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STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

THE MEDIATING EFFECT OF COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMPETITIVE STRATEGIES AND PERFORMANCE OF ACCREDITED UNIVERSITIES IN KENYA

Cecilia Wacuka Gathitu[1], Prof. Peter K'Obonyo[2], Prof. Vincent N. Machuki[3], Prof. James M Njihia[4],

[1] Department of Business Administration – Faculty of Business and Management Sciences, University of Nairobi, Nairobi – Kenya – cgathitu@gmail.com

[2] Department of Business Administration – Faculty of Business and Management Sciences, University of Nairobi, Nairobi – Kenya

[3] Department of Business Administration – Faculty of Business and Management Sciences, University of Nairobi, Nairobi – Kenya

[4] Department of Management Science, Faculty of Business and Management Sciences, University of Nairobi, Nairobi – Kenya.

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ABSTRACT

Research Objective: The objective of this research was to examine the mediating effect of competitive advantage in the relationship between competitive strategies and performance of accredited universities in Kenya.

Research Methodology: The study was anchored on Industrial organization theory basing on structure conduct paradigm, advanced by Porter (1986). Positivism provided the philosophical foundation. The population of the research comprised 53 accredited universities in Kenya. This was a census survey. Descriptive cross-sectional research design was used. Primary data was collected using a pre-tested questionnaire. The respondents were academic registrars from both public and private accredited universities. Four path analysis model by Baron and Kenny's (1986) was applied in the data analysis.

Results and Findings: The research outcomes revealed that competitive advantage partially mediated the relationship between competitive strategies and performance of accredited universities in Kenya.

Implication of the study: The study findings are useful to strategic management practioners and managers from accredited universities in Kenya, policymakers in government as well as scholars and researchers

Key words: *Competitive strategies, competitive advantage and organizational performance*

1. INTRODUCTION

Competitive advantage is said to have no known explicit definition; however, it has been recognized as an important precedent to organizational performance. Porter (1985) defines competitive advantage as the extent to which an organization develops a defensible position over its competitors. This perspective emerged when firms responded to structural characteristics illustrated through Porter's five forces model. On the hand Ma (2000) viewed competitive advantage as a relational term where comparisons were drawn between a prime organization and its competitors on strategic typos of interest in competition. So as to accommodate the various definitions, Sigalas and Pekka-Economou (2013), defined competitive advantage either in terms of performance or in terms of its sources or determining factors.This study suggests the latter perspective, where competitive advantage is derived from a firms ability to develop or acquire a set of attributes or execute actions that allow it to outperform its competitors (Porter, 1985).

Porter (1985) suggested that competitive advantage stemmed from the capability of a company to produce superior services and commodities for its buyers. Additionally, he stated that superior value stemmed from quoting a much lower price tag than rivals for similar gains or offering benefits which are unique that attract a competitive price. A firm is described as a lower-cost producer or service provider by pursuing cost control and minimization in its processing activities/services or applying economies of scale in its purchases, among others, in order to enjoy cost advantage. In differentiation strategy, an organization seeks to be different through branding itself, packaging its products or services as unique compared to rivals or through aggressive advertising. This could happen under a narrow scope, namely differentiation focus, by selecting a niche market based on income levels or social class. In this study, competitive advantage was manifested by way of the following indicators, namely; quality programs or services, delivery dependability, product innovation and timely completion of studies to attain competitive advantage leading to superior performance.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section explains the theory and paradigm anchoring the study, and review of literature on results of previous studies on the role of competitive advantage in the relationship between competitive strategies and performance of accredited universities in Kenya. The study is anchored on Industrial organization theory and structure conduct paradigm.

Industrial Organisational Theory

The Industrial Organizational (IO) Economics theory was advocated by Mason (1939), advanced by Bain (1968) and espoused by Porter (1985) based on the Structure-Conduct - Performance (SCP) paradigm. The paradigm analyzed empirically the impact of marketplace structures on the performance of the industry. The IO perspective is said to offer direct insights into how companies could attain an above-average performance based on the industry structure and the strategic approaches suitable to that structure. The SCP framework demonstrates a stable relationship having a causal and linear "one-way relationship" starting from the structure through conduct to performance with the assumption of equilibrium positions and perfect

information in the industry. However, this assumption is rarely true in real market conditions (Bains, 1968). The model also states that where the market structure is extremely concentrated and is subject to a few big firms, it gives rise to less competition and higher prices and revenues. Where the structure consists of many minor companies, they yield greater competition with lower prices and revenues (Saadatmand, Dabab & Weber, 2018). On the other hand, Chang, Yu and Chen (2016), argued that there could be several response effects that are also likely: from the performance back to the conduct; from the conduct to the structure; and from the performance to the structure hence, the existence of a two-way relationship.

Porter (1985) applied the SCP model to design the industry analysis model. He suggested that the chief diagnostic feature of IO could be used to find strategic approaches that companies may apply in their specific businesses. More precisely, IO offers the strategic management discipline a systematic model for assessing industry rivalry. IO Economics theory provided the main anchorage to this study which postulated the link between competitive strategies as well as the performance of accredited universities within Kenya, while focusing on the external environment to determine appropriate strategic approaches that accredited universities could pursue. However competitive strategies could not be directly linked to performance hence the indirect relationship using competitive advantage.

Organizational Performance.

Organizational performance is described as how a successful organization seeks to achieve its vision, mission, and goals (Short and Palmer,2003). According to Machuki and kamala (2019), it entails effectiveness and efficiency of a company. Other researchers such as Richard, Devinney, Yip and Johnson (2009) suggest that an assessment of organizational performance is an important aspect of strategic management where managers in order to make strategic changes, should be aware of the performance of their organizations. Also, researchers in past studies stated that organizational performance is a multidimensional concept that means different things to different organizations. This explains why there is variation in indicators of performance between different organizations in the economy, which tend to lead to variations in measuring performance. Indicators of performance are said to mostly rely on the main aim of the business and the justification for their presence (Richard et al., 2009).

Two measures are used to operationalize performance, namely; financial and non-financial (Singh, Darwish & Potoˇcnik, 2016). The financial approach focuses on the usage of simple outcome-based monetary pointers supposed to mirror the realization of the monetary goals of the firm. Indicators of this approach include sales growth, profitability and earnings per share (Sheriff, Peous & Ali, 2010). Some strategy researchers have instead used indicators like stock returns and their variations (Montgomerry & Thomas, 1988). Yet, this method remains much more monetary in nature and presumes domination and the validity of monetary objectives in the entity's objectives. Additionally, measuring performance in reality is, to some extent, unique to an organization, as the strategy types a firm develops may determine measures of performance while pointing out the central construct of performance (Richard et al., 2009). The non-financial approach captures subjective measures such as employee compensation, customer satisfaction, employee satisfaction, franchisee satisfaction and supplier relationship with competitors (Kaplan & Norton, 2001). The broader theoretical as well as normative nature

of performance has led to an improved interest pointing to subjective performance dimensions in the past. This heightened focus follows the pattern in appraising performance alongside a triple bottom line of community, monetary and environmental performance (Henriques & Richardson, 2013) and alongside the balanced scorecards framework that integrate extra metrics of internal process, customer and innovation to establish economic performance (Kaplan & Norton, 2001).

According to Wang (2010), university performance should be measured based on the goals to be achieved. The performance of universities was captured using comprehensive dimensions that capture the key performance areas derived from functions, to the extent to which each achieved university goals. Based on this argument, two dimensions were developed, namely the academic and management dimensions. The two dimensions were further divided into four sub-dimensions: research effectiveness, teaching effectiveness, finance and community outreach. Financial/quantitative indicators were measured by gauging how effective universities managed financial resources to serve academic purposes as well as raise the same using indicators such as research grants, tuition fees, entrepreneurial income earnings or government funding. Non-financial/qualitative indicators were linked to outcomes from university objectives. This study adopted measures proposed by Wang (2010) and Muraguri (2016).

Competitive strategies, Competitive Advantage and Organizational Performance

The chief objective of every firm is to attain above average performance and long-term existence in the continually changing unpredictable worldwide business1environment. This notion was first advanced by Porter (1985) who postulated that for organizations to achieve competitiveness, they should apply competitive strategies to achieve competitive advantage to beat their competitors. This could be done by a company that wanted to be a lower-cost producer in its industry or by a company that wanted to add more value to its product by differentiating for the same price than competitors are able to do for superior performance. A firm is described as a lower-cost producer or service provider by pursuing cost control and minimization in its processing activities/services or applying economies of scale in its purchases, among others, in order to enjoy cost advantage. In differentiation strategy, an organization seeks to be different through branding itself, packaging its products or services as unique compared to rivals or through aggressive advertising. This could happen under a narrow scope, namely differentiation focus, by selecting a niche market based on income levels or social class. Under a broad scope, also known as cost focus, exploitation of differences in cost behavior in some geographic location may be targeted (Porter, 1985).

Several empirical studies supporting the notion that competitive strategies significantly influence performance to achieve above average returns and profitability have raised different arguments and outcomes (Machuki & K'Obonyo, 2011; Munyoki & K'Obonyo, 2015; Acquaaha & Agyapong, 2015; Awino et al., (2017); Islami et al (2020). Islami et al., (2020) postulated that generic strategies archetypes were important to increasing an organization's performance, especially in competitive environments. A differentiation strategy was said to have higher performance with time in comparison to those that are pursuing low-cost strategy or focus strategy. Munyoki and K'Obonyo (2015) in their study on competitive strategies and

performance of state corporations in Kenya established that competitive advantage could not be assumed to automatically lead to superior performance or used as a surrogate for superior performance. Acquaah and Agyapong (2015) in their study on the association between competitive strategy and firm performance in Micro and Small Businesses (MSBs) in Ghana discovered differentiation strategy influenced by performance while cost leadership strategy failed to show impact on performance.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was grounded on the positivist philosophy since it involved operationalization of variables and statistical tests of hypothesis based on the relationship between the predictor and criterion variables. The study applied a descriptive cross-sectional survey design which is consistent with positivist philosophy. The study had a population of 53 accredited universities of Kenya.The study used primary data. A semi-structured questionnaire was used for primary data collection. Questionnaires were adapted from previous strategic management studies. They were modified to align them to the current study objectives.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Response rate was 66.6%. The study used a descriptive cross-sectional survey design, with population comprising 53 accredited universities in Kenya (CUE, February 2022). Out of the 53 universities, five (5) firms were used for the pilot study. The five (5) pilot study universities were excluded from the main study. Therefore 48 questionnaires were sent out for the final study, out of which 32 were completed and returned, 16 questionnaires were incomplete and therefore were excluded from the analysis, leaving 32 questionnaires which were analysed. This is a 66.6% percent response from the target population of 53 accredited universities in Kenya. This is presented in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Rate of Response

Ownership	**Questionnaire Distributed**	**Questionnaires accepted**	**Percent**
Government owned (Public)	30	20	41.6
Privately owned	18	12	25.0
Total	**48**	**32**	**66.6**

Source: Research Data (2022)

Table 4.1 above illustrated that 41.6 % (20 out of 48) of the responses were from public or government-owned universities with 25% (12 out of 48) from the privately-owned universities, which corresponds to an overall response rate of 66.6%. The data collection tool (questionnaire) was pretested before the actual data collection process from five academic registrars that were randomly selected from five accredited universities. This process was necessary to ensure that the tool measures what it was expected to measure in this study.

Descriptive Statistics for Measures of Competitive Advantage

Table 4.2 Descriptive Statistics for Measures of Competitive Advantage

Measures of Competitive Advantage	N	Mean	SD	CV-%
My university offers competitive fees for similar courses/programs than other universities.	32	3.719	0.888	23.88
My university is dependable in delivery of its services.	32	4.031	0.33	23.15
My university is always first in the market in introducing new academic programs.	32	3.219	0.795	30.29
Integration of innovation in programs is key to our university.	32	3.625	0.907	25.02
My university has a challenge in ensuring completion of its academic programs on time in line with the set calendar.	32	2.031	1.15	56.62
My university is able to attract highly qualified staff because of better remuneration than its competitors.	32	3.438	1.076	31.3
Our customers view similar programs offered by our competitors as more superior.	32	2.563	1.014	3.56
Average mean score	**32**	**3.23**	**0.99**	**32.83**

Source: Research Data (2022)

The descriptive statistics on competitive advantage indicated that universities were dependable in delivery of their services. This was displayed through a mean of 4.031 and a SD of 0.933. The item, "my university offers competitive fees for similar courses/programs compared to other universities" had a mean of 3.719 and SD of 0.888; "integration of innovation in programs is key to our university" had a mean of 3.625 and a SD of 0.907. The lowest mean at 2.031 in competitive advantage was noted from the item, "my university has a challenge in ensuring completion of its academic programs on time in line with the set calendar." The standard deviation for this item was 1.150 while coefficient of variation was 56.62%. This was an indication that responses to this question differed widely from one university to another. Overall, the academic registrars agreed that competitive advantage intervened in the nexus between competitive strategies and performance in accredited universities in Kenya.

Tests of Hypotheses

The objective of the Study was to examine the mediating effect of competitive advantage on the relationship between competitive strategies and performance of accredited universities in Kenya. It was hypothesized that competitive advantage does not mediate between competitive strategies and performance of accredited universities in Kenya. The mediating effect of competitive advantage on the relationship between competitive strategies and performance of accredited universities in Kenya was tested using the four-path analysis by Baron and Kenny (1986). Organizational performance was measured as a composite of financial resources, teaching effectiveness, research effectiveness and community outreach perspectives. Which were adopted from previous studies done by Wang (2010) and Muraguri (2016). The findings

from the regression tests of the four steps proposed by baron and Kenny (1986) are summarized in the Table 4.3; Table 4.4, Table 4.5 and Table 4.6 for step 1- 4.

Step 1.

Table 4.3: Regression Outcomes for the effect of Competitive Strategies on Performance of Accredited Universities in Kenya

Model Summary				
Model	R	R^2	Adj R^2	SE
1	0.803	0.6454	0.633	0.378

ANOVA[a]

Model		SS	df	MS	F	P
1	Regression	7.8013	1	7.8013	54.605	0.000[b]
	Residual	4.2860	30	0.1429		
	Total	12.0873	31			

Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized		Standardized	T	p
		B	SE	B		
1	(Constant)	1.432	0.306		4.674	0.000
	Competitive Strategies (CS)	0.673	0.01	0.803	7.389	0.000

a. Predictors: (Constant), Competitive Strategies, (CA)
b. Outcome: Variable: Performance of Accredited Universities of Kenya.
Source: Research findings (2022).

The outcomes in Table 4.3 indicate that the study found that competitive strategies had a robust and positive influence on organizational performance with a correlation coefficient score (R) =0.830 and coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.6454$) indicating that competitive strategies explained 64.54% of the variation in the organizational performance while the rest at 35.46% was explained by other factors outside the scope of this study. The overall model was significant (F=54.61, p< 0.05, df1=1 and df2=30), which indicated the model was a good fit for analysis of data. The regression model that was derived was thus represented as follows:

OP=1.432 + 0.673 CS + 0.091 ε. Where,

OP = Performance of Accredited Universities in Kenya

CS= Competitive strategies

ε= Error term.

The output validated the 1st step of testing for the mediating effect. Basing on the findings of the test, the null hypothesis was rejected. The result for the second step is presented in Table 4.4.

Step 2: In step 2, Competitive advantage was regressed on competitive strategies. The outcomes were presented in Table 4.3

Table 4.4: Regression Outcomes for the effect of Competitive Strategies on Competitive Advantage

Model Summary

Model		R	R^2	Adj R^2	SE
1		0.776.	0.602	0.588	0.478

ANOVAa

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
1	Regression	10.347	1	10.347	45.301	0.000[b]
	Residual	6.852	30	0.228		
	Total	17.199				

Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized		Standardized	T	p
		B	SE	B		
1	(Constant)	0.545	0.415		1.314	0.199
	Competitive Strategies (CS)	0.755	0.112	0 .776	6.731	0.000

a. Predictors: (Constant), Competitive Strategies, (CA)

b.Outcome: Variable: Performance of Accredited Universities of Kenya.

Source: Research findings (2022).

The output in Table 4.4 indicate that competitive strategies had a strong and positive relationship with competitive advantage, with a correlation coefficient of R=0.776. The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.6016$) suggested that about 60.1% of competitive strategies were caused by competitive advantage. While 40% of the variation in competitive strategies was due to aspects outside the scope of this study. The overall model was significant (F=45.34, p<0.05, df1=1 and df2=30), which indicated that the model was a good fit. The beta coefficient for competitive advantage was also positive and significant (β= 0.775, T=6.731, P < 0.05), suggesting that competitive advantage positively increases by every 0.775-unit change in competitive strategies. The second step of testing for the intervening effect was confirmed for the researcher to proceed to step three.

Step 3: Performance of Accredited Universities in Kenya was regressed on Competitive Advantage. The results for step three are presented in Table 4.4.

Table 4.5: Regression Outcomes for the Influence of Competitive advantage on Performance of Accredited Universities in Kenya

Model Summary						
Model	R	R^2	Adj R^2	SE		
1	0.6334	0.4012	0.3812	0.412		
ANOVA						
Model		SS	df	MS	F	P
1	Regression	4.849	1	4.849	20.1	.000
	Residual	7.238	30	.2413		
	Total	12.087				
Coefficients						
Model		Unstandardized		Standardized	T	P
		B	SE	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.7692	0.4267		4.146	0.000
	Competitive Advantage (CA)	0.5167	0.1152	0.633	4.483	0.000

a. Predictors: (Constant), Competitive Strategies, (CA)
b. Outcome: Variable: Performance of Accredited Universities of Kenya.

Source: Research findings (2022)

Results in Table 4.5 show a strong and positive linkage between competitive advantage and performance (R=0.6334). A coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.4012$) indicates that competitive advantage explained 40.12% of variation in performance of accredited universities. The remaining of 59.88% explained the variation in the performance by other factors out of the scope of this study. The overall model was significant (F=20.097, p<0.005, df1=1 and df2=30), which indicates the model is a good fit. The beta coefficient for competitive advantage was positive and significant (β=0.633, t-value=4.483, p<0.05, t-value=4.483). A unit increase in competitive advantage increases performance by 0.5167 units. The 3rd step of testing for the influence of competitive advantage on performance of accredited universities was confirmed as significant, thus the condition for proceeding with the fourth step was met.

The fourth step involved carrying out a multiple regression test for the effect of competitive strategies and competitive advantage on the performance of accredited universities in Kenya. In step 4, the performance of Kenyan accredited universities was regressed on competitive strategies and competitive advantage. The Table 4.6 shows the results:

Table 4.6: Multiple Regression Results for the Influence of Competitive Strategies and Competitive Advantage on Performance of Accredited Universities in Kenya.

Model Summary				
Model	R	R^2	Adj R^2	SE
1	0.804	0.6457	0.6212	0.384

ANOVA						
Model		SS	df	MS	F	P
1	Regression	7.8013	1	7.8013	52.82	.000
	Residual	0.0032	2	4.2828		
	Total	7.8045	31			

Coefficients						
Model		Unstandardized		Standardized	T	p
		B	SE	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.4871	0.343	1.411	3.057	0.004
	Competitive Strategies (CS)	0.657	0.147	0.656	4.474	0.000
	Competitive Advantage (CA)	0.016	0.143	0.021	0.147	0.884

a. Predictors: (Constant), Competitive Strategies, (CA)
b. Outcome: Variable: Performance of Accredited Universities of Kenya.
Source: Research findings (2022).

Table 4.6, shows the outcomes of a multiple regression of competitive strategies and competitive advantage on the performance of accredited universities in Kenya. The study found a strong and positive relationship between competitive strategies and the performance of accredited universities in Kenya as represented by the coefficient of correlation (R=0.804). The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.6457$) indicated that approximately 64.57% of the variation in performance of accredited universities in Kenya was influenced by a combined effect of competitive strategies and competitive advantage on performance. However, 35.43% of the variation in performance was because of other factors out of the scope of this study. The effect of competitive strategies on performance was insignificant when accounting for the presence of competitive advantage in accredited universities in Kenya. The F ratio was significant and high (F=26.42, P< 0.05, suggesting that the model had a goodness of fit for the study. The beta coefficient for competitive strategies and competitive advantage was weak and not significant (β=0.016, T=0.147, P>0. 884. Therefore, the null hypothesis, which stated that competitive advantage does not intervene in the relationship between competitive strategies and the performance of accredited universities in Kenya, was rejected. The linear regression expression for the intervening effect of competitive advantage on the relationship between competitive strategies and the performance of accredited universities in Kenya is represented below:

$OP=1.487+0.657CS+0.016CA+0.143\varepsilon$ where,

OP= Performance of Accredited Universities in Kenya

CS= Competitive strategies

CA= Competitive advantage.

Thus, based on the outcomes of this test, it was concluded that competitive advantage partially intervened in the relationship between competitive strategies and the performance of accredited universities of Kenya. The influence on performance was reduced after the introduction of the mediator variable (Adjusted R^2 decline from 0.633 to 0.621).

6.0 CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study examined the mediating effect of competitive advantage on the relationship between competitive strategies and performance of accredited universities in Kenya. The outcomes of the hypothesis test were that competitive advantage partially mediated the relationship between competitive strategies and performance of accredited universities in Kenya. The null hypothesis which stated that competitive advantage does not intervene in the relationship between competitive strategies and the performance of accredited universities in Kenya, was therefore rejected. Based on this outcome, it is the study's conclusion that for accredited universities achieve higher performance by pursuing competitive strategies with a competitive advantage. Competitive advantage is attained through factors such as having dependability in delivery of services followed by offer of competitive fees for similar programs by different universities, offer of innovative programs and having ability to attract highly qualified staff.

6.1 Suggestions for further Research

The data in this research was collected from a single source. Academic registrars provided the data by responding to the questionnaire which covered the various variables of the research. Relying on a response from one person may have some limitations; such as single source and social desirability bias. Future researchers should involve more respondents such as staff or students. Future research should consider incorporating the use of several types of data collection methods and techniques. This research was restricted by the use of questionnaire only. As such, other means of data collection; including interviews, observations and case studies would be recommended. Cross sectional research design was used as the research design. Longitudinal design can be considered in future. This study was based on accredited universities in Kenya. Future researchers should consider replication in other countries to determine the similarities or differences and would further enrich the current finding.

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