



Influence of Social Media Advertising on Student Enrolment in Private TVET Institutions in the Central Economic Bloc, Kenya

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Abstract

It has become paramount for higher education institutions, such as Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions, to invest heavily in their advertising budget. Despite significant resources being invested in advertising, growth in enrolment has not been witnessed in private TVETs. This study, therefore, sought to analyse the influence of different social media advertising platforms on student enrolment in private TVET institutions in the central economic bloc in Kenya. Principals of these institutions and heads of marketing were the respondents in the study. A census of all 174 private TVETs was conducted resulting, in 348 respondents. The study had a 90.5% (n=315) response rate. Questionnaires and interviews were used to collect information for the study. Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analysis were conducted on the quantitative data while thematic analysis was performed on the qualitative data. Results were presented using tables and narration. All TVETs in the study were found to have a website and social media presence, with 73.4% spending under KES 100,000 on digital ads. Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok were the most cited social media platforms utilised. Pearson correlation analysis showed that social media marketing had a strong, positive and significant association ($r = 0.690$, $p < .001$) with student enrolment. The study concluded that social media advertising is a powerful medium for reaching prospective students and influencing their enrolment decisions. The researcher recommended that TVETs ought to invest heavily in social media marketing. They should hire professionals to ensure that they are visible online.

Introduction

Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) are the most practical avenues for acquiring readily employable skills in the job market (Faria, 2021). Higher education institutions, including TVETs, have traditionally relied on reputation, word of mouth and strong professional networks to attract new students (da Silva et al., 2019). However, in today's competitive environment, these institutions are seeing the need for advertising (Papadimitriou, 2017). The rising competition in the current global market has affected the educational sector. Education is now an international product with institutions worldwide competing for students and inventing ways to satisfy student needs and preferences. Against the backdrop of environmental changes, including decreased government



funding and increased competition, the need for marketing in higher education becomes apparent (Awale & Shrestha, 2021).

The growth of public TVETs in Kenya has coincided with a rise in the number of private TVETs (Sifuna, 2020). In such a marketplace, private TVETs face a significant challenge in gaining a competitive edge over public TVETs by offering a wide range of courses and, more importantly, increasing their enrolment. Enrolment of public TVETs has seen an unprecedented surge attributed to government support and increased awareness of the value of technical courses in today's world. Students' enrolment in these institutions has risen to over 600 per cent since 2013. In the 2020 KCSE, 6,617 students who attained C+ and above chose TVET programmes and were placed in public TVETs, up from 2,632 in 2019 (Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development [KICD], 2021). The problem was that despite significant resources being allocated to advertising, growth in enrolment has not been witnessed in private TVETs.

It is therefore vital for higher education institutions such as TVETs to allocate a considerable amount of resources towards their advertising budget. Advertising plays a significant role in today's age of competition. Advertising is the non-personal communication of information, usually paid for and persuasive, about products, services, or ideas by identified sponsors through various media (Ali, 2021). Advertising aims to announce the introduction of a new product or service and increase the buzz-value of the brand or the company (Belousova, 2021). According to LaBianca (2018), the downturn in student enrolment at universities in the US and many countries worldwide is putting pressure on university marketers to deliver. According to Hawkins and Frohoff (2010), one of the challenges in promoting higher education is that parents are not customers. Also, many academics and university personnel are likely to view marketing as compromising academic freedom.

Social media advertising or social media marketing (SMM) is a form of digital marketing in which paid ads are served to a target audience via social media networks. It involves using paid media to promote a brand, product, or service on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, X, and LinkedIn (Merritt, 2021). Social media ads can be tailored to demographics, interests, and behaviours, allowing for highly targeted campaigns. Thanks to technological advancements, various platforms have become more powerful for both users and businesses implementing digital marketing campaigns (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Evans et al. (2021) indicate that in addition to providing companies with a way to engage with existing customers and reach new ones, SMM has purpose-built data analytics that allow marketers to track the success of their efforts and identify even more ways to engage.

Previous studies have found social media to be effective as a broadcast advertising medium. Websites act as one mechanism that contributes to the segmentation and differentiation of an emerging local marketplace of school options (Njuki, 2022). An exploratory study by Bapat et al. (2021) showed that the efficacy of internet ads for university admission is negatively correlated with the students' age group. However, studies conducted among TVETs are scarce. This study, therefore, sought to assess the influence of different social media advertising platforms on student enrolment in private TVET institutions in the central economic bloc. The study recommended the use of social media broadcast advertising campaigns by private TVET institutions to attract more students and increase student enrolment. This study provided actionable insights to optimise social media advertising, enabling private TVETs to compete effectively with public institutions.



Methods

Study Design

The study employed a mixed-methods design, which was preferred because it enabled the triangulation of data from two sources, thereby increasing the trustworthiness of the research. It also enhanced the explanatory power of the results.

Study Area

The study area for this project was the Central Region Economic Bloc (CEREB). CEREB is the area in the central part of Kenya, comprising ten counties: Nakuru, Kiambu, Nyandarua, Meru, Nyeri, Murang'a, Embu, Kirinyaga, Laikipia, and Tharaka Nithi.

Study Population

The target of the study was private TVET institutions located in the central economic bloc. The central economic bloc was selected for this study because it had the largest population of private TVETs compared with other blocs. The central economic bloc had 174 private TVET institutions as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of Private TVETs in CEREB by County

County	Population	Number of private TVETs
Nakuru	2,445,000	41
Kiambu	2,754,000	71
Nyandarua	721,000	4
Meru	1,666,000	8
Nyeri	863,000	21
Murang'a	1,136,000	6
Embu	662,000	10
Kirinyaga	664,000	8
Laikipia	583,000	4
Tharaka Nithi	425,000	1
Total	11,919,000	174

Source: TVETA (2021)

Principals of these institutions and heads of marketing were the respondents in the study. This is because these individuals held strategic positions in private TVET institutions, overseeing enrolment policies and advertising campaigns.

Sample Size and Sampling Procedure

A census of all 174 private TVETs was conducted. As such, the study had 348 respondents, including the principal and the marketing officer from each TVET.

Inclusion Criteria

All principals and heads of marketing of private TVET institutions in the central economic bloc who were willing to take part in the study were included

Exclusion Criteria

Principals and heads of marketing of private TVET institutions in the central economic bloc, which had been in existence for less than 5 years, were excluded.

Data Collection

The study used a semi-structured questionnaire and interviews to collect quantitative and qualitative data. The questionnaire was semi-structured and self-administered by the heads of the marketing department. To establish the validity of the questionnaire, the instrument was piloted to assess its



face, content and construct validity. To verify the reliability of the questionnaire, a pre-test was conducted. The pre-test was conducted in Nairobi County due to the high concentration of private TVETs. Interviews were also conducted with 12 principals of the participating private TVET institutions in the central economic bloc. Data was collected between January and July 2024.

Data Analysis

Data was coded and entered into a computer using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 28 for Windows. Descriptive and Pearson correlation analyses were used to analyse data; descriptive statistics comprised frequencies and percentages. Pearson correlation (r) analysis was crucial in establishing the influence of social media advertising on student enrolment in private TVET institutions in the central economic bloc. Analysis was conducted at a 95% confidence interval using SPSS. Results were presented using tables. Thematic analysis was used to analyse qualitative data. Using thematic analysis, the researcher sought to identify key themes related to the objectives of the study. The researcher began by familiarising themselves with the qualitative data through repeated reading and note-taking, which allowed for initial codes to be generated that captured salient features of the data. These codes were then systematically organised into potential themes, which were refined through iterative review to ensure they accurately represented the data and addressed the study's objectives. Finally, the themes were defined, named, and contextualised within the broader literature, providing a coherent analytical narrative that elucidated key patterns and insights relevant to the research aims. The results were then presented by narration.

Ethical Considerations

Karatina University approved the study. A research permit was obtained from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI). Voluntary participation was ensured, and informed consent was sought from each respondent. The researcher ensured the anonymity of respondents by using codes. Only the researcher and her supervisors had access to the data.

Results

The study had a sample of 348 respondents; however, as shown in Table 2, the actual number of participants was 315. This represents a response rate of 90.5%. The response rate in this study is deemed high and acceptable, as it exceeds the 70% recommended by Kothari (2017).

Table 2: Response Rate

County	Number of private TVETs	Population	Participants	Response (%)
Nakuru	41	82	79	96.3
Kiambu	71	142	131	92.3
Nyandarua	4	8	5	62.5
Meru	8	16	14	87.5
Nyeri	21	42	40	95.2
Muranga	6	12	9	75.0
Embu	10	20	14	70.0
Kirinyaga	8	16	14	87.5
Laikipia	4	8	7	87.5
Tharaka Nithi	1	2	2	100.0
Total	174	348	315	90.5



Social Media Advertising

Social media advertising in TVET institutions was evaluated. All the respondents (100%) in the study indicated that their institution had a website and social media. Similarly, all the respondents indicated that their institution used paid traffic and search engine optimisation on its website. The majority (73.4%) stated that they spent below KES 100,000 on internet advertising. All the respondents (100%) indicated that internet advertising was effective in enhancing enrolment, with 77.1% indicating that this was to a high extent. According to 43.1% of the respondents, internet advertising was the most effective form of broadcast advertising for their institution. The majority (74.3%) of the respondents indicated that cost was a challenge for the institution experienced in advertising to raise enrolment. These results demonstrate heavy reliance on social media advertising to increase enrolment (Table 3)

Table 3: Utilisation of Social Media Advertising by Private TVET Institutions

	Response	Frequency	Percent
Does the institution have a website?	Yes	315	100.0%
If yes, does the institution use paid traffic to its website?	Yes	315	100.0%
If yes, does the institution use search engine optimisation to its website?	Yes	315	100.0%
Does the institution have a social media account?	Yes	315	100.0%
What amount of money was used on internet advertising in 2019?	<KES 100,000	231	73.4%
	KES 100,000 - KES 250,000	66	21.1%
	KES 250,000 - KES 500,000	17	5.5%
	Total	315	100.0%
In your opinion, is internet advertising effective in enhancing enrolment?	Yes	315	100.0%
If yes, to what extent does internet advertising influence enrolment?	High	243	77.1%
	Moderate	72	22.9%
	Total	315	100.0%
In your opinion, which of these is the most effecting form of broadcast advertising for your institution?	Radio	32	10.1%
	Television	64	20.2%
	3D Billboard	84	26.6%
	Internet	136	43.1%
	Total	315	100.0%
What challenges does the institution experience in advertising to raise enrolment?	Cost	234	74.3%
	Negative Perceptions	130	41.3%
	Inadequate Infrastructure	55	17.4%

In the interview, the researcher sought to find out from the respondents the role social media advertising played in promoting their institution to prospective students. Some of the responses are shown below:

"Social media is our main advertising tool. It is affordable, reaches many young people, and allows us to engage with students directly through comments, messages, and live sessions." ¹⁰⁶

"We rely heavily on social media advertising because it is cost-effective and widely used by students. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok help us showcase our programmes and interact with potential students."



"We use social media a lot because most students spend their time online. It helps us reach a wider audience at a lower cost compared to traditional advertising like TV and 3D billboards." 103

"Many students start their college search on social media, so we need to have a strong presence there." 102

The responses showed a high preference for social media as an advertising tool. A prominent theme across the responses is the affordability of social media advertising compared to traditional marketing methods such as television and 3D billboards. Respondents consistently highlight the extensive reach of social media platforms, noting that they enable institutions to connect with a broad audience of prospective students. Another significant theme was the capacity for direct engagement that social media offers.

Student Enrolment

The majority (66%) of the respondents reported an enrolment of between 1,000 and 4,999 in their TVET, while 32.1% indicated between 5,000 and 9,999 students. The enrolment of the TVETs was up to the institution’s capacity according to the majority (68.8%) of the respondents. Of those who indicated that enrolment was not up to the institution's capacity, 58.8% indicated that the enrolment was less, while 41.2% indicated that the enrolment was more than the TVET's capacity. Enrolment retention, access and equity were rated as high by 83.5%, 71.6% and 84.4% of the respondents, respectively. These results demonstrate that most of the private TVETs in the study had high enrolment (Table 4).

Table 4 Student Enrolment in Private TVET Institutions

	Response	Frequency	Percent
Enrolment	1,000 - 4,999	191	60.6%
	5,000 - 9,999	101	32.1%
	10,000 or more	23	7.3%
	Total	315	100.0%
Enrolment to capacity	Yes	217	68.8%
	No	98	31.2%
	Total	315	100.0%
Nature of enrolment in relation to capacity	Less	185	58.8%
	More	130	41.2%
	Total	315	100.0%
Enrolment Retention	High	263	83.5%
	Fair	26	8.3%
	Low	26	8.3%
	Total	315	100.0%
Enrolment Access	High	226	71.6%
	Fair	66	21.1%
	Low	23	7.3%
	Total	315	100.0%
Enrolment Equity	High	266	84.4%
	Fair	12	3.7%
	Low	37	11.9%
	Total	315	100.0%

Participants in the interview were asked to describe the enrolment in their institutions.

"Our enrolment has been very good over the past few years. We have a high number of students joining each intake, and most of our courses are always full" 101

"Yes, enrolment is more than adequate. Many students are attracted to our institution due to our quality training and strong reputation." 107



"Enrolment is fairly good, but there is still room for improvement. Some programmes have very high numbers, while others need more students."¹⁰⁵

The responses supported the quantitative results that enrolment in private TVETs was high, with only a few institutions experiencing low enrolment.

Influence of Social Media Advertising on Student Enrolment

Correlation analysis was conducted between social media advertising and student enrolment. Using Pearson’s correlation coefficient, the study indicated a correlation of $r = .690$, with an asymptotic standard error of .033. The association was also significant ($p < .001$). These findings suggest that higher levels of social media advertising were strongly associated with increased student enrolment rates. This indicates that social media advertising can play a significant role in attracting prospective students to TVETs. (Table 5).

Table 5: Influence of Social Media Advertising on Student Enrolment

		Value	Asymptotic Standard Error ^a	Approximate T ^b	Approximate Significance
Interval by Interval	Pearson's R	.690	.033	9.862	.000 ^c
Ordinal by Ordinal	Spearman Correlation	.747	.024	11.634	.000 ^c
N of Valid Cases		315			

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.

b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

c. Based on normal approximation.

Discussion

Social media advertising had a strong, significant and positive association with student enrolment. The results of this study are similar to the findings of Ali (2021), who found that social media advertisements had very high scores in terms of effectiveness and exposure among freshmen students of Komar University in Iraq. Similarly, the study by Thornton (2017) in the USA revealed that universities' active presence on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube positively impacted student engagement and interest. Although Bapat et al. (2021) found a negative correlation between the efficacy of internet ads and students' age group, the overall impact of digital advertising on enrolment decisions was positive, aligning with the current study's findings. There is widespread use and popularity of social media platforms among the target demographic, making it an effective medium for reaching and engaging potential students. Additionally, the interactive and visually appealing nature of social media advertisements may resonate well with prospective students, influencing their enrolment decisions.

However, this result differs from the findings of Merritt (2021), who conducted a study on community college courses in the USA. Merritt found that there was no significant difference in enrolment between courses offered with social media advertising and those provided without it. Additionally, the study by Culliver (2015) indicated that while social media advertising was essential, its direct association with enrolment was not significant. Kenyan TVET institutions may experience more critical social media advertising effects on student enrolment than U.S. community colleges. In Kenya, with high mobile internet penetration and social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp commanding strong communication tentacles, focused digital advertising can convincingly resonate with young, tech-embracing populations with limited alternative information sources. Conversely, however, American community colleges have a more saturated media context with diverse recruitment practices, with students potentially relying on traditional sources, institutional



reputation, or state-sponsored programmes, perhaps diluting the comparative influence of social media advertisement.

Conclusion

There was a strong, positive and significant association between social media advertising and student enrolment in private TVET institutions in the central economic bloc. TVETs which employed social media advertising were found to have increased student enrolment. This indicates that social media advertising can be a powerful medium for reaching prospective students and influencing their enrolment decisions. Therefore, TVETs ought to invest heavily in social media marketing. They should hire professionals to ensure that they are visible online. TVETs should also ensure that they engage with potential students when queries are made.

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