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Operational Excellence and Sustainable Competitive Advantage in the Telecommunications Industry, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the Study: This study was to examine the relationship between operational excellence and sustainable competitive advantage in the telecommunication industry in Kenya.

Statement of the problem: The telecommunications industry in Kenya is a highly competitive and rapidly evolving sector. As technology advances and consumer demands increase, telecommunications companies face significant pressure to maintain operational excellence while achieving a sustainable competitive advantage. This research sought to examine how operational excellence can be leveraged to create and sustain a competitive advantage in the Kenyan telecommunications industry.

Research Methodology: This study embraced a cross-sectional design with a targeted population of 540 respondents across the telecommunication industry from which a research sample of 162 was selected. Data collection used questionnaires and desktop research to provide primary and secondary data respectively Descriptive statistics was employed in analysis of quantitative while the relationship between the variables was analysed using multiple regression. Research findings were presented using charts and tables.

Results of the study: The study results indicated that operational excellence has a substantial influence on sustainable competitive advantage, as evidenced by the high average score of 4.805 and the significant regression coefficient of 0.621.

Conclusion: The study results suggests that improvements in operational excellence are strongly associated with enhancements in competitive advantage within the telecommunications industry in Kenya

Recommendations: The study recommends telecommunication companies should focus on achieving operational excellence to considerably boost in their competitive advantage and long-term success.

Keywords: Operational Excellence, Competitive Positioning, Telecommunications Industry

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The telecommunications industry plays a crucial role in a country's economic development, providing essential communication services that support various sectors including finance, education, and healthcare. Over the past decade, the industry has witnessed rapid growth and transformation driven by technological advancements and increasing consumer demand for high-quality, reliable communication services. This growth has intensified competition among telecommunications companies, prompting them to seek strategies that not only enhance their operational performance but also secure a sustainable competitive advantage in the market (Davis, 2019).

Similar fit has been witnessed in Kenyan telecommunications industry which is characterized by its dynamic and competitive nature. Major players such as Safaricom, Airtel Kenya, and Telkom Kenya dominate the market, each striving to outperform the others through strategic initiatives aimed at enhancing operational efficiency and achieving a sustainable competitive edge. Despite the significant progress made, many companies still face challenges in aligning their operational strategies with long-term sustainability goals (Gatobu & Maende, 2019).

As such operational excellence has emerged as a key strategic priority for telecommunications firms aiming to improve efficiency, reduce costs, and deliver superior customer service. It involves optimizing business processes, leveraging advanced technologies, and fostering a culture of continuous improvement. Achieving operational excellence requires a holistic approach that integrates various aspects of the business, from supply chain management to customer engagement. Sustainable competitive advantage, on the other hand, refers to a firm's ability to maintain a superior position in the market over the long term. It is achieved through unique value propositions that are difficult for competitors to replicate. In the telecommunications industry,

sustainable competitive advantage can be derived from various sources including innovative product offerings, strong brand reputation, customer loyalty, and regulatory compliance (Farhiya, 2015).

Operational excellence is a widely studied concept in management literature, often associated with practices that enhance efficiency and effectiveness in business operations. According to Slack, Chambers, and Johnston (2020), operational excellence involves the systematic management of operational processes to achieve high levels of performance. In the telecommunications industry, operational excellence is critical for managing complex networks, ensuring service reliability, and meeting customer expectations (Davis, 2019).

Several studies have highlighted the importance of technological innovation in achieving operational excellence. For instance, Gupta and Gupta (2021) argue that the adoption of advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence and machine learning can significantly improve operational efficiency by automating routine tasks and providing real-time data for decision-making. In the context of the Kenyan telecommunications industry, technology adoption is essential for managing network infrastructure and delivering high-quality services to customers.

Customer satisfaction is another crucial component of operational excellence. Research by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (2018) indicates that companies that prioritize customer needs and continuously seek feedback are more likely to achieve higher levels of customer satisfaction and loyalty. This is particularly relevant in the telecommunications industry, where service quality and reliability are key determinants of customer satisfaction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Literature Review

This study was grounded on the Resource-Based View (RBV). Originally coined by Wernerfelt (1984), the Resource-Based View (RBV) stipulates that a firm's internal resources and capabilities are key competitive edge determinants amid turbulent, evolving business landscapes. As Papula and Volna (2013) state, RBV posits that leveraging assets, competencies, processes, and resource substitutes can create firm-specific core competencies over rivals. Additionally, Raduan et al. (2009) argue assessing competitive advantage via RBV allows capitalization of internal capability strengths to enable sustainable dominance. In essence, this seminal theory underscores company resources and strengths as the wellspring for gaining lasting superior performance in disruptive external environments through bespoke value harnessing.

Barney & Hesterly (2012) state that sustainable competitive advantage hinges on costly-to-imitate strategic resources. Such differentiating resources must be valuable, rare, non-imitable and non-substitutable. Valuable resources enable cost reduction or revenue growth. Rare resources are only held by a few capable firms. Imperfect imitability means rivals cannot duplicate the resources. Finally, organizational capability involves fully leveraging the competitive potential of resources for advantage. In essence, the inimitable value of certain exclusive, specialized and strategically activated resources and capabilities makes competitive duplication impossible, thereby sustaining superior firm performance in the long-term.

The RBV relies on two major assumptions in explaining how the resources of a firm can be employed in generating SCA. First, this model assumes that the resources owned by firms are heterogeneous, that is, firms possess different resources even though they may be operating within the same industry. This implies that the uniqueness of certain resources owned by a firm makes them more skilled in accomplishing certain activities thus having a competitive edge (Peteraf & Barney, 2003). Secondly is the resource immobility assumption which assumes that resources are immobile thus allowing the benefits from received from heterogeneous resources by a firm to persist over time due to difficulty in resource trading across firms within the industry.

Hence a firm's sustainable competitive advantage is derived from its ability to acquire and manage valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resources (Barney, 1991). In the context of the telecommunications industry, companies that effectively leverage their technological resources, skilled workforce, and innovative capabilities are more likely to achieve operational excellence and, consequently, a sustainable competitive advantage. According to recent studies, the RBV theory emphasizes the importance of internal capabilities and resources in driving performance improvements (Wernerfelt, 2021).

The RBV theory is relevant to this study as it highlights the importance of organizational resources in achieving sustainable competitive advantage. The theory suggests the strategy of a firm depends on the resources that it owns which are a source of organization capability.

Empirical literature review

Operational excellence is a strategy that focuses on processes within a firm with the aim on improving quality of products and or services which results in customer satisfaction. It involves continuous improvement of the processes to increase efficiency and effectiveness of a firm thus achieving better results. The analysis of operational excellence entails analysis of how well new products are designed, delivery of the product to the market, technological support, efficiency of internal processes, cost management mechanisms, distribution network management, and customer experience management. This can result to a firm attaining and sustaining a competitive advantage.

Mutisya (2015) assessed the sustainable competitive advantage of Safaricom Kenya based on a strategic innovation approach was conducted by Mutisya (2015). The research adopted a case study design using one-on-one interviews with the company's top management who were the respondents. Data collected was analyzed using content analysis. The conclusion of the study was that optimization of strategic innovation by Safaricom Limited for its customers in relation to business indicators based on continuous surveys has enabled the company to attain a competitive edge in the telecommunication industry.

Nyaberi & Machuka (2019) reviewed the impact of strategic positioning in achieving sustainable competitive advantage. The study concept underpins Michael Porter's Theory of Competitive Advantage which opines that a firm needs a relatively attractive position and industry structure for it to be successful. The study argues that organizational strategies are key to aligning the organization to its external environment. The study concludes that organizations gains sustainable competitive advantage which assists it to outshine its competitors when it acquires and or burgeons an attribute(s) which places the organization ahead of competition. They posit that positioning increases an organization's market share, shareholder value, profits, and customer satisfaction through sustainable competitive advantage

Table 1: Summary of Literature and Knowledge Gaps

Author (s) Name (s)	**Purpose**	**Research Gaps**	**Focus on current research**
M'Kuma, Kinyua & Kariuki (2020)	Examined strategic positioning in the telecommunications industry in Kenya in relation to organizational assets	The study focussed on the role of organizational assets which is only one indicator of strategic positioning.	The study will additional indicators of strategic positioning which enable achievement of sustainable competitive advantage.
Mutisya (2015)	Determined Safaricom's sustainable competitive advantage based on a strategic innovation approach	The study focused only on strategic innovation as the only source of sustainable competitive advantage	The study will focus on additional strategies for achieving sustainable competitive advantage
Milao (2018)	Analysed the competitive determinants of the organization in achieving competitive advantage in the telecommunications industry in Kenya.	The study focused on competitive determinants to achieving competitive advantage.	This study will focus on achieving sustainable competitive advantage using competitive determinants for strategic positioning.
Rajkumar & Abraham (2018).	Examined the growth of an industry based on strategic positioning and sustainable competitive advantage	The research focused on marketing of products and services in attaining a competitive edge by a firm.	The study will focus on the importance of positioning strategies in achieving sustainable competitive advantage for a firm
Njuguna (2009)	Explored how organizational learning coupled with strategic positioning can lead to sustainable competitive advantage.	The study posits that organizational learning develops organizational resources and capabilities which lead to sustainable competitive advantage.	The study will seek to enhance understanding of how organizational learning can lead to attaining and sustaining sustainable competitive advantage.
Nyaberi & Machuka (2019)	Reviewed strategic positioning for sustainable competitive advantage based on the theoretical and empirical literature	The study focused on strategic positioning for achieving competitive advantage.	The study will strive to examine the role of positioning strategies to achieving sustainable competitive advantage by a firm

The relationship between dependent and independent variables was represented in a conceptual framework as in Figure 1.0

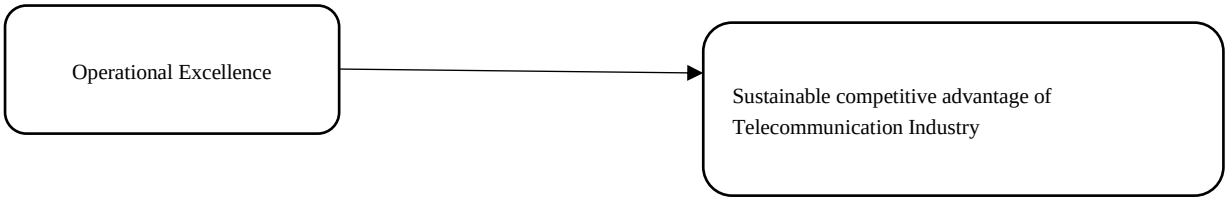


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Table 2 below illustrates how the study variables was operationalized.

Table 1: Operationalization of Variable

Variable	Indicators	Type of analysis	Measurement of Scale
		Descriptive	
	•Continuous improvement		
	•Strategic leadership		
	•Creativity & innovation		
Operational Excellence	Legal compliance		Likert Scale

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study embraced a cross-sectional design to determine the operational excellence practices employed by telecommunication firms to achieve a sustainable competitive edge. In essence, the cross-sectional approach allowed the research to take a snapshot of the positional strategies that Kenyan telecom companies are adopting to gain enduring advantage against rivals. The target population comprised of employees across the four major mobile telecoms i.e., Safaricom, Airtel,

Telkom and Finserve (Equitel) from which with a sample size of 162 respondents was selected for this research study.

Data for the study was collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data was collected using self-administered questionnaires with closed and open-ended questions. These questionnaires included a five-point Likert scale to measure respondents' agreement with certain phenomena. A pilot study was carried out on 10 respondents from the mobile telephony companies to fine-tune the questionnaire and ensure its reliability and validity.

The research instruments' validity was guaranteed by consulting experts in the relevant field to evaluate the suitability of the questions and make necessary modifications. Reliability was tested using Cronbach's alpha, revealing that the questionnaires used in the study had a high reliability level with a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.847. Trained research assistants conducted data collection by distributing and gathering questionnaires from the women's group members. Informed consent was obtained from participants, and the researcher stressed that participation was voluntary, ensuring confidentiality, privacy, and anonymity of their responses.

The process of data analysis followed a series of 5 steps namely organization and preparation of the raw data for analysis, coding and describing the data, identification, classification and categorization of the key themes and concepts, connecting, and interrelating the data and finally data interpretation in relation with the objectives of study. Descriptive statistics was employed in analysis of quantitative while the relationship between the variables was analysed using multiple regression.

Ethical considerations were paramount, and the researcher ensured adherence to research ethics standards, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring voluntary participation, and maintaining confidentiality, privacy, and anonymity.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Response Rate

The study targeted a total of 162 respondents from the administered questionnaires. 110 respondents managed to fill and return the questionnaires while 52 questionnaires were not returned. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Response Rate

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Response Rate	110	68
Non-Response Rate	52	32
Total	**162**	**100**

Source: Research, 2023

The study had a response rate of 68% with an indication that 32% of the respondents did not participate in the research. A response rate of about 70 % is good enough for examination and reporting (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2013).

Reliability Test

Taherdoost (2016) states that the major reason for conducting a reliability test is to eliminate and or minimize errors and biasness of the data collection instrument. The researcher administered the questionnaire with the help of research assistants to 17 respondents across the four major telcos. This represents 10% of the selected sample size who were excluded from the final research study. The result of the pilot study is shown in Table 4

Table 4 Reliability Test

Variables	Cronbach Alpha	Number of Items
Customer Intimacy	0.877	4
Operational Excellence	0.895	4
Product & Service Leadership	0.848	4
Organizational Resources	0.768	4
Overall Statistics	**0.847**	

Source: Primary Data 2023

Taherdoost (2017) states that Alpha coefficient of >0.7 is an acceptable test of reliability. The overall Cronbach Alpha of 0.847 indicates that the questionnaires with the variables meet the reliability test.

Gender of the Respondents

The study sought information regarding personal characteristics of the respondents in terms of sex. The results are shown in Table 5

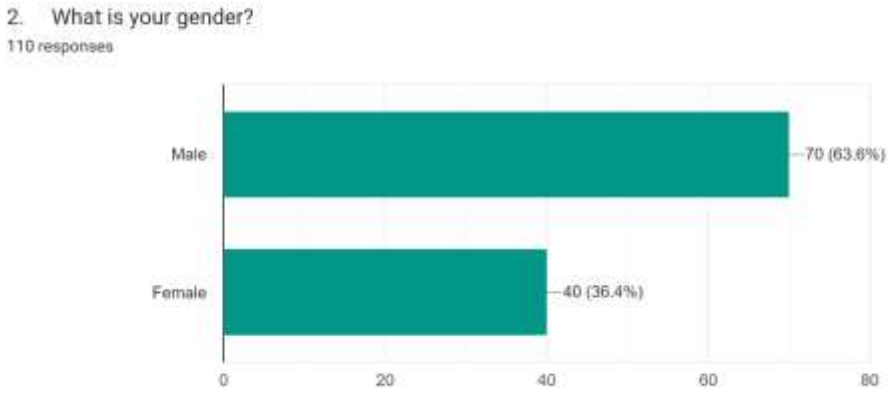
Table 5 Gender of the Respondents

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	70	64
Female	40	36
Total	**110**	**100**

Source: Primary Data, 2023

The study sought to find out how the respondents are distributed across the organizations with regard to gender. Study results indicate that 64% of the respondents were male while 36% were female.

Figure 1 Gender of the Respondents



Age of the Respondents

The study to examine the age of the respondents and the results are shown in Table 6

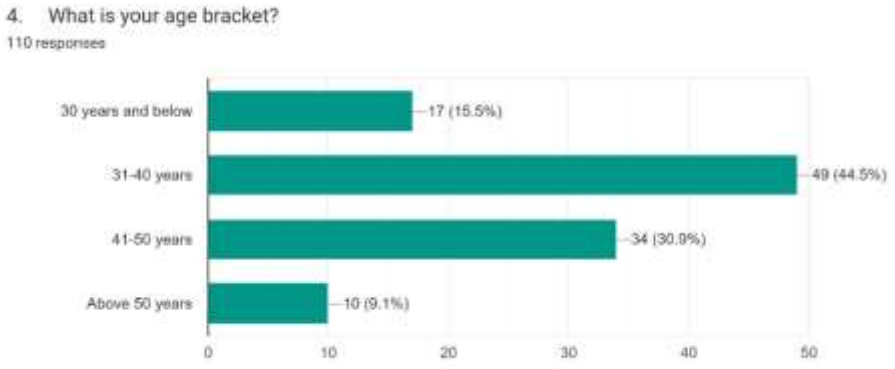
Table 6 Age of the Respondents

Age	Frequency	Percentage (%)
30 years & below	17	15
31-40 years	49	45
41-50 Years	34	31
Above 50 years	10	9
Total	**110**	**100**

Source: Primary Data, 2023

The study results indicate that 15% of the respondents are below 30years of age, 45% were aged between 31-40 years, 31% were aged between 41-50 years and 9% above 50 years. Majority of the respondents are between 31-40 years of age (45%).

Figure 2 Age of the Respondents



Highest Level of Education

The study sought to know the highest level of education of the respondents. The results are shown in Table 7

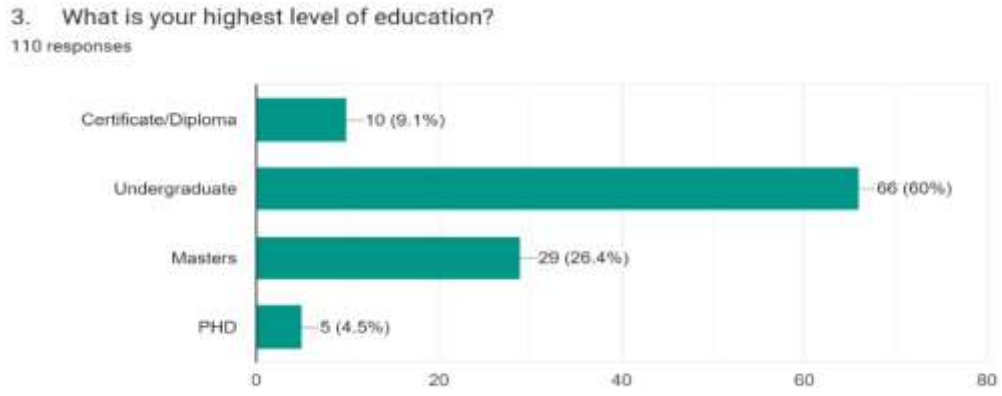
Table 7 Level of Education of the Respondents

Level of Education	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Certificate/Diploma	10	9
Undergraduate	66	60
Masters	29	26
PHD	5	5
Total	**110**	**100**

Source: Primary Data, 2023

The study results indicate that 60% of the respondents have undergraduate level of education, 26% are master level holders, 9% are certificate/diploma level holders while 5% have PHD qualifications. This shows that the respondents have invested in personal growth and development which in turn impacts their organizations.

Figure 2 Level of Education of the Respondents



Level of Management of Respondents

The study intended to know the level of management of the respondents. The results are shown in Table 8

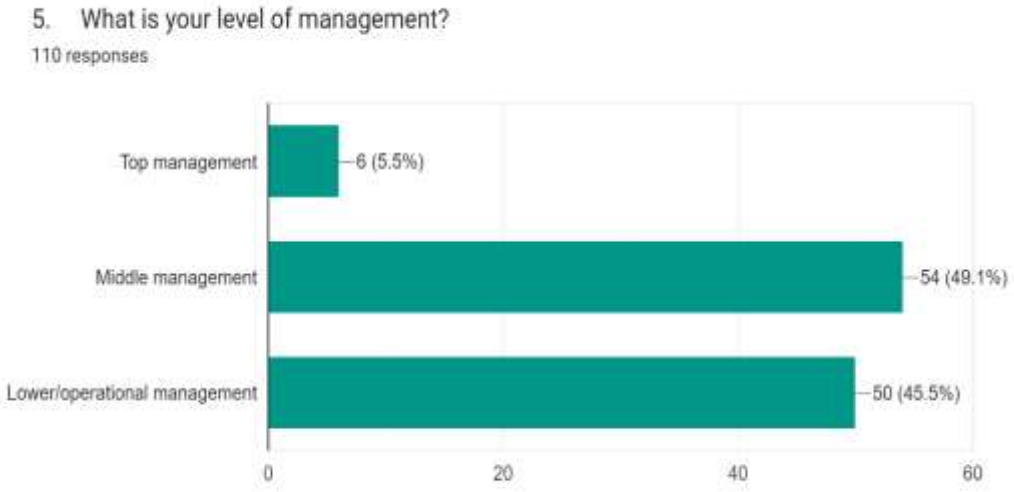
Table 8 Level of Management

Level of Management	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Top Management	6	6
Middle Management	54	49
Lower Management	50	45
Total	**110**	**100**

Source: Primary Data, 2023

The study sought to understand the level of understanding of the respondents on matter strategic positioning and sustainable competitive advantage at the different levels of management. The results indicated 49% of the respondents were operational level employees, 46% at middle level and 5% were top level management.

Figure 3 Level of Management



Length of Service

The study sought to know the length of service of the respondents in the industry. The results are shown in Table 9

Table 4. 1 Length of Service in Industry

Length of Service	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Below 5 years	15	14
6-10 years	44	40
11-20 years	29	26
Above 21 years	22	20
Total	**110**	**100**

Source: Primary Data, 2023

The results show that 40% of the respondents have been in the telecommunications industry between 6-10 years, 26% 11-20 years, 20% above 21 years and 14% below 5 years.

Descriptive Analysis

To establish the relationship between operational excellence and sustainable competitive advantage, the study employed the use of mean and standard deviation in response analysis. A Likert scale was used for scoring the responses form the respondents on a scale of 1 to 5, where 5 – Strong1y Agree, 4 – Agree, 3 – Don't Know, 2 – Disagree and 1 – Strongly Disagree.

Operational Excellence and Sustainable Competitive Advantage

The study sought to determine the effect of operational excellence on sustainable competitive advantage. The results are shown in Table 10

Table 10 Operational Excellence and Sustainable Competitive Advantage

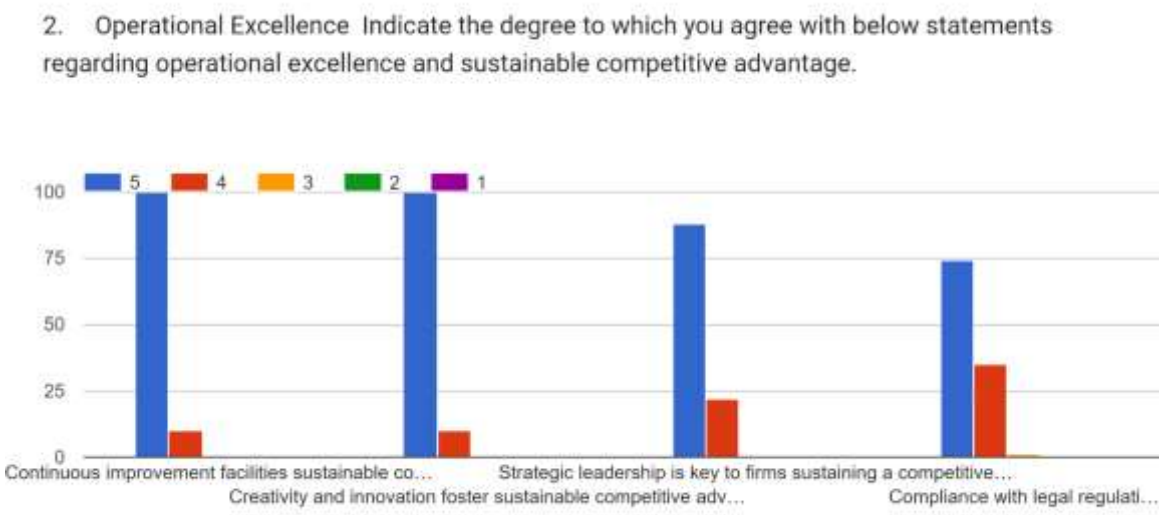
Statement	Mean	Std. Dev.
Continuous improvement facilities sustainable competitive advantage	4.900	.289
Creativity and innovation foster sustainable competitive advantage	4.900	.289
Strategic leadership is key to firms sustaining a competitive advantage	4.782	.402
Compliance with legal regulations impacts sustainable competitive advantage	4.636	.494

Source: Primary Data, 2023

Respondents indicated that continuous improvement with a mean of 4.900 and standard deviation of 0.289 facilitates sustainable competitive advantage and innovation and creativity fosters sustainable competitive advantage with a mean of 4.900 and standard deviation of 0.289. Strategic leadership with a mean of 4.782 and standard deviation of 0.402 is key to achieving sustainable competitive advantage while compliance with all legal regulations with a mean of 4.636 and standard deviation of 0.494 impacts sustainable competitive advantage. The results show that operational excellence significantly affects sustainable competitive advantage of firms in the telecommunications industry in Kenya with and overall men of 4.805 and standard deviation of 0.369.

The results are supported by Mugo and Macharia (2021) state that innovation of market distribution channels significantly influences the competitive advantage of firms in the telecommunication industry in Kenya. Ngogoyo and Okello (2017) posit that strategic decision making enhances the performance of firms in the telecommunications industry in Kenya. Mugo & Namada (2020) posit that firms in the telecommunication industry should adopt process innovation to provide optimum return for competitive advantage.

Figure 5 Operational Excellence and Sustainable Competitive Advantage



Regression Coefficients of the Relationship between Operational Excellence and Sustainable Competitive Advantage.

		Unstandardized Coefficients		**Standardized Coefficients**		
Model		**B**	**Std. Error**	**Beta**	**t**	**Sig.**
1	Constant	1.049	.219		2.180	.038
	Operational Excellence	0.621	.121	.129	.844	.025

Source: Primary Data, 2023

The optimal regression equation was:

Sustainable Competitive Advantage =1.049 + 0.621Operational Excellence.

The study findings established that taking all factors into account, at zero the effect of strategic positioning on sustainable competitive advantage will be 1.049. The findings presented also show that a unit increase in operational excellence will lead to a 0.621(62.1%) increase in the scores of strategic positioning on sustainable competitive advantage. Operational excellence was found to be significant (p = 0.025). This thus indicates that this relationship is statistically significant, suggesting that improvements in operational excellence are likely to have a substantial positive impact on achieving and maintaining a competitive edge in the market.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study also concludes that firms in the telecommunication industry must foster operational excellence in the processes to ensure they gain and sustain competitive advantage. Continuous improvement of process and service delivery, fostering creativity and innovation, ensuring compliance with all regulatory requirements, and providing strategic leadership is key to achieving sustainable competitive advantage.

The study also recommends the adherence to operational excellence by firms in the telecommunication industry to ensure effective and efficient provision of services to customers through continuous improvement and innovations to sustain competitive advantage

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