



Customer Intimacy Sustainable Competitive Advantage in the Telecommunications Industry, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research was to investigate the role of customer intimacy in achieving sustainable competitive advantage within the telecommunications industry in Kenya.

Statement of the problem: In the highly competitive telecommunications industry in Kenya, companies are constantly seeking ways to differentiate themselves and secure a sustainable competitive advantage. Customer intimacy, which involves creating deep, personalized relationships with customers, has emerged as a critical strategy for achieving long-term success. Despite its potential, many telecommunications companies in Kenya struggle to effectively implement customer intimacy practices and fully understand their impact on sustainable competitive advantage. This research aims to address this gap by exploring the role of customer intimacy in enhancing competitive positioning 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 customer centricity has significant impact on sustainable competitive advantage of firms in the telecommunication industry in Kenya with an overall mean of 4.773 and 0.413 coefficient.

Conclusion: Customer centricity is essential in ensuring customers feel 'intimate' with the organization thus enhancing the firm's sustainable competitive advantage.

Recommendations: The study suggests that telecommunications firms should focus on meeting and surpassing customer expectations by building trust and commitment, offering prompt customer service, understanding customer needs, and incorporating customer journey maps into their planning.

Keywords: Customer intimacy, Customer-centric strategy, Telecommunications Industry

1.0 INTRODUCTION

With the world becoming a global village due to globalization, the business environment has become highly dynamic, turbulent, multifaceted, and competitive that only the 'strongest' of firms survive (Pollalis, 2014). For firms to maneuver the unpredictable and highly competitive business environment, the management of firms must be adept at understanding the pressures from the external environment which might affect their businesses and influence their strategy. The need to align organisations with their external environment has created the need for strategy (Nyaberi & Machuki, 2019). For any business to succeed strategy plays an important role. According to Mugo & Macharia (2021) the failure or success of firms depend on their ability to position themselves and compete in the tough market environment. They posit that competitive advantage translates into market leadership if sustained by a firm as long as they can maintain the rarity of the assets and attributes that provide that competitiveness.

In a highly competitive market like telecommunications, achieving sustainable competitive advantage is crucial for long-term success. Sustainable competitive advantage allows companies to outperform their competitors by offering unique value propositions that are difficult for others to replicate (Porter, 1996).

Customer intimacy refers to a strategy where companies focus on building strong relationships with their customers, understanding their needs deeply, and tailoring products and services to meet those needs effectively (Treacy & Wiersema, 1993). It goes beyond traditional customer service by integrating customer insights into the core business strategy. By leveraging data analytics and customer relationship management (CRM) systems, telecom companies

can gain actionable insights into customer behavior and preferences (Payne & Frow, 2005). This enables them to anticipate customer needs and deliver personalized experiences that enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty.

In the telecommunications sector, customer intimacy can differentiate a company by offering personalized services, superior customer support, and customized solutions that enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty (Rust et al., 2004). For instance, companies like Vodafone and Verizon have implemented customer intimacy strategies by leveraging data analytics to personalize customer experiences and anticipate their needs (Gupta & Lehmann, 2006).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Literature Review

This study was grounded on Porter's Five Forces Theory. Porter (1980) developed a framework that can be used to analyze the levels of competition in an industry for purposes of strategic planning. According to Albrecht Enders, et al., (2009) the framework helps in the analysis of the industry to explore factors or forces that influence and determine profitability of the industry. They posit that the framework can be used to strengthen company performance, measure the industry's competitive nature, and develop corporate strategies to enable a firm position itself within the industry. Johnson et al (2008, 2020) posit that Porter's five forces model is a tool that can be used for the identification of certain powers in line with a particular business situation by using the outside-in perspective.

The model focuses on five forces that shape the competition within an industry: (a) the threat of new entry, (b) the threat of substitutes, (c) the bargaining power of buyers, (d) the bargaining power of suppliers, and (e) the extent of rivalry between competitors within an industry (Porter, 1980). Porter argues that an organization can generate generic competitive strategies to enable it to position itself well within the industry (Porter, 2008). Brujil (2018) argue that technological advancements and a shift in strategic thinking has created a shift in Porter's five forces thinking to seeking innovative markets as opposed to competing in an already existing competitive environment. The telecommunications environment in Kenya is highly competitive with all players striving to gain market share which has for a long time been dominated by Safaricom. This theory will be of relevance to the study considering that competition forces players in an industry to strategically position themselves compared to competition to survive.

Empirical literature review

With the increasing sophistication and ever-changing needs and wants of customers, firms have to tailor make their products and services to satisfy and exceed the demands of their customers. Osei (2017) states that customer intimacy involves a clear understanding of a firm's customers, their needs and wants, and working towards meeting the same which involves having a two-way communications with the customers. The end goal is to create a satisfied customer and improving customer relationship between the firm and the customer thus enhancing customer retention. Customer intimacy also results in customer loyalty which enhances the growth and profitability of a firm (Osei, 2017). Sustainable competitive advantage is directly linked to customer intimacy as customers are key to the success of a firm owing to proper account management and customer experience (Haltia, 2021). The enhancement of the customer centric business model is key to sustaining a competitive edge.

A research to analyze the competitive determinants of firms in achieving competitive advantage in the telecommunications sector in Kenya was carried out by Milao (2018). The study targeted a population of 90 leaders at Safaricom Limited. A pilot test was done data was collected using questionnaires. Internal consistency among variables was evaluated using validity and reliability test. Respectively, the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data was done using SPSS and content analysis. The research concluded that organizations should pay special attention to the major competitive advantage determinant factors including innovation, staff training, customer orientation and stakeholder involvement.

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

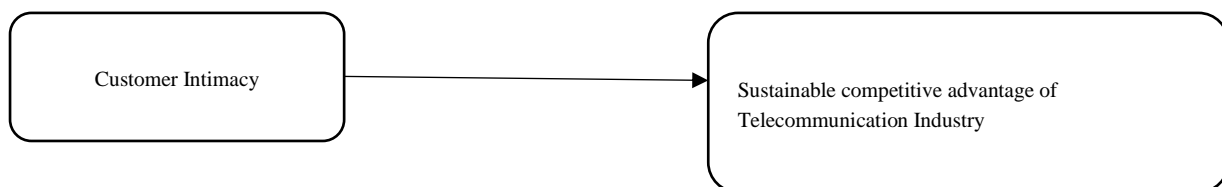


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Table 2 below illustrates how the study variables was operationalized.

Table 1: Operationalization of Variable

Variable	Indicators	Type of analysis	Measurement of Scale
Customer intimacy	•Trust & commitment	Descriptive	Likert Scale
	•Customer centricity		
	•Prompt customer service		
	•Customer journey map		

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 Fin serve (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

Source: Primary Data 2023

Taherdoost (2017) states that Alpha coefficient of >0.7 is an acceptable test of reliability. The overall Cronbach Alpha of 0.877 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

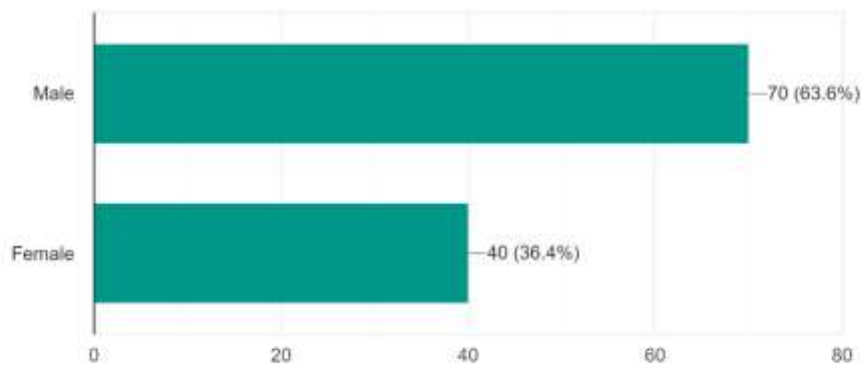
Source: Primary Data, 2023

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

2. What is your gender?

110 responses

**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

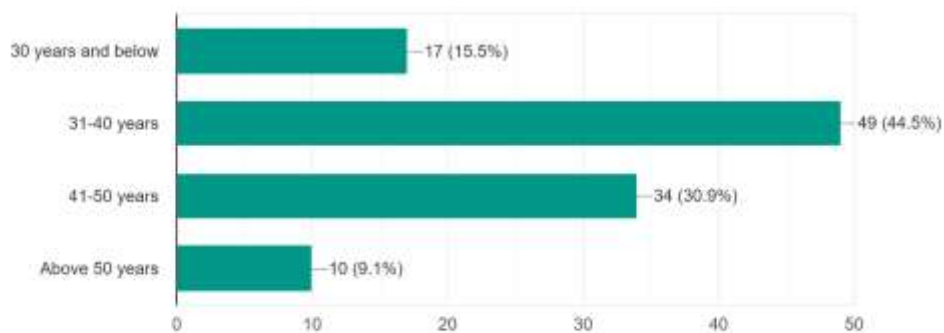
Source: Primary Data, 2023

The study results indicate that 15% of the respondents are below 30 years 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

4. What is your age bracket?

110 responses

**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

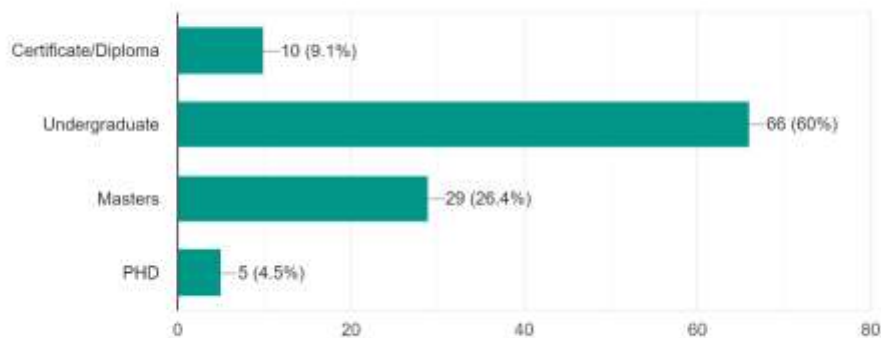
Level of Education	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Certificate/Diploma	10	9
Undergraduate	66	60
Masters	29	26
PHD	5	5
Total	110	100

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

3. What is your highest level of education?
110 responses



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

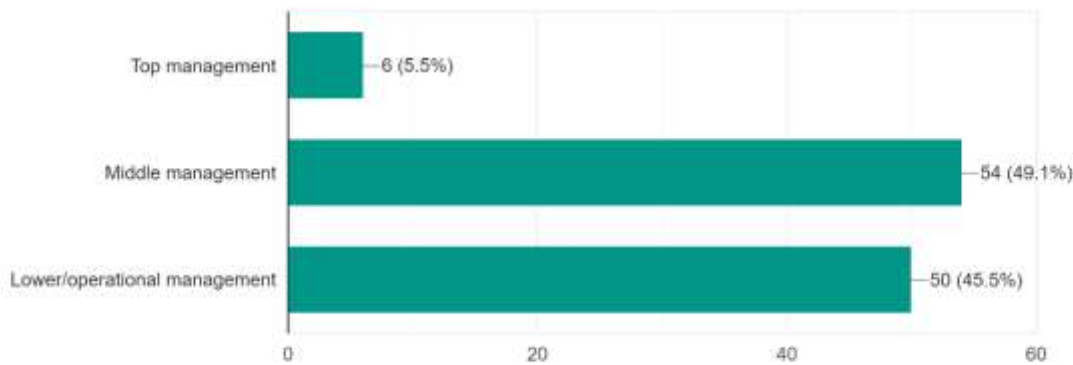
Source: Primary Data, 2023

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

5. What is your level of management?

110 responses



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 9 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 customer intimacy 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 from the respondents on a scale of 1 to 5, where 5 – Strongly Agree, 4 – Agree, 3 – Don't Know, 2 – Disagree and 1 – Strongly Disagree.

Customer Intimacy and Sustainable Competitive Advantage

The study sought to evaluate the effect of customer intimacy on sustainable competitive advantage in the telecommunication industry in Kenya. The outcome is presented in Table 10

Table 10 Customer Intimacy and Sustainable Competitive Advantage

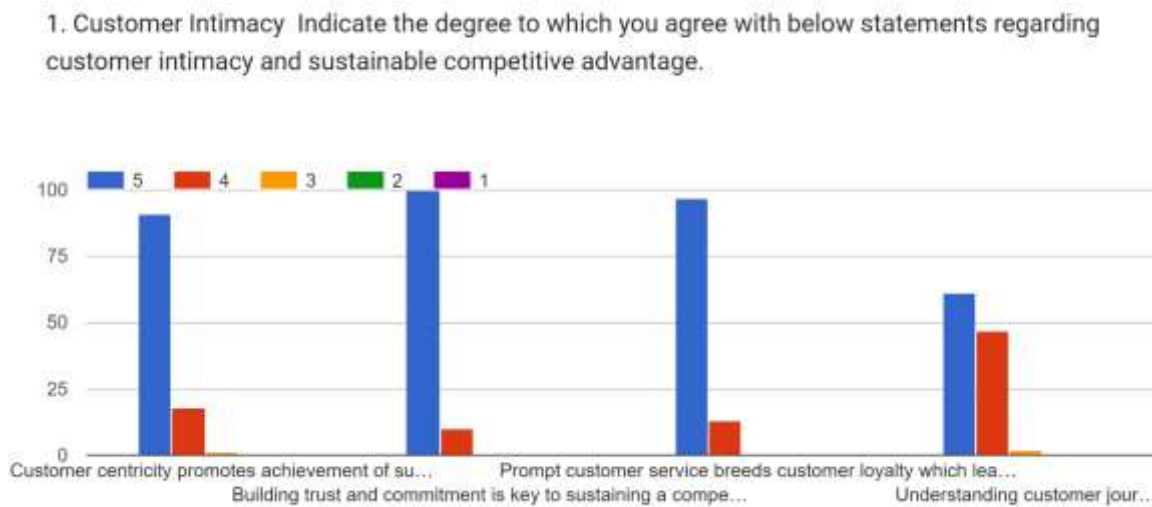
Statement	Mean	Std. Dev
Customer centricity promotes achievement of sustainable competitive advantage.	4.900	.410
Building trust and commitment is key to sustaining a competitive advantage.	4.798	.289
Prompt customer service breeds customer loyalty which leads to sustainable competitive advantage.	4.870	.324
Understanding customer journey maps is key to achievement of sustainable competitive advantage.	4.503	.536

Source: Primary Data, 2023

Respondents indicated that customer centricity with a mean of 4.900 and standard deviation of 0.410 promotes sustainable competitive advantage, building customer trust and commitment with a mean of 4.798 and standard deviation of 0.289 is key to achieving sustainable competitive advantage prompt customer service which results in customer loyalty breeds sustainable competitive advantage with a mean of 4.870 and standard deviation of 0.324 while an understanding of your customer journey maps with a mean of 4.503 and standard deviation of 0.536 is key to achieving sustainable competitive advantage. The results show that customer centricity significantly affects sustainable competitive advantage of firms in the telecommunications industry in Kenya with an overall mean of 4.773 and standard deviation of 0.427.

The results are supported by Agyei and Kilika (2013) who state that industry players need to pay close attention to sustaining customer loyalty through provision of quality service and products is key to firms in the telecommunication industry. Klimontowicz (2014) posit that customer centricity is a strong foundation for sustaining a competitive advantage focusing on customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Bii and Wanyoike (2014) state that customer centric approach as a strategic approach is key to competitive advantage.

Figure 5 Customer Intimacy and Sustainable Competitive Advantage



Regression Coefficients of the Relationship between Customer Intimacy and Sustainable Competitive Advantage.

Table 11 Regression Coefficient of Customer Intimacy and Sustainable Competitive Advantage.

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	Constant	1.049	.219		2.180	.038
	Customer Intimacy	0.413	.127	.316	2.175	.039

Source: Primary Data, 2023

The optimal regression equation was:

$$\text{Sustainable Competitive Advantage} = 1.049 + 0.413 \text{ Customer Intimacy.}$$

The study's findings indicate that, when all factors are considered, the effect of strategic positioning on sustainable competitive advantage is 1.049 at the baseline. Furthermore, the results demonstrate that a one-unit increase in customer intimacy leads to a 0.413 (41.3%) improvement in the scores of strategic positioning on sustainable competitive advantage. Customer intimacy was also found to be statistically significant (p = 0.03), highlighting that this relationship is meaningful. This suggests that enhancing customer intimacy can significantly contribute to achieving and sustaining a competitive advantage in the market.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study findings, the study concludes that customer intimacy positively impacts sustainable competitive advantage of firms in the telecommunications industry in Kenya. Customer centricity, building trust and commitment of customers, timely customer service and understanding

customer journey maps are essential in ensuring customers feel 'intimate' with the organization thus enhancing the firm's sustainable competitive advantage.

The study recommends that firms in the telecommunication industry should strive to meet and exceed customer's expectations through building trust and commitment, providing prompt customer service, understanding, and fostering customer journey maps in their plans and provision of products and services with their customers in mind to promote sustainable competitive advantage.

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