

**ANALYSIS OF DIFFERENTIATION STRATEGY ON PERFORMANCE OF BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT SERVICE PROVISION FIRMS: A CASE STUDY OF THE AGRIBUSINESS INVESTMENT FOR MARKET STIMULATION (AIMS) PROJECT**

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**Abstract:** *This study analyzed how differentiation strategy deployed by Business Development Service (BDS) provider firms influenced their performance while providing services to small and medium businesses (SME's) in Kenya. The study objective was evaluating influence of differentiation strategy on BDS firm's performance. The research was anchored on the Innovation theory of Profit. This study focused on 52 BDS providers who were working in under the Agribusiness Investment for Market Stimulation (AIMS) project to provide services to SME's. This study utilized a quantitative research methodology while descriptive cross-sectional research design was applied. Data was gathered using structured questionnaires. Purposive sampling was utilized with the target population comprised of all of the 52 private BDS providers in the AIMS project in Kenya. The target population was the BDS provider firm owner or manager. Internal reliability was worked out using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The Data gathered was analysed through descriptive analysis that included measures of distribution, measures of dispersion and inferential statistics namely linear regression analysis. Pearson product –moment correlation analysis was utilized to work out the direction and strength of association that exists between the variables. The findings revealed that the differentiation strategy was able to explain variation in performance of BDS firms in the AIMS Project by 62.6% the remaining percentage can be explained by other factors excluded from the model. The study also found that differentiation strategy had positive and significant influence on the performance of ( $\beta=.649, p=.000<.05$ ) BDS provision firms in the AIMS project. The study concludes that differentiation strategy positively and significantly influences the performance of business development service provider firms in the AIMS project.*

**Keywords:** *Differentiation strategy, Business development services (BDS)*

## **1.0 Background to the Study**

Business development Services (BDS) were described by Miehldradt and Mc Vay (2003) as non-financial services offered to businesses that assist them run efficiently leading to business growth. Delivery of BDS to Small and Medium has received much attention of late due to the realization that access to loans is not the only solution to growth in entrepreneurship (Rodriguez, Jr. 2010). While financing plays a major role, the provision of critical non-finance services also known as BDS are critical cogs in MSME & SME development.

While numerous research papers have been developed on the association between Business Development Services and SME performance, very few studies have been carried out on strategic initiatives deployed by the BDS service providers.

In Kenya the bulk of studies done have mainly focused on influence of BDS to performance of SMEs. Mungai .B (2012) in her research on relationship between BDS training and improvement of SMEs established that training on how to manage a business effectively to entrepreneurs led to increased productivity and growth of the business. The study by Okeyo, Gathungu and K'Obonyo (2014) on effects of BDS on market access, procurement and infrastructure services access found out that access to procurement and infrastructure services had the greatest impact on business performance. Njogu and Sakwa (2012) studied effects of BDS training on rural businesses in Kenya, and established that training offered impacted rural enterprises positively and led to improved business performance. Osinde, Stella Kemunto (2013) in her study on businesses in Kisii County indicated that SMEs that received training by BDS providers saw an increase in the volumes sold, profitability and market share. Otieno et al., (2013) study on challenges in the BDS sector and the strategic responses initiated by the BDS Providers indicated that the providers in Kenya deployed various strategic responses to deal with the challenges /situational forces they faced. The study found out that the BDS provider's responded to the various situational forces through initiation of self-regulation by the BDS service providers to ward off unfair completion by unscrupulous consultants. The BDS initiated collaboration between the individual BDS providers and at the sector level through forming lobby associations. Other BDS providers responded by deploying a price strategy that is individualized to the needs of the individual SMEs including charging low initially to enable acceptance and then rolling out a full service package when the SME understands the value of the BDS service. Initiating a diversification strategy was another strategy adopted where the BDS providers moved from offering an individual service like marketing and instead developed a service package with various components that addressed specific SME needs. Some BDS provider's developed a client strategy that cultivated a cordial working relationship with the target clients resulting in ownership of the service by the SMEs.

Global Communities is an international development organization headquartered in USA that has been implementing the Agribusiness Investment for Market Stimulation (AIMS) Program; a five-year, multi-country program since October 2014. The AIMS Program goal was to expand agriculture trade in the region by increasing access to finance and markets for small and medium agribusinesses in Kenya, Tanzania, and Malawi. To build the capacity of the Agribusinesses private BDS provision firms were selected to providers to provide critical support to help SMEs access markets, finance, technology and improve operations required to expand trade.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Business development services delivered to SME's have been shown to be very critical for the growth and expansion of enterprises in Kenya. A study by Kimando & Sakwa (2012) on impact of BDS on Enterprises in rural Kenya determined that BDS offered to businesses impacted the businesses positively. Business Development Services provided by private sector organizations have been seen to be more sustainable and having greater impact as compared to BDS provision by government ministries and donor agencies which are provided on a free or highly subsidized basis. Private sector BDS provision has been shown to be more responsive to the SME needs and is driven by the needs of the SME's (O.K Mbura and M.W. Bambaganya 2014).

While BDS Services provided by private BDS firms are indicated to be more sustainable and have greater impact as compared to government or donor led BDS provision there is a little literature on the strategic actions undertaken by the BDS provider firms as they reach out to SMEs in Kenya. (O.K Mbura et al., 2014). Majority of studies conducted on BDS provision in Kenya have focused only on effects of BDS provision to performance

of SMEs. The studies conducted in Kenya including by Mungai .B (2012) in her research on relationship between BDS training and growth of SMEs, Okeyo et al., (2014) on BDS effects on business performance, market access, procurement and infrastructure services access and Njogu. L and Sakwa. M (2012) on effects of BDS training on rural businesses in Kenya have primarily focused on effects of BDS services to the SME's. There are few studies in Kenya that have focused on the strategic actions of private sector BDS providers and how their strategic actions affect their performance. Otieno, Olomi and Kiraka (2013) investigated the prevailing forces in the BDS landscape and what the BDS provider's strategic actions were. The study did not however investigate how the strategic actions deployed by the BDS provider firms affect their own performance. Goyal, Sergi and Kapoor (2016) in their study assessing BDS providers and MSME's drawbacks and strategic efforts point out that there has been little research literature on the different aspects of BDS providers which include strategic actions, impact, challenges and growth in the context of MSME's. This means that there was a literature gap and a contextual gap as the study was being undertaken in an area where little research had been carried out. This research therefore set out to analyze the influence of differentiation strategy on the performance of business development service provider firms in the Agribusiness Investment for Market Stimulation Program (AIMS).

### **1.1 Research Objective**

To evaluate influence of differentiation strategy on the performance of BDS firms in the Agribusiness Investment for Market Stimulation Program (AIMS).

### **1.2 Research Question**

To what degree has the differentiation strategy influenced the performance of business development service provider firms in the Agribusiness Investment for Market Stimulation Program (AIMS)?

## **2.0: Literature review**

### **2.1 Theoretical and empirical literature review**

According to Tanwar (2013) competitive strategies are about making strategic steps to create a defensive stance in the sector. A business with Competitive advantage over others in the industry is able to attract more buyers than its competitor's resulting in higher revenue, profitability and performance. According to Porter (1985) competition defines whether a firm succeeds or fails, competition therefore defines how appropriate a firms activities determine performance. Porters (1985) defines three generic competitive strategies which include differentiation, cost leadership and focus strategies. To describe the link between Differentiation strategy and firm performance the researcher settled on the innovation theory of profit.

The Innovation theory of profit postulates that for an organization to earn a profit in an industry it must be continually innovative with innovation being defined as the sum of the deliberate changes made to enhance the efficiency of the production process which leads to lowered production cost or increases product demand thus increasing profit margins. The more innovative a firm is the more clients it acquires therefore BDS providers need to continually develop new innovations in provision of services to SME's for them to gain competitive advantage in the sector. The Innovation Theory of Profit was floated by Joseph Alois Schumpeter (1934), who indicated that profits can be earned by a business through introducing new innovations in the industry. In this context innovation was defined as the sum of the deliberate changes made to enhance the efficiency of the production process which leads to lowered production cost or increases product demand thus increasing profit margins.

**Differentiation strategy:** Differentiation strategy is where a firm works to be unique in provision of goods or services with specific attributes that are highly appreciated by its target clients (Porter 1985). A research conducted by Ouma and Oloko on the competitive strategies deployed by long distance Bus companies in Kenya showed that long distance bus companies differentiated themselves by adopting accessible and secure offices making ticket booking convenient to customers, ensuring that their buses stayed on schedule, prompt customer complaints handling through a well-staffed customer care department, adopting a seating arrangement that is comfortable to long distance passengers, serving snack and drinks in the buses, introducing comfortable, well-spaced and adjustable seats, online bus booking system and proper security. A study conducted by Omwoyo (2016) on firms in the airlines sector in Kenya showed that airline firms deployed technology to differentiate their products to its clients. The airlines developed unique products for varied customer groups at an acceptable cost. According to Omwoyo (2016) Differentiation strategy may be difficult to maintain indefinitely over an extended period of time due to competition that evolves regularly, thus businesses deploy a cocktail of various attributes which include price, service and quality that are important for its target clients.

**Firm Performance:** Selvam et al., (2016) identified a list of possible determinants of firm performance based on their study on various studies published earlier. They identified determinants of a firm performance to include profitability performance, growth performance, market value performance, customers’ satisfaction, employees’ satisfaction, environmental performance, environmental audit performance, corporate governance performance and social performance. Selvam et al., (2016) then goes ahead to group the determinants of firm performance into two namely financial performance and strategic performance with financial performance variables being, growth , profitability and market value performance. Strategic performance indicators includes employee and customer satisfaction, environmental and environmental audit performance, social and corporate performance. Market value is a representative of firm’s external evaluation and future performance prospects. This study focused on financial performance determinants with the dimensions being profit and Growth performance with an emphasis on rate of customer acquisition.

### 2.3 Conceptual Framework

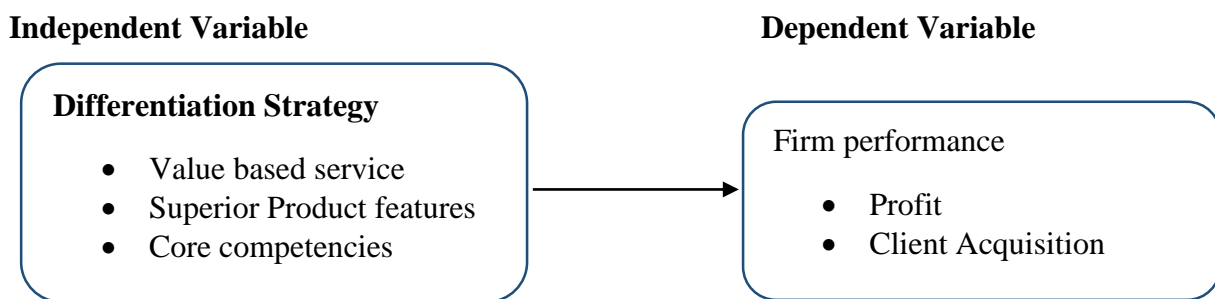


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

### 3.0 Research Methodology

The research study utilized a quantitative research methodology which focuses on measurement and numerical analysis of data collected through questionnaires or surveys. A descriptive cross-sectional research design was utilized in this study. The study design was used to determine the frequencies and percentages of the variables in the defined population. The study location was in Kenya targeted at 52 private BDS provider firms who

provided business development services to SMEs in the AIMS project. The BDS firms were located all over the country spread across the 47 counties in Kenya. The target population comprised all of the 52 private BDS provider's owners/ directors or their respective managers therefore 52 respondents were interviewed for this study.

Purposive sampling was carried out in this study since the population under study were the 52 Private BDS service providers (AIMS) Project. A Structured questionnaire tool was utilized to collect primary data from the population. Given that the respondents consisted of the BDS providers in the AIMS project, a questionnaire was found to be the most suitable tool for gathering data from the respondents who were geographically widespread. The questionnaire utilized close ended questions which captured respondent's demographics and the study variables. The questionnaire was intended to prompt responses in relation to the how the adoption of competitive strategies affects performance of the BDS firms.

Primary data in this study was gathered using a questionnaire. Quantitative data was gathered in the study with the questions being constructed so as to deal with the specific objectives of the research and enable each of the respondents to provide a variety of possible responses. The questionnaire was administered through use of both online and physical means where emails was shared with the target respondents and for those unreachable through e-mail the questionnaire was administered physically through use of research assistants. The respondents were the managers or owners of the 52 Private BDS service provider firms providing services in the (AIMS) Project.

The data collected in this research was analyzed through descriptive analysis including mean, frequencies, percentages and inferential analysis using multiple regression analysis. Pearson Product-Moment correlation analysis was utilized to establish influence of competitive strategies on the performance of BDS providers. The data was fed into the computer using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) and Microsoft excel package after it had been cleaned and coded while the data presentation was done using charts and tables to make the data more illustrative. The relationship between the independent and dependent variables was established by using regression analysis. The dependent variable firm performance of Profitability and the client acquisition will be regressed separately. The regression equation for profitability is as below:-

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta X_1 + \varepsilon$$

In the equation  $Y = \text{Performance}$ ;  $\beta_0 = \text{constant}$ ,  $\beta = \text{Regression coefficient}$ ;  $X = \text{Differentiation strategy}$ ;  $\varepsilon = \text{Error term}$ .

#### 4.0 Findings and Discussion

Results on response rate revealed that 48 respondents out of the 52 potential respondents, filled out the questionnaire. This demonstrates a 92.30 percent response rate which is sufficient for descriptive analysis. According to Kothari (2009), a 60% response rate is sufficient for analysis. With regards to demographic information, a majority 46(95.8%) of the respondents were the owners/directors of the sampled firms, while 2(4.2%) were managers of those firms. The study also showed that most 32(77.1%) of the respondents had served at their respective positions for between 5-10 years. Regarding registration status, the study found that most 34(70.8%) of the firms were registered as limited company. Further, the study established that 31(64.6%) of the sampled firms had existed previously for a period of between 5-10 years. The findings showed that most 33(68.8%) of the respondents were highly educated to the level of post graduate, compared to 15(31.3%) that had the qualification of under graduate.

### 4.1 Descriptive Analysis

#### Performance Areas with Most Growth

The respondents were also requested to point out the performance areas that their BDS firms had demonstrated most growth in the previous 12 months. The scale used was as follows: 1=*Excellent*, 2=*Good*, 3=*Fair*, 4=*Poor*, 5=*Very poor*. The responses are as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Performance Areas with Most Growth

Statement	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor	Very poor	Mean	Std. Dev.
Growth in performance metric in the last 12 months	8.30%	43.80%	43.80%	4.20%	0.00%	2.438	0.712
Growth in profit in the last 12 months	4.20%	50.00%	43.80%	2.10%	0.00%	2.438	0.616
Growth in clients acquired in the last 12 months	2.10%	54.20%	41.70%	2.10%	0.00%	2.438	0.580
<b>Overall</b>						<b>2.438</b>	<b>0.636</b>

From Table 1, most of the respondents (43.80%) indicated that the performance growth in their firms over the last 12 months was good, another 43.80% indicated fair growth, while 4.20% believed the growth had been poor. The results also show that half of the respondents (50%) were positive that over the past 12 months, growth in profit of their firms was good, 43.80% believed the growth in profit was fair, while 4.20% rated the growth in profit excellent. Finally, majority of the respondents (54.20%) were positive that over the past 12 months the growth in clients acquired was good, 41.70% indicated fair, while 2.10% believed it was poor.

#### Differentiation Strategy

The study sought to evaluate influence of differentiation strategy on the performance of private BDS firms in the AIMS project in Kenya. Table 2 shows descriptive results on differentiation strategy variable. The scale used was: (1=*Strongly Agree*, 2=*Agree*, 3=*Neither agree nor disagree*, 4=*Disagree*, and 5=*Strongly Disagree*).

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics on Differentiation Strategy

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	Std. Dev.
The firm has identified a market segment to provide value based services at premium prices	43.80%	37.50%	18.80%	0.00%	0.00%	1.750	0.758
The firm has developed unique service products	37.50%	47.90%	14.60%	0.00%	0.00%	1.771	0.692

targeted to specific markets in the BDS industry.

The firm has developed unique high quality services with superior features that cannot be easily imitated by competitors.

20.80% 41.70% 33.30% 4.20% 0.00% 2.208 0.824

The firm has developed core competencies that attract specific premium clients who repeatedly demand its services.

33.30% 50.00% 16.70% 0.00% 0.00% 1.833 0.694

The firm niche markets are less sensitive to premium costs of services.

2.10% 39.60% 37.50% 16.70% 4.20% 2.813 0.891

The firm utilizes IT technology solutions to target the niche markets with specific BDS services.

18.80% 66.70% 10.40% 4.20% 0.00% 2.000 0.684

The firm continuously strives to develop a unique value proposition targeted at the niche markets.

66.70% 33.30% 0.00% 0.00% 0.00% 1.333 0.476

The organization has improved its profit as a result of providing value based services, superior service features and utilizing its core competencies thus differentiating its BDS service offering from other players in the target market.

35.40% 43.80% 20.80% 0.00% 0.00% 1.854 0.743

The organization has acquired new clients as a

37.50% 45.80% 16.70% 0.00% 0.00% 1.792 0.713

result of providing value based services, superior service features and utilizing its core competencies thus differentiating its BDS service offering from other players in the target market.

**Overall**

**1.928 0.720**

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The results on differentiation strategy in Table 2 show that most (81.30%) of the respondents agreed their firms had identified market segments to provide value based services at premium prices, 85.40% of the respondents agreed that their firms had developed unique service products targeted to specific markets in the BDS industry, 62.50% of the respondents were of the opinion that their firms had developed unique high quality services with superior features that cannot be easily imitated by competitors. The results also indicate that a higher percentage (83.30%) of the respondents were very affirmative that their firms had developed core competencies that attract specific premium clients who repeatedly demand its services, with 41.70% indicating that their firms niche markets are less sensitive to premium costs of services.

Additionally, majority of the respondents (85.50%) agreed that their firms utilizes IT technology solutions to target the niche markets with specific BDS services. The results demonstrated that 100% of the respondents were in agreement that their firms continuously strives to develop a unique value proposition targeted at the niche markets. Similarly, 79.20% of the respondents agreed that their organizations had improved its profit as a result of providing value based services, superior service features and utilizing its core competencies thus differentiating its BDS service offering from other players in the target market.

Finally, it is clear that most (83.30%) of the respondents agreed their organizations had acquired new clients as a result of providing value based services, superior service features and utilizing its core competencies thus differentiating its BDS service offering from other players in the target market. Overall, the descriptive results on differentiation strategy has an average mean and standard deviation of 1.928 and 0.720 respectively. According to Omwoyo (2016), differentiation may be achieved through incorporating a better or more innovative product design, producing product through advanced materials or product is sold or serviced in a unique way and that they produce products and services that appeals to distinct clients.

## **4.2 Inferential Analysis**

### **4.2.1 Correlation Analysis Results**

The study conducted correlation analysis to determine the relationship between differentiation strategy and the dependent variable performance of business development service provider firms in the AIMS project. Table 3 presents the results for the correlation in the study.



Table 3: Correlation Matrix

		Performance	Differentiation Strategy
Performance	Pearson Correlation	1.000	
	Sig. (2-tailed)		
Differentiation Strategy	Pearson Correlation	.606**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	

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

Table 3 shows results that depict a significant and positive relationship between differentiation strategy and the performance of business development service provider firms in the AIMS project in Kenya ( $r=0.606$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) at 5% level of significance. This implies that differentiation strategy has an association with the performance of business development service provider firms in the AIMS Project. This mirrors with the findings of the study by Omwoyo (2016) who found that companies that had utilized differentiation strategy successfully include Starbucks coffee which has innovated a concept of uniquely blended coffee that appeals to distinct clients in the United States of America. The company is able to charge higher prices for its products due to their Coffee unique flavors.

#### 4.2.2 Regression Analysis Results

The study sought to determine the relationship between differentiation strategy and the performance of BDS firms in the Agribusiness Investment for Market Stimulation Project. Table 4 shows the model summary between differentiation strategy and performance.

Table 4: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.796 <sup>a</sup>	0.634	0.626	0.23676

a Predictors: (Constant), Differentiation strategy

#### Source: Field Data, 2022

The results in table 4 show that the coefficient of determination (R squared) was 0.634 implying that 63.4% of the variation in performance of BDS firms in the Agribusiness Investment for Market Stimulation Project can be explained by differentiation strategy. The adjusted R square of 0.626 depicts that all the differentiation strategy in exclusion of the constant variable explained the variation in performance of BDS firms in the Agribusiness Investment for Market Stimulation Project by 62.6% the remaining percentage can be explained by other factors excluded from the model. Table 5 shows the ANOVA results.

Table 5: ANOVA

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	4.471	1	4.471	79.756	.000 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	2.578	46	0.056		
	Total	7.049	47			

a. Dependent Variable: Performance

b. Predictors: (Constant), Differentiation Strategy

#### Source: Field Data, 2022

The ANOVA results in table 5 show that the model was statistically significant in explaining the influence of differentiation Strategy on performance of BDS firms in the Agribusiness Investment for Market Stimulation Project and it is indicated by a p-value of  $0.000 < 0.05$ . Table 6 show regression coefficient.

**Table 6: Regression Coefficient Results**

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	0.680	0.144		4.721	0.000
	Differentiation Strategy	0.649	0.073	0.796	8.931	0.000

a. Dependent Variable: Performance

**Source: Field Data, 2022**

$$Y = 0.680 + 0.649X$$

Were;

Y= Performance

X= Differentiation Strategy

The regression coefficient results in Table 6 show that there is a positive and statistically significant relationship between differentiation strategy and performance of Agribusiness Investment for Market Stimulation Project ( $\beta = .649$ ,  $p = .000 < .05$ ). This implies that a unit change in differentiation strategy leads to an improvement in performance of Agribusiness Investment for Market Stimulation Project by 0.649 units.

### 5.0 Conclusions

The study established that most of the BDS firms in the AIMS Project in Kenya are actively involved in the use of differentiation strategy as a way of enhancing their performance and most of them are adopting the strategy often. The study further concludes based on the findings that these firms improves their performance through identification of market segments to provide value based services at premium prices, through development of unique service products targeted to specific markets in the BDS industry and through development of unique high quality services with superior features that cannot be easily imitated by competitors.

Further, the study concludes that the BDS firms studied are improving their profits as a result of providing value based services, superior service features and utilizing its core competencies thus differentiating its BDS service offering from other players in the target market and also through acquiring of new clients as a result of providing value based services, superior service features and utilizing its core competencies thus differentiating its BDS service offering from other players in the target market. Finally, the research concludes that there an existent positive and significant relationship between differentiation strategy and the performance of private Business Development Service provision firms in Kenya, such that an improvement in the adoption of this strategy leads to an improvement in the performance of the firms that adopt it.

## 6.0 Recommendations

Private Business Development Service provision firms should adopt differentiation strategy because firms that adopt a differentiation strategy results in businesses avoiding competitive rivalry in its specific industry and they do not engage in destructive competitive behavior like what mainly happens in other strategies, this includes the potential of higher margins, market share growth, improved reputation. It is evident the competition within the SME industry must be high for any firms firm seeking to make substantial gains in market share therefore requires private Business Development Service provision firms in Kenya to engage in high performance activities that generate a competitive advantage such as the adoption of differentiation strategy. The study also used perceptual scales to collect performance data of the BDS firms using Google form questionnaires, thus, further studies should be carried out using secondary data from the firms' performance statements to corroborate with the responses given in the current study.

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