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A Systematic Review on the Utilization of Digital Marketing Communication Tools in Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

The upsurge of universities both locally and internationally has culminated into intense competition for potential students within the higher education sector. The digital nature of today's potential students necessitates HEIs to utilize digital marketing communication tools to attract the students. This paper seeks to explore the various digital marketing communication tools employed by HEIs to influence prospective students' choice of the institution to join. It reviews current literature on digital marketing communication tools utilized by HEIs locally and globally. This study finally presents a systematic review of studies that have been conducted in line with the topic. Whereas several articles have been consulted, only those published from 2011 to 2024 have been included in the review. The study established that whereas HEIs across the globe are using digital marketing communication tools, the most commonly used to communicate educational services are websites and social media especially in developed countries. The study identifies a gap in the exploration of digital marketing communication tools in Ugandan HEIs where the only related studies identified focused only on social media usage. The study concludes that HEIs in under-developed and developing countries need to increase momentum in their use of technologically-enabled marketing communication tools such as social media, websites and university apps to ease access to their education services by this digital generation of applicants. Websites should also be accessible over mobile devices. HEIs should understand their target customers' needs to enable them align their institutions' message to the customers.

Keywords

Marketing, Marketing communications, Digital marketing communications, Digital marketing communication tools, Marketing communication strategies, Higher Education Institutions, Universities

INTRODUCTION

Recently, the utilization of marketing communication tools has become requisite in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to enable potential students to obtain information about the educational services offered by the institutions. The upsurge of universities at both local and international levels has culminated into intense competition for potential students within the higher education sector. This competition necessitates HEIs to use all kinds of marketing communication tools to enable them attract a multitude of students and faculty members in addition to gaining leverage in locating the highest subsidies (Vale, et al., 2022). The number of students that enroll at a university, determines the amount of revenue collection owing to the profit-oriented nature of a plethora of them (Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley, 2019). Therefore, an improvement in student enrollment can be one of the ways in which HEIs can maximize profits. The information potential students acquire about particular HEIs and their successes influences their decision to choose those HEIs (Riofita, 2022). The information can only reach the students through the right marketing communication tools.

In this digital generation of applicants, the use of traditional media to advertise HEI's educational services has declined in effectiveness, despite its ability to build an institution's brand awareness (Kusumawati, 2019). However, according to Riofita (2022), digital media can enable effective information sharing to potential students without any limitations on time, distance and space; it demonstrates information reliability, responsibility and transparency. Digital marketing communications encourage potential students to make the decisions to study at a particular institution (Razmerita et al., 2016). To thrive in the prevailing market of competition and scramble for students, it is important that HEIs employ the best and most appropriate marketing communication tools to enable them attract and retain good students in large numbers, as well as teaching and non-teaching staff. In this regard, HEIs need to analyze their target market, determine its needs, and how best to communicate with them. With the current generation of digital applicants, HEIs need to utilize digital marketing communication tools to complement the traditional ones already in use, as they are very instrumental in reaching the applicants.

The unique features of the education sector as well as the nature of its consumers necessitate the utilization of marketing communication tools that can succeed in persuading the consumers to decide on the HEI as well as the programs to join (Uncles, 2018). Owing to transformations in this industry, it is imperative that HEIs capitalize on technology and digital marketing communication tools in addition to the well-known traditional ones such as word of mouth, personal selling, print media as well as radio and television shows among others (Alcaide-Pulido et al., 2017). Digital marketing communications enhance the digital delivery of HEIs' academic and research information as well as supporting community service to prospective students to edify and encourage them to join the institutions (Razmerita et al., 2016).

This study therefore aims at examining the digital marketing communication tools employed by selected HEIs across the globe to influence decision making among potential students while choosing the HEI to join. In this regard, it is paramount for HEIs to include digital marketing communications in their marketing budgets. This implies acceptance of digital marketing communications by HEI's top management to ease their adoption and consequently utilization. Otherwise, without the blessings of top managers, adoption of digital marketing communications becomes hard and to some extent impossible. Failure to adopt digital communications in this digital era may result into catastrophic repercussions to HEIs. HEIs may experience a decline in student enrollment and retention which may deter them from meeting obligations, especially for private HEIs whose main source of revenue is tuition fees collected from students. Existing students may also deliberately refuse to refer others to their institutions, if they are dissatisfied with the status quo at their universities. Therefore, failure to embrace digital technologies in marketing may break universities' competitive advantage with a decline in enrollment or enrollment of poor-quality students and recruitment of poor-quality staff among others.

It is worth noting that the current era is more digital than conventional and digital communication tools can succeed in attracting a bigger audience as compared to the traditional means. Therefore, the utilization of digital marketing communication tools may enable HEIs to reach a wider audience. Digital marketing communications help to raise the interest of prospective students in HEIs' programs which ultimately influences the students to choose those HEIs and specific programs offered thereat (Labausa et al., 2023). To develop good educational programs for students, it is important that HEIs establish the expectations and requirements of prospective students so as to tailor the programs to their needs (Schüller and Chalupský, 2012). This calls for the use of the right marketing communications that enable HEIs to reach all the prospective students.

The study therefore seeks to answer the following research question? What digital marketing communication tools are utilized by HEIs in Uganda to promote their educational services? The findings try to bring to the attention of the reader, the digital marketing communication tools that HEIs across the globe are utilizing and which ones are more effective in improving enrollment, retention and referrals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Higher Education Institutions are increasingly adopting digital marketing communications to increase their visibility within the public (Quinn, 2013 as cited in Chiparo, 2021). Sokolova and Titova (2019), define digital marketing as a of activities and practices of using facets of an organization's conventional marketing, to manage relations with the targeted audiences using electronic devices as well as digital information and communication technologies (ICTs). However, Harbi and Ali (2022), define digital marketing as a digital communication channel such as mobile phones, emails, and social networks among others that can be used to promote a HEIs brand with the help of the internet to target the right audience. To obtain satisfactory results from marketing communications, it is imperative for HEIs to understand their target audience, their mission, the kind of message they wish to convey to the audience, the medium of communication to use, the available funds as well as how successful usage of the communication tools is to be measured (Camilleri, 2017).

According to Abadi and Islamovna (2023), the media that HEIs use for marketing communications include print advertising promotions, social networks, online promotions, broadcast advertising, and offline promotions to various parts of the country undertaken via a cooperation network with schools and/or training institutions (Abadi & Islamovna, 2023). Camilleri (2017), posits that HEIs rely on big data and analytics to explore novel market sections in diverse settings. HEIs employ digital marketing communication tools such as websites, social media, and direct short messages among others to communicate their educational services (Dagumboy and Eden, 2022). HEIs use educational ICTs that augment the quality of courses on their e-learning program to advance students' scholarship experiences (Camilleri and Camilleri, 2017).

They may use blogs, webinars, wikis, electronic fora, and, podcasts, among others to reach their target audiences in addition to social media, online reviews and electronic word of mouth to attract students from diverse audiences (Camilleri, 2019). Ghosal and Prasad (2020) affirm that HEIs in India use digital marketing communication tools such as blogs, e-learning tools, search engines, social media, video portals such as YouTube, Facebook pages for the student community and webinars among others. These compliment conventional marketing communications such as promotional camps for courses and departments, television advertisements, radio channels, offline fairs and promotions, and print media among others.

Today, universities have pages on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Google Plus+, Instagram, and YouTube among others, that are vigorously scrutinized to improve communication with existing and potential students (Chiparo, 2021). Through these pages, universities are able to offer bespoke feedback to inquiries made by potential students. According to Galan, Mark and Stagno (2017), HEIs utilize the internet, social media and digital marketing initiatives to reach, attract and persuade potential students to join them for any of the diverse programs they offer. The accessibility of information on social media to people on the different networks, makes it easy to reach diverse audiences with similar attributes. Natasa, Petrović and Aničić (2019) affirm that social media marketing is comparatively economical, offers hasty feedback, increases website traffic, enhances the institutional brand and eases the opening of new institutional programs, as well as services. Shah, Bennett and Southgate, (2015) as cited in Camilleri, (2019) assert that the online admissions pages for HEIs should depict their international nature and emphasize the services offered to international students. For example, HEIs can consider presenting their course prospectuses in diverse languages and make their international students, brand ambassadors in marketing communications (Choudaha, 2016).

According to Chiparo (2021), technologically oriented prospective students navigate through HEIs' websites to obtain guidance while deciding on the institution to enroll at. Therefore, HEIs must make their websites user-friendly to ease access to information by potential students regarding the programs they wish to enroll for. HEIs should ensure that their websites are collaborative and regularly monitored to provide up-to-date information (Chiparo, 2021). A study conducted by Ruffalo, (2015) revealed that 77% of high school students agreed that websites had a significant impact on their perception of HEIs. Smedescu, Ivanov, Ioanăș, and Fruth (2016), posit that whereas websites are very vital marketing communications tools, they need to be compatible with mobile devices. HEIs need to have good and reliable web-sites, be active on social networks, perform their corporate social responsibility, and inculcate both ethical and environmental sustainability values (Alcaide-Pulido et al., 2017).

Prospective students base on institutions' websites, as well as activity on social media platforms within their favored communication contexts to assess particular institutions (Smedescu et al., 2017). Since parents are the sole funders of most potential applicants, those who are technologically oriented visit HEIs' websites to obtain information about the institutions in support of their children's decision making process in choosing the institution to join (Bohara et al., 2022). HEIs can therefore develop and send electronic mails with content properly aligned to the needs of guardians, parents, and prospective students, as these are capable of influencing decision making in choosing a particular HEI (Abadi & Islamovna, 2023). HEIs can employ Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) to promote themselves especially when launching their free or paid MOOCs (Smedescu et al., 2017). They noted that free MOOCs promote HEIs by attracting students to traditional programs whereas the paid ones generate an additional source of revenue to the HEIs as well as enhancing their visibility. According to Daj and Chirca (2009), HEIs can use digital marketing communications such as search engines, online Public Relations, online partnerships, interactive advertising, email and viral marketing, as well as e-learning communications such as blogs, wikis, video podcasts, social networks, document management, collaboration software, text messaging or notifications as well as mobile broadband among others to communicate their educational messages. Harbi and Ali (2022) suggested that HEIs can use digital marketing communication tools such as blogs, online fora, newsgroups, display advertising, content marketing, search engine optimization, pay-per-click, affiliate marketing, social media, email, and interactive television among others to influence prospective students to make enrollment decisions in their favor.

METHODOLOGY

The research employed a qualitative research approach to guide location of relevant literature by navigating search engines and databases with the assistance of key words such as marketing communications, digital marketing communications, digital marketing communication tools, instruments or techniques, and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) among others. The researcher used Google Scholar search engine as well as databases such as Taylor and Francis Online, Emerald Insight, EBSCOhost, Scite and ProQuest to seek for appropriate literature related to the topic. The articles were selected basing on their year of publication starting from 2011 to 2024. Despite reviewing a multitude of them, only seventeen (17) articles were selected basing on their relevance to the study. One (1) article was published in 2024, two (2) articles were 2023, three (3) in 2022, five (5) in 2021, two (2) in 2020, one (1) in 2019, one (1) in 2018, one (1) in 2017 and one (1) in 2011. The articles were chosen basing on the following research question? What digital marketing communication tools are utilized by HEIs to communicate their educational services? The results and conclusions presented in this study are based on the findings in the selected articles. This analysis also includes the authors' views and a summary of the studies and reviews related to digital marketing communication tools.

RESULTS

The results presented in this section are a result of a systematic review of the literature obtained by looking through search engines, databases and reference lists of publications related to digital marketing communications in HEIs. The analysis divulged a multitude of digital marketing communications that HEIs use to attract students in a bid to boost enrollment.

In Russia, Pyankova, Mitrofanova, Ergunov, and Buyanova (2022), conducted a study on the particularities of marketing communications in the internalization of higher education. They established that HEIs in Russia, extensively employed digital marketing tools such as social networks and websites to get to prospective students. The websites for most of the selected universities were adequately informative, information posted on them was user-friendly, relevant, clear, readable, and up-to-date though under-utilized. Websites were presented in different languages to ease usage for all users and they also had a version for the visually impaired. Only one University did not cater for users with visual difficulties. However, the study established that the websites and social networks lacked information for graduates (Pyankova et al., 2022). Specifically, the universities explored were also found to use social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, VKontakte, Instagram and Youtube among others. It is therefore paramount for the HEIs to keep in touch with their graduates and provide information relevant to them such as available employment opportunities, social events, webinars and career growth programs among others. They should also open alumni networks on social media to keep the information flow. This will increase the students' loyalty to the institutions.

To develop a model for analyzing HEIs image, Alcaide-Pulido, et al (2017), conducted a study on a private university in Spain and a Public University in Portugal. The study established that the online communications employed were more effective than the traditional ones when working with applicants, with existing students as well as with graduates. Likewise, Arevalo (2021) conducted a study on the effectiveness of marketing communication instruments in higher education student recruitment. He established that University websites were among the most effective marketing communication used by the selected HEIs. This implies the intensifying of these communication tools to reap more from the benefits that are realized by utilizing them. A study conducted by Camilleri (2019) on the opportunities and challenges of higher education marketing in the digital era, concluded that HEIs need to utilize different promotional tools to achieve their aims of embracing marketing communications as they have a multitude of opportunities ahead of them to tap into, so as to attract potential students while improving their enrollment.

Dagumboy and Eden (2022) conducted a study in the Philippines, on; "ECD-IMC: an integrated marketing communications model for selected Philippine higher education institutions". The study established that the selected HEIs integrated marketing communication tools and the digital ones used included; social media such as Twitter, currently known as X, as well as Facebook and telephone calls to potential students, Short Message Service or SMS, email, and the universities' websites. The websites and social media were found to be among the most efficient. The study therefore established that contrary to the conventional platforms, digital marketing communication tools used significantly and positively impacted on students' enrolment.

In Peru, Sotomayor-Vidal and Mini-Cuadros (2022), conducted a study to establish the relationship between various digital marketing tools and student enrollment in private HEIs. They established that the selected HEIs used social networks, email marketing, Search Engine Marketing (SEM), Search Engine Optimization (SEO), content marketing, and customer relationship marketing among others to advertise their programs and equip the public with relevant information. The tools were found to have a positive and significant relationship with the student recruitment process. The study further established that digital marketing tools employed influenced the student recruitment process by reducing departmental costs and time, enabling easy reach and attraction of a multitude of prospective students, as well as providing a greater capacity for timely segmentation and measurement of results.

Kusumawati (2019) conducted a study In Indonesia on students' process of choosing HEIs through university digital marketing communication tools, in a large public university. The study established that the university mainly employed social media to market its educational services since the communication platform bases on students and other stakeholders' opinions and experiences. This consequently means that most students who joined the university mainly got information about it and its programs through social media. In Japan, Comai (2023), carried out a study on the challenges and enablers of digital marketing in HEIs. The study established that generally digital marketing tools such as websites, and social media were used by the selected universities. Departments and faculty in Japanese HEIs were also responsible for publishing content. However, the study also established that staff and top management lacked digital marketing knowledge, most universities lacked digital marketing budgets and most of them practiced frequent staff rotations yet these hardened the establishment of strong institutional capabilities. Considering Poland and Ukraine, Kisiolek, Karyy and Halkiv (2021), also conducted a study on, the utilization of Internet marketing communication tools by higher education. They established that Universities studied extensively used internet advertising tools, but found it hard to implement public relations and sales promotion tools which were conventional.

Labausa, Pinca and Cruda (2023) carried out a study entitled, "Investigating Digital Marketing Strategies in Influencing Student Enrollment Decisions in Tertiary Education". They established that the selected universities were using digital marketing communication tools such as social media, mobile friendly websites and education apps, video content strategy enhanced content on web pages and university webinar platforms. Findings revealed that there was a statistically significant relationship between student enrollment decisions in HEIs and digital marketing tools, such as social media presence and retargeting campaigns with $r=.963$ and $p=.008$, mobile-friendly website and educational apps

with $r=.821$ and $p=.089$), video content strategy with $r=.820$ and $p=.089$, Search Engine Optimization enhanced content on web pages with $r=.810$, and $p=.097$, and university webinar platforms with $r=.760$, and $p=.136$. Therefore, the study established that the most influential digital marketing strategies were university webinar platforms. The study suggests that universities should maintain a positive social media presence by utilizing social media platforms to the fullest, enhance retargeting campaigns to increase students' awareness of university programs and services. They should develop mobile-friendly websites, educational apps, video content and university webinar platforms, and make them more accessible, and clearly viewable on mobile phones. These greatly influence student enrollment decisions in HEIs, the most significant being the webinar platforms. Therefore, HEIs need to prioritize the development of user-friendly mobile websites and provide relevant and up-to-date information to attract and retain students.

Mishina and Pace (2021) conducted a systematic review study to establish the digital marketing strategies used to promote international higher education in China'. They identified digital marketing communication strategies such as social networks, mobile marketing, and customer relationship marketing as the most effective in targeting prospective international students. They concluded that HEIs need to upload their profiles on social media networks such as Facebook and Instagram, carefully manage their accounts, consider regular posting, engage picture-based media, and minimize posts with adverts. They argued that together these help to increase student engagement, make the public aware of their brand and reputation, and assist in reaching a myriad of prospective applicants. They recommended that when making marketing plans that target transnational students, HEIs and polytechnics need to adopt Chinese social media platforms such as Sina Weibo and WeChat as these are widely used by potential students in China.

In Kolkata, Ghosal and Prasad (2020) carried out a study on the influence of digital marketing in promoting student enrollment in private HEIs with a focus on the changing patterns of higher education marketing. They established that HEIs employed online counselling, social media marketing, website content and search engine optimization, and videoclip advertisements in complement of print media and admission campaigns. Harbi and Ali (2022) also conducted a review study on the adoption of digital marketing in educational institutions. They established that most studies reviewed identified social media and websites as the marketing communication tools employed by the studied institutions and therefore laid more emphasis on the two. They also established that the studies reviewed hardly considered other marketing communications such as marketing automation, email marketing. Search engine marketing, affiliated marketing and content marketing among others.

Oluwasola, Layefa and Taiwo (2020) conducted a study on, the utilization of digital marketing communication strategies in promoting of private HE in selected Nigerian universities. The study revealed that the selected universities mainly used websites to market their educational services, while paying little or no attention to online relationship marketing, electronic word of mouth, search engine marketing, mobile apps, email advertising, and display advertising among others. Therefore, these universities mainly used the traditional marketing tools and where they went digital, focus was mainly put on the websites. It is important for universities to harness all other digital marketing tools to benefit from the synergy that comes with that integration.

In Botswana, Chiparo (2021) carried out a study on the efficiency of marketing communications techniques used by Private HEIs. The study revealed that in addition to traditional ones, HEIs utilized digital marketing communication tools such as Facebook, Twitter, institutional websites and direct SMS. However, the study established that those tools were among the most effective in attracting students. This implores HEIs to intensify their usage of these tools as they play a significant role in enhancing student enrolment.

In Kenya, Mutali and Omboi (2011) conducted a study on the effect of selected marketing communication tools on student enrollment in private universities. They established that among the marketing communication tools used, the digital ones employed by the selected universities were websites which were indeed some of the most effective in attracting students due to their wide reach and reliability. However, the study established that most of the selected universities had barely embraced social media to help in the attraction of prospective students. It is therefore imperative for the studied universities to tap into the potential of social networks as marketing communication tools. This is because these have a wide reach as the majority of prospective students are currently able to access the sites through smartphones. Masele and Rwehikiza (2024) investigated the usability of social media in the promotion of activities among HEIs in Tanzania. Their multi-case study was conducted with four (4) HEIs both public and private. Findings revealed that social media was perceived second to traditional media in importance despite its ease of use. This means that traditional marketing communication media still dominated in the selected institutions. According to the authors, social media were still considered informal and not a match to the reputation and stance of the HEIs. The study also revealed that the impact of social media was evident through posts of campus life, forthcoming and previous events, as well as published new programs.

Muhangi (2020), conducted a study on the process undergraduate students go through in choosing a HEI to enrol at in Uganda. He established that private Universities were to some extent appreciating marketing contrary to their public counterparts. However, he recommended that HEIs in Uganda should market themselves intensively if they are to compete globally. This will enable them to become more relevant as agents of sustainable development. This study however, did not lay much emphasis on digital marketing communications but on marketing in general.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Results of the systematic review reveal that HEIs in developed countries are more inclined to using more of digital marketing communications as compared to their counterparts in under-developed and developing countries. Specifically, most universities in developed countries mainly use corporate websites and social media to inform the public about the programs they offer and other educational services. However, the speed at which developed countries are adopting digital marketing communications is higher than those in developing and under-developed countries. This paper therefore recommends that HEIs intensify their usage of digital marketing communications to improve their enrollment owing to the digital nature of most applicants.

The study further concludes that HEIs in under-developed and developing countries need to increase momentum in their use of digital marketing communications such as social media, websites, university apps and webinars among others to ease access to their education services by this digital generation of applicants. HEIs should also understand their target customers and their unique characteristics so that they can choose the marketing communications that best suit them. The websites should be easily accessible via mobile devices, since most applicants in this generation own smart phones. Failure to comply may deter HEIs from succeeding in the current scramble for students.

The study identifies a gap in the exploration of digital marketing communications in Ugandan Universities where few related studies were identified on the topic. The studies identified mainly focused on the use of ICTs in the teaching and learning process but not as marketing communication tools. For example, a study carried out by Mirembe and Lubega (2019), entitled, 'Leveraging social media in higher education: a case of Ugandan Universities'. They concluded that there was a mismatch on social media usage between lecturers and students which necessitates the development of a social media policy at HEIs to promote and guide the integration of the platforms in the teaching and learning process. Most of the studies that related to the topic had their main focus on social media usage in HEIs. There is also a need to replicate this study using a mixed research design in Ugandan universities and beyond so as to establish the digital marketing communications employed by these universities and to what extent. The results of the study would provide an insight into the adoption and utilization of digital marketing communications by Universities in Uganda and across borders.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest whatsoever.

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