

INTERROGATING DIGITAL STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AS A CATALYST FOR CUSTOMER RELATIONS: A STUDY OF KENYA POWER

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Abstract

Strategic communication enables organizations to build, manage and maintain effective relationships with their stakeholders and achieve their goals. However, digital communication, characterised by rapid content generation and sharing and misinformation, poses great challenges to customer relations. The Kenya Power Company (KP) faces myriad challenges, including service disruption, vandalism, and regular power outages, which lead to inconvenience, crisis, and may jeopardise customer satisfaction. Against this backdrop, communication strategies used should be timely and accurate, manage reputational risk, build trust and enhance customer relations. The aim of this paper was to critique digital strategic communication as used to promote customer relations by Kenya Power. The research was anchored on the Relationship Management Theory of Public Relations, espoused by Ledingham and Bruning (1998), which postulates that relationships are created through the principles of commitment, two-way communication, trust, mutual benefit and reciprocity. Using a case study design, qualitative data were collected from KP's website, Facebook and X between March 2024 and May 2025. 40 KP's posts, including notices, press statements on power outages, maintenance, and disruptions; service disruptions and improvements, digital customer service and safety together with customer replies, were sampled for the study. The data was studied to identify codes, then categorised into themes and analysed using qualitative thematic content analysis. Findings show that KP has embraced digital strategic communication for customer feedback and service delivery. However, the company's digital communication is characterised by inadequate and delayed customer feedback by customer service call Centre, SMS, automated billing, and online updates; the communication is unreliable, inconsistent and lacks of commitment to customer service and leads to customer frustration and mistrust. The study concludes that poor management of digital strategic communication can contribute to a lack of customer trust, dent organizational image and jeopardize customer relations. The study recommends that KP should provide timely and consistent feedback to customers and synergize its digital communication and service delivery. KP can adopt the use of AI to strategically manage the colossal amount of data generated from digital platforms and offer real-time customer feedback and personalized communication to enhance customer relations.

Keywords: Digital communication, Strategic communication, Customer relations

Introduction

Digital strategic communication is a concept that embraces purposeful, planned use of digital communication technologies to communicate organisational messages, directly engage organizational publics and build organisational brand to achieve organisational goals (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007). The use of digital communication has several advantages to organisations. It enables organisations to construct and share compelling messages with a wide range of their stakeholders using limited costs, encourages personalised communication between organization and their customers, and promotes consistency in message construction, thereby enhancing organizational brand and reputation (Zerfass et al., 2018).

Business ecosystem in the current digital era is characterised by high competition, a highly demanding, more informed customer base, which shapes how organisations manage their communication and the overall customer relations. At the same time, digital communication has transformed how organizations manage their communication. For instance, using social media, organizations receive and provide timely feedback to their customers, monitor customer perceptions, attitudes, needs and preferences, and offer support, thereby promoting customer relations.

According to LiveAgent (2024), customer Relations Management (CRM) involves fostering connections through support, quality, communication, and personalisation to improve loyalty and satisfaction. It focuses on the entire relationship lifecycle, individual interactions, providing customers with better benefits, strengthening consumer relationships and cultivating trust and loyalty over time.

Customer relations improve customer satisfaction and loyalty. According to the expectations-disconfirmation model of customer satisfaction, customers get satisfied if their expectations are met. However, if they believe that they are not met, they get dissatisfied (Buttle & Maklan, 2019). Besides,

trust and commitment play a crucial role in customer satisfaction. Trust is developed from shared experiences, and when parties evaluate each other's intentions over time, it ultimately creates a strong bond. Commitment, which stems from trust, shared values and beliefs, encourages stakeholder collaboration and maintenance of relationships (Buttle & Maklan, 2019). Therefore, using feedback to understand customers' preferences, likes, and dislikes can enhance customer insight, strengthen relationships, and build trust.

Classical CRM emphasized advertising and employee capabilities to meet client needs, interact and build positive relationships. Traditionally, organizations depended on manual record-keeping and personal relationships when handling customers. This was changed by the rise of database marketing in the 1980s. However, with evolving technological trends in the business ecosystem and customer needs, these capabilities are no longer sustainable (Nilashi et al., 2023). By the 1990s, dedicated CRM software emerged, automating sales and customer service functions. The early 2000s saw the integration of analytical tools, allowing businesses to derive insights from customer behaviour. Coupled with globalization and competition in the business industry, organizations are now adopting new CRM strategies. With the advent of social media in the 2010s, CRM expanded into Social CRM, facilitating real-time engagement with customers, including through digital strategic communication.

Kihima and Ong'onga (2024) studied the use of social media as a strategic tool for communication in corporates and found that social media strategies positively influenced brand perception and customer satisfaction, and loyalty. The study found that Crestwood used interactive posts and real-time responses that built a stronger connection between the brand and its customers, enhancing customer satisfaction. Similarly, Lukhanyu (2022) found that the use of digital communication such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp by KCB bank enhanced the achievement of corporate communication goals.

According to Durdeyev and Serdar et al. (2018), some of the factors that positively influence customer satisfaction, which in turn affect future customer behaviour, are reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles. The researchers define reliability as the supplier's readiness to assist in problem-solving, the punctual and formal delivery of services as promised, and the regular provision of progress updates to the client. Responsive organizations enhance reliability by demonstrating a commitment to helping clients and keeping them informed about service timelines and any potential delays.

Despite its effectiveness in managing crises in online environments, CRM in the digital era faces various challenges which might compromise an organisation's reliability and responsiveness. Studies show that organisations face challenges of managing the influx of customer interactions churned within the digital arenas to meet organisational goals (Saurwein, 2022; Jain et al, 2023; Kishore et al., 2023). A study by Kihima, and Ong'ong'a (2024) found that Crestwoods experienced challenges with response time and managing the increased customer inquiries. This leads to delayed feedback, customer assistance and providing personalised experiences.

As organisations expand their customer base and leverage technological affordances, personalised interactions become complex. Macnamara and Zerfass (2012) observe that many organisations lack a clear understanding of how to communicate strategically within these open digital platforms. Badham et al. (2022) observe that strategic communication within the digital arenas poses both opportunities and challenges to strategic communicators. Most organisations leveraging digital communication use a variety of digital platforms. However, integration of messages across all media platforms and data sources, and filtering through the deluge of data to extract meaningful insights that promote organisational goals, presents a daunting task (Kishore et al., 2023; Yuan, 2023; Ziakis & Vlachopoulou, 2023).

Despite these challenges, the field of Public Relations communication still largely relies on graphical user interfaces (GUIs) that were developed in the 10th century. According to Moore and Hubsher (2022), PR (strategic communication) is currently limited; "there are more ways for PR to deliver a message, invoke a feeling, and shape a decision" (p.2). However, this remains underutilised. Kihima and Ong'ong'a (2024) found that Crestwoods company developed FAQ content to manage the influx of customer inquiries, which improved customer interaction efficiency.

Currently, the digital platforms act as Interfaces where people and organisations meet. Additionally, the rise of AI now brings in a new phenomenon of Intelligent (Artificial) User Interfaces, which can interpret what users mean and want. Intelligent User Interfaces (AI) are rapidly learning human actions like persuasion, sympathy, to encourage, scrutinise and play. Muck Rack report (2024) indicates a growing trend in the use of AI in PR. An online survey showed that 40% of PR tasks now employ assistive AI (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2023).

Moore and Hubsher (2022) opine that Intelligent User Interfaces (IUIs) have the potential to strengthen PR functions by connecting audiences to organisations, delivering messages, gathering opinions and data, creating new audience identities, and co-creating messages with specific target audiences, resulting in more personalised communication. Since customers in the digital era expect seamless, real-time actions from their shared experiences, organisations can leverage AI to deliver meaningful, real-time customer feedback and experience. These include the use of AI-powered sentiment analysis tools, which can analyse customer conversations and reviews, measure public opinion and personalise content. AI can enhance efficiency in almost all activities of PR, including quick data analysis, navigating through noise to extract the most important data and adaptability for strategic communication (Sachs Media, 2023).

Kenya Power is a state corporation with the sole mandate of electricity distribution to over 9.6 million registered customers in Kenya. The company plays a crucial role in promoting socio-economic development in the country through energy distribution. In recent years, the company has faced challenges of reliability emanating from incessant service disruptions and frequent power blackouts (Gloria, 2023; Daniel, 2024). Major outages have become common, with notable instances occurring in August 2023, December 2023, May 2024, and December 2024. Kenya Power also faces public complaints from customers, widespread power theft, and vandalism of infrastructure, which point towards poor customer relations. Amidst this, the company experiences immense pressure to meet customer expectations in service delivery, build public trust, and manage customer relationships.

The company has made efforts to leverage technology, including the adoption of mobile payment systems (Mypower), online complaint management platforms, automated metering, a self-service portal for billing and payments, SMS and email alerts for outage notifications and billing updates. The company uses a mobile app for account management and official social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook) for public interaction and complaints handling- all geared towards service efficiency, streamlining customer interactions and improved customer satisfaction.

However, studies on KP's communication and customer-related services reveal conflicting findings. Kiarie (2014) studied technological innovation and customer satisfaction in Kenya Power and found that customers were familiar with most technological innovations, including query service, mobile payments, and SMS alerts. The study indicated that customers were satisfied with technological innovations at KP. However, the study sample was taken from those visiting Kenya Power banking halls, which might contribute to biased responses (Kiarie, 2014).

Nashappi, Omari, and Nyamona (2014) studied factors affecting customer satisfaction at Kenya

Power, revealing stark contrasts with Kiarie's findings. Their study indicated that customers were uncertain about receiving SMS notifications for power outages and disruptions. Furthermore, while customers tended to report issues promptly, the company was slow in addressing and resolving these complaints. The study concluded that customers felt dissatisfied with the organisation's ability to respond to their issues.

Years later, Wanjiru (2017) found that KPLC effectively used Facebook for crisis communication, allowing direct engagement during emergencies, though they received mixed feedback, including sarcasm and anger. Another study by Wanjiku and Njugunga (2024) reported effective communication and alignment of KP activities with its mission at Kenya Power headquarters. Similarly, Ogwel (2024) showed that respondents viewed KP's service delivery positively and noted prompt response to customer needs. However, their sample was exclusively KPLC employees, which could lead to bias.

The conflicting findings in these studies could be attributed to variations in focus and methodologies. However, this makes it difficult to gauge KP's digital strategic communication to address challenges facing its customer relations, especially considering its pivotal role in socio-economic development and huge customer base.

This study set out to evaluate how Kenya Power uses digital strategic communication to promote and enhance customer relations. The study was anchored on Relationship Management Theory (RMT), which emphasises the significance of building and nurturing trust and loyalty between organisations and their stakeholders over time. Customer relations was evaluated against the principles of RMT, which include Commitment, Two-way Communication, Trust, Reciprocity, and Mutual Benefit.

RMT emphasizes that in a relationship, communication should be reciprocal. Digital communication enables organization to engage in a two-way symmetric communication with their

customers, thereby enhancing relationships. Secondly, trust is built through honest and timely service delivery, including communication. Organizations can create mutual benefits by providing value to customers while receiving loyalty and feedback in return. Similarly, reciprocal behaviour such as rewards, goodwill and exchanging benefits can enhance customer loyalty and trust. In this study, RMT provides a roadmap for examining the application of principles of relationship management in KP's digital strategic communication.

Research methodology

This study was carried out through a case study design focusing on digital content from KP's digital platforms. The case study design enabled an in-depth inquiry of KP's customer relations as it naturally occurs in their natural setting -online interactions- which would otherwise be difficult if other study designs and methods were used. Qualitative data was collected from KP's website, X, and Facebook platforms between March 2024 and May 2025. The selected conversations reflected relations between the organisation and their customers during challenging times. The period experienced massive power outages; thus, considered suitable for understanding how KP relates with its customers and how it utilises digital communication to promote customer relations amidst the challenges. 40 posts by KP on X, which is the most interactive digital platform of the three, were first sampled. Only posts on X that attracted over twenty thousand views were sampled because they were considered to have attracted a lot of customer attention and elicited reactions. Reliability was achieved through comparing posts on the three platforms. To achieve data triangulation, posts from X, Facebook and KP website were checked for similarity and consistency of KP's posts and customer replies. While X and Facebook attracted enormous customer replies, the website does not have feedback functionality, but has KP's posts, such as press statements. Sampled content from the three digital platforms included notices and press statements on power maintenance, disruptions, and

outages; service disruptions and improvements; digital customer services and notices of public safety. Content posted by KP and their replies were carefully studied to identify codes and salient themes. Recurrent patterns from the content were grouped into themes such as customer feedback, commitment, reliability, customer satisfaction, trust and loyalty, and billing. Using an inductive approach, the identified themes were analysed based on the principles of RMT earlier identified in the literature. Data was presented using narration and quotes. The study ensured confidentiality and anonymity by blurring personal information such as contacts and meter details on the online posts.

Results and discussions

Customer feedback and Two-way communication

This study found that KP regularly uses its website, Facebook and X for two-way communication with customers on regular updates. KP posts press releases, notices and alerts informing customers about power disruptions, outages, maintenance, and customer services such as self-service, how to buy tokens, and apply for a power meter on their digital platforms. Customers also give feedback, including requests for service restoration, service disruptions from power outages, risks, and service delivery.

Findings show a considerable delay in responses to customer concerns, and a lack of feedback from KP's customer service call Centre, SMS, and even tweets, which could damage customer relations. On 27th January, 2025, KP posted a customer service message on X:

We are here for you 24/7!

Do you have questions about your electricity bill or power supply? Reach out to our call center for quick, professional assistance anytime, anywhere. Experience seamless support with a dedicated team ready to help

This was followed by the following replies from customers:

have called the customer care line and reported using the USSD code, no response. We're the only ones without power, please assist.

*It's been 3 days without electricity. I have called several times with no help. My meter no 5*****8. Migaa road. Kiserian near ack church.*

The study found that KP informs customers to send DM (direct message), but the customers reply that KP does not respond to the direct messages. Lack of feedback was found across KP's digital communication channels, including SMS, call centre and customer care services as shown by customer posts on X and Facebook as shown in Fig.1.

Customer: I have contacted you guys and you have refused to pick my calls

Dms bamjibu skuizi?

Customer: This guys are NOT, Talking, Responding, Replying, Smsing, Calling, Answering,

Figure 1

Customer's post on Facebook showing KP's lack of response to calls



This study also found that KP replies to customers on X, but stops as more customers keep tweeting. In October 2024, KP posted an alert on power disruptions (Figure 2). The post on X attracted 30.6 thousand views and 176 replies. KP replied to eight consecutive tweets; however, as more complaints came in, KP stopped replying. This could be

attributed to the large amount of data generated in the replies.

Customer 1: i have used @KeEquityBank Equity Mobile App some time back today, and I have not received any notification. @KenyaPower_Care Kindly assist.

KP: Hi. Apologies. Kindly DM your meter number, phone number used and transaction details for assistance.

Customer: Please help by sharing with me the token number for the 2k I paid over 5 hours ago for meter number XXXXX it is still not showing on the mypower app.

KP: Hi. The token has not yet been processed. We shall send it to you once it vends. Apologies for the inconvenience incurred. ^ DB

Why can't you

@KenyaPower_Care@KenyaPower

have another alternative of getting tokens rather than relying on this unreliable 888880 way of buying tokens

Figure 2

KP's customer alert on X



These findings show KP faces challenges in offering customer feedback and real-time two-way communication, which might lead to customers' interpretation as a lack of commitment. Lack of feedback on customer calls, SMS and tweets could

be attributed to KP's inability to process the large amount of data generated through digital communication platforms. The findings confirm Jain et al. (2023), who observe that interactions from social media generate a deluge of data, which is challenging to manage and analyse and derive actionable insights.

However, the study found that incessant lack of customer feedback and poor customer service by KP, could lead to customer frustration and may contribute to poor customer relations as shown in Figure 3. below.

Figure 3

Customers' posts on X and Facebook showing poor customer service by KP.



Commitment to customer service

Findings show that while KP uses various digital platforms to enhance its communication with customers. However, customer replies showed that it lacks a strong commitment to providing customer service on these channels. The Customer Service section of the KP website states.

'We aim to support our valued customers with the successful integration of the Integrated Customer Management System into daily operations.'

Further, KP outlines steps for self-service on their website as shown below;

*How to query your power bill via *977# USSD code.*

This service is available for all mobile phone users.

- *Dial *977# on your mobile phone.*
- *For prepaid services (tokens), select option 1, then select option 4 'Manage meters' then select 'add meter to profile' then select 'input meter numbers' and follow the prompts.*
- *For postpaid services (meter), select option 2, select 'my bill' then input your account number.*

Whereas KP posts their commitment to customer service on Facebook and X account (@kenyapower_care) as shown in fig.4, this study found inconsistencies between digital communication on customer service and customer experience, as depicted by several customers' feedback. The post attracted 28.1 thousand views and 83 replies.

Figure 4

KP's post on online customer service



*Customer: **This number is not working** when you raise an incident the only answer you get is we have booked your complaints but no http://action. One thing kplc should do is to train your staff to have the moral value to just to do the work.*

*Customer: But **complaints posted there are not acted upon**. Ni number tu mnapeana then zip.*

*Customer: Used this channel to report **Still following up on a blackout incident reported now three days in Kisumu City**. Incident reference number <http://xxxxxx.Am> not yet sorted. Kindly help.*

On December 27th 2024 a customer replied on X;

@KenyaPower if I sue you guys will you let me win the case? because you've been wasting my time,energy,airtime and losing business just because of your woeful services.

If you can't provide me with lights you might as well let me bag some money from you guys. DEAL?

This study found that KP answers some customer messages, however, social media allows stakeholder interactions without organizational control, unlike owned media. In this case organizations like KP lose control of ownership of their digital platform resulting to both anticipated and unanticipated outcomes. This lack of control may lead to distortion of messages and creation of hate mongering and dent the image of the organization. In this study customers consistently mention that KP does not respond to their messages which perpetuates a narrative that KP lacks commitment to customer needs.

Customer Trust and Loyalty

KP utilizes digital communication to strategically inform customers about fake digital communication, misinformation, fraudsters and how to handle such incidents. This is also meant to ensure customer trust on their services and maintain loyalty. Nonetheless, findings of this study show a lack of customer trust in KP's communication including warnings against online misinformation. This is depicted in customer negative replies on KP's well-intentioned messages warning the public against fraud. The customers'

replies on X depicting KP as liars indicate distrust of the company, its employees and communication.

On December, 20th 24 and January 24 2025, KP informed customers on X to be vigilant of fraudsters and misinformation about job opportunities at KP. The post on fake job opportunity (fig.5) attracted 30 replies, 28.1k views, while the one on fake news attracted 293 replies and 272.5k views.

Figure 5

KP's warnings against misinformation



The replies show a lack of customer trust in KP employees, whom they refer to as the fraudsters. The customers also blame KP for the rise of fraudsters.

Customer: 'these commen are many who install faulty boxes that go off after a couple

of months, some of these commen are your staff'.

Customer: Beware of commen and you know them!!! Wakenya sio wajinga bana!!! Sisi sio matako yenu nani!!!

Customer:

Figure 6

Customer reply showing lack of trust



Customer: This commen pitch tent bere due to your lethbargic inept and deaf attitude towards customer attendance in this vital service ... We started complaining about weekly phase failures aeons ago and it never gets solved ... 🙄😭

Customer: If KPLC technicians and teams could be diligent, top of the game, commen couldn't be an issue ... It's so sad to be coming to your pages complaining not getting fed with updates. Stop them by being serious and UpTo the game.

Similar comments were found on Facebook where a customer asked whether KP agents on Facebook are commen. Other Facebook users were in affirmation, as shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7

customer's posts on Facebook showing fraud at KP



Lack of trust is also found in customers' scepticism about KP's notices and reassurances to provide solutions to the disruptions. On December 18 2024, KP posted a press statement on X about a widespread power outage and reassured customers that it would be resolved, as shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8

KP's post on widespread power outage



Despite the reassurance, customer replies to this post (fig.8) showed scepticism and a lack of customer trust in the company.

Customer: Tumekaa 1 hr bila stima na bado "the cause is yet to be determined"? Kwani what kind of engineers are you people hiring?

Customer: @KenyaPower_Care & @KenyaPower's notice is all smoke, no light. A nationwide outage with 'cause yet to be determined'? Kenyans deserve clarity, timelines, and accountability—not vague apologies at 1 AM.

Customer: Have you guys realised that it's only the date which has been changed? This is the same statement from the last blackout.

Another post about a power outage on September 6th 2024, by CS Energy & Petroleum on a partial power outage received similar comments showing a lack of customer trust in KP.

"Today, Friday 6th September 2024 at 8.56 am, the 220kV High Voltage Loiyangalani transmission line tripped at Suswa substation while evacuating 288MW from Lake Turkana Wind Power (LTWP) plant. This was followed by a trip on the Ethiopia–Kenya 500kV DC interconnector that was then carrying 200MW, resulting to a total loss of 488MW..."

Replies to the post were as follows.

Kila wakati mkiwa na shida munaakea lake turkana wind power why ueni serious bana na life.

This script is now monotonous for nationwide blackouts. Putting the exceptions to remove the notion of countrywide yet the exceptions have no power too or has Eldoret shifted since the upgrade 😊😊

Change the script man 😊

Some customer replies to notices of power outage were humorous and sarcastic:

Customer: The cause is yet to be determined? Incompetent by birth!

Customer: Nowadays, everything is fake.... You can never tell even about the blackouts until it happens to you then you know for sure, bakuna stima. 😊😊😊

Customer: Kama Lake Turkana Wind power ingekuwa mtu angekuwa amejinyonga baki. Kila wakati Lake Turkana Wind power. (If L. Turkana were a human being, it would commit suicide. Every time you blame L. Turkana).

According to Buttle and Maklan (2019), trust and commitment are the glue that holds relationships. Trust influences the value judgment that customers place on an organisation with which they relate, and a lack of it could lead to disloyalty. This study found customers' lack of loyalty, as shown in their replies to KP's posts below.

Customer: Our trust in & support for you be damned! KP, it's after midnight in Upper Matasia, and power's on & off like Christmas lights.. Reasons?! Ref no xxxxxx

Customer: I wish we had other options there's no way for the rest of our lives we're gonna have just this company. High cost of electricity & poor infrastructure while still posting profits. Argh!

Mutual benefit

On Facebook and X, customers mention that KP benefits more than it should by charging unrealistic, extra or illegal billing. Digital technologies however enable KP to offer an explanation to counter these statements shown as follows.

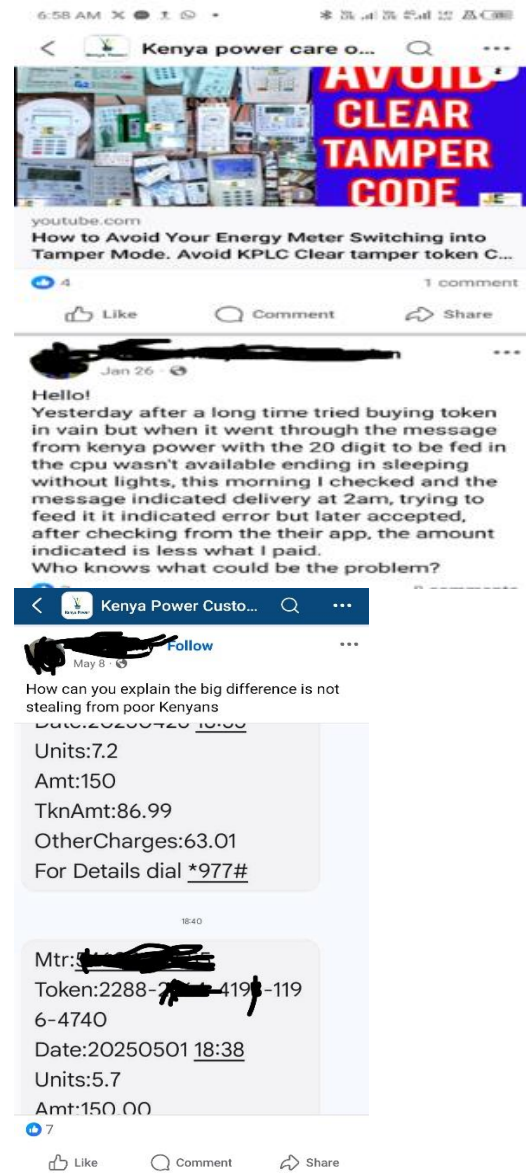
Why is Kenya power giving me less token this day from 9.9 to 7.9 where are you taking my 2 point 👉. Kenya power is aware of your actions

And why do we get charged a whole 10 shillings to request about delayed token messages.

Customer: Why do I get less tokens and my neighbor gets more 😞😞.for 500 I get 17.5 units but my neighbor gets 25 units . This is not fair. kindly explain to me like a small kid ,make me understand 😞

KP: Thanks for reaching out! We have three bands of tariffs for domestic clients, and it's possible that your neighbour is on a different band. To assist you further, could you please share your meter number?Looking forward to helping you. ^ GL

Similar sentiments about unknown charges were expressed on Facebook as shown in Figure 9.



On March 4 2025, KP posted on X a press release stating reduction in the cost of electricity; however, customers reply indicated scepticism about the charges.

Customer: 500 ksh first 24 units second 25 and last 20 nyinyi ni wezi.

*Customer: Reducing where? Kwenu? Because where I sit KSh. 500 used to buy 19 tokens but it's been down to 17 tokens for the last 1 year! ***! Ongezeni bei tukutane kwa systems zenu*

Customer: Please clarify, did you mean reduction of units for the same amount or can

Figure 9

Customer complaints on KP charges

someone explain this, perhaps there is something I missed but this doesn't make sense to me at all.

The study found that KP uses digital spaces to educate customers on tariffs, billing, other charges and how to avoid unnecessary bills. Despite this, customers have a perception that their bills and the costs of tokens are unrealistic and unfair. This perception could be attributed to a lack of trust in the company. According to Grunig and Hunt (1984), providing value to customers can lead to customer loyalty. In this study, however, since KP customers experience numerous blackouts, they receive varied charges thus perceive that they do not receive value for their money. This might contribute to their perception that KP lacks transparency in billing. Communication of these negative perceptions through digital spaces may reinforce negative perceptions about the company leading to poor customer relations.

Customer satisfaction

This study examined customer satisfaction as expressed through their online communication, particularly Facebook and X (formerly Twitter). The results revealed a substantial level of dissatisfaction with the company's service delivery, digital communication, and customer support. Customers expressed delayed service delivery, inconsistent communication, which have led to customer frustration and apathy.

On December 18, 2024, Kenya Power issued a press statement about widespread power outage (Fig. 8). Customers' replies to the post on X showed their dissatisfaction and portrayed the company as negligent and ineffective, highlighting ongoing challenges in managing customer relations.

Customer: @KenyaPower_Care you now need to be serious with your clients. It's over 24hrs without power kindly check and deal with your client issues concerning power blackouts. Our line has got an issue and you need to check it out ASAP. The area within Maseno-Nyawita.

Customer: However you come up with several means of channelling incidents it will not work unless your employees have ethics kubudumia wananchi.

Customer: @KenyaPower_Care & @KenyaPower's notice is all smoke, no light. A nationwide outage with 'cause yet to be determined'? Kenyans deserve clarity, timelines, and accountability—not vague apologies at 1 AM.

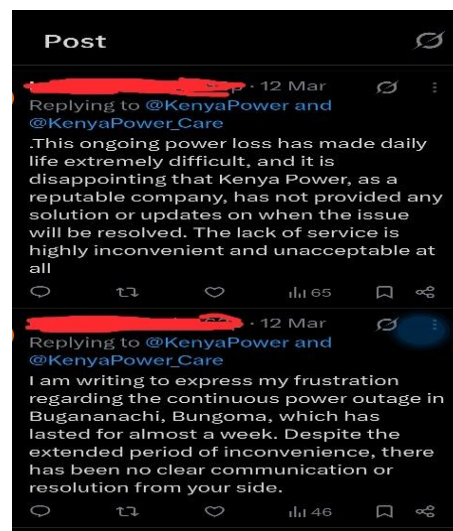
Customer: Kenya Power, powering darkness

You need a competition...monopoly is destroying power supply and consistency in this country

Customers dissatisfaction is also expressed through their frustrations with power outages and poor customer service as shown in Fig. 10 below.

Figure 10

post on X showing customer dissatisfaction





The study found that causes of customer dissatisfaction were inconsistencies between the company's communication and actual service delivery, persistent service disruptions and poor customer service. Press statements indicating that power and token updates have been restored were inconsistent with actual services. This portrayed KP as unreliable and contribute to poor customer relations.

Figure 11

Posts on Facebook showing customer dissatisfaction



These findings are consistent with Nashappi et al. (2014), who showed customer dissatisfaction with Kenya Power's responsiveness. Customers reported issues quickly, but the company was slow to address them. According to Durdeyev and Serdar et al. (2018), reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles positively impact customer satisfaction, which influences loyalty. Ultimately, these findings show that KP's unreliable services contribute to customer frustration, which could hamper customer relations.

Reciprocity

The study found that KP expressed reciprocity through apologies, messages of goodwill and season greetings during festive seasons like Christmas and New Year. KP was also concerned about customer safety. Despite this, there was limited show of reciprocity from KP's customers, majority of whom threw banter at KP as shown in the posts. Season's greetings and new year wishes from Kenya Power read as follows.

KP: Thank you for your trust and support throughout the year. Here's to another year of powering possibilities! #HappyNewYear #PoweringKenyans

Customer reply read as follows.

Customer: No electricity in Kyeleni for the last four days. We don't see any powering possibilities.

Customer: Our Christmas is not merry at all. How can you leave us in darkness for two weeks in the name of a transformer is going for maintenance. This is very wrong Kenya Power. Do something asap

In many instances, KP apologizes for the inconvenience; however, most customers do not reciprocate, instead they give sarcastic replies in return, as shown below.

Customer: Replies zimejaa apologies from this company. Hamuoni mkona shida kubwa within yourselves?

Customer: Kenya Powerless and Blackout Company, your time is up.

How long is 'partial' ffs!! 🚧

Nonetheless, this study found some instances of customer appreciation of KP and their communication.

Customer: Happy new year Too...Keep Powering Possibilities..

Customer: Thank You So Much Kenya Power The Efforts You Have Put forth has impacted alot on Everyone's Life not

only disseminating power but right from CSR... #BeingbestcompanyAlways we Love You ❤️

Customer: Stima imerudi... Congratulations Kenya Power for the efforts you've made

Some customers also showed reciprocation by replying to KP's call for public safety. In return, they posted photos of dangerous electric posts in different parts of the country on X and Facebook as shown in fig. 12 below. Unlike on X, customers on Facebook appreciated KP's communication of goodwill.

Figure 12

Posts about public safety on X and Facebook





Durdeyev and Serdar et al. (2018) observe that, assurance, empathy, and tangibles have a positive impact on customer satisfaction, which determines customer behaviour, such as reciprocity and loyalty. These findings show that when KP shows empathy and concern, customers reciprocate by giving positive feedback. However, the limited appreciation by customers could be attributed to the high frequency of unreliable services such as token update delays, delayed feedback and incessant power blackouts.

This study found that KP utilises digital strategic communication to engage customers in a two-way symmetrical communication. However, their digital communication was characterised by delay across all their digital communication channels, including customer service call Centre, SMS and press statements. Customers expressed delayed communication of power disruption and restoration, failed responses to direct messages (DM) and failure to pick up calls on direct lines. There was also limited personalised communication with customers who complained that their several attempts to reach KP were futile. The study also found inconsistencies in KP's digital communication and service delivery; whereas KP consistently reminded customers to use their digital service lines, such as *977# and report faulty power lines, customers' replies indicate that KP did not provide timely response to their calls and concerns. These lead to customer frustrations, dissatisfaction,

and distrust, which could jeopardise customer relations.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study therefore concludes that poor management of digital communication can contribute to customer frustrations, a lack of customer trust, damage organisational image and jeopardise customer relations. The study recommends that KP should harmonise its digital communication across all its digital platforms, provide timely and consistent feedback to customers and harmonize its digital strategic communication with service delivery. KP can adopt the use of AI to strategically manage the colossal amount of data generated from digital platforms to offer real-time customer feedback and personalised communication to enhance customer relations.

This study contributes to adaptability in contemporary digital strategic communication management. By providing a critique of digital strategic communication as it is practised, the study adds knowledge on how digital arenas shape customer perceptions of trust, satisfaction and customer relations. The qualitative thematic analysis enabled the study to gain in-depth inquiry and analysis of customer perceptions in their natural occurrence. However, the study was limited to online content, which could lead to bias in analysis since customers may take advantage of digital anonymity in their communication. Further research can integrate online content with personal interviews of respondents for further comparison and a deeper understanding of digital strategic communication and customer relations.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

While preparing this document, the authors used ChatGPT for grammar and spell check; nonetheless, the edited content was reviewed by the authors, who assume full responsibility for the publication's content.

Declaration of funding sources

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Marren: Conceptualisation, revising the draft, Methodology, Data curation, Discussion, conclusion and recommendation, Review and editing. Sharon, Ishmael, Lisaa, Haron and Vanessa - Writing – original draft, editing.

Declaration of conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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