Social Media and Demographic Influence in Higher Education

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Abstract

There is extensive use of social media especially among the youths of today. This extensive use of social media has changed the way we communicate and made our availability anytime anywhere. This has led to a paradigm shift in marketing practices of organizations from a traditional brand/product-driven approach to customer-driven approach. With more than 480 million internet users and over 250 million active social media users in India (Dec 17) this new age culture has been well accepted by all sorts of organizations. Higher Educational institutes are also using social media as it offers direct contact with students. Institutes see this as a medium to recruit students and students see the benefit in getting ready information for admissions, course/college/university selection, reaching teachers for guidance and make groups/connections for education, information sharing, placements etc.

Universities/institutes often fail in achieving desired results that accompany the adoption of social media. In this paper, a conceptual approach and research model is prescribed to study the affect of demographic characteristics in the selection of higher educational institutes and role of social media in reaching prospective students. The proposed model will help the higher educational institutes in developing effective strategies and policy framework to reach and connect with students.

Keywords: *Social media, higher education, recruitment, demographics, admissions*

1. Introduction

Social media's quick and easy access has given more power to people to communicate with peers and retrieve information. People have a tendency to connect and share their personal experiences with others having common interests and desires. People also make word-of-mouths communication on social media when they feel attached with any product or service [1]. Social media is a growing phenomenon. Social media generally refers to use of media to make social interaction. The term social media technology (SMT) refers to web-based and mobile applications that allow individuals and organizations to create, engage, and share user-generated new or existing content through multi-way communication in digital environments. The use of social media through SMTs has become widespread. We generally use the term "social networking sites (SNS)" for such applications [2].

Almost every product and service is making its presence felt over social media. Higher education institutes are no exception and they have found a new way to reach students in order to meet the financial goals of their institutions. Social media has emerged as a tool to reach perspective students to get enrolment in institutes without any restriction of time, place or medium. Earlier, the student admission process has strategies such as mailings, phone calls, college fetes, forms and media advertising. Now a day, social media emerged as an important tool in formulating strategies and reaching students for admissions and recruitment process. Old style of one way communication has changed to interactive two way direct communication wherein brands and customers are working together [3]. Through this institutes get the exposure and strengthen relationship with students.

Studies have also shown that social media is now used commonly among budding college students for admission and course related activities. In a survey was conducted in 2013 on 11,000 high school students entering college, 72.8% of them searched for colleges on social media and 75% of them used

social media for information purposes to decide college to get admission. Among all those surveyed, Facebook found to be most popular with reported usage rate of approximately 90% [4]. In another study, 80 percent of the students regularly spend significant amount of time on SNS [5]. Both of the said studies show high usage percentage of social media sites by perspective College students and they also use these sites in selection of course and institutes. These surveys offer a scope and potential for admission offices of the institutes to explore and tap this phenomenon to approach prospective students, which further requires study of student's behavior and factors influencing their social media usage pattern.

2. Literature review on Social media and higher education institutes

Since invent of social media many research studies has described social media as an effective marketing, which is also used by higher education institutes. In this part we will elaborate few of the existing research work, which were the guiding light of this research proposal. For the sake of easiness & understanding this part is further divided in two sections. First section will describe about role of social media. Second part will discuss supporting studies for use of social media by higher education institutes.

2.1 Social Media

Social network sites has been defined as web-based services where individuals can construct profiles, display user connections and search and traverse within that list of connections [11]. All the social media applications provide platform to enable social behavior through dialogue, multiple direction discussions which gives the opportunity to discover and share new information [12].

Over the last decade SMTs has transformed our thinking process about our relationships, our connections with and affinity to others. The persuasive power of online social media communities influence the way we think, plan and take action. With the entry of Internet and email technology into our lives, our ways of communication has changed. Further with the emergence of social media interfaces like Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, Twitter and other such applications, we have seen such a massive harnessing of the potential of the now-pervasive online connectivity in our everyday lives. Social media is an innovative Web-based application for online marketing [6]. Organizations form online communities over social media to reach perspective

customers and to build new business models including a new product marketing channel. This offers high level of customization by monitoring content posted by community members and can obtain an in-depth understanding of each consumer's needs, using this information to develop new products/services. This helps marketers to advertise their new offerings to targeted consumers [7]. Organizations are able to build strong relationships with consumers by overcoming limitation of time and distance [8]. This communication revolution has benefitted individuals and organizations to overcome time and geographical barriers, which in turn allows organizations and consumers to connect around the world at any time [9]. Through online communities marketers also able to gather information about potential consumers from their profile, to know consumer's needs and preferences based on their history and to reach directly to consumers [10].

2.2 Social Media and higher education institutes

In today's digital era, success of an organization is attributed by the effective use of information and communications technology. Higher education institutions also not left behind and have been adopters of this global phenomenon as these can provide valuable insights about the institute and to reach perspective students. This section discusses the use of social media in college recruitment and identifies the risks and benefits of using social media for this purpose. People joined online platforms for many reasons like searching for and sharing information, discussing issues, and making inquiries. These online activities are being performed via a new form of communication technology known as social media or Web 2.0 [13]. Social media can be defined as —a second generation of Web development and design, that aims to facilitate communication, secures information sharing, interoperability and collaboration on the World Wide Web [14].

The first study of the schools and their use of social media revealed that institutions of higher education were outpacing the more traditional Fortune 500 companies as well as the fast-growing Inc. 500 companies in their use of social media to communicate with their customers (i.e., students). For example, at that time, 8% of the Fortune 500 companies were blogging compared with 19% of the Inc. 500 while 32% of colleges and universities were using this tool. [17].

Recent Researches has found that in present era social media has penetrated across almost all types of organizations and this is the reason that these sites

are perceived as a tool for creating online communities of individuals who share common interests, objectives and activities. An average consumer spends significant time on social media. Many organizations visualize online communities as a profitable marketing tool from which they can derive several benefits [15].

With this insight, we can say that SMTs are reshaping the way students communicate generally and within their institution. Students of today have also become technologically savvy and pro-active users of ICTs. Of late many universities and education service providers have reportedly increased use of social media marketing to promote their courses and attract students. Many faculties had realized the fact that 75% of students are on social media on an average of five hours a day [16].

It is a popular perception that SNS can be used for improving pedagogical practices and have limited relative use for other purposes (i.e., recruitment, marketing, and alumni relations). A "Getting Connected" poll was conducted to address extent of use of social media wherein, the focus was on perception of the value social media could add to the institution It was found that most of the colleges saw value in the use of social media and social media and the greatest value attributed to social media was in the marketing and in the delivering of information about the college to students. A survey conducted by National School Boards Association in 2011 finds the high usage of social media by students and survey found that around 60% students on social media talk about topics related to education. These poll finds that social media is mostly used for marketing and information sharing and education [18].

College admissions offices have recognized the growing popularity of social media and virtually all admissions offices now use social media to some extent for student recruitment. Research studies have shown that social media is commonly used among prospective college students during the college-choice process. Higher education institutes use social media technology to recruit prospective students. Admissions departments had understood the significance of social networking sites. The ability to create and maintain a community online is a significant advantage for admissions departments seeking to recruit prospective students for enrollment [19].

In a survey conducted in 2013 on 11,000 high school students, 72.8% searched for institutes using social media and 75% of them used social media as a source of information in deciding college to get admission. It is also found that Facebook is most popular with reported usage rate of approximately 90% [2]. In another study, it is found that around 80 percent of the students regularly spend significant amount of time on SNS [3]. Both of the studies show that there is high usage percentage of social media sites by perspective college students and they use these sites in selection of institutes for admission purposes. Therefore use of social media is win-win situation for both organization and perspective customers. These facts offer a scope and potential for admission offices to explore and tap this phenomenon to approach prospective students.

All the above mentioned studies found that social media is extensively used by higher education institutes and students. Unfortunately, there are very little studies on influencing factor that affect the use of social media. In this paper, an effort has been made to present a conceptual model to study the effect of demographic characteristics and their moderating role in use of social media by higher education institute. It is found that age and biological gender have in particular influence individual's behavior (e.g., information searching, downloading and updating information, and purchase/reservation transactions [20].

2.3 Moderation effect of Demographic Characteristics

In previous research it was found that there are certain demographic characteristics that affect the behavior of online consumers. It is found that particularly age and biological gender are influential factors in an individual's behavior (e.g., for information searching, downloading and updating information, and purchase/reservation transactions) [20]. For example, younger consumers, between the ages of 20 and 30, use the Internet more for emailing, chatting, playing games and meeting new friends [21], whereas older Internet users between the ages of 50 and 64 use it more often for checking email and communicating with family members [22].

Thus we can say that there are biological gender differences in Internet usage behaviors and it was found that women are more involved with social relationships and prefer to maintain those relationships more intimately than men. Because age and biological gender are influencing variables affecting Internet usage behaviors, there is important need to study the effects of these two demographic characteristics.

2.3.1 Moderation role of age

Age is found to be as the most important personal characteristic that affects Internet usage pattern such

as messaging, searching, downloading information, purchasing and computer adoption [20]. It is also found that technology adoption is linked with age differences. There are differences in Internet usage and differences exist between the types of content that individuals seek out depending on age group. Young individuals are more open to new technology as compared to older ones, since older people seems to be more concerned about the difficulties they may face in learning new systems [23]. Younger ones search for alternative information and various other decision criteria when making decisions, on the contrary older consumers are less likely to look for new information [24]. It was also found that younger generation (i.e., up to 40 years) appreciate functional benefits (e.g., ease of transactions and information) from community participation. Young adults (under age 20) were found to be more eager to pursue social and psychological benefits (e.g., a sense of belongingness and social status) than adults over the age of 55. Adults between the ages of 20 and 40 placed more value on hedonic benefits (e.g., entertainment) than other age groups [25]. Therefore we can say that members in online communities in higher education may have different reasons to participate in different activities.

2.3.1 Moderation role of gender

Biological gender has also been widely used as a moderator variable in consumer behavior research. Existing research studies have shown that there is difference in social roles due to different biological gender, which indicate specific behaviors that men or women are expected to display. Studies show that men often act as assertive and aggressive, whereas women are more nurturing and tend to be naïve in nature [26]. These differences in behavior have revealed distinct patterns in communicating and building relationships with others. It is also found that men tend to control relationships and dominate conversations with other people whereas women are more likely to express their personal feelings, be supportive, and cooperate with others for interaction [27].

Similar differences in biological gender have been found in the usage of Websites. Men exhibit preferences for entertainment aspects such as building Web pages, searching for information about products, and participating in online games [28]. In contrast, women are more interested in maintaining

social connections through e-mail and online chatting, communicating with friends, and sharing personal issues and emotions (i.e., social benefits) [29]. It was also found that women tend to use email and online chatting more frequently than men for interpersonal communication (i.e., social benefits) and women prefer to receive advertising e-mails more than men do, which indicates they are less task-oriented (e.g., information search) [30]. Based on the above discussion, differences in biological gender have been observed in online communication and usage behaviors.

3.0 Research Model

Based on the above discussion, we have found that higher education institutes are using social media to reach prospective students and students are also using social media for education and information dissemination purposes. So we can say that there is relationship between social media, higher education institutes and students.
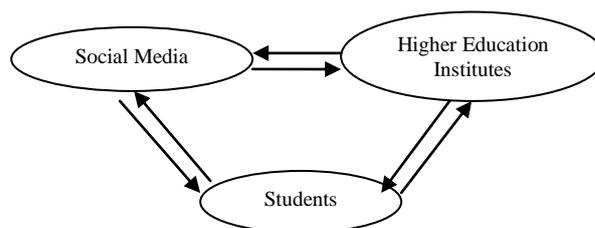

Fig. 1 Relationship between social media, higher education institutes and students

Existing research studies has found that demographic characteristics such as age and gender have influencing effect on use of social media and internet. Thus these demographic factors must be influencing the use of social media in higher education. The present study proposes a conceptual research model wherein a study can be made to find the influence of demographic characteristics in use of social media for higher education. We are purposing two such models for the purpose of the study:
The moderating effect of demographic characteristic (age in figure 2 and gender in figure 3) in use of social media sites of higher education institutes by students.
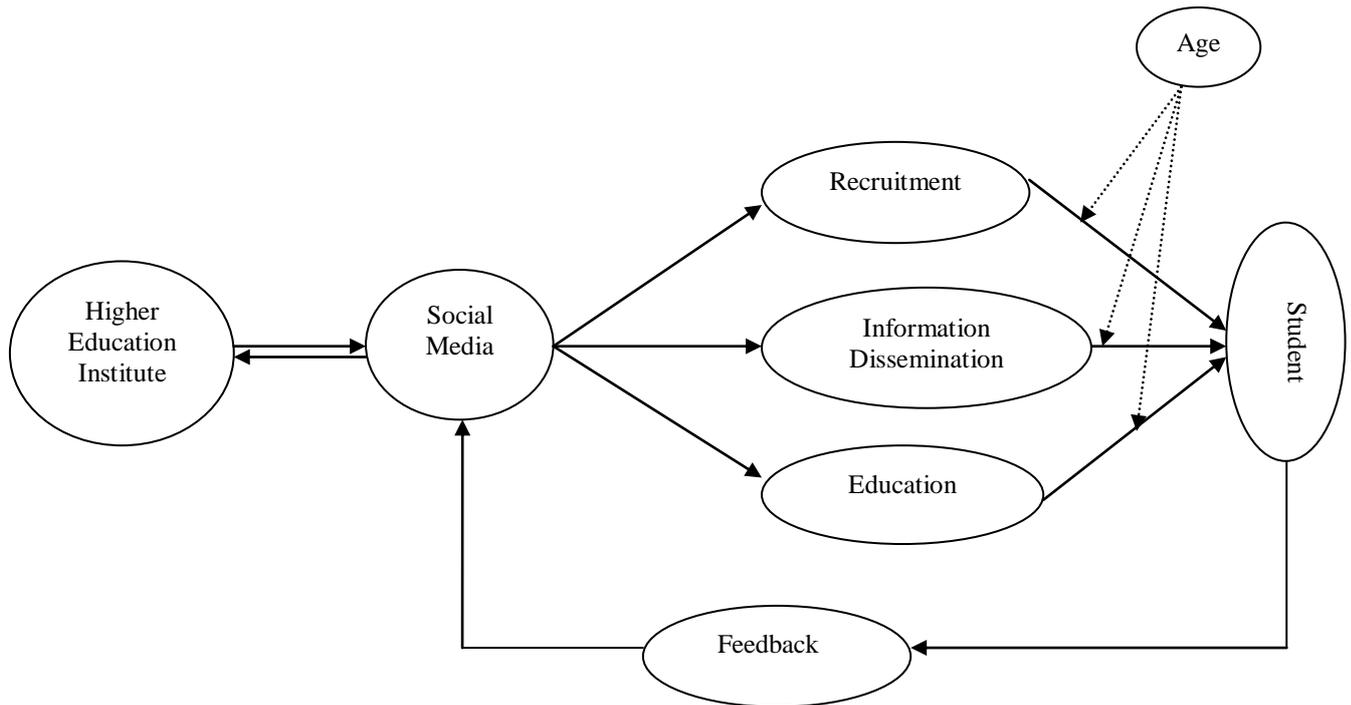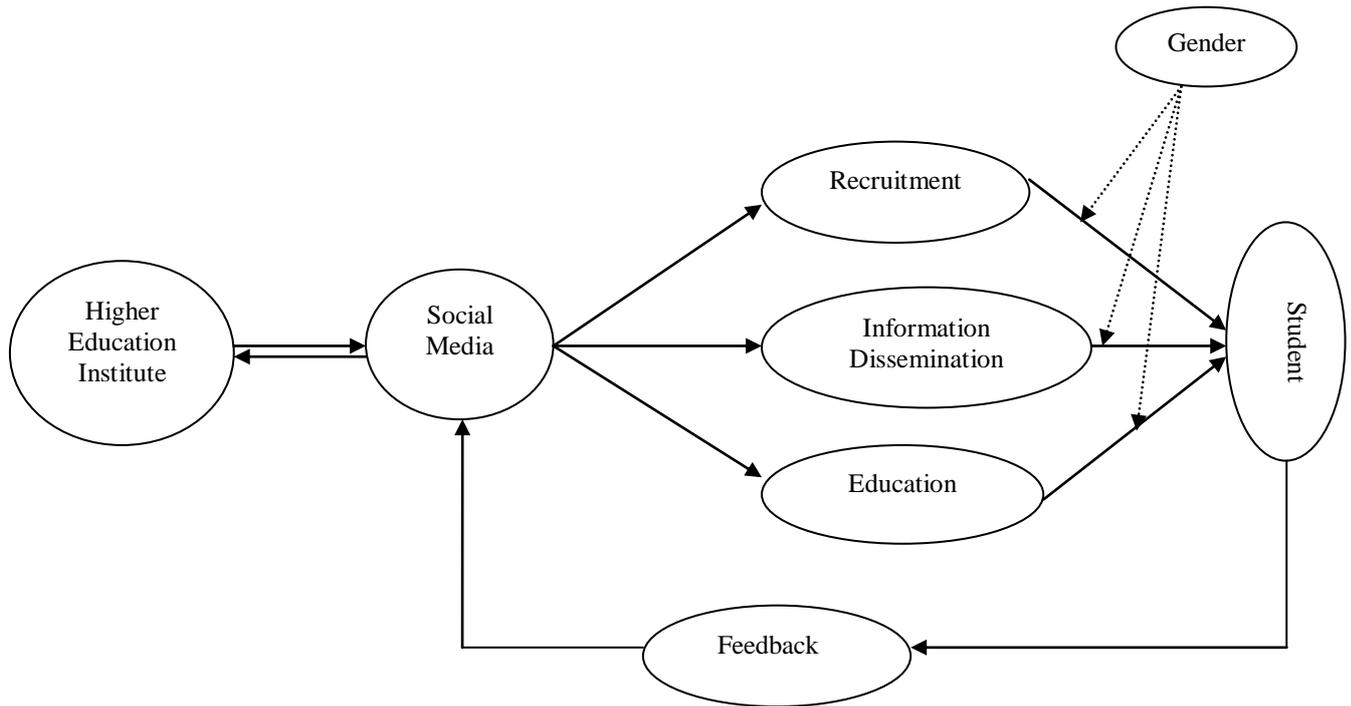
Figure 2 Moderating effects of age

Figure 2 Moderating effects of gender

4.0 Research methodology and design

In research methodology we prescribe specific procedure or technique to collect data, analyze to get information. Based on above model a study can be carried out by researchers, higher educational institutes or marketers to design effective social media campaign to reach perspective students. This will not only benefit the higher education institutes but the students will also be immensely benefitted as the study can subdue the effect of demographic variables like age and gender.

4.1 Selection of participants for the study

The sample for the study will consist of students who have recently joined higher education institutes or suppose to join the institutes soon (within one year of time). Higher education generally refers to post secondary education. This education mostly delivered at universities, vocational institutes, community colleges, institutes of technology and other collegiate level institutions that award academic degrees or professional certifications. So, all these can be part of the study. The study will investigate higher education institutes' social media accounts to get insight of its usage.

4.2 Sample

There are many different courses and institutes it will be difficult to reach and analyze each and every student and institute. This will also require high cost and time which are generally a constraint for such studies. To overcome these constraints and to include representation of entire population probability sampling techniques can be applied. By obtaining your sample with probability techniques, we can say that your sample is representative of the population. An online survey or physical questionnaire can be developed to distribute to potential respondents, both male and female, of different age groups. The advantages of online surveys are their (a) low cost, (b) interactivity, (c) high accessibility to the respondent without time and space constraints, and (d) convenience for data entry and checking whereas physical questionnaire has advantage of (a) familiarity and (b) high response rate.

4.3 Survey Instrument

Prior to starting the survey, participants may be asked whether they had ever joined any social media platform. Only those who had confirmed will be eligible for the survey.

The first part of questionnaire may include the question related to personal profile of participants including age group, gender and family profile. Age group ranges can be adopted from different levels of entry in higher education and universities such as (1) between 18 to 22 years (for under graduate courses), (2) between 22-25 (for post graduate courses) (3) more then 25 (for others, who has some gap in study or working professional, late starters etc.). The second part of the survey will examine social media surfing pattern and levels of participation. This will give insight of surfing pattern which can be analyzed

with demographic characteristics using $\chi2$ test of hypothesis or other suitable statistical technique.

In third part a set of statements related to three factor admissions and recruitment, Education assistance and information dissemination can be formulated to find out prominent factors using factor analysis. All items in this part can be measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Further demographic characteristics in consideration can further analyzed with prominent factors using ANOVA or other suitable statistical technique to study the association between demographic variables and factors in consideration.

A pilot test may also be undertaken to enhance clarity. Based on the feedback gathered, minor changes may be made to ensure that participants would have no difficulty in understanding or answering questions. Pilot survey will also help in testing the application of data collected for analytical purposes.

5.0 Conclusions and future implications

The outcome of this study will benefit the higher education institutes and their marketing departments to design effective social media campaign to reach perspective students. This study will particularly be more beneficial for institutes catering to specific gender where admission is granted to particular gender. There are some courses which are also gender specific so outcome of this study will also benefit such courses. Similarly institutes or courses with specific entry age can also benefitted by the outcome of this study and their campaign can be more specific and effective. Though this study is specific made for higher education institutes, Government agencies and job recruiters can also get benefitted to reach to perspective students with enhanced insight of demographic variables like age and gender.

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