Social Media and Personal Branding of Gospel Musicians in Kenya

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Abstract

The paper investigated the influence of social media on personal branding of gospel Musicians in Kenya. The objectives of the study were to establish the forms of social media used for personal branding, to identify the factors influencing the use of social media for personal branding, to evaluate the extent to which social media is used for personal branding and to measure the effectiveness of social media use for personal branding. The study was guided by the self-presentation theory and the perception and visual communication theory. Mixed methods research approach was employed. 25 gospel musicians who topped the charts in the music industry in Kenya in the year 2018 were interviewed and data from their social media sites reviewed. Data was analysed qualitatively and quantitatively. Findings indicate that various social media sites offer differing advantages with regard to personal branding. Some social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram could offer more effective options over others. Most gospel musicians employ social media managers to run their social media sites. Computer literacy, access to smart phones, internet connectivity, internet speeds, target audience, popularity of the platform and the material prepared for release to the audience were found to influence personal branding. The study recommends that gospel musicians can engage communication professionals to improve their branding, increase their brand equities and fan base. Professional branding can also establish e-commerce options that would enable them to translate their social media fan base into music sales, establish commercial clientele that aligns to their personal brand with a view of growing their financial strength.

Keywords: personal branding, communication, social media, gospel musicians

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to determine the extent to which gospel musicians in Kenya are utilizing social media for personal branding. The concept of personal branding was first introduced by Tom Peter (1997). He acknowledged that identity is created by the person's skills, personality traits and other features that will make him different from others.

Personal branding has been majorly perceived as a means to gain professional growth or sustain popularity (Tarnovskaya, 2017). Further, personal branding has traditionally been the domain of celebrities, politicians or professionals who strive to succeed in their careers. Introduction of the internet and the rise of social media have however seen personal branding evolve into great ideas not exclusive to professionals but also to celebrities. Social media has enabled personal branding to take a new form in which people brand themselves through the content that they share on their personalized profiles (Tarnovskaya, 2017).

The past decade has registered an influx in the use and popularity of social media. Social networks such as Facebook and Instagram are increasingly embedded into the structures and processes of day to day communication both in corporate organizations and among individuals, providing individuals like gospel musicians opportunities to become entrepreneurs who can brand themselves and get a favourable environment for designing an appealing image of themselves (Brems et al., 2017).

Boyd and Ellison (2007) posit that the birth of social media can be dated back to 2004 when Facebook was launched. The authors termed the season a dawn of new error in social networking and marketing for both corporate and individuals.

They looked at the rise of social media as a big opportunity for marketers even though that aspect of marketing was not clear to the public. Kavutha (2018) reports that there are approximately 2.7 billion active people on social media and 2.5 billion of them are using mobile phones to access social media. According to Kavutha, people are increasingly spending more time and other resources on social media interacting with friends' posting photos, videos and messages on Facebook, Instagram and other platforms. Social media has grown and has remodeled the culture of communication and new digital environment that offer numerous new opportunities. McDonald (2018) considers social networks beneficial to musicians noting that they can potentially launch music careers. Kavutha (2018) posits that music fans want to know what their celebrity is doing, where they are doing it and who they are doing it with without care of privacy preferences.

Gospel music or Christian music as it is sometimes referred to, has been in existence since the Bible times. The Bible records several instances where God commanded His people to sing praises to Him during war and during worship (2 Chronicles 20: 21). There are several songs written and sang by various musicians in the Bible, both in the old and new testament. The gospel musicians mentioned in the Bible includes David, who was referred to as the Psalmist and wrote several songs as recorded in the book of Psalms; Miriam the sister of Moses was also a great singer who led worshipers in songs. There were also several skillful singing groups consisting of men and women found in Israel as recorded in the Bible. (1 Chronicles 25:7, 2 Chronicles 20: 21, Ezra 2: 65 and Nehemiah 12: 31, New International Version).

The Recording Industry Association of America (2018) records that the contemporary gospel music industry has its roots in the late 1960s and early 1970s through a Christian movement then known as the Jesus movement. The movement produced several bands in a very short period which was quickly followed by Christian recording labels such as songbird records, Priority records amongst others. By the 1980s the industry was maturing and transforming into a multimillion-dollar enterprise. The gospel musicians like Amy Grant, Ron Kenoly and Sandi Patti had begun saturating the industry and had gained influence in the industry each playing significant roles in the development of the industry (Glazier, 2016). A report filed by gospel Music Association in 2015 states that there is a global significant growth and gospel musicians are creating Unique, powerful music and finding innovative ways to tell their stories (Patilo, 2015).

The Kenyan gospel music remains the most popular genre of music in Kenya hence gospel musicians top the list of the most famous as well as the richest music artists in general. The industry has seen old gospel artists making a comeback as well as new musicians being discovered (Answers Africa, 2018). A report by Mdundo (2016) an online platform distributing music on behalf of Kenyan musicians reveals that a number of gospel musicians have landed on jobs as brand ambassadors for various products because of their distinct brands in the industry. For instance, Kambua a gospel musician based in Nairobi signed a deal with Darling Company as their brand ambassador. The company CEO stated reasons for their choice as "her charming nature and ability to produce and maintain uplifting music". Alai (2012) also reports that Daddy Owen signed a deal with Airtel Kenya as their brand ambassador in 2012.

Mr. Shivan Bhargava the Airtel CEO cited Daddy Owen as being "consistent with the company's brand policy of leading in industry innovation and creating delightful and locally relevant brand experiences for Kenyans." These examples show that a musician's brand plays a key role in their market positioning not just for personal growth but also in the corporate world.

Personal branding has been majorly perceived as a means to gain professional growth or sustain popularity (Tarnovskaya, 2017). The author further adds that personal branding has traditionally been the domain of celebrities, politicians or professionals who strive to succeed in their careers. Introduction of the internet and the rise of social media have however seen personal branding evolve into great ideas not exclusive to professionals but also to celebrities. Social media has enabled personal branding to take a new form in which people brand themselves through the content that they share on their personalized profiles (Tarnovskaya, 2017).

Building a personal brand is now becoming more and more important part of many music artists globally. Ward (2016) identifies Madonna as a celebrity who have successfully branded themselves over the years using social media and other medium to remain relevant in the industry. According to Ward every one of Madonna's music album is a different version of Madonna, from her style of music to her fashion of dressing and to her looks which has changed so many times over the years. According to Ward, Madonna has always left her fans guessing what next and this has been her secret to a long and successful career as a musician and actor.

In Africa, Nigeria's Onyeka Onwenu who started off as a secular musician back in the 1980s, rebranded herself years later to go into gospel music. Later on in her career as a gospel musician, she took to social media to communicate her new brand from which she gains support and good following.

She has continued to win the hearts of her audience by always producing different and relevant content such as health, mutual coexistence, respect for women and children (Nwaeze, 2018).

In Kenya, a number of celebrities have branded and rebranded themselves for the market. Among them is *Bamzigi* (official names Harrison Muniu) a secular rapper who rebranded himself 4 years ago. In reference to a story published on the Pulse newsletter in 2015, after years of struggles in the music industry and personal life the musician redefined his course and came into the music scene with new Kenyan styles of music like *Afro p*op, K*apuka, Electronic Dance Music* and *Dancehall reggae* which have won the hearts of both local and international audience. According to Pulse, he has maximized on social media as a channel to sell himself constantly communicating his brand.

His music is now more popular internationally than in the local market (Pulse, 2015). Size 8 reborn (officially known as Linet Munyali) has had to brand herself after leaving the secular world of music to join gospel music. The female gospel musician had to change her artist name from Size 8 to size 8 reborn. She also changed her dressing and according to Standard Newspaper article, she is now one of the well-dressed gospel Musicians in Kenya. Her image has earned her a new job as a brand ambassador for Softcare Diapers (Monicah, 2018). According to Benjamin, Guillaume & Sasaki (2017) people are brands just as much as products like Nike or Coke, therefore such as a product or a service, individuals are able to differentiate themselves and commercialize their personal brand in order to stand out from the crowd.

In the recent past, the gospel music industry in Kenya has faced challenges related to reputation and general image. In an article titled "What ails the Kenyan gospel ministry?" published in December 2016 by Pastor Musyimi of Mamlaka Hill chapel points out various problems with the gospel musicians in Nairobi.

To begin with, he points out that gospel musicians today suffers a serious decline in the quality of the gospel music. Secondly, some musicians lack of understanding of what the gospel is and therefore do not take it with seriousness it deserves (Musyimi, 2016). The industry has also been criticized for lack of professionalism and producing bad content music that does not qualify to be gospel (Kejitan, 2019). Kejitan also expresses the disappointment of media houses, presenters and Disk Jockeys (DJs) over the bad content music that is currently being produced by Kenyan musicians. He further asserts that unless Kenyan musicians change their work ethics, foreign music will continue to dominate the local media.

In a more recent case, Standard Newspapers reports that Dk Kwenye beat and Hopekid who are gospel musicians have been mentioned in a sex scandal involving a young lady (Makena, 2019). Ouma (2019) reports that "Kenya's gospel industry is a disaster waiting to happen and is unfolding one scandal after another". This scandal that trended on most of the social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube left many people with a lot of question marks about the gospel industry. According to Ouma (2019), the gospel music industry is currently tainted with a web of deceit, immoral behaviours and controversial lifestyle that has tarnished the image and reputation of the industry. From the fore-going discussion, gospel music industry in Kenya is perceived to be ailing from poor personal branding as is largely published both on print and online media. Gospel musicians are therefore facing increasing pressure to adopt social media strategies for personal branding so as to gain a competitive advantage.

It is not however known to what extent gospel musicians are using the social media platform for personal branding in Kenya.

Objectives

The paper aimed at establishing the forms of social media used for personal branding, identifying factors influencing the use of social media for personal branding, evaluating the extent to which social media is used for personal branding, and determining the effectiveness of social media use for personal branding by gospel musicians in Nairobi.

Theoretical framework

This study used two theories; i) self-presentation theory by Goffman (1956). The theory is explained by Baumeister and Hutton (1987) and suggests that individuals have an inner desire to control the impression others have of them hence the need to represent themselves to the social world. This theory helped in creating understanding of how people intentionally or unintentionally present themselves to control or shape how the public view them hence personal branding. In this study, the theory aided the researcher and readers to comprehend the fact that gospel musicians have created for themselves brands through their social media interactions. How the public views them is directly related to their online posts. The theory also helped readers understand how and why the social media messages appeal to various sections of the online audiences, ii) Perception and visual communication theory by Barry (2002). In his handbook published in 2004, Barry states that this theory provide insights, knowledge, and understanding of how people gain information through their senses (i.e., vision) about the environment.

The theory argues that visual perception involves mental and cognitive processes and as such our eyes are the key means of recognizing the environments, world, other people and ourselves.

Barry further explains that perception can be swayed to the positive or negative side depending on the pattern of influence formed by observation. In other words, people observe how others (musicians) look, behave, their values, and form a perception about them (Barry, 2004). The theory enabled the understanding of personal branding through social media which is more visual in nature. The Perception and visual theory therefore guided this study to understand the importance of the visual elements in the social media platforms and how they influence a person's brand.

Methodology

The study utilized a mixed methods research approach as postulated by Creswell, (2012). The study demanded a detailed examination of the social media activity of the study subjects. The study targeted all the gospel musicians in Nairobi County. According to the Performers Rights Society of Kenya (PRISK) the population of the gospel musicians in Nairobi who were registered at the time of study was 3,460. The researcher targeted to study their social media conversations on both Facebook and Instagram in order to determine their social media activities and their influence on personal branding.

Non-probability sampling technique were employed where a researcher depends upon his or her own judgement when selecting members of a population to be studied (Dudovskiy, 2018). According to Morgan (2008) this technique is effective when some members of the population can serve as primary data sources due to the nature of the research objectives. A predetermined criteria were therefore set to guide the process of drawing the sample from the population.

The criteria were; that the gospel musician selected must have had topped the charts in the year 2018, must have had an active social media presence over the same period and must be a resident in Nairobi county. Information obtained from PRISK in April 2018, was that from the entire population, 30 gospel musicians made it to the top of the charts in the year and had active social media presence. In addition, 25 of them were based in Nairobi County (PRISK, 2018).

This research used interviews and content analysis schedule to collect the required data. Qualitative phase of the study involved scheduling interview appointments with each of the respondents, after which the interviews were undertaken as scheduled. Interviews are believed to provide deeper understanding of social phenomenon that would be obtained from purely qualitative methods of data collection. The second phase of the study involved gathering quantitative data from social media sites of selected gospel musicians using content analysis schedule. Content analysis schedule is an analytical process where data from interview transcripts are categorized to facilitate analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The researcher studied the social media posts by the respondents for a period of four weeks and established themes. The study also considered the content of the messages, depth, frequency of the posts and the feedback from the public both on Facebook and Instagram. A total of 1280 social media conversations and 25 interviews were collected and coded under the themes identified for analysis. This data was collected and coded using a coding sheet for analysis following the procedure described by Lindlof & Taylor, (2011).

This process was carried out in the span of four weeks. On the first week, the researcher conducted the qualitative phase of the study. This involved scheduling interview appointments with each of the respondents, after which the interviews were undertaken as scheduled. The researcher took down notes and also recorded some interview sessions for transcription.

This was to ensure that no information was missed out during note taking. The second phase of the study involved gathering quantitative data from social media platforms of selected gospel musicians. Social media communication was downloaded and filed for coding and interpretation. The downloaded messages have been kept as reference for both the researcher and the reviewers.

The process of data analysis began with the organization and categorization of data in order to search for patterns, themes and meanings that emerged from the data. Qualitative data from the interview guide was transcribed, coded and analysed using the content analysis method which involves the process of categorising verbal data to classify, summarise and tabulate the data. Qualitative data gathered from the online conversations was also analysed using thematic analysis as a means to gain insight from data gathered as advocated by Stirling (2001). Quantitative data obtained from the interviews and coding sheet was transcribed and divided into meaningful analytical units for analysis. Data was coded and analysed using the statistical package for social sciences. The results were then reported according to the emergent themes as set out in the objectives.

Findings

**Forms of social media used for personal branding by Gospel musicians**

The forms of social media platforms the musicians had a presence in were as summarized in Figure 1.
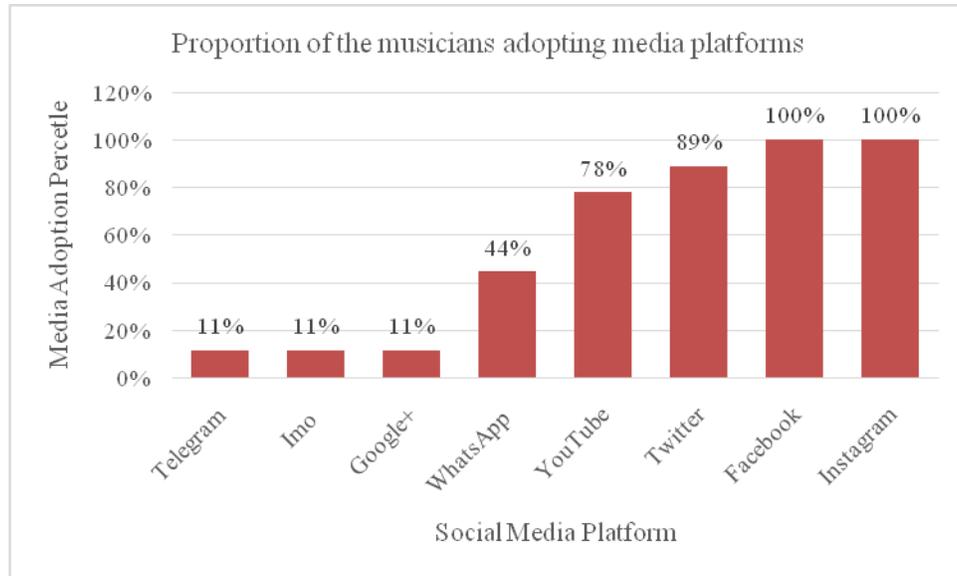
Figure 1: Adoption of social media platforms by gospel musicians

The musicians had activated between four and seven of these platforms in order to reach out to their audience. Facebook and Instagram had been patronized by all the musicians and a sizeable proportion of 78% and 89% of the musicians were also on YouTube and twitter respectively. This finding implies that social media platforms were necessary tools for the musicians to reach out to their audience and vice versa. As such, every musician had multiple social media platform on which they interacted with their audience. The findings agree with Dudharejia (2017) who found out that social media can be used to achieve big goals even within a short span of time.

The most preferred platforms for personal branding were as summarized in Figure 2
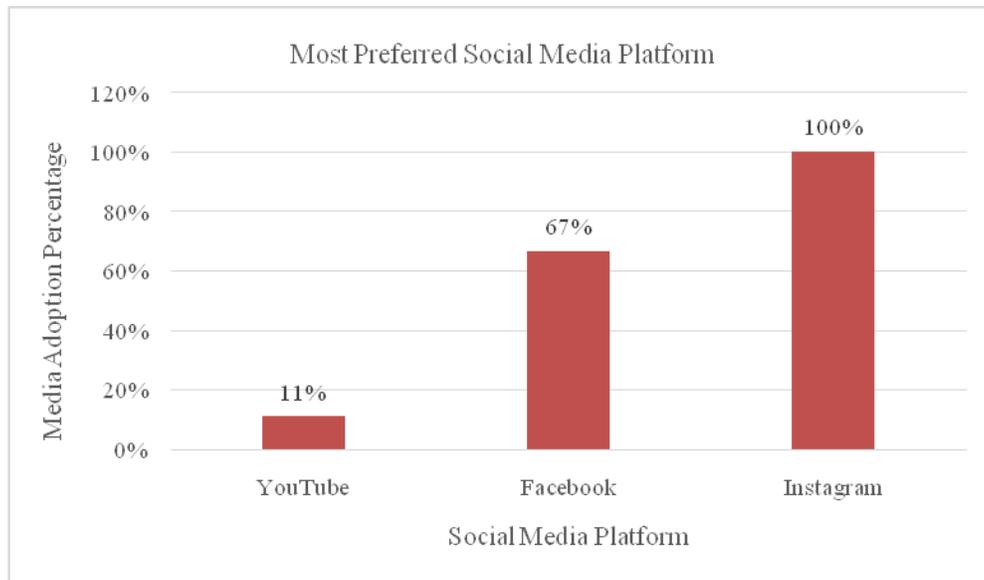
Figure 2 Most preferred social media platform by gospel musicians

Instagram was the most preferred social media platform by all the gospel musicians while Facebook was the second most preferred at 67%. A sizeable number were into you tube. Instagram and Facebook platforms offered better choices for personal branding over others because "they are more interactive than others and less complicated".

The musicians explained that "Instagram is more specialized, you can be sure of the kind of people who will view your posts, they are more serious, they know what they want". Again, Instagram users are a bit more diplomatic in that they take information more seriously and therefore it is possible to know the worth of those one is interacting with. Such an audience accords the musician the commendations, endorsements and critiques necessary to improve the content of the work posted on the platform which includes, album covers, lyrics, videos scenes, concerts, musician's wardrobe, make up, and stage themes among others.

This is an important aspect in that the musician is able to maintain their personal brand. Long (2019) describes Instagram as a social media platform that has immense potential to put one's brand right before the view of specific target market. The platform is free and allows users to be creative with their posts. The author further adds that Instagram compared to other platforms is experiencing the most rapid growth worldwide.

With regard to Facebook platform, some of the musicians reported that Facebook fans are more generic and seem not know what they want. The platform is like a republic of its own where the audience is very large and highly interactive. The platform can therefore develop a mass following for a brand that they can identify with. The comments attracted by some posts can range between great praises on one hand and the highest criticism on the other. Through Facebook, a gospel musician is able to tell the audience's reaction to any content within a short period of time.   Dudharejia (2017) explains that Facebook messages can be accustomed to target a particular audience and in turn receive feedback from that particular audience. This capability of Facebook is therefore ideal for both corporate and personal branding campaigns since the impact of the message can be monitored real time.

To the gospel musicians Twitter, Imo, Telegram and WhatsApp are not very friendly platforms for personal branding. Instead they are decent platforms for disseminating message and news alerts. YouTube, however, is a friendly platform for e-commerce as shown in Figure 3.
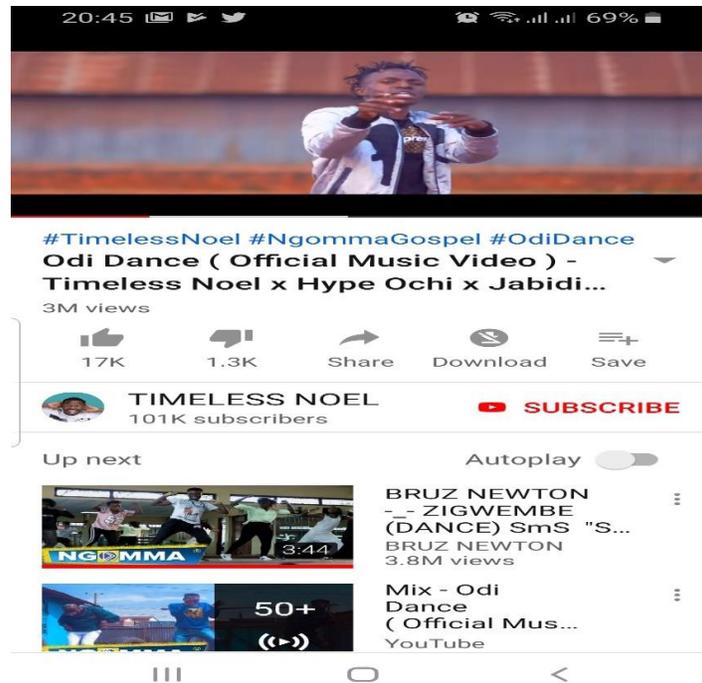
Figure 3: Timeless Noel's YouTube channel with 3 million views

Clip 1 depicts one of the gospel musician's YouTube channel where one of his songs had generated 3 million views, with 17,000 likes and 1300 dislikes. For the musicians, the number of views on YouTube is translated into money. Lusige (2018) explains that for every 1000 views on YouTube a content owner earns approximately 2 to 4 US dollars. Therefore, for every 1 million views a musician earns between 2000 - 4000 US dollars.

Factors influencing the use of social media for personal branding

Findings were that all the musicians had a presence on the social media platforms which they had heavily patronized irrespective of their age. The high adoption of social media use among the musicians was as a result of industry influence as opposed to age of the musicians. All the musicians interviewed targeted the mass markets that are dominated by the young and senior adults with less of teenagers and children. Most of the young and senior adults have access to mobile phones, specifically to smart phones and tablets.

The penetration of mobile phones in Kenya is quite high coupled with the availability of 3G and 4G speed mobile telephone networks. The declining costs of internet make it possible for the average citizen to access digital content in form of text, graphics, still photos, music and videos at a relatively low price. Millions of the young adults in Kenya are already on social media. In addition, most of the musicians are tech savvy and whenever necessary you tube tutorials come in handy in times of need. Some hired professionals to manage their social media pages. These factors contribute to the choice of social media for personal branding

Extent to which social media is used for personal branding

Findings were that the musicians made social media post at least once daily. The musicians posted assorted captions including videos, pictures, and text messages. Videos and pictures on Instagram always generated more feedback over other kind of posts and platforms. Both videos and pictures got me more views and comments than text messages, especially good photos. Figure 4 shows a post by a gospel musician on Instagram and which attracted 4197 likes.

Figure 4: A musician's profile picture summarizing her brand.

Laurinavicius (2017) agrees with this finding stating that the use of pictures is seen as an excellent way to reinforce one's personal brand because it takes advantage of the visual nature of the human brain. Authentic photography plays an important role in delivering the personality of a person's brand. A good-looking picture gives a personal brand a layer of trust and appeal. The picture used should however align with the overall values of an individual. The author also believes that Pictures have the power and ability to tell our stories better than written texts.

Knowingly and or unknowingly people have communicated their values, and intentions through photos they share. Intentional branding campaigns require that a person selects pictures that demonstrate their personal brand and core values (Washington, 2015).

Effectiveness of social media use for personal branding

It was established that social media was the first point of publicity to all successful gospel musicians because the platform had a greater and wider reach when compared to the mainstream media platforms. Social media platforms were therefore the first marketplace they released their music. Friedman (2015) confirms that social media has become such an essential tool for musicians and that it has become a starting point for many in the industry. Musicians and other public figures are now turning to social media as a major source to broadcast important announcements. The author adds that many people have liked music they interacted with online without even knowing much about the musician.

Consequently, social media had helped musicians build their brands in a number of ways. Firstly, providing a wide range of audience for the music uploaded thus increasing the publicity of the music products. Secondly, by providing a valuable feedback system which helps the respective artists to improve on their brands and the products released to the market. While the audience can get to know an artist's music through TV and radio, it is only on social media that the audience can get to know the artist. Thirdly, the social media comments and likes tend to suggest the popularity and acceptability of any piece of music as assessed by the audience.

Fourthly, social media publicity is both local and international and is therefore a convenient place musicians get to market their songs. Ndavula (2018) posits that social media is one powerful platform that is borderless.

Information shared on social media reaches audience that the communicator had not even thought of. Marketing on social media has a potential of successfully marketing a product and or service and creating a devoted brand advocates world-wide. One would therefore miss out on growing their consumer base and brand if they fail to interact on social media. Brands therefore have a high bargaining chip on social media platforms to successfully drive their objectives and attain desirable outcomes.

The musicians' platforms on both Facebook and Instagram are operated in English. The comments in both platforms were characterized by short phrases of no more than 30 words. the use of short words was rampant as a way of reducing the characters in the comment space provided, the use of words like "coz" instead of "because" and "u" instead of "you", "ua" instead of "your" among others was quite common. The words were however straight to the point. Figure 5 shows a typical reaction section of a musician surveyed which depicts the use of short phrases in social media reactions.

Figure 5. Fans react to a musician's post on Instagram

The adoption of English in the platforms was however not without the influence of slang the urban slang used in the day to day communication which is a mixture of English (the official language) and Kiswahili (the national language). A typical reaction on social media reaction Kiswahili English mixture is shown in Figure 6.
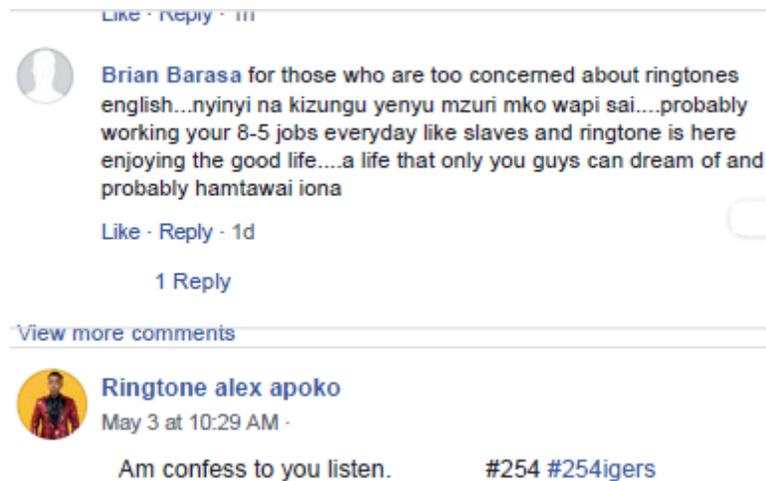

Figure 6: English-Kiswahili mixture on a musician's Facebook reaction

The gospel Musicians rarely used logos for branding purposes. Instead they invested heavily in high quality photography and portraits of themselves which were at times associated with other commercial brands. Some of these photos were taken on well-manicured environments or high-end shopping malls and meeting places. The more captions the musician posted on the social media platforms, the more active he/she was perceived to be. Most frequent were graphical images accompanied by a short message upon which the fans have the options of liking, sharing and commenting on the post. The more popular the musicians posts, the more the likes, shares and comments on average a good post would attract at least one thousand reactions.

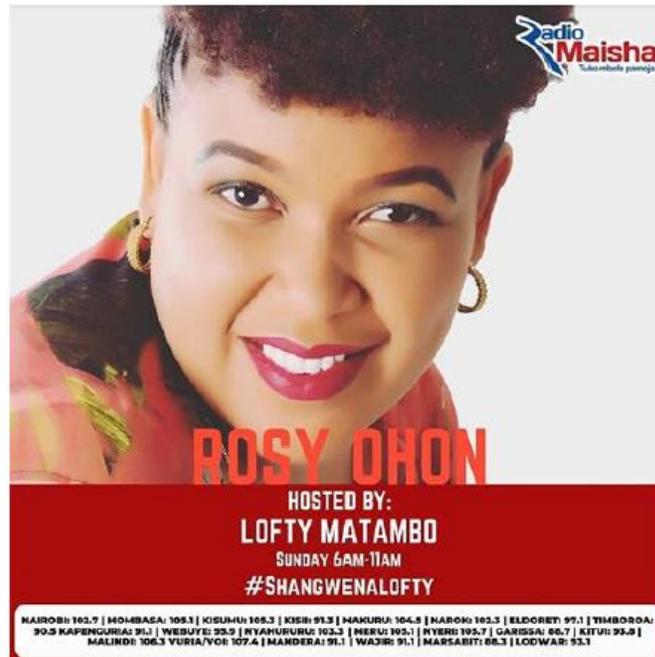*Figure 7: A musician's poster with a signature message posted on social media*

Figure 8: A musician's poster for an upcoming event posted on social media

Most of the musicians' topics revolved around their music products and events, family events, anniversaries, weddings and parties. These occurrences were communicated graphically where carefully selected photos of the respective event were posted on the social media platforms. The musical products would be posted as short clips or trailers which at times had internet links leading the consumers to the full product.

Figure 9 shows the wedding photo of Daddy Owen, a gospel musician that he posted on Instagram. The post attracted 9827 likes and 140 views on Instagram.
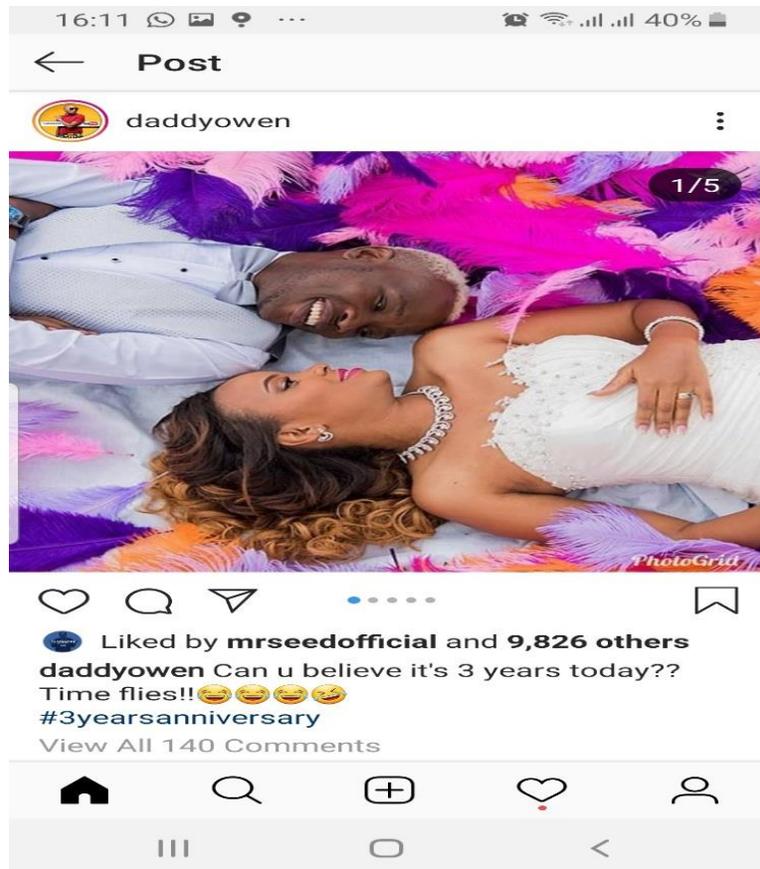
Figure 9: Wedding picture of Daddy Owen on Instagram

This picture is compares to the picture below to establish which kind of content generated more feedback.

Figure 10 was taken during live performance by a gospel musician generated 1022 likes and 7 comments on Instagram. By observation, the study found out that content pertaining to the personal lives of the gospel musicians generated more reaction than content related to their music activities.

Figure 10: Picture of Daddy Owen's live performance on Instagram

Since the reactions from the fans were in form of short phrases, the depth of the conversations were quite shallow, however, the breadth was quite wide because the fans commented on virtually anything they saw on the graphic posted, including comments by other fans. The musicians normally posted some graphic twice weekly but would make comments and reposts on a daily basis.

Conclusion

The study has established that social media platforms could be used in a diversified manner including purposes associated with personal branding. Different forms of social media offer different options with regard to personal branding. As such, some social media platforms could offer effective options over others. Secondly, a number of factors influence the ideal choice of platform for personal branding. These include computer literacy of the users, access to smart phones, internet connectivity, internet speeds, the characteristics of the target audience, popularity of the respective platforms and the material prepared for release into the audience. Thirdly, it was established that each of the musicians make a social media post at least once or twice daily where they post assorted captions including videos, pictures, and text messages. Lastly, the study found out that to almost every musician, social media was the first point of publicity because it gives greater publicity over the mainstream media. Social media provides a wide range of audience for the musical content uploaded thus increasing the publicity. It also provides a valuable feedback system which helps the respective artists to improve on their brands and on the products released to the market.

Peters (1997) believes that a person's brand is his/her calling card. This is to say that for a gospel musician to remain in the competitive music industry their brand is what will sustain them. The rise and growth of social media has made personal branding inevitable for public communicators who appeal to the masses. The findings of this study reveals that social media provides the opportunity for the musicians to brand and rebrand themselves in order to appeal to their audience. There is therefore the need to continuously make concerted efforts to create and maintain a positive brand hence bridging the research gap as stated in this study.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, recommendations were that gospel musicians could hire personal branding professionals alongside the social media page administrators in order to increase their personal brand equities, build a reputable brand image and consequently a wider fan base. Eventually, they could establish e-commerce options that would enable them translate their increasing social media fan base and publicity into increasing sales of their musical products.

The musicians could diversify their product portfolio by incorporating more products aligning to their music and personal brand like Jewellery, perfumes, cloth lines, foot ware and other personal products which could be branded and marketed to their fan base for a commercial benefit. They could also pursue commercial clientele with a view of establishing product endorsement contracts with establishments whose brands align or depict similar values to the respective musician's personal brand and could be marketed alongside the musical products to the fan base for a commercial benefit. For instance, toiletries, cosmetics and other personal products could be marketed to a musician's fan base, consequently stimulating product revenues.

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