

Social Media Advertising as Professional Communication: Strategic Adaptation Under Regulatory Constraints in the Kenyan Legal Sector

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Abstract

This study examined social media advertising as a professional communication channel for legal service providers in Nairobi County, Kenya. The research was motivated by the growing adoption of digital communication platforms alongside the regulatory and professional constraints governing advertising within the legal profession. The study sought to determine the factors influencing the adoption of social media advertising, how law firms utilize it within the existing regulatory framework, and its perceived impact of social media advertising on communication practices, visibility, and engagement. The study was guided by Diffusion of Innovations Theory, the Theory of Reasoned Action, and the Elaboration Likelihood Model. A qualitative research approach within an interpretivist paradigm was adopted using a multiple case study design. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with seven participants drawn from selected law firms in Nairobi County. Participants were selected using purposive sampling supplemented by snowball sampling. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Findings reveal that social media advertising within the legal profession is reframed as informational communication, thought leadership and professional visibility rather than overt promotion. Adoption is influenced by regulatory requirements, professional identity, organizational culture, leadership attitudes, resource capacity and changing client behaviour. The study further established that social media advertising enhances visibility, credibility and long-term engagement, although regulatory ambiguity and resource constraints limit its use. The study concludes that social media advertising in the Kenyan legal sector is best understood as a negotiated communication practice shaped by professional ethics and institutional regulation.

Keywords: social media advertising, legal services, professional communication, legal profession, regulated professions, social media adoption, digital communication

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I. Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has fundamentally transformed how organizations interact with their audiences, reshaping practices of visibility, persuasion and engagement across sectors (Kietzmann et al., 2011; Dwivedi et al., 2021). Organizations increasingly utilize social media advertising to enhance visibility, engage their audiences and strengthen brand positioning in competitive digital environments (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Voorveld, 2018). However, the adoption of social media advertising within regulated professions, such as legal services, remains complex due to professional norms, ethical obligations and advertising restrictions (Boon & Whyte, 2019; Waye & Verreynne, 2011).

The legal profession has historically maintained conservative communication practices emphasizing dignity, professionalism and restrictions on direct advertising (Barton & Hartung, 2021; Wilkins & Ferris, 2022). Although many jurisdictions have gradually liberalized legal advertising, it remains subject to various degrees of regulation and ethical oversight (Gunningham, 2020; Hadfield & Rhode, 2021). In Kenya, the Advocates (Marketing and Advertising) Rules, 2014 permit limited forms of legal advertising while maintaining strict controls over content, tone and channels. These regulations create a unique environment where law firms must balance digital visibility with professional compliance.

At the same time, broader shifts in client behaviour have increased the importance of digital visibility for professional service providers. Clients increasingly rely on online platforms to search for information, evaluate service providers and assess credibility prior to engagement (Appel et al., 2020; Dwivedi et al., 2021; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2022). Consequently, law firms face growing pressure to establish an online presence while simultaneously navigating regulatory constraints and reputational risks (Boon et al., 2020; Sako, 2021). This tension between digital opportunity and professional regulation raises important questions about how social media advertising is understood, adopted and practiced within the legal sector.

Existing scholarship on social media advertising has largely focused on commercial contexts,

examining issues such as adoption, effectiveness and consumer engagement (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021; Voorveld, 2020). While these studies provide valuable insights, they often overlook regulated professional environments where communication practices are shaped by ethical and institutional constraints. Furthermore, much of the literature adopts quantitative approaches, limiting understanding of how practitioners interpret and negotiate social media advertising within their specific professional contexts (Rogers & Song, 2023). This reveals a critical gap in qualitative, context-specific research examining social media advertising as a communicative practice within regulated professions, particularly in developing contexts (Sako, 2021; Boon et al., 2020).

This study addresses this gap by examining how legal service providers in Nairobi County, Kenya, adopt and utilize social media advertising as a communication channel within the legal profession. Drawing on qualitative interpretivist approach, the study explores how practitioners understand social media advertising, how they navigate regulatory constraints and how digital communication practices are integrated into professional work.

By situating the study within communication theory, specifically the Diffusion of Innovations Theory (Rogers, 2003), the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen 1975) and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), the article provides a multi-level analysis of adoption, behavioural intention and persuasive communication processes.

II. Literature Review

Social Media Advertising as Strategic Communication

Social media advertising has emerged as a central component of contemporary organizational communication, enabling institutions to disseminate information, build relationships and enhance visibility within digital environments (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021; Appel et al., 2020). Within communication scholarship, it is increasingly understood as a strategic communication practice that combines information dissemination, audience engagement and relationship management.

Unlike traditional advertising, social media advertising integrates promotional messaging with interactive engagement, thereby allowing organizations to communicate directly with stakeholders in real-time. This shift has transformed advertising from one-directional messaging into a participatory communication process where credibility, trust and engagement play critical roles (Voorveld, 2020; Tafesse & Wien, 2018; Devereaux et al., 2021).

Research indicates that organizations increasingly use social media not only for promotional purposes but also for brand positioning, thought leadership and relationship building (Li et al., 2021; Dwivedi et al., 2021). In professional service contexts, these functions are particularly important because services are intangible and rely heavily on reputation and expertise (Sako, 2021; Wirtz et al., 2021). Consequently, communication strategies often emphasize informational content, knowledge sharing and credibility building rather than overt persuasive messaging.

However, the adoption of social media advertising varies across industries. While commercial organizations embrace direct promotional communication, professional service providers tend to adopt more cautious approaches due to ethical norms and reputational considerations (Boon et al., 2020; Sako, 2021). This suggests that social media advertising practices are shaped by sector-specific institutional environments. African studies also indicate that organizations adopt social media strategically to build visibility and stakeholder engagement while navigating contextual and institutional constraints (Chugh & Ruhi, 2021; Njoroge & Kiragu, 2022).

III. Social Media Advertising In Professional Service Firms

Professional service firms such as law, accounting and consulting organizations operate within environments where credibility and trust are central to client relationships. As a result, communication practices in these sectors differ from those in consumer-oriented industries. Studies indicate that professional service firms use social media primarily for visibility, thought leadership and knowledge dissemination rather than direct advertising (Cortez & Johnston, 2023; Sharafizad, 2025). Social media platforms such as LinkedIn are particularly favoured in professional contexts because they align with norms of expertise and professional networking (Cortez & Johnston, 2023).

Furthermore, professional service communication is often shaped by internal approval processes and hierarchical decision-making structures to ensure accuracy, professionalism and compliance with ethical standards (Sako, 2021; Boon et al., 2020). These controls create a curated communication environment where messaging is carefully managed to protect institutional reputation.

Regulatory Constraints and Legal Advertising

The legal profession has historically maintained strict controls over advertising due to concerns about professionalism, dignity and public trust. Although many jurisdictions have gradually relaxed restrictions, legal advertising remains regulated to prevent misleading claims and inappropriate solicitation (Boon et al., 2020; Wilkins & Ferris, 2022). These regulatory constraints influence how law firms adopt social media advertising, often prioritizing informational communication, expertise demonstration and thought leadership over direct promotional messaging (Sako, 2021). Consequently, legal communication increasingly reflects a balance between digital visibility and regulatory compliance.

Communication Strategies in Regulated Professional Contexts

Communication within regulated professions prioritizes clarity, accuracy and neutrality with professional service providers simplifying complex technical language to improve accessibility while maintaining credibility (Devereux et al., 2021; Sako, 2021). Tone management also plays a critical role, with professional communication emphasizing factual and informational messaging rather than emotional or exaggerated claims (Voorveld, 2020; Li et al., 2021). This approach aligns with central-route persuasion, where audiences evaluate credibility based on expertise and informational value (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Additionally, disclaimers and careful framing are commonly used to manage regulatory boundaries and protect professional reputation (Boon et al., 2020; Wilkins & Ferris, 2022).

Perceived Impact of Social Media Advertising in Professional Services

Research suggests that social media communication in professional service contexts produces indirect outcomes such as visibility, credibility and relationship-building rather than immediate client acquisition (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Jamil et al., 2022).

Clients increasingly rely on digital platforms to evaluate service providers prior to engagement, making online presence an important credibility signal (Appel et al., 2020; Macías-Urrego, 2024).

However, professional service firms often face resource constraints, regulatory uncertainty and difficulties measuring return on investment, which limit strategic integration of social media communication (Sako, 2021; Chugh & Ruhi, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

Diffusion of Innovations Theory explains adoption of communication technologies based on perceived compatibility and relative advantage (Rogers, 2003). The Theory of Reasoned Action explains behavioural intention based on attitudes and subjective norms (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). The Elaboration Likelihood Model explains how audiences process persuasive communication through central and peripheral routes (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

These theories provide a complementary framework for understanding the adoption, utilization and communication impact of social media advertising.

Research Gap

Existing literature on social media advertising largely focuses on commercial sectors, leaving regulated professional environments underexplored (Li et al., 2021; Dwivedi et al., 2021). Furthermore, limited qualitative research examines how legal service providers interpret and operationalize social media advertising within developing country contexts (Chugh & Ruhi, 2021; Njoroge & Kiragu, 2022). There is particularly limited evidence from the Kenyan legal sector, where professional regulation and institutional expectations shape digital communication practices. This study addresses this gap by examining how law firms in Nairobi County adopt, utilize and experience social media advertising as a communication channel within a regulated professional environment.

IV. Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative interpretivist research design to examine how legal service providers understand and utilize social media advertising within a regulated professional environment. The interpretivist approach was appropriate because the study sought to explore participants' meanings, experiences and interpretations of social media advertising rather than measure predetermined variables. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for investigating emerging communication practices embedded within professional and organizational contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tracy, 2020; Denzin & Lincoln, 2023).

Sampling and Participants

The study initially employed purposive sampling to select participants directly involved in managing or overseeing social media communication within selected law firms in Nairobi County, Kenya. Participants included business development managers, communication professionals, consultants, partners and support staff responsible for digital communication functions.

Snowball sampling was subsequently used to identify additional participants through professional referrals. This approach was appropriate for accessing specialized professionals within a regulated sector where participation is often limited (Noy, 2008).

Purposive and snowball sampling are appropriate for accessing specialized professional populations, particularly in regulated sectors (Palinkas et al., 2015; Parker et al., 2019). Sample size adequacy in qualitative research is typically determined by thematic saturation (Guest et al., 2020; Braun & Clarke, 2021). A total of seven participants were interviewed, each representing a different law firm.

Data Collection

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to describe their experiences while enabling probing of emerging themes (Kallio et al., 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2021). The interview guide covered adoption of social media advertising, regulatory considerations, communication strategies, perceived impact and challenges.

Interviews were conducted either in participants' offices or through virtual platforms. Each interview lasted between 20 and 40 minutes. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2022) six-phase approach. The process involved familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme development, theme review, definition of themes and interpretation. This approach enabled identification of patterned meanings relating to adoption, regulatory negotiation and communication practices.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations in qualitative research include informed consent, confidentiality and voluntary participation (Tracy, 2020; Orb et al., 2020). Participants were provided with information about the study and informed consent was obtained prior to interviews. Participation was voluntary and participants could withdraw at any time. Confidentiality was maintained by assigning participant codes (P1–P7) and removing identifying information. Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored and accessed only by the researcher.

V. Findings

Conceptualization of Social Media Advertising

Participants did not conceptualize social media as advertising in the conventional commercial sense. Instead they described it primarily as a means of enhancing professional visibility, demonstrating expertise and providing legal information to the public. Several participants indicated that overt promotional advertising was viewed as inconsistent with the professional norms governing legal practice. Consequently, social media was commonly understood as a platform for thought leadership, public education and professional engagement rather than direct solicitation.

Adoption of Social Media Platforms

Participants reported that social media adoption was primarily motivated by the need to maintain visibility and respond to changing client information-seeking behaviour. Maintaining an active online presence was perceived as increasingly important for ensuring that potential clients could locate and evaluate firms before initiating contact. Platform selection was influenced by audience characteristics, with LinkedIn consistently identified as the preferred platform for professional communication. Participants further indicated that larger firms generally adopted more structured approaches to social media management, whereas smaller firms relied on more flexible and less formalized practices. Across firms, organic content was preferred over paid advertising because it was viewed as more consistent with professional expectations.

Regulatory Influence on Social Media Advertising

Participants consistently described the regulatory environment as an important influence on social media communication. Many expressed uncertainties regarding the interpretation of existing regulations in digital environments, resulting in cautious communication practices. Rather than engaging in overt advertising, participants reported emphasizing educational content, legal updates and professional commentary that complied

with perceived professional expectations. Several firms also relied on internal review and approval processes before publishing content in order to minimize regulatory and reputational risk.

Communication Strategies and Language Use

Participants reported adapting their communication to suit digital audiences by simplifying legal terminology, using audience-appropriate language and maintaining a professional tone.

Educational content was prioritised over promotional messaging, with participants indicating that accessibility and credibility were central communication objectives. The use of disclaimers and informational framing was also common, allowing firms to distinguish general legal information from formal legal advice while maintaining compliance with professional requirements.

Perceived Impact and Challenges

Participants perceived social media as contributing primarily to professional visibility, credibility and long-term stakeholder engagement rather than immediate client acquisition. Social media was viewed as strengthening organizational reputation and maintaining ongoing professional presence within digital environments. However, participants also identified several challenges, including regulatory uncertainty, limited organizational resources and difficulties measuring the tangible outcomes of social media communication. These constraints encouraged cautious implementation and incremental development of digital communication practices.

VI. Discussion

Social Media Advertising as a Negotiated Professional Practice

The findings of this study demonstrate that social media advertising within the Kenyan legal sector is not adopted as a conventional promotional activity but is instead reconstructed as a regulated communicative practice. Law firms do not reject digital communication; rather, they redefine advertising into informational, reputational and visibility-oriented communication. This supports existing literature suggesting that professional service firms prioritize credibility and expertise over overt persuasion (Hawkins & Knake, 2019). It also aligns with research showing that organizations increasingly use social media for relationship-building, expertise signaling and informational engagement rather than direct promotional messaging (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021).

From a communication perspective, this indicates that social media advertising in regulated professions operates through indirect persuasion, where influence is achieved through knowledge-sharing rather than explicit calls to action. The findings further suggest that persuasive communication in professional contexts is shaped by institutional norms and professional expectations as much as by market considerations (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

Adoption as Conditional and Context-Dependent

The findings align strongly with Diffusion of Innovations Theory (Rogers, 2003), particularly the role of perceived compatibility in shaping adoption. Social media advertising is adopted only to the extent that it aligns with professional values of dignity, restraint and ethical conduct. The findings also support previous studies showing that adoption varies according to organizational capacity, with firms implementing different social media approaches depending on available resources and strategic priorities (Li et al., 2021).

However, the study suggests that compatibility in regulated professions is multi-layered, encompassing:

- Cultural compatibility (alignment with professional identity)
- Institutional compatibility (alignment with regulatory frameworks)

Where advertising is perceived as incompatible, it is reframed into acceptable forms such as thought leadership and educational communication. This supports research indicating that innovation in professional service firms is often incremental and strategically moderated rather than disruptive (Oliveira & Martins, 2021).

Importantly, adoption is not driven by technological enthusiasm but by environmental necessity, particularly changing client behaviour and digital search practices. This suggests a shift from voluntary innovation adoption to adaptive compliance with digital visibility expectations.

Normative Influence and Behavioural Intention

The findings further support the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), demonstrating that adoption decisions are shaped by both attitudes and subjective norms.

While participants recognized the benefits of social media visibility, their behaviour was strongly influenced by:

- Professional norms (expectations of dignity and restraint)

- Organizational leadership (partner approval and firm culture)
- Regulatory expectations (compliance with advertising rules)

These findings confirm that in regulated professional contexts, subjective norms exert stronger influence than individual attitudes. Even where positive attitudes toward digital communication exist, behavioural intention is moderated by perceived professional expectations and organizational culture.

This finding reinforces previous research indicating that professional environments encourage cautious adoption of communication innovations where ethical and reputational considerations are significant (Santos & Liguori, 2019).

Regulatory Constraint and Communication Practice

A key contribution of this study is the identification of regulation as both a constraint and structuring mechanism for communication practice. The Advocates (Marketing and Advertising) Rules, 2014 do not simply limit advertising but actively shape how communication is conceptualized and executed.

The findings show that law firms respond through:

- Indirect communication strategies (thought leadership, informational content)
- Platform selectivity (preference for LinkedIn)
- Internal self-regulation (content approval processes)

This aligns with literature on professional regulation, which suggests that organizations often develop internal governance mechanisms to navigate ambiguous regulatory environments (Moliterno, 2012). Similarly, previous studies have shown that regulatory ambiguity often encourages self-regulation and informational communication rather than direct promotional messaging (Devereaux et al., 2021).

However, the study also highlights the role of regulatory ambiguity, which leads to over-compliance and conservative communication practices. Unlike commercial sectors where ambiguity may encourage experimentation, in regulated professions it produces risk aversion and restrained innovation.

Communication Strategies and Message Processing

The findings strongly align with the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), particularly the dominance of central-route processing in professional communication.

Law firms emphasized:

- Simplified but accurate legal information
- Logical and structured explanations
- Credibility and expertise

This indicates reliance on central-route persuasion, where audiences evaluate messages based on informational quality rather than emotional or peripheral cues.

This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that communication within professional service environments prioritizes clarity, credibility and informational value over persuasive promotional appeals (Devereaux et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021).

Unlike commercial advertising, where peripheral cues such as visuals and emotional appeals are widely used, legal communication remains credibility-driven and informationally grounded. This suggests that regulatory and professional constraints limit the use of peripheral persuasion strategies, thereby shaping the nature of digital communication.

Reputational Impact and Indirect Outcomes

The findings indicate that social media advertising in the legal sector produces indirect and cumulative outcomes rather than immediate transactional results. Social media enhances visibility, credibility, trust building and long-term client engagement. This aligns with existing research showing that digital communication in professional services primarily supports relationship-building and reputation management rather than direct sales (Felix et al., 2017; Dwivedi et al., 2021).

The findings also reinforce literature suggesting that digital communication increasingly functions as a credibility signal, enabling stakeholders to evaluate professional expertise before engagement (Li et al., 2021).

The study further demonstrates that digital presence has become a proxy indicator of legitimacy, with clients using social media to evaluate firms before engagement. This represents a shift in professional communication, where reputation is increasingly constructed and maintained within digital spaces.

Social Media Advertising as a Hybrid Communication Model

Overall, the findings suggest that social media advertising in the legal sector represents a hybrid communication model combining informational communication, reputational signalling, indirect persuasion,

and regulatory compliance. Rather than adopting commercial advertising practices, law firms develop context-specific communication strategies that balance digital visibility with professional legitimacy.

This study therefore contributes to communication scholarship by illustrating how social media advertising is interpreted and operationalized differently within regulated professional environments, where communication practices are shaped by institutional norms, regulatory frameworks and professional identity.

VII. Conclusion

The study concludes that social media advertising in the Kenyan legal sector functions as a regulated communication practice emphasizing visibility and credibility. Adoption is influenced by regulatory frameworks, professional identity and organizational capacity. Social media enhances visibility and trust but operates as an indirect communication channel.

Adoption is influenced by regulatory frameworks, professional identity and organizational capacity. These findings align with research demonstrating that digital communication in professional services functions primarily as a reputational and relationship-building mechanism (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Devereux et al., 2021).

The study contributes to communication scholarship by demonstrating that social media advertising in regulated professions operates as a negotiated practice shaped by institutional norms, professional identity and regulatory expectations. This highlights the emergence of a hybrid communication model combining visibility, reputational signaling and indirect persuasion.

VIII. Recommendations

Recommendations for Practice

Law firms should adopt more structured social media communication strategies that align with professional obligations and organizational objectives. This includes investing in digital communication capacity, developing consistent educational and thought-leadership content, and using analytics to evaluate long-term communication outcomes. The Law Society of Kenya should also provide clearer guidance on the application of the Advocates (Marketing and Advertising) Rules, 2014 to social media communication and support practitioners through training and practical guidance on compliant digital communication.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies could examine social media communication across other regulated professions to facilitate comparative analysis. Quantitative research may also investigate the relationship between social media engagement and client acquisition, while longitudinal studies could explore how regulatory developments influence digital communication practices over time. Further research should also examine clients' perceptions of law firms' social media communication and the implications of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, for professional communication.

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