

Cost Leadership And Differentiation As Generic Strategies: Analysis Of Competitiveness Of Large-Scale Retailers In Kenya

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Abstract

The retail sector is pivotal in attracting millions of firms to transact via various distribution channels covering several sectors serving billions of consumers globally. This contemporary globalization has contributed to highly competitive business environment with Kenyan retail sector experiencing influx of new entrants in the recent two decades, creating competitive pressure in the industry leaving retailers grappling to maintain profitability, expand market share and attain customer satisfaction. Firms gain a boost over their rivals by employing generic strategies to repel external forces of competition, secure customer loyalty and develop a sustainable profitable position. Retailers adopt cost leadership, differentiation and focus strategies according to how and where to compete dimensions. The objectives were to assess the effect of cost leadership, and differentiation strategies on competitiveness of large scale retailers in Kericho County, Kenya. Michael Porters Competitive Advantage Theory, resource-based view theory and Competence Based theory anchored the survey. The study employed descriptive research design. The population of the study comprised 250 management staff drawn from 13 licensed large-scale retailers in Kericho County, Kenya. In this research, Yamane's (1967) formula was used to compute the sample size. Content validity of the research instrument was determined by consulting the supervisor as evaluating measuring tools of related studies while reliability was assessed via Cronbach's alpha (α) yielding a score of 0.859 meeting the acceptable range of higher than 0.7 but less than 1. Raw data was collected via semi-structured questionnaires. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics and presented using tables and charts. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was utilized to assist in the analysis. Qualitative data was assessed using content analysis and discussed on a narrative form. The study findings showed that large scale retailers in Kericho County apply generic strategies to compete and differentiation strategy being the primary strategy. Cost leadership was still crucial when pricing is a big factor, therefore, use technology to cut down on waste, lower operational costs and practice bulk buying, work with suppliers and use lean management practices to cut down on costs without hurting service quality. Further, results of the study suggest that large scale retailers in Kericho County combine differentiation and cost leadership strategies. In conclusion, competitiveness among large-scale retailers in Kericho County is best characterized by a mix of differentiation and cost leadership strategies while focus strategy is applied as complementary strategy. It was recommended that large scale retailers should prioritize on uniqueness in products and services by investing in product quality, branding, technology driven services and novel ideas as top priority. Therefore, managers of large-scale retailers should adopt a balanced approach that incorporates both efficiency and customer experience. These hybrid methods can handle changes in the markets and shifts in consumer behavior.

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I. Introduction

Globally, retailers are encountering immense competitive pressure from dynamic consumer preferences, digitization and sustainability (Euromonitor, 2022). According Viet Thai International (2025), retail sales in United States (US), Europe and Japan are expected to decline by 2.1% to 2.5% as customers prioritize value over brand loyalty. Moreover, Asian retailers like Rakuten & Shopee are leveraging on technology to deal with competitive pressure. Cutthroat competition in the US retail sector is becoming intense with companies like Walmart, Target, Kroger and Amazon are under pressure to constantly innovate, differentiate themselves, demonstrate value to customers, secure profitability and attract new consumers to survive in and highly competitive US retail industry (Computer & Communication Industry Association, 2025).

According to Cherif, Dhungana, Fang, Gonzalez- Garcia, Yang, Yenice & Yoon (2020), anti-competitive formalities curtail competitiveness and economic growth in Sub Saharan Africa. Sub Saharan Africa retailing business grapples with lagging local economies, profitability pressures and contemporary global

competition (Mwamba & Outieshat, 2021). Competitive advantage remains elusive among Senegalese firms due to mismanagement and deficient competencies (Aidara, Mamun, Nasir, Mohiuddin, Nawi & Zinol, 2021). In South Africa, retailers face dynamic customer preferences necessitating constant review of business strategies (Biyase, Corbishley & Mason, 2021). As a result, South African new retail entrants are struggling to survive with Stuttaford's exclusive stores closing in 2018, Edcon Group megastore downsizing by closing 24 stores while international brands such as Mango, Nine West and River Island withdrawing and downsizing in the South African market (Nimo, 2022).

Firms in Kenya are striving to remain competitive by pursuing market growth and profits while others succumb to pressure of competition (Gatimu & Amuhaya, 2022). According to Nyongesa & Atieno (2023), some retail stores in Kenya have been experiencing poor performances orchestrating the closure of numerous outlets. Nkaiwuetei (2022), maintains that the tumble of major Kenyan supermarkets is linked to failure to adopt proper strategies and mismanagement. Kamau, Banafa & Kariuki (2022), associate the collapse of Uchumi Supermarket with declining profits, inadequate operating cash flows and mismanagement. Consequently, Uchumi Supermarket closed its outlets in Tanzania in 2015 leaving 300 suppliers stranded trying to recoup their supplies money (Nandonde & Stanton, 2022).

The Kericho business community is grappling with competitive pressure, rising production costs, poor infrastructure and unreliable electricity (Cordinationsud.org, 2022). Nakumatt and Tuskys supermarkets closed its branches including those in Kericho town due to financial mismanagement and poor economic conditions (Cytonn, 2025). According to Businessdailyafrica (2020), Nakumatt closed its branch in Kericho County in 2017 due to rent arrears with their retail space taken over by rival brands. Large scale retailers in Kericho are struggling with performance making it imperative to adopt effective strategies to survive rivalry (Chepnetich, 2022).

Small firms hailing from United States of America (USA), are employing niche strategies to find competitive edge against their larger rivals (Galli-Debicella, 2021). Strikingly, local USA bookstores operate despite the presence of Amazon whereas independent coffee shops manage to meet customer expectations with renowned coffee chains available within their proximity (Galli-Debicella, 2021). Spanish luxury company Balenciaga deploys differentiation strategy mastering on innovation to maintain its market position in a fiercely competitive deluxe market with increasing consumer expectations (Wang, 2024). Indonesian retail companies such as Matahari Department Store employs cost leadership strategy to target low-income market while Mitra Adiperkasa chooses differentiation strategy targeting a middle-income market (Reksoprodjo, Rifqi & Khadija, 2022). This demonstrates the ability of firms to compete successfully via Porter's generic strategies (Galli-Debicella, 2021). In the South African retail industry, firms are promoting development of business strategies such as enhancing customer experience through price cuts, advertising and product promotions to stay afloat (Malgas & Zondi, 2021).

According to Wardhana (2024), Samsung electronics in Indonesia remains competitive by employing a differentiation approach underscoring on continual innovation and advancement of product quality hence distinguishing itself from rivals, add value to products and meet customer expectations. Similarly, Walmart competitiveness is attributed to cost leadership strategy via advanced logistical systems reducing costs which allows offering lower prices to consumers (Wardhana, 2024). In Nigeria, the competitiveness of SMEs is anchored on cost leadership and focus generic strategies (Isichei, Isichei & Muruku, 2025). In Nigeria, businesses are elevating customer satisfaction as an integral approach to outmatch rivals. Equivalently, many retailers are striving to gain competitive advantage by focusing on customer satisfaction (Chima, 2023).

According to Ngana (2022), Naivas Supermarket remains a dominant player in Kenyan retail sector by embracing strategy formulations among them Porter's generic differentiation strategy. Naivas uses differentiation strategy to distinctively develop unique products, promote personnel development, strategically locate its premises, embrace automation, develop a formidable brand identity and engage in customer centered activities including having a smart card for loyalty points to reward frequent customers (Ngana, 2022). Similarly, private supermarkets in the County of Kericho in Kenya embrace Porter's generic game plan to improve performance with cost leadership been the most inclined to, edging on technology to minimize cost, increase profitability and charge cheaper prices. Conversely, differentiation strategy is moderately applied through product promotion, packaging and offering variety of products whereas focus strategy is applied minimally by targeting a specific geographic location (Chepnetich, 2022). Kenya's big retail outlet Naivas outlets edges its competitors through differentiation in quality, automation and branding demonstrating how generic strategies can be leveraged for competitiveness (Ngana, 2022).

Competitiveness

Competitiveness stems from the trade model of competitive advantage (Falciola, Jansen & Rollo, 2020). Boikova, Zeverte-Rizva, Rivza & Rivza (2021), argue that competitiveness is firms' capability to engineer products that meet market demands and attain profitability amid threats of external

competition. Williams (2022) define firm competitiveness as the ability to attain market share and woo customers amid fierce rivalry. Competitiveness is the apt in establishing and fortifying vantage positions in an industry over rivals (Vasiliev, 2022). Igwe, Akpan, Udoh & Syla (2024) argue that firm competitiveness is the capability of firms to generate and sustain a competitive edge in an industry. The metrics of competitiveness include profitability, customer satisfaction and growth in market share (Sharma, Jain & Dhir, 2022). Non-financial metrics for firm competitiveness are customer experiences, pertinent centralized activities and continual upskilling (Phan, Vu, Phan & Vu, 2020).

In the current study competitiveness was measured in terms of profitability as argued by Boikova, Zeverte-Rizva, Rivza & Rivza (2021), market share as per the suggestion of Chepnetich & Simon (2022) and Customer satisfaction according to Sharma, Jain & Dhir (2022). According to Siahaan, Sadalia & Silalahi, (2021), profitability rates demonstrate the extent a firm employs assets and capital for gains and further proposes, return on equity (ROE), return on investment (ROI) & return on assets (ROA) as efficiency measures. ROA & ROE high values/levels depict the firm efficiently deploying its assets and capital whereas ROI measures firms' overall efficiency by balancing net profits and value of total investment (Siahaan, Sadalia & Silalahi, 2021). In the current study, profits were measured in terms of attaining desirable performance relative to competitors as argued by (Dai et al., 2018) Profits reveal the surplus in income over expenditure incurred over a certain period and can take economic or accounting concepts (Isayas, 2022).

Market share represents a fragment of total market a business can command (Asayesh & Rousta, 2023). According to Sahafzadeh & Haghighi (2023), gaining more market share creates a defensible position in an industry through new technology to woo clients from contenders, cultivating a formidable customer base to retain current customers who help in word-of-mouth referrals and acquiring competencies that prevent high turnover costs. Market share can be gauged as per brand reputation, volume of production, economies of scale and level of sales (Cheruiyot & Langat, 2023). Market share was measured in the current study by the ability to expand into new markets as proposed by Porter (1985).

A firm that neglects customer satisfaction risks messing with its products because the contemporary shopper is precise, curious & continuously learning about their needs (Ali, Anwar, Akoi, Abdulrahman, Muhamed, Noori & Saleh, 2021). Customer satisfaction involves continuous improvement of customer products & services through innovation (Rahman, Fadrul, Yusrizal, Marlyna & Momin, 2022). In the study, customer satisfaction was operationalized in terms of service quality & product diversity as argued by Lechner & Gudmundson (2019) and customer happiness as argued by Wanjira & Gathogo (2021). Customer satisfaction is gauged on company image, maintaining the existing market share and rates of customer grievances and alliance (Hallencreutz & Parmler, 2021). Customer satisfaction manifests in provision of unparalleled customer service, creating a loyal customer base (Rane, Achari & Choudhary, 2023))

Generic Strategies

Porter (1985) proposed generic strategies for firms to build a defensible position and establish a competitive edge against their competitors by skillfully employing low-cost, differentiation and focus strategies. Porter's generic strategies are not conditioned to a particular industry or business hence can be executed in different industries or firms (Islami, Mustafa & Latkovikj, 2020). Cost leadership strategy dwells on leveraging on lower cost of production which consequently translates to low pricing and input (Sabir, Gardi, Othman, Aziz, Ahmed, Sabir, Ishmael, Hamza, Ali & Anwar 2021). Porter (1980) note that a firm aims to attain an overall lower cost of production than competitors without altering the quality offered to customers through cost leadership strategy. Lower cost of production also helps a retailer leverage on experience, product design, economies of scale and process design (Saleh, Ali, Akoi, Najmalddin, Ali & Anwar 2021).

In the current study Cost leadership strategy was measured in terms of lower operational cost according to Islami, Mustafa & Latkovikj (2020), lower cost of inputs & lower pricing as suggested by Sabir, Gardi, Othman, Aziz, Ahmed, Sabir, Ishmael, Hamza, Ali & Anwar (2021) and economies of scale as argued by Saleh, Ali, Akoi, Najmalddin, Ali & Anwar (2021). A firm seeking lower operational costs becomes a cost leader by overhauling its value chain to manage cost producing activities with a rewarding low-cost strategy evidenced through high firm efficiency, low operating costs, restricted bonuses, waste intolerance, rigorous evaluation of budget requests, larger span of control, personnel involvement in cost control and rewarding cost regulations (Islami, Mustafa & Latkovikj ,2020). Low cost of input is attained by accessing cheaper labor and proximity to raw materials and storage (Talim, Ali & Top, 2021). According to (Abdullah & Anwar, 2021), Producing in bulk lowers cost of production and as an aftermath, positively impacting the product and process designs respectively. A firm reaps the benefits of economies of scale by focusing on products and services in bulk while spreading overheads over large output (Jerab & Mabrouk, 2023). Lower pricing of products and services is achieved by low-cost arrangements while maintaining bigger profitability margins than rivals (Oladipo, Usman & Oyedokun, 2023) through mastering cost control hence maintaining product quality (Miriti, 2024). According to Handayani, Asri, Yusuf, Novali & Mutia (2025), accessing inputs or labor at lower costs

than rivals involve establishing bargain agreements with suppliers, sourcing reasonable raw materials and securing lower labor costs.

Differentiation can lower competition and increase competitive advantage and continuous creativity, innovation and learning in paramount in the implementation of differentiation (Porter, 1985). Differentiation strategy, according to Rodrigues, Ruivo & Oliveira (2021) is an integrated plan to engineer goods and services that consumer perceives as significant and superior. According to (Akoi, Ali, Saleh, Najmalddin, Mustafa, Abdulmajid & Hama, 2021) differentiation can be achieved by unparalleled technology, distinct features, suppliers' brand name or reputation. Islami, Mustafa & Latkovikj, (2020) believe that a firm's differentiation strategy is evaluated based on value drivers manifesting through human resource activities that build company's personnel expertise, developing product features which appeal to many buyers. In the current study, differentiation strategy was measured in terms of product quality suggested by Andersén (2021), technology according to Tojiri (2023), product marketing and product features as opined by Sudirjo (2023).

Products of high quality enable firms to differentiate themselves in an industry leveraging on innovation (Andersén, 2021). To adapt to a dynamic business environment, firms need to implement innovative ideas to create novel and enhanced products (Andersén, 2021). Uniqueness can be achieved by focusing on customer service efforts, timely innovation and unequalled technology (Rodrigues, Ruivo & Oliveira (2021). Product marketing via promotion and distribution activities improves product proximity, awareness and sales thus increasing market share, developing a loyal customer base and enhancing profitability (Sudirjo,2023). According to Jerab & Mabrouk (2023), high quality products surpass industry standards quality guaranteeing survival and customer satisfaction. Product features with better and innovative functions attract customers desiring superior experiences (Sudirjo, 2023). Technological advancements and innovation pave way for creation of unparalleled value, enhancement of product features, functionality and consumer usage differentiating a firm in the market (Tojiri,2023).

II. Statement Of The Problem

Players in wholesale and retail sectors in Kenya still grapple with massive losses, poor financial decisions and mismanagement manifested in the shutdown of Nakumatt Holdings while Uchumi and Choppies are struggling to stay in business (Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research & Analysis, 2020). According to Cytonn (2020), Kenya's retail sector performance dropped in profitability to 6.7% in 2020 compared to 7.0% in 2019 due to tough economic situations resulting to retailers scaling down operations. Kenyan formal retail sector penetration remains relatively low at 30% compared to 60% in South Africa with expansion activities reducing evidenced by reduced occupancy rates from 77.3% in 2019 to 76.6% in 2020 (Cytonn, 2021). In 2020, a total 127 retail outlets were reported closed among the big outlets 65 from Nakumatt, 33 in Uchumi, 13 in Choppies, 14 in Tuskys and 2 in Shoprite (Cytonn, 2020).

According to Nkaiwatei (2022), the tumble of major Kenyan supermarkets is linked to failure to adopt proper strategies. Nakumatt supermarket succumbed to cutthroat competition due to failure to leverage on customer satisfaction and retention via excellent customer service (Ngana, 2022). Fierce competitive pressure is posing a survival challenge among players (Ngetich, 2023) with the entrance of multinational brands such as Game, Choppies and Carrefour (Chesula, 2021).Despite Naivas, Quickmart, Pandamart and Carrefour aggressively occupying spaces left by struggling chains like Uchumi, Tuskys and Nakumatt, Kenyan retail penetration remain as low as 35% (Cytonn, 2024). Retailers are grappling with customer satisfaction of a burgeoning middle class desiring quality products fueled by increased urbanization standing at 7% per annum compared to global average of 1.7% per annum (Cytonn, 2024).

III. Objectives

1. To assess the effect of cost leadership on competitiveness of large-scale retailers in Kericho County, Kenya.
2. To determine the influence of differentiation on competitiveness of large-scale retailers in Kericho County, Kenya.

IV. Literature Review

Michael Porters' Competitive Advantage theory, Resource-based view theory and Competence-based theory were used.

Cost Leadership and Competitiveness

Kimiti, Muathe and Murugi (2020) investigated cost leadership, competitive advantage and performance in a cross-sectional study in the context of milk processing firms in Kenya. The study was informed by RBV, balanced scorecard and capacity-based view theories. Cost leadership was appraised through scale economies, economies of scope and operational efficiency. Descriptive and explanatory non-experimental research designs were applied. Stratified random sampling design was operationalized to pick 29 milk

processing firms empaneled by Kenya Dairy Board. Regression data analysis was done and findings revealed that performance was influenced by cost leadership. In the current study cost leadership was measured using lower operational costs, lower pricing, economies of scale and lower cost of input. Results in the current study depicted that cost leadership greatly influenced competitiveness through delivering competitive prices.

Msinga, Lala, Mohamed, Ndinya & Ogada (2020) explored effects of cost leadership strategies on performance of insurance firms in Nairobi County, Kenya. Descriptive research design was applied, and sample size was 54 staff from 43 registered insurance firms in Nairobi selected through systematic random sampling. Results of correlation scrutiny depicted a clear association amongst cost leadership and firm returns. The findings additionally exhibited most firms utilizing scale economies and optimal application of assets to tap cost advantage. In the present study, cost leadership was evaluated in terms of lower operational costs, lower pricing, economies of scale and lower cost of inputs. Findings in the current study showed that large scale retailers became more competitive by employing cost leadership through effective operations.

Bayad & Anwar (2021) studied Porters generic competitive strategies influence on the competitive advantage of banking investment in Irag, Kurdistan region. Descriptive survey framework was utilized. A sample size of 128 responders was generated using a random sampling method. Results showed that cost leadership had the highest value and significantly predicted competitive advantage. The study concluded that investment companies should adopt cost leadership for success in the market. This study was done in the Middle East, Iraq focusing on banking investment, but the present research was carried out in Kericho County, Kenya focusing on large scale retailers. The current study results showed d that cost leadership influence competitiveness.

Chelimo (2021) explored strategies adopted by Brookside Dairies Ltd in Kenya to gain competitive advantage exploiting a case study survey design. The probe was subject to Porters generic strategy model and reinforced by RBV theory. Raw data was collected by interviewing six top officials and content analysis was done. Results indicated Brookside achieved a low-cost advantage by investing highly in capital investments, leveraging discounts and sales coupons, tapping from economies of scale and cutting advertising by using social media platforms. The study concluded that the company employed a strategy mix to achieve competitive advantage using cost leadership as a main strategy while maintaining differentiation and focus strategies as tertiary strategies. In the present study, a sample size of 154 responders was used, additionally, descriptive and inferential data analysis was done. Findings in the current study suggest that large scale retailers in Kericho reap from the benefits of economies of scale through bulk purchasing.

Alkhalaidi (2022) examined the strategic planning and its relationship to competitive advantage focusing on Pinar Company in Istanbul City, Turkey. Descriptive research design was exploited alongside simple random sampling to select a sample of 289 respondents. Findings showed that the low cost in Pinar Company enabled it to achieve competitive advantage through producing at lower costs, leveraging economies of scale, commanding a larger market share and having an efficient production line. Correlation analysis found a weighty link between low-cost advantage and competitive advantage. In the survey's conclusion, cost leadership was highly utilized for competitiveness. This research dwelled on strategic planning and its relationship with competitive advantage while in the current study the focus was on competitiveness measured in connection with profitability, consumer satisfaction and market share. Results in the current study revealed that economies of scale are essential for raising profit margins while providing items at comparatively lower costs than rivals boost competitiveness.

Sambuli (2022) examined the strategies adopted by Carrefour ltd in Kenya to achieve sustainable competitive advantage. Competitive advantage theory by Michael Porter and RBV models steered this study. The case study research design was exploited where four senior officers were interviewed using open ended questions. Findings showed that cost leadership impacted competitive advantage substantially. Findings further revealed that Carrefour used low-cost advantage to minimize costs by merging departments, efficiently tapping on employee competencies, capitalizing on merchandisers, outsourcing efficiently and automating its operations. In conclusion, cost leadership was the main strategy initiated as focus and differentiation remained consequent options. In the current study descriptive research design was used. Results in current study showed that large scale retailers employed cost leadership in terms of providing items at lower costs than rivals, hence improving their competitiveness.

Differentiation Strategy and Competitiveness

In a past study, (Haque et. al, 2021) probed the competitive advantage in cost leadership and differentiation strategies of SMEs in the culinary business in Indonesia. Using descriptive design, a conclusion was drawn of differentiation significantly affecting competitive superiority. This probe narrowed down on SMEs in culinary business in Indonesia, Asia but in the current study the focus was on Kenyan large-scale retailers in Kericho County. Results in the current study revealed that differentiation strategy had a direct effect on competitiveness.

Edson & Muranda (2021) studied the effect of competitive strategies and innovation on firm performance of Zimbabwean textile and clothing firms. The study found differentiation strategy precisely affecting firms' returns through enriching product modifications which develop consumer loyalty and maintainable economic results. This study displays a contextual and scope gap since it was carried out in Zimbabwe focusing on innovation and firm performance of clothing firms while the current study explored competitiveness of large-scale retailers Kericho County, Kenya. Findings in the current study showed that large scale retailers actively pursued differentiation strategy by enhancing product quality.

Kubai, Karanja & Kihara (2021) examined the influence of differentiation strategy on performance of insurance companies in Kenya. Neo-classical competition and Michael Porter competitive advantage theories tutored the inquiry. Descriptive research design and census sampling method were exercised. Semi-structured questionnaires were exploited to amass data administered to 55 respondents. Results revealed that insurance companies emphasized product/service differentiation than price and market-based differentiation. Further, the findings showed that above 85% of the firms harnessed differentiation strategies for competitiveness by customizing products creating superior value resulting in customer satisfaction. In the current study differentiation strategy was operationalized in terms of quality of products, use of advanced technology, distinct product features and proffering range of items. The findings in the current study showed that large scale retailers in Kericho County use technology in indifferent nation.

A study by Wanjogo & Muathe (2022) was on gaining competitive advantage through generic strategies in medical training colleges, in Kenya. Cost leadership, focus and differentiation were applied as predictor variables while competitive advantage was the measured variable. Dynamic capabilities, knowledge-based and resource-based theories supported postulates of the survey. Descriptive research models and stratified random sampling techniques were used. 42 staff were sampled from a population of 183 staff in 4 medical colleges in Nyeri County. Outcomes of regression analysis found that differentiation strategy had a positive consequence on competitiveness and managers need to communicate differentiation implications to clients to improve their perception. Results in current study revealed that large scale retailers in Kericho County use unique product features to differentiate themselves.

Abuga (2022) examined the influence of generic strategies and operational performance of taxi- hailing companies in Nairobi city County, Kenya. Differentiation variable was assessed in terms of product, market, distribution, quality and technological leadership supported by Porters generic strategies model. Descriptive research design was employed while stratified random sampling method was applied to sample 75 senior employees across 15 registered taxi firms in Nairobi. Output of data analysis showed that taxi firms differentiated their products/services playing a significant role in operational performance. In the current study, census and stratified sampling techniques were utilized to pick 14 retailers and select 154 respondents respectively. Findings in the current study suggested that large-scale retailers in Kericho County embrace product marketing to satisfy a range of consumer demands to remain competitive.

Ngana (2022) probed the strategies applied by Naivas supermarket limited to gain competitive advantage in Kenya employing a case study survey design. One-on-one interviews with 5 top managers at their head office Nairobi were exercised to collect data. Content data analysis was conducted. Finding affirmed Naivas supermarket differentiated itself from competitors through customer focus, promoting employee welfare, utilizing technology, formidable brand identity, locating premises strategically, and introducing new ideas establishing itself as a category leader. The study used competitive advantage strategies but in the current study competitiveness was conceptualized using profitability, market share and consumer satisfaction. Findings of the current study depicts that large scale retailers in Kericho County differentiate themselves via technology conveying unique qualities to consumers.

Njera (2023) studied product differentiation and performance at tier 3 deposit taking SACCOs in Kenya using cross-sectional research design. The outcome of the survey showed product differentiation positively and significantly impacted the performance and further alluded that these SACCOs can exploit differentiation to survive rivalry. The survey used cross-sectional design hence a methodological gap which was addressed in the current study using descriptive research design. Findings in the current study showed that differentiation strategy was achieved via embracing technology.

A study conducted by Otera & Njuguna (2024) focused on generic strategies and performance of selected fashion companies in Nairobi City County, Kenya. Descriptive research design was applied, and 108 sample managers were drawn from a pool of 440 exploiting stratified sampling. The findings of inferential analysis showed that differentiation displayed valuable and notable effect on firms' economic returns. The survey concluded that fashion enterprises deliberately improved product features attracting more customers. In the current study, the target population was 250 management employees mapped out from large scale retailers in Kericho. Results in the current study revealed that offering quality products was one of the important ways of attracting and retaining customers

Conceptual Framework

According to Shikalepo (2020), conceptual framework gives a visible depiction of the study variables serving as a structure of origin source. Similarly, Luft, Jeong, Idsardi & Gardner (2022) maintains that a conceptual framework articulates study’s phenomenon via a visual representation, purposely demonstrating researchers’ comprehension of key concepts under scrutiny and providing a link by considering emergent concepts not captured in literature review. Conceptual framework harmonizes and enunciates a set of study’s different concepts to provide right kinds of interpretations in distinct research stages, identify levels of analysis; steer and improve study’s final verdict (Farrow et, al. 2021). Conceptual Framework is composed of distinct variables that stand for a characteristic parameter that is influenced by various traits. Variables are categorized into dependent and independent variables. (Mugenda and Mugenda ,2003).

V. Methodology

A descriptive research design was used. The target population was 250 comprised of top management, middle level management and lower level management. Census was in regard to large-scale retailers and stratified random sampling technique was used to select and 154 respondents. Data was collected using a questionnaire whose validity and reliability were determined. The data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Confidentiality among the respondents was upheld

VI. Results

Response Rate

150 questionnaires were disbursed to management employees of 13 selected large-scale retailers in Kericho County using the drop and pick method. The response rate demonstrating the level of participation among the large-scale retailers is summarized in table 4.1 below.

Table 1. Response Rate

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Response	140	93.33
Nonresponse	10	6.67
Total	150	100

Source: Research Data (2025)

The results in table 1 above implies that among the 150 distributed questionnaires 140 were accurately attended and presented giving a high response rate of 93.33 %. Conversely, 10 questionnaires were not presented giving a non-response rate of 6.67 %. Babbie (2010) states that a response rate of 70% or more is typically regarded as outstanding and indicates that the results may be regarded as representative of the intended audience. In a meta-analysis of survey research, Baruch and Holtom (2008) discovered that the modest response rate for organizational research was about 52.7%, with rates over 80% being deemed uncommon. As a result, the study's 93.33% response rate is higher than the typical cutoff point for acceptable response rates, reducing the possibility of non-response bias and improving the validity and generalizability of data.

Descriptive Statistics and inferential statistics

Data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics with the aid of statistical package for social science (SPSS). To interpret the mean, values between 3.5 to 5.0, 2.5 to 3.4 and 2.5 and below implies high, medium and low validation respectively (Mugenda and Mugenda, 2003).

Table 2: Cost leadership strategy

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Dev
The business produces goods at a lower cost.	140	3.27	1.124
The success of the business is linked to lower cost of inputs.	140	3.46	1.096
The business offers goods at relatively cheaper prices compared to competitors.	140	3.59	1.031
Business enjoys benefits of economies of scale.	140	4.01	0.786
Cost leadership strategy influences competitive advantage of a large-scale retailer.	140	4.06	0.717
Aggregate Value		3.68	0.651

Source: Survey data (2025)

Findings in Table 2 Above suggests that most responders were not sure whether that business produces goods at a lower cost (mean of 3.27), showing that not all large-scale retailers have fully optimized their production processes to achieve minimum cost levels. There was a relatively high variation (Standard deviation of 1.124), participants differed notably in their opinions about whether businesses produce goods at lower costs suggesting that respondents' experiences with cost leadership tactics varied, maybe because of variations in supply chain efficiency, business size, and capital expenditure. Similarly, most of the respondents were not sure

whether lower input costs are associated with company success (mean of 3.46). A little variation (standard deviation of 1.096) indicated that cost of inputs some influence on success .The study established that business offers goods at relatively cheaper prices compared to competitors (mean of 3.59). A moderate variation (standard deviation of 1.031) showed some variation in agreement. Business enjoys benefits of economies of scale (m = 4.01), suggesting that large-scale merchants profit from manufacturing efficiency, effective distribution, and bulk purchasing. A lower deviation of 0.786 showed that economies of scale had low benefits to the business. Cost leadership strategy influences competitive advantage of a large-scale retailer (mean of 4.06), indicating broad agreement that implementing cost leadership improves a company's competitive advantage. However low variation (standard deviation of 0.717) shows that cost leadership strategy had little influence on competitiveness. In general, Cost leadership strategy had some influence on competitiveness of a large-scale retailer (aggregate mean of 3.68), though variation competitiveness due to cost leadership was low (aggregate standard deviation of 0.651).

Cost leadership strategy influences competitiveness of a large-scale retailer. Respondents' significant agreement with economies of scale confirms fact that major retailers lower per-unit costs through size (Maican, 2021). Cost leadership as a source of competitive advantage aligns with Porter's model and has been substantiated in Kenyan studies of milk processing enterprises, which shown that cost leadership favorably impacts performance (Kimiti & Muathe, 2021). The findings of this research align with research indicating that competitive intensity, supply chain instability, and management capacity foster heterogeneity (Keelson et al., 2024)

Table 3: Differentiation strategy

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Dev
The business conduct marketing of its products.	140	4.06	1.085
The business offers product quality compared to competitors to attract customers.	140	4.33	0.772
Business focuses on product features to serve different customer needs.	140	4.24	0.853
Business has embraced modern technology.	140	4.27	0.855
Differentiation strategy affects competitive advantage of a large-scale retailer.	140	3.91	0.830
Aggregate Value		4.16	0.646

Source: Survey data (2025)

The outcomes in Table 3 above reveal that business conduct marketing of its products (mean of 4.06). There was little variation (standard deviation of 1.085). Majority of the responders agreed business offers product quality as compared to competitors to attract customers, mean of 4.33. This showed that people consider greater product quality to be the main cause of differences in the marketplace. The lower variation (standard deviation of 0.772) showed that product quality had low effect in attracting customers. Business focuses on product features to serve different customer needs (mean of 4.24), suggesting that major shops in Kericho are embracing innovation and product diversity to satisfy a range of consumer demands. There was low variation in customer needs (standard deviation of 0.853). Businesses have embraced modern technology mean of 4.27 although with standard deviation of 0.855. Differentiation strategy had a direct effect on competitiveness (mean of 3.91) and a relatively low variation (standard deviation of 0.830). In general, most responders agreed that differentiation strategy affects competitiveness of large-scale shops in Kericho County (aggregate mean of 4.16). This suggests that a lot of retailers actively use distinctive value propositions to set themselves apart in the market, such product quality, features, and technology use. However variation in competitiveness due to differentiation was low (Aggregate standard deviation of 0.646)

The results of Kim and Mauborgne (2020), stress that companies seeking distinction must offer outstanding value that supports greater customer loyalty and price premiums, are consistent with this. The results of Kim and Mauborgne (2020), stress that companies seeking distinction must offer outstanding value that supports greater customer loyalty and price premiums, are consistent with this The findings of the study coincide with findings by Kotabe and Kothari (2021), who illustrated how branding and advertising strengthen perceived distinctiveness, which is a crucial element in finding a competitive position. The findings of this research are further corroborated by recent empirical data that demonstrates how technology-driven product diversification greatly enhances both company performance and consumer happiness (Kaliappen & Hilman, 2021; Mwangi & Kinyua, 2020).

Empirical study on product marketing articulates that to turn difference into customer loyalty, relationship marketing and focused communication is very important (Chen & Chang, 2022). The highest level of agreement of product quality is in line with research which exhibits product quality is still a key source of competitiveness for stores, especially when customers can see or understand the quality. As Tajeddini (2023) asserts, high-quality products boost a brand's image, keep customers from leaving, and allow for premium placement. Putting emphasis on product features to meet distinct consumer needs is in line with research that shows that differentiating features and customizing the selection can raise perceived value and lower direct

price competition by meeting special preferences. Careful feature/assortment management helps customer segmentation and trust (Wang, 2023). Findings showed that digital and smart technologies (POS analytics, e-commerce, AI/CRM tools) improve service personalization, convenience, and business efficiency, setting apart firms from rivals, are in line with the high support for technology usage (Chen & Chang, 2023). Literature asserts that tactical differentiation might not lead to long-term benefit if quality features, tech, and marketing are not integrated and performance is not measured (Miller et al., 2024).

Table 4: Competitiveness

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Dev
The business is profitable.	140	4.20	0.794
The business is satisfied with current profits.	140	3.21	1.014
The business market share has increased.	140	3.83	0.927
The business has expanded into new market segments.	140	4.01	0.815
Consumers are pleased with the business products and services.	140	4.28	0.764
Complaints, compliments and suggestions are reviewed to improve customer satisfaction.	140	4.15	0.791
Aggregate Value		3.95	0.586

Source: Survey data (2025)

The findings in Table 4 above shows consumers are happy with business products and services (mean of 4.28) but variation was low (standard deviation of 0.794). The business is unhappy with its current profits (mean of 3.21) and a little variation. The study also established that business has expanded into new market segments (mean of 4.01), suggesting that big retailers are using proactive expansion tactics although variation was low (standard deviation of 0.815). In general, the mean score of 3.95 shows most large scale retailers in Kericho County are competitive. However, competitiveness in form of consumer satisfaction, profitability, and market growth was low (standard deviation of 0.586).

Results of this study on profitability is consistent with the idea that competitiveness is more than simply profitability; it is also about attaining desirable performance relative to competitors (Dai et al., 2018). Porter (1985) and Zhou & Wu (2018) suggest that most merchants have been able to grow their client base, which is an important indicator of competitive positioning. The growth of businesses is a sign of strategic competitiveness, allowing companies to capitalize on economies of scale and capture latent demand (Ismail et al., 2019). On customer satisfaction, retailers who prioritize service quality and product diversity frequently earn higher brand loyalty and market resilience (Lechner & Gudmundson, 2019). Mutinda & Njeru (2020) who established that customer happiness is a big part of how competitive a business is. Findings of this research agree with the previous research by Wanjiru & Gathogo (2021). Further, the results fit with Porter's (1985) competitive framework, which says that expanding into new markets and standing out from the competition are key parts of being competitive. These results are backed up by research. Karanja and Mwangi (2022) discovered that innovation, good customer service, and good operations management had a big effect on how competitive retail is in Kenya. In the same way, Cheruiyot and Langat (2023) found that companies focusing on product quality and the dependability services do better in the market and have a better brand reputation.

Qualitative data collected reveals a wide range of strategic practices used by large-scale retailers, which can be classified as cost leadership, operational efficiency, differentiation, market positioning, and human capital development. These findings are consistent with Porter's (1985) argument that corporations get a competitive edge via cost leadership, differentiation, or focus tactics. A sizable number of respondents emphasize cost-cutting as a competitive advantage; Bulk purchase, production in large scale, minimizing operational costs, manufacturing in big numbers to achieve economies of scale and locating facilities close to raw materials to save money on transportation. Retailers also use techniques such as giving reduced pricing on weekends, selling things at lower prices, and using price advantages to prevent competitors' market access. These techniques are consistent with traditional cost leadership tactics, in which efficiency and cost management translate into price competitiveness (Acquaah 2011; Awino et al. 2018).

Respondents also emphasized the necessity for potent cost control, efficient supply chain planning, simplified operations, reduced waste, and better time management. Well-managed cost strategies and good organizational management were emphasized as critical to long-term success. Such methods are consistent with the resource-based view (RBV), holding that internal efficiencies and process optimizations produce dependable competitive dominance (Barney, 1991; Peteraf, 1993).

While cost minimization dominated replies, distinctiveness emerged as an important competitive advantage. Respondents emphasized the importance of developing innovative and appealing items, providing high-quality offers, assuring product availability, and sustaining strong customer involvement. Excellent customer service and employee wellbeing were also emphasized, both of which are critical to encouraging client loyalty and retention. Differentiation helps companies to transcend beyond price rivalry and establish premium market positioning (Porter, 1985; Kim & Mauborgne, 2015).

The use of contemporary technology was cited as a factor that contributes to efficiency and competition. Technology improves not just manufacturing operations, but also customer involvement and supply chain coordination (Kumar et al., 2020). Embracing innovation provides adaptation in ever-changing retail contexts.

Key market techniques included comparisons to competitors, as well as the utilization of promotions and marketing campaigns. Respondents stated that delivering lower costs and attaining customer satisfaction through affordability increased competitiveness. This is consistent with competitive positioning theory, which emphasizes the necessity of benchmarking and proactive market participation (Narver & Slater, 1990).

Human elements were seen as critical to competitiveness. According to respondents, leadership motivation, the quality of leader-employee connections, and employee well-being all have an impact on organizational success. Leadership approaches foster a positive working atmosphere, which boosts productivity and service quality (Bass and Riggio, 2006).

Table 5: Coefficient of determination using SPSS version 27

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.696 ^a	.484	.473	.42532
a. Predictors: (Constant), Focus Strategy, Cost Leadership Strategy, Differentiation Strategy				
b. Dependent Variable: Competitiveness				

Source: Survey data (2025)

Table 5 summarizes results indicating that the model exhibited a correlation coefficient of R = 0.696, implying a reasonably high association among the variables and competitiveness. The R² = 0.484 implies that about 48.4% of the deviation in competitiveness is elucidated by the three strategic factors. The Adjusted R² = 0.473 shows the framework is a suitable fit, compensating for any bias from the predictors. Standard error of the estimate (0.42532) indicates a substantial dispersion of observed values relative to the regression line.

Table 6: Analysis of variance on generic strategies and competitiveness using SPSS version 27

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	
1	Regression	22.758	3	7.586	41.936	.000 ^b
	Residual	24.241	134	.181		
	Total	46.999	137			
a. Dependent Variable: Competitiveness						
b. Predictors: (Constant , Cost Leadership Strategy, Differentiation Strategy						

Source: Survey data (2025)

To ascertain whether the competitiveness of large-scale retailers in Kericho County is statistically significantly impacted by the combined influence of three generic strategies; cost leadership, focus and differentiation, the ANOVA test was implemented. The regression model is statistically significant at the 0.05 level, as evidenced by the F-value of 41.936 and a corresponding p-value of .000. This implies that the competitiveness of large-scale retailers is substantially predicted by the combined application of the three strategies. The robust overall model fit is confirmed by the fact that the likelihood of acquiring such a high F-value by arbitrary chance is less than 0.1%. The regression model is responsible for 22.758 of the totals 46.999 variance in competitiveness, as the Sum of Squares (SS) indicates. This implies that the predictors (R² = 0.484) account for nearly 48.4% of the variation in competitiveness. As a result, the incorporation of cost leadership, focus, and differentiation strategies accounts for approximately 48.4% of the competitiveness shifts experienced by large-scale retailers. The remaining 51.6% is attributable to elements not considered in the statistical model. Based on the significant ANOVA outcome, it appears that generic strategies collectively improve competitiveness. This corresponds with recent research (Mutua & Ogollah, 2019; Kariuki & Njeru, 2021; Waithaka, 2023), which underscores that the strategic integration of cost efficiency, unique product differentiation, and market focus enables organizations to improve market success and maintain a competitive position. The regression model is a suitable explanation for the competitiveness of large-scale retailers in Kericho County, as evidenced by the ANOVA results. As a result, competitiveness is significantly enhanced by the combination of differentiation, cost leadership and focus strategies. These strategies are likely to result in superior performance, sustainable growth, and consumer loyalty for retailers that strategically integrate them.

Table 7: Analysis of coefficients using SPSS version 27

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	P-value	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
1	(Constant)	.945	.294		3.217	.002
	Cost Leadership Strategy	.262	.062	.287	4.214	.000
	Differentiation Strategy	.466	.066	.517	7.058	.000
Dependent Variable: Competitiveness						

Source: Survey data (2025)

Considering findings in Table 4.8 above, the empirical model is given as.

$$\text{Competitiveness} = 0.945 + 0.262X_1 + 0.025X_2 + 0.466X_3 + \epsilon, \text{ where;}$$

$\beta_0(0.945)$ = Constant (Intercept),

X_1 = Cost Leadership Strategy,

X_2 = Differentiation Strategy,

ϵ = Error term.

Results in Table 4.8 indicates cost leadership exerts a favorable and statistically consequential influence on competitiveness ($\beta = 0.262$, $p < .001$). Each unit difference in cost leadership, leads to a 0.262-units gain in competitiveness. This indicates that optimized cost structures improve enterprises' competitive capacity in the market. The differentiation strategy poses most significant beneficial effect on competitiveness ($\beta = 0.466$, $p < .001$). One unit rise in differentiation leads in a 0.466-units increase in competitiveness, assuming all other parameter remaining constant. The elevated standardized beta (0.517) substantiates that differentiation is the paramount determinant of competitiveness among the predictors. Focus strategy exerts no statistically relevant influence on competitiveness ($\beta = 0.025$, $p = .713$). Its contribution is negligible, as indicated by the low beta value. This suggests that niche-market emphasis is not a significant determinant of competitiveness in this setting.

The regression analysis indicates that the differentiation strategy is the primary factor of competitiveness for large-scale retailers, succeeded by the cost leadership strategy. The emphasis method seems to exert minimal influence. This corresponds with modern strategic management literature, which asserts that companies in dynamic retail marketplaces attain enduring competitive advantage chiefly by providing distinctive value propositions while upholding effective cost structures (Amoako & Okpattah, 2021; Anwar & Shah, 2021). The findings suggest that large-scale shops in Kericho County ought to emphasize innovation, brand distinctiveness, and exceptional service delivery, while concurrently implementing cost efficiency strategies to maintain competitiveness.

VII. Contributions

Outcomes of this research are relevant to managers, owners & various interested parties among the large-scale retailers in Kericho County, Kenya. The findings mirror a true picture of retail sector rivalry consequently enabling investors and owners to spot prospects for lucrative investment and spur societal change. The managers of retail firms gain relevant knowledge and suitable approaches when considering Porters' generic strategies to survive in business by expanding market share, achieving customer satisfaction and attaining profitability. Results of this probe inform state agencies in formulating regulation and policy to enable a favorable environment for sustainable development by grasping factors that provide competitiveness to large-scale retailers in an industry. Findings also acquaint other players in the retail industry in developing informed tactics of dealing with competitors, suppliers and consumers for sustainable business continuity. Finally, the findings envisage to impacts academia in faculties and institutions in Kenya and beyond through providing a model to future researchers in areas of study to form a clear research foundation, broaden the research, substantiate the findings, identify gaps to be addressed and provide empirical findings in ensuing studies.

VIII. Conclusion

The findings indicated that cost leadership considerably improves competitiveness. Retailers may increase profitability, maintain competitive prices, and extend their market share by lowering input costs, leveraging economies of scale, and limiting operating expenditure. This finding supports Porter's notion that cost advantage gives a defensible position in competitive marketplaces and emphasizes the practical necessity of cost management in a country where many customers are price sensitive.

Results revealed that differentiation is the most significant driver of competitiveness. Retailers who engaged in product quality, technical innovation, branding, and distinctive customer experiences saw increased consumer satisfaction and loyalty. Differentiation had the greatest statistical impact on competitiveness, demonstrating that developing distinctive value is the most successful path to long-term success. This conclusion lends credence to the RBV, which stresses the importance of unique and inimitable resources in realizing sustainable advantage.

The results exhibited that the focus strategy had no substantial effect on competitiveness. While many merchants identified target audiences and provided various product lines, narrow geographic or demographic targeting was not widely used and did not result in demonstrable competitive advantages. This shows that in Kericho's dynamic retail environment, broad tactics that mix cost efficiency and distinction outperform narrowly targeted ones.

Research findings showed that competitiveness among large-scale retailers in Kericho County is best characterized by a blend of differentiation and low-cost, whereas focus strategies offer very minimal assistance. This result verifies and expands Porter's paradigm, demonstrating that, while all three methods are theoretically significant, their practical influence varies depending on the environment.

IX. Recommendations

Retailers should focus on making their products and services stand out. Investing in product quality, branding, technology-driven service, and new ideas should be the top priority. Retailers can keep their distinct value propositions and keep competitors from copying them by always coming up with new ideas and marketing that focus on customers. Retailers should use technology and systems that make managing the supply chain easier, cutting down on waste, and lower operating expenses. Buying in bulk, working with suppliers, and using lean management techniques can help keep costs down without hurting service quality. The research shows that companies do best when they use both cost leadership and differentiation strategy.

X. Suggestions For Further Research

Comparative studies in other counties or areas would show if the results were the same in different situations. Research on small and medium-sized stores might show the way they implement strategies. Digital transformation is changing the way stores work; therefore further research should focus on e-commerce, mobile payments, and digital marketing work with cost leadership and distinction. Longitudinal designs would show effect strategies over time, and studies of organizational culture and leadership might help in understanding the internal aspects that help or hurt plan adoption.

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