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Strategic Choice and Competitive Advantage of Private Universities in Nairobi County: A Case of Strathmore University

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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 purpose of this study was to investigate the perceived strategy choices that influence competitive advantage of private universities in Nairobi County. The study was informed by dynamic capability theory, innovation theory and porter's theory. A descriptive research design was adopted and the target population was made of 15 private universities in Nairobi County; however, only Strathmore University was purposively selected for the study. The respondents of the study comprised of VCs, DVCs, deans, university teaching staffs and the university support staffs. The study used census approach to study the VCs and the DVCs since their numbers are manageable, purposive sampling was used to select a sample for deans and the university teaching staffs, while Yamane formula was employed in calculating the sample size for the university support staffs. The study used primary data which was collected using questionnaire. The quantitative data collected was analyzed with the aid of SPSS Version 26.0. The study found that strategic alliance had positive and significant effect on competitive advantage of private universities in Nairobi County (β =.288, p=.000<.05), technologies strategy had positive and significant effect on competitive advantage of private universities in Nairobi County (β =.194, p=.000<.05), product differentiation strategy had positive and significant effect on competitive advantage of private universities in Nairobi County (β =.244, p=.000<.05) and finally marketing initiatives strategy had positive and significant effect on competitive advantage of private universities in Nairobi County (β =.248, p=.000<.05). The study concluded that the strategic choices adopted by the study all had positive and significant effect on the competitive advantage of the university and that through strategic alliances, companies can improve their competitive positioning, gain entry to new markets, supplement critical skills, and share the risk and cost of major development projects. The study thus recommended that the management of private universities in Nairobi County and by extension other private universities in Kenya should always strive to adopt suitable strategic choices in an effort to improve on their competitiveness in the market that is facing serious competition.

Keywords: *Strategic, Choice, Advantage, Alliances, Technologies, Differentiation, Initiatives*

1.1 Background of the Study

The business environment has witnessed several changes that have compelled managers to develop and adopt responsive strategies in order to remain relevant in the market (Issa, Kabalan & El-ammare, 2018). Organizations that have ignored the severity of these changes and not made good strategic choices have shut down. As indicated by Okwumba & Onyiaji (2019), strategic choices are the core of strategic management and successful companies have between those that carefully select relevant strategies, take into account both strategic positions and the strategic implementations. Today, private universities struggle to survive under tough competition in the business environment domestically and globally (Eide, 2018). According to Hayden (2019), such learning institutions are faced with an increasingly competitive environment in which it is difficult to maintain a sustained competitive advantage. True competition consists of the life of constant struggle and rival against rival (Shields & Bredemeier, 2018). It is observed that true competitive situation requires a roadmap to achieve a common goal that brings about struggle among private learning institutions over times. The choice of effective business strategy appears to have gained credence in in the education sector as institutions compete to gain competitive advantage over their rivals, as one of the best responses, as many private institutions now found themselves largely in the business world.

As the number of private universities continues to grow, so does the competition for market survival intensify, competition for survival has been the guiding force for existence and it has been associated with the creation of wealth (Mathooko & Ogutu, 2015). With the development and progress of civilization, competition has become more complex. The firms are engaged in various activities to minimize their costs and maximize their profits. Thus, the core competencies of the organization are reflected in their commercial activities and the most competent is the winner in grabbing a large chunk of market share and leads the industry (Poddar &Gadhawe, 2017).

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 Nigeria, Akingbade (2014) examined the Competitive Strategies and Improved Performance of Selected Nigeria Telecommunication Companies in which it was discovered that the influence of globalization in telecommunication companies in Nigeria had greatly increased the level of competition in the industry and they were forced to be competitive to survive.

In Kenya, Kinoko (2017) studied competitive strategies adopted by Primary lubricant marketers in Kenya. His focus was again on the Major oil companies and he found that broad differentiation strategies and hybrid strategies were in use. Offering lubricants recommended by original equipment manufacturers and offering a wide selection of lubricants for customers were the most important strategies in product offering at that time. Some of these majors have either exited or are in the process of exiting the market. Ngeera (2013) while studying the pharmaceutical industry observed that when firms are faced with competition, they develop strategies to help them achieve competitive advantage. He found that most retail pharmacies used cost leadership while good customer service was used to attract and retain customers.

Competitive advantage is the strategic advantage one business entity has over its rival entities within its competitive industry (Ndanu, 2014). Achieving competitive advantage strengthens and positions a business better within the business environment. Competitive advantage occurs when an organization acquires or develops an attribute or combination of attributes that allows it to outperform its competitors. These attributes can include access to natural resources, such as inexpensive power, access to highly trained and skilled personnel human resources. New technologies such as robotics and information technology either to be included as a part of the product, or to assist making it. competitive strategy implementation has become such a prominent part of the modern business world that it can also contribute to competitive advantage by outperforming competitors with regard to internet presence from the very beginning (Jones, Harrison & Felps, 2018).

Private universities in Kenya have notably increased owing to the growing demand for higher education and a subsequent strain on public universities to handle this demand. In Kenya over 40,000 students qualify for university admission each year, but the public universities through the Kenya Universities and Colleges Central Placement Service (KUCCPS) can absorb only approximately 8,000-10,000 students (CUE, 2018). In Kenya, higher education has been the fastest growing segment of the education sector in the past 10 years, averaging 6.2% each year (KNBS, 2018). Private universities face numerous challenges including: maintaining a steady supply of students who can afford to pay for private university education, stiff competition from their public universities counterpart who have introduced parallel degree courses for full paying students , aggressive competition from foreign universities who have launched an aggressive campaign for recruiting local students, lacking a research focus comparable to public universities and offering specific and narrow programs (Oketch, 2014). Currently the private universities run only private sponsored programmes with government sponsored students being a new strategy set by government to introduce government loans to students in private universities. For the first time local private universities will accommodate privately and government sponsored progammes at the same time. The study looked at what strategies were in place, courses offered, numbers admitted, and capacities, timings of lectures, challenges and advantages.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Today's industry is facing dramatically aggressive competition in a new deregulated environment. Ideally it is believed that the primary purpose of a strategy is to provide the organization with a sustainable position of advantage within a competitive environment. It is also expected that technological change can affect industry-wide entry barriers by protecting individual organizations through capital barriers to entry, economies of scale, in-house knowledge, enhance or eliminate

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opportunities for product differentiation, affect distribution through allowing conventional distribution channels to be circumvented. However the evidence presented by various empirical studies suggest that private universities in Kenya are still struggling to achieve competitive advantage over their rivals. The rapid change in today's environment where market place is increasingly competitive and the rate of innovation rising, coupled by the pressure of the emergence of global knowledge-based economy have made learning institutions to realize that competitive strategies are their key assets.

Strategy implementation is a problem in many companies. As the strategy advances to implementation phase, the primary objectives dissipate and the initial momentum is lost before the expected benefits are realized. Private universities in Kenya are facing numerous external challenges due to changes in the environment. High demand for higher education in Kenya has resulted in significant pressure to expand over the recent years and HEI are facing significant academic and economic challenges. Hence prompting the higher education players to formulate and implement response competitive strategies to mitigate these challenges. The purpose of this study therefore was to carry out a detailed investigation into the perceived strategy choices that influence competitive advantage of private universities in Nairobi County.

1.3 Research Objectives

i. To establish the effect of Strategic Alliances on competitive advantage of private universities in Nairobi County.
ii. To determine the effect of use of technologies strategy on competitive advantage of private universities in Nairobi County.
iii. To assess the effect of product differentiation strategy on competitive advantage of private universities in Nairobi County.
iv. To evaluate the effect of marketing initiatives strategy on competitive advantage of private universities in Nairobi County.

1.4 Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

i. To what extent does Strategic Alliances influence competitive advantage of private universities in Nairobi County?
ii. Does the use of technologies strategy influence competitive advantage of private universities in Nairobi County?
iii. To what extent does product differentiation strategy influence competitive advantage of private universities in Nairobi County?
iv. Does marketing initiatives strategy influence competitive advantage of private universities in Nairobi County?

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Dynamic Capabilities Theory

The theory of dynamic capabilities was first proposed by Teece (1989). Other scholars who address the theory include Gary Pisano and Amy Shuen, in their 1997 paper Dynamic Capabilities and Strategy Management. The theory states that, dynamic capabilities involve the ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies to address rapidly-changing

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environments'. The concept of dynamic capabilities arose from a key shortcoming of the resource-based view of the firm. A dynamic capability describes the ability of a firm to intentionally formulate, establish or carry out a modification to its resources in response to the ever changing forces in an environment (Teece, Pisano & Shuen, 1997). Successful companies in the international/ global market place achieve competitive advantage by having a timely response to market dynamics and speedy service/ product innovation and are in position to timely schedule and deploy their external and internal competences (Teece, *et. al.*, 1997).

This theory suggests three factors that help in explaining competitive advantage of an organization. These factors include; processes showing how activities and operations are done, positions that show assets categories and relations within an organization and lastly paths that describe the strategic direction of an organization. Dynamic capabilities theory concerns the development of strategies for senior managers of successful companies to adapt to radical discontinuous change, while maintaining minimum capability standards to ensure competitive survival. For example, industries which have traditionally relied on a specific manufacturing process can't always change this process on short notice when a new technology arrives; when this happens, managers need to adapt their own routines to make the most of their existing resources while simultaneously planning for future process changes as the resources depreciate.

2.1.2 Innovation Theory

Berlin, Walter and Gruyler (2004), allude that evolution of innovation theories can be explained by the increasing importance of social ingredients which were originally based solely on tangible capital. This can be illustrated by the following, which have been deemed important by innovation specialists, Kipping and Engwwa, (2003). Innovation derived from science, (technology push), innovation derived from market needs, (market pull), Innovation derived from linkages between actors in the market, Innovation derived from technological networks and innovation derived from social networks. The authors, above, further explain that the first explicit theory of innovation management is the technology push theory or engineering theory. In this theory, the innovation opportunities are found in the uptake of research results.

According to this theory, basic research, industrial and R&D are the source of new or improved processes. Alternative views gave birth to market pull theory which gives a central role to research as a source of knowledge to develop or improve products and processes. Then the chain-link theories explain the fact that linkages between knowledge and market are not as automatic as assumed in the engineering and market push theories. The framework in innovation involves systematic steps. First and foremost, innovation triggers an opportunity which could be in the form of technological opportunities or changing requirements on the part of markets. Secondly, it involves funding the resources in the portfolio or mobilizing them. Thirdly, it involves developing a venture. Having picked the relevant trigger signals, a firm makes a strategic decision to pursue them. Fourthly, creation of value. This refers to managing the process to maximize the chances of capturing the value (Bessant & Tidd, 2011).

2.1.3 Porter's Theory

Porter's Five Forces of Competitive Position Analysis were developed by Porter (1979) as a simple framework for assessing and evaluating the competitive strength and position of a business organization. This theory is based on the concept that there are five forces that determine the competitive intensity and attractiveness of a market. Porter's five forces help to identify where power lies in a business situation. This is useful both in understanding the strength of an organization's current competitive position, and the strength of a position that an organization may look to move into. Strategic analysts often use Porter's five forces to understand whether new products or services are potentially profitable. By understanding where power lies, the theory can also be used to identify areas of strength, to improve weaknesses and to avoid mistakes.

A firm can sometimes successfully pursue more than one approach as its primary target. The strategies are applied at business unit level. Strategy consultants occasionally use Porter's five forces framework when making a qualitative evaluation of a firm's strategic position. However, for most consultants, the framework is only a starting point and value chain analysis or another type of analysis may be used in conjunction with this model. According to Porter (1998), the five forces framework should be used at the line-of-business industry level; it is not designed to be used at the industry group or industry sector level. This theory was considered relevant to this study in that it would help the researcher understand how private universities in Kenya can gain competitive advantage over their rivals by implementing various competitive strategies.

2.2 Empirical Review

Kinyanjui and Juma (2014) investigated the effect of strategic plans implementation on performance in Kenya's public universities with a close look at the University of Nairobi. The study adopted descriptive case study research design with a target population of 178 employees from the University of Nairobi and its campuses where senior university management heads were targeted. The sample size of the study was 65 respondents. The findings of the study revealed that strategic alliances positively influenced performance in public universities in Kenya. Results of the inferential statistics such as unstandardized regression coefficients show a positive effect on performance. This further indicates that strategic alliances had a significant effect on performance of public universities in Kenya as indicated by the low p values. The study findings revealed that majority of the respondents agreed that the alliances in the university were innovative and competent in helping the organization come up with new strategies.

In Nigeria, Aun (2014) examined the effect of strategic alliance on the performance of manufacturing companies in Nigeria by adopting descriptive research design. The aim of the study was to investigate factors that determine success or failure of strategic alliance among indigenous multinational manufacturing companies, ascertain the commitment of top management to strategic alliance among indigenous multinational manufacturing companies, and determine the influence of cohesiveness of ties with partners on the acquisition of resources. The study used Primary data which were generated through the administration of questionnaire on all 124 top managers involved in strategic alliance decisions and practices in their various companies using a structured questionnaire. In addition, secondary data were obtained from the annual fact book published by the Nigerian Stock Exchange. The study findings indicated that, there was a positive correlation between top management commitment and strategic alliance, the result of multiple regression showed that top management philosophy, employees, dynamism, commitment and vision significantly affected strategic alliance, the result of F-statistic (14.227) indicated joint significance of all explanatory variables on profit. The value of Durbin Watson (1.93) indicated the likely absence of serial correlation in the error terms of the model used.

Muchiri (2010) conducted a study on Strategic planning in the Higher Education Sector of Kenya, whose findings indicated that, today most universities are collaborating with other institutions and industries to enhance performance. The partnerships have involved linkages between local Kenyan universities and their foreign counterparts. The linkages are typically a one way stream in which Kenyan universities receive books, equipment, training opportunities and even grants support for their development. In return, foreign academics have an opportunity to spend time in the local universities as visiting lecturers or researchers where they collaborate with the Kenyan counterparts. To coordinate and manage these linkages, all state universities have established International liaison offices under the headship of a senior academic, thus calling for clear and effective strategic plans to ensure that performance is promoted and the institutions benefit from the collaborations.

Egoeze, Misra, Maskeliūnas and Damaševičius (2018) investigated the impact of ICT on Universities Administrative Services and Management of Students' Records. The main aim of the study was to investigate the impact of ICT on the administrative services/management of students' records in Nigerian universities by adopting descriptive survey design. The sample size for the study was a total of 200 respondents comprising students, lecturers and administrators were randomly selected from ten universities in Nigeria. The study findings revealed that ICT was being used to display information about the university on its websites making it easy to showcase the university and that enabled the universities gain competitive advantage over their rivals that were not conspicuous online. Many Nigeria universities were found to have website, used mainly to provide easy online access and information about the university, especially for students’ intake. It was further discovered that, application and admission were being conducted online and applicants could check admission status anywhere.

2.2.1 Strategic Alliances

Muthoka and Oduor (2014) while employing a correlational research design and a study sample of five big supermarkets in Kenya (Nakumatt, Ukwala, Naivas, Tuskys and Uchumi), examined the effects of strategic alliances on organization’s competitive advantage focusing on supermarkets and their alliances in Kenya. The study findings indicated that there was a strong, positive effect between marketing strategic alliances and competitive advantage of the supermarkets while for supermarket alliances there was a medium, positive correlation between marketing strategic alliances and performance. However, the study pointed out that 2 tailed tests indicated that there was a statistically insignificant relationship between the variables.

Similarly, Omwanda and Rotich (2018) observed that the resource dependency literature suggests that alliances often represent one of three forms. The first alliance is a horizontal alliance between organizations that compete for the same resources, such as customers or suppliers and usually represent exchanges in one direction. In this arrangement, the organizations exchange or pool their resources toward some goal, such as research consortia or trade unions. The second is a vertical alliance which is an alliance between a firm and those organizations supplying inputs or using its outputs, such as suppliers, buyers, financial institutions, or the labor pool. Vertical alliances also usually represent exchanges in one direction. The third type of alliance is reciprocal, where firms exchange both inputs and outputs and the exchanges flow in both directions. In reciprocal alliances, firms exchange ideas, people and equipment, share lab space and pass designs back and forth such as in joint R&D projects.

2.2.2 Use of Technologies Strategy

Skoumpopoulou, Wong, Ng and Lo (2018) in a study indicated that, just as rapidly changing technology has created new and constantly evolving job types and competencies requiring new skills, it has facilitated significant progress in accommodating the needs of a broader range of students. According to Mahomed and Rothmann (2019), the use of technologies has revolutionized the delivery of education, allowing access to higher education for greater numbers of students at lower cost and with more flexibility. However, for any technology solution to have a transformative impact on student learning and success, it must have as its foundation the specific goals, needs, and interests of the students themselves. While technology can be added to existing structures with the goal of making them marginally more efficient and flexible, technology also offers the opportunity to catalyze more significant reforms to educational structures and practices (Amador, Pérez, López-Huertas, & Font, 2018).

Mao, Liu, Zhang and Deng (2016) evaluated the significance of technology in competitiveness of an organization and found that many companies currently apply technological advances to achieve essential strategies in the dynamic industry.The study indicated that, without technology, a company operates minus competitive advantage since there is no unique way of drawing in clients. However, not every investment in high-tech transformations is of assistance to a business. Sometimes the new ventures fail to either raise a firm on top, help to compete among rivals or even increase returns. The study hence recommended that, there is a need to look to what the other organizations do to satisfy their clients and the deficient areas. With adequate information, an organization become advantaged and can offer the services that do not exist. Therefore, you can also compare the prices, services, location, and marketing strategies and focus on expanding. You need to know that the authority to raise or lower prices for particular products and services is to your customers. Therefore, any business looking to achieve advantage ought to lessen this power by understanding competing sellers.

2.2.3 Product Differentiation Strategy

A study by Chan and Jamison (2001) 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 Ibidunni (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 firm can avoid competition for limited resources by departing from densely populated regions or differentiating itself from its competitors. Another stream of research that emphasizes the benefits of being different derives from the resource-based theory perspective. In this view, it is essential for a firm to preoccupy valuable, non-substitutable, rare, and inimitable resources in order to sustain its competitive advantage over its competitors (Barney, 2017). According to Kayombo and Carter (2019), a product can be differentiated in

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various ways. Unusual features, responsive customer service, rapid product innovations and technological leadership, perceived prestige and status, different tastes, and engineering design and performance are examples of approaches to differentiation (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.

2.2.4 Marketing Initiatives Strategy

Salwa and Sudarsan (2018) indicated that marketing initiative plans help companies and organizations employ marketing strategies that will help them realize both their long-term and short-term objectives. Wilburn Parola, Pallis, Risitano and Ferretti (2018) noted that marketing initiative strategy is a major contributor in the performance of a company and it helps a company do business in accordance with its objectives and it helps many companies achieve their targets or realign their objectives. Similarly, Varadarajan (2018) in a study concluded that marketing initiative strategy is important in business as it helps convince potential customers buy a company's product it is more important due to many company's offering similar products a marketer must take his time to persuade and convince potential buyers buy their products.

Elbanna and Child (2017) noted that marketing initiative is central to success in today's competitive markets, and measuring marketing's performance is critical to managing it effectively. The process of communicating the value of a product or service to customers, for the purpose of selling the product or service has become complex in recent times due to globalization. There is also the need to exceed the expectation of customers since satisfied customers are the organization's least expensive customers; buy again and again; talk favorably about the business, which means free advertising; pay less attention to competition and that it tend to buy new products or equipment lines an organization may add later (Kotler,1988).

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2.3 Conceptual Framework

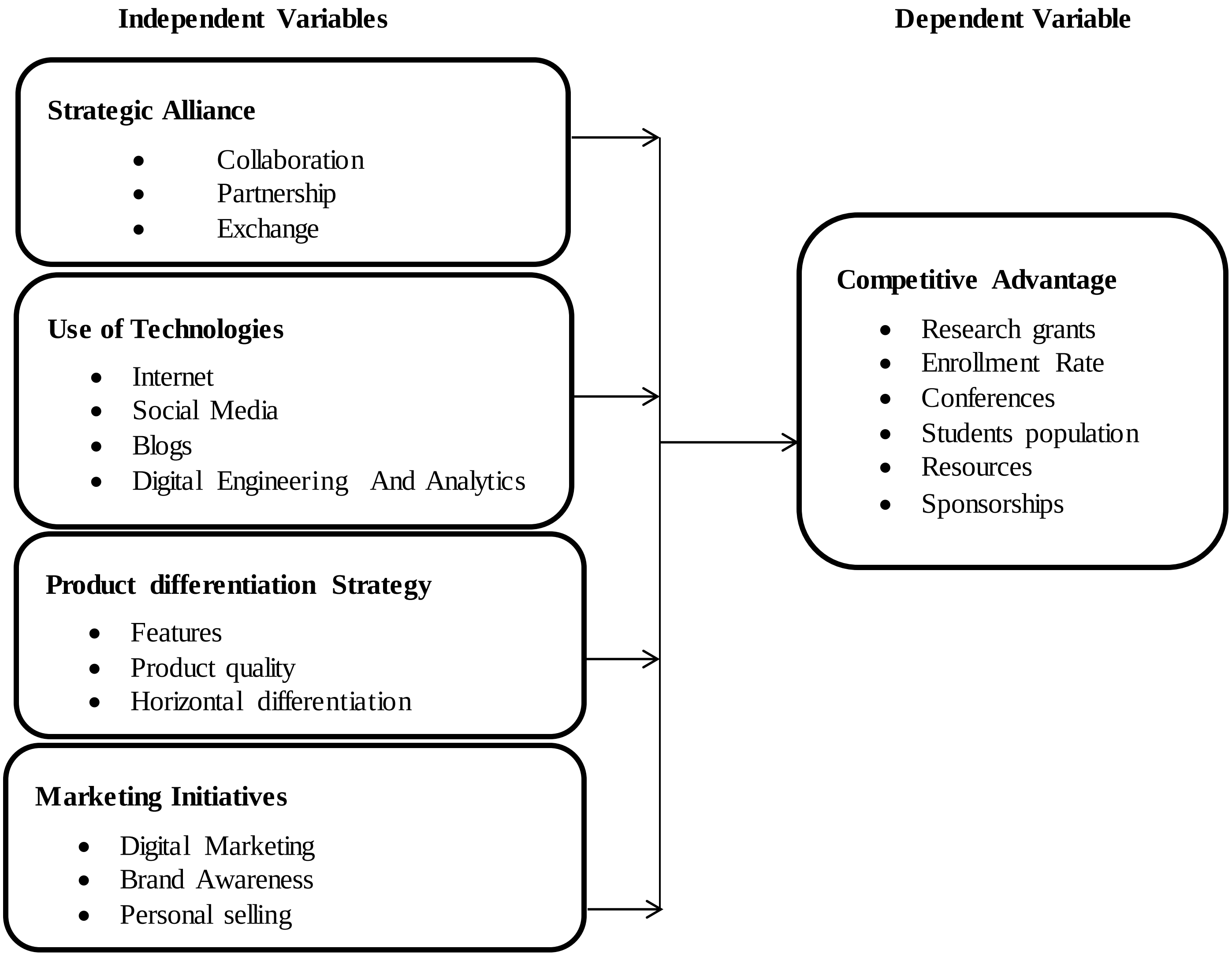

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Source: Researcher (2020)

3.0 Research Methodology

This study employed a descriptive research design. The descriptive research design was used because the study sought to gather quantitative data that describe the nature and the influence of choices of strategies on competitive advantage of private universities in Nairobi County. This study targeted all the employees of Strathmore University made up of top, middle level and lower level management staffs. The units of observation were the Vice chancellor (1), deputy vice chancellors (3), deans (7) and the university lower level staffs (600). Currently there are fifteen (15) chartered Private universities in Nairobi County according to the records of Commission for

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Higher Education (2018). However, this study purposively selected Strathmore University as the area of study because it was the main private universities in Nairobi County with the largest number of students and one of the best performing private universities in Kenya based on the Webometrics Ranking of universities. The study targeted. The study used simple random sampling of 30% of teaching staffs. According to Kothari (2004), a sample size of between 10%-30% is adequate for a descriptive study. The sample size for this study was made up of 294 respondents. For the university staffs, the study adopted Yamane (1967) formula to calculate the sample size since support staffs were the majority of the employees in the university and so a manageable sample size had to be obtained for the study.

The study used structured questionnaire and interview guides to collect primary data. The questionnaires was administered to the deans, teaching staffs and the university support staffs, while the interview guides was used to collect information from the VCs and the DVCs. A questionnaire is a pre-formulated written set of questions to which the respondents record the appropriate responses as required and in accordance with the choices provided if any. Multiple linear regression analysis was done in order to establish the effect of competitive strategies on competitive advantage of the private universities in Nairobi County. A statistical modeling process was initiated to choose the best model between the full and reduced model that explains the influence of the independent variables on the dependent variable.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics for strategic alliance strategy are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics on Strategic Alliance Strategy

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Std. Dev.
We collaborate with other organizations	6.30%	4.30%	12.20%	23.90%	53.30%	4.137	1.174
We invest in partnerships with other members of the supply chain.	5.90%	8.20%	12.90%	23.50%	49.40%	4.024	1.220
We strive to jointly develop new products with other industries.	6.30%	3.90%	16.90%	20.00%	52.90%	4.094	1.190
Our university collaborates with organizations to tap in resources, knowledge and capabilities and skills of their partner.	5.90%	12.90%	19.20%	24.30%	37.60%	3.749	1.249
The alliances our university has signed has enhanced mutual strategies with our partners.	5.10%	8.20%	7.10%	21.60%	58.00%	4.192	1.187
Our university exchanges ideas, people and equipment with other firms	5.10%	4.30%	9.80%	22.70%	58.00%	4.243	1.121

The results of the study indicated that most (77.2%) of the respondents agree that the university collaborates with other organizations. The results had a mean of 4.137 and a standard deviation of 1.174. These numbers indicates that a majority of them agreed with the statement and that there was not a large variance from the mean. Additionally, the study revealed that a majority (72.9%) of university staff agree with the statement that the university invests in partnerships with other members of the supply chain. (Mean= 4.024 and Standard Deviation=1.220). The study results further established that most (72.9%) of the respondents agreed that Strathmore University strives to jointly develop new products with other industries. These results had a mean of 4.094 and a standard deviation of 1.190.

In addition, the study showed that most (61.9%) of the respondents agreed with the statement that their university collaborates with organizations to tap in resources, knowledge and capabilities and skills of their partner (Mean=3.749 and SD=1.249). The study also established that a large percentage (79.6%) of university staff agree that the alliances their university has signed has enhanced mutual strategies with their partners. This was affirmed by a mean and standard deviation of 4.192 and 1.187 respectively.

Finally, the study showed that most of the respondents agreed with the statement that Strathmore University exchanges ideas, people and equipment with other firms (Mean=4.243 and SD=1.121). Overall, the results of the study established that the respondents largely agreed with the university's strategic alliance strategy as shown by the average mean of 4.073 and the 1.190 standard deviation.

In an interview, the VC and the DVCs were asked to indicate some of the strategic choices that their university was using to remain competitive in this industry. In response, the VC indicated that:

> The competitive advantage can be in any form or manner, which helps an organization in increasing and retaining the market share, in simple terms then, competitive advantage is an advantage over competitors gained by offering consumers greater value, either by means of lower prices or by providing greater benefits and services that justifies higher prices. To be able to achieve competitive advantage as a private university, we adopt strategies such as the use of vertical integration, use of horizontal integration such as , use of internet to market, offer e-learning, online registration and release of results and use of market development through opening new campuses in new cities and international markets.

In addition, the DVCs were asked to indicate if their university was adopting strategic alliance strategy. They indicated that:

> Yes as a university we are so much focused on implementing strategic alliance as a strategy that we know will enable our great institution gain competitive advantage in the education sector, not only in Kenya, but also regionally and globally.

The VC and the DVCs were in addition asked to give a brief explanation on how strategic alliance had been able to enhance the competitiveness of their university. In response they indicated that:

> Strategic alliance designed to respond to competition and to reduce uncertainty can also create competitive advantages. However, these advantages tend to be more temporary those developed through complementary (both vertical and horizontal) strategic alliances. As a university we also use cross-border alliances to help transform ourselves or to better use

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our competitive advantages to take advantages of opportunities surfacing in the rapidly changing global economy.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics on Technologies Strategy

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Std. Dev.
Our university increased access to education to greater numbers of students.	3.10%	12.20%	23.10%	30.20%	31.40%	3.745	1.120
Our university has put in place technological systems which focuses on transformative impact on students learning and geared towards specific goal	3.60%	7.50%	30.00%	31.20%	27.70%	3.719	1.060
Our university has made it more convenient for its learners to access online resources.	6.30%	13.00%	23.70%	26.90%	30.00%	3.613	1.218
Our university is determined in ensuring that all the students are engaged in ICT.	4.30%	7.10%	22.40%	29.40%	36.90%	3.875	1.119
Our university uses content marketing to reach out to as many prospective students as possible	6.70%	8.60%	22.40%	34.10%	28.20%	3.686	1.165
All the services offered by the university can be accessed online.	6.70%	6.70%	22.00%	35.70%	29.00%	3.737	1.146

The results of the study revealed that a majority (61.6%) of the respondents agreed with the statement that the university increased access to education to greater numbers of students. This was confirmed by a mean of 3.745 and a standard deviation of 1.120. Additionally, the study showed that most (58.9%) of the university staff agreed that their university has put in place technological systems which focuses on transformative impact on students learning and geared towards specific goal. (Mean=3.719 and Standard Deviation=1.060). On whether the university has made it more convenient for its learners to access online resources, most (56.9%) of respondents agreed with a mean and standard deviation of 3.613 and 1.218 respectively.

The results of the study also established that most (66.3%) of the respondents agree with the statement that their university is determined in ensuring that all the students are engaged in ICT. The results had a mean of 3.875 and a standard deviation of 1.119. In addition, the study revealed that a large percentage (62.3%) of the university staff agreed that their university uses content marketing to reach out to as many prospective students as possible (Mean=3.686 and SD=1.165).

Finally, the results showed that most (64.7%) of the respondents agree that all the services offered by the university can be accessed online. (Mean=3.737 and SD=1.146). Overall, the study had a mean and standard deviation of 3.729 and 1.138 respectively. This implies that most of the

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respondents involved in the study agreed with the university's use of technology strategies and the low standard deviation showing that results did not vary greatly from the mean.

In addition the descriptive statistics results presented in the table, the VC and the DVCs were asked in an interview to indicate if they were using technology to remain competitive and to indicate technology strategy had influenced their competitiveness. In response they indicated that:

> Yes, our university has been adopting technologies strategies as you may call it. The need for skilled cyber security leaders continues to outpace the supply in higher education and some institutional leaders like in our university are applying more flexible solutions, such as hiring contractors. Others are recognizing that effective cyber security leadership requires strong change and people management skills. As a university we are focusing on recruiting people with those soft skills and then providing cyber security training to help new hires acquire the needed technical skills on the job. Our university has been actively adopting technologies strategic resource which is included in creating new values (knowledge, products, processes and material), and we have been showing a constant technological progress, creates dynamic changes and influences the business.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics on Product Differentiation Strategy

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Std. Dev.
Customer focus pricing strategy works very well for our university	3.50%	8.60%	23.10%	33.30%	31.40%	3.804	1.084
The trade differentiation helps us contrast our product with competing products.	9.10%	6.70%	19.80%	24.50%	39.90%	3.794	1.284
We offer quality services to our clients and this has enabled us achieve competitiveness	5.10%	5.50%	20.90%	29.60%	38.70%	3.913	1.131
Our university spends resources in customer segmentation to capture the market	4.00%	2.80%	14.20%	39.50%	39.50%	4.079	1.001
Our products and services are better substitutes of the others in the market	3.60%	4.30%	17.80%	27.70%	46.60%	4.095	1.065
Our institution strives to develop valuable, non-substitutable, rare and inimitable products and services	5.20%	3.60%	19.90%	31.10%	40.20%	3.976	1.102

The results of the study showed that most (64.7%) of the respondents agreed that product differentiation strategy works very well for their university. This was affirmed by a mean of 3.804 and a standard deviation of 1.084. Additionally, the study revealed that most (64.4%) of the university staff agreed that the trade differentiation helps them contrast their product with competing products. These results had a mean and standard deviation of 3.794 and 1.284 respectively.

The study further established that most (68.3%) of the respondents agreed that they offer quality services to their clients and this has enabled them to achieve competitiveness (Mean=3.913 and SD=1.131). Regarding whether their university spends resources in customer segmentation to capture the market, 79% of the respondents agreed with a mean of 4.079 and a standard deviation of 1.001. The study also showed that a majority (74.3%) of the respondents agreed that their products and services are better substitutes of the others in the market. (Mean=4.095 and SD=1.065).

Finally, the study established that a large percentage (71.3%) of the respondents agreed that their institution strives to develop valuable, non-substitutable, rare and inimitable products and services. (Mean=3.976 and SD=1.102). Overall, a mean of 3.944 and a standard deviation reveals that most of the respondents agree with the university's product differentiation strategy and that the responses did not vary largely from the mean.

The VC and the DVCs were asked to indicate if their university was practicing product differentiation strategy and how it had influenced the competitiveness of their university. They pointed out that:

> Yes, we do practice product differentiation strategy. Private tertiary education institutions are wrestling with decisions of how to effectively compete in local and international markets, but the quality of the programmes is not appreciated by students and the industry at large. This is why it is necessary for our university to look for ways of enhancing our competitiveness and one such ways is through differentiation. In our institution, differentiation is more concerned with providing unique and innovative products, and should be regarded as going beyond product or service attributes to encompass everything that positively influence the value that our esteemed clients derive from it.

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Table 4: Descriptive Statistics on Marketing Initiatives Strategy

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Std. Dev.
Our university uses marketing initiative to realize both its short term and long term goals	6.30%	6.30%	17.60%	29.40%	40.40%	3.914	1.181
Our university uses digital marketing campaigns to reach out to more consumers	5.90%	9.00%	14.10%	36.90%	34.10%	3.843	1.163
Our university always strive to exceed the expectations of the clients.	6.30%	8.30%	17.30%	40.90%	27.20%	3.744	1.132
Our university uses materials like annual reports, catalogues, student handbook, employee newsletters, alumni magazines, posters, brochures, student handbooks, Bulletins and fliers to market the university.	1.60%	4.70%	12.60%	45.70%	35.40%	4.087	0.898
Our university carries out market research tools for student recruitment.	4.30%	7.50%	18.80%	37.30%	32.20%	3.855	1.086
Our university has rigorous advertisement activities, so we post higher enrolment numbers	3.10%	5.10%	17.30%	46.30%	28.20%	3.914	0.968

The results of this study showed that a majority (69.8%) of the respondents agree that their university uses marketing initiative to realize both its short term and long-term goals. The results had a mean of 3.914 and a standard deviation of 1.181. Additionally, the study revealed that most (71%) of the university staff agree that their university uses digital marketing campaigns to reach out to more consumers. (Mean=3.843 and SD=1.163)

The study further established that most (68.1%) of the university staff agree with the statement that their University always strive to exceed the expectations of the clients. The results had a mean and standard deviation of 3.744 and 1.132 respectively. The study also showed that the majority (81.1%) of respondents agree that the university uses materials like annual reports, catalogues, student handbook, employee newsletters, alumni magazines, posters, brochures, student handbooks, Bulletins and fliers to market the university (Mean=4.087 and SD=0.895).

The study also showed that most (69.5%) of the respondents agreed that their university carries out market research tools for student recruitment. (Mean=3.855 and SD=1.086). Finally, on whether the university has rigorous advertisement activities, so they post higher enrolment numbers, the majority (74.5%) of respondents agreed. The respondents had a mean of 3.914 and a Standard deviation of 0.968. In general, the responses had a mean and standard deviation of 3.893 and 1.071 respectively. This indicates that most of the staff agree with the university's marketing initiatives strategy.

In addition, the VC and the DVCs were asked to indicate the marketing initiatives they had in place as a university in ensuring they remained competitive in the education sector. They said that:

> As a university, our ability to achieve our goals of sustainability and quality service delivery is highly dependent on how we convert our strategic plans to action, in acquiring good number of students to enroll with our university which will bring about increase in income to carter for sustainability of the institution. In our university, marketing initiative strategy is used as a goal of achieving a sustainable competitive advantage. In line with the above conceptions, in our university marketing strategy is applied to act as a channel which our university tactically adopt to reach prospects convincingly to enroll in our university.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics on Competitive Advantage

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean	Std. Dev.
Our university has been recording constant increase in enrollment for the past five tears	6.30%	11.80%	15.70%	30.20%	36.10%	3.780	1.229
The amount our university get as grants has increased over the past	4.70%	6.70%	12.90%	26.70%	49.00%	4.086	1.143
Our university been among the best in research among private universities in Kenya	8.60%	4.70%	12.90%	28.20%	45.50%	3.973	1.247
Our university has grown over the past 5 years and now we have satellite campuses.	5.50%	8.60%	13.30%	22.70%	49.80%	4.027	1.215
Our university is among the private universities with the highest number of government sponsored students	6.30%	4.30%	22.70%	25.90%	40.80%	3.906	1.170
Our university has the best teaching	10.20%	12.50%	18.00%	21.60%	37.60%	3.639	1.361

Based on the results, the study established that a majority (66.3%) of respondents agree with the statement that the university has been recording constant increase in enrollment for the past five years. The results showed a mean of 3.780 and a SD of 1.229. Additionally, the study also revealed that most (75.7%) of the university staff agree that the amount their university get as grants has increased over the past. (Mean=4.086 and SD=1.143).

The study further revealed that a large percentage (73.7%) of the respondents agree that their university has been among the best in research among private universities in Kenya. These results had a mean and standard deviation of 3.973 and 1.247 respectively. In addition, the results show that most (72.5%) of the respondents involved in the study agree with the statement that the university has grown over the past 5 years and now they have satellite campuses. (Mean=4.027 and SD=1.215).

On whether the university is among the private universities with the highest number of government-sponsored students, most (66.7%) of the respondents agreed. The responses had a mean of 3.906 and a Standard deviation of 1.170. Finally, the study established that most (59.2%) of the university staff agree that their university has the best teaching. (Mean=3.639 and SD=1.361). Overall, the study responses had an average of 3.902 and a standard deviation of 1.228. This implies that most of the university staff involved in the study agree that the university has improved its competitiveness and that most of the responses did not vary greatly from the mean.

4.2 Correlation Analysis

Based on the correlation analysis results revealed a strong positive and significant association between strategic alliance and competitive advantage of private universities in Nairobi County ($r=0.780$, $p<0.05$) at 5% level of significance. This implies that strategic alliance has an association with the competitive advantage of private universities in Nairobi County. The study also found a strong positive and significant association between technologies strategy and competitive advantage of private universities in Nairobi County ($r=0.702$, $p<0.05$) at 5% level of significance. This implies that technologies strategy has an association with the competitive advantage of private universities in Nairobi County. Similarly, the results show that there was a strong positive and significant association between product differentiation strategy and competitive advantage of private universities in Nairobi County ($r=0.725$, $p<0.05$) at 5% level of significance. This implies that product differentiation strategy has an association with the competitive advantage of private universities in Nairobi County. Finally, the study found that there was a strong positive and significant association between marketing initiatives strategy and competitive advantage of private universities in Nairobi County ($r=0.738$, $p<0.05$) at 5% level of significance. This implies that marketing initiatives strategy has an association with the competitive advantage of private universities in Nairobi County.

4.3 Regression Analysis Results

Table 6: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.904a	0.817	0.814	0.31912

a Predictors: (Constant), Marketing Initiatives Strategy, Technologies Strategy, Product Differentiation Strategy, Strategic Alliance

Source: Field Data, 2021

The results in Table 6 shows a coefficient of determination (R squared) of 0.817 and adjusted R squared of 0.814 at 95% significance level. The R squared of 0.817 implies that the independent variables used in this study; strategic alliance strategy, technologies strategy, product

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differentiation strategy, marketing initiatives strategy jointly explains 81.7% of the variation in competitive advantage. The adjusted R squared of 0.814 depicts that strategic alliance strategy, technologies strategy, product differentiation strategy, marketing initiatives in exclusion of the constant variable explains the variation in competitive advantage of private universities in Nairobi County by 81.7 % .The remaining 18.3% of the variation in the dependent variable can be explained by other factors which were not part of the current model.

Table 7: ANOVA

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
	Regression	113.39	4	28.347	278.359	$.000^{b}$
1	Residual	25.459	250	0.102		
	Total	138.849	254			

a. Dependent Variable: Competitive Advantage
b. Predictors: (Constant), Marketing Initiatives Strategy, Technologies Strategy, Product Differentiation Strategy, Strategic Alliance

In Table 7, ANOVA results are shown. The results show that the model adopted by the researcher was statistically significant in explaining the influence of strategic alliance strategy, technologies strategy, product differentiation strategy and marketing initiatives on competitive advantage of private universities in Nairobi County and it is indicated by a p-value of 0.000<0.05.

Table 8: Multiple Regression of Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
	(Constant)	-0.134	0.097		-1.379	0.169
	Strategic Alliance	0.288	0.033	0.334	8.715	0.000
	Technologies Strategy	0.194	0.032	0.218	6.081	0.000
1	Product Differentiation Strategy	0.244	0.033	0.267	7.505	0.000
	Marketing Initiatives Strategy	0.248	0.032	0.284	7.866	0.000

a. Dependent Variable: Competitive Advantage

Regression coefficients show that strategic alliance had positive and significant effect on competitive advantage of private universities in Nairobi County (β =.288, p=.000<.05). This was supported by a calculated t-statistic of 8.715 that was greater than the critical t-statistic of 1.96 further confirming the significance. The result implies that, a unit improvement in the adoption of strategic alliance results into an improvement in competitive advantage of the university by 0.288 units. The results also revealed that technologies strategy had positive and significant effect on competitive advantage of private universities in Nairobi County (β =.194, p=.000<.05). This was supported by a calculated t-statistic of 6.081 that was greater than the critical t-statistic of 1.96 further confirming the significance. The result implies that, a unit improvement in the adoption of technologies strategy leads to an improvement in competitive advantage of the university by 0.194 units.

The results further revealed that product differentiation strategy had positive and significant effect on competitive advantage of private universities in Nairobi County (β =.244, p=.000<.05). This was supported by a calculated t-statistic of 7.505 that was greater than the critical t-statistic of 1.96 further confirming the significance. The result implies that, a unit improvement in the adoption of product differentiation strategy leads to an improvement in competitive advantage of the university by 0.244 units. Finally, the study found that marketing initiatives strategy had positive and significant effect on competitive advantage of private universities in Nairobi County (β =.248, p=.000<.05). This was supported by a calculated t-statistic of 7.866 that was greater than the critical t-statistic of 1.96 further confirming the significance. The result implies that, a unit improvement in the adoption of marketing initiatives strategy leads to an improvement in competitive advantage of the university by 0.248 units.

5.0 Conclusion

Based on the findings, the study concludes that the University was adopting various strategic choices as a way of enhancing their competitive advantage. The strategic choices adopted by the university included; strategic alliance strategy, technologies strategy, product differentiation strategy, marketing initiatives strategy. Based on the findings, the study concludes that the strategic choices adopted by the study all had positive and significant effect on the competitive advantage of the university. The study also concluded that strategic alliances are not a panacea for every company and every situation. However, through strategic alliances, companies can improve their competitive positioning, gain entry to new markets, supplement critical skills, and share the risk and cost of major development projects.

The study further concludes that strategic alliance strategy if properly adopted can enable ease of market entry. Entering foreign markets further confers benefits such as economies of scale and scope in marketing and distribution. The cost of entering an international market may be beyond the capabilities of a single firm but, by entering into a strategic alliance with an international firm, it will achieve the benefit of rapid entry while keeping the cost down, therefore choosing a strategic partnership as the entry mode may overcome the remaining obstacles, which could include entrenched competition and hostile government regulations.

The study found that there was positive and significant relationship between technologies strategy and competitiveness of the university. It therefore suffices to conclude that when an institution adopt technologies strategy, they are more likely to gain competitive advantage in the market. An effective technology strategy will make it possible to priorities resources and funds for all initiatives and projects that will benefit the organization in a way that will allow it to grow and evolve. Mainly, plans should be specific and actionable, whereby they detail the required resources, costs and timeframes.

The study further concluded that it is important that the university to continue implementing product differentiation strategy so as to gain more competitiveness since a successful product differentiation strategy creates brand loyalty among customers. The same strategy that gains market share through perceived quality or cost savings may create loyalty from consumers. In a competitive market, when a product doesn't maintain quality, customers may turn to a competitor. Finally, the study concluded that marketing initiative strategy helps in discovering the areas affected by organizational growth and thereby helps in creating an organizational plan to cater to the customer needs, it helps in fixing the right price for organization's goods and services based on information collected by market research.

6.0 Recommendations

The study recommendations are in line with the study variables, findings and conclusions of the study. Based on the findings, the strategic choices adopted by the study all had positive and significant effect on the competitive advantage of the university. The study also concluded that strategic alliances are not a panacea for every company and every situation. However, through strategic alliances, companies can improve their competitive positioning, gain entry to new markets, supplement critical skills, and share the risk and cost of major development projects. The study therefore recommends that the management of Strathmore university and by extension other private universities in Kenya should always strive to adopt suitable strategic choices in an effort to improve on their competitiveness in the market that is facing serious competition.

The study recommends that senior management of partnering institutions should be involved in strategic operations while ensuring clear and common vision to avoid conflict. There should also be clear guidelines which govern the alliance in order to ensure transparency while promoting mutual trust. Strategic alliance outcomes should be measured against the set objectives. This will provide a clear view on what has been achieved so far and what needs to be done. The partners also need to come up with a clearly defined method of sharing the outcomes, controlling operations and ensuring compatibility of cultural values.

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