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ABSTRACT

This study examined product leadership and its strategic influence on diverse market demands and maintaining competitiveness of mobile service providers in the telecommunication industry. The study employed descriptive survey research design and census approach, to collect primary data through a structured questionnaire administered to managers in the strategic, marketing/business and operations departments of three major players in the industry: Safaricom PLC, Airtel Kenya Network and Telekom Kenya Limited. Data was analyzed using both descriptive statistics (frequencies, mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (regression) with the aid of STATA statistical software. Findings indicate, product leadership has a positive and significant influence on the performance of mobile service providers. The study contributes, to the underexplored area of product leadership in Kenya's telecommunication industry, addressing the theoretical gap while providing practical evidence of its application. The insights generated can act as a guide in strategic decisions, in enhancing competiveness of mobile service providers and promoting customer centric strategies critical to success in the telecommunication industry.

Keywords: *Product Leadership, Mobile Service Providers, Performance, Telecommunication Industry*

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INTRODUCTION

In today's turbulent market environment, the success of any firm depends significantly on the ability to develop a competitive advantage and superior firm performance (Ed-Dafali, Al-Azad, Mohiuddin & Reza, 2023). Organizations are being compelled to analyze globalization's effects, investors demands, changing customer needs and improve their strategies and management systems (Bashir, Fitaihi & Abdelhakim, 2023). Since products in the market are very similar to one another, leading to tight competition, which pushes companies to strive hard in attaining a larger market share by employing precise and accurate strategies. As a consequence, those who make mistakes in deciding their strategy will likely lose (Köseoglu, Altin, Chan & Aladag, 2020). Firms must not only craft efficient strategies but also ensure their effective implementation to maintain a competitive advantage, since their success is strongly based on satisfying the changing needs (Agama, Sylvanus & Kenneth, 2023). Treacy and Wiersema (1995) suggests that the only constant source of competitive advantage is creating customer value. Treacy and Wiersema (1993) distinguished three value disciplines; operational excellence, customer intimacy and product leadership with the aim of achieving superior value for the consumer. MISC Magazine (2014) interprets product leadership as: "Offering customers leading edge products that consistently enhance the customer's use or application of the product, thereby making its rivals' goods obsolete". The offered product may exceed competing offerings by "design, technology, features, customer service," or other complex element (Porter, 1980, p. 36). Strategies focused around product leadership allow the firm to narrow their business focus to providing the best available offerings to improve their leadership position (Treacy & Wiersema, 1995). Firm performance is the outcome of the attractiveness of a business and firm's distinctive way of competing (Porter 1985).

The external competitive factors associated with innovation and knowledge represent a challenge in the current business climate. Management concepts that ignore this new reality can jeopardize the sustainable and sustainable future of organizations (Smilevski, 2024). Given the turbulent economic environment and fierce competition characterized by price wars in the telecommunication industry, the firms are struggling to remain steady in the market place and achieve desired levels of performance (Kifordu, 2024). The telephony sector plays a critical role in communication, contributes to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), creates economic opportunities through mobile money agents, facilitate economic activities, and provide mobile money and internet services (CA, 2023). The industry has expanded into diversified functions to support the growth of technological advancement for better services demanded by any nation (Ikonya, 2015). The telecommunications sector in Kenya was liberalized in 1998 which saw the incumbent government owned monopoly, Telkom Kenya, split into three separate entities: Telkom Kenya to provided telephony service, the Postal Corporation of Kenya to provide postal service and the Communications Commission of Kenya (now the Communications Authority of Kenya) as the industry's regulator. Mobile operator Safaricom, that was initially a department within Telkom Kenya, would be hived off, to become an independent entity, providing mobile telephony services. Today, the players in the telecommunications industry in Kenya include Safaricom PLC, Airtel Kenya Network and Telkom

Kenya among others. The firms offer a range of services, including mobile telephony services, internet infrastructure and services, and money transfers to the Kenyan population and beyond its borders.

The Kenya Communication Act opened the local market to competition, with Communication Authority of Kenya (CA) set up to act as an independent regulatory body for the telecommunication industry. To participate in the sector, a firm needs to make significant investments with license fees being in millions of dollars. The regulator also sets wholesale prices (also known as interconnection rates) and regulates market promotions by requiring its licenses to obtain written approval prior to launch any product or service. In 2010, the regulator had slashed the wholesale rates by 50% from Ksh. 4.40 per call to Ksh. 2.21 leading to price war between operators that saw retail call rates also drop by a similar margin (CA, 2021). The overall mobile (sim) penetration in Kenya grew by 4.3% to stand at 133.6% in 2021 translating to 65.08 million subscriptions compared to 61.41 million in 2020. As at 31st December 2021, Safaricom PLC commanded 70.4% voice traffic, 37% fixed data customers and 42 million subscribers' equivalent to 79% of the country's population amidst Airtel Kenya's 16 million and Telkom's 4.1 million subscribers (CA, 2021). Despite the rise in new mobile subscribers in Kenya Safaricom PLC has remained the market leader with other service providers trying to outperform it by formulating all sorts of strategies like offering free calls and messages across the networks, offering cheaper services in mobile money transfer and other forms of advertisement but without much success. With the huge investments in new and cheaper schemes being introduced every day. It's yet to be established whether the players in the industry are merely giving away profits, in a desperate struggle to win customers or it's a viable strategy that can help them increase their revenue potentials. The study sought to explore product leadership influence on performance of mobile service providers in the telecommunication industry in Kenya**.**

Research Objective

The general objective of the study was to determine the relationship between product leadership and performance of mobile service providers in the telecommunication industry in Kenya. The study was guided by the following research hypothesis;

- Product leadership has no significant relationship on the performance of mobile service providers in the telecommunication industry in Kenya.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Delta Model Strategic Framework

The delta model strategic framework was developed by Dean & company co-founder Dean Wilde, and Arnoldo Hax of the MIT Sloan School of Management to help managers in formulating and implementing effective company strategies to the advantage of their customers. It is a pro-consumer approach towards the implementation of effective management and corporate business strategies in an organization. In other words, it is a strategic framework that puts the customers at the heart of management. It looks at the main ways to build bonds with customers through adaptive processes. Hax and Wilde II (2003) proposes three strategic methods which include best product positioning, total customer solutions, and system lock-In.

According to Hax and Wilde (2001) best product positioning focuses on overall consumer happiness through effective and efficient product creation. There are two approaches to accomplishing the goal: cost reduction, or product differentiation. Cost reduction strategy focuses on product economics or the idea that businesses win through rapid innovation and reduction in production costs. In other words, it shifts the focus from the customer to the product. From customer bonding to production competition. The position is inward and narrow. The primary strategic driving forces are the development of an efficient supply chain, which ensures low-cost infrastructure, a proven internal capability for new product development, which ensures the proper renewal of the existing product line and the securing of distribution channels, which massively transfer the products to the targeted market segments. It advocates for selling of standardized and characterized products in order to maximize total consumer satisfaction and beat the competition. Businesses that can't compete on price must find another way to gain market share. They do this through product differentiation. There are many ways companies can differentiate their products: features, performance and quality, reliability, looks, channels of distribution, complexity, location and marketing efforts. The main limitation of this approach is that it generates limited customer bonding, hence making the incumbent firms vulnerable to new entrants with novel or lower cost products. Its obsessive concern with competitors can also lead to imitation and price wars, resulting in convergence - the worst of all deals. In spite of the inherent limitations of this strategic position, it is by far the most widely adopted.

Empirical Literature

Product Leadership

Product leadership focuses on developing the best product or service. Organizations focusing on this strategy often display an emphasis on creativity and innovation and typically produce a continuous stream of state-of-the-art products and services that render competitor's offering obsolete (Treacy & Wiersema, 1995). Santos (2015) investigated the power of product leadership in generating customer's intentions to buy and concluded that product leadership affected consumers' perception of value and quality, which sequentially generated the consumers' intention to buy through the consumers' attitude and subjective norm. Rachmad, Meliantary, Akbar, Rijal and Aulia (2023) emphasized that brand trust has an impact on product quality and thus affects the purchase decisions made by consumers. The choice of what product to purchase in most consumer markets is not majorly determined by the lowest price, but the product's quality. Product quality can have large effects on demand and consumer welfare and has been recognized as a strategic organizational priority, it is also an important element of competition in a wide range of markets and industries.

The best product reflects traditional thinking and the primary focus is to attract, satisfy, and retain the customer through the inherent characteristics of the product itself either through low cost, which can offer customers a lower price - or differentiation, which can provide customers unique features. The products tend to be standardized and unbundled, the customers massive and faceless, and the focus on competitors that we are trying to equal or surpass. The drivers are the product economics and the internal supply chain, which provide the engine for efficient product production (Hax & Wilde, 2001). Rant and Cerne (2017) revealed that product leadership and customer intimacy are two blocks that build the business attractiveness of hidden champions. More specifically they showed that product leadership negatively moderates the business attractiveness-performance relationship, while the impact of the combination of product leadership and customer intimacy on the business attractiveness-firm performance relationship is not straightforward and depends on different combinations of these values. Njue, Kambura & Moguche (2023) established that product differentiation significantly impacted the performance of commercial banks in Kenya. The findings were supported by Kadenyeka and Washika (2023) who found out that differentiation strategy has a positive and significant influence on performance of selected supermarkets in Kenya and concluded that product innovation should be sustained to fast-track product differentiation, enhance competition, and create barriers to entry in the market. Mutuku, Oloko and Muturi (2024) further emphasized the importance of implementing effective product differentiation strategies in achieving better financial performance and sustained growth of deposit-taking SACCOs in Kenya.

Treacy and Wiersema (1993) notes that an organization that focuses on product leadership will always strive for product development and innovation and want to be market leader of the specific product. Ajay, Vimal, Elizabeth, Ankesh, Neeraj and Al Ali. (2023) explained that new product development involves handling technical issues such as cost, operational bottlenecks, economic changes, competitors' strategy, company policy and ascertained that integrating these attributes in Lean planning enhance quality performance. They ascertained that new product development attributes such as innovation, marketing, organization, customer, product and technology positively influence the Lean Six Sigma structure process and design improvement. Bataineh, Sánchez-Sellero and Ayad, (2024) emphasized that by committing to research and development practices, businesses can generate novel ideas, leverage the latest technology, and incorporate data from external sources, which, in turn, can enhance their capabilities, facilitate knowledge-sharing, develop new skills, and optimize resource use. Kadenyeka and Washika (2023) also noted that innovation and new product introduction by supermarkets in Kenya enhanced their performance. Matinde and Atikiya (2023) concluded that technology, product and pricing innovation strategies had a significant influence on performance of oil marketing firms in Nairobi County, Kenya. According to Kiiru, Mukulu and Ngatia (2023) innovation has a positive and significant impact on performance through increase of profit margins, sale turnover and market share. Similar evidence in terms of product innovation is demonstrated by Somwethee, Aujirapongpan and Ru-Zhue (2023) who explained that innovation capability is determined by management, process, and technology potentials and has a positive influence on sustainable organization performance of community enterprises in Phuket. Satria, Rahmadana and Fitri (2023) emphasized that product innovation had a positive and significant effect on the marketing performance of the coffee shops in Medan City and noted that the shops should establish mechanisms to obtain information about customer needs and expectations and to disseminate and effectively use this information among business functions. Porter (1985) considers innovation as a critical competitive advantage to success. An organization can be in a secured position relative to its competitors if it has an innovative product. The current study sought to fill the knowledge gap by exploring the relationship between product leadership and performance of mobile service providers, as there was no study available linking product leadership to performance of mobile service providers in the telecommunication industry in Kenya

Organization Performance

Organizational performance refers to the set of procedures and activities that an organisation uses to produce value and provide it to its stakeholders (Gutterman, 2023). It comprises the actual output or results of its end activities as measured against its intended outputs (or goals and objectives) (Zhiang & Kathleen, 2023). Strategic management is a set of managerial decisions and actions with which we determine the long-term performance of any company or organization (Smilevski, 2024). Strategic management provides managers with a systematic and comprehensive means of analyzing the organization's internal and external environment, assessing its strengths and weaknesses, both internally and externally, and identifying opportunities through which they can develop and exploit a competitive advantage (Dess, McNamara, Eisner and Sauerwald, 2024).

Kaplan and Norton (2019) are best known as the originators of the balanced scorecard concept which adds to the managerial equation the imperative necessity of aligning the individual and organizational effort with the organizational vision and strategic objectives, in a whole defined by four perspectives: financial, customer and stakeholder, internal processes and organizational capacity of learning and growth. According to Gutterman (2023), it is notable for taking multidimensional perspectives toward organizational performance because value comes in many forms and different types of organizations and stakeholders have their own different concepts of what outcomes are valuable. Performance measurement has become a desperately bugging issue for business and non-business enterprises since last couple of decades around the globe (Sousa, 2024). Dissatisfaction with performance measurement systems has run high in these days. In this study, performance of mobile service providers in the telecommunication in Kenya was measured based on market share in terms of customer subscriptions, customer retention and overall organizational profitability.

Conceptual Framework

Product Leadership Strategy

- Product Quality
- Product Brand Positioning
- Product Research and Development
- Product Innovation

→

Performance of Mobile Service Providers

- Market Share - Customers Subscriptions
- Customer Retention
- Overall Organizational Profitability

Independent Variable **Dependent variable**

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

METHODOLOGY

Positivism approach was used to collect all the facts and figures that are associated with and focus on the influence of product leadership on performance of mobile service providers in the telecommunication industry in Kenya. This study adopted a descriptive survey research design and census technique to select 178 managers which included three key interviewees from Safaricom PLC, Airtel Kenya Networks and Telkom Kenya consisting of strategy, marketing/business development and operations departments since they were well versed with their organizational strategic choices on performance. The study relied on primary data, collected using a self-administered and interview guide. Data was analyzed using the assistance of STATA Statistical Computer software. The analyzed data generated descriptive statistics which included measures of central tendency, dispersion and association. Inferential statistics included correlation and regression analysis. Correlation analysis was conducted in order to establish the nature and strength of the influence of product leadership on performance of mobile service providers in the telecommunication industry in Kenya. Regression analysis was used to investigate the relationship that had been hypothesized between product leadership and performance. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to investigate the degree of association between the variables in the research.

To estimate product leadership influence on performance of mobile service providers in the telecommunication industry the following regression equation was estimated:

$$\mathbf{Y= \beta_o + \beta_1 X_1 + e} \text{ -- } \mathbf{1}$$

Where:

Y= Organizational performance

X_1= Product Leadership

e = Error term

β_o = Constant

FINDINGS

Descriptive Statistics

The objective of the study was to examine the relationship between product leadership and performance of mobile service providers in the telecommunication industry in Kenya. Results were presented in the table below.

Table 1: Product Leadership

Product Leadership	N	SD (%)	D (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	Mean	Std. Deviation
Organization focuses on providing products /services that make competitor's offering obsolete	138	3.6	12.3	20.3	34.1	29.7	**3.7391**	**1.12246**
Our organization focuses on attracting customers through the inherent characteristics of its product/service	138	0.7	2.2	11.6	42.0	43.5	**4.2536**	**.80202**
Our organization focuses on retaining its customers through offering them lower prices for our products/services	138	6.5	9.4	10.9	26.8	46.4	**3.9710**	**1.24362**
Our organization focuses on producing a continuous stream of state of the art products/services	138	0.7	2.9	8.0	44.2	44.2	**4.2826**	**.79220**
Our organization focuses on differentiating its products from those of its competitors	138	2.9	2.9	12.3	44.2	37.7	**4.1087**	**.93344**
Our organization focuses on the development of new products through innovation	138	0.7	5.1	13.8	24.6	55.8	**4.2971**	**.93909**
Our products tend to be standardized and unbundled than those of our competitors	138	2.9	5.1	28.3	37.0	26.8	**3.7971**	**.99017**
Our organization relentlessly pursues new solutions to the problems that our own latest products/services have solved	138	2.9	7.2	16.7	36.2	37.0	**3.9710**	**1.04597**
Most of our new and innovated products are as a result of customer analysis	138	2.2	2.2	17.4	37.7	40.6	**4.1232**	**.92376**

SD= Strongly Disagree; **D**= Disagree; **N**= neither Agree nor Disagree; **A**= Agree; **SA**= Strongly Disagree

The results revealed that a majority of the respondents (55.8%) strongly agreed that their organization focuses on the development of new products through innovation. 42.0% of the respondents agreed that their organization focuses on attracting customers through the inherent characteristics of its product/service (43.5% strongly agreed while 11.6% were neutral). 44.2% of the respondents agreed that their organization focuses on producing a continuous stream of state of the art products/services. A similar response is reported on the aspect of their organization focusing on differentiating their products from those of their competitors (44.2%). 46.4% of the respondents strongly agreed that the primary focus of their organization is to retain their customers through the inherent characteristics of the product itself by offering them lower prices. On the other hand 29.7% of the respondents strongly agreed that their organization focuses on providing products/services that renders their competitor's offering obsolete. On most of their new and innovated products as a result of customer analysis 37.7% of the respondents agreed, 40.6% strongly agreed, 17.4% were neutral while 2.2% for strongly disagree and also disagree. 37.0% of the respondents were in agreement that their products tend to be standardized and unbundled than those of their competitors. 36.2% of the respondents agreed to that their organization relentlessly pursues new solutions to the problems that their own latest products/services had solved.

From the results the highest mean of the statements was 4.2 as observed in the statement our organization focuses on producing a continuous stream of state of the art products/services. However, the statement had the lowest standard deviation of 0.7. It can be noted that all the means of the statements fall within 3.5 and 4.2. This implies that majority of the respondents agreed with the statements under product leadership. The standard deviation also falls within the range of 0.8 to 1.2 meaning that responses are not very much dispersed from each other. This is in line with Widiatmoko, Karyatun and Digdowiseiso (2023), determined the effect of product quality, brand image and promotion on purchasing decisions and concluded that product quality, brand image and sales promotion had a positive and significant effect on the decisions to purchase Nike shoes in East Jakarta. Dirisu, Oluwole, & Ibidunni (2013) also concluded that, there is a positive relationship between firms that pursue product differentiation through product innovation, product design, higher quality product or unique product and the firm performance; Dirisu *et al* (2013) further confirmed that product differentiation could be used as a tool to achieve product leadership and thus enhance organization performance

Correlation Analysis for Product Leadership and Performance

Correlation analysis was done to determine product leadership strategy influence on the performance of mobile service providers in the telecommunication industry in Kenya. Result were presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Correlation Analysis

	Product Leadership	**Performance**
Product Leadership	1.0000	
Performance	0.5721*	1.0000
	0.0000	
Obs	138	138

The results in Table 2 revealed that product leadership and performance are positive and significantly related (r= 0.5721*, p = .0000). The findings are consistent with that of Odhiambo and Anyieni (2023) who concluded that product leadership had a positive and statistically significant connection with competitive advantage of Kenyan commercial banks/lenders.

Regression Analysis

Regression analysis was done to determine the influence of product leadership on the performance of mobile service providers in the telecommunication industry in Kenya. Results were presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Regression Model for Product Leadership and Performance

Source	**SS**	**Df**	**MS**	**Number of Obs**	=	138
Model	35.5937487	1	35.5937487	**F (1, 136)**	=	66.17
Residual	73.1583371	136	.537928949	**Prob > F**	=	0.0000
Total	108.752086	137	.793810845	**R-squared**	=	0.3273
				Adj R-squared	=	0.3223
				Root MSE	=	.73344

Performance	**Coef.**	**Std. Err.**	**t**	**P>|t|**
Product Leadership	.6935462	.0852611	8.13	0.000
_cons	2.27e-08	.0624343	0.00	1.000

The results presented the model summary of fitness for the study phenomena product leadership. From the model, the adjusted R^2 was 0.3223, this indicates that product leadership was found to explain 32.2% variations in performance of mobile service providers. This also implies that 67.8% of the variation in the dependent variable is attributed to other variables excluded from the model.

The results on the analysis of the variance (ANOVA) indicated that the overall model was statistically significant with an F statistics of 66.17 and a P value of .000 which was less than the 0.05 significance level. The findings imply that product leadership was statistically significant in explaining the performance of mobile service providers in the telecommunication industry in Kenya

Regression of coefficients results revealed that product leadership and performance of mobile service providers are positively and significantly related (β=0.6935462, p=0.000). This implies that a unit increase in product leadership would lead to a rise in performance by 0.6935 units. Hence we reject the null hypothesis and conclude that product leadership has a positive significant influence on performance of mobile service providers in the telecommunication industry in Kenya. The findings were consistent with those of Odhiambo and Anyieni (2023) who found product leadership had a positive and statistically significant connection with competitive advantage of Kenyan commercial banks

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study findings indicate that product leadership had a positive and statistically significant influence on the performance of mobile service providers. The paper concludes that product leadership strategies enhance mobile service providers' performance by fostering innovation, customer loyalty and operational agility. The capacity for innovation helps, the mobile service providers stay ahead of market trends, respond to evolving customer preferences and capitalize on emerging opportunities, increasing their market share and revenue growth. The mobile service providers have also invested heavily in research and development activities to improve their services, technology infrastructure and customer experience.

The study provides evidence that, product leadership strategy is an important aspect in determining the performance of mobile service providers and explores how firms build their capacity to innovate, change, and reconfigure their products over time to maintain competitiveness. The paper also concludes that Safaricom PLC has been able to outperform Airtel and Telkom Kenya in financial and service metrics due to its ability to continuously innovate and introduce new, cutting-edge technology, products and services. The study recommended that the mobile service providers' stakeholders and policy makers should invest in network upgrades and customer experience metrics. They should also balance their costs and differentiation, since while cost efficiency matters, differentiation through unique products and services yield sustainable growth in the telecommunications landscape in emerging economies like Kenya.

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