

The impact of Social Media Marketing on Branding of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Zambia-A perspective of the changing role of Marketing

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Abstract— This research discusses the impact of social media marketing (SMM) on the branding of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Zambia. The research uses a desk research approach to inform the study. The empirical findings were based on analytics from digital marketing tools such as SEMrush, Brand 24 and other statistical findings based on scientific findings from the author’s Doctorial research thesis at ZCAS University. The findings show that SMM has a huge impact on branding of HEIs and that social media is changing the role of marketing since it is demanding that marketers are retrained in digital marketing. The article brings out managerial implications as well as recommendations for HEIs for the efficient implementation of SMM strategies.

Keywords— social media, Institutions, Marketing, Branding, Education.

I. INTRODUCTION

Digital marketing has become a highly strategic tool in the marketing and branding of products and services, it has enhanced the marketing function and created new methods of managing the marketing function. Digital technologies are transforming the practice of marketing, they have enabled companies to become more agile, data driven and particular with return on investments (ROI) for marketing activities (Gupta & Lal, 2023). The advent of digital media has given rise to many online forms of marketing, among them is the use of Social Media for Marketing (SMM). Social Media Marketing is the largest and most popular form of digital marketing. Social media becomes highly suitable for marketing in many sectors including the education sector and this is because of its interactive ability. Marketing according to Philip Kotler is a social process by which individuals and groups obtain what they want through creation of offerings and freely exchanging goods and services of value with others (Kotler, 1998). Marketing has a huge social component, and this is the reason why it fits well with the concept of social media and becomes a great innovation for the marketing process.

The advent of SMM presents a shift from traditional marketing to virtual marketing processes. This shift affects branding of goods and services and also affects the role of marketing especially in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This article discusses the impact of SMM on branding in

HEIs by focusing on this changing role of marketing. It analyses empirical findings from different authors and measures the impact of SMM on branding of in HEIs. Branding of educational services has gained credibility and leverage on equity for in emerging countries since it allows these institutions to increase visibility as well as expand markets beyond geographic boundaries (Perera, et al., 2022). The article uses a desktop research method to make useful conclusions on the impact of SMM on branding of HEIs.

II. METHODOLOGY

This is desk research that analysis findings from scientific publications by different authors in different peer reviewed journals. The article also uses reports and academic publications by scholars from different HEIs who have conducted research on similar subjects. This research used digital analytical tools such as SEMrush and Brand 24 to analyze data on social media platforms for HEIs to draw conclusions on the findings from the analysis. A sound methodology is basically one that enables the researcher to concretely provide empirical solutions to their research questions or objectives (Davis, 2010). The researcher is fully confident that the secondary data obtained from various scientific sources and the data analyzed using different digital tools will satisfy the research title and help to draw useful conclusions.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are over sixty registered HEIs in Zambia according to the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in Zambia (HEA, 2022). The amendment of the Higher Education Act of 2011 allowed for the pluralization of private Universities in Zambia, and this led to “the race to the bottom”. The implication for the increase in the number of HEIs implies that prospective students had a huge choice over which institution to enroll into, especially that the HEA ACT in a way standardized credibility for these institutions. The education sector is now faced with intense competition and HEIs now have to find aggressive strategies in order to sustain themselves.

The emerging need for online branding

According to research conducted by Kayombo & Carter brand positioning for HEIs becomes an important factor in creating sustainable competitive advantage (Kayombo & Carter, 2017). Though the research by Kayombo & Carter was a case study, it predicted rising competitive trends in the Education sector. COVID-19 broke out in 2020 and forced HEIs to offer online learning and advertise their products on various social media platforms. This shifted the marketing war from the traditional space to the virtual space and branding became a greater part of any online marketing campaign in the Education sector.

The changing role of the Marketing function

The COVID-19 pandemic represents a huge shift in the role of marketing in the education sector. Marketers working in the Education sector had to either acquire digital marketing skills or subcontract content marketing and data analytics. The demand for marketers with skills in digital marketing skills has increased, according to analytics compiled by Marino, 55% of all advertising in 2023 is digital advertising (Marino, 2023). The implication of this is that the traditional role of marketing changes to a more digital role and this automatically places emphasis on requirements for digital training for practicing marketers. The digital marketing and advertising industry globally is now worth over \$460 billion, gaming follows next with \$300 billion and then website advertising is only worth \$11 billion (Marino, 2023). The growth of the Digital marketing industry confirms that there is a shift in the role of marketing and organizations that are not adaptive or responsive to this may lose their competitive advantage.

Managerial implications

Kurt Lewin as cited by Miller & Ibsen stated that change is the enemy of the people (Miller & Ibsen, 1989). HEIs need to increase budgets for SMM in order for them to build stronger online brands and increase their visibility. There is no doubt that those HEIs that are investing in digital platforms are the likely ones to survive in the near future (Verhoef & Bijmolt, 2019). HEIs need to adopt models for SMM such as the one in Figure I below which categorizes social media platforms in order of popularity according to research conducted at ZCAS University by the author in 2022.

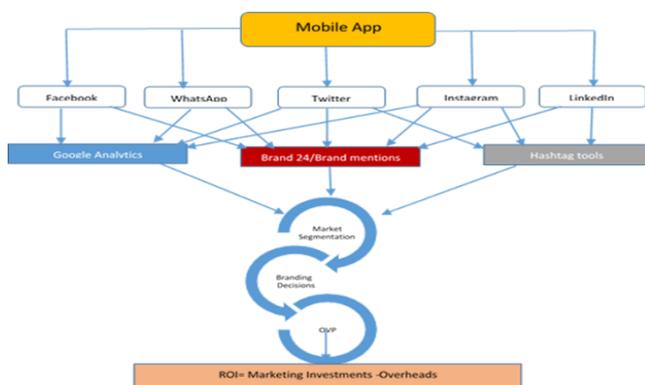


FIGURE I: THE SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING MODEL

The model is an integrated approach to SMM in HEIs and is a basis for building strategies for SMM and monitoring returns for SMM investments since it allows for the incorporation of tools for SMM analytics. HEIs should analyse their investments in social media and have a scientific approach towards managing brands online and selecting suitability of social media platforms.

HEIs that are developing SMM plans are more likely to have stronger brands than those that are not, since social media is providing the best customer engagement (Appel, et al., 2019). Findings from research conducted by the author in 2022 and reflected in figure II below, show that 37.5% of HEIs do not develop an annual SMM strategy and incorporate this in their strategic marketing plan, while 62.5% do not develop an annual SMM plan.

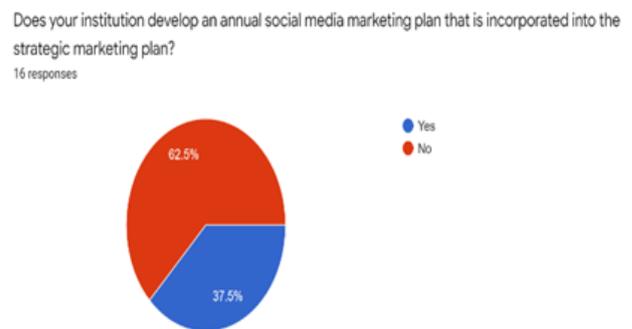


FIGURE II: SMM PLANS IN HEIS

The findings in figure II indicate that SMM is though is the most effective tool for managing brands online, HEIs are not yet planning there online presence. This means that there is need to implement models for SMM based on empirical findings from scientific research.

Effective branding is measured by increase in the number of sales and visibility (March, 2023). If HEIs are able to expand their markets beyond geographic borders, the implication is that their brands are growing and that customers are getting confident in their brand equity. Figure III below shows that 31.3% of HEIs were able to recruit more than 10 international students in 2022 and 31.3% of these institutions recruited above 5%. The finding in Figure III below is confirmation that SMM branding has huge impact on international brand management.

IV. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

If your answer to the previous question was yes, estimate the number of international students you have recruited in your Institution?
16 responses

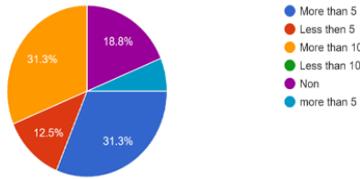


FIGURE 3: INTERNATIONAL STUDENT RECRUITMENT IN HEIS

Analytics using SEMrush and Brand 24 show that HEIs have gained more popularity on social media platforms than on traditional approach, Table I below shows summarized results of this analysis.

TABLE I.

HEI	Traditional	Social Media Platform
Lusaka University	30%	70%
Apex Medical University	25%	75%
Cavendish University	23%	77%
ZCAS University	23%	77%

Comparison of SMM and Traditional marketing brand popularity (Adapted from the research by the author in 2022 at ZCAS University).

Table I above shows that popularity of HEIs is increasing on social media compared to traditional channels. Research findings further indicate that there has been growth in the use of SMM platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, twitter, and Instagram for branding purposes (Jamil, et al., 2022). This increase in the use of social media platforms according to Jamil, et al. influences customer intentions. The interpretations of the findings in Table I and in Figure III lead to a conclusion that prospective students are able to respond to purposefully select a HEIs as a result of its online advertising and branding. Research conducted at University of Rhode Island shows that SMM can influence buyer intentions (Paquette, 2013). Since SMM has the power to influence consumer behavior and lead to intentional choices, the implication is that it is an effective method for marketing HEIs. The challenge perhaps is in how HEIs build their online value propositions (OVP) and also what basis they used to select social media platforms that they utilize for their marketing activities. Table II below shows social media engagement according to analytics by UniRank statistics for 2022.

TABLE II.

HEI	Number of likes on Facebook
University of Lusaka	214,307
Cavendish University	130, 480
University of Zambia	76,805
Chreso University	46,585
Rusangu University	46,361

Statistics on social media engagement in HEIs in Zambia

The levels of engagement on Facebook alone in terms of numbers are high and this means that the popularity of social media for marketing purposes is something that cannot be ignored by marketing professionals in HEIs. This means that the role of marketing has shifted from traditional channels to digital channels. The implication for marketers is that they must get training in digital marketing skills in order to stay relevant in the marketing field.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HEIS ON EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

HEIs should invest more in SMM and build marketing strategies around the concept of social media since it has become the new media for marketing.

HEIs should adopt the use of scientific approaches in selecting strategies and platforms for SMM, so that they can leverage their brand strength and increase their market visibility.

HEIs should ensure that they increase engagement on social media as they is the best way that their institution can increase numbers and increase brand visibility.

VI. CONCLUSION

SMM is the new media in the marketing process, it has become the most popular tool for managing brands and increasing revenue in HEIs. Findings have shown that HEIs are able to expand their markets beyond their geographic boundaries and this implies that branding is highly impacted by SMM. The role of marketing has shifted from the traditional role to a more digital role, and this means that marketers should attain skills that will make them relevant in planning and managing SMM.

Measuring the return on investment for SMM should become an important activity as this is a practical means by which incorporating SMM in the strategic marketing plan can be justified. HEIs operate in a highly competitive environment, and this requires a comprehensive approach in marketing of their services. Social media has gained huge ground especially after the advent of COVID-19 and has forced industry to respond to such trends. SMM planning has become an integral part of marketing planning and once again placing emphasis on the need for retraining of marketers.

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