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Differentiation and benchmarking as competitive strategies: An analysis of organisational performance of savings and credit cooperative societies in Kenya

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Abstract

Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies (SACCOs) are essential in reducing poverty, wealth creation, and development. However, they have been faced with declining organizational performance characterized by low market share, inability to satisfy customers and low employee productivity. In the current study, the aim was to establish the effect of differentiation and benchmarking strategies on organizational performance of SACCOs in Nairobi City county, Kenya. The study was anchored on balanced scorecard model, diffusion of innovation theory, Porter's and general theory of competitive strategies. The target population was forty-nine SACCOs in Nairobi City County, Kenya that were registered with Sacco Societies Regulatory Authority. The target respondents were one operations manager, one finance manager, one administration manager, and one human resource manager from each of the 49 Savings and credit cooperative Societies. A census was used, and primary data was collected using an open and closed ended questionnaire. The validity of research instrument was determined by experts and pilot study. Alpha Cronbach method was used to ascertain the reliability of research instrument and threshold was 0.7. Data was analysed utilizing descriptive and inferential statistics especially mean, standard deviation and multiple regression with the aid of statistical package for social sciences. Tables were utilized to present the data. The researchers upheld research ethics. The results revealed that differentiation strategy had a negative and insignificant effect contrary to much established theory on organizational performance, while benchmarking strategy had a positive and significant effect. The study recommends that management of SACCOs should improve operational efficiency and competitiveness in the market. The study is meant to benefit policy makers, management of Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies, Sacco Society Regulatory Authority, government, academicians and researchers. The findings are additional literature to existing body of knowledge.

Keywords: Differentiation; Benchmarking; Competitive Strategies; Organisational Performance

1. Introduction

Globally, Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies (SACCOs) are classified as microfinance organizations that are run independently by a group of people who join together with shared interests (Nthaga, 2018). Developed countries like UK and USA have well-established SACCOs with a large membership base and good performance (Pearce & Robinson, 2017). In India, despite the financial and economic services they provide, SACCOs are faced with challenges such as poor funding, ineffective management, fraud, and low membership which have thus negatively affected performance (Mmari & Thinyane, 2019). Challenges include declining revenues, economic viability, assets, the volume of client loans granted, and an increase in loan-to-value percentages for SACCOs (Shilimi, 2021). Organisational performance of most of the SACCOs has been below average, and numerous firms across different industries are experiencing financial difficulties while other businesses are barely enduring (Juma & Maseko, 2022). Globally operational SACCOs are faced with enormous challenges that must be overcome to ensure their financial stability and operational excellence.

The performance of organisations throughout Africa encounters major difficulties mainly in public institutions due to corruption and poor governance and inadequate human resources management systems. Profits loss due to corruption in Africa amount to billions each year and this corruption strongly damages both economic development and public confidence. Yasin (2014) argues that SACCOs are outperforming banks in the UK as a result of their effective and aggressive competitive strategies. Globally,Ngugi and Kising'u (2017) contend that a competitive strategy that gives businesses in the UK a competitive edge is called "service differentiation," and it focuses on the content of the services that are provided to clients. It covers the components of the services, the area of specialization, and the mode of delivery. Bangladesh's manufacturing sector, particularly the food sector, has grown quickly, and management of businesses have improved their ability to compete in the market. In order to improve performance, owners of businesses are implementing a variety of competitive strategies in response to the intense competition (Baraza & Arasa, 2017). Competitive strategies have enabled the companies to be competitive and improve their market share and positioning (Hossain, Kabir & Mahbub, 2019). Mrefu & Gichure (2022) note that most Nigerian businesses struggle with cash flow, particularly in financial services .

Kemunto, Kisavi, & Gideon (2020) observe that the investment in Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies dropped by 17%, as per 2019 Sacco Societies Regulatory Authority report, jeopardizing the deposit Taking-Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies' market sustainability. The African continent had 40 million registrants, 40,570 collaborator or partnerships, and a 14.3% penetration rate. Mukonza & Swarts (2020) affirm that many South African businesses use competitive strategies which include green marketing techniques to improve brand recognition and operational efficiency. Kyazze & Nkote (2020) also observed significant drawbacks in SACCOs concerning administration and education matters. Otungu (2020) notes that despite government initiatives toward implementation improvement, the gap between targets and actual results remains significant due to organisations resistant to change with limited capacity and political interference occurrences.Shilimi (2021) argues that despite significant accomplishments by some Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies especially those in regulated businesses, drawbacks remain in administration and education. Kaberi & Kung'u (2022) reveal that 86% of Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies in Kenya experienced a 12% decrease in cash flows and a 15% drop in profitability. In Kenya, the effectiveness of SACCOs is marked by non-performing loans, poor financing, and inadequate management (Nahikiriza, Mugabe & Kansiime, 2023). Most SACCOs also face challenges in financial record-keeping due to a shortage of qualified accountants.

1.1. Organizational performance

Organizational performance, as per Folan & Browne (2005), is the act of comparing a firm's accomplishments in opposition to predetermined objectives and targets. It includes comparing the actual outputs or outcomes to the intended results as stated in the organizational plans. Akintokunbo (2018) argues that profitability, market share, and efficiency are measures of performance. This is a gauge that measures the way firms respond to a demand or take action that results in a successful outcome or in the actual application and utilization of knowledge rather than just its acquisition and possession (Kago, Gichunge, & Baimwera, 2018). An organization's ability to meet the outlined standards in its goals, mission, and vision is evaluated by its organizational performance (Ngugi, 2021). This is the result of an organization's operations and strategy as well as the extent to which it meets its goals and compilation of individuals' acts in accordance with organizational duties (Nafari & Rezaei, 2022). Kirvan (2022) argues that organizational performance is a term that depicts efficiency and effectiveness of a firm or an entity, as an entity's productivity and effectiveness are gauged by its performance. According to Atela & Kipkorir (2023), the purpose of organizational performance is to explain the reasons behind the success or failure of a company, an industry, or, more broadly, the connection between economic and business performance. According to Owenga, Mutinda, & Mapelu (2023), organizational performance encompasses three domains that pertain to company outcomes: monetary performance, comprising profits, asset returns, and investment returns; performance in the product market, encompassing sales and market share; and shareholders' return, encompassing total returns for shareholders and added economic value. This the act of comparing a firm's accomplishments in opposition to predetermined objectives and targets. It includes comparing the actual outputs or outcomes to the intended results as stated in the organizational plans. The financial performance indicators used by organisations consist of profitability , liquidity and capital adequacy. In addition, asset quality serves as another measure of success. Operational efficiency along with member satisfaction levels and governance quality and regulatory standards compliance represent non-financial indicators in SACCOs measurement processes. The assessment takes into account how well SACCOs provides services to members along with member engagement patterns and transparent management practises and robust control systems implementation (Greenwood & Hinnings, 2017). These assessment criteria create a complete performance analysis that links financial conditions to the social and developmental work of the cooperative organisation (Njiru, J. M., & Githinji-Muriithi). In the current study organizational performance was measured in terms market share as argued by Hossain, Kabir & Mahbub (2019), employee productivity as argued by Kirvan (2022) and customer satisfaction as suggested by Chesire & Kinyua (2022). Market share is the total sales of an organization's product in percentage in a particular market niche (Akintokunbo, 2018).

Market share provides firms with information about the preferences of their clientele for their offerings and also shows how successfully an entity is able to improve its marketability. A larger market share provides companies with economies of scale, bargaining power, and a competitive edge over their rivals (Gounaris & Dimitriadis, 2017). Market share is a common tool used by firms to set marketing goals and monitor development (Zarantonello, Grappi, Formisano & Brakus, 2020). Market share measures how much of the market share is controlled by organization as a crucial sign of a company's standing in the marketplace, keeping customers and hence possessing a higher market share leads to increased sales and profits (Hayes, Khartit & Rathburn, 2022). When evaluating company plans, it is widely used as a key performance indicator (KPI), to gauge expansion, and make informed choices regarding resource allocation, market positioning, and upcoming investments (Bhattacharya, Morgan & Rego, 2022). Through a variety of techniques, like product differentiation, innovation, price strategies, and customer satisfaction initiatives, market share of businesses grow. The market share of various SACCOs in Kenya is used to gauge financial standing. Customers who are satisfied with a brand are more likely to stick with it, make more purchases, and refer others to the brand. The preservation of clientele, successful word-of-mouth promotion, and sustained business prosperity all hinge on elevated customer contentment rates. Customer satisfaction implies how effective a company's products, services, and overall customer encounter align with or exceed the anticipations of its clientele (Chesire & Kinyua, 2022). The author argue that organizational viability is determined by how well the customer feels or how goods or service meets client's needs, and as a result, consumer happiness tend to be influenced by the item, Subsequently, organization's financial standing is affected. Customer satisfaction was one of the measures used to assess the performance of SACCOs in Kenya

Employee productivity refers to the level of precision and effectiveness with which staff members execute their responsibilities and generate desired outcomes. The effectiveness of the workforce is crucial in deciding the enterprise's future (Islami, Mulolli & Mustafa, 2018). Employee involvement per unit of duration and outcome are compared to determine employee productivity (Mumen, Oganda, Lutfiani & Handayani, 2020). Organizations that prioritize employee productivity often foster a positive work atmosphere, provide opportunities for learning & growth, and implement streamlined performance evaluation systems. The ability of a company's employees to foster innovation, achieve goals, and provide superior goods and services affects the company's overall performance (Mulyati, Zebua, Chakim & Khairul, 2022). Employee productivity is evaluated to ascertain and gauge how well employees are performing, ensuring that results align as closely as possible with set expectations (Kirvan, 2022).Employee efficiency can be measured against work goals that include measures of scale, such as the variety of accomplishments in an established number of elements or dimensions, quality, such as accomplishments that adhere to established criteria, duration, such as a spectrum of accomplishments in moments, days, hours, months, cycles, and a long time, and expenses, such as the minimum quantity required to be invested (Mulyati, Zebua, Chakim & Khairul, 2022).

1.2 Differentiation and benchmarking as competitive strategies

Competitive strategy encompasses cost leadership, differentiation, and focus strategies that provide sustainable advantages (Teeratansirikool, Siengthai, Badir, & Charoenngam 2013). The concept involves creating distinctions between a firm's offerings and those of competitors, as observed by Banker, Mashruwala, & Tripathy (2014). According to Krishnamoorthy & D'Lima (2014), benchmarking is also a critical part of competitive strategy, enabling performance improvement. Hitt, Ireland, & Hoskisson (2015) outline five business-level strategies: cost leadership, distinctiveness, focused differentiation, integrated cost leadership/differentiation, and focused cost leadership. Alosani, Al-Dhaafri, & Yusoff (2016) support the idea that firms can use benchmarking to learn best practices and enhance performance. Gwangwava, E., & Muranda, Z. (2021) later associate benchmarking with organizational development, while Birir, Kipruto, & Njenga (2022) integrate cost leadership and market focus as fundamental aspects. Differentiation strategy focuses on setting a company apart through unique features, quality, or innovation. Semuel, Siagian, & Octavia (2017) highlight the importance of innovation and quality in achieving differentiation, which leads to competitive performance. Islami, Mulolli, & Mustafa (2018) emphasize that applying Porter's differentiation strategy enhances corporate outcomes. Okeke,O & Unyemachi (2018) connect differentiation with success in research, branding, and customer service. Crespo, Simeos, and Fontes (2020) argue that service differentiation plays a key role in international market success. Elikwu & Mohammed (2020) assert that differentiation earns customer loyalty through distinct offerings. Gwangwava & Muranda (2022) affirms that differentiation defines organizational uniqueness. Engelke (2022) applies service differentiation as a strategic indicator, & Tojiri (2023) adds that it influences pricing, performance, and management. According to a study by Ochieng & Kipkorir (2025) differentiated products are accessibility, affordable, create customer brand loyalty and offers different individual benefits to customers. Benchmarking, as part of strategic management, involves comparing performance metrics to best practices for continuous improvement. Krishnamoorthy & D'Lima (2014) identify benchmarking as a key element of competitive strategy. Alosani, Al-Dhaafri, & Yusoff (2016) describe it as a tool for learning and performance enhancement. Demir (2019) explains that firms strengthen operational effectiveness by using benchmarking to assess and improve performance. Ifrim, Stanciu, Sürgün, & Ungureanu (2020) argue that benchmarking is relevant in dynamic and uncertain environments. Gwangwava, E., & Muranda, Z. (2021) recognize its role in driving organizational improvements. Murerwa & Kinyua (2021),in their study, utilized competitive benchmarking as a measure of performance. Wafula (2022) provides description on internal, external, and functional benchmarking. This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To examine the effect of differentiation strategy on organizational performance of SACCOs in Nairobi City County, Kenya
- To determine the influence of benchmarking strategy on organizational performance of SACCOs in Nairobi County, Kenya

2. Literature Review

2.1 Differentiation Strategy and Organizational Performance

Njoki (2018) evaluated the connection that exists between performance and the differentiation approach. The study chose eight (8) active County of Murang'a SACCOs using a census survey approach. Purposive sampling was used in the research's choosing participants. Primary obtained data was via the use of questionnaires administered to sixty-four (64) respondents. SACCOs financial documents and additional publications provided study's secondary data. Statistically significant relationships between performances and differentiation method were found in assessment of data obtained through inferential and descriptive analysis. In the current study differentiation was measured in in terms of differences in products, technologies, and services. The findings indicated that differentiation strategy is widely recognized as a valuable approach for SACCOs in Kenya. Elikwu & Mohammed (2020) examined the effects of differentiation strategy and how small manufacturing businesses performed as a result. The sample consisted of one hundred ninety-three (193) respondents, and data was primarily obtained utilizing questionnaire. Industrial enterprises are selected using purposive-stratified sampling and random sampling procedures. Regression tests and basic frequency analysis were utilized, and the output unveiled that product packaging differentiation significantly improved client acceptability. Random technique of sampling was deployed whereas in current study census was sued. These results emphasize the importance of continuously refining differentiation efforts in products, technology, and services to enhance competitiveness, customer satisfaction, and overall organizational performance. Gwangwava, E., & Muranda, Z. (2021) conducted research to see whether differentiation strategy has an impact on the success of Zimbabwean garment and apparel companies. Casual research design was applied with a population target study of one hundred and fifty (150) out of fifty (50) various clothing and textile manufacturing firms. A total of 150 respondents from the organizations selected for the process received structured questionnaires. The information was analysed in SPSS utilizing a model of linear regression and descriptive statistics. The conclusion was that differentiation strategy positively affects performances of selected firms. The study's problem was success while the problem in the current study was performance. Continuous upgrade of differentiation strategy across products, technology and services maintains corporate competitiveness with customer satisfaction and organisational performance. Wangui, Ander Mariam & Mote (2021) assessed how performance of Sisco Superior Cargo handling services Limited was affected by differentiation strategy. Target population for descriptive research approach was forty-five (45) employees in governance area of the firm. hence census was use. Results showed that firm's differentiation strategy was its greatest asset in achieving targeted performances. In the study questionnaire and in-depth interviews were used but in the current research only questionnaire was used. The study findings demonstrated that SACCOs in Kenya use differentiation strategy as an established valuable approach.

2.2 Benchmarking Strategy and Organizational Performance

Chebet & Muturi (2019) studied benchmarking as a strategy to see how it affected performance of few private hospitals in Kenya. Researchers focused on the managers and personnel of all 32 private hospitals in Kisii County and using survey design. One hundred and seventy-three (173) proprietors and medical practitioners were selected with the aid of census survey. Responses were gathered through the use of semi-structured questionnaires. Their financial performance is considerably affected by benchmarking, according to inferential and descriptive data. The focus was on benchmarking, but currently competitive benchmarking, performance benchmarking, and strategic benchmarking were considered. The findings indicated that benchmarking strategy was crucial in SACCOs in Kenya. Horvathova, Mokrisova & Vrablikova (2021) investigated benchmarking as a business performance risk assessment. The study sampled forty-eight (48) Slovak heat suppliers. Financial reports of the Slovak analytical agency for the year 2016 were utilized. To examine the gathered data, statistical methods like spearman's rank order correlation were employed. The study's conclusion demonstrated that data envelopment analysis, a very useful benchmarking method, gives benchmarks for sections experiencing performance issues and also identifies the risk performance elements. In the previous study the focus was on performance risk assessment. In the present study the focus was organizational performance. These results emphasize the importance of benchmarking as a strategic tool for enhancing competitiveness, performance, and organizational direction, making it essential for Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies to continuously enhance benchmarking practices to remain competitive in the industry.

Ahmad, Jalagar, Alulis & Aquini (2021) determined benchmarking usefulness for gaining competitive edge and heightened performance. The study employed the usage of market-based orientation, resource-based view and organizational learning theories. One of the suggested objectives that examined performance improvement of banking sector is examination of impacts of benchmarking in context of fundamental comparison of organizational performances in Indian banking industry. Determining whether benchmarking would provide the banking industry a competitive edge was another goal. It was discovered and revealed that the significant influence of competitive advantage where benchmarking is applied has not been clearly emphasized by a lot of studies. In the study market-based orientation, resource-based view and organizational learning theories were used while the recent study utilized the view of resource-based, scorecard balanced model, diffusion of innovation and porter's generic competitive strategies theories. The research data show that benchmarking strategy is a success used in SACCOs in Kenya. External debt and budget deficit are persistent macroeconomic concerns for both developed and developing nations. Numerous studies have explored their causes and consequences, with findings often varying based on region, period, and methodological approach. This study specifically investigates the challenges of budget deficits and the sustainability of external public debt in Bangladesh. Research conducted in other regions highlights relevant dynamics; for instance, Jayaraman and Lau (2009) in the Pacific and Butts (2009) in Latin American and Caribbean countries confirmed a measurable association between external public debt and economic growth, suggesting the importance of prudent debt management for macroeconomic performance.

The literature further highlights the structural roots of fiscal imbalance. Agarwal (2014) noted that fiscal deficits typically arise from a mismatch between public expenditures and tax revenues. Qayyum et al. (2014) warned that external debt can pose substantial burdens on an economy and jeopardize its stability. Osinubi and Olaleru (2006) addressed the debt overhang problem and proposed an optimal external debt ratio to maximize the benefits of borrowing while maintaining macroeconomic stability. Focusing on Jordan, Abdelhadi (2013) found a significant negative relationship between external debt and economic growth, pointing out that a large share of the balance of payments is often allocated to debt servicing. In similar contexts, Alam and Taib (2013) reported a positive relationship between external debt and fiscal deficit, whereas Al-Refai (2015) identified a positive link between domestic debt and economic growth. Shahateet et al. (2014), applying Granger causality tests, found no clear directional causality between budget deficit and debt, suggesting the relationship might be influenced by external factors. Al-Qudah and Jaradat (2018) examined the long-run dynamics and confirmed a connection among external debt, budget deficit, and growth. In contrast, Shihab (2014) discovered a unidirectional causality running from budget deficit to economic growth. Tung (2018) demonstrated that fiscal deficits tend to negatively affect gross output and private investment over both the short and long run.

More recent empirical findings remain mixed. Manasseh et al. (2022) found a significant negative relationship between external debt and growth in developing countries. In the context of Bangladesh, Saima and Uddin (2017) identified a unidirectional long-run causality from public debt to the budget deficit. Similarly, Tajammal and Butt (2024) find a consistently negative impact of external debt on growth in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, with the latter experiencing stronger adverse effects due to higher debt service ratios and weaker fiscal institutions. Farhana and Chowdhury (2014) revealed a negative relationship between foreign debt and GDP growth, but a positive association between investment and growth. Hussain and Haque (2017), using two distinct datasets, reported conflicting results—one indicating a positive and the other a negative long-run relationship between budget deficit and economic growth. Rahman et al. (2012), applying Granger causality tests, found bidirectional causality between GDP and external debt. Saifuddin (2016) observed a positive link between public debt, investment, and growth. However, multiple studies—including those by Hassan and Akhter (2014), Yeasmin et al. (2015), and Makun (2021)—consistently reported a negative impact of debt on GDP. Akhter and Hassan (2012) further indicated that although external debt negatively affects GDP, it positively influences investment and government reserves, suggesting a complex and context-dependent effect.

Despite the extensive literature, empirical evidence remains inconclusive and highly context specific. Variations in results are often attributable to differences in estimation techniques, periods, model specifications, and variable selections. A majority of studies on Bangladesh suggest a negative impact of external debt on growth, although others—including Saifuddin (2016), Edo et al. (2020), Silva (2020), Mohsin et al. (2021), and Joshua et al. (2021)—found a positive influence of external debt under certain conditions. Dey and Tareque (2020) emphasized the potential of sound macroeconomic policies to offset the negative consequences of debt, arguing that fiscal sustainability can be supported through coordinated monetary measures. Meanwhile, Hassan and Meyer (2021) underlined the role of institutional quality in mediating the effects of debt on growth. Given these varied outcomes, it remains essential to revisit the relationship among external debt, budget deficit, and economic growth, particularly in the context of Bangladesh's evolving fiscal landscape.

3. Methodology

Descriptive research design was used, and the target population was 49 Nairobi County Savings and Credit Cooperatives that are registered with Sacco Society Regulatory Authority, and the respondents were one operations manager, one finance manager, one administration manager, and one human resource manager. The total number of questionnaires distributed in the 49 Sacco's to the 4 managers each was a total of 196 and 83.7% rate of response was achieved. In the current study, census was used. Open and closed ended questionnaire was used based on 5-point Likert scale. Pilot study was conducted to determine content validity. Theories and conceptualization of study variables was meant to determine construct validity. Cronbach's Alpha Internal Consistency was used to compute coefficient of reliability with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences. Cronbach's Alpha coefficient threshold of 0.70 or above was regarded as adequate and acceptable as argued by Gliem and Gliem (2003). Differentiation and benchmarking strategies had coefficient of 0.857 and 0.786. Data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics and presented in tables. Research permit was obtained from National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation.

4. Results and Discussion

Differentiation strategy focuses on creating unique products or services that distinguish an organization from its competitors, enhancing customer loyalty and market positioning. This involves offering specialized products, customer service, and innovative digital solutions tailored to members' needs. The findings on differentiation strategy are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Differentiation Strategy

Statement	Percentage					Mean	Standard Deviation
	SD	D	N	A	SA		
The SACCOs differentiate its products to meet customer needs	4.1	2.4	4.1	26.8	62.6	4.4146	.98286
Product differentiation is an effective competitive strategy	2.4	0.8	3.3	32.5	61.0	4.4878	.81347
The SACCOs use differentiated technology	2.4	4.9	4.9	25.2	62.6	4.4065	.96528
Differentiated technology is an effective competitive strategy	4.1	2.4	3.3	25.2	65.0	4.4472	.97681
The SACCOs practice service differentiation	3.3	7.3	7.3	24.4	57.7	4.2602	1.08520
Services are differentiated for easy operations	2.4	4.1	5.7	39.8	48.0	4.2683	.92394
Differentiation strategy is carried out to enhance organizational performance	2.4	3.3	9.8	35.8	48.8	4.2520	.93733
Aggregate Value						4.3623	0.95498

Source: Survey Data (2025)

Table 1 presents the analysis of the effectiveness of the differentiation strategy in relation to the operational performance of SACCOs. The study established that SACCOs utilize product differentiation to meet client needs (mean of 4.4146) though variation clients' needs was low (standard deviation of 0.98286). Product differentiation is an effective competitive strategy (mean of 4.4878). However, variation in effectiveness was low (standard deviation of 0.81347). Researchers established that management of SACCOs in Kenya use differentiated technology (mean of 4.4065), indicating that the practice is widely recognized across the sector but variation was low (standard deviation of 0.96528. Differentiated technology is an effective competitive strategy (mean of 4.4472), confirming consistent impact but variation in effectiveness was low (standard deviation of 0.97681). SACCOs differentiate service (mean of 4.2602) which led to little variance (standard deviation of 1.08520). Differentiated services simplify operations (mean of 4.2683) though variation in operations was low (standard deviation of 0.92394), indicating strong but not uniform agreement. Differentiation strategy enhanced organizational performance (mean of 4.2520) which in turn did not vary much (standard deviation of 0.93733).

In general, all aspects of differentiation strategy affected organizational performance as per the mean of 4.3623. According to standard deviation of 0.95498 variation in organizational performance was low. These results are in line with previous studies Njoki (2018) identified a significant relationship between performance and differentiation strategy. Elikwu & Mohammed (2020**)** highlighted the importance of product packaging differentiation in improving customer acceptance. Similarly, Gwangwava, E., & Muranda, Z. (2021) demonstrated that differentiation strategies positively impact firm performance. Wangui, Ander Mariam, & Mote (2021) emphasize that a firm's differentiation strategy remains a key asset in achieving targeted performance outcomes. The qualitative data showed that differentiation strategy can improve organizational performance of SACCOs in, Kenya. By creating a unique value proposition through product differentiation, management can develop high-quality, customized products tailored to specific market segments, such as salaried individuals or families with children. Market differentiation through distribution channels such as agency or online platforms enhances organizational performance By focusing on service differentiation, management of SACCOs improve customer experience through faster service delivery, reduced waiting time, and enhanced customer service. Differentiation helps build customer loyalty, brand identity, and competitive advantage, which are crucial in improving organizational performance and sustaining growth in a competitive financial landscape. The findings are consistent with Elikwu & Mohammed's (2020) study results which demonstrated that product packaging differentiation plays a crucial role in enhancing customer acceptance. Wangui, Andermariam, & Mote (2021) contend that a firm's differentiation strategy serves as its most valuable asset in attaining targeted performance outcomes.

Benchmarking strategy involves evaluating an organization's processes, products, or services against industry's best practices to identify areas for improvement and enhance competitiveness. It allows learning from high-performing financial institutions, adoption of innovative practices, and refining of operational efficiency. The findings on benchmarking are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Benchmarking Strategy

Statement	Percentage					Mean	Standard Deviation
	SD	D	N	A	SA		
The SACCOs uses Competitive benchmarking	3.3	11.4	13.0	51.2	21.1	3.7561	1.01901
Competitive benchmarking is essential competitive strategy	0.8	9.8	14.6	52.0	22.8	3.8618	.90830
Performance benchmarking is used in the SACCOs	1.6	4.9	12.2	65.0	16.3	3.8943	.78733
Performance benchmarking strategy is crucial in the SACCOs competitive strategy	4.9	6.5	8.1	41.5	39.0	4.0325	1.08594
Strategic benchmarking leads to formulation of competitive strategy in the SACCOs	0.8	5.7	5.7	45.5	42.3	4.2276	.85711
The SACCOs uses strategic benchmarking for direction	3.3	4.1	8.1	44.7	39.8	4.1382	.96092
Benchmarking Affects organizational performance	1.6	9.8	8.9	48.8	30.9	3.9756	.97058
Aggregate Value						3.9837	0.94131

Source: Survey Data (2025)

The results in Table 2 shows that competitive benchmarking is used in their SACCOs (mean of 3.7561) which led to slight variation (standard deviation of 1.01901). Competitive benchmarking is an essential strategy (mean of 3.8618) but variance was low (standard deviation of 0.90830). The study results revealed that performance benchmarking is somewhat used in SACCOs(mean of 3.8943) the variation in usage was low (standard deviation of 0.78733). Performance benchmarking plays a crucial role as a competitive strategy (mean of 4.0325), though the variation was low moderate (standard deviation of 1.08594). Strategic benchmarking leads to formulation of competitive strategies (mean of 4.2276) which in tun showed low variation (standard deviation of 0.85711). strategic benchmarking was used as a directional tool in guiding SACCOs (mean of 4.1382) but there was low variance in direction (standard deviation of 0.97058).The benchmarking affect organizational performance (mean of 3.9756) but variation the performance was low (standard deviation of 0.97058). Aggregate mean of 3.9837 showed that all components of benchmarking had an effect on organizational but a low variation in the performance (standard deviation of 0.94131). The results align with Chebet & Muturi's (2019) study whose findings revealed that benchmarking significantly influences financial performance. The research findings in the current study are consistent with Ahmad, Jalagar, Alulis, &Aquini's (2021) conclusion that benchmarking plays a critical role in strengthening competitive advantage.

Qualitative data reinforced these findings by highlighting that benchmarking serves as a continuous improvement tool in SACCOs within Nairobi City County, Kenya. Through benchmarking, SACCOs identify and adopt best practices from other successful organizations, allowing them to assess their strengths and weaknesses, set performance targets, and enhance efficiency. The approach fosters adaptability in a dynamic financial landscape and cultivates a culture of excellence and innovation. Therefore, benchmarking remains essential for SACCOs aiming to sustain growth, improve financial performance, and stay competitive. These insights align with the study findings of Ahmad, Jalagar, Alulis, & Aquini (2021), who confirmed that benchmarking is pivot in achieving competitive advantage. Organizational performance reflects the effectiveness and efficiency with which an institution meets its strategic objectives, ensuring sustainable growth and competitiveness. Performance is measured through key indicators such as financial stability, membership growth, service quality, and operational efficiency. Enhancing organizational performance enables SACCOs to serve members better, adapt to market dynamics, and strengthen their financial position. The research findings on organizational performance are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Organizational Performance

Statement	Percentage					Mean	Standard Deviation
	SD	D	N	A	SA		
The market share of the organization is high	2.4	6.5	7.3	52.0	31.7	4.0407	.93562
Market share increased after implementing competitive strategies	8.1	6.5	13.0	41.5	30.9	3.8049	1.18501
Customer focus leads to customer satisfaction in the SACCOs	5.7	16.3	6.5	45.5	26.0	3.6992	1.18692
Customer satisfaction increased after improving services	4.9	5.7	10.6	45.5	33.3	3.9675	1.05531
Benchmarking improves employee productivity in the SACCOs	7.3	5.7	12.2	54.5	20.3	3.7480	1.07577
Employee productivity in the SACCOs has changed due to performance benchmarking	5.7	19.5	22.0	30.1	22.8	3.4472	1.20248

Market share, customer satisfaction and employee productivity affect performance of SACCOs	8.9	19.5	6.5	35.0	30.1	3.5772	1.33679
Aggregate Value						3.7549	1.13970

Source: Survey Data (2025)

Table 3 shows that SACCOs enjoy a high market share (mean of 4.0407). However, variation was low (standard deviation of 0.9356). Competitive strategies have somewhat contributed to market share growth (mean of 3.8049) which varied slightly (standard deviation of 1.18501). Customer focus led to some customer satisfaction (mean of 3.6992). which varied slightly (standard deviation of 1.18692). Service improvement was associated with some customer satisfaction (mean of 3.9675) but there was little variation in satisfaction (standard deviation of 1.07577). Benchmarking caused some changes in employee productivity (mean of 3.7480). The changes in productivity showed little variation (standard deviation of 1.0757). Benchmarking moderately improves productivity (mean of 3.4472) but a slight variation productivity (standard deviation of 1.20248). To some extent, market share, customer satisfaction, and employee productivity significantly influence organizational performance of SACCOs performance (mean of 3.5772). The variation the performance was noticeable (standard deviation of 1.14). It is also reflected in the aggregate mean and standard deviation of 3.7549 and 1.13970 respectively. These findings align with Ferreiro's (2018), research findings which indicated that performance indicators are important in assessing and aligning financial strategies to business objectives, ultimately enhancing value creation and efficiency. Qualitative data revealed that organizational performance improves due to focused strategic planning, continuous review, and alignment with changing market needs. Benchmarking, targeting specific market segments, and adopting best practices from leading institutions were seen as crucial. Enhancing employee engagement through recognition and feedback systems was essential in boosting employee productivity..

4.1 Regression Analysis

Regression analysis examined how strategic approaches influence organizational performance and add outcomes to verify their effectiveness. This statistical method investigated which competitive strategies among differentiation and benchmarking have significant influences on the performance of chosen SACCOs within Nairobi City County, Kenya. The results of the analysis appear in Table 4.

Table 4. Analysis of Determination of Coefficient

	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.625[a]	.391	.370	.63130

Source: Survey Data (2025)

Table 4. found that there was an R-value of 0.625, which implies that a moderate positive correlation exists between competitive strategies (differentiation, and benchmarking) and some form of performance of the Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies. Table 4.9 indicates an R Square value of 0.37, which shows what the model could explain in the variation. This suggests that 37% change in organization performance of SACCOs was attributed to the selected strategic approaches employed in the study. The remaining 63% is attributed to other factors not included in this model.

Table 5. Analysis of Variance

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	30.137	4	7.534	18.905	.000[b]
	Residual	47.027	118	.399		
	Total	77.164	122			

Source: Survey Data (2025)

Regression model's F-test value is 18.905 and p-value is equal to 0.000 which is lower than 0.05 level of significance. The model is statistically significant in predicting how the differentiation and benchmarking strategies affect organizational performance.

Table 6. Analysis of Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	.356	.522		.681	.497
Differentiation Strategy	-.071	.140	-.063	-.510	.611
Benchmarking Strategy	.511	.129	.402	3.975	.000

Source: Survey Data (2025)

The regression equation established by the study was:

$Y = 0.356 + 0.071X_1 + 0.511X_2$

Where;-

Y= Organizational Performance of Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies

X1= Differentiation Strategy

X2= Benchmarking Strategy

The constant (B = 0.356, p = 0.497) represents the expected organizational performance of Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies when all the regressors (differentiation, and benchmarking strategies) are set to zero, but its insignificance (p = 0.497) suggesting that it does not have a meaningful impact on performance.

Differentiation strategy showed a negative but insignificant effect (b = -0.71, p = 0.611). This means that a unit increase in differentiation leads to -0.071 decrease in organizational performance of Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies. The results showed that to differentiate products and services from those of competitors do not have a meaningful effect in organizational performance in Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies. It implies that differentiation alone is not enough or perhaps the differentiation strategies implemented by Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies were not effectively tailored to meet specific customer needs. Other factors include operational inefficiencies or the lack of innovative differentiation. The research outcomes contradict Njoki's (2018) study findings which uncovered significant relationships between performances and differentiation. Elikwu & Mohammed (2020) unveiled that product packaging differentiation considerably improves client acceptability. Gwangwava, E., & Muranda, Z.(2021) differentiation strategy positively affects the performances of selected firms. Wangui, Ander Mariam & Mote (2021) showed that firm's differentiation strategy was its greatest asset in achieving targeted performances. The conflicting results may arise from differences in industry sectors, firm-specific capabilities, market conditions, or variations in how differentiation strategies are implemented and measured across studies. Benchmarking strategy emerged as the most influential variable. For every unit increase in benchmarking, organizational performance improves by 0.511 units. This finding indicates that SACCOs that adopt benchmarking strategy tend to experience enhanced performance, possibly due to improved efficiency and the adoption of best practices from leading institutions. This may be accredited to its role as a continuous improvement tool, allowing SACCOs to adopt best practices and enhance operational efficiency, thereby improving financial outcomes. In addition, benchmarking helps Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies to identify and address internal inefficiencies, leading to better alignment with industry standards and improved competitiveness in the financial sector. The outcomes are in accord with Chebet & Muturi (2019) who unveiled that financial performance is considerably affected by benchmarking. Ahmad, Jalagar, Alulis & Aquini (2021) discovered and revealed the significant influence of competitive advantage where benchmarking.

5. Conclusion, Recommendations, Significance, and Future Research Directions

The Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies industry stands to gain considerably from the insights derived from this study. The findings offer valuable guidance to industry stakeholders, enabling them to make informed and strategic decisions aimed at enhancing organizational performance. Specifically, the survey results serve as a critical resource for stakeholders in formulating and implementing competitive strategies that align with SACCOs unique operating environments. By relying on data-driven conclusions, stakeholders can craft tailored approaches that bolster institutional resilience and ensure sustained growth in a highly competitive financial sector. In addition, the regulators (SASRA) can promote knowledge-sharing platforms for benchmarking best practices among SACCOs. These frameworks can facilitate fair competition, promote best practices, and ensure that SACCOs operate efficiently while safeguarding the interests of their members.

Academicians and researchers also benefit from the study's contributions to scholarly literature. The study not only offers a rich foundation of empirical evidence but also proposes specific recommendations that may serve as starting points for further inquiry. The insights presented help direct future research efforts by highlighting key areas where strategic management within SACCOs can be more deeply explored. In this regard, the study strengthens academic discourse on SACCOs performance while inspiring more context-specific investigations into strategic efficacy. From a theoretical standpoint, the study makes a significant contribution to the field of strategic management, particularly concerning the performance metrics of Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies. Contrary to conventional belief, the study found that cost leadership and differentiation strategies traditionally viewed as central to achieving competitive advantage had insignificant impacts on the performance of SACCOs in Nairobi City County, Kenya. This finding challenges the assumption that these mainstream strategies are universally effective across all organizational contexts. Instead, the study identifies focus strategies and benchmarking as having a notable positive influence on performance. These results underscore the importance of tailoring strategic approaches to the specific characteristics and operating conditions of Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies. It also emphasizes the role of continuous improvement and specialization through best practice adoption.

By embracing these alternative strategic approaches, SACCOs management can enhance operational efficiency and attain a more competitive market position. Specifically, there is a need for SACCOs leaders to reassess and refine their differentiation strategies. This involves conducting thorough market research to gain a deeper understanding of members' evolving needs, preferences, and expectations. By aligning products and services with these insights SACCOs can develop a compelling value proposition that not only attracts and retains members but also strengthens overall organizational performance. Furthermore, benchmarking should be institutionalized as a core element of SACCOs strategic planning. This process entails continuously identifying, evaluating, and integrating best practices from successful organizations—both within Kenya and globally. Through benchmarking, SACCOs can enhance both operational and financial performance by adopting proven methods and innovations. This deliberate pursuit of excellence promotes adaptability and positions SACCOs as competitive, member-centred institutions in a rapidly evolving financial landscape.

Further studies could build upon these findings by exploring why cost leadership and differentiation strategies have an insignificant effect on the Nairobi City County's Savings and Credit Cooperative Societies performance in Kenya by investigating the specific challenges or barriers that hinder the effectiveness of these strategies using qualitative survey. Also, research could consider the mechanisms through which focus, and benchmarking strategies exert their significant impact, potentially identifying key factors such as market segmentation techniques or benchmarking methodologies that contribute to their success. Moreover, extending this study to other regions or types of financial institutions could help determine if these findings are generalizable across different contexts.

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