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Effect of Customer Orientation on Performance of Dairy Farmers' Ccooperatives in Western Region, Kenya

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Abstract
This study examined the effect of customer orientation as a core competence on the performance of Dairy Farmers' Cooperatives in the Western, Kenya covering Kakamega, Bungoma, Vihiga and Busia counties. The research adopted descriptive and causal research designs. The study targeted lead farmers and CEOs of Dairy Farmers' Cooperatives. The sample size was 210 comprising of Lead farmers and CEOs from sampled cooperatives. Data was collected using closed-ended questionnaires, supplemented by interviews with County Cooperative Commissioners for qualitative insights. Stratified and simple random sampling techniques were employed. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha while validity was assessed through content, construct, and criterion perspectives. Performance was measured by using 5-point Likert scale by soliciting for responses on volume of milk intake, farmers payment rate, milk sales volume and profit margin. Data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The findings revealed that customer orientation significantly influenced Dairy Farmers' Cooperatives' performance (B = 0.74; P = 0.000). The study concluded that Dairy Farmers' Cooperatives should invest in customer-oriented practices, prioritize customer needs, and ensure consistent delivery of quality products and services. The primary value of this research is its demonstration that strengthening customer relationships and enhancing satisfaction are critical strategies for improving productivity and, ultimately, the performance of Dairy Farmers' cooperatives.
Key words: *Customer Orientation; Core Competence; Dairy Farmers' Cooperatives; Performance*

1.0 Introduction

The model by Prahalad and Hamel (1990) argues that a firm's competitive advantage stems from its ability to build and leverage core competencies the unique, integrated capabilities that are difficult for competitors to imitate. In the context of agricultural cooperatives, these competencies are paramount for navigating market volatility and ensuring sustainable performance. Dairy Farmers' Cooperatives (DFCs) in Kenya serve as essential institutional mechanisms, offering smallholder farmers access to inputs, markets, extension services, and improved bargaining power (Kakamega County Cooperative Directorate Report, 2024). However, despite the theoretical importance of core competencies in organizations for competitive advantage and sustainability and the pivotal role of DFCs, particularly in the Western region of Kenya, they continue to face persistent performance challenges, including weak governance, financial mismanagement, and inefficient service delivery systems. This results in reduced milk deliveries and cooperative instability.

The choice of Western region for this study was informed through critical analysis of the report by the Kenya Dairy Board report on Dairy industry sustainability roadmap 2023-2032 highlighting unique challenges that are met with equally unique, place-based solutions within the national sustainability framework. The report highlights a key flagship initiative, the National Fodder Commercialisation Acceleration that is particularly crucial for Western Kenya. By aiming to put about one million acres under large-scale, irrigated, and climate-smart fodder production, this initiative directly targets the feed scarcity crises exacerbated by deforestation and drought in the region. This systematic approach to securing year-round, affordable feed is a distinctive strategy tailored to stabilize the livelihoods

of Western Kenya's dairy farmers against climate volatility. Based on the detailed report, Western Kenya's unique position in the dairy business, particularly regarding sustainability, is defined by its specific environmental challenges and the targeted solutions proposed in the roadmap. Unlike other regions, its sustainability efforts are deeply intertwined with the direct impacts of climate change on local ecosystems and the subsequent, innovative flagship initiatives designed to address them, (KDB report.2023).

Furthermore, the KDB report (2023) indicates that Western Kenya is poised to be a focal point for biodiversity and land management initiatives that are both restorative and productive. The National Dairy Farm Tree Planting initiative, aiming to contribute 5% of Kenya's national tree-planting goal, addresses the rampant deforestation noted in the region. Planting trees on dairy farms serves multiple unique functions: it sequesters carbon, provides shade for cattle to reduce heat stress, and can act as fodder banks (using species like Calliandra and Sesbania), directly linking environmental restoration to farm productivity and resilience in a way that is specifically critical for this region.

According to Agriterra report (2025). Kenya's Dairy cooperatives have evolved from basic marketing collectives into sophisticated, multi-service agribusinesses and are now central to the sector's modernization. The transition is driven by market liberalization, digitalization, and a shift towards providing integrated services (inputs, credit, training) to members. Leading cooperatives now act as "Dairy Hubs," linking farmers to stable markets, premium prices, and advanced training to improve profitability and milk quality. Digital Integration: Adoption of digital tools is a major trend. This includes ERP systems, digital milk collection records, and mobile platforms (e.g., WhatsApp groups) for extension services, which enhance transparency, efficiency, and trust.

A pivotal trend began with the removal of the Kenya Co-operative Creameries (KCC) monopoly in 1992. This forced cooperatives to compete and innovate, leading to increased roles in providing veterinary and artificial insemination services as government support withdrew. Successful cooperatives emphasize strong, transparent governance with clear elections, term limits, and professional management to build member trust. To capture more value, cooperatives like Githunguri (Fresha) and others have invested in processing facilities for pasteurized milk, yogurt, and other products, reducing reliance on raw milk sales.
(Agriterra. 2025).

A study by Omamo J, Cheloti M, Onyuka A, Kaee A, Shibadu R, Odoro P and Abonyo S (2025) on Value Chain Mapping and Technology Needs Assessment exercise conducted in Bungoma County, Kenya found out that the County's economy and its environs is predominantly agricultural, with maize, sugarcane, and dairy as major sectors, alongside emerging industries such as natural herbs, coffee, and sunflower processing. Their key findings highlight the need for improved post-harvest management technologies, modern agricultural practices, and advanced processing facilities. Additionally, investment in affordable irrigation systems, farm machinery, and digital solutions for market access is identified as critical for sectoral growth. This study created the urge for further investigation of dairy business in the western region hence, the study on the effect of customer orientation on performance of Dairy Farmers Cooperatives in Western region, Kenya (Omamo J. et.al. 2025).

Customer orientation, defined as a company's tendency to gather information about customers' needs and use this knowledge to shape its offerings and interactions accordingly (Wang & Kim, 2023), is the lifeblood of a cooperative. For a DFC, the "customer" is primarily its member/farmer. Excellence in customer service involves not only resolving inquiries but also anticipating needs, providing personalized solutions, and creating a seamless, positive experience (Engkos, Sudrajat & Syahchari, 2021). In highly competitive markets, superior customer service can set Dairy Farmers' Cooperatives apart from other milk buyers and informal hawkers, fostering trust, loyalty, and profitability.

A report by the Kenya Dairy Board (2024) highlights a significant issue: a lack of transparency regarding the payout price to farmers, leading to a perception that farmers are underpaid by their cooperatives. This underscores a fundamental breakdown in the primary relationship upon which a cooperative is built: the trust and satisfaction of its member-customers. When members feel their needs are not met, performance suffers through reduced milk deliveries, disloyalty, and ultimately, cooperative failure.

While studies have explored core competencies in various sectors such as banking (Nosratabadi, Pinter, Mosavi & Semperger, 2023), automobiles (Head, Ondracek, Saeed, Peterson & Bertsch ,2023), and manufacturing (Wanyagah,

Ouma & Okello, 2023), their application within the specific context of Kenyan DFCs remains underexplored. Prior research has often focused on direct effects in different geographical and institutional settings. This study, therefore, seeks to fill this knowledge gap by focusing on one critical competency, customer orientation.

The study addressed the critical gap in understanding how developing customer orientation specifically, the ability to understand and respond to member-farmers' needs as a core competency influences the performance of Western Kenya's struggling Dairy Farmers' Cooperatives (DFCs), which face financial instability and eroded trust despite their vital role in the regional economy.

Based on the strong theoretical and empirical foundation, one hypothesis was tested in this study. A single hypothesis provided a clear, testable prediction derived from theory. Focus was on one hypothesis that enabled precise control of variables, reducing confounding factors and increaseed internal validity focusing on one primary hypothesis helped maintain the statistical error rate at the desired level (e.g., $\alpha = 0.05$).

H_o: Customer orientation has no significant effect on the performance of Dairy Farmers' Cooperatives in the Western Region, Kenya.
H_1: Customer orientation has a significant effect on the performance of Dairy Farmers' Cooperatives in the Western Region, Kenya.

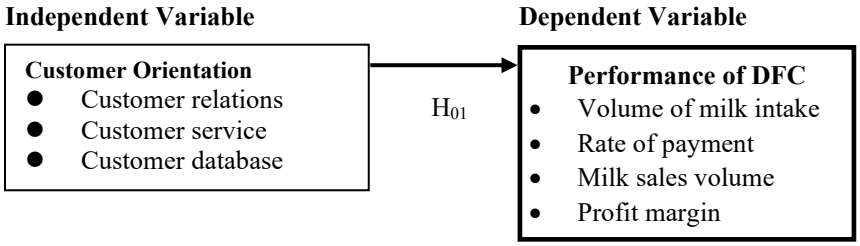

Figure 1: The Conceptual Framework Showing Customer Orientation and performance of Dairy Farmers cooperatives (DFC) in Western Region, Kenya.

Figure 1 is the conceptualization of the relationship between customer Orientation and performance of Dairy Farmers Cooperatives. Under this relationship Customer Orientation takes into account the following constructs; customer relations, customer service, customer database, customized products and how they influence the components of performance of Dairy Farmers Cooperatives that include volume of milk intake, farmers payment rate, milk sales volume.

2.0 Research Methods

This study adopted a positivist research philosophy, which emphasizes measurable and observable phenomena. A descriptive and causal research design was employed to both describe the state of customer orientation in DFCs and to establish a cause-and-effect relationship with performance (Kothari, 2004). The study was conducted in the Western Region of Kenya, encompassing the counties of Bungoma, Vihiga, Kakamega, and Busia. The target population comprised 400 lead farmers (from milk collection centres), forty (40) Managers/CEOs from the 40 registered DFCs in the region and four County Cooperatives Commissioners (for corroborating the information collected direct from the cooperatives, totalling 440 individuals. Using the scientific formula for a finite population at a 95% confidence level, a sample size of 210 respondents was determined. This was distributed as 191 lead farmers and 19 Managers/CEOs. A combination of stratified and simple random sampling was used to ensure representation from both groups. Additionally, all four County Commissioners of Cooperatives were purposively selected for interviews to provide qualitative insights. A closed-ended questionnaire was the primary data collection tool. It used a five-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree) to measure constructs. Collected data were coded and analysed using SPSS Version 26. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations) were used to summarize the data. Inferential statistics, specifically Pearson's correlation and simple linear regression analysis, were used to test the hypothesis.

3.0 Result and Discussion

3.1 Descriptive Statistics

The results on the state of customer orientation in the DFCs are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Customer Orientation

No.	Customer Orientation	N	5	4	3	2	1	Mean	SD
1	Our cooperative offers quality products to its members	186	9.7 (18)	15.1 (28)	32.8 (61)	42.5 (79)	0 (0)	4.08	0.98
2	Our cooperative offers quality services to its members	186	3.2 (6)	32.3 (60)	31.2 (58)	32.3 (60)	1.1 (2)	3.90	0.93
3	Our cooperative implements a customer relationship management plan	186	4.3 (8)	31.2 (58)	20.4 (38)	44.1 (82)	0 (0)	4.04	0.96
4	Our cooperative deals in customized products	186	2.2 (4)	35.5 (66)	24.7 (46)	37.6 (70)	0 (0)	3.98	0.91
5	Our cooperative maintains a customer database	186	0 (0)	2.2 (4)	35.5 (66)	24.7 (46)	37.6 (70)	3.61	1.01
	Aggregate Scores							**3.922**	**0.958**

According to respondents, majority 42.5% (79) and 32.8% (61) agreed and fairly agreed respectively that cooperative offers quality products to its members. However, 9.7% (18) and15.1% (28) strongly disagreed and disagreed respectively to imply non quality products were offered. The statement received a mean score of 4.08 (SD = 0.98), indicating that respondents generally agreed with it. The relatively low standard deviation suggests that while the overall perception was positive, there was some variation in individual responses, though not extreme.

In regard to quality service provision which is slightly different to quality product for the first statement, most respondents were in disagreement32.3% (60) and 31.2% (58) gave a mere fair agreement. However, 32.3% (60) and 1.1% (2) agreed and strongly agreed respectively. The mean score of 3.9 (SD = 0.93), implies that while the overall perception was positive with notable variations in response that won't warrant full agreement.

Responses on whether cooperatives implement a customer relationship management plan majored on agreement state with 44.1% (82) agreeing and 20.4% (38) giving a fair agreement. Those who disagreed were 31.2% (58) and as 4.3% (8) strongly disagreed. The reported mean of 4.04 (SD = 0.96), justifies a positive perception with standard deviation posting some degree of variability. It is in line with Carrielle and Bongo (2020) examined the factors influencing customer satisfaction where potential factors were professionalism, competency, high emotional intelligence, communication skills, implicit service promises, personal needs, reliability, responsiveness, and past experiences.

Nevertheless, on whether the cooperative deals in customized products 37.6% (70) agreed while 24.7% (46) fairly agreed though 35.5% (66) disagreed as 2.2% (4) strongly disagreed. The mean score 3.98 (SD = 0.91), gives a positive perception with standard deviation posting some degree of variability. This is in line with Kiptanui and Chumo (2022) who did a study on the effect of electronic customer relations management on performance of commercial state corporations where the study concluded that there is a significant positive effect between electronic customer relations management and performance of commercial state corporations in Trans Nzoia County.

The study provides that 37.6% (70) and 24.7% (46) of respondents strongly agreed and agreed respectively that the cooperative maintains a customer database as 35.5% (66) fairly agreed and 2.2% (4) disagreed implying that customer records was not in place. The mean score 3.61 (SD = 1.01), gives a positive perception with standard deviation posting some degree of variability. Conclusively customer orientation with the average mean of 3.922 (SD = 0.958) suggests that while the overall perception was positive, there was some variation in individual responses, though not extreme.

3.2 Interview results

The County Commissioner of Cooperatives in four counties were interviewed and their observations were interrelated. Bungoma County explained that dairy farmers cooperatives were highly affected by customer orientation, for instance quality services and quality products were an ultimate measure of satisfied customers. In Vihiga County, the county commissioner of cooperatives highlighted customer orientation core competencies in the dairy cooperatives as branding and trust issues where customers were perceived by brand as well as trusting the process. In Kakamega and Busia, County Commissioners of Cooperatives reinforced the importance customer care strategies. These observations by the County Commissioners of Cooperatives are in sync with research by Amegayibor and Korankye (2021) who studied customer satisfaction and the influence of quality service aspects on cooperative unions whose results indicated that customer satisfaction was influenced by quality service dimensions such as empathy, tangibility, assurance, responsiveness, and reliability. The observations by the County Cooperative Commissioners also supports the findings by Pati and Lee (2023) who conducted a study on strategic core competencies of performance across Chinese and South Korean manufacturing companies and found that customer service intensity and foreign trade activities through export are most likely to be significantly associated with firm performance, particularly customer-based performance, across the Chinese and South Korea manufacturing companies.

3.3 Descriptive Statistics for Performance

The results on performance of Dairy Farmers' Cooperatives are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Performance of Dairy Farmers Cooperatives

No.	Service delivery	5	4	3	2	1	Mean	STD
1	Our dairy farmers cooperative enjoys a large market share based on volume of milk intake	0 (0)	2.2 (4)	12.9 (24)	47.8 (89)	37.1 (69)	4.20	0.74
2	There is prompt payment in our dairy farmers cooperative once milk is supplied	7.5 (14)	9.7 (18)	22.6 (42)	34.9 (65)	25.3 (47)	3.61	1.18
3	Our dairy farmers cooperative has loyal customers with good sales	15.1 (28)	6.5 (12)	20.4 (38)	29 (54)	29 (54)	3.51	1.37
4	There is emphasis on efficiency where wastage is discouraged	15.1 (28)	4.3 (8)	22.6 (42)	30.1 (56)	28 (52)	3.52	1.34
5	Our dairy farmers cooperative has realized quality milk products	29 (4)	0 (0)	29 (54)	55.9 (104)	12.9 (24)	3.80	1.68
6	Our dairy farmers cooperative maximizes on productivity from clients and workers	0 (0)	2.2 (4)	29 (54)	52.2 (97)	16.7 (31)	3. 83	0.72
	Aggregate Scores						**3.75**	**1.05**

Findings depicted in the table above indicate that 37.1% (69) and 47.8% (89) strongly agreed and agreed respectively while 12.9% (24) fairly agreed that DFCs enjoy a large market share based on volume of milk intake. This was supported with a mean of 4.2 and a standard deviation of 0.74. Nevertheless, 25.3% (47) and 34.9% (65) strongly agreed and agreed respectively while 22.6% (42) fairly agreed that there is prompt payment in the DFCs once milk is supplied. This was supported by a mean of 3.61 and standard deviation of 1.18. Furthermore 29% (54) and 29% (54) strongly agreed and agreed respectively with 20.4% (38) fairly agreeing that DFCs have loyal customers with good sales though 6.5% (12) and 15.1% (28) reported the contrary by disagreeing and strongly disagreeing respectively. In the study, 28% (52) and 30.1% (56) strongly agreed and agreed respectively while 22.6% (42) fairly agreed that there is emphasis on efficiency where wastage is discouraged.

Further still, 12.9% (24) and 55.9% (104) strongly agreed and agreed respectively while 29% (54) fairly agreed that dairy farmers cooperatives have realized quality milk products with 29% (4) strongly disagreeing. The mean of 3.8 and standard deviation of 1.68 indicate variability in responses. Nevertheless 16.7% (31) and 52.2% (97) of

respondents strongly agreed and agreed respectively while 29% (54) fairly agreed that DFCs maximize on productivity from clients and workers as 2.2% (4) disagreed with that. In essence for better performance ethical attributes have to be embraced. Solutions for DFCs include training and development, technology and infrastructure development, member engagement, partnerships, product and market innovation, monitoring and evaluation and sustainability initiatives.

3.4 Correlation Analysis

A Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between customer orientation and DFC performance. The results, shown in Table 3, indicate a very strong, positive, and statistically significant correlation between the two variables ($r = 0.735$, $p = 0.000$).

Table 3: Correlation between Customer Orientation and Performance

		CO	PDFC
Customer orientation: **CO**	Pearson Correlation	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)		
	N	186	
Performance of Dairy Farmers cooperatives: **PDFC**	Pearson Correlation	.735**	1

Customer orientation has a positive significant relationship with performance of dairy farmers cooperatives in the Western Kenya Region, ($r = 0.735$, $p < 0.05$) in the correlation table 3. This means that dairy farmers cooperatives in the Western Kenya Region would be able to provide better customer approach if they invested in customer orientation core competency. It agrees with Nyaga, Namusonge and Sasaka (2024) carried out a study on strategic customer focus and performance of agricultural cooperatives in Kenya, the findings revealed that strategic customer focus predicted performance of agricultural cooperatives in Kenya. Polong and Kimutai (2022) in their study on customer focus on sustainability of smallholder dairy farming projects in Kajiado County where customer focus had significant effect on sustainability of small holder dairy farming projects.

3.5 Simple Linear Regression Analysis

Customer orientation and Performance of Dairy Farmers cooperatives

Finding out how Dairy Farmers Cooperatives in the Western Kenya Region respond to customer orientation was the primary goal of the research. In order to accomplish its goal and test its first null hypothesis, which states that:

H_0: Customer orientation does not significantly impact Dairy Farmers Cooperatives affect performance of Dairy Farmers Cooperatives in the Western Kenya Region, the study used inferential statistics, specifically simple linear regression analysis as shown in table 4.

Table 4: Regression for Customer orientation and Performance of Dairy Farmers cooperatives

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.735[a]	.540	.537	.475

a. Predictors: (Constant), Customer orientation

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	56.523	1	56.523	215.71	.000[b]
	Residual	48.148	184	0.262		
	Total	104.671	185			

a. Dependent Variable: Performance of Dairy Farmers cooperatives

b. Predictors: (Constant), Customer orientation

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.506	0.251		5.994	.000
	Customer orientation	0.74	0.06	.735	14.68	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Performance of Dairy Farmers cooperatives

Table 4 shows that the results showed that customer orientation had a R squared value of 0.540, therefore performance of dairy farmers cooperatives was affected by customer orientation to a tune of 54%. F (1,185) = 215.71 and P= 0.000 were the findings of the analysis of variance. This further implies that customer orientation positively and significantly affects the ability to explain performance of dairy farmers cooperatives. Dairy Farmer's cooperatives in the Western Kenya Region had a 0.74 unit improvement in performance for every unit increase in customer orientation, according to the regression coefficient B = 0.74. Consequently, the findings demonstrated that dairy farmers cooperatives in the Western Kenya Region were able to improve performance as a consequence of customer orientation, thereby rejecting the initial null hypothesis. A basic linear regression model equation was built using the regression coefficient findings as

$Y = 1.506+0.74X_1$

Where Y is Performance of Dairy Farmers cooperatives

X1 is Customer orientation

This study corroborates with Langga and Laga (2023) who found that service quality and corporate image had a significant effect on satisfaction of dairy cooperative members in India. Akter and Ahmad (2024) in their study investigated the impact of customer relationship management practices on customer satisfaction in the banking sector where service quality, handling complaints and employee behavior. Findings of the study revealed that complaints handling had the strongest positive impact on customer satisfaction, followed closely by service quality, while employee behavior had a moderate effect. This disagrees with Pati and Lee (2023) who conducted a study on strategic core competencies and performance and found customer orientation insignificant.

4.0 Conclusions

The study confirmed that customer orientation has significant positive effect on performance of dairy farmers' cooperatives in Western Kenya Region. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. Moderately, respondents felt that dairy farmer's cooperatives embraced customers, enabling them access to quality product and services. Positivist research philosophy was idealized in this study with hypothesis test findings having been fully answered precisely by rejecting the hypothesis. The core competency theory through automation of customer records explicitly explains the innovation competencies that dairy farmers cooperatives have to employ. The Resource Based View (RBV) theory was been extensively applied through the milk product quality focus as a source of competitive advantage.

The study's findings underscore practical implications for managing dairy farmer's cooperatives in Western Kenya. The management of cooperatives is crucial, focusing on nurturing adaptive external business environment such as climate and taxation that effectively moderate effect of core competencies on performance of dairy farmers cooperatives and realization that integrating the core competencies in realization of customer orientation, human capital, innovation and strategic partnership enables performance of dairy farmer's cooperatives in Western Kenya Region. While external business environment and SWOT analysis explains the opportunities its threats may be inform of taxation and climatic conditions.

The study's findings carry several policy implications for dairy farmers cooperatives in Western Kenya. Policymakers should prioritize the development of structured customized automation that will strengthen performance. This includes data safety and proper record keeping that will lead to better customer records. Policies regarding periodic training that would equip farmers with relevant skills on animal rearing and the entire process that will lead to better milk production. The Ministry of Agriculture can initiate policies on private partnership with dairy farmers on transport as well as forming programs that would see financial institutions offering credit for farmers.

5.0 Recommendations

Dairy farmers cooperatives should invest in customers and prioritize the daily customers, provision of quality products and services to dairy farmer's ad members of the cooperatives will enhance productivity and in the long run performance. A customer approach will lead to satisfaction and hence make the clients have ease as the key investors. The Government at both levels, National and County should develop policies and training programs that encourage Dairy Farmers Ccooperatives to adopt best practices in member-relationship management as a key component of good governance.

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