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Relationship between leadership, intangible and tangible resources, and sustained competitive advantage in selected Adventist institutions in Zimbabwe

*Godfrey Musara and Marie-Anne Razafiarivony

Adventist University of Africa, Kenya

Abstract

This quantitative study investigated the effects of leadership and tangible and intangible resources on sustainable competitive advantage. A cross-sectional survey was conducted using the Seventh-day Adventist Church Institutions in Zimbabwe, comprising 150 schools, 12 clinics, an NGO, and a university. A questionnaire was administered to 341 purposively selected respondents to participate in the study. The results of the correlation analysis show that leadership (r = .57; p<.01), tangible resources (r =. 53; p< .0l), and intangible resources (r =. 43; p< .05) significantly correlate with sustainable competitive advantage. Furthermore, the regression analysis showed that all three variables combined had a significant effect on sustainable competitive advantage (adjusted R-square = .359) (F (3, 327) =62.61, p<0.05). Additionally, the analysis shows that leadership (β = .370; p < 0.05) and tangible resources (β = .273; p < 0.05) contributed the most to the institutions' sustainable competitive advantage. However intangible resources, singly, do not significantly affect the competitive advantage. The results confirm the key role of leadership in creating a competitive advantage in organizations. Thus, the study highlights that without leaders' willingness and effective engagement, those institutions cannot effectively compete in the marketplace despite the presence of resources.

Keywords: Leadership, Tangible Resources, Intangible Resources, Sustainable Competitive Advantage, Faith-based Institutions

Introduction

Organizations of all sizes face increasing uncertainty and competitive environments. As such, they must constantly adapt to external events and proactively shape the internal environment of their business. Thus, organizations can develop sustainable and effective business models that differentiate their products and services to be competitive. Understanding organizational resources is critical for gaining sustained competitive advantage. Organizational resources are generally what an organization has when entering a business venture. These include all assets, capabilities, organizational processes and attributes, information, and knowledge controlled by the organization (Barney, 1991).

Organizations have focused on resources that competitors cannot easily develop to gain a competitive edge and maintain such an advantage (Kozlenkova et al., 2014). The trend has been widely accepted and has since been the order of the day in various industries in many countries to achieve sustainable competitiveness. Therefore, the application of Resource-based Theory to assess the sustainable competitiveness of organizations has gained popularity in recent years. Its inception brought about the importance of individual firms knowing their resources and capabilities (Grant, 1991). The degree to which organizational resources are useful for creating competitive advantage is determined by their value, rarity, difficulty in imitating, and non-substitutability (Rothaermel, 2012 & Aghazadeh, 2017).

Leadership is key to any developmental initiative in an organization. Although some

 *Contact corresponding author: musarag@zeuc.adventist.org

studies classify leadership and reputation as intangible resources of the organization (Jones and Shideh, 2020), it is evident that leadership holds a distinctive place. Odhiambo et al. (2022) argue that strategic leaders maintain a sustained competitive advantage because they can see opportunities and effectively capitalize on them. Gobillot (2009) highlighted the need to hire leaders capable of embracing modern management principles. Having the right people who make things happen in firms gives the organization both a competitive advantage and profitability (Cuong et al., 2021). Gandossy and Sonnenfeld (2004) and Farah et al. (2019) opine that good leadership enhances job creation and produces quality products and services that meet customers' needs and can withstand market forces' pressure. Colbert (2004) and Farah et al. (2019) underline the importance of selecting good leaders to replace those leaving because such choice affects the development, combination, and deployment of a firm's resources. Creating a good reputation contributes to a firm's sustainable competitive advantage, which is established through the skills of leaders at the organization's helm (Miotto et al., 2020).

In Zimbabwe, many years of political and economic turmoil have affected for-profit or not-for-profit organizations. Indeed, the country's economic situation has been described as the most unstable environment outside a war zone (Moyo, 2010). The organizations in Zimbabwe cannot compete effectively due to several economic factors, such as a high rate of inflation, multiple exchange rate instability, increased cost of production, and limited structural transformation (Kabonga, 2023). Apart from the political and economic environment, stiff competition has permeated various sectors, such as the retail sector, owing to increased external competition from China and South Africa (MacLean, 2002).

Most studies on competitive advantage are associated with business and for-profit organizations, but few have focused on not-for-profit faith-based organizations (Miller, 2002; Iswan and Kihari, 2022; Lipsky, 2011). Moreover, studies on the competitiveness of not-for-profit organizations focus mainly on donor funding (Babiak & Thibault, 2009; Eng et al. 2012; Salim et al., 2011), service quality and service cost (Carroll & Ruseski, 2011). However, to survive and gain sustainable competitive advantage, not-for-profit organizations must also understand their critical strategic resources and look for ways to develop and exploit them. Like other faith-based institutions, the Seventh-day Adventist church-run institutions in Zimbabwe need to empirically determine the effect of their resources and leadership at their helm on their competitive advantage. No empirical study has been conducted to determine the relationship between resources, leadership, and competitive advantage of church-run entities in Zimbabwe. This study intends to fill this gap using the following research questions:

1. Is there a significant correlation between leadership, institutional tangible resources, institutional intangible resources, and sustainable competitive advantage of Seventh-day Adventist institutions in Zimbabwe?

2. What is the effect of leadership, institutional tangible resources, and institutional intangible resources on the sustainable competitive advantage of Seventh-day Adventist institutions in Zimbabwe?

Literature Review

Competitive advantage is key for organizations because it leads to better performance and increased value (Ma, 2000). Selecting a distinctive strategy that leverages a company's unique competitive advantage is crucial for maintaining a market position (Švárová & Vrchota, 2014). Organizations use several ways to achieve a competitive advantage, such as delivering high-quality products or services, unique market positioning, and superior customer relationship management (Irawan & Sudarmiatin, 2024). A competitive advantage is necessary but can be difficult to reach because of its transitory nature. Indeed, the nature of the advantage can change due to technological advances and strategic marketing decisions (Rajagopal, 2012). Pursuing competitive advantage has recently evolved from focusing on financial investment in equipment to a knowledge- and innovation-driven approach (Gomes & Romão, 2023). Not-for-profit organizations can also reach a competitive advantage through various strategies despite disparities in their operational models compared to for-profit businesses (Lee et al., 2001). Several strategies can be used, such as niche, differentiation, and impact delivery, but such strategies do not offer a permanent advantage. They also go through changes, just as for the for-profit sector (Panda, 2019).

Organizations in developing countries can gain a competitive advantage through various strategies and factors. Empirical evidence suggests that information systems (IS) competence, particularly when combined with organizational learning intensity, contributes to competitive advantages in developing economies (Bhatt & Grover, 2005). However, the external and internal environmental conditions of these economies pose some challenges. Organizations in developing countries face more economic challenges than those in developed countries (Upreti, 2015). Moreover, internal instabilities can jeopardize the competitive advantage of sustainability (Ruiz et al., 2017). The development of institutional contexts in emerging economies can create hypercompetitive conditions that contribute to persistent superior economic performance (Hermelo & Vassolo, 2010).

Leadership

Leadership enhances a firm's competitive position (Soehari & Budiningsih, 2020). According to Petrie and Marie (2020), leadership is a dynamic system set in an organization that is not centered on the individual leader but on how the organization can pursue its goals (Petrie & Marie, 2020). The ability of leadership to sustain competitive advantage is linked to understanding the organization's as well as the market structure and selecting the best strategies to suit the organization's nature (Irawan & Sudarmiatin, 2024). According to previous studies, leadership is less about fixed traits that the leadership individual or team possesses and more about observable skills and behaviors that can be learned (Penney & Neilson, 2010).

Leadership plays a critical role in establishing competitive advantage in a few key areas. The most common area is about providing a compelling vision. Nahak and Ellitan (2022) describe the company's vision as what it aspires to become and accomplish. It shapes the organization, keeping it focused. It assists in the challenging of resources and adjusts its current spending habits and business plan. While managers execute the strategies, leaders are supposed to provide a vision of where the organization is heading. Without a clear vision of what the organization wants to achieve, it is difficult to position itself as having a competitive advantage (Madu, 2013).

The next area is related to the strategic direction of the organization. The latter can be described as the plans needed by the organization to implement or make improvements towards fulfilling its vision and accomplishing its goals. Leaders must provide strategic direction to converge all employees towards the same goal (Sarjana & Khayati, 2017). They can motivate employees to accomplish the best strategies for the organization (Zaccaro et al., 2012). Good leaders make effective decisions to direct the organization, even if they are difficult (Kelman et al., 2016). These decisions form the foundation for implementing strategies. Lower-level managers and employees look up to leaders to make effective decisions. Leaders are expected to lead the organization, and given the dynamic nature of situations, they must embrace and adapt to environmental changes (Foulkrod & Lan Lin, 2024). Often, leaders are in a better position to adapt to changes because they have an overall view of the situation and a foresight of what is coming even before the rest of the organization's members (Pesut, 2019).

Tangible Resources

Buckley and Graves (2016) describe tangible resources as the organization's visible physical structures and assets. Zhong (2012) posits that tangible resources are foundational for firm survival and development, and are essential for building a competitive advantage. The availability of resources such as land and other tangible resources is a great opportunity to be used as a competitive advantage when combined with intangible resources (Mesgari & Jabalameli, 2018). Hegde et al., (2018) posit that the land demand has increased in the most recent years, which calls for proper usage of natural resources pivotal in unlocking and achieving productivity as expected by the sustainable development goals (SDGs). Yang et al. (2017) highlight that economic globalization has put a lot of pressure on land supply and demand, and poses a major social and economic challenge to governments. However, the mere fact of possessing tangible resources does not provide a competitive advantage. According to Mai et al. (2021), the impact of tangible resources on competitive advantage is mediated by other factors such as the capacity and willingness to turn these resources into a value-added asset and the firm's reputation. Hence, while tangible resources can be considered an important component of competitive advantage, they must be considered within the broader context of the organization's overall resource portfolio.

Intangible Resources

Intangible resources are crucial in establishing and maintaining a competitive advantage for businesses across various sectors. Scholars claim that valuable intangible resources cannot be acquired or imitated in factor markets. Studies show that such intangible assets can be regulatory and positional capabilities, brand image, and intellectual capital, helping the firm establish a competitive and distinctive edge (Rua & Santos, 2020; Sadiq & Nosheen, 2020). The advantages of intangible resources tend to vary depending on the context, characteristics of the industry, and the type of business operation. For example, in the real estate sector, market relations and human resources are important intangible resources (Grześ-Bukłaho, 2018).

Barney (1991) proposed that intangible resources are inimitable because of their unique history, causal ambiguity, and social complexity. They may have a unique story related to their location or the original owner. A firm can use this unique history to create a corporate reputation (Dowling, 2016). Once a firm's favorable reputation is fixed in the minds of stakeholders, it can help the organization sustain a competitive advantage (Wei et al., 2017; Raithel & Schwaiger, 2015). Causal ambiguity is related to the fact that competitors do not understand how a particular set of resources can bring about sustained competitive advantage for a firm. As this link is not fully understood, competitors cannot imitate firms' strategic actions (Ambrosini & Bowman, 2010). Social complexity is related to social ties within an organization. Every organization has a unique social climate based on the relationships among managers and the relationships between the organization and its customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders (Barney, 1991). Relationships are dynamic and unique, and can never be perfectly emulated. Thus, relationships create an intangible resource the organization can capitalize on to create a sustainable competitive advantage.

Innovation capability is another intangible asset that firms leverage for a sustainable competitive advantage. It is derived from both tangible and intangible resources and is crucial for translating creative ideas into implemented innovations (Kim & Choi, 2022). While the capacity to innovate is considered an intangible resource, its development and impact are influenced by tangible resources such as technology and data capabilities. Thus, technology assimilation strategies, which involve tangible technological resources, contribute to SMEs' innovation capabilities and competitive advantage (Rhee & Stephens, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on resource-based theory, which is considered an "inside-out" process for formulating an organization's strategy. The firm determines its resources and evaluates their potential to create value. The theory posits that firms are strategic entities, that is, social structures that exist as mechanisms to enable the creation and allocation of economic value for the benefit of their stakeholders (Barney, 2018).

Felin et al. (2023) describe the ways and conditions in which the firm can identify endowed resources. The first is to identify resources faster than competitors do. The implication is that a firm must constantly be alert to the detection of potentially value-added resources. Second, firms must possess sufficient strategic information. The latter enables firms to determine new resources in their possession. Third, in light of the changing environment dynamics, the firm needs flexibility and agility to understand how to do things differently (Gavetti and Menon, 2016). Fourth, Felin et al. (2023) state that firms must be able to critically examine possible ways of complementing the resources at hand. There should be a broader vision and capacity to use the resources on hand to search for new resources or to turn current resources into something new and rare, thereby creating new value.

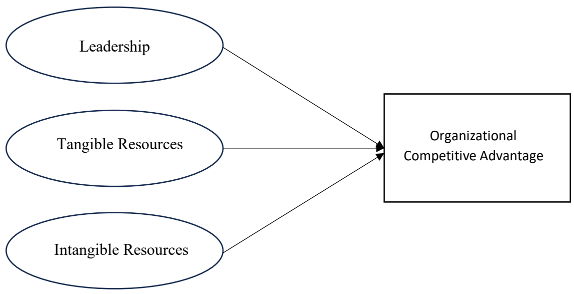
The organization assembles various resources and integrates them through its structures, policies, practices, and culture to reach its objectives (Scott, 2013). The ability of these mechanisms to hold a bundle of resources depends on those who control them. Those in control must be motivated to integrate the resources to achieve the goals. The implication is that the benefits gained from integrating resources must be greater than the costs involved. There must be a larger gain when resources are combined than when they are used independently (Barney, 2018). For example, suppose a firm has two intangible resources: research capabilities and development capabilities. Research capabilities can, on the one hand, generate innovative technological ideas.

On the other hand, development capabilities enable the introduction of new technologies into the market. When research and development capabilities operate together, they generally create more economic value compared to operating independently, making cooperation beneficial (Barney et al., 2021).Different organizations have different sets of resources, and investors have the choice among these organizations and will select where they gain the most economic value. The co-specialization of resources creates economic value as customers are willing to pay a higher price for the goods and services received. Economic value can also be achieved through the efficient use of production factors. The lower the production cost, the higher the economic value derived from the production and delivery of products and services. Hence, the strategy of resource co-specialization enables organizations to increase their profits and gives them a competitive advantage that those who do not co-specialize cannot achieve (Kim et al., 2019).

The resource-based theory is concerned with continuously investigating the relationship between firm resources and the production of excellent results and unique performance, leading to competitive advantage (Alexy et al., 2018; Hussain & Waheed, 2019). Three criteria must exist to motivate investors to continue making co-specialized investments. First, co-specialization conditions must be rare (unique and value-added). Second, these conditions are costly to imitate. Third, the context of co-specialization must not be substitutable. Alternative settings cannot generate the same value from co-specialization. When these criteria are met, a bundle of resources can be a source of a sustained competitive advantage. The process of becoming rare, non-substitutable, and inimitable requires iterative experimentation with changing bundles of co-specialized resources (Shelef et al., 2024). Thus, resource-based theory is relevant for firms with the potential for superior performance. These firms identify the rare and costly ways to imitate resources and capabilities they already control and then find ways to use them to enhance their ability to create economic value. If these resources and capabilities are rare and costly to imitate, the economic value created by exploiting them will be a source of sustained competitive advantage. Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework for the study, as informed by the literature and the theoretical framework.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of the study



Methodology

Research Setting

This study is based on institutions operated by the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Zimbabwe. These institutions are overseen by the Seventh-day Adventist church administrators, including officers and directors of various departments such as health, development, and education. As of 2017, the church owned approximately 540 buildings, 150 schools, 12 clinics, one NGO, and a university with large farms and equipment (Tambama, 2020). The primary objective of these institutions is to provide essential services, primarily education, healthcare, and humanitarian assistance, to surrounding communities.

Research Design

This study used a cross-sectional survey research design to determine the relationship between the resources, leadership, and competitive advantage of church-run entities in Zimbabwe.

Population and Sampling

The study population consists of 3,570 employees across Seventh-day Adventist institutions in Zimbabwe. These institutions include primary and secondary schools, clinics, one non-governmental organization (NGO), and a university. Of these employees, 345 held managerial, leadership, or technical positions. These 345 participants were selected for the study based on their familiarity with leadership behaviors and their knowledge of organizational resources. A nonprobability purposive sampling procedure was employed in this study. Participants were chosen based on their roles as leaders or technical staff within the institutions, as they were deemed best suited to complete the questionnaire. Ultimately, 341 questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of 98 %.

Research Instrument

The study used a self-designed questionnaire consisting of five sections. The first section gathered information on the participants' demographics. Section B provided details about the organization. Section C included two variables: "tangible" resources with 6 items and "intangible" resources with 7 items, based on Cater and Cater's research (2009). Section D measured the "leadership" variable with 11 items, inspired by the work of AlNuaimi et al. (2021). Lastly, section E focused on the "sustainable competitive advantage" variable with 18 items, drawn from the studies of Laskar and Maji (2017), Amrina and Yusof (2011), and Chardine-Baumann and Botta-Genoulaz (2014). A pilot study was conducted with 50 participants from primary and secondary schools in Harare to assess the consistency of the questionnaire. The results from the pilot study showed high Cronbach Alpha coefficients for the variables: 0.87 for "intangible resources," 0.85 for "tangible resources," 0.91 for "leadership," and 0.88 for "sustainable competitive advantage."

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Pearson's correlation analysis was utilized to determine the relationships between the variables. Subsequently, a multiple regression analysis was carried out to measure the effect of leadership, tangible and intangible resources on an organization's sustainable competitive advantage.

Results

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 shows the demographic profiles of the respondents according to age, qualification, gender, and workplace. One-third of the participants were between 30 and 39 years old, and the other one-third were between 40 and 49 years old. Most participants (75%) had a diploma or degree. The results also imply that there were more female participants than male participants. Additionally, a significant proportion of the participants (51%) were employed in secondary schools, while 31% were employed in primary schools.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Demographic	Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age			
	Under 30 years	32	9
	30-39 years	104	31
	40-49years	113	33
	50-59yrs	60	18
	Above 60years	31	9
Qualification			
	Certificate	14	4
	Diploma	123	36
	Degree	131	39
	Masters	62	18
	Doctorate	8	2
	Other	1	.002
Gender			
	Males	160	47
	Females	180	53
Institutions where they work			
	Clinic	9	
	Secondary schools	174	51
	Primary schools	106	31
	Tertiary Institution	32	9
	NGO	19	6

Pearson's correlation analysis examined the relationship between the three variables and sustainable competitive advantage, as shown in Table 2. The results indicate a significant relationship between the variables and sustainable competitive advantage. Leadership had the highest correlation coefficient ($r = .57$; $p<.01$), suggesting that better leadership leads to a higher competitive advantage. Additionally, tangible resources showed a high positive correlation coefficient ($r = .531$; $p< .01$), indicating that utilizing tangible resources is related to higher levels of competitive advantage. This is particularly important for the SDA institutions in Zimbabwe, as many of them possess large areas of land and several buildings. These institutions can gain a competitive advantage by converting their infrastructure into value-added assets.

Furthermore, intangible resources demonstrated a significant relationship with competitive advantage ($r = .429$, $p<.001$), albeit slightly less than tangible and leadership factors. This suggests that the potential of intangible resources in these institutions may not have been fully discovered. However, the findings indicate that as intangible resources increase, the level of competitive advantage also tends to increase. This result aligns with the research conducted by Walley et al. (2011), who emphasized that both tangible and intangible resources are associated with competitive advantage.

Table 2

Model Summary Predictors of Organizational Competitive Advantage

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.604[a]	.365	.359	.48077

a. Predictors: (Constant), Leadership, Tangible, Intangible

Predictors of Organizational Competitive Advantage

The research question was addressed using multiple regression analysis. The results can be found in Tables 3–5. Overall, the competitiveness of Seventh-day institutions in Zimbabwe is influenced by tangible and intangible resources, as well as leadership.

Table 3

Pearson Correlations of Research Variables

		Sustainable Competitive Advantage
Intangible	Pearson Correlation	.429**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001
Tangible	Pearson Correlation	.531**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001
Leadership	Pearson Correlation	.569**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001

Table 3 presents a Model Summary that displays the connection between leadership, tangible and intangible resources, and the competitive advantage of Seventh-day Adventist institutions in Zimbabwe. According to the findings, these three factors collectively account for 36% of the variability in the sustained competitive advantage of these institutions (adjusted R-square = .359). Table 4 depicts the statistically significant effect ($F(3, 327) = 62.61$, $p < 0.05$).

Table 4

ANOVA Results

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	43.413	3	14.471	62.608	.000[b]
	Residual	75.582	327	.231		
	Total	118.995	330			

a. Dependent Variable: Sustained Competitive Advantage
b. Predictors: (Constant), Leadership, Tangible, Intangible

Table 5

Regression Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	T	Sig.
1	(Constant)	1.406	.158		8.908	.000
	Intangible	.018	.054	.021	.336	.737
	Tangible	.204	.045	.273	4.548	.000
	Leadership	.274	.054	.370	5.088	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Sustained Competitive Advantage

Table 5 indicates that leadership ($\beta = .370$; $p < 0.05$) and tangible resources ($\beta = .273$; $p < 0.05$) are the primary factors contributing to institutions' sustainable competitive advantage. The results of the study by Servillo et al. (2012) align with these findings, which indicate that tangible resources, such as infrastructure, transportation, and communication, stimulate firm growth and productivity. Morretta et al. (2020) and Gaya (2017) also support these findings, emphasizing the importance of tangible resources in constituting part of organizational capital for sustainable competitive advantage.

Discussion

The study found that all three independent variables are significantly associated with the dependent variable of competitive advantage, with leadership being the most prominent. This finding seems to align with resource-based theory, which posits that those who control resources can either encourage or hinder the development of resources into value-added strategic components (Barney et al., 2021). Leadership plays a key role in maintaining competitive advantage because they can see opportunities and share their vision with the rest of the organization (Odhiambo et al., 2022). The findings also show that all three independent variables combined explain approximately 36% of the variance in sustainable competitive advantage. This finding resonates with resource-based theory in that it combines all the resources that can best provide a competitive advantage to the organization. Indeed, the study shows that, when compared singly, intangible resources do not seem to significantly affect competitive advantage (see Table 5).

According to Kabue and Kilika (2016) "since resources are more often common than rare, more homogenous than heterogeneous and more mobile than immobile, then firms have to combine the resources to develop rare difficult to imitate processes that will act as a source of sustainable competitive advantage" (p. 105). The mere presence of resources does not bring about competitive advantage. Instead, it is the transformation of these resources into rare, non-substitutable, and inimitable resources that guarantees a definite competitive advantage. The findings also seem to show that tangible resources have more weight as predictors of competitive advantage than intangible resources. This could be explained by the fact that these resources are more available (there is plenty of land, for example) and more visible (because of their nature) than intangible resources, which are not visible and hence may be overlooked by those who could use and develop these resources into a source of sustainable competitive advantage. According to the resource-based theory, competitive advantage is obtained through an intentional effort to detect and exploit the resources on hand.

Conclusion

This study analyzed the relationship between leadership, resources, and sustainable competitive advantage. The results showed that both leadership and resources are significantly associated with a sustainable competitive advantage. Further, leadership and tangible resources significantly and positively predict sustainable competitive advantage in Zimbabwe's SDA church-run institutions.

The findings indicate that leadership plays a vital role in establishing a competitive advantage in these institutions. Therefore, it is essential to merge tangible and intangible resources and transform them into rare and unique resources to attain the desired level of competitive edge. Although these resources are easily accessible, it is crucial for leadership to have a concrete resource investment plan. Investing in low-capital projects can provide aid to financially strained institutions.

This study has some limitations that should be considered. First, it uses a cross-sectional survey to examine data at a specific point in time. Longitudinal studies are required to better understand this situation. Second, the study was limited to faith-based institutions in Zimbabwe. Future studies could broaden the scope to include other countries and types of non-profit organizations. Third, the study relied solely on quantitative data, and future research could benefit from using qualitative designs or a mixed method to uncover additional insights.

Despite these limitations, this study provides valuable information that can contribute to our understanding of competitive advantage in nonprofit organizations in developing countries. Future studies could build on this knowledge to further explore this area.

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