

*Full Length Research*

## Investigating Public Universities Facebook Pages: Extent of Users Engagement

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The development in information technologies have made higher learning institutions to change the way they communicate with their audiences. For instance social media such as face book, tweeter and you tube have been used to communicate with current and prospective students. This study was conducted to investigate the engagement of the facebook pages of public universities in Tanzania. Specifically, the study determined the popularity of the pages, extent to which users put comments upon the posts as well as virality of the messages/posts on the walls. The analysis of the metrics such as popularity, commitment and virality was done to study three Tanzanian public university facebook pages. It was revealed that, the most popular page was SUZA 97.3% followed by UDOM 90.7%, then OUT 71.1%. The study further found that, UDOM facebook page had many comments 81%, followed by SUZA 69.3% then OUT which was below average. The extent to which information were shared in all institutions were below average. This was 41.2%, 1.2% and 4.8% for UDOM, OUT and SUZA respectively.

**Keywords:** social media, public universities, higher learning institutions, engagement, facebook page, commitment, online marketing, branding, virality

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### INTRODUCTION

Internet enables people to gain access to information, create content and disseminate information across more efficiently (Stephens, 2007). Social networkings are the tools which enable internet users to find long-lost friends, classmates, and link these users together and share their profiles. They are used by many people because they are free and easy to use. Recently these social networking sites have gained popularity to individuals, companies, organizations and even politicians who wanted to reach out to their target populations (Read, 2006).

While the use of social media has been noted from

millions of users, most of them are students with a great number of purposes in mind (Selwyn, 2007). They support educational activities through interaction, collaboration, active participation, information and resource sharing (Ajjan and Hartshorne, 2008); Mason, 2006; Selwyn, 2007)

### Problem Statement and Justification

A well-planned social media can help a university to

increase its visibility in the market, increase audience engagement and build a relationship full of trust. It offers universities with a great opportunity to listen publicly, and show that they are listening (Voss and Kumar, 2013).

With that view many universities have been using Facebook in various ways like engaging with newly admitted and current students, aluminae, staff and other stakeholders. Other uses include orientation of newly admitted students, creating awareness on events and campus activities as well as university marketing. (Mack et al., 2007)

However, studies conducted by (Gerolimos, 2011; Voss and Kumar, 2013) indicated under utilization of the benefits of the sites. Therefore the aim of this study was to investigate the extent of user's engagement to public universities Facebook pages in Tanzania. This study will be a basis for influencing universities and other organisations to develop mechanisms which will enable effective utilization of the Facebook pages for various activities related to training, research, outreach and consultancy services.

## REVIEWED LITERATURE

### Facebook Usage in Organizations

Among the social media tools Facebook is the most popular because of its multimedia, flexible, social, and entertaining functionality and capability. It provides users with a personalized profile, allowing information sharing, creation of a friends list, photo albums, the formation of social interest groups, and different kinds of online resources (Mazman and Usluel, 2010). Facebook has been noted to be used by students in various ways including interacting with peers and receiving feedback than they do with their teachers in the traditional classroom (Ophus and Abbitt, 2009; Madge et al., n.d.). Hussan et al., 2012 identified other uses of Facebook among students which include developing academic relationships with their contemporaries, sharing their learning experiences with their colleagues and international community.

Currently social media/ web 2.0 technologies are also employed by organizations in the day to day activities. According to a survey by global consulting firm McKinsey, 65% of companies reported the use of Web 2.0 technologies in their organizations (Bughin and Chui, 2010).

Higher education institutions are not left behind where various social media have been employed. Facebook is widely used as a marketing tool particularly to reach and attract future students (Constantinides et al., 2011) engage newly admitted and current students. They pointed out that unlike in the past where new students who arrived on campus knowing virtually no one, today's

freshmen are connecting with fellow students online through Facebook groups and pages prior to getting in to the campus. The State University of New York (SUNY) for example, created orientation page through Facebook that provides general information and connects newly admitted students in a common virtual space. The page also offers various information including photos of orientation staff and students, relevant videos, and makes use of the "event" function of Facebook, which allows users to see other students who are attending the same orientation session (SUNY Purchase Orientation, 2010). Other information includes links to events from the orientation staff along with questions and comments posted by new students themselves.

The study conducted by Vincent *et al.*, 2012 explored the important role played by media in branding for institutions of higher learning revealed that branding through Facebook was more important when compared to the use of other traditional mass media.

### Extent of Engagement in Facebook Pages

Organizations can communicate with information consumers in its utmost potential. Some organizations not only listen to its customers but also encourage their customers to talk; therefore work towards engagement. The more an organization gets its audience to engage or increase its engagement rate, the more it learns from them. It also increases visibility such that when someone engages with a post, it is also seen by friends. In addition engaging with audience helps to build relationships. Engagement rate has been defined as the percentage of people who saw a post that liked, shared, clicked or commented on it (Facebook, 2014). As organisations grow and become complex it becomes difficult to know its customer well. One thing which can be of importance is to find how the organisation can best engage with its information users effectively. It involves not only listening to user needs and wants but also responding to them. This is one of the most important values social media can offer, as it encourages the "social" aspect of social media which differentiates it from normal web pages. Anderson, (2011); Barnes and Lescault, (2011) stated that the organisation visibility can be increased through engagement such that the more an organization gets its audience the more the visibility of the organisation. A study conducted by Bonsón and Ratkai, (2013) "titled A set of metrics to assess stakeholder engagement and social legitimacy on a corporate Facebook page" identified three metrics namely popularity, commitment; and virality to measure stakeholders engagement. Popularity is measured by the "likes", commitment refers to the number of "comments" and virality is measured by the "shares" on Facebook. It shows how many times a wall post was shared with someone.

**Table: 1** Measurement of User Engagement

| Measure           | Formula                                    | Description   | Sign |
|-------------------|--|---|------|
| <b>Popularity</b> | Number of posts with likes/total posts     | Percentage of the total posts that have been liked        | P1   |
|                   | Total likes/total number of posts          | Average number of likes per post                          | P2   |
|                   | $(P2/\text{number of fans} \times 1; 000)$ | Popularity of messages among fans                         | P3   |
| <b>Commitment</b> | Number of posts with comments/ total posts | Percentage of the total posts that have been commented on | C1   |
|                   | Total comments/total posts                 | Average number of comments per post                       | C2   |
|                   | $C2/\text{number of fans} \times 1; 000$   | Commitment of fans  | C3   |
| <b>Virality</b>   | Number of posts with shares/total post     | Percentage of the total posts that have been shared       | V1   |
|                   | Total shares/total posts                   | Average number of shares per post                         | V2   |
|                   | $V2/\text{number of fans} \times 1; 000$   | Virality of messages among fans                           | V3   |

Source: Bonsón and Ratkai (2013)

The success of the posts depend on the extent to which users are engaging on them. There are various way of determining the success of the posts. According to Graham et.al. 2009 the number of friends or page likes, the frequency of postings on the wall, number of posts and number of questions that have been asked or answered can be used to measure users engagement (Graham et al., 2009). An in-depth analysis of Facebook comments posted by users was conducted by Gerolimos (2011) on 20 American academic libraries' postings and users' postings on their walls stated that a "like" is similar to a comment and is an alternative for the user to express his or her agreement with the original post. Table 1

## METHODOLOGY

This study used the metric analysis of the facebook pages to explore and understand how universities are utilizing and creating value from social media technologies. Metric analysis is the process which aims at measuring facebook users engagement based on three metrics namely popularity, commitment and virality. The study conducted by Bonsón and Ratkai, (2013), pointed out that metrics can provide a better

understanding of the social media such as face book page usage. Table 1. gives the description of the metrics used in this study.

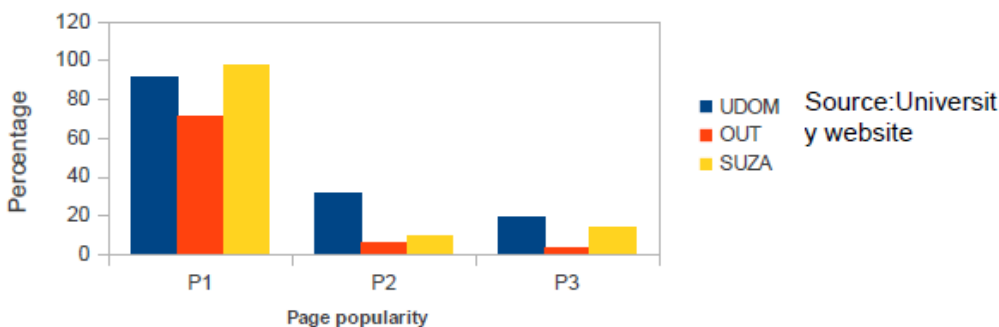
The unit of analysis for the study was the university Facebook pages. This study adopted non probability sampling (purposive sampling). According to Lamb et al (2011) non probability sampling techniques relies on the decision of the researcher such that the researcher selects samples based on some well-known criteria. The researcher started sampling by first looking on the list of public universities through Google search. Then, three public universities were selected based on the presence of the facebook page since June 2012 and the currency of the content in the pages. Pages with the content information up 31 June were selected. These include Open University of Tanzania (OUT), State University of Zanzibar (SUZA), and The University of Dodoma (UDOM) face book pages.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The popularity of the face book page

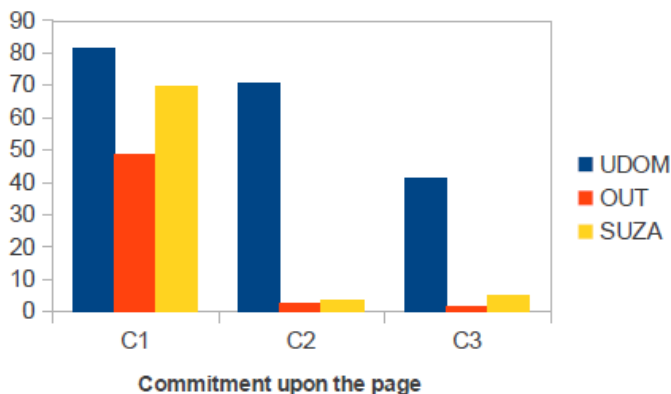
The results indicates that 90.7%, 71.1% and 97.3% were

Figure 1: The popularity of the facebook page



Source:University websites

Figure 2: The commitment upon the facebook pages



Source:University websites

the percentages of the total posts that have been liked in UDOM, OUT and SUZA face book pages respectively.

The average number of likes per post were also found to be 31.5, 6.0 and 8.9 for UDOM, OUT and SUZA respectively as presented in Figure 1.

This tells that people found the page, liked and ideally receive the university’s posts on their news feed. The results further revealed that the messages/posts found in the university face book pages received different measure of popularity such that the most popular page was UDOM 81.0, SUZA 13.3 and OUT 3.4. The results on the popularity of the page indicates that although OUT had many posts on their page few people liked the posts (P2), and therefore the popularity of the posts was low (P3) as can be shown in Figure 1.

**The commitment upon the facebook pages**

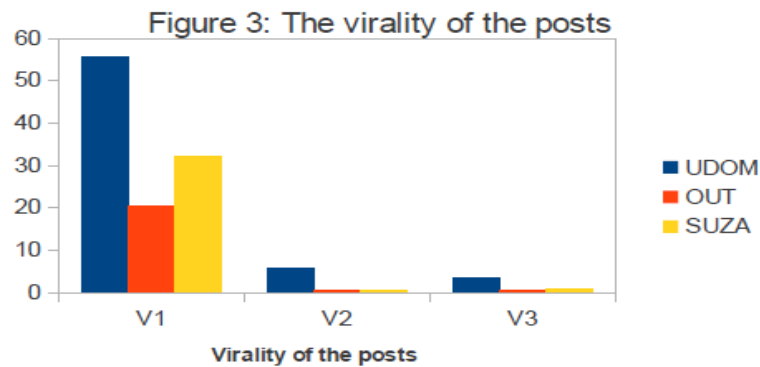
The results on the extent to which users committed on

the posts shows that 81%, 48.3% and 69.3% were the percentages of the total post that have been commented by UDOM, OUT and SUZA respectively. The average numbers of comments per post were UDOM 70.3; OUT 2.2; and SUZA 3.2. The commitment of fans to the page shows UDOM 41.2, OUT 1.2 and SUZA 4.8 as shown in Figure 2 (C1, C2 and C3).

These results tell that users were less committed to OUT page, followed by SUZA then UDOM as few comments were made to the posts.

**The virality of the messages/posts**

The researcher was also interested to find out how posts were shared among the users “virality”. The results show that the percentages of the posts that have been shared were UDOM 55.5, OUT 20.1 and SUZA 32.0 (Figure 3).



However the average number of shares per post were calculated such that UDOM 5.5, OUT 0.4 and SUZA 0.5 as shown in Figure 3 (V1, V2 and V3). These results indicate that more than 50 percent of posts that were made by the UDOM facebook page were shared among the users.

While sending information out is important for organizations, what is important to social media is interaction and how the audience is engaged. Measures of engagement offer some insight into how many people saw and processed a message/post. Voss and Kumar (2013) pointed out that likes are the shallowest indicator of engagement on Facebook; comments show a greater degree of engagement because the user wants their voice to be heard; however, shares demonstrate the greatest degree of engagement because they express a desire for others to see it. When people share posts there is a strong likelihood that they may influence people who follow them. On the other hand an in depth analysis of Facebook comments posted by users Gerolimos (2011) treated "like" and "comment" in a page as a measure of user engagement because a person who like or comment upon the posts express his/her interest and agreement.

This study suggests that all of the postings from all university pages received many likes than any other responses. This study agrees with other study by (Voss and Kumar, 2013) which found that the total number of post likes per post is higher than other responses like comments and sharing. This may be due to the reason that clicking like button is much easier than giving comments and share the information with other person. In addition there are other factors like the type of postings, how interesting the post is. The interaction to the post was found to be associated to types of postings. For instance the study conducted by Voss and Kumar, (2013) on the value of social media revealed that the library postings with more comments are those which were more conversational and informal, thus making it easier to interact with other users.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that all of the three Facebook pages were popular in which SUZA (97.3%) was the most popular followed by UDOM (90.7%), then OUT (71.1%). However the extent in which users engage with the posts is still low as indicated by commitment and virality metrics. This means that the pages investigated were not engaging users effectively.

## RECOMMENDATION

Social media sites offer universities a great opportunity to listen to the wants and needs of their publics, as well as show their publics that they are listening, thus increasing trust. With that view the researcher recommends further study to analyze the type of posts by universities, audience comments as well as types of audience so as to get the basis for engaging audience effectively.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

|      |                                   |
|------|-----------------------------------|
| SUA  | Sokoine University of Agriculture |
| UDOM | The University of Dodoma          |
| SUZA | State University of Zanzibar      |
| SUNY | The State University of New York  |

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