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Strategies to Sustain Food and Beverage Businesses in West Africa Through Alliances and Partnerships

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Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

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Eyorokon Serge Aka

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2023

Abstract

Strategies to Sustain Food and Beverage Businesses in West Africa Through Alliances
and Partnerships

by

Eyorokon Serge Aka

MS, University of Cumbria, 2020

BS, University of Bouake, 2000

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

October 2023

Abstract

Over 50% of strategic alliances fail, impacting business growth and sustainability. Some food and beverage firm leaders in West Africa lack strategies to sustain or grow their businesses through alliances and partnerships. Grounded in Coase and Williamson's transactional cost theory, the purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the alliance and partnership strategies that business leaders of food and beverage firms in West Africa use to sustain their businesses. The participants comprised six senior leaders of a food and beverage firm in West Africa, which has been successful in interfirm partnerships. Data were collected from semistructured interviews and reviews of company documentation. Yin's four principles, thematic analysis, and methodological triangulation were used to analyze the data. Three themes emerged: analyzing the relevance and opportunity for alliances and partnerships, thorough preparation, and efficient implementation promoting a win-win approach. A key recommendation is for organization leaders to create an environment of transparency, trust, and excellent relationships with their partners. The implications for positive social change include the potential for job creation and securing quality product affordability to consumers, entrepreneurship opportunities for local communities to collaborate with and learn from global firms, and improved tax revenue for local community development.

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Dedication

I dedicate this research to God Almighty, who has given me the Favor, strength, knowledge, winning spirit, and resources to complete this doctoral journey; to my wife, Philomene Konan, and my three kids, Yvana, Ariela, and Eliana Aka, for being on my side always; to my father Aka Kakou who instilled me the continuous quest for knowledge, and my mother Kacou Therese, whose hard work has always inspired me. May God bless you.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

The analysis of global business competitiveness uncovers the opportunity to reflect on alliances and partnerships and how a good knowledge of alliances' principles, methods, and complexities can shape the thinking about effective strategies to win sustainably. Organization leaders combine their resources to innovate, build competitive advantage, or ensure safety and production efficiency (Lohmer et al., 2022). Global competitiveness, technological disruptions, market protectionism by regulation, and demographic shifts are some reasons organizations decide to team up and build synergies (Bamel et al., 2021). According to Lohmer et al. (2022), business internationalization through alliances significantly increased in the 1970s when companies serviced other markets and reduced costs through collaborative networks.

Alliances and partnerships are efficient alternatives for emerging markets (Oyedele & Firat, 2019). Therefore, countries in the African continent could be among the top beneficiaries. With the contemporary business challenges in Africa, the need for sustainability strategies for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and large firms are critical success factors for economic and social growth. Countries in the African continent have the potential and the resources to rise.

Interfirm cooperation has multiple but specific facets that researchers must explore. *Coopetition* (i.e., a form of cooperation between competitors) is an example of an alliance that organizations might explore (Amata et al., 2022). As more firm leaders engage in partnerships, strategic alliances fail rapidly (De Man & Luvison, 2019). Therefore, understanding the conditions and strategies for success becomes relevant.

The aspects stated above make the study about alliances and partnerships relevant. The foundation of the study will encompass several elements, among which are the problem, the interview and research questions, the population and sampling, the significance of the study, and the literature review.

Background of the Problem

With growth potential, West Africa has become a place of opportunity for business extension or sustainability, where international players set up businesses despite political and social stability risks. Alliances and partnerships have become a relevant topic in Africa, especially in the competitive food and beverage business, where international and local players and new entrants are increasing investment (Verified Market Research, 2023). Nevertheless, the leaders of the firms operating in West Africa will face and tackle the risks of alliance failure.

Strategic alliance organizations fail for several reasons at a high rate (M. Russo & Cesarani, 2017). On average, between 50% and 60% of strategic alliances that firms conclude ultimately fail, impacting the aim to expand their business or sustain a competitive edge (Shin & Lee, 2019). The situations of failure are diverse and heterogeneous, so it is challenging to locate the reasons for the decline (A. Russo & Schena, 2021). These statistics shaped the conclusion by some authors, such as Sudarman et al. (2021), that the alliance life cycle is quite limited. Therefore, finding the right strategy will significantly affect businesses in Africa in general and West Africa in particular. Making alliances and partnerships succeed in Africa will have many advantages for entrepreneurship on the continent.

The firm that is the subject of my present single case study has a success story in terms of alliances. It has concluded a solid franchising partnership, three cooperation partnerships, and 45 distributorship partnerships. It is among the rare firms to succeed at alliances sustainably. Understanding the strategies that the leaders put in place to succeed will be inspiring.

Problem and Purpose

The specific business problem is that some food and beverage firm leaders in West Africa lack strategies to sustain their businesses through alliances and partnerships. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the alliance and partnership strategies that business leaders of food and beverage firms in West Africa use to sustain their businesses.

Population and Sampling

The research was a case study targeting a multinational firm with a successful experience in alliances and partnerships across West Africa. The population included leaders of food and beverage firms engaged in alliances and partnerships across West Africa. The targeted sample comprised leaders of the firm under study. These leaders, who were my current colleagues, are functional senior managers from the regional office who have been influential in the partnership agreement, regular alignments, governance of the process, and partnership performance review over the last 3 years. The study dealt with the West African market, where the firm experienced cooperation with local partners. However, the interviews took place online, since I was in Canada at the time of the study and the participants and the company under study were based in West Africa. I

interviewed six senior managers who played a significant role in the success of the partnership initiatives the firm has been contracting. I used purposeful sampling, a technique helping to identify and select units with characteristics that the researcher needs in their sample (Shaheen et al., 2019). The selection criteria of purposeful participants included the high involvement of the participants in regular interactions between the firm under study and the partners, stressing their influence in the decision-making process. The data sources were interview sessions and documentation, in line with the business problem and the purpose of the study. The data sources were useful to obtain information about the strategies that the firm leaders have been applying to sustain their businesses through alliances and partnerships. The data sources are in accordance with the ethical principles of the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to protect the participants' rights and ensure reliable and valid findings.

Nature of the Study

There are three primary methods in research: the quantitative method, the qualitative method, and the mixed method (Saunders et al., 2019). Qualitative research is useful for analyzing social phenomena by collecting nonnumerical data, relying on the experiences of human beings, and understanding the *why* and *how* of the phenomena (Aspers & Corte, 2019). In the current research, I used a qualitative study dealing with the participants' thoughts and opinions, valuing their subjectivity and emotions. The qualitative method is appropriate for this study, exploring alliance and partnership strategies to achieve business sustainability. Since the strategies include the success factors and the sources of difficulties, the participants shared their experiences and

subjective and objective thinking and proposed specific recommendations. The quantitative method emphasizes measurement and statistical, mathematical, or numerical data analyses (Saunders et al., 2019). Using quantitative data would have helped with the trend of the targeted population toward specific thinking, but I would not have been able to explore people's thinking and emotions. The mixed research method combines the quantitative and qualitative methods, meaning that the researcher collects both quantitative and qualitative data in the same study (Wambugu & Njoroge, 2022). The mixed method is proper when neither qualitative nor quantitative methods applied separately can fully answer the research question. However, in the current study, the mixed method would be time-consuming and require more resources, such as participants' availability, with a marginal contribution to the study.

In qualitative studies, researchers use several research designs, including ethnographic, case study, phenomenology, and narrative (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). The phenomenological research design involves understanding and describing phenomena people have experienced (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). The phenomenology approach would highlight the commonality of an experience that already exists and fail to consider the specific experiences. With the ethnographic design, the researcher involves themselves in a social and cultural group and interacts with the participants in real life to understand their lifestyle, culture, and perspectives for a period (Kirner & Mills, 2019). Ethnography would be helpful to focus only on cultural characteristics and not consider the business experiences, facts, and learnings necessary for this research's success. In narrative inquiry, the researcher narrates an experience that one or more individuals faced

forming a cohesive story (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). The collection of data by the researcher takes the form of a sequential narrative and uses a storytelling format. The narrative inquiry would not have been appropriate because I did not study the leaders' life stories throughout this research. A case study, commonly used in educational, social, clinical, and business research, is an in-depth empirical analysis of a phenomenon within its actual context, clarifying the boundaries and context (Yin, 2018). The specific research design is a single case study in my qualitative study. The case study was appropriate for this research because it was helpful to describe a successful for-profit organization's experience and perspective and understand the improvement opportunities.

Research Question

What alliance and partnership strategies do leaders of food and beverage firms in West Africa use to sustain their businesses?

Interview Questions

1. What is your viewpoint of alliances and partnerships between two or more entities in your industry, and how can a firm make them successful?
2. Your company has had several alliance experiences. Why did the company leaders engage in these alliances and partnerships?
3. How did the firm leaders use the interfirm partnership to overcome the risks and concerns and achieve positive results?
4. What has been your best alliance or partnership experience and significant achievements? What was your role? What were the key success factors?

5. What have been your major concerns at the implementation of the partnership agreement? How did the firm leaders address your concerns? If not satisfied, how should the leaders have handled your concerns for better results?
6. Are the current partnerships sustainable? Why? What could be improved or leveraged in the current partnerships to make them sustainable?
7. Are trust and transparency key success factors for your alliances? What are the other key success factors?
8. Which form of governance, formal or informal, would make alliances or partnerships sustainable? Kindly elaborate.
9. What do you think about coopetition? What does it take for coopetition work with a current or potential competitor?
10. What other information can you share about your company's partnership and alliance experiences?

Conceptual Framework

The theory that grounds this study was the transaction cost theory, established by Coase (1937) and developed in depth by Williamson (1981). Coase introduced the transaction cost theory by identifying the motive of transactions within the firm and the market and the transaction allocation factors between both. Coase and Williamson considered that a firm emerges and has a significant potential to expand as it can optimize its transaction costs. Strategic alliances have a hybrid nature between the firm and the market and could help reduce production and transaction costs for increasing or sustaining business profitability. Inspired by Coase, Williamson considered that the

complexity of the business environment drove bounded rationality and opportunistic behaviors as two primary causes that justify the need to apply the transaction cost approach in interfirm relationships to improve firm performance.

The transaction cost theory applies well to this study as some leaders use it to guide development of strategies to sustain their businesses. As a business growth and sustainability concept, the theory highlights some critical success factors of the cost optimization strategy through alliances and partnerships. The continuous assessment of opportunistic behavior to ensure that no party in the alliance is disadvantaged is among the principles that shape and sustain the alliance strategy. Additionally, the authors of this theory presented the concept of asset reciprocity as a strategic approach to drive the continuous commitment of the partner to take the economic risk of sharing resources and achieving joint profitability and efficiency goals.

Operational Definitions

Business innovation: The operationalization of a creative idea guided by a commercial motive by using adaptive and value-added solutions, harnessing technology or invention, and aiming to build competitive advantage or business growth (S. Singh & Aggarwal, 2021).

Business sustainability: A durable state of performance of an entity from economic, environmental, and social standpoints (Hübel et al., 2022). It succeeds economically without harming the environment and social welfare.

Coopetition: An arrangement in which two or more competitors decide, formally or informally, to join forces and build synergy on a specific aspect to obtain mutual

benefits and create value (Gernsheimer et al., 2021). Coopetition is a strategic alliance among parties that compete in the same market. Coopetition highlights the concept of cooperation and competition (Amata et al., 2022; Czakon et al., 2020; Köseoglu et al., 2021).

Co-packing: A collaborative arrangement between an industrial entity and a co-packer. A co-packer is a manufacturing entity that produces, packages, and labels for and on behalf of another client company with compensation such as co-packing fees (O'Donoghue et al., 2020).

Interfirm partnerships or cooperations: Formal or informal agreements independent firms make to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes (Baía & Franco, 2021).

Joint venture: A legal agreement between two or more entities that independently join their resources and capabilities to create a shared business entity (Ikuabe et al., 2022). This definition highlights the components of the strategic alliance as it stresses the independence of the parties and the sharing of resources and capabilities to achieve a joint goal.

Strategic alliance: A voluntary agreement that two or more entities conclude to exchange and join knowledge and resources to develop processes, products, or services to strengthen the competitive edge, gain market share, and sustain the business (Wang et al., 2022). It is an agreement between two independent entities cooperating by putting together their resources and skills to strengthen joint beneficial performance (Sudarman et al., 2021).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are untested ideas, events, and thoughts that the researcher uses as concepts in the research (Yin, 2018). There are three assumptions for my research study. First, I assumed that the sample size and the quality of the participants in the interviews would be sufficient to provide clear, insightful, and consistent insight into the research, achieve data saturation, and address the research problem. Another assumption was that the participants would respond to the interview questions with sincerity, transparency, and objectivity despite the strategic aspect of interfirm partnerships and the risk of disclosing confidential information. Third, it was assumed that sufficient secondary data were available to complement or confirm the interview responses.

Limitations

Limitations are potential weaknesses beyond the researcher's control (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). In qualitative studies, researchers should mention any significant limitation that may impact the quality of their paper. The first limitation in this study was the participants' willingness to share strategic insights openly. The second limitation was that the contextual approach for companies operating in Africa may not be easily extendable to other African business circumstances because of the diverse cultures in Africa.

Delimitations

Delimitations consist of a researcher setting the scope and the boundaries of their paper (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). I applied the delimitations at three major points.

First, I limited my interview sessions to six senior leaders, excluding the middle and junior managers in charge of executing the partnership decisions from the interviews. This choice was to obtain input from the most relevant stakeholders and to remain at an entirely strategic level following the purpose of the study. Second, I limited my research to a single case study although the research topic may require analyzing other perspectives for complete analysis. For example, as alliances and partnerships put in relationship two or more entities, it would be complete to engage the leaders of the partner firms to confirm and validate the participants' statements. Also, the situation a single company faces might not be applicable to all African firms of the same business sector. Third, although the industries my study deals with are in the food and beverage sector, my interview sessions took place focusing on leaders from the beverage industry only.

Significance of the Study

Contribution to Business Practice

My study may be significant in that its findings have potential positive professional implications in a context where the global market is highly competitive, and organizations are more inclined to gather resources or knowledge to become stronger. Learning from the successful experience of a multinational bottling company, which has made alliances and partnerships its business model, could inspire leaders of other organizations. Based on the results of the study, the senior leaders of global food and beverage firms could identify potential strategies when investing in a developing country and partnering with smaller and local players. The awareness could also guide the leaders

of local SMEs in collaboration with multinational companies. The feedback of leaders who have already experienced a strategic alliance, mainly those facing difficulties or benefitting from the excellent application of the success factors, could be insightful.

Implications for Social Change

This research could have a positive social impact because facilitating global food and beverage firms to expand their businesses to emerging and developing countries is an opportunity for job creation. The positive social impact also could be making products affordable to the consumers, who can enjoy the nourishing and refreshing features of the food and beverage brands. The success of these types of alliances could improve social conditions. Many developing countries, such as some West African countries, do not have the technology or knowledge to manufacture quality food and beverage products. With the cost of investment in local production, strategic alliances may be an alternative to share risks and encourage businesses to set up businesses with local partners. Tax payments are another source of revenue for the local governments, which could provide additional resources to serve local communities.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The literature review demonstrates an understanding of the literature related to a specific topic under study. As a critical analysis of published knowledge, the literature review provides a summary of the topic, classification of ways the topic has been studied and addressed previously, and comparison of previous studies (Paul & Criado, 2020). In the present study, I reviewed the literature related to the conceptual framework,

transaction cost theory, and previous research on alliance strategies that firm leaders have applied to sustain their businesses.

To conduct this research, I explored several academic databases via the Walden University Library. The following databases were searched for relevant research: Sage Journals, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, EBSCO, ABI Inform, and ProQuest. Additionally, I used the search engine Google Scholar. The keyword searches I used in the databases included *strategic alliance*; *interfirm partnerships*; *interfirm collaboration*; *alliance strategies*; *strategic alliances performance*; *alliance literature review*; *coopetition*; *alliance, trust, and culture*; *alliance risk*; *alliance controls*; *strategic alliances success factors*; *interfirm governance*; *joint venture Africa*; *dynamic capabilities and alliances*; *knowledge-based theory and alliance*; *transaction cost and alliance*; *resource-based theory and alliance*; *strategic alliance failure*; *strategic alliance*; *food and beverage Africa*; and *franchising and licensing Africa*. The 176 references that comprise this study include 137 scholarly, peer-reviewed articles representing 78% of the total references and 88% of the total articles, 14 non-peer-reviewed articles representing 8%, ten websites representing 6%, and 15 books representing 9%. Eighty-four percent (147) of the total references were published from 2019 to 2023.

In this literature review, I first describe transaction cost theory, which is the fundamental theory in understanding strategic alliances in business. I also present how the theory applies to the business sector with examples. Second, I explore three other theories that were developed after transaction cost theory: resource-based theory,

knowledge-based theory, and the dynamic capability theory. Third, I analyze the relevance of alliances and partnerships to current business challenges and how the conceptual framework applies specifically to Africa's food and beverage sector. Fourth, I analyze the most favored alliance strategies in Africa's food and beverage sector and explore the common alliance strategies that the leaders of the firms operating across Africa have been applying, including international joint ventures (IJVs), franchising, licensing, and cooperation. Fifth, I analyze common alliance strategies and critical success factors. Because the success factors for alliances are essential for building a sustainable strategy, I explore the common and specific conditions of success. I then close with a transition to Section 2.

Transaction Cost Theory

Using transaction cost theory helps a researcher identify the benefits related to creating alliances: transaction and cost efficiency. Created by Coase (1937) and supported later by Williamson (1981), the transaction cost theory is the first theory that applies to the alliance motives and success drivers. Williamson stated that the proper organization structure is the one that is efficient by optimizing the cost of transactions. Each transaction has cost implications that the leaders should manage, monitor, and control. The transaction cost theory was born in the context of the competitiveness of the markets. Some firms ventured into alliances and partnerships to reduce production costs, optimize transactions, enhance profitability, and remain competitive. The economies of scale and scope are examples of ways organizations manage costs through strategic alliances.

Two primary constructs compose the transaction cost theory: bounded rationality and opportunistic behavior. *Bounded rationality* refers to the organization's limitation in understanding future situations affecting the business due to business uncertainties and the complexity of the environment (Wu & Chang, 2021). The second factor in transaction cost theory is *opportunistic behavior*, which focuses on the elevation of individual interest at the expense of the parties' joint interest (Mikami & Bird, 2022). When considering bounded rationality specific to strategic alliances, use of the concept of bounded rationality allows me to better understand an organization's inability to understand and anticipate uncertainties that impact a strategic alliance.

Both bounded rationality and opportunistic behavior are factors of risks and can degrade an alliance's performance. To mitigate this risk, Kale and Singh (2009) proposed equity ownership as an ideal governance model when the opportunistic behaviors and risks are very high because equity ownership allows for a better control over the company's resources. In a slightly different approach to mitigate bounded rationality and opportunistic behavior, use of contractual provisions is an alternate model to equity ownership, in that it clarifies partners' rights and duties, the contribution of each party, the way of working, and the mode of resolving conflicts (M. Russo & Cesarani, 2017). In both equity ownership and contractual provisions, dedicated investments or asset specificities help ensure the parties' commitments to the joint goals. Consequently, the choice of governance is a critical success condition in creating a strategic alliance, as governance allows the firm in partnership to avoid the risks of opportunistic behavior and bounded rationality (M. Russo & Cesarani, 2017).

An example of a successful alliance through the lens of transactional cost theory is the ways Coca-Cola franchised business across the world to optimize cost and build efficiency. Coca-Cola's alliances with many franchises is an example of vertical integration because The Coca-Cola Company sells soft drink syrup to its bottling partners (Pereira, 2023). On the one hand, the American company benefits from the cost optimization and transactional efficiency of partnering with local manufacturing firms, because Coca-Cola does not have to invest in operations. On the other hand, the local bottling partner benefits from the brand equity of the Coca-Cola product range to leverage its overall portfolios to lead the market of beverage with reduced investment costs. This example is relevant to explain the transaction cost approach as every party at the Coca-Cola partnership makes important saving and better return on investment by investing less.

Further Perspectives of Alliance Motives and Success Factors

Other authors have expressed different perspectives on alliance motives and success factors. Analyzing the transaction cost theory, De Jong and Woolthuis (2009) objected that the theory is not complete or adequate because it excludes the social relationship aspect and focuses only on the transactions. Many authors, such as Candace and Margarethe (2004), also valued the relationship quality between the parties and the leadership skills. They argued that the social exchange theory would complement the transactional cost approach to determine the critical success factors. The evolution of the market, the advent of globalization, and information technology gave birth to further

theories among the factors (Jones, 2006). Three other conceptual approaches emerged: knowledge based, resource based, and dynamic capabilities theories.

Knowledge-Based View and Social Exchange Theory

The knowledge-based view is a revolution and an improvement of the transaction cost. It also depicts a new view of the collaboration between firms. Grant (1996) stated that the knowledge-based alliance would be the proper perspective of alliance motives, considering the uncertainty of the market environment and the opportunity to exploit the early mover advantage. Mamédio et al. (2019) later claimed that strategic alliances are among the best ways to transfer knowledge in a competitive market environment. Leaders may partner with other firms to acquire specific know-how to add to their core competencies and lead the market (Kyrylenko et al., 2019).

Knowledge sharing inspiring the knowledge-based theory has been one of the most significant motives of the alliance since 2005 (He et al., 2021). The alliance will then be an integrator of shared knowledge, which comprises information, know-how, skills, and technology to create a competitive advantage (Jiang et al., 2021). The efficiency of the integration process and the extent to which the partners of the alliance will utilize the knowledge are two conditions of success (Grant, 1996).

The strategic alliance between Toyota and General Motors is an illustration of a successful partnership based on the knowledge-based view. Contracted in 1984, that alliance was a United States–Japan partnership through which General Motors could learn about the Toyota know-how in terms of production system and the technique to build multiple cars in the same production plant. Toyota could learn from the American

firm the best workforce management practices (Dyer et al., 2016; Petruzzellis et al., 2016).

The knowledge-based view is relevant in the current era, where technology development is increasing and dynamic. According to Bouncken et al. (2021), companies in competition must be creative and reactive to this dynamic move showing new entrants and innovative products and services. An important strategy to sustain a business is to be open to sharing and learning from others in the context of a binding agreement to be on top or influence market demand continuously. Similarly, a relevant way for an aging company to remain up to date with innovative ideas and action is to contract strategic alliances and partnerships (Bouncken et al., 2021). Using these models allows mutual knowledge sharing for value creation and improving quality of service (Kyrylenko et al., 2019). However, the risk of leakage in knowledge sharing is a critical concern. A firm's representatives can trigger the partnership termination after obtaining the knowledge secret they seek (Ahlfänger et al., 2022). The risk of opportunistic behavior becomes significant, which requires protective measures.

Resource-Based Theory

The resource-based theory highlights the relevance of the share of resources as a cornerstone of interfirm partnerships to achieve joint strategic goals. Barney (1991) and Peteraf (1993) have been instrumental in valuing the resource-based view. The authors presented the strategic alliance as combining knowledge, capabilities, skills, and other tangible and intangible resources that firms put together to achieve mutual economic gain. According to Grant (2010), strategic alliances are cooperative relationships through

which the parties can share resources and reach strategic goals. Barney included human resources, tangible and intangible assets, and organizational resources such as corporate culture, organizational structure, rules, processes, and relation with external institutions. The essential motives of the alliance are expansion, diversification, imitation, and disposal of resources (M. Russo & Cesarani, 2017). The critical success factors are value creation and the level of importance of the partners' resources to reach the common strategic goals during the lifecycle of the alliance (Čirjevskis, 2021). In 2013, the global French dairy company Danone signed a joint-venture agreement with the Abraaj Group, a private equity firm from Dubai, to acquire FanMilk, a Danish company based in West Africa. The aim of that strategic alliance in which they invested financial resources was for both companies to grow their international influence by setting operations within the West Africa region (Reuters, 2013).

The resource-based approach highlights the fundamental role that resources, whether material or human, play in the competitiveness of organizations through alliances and partnerships. According to M. Russo and Cesarani (2017), the strategic alliance is an opportunity for firms lacking essential resources or willing to expand and diversify their business to build a competitive advantage. M. Russo and Cesarani considered complementary resources as motives and critical success factors of alliances. The complementary resources are the resources that a firm lacks and for which its leaders engage in alliance to gain complete competencies. The parties could decide to put together either similar resources or different resources to form the alliance. In the first case, the alliance is called endogamic, and in the second case, the alliance is exogamic.

The objective is to achieve economies of scope to create new synergy and provide a more competitive offer to the market that is difficult to replicate. Sometimes the combination of these resources creates what M. Russo and Cesarani called idiosyncratic resources, which means resources that remain valid only within the partnership context, protecting against opportunistic behavior. A problem subject to analyze is the extent to which the resources should be diverse. Too much similarity or diversity of resources would not allow the parties to learn much from each other, according to Jiang et al. (2008), who recommended a balanced approach.

Dynamic Capabilities View

The dynamic capabilities theory is an extension of the resource-based theory. Teece and Pisano (1994) were among the first authors advocating for that approach. The dynamic capabilities theory includes reconfiguring, integrating, or renewing the existing resources to build a core competency or competitive advantage. This theory is a complete version of the resource-based approach because the parties at the alliance do not stop at gathering and using the resources but go further by reconfiguring them to create something difficult to replicate through proper capabilities (Teece & Pisano, 1994). Gilmore and O'Dwyer (2018) found that firms with different capabilities can create mutual value through an alliance. The authors also took a clear position within the theoretical approach of strategic alliances by setting a close relationship between their perception of the rationale and benefits of alliances and the resource-based and dynamic capability views.

The parties in an alliance apply their skills and knowledge to build something competitive from the resources they put together. In this context, the motive and success factor of the alliance covers how the parties in the partnership reconfigure their resources to reach strategic goals (M. Russo & Cesarani, 2017). The parties should then leverage the know-how, the process, and the necessary integration to reconfigure and renew the existing resources. Regarding alliance governance, Mamédio et al. (2019) noted that the capabilities include skills such as identifying alliance opportunities, design, coordination, and learning. This definition and motive of alliance highlight the role of human capabilities in the alliance process (Mamédio et al., 2019). The success factor involves the managerial capabilities to coordinate the alliance's governance and processes. However, the major challenge of this approach is the difficulty for the firm to achieve the synergy of reshaping or renewing resources and achieving the strategic goal.

The partnership between Walt Disney and Oriental Land was a typical dynamic capabilities approach. That win-win 1979 partnership aimed to create a Disneyland in Japan. It was also the opportunity for the American firm to export the American dream. The two partners put together their resources, skills, and capabilities to create something unique and difficult to replicate in the Japanese market (Dyer et al., 2016). So far, Oriental Land, owner of the Tokyo Disneyland and Tokyo DisneySea, is the only company operating Disney Parks that The Walt Disney Company does not own (Causser, 2019).

Relevance of the Concept of Alliances and Partnerships to Current Business

Challenges

The concept of alliances and partnerships is relevant at six major levels. First, alliances and partnerships are performance drivers and help strengthen competitive advantage and innovation. A strategic alliance is an effective strategy to build competitive advantage (Hübel et al., 2022; Planko et al., 2019). The competitive global market obliges firms to join resources, skills, and knowledge to get strong. A firm's leaders may focus on their core competencies and obtain additional competencies from another firm to become stronger and more competitive (Jiang et al., 2021). Additionally, alliances and partnerships help keep company leaders abreast of rapid changes and innovations (Franco & Haase, 2020; Hoelz & Bataglia, 2022). For example, whereas rapid change and dynamic innovation require continuous thinking and innovative capabilities, strategic alliances play a critical role because they help companies to complement each other in terms of resources, knowledge, and skills (Lo et al., 2022; Munten et al., 2021). Bouncken et al. (2021) and Ferrigno et al. (2021) recommended alliances primarily for aging companies with no viable choice but to innovate in the current dynamic and competitive global market. Chebo and Wubatie (2021) confirmed the relevance of alliances for innovative competitiveness by indicating that the way for small firms to grow is to exchange their creativity and innovation through strategic alliances.

Second, alliances and partnerships are practical tools for sharing and minimizing business risks and transaction costs in the context of many firms' business risks and

uncertainties (Monticelli et al., 2021). Planko et al. (2019) demonstrated this by indicating that partnership entities share and reduce business risks as they share resources, knowledge, and skills. Brinster (2021) also confirmed Monticelli et al.'s (2021) findings by revealing that interfirm partnerships help strengthen business efficiency and profitability. Brinster described a business reality that justifies that venturing into business alone exposes a company to gaining more or losing more. Brinster pointed out that the global market has become more competitive with the advent of stronger competitors leveraging innovative ideas, more efficient processes, and agility to build core competencies or invest more resources. That business reality makes investment more subject to uncertainties. Therefore, partnering with the right organization based on knowledge- or resource-based theory is helpful for organizations to reduce the occurrence of business failure and exploit the opportunity to sustain their businesses.

Third, alliances and partnerships could serve as a transition toward mergers and acquisitions (M&A) and system integrations. Strategic alliances and M&A are two distinctive growth strategies and alternatives. Although Nwogugu (2021) stated that applying a strategic alliance or M&A approach could lead to the same goal, Brinster (2021) found that the two concepts are distinct. However, an alliance could be a milestone toward achieving closer business integration through M&A. In other words, as a prestage, the strategic alliance could be an effective alternative to mitigate the risk of building an M&A or any integration system (Geleilate et al., 2021).

Fourth, alliances and partnerships are drivers of international recognition, credentials, and legitimacy. Reputation and international recognition led some organization leaders to rely on strategic alliances and partnerships. Liu et al. (2019) considered that a firm with a high reputation would rely less on the partner's resources. By applying that statement to the business context of emergent markets, Boafo et al. (2022) and Wall (2022) declared that international alliances and partnerships are opportunities for African firms to obtain international legitimacy and offset the limitations of their informal governance structures.

Fifth, alliances and partnerships are a solid platform for sustainable growth, leveraging diversity. Crick et al. (2021) considered cultural differences to be assets that the parties could leverage to enrich their creativity and performance with their share of learning and experience. Nevertheless, alliances and partnerships have disadvantages and could be a factor in business risks. In the definition of strategic alliances, Sudarman et al. (2021) highlighted that each party keeps their independence, meaning that they may further make some choices that are unexpected by the other party. In that context, Jiang et al. (2008) noted the risk of information leakage to the partner even though the firm may acquire knowledge through the alliance. Additionally, the parties in the partnership would be working to minimize the risk of opportunistic behavior that is hard to avoid as long as every firm leader will resist the temptation of letting his firm's interest prevail.

Sixth, alliances and partnerships have become relevant tools for firm survival and growth (Wang et al., 2022). Tian et al. (2021) claimed that interfirm collaborations are positive factors of firm performance. In the complex market context, strategic alliances

and interfirm partnerships reduce investment and profitability risks and ensure business sustainability (Crick et al., 2021; Mamédio et al., 2019). Tian et al. considered that alliances and partnerships had proved their relevance under challenging circumstances, such as the recent market disruptions that COVID-19 caused. Guimarães et al. (2021) concurred when they observed that collaboration has become a source of survival for many SMEs. A firm may put in place an alliance to gain human and technological resource needs (Sudarman et al., 2021). Taking the case of Ghanaian SMEs, an engine of the economy, Tian et al. (2021) confirmed that SMEs are showing openness to this strategic move, which could sustain their growth for years. However, Han (2022) found that engaging in a strategic alliance is appropriate for underperforming firms as an alternative to getting back on track and sustaining their business. Han did not recommend strategic alliances to companies that have already achieved outstanding performance. Instead, the author recommended setting up research and development (R&D) units to strengthen performing firms. Han proposed an alternative to nonperforming firms by stressing the positive effect of alliances.

Most Favored Alliances Strategies in the Food and Beverage Sector in Africa

IJVs

Because IJVs are essential to gain scale and strength, they are becoming common in the emerging markets for which they are a good fit (Akdeniz & Talay, 2022; Ding, 2021). Oguji and Owusu (2021) depicted entry strategies that global or international firms employ to expand their business across emerging markets and presented joint ventures and acquisitions as effective strategies for entering the markets of Africa. In the

same context, Korbi et al. (2021) presented an IJV as one of the most popular modes of entry for international firms across the Middle East and North Africa. Oguji et al. (2021) confirmed this statement for Africa by stating that IJVs, such as partially owned greenfields, are relevant strategies that firms apply to enter African markets.

Two major joint ventures in the food and beverage sector illustrate the advent of successful IJVs on the African continent. In 2013, the global French dairy company, Danone, concluded an IJV with the Abraaj Group, a private equity firm from Dubai, to acquire Fan Milk, a Danish company based in Ghana, Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Togo, and Benin, with more than 60% of its revenue from Ghana. The Fan Milk business has been leading the dairy market with its ice cream brand Fan Milk. The aim of that strategic alliance in which Danone and Abraaj invested financial resources and expertise was for both companies to grow their international influence across the West Africa region, which the leadership team regarded as a market of high opportunities (Reuters, 2013). The joint venture was also an example of cultural integration because it involved three different cultures: the Arabic and the French cultures of the respective owners of the IJV, and the Ghanaian culture, which has influenced the leadership of Fan Milk and driven the market leadership of the Fan Milk brand across Ghana. The joint venture continued to deliver positive results through 2022, keeping Fan Milk in the lead position despite the challenging socioeconomic conditions of the food and beverage market in Ghana and West Africa.

In 2015, the global Dutch brewing company Heineken N.V. signed a joint-venture resourced and transactional cost-based joint venture with the French group CFAO to

create Brassivoire, a brewing firm in Ivory Coast (Heineken, 2017). That agreement took place in the context of the monopolistic leadership of Groupe Castel not only in Ivory Coast but across the Francophone West Africa region. That alliance was an opportunity for Heineken, already present in Central Africa, to enter the West African market and build a presence at a shared cost and risk. The partnership enabled the opening of a modern brewery and the launch of its beer brand Ivoire (Mieu, 2018). In addition to the economic stakes of the partnership, the parties positioned their product at a low and highly competitive price, allowing the leadership team of Brassivoire to value the social relevance of their product and grab a significant market share within the first year (Arthur, 2017). The joint venture continued to play an impactful role as a challenger in the Ivorian market in 2022 (Kadio, 2019).

Franchising and Licensing

Franchising is a legal agreement between two independent entities in which the franchisee buys from the franchisor the right to sell products or services by using their brand and system in exchange for royalties (Bretas & Alon, 2021). According to Jepson (2021), trademarks are the essence of franchising. Franchising can have a positive social, economic, institutional, and infrastructural impact on a country. Franchising applies well to the development needs of emerging or African markets (Lanchimba et al., 2021). Bretas and Alon (2021) stated that its impact on achievement of social goals and income in emerging and African countries is more noticeable than in any other region.

Licensing is an agreement through which an entity gives another entity the right to manufacture its products for a specified reward. The agreement may involve the

transfer of copyright, design, patents, and other property rights (Gaitán, 2021). The operating model of The Coca-Cola Company in Africa, like in many other parts of the world, combines the two notions of licensing and franchising. The leading soft drink brand owner has a bottling agreement with independent manufacturing companies that agree to manufacture, distribute, and execute in the markets across their respective countries in demarcated countries or regions (Pereira, 2023). For example, the Coca-Cola Company signed a licensing agreement with Groupe Castel, a global French brewery and soft drink firm, to become its sole carbonated soft drink bottling partner across Francophone West Africa. That licensing agreement was also an illustration of the transactional cost approach because it was an opportunity for the American company to be present across the West African market at low cost without fixed assets investments. That bottling partnership, which lasted more than 2 decades, strengthening the leadership of Coca-Cola family brands across the region, ended in 2022 (Archyde, 2022; Food Business Africa.com, 2022).

Additionally, many American fast-food brands, such as KFC, Burger King, Pizza Hut, and Dominos, are entering the African market, impacting consumption habits in favor of out-of-home eating (Akanle, 2021; Ntlhanngoe & Chipunza, 2021). Likewise, cafés such as the South African Vida E Caffè and the Canadian Second Cup are present in Ghana. The baking market also highlights the presence of global firms such as the French Paul.

Coopetition

The concept of coopetition is spreading within the business sector, marked by the new dynamism of competitiveness and the need to collaborate for value (Lundgren-Henriksson & Tidström, 2021). Considering the specific features of coopetition among the types of strategic alliances and the current debate around its relevancy in the competitive business arena, I found it crucial to elaborate more on it while discussing the various academic perspectives. Also, the company, the subject of my present case study, has concluded some coopetition agreements that I will explore in the present research.

Coopetition is a peculiar form of interfirm partnership. There is coopetition when two or more competitors decide, formally or informally, to join forces and build synergy on a specific aspect to obtain mutual benefits and create value (Gernsheimer et al., 2021). Coopetition is a strategic alliance among parties that compete in the same market. Coopetition encompasses the distant concepts of cooperation and competition, which are its two cumulative features and conditions (Amata et al., 2022; Czakon et al., 2020; Köseoglu et al., 2021). Bicen et al. (2021) confirmed that a firm that engages in coopetition would have to compete and collaborate with the partner. Like common alliances, there is no unique degree of coopetition. Coopetition varies according to the type and level of outcome that each party expects from the partnership (Klimas et al., 2022). Samsung and Apple are two major players illustrating the features and success of coopetition despite the fiercely competitive environment that characterizes the electronic device industry (Li & Zhao, 2022). Samsung is the chip supplier to Apple and has the exclusive chip production rights. The partnership between The Coca-Cola Company and

Groupe Castel in Francophone West Africa was also an example of coopetition. The bottling partner Castel used to produce and distribute brands owned by The Coca-Cola Company, such as Coca-Cola, Fanta, Sprite, and Schweppes, in addition to its own brands Youki, Djino, and Tops.

The mechanism of coopetition is complex because it combines two notions that seem incompatible in the market competitiveness arena. One of the features and disadvantages of coopetition is the tension that collaboration and competition could entail (Bicen et al., 2021). Cooperating with an entity while simultaneously competing with it is a problematic exercise that raises high risks of misalignment and lack of trust. Analyzing the definition of coopetition by Gernsheimer et al. (2021), it may appear challenging to accept that two rival entities in a marketplace decide to find a common ground of cooperation. Likewise, Riquelme-Medina et al. (2022) found that conflicts, knowledge spillover, and opportunistic behaviors are the major risks of coopetition. Massari and Giannoccaro (2021) argued that cooperation is pursuing a global and joint goal and described it as a way of seeking personal advantage. By this definition, Massari and Giannoccaro, who favored coopetition as a competitiveness strategy, did not exclude the opportunistic behavior that could occur from collaborating with a competitor.

Although coopetition does not remove the rivalry aspect of the goals each party assigns to its business, the leaders of both organizations should look beyond the competitive rivalry and find a common interest. In other words, coopetition is less an arena of the destruction of the weaker company by the stronger than an opportunity for collaborating to become stronger despite their differences (Dhaundiyal & Coughlan,

2020). Crick and Crick (2021b) also concluded that interfirm cooperation among competitors could be amicable.

Overall, coopetition has the same advantages as a typical strategic alliance. Coopetition also allows having an eye on the competitor. Klimas et al. (2022) confirmed that some unique advantages, such as market share increase, innovation, and financial performance, can be achieved only through collaborations with competitors. Additionally, the authors claimed that coopetition is a way to gain a monopoly in a competitive market by finding common ground with a significant competitor. Coopetition also allows smaller firms within the same industry to leverage their resources while obtaining innovative ideas from smaller and flexible market entrants (Klimas et al., 2022). According to Planko et al. (2019), the innovation market requires to a large extent that firms join knowledge and resources to remain competitive at an optimal cost. Alliances and partnerships with other firms without excluding competitors are effective tools for business sustainability.

Many well-established companies, especially high technology firms, find coopetition to be a strategic opportunity to connect and collaborate with new players entering the market. The partnership through which the collaboration with the new players might take place could lead the partners to acquire and exchange innovative ideas and grow consistently (Crick et al., 2021). In the context of high competitiveness that drives innovation, Spieth et al. (2021) also presented coopetition as a way to have an eye on the competitive trend and follow the main competitor. According to Bicen et al. (2021), coopetition is advantageous and critical for knowledge creation and acquisition

(Hassan et al., 2022; Spieth et al., 2021). Also, firms that promote knowledge acquisition and implement coopetition are more innovative (Santos et al., 2021). Furthermore, coopetition helps to get stronger in the problematic regulatory context. Monticelli et al. (2021) noted that when competitors put their strengths and reputations together, their influence over government decision-making is more significant, especially when the union heavily weighs on the economy.

Trust is a critical subject to explore because two competitors must rely on each other to achieve complementary or joint goals. In that context, Klimas et al. (2022) raised the question about the level of trust and commitment the competitors should invest in the partnership. Raza-Ullah and Kostis (2020) also claimed the risky nature of a coopetition venture, considering the firm's exposure to opportunistic behavior and knowledge theft. According to Klimas et al. on one side and Raza-Ullah and Kostis on the other, one of the significant concerns about trust in coopetition is that the parties would keep the knowledge or core competencies they acquired from each other at the end of the partnership. The risk of disclosure of a core competency to a potential competitor could be a high risk of competitiveness. The authors confirmed that firm leaders are very cautious about sharing competencies that a current partner can use against them and become a fierce competitor at the end of the agreement.

The new partnership between Groupe Castel, the bottling partner of The Coca-Cola Company for more than two decades, and Pepsi in Angola following the alliance termination is a relevant illustration (Verstl, 2022). It will be challenging to envisage that the leadership team of Castel will only apply some of the knowledge and expertise they

acquired from The Coca-Cola Company to benefit the new ambitions in the same market. The two ex-partners are now engaging in an intense battle across Africa. This example highlights the need for cautiousness in defining the required level of trust in cooperation. It would therefore be adequate to envisage a balanced approach regarding the level of trust in cooperation. The balanced approach would be that if, according to Crick and Crick (2021a), trust is the cornerstone of any alliance or partnership despite the risks, cooperation is unique and should not require systematically the same level of risk-taking as a traditional strategic alliance (Klimas et al., 2022).

Strategies and Success Factors of Business Sustainability Through Alliances and Partnerships

Commitment and Collaboration

Commitment and sincere collaboration are indispensable to the success of a partnership. Muthoka et al. (2022) confirmed that when the leaders of two or more organizations decide to put together their resources and knowledge to achieve common goals and become stronger, smooth governance requires that every party in the partnership reject any behavior that favors their organization at the expense of the other party. If the leaders from one side of the cooperation are not satisfied with the level of commitment of the other party, they may not be fully committed to the initial agreement. Therefore, the survival or sustainability of the partnership will be at risk. Essuman et al. (2021) supported the statements of Muthoka et al. (2022) and considered that the level of collaboration at an interfirm partnership determines the alliance's performance. Essuman et al. stated that commitment, sincere collaboration, and goodwill drive the other party's

cooperation to achieve common goals. Ding (2021) and Galvin et al. (2021) were also in agreement with the assumption and stated that the commitment must emanate from both sides of the partnership.

Sincere collaboration in partnership is helpful to reduce opportunistic behavior to a large extent and implies that the managers of both firms need to continuously reflect on how to strengthen this mindset and set of behaviors. To achieve this goal, Ghosh and Klueter (2022) recommended a more pronounced implication for the leadership teams of both parties in the alliance to drive the overall collaboration of their respective staff members. Ghosh and Klueter considered that top management should ensure the alliance implementation and monitor efficiency, effectiveness, accuracy, and reliability. Equally important, the way the leaders show a humble attitude in cooperation is an expression of their collaborative involvement. Zhou et al. (2022) found humility from the leaders of every organization in partnering with other entities. Zhou et al. pointed out how CEOs' humility has a positive impact on the success and sustainability of an alliance and on their firm's performance, with a more salient in high-status firms such as firms with well-known trademarks. The role of the leaders is therefore critical to build a collaborative routine by putting in place a partnership governance that guarantees the need to continuously seek common grounds.

An Approach Based on Mutual Trust

Trust is critical for the success of alliances and partnerships. According to Salama et al. (2022), the leaders of the entities involved in an alliance or partnership should trust each other's ability, sincerity, and commitment to reach the goals, working as a team.

Trusting means engaging one's asset, hoping that, in return, the party will share something of value with the other party (Gao et al., 2019). Trust is essential for entities from different cultures collaborating in international strategic alliances. Gehrisch and Süß (2022) indicated that trust from both parties is crucial for successful international strategic alliances. Trust has a more positive impact on cross-border alliance formation and lessens the impact of geographical distance (Jha et al., 2019). Crick et al. (2021) considered trusting a cornerstone for the stakeholders to transcend cultural and ethnic differences by encouraging the parties to take risks. Transparency is also the corollary of trust (De Resende et al., 2018; Rajan & Dhir, 2020).

However, a bad reputation could result from a partnership with the wrong partner. S. H. Chen et al. (2022) indicated that disclosing a firm's core competence without reciprocity is a significant loss that local or international law could barely compensate for at all points. Therefore, a pertinent point of analysis is to understand if the parties in an alliance or partnership should trust each other at any cost. Another relevant concern is to understand to what extent the protection of the law can secure trust and prevent the parties from suffering damages. In response to the above concerns, M. Russo and Cesarani (2017) recommended that the partners in interfirm cooperation work together with trust and commitment during the alliance operational phase without excluding any control. Agreeing with M. Russo and Cesarani, Zahoor et al. (2021) advised a moderating approach considering the risk of sharing knowledge and engaging in mutual trust despite the impact of mutual trust on the success of alliances.

Diversity-Oriented and Cross-Cultural Mindset

Cultural differences shape the relationship between partners in a strategic alliance. Čirjevskis (2021) confirmed that the success and sustainability of the alliance would come from the acceptance and respect of the cultural differences by both parties. Gehrisch and Süß (2022) stated that valuing cultural differences is essential and explained that international strategic alliances are like a marriage of two or more entities from different nationalities. Therefore, leaders from different cultures need to work together and accept the differences in firm values (Buckley & De Mattos, 2021). In agreement with Buckley and De Mattos, Crick et al. (2021) concluded that alliances transcend cultural differences. The parties' leaders should influence their respective teams to accept the cultural differences and focus on continuously finding common ground.

Nevertheless, the above statements do not mean that cultural shock or conflictual situations should never occur. Instead, the stakeholder should ensure accurate preparation of the teams involved in implementing the international cooperation. A cross-cultural mindset becomes a critical success factor of interfirm cooperation in addition to trust. Buckley and De Mattos (2021) indicated that the cultural aspects appear at two levels: The organizational culture that may differ from one firm to another, implying the influence of the leadership style and the social culture of the staff in charge of animating or executing the alliance. Leaders engaged in alliances and partnerships must demonstrate understanding, patience, respect, and a lack of condescending. Cui et al. (2019) claimed that cultural intelligence is critical to managing interfirm relationships. Leaders and

managers need to have cultural intelligence capabilities. Cultural intelligence will be practical for the stakeholders in alliances and partnerships to adapt, collaborate, respect diversity, and share cultural knowledge. The acceptance, respect of cultural differences, and flexibility of the parties are essential elements that apply to the African markets where the heterogeneity of cultures is quite pronounced. Oguji et al. (2021) are among the authors who advocated for these organizational behaviors in alliance formation and implementation. The authors raised that those cultural differences have an impactful influence on IJVs precisely.

Preparedness and Partner Selection

Preparedness and partner selection are among the critical conditions for a successful alliance strategy. Thorough preparation is necessary before engaging in an interfirm partnership (Wang et al., 2022). The preparation involves several aspects, including partner selection and internal readiness. Vaez-Alaei et al. (2022) stated that partner selection is the starting point for establishing an interfirm partnership. Salama et al. (2022) indicated that partner selection is among the critical steps for a successful alliance, clearly mentioning that a wrong partner will not be trusted. Sudarman et al. (2021) recommended time and effort to find and know the right partner. A background check is an effective tool for clarity and confidence in partnering with a firm. Salama et al. stated that the partner selection criteria vary according to culture, resources, and strengths. However, they conceded that some standard criteria could guide decision-makers within organizations' alliance perspectives. As an illustration, evaluating the goals, capabilities, values, resources, and capabilities orientations before allying with

another organization is indispensable (Gilmore & O'Dwyer, 2018). In addition to the reputation, Cheboi et al. (2022) claimed another factor to consider, the partner's business sustainability. The firm leaders must ensure that the partner is strong enough and shares essential values such as sustainability and corporate social responsibility.

Other authors recommended additional requirements for a successful strategy through partner selection. Anderson et al. (2021) recommended a partner with a cooperative experience, advocating that such a partner is more inclined to show more trust in the new partner. As such, prior cooperative experience helps build a successful alliance based on goodwill trust, especially when the parties have established an efficient control system. Additionally, reputation is an indispensable criterium of selection. A partner with a bad reputation should not be of interest to a firm that might expose itself to getting the same impact and a lack of trust (S. H. Chen et al., 2022; Emami et al., 2022). A good reputation for the firm and the staff animating that firm is an essential prerequisite. Furthermore, Wang et al., (2022) engaged the leadership team to ensure that the partner is compatible and has the necessary size and position within the industry for the selected project under the alliance.

Regarding preparedness for a successful alliance strategy, the firms' internal resources and skills should be sufficient and effective. Oh and Yoo (2022) stated that leaders should ensure their respective firms have sound internal resources, skills, and capabilities before engaging in the alliance venture). The leadership team is responsible for onboarding the right resources after thoroughly studying the external environment coupled with the internal potential and risks. The firm's management team should ensure

the staff has the skills to collaborate fruitfully with the competitor's team members (Oh & Yoo, 2022).

Among other criteria, S. Zhang et al. (2022) advocated for alliances between partners from the same industry regarding R&D and partnerships. They pointed out that this type of partnership adds more innovative value to the firm than alliances with partners from different industries. As far as collaborative innovation is concerned, co-competition is an initiative that these authors recommended instantly. Other authors, such as Brache et al. (2022), gave counterintuitive advice that partnering with a local player is more appropriate than an international firm regarding R&D partnership. Moreover, through a multiple case study of a sample of companies from the Spanish food and beverage sector, Morcillo-Bellido (2019) reviewed the alliance success factors compared to best-in-class companies in partnership management. In his paper, the author recommended a few alliance capability developments, alliance negotiation, and risk-analysis systems to better prepare for pre-alliance.

Interfirm Partnership and Control or Relationship

Formalization, control, and trust that essential topics when it comes to the performance of a strategic alliance. Although some authors argued that formal or informal control is a critical success factor of any alliance, others indicated the incompatibility between control and trust. Others again had a moderate view of control in partnerships. Delerue and Ouedraogo (2022) explored the relevancy of control through their interest in the informal relationship instead of the contractual one. The authors found that contracts play a minor role in the African context because of the nature of the

interpersonal and social relationships that informal institutions govern across the continent. The African culture is compatible with informal relationships, which highlights trust. However, the authors recognize that the African context is changing towards a more formal approach to alliances and partnerships (Nkakleu & Biboum, 2019).

Control is necessary for alliance performance. Lehene (2021) established the relationship between alliance monitoring and control and alliance performance, whether a productivity or innovation-based alliance. Lehene identified a solid relationship between alliance control and productivity or performance. The study showed that companies are more likely to achieve results when there is proper governance and mechanism for alliance monitoring. Furthermore, Lehene revealed that exerting proper control and monitoring of an alliance or a partnership is among the strategies that many companies use to ensure transparency, visibility, and trust for the sustainability of the cooperation. R. R. Chen et al. (2023) recommended formalism in alliance governance although they acknowledged the relevance and requirements of trust. The authors proposed a technology mechanism that could be useful to address the concern of impacting trust negatively while addressing opportunistic behavior. R. R. Chen et al. recommended applying the blockchain system as a mechanism to preserve both mutual trust and control, leveraging the decentralized and distributed nature of blockchain technology. The system stores information and decision process in a way that no party can take a high-stakes strategic decision and share information without the approval of the other party. The authors presented the use of distributed consensus in approving a ledger state as an example. Lehene and R. R. Chen et al. considered the relevance of applying a formal

mechanism of control to secure the positive and durable outcome of interfirm alliances, although they acknowledged the leaders of firms in alliances need to promote trust.

However, other authors affirmed that trust and control are not compatible.

Koolwijk et al. (2021) disclosed the importance of trust over control in strategic alliances in the current competitive context where firms need true partners. The author found out that when the level of control is high, it can affect the relationship among the parties and impact trust negatively. In other words, the partner's commitment should come less from its legal obligation to follow the rule and ensure it is not cheating than from developing a close relationship and emotional ties. Similarly, Pedada et al. (2021) acknowledged that a higher relative control by developed market firms in joint ventures increases the likelihood of terminating emerging market IJVs. The partnership should consist more in choosing and trusting the right partner to achieve common goals than putting in place formal controls that could appear as blocking factors.

After allying, the day-to-day execution by the parties requires proper monitoring to take corrective action or to ensure that the partnership yields the expected return. Lehene (2021) was among the authors who believed that a trustful relationship still requires control, an essential factor of interfirm partnership monitoring. Each party should ensure that the other party respects the alliance contract. However, Lehene made the distinction between formal and informal control. Formal control applies in counter-relation with trust in the alliance, as too much control may affect the quality of the contractual relationship (Grunwald-Delitz et al., 2019). Instead, informal control strengthens relationships and trust in interfirm partnerships. Grunwald-Delitz et al. (2019)

mentioned that all controls should not be formal. The authors indicated that the parties' representatives should exert their interpersonal and inter-organizational influencing, collaborative, and risk management skills. Hassan et al. (2022) and Grunwald-Delitz et al. highlighted the high value of interpersonal relationships on the success of alliances. They found that collaborations among partners rely on interpersonal behaviors to exert informal control. Velez-Calle et al. (2021), who also linked trust to informal relationships, claimed that trust is at risk when the relationship between the parties becomes less informal. For example, the length of the contract needs to include the willingness to formalize the execution of alliance obligations and exert proper control. Velez-Calle et al. raised attention to the state of trust in such circumstances of long contracts at the expense of a relationship-based rapport. A balanced approach would be helpful to ensure the firm commitment of the parties' obligations by formal mechanisms and processes applying a minimum of structure without impacting the quality of trust, which appears to be a critical factor of alliances and partnerships, more enforced in some cultures and geographic areas than others.

Sustainable Goals and On-Track Actions

Alliances and partnerships are more likely to succeed if the parties set clear and achievable goals. By achieving the milestones of the joint projects, gradual achievements become substantial motivation factors that leaders apply to build and sustain the other parties' commitments (Wang et al., 2022). Reaching strategic goals or milestones highlight signs of a partnership's positive performance. Therefore, the partners are encouraged to continue to put strengths, resources, knowledge, or skill together to

achieve positive and beneficial outcomes. Being on track with expected milestones becomes a critical success factor of alliance continuity. Another success factor is ensuring the sustainability of this success. Successful alliances would require the consideration of three goals dimensions, without which the durability could be only partial. These are the partnership's economic, environmental, and social impacts (Munten et al., 2021). An alliance could be successful if the parties reach their economic targets. However, that alliance could not be durable if the success does not favor positive social implications and has an anti-environmental impact. If the goals that the parties want to achieve harm one of these three considerations, the parties will need to readjust the joint goals to avoid disappointment as the project progresses.

Reciprocity and Resource Complementarity to Avoid Opportunistic Behavior and Dominance

Reciprocity and resource complementarity in a strategic alliance are signs that the alliance strategy involves efforts by the parties to address the issue of opportunistic behavior. Wang et al. (2022) was among the authors who recognized that reciprocity and resource complementarity are among the drivers of durable and fruitful alliance ventures—similarly, the parties Wang et al. claimed that the parties in an interfirm partnership should avoid possible opportunistic behaviors. Opportunistic behavior is quite risky, resulting in irreparable discontinuity of the partnership (Zhao et al., 2021). Koolwijk et al. (2021) found that the parties' dependence on one another's competencies or assets increases the likelihood of alliance sustainability. A partner showing opportunistic behavior creates a significant lack of trust when the other party realizes

what it will consider unfair treatment by their counterpart. Reciprocity and resource complementarity implies that the parties would be able to learn from each other.

However, reciprocity does not mean the partners should be utterly dependent on one another. Zhao et al. (2021) announced that without having or manifesting opportunistic behavior, the firm should seek beneficial projects even if it is in an alliance. In any case, Oguji et al. (2021) challenged asset reciprocity by arguing that if the scope of the partnership between a dominant developed market firm and a local firm is high, then the likelihood of alliance termination will decrease. According to the authors, international alliance sustainability could rely on the dominance of one of the partners, especially when the alliance puts concerns with a developed market firm and an emerging market firm.

Avoiding Premature and Unplanned Alliance Termination

The ending of an alliance does not systematically mean a partnership's failure. According to C. Zhang et al. (2021), all alliances have a life cycle. A change in external conditions may justify the parties agreeing to decide that their alliance's motives do not exist anymore. Also, terminating a partnership may be a good option when the firm manages too many alliance portfolios. Koval (2021) explored how alliance termination drives value to a firm engaged in multiple alliances. The author focused on unplanned stops and found that the firm's value increases when the alliance termination of a firm managing a more extensive alliance portfolio is inclined to show effectiveness. Although the contrary may occur if portfolio optimization is not necessary, Koval mentioned a moderative action of the former scenario when the firm has substantial alternative

resources to compensate for the termination of the partnership. Leaders should have a clear perspective, plan, and leverage interfirm alliances as short-, medium-, or long-term strategies with a life cycle.

In any case, the alliance partners should avoid unexpected termination, which may negatively impact the continuation of the business. C. Zhang et al. (2021) recommended that leaders take any necessary actions to avoid premature and unplanned alliance termination and anticipate what they could perceive as a failure for the organization to trust another entity. Hohberger et al. (2020) found that early termination harms knowledge acquisition and innovation performance. Therefore, even though every alliance has a life cycle, the leaders are responsible for ensuring a smooth termination process to avoid a negative impact on the firm's business continuity.

Valuing Relationship

Managing relationships is indispensable to successful alliances. As individuals and managers represent their respective firms in cooperation, interpersonal relationships considering respect for each other's differences make the collaboration smooth and fruitful (C. Zhang et al., 2021). C. Zhang et al. (2021) indicated that building a good relationship with the partner's team is convenient for keeping alliances even when troubles occur and one of the parties wants to terminate the contract. Mamédio et al. (2019) found a direct relationship between strategic alliances and dynamic relational capabilities. Mamédio et al. also stated that the dynamic relational capabilities could help the firms benefit more from strategic alliances. Building strong ties and connections among the stakeholders of partnerships positively influences the quality of the

collaboration for achieving mutual goals. In this context, the stability of the decision-making structure and resources is a relevant topic to reduce premature alliance terminations. The recurrent changes in the management team from both sides of the alliance could also negatively impact the survival or development of an alliance.

Firm Leader's Capabilities and Entrepreneurial Competencies

The success of alliances and partnerships relies on the capabilities of the team members in charge of the implementation. Human resource capabilities are indispensable in ensuring the joint project achieves a successful goal (Zahoor et al., 2021). Zahoor et al. (2021) determined a close relationship between entrepreneurial competencies and the success of alliances. The authors pointed out that the leader's ability to understand, assimilate and apply external knowledge may determine their ability to perform joint activities with their partners. Among the authors promoting the knowledge based-theory, Rajan et al. (2023) acknowledged knowledge transfer as a critical success factor of an alliance. The authors pinpointed the absorptive capabilities of the stakeholders as a necessary complement for sustainable productivity and performance. The leaders of the alliances need to have the necessary skills to absorb and apply the acquired knowledge for further success. If the leaders lack these skills, firms in the alliance will succeed by leveraging capability-building sessions to meet the alliance's expectations. The managers need to have sufficient skillsets, both technical but also in terms of leadership. Since the alliance is a project and venture, it would be meaningful for the leaders to have entrepreneurial skills and sufficient knowledge of alliance opportunities, risks, and contingencies.

An Efficient Alliance Governance

The type of governance the parties apply is a critical success factor of alliance continuity. Relevant perspectives regarding alliance governance are the form of governance, whether formal, informal, contractual-based, relation-based, rigid, or flexible. Lee and Cavusgil (2006) stated that the interfirm partnership could be contractual- or relational-based. The first mode requires more formalism and leaves limited space for building interpersonal relationships (Korbi et al., 2021). Lee and Cavusgil explained that, unlike the contract-based approach, the relational-based partnership strengthens the alliance and facilitates knowledge transfer. The relational-based partnership sets up an environment of trust and appears more appropriate for a sustainable partnership, especially in the current competitive context.

Furthermore, Galvin et al. (2021) presented governance, trust, and culture as interconnected. In other words, alliance governance could only be adequate by establishing the proper collaboration with an adaptable culture in which respect, trust, and dedication from all parties are permanently present. Buckley and De Mattos (2021) agreed with the above approach as they stated that the governance of an alliance should be flexible to firm up confidence among the parties for sustainable success. The governance of an alliance will drive more commitment to investing in the partnership. Buckley and De Mattos also advocated that forbearance and adaptability, or congruity are critical success factors for effective alliance collaboration. Firm leaders from each party in a coalition could not see themselves as opponents in the joint activities on which they would like to gather forces, skills, and resources. Finding common grounds may require

abstention from hurting a partner, even in cooperation. Congruence is also a major requirement for alliance success, especially when firms from different cultures cohabit for mutual goal achievement. The ability to adapt and continuously find common ground with the partner builds trust and improves a relationship.

Applying the ideal governance system to the African context, Nkakleu and Biboum (2019) provided a conceptual framework that sustains further reflection on the specificity of African governance. The authors explored the governance that fits the alliance transactions across Africa and set up an integrated approach to African governance despite some heterogeneity. In that context, Nkakleu and Biboum validated the informal nature of some African governance structures and formal institutions. Conversely, Yoon et al. (2018) cautioned that a formal alliance contract is a positive driver for alliance success, especially when there is a size imbalance between the partners, such as start-ups and big firms. The authors addressed recurrent issues that many start-ups could face when envisaging a partnership with more prominent firms to sustain their businesses and the economy of their respective countries. Salama et al. (2022) advocated for a governance leveraging minimum alignment by stating that the representatives of each party should set up alignment forums for exchanging ideas and planning but also for reviewing the business and taking corrective action plans. In that context, formal or informal regular meetings become essential.

In cooperation, specific governance is critical. To achieve successful cooperation, De Resende et al. (2018) expressed the relevance of the governance role by stressing the mission of maintaining the business network, ensuring that none of the parties is

disadvantaged in the alliance, and resolving any conflict from the partnership implementation. Gernsheimer et al. (2021) recommended that the benefits should be mutual and not disproportionate. Otherwise, this could limit the level of transparency and commitment from both parties regarding knowledge exchange. Leaders of both parties would easily be inclined to take the risk and disclose their core competencies unless they feel that what they get in return is worth disclosing their know-how or sharing their portion of contributing resources. This perception justifies the negative impact that opportunistic behavior by one party may create.

Regulation and Authorities

An international strategic alliance can thrive where markets allow easy entry through cooperation with local partners. However, the absence of regulation or weak regulation could create a disorder more conducive to fair trade principles and optimal transaction cost management (Korbi et al., 2021). A protective regulatory environment is vital, and the authorities ensuring strict respect for the law play a significant role in the success of alliances and partnerships. Ding (2021) claimed that when the government supports ensuring the protection and application of the law, the parties are in good condition to make the alliance and partnership work. Nsomba (2021) implied in their paper that a defect of solid regulation of which local governments or regional economic institutions, such as the African continental free trade area (AFCFTA), ensure compliance and resolve conflictual situations might affect the survival of alliances. At this point, Adomako et al. (2021) fustigated the negative impact of an institutional void, which impacts the African political and institutional context. Bureaucracy, the poor

capacity of officials, and unpredictable actions are among the challenges that some African institutions face, showing areas for improvement in protecting private investment and impacting the stability of the alliances. Monticelli et al. (2021) considered stable institutions as a protection against the non-respect of the binding agreement. Finally, international alliances and partnerships are sensitive to political and social stability, according to Akdeniz and Talay (2022). A quiet and adequate political environment is a critical factor in African countries, where the risk of political instability is high.

Additional Focus for Successful Coopetition

Considering the hybrid part of coopetition, which combines competition and cooperation, the strategy could be subject to substantial business risks. Riquelme-Medina et al. (2022) found that conflicts, knowledge spillover, and opportunistic behaviors are significant risks of coopetition. The authors implied that coopetition is a platform on which trust and distrust play, generating and appropriating value and generating joint and individual benefits. Hence, coopetition requires a more subtle approach than common alliances and partnerships. The collaboration is between two entities that compete in the same market. Crick and Crick (2021a) highlighted three major areas of focus related to coopetition. First, the parties should have a strong competition mindset. Leaders with coopetition-oriented minds would drive the adherence of their respective team members to the implementation of this concept which would first appear as a shock. A proper change management approach becomes necessary, and the leaders should draw the attention of their teams to the fact that competition is not enmity. Second, partner selection is crucial in coopetition when a firm's leaders decide to dilute the entity's

competitive advantage by sharing strategic knowledge with its partner (Crick & Crick, 2021a). Third, Crick and Crick pointed out that coopetition requires boldness in accepting to collaborate with a rival. The effort of collaboration to win involves that the leader of a firm needs to ensure contracting with a partner they would not see as a threat.

Transition

Section 1 was an introductory section covering the foundation of the study. I first presented the problem and purpose, the population and sampling, and the nature of the study. I then raised the research question and presented the interview questions. Before reviewing the literature, which was the final and most consistent part of the foundation of the study, I presented the conceptual framework, noted the significance of the study, and gave some operational definitions. In Section 2, I present the research process to ensure the reliability and validity of the study and the plan to protect the participants. In Section 3, I will conclude the study by presenting the findings, the application to social practice, the implications for social change, the recommendations for action and further research, some reflections, and the conclusion.

Section 2: The Project

The project section explains the process of reaching the research purpose and achieving a valid and reliable study. After restating the purpose statement, I clarify the role of the researcher throughout the study and present the participants, the population, and the sampling. The research method, design, data collection instruments and techniques, and data organization techniques are essential to the method preceding the data analysis. Furthermore, I ensure the protection of the participants and the data of the partner organization by applying the research ethics principles. I cover the fundamental notions of reliability and validity.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the alliance and partnership strategies that business leaders of food and beverage firms in West Africa use to sustain their businesses.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher plays many critical roles spanning the whole process, from the data collection and organization to the analysis and the conclusion (Saunders et al., 2019). One or more persons can undertake qualitative research (Saunders et al., 2019). In this study, I handled all the research alone with the academic support of my chair. I collected the data primarily from semistructured interviews and reviewed publicly available company documents. As Collins and Stockton (2022) advised, I tried to understand and interpret the statements of the participants. The documentation comprised primarily the profit and loss evolution since the targeted firm

leaders engaged in alliances and partnerships. I also reviewed documents showing the partnership strategy and nonfinancial results.

The researcher is responsible for objectively treating the information they collect from participants and documentation to mitigate bias that could impact the validity and reliability of the research (Saunders et al., 2019). As a researcher, I already have 11 years of experience in strategic alliances from the same industry. Additionally, I already completed an MBA with a focus on strategic alliances. Regarding the relationships with the participants, I was a colleague of the participants, joining the firm after implementing the alliance and partnership strategies. Conversely, the above factors were not a cause of information bias or subjectivity. My MBA dissertation topic focused only on the critical success factors of alliances, covered a different organization in a different cultural environment, and excluded the complexity of cooperating with competitors. The current topic has a more extensive scope covering firm leaders' strategies to sustain their businesses through alliances and partnerships. The interview protocol (see Appendix A) includes a clear and rigid process that applied to every interview participant without exception, limiting the risk of bias.

In the study, I selected the participants and collected information through interviews. I used semistructured interviews to allow the participants to express themselves, including their emotions. Closed questions would have been too rigid and would have confined the response to a "yes" or "no" without properly elaborating to provide more content. I made the conversation interactive to understand the full context of the participants' explanation. However, I ensured the participants' responses were

brief and did not distract me from the research question or delay the interview with irrelevant responses. Furthermore, in qualitative research with interviews, it is practical to have an interview protocol (see Appendix A) to support a uniform set of questions and simplify the data analysis, as described by Braaten et al. (2020). I shared the interview protocol with the participants before the interview and strictly followed this critical tool to remain focused on the research purpose.

Regarding ethics, *The Belmont Report* (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research [NCPHSBBR], 1979) contains a moral framework that guides research for humans and principles that are well-established in the research code of ethics. The three basic principles of *The Belmont Report* protocol are respect for individuals, justice to ensure the participants' comfort, and beneficence. I respected the participants' decisions, protected them from harm, and made any effort to protect their well-being. I also ensured strict respect for the participants regarding the IRB procedures at interview sessions. The procedures and principles the IRB oversees include keeping confidentiality and securing participants' informed consent before disclosing any information. Informed consent involves the right for the participants to enter and withdraw freely from the research, with full knowledge of what it means to participate and explicit consent before an interview (Fons-Martinez et al., 2022). I used pseudonyms to avoid disclosing the names of the participants.

To have clear, valid, and reliable data sources, I considered three out of the four principles of data collection that Yin (2018) recommended. First, I presented more than one source of evidence to comfort the readers that the information is accurate and

mitigate bias. During the interview sessions, the participants shared their observations, facts, points of view, analyses, and emotions (see Roberts, 2020). I respected the participants with an active listening approach. I asked the interviewees for clarity where necessary. My attitude was nonjudgmental. I showed justice and equity in interacting with the participants and analyzing the information.

Participants

According to Yin (2018), the choice of the participant should involve a close relation between the participants' characteristics, meaning their knowledge, skills, or experiences, and the study phenomenon to address the research question. In the present study, the eligibility criteria for study participants were a function of the role of the selected firm's employees. The participants are among the leadership team implementing the alliances and partnerships to be eligible. They are involved in the partnership's conclusion, implementation, and performance reviews. In this study, the sample of participants was six senior managers who played a significant role in the success of the partnership initiatives the firm has been undergoing. I leveraged my professional connections to have access to the participants and obtain their acceptance to take part in the interview, counting on my working relationships with them. I had one-on-one conversations with each participant and explained to them the project's meaning, interest, and purpose.

The participants' characteristics aligned with the research question to understand the strategies leaders of food and beverage firms apply to sustain their businesses through alliances and partnerships. The participants contracted and applied alliance strategies

with several partners. They were stakeholders of many alliances and partnerships that the company had initiated, including bottling partnerships, licensing, co-packing, distributorship, and coopetition. As the participants were strategic builders, decision-makers, and project leaders of the partnership initiatives, they appeared to have good profiles for providing more about the operating models and, most importantly, the strategies for sustaining the firm through alliances and partnerships. Their knowledge of and perspectives on the alliances and partnerships operating models were helpful for the research.

Research Method and Design

Research Method

There are three primary methods in research: the quantitative method, the qualitative method, and the mixed method (Saunders et al., 2019). Qualitative research is useful for analyzing social phenomena by collecting nonnumerical data, relying on the experiences of human beings, and understanding the why and how of the phenomena (Aspers & Corte, 2019). In this study, I used a qualitative method for exploring the participants' thoughts and opinions, valuing their subjectivity and emotions. The qualitative method was appropriate for this study for exploring alliance and partnership strategies to achieve business sustainability. Since the strategies include the success factors and the sources of difficulties, the participants shared their experiences, both subjective and objective thinking, and proposed specific recommendations. Using quantitative method by leveraging statistics would have been helpful only if I had wanted

to determine the trend of the targeted population toward specific perceptions or behaviors, which was not the case in the present study.

Research Design

In qualitative studies, researchers use several research designs, including ethnographic, case study, phenomenology, and narrative (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). The phenomenology research design involves understanding and describing phenomena people have experienced (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). This study went beyond a description of what the leaders of the organization under study experienced, also including the strategic thinking of the sample of participants about the proper alliance strategies to apply and sustain the business. The participants in the interview not only told of their alliance experiences but also shared their points of view. Therefore, there was a different approach than the phenomenological approach for my study.

With the ethnographic design, the researcher involves themselves in a social and cultural group and interacts with the participants in real life to understand their lifestyle, culture, and perspectives for a period (Kirner & Mills, 2019). Ethnography would be helpful to focus on cultural characteristics rather than consider the business experiences, facts, and learnings necessary and was not appropriate for this study. In narrative inquiry, the researcher narrates an experience that one or more individuals faced forming a cohesive story (Mertova & Webster, 2019). The collection of data by the researcher has the form of a sequential and a storytelling format. The narrative inquiry would not have been appropriate because I did not study the leaders' life stories throughout this research. A case study, commonly used in educational, social, clinical, and business research, is an

in-depth empirical analysis of a phenomenon within its actual context, clarifying the boundaries and context (Yin, 2018). The specific research design was a single case study in my study. The case study was appropriate for this research because using it was helpful to describe a successful for-profit organization's experience and perspectives and understand the improvement opportunities.

Regarding the case study approach, Sibbald et al. (2021) stated that the typologies by Yin (2018) on one side and Stake (1995) and Merriam (1998) on the other are the two main approaches that ensure that the researcher explores the topic of interest quite well in a structured manner. The point of differentiation between the two theories is how the case study's outcome guides the researcher to a conclusion specific to a case or general. Yin's approach to the case study is positivistic. Yin considered that the researcher must continuously have objectivity, validity, reliability, and generalizability in mind during the research process (Yin, 2018). Yin's approach is quite systematic, requiring the researcher to follow a specific approach (Sibbald et al., 2021). Also, Yin emphasized theoretical development and allowed the researcher to make a statement beyond the specific case under study. Unlike Yin, Stake was not for testing preconceived theories; Stake valued the use of peculiar situations to illuminate the phenomenon and enhance the understanding of a research topic (Stake, 1995). Stake stressed the participants' subjective experience, focusing on a situational and case-by-case analysis. Stake considered that the participants would construct their meaning of what exists.

As my research is a single case study that dealt with the alliance strategies that firm leaders apply to sustain their businesses; addressing the research question required a

fact-based, objective approach. It is important to understand if organization leaders follow the general recommendations for alliance and partnership management before looking at specific and exceptional situations. The approach of Yin (2018), meaning the positivistic approach, was appropriate for my study. All rational and factual statements were open to verification (Saunders et al., 2019). In this optic, I used triangulation to confirm the sources of information. My approach was also partially constructive as I applied the sociocultural context of management in West Africa to my research. Therefore, my perspective mixes both approaches but aligns primarily with Yin's theory. Given the seriousness, the recurrence, and the similarities of some significant difficulties, it was worth looking at how to apply the theory. The second reason for my inclination to Yin was the factual and positivist feature of concrete organizational issues.

According to Yin (2018), case studies can be either single or multiple. Multiple case studies include two or more cases to investigate the same phenomena, whereas a single case is practical to analyze a unique case. A multiple case study would be helpful to have multiple and in-depth perspectives on exploring and addressing the business problem. Conversely, I chose the single case study for two reasons. First, the company under study has experienced several partnerships, which is enough experience to explore. Second, a limited number of companies in the food and beverage sector in Africa sustain their businesses through alliances and partnerships.

Data saturation is the point of sufficiency at which additional data collected would not be relevant (Mwita, 2022). Saturation involves the population's heterogeneity, the researcher's budget limitations, and the criticality of these points for achieving the

research goals (Hennink et al., 2019). I ensured data saturation by analyzing the consistency and the sufficiency of the responses by the interview participants. I added one participant to my participant list, which was five initially, to achieve saturation.

Population and Sampling

The targeted population comprised leaders of a food and beverage firm in alliances and partnerships across West Africa. The required sample size in qualitative research is less important than the adequacy and accuracy of the research findings (Hennink et al., 2019). The sample size is often smaller than the quantitative method requirements, focusing on understanding the humans' experiences, observations, and emotions that sustain the research. According to Yin (2018), the most important is the relevance and consistency of the data that the researcher may collect from the sample, whatever the size. The sample becomes relevant as long as the researcher gets in-depth information to sustain their research and address the research question. Data saturation could also help to set up the boundaries of the qualitative sampling size (Hennink et al., 2019).

I used purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is a technique helping to identify and select units with characteristics that the researcher needs in their sample (Shaheen et al., 2019). With data saturation as a criterion, I limited the information collected from purposeful sampling. The study of Kontaxis and Esfandiari (2023) illustrated that a qualitative study could go up to 18 participants until complete data saturation. In the present study, the number of participants was six, sufficient to collect various objective standpoints and complementary responses without burdening the study with too many

interventions. A minimum of three participants could have been sufficient to provide the required input to achieve data saturation and including three others helped to confirm statements in the context of triangulation or cover limited input from others until saturation.

In this study, the sampling of six senior managers included individuals who played a significant role in the success of the partnership initiatives the firm leaders have been undertaking. Through the purposeful participant selection process, I considered the involvement of the participants in regular interactions between the firm under study and the partners, stressing their influence in the decision-making process. These leaders were senior functional managers who have been influential in the partnership agreement, regular alignments, governance of the process, and partnership performance review. They were still working for the same organization. Alternative techniques could be convenience sampling and snowball sampling (Parker et al., 2019). The main feature of convenience sampling is that the researcher chooses participants because they are easy to reach and collaborate with (Andrade, 2021). However, convenience sampling was not relevant for my present study because only leaders, stakeholders of the alliance and partnership experience of the firm under study, would be beneficial. The snowball sampling technique is a technique through which some participants already recruited propose to the researcher other participants that they find relevant to complement the interviewing process (Parker et al., 2019). The snowball technique could have been helpful as an alternative in case some participants are reluctant to disclose sensitive information but was not needed in my study.

Ethical Research

I started research once I obtained approval from the Walden IRB. My ethics approval number for this study was 05-30-23-0981501. One of the objectives of that approval was to ensure that the research process and output follow ethical principles. Regarding research involving individuals, ethical considerations are critical in a research study, addressing concerns such as the protection of the rights of human beings (Reynolds et al., 2022). *The Belmont Report* (NCPHSBBR, 1979) contains ethical principles guiding the research. According to the principle of beneficence in research, the researcher should respect the participants' decisions, protect them from any harm, and make any necessary effort to protect their well-being.

IRB approval helped ensure that I had the qualifications to conduct a study and respect all ethics principles including producing clear informed consents. I ensured strict respect for the participants regarding the IRB procedures at interview sessions. Among these principles are confidentiality and the obtaining participants' consent before they disclose information to me. Informed consent is a valuable principle to safeguard potential participants' freedom to participate in research and the extent to which they are unambiguously willing to participate. This principle is based on trust and integrity and involves the participants' ability to withdraw at any time (Klykken, 2022). According to Vivek (2022), informed consent involves the right for the participants to enter and withdraw freely from the research, with full knowledge of what it means to participate in the research and explicit consent before participating in an interview.

I did not give any monetary incentive to the participants. I incentivized the participants by explaining to each of them the study's background and purpose of the study. Considering the low rate of strategic alliances according to the above statistics, sustaining a business with partners over more than a year could be an interesting story to tell. Therefore, motivating the participants was useful as an incentive to take part in a project that could highlight the participants' contribution in a rewarding experience in case their firm's partnerships yielded positive outcomes. At the end of the project, I made available to the firm leaders a three-page summary of findings and recommendations that they could use for the benefit of the firm. I reminded the participants regularly about the coming interview session.

I provided an invitation (see Appendix B) to every participant that contains the objective of the research, the nature and purpose of the study, the expectations for the participant, and the interview protocol. I shared the consent form with the participants electronically well in advance and requested that the participants reply in an email "I consent." The participants then had enough time to review the form and freely consent electronically. Their emailed responses confirmed that the participants provided their consent to take part in the interview aware of the project and its implications. I indicated that the participant could withdraw from the interview at any time by notifying me by phone or email of their wish to withdraw from the study. I also indicated that the purpose of this study was academic only. To protect the identity of the participants and the firm, I used a pseudonym per participant and kept the firm's name and the countries confidential with pseudonyms. Therefore, for the six participants in the interviews, I used P1, P2, P3,

P4, P5, and P6. I focused on three countries, which I named Country A, Country B, and Country C. To keep confidentiality, Walden University requires that the researcher is allowed to keep the research data for 5 years minimum. Therefore, 5 years after completion of the project, I will permanently delete the electronic data from my laptop and drive. I will shred all paper data.

Data Collection Instruments

As the primary data collection instrument, responsible to see, hear, and interpret the information, I used semistructured interviews with open-ended questions to drive more openness in responding to the interview questions (see Appendix C). Ganesha and Aithal (2022) stated that choosing appropriate data collection instruments is crucial to ensure validity, reliability, and calibration of the research. When the participant did not understand the question, I provided any necessary clarification to the participant. I paraphrased or provided an example to explain the question better, if necessary, as Yin (2018) recommended. Using follow-up questions helps researchers obtain more details as the interview continues (Saunders et al., 2019). To mitigate any research bias, I strictly applied the interview protocol (see Appendix A).

As far as documentation is concerned, I reviewed the following documents: an overall year-on-year profit and loss statement showing the impact of partnerships over the last four years; the partnership revenue impacts by country; a formal PowerPoint presentation of the different types of partnerships that the firm under study has been experiencing; a business case that includes the leaders' choice for competition and discloses the benefits and achievements; and a formal PowerPoint presentation of the

partnerships with key distributors. To enhance reliability and validity of the data collection process, I conducted member checking or informant feedback. Member checking is a technique that researchers use to help improve the validity of a study, properly to give assurance that the interpretation of the researcher is right (Candela, 2019).

Data Collection Technique

I was the primary data collection instrument in this single case study. According to Wa-Mbaleka (2020), the researcher is the primary data collection instrument in the research. Every interview lasted at least 40 minutes. I requested audio interviews via Microsoft Teams and my Android cellphone. The structure of the questions comprised probing questions to encourage the participant elaborate more, prompting questions to keep the participants engaged and give more detailed answers or clarifications. During the interviews, I audio recorded the interviews with the consent of the participants. I used two audio recorders to have a backup in case of technical difficulties with the primary device. I audio recorded the interviews in Microsoft Teams. To ensure confidentiality, I did not video record the participants. Using Microsoft 365 software and Microsoft Edge browser, I activated the transcript. Before recording, I asked for permission to audio record the interview. If I had not obtained permission to record, I would have stopped the interview and thanked the participant.

After the interviews, I transcribed the interview and interpreted each participant's responses to the interview questions. Then, I conducted member checking. The technique was a confirmation that I captured the statements and the meaning of the participants

well. I gave the respondents my interpretations of their responses to the interview questions to confirm the accuracy of my interpretations. The participants were able to correct any errors and challenge what they saw as a wrong interpretation. I achieved data saturation when the participants stopped providing new data. The advantage of the recording was to ensure that I captured all the content, allowing me to return to the interview as much as possible to explore the entire meaningful content.

I used Microsoft Teams to transcribe the interviews after recording them. I reviewed the transcriptions and corrected any transcription errors of the participants' statements. Through methodological triangulation, I was able to uncover errors. The statements of the participants at the interview also confirmed my interpretations of the documentation to ensure that my analysis is based on more than a single source of information. I used methodological triangulation to confirm the sources of information.

I did not face difficult participants. I achieved my goal of the participants' openness to share information, facts, and points of view to gather the necessary input, according to the recommendations of Flick (2020). Considering cultural ties and values helped avoid or limit clashes and constituted a key driver for building a good rapport with the interviewee before and during the interview (Flick, 2020). For example, I used icebreakers at the beginning of the sessions, which were an effective way to get the participants' attention and focus. I demonstrated patience and politeness, as Saunders et al. (2019) recommended to benefit from an adequate first impression. However, I was mindful that too much familiarity may distract the interview process and undervalue the

quality of the input. To address participants who did not trust me or the university to keep confidential information, I reassured the participants that the data are well-protected.

To have clear, valid, and reliable data sources, I followed the four principles of data collection as Yin (2018) identified and recommended. Yin recommended presenting more than one source of evidence, creating a case study database, maintaining a chain of evidence, and cross-checking the accuracy of information extracted from social media. First, I presented more than one source of evidence to reassure the readers that the information is accurate and confirm that there is no error or bias. The interview sessions allowed participants to share their observations, facts, points of view, analyses, emotions, and so on (Saunders et al., 2019). Since the risk of low objectivity could occur, I corroborated any finding with a second data source. Second, I created a case study database to organize and document the data. The database was practical to prevent my interpretation from disturbing an objective understanding by the reader. As a third principle, I maintained a chain of evidence. I set up a close link between the findings and the research question to build the reliability of the information in my case study. The intermediary links were the case study protocol, the citations to specific sources of evidence, and the case study database, as Yin recommended. The fourth principle of Yin, which is about cross-checking thoroughly the data sources collected on social media to avoid invalid or wrong information, did not apply to my study.

Data Organization Technique

The data organization mainly consisted of ordering the data correctly for better analysis and adequate storage of the data and documents, keeping the commitment to

protect the interview participants. I created a file for every participant containing the informed consent, the notes from the interview, and a hard copy of the interview transcript, including the interview date, starting and end time. Additionally, I created a specific folder for the documentation I collected. I made both soft and hard copies. Based on IRB requirements, I will keep all the data confidential for at least 5 years in a secure place before destroying it, according to Walden University's recommendations.

I manually organized and analyzed the interview data. According to Williams and Moser (2019), data organization techniques are useful to categorize the information by theme, date, participant, and application. I considered as the source of analysis the raw transcription from NVivo, and a revised one in case there are some inconsistencies in the software's output. NVivo was convenient for gathering raw interview data, and I used Microsoft Excel to classify the output. Williams and Moser stated that coding is a technique that is practical to assemble, categorize, and sort thematically the data collected by providing an adequate platform for the construction of meaning. I did the coding manually through Excel to confirm the coding output of NVivo. I built a table showing the themes, codes, and fragments of sentences. During the data analysis, I clarified the statement of the interview participants by paraphrasing and giving context where necessary. I built a table showing the themes, codes, and fragments of sentences.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis of the data analysis process or model was appropriate for this study. Thematic analysis is a method helping describe and interpret data in selecting codes and building themes that include and categorize data having the same meaning or

objectives (Yin, 2018). Xu and Zammit (2020) highlighted six steps of thematic analysis: creating a repository, meaning putting the data in a format that helps for easy manipulation creating codes to identify and classify the data (Bell et al., 2022), searching for themes based on the codes, reviewing and refining the themes, defining and naming the themes by organizing them into consistent and coherent accounts, and producing the report. Codes are labels or tags that give meaning to the data helping to quickly identify the segments connecting to the research questions and possible themes (Saunders et al., 2019). Therefore, coding consists of arranging systematically to categorize the information.

The analysis of the data resulting from the interviews and addressing the business problem were according to the process that Burnard (1991) recommended. With the analysis of the interview data, I followed a structured process using coding. After recording the interviews on the laptop, I followed the necessary process, which included the steps of deepening the data analysis to have a better understanding of the context, removing the information that is not relevant, defining the codes during the data analysis and adjusting them if necessary while moving along with the data, categorizing the coding and grouping subcategories under higher categories taking out any repetition and obtaining the support of two colleagues to help confirm the categorizations, requesting that the interviewees confirm the categorizations, starting the writing by gathering all sections and the interviews' findings, and linking the findings to the literature.

Although automatic coding could have been helpful, I did manual coding for the thorough care and more accuracy and control over the inputted data, as recommended by

Adu (2019). First, I read the transcripts carefully and noted my first impressions. Then I reread them until I understood the lateral but also the implied meaning of the statements. Second, I indexed relevant pieces such as words, groups of words, phrases, or sections. These codes encompass actions, concepts, points of view, differences, similarities, repetitions, processes, and other relevant pieces for the analysis (Saunders et al., 2019). I noted surprising or wrong statements and outstanding and insightful opinions. I also noted some points that the participants considered very important. I noted some concepts or opinions I read before during my literature research. Then I noted relevant information to confirm or contradict my perspectives. As the interpreter of these phenomena, I took as many descriptive notes as possible to help build a robust data analysis. I mitigated bias and interpreted the statement objectively, staying close to the transcripts as recommended by Burnard (1991). Third, I chose essential codes from the various codes and grouped them into categories or themes. By combining some codes, I was able to create new codes. At the same time, I dropped some codes that appeared less relevant. Fourth, I labelled the categories and kept the most relevant ones. I built the connections between these categories, driving the main results of my study as described by Yin (2018). I built hierarchies among the most critical categories.

Reliability and Validity

The concepts of reliability and validity are core standards and derive from the central concept of quality in research (Sürücü & Maslakci, 2020). Research quality is a process that analyses mainly the match between the elements of the research design, ensuring that the research outputs are trustworthy and objective, without any bias

(Saunders et al., 2019). Quality covers all aspects of the study design, the questions, methods, the selection of subjects, the measurement, and the outcomes. The researcher must protect the research against biased, inconsistent, or wrong data. Quality is about ensuring data reliability, potential for transferability, and validity (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Proper referencing and triangulation served as examples of research quality tools. An adequate referencing to previous research was an excellent factor for ensuring the reliability of the finding. Researchers use triangulation to confirm output validity by confirming the data with a different source or method (Saunders et al., 2019).

Reliability is the consistency and accuracy of the research that results in the trustworthiness of the output (Adler, 2022). Validity means that the tools, the processes, and the data are appropriate (Saunders et al., 2019). In a qualitative study, the methodological choice should be appropriate to answer the research question. Likewise, the design should be in line with the methodology. Also, sampling and data analysis should be in alignment. The results and the conclusion should also align and should be appropriate to the sample and context. Unreliable and invalid data sources affect one or more of the four cumulative requirements of a qualitative research study: credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability (Amin et al., 2020). Credibility means that the data source and the research findings are believable and appropriate. The trustworthiness of the data means that the researcher should conduct their research and analyses on correct data sources (Yin, 2018). Therefore, there is a strong connection between reliability and trust. Since qualitative research involves nonstatistical data, trust becomes a critical success factor. Among the strategies to ensure the credibility of the

findings in my qualitative study, I followed a robust research design, conducted the research carefully and consistently, and chose the appropriate methods and samples. I indicated, clarified, and accounted for personal bias, which could have influenced the findings. Biased data are source of doubt as they limit the certainty that the source of information is independent of any distorting influence (Saunders et al., 2019). I had meticulous record-keeping, as Yin (2018) recommended. I conducted member checking of the data interpretation and ensured data saturation.

The research data may be transferable to future research. Transferability indicates the degree to which another person or researcher in their judgement can transfer the study to other contexts, settings, or groups, resulting in knowledge transfer and contribution to future research (Amin et al., 2020). Another issue impacting quality is the nondependability of the data source. As a critical element of trustworthiness, dependability means that the participants should take responsibility for their participation, allowing them to evaluate the study, the interpretation, and the recommendations. Dependability indicates that the findings are consistent and repeatable to a reasonable extent (N. Singh et al., 2021). Dependability is a sign of the stability of data over time and circumstances. Through member checking, I requested the participants check my interpretations their responses to the interview questions. I ensured data saturation by collecting from the participants and the documentation adequate information to achieve the research purpose. As I did not achieve data saturation from five participants, I extended the number of interviewees to six until data saturation is achieved. Three

alternate participants were available to participate but were not needed once I achieved data saturation. I thanked the alternate participants for their willingness to participate.

Further, the data should be neutral, meaning confirmable. Concerning confirmability in qualitative research, it is the extent to which other researchers can confirm the study. This principle highlights the importance of triangulation of multiple sources in qualitative research (Yin, 2018). To achieve reliability, I presented findings that more than one source would confirm. For example, by corroborating a participant's statement at an interview with proper documentation, the research reader would trust the data more and build on them. In this case, triangulation would be an effective tool.

To enhance confirmability, I gathered and confirmed data from two sources and make the raw and reviewed data available for further confirmation. I also used triangulation. Triangulation was useful to bring clarity and a better understanding of the findings (Moon, 2019). Triangulation also helped me to corroborate and validate the study. Triangulation is using multiple data sources or methods to understand phenomena better (Saunders et al., 2019). Yin (2018) distinguished four types of triangulations: data triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation, and methodological triangulation. Data triangulation relates a variety of data sources to study a phenomenon. Investigator triangulation implies engaging multiple researchers in an empirical study. Theory triangulation in qualitative study consists of using more than one theory when examining a phenomenon. Methodological triangulation is the process of using more than one method of data collection to analyze a phenomenon. I conducted methodological triangulation. Practically, I confirmed a participant's information with other data sources.

If most participants confirmed the same information, then it would be reasonable to trust the data. Additionally, documentation was a source of confirmation of the information that I collected through interviews.

Transition and Summary

In Section 2, I clarified my role as the only researcher. I provided justification for my research design and method. I shared information about the population and the sampling. Regarding the data collection, I mentioned the data collection instrument and techniques. I defined the concepts of validity and reliability and demonstrated how to apply them throughout the data collection and analysis. I stated how I would organize and analyze the data I collect from the participants and the documentation.

In Section 3, I present the study's findings, their application to professional practice, and their implication in positive social change. Next, I propose recommendations for actions and future research coupled with reflections. I close the analysis with a summary and a conclusion.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the alliance and partnership strategies that business leaders of food and beverage firms in West Africa use to sustain their businesses. Grounded in the transactional cost theory and following the thematic analysis, I identified three themes: analyzing the relevance and opportunity for interfirm partnerships, thorough preparedness, and efficient implementation promoting a win–win approach. Under Theme 1, the interview participants exposed the business context justifying the decision to devise and apply alliance and partnership strategies. The second theme dealt with the conditions and level of preparedness before engaging in the risky venture of alliances. Under the third theme, the participants extended their perspectives about the implementation and governance of the partnership, promoting a win–win approach and excellent relationships while ensuring minimum control.

Presentation of the Findings

The study research question was: What alliance and partnership strategies do leaders of food and beverage firms in West Africa use to sustain their businesses?

I conducted six semistructured interview sessions using 10 open-ended questions coupled with documentation reviews, which allowed me to identify the three major themes. Table 1 includes the themes, the number of respondents who identified the theme, and the number of occurrences of the participants' information and related documentation. For confidentiality, I represented the six participants as P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P6.

Table 1*Frequency of Themes*

Themes	Number of respondents identifying the theme	Number of occurrences
Analyzing the relevance and opportunity for alliances and partnerships	5	34
Thorough preparation	5	29
Efficient implementation promoting a win-win approach	6	75

Over decades, the firm under study, which has subsidiaries in several West African countries, has had a franchise and licensing agreement with an international brand owner. The firm under study is referred to hereafter as the Bottler, whereas the franchisor is named the Brand Owner. The documentation review disclosed that the contract is supplier-customer-based, by which the Brand Owner sells raw food and beverage material to the Bottler. The Bottler was responsible for manufacturing and distributing the finished products according to a joint strategy with the Brand Owner. The Bottler was responsible for the manufacturing and distribution to traders, wholesalers, distributors, and retail outlets, which sold directly to consumers. The three West African countries on which I focused my analysis were named Country A, Country B, and Country C.

Theme 1: Analyzing the Relevance and Opportunity for Alliances and Partnerships

The participants shared the major motives for the decision of the Bottler to engage in alliances, in addition to the franchising and licensing partnership they already had with the Brand Owner. The issues were the urgent need to increase investment and satisfy

demand, the level and complexity of the market, competitiveness, the inefficient operation and cost, and the limited expertise to fully satisfy demand (see Table 2).

Table 2

Theme 1: Analyzing the Relevance and Opportunity for Alliances and Partnerships
Subthemes

Subthemes	Number of respondents identifying the theme	Number of occurrences
Inefficient and high operation costs	4	10
Additional investment needed	1	2
Complexity and competitiveness of market	4	6
Limited expertise	3	3
Adequate partnership model	5	13

Inefficient Operation and Cost Impacting the Profitability and Agility of the Value

Chain

The Bottler leadership team engaged in alliance ventures to address a cost efficiency and value chain profitability challenge. P2 revealed the need for more cost-efficient operations. The bottling operations required a level of investment that was too big for the demand. P2 said, “We have some operations mainly in small countries where we start seeing some issues on efficiency, operation cost because they were a very small market, but you have bottling operation.” P2 added that the Bottler “closed the bottling operations in these countries, trying import from other countries, but the import taxes impacted the value chain profitability and the competitiveness of these products.” P2 stated, “Your product is no more competitive than local producers.” P4 confirmed P2’s statement by saying, “At a certain moment, we closed production locally as it got too expensive.” P4 also said the following about the impact of the import duties:

It is too expensive to import the same models, the same product. If we are talking about the Brand Owner, you can go for an import model when you close local production. But we still see taxes on finished goods.

Therefore, copacking became the cheapest alternative, meaning, “somebody produces your product locally, and then we only have to pay import taxes on raw materials, and that is much cheaper,” according to P4.

The cost efficiency and lean business was also the motive for optimizing the distribution model of finished products in Country C, which the Bottler used to handle directly to the point of sale at a high cost. P5 said, “Our costs continued to rise. As your costs begin to bite, then the only way to win in the market is to compromise our control level with a cost reduction.” Also, P5 thought the Bottler was losing its focus and core competencies of production, distribution, and commercial strategy. P5 revealed, “But till about 2007, we ran direct distribution from the plants to retail. Eighty-five or 90% of our business was direct distribution.” P5 added,

If you come to this place in the morning as much as possible, it was very difficult to tell whether this company was a beverage company, which was just assigned to produce and sell beverages, or it was a transport company.

P5 revealed that the company tried several models, such as managed distribution centers, which were still ineffective. P5 said, “[The] partnership was not that fruitful because we had so many places, so many partners to share the pie, and it got to a level it was not profitable.” P6 confirmed the need to address the concern of overhead costs by “bringing in another person who is better or specialized in whatever you are doing in terms of cost.”

Urgent Need to Increase the Investment to Cover the Need in Working Capital

The Bottler faced some business funding challenges that required additional investment. P3 revealed that the Bottler was facing profitability challenges, and the state of the business became less attractive for the investors. P3 said, “Many challenges in terms of growth, in terms of profitability, there was an erosion of the company’s value, which did not allow or encourage the shareholders to continue investing money for keeping the assets running.” P3 stated that the leadership team was mostly looking for financial investment. P3 said, “I believe that in most cases, it was related to the ability to access funds financing for investment into finance growth actually.” P3 added, “At the end of the day, to meet with demand in terms of growth, the local management has to go to find alliances with people who have the money, who can invest.” Alliances became an alternative to the local leadership team to get the necessary funding to invest efficiently, rebalance the financial statements, and secure the organization’s sustainability.

The review of the Bottler’s financials, especially the yearly profit and loss statements, indicated poor financial performance with negative operating income, which worsened by 55%, and profit before tax, which decreased by 40%, while the sales volume declined only by 2% from 2019 to 2022 before the Bottler leaders engaged in an alliance to improve the financial situation. The Bottler’s ability to generate cash was also a challenge since the earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization were negative, declining at a higher rate. The operating free cash flow, which was already negative, declined by 114%. The level of investment was higher than the return on investment, which was not enough to cover the needs of working capital.

Reviewing the Bottler's year 2020 reality assessment contained in its 2021–2023 master plan, the leadership team highlighted some internal and external factors in the PowerPoint document that provided more background to the difficult financial situation that P3 described. The internal factors included the high-value chain cost, heavy headcount, high depreciation costs, and margin erosion of 12%, with challenges to increase the price. Regarding the external factors, the low disposable income in the countries under the Bottler's operations coupled with double-digit inflation and currency depreciation were challenging conditions that amplified the margin erosion. The unattractive government policies including additional protection taxes was another external factor of financial underperformance.

The Level and Complexity of Market Competitiveness

The markets in which the bottler engaged in strategic alliances became more competitive with the participation of smaller but more agile and numerous competitors. The Bottler faced sales volume challenges as these competitors could sell at a more affordable price, offering to the value chain intermediaries more interesting trade margins and payment conditions, with higher flexibility to visit outlets in remote areas. P1 revealed that sales volume was decreasing in Country A and Country B, impacting the value chain's performance and competitiveness. Partnerships became necessary, and P1 said, "Because the markets in which we finally had to partner with these guys at the point in time we saw that our growth was going down, it had a downward trajectory, volumes were going down." P1 added, "We had no options as an organization but to jointly work our partnerships with those we considered as our fierce competitors within our industry,

the food and beverage industry.” P2 said, “Your product is no longer competitive than local producers.” P2 confirmed that the decision to stop local production in favor of importation made their product less price-competitive because of the import duty impact mentioned earlier. In Country A and Country B, where the Bottler first stopped local production and tried importing from other markets, the high level of competition involving local production players selling low-quality products but at highly affordable prices was the source of the double-digit decreasing volume. The Bottler leadership team found that partnering with the major players to leverage their cost efficiency and distribution capabilities would be a pertinent initiative.

Regarding distributorship in Country C, the market’s growing competitiveness and complexity was the context that led the leadership team to think about partnerships as an alternative. P5 said,

In a world in which we are getting in line with complicated complexities and intense and breakneck competition, I think it is becoming more and more relevant to get into alliances and partnerships to be able to win in the marketplace.

The documentation review displayed the arrival of seven new and strong players from 2014 to 2018. The bottler lost 20% of its market share over the period. P6 revealed also that the Bottler leadership team thought partnering would give “many advantages in terms of creating another stock point covering with a lower level of cost in terms of your fuel cost and reaching your point of sales.” P6 revealed that the African market has a different reality as it is mostly fragmented. This makes it difficult not to partner. P6 said, “When you come to West Africa, the market is so fragmented. The bottler must also

outsource part of his distribution to a distributor.” The demand fulfillment concern and the need to reach untethered points of sale was another motive. In summary, the high level of competition, especially in Country C, the biggest market in the region, was an impactful challenge to the overall organization's growth. Competitors mainly affected price relevance and availability in fragmented areas with high sales potentials.

Limited Expertise

Even though it was not the first motive for the decision to engage in alliances, P3 mentioned seeking expertise. P3 said, “The first rationale was about financing investment, a bit of technology, and know-how.” P6 and P5 stated that the company was also looking to focus on its core competencies and allow experts to bring their know-how where the Bottler lacked expertise. P5 said,

You will have to consider as a business to focus on what you are good at and buy and invented commerce what you are not good at or what you are not as somebody stronger in than you so to be able to achieve your overall goal. So, I think that is the basis, and since we get into a world where things are becoming more complex.

The participants implied that the complexity of the market required agility to act efficiently and effectively at the critical steps of the value delivery to the customers and consumers. The participants revealed that the leaders had to decide to focus on their level of expertise, such as the strategic support in areas where they need more capabilities or financial investment to counteract competition or deliver high quality finished products on time to satisfy the customers. For example, P5 revealed that the Bottler, which was not

performing as a transportation company, needed to outsource the distribution through partnerships. In that context, the participants confirmed that alliances extended the company's current level of expertise, which is a crucial element. The Bottler could still operate independently in areas where they had complete control regarding insights, capabilities, and investments. The limited expertise was a motive that the leadership team of the Bottler found relevant to engage in alliances and partnerships, leveraging the knowledge and practice of external parties.

Apply the Right Partnership Model

To address the challenges identified by the interview participants, the Bottler assigned other entities, toll packers, their right to produce, and distribution partners to handle the distribution with advanced responsibility identified territories. During the interviews, the participants focused on three alliance models that the Bottler applied in three different countries: a toll packing and cooptation model in Country A, a toll packing with brownfield and distribution model in Country B, and a distribution partnership in Country C. P1, P2, P3, and P4 focused on the alliances and partnership in Country B and Country A. P5 and P6 tackled the distributorship across Country C.

The Toll Packing and Cooptation Model in Country A. The model is a mix of tripartite toll-packing agreements and distributorship. Regarding the toll packing or toll-packing arrangement, P3 gave the following definition considering the context:

I have a product I do not have the capacity to produce in my plants; you have the capacity, available capacity. I move there, and then I make a toll packing

arrangement where you produce for me, I pay a fee, and then I have my product, and I sell it.

The Country A model is an extension of the toll-packing model where after producing for the Bottler, the toll packer gets the right to distribute the product as a distribution partner.

P1 stated, “Now, if you have a situation where the partnership is with your first competitor and then your first competitor agrees to further carry out distribution of your products for you.” Since that toll packer manufactures and distributes its own brands and has been a competitor to the Bottler for many years, it also becomes a competitor.

The toll-packing agreement is composed of a tripartite contract with the Brand Owner and the partner. P1 added, “The partnership that we have embarked on as an organization is tripartite in nature. We have not had to move along without the involvement of [the Brand Owner].” In addition, there is an ancillary contract between the Bottler and the partner discussing the commercial agreement and the toll-packing fees. P2 said,

You also have the commercial agreement between the partner and the bottler where we also agreed on the toll packing fees to pay for them to produce for us, the term of paying, the invoicing. All these things are described in an ancillary contract between the Bottler and the toll packer.

In summary, the interfirm partnership in Country A was a hybrid model composed of two main types of agreements. First, the outsourcing of the production of finished goods by an external company, which is the partner, and second, the outsourcing of the distribution of the finished goods by the same partner from the production plant to the customers,

which include the distributors, wholesalers, and retailers. The hybrid model implies that the bottler's partner has the assignment to transform the raw materials into finished goods, package, and sell them. In that case, the support of the Bottler would consist of supporting the partner with strategic insight and expertise, co-funding the operations, animating the sales, ensuring compliance, and taking full accountability for the performance and the brand image vis-a-vis the Brand Owner. The model is slightly different from the next model applied in Country B.

The Toll Packing with Brownfield and Distribution Model in Country B. The Country B model is also a mix of tripartite toll-packing agreements and distributorship, like in Country A. P1 said, “They have an end-to-end arrangement; they are running a factory and doing the distribution.” However, as P3 defined, the partner is not a competitor, and the investment to carry out such an operation is high. P3 said,

There is another option where there is no existing capacity available, but it is a greenfield or a brownfield investment, but it is a full investment. This second one includes more risk, I believe, more commitment, and it costs more.

P3 explained that the Country A partnership required less investment, whereas the Country B partnership required a brownfield with major risk. The partner invested heavily in the upgrade of the bottling plant.

Distribution Partnership in Country C. The distributorship model in Country C is a supplier–customer relationship in which the Bottler sells products to the distributor. At the same time, the distributor has a warehouse and a sales team and distributes to other partners—the Bottler sets-up goals in alignment with the parties. The Bottler develops the

capabilities of the distributor sales team through their own commercial team assigned to respective distributors.

The distribution partnership process that the Bottler applies in Country C went through various steps of development and improvement. P5 revealed,

The level of partnerships has been improving across the years to get them to a state where right now they can kind of move to a level where they have moved into partnership in terms of being able to sit down and come up with joint business plans with their partners to grow the market together and set up capability matrices.

According to P5, the Bottler gradually moved from different steps of collaboration to distributorship. P5 said the Bottler started by partnering with traders with only transactional relationships to direct customers with letters of intent and clear key performance indicators to achieve. Then the Bottler contracted or upgraded some of the actors to distributors, with the added responsibility and accountability of representing a brand over territory within clear boundaries and increasing responsibility and accountability. Now the Bottler raised what P5 called distribution partners. P5 mentioned, “We went on it for the number of years reduced to a certain number when now as much as possible it drove more of what profitability for our partners where then now, we started building the relationship.” P5 added, “We started building the relationship. Where we could plan together, it was more from transactional to a situation where now we could sit down and work with contracts.” In addition to the distributor privileges, the Bottler leaders consider distributors true partners, built and aligned joint business plans, put

capability-building programs in place, initiated brand development analyses with them, and grew relationships.

P6 revealed that in the context of the distribution partnership, the company decided to consolidate the distributors in Country C. P6 stated that the consolidation consisted of shortlisting and increasing the distributor's profitability by enlarging their business. P6 noted 50 distribution partners covering 100 thousand sales points. P6 affirmed, "In Country C, we have about 50 distributors across the country, and we use about 300 salesmen." P6 reported that the model involves demarcating territory for every partner, meaning higher responsibility to the distribution partners; distributors are exclusive to promoting our products. P6 said,

We demarcate the whole country into smaller distributor territories where each distributor has a clearly defined boundary, and they service that area. So, the area belongs to you. You are responsible for all the retail points there and must ensure that the product is available everywhere.

P6 mentioned, "There is always a contract that is put in place." The distributors are small- and medium-sized businesses that the company shortlisted.

Regarding governance, P6 declared that the Bottler set up objectives and key performance indicators in alignment with the distributors: "There are key performance indicators that are defined along the lines of the objectives that we want to achieve." P6 added, "The leaders have established regular business reviews covering business performance, the distributor's profitability, and sustainability." P6 continued, "We do a

360-degree review of the distributor's business to ensure that the distributor is profitable, and the business is sustainable.”

The Bottler tried several distribution models, from direct distribution to sales points to indirect distribution partnerships. Through each step, the Bottler's leadership team sought to minimize the distribution costs, gradually impacting their competitiveness. The leaders needed to focus on their core competencies and allow external partners to take the burden of distribution. The Bottler moved to what P5 considered a real partnership, allowing the distributors to take more responsibility and ownership with strong strategic support but limited investment and control by the Bottler. After analyzing the alliance strategies from the participants' perspectives and experiences with the Bottler, I confirmed that this theme aligned with the literature.

Connecting Theme 1 to the Literature

According to the participants, some causes justified the decision of the company to engage in alliances and partnerships. Leaders may partner with other firms to acquire specific know-how to add to their core competencies and lead the market (Kyrylenko et al., 2019). The Bottler's leadership team was searching for a partner with more knowledge and skills to focus on their core competencies. The partners knew such as distribution in fragmented areas that the leadership team recorded as a weakness. Jiang et al. (2021) considered that a firm's leaders may focus on their core competencies and obtain additional competencies from another firm to become stronger and more competitive. The market's competitiveness was a context requiring the Bottler's team to increase agility and expertise to sustain their market leadership. The participants

highlighted the need for the Bottler to strengthen by joining resources, skills, and knowledge with external partners alongside their usual franchise partnership with the Brand Owner.

Additionally, alliances and partnerships help keep company leaders abreast of rapid changes and innovations (Franco & Haase, 2020; Hoelz & Bataglia, 2022).

Mamédio et al. (2019) were adept at the knowledge-based theory and claimed that strategic alliances are among the best ways to transfer knowledge in a competitive market environment. The participants also stated that their firm needed financial and investment resources to expand its regional footprint and meet market demand. According to M. Russo and Cesarani (2017), that request justified setting up an alliance. M. Russo and Cesarani supported the resource-based theory and claimed that the essential motives of the alliance are expansion, diversification, imitation, and disposal of resources.

The relevancy of alliance and its appropriate model is another connection between the literature and the interviews. Klimas et al. (2022), Raza-Ullah and Kostis (2020), and interview participants gave insight into the relevance of coopetition. The literature contained an analysis of the positives and risks related to coopetition. Regarding the choice to extend an alliance to competitors, Klimas et al. raised the question about the level of trust and commitment the competitors should invest in the partnership. Raza-Ullah and Kostis also claimed the risky nature of a coopetition venture, considering the firm's exposure to opportunistic behavior and knowledge theft. One of the significant concerns about trust in coopetition is that the parties would keep the knowledge or core

competencies they acquired from each other at the end of the partnership. The company leaders have chosen cooperation as long as the legal framework is clear.

Connecting Theme 1 to the Conceptual Framework

The motives of alliances and partnerships align with the transactional cost approach, which helps to address cost and transactional efficiency concerns. Williamson (1981) considered that a firm emerges and has significant potential to expand as it can optimize its transaction costs. Williamson added that strategic alliances are hybrid between the firm and the market and could help reduce production and transaction costs for increasing or sustaining business profitability.

The Bottler leaders sought a partner to optimize operation cost and efficiency, aligning with the transaction cost theory. As P2 stated, partnering with a local company would be useful to make financial savings and increase business profitability. The Bottler leaders could then benefit from economies of scale by increasing their investment and having a better operational cost per unit of the finished product. The transaction cost approach was also useful for the bottler to benefit from economies of scale, make financial savings and increase business profitability through alliances and partnerships.

Theme 2: Thorough Preparation

The participants agreed that preparedness is a critical step to achieve. In preparation for the alliance venture, the participants included the following elements: Consistent business case, goal alignments with both the internal leadership team and the partner, a formal and protective legal agreement, and a structured partner selection process.

Table 3*Theme 2: Thorough Preparation Subthemes*

Themes	Number of respondents identifying the theme	Number of occurrences
Strong business case	4	6
Internal alignment on the goals	2	2
Joint business plan with the partner	3	5
Consistent and protective legal agreement	3	5
Partner compatibility, and readiness	5	11

Strong Business Case

According to the participants, a sustainable alliance strategy requires thorough preparation. A business plan or case should include all necessary elements to ensure visibility and counteract any business risk. P2 said, “The first thing is trying to understand the valuation of your operation and the business case: What do you want to do? What are the cost implications? What are the risks relating to business continuity and what kind of impact it may have on the business, your business, and the partner on the partner business?” P2 also requested a “very good and thorough business case to understand all the implications on the end-to-end supply chain.” P2 recommended the establishment of short- and long-term goals when they said,

I will take compliance perspective, cost implication perspective, and also thinking on a short- or long-term because, depending on the objective, some partnerships also maybe or sometime tactically just to sustain uncomfortable situation, the time to build up. However, some of them also can be strategic and in the long term.

P3 went further by requesting a competency gaps report, discrepancies analysis, and corrective action plans before engaging into partnerships. P3 said, “Based on the

competency gap, all the discrepancies or all the differences or all the misalignments would have been visible, and then some action would have been taken to close these gaps and then go with the deal.” P5 added to the business plan the concept of “capability building.” In the business plan, risk assessment is for P4 the most difficult. P4 said, “one of the difficult parts is to evaluate on the risk assessment for the middle and the long term.” Building a business case requires a complete analysis of the short- and long-term implications of the strategic initiatives that the partners want to take. Among the complexities of the business plans that the participants described, a strong business plan would require not only a risk assessment of both certainties and some uncertainties but also alignment of parties who might be from different cultures.

Internal Alignment on the Goals

One thing is to set clear goals, and another is to get the full alignment of the leadership team and the functions in charge of executing them. In that context, P3 advised that the leaders should have “a common vision of the core of the essence of the partnership.” P5 recommended the involvement of all departments to join the commercial department, be accountable, and be fully involved in the success of the alliance since the outcome will impact the whole business. P5 stated, “As much as possible, you need to get yourself into a situation where whatever organization is joined across all departments to make that happen. Everybody’s key performance indicators are linked towards your partners’ success.” The alignment involves all stakeholders of the alliances and partnership, including the internal and functional team members in charge of implementing the partnership.

Joint Business Plan with the Partner

P6, P3, and P5 extend the business planning devising and alignment to all the parties at the partnership, meaning not only the company's internal team but also the partners. P3 considered that the parties need to "know exactly what the objectives are in addressing the need of the markets." P6 requested a clear definition of the vision and partnership goals, which are motivating factors for both companies. According to P5, alignment on time deliverables with the parties should be part of the planning. P5 mentioned, "A thorough planning of our project including a realistic and alignment on-time deliverables would be key." Regarding distributorship, P5 also said, "Most important is, is the person aligned to the vision?" meaning that the partner's alignment is critical for the partnership's success. P6 went further in the partner's alignment by requesting that both parties at the partnership "align on the mindset and governance that they will use to run the partnership." Most participants agreed that goal alignment among the parties at the partnership and the internal teams of both parties is essential to achieve success. The participants recommended the inclusion of all stakeholders through the business planning structure and format to deliver firm expectations and provide clarity to achieve expected alliance goals.

Consistent and Protective Legal Agreement

As an interfirm partnership involves that parties take the risk of sharing resources and knowledge, the parties must avoid exposing their competitive edge and reputation and ensure that there is no violation of their agreements and expectations. The participants considered that a consistent and protective legal agreement will be helpful.

According to P1, P3, and P6, a consistent and protective legal agreement will secure the parties' interest while structuring and clarifying the deliverables and responsibilities of the parties. P3 recommended achieving that milestone "by establishing a very strong legal agreement, by trying to put together, by trying to make sure that all the risks, all the concerns, all the fears are covered within a legal agreement, within a document." P3 added, "A critical success factor would have been to bring more formalism, more structure." P3 ended their perspective on that subject by stating, "There should be like a clear legal framework." P6 confirmed, "In every step you take you have to ensure that the steps you are taking are in alignment with the contractual obligations that both parties have under the agreement." P1 stressed the need for the parties to stick to the formal agreements as they said, "So, you bring in a very solid legal document that gives cover or perceived cover to all the parties involved in this arrangement." The participants agreed that the parties should put in place a clear and strong legal framework to secure the interests and alignments. Unlike the informal agreement, which might create confusion in interpretation in case of conflict, the contractual agreement, acknowledged and signed by the parties, is useful to offset to a large extent, the high-risk of interfirm alliances.

Partner Compatibility and Readiness

According to the interview participants, choosing a partner is a critical element to consider. The review of the interviews uncovers some similarities but also some differences among the participants. P3 considered the preassessment of the partner's ability to collaborate and achieve success an indispensable step. P3 declared that hiring an external consultant to do the assessment could guarantee objectiveness:

It should be formalized, and I would say even maybe conducted by an independent party to issue a very specific report on the divergences on the differences, on the cultural aspect, on the governance aspect, on the leadership aspects, and then based on the reports, to see if it is possible to have an action plan to fix the gaps.

The gap analysis would then confirm whether there is compatibility to partner or if there are some corrective actions that the parties need to take to be ready for partnership. For P3, cultural compatibility is among the critical elements the assessor should consider. P3 elaborated further by considering that a balance of power between the partners is necessary for alliance success. P3 mentioned,

If one of the entities is too weak and the other one too strong, yeah, there will be an issue. Yeah, so we should have a balanced power level for each entity. Not exactly the same, but it should be. It should be balanced.

P3 implied that a balanced power among the partners is a condition for success. None of the parties in a partnership should feel disadvantaged.

P2 considered finding the right partner critical and recommended among the top criteria “the partner’s commitment, the partner’s values and the partner’s willingness to embark or withdraw in this journey.” P2 added that a committed partner has a good potential to overcome cultural challenges, saying,

If you have someone committed even at the beginning, you do not have the same level of culture or maybe the same way of doing the operation, but his commitment generally will give him the power to overcome those challenges.

P2 recognized the importance of cultural compatibility and commitment to partnership success. Conversely, P2 considered commitment more critical as it could overcome cultural differences.

P4 was more pragmatic as they said, “You need a good richest contractor when you are talking about finance.” P4 considered that a partner should have a strong financial capacity to run a bottling or distribution operation. P5, who covers the distributorship agreement, does not exclude the criterium of financial that P4 claimed. P5 also values the motivation and the entrepreneurial instinct of the partner. P5 stated, “The other one for me, in terms of the fourth one, is the hunger of the person, the entrepreneurial instincts of the person, the entrepreneurial characteristics of the person,” adding, “You cannot buy entrepreneurial instinct, and you cannot buy the hunger to win.” The financial capacity to run operations coupled with the entrepreneurial skills and orientations of the partners are critical elements to consider when selecting a partner for an interfirm partnership.

To make a good selection of the partners in Country B and Country A, P1 revealed that an important element was to put priority on the profile of partners who already have basic and significant investments on the ground or who have end-to-end financial muscles to carry a bottling or distribution operation according to the Brand Owner’s requirements. P1 revealed,

So that is very key. Number 2 has got to do with partners who already have got investments and facilities on the ground for which it will take just little extra investment to be able to bring them up to speed, to be able to meet the standards

that the company requires of them to be able to bottle or to qualify to bottle our beverages for us.

According to P1, it is more beneficial to partner with entities with experience in the business to operate, as well as the investment autonomy and financial capacity to drive the business. P1 qualified the financial capacity and experience as criteria for partner selection to achieve a sustainable alliance.

Among the partner assessment criteria, ethics considerations and due diligence have also been critical to the partnership's success. P1 affirmed, "One of the criteria has been ensuring that you are dealing with a genuine and authentic partner, people who are playing it ethically." With the partnership in Country B, for example, P1 informed that the Bottler and the Brand Owner had to ensure the partner had a clean source of funds. P1 revealed, "The other key and the source of such funds, I mean, I often investigated, and based on whether it is a clean source of funds or whatever it is, we then make a decision." P1 revealed the Brand Owner's important implication and support in confirming the candidate's profile. P1 said,

The [Brand Owner] and legal teams have been leading in this, okay, and detailed and very deep research is done on each of the parties, the directors of the companies, and then once they are all given a clear green light.

Ethical considerations are primary criteria that both the Bottler and the Brand Owner will consider before analyzing other steps of collaboration compatibility.

Finally, P1 required that the partner demonstrate minimum expertise and capabilities, whether industrial or commercial, involving facilities, human resources, know-how, or potential to have them:

My definition of technical capability does not only limit to factory technical requirements. For those who even want to do the distribution for us, we will assess whether they have the knowledge, the capability, the team, and the people to do so. Even if they do not have, at least we will check if they have the ability to recruit.

Similar to the initial financial and investment capacity, P1 also claimed knowledge and expertise as criteria to consider when selecting a partner. P1 showed interest in a consistent partner team with sufficient knowledge and ability to demonstrate manufacturing or distribution skills.

Connecting Theme 2 to the Literature

The authors in the literature (e.g., Salama et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022) and the interview participants agreed that thorough preparation is indispensable for a successful and sustainable alliance strategy. Wang et al. (2022) considered thorough preparation necessary before engaging in an interfirm partnership. Salama et al. (2022) stated that the partner selection criteria vary according to culture, resources, and strengths. The participants agreed with these criteria and added other elements. The participants mostly considered that choosing a good partner is essential. Selecting partners includes ensuring that the partner meets certain criteria. Among the criteria, the participants mentioned the partner's operational and financial readiness, skills, cultural compatibility with the

company values, and ability to comply with international regulations regarding quality and safety. Preparedness also includes goal alignments and a solid business case. A protective legal agreement among the parties is essential, meaning that it helps clarify expectations and secure respect for each party's obligations.

Connecting Theme 2 to the Conceptual Framework

Preparedness is useful to confirm the positive impact of the transactional cost approach before engaging in the partnership venture. Good preparation of the alliance project aligns with the conceptual framework because a sound business plan, which includes the project's financial and operational aspects, will also help determine the project's profitability upfront. A sound business plan will contain the project description, implications, and gaps to be corrected. Williamson (1981) stated that the proper organizational structure is efficient by optimizing the cost of transactions. Each transaction has cost implications that the leaders should manage, monitor, and control. That perspective requires a cost-benefit analysis that includes thorough preparation and analysis of critical transactions with cost implications.

Bounded rationality is another concept of the transactional cost theory that is a context for proper planning to reduce risks. Bounded rationality refers to the organization's limitation in understanding future situations affecting the business because of business uncertainties and the complexity of the environment (Wu & Chang, 2021). Therefore, the participants make a valid point by claiming thorough preparation ahead of any alliance or partnership initiative.

Theme 3: Efficient Implementation Promoting a Win–Win Approach

After the preparation, implementing an interfirm partnership requires some critical specific skills, which the interview participants described based on their experiences. From their respective perspectives, I could picture a model based on a win–win approach in an environment of trust and transparency, with effective support to the partner, without excluding a minimum of control. An in-depth analysis of Table 4, dealing with Theme 3, will cover these aspects.

Table 4

Theme 3: Efficient Implementation Promoting a Win–Win Approach

Themes	Number of respondents identifying the theme	Number of occurrences
Adopt a mixed form of governance	6	10
Create an environment of transparency, trust, and excellent relationship	6	26
Establish a proper control and activity monitoring system to avoid risks and promote performance	4	13
Bring full support to the partner in the implementation of the partnership	4	12
Demonstrate special soft skills during partnership implementation	4	14

Adopt a Mixed Form of Governance

Regarding partnership governance, the participants have different approaches, at least in the degree of formalism of informality. The participants mostly recommended formal governance as a basal approach to clarify and secure the parties' interests.

According to P2, the governance should be formal: “It is formal first because of the kind of product we are doing, we are in fast-moving consumer goods, and we know the risk of

that product.” P2 stressed the complexity of the food and beverage category products, which requires a high level of attention, control, and compliance given the risks related to consumption. P4 went in the same direction, mentioning, “You have to make it quite formal, especially when you talk about quality.” P3 was more categorical and stated that formalization brings simplicity and professionalism to the alliance implementation. P3 elaborated, “Definitely, you will formalize the formalize one because of the complexity of alliances.” P3 said again, “The only way to survive is to bring governance.” P3 added, “We are talking about business. Let us be pragmatic, specific, and formalize things.” Formal alliance governance is helpful in bringing precision and clarity to the parties and professionalism in the alliance implementation.

However, P1, P6, and P5, were more towards the hybrid nature. P1 would describe the best alliance governance as a hybrid. P1 said, “I will describe it as a hybrid, and both sides are critical.” P6 declared the reason for the mixed approach: “It is important that you document everything. Discussions are documented. The contracts clearly define key performance indicators. However, in certain situations, you will need informal governance methods to balance the emotions and feelings and the parties’ decisions.” Coming to the distributorship in West Africa, P6 justified the informal approach because most distributors are not well-educated. Therefore, a too formal environment would make them less responsive and less comfortable. In the same context of distributorship, P5 agreed with P6 on the hybrid nature of successful governance as they said, “Yes, and there is a formal framework, which has to be followed. However, much work that has to be done to arrive at that and achieve the goals and aspirations of

the company is much dependent on the informal.” Therefore, P5 added, “You need to be informed within a formal framework.” Even P4 who is in favor of more formalism for control purposes, tempered their first view by admitting, “It has to be more official, but daily, you have to have in mind the culture of the organization and the country and the managers on the other side where you are working with.” Without excluding the relevance of formalism in strategic alliances and partnerships, P1, P6, and P5 consider that the informal relationship has several benefits, such as reinforcing relationships based on interpersonal ties. Through informal relationships, the parties could break barriers of accessible communication, which is necessary to build trust. Therefore, a hybrid model would be a fruitful strategic approach.

Create an Environment of Transparency, Trust, and Excellent Relationship

Transparency has been a successful driver in the Bottler’s alliance strategy. P1 stated that transparency is the way to go in alliance governance. P1 declared, “In our organization, our approach so far has been one of being transparent to the best of our ability to our partners.” P1 considered that transparency would bring more trust and confidence in the alliance relationship. P1 declared, “When your partner knows that you are truly transparent, their level of trust becomes unprecedented.” On the other hand, P1 raised the point that lack of transparency causes wrong decisions based on inaccurate information, saying, “You do not know all the details of the variables that you are dealing with. And so, you make wrong decisions, and it backfires on all parties.” P1 declared, “These are really very crucial things that make them believe in the project and put in all

their resources without fearing that it was going to go wrong.” Creating confidence through transparency drives partners to invest more.

Without ignoring the relevance of trust in alliance, P3 valued transparency and considered it not an indispensable complement to trust. An alliance or partnership can work well if there is transparency, even though there is no trust; Taking the example of two entities partnering, P3 said, “Two entities can decide to work together on the project. They might not be even the level of trust, a certain level of trust, but as long as there is transparency, it can still work.” P3 considered transparency a sign of professionalism and pragmatism and should precede trust, which, to some extent, is related to emotions and feelings. P3 said again, “I will start with transparency before trust because we are talking about business, and I do not think trust can be enough. To establish a partnership of this caliber, I strongly believe in what we call due diligence.” According to P3, the partners should focus more on ensuring transparency in their relationships. A transparency-based relationship will be helpful to achieve the joint goals with or without trust.

P2, like P1, considered that trust and transparency are both indispensable for a successful partnership. At the same time, a truthful and sincere collaboration is a source of trust. Taking the example of the long-term collaboration with the Brand Owner in the context of licensing that has created a level of trust that the company is benefitting from, P2 said,

I think the first two things I would say over there is trust and transparency.

Because, yes, because of the trust, because we had been working with the Brand

Owner for more than 30 years now, and we have been able also to fulfill the requirements on the on all the supply chain.

Considering the distribution partnership with lower-size businesses in Country C, P5 also argued that transparency is a source of trust necessary to build a durable partnership relationship. P5 said, "As much as possible, we are not transparent enough to have eroded every suspicion, then it might be on paper a partnership, but it might be one-sided, and that one-sidedness does not build trust." As far as P6 is concerned, transparency is key to allowing the other party to understand the partner's true reality. P6 declared, "You need to understand the distributors' financial position to make such reviews relevant. So, where there is no transparency, you realize that you cannot have very good discussions with your distributor." Conversely to the perspective of P3, P1, P2, P5, and P6 considered trust indispensable as transparency in exerting an efficient alliance governance. At the same time, they considered transparency a prerequisite for trust in interfirm partnerships. A key point from the analysis is how to build trust and transparency.

P6 revealed that there should be joint ownership of the relationship to build trust and transparency. Opportunistic behavior and lack of commitment and ownership kill trust. P6 said, "The other one is the fact that there should be joint ownership of the relationship. When one party is more interested in the sustenance of the relationship than the other, then you lose trust and transparency." The ownership of the Bottler team by showing signs of trust will motivate the partners to be open. The bottling leadership team has a role to play. P5 stated, "There should be trust, and then the trust has to be demonstrated." More precisely, P4, who also values trust to a lesser extent, proposed a

good demonstration of trust by regular sharing of “production plans, the requirements, volumes, expectations, supply.” P6 and P5 agreed that opportunistic behavior affects an alliance relationship based on trust and transparency. The participants recommended that the parties demonstrate their good intentions to cement the alliance relationships through concrete and exemplary actions.

Trust will create reciprocity, as P2 implied by the following statement: “Having a kind of trust between the partner because if the trust does not exist, meaning that they will not be open to collaborating with you.” Trust and transparency do not exclude cautiousness and control. The question about trust and transparency is more accurate in cooperation, where two entities competing in the same market decide to join resources or knowledge to achieve common goals.

As an area of improvement, P4 implied that the scope of the partner is too large, and the Bottler has limited control. The operating model in Country B discloses the partner’s increased responsibility for production and distribution. According to P4, the limited control on the sales part is an area of improvement, despite the current performance. There is no control or tracking of commercial planning and performance. P4 affirmed, “Again, the commercial part is the most difficult one because you do not have an option and from the initial part if they do not comply with quality, volumes, or whatever standards.” P4 indicated that adding the distributorship to a toll-packing partner increases the loss of control, hence the company’s influence. As a competitor, the partner could grow the sales of their products to the extent of the company’s brands. P4, speaking about the partner, said, “On the other side, he can break you had to in benefits of his own

brands that he is producing. So, slowing down the sales of our product.” Despite the current positive performance of the alliance in Country B, P4 considered that losing control of commercial operations, which is a critical and sensitive activity of the Bottler strategy, by outsourcing them to an alliance partner as potentially hazardous. The partner has a substantial investment capacity and is acquiring a competitive strength through a partnership that they could leverage in the same market in case of an unexpected alliance termination.

Regarding the level of transparency and the disclosure of strategic information, P4 recommended cautiousness because it is challenging to understand the final intention of the partner. P4 said, “You never know their final objective; you have a short-term objective, but the final objective is difficult, and how it will play their cards.” P1 also recognized the risk of being transparent, especially in competition, and claimed that the Bottler had implemented some risk-mitigation measures. P1 said that the Bottler tries as much as possible to limit the risk related to competition. P1 said, “If it is a competition arrangement that has got to do with toll packing, then all our discussions and our transparent discussions, the agreements, and all those things are going to be limited to toll packing.” If it is about a distributorship agreement, then the Bottler will limit their transparency to the route-to-market approach in order to help the partner win the market. P1 said,

So it is not going to talk about my people strategy; it is not going to talk about my route to market strategy. If it has to do with distribution, then yes, my route to

market discussion comes up, and then we are going to have that kind of discussion but limited to route to market or distribution.

P1 acknowledged the risk of extending the partnership assignment to all strategic domains of activities, from manufacturing to sales and distribution. P1 recommended full transparency only at the specific sector of activity subject to partnership.

P1 declared that the risk of losing competitiveness and relevance in the competition markets is minimal because strategy is dynamic and changing, and the partner cannot hold a strategy shared with them for granted. P1 said,

With respect to Country B, you obviously are fully exposed to them in terms of your strategy. Now how do you, how do you manage that threat going for it assuming the relationship falls apart? Strategy is not forever strategy; Strategy is time-bound, and you can always change the direction.

According to P1, one fact is clear that once shared, the know-how cannot be taken away from the partner. Knowing that aspect, the company had to make a choice and accept the risk. P1 added, “When it changes when my new strategy comes up when you are gone, it is not for discussion.” The participants acknowledged that the risk related to transparency at alliances is real, even though the P4 has a moderated concern, which in no case compromises the relevance of competition to achieve sustainable goals.

To keep excellent relationships, it is critical to be reactive addressing implementation misunderstanding as they occur. P1 stated,

So you may have a partner who will be running faster than the organization, and they tend to get frustrated and will label you as quite slow in what you do, and

you just have to find a very good way and a very honest way of letting them know that the kind of governance that we put in place is very key and beneficial to both parties.

Based on the successful Country B experience P1 confirmed that honest communication coupled with a win–win approach can effectively address misunderstandings and issues in case of cultural differences during partnership implementation.

Establish a Proper Control and Activity Monitoring System to Avoid Risks and Promote Performance

Compliance with the brand standards has been one of the major areas of improvement. Another concern that constitutes a risk for the partnership’s sustainability is the partners’ compliance with the brand standard, which is still an improvement area. P1 said, “Number 2 has to do with standards, keeping to standards.” The company is a franchise of a multinational and high-equity brand. Compliance includes the elements of corporate social responsibility, and the company’s leaders do not want to compromise with them to keep their license to operate. Any partner must then be on the same page of compliance. P1 said again:

We are to look at the one big thing that we should continue to be doing to ensure that sustainability we have enjoyed so far remains, then I will largely point the finger to compliance, and by compliance I’m talking about manufacturing standards meeting ensuring that they continue to do all the relevant things that are expected of them to ensure we stay compliant with the standard sets by the Brand Owner, okay, which will then protect our license to operate.

The participants claimed that compliance with the brand standards is non-negotiable as the Bottler's license to partner with the Brand Owner and operate the production and distribution could be at high risk. Compliance applies to relevant aspects and standards that secure the image and equity of the brand, including safety, quality, and corporate social responsibility.

P1 provided more elements of compliance that the partner should be improving upon. P1 said, "I talk about compliance, it's very broad quality, technical compliance, environmental, we're talking about how you relate to the government entities, how you do business ethically and all those standards that are expected of us as a responsible manufacturing." P2 also pinpointed the risk to the company's brand reputation and the need to take necessary actions to protect it through training and tight monitoring. P2 said, "You think about your reputation if your partner is not maybe doing things you wanted." P2 added, "The partner also has to comply with the requirements you will give to them the requirements they have to comply on. You will train them, and so they understand the requirement, and after, you will follow up." Another point of compliance is about the respect of the agreed sales pricing, where the partner will still have some effort to make. P1 said, "The third one has got to do with the conflicts around pricing."

The Bottler should ensure that the partner complies with essential and sensitive aspects of the business sustainability. These elements include quality, safety, legal, and environmental standards; requirements to protect the brand reputation; and the strict respect of agreed sales pricing. The Bottler provides clarity, develops the capabilities, and takes any necessary action to enforce these principles.

Compliance is critical since it may affect the Bottler's license to operate as a partner of the Brand Owner and keep their trust. P2 stated that the Bottler leadership put some quality and safety controls and processes in place to anticipate any brand risk. On this perspective, P2 declared, "I will say on the compliance perspective, not compromising with quality, safety, and environment." P2 added,

Our license to operate, you can lose it if you have, for example, an incident management and crisis resolution (IMCR), if you have a product in the market not meeting the requirements. Even if you are close to your partner, you also have to put some controls on a quality perspective.

Compliance with quality and safety standards conditioning the brand equity and reputation is an essential aspect that the Bottler's leadership team considers during the alliance governance process. By establishing robust control mechanisms and performance review systems, the parties must work together and take necessary actions to secure the brand image and keep the franchise and licensing rights operating.

Transparency and trust do not mean a lack of control. P4 is the participant who elaborated more about this statement. Without not trusting the report that the partner provides about the state of the operation, P4 recommends a thorough understanding of the joint operation in order to have a proper discussion and avoid surprises of opportunistic overestimation, especially when the toll packer is now the initiator of the sourcing of raw materials and the whole production process. P4 affirmed,

Of course, there must be a certain way of trust, trust, respect. If you go to a toll packing model and you are purely a commercial company, and you go to your

product, you let it co-pack. If you do not have ideas about the transformation costs and the packaging costs and you are not coming out of the industrial area, then you can have some surprises. And then I think the company's background is important to see if it is really the partner is aligned and is not taking you somewhere else. So, trust is important, but you have to be able to verify the cost, data, and volumes.

P4 required cautiousness by fully understanding the operations and the involvement of the Bottler's representatives in the partnership's operations, checking the process and cost elements. P4 stated, "So trust is important, but you have to be able to verify the cost, the data, the volumes." In addition to a structured reporting system to ensure the partner is transparent and compliant, P4 implied that the Bottler's team needs to assign qualified people to enforce the control. A good understanding of the bottling operations is helpful in asking the right questions, challenging the partner's reporting, and understanding the partner's constraints.

Regarding performance monitoring, business reviews through meetings or structured reporting systems could be relevant control and alliance performance management tools. P4 declared that meeting routines are an effective alignment framework, "you have to have at least weekly meetings." P6 added, "You conduct your business reviews, look at the profits the distributor is making, you see how you can grow the business of the distributor, you where they are areas of losses." The partners should then set up regular business reviews and continuous performance discussions to ensure the partnership's sustainability.

Bring Full Support to the Partner in the Implementation of the Partnership

Limited support to the partners has been an area of improvement in the Bottler's partnership experience. The participants raised concerns about the partner's support level, mainly at the distribution partnership level. P5 stated that the support from the other department of the organization when dealing with the partners sometimes comes at a different speed. P5 pointed out the limited reactivity to the partner's needs. P5 said,

When it is out of the commercial team's reach, you do not see that speed to bring about results for our partners. Thus, our partners are always suspicious. They cannot trust us fully because when we hit a brick wall, as much as possible, the support will need from other departments is not forthcoming, or it is not forthcoming with the speed to be able to turn around situations and at every point in time.

P6 confirmed P5's statement by acknowledging that unlike the sales department, the leaders in the finance and operations departments do not show the same diligence in supporting the distribution partners. P6 stated that distribution partners are not financially strong and need financial support to be effective. In that context, P6 raised the impact of their credit policy, which is sometimes a challenge to overcome and a source of partner dissatisfaction.

P5 claimed, as another area of improvement, that in macroeconomic challenges, the leaders tended to set up the pricing to secure the company's profitability without considering the negative impact on the partners' profitability and sustainability. P5 said,

Our distributors were getting poor over the past 4 years. The P&L, the profit they were making, was dwindling, and I realized it was just because of something that we were doing as a business which we were not taking into consideration for our distributor any time there was a price upward or price review due to the economic conditions in which we found ourselves in.

P5 recommended, for common ground, that the Bottler leadership team should be more sensitive to the partners' financial concerns by reconsidering any impact of pricing decisions on their profitability and ability to sustain their businesses.

A third area of improvement is regarding the limited support to the partners, especially the distributor partners. P5 noted the limited patience of the company toward the outcomes of the partnership projects, which might end up having ongoing challenges for the distributor. P5 said,

We are quick to start something, we are not seeing good results, then we quickly move on to want to move on to something else. Moreover, some of these new ideas that we want to take are going to have lasting challenges for the distributor because it changes the whole structure.

According to P5, the effective implementation of a partnership and a successful collaboration require understanding and patience from both parties. P5 implied that the parties should not be quick to conclude that the partnership is a failure. The parties need to reassess the context of implementation, analyze the issues, and give time and necessary support to each other.

The search for a win–win outcome of the alliances and partnership requires ownership, responsibility, and support from each other. P2 stated about the partnership, “It is a win–win situation, but each party has to play his role.” To enforce compliance by the partner of Country B, P1 mentioned that the Brand Owner and the Bottler were responsible for providing the partner with the necessary support. P1 stated, “You are there to help them be more compliant, you as the Bottler and the Brand Owner also helping to maintain that level of compliance and win.” P2 stressed the responsibility of the Bottler during the partnership implementation:

Train and coach the partner on production compliance to quality, safety and environment standards, and market execution. The partner also has to comply to the requirements you will give to them the requirements they have to comply on. You will train them, so they understand the requirement, and after, you will follow up.

P2 added, “They will understand everything, they will comply to everything, but you will be behind putting them, coaching them, training them, and answering them.” P2 considered capability development, which includes training and coaching of the partner, to be an effective tool that will allow the company to overcome the negatives of cultural differences, sometimes driving so hesitations about committing to more. P2 stated,

We still face some challenges in time to sign because culture you will not build it in 1 or 2 years. It is something you will maybe build up after several years, but the commitment generally and the training support behind discussing also will help to overcome.

Building culture compatibility in an alliance takes time. Through performance follow-up, coaching, and capability building, a company can shorten the process and gain the total commitment of its alliance partner.

P5 also valued capability building as a complement to the joint business planning and a great support to the partner in achieving joint implementation goals. Both P5 and P2 went further by highlighting the level of ownership that the Bottler team needs to demonstrate in guiding the partner and ensuring they are correctly implementing the partnership. P5 stated, “We also have to be the ones who own the whole in the partnership.” The partner trusts the Bottler for having the necessary knowledge to guide them, at least on some relevant aspects of the expertise. P5 stated,

You have partners who look up to you and wait to hear from you and will only decide after getting your input. Because they know that everything you are doing for them, every proposal you are bringing, every initiative, every intervention to win in the market adds value to them.

P2 confirmed,

The Bottler will have the ownership on answering the operations work wells. In terms of production, in terms of compliance to quality, safety and environment requirements and even in in in relation with the market execution, the Bottler has the ownership of answering all this.

The role of the Bottler is critical in guiding and advising the partner in achieving the common partnership goals. P5 mentioned that the partners trust the Bottler’s team to animate efficiently the business operations as experts. P2 highlighted the necessary

ownership and dedication that the Bottler's team needs to demonstrate in helping the partners from manufacturing to distribution.

Another important point in supporting the partner is delivering on commitment and becoming pragmatic in how the partner sees a tangible positive impact in their financials. P5 said, "They have to see it in the way you act, feel it in the way you talk. Feel it in the way you make it reflect in your pockets in terms of their profitability." According to P5, these actions are a booster to the partner to do the same in playing their role. According to P5, delivering on commitment and walking the talk will be a strong sign of demonstrating trust. P1 confirmed the respect of commitment and promised as a trusted driver as they claimed: "The level of trust that you have been to the discussion demonstrating and what you say by walking the talk consistently." P1 shared the experience of Country B and Country A, where the leaders built trust through respect of commitments.

In the distributorship agreement, P5's recommendations for ownership and care for the distribution partner, obliging the Bottler to reflect on the best support method continuously, are the cement for success. P5 said again about the distributor partnership in Country C, "We need to sit back and look at their books and see whether all these price increases are really helping them to cover their costs, or we are rather kind of crippling them in the long run." P5 recommended a value chain analysis approach to sustain any decision that affects the partners' sustainability. The profitability initiatives of the Bottler should not negatively impact the profitability of the distribution partner, who is at the same time a customer and a success enabler.

The implication of the internal team is also critical. Regarding the distributorship agreement, P5 and P6 required the implication of all departments of the bottling company to help the partner succeed. P5 mentioned, “As much as possible, you need to get yourself into a situation where whatever organization is joined across all departments to make that happen. Everybody’s key performance indicators are linked towards your partners’ success.” A final point that could help the partner in the distributorship agreement is ensuring the partner’s motivation remains through the set-up of an incentive system. P6 claimed that an incentive mechanism would also secure the interest of the distributors toward their products in the very competitive market of Country C. P6 said, “The one way of establishing that the distributor is always motivated is to put in place a certain incentive scheme, which we usually call the trade terms.” Obtaining consistent and competitive trade margin is a substantial customer value driver. Therefore, incentivizing the distributors with additional margin upon delivering on agreed expectations is helpful to boost their interest. Once a distributor agrees on trade terms, it is a sign that the reward will be up to their upfront expectations and secure loyalty.

Support to the partner appears as an obligation, and P2 required the Bottler to have more ownership in the partnership implementation because they are first responsible before the Brand Owner. P2 said, “In terms of production, in terms of compliance to quality, safety and environment requirement and even in in in relation with the market execution. The Bottler has the ownership of answering all this.” Again, P2 revealed that significant support from the Brand Owner has been critical throughout the alliances and partnerships. The support included their involvement in the agreements set up, their

technical insight and guidance, and the capability-building initiatives. P2 added, “From the day one of the project, they had been 100% involved. The assessment is done with them with the technical team, we do it together. The action plan also is done in collaboration with them.” The Brand Owner is a global organization with years of experience, and their involvement has been an effective success driver.

Demonstrate Special Soft Skills During Partnership Implementation

The leaders of an alliance strategy should demonstrate a certain level of skills to be successful. According to P2, successful leaders should demonstrate passion, perseverance, and consistency, as a partnership is a whole journey. P2 said,

You have to have passion because if you are not passionate at the beginning, you will see some kind of challenge, and maybe you will just say no, he is not going to make it; he is far below my expectations.

P2 added, “You will struggle, but yes you have to push, be consistent and make it.”

Technical skills are critical, but more is needed. Passion, dedication, perseverance, and consistency are indispensable to succeed at alliance journeys. These values are useful to overdeliver on expectations and sustain the partnership in situations of business challenges and uncertainties.

In the same optics, referring to the distribution model, P5 advocated for patience and enough time to build and strengthen the necessary relationship, trust, and loyalty. P5 said, “Results take time, and you are dealing with human beings.” P5 added,

You should not sacrifice or compromise on the amount of time you need to get a relationship to a place, put in place all the structures, all your capability,

framework and everything to build them to that point where now you can get on what, autopilot.

In addition to building trust and relationships, patience is an excellent value to put the adequate structures, capabilities, and framework for the joint business to move smoothly.

Connecting Theme 3 to the Literature

Formalism and trust have been an extensive discussion topic during the literature and the interviews. For example, Lehene (2021) established the relationship between alliance monitoring and control and alliance performance, whether a productivity or innovation-based alliance. Lehene identified a solid relationship between alliance control and productivity or performance. However, Koolwijk et al. (2021) disclosed the importance of trust over control in strategic alliances in the current competitive context where firms need true partners. On both sides, the views vary. However, the authors and interview participants agreed that creating an environment of trust is essential. The participants agree that control is necessary for alliance performance. The level of formalization could be to ensure visibility and control. At the same time, the firm leaders show an informal approach at some point to enhance relationships and break cultural differences. Lehene and Koolwijk et al. chose among the two approaches that the literature contains. The participants went mostly for a hybrid model.

A win–win approach in governance will secure the trust and transparency necessary to achieve the goals. Wang et al. (2022) claimed that the parties in an interfirm partnership should avoid possible opportunistic behaviors. Opportunistic behavior is quite risky, resulting in irreparable discontinuity of the partnership (Zhao et al., 2021). The

interview participants were in line with a win–win governance approach. The participants require that the leaders provide the necessary support, demonstrate patience, and address issues as they occur to avoid frustration and maintain relationships. Considering the uncertainties and risks of alliances and cooperation, the participants claimed that a win–win approach drives excellent relationships, which C. Zhang et al. (2021) and Mamédio et al. (2019) claimed for a successful and sustainable alliance.

Connecting Theme 3 to the Conceptual Framework

According to Mikami and Bird (2022), opportunistic behavior is another important challenge that the transactional cost theory supporters need to address. The interview participants mostly warned against opportunistic behavior, which focuses on elevating individual interests at the expense of the parties' joint interests (Mikami & Bird, 2022). The participants at the interview recommended continuous support, transparency, and quick misunderstanding resolution, to ensure the partner keeps the same win–win approach and the related excellent relationship.

Applications to Professional Practice

My study may be significant because its findings have potential positive professional implications in a context where the global market is highly competitive, and organizations are more inclined to gather resources or knowledge to become stronger. The firm under study has an extensive experience in partnership in addition to more than 30 years of franchising and licensing experience. Learning from the successful experience of a multinational bottling company, which has made alliances and partnerships with its business model, could inspire leaders of other organizations.

Based on the study's results, global food and beverage firm senior leaders could identify potential strategies when investing in a developing country and partnering with smaller and local players. The awareness could also guide the leaders of local SMEs in collaboration with multinational companies. The feedback of leaders who have already experienced a strategic alliance, mainly those facing difficulties or benefitting from the excellent application of the success factors, could be insightful.

This research could also be useful to the firm's internal leadership team under study. An analysis covering confidential views from key stakeholders of the alliance and partnership process is inspiring, and the identified areas of improvement are learning points to improve. The output includes partners' feedback and improvement areas, and discussion points for finding further alternatives or strategies. For example, distributorship has gone through a structured process and is on track to deliver greater results if the leadership team considers the recommendations. Some of the recommendations may require further analyses and the consideration of other parameters. For example, the partner's financial support, such as increasing their share of profit in a period of crisis, requires financial capacity to satisfy the partners up to their requirements, and the participant may not be aware of some factors to consider. Therefore, a decision to follow the recommendations may require further analyses. In that context, the take-away is understanding the need to act at the right time. On the other hand, cultural alignment and relationship improvement might not necessitate cost and only require leadership skills. The level of cautiousness in alliances is another relevant reflection area where the internal team may spend time envisaging risk management action plans.

To leaders of business very new in interfirm partnerships, the study shows that preparedness is critical and requires a 360 and cross-functional analysis, from the business case to the cultural compatibility assessment. The other critical learning point is that issues, including alliance termination, can occur at every process stage. Therefore, preparation is only a first stage of a long journey. Finally, the concept of coopetition is a new orientation of reflection. Assessing and applying the possibility of partnering with fierce competitors is not impossible, and the case under analysis is a great illustration.

Implications for Social Change

This research could have a positive social impact because facilitating global food and beverage firms to expand their businesses to emerging and developing countries is an opportunity for job creation in local communities. The sustainability of organizations in the current competitive environment is useful to secure jobs, hence bringing a positive social impact. Strategic alliances and partnerships appear as business growth factors and constitute an opportunity to build further job creation opportunities.

The positive social impact also could be making products affordable to the consumers, who can enjoy the nourishing and refreshing features of the food and beverage brands. The success of these types of alliances could improve social conditions. The rise of inflation in West Africa could affect the competitiveness of quality products, which require costly quality components in raw materials and some global standard of production with high-level expertise. In that context, strategic alliances are useful to achieve economies of scale and maintain high-quality goods' profitability and

affordability. One of the risks of uncontrolled consumer price increases is shifting consumer demand towards lower-quality goods that could negatively impact health.

Many developing countries, such as some West African countries, need the technology or knowledge to manufacture quality food and beverage products. With the cost of investment in local production, strategic alliances may be an alternative to share risks and encourage businesses to set up businesses with local partners. That initiative will help to sustain entrepreneurship and create opportunities for side businesses, either small- or medium-sized, for the benefit of households. Another critical point in growing businesses through alliances and partnerships is the increase of tax revenue that the governments can use to improve the quality of living and social conditions of local communities.

Recommendations for Action

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the alliance and partnership strategies that business leaders of food and beverage firms in West Africa use to sustain their businesses. The study findings could benefit the leaders and decision-makers of the firm under study as well as other companies seeking alliances and partnerships. Alliances and partnerships came as the only viable alternative to address the major issues that the participants listed. The positive outcomes confirmed by the documentation review are a sign that the strategies the leadership team applied worked.

From the literature, interview sessions, and company documentation reviews, several common views could serve as learning points. Among the recommendations that the leaders of other firms envisaging interfirm cooperations should be aware of alliance

and partnership preparedness, from the project's ideation to the business case and the partner selection, considering the cultural compatibilities. Also, win-win alliance governance at implementation is indispensable to strengthen trust and excellent relationship. I plan to facilitate professional training sessions to inspire business leaders to explore ways to overcome competitive threats, adapt to market dynamics, or achieve sustainable growth through interfirm partnerships.

Recommendations for Further Research

For further research, it would be good to know how the teams under the supervision of the firm leaders should apply the alliance strategies effectively to achieve expected business goals sustainably. The leadership team must communicate a vision to the people in charge of the implementation and control. These two aspects are a different reality subject for further study. It is also good to know what the partners think. P2 suggested that partners should also give their points of view. A strategic alliance involves two or more parties, and an interesting approach would be understanding every stakeholder's perspective.

P4 spoke firmly about trust in cooperation, but their key message is that one never knows what is in the partner's mind until alliance termination. Even though alliances consist mostly of achieving common goals, the motivations could differ. Alliance termination is a subject of study that requires further research. Strategy is not static, as P1 said, but exposing an organization by sharing its core competencies is a high exposure that might require closer attention. Can we use alliances just tactically for a short-term goal, as P1 said, without further consequences? In any case, the thinking around the

alliances and partnership strategies is ongoing. What makes the subject interesting is that the approach is contextual and, to a large extent, involves the culture. Even though it can inspire leaders from other organizations, it makes every study unique.

One of the limitations of the current research was the inability to extend the contextual situation's outcomes to others systematically. Further research could address the limitation of the current study to apply to other circumstances. Even though the six leaders demonstrated alignment on some strategic approaches and mindsets, the current research remains contextual, dealing with a single case facing a specific business challenge. Exploring other companies from the same or other sectors may be a meaningful contribution to the strategic alliances and partnerships literature. Further approaches would either confirm the outcomes of the present research or display other alternatives that could inspire African leaders.

Reflections

Studying alliances and partnerships has been a great experience and learning opportunity. Participants were quite interested in participating in the study. They also trusted me to keep their perspective confidential. The participants spoke their mind. At the same time, it was a good idea not to see the candidates face-to-face. It might have been tough to hide some emotion and body language to remain neutral as I facilitated the interview sessions. It was challenging recruiting and having interviews without bias because for 2 years, I have been a major stakeholder in the alliance and partnership. There are some contexts in which the participants, despite their positions, may not have been aware of some realities and facts. In any case, I had to avoid any bias. Listening

actively to people bringing different perspectives was good, which some could have avoided during a regular business meeting without anonymity.

Finally, it was a great experience doing a study about alliance strategies. I spent 16 years in companies in alliances, working in alliance implementation or building agreements. I have been at different levels of the partnership. I have witnessed alliance successes but also unexpected and expected failures. After my MBA with dissertation dealing with interfirm partnerships, this experience was complementary knowledge for an in-depth understanding of the basics. Alliances and partnerships have complexities that we cannot take for granted knowledge. Learning is continuous.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the strategies was to explore the alliance and partnership strategies that business leaders of food and beverage firms in West Africa use to sustain their businesses. Three main themes emerged from the thematic analysis: analyzing the relevance and opportunity for alliances and partnerships, thorough preparedness, and efficient implementation promoting a win-win approach.

The research complemented the literature review, confirming most of the authors' perspectives and having some specific learning points. That study involved four types of alliances: simple toll packing agreement, coopetition, franchising, and distributorship. The research findings could be useful to business owners and organizations seeking sustainability alternative in this competitive world. Strategies exist and could be situational. However, the collection of primary data showed that despite different

applicability to every situation, some common views and principles could inspire business leaders. Even though the research covers a West African reality, it also includes general and situational concerns that can inspire decision makers beyond Africa. African leaders could be great beneficiaries of this growth model, which is an effective alternative. A sustainable company is a company that is successful economically with positive social and environmental impacts.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Research question: What alliance and partnership strategies do leaders of food and beverage firms in West Africa use to sustain their businesses?

Interview purpose: Explore the alliance and partnership strategies that business leaders of food and beverage firms in West Africa use to sustain their businesses.

- A. Select the participants and send them an invitation by email after discussing with them physically or over the phone.
- B. Send the participants the interview questions, including the problem, purpose, and informed consent, at least 48 hours before the interview. If needed, send the letter from Walden University supporting my request. Provide any clarification needed regarding the interview questions.
- C. Thank the participant for his availability, introduce myself, restate the purpose of the interview, and obtain authorization to record the conversation.
- D. Collect the informed consent.
- E. Start recording and start the interview with questions 1 to 10.
- F. Listen to the interviewee quietly without disturbing him unless he asks for precision.
- G. Ask the interviewee any follow-up questions needed. Take notes.
- H. End the interview and explain the next steps.
- I. Thank the participant for taking part in the interview.
- J. Remain available for further detail and request the interviewee's availability to provide any further detail I may need.

K. Protocol ends.

Appendix B: Invitation Letter to Participate in the Proposed Study

My name is Serge Aka, a doctorate student at Walden University, Minneapolis, United States of America. I am in the doctoral study of my Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) program, which is the final step of the entire program. My research topic is: Strategies to Sustain Food and Beverage Businesses in West Africa Through Alliances and Partnerships. The research purpose is to explore the alliance and partnership strategies that business leaders of food and beverage firms in West Africa use to sustain their businesses. The general business problem is that strategic alliance organizations fail for several reasons at a high rate. The failure situations are diverse and heterogeneous, so locating the reasons for the decline is challenging. Therefore, finding the right strategy will significantly influence businesses in Africa, particularly in West Africa. Making alliances and partnerships succeed in Africa will have many advantages for entrepreneurship on the continent.

Your input would be quite valuable in sharing some personal approaches, best practices, and tips that allowed you to succeed in sustaining your business through alliances and that can foster our academic knowledge. As a leader of this organization, your support of the research by participating in the interview sessions will be constructive. Your company has a strong experience in strategic alliances and partnerships across West Africa. It has a clear record that this operating model works. This research will add to previous research to address the low success rate of strategic alliances. The interest is to create a base of learning to inspire generations about a business model that is a critical success factor. This base of learning will also be helpful

to understand the risks and challenges. Your responses to the interview will help answer the research question: What alliance and partnership strategies do leaders of food and beverage firms in West Africa use to sustain their businesses?

This work is intended for academic purposes only, and your input will be treated with strict confidentiality, according to Walden University confidentiality protection guidelines inspired by *The Belmont Report*. The interview will be scheduled at your convenience and will last up to 40 minutes. You will have the full right to refuse to participate or withdraw at any time. Should you decide to participate, I will share a consent form via email that will determine your rights during the process, alongside the purpose of the research. I will share the interview questions summary and request your approval to proceed. I hope you will participate in this interview session with the participation of five people. I have the approval of the managing director to proceed. I remain available for any further request and at your entire disposal. My contact details are as follows: _____

Thank you for considering this request.

Serge Aka, Walden University DBA student

Appendix C: Interview Questions

This session includes open-ended questions that I will use:

Researcher: Serge Aka

Time of the interview: _____

Date: _____

Place: _____

Interviewee: _____pseudonym (P1)

The basis for the exploration of the strategies that the alliance and partnership strategies that business leaders of food and beverage firms in West Africa use to sustain their businesses are the following open-ended research questions:

1. What is your viewpoint of alliances and partnerships between two or more entities in your industry, and how can a firm make them successful?
2. Your company has had several alliance experiences. Why did the company leaders engage in these alliances and partnerships?
3. How did the firm leaders use the interfirm partnership to overcome the risks and concerns and achieve positive results?
4. What has been your best alliance or partnership experience and significant achievements? What was your role? What were the key success factors?
5. What have been your major concerns at the implementation of the partnership agreement? How did the firm leaders address your concerns? If not satisfied, how should the leaders have handled your concerns for better results?

6. Are the current partnerships sustainable? Why? What could be improved or leveraged in the current partnerships to make them sustainable?
7. Are trust and transparency key success factors for your alliances? What are the other key success factors?
8. Which form of governance, formal or informal, would make alliances or partnerships sustainable? Kindly elaborate.
9. What do you think about cooptation? What does it take for cooptation work with a current or potential competitor?
10. What other information can you share about your company's partnership and alliance experiences?