Factors Influencing the Adoption of Social Media in Public Relations Practice in Public Universities in Nairobi

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Abstract

Organizations have realized that they must use social media tools to engage with their key stakeholders to maintain relevance and drive the conversation. Despite research efforts to highlight adoption of social media in public relations practice, there is a limited understanding on factors that encourage and hinder social media adoption for public relations practice in public universities in Kenya. The specific objectives of the study were to identify social media platforms used, explore factors influencing the adoption of social media and to establish the effects of adoption of social media in PR practice in public universities in Nairobi County. The research used descriptive research design with questionnaire survey. Target population was 80 public relations staff in four public universities. Stratified random sample of 67 respondents was used in the study. Both quantitative and qualitative analysis methods were used in the research. Results show that organizational factors significantly influence social media adoption in public relations practice in their universities. Technological and environmental factors were also found to influence social media adoption the universities.

Keywords: Social Media, Public Relations, Public Universities.

Introduction

The environment within which public universities operate has changed due to the privatization of university education and liberalization of student selection since the inception of Commission for University Education in 2012 (Njoro, 2017). Public universities in Kenya today are operating in a highly turbulent and dynamic environment; they are faced with tremendous competition as a result of liberalization of the higher education industry (Mathooko, 2013). The survival, growth and prosperity of any organization depends on how well it responds to changes taking place in the environment. This quest to create unique value propositions and achieve preferential university status is where adoption of social media in public relations comes into effect. Public universities in Kenya that want to compete favourably into the future must better leverage their public relations practices for institutional advancement (Ng'ethe, 2014). It is becoming imperative that universities begin to discover how to develop unique value propositions to make them attractive to students and faculty who want to choose universities that give them the best value for their money and time (Kinsky et al., 2016).

Social media has seized the academic world and education for more than a decade. Technology advancement and particularly the introduction of social media has increasingly played a critical role in shaping the success of institutions of higher learning (Ahmad, 2019). Unlike most other brands, universities have a diverse range of stakeholders who inadvertently influence their communication strategies, suggesting the need to adopt and embrace the benefits and opportunities that social media can bring as a tool (Peruta & Shields, 2017). Social media has demonstrated its strengths in connecting several stakeholders, including students to each other, teachers to themselves, students and teachers, all the entities in the university, as well as external actors (Junco et al., 2011). Social media affords public relations practitioners the opportunity to foster relationship with the current and potential customers as well as the general public (Andoh-Quainoo & Annor-Antwi, 2015). The relationship building aspect of social media is at the core of Public Relations practice in public universities since it drives organizational success (McCorkindale & DiStaso, 2014).

Social media offers public relations practitioners new options for every aspect of the corporate communications process, from research to evaluation. Social media tools can be utilized to create and distribute meaningful content to a wider audience that traditional media does not allow (Kelleher & Sweetser, 2012). The future of social media and public relations is one of stepping past the technologies as marketing and advertising tools and embracing them as tools capable of solving problems and engaging publics in real-world issues (Heath, 2010). The

relationship building aspect of social media is at the core of Public Relations practice in public universities since it drives organizational success. Social media offers public relations practitioners new options for every aspect of the corporate communications process, from research to evaluation, thus social media tools can be utilized to create and distribute meaningful content to a wider audience that traditional media does not allow. Examining the factors of social media adoption in public relations practices among public universities in Kenya, and particularly in Nairobi County, becomes the focus of this study

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) theory. Diffusion is the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system. Rogers (2003) defines innovation as an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption. The theory identifies five attributes of an innovation that influence its adoption: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) which the study also utilizes suggests that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use are the primary determinants of technology acceptance. Perceived usefulness is defined as the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performance. Perceived ease of use is defined as the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would be free of effort.

Literature Review

Many researchers have identified factors that influence adoption of social media in public relations practice (Khan & Qudrat-Ullah, 2021; Lal et al., 2020; Navarro et al., 2020). Studies based on the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology found that demographic information, performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, facilitating conditions, and perceived enjoyment influence the intention to adopt (Al-Badri et al., 2020). Research concludes there is high awareness among PR professionals, with many organizations already using or planning to use these tools.

Technological factors influencing adoption include perceived benefits, perceived risks, compatibility, and cost-effectiveness (Sharif et al., 2015; Pittman et al., 2021). While users have become more receptive, challenges remain regarding the difficulty of measuring specific outcomes like return on investment (Lal et al., 2020). Other concerns include system compatibility, language use, and problems such as spamming (Lombardo et al., 2021; Sikandar Ali, 2020).

Organizational factors, including management drive, social media policies, and the degree of formalization, significantly influence adoption (Sharif et al., 2015). Top management influences resource availability, adequate financial support, and human capital required to initiate adoption (Seo & Vu, 2020). Furthermore, managers who possess awareness and enthusiasm about social media create a comfortable environment for experimenting with such innovations (Jamshidian & Salehi, 2020).

The adoption process is directly affected by top management, as they make decisions regarding daily functions and future investments (Gesualdi, 2019; Lashgari et al., 2018). Well-informed leaders with positive dispositions can induce other managers to consider social media through encouragement and support (Ayaburi & Treku, 2020). Organizations whose top management is innovative and knowledgeable are more likely to embrace new technologies in their public relations (Cartwright et al., 2021; Joyce, 2020).

Organizations perceive social media as a tool to gain a competitive advantage; as competitors adopt these technologies, others are compelled to follow to stay ahead (Ahmad, 2019; Cao et al., 2018). Environmental influencers also include government policies, initiatives, and the presence of basic infrastructure like high-speed internet (Cao et al., 2018; Lal et al., 2020). Finally, external factors such as globalization, economic situations, and market trends further dictate the rate of adoption in PR practice (Al-Badi et al., 2020; Navarro et al., 2020).

Methodology

The methodology for this study employed a descriptive research design to examine the factors and effects of social media adoption in public relations within the academic sector. The study focused on four specific public universities located in Nairobi County: The University of Nairobi, Multimedia University of Kenya, the Cooperative University of Kenya, and the Technical University of Kenya. The target population consisted of 80 public relations staff members across these institutions, from which a sample of 67 respondents was selected using a stratified random sampling technique to ensure balanced representation from each university.

Data collection involved a combination of primary and secondary sources. Primary data was gathered through structured questionnaires developed via Google Forms and administered to the sampled PR practitioners. This was supplemented by secondary data obtained through desk research and data mining from relevant internet sources. To ensure the effectiveness and reliability of the research instruments, a pretest was conducted before the full-scale data collection began.

The analysis of the gathered data utilized both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data was processed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25, which allowed for descriptive statistics and multiple linear regression analysis to identify relationships between variables. Qualitative data from open-ended questions was managed using NVivo version 12, where responses were coded to identify recurring themes. Throughout the process, ethical standards were maintained by securing necessary institutional approvals and ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of all participants.

Findings

Influence of Organizational Factors

University	Statistics	Top_mgt_support	Mgt_awareness	Mgt_commitment	Org_char	Resource
University of Nairobi	Mean	3.8667	3.8667	3.9333	3.8667	3.8667
	Standard Deviation	0.3519	0.5164	0.4577	0.5164	0.3519
Multimedia University of Kenya	Mean	3.8182	3.8182	3.9091	3.8182	3.5455
	Standard Deviation	0.4045	0.4045	0.5394	0.4045	0.5222
Technical University of Kenya (TUK)	Mean	3.7500	3.7500	4.0000	3.6250	3.8750
	Standard Deviation	0.4629	0.7071	0.0000	0.5175	0.3536
Cooperative University of Kenya	Mean	3.8116	3.8116	3.8475	3.7700	3.7624
	Standard Deviation	0.4064	0.5427	0.3324	0.4795	0.4092

Table 1: Mean and standard deviations of organizational factors by universities

Results of descriptive statistics of organizational factors show that all the means across the studied universities were above 3.75. Management awareness and enthusiasm and Management commitment and participation was rated with highest mean of 3.8605. This means that the respondents agreed that the factors influence social media adoption in public relations practice in their universities. Management commitment and participation was rated highest at Technical University of Kenya with mean of 4.1538.

The findings that there was very significant but weak negative correlation between resource availability and top management support and between it and organizational characteristics are consistent with previous studies. The studies reported the influence of top management support on the implementation of social media.

Influence of Technological Factors

Technological Factors	Mean	Standard Deviation	Kurtosis	Skewness	Confidence Level(95.0%)
Cost of adoption and operation	3.8372	0.3735	1.6606	-1.8935	0.1150
Credibility of the technology	3.8140	0.3937	0.8338	-1.6725	0.1212
Compatibility	3.8140	0.3937	0.8338	-1.6725	0.1212
Complexity	3.8605	0.3506	2.7779	-2.1566	0.1079
Opportunity to try and test technology	3.8605	0.3506	2.7779	-2.1566	0.1079
Ease of use of technology	3.8140	0.3937	0.8338	-1.6725	0.1212
Expected effort	3.8605	0.3506	2.7779	-2.1566	0.1079
Social influence	3.7674	0.4275	-0.2937	-1.3123	0.1316
Facilitating conditions for adoption	3.7674	0.4275	-0.2937	-1.3123	0.1316
Perceived enjoyment	3.8605	0.3506	2.7779	-2.1566	0.1079

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of technological factors

Results of descriptive statistics of technological factors showed that cost of adoption and operation was rated with the highest mean rating (Mean=3.8372, standard deviation=0.3735). All the technological factors were rated with mean above 3.7674 showing that the respondents generally agreed that the organizational factors influence social media adoption in public relations in the universities. Cost of adopting and operating technology was rated with mean of 4.1111 at University of Nairobi.

Influence of Environmental Factors

Environmental factors	Mean	Standard Deviation	Sample Variance	Kurtosis	Skewness	Confidence Level(95.0%)
Competition	3.7674	0.4275	0.1827	-0.2937	-1.3123	0.1316
Government influences, policies and initiatives	3.8140	0.3937	0.1550	0.8338	-1.6725	0.1212
Basic ICT infrastructure	3.7209	0.5036	0.2536	-0.5087	-0.4200	0.1550

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of environmental factors

Results of descriptive statistics of environmental factors show that government influences, policies and initiatives was rated with the highest mean rating (Mean=3.8140, standard deviation=0.3937). All the environmental factors were rated with mean above 3.7209 meaning that the respondents agreed that the environmental factors influence social media adoption in public relations in the universities.

k	df	SS	MS	F	Significance F		Regression Statistics	
Regression	3	1.4604	0.4868	3.3568	0.0284		Multiple R	0.4530
Residual	39	5.6558	0.1450				R Square	0.2052
Total	42	7.1163					Adjusted R Square	0.1441
							Standard Error	0.3808
							Observations	43

	Coefficients	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value	Lower 95%	Upper 95%	Lower 95.0%	Upper 95.0%
Intercept	7.6720	1.2320	6.2275	0.0000	5.180	10.164	5.180	10.164
Competition	-0.3727	0.1589	-2.3455	0.0242	-0.694	-0.051	-0.694	-0.051
Govt_influences	-0.3737	0.1567	-	0.0220	-0.691	-	-0.691	-0.057

			2.3856			0.057		
ICT_infrastructure	-0.2827	0.1302	-2.1720	0.0360	-0.546	-0.019	-0.546	-0.019

Table 4: Regression of environmental factors

The results of regression analysis suggest that competition and government influence are the main environmental factors that affect social media adoption in public relations in the universities. Competition had negative relationship with adoption of social media adoption in public relations (β=-0.3727, t=-2.3455, p= 0.0242). It means that a unit increase in competition was associated with a decrease in social media adoption.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study indicates that the ease of use of social media technologies is positively correlated with facilitating conditions but negatively correlated with social influence, confirming the foundational technology adoption findings of Venkatesh and Davis (2000). Furthermore, the data reveals that social influence and facilitating conditions are correlated and significantly impact the adoption of social media within public relations practice, corroborating the research of Al-Badri et al. (2020). Statistical analysis specifically showed a significant positive correlation between credibility and the opportunity to test technology ($r = 0.325$, df = 41, p = 0.041, 95\% \text{CI} [0.028, 0.622] $), aligning with previous studies by Babiker (2017), Martens (2020), and Pittman et al. (2021). Additionally, a significant weak negative correlation was found between competition and ICT infrastructure, supporting existing literature that identifies environmental factors as key drivers of social media adoption (Ahmad, 2019; Cao et al., 2018; N. M. Lee & Merle, 2018).

To further understand these dynamics, environmental factors affecting social media adoption in university public relations were examined using both correlation and regression analyses. The correlation results demonstrated a significant weak negative relationship between competition and ICT infrastructure, suggesting that as competition levels increase, the perceived quality or availability of infrastructure tends to decrease. Other variables, including government influence, legal frameworks, and social norms, did not show significant correlations with ICT infrastructure. However, with mean ratings for all factors exceeding 3.72, there is a clear consensus among respondents that environmental factors are influential in the adoption process within the university setting.

The regression analysis further revealed that all independent variables, with the exception of the intercept, yielded negative beta coefficients. Notably, government influence demonstrated a negative relationship with social media adoption in public relations. These results suggest that competition and government influence serve as the primary environmental factors affecting adoption in these institutions. These findings align with prior research by Alikilic and Atabek (2012) and Sharif et al. (2015), which notes that while competition and government policy are influential, their impact on social media adoption and ICT infrastructure can often be restrictive or complex.

Organizational factors significantly influence social media adoption in public relations practice in their universities. Technological and environmental factors were also found to influence social media adoption. The results suggest that competition and government influence are the main environmental factors that affect social media adoption in public relations in the universities.

It is recommended that further research work on adoption of social media in public relations practice should be based on larger samples and across different universities in the East African region and Africa. There is also need to study the effect of intervening variables such as university and national politics as well government policies on social media and public relations.

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