The Influence of Online Advertising on Student Preferences towards Smartphone Brands: A Case of the Students at University of Iringa

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to assess the influence of online advertising on student preferences towards smartphone brands. Specifically, the study intended to examine the influence of social media influencer endorsements, advertisement credibility and electronic word of mouth for the students of University of Iringa. The research employed a quantitative research approach. Cross-sectional design was used to gather data and descriptive design used to analyze and summarize the results to answer the research problem. The targeted population was 5262 students from University of Iringa where a sample size of 98 was drawn out of it. Simple random sampling technique was used to select respondents who are the students of University of Iringa. Data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics via SPSS version 20 software. The findings highlighted the significant influence of electronic word of mouth and online advertising credibility on student preferences for smartphone brands. However, social media influencer endorsements exhibited a moderate influence. Students displayed a preference for credible and transparent advertising content, valuing their purchasing experiences and relying on peer feedback through electronic word of mouth. Nevertheless, the study also revealed a level of skepticism and limited impact of social media influencer endorsements on student preferences for smartphone brands. This detailed understanding underscores the importance for firms to craft genuine and transparent influencer partnerships, and leveraging credible advertising practices to resonate with student discerning preferences in the competitive smartphone market. While price is one of the significant factors influencing consumer preferences, the study also recommends that manufacturers should prioritize innovation, efficient supply chains, and sustainability for competitive and affordable products without compromising quality. Furthermore, given that this study was carried out in a specific geographical context and within a defined timeframe, it can serve as a valuable template for potential replication in various geographical settings and across different time periods.

Keywords: Social Media Influencer Endorsements, Ad credibility, Electronic Word of Mouth and Online Advertising

Introduction

The rapid rise of digital technology has reshaped marketing, making online advertising a potent tool for influencing consumer preferences. Researchers and marketers have shown considerable interest in understanding how online advertising impacts consumer behaviour, especially among students. In Tanzania, the online advertising industry has seen significant growth due to the increasing number of internet users, with a 50% internet subscription rate reported by TCRA in March 2023. This growth trend continues, with a 17% annual increase in internet subscriptions reported in the quarter ending December 2022. The widespread use of smartphones has created a lucrative advertising opportunity, particularly among youth and entrepreneurs, who are increasingly using smartphones for online businesses and targeting this substantial audience.

The Government of Tanzania has initiated its recognition of the significance of online advertising and e-commerce, as this acknowledgment was notably evident in a recent addressed by the Minister of Finance and Planning, Dr. Mwigulu Nchemba. The occasion was the presentation of the Government General Budget for the financial year 2023/2024 on June 15, 2023, in Dodoma City. During this event, Dr. Mwigulu Nchemba highlighted the government's intentions to advance its stance on digital practices. The government plans to implement a digital system for tax collection on online advertising, demonstrating its commitment to fostering a conducive environment for the industry's growth. This step aims to regulate digital taxes effectively and ensure fair participation by all stakeholders, harnessing the economic potential of online advertising.

The use of smartphones is increasing day by day as the people are becoming addicted to online and virtual world part of daily entertainment and communication. It is not only a luxury to have a smartphone but it has become a necessity (Hosain et al, 2020). Smartphones have become integral to student daily lives, serving as conduits for communication, information retrieval, and entertainment. As these devices transcend mere communication tools and evolve into lifestyle companions, the factors influencing student smartphone preferences have grown increasingly intricate. Online advertising, propelled by platforms such as social media, search engines, and websites, plays a significant role in shaping student perceptions and choices of smartphone brands.

According to Gamlath (2022), two most preferred smartphone brands are Samsung smartphones followed by Apple smartphones. Other prominent smartphone brands that hold significant market share and usage in Africa, besides Samsung and iPhone, encompass Tecno, Infinix, Nokia, Huawei, Itel, and most recently, Google Pixel, which has exhibited favourable performance within the current market landscape. The use of online advertising is a good avenue for cell phone shops to attract and eventually encourage the consumers to buy smartphones (Sulayon et al, 2021). In recent times, there has been a remarkable surge in the number of young entrepreneurs in Tanzania specializing in the sale of smartphones. These knowledgeable individuals have effectively utilized various social media platforms to promote their businesses, forming strategic partnerships with

social media influencers and actively seeking feedback from their customers to establish a strong sense of trust and credibility. Notably, these entrepreneurs have established dedicated Instagram accounts to showcase and market their products and services. Among the notable firms in this market are iPhone House Tz, iPhone Used Tz, Apple Home, Samsung Shop, Samsung Used Tz and several others. Additionally, these entrepreneurs have adopted a practice known as 'topping-up,' wherein they compare the value of different series of smartphones to cater for their customers' preferences and demands. This rapidly growing trend has attracted the interest of numerous tech-minded youths who are enthusiastic about keeping pace with the ever-evolving technology landscape.

According to Göktaş et al (2021) the students use instant messaging and social media applications intensively on their smart phones. As they spend a considerable amount of time online, browsing content align with their interests, and actively searching for social trends and academic materials related to their environment, they are exposed to excess of advertisements across various digital platforms, including social media, search engines, websites, and mobile apps. This continuous exposure to online ads has raised questions about its influence on student brand preferences and purchasing behaviour.

Through the examination of factors such as social media influencer endorsements, advertisement credibility, and Electronic Word of Mouth. This study aspires to provide valuable insights into the mechanisms through which online advertising wields influence over student choices within the smartphone market. By doing so, the researcher provided valuable insights into the effectiveness of different advertising formats and approaches, shedding light on how businesses can optimize their advertising strategies to foster positive brand perceptions and achieve sustainable growth in the highly competitive digital landscape. The University of Iringa serves as an ideal context to explore this phenomenon, illuminating the ways in which online advertising strategies impact the decisions of a diverse student body in their selection of smartphone brands.

General Objective

The objective of this research was to investigate the influence of online advertising on student preferences towards smartphone brands. This study aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of how online advertising strategies influence the brand preferences of students in the context of smartphones

Specific Objectives of the Study

The study was designed to achieve the following specific objectives:

i.   To examine the influence of social media influencer endorsements on student preferences towards smartphone brands

ii.   To investigate the influence of online advertisement credibility on student preferences towards smartphone brands

iii.   To examine the influence of Electronic Word of Mouth on student preferences towards smartphone brands

Literature Review

Theoretical Literature Review

Kelman's Social Influence Theory

The central theme of social influence theory, as proposed by Kelman (1958), revolves around how individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and subsequent actions are shaped by referent others through three distinct processes: compliance, identification, and internalization. These processes represent different levels of change that can occur when individuals accept influence from others. Compliance involves individuals adopting induced behaviour to obtain rewards or avoid punishments. Identification occurs when individuals adopt behaviour to establish or maintain beneficial relationships. Internalization takes place when individuals accept influence because they find the induced behaviour congruent with their value system and the content of the behaviour aligns with the opinions and actions of others.

Source Credibility Theory

Source credibility theory, as it pertains to the works of Carl Hovland, Irving Janis, and Philip Asch (1963), focuses on how the perceived credibility of the source of a message influences the persuasiveness and acceptance of that message. These scholars made significant contributions to understanding the factors that determine the credibility of a source and its impact on attitude change and persuasion. This theory assumes that people will be more likely to be persuaded when the communicator or the person delivering the message shows himself as a credible person.

Source credibility was a key focus in this study, with an examination of how students perceive the expertise and trustworthiness of sources delivering online advertisements, electronic word of mouth, and social media influencer endorsements for smartphone brands. This emphasis on credibility dimensions was crucial in understanding their influence on student preferences. Additionally, the study drew from Irving Janis's insights to explore how students critically assess source credibility, examining factors that define credibility for various sources. Furthermore, Philip Asch's research on social conformity and peer influence contributed to understanding how social factors, in addition to expertise and trustworthiness, shape student preferences for smartphone brands

The Source Credibility Theory has offered a robust framework for comprehending the intricate interplay of source credibility, which includes expertise, trustworthiness, and social dynamics, in shaping the influence of online advertisement credibility, electronic word of mouth, and social media influencer endorsements on student preferences when it comes to smartphone brands. Social credibility characteristics, encompassing trustworthiness, the appeal of the source, and expertise, form a comprehensive framework for evaluating the effectiveness of celebrity endorsers (Ohanian, 1990). In a study by Munnukka et al. (2016), and Izzati et al. (2021) an additional dimension of similarity was introduced within the realm of Source Credibility Theory, particularly tailored for social media influencers (SMIs). According to Yuan et al. (2018), elements of credibility within the Social Media Influencer Value Model, such as attractiveness, similarity, and trustworthiness, plays a positive role in influencing brand awareness, purchase intent, and perceived trust. The

integration of these dimensions of source credibility into this research has provided invaluable insights into the multifaceted ways in which source credibility exerts its impact on consumer behaviour within the context of smartphone brand preferences.

Decision Making Theory

Decision-making theory was first introduced by Simons, (1948). The decision-making process comprises two integral components: the actual decision-making itself and the subsequent process of action or implementation. The Consumer Decision-Making Model offers a valuable framework for understanding how students arrive at their preferences towards smartphone brands in the context of this study. This model outlines a series of stages that individuals typically go through when making a purchasing decision.

First, students recognize a need or problem, such as the desire for a new smartphone. The exposure to online advertising, Electronic Word of Mouth and Social Media Influencer endorsements can trigger this recognition by highlighting new features or opportunities in the smartphone market. Once the need is recognized, students engage in information search, seeking details about different smartphone brands, features, and options. Online advertising, electronic word of mouth, and social media influencer endorsements serve as significant sources of information during this stage, influencing the information students gather.

The purchase decision stage involves students selecting a specific smartphone brand. Their brand preferences influenced by the information obtained from online advertising, electronic word of mouth, and social media influencer endorsements, align with their ultimate purchase decisions. Lastly, after purchasing a smartphone, students engage in post-purchase evaluation. They assess their decision and overall satisfaction with their chosen brand. Online advertising electronic word of mouth, and social media influencer endorsements can continue to influence student post-purchase attitudes and behaviours.

Empirical Literature Review

Abbas et al. (2018) examined the impact of celebrity endorsements on the purchase intentions of male and female customers regarding mobile phones. They conducted empirical testing with a sample of 800 respondents (400 males and 400 females) using a questionnaire strategy. The study found that likeability, attractiveness, experience, and personality were the most influential factors for male customers' mobile phone purchase intentions. Female customers, on the other hand, considered likeability, attractiveness, and celebrity credibility when purchasing mobile phones. The research highlighted the importance of celebrity endorsement criteria and its effects on both male and female customers' purchase intentions for mobile phones. The study recommended that marketing and media managers should focus on likeability, personality, attractiveness, and experience of celebrities when targeting male customers. Additionally, when advertising mobile phones designed for females, they should emphasize likeability, attractiveness, and celebrity credibility. Aziz (2021) examined the influence of social media influencers on students' smartphone purchase intentions in Pakistan, using a quantitative method with a cross-sectional design involving 119 respondents. The study found that celebrity attractiveness had the highest impact on smartphone purchase intentions, while celebrity trustworthiness had the lowest impact.

It suggests that when marketing smartphones to university students, emphasizing the attractiveness of celebrity endorsers may be more effective than focusing on trustworthiness.

Advertisement Credibility

Mosa (2021) conducted research on the "impact of advertising credibility on purchase intentions among Iraqi Facebook users". The study adopted a quantitative approach by surveying a sample of 487 respondents to examine his objective. The results showed that advertising credibility had a moderately positive effect on purchase intentions. The study recommended that marketers should be keen to provide realistic and honest information about marketing offers in their advertising messages. Hussain (2020) examined the concept of "advertising credibility and its effects on brand credibility, brand image, corporate credibility and corporate image". A qualitative approach used with ten interviews and four focus groups conducted among participants drawn from the London area and data analyzed using thematic analysis. A case study design used in collecting data, where qualitative approach employed and the findings indicated that advertising credibility has a positive effect on brand credibility, brand image, corporate credibility and corporate image.

Electronic Word of Mouth

Saputra (2021) assessed "the influence of brand image, trust, perceived price and Word of Mouth towards purchase intention smartphone in Jakarta". The populations were all smartphone users in Jakarta. The samples data number collected from 220 respondents who lived in Jakarta, and aged between 21-30-year-old who chose the smartphone. Quantitative designs employed in this research and data collection technique was carried out by distributing the questionnaires online using Google Form through social media (WhatsApp, Line, Instagram and Facebook). This research used the non-probability sampling method with convenience sampling technique. Multiple regression analysis was used to analyze research data by using SPSS Version 22 software. The result of this study has showed that brand image, trust, perceived price and Word of Mouth have positive and significant effect on purchase intention smartphone in Jakarta. The study recommended that marketers and businesses have to consider focusing those factors when developing marketing strategies to enhance consumer intentions to purchase smartphones.

Iqbal et al., (2022) examined "electronic word of mouth effect through social media and shopping websites on purchase intention of smartphones in India". The study analyzed the comparative effects between electronic word of mouth on online shopping platforms and social networking platforms on consumers' purchase intention of smartphones in India. The data were collected using a questionnaire from 361 respondents in Uttar Pradesh, India. Multiple regression has been applied to empirically measure the influence of independent factors (E-WOM credibility, E-WOM attitude, E-WOM quantity, and E-WOM format) on the dependent factor (consumers' purchase intention). The result indicates that electronic word of mouth credibility, electronic word of mouth quantity, and electronic word of mouth format on online shopping platforms have more impact than electronic word of mouth on social media on the purchase intention of smartphones.

Sharifpour (2016) conducted a study to investigate "the effect of Word of mouth on purchase intention and brand awareness focusing on Samsung cell phone brand". The group studied in the current work is a sample of Samsung customers in Esfahan city in Iran (2015). In this study, for the sake of data collection, a form of descriptive research method applied. The Statistical sample consists of 384 respondents who accepted to take the survey which was prepared in the form of a questionnaire. The results indicated that there is a significant positive relationship between the electronic word of mouth and purchase intention and there is a significant positive relationship between the awareness of a brand and purchase intention while there was no effective relation found between electronic word of mouth and brand awareness.
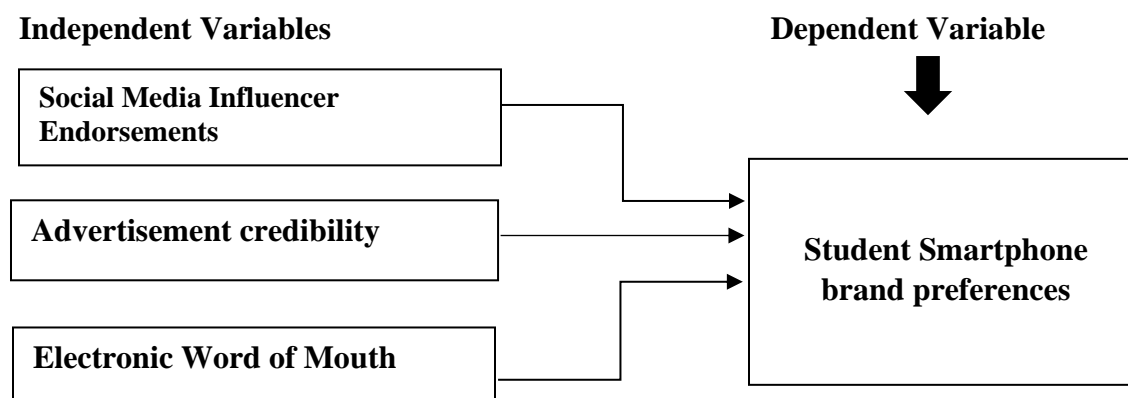
Conceptual Framework

Independent Variables   **Dependent Variable**

| Social Media Influencer Endorsements |

| Advertisement credibility |

| Electronic Word of Mouth |

| Student Smartphone brand preferences |

Figure 1. A conceptual Framework

Source: Research Construction, (2023)

Research methodology

Study Area

The study was conducted at the University of Iringa, situated in the Iringa Region of Tanzania within Iringa Municipal. Iringa Municipal is host to three universities: the University of Iringa, Ruaha Catholic University, and Mkwawa University College of Education. The selection of the University of Iringa as the research site was driven by the researcher's familiarity with the location and prior experience, which created an advantageous environment for conducting the study, considering factors such as time and economic considerations.

Research Approach

The study utilized a quantitative approach, which involves generating data in a quantitative format that can undergo rigorous statistical analysis in a formal and systematic manner (Kothari, 2004). This scientific approach, grounded in statistical data gathering and analysis, minimizes the potential for bias. When accounting for time constraints in data collection, the quantitative approach proves advantageous compared to qualitative methods, which demand extended time for achieving accuracy. Additionally, structured questionnaires within this approach enabled the collection of precise and relevant data from respondents, streamlining the process compared to

structured interviews, which would require more time for data extraction. Consequently, the survey method was chosen for data collection among University of Iringa students due to its ability to target specific groups and facilitate cross-group comparisons.

Research Design

Saunders (2012) defines research design as the comprehensive strategy for gathering and analysing data, encompassing methods to enhance both the internal and external validity of the study. In this particular study, a cross-sectional design was employed with the primary aim of collecting data from a specific group of subjects at a single point in time. Cross-sectional designs are valuable for obtaining a snapshot of the current state or attributes of a phenomenon, such as behaviours, attitudes, preferences, or variable relationships. This choice allowed the researcher to efficiently collect a wide range of responses through questionnaires, employing quantitative methods for analysis. Such an approach is especially useful when time and resource constraints make long-term data collection challenging, providing timely and cost-effective insights into the research questions and contributing to the field's knowledge base.

Study Population

Kolen (2014) defines the study's population as the group of respondents meeting specific criteria, which, in this case, comprises the students of the University of Iringa located in Iringa Municipal. This research delves into the impact of online advertising on student preferences for smartphone brands, recognizing students as early adopters of technology and digital platforms. The University of Iringa, with its diverse student body representing various socio-economic backgrounds, cultural contexts, and levels of technological familiarity, serves as an apt microcosm for investigating this influence. Given that students predominantly use electronic devices, such as smartphones and computers, for academic and social purposes, making them frequent recipients of online advertisements, their insights offer valuable perspectives. Therefore, this study encompasses the entire University of Iringa student population, totalling 5262 students.

Sampling Frame and unit of analysis

A sample frame, as per Cochran's (1977) definition, plays a pivotal role in probability sampling methodologies, serving as a comprehensive list of individuals within a specific population of interest. It acts as the pool from which potential participants are systematically drawn, ensuring the study's representativeness and statistical validity. In this study, the sample frame was meticulously derived from the University of Iringa's student database, maintained by the admission office, forming the primary source for identifying and characterizing the student population under investigation. The construction of a precise and comprehensive sampling frame is crucial for bolstering the study's external validity and its capacity to generalize findings, and in this research, it assures that the participant sample accurately represents the diversity and composition of the university's student body, ultimately enhancing the study's reliability.

Sampling Procedures

Sampling Strategy

Sampling, defined as selecting a part of a larger population to make inferences about the whole (Kothari, 2004), was a crucial aspect of this study. The researcher employed a probability-based sampling approach, specifically simple random sampling, where respondents were chosen randomly from the sampling frame, and ensuring equal chances for all students at the University of Iringa to participate. Given that the study focused on students, who frequently encounter online ads and are smartphone users, it was reasonable to assume their familiarity with both online advertising and smartphone brands. This strategy aimed to comprehend student preferences, which were believed to be influenced more by their overall online experience than by their specific fields of study. Thus, irrespective of their courses or faculties, all University of Iringa students were considered eligible for participation, guaranteeing equal opportunity for every student to be included in the study (Magigi, 2015).

Sample Size

A sample size in research refers to the number of subjects or respondents selected from the population to represent it for a specific study. Padua (1998) explains one of the methods of identifying a sample size which is by using Slovin's formular. For this study, the stated formular was used to identify the required number of respondents from University of Iringa.

$$= \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where e = Desired Margin of Error
      N = Population
      n = Sample Size
      $n = \left(\frac{5262}{1+(5262\,(0.1)^2)} \right) = 98.1 \approx$ 98 Students of University of Iringa

The sample size of this study results to 98 respondents as indicated. This sample size is enough to justify the facts concerning the influence of online advertising on student preferences towards smartphone brands. Therefore, the findings obtained from this sample size reflects the tendency of the remainder population concerning the influence of online advertising on student preferences towards smartphone brands for them.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data collected for this study was analysed using descriptive statistical methods in SPSS Version 20 software. This analysis involved generating frequencies, percentages, and identifying the mode to assess data distribution and central tendencies. These techniques revealed patterns and characteristics within the dataset, offering a thorough grasp of the study's quantitative findings. This approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration of university students' preferences and trends regarding smartphone brands, providing valuable insights into participant perceptions and facilitating the identification of dominant patterns and variations within the data.

Validity and Reliability Analysis

Validity of the Study

Validity, as described by Bordens (2015), pertains to the quality of research instruments, ensuring their accuracy, correctness, truthfulness, meaningfulness, and appropriateness for the study's purpose. The KMO measure of sampling adequacy yielded a value of 0.760, indicating a high degree of adequacy for factor analysis. A value closer to 1.0 suggests robust correlations among variables. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity resulted in a chi-square statistic of 125.750 with 6 degrees of freedom and a significant p-value of 0.000, affirming the suitability of the dataset for factor analysis.

Table 1.

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.760
	Approx. Chi-Square	125.750
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Df	6
	Sig.	.000

To enhance external validity, the researcher meticulously cited all sources of materials and evidence.

Reliability Analysis

In assessing the reliability of the data, the researcher employed Cronbach's alpha test. The outcomes presented in Table 2 reveal a high level of consistency in the dataset. Notably, the independent variables such as SMI Endorsements and Electronic Word of Mouth, demonstrated a strong degree of reliability, as evidenced by their Cronbach's Alpha values of 0.873. As suggested by Lee Cronbach, the Cronbach's alpha test serves as an indicator of the internal coherence of a scale or test. It is quantified within the range of 0 to 1, with a general guideline that a Cronbach's alpha of 0.7 or higher indicates robust reliability.

Table 2: Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.873	18

Source: Research Findings, (2022)

Discussion of findings on specific objectives

Response rate

A total of 98 self-administered questionnaires distributed to the respondents out of which 98 usable questionnaires were successfully filled and returned giving a response rate of 100% which is excellent for the study.

Table 3: Response rate

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Returned questionnaires	98	100
Unreturned questionnaire	0	0

Total	98	100

Source: field data (2023)

4.3 Gender of Respondents

The result on respondents' gender is shown in Table 5. It shows that 55.1% of the respondents were males while 44.8% of the respondents were females. Gender demographic was considered in this study when gathering data in order to explore potential variations in preferences between male and female students

Table 4: Gender of Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Female	44	44.8
Male	54	55.1
Total	98	100.0

Source: Field data (2023)

The Influence of Social Media Influencer Endorsements on Students Preferences towards Smartphone Brands.

Under this objective, the researcher wanted to examine the influence of Social Media Influencer Endorsement on student preferences for smartphone brands since it has been noticed that these individuals have influence in youth preferences of various styles and way of living. To answer this objective of the study, five statements were given to the respondents to rate using Likert scale of agreement. The response to these statements is indicated in Table 3.

Table 5: **Responses from the students on the Influence of Social Media Influencer Endorsements on Students Preferences towards Smartphone Brands.**

Statement		SD	D	N	SA	A	Total
I trust smartphone brands that have collaboration with social media influencers that I admire	F	22	33	8	13	22	**98**
	(%)	22.4	33.7	8.2	13.3	22.4	**100%**
I am more inclined to trust and prefer a smartphone promoted by social media influencers with a large follower count.	F	24	37	8	13	16	**98**
	(%)	24.5	37.8	8.2	13.3	16.6	**100%**
Influencers with high engagement metrics (likes, comments, shares) influence my preferences for smartphones	F	25	27	7	14	25	**98**
	(%)	25.5	27.6	7.1	14.3	25.5	**100%**
Influencers who are honest and open about their experiences with a certain smartphone brand impact my brand preferences.	F	10	21	6	23	38	**98**
	(%)	10.2	21.4	6.1	23.5	38.8	**100%**
Influencer opinions and experiences shape my perception and consideration of a certain smartphone brand.	F	14	19	9	19	37	**98**
	(%)	14.3	19.4	9.2	19.4	37.8	**100%**

Source: Field data (2023)

The responses to Statement 1 reveal a significant 56.1% disagreement rate, with 33.7% expressing disagreement and 22.4% strong disagreement regarding trusting smartphone brands solely due to social media collaborations. In contrast, 35.7% agreed, and 8.2% remained neutral, illustrating the nuanced perspectives on the impact of such collaborations on brand trust.

Statement 2 reflects an interesting trend, with 62.3% disagreeing with the notion that they trust smartphones endorsed by influencers solely because of their large follower counts. Conversely, 29.9% disagreed, and 8.2% remained neutral. Statement 3 explores the influence of engagement metrics on brand preferences, with 53.1% disagreeing, including 27.6% who disagreed and 25.5% who strongly disagreed. The agreement rate is 39.8%, comprising 14.3% who agreed and 25.5% who strongly agreed, while 7.1% remained neutral. Statement 4 indicates that 62.3% prioritize influencer honesty in forming preferences towards smartphone brands, although 10.2% strongly disagreed, 21.4% disagreed, and 6.1% remained neutral, resulting in 31.6% disagreement regarding influencer honesty's influence. Statement 5 illustrates influencer influence on smartphone preference, with 57.2% agreeing, including 37.8% agreement and 19.4% strong agreement, while 33.7% disagreed, comprising 19.4% disagreement and 14.3% strong disagreement, and 9.2% remained neutral. These findings emphasize the varying degrees of influence that social media collaborations, influencer metrics, honesty, and opinions exert on student smartphone brand preferences.

Table 6: Summary of modes for each five statements concerning the influence Social Media Influencer Endorsements on Students Preferences for Smartphones

		I trust smartphone brands that have collaborations with social media influencers that I admire	I am more inclined to trust and prefer a smartphone promoted by social media influencers with a large follower count.	Influencers with high engagement metrics (likes, comments, shares) influence my brand preferences	Influencers who are honest and open about their experiences with a certain smartphones brand impact my brand preferences.	Influencer opinions and experiences shape my perception and consideration of a certain smartphone brand.
	Valid	98	98	98	98	98
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0
Mode		**2**	**2**	**2**	**5**	**5**

Source: Field data (2023)

The findings indicate that social media influencer endorsements moderately impact students' smartphone brand preferences, potentially due to perceived motives for endorsement. While influencer endorsements play a role, they may not be the primary driver of preferences. Influencer honesty is highly valued, but its exclusive impact is questioned, reflecting complexity in decision-making. Influencer opinions matter, yet a minority resists their influence, suggesting alternative drivers. This aligns with Aziz's (2021) research on influencer trustworthiness's limited impact on student smartphone purchase intentions, highlighting the need for a comprehensive understanding of consumer preferences in influencer-centric smartphone brand marketing.

The Influence of Advertisement Credibility on Students Preferences towards Smartphone Brands.

The researcher wanted to investigate the influence of advertisement credibility on student preferences for smartphone brands at University of Iringa. To answer this objective of the study, five statements were given to the respondents to rate using Likert scale of agreement. The response to these statements is indicated in Table 4.

Table 7: **Responses from the Students on the Influence of Advertisement Credibility on Students Preferences towards Smartphone Brands**

Statement		SD	D	N	SA	A	Total
The credibility of the smartphone brand or organization behind the online advertisement affects my brand preferences.	F	11	10	7	47	23	**98**
	(%)	11.2	10.2	7.1	48.0	23.5	**100%**
I am more likely to consider or choose a smartphone brand that is consistent in its messaging across different online platforms.	F	12	40	10	11	25	**98**
	(%)	12.2	40.8	10.2	11.2	25.5	**100%**
The presence of specific facts, figures, or data supporting the claims made by a brand in online advertisements impacts my brand preferences towards smartphone	F	11	13	12	20	42	**98**
	(%)	11.2	13.3	12.2	20.4	42.9	**100%**
The credibility of an advertisement significantly impacts my perception of the smartphone brand it promotes.	F	5	17	12	28	36	**98**
	(%)	5.1	17.3	12.2	28.6	36.7	**100%**
Positive customer testimonials or reviews in online advertisements impact decision to choose a smartphone brand to buy.	F	14	11	9	27	37	**98**
	(%)	14.3	11.2	9.2	27.6	37.8	**100%**

In Statement 1, 75.5% of respondents agreed that credibility in online smartphone brand advertising influences their preferences, with 42.9% strongly agreeing. Statement 2 revealed that respondents generally value consistent messaging across online platforms, with 36.7% agreeing, while 53% disagreed. For Statement 3, 70.4% agreed that data-backed claims in online ads affect their brand preferences. Statement 4 showed that 63.3% believed that ad credibility affects their perception of the promoted smartphone brand, and Statement 5 indicated that 65.4% found positive customer testimonials in online ads influential. The study unveiled a significant influence of ad credibility on students' smartphone brand preferences. Students preferred brands endorsed by credible and trustworthy companies, indicating a favourable reputation can lead them to consider trying a new smartphone model. Online ads, particularly those with believability and factual information, strongly impacted students' brand preferences.

Table 8: Summary of modes for each five statement concerning the influence of Advertisement Credibility on Students Preferences for Smartphones

		The credibility of the smartphone brand or organization behind the online advertisement affects my brand preferences.	I am more likely to consider or choose a smartphone brand that is consistent in its messaging across different online platforms.	The presence of specific facts, figures, or data supporting the claims made by a brand in online advertisements impacts my brand preferences towards smartphone	The credibility of an advertisement significantly impacts my perception of the smartphone brand it promotes.	Positive customer testimonials or reviews in online advertisements impact decision to choose a smartphone brand to buy.
	Valid	98	98	98	98	98
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0
Mode		**4**	**2**	**5**	**5**	**5**

Source: Field data (2023)

These findings contrast with previous research by Kumar (2018), who suggested that negative perceptions of ads might reduce their influence on attitudes and purchase intentions. However, they align with Mosa's (2021) recommendation that providing realistic and honest information in advertising messages can positively affect purchase intentions. For smartphone brands and other companies targeting youth preferences, prioritizing authenticity and honesty in online advertising is crucial. This approach can establish genuine connections with students, fostering stronger brand affinity in an internet-driven landscape.

The Influence of Electronic Word of Mouth on Student Preferences towards Smartphone Brands

The researcher wanted to examine the influence of Electronic Word of Mouth on student preferences for smartphone brands at University of Iringa. To answer this objective of the study, five statements were given to the respondents to rate using Likert scale of agreement. The response to these statements is indicated in Table 9

Table 9: **Students' Responses on the influence of Electronic Word of Mouth on Student Preferences towards Smartphone Brands**

Statement		SD	D	N	SA	A	Total
I am influenced by the opinions and experiences shared by others in making my brand choices.	F	5	15	8	47	23	**98**
	(%)	5.1	15.3	8.2	48.0	23.5	**100%**
I share my experiences and opinions about smartphone brands through eWOM	F	7	11	14	15	51	**98**
	(%)	7.1	11.2	14.3	15.3	52.0	**100%**
Positive eWOM about smartphone brands make me more likely to prefer that brand	F	10	12	10	29	37	**98**
	(%)	10.2	12.2	10.2	29.6	37.8	**100%**
I consider the expertise and knowledge of eWOM contributors when evaluating smartphones information	F	6	13	8	55	16	**98**
	(%)	6.1	13.3	8.2	56.1	16.3	**100%**

The popularity and virally of eWOM messages about a smartphone brand influence my preferences	F	10	11	9	50	18	**98**
	(%)	10.2	11.2	9.2	51.0	18.4	**100%**

In Statement 1, 71.3% of respondents agreed that they are influenced by the opinions and experiences of others in their smartphone brand choices. For Statement 2, 60.2% of students engage in electronic word-of-mouth by sharing their experiences and opinions about smartphone brands. Statement 3 saw 67.4% agreeing that positive electronic word-of-mouth influences their preferences, emphasizing its influential role. In Statement 4, 72.4% consider the expertise of electronic word-of-mouth contributors when evaluating smartphone information, while Statement 5 revealed that 69.4% believe the popularity of electronic word-of-mouth messages impacts their preferences.

These findings highlight the significant role students assign to electronic word-of-mouth in shaping their smartphone brand preferences. They eagerly contribute their opinions and are receptive to others' experiences. Positive electronic word-of-mouth, the expertise of contributors, and message popularity collectively guide their brand selection process, underscoring the pivotal role of electronic word-of-mouth in shaping their preferences.

Table 10. Summary of modes for each five statement concerning the influence Electronic Word of Mouth on Students Preferences for Smartphones

		I am influenced by the opinions and experiences shared by others in making my brand choices.	I share my experiences and opinions about smartphone brands through eWOM	Positive eWOM about smartphone brands make me more likely to prefer that brand	I consider the expertise and knowledge of eWOM contributors when evaluating smartphones information	The popularity and virally of eWOM messages about a smartphone brand influence my preferences
	Valid	98	98	98	98	98
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0
Mode		**4**	**5**	**5**	**4**	**4**

These results align with Elseidi's (2016) findings that electronic word-of-mouth significantly impacts brand image, attitudes, and purchasing intentions. However, they differ from Hardjono et al. (2020) study, which found that electronic word-of-mouth credibility sources only partially influenced gadget purchase decisions. These findings emphasize the profound influence of electronic word-of-mouth on student preferences for smartphone brands, underscoring the need for brands to actively engage in and align with electronic word-of-mouth discussions to resonate with the student demographic in the digital age.

Recommendations for the actions

Brands should prioritize authenticity, credibility, and ethical advertising practices. Incorporating data-backed claims, customer testimonials, and transparent information into advertisements can enhance brand credibility among students. When collaborating with social media influencers, firms

must carefully select influencers whose values align genuinely with their brand and maintain transparency in these partnerships. This approach, rooted in authentic experiences rather than financial transactions, can build trust with the intended audience. Manufacturers and industries should focus on innovation, optimization of supply chains, and sustainability to provide high-quality products at affordable prices, fostering a favorable environment for consumer preferences. By integrating these recommendations, firms can redefine online advertising as an ethical, transparent, and impactful medium that resonates with student preferences.

For future studies, researchers can explore cross-cultural influences on the impact of online advertising, conduct longitudinal studies to track evolving consumer preferences, delve into the ethical implications of advertising practices, foster collaboration between academia and industry to develop effective strategies, assess the effectiveness of consumer education initiatives, analyze the influence of regulation on consumer trust, and conduct comparative studies on the effectiveness of different online advertising platforms. These avenues of research will contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics between online advertising and consumer preferences, guiding the development of more effective and ethical advertising strategies in the digital age.

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