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LEAN THINKING AND COMPETITIVE STRATEGIES AND PERFORMANCE OF ACCREDITED UNIVERSITIES IN KENYA: MODERATING ROLE OF CORPORATE REPUTATION

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to examine the moderating effect of corporate reputation on the relationship between competitive strategies and performance of accredited universities in Kenya. The corresponding null hypothesis stated that corporate reputation has no significant moderating effect on the relationship between competitive strategies and the performance of accredited universities in Kenya. Corporate reputation was measured using its six dimensions, namely, quality programs, quality services, quality management, quality leadership and capacity to attract and retain talented staff. The study was guided by two theories, namely, Industrial Organization (IO) and Resource based theory. The study was conducted using a cross-sectional descriptive survey design. Primary data was collected using a semi structured questionnaire which was administered to academic registrars from 53 accredited universities in Kenya. The response rate was 66.6%. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to summarize and make inference from the research findings. The moderating effect of corporate reputation was tested using step wise regression method advanced by Baron and Kenny (1986). The study concluded that corporate reputation did not moderate the relationship between competitive strategies and performance of accredited universities in Kenya. However, descriptive statistics on measures of corporate reputation had an average mean score of 3.99 which indicates that managers in accredited universities agreed to a great extent on the importance of applying corporate reputation measures. Thus, emphasis on four measures whose mean scores ranged from, 4.031 to 4.156, above the average means score was recommended, namely, quality programs or quality services, strong management and leadership, capacity to attract and retain talented staff, benchmarking academic program/services with other highly rated universities and the perception that accredited universities are reliable institutions for academic training and research. Future research could explore different functional forms or non-linear relationships between variables since corporate reputation did not have sufficient evidence to conclude a significant linear relationship between competitive strategies and performance of accredited universities.

Key words: competitive strategies, corporate reputation and performance of accredited universities in Kenya.

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Introduction

The debate on strategy and organizational performance linkage continues to attract attention with strategic management scholars arguing that competitive strategies are weakly correlated with performance (Munyoki & K'Obonyo, 2015; Nandakumar, Ghobadian, & O'Regan, 2011). Thus, researchers in strategic management suggest that since this connection is weak, it could be addressed by considering contingent factors internal to the organization in explaining the performance heterogeneity in organizations. Corporate reputation is one of the predictive factors suggested in this study based on the extant literature (Ndung'u, 2020). 21 st century has witnessed closure of businesses, financial scandals and loss in investors' confidence in organizations. This has led to decreased corporate reputation (Vig, Dumicic & Klopotan, 2017). This has increased impetus for research among scholars for corporate reputation. Several previous studies have confirmed positive effects of corporate reputation on financial and non-financial success of the business (Juniarti, Nathania & Krisnanda, 2024; Ndung'u, 2020; Roberts & Dowling, 2006; De la Fuente Sabaté & De Quevedo Puente, 2003).

Some studies reveal contrary outcomes, where excellent performance was not guaranteed by investing in corporate reputation (Rose & Thomsen's, 2004; Pire & Trez, 2018). Additionally, findings from (Gök & Özkaya, 2011; Mpofu, 2019) showed the presence of weak or non-existent relationships between variables. Therefore, absence of convergence on the relationship that exists between corporate reputation and performance demonstrates the need for more studies such as the effect of corporate reputation as a moderating variable in the relationship between competitive strategies and performance of accredited universities in Kenya.

Research Objective and Hypothesis

The research objective was to determine the effect of corporate reputation on the relationship between competitive strategies and performance of accredited universities of Kenya while the corresponding hypothesis stated:

$H_{01:}$ Corporate reputation has no significant moderating effect on the relationship between competitive strategies and performance of accredited universities in Kenya.

Literature Review

This section reviews the literature on competitive strategies, corporate reputation and performance of accredited universities in Kenya. The review captured both theoretical and empirical literature.

Competitive Strategies

Competitive strategies are described as the deliberate selection of various sets of activities that would deliver a unique mix of value over competitors or taking offensive or defensive actions in order to develop a defendable position in an industry, to manage successfully the five forces in Porter's model,namely,threat of new entrants,bargaining power of buyers,bargaining power of suppliers,threat of new substitutes and competitive rivalry and thereby yield a superior return on investment for the company (Porter,1980)). Prahalad and Hamel (1980) posit that competitive strategies are engaged by businesses to achieve or improve competitive advantage and superior performance in their industry. Consequently, the goal of competitive strategies is to come up with innovative ways to gain market and industry supremacy by satisfying consumers' needs and preferences and responding to stakeholders' sensitive needs. Competitive strategies in this study comprised: Cost-leadership strategy, Differention strategy, focus strategy, market penetration, market production and product development, and strategic alliances (Porter,1985; Ansoff, 1965; Dussauge & Garrette, 1995).

Corporate Reputation

Corporate reputation is described as a key intangible asset that has been created on the basis of collective perception of an organization past activities and expectations concerning future actions, in view of their efficiency in relation to the main competitors (Walker, 2010). Corporate reputation is described as a multidimensional concept whose definition is drawn from various academic disciplines such as in economics, strategy, marketing, organizational behaviour, sociology, and accountancy. It is categorized as an intangible asset, difficult to replicate and generates competitive advantage that also explains performance heterogeneity and variance (Smith, Rupp & Motley, 2013). In this study, corporate reputation was anchored on resource-based theory (Barney, Ketchen & 2011; Barney, 2012), and was measured using six dimensions, namely, quality programs, quality services, quality management, quality leadership and capacity to attract and retain talented staff that were adopted from FMAC reputation index (Fombrun & Van Riel, 1997).This was because it was said to be the most established and it yielded valuable data on reputation and linked reputation to performance. The measures that were applied were those considered relevant in measuring reputation in a university.

Organizational Performance

Organizational performance is described as an important measure of an organization’s success to the extent to which an organizations visions, missions and goals are achieved (Short & Palmer (2003). The assessment of organizational performance is an important aspect in strategic management where executives know how their organizations perform as well as get informed about which strategic changes need to be made. Organizational performance is also said to be multidimensional concept which explains why there is variation in indicators of performance among different organizations hence the different performance measures (Richard, Devinney, Yip & Johnson, 2009). There are two approaches used to measure performance, namely, financial and non-financial (Singh, Darwish & Potoˇcnik, 2016). Uuniversity performance was captured using dimensions which achieved university goals, namely financial resources, teaching effectiveness, research effectiveness and community outreach. Similar measures were adopted from scholars who had done studies on universities (Wang, 2010; Muraguli, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

The study was anchored on Industrial Organization (economics) Theory (Mason, 1953; Bain, 1968) which conceives companies achieve above average performance based on strategic approaches suitable to their particular business or industry structure. The theory postulated the association between competitive strategies and performance of accredited universities in Kenya while focusing on the external environment to determine appropriate strategic approaches that universities pursue.

The Industrial Organization (Economics) theory has received criticism despite its widespread acceptance in research. The assumptions made, are that resources in the firms are all identical leading to identical strategies in all businesses, yet that is not the reality in real life as different firms possess different resources, for example, intangible assets. Thus, other perspectives for explaining the relationship between competitive strategies and organizational performance included; Resource Based theory (RBT). RBT perspective takes a shift from industry analysis which assumes resources are homogenous within a given industry hence transferable across firms in that industry; to focusing on firm analysis. Firm analysis posits that a firm can distinguish itself from its rivals by strategically developing and deploying specific resources. At the same time, an effective differentiation develops competitive advantage over rivals (Wernefelt, 1984; Barney, 1991). Resource based theory (RBT), supported corporate reputation; an intangible asset, residing internally inside universities.

***Competitive strategies, Corporate Reputation and Performance of Accredited Universities in Kenya*.**

Corporate reputation as an intangible asset that is hard to copy was said to drive competitive advantage and performance. It was also regarded as an intangible resource of great worth causing a firm to differentiate itself from its competitors (Raithel & Schwaiger, 2015). Further theoretical discussions on corporate reputation by Pires and Tires (2018) revealed a company's reputation negatively impacted on organizational performance (Pires & Tires, 2018). Other studies found out that corporate reputation was significantly correlated with most indices of corporate success but also had unsettling results because of its multidimensional effect on performance (Lee & Roh,2012). Thus, lack of convergence on the relationship between competitive strategies and organizational performance, created an invitation to examine whether corporate reputation moderated the relationship between competitive strategies and organizational performance of accredited universities in Kenya.

Research Methodology

The study used a cross- sectional survey design to determine whether corporate reputation moderated the relationship between competitive strategies and performance of accredited universities of Kenya at a particular moment in time. Primary data was collected using a structured questionnaires among academic registrars in the 53 accredited universities, in both private and public universities (CUE, 2022). Five accredited universities were used for pilot testing on the reliability and validity of the questionnaire instrument and were exempted from the final analysis of data. Reliability of the measurement items applied Cronbach Alpha coefficients whose cut off point was 0.7 (Kothari, 2018). Validity of data which measures whatever was anticipated to be measured, used content, construct and face validity (Patton, 2002). Factor analysis in data analysis was applied for the withdrawal of common attributes from the data that are scored commonly. Diagnostics tests such us linearity, normality and multicollinearity were also conducted and they confirmed study variables were ideal for linear regression analysis (Prabowo, 2014). The objectives of the study were tested while using inferential statistics. Step wise regression analysis by Baron and Kenny (1986) was applied to test the moderation effect of corporate reputation. Anova/F-test tested the significance of the model. The T-tests, tested the significance of the individual sets of data. Outcomes of the study were analyzed using coefficients and P-values.

Data Analysis and Results

Factor Analysis

Factor analysis was adopted to appraise the construct validity described as the intensity to which respondents are knowledgeable about the variables under review (kline, 1994). To ensure scientific consistency in determining which items to pick and process results, the researcher restricted themselves to items with factor loadings of 0.5 and above (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's test for sampling adequacy to test diverse kinds of validity on the variables were presented in the table below for sampling adequacy and tests for sphericity on perceived usefulness (PU) for the execution of factor analysis. Sufficiency and suitability of the construct to execute factor analysis was set at 0.5 while the number of significant Bartlett's test equals to 0.05 (Patton, 2002). The tables below present summary of findings on validity.

Table 4.1: Summary of KMO and Bartlett Test Results

		Bartlett's test of sphericity		
Variables	***KMO***	***Chi-square***	***Df***	***Sig. level***
Competitive strategies	0.575	354.03	253	0.000
Corporate reputation	0.767	34.83	15	0.000
Organizational performance	0.696	573.69	231	0.000

Source: Research Data (2022)

The KMO values were found all above 0.5 while Bartlett's test for Sphericity values were all less than 0.05 (level of significance), indicating that variable collinearity was low in the specific variables. The variables thus passed the validity test for further analysis. Similarly, Principal Component Analysis obtained showed the factor loadings for each item. The study used the factor loadings of the items that were equal to or above 0.5 as a threshold. Loadings with high values indicated that the factors explained a variation which was significant. Results for communality for competitive strategies, corporate reputation and organizational performance were presented in Table 4.2:

Table 4.2 Principal Component Analysis

COMPETITIVE STRATEGIES

ITEMS	*FACTOR LOADINGS*
My university minimizes costs through applying innovative technology that increases operational efficiency.	0.6228
My university outsources non-core functions to control costs.	0.4912
My university pursues cost cutting measures through tight controls on its overhead costs.	0.2662
My university pursues cost advantage by analyzing and rationalizing its value chain processes through bulk buying from suppliers.	0.4255
My university seeks to benchmark with other reputable universities.	0.7347
My university emphasizes on building a strong brand name for its identification by offering unique programs.	0.4637
My university emphasizes innovative programs as central for gaining competitive advantage.	0.3804
My university offers specialist programs to a niche group of students customized to their unique requirements.	0.3824
My university targets the high-end market ready to pay a premium price for programs.	0.6431
My university serves specially defined market segment.	0.6049
My university offers low-cost, short-term courses to a select group of students.	0.0881
My university has an aggressive promotion/advertising strategy for its programs to optimize student market share.	0.6981
My university has partnered with other well-established universities in order to strengthen its resources and customer pool.	0.6242
My university has invested heavily on online learning technology to leverage on her market share of students.	0.7428
My university has established a center of innovation for development of new innovative programs using modern technology.	0.7919
My university seeks to position itself as the market leader by constantly reviewing programs against ISO and CUE standards in order to match public and customer's demand.	0.7306

My university hosts periodic conferences with other strategic partnerships, local or international universities or agencies to exchange knowledge, expertise and technology leading to quality programs and researches.	0.6971
My university has expanded in other geographical areas (expanding regionally) through media, websites and research fairs.	0.6444
My university explores new markets through use of internet and electronic technology (online distance learning).	0.6312
My university conducts exchange programs with international universities to provide unique experiences to their students and staff adjuncts.	0.7129
My university has increased enrolment of foreign students through online learning.	0.6549
My university interacts with relevant industries to obtain opportunities to enhance skills for their students.	0.7071
My university conducts exchange programs conducted with international universities to provide unique experiences to their students.	0.7777
My university seeks to acquire basic research funding and knowledge through partnerships with industry enterprises.	0.7607
My university sets its fees for similar courses/programs slightly lower than other universities.	0.3469
My university is dependable in delivery of its services.	0.6453
My university is always first in the market in introducing new academic programs.	0.5259
Integration of innovation in programs is key to our university	1.0029
My university has a challenge in ensuring completion of its academic programs on time in line with the set calendar.	0.4777
CORPORATE REPUTATION	
Our university is known for strong management and leadership.	*0.6906*
My university endeavors to offer professional and quality programs/services subject to CUE standards.	*0.4676*
My university is ISO certified.	*0.6569*

My university is highly regarded for its ability to attract highly trained staff through having a favorable staff policy.	*0.6709*
My university benchmarks its academic programs and services with other highly rated universities.	*0.3991*
My university is perceived by stakeholders as a reliable institution for academic training and research.	*0.7343*
ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE	
The tuition income per annum in my university has been increasing from increasing student enrollment.	0.9567
The tuition income per annum in my university has been increasing from increasing student enrollment.	0.9567
The amount of research grants in my university has been increasing compared to our competitors.	0.6347
My university offers market-driven programs.	0.7422
My university has put in place infrastructure that supports quality learning such as open access initiatives and digital repositories in comparison to our competitors.	0.8278
The number of graduating students has continued to increase in my university in comparison to those of our competitors.	0.6717
My university complies to set standards by CUE for our programs to encourage consistency in quality and relevance.	0.7842
My university participates in college conferences and educational events in order to enhance teaching effectiveness.	0.7381
Academic programs are reviewed regularly in my university compared to our competitors.	0.8969
My university lays emphasis on the use of new technology in our teaching methods.	0.8729

Test of Hypothesis

Objective: To examine the effect of corporate reputation on the relationship between competitive strategies and performance of accredited universities in Kenya.

$H_{01:}$ Corporate reputation has no significant moderating effect on the connection among competitive strategies and performance of accredited universities in Kenya.

To test the moderating effect, the study applied step wise regression analysis using three steps method proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986).

In the first step; performance of accredited universities in Kenya was regressed on competitive strategies and results were significant, revealing a strong and positive relationship between competitive strategies and performance of accredited universities in Kenya. The table 4.3 below presents:

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

Model Summary				
Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.803	0.6454	0.6336	0.384

ANOVA						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	7.8013	1	7.8013	54.61	.000
	Residual	4.2860	30	0.1429		
	Total	12.0873	31			

Coefficients						
Model		Unstandardize0d Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.432	0.306	0.904	4.674	0.000
	CS	0.673	0.091	0.803	7.389	0.000

a. Predictors: (Constant), Competitive strategies
b. Dependent Variable: Performance of Accredited Universities in Kenya
Source: Research findings (2022).

The results in Table 4.3 revealed a strong and positive relationship between competitive strategies and performance of accredited universities in Kenya, with a coefficient of correlation of (R=0.803). A coefficient of determination of ($R^2 = 0.6454$) indicated that competitive strategies explained 64.54% of performance variation in accredited universities in Kenya. 35.46% of variations was explained by other factors out of the scope of this study. The overall model was significant (F=54.61, p<

0.05) which indicated that the model was a good fit for the data analysis in this study. The outcomes thus confirmed the first step of testing for moderating influence as significant providing for a condition to proceed to step 2.

Step 2 involved testing the combined effect of competitive strategies and corporate reputation on performance of accredited universities in Kenya. The result for the second step is presented in the Table 4.4 below.

Table 4: Regression Outcomes for the Influence of Competitive Strategies and corporate reputation on Performance of Accredited Universities of Kenya

Model Summary						
Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Std. Error of the Estimate		
1	0.851	0.725	0.706	0.339		
ANOVA						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	8.757	3	2.919	38.14	0.000
	Residual	8.758	29	0.302		
	Total	17.515	32			
Coefficients						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	0.730	0.306	1.169	1990	0.056
	CS	0.454	0.091	0.726	4.060	0.000
	CR	0.353	0.122	0.565	2.887	0.007

a. Predictors: (Constant), Competitive strategies, Corporate reputation

b. Dependent Variable: Performance of Accredited Universities in Kenya

Source: Research findings, 2022.

Table 4 indicates that the combined effect of *competitive* strategies and corporate reputation on performance of accredited universities in Kenya had a coefficient of correlation of R = 0.851 indicating an increase in strength from R= 0.803 in step 1. This increase suggested that the addition of corporate reputation variable strengthened the association between competitive strategies and performance of accredited universities in Kenya, where R^2 = 0.737, meant that 73.7% of change in performance of accredited universities in Kenya was explained by a combination of competitive strategies with corporate reputation and the remaining 26.3 % was explained by factors outside the scope of this study. The overall model was significant (F=38.14, p < 0.05), further demonstrating that the model was a good fit for the data- analysis. The beta coefficient for competitive strategies and corporate reputation was also was significant, (β=0.353, P=0.007< 0.05), showing that performance of accredited universities in Kenya increased by beta 0.353, meaning that a unit change in the combined effect of competitive strategies and corporate reputation increased performance of accredited universities in Kenya by beta 0.353. Therefore, since the combination of corporate reputation and competitive strategies on performance of accredited universities in Kenya was significant P-value (0.007<0.05); Step 3 in step wise regression model was confirmed in Table 4.5 below.

Table 4.5: Multiple Regression Outcomes for the effect of Competitive Strategies, Corporate Reputation, Interaction term of Competitive Strategies and Corporate Reputation on Performance of Accredited Universities of Kenya.

Model Summary

	R	R^2	Adj R^2	SE
1	0.858	0.7367	0.709	0.337

ANOVA

Model		SS	df	MS	F	P
1	Regression	7.8045	3	2.6015	26.11	0.000
	Residual	7.5348	28	0.2691		
	Total	15.3393	31			

Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized		Standardized	T	P
		B	SE	B		
	(Constant)	2.338	1.463	3.744	1.412	0.169

	CS	-0.059	0.465	-0.095	-0.007	0.995
	CR	-0.052	-0.377	-0.084	-0.716	0.480
	CS*CR	0.126	0.111	0.202	0.841	0.408

a. Predictors: (Constant), Competitive Strategies, Corporate Reputation and interaction term between competitive strategies and Corporate Reputation.
b. Outcome Variable: Performance of Accredited Universities in Kenya
Source: Research findings (2022)

The outcome of the multiple regression on the final step 3, that tested for the moderation effect of corporate reputation where performance was regressed on competitive strategies and the interaction term between corporate reputation and competitive strategies displayed on Table 4.5 presented a coefficient of correlation R=0.858 which indicated a robust and positive association between performance of accredited universities in Kenya regressed on competitive strategies, corporate reputation and the interaction term between competitive strategies and corporate reputation. Further, the coefficient of determination increased from R^2= 0.725 to R^2 0.737 after the addition of the interaction term implying that about 1.2% of the variations in performance of accredited universities was caused by the addition of interaction term between competitive strategies and corporate reputation. The minimal R^2 change of 0.012 inferred that the introduction of corporate reputation as the moderator with the independent variable did not significantly influence the dependent variable. The overall model used was significant and had a goodness of fit for the data analysis in this study (F= 26.11, P<0.05). The beta coefficient for interaction term implied that a unit change in interaction term (β=0.126, P=0.408>0.05) contributed to 0.126 or 12.6% in performance variation of accredited universities in Kenya; revealing minimal improvement on performance by the interaction term added in the model. Similarly, P-value (P>0.408) for the interaction term was insignificant.

The study found out that corporate reputation does not moderate the relationship between competitive strategies and performance of accredited universities in Kenya. This therefore means that the presence of corporate reputation did not amplify the relationship between competitive strategies and performance of accredited universities. The researcher did not find any studies with similar predictor and criterion variables that concurred or supported this study. Though, a study on companies in the Indonesian stock exchange found corporate reputation to having significantly moderated the relationship between company social responsibility and performance (Nathania & Krisnanda, 2024). This means that some predictor variables other than competitive strategies when connected with performance may result in significant outcomes. Also, a study done by Ndung'u (2020) on manufacturing firms in Kenya, submitted that corporate image moderated the relationship between competitive strategies and performance. This means also that corporate reputation may strengthen the relationship between competitive strategies and performance based on other sectors such as in manufacturing. To the extent that corporate reputation did not moderate the link between competitive strategies and the performance of accredited universities in Kenya, there is a need for future research to explore different functional forms or non-linear relationships between variables. Basing on findings from descriptive statistics, academic registrars agreed to a great extent corporate reputation is an important factor for improving the relationship between the predictor and criterion variables in the study.

Conclusion

The main objective of the study was to determine the moderating role of corporate reputation in the relationship between competitive strategies and performance of accredited universities in Kenya. The study concluded that corporate does not moderate the relationship between corporate reputation and performance of accredited universities in Kenya. This calls for consideration of further researches on the combination of variables. The study recommended that accredited universities align to those measures of corporate reputation with a means score above the average mean score for corporate reputation (3.99). In this case, measures with a mean score ranging from 4.031 to 4.156, namely, quality programs or quality services, strong management and leadership, capacity to attract and retain talented staff, benchmarking academic program/services with other highly rated universities and the perception that accredited universities are reliable institutions for academic training and research.

Limitations and Recommendations of the study.

The study was limited to accredited universities in Kenya; thus, findings could not be generalized to other international universities or sectors. Therefore, a longitudinal study was proposed. Data used in the analysis were collected using semi structured questionnaires which did not give respondents a chance to explain their views in context. Thus, other data collection methods like structured interviews or focus groups could be applied in future researches. This study relied on a single informant which may be viewed as introducing bias hence other informants like students and staff could be included in future research.

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