

Strategic Organizational Learning Capability and Sustainable Competitive Advantage of Seed Companies in Kenya

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Abstract

The strategic capabilities and the sustainable competitive advantage have remained a central locus of academic discourse, though their comprehensive examination within the developing world, particularly in Kenya, in the area of seed industry has been noticeably limited. The objective of this study was to look into the influence of strategic organizational learning capability on the sustainable competitive advantage of seed companies in Kenya. The theories that supported the study were: organizational learning theory and dynamic capability theory. The research adopted a positivist approach because the role of the researcher was limited to data collection and interpretation in a manner which was observable and verifiable. The research used cross-sectional and descriptive designs where qualitative data was collected through reviewing of company manuals. A questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data from 76 private seed firms in Kenya, using stratified sampling technique, with 280 respondents from top management, finance, operations, and information communication technology departments. Data acquired through the administration of questionnaires was analyzed utilizing multiple regression analysis, and a rigorous assessment of hypotheses. The investigation yielded an array of insightful findings, notably, strategic organizational learning capability emerged as a pivotal determinant, displaying a robust and statistically significant positive relationship. The study concluded that strategic organizational learning capability indeed had a significant influence on the sustainable competitive advantage of seed companies in Kenya. The study stresses the importance of investing in and strengthening strategic organizational learning capability. Seed companies should therefore foster a culture of continuous learning, measure and assess learning outcomes, and promote sustainable competitive advantage.

Key words: *strategic human resource capability, sustainable competitive advantage, seed industry*

DOI 10.35942/jahss.v3i1.11

Cite this Article:

Kosiom, T., Uzel, J., Oloo, D., & Bana, W., (2024). Strategic Organizational Learning Capability and Sustainable Competitive Advantage of Seed Companies in Kenya. *Journal of Applied Humanities and Social Sciences- ISSN 2791-1594*, 3(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.35942/jahss.v3i1.11>

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Seed companies play a pivotal role in agriculture industry (Donovan, Rutsaert, Domínguez, & Peña, 2022) which is the backbone of the Kenyan economy (Jonga, Waiganjo, & Njeru, 2018). Despite their important role, their competitiveness and thus performance hence the ability to serve the agriculture industry has been a challenge (Jonga, Waiganjo, & Njeru, 2018). The effort by firms to undertake strategic actions that allow for the sustainable competitive advantage (SCA) against rivals in same industry is facing a major challenge in the modern, evolving business environment (Islami, Mustafa, & Topuzovska Latkovikj, 2020). Firms are searching for more creative ways, including harnessing strategic capabilities, to set themselves apart from competitors hence gaining the SCA (Hieu, 2020; Chepkole & Deya, 2019). Strategic capability is an accumulated and complex set of knowledge and skills that enables a firm to take strategic actions that bring sustained economic competitive advantage (Runtu & Ellitan, 2021).

Seyhan, *et al.*, (2017) stated that strategic capability of an organization is dependent on physical and financial assets, technology, human resources, and organizational structures. Ndanu (2020) viewed the SCA as firm's capacity to perform better owing to the different levels of strategic capabilities. Organizations aim at building their growth and gaining the SCA through recognizing, developing, and enhancing strategic capabilities that are central to them (Seyhan *et al.*, 2017; Parnell, 2019). Organizations need diverse strategic capabilities in every function for value creation and sustainability (Abazeed, 2020; Sebhatu, 2021). Impact of strategic capabilities on the SCA has been studied with results showing that access to capabilities such as human resource development, financial management, organizational learning, marketing, market-linking and technology have varying influence (Zgarni & Lamia, 2019). Nusair, *et al.*, (2021) examined strategic capabilities in small- and medium-sized firms (SMEs') with an emphasis on marketing, management, and organizational capacities, as well as how these factors affect company performance. According to the author, strategic capability significantly affects customer satisfaction in service SMEs compared to similar categories in manufacturing. Dhir and Dhir (2019) carried out a study on e-

organizations in India and found out that organizational creativity, flexibility, and innovation capabilities are critical in retaining a competitive edge and improving company performance. The impact of strategic capabilities in achieving sustainable competitive advantage of southern fertilizer industry in Iraq was significant and positive (Hattab, Atti, & Sabeeh, 2023)

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Seed companies play a key role in contributing considerably to Kenya's food security, as well as overall economic growth and development through provision of certified seeds. However, there is inadequate supply of quality seed in the market leading to poor production and low productivity (Kiruthi, 2022). Although the number of registered seed companies in Kenya has dramatically increased, the availability of certified seed is still relatively low (Jonga, Waiganjo, & Njeru, 2018). This trend has made Kenya to become a net importer of agricultural commodities thus depleting the foreign exchange earnings while exposing the country to global commodity volatility (Al-Sadiq, Bejar, & Ötoker, 2021). This has also resulted in job opportunities shifting to exporting countries, leading to a significant increase in unemployment (Scott, Kamau, & Snyder, 2021). Improving seed industry's SCA is touted to enhance provision of high-quality seed that will bring about high yields resulting to sufficient food security, wealth creation and economic growth (Westengen, *et al.*, 2019; Bogale, 2021).

Existing empirical studies have examined the strategic capability of companies in various industries and contexts but they fail to address the unique challenges, opportunities and dynamics faced by seed companies in Kenya. This study therefore, aimed at addressing this gap by investigating the influence of strategic capabilities on the SCA in the context of the Kenyan seed industry. The overall goal was to enhance availability of certified seed, promote agricultural productivity, food security and reverse trade imbalances.

1.3 Objectives of The Study

The objective of the study was to examine the influence of strategic organizational learning capability on the sustainable competitive advantage of seed companies in Kenya.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

2.1.1 Organizational Learning Theory

Organizational Learning Theory, advanced by Chris Argyris and Donald Schön in the 1970s, emphasizes the importance of both single-loop and double-loop learning within organizations (Rhodes, 1998). It explores how organizations acquire and

apply knowledge, promoting adaptive responses to change and a critical examination of underlying assumptions. The theory also highlights the creation and transfer of knowledge, ultimately striving for the development of learning organizations capable of continuous improvement and innovation. It provides a framework for understanding how organizations can become more effective, adaptive, and responsive to change by harnessing their collective knowledge and learning capabilities (Hafit, *et al.*, 2022). In promoting a learning mindset and creating supportive environments, organizations can enhance their performance, competitiveness, and long-term success. Organizational learning refers to creation, retention and transferability of knowledge inside the organization leading to improvement over time and enhancement of the organizational resilience (Nerland, 2022).

Survival of an organization is to a significant degree, subject to how well the organization can learn and adjust to the environmental changes, accepts changes, and improves its operations (Odor, 2018; Helder & Pinheiro, 2020). This implies that the ability of a firm to learn, acquire, apply, as well as disseminate and manage knowledge to enable it adapt and thrive is the basis of this theory (You, Kim, & Lim, 2021). Organizational learning theory was critical in seed industry, in particular, plant breeding that require immense experience and learning. This theory underpins the study's objective, which was the determination of the influence of strategic organizational learning capability on Kenya's seed enterprises' sustainable competitive advantage.

2.1.2 Dynamic Capability Theory

David J. Teece and his associates first put forth the theory in the 1990s in an effort to address the shortcomings of traditional resource-based theories of competitive advantage. Dynamic capacity theory places more emphasis on the relevance of organizational processes and capabilities in adjusting to shifting market conditions (2000). Dynamic capability is the ability of a business to actively integrate, develop, refresh, and reconfigure its internal and external resources and skills in order to respond to and alter rapidly changing business environments. Teece (2019) made a substantial contribution to the theory of dynamic capability by explaining the micro-foundations for each of the three aspects of sensing, seizing, and changing. Dynamic capability refers to finding, identifying, generating, and taking advantage of the chances for entrepreneurship given in the external contexts of intense intricacy and instability, organizations can strategically match their resources and demands (Bari, Chimhundu, & Chan, 2022).

This theory posits that industry need dynamic capability to establish continued strategic competitive advantage because dynamic capability produce intangible, valuable resources, that are both rare and hard to duplicate (Li, *et al.*, 2021). This

theory concentrates on a firm's ability to quickly arrange or rearrange outside capabilities effectively to satisfy current market needs (Blandina, Muathe, & Maina, 2021). Thus, dynamic capability denotes the potential of an organization to attain new and innovative systems of competitive advantage regardless of core rigidities and path dependencies in the company's technical and organizational processes (Muithya & Muathe, 2020). They are therefore the foundation of strategic competitive advantage and the driving force behind adaptability and innovation.

2.2 Review of Literature on the Study Variables

Strategic organizational learning capability is firms' ability to acquire, assimilate, and apply knowledge which contributes to the SCA to enable firms stay ahead of the competition, respond to market changes, drive innovation, and continuously improve performance (Azeem, Ahmed, Haide, & M., 2021). It creates a knowledge-driven culture that empowers employees, fosters creativity, and positions the organization as a learning organization capable of leveraging knowledge to gain a sustainable competitive edge. Management therefore, needs to acknowledge the importance of learning, that is, developing an organizational learning culture which facilitates attainment, creation, alongside dissemination of knowledge as values that are central. In the post COVID-19 pandemic, a strong learning corporate culture is required to maintain the SCA of firms (Githuku, Kinyua, & Muchemi, 2022). Creating an environment of a learning culture encourage people to share experiences that lead to new ideas and creative solutions to challenging issues. There are known negative effects of knowledge hiding on organizational performance. A management commitment and involvement in learning in all crucially important parts of an organization's operations increases firm's competitiveness (Jasimuddin & Saci, 2022).

The Sustainable Competitive Advantage encompasses the unique strengths and capabilities in a business which empower it to outperform its rivals consistently over the long term (Abdi, Omwenga, & Guyo, 2020). It is the ability of a company to create and maintain a unique and defensible position in the market, which is not easily replicated by other players. To achieve the SCA, a company must possess certain qualities or attributes that set it apart from others. In research to establish the determinants of a firm's SCAs, Lee and Yoo (2021) carried out a study focusing on Korean small enterprises. The researchers looked at innovation capability mediated the enhancement of a company's competitive advantages through market orientation.

Customer perspective plays a significant role in achieving SCA (Yousef & Karam, 2020). Understanding customers' needs, delivering superior value, ensuring satisfaction and loyalty, leveraging feedback for continuous improvement, driving customer-centric innovation, and building a strong brand reputation, companies can

differentiate themselves and maintain their competitive edge over the long term (Wang, et al., 2023). Customer satisfaction is a central component of the customer perspective. It involves measuring the level of customer satisfaction with various aspects, such as delivery deadlines, product quality, and price. Financial perspective involves assessing and managing financial performance and metrics to achieve business objectives and create value for stakeholders (Marcu, 2020). The financial perspective is crucial in measuring the financial health, profitability, and efficiency of a company. Learning and growth perspective is a viewpoint that focuses on the capacity of an organization to learn, innovate, and develop its employees and internal capabilities (Utomo, Machmuddah, & Setiawanta, 2019). It recognizes that continuous learning and improvement are critical for long-term success and the SCA. The learning and growth viewpoint also entail assessing the company's viability with regard to educating staff on rapidly evolving technologies and demonstrating to them how to increase productivity (Yousef & Karam, 2020). Modern businesses operate in a fast-paced environment, and technological improvements and evolving market trends require organizations to continuously adapt and upgrade their employees' skills and knowledge.

3.0 Research Methodology

The current study used cross-sectional and descriptive in order to examine the relationship between strategic capabilities and the SCA of Kenyan seed companies. These designs were the most appropriate for this study because they allowed for the evaluation of the influence of multiple variables on a single variable without manipulating the variable. The study tested correlations relating to the current status of the relevant variables. A descriptive survey study design's main goal is to explain the current circumstance as it stands.

Target population came from the operations in the firm that included research/breeding, production, processing and marketing/distribution. All the firm sizes of the seed companies were included in the study. The target population under the focus study were senior managers from the four functional areas of the seed companies operating in Kenya who were deemed to play strategic roles. The units of analysis of this study was drawn from 95 private seed companies operating in Kenya and the unit of observation was senior employees of these companies comprising of top management, finance, operations and ICT who are deemed to be involved in strategic decision making where 63 companies participated in the study. Current study sampling frame consisted of senior managers from four functional areas namely, top management, finance, operations and ICT of the seed companies operating in Kenya. The units of analysis of this study were drawn from 95 seed companies operating in Kenya and the unit of observation was senior employees of these companies who were deemed to be involved in strategic decision making.

A stratified random sampling technique was implemented to allow sampling to be carried out individually in every stratum, where every stratum was then sampled using simple random sampling. The sample size of the population was obtained through application of a formula provided below considering that total population was 95 seed companies. Adam (2020) provides a formula to compute sample size:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N\epsilon^2}$$

Where n = minimum returned sample size

N = the population size

ϵ = adjust margin of error $\left[\epsilon = \left(\frac{pe}{t} \right) \right]$

e = the degree of accuracy expressed as a proportion

ρ = the number of standard deviations that would include all possible

t = t-value for the selected alpha level of confidence level.

When applied in this case, it was $\epsilon = \frac{2(0.05)}{1.96} = 0.051$

Sample size would be $n = \frac{95}{1 + 95(0.051)^2} = 76$ seed companies from a total of 95.

Four functional areas comprising of top management, finance, operations, and ICT were identified for each seed company from which a total of 280 respondents were drawn. Representatives from each of the four functional areas, namely, top management, finance, operations and ICT were sampled.

Data was collected using mixed structured questionnaires with closed-ended questions addressed to the senior managers from the four functional areas, namely, top management, finance, operations and ICT during the study which were largely primary data. The closed questions were created to keep the questionnaire at a manageable length and encourages response. It is also more suitable because it allowed for consistency in the questions posed and the collection of data for analysis. Cooper and Schindler (2011) indicated on their description that the questionnaires. Regression analysis was applied in inferring the relationship between the study variables.

4.0 Research Findings and Discussions

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

4.1.1 Strategic Organizational Learning Capability

The second objective was to assess how strategic organizational learning capability affected Kenyan seed companies' SCA. The impact of each independent variable within the crucial range of 3.4 to 4.1 was generally acknowledged by the study

participants. The respondents' opinions did not differ significantly, as evidenced by the overall standard deviation of 0.77. They specifically moderately acknowledged the influence of strategic organizational learning capability in their respective companies (overall mean score = 4.096). This highlights that the surveyed individuals or companies showed a moderate level of recognition for the impact of strategic organizational learning capability within their organizations. The mean score of 4.096 quantifies this acknowledgment, signifying that the respondents viewed this influence moderately. It suggests that organizations in the study perceive that their strategic organizational learning capabilities play a noticeable, yet not exceedingly dominant role in shaping their operations and outcomes. This finding indicates that there may be room for further enhancing and leveraging organizational learning capabilities to improve overall performance.

Similarly, all the three sub-variables used to measure this variable indicated moderate degrees of agreement, that is, openness to learning culture (mean score= 4.09), intrapreneurial capability (mean score= 4.15), and Knowledge Management Capability (mean score= 4.04). Importantly, the study respondents revealed a strong reaction to most of the statements that measured intrapreneurial capability, only moderately agreeing with the statement that “potential intrapreneurs are facilitated to venture wider in the market for the SCA.” Moderate agreement was also expressed for the rest of the other statements that measured strategic organizational learning capability.

Table 1: Descriptive Results for Strategic Organizational Learning Capability

Statement of the questionnaire	Mean	Std. Dev.
Learning in our company has improved our SCA	4.06	.827
Our company has structured team through which learning occurs to enable the SCA	4.12	.747
Our organization has adopted technology in its learning processes for the SCA	4.16	.873
Our organization supports individual learning through reward and recognition systems to advance the SCA	4.03	.932
Innovativeness in our organization is positively related to our SCA	4.21	.682
Resource allocation to new opportunities in our organization are highly encouraged to boost the SCA	4.24	.688
Profitable innovations in our organization are highly rewarded to advance SCA	4.22	.713
Potential intrapreneurs are facilitated to venture wider in the market for SCA	3.93	.720
Knowledge creation in our organization positively	3.99	.756

influence our organization's SCA		
Sharing of knowledge, experiences, information and skills strengthens our SCA	4.08	.768
The application of the collected, processed and shared knowledge in our organization increases our SCA	4.07	.707
Our company uses different methods, processes and practices to improve our SCA	4.05	.813
Overall Mean	4.0969	0.768833

Source: *Survey Data (2023)*

The findings concur with Mworira and Muchemi (2022), who reported that organizational learning strategy has a positive and significant influence on the success of Kenya's medium-sized family-owned businesses. It is also in line with Odor (2018) and Helder & Pinheiro (2020), who found out that the survival of an organization is to a significant degree subject to how well the organization can learn and adjust to external changes, accept changes, and advance its actions. This finding confirms the Organizational Learning Theory as explained by You, Kim, and Lim (2021), which states that the ability of a firm to learn, acquire, apply, as well as disseminate and manage knowledge will enable it to adapt and thrive. The findings fit well into the definition of the strategic organizational learning capability concept by Azeem, Ahmed, and Haide (2021), who defined it as firms' ability to acquire, assimilate, and apply knowledge that contributes to a firm's competitive advantage to enable it to stay ahead of the competition, respond to market changes, drive innovation, and continuously improve performance. It can be concluded that seed companies have known how to transfer knowledge from one area of the company to another in enhancing the SCA, as observed by López, Guadalupe, Hernández, Osuna, and Limón (2023). Organizations seeking SCA should therefore consider strategic organizational learning capability.

4.1.2 The Sustainable Competitive Advantage

The sustainable competitive advantage was the dependent variable for the study. There was moderate degree of agreement about the influence of the SCA in the respective companies of the study respondents. The descriptive results revealed an overall mean score of 4.09, denoting an agreement. This means that there was a moderate level of consensus among the study respondents regarding the influence of SCA in their respective companies, as demonstrated by the 4.09 overall mean score. The average score indicates that there is a discernible level of consensus among the respondents regarding the significance and impact of SCA within their respective companies. The term "denoting an agreement" further emphasizes this consensus, indicating that the respondents generally acknowledged the significance of SCA in shaping their company's performance and competitive position. The

mean score of 4.09 quantifies this moderate level of agreement, highlighting the relevance and impact of SCA in their respective companies

Subsequently, the sub-variables measuring for this variable also yielded moderate degrees of agreement: Customer perspective (mean score= 4.13), Learning perspective (mean score= 4.11), and financial perspective (mean score= 4.03). Notably the increased mean scores in Customer perspective and learning perspective was attributed to the strong degrees of agreement with the following statements; “The use of customer surveys in our company has improved the SCA,” “Potential clients are referred to us by our customers,” and “We encourage new innovations in seed production.” The study respondents moderately agreed with the remaining statements that measured for the SCA. The responses showed only slight variations, as indicated by the overall standard deviation of 0.773.

Table 2: Descriptive Results for the sustainable competitive advantage

Statement of the questionnaire	Mean	Std. Dev.
Feedback from our customer satisfaction questionnaires is outstanding	4.10	.872
The use of customer surveys in our company has improved the SCA	4.24	.778
Potential clients are referred to us by our customers	4.17	.731
We value and reward customer loyalty	4.02	.730
Our firm has experienced growth in profits	4.08	.834
Our firm has experienced growth in revenue	4.05	.795
Our return on investment has been impressive	4.04	.843
Our company’s pricing strategy is competitive	3.96	.860
Our company embraces continuous learning	4.06	.766
Our employees have been engaged in continuous research and development	4.10	.743
We encourage new innovations in seed production	4.22	.670
Our sales have increased due to continuous production of quality crop varieties	4.10	.654
Overall Mean	4.0941	0.773

Source: *Survey Data (2023)*

The findings are intricately tied to the concept of the Sustainable Competitive Advantage, a fundamental principle in modern business strategy. SCA, as defined in the literature, encompasses the distinctive strengths and capabilities of a business that enable it to consistently outperform competitors over an extended period (Abdi, Omwenga, & Guyo, 2020). The data, with its emphasis on customer satisfaction, innovation, and financial performance, vividly illustrates the key determinants of SCA. A high level of customer satisfaction, as reported in the questionnaire, aligns perfectly with Wang *et al.*, (2023) that understanding and meeting customer needs, ensuring loyalty, and driving continuous improvement are essential components of SCA. This suggests that the seed companies' customer-centric approach is a vital source of the SCA, fostering long-term loyalty and differentiation from rivals. The seed companies' commendable financial performance, characterized by growth in profits and revenue, resonates with the financial perspective's core tenets of assessing and managing financial metrics to create value for stakeholders (Marcu, 2020). Thus, the data underscores the symbiotic relationship between financial strength and the SCA. In essence, the results provide empirical evidence of how customer-centricity and financial soundness play pivotal roles in the attainment and maintenance of SCA, reaffirming the theoretical foundations outlined in the literature.

The data underscores this idea by revealing that the seed companies consistently receive outstanding feedback from customer satisfaction questionnaires, reflecting a high level of customer contentment (Ribeiro & Neto, 2021). In the context of Porter's theory, such customer satisfaction can be regarded as a crucial characteristic that enables the seed companies to outshine their competitors, as satisfied customers are more likely to remain loyal, thereby providing the company with the sustainable competitive edge. This correlation between customer satisfaction and the SCA underscores the significance of cultivating strong customer relationships, a key tenet of Porter's theory (Nguyen et al., 2021). The results indicate that the company places a strong emphasis on innovation, continuous learning, and research and development. These attributes are vital components of the Competitive Advantage Theory, which emphasizes the creation of goods or services of superior quality that can be offered at a premium price. Innovation and product quality are intrinsic characteristics that distinguish a company from its rivals and enable it to command higher prices for its offerings (Nguyen et al., 2021).

4.2 Inferential Analysis Results

To determine the linear relationship between the independent, dependent, and moderating variables, a correlation analysis was performed.

Table 3: Regression Results

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate		
.483a	0.23282	0.229113	0.446658		
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	12.53266	1	12.53266	62.81918	.000b
Residual	41.29728	207	0.199504		
Total	53.82994	208			
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	2.088963	0.25217		8.283951	0.000
strategic organizational learning capability	0.484173	0.061088	0.482514	7.925855	0.000

a. *Dependent Variable: competitive strategies*

b. *Predictors: (Constant), strategic organizational learning capability*

Source: *Survey Data (2023)*

The Sustainable Competitive Advantage (meanSCA), the dependent variable, notably showed a linear relationship with the moderating and predictor variables. Strategic Organizational Learning Capability (R=0.483, p-value<0.05) showed a strong positive linear relationship. The coefficient for strategic organizational learning capability was 0.484, p<0.05. These results indicate that as a company's strategic organizational learning capability increases, its strategic competitive advantage also tend to increase. This implies that organizations with a strong learning culture are better positioned for overall success. The results were in tandem with most of the empirical findings that indicated that strategic organizational learning capability influenced sustainable competitive advantage (Abdi, Omwenga, & Guyo, 2020); (Blandina, Muathe, & Maina, 2021).

5.0 Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study investigated the impact of strategic organizational learning capability on the SCA of seed companies in Kenya. The research found that strategic organizational learning capability had a strong positive and statistically significant linear relationship with the SCA. The study concluded that strategic organizational learning capability indeed had a significant influence on the SCA of seed companies in Kenya. This conclusion was supported by the variable's low p-value, which indicated statistical significance at a confidence level exceeding 95%.

Furthermore, the Beta coefficient for strategic organizational learning capability was positive and significant, signifying that it was an influential predictor variable in the model. In essence, this study provides empirical evidence that emphasizes the importance of strategic organizational learning capability in enhancing the competitive advantage of seed companies in Kenya, highlighting its potential as a key driver of sustainable success in this industry.

5.3 Recommendations

The study stresses the importance of investing in and strengthening strategic organizational learning capability. Seed companies should foster a culture of continuous learning, measure and assess learning outcomes, and promote knowledge transfer. The use of technology and benchmarking with industry best practices are encouraged to enhance the impact of organizational learning. The study recommends investing learning practices for the companies and their staff and continuous evaluating of new opportunities coming up within the industry, locally, regionally and globally.

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