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STRATEGIC ALLIANCE CAPABILITY AND COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE OF TELECOMMUNICATION FIRMS IN RIVERS STATE

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Abstract
This study examined the relationship between strategic alliance capability and the competitive advantage of telecommunication firms in Rivers State, Nigeria. The dimensions of strategic alliance capability investigated were relational capability and knowledge sharing capability. Competitive advantage was conceptualized through two measures: cost advantage and differentiation advantage. The study addressed two research questions and tested two corresponding null hypotheses. A descriptive survey research design was employed, with a population comprising four major telecommunications operators (MTN, Airtel, Globacom, and 9mobile). Using a purposive sampling technique, data were collected via a structured questionnaire from 76 top and middle management staff involved in alliance activities. Data analysis was conducted using Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient. The findings revealed a significant positive relationship between relational capability and cost advantage ($r = .684$, $p < .01$), and between knowledge sharing capability and differentiation advantage ($r = .682$, $p < .01$). The study concludes that strategic alliance capability is a critical driver of competitive advantage in the telecommunications sector. It is recommended that firms deliberately strengthen relational capability to reduce operational costs and enhance coordination, while investing in knowledge-sharing structures to foster service innovation and differentiation.

Keywords: strategic alliance capability, relational capability, knowledge sharing capability, competitive advantage, cost advantage, differentiation advantage, telecommunications, Rivers State.

Introduction
Organisations increasingly rely on strategic collaborations to strengthen their competitiveness and operate effectively in dynamic markets. In the telecommunication industry, where rapid technological change, heavy infrastructural investment, and intense rivalry define the business environment, strategic alliances have become essential for sustaining relevance. Strategic alliance capability enables firms to manage and benefit from these collaborations, and recent studies highlight relational capability and knowledge sharing capability as core dimensions that determine the success of inter-firm partnerships (Das & Teng, 2020). Competitive advantage remains a major priority for telecommunication firms seeking to outperform rivals and maintain favourable market positions. It refers to an organisation's ability to deliver superior value or operate more efficiently than competitors (Wanaswa et al., 2023). Two widely accepted measures of competitive advantage are cost advantage and differentiation advantage. Cost advantage involves reducing operational expenses and improving efficiency, which is crucial in telecommunications where infrastructure costs are high (Mohamed & Gichinga, 2023). Differentiation advantage reflects the ability to provide distinct, innovative, or higher-quality services that set a firm apart (Kabanda & Gitahi, 2023).
To achieve these competitive outcomes, telecommunication firms commonly enter strategic alliances with infrastructure providers, technology firms, and other network partners. The success of these alliances depends on internal capabilities that support partner coordination. Relational capability fosters trust, strengthens communication, and promotes smooth cooperation, which can help reduce coordination costs and enhance operational efficiency (Liu, Wang & Su, 2023). This makes it a critical driver of cost advantage in collaborative environments. Knowledge sharing capability is

equally important, especially in industries driven by continuous technological upgrades. It reflects a firm's ability to acquire, disseminate, and apply knowledge obtained from partners. In the telecommunication sector, strong knowledge-sharing routines enable firms to innovate and create differentiated service offerings. Studies have shown that organisations with effective knowledge exchange achieve superior innovation and competitive differentiation (Zhu, Sun & Zhang, 2022; Gómez-Bayona et al., 2023).

Although existing research recognises the role of strategic alliances in shaping organisational competitiveness (Kale & Singh, 2021; Liu et al., 2023), few studies have examined how relational capability and knowledge sharing capability jointly influence cost advantage and differentiation advantage within Nigerian telecommunication firms. This gap provides the basis for the present study, which investigates the relationship between these alliance capabilities and the competitive advantage of telecommunication firms in Rivers State.

Statement of the Problem

Competitive advantage has become increasingly difficult for telecommunication firms to sustain, especially in an environment characterized by rapid technological change, high operational costs, rising customer expectations, and intense industry rivalry. Although firms strive to achieve cost advantage through efficient operations and differentiation advantage through superior service delivery, many telecommunication operators in Rivers State still struggle with high infrastructural expenses, inconsistent service quality, limited innovation, and declining customer loyalty. These challenges raise concerns about the extent to which firms are able to build and sustain competitive advantage in a highly dynamic and technology-driven sector.

Strategic alliances have been introduced as a mechanism to help firms strengthen their competitive advantage, particularly by enabling them to share resources, reduce operational burdens, and access new technologies or markets. However, the ability of these alliances to translate into meaningful competitive outcomes depends largely on internal alliance capabilities. Relational capability, which fosters trust, collaboration, and effective coordination among partners, is often weak, leading to strained partnerships, communication gaps, and inefficient resource utilization. Likewise, knowledge sharing capability, which enables firms to acquire and apply new knowledge from alliance partners, is frequently underdeveloped due to poor learning systems, limited knowledge transfer structures, and low absorptive capacity.

Despite the increasing reliance on alliances in Nigeria's telecommunication industry, empirical evidence remains limited on how relational capability and knowledge sharing capability influence the two most critical dimensions of competitive advantage, cost advantage and differentiation advantage. Existing studies have tended to examine alliances broadly, without isolating these capabilities as specific determinants of competitive outcomes. Consequently, there is insufficient understanding of how these capabilities contribute to reducing costs or enhancing service differentiation within the telecommunication firms operating in Rivers State.

It is against this backdrop that the present study investigates the relationship between relational capability, knowledge sharing capability, and the competitive advantage of telecommunication firms in Rivers State.

Conceptual Framework

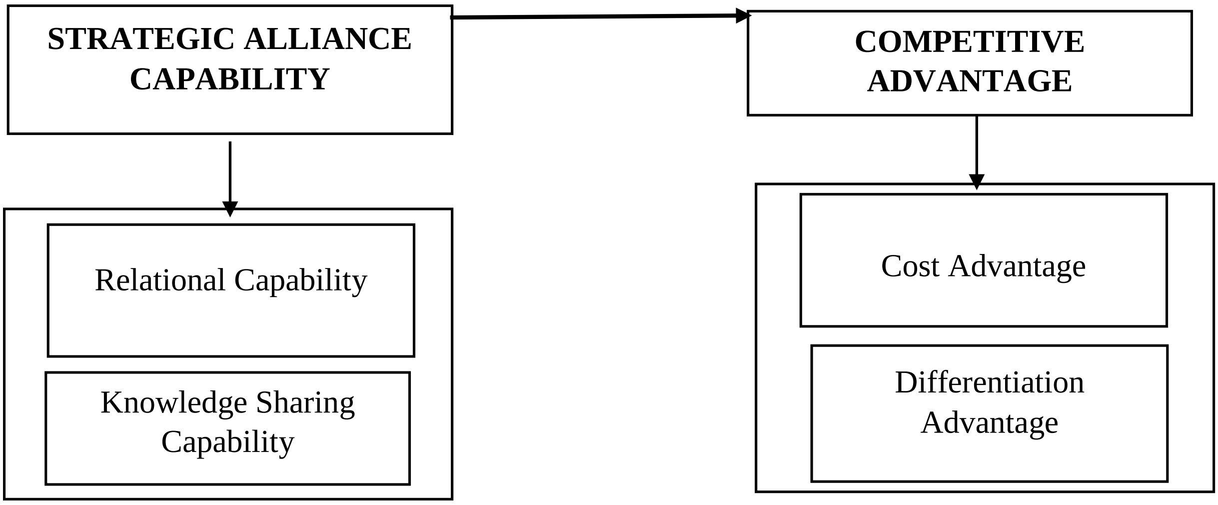

Figure: 1.1: A Conceptual framework showing the relationship between Strategic Alliance Capability and Competitive Advantage of Telecommunication Firms in Rivers State.
Source: Adopted from Ajao et al. (2015); Wogwu, (2021).

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study was to examine the relationship between strategic alliance capability and competitive advantage of telecommunication firms in Rivers State. The specific objectives are to:

1. investigate the relationship between relational capability and cost advantage of telecommunication firms in Rivers State;
2. examine the relationship between knowledge sharing capability and differentiation advantage of telecommunication firms in Rivers State.

Research Questions

The following research questions are raised to guide this study

1. What is the relationship between relational capability and cost advantage of telecommunication firms in Rivers State?
2. How does knowledge sharing capability relate to differentiation advantage of telecommunication firms in Rivers State?

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were postulated to guide this study:

H_{01}: There is no significant relationship between relational capability and cost advantage of telecommunication firms in Rivers State.

H_{02}: There is no significant relationship between knowledge sharing capability and differentiation advantage of telecommunication firms in Rivers State.

Conceptual Review

Concept of Strategic Alliance Capability

Strategic alliance capability refers to the internal capacity of an organisation to initiate, manage, and sustain collaborative relationships in ways that create value for the participating firms. It reflects the set of skills, routines, structures, and behavioural patterns that enable a firm to work effectively with external partners. These partners may include suppliers, technology providers, research institutions, distributors, or even competitors, depending on the strategic goals of the alliance. As business environments become more complex and technology driven, organisations increasingly depend on alliances to access new resources, reduce risks, and take advantage of innovation

opportunities. Strategic alliance capability therefore plays an important role in determining whether such collaborations succeed or fail (Kale & Singh, 2021).
The concept emphasises that alliances do not generate value automatically. Firms need capabilities that support partner selection, negotiation, coordination, communication, and joint problem-solving. Strategic alliance capability also involves the ability to govern relationships in ways that encourage trust and discourage opportunistic behaviour. As markets become more dynamic, firms benefit from alliance capabilities that help them learn from partners and adapt to changing conditions. Recent studies highlight that organisations with strong alliance capabilities are better positioned to integrate external knowledge, coordinate shared activities, and maintain stable, productive partnerships over time (Gómez-Bayona et al., 2023).
In today's competitive environment, strategic alliance capability is viewed not only as an operational skill but also as a strategic resource. It contributes to long-term performance by enhancing a firm's ability to build networks, expand its market reach, and respond quickly to technological changes. Telecommunication firms, for instance, depend on alliance capability to collaborate with equipment suppliers, digital service providers, and infrastructure partners. Through such collaborations, firms can gain access to new technologies, share costs, and improve service quality. Strategic alliance capability therefore reflects an organisation's readiness to work jointly with others in a way that strengthens its strategic position and improves overall competitiveness (Liu, Wang & Su, 2023). However, the dimensions were discussed below

Relational Capability: Relational capability refers to an organisation's capacity to build, manage, and sustain high-quality relationships with its strategic alliance partners. It involves developing trust, mutual respect, shared understanding, and open communication between firms engaged in collaborative activities. Strong relational capability allows organisations to coordinate joint tasks more effectively, reduce conflicts, and maintain stable partnerships even in the face of uncertainty. In strategic alliances, where partners often have different goals and resources, relational capability ensures that both sides remain committed to shared objectives and willing to invest in the partnership over time (Kale & Singh, 2021).
Relational capability includes the ability to communicate transparently, negotiate fairly, and resolve disagreements in ways that preserve the long-term value of the alliance. Firms with strong relational capability typically create relational norms such as cooperation, flexibility, and reciprocity, which support smooth collaboration and discourage opportunistic behaviour. In rapidly changing sectors like telecommunications, relational capability becomes particularly important because partners rely heavily on one another for technological updates, infrastructure support, and service innovation. Recent studies note that relational capability strengthens coordination and improves the effectiveness of shared initiatives, making it a crucial driver of alliance performance (Liu, Wang & Su, 2023). It ultimately provides the foundation for long-lasting, productive, and value-creating partnerships.

Knowledge Sharing Capability: Knowledge sharing capability refers to an organisation's ability to acquire, transfer, disseminate, and apply knowledge obtained from alliance partners. It reflects the internal processes and structures that enable firms to absorb new information, integrate it into existing routines, and use it to improve operations or develop new offerings. In strategic alliances, knowledge sharing is essential because partners often collaborate to access new technologies, managerial skills, or market insights. A firm with strong knowledge sharing capability is able to learn quickly from its partners and transform shared knowledge into competitive advantage (Gómez-Bayona et al., 2023).
This capability requires effective communication channels, supportive organisational culture, and systems that encourage employees to exchange information openly. It also involves mechanisms for codifying, storing, and retrieving knowledge so that lessons gained from alliances are not lost. Knowledge sharing capability becomes especially important in technology-intensive sectors, where rapid innovation demands continuous learning and adaptation. In telecommunications, for example,

firms rely on knowledge from partners to upgrade network infrastructure, adopt new digital platforms, and enhance service delivery. When knowledge sharing capability is strong, organisations benefit from faster innovation cycles, improved problem-solving, and enhanced differentiation in the marketplace (Zhu, Sun & Zhang, 2022).

Concept of Competitive Advantage

Competitive advantage refers to the unique position a firm achieves that allows it to outperform its rivals in the marketplace. It reflects the ability of an organisation to offer greater value to customers or to operate more efficiently than competitors. Competitive advantage is rooted in the idea that firms must develop distinct capabilities, resources, or strategies that differentiate them from others within the same industry. This concept remains central to strategic management because it determines how long an organisation can sustain superior performance in a dynamic business environment (Wanaswa et al., 2023).

Modern scholars explain competitive advantage as the outcome of strategic choices that enhance value creation. It may emerge from superior technology, cost efficiency, innovative products, customer experience, brand reputation, or knowledge-based assets. As markets become more technology driven, organisations increasingly depend on intangible capabilities such as knowledge, strategic partnerships, and collaborative skills to maintain competitiveness. Recent studies argue that firms can no longer rely solely on physical resources; rather, they must cultivate capabilities that allow them to respond quickly to market changes and customer needs (Kabanda & Gitahi, 2023).

Competitive advantage is commonly viewed through two broad measures: cost advantage and differentiation advantage. Cost advantage is achieved when a firm operates at lower cost than its competitors through efficiency, scale, technology, or effective resource utilisation. Differentiation advantage arises when a firm offers products or services that customers perceive as superior or unique. Both measures are essential in industries like telecommunications where firms compete not only on price but also on service quality, reliability, speed, and innovation (Mohamed & Gichinga, 2023). Given the rapid evolution of technology, firms must continually develop, refine, and sustain competitive strengths that allow them to remain visible and relevant. Competitive advantage therefore reflects an organisation's ability to create superior value consistently and maintain a favourable position within its competitive landscape (Liu, Wang & Su, 2023). The measures were discussed below.

Cost Advantage: Cost advantage refers to a firm's ability to operate at a lower cost than its competitors while delivering similar or superior value to customers. It emerges when an organisation is able to reduce production, operational, or service delivery expenses through efficiency, scale, technology, or better resource utilisation. Firms that achieve cost advantage are able to offer competitive pricing, improve profitability, and withstand market pressures more effectively than rivals. In industries like telecommunications, cost advantage is particularly important because firms face high infrastructural costs related to network upgrades, fibre deployment, spectrum licences, and energy consumption. Lowering these costs allows firms to invest more in innovation and expand their market reach (Mohamed & Gichinga, 2023).

Achieving cost advantage often requires strategic choices such as outsourcing, process automation, technological innovation, shared infrastructure, and effective supply chain coordination. Strategic alliances also help firms lower costs by enabling shared investment and resource pooling. When cost structures are efficient, organisations can maintain price leadership, attract price-sensitive customers, and strengthen their financial stability. Recent studies emphasise that firms with strong internal capabilities and collaborative strategies are more likely to sustain cost advantage in dynamic and highly competitive markets (Liu et al 2023).

Differentiation Advantage: Differentiation advantage refers to a firm's ability to offer products or services that customers perceive as unique, superior, or more valuable compared to those of competitors. It focuses on creating distinctiveness through innovation, service quality, customer experience, brand reputation, or specialised features. Differentiation is essential in sectors where customers seek more than low prices and place high value on performance, reliability, and technological advancement. In the telecommunications industry, differentiation may be reflected in network quality, data speed, service reliability, customer support, digital service innovation, and value-added offerings that enhance customer satisfaction (Kabanda & Gitahi, 2023).

Firms achieve differentiation advantage by leveraging unique capabilities, adopting advanced technologies, and continuously improving service attributes that matter to customers. Strategic partnerships also play a key role, allowing firms to access new technologies, content, and expertise that support superior service creation. Differentiation strengthens customer loyalty, reduces switching behaviour, and positions the firm as a preferred choice in a saturated market. Scholars note that in fast-changing digital environments, firms that innovate rapidly and understand customer expectations are more likely to maintain differentiation advantage and sustain long-term competitiveness (Wanaswa et al., 2023).

Theoretical Review

The Relational View (RV)

The Relational View, introduced by Dyer and Singh (1998), explains that firms can achieve competitive advantage through strong inter-firm relationships. The theory argues that collaboration allows organisations to create "relational rents"—benefits that arise from joint activities such as trust building, shared knowledge, and coordinated routines. These advantages emerge because partnerships enable firms to combine complementary resources and generate value that cannot be achieved independently. Recent scholars also maintain that in fast-changing industries, effective relational practices help firms reduce costs, innovate quickly, and strengthen competitive positions (Parmigiani & Rivera-Santos, 2020; Villena & Craighead, 2021).

The Relational View assumes that trust, cooperation, and knowledge exchange are important drivers of alliance success and that the advantages gained from such relationships are difficult for competitors to imitate. This makes the theory suitable for industries like telecommunications where firms depend heavily on alliances for infrastructure sharing and technological advancement.

The theory is relevant to this study because it directly supports the two dimensions of strategic alliance capability, relational capability and knowledge sharing capability. Relational capability reflects the trust and cooperative routines emphasised by the theory, while knowledge sharing capability aligns with the idea that shared learning improves innovation. The Relational View therefore provides a useful explanation of how alliance capabilities can lead to cost advantage and differentiation advantage among telecommunication firms in Rivers State.

Empirical Review

Villena and Craighead (2021) investigated the role of collaborative capabilities in enhancing supply chain competitiveness in their study titled Relational Governance, Learning and Supply Chain Advantage. The primary objective was to determine how knowledge sharing, trust, and relational norms influence cost efficiency and service responsiveness. The population comprised 312 manufacturing and technology firms across the United States. A survey research design was adopted, and structural equation modelling was used for data analysis. Findings showed that knowledge sharing capability significantly improved innovation and customer responsiveness, while trust and relational norms strongly enhanced cost efficiency. The study recommended that firms establish knowledge-sharing systems and strengthen long-term partnerships. However, the focus on supply chain networks limits its direct applicability to telecommunication alliances in Nigeria.

Liu et al (2023) conducted a study titled Relational Capital, Complementary Resources and Alliance Success to examine the role of relational capital in improving alliance performance. The study's objective was to determine whether trust, cooperation, and communication mediate the relationship between complementary resources and alliance outcomes. The researchers surveyed 210 alliance-engaged firms in China using a structured questionnaire and analysed the data through moderated mediation modelling. Findings revealed that relational capital significantly enhanced alliance success and reduced partner conflict. They recommended that firms strengthen communication routines and establish clear relational norms to support long-term collaboration. However, the study measured alliance performance rather than competitive advantage, and did not focus on telecommunication firms in Rivers State, creating an empirical gap that the present research addresses.

Gap in Literature

The reviewed literature shows that while several studies have examined relational capability, knowledge sharing, and alliance-related outcomes in different sectors and countries, none has specifically investigated how strategic alliance capability influences competitive advantage among telecommunication firms in Rivers State. Existing studies were mostly conducted in foreign contexts and focused on outcomes such as alliance performance, innovation, or general competitiveness, leaving a contextual gap in understanding these relationships within Nigeria's telecom industry. In addition, previous studies did not link relational capability and knowledge sharing capability directly to cost advantage and differentiation advantage, which are the key measures adopted in the present study. This creates both a contextual and dimensional gap that the current research is designed to fill by providing empirical evidence from telecommunication firms in Rivers State.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design to examine the relationship between strategic alliance capability and competitive advantage among telecommunication firms in Rivers State. The population comprised four telecommunication firms, MTN, Airtel, Globacom, and 9mobile, and purposive sampling was used to select knowledgeable top and middle management staff involved in alliance-related activities. A total of 80 questionnaires were distributed, and 76 were retrieved and used for the analysis. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire measuring relational capability, knowledge sharing capability, cost advantage, and differentiation advantage. Content validity was confirmed by experts in strategic management, while a pilot test with ten respondents outside the study area produced a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.84, indicating reliability. Data were analysed using the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient (PPMCC) with the aid of SPSS version 25, and all hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 significance level.

Results and Discussion

Ho_1: There is no significant relationship between relational capability and cost advantage of telecommunication firms in Rivers State.

Table 4.2: Result of Bivariate Analysis between Relational Capability and Cost Advantage of Telecommunication Firms

	Relational Capability	Cost Advantage
Relational Capability	Correlation Coefficient	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.
	N	76
Cost Advantage	Correlation Coefficient	.684**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	76

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)
*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Source: SPSS-Generated Output (2025)

Table 4.2 shows the bivariate analysis between openness and productivity of food processing SMEs. The result indicates a strong positive correlation between openness and productivity (r = .713**), which is significant at the 0.01 level. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected, and the alternate hypothesis is accepted.

Ho₂: There is no significant relationship between knowledge sharing capability and differentiation advantage of telecommunication firms in Rivers State.

Table 4.11: Result of Bivariate Analysis Between Knowledge Sharing Capability and Differentiation Advantage

	Knowledge Sharing Capability	Differentiation Advantage
Knowledge Sharing Capability	Correlation Coefficient 1.000	.682**
	Sig. (2-tailed) .	.000
	N 76	76
Differentiation Advantage	Correlation Coefficient .682**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed) .000	.
	N 76	76

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)
*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Source: SPSS-generated Output

Table 4.3 presents the result of the bivariate analysis between knowledge sharing capability and differentiation advantage of telecommunication firms in Rivers State. The result shows that knowledge sharing capability has a strong and positive relationship with differentiation advantage ($r = .682^{**}$) and this correlation is significant at the 0.01 level. Based on this outcome, the null hypothesis (Ho_2) which states that there is no significant relationship between knowledge sharing capability and differentiation advantage is rejected. Therefore, the alternate hypothesis is accepted, indicating that there is a significant relationship between knowledge sharing capability and differentiation advantage of telecommunication firms in Rivers State.

Discussion of Findings

Relational Capability and Cost Advantage

The findings of the study revealed a significant positive relationship between relational capability and cost advantage among telecommunication firms in Rivers State. This implies that firms with strong relational capability, expressed through trust, cooperation, open communication, and effective coordination with alliance partners, are more likely to achieve reduced operational costs. This aligns with the assertion of Liu et al. (2023), who found that relational mechanisms strengthen cooperation and enhance performance efficiency in alliance settings. The outcome suggests that telecommunication firms benefit from relational capability through lower transaction costs, shared investments, and more efficient network operations. The finding supports the Relational View, which posits that inter-firm relationships generate unique advantages that individual firms cannot achieve alone. Therefore, relational capability contributes meaningfully to cost efficiency in the telecommunication sector.

Knowledge Sharing Capability and Differentiation Advantage

The study found a significant positive relationship between knowledge sharing capability and differentiation advantage of telecommunication firms in Rivers State. This indicates that firms that effectively acquire, disseminate, and utilise knowledge from alliance partners are more likely to deliver unique, innovative, and high-quality services. This aligns with Gómez-Bayona et al. (2023), who emphasised that knowledge processes enhance innovation and competitiveness in collaborative environments. The result further supports the Relational View, which highlights knowledge exchange as a source of collaborative advantage. In the telecommunication sector, knowledge sharing facilitates the adoption of new technologies, improved customer experience, and the development of differentiated digital services. Thus, knowledge sharing capability strengthens firms' ability to stand out in a competitive market.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between strategic alliance capability and competitive advantage of telecommunication firms in Rivers State, focusing specifically on relational capability and knowledge sharing capability as key alliance dimensions. The findings showed that both relational capability and knowledge sharing capability have significant positive relationships with cost advantage and differentiation advantage. This implies that telecommunication firms that build trust, improve coordination, and strengthen communication with partners are more likely to reduce operational costs and enhance service quality. Likewise, firms that promote effective knowledge exchange benefit from faster innovation and improved competitiveness. The study therefore concludes that strategic alliance capability is an essential driver of competitive advantage in the telecommunication sector and should be deliberately developed to support long-term performance.

Recommendations

1. Telecommunication firms in Rivers State should strengthen their relational capability by promoting open communication, building trust, and maintaining cooperative relationships with alliance partners, as these behaviours help reduce operational costs and improve coordination efficiency.
2. Telecommunication firms should invest in knowledge sharing structures such as joint training, digital collaboration tools, and knowledge documentation systems, as these will support innovation, enhance service differentiation, and improve responsiveness to customer needs.

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