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Insights into Instagram use by Technical and Vocational Education and Training colleges

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Authors:
Liezel Cilliers[1]
Kim Viljoen[2]

Affiliations:
[1]Department of Information Systems, Faculty of Management and Commerce, University of Fort Hare, East London, South Africa

[2]Department of Business Management, Faculty of Management and Commerce, University of Fort Hare, East London, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Liezel Cilliers,
lcilliers@ufh.ac.za

Background: Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges use social media to improve their brand and connect with potential students and employers. While Instagram is the third most popular social media network in South Africa, little is known about the marketing strategy of TVET colleges on this social media platform.

Objectives: This article aims to investigate the use of Instagram as a marketing tool by TVET colleges in South Africa.

Method: There are 19 TVET colleges that have an Instagram account. All posts were collected from these 19 accounts for the period January 2019 to June 2020 and analysed using sentiment and descriptive analysis.

Results: Only 57% of TVET Instagram accounts were active, which means Instagram is the least utilised social media platform for marketing purposes among TVET colleges. TVET colleges use Instagram to connect with their followers, provide generic information, share what is happening on their campus and build their brand by exposing their achievements. Post sentiments were either positive or neutral.

Conclusion: There is no social media marketing strategy to guide TVET colleges, leading to the unprofessional and inconsistent use of Instagram as a marketing tool.

Contribution: The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) needs to compile a social media strategy to assist TVET colleges to engage and build relationships with all stakeholders.

Keywords: Technical and Vocational Education and Training colleges; higher education; South Africa; Instagram; a marketing tool; policy.

Introduction

The popularity of social media has transformed how professional organisations approach marketing activities because of the ability to reach diverse social groups and the power to modify human relations online (Robinson, Wheeler & Damron 2019). There were an estimated 3.96 billion social media users worldwide in 2022. Because of this large audience, professional organisations have harnessed the power of social media to improve brand recognition and loyalty (Stuart, Stuart & Thelwall 2017).

Technical and Vocational Education and Training colleges are post-school education and training institutions that fall under the purview of the South Africa Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). Technical and Vocational Education and Training colleges offer occupational or vocational courses by design (DHET 2020). South Africa has 50 registered TVET colleges, with more than a million students enrolled in 2020 (Nkosi 2022).

Technical and Vocational Education and Training colleges must build a professional corporate identity to foster relationships with stakeholders, such as students, staff and future employers (Clark, Fine & Scheuer 2017). Social media enables social listening, which TVET colleges can use to create marketing and recruitment tools, offer career opportunities, encourage collaboration and teach (Benson & Morgan 2018). Literature suggests that social media marketing research in the higher education sector has focused on a few select issues, such as student recruitment (Le, Dobele & Robinson 2019; Lu & Miller 2019; Rippé et al. 2018), consolidating student loyalty (Garza & Royo 2019) and brand recognition (Smedescu 2014). However, Bonilla Quijad et al. (2022) state that social media can build quality relationships with users by creating brand communities for advertisement purposes, generating electronic word-of-mouth marketing and managing relationships with key stakeholders.

As of March 2022, there were 6.81 million Instagram users in South Africa, up from 5.66 million in March 2021. Sixty-one percent of Instagram users fall in the 18–34 age category, which is the typical age of TVET college students (Statista 2022). A report from the Higher Education Marketing (2018) concurs that the Instagram user base is younger in age and more willing to interact with online brands. Thus, Instagram is the perfect tool to be included in a marketing strategy to improve online visibility and brand recognition of TVET colleges (Bonilla Quijad et al. 2020; Robinson et al. 2019).

Instagram is an image-based platform that interests younger users as they are more willing to interact with brands online (Alison & Peruta 2018; Bonilla Quijad et al. 2022). Instagram is already widely used by young adults, so TVET colleges can use the platform to connect with potential students who consider social media their primary communicative tool. Amanatidis et al. (2020) report that Instagram is the fastest-growing social media tool among young people globally, while Anderson and Jian (2018) found that Instagram has become more popular among young adults in the United States than Facebook. Chan, Lam and Chiu (2020) report similar findings for young adults in Hong Kong, where Instagram is among the three most popular social media platforms.

Technical and Vocational Education and Training colleges do not see themselves as commercial entities and thus do not actively 'chase' students but instead rely on word of mouth from students to market the institution (Missaghian & Pizarro Milian 2018). While social media has been used for teaching and learning, the technology has yet to be utilised effectively for marketing purposes in education (Murire & Cilliers 2019; Stuart et al. 2017). Peruta and Shields (2017) and Stuart et al. (2017) report that when institutions do use social media for marketing purposes, they rely on instinct and perception rather than a formal marketing strategy, resulting in oversaturated feeds and little engagement from users. Recently, a review of Instagram in higher education found a need for a solid theoretical foundation to guide future marketing activities (Davies, Lorne & Sealey-Huggins 2019). Further criticism included that studies tend to have small sample sizes, data are collected over one semester and robust methodology was absent. Despite the popularity of Instagram, there needs to be more research on how TVET colleges use social networks in their marketing and communication activity (Alison & Peruta 2018). This article aimed to fill this gap by investigating the use of Instagram as a marketing tool by TVET colleges in South Africa. The research questions are, therefore:

RQ1: What do TVET colleges post on Instagram?

RQ2: What is the sentiment of Instagram posts on TVET colleges' accounts?

RQ3: What common mistakes do TVET colleges make when posting on Instagram?

Literature review

The rise of smartphones and the platform's visual nature drives the growth of Instagram as a marketing tool. Shop owners can upload photos on Instagram to provide product information and increase brand recognition. Similarly, young adults can take pictures, apply digital filters and share these on various social network sites (Rahmayani & Nofrialdi 2022). Instagram is different from other text-focused platforms as it is more of a visual medium. In marketing terms, Instagram can help build trust and credibility among clients (Pittman & Reich 2016). Technical and Vocational Education and Training colleges can use the collaborative nature of Instagram to encourage interactive communication and strong relationships with their clients (Robinson et al. 2019).

Affinity spaces are online or offline locations where Instagram users convene because of shared interests or endeavours. The common interest of Instagram users supersedes distinctions such as age or gender, meaning that affinity spaces reduce the traditional geographical, hierarchical, temporal and institutional barriers. Affinity spaces create communities for TVET colleges to share information about themselves, thus building their brand to a geographically dispersed population. Even after students graduate from TVET colleges, these communities provide a portal of information that establishes client loyalty (Gee 2005; Gee & Hayes 2012; Greenhalgh et al. 2020).

Whiting and Williams (2013) identified the various purposes of social media that businesses tend to exploit for marketing purposes: information seeking and sharing, entertainment, seeking opinions, social interaction and knowledge sharing. Young adults use Instagram to find information about potential institutions to further their studies, campus and student lifestyles and even job opportunities (Kumar & Nanda 2019; Fujita, Harrigan & Soutar 2017). Technical and Vocational Education and Training colleges need to include this information on their Instagram accounts to improve their branding and student loyalty (Galan, Lawley & Clements 2015).

Instagram has provided tools to their users to improve their experience and increase the reach of content posted on social media. Instagram users can share photographs and videos by using a hashtag (#) to make these more visible (Sheldon & Bryant 2016) and create Instagram stories about specific topics that disappear after 24 h from the user's profile (Veissi 2017). Hong et al. (2020) found that these stories tend to be more informal or vulnerable than Instagram posts, which are more carefully curated and positive.

An Instagram user account is either public or private. Images in private accounts are only viewable by users who have been approved to see them, whereas anyone can view those in public accounts. Users can also 'follow' other accounts, although Instagram has an asymmetric network which means that users follow a specific page but do not need to be followed back by that page (Hu, Manikonda & Kambhampati 2014). The success of an account is determined by the number

of followers, likes and comments posted to an image which reflects the popularity of that post (Amanatidis et al. 2020).

Technical and Vocational Education and Training colleges can increase branding and student loyalty by generating positive emotions from their students on their Instagram page (Bonilla Quijad et al. 2020). This type of marketing is cost-effective, easy to use and accessible because of the ubiquitous nature of social media. Instagram also provides tools to measure, track and analyse the effectiveness of posts and campaigns run by the TVET college (Rietveld et al. 2020). These statistics will help TVET colleges to build their brand image and awareness, improve service, build a community and manage their reputation (Shields & Peruta 2019).

Methodology

The design of this study is exploratory, non-experimental and cross-sectional. The research uses data from the official Instagram profile of the 19 TVET colleges in South Africa that were found to have an Instagram account. Data were collected from January 2019 to June 2020 and included all the posts on the TVET colleges' Instagram pages and metadata about the Instagram accounts. These periods represent 12 months in the academic cycle of TVET colleges, including the start of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Basic information about the Instagram accounts was collected: total number of images and videos posted, profile text description, number of followers and type of account. Next, the following information was extracted for all public images posted by the account: URL, date posted, number of comments received and number of likes received.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University Research Ethics Committee at the University of the Western Cape. Ethics Reference Number: HS19/8/6. Although all images analysed were publicly available, to ensure ethical treatment of them, no information of a personal nature or that could identify an individual was shared. For this research, qualitative data were collected from Instagram. Photographs and associated text were categorised based on the context of each post. The qualitative data were analysed, making use of sentiment and thematic analysis.

Results

There are 19 TVET colleges that have an official Instagram page, which means that Instagram is the social media platform that is the least utilised for marketing purposes in the TVET colleges sector in South Africa. There was an average increase of 77% of followers per TVET college during the 2019–2020 period, followed by a 63% increase during the 2019–2020 period. Most accounts were created in 2016 (31%), followed by 2018 and 2019 with 21% of accounts, respectively. None of the TVET college pages were verified, potentially creating confusion as students can create Instagram accounts with a similar name. According to Instagram, users can use the profile bio tab to demonstrate the account's authenticity by adding information about TVET colleges. Only 37% of the TVET colleges used this function, and even then, varying degrees of information were provided. Although all but 2 of the TVET colleges registered the Instagram account as a business account, only 9 added an email address and 11 a telephone number to the account. Sixteen TVET colleges chose to add the website information in the bio tab. All the TVET colleges chose to leave the security setting on the default option, 'Public', which makes sense as the goal of the TVET Instagram pages is to promote the college, and for this, the maximum number of people must be able to reach it.

All 2208 posts on the 19 TVET colleges' Instagram account that were posted between January 2019 and June 2020 were included in the analysis of the study. December, January and June are the months with the least number of posts as the TVET colleges were closed or busy with admitting students to their respective programmes. April 2020 also had a low number of posts, which can be attributed to the hard lockdown in the country at this time. As the TVET colleges responded to the pandemic by making learning material accessible and complying with the COVID-19 rules by the National Government, the number of posts slowly started increasing in the subsequent months. The busiest month was October 2019, corresponding to the period when students were writing exams and TVET colleges were busy with the last academic activities of the year. August to October 2019 had the most posts, driven mainly by graduation activities in the TVET colleges.

The content that TVET colleges posted on their Instagram pages came from three sources: the individual TVET colleges, National Student Funding Scheme and the National Government, including the DHET. In many instances, the TVET college reposted or used official communication provided by the latter two sources regarding student funding or COVID-19.

Technical and Vocational Education and Training colleges use Instagram to share what is happening on campus, connect with their followers, provide generic information and build their brand by exposing their achievements. TVET colleges used Instagram to share their success stories with their followers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, TVET colleges used Instagram to share how they were preparing to continue with classes and keep students safe when returning to campus. Posts were used to prepare students to transition to online learning platforms and provide positive reinforcement that learning would continue despite the hard lockdown. Positive messages were meant to decrease anxiety among students by ensuring that there was a plan to 'save the 2020 academic year'. Another topic often found in Instagram posts was gender-based violence (GBV). Technical and Vocational Education and Training colleges shared information with students about preventing and finding assistance for this important social issue.

Many TVET colleges use Instagram to connect with their followers. In some cases, the colleges used the posts to take a stance on a specific topic, such as GBV, to de-escalate

emotional situations and show that TVET college cares for the students and takes their plight seriously.

Technical and Vocational Education and Training colleges also used Instagram to connect with their students during times of celebration such as Christmas, Valentine's Day or Easter. Often the TVET college would post a short welcome message at the start of a new year for students to read. The accessibility of social media means that TVET colleges can reach a large audience inexpensively and quickly with such messages.

Information sharing provided TVET colleges with the opportunity to efficiently reach a large group of interested parties. The posts that had the maximum impact were when the TVET college personalised the message for their students by providing a short narrative of how the information provided by the external stakeholders impacted them.

Many TVET colleges used Instagram to promote online learning resources during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was a massive task, as traditionally, TVET colleges did not incorporate online resources into their teaching pedagogies. The TVET colleges provided information about zero-rated websites to the students. Some TVET colleges used YouTube or regional radio or television to broadcast educational resources to students in rural areas. The information about these efforts could be distributed via Instagram to the students.

Instagram can provide exposure to the various activities and accomplishments of TVET colleges. Outreach projects during the COVID-19 pandemic were one way for TVET colleges to connect to their local community. Exposure for the prospective qualifications at TVET college can also provide prospective students with the necessary information about career choices and any questions they may have about the application or registration process at the TVET colleges.

A further activity identified in the connect category is the achievements of the students or staff at TVET colleges. Announcing the achievements on a public platform provides valuable marketing and brand-building opportunities to the TVET college as prospective and current students are motivated to choose a particular TVET college as they excel at their craft.

The majority of the posts, 66.60%, were classified as positive and incorporated posts in the connect and exposure categories. A third (33.35%) of posts were classified as neutral and related to information sharing from the TVET college. This study classified only one post, or 0.05%, as negative, which had to do with a GBV incident at one of the TVET colleges.

Instagram is an image-based social media platform, and as such, special attention needs to be given to the images posted. Some of the mistakes encountered included the fact that images were cropped so that information is cut off at the edges. Similarly, when pictures were cropped, the text was not always readable. Photographs posted on Instagram were not always in focus or grouped according to topic, but rather uploaded as individual pictures. A busy background was found to distract from the message, where pictures in a post should be intuitive, easy to understand and readily linked to a specific topic by the reader. Technical and Vocational Education and Training colleges should indicate that consent was obtained from individuals before posting on social media sites. The narrative that explains the images should be relevant and explain the topic of the post. Several posts did not have any text that accompanied the pictures which is confusing to the reader. All these mistakes distract from the professional image of the TVET college.

Discussion

Instagram is a very popular social media network among young adults who prefer social media as their primary communication tool and to use an image-based platform to engage with brands online (Robinson et al. 2019). These preferences make Instagram the ideal marketing tool to increase brand recognition and customer loyalty in this user market. This article aimed to investigate the use of Instagram as a marketing tool by TVET colleges in South Africa. To do this, 2208 posts from 19 TVET colleges were analysed using sentiment and thematic analysis, covering an 18-month period. This study provides insights into how TVET colleges engage with Instagram as a marketing tool. The results add to the previous literature and clarify aspects of this emerging field of research.

Determining what factors drive user engagement with the brand has been a focus of interest for academics and marketing specialists in recent years. All the TVET colleges recorded a positive increase in their followers during the 2020–2021 year. This increase is likely because of COVID-19 with the increased usage of social media because of students being at home. Literature has suggested that all social media platforms experienced increased usage during this time (Seddighi, Salmani & Seddighi 2020).

None of the TVET colleges had verified their Instagram accounts, meaning that Instagram users could not distinguish between the real account and those created by students with similar names. Fake accounts become problematic when incorrect information is distributed on the students' accounts. The bio description on Instagram allows users to introduce themselves to Instagram users. Only 37% of the TVET colleges used the bio description to promote the college to Instagram users which is a missed opportunity to market the college.

The findings showed that TVET colleges use Instagram to connect with their followers, provide generic information, share what is happening on campus and build their brand by exposing their achievements. Posts were positive (66.60%) or neutral (33.35%), with only 0.05% of the posts negative. Generic information sharing was primarily neutral, while positive posts referred to the other three categories. Thus, TVET colleges are using Instagram not

only for branding activities but also to share information, connect with their community and showcase the achievements of the college.

Technical and Vocational Education and Training colleges need to maintain a professional presence on its Instagram page or risk harming their brand and reputation among its community of followers. The analysis of the results also showed that TVET colleges make mistakes when posting on Instagram, which decreases the efficiency of the posts and could even lead to harming their brand. The absence of a social media marketing policy to guide higher education in South Africa means that each institution undertakes these activities in silos, based on the efforts of an individual in the institution, and often without a proper marketing strategy in place. The findings of our research suggest that TVET colleges should invest more effort in defining a strategy for the management of their official profile on Instagram, as the target audience of the college is young adults who are very involved and familiar with social networks. Instagram can help TVET colleges gain a presence and brand image, making these colleges as more attractive options for students to further their studies.

Policy and practical implications

It is vital that the DHET, TVET college principals and heads of marketing in TVET colleges are aware of the significant role that social media plays in communicating with both current and prospective staff and students.

Social media pages of TVET colleges need to be standardised to avoid poor-quality branding. There needs to be a social media policy that guides the TVET colleges on how to maintain their social media pages leading to each college undertaking marketing activities in isolation. Without guidance, the colleges may not present a professional brand and even do their brand damage which could decrease student loyalty. Technical and Vocational Education and Training colleges may even be in contravention of national legislation regarding the privacy of individuals when posting pictures or information on Instagram. Once a TVET college starts a social media page, it is not likely that the TVET college will delete the account even if it is inactive. Someone should be assigned to the page to post regularly and answer any questions on the various platforms to improve engagement. Technical and Vocational Education and Training colleges must verify their accounts as genuine, meaning that similar pages created by students that may post the wrong information can immediately be identified as copies. Technical and Vocational Education and Training colleges can use Instagram to develop a brand that showcases activities and facilities to prospective students. Part of this exercise is to approach the Instagram account as a professional and informative tool that provides usage metric that can be analysed to improve the marketing objective.

Conclusion

This study provides insights into how TVET colleges engage with Instagram as a marketing tool to improve their brand recognition and customer loyalty. The findings showed that TVET colleges use Instagram to connect with their followers, provide generic information, share what is happening on campus and build their brand by exposing their achievements. The sentiments of posts from students were largely positive. Ten common mistakes were identified that could assist TVET colleges in using Instagram more effectively to improve their brand image. Policy implication was also discussed as the absence of a social media marketing policy by the National Government means that efforts to market their brand by TVET colleges were done in silos and infrequently. These efforts reflect poorly on the college and could damage its brand among young adults searching for potential ways to further their education. The DHET should provide guidelines to all TVET colleges on including social media in their communication strategy.

Instagram is a relatively new social media platform for marketing purposes, as most TVET colleges only created their accounts from 2016 to 2019. The engagement level and perspective improved during the subsequent years of use. The study only focused on Instagram but could be expanded to other social media sites to provide a helpful comparison of the representativeness of the research results. The study only focused on the posts by TVET colleges on Instagram, but it may be helpful to obtain the perspective of marketing managers, managers and students at these institutions.

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Competing interests

Authors' contributions

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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