

Original Research Article

Organizational Ambidexterity and Performance of Telecommunication Firms in Kenya

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Abstract: The business environment in the 21st century has remained very competitive and firms that will survive must be innovative and efficient in their operations. In Kenya, there is one company that has dominated the industry with 66 percent market share and 77.4 percent revenue, while the others are struggling to achieve sustainable performance. The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between organizational ambidexterity and performance in telecommunication firms in Kenya. The objectives of the study are firstly to investigate the extend to which exploration and exploitation strategies are applied in telecommunication companies in Kenya; to evaluate the performance of the companies; to propose strategic decision making approaches that can be used to achieve better performance in the telecommunication firms in Kenya. It analysed thirty one studies via systematic review and the findings were that there is a positive joint effect of exploration and exploitation when the two capabilities are employed simultaneously. Organizational ambidexterity has a positive influence on organizational performance and the study recommends that the co-existence of exploration and exploitation is paramount to organizational performance.

Keywords: business environment, 21st century, Kenya, telecommunication firms, organizational ambidexterity.

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The business environment in the 21st century has remained very competitive and firms that will survive must be innovative and efficient in their operations. The organizations should have the ability to meet the changing needs of the customers by innovating more rapidly and adjusting existing products to respond to the trends (Gachigo *et al.*, 2019). The ability of the firm to balance and manage the exploration and the exploitation activities is the main determinant if the company will survive in the industry and maintain or grow their profitability and market share. Organizational ambidexterity is the term used to define the ability of an organization to simultaneously explore and exploit its activities, where exploration refers to new knowledge focus while exploitation refers to efficiency and alignment of the current business through enhancement and refinement thus ensuring business sustainability (Mutisya *et al.*, 2020). According to Mutisya *et al.*, (2020), there is consensus among scholars that though organizational ambidexterity is important, it is not

achieved easily by companies. There are various measures of organizational ambidexterity such as innovation activity, output-efficiency score, share of disruptive products, knowledge creation and learning through research and development activities, participation in innovative financing programs and sustainable development (Dranev *et al.*, 2020). There are various strategies that improve organizational ambidexterity like supporting structures, processes and behaviours, for example, strategies such as proactiveness and quality orientation. The organizational ambidexterity must maintain balance between the exploration and exploitation (Kassotaki, 2022). Performance on the other hand is the ultimate measure of the organization's outcome and mainly done in relation to results (financial performance) and in relation to determinants of the results such as competitiveness gauged by market share. These indicators are used to evaluate the state of the firm's performance, design strategies that can be used to achieve competitive advantage. The company must be able to understand its key indicators in order to measure performance (Aldoghan *et al.*, 2022). The study uses two related

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dimensions; financial performance (revenue) and competitiveness (market share) (Kafetzopoulos, 2021). Organizations will improve performance by predicting and foreseeing market needs and placing new products and services in the market. The more objective and consistent measures of performance, the more suitable to accurately evaluate the organization's performance (Abdalla & Mahmed, 2020).

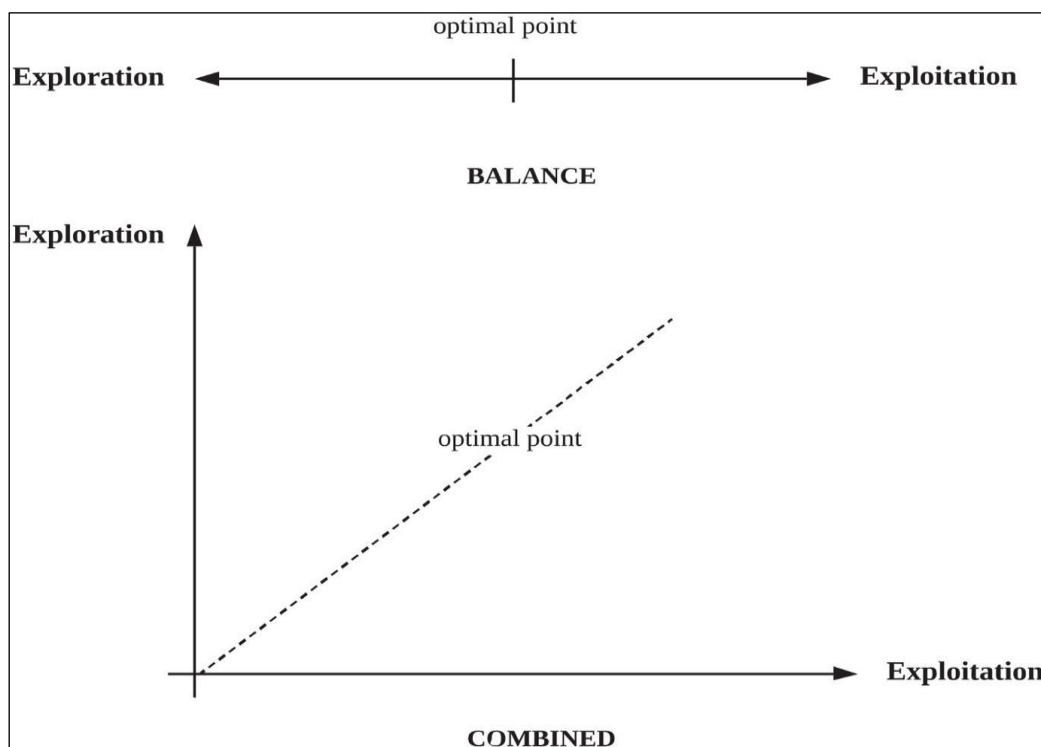
In the telecommunication industry in Kenya, there are five major companies (Communications Authority of Kenya, 2023), and intense competition has led to some companies achieving very low levels of the market share and revenue and so they are on the verge of leaving the industry (Mwaniki & Anene, 2023). This study then aims at investigating the relationship between organizational ambidexterity and performance on telecommunication firms in Kenya.

The telecommunication industry has achieved considerable growth over the years, from the time when Telkom was a monopoly to being joined by Safaricom, Airtel Kenya and others. The stiff competition by the two major players in the industry has made Telkom lose its allure (Mugo & Macharia, 2021) and only retain 4

percent of its market and 4.7 percent in revenue, while Safaricom, the leader in the industry, has 66 percent market share and 77.4 percent revenue (Communications Authority of Kenya, 2023). Safaricom has gained competitive advantage through the cost leadership and differentiation strategies. The introduction of Mpesa product gave the company the leadership spot. Other companies have tried to play catch-up by introducing the Telkom Kash, Airtel Money and Equitel money to below average performance. Technology has also played a big role in innovation by the firms moving from fixed lines to 2G and onwards to 5G in 2023. The firms also serve the low income earners by providing low cost phones and the people are able to pay for their transactions through Mpesa (Mugo & Macharia, 2021).

The term organizational ambidexterity was introduced by a scholar called Duncan in 1976. Another scholar named March, further introduced the concepts of exploration and exploitation, describing them as the independent activities that also include inherent trade-offs in 1991 (Kassotaki, 2022).

The ideal point between the two is well analysed in a diagram by Kassotaki, (2022).



The ability of organizations to innovate ensures that it remains competitive while improving its performance (Gachigo *et al.*, 2019). Kassotaki (2022) gives organizational ambidexterity as positive and significantly associated with the performance of the organization, where higher performance outcomes are determined by the management's ability to explore and exploit the activities. Innovation is no longer a luxury but a necessity for the firms to survive. Their long-term

success will be a result of continuous innovation leading to higher rates of performance and growth. Although innovation has been determined as the driver of sustainable competitive advantage, there are substantial costs that can affect the organization's return on investment and thus its performance in general, including revenue growth, profitability, and market share. When a firm is adopting an innovation strategy, they should know when and how best to make adjustment when the

business environment demands. Due to lack of integration of innovation in the telecommunication business in Kenya, several firms have not been able to perform optimally, with various challenges such as price wars and tilting of market shares between the major players in the industry (Gachigo *et al.*, 2019).

Statement of the Problem

There are 5 major telecommunication companies in Kenya. The telecommunication industry has achieved considerable growth over the years, from

the time when Telkom was a monopoly to being joined by Safaricom, Airtel Kenya and others (Mugo & Macharia, 2021). Safaricom has gained the number one slot in the industry gaining competitive advantage over the rest, through the cost leadership and differentiation strategies. Other companies have tried to play catch-up but to below average performance. According to Communications Authority of Kenya (2023, p. 41), the performance of the telecommunication firms in terms of market share and revenue is analyzed in the table below:

Table 1: Performance table

No	Telecommunication firms	Market Share	Revenue
.1	Safaricom PLC	66%	77.4%
.2	Airtel Networks Kenya Ltd	27%	17.7%
.3	Telkom Kenya Ltd	4%	4.7%
.4	Finserve Kenya Ltd (Equitel)	2%	0.2%
.5	Jamii Telecommunications Ltd	1%	0.0%

Several studies have been conducted on the organizational ambidexterity and performance on telecommunication firms in Kenya. The telecommunication companies struggle to enter the market that is dominated by one company with 66 percent market share and 77.4 percent revenue (Communications Authority of Kenya, 2023), while the others are struggling to achieve sustainable performance and are almost leaving the industry (Mwaniki & Anene, 2023). Loyalty by customers is another hurdle that makes smaller firms not to gain more customers and are thus left to share 33.6 percent of revenue. Sullivan (2024), agrees that the telecommunications firms are in dire need of innovation if they are to survive in the industry. Mugo and Macharia (2021), also agree that sustainability of innovation in a competitive environment has some firms performing poorly while other firms are thriving in the Kenya’s telecommunication industry. According to Mwaniki and Anene (2023) companies must develop competitive advantage to survive in the industry through the use of organizational ambidexterity strategies.

According to Gachigo *et al.*, (2019) the use of exploration and exploitation strategies lead companies to improved performance. The same is argued by Karama and Linge (2019), Peng *et al.*, (2019) and Mutisya *et al.*, (2020). Improvement in the performance of an organisation would be reflected in the revenue and market share. Companies that fail to embrace organizational ambidexterity perform dismally (Gachigo *et al.*, 2019). With the exception of Safaricom that has continuously improved their services as well as coming up with new products, the others have not been able to develop strategies that will improve their performance.

The findings of this study will be significant to the management of the telecommunication firms in Kenya, to policy makers on how to assist the players in the industry achieve greater performance and to scholars

who are interested to carry out research on organizational ambidexterity and performance.

Purpose of the Study

To investigate the relationship between organizational ambidexterity and performance in telecommunication firms in Kenya.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- i. To establish the extend to which exploration and exploitation strategies are applied in telecommunication firms in Kenya.
- ii. To evaluate the performance of the companies, for example, revenue growth and profitability and how it is correlated with the exploration and exploitation strategies.
- iii. To identify strategic decision making approaches that can be used to achieve better performance in the telecommunication firms in Kenya.

METHODOLOGY

This study has adopted the desktop research methodology. Desktop research is the use of secondary data by researchers, and involved review of already existing research in a particular field inorder to gain a broader understanding of the field. The reviews are used to identify the research gaps, methodologies and analyses in specific areas (Wahid *et al.*, 2023). The use of desktop research has gained consistently since the onset of COVID-19 and it is cost effective, time efficient and easier accessibility of the data. Kassotaki (2022), in his article on review of organizational ambidexterity reviewed 122 articles in regards to organizational ambidexterity.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theory of Competitive Advantage

The study is primarily based on the theory of competitive advantage. The theory of competitive advantage was developed by Micheal Porter in 1985 (Karama & Linge, 2019). The theory argues that sustainable competitive advantage is achieved by use of the companies' internal factors such as assets, skills and abilities (Hutahayan, 2020).

Competitive advantage is the possession of specific values that businesses use to earn opportunities, through exploration and the exploitation activities discussed earlier, that create revenues for the company (Nguyen *et al.*, 2021). A firm must lay emphasis on the quality of their products, in terms of employees and practices to achieve organizational ambidexterity. An emphasis on good products relate positively to innovative products in the market and thus having a direct result in market share and customer loyalty (Kafetzopoulos, 2021). Competitive advantage is when a firm adopts strategies that ensure it maintains and sustains favourable market position that then translate to higher profits or returns. It is also achieved when a company has higher profitability than the average profitability of its competitors (Karama & Linge, 2019).

The theory has been criticized by some scholars such as Hutahayan (2020), who argue that although the theory uses the internal resources to achieve competitive advantage, the company can be able to use external resources to exploit opportunities such as outsourcing, leasing among others. An example of a company outsourcing activities include Safaricom that outsources the loan management facility, fuliza to NCBA bank (Murimi, 2020). Another scholar who criticizes the theory is Campella (2021) who argues that the introduction of a product can bring negative performance in a firm in both revenue and market share. The competitive advantage theory also fails to appreciate that new products in the market can disrupt the equilibrium even where firms had the competitive advantage for a long time, it may be difficult to sustain it due to the dynamic nature of the industry. Other issues that may affect companies include imitations by competitors, shifting customer preferences thus the need to explore on a more focused way.

Theory of Continuous Learning

The study also relies heavily on the theory of continuous learning. The theory of continuous learning also called the conception of experiential learning was founded by John Dewey, Kurt Lewin and Jean Piaget (Miettinen, 2010) between 1859 to 1952 and they believed in progressive learning (Sikandar, 2015). According to Ord and Leather (2011), the proponents gave the experience as being conceived and learning

from the results and as a consequence of 'trying' and 'undergoing', they achieve the full potential of continuous learning. The adoption of continuous learning by embracing the mindset of innovation and adaptability leads to thriving in the ever-changing world and gaining sustainable performance throughout the life of the company (Ord & Leather, 2011). Elidemir *et al.*, (2020) also agree that training provides skills improvement and knowledge that improves the employees capabilities and thus creating positive performance outcomes. An organisation that embraces learning of its employees, gains from their innovativeness and creativity and thus an improvement on financial performance and market share of their products.

To achieve organizational ambidexterity the company must cultivate a culture of continuous learning and keep on the innovative ways for the company to be successful. When the company refuses to look into innovation and continue to do things the same way, they may lose their performance levels to other companies. The key to continuous learning is where new knowledge and experience leads the company to improve their performance. The company must use its resources to search for new knowledge, termed as investments, so as to remain competitive, innovative and creative (Hijfte, 2020).

The theory has been criticized by scholars among them Morris (2019) who argues that the theory lacks clarity on what actually constitutes concrete experience that improves the experience of the learners. However, scholars such as (Ashal *et al.*, 2021) embrace the culture of continuous learning and adaption in order to achieve organizational ambidexterity and support their point by encouraging companies to adopt continuous learning as it enhances their capabilities as they balance the activities under exploration and exploitation and in the long term it will improve their performance.

Conceptual Framework

There are 2 variables under study as shown below. The independent variable is the organizational ambidexterity while the dependent variable is the organizational performance. The independent variable is measured using the exploration and the exploitation variables where the activities are complementary to one another. The exploration variable is measured by assessing the innovation investment, openness to change, external collaboration and knowledge creation and learning while the exploitation variable is measured by operational efficiency, productivity and quality improvement, customer satisfaction and retention.

The dependent variable of performance is measured by considering the market share and profitability of the telecommunication firms in Kenya.

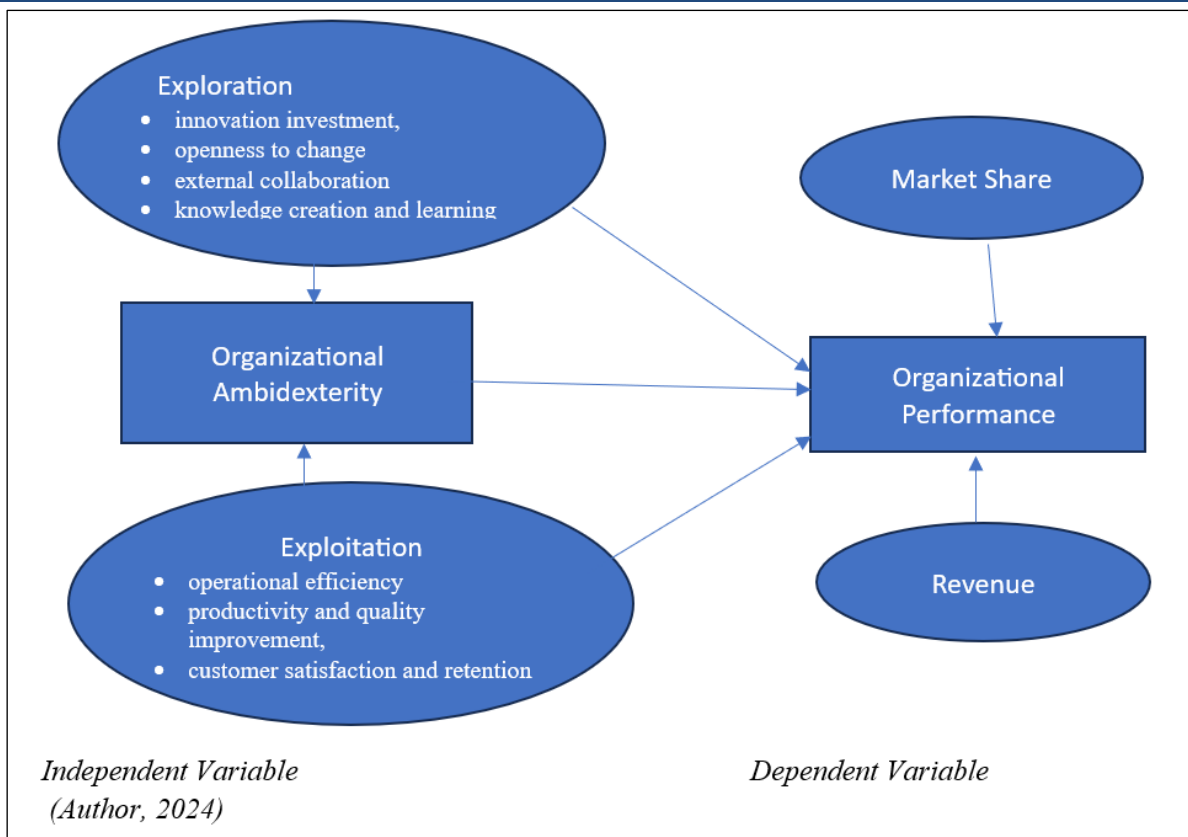


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

EMPIRICAL LITERATURE

This study analysed studies conducted that examined exploration, exploitation and performance in the telecommunications industry in Kenya. In a study on the exploration innovative strategy and performance of the telecommunication industry in Kenya, Gachigo *et al.*, (2019) look at the innovation strategies and how it enhances business in the telecommunication firms in Kenya. The authors used the descriptive research design with the target population of all 58 Safaricom outlets employees and management. Using the stratified sampling technique, the authors used a random sample from each stratum and had a sample size of 365 employees. Data was collected through the use of questionnaires and analysed using means, standard deviations and regression analysis. The study by Gachigo *et al.*, (2019) used the job-to-be-done theory. In the job-to-be-done theory, customers make purchases depending on the job to be completed. The theoretical gap in the job-to-be-done theory is the compensatory behaviour of customers who can do with what is available. This is especially true when new technology or innovation is being developed (Hall, 2020). The study also had a methodological gap as this method has the limitation of scope as it describes the current situation and does not establish the cause and effect relationships. It mainly relies on existing data as well as the problem of the researcher’s biases and preconceptions that may influence the interpretation of the data (Sirisilla, 2023). This study addressed the theoretical and methodological

gap by analyzing a large number of studies on organizational ambidexterity and performance on telecommunication firms in Kenya. The findings were that “a unit increase in exploitative and explorative innovation leads to 23.40 percent increase in organizational performance in telecommunications firms in Kenya” (pg. 313). The study concluded that organizational ambidexterity has significant effect on organizational performance and employees are encouraged to bring new ideas as they practice organizational ambidexterity in order to increase market share or create new markets (Gachigo, *et al.*, 2019).

Karama & Linge (2019), in a study on the strategic factors influencing market share of telecommunications firms in Kenya, that was conducted using the causal-comparative research design whose target population were the four key telecommunication firms in Kenya. Questionnaires were administered to all the 362 management employees and a response rate of 85.4 percent was achieved. The analysis was conducted using mean and standard deviation. The findings were that product differential and price had a significant effect on market share. They concluded that firms need to innovate unique products with better quality and good prices to meet customer needs and thus achieve competitive advantage. The companies are supposed to incorporate feedback from stakeholders to be successful, and minimise resistance when reaching out to new markets as well as sustain the current markets. The study found out that higher market shares put the company at a

competitive advantage as they receive better prices from the suppliers thus achieving greater economies of scale and thus passing on the benefit to the consumers, and in turn gaining loyalty. The study used the theory of market share theory. The theoretical gap is that market share may not always amount to competitive advantage when customers are not certain of the product attributes or quality indicators (Mauboussin & Callahan, 2022). The market share is one of the main determinants of profitability and the higher the market share, the higher the profitability and return on investment is higher. The increase in market share increases the reputable recognition thus the ability to sell more.

Peng *et al.*, (2019), in their study on linking organizational ambidexterity and performance: the drivers of sustainability in high-tech firms in Taiwan, implore the need to balance conflicts from exploration of new knowledge and the exploitation of existing knowledge. The study used questionnaires to conduct the research where the questionnaires were distributed using the stratified random sampling technique where top managers were selected. The sample size was 1200, however 234 responses were provided, giving a response rate of 23.4 percent. The study found a curvilinear (inverse U-shaped relationship) of organizational ambidexterity on performance in companies where positive results are achieved up to a certain point, as they argue that too much search for new knowledge maybe associated with higher risks as well as the costs to the research and development function. There should be trade-off between exploration and exploitation thus achieving synergistic performance while if either one is absent, then it impairs the synergistic effect. Most of the studies show that there is a positive effect of organizational ambidexterity on performance while a few show a negative effect. Companies engage in exploitation to confirm their current viability and in exploration to confirm future viability by adding new products and services. Organizational growth requires both exploration and exploitation. The study by Peng *et al.*, (2019) had a methodological gap as there was a low response rate of 23.4 percent. The theoretical gap of the organizational learning theory is the tendency to be idealistic where the theory assumes that all members of staff are willing and able to engage in collective learning. This is not true at all times due to the organizational politics, resistance to change and power dynamics that may hinder the learning process. Organizational learning is also complex and more abstract thus difficult to quantify and evaluate (Theory Hub, 2024). However, this study analyzed a large number of studies to address the methodological and theoretical gaps in the study by Peng *et al.*, (2019). They concluded that there is a positive joint effect of the exploration and exploitation on organizational performance when the two capabilities are employed simultaneously.

In conclusion, Mutisya *et al.*, (2020) also looked at influence of organizational ambidexterity on

the performance of large manufacturing firms in Kenya. The study was grounded on the positivist philosophy and using the cross-sectional survey design where they conducted the survey in all 107 Kenyan large manufacturing firms. Since the study was a survey, a questionnaire was sent to one person in the organizations represented, with the organizations being those with more than 50 employees and with an annual sales revenue of over Kshs. 1 Billion. The data was collected using structured questionnaires. The study was to determine if the organizational design determines the relationship of the organizational ambidexterity on performance in the large manufacturing firms. The relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable was assessed using the simple linear regression analysis. The study found that “the effect of organizational ambidexterity on organizational performance is significant where $R^2=0.347$, $F=51.100$, $P<0.05$, $\beta=0.589$, $t=7.148$, $P<0.05$ ” (pg 16). The conclusion was that there was 34.70 percent change in performance that is directly attributable to organizational ambidexterity. Further the study had a mediating variable being the organizational design and the findings being that there was “significant at $R^2=0.185$, $F=21.753$, $P<0.05$, $\beta=0.430$, $t=4.664$, $P<0.05$ ” (pg 16) and interpreted that 18.50 percent of variation in organizational design was explained by organizational ambidexterity. The study concluded that organizational ambidexterity is partly determined by organizational design and its effect on performance. The synergistic effect of ambidexterity leads to better performance. The methodological gap noted in the study by Mutisya *et al.*, (2020) was that there was only one respondent per organization and this introduces the element of single source bias. The study also did not include the theoretical underpinnings. This study addressed the theoretical and methodological gap by analysing a large number of studies on the relationship between organizational ambidexterity and performance in telecommunication firms in Kenya.

STUDY FINDINGS

The study sought to establish the extend to which exploration and exploitation strategies are applied in telecommunication companies in Kenya, evaluate the performance of the companies, for example, revenue growth and profitability and how it is correlated with the exploration and exploitation strategies and propose strategic decision making approaches that can be used to achieve better performance in the telecommunication firms in Kenya. The findings were that there is a positive joint effect of exploration and exploitation when the two capabilities are employed simultaneously. Organizational ambidexterity has a positive influence on organizational performance and the study recommends that the co-existence of exploration and exploitation is paramount to organizational performance.

The study found significant positive correlation of the organizational ambidexterity to the performance of

the organization, where according to Gachigo *et al.*, (2019), a unit change in innovation strategies has a 40.2 percent increase in organizational performance. Karama and Linge (2019) saying that product differentiation and price have significant effect on market share. Peng *et al.*, (2019) also agreeing that there is a positive effect of organizational ambidexterity on performance upto a certain level, and Mutiyisa *et al.*, (2020) giving 37.7 percent improvement in performance based on organizational ambidexterity.

Innovation is a key driver of sustainable competitive advantage, yet most of the telecommunications firms are not fully employing the innovation strategy, and gives it as a reason why most of the firms have been performing dismally. The firms should use the exploration strategy in response to changes in a highly competitive environment where a company must develop responsive strategies in order to remain in the market. They argue that previous studies have focused on the financial strategies, technologies, organizational structure and training and recommends further research on other factors that can affect organizational performance. They found that for a unit change in innovation strategies, there is a 40.2 percent increase in organizational performance (Gachigo *et al.*, 2019).

The study also concluded that there was significant effect on market share and that higher market shares put the company at a competitive advantage as they receive better prices from the suppliers thus achieving greater economies of scale and thus pass on the benefit to the consumers, and in turn gaining loyalty. The innovation strategy also creates more customers as they buy from the company that has the new product, regardless of where they bought their product from before. The market share is one of the main determinants of profitability and the higher the market share, the higher the profitability and return on investment is also higher. The increase in market share increases the reputable recognition of the company thus the ability to sell more (Karama & Linge, 2019).

According to Mutiyisa *et al.*, (2020), there is consensus among scholars that though organizational ambidexterity is important, it is not achieved easily by companies. This is because the activities are diverse and require different structural designs that may require realignment thus affecting performance in the short term. They bring out various scholars on the field of organizational ambidexterity and performance who give conflicting results in the telecommunication industry. However, there is consensus that there is positive influence on performance when organizational ambidexterity is achieved.

The study had a methodological gap in the use of desktop research design on the relationship between organizational ambidexterity and performance in

telecommunication firms in Kenya. Most of the reviewed studies used the primary data collection methods such as questionnaires, surveys and interviews. However, the review of a large number of existing literature ensured that the data is comprehensive and eliminates the gap in the use of desktop research design. This ensured that the study provided a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between organizational ambidexterity and performance in telecommunication firms in Kenya.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study has found that there was significant positive correlation of the organizational ambidexterity to the performance of the organization, where according to Gachigo *et al.*, (2019), a unit change in innovation strategies has a 40.2 per cent increase in organizational performance. Karama and Linge (2019) say that product differentiation and price have significant effect on market share. Peng *et al.*, (2019) also agreeing that there is a positive effect of organizational ambidexterity on performance upto a certain level, and Mutiyisa *et al.*, (2020) giving 37.7 percent improvement in performance based on organizational ambidexterity. The study also found out that innovation is a key driver of sustainable competitive advantage, yet most of the telecommunications firms are not fully employing the innovation strategy, and gives it as a reason why most of the firms have been performing dismally. They found that for a unit change in innovation strategies, there is a 40.2 percent increase in organizational performance (Gachigo *et al.*, 2019). The study also concluded that there was significant effect on market share and that higher market shares put the company at a competitive advantage as they receive better prices from the suppliers thus achieving greater economies of scale and thus pass on the benefit to the consumers, and in turn gaining loyalty (Karama & Linge, 2019). Overall the study concluded that there is positive influence on performance when organizational ambidexterity is achieved.

This study has the following proposals that may be considered by the stakeholders. Firstly, the government can create business friendly environment and enabling environment for innovation like the creation of innovation hubs to ensure that ideas can be incubated and experimented. It can also encourage innovation by giving tax exemptions on technologies that improve performance in organizations. Secondly the government and regulatory bodies should collaborate with telecommunication firms in order to achieve quality goods and services for its customers. Thirdly the telecommunication firms should comply with regulatory bodies and collaborate with other players in the industry and lastly to the investors who should invest in research and development in order to expand operations and innovate new products.

In order for the telecommunication companies to assist the Government of Kenya in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and Vision 2030 in terms of the promotion of digital inclusion, partnering with institutions to provide digital learning, supporting SMEs through partnering in businesses, providing high speed broad band infrastructure to support access to digital services, innovation and digitalization of key sectors, the companies should invest in organizational ambidexterity strategies. The investment in organizational ambidexterity will make them research in new products and services while improving the existing products and services they are already offering. The overall effect of growth in the various sectors will have Kenya achieve Vision 2030 and the SDGs by 2030.

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