



IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS OF STUDENT

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Abstract:

Student mobility and globalisation has caused universities around the world to compete for students by promoting their universities and courses using a variety of methods. Concurrently, prospective international students go through a university search, decision-making and selection process using a variety of information sources. Before the advent of social media, traditional information sources such as print media, broadcast media, education fairs and university websites have been dominant. The popularity and pervasiveness of social media such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Google+, YouTube, now presents an alternative university information source as many teenagers and students engage, collaborate and participate in these online communities. This thesis investigates how social media influences students decision of course and university.

Key words: Students, Decision Making, Social Media, Universities, Institutions.

INTRODUCTION

ICT has transformed how individuals and organizations work, communicate, transact, recruit, and do business. Businesses have incorporated information and communications technology and internet technology into their manufacturing, marketing, and communication operations to stay up with changing business and marketing trends. Social media and its evolution have inspired companies to find sustainable ways to engage with current customers and attract new ones. This new communication and marketing issue applies to colleges and educational institutions that impact student decision-making[1].

University course information has traditionally come from print and broadcast media, friends, family, and websites. Studies of kids, teens, and Gen Y increasingly show that they are heavy Internet and social media users. As prospective students, they may use Facebook, Twitter, and Google+ to research university courses. The social media revolution is changing student recruitment by influencing people's behavior, decision-making, beliefs, and perceptions. The demassification of communication channels and technology empowered consumers and increased university competitiveness (Flew, 2011, p. 165). Educational institutions have to adjust to social media and Internet technology's effects on people's buying behavior and decision making by being more responsive and successful in recruiting and marketing[2-4].

However, colleges face several obstacles in setting and implementing marketing goals and strategies. Some of these issues and challenges include a lack of knowledge and expertise in social media marketing, poor Internet-based marketing techniques, the growing complexity of marketing and recruitment strategies and practices, fast-changing social media, and potential students' changing decision-making and communication choices and processes using new devices and social media platforms and applications[5-6]. Online 2.0 has spawned social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace, wikis, blog sites, hosted services, video-sharing sites like YouTube, Vimeo, NetFlix, Hulu, Yahoo, and online apps. Teens are drawn to social media, according to research. According to

Insites (2011), 73% of Europeans, or 347 million users, utilize social media. Facebook is Europe's most popular social network with 62% registered users.

According to a 2011-2012 research in India, 18–24 years old spend 21% of their time online (Brand Watch, 2012). Indian 18–24-year-olds use social media more than other age groups. At least 82% of 25-34-year-olds use mobile web. While 94% of Indians use personal computers for social networking, smart phones and tablets are becoming more popular (Brand Watch). In 2012, there were 6.5 billion mobile customers worldwide (Social Networking Watch, 2012). In 2015, 7.5 billion mobile customers are predicted, with 65 percent coming from Africa and the Asia Pacific[6-10]. However, Arab social media use grows despite limitations. As of 2011, at least 30% of the region's population has Internet connection (Zuehlke, 2012). This is somewhat higher than Asia Pacific's 27%. Interestingly, Arabs still use Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. Arabic sites keep growing.

Recent statistics and technology advances continue to push educational institutions to find new ways to engage with and recruit international students. Larger schools in different nations compete for the finest and brightest students from across the world (Social Media Week, 2022). Since traditional media and marketing efforts are expensive and have limited student reach, several colleges have taken advantage of social media to promote their programs and recruit prospective students[10-12].

Most institutions recognize social media's limitless potential for recruiting and interacting with students. Well-known colleges adopting social media include Yale, Rochester, John Hopkins, Oregon, Harvard, and Princeton (Social Media Week, 2012). Social media is also used by 92 of India's 100 best schools and institutions to recruit students. However, 3.7 social media sites are used on average. Facebook is the most popular social media platform.

Higher education students are called digital natives (Thompson, 2007) and the “Social Networking Generation” (Joly, 2007, p.71) owing to their frequent social networking. The 2012 PEW Internet Project found that 73% of internet teenagers and 72% of young adults, including potential university students, use social media for various purposes. Morris (2012) proposed students utilize social media to aid university decision-making. Levitz (2012) found that 46% of prospective students visited and 69% “liked” a college's Facebook page. Universities are also active on social media, which Taylor (2008) argues can help brand them if used properly. Therefore, colleges may utilize social media to boost awareness and attract more students by encouraging involvement, engagement, and cooperation[13-20].

A scholarly investigation focused on the decision-making process of students with regard to purchasing goods and services, which is heavily influenced by social media. The advent and proliferation of the internet has progressively transformed societal norms, where online platforms and applications have evolved into pivotal tools in modern-day technical utilization. Individuals globally utilize social media platforms as a means to establish connections with other individuals or entities. A multitude of individuals foster numerous social associations via online communication platforms, leading to the consumption of information by a significant number of people. Online social networking platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn have been increasingly utilized by people worldwide to share their experiences. As students/consumers, individuals disseminate product evaluations, information regarding a particular service, recommendations regarding education, career, universities, institutions, nourishment or health, caution regarding products, instructions on how to use certain products, and a myriad of other insights. Over the past decade, there has been a proliferation of user-driven web technologies on the World Wide Web, such as blogs, social networking sites, and media sharing platforms. The proliferation of digital technologies commonly referred to as “web-based social media” has substantially facilitated the emergence and dissemination of user-generated content, the establishment of a global community, and the dissemination of consumer opinions. In this research, the in-depth study to understand the decision making / purchasing behaviour of student as a consumer will be done thru collection of primary data[20-25].

The main research aim is: To investigate how and whether social media impacts or influences students' university decision-making process. The research objectives that are aligned with the

secondary questions are as follows:

- 1) To determine if students use social media for university and programme selection.
- 2) To determine if social media influences the university course selection process of potential students.
- 3) To identify social media sites and features that universities could engage on and integrate to attract and recruit students.

PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

The first study objective was to determine if students use social media for university and course selection. Survey findings indicate that social media that have significant following and student profiles include Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Twitter, Google+, YouTube, Pinterest, Instagram and other social media. This study literature found that that these social media are used for university course recruitment online or for preliminary information search before the prospective students visit the institution in person[26-27].

The data analysis suggests that students use both traditional information sources as much as they use social media. However it is not evident that one exerts more influence than the other. This finding is in contrast with what one would expect considering the high popularity of social media amongst high school students and teenagers and the prolific use of social media amongst this group. While this discrepancy requires a more thorough investigation, there are a number of possible explanations that can form the basis of a number of hypotheses for future research. One possible explanation for the low importance of social media as a source of influence for future students could be the lack of relevant content. This is due to the low engagement of such tools by universities as public relation and direct marketing tools. Most internet users expect to see links with corporate blogs, discussion forums or social networking applications like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Delicious, Flickr, and Digg on the web pages they visit. A large majority of universities do not provide online visitors with such options on their home pages and some universities are limiting their attention on social networks like Facebook and Twitter. Lack of exciting and innovative applications, but also lack of other forms of social media like online communities, blogs, forums, and bulletin boards make it difficult to connect with future students. Creating attractive social media applications and connecting with potential students is therefore a major challenge for university marketers. This requires the allocation of resources, a different approach to marketing (from one-to-many to one-to-one), monitoring the social media domain, keeping these applications up-to-date[28].

The second study objective was to determine if social media influences the university course selection process of potential students. In this study, 19 respondents (24%) indicated that social media had high impact on their university decision making. In addition, 12 respondents (16%) said it had some influence and 17 respondents (22%) felt social media provided additional information. Interestingly, only 21 respondents (13%) depended on social media as an information source as compared to 68 (41%) who depended on traditional information sources. The literature review established that students use social media to enquire about finance issues, gain information about programs and activities, gather insight about course expectations, understand about other competitive courses and achieve persuasion to actually enroll in the respective programs (Pimpa, 2003). This research illustrated further on how the students use social media for selecting University to study[29-34].

Students use social media for a variety of purposes :- to gauge accessibility after failing to get admission from local Universities (Maringe & Carter, 2007); to explore career prospects and to explore cost issue to determine affordability (Cubillo, Sanchez, & Cervino, 2006); to investigate the international University collaboration with other accredited sister institutions (Cheung, Yuen, T.W.W., Yuen, C.Y.M., & Cheng, 2011); to weigh the cultural fitness for study and success in a preferred

course (Counsell, 2011). Additionally, research has found that students are more concerned about the learning environment and will most probably investigate the situation by reading comments from others via social media or other online platforms (Chung, Holdsworth, Li & Fam, 2009). There are many instances when family and friends add prospective students to University social media groups or recommend their following to interact with professors or administration assistance for course selection (Bodycott, 2009; Lee & Morrish, 2011)[35].

It is likely that students may have sought to obtain information on other areas such as the university's facilities, services, events, activities instead of specifically seeking university and course information. Social media may therefore have not been the students' primary source of university information.

The third study objective was to establish students' social media usage and preference. Various literature sources cite studies on students' decision making with assistance of social media and networks (Phang, 2012)[36]. Evidence of social networks and media influencing students decision making in University course choices has further been demonstrated by online recommendations from peers, tutors, relatives, pals and sometimes strangers (Cubillo, Sanchez, & Cervino, 2006; Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Maringe & Carter, 2007).

Additional studies by Mazzarol & Soutar (2002) indicate that international students prefer advice and referrals from the University alumni via social media to share experiences and expectations. This is despite that fact that the students will make the final decision after consulting with other people and accessing various online and traditional sources of information (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Furthermore, Pimpa (2003) established that international students decision-making vary with the level of education in consideration. The prospective students can opt for contacting friends and other students in various social media like Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Google+, among others. However, if what the international student seeks is about financial support such as scholarships or the university course costs, then the University website is a common attraction (Pimpa, 2003)[37].

The fourth and final study objective was to identify social media sites and features that universities could engage on and integrate to attract and recruit students. Facebook attracts amongst the highest following amongst social media sites and therefore can be used as a key channel for recruiting international students (Maringe, 2006; Maringe & Carter, 2007). However, some respondents were concerned that the information is not exhaustive for their decision making needs at all times. Indeed the dynamic social media with live updates influence the international students' decision as the queries and updates occur instantly (Cubillo, Sanchez, and Cervino, 2006). The challenge for university marketing teams is to find ways to stimulate students and advocates providing comments and reviews in university-sponsored forums or online communities, and also publishing in their own online social networks, blogs, or other forms of social applications. This is a practice already implemented by many businesses, with very positive results on brand awareness, acquisition, and customer loyalty. The simple presence in the social media space is not enough for successful higher education marketing. Recruitment officers should actively and continuously engage the social media in their promotional mix, understand the online behavior of potential students, and accept that the customer is in fact a powerful party. Strong institutional commitment is very important and university marketers must be willing to allocate resources in this form of communication.

Marketing strategies utilising the social media present a promising domain for higher education institutions although higher education institutions are still in the infancy stage of this approach and have a lot to learn. Field experience suggests that the approach to social media channels as communication tools must be different from the traditional mass media. The focus of social media-based marketing should be on two-way communication, dialog and engagement rather than using the social media as broadcasting channels or advertising platforms. While cost reduction and increasing

effectiveness can be serious arguments for higher education institutions to engage social media as part of their marketing strategies, such strategies require a redesign of marketing departments and changes in communication approaches: from one-way communication to listening to customer voice and customer engagement. While most higher education marketing departments are not familiar with this type of communication, university management must make a serious effort to restructure and acquire personnel with the right capabilities. One less visible yet important problem with engaging social media strategies is the very essence of these channels, namely the user generated content. The deployment of such media could expose serious internal problems to the public and disseminate complaints by incumbent students or even personnel to a large scale. Openness is a serious advantage, but also a disadvantage for organisations trying to keep things hidden from public scrutiny. The openness of the social media can therefore mean trouble for some higher education institutions and reputation management must become a part of the marketing agenda. Another weakness of engaging social media strategies can be the need for substantial organisational resources in order to monitor and utilise the online discussion created within such channels.

Type of research: This research is a case study which focuses on the social media effect on students in selection their university and programme selection.

Sampling Type: Students selected from the age group of 15-25 years and the questionnaire has been prepared

Sampling size: This case study and survey has been done with 1500 people.

Statistical Tools: Google form for the survey.

Limitations of the Study: The main limitation for the research is to take the concerns from the students is online as less access with the students offline. This is also due to the restrictions due to COVID. Individual surveys are not good at following trends in real time or over short periods of time.

Because surveys collect data at a single point in time, it is difficult to measure changes in the population unless two or more surveys are done at different points in time. Such repetition is often expensive and time-consuming, making frequent periodic surveys impractical. The following may also effect the research.

- Insecurity limiting access to the population of concern
- The lack of time to carry out a survey
- The lack of funding necessary to carry out a survey
- The lower priority for carrying out a survey because of competing urgent task

RESEARCH FINDINGS

This chapter presents the discussion related to the survey findings and research hypotheses. The survey analysis from the previous chapter indicates that students recognize the importance of social media in university course choices and for other ad hoc communication purposes. Next, this chapter takes a fine look at these survey findings and puts them in perspective of the research objectives, research hypotheses and the research question.

The first study objective was to determine if students use social media for university and course selection. Survey findings indicate that social media that have significant following and student profiles include Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Twitter, Google+, YouTube, Pinterest, Instagram and other social media. This study literature found that that these social media are used for university course recruitment online or for preliminary information search before the prospective students visit the institution in person.

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low importance of social media as a source of influence for future students could be the lack of relevant content. This is due to the low engagement of such tools by universities as public relation and direct marketing tools. Most internet users expect to see links with corporate blogs, discussion forums or social networking applications like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Delicious, Flickr, and Digg on the web pages they visit. A large majority of universities do not provide online visitors with such options on their home pages and some universities are limiting their attention on social networks like Facebook and Twitter. Lack of exciting and innovative applications, but also lack of other forms of social media like online communities, blogs, forums, and bulletin boards make it difficult to connect with future students. Creating attractive social media applications and connecting with potential students is therefore a major challenge for university marketers. This requires the allocation of resources, a different approach to marketing (from one-to-many to one-to-one), monitoring the social media domain, keeping these applications up-to-date.

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In this study the first research hypotheses and null hypothesis was established as follows:

H1: Social media marketing can effectively influence students' university decision-making process.

H0: Social media marketing cannot effectively influence students' university decision-making process.

This study established that students are prolific users of social media and engage on a variety of social media for a variety of purposes. Likewise from the literature review, there are countless examples of universities engaging with prospective university students using a variety of strategies. Social media engagement by universities may be at a more advanced level in some countries as opposed to other for example in where this study was conducted. Therefore what this indicates is that the early adoption stage in some countries may lead to more advanced level of social media use for marketing and recruitment and so provide a useful alternative for university information source that will or could influence university decision-making. This finding is proved by the social media profile ownership during 'high school' being lower than 'now'. This increase in frequency implies the effectiveness of social media in decision process.

Therefore, the alternate hypothesis is coupled with the specific decision needs. **H1:** Social media marketing can effectively influence students' university decision-making process is approved while the null hypothesis is disproved. This study established Universities are also likely to use social media to market their courses to students because they are busy and no time for going to the institutions in person (Greenbank & Hepworth, 2008).

The second research hypothesis and null hypothesis was focused on university decision-making as follows:

H2: Students turn to social media for university decision- making.

H0: Students do not turn to social media for university decision- making.

This study established various social media used for university course decisionmaking. These include Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Twitter, Google, YouTube, Pintrest, Instagram and other social media. This study also established the actual reasons why the students turn to these social media including university information, courses, sample lectures, student activities and other information. Therefore, the alternate Hypothesis **H2:** Students turn to social media for university decision-making is verified while the null Hypothesis **H0** is disapproved.

The research question for this study was “**What impact or influence does social media have on students university decision making process?**” Taking into consideration the survey findings and the study objectives and validation of the study hypothesis it may be inferred that social media does have impact and influence on the university and course decision making process. Although the impact or influence does not appear to be overwhelming, based on prolific social media usage, presence on several social media sites, and access to university and course information on university social media sites, it can be concluded that that social media influence generally co-exists with traditional information sources in the university course selection and decision-making process.

CONCLUSION

On the backdrop of increasing student mobility, the lure of students to education hubs aside decreasing budgets and funding, many universities globally need to become more competitive to achieve student recruitment goals. The natural response to this is to utilise whatever traditional recruitment channels are available which do come at a cost to the university, both in terms of resources and finances. Choudaha (2022) suggests that, “In this context, social media presents an ideal opportunity by not only balancing institutional control of the communication and admissions process but also adapting to the changing engagement patterns of prospective students. In this context, the collaborative and engaging nature of social media provides a communication platform built on opinions and experiences of students and alumni and thus provides an opportunity to “tame the fundamentally unpredictable and serendipitous nature of word of mouth without losing what makes it so valuable in the first place—its

authenticity”. (Zeisser, 2010). The recommendations in this section focus on some of the going beyond what may or already is being done by universities and based on inputs from the study.

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