Differentiation Strategy and Patient Satisfaction in Level 5 Private Hospitals, Nairobi County, Kenya

Thomas Mwendwa Maingi [1] Eunice Wandiga [2] George Gachuru [3]

School of Business and Leadership Studies

St. Paul's University, Kenya.

Corresponding Author's Email: thomasmaingi@gmail.com

Abstract

The interplay between differentiation competitive strategy and patient satisfaction is an important concern in healthcare, particularly for Level 5 private hospitals in urban environments like Nairobi, Kenya. This study was drawn upon established theoretical frameworks including the Porter's generic strategies and SERVQUAL Model to understand the influence of differentiation strategy on patient satisfaction. While the broader literature on strategic leadership and healthcare administration offers critical insights into competitive dynamics, a distinct gap exists in understanding the influence of specific competitive strategies such as differentiation on patient satisfaction in Nairobi City County. Patient satisfaction is a critical measure of healthcare quality, particularly in Kenya's competitive private hospital sector, where Level 5 private hospitals play a pivotal role in delivering specialized care. This study examined the effect of differentiation strategy on patient satisfaction in Level 5 private hospitals in Nairobi County, Kenya. The study employed a cross-sectional survey research design, utilizing stratified random sampling to select a sample of 99 administrative and key management personnel from a target population of 132 across 9 Level 5 private hospitals in Nairobi City County, Kenya. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analysis. Findings revealed that differentiation strategy significantly and positively influenced patient satisfaction, with quality of care, innovation, and patient-centered services as key drivers. The study concludes that investing in technology, staff training, and personalized care is essential for hospitals seeking competitive advantage through improved patient satisfaction. It recommends that private hospital managers emphasize differentiation in their strategic planning and that policymakers integrate innovation and patient-centered standards into regulatory frameworks.

Keywords: *Differentiation strategy, SERVQUAL Model, Patient satisfaction, Competitive strategies*

1. Background

Healthcare in Kenya has undergone profound changes, driven by demographic shifts, technological advancement, economic pressures and demand for quality care (Kumpune et al., 2022). In Kenya, Level 5 hospitals, as classified by the Kenya Medical Practitioners and Dentists Council (KMPDC) and the Ministry of Health (MoH) represent among the highest tier of private healthcare facilities in the country. These institutions are characterized by their advanced medical equipment, specialized services, and highly qualified medical personnel- thus, operating in a highly competitive environment, striving to attract patients, retain skilled staff, and maintain financial sustainability (Tsofa etl, 2017; Teisberg et al., 2020; Barasa et al., 2021). Patient satisfaction has emerged as a fundamental metric in healthcare delivery as it reflects the overall experiences and perceptions of patients during their treatment journey (Ng and Luk,2019). Fatima, Malik and Shabbir (2018) urged that patient satisfaction encompasses different aspects such as quality of care, communication, responsiveness, empathy of caregivers, waiting times, and the general environment of a healthcare facility.

As a result, patient satisfaction has emerged globally as a Key Performance Indicator (KPI) for hospitals due to its influence on patient loyalty, referrals, and financial sustainability (Larson et al., 2019; Ng & Luk, 2019). Strategic management theories, particularly Porter's Generic Strategies, highlight differentiation as a pathway for organizations to achieve competitive advantage through unique, high-quality services. For hospitals, differentiation entails investment in advanced medical technologies, specialized care units, patient-centered services, and branding. Yet, empirical evidence on how differentiation strategies affect patient satisfaction in Kenyan private hospitals remains limited. This study addresses this gap by examining the effect of differentiation (competitive) strategy on patient satisfaction in Nairobi's Level 5 private hospitals.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The study draws on Porter's Generic Strategies and the SERVQUAL model. Porter's differentiation emphasizes uniqueness through innovation, service quality, and specialization (Porter. 1980). The SERVQUAL model pioneered by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Bery provides a comprehensive framework for examining service quality in healthcare through five interconnected dimensions- tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy (Parasuraman et al.,

1991*; Parasuraman et al., 2002; Holbeche, 2022; Cusumano et al., 2024). The model can be used to assess patient satisfaction through tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, aligning closely with differentiation practices in healthcare (Parasuraman et al., 2002; Dimsdale & Baum, 2013; Cusumano, 2022; Holbeche, 2022; Gawande, 2021)

2.2 Empirical Evidence

Empirical studies have consistently emphasized differentiation strategies—such as specialization, quality improvement, technological advancement, and patient-centered care—as critical drivers of hospital performance and patient satisfaction. Fowler (2015) demonstrated that hospitals offering specialized services, such as cardiac care, achieved higher patient satisfaction and better clinical outcomes than those without such services. Similarly, Jha and Epstein (2010), found that hospitals implementing long-term quality improvement initiatives recorded lower mortality rates and improved satisfaction levels, positioning quality initiatives as a viable differentiation strategy. Rao et al. (2023) emphasized the role of advanced technologies, showing that hospitals equipped with robotic surgery and modern imaging systems attracted more patients and achieved superior treatment outcomes. Equally, Wolf et al. (2019) underscored patient-centered care as a key differentiator, linking personalized care with higher satisfaction and loyalty. Collectively, these studies underscore differentiation as central to enhancing hospital competitiveness and patient well-being, though most were conducted outside African contexts, leaving gaps in understanding their applicability in resource-constrained systems such those in Kenya.

In the Kenyan healthcare context, similar patterns have been observed. Njoroge et al. (2018) revealed that specialized services such as oncology and cardiac care significantly improved patient satisfaction and outcomes in Nairobi County, recommending hospitals expand specialized offerings as a differentiation strategy. Gitagia (2015) reinforced the importance of quality improvement, showing that hospitals in Nairobi implementing patient safety programs experienced reduced mortality and higher satisfaction scores. Mwangi and Muthee (2019) underlined the impact of technological investments, finding that hospitals with advanced equipment delivered better outcomes and attracted more patients, though they did not assess long-term effects on patient loyalty. Lastly, Muthoni et al. (2023) showed that patient-centered care substantially enhanced satisfaction and loyalty in Nairobi hospitals, but noted that the integration of this approach with other differentiation strategies remains underexplored. Together, these

Kenyan studies confirm that differentiation strategies play a pivotal role in improving patient satisfaction but also reveal critical research gaps in private healthcare settings.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a cross-sectional research design to examine the relationship between differentiation strategy and patient satisfaction in Level 5 private hospitals in Nairobi City County. The design was appropriate as it allowed data to be collected at a single point in time, enabling the analysis of relationships between variables within a defined context. The target population consisted of 132 administrative and management personnel drawn from nine Level 5 private hospitals, categorized by the Ministry of Health and the Kenya Medical Practitioners and Dentists Council as institutions offering advanced and specialized services. These individuals were selected because their roles directly influence the design and implementation of differentiation strategies such as specialization, technological innovation, and patient-centered care, which are central to patient satisfaction outcomes.

3.2 Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

The sample size was determined using Yamane's formula, yielding 99 respondents. Stratified random sampling was employed to ensure representation across senior, middle, and lower management levels, with proportional allocation to each stratum. Data were collected through structured questionnaires consisting of closed-ended items measured on a five-point Likert scale. The instrument was divided into sections on demographic information, differentiation strategies, and patient satisfaction dimensions guided by the SERVQUAL model, including responsiveness, reliability, empathy, assurance, and tangibility.

3.3 Pilot Test

A pilot test was conducted with 10 managers at a comparable Level 5 private hospital to refine the questionnaire. Content validity was confirmed through expert review, while construct validity was ensured by grounding items in established theories. Reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, with a threshold of 0.70 applied.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were cleaned, coded, and analyzed using SPSS version 23. Descriptive statistics summarized the findings, while correlation and regression analyses were employed to test the strength and predictive effect of differentiation strategies on patient satisfaction. Ethical clearance was obtained from ISERC and NACOSTI, and strict measures were taken to protect confidentiality, ensure voluntary participation, and safeguard data.

4. Results

4.1 Social Demographic Characterization

Table 1 presents the result summary of the socio-demographic attributes of the study respondents. The socio-demographic profile of respondents revealed a fairly balanced gender distribution, with women (52.8%) slightly outnumbering men (47.2%). In terms of age, the majority were between 30 and 44 years (51.6%), followed by 45–59 years (30.3%), indicating that the study largely drew insights from professionals in their prime working years. Younger respondents aged 18–29 made up 15.7%, while those over 60 were minimally represented (2.3%).

Education levels reflected a highly skilled workforce, with most respondents holding either a diploma (38.2%) or undergraduate degree (37.1%). A notable proportion also possessed master's degrees (19.1%), while PhD holders were few (4.5%). Only 1.1% had high school qualifications, highlighting that staff in Level 5 hospitals generally possess strong academic and professional training.

Regarding job levels, team leaders dominated the sample at 41.6%, followed by supervisors (23.6%). Managers and directors together accounted for 30.3%, while chief officers represented just 4.5%. This distribution shows that perspectives were primarily drawn from individuals directly involved in daily hospital operations, complemented by inputs from higher-level decision-makers.

Additionally, experience levels demonstrated a seasoned workforce. About one-third (33.7%) had 4–6 years of experience, 29.2% had 7–10 years, and 23.6% had over a decade of experience in healthcare. Only 13.5% had less than three years of experience, demonstrating that the findings were largely informed by professionals with vast exposure to hospital administrative operations and patient care.

In a nutshell, the results depict a diverse yet experienced respondent group, characterized by gender balance, strong educational backgrounds, significant operational leadership, and substantial work experience—all of which enhance the credibility and reliability of the study's insights.

Table 1: Social Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Characteristics	Category	Frequence	Percentage
Gender	Male	42	47.19
	Female	47	52.81
		89	100
Age	18-29	14	15.7
	30-44	46	51.6
	45-59	27	30.3
	60+	2	2.25
		89	100
Education level	High school	1	1.12
	Diploma	34	38.20
	Degree	33	37.08
	Masters	17	19.10
	PhD	4	4.45
		89	100
Job Level	Chief Officer	4	4.45
	Director	14	15.73
	Manager	13	14.61
	Supervisor	21	23.60
	Team Leader	37	41.57
		89	100
Years of Experience	Less than 1 year	2	2.25
	1-3	10	11.24
	4-6	30	33.71
	7-10	26	29.21
	More than 10	21	23.60
		89	100

4.2. Descriptive Analysis of the Variables

This section presents the descriptive analysis of differentiation strategy, which examines how Level 5 private hospitals in Nairobi County create unique services and experiences to differentiate themselves from competitors. The Likert scale ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation for each statement as well as the aggregate scores.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Differentiation Strategy

Statement	Mean	SD
We prioritize patient comfort and welcoming environment	4.62	0.61
We emphasize high quality patient care and personalized attention	4.56	0.64
Our staff training programs focus on providing exceptional patient experiences	4.53	0.62
We focus on building a strong brand image and reputation	4.49	0.66
We invest in advanced medical technology and equipment	4.47	0.66
We offer unique and specialized services not readily available elsewhere	4.40	0.70
Aggregate Mean and Standard Deviation	4.52	0.54

Source: Research Data (2025)

The results indicate that differentiation strategy is strongly emphasized among the surveyed hospitals, with an aggregate mean of 4.52 (SD = 0.54). The highest-rated item, "We prioritize patient comfort and welcoming environment" (M = 4.62, SD = 0.61), suggests that hospitals deliberately focus on creating positive patient experiences as a key differentiator. High agreement with "We emphasize high quality patient care and personalized attention" (M = 4.56, SD = 0.64) and "Our staff training programs focus on providing exceptional patient experiences" (M = 4.53, SD = 0.62) indicates that personnel development and service quality are central to differentiation efforts.

These findings imply that hospitals invest significantly in human and operational resources to stand out in a competitive healthcare market, reflecting a strategic orientation toward patient-centered care. Additionally, items relating to brand reputation, technology investment, and specialized services, while slightly lower, still show strong agreement (Mean ranging from 4.40 to 4.49, SD = 0.66–0.70). This suggests that hospitals pursue differentiation not only through direct patient care but also through infrastructure, advanced equipment, and unique service offerings. Collectively, the results demonstrate that differentiation is a deliberate, multi-dimensional strategy designed to enhance patient satisfaction and strengthen market positioning. By prioritizing both experiential and technological aspects, these hospitals appear to leverage differentiation as a core mechanism for competitive advantage.

4.5.4 Patient Satisfaction

This section presents the descriptive analysis of patient satisfaction in Level 5 private hospitals in Nairobi County. Patient satisfaction was measured using eight Likert scale statements, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Table 3 presents the mean and standard deviation for each item and the aggregate scores.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Patient Satisfaction

Statement	Mean	SD
Patients would recommend our hospital to others seeking medical service	4.62	0.63
Patients are satisfied with the quality of medical care provided	4.62	0.61
Patients express satisfaction with overall quality of care provided	4.55	0.64
Patients are satisfied with the communication and responsiveness of our hospital staff	4.54	0.64
Patients feel respected and valued by our hospital staff	4.53	0.64
Patients are satisfied with the cleanliness of the hospital environment	4.51	0.66
Patients feel that their concerns and feedback are valued and addressed	4.47	0.68
Patients are satisfied with the waiting times for appointments and procedures	4.34	0.72
Aggregate Mean and Standard Deviation	**4.52**	**0.55**

Source: Research Data (2025)

The results indicate a high level of patient satisfaction across the surveyed hospitals, with an aggregate mean of 4.52 (SD = 0.55). Items such as "Patients would recommend our hospital to others seeking medical service" (M = 4.62, SD = 0.63) and "Patients are satisfied with the quality of medical care provided" (M = 4.62, SD = 0.61) received the highest ratings, suggesting that hospitals successfully meet patient expectations regarding clinical quality and overall reputation. Strong agreement with statements on communication, responsiveness, and respect from staff (M ranging from 4.53 to 4.54, SD = 0.64) demonstrates that hospitals also emphasize interpersonal aspects of care, which are critical for perceived patient value and satisfaction.

Although the item "Patients are satisfied with the waiting times for appointments and procedures" received the lowest rating (M = 4.34, SD = 0.72), it still reflects moderate to high satisfaction, indicating that while operational efficiency is generally effective, there may be areas for improvement in scheduling and service delivery speed. Overall, these findings suggest that Level

5 private hospitals in Nairobi County maintain a strong focus on both clinical quality and patient-centered service delivery, which collectively contribute to high patient satisfaction. The consistency in high mean scores across multiple dimensions implies that strategic approaches such as cost leadership, differentiation, and focus strategies may be effectively translating into tangible patient experiences.

4.2 Correlation Analysis

Table 4 presents the correlation between differentiation strategy and patient satisfaction. The results indicate a strong and statistically significant positive relationship ($r = 0.79$, $p < 0.01$). This suggests that as hospitals enhance their differentiation strategies—such as through offering specialized services, advanced technology, and personalized patient care—levels of patient satisfaction also increase.

Table 4: Correlation between Differentiation Strategy and Patient Satisfaction

Variable	Differentiation Strategy	Patient Satisfaction
Differentiation Strategy	1	0.79**
Patient Satisfaction	0.79**	1
Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
N	89	89

Note: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). *Source: Research Data (2025)*

The strong correlation highlights that differentiation is a critical driver of patient satisfaction in Level 5 private hospitals. By tailoring services to meet diverse patient needs and creating unique experiences, hospitals gain a competitive advantage that translates into higher satisfaction. This relationship underscores the importance of continuous innovation and patient-centered care as central strategies in healthcare management. Furthermore, the results suggest that patients value not only clinical outcomes but also the quality of interaction, responsiveness, and specialized attention they receive, reinforcing differentiation as a cornerstone of competitive strategy in hospital settings.

4.3 Simple Linear Regression Analyses

To examine the independent effect of differentiation strategy on patient satisfaction, simple linear regression analyses were performed (Table 5). This was aimed at establishing whether unique services, high-quality care, and innovation significantly influence how patients evaluate their hospital experiences. To test this, the following regression model was estimated:

$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \epsilon$

where X_1 = Differentiation.

Table *5*: Simple Regression Analysis Results for Differentiation Strategy and Patient Satisfaction

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.787	.620	.616	0.343
ANOVA [a]				
Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	16.683	1	16.683	141.88	.000
Residual	10.230	87	0.118		
Total	26.914	88			
Coefficients [a]				
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	0.868	0.309		2.809	.006
Cost Leadership	0.809	0.068	0.787	11.911	.000

Source: Research Data (2025)

Table 5 shows that the regression model was significant, $F(1,87) = 141.877$, $p < .001$, accounting for 62.0% of the variance in patient satisfaction. The regression coefficient ($B = 0.809$, $p < .001$) indicates that greater adoption of differentiation strategies corresponded with higher satisfaction ratings among patients. The relationship between cost leadership strategy and patient satisfaction can thus be expressed by the regression equation:

$Y = 0.868 + 0.809 X_2$

This suggests that providing distinctive services, innovation, and consistently high-quality care are more likely to enhance patient experiences.

4.4 Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

The regression analysis revealed that differentiation strategy had strong and most significant effect on patient satisfaction. As shown in Table 6, differentiation recorded an unstandardized coefficient of B = 0.470 with a significance level of p < .001, indicating that for every unit increase in differentiation efforts, patient satisfaction increases by nearly half a unit, holding other factors constant. Its standardized coefficient (Beta = 0.457) was the highest of all predictors, confirming that differentiation is the most influential driver of patient satisfaction within the combined model.

Table 6: Regression Coefficient of Differentiation Strategy on Patient Satisfaction

Variable	B (Unstandardized)	Std. Error	Beta (Standardized)	t	Sig.
Differentiation	0.470	0.101	0.457	4.642	0.000

Dependent Variable: Patient Satisfaction

These findings suggest that hospitals that emphasize differentiation through unique service offerings, specialized care, advanced technology, and patient-centered practices are more likely to achieve higher patient satisfaction levels. The strong statistical significance underscores that differentiation is not just a supportive factor but a central strategy in shaping positive patient experiences.

5. Discussion

The study findings indicate that differentiation strategy emerged as the strong predictor of patient satisfaction, highlighting the critical role of offering unique services, advanced technologies, and patient-centered care in private hospitals. This outcome is consistent with earlier studies such as Fowler (2015), Jha and Epstein (2010), and Rao et al. (2023), who reported that specialization, continuous quality improvement initiatives, and technological investments form the foundation of effective differentiation, leading to enhanced hospital performance and superior patient experiences. In the Kenyan context, similar evidence was provided by Njoroge et al. (2018) and Gitagia (2015), who emphasized that differentiated services such as specialized clinics and quality improvement programs significantly improve patient satisfaction by ensuring high-quality and personalized care.

The present study advances this body of knowledge by empirically demonstrating that differentiation not only strengthens clinical outcomes but also directly fosters satisfaction, loyalty, and perceived value among patients in Nairobi's private hospitals. The regression results confirmed that differentiation strategy had the largest and most statistically significant effect (B = 0.470, p < 0.001), while the correlation analysis revealed a strong positive relationship (r = 0.79, p < 0.01) between differentiation and patient satisfaction. These findings suggest that hospitals that prioritize innovation, service uniqueness, and patient-centered initiatives achieve more consistent improvements in satisfaction levels compared to those that rely primarily on operational or structural adjustments.

By focusing on differentiation as a core driver of patient satisfaction, this study underscores its strategic relevance in shaping competitive advantage in healthcare. Differentiation through high-quality, innovative, and patient-focused care emerges as the cornerstone of enhancing patient experiences and sustaining hospital competitiveness in the increasingly dynamic and demanding private healthcare market.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study revealed that differentiation strategy had a significant and positive effect on patient satisfaction. Hospitals that emphasized unique service offerings, personalized care, high-quality attention, and technological innovations achieved higher satisfaction among patients. The findings highlighted that patients valued experiences that went beyond basic care, including comfort, responsiveness, and individualized attention. Differentiation was found to be a central mechanism for hospitals to enhance perceived quality and overall patient experience. Unlike some prior studies that did not examine satisfaction in resource-constrained settings, the current study confirmed that differentiation remained highly relevant in Kenyan private hospitals. Generally, the findings reinforced the view that differentiation strategies are essential for achieving competitive advantage through enhanced patient experiences.

The study recommends hospital managers to invest in staff training, advanced technologies, and personalized care models to enhance patient experiences. To the policymakers the study recommends them to iincorporate differentiation-oriented benchmarks into regulatory and accreditation frameworks. Lastly, the study recommends future studies to examine how differentiation interacts with digital health transformation and medical tourism in Kenya.

Conflict Of Interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests

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