

Employee and Customer-based Engagements as a Competitive Advantage: A Study of Selected Downstream Gas Distribution Companies in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria possesses vast natural gas reserves, yet commercialisation within the downstream gas distribution sector remains inadequate despite sustained government reforms and policy interventions. The sector continues to experience customer churn, employee turnover, infrastructure deficits, and weak commercial performance driven by ineffective stakeholder and competitive management. This study addresses the limited empirical evidence linking stakeholder engagement and competitive advantage by using five dominant and regulator-licensed downstream gas distribution companies in Nigeria. Adopting a cross-sectional quantitative survey design, data were collected from 146 respondents using a structured five-point Likert scale questionnaire and analysed with descriptive and inferential statistics in SPSS version 31. Regression results revealed that customer engagement exerted the strongest positive influence on competitive advantage, with $R = 0.907$, $R^2 = 0.822$, and $p < 0.001$, explaining 82.2% of the variance. The findings demonstrate that sustainable competitive advantage is best achieved through proactive and inclusive engagement of primary stakeholders, particularly customers. The study reinforces Stakeholder Theory and Dynamic Capability Theory by highlighting the strategic importance of stakeholder-oriented competitiveness in Nigeria's downstream gas sector. It further provides evidence-based insights for policymakers, investors, and industry leaders seeking to strengthen market competitiveness and accelerate Nigeria's gas commercialisation agenda.

Keywords: *Competitive advantage, customer engagement, employee engagement, primary stakeholder, stakeholder engagement.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Competition remains a defining feature of organisational and economic life, driven by resource scarcity, technological advancement, and global interconnectedness. The environment in which modern organisations function is volatile, unpredictable, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) which requires continuous innovation and strategic adaptation. Competitive advantage, defined as a firm's ability to achieve superior performance through value creation that competitors cannot easily replicate (Porter, 1980), has therefore become essential for organisational survival (Uford, 2026). Early perspectives on competitive advantage focused on external positioning and industry structure, particularly through the competitive forces and strategic conflict approaches. These viewpoints, however, were unable to sufficiently account for the ongoing performance disparities between businesses in the same sector. As a result, focus turned to internal resources and capabilities, which gave rise to the resource-based paradigm and then the dynamic capability approach. The dynamic capability perspective argues that firms sustain competitive advantage through their ability to sense opportunities, seize them, and reconfigure resources in response to changing environments (Teece, 2007). Within this context, stakeholder relationships and relational capital have emerged as critical strategic assets. Effective engagement with employees, customers, host communities, and regulators enhances innovation, legitimacy, operational stability, and long-term performance. These dynamics are especially pertinent to the downstream gas distribution industry in Nigeria, which faces intense competition, regulatory pressures, and evolving stakeholder

expectations (Uford et al, 2022). The study therefore argues that stakeholder engagement represents a critical dynamic capability through which firms can build resilient and sustainable competitive advantage in an increasingly complex business environment.

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria possesses substantial natural gas reserves estimated at 210.54 trillion cubic feet (TCF) (Odinaka, 2025), supported by reforms such as the Petroleum Industry Act, the Gas Distribution Licence regime, and the Gas Network Code aimed at liberalising the downstream gas sector. Despite these reforms, the sector continues to experience weak competitive performance characterised by poor employee relations, inconsistent customer experiences, and reputational challenges. This suggests that structural and regulatory reforms alone are insufficient to achieve sustainable competitive advantage. According to research on strategic management, stakeholder engagement is a key factor in an organisation's long-term competitiveness, resilience, and legitimacy. Relational assets like trust, credibility, and commitment can improve operational stability, productivity, and market positioning when properly managed, according to the dynamic capability approach (Teece, 2007). However, stakeholder engagement as a source of competitive advantage has received little empirical attention in Nigerian research, which has mostly concentrated on price, infrastructure deficiencies, and regulatory reforms. Additionally, the combined impact of employees, and customers, on firm-level outcomes has rarely been studied in the past. Although international evidence suggests that effective stakeholder engagement improves competitiveness (Bridoux & Stoelhorst, 2022), this relationship remains underexplored within Nigeria's downstream gas distribution sector. Hence the need to examine how the dominant five have used stakeholder engagement for sustained competitive advantage over the years.

Aim and Objectives of the study

The aim of this study is to evaluate the relationship between stakeholder engagement and competitive advantage in Nigeria's downstream gas distribution sector. The specific objectives of this study are to:

- i. examine the relationship between employee engagement and competitive advantage,
- ii. investigate how customer engagement influences competitive advantage.
- iii. evaluate the relationship between stakeholder engagement and competitive advantage of downstream gas distribution companies in Nigeria.

Research Questions

The study provides answers to the following questions:

- i. What is the relationship between employee engagement and competitive advantage?
- ii. What influence does customer engagement have on competitive advantage?
- iii. What is the relationship between stakeholder engagement and competitive advantage in the downstream gas distribution companies of Nigeria?

Research Hypotheses

Based on the above research questions, the null hypothesis are developed as follows:

- i. There is no significant relationship between employee engagement and competitive advantage.
- ii. Customers engagement does not significantly influence competitive advantage.
- iii. There is no significant relationship between stakeholder engagement and competitive advantage in the downstream gas distribution companies of Nigeria.

Significance of the Study:

This study extends stakeholder theory by contextualising it within Nigeria's dynamic gas sector, offering insights into how stakeholder engagement influences competitive outcomes in emerging markets. It provides practical guidance for gas distribution firms on enhancing value creation, operational efficiency, and reputation. The findings are valuable to shippers, regulators, potential entrants, and investors promoting sustainable energy infrastructure. Additionally, it enriches literature by linking stakeholder theory with competitive strategy in a real-world context.

Scope and Delimitation of the Study

This study is situated within Nigeria's downstream gas distribution sector and focuses on how the licensed piped natural gas (PNG) distribution companies, including NGML, Axxela Group, SNG, Falcon, and NIPCO have been treating their employees and customers for sustained competitive advantage. It adopts a cross-sectional research design and relies on primary data collected through structured questionnaires administered to relevant organisational stakeholders. The study examines the relationship between stakeholder engagement and competitive advantage, with specific attention to employees, and customers. It is delimited to the downstream pipeline natural gas (PNG). Midstream and upstream gas operations are excluded to avoid structural and regulatory distortions. Other gas forms and secondary stakeholders are also excluded to ensure conceptual clarity and analytical precision.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Review

Competitive Advantage

Competition is a foundational concept in economics and strategic management, rooted in classical theory where firms contend for scarce resources, customers, and market dominance. Early views emphasised price competition and market equilibrium, but persistent performance differences among firms challenged assumptions of perfect competition. Magretta (2012) defines competition as rivalry among firms within the same industry for customers, resources, and market share. Contemporary strategic management views competition as a multidimensional contest encompassing cost, quality, service, innovation, reputation, and relational capital.

In the literature, competitive advantage has been characterised in complementary ways. Porter (1980) views it as a firm's ability to outperform rivals through cost leadership, differentiation, or focus strategies. Grant (2021) similarly defines competitive advantage as the capacity to generate superior economic value relative to competitors. From a resource-based perspective, Barney (1991) argues that advantage stems from valuable, rare, inimitable, and well-organised resources, as articulated in the VRIO framework. These resources may be tangible or intangible, including reputation, culture, trust, and relational capital. Contemporary scholarship further emphasises that competitive advantage is dynamic and requires continual resource reconfiguration (Teece, 2007). This viewpoint is particularly pertinent in volatile, regulated, and stakeholder-sensitive industries. Competitive advantage's sources have evolved significantly across different economic eras. During the industrial age, advantage was largely derived from economies of scale, access to raw materials, capital intensity, and production efficiency. In the post-industrial and information age, innovation, technology, brand equity, and speed to market became dominant drivers. In the contemporary knowledge-based economy, scholars increasingly argue that people, relationships, and organisational culture constitute the most sustainable sources of advantage (Pfeffer, 1998; Wright, Dunford, and Snell, 2001). Intangible assets such as trust, commitment, social capital, and stakeholder relationships are harder to imitate and therefore more likely to produce sustained advantage. This shift explains why effective management and engagement of people, employees, customers, communities, and regulators, is now central to competitive advantage and will remain so in the future. As Emeka-Okoli, Nwankwo, Adanma, and Nwankwo. (2024) and Zulkifli (2022) note, firms that leverage human and relational capabilities outperform those that rely solely on physical or financial assets.

The literature identifies organisational resources, leadership capability, strategic alignment, institutional context, and industry structure as major determinants of competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Grant, 2021). Key drivers include innovation capability, cost efficiency, service quality, agility, brand reputation, trust, and stakeholder engagement (Ifere & Anyaogu, 2024; Sloan & Oliver, 2013). In developing economies, regulatory relationships and social legitimacy also shape competitive positioning. Competitive advantage is measured using both financial and non-financial indicators such as profitability, revenue growth, market share, customer loyalty, operational reliability, and brand equity (Wang & Barney, 2006; Maximova, 2017). Recent studies advocate multidimensional measurement approaches that combine financial, relational, and perceptual indicators (Venkatraman & Ramanujam, 1986). Sustainable stakeholder relationships are also recognised as critical indicators of long-term competitiveness (Freeman, Dmytriiev & Phillips, 2021). In highly regulated

industries, operational resilience, safety performance, and regulatory compliance further reflect sustained competitive advantage (Sigalas, Economou & Georgopoulos, 2013).

Competitive advantage delivers several benefits, including superior financial performance, enhanced resilience, reduced vulnerability to competitive pressures, and long-term organisational sustainability (Porter, 1990). Strong competitive advantages put businesses in a stronger position to draw in capital, hold on to personnel, and weather market and regulatory shocks. In capital-intensive subsectors such as downstream gas distribution in Nigeria, competitive advantage is particularly critical. High fixed costs, regulatory scrutiny, safety risks, and dependence on stakeholder cooperation mean that even minor disruptions can have significant financial implications. Competitive advantage enables firms to operate efficiently, maintain licence legitimacy, secure customer loyalty, and manage community and regulatory relationships effectively (Smith, 2007; Timane, 2012; Uford, 2026).

Stakeholder Engagement

The stakeholder concept emerged as a response to the limitations of shareholder-centric views of the firm, which prioritised profit maximisation for owners while marginalising broader societal interests. Early foundations of stakeholder thinking can be traced to systems theory and corporate planning literature of the 1960s and 1970s, which recognised organisations as open systems interacting continuously with their environments. However, the concept gained formal prominence through Freeman's (1984) which repositioned organisations as networks of relationships rather than mere economic entities. He argued that organisational success depends on the firm's ability to manage relationships with groups that can affect or are affected by organisational objectives. This marked a paradigm shift from narrow economic models to relational and ethical perspectives of strategy. Since then, stakeholder theory has evolved into a dominant framework in strategic management, corporate governance, sustainability, and organisational performance research (Donaldson and Preston, 1995; Mitchell, Agle, and Wood, 1997).

Depending on the theoretical perspective and research setting, stakeholders have been defined in a variety of ways. Freeman (1984) broadly defined a stakeholder as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of an organisation's objectives." This inclusive definition captures both internal actors—such as employees, managers, and shareholders, and external actors, including customers, suppliers, regulators, host communities, financiers, and society at large (Akata, 2017). Donaldson and Preston (1995) expanded the concept by emphasising the legitimacy of stakeholder interests, arguing that stakeholders possess intrinsic value rather than being merely instrumental to shareholder wealth. Mitchell et al. (1997) further refined stakeholder identification by introducing the attributes of power, legitimacy, and urgency, which determine stakeholder salience and managerial attention. Despite definitional variations, a unifying theme across the literature is that stakeholders represent critical relational assets whose expectations, behaviours, and perceptions significantly influence organisational outcomes.

Stakeholders are commonly categorised along several dimensions, including internal versus external, primary versus secondary, and voluntary versus involuntary stakeholders. Among these, Clarkson's (1995) classification into primary and secondary stakeholders is particularly useful for operational and strategic prioritisation. According to Clarkson (1995), primary stakeholders are those whose continued participation is essential for organisational survival. These include employees, customers, suppliers, shareholders, regulators, and host communities. Any disruption in the relationship with these groups can directly threaten operational continuity. Conversely, secondary stakeholders—such as the media, advocacy groups, and non-governmental organizations—have an impact on the organization or are impacted by it but are not essential to its immediate existence. The adoption of Clarkson's framework is especially appropriate in highly regulated and infrastructure-intensive industries, such as downstream gas distribution, where primary stakeholders exert direct influence on operations, compliance, and performance. By focusing on primary stakeholders, organisations can allocate resources strategically and address the most performance-critical relationships.

Although often used interchangeably, stakeholder management and stakeholder engagement represent conceptually distinct approaches. Stakeholder management traditionally reflects a control-oriented, firm-centric perspective focused on mitigating risks, resolving conflicts, and ensuring compliance (Donaldson and Preston, 1995). It is often reactive and transactional in nature. In contrast, stakeholder engagement emphasises ongoing,

two-way communication, collaboration, trust-building, and value co-creation (Sloan and Oliver, 2013). Engagement recognises stakeholders as active partners rather than passive recipients of managerial decisions (Tor, Gambo and Ogedengbe, 2025). This approach aligns with dynamic capabilities thinking, where relational capabilities enable firms to adapt, innovate, and sustain competitive advantage (Teece, 2007). Therefore, in modern business climates marked by social expectations, strict regulations, and competitive complexity, stakeholder engagement is preferable to stakeholder management. Engagement moves beyond compliance toward performance optimisation and long-term sustainability. In Nigeria's gas industry, effective engagement of primary stakeholders, particularly employees and customers—has been shown to foster trust, enhance organisational resilience, and support improved performance outcomes (Gromis di Trana, Fiandrino, & Yahiaoui, 2022).

Effective stakeholder engagement requires deliberate structures, processes, and leadership commitment. The literature identifies several key mechanisms, including transparent communication, participatory decision-making, responsiveness to stakeholder concerns, and alignment of organisational objectives with stakeholder expectations (Greenwood, 2007; Morsing and Schultz, 2006). Engagement should be continuous rather than episodic, integrated into strategic planning, performance management, and governance systems. Firms that institutionalise engagement practices are better positioned to anticipate risks, manage conflicts proactively, and co-create value with stakeholders (Harrison, Bosse, and Phillips, 2010).

Employees are central to organisational capability, service quality, and operational reliability. Their interests include fair compensation, safe working conditions, career development, job security, and meaningful participation in decision-making and to achieve self-actualization based on the Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Weiss, 2021; Etim & Uford, 2019). Employee engagement enhances motivation, reduces turnover, and improves productivity and innovation (Harter et al., 2002). Effective engagement strategies include transparent communication, inclusive leadership, performance-linked rewards, training, and a strong safety and ethical culture. In technically intensive sectors such as gas distribution, engaged employees directly influence operational efficiency and competitive advantage (Kotovska, 2025; Onwujei, 2025; Ruzhnikov and Dundin, 2025).

Customers seek reliable supply, fair pricing, service quality, responsiveness, and contractual transparency (Weiss, 2021). In business-to-business energy markets, long-term relationships and trust are particularly critical. Effective customer engagement improves loyalty, reduces churn, and strengthens brand equity (Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, and Ilić, 2011). Engagement mechanisms include consistent service delivery, proactive communication, complaint resolution systems, and collaborative problem-solving. Firms that engage customers as partners rather than mere buyers are better positioned to sustain market share and profitability (Babu, 2023; Berggren and Schreeb, 2024; Busacca and Bertoli, 2025; Ogbunamiri and Agu, 2022).

The Nigerian Downstream Gas Distribution Subsector

Nigeria holds one of Africa's largest proven natural gas reserves of 210.54 trillion cubic feet, positioning gas as a vital resource for economic diversification and energy transition (Odinaka, 2025). To improve the industry, the government introduced reforms such as the Petroleum Industry Act, 2021 and the Nigerian Gas Transportation Network Code to encourage transparency, investment, and competition. Despite these reforms, the downstream gas distribution sector remains intensely competitive, reflecting a "Red Ocean" market environment with shrinking margins and overlapping rivalry (Kim & Mauborgne, 2017). Operators continue to face challenges including high capital costs, regulatory uncertainty, host community disturbances, and increasing customer expectations. As a result, firms now rely more on internal capabilities and stakeholder relationships than on physical assets alone to sustain competitive advantage (Porter, 1980). Differences in employee, customer, community, and regulatory engagement have contributed to varying levels of operational efficiency and organisational performance across firms. The resource-based view identifies intangible assets such as trust, human capital, service culture, and relational capability as major sources of competitiveness (Barney, 1991). Studies further show that employee engagement improves productivity and operational reliability (Harter et al., 2002). Similarly, customer engagement strengthens loyalty and enhances market positioning (Brodie et al., 2011). However, research on Nigeria's gas sector has largely focused on regulation, infrastructure, and pricing, with limited attention given to stakeholder engagement as a driver of competitive

advantage (Emeka-Okoli, Nwankwo, Otonna, & Nwankwo, 2024).

Theoretical Review

Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder Theory, developed by Freeman (1984), emerged to challenge shareholder-focused approaches by viewing organisations as networks of relationships among parties that influence or are influenced by organisational goals. The theory was later expanded through its normative, descriptive, and instrumental dimensions (Donaldson & Preston, 1995), alongside the stakeholder salience framework based on power, legitimacy, and urgency (Mitchell et al., 1997). It emphasises that organisational value creation depends on trust, cooperation, and mutual dependence among stakeholders. The theory further argues that firms must balance competing stakeholder interests within their institutional environments. Nigeria's downstream gas distribution industry is extremely important to this viewpoint because of its capital-intensive operations, stringent regulations, and dependence on outside legitimacy. Operational stability and sustainability are greatly impacted by important stakeholders, including workers, clients, regulators, suppliers, financiers, and host communities. Therefore, maintaining regulatory compliance, customer loyalty, and social licence to operate all depend on stakeholder participation. However, critics argue that the theory's broad stakeholder scope makes prioritisation and practical implementation difficult (Freeman et al., 2010; Ramoglou et al., 2021). Others contend that it inadequately explains how stakeholder relationships translate into sustained competitive advantage in dynamic markets (Key, 1999). Consequently, integrating Stakeholder Theory with Dynamic Capabilities Theory provides a stronger framework for explaining how adaptive capabilities and stakeholder engagement jointly enhance competitiveness (Teece, 2007; Bridoux & Stoelhorst, 2022; Valle & Sarturi, 2022).

Dynamic Capability Theory

Dynamic Capability Theory explains how firms sustain competitive advantage in changing environments through continuous learning and adaptation (Teece et al., 1997). Developed as an extension of the Resource-Based View, the theory shifts focus from static resources to the ability to reconfigure competencies in response to market changes (Barney, 1991). Teece et al. (1997) describe dynamic capabilities as the capacity to integrate, build, and renew internal and external resources. The theory highlights sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring as core dimensions of organisational adaptability (Teece, 2007). Later studies stressed the role of organisational learning, managerial cognition, and stakeholder relationships in building adaptive capacity (Helfat & Peteraf, 2015; Teece, 2014). The theory is highly relevant to Nigeria's downstream gas distribution sector due to regulatory uncertainty, infrastructure challenges, and evolving stakeholder expectations. Firms in the sector must continually adapt operational, commercial, and relational capabilities to remain competitive. Dynamic Capability Theory therefore provides a strong basis for understanding how stakeholder engagement supports sustained competitive advantage. However, critics argue that the theory lacks conceptual clarity and offers limited practical guidance for capability development (Winter, 2003; Arend & Bromiley, 2009). Consequently, it is best complemented by Stakeholder Theory, which identifies relevant stakeholders, while Dynamic Capability Theory explains how firms adapt these relationships over time.

Empirical Review

In recent years, the empirical link between stakeholder engagement and competitive advantage has gained significant traction across management and organisational research. As companies increasingly recognize the impact of stakeholder relations on performance outcomes, scholars and practitioners have turned their attention to how firms can build trust-based, inclusive, and adaptive engagement strategies to drive competitive differentiation. This section discusses the link.

Empirical studies consistently show that stakeholder engagement, especially employee-focused practices, enhances competitive advantage. Using a mixed-methods approach involving 1,247 employees, Onwujei (2025) found that wellbeing initiatives improved engagement, reduced turnover and safety incidents, and strengthened competitiveness in Nigeria's oil and gas sector. Ruzhnikov and Dundin (2025), through a structured developmental model, reported that continuous employee development improved performance,

strategic decision-making and long-term efficiency. Through content and comparative analysis, Kotovska (2025) established that employee engagement increased productivity, service quality and organisational competitiveness. Likewise, employing a case study methodology, Ghunaimi and Kassim (2024), as well as James et al. (2023) through a critical review, concluded that communication, team-building and employee engagement improved productivity, resilience, safety and sustainable competitive advantage.

Empirical studies affirm that customer engagement is a critical determinant of competitive advantage. Babu (2023), through a conceptual and analytical review, found that effective customer relationship management (CRM) systems enhance customer satisfaction, loyalty and service quality, thereby improving organisational performance. This position was also confirmed by Busacca, and Bertoli (2025) through a conceptual synthesis and literature review, established that customer engagement results in customer loyalty which increases profitability, reduces cash-flow risk and strengthens market resilience. In Nigeria, Ogbunamiri, and Agu (2022) employed a survey design with multiple regression analysis and found that all elements of the 7Ps marketing mix significantly influence customer loyalty in the downstream petroleum sector. Collectively, these findings suggest that sustained customer engagement through CRM, loyalty management and customer-centric service delivery provides firms with enduring competitive advantage.

Conceptual Framework

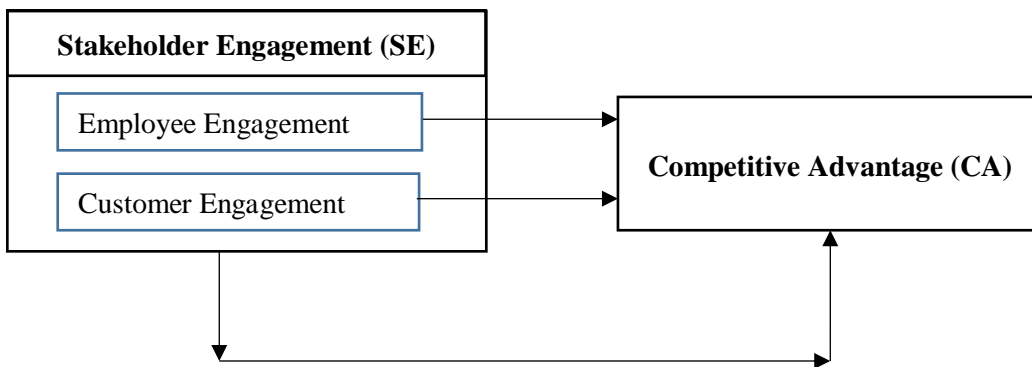


Figure 1: Model of Study
 Source: Researcher (2026)

3. METHODOLOGY

In order to investigate the connection between stakeholder involvement and competitive advantage among particular downstream gas distribution companies in Nigeria, the study used a descriptive quantitative research approach. Structured questionnaires were distributed to pertinent employees as part of a cross-sectional survey strategy. The quantitative approach was suitable for measuring variable relationships and testing hypotheses using empirical data (Creswell, 2014). The design was considered efficient, cost-effective, and suitable for generalising findings.

The population of this study is finite and consists of 222 professionals from five downstream gas distribution companies in Nigeria. The selected firms are NGML, Axxela Group, SNG, NIPCO Gas, and Falcon. These organisations were purposively selected because they are industry leaders with sustained competitive advantage over the years that new entrants can learn from. All five companies are licensed gas distributors, making them suitable for the study. Respondents were drawn from Human Resources/Capital, and Commercial and Business Development/Operations. These departments were so chosen because they interact directly with the desired key stakeholders, employees, and customers. The study was limited to permanent staff to reduce bias, and the population distribution is NGML (66), Axxela (43), SNG (31), NIPCO (40), and Falcon (42), totalling 222 respondents. The population size is in tandem with Ihunwo & Okparanta (2025).

Based on the total population, the sample size was calculated using the Yamane’s (1967) formula for sufficient representation as shown below: $n = \frac{N}{1+N(e^2)}$

where, n = sample size

N = population size: 222

e = allowable sampling error: 0.05

Replacing the variables with numbers in the formula above,

$$n = \frac{222}{1+222(0.05^2)}$$
$$n = 142.77$$

Sample size $n = 143$

Based on proportionate stratified sampling, the sample breakdown becomes NGML (43), Axxela (28), SNG (20), NIPCO (26), and Falcon (27), totalling 143.

To account for expected attrition, the required sample size was adjusted using the formula: $n_{adjusted} = \frac{n_{desired}}{1-a}$

Where: $n_{desired} = 143$

a = anticipated attrition rate (30%)

Hence, two hundred and five (205) copies of questionnaire were distributed, of which only 169 was received and after editing, the 146 valid ones were used for the analysis.

For the study, a multi-stage sampling strategy that included convenience, proportionate stratified, and purposive sampling techniques was used. Purposive sampling was used to select the five major licensed firms and relevant departments that interact directly with key stakeholders based on their experience and contextual relevance (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Thereafter, proportionate stratified sampling was applied to ensure fair representation across the selected companies. Convenience sampling was subsequently used to obtain responses from available and willing participants (Golzar, Noor, & Tajik, 2022). This combined approach enhanced representativeness, contextual relevance, and practical data collection efficiency.

A structured questionnaire that was created based on previously validated instruments and modified to fit the Nigerian downstream gas distribution setting served as the data collection tool. Closed-ended questions on a 5-point Likert scale from "Strongly Disagree (1)" to "Strongly Agree (5)" were used in the questionnaire to gauge respondents' experiences and viewpoints. Three sections comprised the questionnaire: competitive advantage, stakeholder participation, and demographic data. The questionnaire was disseminated both physically and electronically, and it was pilot tested with a small portion of the target population. The questionnaire was revised based on input from the pilot test.

Stakeholder engagement was conceptualised as a multidimensional construct using dimensions such as employee engagement, customer engagement, community engagement, regulatory engagement, adapted and adopted from established scales (Clarkson, 1995; Sloan and Oliver, 2013, Tor, Gambo and Ogedengbe, 2025). For competitive advantage, the study employed sustainability (ability to sustain relationship with primary stakeholder (Employee, Customer, Community, Regulator) as a dimension (Freeman, Dmytriiev and Phillips, 2021) with performance measures such as top talent retention, customer loyalty, operational stability and public reputation. This is consistent with previous quantitative studies on competitive strategy and business sustainability of Barney (1991); Ferro-Soto, Macías-Quintana, and Vázquez-Rodríguez (2018); Ifere and Anyaogu (2024); and Maximova (2017). All items were rated using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree and 5 = strongly agree. The Likert scale approach is appropriate for assessing perceptions and attitudes and is widely used in strategic management research (Taherdoost, 2019).

After being pilot tested with a small sample of the target demographic, the major data used in this study was obtained through the distribution of both online and physical questionnaires. A formal introduction letter, consent form, and instructions were attached to ensure ethical standards and voluntary participation. The use of primary data was adopted because it provides real-time, organisation-specific insights and eliminates overreliance on potentially outdated secondary data (Creswell, 2014). The instrument underwent expert assessment by academics, industry professionals, and supervisors who are SMEs in the topic of stakeholder engagement and strategy in order to guarantee content validity. Twenty respondents from the target population's subset participated in a pilot study. Based on the pilot result, revisions were made to improve clarity and relevance. The reliability confirmed by Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.811, and 0.840 respectively for stakeholder engagement and competitive advantage. These reliability coefficients are above the threshold of at least 0.7 recommended by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) thus indicating strong internal consistency.

Following editing, the returned questionnaire copies underwent processing and analysis. Regression analysis was used to test the hypotheses and ascertain the predictive power of stakeholder engagement on competitive advantage; the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 31 was utilised for the analysis. Descriptive statistics, such as mean, median, etc., were used to summarise respondent demographics and variable distributions. Statistical significance was evaluated at $p < \alpha = 0.05$, which is consistent with standard quantitative research practices (Engman, 2011). The study ensured ethical integrity through informed consent and voluntary participation (Victor, 2025). Confidentiality, anonymity, and data security were maintained in compliance with the Nigeria Data Protection Act (KPMG, 2023). The principle of non-maleficence was upheld to prevent harm or exploitation of respondents (Kumolu-Johnson & Olajide, 2021).

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

Socio-Demographic Information

The socio-demographic data gave a better understanding of the background characteristics of the respondents. It revealed the gender that is more prominent in the organisation, their age range, educational qualification, their years of experience and their respective departments/organisations. All these are to ensure the right population was captioned. The data are presented as follows:

From a population of 222, a sample size of 143 was determined using the Taro Yamane formula, with a 30% attrition allowance. Accordingly, 205 copies of questionnaire were distributed. Of these, 169 were returned, representing a response rate of 82.4%. Following data screening and editing, 23 of them were excluded due to incomplete responses, leaving 146 valid ones that were used for the analysis in SPSS. The 146 responses used exceeded the minimum required sample size of 143 and represented 86.4% of the returned copies of questionnaire.

Table 4. 1 Frequency distribution of socio-demographic data of respondents

		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	106	72.4
	Female	40	27.6
	Total	146	100.0
Age	Below 25 years	0	0
	26 – 35	37	25.3
	36 – 45	76	52.0
	46 – 55	33	22.7
	56 years and above	0	0
	Total	146	100.0
Highest Level of Education Obtained	O' level	0	0
	NCE / OND	0	0
	HND/B.Sc./ BA	31	20.9
	M.Sc./MBA	113	77.3
	Ph.D/DBA	2	1.8
	Total	146	100.0
Number of Years in the Company	1 – 5 year	29	19.6
	6 – 10 years	35	24.4
	11 - 15 years	50	34.2
	Above 15 years	32	21.8

	Total	146	100.0
Department	Human Capital	46	31.5
	Commercial & Buz Dev/OPS	100	68.5
	Total	146	100.0
Company	NGML	45	30.7
	Axxela Group	28	19.1
	SNG	27	18.7
	Nipco Gas	20	13.8
	Falcon	26	17.8
	Total	146	100.0

Source: Researcher (2026)

Table 4.2 shows that 72.4% of respondents are male and 27.6% are female, indicating adequate gender representation in the sample. In terms of age, 25.3% are between 26–36 years, 52.0% between 36–45 years, and 22.7% between 46–55 years, while none are above 56 years. This indicates that all respondents are within active working-age categories and are mature enough to provide reliable information.

The table further reveals that 20.9% of respondents possess HND/BSc/BA qualifications, 77.3% hold MSc/MBA degrees, and 1.8% have PhD/DBA qualifications, implying that all respondents are adequately educated to understand and respond accurately to the questionnaire. Regarding work experience, 19.6% have spent 1–5 years in their organisations, 24.4% between 6–10 years, 34.2% between 10–15 years, and 21.8% over 15 years, indicating that most respondents (80.4%) have more than five years of industry experience and sufficient organisational knowledge.

In addition, respondents were drawn from relevant departments, including Human Capital (31.5%), and Commercial and Business Development/Operations (68.5%). The respondents also represented the target organisations, namely NGML (30.7%), Axxela Group and SNG (19.1% each), Nipco Gas (13.8%), and Falcon (17.8%), confirming that the appropriate study population was captured.

Chapter 1 Descriptive Analyses

The descriptive statistics of responses are as contained in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2 Descriptive statistics of responses

COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE	Mean	Median	Mode	Standard deviation	Variance	Maximum	Minimum	Range
Overall Mean and Standard deviation of CA	4.3968	4.3333	4.40	0.24070	0.058	4.95	3.89	1.05

Source: Researcher (2026)

According to Table 4.2, an overall mode of 4.40 shows that most of the respondents agreed that effective engagement of stakeholder have direct relationship with competitive advantage. The mean of means (4.3968) for a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 3 (neutral) and to 5 (strongly agree), indicates that respondents choices clustered around agreeing to the above submission.

Testing of Hypothesis

Below is the analysis for each of the hypothesis. A decision rule of $\alpha = 0.05$ (confidence level of 95%) is used to test the significance level; to know if the independent variable (IV) stakeholder engagement is a significant

predictor of the dependent variable (DV) competitive advantage.

(i) Hypothesis one (H₀₁): There is no significant relationship between employee engagement and competitive advantage.

Table 4. 3: SPSS Regression Output on Employee Engagement and Competitive Advantage

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.572 ^a	.327	.324	.19794

a. Predictors: (Constant), Employee_Engagement

ANOVA^a

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	4.241	1	4.241	108.252	<.001 ^b
	Residual	8.737	145	.039		
	Total	12.978	146			

a. Dependent Variable: Competitive_Advantage

b. Predictors: (Constant), Employee_Engagement

Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	3.074	.128		24.058	<.001	2.823	3.326
	Employee_Engagement	.305	.029	.572	10.404	<.001	.248	.363

a. Dependent Variable: Competitive_Advantage

Source: SPSS, Researcher (2026)

In Table 4.3 above, the Model Summary Table shows a moderately strong positive correlation between employee engagement and competitive advantage, with R = 0.572 while R² value of 0.327, indicates that employee engagement accounts for 32.7% of the variation in competitive advantage in the Nigerian downstream gas distribution sub sector, while other factors not captured in this study account for the remaining 67.3%. On the Coefficients Table, the intercept of the regression model B-value (Constant) = 3.074. The slope of the model B-value (Employee Engagement) is 0.305. This implies that for every 1-point increase in Employee Engagement, Competitive Advantage is expected to increase by 0.305 units. The ANOVA Table shows a P-value of 0.001 which is lower than the level of significance $\alpha = 5\%$ (i.e. $0.001 < 0.05$), this confirms that the regression model is statistically significant. Consequently, the null hypothesis was not supported, and the study concludes that Employee Engagement has significant positive relationship with Competitive Advantage.

(ii) Hypothesis two (H₀₂): Customer engagement does not significantly influence competitive advantage.

Table 4.4: SPSS Regression Output on Customer Engagement and Competitive Advantage Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.907 ^a	.822	.821	.10181

a. Predictors: (Constant), Customer_Engagement

ANOVA^a

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	10.667	1	10.667	1028.980	<.001 ^b
	Residual	2.312	145	.010		
	Total	12.978	146			

a. Dependent Variable: Competitive_Advantage

b. Predictors: (Constant), Customer_Engagement

Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	1.378	.094		14.601	<.001	1.192	1.564
	Customer_Engagement	.683	.021	.907	32.078	<.001	.641	.725

a. Dependent Variable: Competitive_Advantage

Source: SPSS, Researcher (2026)

Table 4.4 indicates a very strong positive relationship between customer engagement and competitive advantage, with an R value of 0.907. The R² value of 0.822 shows that customer engagement explains 82.2% of the variation in competitive advantage within the Nigerian downstream gas distribution sub-sector, while 17.8% is attributable to other factors. The regression coefficient further reveals that a one-point increase in customer engagement leads to a 0.683-unit increase in competitive advantage. In addition, the ANOVA result produced a p-value of 0.001, which is below the 5% significance level (0.001 < 0.05), confirming that the regression model is statistically significant. Consequently, the null hypothesis was not support, and the study concludes that customer engagement has a significant positive influence on competitive advantage.

(iii) Hypotheses three (H₀₃): There is no significant relationship between stakeholder engagement and competitive advantage in the downstream gas distribution companies in Nigeria.

Table 4.5: SPSS Regression Output on Stakeholder Engagement and Competitive Advantage Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.884 ^a	.781	.780	.11286

a. Predictors: (Constant), Stakeholder_Engagement

ANOVA^a

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	10.138	1	10.138	795.858	<.001 ^b
	Residual	2.841	145	.013		
	Total	12.978	146			

a. Dependent Variable: Competitive_Advantage

b. Predictors: (Constant), Stakeholder_Engagement

Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	1.399	.107		13.127	<.001	1.189	1.609
	Stakeholders_Engagement	.685	.024	.884	28.211	<.001	.637	.733

a. Dependent Variable: Competitive_Advantage

Source: SPSS, Researcher (2026)

Table 4.5 reveals a very strong positive relationship between stakeholder engagement and competitive advantage ($R = 0.884$), with stakeholder engagement explaining 78.1% of the variation in competitive advantage ($R^2 = 0.781$). The findings indicate that only 21.9% of the variation is attributable to factors outside the scope of this study. The regression coefficient ($B = 0.685$) suggests that a one-point increase in stakeholder engagement leads to a corresponding 0.685-unit increase in competitive advantage. Furthermore, the regression model is statistically significant, as the ANOVA result shows a p-value of 0.001, which is below the 5% significance level ($0.001 < 0.05$). Accordingly, the null hypothesis was not supported, confirming a significant relationship between stakeholder engagement and competitive advantage in the Nigerian downstream gas distribution sub-sector.

Discussion of Findings

Hypothesis one (H_{01}) reveals that employee engagement significantly predicts competitive advantage, with a one-point improvement in engagement increasing competitive advantage by 0.305. The finding suggests that consistent employee engagement delivers measurable competitive benefits to organisations. This aligns with the studies of Kotovska (2025) and Onwujei (2025), who established a positive relationship between employee engagement and competitive advantage.

Hypothesis two (H_{02}) established that customer engagement significantly predicts competitive

advantage. This finding aligns with studies by Babu (2023), Busacca and Bertoli (2025), and Ogbunamiri and Agu (2022), which affirmed that customer engagement enhances organisational performance and competitive advantage.

Hypothesis three (H₀₃) the result of the joint effect of both primary stakeholders considered validates that the combination of employee and customer engagements significantly predicts competitive advantage. It is worthy to state also that although each of the primary stakeholder engagement were individually statistically significant, the combined effect is stronger in influencing competitive advantage. This result agrees with the findings of Tor, Gambo, and Ogedengbe (2025); Yadau, Olofin, Gambo, and Nwoye (2024) who submitted that stakeholder engagement positively impact organisational outcomes.

Summary of Findings

After answering the research questions and testing each of the three hypotheses, the summary of findings indicates that:

- i. when employees are well engaged, it will make them to stay longer at the organisation which will give the organisation a competitive edge.
- ii. when customers are engaged effectively, the business to customer relationship will be sustained for a long time which will lead to continuous re-purchases that will give the organisation competitive advantage.
- iii. the combined engagements of all the aforementioned primary stakeholders will give an improved competitive advantage to the organisation.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study provides empirical evidence that effective stakeholder engagement has direct relationship with competitive advantage in organisations i.e., if stakeholders are effectively engaged, competitive advantage will increase and if otherwise, it will decline. This is in tandem with Wu (2012) and Hubbart (2024). Engagement should be proactive and not reactive.

Implication of findings

According to the findings, downstream gas distribution companies can improve long-term economic sustainability by gaining and maintaining a competitive edge through continuous engagement with primary stakeholders. Additionally, the study makes a substantial contribution to academic, scientific, and business understanding.

Theoretically, the findings reinforce both the Stakeholder Theory and Dynamic Capabilities Theory, emphasising that sustainable success now depends more on effective stakeholder management than on physical assets alone (Emeka-Okoli, Nwankwo, Adanma & Nwankwo, 2024; Zulkifli, 2022). The significance of open and proactive communication with employees, customers, and other stakeholders is also emphasised by the study. Furthermore, the Dynamic Capabilities approach affirms that in order to satisfy shifting stakeholder expectations, businesses must constantly modify and reorganise their capabilities. Practically, the study shows that competitive advantage is achieved not only by identifying stakeholder needs, but also by embedding them into organisational policies and decision-making processes. From the Policy perspective, regulators should ensure that industry stakeholders are properly consulted before implementing new policies.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion, it is recommended that: organisations should continuously engage employees and customers effectively, this will lead to top talent retention, customer loyalty, sustained competitive advantage and business sustainability. More importantly, for the Nigerian downstream gas distribution companies to have long-term competitive advantage, customers should always be treated as king that they are.

Contribution to knowledge

The study makes a theoretical contribution by combining Dynamic Capabilities Theory and Stakeholder Theory into a cohesive framework for comprehending how stakeholder engagement generates competitive

advantage—a revolutionary strategy in Nigerian. On Nigerian firms, it provides valuable empirical insights from a developing economy where stakeholder engagement is crucial for the gas commercialization and infrastructural development. The study demonstrates that competitiveness can be enhanced through stakeholder management, not just physical assets. Methodologically, it applies a robust multistage sampling design suitable for complex industries, and it develops a valid, reliable survey instrument for assessing stakeholder engagement, and their impact on competitive advantage, offering a replicable tool for future research and practice.

Limitation of the Study

This study recognises certain limitations despite its contribution to understanding how stakeholder engagement influences competitive advantage in Nigerian gas firms. The use of purposive sampling and survey-based data limits the generalisability of the findings and may reflect respondents' subjective opinions. In addition, the focus on selected firms and reliance on structured questionnaires restricted deeper insights into organisational culture and leadership attitudes, while self-reported responses posed risks of bias. Furthermore, external factors such as policy changes, gas price volatility, and infrastructure challenges were not directly examined, although the study still provides a solid basis for future research and practical policy implications.

Suggestion for Further Studies

Future studies should adopt longitudinal approaches to examine how stakeholder engagement evolves over time and influences competitive advantage. Comparative studies across African countries such as Algeria, Angola, and Nigeria could also provide deeper insights into regional variations within the gas sub-sector. Further research should extend to the upstream and midstream segments of the value chain to broaden contextual understanding. In addition, the use of mixed methods may offer richer insights and more robust findings on the relationship between stakeholder engagement and competitive advantage.

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