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**EFFECT OF DIFFERENTIATION STRATEGY ON PERFORMANCE OF SELECTED PRIVATE LEARNING  
INSTITUTIONS IN KENYA**

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## EFFECT OF DIFFERENTIATION STRATEGY ON PERFORMANCE OF SELECTED PRIVATE LEARNING INSTITUTIONS IN KENYA

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### ABSTRACT

*The business environment has witnessed several changes that have compelled managers to choose and adopt responsive strategies in order to remain relevant in the market. Strategic choice is the third logical element of the strategy formulation process. The broad objective of the study was to determine the effect of differentiation strategy on performance of selected private learning institutions in Kenya. The study was anchored by resource-based view (RBV),. Explanatory research design was used and the target population was 98 selected private learning institutions in Kenya. The respondents were 1 strategic Manager and 1 supervisor from marketing department respectively which was a total of 196 respondents. The study used primary data, collected through questionnaires administered through drop and pick later method. The data collected was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The study findings revealed that differentiation strategy had a statistically significant positive effect on performance, as evidenced by the beta coefficients (differentiation strategy:  $\beta_1=0.284$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . The findings revealed that there was a statistically significant moderating effect of human capital on relationship between differentiation strategy, on performance with  $\beta_1=0.208$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ; The study concluded that differentiation strategy affect performance. Based on the findings, the study recommends that government develop policies that can improve performance of learning institutions in Kenya. Future research may be carried out on the effective implementation of competitive strategies on organization performance*

**Key words:** *Differentiation Strategy and Performance*

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## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

A competitive strategy is an art of creating or exploiting those advantageous aspects that are most telling, enduring and most difficult to copy or terminate (Pulaj, Kume, & Cipi (2015) whereas organizational performance is an assembly of financial and non-financial pointers which provide information on the degree of achievement of objectives (Lebens & Euske, 2016). For firms to succeed in a competitive global environment, they need good strategies. A methodology could be a firm's hypothesis around how to compete effectively, a binding together subject that gives it coherence to its different activities (Peng, 2009).

In New Zealand, Askarany and Yazdifar (2012) investigation of how firms either or not in the manufacturing sectors grow in relation to adoption of competitive strategies found out that, the relationship was significantly positive. According to Badwan, Al Shobaki, Naser and Amuna (2017), higher education is more competitive than ever in the UK; not only are there 160 universities in direct competition, the increasingly popular private providers of higher education are making the sector very crowded, as they all vie for the attentions of students across the country and the world.

In a study on business strategy in Ghana by Acquah (2011) reveals that cost leadership strategy results in improvements in efficiencies. These capabilities include cost and price reduction, increase in sales growth and market shares, and high performance. Valipour, Birjandi, & Honarbakhsh (2012) conducted a study to establish the effects of cost leadership strategy and product differentiation strategy on the performance of firms in Iran. The findings of the study revealed that a positive relationship exists between financial leverage and performance furthermore if the companies chose product differentiation strategies rather than cost leadership strategy, this relationship was more positive. Thus, if the company chose cost leadership strategy; the company's performance

increases. While if the company chose product differentiation strategy; the company's performance increases

Murage (2011) analysed the competitive strategies in the petroleum industry and found that service stations use differentiation as a method of obtaining competitive advantage over other service stations. Gathoga (2011) focused on competitive strategies by commercial banks in Kenya. The study revealed that banks in Kenya use various means in order to remain competitive, he also concluded that expansion into other areas by opening new branches has also, been used as a strategy

## Problem Statement

As competition intensifies in the education sector, players are forced to craft superior strategies to help them gain a competitive edge against their competitors. Across industries, most organizations should recognize that gaining a competitive advantage is the most difficult task they will confront in the twenty-first century. In the recent decade, the importance of competitive advantage and distinguishing competencies as factors of a firm's success and growth has skyrocketed. This process is becoming more significant due to the idea that long-term sustainable competitive advantage is the basic basis of above-average performance. Liu & Atuahene-Gima (2018), noted that Learning institutions in the Scandinavian countries heavily relied on conducting strategic analysis and implementation of competitive strategies for survival and acquisition of significant market share in the global markets.

Institutions in Kenya's higher education sector are searching for creative and innovative strategies to get a competitive edge. In the recent past, higher education sector in Kenya has experienced some dynamic change in the external environment as established by Gituku and Kagiri (2015). (Kimando et al., 2012), while conducting research on the topic "strategies employed by private universities in Kenya", noticed that notwithstanding a few experimental examinations taking a gander at the

development of private advanced education internationally, where a few aspects stick out: the processes of differentiation, diversification, and stratification/focus, little has been explored on the serious techniques utilized by private universities, resulting in a knowledge gap.

Similarly, their study only focused on a narrow scope of this subject that is adoption of technology, innovation and differentiation strategies as a competitive advantage (Kimando et al., 2012). The study only looked at the adoption of these strategies but did not consider different aspects of competitive strategy such as quality of service delivery in these institutions. This study therefore sought to enrich the empirical evidence base on this subject by expanding the studies to assess of differentiation strategy on performance of selected private learning institutions in Kenya

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Theoretical Literature**

#### **Resource Based Theory**

Wernerfelt's (2014) resource-based view (RBV), proposed that an edge over competitors may be achieved through creatively conveying better worth, to customers. The surviving writing centers on a company's strategic discovery and usage of assets for fostering a competitive advantage (Barney, 2011). Worldwide business scholars additionally clarify those subsidiaries' competitiveness or local partnerships in the developing world to determine the achievement and failures of organizations across borders (Luo, 2013). Local expertise given by a subsidiary or a local alliance becomes a valuable resource for theorizing value in accordance with local needs (Gupta & Govindarajan, 2011).

The resource-based view theory regards the firm as a cognitive system, which is characterized by idiosyncratic and context-dependent competences that are core to strategic purpose. These are habituated by hierarchical proficiencies, or sets of routines, involved in the administration of the

firm's core business processes that help to create value. Competences typically involve the development of specialist expertise, and firms may become locked into a trajectory that is difficult to change effectively in the short to medium-term (Hooley et al., 2001; Nderitu et al., 2018).

The premises of the resource-based view is that successful firms develop distinctive capabilities on which their future competitiveness will be based; which capabilities are often idiosyncratic or unique to each firm, and may also be tacit and intangible in nature. Competitive advantage is seen to be founded on a complex of competences, capabilities, skills and strategic assets possessed by an organization, or in other words from the astute management of physical and intellectual resources which form the core capability of the business (Hooley et al., 2001).

In the context of this theory, it was evident that the resources that a institution of higher learning plays a big role in the strategic management practices. This is because no matter how good the strategies are, without the necessary resources to enable the implementation, they remain in the planning phase. The resource based approach will see the institutions with superior systems and structures being profitable not because they engage in strategic investments that may deter entry and raise prices above long run costs, but because they have markedly lower costs, or offer markedly higher quality or product performance (Kuria, 2017).

### **Empirical Literature Review**

#### **Performance**

Performance is associated with a firm's results, and revealed through outcomes of business processes and accomplishments and the success of meeting established goals. Jouirou and Kalika (2004) measured organizational performance by a subjective way including cost reduction, customer satisfaction, improved production, and the ability to innovate. Wu (2001) used efficiency, sale performance, customer satisfaction and

relationship development to measure of firm performance

### Differentiation Strategy and Performance

Differentiation involves offering customers something unique for which they are ready to pay for Haberberg and Ripple (2016). Differentiation strategy is usually constructed around a variety of features or traits, according to Wang, Lin, and Chu (2011), such as technology and innovation, brand image, product quality, reliability, a company's reputation, customer service and durability. Education is a service; as it is not something tangible. As a result, service businesses seek to stay ahead of the competition by providing excellent service. According to research, providing high- quality service is an important technique for attracting and retaining clients (Zeithaml,2000).

A study by Chan and Jamison (2017) on competitive strategies applied in banks in China found out that the sector witnessed important players going in and out, different legal regulations were fulfilled, the structure and intensity of the competition became different and the trade differentiation became the most important element of the competition strategies during that time. Diris, Iyiola and Ibdunni (2013) in a study which examined product differentiation as a tool of competitive advantage found that product differentiation as a tool for competitive advantage has positive and significant influence on organizational performance of manufacturing companies.

Similarly, Widuri and Sutanto (2019) discovered that, quality service is key element of a successful business and that the businesses struggle to improve products so as to retain customers. The

company adopts product differentiation strategies to deliver the best products at competitive prices to the customers. According to Davcik and Sharma (2015), a company can avoid competing for limited resources by moving away from crowded areas or being different from other companies. Another area of study that focuses on the advantages of being unique comes from the resource-based theory viewpoint. In this opinion, it's important for a company to have valuable, rare, and hard-to-copy resources in order to stay ahead of its competitors. (Barney, 2017).

According to Kayombo and Carter (2019), A company can avoid competing for limited resources by moving away from crowded areas or being different from other companies. Another area of study that focuses on the advantages of being unique comes from the resource-based theory viewpoint. In this opinion, it's important for a company to have valuable, rare, and hard-to-copy resources in order to stay ahead of its competitors. (Guerrero, Urbano & Herrera, 2019). Rather than cost reduction, a firm using the differentiation needs to concentrate on investing in and developing such things that are distinguishable and customers will perceive.

### Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework is a structure which the researcher believes can best explain the natural progression of the phenomenon to be studied (Camp, 2001). It is linked with the concepts, empirical research and important theories used in promoting and systemizing the knowledge by the researcher (Peshkin, 1993). Figure 2.1 reflect conceptual framework that shows the relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable of the study..



**Independent Variable**

**Dependent Variable**

**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework**

Source: (Researcher, 2024)

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted explanatory research design which looks for explanations on the nature of certain relationships and investigates the causal relationship between variables. Other scholars have previously used the design successfully, and came up with credible and reliable conclusions (Muriuki, 2015). The target population was 98 private learning institutions in Kenya. The list of the private learning institutions in Kenya. The respondents were 1 strategic Manager and 1 supervisor from marketing department respectively which was a total of 196 respondents from selected private learning institutions in Kenya. A census survey was used in this population.

This study used primary data collection through questionnaire. The questionnaire was used because of its economy, also to ensure anonymity; it permits use of the standardized questions and has uniform procedures. It also provides time for subjects to

think about responses and it is easy to score. The questionnaire is made up of closed ended and open-ended questions to avoid being too rigid and quantify data especially where structured items is used (Kothari, 2004). This study used close-ended questions in a form of a 5-point type Likert scale. Likert scale is an interval scale that specifically uses five anchors of strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree and strongly agree.

The results emanating from the reliability tests indicated that all the responses were reliable as the Cronbach's alpha indicated values higher than 0.7 indicating data from the survey is reliable, as shown in table. The alphas for differentiation strategy, cost leadership, focus strategy and human capital on performance. where  $\alpha = (0.912, 0.823 \text{ and } 0.931)$  respectively.

**Table 1: Reliability tests**

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
Differentiation strategy	0.912	5
Human capital	0.823	4
performance	0.931	5

**Source: Survey Data (2024)**

The study therefore adopted content validity for the purpose of assessing the accuracy of the data. This enabled the researcher to assess validity of instrument including clarity, relevance, interpretation of questions and time spent and improves where necessary. Scholars at the School of Business were consulted to examine and review the instrument for content validity to avoid Type 1 error and Type 11 error. Any ambiguous questions were identified and rectified. Further factor analysis was conducted to determine the validity

In this study, two diagnostic tests were done before data analysis to authenticate the research findings. The tests included normality which used Shapiro-Wilk tests to check for normality and Multicollinearity test, homoscedasticity, Autocorrelation and linearity test. Data collected

was edited, cleaned and coded for completeness. Cleaned data was then analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics including mean, standard deviation and coefficient of variation (CV), while inferential statistics was used to evaluate the hypotheses presented in the study.

The linear regression model was;

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \epsilon$$

Where; **Y**= Performance (Dependent variable); **X<sub>1</sub>**= differentiation strategy;  **$\beta_1$**  = beta coefficient;  **$\epsilon$**  = Error term

Multiple regression analyses was used to test hypotheses  $H_{01}$ . Correlation analysis was used to check on the overall strength of the established

regression model. The results from this model was presented in tables where analysis of variance (ANOVA) table was also presented by Correlation analysis. The most common indices used in correlation analysis is Pearson Correlation coefficient.

### Data Analysis, Presentation, Interpretation And Discussion

In the research study, a total of 196 individuals were selected for participation. Out of these, 158 individuals effectively completed and returned the

questionnaires as per the instructions, resulting in a response rate of 80%. This response rate is significantly higher than the average response rate of 52.7% reported by Baruch and Holtom (2008), indicating a highly favorable result. The researchers ensured that ethical standards were strictly followed throughout the fieldwork process, and participants were informed about the significance of their participation and the necessity of providing accurate information (Baruch & Holtom, 2008).

**Table 2: Respondent Gender**

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	92	58
Female	66	42
<b>Total</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 3: Age**

Age of the Respondents	Frequency	Percent
below 30 Years	13	8.3
31– 40 Year	74	46.8
41 – 50 Years	43	27.2
51– 60 Year	18	11.4
Above 61 years	9	5.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 4: Level of Education**

Highest Level of education	Frequency	Percent
Primary	0	0
Secondary	7	4.4
Diploma	14	8.9
Undergraduate	49	31.1
Post graduate	67	42.4
Others	21	13.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source: Survey Data (2024)**

The study sought to establish the gender of the respondents. Results revealed that 58% were male respondents while 42% were female respondents. The results demonstrate that majority of respondents were male. The respondents were asked to indicate their age bracket on the questionnaire to assess if the

respondents were from diverse age groups as indicated in table 4, 8.3% were aged below, 46.8% were aged between 31 - 40 years, 27.3% were aged between 41 - 50 years, while, 11.4% were aged between 51-60 and lastly, 5.7% were above 61 years of age. The researcher sought to find out the highest level of education of the

respondents. The table 4 shows the findings that 4.4% of the respondents, were secondary certificate holders, this was followed by 8.9% who had diploma. 31.1% were undergraduate holders, Further, 42.2% were post graduate holders. While 13.3% had other qualification

## FINDINGS

### Descriptive Statistics

#### Differentiation strategy

The findings are derived from a Likert scale in the questionnaires. The respondents were supposed to indicate their level of agreement or otherwise with a given statement. The descriptive statistics was done based on each independent

variable/objective. The study sought to find out effect of differentiation strategy on performance. the results from the summary descriptive statistics on table 5 showed that on the responses The institution has a desired brand position differentiated enough to survive in the market mean of 3.23, The institution differentiates its programs through skilled & qualified staff mean response of 4.23, The institution offers a variety of courses in different sectors relevant to 21st century problems mean =2.91, The institution only offers programs sponsored by national government mean = 4.02, The institution offers a variety of courses in different sectors relevant to 21st century problems as mean =4.34

**Table 5: Differentiation strategy**

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
The institution has a desired brand position differentiated enough to survive in the market	3.23	1.419	-.193	-1.269
The institution differentiates its programs through skilled & qualified staff	4.23	1.453	-.237	-1.280
The institution offers a variety of courses in different sectors relevant to 21st century problems	2.91	1.465	.177	-1.375
The institution only offers programs sponsored by national government	4.02	1.400	-.050	-1.295
The institution offers a variety of courses in different sectors relevant to 21st century problems	4.34	.992	.121	-.728

Survey Data (2024)

#### Performance

The study sought to find out the effect of performance. Table 6 indicated the descriptive statistics results as; The institution lacks sufficient competent trained staff mean =3.02, Very high

number of students graduates every year mean=4.07, The institution achieves its goals within the set timelines mean=4.16. We have increase of return on investments mean= 2.11, A very high number of student reports after admissions mean= 3.98.

**Table 6: Descriptive on Performance**

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
The institution lacks sufficient competent trained staff	3.02	1.048	.561	-.857
Very high number of students graduates every year	4.07	1.054	.567	-.917
The institution achieves its goals within the set timelines	4.16	1.150	.492	-.975
We have increase of return on investments	2.11	1.104	.520	-1.093
A very high number of student reports after admissions	3.98	1.072	.681	-.867

Survey Data (2024)



### Correlation Analysis

To examine the strength of the linear relationship between two variables, the Pearson product moment correlation coefficient was employed in

this study. The findings showed that Differentiation strategy had a positive and significant correlation with performance ( $r = .678$   $p = 0.000$ )

**Table 7: Correlation Analysis**

		PF	DS
Performance	Pearson Correlation	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)		
	N	158	
Differentiation strategy	Pearson Correlation	.678**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	158	

Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**Source: Survey Data (2024)**

### Model Summary

The findings in Table 8, revealed that differentiation strategy, correlate with performance up to 80.7% ( $R = 0.807$ ) and accounts for a variation of 65.1% ( $R^2 = 0.651$ ). This implies that 34.9% of the

change in performance was caused by other factors which were not included in the study. The findings further revealed that even if the results adjust, the study would still account for 64.4% (Adjusted  $R^2$ , 0.644) variation of performance.

**Table 8: Multiple Linear Regression Analysis Model Summary**

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.807 <sup>a</sup>	.651	.644	.26543

a. Predictors: (Constant), Differentiation strategy

**Source: Research Data, (2024)**

Further ANOVA tests were conducted to determine whether the model works in explaining the relationship among variables as postulated in the conceptual model. The findings from Table below show an F value of 123.216 with a significance level

of 0.000 which is far lower than the confidence level of 0.05, hence establishing the model is statistically significant. The implication is that each independent variable contributes significantly to changes in the dependent variable.

**Table 9: Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)**

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	87.239	3	29.079	123.216	.000 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	36.422	154	.236		
<b>Total</b>		<b>123.661</b>	<b>157</b>			

a. Dependent Variable: performance

b. Predictors: (Constant), differentiation strategy

**Source: Research Data, (2024)**

The first hypothesis  $H_{01}$  stated that Differentiation strategy has no significant effect on performance of selected private learning institutions in Kenya. Differentiation strategy has a positive effect on the

performance. The results in Table 10 show that the p value is 0.002 less than 0.05, which indicates that the relationship is statistically significant, so the hypothesis is rejected.

**Table 10: Effect of Differentiation strategy and performance**

Model		Standardized Coefficients		Unstandardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	T	Sig.
2	(Constant)	.257	.062		4.145	.002
	Differentiation Strategy	.284	.068	.290	4.176	.002

a. Dependent Variable: performance

**Source: Research Data, (2024)**

### Discussion of the Findings

The first objective of this study was to determine the effect of differentiation strategy on performance of selected private learning institutions in Kenya. The findings revealed that there was a statistically significant association between differentiation strategy on performance with a p-value of 0.002, which is lower than the standard 0.05 probability significance level. The findings were in agreement with Diris, Iyiola and Ibiidunni (2013) in a study which examined product differentiation as a tool of competitive advantage found that product differentiation as a tool for competitive advantage has positive and significant influence on organizational performance of manufacturing companies.

### Summary of Findings

The initial aim of the study was to determine the effect of differentiation strategy on performance of selected private learning institutions in Kenya. Correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between differentiation strategy on performance. Furthermore, the regression analysis confirmed a statistically significant linear relationship between differentiation strategy on performance, with evidence of  $\beta=0.284$  and  $p<0.05$ .

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research concluded that differentiation strategy has a positive and significant effect on performance of selected private learning institutions in Kenya. The study's findings concluded that institution offers a variety of courses in different sectors relevant to 21st century problems

The findings revealed a statistically significant relationship between Differentiation strategy, and performance of selected private learning institutions in Kenya. The Findings from this study will inform policymakers of the potential benefits and drawbacks of conducting investigations concerning performance learning institutions in Kenya, as well as the identification of critical issues. The study recommends that government develop policies that can improve performance learning institutions in Kenya.

### Suggestions for Further Research

This study concentrated on the Influence of Differentiation strategy on performance of selected private learning institutions in Kenya. Future research may be carried out on the effective implementation of competitive strategies on performance

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