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Investigating the Key Factors Influencing the Acceptability of Social Media Platforms Among Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) for Business Communication in Kenya

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Abstract

The widespread integration of social media into business operations presents significant opportunities for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) to enhance customer engagement, communication efficiency, and market visibility. However, the acceptability of these platforms remains uneven due to differences in perception, digital readiness, and infrastructural constraints. This study investigated the key factors influencing the acceptability of social media platforms among SMEs in Siaya County, Kenya. A descriptive research design was adopted, and data were collected from 385 respondents using structured questionnaires. Descriptive analysis showed that 66.2% of respondents strongly agreed that social media is useful for achieving business communication goals, while 75.5% acknowledged being influenced by peers or industry trends. Conversely, 42.4% disagreed that the tools are affordable, and 49.1% expressed distrust in the security of social media platforms. Additionally, the Kruskal-Wallis H test revealed a statistically significant difference in acceptability across age groups, $\chi^2(3) = 37.079$, p < .001, with the 26–35 age bracket showing the highest mean rank (175.18). The study concludes that perceived usefulness, peer influence, affordability, digital competence, and age significantly affect platform acceptability. It recommends digital literacy programs, affordability interventions, and age-responsive strategies to boost the adoption of social media for business communication among SMEs.

Keywords: Social media; Acceptability; SMEs; Business Communication; Digital Literacy; Technology Adoption

1. Introduction

The rapid proliferation of social media platforms globally has significantly transformed the landscape of business communication, offering unprecedented channels for engagement, marketing, and customer support, particularly for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) that typically lack access to capital-intensive marketing tools. More than 4.9 billion people were active social media users as of 2024, representing over 60% of the global population [1]. In sub-Saharan Africa, mobile-based social media usage continues to grow, with an annual increase of 17%, largely driven by smartphone penetration and mobile broadband access [2].

In Kenya, SMEs account for more than 80% of employment and contribute nearly 45% of the country's GDP, highlighting their strategic importance in national development [3]. These businesses are increasingly relying on platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok, not only for marketing but also for real-time customer engagement, digital brand management, and operational communication [4].

Despite this potential, the acceptability of social media platforms among Kenyan SMEs remains fragmented. One critical challenge is digital literacy, many SME owners lack formal training in digital tools, limiting their ability to navigate or evaluate platform features effectively [5]. Affordability also plays a key role, as high mobile data costs deter frequent

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platform use [6]. In addition, cybersecurity concerns and platform complexity often lead to low confidence in adopting social media for strategic communication [7].

Past studies have examined general barriers to technology adoption among SMEs, often focusing on infrastructure or system usability [8]. However, few have specifically explored "acceptability" as a standalone construct, an aspect encompassing perceived usefulness, trust, affordability, and social influence [9]. This study addresses that gap by investigating the key operational, strategic, and socio-cultural factors influencing the acceptability of social media platforms among SMEs in Kenya. The findings aim to inform inclusive digital transformation strategies tailored to the realities of resource-constrained SME environments.

2. Methods

This study adopted a descriptive research design to investigate the key factors influencing the acceptability of social media platforms for business communication among Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Siaya County, Kenya. The design allowed for an in-depth understanding of perceptions, usage patterns, and relationships among constructs such as usefulness, affordability, ease of use, digital competence, peer influence, and system integration.

The study population consisted of SME owners, managers, employees, and digital communication personnel from five key sectors: retail, services, agribusiness, manufacturing, and hospitality. Siaya County was purposively selected due to its dynamic entrepreneurial growth and increasing uptake of digital tools. Stratified random sampling was employed to ensure proportional representation from each sector and respondent category. A sample size of 385 participants was determined using Cochran's formula for unknown populations, ensuring sufficient statistical power.

Data were collected using structured questionnaires that incorporated both closed and open-ended questions aligned with the study objectives. Items measured constructs such as perceived usefulness, ease of adoption, affordability, digital skills, trust in platform security, and peer influence, drawing on validated models including the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT).

The questionnaire's content and face validity were evaluated by three subject matter experts, yielding an average validity index of 0.92. A pilot study conducted in Bungoma County enabled refinement of language and structure. Reliability testing using Cronbach's Alpha returned acceptable values above 0.70 across all constructs, with an overall internal consistency score of 0.910.

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS Version 25. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means) were computed to summarize perceptions and platform usage patterns. Inferential analysis included the Kruskal-Wallis H test to determine whether perceptions of social media acceptability differed significantly across age groups.

Ethical approval was secured from the Kibabii University Research Ethics Committee and NACOSTI. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, assured of confidentiality, and granted the right to voluntary participation. Data were anonymized, securely stored, and used strictly for academic purposes.

This approach ensured a comprehensive examination of the acceptability of social media platforms for SME communication, setting the foundation for evidence-based recommendations and the formulation of the Social Media Acceptability and Usability Framework (SMAUF).

3. Findings and discussion

This section presents and discusses the key findings of the study based on data collected from SMEs in Siaya County. It begins with descriptive statistics that highlight respondents' perceptions of social media acceptability across constructs such as usefulness, affordability, digital competence, and peer influence. Inferential statistical techniques, including spearman's correlation, and factor analysis, are then applied to examine relationships between variables. The results are interpreted in light of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), UTAUT, and relevant literature, with qualitative insights from interviews enriching the discussion. The findings offer a comprehensive understanding of factors influencing social media acceptability for business communication among SMEs and lay the groundwork for developing the Social Media Acceptability and Usability Framework (SMAUF).

3.1. Perceived Acceptability of Social Media Platforms for Business Communication

This subsection evaluates the perceived acceptability of social media platforms among SMEs in Siaya County. Acceptability was operationalized through a set of statements measuring perceptions on usefulness, ease of adoption, cost-effectiveness, staff digital competence, security trust, system integration, and peer influence. The results are indicated in Table 1

Table 1 Respondents' Perceptions on Acceptability of Social Media Platforms

Statement	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Total
Social media is useful for achieving our business communication goals.	8 (2.6%)	16 (5.3%)	30 (9.9%)	48 (15.9%)	200 (66.2%)	302 (100%)
Social media platforms are easy to learn and adopt.	52 (17.2%)	48 (15.9%)	48 (15.9%)	64 (21.2%)	90 (29.8%)	302 (100%)
Social media tools are affordable to use and maintain.	70 (23.2%)	58 (19.2%)	56 (18.5%)	52 (17.2%)	66 (21.9%)	302 (100%)
Our staff possesses sufficient digital skills to use social media platforms.	38 (12.6%)	62 (20.5%)	62 (20.5%)	76 (25.2%)	64 (21.2%)	302 (100%)
We trust the security and privacy measures provided by social media platforms.	66 (21.9%)	82 (27.2%)	60 (19.9%)	48 (15.9%)	46 (15.2%)	302 (100%)
Social media platforms integrate smoothly with our existing business systems (e.g., CRM, sales).	48 (15.9%)	80 (26.5%)	48 (15.9%)	54 (17.9%)	72 (23.8%)	302 (100%)
We are influenced by peer businesses or industry trends to use social media.	6 (2.0%)	22 (7.3%)	46 (15.2%)	94 (31.1%)	134 (44.4%)	302 (100%)

Table 1. 0 illustrates that 66.2% of respondents strongly agreed that social media is useful for achieving business communication goals. This high perceived usefulness aligns with prior studies that highlight social media's role in expanding market reach, improving customer engagement, and facilitating real-time communication among SMEs [1], [2]. On the other hand, 42.4% of respondents either strongly disagreed or disagreed that social media tools are affordable to use and maintain, suggesting that cost remains a limiting factor for many SMEs, consistent with findings from previous studies which reported financial constraints as a major barrier to digital adoption in small enterprises [3].

Regarding ease of adoption, 51% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that social media platforms are easy to learn and use, though 33.1% expressed disagreement. This reflects a moderately positive perception, echoing previous evidence that digital tools are often perceived as usable when proper guidance and training are available [4]. Concerning digital competence, 46.4% of participants believed their staff possessed sufficient skills to use the platforms. However, a substantial proportion either disagreed or were neutral, pointing to skill gaps, a trend also reported in research highlighting the digital divide in rural and semi-urban enterprises [5].

Security and privacy concerns were apparent, with 49.1% of respondents expressing a lack of trust in the data protection mechanisms of social media platforms. This concern is consistent with earlier studies that identified data privacy as a major hindrance to technology uptake among businesses [6], [7]. Similarly, perceptions on system integration were divided: 41.7% agreed that social media integrates well with existing business systems (e.g., CRM), while 42.4% disagreed. This reflects varying technological readiness among SMEs, which may be influenced by internal infrastructure or compatibility challenges [8].

Peer influence was noted as a significant factor, with 75.5% of respondents reporting that their adoption of social media was driven by trends among competitors or similar businesses. This reinforces the notion that social proof and industry conformity play important roles in technology adoption decisions [9], [10].

Overall, these findings suggest that while social media platforms are widely seen as beneficial, adoption is shaped by a combination of operational realities and socio-technical perceptions. The study contributes to the understanding that tailored interventions, such as affordable packages, training programs, and user-centric design, can enhance social media acceptability in SME settings.

3.1.1. Influence of Age on Perceptions of Social Media Acceptability

To assess whether perceptions of social media acceptability varied significantly across different age groups of SME respondents, a Kruskal-Wallis H test was conducted. This non-parametric test was deemed suitable due to the ordinal nature of the data and the violation of normality assumptions.

Table 2.0 presents the mean rank scores for the perceived acceptability of social media platforms by age bracket, while Table 3.0 displays the Kruskal-Wallis test statistics.

Table 2 Mean Ranks for Acceptability of Social Media Platforms by Age Bracket

Ranks			
	Age Bracket	N	Mean Rank
Acceptability of Social Media Platforms	18-25	62	154.95
	26-35	130	175.18
	36-45	58	151.43
	Above 55	52	88.27
	Total	302	

Table 3 Kruskal-Wallis Test Results

Test Statistics[a,b]	
	Acceptability of Social Media Platforms
Kruskal-Wallis H	37.079
Df	3
Asymp. Sig.	.000
a. Kruskal Wallis Test	
b. Grouping Variable: age bracket	

The results show a statistically significant difference across the age groups, $\chi^2(3) = 37.079$, $p < .001$. Respondents aged 26–35 exhibited the highest mean rank (175.18), indicating the most favorable views, followed by those aged 18–25 (154.95) and 36–45 (151.43). Participants above 55 years scored the lowest mean rank (88.27), signifying the least favorable perceptions. These findings are in line with earlier research that identified younger cohorts as more digitally inclined and more open to adopting innovative communication technologies [11], [12].

This age-based disparity emphasizes the need for age-sensitive digital engagement strategies within SMEs. Generational differences in technology attitudes and capabilities should be considered in any intervention aimed at improving digital adoption. Training programs that target older age groups and encourage intergenerational collaboration could bridge this perception gap and foster broader acceptance of social media tools for business communication.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that the acceptability of social media platforms among SMEs in Siaya County is generally favorable, particularly in terms of perceived usefulness and peer influence. However, concerns around affordability, staff digital competence, security, and system integration persist, suggesting that while awareness and willingness to

adopt social media are high, practical barriers still hinder full-scale adoption. Additionally, age emerged as a significant factor influencing perception, with younger respondents, especially those aged 26 to 35, demonstrating more positive attitudes toward social media for business communication than older counterparts. These insights highlight the need for targeted capacity-building initiatives, cost-effective digital solutions, and age-responsive strategies to enhance the overall adoption and effective use of social media in SME settings. The results also provide empirical grounding for the development of the Social Media Acceptability and Usability Framework (SMAUF), which aims to guide SMEs in overcoming usability barriers and maximizing digital communication outcomes.

4.1. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to improve the acceptability of social media platforms for business communication among Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Kenya:

4.1.1. Enhance Digital Literacy and Staff Training

SMEs should invest in targeted training programs to improve staff digital competence in using social media platforms. This is particularly important given the mixed feedback on user-friendliness and skill readiness. Training should focus on platform-specific functionalities, content creation, customer engagement strategies, and safe online practices to build confidence and increase adoption across age groups and business sizes.

4.1.2. Promote Affordable and Scalable Social Media Solutions

To address concerns around affordability, technology developers and government agencies should collaborate to promote cost-effective digital communication tools tailored to SMEs. Subsidized data plans, bundled marketing services, or freemium platform models can lower the financial barriers to entry, especially for micro and small enterprises.

4.1.3. Build Trust Through Secure and Reliable Platforms

Social media service providers and developers should prioritize transparency in their data protection policies and offer enhanced security features (e.g., two-factor authentication, access controls). SMEs must be made aware of these measures through awareness campaigns to build confidence in the safety of using these platforms for business interactions.

4.1.4. Strengthen System Integration with Business Operations

Developers should create tools and plugins that allow seamless integration of social media with existing SME systems such as inventory management, point of sale (POS), and customer relationship management (CRM). Improved interoperability will increase efficiency and reduce redundancy, thus encouraging sustained usage.

4.1.5. Leverage Peer Influence and Mentorship Models

Since peer influence significantly affects adoption decisions, successful SME users of social media should be engaged as digital champions or mentors. County governments and business associations can facilitate forums or digital hubs where SMEs share best practices, success stories, and lessons learned to boost collective confidence in digital transformation.

4.1.6. Design Age-Inclusive Digital Strategies

The observed generational gap in perceptions of social media acceptability calls for age-inclusive interventions. Older SME owners and managers should receive tailored digital coaching and exposure to relatable success cases to demystify technology and encourage their participation in digital business ecosystems.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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