STRATEGIC QUALITY MANAGEMENT PRACTICES AND PERFORMANCE OF FOOD PROCESSING FIRMS IN MERU COUNTY, KENYA

BY

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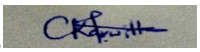
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS AND LEADERSHIP STUDIES IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF REQUIREMENTS FOR THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION (STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT OPTION) OF ST. PAUL'S UNIVERSITY

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DECLARATION

This dissertation is my own original work and to the best of my knowledge has not been presented in any other university or learning institution for award of a diploma or degree.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family: my husband, Desmond Mwirabua and daughters, Lintui and Kiende for being understanding and patient during my studies, and to my parents, siblings and friends whose inspiration, prayers and immense efforts to support me have taken me this far.

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ABSTRACT

The performance of food processing firms in Meru County has been a major concern for policymakers and stakeholders due to the critical role that this sector plays in the county's economy. However, it has been hampered by various challenges, including inadequate access to raw materials, inadequate infrastructure, stiff competition from imported products, and the lack of access to finance and technology. The study sought to assess the effects of strategic quality management practices and performance of food processing firms in Meru County, Kenya. Specifically, the study focused on the effect of customer-focus, quality assurance, quality control and quality improvement on organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County. The study was anchored on the concepts of Service Quality Model, Deming's Theory, Quality Improvement Theory, Resource-based View Theory and Balanced Scorecard Theory. The study adopted a cross-sectional research design. The unit of analysis was 20 food processing firms in Meru County. The unit of observation was 195 top and middle level management employees at various food processing companies in Meru County. Stratified random sampling was used to get a sample from different management groups. Slovins' formula was employed in calculating a sample size of 132 for the study. Structured questionnaires were used to collect primary data while the secondary data was collected from the food processing firms' documents. Piloting was done at two food processing firms in Nyeri County. Cronbach's Alpha was used to test the reliability of the study with a thresh hold of 0.7. Frequency, percentage, means and standard deviations were used to describe population characteristics in descriptive analysis. Inferential statistics employed Pearson's Product Moment correlation and various regression models to establish the variables' relationships. The study concluded that there was a moderate positive and statistically significant correlation between customer-focus quality assurance, quality control quality improvement and organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County. The study recommended that food processing firms in Meru County should develop a customer-centric culture where all employees understand the importance of customer satisfaction and prioritize meeting customer needs. The study also concluded that food processing firms in Meru County should establish, implement and maintain quality management systems, such as ISO 9001, to improve compliance, food safety, competitive advantage and firm performance ultimately.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATION

AFA	Agriculture and Food Authority
BSC	Balanced Scorecard
CRM	Customer Relationship Management
EBITDA	Earnings, Before, Interest, Taxes, Depreciation and Amortization
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GOEs	Government Owned Entities
GVA	Gross Value Added
KNBS	Kenya National Bureau of Statistics
KPIs	Key Performance Indicators
MDCU	Meru Dairy Cooperative Union
NACOSTI	National Council of Science and Technology and Innovation
PPS	Probability Proportional to Sizes
RBV	Resource Based View Theory
ROI	Return on Investment
SMEs	Small and Medium Enterprises
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Sciences
SQM	Strategic Quality Management
USDA	U.S. Department of Agriculture

OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF TERMS

Food Processing Firms	These are firms which engage in operations such as milling, drying, pasteurization, canning, curing, baking, and packaging to transform raw agricultural products into food or food forms. These make foods better for consumption, storage; improve the quality and shelf life.
Firm Performance	This is a how effectively and efficiently manufacturing firms are conducting their activities so as to achieve optimal productivity. Market share, profit margins and sales volume will be used to measure performance.
Customer Focus	It is a firm's attention on striving to identify, meet and exceed customer expectations for both internal and external customers in the short and long term. It was measured using retention strategies, complaint handling and customer feedback systems.
Quality Assurance	It provides confidence that quality requirements are met by paying attention to every stage of the process. It was measured by compliance index, quality costs and quality commitment.
Quality Control	This refers to the procedure of preventing and correcting quality standards to fulfill client expectations. This was measured by product quality and product defect rate
Quality Improvement	Quality management emphasizes meeting quality standards and entails ongoing efforts to improve products, services, or processes within food processing firms. It was measured by quality audit and employee competence.
Quality Management Practices	These are the management efforts geared towards customer satisfaction and continuous improvement in all organizational processes
Strategic Quality Management Practices	These are management efforts aimed towards customer satisfaction and continuous improvement in all organizational processes. They are food processors' standardization practices and a framework for quality management systems to satisfy performance goals.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

The food processing sector is an essential part of the global economy, providing a vital link between agriculture and consumer markets. This industry includes activities such as canning, freezing and dehydrating food products. The performance of food processing firms is critical to ensuring food security and economic development (Opara, 2018). These firms play a critical role in ensuring food security by preserving and extending the shelf life of food products. This is particularly important in developing countries, where food spoilage is a significant challenge due to inadequate infrastructure and storage facilities. Food processing firms also provide a vital link between farmers and consumers by adding value to raw agricultural products and making them more accessible to consumers (Lee, 2020).

The performance of food processing firms is vital for economic development. These firms create jobs, generate income and increases an overall GDP of a country. From a World Bank report, the food processing industry is the largest employer in many developing countries, providing jobs for millions of people (World Bank, 2019). Moreover, food processing firms create opportunities for small-scale farmers and rural communities to participate in global markets, thus promoting inclusive economic growth. The performance of food processing firms is critical for ensuring food safety and quality. These firms are responsible for complying with government regulations, ensuring that food products are safe for consumption and meet the required quality standards. Food processing firms also invest in research and development to improve their products' nutritional content and reduce their environmental impact (Dai, Chen, & Zhang, 2018).

The food processing sector in the United States is among the largest manufacturing sectors, generating an estimated $700 billion in revenue annually (USDA, 2020). The industry is growing steadily in recent years, with a compound annual growth rate of 2.2% between 2015 and 2020 (IBIS World, 2020). The industry's profitability has also been strong, with the average Earnings, Before, Interest, Taxes, Depreciation and Amortization (EBITDA) food processing firms’ margin in the US at 9.3% in 2019 (Deloitte, 2020). The industry is dominated by large multinational firms such as Nestle, PepsiCo and Coca-Cola, which collectively account for a significant share of the market (IBIS World, 2020).

The food processing industry in India is a critical sector for economic development, generating employment opportunities and promoting inclusive growth. The industry's revenue has been growing at a compound growth rate of 11.2% per annum from 2015-2020, reaching $475 billion in 2020 (IBIS World, 2020). However, profitability has been relatively low, with the average EBITDA margin for food processing firms in India at 7.1% in 2019 (Nutrition & Development, 2021). The industry is dominated by domestic firms such as ITC Limited, Britannia Industries and Amul, which collectively account for a significant share of the market.

In Nigeria the food processing industry is an essential sector for economic development and food security. The industry has been growing at a compound growth rate of 5.1% yearly from 2015-2020, reaching $54.8 billion in 2020 (African Development Bank Group, 2020). However, profitability has been relatively low, with the average EBITDA margin for food processing firms in Nigeria at 3.5% in 2019 (Deloitte, 2020). The industry is dominated by domestic firms such as Dangote Group, Flour Mills of Nigeria and Chi Limited, which collectively account for a significant share of the market.

The food processing industry in South Africa is a significant sector that contributes to economic growth and employment opportunities. The industry has been growing at a compound growth rate of 4.4% annually from 2015-2020, reaching $31.4 billion in 2020 (International Trade Centre 2020). Profitability has been relatively strong, with the average EBITDA margin for food processing firms in South Africa at 12.1% in 2019. The industry is dominated by large multinational firms such as Unilever, Coca-Cola and Nestle, which collectively account for a significant share of the market.

In Ethiopia, the food processing industry is a growing sector that holds a key role in promoting food security and economic growth. The industry has been growing at a compound growth rate of 5.9% annually from 2015 to 2020, reaching $7.1 billion in 2020 (The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2020). However, profitability has been relatively low, with the average EBITDA margin for food processing firms in Ethiopia at 5.2% in 2019 (Deloitte, 2020). The industry is dominated by domestic firms such as Belayneh Kinde Import and Export, National Alcohol & Liquor Factory and East Africa Bottling, which collectively account for a significant share of the market.

The food processing industry in Kenya is a vital sector that contributes to economic development and job creation. The industry has been growing at a compound growth rate of 6.3% from 2015-2020, reaching $5.8 billion in 2020 (World Bank Group, 2020). However, profitability has been relatively low, with the average EBITDA margin for food processing firms in Kenya at 3.9% in 2019. The industry is dominated by domestic firms such as Brookside Dairy Limited, Unga Plc, Bidco Africa and Pwani Oil, which collectively account for a significant share of the market (World Bank Group, 2020).

1.1.1 Strategic Quality Management Practices

Strategic Quality Management (SQM) is a management approach that integrates quality management principles with strategic planning and execution to achieve organizational goals and objectives (Nakajima, 2017). SQM aims to develop the overall performance of a firm by establishing a quality-focused culture that prioritizes continuous improvement, customer satisfaction and stakeholder engagement (Mittal & Dhar, 2019). SQM involves the implementation of a set of systematic, well-defined processes and techniques to measure and analyze quality metrics, identify and address areas of improvement, and align quality goals with the organization's strategic direction (Hoyle, 2017). SQM is crucial for organizations seeking to gain a competitive advantage in their respective industries. It helps organizations to improve on customer satisfaction, reduce costs, increase efficiency and enhance their overall reputation (Nakajima, 2017). SQM also supports the achievement of organizational goals by ensuring that quality is embedded in all aspects of the organization's operations, from product design and development to service delivery and support (Hoyle, 2017).

Strategic quality management practice is a critical aspect of modern business operations that can enhance competitiveness and profitability. In the food processing industry, SQM is essential for ensuring that firms meet regulatory requirements, consumer expectations and operational efficiency. SQM practices involve the systematic and continuous improvement of all aspects of a firm's operations to achieve optimal quality outcomes, (Mann, Seth, & Jain, 2019). The first step in SQM is to establish clear quality goals that align with the firm's strategic objectives. This involves assessing customer needs, market trends, and industry best practices to identify areas of improvement. Once quality goals are established, firms must implement appropriate quality control measures to monitor and manage their operations. This includes establishing quality assurance protocols, implementing quality control systems, and conducting regular audits to identify areas of improvement (Mann et al., 2019).

SQM is critical in the food processing industry due to the potential for food borne illness and contamination. Food processing firms must adhere to strict regulatory requirements and industry standards to guarantee safety and quality of their commodities. SQM can help firms achieve these objectives by ensuring that all aspects of their operations are aligned with regulatory requirements, industry best practices and consumer expectations (Nakajima, 2017). One of the most significant benefits of SQM in food processing firms is improved operational efficiency. SQM practices can help firms identify inefficiencies and areas of improvement, leading to streamlined operations and reduced costs. SQM can also help firms to improve on their product quality, leading to increased customer satisfaction and loyalty (Tang & Chen 2017).

Some of the strategic quality management (SQM) practices that enable organizations to achieve their quality objectives and improve overall performance include: establishing clear quality goals and objectives, adopting a customer-focused approach, implementing quality control systems, conducting regular audits and reviews, encouraging employee involvement and empowerment, developing supplier partnerships and using data-driven decision-making (Mittal, & Dhar, 2019). In this study, strategic practices that were adopted include customer-focus, assurance, control and improvement of quality.

Customer focus is a fundamental principle and an organizational philosophy that places the customer at the center of all business activities and decisions. It is one of the core principles of TQM, emphasizing the importance of meeting or exceeding customer expectations and delivering superior value to customers (Lee, 2020). To achieve customer satisfaction and loyalty, food processing firms must understand needs and expectations of customers and develop goods and services that satisfy them (Javed, Rasheed, & Rafique (2021). This involves conducting market research, analyzing customer feedback and identifying trends to improve product development and marketing strategies. Quality assurance is another key practice in SQM that involves ensuring that food processing firms comply with regulatory requirements and industry standards. This practice involves establishing and implementing quality policies and procedures, conducting audits and inspections, and continuously monitoring and reviewing quality performance (Hu & Zhang 2021). Quality assurance helps to prevent defects, reduce waste, and ensure consistent quality in products and services.

Quality control is another critical practice in SQM that involves monitoring and controlling production processes to ensure product quality. Quality control includes the inspection and testing of the raw materials, production processes and complete products to identify defects and deviations from quality standards (Kumar & Mittal, 2019). This practice helps to reduce waste, improve efficiency and ensure consistent product quality. Quality improvement is a continuous process in SQM that involves identifying and analyzing quality problems, developing solutions and implementing changes to improve overall quality performance. This practice involves the use of quality methods and tools such as statistical process control, source analysis and process mapping, to find and eliminate quality problems (Prasad, Sarin, & Kumar, 2019). Quality improvement helps to increase customer satisfaction, reduce costs and improve competitiveness.

1.1.2 Firm Performance

This refers to the effectiveness of a firm in achieving its strategic goals and missions. It involves measuring and evaluating the performance of an organization in various areas such as product quality, efficiency of the process, customer fulfilment, monetary performance, and employee engagement (Rahim, Kamarulzaman, & Omar, 2019). The importance of organizational performance lies in its impact on the success and sustainability of an organization.

Effective management of organizational performance can help organizations to achieve their strategic objectives, deliver value to customers and remain competitive in the market. It can also lead to improved financial performance, increased market share and enhanced brand reputation, (Ghani, & Zairi, 2017). Assessing organizational performance enables organizations to improve their decision-making capabilities, develop effective strategies and improve their performance over time. As pointed out by Amran (2020), assessing organizational performance helps organizations to benchmark their performance against industry standards and best practices, as well as against their competitors. It provides organizations with a basis for identifying areas of improvement, making necessary changes, and enhancing their competitiveness. Furthermore, assessing organizational performance promotes a culture of continuous improvement, fosters effective communication and collabouration among employees, and improves employee motivation and engagement.

There are various indicators used to assess organizational performance. These indicators are broadly categorized into non-financial and financial indicators. Monetary indicators measure the firm's financial performance including; profitability, revenue growth, return on investment, and cash flow. As highlighted by Bhattacharyya *et al.* (2018), financial indicators are critical in measuring the financial health of the organization, its ability to generate profits, and its capacity to sustain its operations over time. Non-financial indicators, on the other hand, measure the non-financial aspects of organizational performance, including customer fulfilment, engagement of employees, innovation, and social responsibility.

According to Singh and Srivastava (2022), non-financial indicators are becoming increasingly important in assessing organizational performance as they give a highly comprehensive and balanced insight on a firm's performance. Satisfaction of customer measures clients' fulfilment with the organization's products or services. Employee engagement measures the level of employee commitment, motivation and satisfaction with their work. Innovation measures the organization's ability to develop and implement new ideas and products. Social responsibility measures the extent to which the organization is contributing to society and the environment.

Organizational performance is a crucial aspect of business success in the food processing industry. Effective management of organizational performance is essential to ensure that food processing firms meet their strategic objectives, deliver value to customers, and remain competitive in the market. One important aspect of organizational performance in food processing firms is product quality. High-quality products are essential for customer satisfaction and loyalty, and they also help to maintain regulatory compliance and minimize product recalls and associated costs (Gupta, Singh, & Srivastava, 2021). To effectively manage the quality of products, the implementation of control processes as well as continuous improvement of quality performance should be given preference.

Another important aspect of organizational performance in food processing firms is process efficiency. Efficient processes help to reduce costs, improve delivery times and enhance customer satisfaction. Effective management of process efficiency involves identifying and eliminating waste, streamlining processes and using technology and automation to optimize operations (Chikuni, Saniso, & Masuka, 2020). Financial performance is another critical aspect of organizational performance in food processing firms. Effective management of

financial performance involves the optimization of revenue and profit margins, as well as the management of costs and expenses. Key financial metrics, like ROI, profit margins and cash flow, are important indicators of organizational performance (Liao & Chen, 2020). For this study, organization performance was determined using market share, number of employees and company turn-over.

1.1.3 Food Processing Firms in Meru County

Meru County is known for its diverse agricultural production, with crops such as coffee, tea, bananas, maize, beans and potatoes being the mainstay of the local economy (Karongo, 2020). In the 1970s, with the advent of industrialization in Kenya, the government started to encourage the establishment of food processing industries to add value to agricultural products. Meru County benefited from this policy and various food processing firms started to emerge. One of the notable firms established during this period is the Meru Dairy Cooperative Union (MDCU), which was formed in 1973 to promote the dairy industry in the region. MDCU is a farmer-owned cooperative that provides milk collection, processing and marketing services to small-scale dairy farmers in Meru County (Gichohi & Kariuki, 2018). The cooperative started with a small processing plant that processed fresh milk and butter for the local market. Over the years, the cooperative has grown in size and production capacity. Currently, it is one of the largest dairy processors in the region, with a capacity of processing 120,000 liters of milk each day.

The success of the Meru Dairy Cooperative Union inspired the establishment of other food processing firms in the County. One of the notable firms is the Meru Fruit Processors, which was founded in 1980 to process fruits and vegetables from the region. The company started with a small processing plant that produced fruit juices and canned fruits for the local market. Over the years, the company has expanded its product range to include dried fruits, fruit concentrates and fruit pulps for the export market (Kiplangat, 2017). Currently, the company has a processing capacity of 20,000 metric tons of fruits and vegetables per year and employs over 200 workers.

Another notable food processing firm in Meru County is the Meru Coffee Millers, which was established in 1985 to process coffee beans from local farmers (Gitau, 2018). The company started with a small processing plant that produced, washed and sun-dried coffee beans for the export market. Over the years, the company has invested in modern processing equipment

that has enabled it to produce high-quality coffee beans that meet international standards. Currently, the company has a processing capacity of 3,000 metric tons of coffee beans per year and employs over 100 workers.

The 1980s and 1990s saw the emergence of various food processing firms, including meat processing, fruit processing and grain processing industries. One of the notable firms established during this period is the Meru Meat Processors, which was founded in the early 1980s to process meat products. The firm has grown over the years to become one of the leading meat processors in the region, (Nderitu, 2019). The 2000s saw the emergence of various value-addition food processing firms, including juice processing, honey processing, and flour processing industries.

Food processing firms in Meru County face several challenges that affect their operations and profitability. One of the significant challenges faced by food processing firms in Meru County is inadequate access to raw materials. According to Njagi, Njeru, and Gachuiri (2020), the agricultural sector in Meru County is not fully exploited and there is limited production of raw materials such as fruits and vegetables, which are essential for food processing. This shortage of raw materials affects the quantity and quality of products that the firms can produce, which, in turn, affects their competitiveness in the market.

Another challenge faced by food processing firms in Meru County is inadequate infrastructure. The lack of well-maintained roads, electricity and water supply hinders the transportation of raw commodities to the processing plants and the distribution of finished goods to the market (Njagi et al., 2020). This challenge increases the cost of production and reduces the firms' profitability, as they have to incur additional costs to access basic amenities. Moreover, food processing firms in Meru County face stiff competition from imported processed foods, which are relatively cheaper than locally produced products.

According to KNBS (2019), the food and beverage industry in Kenya faces competition from imported products, which account for about 10% of the total domestic consumption. This competition affects the demand for locally produced products and firms have to lower their prices to remain competitive, thus reducing their profit margins. Additionally, the lack of access to finance and innovation is a significant issue for food processing firms in Meru County. Most of these firms are SMEs that lack the financial muscle to invest in new technologies that could improve their production processes and increase their efficiency

(Mwendwa, Mbithi, & Oloo 2020). This challenge limits their growth potential and hinders their ability to compete with larger firms.

To address these challenges, the government of Kenya has implemented various programs aimed at supporting the food processing sector in Meru County. For instance, the government has invested in infrastructure development, such as improving road networks and electricity supply to support the growth of the sector, (Karanja, Waiganjo, & Muturi, 2021). Additionally, the government has established the Agriculture and Food Authority (AFA), which provides technical assistance to food processing firms in areas such as product development, quality assurance and export promotion. The government has also partnered with financial institutions to provide credit facilities to food processing firms at affordable rates.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The performance of food processing firms in Meru County is a major concern for policymakers and stakeholders due to the critical role that this sector plays in the county's economy. One of the critical aspects that affects the performance of these firms is the implementation of strategic quality management practices, which can help them to improve their operational efficiency, product quality and customer satisfaction, (Karanja, Waiganjo, & Muturi, 2021). According to KNBS, the beverage and food industry is among the key drivers of the Kenyan economy, accounting for about 20% of the manufacturing sector's gross value added (GVA) and 12% of the country's total employment (KNBS, 2020). However, the functioning of food processing companies in Meru County has been hampered by various challenges, including inadequate access to raw materials, inadequate infrastructure, stiff competition from imported products, and the poor access to technology and finance. The county has poor road networks, limited access to electricity and water shortages, which have made it difficult for firms to transport their products and maintain consistent production. According to (KNBS, 2020) report, 56% of the roads in Meru County are in poor condition, making it difficult for firms to transport their products to the market. Additionally, electricity supply in the county is unreliable, with many firms experiencing frequent power outages.

These challenges have resulted in high production costs and reduced profitability for the firms. The report further revealed that high cost of production inputs such as energy, labour, and raw materials is a challenge facing food processing firms in Meru County. The cost of

energy in Kenya is among the highest in Africa, making it expensive for firms to operate and produce goods. Additionally, the high cost of raw materials such as fruits and vegetables has made it difficult for firms to sustain competitive prices in the market. The cost of labour is also high, with the minimum wage in Kenya currently standing at Kshs. 14,014 ($128) per month. These high production costs have made it difficult for firms to remain competitive in the market, resulting in reduced profitability. The food processing firms in Meru County have limited access to credit, inadequate skills and technology, which has limited their capacity to produce high-quality goods and meet the growing demand in the market. According to the KNBS report, only 11% of the firms in Meru County have access to credit facilities, while only 6% have adopted modern technologies to improve their production processes. Additionally, many firms lack the necessary skills to produce high-quality products that meet the international standards, limiting their access to export markets.

Studies have been conducted on the strategic management of quality on food processing enterprises, for instance, Rosabel (2018) research on management of quality and performance of Port Harcourt food and beverage companies. 162 managers from 280 food processing plants were sampled using the Krejcie & Morgan table. Thus, management should boost strategic quality planning to improve product conception, production, inspection and delivery. However, the study was conducted in Port Harcourt and used Krejcie & Morgan table to establish the sample size while the current study used Slovins' Formula and stratified random sampling to determine the sample size. Milanoi (2019) examined quality management and organizational performance in Nairobi County manufacturing enterprises. Quality programs depend on manpower, according to the report. Quality management approaches are more likely to benefit the manufacturing industry if people are more trained, involved and empowered. However, the study focused on the firms within Nairobi County as opposed to the current study which was conducted in food processing firms in Meru County.

Rotich (2018) conducted a study on the Kenya's Unga Holdings Company Limited's food processing performance and strategic quality management. The study indicated that quality enhancement statistically affected business performance. Managers should monitor and sustain performance by training staff and guaranteeing ongoing quality audits and system measures of Unga Holding Limited. However, the studies conducted focused on different food processing firms and were conducted in different geographical areas thus creating a gap

in Meru County. Hence the need to conduct a study on the strategic quality management practices and organization performance of food processing firms in Meru County, Kenya

1.3.1 Objectives of the Study

The study's general objective was to assess the effects of strategic quality management practices and performance of food processing firms in Meru County, Kenya.

1.3.2 Specific Objectives

The following specific objectives guided this study:

i. To evaluate the effect of customer-focus on performance of food processing firms in Meru County.

ii. To evaluate the effect of quality assurance on performance of food processing firms in Meru County.

iii. To examine the effect of quality control on performance of food processing firms in Meru County.

iv. To examine the effect of quality improvement on performance of food processing firms in Meru County.

1.4 Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were used in this study

$H0_1$: Customer-Focus has no statistically significant effect on performance of food processing firms in Meru County.

$H0_2$: Quality assurance has no statistically significant effect on performance of food processing firms in Meru County.

$H0_3$: Quality control has no statistically significant effect on performance of food processing firms in Meru County.

$H0_4$: Quality improvement has no statistically significant effect on performance of food processing firms in Meru County.

1.5 Scope of the Study

The research focused on the effect of strategic quality control and performance of organization of food processing firms in Meru County, Kenya. The independent variables of

the study were customer-focus, quality assurance, quality control and quality improvement. The dependent variable of the study was organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County. The researcher used cross-sectional design. The unit of analysis was 20 food processing firms in Meru County. The unit of observation was 195 top and middle level management employees at various food processing companies in Meru County. Stratified random sampling was used to get a sample from different management groups (strata) in the 20 food processing companies in Meru County. Slovins' Formula was employed in calculating a sample size of 132 for the study.

1.6 Significance of the Study

Policy Makers

The study can provide policy makers with insights in the effectiveness of quality administration practices in ensuring the safety and quality of food products, and how these practices can be incentivized and regulated to promote better outcomes. This information can inform the expansion of policies and regulations linked to food safety and quality, which can benefit consumers, businesses, and the wider society. Policymakers might utilize the findings to enforce guidelines and encourage continuous development.

Food Processing Firms

The study can provide food processing firms with insights into the efficiency of their quality management practices and how these practices impact their overall performance. The study can also help firms identify areas for improvement and develop strategies to enhance their performance.

Customers

The study can be beneficial for customers, as it can help them understand the quality management practices of food processing firms and how these practices affect the quality and safety of the products they consume.

Regulators

The study can provide regulators with valuable information on the quality management practices of food processing firms and their influence on food safety and quality. This information can help regulators develop policies and guidelines that guarantee quality and safety of food commodities.

Investors

The study can be useful for investors, as it can provide them with insights into the performance of food processing firms and their potential for growth and profitability. This information can help investors make informed decisions about investing in food processing firms.

Researchers

The study can be valuable for researchers, as it can enhance quality management knowledge in the food processing industry and their influence on organizational performance. This information can help researchers develop new theories and models on quality management and performance.

1.7 Limitation of the Study

Respondents were reluctant to provide information for fear of being intimidated or slandered. A St. Paul University introductory letter and NACOSTI research authorization reduced this. These documents affirmed ethical guidance and confirmed that the information provided was exclusively for academic use. The researcher also had trouble getting information from respondents because feelings, emotions, attitudes and perceptions cannot be quantified or validated objectively. The researcher dealt with this limitation by encouraging them to participate without holding back.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a review of the literature on the theories that underlie the variables in this study: impact of customer-focus on organizational performance, quality assurance on organizational performance, quality control on organizational performance and quality improvement on organizational performance. It reviews critical and empirical literature on all essential factors. It summarizes and evaluates the literature and a conceptual research framework underpins the research hypothesis.

2.2 Theoretical Review

The study was informed by the concept of Service Quality Model, Deming's Theory, quality improvement, balanced scorecard and RBV Theory.

2.2.1 Service Quality Model

The Service Quality Model was pioneered by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry in 1988. The Service Quality Model assumes that service quality is a reflection of the attributes of the service delivery system and management has full control of the inputs defining these attributes. Customers' expectation of service delivery is influenced by the past experiences when receiving similar services. The customers, therefore, engage in what is known as the attribution process (Mok, Sparks & Kadampull, 2009). According to Brent (1989), the quality of an output more often than not depends on an individual's personal judgment as well as evaluation regarding some set of attributes of the output. Brent further explains that a customer's assessment of service quality is not static and changes over time. This assessment is influenced by the customer's ongoing service experiences.

Khan and Fasih (2014) point out that in Service Quality Model, tangibles are seen to be perceptible by touch or a visible existence. Information and communication technology (ICT), tool, sites, company's employees and any visible facilities form the tangible dimension of service quality. However, these tangibles are applied in various ways by the service providers and are perceived and experienced on different levels by the end users. Tangibles are especially important to service delivery firms as they are crucial variables to developing strong, positive and inspiring customer association and experience, through its proprietary assets (Naidoo, 2014).

The process in which a service provider remains faithful in rendering services to its customers can be considered as the reliability dimension of service quality (Khan & Fasih, 2014). Reliability assures the customer of a service provider's ability to consistently provide a perceived quality of service. Reliability has an impact on trust and the overall impression left in the mind of a customer after service consumption (Abd-El-Salam, 2013). The reliability dimension of service quality is vital and is perceived through the people aspect of service quality (Kaura, 2012).

Khan and Fasih (2014) further noted that assurance is the process of acquired knowledge being showcased by staffs in executing their term of preferences during service delivery and can be highly assuring to customers. This gives customers the confidence that the service delivery representative will perform his/her duty professionally and ethically. Naidoo (2014) argues that not all customers have the expertise to understand the quality of service and values they received, and as such may require effective communication or personal explanations to understand the value they receive. This service quality dimension is performed through the people aspect of service quality.

According to Kaura (2012) empathy is the ability of service delivery firms to pay attention to individual customer problems and demands, then address these issues effectively. Khan and Fasih (2014) also argue that the way the company takes responsibility to address problems faced by their customers on an individual or group level is classified as empathy. This service quality dimension is perceived through the people aspect of service quality. Responsiveness as a dimension of service quality is perceived through the people aspect of service quality.

The Service Quality is relevant to the current study in that it is often associated with SERVQUAL, focuses on the dimensions of service quality that customers value, such as reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibles. Companies use these dimensions to assess and improve on the quality of their services. Hence the theory helps in explaining the effect of customer-focus on organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County.

2.2.2 Deming's Theory of Profound Knowledge

Deming (1993) established management philosophy and systems theory-based theory. The system is one component of institutions, according to Deming's Theory. The hypothesis states that a management's ability to optimize system components influences employee success.

Martinez-Costa (2008). Deming (1993) states that outside knowledge is only valuable if invited and received with a desire to develop and learn.

The Stewart cycle (Planning and Audit Act), deep knowledge system, and 14 administration points form Deming's overall quality management theory. His theory brings out a relationship whereby quality equals working efforts on total costs. As quality declines, costs rise for a cost-focused organization. Deming's in-depth knowledge system includes an understanding of corporate procedures and systems, causes of variation, the theory of knowledge, and of human nature (Gebbler, 2012). Quality can be studied by understanding an organization's expertise.

Martinez-Costa (2016) stated that understanding an organization's systems is necessary to help change management styles and enhance quality since components form a system. Quality is optimizing component performance to meet system objectives. Martinez-Costa (2016) found that many organizations lack a distinct mission, mostly long-term. Short-term thinking, bottom line thinking, and quarterly or annual performance appraisals force quick-fix solutions (Carder & Ragan, 2014).

The theory is important for it states that a firm must be managed because it cannot control itself. This shows that food processing companies in Meru County must be managed. To do this, the leaders in food processing companies in Meru County must seek to understand the organization(s) they are attempting to manage. Food processing enterprises cannot be managed efficiently or perform poorly without this understanding since they may only optimize particular elements. To achieve product quality, system optimization requires cooperation and coordination between parts, which requires leadership. Thus, the hypothesis explained how quality assurance affects Meru County food processing company performance.

2.2.3 Quality Improvement Theory

Deming (1986) developed the theory which had a technical orientation towards quality. The approach is that constant improvement helps in having a seamless whole manufacturing process. It lays emphasis on the improvement of products which results in waste reduction, increased customer loyalty and reduced staff litigation. The theory proposes that statistical quality control and shop-floor involvement are integral in quality improvement. (Deming, 1986) explains that quality improvement initiatives require senior management support.

Management invests in procedures, creates culture, picks suppliers and builds long-term connections. The Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle aids in quality improvement.

A business can use the principle to fix quality control difficulties with good management. Management's actions shape a company's culture and determine its success. This improves procedures, products and services and boosts employee happiness. These are essential for customer focus and business survival (Jaafreh & Al-abedallat, 2013). The Quality Improvement Theory emphasizes quality in the construction of an organizational framework that promotes cooperation and learning to adopt process management practices, which improves performance (Hardie, 2013). According to Lamport (2010) top management is responsible for most quality issues; it should instruct workers on what is acceptable and how to accomplish it. These include an acceptable working atmosphere and climate that is devoid of fault finding, blame, or fear, provides clarity of issues, communicates effectively and enhances performance.

The theory is key for the study since top management should be committed to applying the concepts and practices that reduce waste, rework, employee attrition, and litigation while improving quality, customer loyalty, workers' happiness and profitability. This hypothesis helped to describe how quality control affects Meru County food processing firms' performance.

2.2.4 Resource Based View Theory

The Resource Based View (RBV) was developed by Edith Penrose in 1959 and later enhanced by Wernefelt (1984). This theory states that an organization's competitive advantage depends on its internal resources. The theory argues that an organization can only lay down strategies that are within the limitation of its internal resources. The resources are the inputs that allow a company to generate and operate. Some organizations can improve customer value chains, create new products, or enter new markets. The RBV develops lasting competitive advantages using internal resources and competencies. RBV states that not all business resources are strategic and thus competitive. Only resource heterogeneity and immobility create competitive advantage (Madhani, 2010).

The theory explains that the resources of an organization may remain dormant until it deploys its skills and gains a lasting competitive advantage and they must remain inimitable for competitive advantage to be achieved. If the resources are not unique to an organization, then

the competitive advantage may not last long. A heterogeneous resource must be valued, scarce, inimitable, and non-substitutable to preserve competitive advantage (Talaj, 2012).

The theory expounds that instead of learning new skills for each opportunity, it is easier to exploit external opportunities using existing resources. The theory expounds on the role of assets in improving company performance. It assumes diverse, immobile resources. Under heterogeneity, organizations have different skills, competences and resources. Under the assumption of immobility, the resources avoid switching companies, at least temporarily (Madhani, 2010).

The model is relevant to the current study in that if food processing firms will effectively utilize the resources within the organization and focus on continuous improvement, the company will then deliver high quality products to the customers. The theory, therefore, creates understanding on the effect of continuous improvement on firm's performance of food processing businesses in Meru County.

2.2.5 Balanced Scorecard Theory

Kaplan and Norton (1992) established the BSC Theory. The BSC Theory recommends measuring performance using finances, consumer, internal processes, and knowledge and development perspectives. Success in one area often leads to success in others. The financial perspective relates to revenue growth and profitability. Consumer happiness and loyalty constitute the consumer perspective. The internal processes perception stresses on the organization's internal processes' efficiency and effectiveness. Growth-learning perspective explores the growth of the firm's individuals, schemes, and culture (Kaplan & Norton, 1996).

Kaplan and Norton (2000) stated that the strength of BSC theory is its ability to link strategic objectives with operational activities. By measuring performance across multiple perspectives organizations can ensure that their actions are linked to their strategies and progress towards their goals (Kaplan & Norton, 2000). The BSC also helps to communicate strategy to all personnel, ensuring that everyone is sharing in the objectives. The Balanced Scorecard Theory has been widely adopted by many organizations and has been the subject of extensive research over the past two decades. Studies have shown that the BSC can improve organizational performance by providing a framework for strategic management and aligning activities with strategic objectives (Hoque, 2014).

One area of research that has drawn particular attention is the connection between the BSC and monetary performance. While the BSC was at first developed as an instrument for measuring and managing non-financial aspects of organizational performance, many studies have found that the BSC is also effective in improving financial performance (Lindholm & Laine, 2015). For example, a study by Lee and Kim (2014) found that implementing the BSC led to improvements in financial performance in Korean manufacturing firms. Another area of research has focused on varied BSC uses of organizations. For example, studies have examined the use of the BSC in non-profit organizations (Bourne 2005), healthcare organizations and government agencies (Othman & Azzali, 2014). These studies have shown that the BSC may be adapted and customized to fit the needs of different types of organizations and can be an effective tool for improving performance.

However, there are also some weaknesses associated with the BSC theory. One criticism is that the framework can be complex and difficult to implement, particularly for smaller organizations with limited resources (Hoque, 2014). Another criticism is that the BSC is too focused on financial outcomes and may neglect other important areas such as social and environmental impact (Lindholm & Laine, 2015). Despite these criticisms, the BSC remains a popular and widely used management tool. The framework has been adapted and modified to suit the requirements of different organizations and industries and continues to progress as new visions are increased. Therefore, the theory helps in explaining the dependent variable of the study which is performance of food processing firms in Meru County.

2.3 Empirical Literature Review

2.3.1 Customer-Focus on Organizational Performance

Customer focus, at its core, is a business strategy centered on understanding and satisfying the needs and expectations of customers. It is grounded in the belief that customers are the lifeblood of any organization, and their satisfaction and loyalty directly impact a company's profitability and sustainability (Homburg, Jozić, & Kuehnl 2017). Customer-focused businesses align their strategies, processes and resources to create exceptional experiences that keep customers engaged and loyal. To be customer-focused, a business must first understand its customers deeply (Stone, 2019). Customer segmentation is a key tool in this endeavor. By dividing their customer base into distinct segments based on demographics,

behaviors, and preferences, companies can tailor their offerings and marketing efforts to cater to each group effectively.

Shaohan (2017) conducted a study on Chinese companies and consumer attention. The survey sampled 143,000 Chinese enterprises with turnover over 5 million RMB. The stratified Probability Proportional to Sizes (PPS) technique was randomly used to select target enterprises from 29 Chinese provinces. Customer contact behaviors, production performance and customer contentment are affected by corporate customer orientation, according to the study. Financial performance depends on production and consumer happiness. However, the study was conducted in Chinese companies which had a larger sample size of 143,000 respondents as contrasting to this study which was carried out in Meru County and had a smaller sample size of 132 respondents.

Shavazi, Moshabaki and Hoseini, (2018) carried out research on the relationship between customer relationship management and organizational performance using balanced scorecard-based conceptual framework (Iranian Bank Study). This research studied customer relationship management on banking performance and Iranian banks provided data. After thorough literature analysis, CRM subprocesses and four balanced scorecard performance metrics were extracted and the CRM practices correlated with bank performance. The study was conducted in Iranian Banks thus the findings of the banks cannot be generalized in the food processing firms as this research was conducted in food processing firms in Meru County.

Ogollah and Muturi (2016) carried out research on the effect of customer focus strategy on performance. The descriptive cross-sectional survey targeted 181 respondents. The study used questionnaires as the main data collection instrument to collect primary data. Customer focus approach and performance were favorably and significantly correlated. Regression research showed that customer focus strategy improves performance significantly. The results also proved that customer focus strategy affects performance significantly. However, this study only focused on the customer focus leaving out other quality management strategies like quality assurance, quality control and quality improvement.

Kangethe (2018) examined customer quality and operational performance of Kenyan government-owned entities. It was a descriptive study and the secondary data was acquired from prior research papers, journal articles, textbooks, reports, conference proceedings and

commercial government owned companies' publications and websites. The survey found that Kenyan GOE management clearly communicates its aims and plans to employees. Management must define and communicate a customer service vision to the organization and customer service professionals. The study employed descriptive research design and secondary data, while the current study used cross-sectional research design and primary data.

2.3.2 Quality Assurance on Organizational Performance

Milanoi (2019) examined quality assurance and organizational performance in Nairobi County manufacturing enterprises. The descriptive survey sampled 70 manufacturing enterprises. Primary data (quantitative and qualitative) was obtained. All initiatives demonstrate senior management commitment in the respective organizations. The company's vision included quality assurance. However, the research was conducted using an expressive research design and was conducted in Nairobi County as opposed to the current study which was carried out using a cross-sectional research design and was done in food processing firms in Meru County.

Abedalfattah and Abedallat (2018) carried out a study on the Jordanian organizational performance and quality assurance practices. The study found that quality assurance characteristics (leadership, strategic planning, customer focus, and employee relation) influenced organization performance from a managerial perspective. Managers should focus on these characteristics to improve organization performance. However, the study was a desktop research design focusing only on the empirical review while the current study reviewed theoretical and empirical reviews. The study also included research methods applying cross-sectional research design and collecting data from the primary sources.

Chelangati (2022) conducted a critical literature analysis on quality assurance practices and organizational performance. The study found that existent literature supports quality assurance practices and organization performance. Assurance practices increase output quality by increasing process efficiency, decreasing errors, and speeding up operations and reaction. Based on these findings, assurance practices alone can improve organization performance. Nonetheless, the study only focused on critical literature review but the current study reviewed both the literature and research methods while applying cross-sectional research design to collect data from the primary sources.

Mauro, Gheith and Mario (2018) investigated innovation, soft and hard quality management in Nepalese higher education The research was quantitative and 356 public university academic personnel were surveyed online. The outcome was that innovation boosts organizational performance, while quality assurance practices boost innovation. Soft and hard quality management approaches impact organizational success. Although the study was conducted in Nepal using a quantitative research design, this study was conducted in Kenya, specifically the food processing firms in Meru and adopted a cross-sectional research design.

2.3.3 Quality Control on Organizational Performance

Oloo (2017) examined Kenyan mobile telecoms businesses' quality control and organizational performance. Kenya's five mobile phone companies were targeted and a semi-structured questionnaire provided primary data. Data analysis employed descriptive statistics and regression. The finding was that quality control was statistically significant to performance of the mobile telecom providers. It ranked mobile communications businesses' quality control practices and discussed their ramifications. Leadership commitment was followed by supplier quality management.

Muogbo (2019) examined how quality control practices affect organizational growth and floriculture manufacturing enterprises in Nigeria. The change processes increased net profit, sales volume, number of employees, market share, and understanding strategy formation (Vision, Mission, Objectives & Goals), implementation, evaluation and control. The examination indicated most Anambra State manufacturers did not apply quality control. Their implementation significantly affected their competitiveness and industrial organizations. Nonetheless, the study was conducted in Nigerian manufacturing firms with specific focus on the floriculture industry while this study was based on food processing firms in Meru County.

Owiti (2018) explored how quality control practices affect hotel organizational performance in Nairobi. ISO standardization affected recurring customers, occupancy, income per room, and booking efficiency, according to the study. It found out that these hotels only used benchmarking as a quality management practice, but other practices would offer them a competitive edge. However, the study was conducted in hotels in Nairobi which are in a different sector from the food processing firms. The study was also confined to ISO standardization while the current study focused on the customer-focus, assurance, control and

improvement of quality on the company's performance of food processing companies in Meru County.

Kanorio (2017) evaluated Kenyan banks quality control practices and operational performance. The study found out that value management schemes improved bank productivity, income sales and service performance, as competitive banks gained market share. Efficiency and customer satisfaction lowered operational expenses and enhanced client retention. However, the study was conducted in the Kenya's banking sector thus the findings of the banks cannot be applicable in the food processing firms.

2.3.4 Continuous Improvement on Organizational Performance

Chang (2019) conducted a study on performance and quality improvement on the whole quality organization. Performance measurement was used to establish whole quality management reward and recognition procedures. An in-depth case study of performance measurement's impact on continuous improvement was followed by the creation of an optimal total quality-based performance measurement model. Empirical performance measurement systems involve all corporate operations and ensure congruence between all measurement system elements. The study's dependent variable was total quality organization, while the current study's is Meru County food processing enterprises' organizational performance.

An empirical study by Khan, Ali, and Hongqi (2018) examined how continuous improvement affects organization performance in Pakistan. In-depth manager interviews were conducted in 40 textile, sports, and surgical equipment industries. The study found that innovation in the workplace increases efficiency, reduces defects and ultimately improves product quality. Continuous improvement in product creation, manufacturing, staff involvement, and quality systems gives companies a competitive edge.

An empirical study by Kovach (2017) examined how quality improvement practices affect learning. New and old scales were used to create a survey. Structural equation modelling showed that a firm's CIP maturity fully mediated the impacts of CIPs and learning on organizational improvement. These findings show that a corporation needs an organizational framework to enable continuous development and assist it better its work. The current study used a descriptive survey design, while the present study used a cross-sectional approach.

Almaiman (2018) examined how Saudi non-profits may foster quality improvement culture. Literature suggests non-profits are neglected. Saudi Arabia lacks empirical study on this problem and hence the Grounded theory was used to examine literature and actual data. 17 Saudi non-profit interviews yielded 19 criteria. Jagdeep and Singh (2016) sought to investigate the effects of the continuous improvement philosophy through use of extensive review of the literature. This paper discusses CI's origins, how it grew into complex organizational approaches, and current research in this topic. However, the study was conducted in Saudi non-profit organizations; therefore, it may not apply to Meru County's profit-making food processing enterprises.

Otieno (2018) examined Kenyan commercial banks' quality improvement and efficiency. The descriptive survey study targeted 39 respondents. Study data was collected via questionnaires. The study found that customer focus, employee involvement, quality improvement programs, leadership and factual decision-making boost organizational efficiency. The study further revealed that factual approach to decision making, customer focus and quality improvement programs have been implemented to a large extent, engagement of people to a moderate. However, the study used a descriptive survey design and a target population of 39 respondents as opposed to the current study which was conducted using a cross-sectional research design and a sample size of 132 population determined using Slovins' Formula.

2.4 Summary of the Reviewed Literature

Table 2. 1:Summary of the Reviewed Literature

Author	Focus of the Study	Findings of the Study	Gaps	How the Gaps were closed
Shaohan, (2017)	Customer focus and organizational performance: a Chinese company study.	The investigation found that company customer orientation impacts customer contact behaviors, production performance, and customer satisfaction. Production and customer satisfaction boost profits.	However, the study was conducted in Chinese companies which had a larger sample size of 143,000 respondents.	The current study was conducted in Meru County and had a smaller sample size of 132 respondents.
Shavazi, Moshabaki and Hoseini, (2018)	Balanced scorecard-based customer relationship management and organizational performance (Iranian Bank Study).	The results indicated that CRM affects bank performance.	However, the study was conducted in Iranian Banks thus the findings of the banks cannot be applicable in the food processing firms	The current study was conducted in food processing firms in Meru County.
Ogollah and Muturi (2016)	Customer focus on performance.	The results indicated that Customer focus strategy affects performance significantly.	However, the study only focused on the customer focus leaving out other quality management strategies such as quality assurance, quality control and quality improvement which will be included in the current study.	The previous study only focused on the customer focus leaving out other quality management strategies such as quality assurance, control and quality improvement which were included in the current study.
Kangethe, (2018)	Customer quality focus and operational	The survey found that Kenyan GOE management clearly communicates its	However, the study used descriptive research design and utilized secondary	This study used cross-sectional research design and also collected

	performance of Kenyan government owned entities.	aims and plans to employees. Management must define and communicate a customer service vision to the organization and customer service professionals.	data sources	primary data.
Milanoi, (2019)	Nairobi County Quality assurance and manufacturing enterprises' organizational performance	All initiatives demonstrate senior management commitment in the respective organizations. The company's vision included quality assurance.	However, the study was conducted using a descriptive research design and was conducted in Nairobi County	The current study was conducted using a cross-sectional research design and was done in food processing firms in Meru County.
Abedalfattah and Abedallat, (2018)	Effect of quality assurance practices on organizational performance in Jordan: an empirical study	Leadership, strategic planning, customer focus, and staff relations were strongly associated with management success in the study.	However, the study employed a desktop research design focusing only on the empirical review.	The current study reviewed both the theoretical and empirical review. The study also included research methods applying cross-sectional research design and collecting data from the primary sources
Chelangati, (2022)	Quality assurance practices and organization performance: A critical review of literature	The study found that existent literature supports quality assurance practices and organization performance. Assurance practices increase output quality by increasing process efficiency, decreasing errors, and speeding up operations and reaction.	Nonetheless, the study only focused on critical literature review.	The current study reviewed both the literature and research methods applying cross-sectional research design and collecting data from the primary sources.

Mauro, Gheith and Mario, (2018)	Hard and soft quality management approaches, innovation, and higher education success in Nepal	Innovation boosts organizational performance, while quality assurance practices boost innovation. Through hard quality management, soft quality management affects organizational performance.	However, the study was conducted in Nepal, adopting a quantitative research design.	The current study was conducted in Kenya, specifically the food processing firms in Meru and adopted a cross-sectional research design.
Oloo, (2017)	Kenyan mobile operators' quality control and organizational performance.	Quality control practices and organizational performance of Kenyan mobile telecommunications providers are statistically significant. It ranked mobile communications businesses' quality control practices and discussed their ramifications.	However, the study was conducted in mobile telecommunications firms in Kenya	The current study was conducted in food processing firms in Meru County.
Muogbo (2019)	Quality control practices on organization growth and floriculture manufacturing enterprises in Nigeria.	The change processes increased Gross profit, sales volume, personnel count, market share, and familiarity with strategy creation, deployment, review, and management.	Nonetheless, the study was conducted in Nigerian manufacturing firms with specific focus on the floriculture industry	The current study focused on the food processing firms in Meru County.

2.5 Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework is a foundational structure or theoretical framework that provides a systematic and organized approach to understanding and studying complex phenomena. It serves as a roadmap or skeleton for research, guiding researchers in developing hypotheses, conducting investigations and interpreting results. The independent variables of the study

were customer focus, quality assurance, quality control and quality improvement. The dependent variable was firm performance.

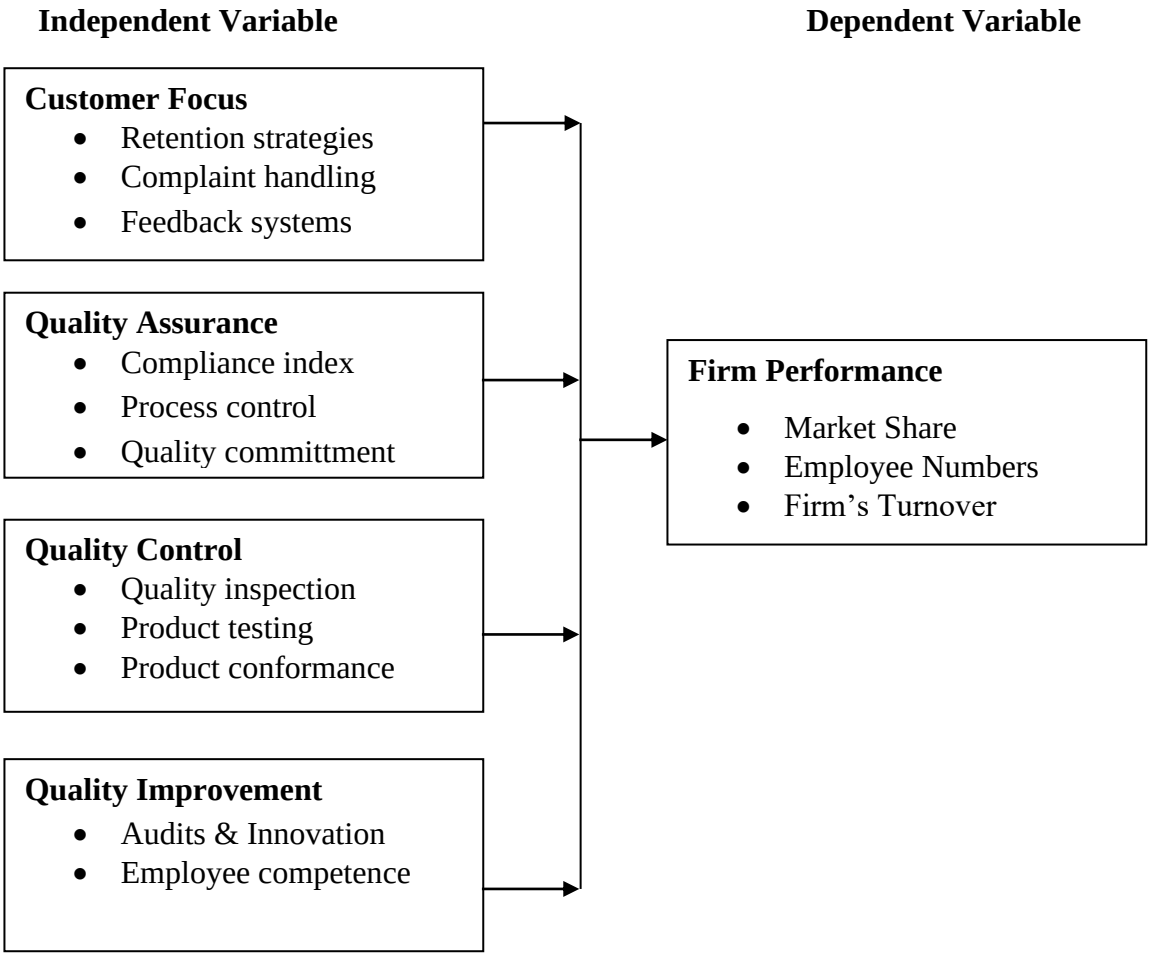


Figure 2. 1:Conceptual Framework

Source: Own Conceptualization (2023)

2.5.1 Customer Focus

Customer focus is a cornerstone of modern business strategies. At its core, it revolves around understanding and prioritizing the needs and expectations of customers. The food processors encounter several implied needs from customers that have to be considered and they mostly come as product feedback or preferences. This variable entails in-depth customer understanding through market research, surveys and data analysis. The culture of a facility in food safety is also impacted by how customer communications are collected, assessed and cascaded to drive quality. Ultimately, a strong customer focus not only fosters customer loyalty and satisfaction but also grants a competitive advantage in today's dynamic markets.

2.5.2 Quality Assurance

Quality Assurance (QA) is a systematic approach that provides the framework and direction for QC with the aim of preventing defects or issues in products or services before they occur. It encompasses the establishment of rigorous quality standards, guidelines and procedures. Continuous process evaluation is a fundamental component of QA, allowing organizations to identify weaknesses and areas for improvement early in the production or service delivery process. Additionally, QA emphasizes employee training and education to ensure compliance with quality standards. It also involves meticulous documentation of processes and procedures, facilitating audits and maintaining a high level of quality consistency.QA also comprises regular audits, reviews and feedback to monitor and develop the quality system.

2.5.3 Quality Control

Quality Control (QC), provides the feedback and evidence for QA. QC activities involve meticulous inspections, rigorous testing and sampling to verify that products or services adhere to predefined quality standards and specifications. The identification of defects or non-conformities is a primary function of QC, often leading to corrective actions such as rework, repairs, or process adjustments. Statistical process control techniques play a significant role in QC, ensuring that processes consistently meet quality requirements. Quality metrics and performance indicators are established to assess the effectiveness of QC efforts continually.

2.5.4 Quality Improvement

Quality Improvement (QI) is an ongoing process dedicated to enhancing the quality of products, services and processes within an organization. Central to QI is the concept of continuous improvement, whereby firms continually strive to make incremental enhancements over time. Root cause analysis is a vital component of QI, helping identify underlying causes of defects or quality issues and enabling the implementation of corrective actions to prevent recurrence. Methodologies such as Lean and Six Sigma are often employed to streamline processes, reduce waste and elevate overall quality. Feedback loops with employees, customers and stakeholders are crucial for gathering input that informs quality improvement initiatives, ensuring that organizations remain agile and responsive to changing needs and competitive pressures.

2.5.5 Firm Performance

Firm performance often referred to as organizational performance, is a comprehensive assessment of how effectively and efficiently a business or organization is achieving its goals and objectives. It is a multifaceted concept that encompasses various dimensions and indicators, including financial, operational, strategic and stakeholder-related aspects. Evaluating firm performance is crucial for assessing its competitiveness, sustainability and overall success. Financial performance is a fundamental aspect of evaluating a firm's health and sustainability. It provides a snapshot of the organization's economic viability and effectiveness in generating profits. Key indicators in this dimension include profitability metrics like net profit margin, return on assets (ROA), and return on equity (ROE). These measures help assess how efficiently the firm utilizes its resources to generate earnings. Additionally, revenue growth trends indicate the firm's ability to expand its market presence and competitiveness. Cost efficiency metrics unveil the effectiveness of cost management strategies, while liquidity ratios assess the firm's capacity to meet short-term financial obligations.

CHAPTER THREE
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The chapter discusses the study design, population goal and sample size, sampling procedure, research instruments and how they ensured reliability, data collection techniques and data analysis systems.

3.2 Research Design

The study employed a cross-sectional research design. Cross-sectional research design is a widely employed methodology within the field of social sciences and research. This design involves the collection of data from a sample of individuals or subjects at a single point in time (Neuman, 2014). By doing so, it offers a snapshot of a population's characteristics, attitudes, behaviors or outcomes. The researcher utilized cross-sectional research design to examine various variables concurrently and understand relationships and patterns within the data. This method provides valuable insights into the status quo of a particular phenomenon or group, making it an essential tool in the researcher's toolkit (Creswell, 2017).

Cross-sectional research design offers several advantages. It is notably efficient and cost-effective compared to longitudinal studies, which involve data collection over multiple time points (Setia, 2016). Cross-sectional studies are particularly practical when studying large and diverse groups or when initial insights and hypotheses need to be generated. Additionally, they allow for comparative analyses, enabling researchers to compare different groups or populations at the same moment in time and identify differences and trends.

3.3 Target Population

Target population refers to specific group or set of individuals, objects, or elements that a researcher intends to study and draw conclusions about (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2019). It represents the larger group to which the research findings will be generalized or applied. Identifying and defining the target population is a critical step in the research process as it determines the scope and boundaries of the study. The unit of analysis was 20 food processing firms in Meru County. The unit of observation was 195 top and middle level management employees at various food processing companies in Meru County. The trait of populace was as indicated in table 3.1.

Table 3. 1: Target Population in Food Processing Firms

Food Processing Firms	Top Management Level (MD, Managers)	Middle Management Level, (Department Heads, team leads)	Total
Meru Nuts Company Ltd	5	10	15
Meru Industries Ltd	3	6	9
Mukululu Wine makers	4	6	10
Meru Supreme Industries	3	5	8
Nubian Foods Industries Ltd	4	6	10
Mafuko Industries Ltd	5	10	15
Beam Stores and food manufacturers	3	5	8
Lenge Foods Ltd	3	4	7
Royal Animal Feeds	3	5	8
Mwanga Millers	4	5	9
Meru Herbs	4	4	8
Deluxe Food Industries	3	5	8
Tripple L Animal feeds	2	5	7
Mt. Kenya Food Products Ltd	3	6	9
Mt. Kenya Dairies	4	6	10
White Bird Millers, Kiirua	3	5	8
Arya Maize Millers	3	5	8
Daiichi Farm Ltd	4	10	14
Mt. Kenya Milk	5	10	15
Chania Feeds manufacturers	3	6	9
Total	**71**	**124**	**195**

Source: Meru Manufacturers Association (2023)

3.4 Sampling Design and Procedure

This refers to selecting a small number of study subjects who are representative of a given population (Orodho, 2011). According to Harry (2017), a large sample is ideal and allows accurate statistics to be calculated. Sampling procedure is the procedure of defining a sample out of a study population; it is a cycle of arriving at a representative sample (Ogula, 2015).

Stratified random sampling was utilized to get a sample from different management groups (strata) in the 20 food processing companies in Meru County. Slovins' Formula was employed in calculating a sample size of 132 for the study.

$$n = \frac{N}{1+Ne^2}$$

Where: n = sample size
N = population size
e = margin of error
1 = is a constant value

$$n = \frac{195}{1+195\ (0.05)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{195}{1.4875}$$

$$n = 131.09$$

$$= 132$$

Using the above formula, a sample of 132 management staff was selected. Stratified random sampling was utilized to sample each management group (stratum) from the population of management staff in the identified food processing firms. It also showed the size of the sample as calculated for each management group.

Table 3. 2: Sample Size

Employee Level	**Population**	**Sample Size**
Top Management Level (MD, Managers)	71	48
Middle Management Level, (Department Heads, Team leads)	124	84
Total	**195**	**132**

3.5 Data Collection Instrument

Research instruments acquire information from sampled population. The data type and number and dispersion of respondents determine the research instrument (Babbie, 2010). The study utilized secondary and primary data. Structured questionnaires were used to collect study-relevant primary data. Dörnyei and Taguchi (2009) define questionnaires as written tools that ask respondents to write or select answers to questions or statements. The 5-point Likert scale questionnaire covered all the study objectives. Secondary data was collected from the food processing firms using document analysis regarding market share, number of employees and turnover rates.

3.6 Pilot Test

Piloting was done at Premier Food Industries and Tetu Global Nuts Beverages which are both food processing firms in Nyeri County. Nyeri County was selected because it has similar characteristics with those of Meru County. Patton (2014) suggests carrying out a pilot study prior to the primary study to test research tools. A pilot study checks the tools' suitability for the research and their clarity, especially questionnaire items. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2003), 10% of the sample is acceptable for directing, therefore the study piloted 13 questionnaires.

3.6.1 Validity of Research Instruments

Validity is the extent to which a particular instrument, tool or study accurately measures what it is intended to measure. Validity promotes accurate measurement as it examines how well the study data represents the variables (Kothari, 2012). A questionnaire has both content and face validity. Face validity is the likelihood of misinterpretation. The term "content validity" describes the extent to which a given measure accurately reflects a certain social concept. Cooper and Schindler (2015) suggest pre-testing to reduce face validity.

3.6.2 Reliability of Research Instruments

Research tool reliability determines consistency. A trustworthy instrument collects similar data from similar study populations. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient tested the study instrument's reliability since a Likert-type scale with 5 points was used. Reliability testing incorporated SPSS-coded data and captured pilot study data. Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was calculated from the captured data. The result was 0.7 coefficients which gave the confidence to consider the study variables. Nunnally and Bernstein (2015) advocate reliability levels of 0.7 or above.

3.7 Data Collection Procedure

The researcher initially applied for National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation in Kenya (NACOSTI) through St. Paul's University. After the essential approval the researcher sought for consent from the administration of respective manufacturing firms. During this initial visit, the researcher discussed the purpose of the study with the senior manager in charge of the food processing firms in Meru County and arranged for data collection. The researcher distributed the printed questionnaires to respondents at their work stations. After two weeks, the researcher collected questionnaires from study participants.

Due to the small sample size, some respondents were given more time to complete questionnaires to enhance response rates. This method is called Drop-Off and Pick-Up method.

3.8 Data Analysis and Presentation

Data analysis comprises summarising, finding trends, and using statistical methods. Data analysis involves reviewing, analysing, and summarising data to draw conclusions and find helpful information (Bryman & Bell, 2002). Questionarrie' data was cleaned and modified prior to coding and analysing. Likert scales used in the closed-ended questionnaire were transformed to mathematical codes and then graded on a scale from 1 to 5 based on how strongly those codes predicted the target component, then recorded into SPSS version 24.

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse data. Frequency, percentage, means and standard deviations were used to describe population characteristics. Inferential statistics was employed. Both Pearson's Product Moment correlation and multiple regression models were commonly used in research to explore and analyze the relationships between variables, to know the aspects that impact a particular outcome and to make predictions based on the relationships identified (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). The finding of the study was presented in table form. The equation holds for multiple regression models.

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + \varepsilon$$

Where:

Y = Performance of food processing companies

X_1 = Customer-focus

X_2 = Quality improvement

X_3 = Quality control

X_4 = Quality assurance

$\beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3, \beta_4$ =Regression Coefficients

ε = Error term

3.8.1 Diagnostic Test

The study undertook preliminary diagnostic tests to ensure suitability of correlation and multiple linear regressions. The preliminary diagnostic tests include normality tests, multicollinearity test and Autocorrelation Test. Multicollinearity is a phenomenon in which one predictor variable in a multiple regression model can be linearly predicted from the

others with a substantial degree of accuracy. Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) was used to check the Multicollinearity of the data. Normality tests are used to determine if a data set is well-modeled by a normal distribution and to compute how likely it is for a random variable underlying the data set to be normally distributed. Normality tests were done by determining Kolmogorov- Smirnov values. Finally, the study conducted an autocorrelation test. Autocorrelation refers to the correlation of a variable with itself over time. When autocorrelation is present it implies that the current value of the variable is related to its past values. This can lead to biased estimates of the regression coefficients, as the effect of the independent variables may be attributed to the auto correlated error term rather than the true relationship between the variables.

3.9 Ethical Consideration

This study credited other authors and followed citation guidelines. The researcher sought consent from the relevant authorities prior to the commencement of the study. According to Jackson (2011), the researcher protected and respected human and non-human participants in a study. Integrity, informed permission, secrecy, anonymity, privacy and research independence led the researcher throughout the study (MacDonald, Headlam & Coolican, 2008).

3.10 Logical Considerations

In addition to ethical considerations, logical rigor is vital in the research process. The researcher began by carefully designing the research which involved formulating clear research questions or hypotheses that guided the study's logical structure. Data collection and analysis were critical steps where logical considerations come into play. To maintain logical rigor, the researcher adhered to standardized procedures to ensure data reliability and validity. Citation and referencing were essential logical practices. The researcher cited and referenced relevant literature, grounding the research in existing knowledge and properly crediting all sources. This not only adds logical coherence to the research but also showcases a thorough understanding of the field.

CHAPTER FOUR
RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

The chapter focuses on data analysis, results presentation and discussion of the findings. The general objective of the study was to investigate the effect of strategic quality management practices on performance of food processing firms in Meru County, Kenya.

4.2 Response Rate

Response rate equals the number of people by whom semi-structured questionnaires were properly completed divided by the total number of people in the entire sample (Fowler, 2004). The study administered 132 questionnaires for data collection and 100 questionnaires were properly filled and returned. This represented 76% overall successful response rate. The respondents were also assured of confidentiality of the information provided. Trex (2012) suggested that a response rate of 50% is adequate 60% is good and 70% and above very good for analysis. This implies that 76 per cent response rate was very appropriate for data analysis.

Table 4. 1: Response Rate

Sampled No. of respondents	No. of Questionnaires Returned	Response Rate (%)
132	**100**	**76**

4.3 Demographic Information

The demographic information presented is on the gender of the respondents, age, education level and the duration the respondents had been working in food processing firms in Meru County, Kenya.

4.3.1 Gender Representation of the Study Subjects

The respondents were also asked to indicate the gender representation of the study subjects. The findings were as presented in table 4.2

Table 4. 2: Gender Representation of the Study Subjects

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Female	59	59
Male	41	41
Total	100	100

According to the findings, 59% of the respondents were female while 41% were male. This shows that majority of the employees in food processing firms in Meru County were female. Gender is important for a public human resource policy because it can ensure more diversity on the teams, add new perspectives and hence stimulate innovation and ultimately, improve financial results in the manufacturing firms (Kirton, 2012).

4.3.2 Age of the respondents

The respondents were asked to indicate their age. The findings were as shown in table 4.3.

Table 4. 3: Age of the respondents

Age of the respondents	Frequency	Percentage
20-30 years	15	15
31-40 years	24	24
41-50 years	43	43
Above 50 years	18	18
Total	**100**	**100**

From the findings, 15% of the respondents indicated that they were in the age bracket of 20-30 years, 24% indicated that they were in the age bracket of 31-40years, 43% indicated that they were in the age bracket of 41-50 years while 18% ndicated that they were above 50 years. This implies that most of the respondents were above 41-50 years. Age determines the efficiency of the human resource in the manufacturing firms. Human resource above 35 years have been in the market for a while thus they undesrtand the operational processes better than the junior employees.

4.3.2 Respondents' Highest Level of Education

The respondents were asked to indicate their highest level of education. The findings were as shown in table 4.4

Table 4. 4: Respondents' Highest Level of Education

Level of Education	Frequency	Percentage
Undergraduate	53	53
Master Degree	32	32
Postgraduate	15	15
Total	**100**	**100**

From the findings, 53% of the respondents indicated that they had attained undergraduate degree, 32% indicated that they had attained masters degree while 15% stated that they had attained postgraduate degree. This shows that majority of the respondents had attained bachelors degree education. The education level determines the efficiency of staff since staff with high education level tend to perform better.

4.3.3 Duration of Service in the Manufacturing Firms

The respondents were also asked to indicate the duration they had been working in manufacturing firms in Meru County. The findings were presented in table 4.5.

Table 4. 5: Duration of Service in the Manufacturing Firms

Duration of Service	Frequency	Percentage
2-5 Years	13	13
5-10 Years	19	19
More than 10 years	68	68
Total	**100**	**100**

According to the findings, 13% of the respondents indicated that they had been working in the manufacturing firms in Meru County for 2-5 years, 19% of the respondents indicated that they had been for 5-10 years, while 68% of the respondents indicated that they had been working for more than 10 years. This shows that majority of the respondents had been working in manufacturing firms for more than 10 years. The duration of service an individual has worked determines his/her capacity. Employees who have longer working experience tend to have better skills.

4.3.3 Duration of the Manufacturing Firm has been in Existence

The respondents were also asked to indicate the duration the manufacturing firm has been in exisstence. The findings were presented in table 4.6.

Table 4. 6: Duration of the Manufacturing firm has been in Existence

Lengthy of Existence	Frequency	Percentage
1-5 Years	19	19
6-10 Years	29	29
11-20 Years	44	44
More than 20 years	8	8
Total	**100**	**100**

According to the findings, 19% of the respondents indicated that their organization has been in operation for 1-5 years, 29% stated 6-10 years, 44% stated 11-20 years while 8% stated more than 20 years. This implies that majority of the firms have been in operation for 6-10 years and 11-20 years. Hence, they were well conversant with the strategic quality management practices on organization performance of food processing companies in Meru County.

4.4 Descriptive Statistics

The study requested respondents to give opinions in regard to effect of customer-focus, quality assurance, quality control and quality improvement on organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County. The interpretation of the findings was made based on the mean and standard deviation. The value of the mean indicated the level of agreement. The value of the mean ranged between 1-5, with 1 being the least mean and 5 being the highest mean. Standard deviation is a measure of the dispersion of a set of data from its mean.

4.4.1 Customer-Focus on Organizational Performance

The respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement on the effect of customer-focus on organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County. The findings were as indicated in Table 4.7

Table 4.7: Customer-Focus on Organizational Performance

	SA %	A %	U %	D %	Mean	Std
Customer focus ensures customer complaints are resolved thus reducing customer dissatisfaction and improving performance.	26	47	17	10	3.887	0.907
Customer focus ensures customer engagement that helps to obtain feedback critical for improving performance	37	45	13	5	4.113	0.870
Customer focus ensures that customers are able to acquire the right quality products which improve organization performance.	55	42	3	0	4.516	0.565
Customers are able to have their product orders on time and in full ensuring customer retention and improved firm performance.	57	37	6	0	4.500	0.621
The firm assesses customer feedback and takes insights back to production for improvement which improves firm performance.	39	44	11	6	4.145	0.866

According to the findings, majority of the respondents (73%) agreed that customer focus ensures customer complaints are resolved thus reducing customer dissatisfaction and improving firm performance with a mean of 3.887. The findings further indicated that majority of the respondents (82%) agreed that customers focus ensures customer engagement that helps to obtain feedback which enhances firm performance with a mean of 4.113. The study findings are in line with those of Fonseca and Amaral (2017) who found that customer focus is an essential aspect of organizational success as it promotes improvement of products and services, leading to enhanced organizational performance. By prioritizing customer needs, organizations can retain customers and attract more which increases sales and in turn, improves the overall performance. Additionally, resolving customer complaints, assessing customer needs and gathering performance feedback enables organizations to make necessary improvements, resulting in better organizational performance.

In addition, majority of the respondents (94%) agreed that customers acquire the right quality products which improve performance with of mean of 4.516. Majority of the respondents (97%) also agreed that customers have their product orders on time and in full which leads to customer retention and enhances organization performance with a mean of 4.000. The findings are in line with Osieke, (2016) research which explains that customer focus ensures that organizations prioritize delivering the right quality products to meet customer

expectations. By understanding customer needs, preferences and demands, organizations can align their product development and manufacturing processes to deliver high-quality offerings.

In addition, majority of the respondents (83%) agreed that firm assesses customer feedback and take insights back to production which improves organizational performance with a mean of 4.145. The standard deviation ranged from 0.565 to 0.907 indicating that the dispersion of the respondents from the mean was minimal. According to Gungor and Gupta, (2018) when customers receive products that meet or exceed their expectations, it leads to increased customer satisfaction, positive reviews and referrals, and a stronger market position for the organization. Consequently, the firms' performance improves in terms of customer retention, market share and profitability.

4.4.2 Quality Assurance on Organizational Performance

The respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement on the effect of quality assurance on organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County. The findings were as indicated in Table 4.8

Table 4.8: Quality Assurance on Organizational Performance

	SA %	A %	U %	D %	Mean	Std
The organization has quality policies and systems which guide the entire production process	52	39	9	0	4.419	0.667
Process control involving documentation and record keeping ensures consistency hence enhancing performance	37	31	19	13	3.887	1.073
Quality compliance index ensures customer, statutory and regulatory requirements are met which improves performance	44	40	6	10	4.177	0.932
Process control reduces product inspection costs which improves the performance of the organization	37	39	10	14	3.984	1.032
Quality commitment ensures execution of corrective actions and propels improvement thus improving performance.	42	39	11	8	4.145	0.921
Quality commitment helps to maintain food safety, hygiene and quality thus protect a company's reputation and positively affecting performance	44	50	6	0	4.371	0.607

According to the findings, majority of the respondents agreed (91%) that the organization has quality assurance policies and systems which control the entire production process with a mean of 4.419. The findings further indicated that majority of the respondents (68%) agreed that practice of quality documentation and record-keeping encourages quality consciousness among the employees which is positively linked to performance with a mean of 3.887. The study findings are in line with those of Makori and Odero (2018) who found that quality assurance policies and practices play a crucial role in fostering quality consciousness among employees within an organization. When employees are aware of and actively engaged in maintaining high-quality standards, it can have a positive impact on overall performance.

The findings indicated that majority of the respondents (84%) agreed that quality compliance index ensures customer, statutory and regulatory requirements are met which positively affects organizational performance with a mean of 4.177. The study findings are in line with those of Sajid and Syeda (2017) who found that quality procedures often involve the establishment of standardized processes and documentation to ensure consistent adherence to safety and regulatory requirements. This includes developing and implementing standard operating procedures, quality management systems and regulatory compliance frameworks.

Further majority of the respondents (76%) agreed that process control reduces product inspection costs which is positively linked to a firm’s performance with a mean of 3.984. Majority of the respondents (81%) also indicated that quality commitment ensures execution of corrective actions and propels improvement hence higher performance with a mean of 4.145. Majority of them (94%) also agreed that quality commitment helps to maintain food safety, hygiene and quality thus protecting a company's reputation which improves the performance of the firm with a mean of 4.371. The standard deviation ranged from 0.667 to 1.073 indicating that majority of the respondents agreed with the issues raised. Demonstrating a strong commitment to quality helps protect a company's reputation in the marketplace. The findings agree with a study carried out by Jordan, (2014) who found that organizations that prioritize quality commit to investing in resources, processes and training to ensure consistent and superior product performance.

4.4.3 Quality Control on Organizational Performance

The respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement on the effect of quality control on organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County. The findings were as indicated in Table 4.9

Table 4. 9: Quality Control on Organizational Performance

	SA %	A %	U %	D %	Mean	Std
The organization has product specifications and work instructions followed along the production line.	47	34	13	6	4.210	0.908
Quality inspections on products and equipment help in timely error detection which improves firm performance.	50	31	15	5	4.258	0.886
Product testing ensures conformance to specifications hence improving sales and enhancing firm performance	44	53	3	0	4.403	0.557
Product testing yields data for making decisions which reduces losses thus enhancing performance	37	44	16	3	4.145	0.807
Product durability and conformance to specifications lowers production costs hence higher performance.	55	34	8	3	4.403	0.778
Product durability increase the product shelf life which improves the performance of the organization	26	47	17	10	3.887	0.907

According to the findings, majority of the respondents (81%) agreed that the organization has product specifications and standards that are followed along the production line hence improving performance with a mean of 4.210. Majority of the respondents (81%) also agreed that quality inspections on products and equipment help in timely error detection which improves a firm's performance with a mean of 4.258. The study findings are in line with those of Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman, (2019) who found that process control ensures that products meet specified quality standards consistently. Implementing effective inspection measures helps organizations to maintain consistency in product quality.

Majority of the respondents (97%) also agreed that product testing ensures conformity to specifications hence improving sales which enhances a firm's performance with a mean of 4.403. In addition, majority of the respondents (81%) agreed that product test results are used to make data-driven decisions which reduce time/material losses and costs, which improve

the performance of the organization with a mean of 4.145. Product testing verifies that the processes are validly controlled. The findings agrees with a study by Oloo, (2017) who found that the only certain way to remain in compliance and realize success in production is through a thorough food testing and analysis process. Thus, food manufacturers have to produce structurally sound products of the highest quality, taste, nutritional value and price.

Majority of the respondents (88%) agreed that the product durability and conformance to specifications lowers production costs which improves firm performance with a mean of 4.403. Finally, majority of the respondents (73%) agreed that personnel are well trained on recording and documenting results and actions taken to resolve any quality and production issues thus improving traceability and positively affecting performance with a mean of 3.887. The study is in agreement with Hou and Gopala (2015) study which noted that the combined effect of customer retention driven by product quality and product performance can significantly influence an organization's performance. Customer retention contributes to stable revenue streams, reduces customer acquisition costs and increases profitability.

4.4.4 Quality Improvement on Organizational Performance

The respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement on the effect of quality improvement on organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County. The findings were as indicated in Table 4.10.

Table 4.10:Quality Improvement on Organizational Performance

	S A %	A %	U %	D %	SD %	Mean	Std
The firm has well trained and skilled employees along the production line to produce safe and quality food products which has positively affected performance	37	34	10	16	3	3.855	1.185
Employees actively seek opportunities to enhance their competence and experience consequently leading to higher performance	55	34	8	3	0	4.403	0.778
Quality audit findings are implemented to ensure product and process improvement for better performance.	44	46	7	3	0	4.307	0.738
Quality audit helps to identify whether the quality policies of organizations meet quality standards adequately.	37	44	16	3	0	4.145	0.807
Employees participate in innovation and cross-functional benchmarking which improves performance.	55	33	7	5	0	4.387	0.869

According to the findings, majority of the respondents (71%) agreed that the firms have well trained and skilled employees along the production line to ensure safe and quality products which has positively affected performance with a mean of 3.855. Majority of the respondents (89%) also agreed that employees actively seek opportunities to enhance their competence and experience consequently leading to higher performance with a mean of 4.403. According to Oakland and Marosszeky (2016), actively seeking opportunities for competence and experience development demonstrates a proactive and growth-oriented mindset among employees. This mindset is characterized by a desire to expand one's skill set, stay updated with industry trends and improve job-related capabilities. Such employees often engage in activities such as attending training programs, pursuing certifications, participating in workshops or seminars, seeking mentorship or coaching and taking on challenging food safety and quality related projects or assignments.

The respondents (90%) further agreed that quality audit findings are implemented to ensure product and process improvement which has positively affected firm performance with a mean of 4.307. In addition, majority of the respondents (81%) agreed that quality audit helps to identify whether the quality policies of organizations meet quality standards adequately, affecting the performance with a mean of 4.145. The study findings are in line with those of Sousa and Voss (2016) who noted that through quality audits, organizations can assess whether their products are fit for consumer consumption. Audits also identify any deviations, non-compliance, or areas for improvement in product quality, manufacturing processes and quality control measures. By conducting regular quality audits, organizations can identify and address issues proactively, ensuring that products meet or exceed consumer expectations, thus enhancing overall organizational performance.

Majority of the respondents (88%) also agreed that employees participate in innovation and cross-functional benchmarking which improves performance with a mean of 4.387. The standard deviation ranged from 0.607 to 1.185 indicating that majority of the respondents agreed with the issues raised. The finding agrees with those of Mallen, (2016) who found that when employees are committed to quality, they actively engage in tasks that contribute to quality control, adherence to standards and continuous improvement. Such commitment can be fostered through training, promotion of idea implementation, benchmarking cross-functionally, clear communication of quality expectations and recognition of employees' role in delivering quality outputs.

4.4.5 Organizational Performance of Food Processing Firms

The respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement on organizational performance of food processing firms. The findings were as indicated in Table 4.11.

Table 4. 11: Organizational Performance of Food Processing Firms

	S A %	A %	U %	D %	SD %	Mean	Std
The organization has gained new market shares for the last three years	37	34	10	16	3	3.855	1.185
The organization has opened new branches in other towns	55	34	8	3	0	4.403	0.778
The organization has recorded higher sales volume for the past three years	44	46	7	3	0	4.307	0.738
The organization has recorded higher profits for the past three years	37	44	16	3	0	4.145	0.807

According to the findings, majority of the respondents (71%) agreed that the organizations have gained new market shares for the last three years with a mean of 3.855. Majority of the respondents (89%) also agreed that the organizations have opened new branches in other towns with a mean of 4.403. They further agreed (90%) that the organizations have opened new branches in other towns with a mean of 4.307. In addition, majority of the respondents (81%) agreed that the organizations have recorded higher profits for the past three years with a mean of 4.145. The standard deviation ranged between 0.607 and 1.185 indicating that majority of the respondents agreed with the issues raised.

According to Kuehnl (2015), the processing firms may have experienced significant growth in sales and revenue during the past three years. This growth could be a result of successful marketing and sales strategies, expanding into new markets, launching new products or services, or effectively targeting customer needs and preferences. Expansion or diversification strategy could have resulted in increased market share, a broader customer base, and higher profits.

4.5 Diagnostic Tests

4.5.1 Autocorrelation Assumption Test

Autocorrelation refers to the correlation between observations within a single variable over different time periods. An autocorrelation test, also called a test for serial correlation, is a statistical test used to determine the presence of autocorrelation. The results of the test of autocorrelation assumption are presented in Table 4.12

Table 4. 12: Autocorrelation Assumption Test Results

Variable	Durbin-Watson
Customer-Focus	2.345
Quality Assurance	2.446
Quality Control	2.235
Quality Improvement	2.347
Organizational Performance	1.897

The findings revealed that Durbin- Watson statistic value of customer-focus was 2.345, quality assurance was 2.446, quality control was 2.235 quality improvement was 2.347, and for organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County was 1.897. This implies that the study variables had the independence of errors because it meets the threshold of Durbin-Watson between 0-4.

4.5.2 Normality Assumptions Test

Normality refers to the characteristic of a distribution being normal or approximately normally distributed. A normality test is a statistical test used to determine whether a dataset follows a normal distribution or not. The essence of conducting a normality test is to assess the assumption of normality for a dataset. The study conducted a normality test to determine whether the data is normally distributed or not. The result of the normality test is indicated in Table 4.13

Table 4. 13: Normality Assumption Test Results

Variable	Kolmogorov- Smirnov	Sig
Customer-Focus	.282	.667
Quality Assurance	.228	.877
Quality Control	.236	.912
Quality Improvement	.174	.871
Organizational Performance	.236	.877

The Normality assumption test results in Table 4.4 established that the data was normally distributed since the significance values for Kolmogorov-Smirnov were greater than 0.05. The study findings indicated that customer-focus had a Kolmogorov-Smirnov significance value of p=.282>0.05. Quality assurance had p=.228>0.05, quality control had p=.236>0.05, Quality improvement had p=.174>0.05 and organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County had p=.236>0.05. Since the p-values were greater than the significance level (0.05), this implies that the data were normally distributed.

4.5.3 Multicollinearity Test

Multicollinearity refers to a statistical phenomenon in which two or more independent variables in a regression model are highly correlated with each other. The study conducted a multicollinearity test to determine whether the predictor variables are highly correlated with each other, and if so, to what degree. The study result is presented in Table 4.14

Table 4. 14: **Multicollinearity Assumption Test Results**

Variables	Tolerance	VIF
Customer-Focus	.782	1.279
Quality Assurance	.673	1.486
Quality Control	.567	1.764
Quality Improvement	.786	1.272
Organizational Performance	.678	1.475

From the finding the tolerance and variance inflation factor value for customer-focus (tolerance=0.782 and VIF=1.279), for quality assurance (tolerance=0.673 and VIF=1.486), for quality control (tolerance=0.567 and VIF=1.764) and for quality improvement (tolerance=0.786 and VIF=1.272) and for organizational performance of food processing

firms in Meru County (tolerance=0.678 and VIF=1.475). The study results imply that all tolerance values for the five variables under study were all above 0.10 and VIF values all less than 10, this implies that the data used had no Multicollinearity.

4.6 Inferential Statistics

4.6.1 Correlation Analysis

4.6.1.1 Customer-Focus and Organizational Performance

The study sought to establish the correlation between customer-focus and organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County. The findings of the study are as shown in Table 4.15.

Table 4. 15:Customer-Focus and Organizational Performance

		Organization Performance
Customer-Focus	Pearson Correlation	.443**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	100

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

As indicated in Table 4.12, the study found out that there was a moderate positive and statistically significant correlation between customer-focus and organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County, ($r = 0.443$; $p < 0.05$). This implies that better customer focus enhances organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County. The study agreed with Komba, (2016) who found that customer focus approach and performance were favorably and significantly correlated. Regression research showed that the customer focus strategy improves performance significantly.

4.6.1.2 Quality Assurance on Organizational Performance

Additionally, the study sought to establish the correlation between quality assurance and organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County. The findings of the study are as shown in Table 4.16

Table 4. 16: Quality Assurance on Organizational Performance

		Organization Performance
Quality Assurance	Pearson Correlation	.366**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.006
	N	100

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

As indicated in Table 4.16, the study found out that there was a moderate positive and statistically significant correlation between quality assurance and organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County ($r = 0.366$; $p < 0.05$). This implies that better quality assurance improved the organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County. The findings are in line with Njogu, (2012) who noted that assurance practices increase output quality by increasing process efficiency, decreasing errors and speeding up operations and reaction. Based on these findings, assurance practices alone can improve organization performance

4.6.1.3 Quality Control on Organizational Performance

The study further examined the correlation between quality control on organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County. The results of correlation analysis are outlined in Table 4.17.

Table 4. 17: Quality Control on Organizational Performance

		Organization Performance
Quality Control	Pearson Correlation	.387**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	100

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The study as shown in Table 4.15 established that there was a moderate positive correlation existing between quality control and organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County, ($r = 0.387$; $p < 0.05$). The results of the correlation analysis indicated that better quality control improves the organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County. The findings are in agreement with Mauyo (2013) who found out that Kenyan mobile telecom quality control and performance providers are statistically significant. It ranked mobile communications businesses' quality control practices and discussed their ramifications. Leadership commitment was followed by supplier quality management.

4.6.1.4 Quality Improvement on Organizational Performance

The study further examined the correlation between quality improvement and organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County. The results of correlation analysis are outlined in Table 4.18

Table 4. 18: Quality Improvement on Organizational Performance

		Organization Performance
Quality Improvement	Pearson Correlation	.399**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	100

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The study as shown in Table 4.15 established that a moderate positive correlation existed between quality improvement and organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County ($r = 0.399$; $p < 0.05$). The results of the correlation analysis indicated that quality improvement enhances organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County. The findings are in agreement with, Mugeri (2014) who found that innovation in the workplace increases efficiency and reduces defects hence improving product quality. Continuous improvement in product creation, manufacturing, staff involvement, and quality systems gives companies a competitive edge.

4.6.2 Regression Analysis

The study carried out a regression analysis to evaluate the combined effect of customer-focus, quality assurance, quality control and quality improvement on organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County.

Table 4.19: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Sig. F Change
1	.878[a]	.770	.749	.3873	.000

The R-Squared is the proportion of variance in the dependent variable which can be explained by the independent variables. The R-squared in this study was 0.770, which shows that the four independent variables (customer-focus, quality assurance, quality control and quality improvement) can explain 77.0% of organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County, while other factors explain 23.0%.

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	28.563	4	7.141	80.236	.000[b]
	Residual	8.532	95	.089		
	Total	37.095	99			

a. Dependent Variable: Organizational Performance of Food Processing Firms
b. Predictors: (Constant), Customer-Focus, Quality Assurance, Quality Control and Quality Improvement.

The analysis of variance in this study was used to determine whether the model is a good fit for the data. From the findings, the p-value was 0.000 which is less than 0.05 and hence the model is good in predicting how the four independent variables (customer-focus, quality assurance, quality control and quality improvement) influence organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County. Further, the F-value was (47.607) which shows that the model was fit in predicting the influence of the independent variables on the dependent variable.

Table 4. 20: Regression Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.038	.145		.260	.796
	Customer-Focus	.596	.107	.548	5.578	.013
	Quality Assurance	.233	.081	.245	2.877	.006
	Quality Control	.245	.104	.179	2.356	.022
	Quality Improvement	.323	.106	.360	3.052	.003

Table 4.17 shows the overall significant test results for the hypothesized research model. The interpretations of the findings indicated follow the following regression model.

$$\mathbf{Y= \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4}$$

Therefore,

$$\mathbf{Y= 0.038 + 0.596 X_1 + 0.233\ X_2 + 0.245 X_3 + 0.323}$$

According to the intercept (β_0), when the four independent variables were held constant, the value of organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County was 0.038. In

addition, holding all the other independent variables constant, a unit increase in customer focus would lead to a 0.596 improvement in organizational performance. Further, holding on the other independent variables constant, a unit increase in quality assurance would lead to a 0.233 improvement in organizational performance.

In addition, holding all the other variables constant, a unit increase in quality control would lead to a 0.245 improvement in organizational performance. Finally holding all the other variables constant, a unit increase in quality improvement would lead to a 0.323 improvement in organizational performance. From these findings it was inferred that customer focus influenced organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County most, followed by quality improvement, quality control and quality assurance.

4.7 Hypothesis Testing

The study tested the hypothesis using p-values in Table 4.20.

4.7.1 Customer-Focus on Organizational Performance

The study sought to test the hypothesis that: **H_{01}:** Customer-Focus has no statistically significant effect on organizational performance on food processing firms in Meru County. From the findings, the p-value was 0.013 which was less than 0.05 significant level. Therefore, based on the rule of significance, the study rejected the null hypothesis **(**H_{01}**)** and concluded that customer-focus has statistically significant effect on organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County. The findings are in line with those of Ogollah and Muturi (2016) who found out that customer focus approach and performance were favorably and significantly correlated. Regression research showed that customer focus strategy improves performance significantly. The results also proved that the customer focus strategy affects performance significantly.

4.7.2 Quality Assurance on Organizational Performance

The study sought to test the hypothesis that: **H_{02}:** Quality assurance has no statistically significant effect on organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County. From the findings, the p-value was 0.006 which was less the 0.05 significant level. Therefore, based on the rule of significance, the study rejected the null hypothesis **(**H_{02}**)** and concluded that quality assurance has statistically significant effect on organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County. The study findings are in line with those of Mauro, Gheith and Mario, (2018) who found out that innovation boosts organizational performance,

while quality assurance practices boost innovation. Soft and hard quality management approaches impact organizational success.

4.7.3 Quality Control on Organizational Performance

The study sought to test the hypothesis that: **H_{03}:** Quality control has no statistically significant effect on organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County. From the findings the p-value was 0.022 which was less the 0.05 significant level. Therefore, based on the rule of significance, the study rejected the null hypothesis **(**H_{03}**)** and concluded that quality control has statistically significant effect on organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County. The study findings are in line with those of Kanorio, (2017) who found out that quality control practices improve operation efficiency and customer satisfaction which enhances performance of the firms.

4.7.4 Quality Improvement on Organizational Performance

The study sought to test the hypothesis that: **H_{04}:** Quality improvement has no statistically significant effect on organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County. From the findings the p-value was 0.003 which was less the 0.05 significant level. Therefore, based on the rule of significance, the study rejected the null hypothesis **(**H_{04}**)** and concluded that quality improvement has statistically significant effect on organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County. The study findings are in line with those of Khan, Aliand Hongqi (2018) who found out that continuous improvement in product creation, manufacturing, staff involvement and quality systems gives companies a competitive edge.

Table 4. 21:Summary Table

Hypothesis		**Findings**	**Decision**
i.	Customer-Focus	.013	Reject
ii.	Quality Assurance	.006	Reject
iii.	Quality Control	.022	Reject
iv.	Quality Improvement	.003	Reject

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a detailed summary of the major findings of the actual study; it then draws conclusions and discusses implications emanating from these findings. Finally, it makes some recommendations and suggestions on areas of further study. The main aim of this study was to assess the effects of strategic quality management practices and organization performance on food processing firms in Meru County, Kenya.

5.2 Summary of Major Findings

The key findings were summarized and categorized in terms of specific objectives.

5.2.1 Customer-Focus on Organizational Performance

According to the findings, majority of the respondents agreed that customer focus ensures customer complaints are resolved thus reducing customer dissatisfaction and improving firm performance. By prioritizing customer needs, organizations can retain customers and attract more which increases sales and in turn, improves the overall performance. Additionally, resolving customer complaints, assessing customer needs and gathering performance feedback enables organizations to make necessary improvements, resulting in better organizational performance.

In addition, majority of the respondents agreed that customers acquire the right quality products and have their product orders on time and in full which leads to customer retention and enhances firm performance. Majority of the respondents also agreed that firms assess customer feedback and take insights back to production for action. The standard deviation ranged from 0.565 to 0.907 indicating that the dispersion of the respondents from the mean was minimal. Consequently, a firms' performance improves in terms of customer retention, market share, and profitability.

5.2.2 Quality Assurance on Organizational Performance

According to the findings majority of the respondents agreed that the organizations have quality assurance policies and systems which control the entire production process. The findings further indicated that majority of the respondents agreed that practice of quality documentation and record-keeping encourages quality consciousness among the employees

which is positively linked to performance. From the findings, majority of the respondents agreed that quality compliance index ensures customer, statutory and regulatory requirements are met. This includes developing and implementing standard operating procedures, quality management systems and regulatory compliance frameworks.

Further majority of the respondents agreed that process control reduces product inspection costs. Majority of the respondents also indicated that quality commitment ensures execution of corrective actions and propels improvement. Majority of them also agreed that quality commitment helps to maintain food safety, hygiene and quality thus protecting a company's reputation which improves the performance. The standard deviation ranged from 0.667 to 1.073 indicating that majority of the respondents agreed with the issues raised. Demonstrating a strong commitment to quality helps protect a company's reputation in the marketplace.

5.2.3 Quality Control on Organizational Performance

According to the findings, majority of the respondents agreed that the organizations follow product specifications and standards along the production line. Majority of the respondents also agreed that quality inspections on products and equipment help in timely error detection.

Majority of the respondents also agreed that product testing ensures conformance to specifications. In addition, majority of the respondents agreed that product test results are used to make data-driven decisions which reduce time/material losses and costs, which improves the performance. Testing verifies that the processes are validly controlled. Majority of the respondents also agreed that product durability and conformance to specifications lowers production costs. Thus, food manufacturers have to produce structurally sound products of the highest quality, taste, nutritional value and price.

Finally, majority of the respondents agreed that the personnel are well trained on recording and documenting results and actions taken to resolve any quality/production issues. Customer retention contributes to stable revenue streams, reduces customer acquisition costs, and increases profitability. According to the findings, majority of the respondents agreed that the firms follow product specifications and standards during production. Customers are more likely to trust and continue using products that demonstrate conformance and good shelf life, leading to improved brand reputation and increased customer loyalty.

5.2.4 Quality Improvement on Organizational Performance

According to the findings, majority of the respondents agreed that the firms have well trained and skilled employee along the production line to ensure safe and quality products. Majority of the respondents also agreed that employees actively seek opportunities to enhance their competence and experience consequently leading to higher performance. This mindset is characterized by a desire to expand one's skill set, stay updated on industry trends and improve job-related capabilities. Such employees often engage in activities such as attending training programs, pursuing certifications, participating in workshops or seminars, seeking mentorship or coaching, and taking on challenging food safety and quality related projects or assignments.

The respondents further agreed that quality audit findings are implemented to ensure product and process improvement. In addition, majority of the respondents agreed that quality audits help to identify whether the quality policies of organizations meet quality standards adequately. Majority of the respondents also agreed that employees participate in innovation and cross-functional benchmarking. The standard deviation ranged from 0.607 to 1.185 indicating that majority of the respondents agreed with the issues raised. Such commitment can be fostered through training, promotion of idea implementation, benchmarking cross-functionally, clear communication of quality expectations, and recognition of employees' role in delivering quality outputs.

5.3 Conclusions

Based on the findings from the study the researcher made the following conclusions, which were also based on specific objectives;

5.3.1 Customer-Focus on Organizational Performance

Customer focus ensures customer complaints are resolved thus reducing customer dissatisfaction and improving firm performance. By prioritizing customer needs, organizations can retain customers and attract more which increases sales and in turn, improves the overall performance. Additionally, resolving customer complaints, assessing customer needs and gathering performance feedback enables organizations to make necessary improvements, resulting in better organizational performance.

In addition, customers acquire the right quality products and have their product orders on time and in full which leads to customer retention and enhances firm performance.

Consequently, a firms' performance improves in terms of customer retention, market share, and profitability.

The organization assesses customer needs and performance feedback which improves organization performance. The study also concluded that there was a moderate positive and statistically significant correlation between customer-focus and organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County, ($r = 0.443$; $p < 0.05$). This implies that better customer focus enhances performance of food processing firms in Meru County.

5.3.2 Quality Assurance on Organizational Performance

The food processing firms have quality assurance policies, verification and validation activities which guarantee the entire production process. The practice of record keeping and documentation encourages quality consciousness among the employees which is positively linked to performance. Consistent product quality enhances customer retention which positively affects organization performance. Producing quality products leads to customer satisfaction which is positively linked to performance. The compliance index KPIs have helped to ensure systems and standards are maintained and requirements met which has improved firm reputation and performance. The study also concluded that there was a moderate positive and statistically significant correlation between quality assurance and organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County ($r = 0.441$; $p < 0.05$). This implies that better quality assurance improves the performance of food processing firms in Meru County.

5.3.3 Quality Control on Organizational Performance

The food processing firms have product specifications and work instructions which are followed along the production line. Quality inspections, sampling and testing of materials and finished products ensures that food safety and customer requirements are met which improves organization performance. The firms have invested in validated production and testing equipment which has reduced errors, defects, costs and reduced downtime thus improving on overall firm performance. Quality commitment strengthens competitive position of the organization thus improving performance. Quality commitment helps to protect a company's reputation thus positively affecting performance. The study further concluded that there was a moderate positive correlation between quality control and organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County, ($r = 0.441$; $p < 0.05$). The results of the correlation analysis

indicated that better quality control improves the organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County.

5.3.4 Quality Improvement on Organizational Performance

The organizations have well skilled employee along the production line to ensure quality products. Employees actively seek opportunities to enhance their competence and experience consequently leading to higher performance. Quality audit helps to ensure that products are fit for consumption. Quality audit helps to identify whether the quality policies of organizations meet quality standards adequately. Employees participate in guaranteeing delivery of quality products which improves performance. The study also concluded that there was a moderate positive correlation that existed between quality improvement and organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County ($r = 0.441$; $p < 0.05$). The results of the correlation analysis indicated that quality improvement enhances organizational performance of food processing firms in Meru County.

5.4 Recommendations

In light of the foregoing findings, the study recommends that;

5.4.1 Customer-Focus on Organizational Performance

The study recommended that food processing firms in Meru County should develop a customer-centric culture, foster a culture where all employees understand the importance of customer satisfaction and prioritize meeting customer needs and encourage regular communication and feedback loops with customers to gain insights into their preferences and expectations. Food processing firms in Meru County should implement effective customer relationship management (CRM) systems: Utilize CRM systems to track customer interactions, analyze data and personalize customer experiences. This enables better understanding of customer behavior and helps in tailoring products, services and marketing efforts to meet customer demands.

5.4.2 Quality Assurance on Organizational Performance

The study recommended that food processing firms in Meru County should establish robust quality management systems. They should implement and maintain quality management systems, such as ISO 9001, to ensure adherence to quality standards and regulatory requirements, develop documented procedures, perform regular audits and conduct internal assessments to monitor and improve quality assurance practices. Moreover, the study

recommended that food processing firms in Meru County should train employees on quality assurance: Provide comprehensive training programs to employees, focusing on quality assurance principles, methodologies and techniques. They should also empower employees to take ownership of quality and provide them with the necessary tools and skills to identify and address quality issues effectively.

5.4.3 Quality Control on Organizational Performance

The study recommended that food processing firms in Meru County should implement statistical process control (SPC). They should utilize SPC techniques to monitor and control manufacturing processes, enabling early detection of variations or defects. This helps in maintaining consistent product quality and minimizing rework or scrap, leading to cost savings and improved efficiency. The study recommended that food processing firms in Meru County should, invest in advanced quality control technologies, explore and adopt advanced technologies such as automated inspection systems, machine vision, or sensor-based monitoring to enhance accuracy, efficiency and speed of quality control processes.

5.4.4 Quality Improvement on Organizational Performance

The study recommended that food processing firms in Meru County should embrace continuous improvement methodologies. They should implement continuous improvement frameworks such as Lean Six Sigma or Total Quality Management (TQM) to drive ongoing quality improvement initiatives. They should also engage employees in problem-solving and process improvement projects to enhance quality, reduce waste and streamline operations. The study recommended that food processing firms in Meru County should foster a culture of innovation, encourage employees to innovate and experiment with new ideas to improve product quality, processes and customer satisfaction. The firms should create a supportive environment that rewards and recognizes innovative contributions from employees.

5.5 Suggestions for Further Studies

The study recommended that a study should be conducted in other counties such as Nyeri and Embu for generalization of the study findings. Moreover, the researcher suggested that future studies should investigate the strategic quality management practices and performance of food processing firms in Meru County in comparison to other sectors within the region, such as agriculture, manufacturing or services. This study was based on a self-assessment of quality by team leaders in the studied firms, which could have resulted in an inherent bias,

thus future studies may instead look at the perceptions of customers on quality. The researcher also suggested that qualitative research, such as in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, can be employed to delve deeper into the challenges and barriers that food processing firms in Meru County face when implementing strategic quality management practices.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX I: RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear respondent,

I am an MBA student at St. Paul's University. I am to submit a research project as a requirement for partial fulfillment of a degree of master of business administration in the faculty of business studies. My research work is on "***Effect of Strategic Quality Management practices on Performance of Food Processing Companies in Meru County***" I hereby request your assistance in filling in the questionnaires provided. I also wish to assure you that the information given will be treated with utmost confidentiality and will be used for the sole purpose of this study.

Section A. RESPONDENTS DETAILS

1. What is your gender?

Male [ ]

Female [ ]

2. What is your age category?

20-30 years [ ]

31-40 years [ ]

41-50 years [ ]

50 years and above [ ]

3. Highest education qualification attained

Professional Certificate [ ]

College [ ]

Undergraduate [ ]

Postgraduate [ ]

4. How long have you been working in this organization?

Below 1 Year [ ]

2-5 Years [ ]

5-10 Years [ ]

Above 10 Years [ ]

5. How long have your organization been in existence?

1-5 years [ ]

6-10 Years [ ]

11-20 Years [ ]

Above 20 Years [ ]

Section B: Customer-Focus on Organizational Performance

In a scale of 1-5, where; 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, and 5=Strongly indicate your level of agreement on the effects of customer-focus on organizational performance of food processing companies in Meru County.

Customer-Focus	1	2	3	4	5
Customer focus ensures customer complaints are resolved thus reducing customer dissatisfaction and improving performance.					
Customer focus ensures customer engagement that helps to obtain feedback critical for improving performance					
Customer focus ensures that customers are able to acquire the right quality products which improve organization performance.					
Customers are able to have their product orders on time and in full ensuring customer retention and improved firm performance.					
The firm assesses customer feedback and takes insights back to production for improvement which improves firm performance.					

Section C: Quality Assurance on Organizational Performance

In a scale of 1-5, where; 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, and 5=Strongly indicate your level of agreement on the effects of quality assurance on organizational performance of food processing companies in Meru County.

Quality Assurance	1	2	3	4	5
The organization has quality policies and systems which guide the entire production process					
Process control involving documentation and record keeping ensures consistency hence enhancing performance					
Quality compliance index ensures customer, statutory and regulatory requirements are met which improves performance					
Process control reduces product inspection costs which improves the performance of the organization					
Quality commitment ensures execution of corrective actions and propels improvement thus improving performance.					
Quality commitment helps to maintain food safety, hygiene and quality thus protect a company's reputation and positively affecting performance					

Section D: Quality Control on Organizational Performance

In a scale of 1-5, where; 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, and 5=Strongly indicate your level of agreement on the effects of quality control on organizational performance of food processing companies in Meru County.

Quality Control	1	2	3	4	5
The organization has product specifications and work instructions followed along the production line.					
Quality inspections on products and equipment help in timely error detection which improves firm performance.					
Product testing ensures conformance to specifications hence improving sales and enhancing firm performance					
Product testing yields data for making decisions which reduces losses thus enhancing performance					
Product durability and conformance to specifications lowers production costs hence higher performance.					
Product durability increase the product shelf life which improves the performance of the organization					

Section E: Quality Improvement on Organizational Performance

In a scale of 1-5, where; 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, and 5=Strongly indicate your level of agreement on the effects of quality improvement on organizational performance of food processing companies in Meru County.

Quality Improvement	1	2	3	4	5
The firm has well trained and skilled employees along the production line to produce safe and quality food products which has positively affected performance					
Employees actively seek opportunities to enhance their competence and experience consequently leading to higher performance					
Quality audit findings are implemented to ensure product and process improvement for better performance.					
Quality audit helps to identify whether the quality policies of organizations meet quality standards adequately.					
Employees participate in innovation and cross-functional benchmarking which improves performance.					
The firm has well trained and skilled employees along the production line to produce safe and quality food products which has positively affected performance					

Section F: Organizational Performance of Food Processing Companies

In a scale of 1-5, where; 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, and 5=Strongly indicate your level of agreement on the organizational performance of food processing companies in Meru County.

Organizational Performance	1	2	3	4	5
The organization has gained new market shares for the last three years					
The organization has opened new branches in other towns					
The organization has recorded higher sales volume for the past three years					
The organization has recorded higher profits for the past three years					

Thank You

APPENDIX II: WORK PLAN

Time and Activities	Dec 2022	Jan 2023	Feb 2023	Mar 2023	July 2023	Sept 2023	Sept 2023	Oct 2023
Developing Concept Paper								
Chapter One								
Literature Review								
Research Methodology								
Data collection and analysis								
Defending the research Project								
Corrections								
Editing and Publishing								

APPENDIX III: BUDGET

Item	**Qty**	**Amount**
Internet services	3GB	3000/=
Flash Disk	2GB	1000/=
Laptop	1	24000/=
Type and print final project	70 pages	3600/=
Bind final project	6 copies	1200/=
Printing and photocopying of questionnaire	175 copies of questionnaire @ 2/=	2000/=
Data Collection	10 Days	3000/=
Printing and Photocopying of the thesis document	8 copies of project	2000/=
Hard cover Binding	2 copies of project	1200/=
Publication	1	20,000/=
Contingencies	10%	6, 479/=
Grand Total		**64, 792/=**

APPENDIX IV: LIST OF FOOD PROCESSING FIRMS IN MERU COUNTY

1. Meru Nuts Company Ltd
2. Meru Industries Ltd
3. Mukululu Wine makers
4. Meru Supreme Industries
5. Nubian Foods Industries Ltd
6. Mafuko Industries Ltd
7. Beam Stores and food manufacturers
8. Lenge Foods Ltd
9. Royal Animal Feeds
10. Mwanga Millers
11. Meru Herbs
12. Deluxe Food Industries
13. Triple L Animal feeds
14. Mt. Kenya Food Products Ltd
15. Mt. Kenya Dairies
16. White Bird Millers, Kiirua
17. Arya Maize Millers
18. Daiichi Farm Ltd
19. Mt. Kenya Milk
20. Chania Feeds manufacturers

APPENDIX V: ISERC CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

ST. PAUL'S UNIVERSITY

Private Bag 00217 Limuru,
Kenya
Email: office@spu.ac.ke
Website: www.spu.ac.ke

Tel Office: +254 (0) 20-2020505/10
Mobile: +254 (0) 728-669000
(0) 736-424440

REF: SPU/22/2023 **Date: 5th June 2023**

TO: Christine Karwitha Gitonga
St. Paul's University

Dear Christine,

RE: Strategic Quality Management Practices and Organization Performance of Food Processing Firms in Meru County, Kenya

Greetings,

This is to inform you that SPU- Institutional Scientific Ethics Review Committee has reviewed the above-named research proposal. **Your ERB approval number is 31, for the period between 5th June 2023 – 5th July, 2024.**

This approval is subject to compliance with the following requirements;

i. Only approved documents including (informed consents, study instruments) will be used.
ii. All changes including (amendments, deviations, and violations) are submitted for review and approval by SPU- Institutional Scientific Ethics Review Committee.
iii. Death and life-threatening problems and serious adverse events or unexpected adverse events whether related or unrelated to the study must be reported to SPU- Institutional Scientific Ethics Review Committee within 72 hours of notification
iv. Any changes, anticipated or otherwise that may increase the risks or affected safety or welfare of study participants and others or affect

APPENDIX VI: LETTER FROM POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

ST. PAUL'S UNIVERSITY

Private Bag 00217 LIMURU, KENYA
Email: office@spu.ac.ke
Website: www.spu.ac.ke

Tel Office: +254 (0) 20-2020505/10
Mobile: 254 (0) 728 - 669000
(0) 736 - 424440

BOARD OF POSTGRADUATE STUDIES

5th June, 2023

National Commission for Science and Technology,
P.O. BOX 30623-00100,
Nairobi.

Dear Sir/Madam,

RE: RECOMMENDATION FOR CHRISTINE KARWITHA GITONGA MBADIST211020 –TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

This letter confirms the above-named person is a student in the Master of Business Administration at St Paul's University.

The second year consists of a major research work leading to a Thesis. The student's selected topic is:

" Strategic Quality Management Practices and Organization Performance of Food Processing Firms In Meru County, Kenya."

Kindly grant this student the required permit.

Yours Faithfully,

DIRECTOR POSTGRADUATE STUDIES ST. PAUL'S UNIVERSITY

09 JUN 2023

Dr. John Muhoho
Director, Board of Postgraduate Studies

APPENDIX VII: NACOSTI PERMIT

REPUBLIC OF KENYA

NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR SCIENCE,TECHNOLOGY & INNOVATION

Ref No: **743482**

Date of Issue: **30/June/2023**

RESEARCH LICENSE



This is to Certify that Ms.. christine Karwitha gitonga of St. Paul's University, has been licensed to conduct research as per the provision of the Science, Technology and Innovation Act, 2013 (Rev.2014) in Meru on the topic: Strategic quality management practices and organization performance of food processing firms in Meru County, Kenya for the period ending : 30/June/2024.

License No: **NACOSTI/P/23/27210**

743482

Applicant Identification Number

Director General
NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR SCIENCE,TECHNOLOGY & INNOVATION

Verification QR Code

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See overleaf for conditions