IOSR Journal Of Economics and Finance (IOSR-JEF)
e-ISSN: 2321-5933, p-ISSN: 2321-5925.Volume 17, Issue 3 Ser. 1 (May. – June. 2026), PP 47-54
www.Iosrjournals.Org

Nexus Between Process Alignment, Firm Size And Sustainable Competitive Advantage Among DT-SACCOs In Kenya.

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Abstract
Sustainable competitive advantage has been a major topic of interest among managers of both commercial and non-commercial Organizations globally. As the operating environment becomes competitive, managers faced with dwindling performance for their Organisations are concerned not just with achieving competitive advantage but sustaining the same for long term benefit and survival. This is mostly achieved through Process alignment which is the mechanism by which an organization can visualize the relationship between its business processes and strategies. It enables organizational decision makers to collect meaningful insights based on their current processes. Creating a sustainable competitive advantage is the most important goal of any Sacco's and is the most important single attribute on which each Sacco's must place its most focus. The purpose of this study was to analyze the relationship between process Alignment on Sustainability of Competitive Advantage among Deposit taking Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies in Kenya and the moderating effect of firm size on this relationship. The study was anchored on value chain analyses model. The study adopted a correlational research design where data was collected only once from the respondents by use of questionnaires from four senior managers in each of the one hundred and sixty four SACCOs involved in this study. Statistical package for social sciences (version 23) was used for data analyses. Regression was used to establish the relationship between the variables and data was presented through descriptive and inferential statistics and all ethical considerations were made. The study found that process alignment influences sustainable competitive advantage and also there was a moderate positive relationship between process alignment (r= 0.492, p=.001) and sustainable competitive advantage of SACCOs in Kenya and that sustainable competitive advantage is achieved through process alignment. Moreover, firm size was found to influence this relationship. The study recommends that SACCOs in Kenya should strategically align their processes well in order to sustain their competitive advantage and remain relevant in meeting the needs of their stakeholders.

Keywords: *process alignment, Sustainable competitive advantage, Firm size*

Date of Submission: 02-05-2026 Date of Acceptance: 12-05-2026

I. Background Of The Study

Sustainable competitive advantage, refers to the long-term benefits of implementing some unique values creating products which competitors cannot implement simultaneously, along with the inability to duplicate the benefits of this strategy (Omar Rabeea Mahdia, 2014). An organization's ability to sense and its speed of response is strategy that enables the organization to catch opportunities and avoid threats, enhancing its competitive advantage (Herrera, 2015). Source of competitive advantage is based on three dimensions: resources, distinctive capabilities and core competence (Pelc, 2014). Tangible assets are resources such as property, vehicles and machinery, which have fixed long-term capacity and are difficult to transfer for cash. However, tangible assets are not a source of competitive advantage because they are easy to be replicated and are therefore relatively imitable, substitutable and mobile. In contrast, intangible resources are the most important strategically: knowledge or information for example organizational culture, product reputation, organization brand and the perception of service quality. All of these may be transferred for a competitive advantage at any time (James Pearson, 2015); (Rohana Othman, 2015); (Ismaila, Khairy, Domila, & Isab, 2014). To gaining competitive advantage by attaining a certain level of organizational performance is the primary condition for the successful organization on long-term (Jelinkova, 2015). Several ways have been tried to make it possible by improving quality and reducing costs. Therefore, in studies of strategic management the subject of the competitive advantage is often raised, but among scholars and practitioners there were doubts about the sources of conceptualization and measurability of the competitive advantage (Sołoducho-Pelc, 2014).

Most of recent research has found a positive relationship between competitive advantage and organizational performance (Pearson, Pitfield, & Ryley, 2015).

Business sustainability of service-rendering organizations is one of the major concerns for those at managerial levels world-wide. For example, recent study conducted by (Nigel, 2016) and (Valentina & Massimo, 2016) in the service industry reveals that to remain in business, those at the managerial cadres need to be conscious of the characteristics of services in the industry and strategic alignment of management principles.

The success of cooperative organizations hinges crucially on their ability to sustain competitive advantage and achieve superior firm performance. Attainment of sustainable competitive advantage is enhanced when resources are deployed to create value for customers leading to superior performance (Almarri & Gardiner, 2014). Performance is a central issue for cooperative organizations because it would have a significant impact on their members' economy. Cooperatives must remain competitive, relevantly providing dynamic operations and deploying competitive advantage strategies and are effectively self-help organizations upholding environmental sensitivity (Leonidou, Leonidou, Fotiadis, & Zeriti, 2013). Firms can generate superior performance by implementing effective and successful strategies driven from a keen awareness and understanding of their key competitive advantage firms can generate (Jay, 1986).

Aligning Processes Formalization of operational processes is considered particularly effective in logistics cooperation. However, with well-developed processes organizations can maintain operational flexibility that influences positively their logistics performance and customer satisfaction. Process standardization fairly impacts resource optimization, hence influence operational costs. High degree of process standardization in firm routines works as a control system to perform effectively with respect to time schedules and service quality. There are several examples of process standardization in practice for example in car manufacturing, green supply chains and logistics (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014). Savings and credit cooperative societies can acquire new know-how and information by being involved in customer's business processes and executing activities jointly may increase cooperation based learning (Raue & Wieland, 2015) moreover, Organizational learning as a set of aligned processes fosters firm's knowledge resource (Sandberg & Aman, 2010).

A firm's size can be measured in terms of total number of employees, founders and contract workers in the firm (Bonaccorsi & Giannangeli, 2010). a positive relationship exists between the size of firm and its growth (Stam, Garnsey, & Heffernan, 2006). Human resources as the effective effort that can be put to work as shown by the number of people and hours of work available, the capacity of the employees to do the work as well as their productivity. Armstrong (2006) further points out that resource can be strengths or weaknesses of a firm. Just as physical resources such as raw materials, equipment and financial capacity can enhance or constrain productivity, so too can human resources practices such as training, experience and skills) (Armstrong, 2006). Large firms are seen as those that can bring market power and economies of scale, leading to improved future performance of firms. Growth of financial markets has great influence on economic growth (Rajesh Ramkumar, 2015).

Statement of the problem

Organizational cannot fully achieve their objectives without attainment of competitive advantage based on the existence of processes and not just the reliance on equipment, buildings or appliances (Stephen, 2015). Well aligned Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies have sustained competitive advantage and are overwhelmed by high levels of new customer acquisition, expansion, attraction of high caliber workforce and high rate of new service innovations while those that are not are fighting for survival with shrinking market share and high level of employee turnover to the extent of some engaging in malpractices and facing governance issues. Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies in Kenya have been adversely affected by inadequate managerial skills and knowledge (Ondieki, 2011). In a study to determine the impact of leadership, corporate governance and regulations on credit risk management of Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies in only three regions in Tanzania (Magali, 2014), study findings may not be applicable in Kenyan set up due to environmental diversity. Again this study left out other internal factors focused by this research study. This study sought to establish the relationship between process alignment and sustainable competitive advantage among deposit taking SACCOs in Kenya and the moderating effect of firm size on this relationship.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to establish the nexus between process alignment and sustainable competitive advantage among deposit taking SACCOs in Kenya and the moderating effect of firm size on this relationship.

II. Literature Review

Value chain analysis concept was introduced by (Porter, 1985) to describe all the range of activities organizations under take when producing goods and services from conception through the various stages until it reaches the final user in their respective industries. Products are assumed to gain value as they move from one player to another along the value chain (Hellin & Meijer, 2006). This approach of Value chain approach is fast emerging as a tool for business development irrespective of the sector (Gereffi & Barrientos, 2011). The main focus of interventions is on creating an inclusive value chain system in the industry among organizations. Inclusive business models or value chain are those that do not leave out or exclude small- holders (Harper & Roy, 2015). This view is also expressed by (Pastakia & Oza, 2011) where they consider inclusive value chain, as a market based arrangement that provides avenues for creating wealth for the poor through value creation by production and delivering quality products and services to the final users/customers.

To attain competitive advantage and sustain it, deposit taking Savings and credit cooperative societies in Kenya should carefully look at their value chain. They should keenly look at all the activities they engage in when serving their customers in order to create superior value and optimize their performance. Savings and credit cooperative societies have a number of processes and activities such as procurement, human resources management, marketing and sales, distribution, services, information technology and firm infrastructure. Through these activities, savings and credit cooperatives can enhance their value creation by minimizing wastage as they under take them. For instance, they can lower cost of production by using their bargaining power as customers to negotiate for lower prices of their inputs. This model of value chain is important to this study since it outlines how organizations can create value and attain competitive advantage in their respective industries.

Empirical Review

In a research study conducted in Pakistan involving three hundred and twenty companies in the telecommunication sector indicated that service quality (a measure of process alignment) should be seen and considered positively significant as a source of competitive advantage (Warraich, 2014). Moreover, a study focusing on the relationship between service quality and firm performance involving a sample of forty five telecommunication organizations in Iran was conducted and the results of the study showed a positive correlation between service quality as a measure of process alignment and firm performance (Maryam, 2014).

In another study focusing on the influence of knowledge management on manufacturing firms where it was defined as production and operational performance which was measured as flexible time, quality, cost, flexible process and customer satisfaction. The findings of the study revealed that knowledge management process alignment and other factors have direct effects and significant on manufacturing performance (Tan & Wong, 2015).

III. Methodology

This study used a correctional research design and was conducted in Kenya involving all the licensed deposit taking SACCOs which totaled to one hundred and sixty four. Data was only corrected only ones from a target population of six hundred and fifty six senior managers working in these SACCOs that were purposively sampled. SPSS version 23 was used to analyze the collected data, descriptive and inferential statistics were then used for presenting the results.

Response Rate, Reliability of Instruments and Respondent Characteristics

The study was conducted in Kenya and focused on the CEOs of all the one hundred and sixty-four licensed deposit taking savings and credit cooperative societies.

Response rate

112 of the 164 respondents who could have been the target group answered, yielding a response rate of 68.3%, which was deemed acceptable for analysis. According to Mugenda & Mugenda (2012), response rates above 50% are deemed suitable for analysis and reporting, above 60% are commonly regarded as good, and above 70% are deemed excellent. Khan (2011) offers a similar guideline, stating that a response rate of more than 70% is considered to be extremely good. Furthermore, according to Dixon and Royce A. Singleton (2012), a response rate of 50% is deemed adequate, and a rate of 70% or higher is regarded as very good. Thus, based on these suggestions, it can be inferred that the study's response rate was sufficient, boosting confidence in the study's ability to be generalized. This information served as the foundation for the analysis and findings presented in this chapter.

Reliability Assessment of Data Collection Instrument

In order to examine the different study variables, the researcher attempted to evaluate the accuracy of the data that was gathered. Evaluating the internal consistency of the data gathered through research questionnaires was the aim of the reliability evaluation process. Cronbach Alpha was calculated to gauge this and determine how reliable the data was gathered. According to George and Mallery (2003), a Cronbach Alpha score of more than 0.7 is considered adequate for reliability assessment in research studies.

Table 1: Cronbach Alpha for Reliability Assessments

Variables	Number of items	Cronbach Alpha Values
Process alignment	6	0.851
Sustainable competitive advantage	6	0.883

As can be seen in Table 1, all of the variables had Cronbach alpha values better than 0.7, including sustainable competitive advantage and process alignment. Based on the findings, it can be deduced that the assessed constructs possessed sufficient reliability for the ensuing analytical phases, since each Cronbach Alpha value exceeded 0.7. These alpha values are consistent with the reliability assessment's alpha values, which yielded a value of 0.8248, which is consistent with the study's Cronbach's Alpha value (Muna, 2012).

Respondents' characteristics

The goal of the study was to ascertain the age, gender, and educational attainment of the respondents. The findings suggest that, of the CEOs who replied, men made up 74.1% and women, 25.9%. According to this gender breakdown, there were more male CEOs than female CEOs in Kenya's deposit-taking savings and credit cooperative societies. It also suggests that this industry is more focused on men. Furthermore, 41.1% of the CEOs were older than fifty.

This indicates that the workforce of CEOs in this industry is sufficiently mature and possesses the essential expertise and exposure to propel the industry to new heights. The data also show that 42.0% of respondents had a bachelor's degree as their highest level of education. Master's degree holders made up 15.2% of the population, while Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) holders made up 1.8%.

According to reports, 41.1% of CEOs held additional credentials, such as professional qualifications and certifications, in addition to diplomas and certificates. This suggests that the respondents have a good education and are aware of the dynamics of this industry as well as the concepts of sustained competitive advantage and strategic alignment.

Firm size.

This study determined how DT-SACCOs in Kenya relate to one other in terms of strategic alignment and long-term competitive advantage. The size of the DT-SACCOs in Kenya was determined by total assets, with organizational size serving as the moderating variable in this study. According to the regulator's 2017 annual SACCO supervisory report, total assets were divided into three levels. These were the DT-SACCOs with assets over KES 5 billion, assets between KES 1 and 5 billion, and assets under KES billion. DT-SACCOs with assets above KES 5 billion were classified as large, those with an asset base between KES 1 and 5 billion as medium sized, and those with assets below KES 1 billion as small sized SACCOs, according to the research. Table 2 contains Results on the size of these DT-SACCOs.

Table 2:
Firm size

		Occurrence	Percent
Valid	Below 1 billion	67	60
	1-5 Billion	26	23
	Over Billion.	19	17
	Total	**112**	**100.0**

According to these findings, the majority of the DT-SACCOs included in this study (60%) had an asset base below KES 1 billion, placing them in the small-sized SACCO category. The remaining 23% had a total asset worth between KES 1 and 5 billion, placing them in the medium-sized SACCO category, and the remaining 17% had a net worth of assets exceeding KES 5 billion, placing them in the large-sized SACCO category.

The literature makes it clear that a company's size affects both its competitiveness and position in the market. There has been a contention that excessive specialization paralyzes small businesses, whereas larger businesses might achieve economies of scale by retaining operational specialist teams and activities (Daft, 2015).

While larger enterprises tend to become more formalized, require complex and unforeseen regulatory modalities, and have additional personnel that is specialized in tasks and units, smaller firms can behave informally and the owner can directly control practically all operations (Hernawati, 2020). Greater scale offers businesses with strong marketing departments, like banks, more revenue and market power (Jha & Malviya, 2015).

Big businesses are automated, diversified, and reliable. When demonstrated, the multifacety of a company can produce commodities with several uses and handle a multitude of tasks. Large corporations have the potential to stabilize markets for many years. Hernawati (2020) asserts that a company's size is a critical factor influencing its competitiveness and operational strategy. While some researchers contend that a firm's size has an impact on its efficacy and efficiency, others counter that it doesn't.

Influence of Process Alignment

The focus of this analysis was on determining the degree of process alignment that gives Kenyan DT-SACCOs a durable competitive edge. CEOs were asked to answer to five process alignment attributes; the examined data from the CEOs about the impact of process alignment on sustainable competitive advantage in Kenyan DT-SACCOs is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Process Alignment

Process Alignment	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
This organization has proven processes for offering services	112	3.68	.70
In this organization the processes are flexible	112	3.55	.55
This organization exercises service benchmarking	112	3.70	.81
There is timely service delivery in this organization	112	3.45	.72
This organization has a record of speedy adaptation to new processes	112	3.58	.80
Average	112	3.59	.66

Based on the findings of this study, the majority of chief executive officers concurred that DT-SACCOs in Kenya had some process alignment that contributed to their sustained competitive advantage.

The findings of Maryam et al. (2014), who looked into the connection between service quality and company performance using a sample of 45 Iranian telecom companies, corroborate these findings. According to the findings of their study, company success and service quality a metric for process alignment have a favorable relationship. It also supports the findings of Warraich et al. (2014), who conducted a study with 320 telecom businesses in Pakistan and found that an organization's ability to provide pleasant customer experiences (CA) is based on its service quality, which is a measure of process alignment.

Furthermore, out of all the process alignment elements, the one that indicates "the organization exercises service benchmarking" had the highest mean (M=3.70, SD = 0.81), indicating that it is the most important factor in maintaining DT-SACCOs' competitive advantage. Overall, this study showed that DT-SACCOs in Kenya had an average degree of process alignment (M=3.59, SD=0.66) on sustainable competitive advantage.

Sustainable competitive advantage

CEOs were questioned about six characteristics of the sustainable competitive advantage of the DT-SACCOs they represent in order to gauge the level of sustainable competitive advantage among DT-SACCOs in Kenya. Table 4 presents the results of the analysis of the CEOs' data regarding the degree of sustainable competitive advantage among Kenyan DT-SACCOs.

Table 4: Sustainable competitive advantage

Sustainable Competitive Advantage	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
There is effective supply chain management in this organization	112	3.46	.55
There is high rate of service differentiation in this organization	112	3.31	.69
There is high rate of service innovation in this organization	112	3.06	.87
This is high rate of responsiveness in this organization	112	3.11	.60
This organization has economies of scale	112	3.65	.66
There is cost leadership in this organization	112	3.62	.48
Average	112	3.37	.38

These findings demonstrate that businesses that maintain their competitive advantage benefit greatly from economies of scale, as seen by the fact that this characteristic had the highest mean score (M = 3.65, SD = 0.66). The study concluded that DT-SACCOs in Kenya had a moderate sustainable competitive advantage (M= 3.37, SD =.38) based on these findings.

Relationship between Process alignment and Sustainable Competitive Advantage

Following the successful completion of normality tests for the variable distribution, correlation analysis was performed to examine the potential association between process alignment and sustainable competitive advantage. The bivariate correlation results between process alignment and the sustained competitive advantage of Kenyan credit cooperative societies and deposit taking savings are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Bivariate Correlation analysis results

		SCA	Process Alignment	Deductions
SCA	Correlation Coefficient (Spearman's rho)	1.000	.492	Positive
	Sig. (P-Value)	.	.000	Reject H_o
Process Alignment	Correlation Coefficient	.492	1.000	Positive
	Sig. (P-Value)	.000	.	Reject H_o

A null and alternate hypotheses were investigated in order to determine the association between process alignment and sustained competitive advantage among DT-SACCOs in Kenya.

The alternative hypothesis, which proposed a relationship between process alignment and SCA among DT-SACCOs in Kenya, was compared to the null hypothesis, which suggested no such relationship.

Table 5's results show a moderately favorable association coefficient of 0.492, which is statistically significant at $p<0.05$. Based on these findings, the researcher decided to adopt the alternative hypothesis that there is a relationship between process alignment and sustained competitive advantage among Kenyan DT-SACCOs instead of the null hypothesis. This indicates that, generally speaking, among Kenyan DT-SACCOs, process alignment is positively correlated with sustained competitive advantage. This outcome is consistent with that of Maryam et al. (2014), who employed a sample of 45 Iranian telecommunications companies to examine the relationship between service quality and company performance. The results showed that there is a favorable correlation between company performance and service quality, which is a gauge of process alignment.

The findings also support those of Warraich et al. (2014), who conducted a study with 320 telecom companies in Pakistan and found that service quality a measure of process alignment should be viewed favorably as the cornerstone of competitive advantage. It also corresponds with the findings of a research study by Benner and Tushman (2015), which sought to ascertain how companies foster a culture of learning and align processes in order to develop dynamic capabilities. They concerned two crucial business factors (learning-oriented company culture and process alignment). According to their findings, corporate dynamic capacities and performance were significantly enhanced by organizational process alignment and an organizational culture of learning.

The investigation's findings provide empirical support for the notion that, in order to advance corporate vivacious capacities and produce healthy performance, process management should be linked against corporate contextual circumstances. These findings imply that DT-SACCO management in Kenya can adopt business strategies that increase value, reduce waste, and help them establish and maintain a competitive edge. By demonstrating the significance of the deposit taking SACCO operations described in the value chain analysis and the potential for value creation, these results advance our existing understanding.

Moderating effect of firm size

To determine the extent to which each firm size category (Small, medium and large) moderates the relationship between process alignment and sustainable competitive advantage in DT-SACCOs in Kenya, multi-moderation regression analysis was carried out. The study examined the moderating influence of firm size on the relationship between strategic alignment and sustainable competitive advantage. The results showed that firm size significantly ($P<0.05$) moderates the relationship between process alignment and sustainable competitive advantage among deposit taking savings and credit cooperative societies, with a R square change of 0.048 from 0.410 to 0.458. The inclusion of an interaction factor in the model resulted in a 6.7% improvement in R square (change R square =.067, $P<0.05$). This suggests that the relationship between process alignment and Sustainable Competitive advantage among DT-SACCOs in Kenya is moderated by company size.

IV. Conclusion

Majority of the chief executive officers agreed that there was an extent of process alignment on sustainable competitive advantage in DT-SACCOs in Kenya. Moreover, the aspect of "the organization exercises service benchmarking" scored the highest mean (M=3.70, SD = 0.81) among the other aspects of

process alignment meaning that it the most vital aspect in sustaining competitive advantage among DT-SACCOs. In general, this research revealed existence of average extent of process alignment (M=3.59, SD=0.66) on sustainable competitive advantage in DT-SACCOs in Kenya.

This study found a positive relationship ($r=0.492$, $p< 0.05$) between Process alignment and sustainable competitive advantage among DT-SACCOs in Kenya. This meant that on overall, process alignment was positively related to sustainable competitive advantage among DT-SACCOs in Kenya. Firm size was found to have a moderating influence on the association amid strategic alignment and sustainable competitive advantage among DT-SACCOs in Kenya. This is because there was R square change of .048 from .410 to .458 when size of the firm as a moderator was launched in the equation. From the results it was found that Small size firms moderates the relationship between process alignment and sustainable competitive advantage among DT-SACCOs in Kenya more than medium and large size firms. This is because the R square change for small size (0.065) is greater than the R square change for medium size firms (0.023) and large size firms (0.022).

V. Recommendations

Organizational processes are very key and important to firms, thus, Management of DT-SACCOs should purpose to align their internal processes by adopting best industry practices such as service bench marking and others that can minimize lead time during service delivery, with this, savings and credit cooperative societies will be effective and efficient and therefore end up sustaining their competitive advantage.

Size of the firm whether small medium or large determines a lot as far as organizational success is concerned. Therefore, Management of DT-SACCOs in Kenya should be concerned with their firm size since it matters a lot in enhancing them to sustain their competitive advantage. They should ensure that their savings and credit cooperative societies do not over expand since too much growth in size can lead to inefficiencies and wastage leading to competitive disadvantage as shown by the moderating effects where the model fit kept decreasing as the size increased.

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