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IMPACT OF DIGITAL MARKETING ON STUDENTS' PERCEPTION IN SELECTING HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTES DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

SOUVIK ROY CHOUDHURY
RESEARCH SCHOLAR
MARKETING & SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGEMENT
CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF JAMMU
RAHYA-SUCHANI (BAGLA)

ANJU THAPA
ASST. PROFESSOR
MARKETING & SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGEMENT
CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF JAMMU
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RESEARCH SCHOLAR
MARKETING & SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGEMENT
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ABSTRACT

Digital Marketing has revolutionized the way students are inclined towards higher education and opting for these institutes. In the time of pandemic, studying this topic is of utmost relevance which can open up further research opportunities in this area. The objective of the given paper is to study the student's perception in selecting institutes for higher education. Also, the impact of digital marketing on student's perception in selecting higher education institutes during COVID pandemic has been analyzed. In this study, respondents were selected from various public higher education institutes in northern India undergoing courses from graduation until PhD. A total of 656 questionnaires (Male= 356 and Female= 300) were used to conduct the research and 32 responses were rejected because they were incomplete. The data which were collected has been organized and analyzed by using different statistical tools and techniques. On the basis of age, respondents have been classified into four categories i.e., ranging from 18-20 years, 20-22 years, 22-24 years and above 24 years. Out of the total respondents, majority of the respondents are in the age group between 18-20 and 22-24 years (29.3%), followed by those between 20-22 years (24.4%), and remaining respondents with age group above 24 years (17.1%). On the basis of data, most of the respondents were influenced by the Institutional website (81.1%), good social environment of the institution is the top most priority of the respondents (50%) in selecting the institution for higher education are some of the key findings of this study in addition to other sub findings.

KEYWORDS

Covid-19 pandemic, digital marketing, higher education.

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INTRODUCTION

In the present time, Internet is a part and parcel of everyday day life without which no activities can be imagined. In the business world, digital marketing is the prime implementation of Internet technology. By the usage of efficient search engine marketing strategies and certain keywords on a registered website, it is quite possible for more visibility of the website link to be found at the top while a search is made (Sawhani D.K. & Susilo D., 2020). In addition to other sectors, higher education has been also impacted equally by digital marketing especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. Education stakeholders have left no other option except for going digitally during these lockdown situations. There has been a tremendous use of internet and mobile devices, social media etc. by these stakeholders to access information as well as for the transfer of knowledge. As students are becoming more tech-savvy, universities and colleges are facing a challenge with regards to the growth in enrolment due to the aspect of digital marketing (Martin, 2015). Sherman (2014) mentioned about challenges, both external and internal being faced by higher education institutes worldwide. From the marketing point of view, higher education institutes require to shift from attractive brochures to the presence on web in order to capture the attention of the prospective students. Universities and colleges are becoming more particular regarding spending money in recruiting digital marketing experts which helps in the placement process of the students easier. On the reverse side of the coin, increase in competition and rise in fees have compelled the students to become pickier in their choice of the institution (Sherman, 2014).

Social media is an intrinsic part of our daily lives. In addition to the goods industry, the service industry is also catered by means of digital marketing. Service product which includes educational services such as higher education institutions are competing fiercely for admitting prospective students (Prihadini D. et al., 2020). A concrete and logical Digital Marketing strategy can help with the enrollment procedure and many global institutions have already found their own way of alluring the students. In the present era, researching options of choosing a higher education institute by means of the social media is quite common. One of the institutes uses the social networking site Twitter as a medium to showcase the potential of the faculties and the achievement of the current students in order to communicate with their prospects before a campus visit. In order to drive enrollment numbers, during the annual recruitment week of a particular institute, they

have promoted their curriculum, campus culture and faculty. This is one of the finest ways to help a student in deciding a higher education institute who are quite confused in selecting one. In order for the enhancement of student engagement, a fundraiser program is hosted by students of a particular institute every year. It brings together the alumni, researchers, faculties and the students in one platform and live video streaming takes place via social networking sites in order to reach wider audience. These kinds of programs are helpful in enticing the future students to make a decision in selecting higher education institutes.

Selection of higher education institutions had a major impact on the students' perception during this period. As per the annual survey conducted by Cambridge International, 84 per cent of students resorted to a substitution in their most preferred institution destination. The reason for this choice is mainly due to uncertainty in general, travel issues, financial troubles. Owing to the ongoing pandemic scenario, bulk of the student from India had shown interest in pursuing higher education in India only (Cambridge International's Destinations Survey Annual Report).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To study the student's perception in selecting Institutes for higher education.
2. To analyze the impact of digital marketing on students' perception in selecting higher education Institutes during COVID Pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

The primary data has been collected by asking different questions from the respondents using surveying with the help of a Questionnaire. The Secondary data has been collected from various books, journals, annual reports, magazines, newspapers, published papers, websites, etc. The study has been conducted in all over India from major public institutions. The respondents of the research study comprised of respondents starting from those enrolling at the university to that pursuing their doctoral education. The different age-groups for the study comprised of four different categories, namely, 18-20, 20-22, 22-24 and 24 and above. The questionnaire used for studying the impact of Digital Marketing on students' perception in selecting higher education institutes was based on closed type questions only. A total of 656 questionnaires (Male= 356 and Female= 300) were used to conduct the research and 32 responses were rejected because they were incomplete. Percentages were calculated for statements for the questions and displayed in the form of a table in the paper and also analysis is done and is mentioned under the results and discussion section.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Digital marketing is frequently referred to as 'online marketing', 'web marketing' or 'Internet marketing'. Advanced promoting is an umbrella term for the showcasing of items or administrations utilizing computerized innovations, mostly on the Internet, yet it additionally incorporates cell phones, show publicizing, and some other computerized medium (Kusumawati, 2019). The Internet has held everybody's creative mind more than ever and keeps on developing in manners that have no one would have envisioned regardless of socioeconomics, there is a longing among each age gathering to stay up with the most recent patterns on the internet (Munshi, n.d.). Human being is in habit when they are being encircled by a massive portion of promoting messages, the majority of which they don't for even a moment notice. The market is over-immersed with bunches of items and administrations, which consistently are being driven into the consideration of expected customers. Behind any market promoting exertion, there is a basic intention to construct a drawn-out relationship with the clients. In spite of the fact that maintenance of the customers relies upon meeting their expressed as well as implicit necessities by giving wanted items and offering required assistance at a reasonable value, it is the work of relationship fabricating that assists associations with grasping the purchaser brain science and discuss successfully with them (Štefko et al., 2015). Digital promoting includes the utilization of the Internet to market and sell labor and products. Digital advertising uses the force of electronic business to sell and market items (Bala & Verma, n.d.). The internet and virtual entertainment offer universities important instruments to all the more likely speak with their objective gatherings. The fundamental benefit comes from the likelihood to acquire criticism, the disservice being the inconceivability to control each part of the two-way discussion (Alexa et al., 2012).

The utilization of digital media as a mode of correspondence is progressively acquiring a spot in different ventures. This is because of the far-reaching utilization of advanced based specialized gadgets which are additionally progressively equally conveyed, and the expense of web information access is progressively reasonable. The study results show that the pattern of involving computerized media as a wellspring of data by youngsters is very high, particularly in enormous urban communities (Ramadhan & Gunarto, 2021). The customers are looking and looking through more on internet to find the best arrangement structure the dealers around India when contrasted with customary or traditional techniques. Organizations can truly profit from digital marketing like site design improvement such as search engine optimization (SEO), social media optimization (SMO), promotion of efforts, direct showcasing by email, books in the form of digital mode, optical circles and games are turning out to be increasingly more typical in our propelling innovation. It has been found that, as a whole unit is associated by means of Facebook and WhatsApp and the rising usage of virtual entertainment is setting out new open doors for advertisers using digital means to draw in the clients via computerized stage. Being familiar with purchaser's thought processes is found to be significant in light of the fact that it provides a more concrete comprehension of how clients are influenced via a store or a brand (Bala & Verma, n.d.).

Digital marketing planning is indistinguishable to some other showcasing plan, as a matter of fact it's inexorably odd to have separate designs for 'computerized' and 'disconnected' since that is not the way in which your clients see your business. (Chaffey & Bosomworth, n.d.). Because of the quick advancement of the innovation, the nonstop expansion sought after and supply, the store network stretching and the large measure of date, the main answer for face the significant changes is the computerization of the multitude of cycles. However, despite the fact that the new period of correspondence is here, expert propose that organizations shouldn't overlook customary strategies, and to attempt to mix advanced showcasing with conventional missions to accomplish their goals (Todor, n.d.). In the period of digitalization, the significance of advanced advertising has expanded over time one year to one more as a feature of the promoting procedure rehearsed by associations of any kind and any size. Considering that computerized showcasing requires the presence of a substance promoting, the achievement or the disappointment of the organization's internet based correspondence depends to a critical degree on the nature of its substance promoting (Baltes, n.d.).

To diminish the spread of the new Covid pandemic, institutions all over the globe are moving rapidly to move many courses from classes to on the internet with online computer learning (e-learning) so it turns into a mandatory instructing and educational experience for instructive organizations. Internet online based teaching is not simply putting learning materials on the web. Educators should arrange the substance and conveyance strategies for learning in new ways so understudies don't feel confined and alone in the growing experience. Subsequently, satisfactory educator information and abilities, as well as ICT devices, should be ensured, as study creators in nations where web-based learning happens. It had not spread before the COVID-19 pandemic (Ramadhan & Gunarto, 2021). The pandemic has uncovered the weaknesses of the ongoing advanced education framework and the requirement for more preparation of teachers in computerized innovation to adjust to the quickly changing training environment of the world. In the post-pandemic circumstance, the utilization of e-learning and virtual schooling might turn into a basic piece of the advanced education framework. The advanced education organizations and colleges need to design the post-pandemic schooling and examination techniques to guarantee understudy learning results and norms of instructive quality (Rashid & Yadav, 2020).

The COVID-19 circumstance has moved understudies and staff into another domain of via distance learning by means of virtual study halls. These fast changes from conventional up close and personal classes to virtual homerooms have achieved a progression of contemplations that workforce and understudies should attain a split the difference to accomplish a common and significant cooperative social space and learning. The requirement for understudy and personnel coordinated effort is basic, considerably much more with respect to grown-up students, as adaptability should be accessible for the two players to effectively connect through the web-based stage utilized. Workforce serving a different populace of institutions understudies may really consider themselves to be responders in the second-line to support understudies by means of undeniably challenging changes and assisting them with enduring during the pandemic (Neuwirth et al., 2021). Because of the emergency initiated by the Covid pestilence, developments in scholarly community and advanced education that would have regularly required quite a long because of the different disconnected regulatory guidelines are currently presented immediately surprisingly fast (Strielkowski, 2020). As per the reports by UNESCO, as on 1st April 2020, schools and advanced education institutions (HEIs) were shut in 185 nations, influencing 1,542,412,000 students, which comprise 89.4% of absolute enlisted students. Toward the start of May, a few nations, encountering diminishing quantities of cases and passing, began lifting control measures. Be that as it may, on 7 May (the hour of composing the report), schools and higher education institutions (HEIs) were as yet shut in 177 nations,

influencing 1,268,164 088 students, which comprise of 72.4% of complete enlisted students (Marinoni, n.d.). There are different customers of the higher education foundations: students, their parents, monetary allies, employees and the overall local area that is somehow affected by the educational institute movement. Normally, educational institute essential customers and target bunch are students. Simultaneously, students, as an objective gathering, should be portioned and focused on differentially as there can be: primary school students, secondary school graduates and university level graduates, and each gathering has various necessities and assumptions (Alexa et al., 2012).

Institutions involved in higher education in the nation will contend to give learning and educating climate fitting for the creation of alumni employable in industry related to information sector. Higher education in India is not reliant upon unfamiliar understudies, will be least impacted by the worldwide production network disturbance there on. From a demographic point of view, positive from the interest side, Indian advanced education foundations won't confront shortage of understudies and thus no income fall. Nevertheless, the institutional job re-imagined because of reliance on virtual homerooms and online exchanges, the expenses will be lesser, albeit the confidential foundations could charge strongly (Gurukkal, 2020). In this study plainly at the closure of universities, understudies were loaded up areas of strength for with feelings and, to a little degree, with brief happiness. Upon the start of electronic classes, the predominant feelings transformed into good ones, fundamentally hopefulness and alleviation yet additionally energy for the new experience. By far most had no trouble in changing to internet based educating, as cooperation in the class was more straightforward, basically through the potential outcomes presented by innovation, yet additionally due to the method of correspondence between the educator and the under studies. This end is as per different investigations on distance schooling and e-learning (Karalis & Raikou, 2020). This study has recognized five significant difficulties to successful web-based progress: coordinating simultaneous and offbeat devices into consistent internet based conveyance, beating boundaries to innovation access, working on internet based skills for students and workforce, defeating scholastic deceitfulness issues in internet based appraisal, and protection and confidentiality. This study likewise recognized four procedures that perhaps might be integrated into an excellent practice system for online instruction. In the first place, institutional help ought to be noticeable and complex with a specific spotlight on web based materials for improvement in learning and innovation support for understudies and staffs. Second, to relieve the impacts of any future emergencies, mixed learning ought to be embraced as an obligatory part of face to face guidance in an after Covid world. Third, preparing in instructive advances and their successful use ought to be accessible to personnel and understudies who require it. Last, the limit with respect to students to take part in web based learning networks should be improved to guarantee that a comparable feeling of connectedness can be held assuming projects change to online-just methods of conveyance (Turnbull et al., 2021).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study has been conducted grounded on both primary as well as secondary data sources. The primary data has been collected by means of survey method with the help of questionnaire. The secondary data has been collected from diverse journals, annual reports, articles, published papers and websites, etc. The study has been conducted in the selected public education institutes of northern India. The respondents of the research study comprise of students undergoing higher education at different higher education institutes starting from under-graduation to that of PhD. The questionnaire used for studying the impact of digital marketing on student perception in selected public higher education institutes during the Covid pandemic was based on close ended types. For the purpose of given study, questionnaires were shared on the WhatsApp groups as well as e-mail in google forms. A total of 656 questionnaires (Male = 356 and Female = 300) were used to conduct the research and 32 responses were rejected because they were incomplete. The data which were collected has been organized and analyzed by using different statistical tools and techniques.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Following results of the respondents in the selected higher education institutes has been discussed in detail:

Gender- Respondents have been classified into three categories i.e. male, female and others on the basis of their gender. Analysis has revealed that out of a total number 54.26% were males whereas 45.73% are females. The results show that male respondents are more agreeable to respond as compared to their female counterparts.

Age- On the basis of age, respondents have been classified into four categories i.e. ranging from 18-20 years, 20-22 years, 22-24 years and above 24 years. Out of the total respondents, majority of the respondents are in the age group between 18-20 and 22-24 years (29.3%), followed by those between 20-22 years (24.4%), and remaining respondents with age group above 24 years (17.1%). It has been seen that the students with age group above 24 years are comparatively lesser in number than others.

Geographical demographics- On the basis of geographical region, the respondents have been divided into five categories i.e. North-India, South-India, East-India, West-India and others. The demographic profile indicates that out of 656 respondents, most of the respondents (85.4%) are from North-India, followed by respondents from South-India (6.1%). Other states comprise of 4.3% followed by East-India (3.7%) and West-India (0.6%). Majority of the students were identified from the Northern part of the Country as the given study is confined to that particular region.

Program enrolled- On the basis of data, respondents has been categorised into four programs i.e. under-graduate, post-graduate, Doctorate/PhD and others. Most of the respondents were enrolled in under-graduate program (48.8%) which is followed by post-graduate (37.8%), other programmes (9.8%) and Doctorate/PhD (3.7%).

TABLE 1

| Program Enrolled | Under-Graduate | PG | Doctorate | Others |
|------------------|----------------|-------|-----------|--------|
| Percentage | 48.8% | 37.8% | 3.6% | 9.8% |

Information about the University/Institute- Most of the respondents (45.1%) access internet to explore information regarding the selected university/ institution followed by other sources of information. Educational websites play very imperative role in getting said information as 24.4% respondents' access websites during pandemic. Very less respondents (3.7% only) use newspaper as its delivery was affected during pandemic.

TABLE 2

| Information about University/Institute | Internet | Educational websites | Newspaper | Youtube | Others |
|--|----------|----------------------|-----------|---------|--------|
| Percentage | 45.1% | 24.4% | 3.3% | 1% | 26.2% |

Decision about the choice of Program- On the basis of data, it has been seen that most of the respondents decide about their choice of pursuing program during their graduation (34.8%) followed by higher secondary school (29.9%) and only 8.5% respondents actually make their decisions about pursuing higher education during their secondary school time.

TABLE 3

| Timing of the decision | Graduation | Hr. Sec | PG | Sec School |
|------------------------|------------|---------|-------|------------|
| Percentage | 34.8% | 29.9% | 26.8% | 8.5% |

Decision about the selected program- Data revealed that more than half number of respondents (61.6%) decide about the particular selected institution during Covid pandemic time only while others decide before Covid pandemic.

TABLE 4

| Before/During Covid pandemic time | During Covid Pandemic | Before Covid Pandemic |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Percentage | 61.6% | 38.4% |

Influence of various sources- Data exposed that about 38.4% respondents strongly agreed that they were influenced by internet/websites for their choice of selecting institution for higher education. 45.1% respondents were influenced by their teachers, 34.8% respondents were influenced by their friends, 57.9% respondents were influenced by the parents, and 32.3% respondents were influenced by their siblings while 20.1% respondents were influenced by other people (measured using 5-point Likert scale).

TABLE 5

| | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neither Disagree nor Agree | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|-------------------|-------------------|----------|----------------------------|-------|----------------|
| Internet/Websites | 3% | 3.7% | 22% | 32.9% | 38.4% |
| Means of Teachers | 1.8% | 9.1% | 10.4% | 33.5% | 45.1% |
| Means of Friends | 4.9% | 8.5% | 17.7% | 34.1% | 34.8% |
| Means of Parents | 3.7% | 4.3% | 9.8% | 24.4% | 57.9% |
| Means of Siblings | 10.4% | 5.5% | 18.3% | 33.5% | 32.3% |
| Other means | 13.4% | 12.2% | 20.7% | 33.5% | 20.1% |

Other sources of motivation- On the basis of data, it has been seen that about 23.8% respondents strongly agreed that they were influenced by institutional counselor for their choice of selecting institution for higher education. 25.6% respondents strongly agreed that telephone and email contacts with the employees of the institution also facilitate their choice of selecting institution for higher education during the Covid time. Advertisements (25%) by the institutions also influence their choice.

TABLE 6

| | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neither Disagree nor Agree | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|--|-------------------|----------|----------------------------|-------|----------------|
| Means of School Counselor | 13.4% | 12.2% | 23.2% | 27.4% | 23.8% |
| Means of Telephone or Email contact with the employees of the University | 11.6% | 11.6% | 24.4% | 26.8% | 25.6% |
| Means of Education exposition/fair | 11.6% | 11% | 23.8% | 28% | 25.6% |
| Means of advertisements from the University/ Institute | 7.3% | 12.2% | 24.4% | 31.1% | 25% |
| Means of Internet pages | 6.7% | 7.3% | 26.8% | 27.4% | 31.7% |
| Means of visit from the University to your School | 13.4% | 12.8% | 22.6% | 25% | 26.2% |
| Means of visit to the university/Institute | 10.4% | 6.7% | 18.9% | 34.8% | 29.3% |

Factors affecting choice of institution- Good social environment of the institution is the top most priority of the respondents (50%) in selecting the institution for higher education. Institutional image and reputation (49.4%) also play important role in selecting institution for higher education. Job opportunities/placements (40.9%) are also one the factor that influences the decision of the respondents. Research quotient of the institution also influences the decision of the respondents (30.5%). Very interestingly about 14% of the respondents have no other options during Covid crisis.

TABLE 7

| *Factors for the choice of the study program | Good Social Environment | Institutional Image and Reputation | Job Opportunities/ Placements | Research Quotient | No other options during Covid crisis |
|--|-------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Percentage | 50% | 49.4% | 40.9% | 30.5% | 14% |

Websites influencing choice of institution- On the basis of data, most of the respondents were influenced by the institutional website (81.1%) while making their choice for the institution. 18.3% of the respondents followed careers 360 for the selection of institutions, 17.1% of the respondents were referring to shiksha.com etc. for determining their choice of the institution.

TABLE 8

| * Influence of Websites | Institutional Website | Career 360 | Shiksha.com | College Dunia | College Dekho |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|------------|-------------|---------------|---------------|
| Percentage | 81.1% | 18.3% | 17.1% | 12.2% | 9.1% |

Ideal location for the institution- A large number of the students approximately 67.9% of the respondents preferred good facilities i.e. buildings, common areas, cafes, library reading room etc. while selecting the higher education institutes. Opting for the institution that is in the vicinity was preferred by 32.3% of the respondents which was quite logical considering the pandemic. Close to the second alternative, large and diverse social environment constitutes 31.7% of the surveyed respondents. 20.7% of the respondents prefer the selected institution to be in a big city. Least number of respondents chose to select an institution that is in a smaller place (10.4%).

Thus, from the above data analysis it has been concluded that north India constitutes majority of the surveyed respondents totaling to 85.5%. Almost half of the respondents, equaling to 49.1% are undergoing under-graduation course. Internet seems to be the prime source of data collection in the era of digitalization which is supported by our data and constitutes 45.5%. In addition to other sectors, education sector has been also influenced due to the Covid pandemic. 61.8% of the respondents chose their respective institutes during the Covid pandemic. Although decisions were significantly influenced due to Covid-19, but still parents remain the prime source of inspiration behind the choice of the study program for majority of the respondent amounting to 58.2%. The foremost importance for the selection of the higher education institute during the Covid pandemic owes to good facilities (buildings, common areas, cafes, library, reading rooms, sports facilities etc.) with 67.9% of the respondents supporting this crucial factor.

TABLE 9

| *Ideal location | Percentage |
|--|------------|
| Good facilities i.e. buildings, common areas, cafes, library reading room etc. | 67.9% |
| Vicinity of the institution | 32.3% |
| Large and diverse social environment | 31.7% |
| Prefer the selected institutions to be in a big city | 20.7% |
| Prefer to chose a Institution to be in a smaller place. | 10.4% |

Note: * marked statements deals with multiple responses from the respondents.

CONCLUSION

It may be concluded that life has become much simpler after the advent of digital marketing. Digital marketing by means of different digital channels likely, websites, social media, mobile apps, email, search engines has made the students even during the time of the Covid pandemic gather information with the click of a mouse sitting at the comfort of the home. Accumulation of knowledge of the different higher education institutes is quite easy at the present era. In this time, almost all institutions are having their presence in social media. Accessing information by connecting with the alumni and present students by means of the power of digital marketing makes a huge difference compared to the traditional way of gaining information about an institute by way of calling or by visiting a university is no more required. Last but not the least, it may be inferred that those higher education institutes lacking the proper digital marketing infrastructure has lost in the battle of the attracting the right students during the time of the pandemic.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Students should use the power of digital marketing more and more in the present era in order to get the right information at the right time as everything around the globe has gone digital. Digital marketing experts must be recruited at the universities such the whole process becomes easier to access from the student's point of view. A continuous update must be done in the respective web pages of the higher education institutes. In such a manner, students will be updated with the present ongoing scenario whether it deals with curriculum updates, faculty publications, achievement of present students pertaining to studies as well as

extra-curricular activities etc. As per limitation point of view, the study can be further expanded to other countries. Moreover, a comparison can be made between different regions of the country.

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