

ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING (SMM) IN HEI'S ADMISSION

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) are shaping their operational approach in a more business oriented manner due to intensification of competition to recruit quality students. This requires adaption of various marketing communication tools to develop, sustain and improve brand image. The invent of Web 2.0 technologies have offered many such options to organizations including social media (SM) that is being now used by many (HEIs) to connect with their stakeholders especially students. The specific objective and purpose of this study is to investigate the use of SM marketing in the higher education sector in Pakistan and its perceived impact on admission of students.

Methodology: It is a qualitative study based on inductive approach where in-depth interviews were conducted with the university's administrators responsible to manage the SM activities. The interviews were transcribed using NVivo to determine content type placed online by the HEIs in Pakistan, benefits accrued and their perceived impact on student admission. In addition ethnography technique was used to find the type of content on SM being placed by the Pakistani HEIs.

Findings: The study illustrates that Facebook and Twitter are the most commonly used social media accounts by the Pakistani HEIs. The content placed on SM by the Pakistani HEIs include announcements, admissions, events, community messages, promotional messages, achievements, greetings, endorsements and job/internships opportunities. Through this content HEIs are able to better engage with their students, obtain necessary feedback, correct any misperceptions and help in career building. These benefits are consequently contributing directly and indirectly to the elements considered important by students for selection of HEIs as highlighted in students' preference theories (Soutar & Turner, 2000; Maringe, 2006; Mangan, Hughes, Davies, & Slack, 2010).

Implications: This study will help the HEIs to understand common benefits they can accrue through their SM use and its potential in facilitating their admissions process. The study will also let the managers of SM in HEIs know of ways to optimize their usage of SM that will consequently help them better gauge the identified benefits and ultimately help in achieving desired objectives pertaining to students' recruitment.

Key Words: Social Media Marketing, Web 2.0, Facebook, Twitter, Higher Education Marketing, Students' Admission

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1 INTRODUCTION

Higher Education is widely considered as an integral part of the economic growth of nations and consequently the world. But like many other service sector organizations it is also facing intense competitive environment where the Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) are striving to build and maintain a distinctive image.

The notion 'HEIs as Businesses' and 'Students as Customers' had long been debated and discussed in academia. Kotler and Levy(1969)pointed out that students were admitted by colleges as a marketing activity. Many countries in the world including UK have declared Higher Education (HE) as an industry, defining the business side of the Institutes. Caruana, Ramaseshan, & Ewing (1998)also highlighted the business side of tertiary education institutes which just like businesses are required to continuously change and monitor the political, economical, social, technological and legal changes in the environment where they function. The declining governmental support to HEIshas also played its role in making HEIs function like business where they were left with the option of either cutting their costs and/or generating revenues like other businesses to sustain financially(Caruana, Ramaseshan, & Ewing, 1998).

Despite all counter debates and arguments for a University's role as a business, one can clearly see that Universities are investing time and money to brand themselves by redesigning logos, catchy taglines, appealing advertising campaigns, brochures, etc.(Williams & Omar, 2013). Academic departments are being made to adapt marketing orientation where they should not only try to excel in their specific field of study but communicate their academic excellence to the internal and external stakeholders to attract potential business either in form of students' admission, research projects, grants, etc.

With realization of this importance of market orientation, different communication channels are being deployed by the HEI in order to position themselves in the mind of their stakeholders more effectively. The marketing communication mix offers various communication tools to businesses to achieve this desired position, while communicating the value proposition to their customers. This communication mix is defined as company's promotional mix consisting of various promotional tools including advertising, sales promotion, public relations, personal selling, direct marketing, etc. (Kotler & Keller, 2011). HEIs have similarly made use of the available traditional marketing communication tools to promote themselves including TV and print media, sponsorships, scholarships, exhibitions, etc. But with the advent of convenience of online-marketing, many have started to adopt more innovative marketing communication channels like Social Media (SM)(Bélangerp, Bali, & Longden, 2014).

SM marketing is an activity which no doubt involves cost and investment of time but due to newness of this communication tool, many organizations are still not certain of its clear benefits. Many organizations would simply adapt this to have a modern look (Lagrosen & Josefsson, 2011). But just like word-of mouth; communication via SM, also called e-word-of-mouth, is considered to be more authentic and reliable. The same stands true in the wellness & sports industry (football clubs) (Lagrosen & Grunden, 2014; McCarthy, Rowley, Ashworth, & Pioch, 2014), but its effectiveness in many other industries including higher education sector is still not yet explored in-depth, particularly in Pakistan. Despite its acknowledged importance and adaption by many organization, and even HEIs, its clear benefits are still not much known.

The specific objective and purpose of this study is to investigate the use of SM marketing in the higher education sector in Pakistan and its perceived impact on admission of students.

This study will enable HEIs to better understand the potential of SM marketing to connect with their students and learn if it has any impact on the students' admission process in Pakistan.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Business Perspective of Higher Education Institutes:

'Can Universities be managed like Businesses?' or 'Can students be treated like customers?' had been discussed and debated in length in various previous researches. This mainly had been due to the fact that public sector institutes, which constitutes a big portion of the HEIs system, are functioning under the model of NFP (Not for Profit) organization and therefore the business side may not match with the first stated objective (Bélangerp, Bali, & Longden, 2014). But yet the crunching financial status of the institutes, where they are required to be more self-dependent, is making them think, act and behave like businesses.

The increasing number of HEIs also did not contribute much to this cause where the cutthroat competition to recruit quality students has further demanded from institutes to brand themselves like businesses. This competition is expected to further complicate as more institutes are being formulated and many virtual setups are being established; increasing number of options for prospective students. A strong and well understood University brand is therefore believed to make students' decision process much easy and convenient.

This branding phenomenon is not just limited to the admission of students but is also supporting the cause of HR, to attract quality faculty, research groups and offices of commercialization to draw industry for joint activities and research. Faculty is being encouraged to engage with external stakeholders to acquire research funding to help Universities sustain independently. Knowledge and research services are being sold to enable HEIs sustain financially and to also enhance its knowledge base. All this require institutes to hold a strong brand image to attract possible clients. In this regard this becomes imperative to learn how to sustain like businesses and how to portray a strong brand image.

Another emerging fact that perhaps make HEIs to think and act like businesses is the changing behavior of young generation, which has made them more brand savvy compare to their previous generations (Whisman, 2009). They are defining themselves through the brands they use. This is making HEIs to define their reference groups to make it easier for prospective students to relate themselves to a certain groups in line with their own personalities or wana-be personalities.

2.2 Marketing Practices of HEIs:

Higher Education is widely considered as an integral part of the economic growth of nations and consequently the world. Pakistan has also seen tremendous growth in this sector since the last 20 years where more that hundred higher education institutes have been established by the public and private sector (Amin, 2012). Only Islamabad and Rawalpindi have over 20 Universities according to Higher Education Commission statistics of 2014 (HEC Recognized Universities, 2014).

The growth in number of Universities has intensified the competition for admission of quality students. Universities have starting engaging in activities to promote themselves to prospective students through various means. One can see that both above-the-line (ATL) and below-the-line (BTL) approaches have been adapted where Universities are placing adverts about their degree programmes in newspapers and occasionally on TV/Radio and yet participating in educational exhibition at various levels (Vedmitra, Dhruv, Kumar, & Raj, 2012). Universities are also found to engage themselves in sponsoring events like businesses

with objective of promoting themselves to potential students. One can also see and witness billboards carrying messages by various educational institutes showing their presence and making people aware of various degree programmes that they offer. Institutional ranking is also used as a mean to promote and attract prospective students (Whisman, 2009). At the same time many renowned Universities have their Facebook, Twitter and other SM accounts to stay connected to their students and giving them opportunity to share their views to promote various activities through this media.

2.3 Web 2.0&SM:

SM is defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The back bone is thought to be the Web 2.0 which enables the creation of informal users’ networks and supports the flow of thoughts/ideas and knowledge in a dynamic manner (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014). SM is amongst the five main categories of Web 2.0.

There are different types of SM tools which are being used. Facebook & Twitter are the most widely used SM tools and are considered to be more effective than others. LinkedIn, Flickr, and YouTube are also being used but generally have low usage (Chikandiwa, Contogiannis, & Jembere, 2013). Facebook provides a more interactive platform allowing people to share comments, video, pictures, and also develop communities that act like blogs. Twitter is a short messaging platforms mostly used to advertise in short messages for mass market. LinkedIn is a professional social network platform. YouTube allows sharing of videos and comments and Flickr permits picture sharing (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014). All these types have one thing in common that is the element of connectivity & socialization. Despite differences in features they all provide a platform for e-socialization to its users. This study tried to determine what SM types/tools are being generally adapted by the HEIs in Pakistan?

2.4 SM for Marketing:

The use of SM by companies has become very common. It is considered as an effective marketing communication tool (Lagrosen & Grunden, 2014). SM in comparison to other market communication efforts is considered to be more reliable by the customers, provided it is not exaggerated. The interactive and viral nature of this media makes it a more attractive option, especially for companies who have young customers (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014). Firms see SM as a cheap and yet more effective alternate for promotion in era of financial crunch (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014). But it is not just helping reduce costs but also considered to increase sales. Dell claimed to earn \$3 million more in 2009 due to their presence on Twitter. Sony announced \$1 million increase in their profits due to their SM activities on Twitter account (O’Flynn, 2010).

But just like any other marketing tool this media needs to be managed in a way that it can help serve the desired outcomes. In the context of HEIs in Pakistan, it is a new phenomenon and this study will therefore try to learn how the use of SM being managed by Pakistani HEIs?

Despite rapidly increasing adaption of SM by the companies, yet there is very limited research that enables one to understand its impact on purchase intention. One of the studies in this regard was conducted by Mohammad Reza Jalilvand & Neda Samiei in which the authors tried to understand impact e-word-of-mouth on brand image and ultimately purchase intention that showed conclusive support for an existence of strong relationship between e-word-of-mouth and brand image and consequently the purchase intention (Jalilvand & Samiei,

2012). But e-word-of-mouth is a subset of various benefits which SM has to offer that must be understood collectively.

2.5 Benefits of use of SM marketing:

Tsimonis & Dimitriadis (2014) conducted a study to find benefits being accrued by organizations through use of SM marketing (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014):

- It helps create and strengthen relationship with customers.
- It allows connecting easily with customers to listen to their needs.
- It allows brand awareness through positive word of mouth.
- With SM companies get access across the globe.
- It supports the implementation of marketing plans and promotes product use.
- It allows firms to more effectively engage with their stakeholders.

With above given benefits, this study tried to determine the benefits being accrued by the HEIs through their SM usage and how it relates or deviates from other industries?

2.6 Use of SM marketing by HEIs:

Research has shown that several European HEIs are already using SM marketing to promote their offerings and services, with the objective of increasing their market segment, be it students, research grants, philanthropic donations or other performance enhancing outcomes (Asderaki & Maragos, 2012). The top-down marketing communication method is considered not as effective as it was before and the new market economy is based upon peer-to-peer communications. The University ranking, in terms of image building, still holds some impact on stakeholders but the fundamental rule of marketing is to 'always brand from the consumer' (Bélangerp, Bali, & Longden, 2014). SM tools provide a good opportunity to organizations like HEIs to promote themselves through their related communities. Yet it can have its consequences where firms have little or no control over the message that is communicated. But then it is a media which is inevitable and with a lot of potential. This study will try to determine what SM types/tools are being generally adapted by the HEIs in Pakistan?

2.7 Potential of SM marketing in Pakistan:

As per the statistics gathered by Pakistan Advertising Society there are 12.8 million active users on SM in Pakistan as of Feb 2014 (Pakistan Social Media Report, 2014). This number is continuously growing at a rapid speed. Only in Feb 2014, Facebook received over 200,000 new Pakistani users. More than 50% of these users are in the age group of 18-24 years, which is the age for University going students. The report suggests that the increasing penetration of SM use would be revolutionary for Pakistan. According to CEO of PakWheels.com, online network to sell/purchase cars and a blogging portal, Pakistan would have more than 100 million users by 2019 (2014, Nov 2).

2.8 Students' preference of a University:

Soutar and Turner (2000) conducted a study to find factors that play important role in students' choice of a university in Australia. The study was quantitative in nature where through the conjoint analysis they identified various attributes which play important role in selection of a university (Soutar & Turner, 2000). It included course suitability, academic reputation, job prospects, quality of teaching, campus atmosphere, university type (modern/traditional/hi-tech), distance from home, family opinion & ability to transfer. The above attributes are listed in priority sequence in reference to their percentage importance

In a similar study FelixMaringe (2006) identified promotional practices of a university, prominence/reputation of the institutions and staff, facilities and campus location, price and programmes as important factors in students' choice of a University (Maringe, 2006).

In a more recent study by Mangan et al (2010) they identified several factors playing an integral role in selection of a university including tuition fee payment schemes, admissions process, school facilities, faculty profiles & scholarships(Mangan, Hughes, Davies, & Slack, 2010).

Based on their theoretical constructs the above three studies can be combined to list following factors playing integral role in students' preference of a university:

- Price/scholarships
- Availability of information on relevant courses
- Academic reputation
- Job prospects after graduation
- Faculty quality
- On campus environment
- Campus facilities
- Family opinion about the institutes

From the perspective of SM this study tried to understand if the perceived benefits of the use of SM contribute and relate to above attributes, which play important role in students' selection of a university, and thus facilitating the student admission process.

3. PURPOSE & RESEARCH OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

Based on the literature review above, this study will try to understand the use of SM marketing in the HEIs in Pakistan and how it can facilitate the student admission process. As this phenomenon is still in its infancy stages therefore a qualitative study will be conducted to explore above objective by finding answers to following questions:

- Which SM tools are being generally adapted by the HEIs and later being used by the students of Pakistani HEIs?
- What is the nature of content being used by the HEIs in their SM activities?
- How the content used by HEIs in their SM activities is perceived to benefit the HEIs and its relationships with the students' preference theories?

4. METHODOLOGY

This study was based on qualitative analysis by making use of netnography and in-depth interviews. Interviews were conducted with the university's administrators responsible to manage the SM activities. The interviews were semi-structured in nature allowing flexibility of responses for better in-depth understanding of the use of SM in Pakistani HEIs. The focus was to identify benefits HEIs are obtaining through the use of SM and its perceived impact on student admission.

In addition netnography was used to study the SM usage of selected HEIs in Pakistan to understand the choice of their SM tools and to observe usage of SM by these institutes over the period of last 6 months in a longitudinal study to find the content type being placed on their SM pages.

The methodology to obtain empirical evidence was structured into three steps where **first** through netnography information was gathered regarding type of SM being used by the 10 selected HEIs and later adapted by the students for use? The **second** part of the research included longitudinal study spanning over period of 6 months usage of SM accounts of the selected HEIs in Pakistan to understand the type of content being placed on SM pages by the HEIs? The **last** part of the research was directed towards understanding benefits being accrued by the HEIs through their SM presence and how SM use is affecting their student admission. The information gathered was transcribed to look for emerging themes in this context. The content analysis approach was used to determine these themes. The data analysis was based on the approach of qualitative data analysis suggested by Wolcott (1994) i.e. Description, analysis and interpretation (Wolcott, 1994). The description part relied on the responses of individual, which was transcribed, whereas in analysis part emerging categories and themes were narrated that emerged as a result of content analysis followed by interpretation to bring meaning to the collected data in the context of this study. NVivo software was used to transcribe the interviews and look for emerging themes that explained the use of SM by the Pakistani HEIs.

5 RESULTS:

5.1 Historical background of the Use of SM:

The interviews revealed that presently there are two categories of SM accounts being used by the Pakistani HEIs. One that is being officially managed and the other one is being managed and run by the students. Most of the universities have SM presence since 2006-07 through the pages which were being managed by the students themselves. The official SM accounts have been mostly created by the universities in the year 2012-13. This shows a very late entry by the university's management to adapt SM tools for communication purposes.

5.2 SM Tools being generally adapted by the HEIs:

The netnography research through content analysis of the websites of the 10 selected HEIs showed that HEIs are generally using following SM tools to connect with their stakeholders:

- Facebook
- Twitter
- LinkedIn
- Vimeo
- Flickr
- Youtube



Fig 1: Word Cluster Diagram through NVivo by analysis of snapshots from websites of selected Universities

From the word cluster diagram, generated through NVivo, we can see that Facebook and Twitter are the most commonly used SM tools by the Pakistani HEIs. At the same time we do see usage of LinkedIn & Vimeo. Both are totally different from each other where LinkedIn is a professional social network platform and Vimeo allows institutes to upload their video mostly documentaries or short messages for promotion purposes. YouTube and flicker are also being used but by very few Universities. The YouTube is no longer active due to its ban in Pakistan and flicker has no updated content by the institutes which are using it.

5.3 Type of content being used by the HEIs:

In order to understand the type of content being used by the HEIs netnographical research was used to study last 6 months usage of SM pages of selected HEIs. This analysis enabled to identify 9 categories of the type of content being placed on SM by the HEIs over the last 6 months period. These 9 categories are listed below in priority sequence with brief explanation on the content type.

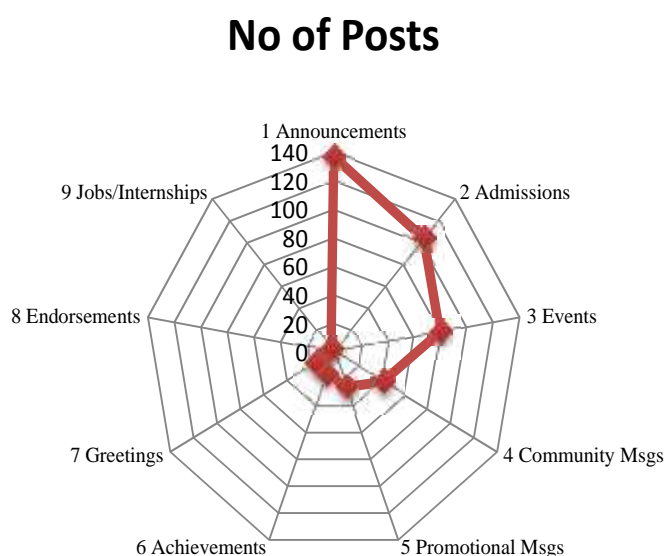


Fig 2: Radar Chart Explaining the utilization of different categories of content on SM Pages of HEIs

1. **Announcements:** It was observed that the selected Universities for this analysis were mainly using the SM for ‘announcements’. This ranged from general to event specific. Most of the announcements were directed towards the existing students whereas there were few regarding some events that permitted external participation and therefore were targeting students and staff from other universities or people from the industry where the post was pertaining to any event of interest for them. But it was observed that the number of likes for a post containing announcement was not much. But these posts did receive good number of comments showing more active involvement by its readers/observers.

2. **Admissions:** The second most used content type was posts related to admissions. In this universities were not only posting admissions ads but also information pertaining to various events related to admission including open house, educational expos and seminars. The number of likes for such posts was generally more than the announcements. Also, as one would expect, there were more comments being written against such posts as prospective students were enquiring about various details regarding the institute and the admissions process.

3. **Events:** The third most commonly used content by the HEIs was information pertaining to various events. This included both academic and non-academic. As the core product is education therefore there were more posts pertaining to academic events compared to non-academic. But the number of likes that were being received by the non-academic events was more than the academic event.

4. **Community Messages:** The next most frequently used content on the Facebook by HEIs was messages pertaining to the community including community support programmes, messages pertaining to any event with associated social cause, quotes containing moral lessons and similar other messages. The number of likes received by such posts was generally very high and it attracted more following compared to the previously mentioned content types. Also such posts were shared more on average by the readers compared to many other content types.

5. **Promotional Messages:** The fifth content type being used by the HEIs is the promotional messages regarding their institutes. Although in comparison to previously stated content type, this was not being used as often but attracted the most number of likes by the HEIs. These messages mostly included information of various exceptional facilities that are available to the institute, images depicting scenic beauty of the campuses and other ads to promote the university.

6. **Student/Faculty Achievements:** It was observed that one of the most reputable institutes, part of this analysis, was frequently placing posts pertaining to achievements of their faculty and students. But on average this was the sixth most commonly used content type by the HEIs. In between the two, students’ achievements were placed on SM more than information pertaining to faculty achievements.

7. **Greetings:** Another content that was observed to have very high following in terms of number of likes was the greetings. This included Eid, New Year, Season Greetings and such other events.

8. **Endorsements:** Although not very frequently but some of the HEIs were placing endorsements by their alumni or people from the industry regarding their university. Such content did not receive on average many likes but could be due to the quality and level of the endorsements.

9. **Jobs/Internships:** The last content type observed was the information pertaining to jobs and internships. It included both on-campus jobs and opportunities outside the university for the students.

5.4 Benefits/Outcomes of the Use of SM by the HEIs:

The interviews revealed following categories of benefits that are being accrued by the HEIs through their SM presence.

1. **Hassle free information access:** One of the most important benefits that were highlighted by the SM managers was its convenient ability to provide information to various stakeholders. Continuously the data being uploaded is creating the institutional history. This history can be easily managed by the SM managers to reflect a positive image of the institute. As said by one of the respondent "...in a higher education setup such tools are more important where the access to information can be more facilitated through SM presence. What is interested to see is that more and more students are on SM now and this is not just simply a platform to socialize, it is a platform to find information and information and learning goes hand to hand.

2. **Easy reach to the desired audience:** The SM usage is giving HEIs an easy access to their target audience. The marketing rule of 'Follow your customer' is being facilitated through the use of SM where the new generation is day in and out breathing in the circle of SM and HEIs can now access them through their own presence on SM.

3. **Student Engagement:** Usage of SM in HEIs is believed to remove communication gaps between the students and university's staff. The student in general might be hesitant to interact with the management of the university due to several cultural and traditional reasons but SM has enabled the university management to remove these barriers where the student can now comment on any of the university's policy/activities, share his/her viewpoint and suggest any improvements based on their understanding. This entire process allows university management to be closer to their students to better understand their issues and sense their pulse. This engagement was not only limited to existing students but also prospective students who would interact through the SM to learn about the university and its various functions.

4. **Career building:** One unique benefit to HEIs that emerged from the interviews was the ability of SM to help build a positive brand image in front of the potential employers of their students. The SM content of universities is public information and is visible to all the stakeholders. Potential employers, especially in IT business, very closely follow the activities of a university on SM. When they are able to see various achievements of the students of that university and the university itself, endorsements by the renowned people, information on various events within the university, they develop a certain image about that institute in their minds. This helps the graduates of that institute to have edge over others at the time selection. One of the respondent said "...use of SM helps our students in their career building because the potential employers based on the information on our SM pages get to know about the quality of our graduates."

5. **Correcting misperceptions:** Another highlighted benefit emerged from the themes of the interviews was the ability of SM to help HEIs correct any misperception about their image. As universities in past have not focused much on their marketing activities therefore some institutes were not able to realize that the image they are portraying to the outside world is not in line with their actual circumstances. One of the managers of SM supported this by relating an example where his institute was perceived outside as an engineering institute only. Although engineering disciplines was their strengths but they were at the same time offering

education in various other fields which were not that visible to the outside world. They managed to correct this misperception through SM by highlighting various other programmes they offer and strengths of those programmes.

6. Feedback: Some of the SM managers highlighted that SM use is enabling them to obtain important feedback from the students to improve their services.

7. DISCUSSION

The empirical evidence above reveals that HEIs in Pakistan have started adapting SM for advance yet informal communication with their stakeholders. They have opted for various SM tools that are available but preference is being given to Facebook and Twitter. This perhaps is due to more comprehensive features available on Facebook and Twitter offering a very wider audience reach. There do exist other SM types that are being followed like LinkedIn, Vimeo, flicker and YouTube, but they are not being regularly updated or maintained by the SM managers. The preference SM tools such as Facebook and Twitter by the Pakistani HEIs is in line with previous research in this regard by Chikandiwa et al (2013) (Chikandiwa, Contogiannis, & Jembere, 2013).

The type of content being placed on SM pages by the Pakistani HEIs is classified into 9 categories including announcements, admissions posts, events posts, community messages, promotional messages, achievements, greeting messages, endorsements and job/internships ads. It was observed that most widely used content type by the selected HEIs of this study included 'announcements'. The second most common purpose for which SM is being used by the HEIs in Pakistan is for admissions related posts that included admissions ads, information about specific departments and their admissions process, admissions deadlines, open house events, etc. While observing the number of likes for the specific content types, it was observed that promotional messages of the institutes were receiving the maximum number of average likes followed by community messages and then general greetings. It is very interesting to see that SM content preference by the students or the audience of those SM pages is mostly the content with general social purposes i.e. promotional, community and greeting messages. So it may be of great importance for HEIs to learn that SM content is being preferred as long as it is connected with the social aspects of life. Even messages that were linked to the promotion were mostly depicting images of various beautiful campus facilities on which people would comment and talk like in a normal day social talk.

The type of content which is being used by the HEIs on their SM pages is offering them various benefits including its ability to offer hassle free information access to its audience, easy reach to the desired audience, students' engagement, career building, and ability to correct any misperceptions and to obtain important feedback from their stakeholders, mostly students.

6.1 SM impact on Students' Admission:

In order to find any connection between the student admission and SM, in-depth interviews were conducted with the SM managers of selected HEIs. Although there were some direct results shared by the SM managers reflecting the efficacy of use of SM in facilitating the student admission process but this study focused more on indirect queues that help to understand the contribution of SM towards the students' admission process. The respondents in general agreed to SM effectiveness as a tool to facilitate students' admission process. One of the SM manager claimed that their number of applicants increase by 75% with their use of

SM and she has been rewarded by her management for this achievement. As said by her “Our presence on SM and follow up activities related to admission resulted into 75% increase in the online application submissions last year. I was given cash award by the University management for this achievement.”

In order to understand the indirect connection between the use of SM and student admission the benefits highlighted by the SM managers of the HEIs were studied in line with the students’ preference theories highlighted earlier in the literature review.

With the entry of 3G and 4G networks and declining prices of smart phones it is becoming more and more possible for individuals in Pakistan to stay connected to their SM networks. Similarly the adaption of SM by the HEIs is enabling their stakeholders to access information about them through their SM pages on-the-go. A history is being maintained on the activities of the institutes, which are constantly being shared, liked and being commented upon by the users. This all is enabling the stakeholders of HEIs to have hassle free access to the information about the university, its facilities, programs and faculty. The students’ preference of a University very much depends upon this easily accessible information on campus facilities, environment and academic programs which have been highlighted in previous studies to play a strong role in determining students’ preference of an institute (Maringe, 2006). The netnography study revealed that information pertaining to admissions was receiving maximum comments from its users confirming the viability of the SM as a tool to communicate timely information about admissions and thus facilitating the admissions process. This proved that SM role as a hassle free information provider can contribute significantly towards facilitating the admissions process for HEIs and perhaps was the reason for 75% increase in the online applications as was stated by one of the SM managers.

In marketing one of the basic principles is to follow the customers so as you can better connect with them and understand their preferences and convey information about your offering. There has to be a connection between the business and the customer. SM seems to provide that connect where the young generation of the age group of 18-24 year is available on SM (Pakistan Social Media Report, 2014). They are perhaps not reading newspapers or watching TV but are definitely connected through their smart phones and computer devices on SM. So HEIs can now send well directed promotional messages about their campus facilities, programmes and quality staff through their presence on SM. Prospective students can better understand suitability of the courses offered, academic reputation of the institute and campus atmosphere in light of information available online. All these factors according to Souter & Turner (2000) play important role in students’ preference of HEIs (Soutar & Turner, 2000).

SM has also enabled HEIs to better engage with their student community in a more informal and convenient setting compared to traditional communication models that were otherwise available. One of the SM managers said “Just like in an offline environment we are better able to understand each other when we meet. Similarly, SM enables interaction in an online environment and helps us remove any gaps. If we would not interact with our students, then we would not know about their thinking and their ideas and similarly they won’t understand us”. This student engagement model provides important feedback to the HEIs to improve their services and offering. This feedback loop would enable perfection in university’s offering removing any misalignment between their expected outcomes and real results.

The potential employers of the students can take the important information about the HEIs from SM for their convenience of

admission. The achievements of the university and its students, which is one of the content types being used by the HEIs, can help in gauging an image about the graduates of a university to its potential employers. This can help HEIs improve employability of their graduates that has been termed as one of the most important factor in students decision of selection of a HEI (Soutar & Turner, 2000)

Any misperceptions about the university can now be corrected easily through the SM allowing HEIs to create and maintain image consistent with reality. This removes any confusions dissonance that can lead to dissatisfaction.

All identified benefits are generally found to relate to and contribute towards factors which play an important role in students' selection of a HEI. This perhaps is the reason why admissions posts are found to be most heavily placed and used SM content by the HEIs in Pakistan.

8. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE HEIS

This research revealed that the SM use by Pakistani HEIs is growing rapidly. But it is, at the moment, limited to tools such as Facebook and Twitter. There exist several other options that need to be explored by the HEIs to ensure that they have diversity in their SM activities to have access to maximum audience. The study highlights that the content type which is being mostly liked and followed by their audience is that which is more social in nature. It is therefore posts containing messages about university's facilities, community messages and greetings that are attracting more audience compared to posts containing general announcements. This was very interesting to see that the content type which is being most commonly used by the HEIs in Pakistan is the second least likely content type. This reflects a misdirect approach of using SM by the Pakistani HEIs.

Perhaps the HEIs need to develop systems to monitor their SM activities over a certain period i.e. annually or bi-annually to see the changing trends in terms of their audience liking and disliking. This can give them better knowledge on what content type is more suited to the requirements of their target audience.

The interviews conducted also revealed certain points of consideration for the management of SM in Pakistani HEIs as follow:

1. Relevant Updates: SM content is attractive as long as it is being regularly updated. But HEIs also have to make sure that whatever they are placing on SM is to be relevant as well and it is a really difficult task to come up with the content that is relevant and effective both.

2. Dedicated staff for SM Management: In order to take the maximum benefit through customer engagement process, HEIs need to hire dedicated staff that is exclusively following SM. The glitch in the administration is that the person who is dealing with SM is usually also dealing with many different websites and there is a lot of burden and administrative duties along which they are trying to manage SM. So it is important to have someone who is exclusively managing the SM content on website.

3. Double-edged sword: SM is a kind of media that run wilds like a fire in the forest. You cannot control it. Once it is fused it just goes everywhere. The SM would not only add to the positive image but could also affect you negatively in a very bad manner. The negative feedback and comments are to be dealt sensibly while ensuring the principles of freedom and

flexibility. The key to SM is freedom and flexibility and controlling this would make HEIs look more negative on SM.

4. Graphics of SM pages: Photos are good way to go about on SM because they add a lot of color to SM. It has been seen that people respond more to a better graphically designed posts compared to a simple information messages. One needs to come up with creative designs for the posts to attract the audience. They won't reply to simple text based messages.

5. SM content to be social centric: It has been seen that students generally follow posts that can generate social debate or discussion. The SM managers therefore need to keep this fact in mind while placing different content on SM.

6. Dynamic website supports SM use: SM activities are seen to be complimented by a well-designed website of the university. The websites are generally connecting students to SM. One of the respondent mentioned that their SM presence was possible only after they developed a more dynamic website that attracted student flow online for information relating to the university.

7. More involvement required from Senior Management: The senior management needs to either learn the SM tools or hire personal at senior level who understands such tools to make the most of it. The drive for use of SM is presently there because of induction of young staff that is already on SM and can understand its potential. But a centralized mechanism is required to ensure proper follow-up on SM activities where senior management is fully abreast of SM benefits.

8. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study were helpful in understanding the use of SM by the Pakistani HEIs and how it is perceived to facilitate the students' admission process. The SM usage at an official level is a new concept for majority of the HEIs in Pakistan. The preference of SM tools is in general the same which is seen in other industries where Facebook and Twitter are the most widely used SM tools. The content type being generally used on SM includes announcement, admissions posts, events posts, community & promotion messages, achievements of students and faculty, greeting messages on special occasions, endorsements and jobs/internship ads. The SM adaption by the HEIs is offering them various benefits including hassle free access to information, easy reach to their desired audience, students' engagement, career building, correcting misperceptions and obtaining important feedback. These benefits are consequently helping HEIs to offer information on their programmes and courses, share endorsements and achievements to communicate their academic reputation, help sustain positive image to their students' potential employers and offering their graduates better job prospects, share information about their quality faculty, campus facilities and environment and also help convey a positive image to the family members of the prospective students through information on their SM pages. All above stated factors resulted through the benefits of SM use highlighted by the SM manager, which plays significant role in students' preference of a university according to past studies (Soutar & Turner, 2000), (Maringe, 2006)&(Mangan, Hughes, Davies, & Slack, 2010) and therefore facilitates the students' admission process

9.0 FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

This research has explained the phenomenon of use of SM by the Pakistani HEIs from the students' admission perspective, focusing on the responses received from the managers of SM activities in selected universities. Student admission forms part of marketing activities of the HEIs and therefore future research can try to understand the use of SM and its benefits from the lens of marketing theories including brand image, brand loyalty or brand equity. In addition other stakeholders may also be included in the empirical research to gauge multiple viewpoints including SM agencies, students, etc. Use of SM by the HEIs shall also be studied from the perspective of various SM frameworks, including SM building blocks (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011), to allow more comprehensive understanding on the use of SMM by the HEIs.

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