



ISSN NO. 2320-5407

Journal Homepage: -[www.journalijar.com](http://www.journalijar.com)

## INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH (IJAR)

Article DOI:10.21474/IJAR01/ 9553  
DOI URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/9553>



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF  
ADVANCED RESEARCH (IJAR)  
ISSN 2320-5407  
Journal Homepage: <http://www.journalijar.com>  
Journal DOI:10.21474/IJAR01

### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMPETITOR ORIENTATION AND PERFORMANCE: SCENARIO IN KENYAN UNIVERSITIES.

Chebet J. Bowen<sup>1</sup> and Bernard K. Njehia<sup>2</sup>.

1. Kabarak University, School of Business & Economics, P.O. Private Bag-20157, Kabarak, Kenya.
2. Dept. of Agribusiness Management and Trade, School of Agriculture and Enterprise Development; P. O. Box 43844 – 00100 Nairobi.

#### Manuscript Info

##### Manuscript History

Received: 08 June 2019

Final Accepted: 10 July 2019

Published: August 2019

##### Key words:-

Market Orientation, Competitor Orientation, Customer Satisfaction, Customer Retention, Academic Programmes, Student, Performance

#### Abstract

Competitor orientation is one of the market orientation components based on an organization's ability to understand the competitor's capabilities and strategies as well as strengths and weaknesses in order to generate competitive advantage in the organization. It involves an organization assessing their positions, developing appropriate strategies and responding quickly to competitors' actions and market dynamics. Amid stiff competition for students in the higher education market, this study sought to analyse the relationship between competitor orientation and performance of universities in Kenya. The research design adopted for this study was descriptive and correlative, and targeted 63 universities in Kenya. A total of 115 respondents were selected from a sample of 23 universities. Both stratified sampling and purposive sampling were used in selecting respondents from the population. A structured questionnaire, administered through drop and pick method was used in collecting data. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used in analysing data using Stata and Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Inferential statistics showed a relationship of competitor orientation on student satisfaction and number of programmes in both private and public universities is statistically insignificant. However, when universities are categorized into private and public universities, competitor orientation becomes statistically significant in public universities and improves student satisfaction and number of programmes but less in private universities. The study concludes that a university that is competitor oriented is likely to be successful and achieve competitive advantage through constant monitoring and assessing its strengths and weakness relative to its competitors.

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#### Introduction:-

In a competitive education market, the extent of an organization's orientation tends to be crucial to remain competitive. (Goldman & Grinstein, 2010). Market orientation (MO) is a term that emerged in the mid-1950's referring to the implementation of the marketing concept, which holds that the key to attaining organizational goals

**Corresponding Author:-Chebet J. Bowen.**

Address:-Kabarak University, School of Business & Economics, P.O. private Bag-20157, Kabarak, Kenya.

is by generating, delivering and communicating superior customer value to potential and current markets/customers better than competitors (Kotler & Keller, 2009). Market-orientation is the implementation of marketing concept whose components are customer orientation, competitor orientation, inter-functional coordination), intelligence generation, dissemination and responsiveness (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990; Narver & Slater, 1990). The significance of MOs in organizations is articulated by Tschida (2010) who states that organizations that adopt market orientation by being competitor oriented are aware and familiar with the environment in which they operate in and have capability of analyzing and using the information for competitive advantage. According to Lado et al., (1998), it is the responsibility of firms to analyze their markets, environment and competitors, use the collected information to co-ordinate all organization's departments, and develop competitive actions in order to maintain the sustainable competitive advantage.

Organizations operating in dynamic competitive environments face challenges such as marketing problems, limited resources and changes in customer needs and wants (Rivera-Camino & Ayala, 2010). Consequently, organizations need to look for ways of managing their target markets more efficiently and effectively better than their counterparts by being competitor oriented. Organizations that embrace and implement the marketing concept are likely to be successful enabling them to achieve superior organizational performance.

Within the landscape of university education in Kenya, the growing demand for university education triggered the establishment of many institutions and alternative modes of study (Commission for University Education, 2014). The exponential increase of both public and private universities has opened the door to a critical mass of present and future generations. The result of this tremendous growth has heightened competition among the universities for students drawn from the education market. Newman (2002) agrees that universities currently are faced with threats and for them to survive in a competitive environment depends on how well they respond to environmental challenges such as competing for both students and resources from the same education target marketplace. Given the aggressive competition, globalization and varying customers' needs and wants, universities need a strong market orientation and strategic marketing approaches to stay relevant in the competitive market place. Canterbury (2000) stated that marketing of higher education encounters some challenges because of diverse markets and characteristics that are different from other markets of goods and services necessitating them to be proactive in their marketing practices. In the foregoing, it is logical for universities in Kenya to adopt a market-oriented approach that influences on the activities of an institution's quest for improving performance by focusing on competitive strategies.

Existing literature shows that most studies on the relationship between competitor orientation and performance of universities have been conducted mostly in developed countries with a few from developing countries. These studies lack important areas that require a combined effort of university management on the existing information regarding the clients and the competition (Akonkwa, 2009). According to Frambach., Prabhu and Verhallen, (2003), most of the large body of work on market orientation has not made the distinction between organizations that are primarily customer oriented versus those that are primarily competitor oriented. The studies also concentrated on business organizations and failed to focus on service organizations like universities. Furthermore, no study has analyzed the relationship between competitor orientation and university performance in a Kenyan context. It is therefore imperative to investigate how competitor orientation relates to performance and seeks to test the following null hypothesis:

"H<sub>01</sub>: There is no significant relationship between competitor orientation and performance of selected universities in Kenya"

### **Theoretical background**

A business is competitively oriented if it constantly reassesses its strengths and weaknesses relative to its competitors (Narver & Slater 1990). It is an organization's ability to understand the competitor's short-term and long-term capabilities and strategies as well as strengths and weaknesses in order to generate competitive advantage in the organizations (Zhou, Brown, & Dev, (2009). Shin (2012) suggests that if organizations want to understand current and potential competitors, it need to assess their positions, develop appropriate strategies, and respond quickly to competitors' actions; and market dynamics with prompt precise actions in the short run and at the same time modify marketing programmes in the long-run (Han, Kim & Srivastava, 1998). Kai and Fan (2010) have highlighted the importance for organizations to understand their current and potential future competitors as it is vital for organizations to find out their competitors' information and strategies to enable them plan and come up with strategic strategies to achieve competitive advantage.

According to Voon (2008) service organizations are required to be competitor-oriented in order to deliver better services that customers would perceive as superior to competitors. In addition, having knowledge of competitors, being responsive to competition and being strategic in customer targeting leads to service differentiation. Competitor orientation requires an institution to understand both the current actual competitors, as well as the potential ones, in terms of strong and weak points on short term and the effect of their capacities and strategies in the long term (Porter, 1985). Therefore, the significance of competitor orientation is to monitor the organization's current and predicted future competitors to develop awareness of their information and strategies (Kai & Fan, 2010; Kaliappen & Hilman, 2013). O'dwyer and Gilmore (2017), established that among the market orientation elements, only competitor orientation was found to be significantly related to organizational performance in the context of small firm sustainability. In addition, competitor orientation help firms to plan and organize their resources to provide customers' satisfaction and value towards their products and services by doing research and investigating competitive, differentiated and distinctive strategies (Essays, UK. 2018).

The 3C's model, also known as "The Strategic Triangle" is a theory which was developed by Kenichi Ohmae in the 1980s. The theory posits that if a business organization wants to be successful, it is supposed to be strategic by looking at three success factors: the customer, the company and the competitor (3Cs) (Ohmae, 1982). The concept takes into consideration three variables (3Cs) to explain a complete marketing strategy. When companies integrate the 3Cs, they are able to have sustainable competitive advantage. The model points out that a strategist, a marketer or a manager should focus and take into account the 3Cs in order to achieve superior performance, relative to competition. The theory points out that a successful strategy adopted by a company should be one that ensures a better or stronger matching of company's strengths to customer needs than are provided by competitors.

Specific literature linking market orientation and performance for universities is scanty. In a related study, Chaudhry et al (2016) investigated the impact of market orientation components on the performance of private universities in Pakistan. The study was based on performance measures developed specifically for universities. The data was collected using survey from 300 faculty members randomly picked from 15 private universities. The results confirmed that there was a significant and positive relationship between market orientation components and performance measures such as student retention, student growth and market share. Likewise, Hilman and Kaliappen, (2014) investigated the link between market orientation dimensions of competitor orientation and customer orientation and performance of hotels in Malaysia. A self-administered mail questionnaire targeted the top and middle-level managers of three to five star rated hotels in Malaysia. The study established that competitor orientation and customer orientation were practiced by hotels in Malaysia as core marketing strategies. The findings also found that both competitor orientation and customer orientation was positively linked to organizational performance.

### **Conceptual Framework**

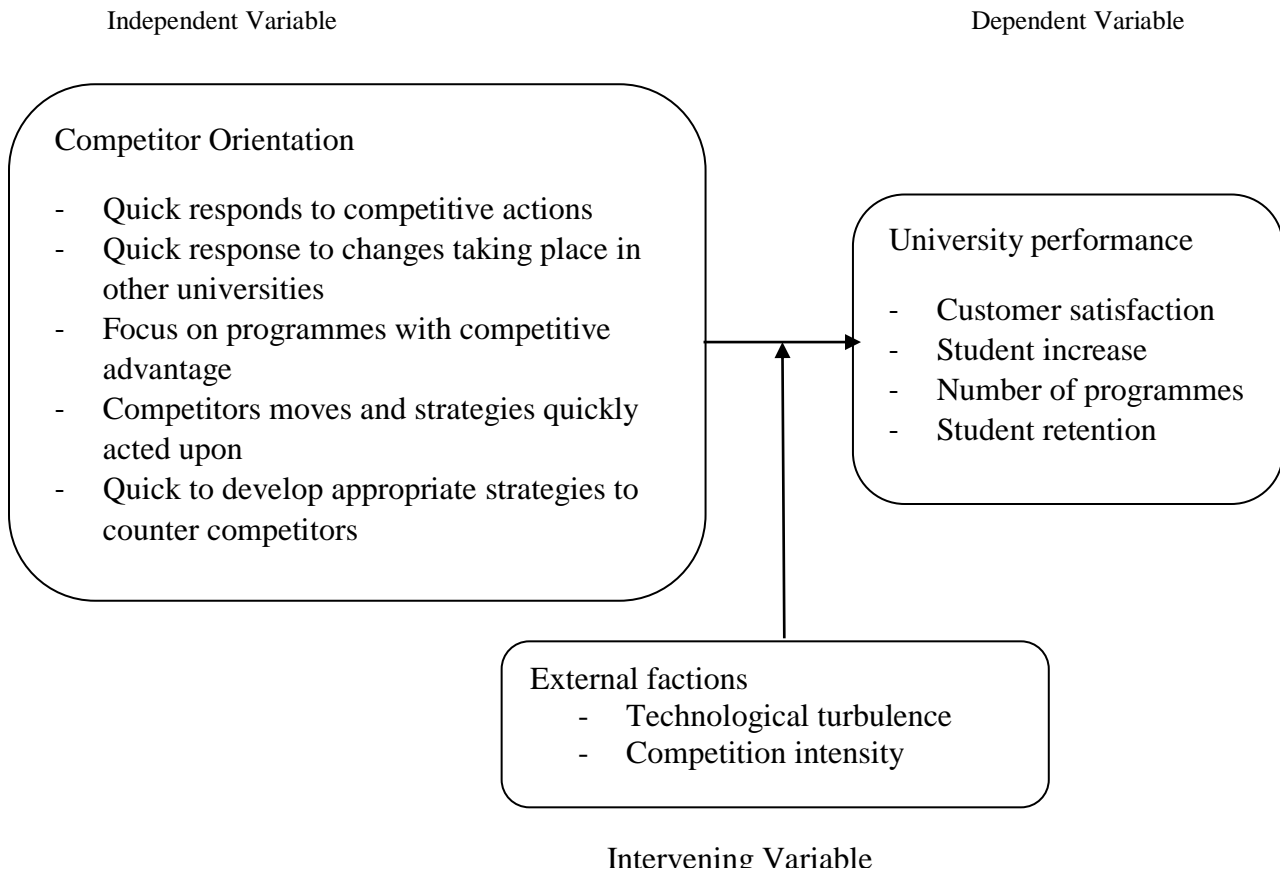
Performance measures in organizations have been conceptualized in terms of objective criteria of financial performance; however, some scholars have proposed a broader performance construct that incorporates non-financial measures such as, market share, product quality, and company image (Waiganjo, Mukulu & Kahiri, 2012). Practical studies focusing on higher education use and rely on performance evaluation according to subjective criteria (Caruana, Ramaseshan & Ewing, 1998) which include customer satisfaction, student growth, number of programmes and student retention. In addition, according to Kaplan and Norton (1996), a firm performance is not only measured by financial performance but also by learning and growth, internal business process and customer-related performance measures.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework for this study. This study adopted the performance indicator by Caruana, Ramaseshan and Ewing, (1998) of customer satisfaction, student increase, number of programmes and student retention. It assumed that responding quickly to competitors' actions, strategies and changes taking place in other universities would lead to competitive advantage hence performance. Focusing on competitive academic programmes and developing appropriate strategies to counter competitors leads to better competitive advantage. The external factors identified were technology turbulence and competitive intensity as proposed by Kohli and Jaworski (1990).

## Methodology:-

### Sample and data collection

The research design adopted for this study was descriptive and correlation designs. The target population for this study was 63 universities in Kenya. Data were collected from a total of 115 respondents selected from a sample of 23 universities in Kenya. Both stratified sampling and purposive sampling were used in selecting respondents from the population. A structured questionnaire, administered through drop and pick method was used in collecting data.



**Figure 1:-**Conceptual Framework

### Measures

The measure of competitor orientation was adopted from a scale developed by Narver and Slater (1990). This study's measure of competitor orientation comprised five independent variables measuring competitor orientation which were refined to suit a university set up. The dependent variable (university performance) was measured by four measures of performance namely customer (student) satisfaction, student increase (growth), number of academic programs and student retention. These performance measurements were propounded by (Caruana, Ramaseshan & Ewing, 1998). Both competitor orientation measures and university performance measures used five point scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree.

### Reliability and validity of the instrument

The reliability of the study variable was checked using Cronbach's alpha which is a method used as a coefficient of internal consistency among research instruments (Cronbach 1951). Cronbach alpha coefficients for four dimensions of competitor orientation individually and for overall market orientation tool. In this study, a cut off value of 0.5 for Cronbach's coefficient was adopted according to (Nunnally 1967) as well as Nunnally (1968) The cut off value of 0.5 was used not without precedent as (Bankson & Stoke, 2000; Blankson & Cheng, 2005) had embraced it in other related studies. Construct and Content validity tests were performed for this study.

To achieve the objective of the study, both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse the data. Inferential statistics such as factor analysis, correlation and regression analysis was used to establish the nature and magnitude of the relationships between the market orientation variables and universities performance.

A normality test was performed to assess normal distribution of the data set while, multicollinearity test was performed using pairwise correlations among the variables to test if independent variables are correlated to each other. Quantitative data was analysed to assess the influence of competitor orientation variable on the performance measurement variable for closed-ended questions. The hypothesis was tested using regression analysis and data analysed using SPSS software.

### Analysis and discussion of results:-

Out of the 115 questionnaires administered to both members of staff and students, 106 were filled and returned representing a response rate of 92%. The majority of the respondents were from faculty members (35.48%), Marketing/Corporate Affairs (33.87%) and Academic Registrar/Admission (30.65%). With regard to the length of service, and year of study, the majority of the staff respondents had been in the service for a period of 1 to 5 years while majority of students leaders were 4<sup>th</sup> year students.

The results of descriptive analysis gathered using a 5-point Likert scale item from the respondents in both public and private universities are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1:-Staff Responses on Extent of Agreement on Competitor Orientation in University**

Competitors' actions and strategies	SD	D	NS	A	SA	CHISQ	P>CHISQ
Our university is quick to respond to competitive actions that threaten the university	1.61	6.45	14.52	53.23	24.19	51.87	<.0001
Our university is fast at responding to changes taking place in other universities	-	3.23	27.42	50.00	19.35	28.19	<.0001
Our university focuses on programs where they have or can develop competitive advantage	-	4.84	6.45	56.45	32.26	44.45	<.0001
Information on competitors' strategies are quickly acted upon by the university	-	4.84	27.42	45.16	22.58	20.45	<.0001
Our university is quick to develop appropriate strategies to counter competitors	1.61	3.23	17.74	48.39	29.03	46.87	<.0001

The results indicated that universities respond to various competitive actions and strategies that emerge. The  $p < 0.0001$  indicates that the variable items are significant. The descriptive results indicated that there existed a relationship between competitor orientation and performance of universities in Kenya. These results are in line with the work of Zebel and Goodwin (2011) who stated that if companies wants to remain competitive and serve the market better than its competitors, it needs a continuous collection of information regarding the existing and perceived future needs and wants of customers.

### Factor Analysis

All the five competitor orientation measures were subjected to factor analysis using exploratory factor analysis (EFP) approach to establish the minimum number and nature of factors that would account for the maximum variance in the data collected. It measures respondents' beliefs about the constructs in the conceptual model (Malhotra, 2010, Brown, 2001). The factor analysis outcome of the process supported distinct concepts of competitor orientation. The total variance explanatory component for competitor orientation variable has an Eigen value of 2.553.

When the dependent variable university performance (student satisfaction, Student growth, number of programmes and student retention) were subjected to factor analysis, the results reveal that all the variable indicators of the dependent variable (university performance) had factor loading ranging from 0.8733 to 0.4858 which is greater than 0.4. Thus, all the variable items were retained for further analysis.

Factor analysis was also performed for independent variable (competitor orientation), and the results show that all the variable indicators of the independent variable had a factor loading greater than 0.4 as it range between 0.6464 to 0.8206, indicating that it met the threshold for regression analysis.

Normality test was performed to assess whether data set are normally distributed. Shapiro-Wilk test and Shapiro-Francia test as well as Q-Q test was used to test for normality. Skewness and Kurtosis for the various variables were tested to assess their normality of distribution (Ogunnaike, Akinbode, & Onochie, 2014). The result in Table 2 shows that Skewness test and Kurtosis test indicate that the data are normally distributed. This confirmation is positive for further multiple regression analysis.

**Table 2:-Normality Tests**

Variable	Shapiro-Francia		Shapiro-Wilk		Skewness Test	Kurtosis Test
	P-Value	Z-Value	P-Value	Z-Value	Pr(Skewness)	Pr(Kurtosis)
Customer satisfaction	0.92545	2.926	0.93180	2.886	0.0032	0.0081
Student increase	0.94430	2.367	0.91535	3.353	0.0049	0.5623
No. of academic programmes	0.99111	-1.149	0.98122	0.101	0.3379	0.1612
Student retention	0.84613	4.315	0.81720	5.016	0.0000	0.0000
Competitor orientation	0.95727	1.860	0.95536	1.971	0.0520	0.6898

Multicollinearity test was performed using pairwise correlations among the variables to test if independent variables are correlated to each other. Table 3 shows the correlation between competitor orientation component and university performance measures.

**Table 3:-Correlation between Competitor Orientation and Performance Measures**

	1	2	3	4	5	
Customer satisfaction (1)	1.0000					
Increase number of student (2)	0.0040 (0.9756)	1.0000				
Number of academic Programmes(3)	0.3243* (0.0101)	0.1753 (0.1730)	1.0000			
Student retention (4)	0.1875* (0.1445)	0.2509* (0.0492)	0.4437* (0.0003)	1.0000		
Competitor orientation (5)	0.3706* (0.0030)	0.1467 (0.2551)	0.1054 (0.4150)	0.3206* (0.4150)	1.0000	

Note: \*coefficient is significant at the 0.05 level. The P-values are in parenthesis.

Based on the findings, the studied variable do exhibit statistically significant relationship with other constructs in the correlation matrix, which warrants further investigation. The correlation between the independent and dependent variables indicate a moderately weak correlation.

### Regression Analysis

The results in Table 4 show the values of adjusted R square for competitor orientation and each of the individual performance measure. The value of adjusted R square for competitor orientation and customer (student) satisfaction (model 1) is 0.4577, which indicates that 45.77 percent variation in customer (student) satisfaction is explained by competitor orientation. The 8.03 percent variation in student increase (growth) (model 2), and 11.88 percent variation in student retention (model 4). These values imply the association of competitor orientation with different performance measures. Among these performance measures, the customer (student) satisfaction performance (model 1) is more influenced by competitor orientation because the value of adjusted square for customer (student) orientation is greater than all other measures as shown in Table 4. The results further show that the independent variable (competitor orientation) is statistically insignificant when both types of universities are lumped together. The inferential statistics showed that competitor orientation improve student satisfaction, number of programmes and student retention. However the results are statistically insignificant.

**Table 4:-Regression Results of Relationship between Market orientation and Performance**

Variables	Customer (student) satisfaction (D1) Model 1	Increase number of students (D2) Model 2	Number of academic Programmes (D3) Model 3	Student retention (D4) Model 4
Competitor orientation	0.1038 (0.80)	-0.0601 (-0.34)	0.0532 (0.36)	0.1817 (1.07)
F	13.87	2.33	0.96	3.06
R <sup>2</sup>	0.4933	0.1406	0.0626	0.1766
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.4577	0.0803	0.0028	0.1188
Root MSE	0.6437	0.8880	0.7339	0.8472
Number of observations	62	62	62	62

The t-values are in parenthesis. The asterisks \*, \*\*, \*\*\* represent significance at 10%, 5%, and 1% respectively. Dependent 1 captures questions on customer satisfaction, dependent 2 captures questions on increase number of students, dependent 3 captures questions on number of programs while dependent 4 captures questions on student retention. Model 1, 2, 3 and 4 were run without effect of intervening variables.

When universities were categorized into private and public universities, competitor orientation became statistically significant for public universities. The results show that competitor orientation improves student satisfaction and number of programmes than in private universities. Table 5 shows the regression analysis results per university category.

**Table 5:-Regression Analysis Results per University Category**

Variable	Private Universities				Public Universities			
	Customer (student) satisfaction (D1) Model 1	Student increase (D2) Model 2	Number of academic programmes (D3) Model 3	Students Retention (D4) Model 4	Customer satisfaction D1 Model 1	Student increase D2 Model	Number of academic programs D3 Model 4	Student retention D4 Model 4
Competitor orientation	-.03120 (-0.19)	-.2001 (-0.90)	-.0910 (-0.55)	0.1070 (0.64)	0.4660 (2.54)**	0.2990 (0.70)	0.4084 (1.81)*	0.2839 (0.84)
F	0.0000	0.2852	0.3858	0.3921	0.0005	0.0447	0.0295	0.0105
R <sup>2</sup>	0.5522	0.1412	0.1183	0.1170	0.6140	0.3725	0.4018	0.4668
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.4963	0.0339	0.0081	0.0066	0.5368	0.2470	0.2821	0.3602
Root MSE	0.6818	0.9108	0.6780	0.6874	0.5031	0.8191	0.6173	0.9275
No. of Observation	37	37	37	37	25	25	25	25

The t-values are in parenthesis. The asterisks \*, \*\*, \*\*\* represent significance at 10%, 5%, and 1% respectively. Dependent 1 captures questions on customer satisfaction, dependent 2 captures questions on increase number of

students, dependent 3 captures questions on number of programs while dependent 4 captures questions on student retention. Model 1, 2, 3 and 4 were run without effect of intervening variables.

Following the series of regression analysis and the subsequent findings in the above tests, the study rejected the null hypothesis  $H_{01}$ : “there is no significant relationship between competitor orientation and performance of selected universities in Kenya” when it comes to customer satisfaction and number of programmes in public universities when categorized into private and public universities. However, the study accepted the null hypothesis when universities are lumped together. This means that there is a positive significant relationship between competitor orientation and organizational performance in public universities but when universities are combined, there is no significant relationship between competitor orientation and performance of universities in Kenya.

### **Discussion:-**

The purpose of this study was to establish whether there is a relationship between competitor orientation and organizational performance. The descriptive results show that respondents were in agreement with all the statement regarding the extent of competitor orientation being practiced in their respective universities whether it is private or public university. These result means that universities respond to various competitive actions and strategies. The Chi-square tests for the items regarding competitor orientation in universities in Kenya indicated that all the respective universities targeted agreed with competitor orientation indicating that universities are competitor oriented by responding to various competitive actions and strategies. Similarly, results from students’ representative/leaders agreed that their respective universities respond to competitors’ actions and strategies. The respondents agreed to the fact that being competitor orientated positively influenced student satisfaction, student growth, increased programmes and student retention and competitor orientation is thus significant. The results also corresponds with the earlier works of Shin (2012) and Voon (2008) who stated that service providers need to be competitor-oriented by having knowledge of competitors, being responsive to competitors and being strategic in customer targeting.

Regression results showed that when both private and public universities are combined, competitor orientation improves student satisfaction, number of academic programmes and student retention but the results are statistically insignificant. This result supports the study by Smirnova et.al. (2011) with a finding that market orientation with an orientation dimension on competitors affects the business performance.

The study established that competitor orientation has a significant and positive relationship on student satisfaction and number of academic programmes when universities were categorized into private and public universities. The findings supports previous studies of O’dwver and Gilmore (2017), that SMEs consider competitor orientation as their benchmark by deciphering intelligence from customer based activities and practices and translating that intelligence into innovation.

In private universities the results showed that competitor orientation improves student retention though statistically insignificant. This study demonstrates that public universities are more competitor oriented than in private universities. This implies that public universities put more emphasis on analysing competitor behaviour and responding to their competitors’ actions compared to private universities. Existing literature agree with these findings that market orientation plays a key role in ensuring a superior performance in organizations (Caurana et al, 1998; Flavian and Lozano, 2006; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2010; Zebel and Goodwin, 2012). The study demonstrates that universities especially public universities have prioritised competitor orientation and consider it as central to organizational performance.

### **Conclusion:-**

In analyzing competitor orientation and its relationship with performance, this study found that universities especially public universities consider competitor orientation as key in improving student satisfaction and number of academic programmes. This illustrates that there is a link between competitor orientation and performance of universities. Universities can achieve competitive advantage through constant monitoring and assessing its strengths and weakness relative to its competitors. This study confirms the applicability of Ohmae’s 3C strategic triangle model in relation to performance of universities.



**Acknowledgement:-**

The author wishes to acknowledge all institutions involved in this study for granting permission for collection of data.

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