

The Role of Brand Awareness in Enhancing CSR in Private Universities in Kenya

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Abstract—This study investigated the significant role that brand awareness plays in enhancing Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives within private universities in Kenya. The research aimed to investigate how brand awareness can be leveraged to enhance Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives in private universities in Kenya. Specifically, it sought to understand the strategies these institutions use to increase their visibility and engagement on social media platforms like Instagram, and how this, in turn, impacts their CSR efforts. Guided by social media engagement theory, a qualitative research design was employed, focusing on five prominent private universities in Kenya: Management University of Africa, KCA University, Kabarak University, and St. Paul's University. Semi-structured interviews with corporate communication experts provided in-depth insights into their CSR strategies. The findings reveal that the strategic use of Instagram contributes to building trust, fostering loyalty, and amplifying the reach and impact of CSR activities. Additionally, the study underscores the broader implications of brand awareness, suggesting that universities with strong, recognizable brands are better positioned to attract partnerships, drive sustainable development, and make a lasting contribution to society. The research highlights that a well-crafted brand presence on social media elevates the institution's public image and strengthens relationships with key stakeholders, including students, alumni, and the broader community. This research advocates for the continued investment in brand-building as a fundamental component of CSR strategies within Kenya's private higher education sector.

Index Terms— Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Instagram, Kenya, Private Universities, Brand Awareness.

1. Introduction

Private universities in Kenya have recognised the value of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as a differentiating strategy in the competitive environment of higher education. Enhancing CSR initiatives requires strong brand awareness because it affects how stakeholders see and evaluate these efforts.

Social media platforms have become integral to communication and engagement strategies for organizations, including universities. According to Los and Bria (2013), social media is affecting all organizations across different dimensions: organizations' internal communication, working relationships, relationships with their stakeholder audiences, conversations

with consumers, business model innovation, and organizational reputation and legitimacy. Multiple disciplines have analyzed this phenomenon from different perspectives, producing a considerable amount of knowledge.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and sustainability have been identified as key factors in the production of value for both public and commercial entities in recent decades. Public organisations have been compelled by the United Nations (UN) Agenda 2030 to give sustainable practices and policies more thought because of their critical role in the global movement towards sustainable development. Universities that are involved in the production and dissemination of scientific information, in particular, are expected to incorporate CSR principles into all aspects of their academic endeavours, including research, teaching, and third-mission operations. Universities are therefore expected to inform their stakeholders of their dedication to sustainability and corporate social responsibility. There are many aspects to this CSR integration in universities. It entails integrating sustainability concepts into research procedures, taking the social and environmental effects of academic studies into account, and coordinating research efforts with the SDGs. It also means incorporating CSR and sustainability into the teaching curriculum to give students the information and abilities they need to address sustainability issues in the workplace (Esposito et al., 2021).

According to Esposito et al (2021), universities have started to disclose their CSR practices and performances using different communication tools, such as sustainability reports, CSR reports, alternative non-financial reports, corporate websites, press, and others. However, these channels do not allow the opportunity to interact with internal and external stakeholders as they are based on one-way engagements. Thus, social media (SM) has arisen as a new communication channel that employs “mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content” (Kietzmann et al. 2011). Social media has completely changed the communication paradigm, becoming a vital part of daily life. Social media has made it possible for universities and its stakeholders to have an honest and timely conversation about a variety of subjects, including CSR. Social

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media has been used by universities to develop a new paradigm for stakeholder participation and communication. Universities now have more ways to interact with stakeholders and get immediate feedback on their messaging thanks to social media (Bellucci & Manetti 2017). To satisfy society's growing need for openness in public administration, it is especially necessary to involve stakeholders in CSR practices (Aversano et al. 2020). As a result, there is now a two-way transactional communication method replacing the one-way transmission approach to communication (seen in annual reports, sustainability reports, and university websites) for the dissemination of CSR information (Reilly & Hynan 2014). In this setting, academic institutions have begun interacting with stakeholders through social media by triggering two-way symmetrical interactions.

In Kenyan private higher education institutions, the potential of Instagram for stakeholder engagement and CSR initiatives has not been thoroughly examined. While Instagram offers significant opportunities for engagement, awareness-raising, collaboration, and monitoring, there is a lack of understanding of its specific impact on CSR activities in this sector. This research investigated how stakeholder engagement through Instagram can enhance CSR efforts in Kenyan private universities, providing insights into effective strategies for leveraging Instagram to drive positive social impact and promote responsible practices.

A. Statement of the Problem

Although Instagram has gained immense popularity among users and businesses, research on its unique features, user habits, and societal impacts has lagged (Ling, 2019). Studies on Instagram's role in corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication are limited, with most research focusing on Twitter and Facebook (Abitbol & Lee, 2017). Despite its high engagement rates, Instagram remains underexplored, particularly in the context of CSR.

In Kenyan private higher education institutions, the potential of brand awareness for enhancing CSR initiatives has not been thoroughly examined. While brand awareness offers significant opportunities for engagement, reputation building, collaboration, and visibility, there is a lack of understanding of its specific impact on CSR activities in this sector. This research aimed to investigate how increased brand awareness can enhance CSR efforts in Kenyan private universities, providing insights into effective strategies for leveraging brand reputation to drive positive social impact and promote responsible practices.

2. Theoretical Review

A. Social Media Engagement Theory

Proposed by Gangi and Wasko (2016), defined Social Media Engagement theory as the difference between psychological state and behaviour through involvement and participation (Hwang & Thorn, 2008) a broad psychological state in which one interacts to find meaning on a personal level (Ray et al., 2014). Social Media Engagement Theory focuses on the

interactive and participatory nature of social media platforms, emphasizing the importance of engagement with stakeholders. According to Di Gangi and Wasko (2016), the co-creation model of Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) in the service industry is expanded upon and modified in this study to provide a condensed theoretical framework for understanding SME. We expand on the model that was initially developed as a model of user-organization interaction, concentrating on the social interactions that are facilitated by the social media platform that an organisation offers. By using a socio-technical systems viewpoint, we expand on the work of Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) and first examine the reasons why the user experience affects engagement and then utilisation. It provides insights into how private universities can effectively utilize Instagram as a tool for engaging stakeholders and enhancing their corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives.

Private universities should leverage the platform to encourage active participation and dialogue with stakeholders. Social Media Engagement Theory also emphasizes the importance of responding to stakeholder comments and messages in a timely and personalized manner. According to Mboga (2018), the theory proposed that meaning and value of creation is shifting from firms or businesses to personalized consumer experiences through dialogue. This fosters the dialogue of several entities are intern directly related to access, and transparency, including the understanding on the social media risks and benefits of their engagement. The theory adds the aspect of the role of technology in facilitating engagement and interaction between users. They agree with not just participation and psychological state but more to individual involvement and personal meaning. Private universities can use Instagram to address inquiries, respond to feedback, and engage in conversations with stakeholders. Universities may show their dedication to hearing and appreciating stakeholder viewpoints by actively engaging in these discussions, which will promote diversity and involvement.

According to Di Gangi and Wasko (2016), while social media engagement theory provides a framework for understanding the motivations and behaviours of social media users, there is still a lack of comprehensive understanding of how these factors influence engagement and user behaviour.

3. Material and Methodology

The research adopted a qualitative research design to deeply understand how Instagram is used for CSR communication among private universities in Kenya, focusing on four institutions: Management University of Africa, KCA University, Kabarak University, and St. Paul's University. These universities were chosen due to their prominence and increasing involvement in CSR. Homogeneous and purposive sampling techniques were employed, targeting corporate communication experts from each university. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten participants, with an interview guide to explore CSR communication strategies on Instagram. A qualitative content analysis of Instagram posts from the selected universities was also conducted, using a coding framework developed from the research objectives.

Findings from interviews and content analysis were triangulated to enhance credibility and validity.

A. Research Design

The research design adopted for this study was qualitative. A qualitative research design was chosen due to its ability to provide a deep understanding of the complex phenomenon being investigated the utilization of Instagram for CSR communication among private universities in Kenya. According to (Dangal, 2021), the process of research involved emerging questions and procedures; collecting data in the participants' setting; analyzing the data inductively, building from particulars to general themes; and making interpretations of the meaning of the data. Qualitative research allows for the exploration of multiple perspectives, motivations, and contexts that influence stakeholders' perceptions, attitudes, and engagement in the realm of CSR communication (Dangal, 2021).

B. Study Site and Population

The study focused on the dynamic landscape of private universities in Kenya, specifically Management University of Africa, KCA University, Kabarak University, St. Paul's University, and Mount Kenya University. These institutions were chosen for their growing prominence in the educational sector and their increasing involvement in corporate social responsibility (CSR). These universities were selected to manage research costs, time constraints, and accessibility, ensuring a feasible investigation into CSR practices through engagement with corporate communication experts in their respective corporate affairs departments.

C. Sampling Frame

The sampling frame for this research was lists of corporate communication experts from the chosen university which were derived from the HR office of the private universities.

D. Sample Size

The sample size for this research involved five private universities in Kenya: Management University of Africa, KCA University, Kabarak University, and St. Paul's University. Within each university, the study included the corporate communication experts. The specific number of individuals consisted of 2 participants from KCA University's Corporate Affairs Office, 2 participants from Management University, 2 participants from Kabarak University and 2 participants from St. Paul's University. This targeted approach aimed to provide a focused and detailed examination of the practices and dynamics within the selected universities.

E. Sampling Technique

In this study, homogeneous and purposive sampling techniques were used. Homogeneous sampling ensured that the selected universities shared similar characteristics, making the sample more focused and relevant to the research objectives. According to (Omona, (2013), homogenous sampling involves individuals, groups, or settings because they all possess similar characteristics or attributes.

Purposive sampling was used to select specific individuals who could provide the most relevant and insightful information for the study. Corporate communication experts from the chosen universities were interviewed due to their specialized knowledge and direct involvement in CSR communication strategies. Dolores & Tongco (2007), the purposive sampling technique, also called judgment sampling, is the deliberate choice of an informant due to the qualities the informant possesses. It is a nonrandom technique that does not need underlying theories or a set number of informants. Simply put, the researcher decides what needs to be known and sets out to find people who can and are willing to provide the information by virtue of knowledge or experience (Bernard 2002, Lewis & Sheppard 2006).

F. Semi-Structured Interviews

The primary data collection method of semi-structured interviews involved the creation of an interview guide that served as a flexible framework for guiding the conversations with participants. This guide was carefully designed to encompass a range of open-ended questions that delve into the nuances of CSR communication strategies on Instagram. The questions were carefully crafted to encourage participants to share their experiences, perceptions, and insights related to the research topic.

G. Qualitative Content Analysis

The coding framework was derived from the research objectives and informed by the existing literature. It encompassed aspects such as the types of CSR activities depicted, the tone of communication (e.g., informative, persuasive, emotive), the engagement strategies used (e.g., interactive features, storytelling), and the overall alignment of CSR communication with the universities' branding and mission. Each piece of content was systematically analyzed and coded according to the established categories.

H. Data Collection Procedures

The research used semi-structured interviews and content analysis for data collection. Ten participants from the Corporate Affairs Offices of KCA University, Kabarak University, St. Paul's University, and Management University were selected. The interview guide was finalized and tested with a pilot group to ensure clarity. Each interview began with an explanation of the study's purpose and obtaining informed consent, followed by general questions to build rapport. Probing techniques were used for detailed responses, and participant feedback helped refine the process. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed thematically to identify patterns in CSR communication and stakeholder engagement.

Simultaneously, a qualitative content analysis of Instagram posts from the selected universities was conducted. A coding framework was developed and refined through pilot testing, ensuring consistency and clarity. Inter-coder reliability was assessed, and the final coding framework was applied to the entire dataset. Thematic analysis identified patterns and trends, with findings validated by participants. This comprehensive approach ensured systematic and rigorous data collection, with

adjustments made based on pilot test insights to enhance the study's validity.

I. Data Analysis and Presentation

Interviews were conducted and transcribed for analysis using Mayring's qualitative content analysis, which organizes communication content methodically (Mayring, 2007). This approach combines the structured aspects of quantitative analysis with qualitative techniques, enhancing reliability and validity.

The first step in qualitative content analysis is defining the source material, including interview details, sample selection, and text generation process (Mayring, 2003). The research question and theoretical background are integrated into the coding agenda and interview guide. Categories are created inductively from the data, with some deductively identified based on theoretical elements. Categories are adjusted throughout the research process to avoid biases (Mayring, 2003).

To ensure thorough analysis, categories were described with examples, and coding guidelines were established. The researcher highlighted relevant statements in the transcripts, organized them by color-coded categories, and created new categories as needed. Quotes were used directly when applicable. Findings from interviews and content analysis were triangulated to enhance the study's credibility and validity by corroborating insights from different data sources.

4. Ethical Considerations

Permission was sought from the relevant authorities at Management University of Africa, KCA University, Kabarak University, and St. Paul's University to ensure ethical standards. This process involved transparently explaining the research goals, methodologies, and expected outcomes. Participants were fully informed and provided voluntary consent, with strict confidentiality and data security measures in place. Ethical approval was sought to align with established guidelines, maintaining integrity and respecting participants' rights and well-being. Accessing data from the Instagram pages of the chosen universities required careful planning to comply with Instagram's terms of service and respect user privacy. Permission was obtained from the universities' corporate communication offices, outlining the study's objectives and data protection assurances, and data collection adhered to Instagram's guidelines using authorized tools or manual methods.

5. Results and Discussions

A. Response Rate

Four of the five private institutions that were chosen for this study each with two specified participants responded, bringing the total number of participants to eight. This response rate corresponds to 80% of the sample that was expected. While this is less than the full 100% participation, the 80% response rate is considered sufficient for the findings to be analyzed. Kuzel (1992:41) recommended six to eight interviews for a

homogeneous sample and twelve to twenty data sources "when looking for disconfirming evidence or trying to achieve maximum variation." He linked his recommendations to sample heterogeneity and research objectives.

B. Demographic Profiles of Informants/Respondents

The survey revealed that most of the respondents were male. The largest portion of the respondents had 2-5 years of working experience, followed by those with 6-10 years, and more than 10 years. Furthermore, the majority of the respondents worked in the corporate affairs department at their respective workplaces.

C. The role of brand Awareness in Enhancing CSR in Private Universities in Kenya

Instagram's influence on improving the university's brand presence was a frequent area of discussion among participants. For instance, participant 1 from Management University of Africa, said, "Instagram has helped us reach a wider audience. Our brand awareness has increased dramatically as a result of the content's visual attractiveness and simplicity of sharing." Similarly, Participant 5 from KCA University, stated, "Since we started using Instagram, our visibility has grown tremendously." During school visits, prospective students frequently bring up our Instagram posts, demonstrating the genuine impact of our online presence."

"Through regular posts and stories, we've been able to showcase our CSR activities effectively, which has increased our visibility among prospective students and partners," participants 2 from KCA said when discussing ways to improve their competitive edge. "The visual nature of Instagram allows us to highlight our unique CSR initiatives, which sets us apart from other universities and enhances our competitive advantage." Participant 3 from Kabarak University.

Participant 4 from St Pauls University stated, "We've noticed that our followers are more loyal and engaged when we consistently post about our CSR projects on Instagram." This helps to create loyalty among stakeholders. It fosters a feeling of trust and community." The Management University of Africa participant - 6 stated that "Instagram is an excellent platform for showcasing our success stories and achievements in CSR, which in turn builds customer loyalty and trust in our institution." To code for brand recognition, recurrent themes like visibility, competitive advantage, and consumer loyalty had to be found.

The content analysis of Instagram posts by the private universities involved in the study revealed several strategies employed to boost brand awareness through their respective CSR initiatives. One is the use of visually appealing graphics and high-quality photos with captivating descriptions. Universities regularly use these strategies to draw in viewers. The posts were more likely to be seen and shared because they stood out in the jammed Instagram feed thanks to the use of expert photography and well-designed visuals. These photos were complemented by interesting descriptions that added context and narrative components, which increased the postings' allure.

The second approach involves student involvement. Articles that showcase students participating in CSR initiatives have generated significant interaction. Universities demonstrated the human aspect of their corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives by exhibiting students who were actively engaged in volunteer work, environmental projects, or charitable activities. This strategy not only made the information inspiring and relevant, but it also illustrated the university's commitment to social responsibility and student development.

For example, a Kabarak University post featured student peer counselors caring for their classmates during the institution's health awareness week, which aimed to promote well-being among Kabarak University personnel and students, and this was held in collaboration with Kabarak Medical Centre. This post received numerous likes and comments, reflecting high engagement.

The audience responded well to posts that described the results of various initiatives, such as enhanced infrastructure, educational initiatives, or healthcare services offered to underprivileged communities. St. Pauls University, for instance, released a series of their effect on community development over the past 120 years. The posts gained authenticity and emotional appeal through expressions of gratitude from community memories.

D. Discussion

The study findings reveal that brand awareness in Corporate Social Responsibility is instrumental in enhancing an institution's image, credibility, and reputation. In the context of private universities in Kenya, the simplicity of sharing has resulted to increase of visibility among prospective students and partners. This indicates that Instagram has helped reach wider audience through photography and well-designed visuals in enhancing brand awareness. These results are consistent with those of Adianto and Sari (2023), who pointed out that social media platforms like Instagram are currently frequently used to establish solid customer-brand relationships. Social media particularly Instagram has improved brand loyalty, raised consumer awareness of brands, and altered the way consumers make decisions leading businesses to place a greater emphasis on customers than on their goods. The power of a brand in consumers' thoughts is referred to as brand awareness, and it manifests itself in their capacity to recognize the brand in a variety of frameworks (Perdana & Dimiyati, 2023).

6. Conclusion

This study highlights the critical importance of brand awareness in amplifying the impact of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives within private universities in Kenya. The research demonstrates that by strategically utilizing platforms such as Instagram, these institutions can significantly enhance their visibility, engage with a broader range of stakeholders, and effectively communicate their commitment to social responsibility. A well-established brand presence does more than just distinguish a university in a competitive educational landscape; it builds trust, fosters loyalty among stakeholders, and reinforces the institution's image as a

responsible and ethical entity. Moreover, the findings suggest that universities with a strong brand are better positioned to attract prospective students, partners, and donors, thereby driving sustained positive social change and contributing to the overall development of society. This study underscores the need for private universities to invest in building and maintaining a robust brand identity as a cornerstone of their CSR strategies, ensuring that their efforts resonate deeply with the communities they serve and leave a lasting impact.

7. Recommendations

To enhance CSR in private universities in Kenya, stakeholders should adopt several strategies. Policy-makers should encourage and support the integration of social media platforms like Instagram into CSR communication strategies by developing guidelines and best practices that emphasize digital engagement for community involvement and transparency. The government should consider providing incentives for universities that demonstrate exceptional CSR activities and effectively communicate these initiatives via social media, fostering a culture of accountability and active participation. Universities should invest in training their communication teams to maximize the potential of Instagram for CSR promotion, ensuring broader and more impactful stakeholder engagement. Additionally, universities should collaborate with industry partners to create impactful CSR programs that can be showcased on social media. By partnering with businesses, NGOs, and community organizations, universities can design and implement CSR projects that address pressing societal issues and benefit from their partners' resources and expertise. Highlighting successful partnerships and their outcomes on Instagram can attract further support and participation from other stakeholders, creating a virtuous cycle of community involvement and positive social impact.

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