

**INFLUENCE OF DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGIES ON STUDENTS'
ENROLLMENT IN PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES: A CASE OF MOUNT KENYA
UNIVERSITY-KENYA**

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Abstract

In the past, most businesses traditionally relied only on marketing ideas to support their business but in recent years, managers have introduced strategies that have greatly influenced today's business. The aim of this research was to determine the influence of digital marketing strategies on students' enrolment in private universities, a case of Mount Kenya University-Kenya. A descriptive survey design was employed in conducting this study. The target population was 74 respondents. Census sampling was used for the study. Data from primary sources was used. Data from the primary was gathered using a semi-structured questionnaire. A pilot study of five marketing staff from United States International University-Africa (USIU) in Nairobi was conducted to ensure the validity of the questionnaire. The data that had been gathered was examined to see whether or not there are any gaps, inaccuracies, omissions, or other types of irregularities. SPSS Version 23.0 was used alongside MS Excel software to obtain both descriptive and inferential statistics. In the study, descriptive statistics was provided in the form of tables, bar charts, and graphs. These statistics entailed the usage of the mean as well as the standard deviation. The Pearson correlation coefficient and the OLS approach via regression was used as part of the inferential statistics in order to determine the nature of the relation that exists between the study's various variables. The study concluded that; the institution's website, social media presence, video marketing, brand awareness through display advertising, content optimization for search engines, and social media cause accessibility have been lauded. These factors considerably impact the university's digital marketing strategy and student enrollment. The study recommended that the institution should improve website user experience, social media presence, video marketing, display advertising, and search engine optimization. These measures will boost enrolment.

Keywords: *Digital Marketing Strategies, Students' Enrollment, Private Universities*

INTRODUCTION

Marketing refers to a process through which people and groups get what they want by developing, offering, and freely exchanging products and services of value with others (Kotler, Keller, Ang, Tan, & Leong, 2018). According to Hossain and Rahman (2017),

marketing is the process of developing and maintaining the needs and wants of consumers and sustaining long-term profitable client relationships. Marketing is essential for every product, regardless of prestige (Kotler, 2010). Higher education has been identified as a veritable vehicle for the growth of economies and for fostering development internationally. A country can only develop by appreciating the significance of higher education (Shabban, 2013). Developing and developed countries are working hard to obtain the highest possible quality standards in higher education. This has forced them to enforce strict standards regarding licensing and, according to charters, for institutions of higher learning (Steiner, 2012). The need for the exercise of the requisite standards, notwithstanding, calls for optimal marketing to ensure the realization of adequate student numbers. The marketing approaches involved have gradually evolved over the years.

Globally, well-known universities like Yale, Rochester, and John Hopkins have used marketing strategies to communicate their programs to international students (Social Media Week, 2012). The utilization of these strategies provided as part of university marketing has contributed to the high number of student enrollments and provided an avenue that prospective students can use to make the right decisions on course enrollment. Facts and enrollments: the factual and enrollments programs about the factual and enrollments This is because they get adequate, factual, and timely information about the various programs being offered by different universities and their underlying benefits. In the United States of America, for example, 92% of the top 100 colleges and universities utilize marketing to promote their programs to potential students, boosting the decision-making process for parents and prospective students (Social Media Week, 2012).

In Nigeria, Onyemaechi (2013) cites several marketing communication choices available to marketers because of globalization and the growth of new-fangled technologies. The options included all the academic, administrative, and support services that the institutions offer to prospective students once they are enrolled. As such, marketers have been pressurized to come up with innovations since the current media setting has developed an additional realm for them to deal with (Cubillo et al., 2016). In Kenya, Safaricom ltd, Airtel ltd, and Kenya Power company ltd are some of the companies that engage in marketing strategies to attract clients,

According to Banya (2011), Sub-Saharan Africa has experienced rapid growth in higher education compared to the global average since 1996. For example, Kenya has recorded an average annual increase of 6.2% since 1998. According to Oketch (2015), private universities are challenged by their inability to sustain the number of applicants who cannot meet the tuition costs. They also face competition from public universities that offer similar programs on a for-profit basis. Further, they face competition from foreign universities with extensive marketing campaigns to recruit local students. Private universities also have limited access to funding for their research programs.

From the onset of this millennium, Kenya has experienced tremendous growth in expanding private universities as a reaction to innovation and the need to meet global standards in university education. Further, during the last two decades, Kenya's higher education sector has grown tremendously at an average of 6.2 percent yearly (Deloitte & Touche, 2014). According to Sifuna (2012), there has been a significant increase in student enrollment in institutions of higher learning, which is explained by the role of privately sponsored programs in government universities and the growth of private institutions.

According to the 2019 data from Kenya Universities and Colleges Central Placement Service (KUCCPS), there are currently 33 registered private universities in Kenya. Unlike public

universities that are allocated an equal share of students sponsored by the government, most private universities have to take extra measures to get the students they require because of stiff competition among them. This is because institutions of higher learning report low student admissions (Mutula, 2014). The present pattern in private colleges is compounded by cutthroat competition, particularly with the formation of satellite campuses across the country and the utilization of various marketing correspondence (MC) apparatuses to attract new applicants. This research will therefore examine the influence of marketing strategies on student enrollment.

Private universities in Kenya have emerged as viable options for acquiring higher education. Such universities offer market-driven courses and compete the overcrowded public universities in providing a conducive environment for academic excellence (Oketch 2009). This is because most of them have modern infrastructure including libraries, information and communication technologies that are vital for academic excellence and research. Private universities are known for their good performance compared to public universities. This is attributed partly to good facilities and infrastructure and close policing by the Commission for Higher Education, which ensures that the institutions adhere to strict standards and regulations set by the government. The universities therefore strive to provide education commensurate with the fees they collect from students (Mutula, 2012).

Problem Statement

During the last 20 years, public universities mainly offered higher learning to students who met the set admission conditions and were operating in a supply-side market (Mutula, 2014). However, with the establishment of private universities, the education sector has experienced an increase in admitted students and an improvement in the quality, variety, and number of courses offered. This is due to innovation and the adoption of modern education practices, thus making student enrolment more competitive. Competition for students continues to grow because of a profit focus, a characteristic of most private universities (Oketch, 2015). Most notably, in recent years, dismal performance in the national examination at the secondary school level has affected student enrollment in universities. This has led to private universities competing with public universities for the limited numbers that meet the admission requirements hence a change in marketing strategies.

In universities today, there is a need to ensure that there is proper communication through the use of marketing strategies (Terkan, 2013). Whether the communication is audio or visual, it must be effective to fit the different needs of the public. It is one problem experienced by private universities. It must be realized that marketing cannot be without proper communication (Terkan, 2013). It explains the challenge of enrollment in private universities. When a marketing communication strategy is chosen, it must be one that will ensure proper communication. For example, social media cannot be used to reach audio users. The fact that private universities in Kenya have failed to recognize this importance has led to the challenges of ensuring efficient marketing communication tools.

Mount Kenya University (MKU) operates in a more competitive environment than it did a decade ago. The university's overall sustainability is determined by how it repositioned itself to increase student enrolment in a competitive environment. The approval of public universities to offer parallel programs and to raise additional funds have complicated the market for private universities such as MKU. It has brought about stiff competition between public and private universities as they compete for all students placed by KUCCPS and self-sponsored students in their colleges/institutions. Therefore, universities must develop proactive marketing strategies that will ensure increased student enrollment and long-term

university growth and sustainability. This study, therefore, seeks to find out the influence of marketing strategies on university students' enrolment.

Theoretical Literature

Relationship Marketing Paradigm

The study was based on the relationship marketing paradigm as postulated by Sheth and Paravitiyar in 1995. The theory argues that the process of establishing and enhancing relations with clients at a profit is of essence for the growth of an enterprise prospects. This is accrued from the fact that the mutual co-existence that comes from the relationship occasioned by the marketing creates additional value beyond the service itself. This has the ultimate effect of creating a strong long term bond with the client encouraging repeat buying and retention for long periods (Braxton, 2006).

The theory applies well to the study which sought to carry out a descriptive analysis of the influence of marketing strategies on university students' enrolment. This was occasioned by the fact that higher education in the republic of Kenya has become very competitive and the need to create relationships which transcend the prevailing situation of students registering for programs and completing them is of essence. The need to provide a barrier to the competition cannot be over emphasized. This is because in the situation of good relations between the university and the students, good relations are bound to be created and the potential for the replication of the process by another institution may be curtailed if a good rapport and long term relationship is created. This may enhance customer retention and building up of loyalty by the institution leading to growth in student numbers and enhanced prospects from the relations created (Freeman, 2007).

Freeman, (2007) was of the view that the creation of relations also reduces the potential of students' dropping out from the institutions. This is because there is mutual attachment between the client and the service provider leading to a situation whereby the needs of the client are effectively met and the service provider benefits from retaining the client. The enhanced relations continuously attract and motivate creation of more relationships between the students' parents, alumnae and the greater community with the institution. This enhances the institutions prospects in terms of earning goodwill and the requisite standing which ultimately translates to growth in the student population. This enhances the stature of the institutions from the salient marketing approach which is cost effective and assures long term growth,

Braxton & Hirschy (2005) opined that the relationship marketing approach has the potential to enhance the levels of student satisfaction, commitment, trust and the ability to develop loyalty. This assures the institutions of a continuous stream of students even without them engaging in expensive pitches in the mass media and related mediums. This is all accrued from the positive experiences that the students had encountered with the institutions.

Empirical Literature

Digital marketing has been defined as a sub-branch of traditional marketing that makes use of digital channels to achieve the same goal as traditional marketing, which is to attract new customers and keep old ones (Kotler, 2013). Digital marketing is also defined by other authors as internet marketing, online marketing, or web marketing (Dholakia, 2015).

Digital marketing is the application of the internet related technologies in order to accomplish an organization's set objectives. According to Smyth (2007), DM concept is said to have originated from the internet and search engines of the website and the first search engine activity happened in the year 1991 but more profound from 2000. Generally, Digital

marketing includes mobile phones, display advertising, social media, email advertising, search engine optimization (SEO).

The 21st century is shaped by the technological revolution and globalization where the internet impacts all aspects of business and digitization cannot be avoided in selling an organization effectively. According to Beckinsale and Levy (2014), DM has many advantages unlike the businesses in the 20th century having more opportunities for any business to tap into. Globally, many companies today have realized the importance of DM platform and they have quickly shifted from the exchange of goods towards service interactivity and relationship marketing.

Various studies (Harwood, 2009) acknowledge an increasing trend in DM in the recent past having had a budget of \$77 billion in 2016 with an average of 3.22 billion people being connected to the internet. In the same light, the number of internet users in Kenya has been on the rise with those accessing the internet services reaching 74.2 percent while mobile users were at 88 percent in 2016, communication commission of Kenya (CCK, 2016). This upward trend in DM globally indicates the direction under which marketing dynamics are taking going into the future.

METHODOLOGY

A descriptive survey design was employed in conducting this study. The target population of the study comprised of the 74 respondents drawn from marketing department and admission officers from all MKU centers. There are 18 centers in total. The study used primary and secondary sources to collect data. Data from the primary sources was gathered using a semi-structured questionnaire. The secondary data was used to confirm and authenticate the enrollment of students' as indicated by the respondents. Descriptive and inferential statistical methods was used in the research to assess the data. Regression analysis was used as part of the inferential statistics to determine the relationship between the study's variables.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Responds Rate

The study sample size was 74 respondents. Out of 74 respondents, 71 of them participated in the research while 3 of them did not participate or failed to answer the questionnaire. This means that the responds rate was 71 (95.94) while non responds was 3 (4.05).

Influence of digital marketing strategies on students' enrolment

This section contains results from descriptive statistics obtained while establishing the influence of digital marketing strategies on students' enrolment in private universities, a case of Mount Kenya University-Kenya.

The study found out that a (M=1.95, SD=1.07) of the respondents suggested that he university has a sound website user experience, a (M=1.85, SD=1.07) of the respondents suggested that the university has social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, a (M=1.80, SD=1.05) of the respondents suggested that the university utilizes video marketing to its fullest potential, a (M=1.84, SD=1.06) of the respondents suggested that the university increases brand awareness through display advertising, a (M=1.81, SD=1.01) of the respondents suggested that contents of the university are optimized to rank on other search engines while a (M=1.83, SD=1.10) of the respondents revealed that they can access the courses offered at the university through the social media.

Majority of the respondents suggested that the university has a sound website user experience as factors influencing digital marketing strategies on students' enrolment in private universities, a case of Mount Kenya University-Kenya.

Table 1: Influence of digital marketing strategies on students' enrolment

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
The university has a sound website user experience	71	1.00	5.00	1.9577	1.07486
The university has social media platforms such as Facebook	71	1.00	5.00	1.8592	1.07299
The university utilizes video marketing to its fullest potential	71	1.00	5.00	1.8028	1.05044
The university increases awareness through display advertising	71	1.00	5.00	1.8451	1.06433
Contents of the university are optimized on other search engines	71	1.00	5.00	1.8169	1.01854
I can access the courses offered through the social media	71	1.00	5.00	1.8310	1.10823
Valid N (listwise)	71				

Enrollment in Private Universities

The study found out that a (M =1.78 , SD =0.92) of the respondents suggested that the university enrolment has increased over the years, a (M =1.69 , SD=0.96) of the respondents revealed that the number of graduates has increased , a (M = 1.76, SD=0.99) of the respondents revealed that the student population in every course is rising, a (M= 1.74 , SD = 0.95) of the respondents ascertained that the university has expanded due to high number of students while a (M =1.64 , SD = 0.95) of the respondents revealed that the university has opened up other branches over the years.

Table 2: Enrollment in Private Universities

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
The university enrolment has increased over the years	71	1.00	5.00	1.7887	.92452
The number of graduates has increased	71	1.00	5.00	1.6901	.96498
The student population in every course is rising	71	1.00	5.00	1.7606	.99232
The university has expanded due to high number of students	71	1.00	5.00	1.7465	.95197
The university has opened up other branches over the years	71	1.00	5.00	1.6479	.95765
Valid N (listwise)	71				

Regression Analysis

Model Summary

From the analysis of table 3, the coefficient of determination, denoted by the letter R, equals 0.990. A very high degree of explanation for the dependent variable is indicated by a result of 0.990, which is the maximum possible.

The value of R Square, is 0.980. A result of 0.980 implies that the independent variable can explain nearly 98% of the variation in the dependent variable.

Table 3: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.990 ^a	.980	.979	2.74215

a. Predictors: (Constant), Digital marketing strategies

ANOVA

The value of F is calculated to be 803.645. F. The F-value is used in the process of determining whether or not the regression model as a whole is statistically significant. The F-value is rather high in this case, which indicates that there is an exceptionally large relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable.

The fact that the significance level of the F-value is less than 0.001 (or that p is less than 0.001), indicates that the regression model may have a great predictive power.

Table 4: ANOVA

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	24171.609	4	6042.902	803.645	.000 ^b
	Residual	496.278	66	7.519		
	Total	24667.887	70			

Coefficients

The Constant was -0.763 is the constant term. While in terms of digital marketing strategies, the unstandardized coefficient (B) is 1.097. This implies that the dependent variable is expected to rise by 1.097 units on average for every unit increase in digital marketing strategies. The dependent variable's standardized effect size of digital marketing strategies is shown by the standardized coefficient (Beta), which is equal to 0.322. The t-value for this coefficient is 7.529, which indicates statistical significance for the coefficient.

Table 5: Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t
		B	Std. Error	Beta	
1	(Constant)	-.763	1.327		-.575
	Digital marketing strategies	1.097	.146	.322	7.529

The results of this research provide important new information on how digital marketing tactics affect student enrollment at private colleges. The findings show that internet marketing is an important factor in luring potential students to Mount Kenya University.

Differentiation is influenced by perception. In order to implement a product differentiation strategy, firms often alter the objective qualities of their products or services, but in the end, the existence of a product difference is always contingent on how consumers perceive it. Consumers utilize value signals, such as advertising, reputation and personality, the professionalism, manner, and personality of a supplier's personnel, the attractiveness of facilities, and information from sales presentations, according to Porter (1985). Porter (1985)

makes the argument that if a corporation has a limited grasp of what consumers find significant, it may be able to accept a new form of difference in advance and educate customers to enjoy it. Porter (1985) cautions, however, that people won't pay for anything, no matter how significant the value.

"Digital marketing tactics, particularly those used by Mount Kenya University, have had a significant influence on student enrolment at private institutions. Prospective students now find it simpler to learn about the institution, its programs, and admission criteria thanks to the accessibility and ease of online platforms.

In order to collect information and choose a university wisely, students are increasingly turning to digital resources like social media and institution websites. These tech-savvy students were drawn to and kept engaged by Mount Kenya University because to its effective digital marketing efforts.

Grant (1998) adds that the key to differentiation is a company's ability to respond to customer demand. A company must carefully analyze the needs and behavior of its consumers in order to comprehend what they value, what is important to them, and what they are willing to pay for in order to be successful with any differentiation strategy (Thompson & Strickland, 2003). In order to set itself apart from rivals visibly and clearly, a company's product or service offering must have the elements that customers want.

"Mount Kenya University's usage of digital marketing techniques has allowed it to reach people outside of its usual geographic limitations. There is a rise in enrolment from varied backgrounds as a result of prospective students from many locations, including foreign students, having easy access to information about the institution and its offers.

"Digital marketing techniques like search engine optimization and focused online advertising have raised Mount Kenya University's profile among prospective students. These tactics have helped the institution stand out from its rivals and draw in students who would not have otherwise known about its programs.

Porter (1985) asserts that creativity cannot lead to distinction unless the consumer appreciates it. A successful differentiation strategy looks for chances to provide clients value in exchange for a price premium over the extra costs. Johnson and Strickland (2003) assert that differentiation fails when customers do not place a high enough value on a brand's uniqueness to pick it over a rival's brand or when the difference is easy for rivals to imitate or mimic, eliminating the basis of differentiation. The crucial issue is whether differentiation increases value for customers (Grant, 1998).

"The interactive features of internet marketing tools have made it possible for Mount Kenya University to communicate with potential students directly, answering their questions and giving them individualized information. This degree of involvement has helped establish credibility and trust, which has eventually influenced students' enrollment choices at the institution.

Both physical and abstract differences are possible (Grant, 1998). The emphasis of palpable difference is on the outward characteristics of a product or service that are significant to customers' preferences and decision-making procedures. A few of them are shape, color, weight, design, material, and technology. Another element of physical distinction is how well the good or service performs in terms of reliability, consistency, taste, speed, durability, and

safety. Intangible differentiation is required since a customer's assessment of a product or service's worth is not just dependent on its physical attributes.

Digital marketing techniques have been essential in highlighting Mount Kenya University's distinctive qualities and strong points. The institution has been successful in communicating its value proposition via aesthetically engaging material, testimonials, and success stories, which has led to a rise in enrollments.

"The application and enrollment processes for students have been expedited as a result of Mount Kenya University's inclusion of digital marketing tactics into its entire marketing and enrollment processes. Higher enrollment rates are a result of the process being more streamlined and simpler for students via the use of online applications, digital payment methods, and virtual campus visits.

A successful differentiation strategy aims to provide the company a competitive advantage. According to Grant (1998), a company's ability to outperform rivals in terms of its primary performance goal, profitability, is referred to as having a competitive edge. An business is said to have earned competitive advantage when it provides customers with what they want faster or better than competitors (Johnson et al., 2005). Through an effective differentiation strategy and a market premium that surpasses the cost of difference, a firm may obtain (or has the potential to achieve) a continuously higher rate of profit (Grant, 1998). According to Ennew, Watkins, and Wrights (1995), the uniqueness and subsequent client loyalty that comes from differentiation protect the business against competitors, the threat of entry, and substitute products.

"Digital marketing methods have provided Mount Kenya University a competitive advantage in recruiting and maintaining students in an environment that is becoming more and more competitive. The institution has been able to modify its marketing strategies to fit the changing demands and preferences of students by keeping up with the most recent digital trends and technology, assuring its continuous success in student enrolment.

Private institutions in Kenya, including Mount Kenya University, have found that using digital marketing methods to attract more students is a successful strategy. According to the survey, search engine optimization, social media efforts, and targeted internet advertising all helped students make their choice to attend this particular institution.

Conclusions

Digital marketing strategies are critical in influencing student enrolment. The institution's investment in user-friendly digital interfaces and online marketing has yielded a demonstrable impact, affirming the role of digital platforms as indispensable tools for modern educational institutions. As indicated by the regression analysis, focusing on enhancing digital marketing efforts can have a statistically significant effect on increasing enrolment rates.

Recommendation

The study recommended that:

The university should continue to enhance its website user experience, maintain an active presence on social media platforms, leverage video marketing opportunities, increase brand awareness through display advertising, and improve search engine optimization. These efforts will attract more prospective students and increase enrollment.

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