

Influence of Customer Orientation on the Growth of Manufacturing Firms in Nakuru East and West Sub-Counties Kenya

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Abstract: Manufacturing firms have encountered growth challenges registering marginal growth in profits while others have even liquidated. The study examined the influence of customer orientation on the growth of manufacturing firms in Nakuru town Kenya. Resource-Based Theory was used as the basis of the study. A descriptive research design was used with a target population comprising of the sales and general managers in manufacturing firms in Nakuru town Kenya. As such, the respondents of the study were 64 sales and general managers thus prompting a census approach. The study made use of the questionnaire as the main primary data collection method. The instrument was pilot tested to check for the validity and reliability of instrument. The study findings indicated that customer orientation had positive significant relationship with the growth of manufacturing firms. Regression analysis on the other hand showed that customer orientation had significant influence on the growth of manufacturing firms. Based on the study findings, the study recommended that the management should focus on policies that enhance customer satisfactions with their products to enhance their customers' loyalty. On the other hand, the manufacturing firms should have a way of assessing their competitors to enable them enhance their competitive advantage.

Keywords: Customer, Customer Orientation, Strategy, Manufacturing firms, Growth

I. Introduction

In unpredictable business environment there arises a need for organizational actions that are strategically planned, a firm will need to align its operations in a manner that will enable it to meet the customer needs and at the same time remain competitive relative to other players in the market [1]. Since a firm's strategy should be multi-dimensional, different attributes of strategy should be pursued by a firm at the same time by continuously seeking out new opportunities and ensuring strategic alignment [2]. Having a strategy helps organizations find solutions to problems, create new capabilities, and improve business performance [3] by allowing organizations and the managers to gather specific resources, recognise opportunities for providing valued products and services, and to convey those products and services for higher profits [4].

A firm's strategic orientation reflects the strategic directions implemented by a firm in order to create the proper behaviours for the continuous superior performance of the business. A firm invests its resources in activities that reflect its strategic orientation [5]. Strategic orientation is considered as a dynamic capability that represents the organization's ability to integrate and build internal and external competencies [6]. The strategic orientation of the organization may play a key role in how the organization defines and structures its activities and initiatives.

Moreover, the strategic orientation has deep effects on different organization's dimensions, like effectiveness and competitive advantage and it indicates the value of organization's trend to discover, create and maintain a set of responds suitable to the environment [7]. Strategic orientation is related to the decisions that businesses make to achieve superior performance. Strategic orientation is an organization's direction for reaching a suitable behaviour in order to attain superior performance. Competitor and customer orientations are the most important for organizations to achieve long term success [8].

Strategic orientation involves the implementation of strategic trending that guides the activities of an organization to embedded behaviours that achieve permanence in optimal conditions for the business. Strategic orientation is therefore important in finding out the organization's chances and abilities support environment and to secure competitive advantage for itself [9]. According to Hakala [10], firms with strategic orientation are willing to act proactively relative to environmental opportunities, be aggressive toward competitors, take risks and utilize their limited resources better

The strategic orientation and the level of inter functional coordination of a firm influence the ability of the firm to take advantage of a new product to make it successful. Therefore, even after controlling for the innovation characteristics, firm orientation can have a marginal impact on innovation performance. A firm's strategic orientation reflects the strategic directions implemented by a firm to create the proper behaviours for the continuous superior performance of the business. Strategic orientation helps an organization analyze strategy for future growth as it compares with the actual execution of procedures [11].

II. Statement of the Problem

Manufacturing firms in Kenya are said to be experiencing performance challenges with many reporting profit warnings due to challenges in the operating environment. A report by Kenya national bureau of Statistics [12] reported that the manufacturing industry in the country improved by 3.5% in 2015 and 3.2% in 2014 thus contributed 10.3% to gross domestic product (GDP). Further, KNBS [13] indicated that the manufacturing sector grew marginally by 0.2% in 2017 compared to a growth of 2.7% in 2016. The report further notes that the volume of output contracted by 1.1% in 2017. This clearly indicates the pitiable situation facing manufacturing firms seeking improved growth in the market. Were [14] noted that the trends in manufacturing firms' situation demonstrates that Kenya is going through a premature deindustrialization in a context where manufacturing and industry are still relatively under-developed. Given the market in which the manufacturing firms existing that is highly competitive, it is questionable how the firms survive and what strategic orientations do they adopt to ensure their growth? Various studies have sought to examine the effect of strategic orientation on organizational growth and performance. Nduati and Kavale [15] examined how organizational competitiveness influenced strategic orientation of cement manufacturing firms in Kenya. Lagat et al. [16] examined the effect of market orientation on performance of manufacturing sector in Kenya. Kiiru et al. [17] examined how competitive orientation mediates the relationship between dynamic capabilities and competitive advantage of small and medium retail enterprises in Kenya. Mohamud [18] examined the effect of firm size on the relationship between strategic planning dimension and performance of manufacturing firms in Kenya. Despite these studies, being done, the findings have been unclear on the role of orientations strategies on the growth of manufacturing firms in Kenya. Hence, this study sought to fill this gap by examining the influence of orientation strategies on growth of manufacturing firms in Nakuru town Kenya.

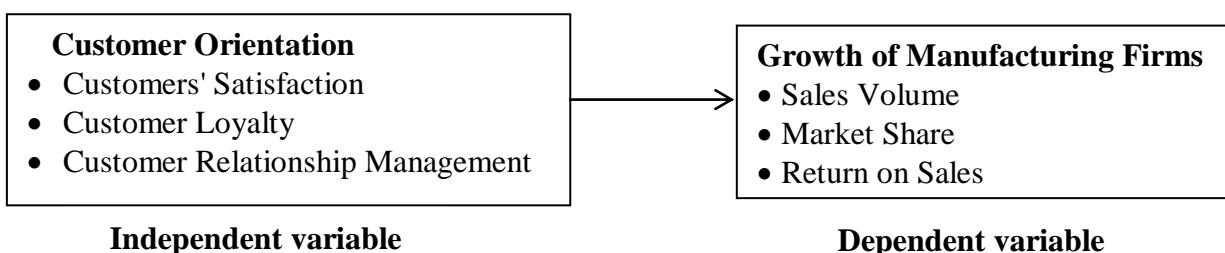
III. Specific Objectives

To examine the influence of customer orientation on growth of manufacturing firms in Nakuru East and West sub-counties Kenya.

IV. Hypotheses of the Study

H_0 : Customer orientation has no statistically significant influence on growth of manufacturing firms in Nakuru East and West sub-counties Kenya.

V. Conceptual Framework



VI. Resource-Based Theory

The resource-based view (RBV) was propounded by Wernerfelt [19] in 1984. The theory suggests that competitiveness can be achieved by innovatively delivering superior value to customers. The extant literature focuses on the strategic identification and use of resources by a firm for developing a sustained competitive advantage [20]. International

business theorists also explain the success and failures of firms across boundaries by considering the competitiveness of their subsidiaries or local alliances in emerging markets. Local knowledge provided by a subsidiary or local alliance becomes an important resource for conceptualizing value as per the local requirements [21].

Azhar [22] defined strategic orientation as an attribute that influences the ability of a firm to focus on strategic direction of the firm and build or sustain the proper strategic fit for superior firm performance. Since strategic orientation vary from one organization to the next; and vary based on contextual organizational variables, strategic orientation is viewed as a multidimensional construct [23]. Therefore, organizations use resource allocation and environmental cues to determine the right plan for the company to achieve its goals. Based on strategic management literature, strategic orientation increases the likelihood of share goals, making it easier to implement effective processes and improve performance.

The resource-based view describes a firm in terms of the resources that firm integrates. Resources are insufficient for obtaining a sustained competitive advantage and a high performance as well [24]. Being so, firms must be able to transform resources in capabilities, and consequently in a positive performance. Firms reach a superior performance, not because only they have more or better resources, but also because of their distinctive competences (those activities that a particular firm does better than any competing firms) allow to do better use of them [22]. In the dynamic perspective, capabilities approach is a theoretical stream inside the RBV.

This theory is relevant to the study since it considers that, the manufacturing firms in Kenya are constantly creating new combinations of capabilities and, on the other hand; the market competitors are continually improving their competences or imitating the most qualified competences from other firms [23]. This approach puts emphasis on internal processes, assets and market position as restricting factors not only the capability to react but also the management capability to coordinate internal competences of the firms. The impact of strategic orientation on manufacturing firms in Kenya differs from big businesses based on resource allocation constraints and capabilities of the firm.

VII. Customer Orientation

Customer orientation emphasizes the importance for a firm gaining sufficient understanding of its customers and continuously finding ways to deliver superior customer value. Customer orientation places the highest priority on meeting customers' needs. A customer-oriented firm is willing and able to identify and analyse customer needs and preferences and, consequently, can serve customers better. A consumer orientation helps the firm to learn a large part of the market's technical issues and provides an evaluation of possible segments, of the importance of the market, and of its growth rate [15].

Customer orientation represents the degree to which customer information is both accessed and utilized by the business unit. They emphasize the need to only introduce the terms of the business unit to be favourable to its customers, but also to collect information of their customer's tastes, needs and preferences. Thus, customer orientation is an essential element of an organization and attention drawn on information about customer needs should be taken as value-add within the firm [25]. Further, customer orientation is a concept that comprises of orientations that understand customers and those focus on customer satisfaction [26].

Customer orientation focuses on identifying customer's expressed needs that will guide the firm in developing products and services. Customer-oriented businesses focus on understanding the desires of their customers. Such firms identify the needs and wants of the customers in the markets they serve and then develop products and services that meet and satisfy those desires. In this regard customer orientation differs from the related construct of market orientation, because unlike the latter, customer orientation captures immediate and expressed customer demands as well as the latent, unarticulated needs of the customers [27].

The influence of customer orientation on the firm performance is short-term because firms that only rely on customers' expressed needs to develop their products, are at a risk of not creating new insights into value-adding opportunities for the customer and thereby missing an opportunity for customer dependence as well as losing out on customer loyalty. The long term growth impact of a customer orientation in a dynamic market environment therefore, is likely to be negligible especially in a vibrant market environment [28].

Consumer oriented organizations display market oriented behaviours such as a strong focus on individual customer needs and adherence to its changes. They also strategically segment their customers to better focus on specific characteristics of separate groups [29]. Today, customer orientation is considered a basis for the onward movement and

survival in firms operating in competitive markets. In other words, all the paths to survival and profitability of an organization and enterprise will lead to preserving and promoting customer loyalty and assuring them as to their access to the their expected services in the shortest possible time span and with the best possible quality [30].

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Being customer-oriented implies that an organization is actively seeking to create, proliferate, and respond to market information, but also refers to employees' capacity for relating to customers, which in turn, has a positive effect on customer satisfaction. Customer-oriented organizations predict new customer needs and respond to those needs by delivering goods and services which are of higher value and generate customer satisfaction. In addition, customer-oriented behaviour can build a good relationship between service provider and customers and subsequently bring in enhanced organization performance [31].

One customer-oriented organizational model is Customer Relationship Management (CRM) which uses customer information to create a customized strategy so as to increase customer loyalty level while reducing operational costs. Customer Relationship Management (CRM) is a managerial strategy which helps organizations gather, analyze, and manage information on customers through information technology (IT) tools in order to meet customer needs and build a mutually profitable long-term relationship [32].

VIII. Growth of Manufacturing Firms

The manufacturing industry today is in a state of metamorphosis with contemporary issues such as customer satisfaction, competitive advantage, revenue and expenditures, organizational culture, technological advancement, global markets, diverse customer demands and need for effective workforce with a global mindset penetrating every aspect of the organization. For a long time, manufacturing firms in the world have been taking advantage of, and spending money and trusting external providers of competitive services in order to offer cost effectiveness and efficiency of internal resource procedures. This is particularly important for organizations, which are considered as important players in the manufacturing sector in any country because of the economic benefits they provide in their economic environment [33].

The strategy-firm growth relationship may deserve a more critically rich and inclusive paradigm involving different juxtapositions of strategy that may contribute to firm growth. Strategy, whether as maximization or sustaining act, can be seen to unite both purpose and decision-making for an organization and in this sense it can be said to exert a significant influence on firm growth. Moreover, the SO (strategic orientation) dimensions engage both the entrepreneurial approach to strategy-making through the dimensions of pro-activeness, futurity, riskiness and aggressiveness as well as the conservative approach to strategy-making through the dimensions of analysis and defensiveness [34].

There are many important competition tools that firms use to ensure competitive advantage; the factors such as product and service quality, reducing costs, creating innovation, sustainability, stabilization and innovative strategies have an important part while enterprises try to ensure competitive advantage. Innovation is also a long-termed performance indicator which is integrated with concepts like change, creativity, improvement and risk taking for the firms, competition mostly shapes around the customer. This situation orientates the firms towards a customer-centered organization and it puts the customer relations forward. The factors such as the firm focusing on its basic competences, having a flexible and learning structure, being innovation-centered with openness towards organizational change also requires being consolidated with innovative strategies. Here, innovation means a strategic understanding based on adopting a new tool, policy, program, process, product or service which are produced internally or produced from external resources and may be considered as new in the organization [35]. Innovative strategies carry a significant meaning especially for the firms with limited resources and it is an important indicator of the market orientation competence of such firms. Innovative strategies of the firms are the vision to transform any innovation to product that could be presented to the market, to bring it to a position that creates new markets and have competitive advantage. A

firm becoming a market builder means that it is capable of orientating the customer and has the opportunity to be a leader in the market [36].

IX. Research Methodology

9.1 Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive research design because the study seeks to respond to the problem by answering the why, how and when questions about the study. According to Kothari (2004) described research design as the agreement of procedures for the gathering and analysis of data, obtaining results that is relevant to the research aim and goals. Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) describe descriptive research design as a systematic, empirical inquiring into which the researcher does not have a direct control of independent variable as their manifestation has already occurred or because they inherently cannot be manipulated. In this study the researcher sought to examine the influence of orientation strategies on the growth of manufacturing firms in Nakuru town without any interference or manipulation of the situation whatsoever. As such the descriptive research design was suited for this research.

9.2 Target Population of the Study

Population is identified as a well defined set of people, services, elements, events, group of things or households that are being investigated [17]. Target population is the specific population about which some specific information is desired. In this study, the target population comprised of the general managers and sales managers in manufacturing firms with their headquarters in Nakuru town, Kenya. Nakuru town has a total of thirty two manufacturing firms. Therefore the study will be targeting 32 general managers and 32 sales managers in manufacturing firms in Nakuru town making a total of 64 respondents. The study will adopt a census since the population of the study is not so huge.

9.3 Research Instrument

According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2009), questionnaires are very suitable in collecting data. In tandem with this assertion, a structured questionnaire will be used to collect data from the respondents. The questionnaire captured data relative to respondents' background. Most importantly, it captured data regarding both the independent and dependent variables. The questionnaire enabled the researcher to collect data on a Likert scale. The scale was a five point Likert scale ranging from 5-Strongly agree, 4-Agree, 3-Uncertain, 2- Disagree and 1- Strongly Disagree. The instrument was tested for validity and reliability before data collection.

X. Findings and Discussions

10.1 Response Rate

The study had 64 questionnaires which were distributed to be filled by the respondents for data collection. 10 questionnaires were not returned. 54 questionnaires were completely filled up and returned for data analysis. This represented a response rate of 84.4 % which was characterized as very good (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003).

10.2 Customer Orientation

The study observed respondents view regarding customer orientation and findings from the analysis were as presented in Table 1

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics on Customer Orientation

	SA (%)	A (%)	N/S (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Mean	Std. Dev
Our firm focus on identifying customer needs that guide in developing products and services	70.4	29.6	0	0	0	4.70	.461
We identify products and services that satisfy the desires of our customer	42.6	57.4	0	0	0	4.43	.499
Our company is able to recognize the complaints from our customers which are addressed promptly	61.1	37.0	1.9	0	0	4.59	.533
Our firm is always customer oriented through creating and delivering value to the customer	55.6	44.4	0	0	0	4.56	.502
Through customer orientation our company is able to identify the demands of our customers	74.1	25.9	0	0	0	4.74	.442

Our firm is able to promote customer loyalty by delivering the expected services in the shortest time possible	61.1	38.9	0	0	0	4.61	.492
We have managed to build a good relationship with our customers by responding to their needs	59.3	37.0	3.7	0	0	4.56	.572
Our firm continuously monitor our customers' needs	48.1	50.0	1.9	0	0	4.46	.539
Valid N (listwise)			54				

From the descriptive, majority of the respondents agreed that their firm focus on identifying customer needs that guide in developing products and services. 70.4% of the respondents strongly agreed while 29.6% of them agreed recording a mean of 4.70 and a standard deviation of .461. In addition, 57.4% and 42.6% of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed respectively that they identify products and services that satisfy the desires of their customer. This statement had a mean of 4.43 and a standard deviation of .499. Respondents agreed that their company is able to recognize the complaints from their customers which are addressed promptly. 61.1% of the respondents strongly agreed while 37.0% of them agreed registering a mean of 4.59 and a standard deviation of .533.

Respondents further agreed that their firm is always customer oriented through creating and delivering value to the customer. 55.6% of the respondents strongly agreed while 44.4% of them agreed with a mean of 4.56 and a standard deviation of .502. With a mean of 4.74 and a standard deviation of .442, 74.1% and 25.9% of the respondents strongly agreed and agreed respectively that through customer orientation their company is able to identify the demands of their customers. Respondents agreed that their firm is able to promote customer loyalty by delivering the expected services in the shortest time possible. As such, 61.1% of the respondents strongly agreed while 38.9% of them agreed registering a mean of 4.61 and a standard deviation of .492.

They agreed that ($M=4.56$, $SD=.572$) they have managed to build a good relationship with their customers by responding to their needs. 59.3% of the respondents strongly agreed while 37.0% of them agreed. Finally, respondents agreed that their firm continuously monitor their customers' needs where 50.0% of the respondents agreed while 48.1% of them strongly agreed. This aspect had a mean of 4.46 and a standard deviation of .539. The respondents demonstrated high level of agreement with each other views with all aspects returning standard deviation values less than 0.6. Therefore the respondents had similar views with respect to the issues relating to customer orientation in manufacturing firms.

10.3 Growth of Manufacturing Firms Descriptive Statistics

The researcher sought to examine the growth of manufacturing firms in Nakuru town. The percentages mean and standard deviation were computed. Findings from the analysis were as presented in Table 2

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics on Growth of Manufacturing Firms

	SA (%)	A (%)	N/S (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Mean	Std. Dev
Strategic orientation have helped our organization to create new capabilities through market expansion	37.0	63.0	0	0	0	4.37	.487
Through strategic orientation our firm has been able to cultivate, maintain and increase the market share and to satisfy customer demand	51.9	48.1	0	0	0	4.52	.504
Strategic orientation has helped our business to develop strategies that drive the business to realization of opportunities and allocation of resources to those opportunities	46.3	53.7	0	0	0	4.46	.503
Strategic orientation has guided our firm on the direction it intend to pursue in order to monitor its activities for better business performance	55.6	44.4	0	0	0	4.56	.502
Through product orientation our firm has modified products that satisfy the need of our customers hence selling in huge volumes	53.7	46.3	0	0	0	4.54	.503
Strategic orientation has enables our firm to earn high returns from the sales	44.4	55.6	0	0	0	4.44	.502
Through strategic orientation, our firm has improved its business performance	50.0	50.0	0	0	0	4.50	.505
Valid N (listwise)			54				

From the findings respondents agreed that strategic orientation have helped their organization to create new capabilities through market expansion. 63.0% of the respondents agreed while 37.0% of them strongly agreed registering a mean of 4.37 and a standard deviation of .487. More so, respondents agreed that through strategic orientation our firm has been able to cultivate, maintain and increase the market share and satisfy customer demand where 51.9% and 48.1% of the respondents strongly agreed and agreed respectively recording a mean of 4.52 and a standard deviation of .504. The study indicated that respondents agreed with the statement that strategic orientation has helped their business to develop strategies that drive the business to realization of opportunities and allocation of resources to those opportunities. Therefore, 53.7% of the respondents agreed while 46.3% of them strongly agreed registering a mean of 4.46 and a standard deviation of .503. 55.6% of the respondents strongly agreed while 44.4% of them agreed that strategic orientation has guided their firm on the direction it intend to pursue in order to monitor its activities for better business performance. This had a mean of 4.56 and a standard deviation of .502.

Respondents agreed that ($M=4.54$, $SD=.503$) through product orientation their firm has modified products that satisfy the need of their customers hence selling in huge volumes. 53.7% of the respondents strongly agreed while 46.3% of them agreed. The researcher observed that 55.6% of the respondents agreed while 44.4% of them strongly agreed that strategic orientation has enabled their firm to earn high returns from the sales registering a mean of 4.44 and a standard deviation of .502. Lastly, respondents agreed that through strategic orientation, their firm has improved its business performance. 100% of the respondents strongly and/or agreed with the statement recording a mean of 4.50 and a standard deviation of .505. The standard deviation values were all less than 0.6 indicating high level of agreement between the respondents views in as much as growth of manufacturing firms is concerned.

10.4 Correlation Analysis

The study examined the relationship between customer orientation and the growth of manufacturing firms in Nakuru town West and East sub-counties. Pearson product moment correlation coefficient was used in this regard. The results from the analysis were as presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Relationship between Customer Orientation and Growth of Manufacturing Firms

		Growth of Manufacturing Firms
Customer Orientation		.366**
Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)	.006
N		54

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Findings demonstrated the existence of a weak positive significant ($r=.366$, $p=.006$) relationship between customer orientation and growth of manufacturing firms. Hence, the growth of the manufacturing firms is dependent on customer orientation. Thus, having a good customer orientation goes a long way in enhancing the growth of manufacturing firms in Nakuru East and West Sub-counties in Kenya. Other findings from other researchers indicated that consumer oriented organizations display market oriented behaviours such as a strong focus on individual customer needs and adherence to its changes. They also strategically segment their customers to better focus on specific characteristics of separate groups [29]. Today, customer orientation is considered a basis for the onward movement and survival in firms operating in competitive markets. In other words, all the paths to survival and profitability of an organization and enterprise will lead to preserving and promoting customer loyalty and assuring them as to their access to the their expected services in the shortest possible time span and with the best possible quality [30].

10.5 Hypothesis Testing

The first null hypothesis (H_01) stated that: Competitor orientation does not significantly influence the growth of manufacturing firms in Nakuru East and West sub-counties Kenya. The model summary gave the following results.

Table 4: Model Summary on Customer Orientation

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.366 ^a	.134	.119	.16671

a. Predictors: (Constant), Customer Orientation

The model summary indicated an R-squared value of .134 indicating that customer orientation accounted for only 13.4% of the total variation in growth of manufacturing firms. Therefore, customer orientation influences the growth of manufacturing firm in Nakuru East and West Sub-counties. The ANOVA findings were as presented in table 5

Table 5: ANOVA^a on Customer Orientation

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	2.134	1	2.134	76.795	.000 ^b
	Residual	1.445	52	.028		
	Total	2.579	53			

a. Dependent Variable: Growth of Manufacturing Firms

b. Predictors: (Constant), Customer Orientation

The findings gave an F-statistic ($F_{(1, 52)} = 76.795, p < .000$) which was significant at $p < .05$. Thus, customer orientation significantly influences the growth of manufacturing firms in Nakuru East and West-sub Counties. Therefore, the null hypothesis, H_01 that, customer orientation has no significant influence on growth of manufacturing firms in Nakuru East and West Sub-counties, Kenya was rejected. The study therefore concluded that customer orientation has a significant influence on the growth of manufacturing firms in Nakuru East and West sub-counties in Kenya.

XI. Conclusions and Recommendations

The study concluded that the customer orientation significantly influences the growth of manufacturing firms in Nakuru town, Kenya. Hence there was a positive relationship between customer orientation and growth of manufacturing firms in Nakuru town. Therefore, customer orientation was vital in determining the growth of manufacturing firms in Nakuru town, Kenya. Customer orientation was shown to have a significant relationship with the growth of manufacturing firms in Nakuru West and East sub-county. As such the researcher recommended that the management of manufacturing firms should devise policies aimed at enhancing customer satisfaction in their product. This would go a long way in enhancing customer loyalty and enhance the firms' performance. In addition the firms should focus and enhance their customer relationship management. This will play a role in enhancing a grip on the firms' customers and ensuring firms performance sustainability hence their growth.

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