

The Influence of Twitter and Facebook on Public Relations Strategy in Universities: A Case Study of St Paul's University

Bariu Michael Kimathi ¹, Winnie Ndeti² & Mwanthi Shadrach ³

St. Paul's University

Abstract

The main aim of this study was to determine how the use of Twitter and Facebook has influenced how universities develop and carry out their Public Relations strategy. A case study was conducted at St Paul's University in order to acquire the necessary data from sources that had insight into how the university carried out its social media strategy. Public Relations activities such as image and brand positioning, customer relations, employee relations, marketing and advertising on Facebook and Twitter were analyzed in order to ascertain the Public Relations strategy of the university. The Technology Acceptance Model and the Adaptive Structuration Theory, formed the theoretical framework of the study. The study adopted mixed research methods during data extraction in order to acquire information from respondents. A total of 361 respondents from the Department of Communication Studies and the Public Relations Department were targeted with an 80% response rate. The data was acquired from the Public Relations Department using interviews while questionnaires were used to extract data from students and lecturers in the Department of Communication Studies. After data collection, interview data was analyzed thematically while questionnaire data was analyzed using SPSS. The study findings revealed that the use of Facebook and Twitter had influenced how the university developed and carried out its Public Relations Strategy. Service delivery by the Public Relations Department had been forced to change in order to keep up with the demands of their publics on social media. It was further revealed that there were both positives and negatives involved in the use of these new media. Based on the findings, the study therefore recommends that Public Relations practitioners and institutions of higher learning would be served best by adopting social media at the corporate level.

Key words: Facebook, Twitter, Public Relations, Strategy, St Paul's University

Introduction

This study examines the influence of Facebook and Twitter in Public Relations strategy in universities. The contents of the paper will be analyzed under five main sections: the background of the study, methodology, results and discussions, conclusions, and finally recommendations.

Background of the Study

The adoption of social media as day-to-day communication tools by the global community has made them integral components of Public Relations departments worldwide. As stated by the New Media Consortium (2016), communications have become shorter, more frequent and can happen instantaneously between individuals and organizations across the globe. Public Relations officers have thus identified the need and benefit of incorporating social media into their overall communication strategy. However, as Tuten (2014) states, public relations professionals must first comprehend how to operate digital platforms due to the various challenges they pose.

The growth of social media usage has been immense ever since its introduction to the global audience. According to the GlobalWebIndex (2023), there are over 4.7 billion people using social media around the world as of January 2023. This rate of usage has been growing at a rate of 12.5% since the year 2015. In Africa for instance, the continent has been experiencing a growth rate of 13.92% in the use of various social media platforms. Facebook and Twitter have also emerged as some of the most popular platforms in the world. The ability for Facebook to help users connect with friends, family, organizations and strangers from all over the world has seen it become the most popular social media platform with 3.88 billion people using it as of January 2023 according to Statista. Twitter on the other hand, garners 368 million users as of January 2023 according to Statista. In Kenya, Facebook still remains very popular with 14 million users as of January 2023 according to Statista while Twitter has 1.9 million users as of January 2023 according to DataReportal.

This popularity of social medial platforms has seen them become integrated into the corporate world. Public relations managers and their institutions need to create a proactive social media strategy that satisfies the needs of their publics as well as the objectives of the company. As Edelman (2012) argues, an effective proactive strategy can help shape the institutions brand and

image in a powerful manner. In universities for instance, the net generation has forced the institutions and their staff to adopt to their new age needs. They learn and acquire knowledge differently thus rendering the old traditional teaching practices out of place (Ulbrich et al., 2011). Apart from affecting teaching practices, social media has also affected other university operations like advertising and marketing. Their ability to reach a global audience, have made Facebook and Twitter particularly favorites among public relations practitioners (Evans, Twomey & Talan, 2011).

African institutes of higher learning have also embraced the use of social media in their various communication needs. However, the implementation of social media as communication tool within the university sector is non-existent or still in its infancy. As Gordon (2010) argues, most public relations professionals do not yet comprehend the benefits of using social media in the corporate sector. The poor application of ICT and other socio-economic factors also play a major role in the slow integration and use of Facebook and Twitter for public relations activities in Africa.

Literature review

Social media have become game changers for both personal and corporate communication due to their various advantages over other forms of media. According to Berger (2008), social media are the latest electronic and web-based venues for communication, including social networks, podcasts, blogs, chat rooms, and webpages. Social Networking Sites (SNS) such as Facebook and Twitter offer users the chance to establish relationships and create online communities with who they interact with on a regular basis. This capacity has also made them useful tools for corporate activities such as marketing, advertising, customer relations, media relations and many more (Chi, 2012). Facebook, which is used by 25.1% of the eligible population in Kenya offers users the opportunity to interact with other users from all over the world in real-time. With 14 million users in Kenya and 3.88 Billion globally, Facebook is the most popular social media platform in the world. This has therefore given it the capacity to offer the corporate sector many opportunities to market their services as well as interacting with customers directly. Twitter on the hand is used by 5.2% of the eligible population in Kenya. With 368 million users globally and 1.9 million users in Kenya, it is clear that Twitter is another popular communication channel.

Its appeal is further enhanced by its capability to offer users personalized experiences as well as creating links to their social media profiles on Facebook and other platforms (Fischer et al., 2011).

For a social media strategy to work, one has to consider both the target audience and their specific content needs. The idea behind social media strategy is to make sure the content an individual or organization posts on social media receives as much engagement as possible. According to the Social Media Measurement Standards Conclave (2013, p.6), engagement is an action that surpasses exposure while also implying that an interaction has occurred between multiple participants on social media. With audiences based on factors such as age, income, education, location, it is imperative for social media users to tailor-make their content to target specific audiences in order to make it more effective (Axel, Tim & Jean, 2013). Audiences are no longer just passive consumers of the content posted on Facebook and Twitter but are increasingly becoming active by commenting, liking and sharing what they interact with. This interaction creates what researchers call “Electronic Word of Mouse/Mouth (EWOM)” (Liu et al., 2016). This liberalization of the online sphere has caused the exchange of information while compelling brands and organizations to conduct themselves appropriately (Awata, 2010).

Studies conducted in the field of social media and public relations also highlight the various benefits and challenges social media has presented to those who use it. As Raj, Joseph, & Rousseau (2015) discovered in their study on the pattern and usage of social media, public relations officers in the Indian city of Bengaluru used social media for activities such as customer relations, media relations, employee relations and maintaining relationships with the general public. This is in line with what Xiongfei, Xitong, Doug & Xi (2016) discovered in their study on how social media affects employee performance. They discovered that by using social media for employee communication, there was a sense of unity and a shared vision which led to improvement in performance.

Universities just like any other organizations have a need to communicate and stay in touch with their publics. As Snoeijers et al. (2014) in their study about student’s response towards a university crisis on social media discovered, most of their stakeholders were on social media and therefore the universities could target them directly and quickly. The universities have a special

interest in maintaining these relationships just like any other profitable or non-profitable organization. This is further supported by the study conducted by Smith et al. (2017). In this study about the rise of brand ambassadors and influencers, it was discovered that organizations were using influencers and other famous brand ambassadors and celebrities for brand and image building, marketing and advertising and corporate social responsibility activities. This need to build credibility with online audiences is a strategy public relations experts cannot ignore as it could reflect on their organizations performance.

Studies in Africa such as Achor, Nwachukwu, & Nkwocha's (2015) paper which evaluated the impact social media had on information management, found out that social media had both personal and corporate benefits. It was also a critical tool used during crises management as it can disseminate information to a global audience quickly. However, in a study by Inya (2017), which analyzed how social media had influenced public relations activities by universities in Nigeria, public relations officers were under-utilizing social media. They did not have the necessary skills and other resources needed to fully utilize social media for their public relations activities.

The main objective of this paper was to study and analyze the influence of Facebook and Twitter on Public Relations Strategy at St Paul's University.

Research Questions

The study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How has the emergence of Facebook and Twitter influenced the University's Public Relations Strategy?
2. How does the university currently use Facebook and Twitter to implement its Public Relations Strategy?
3. How effective is Facebook and Twitter in implementing the university's Public Relations Strategy?
4. Is it possible to create a successful Public Relations Strategy by using Facebook and Twitter?

Methodology

The study adopted mixed methods research in order to collect the necessary data. This was seen as appropriate since it would allow the researcher to collect both qualitative and quantitative data without manipulating the variables. This is supported by Mugenda et al. (2003), who argues that mixed methods enables the researcher to collect and compare data using deductive reasoning to arrive at an observation which can be generalized to other areas beyond the scope of study.

Population and Sampling

The study was conducted within St Paul's university. The researcher targeted the university due to its familiarity and presence within an urban setting therefore making the use of social media highly likely. The employees in the Public Relations department as well as students and lecturers from the Department of Communication Studies formed the target population. The Department of Communication Studies has 4019 students and 10 permanent lecturers (St Paul's University Registry, 2023). Secondary data was extracted from the university's official Facebook and Twitter pages.

Stratified random sampling, simple random sampling and purposive sampling were used in order to arrive at the desired sample size. Stratified random sampling was used to cluster the students based on their year of study. This type of sampling enables the researcher to target only those who are likely to provide the required data while ensuring all parts of the population are represented. Purposive sampling was used to pick the university's Public Relations manager to represent the Public Relations Department. As Etikan et al. (2016) state, purposive sampling allows the researcher to target individuals with an intimate knowledge on the study. The manager therefore would offer in-depth information on the university's social media strategy. The lecturers sample size was arrived at by census due to the small population size of just 10. This gave the researcher a total of 361 respondents.

Table 1: Population

	Target Population	Sample size	Total
Students	4019	350	350

lecturers	10	10	10
Public relations department	4	1	1
			361

Data Collection Instruments

To collect data from students and lecturers, questionnaires were administered while an in-depth interview was conducted to gain the insights of the Public Relations manager. Primary qualitative data was acquired from the university’s public relations manager through a face-to-face interview in order to understand the university’s social media strategy since it began using Facebook and Twitter for its various corporate activities. Close ended questionnaires were administered to students and lecturers to gain their insights as they were key in understanding how the university’s publics viewed its strategy on social media. Secondary data from the university’s official Facebook and Twitter pages was done using sentiment analysis tools in order to determine the kind of content posted and the level of engagement from the target audience.

The instruments validity and reliability were ascertained by experts in the field such as the researcher’s supervisors, before the study was carried out. As Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) argues, validity is the degree to which the data analysis relates to variables in the study while reliability is the ability of the instrument to produce consistent results after repeated trials. A pilot study consisting of 5 lecturers and 50 students randomly selected within the university to help ascertain the reliability of the research instruments.

Data collected using the close-ended questionnaires administered to lecturers and students was analyzed using the SPSS statistical package. Data from the social media pages of the university as well as data form the key informant interview with public relations manager was analyzed based on the emerging themes. Descriptive statistics were used to present the findings using tables and bar charts.

Ethical factors were also taken into consideration before the study was carried out. Permissions from the university's Ethics and Review Committee (SPUISERC) were acquired before the researcher applied for the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) permit. Once the SPUISERC clearance form and NACOSTI permit were secured, the researcher was able to proceed with the study. The respondents were asked to sign an informed consent form for their own comfort and safety before the data collection exercise began.

Results and discussion

The study aimed at understanding how Facebook and Twitter have influenced public relations strategy in universities with a case study of St Paul's university. The data was acquired from sources within the university using an in-depth interview and questionnaires. From the student's sample, 350 questionnaires were handed out with 281 being duly filled and returned. Of the 10 questionnaires handed out to the lecturer's sample, 7 were duly filled and returned. This gave the researcher a total of 288 filled and returned questionnaires as well as information from the key informant interview. The response rate was therefore 80%.

Demographics of respondents

From the student's data, the researcher was able to categorize the students by their gender and year of study. Male respondents were 128 thus representing 45.6% of the student population while females were 153 and thus represented 54.4% of the population. This indicates that there was a higher response rate from females than males. The second classification was derived from their year of study. A majority of respondents (39%), indicated that they were in their first year of study, 29.2% in second year, 21.4% in third year and 17.8% in fourth year.

From the lecturer's sample, the respondents were categorized based on their gender and duration of stay at the university. The majority of respondents in this group were male which represents 57.1% of the population while females represented 42.9% of the population. A majority of the respondents, which is 57.1%, had worked at the university for more than 10 years while 42.9% had been there for between 6 to 10 years.

Q1: How has the emergence of Facebook and Twitter influenced the University's Public Relations Strategy?

The study was able to interrogate how the university had changed its public relations strategy after Facebook and Twitter became popular modes of communication among its publics. The key informant interview was able to highlight that the university had to create a proper social media strategy in order to keep up with the changing times. The university's social media strategy is based on a calendar that is acted upon weekly or monthly based on the set objectives.

Basically social media have made us set up a working plan that we follow at all times. We plan weekly or monthly activities that are carried out on our social media platforms based on targets we set together with the administration. We then design the strategy around whichever platform serves our needs best especially in reaching the target audience. The messages must then be created and packaged in a manner that the target audience will easily understand and respond to if possible.

The findings were in line with Stageman & Berg (2013), who argue on the importance of personalizing messages on social media in order to establish unique relationships with your audience.

Q2: How does the university currently use Facebook and Twitter to implement its Public Relations Strategy?

In order to implement its public relations strategy, the study discovered that the university was employing a number of tactics to achieve their goals. For instance, a group of students known as “**digital warriors**” was used by the university to help in Brand and Image promotion as well as Marketing and Advertisements. It was revealed that content was created in collaboration with students and other staff and uploaded on Facebook and Twitter. The university also used #hashtags such as #SPU, #WeAreSPU and #KaribuSPU promote various content and information on Facebook and Twitter.

“We use the digital warriors to promote content on student intakes, sports events, academic events and graduations. The warriors help as trend by sharing and reposting our content or

tagging us in trending topics in order to help us and our content trend. This is a very important way to position our brand positively to our clients and potential clients.”

However, the study discovered that the university was simply using the students and other staff involved in these social media campaigns as props and models. Efforts to integrate the use Facebook and Twitter for customer relations and employee relations had not been carried out.

Q3: How effective is Facebook and Twitter in implementing the university’s Public Relations Strategy?

The effectiveness of using Facebook and Twitter was highlighted by the interviewee who revealed that, due to their capacity to reach audiences globally quickly and in real-time, they are more effective than traditional media.

“On TV or Radio, you just put out content to the general public and hope for the best. On Facebook and Twitter you can target an individual directly and interact with them one-on-one. This is a game-changer in the public relations sector especially in marketing and advertising. It is also easier to deal with a crisis using these tools since you can monitor online sentiments and respond in a fast and efficient manner before things get out of hand.”

Facebook and Twitter were also discovered to be cheaper than traditional media during advertising and marketing campaigns. One could also place the same advert on their various social media platforms at minimal or no cost at all.

Q4: Is it possible to create a successful Public Relations Strategy by using Facebook and Twitter

The study also examined the possibility of creating successful public relations strategies for Facebook and Twitter. Due to Facebook and Twitter offering practitioners many advantages like reaching a large audience quickly and being able to monitor interactions and responding to feedback instantly, the public relations manager felt it was a critical tool in the overall communication strategy of any organization. The university’s existing social media strategy is a clear indicator that these platforms such as Facebook and Twitter will continue to play a major

role in its overall public relations strategy. The interviewee also revealed that the university's social media team was expected to continue growing in order to maximize the benefits of these new platforms.

“At the moment I think that even with the existing challenges such as lack of privacy, difficulty in verifying information, hackers and other malicious actors, social media will continue to play an integral role in public relations. This is because people are becoming more aware of these platforms and how to use them. The existing challenges are also being solved each day. For instance at the university we currently have a small team but we intend to expand and train more managers in future.”

Conclusion

From the findings, it can be deduced that institutions of higher learning have incorporated social media in their communications strategy. On the other hand, other stakeholders and publics of the university also view social media as a powerful tool for both personal and official communication needs. The use of Facebook and Twitter has enhanced the university's capacity to reach new audiences and untapped markets. The findings also indicate that the university did not just use social media to advertise its services alone, it also announced various programs and activities like sporting events, cultural events and academic events. Stakeholders also feel that more could be done in order to maximize the use of social media for various communication needs within and outside the university.

When it comes to matters of what strategy the university had to create, it can be deduced that the arrival of Facebook and Twitter, has made it imperative that PR officers quickly learn and implement social media strategies in their PR activities. For instance, St Paul's has had to create a clear social media strategy with well planned activities that help it execute its plans. This capacity to communicate in real time also allows the university to measure the effects of its campaigns through comments, likes, retweets and shares.

The data revealed that the university was currently using Facebook and Twitter for brand positioning, advertising and marketing and other various announcements. The university was working with students and other staff to create unique content which is then posted on Facebook

and Twitter. This is used to advertise the universities programmes and services as well as events such as graduations. The use of “digital warriors” has also been incorporated to help paint the university in a positive image to its audiences on social media.

The platforms are also revealed to be highly effective in implementing the universities public relations strategy. The capacity to interact with publics in real time combined with the opportunity to monitor sentiment and feedback makes these platforms very valuable. However, a few challenges relating to cost of integrating the platforms into the overall strategy, cost of other infrastructure and employee hiring and training and worst of all cyber security issues were found to be affecting the speed of how these platforms were being integrated in the public relations sector.

Even with these challenges, it was discovered that a majority of respondents felt that Facebook and Twitter had long term applications in both formal and informal communication. The public relations manager asserted that the university felt the same way and would continue to invest in expanding its application of these platforms in public relations strategy by expanding and training the social media team.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the paper, the researcher recommends that institutions of higher learning need to realize that their student and staff population are not just models and influencers to help the university trend. Their views on the integration of Facebook and Twitter for various communication needs within the university should be incorporated into the social media strategy.

The public relations departments in universities should also endeavor to have more professionally trained staff to handle their various social media platforms. This is due to the reason, as revealed in the study, the departments were small and did not have enough staff to handle all the needs of the social media strategy.

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