Influence of Social Networks on Students' Choice of a University: A Case of St Augustine University of Tanzania

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Abstract: The main objective of this study was to establish the influence of social networks on students' choice of a university using the descriptive research design. Simple random sampling method was used to select 138 out of 1553 potential respondents to fill the questionnaire. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics in terms of frequencies and percentages through the Statistical Package for Social Sciences. This study established that majority of students used the social media platform in getting information regarding their current university. Instagram was found to be the mostly preferred social media site to provide information about the university. The study recommends that universities should develop and make use of social media platforms which work better in attracting potential students to join so as to increase the number of students. Top management teams should support the use of identified social media platforms in attracting potential students to join. Finally, universities should identify potential students and ask them to recommend their friends to choose the same university.

Keywords: Social networks; marketing; Instagram; Facebook; twitter; Utube; interaction.

Introduction

The advent of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) such as Web 2.0 led to the explosion of social media. These include social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter and Myspace, Wikis, Blog Sites, Hosted Services, Video-Sharing Sites and Web Applications. Social networks have changed how individuals and businesses function worldwide regarding communicating, making transactions, recruiting and conducting business (Šola & Zia, 2021). To keep pace with the ever-changing business and marketing trends, business organizations have integrated ICTs and internet technology into business, communication processes, production and marketing. The

development of social networks and their innovation has led organizations to better ways of communicating with their clients (Le *et al.*, 2019). This new communication and marketing challenge now extends to universities and educational institutions that attempt to influence students' decision-making processes (Krezel & Krezel, 2017).

Beforehand, traditional sources of information like broadcast and other print media, referrals from colleagues, family and friends and university websites, have been the main sources of program information. However, recent studies suggest that students are inexhaustible Internet and social network users (Kumar et al., 2020; Le *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, social networks and the internet have been affecting people's buying behavior and decision-making, which has put pressure on educational institutions to adopt new recruitment and marketing techniques.

It is argued that using social platforms would allow higher education institutions to reach out to more prospective students (Hashim & Zamani, 2015). Studies such as Lupton (2014); Mosha *et al.* (2015) and Kumar and Nanda (2019) report that some institutions use social networks to improve their business objectives. For example, Lupton (2014) argues that academicians have been using social networks strategically for their academic work with many benefits.

In addition, other scholars overstated the use of social networks in university activities. For example, Mashabe (2011) found that high school and university students aged between 8-24 years use social networks much to stay connected to their peers. Besides, stakeholders like students, faculty members, parents and donors could be accessible via these social media platforms. This calls for universities to integrate their social network platforms and accounts into marketing and communication strategies. Scientists such as Davis III *et al*. (2012) and Mosha *et al.* (2015) subscribe that social networks help universities share information and build relationships, if appropriately used. These networks are powerful tools that can be used to communicate and recruit new students, new staff and operate fund-raising channels (Troise and Camilleri, 2021).

Furthermore, using social media platforms as university advertising and marketing channels is a better move towards attracting new students, given their quick adoption in the use of social networks

and registered positive experiences in the corporate world of the impact of social networks in marketing (Masele & Rwehikiza, 2021). Likewise, Wibowo *et al.* (2020) are of the view that higher education social networks improve customer retention and communication and increase brand loyalty. Therefore, it can be assumed that using social media networks to drive university enrollment rate would be a better approach and helps new students make decisions about their study choices and institutes to join for academic endeavors.

Social networks provide opportunities through which university academic activities reach out to stakeholders by promoting news, publications, programs and other resources. Additionally, social networks offer an opportunity to disseminate information and engage with key stakeholders, hence growing the online communities around the university and leading to more expansion and outreach (Kumar & Nanda, 2019; Mazurek *et al.,* 2019). Social networks may not be all-inclusive and need to be part of a greater communication effort. However, scholars such as Mashabe (2011) and Masele & Rwehikiza (2021) recognize that marketing experts can communicate and engage with their customers for greater and broader feedback about products and services, thereby profitably meeting their needs through social networks. Social networks, when used strategically and adequately, provide many possibilities to help most institutions, mainly higher education institutions, improve and drive the quality of their services (Mosha *et al.,* 2015). In addition, social networks are ubiquitous among youth, especially in universities.

With increasing competition, social network platforms offer Tanzanian universities opportunity to promote their services at reduced costs and broader reach. The population of Tanzanians on social networks has been growing tremendously especially among the youth generation, who are the main target audience of these universities. Since most universities have adopted social network platforms as professional work tools (Lupton (2014), there are many studies from developed economies than developing economies on factors influencing students' choice of university using social networks. Literature on the influence of social media in enhancing communication and marketing of university programs in developing economies is either sparse or non-existent. Despite the potentialities of social networks in attracting a

customer base, literature is inadequate to show the influence of social networks on student's choice of university.

Besides, information on whether academic institutions are using social networks and other emerging platforms to their full potential to influence students' choice of university remains unaddressed. Given social networks' potential for the growth of universities, it still needs to be empirically established whether social networks play a role in better communication in increasing university enrollment. Thus, this study focused on the Influence of Social Networks on Students' Choice of University in Tanzania. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Did students use social media platforms in getting information regarding their current university?
2. What kind of social media did students use in getting information regarding their current university?
3. Did students interact with their friends in searching for information regarding university?

Literature Review

A number of studies, for example Reddy et al. (2014), Shu and Scott (2014) and Hamade (2013) have addressed the question of how social networks affect students' choice of university in developed economies. Hamade (2013) examined the perception and use of social networking sites among university students in Kuwait and studied the positive and negative effects. The study showed that most students frequently view posts on Twitter and Facebook. While positive results were better relationships with family, relatives and friends and greater participation in socio-political environment, negative effect was a consideration of social media as a platform for mockery communication rather than serious official issues. One of the limitations of Hamades' study was using a stratified sample, which is non-probability, as students' selection was based on student availability at the time the questionnaire was distributed. This could mean that this finding cannot be extrapolated to the total population.

In another study, Chawinga (2017) examined how social networks enabled teaching and learning at Mzuzu University in Malawi. The study analyzed student blogs and Twitter posts after administering a questionnaire. The results showed that social networks like Twitter and other blogs provided a learner-centered approach to teaching. Using these technologies, students shared and discussed course materials, posted their course reflections and interacted with each other and their instructors. This study shows how social media are a helpful learning process for influencing students' choice of university. However, this study did not consider internet and data packet costs, inaccessibility of Wi-Fi, poor bandwidth and inadequate computers as key variables influencing students to use social networks for learning purposes.

In addition, Chukwuere and Chukwuere (2017) assessed how social networks affect students' social lifestyles in South African universities. The study employed a quantitative research methodology with a questionnaire instrument among 69 female students from North-West University, South Africa. The results showed that social networks refined how female students think, interact, communicate, fall in love and socialize, etc. However, one of the limitations of this study is apart from the usefulness of social media in a social lifestyle, how could social media influence students' choice of university? Hence, this was the focus of this study.

Uusiautti and Määttä (2014) examined how university students perceived the possibilities of using social networks in academia and social networking. Findings indicated that social networks could increase students' social capital in many ways such as through peer support, groups and learning environments and could improve bonding and togetherness. However, these opportunities should be better explored in an educational context such as students' choice of university.

Factors Influencing usage of Social Media

There are a numerous factors that may affect online customer purchase expectations. These may include the following:

Perceived Ease of Use

This is the degree to which a person accepts that using a particular framework is effective with little or no effort (Lala, 2014). A customer sees ease of use not only as a person's ability to use a development easily but also their ability to identify the best product or administration, with the ability to analyze the degree and benefits of developing products and administrations. From the buyers' point of view, ease of use reflects customers' belief that they can appropriately use a particular item or regimen after reading the instructions or using an item or regimen in a reasonable time frame. For

example, online networking sites encourage individuals to use the interpersonal organization management to search for data (Borgatti & Cross, 2003).

Perceived Usefulness

This is how much a person accepts that using a particular framework would improve their activity execution (Lala, 2014). Seen convenience reflects a person's outcome or consequences in using a particular framework. For example, a customer sees an item or administration as valuable if it sustainably fulfills its motivation after using it. The value seen is the degree to which a development is seen as beneficial to customers. That little wiggle room can serve as financial gain or social glory (Rogers, 2005).

Credibility

Customers usually buy from general dealers who rely on security. Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) data can now be created by any client on the Internet. Therefore, data quality and reliability are becoming increasingly important (Xu, 2014). Therefore, the customer will usually buy from ordinary dealers who rely on their security. Today, electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) data can be produced by any client on the Internet. Accordingly, data quality and credibility have become more and more fundamental.

Buyers approach articles and administrations excitedly when the data meets their needs (Olshavsky, 1985). In addition, previous specialists found that online audits influence buyers' purchase expectations. Likewise, the nature of eWOM data in online networks can determine buyers' purchasing goals (Lee & Shin, 2014). In addition, previous research has shown the link between data validity on shoppers' purchasing goals and data appropriation (Prendergast et al., 2010). Therefore, social network sites are suitable platforms for high-quality word-of-mouth (WOM) communication (Erkan & Evans, 2014; Kim et al., 2014). Furthermore, WOM offer an incredible opportunity to share and verify reviews and encounters on articles, administrations and brands with companions and collaborators (Kozinets et al., 2010; Moran & Muzellec, 2014).

Notwithstanding day-by-day discussions between clients, social network sites enable sentiment pioneers to make and elevate profiles identifying with items and administrations of brands. Customers can consciously post about brands and

their items or administrations. Previous specialists found that online audits influence buyers' purchase expectations (Lee & Shin, 2014; Park et al., 2007). Therefore, the nature of eWOM data in online life can determine buyers' purchase expectations. Individuals experiencing eWOM on the internet need to study the data thoroughly to get perfect buying destinations for universities.

Taecharungroj (2017) studied Social Network Marketing for Universities focusing on 12 Content Types Universities Post on Facebook in US and Thailand. The study aimed to examine and categorize how universities used Facebook as a platform to engage their audiences. A total of 1394 Facebook posts from six universities was analyzed for content types. The study identified the following post types: research, faculty, curriculum, campus, students, alumni, industry, events, products, image and reputation and announcements. The most common post type in US universities was research while the most common post types in Thailand were events and information. Based on the results, the author suggests that universities need to be both proactive and strategic in social networks so as to enhance communication and marketing of their programs. Almadhoun et al. (2011) used a descriptive and explanatory approach and collected qualitative and quantitative data through questionnaires and semi-structured interview on the use of social networks in promoting Malaysian higher education and found that most Malaysian higher education institutions used social networks for promotional and marketing engagement purposes.

Pima (2013) used portals to examine challenges higher education institutions faced in mainland Tanzania. Ten institutions participated in the study with a sample of 446 obtained through simple random, stratified and evaluative sampling. The primary data collection tool was a questionnaire supplemented by interviews, observations and a document review. The results show the following main challenges: high running costs, lack of adequately qualified staff, lack of management support and failure to involve key groups. The study recommended setting aside enough resources for IT directorates to hire well-qualified staff. In addition, staff should have sufficient experience and management should prioritize ICT and the involvement of key stakeholders in the implementation and use of portals.

Methodology

Design

The researchers used a descriptive design to build the study from data collection, analysis and reporting. The design was appropriate since this study was conducted in one institution. The study involved describing features of a data set by generating summaries about data samples as informed by Creswell (2014).

Population and Sampling

The population of this study consisted of 2553 first-year students in five faculties of the Saint Augustine University of Tanzania. The selection of this population was based on the fact that they were the third group of students to be admitted through the Tanzania Commission of Universities (TCU) by choosing a university of their choice through online platforms. A simple random sampling method was used to select 138 respondents.

Statistical Treatment of Data

Data analysis involved descriptive statistics in terms of frequencies and percentages. The analysis was done through the Statistical Package for Social Sciences.

Ethical Considerations

This study implemented various strategies to meet ethical requirements. At the beginning, an introductory letter from the researcher to respondents was given outlining in brief the purpose of the study. Research participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, free from any type of coercion. Respondents were assured of confidentiality of data collected. The plagiarism check was run to ensure that the similarity index is no more than 20% to ensure the originality of the dissertation.

Results and Discussion

This study sought to establish the influence of Social Networks on Students' Choice of a University, a Case of St Augustine University of Tanzania. The study was guided by the following research questions:

Research Question 1: Did students use social media platforms for getting information regarding their current university?

This research question was prompted by the fact that there are numerous ways through which potential students can get information about universities to join such as information from friends, educational exhibitions/fairs, family members, posters, random walk-in requests, information from lecturers and searching for a university on the website (Singer & Hughey, 2002; Heiberger & Harper, 2008; DeAndrea et al., 2012).Table 1 indicates that 35 (25.4%) students reported that they never used social media platforms in getting information regarding their current university. On the contrary, 103 (74.6%) students used social media platform in getting information regarding their current universities. This implies that the majority of students used social media platforms to seek a university to join.

Table 1: Whether Students Used Social Media

RESPONSE	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
No	35	25.4	25.4
Yes	103	74.6	100.0
Total	**138**	**100.0**	

Table 2: Types of Social Media Platforms Used

SN	Platform	Frequency	Percent	Position
1	Instagram	88	63.8	1st
2	Twitter	22	15.9	2nd
3	Facebook	21	15.2	3rd
4	Utube	7	5.1	4th
	Total	**138**	**100.0**	

Therefore, social media platforms are a powerful instrument through which potential students can choose a university to join. This finding concurs with the study findings of Sumitha (2011) in India which revealed that students often used social networking sites to connect to universities and get information pertaining courses, lecturers and available facilities.

Research Question 2: What kind of social media did students use to get information regarding their current university?

Results in table 2 indicate that Instagram (63.8%), twitter (15.9%), Facebook (15.2%) and Utube (5.1%) were the most common used social media platforms

by students to get information regarding their university. The findings are in harmony with a previous study by Shields and Peruta (2019) in the USA which revealed that majority of students reported using social media platforms to learn more about higher education schools under consideration. The current study revealed that the most popular social media platform used by potential students in seeking a university to join was Instagram while the least popular was Utube. Therefore, Instagram is the most common platform used by potential students to join a university. This finding concurs with the findings of Alhabash and Ma (2017) in USA which revealed that participants spent most time daily searching for universities using Instagram, followed by Snapchat, Facebook and Twitter.

Research Question 3: Did students interact with their friends in searching for information regarding university?

Much as potential students used social media platforms in searching for a university to join, it was necessary to establish whether potential students interacted with their friends in searching for information regarding a university to join. Table 3 indicates that 115 (83.3%) potential students interacted with their friends in the process of seeking a university to join while 23 (16.7%) did not interact with their friends.

Table 3: Whether Students Interacted with Friends

Response	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	115	83.3	83.3
No	23	16.7	100
Total	**138**	**100.0**	

This suggests that the majority of potential students interacted with friends in the process of seeking a university to join. This finding matches with that of Fisher et al (2007) in USA who were of the view that human interactions play an intrinsic role in facilitating communication among people.

Conclusions and Recommendations
Conclusions
This study concludes that majority of students used the social media platform in getting information regarding their current university. Instagram was found to be the mostly preferred social media site to provide information about the university. Finally, students' interaction with friends was a driving force in influencing students to choose a university.

Recommendations
Based on conclusions, universities are advised to develop mechanisms that will establish the role of various social media networks in attracting potential students and make use of those social media platforms which work better so as to increase the number of students in the universities. Top management teams should support the use of social media platforms, especially Instagram which sounds to work better, in attracting potential students to join particular universities. The power of potential students communicating with their friends regarding universities to join should be taken as an added advantage in attempt to increase number of students in universities. Particularly, universities can identify potential students and ask them to recommend their friends to choose the same university.

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