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INFLUENCE OF PRODUCT DIFFERENTIATION STRATEGY ON THE GROWTH OF SUPERMARKETS IN KAKAMEGA COUNTY

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to investigate the influence of product differentiation strategies on the growth of supermarkets in Kakamega County, Kenya. The study was based on differentiation theory. The study adopted descriptive survey design and targeted 121 officers from 7 supermarkets and their branches spread across major towns of Kakamega County, from where Yamames sampling formula was used to get a sample size of 93 respondents. A pilot study was done in an established supermarket in Bungoma County (Khetia) to test instrument validity and reliability. Data was collected by structured questionnaires. Data analysis was computed by SPSS 24, where descriptive (frequencies, percentages, mean and standard deviations) and inferential statistics (correlations and multiple regression) was generated. A total of 85 out of the sampled 93 respondents returned completely filled questionnaires representing a response rate of 91.4% which is good for generalizability of research findings to a wider population. From the values of unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parenthesis, product differentiation strategy was significant predictors of the perceived growth of supermarkets in Kakamega County (dependent variable). The study concluded that product differentiation strategy if timely applied can attract new customers and while retaining old customers through brand loyalty tactics. The study recommended that one; for supermarkets to realize a significant growth, they must offer a wide range of products to cater for all types of shoppers.

Key Words: *Product Differentiation, Growth of Supermarkets, Kakamega County*

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INTRODUCTION

Most supermarkets in the world are operating in a profitable market but they are confronted with the problem of high competition, and this creates the necessity of the adoption of appropriate differentiation practices (Verlag, 2009). In the differentiation focus strategy, a supermarket aims to differentiate within just one or a small number of target market segments. The special customer needs of the segment mean that there are opportunities to provide products that are clearly different from competitors who may be targeting a broader group of customers. Differentiation is perceived to be a source of competitive advantage. Although research in a niche market may result in changing a product in order to improve differentiation, the changes themselves are not differentiation. Marketing or product differentiation is the process of describing the differences between products or services, or the resulting list of differences. This is done in order to demonstrate the unique aspects of a firm's product and create a sense of value (Verlag, 2009).

Further, a differentiation strategy is appropriate where the target customer segment is not price-sensitive, the market is competitive or saturated, customers have very specific needs which are possibly under-served, and the firm has unique resources and capabilities which enable it to satisfy these needs in ways that are difficult to copy. These could include patents or other Intellectual Property (IP), unique technical expertise, talented personnel, or innovative processes. Successful differentiation is displayed when a company accomplishes either a premium price for the product or service, increased revenue per unit, or the consumers' loyalty to purchase the company's product or service (brand loyalty). Differentiation drives profitability when the added price of the product outweighs the added expense to acquire the product or service but is ineffective when its uniqueness is easily replicated by its competitors. Successful brand management also results in perceived uniqueness even when the physical product is the same as competitors (Hambuck, 2003). Thus, differentiation strategy is not suitable for small firms because to apply differentiation with attributes throughout predominant intensity in any one or several of the functional groups; finance, purchase, marketing, inventory (Hambuck, 2003).

Some of the differentiation strategies adopted by organizations to foster business firm growth evolve around interplay of various elements of the retail mix which include; offering quality products, wide selection, assortment, strategic positioning, after-sales-service, quality service, convenient location, parking space, attractive design and layout, conducive atmosphere, sales incentives, convenient operating hours, own branding/value addition and a one-stop-shop. Thus economically valuable bases of product and service differentiation can enable a firm to increase its revenues, neutralize threats and exploit opportunities (Carpenter & Moore, 2010).

Competition in the supermarket chains in Kenya has seen a number of new supermarkets come up in upcountry towns, residential areas and even estates in Nairobi-the business hub of Kenya. Such supermarkets include; Tuskys, Naivas, Nakumatt, Mulleys, Choppies, Khetia among others. Some of the supermarkets in town have even opened branches in the estates or residential areas as a strategy to be the preferred choice for most customers so as to increase sales growth. This has shaken the operation base and market for those supermarkets situated within central business districts of Nairobi city and rural town centers of Kenya This trend has made most supermarkets to adopt appropriate differentiation strategies for customer and sales growth and ensuring continuous survival amidst ever increasing competition.

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Statement of the problem

The differentiation strategy has been adopted by most business firms as a niche competitive advantage strategy. Further, Arthur et al. (2006) asserted that effective ways of adopting the differentiation strategy is by creating value for buyers and assume that such competitive strategy is not easily copied or matched by rivals. Thus, anything a business firm can do to create value for buyers represents a potential basis for differentiation. In this regard, the effect of differentiation is to boost firm growth whenever the extra price the product or service commands outweighs the added costs of achieving the differentiation. But a business firm's differentiation strategy can only fail when buyers do not value the brand's uniqueness and or when a company's approach to differentiation is easily copied or matched by its rivals with resource power to implement the differentiation strategies (Arthur et al., 2006).

With reference to supermarkets locally, the battle for control of the retail market has intensified in Kenya as both foreign and local megastores roll out expansion plans. The industry has encountered collapse of supermarkets like Nakumatt which has been dominant in the last few years. This continues to cause anxiety and lost confidence amongst lenders and suppliers in the industry given the loss of revenue, job opportunities and market for suppliers occasioned by the problems in Nakumatt and Uchumi (Macharia, 2016). Several studies have been done on retail chain stores in Kenya to ascertain causes of their collapse; Njiru (2010); Wangari (2012); Imbuga (2015). Further there are very few and inconclusive empirical studies on influence of differential strategies on growth of supermarkets; Huddleston, Whipple and Auken, (2004); Smith and Wilson (2004);Fratto and Genessa (2006); Eckman et al., (2009); Parrish (2010); This study therefore fills this gap by investigating the influence of product differentiation strategies on the growth of supermarkets in Kakamega County, Kenya.

Objective of the study

The objective of the study was to investigate the influence of product differentiation strategies on the growth of supermarkets in Kakamega County, Kenya.

Research Hypotheses

H_{01}: Product differentiation strategy does not significantly influence growth of supermarkets in Kakamega County.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Review of theories related to the study

Differentiation theory

Differentiation concept can be traced back to Chamberlin and Robinson's independent 1930s work on deviations from the classical perfect competition model that arose as an advancement of the theory of monopolistic competition (Chamberlin & Robinson, (1971). The Differentiation theory is thus much like the classical economics perfect competition model in that it describes an abstract ideal world, thus marketers try to differentiate their brands from others, so that they face less direct competition.

Thus differentiation model which formed the basis of differentiation theory underpins a series of widely held beliefs, which can be broadly summarized as the following: A brand must be perceived as different in order to win market share (customers must have a reason to start buying the brand); A brand must be perceived as different in order to maintain market share. This means that customers in the retail supermarkets must have a reason to keep preferring the brand in the face of competition from other brands and new entrants; some brands are much more differentiated than others, meaning that their customer base is more loyal and less sensitive to actions of competitors. This may result in greater profitability. However, the highly differentiated brand

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may suffer from constraints on market share because it is only a select group of people, or only in a specific situation that it is preferred (Aaker, 2001).

Therefore, differentiation model and theory is related to this study in that it assisted in determining whether product and service differentiation can be a viable strategy in attracting new customers while retaining old customers so as boost growth of supermarkets in Kakamega County, Kenya.

Conceptual framework

Product differentiation strategy
- One-stop shop products
- product range &quality
- Product value additions
- Demand driven product selection
- Product assortments from reputable suppliers
- Product display &access

Growth of Supermarkets
- Increase in sales volumes
- Growth in sales revenues
- Increase in customer base &value
- Increase in market share and value
- Expansions in capacity & branches
- Customer satisfaction

Dependent Variable **Independent Variable**

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Source: Author (2019)

Empirical review of literature related to the study

Product Differentiation Strategy and Growth of Supermarkets

McCracken (2002) insists that in implementing this strategy, a company provides a unique product or service from those of the rivals in the market, thus product differentiation tailors the product to perfectly suit the need of the customer. In implementing differentiation strategy one needs to consider the distinct feature of his/her company from the rest of the companies hence customers should be made aware of the product distinction so that they form a positive perception about the company.

McCracken (2002) further asserted that differentiation can be achieved through analysis of buyers' behaviors and needs so as to determine what is important and valuable to them. Distinct feature are further incorporated in the product so as to attract the buyer, due to these distinct features buyers needs and preference are met. This is a tactic used to gain a competitive edge against the competitor by the organization practicing it. Due to the different attributes offered by these products, there tends to be an increase in sales as thus increasing sales and Murphy (2007) found that differentiation leads to stronger brands reputation hence appealing to more customers.

Hingley et al. (2008) also found that differentiation takes into consideration the differences within the customers such as purchasing power, tastes and preferences among others thus creating a product that meets a specific need. Similarly, Thomas and Mwangi and Omhui (2013), asserted that differentiation strategy enables a product to compete on non-price factors as well as promotional variables. On the other hand, Vlachvei, Notta and Demiri (2010) established that competitive strategies only worked best for larger firms in terms of growth of sales, brand reputation and efficiency as compared to smaller firms. The conflicting findings may be attributed to the differences in geographic locations that create distinct micro and macro-economic conditions.

McKenzy (2010) also found that business firms practicing differentiation creates value to the customer by providing high quality services as well as products at premium prices and ability to balance cost and benefits of a product in relation to competitors determines the effectiveness of differentiation strategy; thus business firms practicing differentiation strategy endeavors to create as well as market products that are perceived to be unique for different groups of customers while differentiated products seek to create a superior fulfillment of customer needs thus leading to customer satisfaction which in turn creates customer loyalty.

Strickland (2010) similarly asserted that although in differentiation there tends to be a lower responsiveness to price by customers, differentiation is relevant in circumstances where there is a likelihood of product differentiation and that customers are conscious of the differentiated products as having value. Firms can thus differentiate their products or services by amending or improving the product features, joining distinct functions within the firm, launching the product at the right time, evaluating location advantages, mixing products and linking with other firms plus ensuring that varied tastes and likes by different consumers are checked and met.

Grant (2010) also found that to achieve differentiation advantages successfully product superiority must be taken into consideration where firms should match customers' demand for differentiation with the firm's capacity to supply differentiation. Therefore, a successful differentiation depends on both the demand side and supply side of a product. As the demand side is concerned, the key is to fully understand customers in terms of their requirement and preference of product features that make it superior or unique, and their willingness to pay for superior value.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, the researcher used descriptive research survey design. Descriptive research involves collecting data that answers questions about the participants of the study. The target population or those cases that contained the desired information consisted of 7 supermarkets and their branches spread across major towns of Kakamega County, by the year 2018 the targeted supermarkets in kakamega County (which was the unit of observation) were ; Tuskys, Khetia, mama watoto, Frankmart Kapematt, Maisha Mart and Jilvivik. The data analysis in this study involved the use of descriptive and inferential statistics. SPSS version 23 is the computer analysis tool that was used in this study.

FINDINGS

Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics are the summarized responses in terms of frequencies and percentages as per each statement measuring the study's independent variable, product differentiation. That is, the descriptive statistics tables indicated the outcomes of responses to each of the statements on study variable using Likert scale with values ranging from 5 to 1; that is; 5=Strongly Agree, 4=Agree, 3= Uncertain, 2=Disagree and 1= Strongly Disagree. The results were presented in the table form showing frequencies of responses as per each statement and its corresponding percentage score in brackets.

Product differentiation strategy and growth of supermarkets

This summarized responses of the study, that is, the influence of product differentiation strategy on the growth of supermarkets in Kakamega County. The descriptive results were presented in table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics: Product Differentiation

Statement	5	4	3	2	1	mean	Std.dev
1.Product selection and quality attracts many customers	9(10.6)	55(64.7)	4(4.7)	9(10.6)	8(9.4)	3.56	0.817
2.We selects products from reputable suppliers	13(15.3)	49(57.7)	7(8.2)	9(10.6)	7(8.2)	3.61	0.924

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3.The supermarket has demand driven products	17(20.0)	47(55.3)	5(5.9)	11(12.9)	5(5.9)	3.71	0.911
4.Product display and ease of access attracts many customers	16(18.8)	48(56.5)	4(4.7)	12(14.1)	5(5.9)	3.68	0.815
5.The supermarket offers one-stop shop products	5(5.9)	38(44.7)	19(22.4)	16(18.8)	7(8.2)	3.21	0.881
6.The supermarket engages in product value additions	14(16.5)	41(48.2)	8(9.4)	16(18.8)	6(7.1)	3.48	0.981
7.Generally the supermarkets' product differentiation strategy has yielded an improvement in the supermarket's overall growth	9(10.6)	57(67.0)	4(4.7)	9(10.6)	6(7.1)	3.64	0.845
Valid listwise 85							
Grand mean = 3.556							

From table 1, most respondents agreed (64.7%) and strongly agreed (10.6%) that product selection and quality attracts many customers, that is, some customers stick to product quality and not necessarily price, thus price selecting from a wide range of quality products. In this regard,, 57.7% and 15.3% of respondents agreed and strongly agreed respectively that the supermarket selects products from reputable suppliers, this implied that a good number of supermarkets selected their products from reputable suppliers to attract brand loyalty from customers who value and cherish quality brands. Similarly, most respondents agreed (55.3%) and strongly agreed (20.0%) that the supermarket has demand driven products; thus majorly stocks products that have a high demand from customers.

More, so, most respondents agreed (56.5%) and strongly agreed (18.8%) that product display and ease of access attracted many customers; this explained the reason why most supermarkets keeps on changing product displays to send different clues to customers. Further, 44.7% and 5.9% of respondents agreed and strongly agreed respectively that the supermarket offered one-stop shop products. This implied that some supermarkets in Kakamega County had adopted the one-stop shop strategy where customers could access all their shopping needs without hopping from one supermarket to another. Similarly most respondents agreed (48.2%) and strongly agreed (16.5%) that supermarket engaged in product value additions; implying that product value additions like attractive repackaging, assembling, redesigning attracts some customers to supermarkets that engages in value additions.

Lastly, most respondents agreed (67.0%) and strongly agreed (10.6%) that generally the supermarkets' product differentiation strategy had yielded an improvement in the supermarket's overall performance. The grand mean is 3.556 rounded off to 4 which is agree on the Likert scale; implying that most respondents agreed that product differentiation strategy is a viable strategy that can aid in the growth of supermarkets. This was supported by McCracken (2002) who insists that in implementing product differentiation strategy, a company provides a unique product or service from those of the rivals in the market, thus product differentiation tailors the product to perfectly suit the need of the customer. In implementing differentiation strategy one needs to consider the distinct feature of his/her company from the rest of the companies hence customers should be made aware of the product distinction so that they form a positive perception about the company.

McCracken (2002) further asserted that differentiation can be achieved through analysis of buyers' behaviors and needs so as to determine what is important and valuable to them. Distinct feature are further incorporated in the product so as to attract the buyer, due to these distinct features buyers needs and preference are met. This is a tactic used to gain a competitive edge against the competitor by the organization practicing it. Due to the different attributes offered by these products, there tends to be an increase in sales and Murphy (2007) found that product differentiation leads to stronger brands reputation hence appealing to more customers.

Inferential statistics

Direct influence of product differentiation strategy on the growth of supermarkets

This tested the linear influence of product differentiation strategy on the growth of supermarkets as shown in table 2.

Table 2: Direct influence of product differentiation strategy on the growth of Supermarkets

Model Summary

					Change Statistics				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.810[a]	.656	.651	.64894	.656	158.005	1	83	.000

ANOVA[b]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	66.540	1	66.540	158.005	.000[a]
	Residual	34.953	83	.421		
	Total	101.493	84			

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	.674	.236		2.857	.004
	Product Differentiation	.829	.066	.810	12.570	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Growth of Supermarket

The model summary showed that $R^2 = 0.656$; implying that 65.6% variations in the growth of supermarkets in Kakamega County was explained by product differentiation strategy while other factors not in the study model accounted for 34.4% of variation in the growth of supermarkets in Kakamega County. Further, coefficient analysis showed that product differentiation strategy significantly influences the growth of supermarkets in Kakamega County ($\beta = 0.829$ (0.066); at $p<.01$). This implied that a single improvement in sustainable product differentiation strategies will lead to 0.829 unit increase in the growth of supermarkets in Kakameaga County. Therefore, the linear regression equation was;

(ii) $y = \mathbf{0.674 + 0.829X_2 + \varepsilon}$

Where;

y = growth of supermarkets

X_2 = product differentiation strategy

ε = error term

Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis stated that there is no significant relationship between product differentiation strategy

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and the growth of supermarkets in Kakamega County. The multiple regression analysis showed that product differentiation strategy significantly influences the growth of supermarkets in Kakamega County (β = 0.414 (0.052); at $p<.01$). **Hypothesis two was thus rejected.** This implied that a single improvement in viable product differentiation strategies led to 0.414 unit increase in the growth of supermarkets in Kakameaga County. The results were supported by Hingley et al., (2008) who found that differentiation takes into consideration the differences within the customers such as purchasing power, tastes and preferences among others thus creating a product that meets a specific need. Similarly, Thomas and Mwangi and Omhui (2013), asserted that differentiation strategy enables a product to compete on non-price factors as well as promotional variables. On the other hand, Vlachvei, Notta and Demiri (2010) established that competitive strategies only worked best for larger firms in terms of growth of sales, brand reputation and efficiency as compared to smaller firms. The conflicting findings may be attributed to the differences in geographic locations that create distinct micro and macro-economic conditions.

McKenzy,(2010) also found that business firms practicing differentiation creates value to the customer by providing high quality services as well as products at premium prices and ability to balance cost and benefits of a product in relation to competitors determines the effectiveness of differentiation strategy; thus business firms practicing differentiation strategy endeavors to create as well as market products that are perceived to be unique for different groups of customers while differentiated products seek to create a superior fulfillment of customer needs thus leading to customer satisfaction which in turn creates customer loyalty.

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CONCLUSIONS

The study concluded that product differentiation strategy if timely applied can attract new customers and while retaining old customers through brand loyalty tactics.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Secondly for supermarkets to realize a significant growth, they must offer a wide range of products to cater for all types of shoppers.

Areas for further research

First, a similar study can be done specifically on only well-established supermarket chains country wide so as to evaluate their product differentiation strategies that they use to attain countywide market share and value. A similar study can be done using objective financial measures so as to specifically assess the supermarkets' financial growth based on the application of the competitive strategies.

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