

## THE DIMENSIONS OF STRATEGY: A STUDY CASE OF UNILEVER'S RESPONSIBLE UMBRELLA STRATEGY

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**Abstract:** *The strategy concept has been acknowledged as one of the most important factors that might contribute to an organization's success as it might be perceived an expression of the company's ability to adapt, change and respond properly to the overall dynamic business environment. Besides understanding what a strategy is, another important topic that should be considered in order to properly comprehend the concept, is related to the question how strategies are developed? Therefore, the objective of this study is to explain the dimensions of strategy, respectively the strategy process, content and context utilizing a qualitative approach. Within this scope, an analysis of Unilever's overall strategy has been provided, revealing the main reasons why the organization has chosen to be perceived as responsible (strategy context) and which actions have been taken by the firm in order to consolidate its company image and reputation (strategy process and strategy content). The results reveal a constant effort made by the company in order to consolidate its position in the fast-moving consumer goods market worldwide. Additionally, the results sustain that the organization has used the concept of businesses responsibility and the firm's inheritance in a strategic manner.*

**Keywords:** *strategy, strategy process, strategy content, strategy context, Unilever.*

**JEL Classification:** *M14, L29, I31.*

### 1. Introduction

The strategy concept has been acknowledged as one of the most important factors that might contribute to an organization's accomplishment. Despite the fact that the term of strategy has been debated significantly since the '90 in the field of strategic management, a widely endorsed explanation of the notion has not been yet established (Khalifa, 2021). Over the time, strategy was been associated with several aspects such as: objectives and resources usage (Chandler, 1969), future and past decisions of a company (Kenneth, 1987; Mintzberg, 1987), environmental opportunities, market share (Ansoff, 1980), and competitive advantage (Porter, 1997). Furthermore, recent definitions of the concept have correlated strategy with terms such as challenges, change, power, company performance, plans, joint effort of organizational stakeholders and managers/owners, growth and winning (Toma & Marinescu, 2015; Toma, et al., 2016; Khalifa, 2021). In short, the concept may be perceived as a company's various responses towards changes that may occur in a dynamic business environment. Existing literature reveals that corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices incorporated in companies' strategies may contribute to employee retention and attracting talented workforce. CSR presents a mutually beneficial situation empowering organizations and stakeholders to achieve, working together, economic and social objectives.

Besides understanding what a strategy is, another important topic that should be considered in order to properly comprehend the concept, is related to the question how strategies are developed? Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explain the dimensions of strategy, respectively the strategy process, content and context utilizing a qualitative approach. Within this scope, an analysis of Unilever's overall strategy has been provided, revealing the main reasons why the organization has chosen to be perceived as responsible (strategy context) and which actions have been taken by the firm in order to consolidate its company image and reputation (strategy process and strategy content). Moreover, the evaluation of Unilever's strategy has been based on B. de Wit and R. Meyer's (2020) developed framework regarding the dimensions of strategy.

The paper's structure consists of the following parts: introduction, literature review (a briefly explanation of strategy and the dimensions of the concept), results and discussion (the evaluation of Unilever's dimensions of strategy), conclusions and bibliography.

## **2. Literature review**

### **Defining the concept of strategy**

In the business and strategic management literature, the concept of strategy has derived from the military field (Toma and Grădinaru, 2016). Most authors have linked this term with other concepts such as business models, entrepreneurship, leadership, creativity, and development (Săseanu, et al., 2014; Grădinaru, et al., 2017; Toma, et al., 2018; Toma & Tohănean, 2019). Moreover, recent definitions of the concept have correlated strategy with challenges, power, organizational performance, plans, joint effort of stakeholders and managers/owners, growth and winning (Toma, 2013; Tohănean, et al., 2018; Khalifa, 2021). The pioneers of strategic management highlighted several features of strategy that are still relevant nowadays. For example, strategy is formulated and implemented in accordance with the company's stated goals in a certain period of time. Strategy should be a reflection of those goals (Grant, 2021).

Moreover, the concept is dynamic (Ansoff, et al., 2019). Strategy changes in accordance with objectives or in order to attain them. Moreover, in order to achieve the goals, available resources are used in a strategic manner (for example, considering the human resource, certain individuals are responsible with specific parts of the strategy process; some design the strategy, while others make sure that the strategy performs as expected). Therefore, strategy implies a common effort (Clegg, et al., 2019) and involves the use of various tools, techniques, and methods such as quality assurance, marketing mix, Six Sigma, creative thinking, and balanced scorecard (Toma, 2008; Toma & Naruo, 2009; Toma, et al., 2010; Toma, et al., 2013; Grădinaru, et al., 2016)

Companies could not exist without the human component. Moreover, individuals have the ability to learn from previous experiences and therefore apply the accumulated knowledge into practical decisions (Marinescu & Toma, 2013). Furthermore, strategy should be related to the needs of the company and of those legitimate stakeholders (Clegg, et al., 2019). Hence, it should reflect this understanding through the generated results (for example, increased market share in value or volume). For instance, during the pandemic (2019-2020) Unilever Romania decided to launch Dero Protect Powder detergent with 42 washes in order to capitalize on consumers' pressing need to avoid possible Sars-Cov-2 infection. Even though the moment was proper for the product launch and the format choice reflected the biggest segment existing in the detergent market (the most used format in the Romanian fabric cleaning market is represented by powders, followed by liquids and lastly capsules), Dero Protect did not performed as expected. There were three important aspects Unilever learned afterwards: commercials TV still represent an important channel through which the firm can communicate with the targeted consumers (the company promoted the product only online through social media); variety is important for Romanian consumers (with only one product it is difficult to increase market share and the organization should have considered to launch a Dero Protect range- powder, liquid and capsules options); Romanian consumers are mostly price sensitive (Dero is perceived as an affordable brand. On the other hand, Dero Protect had approached a more premium price strategy, closely to its main competitor, Ariel, and therefore consumers were not interested in purchasing the product). Future decisions made for Dero should require considering these insights in order to improve strategic approaches designed for the brand.

In the current business environment, it is difficult for companies to differentiate and stand out due to the increasing number of competitors (Mintzberg, et al., 2008). On the

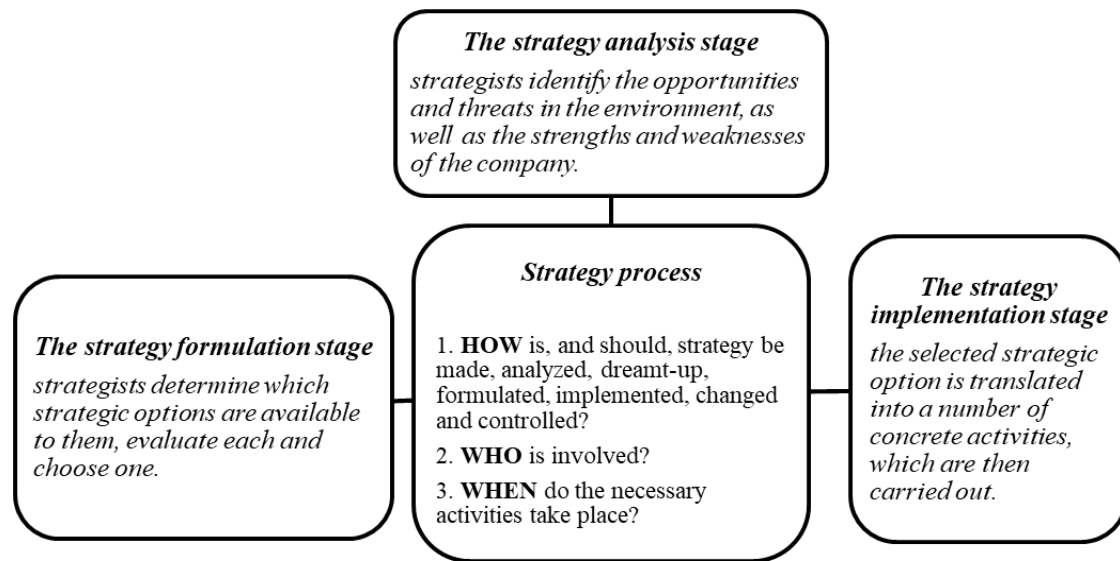
other hand, consumers may benefit of variety in terms of products or services, access to information and therefore reviews provided for a specific good and worldwide purchasing possibilities (Mintzberg, et al., 2008). While at first side, these may be perceived as threats for companies, they might be viewed also as opportunities that can be exploited by organization in order to obtain competitive advantage. A winning company is a firm which manages to adapt and transform threats into opportunities (Ansoff, et al., 2019). Additionally, nowadays, organizations are expected to be accountable of their actions (Ansoff, et al., 2019). A good example in this case is Ariel, a powerful brand owned by Procter & Gamble (P&G). For example, Ariel's brand purpose is very much connected with the category specifics as it is focused on reinventing cleanliness to decarbonize laundry across its entire value chain. To support this purpose, from product point of view, Ariel is constantly working to improve its formula or innovate and deliver a superior clean, even in cold water. Ariel, from a strategic angle, developed a strong plan and committed to it.

#### The dimensions of strategy

Besides understanding *what a strategy is*, another important topic that should be considered in order to properly comprehend the concept, is related to *how strategies are developed*? B. de Wit and R. Meyer (2020) have stated that the dimension of strategy is formed considering the following strategic aspects: context, process and content.

The strategy process reveals the manner in which strategies arise (Mintzberg & Lampel, 1999). Thus, it might be described as the most complex component of a strategy dimension, compressing several concepts such as: strategic thinking, formulation, implementation, changing, controlling, innovation and analyzation (Fréry, 2006). Additionally, the stages of strategy process are considered the following: analysis, formulation and implementation phases (Randall & Dent, 2019) (Fig. no. 1). During the analyzation phase the company identifies opportunities that can be exploited and evaluates components of its business (for instance, threats, strengths and weaknesses) (Baumgartner & Rauter, 2017). Afterwards, based on the acquired and analyzed information, the managers establish the accessible strategic options and choose the ones which fit the company's interests and focus (formulation phase) (Randall & Dent, 2019). The last stage, respectively the implementation phase, entails converting the strategically developed and selected responses into tangible activities (Friesl, et al., 2021).

The strategy content might be perceived as the outcome of these undertaken strategic actions based on the level of aggregation (de Wit, 2020). Therefore, strategy can be created for functional, business, corporate and network purpose (Bob de Wit & Meyer, 2004). The functional extent appertains to an organization's departments (Casadesus-Masanell & Ricart, 2010).



**Fig. no.1: The components of the strategy process**

Source: Adapted after Fréry, F., 2006. *The fundamental dimensions of strategy*. MIT Sloan Management Review, 48(1), pp. 71-75.

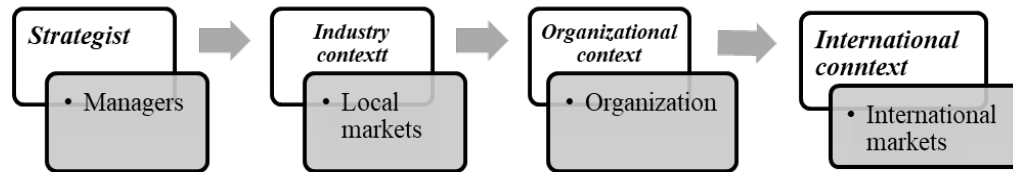
On the other hand, the following strategy approach concentrates on the administering process of a business unit, while the corporate strategy assures the alignment between various business units owned by an economic entity (Mintzberg, et al., 2003). Lastly, the network strategy relates to the partnerships developed to further support the company's goals (Bob de Wit & Meyer, 2004).

On the other hand, strategy context is formed by situations in which strategy activities take place (Burgelman, 1983). The concept is strongly associated with circumstances and the ability of managers to adapt, shape and create conditions (Constantiou & Kallinikos, 2015). The components of strategy context are as follows: the strategist, the industry (market), organizational and international context (de Wit, 2020) (Fig. no. 2).

The strategist represents the individual who is responsible with strategy design and implementation (the strategizing process) (Rasche & Seidl, 2020). The market context enhances a broad and complex set of components that have the capacity to influence an organization's behavior (for instance, suppliers, consumers and competitors; technological, economic and social-cultural drivers) or can be influenced by a company's development (Whittington, 2019). The industry context through regulations may constraint the potential of strategy. On the other hand, the market environment may provide a clear perspective of how competitive advantage may be gained by enabling strategizing manager to capitalize on ascending trends (Whittington, 2019). The organizational context refers to the legacy of the company as well as to the management practices or ways of doing business that have been passed on from a generation to another (Melnik & Ermolaev, 2020). Similar to the industry context, organizational circumstances have a two-sided perspective. For instance, inheritance may contribute to creating differentiation points from competition, preserve traditions and increase the company's credibility among stakeholders and shareholders, while outdated business practices may limit and affect the overall performance of applied strategy and therefore of the firm (Vermeulen, 2018).

Moreover, leadership may be perceived as a critical component for organizational

development (Xie, 2019). Lastly, international context occurs when the organization's horizons are expanded and the company operates abroad. Operating abroad requires an understanding and an efficient integration of various factors that the firm should take into consideration such as cultural differences, other consumer behaviors, the countries laws and regulations (Kaleka & Morgan, 2019).



**Fig. no.2: The components of strategy context**

Source: Adapted after Kaleka, A. & Morgan, N., 2019. How marketing capabilities and current performance drive strategic intentions in international markets. *Industrial Marketing Management*, Volume 78, pp. 108-121.

### 3. Research methodology

Following a qualitative approach, the present paper aims to explain the dimensions of strategy, respectively the strategy process, content and context. Within this scope, an analysis of Unilever's overall strategy has been provided, revealing the main reasons why the organization has chosen to be perceived as responsible (strategy context) and which actions have been taken by the firm in order to consolidate its company image and reputation (strategy process and strategy content). Moreover, the evaluation of Unilever's strategy has been based on B. de Wit and R. Meyer's (2020) developed framework regarding the dimensions of strategy.

### Results and discussions

In 1930, two independent entrepreneurial ventures, respectively the Lever Brothers (William and James Lever) and Margarine Unie (Jurgens and Van den Bergh) have merged and formed the nowadays multinational company known as Unilever. With over 330.000 products in its portfolio, the company has grown to become one of the most important players in the fast-moving consumer goods industry (FMCG) and present in more than 190 countries. But what factor contributed the most to the organization's outstanding growth? A possible answer to this question may be considered the responsible, purpose and people-driven company image Unilever built even since the beginning. Moreover, the organization developed and applied a strategy which is based mostly on responsible practices. Why and how did Unilever create this strategy?

### Strategy context

The current strategy context favors companies which integrate concepts such as sustainability, durability, fairness and general wellbeing in their business strategy. Considering how consumer behavior might be affected by the pandemic, Euromonitor identified ten global consumer trends for 2022, respectively the *backup planner* (individuals how are willing to purchase other goods, if they are not able to find in store their usual product option); *the climate changers* (individuals which are interested in

responsible and sustainable companies and products); *the digital seniors* (a category which before the pandemic were not in scope, but now, due to the constraints of Covid-19, have learned to purchase goods using online channels); *the financial aficionados* (consumers how are willing to invest-for instance in cryptocurrencies, in order to improve their financial stability); *the great life refresher* (individuals how are interested in wellbeing and are willing to change their lifestyle, improve their mental and physical health); *the Metaverse movement* (consumers how are attracted by simulated, 3D digital ecosystems of the future); *the pursuit of preloved* (circular economy, secondhand shopping); *the rural urbanites* (individuals how are considering to migrate from urban to rural communities); *the self-love seekers* (genuineness and self-acceptance at individual level); *the socialisation Paradox* (this category enhances two types of consumers, respectively the ones how are pleased to resume to their day-to-day activities -before COVID-19, and others that are still hesitating). Furthermore, considering the international context, firms must meet the expectations not only of consumers, but also those of suppliers, business partners, governments, employees, investors, and society as a whole. Integrating responsible practices into daily corporate operations has become a critical criterion, particularly for international expansion. From an organization's context perspective, Unilever's legacy represents a strength point of the company that can and has been exploited in order to create value for both the firm and its brands. Thus, it may also be perceived as useful tool that can compensate, to some extent, the quality of the company's products when comparing with those of Procter and Gamble (P&G). Unilever's inheritance represents a competitive advantage. William Lever has been an example of best practices by supporting its employees, consumers and local communities. For instance, when the entrepreneur expended the business to Liverpool and developed the Port Sunlight factory, besides creating job opportunities for the local community, he provided high-quality accommodation, facilities, and recreational opportunities for his workers. Moreover, he proven to be genuine interested in identifying and fulfilling the needs of individuals by offering them accessible options for health and hygiene. Nowadays, Unilever's managers aim to conduct their business in the same way William Lever did back then when Unilever was only an entrepreneurial initiative.

### Strategy process

Firstly, strategists of Unilever have acknowledged the ascending trend of responsible business as a market opportunity that can be used to gain competitive advantage and create sustainable value for a set of various parties of interest. As threats, the company was invariably been aware of the variety of choices that the consumers will have over time. Thus, the firm's main competitor has always demonstrated an impressive innovation capacity. For instance, in the Romanian FMCG market, the majority of P&G products are perceived as more efficient and qualitative comparing with Unilever's ones. For example, in the toilet blocks segment, Bref (P&G) has been the leading brand by the end of December 2020 with 43% market share, while Domestos (Unilever) registered a 3<sup>rd</sup> position with only 11% market share (Tabel no.1) (Nielsen Global, 2020). Unilever's products have a decent quality and are slightly less expensive than Procter's ones (comparing with non-promo periods of time).

**Tabel no.1: Market shares of top players in the toilet blocks segment  
(Romania)**

| MARKET SHARE (Romania) |           |
|------------------------|-----------|
| 2020                   |           |
| <b>BREF</b>            | <b>43</b> |
| PLAYER NO.2            | <b>16</b> |
| <b>DOMESTOS</b>        | <b>11</b> |
| PLAYER NO.4            | <b>9</b>  |
| PLAYER NO.5            | <b>7</b>  |
| OTHERS                 | <b>15</b> |

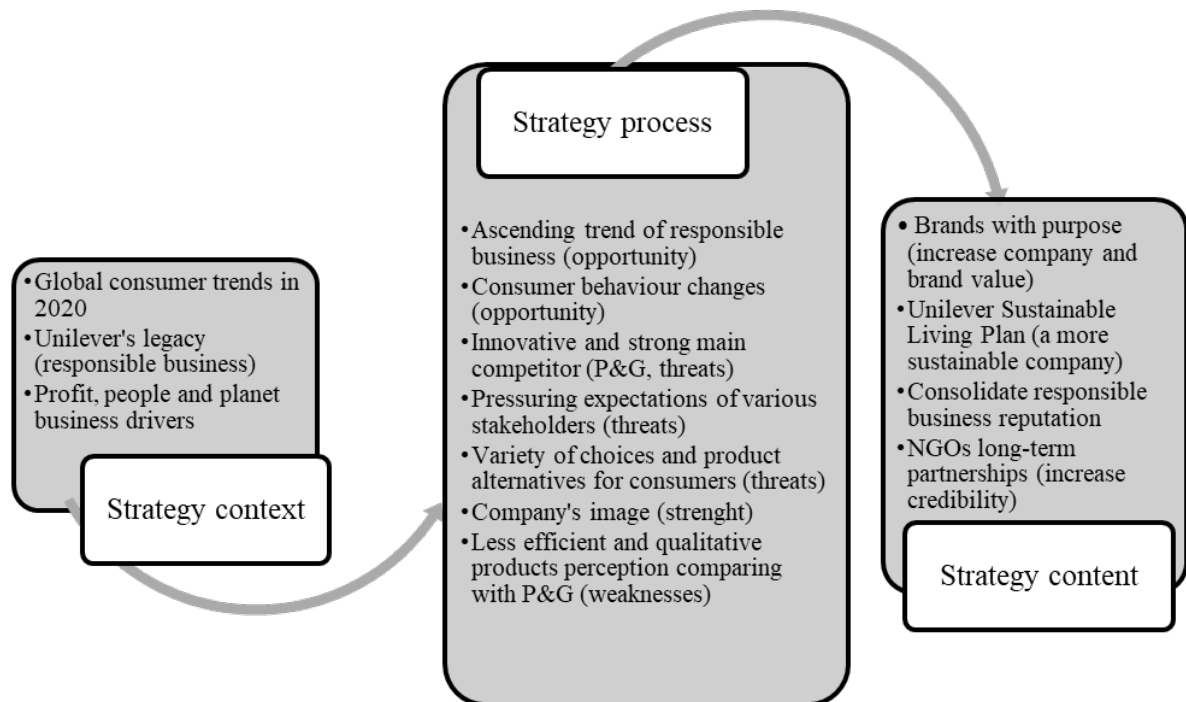
Source: Nielsen Insights Reports, December 2020.

Moreover, in the Romanian FMCG market, P&G seems to be a trend setter, while Unilever a follower (for instance, P&G was the first company which launched detergent capsules in Romania, while Unilever has started recently to invest in future formats of detergents). Therefore, considering the presented arguments, meaningfulness, a close to individuals and purpose driven image may assist Unilever in increasing the value of products.

### Strategy content

Giving the circumstances (the need of balancing with the demands of numerous stakeholders, a diverse range of product options for consumers, the need of establishing a responsible business presence, and competing against innovative and strong rivals), Unilever decided to enhance its image as a corporation that cares about the well-being of people and the environment. Within this scope, the organization has been aiming to create brands with purpose. Therefore, the most powerful Unilever brands have been associated with social causes in order to attract and retain consumer. Purpose can offer the consumers the extra motivation or differentiation they are looking for at shelf, among all those functional propositions. For instance, Dove (a well-known brand of Unilever from the beauty and personal category) encourages self-esteem, natural beauty and educates young consumers regarding the negative impact social media has on day-to-day life. Domestos (iconic toilet cleaning brand of Unilever) sustains the access to sanitization and hygiene in schools, while Cif (an important player in surface cleaning, house hold category) cleans places beloved by local communities. Additionally, in order to consolidate the responsible company image, the firm has developed Unilever Sustainable Living Plan (USLP) 2010-2020, an ambitious plan meant to improve day-to-day business activities and create sustainable value for a broader set of legitimate parties of interest. Hence, Unilever has developed strategic and long-term partnerships with NGOs in order to increase credibility among its stakeholders and reinforce the idea of responsible business.

The strategy content (brands with purpose; profit, people, planet orientation; responsible business image; USLP) is supported by global, corporate, business and functional efforts. Unilever's global strategy (strategist and CEO Alan Joe since 2019) sustains and motivates the appliance of responsible practices by worldwide branches. On the other hand, corporate and business strategies adhere to global standards while assuring local markets and industries adaptation. Moreover, individuals how are grouped into departments, carry out the entire business activity and act in accordance with the firm's values, mission and vision.



**Fig. no.3: The dimensions of Unilever's responsible umbrella strategy**

Source: Author's own contribution based on literature review

#### 4. Conclusions

Considering the current competitive business environment, strategy can be characterized by an organization's taken action and its capability to innovate, adapt or influence the industry, local and international context (depending on the type of strategy used within this scope). The concept may be perceived as a company's various responses towards changes that may occur in a dynamic environment. For instance, consumer's behavior modifications, the increasing pressure and demands of vital parties of interest, the variety of choices in terms of products and services available to individuals, access to worldwide information may be considered factors that trigger firms to act and therefore apply strategies in order to remain in the market.

The analysis of the dimensions of Unilever's responsible strategy reveals a constant effort made by the company in order to consolidate its position in the FMCG market worldwide. Within this scope, the company has used the concept of businesses responsibility and the organization's inheritance in a strategic manner. The first strategic step conducted by Unilever has to evaluate and improve its value chain and afterwards associate its most powerful brands with a relevant social mission. Moreover, the paper sustains that the appliance of responsible strategies has become a genuine criteria of evaluating an organization's performance in the current business environment. Furthermore, Unilever has proven to be aware of this particular tendency and designed its strategy accordingly.

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