

# Social Media, External Prestige and Students' Attitude towards Postgraduate Enrollment: A Conditional Process Analysis across Levels of University Reputation

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## Abstract

**Purpose-** This paper aimed to determine the conditional effect of University reputation on the indirect process of external prestige on the relationship between social media and students' attitude towards postgraduate enrollment.

**Design/Methodology-** The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design, multistage random sampling in collecting data using a self-administered questionnaire. The sample size was 504 students from four universities in Kenya.

**Findings-** Outcome indicates a partial indirect effect of social media and students' attitude via external prestige. It further reveals a conditional effect of university reputation on the link between; social media and external prestige, and, external prestige and students' attitude. Finally, a test of the conditional indirect process is also confirmed.

**Practical Implications-** Results of the study might help university managers and policymakers in developing effective strategies, policies, and techniques to attract potential students through social media platforms and also develop and strengthen university prestige and reputation through proper management of resources, social responsibility, and employment of qualified academic staff.

## Originality/value

The study findings bring new understanding concerning the indirect effect, the conditional process and highlight new insights on identifying mechanisms that exert a conditional effect on the indirect paths of the study variables.

## Introduction

In today's competitive business environment, students' attitude towards postgraduate enrollment is a major concern for university managers. In the context of Kenya, student enrollment in postgraduate studies has been declining as evidenced by the recent statistics released by the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics in 2018. This report indicates that Universities might not be doing enough to gain the confidence of students who prefer competitive institutions with high quality, reputable and marketable programs. It is therefore important to carry out a study on students' attitude as it shapes their tastes, preferences and determines their choice making decisions for further studies (Asiegbu, Powei, & Iruka, 2012). Attitude is a learned predisposition to act in a consistent way towards an object based on feelings and opinions towards other people, products, ideas, activities, and other objects in their environment that result from an evaluation of knowledge about the object (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975).

In a study of Bebetos, Derri, Zafeiriadis, and Kyrgiridis (2017) concerning mainstream physical education classes, the authors found that non-disabled students' attitudes were proved powerful in predicting their behavior towards their disabled peers in the physical education class, hence attitude has a significant effect on an individual's attitude that influence decision making. This is also supported by Yeo, Goh, and Rezaei (2017), who argues that behavioral intention is highly predicted by an individual's attitude which may influence the response to a stimulant. The authors argue that a person who holds a favorable attitude towards action will be more inclined to perform it. Attitude and the behavioral intention was also studied by Hong, Lin, and Hsieh (2017) whose study points out that consumer innovativeness on perceived value and continuance intention to use the smartwatch is strongly influenced by individual attitude.

This study argues that the decision for a student to enroll in a postgraduate study is determined by attitudes and the beliefs of the outcome expectations of that enrollment. This is in line with Edmonds, Flanagan, and Palmer (2013) whose study on students' attitude to enroll in law school revealed that expected work enjoyment and job opportunities for students were the main influences to study a law degree. Another study done by Bazelais, Doleck, and Lemay (2018) on the investigation of pre-university science students' behavioral intentions towards using online learning technologies indicates that attitude plays a key role in decision making to use the online learning technologies. These results are also supported by Omotayo and Adebayo (2015) and Alqasa, Mohd Isa, Othman, and Zolait (2014), whose findings show that students attitude affects their behavioral intention to adopt internet banking systems in Nigeria and Yemen respectively.

Social media development has changed the way people interact with one another and the way they share information (Bong, 2017). This 21st century has witnessed the emergence of the millennial cohort, a new generation of consumers who are savvy, powerful and sophisticated and difficult to influence, persuade, and keep (Menezes & Devi, 2016; Nanji, 2017). This cohort is always active on social media searching for the latest information on products, services, and entities. This has changed the entire marketing landscape from traditional marketing to shift towards social media marketing (Erdoğmuş & Cicek, 2012) which has led to more businesses being active on social media compared to the past by building and positioning their brand in the mind of their customers.

Social media usage by university students has created a great interest in both areas of academics and social scientists. In this digital era, social media sites are becoming important places where students interact freely with members of the networks as they share information and study experiences, research projects and job opportunities with each other (Yapıcı & Hevedanlı, 2012) which affects students' attitudes. This increase in social media usage at higher education level seems to be fulfilling the prediction of Kelly (2008) who claimed that universities will one time lose their privileged responsibility as the sole disseminator of knowledge, and

gatekeeper to it, as knowledge becomes more widely produced and accessed by people in diverse ways through other means and sources.

According to Constantinides and Stagno (2013), research in social media should focus on marketing communication particularly on the information that students look for and what is provided by higher learning institutions in their traditional forms of communications. Boyd (2007) points out that social media are an attractive and effective marketing tool for higher education, because of its high adoption rate by the younger generation. This new phenomenon has improved communications by firms having a one on one engagement with their customers which can increase brand loyalty. This is why Constantinides and Stagno (2013) argues that embracing social media as part of university marketing strategies could lead to higher levels of enrollment and can help prospective students make better decisions concerning their university selection.

Despite an increase in studies focusing on higher education institutions using social media as part of their marketing strategies to influence students' attitude towards enrollment (Constantinides & Stagno, 2013), there is little evidence of studies that have employed methods to test for conditional indirect effect models which provide robust and precise results to the extent that they simultaneously include the different effects, providing an overall vision of the process studied (Borau, El Akremi, Elgaaied-Gambier, Hamdi-Kidar, & Ranchoux, 2015). To fill this gap, this study examined the impact of Social Media, External Prestige and Students' Attitude towards Postgraduate Enrollment: A Conditional Process Analysis across Levels of University Reputation. The main purpose being; to determine whether social media would indirectly affect students' attitude towards postgraduate enrollment via external prestige, University reputation would exert a conditional effect on the link between social media and external prestige and the link between external prestige and Student' attitudes towards postgraduate enrollment, and finally, to examine whether University reputation exerts a conditional effect on the indirect link between social media and students' attitude towards postgraduate enrollment via external prestige.

## Literature Review

### The Mediating effect of External Prestige

According to Guerrero and Challiol-Jeanblanc (2017), perceived external prestige captures insiders' perceptions about what outsiders may think about their organization. This comes as a result of several sources of information about an institution such as word of mouth, publicity and internal communications regarding how it is perceived (Mathe, Scott-Halsell, Kim, and Krawczyk (2017). The antecedents to creating organizational prestige include organizational visibility, status level of the employee, and success in achieving organizational goals (Fuller et al. (2006), which this study argues that can be enhanced through social media platform interaction.

Purolinna (2016) asserts that prestige is often considered as an attribute of the university image or brand image. The author posts that external prestige is a source of knowledge and beliefs or the consequence of a consistent image. This is supported by the author's study which indicated that external prestige explained overall university image more than any other factors used in the study. According to Sung and Yang (2008), external prestige is a vital element of university image which represents the appreciation indicated by the external environment which may include; family members and friends, media and institution ratings.

University's prestige has been pointed out as one of the most important brand image element that has the greatest impact on students' decision of whether they should or not apply for further studies in a specific institution of higher learning. For example, Whitehead, Raffan, and Deaney (2006) claim that prestige may also discourage some students from applying to some universities, out of fear of not being competitive enough. As such a university's prestige may serve as an attraction or a hindrance to others due to contrasting

reactions among students concerning their feelings on its status among competitors, depending on the student's prior socialization.

We can, therefore, conclude that social media engagement between the prospective student and the alumni, university academic and administrative staff has a direct effect on external prestige which in turn influences students' attitudes towards postgraduate enrollment. Based on the above discussion we propose our first Hypothesis:

H1: Social media would indirectly affect students' attitude towards postgraduate enrollment via external prestige

### **The Moderating Role Of University Reputation**

Reputation in the higher education context is regarded similar to corporate reputation. It enables universities to attract prospective students by influencing their attitudes towards enrollment intentions (Zehua & Sheikha, 2014). According to Heslop and Nadeau (2010), building a strong reputation creates stakeholder confidence and enhances relationship as stakeholders always search for information and recommendation from external environments about a business institute before making a further commitment (Zehua & Sheikha, 2014).

In a university perspective, prospective students presumably search for information on a university before making enrollment decisions. A university with a good reputation has a good public relation, high ratings, attracts excellent students, top academic faculty and donation from investors and other corporate organizations (Armstrong & Sperry, 1994). Thus a university with a good reputation will not only influence students' attitude to enroll in it but also pave the way for graduates to get a better job in elite companies.

A study done by Matherly (2011) reveals that reputable universities affect the probability of parents sending their children to enroll in them for their programs. The author's study on decision criteria used by students in selecting a university and factors that influence the image of a university found that reputation of a higher learning institution has an impact on students' attitudes towards postgraduate enrollment. According to Ressler and Abratt (2009), students may want good qualified lecturers and professors and a variety of course offerings; alumni may want post-experience updates, employers seek capable graduates and faculty want tenure and good salaries. In conclusion, the authors assert that universities should continually assess their reputation capital among all stakeholders for this affects application and enrollment intentions.

According to Hou, Morse, and Yueh-jen (2012) rankings of Universities have a great impact on all stakeholders in the knowledge service industry and appear to have a particularly potent effect on decision-making in professional schools and other postgraduate programs resulting to a trend in students applying to selective universities. A university's ranking position provides evidence of its academic quality, and a degree obtained from a university with a higher ranking position is more valuable in the market, aiding students in finding jobs after graduation (Delgado-Márquez, Escudero-Torres, & Hurtado-Torres, 2013). In conclusion, Delgado-Márquez et al. (2013) findings affirm that internationalization positively and significantly influences a university reputation image which has an impact on students' attitude towards postgraduate enrollment.

In conclusion, Munisamy, Jaafar, and Nagaraj (2014) confirm that career prospects, university reputation, and its programs are the most important factors in the students' decision of a place for further studies. As students pursue their carrier development, they are keen on a university's reputation because it affects the graduate labor market prospects (Drydak, 2015). Thus so much depends on reputation. Every institution of higher learning needs to guard it as it is the cornerstone of power (Elffers & Greene, 1998).

Kelly (2014), demonstrates that varying dimensions of reputation directly influences consumers buying behavioral intentions. According to Kelly, such interactions between two variables which both have a direct

effect on the outcome indicates that a moderation model is applicable. It is on this basis that this study adopts University reputation as a moderating variable and proposes Figure 1 as the conceptual model of the study. Based on the above discussion, we post the following Hypotheses:

H2: University reputation significantly exert a conditional effect on the link between social media and external prestige

H3: University reputation conditionally affect the relationship between external prestige and Student' attitudes towards postgraduate enrollment

H4: When university reputation is enhanced it will have a conditional effect on the indirect link between social media and students' attitude towards postgraduate enrollment via external prestige.

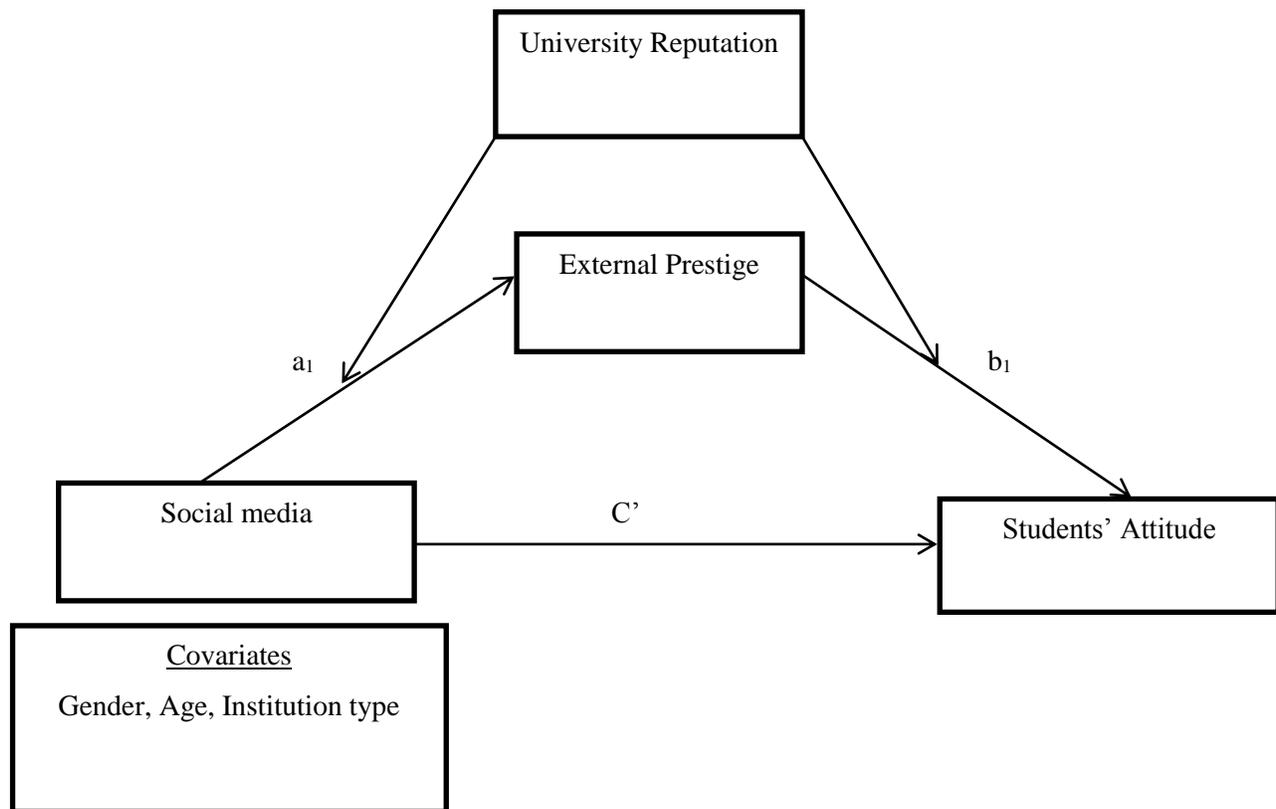


Figure 1 - Research Model

Source: Adopted from Hayes (2013, 2018), Model 58 with modification

## Measurement

### Students Attitude towards Postgraduate Enrollment

Students were asked on their current feelings about enrolling for postgraduate studies after their first degree. The variable was measured using seven semantic differential items to assess their attitudes using bipolar evaluative adjectives; for me enrolling for postgraduate study soon would be," Good-Bad, Wise-Foolish, Useful-Useless, Beneficial-Harmful, Rewarding-Punishing, Desirable-Undesirable, and Valuable-Worthless.

All items were scored on a 7-point scale, with 7 indicating extremely, 6 quite, 5 slightly, 4 neither, 3 slightly, 2 quite, and 1 extremely. These items are adopted from Hennessy, Bleakley, and Fishbein (2012) and Ajzen (2013).

### ***Social Media***

Social media has six items adapted from Zehua and Sheikha (2014) and Constantinides and Stagno (2012) with few modifications to suit the current study. The questions include; social media allow people with similar interest to stay connected, social media (Facebook, WhatsApp) is a necessity in academic studies in this era, the reason I use social media most is it connects me with fellow students worldwide, I normally use social media platforms to get shared experiences through various platforms, I prefer to use social media platforms while searching for information on various education programs, I prefer social media platforms due to shared opinions through different forums in relation to education matters.

### ***External Prestige***

External prestige measurement items are adopted and used in their original form from Sung and Yang (2008). Items include, This University is seen as a prestigious institution by the overall society, I think my acquaintances think highly of this university, This University successfully retains a prestigious place in various University ranking systems, and Media coverage about this University is very positive.

### ***University Reputation***

This variable has six (6) measurement items adopted from Zakari (2016), Zehua and Sheikha (2014) and Sung and Yang (2008). The items include; I would check if the academic programs run by the university are reputable, This University's graduates are easily employable, This university looks like a university with strong prospects for future growth, I believe this university is well managed, This university is socially responsible to its diverse stakeholders and I believe this university is financially sound.

### ***Covariates***

The study has three control variables namely; gender, age, and the type of institution (Public or private). For example, gender and age have been found to have a significant effect on the decision making process. Studies done by Awan and Zia (2015), Migin, Falahat, and Khatibi (2015), Levitz (2012) have all indicated that the type and status of an institution have a significant effect on students' attitude when it comes to enrollment decisions, hence should be monitored by being included in the model. Gender was measured as "0" for Female and "1" for Male, age was grouped into five categories (< 20, 21 – 25, 26 – 30, 31 – 35 and >36) and types of institution measured as 1 for "Public" or 2 for "Private".

### ***Research Methodology***

This study surveyed fourth-year finalist students from four universities in the Republic of Kenya to validate the proposed model (Figure 1) between April and May 2019. Data were collected from a sample size of 504 students randomly selected from a target population of 1320 using an anonymous, self-administered; closed-ended questionnaire.

The study used a cross-sectional survey design and multi-stage sampling technique to obtain its sample size using three stages. The initial stage involved a simple random sampling to identify two public universities from a list of eight and two private universities from a list of seven using random numbers assigned to the universities. The second stage involved a simple random sampling of faculties from the identified universities to get two from each using random numbers assigned to them from both the public and private universities. The last stage entailed systematic random sampling in selecting the respondents of the study from class nominal rolls of the selected faculties. Then finally, the researcher sought the consent of the respondents in advance to participate in the study before giving them the questionnaire.

*Table 1 - Target Population and Sample Size*

Selected University	Selected school	Students per School	Student per University	Distribution %	Sample size Per school
University Of Eldoret	Natural Resource management	220			84
	Environmental studies	103			39
	<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>323</b>	323	25%	<b>123</b>
Kibabii University	Business & Economics	196			75
	Computing & Informatics	311			119
	<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>507</b>	507	38%	<b>194</b>
Mount Kenya University	Hospitality, Travel & Tourism	67			26
	Business management	163			62
	<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>230</b>	230	17%	<b>88</b>
Catholic University	Arts & Social science	78			30
	Education	182			69
	<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>260</b>	260	20%	<b>99</b>
		<b>Total</b>	<b>1320</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>504</b>

## Data Analysis

### Demographic Attributes of Respondents

Five hundred (504) self-administered questionnaire was given to the respondents; out of which 473 were returned but only 468 used as 5 of them were not properly filled, thus excluded from the analysis. This indicated a response rate of 93%. Table 2 indicates the summary of the demographic characteristics of the respondents which shows that 52.1% (N=244) were male and 47.9% (N=224) were female. Majority of the respondents (67.5%, N= 316) were of ages 21 – 25 and the least were those aged above 36 years (N=10) representing 2.1%. The demographic statistics further reveals that 62.4% (N=292) of the respondents came from Public Universities while 37.6% (N=176) were from Private Universities, with faculty of Education having the majority of respondents (37.4%, N= 175) while the faculty of Hospitality, Tourism & Travels had the least with 5.1% (N=24). Lastly, findings indicate that 50.6% (N= 237) of the respondents were privately



self-sponsored, 44% (N=206), government-sponsored and 5.3% (N= 25) were sponsored by their employers.

Table 2 - Sample Demographic Characteristics

Demographic	Factors	No	Percentage
Gender	Male	244	52.1
	Female	224	47.9
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>468</b>	<b>100</b>
Age	Below 20 years	13	2.8
	21-25	316	67.5
	26 – 30	105	22.4
	31-35	24	5.1
	Above 36	10	2.1
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>468</b>	<b>100</b>
Institution Type	Public	292	62.4
Current Program	Private	176	37.6
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>468</b>	<b>100</b>
Current Program Enrolled	Education	175	37.4
	Business	127	27.1
	Environmental studies	36	7.7
	Natural Resource Management	79	16.9
	Arts & Social Science	27	5.8
	Hospitality, Tourism & Travel	24	5.1
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>468</b>	<b>100</b>
	Fees Payment	Privately Sponsored	237
Government Sponsored		206	44.0
Sponsorship from Employer		25	5.3
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>468</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 3 indicates the means, standard deviations, reliability and correlation results for all variables of the study. Results show that a student's attitude has the highest mean of 6.12 with a standard deviation of .799 while University reputation has the least with 5.39 and a standard deviation of 1.051. Furthermore, the scale reliability was in the accepted range as the Cronbach' Alpha was above .7 for all variables apart from External prestige which had a low scale of .627 which is also acceptable (Nunnally, 1978). Results of correlation indicate that all variables were positively associated with Students' attitude towards postgraduate enrollment with External prestige having the highest relationship with  $r = .306$ ,  $p < .01$ , followed by social media with  $r = .246$ ,  $p < .01$  while university reputation has the weakest but positive association with  $r = .199$ ,  $p < .01$ .

Table 3 - Means, Standard Deviations, Reliability And Correlation Results

Variable (N=468)	M	SD	Reliability( $\alpha$ )	Correlation 1	2	3
Attitude	6.12	.799	.862	-		
Social media	5.69	.932	.743	.246**	-	
External Prestige	5.57	.857	.627	.306**	.344**	-
University Reputation	5.39	1.051	.700	.199**	.432**	.528**

\*\* Correlation is significant at  $p < .01$  (2-tailed)

Before testing the Hypotheses, twenty-three questions relating to the variables of the study were factor analyzed using principal component analysis with Varimax rotation to test for construct validity (Table 4). The analysis yielded four factors explaining a total of 49.70% of the variance for the entire set of variables. Factor one was labeled students' attitude towards postgraduate enrollment with all the seven items loading. This factor explained 24.61% of the variance. The second factor derived from the analysis was social media

with five items loading. However, one item was removed as it failed to load. The variance accounted for by this factor was 12.32%. The third factor was labeled external prestige with only two items loading as two of its items were removed as they did not meet the criteria. This factor explained 7.25% of the variance. Finally, the fourth factor was labeled University reputation with three items which explained 4.89% of the total variance. The study indicates that three of its items did not meet the accepted threshold; hence they were removed from the analysis.

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of sampling adequacy (KMO) reported a value of .880 with results of Bartlett's Test of Sphericity reporting a Chi-Square of 3066.522 at df =253 which was significant at .000. Since the KMO was greater than .5 and Bartlett's test having a significant Chi-square, the findings provided evidence for the suitability of factor analysis.

*Table 4 - Factor Analysis*

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of sampling Adequacy	.880			
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	3066.522		
	df	253		
	Sig	.000		
<b>Variables and measurement items. (Note: Vr1- 4 Variable 1 to 4)</b>				
<b><u>Social media items loaded as variable 2</u></b>				
Social media allows people with similar interest to stay connected <b>(Removed)</b>			-	
Social media (Facebook, WhatsApp) is a necessity in academic studies in this era			.646	
The reason I use social media most is it connects me with fellow students worldwide			.671	
I use social media platforms to get shared experiences through various platforms			.660	
I prefer to use social media platforms while searching for various education programs			.692	
I prefer social media platforms due to shared opinions thru different forums about education matters			.623	
<b><u>University Reputation items loaded as variable 4</u></b>				
I would check if the academic programs run by the university are reputable				.557
The university graduates are easily employable				.673
This university looks like one with strong prospects for future growth				.559
I believe this university is well managed <b>(Removed)</b>				-
This university is socially responsible for its diverse stakeholders <b>(Removed)</b>				-
I believe this university is financially sound <b>(Removed)</b>				-
<b><u>External Prestige items loaded as variable 3</u></b>				
This university is seen as a prestigious institution by the overall society			.710	
I think my acquaintances think highly of this university			.630	
This university successfully retains a prestigious place in the ranking system <b>(Removed)</b>			-	
Media coverage about this university is very positive <b>(Removed)</b>			-	
<b><u>Students Attitude towards enrollment loaded as variable 1</u></b>				
For me, enrolling for postgraduate studies in the near future would be.... Good -Bad		.684		
For me, enrolling .....Wise-Foolish		.708		
For me, enrolling ..... Useful-Useless		.730		
For me, enrolling .....Beneficial-Harmful		.713		
For me, enrolling ..... Rewarding-Punishing		.727		
For me, enrolling ..... Desirable-Undesirable		.793		
For me, enrolling ..... Valuable-Worthless		.726		

***Indirect Effect of Social Media on Students' Attitude via External Prestige***

To test Hypothesis 1, Hayes (2018) PROCESS macro vs3.2 (Model 4) was adopted. In the first place, we sought to determine;

1. the effect of social media on external prestige indicated as path “a1” (Figure 1)
2. The effect of external prestige on students’ attitude towards enrollment, path “b1” (Figure 1).
3. The effect of social media on students’ attitude towards enrollment while controlling for external prestige, path C’ of Figure 1.
4. Lastly, the indirect path between Social media and Students' attitude to enroll via external prestige (a1×b1). The bias-corrected percentile bootstrap method determines whether the last condition is satisfied. Covariates (gender, age, and type of institution (Public or Private) were all included in the analysis.

Table 5 (Model 1) indicates that, in step 1, social media significantly affect external prestige with  $b=.320$ ,  $p < .001$ . The model explains 12% of the variance with all the covariates being insignificant. In the second step, external prestige was found to be statistically and significantly affecting students’ attitudes towards postgraduate enrollment with,  $b=.233$ ,  $p < .001$  (Table 5 Model 2). Additionally, in the same Model 2 (Table 5), we tested for the third step while controlling for external prestige. The study reveals that social media was statistically found to have a significant effect on student’ attitude towards postgraduate enrollment with,  $b=.158$ ,  $p < .001$ . The type of institution covariate was found to be significant with  $b=.192$ ,  $p < .01$ . This model accounted for 13.2% of the variance.

Finally, results for the bias-corrected percentile bootstrap method (Model 3, Table 5) indicate that the indirect effect of social media on students’ attitude towards enrollment via external prestige was significant ( $a \times b$ ),  $b=.074$ ,  $SE = .021$ ,  $95\% CI = [.036, .121]$ . The indirect effect model indicates a partial mediation between social media and students’ attitude via external prestige. Furthermore, Model 4 (Table 5) reveals the total effect [ $C' + (a \times b)$ ] of the findings with social media having a  $b=.233$ ,  $p < .001$ . Results further show that the type of institution covariate affects students' attitude towards enrollment with  $b=.202$ ,  $p < .01$ . Based on the above results, Hypothesis 1 was supported by the study findings.

*Table 5 - Indirect Effect Of Social Media On Students’ Attitudes Via External Prestige*

Predictors	Model 1 (EP)		Model 2 (ATT)		Model 3 Mediation ( $a_1 \times b_1$ )	Model 4(ATT) Total effect	
	b	t	b	t		b	t
Gender	-.060ns	-7.98	.073ns	1.049		.059ns	.825
Age	-.004ns	-.080	.005ns	.097		.006ns	.114
Institution type	.044ns	.557	.192**	2.629		.202**	2.689
Social media	.320***	7.822	.158***	3.922	.320 × .233 = .074	.233***	5.959
External Prestige	-	-	.233***	5.406		-	-
R <sup>2</sup>	.120		.132			.077	
F	15.797***		14.005***		CI=.036,.121	9.615***	

Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ , ns= Not significant EP= External Prestige, ATT= Students’ Attitude

Results from the conditional process analysis using Hayes (2018) PROCESS macro vs3.2, (Model 58) are presented in Table 6 and 7. In the first multiple regression, we sought to examine whether university reputation (Moderator) exerts a conditional effect on the relationship between social media and external prestige (depicted as path a1 in Figure 1). Results indicate that the University reputation has a direct effect on external prestige ( $b=.399$ ,  $CI=.328, .470$ ). Importantly, the interaction of University reputation on the relationship between social media and external prestige indicates a significantly positive effect with  $b=.058$ ,  $CI=.006, .111$ . This was done while controlling for gender, age, and institution type. Results indicate that all

the covariates were non-significant in this model. The  $R^2$  of this model was .305 implying that it explains 30.5% of the variance in this model.

Table 6 - Conditional Effect of University Reputation on Link between Social Media and External Prestige

Variable	b	SE	t	p-v	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	-.090ns	.150	-.600	.548	-.384	.204
Social media	.159***	.041	3.831	.000	.077	.240
University reputation	.399***	.036	11.089	.000	.328	.470
Interaction (social media × Univ.reputation)	.058*	.027	2.193	.029	.006	.111
Gender	-.056ns	.067	-.838	.402	-.187	.075
Age	-.010ns	.047	.206	.871	-.082	.101
Institution type	.052ns	.070	.741	.459	-.086	.190
$R^2$	.305					
F	33.785***					

N= 468, Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ , ns = Not significant

Figure 2 indicates the nature of the interaction. The figure reveals that at low levels of social media engagement, higher levels of External prestige were associated with higher levels of University reputation compared to low levels of University reputation. Furthermore, as social media engagement increases, there is a drastic increase in External prestige for higher learning institution with high levels of reputation compared to a marginal increase in External prestige for institution having low levels of reputation. Based on the findings, Hypothesis H2 is hereby supported.

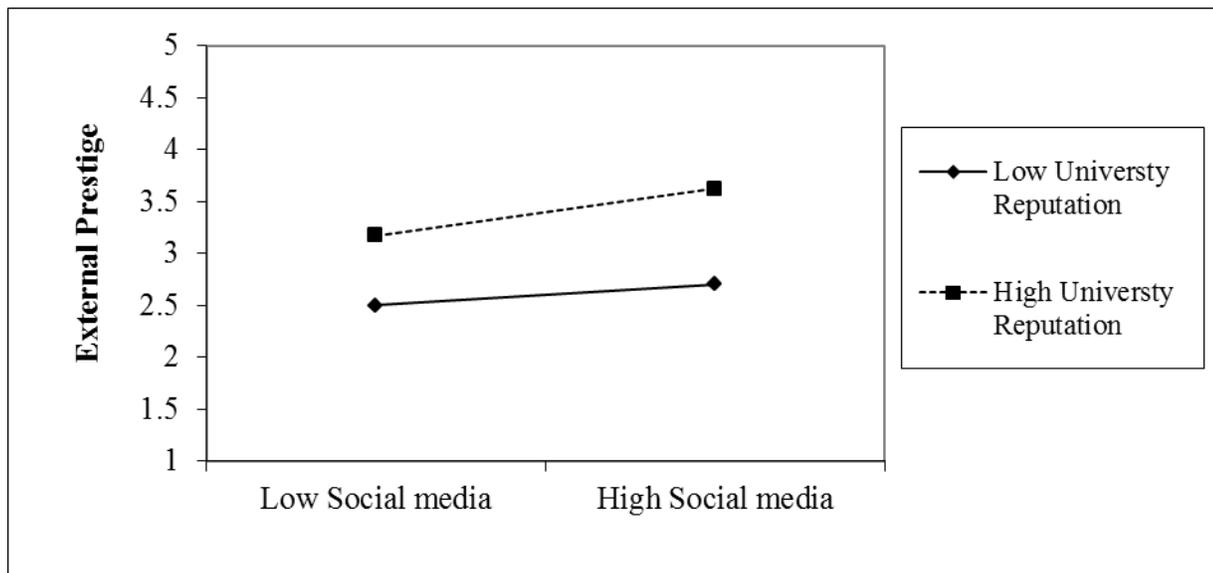


Figure 2 - Nature Of Interaction Between Social Media And University Reputation

Secondly, we tested to see whether the university reputation moderates the path from external prestige to students' attitudes towards enrollment (path b1 in Figure 1). The outcome in Table 7, shows that external prestige has a direct effect on students' attitude with  $b=.249$ ,  $CI=.154, .345$ . Furthermore, the interaction of the moderator (university reputation) on the relationship between external prestige and students' attitude towards postgraduate enrollment appeared to be significantly positive with  $b=.083$ ,  $CI=.018, .148$ . This was done in the presence of the covariates, with the type of institution a student is enrolled in having a positive and statistically significant effect on their attitude towards enrollment  $b=.188$ ,  $CI=.045, .331$ . The  $R^2$  for this

second regression model was .143, implying that 14.3% of the variance in students' attitude towards postgraduate enrollment could be accounted for by the model.

Table 7 - Conditional Effect of Institution Reputation on Link between External Prestige And Attitude

Variable	b	SE	t	p-v	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	5.766***	.156	37.055	.000	5.460	6.071
Social media	.160***	.042	3.790	.000	.077	.242
External prestige	.249***	.048	5.139	.000	.154	.345
Institution reputation	-.017ns	.041	.406	.685	-.064	.098
Interaction (social media × Inst. Reputation)	.083*	.033	2.502	.013	.018	.148
Gender	.072ns	.069	1.048	.295	-.063	.208
Age	.006ns	.048	.120	.904	-.089	.100
Institution type	.188*	.073	2.587	.010	.045	.331
R <sup>2</sup>	.143					
F	10.990***					

N=468, Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ , ns = Not significant

Figure 3 reveals that with low levels of external prestige, students' attitude towards enrollment is at the same level for both low and high levels of University reputation. However, as external prestige increases there is a drastic increase in students' attitude towards enrollment with high levels of University reputation compared to an institution with low levels of reputation. Based on these results, Hypothesis H3 is also supported.

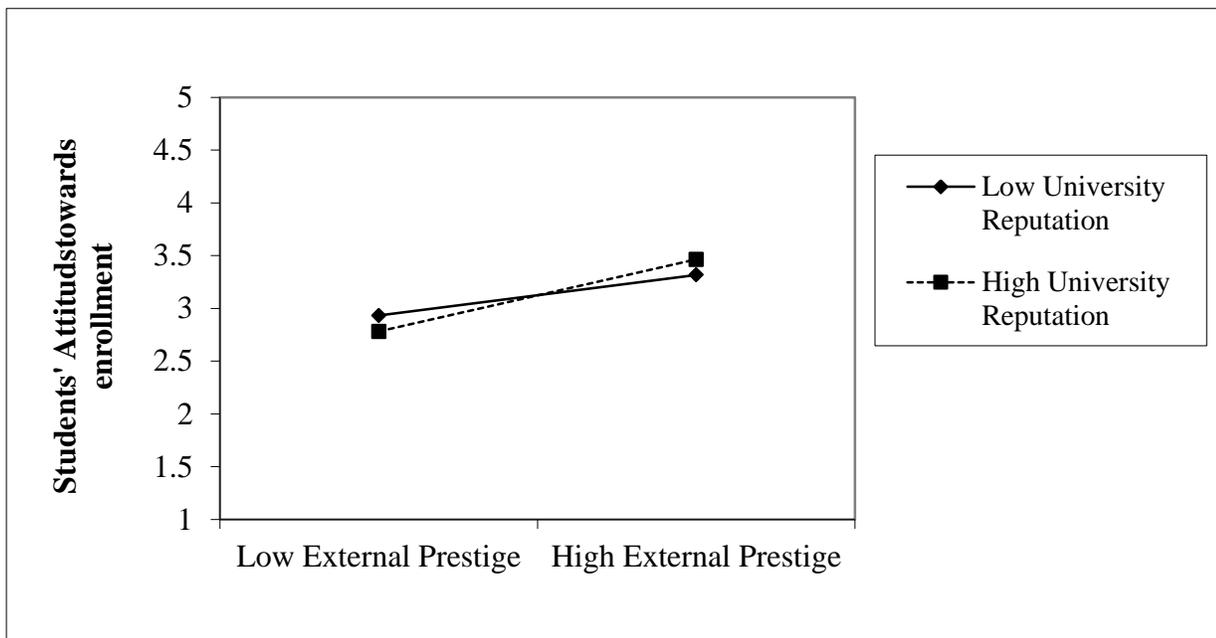


Figure 3 - Nature Of Interaction Between External Prestige And University Reputation On Students' Attitude

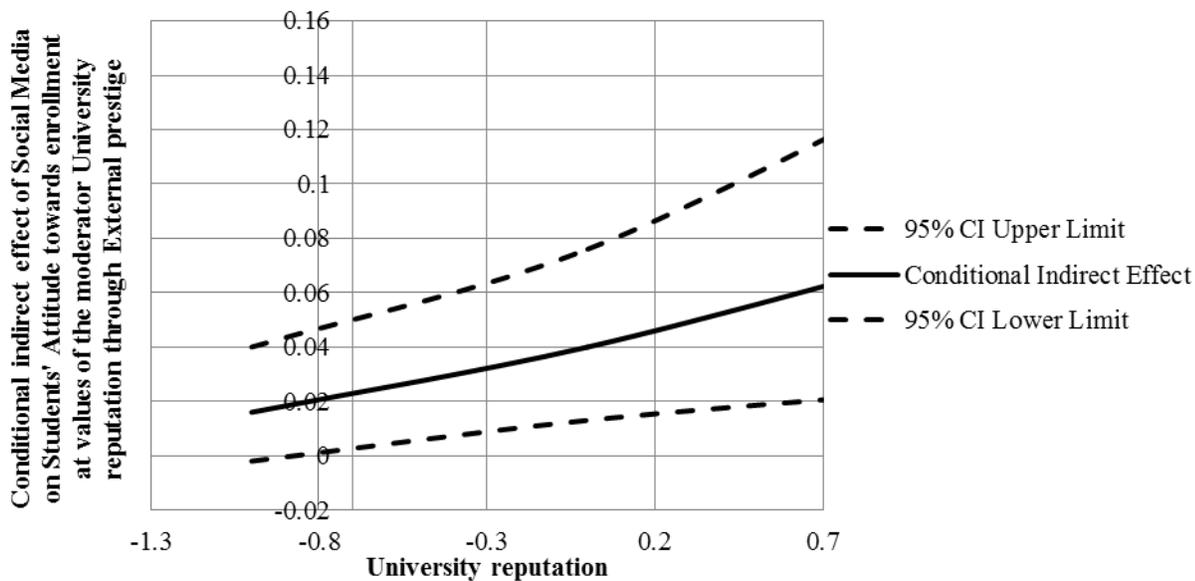
Lastly, in Hypothesis 4, we hypothesized that different pathways would operate between social media; external prestige and students attitude towards postgraduate enrollment with varying levels of university reputation. This was done by probing the data at three levels of the moderator (university reputation), Table 8 shows that the conditional indirect effects were not found between social media and students' attitude towards postgraduate enrollment via external prestige with low level of university reputation ( $b = .016$ ,  $CI = -.002, .040$ ) but was found with the mean level ( $b = .040$ ,  $CI = .013, .076$ ) and high level ( $b = .074$ ,  $CI = .025,$

.140) of university reputation. However, the conditional indirect effect was much stronger with high levels of the moderator with  $b=.074$ . These results are further supported and explained by Figure 4. Hypothesis H4 is therefore supported.

*Table 8 - Conditional Process Analysis Showing The Indirect Effects At Three Levels Of University Reputation*

Different levels of the moderator Attitude on the indirect effect	Effect	SE	LLCI	ULCI
Low university reputation (mean minus one standard deviation = -1)	.016	.011	-.002	.040
Mean university reputation (mean = 0)	.040	.016	.013	.076
High university reputation (mean plus one standard deviation = +1)	.074	.029	.025	.140

CI = 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect: if CI does not include zero, the indirect effect is considered statistically significant.



*Figure 4 - Conditional Indirect Effect Of Social Media On Students' Attitude Towards Enrollment At Values Of The Moderate University Reputation Via External Prestige*

## Discussion

The impact of social media influencing students' attitude and intentions to enrollment for postgraduate studies has been researched extensively and garnered considerable empirical support (Aghaz, Hashemi, & Sharifi Atashgah, 2015; Asiegbu et al., 2012; Bebetos et al., 2017; Raza, Bakar, & Mohamad, 2017). However, studies regarding the underlying mediating and moderating mechanisms in this context remain largely scarce which is addressed in this study.

Results of the study confirm that social media directly affects external prestige. This may be argued that the interaction of students with peers, alumni, academic and administrative staff on social media platforms affects the University image and its attractiveness. This is supported by the suggestion of Mignonac, Herrbach, and Guerrero (2006) who affirms our argument that external prestige is an organization's strength of attractiveness. Besides, our findings confirm that students' attitude is positively affected by external prestige of the institution. This supports the work of Carmeli, Gilat, and Weisberg (2006) who argues that a favorable organizational image (external prestige) plays an important role by influencing individual's attitude in

augmenting their strong identification and commitment towards the organization. The author's study reveals that when individuals believe that outsiders assess their organization in a positive light and attribute it as being prestigious, they tend to bask in the organization's reflected glory.

The results of the mediation model bring new insights into literature that external prestige has a partial mediating effect on the relationship between social media and students' attitude towards enrollment. Partial mediation means that the mediating variable accounts for some, but not all, of the relationship between the independent variable and dependent variable. In this case both the mediated effect ( $a_1 \times b_1$ ) and the direct effect ( $C'$ ) are statistically significant indicating that the external prestige (mediator) significantly accounts for part of the relation (MacKinnon, 2012). The reason might be due to the complexity of the behaviors under the study, as there may be a variety of causes of those behaviors, hence, a single mediator would only partially explain the relationship between the independent and the dependent variables (Baron & Kenny, 1986; MacKinnon, 2012).

The findings of this study support the few empirical studies which have investigated the role of university's prestigious image and its impact on student attitudes (Alwi & Kitchen, 2014; Casidy & Wymer, 2016, 2018; Fuller et al., 2006). As Casidy and Wymer (2016) point out, prestigious university name helps to attract greater and high-quality students, higher quality staff and helps in attracting research grants, hence supporting the theory in terms of the mediation process.

Our finding in relation to moderation supports prior studies which have shown that reputation being the overall value, esteem, and character of a brand as judged by people is critical for institutions of higher learning in building the university image (Dennis, Papagiannidis, Alamanos, & Bourlakis, 2016; Kelly, 2014; Munisamy et al., 2014). For example, Dennis et al. (2016), found that the reputation of an institution is among the strongest influences on student's attitude towards the choice of an institution. This is because it describes the image of quality, influence, and trustworthiness that a university has in the eyes of its competitors. This is further confirmed by Melewar and Akel (2005) who asserts that a positive institutional reputation is critical for crowded and competitive markets as prospective students may attend a leading university because of the overall reputation, even though a faculty may not be perceived as strong. Thus, our findings add some new knowledge by supporting theory and literature.

Finally, the moderated mediation model indicate that the indirect effect is not moderated at the low level of university reputation but it moderates (though weak) at the mean level and it increases with high levels of University reputation. This may be explained and supported by Kuenzel and Halliday (2010) who argues that if an institution/brand is perceived to have a high reputation by individuals, it indicates a successful brand, which may enhance their pride in identifying themselves with the brand/institution that due to its good reputation. Furthermore, this may be discussed in line with social identity theory which indicates that people are motivated to enhance their feeling of self-worth by aspiring to belong to high status and reputable institutions (Hasan & Hussain, 2015; Podnar, 2011). We, therefore, argue that the higher the university reputation, the higher prestigious it is perceived by students and the higher the effect on their attitude towards enrollment.

The above information provides university managers with an understanding of how to best harness the various levers at their disposal (Calantone, Whipple, Wang, Sardashti, & Miller, 2017). For example, if a University seeks to improve enrollment by investing in greater social media engagements, it would also be important to consider investing in attractive, marketable and reputable programs that would make students' attitude to be favorable towards their institutions (assuming external prestige elements are already present) because these efforts enhance Social media engagement which positively impacts on students' attitude

towards enrollment. Thus the moderated mediation model used in this study provides greater predictive power and insights than the mediation or direct effect models when used alone.

## **Conclusion**

This study provides a comprehensively integrated model for understanding social media, external prestige and students' attitude towards postgraduate enrollment, moderated by university reputation. From the study findings, social media engagement affects the university's external prestige which in turn affects students' attitude towards enrollment. Additionally, the study further confirms that university reputation has an effect on students' attitudes and how they make their decisions concerning institutions of higher learning. These may imply that the choice decisions partly depend on the reputations of the university using social media platforms and its external prestige, hence the variables used in this study plays a key role in students decision making the process. Finally, our findings also point to some interesting directions for future research.

## **Implications**

### **Theoretical and Practical Implications**

Theoretically, this study confirms the existing literature that social media platforms play a key role in influencing an individual's attitude towards a product, a service or an entity. It further confirms that social media affects external prestige as it increases its attractiveness through the sharing of information by satisfied customers and their interaction with the organizations' staff. Additionally, this study adds new knowledge to literature that External prestige mediates the relationship between Social media and Students' attitude. It further brings new insights through the moderation and moderated mediation model used in this study. The use of social media has become an integral part of every business. It aids interconnectivity and interaction of not only the existing students but also with the prospects and the organization's staff. The findings of this study, therefore, may help university management and policymakers in developing effective strategies, policies, and techniques that attract potential students through social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, university webs, blogs, and YouTube. This will help both students and universities to reach out to each other in a simpler and faster manner (Bong, 2017; Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009). Finally, the findings may help the management and policymakers in developing strategies for managing the university image through proper management of resources, social responsibility, employing qualified academic staff, offering accredited programs and ensuring student's care is a top priority as these affect students' attitude when making enrollment decisions.

### **Implications For Future Research**

This study adopted a cross-sectional research design as all data were collected at one point in time; which makes it difficult to generalize the findings and account for changes that may occur in the attitude of students. Future research should, therefore, consider using longitudinal designs to seek more evidence for the assumptions that have been made in this study.

Additionally, more research is needed to test the present model on other populations. While the sample size of the current study was large, the study collected data from only one region of the Republic of Kenya. Future studies should consider a wider area and a large target population to validate our findings.

Thirdly, a quantitative research approach was adopted in collecting data from respondents. Future research should consider adopting a mixed-method approach by collecting both qualitative and quantitative data which may yield richer and in-depth findings by revealing other issues that influence students' attitude towards enrollment in particular institutions of higher learning. Finally, further research is needed to investigate the

robustness of our findings, and to determine the extent to which our findings can be generalized to other contextual settings or other countries.

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