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## EFFECT OF WEBSITE QUALITY ON UNIVERSITY CHOICE: A CASE STUDY OF GEN Z STUDENTS FROM SELECTED PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN NORTH RIFT, KENYA

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### ABSTRACT

In the digital age, university websites play a critical role in shaping prospective students' perceptions and influencing their enrollment decisions—particularly among Generation Z (Gen Z), who are digital natives with high expectations for seamless, responsive, and informative online experiences. This study investigates the effect of website quality on university choice among Gen Z students in selected public universities in Kenya's North Rift region. Drawing on SERVQUAL and web usability frameworks, the research focuses on key website quality dimensions like; visual appeal, usability, content completeness, mobile responsiveness, and search engine visibility. The study adopted a descriptive research design, collecting data from a total of 210 undergraduate students who constituted 70 each from Moi University, University of Eldoret, and Koitaleel Samoei University College using structured questionnaires. Respondents were selected using stratified random sampling to ensure diversity across faculties and academic years. Findings reveal that website quality significantly influences students' university selection decisions, with content clarity, mobile optimization, and ease of navigation being the most impactful factors. Students reported that well-maintained and informative websites increased their trust in the institution and positively influenced their choice to apply. Conversely, outdated or poorly structured websites discouraged further exploration and application. The study concluded that improving website quality can serve as a strategic digital marketing tool for public universities to enhance visibility, credibility, and student enrollment especially in rural or underserved regions where online engagement is often the first and only point of contact. These insights have important implications for university administrators, web developers, and higher education policymakers seeking to attract and retain Gen Z learners in an increasingly competitive digital landscape.

**KEYWORDS:** Website Quality, University Choice, Gen Z Students, Public Universities, Higher Education, Digital Marketing, Student Enrollment

## **BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY**

A university's website often serves as the first and most detailed touchpoint for prospective students seeking information about academic programs, campus life, tuition, and admissions processes (Ojino et al., 2013). Among various digital marketing tools, website quality has emerged as a primary driver of enrollment decisions, frequently outweighing the influence of social media or email campaigns (Imathiu & Mwadulo, 2024). In Kenya, both private and public universities targeting local and international applicants increasingly invest in user-friendly design, structured navigation, mobile responsiveness, and SEO optimization to enhance visibility and student recruitment (Culture Foundry, 2024; USIU-Africa, 2022). Drawing from global best practices and Kenyan-specific research, website quality can be analyzed across several key dimensions like Visual appeal and credibility. Research shows that website users, especially digital natives, assess credibility based on visual layout, colour schemes, typography, and interface design (Fogg et al., 2003; Ojino et al., 2013). A poorly designed site may erode user confidence and lead to abandonment. Navigation and usability, a clean, intuitive structure enhances trust and encourages deep engagement. Difficult or cluttered navigation discourages return visits (Imathiu & Mwadulo, 2024). Gen Z users demand timely, accurate details, course offerings, tuition breakdowns, FAQs, and application steps are essential in their decision-making (Culture Foundry, 2024). Mobile optimization with the majority of Kenyan youth accessing university websites via smartphones, mobile responsiveness and fast load times are crucial (CAK, 2023). A site optimized for search engines is more likely to reach potential applicants, especially in competitive higher education spaces (USIU-Africa, 2022). Gen Z (born between 1997 and 2012) are digital-first consumers who expect polished online experiences, interactive content, and immediate access to information. They are unlikely to tolerate outdated design, broken links, or slow load speeds (Wikipedia, 2025; Culture Foundry, 2024).

In Kenya's North Rift region which covers Uasin Gishu, Nandi, Elgeyo-Marakwet, Baringo, and West Pokot many prospective students rely on university websites as their main source of information due to distance or lack of outreach. Hence, the first impression from a university's website carries significant weight in influencing their decisions. A study by Ojino et al. (2013) at Masinde Muliro University revealed that many Kenyan university websites face critical usability and content deficiencies. The researchers recommended enhanced navigation design, mobile-friendliness, multimedia integration, and updated content. Further, SERVQUAL-based models have confirmed that tangibility and responsiveness both essential digital service attributes affect students' perception of service quality and institutional credibility (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Marketing strategies adopted by KCA University and Mount Kenya University demonstrate that website quality correlates positively with application rates, as improved online platforms foster trust and clarity in institutional messaging (USIU-Africa, 2022).

**PROBLEM STATEMENT:**

Despite the increasing importance of university websites as a key information source and decision-making tool for prospective students particularly among Gen Z, many public universities in Kenya's North Rift region continue to struggle with outdated, poorly designed, and difficult-to-navigate websites. These limitations undermine students' ability to access accurate, timely, and user-friendly information about academic programs, tuition, and admissions, which may negatively influence their university choice. While private institutions have made significant progress by aligning their websites with Gen Z expectations, such as mobile responsiveness, search engine visibility, and visual appeal, many public universities lag behind. This creates a critical gap in digital engagement and recruitment strategies, especially in rural areas where students rely heavily on online resources. There is therefore a need to investigate how website quality influences university choice among Gen Z students in selected public universities in North Rift, Kenya, and to identify which specific website dimensions most significantly impact their enrollment decisions.

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to examine how the quality of university websites influences the decision-making process of Gen Z students when selecting public universities in the North Rift region of Kenya. The study specifically evaluates key website quality dimensions such as usability, content completeness, mobile responsiveness, and visual appeal and their impact on students' university choice.

**SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

This study is significant for several stakeholders in higher education. For university administrators and marketers, the findings offer evidence-based insights into how website improvements can enhance student recruitment, especially among digital-native Gen Z applicants. For policymakers, the study highlights the role of digital infrastructure in increasing access to higher education. Additionally, it contributes to existing academic literature on digital marketing and education service quality in developing countries.

**SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

The study focuses on three selected public universities in Kenya's North Rift region: Moi University, University of Eldoret, and Koitaleel Samoei University College. It targets undergraduate Gen Z students (aged approximately 18–27) who have interacted with their respective university websites during their application or enrollment process. The research is limited to website quality factors and does not cover other marketing or institutional influences on university choice.

## **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

- The study is limited to public universities in the North Rift region and does not include private institutions, which may have different digital strategies.
- The findings are based on self-reported data from students, which may be subject to bias or recall inaccuracies.
- Website evaluation is based on student perceptions rather than expert web audits, which may affect the objectivity of technical assessments.
- Rapid changes in website design or digital tools may affect the long-term relevance of the findings.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Theoretical Review**

#### **Information Systems (IS) Success Model**

DeLone & McLean's IS Success Model emphasizes system quality, information quality, and service quality as precursors to user satisfaction, usage intention, and net benefits. Applied to university websites, these dimensions correspond closely to usability, content clarity, and reliability factors that influence prospective students' trust and decisions.

#### **Webreep & TAM Frameworks**

The Webreep model posits that navigation, content, performance, and trust determine user satisfaction and loyalty. Meanwhile, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) asserts that perceived ease of use and usefulness shape behavioral intention to use systems. For Gen Z visiting university websites, a usable, informative, and trustworthy site influences choice (Van Deventer & Lues, 2023)

#### **Information Sensibility & ISE Model**

Gen Z engages with online information through socially situated meaning-making and values source credibility (Hassoun et al. 2023). The Information Service Evaluation (ISE) Model further supports integrating user perceptions and system attributes to understand website adoption and satisfaction.

### **Empirical Evidence**

Gen Z (born 1997–2012) are mobile-first digital natives—ambitious, pragmatic, and highly dependent on technology for information and decisions. They prioritize efficiency, transparency, and authenticity online (GeoPoll, 2024). They prefer visual and interactive content, short load times, and clear navigation, and are quick to abandon frustrating or outdated digital experiences (Online Manipal, 2024; Kanopi, 2023).

Studies on public universities in Kenya show that accessibility—especially information access is key to university choice. However, few address digital quality specifically (Mulonzi, 2014; Mahangiru, 2016). Research at KCA University (private) found that government-sponsored students are often influenced by university websites when choosing courses and institutions (Warui, 2020). A Strathmore

University study of postgraduate students found that website quality (over social media and email) is the most important predictor of enrollment decisions. Key factors include design, content accuracy, and mobile friendliness (Imathiu & Mwadulo, 2024). Research involving South African Gen Y students confirmed that information quality, system quality, ease of use, and satisfaction predict website usage and positive attitudes—ultimately influencing engagement and decisions (Van Deventer & Lues, 2023). Visitor data analysis for a European university reveals that mobile compatibility, multimedia optimization, and traffic sources influence user retention and behavior. Insights into device preference and content access trends inform optimal website design (Aydin, 2021)

### **Literature Gaps and Knowledge Gap**

Little research explicitly targets public universities in rural Kenyan regions, such as North Rift, regarding website quality and its use among prospective students. Most studies focus on expert or technical audits rather than students lived experiences and behavioral outcomes. There is a need to examine direct linkages between students' perceptions of website quality and actual choices or application decisions in the Kenyan context.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study will adopt a **descriptive cross-sectional survey design**. The design is appropriate for collecting quantitative and qualitative data from a large sample at one point in time, enabling the researcher to assess perceptions, preferences, and the relationship between website quality and university choice among Gen Z students.

### **Location of the Study**

The study will be conducted in three public universities located in the North Rift region of Kenya:

- Moi University (Uasin Gishu County)
- University of Eldoret (Uasin Gishu County)
- Koitaleel Samoei University College (Nandi County)

These institutions were selected based on accessibility, student population, and representativeness of public universities in the region.

### **Target Population**

The target population will consist of Generation Z undergraduate students (aged 18–27) who have accessed or used their university's website either during the application process or for academic-related purposes. These students are best positioned to evaluate the role of website quality in their decision-making.

## **Sampling Procedures and Sample Size**

### **Sampling Procedure:**

- Stratified random sampling will be employed to ensure representation across the three universities.
- Each institution will form a stratum, and within each stratum, students will be randomly selected.

### **Sample Size:**

- A total of 210 respondents will be selected—70 students from each university.
- This sample size is deemed adequate for statistical analysis and generalizability within the North Rift region.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

- A structured questionnaire will be the primary data collection tool.
- The questionnaire will consist of both closed-ended Likert-scale items (to assess dimensions of website quality and influence on choice) and a few open-ended questions for richer insights.
- Questionnaires will be administered physically and digitally (e.g., Google Forms), depending on student preference and access.

## **Validity and Reliability of the Research Instruments**

### **Validity:**

- Content validity will be established through expert review by university lecturers and digital marketing specialists.
- A pilot study will be conducted with 20 students (not part of the final sample) to refine question clarity, layout, and structure.

### **Reliability:**

- Cronbach's Alpha coefficient will be used to measure internal consistency of the Likert-scale items.
- A coefficient value of 0.70 or above will be considered acceptable for reliability.

### **Data Analysis**

- Quantitative data will be analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25.
- Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means) will be used to summarize student perceptions.
- Inferential statistics—including correlation and regression analysis—will test the relationship between website quality dimensions (usability, content, design, mobile responsiveness, SEO) and university choice.
- Qualitative data from open-ended responses will be analyzed thematically.

### **Ethical Considerations**

- Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant university research ethics committee.

- Participants were informed of the purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature of the study.
- Informed consent will be obtained from all respondents.
- Anonymity and confidentiality was ensured by using codes instead of names.
- Data collected was used strictly for academic purposes and stored securely.

## **DATA ANALYSIS, PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION**

### **Introduction**

This chapter presents and interprets the results of the data collected through student questionnaires, which were distributed among Gen Z students in three selected public universities in Kenya's North Rift region: Moi University, University of Eldoret, and Koitaleel Samoei University College. A total of 210 responses were analyzed (70 from each institution), focusing on demographic characteristics, website usage behavior, perceptions of website quality, and the influence of website quality on university choice.

### **Demographic Information**

#### **Gender Distribution**

Out of 210 respondents:

- **120 (57%) were male**
- **90 (43%) were female**

This indicates balanced gender representation, with a slight male majority. It reflects typical university student demographics in the region.

#### **Age Distribution**

- **Below 18 years:** 30 respondents (14%)
- **18–20 years:** 50 respondents (24%)
- **21–23 years:** 90 respondents (43%)
- **24 and above:** 40 respondents (19%)

Most respondents (43%) were aged **21–23**, which aligns with typical undergraduate student age ranges in their second or third year of study.

#### **Year of Study**

- **First Year:** 90 (43%)
- **Second Year:** 60 (29%)
- **Third Year:** 50 (24%)
- **Fourth Year and above:** 10 (4%)

A majority were in their **first year**, likely reflecting students who recently interacted with university websites during the admission phase.

#### **Mode of Accessing University Website**

- **Mobile phone:** 55%

- **Cybercafé:** 25%
- **Laptop/computer:** 20%

The high reliance on **mobile phones** underscores the necessity of mobile-friendly and responsive website design.

### Website Usage Behavior

#### Visit Before Application

- **Yes:** 84%
- **No:** 16%

An overwhelming majority of students **visited the university website prior to applying**, indicating its central role in the decision-making process.

#### Frequency of Website Visit

- **Weekly:** 64%
- **Daily:** 28%
- **Monthly:** 8%

Most students are **active weekly users** of the university websites, suggesting a demand for regularly updated and functional platforms.

#### Purpose of Website Visit Before Joining

- **To learn about programs/courses:** 40%
- **To compare universities:** 30%
- **To explore campus life:** 20%
- **To check tuition/admission info:** 10%

**Academic programs** were the primary information sought, followed by comparative evaluation of institutions—emphasizing the website's strategic role in marketing and differentiation.

#### Perception of Website Quality

##### Visual Design & Appeal

- 30% agreed, 20% strongly agreed the website is visually appealing
- However, 20% disagreed, and 30% remained neutral

This reflects **moderate satisfaction** with visual aspects, but significant room for improvement in design quality and first impressions.

##### Modern & Professional Design

- 40% disagreed the design was modern or professional
- Only 20% agreed or strongly agreed

This highlights a **perception gap**, where many Gen Z users **do not find university websites up-to-date or professional**, which could damage credibility.

##### Navigation & Usability

- 50% (combined agree + strongly agree) found it user-friendly
- 30% neutral; 20% disagreed

This shows relatively positive feedback on **navigation**, but the neutral and disagreeing group reflects possible design or structure challenges.

### Speed & Mobile Optimization

- 40% disagreed the site loads quickly
- Only 30% rated it positively (agree + strongly agree)

Given that 55% use mobile phones, **poor site speed and mobile responsiveness** may hinder access and influence negatively.

### Content & Updates

- 60% disagreed the site was regularly updated
- Only 10% agreed

This is a significant weakness, especially for Gen Z users who expect **real-time and dynamic content**.

### Information Accessibility & Trust

- 70% (40% agree + 30% strongly agree) found necessary information easily
- 35% agreed and 20% strongly agreed the content was clear
- Only 40% trusted the information, suggesting issues with **credibility or completeness**

### Multimedia Integration

- 30% agreed and 20% strongly agreed that multimedia helped them understand the university

This shows **moderate effectiveness of multimedia** use, which could be improved through better video tours, images, and virtual experiences.

### Influence on University Choice

#### Website's Role in Decision Making

- Only **10% agreed**, and **20% strongly agreed** the website influenced their application
- A large portion (60%) **disagreed**

Despite high visitation, most respondents **do not view the website as a major factor** in their university choice likely due to **perceived quality issues**.

#### Trust in University Based on Website

- **60% said no**, **40% said yes**

This suggests that current website standards **do not inspire enough trust**, reducing their strategic value in enrollment campaigns.

### Comparison of Websites

- 55% compared multiple university websites
- 45% did not

Students are **actively comparing institutions online**, making quality and presentation critical in influencing their final choice.

### Perceived Importance of Website

- 70% said **very important**
- 5% said **important**

- 25% said **slightly important**

Despite limited direct influence reported, most students **perceive a university website as an essential tool** in their selection process, showing a discrepancy between expectations and current delivery.

### Discussion of Key Findings

- The university website is a critical initial contact point for Gen Z students, yet many university sites in the North Rift region fall short in design, usability, responsiveness, and content freshness.
- Most students visit the websites frequently and view them as **important decision-making tools**, particularly when comparing courses and universities.
- **Mobile optimization and content quality** are the weakest areas identified.
- Trust and perception of credibility are **not fully established** by current website standards, reducing the potential influence on final enrollment decisions.
- The **disconnect between website visitation and decision impact** suggests that while students value the website, its current quality undermines its strategic role.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Introduction

This chapter presents a summary of the key findings, draws conclusions from the data analysis, and outlines practical recommendations. The objective was to examine how various dimensions of university website quality influence university choice among Generation Z students in selected public universities in the North Rift region of Kenya—specifically Moi University, University of Eldoret, and Koitaleel Samoei University College.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

### Demographic Insights

- **Gender:** Majority were male (57%) and female (43%).
- **Age:** Most respondents (43%) were between 21–23 years.
- **Year of Study:** A majority (43%) were in their first year.
- **Access Mode:** Over half (55%) accessed the university website via mobile phones, highlighting the importance of mobile optimization.

### Website Usage Behavior

- **84%** of respondents visited the university website before applying.
- **64%** visit the website weekly, indicating regular reliance on digital platforms for updates.

- **Main usage reasons** included learning about programs (40%), comparing universities (30%), and exploring campus life (20%).

#### **Perception of Website Quality**

- Website design and visual appeal received **mixed ratings**, with 50% rating it positively (agree/strongly agree).
- **Navigation and usability** were seen as moderately satisfactory by most respondents.
- **Mobile responsiveness and speed** were major concerns; 40% disagreed that websites load quickly.
- **Content freshness** was rated poorly; 60% said the websites were not regularly updated.
- **Trust and credibility** were also moderate; only 40% said they fully trust the website content.

#### **Influence on University Choice**

- Despite high website usage, only **30%** (combined) said the website significantly influenced their university choice.
- **60%** said the quality of the website did not increase their trust in the institution.
- **70%** considered a university website “very important” when choosing where to study, even if it didn’t directly influence their final choice.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

1. **High Usage but Low Impact:** While most students access university websites regularly, especially before applying, the actual influence of the website on their final choice remains relatively low. This disconnects points to deficiencies in quality and trustworthiness.
2. **Mobile Optimization is Critical:** The high number of students accessing university websites via mobile phones necessitates fully mobile-responsive platforms. Poor responsiveness significantly affects user experience.
3. **Content Quality and Freshness are Weak:** Gen Z students expect real-time, clear, and comprehensive information. Outdated or incomplete content undermines the website’s effectiveness as a decision-making tool.
4. **Website as a Marketing Tool is Underutilized:** The perception that university websites lack modern design and professional appeal indicates that institutions are under-investing in digital user experience. This reduces the website’s power in student recruitment.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. **Improve Website Design and Visual Credibility**  
Universities should invest in professional, modern, and user-friendly designs that reflect institutional credibility and align with Gen Z expectations.

**2. Enhance Mobile Responsiveness and Load Speed**

Given that most students access websites via smartphones, platforms must be optimized for mobile access with fast load times.

**3. Regularly Update Website Content**

Academic programs, tuition fees, admission criteria, campus life, and FAQs should be current, clearly presented, and easy to find.

**4. Strengthen SEO and Multimedia Integration**

To improve visibility and engagement, institutions should integrate SEO strategies and rich media content like virtual tours and student testimonials.

**5. Use Analytics and Feedback Loops**

Institutions should track user engagement using analytics tools and conduct periodic surveys to evaluate and adjust their digital strategies based on actual student behavior.

**Suggestions for Further Research**

- A comparative study involving **private universities** to assess how website quality varies between public and private institutions.
- A qualitative investigation to explore the **psychological or emotional triggers** that influence student trust based on digital experiences.
- An extended study on the role of **social media integration** within university websites and its effect on student recruitment.

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