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INFLUENCE OF MARKET ORIENTATION ON COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE OF MOBILE TELECOMMUNICATIONS COMPANIES IN KENYA

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Abstract: **The primary goal of this research was to evaluate the influence of market orientation on competitive advantage of mobile telecommunications companies in Kenya. A descriptive research design was used in this research. The population of this study was all 2666 employees in three telecommunication companies in Kenya (Safaricom, Airtel and Telecom Kenya) who worked in Nairobi. The sample size for this study was 347 respondents selected through stratified sampling. This study utilized questionnaire to collect data. The drop and pick method of administration was used. Descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis were used to analyse the collected data. Presentation of the findings was through descriptive statistics and multiple ordinary least squares regression. The study established that market orientation had a positive and significant influence on competitive advantage. The recommendation of the study was that telecommunication companies should continually engage in market research to track the continually changing customer needs and preferences. The companies should have a versatile system of tracking the industry changes and determining how these changes influence customer needs.**

Keywords: **Market Orientation, Competitive Advantage, Telecommunication Companies.**

1. INTRODUCTION

Strategic capabilities according to Davis and Simpson (2017) consist of all information, assets, firm characteristics, competencies, organizational procedure and knowledge controlled by a company that allows it to formulate and execute strategies that improve its effectiveness and efficiency. Teece (2012) considers organizational capabilities to be strengths that organizations can use to formulate and implement their programs, activities and strategies. They are broadly in three categories that include physical capital capabilities, human capital capabilities, and organizational capital capabilities. Physical capabilities include the physical infrastructure available to the firm, whereas human capabilities are the competent personnel and organizational capabilities look at the leadership and reporting structure of the firm.

Ridwan and Bakri (2017) observe that a firm's sustainable competitive advantage and strategic capabilities that the firm possesses have a positive relationship. Barney (1991) had earlier indicated that possessing a strategic resource that is rare, non-substitutable, imperfectly mobile and valuable is not a guarantee that it will generate competitive advantage. Andersen (2011) supported this view by indicating that having strategic capabilities does not always result into competitive advantage. However, Anderson (2011) also indicated that a firm cannot have competitive advantage without having strategic capabilities. Possessing a strategic resource does not mean that the organization utilizes that resource effectively. Therefore, Othman, Arshad, Aris and Arif (2015) indicate that for a strategic resource to contribute to competitive advantage, there must be processes, activities and routines to effectively utilize and coordinate the utilization of those capabilities. These become the link between strategic capabilities and competitive advantage.

Kenya continues to experience a high and expanding demand for mobile phones and other telecommunication gadgets. The telecommunication companies which were largely operating in high income and urban areas, have now moved to low income and rural areas to meet the expanding demand. Mobile phone use has been largely integrated into the Kenyan culture. The trend in the telecommunications market in Kenya is the movement towards rural markets as urban markets become saturated. According to the Communications Authority of Kenya (CA), the year-on-year for the past five years in Kenya is 65 percent. Statistics indicate that Kenya has more than 18 million subscribers, up from 6.5million in the year 2006 (Nokia, 2010). Penetration of mobile telecommunications in Kenya is mainly driven by affordability and innovation.

Safaricom Ltd is the market leader in Kenya's telecommunications sector (CA, 2018). However, its the market share is being depleted by other competitors to drop to 65.4 percent in October 2018 from 80.7 per cent recorded in June 2010. This has meant a gain to its key competitor Airtel Kenya Ltd. In December 2018, Airtel's market share had risen to 19.7 percent from 9.1 percent recorded in 2010. According to CA (2018), Airtel Kenya, which is a subsidiary of Airtel Africa, is the second largest mobile telecommunications company in terms of customer numbers. Telkom Kenya is the third largest mobile telecommunications services company in Kenya. The company has a market share of 8.6 percent as at December 2018 (CA, 2018).

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In 2018, Safaricom reported a record net profit in East Africa of KES 55.29 billion while Airtel Kenya continued its loss-making trend when it reported a loss of made a KES 5.9 billion loss. Similarly, Telkom Kenya continued on its loss-making streak by reporting a loss of KES 3.5 billion (Olingo, 2018). This indicates that there are differences in how the three companies develops and sustains their competitive advantage. Talaja, Miočević and Alfirević (2017) indicate that in today's competitive, dynamic and globalized markets that firms operate, it is challenging to create and sustain competitive advantage. One major competitive challenge for organizations regards the understanding of the major factors contributing to the competitive advantage of the firm.

The market dynamics in Kenya have not changed either. Past studies such as Letangule and Letting (2012) in the telecommunications sector in Kenya investigated the influence of innovation strategies on firm performance. Kagwiria (2010) conducted a study on the basic growth strategies employed by Safaricom, have not dwelt on the influence of market orientation on competitive advantage of mobile telecommunications companies in Kenya. Therefore, there was need to find out market orientation influence competitive advantage of mobile telecommunications companies in Kenya.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Market-Based Theory (MBT) was developed by Bain (1968). The arguments of Bain (1968) were that external market orientation and industry factors are the principal determinants of the competitive advantage of the firm. The basis of this theory is that a firm gains competitive advantage by conducting marketing activities like the ones conducted by other firms but in very different ways. This theory hence prescribes to the firm that in determining its product or service offering, it should first scan the market to determine the needs of the customers and what other firms are providing. The firm should then produce the products that will please customers better than the competing products.

This theory was used in this study to establish the expected influence of market orientation on competitive advantage. Scholars who have used the theory to guide their studies include Aprizal et al. (2016) who used it in the study on the influence of market orientation on organizational financial performance and competitive advantage. Putri et al. (2016) also applied the theory on the study of the influence of market orientation on market performance and competitive advantage. Talaja et al. (2017) note that the theory advocates for assessing the external environment to inform strategy formulation. When a firm has a good grasp of the market and its customers, it gains power as it is able to provide the market with valuable products that satisfy customers.

Talaja et al. (2017) defines market orientation as a philosophy in the organization that is focused on investigating the customer needs and satisfying those needs through the organization's product mix. This varies from the marketing strategies in the past that focused on making products and then adopting sales techniques to sell the products to customers (Lonial & Carter, 2015). Market orientation starts by conducting research to establish customer needs and then designing products that would effectively meet those needs (O'Cass et al. (2015). Market orientation hence underscores the importance of coordination between the organization and its target customers (Ngo & O'Cass, 2012). In this study, market orientation was measured by adaptability to customer needs, customer influence in decisions and organization wide understanding of customer wants and needs.

An organization attains competitive advantage when it uses its available resources and capabilities to achieve success which is above the average experienced by other firms in the sector. Competitive advantage enables the firm to grow, attain high market share, discourage entry to the industry and achieve sustained above average profitability. Competitive advantage can be measured using potential competitiveness indicators or past performance indicators. Ismail et al. (2017) indicated that key measures can include productivity, market share, gross margin, product cost, net income, returns on assets and unit cost ratio. Moreover, Malika and Kilika (2014) noted that financial performance (returns on investment, sales growth, profit), total factor productivity, and non-financial performance(Employees growth, employee satisfaction and customer satisfaction) are robust indicators of competitive advantage. In this study, competitive advantage will be measured through sustained high financial performance, market share and customer numbers.

Seyhan, Ayas, Sonmez and Ugurlu (2017) investigated the association between market orientation and competitive advantage of Turkish manufacturing companies. The study relied on primary data that was collected using structured questionnaires. The population of study was mid-level and top managers of companies in the carpet manufacturing sector. The study sample was 203 top and middle level managers. The collected data was analysed using multiple regression analysis and correlation. The study results indicated that market orientation by manufacturing firms had a positive influence on the firms' competitive advantage. The findings from the study showed that marketing capabilities and market-linking capabilities were positively associated with competitive advantage.

Aprizal et al. (2016) studied the influence of market orientation on competitive advantage of computer sales and accessories providers in Makassar City, Indonesia. The study sought to assess how market orientation influenced consumer behaviour and whether this effect on consumer behaviour influenced competitive advantage. The study targeted key marketing employees in the computer sales companies and selected a sample of 62 respondents. The study applied questionnaires to collect data. Correlation analysis, path analysis and chi square tests were used in analysing the collected data. Findings revealed that market orientation has a strong association with competitive advantage. Findings from path analysis indicated that consumer behaviour was shaped by market orientation which led to competitive advantage.

In Indonesia, Putri, Suryana, Tuhpawana and Hasan (2016) assessed the effect of market orientation on marketing performance and competitive advantage of furniture manufacture industry in West Java. The study applied a causal research design. The units ofobservation were the businesses dealing in furniture products while the unit of unit of analysis was the furniture industry inWest Java. The study population was 392 furniture manufacture businesses and the sample selected was 80 respondents. Analysis of the data collected through structured questionnaires was through partial least squares regression. Findings indicated that adopting a market orientation enabled the firms to enhance their market performance and competitive advantage.

Parnell (2011) investigated the role played by strategic capabilities on competitive advantage and financial performance of retail companies in United States, Peru and Argentina.The study categorized the businesses using Porter's typology and applied the Zahra and Covin's self-reported scale for the purpose. Data from 277 participants of a retail trade fair that took place in US was collected using a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered though postal mail. Those who completed and returned the questionnaires were 136 retailers in the three countries. The study findings indicated positive links between competitive advantage and marketing capabilities.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Descriptive research design was used in this research. The population of this study was all 2666 employees in three telecommunication companies in Kenya (Safaricom, Airtel and Telecom Kenya) who worked in Nairobi. The sample size for this study was 347 respondents selected through stratified sampling. This study utilized questionnaire to collect data. The drop and pick method of administration was used. Descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis were used to analyse the collected data. Presentation of the findings was through descriptive statistics and multiple ordinary least squares regression.

5. FINDINGS

The study sought to establish the role played by market orientation in enabling the organization to attain competitive advantage. This section provides descriptive statistics from the analysis of the Likert scale responses. The rating was from 1 – 5 (strongly disagree to strongly agree). Means scores and standard deviations were used in the analysis and are presented in Table 1.

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Table 1: Market Orientation

Statement	Mean	Std. Dev.
Product and service decisions are made based on results of marketing research	4.21	.984
All employees in the organization have an elaborate awareness of customer needs and wants	4.04	.980
Information from customers clearly affects our decisions	4.20	.872
Recommendations and comments from customers usually lead to changes	3.76	1.115
The organization encourages direct contact between employees and customers	3.70	1.095
The organization ignores customer interests in its decision making	2.27	.879
Different organizational units usually cooperate to effect changes required by customers	3.91	0.791
The organization takes immediate corrective action when there is information that customers are unhappy with our products or service	4.31	0.905
The organization organizes immediate product or service modifications when customers need such modifications	3.85	1.062

The study results presented in Table 1 show that respondents agreed to all the statements except one. The mean scores were between 3.5 and 4.5 indicating agreement to the statements provided. Specifically, the respondents agreed that the organization takes immediate corrective action when there is information that customers are unhappy with their products or service(Mean = 4.31; std dev. = 0.879). Respondents also agreed that product and service decisions are made based on results of marketing research(Mean = 4.21; std dev. = 0.984), information from customers clearly affects decision-making (Mean = 4.20; std dev. = 0.872) and that all employees in the organization have an elaborate awareness of customer needs and wants(Mean = 4.04; std dev. = 0.980).

These findings suggest that the mobile telecommunications companies engaged had a marketing orientation. This was evidenced by their engagement in marketing research, diffusion of marketing information amongst the employees, customers being at the centre of decision making and customer responsiveness. Further, the companies engaged in departmental cooperation to meet customer needs, and engagement in changes demanded by customers.

However, respondents disagreed that the organization ignores customer interests in its decision making (Mean = 2.27; std dev. = 0.879). This indicates that the telecommunications companies mostly consider customer interests when making product decisions. These findings suggest that the three telecommunications companies surveyed had a market orientation with their decisions revolving around the customer needs.

The dependent variable in the study was competitive advantage. This section provides an analysis of the primary and secondary data collected on the variable. In the questionnaire, respondents were provided with 5 statements on competitive advantage and were requested to rate the statements in the context of the nature of competitive advantage that their organization enjoyed in the industry. The statements were on a scale of 1 – 5 (Not at all to very great extent). This section provides descriptive statistics from the analysis of the Likert scale responses. Means scores and standard deviations were derived from the analysis and findings are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Competitive Advantage

Statement	Mean	Std. Dev.
Sustained above average financial performance	3.43	1.160
Sustained improvement in market share	3.46	1.000
Sustained improvement in customer numbers	3.86	.930
Improved customer retention rate	3.60	.998
Improved customer satisfaction	3.72	1.180

Findings in Table 2 reveal that respondents indicated that the organizations experienced sustained improvement in customer numbers to a great extent (Mean = 3.86; std dev. = 0.930), improved customer satisfaction to a great extent (Mean = 3.72; std dev. = 1.180) and improved customer retention rate to a great extent (Mean = 3.60; std dev. = 0.998). However, the organizations experienced sustained improvement in market share to a moderate extent (Mean = 3.46; std dev. = 1.000) and sustained above average financial performance to a moderate extent (Mean = 3.43; std dev. = 1.160).

The findings show that market orientation had a significant and positive association with competitive advantage (r = 604; p = 0.000). These results suggest that mobile telecommunication companies with a high market orientation are expected to achieve a higher competitive advantage that its peers. The study established that market orientation had a positive and significant influence on competitive advantage. The implication of these results is that a firm with a strong market orientation is expected to gain competitive advantage over its peers. Market orientation was the most significant strategic capability in the study. It had the most effect on competitive advantage. The study results indicated that organizations took immediate corrective action when there was information that customers were unhappy with their products or services and engaged in marketing research to inform decision making. Further, the telecommunication companies listened to customers and employees in the organizations had elaborate awareness of customer needs and wants. Moreover, the organizations considered customer interests in decision making.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The study concludes that market orientation is important in attaining and sustaining competitive advantage in mobile telecommunications sector in Kenya. The mobile telecommunications sector in Kenya engaged in market orientation which involves researching on the needs of the customers and then making all marketing mix and positioning decisions based on the customer needs. The companies had effective systems to gather and analyse market data which they applied in making decisions. This approach to managing customer needs significantly contributed to competitive advantage.

Telecommunications companies should continually engage in research to track the continually changing customer needs and preferences. Market orientation in the telecommunications sector is critical due to the continues and the increased rate of change in technology. This requires the companies to have a versatile system of tracking the industry changes and determining how these changes influence customer needs. This would enable the companies to effectively respond to market changes.

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