IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON FURNITURE CUSTOMISATION BY LOCAL CRAFTSMEN IN NAIROBI, KENYA

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ABSTRACT

Background: The furniture market in Kenya was estimated to be around US$ 496 million in 2013. The jua kali (informal) sector held over a third of the sales which estimated to about US$ 160 million with a 10% compound annual growth rate. (Creapo Oy, 2015). This sector majorly consists of local craftsmen who have refined their skills through apprenticeship - a hand-on and experience-based informal way of education. (Maina, Rukwaro & Onyango, 2017) The rise of social media in recent years has impacted many industries, and the furniture design industry is no exception. The increasing influence of the internet and social media platforms has shifted the field of furniture design by making inspirations and ideas globally accessible. It has also led to a growing demand for personalised, custom-made furniture. (Gomes, 2024). **Problem:** In Kenya, customised furniture from the formals sector is often expensive and out of reach for many people. As a result, local craftsmen in the informal sector play a crucial role in meeting this demand for affordable, tailored furniture. However, not many have the machinery or skills to produce some of these designs. **Objective:** The main objective of the study was to investigate how social media platforms have led to the rising interest in customized furniture made by local craftsmen. **Design:** The study employed a survey research design using a mixed-methods approach that included desktop research, interviews, and field observations. **Setting:** The setting for the study was in Nairobi along Ngong Road Corner near Be Energy Racecourse Gas Station. This

area was selected due to the concentration of skilled local furniture craftsmen. **Subjects:** The respondents of this study included local craftsmen along Ngong Road, designers and customers. **Results:** The findings showed that social media platforms not only increased the reach of local craftsmen to the market but also the standards and expectations for furniture customisation. It also highlights the new found appreciation of customers for the local craftsmen in regards to their skilled workmanship, time and effort put into creating a piece. **Conclusion:** This study underscored the role of social media in influencing consumer behaviour and with the continued growth of social media, the demand for customised furniture will continue to increase.

Keywords: ***Furniture customisation, local craftsmen, social media***

INTRODUCTION

Gilbert O. Ototo and Richard P. Vlosky stated in their article "*Deconstructing Innovation in the Wood Furniture Industry in Kenya*" that the furniture industry, specifically, the wood furniture industry in Kenya is a major driving socioeconomic sector when it comes to employment, manufacturing, revenue and the additional value to both the rural and urban areas (Ototo and Vlosky, 2023).

The World Bank Group in 2013 estimated the Kenyan Furniture market at about US$ 496 million in sales, with a 10% compound annual growth rate (CAGR) between 2009 and 2013. This growth came about due to urbanisation, construction of both commercial and residential spaces and economic growth which were observed to continuously grow over the course of recent years (Creapo Oy, 2015).

Kenya's furniture industry is divided into 3 groups namely;

- The jua kali furniture sector (Informal furniture sector)
- Formal furniture sector
- Imported furniture sector

The jua kali sector accounts for more than a third of market sales with an approximate value of US$ 160 million, and is growing at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 10%. The imported sector represents 13% of sales, amounting to US$ 66 million with a CAGR of 24% between 2009 and 2013. Thus, the fastest growing sector among the three. Lastly, the formal sector holds the largest market share at 60%. However, it is also the slowest growing with a CAGR of 8% (Creapo Oy, 2015)

Social media platforms, in recent years, have played a key role in how businesses and people connect and communicate with one another. The Kenyan furniture industry is no exception. According to Statistica, 37 million Kenyan are able to have internet access in 2025 and this figure is projected to increase to 61 million by 2029. The use of social media had a dramatic increase between the years 2014 to 2024 growing from 31 million users to three times the amount by 2023. The most commonly used platforms identified were WhatsApp, TikTok and Instagram. The least used platforms were Snapchat and Facebook Messenger although it is important to note that there was a rise in Facebook users from 2018 to 2025. The most used websites were Goggle with 170 million visits and YouTube with 80 million visits (Cowling, 2025).

The manner in which social media platforms have become easily accessible has influenced the furniture industry through customers and craftsmen alike. This is observed in the manner in which they connect as well as providing DIY projects (do-it-yourself) as affordable options (Nauradika.com Staff, 2023).

Influencers are also key players in transforming the furniture industry through social media, redefining how we envision our spaces. The spark curiosity and encourage self-expression in design among their viewers (Elevate, 2025).

Problem Statement

This continuous rise in social media has led to an increased demand for furniture customisation among the public. In Kenya, customised furniture from the formals sector is often expensive and out of reach for many people. As a result, local craftsmen in the informal sector play a crucial role in meeting this demand for affordable, tailored furniture. However, not many have the machinery or skills to produce some of these designs.

Usage	Type of Furniture
Depending on where it is used	Interior or exterior furniture
Depending on individual or collective use	Personal furniture, urban furniture, industrial furniture
If the furniture units are combined side by side, one over another or connected to each other	Modular furniture
Depending on the geographical region they are shaped	English, Italian and Scandinavian furniture
If they are produced with lamination technique and through the modelling of laminated and wood materials	Laminated furniture
If they are made to serve different purposes	Multi-functional furniture
If they are manufactured according to the style before or after the industrial period	Classical or modern furniture
Depending on its mounting	Demounted or mounted furniture
Depending on how it can be used	Fixed or movable furniture
If it is designed for specific areas	Kitchen, living room, bedroom, Office furniture etc.
Based on its style	Rustic, avantgarde etc. furniture
Depending on the material used	Wood, panel, wicker furniture etc.

Figure 1: Furniture Classification (Kagin and Demir, 2017)

Objectives

The *main objective* for the study was to investigate how social media platforms have led to the rising interest in customized furniture made by local craftsmen.

Other objectives also included:

- To understand what factors are to be considered during furniture customisation
- To explore the impact of social media on design

Scope

The study was based in Nairobi along Ngong Road Corner near Be Energy Racecourse Gas Station. This area was selected due to the concentration of skilled local furniture craftsmen.

THEORY

Furniture Design and Customisation Trends

Kaygin and Demir (2017) have stated in their article "The Importance of User-Centred Design in Furniture" that furniture can be classified according to their function, area they are used, structure, purpose, styles, materials and top surface treatment.

Factors to Consider when Involved in Customised Furniture Making

When it comes to making customized furniture, it is important to note that each piece is unique and that there are key factors that play a role in making the furniture not only to the client's style but also functional and durable. Some of these factors include:

1. The Design Style and Functionality

When customizing a furniture piece or set, it is important to ensure that the chosen style aligns with the design of the space in which you intend to have it. This could be taking into consideration elements such as patterns, colours, themes (minimal, African, industrial, contemporary etc). Having customized furniture pieces that complement the overall interior design look of a space gives the space a sense of harmony to the space (Bret, 2021).

Functionality is also a key feature to consider. When customizing, functionality is a critical feature to ensure that your furniture is designed to cater to your needs and offer maximum use as well. Be it for storage, space saving or even multipurpose (Bret, 2021).

2. Materials

Here, you have the flexibility to select materials for your furniture which could boost both comfort and style. Such could include wood (oak, walnut, teak, Meru, pine), upholstery (cotton, leather, wool), metal, glass and even eco-friendly materials such as bamboo and reclaimed wood. (Bret, 2021).

3. Size and Dimensions

When custom-making your own furniture pieces, it is important to ensure that you have the correct measurements that are required to avoid wasting materials and also the

furniture not fitting right in the space. (Kigen, 2024).

4. Budget

Having a budget allows one to be mindful when it comes to cost efficient decision making in terms of materials used, labour and specific custom feature to be applied in the design. Such could include storage, finishes or hardware accessories. (Bret, 2021).

5. Durability and Maintenance

When choosing materials and the type of finishes wanted, it is important to note the longevity of the final product as well as how the product will be maintained to ensure that it does not wear and tear quickly. (Bret, 2021).

6. Craftsmanship

Having a skilled craftsman will ensure that your furniture is made in a manner that has high quality joinery that will be sturdy and log-lasting and who will also pay attention to details of the design. (Kigen, 2024).

6. Legal and Safety Standards

Depending on the type of furniture made and the user (e.g. children) measures must be taken such as ensuring that the materials are non-toxic and without sharp edges. Regulations governing the industry must also be adhered to.

The Impact of Social Media Platforms on Design

The rising influence of the internet and social media has significantly transformed interior design by making inspiration easily accessible and encouraging direct interaction between designers and the public. Platforms such as Instagram and Pinterest allow users to instantly explore trends and styles, while also facilitating conversations that shape design decisions. As trends evolve more quickly, designers are compelled to be increasingly flexible and responsive. Additionally, social media has played a key role in promoting sustainable practices, such as second-hand furniture shopping, and highlighting the importance of creating unique, eco-conscious interiors. (Gomes, 2024)

The Democratization of Design Through Social Media

In this context, the word democratization refers to the action of making something accessible to everyone. Gone are the days when interior design was viewed as something categorised for the rich and famous. Today, thanks to social media, it has been a game changer, making design for everyone. (Gomes, 2024)

1. Global Influence and Trendsetting

Social media has made the world feel like a small place with how information from all over the world is right at one's fingertips. A design trend that starts in a small town can go viral in within minutes thanks to platforms like Instagram. This fast spread of ideas keeps the design world exciting and constantly evolving. (Gomes, 2024)

2. Personalization and Self-Expression

Through social media it has become easy for one to tap into new design perspectives and ways to express oneself. Its world-wide reach to diverse content, has brought forth a seamless combination of different cultures and styles and caused creators to feel confident in their unique ways of expression. (Alves, 2024)

3. Do-It-Yourself (DIY) Culture

The continuous growth of the DIY culture with increasing tutorials of home décor and crafts from platforms such a s TikTok and YouTube has provided a cheap alternative hack to various trends and also an interesting way to keep young keeps creative. This has encouraged people to make their own spaces by adding their very own personal feel without needing a designer. (Gomes, 2024)

4. Interactive Learning and Engagement

Social media has become a space where people from everywhere around the world can interact, learn and collaborate with one another. It has created a space for open dialogue and helped bridge the gap between experts and beginners where they can easily ask for advice. (Gomes, 2024) This in turn has also allowed designers to have immediate feedback from users and to

hence make informed decisions and adaptations quickly (Alves, 2024).

5. Affordability and Accessibility

Designers and influencers collaborate with brands to offer exclusive discounts to their followers and hence making these brands both more affordable and accessible. It also helps provide young and fresh designers to present and promote their work. (Gomes, 2024)

Craftsmanship in Kenya

Craftsmanship is defined as the quality of the design, shown in something by the skill, time, and attention to detail put in by the artist/designer. It's fretting over the small details, to make sure that the larger problem is being solved perfectly. (Canvs Editorial, 2023)

Craftsmanship traditionally has been passed down from one generation to the next. This was a means to preserve the skills that were obtained over the many years of experience. They reflect the cultural diversity and unique identities of various tribes and ethnic groups. Each telling a story and capturing the essence of the community it belongs to (Raymond, 2023).

Having a closer look at the informal furniture sector in Kenya, majority, if not all craftsmen, acquire their craft through apprenticeship. Apprenticeship is described as a form of informal education from which craftsmen pass their knowledge and skills that they have acquired from their lived experiences to others training under them (apprentice). It is a form of practical training (learning on the job). These apprentices in most cases have little to no training and are therefore not in a position where they can understand and integrate basic design skills and principles. Commonly, they are taken in by an experienced skilled craftsman who trains them on the craft for a period of time until which the apprentice can work independently (Maina, Rukwaro, and Onyango, 2017).

Challenges Faced by Local Furniture Craftsmen

1. Limited Technology

Many local craftsmen work with out-dated machinery and tools to create

their works. This in turn may lead to lack of precision. When working with CNC cutters and various other machinery, many outsource which ends up being an added expense. (Ombidho, 2024)

2. Managing Customer Expectations

Local craftsmen are limited to the technology they have to make their furniture pieces. Therefore, they at times are unable to keep up with some customer expectations that require advanced technology and equipment to achieve and this in turns makes them lose potential customers.

3. Competition from Imported and Mass-Produced Furniture

Furniture pieces imported from China, Turke and the Middle East often provide a cheaper alternative to the market. The mass-produced furniture pieces that are factory made and polished make it hard for small scale local craftsmen to compete in prices. (Ombidho, 2024)

4. Financial Constraints

Local craftsmen experience financial constraints in various ways. For example, although social media is a cheaper option for advertisement as opposed to traditional forms of advertisement, it still requires a substantial investment for items such as:

- Paid promotions or sponsored ads
- Professional photography or video production
- Branding and packaging

Another financial constraint may arise when acquiring materials from supplies to carry out a project. Unlike more established furniture businesses, local craftsmen rely on deposits and some of their own finances which they recover on full payment.

5. Language and Communication Barriers

Language becomes a barrier for craftsmen when they which to expand their market reach, however are unable to do so due to lack of proper communication with the potential customers that speak a different dialect (Ombidho, 2024).

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design and Approach

For this study, survey research design was applied. This involved collecting information from one or more groups of people in regards to their characteristics, beliefs, attitude or past experiences through the use of structured questions. The goal is to gather insights into a broader population by analysing data collected from the sample (Leedy & Ormond, 2005).

A mixed research approach involving both qualitative and quantitative methods was applied during this study. Qualitative research is all about understanding the deeper meaning behind people's experiences, behaviours, and social situations; things that can't be captured through numbers alone. Researchers gather rich, detailed information from sources like interviews, personal journals, photographs, and videos to get a fuller picture of what's really going on. (National University, retrieved 2025)

Quantitative research approach focuses on gathering clear, measurable data to explain cause-and-effect relationships. It is all about working with numbers to make sense of the data. It involves collecting data that can be measured—like percentages, frequencies, or scores—and then analysing it using statistics. The goal is to produce clear, objective findings that can help test ideas, spot trends, or even predict future outcomes (McLeod, 2023).

Population and Sampling

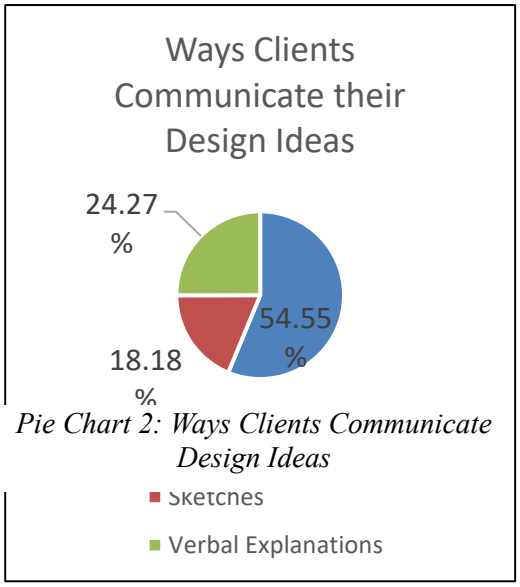
The setting for this study took place along Ngong Road near Be Energy Racecourse Gas Station in Nairobi. This area was specifically chosen due to the large number of local craftsmen within the area. When selecting the local craftsmen and designers as subjects for this study, purposive sampling method was applied. According to Bisht (2024), this method is suitable for small populations with a clear research purpose, allowing the researcher to target individuals with specific attributes relevant to the study.

Data Collection Tools

1. Interviews

During this study, the researcher carried out face-to-face interviews the local craftsmen and designers. The interviews carried out were semi-structured which allowed the interviewer to engage with the interviewee and also ask questions according to each individual's response. The interviews were also recorded and notes were taken down for future reference.

2. Observation



Pie Chart 2: Ways Clients Communicate Design Ideas

This qualitative method of collecting primary data involves the researcher's own dire observation of people, actions and situations without necessarily asking from the respondents (Maina S, 2012).

3. Questionnaires

This form of data collection allowed the researcher to design structure a questionnaire for potential customers and was distributed through online platforms.

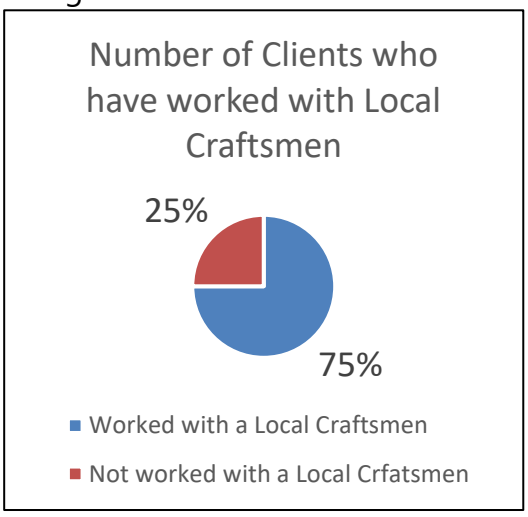
Data Presentation and Analysis Methods

The data collected through this research was presented through the use of photographs, charts and tables.

The data was analysed thematically which was beneficial in spotting recurring themes and patterns. This method was used because if helps one organise and understand a lot of information in a manner that responds to the research objectives set forth. A key feature of thematic analysis is its flexibility when exploring thoughts, opinions, experiences, or understanding of a particular topic.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

A total of 12 local craftsmen, 5 designers and 8 potential clients were selected for the study. From the interviews done with the local craftsmen, it was identified that 70% communicate/connect through digital platforms while 30% through walk-in interactions. In the past, most of the communication was done through face-to-face interaction, however, with the growth of social media and the changes caused by the lockdown due to Covid 19, most of the communication has shifted to digital platforms.



Pie Chart 3: Number of Clients That Have Worked with Local Craftsmen

It was also identified that the number one used platform by craftsmen is Facebook, followed by Instagram and WhatsApp. TikTok and email were the identified as the least used by the craftsmen. These platforms are not just used for communication but also as a marketing strategy for the craftsmen to showcase their work and reach more people.

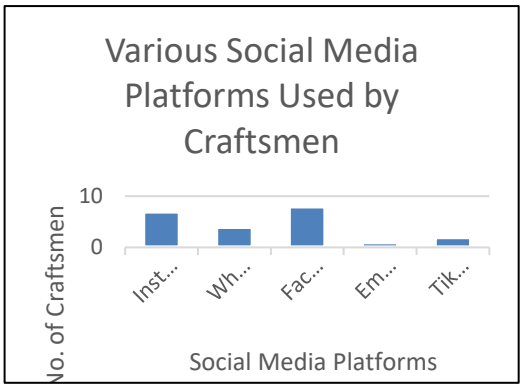
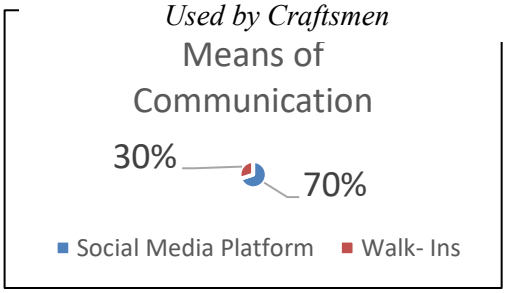


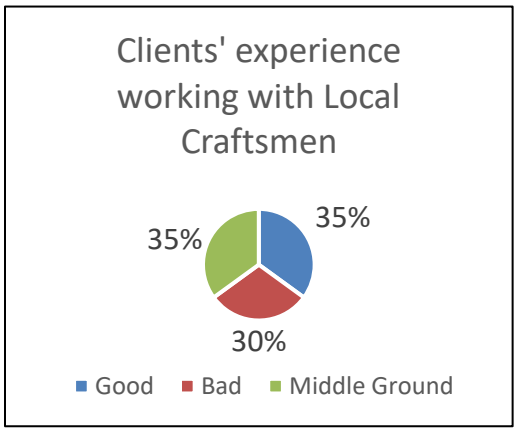
Table 1: Various Social Media Platforms Used by Craftsmen



Pie Chart 1: Means of Communication Used by Local Craftsmen and Clients

It is also important to note that clients expressed that they prefer to communicate their ideas by use of images they see online. They explained that using the various social media platforms they are able to keep up with trendy designs and ideas and are able to provide the craftsmen with a visual representation of what they wish to customise.

From the research done it was identified that 75% of people have worked with local craftsmen before and of them majority, approximately 65% to 70% had positive remarks.



Pie Chart 2: Clients' Experience Working with Local Craftsmen

Data Analysis

The data collected during this research was analyses thematically to show how social media platforms have made an impact on furniture customisation by the local craftsmen. These are as follows:

1. Lead to Customisation as a Form of Branding

Having access to the internet gives one an opportunity to see how successful businesses stand out from their competition. One of the more prominent factors on how this is done is through branding. Many businesses recently have begun using furniture design in their spaces as a way of branding themselves in a unique way. This is done through having customised furniture pieces that represent the business's theme in different ways such a colour, patterns, shapes and even materials.

2. Improved Communication

After the Covid 19 lockdown, many craftsmen had to apply social media in their day-to-day business as a strategy to ensure the continuity of their business. Previously, they would connect with new potential customers physically during walk-ins. However, due to the Covid 19 lockdown, the local furniture craftsmen had a drop in their business as did many others. In order to overcome this, they strongly focused on making their presence known over various social media platforms.

This gave the public an opportunity to have a variety of options to pick from and also helps with better communication in relation to regular updates on the status of an ongoing project. This is done through sending

images via WhatsApp to the client during different stages of the project so that if any changes need to be made, they are done do in a timely order.

3. Introduced Unique Design Ideas

As we have seen that the increase of online presence has led to learning about many different design ideas and trends. This as mentioned has been through exposure to various different cultures and beliefs and how furniture design is applied.

The impact of influencers and how they encourage their viewers to express themselves in their own unique way has also played a role in encouraging clients to want customised pieces that borrow different design elements from various trends and create their own unique one.

This in turn has led to local craftsmen slowly growing their catalogue to include new and more trend designs that are different from their competitors.

4. Introduced Different Techniques

Social media has introduced craftsmen to various different techniques on how to achieve different designs. Whether it be through recycling of materials, or ways in which complicated but classy looking designs, can be achieved easily through some simple hacks, it is no secret that many different craftsmen have their own techniques on how they achieve their designs.

5. Promotes Local Craftsmanship

Local craftsmen today have taken up social platforms as a way to promote their business and reach a wider market as it is a low-cost and high-impact alternative to traditional marketing channels that are more financially costing. Using social media platforms, they post photos of their well-crafted furniture pieces to attract attention and by continuously doing so, they are able to build their brand that reflects their values, design aesthetics, and cultural influences.

6. Leveraging Trends



Figure 2: Furniture by Local Craftsman (Source: Author)

Social media has influenced craftsmen to become more perceptive in aligning with trending hashtags or participating in viral challenges to boost discoverability. Hashtags like #CustomMadeKenya, #NairobiFurniture, #HandcraftedWithLove, and #MadeInKenya help position their work within broader digital conversations.

7. Collaborating with Interior Designers

There are a number of local craftsmen that mentioned having worked with interior designers for various projects. Tagging a designer on their posts provides a sense of credibility and attracts potential customers to the craftsmen.

CONCLUSION

From this study we can clearly conclude that social media has definitely had an impact on how the furniture industry is today. This impact has created a growing need for customisation of furniture pieces that are unique and allow the owner to express him/herself through the designs of their furniture. We can also note that social media and its influence is here to stay and will only keep growing as the years go by.

In order to keep with this growing demand, the local craftsmen have taken measures to integrate themselves with their market through having a digital presence. This has in turn also cause a growing appreciation of the skills and craftsmanship by the local craftsmen as well as their time and effort by the public. We can also predict that with this new found appreciation for craftsmanship and customisation, there will be an increase in designers seeking craftsmen to collaborate in carrying out projects.

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