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Competitive Strategies and Performance of Selected Large Supermarkets in Nairobi City County, Kenya

Charles Imo Avoga[1], Mr. Shadrack Bett[2]

[1]*Master of Strategic Management, Student, Kenyatta University, Kenya*

[2]*Department of Business Administration, Kenyatta University, Kenya*

ABSTRACT

A company's success is significantly influenced by its competitive response strategy. Competitive response strategies essentially aim to steer a business through its uncertain and erratic external environment while enabling it to keep order and efficiency in its internal operations. The COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected Kenya's retail industry and the economy. Due to a fall in economic productivity and consumer spending, many shops have struggled with smaller sales margins. Due to declining sales, companies have also been forced to lay off employees and close some branches. There is plenty of research on competitive response methods in other industries. However, few studies have focused on supermarkets, and no studies exist on whether or not these strategies were effective during the Covid-19 epidemic. Therefore, this study aimed to establish how competitive response strategies affected certain supermarkets' performance during COVID-19 in Nairobi. The research examined the effect of supermarkets' cost leadership, focus strategy, and differentiation on their operations during the COVID-19 crisis in Nairobi, Kenya. Specific research questions guided the overall study aims. The study employed a descriptive research design to address the research questions. The population of interest included the top, middle, and lower-level management staff from supermarkets participating in this study. The target population comprised 204 workers from various stores within the chosen supermarkets. In this investigation, the census approach of data collection was employed. Semi-structured and closed-ended questionnaires were the data collection instruments. The equipment used to perform the study was checked to confirm its accuracy and validity before it was set up for use. The data was then processed and categorized, and ready for analysis. Descriptive analysis was used to interpret the findings using average, frequency, and confidence interval statistics. The research only used inferential analysis inside the multi-regression paradigm. The model showed the level of correlation between the research variables. For inferential analysis, the correlation showed the significance of the linkages underpinning firm performance, cost leadership, and differentiation. Additionally, regression analysis showed the significance of the relationships underpinning dependent and independent variables. Lastly, the research complied with the required ethical standards and guidelines.

Key Words: Cost Leadership Strategies, Differentiation Strategies, Focus Strategies, Supermarkets, Competitive Strategies

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1.0 Introduction

1.1Background

Businesses today must work harder than before to remain competitive, owing to the rapidly evolving socioeconomic environment. Businesses need sustainable competitive advantage plans if they want to stay in business. A company's competitive strategy is the set of actions it takes to increase profits, reduce losses, and hold its own against other firms. These tactics are crucial in determining which areas or sectors a company should focus on to achieve its goals. Companies that can plan ahead and successfully conduct their competitive strategy tend to outperform their rivals. According to Atikiya (2015), businesses with sound competitive strategies have a better chance of capitalizing on openings in the market, giving them an edge over their rivals. Porter fronted cost leadership, differentiation, and focus strategy as three critical competitive strategies for a business. A company may adopt a cost leadership strategy, which entails reducing expenses across the board to create a low-cost structure in which high-value products are produced with fewer standard features. This increases market share and builds a competitive advantage. Differentiation measures may include innovation, product promotion tactics, sales, and advertising. Innovation partly focuses on manufacturing goods, quality, and performance (Hansen et al., 2015).

A focus strategy narrows down to particular market segments by distinguishing customer demands and adopting reasonable pricing strategies to meet their demands (Jiri et al., 2013). Leitner and Güldenberg (2009) described that hybrid strategies combine elements of all three approaches to allow businesses to keep their offerings fresh while still focusing on price and differentiation. A company's chances of success are lower than those of its competitors if it has a unique selling proposition and instead focuses on being like everyone else. According to Atikiya (2015), top-performing businesses may largely be attributed to their superior technological expertise, strategic foresight, and product quality. As a result of a lack of customers and business possibilities, many companies are still fighting an uphill battle to become profitable. However, this game is changing regarding how new business ways are designed. In order to remain competitive, businesses are implementing Porter's three pillars of strategy: cost reduction, product differentiation, and market diversification. Accordingly, this research examines how competitive tactics might boost the efficiency of Kenya's leading supermarkets.

Due to increased competition, increased consumer shifting, and dynamic business responsibilities, firms in emerging countries must review and evaluate their strategies and management structures. The contemporary commercial setting in which businesses function is vibrant, and fulfilling the evolving expectations of all customers is extremely important (Striteska & Spickova, 2012). As a result of these variables, a successful business must have an operational balance scorecard strategy in place to decide its overall performance and execute methods and different structures to increase efficiency. Various supermarkets around the globe have managed to experiment with different tactics to optimize their overall quality. The Delhaize Group, based in the Netherlands and functioning across multiple continents, has experimented with various ways to improve its organization's performance. Delhaize (2017) claims that the techniques used included introducing well-known chain stores to clients in numerous places, introducing opportunities for customers to save money on their transactions, and providing excellent options for cleaner and better items. The entire Marketplace, a food store in the United States of America has implemented a variety of tactics to enhance its growth. Whole Food Market's 2016 financial year initiatives comprised periodic substantial reductions and increased advertising on important grounds of uniqueness with opponents. Others featured a uniform pricing mechanism throughout their supermarkets, the growth of actual supermarket outlets, and the creation of new top managerial roles to improve company functions (Whole Food Market., 2017). The correlation between Porter's assertions and funding is still being investigated. Since the advent of globalization and the free market system, intense competition has arisen in all industries, the pharmaceutical business being one of the most lucrative. This has piqued much interest in the study of tactics. Among the Eastern and Southern Hemispheres countries, Tanzania has surpassed Kenya as the second-leading manufacturer of generic pharmaceuticals, behind only Kenya. To what extent did Hhary and Mboma's (2020) cost leadership strategy impact the success of the pharmaceutical industry was the primary focus of their research. The findings demonstrated that Zenufa Laboratories Limited's performance improved due to cost leadership, suggesting that more cost leadership strategies boosted the effectiveness of the pharmaceutical company.

Mohamed (2019) sought to analyze the factors affecting retail performance in Dar es Salaam. Supermarket performance in Dar es Salaam was significantly correlated with technological sophistication, organizational strategy, government regulation, and management skills but not with capital, team dynamics, workplace culture, the economic climate, or the firm's size. The research calls for a greater analysis of the variables affecting the distribution of supermarkets across Tanzania. In Kenya, supermarkets are distinguished by the clients they serve and the variety of goods they offer. Supermarkets have always catered to a particular market of upper-middle-class and upper-middle-class shoppers (Njiiru, 2016). However, supermarkets now serve various clients from all socioeconomic classes due to greater business. Nakumatt and Carrefour stores are two major supermarkets that cater to high-end clientele, while Naivas is more oriented to the mainstream market approach. The number of smaller family-owned stores on estate levels cater to the mass market, which includes people from all walks of life (Mwebi, 2013). In Kenya, the big supermarkets have faced a variety of issues. Nakumatt, East Africa's largest supermarket, is experiencing serious financial difficulties. The supermarket also deals with setbacks in paying employees' wages, a shortage of appropriate items for sale, and rising liabilities to vendors. As a result, the supermarket has been compelled to take a variety of ways to boost its efficiency. Location cutbacks, a halt on new job increases, and a decrease in the number of things provided at its stores are among the actions.

The outbreak of COVID-19 in Kenya in 2020 adversely affected the country's GDP, led to massive job losses, and slowed economic growth. The pandemic worsened an already struggling economy. Many companies have closed down or downsized their operations, leading to diminished productivity and performance. The unprecedented speed of change during the COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated a dynamic and fluid approach to strategic management. Many companies in Kenya were forced to revise their long-term goals and focus on their organizations' immediate business shocks. For instance, companies had to implement strategies to manage changes in the local and global supply chains, the decline in demand for products and increased demand for products, change customer preferences and tastes, and implement enhanced health and safety measures. Besides, organizations were forced to lay out clear plans for the post-COVID crisis world. Many corporate leaders realized that the pandemic might persist for longer periods and needed to put measures in place to counter the adverse impacts of the protracted crisis period.

1.1.1 Organization Performance

Organizational performance is the variance between an organization's present output and its set objectives (Abdalkrim, 2013). According to Ongeti (2014), a company's performance is measured by its productivity, usefulness, financial soundness, and importance. Firm performance refers to a company's capacity to achieve its goals through effective and efficient resource management. Effectiveness relates to how a company uses strategies to fulfill set objectives, while efficiency relates to providing products that suit clients' requirements. Agility, effectiveness, and trade rating are all popular business key parameters, according to Ekawati (2014). The two main fundamental determinants of firm success are financial and non-financial success measurements. Non-financial performance measurements involve conceptual subjective indicators. Muchhal (2014) also purports that scorecards provide a missing or incorrect picture of a firm's existing consumers. Non-financial performance measurements involve consumer gratification, business unit connection, and employees. In the past few years, enterprises have begun embracing the measuring performance technique of performance analysis. Financial profitability, excellent consumer service, internal company processes, and skill advancement are all domains where equitable overall scores assess an enterprise's performance.

In determining efficiency, there must be a significant association between the firm's goals and measurement techniques and tangible outcomes. The significance of achievement measurements must also be explicitly explained. Organizational success can be evaluated using various methods, including performance measurement, balanced scorecards, and key performance indicators (KPIs). The KPI assesses a firm's or a specific entity's strengths or weaknesses, such as initiatives, plans, and other indications (Ishaq et al., 2014). They specify a system of principles to be measured on. There are two types of KPIs: quantitative and qualitative. Intake, outputs, action, method, regulation, and period are all measured elements.

The objective of Gatutha and Namusonge (2020) was to ascertain how competitive strategies affect Kenyan supermarket performance, focusing on the top 10 supermarkets in Nairobi. One particular aim was to establish the impacts of focus strategies, cost leadership, and differentiation on Nairobi City's supermarkets' performance. The study aimed to determine why supermarkets continue to endure diminishing sales and eventually close despite increasing knowledge and competitive strategies. The study's conclusions show that supermarket performance in Nairobi, Kenya, and competitive strategies are strongly and favorably correlated. The research advises shop management to reduce operational and administrative costs as a result continuously. Additionally, the management should ensure sufficient overhead controls and that spending on advertising and promotions is kept to a minimum. Second, the research urges supermarket management to continually develop new ideas since this is an essential element of differentiation that grants firms dominating positions and long-term benefits, especially those with distinctive traits that no other company or organization can replicate. The results of Gatutha and Namusonge are supported by research conducted by Rubi (2018), who claims that supermarkets have adopted differentiation and cost leadership strategies. Supermarkets' profits have increased due to the implementation of these competitive strategies. The regression and correlation analysis demonstrates that the focused approach positively impacts performance, even though it has not been fully embraced. Precise, quantifiable, achievable, reasonable, and time-bound standards should be followed when developing KPIs. According to Hladchenko (2015), the performance measurement is a business assessment measure that management utilizes to assess the pursuit of the company's processes while also controlling and keeping a careful eye on the effects of these operations. The organization's performance is designed to help companies put overall strategies into motion (Martello et al., 2016). In this research, the firm's success was assessed in regard to its comparative edge over its rivals, as well as its total profits and sales growth.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

A competitive response strategy is a key factor in a company's success. Essentially, a competitive response strategy seeks to guide a company through the volatile and unpredictable external environment and enable it to maintain order and efficiency in its internal processes. Both start-up and established businesses ought to implement strategic business models that allow them to thrive in a particular environment and situation. A company's performance should be constantly measured and evaluated through the laid-out metrics to understand the organization's responsiveness to the changes in the external environment. Organizational strategic transition planning strategies may be a key success factor, assisting the organization in surpassing its planned objectives. Kenya's retail market is undergoing a transformation fueled by rivalry, the country's transition to an intermediate industry, and technological advancements. A wealth of research on competitive response strategies exists in many sectors, but very little on supermarkets specifically, and no studies examining the efficacy of such tactics during the Covid-19 pandemic. This research closed the information disparity on the effect of different supermarkets' competitive methods on their performance during the COVID-19 pandemic in supermarkets in Nairobi, CBD.

The COVID-19 pandemic has undermined the retail sector in Kenya and the economy. Consequently, many retailers have contended lower revenue margins due to a decline in economic production and consumer spending. The decreased revenues have forced companies to lay off workers and close some branches. Implementing lockdown, curfew, and other COVID-19-related restrictions have caused many consumers to avoid retail stores, leading to declining sales. Also, many jobs have been lost, meaning many Kenyans lost their sources of income and had to cut down on expenditure, thereby undermining the growth of the retail sector. The COVID-19 crisis worsened the financial woes of some major retailers, such as Tuskys Supermarket, which were forced to close down. After two years, South Africa's Shoprite Holdings closed its two subsidiaries in Kenya. Also, Botswana's Choppies exited Kenya's retail industry.

Despite COVID-19, local company Naivas Supermarket opened a new store in Juja City Mall, taking over 37,000 square feet of valuable retail space recently vacated by Tuskys Supermarket. The business has been expanding to preserve retail market domination since this is its 76th location, following the opening of six additional locations in 2021. In the face of competition from global retailer Carrefour, which plans to open five stores in Kenya by 2021, and domestic retailer QuickMart, which wants to introduce four stores this year, the retailer intends to expand its presence in Kenya. However, various studies have investigated competitive response strategies outside Kenya. For example, Nwachukwu et al. (2018) conducted studies in Nigeria focusing on competitive response strategies in various industries. Other studies like Mbithi (2016), Guyo (2020), and Otieno et al. (2018) carried out their studies on different sectors of the economy with a focus on how competitive strategies impact performance. However, this study looked at the retailing industry, which the studies did not cover. Also, no studies have shown how the competitive response strategy was affected during the pandemic. Therefore, the present study sought to determine the impact of competitive response approaches on the performance of selected supermarkets in Nairobi during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

To establish the influence of competitive response strategies on the performance of selected supermarkets in Nairobi during COVID-19**.**

Specific Objectives of the study will be;

1. To assess the effect of cost leadership strategies on the performance of supermarkets in Nairobi County/CBD Kenya
2. To show the effect of differentiation strategies on the performance of supermarkets in Nairobi County/CBD Kenya
3. To determine the influence of focus strategies on the performance of supermarkets in Nairobi County/CBD Kenya

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Literature

2.1.1 Balanced Scorecard Theory

The theory was postulated by Robert Kaplan and David Norton (1992). The balanced scorecard was thought to be only about measurements and not finances. The approach withheld certain measures of financial performance and indicators at the bottom of the chain but was later supplemented with other drivers and financial performance indicators (Brown, 2000). The balanced scorecard theory is also related to the joining of employee rewards with respect to their performance in all areas. The balanced scorecard theory comprises four (4) perspectives: financial, internal business, learning, customer, and growth perspectives. A balanced scorecard aims to put through, be in charge and challenge the whole organization to realize a shared view about the future. Proposed in 1992, the theory sheds light on the underperformance of the traditional management system and the fundamental dependence on measures of financial performance, which are indicators that keep them from moving forward.

Koplan and Norton (1996) believed that the four (4) major perspectives provide a way to balance the expected and actual performance outcomes. The balanced scorecard has proven to be an excellent tool to organize, show, capture, and translate intangible assets into real value for the entire stakeholder of an organization, thereby enabling the implementation of their various strategies effectively. The balanced scorecard has been effectively translated and implemented in public and non-profit-oriented sectors. The Balanced Scorecard Theory has a crucial challenge: the consummation of time and its difficulty to implement. It takes an organization about two years to efficiently and fully implement the system. In addition, it requires a long-term commitment.

2.1.2 Contingency Theory

Austrian psychologist Fred Edward Fiedler proposed the contingency concept of management in 1964 (Robbins & Coulter, 2002). It is proposed that even the most efficient and suitable governing structured analysis is one in which the functional framework corresponds to the firm's circumstances. As a result, the model suggests that when management makes operational actions in respective businesses, managers should analyze all parts of the present condition and react to those important to the present scenario (Olum, 2004). Guidelines for managerial questions and challenges are based on the specific settings that occur in the company (Andrews et al., 2012). As a result, strategy performance should be based on the current setting or environment. This shows that diverse environmental factors having diverse circumstances can necessitate alternative solutions for addressing organizational difficulties, implying a link between environmental perception and an overall level in a given scenario (Donaldson, 2001). Opponents have criticized the "general rule" or "single efficient optimization" strategy, which imposes remedies for challenges in companies across the board. Instead, they recommend that proactive approaches contribute to the company's perfect position, including its surroundings. According to Hambrick and Fredrickson (2005), the primary purpose of a firm is to accomplish a steady long-term future. The orientation, decisions, and assessment of the performance of decided steps are all influenced by the objectives and purpose objectives of corporates. As a result, a firm's competencies and facilities must be aligned to capitalize on marketplace possibilities and acquire competitiveness (Garlichs, 2011).

2.1.3 Dynamic Capabilities Theory

Amy Shuen, Gary Pisano, and David Teece G proposed the dynamic capabilities theory, asserting that a company succeeds by constantly incorporating, growing, and restructuring inner and outer skills to handle the difficulties of constantly changing surroundings (Teece, 2000, 1997; Zahra et al., 2006). The dynamic capacities viewpoint aimed to expand Penrose's resource-based perspective of the organization. On the one hand, the resource-premised philosophy of the company prioritizes "competitiveness." On the other hand, dynamic capabilities prioritize "competitive survival" in reaction to the fast-shifting current state of the environment (Ludwig & Pemberton, 2011). The premise of this theory is that an institution's core competencies must be exploited to establish relatively brief competitiveness that can be turned towards a lengthy competitive edge (Helfat &Peteraf, 2009). Dynamic capabilities theory involves the creation of strategies by strong organization managers to address profoundly disruptive influences while maintaining maximum capacity levels to encourage sustainable growth (Ludwig & Pemberton, 2011). Multiple capacities allow an enterprise to remain agile and adapt to evolving requirements in a global context (Teece et al., 1997). Dynamic skills improve a company's capability to grow and thrive in the industry because leadership is responsible for organizing novel options that can create more worth for the company's consumers.

2.1.4 Resource-Based View Theory (RBV)

The RBV theory may be attributed to the writings of Wernerfelt (1984), Prahalad, Penrose (1959), Hamel (1991), and Barney (1991). The focus of the RBV is on the physical and conceptual assets that make up brand factors with the potential to increase efficiency (Kellermanns et al., 2016). The RBV theory stresses the role of core services inside a company and their application in defining strategy, which could aid in building long-term competitiveness in the industry (Schroeder et al., 2002). Businesses produce capabilities from various assets under company management, and once they are stronger and more durable, they could generate a key success factor (Pearce-Higgins et al., 2007). This means that assets are critical in a business's strategic management practices, particularly in the execution operations, which, if not handled correctly, can significantly impede an organization's progress and sustainability. The resource method, fronted by Learned et al. (1969), holds that anything that a corporation is competent to accomplish is not merely a consequence of its possibilities but also of the pool of assets within the ownership as management. The findings confirm the inside-out view of a corporate goal, which is crucial for seeking, enshrining, and preserving a strategic edge. The resourced-based theory is founded on a managerial approach that views a firm's assets as strategic rather than its location in the surrounding environment. When performing trade in the enterprise, a competitive edge should be established on enterprise core competencies instead of assessing outside benefits and threats (Barney, 1991). According to the resource-based hypothesis, some resources fully owned by enterprises can provide a market edge and significantly higher efficiency (Ainnuddin et al., 2007).

2.2 Empirical Literature

2.2.1 Cost Leadership Strategy and Performance

Austine (2020) explored Kenyan insurance firms' competitive strategies and performance and grounded his research on several theories, including contingency, Porter's generic competitive, and balanced scorecard theories. The descriptive research methodology was adopted in this study. According to the Insurance Regulatory Authority's 2017 annual report, the target population was 55 registered enterprises. The study subjects were chosen using stratified proportional random sampling, and the number of target respondents was determined using the Yamane Formula. Standardized questionnaires were used to gather information. The supervisor used professional judgment to assess the questionnaire's face validity. A pre-evaluation of the questionnaire was done on ten participants, and their opinions were taken into account. Test-retest and Cronbach's Alpha was applied for external and internal reliability, respectively. The cutoff was 0.78 Cronbach's Alpha. The outcomes of the analyzed data were then shown in tables. The inferential analysis utilized Pearson's correlation and multiple regression techniques. ANOVA was used to determine the change in the dependent variable in proportion to the independent factors. The study used the scientific package for social science seventeen as an analytic tool. The findings indicated that the cost leadership approach has a favorable and substantial relationship with performance. The study by Austine focused on the insurance industry and did not examine the effect of innovation. This study focused on the supermarket industry and examined how innovation affects performance.

Muia's (2017) research into the impact of competition on Kenya's insurance industry performance was to gain a better knowledge of these factors. The purpose of this research was, in part, to determine if and how a cost leadership approach influences the success of Kenyan insurance firms. Descriptive research was used because it best reflected the goal of this study, which was to establish the status quo of facts in a sample. Members of the 47 Kenyan insurance companies and the Association of Kenya Insurance members made up the study's target demographic (AKI). To get the sample size of 141, Muia (2017) employed a purposive sampling method to select a random subset of three people from the strategic planning departments of participating insurance companies. Even though only 135 of the required 200 surveys were completed and returned, a 95.7% response rate was adequate. Descriptive statistics were utilized to examine the data, including mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage. The correlation coefficient was utilized for inferential analysis to determine the degree to which differentiation, focus, and cost leadership were associated with improved company performance. The regression method was employed to demonstrate the dynamics of the interplay between the two sets of variables. The study found that most businesses either match or undercut their competitors' prices and extensively promote their products. As was also discovered, many people routinely minimize labor input by automating more of their processes. The cost leadership technique was found to significantly and positively affect insurance results. Although Muia (2017) focused on the insurance industry, this study focused on supermarkets.

Atikiya (2015) looked at the role of competitive strategies on the productivity of Kenyan manufacturers. This research found the methods employed by Kenyan manufacturers to stay ahead of the competition and boost their productivity. This research analyzed the impact of a cost leadership strategy on the fiscal status of manufacturing companies. Specifically, Porter's classification of competitive business strategies served as the study's theoretical premise. A survey research design was chosen, and a total of 454 manufacturing enterprises were surveyed from 12 important industrial sectors, with a stratified sample of 189 firms. In this study, the researcher employed a multistage sampling strategy. Initially, the 12 sectors were stratified using the stratified sampling method. Then, a sample was chosen from each stratum using a basic random sampling method. Data were gathered by questionnaire. Study hypotheses were also tested using descriptive statistics and inferential statistics. Results show that Kenyan manufacturing companies have, for the most part, embraced competitive strategies. The research showed that cost leadership significantly correlates with financial success for Kenya's manufacturing companies. Although Atikiya (2015) focused on the manufacturing industry, this study portrayed the role of competitive strategies on supermarkets' performance during the covid-19 period.

The primary focus of Baraza's (2017) study was on East African Breweries Limited, a Kenyan manufacturing company, and how competing strategies influenced the company's success. Potentially improved policies in competitive tactics and performance can arise from this research. This study used a phenomenology-based, qualitative, descriptive research style. The intended recipients were members of EABL's staff, particularly those with managerial responsibilities. The study's core data came from a combination of primary and secondary sources. Questionnaires and in-person interviews were the two most common means of information collection. Financial performance data was collected from secondary sources, such as company websites, publications, and annual reports that had already been made public. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data. The research concluded that cost leadership is crucial because it influences organizational performance and decision-making. Those in charge of selecting and enacting competitive strategies believe that organizations operating in a competitive environment should have the necessary strategies. While Baraza (2017) concentrated on a particular company (EABL), this study focuses on several selected supermarkets in Nairobi CBD.

Arasa and Gathinji's (2014) major objectives were to examine the link between firm success and competitive strategies among firms operating in Kenya's mobile telecommunications industry. Companies' competitive tactics in the Kenyan market were uncovered. The study assessed the extent to which these strategies were implemented inside the companies and how they affected the firms' overall performance. Sixty-three participants (out of 72) selected for this study contributed usable data using a descriptive survey. According to the poll's results, low-cost leadership is the preferred strategy in the face of intense competition. The methods adopted, the report concludes, boost the firm's efficiency. A low-cost leadership strategy committed workforce, and lean manufacturing are essential to a firm's low-cost-advantage goals. Arasa and Gathinji (2014) have laid a good foundation for the present study. However, while Arasa and Gathinji focus on telecommunication, this study focused on Kenyan Supermarkets.

Simiyu and Makhamara (2020) explored the impact of strategic positioning on the competitive edge at G4S Kenya. The study was anchored on RBV, capability-based, and competitive advantage theories. A descriptive research methodology was used to select from a population of 540 employees at G4s in Nairobi, Kenya. A sample size of 122 employees was reached. Questionnaires were used to gather primary data. Descriptive and inferential approaches were used in the analysis. Ethical standards and principles were observed. Results were provided in graphs and tables and revealed that cost leadership has a positive and important impact on G4S' competitive advantage. This current study focused on supermarkets in Nairobi and examined other competitive response strategies like innovation and differentiation.

In the context of COVID-19, Ma (2021) looked at the role of competitive strategy on profitability: A Case Study of McDonald's. Data on the balance sheet items and income statement items of McDonald's for the last half a decade was gathered from the US Securities and Exchange Commission's website. Then, using Excel, a formula model was created, and the data was input with uniform precision into the model to examine McDonald's fiscal performance. The results suggest that cost leadership has a positive and significant link with performance. Ma's research focused on restaurant chains, whereas this research concentrated on the Nairobi County supermarket industry.

2.2.2 Focus Strategy and Performance

Buul and Omundi (2017) conducted research in Kenya to see how competitive strategies affect the success of small and medium businesses. The study used a descriptive correlation approach using primary data gathered via questionnaires. The research focused on 4,560 SMEs in Nairobi's central business district. The data was exported into SPSS (V.20). Quantitative approaches were used to examine the data. The properties of the obtained data were described using descriptive statistics. Notably, the associations between the research variables were established using inferential statistics. SME performance was found to be influenced by focus strategy favorably and substantially. Buul and Omundi's study focused on small and medium businesses and did not consider the impact of innovation; however, the present study focused on a few chosen supermarkets in Nairobi County. The effect of innovation on performance was examined as well.

The impact of competing strategies on performance was explored by Ndung'u et al. (2018). A descriptive cross-sectional survey method was followed. The intended audience in Kenya was large-scale industrial companies. A structured questionnaire was issued to top managers in 139 companies across 13 industries. Seventy-five questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of 54 percent. Descriptive statistics and linear regression were used in the analysis. According to the descriptive results, regression research showed that focus strategy has a considerable impact on the performance of major manufacturing companies. Unlike Ndung'u et al. (2018) research, which focused on the manufacturing industry, this study concentrated on the supermarket industry.

2.2.3 Differentiation and Performance

Giantari & Jatra (2019) studied the role of differentiation strategy on SMEs' creativity, market focus, and business performance in Bali province. The study adopted a survey design of a research population of 60 business units drawn from SMEs in the textile industry. A sample of 60 entrepreneurs from the study population was randomly selected to participate in the study. The researchers adopted a qualitative research approach and used interviews to collect data. The study analyzed four variables; market orientation, innovation strategies, differentiation strategy, and business performance. The study showed that market focus positively influences business performance as the business prioritizes the needs of the key target markets. Additionally, market orientation was shown to impact differentiation strategy positively. Focusing on the needs of a particular market segment allows the business to appropriately differentiate its product or service line. Notably, the researchers observed the mediating role of differentiation strategy between market focus and business performance. In other words, SMEs that adopted effective differentiation strategies better served the needs of their markets and improved their performance in the long run (Giantari & Jatra, 2019). Thus, the researchers underscored the role of differentiation strategy on business performance. Differentiation strategies ought to cut across all areas of the organization. For instance, the organization could conduct employee differentiation to bring out the best of their skills and talents. The study yielded new insights on the topic under the current study but exhorts further research on the same in the Kenyan context.

Moreover, Omondi (2018) studied the role of differentiation strategy on the performance of pharmaceutical industries in Kenya. The study was conducted against the backdrop of mushrooming pharmaceutical companies in Kenya. In particular, the study identified and assessed the effectiveness of differentiation strategies adopted by pharmaceutical companies in the country. The study used a survey design and a quantitative research approach. A total of 46 pharmaceutical firms based in Nairobi were selected to take part in the study. Standardized questionnaires were used for data collection. The findings identified the following differentiation strategies commonly adopted in the pharmaceutical industry; value-added products, promotional, service, distribution network, and marketing strategies. Firms in the industry are constantly recognizing ways of staying ahead of the competition through value addition and packaging. All the strategies adopted by the companies were shown to positively influence performance, consistent with the findings of Giantari & Jatra (2019). Service differentiation was identified as the commonest strategy adopted by firms. Pharmaceutical companies employ and adequately train their medical representatives to provide sufficient information to their clients. The companies also offer free samples to doctors to demonstrate the effectiveness of their products and increase their market share. Therefore, the findings mirror those of previous studies in underscoring the positive influence of differentiation on performance.

2.3 Conceptual Framework

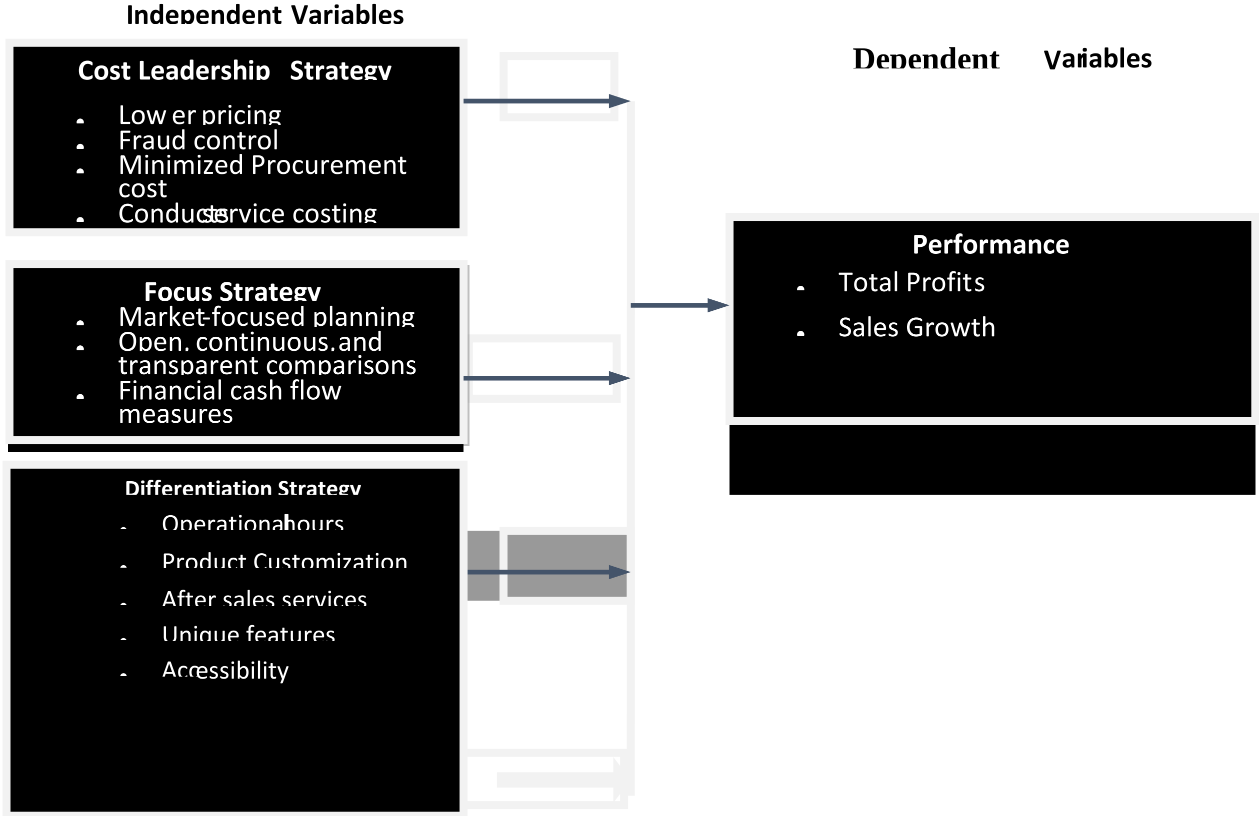

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Source: Researcher (2022)

3.0 Research Methodology

A descriptive research strategy guided the present study because it enabled the researcher to uncover information that described elements of the demographic or phenomena examined using quantifiable data (Ledford & Gast, 2018). There are 226 retail supermarkets in Nairobi County (Maina & Ngugi, 2019). However, there were 8 major retail supermarket chains that operate in Nairobi County (Appendix II). The 8 supermarkets constituted the target population for the present study as it was the entire group of major supermarkets that the research intended to analyze.

The principal investigator conducted a census to study the eight major supermarkets that operate in Nairobi County. A total of 48 participants was selected for the study, including six from each supermarket. The participants included two members of each branch's top management, two middle management members, and two supervisors of various departments working in each branch. The selection of participants from the different management levels enriches the data collected as it allowed the researcher to get multiple perspectives about each competitive strategy. A census is an investigation of every unit, person, or item that makes up a population. A complete enumeration, which is also called a complete count, is the name given to this type of count

(Sheppard et al., 2020). The data gathered through the census method is accurate and dependable, which means that the results based on this approach are correct and highly reliable. This is because researchers carefully examine each member of the population. According to Sheppard et al. (2020), because the investigator has no control over the selection of sample items, the results based on the census method are less likely to be biased. The census approach was used to gather data in this study.

The census approach was effective for this study because it prevented bias. All 204 study participants participated in the investigation. The census methodology is also called complete enumeration, meaning every data set was examined. This method was effective because all participants offered their insights, broadening the range of the data to be collected and ultimately enhancing the accuracy and reliability of the data. Because the census approach is unbiased, the data collected was accurate and reliable. The study utilized both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected via a closed-ended questionnaire, requiring the participant to choose one of five viable answers that address the competitive strategies. The first section of the questionnaire addressed the basic information about the participants. The second part addressed questions about cost leadership, focus strategy, differentiation, innovation, and performance. Secondary data was obtained from the supermarkets' financial statements to gauge their performance during the pandemic.

Data analysis is the process of converting raw data into refined data (Kombo & Tromp, 2006). Following data gathering, the tools were examined for clarity and completeness. This guaranteed that the data is consistent and sufficient to be evaluated. After that, the data was cleaned, categorized, and processed. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistical analysis, which yielded statistics including confidence interval, frequency, and average. The quantitative data collected was exported into Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0 for analysis. Percentages, averages, and standard deviations were generated and presented in tables. The multiple regression model was used to show the associations between the independent variables and the dependent variable.

The regression model is shown below.

$$Y = \beta o + \beta_1 CL + \beta_2 FS + \beta_3 DI + \varepsilon$$

Y=Performance

B_0=Constant

CL= Cost Leadership

FS=Focus Strategy

DI= Differentiation

ε=Error

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to test the joint significance of all the coefficients. A p-value of 0.05 was used to measure the significance of the variables.

4.0 Data Analysis Results

4.1 Cost Leadership and Performance

Table 1: The Supermarkets' Cost Leadership Strategic Actions

Statements	**Mean**	**Standard Deviation**
1. Reduction of prices of commodities expanded customer base	4.02	.7136
2. Adoption of new technologies reduced operational costs	3.68	.7606
3. Procurement cost-reduction measures reduced operational costs	3.84	.8592
4. Specialization in high-demand goods increased profit margins	4.07	.8266
5. Promotion of efficiency in service delivery created a price advantage	4.11	.9415

Source: Field Data 2022

The analysis shows that cost leadership positively impacted the supermarkets' performance during the pandemic. This is evident in the statement that supermarkets reduced the prices of their commodities during the pandemic and which helped to attract more customers ($\bar{x}$=4.02, D=.7136), that supermarkets in Nairobi CBD adopted new technologies to reduce operational costs during the pandemic ($\bar{x}$=3.68, D=.7606), that supermarkets reduced procurement costs to minimize operating costs ($\bar{x}$=3.84, D=.8592), that supermarkets specialized in high demand goods to increase revenue margins ($\bar{x}$=4.07, D=.8266), and that supermarkets promoted efficiency in service delivery to create price advantage ($\bar{x}$=4.11, D=.9415).

4.2 Differentiation Strategy and Performance

Table 2: Differentiation and Performance of Supermarkets

Statements	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. Offered cheaper substitutes to increase the customer base	4.09	.8397
2. Product design and packaging according to consumer preferences to increase market share	4.13	.7285
3. Providing after-sale services to build customer loyalty	3.08	.6921
4. Touch-free shopping and home deliveries to improve customer safety	3.43	.7516
5. Price differentiation to attract more customers	3.78	.9254

Source: Field Data 2022

The analysis above indicates that the majority of the respondents affirmed that differentiation strategies played a significant role in the supermarkets' performance during the pandemic. This is evident in the fact that they offered cheaper substitutes to customers who could not afford the conventional goods in order to attract more customers ($\bar{x}$=4.09, D=.8397), that supermarkets designed and packaged their products to resonate with customer tastes in order to grow their market share (x̄=4.13, D=.7285), that supermarkets provided after sale services to build customer loyalty during the pandemic (x̄=3.08, D=.6921), that supermarkets adopted technologies to provide touch-free shopping and home deliveries to improve customer safety and increase their sales margins (x̄=3.43, D=.7516), and that supermarkets used price wars to gain an edge over their competitors in the market (x̄=3.78, D=.9254).

4.3 Focus Strategy and Performance

Table 3: Focus Strategy and Performance of Supermarkets

Statements	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. Prioritized stocking of fast-moving commodities to boost sales	4.14	.8592
2. The enterprise prioritized survival rather than thriving	3.98	.7436
3. Creating new digital experiences for customers	3.83	.9116
4. Maintained geographic and demographic market coverage by creating distinctive customer experiences	4.01	.8531
5. Redesigned products and services to suit the specific client's needs during the pandemic	4.05	.9208

Source: Field Data 2022

The results above show that focus strategy influenced the supermarkets' performance during the pandemic. This is evident in respondents' affirmation of the statements that the supermarkets specialized in fast-moving goods to increase their sales margins (x̄=4.14, D=.8592), that supermarkets focused on surviving the pandemic rather than thriving (x̄=3.98, D=.7436), that supermarkets focused on creating new digital experiences for customers since physical shopping was hampered by the COVID restrictions (x̄=3.83, D=.9116), that supermarkets created distinctive customer experiences to maintain their geographic and demographic market coverage (x̄=4.01, D=.8531), and that supermarkets re-designed their products and services to suit the specific needs of their customers (x̄=4.05, D=.9208).

4.4 Inferential Statistics

Table 4: Regression Analysis Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square change	F Change	Df1	Df2	Sig. F Change
1	.906(a)	.784	.739	.49031	.784	1.264	4	96	.000

Source: Field Data 2022

Table 5 above shows the coefficient determination R=.784, equivalent to 78.4 %. This suggests that differentiation, cost leadership, and focus strategies accounted for 78.4% of the supermarkets' performance during the COVID-19 pandemic. The supermarkets' performance was the dependent variable, while cost leadership, differentiation, and focus strategies were the independent variables. The p-value of .000 is less than .05, meaning the findings were significant at a 95% confidence level.

Table 5: Anova Table Summary

	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Regression	.793	4	.296	.427	.000
Residual	19.41	34	.811		
Total	20.203	38			

Source: Field Data 2022

Table 6 above shows that there is a significant association (p=.000) between the competitive strategies and the performance of the supermarkets during the pandemic.

Table 4.6: Regression Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	T	Sig.
1. Constant	0.852	0.127		8.124	0.000
Cost leadership	0.079	0.035	0.119	2.083	0.048
Differentiation	0.071	0.021	0.145	1.868	0.036
Focus	0.058	0.047	0.132	1.619	0.039

Source: Field Data 2022

The linear regression model is, therefore, as follows;

Y= 0.852 + 0.079CL + 0.058FS + 0.071DI + 0.127

The linear regression model above shows that all three competitive strategies affected performance. That is to say, one unit change in cost leadership affected supermarkets' performance by 0.079 units, one unit change in focus strategy affected the performance of the supermarkets by 0.058 units, and one unit change in differentiation affected the supermarket's performance by 0.071 units. Therefore, cost leadership had the biggest impact on supermarket performance, while focus strategy had the least impact on the performance of the supermarkets studied.

5.0 Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

5.1 Summary of the Findings

5.1.1 Cost Leadership Strategy and Performance

The study's first goal was to evaluate how cost leadership methods affected the performance of supermarkets in Nairobi County/CBD, Kenya. Overall, it emerged that the cost leadership strategies improved the performance of supermarkets during the pandemic. The study showed that supermarkets reduced the prices of their commodities during the pandemic, which helped attract more customers. The reduction of prices of the commodities meant customers would get more value for the same units of products than before and help them manage the harsh economic effects of the pandemic. To many customers, the price of a product is its most important feature and significantly appeals to price-sensitive customers in the market. The COVID-19 pandemic increased the price sensitivity of most customers in the industry since they had either lost their jobs or suffered income reductions. The findings also showed that supermarkets adopted new technologies to reduce operational costs, which helped them maintain or increase their revenue margins. Supermarkets adopted cashless payment and transacting methods, reducing the personnel needed to manage supermarket operations. The use of e-commerce by supermarkets increased during the pandemic to minimize physical contact and prevent the spread of the virus. Supermarkets also integrated procurement, supply management, and marketing technologies, which improved overall efficiency and cost reduction during the pandemic. As a result, many supermarkets were able to remain afloat. The present study also agrees with Atikiya (2015) who looked at the role of competitive strategies on the productivity of Kenyan manufacturers and showed that cost leadership strategies significantly impacted financial performance. However, the findings contradict those of Muthoka and Oduor (2016), who investigated the impact of technology on supermarket performance and alliances in Kenya and found no important association between technological and strategic relationships and supermarket performance. The confounding effect of the COVID-19 pandemic could explain the difference between the findings of Muthoka and Oduor (2016) and the present study.

5.1.2 Differentiation Strategy and Performance

On differentiation strategy and performance, the study affirmed that differentiation strategies played a significant role in the supermarkets' performance during the pandemic. In particular, supermarkets offered cheaper substitutes to customers who could not afford conventional goods to attract more customers. Substitutes' availability helped supermarkets increase their customer bases, which translated to improved performance during the pandemic. Substitutes enabled the supermarkets to meet customers' needs with different budgets, improving their overall revenue margins. Product and packaging differentiation helped customers to better serve the needs of different customer segments. Product and service differentiation was also evident in the form of offering after-sale services to customers. For example, some supermarkets helped deliver the products to awaiting customers in the parking lot to reduce the necessity of their physical entry. This not only fostered customer convenience but also helped reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Improved customer convenience and safety translated to increased customer satisfaction and organizational performance. Price differentiation also helped supermarkets to enhance their performance during the pandemic. Consistent with Ifeoma et al. (2021), differentiation enables firms to create, use, transfer and utilize the knowledge assets at their disposal to build sustainable competitive advantage. Businesses can align their intangible assets with changing demands of the industry. It also enhances competitive advantage and productivity. Further, this study agrees with Hariyati et al. (2018) who studied the impact of differentiation strategy on SMEs' business performance and intellectual capital in Indonesia and underscored the significance of the differentiation in firm performance. Evidently, differentiation enabled supermarkets to create, use, transfer and utilize the knowledge assets at their disposal to build sustainable competitive advantage. It also emerged that differentiation does not only improve performance in the context of COVID-19, comparing the present study and Hariyati et al. (2018).

5.1.3 Focus Strategy and Performance

On focus strategies and performance of the supermarkets during the pandemic, the findings suggest a significant positive correlation between focus strategies and performance. In particular, the supermarkets specialized in fast-moving goods to increase their sales margins. Increasing stock levels of fast-moving goods helped supermarkets to build a reputation as the best providers of certain categories of products, such as household commodities. This aligns with Cohen (2017), who showed that the provision of specific products leads to a distinctive company reputation for a company in comparison to its competitors and could improve organizational performance.

Additionally, many supermarkets refocused their strategies from thriving to surviving. The harsh economic effects of the pandemic made it difficult or near impossible for supermarkets to increase their profit margins. Many supermarkets across the world shut down because they incurred losses. This forced many supermarkets to prioritize surviving the pandemic rather than achieving their growth objectives. Focusing on survival rather than growth enabled supermarkets to set realistic targets, which helped them remain afloat during the pandemic.

Also, supermarkets improved their creativity and innovation to create new digital experiences for customers, improving customer satisfaction and performance. The study mirrors other previous studies, including Mulu (2019) and Marangu et al. (2017), which underscored the importance of a company's ability to innovate and adapt to new technologies in the industry. According to the two studies, businesses with high innovation ability and conforming to new technologies can easily build sustainable competitive advantages in their industries. Many supermarkets created new digital experiences, such as e-commerce platforms, digital platforms to help customers know when it would be convenient for them to shop, and online shopping. Adopting new technologies helped supermarkets tackle the pandemic's realities and maintain market shares.

This study also concurs with Buul and Omondi (2017) who studied the impact of competitive strategies on the success of small and medium businesses, and showed that SME performance was influenced by focus strategy favorably and substantially. The similarities in the findings could be attributed to the homogeneous nature of Kenya's retail sector. This study also agrees with Ndung'u et al. (2018) who studied the impact of focus strategies on the performance of firms in the manufacturing sector in Kenya. Like the present study, Ndung'u et al. (2018) showed that the focus strategy has a considerable impact on the performance of companies. Focus strategy enabled firms in both the retail and manufacturing sectors to capitalize on the advantages therein to improve performance. Overall, the study found a significant positive association between focus strategy and supermarkets' performance.

5.1.4 Inferential Statistics

Lastly, the regression analysis model showed that differentiation, cost leadership, and focus strategies accounted for 78.4% of the supermarkets' performance during the COVID-19 pandemic. This implies that other factors contributed only 21.6 percent of the supermarkets' performance during the covid-19 pandemic. This is slightly different from a study by Gatoto (2018), who showed that cost-leadership, focus, and differentiation strategies accounted for 84 percent of the supermarkets' performance. The differences in the contributions of the competitive strategy could be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic. The competitive strategies were ineffective during the pandemic because of their disruptive economic impact. The study also showed that cost leadership had the biggest impact on supermarket performance, while focus strategy had the least impact on the performance of the supermarkets studied. The findings contrast that of Gatoto (2018), who found differentiation strategy to have the biggest impact on performance. The variances in the impacts of the competitive strategies could still be attributed to the pandemic, where most businesses prioritized cost reduction and customers minimized expenditure to help them withstand the effects of the pandemic. Therefore, competitive strategies focused on cost reduction tended to have a greater effect on firm performance during the pandemic.

5.2 Conclusions

The study concluded that cost leadership strategies significantly impacted the performance of supermarkets in Nairobi County. In particular, supermarkets reduced the prices of their commodities during the pandemic, adopted new technologies to reduce operational costs, and reduced procurement costs to minimize operating costs. In addition, the supermarkets specialized in high-demand goods to increase revenue margins and promoted efficiency in service delivery to create a price advantage. All these strategies had a significant positive impact on performance. The study also concluded that differentiation strategies positively impacted supermarkets' performance in Nairobi County. Supermarkets offered cheaper substitutes to attract more customers, designed and packaged their products to resonate with customer tastes to grow their market share, and provided after-sale services to build customer loyalty. Moreover, the malls adopted technologies to provide touch-free shopping and home deliveries to improve customer safety, increase their sales margins, and use price wars to gain an edge over their competitors in the market. All these strategies had a significant positive impact on supermarkets' performance.

The research also concluded that focus strategies had a significant positive impact on supermarkets' performance. The supermarkets specialized in fast-moving goods to increase their sales margins and refocused their strategies from growth to surviving the pandemic. They also focused on creating new digital experiences for customers and created distinctive customer experiences to maintain their geographic and demographic market coverage. Lastly, the supermarkets re-designed their products and services to suit the specific needs of their customers. All the focus strategies were found to have a positive impact on performance. Overall, the study found that competitive techniques greatly improved the performance of supermarkets in Nairobi, Kenya.

5.3 Recommendations

The study recommends the prioritization of cost leadership strategies by supermarkets to improve their performance, particularly during economic uncertainties. The recommendation is informed by the finding that cost leadership strategies had the greatest impact on supermarkets' performance during the pandemic. The present study showed that one unit change in cost leadership affected supermarkets' performance by 0.079 units, which was the biggest impact. Firms could adopt production methods, service delivery strategies, and strategic actions that prioritize cost reduction to offer customers more value at less cost and help them lower their overall production costs. Secondly, the present study recommends the adoption of robust competitive strategies by supermarkets to build sustainable competitive advantage and performance. This is informed by the finding that competitive strategies account for 78.4% of the performance of supermarkets. This means that other factors only account for about 22 percent. The design and pursuit of competitive strategies should inform the supermarkets' strategic planning objectives.

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