

An Analysis of the Differentiation Strategies of Degree Programmes and Their Perceived Relevance by Public Universities in Kenya

Mbaka, John Kinyua

Laikipia University, P O. Box 1100-20300, Nyahururu, Kenya.

* Email Address: jmbaka@laikipia.ac.ke

Abstract

This study presents the differentiation strategies employed by public universities in Nakuru County, Kenya. The novelty of this research was guided by the Porter's marketing strategies with public universities engaging in a marketing mix in presenting the courses they offer. Informed by primary data collected from public universities in Nakuru County, the study used descriptive statistics and a linear regression to describe the perceived relevance of Bachelor of Commerce course (B.Com). While the details of every institution may not have been exhaustively covered in the study, key trends were substantially evoked. Differentiation strategy was found to be relevant in the Public universities as a means of enhancing the B.Com program performance exhibited by high correlation between the three differentiation strategies analyzed in the study; B.com Course Content, B.Com Promotion strategy and Differentiation in the B.Com program price and the level of students attractiveness to the B.Com programs offered in different Public Universities in Nakuru Town. The study recommends that public universities innovatively re-design the B.Com program by evolving unique syllabus that can make the program more outstanding. Moreover, they should re-design the B.Com programs using the principles of differentiation as a tool of competitive advantage to attract the clients and premium price for the program while at the same time using social media platforms to reach their target niche.

Key Words: Differentiation strategies; Public universities; Descriptive statistics

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1. Introduction

Institutions of higher learning especially the public universities in Kenya have been crippling in-terms of sustaining their daily management (Mugo and Mathu, 2021). Specifically, financial challenges have been documented as the major challenge bedeviling the public universities in the country. Literature suggests that the upsurge of private universities has posed competition hence decreasing the number of student enrollment. As the number of private universities in the country increases, competition for student enrolment has increased hence compromising the survival of public universities (Mulinge and Arasa, 2017).

With increasing number of universities in the country, public universities are operating in a more competitive environment than they did a decade ago where their overall sustainability is determined by how well they reposition themselves to increase student enrolment in the competitive environment. Public universities in the past have had a comparative advantage in student enrollment and had total reliance on government funding. However, recent trends have seen the government decreasing its funding to these institutions (McCowan, 2018). Public universities are therefore required to seek alternative funding arrangements to increase on their finances. With the decrease in cut-off points of university minimum entry, self-sponsored programmes which public universities relied on seemingly became unviable.

Guided by Michael Porter's theory of Competitive Advantage, public universities, just like industries, are constantly involved in a dynamic interplay in an attempt to build a successful and competitive edge over each another. This is also compounded by the entry of private universities in the academic market. Based on this theory, both public and private universities must present a niche of distinctive products and competitive advantage to survive the inherent competition in the higher education market in the country (Mathooko and Ogutu 2015).

Porter's theory, in oblivion, has been applied by public universities in cementing their trademarks on specific programmes hence gaining popularities as focal points of specialization. The theory postulates three basic approaches to competitive strategy; low cost leadership strategy, niche strategy and the differentiation strategy (Kamau 2020). This study focused on how universities are differentiating their degree programmes to achieve a competitive edge in the market. Differentiation is defined as positioning a brand in such a way as to differentiate

it from the competition and establish an image that is unique. Differentiation strategies are marketing techniques used by a firm to establish strong identity in a specific market; also called segmentation strategy (Makhmutov *et al.*, 2019).

Porter's theory argues that in a differentiation strategy, a firm seeks to be unique in its industry along some dimensions with the motive to dominate a certain niche (Gure and Karugu, 2018). It selects one or more attributes that many buyers in an industry perceive as important, and uniquely position it to meet the needs. Nakuru town in Kenya plays host to three public university campuses. These are Egerton, Jomo Kenyatta, and Kenyatta university campuses. In addition, three private universities, Mount Kenya, St. Pauls and Kabarak Universities also operate in the town not to mention the public and private tertiary colleges.

Of interest to this study, all the three public universities offer the Bachelor of Commerce (BCom) degree programme on a self-sponsored basis thereby a commercial aspect of the programme. As such, the importance to the investigate differentiation strategy adopted and its relevance to the perceived attractiveness of the BCom programs as operationalized by the three public universities in Nakuru Town was eminent. The study employed a three tier approach in the differentiation strategies; Differentiation in Course Content, Promotion strategy and Differentiation in the program price and the perceived attractiveness of B.Com programs offered in different Public Universities in Nakuru Town.

This study is guided by the conceptual framework in figure 1 below. Exogenous variables in this study are conceptualized as characteristics that are specific to each university in the study area and are therefore uniquely intervening hence impacting the causality effect of the predictors on the outcome variable. The study considered three independent variables that impact on the competitiveness of the B.com course among the public universities in the sampled area. The assumption hypothesized by the study is that different differentiation strategies employed by different universities is premised on universities internal and external environment. This environment defines how successful individual universities position their element of various differentiation strategies.

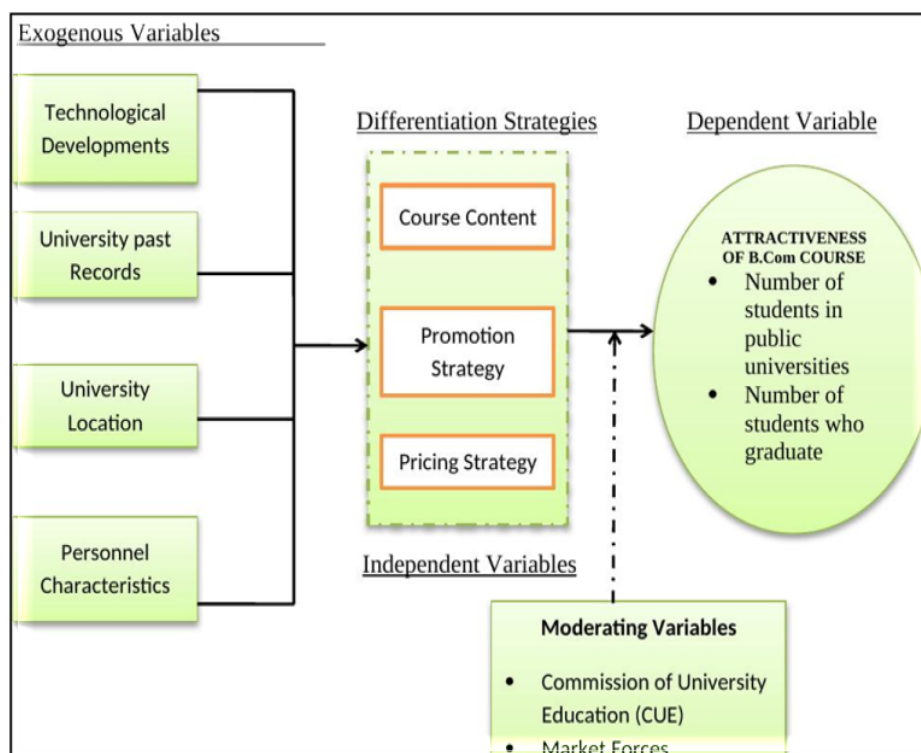


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

2. Literature Review

2.1 Differentiation in Course Content

A study by Kara *et al.*, (2020) reported that high student lecturer ratios are evident across public institutions in Kenya, with an average of one lecturer for 70 students. In fact, these figures may even underestimate the ratio, given that public universities are believed to under-report student numbers on account of confidentiality of the

exact size of their private student cohort. A similar study by Nafukho *et al.*, (2019) reports that public universities had a class size of up to 1200 students which means that student lecturer contact is not easy to achieve. The study concludes that the huge number of the students affects the students contact hours with the lecturers hence compromising the quality of the grandaunts in the long run.

Musa (2020) notes that universities in the country rely on part-time lectures to complement on the shortfall of the teaching staffs despite that these lecturers are less motivated due to payment delays. Whether real or perceived, the combination of lack of human resources and teaching resources has a magnifying effect, as effective teaching of large classes to a large extent depends on audio-visual and other equipment in classrooms which most universities are struggling to adapt. According to Kirui and Sang (2019), development of teaching approaches in the Kenyan universities is still out of reach by many people due to limited physical and financial capacity in the Kenyan higher education institutions. Kibuku *et al.*, (2019) further notes that universities are progressively using e-learning to provide an alternative mode of teaching whose quality is still debatable.

A study by Omingo and Mberia (2019) identified that educational marketing is one of the new emerging trends. They randomly selected students to analyze and compare the higher education marketing strategies among private and public universities in Kenya. They found that found that syllabus and the quality of grandaunts to be the key marketing strategies by the universities. A similar study by Kimani (2020) indicated that course package is the major strategy employed by Kenyan public universities where universities try to package themselves based on majoring in their traditional line of establishment and marketing them through social media.

2.2 Differentiation in Promotion Strategy

Muriithi and Waithaka (2020) conducted a study on the use of promotional mix in the agrochemical business in Kenya. The destinations of this investigation were, to build up promotional mix components utilized by agrochemical firms in Kenya, decide among the agrochemical firms, the degree of utilization of the promotional mix components, the goal of every one of the promotional mix components, and the variables that impact the decision of promotional mix. In this investigation it was discovered that all the agrochemical firms in Kenya utilize all the promotional mix components, with personal selling being generally favored.

In his study on university segmentations in Kenya, Maina (2017) established that branding is an important element for higher learning institutions in Kenya. The study notes that branding is an important element since students consider a university that is well branded. Therefore, universities need to segment their markets and know their target segments amidst competition in the academic industry. A similar study by Mogaji (2019) identified internal branding, brand position and research as an important factor that make universities' ranking to be competitive.

In examining the strategies employed by Safaricom Ltd, Njeri (2017) found out that new product creation improved the uptake of the company's product leading to increased profitability. This has a marketing implication to the universities in the country. First, universities are engaging in programme evaluation to match with market demands while maintaining their advantage. On the same note, universities are introducing their product to the high school students hence creating an awareness of their products and services to the target niche.

M'kwiriga and Imita (2018) conducted a study on the effect of promotion on sales in dairy industry among Meru cooperative societies identified proper product branding and quality as the major strategy used to market their products. In their study, they found that promotion can build organization sales and the ultimate financial stability by increasing the number of customer base.

2.3 Differentiation in Pricing Strategy

Edwards *et al.*, (2019) on mapping the pricing processes of companies found that managers use their knowledge and experiences to define prices, as well as models of costs, contribution margin goals, and well-structured profit goals. Giroud and Mueller (2017) concludes that individual firms may adopt low profit level pricing in times of economic recession in order to maintain market share or to penetrate a new market. While investigating on economies pricing decisions, Otiti (2019) found that construction firms submitted a bid price aimed at what the market can bear.

Using both primary and secondary data, Pete *et al.*, (2017) concluded that universities in Kenya have adopted various competitive strategies to remain competitive in the market. These strategies are; product (course) differentiation, customer (students) focus, product (curriculum and course reviews) development such as introduction of new courses, concentrated growth, diversification, market development, and vertical integration.

3. Methodology

The study employed exploratory survey design. The study adopted survey method in form of administering questionnaires to a selected sample of the students in the three Public Universities operating in Nakuru Town.

The study consisted of a target population of 1,883 B. Com students as; Egerton University 1,331, Kenyatta University 151 and JKUAT 401 operating in Nakuru Town. The research applied proportionate stratification that was based on the stratum's share of the total population to come up with the sample in each stratum. Egerton had a sample size of 225 followed by JKUAT (68) while Kenyatta had 25. The required sample size for this study was 318 Bcom students.

4. Results and Discussions

The researcher distributed a total of 318 questionnaire and collected back 287 questionnaire representing 90.0% return rate that was significant enough to establish the relevance of differentiation strategy on competitive advantage of Public Universities in Kenya which was the main objective of the study.

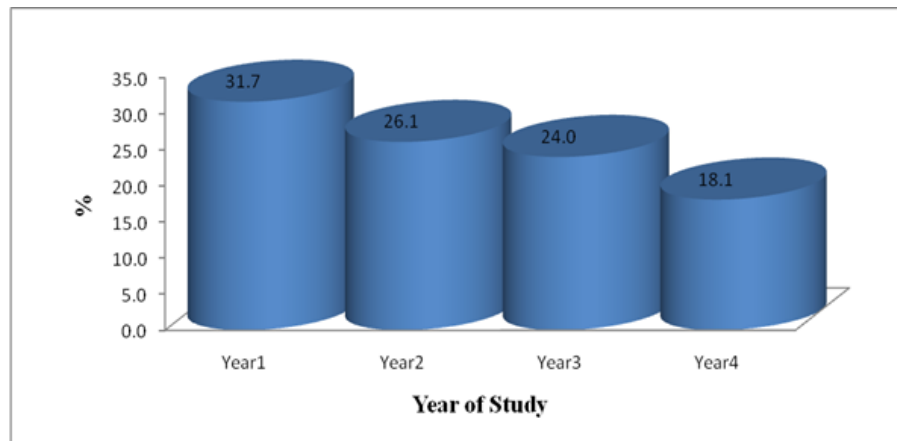


Figure 2: Respondents by the Year of Study

Majority of the students (31.7%) were in year one, 26.1% were in second year, 24.0% were in third year and 18.1% were in the fourth year of study. This finding indicated that the number of students in the B.Com Program progressively decreased towards the final year of study. This was so because of either drop out, transfers to other universities or being discontinued.

4.1 Differences in Course Content of the B.Com Program

The aim of the study was to establish the differences in course content of the B.Com Program in the Public Universities in Nakuru Town. The variables used to analyze this concept included the students' perception on the following specific areas in the B.Com program: establishment of the program, course content, branding and quality.

Table 1: Students View of the B.Com Program Content

B.Com Course Content	SA	A	U	D	SD
Product is well established	14.2	8.4	-	41.6	35.8
Content is relevant to the market	38.4	31.5	-	15.2	14.9
Content has a unique identity	9.4	6.5	11.5	35.1	37.5
The program has a unique symbol	3.2	5.1	-	47.9	43.8
The program has tag line	8.4	9.2	-	39.7	42.7
Content has a unique syllabus	7.5	4.9	-	42.6	45.0
Programme has an exchange programs	7.9	5.7	-	45.2	41.2
Industry CEOs participate in the program	2.4	5.1	-	47.3	45.2
The Content is unique	6.3	9.3	-	39.2	45.2
Content is of high quality	11.2	9.1	-	41.2	38.5

Source: Field Data (2021)

Majority of the students (77.4%) disagreed that the B.Com product was well established in their respective universities compared to 22.6% who agreed. Approximately 69.9% of the students agreed that the B.Com course content in their respective universities was relevant to the market needs compared to 30.1% who disagreed. Majority of the B.Com students 72.6% disagreed that the B.Com course content in their respective universities has a unique identity compared to 15.9% who agreed and 11.5% who were undecided. Majority of the B.Com students which presents 91.7% disagreed that the B.Com program had a unique symbol like logo, which made it distinct from other B.Com Programs compared to 8.3% who agreed. 82.4% disagreed that the B.Com program had a unique tag line, which made it distinct from other B.Com Programs content in the respective universities

compared to 17.6% who agreed. Majority of the students (87.6%) disagreed that the B.Com program had a unique syllabus which made it attractive than other programs from other universities compared to 12.4% who agreed. Majority of the students (86.4%) disagreed that the B.Com program had exchange learning programs with other universities outside the country distinguished as centers of Commerce compared to (13.6%) who agreed. Majority of the students 92.5% disagreed that the B.Com program in their universities involved practicing CEOs of organizations as a way of bringing commerce theories close to practice compared to 7.5% who agreed. Majority of the B.Com students (84.4%) disagreed that the B.Com program content in their respective universities was unique compared to other competing programs compared to 15.6% who disagreed. Majority of the B.Com students who represents 79.7% of the respondents disagreed that the B.Com course content in their respective universities was of high quality compared to 20.3% who agreed.

These findings showed that according to the students, the B.Com programs in the public Universities in Nakuru Town were differentiated using only one strategy; the program course content was designed to meet the market needs. The universities failed in the following aspects of differentiation; establishment of the program, the B.Com course content had no unique identity, symbol, tag line nor syllabus. This concurs with the finding by Kimno *et al.*, (2019) who concluded that as much as private universities in Kenya are engaging in differentiation strategies, none the differentiation strategy use by private universities in Kenya had a relationship with the performance of private universities in Kenya. The overall impact was an increase in the student enrollment across various courses offered by the universities. The program also did not attract exchange program with other business schools outside the country and that no CEO was involved in the program as a way of bring commerce theories close to practice.

4.2 Promotion of the B.Com Program by the Public Universities

The variables used to analyze this predictor included; program promotion in the media, marketing plan, personal marketing, areas of specialization and program alignment to university strategic plan.

Table 2: Students Perception on the B.Com Program Promotion

Brand promotion Strategy	SA	A	U	D	SD
Promotion in print	21.6	13.4	-	31.4	33.6
Promotion in electronic	5.2	3.7	-	43.5	47.6
Promotion in social media	3.1	6.3	-	45.8	44.8
Students promote the program	36.4	38.5	4.8	10.1	10.2
Promoted in secondary school	5.3	4.2	-	47.3	43.2
Many areas of specialization	41.5	45.8	-	6.9	5.8

Source: Field Data (2021)

Majority of the students, 65.0% disagreed that the universities promoted the B.Com program in the print media compared to 35.0% who agreed. Majority of the students, (91.1%) disagreed that the universities promotes the B.Com program in the electronic media compared to 8.9% who agreed. Majority of the students who represents 90.6% of the respondents disagreed that the universities promoted the B.Com program in the social media compared to 9.4% who agreed. Majority of the respondents (74.9%) agreed that the students promoted the B.Com program at will because they were convinced that the program was superior compared to 20.3% who disagreed and 4.8% who were not sure. Majority of the student respondents, 90.5% disagreed that the universities promoted the B.Com program in the secondary schools compared to 9.5% who agreed. Majority of the respondents 87.3% agreed that the B.Com program had many areas of specialization from which the students could choose from compared to 12.7% who disagreed.

This finding showed that the universities promoted the B.Com program using the following strategies; the students promoted the program among the prospective clients, the B.Com program had many areas of specialization from which the students could choose. On the other hand, according to the students the universities failed to promote the program in the following specific aspects; the universities were unable to promote the program in the print, electronic and social media. The university did not promote the program using personal selling technique like promoting the program in secondary schools. A similar study on all public universities in Kenya by Sande, (2019) recommends that emphasis be put on the mainstream media advertising and social media to attract more students by public universities in Kenya.

4.3 Price Difference of the B.Com Program in the Public Universities in Nakuru Town

The proxies used to capture differentiation in programme price were; the number of students in the program, price levied on the program and student enrollment capacity.

Table 3: Students Perception on B.Com Price Differentiation

Price Differentiation	SA	A	U	D	SD
Increased enrollment	35.9	41.6	-	9.5	13.0
Price is slightly higher	17.2	8.3	-	42.7	31.8
The students pay price all at once	9.5	8.5	-	48.4	33.6
We enroll to full capacity	45.3	48.1	-	3.1	3.5
Students pay fees in advance	8.6	5.9	13.4	39.5	32.6

Source: Field Data (2021)

The study established that the majority of the students, 77.5% agreed that the enrollment in the B.Com program had increased compared to 22.5% who disagreed. Majority of the respondents 74.5% disagreed that the public universities charged slightly high fees for the B.Com program compared to 25.5% who agreed. 82.0% disagreed that the students paid fees for the B.Com program all at once compared to 17.5% who agreed. Majority of the students, 93.4% agreed that the enrollment in the B.Com program was to capacity compared to 6.5% who disagreed. Majority of the students, 71.2% disagreed that the students paid fees in advance for the B.Com program compared to 14.5% who agreed and 13.4% who were not sure.

These finding indicated that the public universities managed to differentiate the fees of B.Com program using the following strategies; maintained a steady enrollment to the capacity of the B.Com program in spite the fees charged. On the other hand, the university did not manage to increase the program fees to make the fees special and justifiable by the superiority of the course content and the unique delivery methods. Secondly, the university did not manage the students to pay the program fees in advance and all at ones as a means of differentiating the fees. In line with the current study, Kirui (2019) notes that just like how consumers pay a price to purchase a product or service, students pay tuition fees to acquire education and noted that students are not getting the value for the tuition fee they pay, hence the frequent cognitive dissonance and dissatisfaction with the services from universities.

4.4 Differentiation Strategies and Perceived Attractiveness of the B.Com Program

Table 4 below represents the relationship between differentiation strategy and perceived attractiveness of the B.Com Program by the Public Universities in Nakuru Town. The key variables used to analyze this relationship were the program content, promotion and price with the client loyalty to the program.

Table 4: Attractiveness of the B.Com Program

Programme Attractiveness	SA	A	U	D	SD
University is students choice in spite of fees	45.7	38.4	-	8.5	7.4
University is students choice in spite of other universities promotions	36.2	33.8	-	14.8	15.2
University is students choice in spite of other universities in neighborhood	6.8	4.9	11.5	41.6	35.2
University is students choice because of the unique program	11.8	5.3	-	42.7	40.2
The program here is recognized by employers	39.7	42.5	-	9.6	8.2
The program is flexible	46.3	39.7	-	8.6	5.4

Source: Field Data (2021)

The study established that 84.1% of the students agreed that they were loyal to the B.Com program in spite of the fees charged compared to 15.9% who disagreed. 70.0% of the students agreed that they were attracted to the B.Com program in spite of other universities promoting the program aggressively compared to 30% who disagreed. Majority of the students (76.8%) disagreed that they were attracted to the B.Com program even if other universities start the same program in their neighborhood compared to 11.7% who disagreed and 11.5% who were undecided. Majority of the students, 82.9%, disagreed that they were attracted to the B.Com program because it was unique compared to 17.1% who disagreed. Majority of the students, 82.2% of the students agreed that they were attracted to the B.Com program because it was recognized by prospective employer compared to 17.8% who disagreed. Majority of the students 86.0% agreed that they were attracted to the B.Com program

because it was flexible compared to 14.0% who disagreed.

These finding indicated that the students were attracted to the B.Com programs in the universities under the study because; of the increased enrollment, the program was already famous enough and that it did not require further promotion and because the B.Com program is recognized by prospective employer and that it was flexible.

The study sought to scientifically establish the relationship between differentiation strategy and perceived attractiveness of the B.Com Program by the Public Universities in Nakuru Town. To assess the impact of the various differentiation strategies on the perceived attractiveness of B.Com course, a Pearson correlation and one way ANOVA was used.

Table 5: Differentiation Strategies and Attractiveness of the B.Com Program

	Program Attractiveness	Program content	Price Differentiation	Promotion Differentiation
Program Attractiveness	1			
Program content	0.57	1		
Price Differentiation	0.83	0.49	1	
Promotion Differentiation	0.63	0.72	0.305	1

Source: Field Data (2021)

There is a high correlation of 83% between the B.Com program attractiveness and price differentiation, 63% correlation between the B.Com program attractiveness and B.Com Program Promotion and 57% correlation B.Com program attractiveness and B.Com Program course content. The existence of high correlation showed that differentiation strategy was relevant in the Public universities as a means of enhancing the B.Com program performance tested by the level of students' attractiveness to the B.Com programs offered in different Public Universities in Nakuru Town.

A one way ANOVA was used to test for the differences among respondents from the three categories of universities (Egerton, JKUAT and Kenyatta universities) on the adoption of differentiation strategies. One-way ANOVA was used to tests whether the mean of the attractiveness of the B.Com Program was statistically significant among the three public universities.

Table 6: Differentiation Strategies and Program Attractiveness

Differentiation Strategy	Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	F	P	Bartlett's test Prob>chi2
Course Content	Between groups	4.70	4	1.76	1.95	0.102	0.93
	Within groups	169.88	282	0.60			
	Total	174.58	286	0.61			
Promotion Strategy	Between groups	2.75	4	0.68	2.37	0.043	0.01*
	Within groups	171.83	282	0.61			
	Total	174.58	286	0.61			
Pricing Strategy	Between groups	1.65	4	0.41	0.67	0.611	0.72
	Within groups	172.58	282	0.61			
	Total	174.58	286	0.61			

There was a statistically significant difference among the differentiation in promotion strategy used by different universities as determined by one way ANOVA ($F=2.37$, $p=0.043$ and Bartlett's test $\text{Prob}>\chi^2=0.01$). However, there was no statistical differences in course content and program pricing in informing its attractiveness across the different universities. This could be attributed by the fact that these variables are more exogenous and closely monitored by the Commission of University Education.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Differentiation strategy was found to be relevant in the Public universities as a means of enhancing the B.Com program performance exhibited by high correlation between the three differentiation strategies analyzed in the study; B.com Course Content, B.Com Promotion strategy and Differentiation in the B.Com program price and the level of students attractiveness to the B.Com programs offered in different Public Universities in Nakuru Town. The study strongly recommends that the universities should make use of both electronic media like T.V. and radios and also social media like twitter, face book to promote the program since the prospective clients who are young people use the social media and electronic media most of the times. The universities should promote the program in secondary schools as the primary market for the clients who intend to join university education.

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