

Analysis of competitiveness in SMEs in the restaurant subsector in the city of Cúcuta, Colombia

Análisis de competitividad en las Pymes del subsector restaurantes de la ciudad de Cúcuta, Colombia

CASADIEGO-DUQUE, Yair R. ¹
RUEDA-VERA, Gerson²
AVENDAÑO-CASTRO, William R. ³

Abstract

The competitiveness of SMEs in the restaurant subsector of the city of Cúcuta (Colombia) is analyzed. The research has a quantitative approach and a non-experimental-transectional design. Twenty-five restaurants participated and a validated questionnaire was used. The findings show that the SMEs in the restaurant subsector are competitive at the regional level, although they need to improve in the control of process management and improvement plans. The sub-sector must remain within a conservative strategy with some modifications.

key words: SMEs, restaurants, competitiveness, tertiary sector, strategy.

Resumen

Se analiza la competitividad de las Pymes del subsector restaurantes de la ciudad de Cúcuta (Colombia). La investigación tiene un enfoque cuantitativo y un diseño no experimental-transeccional. Participaron 25 restaurantes y se utilizó un cuestionario validado. Los hallazgos muestran que las Pymes del subsector restaurantes son competitivas a nivel regional, aunque debe mejorar en el control de la gestión de procesos y planes de mejoramiento. El subsector debe permanecer dentro de una estrategia conservadora con algunas modificaciones.

Palabras clave: Pymes, restaurantes, competitividad, sector terciario, estrategia.

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of globalization, the prevailing economic system and the variations in the market, impose on all organizations, regardless of their size, sector or nature, a variety of challenges and demands so that they can compete and survive the economic, productive and social dynamics (Puerto, 2010; Bastos, et al, 2016; Reddy and Kumar, 2019; Cranne, et al, 2019). Even small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are affected by the processes

¹ PhD (c) in Education, Master in Global Planning. Research Professor, Francisco de Paula Santander University (Cúcuta, Colombia). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3649-8042>. email address: yaircasadiego@ufps.edu.co

² PhD (c) in Education, Master in Pedagogical Practice. Research Professor, Francisco de Paula Santander University (Cúcuta, Colombia). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9032-7100>. email address: gersonruedavera@ufps.edu.co

³ PhD in Social and Humans Sciences, Master in Education, Master in International Trade, Master in Administration. Research Professor, Francisco de Paula Santander University (Cúcuta, Colombia). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7510-8222>. email address: williamavendano@ufps.edu.co

of globalization, market internationalization and the development of information and communication technologies, among other factors (Heang, 2017).

Different researches show some of the main challenges of SMEs in the context of globalization: to strengthen capacities for management, adoption and implementation of technologies (Monge, et al, 2005:26; Galeano, et al., 2016:93; Puentes, 2017:21; Lago et al, 2012), to seek the internationalization of their products (Puerto, 2010:184; Bastos, et al, 2016:67), to design strategies based on innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship (Avendaño, 2012; Chirinos, et al., 2018:3), to empower the skills and capacities of its workers (Iglesias, et al, 2018:4; Vera and Blanco, 2019:26; Elizondo, et al., 2018:327), strengthen various capacities for competitiveness (Hernández, et al., 2014:112; Olea, et al., 2016:129; Vázquez, et al., 2014; Rovira and Hiriart, 2014), among others.

What can be inferred from the extensive literature on the subject is that SMEs are not low-impact organizations with slow growth or little development, but rather complex organized functional structures that can make a difference and be highly competitive within the market (Ávila, 2014; Romero, et al., 2016:30; Bradot, 1999:9). On the other hand, SMEs have a significant importance within the economy of countries for the employment they generate, their contribution to GDP, and the improvement of the quality of life and welfare of communities (Saavedra and Saavedra, 2014:154; Inter-American Development Bank, 2000:1; Rodriguez, et al, 2019: 73).

SMEs in Colombia contribute to 35% and 40% of GDP, and on average, these types of companies contribute 25% of the GDP of Latin American economies, although in Europe, SMEs contribute more than 55% of GDP. Likewise, in the Latin American region, MSMEs represent 99.5% of companies (Correa, et al, 2018; Montoya, 2018).

Table 1
Participation of SMEs in production and
employment in some Latin American countries

Country	Participation in formal employment (%)	Participation in production (%)
Argentina	70.2	53.7
Brasil	59.8	34.3
Chile	63.0	20.4
Colombia	67.2 (81.0 - 2018)	38.7
Ecuador	55.0	20.0
Mexico	75.0	62.0
Paraguay	77.0	-
Peru	67.9	55.5
Uruguay	68.5	-
Venezuela	38.1	-

Source: adapted from Saavedra y Saavedra, 2014, p. 154

Other data in the Colombian context: MSMEs oscillate between 95% and 99% of organizations (Gómez y Borda, 2018; Gil y Jiménez, 2014), contributed with 63% of formal jobs in 2014 (Gil y Jiménez, 2014), although already in 2018, they contributed with 81% of formal job (Montoya, 2018). It is also estimated that it represents 40% of wages, 45% of manufacturing production and the contribution to the social security system of 650,000 entrepreneurs (Gil y Jiménez, 2014).

Table 2 describes for each economic sector in Colombia the percentage of micro, small, medium and large enterprises. As can be seen, microenterprises represent the largest number of businesses, and together with small and medium enterprises, they make up more than 99% of the organizations.

Table 2
Colombia. Distribution of enterprises by size and sector (percentages)

Sector	Microenterprise	Small	Medium	Large
Industry	90.7	6.6	1.8	0.9
Services	91.1	6.7	1.7	0.5
Construction	82.6	12.5	3.8	1.1
Commerce	95.1	3.8	0.8	0.2

Source: Gómez y Borda, 2018, p. 229

As well as highlighting the contribution of MSMEs, the contribution to the economy and the great opportunities for these organizations, research in different contexts also shows the high mortality rate of MSMEs in Latin America (Romero, et al, 2016:30; Núñez, et al, 2015), and the factors that contribute to the mortality rate of SMEs, as thousands do not manage to survive the first 5 years. In Colombia, the survival of MSMEs is a challenge, since out of every 100 new companies that fit into this category, only 43 remain in the first five years: "compared to countries in the region, Colombia's survival rate is low. In countries like Argentina or Chile, nearly half of the MSMEs survive five years after their creation, a figure that is in line with the rates observed in high-income economies" (Montoya, 2018, p. 1).

Within the framework of all these dynamics, competitiveness becomes a relevant factor because it allows improving the numbers on survival and success of organizations. It should also be considered that the competitiveness construct, serves as a measure of certain capabilities (Montoya, et al, 2010: 107), and in this scenario, some methodologies and instruments allow the analysis of the competitiveness of enterprises or sectors, for example, the matrix of strategic position and action evaluation (SPACE) which is based on information from both the internal and external environment (David, 2013). In the first case, dimensions such as internal forces and competitive advantage are taken into account, and in the second case, aspects such as the stability of the environment and the strength of the industry are reviewed.

According to Suñol (2006), competitiveness at the microeconomic level is related to productivity, efficient use of resources and the quality of the products or services offered. Therefore, competitiveness at microeconomic levels is obtained by adopting standards of efficiency in the use of resources and the quality of products - services, through technological modernization, and organizational and labor development. However, SMEs very often face various situations that make it difficult to achieve their purposes: access to credit and financing sources, poor market knowledge, lack of technology in the processes, lack of leadership, little autonomy, poor medium and long term planning, low levels of innovation, among others (Ferraro, et al, 2011; Marrero y Solari, 2015; Zapata, 2004).

Capacities such as adaptation to change (permanent), definition of comprehensive and challenging strategies, creative use of technologies, production of goods and services with added value, satisfaction of consumption needs, and others, become the basis for improving competitiveness both at the level of companies and local and regional sectors: "[...] a country, region, company or sector wishing to achieve success must be competitive, meaning that it must have a set of internal and external qualities that allow it to generate sustained value in the market to face new paradigms" (Maya, et al, 2011, p. 79).

From the perspective of the Five Forces Theory, companies are exposed to factors such as the threat of entry of new competitors, the bargaining power of suppliers, the bargaining power of buyers, the threat of entry of substitute products and rivalry between existing competitors (Porter, 2008; Grundy, 2006). Therefore, these are also basic factors relevant to decision making and the achievement of the organization's goals.

It is possible that changes in internal policies, poorly trained and qualified human resources, absence of strategies (or strategic planning), lack of actions in the short and medium term, decision making without reliable and valid information, poor knowledge of the environment, inappropriate methodologies, and others, do not allow the formulation of strategies for improving competitiveness. As a result, there will be dissatisfied clients, slow or no growth, little added value, greater risk of failure, and little orientation to results, among others.

The issue of competitiveness is a concern for every country, organization, company, sector or sub-sector. In this research, the analysis focuses on the subsector restaurants of the service sector in the city of San José de Cúcuta, a municipality located in the department of Norte de Santander (Colombia). This subsector is one of the most important in the city, but due to various factors such as the border closure, the devaluation of the Bolívar currency, the lack of policies to strengthen the city's economy, among others, it must review its competitiveness strategies. The objective of the study is to analyze the competitiveness of SMEs in the restaurant subsector in the city of San José de Cúcuta as a diagnosis.

2. Methodology

The study is framed within the empirical-analytical paradigm, the quantitative approach and has a non-experimental - transectional design. The population corresponded to the companies belonging to the restaurant subsector of the city of San José de Cúcuta, which are characterized as small and medium enterprises, and which in turn meet the following particularities: 1. Exercise commerce in a legal manner; 2. Registered in the Chamber of Commerce of San José de Cúcuta; and 3. Located in the city of San José Cúcuta. An intentional sampling was used for the present investigation because it allows selecting the most characteristic cases of the population. Twenty-five SMEs from the restaurant subsector were selected.

A questionnaire was used for the managers and/or owners of the restaurants selected to participate in the study. The results of the questionnaire allowed the introduction of information in three types of matrixes related to the analysis of capacities and competitiveness: 1. Internal Capacity Profile -ICP-; 2, Environmental threat and opportunities profile -ETOP-; and 3, Strategic Positioning and Action Evaluation Matrix -SPACE- (David, 2013).

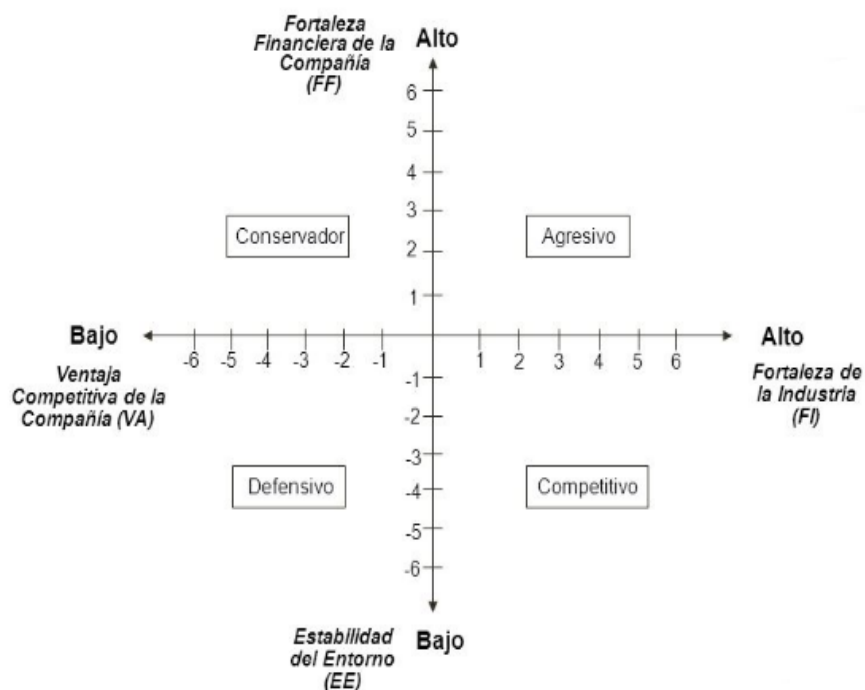
The strategic position and action evaluation matrix (SPACE) is a tool for the formulation of alternative strategies that, through the use of a four-quadrant framework, shows whether the organization needs aggressive, conservative, defensive or competitive strategies. The axes of the SPACE matrix represent two internal dimensions such as financial strength (FS) and competitive advantage (CA), and two external dimensions such as environmental stability (ES) and industry strength (IS).

The importance of this matrix should be stressed, because it allows organizations to determine the strategic position of the organization. However, at the time of formulating these strategies, one should not ignore the political, economic, social and legal guidelines that may be taken by the national government, which at a certain moment may affect the strategies that have been designed for competitiveness by the SMEs in the sector in a favorable or unfavorable way.

The validation of the content of the instrument was carried out through the technique of expert judgment made up of three experts: two (2) in the field and one (1) statistical methodologist. To establish the reliability of the instrument, the reliability of the survey was determined through the application of the internal consistency test Reliability Analysis-Scale (ALPHA) or commonly called Cronbach's Alpha.

Image 1

Illustration of the final product of the strategic position and action evaluation matrix (SPACE).



Source: David (2013)

The information obtained was systematized, tabulated, classified and analyzed. The statistical program *Software Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS) in its version 2.0 was implemented in this data treatment process, which allowed a descriptive analysis to be made.

3. Results

3.1. Internal diagnosis of the companies

A diagnosis was made through an internal analysis of the SMEs in the restaurant subsector of the city of San José de Cúcuta, using as an instrument a questionnaire that was applied to 25 companies that made up the study sample. The analysis used the internal capacity profile (ICP) proposed by Serna (2015) and David (2013. P. 149), which takes into account five categories: management capacity, competitive capacity, financial capacity, technological capacity and human talent capacity.

Table 3
Internal diagnosis of SMEs in the restaurant subsector,
San José de Cúcuta. Internal Capacity Profile (ICP)

CATEGORY	Strengths			Weaknesses			Impact		
	A	M	B	A	M	B	A	M	B
1 Management Capacity - Organization	2.45						X		
2 Management Capacity - Planning	2.81							X	
3 Management Capacity - Control					2.01			X	
4 Management Capacity - Direction	2.72						X		
5 Human Talent Capacity - Direction				2.33					X

CATEGORY		Strengths			Weaknesses			Impact		
		A	M	B	A	M	B	A	M	B
6	Human Talent Capacity – Training and Development		1.88						X	
7	Human Talent Capacity - Motivation		1.72						X	
8	Competitive Capacity - Marketing	2.36						X		
9	Competitive Capacity – Customer Service					2.12		X		
10	Technological Capacity - Production					2.23		X		
11	Technological Capacity - Quality					1.97		X		
12	Technological Capacity – Research and Development		2.30					X		

Source: Authors

The results for the subsector were unified based on the answers obtained for each of the companies in the sample. Table 3 shows the consolidated averages obtained for each of the categories, which show the level of impact as strength or weakness of each category for the subsector.

The numerical values deposited within the IPC matrix range from 1 to 3 where 1 speaks of a low grade, 2 of a medium grade and 3 of a high grade of strength or weakness, as appropriate. The values shown in Table 3 are an average of the scores obtained for each of the variables in the categories analyzed for the SMEs in the sample. Assuming that the minimum average possible to obtain is 1 and the maximum is 3, the high, medium and low levels were organized within the decimals contained between these digits, with any value being low between 1.00 and 1.67; medium level between 1.68 and 2.33; and high level between 2.34 and 3.00.

Most of the categories analyzed within the ICP showed variables with high and medium impact strengths. It should be noted that the restaurant sub-sector in Cúcuta is a market that has management leaders who understand the organizational structure of the companies they are in charge of and are trained to make correct, assertive, agile and well-timed decisions.

The employees are trained for the correct development of the functions in their charge; they are committed to the vision, mission and institutional goals; they are periodically trained, updated, encouraged and motivated to enjoy the performance of their duties. Organizationally, most of the companies that make up the sample are correctly constituted with a clear horizon and objectives.

They generate awareness of the competition and organize strategies that maintain a competitive, agile and dynamic subsector to the demands of the market, which is clearly favored by integrating to the production processes vanguard technologies that allow giving services of greater quality with wide margins of satisfaction of the client.

There are high, medium and low impact weaknesses that must be worked on within the sub-sector to prevent certain strengths from being undermined. The results of the categories analyzed within the ICP made it clear that there are deficiencies in the management control systems.

The sub-sector is weak with respect to innovation and renewal processes, although they manage to adapt to the realities of the market, which sometimes behaves in a variable and unstable way, management control and the establishment of improvement plans could encourage more solid and forceful results.

Failures in personnel selection systems were identified and although in general terms the work performance of those who make up the subsector's workforce is good, the selection systems lack organized processes that allow for the establishment of correct personnel selection procedures. In addition, the restrictions that hierarchical

aspects impose on employees in order to have initiative and autonomy in the development of actions could have a negative impact on the performance of human talent. The weakness is compensated with favorable job performance evaluations for most of the workers in the companies of the sub-sector, however, it is still a latent weakness.

In terms of competitive capacity, customer databases, loyalty programs and clear routes for requests, complaints and claims are high-impact weaknesses that require prompt attention. In the production category, we identified medium-impact weaknesses related to inventory control, production process evaluation and innovation of the products offered.

Lastly, quality assessment processes and strategies for continuous improvement are a weakness with a low to medium impact in almost all the companies in the subsector in the sample.

3.2. External diagnosis of the companies

A diagnosis was made through an external analysis of the SMEs in the restaurant subsector of the city in which the research was carried out, using as an instrument a questionnaire that was applied in the 25 companies that made up the study sample. For the analysis a matrix was used: Environmental Threat and Opportunity Profile (ETOP), where five factors are taken into account: political, economic, geographical, competitive, technological and social, which can have a negative or positive impact on the subsector.

Table 4
External diagnosis of SMEs in the restaurant subsector, San José de Cúcuta
Environmental threat and Opportunity Profile (ETOP).

CATEGORY		Opportunity			Threat			Impact		
		A	M	B	A	M	B	A	M	B
1	Technological Factors	2.95						X		
2	Economic Factors				2.42			X		
3	Political Factors				2.33			X		
4	Geographical Factors	2.83						X		
5	Social Factors					2.09			X	

Source: Authors

The results were unified following the same methodology as the IPC matrix based on the responses obtained for each of the companies in the sample. Table 4 shows the consolidated averages obtained for each category, which show the level of impact as an opportunity or threat that each group of factors has for the subsector.

Technological factors represent a high-impact opportunity in every sense. They are the way in which the sub-sector and the different companies that make up the sector are present in the digital market, not only to increase their recognition, position themselves and achieve customer loyalty, but also to carry out economic activity. The different variables analyzed within the geographical factors also result in an opportunity of high impact in its majority for the SMEs of the restaurant subsector of the city of San José de Cúcuta.

During the recent periods the local governments have worked in exploiting the tourist side of the city, allowing the gastronomy of the region to stand out as a potential point before the country for its own and visitors to delight their palate. Social factors in Cúcuta are difficult to analyze because the restaurant sub-sector may have been affected to some extent by the establishment of informal food stands by migrants from Venezuela.

The social crisis that presented a critical peak during 2018 and part of 2019 had repercussions as a serious threat to all members of the sub-sector. However, it should be clarified that the Venezuelan clientele was identified as

consumers of the restaurants, in addition to other products and services in other economic sectors of the city (Chamber of commerce of Cúcuta, 2018; Colombian Association of the Gastronomic Industry, 2019).

In addition to the informality in the establishment of food businesses, there is little control by the local authorities over these sites, which in many cases do not offer the guarantees of hygiene and quality that companies that are legalized and formally linked to the restaurant subsector in Cúcuta do.

The crisis in the neighboring country, which is currently having a lesser impact on the region than in previous years, is still affecting all economic sectors in the region, and the restaurant sector is no exception. The changes in economic dynamics, the devaluation of the national currency against the dollar, the floating population, the high rates of insecurity, among other social and economic factors, such as unemployment (16.2%) and informality (73.3%) that affect people's ability to purchase products and services in all sectors, are now becoming latent threats with high and medium impact for the group of companies belonging to the sample.

In addition, the policies of the National Government have not been favourable to growth; on the contrary, they sometimes become a barrier that slows down development and leads to austerity measures in order to keep afloat in an environment that requires high competitiveness (Colombian Association of the Gastronomic Industry, 2019; National Administrative Department of Statistics, 2019).

3.3. Strategic position and action evaluation matrix

The result of the strategic position and action evaluation matrix (SPACE) indicates which could be the most appropriate strategy to be developed by the SMEs of the city's restaurant sub-sector in order to strengthen their presence in the regional market and increase their competitiveness in the market. A series of variables were selected that include financial strength (FS), competitive advantage (CA), environmental stability (ES), and industry strength (IS). Each variable in the FF and FI dimensions was given a numerical value from +1 (worst) to +6 (best) and from -1 (best) to -6 (worst) for the variables in the VC and EA dimensions. The average score was calculated for each of the dimensions as shown in Table 5.

Table 5
Average score of FS, CA, ES and IS

Environmental stability		
1	Inflation rate	-1.64
2	Technological changes	-2.73
3	Government policies	-2.18
4	Political and social stability	-2.27
5	Competitive pressure	-3.00
6	Demand variability	-2.82
7	Fluctuations in taxes and tax laws	-3.09
Average score per environmental stability factor		-17.73
Industry strength		
1	Abundance, diversity of inputs and suppliers	3.55
2	Financial stability of the market	3.82
3	Ease of market entry barriers for new competitors	3.27
4	Substitute products	2.91
5	Growth potential	3.64
6	Social recognition that generates customer preference	3.82
7	Rivalry between companies in the sector	3.91

8	Know how - good will	4.64
9	Technological progress and knowledge	3.91
10	Good relationship with your suppliers	4.55
	Average score per strength factor in the industry	38.00
	Competitive advantage	
1	Market participation	-3.55
2	Technological knowledge	-3.64
3	Highly trained human talent	-4.18
4	Competitive prices	-3.91
5	Good-timed delivery of orders	-4.09
6	Geographical accessibility	-3.91
7	Product originality	-4.00
8	Customer service	-4.09
9	Product quality	-4.00
10	Company's trajectory and prestige	-4.00
11	Customer loyalty	-4.27
12	Control over suppliers and distributors	-4.64
13	Infrastructure	-3.64
14	Financial position	-4.27
	Average score per competitive advantage factor	-56.18
	Financial strength	
1	Liquidity	4.00
2	Solvency	4.00
3	Working capital	4.36
4	Leverage	3.55
5	Profitability indicators	3.91
6	Debt ratios	4.36
	Average score per financial strength factor	24.18

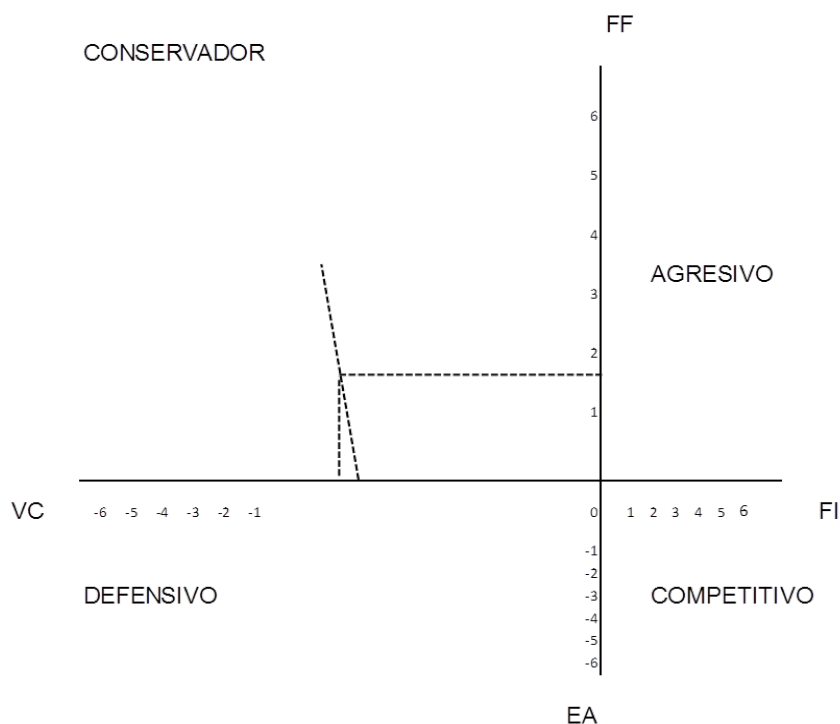
Source: Authors

The ratings corresponding to the X axis (CA and IS) are added up to obtain the coordinates of the directional vector: X axis: $-4.01 + (3.80) = -0.21$. Likewise, the ratings corresponding to the Y axis (ES and FS) are added up to obtain coordinates of the directional vector: Y axis: $-2.53 + (4.03) = +1.50$. The results are noted on the Cartesian quadrant plane to determine the most convenient strategy for the sector, obtaining a conservative type strategy for the SMEs of the restaurant subsector of the city of San José de Cúcuta.

The results indicate that the most convenient strategy for SMEs in the restaurant subsector of the city of San José de Cúcuta should be conservative. This means staying within the basic competences of the sub-sector and not running too many risks. Through the internal and external analysis of the subsector, it became evident that the SME restaurants in Cúcuta function adequately within the market of the region.

Image 2

Graph of the matrix of strategic position and action evaluation for the restaurant subsector of San José de Cúcuta



The average of ES is: $-17.73/7 = -2.53$ The average of IS is: $38.00/10 = 3.80$

The average of CA is: $-56.18/14 = -4.01$ The average of FS is: $24.18/6 = 4.03$

Coordinates of the directional vector: Axis X: $-4.01 + (3.80) = -0.21$

Coordinates of the directional vector: Axis Y: $-2.53 + (4.03) = +1.50$

Source: Authors

In spite of the threats of the environment and the weaknesses of each of the companies in the sample, the economic activity of the subsector is maintained and, unlike other markets in the region, it is fluid and sustained even in periods of crisis. The conservative strategy indicates not to deepen in significant changes, since the way the sub-sector currently works does it in an adequate and reasonable way, showing competitiveness and stability.

The SMEs in the restaurant subsector in San José de Cúcuta have found in diversification a way to grow within the industry and to create a differential and sustainable gastronomic scene. As evidenced in the external analysis conducted through the ETOP, the social and economic crisis coming from Venezuela has impacted as a threat to all restaurant SMEs in the city, however, the possibility of reinvention and expansion through culinary diversity, have allowed the restaurant sub-sector in Cúcuta to have options for all tastes, helping the companies affiliated to it not only sustain themselves, but present profits even in times of recession.

In Cúcuta, the SMEs restaurant sub-sector has found a habitat to evolve and maintain itself despite the informality and competition from large chains. Multiple options for the delight of any diner are the order of the day, which has favored the growth of the sub-sector in the city following the trend nationally and globally. Currently, Colombians are eating out more often, which is leading to many companies in the sub-sector to grow rapidly, even if their brand is incipient. The meals outside the home represented 6% of the total consumption of the Colombian homes, being this the eighth category with greater growth within the total consumption, in

addition in estimations it is believed that 38% of the people who inhabit great cities like Cúcuta, eat once or twice per week outside the home which clearly favors the development/maintenance of the companies present in the subsector SMEs of restaurants.

The results of the internal and external analysis, in addition to the SPACE matrix, are consistent with global and national trends in the restaurant subsector for San José de Cúcuta. It is clear that the sub-sector is threatened by a multi-dynamic environment that demands renovation and is affected by the weaknesses of the companies that comprise it. However, the way in which it operates keeps it competitive in the market, allows for no declines despite a growing global economic crisis and positions it as a prosperous economic sub-sector.

Such statements find evidence in the results of the strategic position and action evaluation matrix (SPACE), which indicates that the subsector SMEs of restaurants for San José de Cúcuta should at this time be kept under conservative strategies that allow the economic dynamics that have led so far continue to occur in the same way because there is no need to risk given the results that the subsector provides year after year.

Of course, such a positive dynamic of the sub-sector does not mean that the sub-sector should be trusted and neglected aspects that were identified as threats or weaknesses with high impact. At present, companies in the restaurant SME sub-sector have had to face increasingly aggressive competition, consumers have become more complex, more demanding and difficult to please, technology is changing very rapidly, the liberalization of international markets and the emergence of economic blocks are affecting the work of business organizations. This requires a high level of disposition at the level of management and administration, because any process of change or improvement must be supported by the leaders.

4. Conclusions

The strategy to maintain competitiveness in the market indicated by the SPACE matrix results is conservative; however, this does not mean that the sub-sector should not generate changes and improvements. On the contrary, although the sector shows good indicators, it should make use of its internal strengths in order to take advantage of opportunities. Technological factors represent a high-impact opportunity in every sense as a way to make a presence in the digital market and increase recognition. Also working together with the city's tourism sector could be a potential point of entry into the market.

Internal weaknesses other than those already mentioned must be overcome, things like human talent selection systems must be improved, and work must be done on establishing customer databases, loyalty programs and routes for requests, complaints and claims. Finally, although external threats have been successfully avoided, it is important to work on market development, product development, backward, forward and horizontal integration and to continue with diversification strategies.

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