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Pseudo-Social Media Accounts and Kenya's Entertainment Industry: Reputational Implications for Personal Brands

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Abstract

This research article examines how Kenyan entertainers' personal brands with a particular emphasis on how the brand reputation are affected by pseudo-social media profiles. Public individuals' reputations are frequently damaged by pseudo-accounts that engage in fraud and disseminate misleading information. The research article used a qualitative, exploratory approach and focused on millennial and Gen Z's social media users as well as musicians, actors, comedians, and influencers. The research article, which involved focus groups and semi-structured interviews with brand owners, digital marketers, and social media users, was directed by the Information Manipulation Theory. Content research article of impersonated accounts showed that audiences become sceptical of content, including authentic ones, since deceptive profiles tend to undermine audiences' confidence. The MAX Weber's Qualitative Data Analysis (MAXQDA) was used to evaluate the data and establish the recurrent patterns. In order to reduce these dangers in the digital era, the findings highlights the substantial damage done to brand reputation and the necessity of improved verification procedures and public awareness.

Key Words: Brand Image, Entertainment Industry, Influencers, Information Communications Technology, Pseudo Accounts, Social Media.

Introduction

Different people use social media for different purposes from entertainment, education and business. Despite its varied uses, one thing is clear among all platforms, they hold their disadvantages and advantages. A disadvantage that is now very rampant across all platforms and that informs this research article is that of purposefully creating fake profiles on social media in a bid to spread false news, scam people and many more. According to van der Nagel (2017), anonymity in social media mainly centres on themes such as freedom versus harm since anonymous people can communicate with little to no consequences but can also give rise to online harassment and abuse.

There is no way of knowing how much one's reputation will be impacted by these incidents, according to Awan et al. (2022). Security concerns, information leaks, and hacking are now more common as a result of man's problems evolving to be technological in nature along with the changing times and technological breakthroughs. Despite how widespread this problem is, Awan et al. (2022) explain that Facebook, one of the biggest social media platforms with billions of users, attempted to develop a security system to prevent spamming and phishing but this proved challenging due to the large number of users; as a result, the security measure could not be applied to the new form of threat that is fake profiles. In their research article, Awan et al. (2022) argue for the need for a solution based on big data that can cover new technologies.

On the TikTok sphere, the platform has also been plagued with fake accounts. TikTok has been vigorously combating fake accounts, just like other social media platforms. The platform's most recent report includes a section on false interaction that identifies fake followers and likes. From January to March 2022, the platform claimed that more than

623 million fake accounts were deleted. Additionally, TikTok still actively prohibits posting from suspicious accounts and breaking community guidelines. After the start of the war in Ukraine, fake accounts drew a great deal of attention with some media sites referring to Russia's conflict with Ukraine as a "TikTok war" (Gisuser, 2022).

A research article done in India by two advocates Ghosh and Kalra (2021) shed light on data collected in 2019 by a Swedish E-commerce start-up which found that the top three markets with the highest numbers of fake accounts were the United States (49 million), Brazil (27 million), and India. This also included the assessment of more than 1.84 million Instagram accounts across 82 countries (16 million). Additionally, according to Facebook's enforcement analytics report, close to 90 million profiles which is 5% of all profiles on their site are perceived to be fake.

In the United States, Mekan (2022) did a research article where they surveyed 1500 United States users on Facebook, X, and Instagram. Mekan (2022) found out that half of the participants own 2 or more fake social media accounts with the South having the most at 30.9%, the mid-Atlantic at 21.6% and the Midwest at 18.5%. Underpinning, Mekan (2022) also posed an integral question; 'behind who are you hiding' and revealed that of the half of the 1500 participants who were found to own fake social media accounts, 80.9% were posing as someone of the same sex, 13.1% as someone of the opposite sex, 3.5% as a fake business and 2.5% as a celebrity

Australia has also had its fair share of fake accounts with one case even leaving a 47-year-old in jail. In 2017, to interact with minors online, the man allegedly pretended to be Canadian Pop star Justin Bieber on "various online platforms," according to Queensland Police News. Police allegedly found child exploitation material on the man's computer, which he allegedly obtained online by posing as the 28-year-old pop sensation. The man, a law professor, was accused of rape, child molesting, and creating child exploitation materials. This act saw the Queensland police blame weak online security for the alarmingly high number of offenses owing to social media and the internet as a whole (Farley, 2017).

In Kenya, perhaps the largest impersonation scam witnessed was that of business mogul Jimmy Wanjigi. On October 9, 2019, an X (formerly Twitter) handle under his name tweeted that if Eliud Kipchoge won the INEOS 1:59 marathon challenge, he would personally gift him a private jet (Tendu, 2019). This incident came as a shock to many Kenyans, who, until Wanjigi revealed that the claims were false, the fake tweet had already earned an audience that were taking it as the gospel truth; and were anticipating the marathoner's win. This impersonation menace has since plagued more than just business moguls in Kenya, highlighting the urgent need for research on the impact of such claims on personal brands in the digital space.

Statement of the Problem

In Kenya, prominent people have faced the problem of social media accounts using their personal information under pretence and at times spewing lies, conning unsuspecting fans, creating fake accounts under their names and even duping them. Unless this trend is dramatically reversed, more personal brands will continue to have their reputations tarnished with little to avail way to rectify that. The focus of this research article is to investigate the role pseudo-social media accounts have on individual brand reputation in the entertainment industry in Kenya.

From 2014 to 2016, the creation of pseudo-social media accounts increased by 11% (Simiyu 2018). In the same breath Ghosh and Kalra 2021 posit that currently, the United States 49 million, Brazil 27 million and India are in the lead with the highest number of fake social media accounts. Additionally, a research article done by Mekan (2022) indicates that half of 1500 US users of Facebook, X, and Instagram have 2 or more fake accounts. Similarly, according to Gariano (2021), the year 2020 saw a record 28,000 complaints to the Internet Crime Complaint Centre related to spoofing, with losses totalling approximately 216 million dollars. In addition, in the year 2021 between the months of April to June, Facebook removed 1.7 billion fake accounts from its platform (CBS News, 2021). A U.S. Navy Petty Officer known as Mike Sency in an interview with CBS News expressed disappointment citing that more than 500 fake accounts were using his face and real name for dating scams and coning people (Sency, 2021).

Rust et al. (2021) posit that the continuous emergence of social media has played a pivotal role in fostering constant interaction between a brand and its stakeholders thereby emphasizing the importance of branding. While studies have been conducted over the years to examine myriad phases of social media, such as examining the connection and disconnection of people and even the impact of social media on traditional media, the topic of pseudo-accounts and their impact on personal Brand reputation is hardly examined in the Kenyan context. Therefore, to find solutions to this new threat that is emerging, further investigation into this research subject is necessary. It is to this end that this research article seeks to examine the influence of pseudo-social media accounts on brand reputations for personal brands in Kenya's entertainment industry.

Literature Review

Social media emerged in the early 2000s as a platform for digital communication and social networking. However, with rapid advancements in technology, its scope has expanded significantly, integrating into various sectors such as religion, politics, governance, academia, and, most notably, the corporate world. Today, social media is a vital tool for branding, marketing, influencing, and connecting businesses with their audiences. In academic research, social media serves both as a subject of study and a research tool. Although it remains a relatively new field, the opportunities for exploration continue to grow. According to the (Government Social Research, 2016) report, social media research encompasses any study that utilizes data from online platforms. Broadly, such research falls into two categories: those that use social media as a tool for data collection and those that examine the behaviour and content generated on these platforms. This study aligns with the latter, focusing on how pseudo-social media accounts affect personal brand reputation in Kenya's entertainment industry.

In putting this research article into context, the researcher explores pseudonymity. Gerrard (2020) helps us comprehend pseudonymity while also identifying gaps, how this research article contributes to the discourse on pseudonymity, particularly in the technology era, and the boundaries that need to be drawn. During research article, Gerrard (2020) aimed to examine the tricky aspect of handling personally identifiable information from pseudonymous social media users. Is data being collected in the public domain? This forms one of the four questions that Gerrard 2020 poses at the beginning of the research process. The other questions include; are there participants who are younger than 16 years old? Does the research include any dangers for the researchers, and will consent be obtained?

Gerrard (2020) notes in her research article that 22 adult viewers of the three teen-targeted television programs *Pretty Little Liars* (2010–2017), *Revenge* (2011–2015), and *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-2017) participated in the research article over the course of four years. Gerrard (2020) makes it plain in her conclusion that her work did not claim to provide the correct solutions to the previously raised problems or to make an argument for or against the principles of anonymization. However, it tackles some of the problems that anonymous social media personas provide for the ethical standards of qualitative research.

Given the prevalence of pseudonymity on social media and the expanding platform adoption across all global demographics, the research offers a support tool for academics who are grappling with comparable ethical dilemmas. Finally, according to Gerrard (2020), pseudonymity will probably continue to be widely used by social media users and qualitative researchers for years to come, and online identity politics will only get more complicated as platforms expand. Therefore, dealing with the various aspects of a participant's already pseudonymized identity presents substantial practical difficulties for qualitative internet researchers and raises the possibility that the participant could inadvertently lose their anonymity as a result of research article outputs. This suggests that Gerrard (2020) only deals with pseudonymized participants who are doing so voluntarily, and thus lies the gap—what about those pseudonymized unintentionally?

Similarly, other industries have recently seen significant growth even though entertainment companies were the first to use social media as a promotional tool. This research is positioned in the marketing field, which is another area. According to a research article by Appel et al. (2020) looking at the future of social media in marketing, social media's future may be both large and slightly different due to ongoing innovation and the world's rapid pace. They contend that it is crucial to take consumer behaviour and marketing into account while analysing the potential of social media. Major platforms are continuously adding new features and services, and the user/consumer side, which involves people finding new uses for social media, are both made possible by this ongoing innovation. This raises the question of whether personal branding could be a part of the future Appel et al. (2020) describes.

In an effort to shape the future of social media via the lenses of consumers, industry, and public policy, Appel et al. (2020) locate social media in marketing in the immediate, near, and far futures based on their research article. An overview of the framework identifies three themes for the near future: omni-social presence, the emergence of new social influence mechanisms, and privacy issues. The concept of omni-social presence suggests that social media is capable of more than just bringing people together and that it can have an impact on every stage of the consumer decision-making process. Due to the high cost of traditional celebrities, according to Appel et al. 2019, there has been a trend in micro-influencers, who represent smaller firms and are more reasonably priced.

Additionally, there are privacy issues, where Appel et al., (2020) focuses solely on personalization and privacy. The need for brands and agencies to hold social media accountable for its actions regarding consumer data as well as advocate for privacy, trust, and the removal of fake or hateful content are brought up, even though privacy concerns from the perspective of personal brands are not mentioned or explored.

Appel et al., 2020 encourage academics to approach social media as a place where intriguing and novel consumer behaviours exist and can be examined as they carry out their research. They also caution scholars not to be distracted by technical "new toys" at the expense of taking into account the behaviours associated with such platforms and technologies since it is how individuals utilize social media and the related technology that is ultimately of importance. Therefore, could the creation of pseudo social media accounts be one of those behaviours cited?

Delving deeper into fake accounts, in his research article, Sheikhi (2020) points out that the high profit made by Instagram as a platform has made it susceptible to malicious activities like fake accounts. He explains that unlike the past, many attacks with a limited or small effect can now have a considerable impact on people's lives and therefore this brings in the question, is brand reputation part of what could be damaged? He goes ahead to explain that with Instagram, when someone has over a hundred thousand followers or even millions, they use their platforms to place for advertising which thus becomes a lucrative business. In this research article, the researcher focuses on how Instagram users could benefit from fake accounts to grow their following and eventually grow their probability to make business through advertising since as earlier indicated, the more followers, the higher the chances of playing an advertising role on social media.

It is to this end that Sheikhi (2020) seeks to find a way to detect these fake accounts that are artificially inflating the number of followers. Sheikhi (2020) in his research article had data sets with fake accounts and legitimate ones. The data set was then put in a classifier to classify the fake accounts. The results of this research article showed that the method classified over 98% of the accounts with a low error rate. Could this be implemented on other platforms, could it prove useful in eradicating pseudo-accounts and what markers made the fake accounts identifiable? Some of these markers were usernames, profile pictures, verification and many more.

Additionally, just like Sheikhi (2020), Awasthi et al., (2020) also concurs that the heavy utilization of social networks fostered collaboration of people with common interests but also created a space for malicious activities. Awasthi et al. (2020) explains that fake accounts on social media can be bots which would mean that they are computer generated, cyborgs which is half human half-bot or human generated. In this research article, Awasthi et al. (2020) tries to review available techniques for fake profile detection

In addition to Awasthi et al., (2020) research by Khaled et al. (2018) also concurs that the growth of social media and the massive amounts of personal data has attracted attackers and imposters to steal personal data, share false news and spread malicious activities. They point out that though in the past there has been ways to curb fake accounts, these algorithms have not performed well. The researchers therefore propose a new algorithm to help in fake account detection specifically on X. They use machine learning classification algorithms to decide whether the targeted accounts are real or fake and just like Sheikhi (2020), this algorithm was able to correctly classify about 98% of the accounts in the data set.

In the same argument as Sheikhi (2020), Gurajala et al. (2016) explain that in the world of social media, audience size commanded by an organization or individual plays an integral role of measuring an entity's popularity which later translates to economic and or political implications. Efforts to measure this has however been complicated due to the rise of fake accounts. The researchers therefore analysed 62 million publicly available X profiles to distinguish the automatically generated fake profiles. A reasonable number of highly reliable fake user accounts were identified using a combination of a pattern matching algorithm on screen names and analysis update times. The analysis of these fake accounts' profile creation times and URLs revealed their distinct behaviour in comparison to a ground truth data set. The characteristics of users' friends and followers in the two data sets revealed the very different nature of the two groups even more. The ratio of followers-to-friends for real users was one, consistent with previous observations, whereas the fake profiles had a median ratio of 30, indicating that the fake users identified were primarily interested in making friends (Sheikhi, 2020). An analysis of the temporal evolution of accounts over two years revealed that the friends-to-followers ratio increased for fake profiles while decreasing for real users. Their findings suggest that a profile-based approach can be used to quickly identify a core set of fake online social network users.

Having seen varied ways that could help in identifying whether an account is real or fake seems has not taken great strides to help users figure this out and more so where influential personal brands are concerned since most pseudo-accounts in their names are tailored to look exactly like the original hence it is hard for the fanbase to distinguish them. Social media has made great strides into looking at fake accounts but still the area of personal brands, pseudo-accounts and brand reputation seem to be left out of this conversation.

Material and Methods

This research article adopted an exploratory research design, which is well-suited for investigating evolving and complex phenomena (George, 2021). The design facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the impact of fraudulent pseudo-social media accounts on personal brand reputation by identifying patterns and themes within the data.

The target population was divided into two groups. The primary population included public figures with significant social media followings on platforms such as X and Instagram. This group comprised musicians, actors, comedians, models, socialites, MCs, and event organizers in Kenya's entertainment industry, focusing on those who had reported encounters with pseudo-social media accounts. The secondary population included everyday social media users from millennial and Gen Z demographics. Their inclusion provided a broader perspective, allowing for a comparative analysis of how pseudo-social media accounts affect both high-profile individuals and regular users. The research article involved 30 participants, divided into two groups:

Table 1: Sample size by Occupation

No	Category	Number of interviewees
1.	Entertainment Professionals (<i>Actors, Musicians, DJs, Comedians</i>)	6
2.	Media and Public Figures (<i>Entertainment journalists & Commentators</i>)	4
3.	Influencers and Managers (<i>Influencers & social media managers</i>)	5
4.	Event Hosts and Performers (MCs & Models)	5
5.	Social Media Users	10
6.	TOTAL	30

Source: Researcher 2024

The primary target population was selected using judgmental sampling, a non-probability technique that selects participants based on specific criteria (Ilker & Bala, 2017). The criteria included individuals in the entertainment industry with a substantial social media presence and documented experiences with pseudo-accounts. For the secondary population, convenience sampling was used to select social media users who were readily available and willing to participate (Edgar & Manz, 2017). The research study employed both primary and secondary data collection methods. Primary data was gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), while content analysis was used as a secondary method.

Unstructured interviews guided by an interview guide were conducted with public figures and social media users. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and via Zoom, lasting about 30 minutes each. Probing techniques were used to encourage participants to elaborate on their experiences (Koea, 2022). Notes were taken alongside audio recordings for accurate data capture and analysis. FGDs were conducted with everyday social media users to gain deeper insights into how pseudo-social media accounts affect this demographic. Two FGDs, each comprising five participants, allowed for dynamic group interactions and the exploration of shared experiences. The discussions were moderated and guided by

open-ended questions, with sessions recorded for transcription and thematic analysis. Content analysis was used to examine the types of pseudo-accounts and the content shared on platforms like Instagram and X. This method helped identify patterns, themes, and connections within the data, providing a deeper understanding of how these accounts affected the target population's personal brand reputation (Barkley, 2021).

Data Analysis Plan

The data collected was transcribed. Parameswaran et al., (2020) define this as making an accurate written record of the material. This entailed verbatim recording of the interviewees' responses to each question in the case of interviews, and in the event of oral histories or sound files. Secondly, it was imperative to "clean" the data after it had been completely transcribed. This was especially pivotal for interview transcripts, which frequently contained repetitions and asides. These were eliminated from a transcript to make the information more manageable.

According to Shaw and Satalkar (2018), it is vital to understand that cleaning does not entail changing the language used; rather, it entails removing any passages that have nothing to do with the interview's subject matter or any words that were frequently used in casual speech but not in more professional written reports. Lastly, the clean and transcribed data was coded through line-by-line coding to ascertain the themes and significant patterns in play through thematic analysis. Afterward, the MAXQDA software was used for data entry, analysis, and triangulation

Discussion of Key Findings

This research findings revealed that pseudo-social media accounts significantly impact brand perceptions and reputations. One major issue is the erosion of trust and credibility, as fake accounts undermine followers' confidence in genuine entertainers. This distrust extends to the content shared by real accounts, leading to scepticism about its authenticity. Consequently, maintaining a credible online presence becomes challenging, and entertainers face public criticism and backlash due to misinformation spread by these fake accounts.

An unexpected result was the emotional and mental toll on entertainers. While reputational damage was anticipated, the extent to which stress and anxiety hinder creativity, content production, and overall well-being was surprising. This ongoing struggle not only affects the personal lives of entertainers but also influences their professional output. Additionally, the confusion and misinformation generated by unverified accounts make it difficult for followers to discern authentic profiles, distorting public perception and weakening the connection between the brand and its audience. The presence of fake accounts also strains relationships with business partners, as controversies arising from these accounts can lead brands to withdraw endorsements and disrupt long-term collaborations, thereby undermining marketing strategies.

A further surprising finding was how well fake accounts can mimic genuine social engagement, making it difficult for audiences to differentiate between real and fake profiles based on metrics like likes, shares, and comments. This complicates efforts by entertainers to combat impersonation and restore their credibility. The presence of pseudo-social media accounts profoundly impacts the perceptions and reputations of personal brands. The erosion of trust and credibility is one of the most significant effects, as fake accounts undermine follower confidence in genuine entertainers and their content. This erosion of trust extends to public criticism and backlash, further damaging the entertainer's reputation. The confusion and misinformation generated by fake accounts contribute to a distorted public perception, making it difficult for followers to identify authentic accounts. Additionally, the strain on relationships with business partners due to controversies from fake accounts results in lost endorsements and strained collaborations. The emotional and mental toll on entertainers, resulting from the constant need to combat these issues, affects their creativity, content production, and overall well-being.

The research underscores the critical importance of addressing these vulnerabilities to safeguard reputations and foster successful interactions with audiences and business partners. By understanding these dynamics, personal brands can better navigate the challenges posed by pseudo-social media accounts and enhance their credibility in an increasingly complex digital landscape.

Conclusion

In summary, this research article set out to examine the perceptible impacts of pseudo-social media accounts on the reputations of personal brands in Kenya's entertainment industry, discerning the changes in brand perception and consumer trust resulting from interactions with impersonators on social media platforms. The key findings highlight that

the presence of pseudo-social media accounts profoundly impacts the perceptions and reputations of personal brands. The erosion of trust and credibility is one of the most significant effects, as fake accounts undermine follower confidence in genuine entertainers and their content. This erosion of trust extends to public criticism and backlash, further damaging the entertainer's reputation. The confusion and misinformation generated by fake accounts contribute to a distorted public perception, making it difficult for followers to identify authentic accounts. Additionally, the strain on relationships with business partners due to controversies from fake accounts results in lost endorsements and strained collaborations. The emotional and mental toll on entertainers, resulting from the constant need to combat these issues, affects their creativity, content production, and overall well-being.

Recommendations

- i. To enhance verification processes, it is essential for social media platforms to streamline and improve their verification systems, making them more accessible, particularly for emerging talents in the entertainment industry.
- ii. Establishing official accounts across major social media platforms to help on creating a solid brand identity and reducing the chances of impersonation.
- iii. Entertainers and their management teams should regularly monitor social media platforms for potential impersonators and report them promptly.
- iv. Personal brands should run awareness campaigns to inform their audience about the dangers of fake accounts and how to verify the authenticity of the profiles they follow.
- v. Entertainers should maintain open communication with their business partners, promptly informing them of any impersonation issues.
- vi. The entertainment industry should advocate for stronger legal frameworks in Kenya to combat digital impersonation and fraud.

Areas for Further Research

- i. Exploring the Role of Audience Perception in Shaping Personal Brands: Future research could examine how audience perception and engagement influence the development and sustainability of personal brands in the entertainment industry, particularly in response to varying degrees of authenticity, creativity, and relatability.
- ii. Preventative Measures against Content Duplication and Mimicry: Investigate strategies for safeguarding personal brands against content duplication and mimicry by fake accounts, potentially exploring the role of digital watermarking, copyright enforcement, and AI-driven content protection tools.
- iii. Crisis Management Strategies for Personal Brands: Future research could focus on developing and accessing crisis management frameworks specifically tailored to personal brands in the entertainment industry, aimed at mitigating the reputational damage caused by pseudo-social media accounts.

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Ethical Pledge:

The author confirms that she followed full ethical considerations and acknowledged their sources appropriately without plagiarizing or duplicating other people's works.

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This article adhered to all ethical guidelines for research involving human or animal subjects. Approval was given by Daystar University and NACOSTI.