

An Assessment of Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of Communication Platforms and Content Used in Communicating Drugs and Substance Abuse: The Case of Laikipia University in Kenya

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Abstract

The continued rise in the prevalence of Drugs and Substance Abuse (DSA) among university students has been linked to insufficient communication on the topic. This is in spite of sustained communication by respective universities to promote knowledge and ideal attitude and practices. Correspondingly, Social Networking Sites (SNSs) are increasingly being adopted by universities as platforms for communicating with their students on topical issues, including DSA. Conversely, empirical evidence indicate that audiences' perception of the media used in specific communication situations can impact on their response to the content and message therein. Hence, employing an institutional based cross-sectional convergent mixed methods design, and Laikipia University as a representative of other public universities in Kenya, this study sought to examine the perceptions of the University's first year and second year undergraduate students towards the communication platforms and content used by the University to communicate about DSA. The study established that while the students acknowledged the use of both traditional and online platforms by the University, they expressed preference for online platforms and desire for content that met the specific affordances of the SNSs used.

Keywords: Drugs and Substance Abuse, Kenya, Perceptions, Social Networking Sites, University

Introduction

The world over, Drugs and Substance Abuse (DSA) has been shown to impede the social and economic development of a country (Sorge et al., 2020; Nyaga et al., 2021). The impact is far-reaching in developing countries, like Kenya, where DSA has become a public health concern due to the continued rise in the prevalence of use among the youth and young adults (Kamenderi et al., 2019).

The World Health Organization (WHO) approximates that 45 percent of the 149-472 million people aged between 15-64 years who use substances annually are students in institutions of higher learning (WHO, 2014). Correspondingly, the World Drugs Report (WDR, 2018) indicates that substance use among university undergraduate students continues to rise globally, with studies conducted in various universities across Africa showing the prevalence to be between 28 percent and 62 percent among this group (Osman et al., 2016; Arora et al., 2016). In Kenya, substance use among university undergraduate students has been on the rise with a prevalence of between 20 percent and 68 percent recorded in various universities in the country (Atwoli et al., 2011; Oteyo et al., 2013; Ndegwa et al., 2017; Musyoka et al., 2020; Mbuthia et al., 2020).

As a result of the prevalence, majority of universities in Kenya have enacted alcohol and drug abuse policies aimed at creating awareness and mitigating substance use and abuse within university premises (Larimer et al., 2010; Otingi, 2012; Ronoh, 2014). However, despite the universities implementing various communication strategies to address the problem, insufficient communication is still linked to the persistent cases of DSA among university students (Masese, 2020). Various scholars attribute this to the perceptions held by the students towards the communication approaches used (including perceptions towards the media platforms and content therein) that may influence them to either access or avoid looking for information on DSA (Harris et al., 2021; Beebe & Beebe, 2021).

Conversely, besides enacting drug abuse policies, strategies that could be used in DSA mitigation include tailoring communication to create awareness, promote knowledge, and ideal practices related to substances and substance use (Pere, 2018, Mbuthia et al., 2020). This is in line with the National Authority for the Campaign Against Alcohol and Drug Abuse (NACADA, 2021) guidelines on alcohol and drug use prevention which advise that preventive communication programs need to be tailored to the needs of specific target groups with age-appropriate messages, language, and activities. By doing so, these programs can better resonate with the students by addressing the unique needs, challenges and influences faced by university students, and equip them with the knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to make healthy choices regarding substance use and abuse.

To develop and implement communication programs that resonate with young people, like university students, communication experts recommend the Social and Behaviour Change Communication (SBCC) approach (Abamecha et al., 2021; Ngigi & Busolo, 2018). Given that the approach is grounded in theory, research, and interaction, it has been proposed as effective in promoting desired knowledge, attitudes, and practices among young people. Hence, proponents of the SBCC strategy posit that it can be used in developing tailored messages, while using a variety of population appropriate communication channels, to motivate sustained individual and community level changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours (Clark et al., 2017).

Thus, with the focus being on using appropriate channels of communication, the internet may be a suitable platform for the delivery of SBCC promotional messages to young people like university students. This is because this age group has been shown to habitually use the technology for majority of their communication needs. For instance, Wamuyu's survey (2020) on Kenyan youth's internet usage established that social media dominates internet use among 7- to 25-year-olds, with 90 percent of the users accessing the internet via mobile devices and 2 out of 3 youths either owning a mobile device or having access to one. This corresponds with statistics posted by online web traffic analysis platforms (Statcounter, n.d.) indicating that as at June 2023, the most popular Social Networking Sites (SNSs) in Kenya were Facebook, Twitter/(X), YouTube, Instagram, Pinterest, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, Tumblr, Tagged, Snapchat, Google+ and Yahoo. Heinrichs et al. (2011) attribute the popularity of these sites to their affordances such as enabling users to access information, create content, distribute, or share content and express their opinions. These statistics support the hypothesis that to reach this population effectively, a communication strategy would have to incorporate the SNSs as key channels of communication (Pew Research Centre, 2018).

The success of Social and Behaviour Change Communication (SBCC) strategies lies in the information adequately and effectively reaching the target audiences, impacting them and achieving the intended communication objectives for the audiences (Singal et al., 2014). This is especially true in a situation like in the case of universities, where insufficient communication has been linked to the sustained incidences of DSA (Masese, 2020). In such a scenario, adequate communication can play a significant role in improving the students' awareness, attitude and practices relating to DSA. Nonetheless, considering that majority of universities have incorporated SNSs in their communication strategies, the success of communication carried out on these platforms is dependent on how the target audiences (in this case the students) perceive and appreciate these platforms and the content in them (Camilleri & Falzon, 2020; Chung, 2018).

Literature Review

The Role of Perception in Social and Behaviour Change Communication

Perception refers to the ability to become aware of something, or the way something is regarded and interpreted (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Within the field of psychology, perception has been defined as either the processing of external information by the sensory systems, such as visual or auditory information (Montemayor & Haladjian, 2017) or an individual's experience involving the five senses of seeing, hearing, touching, and smelling of objects or people around him (Rogers, 2017). In social media studies, perception has been considered in relation to an individual's opinions regarding the media, communication content, source credibility, participation, ease of use and usefulness of online technologies such as SNSs (Camilleri & Falzon, 2020; An & Kerdpitak, 2023).

In the context of a digital age where information is transmitted across multiple platforms and media, coupled with the ever-evolving media consumption habits, it is imperative to understand how audiences' perceptions may influence their engagement, interpretation of communication content and acceptance of messages. This can provide valuable insights into developing effective communication strategies in this digital era because as Zhao (2023) posits; in the current modern society, people's perceptions are affected by the virtual environment enabled by the social media ecosystem.

Various studies have established the significance of audience perceptions in the success of any communication strategy incorporating social media and SNSs (Camilleri & Falzon, 2020; Chung, 2018; Tsfati & Cohen, 2013). Camilleri and Falzon (2020) confirmed that university students' perceptions of online platforms such as SNSs, influenced their intentions and usage of those technologies for their communication needs. Conversely, audiences' perceptions towards social media and SNSs and the content in them is influenced by their interpretation of metrics such as the popularity of a media content within their social circles. This in turn influences their acceptance of the message and how they interact with the content either by sharing or commenting on it (Chung, 2018). How an audience perceives the media can also determine indirectly how they will react to the media and the content therein. In this regard, Tsfati and Cohen (2013) established that audiences' attitude towards the media influenced their perception of how the media can influence them emotionally or socially.

Correspondingly, there are studies that have also put forth factors that can influence media users' perceptions towards the content they access on social media platforms and SNSs (Harris et al., 2021; Beebe & Beebe, 2021). Harris et al. (2021), while focusing on college students, established

that factors such as the ease of accessing the content; relatability of both the source and message; sincerity of the source; motivations of the source; and generalisation of the message influenced the perceptions formed by young people towards the content they engaged with on SNSs. Beebe and Beebe (2021) also acknowledge that audiences tend to be interested in messages that relate to their interests, needs, goals, and motivations. For instance, if one was to access content on DSA, how they perceive the content as relatable would be determined by whether the message relates to what they have experienced such as peer pressure to engage in misuse of the substances, or when the source of the message is their peer and hence the audience can view them as an extension of peer-constructed norms. That being the case, the owner of the message is perceived as one who can understand them and relate to their situation.

Based on the foregoing significance of audiences' perception in communication process, this study sought to examine university students' perceptions of the communication platforms and content used by the respective University to communicate about DSA.

Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by the tenets of the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) that strives to explain why people choose various media and what they do with media content (Katz et al., 1974; Pierce, 2009). Although initial studies from a UGT perspective focused on TV, Radio, and Newspapers, recent upsurge, and ubiquity of new media such as SNSs have led to renewed interest in the postulations of the UGT. The theory has been used in predicting computer-internet communication because it emphasizes on the psychological needs such as audience perceptions and gratifications that motivates choice of media and communication contents (Carolyn, 2002; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Godlewski & Perse, 2010). These studies recognise the various gratifications that have emerged from the array of online and digital communication platforms available to users.

The theory considers audiences as constantly active in their choice of media and willing to expose themselves to the media they feel will give them desired gratifications (Wang, 2014). Accordingly, how audiences perceive the usefulness of a medium is based on whether they consider it as being able to fulfil their communication needs and gratifications such as entertainment, information seeking, and socialisation (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Godlewski & Perse, 2010). Thus, when planning to communicate to an audience such as the university students, it would be necessary to consider the gratifications they seek when choosing and participating in communication conducted online on various SNSs. This would in turn be useful in determining the ideal media and content, with the aim of meeting these gratifications.

Another postulation of the theory is that audiences are dependent on their own perceptions and previously held beliefs, values, and interests when seeking specific gratifications from the media and media content (Wang, 2014). Understanding these factors that determine audiences' choice of media and the content in them can enable communicators tailor their communication approaches for desired results. This would entail selecting the right media mix preferred by their target audiences, such as university students, and in designing communication content that appeal to their gratifications.

Correspondingly, social media and SNSs possess affordances that endear them to users. Media affordances in this case refer to the various specific functions and actual or imagined strengths of the SNSs, that entice users to take certain actions such as commenting, uploading contents, and tagging friends (Trepete, 2015; Ronzhyn et al., 2022). Hence, as advanced by the UGT, different SNSs appeal to their users because of their various affordances that enable the content to be presented in a format that appeals to the users' sought gratifications (Harris et al., 2021; Beebe & Beebe, 2021; Alhabash & Ma, 2017). In turn, these affordances encourage engagement and participation when the users perceive their needs to have been met.

Applying the UGT to user-generated media like SNSs can therefore help in understanding how users perceive and engage with the platforms and the roles they take such as consuming, participating and producing, as well as the gratifications they derive from their usage (Wang, 2014). Also, given scholarly findings (Onah et al., 2019; Beebe & Beebe, 2021; Harris et al., 2021) that audiences' perception of the media used in specific communication situations can impact on their response to the content and message therein, it is important to study the perceptions of audiences, such as university students, towards the communication platforms and content used by their university to communicate about DSA. This is because these perceptions ultimately influence their acceptance and adoption of the messages, leading to knowledge, attitude, and adoption of ideal practices relating to DSA.

Methodology

Research Design

This study used an institutional based cross-sectional convergent mixed methods design, involving a survey and Online Focus Group Discussions (OFGD). The cross-sectional method allowed for the description and analysis of the study sample at a specific point in time, while the convergent mixed methods enabled the concurrent collection of qualitative and quantitative data, their analyse and correlation (Creswell, 2003).

Study Area

Laikipia University was the study area. The sample from the university was considered a representative of the other public universities in Kenya because the Kenya Universities and Colleges Central Placement Services (KUCCPS) used in the country ensures that students are picked competitively from the same pool for placement to public universities without special considerations. This placement process ensures that the population characteristics of public universities in Kenya are the same. Laikipia University also implements a drugs and alcohol prevention policy, thus presenting an ideal environment to assess the effectiveness of the communication approaches that have been factored in the policy.

Study Population

The study population was the first year and second year undergraduate students. Studies have proven that for majority of students in this cohort, the campus life introduces them to social pressures which make them susceptible to experimenting and abusing drugs and substances (Midford, 2009; Musyoka et al., 2020; Certain et al., 2009). The approximate number of this population (Laikipia University) based on the Kenya Universities and Colleges Central Placement Service (2021) statistics was 2338 for first year students and 1777 for second year students.

Sampling Procedure and Sample

Stratified sampling technique was adopted in sampling the students, with the four (4) academic schools in the university used as the strata. In calculating the proposed sample for each stratum, Cochran's (1977) formula recommended for large populations was used as follows:

$$\text{Sample size } (n_0) = \frac{(Z_{1-\frac{\alpha}{2}})^2 p(q)}{(d)^2}$$

$$\text{Where } \left| z_{1-\frac{\alpha}{2}} = 1.92 \right| z_{1-\frac{\alpha}{2}} = 1.645 \text{ (from Z tables)}$$

and:

$$p = 0.50$$

$$q = 1 - p = 0.50$$

$$d = 0.10$$

$$n_0 = \frac{(1.645)^2 (0.50)(0.50)}{0.10^2} = 67.65$$

$$(a) \text{ For Sample 1 (1}^{\text{st}} \text{ year students), where } N=2338 \quad n = \frac{n_0}{1 + \frac{n_0-1}{N}}$$

$$n = \frac{n_0}{1 + \frac{n_0-1}{N}}$$

$$n = \frac{67.65}{1 + \frac{66.65}{2338}} = \frac{244}{1.1373} = \frac{67.65}{1.02} = \mathbf{66.3 \text{ students}}$$

If we divide into 4 equal strata, then each of the $n_i = \frac{nN_i}{N}$ was 16.5 which is approximately **17 units per stratum**.

(b) For Sample 2 (2nd year students), where N=1777

$$n = \frac{n_0}{1 + \frac{n_0 - 1}{N}}$$

$$n = \frac{67.65}{1 + \frac{66.65}{1777}} = \frac{245}{1 + \frac{244}{1288}} = \frac{67.65}{1.0375} \frac{244}{1.189} = \mathbf{65.2 \text{ students}}$$

If divided into 4 equal strata, then each of the $n_i = \frac{nN_i}{N}$ was 16.3 which is approximately 16 units per stratum. The OFGD participants were selected from each of the four academic schools in the University, with two participants (1 female and 1 male) selected from each school. Thus, each OFGD had 8 participants.

Data Collection and Analysis

For the survey, an online self-administered questionnaire was used to get data on the type of communication content that appeal to the students and their description of the content posted by the University on the SNSs. The OFGDs were used to collect data on the participants' perception of the communication platforms and message presentation formats. The two OFGDs (one for the first-year students and another for the second-year students) were conducted synchronously using 'google-meet' online app.

Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS version 21.0) was used in analysing the quantitative data from the online self-administered questionnaire. The qualitative data from the OFGDs was analysed using inductive content analysis methods (Palys & Atchison, 2014). This enabled the analysis and elucidation of the inherent meaning of the participants' responses for inference making and correlation with the quantitative data. The analysis was guided by the tenets of the UGT and postulations by previous scholarly works.

Ethical Considerations

Permission to carry out the research was obtained from the board of post graduate studies of Laikipia University and ethical clearance was done by the Laikipia University Institutional Scientific Ethical Review Committee (LU-ISERC). A research permit was then sought from the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI). Research ethics observed in the study included informed consent, confidentiality, objectivity and honesty in data handling and storage. All the participants took part in this study voluntarily and without any coercion, inducement or deception and were also free to opt out of the research, if they so wished.

Study Findings and Discussions

Students' Perception of the Communication Platforms Used by the University

To ascertain the students' perceptions of the SNSs as platforms of communication, the OFGD participants were asked to expound on their perceptions of the communication platforms used by the University for general communication. The participants' sentiments are captured in the following three excerpts:

Excerpt 1

Most of the students come to school for classes, and immediately they are done with their classes, they go home. Because most are in 2nd year, 3rd year and 4th year, they stay outside school. So, some of the students do not pass around the noticeboards where most information is posted because they don't have the time or interest. So, I prefer it being online. (OFGD participant 12)

Excerpt 2

They (students) only come when they have classes, and maybe when they want something to do in between the classes.... I prefer the online one because one can talk since you are not known, it's anonymous. Your opinion is not like you you you (sic). It can be understood and taken into consideration. (OFGD participant 7)

Excerpt 3

.....I think our campus is mainly an offline campus. (OFGD participant 13)

From these responses, although the students acknowledge that the institution prefers communicating to them through noticeboards, they imply that they find the communication platform inaccessible. The students reveal their preference for accessing information from online sites such as SNSs because they perceive these as offering some degree of anonymity and freedom of speech (OFGD participant 7, Excerpt 3). The students' assertion that accessing the noticeboards is a challenge to them alludes to medium limitations which in turn affects the ease of use. The specific reasons behind these claims may be due to the context and individual circumstances as advanced by Camilleri and Falzon (2020). For example, some of the respondents say the students stay out of campus, hence they only have time for classes. They also do not take time to walk around the institution (OFGD participant 12, Excerpt 1).

According to Camilleri and Falzon (2020), an individual's perceived ease of use of a medium and perceived usefulness of the medium will have a positive effect on their intention to use them. This assertion corresponds to the UGT's postulation that an individual will use a medium to enhance his gratifications. Hence, in the above scenario, the students' responses indicate that they are not comfortable accessing information on the noticeboards and as such do not consider the medium (noticeboards) useful to them because it does not meet their information needs or gratifications. In this case, as indicated by some of the respondents (OFGD *participant 12*, Excerpt 1), the students may decide to avoid the communication medium, resulting to them missing out on the information posted on the noticeboards.

Correspondingly, in connection to creating awareness on drugs and substances, the OFGD participants were asked about their perceptions of the communication platforms used in disseminating information on drugs and substance use. They responded in various ways as follows:

Excerpt 4

Most of the sensitisation on drugs is mostly offline, of which you might find some posters around school but not online. I think it would be more effective when they use the online sites. (OFGD participant 6)

Excerpt 5

Yes, they talk about drugs. The university tries to control, but not online. When you go to these pages, the online platforms, they do not talk much about drugs, but when you walk around, you will see some posters about drugs. (OFGD participant 13)

Excerpt 6

Yes, I prefer online because now when you say that its physical, then there is no way someone is going to come from the far end of the school, to come and hear about drugs. It doesn't even make sense. They (students) only come when they have classes, and maybe when they want something to do in between the classes. But you just can't wake up and say am going for anti-drugs campaign... (OFGD participant 7)

From the above responses (Excerpts 4, 5, 6), while the students recognise that the University provides information on DSA, they report that this information is mostly offline, on noticeboards. The students

nonetheless suggest their preference for online platforms for communication and dissemination of information. Their inclination for online platforms is in line with the tenets of the UGT that users are motivated to use certain media because of the ease of use associated with a medium (Rubin, 2009; Ferris et al., 2021). These findings also confirm Harris et al.'s findings (2021) in their study on what motivates college students towards certain SNSs, some of which include their ability to easily access the medium and the availability of adequate and useful information.

Nevertheless, some of the respondents also indicated their preference for alternative modes of communication as shown in the next excerpts.

Excerpt 7

I think this is the first time am hearing there was a drugs campaign week. I never got the information. Sometimes I think there should be a proper way to communicate with all the students. Or even maybe sometimes they can tell the lecturers on Monday that this is a week of (anti-drugs campaign). They should look for a way to communicate with the students, to be closer to the students. (OFGD participant 8)

Excerpt 8

.....we only think the only association between us and lecturers are the courses they've been assigned to take us through. But they never talk about what's going to happen outside class. For instance, when we are having an activity in the campus, we never hear from lecturers. The real question is, how many people are going to go through the noticeboards to read about such information? Lecturers should be speaking about these things in class. If we are having an awareness week, the lecturer should be informed so that they can also advocate for it. (OFGD participant 2)

Excerpt 9

I think it would be easier if they have a way of communicating through the class reps (representatives). The only leaders they (students) know are their class reps. But they don't like using class reps. But I think they should use class reps because class reps have more impact than union officials. We (the class representatives) are the ones sending information to the group. So, when I

share information with my classmates about scheduled classes, I can also tell them about anti-drugs campaign and where to get more information. (OFGD participant 14)

The above reactions (Excerpts 7, 8, 9), indicate that there are also students who think that incorporating lecturers as well as student representatives and leaders in the communication process would also be successful in reaching a majority of the students. The main reason cited for these preferences is that the students perceive the lecturers and student leaders as credible sources of information. This perception is also captured by the findings of Onah et al. (2019) as well as Beebe and Beebe (2021) that audiences perceive a message as relatable and useful based on whether they consider the source of the information as credible.

Students' Perceptions Regarding Content Presentation Format

To establish the students' perceptions of the content on the SNSs, the study first sought to understand the types of content that appealed to the students as shown in figure 1.

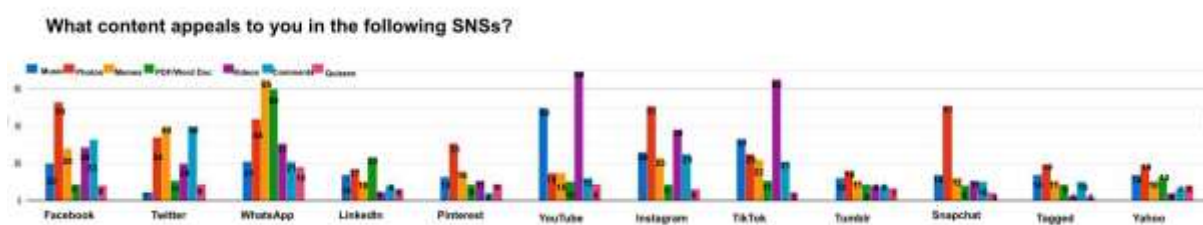


Figure 1: Types of content that appeal to the students on various SNSs

According to Figure 1, the sampled students acknowledged that they found different types of content appealing to them based on the type of SNS. For instance, 53 of the students found photos appealing on Facebook; for Twitter/X, 40 students responded as preferring memes and comments; for WhatsApp, 65 students preferred memes; for LinkedIn, 23 students preferred PDF/word documents; for Pinterest, 31 students preferred photos; for YouTube, 69 students preferred videos; for Instagram, 51 students preferred photos; for TikTok, 65 students preferred videos; for Snapchat, 51 students preferred photos; for both Tagged and Yahoo, 19 students preferred photos; and for Tumblr, 16 students preferred photos.

These results are consistent with the findings by Kili et al. (2022) on the affordances of social media that endear Kenyan university students to various SNSs, where Facebook was preferred by the students for

sharing of photos and videos. Accordingly, the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) posits that individuals make conscious decisions on how to use media to fulfil their needs. These needs are their reasons for seeking out and using certain media (Rubin, 2009). Hence, the results in figure 1 indicating the various gratifications the students seek from the various SNSs, denotes that any communication content uploaded and distributed on these platforms should consider satisfying these gratifications, to motivate the students to access and accept the message.

Subsequently, it was also important to establish how the students perceive the content they access on the various SNSs operated by the university because this can influence their acceptance of the content and messages therein. In line with this, the students were asked to describe the content in the SNSs operated by the university. Figure 2 shows their perceptions of the content on the SNSs.

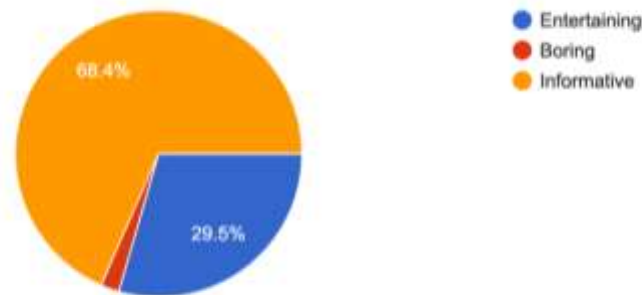


Figure 2: Students' description of the content on the SNSs

As shown in Figure 2, the majority of the student perceived the content posted on the SNSs by the University to be either informative (68%), entertaining (29%), or boring (2%). The OFGD participants further elaborate on this as follows:

Excerpt 10

I think the content that we find on the platforms is very boring honestly. They are very boring because you read a poster and that same poster you'll find it on WhatsApp. It is there because a student leader was sent to post it and make it go viral through WhatsApp. And you find it is just a simple poster. Like the one we used recently, it was 'get high on life not on drugs' just like that and then we are done. And there are so many questions revolving around it, like what do you mean? Like how is

somebody who is an alcoholic supposed to grasp that message and use it for transformation? So, the inform is very boring and is not that impactful in the first place. They need to do something about it.
(OFGD participant 2)

From the above participant's response (Excerpt 10), it can be argued that the student cannot relate to the content because it is not entertaining, hence does not meet their gratifications. Considering that one of the UGT's supposition is that an individual's psychological makeup can influence the choices they make in relation to the media and content they consume (Ferris et al., 2021), the fact that the student perceives a content as boring, can influence how they interact with it. The student's sentiments are also in line with Moreno et al.'s (2019) conceptualisation of emotional affordance that refers to the attributes of social media that can arouse user's emotional reactions. These emotional affordances can result in emotional outcomes, for example when photographs affect judgements of personality than texts. Thus, the fact that the student perceives the content as boring means that the content has failed in fulfilling the student's emotional needs in relation to the information being communicated. This can have a negative outcome because the student may not benefit from the information either by learning or improving on their knowledge, attitude or practices relating to DSA. This outcome was captured in the following response by one of the OFGD participant:

Excerpt 11

The information there isn't very interesting because you find that they just print and then they put it in the media, like during the anti-drug campaign. They should even put something like a drug, a photo of a cigarette, or some other drug. Then they say they are doing something against it. If they are talking about the effects of drugs, they can even put a photo of infected/spoilt lungs. Instead, they are just using a letter, they scan the letter and post there. So sometimes you just go past it. (OFGD participant 8)

The respondent in Excerpt 11 also alludes to the content as boring and failing to meet their information needs regarding DSA. Like the previous response by *participant 2* (excerpt 10), this response indicates that the University uses cross-posting approaches in posting their content across different SNSs. A problem with this approach is that it does not take into account that SNSs work differently and have different features that help them gain traction among their users like hashtag for Twitter and Instagram (Dunlop et al., 2016). The platforms also have slightly different posting formats, for example, images from Facebook or Instagram

cross-posted to Twitter will appear as a link to the image. Thus, although cross-posting has been shown to save on time in updating SNSs (Bretous, 2022), the practice has equally been discouraged because there is often lack of customization to utilise the unique features of each site, eventually leading to reduced engagement (Varghese, 2023). These disadvantages may eventually impact on the success of the whole communication process because the gratifications the users seek when they visit these sites may not be met.

The above responses also confirm the UGT tenet that media users are actively selecting content and actively interpreting the content, in line with whether it fulfils their needs and provide desired gratification (Ferris et al., 2021). The theory also advances cognitive needs (such as acquisition of information, understanding or knowledge) and affective needs (such as emotions, pleasure or feeling) as some of the needs influencing user's choices. Hence, from the above sentiments, it can be deduced that the students are actively evaluating the content they get from the University's administration based on whether they perceive them as meeting their cognitive or affective needs. This behaviour was also confirmed through studies by Alhabash and Ma (2017) and Lee et al. (2023) that university students were inclined to use certain media and engage with certain content based on how they perceived them as meeting their needs. These perceptions act as motivations when selecting, using, and engaging with content on various media platforms.

Correspondingly, when the OFGD participants were asked whether they perceived the content on the sites as meeting their needs, they responded as follows:

Excerpt 12

.... also, the person updating the Twitter and Facebook pages needs to up their game. Who said we cannot be informed and at the same time be entertained? (OFGD participant 15)

Excerpt 13

I prefer Facebook because at least it is updated frequently with some photos, but mostly screenshots of documents. (OFGD participant 3)

These reactions (Excerpt 12,13), demonstrate that some of the students felt that the content on some of the SNSs needed improvement to conform with the affordances of the platforms and the gratifications sought by the students when they visit those sites.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Although the students acknowledged the use of both traditional and online platforms by the University, they expressed preference for online platforms, and desire for content that met the specific affordances of the SNSs used. Taking into account the postulations of the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) that audiences' values, beliefs, and interests can directly affect their choice of media and content, there is need to consider these factors if the intent is for the students to feel inclined to access the SNSs and content therein. Also, since audiences' interests correspond to the gratification they seek, it is important to examine the gratifications sought by university students when using SNSs, so as to align the type of content with these needs and the affordances of the SNSs used in communicating with them. University administration can consider these suggestions when developing communication content aimed at promoting knowledge, attitude and ideal practices relating to DSA.

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