

**INFLUENCE OF TOTAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT (TQM) PRACTICES ON
COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE OF FIVE STAR HOTELS IN NAIROBI COUNTY,
KENYA.**

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**A RESEARCH PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENT FOR THE AWARD OF MASTER OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION
DEGREE IN THE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS OF AFRICA NAZARENE UNIVERSITY**

JULY 2022

DECLARATION

I declare that this document and the research that it describes are my original work and that they have not been presented in any other university for academic work.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to my daughter, Gianna Gathoni, and son Nathaniel PJ whom due to considerable time I spent away from home as I prepared the project, bore with me.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

My profound appreciations go to the Almighty God for being with me as I prepared this project. I also want to acknowledge my capable supervisors Dr. Veronicah Kaluyu and Dr. Peter Gaiku for guiding me as I prepared the project. In addition, I appreciate the University for giving me the chance to pursue my studies and even prepare the project as part of fulfilling my responsibility before I graduate. Special appreciation goes to the faculty and its staff who were critical throughout the studies and as I prepared this project. More so, I would wish to appreciate my colleague students for being part of my life and helpful as I prepared the project. Furthermore, I would also want to appreciate my employer for giving me the chance to pursue the master's degree while working.

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ABSTRACT

The study evaluated the influence of Total Quality Management (TQM) practices on competitive advantage of five-star hotels in the Nairobi County. The study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic era. The first specific objective sought to determine the influence of product improvement practices on competitive advantage of five-star hotels in the Nairobi County. The second one sought to ascertain the influence of service improvement practices on competitive advantage of five-star hotels in Nairobi County. The third one sought to examine the influence of employer-employee relationship practices on competitive advantage of five-star hotels in the Nairobi County whereas the fourth one sought to evaluate the influence of consumer-business relation practices on competitive advantage of five-star hotels based in the Nairobi. The correlational research design was utilized to conduct the study among 197 employees working in five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County. Random sampling method was utilized to select the participants whereas questionnaires were utilized to collect data from the participants. The SPSS program was utilized to analyze the data. The study established that TQM practices namely product development practices, service improvement practices, employer-employee relationships and consumer-business relation jointly had an influence of 79% on the hotels' competitive advantage. However, product improvement practices alone did not significantly influence the competitive advantage of five-star hotels based in the Nairobi. Service improvement practices were found to have the highest influence on hotels' competitive advantage implying that the level of personalization of services, efficiency in service delivery and levels of courtesy were critical at enhancing the hotels' competitive advantages. The study concluded that the five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County should improve the quality of their services, employer-employee relationships and consumer-business relation to enhance their competitiveness over competitors. The study recommends further research should be conducted in this area since the current study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic era, which affected data collection process.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Competitive Advantage: For the purpose of this study, this is defined as the ability of firms to perform exemplary above their competitors using the attributes that they acquire in their business processes. The attributes in this case relate to the set of unique features that firms acquire either through their brand names or through the unique features of their products and services. Throughout the study, it is measured in terms of organizational performance, unique competencies and innovative capabilities.

Consumer-business relation practices: For the purpose of this study, these are defined as the business practices developed within organizations to improve the way they relate with consumers. The current study measures them in terms of service delivery, product features that meet customers' needs and customer-driven quality.

Employer-employee relationship practices: This relate to the way employers and employees relate with each other with an aim of improving service delivery, and it is measured in terms of level of interaction among employees, level of interaction with management teams in quality improvement and level of employee participation in quality improvement.

Product improvement practices: This relates to business measures developed in an organization to improve products in an organization. The current study measures them in terms of new features introduced into hotel's products, improved quality and new outlook of the products.

Service improvement practices: This relates to business measures put in place within an organization to improve service delivery. Throughout the study, they are measured in terms of level of personalization in service delivery, level of efficiency in service delivery and level of courtesy in service delivery.

TQM practices: These are the concepts that address themselves to management of organizations with a view to providing quality products/services to customers. Throughout the study, they are measured in terms of product improvement practices, which included new features, improved quality and new outlook and service improvement practices, which was measured in terms of the level of personalization in service delivery, the level of efficiency in service delivery and the level of courtesy in service delivery. TQM practices were also measured in terms of employer-employee relationship practices (interaction with management teams, interaction among employees and employee participation in quality improvement) and consumer-business relation practices (service delivery, product features that meet customers' needs and customer-driven quality).

Nairobi County: The Nairobi County was defined as the traditional Nairobi provincial administrative region in the country. The county's map is provided at the appendix to depict the areas from which the five-star hotels included in the study were selected from.

Five-Star Hotels: Were defined as the hotels that provided guests with experiences that met or even exceeded their expectations of luxury, décor and comfort. Some of the factors considered while ranking the hotels as five-star included multilingual staff members, standalone concierge staffs available most of the time, high staff-to-room ratio, pre-check-in registration, exceptional services such as shoe polishing, dry cleaning, ironing and laundry. Other factors considered included daily housekeeping, luggage storage and standalone lounges among other high ranking services.

COVID-19 Pandemic Period: This is the period March 11, 2020 when Covid-19 pandemic was declared global by World Health Organization (WHO) to date.

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

NACOSTI National Commission for Science Technology and Innovation

PEST Political Economic Social Technology

SPSS Statistical Program for Social Scientists

TQM Total Quality Management

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1: Introduction

This chapter introduces the study by providing its background, identifying the study problem, the objectives that the study seeks to attain and the study's significance in terms of contribution to existing literature as well as its scope. It also highlights some of the study's limitations, delimitations and conceptual framework utilized to conduct it.

1.2: Background of the Study

Every organization that wishes to compete effectively in its respective industry must develop or attain competitive advantage. However, not very many organizations in the country and elsewhere have been able to attain competitive advantage because the process of attaining competitive advantage proves challenging to most of them. While this is the case, business processes in the country and elsewhere are becoming competitive especially at this age of internet and globalization (Yeng, Jusoh, & Ishak, 2018). Accordingly, most of the organizations are finding it hard to survive in their respective industries; and the few that survive struggle to maintain their markets because they do not understand how to approach business practices strategically.

Despite the challenges that organizations face in order to attain and maintain competitive advantage, Chiwawa and Wissink (2021) have demonstrated that TQM is able to produce two sets of competitive advantages namely cost and differentiation-based advantages. The study also demonstrated that complexities within TQM processes are able to bar competitors from imitating such types of competitive advantages once organizations develop them. This is in line with Ceglinski (2017) who claims that organizations attain competitive advantage over their

competitors in two different approaches namely cost and differentiation. With regard to cost differentiation approach, Ceglinski (2017) claims that organizations seek to offer their products or services at relatively lower prices by minimizing costs. While this approach is good, it normally works perfectly among price-conscious customers who love to acquire valuable products/services at reasonably lower prices. Accordingly, it may not always apply to certain markets especially where customers are not price-conscious.

For organizations to attain competitive advantage through cost, it ought to operate at relatively lower costs than the competitors using the resources to maximize output. However, for it to happen, it should take advantage of the economies of scale implying that they should offer a variety of services at once or produce products in large numbers (Owusu & Duah, 2018). In service industry, this might result to high market share that may bar potential entrants into the industry because of the amount of work that would be required to match that type of service (Ceglinski, 2017).

Organization can alternatively minimize their operating costs by offering standardized products or services. Standardized products in this case do not imply products of low quality, but products that are relatively the same. The problem with such an alternative is that it might not be possible to customize standardized products; hence, the process of attaining competitive advantage through cost might be a challenge to some of the firms and even industries (Chiwawa & Wissink, 2021). Another challenge with this strategy is that it might require organizations to pay low wages and salaries as well as locate business premises within low rent areas. Furthermore, the firms that pursue this type of competitive advantage are normally required by circumstances to control all functional groups – a task that proves relatively hard to accomplish for some of them (Ceglinski, 2017). Accordingly, most of the firms that benefit from cost leadership strategy are normally the

large ones because they benefit from economies of scale, big market share and produce goods in big volumes.

With regard to differentiation approach, AdiWibowo and Adistry (2017) claim that organizations can differentiate their products/services from those offered by their competitors; upon which, they can charge premium prices for the products/services. This approach is generally applicable to markets whose customers are not sensitive to prices and in markets that are saturated or very competitive. In such markets, organizations focus their attention on addressing customers' specific needs using their unique capabilities and resources. The extent to which organizations succeed in implementing this type of competitive advantage is normally displayed by customer loyalty. It is also displayed by perceived uniqueness in their physical products/services in comparison to those of their competitors. The unfortunate thing is that the strategy is also unsuitable for small organizations implying that it is suitable for big ones.

Despite the challenges that organizations in the hospitality industry face in order to attain competitive advantage over one another, the COVID-19 pandemic now presents an additional problem to them. According to Chang and Wu (2021), it presents the growth challenges that the hotels in the industry must face. The COVID-19 pandemic is a contagious disease that broke out in Wuhan, China in December 2019 (Ondicho, 2021). Following its outbreak, most of the hotels in the country and other parts of the world were closed for some time to minimize the spread of the disease. The closure of the hotels led to loss of revenues, which the hotels must seek to recover post COVID by enhancing their competitiveness.

At global level, most of the hotels suffered from bookings' cancellation. The effects spilled over to other parts of the world including Africa and Kenya in particular. In Kenya, most of the

hotels' bookings were cancelled leading to loss of projected revenues in the industry (Ondicho, 2021). This was because of the frequent hotels' closure following the measures that the government took to curb the spread of the pandemic. At the time of the study, the hotels were under instructions to observe social distance measures that limited the number of customers they served at any given time. Although the hotels were allowed to serve the members of the public, they were also barred from operating overnight; as such, they were impacted heavily by the pandemic. The effects had notable effects on their competitive advantages, which the current study sought to determine how they were impacted by various TQM practices.

Table 1.1 attached at the appendix provides the list of five star hotels in the Nairobi County, which at the time of the study, were twenty-six (26). The hotels offered high levels of personalized services to customers, had spacious rooms and high quality accessories and toiletries serviced regularly throughout the day.

The study was based in the Nairobi County for two main reasons. Firstly, being the Kenya's capital city, it consisted of different types of five-star hotels that were representative of other similar hotels in the country. Secondly, the Nairobi County was among the most affected counties by the COVID-19 pandemic in the country; as such, it provided an accurate overview of how the hospitality industry in general was impacted by the pandemic.

1.3: Statement of the Problem

The hotel industry in Kenya was among the worst affected industries in the country by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Kenya News Agency (2022), the new arrivals from the international market declined by 17.5% while the earnings in the industry declining by 43.9% in 2020. The decrease in new arrivals reduced bed occupancy rate in the industry by 58% in 2020

rendering most of the people in the industry jobless. According to World Bank and Mbaabu (2020), majority of the five-star hotels in the country were among the most affected hotels by the COVID-19 pandemic. Various studies have demonstrated that TQM has significant influence on financial performance and service quality of firm in diverse sectors (AdiWibowo & Adistry, 2017; Thai & Jie, 2018). Nonetheless, very little has been done on hospitality industry in Kenya to determine the influence that TQM might have in enhancing their competitive advantages. In spite of this, a number of studies have been conducted globally on the influence of TQM on competitive advantage in various sectors. Christian and Justinius (2021) appraised the factors that influenced the attainment of competitive advantage within the AyamGeprek business based in Jakarta. Kakkar and Kumar (2020) evaluated the extent to which service quality impacted customer satisfaction within the Indian hospitality industry during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nzisa, Gitahi and Kiprof (2021) evaluated the extent to which the Kenyan based hotels were ready technologically during the COVID-19 pandemic to enhance their competitiveness. However these studies did not focus on the influence of TQM variables (product improvement practices on foods and related products, service improvement practices, employer- employee relationship practices and consumer-business relation practices) on hotels' competitive advantage. Of particular interest, the studies did not evaluate how the aforementioned TQM practices influenced competitive advantage. To bridge the knowledge gap, the current study evaluated the influence of Total Quality Management (TQM) on competitive advantage of five star hotels during the COVID-19 pandemic. Special interest is directed towards product improvement practices on foods and related products, service improvement practices, employer- employee relationship practices and consumer-business relation practices on hotels' competitive advantages during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.4: Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the current study was to determine the influence of total quality Management practices on competitive advantage of five-star hotels in Nairobi County.

1.5 Objectives of the Study

This study was guided by general and specific objectives.

1.5.1 General Objective

To examine the influence of Total Quality Management (TQM) practices on competitive advantage of five star hotels in Nairobi County.

1.5.2 Specific Objectives

The study's specific objectives were:-

- i. To determine the influence of product improvement practices on competitive advantage of five-star hotels in Nairobi County.
- ii. To ascertain the influence of service improvement practices on competitive advantage of five-star hotels in Nairobi County.
- iii. To examine the influence of employer-employee relationship practices on competitive advantage of five-star hotels in Nairobi County.
- iv. To evaluate the influence of consumer-business relation practices on competitive advantage of five-star hotels in Nairobi County.

1.6: Research Hypotheses

To determine the influence of TQM practices on competitive advantage of five-star hotels in Nairobi County, the study hypothesized as follows;

HO₁: Product development practices have no significant influence on competitive advantage of five-star hotels in Nairobi County.

HO₂: Service development practices have no significant influence on competitive advantage of five-star hotels in Nairobi County.

HO₃: Employer-employee relationship practices have no significant influence on competitive advantage of five-star hotels in Nairobi County.

HO₄: Customer-business relation practices have no significant influence on competitive advantage of five-star hotels in Nairobi County.

1.7 Significance of the Study

The study contributes to the body of existing literature on TQM and competitive advantage in different ways. Firstly, it determines the way the five-star hotels in the Nairobi County utilize or does not utilize TQM processes effectively to attain competitive advantage. In so doing, it determines what needs to be done to improve the competitiveness of the five star hotels in the Nairobi County. This is critical to individual five-star hotels in the Nairobi County in their processes of determining the critical paths they can take to improve their levels of competitiveness in the hotel industry.

Secondly, it fills a knowledge gap on the effectiveness of TQM practices on the attainment of competitive advantage in the hotel industry. While filling the gap, it highlights the important

role that TQM plays in enhancing the level of competitiveness in the hotel industry and the manner in which different five-star hotels in the country can use TQM to attain competitive advantage over their competitors. Accordingly, researchers can use the study as reference materials for their studies. Additionally, they can use it to identify research gaps for further research.

Thirdly, the study highlights some of the effects that COVID-19 pandemic had on the hotel industry. By so doing, it touches an important area that is critical to the national government and policy makers; as such, both groups of people might find the study's findings relevant in determining what should be done to revive the hotel industry in the country. The government, on one hand, might understand how the hotel businesses were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas, the policy makers, on the other hand, might understand some of the measure they might develop to help the industry to recover from the effects of the pandemic. Theoretically, the study advances the field of TQM and competitive advantage by evaluating their effects on Kenyan hotel industry specifically five-star hotels. It depicts the extent to which both TQM and competitive advantage influence the hotel industry thereby lays the foundation for similar studies in the future. More importantly, it pinpoints the areas for further research in the country thereby researchers might find the study relevant to their study processes.

1.8 Scope of the Study

The current study limits its scope to TQM in the hotel industry with a special attention to five-star hotels in the Nairobi County. It further narrows the scope down to TQM processes in terms of product/service improvement, employer-employee relationship and customer-business relation as well as the process of attaining competitive advantage. Special attention is directed to the foods and services that the hotels offer to their customers.

1.9 Delimitation of the Study

The current study focuses its attention on the TQM practices that five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County utilize to attain competitive advantage over their competitors. It thereby collects data from people working in five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County. In so doing, it excludes hotels' customers who could provide additional data on what the hotels do to them to enhance their competitiveness. The decision to exclude hotels' customers from research participants was because it could be problematic to obtain data from them particularly at this time that most of the hotels are operating at low capacity due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, special attention was directed to hotels' workers who the researcher believed could provide part of the data that hotels' customers could provide. Such data was related to customer-business relations that five-star hotels use to enhance their competitiveness in the hotel industry.

1.10 Limitations of the Study

The current study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic at a time when some of the target hotels were not opened. Although effective measures were put in place to ensure that the data collected was representative, the fact remained that the data collection process was not as random as anticipated right from the start. Additionally, some of the hotel workers who were supposed to be in the sample either were on compulsory leaves or laid off due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, it is possible that the data was collected from specific groups of workers and to some extent the hotels that withstood the pandemic's negative effects. To overcome this limitation, the researcher collected data from different five-star hotels to ensure that it was representative of the target hotels. Additionally, most of the data collected from research participants was self-reported; as such, the researcher was unable to authenticate its accuracy. The

researcher, though, utilized different mechanisms to ensure that the participants provided accurate data to the best of their knowledge.

1.11 Assumptions of the Study

The study presumed that research participants provided accurate information to the best of their knowledge. The presumption was that they could remember everything included in the questionnaire that needed them to remember how TQM processes occurred in their hotels and how the hotels enhanced their competitive advantages using TQM practices. Additionally, it presumed that the research participants were not biased in providing the responses. Accordingly, they reported them as accurately as they were without any influence from their personal opinions. Furthermore, the study presumed that the COVID-19 pandemic did not hinder the process of obtaining data from the respondents implying that the data collected was sufficient for effective data analysis.

1.12 Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored by the Deming theory and TQM theory with a special focus to customer focus, teamwork and continuous improvement.

1.12.1 The Deming Theory

The Deming's theory, which highlights the need for organizational systems to promote cooperation among various parties in organizations, was utilized to evaluate cooperation between hotels' employees and those in hotels' management positions. The cooperation in this case was defined in terms of the extent to which the employees and management teams cooperated in improving

organizational processes, products and services on a continuous basis with a view to making sure that they met customers' needs and expectations.

The theory, which was developed by Deming in 1986, stresses the responsibility of the people who serve in top management team in changing organizational systems and processes. It claims that they play important roles in promoting quality by creating visions and communicating the way they should be implemented. It further identifies the fourteen principles that should be adopted throughout the TQM processes. The principles include constancy of purpose towards improvement, the adoption of new philosophy that embraces change, the need for inspection and training throughout the process. Others include effective leadership, elimination of work standards and inclusion of everybody in the entire process. While the current study focuses much of its attention on every principle, it evaluates the way various units in the hotels are included in TQM process. In addition, it evaluates the constancy of purpose towards improving the quality of products and services that the five-star hotels offer to customers among other things. This theory informs research hypotheses no 1 and 2 namely HO₁: product development practices has no significant influence on competitive advantage of five-star hotels in Nairobi County and HO₂: service development practices has no significant influence on competitive advantage of five-star hotels in Nairobi County.

1.12.2 TQM theory

The three TQM principles namely, teamwork, continuous improvements and customer focus proposed by Dean and Bowen in 1994 are also utilized to conduct the study. The teamwork principle relates to the collaboration between those in management teams and those not in management teams. The principle acknowledges that those in non-managerial positions can as well

make important contributions to organizational development. As such, it includes them in organizational processes to improve work processes. According to Orwig and Brennan (2019), the extent to which those in management positions foster teamwork impacts directly the attainment of continuous improvement and customer satisfaction. As a result, teamwork is critical in TQM and its subsequent effects on competitive advantage.

The customer focus relates to the extent to which firms seek to meet customers' needs with a view to satisfying them. According to Daru (2016), it is among the most critical components in TQM. The continuous improvement on its part relates to the development made within an organization on a continuous basis. According to Daru (2016), it is a philosophy focused on improving organizational processes on a never-ending basis. Within the hotel industry, it relates to the changes made in food and service delivery processes to improve hotel's competitive advantage.

The teamwork principle is used to determine the extent to which employees working in the five-star hotels in Nairobi County work together to enhance the competitiveness of their hotels. The customer focus is used to evaluate the extent to which the hotels develop products and services that meet customers' needs whereas continuous improvement is used to evaluate how the hotels improve products and services on a continuous basis. This theory underpins research hypotheses no 3 and 4 namely HO₃: employer-employee relationship has no significant influence on competitive advantage of five-star hotels in Nairobi and HO₄: customer-based relation has no significant influence on competitive advantage of five-star hotels in Nairobi County.

1.13 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework provides the link between the study's variables. The competitive advantage is the study's dependent variable whereas TQM practices are its independent variables. As Figure 1.1 depicts, the hotels' competitive advantage is measured in terms of organizational performance, unique competencies and innovative capabilities. The organizational performance is measured in terms of the unique products and services that the hotels offer to customers whereas the unique competencies are measured in terms of the hotels' reputations, employees' unique skills and the way employee delivery services. The innovative capabilities, on the other hand, are measured in terms of service delivery and product development.

The TQM practices are measured at three levels namely, product improvement, service improvement, consumer-business relation and employer-employee relationship (Yeng, Jusoh, & Ishak, 2018). The product improvement practices are measured in terms of how the hotels improve the quality of their foods; introduce new features and outlook to their foods. The service improvement practices are measured in terms of the way hotels personalize services, their efficiency and levels of efficiency in service delivery. The employer-employee relationship, on the other hand, is measured in terms of the way employees interact with hotels' management teams and participate in improving products' quality (Fening & Boateng-Okrah, 2017). The customer-business relation is measured in terms of service delivery, products' features that meet customers' needs and customer-driven quality (Figure 1.1).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the empirical literature reviewed. In empirical literature the relationship between independent and dependent variable of the study are discussed. Knowledge gaps in each study are identified and the relevance of the current study in bridging the research gap presented at the end of this chapter.

2.2 Review of Literature

The purpose of the current study was to evaluate the influence of TQM practices on competitive advantage among five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County, Kenya during the COVID-19 pandemic. In line with this purpose, this chapter evaluates past studies relating to TQM, competitive advantage, and the link between them. It starts by defining both TQM and competitive advantage before providing their various elements and reviewing empirical studies conducted in the past. It concludes by summarizing their main findings with a view to identify the knowledge gap that the current study fills.

AdiWibowo and Adistry (2017) define TQM as the concept that addresses itself to management of organizations with a view to providing quality products/services to customers. Bolatan, Gozlu, Alphan and Zaim (2016) define it as the holistic management process that streamlines organizational activities towards satisfying customers' needs with a focus to attaining organizational objectives. Yeng *et al.* (2018) define it as a series of guiding justifications and philosophy that forms the basis of improving organizational processes on a ceaselessly manner.

While the above definitions are good because they include some of the aspects contained in TQM and even provide a general overview of what it entails, majority of them are excessively broad to the extent that they include some of the aspects that are not included in the current study. Others are too brief that they are unclear. To address these challenges, the current study defines TQM as an all-inclusive and structured approach of management that seeks to enhance the quality of products and services within an organization on an ongoing process in response to feedbacks obtained from various stakeholders (Fening & Boateng-Okrah, 2017).

The word total from TQM is considered in the current study to include everything in the hotels that concerns itself with service delivery and product development. Accordingly, the focus is not limited to management team alone, but it is also extended to other employees and organizational processes (Yeng *et al.*, 2018). However, because of the time limit and financial constraints, some of the aspects that relate to suppliers and other stakeholders are not considered in the analysis. The term quality on its part is considered to relate to degree of excellence in service delivery and products that hotels offer to their customers whereas the term management relates to the way issues of concern are handled, controlled and even directed within five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County. In this respect, TQM is viewed in the current study as the art of managing the entire process of attaining excellence within the five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County.

Fening and Boateng-Okrah (2017) identify universal responsibility, defect prevention, customer orientation and continuous improvement as the four concepts of TQM. Yeng *et al.* (2018) on their part identify suppliers' quality management, strategic planning, leadership, product/service design, process management, employee management and information analysis as well as customer relationship management as the eight elements that define TQM.

The literature review demonstrates that when high quality suppliers are included in business processes, they help organizations to improve their business practices (Bolatan et al., 2016). The implication is that when low quality suppliers are included in those processes, they obviously hinder organizations from improving their business practices and processes because the raw materials they provide are utilized in business processes; hence, influence the quality of products. While the current study acknowledges that suppliers are important elements within TQM processes, it does not include them in the sample to understand their contribution to TQM processes. Instead, it relies heavily on people working in the five-star hotels to evaluate the quality of the products that the hotels offer to customers.

Yenget *al.* (2018) defines competitive advantage as the ability of firms to perform exemplary above their competitors. On equal measure, Hosseini, Soltani and Mehdizadeh (2018) claim that firms attain competitive advantage when they accrue profits that exceed average rates within their respective industries. The implication is that competitive advantage relates directly to the way firms perform in the light of their competitors and that firms must earn extra-ordinary profits for them to be said to attain competitive advantage. According to Yeng et al. (2018), firms attain competitive advantage when they produce goods and services that are valuable to customers in comparison to those produced by their competitors. Hakkak and Ghodsi (2015) go a step further to claim that organizations attain competitive advantage when they pay attention to their external positions and internal capabilities.

To benefit from the two dimensions of competitive advantage portrayed by different authors, the current study defines competitive advantage as the attributes that organizations acquire in their business processes that allow them to outperform their competitors. The attributes in this case relate to the set of unique features that firms acquire either through their brand names or the

unique features of their products and services (Wang, 2014). Upon acquiring these attributes, firms are able to outperform their competitors; hence, they are said to attain competitive advantage over them. Accordingly, the competitive advantage that the five-star hotels in the Nairobi County attained over the years is measured in terms of their unique attributes, the way they perform in the light of other hotels in the country and the innovative capabilities that enable them to execute TQM practices.

The definition adopted in the current study acknowledges that competitive advantage develops primarily from the value that organizations develop for their customers. It also acknowledges that the value exceeds the cost of creating it because firms cannot create it unless they meet basic costs. Furthermore, it acknowledges that customers pay for the value they see in services and products that firms offer to them and that superior value stem from the lower prices that firms charge for their products/services or unique benefits that customers accrue from those products/services.

Hakkak and Ghodsi (2015) identify two types of competitive advantages; the cost and differentiation advantages. The cost advantage relates to the advantage that organizations attain when they produce products or offer services at the lowest costs in comparison to their competitors. Some of the factors that enable organizations to attain or develop cost advantage include efficient distribution channels, high level of expertise at various levels of production or service delivery and skills in developing effective products or services. Others include access to capital required to develop unique products, which acts as a barrier to entry into an industry. The unfortunate thing with this type of advantage is that the firms that pursue it should find and exploit almost all the sources that minimize cost.

The firms that pursue differentiation advantage normally select one or more of the attributes that consumers view as important to them and position themselves uniquely to provide them. This enables them to charge premium prices on their products/service and in so doing attain competitive advantage over their competitors. In spite of this, it would be important to note that differentiation differs from one industry to the other. As a result, it can be based on delivery systems, marketing approaches or products themselves or any other factor. In the hotel industry, it can be based on any of the three factors, but the most common ones are service delivery systems and products. In this respect, the current study focuses much of its attention on the two approaches. In addition, it would be important to note that firms that pursue this type of competitive advantage should be unique in their own way. The advantage is that unlike the cost advantage, more than one firm can differentiate their products or services so long as consumers value a variety of attributes (Ceglinski, 2017). Under such an understanding, it is possible for different hotels operating at the same level to differentiate their products and services; hence, the study covers the five-star hotels operating in the Nairobi County.

Different elements are utilized to measure the level of competitive advantage, but the most common ones include organizational performance in relation to competitors, dynamic capabilities and core competencies. The dynamic capabilities in this case relate to the way organizations develop, integrate and even reconfigure their various levels of competencies in response to changes that occur within their business practices and environments. The four most common types of these capabilities include networking capability, innovative capability, absorptive capability and adaptive capability. The adaptive ones relate to the way organizations identify and even capitalize on opportunities that emerge within their markets whereas the absorptive ones relate to the way organizations recognize the importance of new information in their business processes (Firman &

Thabrain, 2018). The networking capabilities relate to the way organizations develop links with each other.

Due to time limit and financial constraints, the current study does not evaluate the dynamic capabilities. Instead, its focus was on the innovative capabilities, which relate to the way organizations develop new products or even improve the existing ones so that they can meet customers' needs. This extends to process innovativeness, product and even market innovativeness. When organizational resources and capabilities are rare, they enable organizations to acquire and even develop competitive advantage over their competitors (Ceglinski, 2017). However, they require the unique competencies. The unique competencies in this case relate to the way organizations identify problems within their business practices and develop solutions to those problems. They are thereby the integrated bundles of technologies and skills that are competitively unique to organizations that possess them.

The current study acknowledges that the presence of resources within organizations is not sufficient for them to attain competitive advantage. Accordingly, they need to have dynamic capabilities that would allow them to deploy their resources in their business processes and even combine them with organizational processes to attain competitive advantage. More importantly, they would require core competencies in terms of skills for them to attain competitive advantage. In this respect, the level of competitive advantage within the five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County is also measured in terms of the way the hotels perform in comparison to their competitors. However, because most of the hotels are private ventures thereby not mandated by national law to publish their financial report on local newspapers or on their websites for the members of public to scrutinize the way they perform, their performances is measured in terms of the way they meet customers' needs via unique products and services.

Customer satisfaction is measured in terms of the way the hotels offer their products and services. In addition, the level of competitive advantage within the hotels is measured in terms of hotels' abilities to improve their products and services and even improve the processes of offering those products and services. With regard to unique competencies, the study evaluates the unique skills that hotels' employees possess and the manner in which the hotels offer their products and services to meet/satisfy customers' needs.

2.2.1: Product improvement practices and competitive advantage.

Firman and Thabrain (2018) evaluated the mediating effect of innovation made on organizational products on the relationship between TQM and dynamic capabilities as they related to attainment of competitive advantage. They utilized questionnaires to collect data from 50 research participants who were selected from Padang-based colleges. The authors established that innovation made on organizational products and dynamic capabilities had positive effect that was significant on attainment of competitive advantage. However, they failed to establish the mediating effect that innovation played within the link between dynamic capabilities and TQM as they related to attainment of competitive advantage. Although the current study does not evaluate such effect, it utilizes questionnaire to collect its data. Furthermore, it evaluates the influence of TQM on attainment of competitive advantage – a gap that Firman and Thabrain (2018) left unfilled. Nevertheless, it is conducted in Kenya implying that it is significantly different from Firman and Thabrain (2018); hence, critical to the body of existing literature on the influence of TQM on attainment of competitive advantage. More importantly, it was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which Firman and Thabrain (2018) did not address.

Izvercian et al. (2014) evaluated the impact of TQM practices and human resources on enhancing firm competitive advantage. Using theoretical and conceptual models, they established that TQM practices had positive influence on firm competitive advantage.

2.2.2: Service improvement practices and competitive advantage

Christian and Justinus (2021) appraised the factors that influenced the attainment of competitive advantage within the AyamGeprek business based in Jakarta. The study directed special attention to the effects that innovation process, product innovation and market orientation had on the attainment of competitive advantage within the study area. Using a sample of 77 respondents, the study did not identify product innovation as impacting the businesses' competitive advantage. The study was critical to the evaluation of product innovation on firm performance, but it did not evaluate the effect of product innovation on attainment of competitive advantage in the hospitality industry; thus, the need for the current study.

Christa and Kristinae (2021) appraised the effect of product innovation on the performance of different industries in Indonesia during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a sample of 300 respondents, the study established that the products that were managed effectively to enhance their superiority had positive effects on firms' performance. The study was conducted in Indonesia while the current study will be conducted in Nairobi Country in Kenya. Indonesia and Kenya have different cultural and economic attributes hence this study.

Owusu and Duah (2018) evaluated TQM as a competitive advantage tool within the Ghanaian telecommunication industry using descriptive research design. With the help of bar charts and frequency tables that were developed using the SPSS program, they demonstrated that the 150 mobile users that took part in the study considered long-term usage as the most important

attribute in selecting the telecommunication company of their choice. In addition, they considered network coverage as the second most important attribute in that process. Furthermore, they considered tariffs as the third most important attribute whereas game of choice, reception benefit and customer care were the least factors in their analysis. The study concluded that TQM was a competitive advantage tool within the Ghanaian telecommunication service industry. The study focused on TQM as a competitive advantage tool within service industry, they did not consider the effects of various TQM components on attainment of competitive advantage. Additionally, they utilized descriptive research method to conduct the study implying that it was largely descriptive. More importantly, they conducted it on a telecommunication service industry and outside the country contrary to the current study that was conducted in the country and hospitality industry. In the light of this, the current study is largely evaluative rather than descriptive and it evaluates the effects of various TQM components on competitive advantage within the hospitality industry in the country. This study was conducted in Ghana in the telecommunication industry while the current study is conducted in the hospitality industry in Nairobi County in Kenya. Telecommunication industry has different competitive advantage dynamics from hospitality hence this study.

Kakkar and Kumar (2020) evaluated the extent to which service quality impacted customer satisfaction within the Indian hospitality industry during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study collected data from research participants using structured questionnaires. Unlike the current study that collected data from people working in the hospitality industry, the study collected data from hotels' customers. Using a sample of 150 research participants and descriptive statistics, the study established that although most of the services in the hotel industry had changed post COVID-19 pandemic, majority of the hotels' customers were satisfied with the new services. In spite of this,

Kakkar and Kumar (2020) did not evaluate the influence of TQM on competitive advantage; hence, the need for the current study.

2.2.3 Employer-employee relationship practices and competitive advantage

AdiWibowo and Adistry (2017) evaluated the effect of TQM in terms of leadership on the competitiveness of the oil and gas industry. Like the current study, they collected their data using questionnaire and analyzed their data using multiple linear regressions model. They established that leadership and employee cooperation had positive effects on attainment of competitive advantage within the oil and gas industry. In spite of this, their conceptual framework was too technical to the extent that it did not define the various aspects that defined each aspect of TQM practices. In addition, they defined the industry's competitiveness in general terms to the extent that it was hard to determine what was included in that definition or even excluded from it. To bridge the gap that the study left uncovered, the current study defines the exact elements that define TQM practices and competitive advantage in its analysis. In addition, it is conducted in a hospitality industry, which is significantly different from the oil and gas industry that is normally influenced by various political factors. Even though the hospitality industry is also influenced by political factors, the influence of these factors is slightly different from the geopolitical ones that affect the performance of the oil and gas industry in terms of the number of barrels produced at any given time. More importantly, the current study focuses much of its attention on organizational resources; hence, excludes the external factors that influence the development and attainment of competitive advantage.

Chiwawa and Wissink (2021) appraised the factors that determined employee engagement within the South African hospitality industry from an employee perspective during the COVID-19 lockdown. The study collected both qualitative and quantitative data using a pre-developed questionnaire. Using a sample of 260 respondents from 15 hotels within the eThekwinini region, the study established that the hotels that engaged employees in their business processes had higher competitive advantage over their competitors. Nonetheless, it did not evaluate the effect of product and service improvement practices as well as consumer-business relation practices on competitive advantage; thus, the need for the current study.

Marwa, Zulfikarijah and Supriyati (2021) appraised the effect of TQM practices on the performance of medium and small firms in Malaysia. Contrary to the current study that included only four TQM's variables, the study included obsession with quality, employee involvement and empowerment, controlled freedom and education and training as the TQM's variables. Other TQM's variables included in the study included teamwork, customer focus, long-term commitment, unity of purpose, continuous improvement and scientific approach. Using a sample of 45 respondents, the study established that customer focus had notable effect on the performance of the firms implying that it affected the attainment of their competitive advantage. Employee empowerment and involvement was also found to have significant effect on firms' performance as well implying that it also impacted the attainment of their competitive advantages. In spite of this, continuous improvements did not impact the performance of the firms. Despite the study's wide-ranging findings, the study was conducted in Malaysia. Additionally, it was conducted in diverse industries without narrowing its focus to the hotel industry; thus, the need for the current study.

Ntwiga, Muchara and Kiriri (2021) appraised the impact of employee empowerment on enhancing the competitive advantage of hospitals based in the Nairobi County. Using a descriptive correlational design, they collected data from 154 patients, 154 hospital employees and 31 public and private hospitals. The study established that employee empowerment had notable influence on enhancing hospitals' competitive advantages.

2.2.4 Consumer-business relation practices and competitive advantage

Othman et al. (2020) appraised the effect of TQM practices on the competitiveness of Iraq based banks. Contrary to the current study that defined TQM practices in terms of services, products, consumer-business and employer-employee relationships, they defined TQM practices in terms of customer attention, information and analysis, staff management and leadership. Using a sample of 53 bank managers, they established that the four TQM variables included in the study had substantial influence on the competitiveness of the Iraqi banks. Despite the study's findings, it left a research gap, which the current study, bridges.

With a special focus to technological readiness in the hospitality industry, Nzisa, Gitahi and Kiprop (2021) evaluated the extent to which the Kenyan based hotels were ready technologically during the COVID-19 pandemic to enhance their competitiveness. Using a sample of 138 star-rated Kenyan hotels, they established that technology readiness had substantial influence on the hotels' competitiveness from a consumer-business relationship. Nonetheless, they did not evaluate the influence of TQM practices on the hotels' competitiveness advantage; thus, the need for the current study.

Marwa, Zulfikarijah and Supriyati (2021) identified customer focus as impacting the performance of medium and small firm based in Malaysia negatively suggesting that something

needed to enhance their competitive advantage. In spite of this, they did not evaluate the effect of customer focus on the competitiveness of the hotels based in Malaysia and Kenya in particular; hence, the need for the current study.

2.3 Summary and Research Gap

The empirical review has demonstrated that while a number of studies have been conducted in the area of interest, most of them do not address themselves to the exact area of interest. More importantly, most of those studies have been conducted in other parts of the world other than in the country and they did not address themselves to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Kenya News Agency (2022), the COVID-19 pandemic had notable effects on the Kenyan hotel industry. As such, the reviewed literature left a gap that need to be filled. In spite of this, Ceglinski (2017) have demonstrated that there is strong link between sustainable competitive advantage and TQM both empirically and theoretically. Kakkar and Kumar (2020), for instance, established that although most of the services in the hotel industry had changed post COVID-19 pandemic, majority of the hotels' customers were satisfied with the new services. Christian and Justinus (2021) identified product innovation as impacting the businesses' competitive advantage. Christa and Kristinae (2021) established that the products that were managed effectively to enhance their superiority had positive effects on firms' performance.

Owusu and Duah (2018) on their part identified some of the TQM attributes that enhanced the competitiveness of the Ghanaian telecommunication service industry, but their study was largely descriptive. More importantly, Firman and Thabrain (2018) established that innovation and dynamic capabilities had positive effect that was significant on attainment of competitive

advantage, but they did not establish the mediating effect that innovation played within the link between dynamic capabilities and TQM in the process of attaining competitive advantage.

Based on the above literature review, it is evident that despite the high number of researches that have been conducted before in relation to TQM and competitive advantage, very few of them have evaluated the link between the two variables in Kenya during the COVID-19 pandemic. The unfortunate thing is that the few ones provide conflicting results. In addition, some of them have been conducted in a descriptive manner implying that they have not evaluated the issue in an explanatory manner. In the light of this, the current study has identified a knowledge gap in the country and in the field of study that needs to be filled. It has gone ahead to evaluate the influence of TQM practices on the attainment of competitive advantage among five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study attempts to depict the manner in which the hotels utilized or did not utilize TQM processes during the COVID-19 pandemic to enhance their competitive advantage. The next chapter outlines the methodology that was utilized to conduct the study.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1: Introduction

This chapter presents research design, target population, sampling and sampling procedures, data collection procedures, details of pilot study and data analysis methods employed in the study in answering the fundamental research questions.

3.2: Research Design

A correlational research design that focused much of its attention on evaluating the link between independent and dependent variables was utilized to conduct the current study. The design was largely non-experimental meaning that no form of intervention was introduced into research participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study was carried out at a single point in time to provide an overview of the influence of TQM practices on the attainment of competitive advantage at that particular time.

The correlational research design was preferred over other designs because it was flexible in the sense that it did not manipulate the variables included in the study to determine their effects on the dependent variable. As a result, the process of evaluating the link between the variables was direct. In addition, the design was more ethical because it did not withhold some forms of interventions on certain groups of research participants or even expose them to invasive techniques to achieve intended objectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

3.3: Research Site

The current study was conducted within the Nairobi County, which had about 28 five-star hotels at the time of the study. The decision to include hotels from the Nairobi County was largely informed by the corona virus pandemic, which at the time of the study was rampant in the country. In line with the ministry of health's guidelines that limited movement within the county, the researcher restricted the study to the Nairobi County. Even though five-star hotels from other parts of the country were excluded from the sample, the research site was appropriate for the study because Nairobi is the capital city of Kenya. Accordingly, it consists of five-star hotels that represent the face of similar hotels in the country.

3.4: Target Population

The target population included employees working in the five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County. At the time of the study, there were twenty-eight (28) five-star hotels in Nairobi County, which before the outbreak of the corona virus pandemic employed 5,763 employees (Fredrick, 2019). The 5,763 employees were eligible to take part in the study.

3.5: Study Sample

3.5.1 Sampling Procedure

Given that the hotel employees included in the study worked in different hotels with different working conditions that were critical to answering research questions, stratified sampling method was used to select the hotels included in the study. The method involved arranging the hotels alphabetically using their names, selecting the first hotel from the first strata randomly and selecting the third hotel from the other strata. Doing so minimized the heterogeneity in the hotels'

working conditions thereby provided a representative sample. The simple random sampling method was then used to select the hotels' employees included in the study. The method entailed picking hotels' employees randomly without favoring some of them over others, recruiting them into the study and asking them to participate in it on voluntary basis (Casteel & Bridier, 2021). Due to the nature of the sampling method(s) used throughout the study, the findings from the sample included in the study were generalized to five-star hotels in Nairobi County.

3.5.2: Study Sample Size

Before determining the sample size, it would be important to note that large sample sizes are normally good because they increase statistical significance and statistical power. The statistical significance on its part minimizes the likelihood of committing type 1 error whereas the statistical power on its part enables studies to detect what they are supposed to detect. While this is the case, the problem is that it is not always possible to increase sample sizes at the expense of other resources such as time and financial resources. Accordingly, sample sizes are normally determined with the other resources in mind.

Sample size is also determined based on desired level of precision, level of variation and level of confidence. The level of confidence relate to hypotheses under consideration whereas the level of accuracy relates to the estimates of population parameters (Casteel & Bridier, 2021). The level of variation on its part relate to the standard deviation of variable of interest in relation to the main ones. The current study evaluated its hypotheses at a 7% significance level contrary to 5%, which is very common in most studies. Additionally, it focused much of its attention on high level of accuracy; hence, determined the sample size as follows;

Due to the impracticability of interviewing all the employees working in the industry, simplified formula $n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$ was utilized to determine the sample size (Casteel & Bridier, 2021). The letter n in the formula represents the sample size, N the population size whereas e represents the level of precision. In line with the target population, the study utilized the following values; N = 5763 and e= 0.05. Inserting these values into the formula gave a sample size of 197 research participants as follows;

$$n = \frac{5,763}{1 + 5,763(0.05)^2}$$

As a result, a sample size of 197 research participants was utilized throughout the study.

3.6: Data Collection

3.6.1 Data Collection Instruments

Different instruments could have been utilized to collect data from research participants. For instance, an interview process or guide could have been utilized to collect it. The advantage of an interview would be that it would enable the researcher to collect in-depth data through probing (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). However, its main disadvantage would be that it would consume a lot of time and resources because the researcher would have to interview every research participant. Because of time limit and financial constraint, the researcher did not collect data via interviews. Instead, a questionnaire attached at the appendix (Appendix 4) was utilized to collect data from research participants.

The questionnaire consisted of 14 main research questions, most of which were structured in 5-point Likert scale that range from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. The Likert scaled

research questions measured various variables included in the study as provided by the conceptual framework. The other research questions were meant to supplement the main research questions; hence, they were summarized quantitatively to contribute to the study's overall objectives.

3.6.2 Pilot Testing of Research Instruments

Before the questionnaires were utilized to collect the actual data, they were piloted on two five-star hotels based in Nairobi County. In line with Creswell and Creswell (2018), the two five-star hotels included in pilot testing were excluded from the final sample. Both hotels were used to test the clarity and validity of research questions. As such, the unclear research questions were revised based on the responses obtained from pilot study whereas the clear ones were retained in their original form.

3.6.3: Instrument Reliability

The test/retest method was utilized to evaluate the reliability of the questionnaire utilized to collect the data. The process entailed interviewing twenty employees working in two five-star hotels and evaluating the ratio of the responses, they provided. Twenty (20) participants were selected because it was 10 percent of the target sample; hence, it was sufficient for the current study. The closer the ratio between the responses they provided during the first time in relation to the second time, the higher the reliability of the instrument; in contrast, the more divergent the ratio of the responses, the lower the instrument's reliability. As a result, a value of at least 0.7 was considered as appropriate whereas that below it was considered inappropriate. Accordingly, the research questions with values below 0.7 were revised to improve their reliability (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The two five-star hotels that were include in pilot testing were excluded from the final sample to eliminate the possibility of interviewing the same employees during the final study.

3.6.4: Instrument Validity

The validity of an instrument relates to the extent to which an instrument measures what it is supposed to measure. The four different types of validity include; face validity, content validity, construct validity and criterion validity. The criterion one is concerned about the suitability of an instrument in terms of producing desired results. This was determined in the light of previous studies to evaluate whether the study's findings were similar to those from previous studies or not. The construct one relates to the way research items and concepts are operationalized (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This type of validity was determined via pilot testing by evaluating the similarity of responses from similar research questions.

The face validity concerns itself with the observable aspects of an instrument. It relates to what one can see by just looking at instrument to determine whether it measures what it is supposed to measure. This was done by the researcher by simply checking whether research questions matched conceptual domains or not (Casteel & Bridier, 2021). The absence of the domains contained in the conceptual framework was considered as lack of face validity, and vice versa.

The content validity relates to adequacy of content contained in an instrument in terms of representativeness. This helped in determining the need for including items that were left out in the questionnaire; hence, it was critical to the current study. The process of evaluating it entailed making educated judgment about the instrument to determine whether the content was representative of concept measured or not. Anything left out was included to improve its representativeness.

3.6.5 Data Collection Procedure

The literature review shows that different processes could be utilized to collect data from research participants, but it would be important to note that the process utilized should be aligned to study's objectives and research questions. In line with this, the data collection process entailed starting by approaching the five-star hotels in the Nairobi County and requesting for permission from the hotels' management teams to collect data from the hotels.

Once the permission was granted, the researcher then went ahead to approach individual employees with an intention of recruiting them into the study. The process of recruiting them involved introducing the study and its benefits to them and requesting them to take part in it on voluntary basis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The ones who accepted to take part in it on voluntary basis were issued with consent forms to read and sign before they were issued with questionnaires to fill on their own. To ensure that they filled the questionnaires in the right way, they were taken through the filling process by the researcher. A formal arrangement was then made to collect the questionnaires once they filled them.

3.7 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics: The descriptive statistics were utilized to provide an overview of the research participants and summarize the main findings without necessarily testing the study's hypotheses. Special attention was directed towards the participants' demographic factors and other attributes that were relevant to the study.

Inferential statistics: The correlation tests were conducted to determine the association between the independent variables (product/service improvement practices, employer-employee relationship and consumer-business relation) and dependent variable (competitive advantage). A

correlation between 0.00 and 0.10 was considered negligible, that between 0.10 and 0.39 weak, that between 0.40 and 0.69 moderate, that between 0.70 and 0.89 strong whereas that between 0.90 and 1.00 was considered to be very strong (Schober, Boer, & Schwarte, 2018).

The multiple linear regression model analysis was also conducted to determine the way the independent variables influenced the dependent variable. The test's four main assumptions namely, residuals' independence, normality, linearity and multi-collinearity were evaluated before the data was used to conduct the analysis. The variables' scatter plots were used to evaluate the linearity assumption whereas the Variance of Inflation Factors (VIFs) was utilized to evaluate the multi-collinearity assumption. The VIF values less than 10 were considered appropriate for the study whereas those above 10 were considered to suggest the presence of multi-collinearity in the data. The Durbin-Watson's statistic, on the other hand, was utilized to evaluate the independence of residuals whereas the P-P plot was utilized to evaluate the normality assumption. The coefficient of determination represented by r^2 provided the proportion of variation in the competitive advantage (dependent variable) that was explained by TQM practices (independent variable). The SPSS computer program was utilized to conduct the data analysis. The model was utilized to depict the extent to which the independent variables (product/service improvement practices, employer-employee relationship and consumer-business relation) predicted the dependent variable (competitive advantage).

Testing Study Hypothesis: A 5% significance level was utilized to test the study's hypotheses. The decision rule involved rejecting the null hypothesis if the p-value was less than or equal to 0.05. Otherwise, the null hypothesis was retained if the p-value was greater than 0.05 (Casteel & Bridier, 2021).

3.8 Legal and Ethical Considerations

The current study collected data from human beings; as such, unless ethical measures were taken into consideration it was possible to harm research participants in one way or the other. In this respect, the following measures were observed to minimize possible harms with a view to protecting research participants.

The first measure entailed obtaining an authorization letter to conduct the current study from NACOSTI. The letter ensured that the necessary measures were put in place to minimize possible harms on research participants.

The second measure entailed making sure that research participants took part in the study on voluntary basis and that they were aware of what was expected of them throughout the study process. In line with this, a consent form attached at the appendix (Appendix 3) was utilized to recruit and obtain permission from the participants. The form informed the participants that they could withdraw from the study at any time without giving reasons. It also informed them that the data collected from them would be treated with high level of confidentiality; hence, it would not be shared with unauthorized people including the hotels' management teams. Furthermore, it informed that the process of taking part in the study would not cost them anything except the time they spent filling questionnaires and that there would be no direct benefit for taking part in the study. The form concluded by asking research participants to append signatures as an indication that they read and understood everything contained in it.

CHAPTER FOUR: DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1: Introduction

This chapter presents the results of the study. The sections in this chapter include the general information section encompassing the response rate and demographic information. The chapter also outlines the descriptive and inference statistics in line with the study objectives.

4.2: Response Rate

Out of the 220 questionnaires that were distributed to the potential research participants, 197 of them were filled and returned giving a response rate of 89.55 percent. The response rate was considered appropriate for the study because it was above 70 percent as Casteel and Bridier (2021) recommends. Table 4.1 presents the findings for the response rate.

Table 4.1: The response rate

	Frequency	Percentage
Non-response	23	10.45%
Response	197	89.55%
Total	220	100%

4.3 Respondents' demographic characteristics

About 47.2 percent of the participants were males whereas 52.8 percent of them were females as Table 4.2 depicts.

Table 4.2: The respondents' gender

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	93	47.2%
Female	104	52.8%
Total	197	100%

Given that the distribution of the respondents by gender was almost equal, then the study's findings were not influenced in one way or the other by the gender of the respondents.

Approximately 10.2 percent of the respondents were aged between 18 and 24 years, 20.8 percent of them were aged between 25 and 34 years whereas 23.9 percent of them were aged between 35 and 44 years. About 22.3 percent of the respondents were aged between 45 and 54 years, 15.2 percent were aged between 55 and 64 years whereas 7.6 percent of them were over 65 years of age as Table 4.3 depicts.

Table 4.3: The respondents' age categories

Age categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
18 - 24 years	20	10.2%
25 – 34 years	41	20.8%
35 – 44 years	47	23.9%
45 – 54 years	44	22.3%
55 – 64 Years	30	15.2%
Above 65 years	15	7.6%
Total	197	100%

About 4 percent of them were high school graduates with no formal training in hotel management, 29 percent of them had certificates in hotel related courses whereas 37 percent of them had diplomas in hotel related courses. About 19 percent of them had higher diplomas, 8 percent of them had bachelor's education level whereas 3 percent of them had master's education levels as Table 4.4 depicts.

Table 4.4: The respondents' highest levels of education

Education level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
High school	8	4%
Certificate	57	29%
Diploma	73	37%
Higher diploma	37	19%
Bachelor's education	16	8%
Master's education	6	3%

Approximately 7.6 percent of the respondents worked in food and beverage department, 15.2 percent in front office department, 17.3 percent in housekeeping, 13.2 percent in concierge department whereas 14.2 percent of them were in guest service department. About 13.7 percent of them were in sales and marketing department, 11.2 percent in the human resource department whereas 7.6 percent of them worked in kitchen department as Table 4.5 depicts.

Table 4.5: The respondents' departments/units

Age bracket	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Food and beverage	15	7.6%
Front office	30	15.2%
House keeping	34	17.3%
Concierge	26	13.2%
Guest service	28	14.2%
Sales and marketing	27	13.7%
Human resource	22	11.2%
Kitchen	15	7.6%
Total	197	100.0%

About 3.6 percent of them had worked in their respective hotels for less than one year, 5.1 percent for between 2 and 4 years, 13.2 percent for between 5 and 7 years whereas 33 percent of them had worked for between 8 and 10 years. About 45.2 percent of them had worked in their respective hotels for over 10 years as Table 4.6 depicts suggesting that they had vast knowledge about their hotels.

Table 4.6: Respondents' years of work at their respective hotels

Number of years at work	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Less than 1 year	7	3.6%
2 – 4 years	10	5.1%
5 – 7 years	26	13.2%
8 – 10 years	65	33.0%
Over 10 years	89	45.2%
Total	197	100.0%

4.4 Descriptive statistics

4.4.1 Descriptive statistics for product improvement practices

The product improvement practice was the study's first independent variable and it was evaluated using three statements relating to improvements made on hotels' food during the COVID-19 pandemic. A 5-point Likert scale was utilized to evaluate the degree to which the participants either agreed or disagreed with the three statements. A (1) scale indicated a strong disagreement, (3) a neutral position whereas a (5) scale indicated a strong agreement with the

statements. Both means and standard deviations were utilized to describe the study's findings.

Table 4.7 summarizes the study's findings.

Table 4.7: Respondents' levels of agreement/disagreement to food improvement statements

Statements	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. There are new features/improvements on the hotel's foods	197	4.10	0.386
2. The hotel has improved the quality of its foods	197	3.19	1.020
3. I am happy about the continued improvement of the hotel' foods	197	4.18	0.843
The overall score on product improvement practices	197	3.8223	0.26624

As seen in Table 4.7, the respondents agreed that there were new features/improvements on the hotels' foods ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.386$). Nonetheless, they were almost neutral that the hotels had improved the quality of their foods ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 1.020$) indicating that they had not done much to improve the quality of their foods. In spite of this, they agreed that they were happy with continued improvements made on hotels' foods ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 1.046$). The overall mean score

($M = 3.8223$, $SD = .26624$) depicted that they almost agreed that new improvements had been made on hotels' foods suggesting that the foods had improved slightly.

4.4.2 Descriptive statistics for service improvement practices

The service improvement practices were the study's second independent variable and they were evaluated using three statements relating to improvements made on hotels' services during the COVID-19 pandemic. A 5-point Likert scale was utilized to evaluate the degree to which the participants either agreed or disagreed with the three statements. A (1) scale indicated a strong disagreement, (3) a neutral position whereas a (5) scale indicated a strong agreement with the statements. Both means and standard deviations were utilized to describe the study's findings. Table 4.8 summarizes the study's findings.

Table 4.8: Respondents' levels of agreement/disagreement to service improvement practices statements

Statements	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. The hotel's services are personalized to customers' individual needs	197	4.15	.509
2. The service delivery process is efficient	197	4.40	.577
3. The level of courtesy in service delivery has improved greatly over the years	197	3.77	1.048
The overall score on service improvement practices	197	4.044	0.19716

As can be seen in Table 4.8, most of the respondents agreed that the hotels' services were personalized to meet customers' needs ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 0.509$). The respondents also agreed that service delivery processes were efficient ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 0.577$). Nonetheless, they were almost neutral that the level of courtesy in service delivery in their respective hotels had improved over the years ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 1.048$). The overall mean score ($M = 4.044$, $SD = 0.19716$) depicted that the participants agreed that service delivery processes in their hotels had improved greatly.

4.4.3 Descriptive statistics for employer-employee relationship practices

The employer-employee relationship practices were the study's third independent variables and they were evaluated using three statements relating the relationship between employers and employees. A 5-point Likert scale was utilized to evaluate the degree to which the participants either agreed or disagreed with the three statements. A (1) scale indicated a strong disagreement, (3) a neutral position whereas a (5) scale indicated a strong agreement with the statements. Both means and standard deviations were utilized to describe the study's findings. Table 4.9 summarizes the study's findings.

Table 4.9: Respondents' levels of agreement/disagreement to employee-employer relationship statements

Statements	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. There is high level of interaction between employees and those in management team	197	4.13	.462

2. There is high level of interaction among employees in different departments than before	197	4.11	.587
3. There is high level of employees participation in quality improvement of hotel's products and services	197	4.26	.534
The overall score on employer-employee relationship practices	197	4.1658	.29282

As seen in Table 4.9, the respondents agreed that the level of interaction between employees and those in management teams was high ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 0.462$). The respondents also agreed that the level of interaction among employees from different departments was higher than before ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.587$). Furthermore, they agreed that the level of employees participation in quality improvement of hotels' products and services was high ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 0.534$). The overall mean score ($M = 4.1658$, $SD = .29282$) depicted that the participants agreed that the level of interaction between employees and employers was high.

4.4.4 Descriptive statistics for consumer-business relation practices

The consumer-business relation practices were the study's fourth independent variable and they were evaluated using three statements relating to the link between hotels and customers. A 5-point Likert scale was utilized to evaluate the degree to which the participants either agreed or disagreed with the three statements. A (1) scale indicated a strong disagreement, (3) a neutral position whereas a (5) scale indicated a strong agreement with the statements. Both means and

standard deviations were utilized to describe the study's findings. Table 4.10 summarizes the study's findings.

Table 4.10: Respondents' levels of agreement/disagreement to customer-business relation statements

Statements	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. The service delivery process in the hotel meets customers' needs	197	4.28	.505
2. The hotel's products features meet customers' needs	197	3.73	.791
3. The level of product quality in the hotel is customer-driven	197	4.38	.487
The overall score on consumer relationship	197	4.1320	.25767

As seen in Table 4.10, the participants agreed that service delivery processes in the hotels met customers' needs ($M = 4.28$, $SD = .505$). The respondents also almost agreed that the hotels' products' features met customers' needs ($M = 3.73$, $SD = .791$). Furthermore, they agreed that the level of quality in the hotels was driven by customers' needs ($M = 4.38$, $SD = .487$). The overall mean score ($M = 4.1320$, $SD = .25767$) depicted that the participants agreed that the hotels' services and products were driven by customers' needs.

4.5 Diagnostic test Results

The data did not violate the linear assumption between the dependent and independent variables as Figures 4.1 to 4.4 depict. As such, the data was used for analysis.

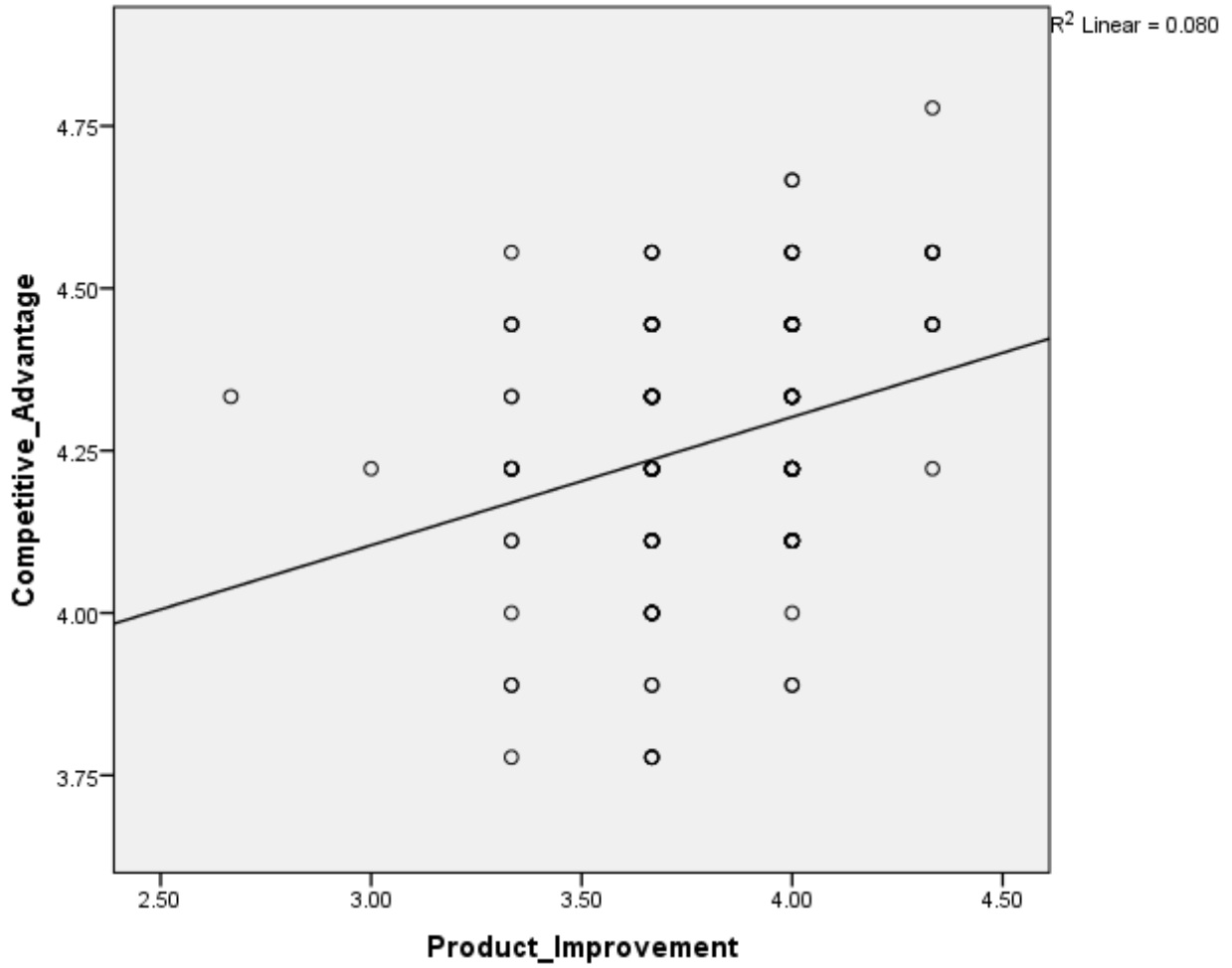


Figure 4.1: Scatter plot of product improvement practices versus attainment of competitive advantage

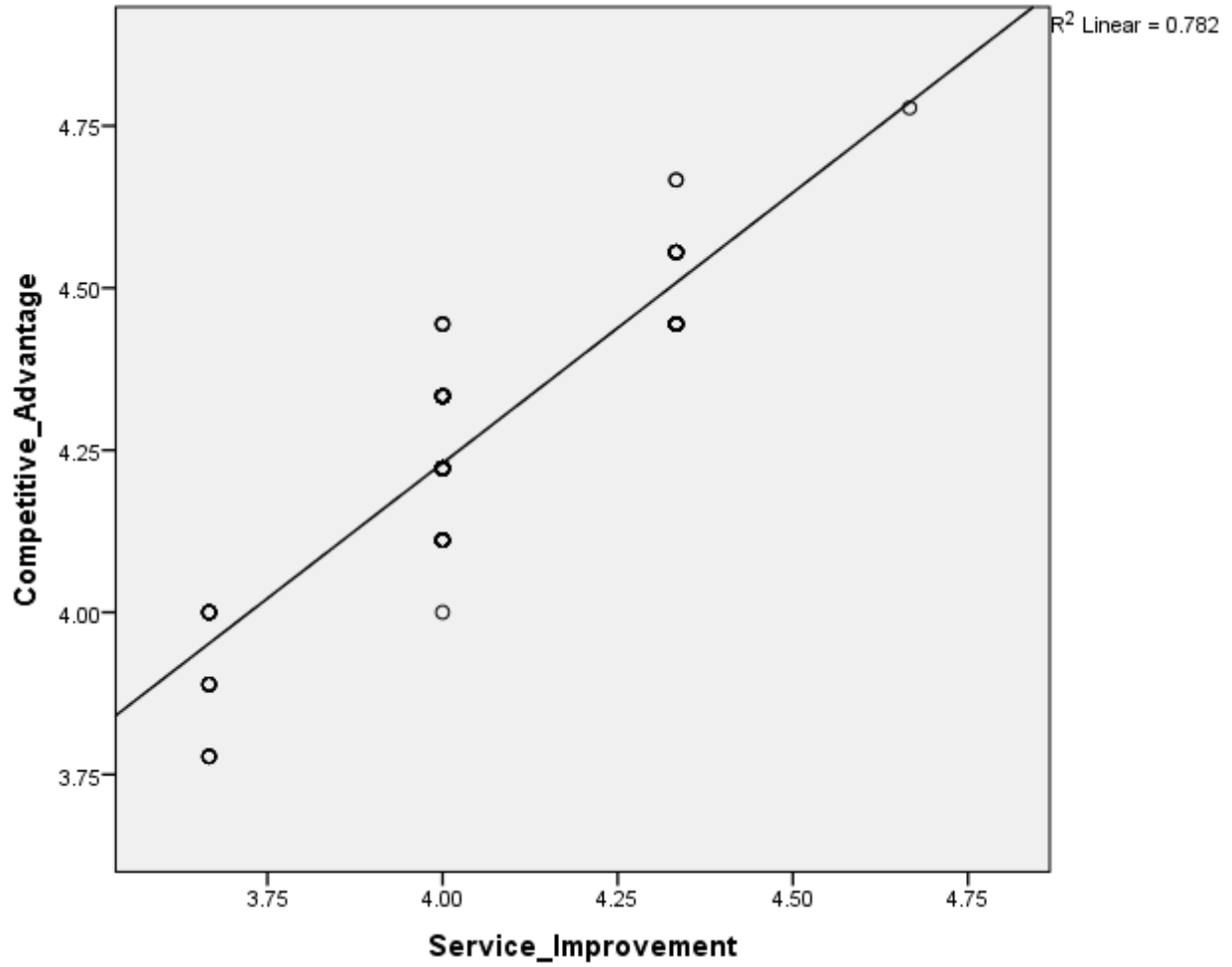


Figure 4.2: Scatter plot of service improvement practices versus attainment of competitive advantage

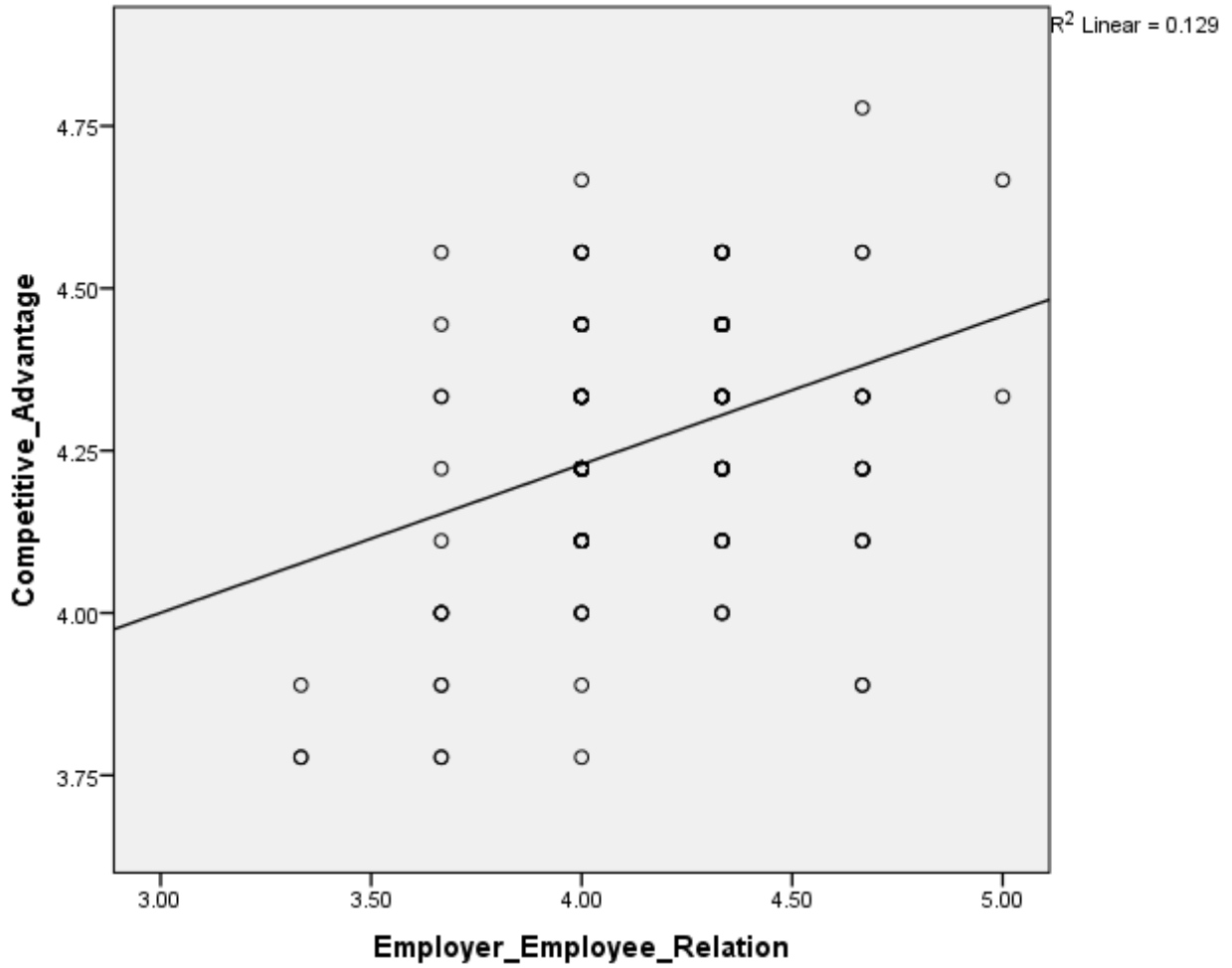


Figure 4.3: Scatter plot of employer-employee relationship practices versus attainment of competitive advantage

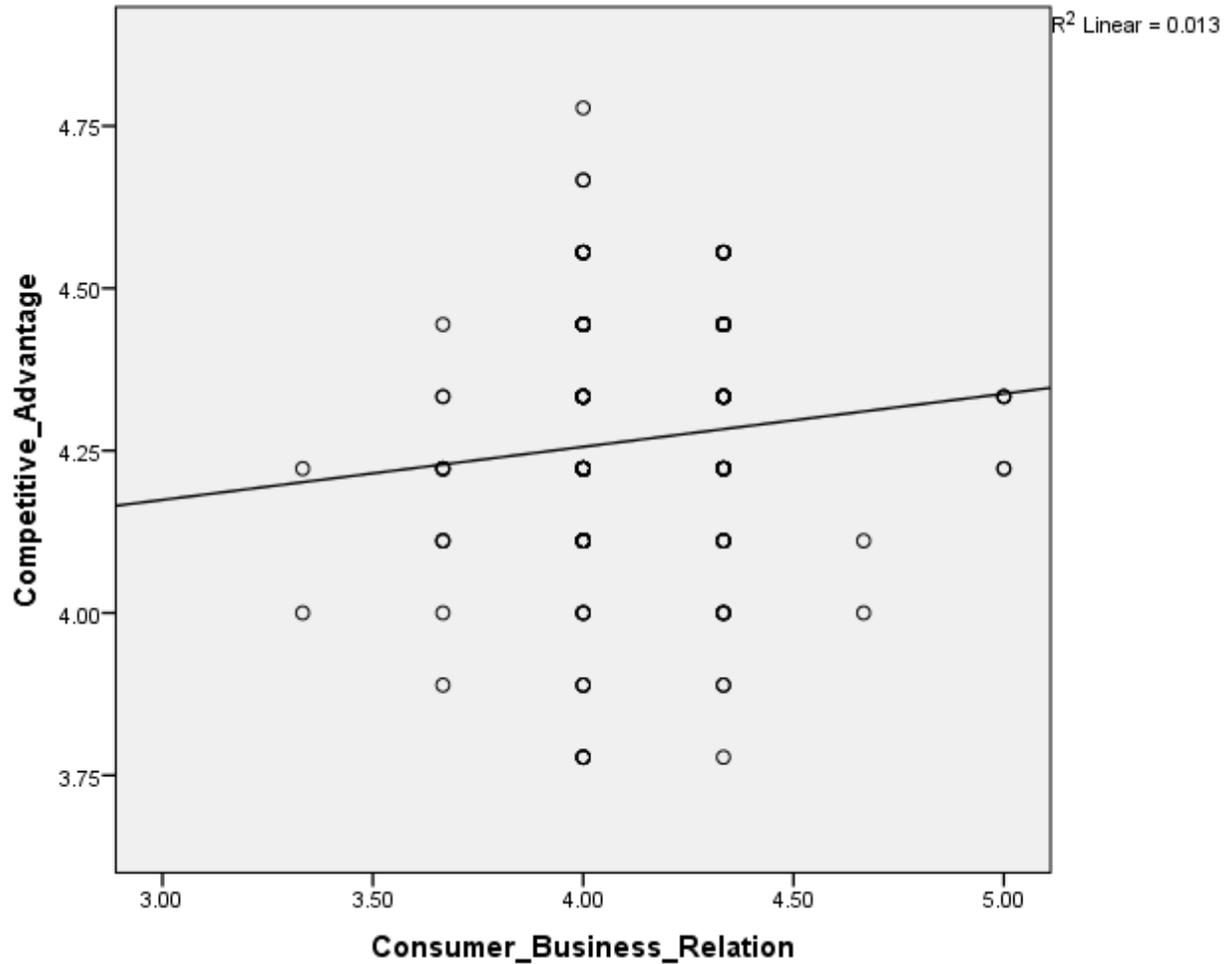


Figure 4.4: Scatter plot of consumer-business relation practices versus attainment of competitive advantage

The Variance of Inflation Factor (VIF) was utilized to evaluate the multi-collinearity assumption. Table 4.11 summarizes the findings depicting that the assumption was not violated because the VIF values were less than 10 whereas tolerance scores were above 0.2. Accordingly, the data was suitable for further analysis.

Table 4.11: The multi-collinearity test's output

	Collinearity statistics	
	Tolerance	VIF
Product improvement practices	.884	1.131
Service improvement practices	.824	1.213
Employer-employee relationship	.883	1.132
Consumer-business relation	.995	1.005

The Durbin-Watson's statistic, on the other hand, was utilized to evaluate the assumption that the values of the residuals were independent of each other. Given that the statistic's value (1.594) was close to 2 as Table 4.12 depicts, the assumption was also met; hence, the data was considered appropriate for further analysis.

Table 4.12: The Dublin-Watson's statistic

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.891 ^a	.794	.790	.08530	1.594

a. Predictors: (Constant), Consumer Business Relation, Employer-Employee relation, Product Improvement, Service Improvement

b. Dependent Variable: Competitive Advantage

The P-P plot was utilised to evaluate the normality assumption. Figure 4.5 provides the findings depicting that the assumption was met because most of the values touched the plot.

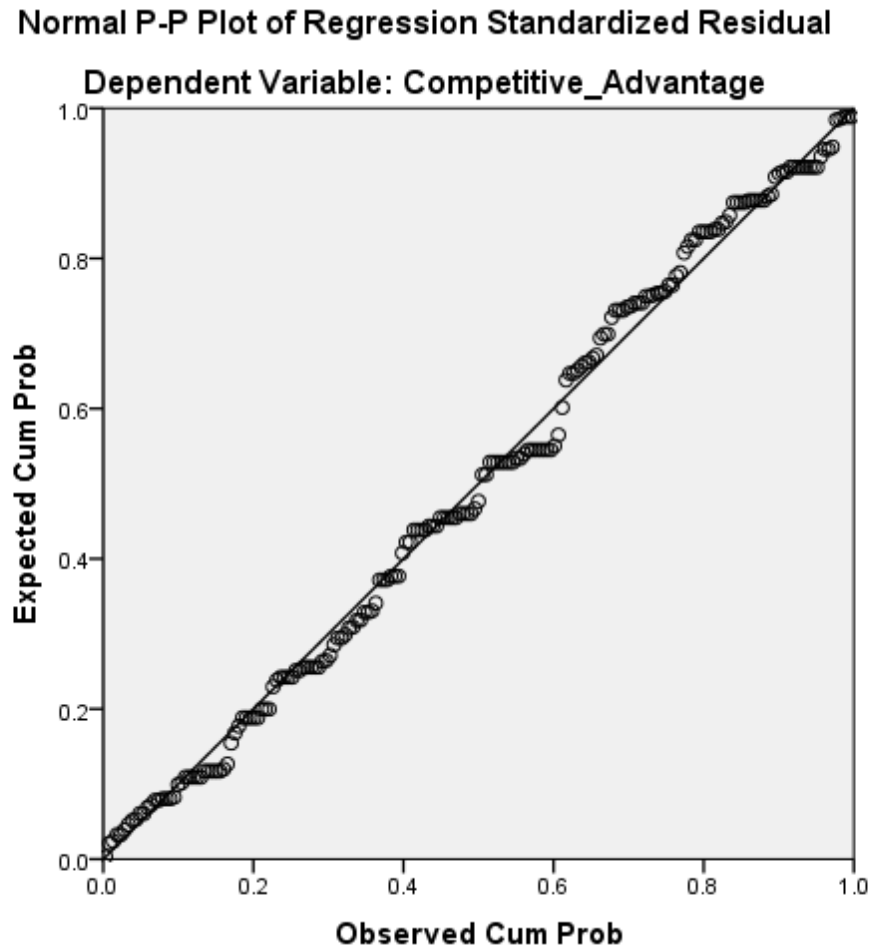


Figure 4.5: The model's P-P plot

4.6 Inferential Statistics

The next part of the findings presents the correlation analysis between the study's independent variables and dependent variable. It presents the findings based on the study's objectives and research hypotheses.

4.6.1 Relationship between Product Improvement Practices and Competitive Advantage

Based on the study's first null hypothesis and first research objective, the study evaluated the link between product improvement practices and the attainment of competitive advantage in

the five-star hotels located within the Nairobi County. As can be seen in Table 4.13, there was a statistically significant correlation between product improvement practices and competitive advantage in the Nairobi-based five-star hotels that took part in the study, $r(197) = .283$, $p < 0.05$, at 5% significance level. Nonetheless, in line with Schober, Boer and Schwarte (2018), the correlation was weak because it was between 0.10 and 0.39.

Table 4.13: The correlation between product improvement practices and hotels' competitive advantage

		Product	Competitive Advantage
	Pearson Correlation	1	.283**
Product	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	197	197
Competitive advantage	Pearson Correlation	.283**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	197	197

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

4.6.2 Relationship between Service Improvement Practices and Competitive Advantage

In line with the second null hypothesis and second research objective, the study evaluated the link between service improvement practices and the attainment of competitive advantage in the 5-star hotels in the Nairobi County during the COVID-19 pandemic. As can be seen in Table 4.14, there was a statistically significant correlation between service improvement practices and

attainment of competitive advantage in the Nairobi-based five-star hotels that took part in the study, $r(197) = .884$, $p < 0.05$. In line with Schober, Boer and Schwarte (2018), the correlation was strong suggesting that service improvement practices had strong influence on the attainment of competitive advantage among the hotels.

Table 4.14: The correlation between service improvement practices and hotels' competitive advantage

		Service improvement	Competitive Advantage
	Pearson Correlation	1	.884**
Service Improvement	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	197	197
	Pearson Correlation	.884**	1
Competitive Advantage	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	197	197

4.6.3 Relationship between Employer-Employee Practices and Competitive Advantage

In line with the third null hypothesis and third research objective, the study evaluated the link between service improvement practices and the attainment of competitive advantage in the 5-star hotels in the Nairobi County during the COVID-19 pandemic. As Table 4.15 depicts, there was a statistically significant correlation between employer-employee relationship practices and competitive advantage in the Nairobi-based five-star hotels that took part in the study, $r(197) = .360$, $p < 0.05$. Nonetheless, in line with Schober, Boer and Schwarte (2018), the correlation was

weak suggesting that employer-employee relationship did not have considerable influence on the attainment of competitive advantage in the hotels that took part in the study.

Table 4.15: The correlation between employer-employee improvement practices and hotels' competitive advantage

		Employer employee relation	Competitive advantage
	Pearson Correlation	1	.360**
Employer employee relation	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	197	197
	Pearson Correlation	.360**	1
Competitive advantage	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	197	197

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

4.6.4 Relationship between Consumer-Business Relation Practices and Competitive Advantage

Based on the fourth null hypothesis and fourth research objective, the study evaluated the link between service improvement practices and the attainment of competitive advantage in the 5-star hotels in the Nairobi County during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study did not establish a statistically significant correlation, $r(197) = .113$, $p > 0.05$ between consumer-business relation and competitive advantage suggesting that an increase in consumer-business relation did not necessarily improve hotels' competitive advantage during COVID-19 pandemic (Table 4.16).

Table 4.16: The correlation between consumer-business relation practices and hotels' competitive advantage

		Consumer- business relation	Competitive Advantage
	Pearson Correlation	1	.113
Consumer-business relation	Sig. (2-tailed)		.113
	N	197	197
	Pearson Correlation	.113	1
Competitive Advantage	Sig. (2-tailed)	.113	
	N	197	197

4.6.5 Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

The multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to determine the extent to which the TQM practices influenced the attainment of competitive advantage among the five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County. The model's overall summary was as presented in Table 4.17 depicting that the variation in the study's independent variables explained about 79% of variation in its dependent variable.

Table 4.17: Model's overall summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.891 ^a	.794	.790	.08530	1.594

a. Predictors: (Constant), Consumer Business Relation, Employer-Employee relation, Product Improvement, Service Improvement

b. Dependent Variable: Competitive Advantage

The analysis of variance was conducted at 5% significance level and the results are as presented in Table 4.18. The findings were significant, $F(4,197) = 185.001$, $p < 0.05$, indicating that the overall model was significantly useful in explaining the attainment of competitive advantage among the five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County.

Table 4.18: The model's ANOVA output

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
	Regression	5.385	4	1.346	185.001	.000 ^b
1	Residual	1.397	192	.007		
	Total	6.782	196			

a. Dependent Variable: Competitive Advantage

b. Predictors: (Constant), Consumer-Business Relation, Employer-Employee Relation, Product Improvement, Service Improvement

Further regression model analysis was conducted and the findings are as presented in Table 4.19.

Table 4.19: Model's coefficients

Model	Unstandardized		Standardized	t	Sig.	Collinearity	
	Coefficients		Coefficients			Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance VIF	
(Constant)	.568	.169		3.356	.001		
Product improvement	-.011	.024	-.015	-.437	.663	.884	1.131
1 Service improvement	.809	.034	.858	23.771	.000	.824	1.213
Employer-employee relation	.055	.022	.086	2.467	.015	.883	1.132
Consumer-Business relation	.058	.024	.080	2.448	.015	.995	1.005

a. Dependent Variable: Competitive Advantage

As seen from the Table 4.19, the following model equation was modelled:

$$Y = 0.568 + 0.809X_2 + 0.055X_3 + 0.058X_4 + \varepsilon$$

Where:

Y = Competitive advantage

X₂ = service improvement practices

X₃ = employer-employee relationship practices

X_4 = consumer-business relation practices

ε = the model's random error

Based on the modelled equation, when all the study's independent variables are held constant, the competitive advantage would be 0.568. However, a unit increase in service improvement practices while other factors are held constant would result in 0.809 increases in the hotels' competitive advantage. Based on the model's beta value, this would be about 85.8 percent change in the hotels' competitive advantage implying that service improvement practices had the largest influence on the attainment of competitive advantage in the hotels during the COVID-19 pandemic. A unit increase in the hotels' employer-employee relationship practices would result in a 0.055 increase in the hotels' competitive advantage. According to the beta value, this would be about 8.6 percent change in the hotels' competitive advantages. Similarly, a unit increase in consumer-business relation while other things are held constant would result in a 0.058 increase in the competitive advantage. This would be about 8.0 percent increase in the competitive advantage. The findings suggest that service improvement practices had the greatest influence on the attainment of competitive advantage of the five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County during the COVID-19 pandemic. The employer-employee relationship and consumer-business relations follow, but their influences are almost negligible meaning that they do not add much to predicting the increases in the hotels' competitive advantage.

4.7: Hypothesis testing and findings

The first null hypothesis of the study was:

HO₁: Product development practices have no significant influence on competitive advantage of five-star hotels in Nairobi County.

The hypothesis was not rejected because the study's p-value (0.663) for product improvement practices was greater than 0.05 (Table 4.19). This means there is no significant relationship between product development practices and competitive advantage among five-star hotels based in Nairobi County.

The second null hypothesis of the current study was:

HO₂: Service development practices have no significant influence on competitive advantage of five-star hotels in Nairobi County.

However, the hypothesis was rejected because the p-value (.000) for service improvement practices was smaller than 0.05 implying that service improvement practices has significant influence on competitive advantage of five start hotels in Nairobi County.

Similarly, the third null hypothesis of the current study was:

HO₃: Employer-employee relationship practices have no significant influence on competitive advantage of five-star hotels in Nairobi County.

The hypothesis was rejected because the p-value (.015) for employer-employee relationship practices was smaller than 0.05 as well (Table 4.19). The findings implied that the influence of employer-employee relationship on competitive advantage of five-star hotels in Nairobi County was significant.

Similarly, the fourth null hypothesis of the current study was:

HO₄: Consumer-business relation practices have no significant influence on competitive advantage of five-star hotels in Nairobi County. The hypothesis was also rejected because the p-value (.015) for consumer-business relation was smaller than 0.05 as well. Contrary to the

correlation analysis that depicted that an increase in consumer-business relation did not necessarily result in an increase in hotels' competitive advantage, the multiple linear regression analysis established that consumer-business relation had substantial influence on hotels' competitive advantage. According to Schober, Boer, and Schwarte (2018), it would be worth noting that while the two types of tests (multiple linear regressions and correlation analysis) might appear similar thereby mistaken to measure one thing, the tests are distinct from each other. On one hand, the correlation analysis was used to measure the strength of the linear relationship between hotels' competitive advantage and consumer-business relation whereas the multiple linear regressions, on the other hand, were used to predict the influence that consumer-business relation had on hotels' competitive advantage. The study established that while consumer-business relation did not have a statistically significant influence on the linear relationship between the two variables, consumer-business had statistically significant influence in predicting hotels' competitive advantage; hence, the anomaly in the results from the two tests.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1: Introduction

This chapter presents a discussion, summary, conclusion, and recommendations. The discussion, summary, conclusion, recommendations for improvements for the study are presented in line with the study research objectives. Recommendations for further research are also presented in this chapter. Furthermore, this chapter presents the summary of the broader implications of the findings for theory, practice, policy and further research in Total Quality Management practices.

5.2: Discussions

This part of the chapter discusses the study's findings in the light of previous studies. It attempts to depict the extent to which the study's finding agree or do not agree with previous studies. It provides explanations for variations in the findings and it is organized according to the study's objectives.

5.2.1 Influence of Product Improvement Practices on hotels' competitive advantage

The first research objective sought to evaluate the influence of product improvement practices on competitive advantage of five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County. The study hypothesized that product improvement practices did not influence competitive advantage of five-star hotels in the Nairobi County. Three sets of questions relating to improvements made on hotels' foods were utilized to measure the level of product improvement practices in the hotels included in the analysis.

The study established that there was a positive weak correlation that was statistically significant between product improvement practices and competitive advantage among the five-

star hotels based in the Nairobi County, $r(197) = .283, p < 0.05$. According to Schober, Boer, and Schwarte (2018), the weak positive correlation suggested that as the five star hotels based in the Nairobi County improved the quality of their foods during the COVID-19 pandemic, their competitive advantages increased slightly. Although the correlation test provided the strength of relationship between improvements made on the hotels' foods and hotels' competitive advantage, which in this case was established to be weak, it did not provide the extent to which the improvements made on the foods predicted/estimated hotels' competitive advantages during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this respect, the linear regression analysis was conducted to determine the influence that improvements made on hotels' foods (product improvement practices) had on the attainment of competitive advantage in the hotels.

The study established that product improvement practices did not have statistically significant influence, $t(197) = -0.437, p > 0.05$, on the attainment of competitive advantage among five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County during the COVID-19 pandemic. The implication was that the improvements made on the hotels' foods during the COVID-19 pandemic did not influence the extent to which the five star hotels based in the Nairobi County attained competitive advantage over their competitors. As a result, even though the hotels' competitive advantages improved with improvements made on the hotels' foods, the improvements made on the hotels' foods did not influence the hotels' competitive advantage in any way. Inasmuch as the findings might appear contradictory, it would be worth noting that the two tests (multiple linear regressions and correlation analysis) measured two different aspects of the study. On one hand, the correlation analysis measured the strength of the linear relationship between hotels' competitive advantage and product improvement practices whereas the multiple linear regressions, on the other hand, predicted/estimated the influence that product improvement practices had on hotels' competitive

advantage. The study established that while product improvement practices had a weak correlation with hotels' competitive advantage during the COVID-19 pandemic, it did not influence the extent to which the hotels attained competitive advantage during the pandemic. In this respect, the observed correlation between hotels' competitive advantage and product improvement practices was not causal; hence, the anomaly in the results from the two tests.

The findings were in agreement with Christian and Justinus (2021) who did not identify product innovation as impacting the competitive advantage of the AyamGeprek business based in Jakarta. The findings implied that the improvements made on the hotels' foods during the COVID-19 pandemic did not enable the five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County to improve their competitive advantage during the COVID-19 pandemic. Several factors might explain the study's non-influence of products improvement practices on the attainment of competitive advantage in the hotels included in the analysis. Firstly, it is possible that the improvements on the foods did not mean much to hotels' customers thereby did not influence how the hotels attained competitive advantage. Secondly, it might mean that the improvements were unnoticeable to influence the hotels' competitive advantages greatly.

The findings, however, were in disagreement with Firman and Thabrain (2018) who established that innovation made on organizational products had positive effect that was significant on the attainment of competitive advantage. Similarly, they were in disagreement with Christa and Kristinae (2021) who identified improvements made on products as impacting firms' performances and their competitive advantages.

5.2.2 Influence of service improvement practices on hotels' competitive advantage

The second research objective sought to evaluate the influence of service improvement practices on the attainment of competitive advantage among the five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study hypothesized that service improvement practices did not influence the attainment of competitive advantage among the five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County during the pandemic. Three sets of questions relating to personalization in hotels' services, efficiency in service delivery and the level of courtesy in the services were utilized to measure the level of improvements made on hotels' services.

The study established that there was a positive correlation that was statistically significant between service improvement practices and competitive advantage, $r(197) = 0.884$, $p < 0.05$. In line with Schober, Boer, and Schwarte (2018), the results suggested that service improvement practices had strong influence on the attainment of competitive advantage in the five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County. In view of this, a linear regression analysis was conducted to determine the extent to which service improvement practices influenced the attainment of competitive advantage in the hotels during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study established that service improvement practices had statistically significant influence, $t(197) = 23.771$, $p < 0.05$, on the attainment of competitive advantage among five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County during the COVID-19 pandemic. For this reason, the second null hypothesis that presumed that service improvement practices did not have statistically significant influence on the attainment of competitive advantage among five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County was rejected. In so doing, the alternative hypothesis that hypothesized that the influence of service improvement practices on hotels' competitive advantage was statistically significant was accepted.

The findings were in agreement with Owusu and Duah (2018) who established that service improvement in terms of network coverage had substantial influence on the competitive advantage of the Ghanaian telecommunication companies. The results suggested that the improvements made on the hotels' services had substantial influence on the attainment of competitive advantage in the five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County. They showed that a unit increase in improvements on hotels' services increased the hotels' competitive advantage by 0.809, which was about 85.8 percent change in the overall hotels' competitive advantage. The implication was that the more the hotels improved their services the more they attained competitive advantage over their competitors during the COVID-19 pandemic. In line with Kakkar and Kumar (2020), the findings suggest that majority of the hotels' customers were satisfied with the new changes made in the hotels to improve their service delivery processes. In view of this, it would be paramount for the hotels to continue improving their services to outperform their competitors.

5.2.3 Influence of employer-employee relationship practices on hotels' competitive advantage

The third research objective sought to evaluate the influence of employer-employee relationship practices on the attainment of competitive advantage among the five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study hypothesized that the employer-employee relationship did not influence the attainment of competitive advantage among the five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County during the pandemic. Three sets of questions relating to interaction between employees and those in management teams, different departments and between employees and employers in general were utilized to measure the level of employer-employee relationship for the hotels included in the analysis.

The study established that there was a positive weak correlation that was statistically significant between employer-employee relationship and competitive advantage, $r(197) = 0.360$, $p < 0.05$. The implication was that as employer-employee relationship improved in the hotels, the hotels' competitive advantage improved also. Even if the correlation analysis provided the strength of the relationship between hotels' employer-employee relationship, which in this case was established to be weak, it did not provide the extent to which the improvements made on the hotels' employer-employee relationship predicted/estimated hotels' competitive advantages during the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, a linear regression analysis was conducted to determine the influence that employer-employee relationship had on the attainment of competitive advantage in the hotels.

The study established that employer-employee relationship had statistically significant influence, $t(197) = 2.467$, $p < 0.05$, on the attainment of competitive advantage among five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County during the COVID-19 pandemic. For this reason, the third null hypothesis that presumed that employer-employee relationship did not have statistically significant influence on the attainment of competitive advantage among five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County during the COVID-19 pandemic was rejected. In so doing, the alternative hypothesis that hypothesized that the influence of employer-employee relationship on hotels' competitive advantage was statistically significant was accepted.

The results suggested that the employer-employee relationship in the hotels had substantial influence on the attainment of competitive advantage in the five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results showed that a unit increase in employer-employee relationship in the hotels increased the attainment of competitive advantage in the five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County by 0.055 units. In line with the beta value, this was about

8.6 percent increase in the overall competitive advantage. The results suggested that the hotels that improved employer-employee relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic were linked with services/products that met customers' needs, innovative ways of developing services/products and innovative ways of improving services. Accordingly, employer-employee relationship was critical in enabling five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County to enhance their competitive advantage during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The findings were in agreement with AdiWibowo and Adistry (2017) who established that leadership and employee cooperation had positive effects on attainment of competitive advantage within the oil and gas industry. Additionally, they were in agreement with Chiwawa and Wissink (2021) who established that the hotels that engaged employees in their business processes had higher competitive advantage over their competitors. Furthermore, they were in agreement with Marwa, Zulfikarijah and Supriyati (2021) who identified employee empowerment and involvement as critical in enhancing firm performance and competitive advantage.

5.2.4 Influence of consumer-business relation practices on hotels' competitive advantage

The fourth research objective sought to evaluate the influence of consumer-business relation practices on the attainment of competitive advantage among the five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study hypothesized that consumer-business relation practices did not influence the attainment of competitive advantage among the five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County during the pandemic. Three sets of questions relating to service delivery process in the hotels meeting customers' needs, level of product quality in the hotels being driven by customers' needs and hotels' product features meeting customer's needs

were utilized to measure the level of consumer-business practices in the hotels included in the analysis.

The study established that there was no statistically significant correlation between customer-business relation practices and competitive advantage, $r(197) = .113, p > 0.05$. This was in relation to the fact that the study's p-value (0.113) was greater than 0.05, which was the study's significance level. Given that the correlation analysis evaluated the strength of the link between hotels' competitive advantage and consumer-business relation, which in this case was weak; it did not provide the extent to which improvements made on hotels' consumer-business relation predicted/estimated hotels' competitive advantages during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this respect, multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to determine the influence that improvements made on hotels' consumer-business relation had on the attainment of competitive advantage in the hotels.

The study established that the consumer-business relation had statistically significant influence, $t(197) = 2.448, p < 0.05$, on the attainment of competitive advantage among five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County during the COVID-19 pandemic. The implication was that the improvements that the hotels made in consumer-business relations during the COVID-19 pandemic had statistically significant influence on the extent to which the five star hotels attained competitive advantage over their competitors during the pandemic. According to Schober, Boer, and Schwarte (2018), it would be worth noting that while both multiple linear regressions and correlation analysis might appear similar thereby mistaken to measure one thing, the tests are distinct from each other. In the current study, the correlation analysis was used to measure the strength of the linear relationship between hotels' competitive advantage and consumer-business relation whereas the multiple linear regressions, on the other hand, were used to predict/estimate

the influence that consumer-business relation had on hotels' competitive advantage during COVID-19 pandemic. The study established that while consumer-business relation and hotels' competitive advantage were not statistically correlated with each other, consumer-business had statistically significant influence in predicting hotels' competitive advantage; hence, the anomaly in the results from the two tests.

The results suggested that the consumer-business relation in the hotels had substantial influence on the attainment of their competitive advantage during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results showed that a unit increase in consumer-business relation in the hotels increased the attainment of competitive advantage in the five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County by 0.058 units. In line with the beta value, this was about 8.0 percent increase in the overall competitive advantage. The results suggested that the hotels that improved their service delivery processes, developed products that met customers' needs and aligned their products' quality with customers' needs were able to improve their competitive advantage over their competitors. For this reason, the five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County should continue developing products that meet customers' needs particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Doing so would enhance their competitive advantage thereby enable them to overcome the negative effects associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The findings were in agreement with Othman et al. (2020) who established that customer attention had substantial influence on the attainment of competitive advantage in the Iraqi banking industry. Additionally, they were in agreement with Nzisa, Gitahi and Kiprop (2021) who identified technological readiness in the Kenyan hospitality industry as enhancing the competitiveness in the industry. Furthermore, they were in agreement with Marwa, Zulfikarijah

and Supriyati (2021) who identified customer focus as impacting the performance and competitive advantage of the medium and small firms based in Malaysia positively.

5.3: Summary of the main findings

The findings show that TQM practices in form of service improvement practices, employer-employee relationships and consumer-business relation had substantial influence on the attainment of competitive advantage among five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, they show that product improvement practices did not influence the attainment of competitive advantage of the five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings suggest that the more the hotels improved their services, employer-employee relationships and enhanced their relationships with customers, the more they attained competitive advantage over their competitors during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the improvements that they made on the quality of their foods did not influence the extent to which they attained competitive advantage over their competitors.

5.4 Conclusions

The current study evaluated the influence of TQM practices on the attainment of competitive advantage among five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County during the COVID-19 pandemic. It established that service improvement practices made in form of personalizing services to customers' needs, service delivery and courtesy had substantial influence on the attainment of competitive advantage in the five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County. In view of this, the study concludes that the five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County should personalize services to customers' needs, improve their levels of courtesy and service delivery to attain competitive advantage over their competitors. Similarly, it established that employer-employee relationship in

form of interaction between various groups of employees including those at the management team and participation of employee in quality improvement practices had substantial influence on the attainment of competitive advantage in the five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County. In line with this, the study concludes that the five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County should improve their employer-employee relationships to attain competitive advantage over their competitors. The study acknowledges that the attainment of competitive advantage in the hotels would be critical at improving their performances; hence, enable them to overcome most of the challenges facing the hotel industry in the country especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Alongside the above, the study established that consumer-business relations in form of service delivery processes that met customers' needs, products' that met customers' needs and levels of product quality that were customer-driven had positive influence on hotels' competitive advantage during the COVID-19 pandemic. In view of this, the study concludes that five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County should develop service delivery processes and products that meet customers' needs. Additionally, they should develop products and services that are customer-driven.

5.5 Recommendations

In the light of the study's findings, the study recommends as follows:

1. Five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County should improve the quality of their relations with customers on a continuous basis to enhance their competitive advantage over their competitors.
2. Five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County should also improve the quality of their services to enhance their competitive advantage as well. The improvements made on services should focus on meeting customers' needs in order to attract more customers.
3. Furthermore, they should improve the quality of their employer-employee relationships to enhance their competitive advantage as well and as they do this, they should focus their attention on meeting customers' needs and offering products and services that meet customers' expectations.

5.6 Areas of further research

In spite of the above, the current study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, its data collection process and scope was limited in a way due to closure of some of the hotels that formed part of the target population and employees who were on compulsory leaves. For this reason, there would be the need for further research to include the TQM practices and competitive advantage areas that the study did not evaluate. Future research should also include suppliers and hotels' customers in their analysis to broaden their scope beyond what the current study managed to do. Doing so would establish the extent to which different factors included in the current study influence the attainment of competitive advantage in the five-star hotels based in the Nairobi County.

Alongside the above, even though the study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was unable to evaluate the extent to which the pandemic impacted the hotels' competitive advantages because almost every hotel in the country was impacted in one way or the other by the pandemic. In the light of this, there would be the need to evaluate the post-effects of the pandemic on the hotels' competitive advantages and other pertinent areas. Doing so would be critical in enabling the hotels to determine what they should do to ensure that they hotels remain competitive. Additionally, it would enable policy makers to determine what to do to enhance the sustainability of the hotels.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: QUESTIONNAIRE

Questionnaire

1. Kindly indicate your gender by ticking (✓) the appropriate information

- Male
- Female

2. Kindly indicate your age bracket by ticking (✓) the appropriate information

- 18 – 24 years
- 25 – 34 years
- 35 – 44 years
- 45 – 54 years
- 55 – 64 years
- Above 65 years

3. Kindly indicate your highest level of education by ticking (✓) the appropriate information

- Primary education
- High school education
- Certificate
- Diploma
- Higher diploma
- Bachelor's education
- Master's education

PHD

4. Kindly indicate the department or unit in the hotel that you work in; by ticking (✓) the appropriate information

Food and beverage

Front office (customer service, Reservations, reception and room assignment)

House keeping

Concierge

Guest service

Sales and marketing

Human resource

Kitchen

5. Kindly indicate the number of years you have worked in this hotel: by ticking (✓) the appropriate information

Less than 1 year

2 – 4 years

5 -7 years

8 – 10 years

Over 10 years

6. Product Development Practices

Kindly indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements as they relate to your hotel; by ticking (✓) the appropriate information

	Statements	(1) Strongly Disagree	(2) Disagree	(3) Neutral	(4) Agree	(5) Strong Agree
1.	There are new improvements on the hotel's foods					
2.	The hotel has improved the quality of its foods					
3.	I am happy about the continued improvement of the hotel' foods					

7. Service Development Practices

Kindly indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements as they relate to your hotel; by ticking (√) the appropriate information

	Statements	(1) Strongly Disagree	(2) Disagree	(3) Neutral	(4) Agree	(5) Strong Agree
1.	The hotel's services are personalized to customers' individual needs					

2.	The service delivery process is efficient					
3.	The level of courtesy in service delivery has improved greatly over the years					

8. Employer-employee relationship Practices

Kindly indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements as they relate to your hotel; by ticking (√) the appropriate information

	Statements	(1) Strongly Disagree	(2) Disagree	(3) Neutral	(4) Agree	(5) Strong Agree
1.	There is high level of interaction between employees and those in management team					
2.	There is high level of interaction among employees in different departments than before					
3.	There is high level of employees participation in quality improvement of hotel's products and services					

9. Consumer-business relation Practices

Kindly indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements as they relate to your hotel; by ticking (√) the appropriate information

	Statements	(1) Strongly Disagree	(2) Disagree	(3) Neutral	(4) Agree	(5) Strong Agree
1.	The service delivery process in the hotel meets customers' needs					
2.	The hotel's products features meet customers' needs					
3.	The level of product quality in the hotel is customer-driven					

10. Competitive advantage

Kindly indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements as they relate to your hotel; by ticking (√) the appropriate information

	Statements	(1) Strongly Disagree	(2) Disagree	(3) Neutral	(4) Agree	(5) Strong Agree

	<i>Organizational performance</i>					
1.	The hotel has improved the way it meets customers' needs					
2.	The hotel offers unique products					
3.	The hotel offers unique services					
	<i>Unique competencies</i>					
1.	The hotel has a good reputation					
2.	The employees have unique skills					
3.	The level of relationship in service delivery among employees is high					
	<i>Innovative capabilities</i>					
1.	The hotel has developed products that meet customers' needs					
2.	The hotel has developed innovative ways of developing its products					

3.	The hotel has developed innovative ways of improving its services					
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11. What are your views on implementation of Total Quality Management in your hotel? Please explain

12. What are your views on attainment of competitive advantage in your hotel? Please explain

13. Are there challenges that you would like to share? Please explain

14. What would you recommend for best practice?

Thank you

Table 1.1: The list of 5-star hotels in Nairobi County

	Hotel	Location
1.	Sankara Hotel	Westlands
2.	The Boma Hotel	Langata
3.	Dusit D2	Westlands
4.	Sarova Stanley	CBD
5.	Tribe Hotel	Westlands
6.	Radisson Blu	Westlands
7.	Villa Rosa Kempinski Nairobi	Westlands
8.	Hemingways Nairobi	Karen
9.	Movenpick residences Nairobi	Westlands
10.	PrideInn Azure Hotel Nairobi	Westlands
11.	Park Inn Hotel	Westlands
12.	Ibis Styles Nairobi	Westlands
13.	Golden Tulip Westlands	Westlands
14.	The Nairobi Safari Club	Kamukunji
15.	Best Western Plus Meridian Hotel	Westlands
16.	Panari Group	Embakasi
17.	Weston Hotel Nairobi	Westlands
18.	Laico Hotel	CBD
19.	Giraffe manor	Langata
20.	Crowne Plaza Nairobi Airport	Embakasi
21.	Nairobi Serena Hotel	CBD
22.	Ledger Plaza Hotel	CBD
23.	Emara Ole-Sereni	Embakasi
24.	The Concord Hotel & Suites	Westlands
25.	Palacina Residential Hotel	Westlands
26.	Windsor Golf Hotel & Country Club	Westlands



18th, August 2020

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The Director,
National Commission for Science,
Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI),
P. O. Box 30623, 00100
Nairobi, Kenya

Dear Sir/Madam:

RE: RESEARCH AUTHORIZATION FOR: CAROLINE KAGWIRIA KINANU

Miss. Caroline is a postgraduate student of Africa Nazarene University in the Master of Business Administration (MBA) program.

In order to complete her program, Miss. Caroline is conducting a research entitled: **“Influence of Total Quality Management (Tqm) Practices on Attainment of Competitive Advantage: A Case of Five Star Hotels in the Nairobi Region, Kenya”**

Any assistance offered to her will be highly appreciated.

Yours Faithfully,

**For DR. Kimani Gichuhi,
MBA, Coordinator,
School of Business,
Africa Nazarene University.**



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A map of the Nairobi County

