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ABSTRACT

This study endeavored to examine the effect of strategic leadership on competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories. The study adopted descriptive survey design. The study was conducted among 31 Kenya Tea Development Agency (KTDA) managed tea factories located in the western region of the Great Rift Valley in Kenya. The respondent's population comprised of 155 KTDA employees tasked with management of 31 tea process factories. The study used stratified random sampling to arrive at the sample size desired in the study of 112 as calculated using Yamane Formula. The study collected data through the use of closed-ended questionnaires. Collected primary data collected was edited, cleaned, and coded; and then IBM SPPS version 27 was used to analyze primary data. Descriptive statistical analysis was used to summarize data using frequencies, percentages means and standard deviations. Using Pearson correlation coefficient, the findings established a direct and positive relationship between Competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories in the West of Rift Valley Region , Kenya and independent variables; strategic vision, strategic alignment, strategic communication and strategic innovation. Further inference using multiple linear regressions showed a significant proportionate contribution of dynamic capabilities towards Competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories in the West of Rift. This study observed that strategic vision showed the greatest positive significant predictive power Competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories in the West of Rift in Nairobi County while strategic alignment had least positive significant predictive power. In this regard, the study recommended that while top management is effective in executing the strategic vision, proactive strategies should be developed to ensure that the vision aligns with evolving market trends. Additionally, engaging employees and other stakeholders in the vision-setting process through regular consultations and feedback mechanisms will enhance collective ownership and implementation of strategic goals. KTDA should refine its strategic alignment by addressing gaps in decision-making structures and ensuring that intellectual resources are fully integrated with operational needs. The organization should improve its strategic communication processes by enhancing customer feedback mechanisms and regulatory lobbying efforts.

Key Words: *Strategic Vision, Strategic Alignment, Strategic Communication, Strategic Innovation*

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of firm competitiveness is addressed by the competitive strategy which consists of all these moves and approaches that a firm has and is taking to attract buyers, withstand competitive pressure and improve its market position. That is, a competitive strategy consists of business decisions a firm must undertake in order to attract more customers and fulfil its expectations (Thompson & Strickland, 2023). Ross (2020) argued that organizations are in stiff competition with each other and especially so when they try to sell similar products and services to the same group of customers; that is; both the identity of competitors in terms of their characteristics and the type of strategic focus they take may change because of the entry of new firms, deregulation, changing economic conditions or changing social cultural values and technology.

First most boards across the globe make most of strategic decisions that influence competitiveness of profit-making firms whether locally or internationally. For instance, FRC (2018) report that in the UK, listed corporations are governed by the UK corporate governance Code; always referred to as Code 2018; which promotes the spirit of “comply or explain”; that is, companies are expected to either comply with the provision of the Code or deviate from it but have to explain their reasons for doing so. However, while the Code (2018) does not mandate absolute adherence to its provisions, in practice, companies largely comply with the regulation.

Ross (2018) reported that tea imports to Africa were also reduced by 5% reflecting weak demand in Morocco and Tunisia because imports by Pakistan reduced the volume which was similar to the longer-term average of 108,000 Metric tons. In East and Southern Africa, Malawi produces 42,000 metric tons of black tea, 90% of which is exported. Tea from Malawi gives reddish liquor. Much of it is produced by the Laurie Tea Processing method (the Laurie Tea Processor was a former tobacco-processing machine adapted for the tea trade). Clonal varieties are useful for teabag blends, to which they provide color and the seedling types are basic blending types, both seem completive when fetching prices (Ross, 2018).

Kenya Tea Development Authority is the leading management agency for small scale tea farmers; manages 65 tea factories that purchase tea from about 560,000 farmers) and boasts of effective management services to the tea sector for efficient production, processing, and marketing of high-quality tea (KTDA, 2019). Kenya was ranked fourth position among the largest producers of black tea production in the world market after India, China and Sri Lanka (Kenya Bureau of statistics, 2020); and the year 2020 saw tea as a crop accounting for approximately 20% of the farming GDP when in comparison with 8% farming GDP for coffee and 6% farming GDP from horticultural production.

In 1960, the Special Crops Development Authority (SCDA) was established to oversee this crucial sector. This was replaced by Kenya Tea Development Authority (KTDA) in 1964 that was established under the Agriculture Act (Cap 318) Section 91 (Legal Notice No. 42). KTDA took over small-holder management on behalf of government and was privatized by transferring its management to tea farmers. The process of privatization was started in 1991 when the Parastatal Reform Strategy Paper listed KTDA among strategic parastatals to be privatized. In 1999, the KTDA order was revoked through legal Notice No. 44 and in June 15th 2000, KTDA was transformed into a private company, the KTDA (Agency) and registered under the companies act. There were 45 small-holder tea factories at the time of privatization in 2000. These have since grown to 65 tea factories as at 2022 (KTDA, 2022).

KTDA managed factories. It accounts for 60% of Kenya’s total tea production and about 6% of global tea production. Currently there are 65 tea-manufacturing factories in Kenya under the KTDA Ltd Management. Each factory has a processing capacity of about 3 million Kg of made tea per year with a total output capacity of about 220 million Kg of made tea per annum. KTDA mainly manufactures Black C.T.C. (Cut, Tear and Curl) teas. The primary grades produced are Broken Pekoe 1 (BP1), Pekoe Fanning 1 (PF1), Pekoe Dust (PD) and Dust 1 (D1) while the secondary grades are Fanning 1 (F1), Dust (D) and Broken Mixed Fanning (BMF). Kenya Tea Development Agency Limited was incorporated on 15th June 2000 as a private company under (Cap 486) of Laws of Kenya becoming one of the largest private tea management Agency globally

Statement of the Problem

Locally, the tea sector has been playing a significant role in Kenya's economy, accounting for over 30% of export revenues, while the tea industry is among the largest employer in the private sector, with more than 80,000 people working on the tea estates (World Bank, 2022). Further the tea industry has had economic and social impacts on the local communities since small scale tea farmers produce about 60% of the tea. To support the tea industry, the Kenya Tea Development Agency has struggled to increase climate resilience of its farmers to secure supply chains, reduce energy costs for tea factory processes and opening up other subsidiaries to scale up tea market value chains and protect tea farmers plus the tea processing factories (KTDA, 2022).

However, despite Kenya having been the world's second largest tea exporter after Sri Lanka and the tea sector being the backbone of the Kenyan economy, the tea sector is currently facing a myriad of competitive related challenges. First, there is overproduction of tea leading to oversupply in the world markets, thus impacting negatively on low tea prices (World Bank, 2022) revealing low competitiveness of the Kenyan tea. Tea Research Foundation of Kenya reports (2022) indicated that there have been various allegations levied against the managing agent KTDA due to the falling tea prices due competitiveness issues, price fixing, unfavorable regulations from KTDA, poor management and performance bonds at the tea auctions, non- independent directors and underhand dealings among other complaints which boils to leadership problems (Minja (2021).

While previous studies have examined the impact of various factors such as climate change, production costs, and global market trends on the competitiveness of the tea industry (Ochieng & Njoroge, 2020; Kamau & Otieno, 2021), limited research has focused on the role of strategic leadership in enhancing competitiveness within KTDA-managed tea factories. Most existing studies have concentrated on operational efficiency and policy frameworks but have not adequately addressed the influence of leadership strategies on market positioning and sustainable competitiveness (Muthoni & Kinyua, 2022). This study aims to bridge this gap by investigating how strategic leadership contributes to improving the competitiveness of KTDA tea factories.

Empirical research on strategic leadership in Kenya's tea industry is scarce, with most studies focusing on corporate governance and general management practices rather than leadership strategies tailored to competitiveness (Mwangi et al., 2021; Kiprono & Cheruiyot, 2022). Moreover, while studies on other agricultural sub-sectors such as coffee and horticulture have highlighted the significance of strategic leadership in enhancing competitiveness (Ngugi & Karobia, 2020), similar research within the tea sector remains limited. This study sought to fill this empirical gap by providing evidence-based insights into how strategic leadership influences competitiveness in KTDA-managed tea factories in the West of Rift Valley region, Kenya.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of the study was to examine the effect of strategic leadership on competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories in the West of Rift valley region, Kenya. The specific objectives;

- To examine the influence of strategic vision on competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea

Factories in the West of Rift Valley region, Kenya.

- To evaluate the influence of strategic alignment on competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories in the West of Rift Valley region, Kenya.
- To determine the influence of strategic communication on competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories in the West of Rift Valley region, Kenya.
- To determine the influence of strategic innovation on competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories in the West of Rift Valley region, Kenya.

The study was guided by the following research hypotheses

- **H_{01}:** There is no significant influence of strategic vision on competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories in the West of Rift Valley region, Kenya.
- **H_{02}:** There is no significant influence of strategic alignment on competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories in the West of Rift Valley region, Kenya.
- **H_{03}:** There is no significant influence of strategic communication on competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories in the West of Rift Valley region, Kenya.
- **H_{04}:** There is no significant influence of strategic innovation on competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories in the West of Rift Valley region, Kenya.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical framework

Transformational Leadership Theory

The Transformational Leadership Theory, conceived by Bernard M. Bass and Bruce J. Avolio in 1990, has significantly influenced the discourse on leadership. It posits that effective leaders have the capacity to inspire and motivate their followers to achieve exceptional results by cultivating a compelling vision and fostering trust, loyalty, and commitment. At the heart of this theory is the concept of idealized influence, or charisma, where transformational leaders serve as role models for their followers. Through their exemplary behavior, they instill trust, admiration, and respect, eliciting a sense of pride and loyalty among their followers. This idealized influence enables leaders to exert a powerful influence over their followers, inspiring them to align with the leader's vision and goals.

Another key element of transformational leadership is inspirational motivation. Leaders in this model communicate a clear and inspiring vision of the future, compelling their followers to strive towards common objectives. By articulating high expectations and imbuing their work with meaning and purpose, transformational leaders inspire their followers to exceed their own expectations and pursue excellence. Furthermore, transformational leaders engage in intellectual stimulation, encouraging their followers to think creatively and challenge the status quo. They foster an environment where innovation and critical thinking are encouraged, empowering their followers to explore new ideas and approaches. By promoting intellectual stimulation, transformational leaders facilitate continuous learning and growth within their organizations.

Strategic Contingency Theory

Strategic Contingency Theory, introduced by Donald C. Hambrick and James W. Fredrickson in 1987, offers a comprehensive perspective on strategic management, emphasizing the contingent nature of effective organizational strategy. At its core, the theory argues that successful strategic management is contingent upon various factors, including the external environment, internal resources and capabilities, and the leadership of the organization.

One of the central tenets of Strategic Contingency Theory is environmental determinism. It acknowledges the significant impact of the external environment on organizational strategy. According to this perspective, organizations must continuously monitor and adapt their strategies in response to changes in the external environment, such as shifts in market dynamics, technological advancements, or regulatory changes. Failure to do so may leave organizations vulnerable to obsolescence or loss of competitive advantage.

Stakeholder theory

According to Abrams (1951) stakeholder theory specifies that a corporate entity consistently seeks to deliver a balance stakeholder interest so that each interest constituency may obtain degree of satisfaction. That is, as per Stakeholder theory, management is required to fulfill their fiduciary duties to the pertinent stakeholders and safeguard their interest and therefore influences the roles of the board. Further, Reguera, Laffarga, and Fuentes (2021) contended that stakeholder theory focuses on relationship management with group of stakeholders for individual benefits and those groups who require management's attention. Stakeholder theorists argue that for companies to survive, it is important for them to manage the network relationships and take care of the interests of its stakeholders, i.e. suppliers, business partners and employees, and it was also argued that this group of networks is critical other than owner-manager-employee relationships as in agency theory.

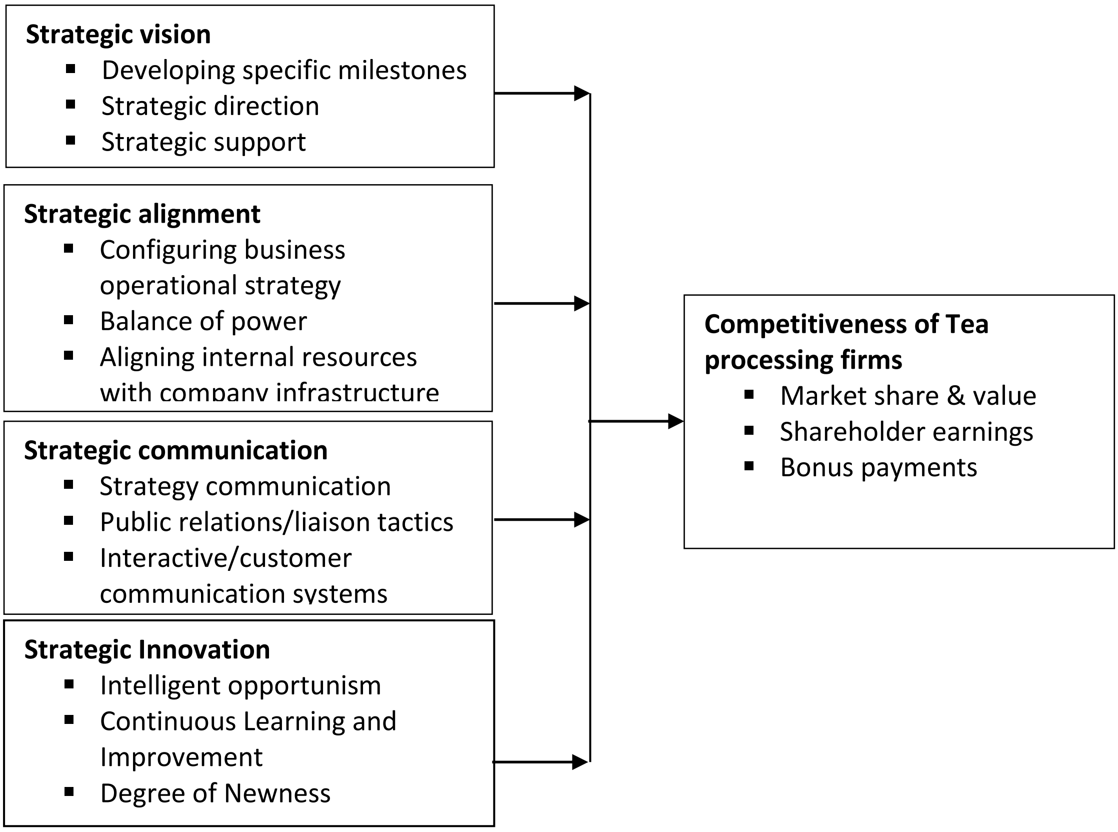
Stakeholders in a corporation include suppliers, employees, customers, governmental bodies, political groups, trade associations, trade unions, communities, associated corporations, prospective employees, prospective customers and the general public. In this regard, the firm and its managers have special obligations to ensure that the shareholders receive a fair return on their investment; but the firm also has special obligations to other stakeholders, which go above and beyond those required by law. In cases where these interests' conflict, the demands and interests of some stakeholders, including shareholders, must be moderated or sacrificed in order to fulfill basic obligations to other stakeholders (Allen & Zhao, 2007).

Visionary Leadership Theory (Kouzes & Posner, 2022)

The Visionary Leadership Theory, introduced by James Kouzes and Barry Posner in their seminal work "The Leadership Challenge," first published in 1987 and revised in 2022, emphasizes the role of leaders in inspiring and motivating others through a compelling vision of the future. According to Kouzes and Posner, effective leaders are those who can articulate a clear and inspiring vision that resonates with their followers.

At the core of the Visionary Leadership Theory is the notion that leadership is about inspiring a shared vision. Leaders, according to Kouzes and Posner, must be able to envision a future that is both desirable and attainable. They argue that by communicating this vision effectively, leaders can inspire and mobilize others to work towards its realization. Crucially, the theory highlights the importance of leaders enlisting others in the vision. Kouzes and Posner emphasize that leaders cannot achieve their vision alone; they must engage and empower others to contribute to the vision's creation and implementation. By involving others in the process, leaders can foster a sense of ownership and commitment among their followers, increasing the likelihood of success.

Conceptual Framework



Independent variables **Dependent Variable**

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Strategic Vision and Competitiveness of Firms

Strategic vision is conceptualized in this study to refer to the leader's ability to articulate a clear vision, direction, entice strategic support; and a leader's clear sense of purpose to influence and motivate their teams in order to achieve company objectives and goals. Strategic vision is a view of how someone would like the future to look like and is an important dimension for anyone in leadership position and is associated with future directed goals (Jonyo, Ouma, & Mosoti, 2018).Further, leadership vision provides an insight of what an organization is developing into. The ability of an organization to develop a vision and manage through the changes created by the vision is a representation of competencies of the organization that foster its competitive advantage (Babu & Chalam, 2021).

Strategic Alignment and Competitiveness of Firms

Strategic alignment refers to the leader's ability to craft a suitable strategic alignment model that fully addresses a firm's corporate, functional/operational, IT and business strategy; which summarily encompass among others, defining structure/infrastructures, delegations, span of controls, reward and recognition, intellectual and operational domains; all meant towards achieving company objectives and goals.

Strategic alignment can be traced back to Henderson and Venkatraman(1993) whoobserved that strategic alignment was originally defined as concerning the inherently dynamic fit between external and internal domains, such as the product/market, strategy, administrative structures, business processes and IT. These definitions show that Business-IT alignment is both an internal and external process across an organization or organizations. Firms can create sustainable competitive advantages through external alignment with business environment and internal alignment with resources and infrastructure. For instance, the business strategic alignment with IT is considered to be a very important issue particularly when IT becomes an essential part of the business and is used to leverage special business competencies, merge companies, restructure industries, and facilitate global competition (Johnson and Lederer, 2020).

Strategic Communication and Competitiveness of Firms

Strategic communication involves how a leader communicates a company's shared vision using a feasible communication strategy. That is, tactical internal and external information encoding, decoding, transmission flow plan, defining suitable modes of communication, selection of communication media and timely evaluation of feedback from key stakeholders Company success is dependent on effective communication particularly in a multicultural and competitive global environment yet the types of effective communication that impact competitiveness have not been well explored. Although companies are aware of the importance of communication, far less attention is paid to promoting the use of effective communication within and outside the organization as compared to other factors. That is, companies can suffer performance losses due to ineffective communication which too can severely affect a company's corporate image. In this regard, traditional views of organizational competitive advantage have failed to directly address the importance of communication as a differentiator (Bowonder et al, 2020).

Competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories

Competitiveness of firms (in this case tea processing firms in Kenya) is the criterion or dependent variable in the study pointing out pertinent issues surrounding competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories. This will be assessed by evaluating whether tea firms experience growth in market share & value, increase in shareholder earnings, increase in sales volumes and consistency in bonus payments to tea farmers.

That is, from the resource based view of gaining competitive advantage, firms' resources reside within a firm and therefore an advantageous competitive position of a firm is built on value creating resources that are critical inputs into the production and distribution of its products and services (Barney, 1991). However the heterogeneity of the resource bases of different firms suggests that firms are presented with different opportunities for sharing and adapting their portfolios of assets. In this regard, the resource based view theory informs this competitiveness variable by asserting that tea processing firm's competitiveness emanates from resources unique to the firms such as key competencies, assets, capabilities, resources, information, and knowledge.

Empirical Studies

Existing body of research posit that effective application of a leader's strategic vision results to organizational effectiveness (Dhammika, 2019). Empirically, Edwards (2019) study found a positive relationship between strategic vision with employee inspiration and organization performance; and concluded that strategic vision that is action oriented, innovative and takes into consideration the organization's mission and values, enhances organizational performance.

Ouagari (2020) studied leadership vision in 67 state owned firms in Morrocco. The study targeted mid-level managers to get their perception on leadership vision of the top management teams. The study revealed that for an organization to perform it should have a business strategy based on strategic leadership with a clear vision, and posited that lack of a clear vision is a major cause of declining competitiveness in many state owned firms in Morrocco.

To begin with, Jennifer, et al., (2019) did a meta-analysis of business strategy alignment and found conflicting findings. That is most reviewed empirical studies found the alignment dimensions (intellectual, operational, and cross-domain) demonstrate unique relationships with the different performance types (financial performance, productivity, and customer benefit). All mean corrected correlations between dimensions of alignment and dependent variables were positive and most of the credibility interval values in these analyses were also positive. Overall, the evidence gathered from the extant literature suggests there is not much of an alignment inconsistency. This study contributes to the literature by clarifying the relationships between strategic alignment, performance outcomes and offering insight into strategic alignment and firm competitiveness relationship.

Ammar, Jameel and Dojanah (2018) studied on the relationship between strategy alignment, information management and business performance of small health care organization performance in Jordan. The results from analysis showed that strategic alignment leads the organization to better information management. That is aligning strategy with information management will enhance the organization performance and will give it higher chances for business success; and better information system will lead to greater share of the market and substantial achievements for the organization.

Quirke (2021) study found that many strategic managers lack an understanding of the meaning and role of strategy communication. Similarly, employees often feel confident about their job performance but, in fact, they have no idea what their organization actually wants to accomplish. This may suggest that the practice of strategy communication in business organizations is not ideal yet can cost firm performance.

Uchida (2021) reported that communication tactics includes the effective use of information both “soft” or “hard” information gathering. For example, relationship lending, the most common techniques for lending to small firms, is based on the "soft" information which is accessible by keeping a close relationship with the client. Alternatively, there exist transaction-based lending techniques; those are mainly based on the "hard" information about the businesses.

Strategic innovation refers to the intentional and systematic process of creating new ideas, products, services, or business models that provide a competitive advantage and drive organizational success. It involves identifying and capitalizing on opportunities for innovation within the broader strategic framework of an organization (Martins et al., 2020). Wambui (2018) investigated the influence of innovation strategies on organizational performance using Telkom Kenya Limited as a case study. They collected data through semi-structured questionnaires from all 40 employees at the company's headquarters. The findings revealed that both process innovation and administrative innovation strategies had a positive effect on organizational performance, as reported by the respondents. The study emphasized the importance of implementing administrative innovations such as developing innovation hubs, introducing feedback platforms, automating processes, and initiating cultural change to equip employees with the necessary skills for growth. Process innovation was identified as the innovation strategy with the greatest positive impact on organizational performance. It was found to improve product and service quality, enhance operational efficiency, boost brand image, increase sales, and improve market ranking. The study recommended that organizations consider and implement these innovation strategies to improve their overall performance levels. The findings of the study however cannot be used to draw conclusion on innovation in the transport industry.

METHODOLOGY

The research adopted descriptive survey design. The respondent’s population comprised of 155

KTDA employees tasked with management of 31 tea process factories. The management team comprised of Factory Unit Manager, Factory Accountant, Field System Administrator, Production Manager and Field Service Coordinator. The study used stratified random sampling to arrive at the sample size desired in the study. The study's sample size of 112 was determined using Taro Yamane's proportional sampling technique. The study collected data through the use of closed-ended questionnaires.

Both the descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages and means) and inferential statistics (correlation and regressions) were used to analyze the data collected with significance level of 0.05. The findings were presented in form of tables and models.

The regression equation was as follows:

$Y= \beta_0+ \beta_1X_1+\beta_2X_2+ \beta_3X_3+\beta_4X_4 + \varepsilon$

Where Y is the dependent variable (Competitiveness),

β_0 is the regression constant,

β_1, β_2, β_3 and β_4 are the coefficients of independent variables,

X_1 is strategic vision

X_2 is strategic alignment

X_3 is strategic communication

X_4 is strategic innovation

ε is error term

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Response Rate

One hundred and twelve questionnaires were distributed to respondents, 89 were received this represented 79.5% response rate and 28 questionnaires were not received this accounted for 20.5% of the total questionnaires distributed. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2008), a response rate of at least 50% is required for statistical analysis. Questionnaires were administered using a drop and pick approach, which may have contributed to the high response rate. However, the greater response rate was also attributed to the promise of anonymity, and respondents were not forced to divulge traceable names. The findings are presented below in Table 1.

Table 1: Response Rate

	Frequency	**Percentage**
Returned	89	76.1
Not Returned	23	23.9
Total	**112**	**100.0**

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics are used to define and describe the properties of a set of data (Mboya, 2019). The presentation of descriptive statistics is based on the frequencies, percentage, mean and standard deviation of study variables. These variables were strategic vision, strategic alignment, strategic communication and Strategic innovation which were independent variables while competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories was dependent variable. The respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement from 1 strongly disagree, 2-Disagree, 3 Neutral, 4-agree and 5 strongly agree. The findings are as follows.

Strategic vision

The first objective of this study was to analyze the effect of strategic vision on the competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories. To achieve this, the researcher queried the respondents about the strategic vision in respect to competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories. The responses are as shown in Table 2 in which percentage are presented inside brackets while frequency outside brackets.

Table 2: Strategic vision

Strategic vision	5	4	3	2	1	M	SD
Top management is aggressive in making the firm a winner in the tea market	27 (24)	47.2 (42)	13.5 (12)	9 (8)	3.4 (3)	3.85	1.03
The top management team focuses on efficient execution of the organization's strategic vision and mission.	32.6 (29)	52.8 (47)	1.1 (1)	10.1 (9)	3.4 (3)	4.01	1.03
Top management team leads by example in clearly defining the path to be followed by the organization in executing its vision.	19.1 (17)	55.1 (49)	15.7 (14)	3.4 (3)	6.7 (6)	3.76	1.02
The top management team establishes more revolutionary organizational visions based on dynamic business environment	19.1 (17)	51.7 (46)	13.5 (12)	14.6 (13)	1.1 (1)	3.73	0.97
The top management team has a complete understanding of the firm's stakeholders.	18 (16)	60.7 (54)	7.9 (7)	10.1 (9)	3.4 (3)	3.80	0.97
The top management team clearly develops specific milestones for the organization' staff to work toward in achieving them	9 (8)	67.4 (60)	18 (16)	2.2 (2)	3.4 (3)	3.76	0.78
The top management team is focused on changing new technologies to a capability that is transformative.	31.5 (28)	47.2 (42)	13.5 (12)	6.7 (6)	1.1 (1)	4.01	0.91
Mean Score						**3.85**	

N=89; KEY: 1= Strongly Disagree; 2= Disagree; 3=Neutral; 4= Agree; 5=Strongly Agree; M=Mean; SD= Standard Deviation.

The findings indicate that respondents generally agreed on the importance of strategic vision in enhancing competitiveness, as reflected in the overall mean score of 3.82. Regarding the aggressiveness of top management in making the firm a market leader, 66.2% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed, with a mean score of 3.85 and a standard deviation (SD) of 1.03. This suggests that while most respondents recognize the management's proactive approach, there is some variation in perception, as indicated by the SD. Similarly, when asked whether the top management effectively executes the organization's strategic vision and mission, 85.4% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed, yielding a mean score of 4.01 and an SD of 1.03. This was the highest-rated aspect, signifying strong confidence in the leadership's ability to implement its strategic direction. However, the 13.5% disagreement highlights potential challenges in uniform implementation across all factories.

The findings further show that 74.2% of respondents believe the top management leads by example in defining the organization's vision, with a mean of 3.76 and an SD of 1.02. However, a notable 15.7% remained neutral, implying some uncertainty among employees regarding the clarity of leadership's strategic direction. The ability of management to establish revolutionary organizational visions in response to a dynamic business environment was supported by 70.8% of respondents, with a mean of 3.73 and an SD of 0.97. The 15.7% disagreement suggests that while management is seen as forward-thinking, some employees feel that adaptation to market changes could be improved.

In terms of understanding stakeholders' needs, 78.7% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed, with a mean of 3.80 and an SD of 0.97. This indicates confidence in leadership's awareness of key stakeholders, though the 13.5% disagreement suggests some concerns regarding stakeholder engagement. Similarly, 76.4% of respondents agreed that top management sets clear milestones for employees, yielding a mean score of 3.76 and an SD of 0.78. The relatively lower SD indicates a high level of consistency in responses, demonstrating that employees generally perceive the leadership as providing clear performance targets. However, the 18% neutral response implies that some staff may not fully comprehend these milestones.

A significant 78.7% of respondents agreed that top management focuses on leveraging new technologies for competitive advantage, with a mean of 4.01 and an SD of 0.91. This was among the highest-rated factors, reflecting strong belief in the leadership's commitment to innovation. The relatively low SD suggests that most employees share this view. Lastly, when asked about management's overall aggressiveness in making the firm a market leader, 73.1% agreed or strongly agreed, resulting in a mean score of 3.67 and an SD of 0.97. However, 15.8% disagreed, indicating that some respondents feel the leadership could be more proactive in market positioning.

Overall, the findings suggest that strategic vision plays a critical role in driving competitiveness in KTDA-managed tea factories. The highest-rated aspects include efficient execution of strategic vision and leveraging new technologies (both with a mean score of 4.01), reflecting strong leadership efforts in these areas. However, aspects such as revolutionary vision adaptation (mean: 3.73) and market aggressiveness (mean: 3.67) show moderate variation, suggesting the need for more proactive strategies to respond to industry changes. The overall mean score of 3.82 confirms that strategic vision significantly enhances competitiveness, though improvements in stakeholder engagement, clarity in milestone setting, and market positioning could further strengthen KTDA's competitive edge.

Strategic vision is widely recognized as a key driver of organizational competitiveness. Mintzberg and Waters (2020) highlight that companies with a well-defined strategic vision tend to outperform competitors in volatile markets. Similarly, Kaplan and Norton (2019) argue that organizations with clear strategic milestones and measurable objectives experience greater market stability and growth. KTDA's challenge in clarifying milestone setting aligns with their findings, emphasizing the need for more structured progress indicators to translate vision into tangible competitive advantages. Further, Drucker (2021) found that companies with strong stakeholder engagement strategies sustain long-term competitiveness better than those without. KTDA's room for improvement in stakeholder engagement suggests that a more inclusive approach involving suppliers, regulators, and local communities could enhance strategic alignment and operational effectiveness.

While most studies emphasize strategic vision as a key competitiveness factor, some research suggests that vision alone is insufficient without adaptability. Teece, Pisano, and Shuen (2022) found that firms with rigid strategic visions struggled to adapt to rapid market shifts, diminishing their competitiveness. This implies that KTDA should not only refine its vision but also ensure it remains flexible to external market forces. Additionally, Porter (2018) argues that market positioning is often more critical than strategic vision in sustaining competitive advantage, particularly in commodity industries like tea. KTDA's challenge in market positioning suggests that while vision is essential, a stronger focus on differentiation and branding strategies might be necessary to enhance competitiveness further.

Strategic alignment

The second objective of this study was to establish the effect of strategic alignment on the competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories. So as to achieve this objective, the study sought to establish the degree to which strategic alignment affected competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories. The findings are as shown in table 3 in which percentages are presented inside brackets while frequency outside brackets.

Table 3: Strategic alignment

Strategic alignment	5	4	3	2	1	M	SD
There is a well-configured business operational strategy	44.9 (40)	40.4 (36)	12.4 (11)	1.1 (1)	1.1 (1)	4.27	0.81
The reward and recognition mechanisms are aligned with the company's human capital development strategy	24.7 (22)	61.8 (55)	10.1 (9)	2.2 (2)	1.1 (1)	4.07	0.74
The balance of power is clearly configured within the organization structure	40.4 (36)	46.1 (41)	7.9 (7)	3.4 (3)	2.2 (2)	4.19	0.89
There is a seamless flow between the IT, information system and business strategy	33.7 (30)	51.7 (46)	9 (8)	4.5 (4)	1.1 (1)	4.12	0.84
The top management has effectively aligned internal resources with company infrastructure	43.8 (39)	44.9 (40)	6.7 (6)	2.2 (2)	2.2 (2)	4.26	0.86
There is feasible fit between intellectual and operational domains	20.2 (18)	46.1 (41)	29.2 (26)	2.2 (2)	2.2 (2)	3.80	0.87
There is dynamic fit between external business and internal business domains	29.2 (26)	46.1 (41)	15.7 (14)	4.5 (4)	4.5 (4)	3.91	1.02
Mean Score						**4.09**	

N=89; KEY: 1= Strongly Disagree; 2= Disagree; 3=Neutral; 4= Agree; 5=Strongly Agree; M=Mean; SD= Standard Deviation.

The findings indicate an overall mean score of 4.09, suggesting a strong agreement among respondents that strategic alignment significantly contributes to competitiveness. However, variations in responses highlight areas requiring improvement. A well-configured business operational strategy was the highest-rated factor, with 85.3% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing, resulting in a mean score of 4.27 and an SD of 0.81. This suggests that most employees recognize structured business operations as crucial for organizational success. Similarly, reward and recognition mechanisms aligned with human capital development were widely supported, with 86.5% agreement (mean: 4.07, SD: 0.74). This indicates that the company's incentive structures are generally well-integrated with workforce development, though 12.3% of respondents remained neutral or disagreed, implying potential gaps in perception or implementation.

Regarding balance of power within the organization, 86.5% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed, yielding a mean score of 4.19 and an SD of 0.89. The 5.6% disagreement suggests that while power structures are generally clear, some employees may perceive inefficiencies in decision-making hierarchies. The integration between IT, information systems, and business strategy was acknowledged by 85.4% of respondents, with a mean of 4.12 and an SD of 0.84. The 5.6% disagreement suggests that while digital systems are well aligned with business operations, there may still be challenges in seamless technological adoption.

A strong alignment of internal resources with company infrastructure was supported by 88.7% of respondents, with a mean score of 4.26 and an SD of 0.86. This demonstrates confidence in the firm's resource allocation efficiency, though a 4.4% disagreement highlights possible constraints in infrastructure management. However, when assessing the fit between intellectual and operational domains, the agreement level was lower (66.3%), with a mean of 3.80 and an SD of 0.87. The 29.2% neutral response suggests uncertainty or inconsistency in how knowledge and skills are applied to practical business functions.

Additionally, the dynamic fit between external and internal business domains received 75.3% agreement, with a mean score of 3.91 and an SD of 1.02. However, 9% of respondents disagreed, highlighting challenges in aligning external market conditions with internal business strategies. The higher standard deviation (1.02) suggests greater variability in responses, indicating differing experiences across departments or roles.

Overall, the findings suggest that strategic alignment plays a critical role in driving competitiveness in KTDA-managed tea factories. The highest-rated aspects include operational strategy configuration (mean: 4.27) and resource alignment (mean: 4.26), reflecting strong structural and resource-based integration. However, aspects such as intellectual-operational fit (mean: 3.80) and external-internal business alignment (mean: 3.91) exhibit greater variation, signaling areas that require more targeted efforts to bridge strategy gaps. The overall mean score of 4.09 affirms that while strategic alignment is well-implemented, improving knowledge-application synergies and external market adaptation could enhance KTDA's competitiveness further.

The importance of strategic alignment in driving competitiveness has been widely supported by previous studies. Jennifer et al. (2019) conducted a meta-analysis on business strategy alignment and found that intellectual, operational, and cross-domain alignment positively correlate with financial performance, productivity, and customer benefit. This aligns with KTDA's strong operational strategy configuration and resource alignment, reinforcing the idea that well-integrated internal strategies enhance firm competitiveness. Similarly, Ammar, Jameel, and Dojanah (2018) studied strategic alignment in Jordan's healthcare sector and found that aligning business strategy with information management significantly improved organizational performance. KTDA's high rating in resource alignment resonates with these findings, indicating that efficient resource management is a key factor in sustaining competitiveness. Further, Toto, Novita, and Rina (2021) examined business strategy orientation in Indonesian rural banks and confirmed that effective strategic alignment between business and IT systems enhances performance. Additionally, Kalunda (2022) found that Equity Bank Kenya's competitive advantage stemmed from aligning processes, products, and human resources. While KTDA has demonstrated strong operational and resource alignment, the gaps in intellectual-operational fit suggest an opportunity for better leveraging knowledge-driven strategies to enhance competitiveness.

While most studies support the role of strategic alignment in enhancing competitiveness, some research suggests that its impact is context-dependent. Wan-Ching (2019) found that in India's health institutions, competitive advantage stemmed more from trusted products and innovative equipment than from strategic alignment. This raises a key question for KTDA can product differentiation and branding play a more dominant role in competitiveness than structural alignment? Additionally, McDermott and Prajogo (2022) found that ambidextrous innovation (balancing exploration and exploitation) was a stronger driver of performance in Australian SMEs than pure strategic alignment. This suggests that KTDA should not over-rely on alignment but also incorporate more flexible and adaptive strategies to navigate market changes.

Strategic communication

The third objective of this study was to examine the effect of strategic communication on competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories. To achieve this, the researcher probed the respondents about the strategic communication. The findings are in table 4 in which percentage are presented inside brackets while frequency outside the brackets.

Table 4: Strategic communication

Strategic communication	5	4	3	2	1	M	SD
The top management team clearly communicates strategic direction	55.1 (49)	36 (32)	4.5 (4)	2.2 (2)	2.2 (2)	4.39	0.86
There established customer communication systems to timely and seamlessly handle customers'/employees' needs and feedback	21.3 (19)	57.3 (51)	18 (16)	1.1 (1)	2.2 (2)	3.94	0.80
Existing strategy communication hampers company competitiveness	42.7 (38)	46.1 (41)	6.7 (6)	2.2 (2)	2.2 (2)	4.25	0.86
There are interactive communication systems with suppliers to handle value chain alignments	30.3 (27)	51.7 (46)	12.4 (11)	3.4 (3)	2.2 (2)	4.04	0.88
Company's public relations managers always communicate responsibly to protect the company image in the public during crises	25.8 (23)	47.2 (42)	23.6 (21)	1.1 (1)	2.2 (2)	3.93	0.86
Company liaison officers always utilize communication channels to align company goals and increase synergy with partners	18 (16)	38.2 (34)	36 (32)	4.5 (4)	3.4 (3)	3.63	0.95
Company's public relations managers lobby's government regulatory bodies to protect pertinent interests	22.5 (20)	44.9 (40)	23.6 (21)	5.6 (5)	3.4 (3)	3.78	0.97
Mean Score						**3.99**	

N=89; KEY: 1= Strongly Disagree; 2= Disagree; 3=Neutral; 4= Agree; 5=Strongly Agree; M=Mean; SD= Standard Deviation.

The results indicate an overall mean score of 3.99, suggesting that respondents generally agree on the importance of effective communication in driving competitiveness. However, differences in standard deviations highlight varying levels of consistency in responses across different strategic communication aspects. The highest-rated aspect was top management's clarity in communicating strategic direction, with 91.1% agreement (mean: 4.39, SD: 0.86). This indicates strong leadership communication, which ensures employees understand and align with the company's long-term vision. Similarly, existing strategic communication practices impacting company competitiveness received 88.8% agreement, yielding a mean of 4.25 and an SD of 0.86, suggesting that communication plays a crucial role in shaping the firm's competitive standing.

Customer communication systems, which ensure timely handling of customer and employee feedback, received 78.6% agreement (mean: 3.94, SD: 0.80). However, 18% of respondents were neutral, and 3.3% disagreed, indicating potential inefficiencies in responsiveness or accessibility of these systems. Supplier communication systems for value chain alignment were acknowledged by 82% of respondents (mean: 4.04, SD: 0.88), emphasizing that supplier collaboration remains a key strategic focus, though 5.6% disagreement suggests gaps in alignment effectiveness.

Regarding public relations (PR) managers' role in protecting the company's image during crises, 73% agreed or strongly agreed (mean: 3.93, SD: 0.86). However, 23.6% of respondents remained neutral, indicating that while PR efforts exist, their impact may not be fully visible or consistently effective. Similarly, PR managers lobbying regulatory bodies received 67.4% agreement (mean: 3.78, SD: 0.97), but a 9% disagreement rate highlights potential shortcomings in advocacy efforts.

The lowest-rated aspect was the effectiveness of liaison officers in utilizing communication channels to align company goals and improve synergy with partners, with 56.2% agreement (mean: 3.63, SD: 0.95). Notably, 36% of respondents remained neutral, and 7.9% disagreed, indicating uncertainty or ineffectiveness in how communication strategies integrate external partnerships. The higher standard deviation (0.95) suggests differing experiences among respondents, possibly due to inconsistencies in execution across departments.

Overall, these findings highlight that strategic communication significantly impacts competitiveness, particularly in leadership clarity, supplier collaboration, and PR management. However, challenges remain in ensuring effective customer feedback mechanisms, proactive regulatory lobbying, and strengthening communication between liaison officers and external partners. While the overall mean score of 3.99 suggests generally effective communication, targeted improvements in partner engagement and government relations could further enhance the firm's competitive positioning.

Several studies support the idea that strategic communication is essential for organizational success. Hebda (2022) found that effective strategic communication in large American firms, particularly through PR efforts and internal leadership engagement, significantly boosted employee motivation and innovation, which aligns with this study's findings on leadership clarity and supplier collaboration. Similarly, Fombrun (2020) emphasized that firms with strong communication strategies enhance their corporate reputation, contributing to market competitiveness echoing KTDA's strengths in PR management. Additionally, Gilley, Dixon, and Gilley (2018) highlighted that communication plays a critical role in driving change and innovation within organizations, particularly when leaders foster collaboration and teamwork. This finding supports the positive impact of communication on KTDA's supplier relationships, reinforcing that well-structured communication fosters stronger industry partnerships.

While the study confirms that strategic communication significantly contributes to competitiveness, some literature suggests additional nuances. For instance, Quirke (2021) found that many strategic managers fail to recognize the full role of communication, leading to misaligned organizational goals. This aligns with KTDA's identified gaps in regulatory lobbying and liaison officer communication, where strategic communication may not be fully optimized. Moreover, Uchida (2021) highlighted the importance of balancing "soft" (relationship-based) and "hard" (data-driven) information in strategic communication. While KTDA excels in leadership clarity, its customer feedback mechanisms are weak, suggesting a need for a more structured approach to both qualitative and quantitative information flow to ensure better responsiveness to market demands. Furthermore, Newsom, Turk, and Kruckeberg (2019) emphasized that stakeholder-oriented public relations enhance competitive advantage. KTDA's moderate effectiveness in PR aligns with their argument, but further improvements in targeted engagement with government bodies, consumers, and global markets could refine competitiveness even further.

Strategic innovation

The fourth objective of this study was to determine the effect of strategic innovation on the competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories. So as to achieve this objective, the researcher sought to find out how strategic innovation affects the competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories. The results are presented in Table 5 in which percentage are presented inside brackets while frequency outside brackets.

Table 5: Strategic innovation

Strategic innovation	5	4	3	2	1	M	SD
KTDA managers effectively scan the external environment to identify lucrative business opportunities.	56.2 (50)	18 (16)	9 (8)	12.4 (11)	4.5 (4)	4.09	1.25
Our organization demonstrates adaptability in seizing emergent chances for strategic innovation.	24.7 (22)	47.2 (42)	7.9 (7)	16.9 (15)	3.4 (3)	3.73	1.12
Top management encourages proactive exploration of untapped markets and technologies.	24.7 (22)	42.7 (38)	10.1 (9)	16.9 (15)	5.6 (5)	3.64	1.19
KTDA invests heavily in employee training and skill development to foster continuous improvement culture.	27 (24)	50.6 (45)	11.2 (10)	10.1 (9)	1.1 (1)	3.92	0.94
Managers consistently review organizational competitiveness metrics to drive evidence-based decision-making.	29.2 (26)	42.7 (38)	15.7 (14)	7.9 (7)	4.5 (4)	3.84	1.08
Lessons learned from past experiences are systematically incorporated into our strategic planning processes.	28.1 (25)	50.6 (45)	9 (8)	6.7 (6)	5.6 (5)	3.89	1.07
KTDA frequently introduces groundbreaking ideas and concepts that challenge conventional wisdom.	33.7 (30)	44.9 (40)	11.2 (10)	4.5 (4)	5.6 (5)	3.97	1.07
Mean Score						**3.87**	

N=89; KEY: 1= Strongly Disagree; 2= Disagree; 3=Neutral; 4= Agree; 5=Strongly Agree; M=Mean; SD= Standard Deviation.

The findings indicate an overall mean score of 3.87, reflecting a generally positive perception of strategic innovation efforts. However, variations in standard deviations (SDs) suggest differing opinions among respondents regarding various aspects of innovation. The highest-rated component was KTDA managers' effectiveness in scanning the external environment for business opportunities, with 74.2% agreement (mean: 4.09, SD: 1.25). This suggests that managers are proactive in identifying growth avenues, though a relatively high SD of 1.25 indicates some inconsistency in how this capability is perceived across different respondents.

Frequent introduction of groundbreaking ideas that challenge conventional wisdom was also rated positively, with 78.6% agreement (mean: 3.97, SD: 1.07). This implies a strong inclination toward innovation, though 5.6% of respondents disagreed, indicating that some may not fully recognize the impact of such initiatives. Investment in employee training and skill development to foster a culture of continuous improvement was well-rated, with 77.6% agreement (mean: 3.92, SD: 0.94). The relatively lower SD (0.94) suggests consistency in responses, highlighting a widely accepted organizational effort toward capacity building. Similarly, systematic incorporation of lessons learned into strategic planning garnered 78.7% agreement (mean: 3.89, SD: 1.07), indicating that knowledge from past experiences is actively utilized, though 5.6% disagreement suggests some gaps in execution.

Managers’ regular review of competitiveness metrics for evidence-based decision-making was acknowledged by 71.9% of respondents (mean: 3.84, SD: 1.08). However, 12.4% disagreed or strongly disagreed, suggesting that data-driven decision-making may not be consistently applied across all levels of management. The lowest-rated aspects were organizational adaptability in seizing emergent opportunities (mean: 3.73, SD: 1.12) and top management’s encouragement of proactive exploration of untapped markets and technologies (mean: 3.64, SD: 1.19). While 71.9% and 67.4% of respondents, respectively, agreed with these statements, relatively higher SDs indicate diverse opinions on the effectiveness of these practices. Notably, 16.9% of respondents disagreed with both statements, highlighting possible organizational inertia in adapting to new market trends. Overall, the findings suggest that while KTDA embraces strategic innovation, challenges exist in ensuring adaptability, proactive market exploration, and uniform application of innovative strategies. Addressing these gaps could further enhance KTDA's competitive edge in the tea industry.

Numerous studies emphasize the role of strategic innovation in enhancing organizational competitiveness. Wambui (2018) found that process and administrative innovation strategies significantly improved performance in Telkom Kenya, similar to KTDA's efforts in streamlining production processes and introducing administrative efficiencies. However, Wambui also highlighted the importance of innovation hubs and feedback platforms, which could be areas where KTDA still needs improvement. Additionally, Mbocho (2020) demonstrated that technological, process, and social innovation positively impact performance in manufacturing firms like Bamburi Cement. This aligns with KTDA's partial success in leveraging innovation but also supports the argument that a more structured and expansive application of strategic innovation such as better technology adoption and social innovation strategies could further enhance competitiveness.

Furthermore, Tseng et al. (2018) highlighted that service innovation and sustainable product-service systems drive performance, particularly in resource-constrained firms. KTDA's focus on tea processing innovations is beneficial, but exploring sustainability-driven innovations, such as organic tea production or eco-friendly packaging, could further elevate its global competitiveness.

While the findings affirm that strategic innovation influences competitiveness, some literature suggests additional complexities. McDermott and Prajogo (2022) found that ambidextrous innovation (balancing exploration and exploitation) is most effective for SMEs, yet KTDA faces challenges in proactive market exploration. This suggests that KTDA may need to strengthen its balance between exploring new markets and optimizing current processes to remain competitive. Additionally, Mdasha (2018) found that product and service innovation significantly enhance SME performance, but also emphasized the need for regulatory and advisory support to guide firms in adopting effective innovation strategies. If KTDA struggles with the uniform application of innovation, a more structured regulatory framework and internal innovation policies could improve consistency across all factories. Lastly, Wan-Ching (2019) suggested that company core values and trusted products can sometimes outweigh the role of leadership vision and innovation in maintaining competitiveness. This implies that while KTDA should enhance its innovation strategies, maintaining high product quality and brand reputation remains equally vital.

Competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories

The general objective of the study was to determine the influence of strategic leadership and competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories. The results are presented in Table 6 in which percentage are presented inside brackets while frequency outside brackets.

Table 6: Competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories

Competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories	5	4	3	2	1	M	SD
Net revenue has remained stable in the past 6 months	27 (24)	43.8 (39)	25.8 (23)	1.1 (1)	2.2 (2)	3.92	0.88
Customer base has remained stable in the past 6 months	24.7 (22)	52.8 (47)	14.6 (13)	6.7 (6)	1.1 (1)	3.93	0.88
We run net promoter scores to determine customer switching patterns	51.7 (46)	31.5 (28)	5.6 (5)	6.7 (6)	4.5 (4)	4.19	1.11
There is high customer turn over in the past 6 months	42.7 (38)	42.7 (38)	5.6 (5)	5.6 (5)	3.4 (3)	4.16	1.00
Existing leadership skills from top management team has led to increase in business profits.	43.8 (39)	44.9 (40)	4.5 (4)	1.1 (1)	5.6 (5)	4.20	1.00
There is consistent payments of bonuses	36 (32)	33.7 (30)	18 (16)	6.7 (6)	5.6 (5)	3.88	1.15
There is frequent scanning of our competitor's business growth tactics	39.3 (35)	43.8 (39)	5.6 (5)	5.6 (5)	5.6 (5)	4.06	1.09
Mean Score						**4.06**	

N=89; KEY: 1= Strongly Disagree; 2= Disagree; 3=Neutral; 4= Agree; 5=Strongly Agree; M=Mean; SD= Standard Deviation.

The results indicate an overall mean score of 4.06, signifying a strong level of agreement among respondents that strategic leadership influences competitiveness. However, varying standard deviations (SDs) across different aspects suggest differing levels of consensus. One of the highest-rated aspects was the impact of leadership skills on business profitability, with 88.7% of respondents agreeing (mean: 4.20, SD: 1.00). This suggests that the top management's strategic decisions have positively influenced financial performance, though 5.6% disagreed, indicating room for improvement.

Similarly, customer retention stability over six months was well-rated, with 77.5% agreement (mean: 3.93, SD: 0.88). This reflects the tea factories' ability to maintain a consistent consumer base, though 7.8% of respondents noted some level of customer attrition. Net revenue stability over six months was also positively perceived, with 70.8% agreement (mean: 3.92, SD: 0.88), demonstrating financial resilience. However, the presence of 2.2% strong disagreement suggests fluctuations in revenue for some factories, potentially due to market volatility or operational inefficiencies.

A crucial competitive practice is running net promoter scores (NPS) to monitor customer switching patterns, which was strongly endorsed, with 83.2% agreement (mean: 4.19, SD: 1.11). The slightly higher SD (1.11) suggests some differences in how consistently NPS is implemented across factories. Interestingly, customer turnover over six months received 85.4% agreement (mean: 4.16, SD: 1.00). While this seems contradictory to customer stability findings, it could indicate that some factories experience higher churn rates while others maintain stable clientele.

Additionally, frequent scanning of competitors' business growth tactics was widely acknowledged, with 83.1% agreement (mean: 4.06, SD: 1.09). This suggests that KTDA factories are actively monitoring industry trends, although 5.6% disagreed, indicating that not all entities may be engaging in this practice effectively. A slightly lower rating was given to consistent bonus payments, which received 69.7% agreement (mean: 3.88, SD: 1.15). This suggests variability in bonus issuance, potentially influenced by financial constraints or differing management policies across factories. Overall, the findings suggest that strategic leadership has played a key role in sustaining KTDA's competitiveness, particularly in financial stability, customer retention, and market intelligence practices.

However, challenges such as customer churn and inconsistent bonus payments remain areas for further strategic intervention.

Numerous studies affirm that strategic leadership significantly impacts firm competitiveness. Jooste and Fourie (2018) found that strategic vision among financial firm directors in South Africa directly influenced organizational performance, reinforcing the importance of market intelligence and financial stability, both of which KTDA has successfully leveraged. Similarly, Edwards (2019) established a positive relationship between strategic vision and organizational performance, emphasizing that leaders who incorporate action-oriented and innovative strategies aligned with company values drive sustainable growth. KTDA's leadership appears to reflect this dynamic, particularly in market intelligence and customer retention strategies. Moreover, Kalunda (2022) studied strategic alignment at Equity Bank (Kenya) and found that a well-aligned leadership strategy helped increase profitability, expand customer base, and enhance product innovation. KTDA's strong financial stability is consistent with this finding, but issues like customer churn indicate gaps in fully optimizing customer engagement strategies.

While strategic leadership generally contributes to competitiveness, some studies highlight areas where it may not be the sole determinant. Wan-Ching (2019) found that in India's health institutions, core product trust and brand reputation sometimes outweighed leadership vision in sustaining competitiveness. This suggests that KTDA's customer retention challenges may not be entirely a leadership issue but also linked to product differentiation, pricing, and evolving consumer preferences. Additionally, Brady and Walsh (2018) suggested that strategic leadership impacts performance but must be complemented by continuous innovation and adaptive business models. This contrasts with KTDA's challenge of inconsistent bonus payments, which may indicate a need for more flexible financial planning and incentive structures to maintain employee and farmer motivation. Further, Newsom, Turk, and Kruckeberg (2019) highlighted that strategic communication plays an essential role in public relations and stakeholder engagement, reinforcing that effective leadership must be paired with strong communication strategies to reduce issues like customer churn and improve stakeholder trust.

Inferential Statistics Analysis

Correlation Analysis

The researcher undertook correlation analysis to establish the nature and strength of the relationships between the independent and the dependent variables of the study. Linearity was also tested by use of Pearson Correlation analysis which computes both the linear and nonlinear components of a pair of variables. Linear regression analysis assumes there is linear relationship between independent and dependent variables. The linearity is as a result of significance level being less than 0.05 which was evident for all study variables. All linear relationships were significant at 0.01 (99.0% confidence level). The results are as shown in Table 7.

Table 7: Pearson Correlation Analysis

		Strategic vision	Strategic alignment	Strategic communication	Strategic innovation
Strategic vision	Pearson Correlation	1			
	Sig. (2-tailed)				
	N	89			
Strategic alignment	Pearson Correlation	.514**	1		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000			
	N	89	89		
Strategic communication	Pearson Correlation	.104	.219*	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.340	.042		
	N	89	89	89	
Strategic innovation	Pearson Correlation	.292**	.213*	.421**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.006	.048	.000	
	N	89	89	89	89
Competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories	Pearson Correlation	.624**	.707**	.412**	.584**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.003	.000
	N	89	89	89	89

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

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The results indicate that strategic vision has a positive Pearson correlation (r=0.642, p=0.000) effect on competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories. This indicates that strategic vision play a major role in competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories. The articulation of a clear strategic vision is often posited as a driver of organizational competitiveness. However, recent empirical evidence presents a more complex picture. A study by Al-Hakimi et al. (2024) examined the combined effects of strategic intelligence, leadership, planning, and thinking on business performance within large Saudi industrial companies. The findings revealed that, among these factors, only strategic planning had a significant positive impact on performance, while strategic intelligence, leadership, and thinking did not demonstrate a direct effect. This suggests that while a well-defined strategic vision is valuable, its standalone influence on competitiveness may be limited without effective planning and execution mechanisms.

The results also indicated that there is a positive relationship between strategic alignment and competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories (Pearson correlation coefficient= 0.707, P=0.000). Strategic alignment therefore has a positive effect in competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories. Aligning organizational resources and capabilities with strategic objectives is widely regarded as essential for enhancing decision-making effectiveness and overall performance. Ghonim et al. (2022) explored this relationship within Egypt's public sector and found that strategic alignment positively affects decision effectiveness. This underscores the importance of integrating various dimensions of strategic alignment to achieve improved organizational outcomes. Similarly, Mulago and Oloko (2019) investigated Kenya's telecommunication sector and concluded that firms aligning their employees, key processes, IT, and customer strategies with long-term objectives experienced enhanced performance. These studies collectively affirm that strategic alignment is a critical factor in bolstering organizational competitiveness.

The analysis show that strategic communication has a positive Pearson correlation coefficient (r= 0.412 P=0.003) effect on competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories. This indicates that strategic communication factors cannot be ignored whenever considering the competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories. Effective strategic communication is pivotal in ensuring that organizational goals are clearly conveyed and understood across all levels, facilitating better coordination and execution of strategies. While the direct impact of strategic communication on competitiveness is less frequently isolated in recent studies, its role is often embedded within broader strategic initiatives. For instance, the research by Al-Hakimi et al. (2024) implies that strategic planning which inherently involves communication processes significantly enhances business performance. This suggests that while strategic communication alone may not be extensively studied as an isolated factor, it is integral to the successful implementation of strategic plans that drive competitiveness.

The results showed that there is positive relationship between strategic innovation and competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories (Pearson correlation coefficient, r= 0.584, P=0.000). This implies that strategic innovation is very necessary in competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories. The capacity for strategic innovation enables organizations to adapt to market changes and maintain a competitive edge. Wanyama et al. (2024) conducted a comprehensive study across various industries and found that companies effectively implementing strategic innovations achieved notable improvements in market share, operational efficiency, and brand differentiation. However, the study also highlighted existing gaps, such as the need for integrated frameworks encompassing all types of innovation and a deeper understanding of the roles of culture and leadership in fostering innovation. These findings indicate that while strategic innovation is a potent tool for enhancing competitiveness, its success depends on a holistic approach that considers various organizational factors.

Multiple Regression Analysis

Multiple regressions try to figure out whether a set of variables predicted a single dependent variable (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2008). Multiple regressions were used in this case since there were multiple independent variables in the sample. This study was interested in finding out whether and how strategic vision, strategic alignment, strategic communication, Strategic innovation affects competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories. The four independent variables were considered together (one equation) as predictors of competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories. A multiple linear regression model was used to test the significance of the effect of the independent variables on the dependent variable.

The study sought to determine the model summary findings in order to determine the overall percentage change in the competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories that was explained by all the metric of the strategic leadership by use of R^2. The results in Table 8 present R, R^2, Adj $R^{2,}$ F ratio and Sig. value.

Table 8: 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	.840[a]	.706	.692	.22557	.706	49.233	4	84	.000

a. Predictors: (Constant), Strategic innovation, Strategic vision, Strategic communication, Strategic alignment
b. Dependent Variable: Competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories

The results from the model summary in Table 8 give us information on the overall summary of the model. It can be deduced that strategic leadership account for 70.6% significant variance in competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories (R square =.706, P=0.000) implying that 29.4% of the variance in competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories is accounted for by other variables not captured in this model. The next Table 9 is ANOVA which is also known as model of fit (goodness of fit; F Ratio, Sig Value).

Table 9: Model of Fit (ANOVa Table)

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	10.020	4	2.505	49.233	.000[b]
1 Residual	4.172	84	.051		
Total	14.193	88			

a. Predictors: (Constant), Strategic innovation, Strategic vision, Strategic communication, Strategic alignment
b. Dependent Variable: Competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories

According to the data, the F value is more than one, as demonstrated by a value of 49.233, which indicates that the enhancement obtained as a consequence of model fitting is significantly greater than the model errors/inaccuracies that were not included in the model ($F (4,88) = 49.233$, $P=0.000$) The big F value is very unlikely to have occurred by coincidence (95.0 percent), meaning that the final research model has significantly improved in its capacity to forecast competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories as a result of the strategic leadership techniques examined.

Table 10: Regression Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	.270	.308		.874	.385
Strategic vision	.535	.078	.549	6.899	.000
1 Strategic alignment	.161	.039	.157	4.128	.000
Strategic communication	.217	.077	.210	2.838	.006
Strategic innovation	.173	.074	.183	2.343	.022

a. Dependent Variable: Competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories

A regression of the four predictor variables against competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories established the multiple linear regression model.

$$\mathbf{Y=0.270+ 0.535X_1+0.161X_2+0.217X_3+0.173X_4}$$

where:

Y= Competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories

X_1= Strategic vision
X_2= strategic alignment
X_3= strategic communication
X_4= Strategic innovation

From the findings presented, all strategic leadership in this study had significant effect on the competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories. If strategic leadership are held at zero or it is absent, the competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories would be 0.270, p=0.385. This implies that absence of strategic leadership the competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories would be positive but significantly.

It was revealed that strategic vision had unique significant contribution to the model with B=.535, p=.000 suggesting that controlling of other variables (Strategic alignment, Strategic communication and Strategic innovation) in the model, a unit increase in strategic vision would result to significant increase in competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories by 0.535 units. These findings align with the existing literature, such as Edwards (2019), who found a strong relationship between strategic vision, employee inspiration, and organizational performance. Similarly, Jooste and Fourie (2018) established that effective strategic leadership, measured by strategic vision, significantly influenced firm performance in South Africa's financial sector. Furthermore, Brady and Walsh (2018) demonstrated that strategic vision directly impacts organizational performance and firm competitiveness. On the other hand, Wan-Ching (2019) found an insignificant relationship between leadership vision and firm performance in India's health institutions, suggesting that product trust and innovation were more influential than leadership vision. This indicates that while strategic vision is crucial, its impact may be contingent on industry-specific factors.

The coefficient of strategic alignment was 0.161, which was significant (p=.000) and also positive. When the variance explained by all other variables (Strategic vision, strategic communication and Strategic innovation) in the model is controlled, a unit increase in strategic alignment would result to significant increase in competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories by 0.161 units. This aligns with research by Jennifer et al. (2019), whose meta-analysis found that strategic alignment influences financial performance, productivity, and customer benefits. Additionally, Ammar, Jameel, and Dojanah (2018) demonstrated that strategic alignment enhances business performance by improving information management. Similarly, Kalunda (2022) found that strategic alignment in banking institutions, particularly in process optimization and resource allocation, contributed to competitive advantage. However, Toto, Novita, and Rina (2021) found that the impact of strategic alignment depends on information systems' implementation effectiveness. Their study on rural banks in Indonesia suggested that misalignment between business and IT strategies could limit performance gains. This indicates that while strategic alignment is beneficial, its effectiveness may depend on the integration of supporting technologies and systems.

Another variable that also had a unique significant contribution to the model was the value for strategic communication (B=.217, p=.006). When other variables in the model are controlled (Strategic alignment, Strategic vision and Strategic innovation), a unit increase in strategic communication would result to significant increase in competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories by 0.217 units. This finding is consistent with Quirke (2021), who emphasized that a lack of strategic communication impedes firm performance. Moreover, Hebda (2022) found that senior managers who effectively communicated and encouraged feedback from employees improved innovation and organizational performance. Similarly, Newsom, Turk, and Kruckeberg (2019) highlighted the role of public relations in fostering cooperative stakeholder relationships and maintaining a competitive edge. Conversely, Uchida (2021) and Dolezal et al. (2020) suggested that strategic communication's impact varies based on the type of information used. While "soft" relationship-based communication enhances lending decisions, a reliance solely on "hard" financial data can mislead decision-making. This suggests that firms must balance formal and informal communication strategies to maximize competitiveness.

Lastly, strategic innovation had unique significant contribution to the model with B=0.173, p=.022 implying that when other variables in the model are controlled (Strategic alignment, strategic communication and Strategic vision), a unit increase in strategic innovation would result to significant increase in competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories by 0.173 units. These findings align with McDermott and Prajogo (2022), who found that ambidextrous innovation (a balance between exploration and exploitation) positively influenced performance in Australian SMEs. Similarly, Wambui (2018) demonstrated that process innovation enhances product quality, operational efficiency, and market competitiveness. However, Mbocho (2020) found that while innovation strategies improved performance in manufacturing firms, their direct impact on competitive advantage was less clear. Additionally, Tseng et al. (2018) emphasized the role of sustainability in strategic innovation, suggesting that innovation efforts must align with broader market and environmental trends to be effective. This implies that while strategic innovation is crucial, its effectiveness may depend on factors such as industry dynamics, regulatory environments, and sustainability considerations.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Going by the outcome of the study, there emerged a very strong, positive and statistically significant correlation between strategic vision and competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories indicating that the strategic vision techniques affect competitiveness. The study concludes that strategic vision is a crucial factor in enhancing competitiveness in KTDA-managed tea factories. While top management demonstrates effectiveness in executing strategic vision, particularly in leveraging technology and setting clear milestones, there is room for improvement in adaptability and stakeholder engagement. Employees generally perceive leadership as proactive, yet variations in perception suggest gaps in aligning strategic vision with industry changes.

The study concluded that strategic alignment has significant effect on the competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories. This postulated that strategic alignment plays major role in enhancing competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories. The study establishes that strategic alignment significantly contributes to competitiveness in KTDA-managed tea factories. Structured business operations, resource optimization, and reward mechanisms are well-integrated, but challenges remain in decision-making structures and aligning intellectual resources with operational goals. Additionally, there is a need for better external market adaptation and seamless integration of digital systems with business strategies.

The study concluded that strategic communication has significant effect on the competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories. This suggested that strategic communication plays significant role in enhancing competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories. The study finds that strategic communication plays a key role in the competitiveness of KTDA-managed tea factories. While leadership communication is highly rated, inefficiencies exist in customer feedback mechanisms, regulatory lobbying, and the role of liaison officers in fostering partnerships. Public relations efforts are moderately effective but require more structured engagement.

The study concluded that strategic innovation has significant positive effect on the competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories. This suggested that strategic innovation does play significant role in enhancing competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories. The study concludes that strategic innovation is a critical driver of competitiveness in KTDA-managed tea factories. While managers actively identify business opportunities and foster continuous improvement, inconsistencies exist in adaptability to new markets and proactive exploration of emerging technologies. Some employees perceive innovation efforts as inconsistent across departments.

KTDA should strengthen its strategic vision by fostering greater adaptability and stakeholder engagement. While top management is effective in executing the strategic vision, proactive strategies should be developed to ensure that the vision aligns with evolving market trends. Additionally, engaging employees and other stakeholders in the vision-setting process through regular consultations and feedback mechanisms will enhance collective ownership and implementation of strategic goals.

Second, KTDA should refine its strategic alignment by addressing gaps in decision-making structures and ensuring that intellectual resources are fully integrated with operational needs. A more dynamic approach to external market adaptation should be adopted, including continuous assessment of industry trends and competitor strategies. Further, improving the synergy between digital systems and business strategies will enhance efficiency and competitiveness. Investments in infrastructure should also be made to support a rapidly evolving business environment.

Third, the organization should improve its strategic communication processes by enhancing customer feedback mechanisms and regulatory lobbying efforts. Strengthening the role of liaison officers in fostering partnerships and improving external communication will contribute to a more responsive and transparent business environment. Public relations efforts should be more structured, with a focus on proactive engagement with regulatory bodies, industry stakeholders, and the broader market.

Finally, to enhance strategic innovation, KTDA should develop a more structured and consistent approach to identifying and implementing new market opportunities. The organization should promote a culture of continuous learning and encourage proactive exploration of emerging technologies and untapped markets. Training programs should be reinforced to ensure that all employees understand and contribute to innovation initiatives. Additionally, innovation strategies should be uniformly applied across all departments to minimize inconsistencies in implementation.

Areas for Further Research

This study determined the influence of strategic leadership and Competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories in the West of Rift. Four specific objectives were considered that is the role of strategic vision, strategic alignment, strategic communication and strategic innovation. To begin with, the scope of the study was only limited to KTDA managed Tea Factories in the West of Rift and therefore the findings may not necessarily reflect other tea factories in Kenya, thus there is a need for similar study considering all tea factories in Kenya beyond those managed by KTDA.

Secondly, the study focused on four strategic leadership which did not fully determined competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories, Kenya. This implies there may be other strategic leadership variables such as Strategic Agility and strategic risk management which further studies ought to consider.

Similarly, the study did not factor moderating, mediating or intervening variables which may affect competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories. Therefore, further studies should focus on government regulations and policies and other macro-economic factors which may affect Competitiveness of KTDA managed Tea Factories in the West of Rift either directly or indirectly.

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