

# The Roles of Strategic Leadership in Ensuring Sustainable Competitive Advantage: Empirical Evidence from Pharmaceutical Distribution in Emerging Markets

**Dr Blessing Takawira,**  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1633-8693>

PhD, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, College of Business & Economics, University of Johannesburg, Auckland Park Kingsway Campus, South Africa

**Professor Emmanuel Mutambara,**  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8030-9061>

PhD, Professor, Senior Lecturer, Graduate School of Business & Leadership, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

**Corresponding author:** Blessing Takawira, [takawirablessing@gmail.com](mailto:takawirablessing@gmail.com)

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**Abstract:** *This research addresses the crucial yet underexplored area of strategic leadership roles in enhancing sustainable competitive advantage in the pharmaceutical distribution sector of emerging markets, particularly focusing on South Africa. The relevance of this study lies in its exploration of strategic leadership within a sector experiencing significant growth and global competition, specifically in the context of emerging markets where such investigations are scarce. The primary aim is to delineate strategic leadership roles crucial for fostering sustainable competitive advantage in this sector. The choice of the pharmaceutical distribution sector in South Africa as the research object is due to its dynamic nature and the unique challenges it presents in emerging markets. This study covers a significant period that reflects the evolving dynamics of the industry. Utilising a qualitative research methodology, the study involves in-depth interviews with 10 strategic leaders in South African pharmaceutical distribution firms. This approach provides a robust informational and statistical basis for the research. Through thematic analyses, the research uncovers five key strategic leadership roles: setting strategic direction, managing business complexity, promoting organisational structure, managing organisational culture, and developing human resources. These roles are pivotal in establishing and maintaining a sustainable competitive advantage in the pharmaceutical distribution industry in emerging markets. The study confirms the hypothesis that effective strategic leadership is vital for achieving sustainable competitive advantage. It reveals specific trends and quantitative regularities in leadership strategies that contribute to this goal. This research offers substantial practical significance for managerial decision-making in the pharmaceutical distribution industry, particularly in emerging markets. Its insights are crucial for leaders aiming to create and sustain competitive advantage, thereby contributing to the industry's growth and stability. Furthermore, it lays a foundation for future investigations across various contexts within the pharmaceutical sector and different leadership perspectives.*

**Keywords:** strategic leadership, competitive advantage, pharmaceutical distribution, emerging markets, South Africa.

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# The Roles of Strategic Leadership in Ensuring Sustainable Competitive Advantage: Empirical Evidence from Pharmaceutical Distribution in Emerging Markets

## Introduction

The pharmaceutical distribution industry has witnessed significant growth in recent years, particularly in emerging markets (Abbas et al., 2020). The increasing demand for medicines and the globalisation of pharmaceutical supply chains have intensified competition, making it imperative for firms to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage (SCA) to achieve long-term (Porter, 1996). Strategic leadership is recognised as a key determinant of SCA, enabling organisations to navigate complex environments and adapt to changing circumstances (Hitt, Ireland, & Hoskisson, 2019). These markets present numerous opportunities driven by demographic shifts, rising income levels, and an increasing burden of chronic diseases (PwC, 2020). However, they pose unique challenges, including political instability, weak regulatory frameworks, and infrastructural deficiencies (Xu et al., 2021). As a result, organisations' ability to navigate these complex environments and achieve an SCA is crucial for long-term success (Fuertes et al., 2020).

Despite the growing interest in the role of strategic leadership in driving SCA and the increasing importance of emerging markets in the global pharmaceutical industry, there is limited research on the specific roles of strategic leadership in ensuring SCA within the context of pharmaceutical distribution in emerging markets like South Africa (Ali & Anwar, 2021). This gap in the literature may limit our understanding of the factors that enable pharmaceutical distribution companies to succeed in these complex and dynamic markets (Gurgula, 2020). Furthermore, the unique challenges and opportunities associated with pharmaceutical distribution in emerging markets, such as complex supply chains, regulatory environments, and evolving market dynamics, necessitate a deeper understanding of the strategic leadership practices that can enable firms to navigate these environments effectively (Modisakeng, Matlala, Godman, & Meyer, 2020; Adebisi, Nwogu et al., 2022). As such, there is a need for empirical research that investigates the roles of strategic leadership in ensuring SCA in the context of pharmaceutical distribution in emerging markets, focusing on the experiences of pharmaceutical distribution managers in South Africa.

The present study endeavours to fill this void in the existing body of literature by adopting a qualitative research methodology to investigate the roles of strategic leadership in ensuring SCA in the pharmaceutical distribution industry in South Africa. By conducting in-depth interviews with ten pharmaceutical distribution managers in South Africa, this study seeks to generate valuable insights into the strategic leadership practices that contribute to SCA in this context and provide empirical evidence to inform managerial decision-making and policy development. The subsequent sections of the paper are organised in the following manner: Section 2 presents a comprehensive literature assessment on strategic leadership, sustainable competitive advantage, and the specific context of pharmaceutical distribution within emerging countries. In Section 3, the technique utilised in the study is explicated, including the research architecture, participants, data gathering and analysis methods. The study's findings are presented in Section 4, while Section 5 discusses these findings in the current literature. Section 6 encompasses the final segment of this study, wherein conclusions, implications, limits, and ideas for further research are presented.

**Objective.** This study's primary objective is to explore strategic leadership's roles in ensuring SCA in the pharmaceutical distribution industry in emerging markets. The study seeks to address the following research inquiry in a more precise manner:

**Research Question.** In the pharmaceutical distribution industry of an emerging market like South Africa, what are the unique roles and practices of strategic leadership that contribute to sustained competitive advantage?

**Justification.** Several critical factors and gaps in the existing literature justify the proposed research. The pharmaceutical distribution industry in emerging markets has experienced significant growth in recent years and is subjected to unique challenges and opportunities. However, there is a paucity of empirical research investigating the strategic leadership practices that can ensure a sustainable competitive advantage within this context. Understanding the interplay of strategic leadership and SCA in the pharmaceutical distribution industry in emerging markets is crucial, considering the increased global competition, the complexities

associated with supply chains, and the unique regulatory environments. The research is especially relevant for South Africa. This emerging market presents a rich context for exploring this interplay due to its dynamic demographic shifts, rising income levels, and an increasing burden of chronic diseases, alongside its unique challenges like political instability and infrastructural deficiencies.

This study aims to offer valuable insights to inform managerial decision-making and policy development by conducting in-depth interviews with pharmaceutical distribution managers in South Africa. The research will also contribute to the academic discourse on strategic leadership and sustainable competitive advantage in emerging markets, thus enriching the literature in this field. Therefore, this research bears significance for academia and industry, adding to our knowledge of strategic leadership in complex and competitive environments. The primary aim of this study is to explicitly investigate and delineate the strategic leadership roles that are instrumental in fostering sustainable competitive advantage within the pharmaceutical distribution sector of emerging markets, with a particular focus on South Africa. It involves examining specific strategies and behaviours of leadership that contribute to sustained competitive success in this sector.

## Literature Review

### Theoretical Framework

**Strategic Leadership.** Strategic leadership pertains to the capacity of senior-level executives to steer an organisation's overarching vision, formulate and execute strategies, and influence stakeholders to attain the intended results (Amayreh, 2020). It involves both the formulation and execution of strategies aimed at achieving a sustainable competitive advantage (Cortes & Herrmann, 2021). Several studies have identified the key components of strategic leadership, such as vision, strategy formulation, and strategy implementation (López-Lemus et al., 2020; Mistarihi, 2021; Mohammed & Al-Kyumi, 2021). These components enable organisations to navigate complex and dynamic environments and respond effectively to changes in the competitive landscape. Strategic leaders are known for creating a shared vision and inspiring others to commit to achieving organisational goals (Ho, Lam, & Law, 2022). The organisation demonstrates a proactive approach by predicting shifts in the external environment and strategically aligning internal resources and skills to effectively capitalise on emerging opportunities (Qomar & Sujianto, 2023). Furthermore, strategic leaders foster a culture of innovation, promote learning, and encourage risk-taking, which are essential for long-term success (Peng, 2021).

Despite the growing body of literature on strategic leadership, several gaps and challenges warrant further investigation. For instance, much of the research on strategic leadership has been conducted in Western contexts, which limits the generalisability of the findings to other cultural settings (Northouse, 2021). As organisations increasingly operate in diverse and global environments, it is crucial to understand how cultural differences impact the effectiveness of strategic leadership practices (Solomon & Steyn, 2017). Additionally, there is a need for more longitudinal and process-oriented research that examines how strategic leadership evolves and shapes organisational outcomes (Boivie, Withers, Graffin, & Corley, 2021). Such research would provide valuable insights into the dynamic nature of strategic leadership and the mechanisms through which it influences organisational performance. Nonetheless, the research of Alasiri and AlKubaisy (2022) examines the connection between private sector company success in Western Saudi Arabia and factors such as leadership, work climate, IT alignment, and company performance. Strategic leadership in promoting employee creativity could guide future research in both private and public sectors (Atiyeh, 2022). Therefore, this literature review highlights the critical role of strategic leadership in driving organisational success and the need for further research to address the identified gaps and challenges. The research paper proposes to contribute to understanding strategic leadership and its impact on organisations across different contexts and industries.

**Sustainable Competitive Advantage.** A SCA is an organisation's ability to maintain its competitive position over time, achieving superior performance compared to its competitors (Mikalef, Krogstie, Pappas, & Pavlou, 2020). It can be achieved by effectively managing resources, capabilities, and core competencies (Elia, Giuffrida, Mariani, & Bresciani, 2021). The resource-based view (RBV) suggests that organisations can achieve SCA by leveraging their unique resources and capabilities to create value that is rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (Freeman, Dmytriyev, & Phillips, 2021). Porter's (2011) work on competitive strategy further highlights the importance of differentiation and cost leadership as sources of SCA. According to this perspective, organisations must continually identify, develop, and protect their valuable resources and capabilities to maintain their competitive advantage (Nandi et al., 2020).

Porter's (1980) competitive strategy framework suggests that organisations can achieve SCA through differentiation, cost leadership, or combining the two (focused strategy). Differentiation involves creating unique products or services that offer superior value to customers, while cost leadership entails achieving a lower cost structure than competitors. In this framework, organisations must make strategic choices about their competitive positioning and align their resources and capabilities accordingly (Porter, 2011). Porter's competitive strategy framework, introduced in his seminal work "Competitive Strategy" (1980), argues that one of three broad approaches can help businesses accomplish SCA: differentiation, cost leadership or a focused strategy (a combination of cost leadership and differentiation targeting a narrow market segment). This framework has become one of the most influential and widely adopted models for understanding the sources of competitive advantage and guiding strategic decision-making in various industries (Porter, 1989).

Cost leadership involves achieving a lower cost structure than competitors by pursuing economies of scale, scope, and learning and adopting process innovations and efficient supply chain management (Louw & Venter, 2021). By achieving cost leadership, organisations can offer products or services at lower prices or maintain higher profit margins, increasing market share and profitability (Fuertes et al., 2020). Differentiation refers to creating unique products or services that offer superior value to customers, setting the organisation apart from its competitors (Hitt et al., 2019). Differentiation can be achieved through various means, such as superior product quality, innovative features, exceptional customer service, or a strong brand image (Johnson et al., 2020). By successfully differentiating, organisations can command premium prices, attract loyal customers, and reduce the threat of competition (Nwachukwu & Vu, 2020).

A focused strategy combines cost leadership and differentiation elements, targeting a specific market segment with a specialised product or service offering (Cong & Thu, 2021). By concentrating on a narrow market segment, organisations can deeply understand their target customers' needs and preferences and tailor their offerings accordingly. This strategy can increase customer loyalty, reduce competitive pressure, and the ability to charge premium prices (Lynette & Peet, 2014). Hence, this literature review highlights the critical role of sustainable competitive advantage in driving organisational success and the need for further research to address the identified gaps and challenges. The research paper aims to contribute to understanding SCA and its impact on organisations across different contexts and industries.

***Pharmaceutical Distribution in Emerging Markets.*** Given their rapid growth and untapped potential, emerging markets have become increasingly important for the pharmaceutical distribution industry (Tannoury & Attieh, 2017). Several factors, such as favourable demographics, rising income levels, and the increasing burden of chronic diseases, have contributed to the growth of the pharmaceutical industry in these markets (PwC, 2020). However, emerging markets also present unique challenges, such as political instability, weak regulatory frameworks, and infrastructure deficiencies, which require effective strategic leadership to navigate (Louw & Venter, 2021). Pharmaceutical distribution presents unique challenges and opportunities in these markets, such as complex supply chains, regulatory environments, and evolving market dynamics (Moosivand, Ghatari, & Rasekh, 2019). Understanding the factors that influence the performance of pharmaceutical distribution in emerging markets is critical for companies seeking to capitalize on these opportunities and improve patient access to medicines.

South Africa is one of the largest pharmaceutical markets in Africa and a key gateway to the broader sub-Saharan region (Horner, 2022). The pharmaceutical distribution landscape in South Africa is characterised by a mix of local and international players, including wholesalers, distributors, and retail pharmacy chains (Naidoo & Suleman, 2021). The market is heavily regulated, with the South African Health Products Regulatory Authority (SAHPRA) overseeing the registration, pricing, and quality control of medicines (Gray, Suleman & Pharasi, 2017). Several challenges and opportunities have been identified in the literature on pharmaceutical distribution in South Africa. Key challenges include supply chain inefficiencies, regulatory compliance, and the need for effective demand forecasting and inventory management (Moodley & Suleman, 2019). These challenges can lead to stockouts, high costs, and reduced access to medicines for patients (Kumar et al., 2018).

On the other hand, opportunities for growth and innovation exist in areas such as digitalisation, market consolidation, and the expansion of private healthcare services (WHO, 2020). For instance, adopting digital technologies can help reduce costs, improve supply chain visibility, and enhance customer service (Gray, Riddin & Jugathpal, 2016). Moreover, market consolidation can lead to increased efficiencies and economies of scale, while expanding private healthcare services may create new market segments and distribution channels for pharmaceutical products (Tetteh, 2022). Future research should explore the interplay between

industry dynamics, firm-level resources and capabilities, and strategic leadership in shaping the performance of pharmaceutical distribution companies in South Africa and other emerging markets. For this reason, this literature review highlights the critical role of pharmaceutical distribution in emerging markets like South Africa and the need for further research to address the identified gaps and challenges. The research paper aims to contribute to understanding pharmaceutical distribution in emerging markets and its impact on organisations and healthcare systems.

**Methodology.** The authors have adopted a qualitative research methodology, using in-depth interviews with strategic leaders in the pharmaceutical distribution industry in South Africa. This approach contrasts with earlier works' more commonly employed quantitative methods. By choosing a qualitative method, our study delves into the rich, descriptive insights of leadership practices, which quantitative methods may overlook. It allows us to capture the essence of strategic leadership behaviours and decisions contextually bound to the unique challenges and opportunities within emerging markets.

**Scientific Novelty.** This study contributes novel empirical evidence to the field of strategic leadership in emerging markets. While previous research, such as the work by Modisakeng, Matlala, Godman, & Meyer (2020), has provided a broad overview of the challenges in pharmaceutical distribution, our study is innovative in its empirical investigation of how these challenges are navigated by strategic leadership to maintain SCA. Furthermore, the insights garnered from the experiences of pharmaceutical distribution managers in South Africa offer a unique contribution that has not been previously documented in the academic discourse.

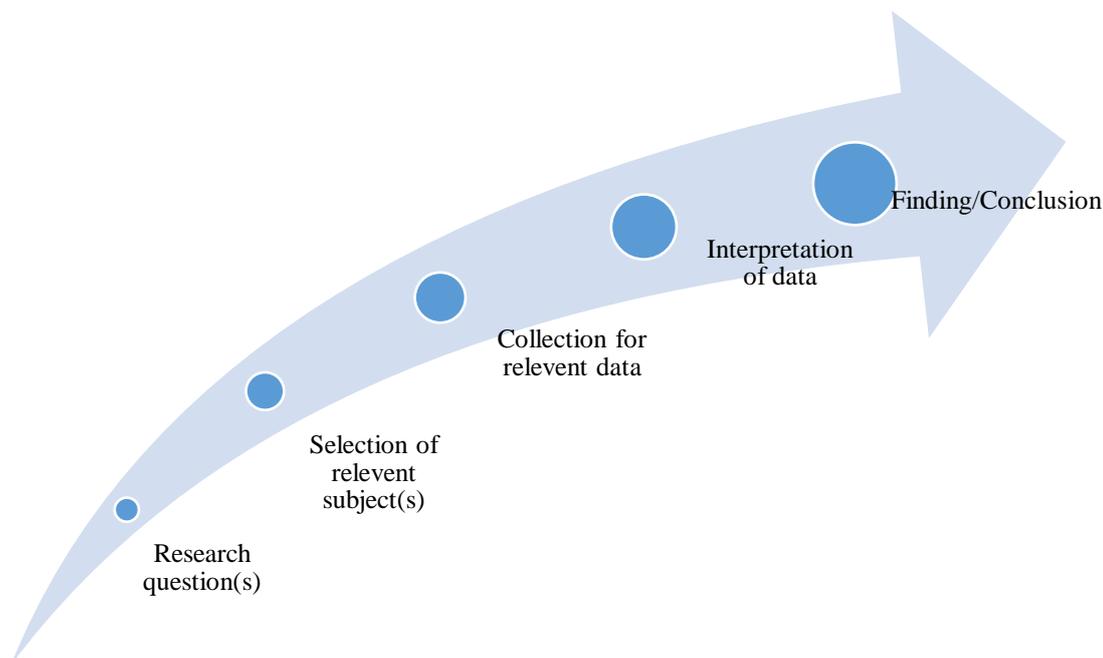
## Methodology

**Research Approach.** Research strategies should be selected considering the study's overarching goals, secondary objectives, and anticipated applications of the study's results and suggestions (Kolb, 2017). In the realm of academic inquiry, researchers can employ a range of research methodologies, each falling into one of three overarching categories: exploration, description, and causal analysis (Kolb, 2017; Babbie, 2019; Myers, 2020; Wiid & Diggines, 2021). The research in question employed an exploratory strategy, as its purpose was to acquire fresh perspectives, uncover novel concepts, and enhance understanding of the responsibilities played by strategic leadership in achieving competitive advantage. Considering that the roles of strategic leadership, let alone the development of sustaining competition, is not yet well researched in pharmaceutical distribution in emerging markets like South Africa (Bushe, 2019), among the three ways that were studied, it was determined that exploratory research was the most suitable option. According to Babbie (2020), exploratory research is most appropriate when the research focuses on a novel topic or when the subject of study is still in its early stages of development.

This study used a qualitative research methodology to investigate the significance of strategic leadership in facilitating the attainment of sustained competitive advantage within the pharmaceutical distribution sector in South Africa. The qualitative methodology allows for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation by providing rich, contextualised, and nuanced insights (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This study adopted an exploratory research methodology to better understand the responsibilities of strategic leadership in maintaining competitive advantage. An exploratory study was an appropriate method since the effect of strategic leadership on competitive sustainability in the pharmaceutical distribution sector is primarily uncharted, especially in developing markets like South Africa (Bushe, 2019). Without extensive background information, this method was invaluable for illuminating hitherto unexplored study regions (Babbie, 2020). As proposed by Umar (2020), this investigation also uses a systematic review strategy, which draws from a wide variety of previously published material to provide an in-depth understanding (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Given the exploratory character of this study, a qualitative methodology was deemed the most suitable approach for data collection, with the help of Bryman's (2017) framework shown in Figure 1. Following the advice of prominent experts on the subject, the research method prioritised conducting a thorough literature study. According to Hiebl (2023), a poorly done literature study might negatively affect the quality of a thesis, paper, or dissertation. Research findings might be off if the researcher does not fully understand the breadth of the current literature, as (Gray, 2021) noted. Examiners and reviewers place significant emphasis on the literature review when determining the overall quality of a thesis or paper. According to research conducted by Ariono, Wasesa and Dhewanto (2022), reviewers form an opinion of the entire thesis based on the quality of the literature review, with a poorly written review prompting reviewers to suspect flaws in the rest of the work.

In addition to being found and evaluated, literature should be critically assessed, as stressed by (Obi et al., 2021). Instead of taking the available material at face value, critical thinkers should question its veracity and seek other viewpoints. It is worth noting that authors, like everyone else, might change their minds over time (Blaikie & Priest, 2019). The goal of this review was to evaluate the body of literature by applying a set of criteria to it, rather than just comparing studies to one another but rather measuring each against a predetermined benchmark of quality (Rethlefsen et al., 2021).



**Figure 1. The Process of Qualitative Research**

Source: Adopted from (Umar, 2020)

**Research Design and Philosophy.** Qualitative methods were used because of their superiority in eliciting participants' experiences (strategic leaders). The researchers adopted a phenomenological perspective to record the individuals' thoughts and feelings. The pharmaceutical business may benefit greatly from this method's emphasis on individual experience and interpretation, as it sheds light on the many facets of strategic leadership in the sector (Myers, 2020). Two primary research methods can be employed in academic research, namely quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative research is characterised by its reliance on numerical data, measurements, and computations. It is typically characterised by a higher degree of structure and adherence to scientific principles than qualitative research, which is sometimes considered unrelated to the qualitative methodology (Wiid & Diggines, 2021).

In contrast, qualitative research is predicated on acquiring comprehensive and intricate descriptions provided by participants, aiming to obtain a deeper understanding of a specific situation (Wiid & Diggines, 2021). This aspect was considered relevant to the research paper. Therefore, the research utilised a qualitative methodology to effectively explore and understand the participants' lived experiences (strategic leaders). Furthermore, using qualitative research methods would address the dearth of theoretical frameworks within the present research domain.

Every research study is grounded in a paradigm encompassing philosophical beliefs and assumptions about the nature of trustworthy research and the most appropriate procedures for advancing knowledge (Myers, 2020; Gray, 2021). Within the realm of research, two primary research philosophies exist, each characterised by contrasting assumptions on reality and perspectives on the world. These philosophies are commonly referred to as the positivistic paradigm and phenomenological philosophy (Flick, 2018). The present investigation was undertaken within the framework of phenomenological philosophy to delve into and comprehend the lived experiences and insights of the participants, who were identified as strategic leaders. Epistemologically, phenomenological techniques are grounded in a philosophical framework that centres on personal knowledge and subjectivity, emphasising the significance of individual perspectives and interpretations (Myers, 2020). Hence, a comprehensive understanding of the functions of strategic leadership within the pharmaceutical sector and the ability to discern and use competitive advantage (namely,

sustainability) among the individuals involved in this research constituted a crucial component of this study. The epistemological basis for this study involved the researcher interacting with strategic pharmaceutical leaders/managers to explore how strategic leadership roles ensure sustainability in pharmaceutical distribution in emerging markets.

The primary objective of phenomenology is to acquire a more profound comprehension of the essence and significance of individuals' lived experiences. The primary focus of this study revolves around investigating the conceptual understanding of strategic leadership within the context of Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity (VUCA), particularly in the current era marked by the COVID-19 pandemic. The study utilised a phenomenological research approach to investigate the experiences and views of pharmaceutical distribution managers about strategic leadership and the attainment of sustained competitive advantage. The phenomenological approach focuses on understanding a phenomenon by examining an individual's experiences (Larkin, Shaw, & Flowers, 2019).

***Participants and Sampling Method.*** Ten strategic leaders from a pharmaceutical distribution firm in South Africa participated in the study. Participants were selected using a purposive sample technique, considering their positions as strategic leaders and their expertise in the business. The goal of this selection process was to include “information-rich” individuals with deep understanding, specific expertise, and first-hand experience in pharmaceutical distribution management (Umar & Egbu, 2018). One of the requirements for participation was that applicants have worked in the pharmaceutical distribution industry for at least five years. Table 1 displays information about the participants.

The study involved ten pharmaceutical distribution managers from an organisation in South Africa. The participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy, ensuring they held strategic leadership positions within their respective companies and had relevant experience in the pharmaceutical distribution industry. Purposive sampling allowed for selection of participants who could provide valuable insights into the study question (Campbell et al., 2020). A research population refers to a collective group of study elements, including individuals, artefacts, events, or organisations. These elements are selected for data collection, which serves as the foundation for subsequent analysis (Klenke, Martin, & Wallace, 2016; Babbie, 2020). The sample population for this study comprises pharmaceutical distribution managers, as determined by the study's objectives. Klenke et al. (2016) noted that the target population for the study did not encompass all members.

Therefore, the researchers established eligibility criteria to delineate the requirements for inclusion in the target group. For instance, a managerial position may grant an individual membership within the general population. However, it does not inherently grant inclusion within the specific target group unless they had at least five years of experience as a pharmaceutical distribution manager. Hence, the individuals included in the target population for this research were strategic leaders who possessed substantial expertise and understanding in overseeing the work of a pharmaceutical distribution manager and executing various strategic leadership responsibilities. This is due to the fact that phenomenological qualitative research, such as the study at hand, places significant emphasis on the dependence on experiential knowledge, insightful understanding, and the inter-subjective perspectives of the individuals involved in the research process (Myers, 2020).

Sampling is selecting a subset of a population to be studied using a predetermined set of criteria (Babbie, 2020). There are two main types of sampling techniques: probability sampling and non-probability sampling. The chance of a sample being drawn from a population is unknown when using a non-probability sampling technique, which relies on the researcher's assessment (Wiid & Diggines, 2021). The interest of this study was in the intricacies of the sample being studied, drawing on theory and practice, such as the researcher's experience and the evolutionary nature of the research process. This study, therefore, employed a non-probability sampling method. The success of a phenomenological or qualitative investigation hinges on the selection of suitable subjects (Kolb, 2017). The study employed a purposive sample technique to attain this efficacy, including only “information-rich” people with substantial insight, specific knowledge, or firsthand experience in pharmaceutical distribution management. See Table 1 below for the participant's profile.

Table. 1.1 Participants Profile

Partakers (n=10)	Positon	Subdivision	Years in industry	Educational level	Employees in department
Participant A	General Manager	Legal and Operations	31	Diploma	197
Participant B	Franchise Manager	Franchise and Sales and Marketing	10	Degree	20
Participant C	HR Manager	HR (Human Resources)	21	Degree	197
Participant D	Finance Manager	Finance and Human Resource	5	Degree	18
Participant E	Responsible Pharmacist & Operations Manager	Legal and Operations	7	Degree	98
Participant F	Warehouse Manager	Supply and Operations	32	Degree	15
Participant G	Telesales Manager	Sales and Marketing	27	Diploma	21
Participant H	Credits Manager	Finance and Operations	8	Diploma	5
Participant I	Inventory Manager	Supply and Operations	35	Diploma	12
Participant J	IT Manager	IT (Information Technology)	20	Degree	3

Source: Compiled by the authors

**Data Collection and Analysis.** With participants' permission, the authors conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews that lasted around 60 minutes and recorded the audio. The duties of strategic leadership and maintaining a competitive edge were the focus of a standardised interview guide. After that, we used the six-stage method provided by Braun and Clarke (2022) to analyse the qualitative data using theme analysis, showing patterns and themes that shed light on the study issue. Due to the exploratory nature of the data and the study, no statistical analysis was performed.

Verbatim transcripts of the interviews were then subjected to the six-step process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation, known as thematic analysis, outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). The process encompassed acquainting oneself with the data, formulating preliminary codes, searching for themes, examining the identified topics, establishing and labelling the themes, and ultimately preparing the final report. The utilisation of thematic analysis facilitated the discernment of recurring patterns and themes within the data, thereby providing insights into the significance of strategic leadership in guaranteeing long-term competitive advantage within the pharmaceutical distribution sector. Interviews were conducted to gather exploratory qualitative data. This data was examined using a non-quantitative approach, and no statistical analysis was deemed applicable (Myers, 2020). In this study, the researcher employed the data analysis technique known as thematic analysis, which helped her narrow her focus from a superficial interpretation of the interviews' raw data to the underlying patterns and core themes (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2022). The researcher benefited greatly from using thematic analysis because it requires nothing from a theoretical or technical background yet provides a thorough organisation and description of the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Purposive sampling, in-depth interviews, and an interpretive methodology made it possible to assess and analyse data as it was being gathered for this study. (Babbie, 2020; Myers, 2020). The data analysis process involved a series of iterative steps, including compiling notes derived from the researcher's thoughts and observations, reducing interview notes, categorising data from all interviews, and establishing connections with other data sources, such as the literature review. After categorising the data and identifying themes, the last stage involved presenting the data in a tabular structure that systematically reflects the identified themes. See Table 2 below. Research data sets contain crucial elements in answering a research question, and themes reflect patterns or meanings that arise from these data sets (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The tabular format was suitable for displaying reduced data in an organised and orderly manner, which assisted when discerning patterns, establishing connections of themes and patterns, and any other analysis of data.

**Trustworthiness.** The confirmability was ensured using procedures such as member verification, peer debriefing, and reflective journaling (Guba, 1981). Preliminary results were shared with participants for member verification to provide an accurate portrayal. The legitimacy of the study was bolstered by peer debriefing, which consisted of talks among researchers regarding their methods and conclusions. Because the researcher documented their beliefs, thoughts, and prejudices in a reflective notebook, their study gained credibility and transparency.

Several measures were employed to ensure the study's trustworthiness, particularly member checking, peer debriefing, and maintaining a reflexive journal (Guba, 1981). Member checking involved sharing the preliminary findings with the participants to ensure an accurate representation of their perspectives. Peer debriefing involved engaging in discussions with peers to strengthen the credibility of the study by examining the research method and outcomes. In conclusion, the researcher diligently maintained a reflexive notebook throughout the research endeavour, meticulously recording personal biases, assumptions, and thoughts. This practice was undertaken to augment the transparency and credibility of the study.

## Results and Discussion

Table. 1.2 Identified Five Roles of Strategic Leadership to Sustain Competitive Edge

Theme reflecting role	Frequency	Elements of the theme
Setting strategic direction	eight	Building synergy to respond to external change
		Reconfiguring strategic posture
		Managing technological change
Business complexity management	five	Balancing sales and costs
		Managing customer value
		Diversifying a portfolio of pharmacy stores
Promoting organisational structure	nine	Building a unifying structure – One Alpha Pharma
		Building new partnerships for growth
Organisational culture management	seven	Changing organisational culture
Human resource development	eight	Upskilling human capital to meet future business needs

Source: Compiled by the authors

**Setting Strategic Direction.** Eight strategic leaders expressed how they were setting the direction of competitive behaviour reconfiguring operations while managing technological changes. One of the strategic leaders reflected on how he responded to external changes and set the future direction for competing.

*The industry changed with Single Exit Price (SEP) pricing.... It became highly regulated where bonusing discounts were disallowed by government. We had to change the way we approach business. We had more synergy to be able to do our promotions and our marketing together. Then we became one Alpha Pharm national company. The strategic decision is to save costs and continue to lead (Participant D).*

As illustrated below, strategic leaders were also scanning the competitive landscape to map the future.

*We are trading in a very competitive environment, we are competing with government and NHI, and regulations and corporates in our industry. Independent pharmacies are trading in, a lot of pharmacies get their backs up against the wall. To avoid that the store is sold to a corporate, Clicks or Dis-Chem or TLC, Alpha Pharm takes over the pharmacy. If the licence or the business could be sold to a corporate, it becomes even harder for the remaining independent pharmacies. We have been taking over stores that are in financial difficulty (Participant B).*

Another aspect of setting direction was about reconfiguring the organisation's strategic posture and re-thinking ways of doing business to compete well.

*Prior to us being Alpha Pharm we would have been three separate entities where we had Natal wholesale chemists which included Durban and Newcastle. Inland we had what is called Free State Buying Group and they had a branch in Pretoria and a branch in Bloemfontein....We had to change the way we approach business. We subsequently all changed our name to Alpha Pharm KZN, Alpha Pharm Bloemfontein, and Alpha Pharm Cape Town. Then we became one Alpha Pharm, a national company with a national footprint (Participant C).*

Another strategic leader elaborated on how strategic direction entailed making strategic choices on technological changes appropriate to ensure everyone's involvement in shaping the future. This is how it was expressed by one of the participants:

*The management team to implement to help us to get to our strategies and to eventually achieve our goals. We decided to go on a new ERP system, we are implementing this new ERP and that is absolutely a necessity to achieve our company goals, to get everybody in the platform, to get our buying right, to get us the finance side right, to get our operations right and we need to get a new ERP system (Participant E).*

Another strategic leader reported on the variety of technological efforts that were being implemented to add value to enhance internal capacity and procurement.

*Decision was made by the heads of Alpha Pharm to bring modern technology.....improve procurement processes and purchasing power of the company .....we got as far as implementing the new IT system, Oracle. ....they are trying to do a lot to add value to the business... (Participant D)*

Business Complexity Management. Five strategic leaders concurred that they had the task of managing the complexity of business, which was manifested in various ways. One of the participants focused on the complexity of business arising from the need to continuously balance an in-ward focus to manage costs and an out-ward focus to generate sales.

*We will set goals for ourselves.....we make strategic decisions based on line items if packaging has sky-rocketed we dig deeper. We try to reduce our costs to sustain the business. On the marketing side we might try different forms of advertisement, competitions.....we have really managed the expenses of the business and it is on the sales side that we are really struggling and that could be competition in the market which we do have in KZN especially we have Pharmed, Kharwastan and City Medical.....(Participant H).*

Internal complexity also entailed understanding and managing the relationships between costs and quality, but also technology and innovation, as illustrated below.

*It is to ensure that the medications the pharmacies receive are of adequate quality ....quality management. We have got to look at cutting costs. We need to start multiskilling people, teaching people to do other things. It is mainly from the top – from our head office. ....the change in the IT system. I think one of the things is innovation (Participant C).*

This is what one of the strategic leaders had to say regarding dynamic changes in customer value.

*For a business to work we have something call GP, you know that. Gross profit, which means some of your prices are higher and some of your prices are lower, but you must sell the higher ones and you must sell the lower ones. .... If the customer GP is very low, the growth profitability of the customer to me is low, sometimes I could say we are servicing you simply to get volume ...future value from the business, we are not making any profits (Participant I).*

Another dimension of managing complexity entailed diversifying the portfolio by bringing on-board independent retail pharmacies poorly run by moonlighting, black owners without any business experience and training.

*The challenge is that many new pharmacists entering the marketplace are black pharmacists who are compromised because they do not have funding to finance their businesses. We have been taking over stores that are in financial difficulty. ....whatever affects those people...retailers, affects us as a wholesaler too (Participant F).*

**Promoting Organisational Structure.** Nine strategic leaders asserted that they were championing and building support for a unifying organisational structure and system and partnerships for growth. Strategic leaders were championing and supporting a shift from being a regional pharmaceutical wholesaler to a national corporation with a corporate office and a new modus operandi. This task of organisational design to create a united force was reported as follows:

*We have gone from being a wholesaler into a sort of corporate business. We were three different businesses operating nationally, now amalgamated into one business, Alpha Pharm corporate. Business has changed in the past few months. .... now we are one big national company. The new organisation is still getting into place, managers are lost in the change and new ways of doing business. We have had a huge change in the last 3 years. That has been a bit of a challenge because of the huge change we have had, we now have a head office at Johannesburg. We always know that change is good, but it is also very difficult to change. Our management has changed drastically (Participant G).*

The task of organisation design also related to partnerships as a mode of achieving business survival and growth.

*With change in the health sector, if we as pharmacies want to remain in this industry. Then, we must partner one way or another with the public sector Alpha Pharm needs to be strategic, looking at how we compete with the short liners and with the corporates, you will see partnerships starting to come about, with the likes of Super Groups and things like that (Participant A).*

**Organisational Culture Management.** This study reveals that seven strategic leaders knew that changing mindsets and ways of doing things were at the heart of sustaining how we compete in the market.

*We needed to change the mind-set and culture of people because we are coming from three completely different regions with three completely different business ideas, so we must get all of that onto a common platform. Alpha Pharm is a merger. We must cut costs and improve efficiency by changing our system (Participant J).*

Managing cultural change also entailed change of artefacts, and new espoused values to drive behaviours.

*Part of the change at alpha Pharm, you would have seen that it was the change of the logo of the business, there was also change in slogan of the business. Now it says; Care, Service and Value. You need to look at that one and that is what Alpha Pharm is trying to achieve (Participant I).*

Re-orientation and entrenchment of new reporting lines and ways of interaction within and across various levels of the organisation was part of cultural change, as depicted in the quote below.

*We need to keep abreast of what is going on in the industry. We have heads of departments that are all based in Centurion. ...it is driven through that structure, so you need strong communication filtering down. decisions will have to be made on a national level and everybody will follow suit..... micro level..... I would have a monthly management meeting. Communication is what key for whatever happens. We must all be on the same page. We would in turn, as general managers have meetings in Centurion where we are meeting with the corporate heads, and we have feedback on both ways (Participant E).*

**Human Resource Development.** A total of eight manifested the task of up-skilling people and developing strategic human resources for future market demand and labour requirements. One of the strategic leaders emphasised the importance of developing human resources as a crucial response to deviations in the aggressive environment.

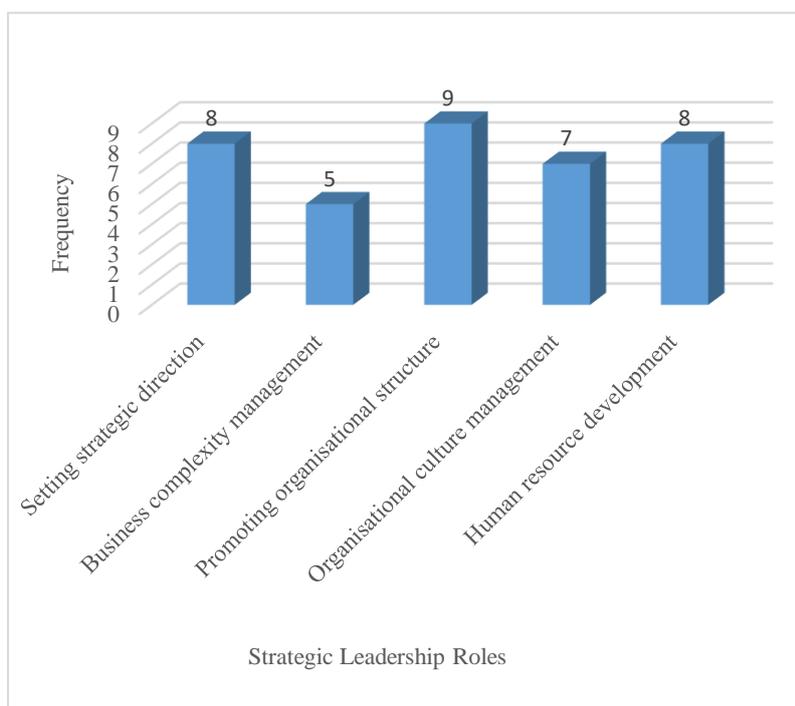
*I do a lot of employment equity drives regarding skilling people up and training and development. I take directive from regional Human Resource (HR). We are looking to see outside the organisation, we have got National Health Insurance (NHI) coming on board. If we want to become a strategic partner within the NHI, we would obviously need to improve our BEE status. One of the things we can do is through our employment equity and our skills and training (Participant C).*

*..... policies must be implemented by our national head so that we all know exactly what our goal is and what we need to achieve....(Participant C).*

With a more focused view, another strategic leader elaborated on developing resources to drive the business in the future, as illustrated below.

*Development also tries to reach the BEE points; you must be compliant with all the legislation regarding employment equity and skills development. ....these skilled staff could keep drive this organisation in future. I try my best within my portfolio to make sure that we are sustainable regarding our staffing... sustainability ties into BEE which is key for our business (Participant H).*

The bar-chart diagram illustrating the frequency of identified roles of strategic leadership is in Figure 2 below. The bar-chart diagram illustrates the frequency of identified roles of strategic leadership to sustain a competitive edge. Each bar represents one of the five key roles: Setting Strategic Direction, Business Complexity Management, Promoting Organisational Structure, Organisational Culture Management, and Human Resource Development. The length of the bar correlates with the frequency each role was mentioned or identified in the study, providing a clear visual representation of which roles are most prevalent or emphasized by strategic leaders in the pharmaceutical industry.



**Figure 2. Frequency of Identified Roles of Strategic Leadership**

Source: Compiled by the authors

## Discussion of the Results

*Setting Strategic Direction.* However, the study's most important conclusion is that different types of strategic leadership can have varying impacts on the durability of a company's competitive edge. Setting direction influences competitive advantage by building synergy to respond to external change, reconfiguring strategic posture and managing technological change. DuBrin (2022) asserts the role of setting direction relates to the charismatic role of a strategic leader. It cannot be overstated how crucial it is for a group to have a common understanding of its purpose if it is to successfully define direction (Sturm, Vera, & Crossan, 2017). In any effort to sustain competitive advantage, empowering and energising people regarding the direction in which an organisation competes is crucial. This is the bedrock of commitment but also organisational citizenship.

The findings explicitly show that the foundation of setting an organisation's direction is a good understanding of internal resources and capabilities and the competitive landscape to map the future. Setting direction embraced activities revealing how Alpha Pharma was also competing with the government, NHI, and corporations such as Clicks, Dis-Chem and TLC. In this regard, it is not surprising that setting direction was also about reconfiguring the organisation's strategic posture and re-thinking ways of doing business to compete well.

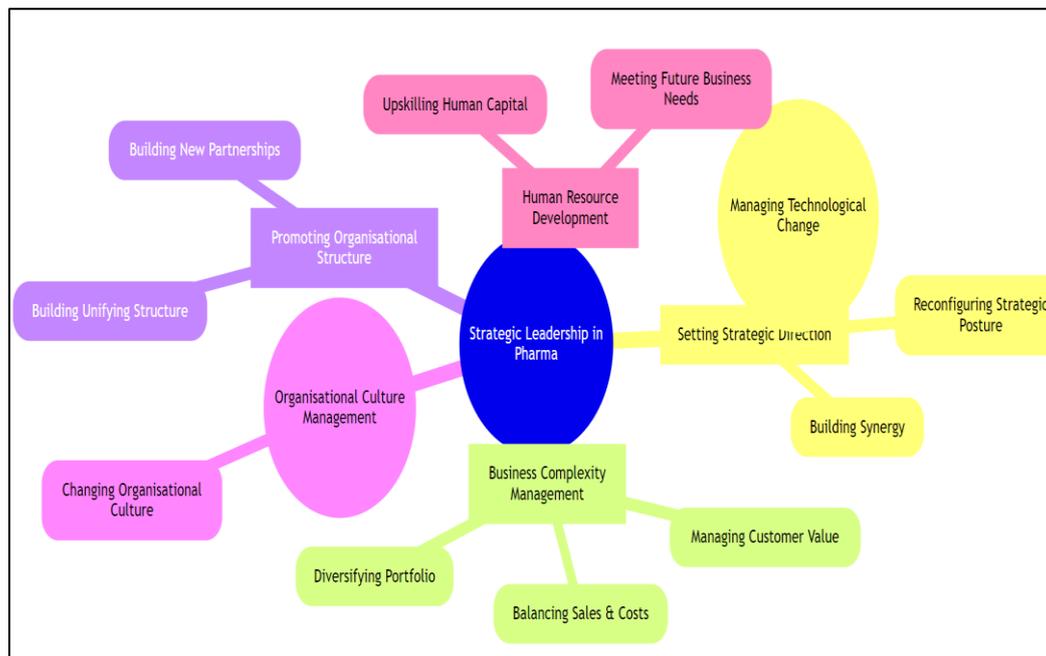
Additionally, setting strategic direction also entailed making strategic choices on technological changes appropriate to ensure everyone's involvement in shaping the future. This is salient as technological changes may influence the procurement process, financial process, and financial process to add value to internal capacity. Notably, Alpha Pharma was shifting away from price-based competitive advantage (e.g., bonuses), which is not only easy to imitate by competitors but was also vulnerable to industry changes such as the adoption of single Exit Price (SEP) pricing. It is prudent that strategic leadership considers how strategic direction exploits and explores resources to sustain rather than erode competitive advantage in the market. Painter, Pouryousefi, Hibbert, and Russon (2018) explicitly state that internal alignment is essential for organisational efficiency.

*Business Complexity Management.* However, the strategic leadership role also managed business complexity, which emanated from the tension between managing costs and generating sales in a competitive environment. It is noteworthy that Alpha Pharma was encountering competition from Pharmed, Kharwastan and City Medical in KwaZulu-Natal, just to mention a few. This was critical, especially when Alpha Pharma struggled to generate sales despite different forms of advertisement and market competition. Circumstances like these trigger the question of what needs to be done to regain or create a new basis of competitive advantage that is sustainable.

*Organisational Culture Management.* Furthermore, the tasks of managing organisational culture and design (e.g., structure unifying previously different organisations, use of partnerships for growth) are valuable in sustaining competitive advantage if aligned with strategy. As Alpha Pharma was restructuring to create a head office, new responsibilities and reporting lines, it is interesting that a change in elements of culture accompanied this. For example, a new logo and new values were introduced as part of the amalgamated “one Alpha Pharma”. Culture is often viewed as the taken-for-granted beliefs and values shared in a particular group (Johnson et al., 2020). It is pivotal for strategic leaders to remember that what individuals believe in and value influences their strategic decisions and how they respond to issues they face. The espoused values of Alpha Parma include care, service and value. However, strategic leaders are cautioned to delve underneath the espoused values to fathom the underlying taken-for-granted values or assumptions which sustain a competitive advantage (Louw & Venter, 2021).

*Human Resource Development.* Building human capital was central to sustaining competitive advantage as it prepared a pipeline of future employees (up-skilling, training) for future market demand and labour requirements. Managing human capital was not simply strategic to meet BBEE regulatory requirements but also open up business possibilities as a strategic partner of the upcoming National Health Insurance. In this regard, human capital development is not just an in-ward focused task, as it has external market implications in future. It is salient to stress that strategic leaders were also entering into partnerships for growth or defending turf. However, building social capital to sustain competitive advantage was not equally pronounced in this study. It is posited that there are three types of social capital. Family, friends, and those who share one's culture, ethnicity, or professional interests are all examples of the kind of people with whom one has established strong bonds through social capital. Secondly, social capital acts as a kind of communication. In this context, “social capital” refers to ties between people that go beyond a common identity. Finally, social capital as linkage establishes ties to higher and lower entities in the social hierarchy. According to Hitt *et al.* (2019), social capital encompasses the relations between individuals and organisations that enable the exploitation and exploration of value. Social capital is a serious resource for strategic leaders to manage, as it includes relations inside and outside the organisation (Thakhathi, le Roux & Davis, 2019). Thus, internal social capital is about relations between strategic leaders and those they lead. External social capital is concerned with the relations between strategic leaders and those outside the organisation who network to benefit the business and its customers, among other key stakeholders.

Thus, building human capital should be aligned with the requirement to explore and exploit future market demands (Johnson, Whittington, Scholes, Angwin, & Regner, 2016). There is also a need to focus on building social capital and relationships to ensure the effective use of partnerships for business survival and growth. Here is the mind map diagram illustrating the strategic leadership roles in the pharmaceutical industry in Figure 3 below. The mind map diagram provides a visual representation of the strategic leadership roles in the pharmaceutical industry, branching out from a central node labelled “Strategic Leadership in Pharma”. Each major branch represents a distinct role identified in the study: Setting Strategic Direction, Business Complexity Management, Promoting Organisational Structure, Organisational Culture Management, and Human Resource Development. Sub-branches extend to detail the specific activities or focus areas within each role, such as “Building Synergy”, “Reconfiguring Strategic Posture”, and “Managing Technological Change” under Setting Strategic Direction. This mind map helps to conceptualise the complex interrelations and scope of strategic leadership roles in a structured and hierarchical manner.



**Figure 3. The Strategic Leadership Roles in the Pharmaceutical Industry**

Source: Compiled by the authors

### Contributions of the Study

This research significantly advanced our understanding of strategic leadership, particularly as it relates to the pharmaceutical distribution industry in developing countries. The study enriched our comprehension of the significance of strategic leadership roles in establishing a long-term competitive edge in this sector. Identification of Strategic Leadership Roles: The research established five distinct strategic leadership roles within pharmaceutical distribution in emerging markets: (1) setting strategic direction, (2) business complexity management, (3) promoting organisational structure, (4) organisational culture management, and (5) human resource development.

**Sustainable Competitive Advantage:** The study revealed how these leadership roles contribute to creating and maintaining a sustainable competitive advantage.

**Recommendations for Best Practices:** Based on the identified roles and their impacts, the study provides recommendations for enhancing sustainable competitive advantage. For example, leaders need to focus on internal synergy and resource exploitation to set a strategic direction. Similarly, business complexity should be managed by balancing costs, sales, and risks. The organisational structure should be unified and aligned with the strategy, while organisational culture should delve deeper into underlying values and assumptions. Finally, human resource development should anticipate future market demands and build social capital for business survival and growth.

**Laying groundwork for future research:** This research opens various new avenues for inquiry. It suggests expanding the focus to various contexts within the pharmaceutical industry and employing diverse data collection methods. It also encourages exploring the perspectives of non-strategic leaders and employees, their roles in shaping competitive strategy, and the potential interplay between sustainable procurement, strategic leadership, and the sustainability of pharmaceutical distribution in emerging markets.

**Practical Implications for the Pharmaceutical Distribution Sector:** The insights drawn from this study can inform the decision-making processes within the pharmaceutical distribution industry in emerging markets, aiding in establishing sustainable strategies and practices. However, the contributions should be interpreted considering the study's limitations: data was collected mainly through interviews, the results may not be generalized globally, and real-time observational data was not employed. Despite these limitations, this study's findings offer valuable insights that could be applied to similar contexts within the industry.

## Conclusions

The present study has successfully identified and thoroughly examined the strategic leadership responsibilities within the context of pharmaceutical distribution in emerging markets. The primary objective of this study was to investigate the many functions of strategic leadership within the pharmaceutical distribution sector in emerging markets and to determine how these functions contribute to establishing a sustainable competitive advantage. To accomplish this goal, specific objectives were formulated to guide the research process. Data was obtained using semi-structured interviews. The study has identified the roles of strategic leadership and recommended how competitive advantage can be sustained. The study has laid the basis for how strategic leadership roles are a potential source of sustained competitive advantage from pharmaceutical distribution in emerging markets. It is also notable that the objective of this study has been met by revealing how each of the identified five different roles of strategic leadership (1) setting strategic direction, (2) business complexity management, (3) promoting organisational structure, (4) organisational culture management and (5) human resource development influences the sustainability of competitive advantage.

This study has three primary drawbacks. The primary constraint in this study pertains to the data-gathering process, which predominantly relies on a single method, specifically conducting interviews with individual strategic leaders. Using interviews as the primary strategy for data gathering necessitated the researcher to rely on the information disclosed or shared by strategic leaders during the interview process. To address this issue, subsequent interviews were conducted to obtain further information and ensure the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the data provided by key decision-makers, if needed. The second limitation is that results cannot be generalised to the global pharmaceutical industry as the results are exclusive from pharmaceutical distribution in emerging markets such as South Africa. The results on how the strategic leadership roles affecting the sustainability of competitive advantage are limited to management levels within pharmaceutical distribution in emerging markets. In this way, the results do not give an all-inclusive view of the organisation. The results cannot be generalised to pharmaceutical distribution in emerging markets and only apply to pharmaceutical distribution in emerging markets. The reason is that this research focused only on the roles of strategic leadership in pharmaceutical distribution in emerging markets. The third limitation is that the study did not use real-time observation data. It is a reconstruction of competitive advantage rather than the foresight of competitive strategy. Finally, due to the study's specific sectoral focus, the generalizability of the findings in a quantitative manner may be limited. Nevertheless, several aspects of these findings may possess transferability to comparable contexts. The subsequent part deals with proposing potential avenues for future research.

From both a methodological and substantive standpoint, the following issues are proposed as potential avenues for future research within the field of strategic leadership, strategy, and sustainability: it is necessary to conduct additional research to enhance the depth of understanding regarding the significance of strategic leadership in promoting sustainability. It may be achieved by widening the scope of the study context to encompass a greater range of contexts within the pharmaceutical business subject to investigation. Moreover, this research could potentially derive advantages by employing many data-gathering methods. Furthermore, the research conclusions could be validated, questioned, or expanded upon through subsequent studies that employ the same methodology but centre on critical perspectives provided by non-strategic leaders.

Academic scholars in the field of strategy recognise that individuals who do not possess strategic leadership roles, as well as other employees, are a subset of the various actors who contribute to developing and implementing competitive strategies. The inquiry into the cognitive processes of persons regarding strategic leadership roles and their impact on the sustainability of competitiveness presents a compelling area for academic investigation. In conclusion, future investigations may prioritise examining the relationship between sustainable procurement and strategic leadership as key factors contributing to the sustainability of pharmaceutical distribution in emerging economies. Future research could also include all the departments from pharmaceutical distribution in emerging markets to determine the strategic leadership pedagogical framework for the entire organisation.

## Recommendations

For the roles of strategic leadership in ensuring sustainable competitive advantage for pharmaceutical distribution in emerging markets, the following are the recommendations: (a) setting strategic direction needs internal synergy to respond to external change. There is a need not only for an external focus to explore opportunities but also to build and exploit internal resources and capabilities. (b) business complexity

management is key to sustaining competitiveness by balancing the tension between costs and sales and managing risks in the business portfolio before pursuing growth. (c) In promoting organisational structure for successful strategy implementation, these structures must be aligned with the strategy and interact as a unified structure. (d) Organisational culture management should focus not only on artefacts (e.g., logo, structure) or espoused values but also on the underlying values and basic assumptions that shape behaviours to sustain competitive advantage. (e) human resource development should be aligned with requirements to explore and exploit future market demands. There is also a need to focus on building social capital and relationships to ensure the effective use of partnerships for business survival and growth.

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