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A Discussion about the Possible Effect of Middle Income Trap on Large Scale Firms' Selection of Competitive Strategy

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Abstract

Middle-income trap that is based on per capita income and measures per capita income in dollars and predominantly in relation to the Purchasing Power Parity indicates the vicious cycle a country enters at a certain income level. Thus, countries caught in the middle-income trap stay within this cycle for long periods of time and could not ascend to the next income level, the high-income group. Several ways out of this trap for countries were proposed in the literature stressing the significance of state incentives and support that state could provide for the private sector. The objective of this study is to discuss the possible changes that incentives provided by the state based on R&D innovations could initiate especially in competitive strategies of large scale firms and to present two propositions based on this discussion.

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Keywords: Middle Income Trap (MIT), Government Incentives and Supports, Competitive Strategies, Change in Strategy, Turkey.

1. Introduction

Nations, especially during the first stages of their economic growth generally have an economic structure based on agriculture. In time, productivity increases due to the mechanization, increasing capital stock and the transfer of labor into the industries. As a result, per capita income in national economies increases. Within this growth process, countries move from low-income group to lower middle-income group, from this group to upper middle-income group and finally to high-income group. However, this growth process does not have an automated impetus propelled by time. An analysis of the growth performances of nations would demonstrate that they usually stay in a

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specific income group for extended periods of time (Yaşar and Gezer, 2014). For instance, developing countries experience great difficulties in their transition from the middle-income group to the high-income group. Thus, the concept summarized as the entrapment of countries or regions with middle level per capita income in a specific income range, in other words the inability of countries to complete their transition into a higher level of income, namely "Middle Income Trap" (MIT) arises. The fact that the concept especially concerns the developing nations makes it a more interesting subject for the researchers (Kurtoğlu, 2014).

Middle-income trap basically derives from the difficulties experienced in economic growth in developing nations, which is related with the production structures of countries and sub-country regions. Thus, factors such as characteristics of production structure, businesses, labor, employment, industries, regions, technology level, foreign trade structure, product patterns, government incentives and support mechanisms, are among the concerns that should be analyzed in the definition of the problem and in the development of solution proposals (Yeldan *et al.,* 2013). Therefore, the focal point of the study is the discussion on the government incentives and support mechanisms that would be provided to break free of the middle-income trap and its effects on the strategies the private sector corporations would follow.

In the first section of the study, the meaning of middle-income trap in economics would be addressed. Then, the role of the government in middle-income trap exit strategies would be discussed. Furthermore, the concept of change in strategy would be explained and the effects of R&D based innovation incentives by the government on competitive strategies of especially large-scale companies would be discussed and finally a hypothesis would be presented as a result.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Middle Income Trap

The term "*trap*" is used to define a stable economical balance that could not be altered by any factor in the literature of economics. By the increase of a factor that helps to increase per capita income, an increase in per capita income occurs. But immediately after that fact, an increase in a factor that reduces the per capita income would cause the per capita income to decrease. Finally, income per capita would return to its initial value of equilibrium as a result of the latter detractive factor. In other words, income per capita would neither increase nor decrease, thus, would result in a state of equilibrium, which would in turn cause zero economic growth (Koçak and Bulut, 2014). Countries could experience such *income traps* in certain periods. These traps could occur in national economies in low-income levels as well as medium levels of income. Furthermore, in some cases, due to the economy-specific structural problems, blockages and declines in economic growth could be experienced even in high-income economies (MÜSİAD, 2012).

A vague area concerning middle-income trap is the uncertainty about the level of income that should be accepted as middle level income. When the concept was first discussed, national economies with 20% of per capita income in the USA were accepted as middle-income economies (Eğilmez, 2012, 2014). However, according to Eichhengren *et al.* (2001), whose work was intensively quoted in the literature, countries with a yearly per capita income of over USD 16.000 should be accepted as countries with over middle per capita income. The same study also stated that, in middle level income economies, which should have 58% of per capita income of the USA, manufacturing industry should have a share of 23% in gross national income for developing countries. According to Kharas and Kohli (2011), countries with a per capita income of USD 1,000 – 10,000 are classified as low and middle-income countries (Dalgıç *et al.,* 2014). Today, the most prevalent view is the classification made by the World Bank based on per capita income (Eğilmez, 2012, 2014). According to a calculation by the World Bank in 2013, countries with a per capita GNP of USD 1,045 are considered as "*low-income countries*," whereas countries with a per capita GNP between USD 1,045 and 12,745 were classified as "*middle-income countries*." Middle-income countries are divided into two categories as well. Those with a per capita GNP of USD 1,045 – 4,125 are considered as "*lower middle-income countries*," while those with a per capita GNP of USD 4,125 – 12,745 are considered as "*upper middle-income countries*." According to the World Bank classification, countries with a per capita income of USD 12,746 and higher are considered as "*high-income countries*" (Koçak and Bulut, 2014). The time needed for counties in middle-income group to fell into the trap for lower and upper income level countries are 28 and 14 years

respectively. Thus, for a lower middle-income country to prevent from falling into the category of a low-income country, an average per annum growth rate of 4.7% is required. Similarly, for an upper middle-income country, 3.5% average yearly growth rate should be met not to become a lower middle-income level country (Dedekoca, 2015). According to certain economists who study economics of growth, the countries within the low-income group face the danger of "*poverty trap*," while countries in middle-income group could fall into "*middle-income trap*." Literature review shows that if countries within the low-income group could overcome the poverty trap, they could proceed towards the high-income level. Table 1 demonstrates the countries that are experiencing poverty trap based on the calculations of Felipe *et al.* (2012).

Table 1. Countries within Low-income Trap

Asia	Sub Saharan Africa	Sub Saharan Africa
Afghanistan	Chad	Niger
Bangladesh	Congo	Nigeria
Laos	Eritrea	Rwanda
Mongolia	Gambia	Senegal
Nepal	Ghana	Sierra Leone
Caribbean	Guinea	Sudan
Haiti	Kenya	Tanzania
Sub Saharan Africa	Lesotho	Togo
Angola	Liberia	Uganda
Benin	Madagascar	Zambia
Burkina Faso	Malawi	Zimbabwe
Burundi	Mali	-
Cameroon	Mauritania	-

Source: Yeldan, Taşçı, Voyvoda and Özsan (2012)

On the other hand, the analysis of growth performances of various countries demonstrate that the countries that have overcame the poverty trap and moved into the middle-income group a long while ago, could never break free from this income level. In other words, the economies of countries that move into the middle-income group stagnate and these countries could not ascend towards the high-income group (Koçak and Bulut, 2014). The case where countries stick in the middle-income group and could not pass or leap into the high-income group is defined as "*middle-income trap*." In other words, middle-income trap could be defined as the situation where in capita income could not develop beyond a certain level in an economy or an economy going into stagnation after reaching a certain level of income (Dedekoca, 2015; Eğilmez, 2012, 2014). Middle-income trap that takes per capita income in countries and measures the per capita income predominantly based on the purchasing power parity, indicates the vicious cycle that a country is trapped in within a certain level of income. As a result, countries caught in middle-income trap could stay within for long periods of time and could not ascend to the next level of income, namely the high-income group. Analysis of these countries would reveal that middle-income countries have moved from low-income group to the middle-income group quickly propelled by a high growth rate, but slowed down after reaching there (MÜSİAD, 2012). Table 2 demonstrates the countries in middle-income trap.

Table 2. Countries that were in low-income group during 1962-2012 and attained middle-income level then on.

	Number of years as low-income country in post-1962 period	Per capita GNP growth rate while low-income country (%)	The year country became a lower medium-income country	Per capita GNP growth rate while lower medium-income country (%)	The year country became an upper medium-income country	Per capita GNP growth rate while upper medium-income country (%)	Average per capita GNP growth rate 1962-2012 (%)
Botswana	19	13,43	1981	4,80	2004	7,43	8,38
Brazil	13	11,03	1975	3,84	2006	14,13	7,00
China	40	6,33	2002	14,81	2010	13,93	10,11
Ecuador	13	10,18	1975	3,87	2010	7,91	5,62
Costa Rica	14	7,34	1976	4,34	2003	7,71	6,74
Colombia	17	6,50	1979	4,51	2007	11,15	5,10
North Africa	11	7,11	1973	3,71	2005	8,52	5,16
Malaysia	16	7,58	1978	4,63	2003	9,08	6,40
Mexico	12	8,46	1974	4,58	1999	6,24	5,90
Peru	29	2,52	1991	8,23	2009	9,23	5,11
Thailand	26	8,10	1988	5,64	2010	9,49	7,10
Tunis	17	8,55	1979	4,39	2009	1,56	5,43
Turkey	13	7,84	1975	4,43	2004	10,57	6,19

Source: Yaşar and Gezer (2014)

Middle-income trap was mentioned in the study titled *"An East Asian Renaissance: Ideas for Economic Growth"* published by the World Bank in 2007 for the first time. According to this report, medium-income countries have a lower growth trend when compared to rich or poor countries. The World Bank Report, *"Avoiding Middle-Income Growth Traps"* published in 2012, stated that several countries with a rapid growth trend since 1950's have reached the middle-income level, but just a few were able to make the leap to the high-income country level and thus an increasing number of countries are withheld in the middle-income trap (Koçak and Bulut, 2014). Another report published in 2012 by the World Bank titled "*China 2030: Building a Modern, Harmonious, and Creative Society*" determined that 101 countries were within the middle-income group as a result of calculations based upon the year 1960. Very few of these 101 nations were able to become a member of the high-income group as of the year 2008. In fact, based on the year 1960 data, Middle Eastern and Latin American countries were locked in the middle-income trap since their economies lacked the required progress since 1960. When compared to Latin American countries, Asian countries such as Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, moved out of the middle-income trap more rapidly and rose to the group of high-income countries. Thus, it could be stated that the economic growth could not be maintained only through free market economies as in Latin America countries, but it is necessary to determine macroeconomic level strategies in education, technology, law and corporate infrastructure. In addition, another necessity for countries to get over the middle-income trap is to realize a structural transformation in economy via high added value production as in Asian countries, in addition to product differentiation (Altınpınar, 2015). Table 3 shows the countries that attained the upper medium income group as determined by the calculations of Felipe *et al.* (2012).

Table 3. Countries ascended from upper medium income to high-income level in post-1950 period

Country	Year the country reached Upper Medium Income Level	Year the country reached High Income Level	Years spent in Upper Medium Income Level (Years)	Average Growth Rate During Transition Period (%)
Japan	1976	1983	7	4.7
Korea	1988	1995	7	6.5
Singapore	1978	1988	10	5.1
Taiwan	1986	1993	7	6.9
Austria	1964	1976	12	4.1
Belgium	1961	1973	12	4.4
Denmark	1953	1968	15	3.3
Finland	1964	1979	15	3.6
France	1960	1971	11	4.4
Germany	1960	1973	13	3.4
Greece	1972	2000	28	1.8
Ireland	1975	1990	15	3.2
Italy	1963	1978	15	3.4
Netherlands	1955	1970	15	3.3
Norway	1961	1975	14	3.5
Portugal	1978	1996	18	2.8
Spain	1973	1990	17	2.7
Argentina	1970	2010	40	1.2
Chile	1992	2005	13	3.7
Israel	1969	1986	17	2.6
Mauritius	1991	2003	12	4.0

Source: Yeldan, Taşçı, Voyvoda and Özsan (2012)

Similar to the countries in middle-income group, countries in high-income group could fell into the trap. For example, Japan successfully moved from the middle-income group to the high-income group. However, following this transition, Japan's average growth rate for the last 20 years remained below 1%, putting the country's economy in a vicious circle. Thus, although Japan has a high per capita GNP, it is in a stagnant growth deadlock, and could not break through the vicious circle. EU countries display a similar outlook as Japan. During the post-2009 crisis years, the growth rates of European economies stagnated as well. In this process, economic growth rates in Europe display rather low figures, economies could not create new jobs and as the population grows older, social security deficit, public debt burden and budget deficits increase without control. Thus, just as Japan, EU member countries have entered into *high-income trap* and no consensus has been reached as to how to get free of this income trap yet (MÜSİAD, 2012).

2.2. Middle-Income Trap Exit Strategies and Government Incentives

Countries with low income could compete in international markets with low cost labor-intensive products transferred from abroad using the advantages of low labor costs. As labor and capital is transferred from low productive sector of agriculture to manufacturing sector with a higher productivity, the national productivity, hence the income level of the country rises. However, as the countries reach middle-income level underemployment in rural areas decreases, wages increase, thus decreasing international competitive capacity. Countries that could not raise the level of productivity via innovation could not achieve the high-income level and fell into the middle-income trap (Öz, 2012). The literature on middle-income trap that have developed recently concentrated on the measures that should be taken to save the national economies from the middle-income trap. One of the most significant of such studies is without doubt the study by Kanchoachat and Intrakumnerd (2014). Kanchoachat and Intrakumnerd (2014) scrutinized the middle-income trap literature based on the middle-income trap exit methods

within the 3 groups displayed in Table 3. According to that study, based on the first group of literature, middle-income trap occurs due to the shortcomings in getting education and institutions right. They stressed that at this stage the government should be assigned a minimum role. According to the second group of literature, the main reason of the middle-income trap is the lack of the capabilities of national economies to follow up comparative superiorities and to change their composition of exports. Second group assigns a role of accelerator and services facilitator at that point. And finally the third group stresses that the main reason for the middle-income trap is the insufficient and inefficient government that could not provide industrial upgrading, in other words that could not improve its capabilities to produce and export high-technology products. The only way to break through the middle-income trap according to the last group is to copy, adapt and innovate the technology of industrial economies by the proactive government (Yılmaz, 2015). All three groups of literature are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. A summary of three middle income trap literature

Overcome way of MIT	Major causes of MIT	The role the state should play
Getting education and institutions right	Inadequate quality of education and instituaitions	Mimimum. To make the right incentive systems; investing more in education and R & D
Changing export composition by following comparative advantage	Inadequate capabilities to produce and export higher technology products	Faciliting. To support industries in which a country possesses comparative advantage
Industrial upgrading by the proactive state	Inappropriate and insufficient role of the state in enhancing capabilities to produce and export higher technology products.	Proactive. To focus on capability accumulation and deliberate attention to advancing industrial upgrading

Source: Yılmaz (2015)

Independent of the theoretical framework for the causes of middle-income trap as explained above, its main reason is the insufficient capabilities of national economies to create innovation. The capability to create innovations is dependent on three factors in an economy. There are: (1) The insufficient level of human capital, (2) Low share of high technologies in exports due to the lack of human capital and (3) Low level domestic savings. Countries that could not overcome the middle-income trap due to these reasons face problems such as low investment rates, slow growth in manufactured goods production and low differentiation of manufactured goods production (Bozkurt *et al.,* 2014).

As mentioned above, government has extensive responsibilities in middle-income trap exit strategies. Primarily, the government should vitalize the economy using necessary public policies. For instance, it needs to develop advanced infrastructure access, increase the protection of property rights and implement required reforms against existing wage rigidity in labor markets. The main point that should be underlined on the duties of the government in this aspect could be summarized as follows: The innovations and reforms, R&D activities and information technologies that must be implemented by the government should be performed in steps within the axis of a strategic plan (Yaşar and Gezer, 2014). Thus, this raises the significance of the incentives and support that the government would provide for the private sector. Here, the need to expand government incentives and support behind the scope of research and development to cover especially commercialization and marketing processes not to waste the efforts and to utilize the end products should be stressed. Because, research and development efforts that are not commercialized, would not benefit growth at all. It is also necessary to be able to measure the consequences of the incentives provided (MÜSİAD, 2012). For instance, Turkey is among the countries that are in middle-income trap.

Literature on Turkey frequently stresses the numerous responsibilities of the government in breaking away from the middle-income trap. For instance TİSK (2012) stated that the door out of middle-income trap is a new industrialization reform and thus the government should implement "industrialization transformation programs" to support domestic production (TİSK, 2014). Also in a report by MÜSİAD (2012), it was stated that the government endeavors to fulfill its duties in this direction. The efforts by KOSGEB on R&D, Innovation and Industrial Applications Support Programs, Thematic Project Support Programs; TÜBİTAK's R&D incentives and the incentive program announces by the current government in April 2012 are considered as steps towards a solution for the middle-income trap (MÜSİAD, 2012). Therefore;

Proposition 1: When a government finds itself in middle income trap, it will increase research and development based incentives and supports to firms in the country.

2. Change in Strategy

The second main concept of this study is "change in strategy". However, first, the concept of change will be explained generally. According to Macri et al. (2002), change is a set of responses given by different sub-groups of an organization to various elements of the environment. Another definition is that change is a process of learning in which individuals or organizations learn new things and forget old ones (Rampersad, 2004). "Organizational Change (OC)" is an important phenomenon since it may lead to positive consequences for organizations. A meta-analysis based on psychological intervention programs found that these programs generally increase the productivity levels of workers (Guzzo et al., 1985). In a similar vein, cultural change in British Airways during the process of privatization brought a stronger financial performance to the firm. However, OC may also have some negative consequences on organizations (Abrahamson, 2004; Trinh and O'Connor, 2002) such as lower levels of employee and customer satisfaction, lower worker productivity and weaker financial performance. Even a change in the core activities of an organization can increase the risk of organizational mortality (Singh et al., 1986).

Various factors can trigger change in organizations. For example, changes in internal and external environment may encourage OC. Changes in the political, economic, social, technological, ecological or legal elements of the external environment may force organizations to change. The economic development of Germany and Japan after World War II, and strategic alliances among countries such as in the EU and NAFTA are some of these changes in the external environment (Hellriegel et al., 1995). A recent study found that media coverage can trigger some changes in strategies (Bednar et al., 2013). In addition, some technological and managerial shifts in an organization may also trigger OC (Reitz, 1977). For example, if a computer-aided system is built in a library, the personnel may need training in computer-supported library services (Damanpour and Evan, 1984). In addition, characteristics of chief executive and top management can influence likelihood of change. For instance Boeker (1997) found that longer tenure of chief executives and higher diversities of top management teams affect changes in organizational strategies and poor performance moderates this relationship. Finally, performance outcomes may provide some feedback to organizations and persuade them to initiate processes of change (Ginsberg, 1988).

Change can be implemented in various elements of an organization such as culture, physical environment, power relationships, products and services, structure and technology. Cultural change in organizations means changes in the values, beliefs, assumptions, norms etc. which are largely shared by the members of the organization. Members of organizations have often tendencies to resist cultural changes that clash with embedded values, norms and beliefs of their organizations (Ravasi and Phillips, 2011). An organization may rearrange its physical environment. For example, after privatization, British Airways redesigned its headquarter to create a physical environment more consistent with its new culture (McShane and Von Glinow, 2003). In addition, power balances in organizations may change. For example, members of information technology or information/knowledge management departments in organizations seem to have increasing power in the current information-based economy. Changes in products and services mean that an organization may have a completer change of the mix of products and services or add new products and services to the existing ones. Structural change is related to changes in elements of organizational structure such as authority and responsibility, centralization, formalization, complexity, span of control and division of labor (Daft, 1998; Efil, 2005; Waldersee and Griffiths, 2004). A change in technology means changes in the

equipment, knowledge base and procedures that organizations use to produce products and services. However, these elements are often closely related, so a change in one element of an organization will require another change. For example, Appelbaum et al. (1998) reported that a change in hard/soft elements of an organization requires another change in soft/hard elements. This situation is known as "Critical System Thinking to OC" (Cao et al., 1999, 2000, 2004).

In addition, an organization may change strategy. Some scholars have called this development "strategic change", although this can be misleading with the misconception that strategic changes are more important than other changes. Therefore, in this study, the term "change in strategy" is used, as defined by Ginsberg (1988). The topic of change in strategy has been center of the growing literature in organizational theory, strategic management fields (Fiss and Zajac, 2006: 1173; Kraatz and Zajac, 2001) and even organizational behavior. For instance, it is assumed that change in strategy is an emotionally turbulent context. Therefore, recognizing emotions of employees can help leaders to manage a change in strategy effectively (Sanchez-Burks and Huy, 2009).

The meaning of change in strategy depends on the conceptualization type of strategy (Ginsberg, 1988). At this point, some scholars argue that a distinction between approaches to strategy is artificial (Ketchen et al., 1996); it is largely fair to say that there are two main approaches to strategy of "strategy as content" and "strategy as process" (Olson and Bokor, 1995). "Content focuses on the specifics of what was decided, whereas process addresses how such decisions are reached in an organizational setting" (Fahey and Christensen, 1986: 168). The first, content approach to strategy mainly focuses on three elements of corporations, namely the goals, scope and competitive strategies of the business units (Ginsberg, 1988). The goal part of the content is related to the end results that organizations try to reach such as economic and social performance and autonomy. As the second element of content, scope is related to the borders of an organization in respect of the product, geography and activity such as diversification, geographic expansion and vertical integration etc. Finally, the third part of content, the competitive strategy is more related to taxonomies of strategy types, antecedents of business unit performance, industry segmentation, stages of industry evolution and strategic groups (Fahey and Christensen, 1986). However, as emphasized above, the content approach largely focuses on the question of "how?". For example, the degree of formality in planning is one of the main interests of the process approach (Olson and Bokor, 1995). In addition, this stream of research examines the effects of the characteristics of individuals and groups in the organization on the formation and particularly the implementation of strategy and organizational performance (Huff and Reger, 1987). Ketchen et al. (1996) tested whether or not levels of political activity and information usage among top managers during the strategy process were related to organizational performance in a dynamic environment. Austin (2009) stated the importance of organizational culture during a change in strategy. According to him, leading a strategic change in organizations is a difficult task. These risks grow during *controversial change in strategy,* change that challenges deeply held organizational values, norms and beliefs (Austin, 2009:52 cited from Austin, 1997).

This study mainly focuses on the competitive strategy part of content approach. The two most preferred strategy typologies in literature are those of Miles and Snow (1978) (analyzer, defender and prospector) and Porter (1980) (cost leadership, differentiation and focus). In cost leadership strategy, the main aim of the firm is to become an organization which produces products and services at the lowest cost in the industry. The only tool for this strategy is economies of scale. In differentiation strategy, by differentiating products and/or services, a firm persuades customers to pay a premium price for products and services. The firm can achieve differentiation in technical characteristics, design, reliability or quality of the products and services (Eren, 1997). Finally, focus strategy (cost focus and differentiation focus) adopts an approach of segmentation. However, cost leadership and differentiation strategies are industry-wide. In this strategy, the firm may concentrate on a certain group of customers, a channel of distribution, a geographical region or a particular line of product. According to Porter (1980), a firm which chooses one of these strategies will perform better than a firm which is stuck in the middle.

For the authors of this study, change in strategy means change in competitive strategy. For example, a firm may switch its strategy from cost leadership to differentiation. As previously stated, there can be various factors behind this change such as performance outcomes, or changes in external and internal environments (Ginsberg, 1988). One dimension of the external environment of firms is economic factors. Some economic factors such as employment rates, general availability of credit, inflation rates, the level of disposable income, prime interest rates, propensity of people to spend, trends in the growth of the gross national product should be taken into consideration by firms during their strategic management efforts (Eren, 1997; Pearce and Robinson, 1997). Governments that experience

the "middle income trap" can follow various strategies to escape from this. As has been already emphasized, one strategy is to give research and development-based incentives and support to firms. In this situation, some large-scale firms may change their competitive strategy from cost leadership to differentiation to be able to obtain benefits from these incentives and support. At this point, emphasis of "large-scale" is important since innovation is mainly associated with large-scale firms in innovation literature except for a few studies which have focused on the innovation processes in small and medium-scale firms (for example Bigliardi, 2013; Terziowski, 2010). Therefore,

Proposition 2: When research and development-based incentives and support are offered by the government in a country, an increased proportion of large-scale firms in that country will prefer to use differentiation strategy.

Conclusion

The main aim of this study was to discuss how the middle income trap experienced by a country affects the competitive strategy of large-scale firms in that country. After discussion, two propositions were presented.

This study has some original points of value. The first is that previous literature on strategic management has focused more on the process than the content of strategy (Fahey and Cristensen, 1986 cited from Hofer, 1975). Second, as far as is known, there are few studies which have examined the relationship between the middle income trap as an economic indicator and strategic management. Finally, this study presents a set of relationships (middle income trap → research and development-based incentives and support of government → changes in competitive strategy of large-scale firms (from cost leadership to differentiation). Future studies can test the hypotheses that were generated in this study. In addition, according to the findings of a study, a change in strategy that contributes positively to one dimension of performance can impact the other performance dimension negatively (Trinh and O'Connor, 2002). Therefore, it can be investigated that how changes in strategies of large-scale firms affect different dimensions of their performances.

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