stakeholders, but it is also reactive (responsiveness according to Poolton et al., 2006) in the sense of responding to changes in the competitive environment. It also emphasises sustainability and proactiveness (Poolton et al., 2006) through their focus on profitable and sustainable business model, as captured in a message from the founder, published in the company’s Pelican News:

*“The very success of Blue Skies is based on our awareness of future development; this is at the heart of our Joint Effort Enterprise Model”* (Blue Skies, 2014b)

The following sections present detailed analysis of the data from the various sources as indicated above. The purpose is not to highlight the relative importance of any particular source of data but to apply the relevant evidence to the research phenomenon (Yin, 2018).

## **Data Analysis**

We adopted the template analysis, as it has been used effectively and extensively in management and organisational research (e.g., King, 2004; Nemkova, 2017; Brooks *et al.*, 2015; Miles and Huberman, 1994). Template analysis is a form of thematic analysis, which balances the use of structure in analysing textual data with the flexibility to adapt the analysis to the needs of a particular study (Brooks *et al.*, 2015). Considering the different types of data used for this study including interviews, emails, field notes and website information, the flexibility of template analysis helps in making the data analysis highly effective for this study. Consistent with the template analysis, we adapted the Agility Strategic Framework (ASF) as the basic structure to critically analyse the themes from the textual data. This framework is robust for this research, as it has been applied in similar research (Poolton *et al.*, 2006). However, we provide further application and advancement of theory by applying it to real world case of a multinational company rather than SME as advanced by Poolton *et al.*, (2006).

Based on our data analysis and review of the literature, we deduced three features of agility, i.e. robustness, responsiveness and proactiveness (see Figure 1). Consistent with the ASF, the findings have been categorised into how the company has employed strategies to be robust, responsive and proactive. The findings in relation to these three themes will be used to evaluate the presentence of marketing agility concerning BS' company, and the strategies being used to sustain agility by incorporating the concept of network agility, which has previously been applied in the area of supply chain management (Gligor *et al.*, 2015; Yang, 2014; Chan and Chiang, 2011).

## **Key findings: Evidence of agility**

Agility has been described as reconfiguration and manoeuvrability of options swiftly in response to unpredictable needs and conditions in the business environment in order to reap possible benefits (Nemkova, 2017; Chen and Chiang, 2011; Gligor *et al.*, 2015; Li *et al.*, 2008; Agarwal *et al.*, 2007).

The three key components of agility are presented below to structure the evidence of marketing agility as observed in our case firm:

### ***Robustness***

Robustness refers to how the company demonstrates resilience to cope with turbulence in the various markets in which it operates (*Poolton et al.*, 2006). *Cardogan et al.*, (2012) argue that in a highly turbulent environment the firm needs to demonstrate greater agility. As Figure 1 reveals, a strategy to ensure robustness to sustain agility is through sponsorship and relationship management with different stakeholders such as retailers, farmers and host communities in the form of Joint Effort Enterprise (JEE) and corporate social responsibility.

BS' JEE framework according to the company, hinges on three main principles, which ensure sustainability and robustness of their business model: a diverse society, a culture of respect and drive for profit. This model simply means that the company recruits and retains the right calibre of staff from various backgrounds; ensures that all stakeholders are respected in the process of profit maximisation so as to impact positively on the environment and the community. Such approach can be useful in emerging markets which are noted to be typically high culture context and emphasise more on relationship (*Hofstede*, 2001). Though JEE appears to be robust for BS, the company continues to monitor it to assess whether it requires any modifications. For example, between 2011 and 2012, BS launched a study into JEE, which resulted in presenting an extension of the core principles of JEE into what they called a JEE Virtuous Cycle, which indicates a sense of continuous process, hence our contention that JEE provides evidence of robustness.

Furthermore, turbulent times and institutional voids which are common in emerging markets call for effective relationship management with different stakeholders in order to remain legitimate and robust in those countries (*Lee et al.*, 2018; *Salmi and Heikkila*, 2015; *Ghauri et al.*, 2014). Whereas the effects of corporate social responsibility are debatable, BS' approach in maintaining



relationship with the community is showing positive results. For example, the BS relationship with the farmers has created customer loyalty. For instance, in September 2017, the company reported of a farmer who has remained with the group and produced fruits for BS for over 14 years. Another farmer has also been producing mango for the company for over 13 years. These farmers have highlighted how they have received secure payments and compost due to their long-term relationship with the company. The founder and chairman of BS indicated in a report by PWC (n.d) they have everybody pulling together in the organisation, therefore competition should watch out. Due to the strength they have in a relationship with staff, they believe they have robust strategies to deal with competition.

From the above, we contend that relationship networks provide companies with test of robustness in their marketing agility. This is consistent with the partnering agility component of the network agility triad (Chen and Chiang, 2011; Sambamurthy *et al.*, 2003). In this regard, development of relationship is considered as integral part of demonstrating export-related capability (Freeman *et al.*, 2012; Morgan *et al.*, 2004). In the supply chain management literature, partnering agility concerns leveraging assets, knowledge, and competencies of suppliers, distributors, contract manufacturers and logistics providers in exploring and exploiting opportunities for competitive actions (Chen and Chiang, 2011). In extending this definition to the field of marketing, we observe that the needed flexibility in marketing agility (Gligor *et al.*, 2015) would be possible if there is a strong partnership with suppliers, in this case, the farmers and the farming community. There is evidence of strategy to ensure such relationships through BS' award-winning Joint Effort Enterprise (JEE) and corporate social responsibility initiatives, support for farmers and farming communities and relationship with its key retailers, particularly in the UK and the Netherlands (Pullman, 2016; WIPO, n.d.). An example of evidence of BS relationship with stakeholders and its effects are captured in the following quote:

*“We also, with our partners, especially Albert Heijn and Waitrose, support the communities in education, health and sports. We also assist the farmers in a number of ways including supply of good quality compost from our waste, and offering them advice through our team of agronomists”.*

It must be emphasised that the relationship with the farmers is based on mutual respect and informal rather than formal relationships. This means the farmers are free to sell their products elsewhere. However, the commitment BS makes to the farmers, and the activities in their communities have ensured that the farmers remain loyal. In effect, robustness ensures that potential bottlenecks and risks of failures emanating from sourcing of raw materials and accessing key retailers are reduced (Poolton *et al.*, 2006).

Management of staff can also be considered as evidence of robustness in dealing with marketing agility. Though Poolton *et al.*, (2006) touched on the role of staff in dealing with agility, it was more in relation to staffing levels skills of operatives. However, from interaction with non-managerial staff during the visit to the factory in Ghana, it was obvious of how management of staff can be crucial. BS has many ways to treat their staff, but two of the ways discovered during the visit was the provision of facilities such as library and healthcare on site. Whereas staff levels may be managed by recruiting from the many unskilled labour that visit the factory daily looking for employment, the provision of healthcare facilities ensure that staff with minor conditions are treated quickly so that they can return to work as soon as possible.

Besides, the provision of the library provides staff a quiet place to rest between shifts and to update their knowledge. These strategies ensure that staff feel valued, thus demonstrating their long-term commitment to the company. BS website reports of examples such long term relationships which have resulted in staff recommendations to their friends and families as well as evidence of staff staying in employment for the company for over 10 years. Operative staff expressed their

gratitude for BS. Whereas it may be seen that people without jobs may express gratitude that they have found some form of employment, to stay with the same organisation beyond 10 years goes beyond basic level of satisfaction but demonstration of commitment. In this regard, we extend Poolton *et al.*, (2006) view on preventative maintenance to reduce vulnerability to include treatment of staff in such a way to reduce how the company may be vulnerable to possible staff shortage and high staff turnover, rather than focusing on just equipment.

### ***Responsiveness***

Though Cadogan *et al.*, (2012) indicate the importance of further research into responsive behaviour in export market orientation, we examine responsiveness beyond export by examining BS agility in its marketing strategy as a whole. Responsiveness is about operational strategies to quickly address unforeseen occurrences which could potentially impact on a company's businesses in various locations (Li *et al.*, 2008; Vazquez-Bustelo *et al.*, 2007). It concerns the need for organisations to modify their strategies to match opportunities and threats (Dong *et al.*, 2013). In this regard marketing agility goes beyond strategic sensitivity (Doz and Kosonen, 2010) by quickly responding to changes in the circumstances of the business (Harvey *et al.*, 2008). Table 1 presents the themes which emerged from our analysis concerning how BS has demonstrated responsiveness in marketing agility. These are in response to challenges or opportunities in their markets (Gligor *et al.*, 2015; Purvis *et al.*, 2015; Dong *et al.*, 2013; Chen and Chiang, 2011). One of the key problems facing businesses in emerging markets, especially in Africa, is unreliable energy supply (Africa Progress Panel, 2015). An interview with the founder of the company described the quality of power supply in Ghana as poor. The Electricity Company of Ghana has been shedding power in Ghana and companies have not escaped from the uncertainty and volatility of unreliable power supply.

Though there is some level of investment by government and private businesses on different sources of energy, including solar, Ghana lags behind other African countries such as Kenya and South Africa (Amankwah-Amoah, 2015). BS demonstrates their agility in responding to the

unforeseen power interruption by using diesel generators up to 50% of their operations in 2015, according to the General Manager. This was the only way to be able to meet orders from their retailers. Though the back-up energy through generators is rather more expensive, it offers the company the flexibility needed to be responsive to the needs of stakeholders, including employees, as in 2015, some workers were concerned about their job security as a result of the power supply situation.

The development of sales in host and regional markets can be discussed in terms of agility in relation to proactiveness as well as responsiveness. The discussion in relation to proactiveness is presented in the next section. However, concerning the responsiveness, the company is developing the West African market with different types of products in response to conditions in the UK. First, the weakening of the pound may present a squeeze on the company's profits, which means under those circumstances, it may be advisable to sell outside the UK. Their markets in the Netherlands and France also offer them a buffer against weakening pound sterling. Another responsive reason why the company is diversifying its market offering to take advantage of the opportunities in host markets is in response to strike in the airline industry. British Airways strike which impacted on the company's ability to export fruits from Ghana to the UK was felt badly. BS had to take a decision to reduce the number of staff in response to this situation. However, considering the close relationship the company has with its employees (PWC, n.d.), this was a difficult decision to make, hence the need to develop the local markets to absorb such shocks in future and to continue to exploit growth opportunities.

However, it presented the company with an opportunity to be more agile and diversify their risks. It has now become a policy decision for the company that, any subsequent location of subsidiary will be influenced by multiple motives – resource seeking and market seeking motives (Barthel *et al.*, 2011; Dunning, 2001). It will not only be motivated by the need to obtain fresh fruits for the European market, but seek countries which will offer the company the option to add value to

their fresh fruits and sell to the local markets. These multiple motives will support the business should the demand conditions in Europe or transport difficulties result in challenges for the company. It must be emphasised that as not all the fruits they supply can be obtained in all the countries they operate in, the types of fresh juice they sell also vary in response to demand, competition and availability of raw materials. These differences reflect how the products have been marketed. For example, whereas fresh cut fruits are marketed as being available worldwide, their juice in Ghana and South Africa are presented differently. Freshly squeezed juice is presented as available in Ghana, and fruit in a bottle and still lemonade are available in South Africa (Blue Skies, 2016b)

Another evidence of agility is how BS has responded to competition in their host countries. BS has experienced what Poolten *et al.*, (2006) describe as turbulence in business environment, which include the intensity of competition and the dynamic nature of customer requirements. Freeman *et al.*, (2012), indicated that the likelihood of a firm surviving in a domestic niche market depends on the strength and intensity of competition. Furthermore, Sørensen and Madsen (2012) indicate that agility and adaptability are crucial for successful competition in international markets. BS had to compete with big multinational companies operating in Ghana. BS therefore used the strength in country of origin branding strategy, by emphasising the “Ghanaianness” of their products sold in Ghana. The effects of country-of-origin on brand perception and consumer behaviour have been debated in the literature for decades, with researchers presenting different results (Ferguson *et al.*, 2008; Khan and Bamber, 2008). However, it is understandable why BS uses country of origin concept to operate in the food industry. This is because whereas products such as detergents are not normally strongly linked with country of origin, food product category is strongly associated with country of origin (Tseng and Balabanis, 2011). Thus the country of origin becomes an asset for the company instead of a liability. It has been suggested that firms from emerging economies encounter 'liability of emergingness' (Madhok and Keyhani, 2012).

BS uses country of origin in refreshing their labelling strategy in response to competition. As indicated by Dong *et al.*, (2013), response to customer needs and actions of competitors are crucial. BS currently clearly uses marks such as “freshly squeezed in Ghana”, displayed on their pineapple juice and “from Ghana” on their tropical juice (Blue Skies, 2017). In this regard, WIPO (n.d.) highlighted that the BS used labelling to compete with imported brands and to attempt to increase domestic sales by 20 per cent over a five-year period in 2012. It can therefore be concluded that revitalisation of brand is an evidence of marketing agility in emerging markets. Overall, the branding strategy of BS has been successful and provide the company with confidence.

### ***Proactiveness***

Cadogan *et al.*, (2012) highlight the need for further research on responsiveness and proactiveness in relation to export market orientation to further understand strategic flexibility/agility. As seen above in relation to responsiveness, we look beyond export of BS products examining how they demonstrate responsiveness in conducting their overall business operation. This part deals with how the company anticipates and stimulates growth in generating timely demand for their products. In terms of theoretical context, it is compatible with Doz and Kosonen (2010) in their description of strategic sensitivity component of their strategic agility triad (the two other components of the triad being leadership unity and resource fluidity). Strategic sensitivity is about how quickly and organisation perceive and pay attention to strategic changes in the business environment. In extending this concept to evidence of marketing agility, we acknowledge that different environmental conditions will dictate different response from business (Cadogan *et al.*, 2012).

However, the business in question must have strategies in places to provide nimbleness to deal with such changes. Figure 1 presents the key examples in BS’ experience in detailing with marketing agility. The company anticipates growing demand for their products but appear not to anticipate a permanent change in the lack of supply of reliable energy from the national grid. The General Manager in Ghana indicated in 2015 that the company had been exploring alternative

sources of energy supply, in addition to the use of diesel generators to be able to adequately meet changing energy needs. An option being investigated is supply of renewable energy. The following interview quote confirms the challenge faced and options being explored to remain agile:

*“There should be more reliable energy supply or help to develop self-generation energy projects (e.g. biogas). At the moment, the cost of energy in Ghana is just too high, and even the supply of energy is not reliable. We are sometimes compelled to use generators, and we are now looking into biogas”.*

From the above quote, it shows that company is taking a proactive approach through the exploration of alternative energy options in order to meet the changing customers demand in a timely manner. For their strategy to be robust, the company is constantly exploring collaborative strategies in order to reduce uncertainties. Another evidence of proactiveness is the company’s clear indication in an interview with the Communications Manager as quoted below:

*“We have a factory in the UK as a backup and also to produce specialised [product offerings] that cannot be produced in any of our foreign factories. An example is mixing cherries with other fruits”.*

Setting up the factory in the UK as a back-up highlights the company’s preparedness to increase production and respond to urgent requests, which may not be honoured in any of the subsidiaries. Also, the back-up factory in the UK means the company is in a position to respond to the types of fruits consumers’ request, such as a combination of different types of fruits which may not be available in a single country. Such an approach to have back-up to respond to any changing consumer needs in what Yang (2014) refer to as marketing/customer sensitivity is needed in demonstrating potential for marketing agility (Poolton *et al.*, 2006). Customers have increasingly become well-informed and demanding (Vazquez-Bustelo *et al.*, 2007), therefore responding to their demands is not only reactive but could potentially create new opportunities for the firm in the home

and host countries. The continuous development of the host country market in relation to the proactive component of agility concerns the need to create or stimulate demand for the products in those markets. In this regard, the company targets those markets with fresh juice which is not sold in their European markets. It can be concluded that BS uses adaptation in deploring marketing agility in the various markets it serves.

BS not only plans to sell to the host countries' customers, but also expand to nearby countries due to the increasing economic integration made possible formally through the Economic Community of West African States, and informally through advanced information technology, which has made online transactions and accessibility of product information relatively easier. The IT revolution and digitization offer important opportunities to the company to become nimble, flexible and proactive in meeting the changing demand of customers. Existing studies demonstrate the important role of IT in agility (Ravichandran, 2018; Lu and Ramamurthy, 2011; Tallon and Pinsonneault, 2011; Weill *et al.*, 2002). Multi-sourcing of fruits from different countries also provides evidence of proactive agility. BS indicated that the declining agriculture in Ghana was affecting their ability to meet demand from some European customers. Besides, they have identified periods of the year when they are likely to experience shortage of some types of fruits from different countries. For example, May to June is usually considered as a transition period, because the quantity of crops in the southern hemisphere diminishes as those in the Mediterranean regions start to emerge. Bortoluzzi *et al.*, (2014) argue that firms become more agile by virtue of expanding their international activity and gaining more experience, and this appears to be consistent with how BS source their raw materials and operate in different geographical locations.

During this period, the company continues to satisfy the needs of their retailers by sourcing more melon from Egypt. From the above analysis, we can put forward an adapted version of the Agility Strategic Framework which highlights evidence of marketing agility by BS. However, we postulate that for the company and those operating in a similar industry to remain robust, they



should not only be responsive but also proactive. In effect, evidence of agility should be juxtaposed with strategy of agility, as the effectiveness of the evidence and strategy would be influenced by environmental factors such as the behaviour of consumers, suppliers, retailers, government, communities and the company's growth objectives. For BS, the JEE framework offers a strong platform in this regard, due to its desire to grow profit, reduce effects on the environment and value diversity in its corporate culture.

Another evidence of agility is how standardisation and adaptation have been deployed in the marketing mix, and the manifestation of this strategy abound. Typically the decision about whether to adapt or standardise strategies depends on financial gains and competitive advantages which call for standardisation, and the necessity to respond to host country conditions, which dictates adaptation strategy (Rao-Nicholson and Khan, 2017; Vrontis *et al.*, 2009). Adaptation in this context should present benefits which outweigh any anticipated financial gains emanating from economies of scale (Bock *et al.*, 2012). For example, it is noted that marketing mix adaptation enhances export performance of organisations (Freeman *et al.*, 2012). BS shows evidence of marketing mix adaptation, examples of which are presented below:

To begin with, the product distribution is done differently in the different host countries. The products are available for purchase through designated supermarkets and online in the UK (through Amazon). However in South Africa the products are purchased through the firm's own website. Retailing and distribution in Ghana are through designated locations in the capital city of Accra. The strategy at these designated areas is further adapted in response to customer characteristics (Theodosiou and Leonidou, 2003). For example, a variety of products are sold around the public sector offices in Accra and in schools between 9am and 5pm in accordance with the normal office hours of public sector workers who require the products. Similarly customers who attend churches are targeted on Sundays between 8am and 1pm, depending upon when the services for the various churches start and finish.

Besides, the products are also adapted to suite the environment. In South Africa, the “fruit in a bottle” products include Star Ruby Grapefruit Juice, Valencia Orange Juice, Ginger and Lime Still Lemonade and Strawberry Still Lemonade which are presented in different sizes according to customer needs (Blue Skies, 2016b). In Egypt, BS obtains different products such as melons, watermelons, oranges, red and white grapefruits, red and white seedless grapes, strawberries, and pomegranates for export. However, the products sold in the domestic market are only salad and juice. In selling the respective products in South Africa and Egypt, BS has the flexibility required to deal with unexpected changes in those markets. Drawing from the resource-based view (RBV), Bock *et al.* (2012) indicated that the agility depends on the adaptability of the firm’s resources and the managerial commitment to deploy those resources. In this regard, it can be stated that the managerial commitment to enhance agility through adaptation is evident in the various examples of marketing mix adaptation across markets by BS. Another example of marketing mix adaptation is the different prices of products in different countries. However, this is not necessarily an example of marketing agility.

However, adapting the market offering in different African markets as a back-up and supplementary strategy for the main line of business, which is exporting fruits to the European markets, is a clear evidence of marketing agility. Therefore BS strategies also fit the definition of strategic agility, which is that they constantly possess the ability to change their course of action to maintain its competitive advantage (Ivory and Brooks, 2018; Weber and Tarba, 2014; Fayezi *et al.*, 2015). Such an approach is consistent with Poulis and Poulis (2013) who drew on contingency theory to suggest different layers of adaptation, including what they described as more agile forms of adaptation, which are driven by both internal and external factors. Internal factors may be the proactive tendency of the organisation to provide marketing agility-compatible corporate culture which is transferred across the various subsidiaries. External factors may include pressure from the

retailers in Europe, as well as pressure from competitors and other stakeholders and how the company reacts to them or proactively anticipate them.

It must be noted that adaptation is also used in some aspects of the business as it has many advantages, including financial gains, better coordination between subsidiary and headquarters and consistent corporate brand image (Rao-Nicholson and Khan, 2017; Poulis and Poulis, 2013). The founder and chairman was reported as saying that affinity of Ghana is the model they use across all their six sites (PWC, n.d.), demonstrating evidence of standardisation of culture and practices which support their drive to be agile in the competitive business environment.

### **General discussion and implications**

In the light of increasing importance of marketing agility, this paper sought to examine how marketing agility manifest in firms that are based in emerging markets. Based on a single case analysis, we developed a three-dimensional perspective on marketing agility, i.e., *robustness*, *responsiveness* and *proactiveness* which demonstrates organisational attempt towards achieving agility. The analysis revealed that three components of framework need to operate together in a cycle as evident in BS' JEE Virtuous cycle, as a much wider cooperation from different stakeholders is required. BS is confident it has agile brand because they confirmed that they believe they have a head start in brands they introduce to the market because of who they are (corporate brand, which has received goodwill from both home and host countries). The corporate brand has been successfully sold to the staff, who have been described as a resilient and tough, therefore able to confront any challenges presented. The founder, for example, indicated his pride in his staff in how they manage adversity admirably, which also impresses their customers (Blue Skies, 2016c)

### **Contributions to theory and practice**

From a theoretical standpoint, one of the main contributions of this study is to develop a model which captures the features of organizational agility. We redefine the components of ASF by

applying it to a new industry and new profile of business. According to Poolton (2006), ASF was formulated specifically to allow SMEs to access the benefits of agility. We extend this process by applying it to a firm based in the emerging economy which is establishing its foot print in international markets. While we apply the concepts of robustness, responsiveness and proactiveness, we contend that what they represent in emerging market is different, at least, within the fresh fruit industry. We demonstrate that the relationships are highly essential in ensuring that marketing agility stands the test of time. More generally, we explored the relationship between ASF and other concepts in management research such as strategic sensitivity and strategic agility by bringing these home to the business context in emerging African markets; a context which still lags behind in terms of research currency, compared to other continents.

From practical point of view, our findings stress the importance of developing high level of organizational agility as a path in improving organisational competitiveness. For multinationals in emerging markets, agility can improve their chances of success. Our findings also not only revealed a real-world application of ASF, but also a list of key features (see Figure 1) which need to be taken into consideration in order to remain agile, especially in emerging markets. Any changes an organisation introduces, whether proactively or reactively need to be implemented by key stakeholders, especially staff, partners, suppliers and customers. JEE framework of BS sufficiently captures the integration of the interests of these stakeholders in order to ensure their long-term commitment to the objectives of the organisation, which is to achieve profitability in a sustainable manner. Our findings suggest companies operating in similar industry may adopt or adapt such approach for their business operations.

*Harvey et al.*, (2008) state that marketing managers should develop time-oriented marketing strategies to provide organisational agility. BS' example as presented through the JEE and the framework provided could be useful in terms of its emphasis on robustness, responsiveness and proactiveness. BS success story in the challenging market cannot be overemphasised, considering

the impact it has made and the profile of people that have acknowledged the business model and have been in touch with the company at different points. These include political leaders, Queen Elizabeth II (Queen of the United Kingdom), students from foreign universities such as Stanford University (USA), television personalities and celebrities (Blue Skies, 2016a; Blue Skies, 2015). BS could therefore be an exemplar for many organisations, not only in considering the variables we have presented but also in acknowledging how they have achieved their goodwill needed for implementation of various strategies. Concerning responsiveness component of the agility triad, we present a list of factors which are very common in emerging markets, and how BS address such issues could be exemplar for other businesses. For instance, the influence of governments is higher in emerging markets (Amankwah-Amoah and Debrah, 2017; Salmi and Heikkila, 2015), therefore it requires a great deal of lobbying to make the required changes in such countries. The role of the government is crucial as their policies and attitude towards private investment directly impact on businesses. How entrenched lack of reliable energy supply is in Africa cannot be over-emphasised, and BS provides an example of sustainable approach for companies to address this in order to remain agile.

### ***Limitations and future directions***

The study is not without limitations. One limitation of this study is the focus on a single case organisation. Another limitations is that the data was collected from a single country. Though we have attempted to collect data from multiple sources over extended period of time (see Table 1) in order to strengthen the extent to which the study covers typical operations in the fruit processing business, this data is mainly based on BS. Besides, the authors only visited one BS factory in Ghana, and there are other factories in Egypt, South Africa and Brazil, as well as the headquarters in the UK, which could have provided further examples of agility. However, we reduced such effects through collection of data at the strategic level through the views of the founder and communications manager as well as information from the website. It can however be assumed that

specific incidents and examples of agility would have been varied from country to country. For example, the response to competition in Ghana would be different from how BS may respond to competition in different countries, depending upon who the competitors are and their perceived firm-specific advantages (Rugman, 2010; Birkinshaw *et al.*, 1998). This is also consistent with Cunha *et al.*, (2016), who alluded that cultural, economic and institutional idiosyncrasies as well as recent involvement of multinational companies in Africa suggest that leadership and management issues need to be addressed differently, as there could be contradictions between the home and host country.

Future research based on BS may therefore include collection of data from all subsidiaries to compare any differences and similarities to fully understand how BS examples may impact on theory. Future studies may also include multiple cases from different organisations to fully understand how marketing agility is manifested. Therefore as the current study is based on one organisation, the results may be applied elsewhere with caution.

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**Figure 1: Strategy and Evidence of Marketing Agility**

