

An Analysis of Digital Marketing's Effect on Pune Private University and College Freshmen's Decision to Enrolment

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Abstract

Over the past decade, there has been a notable increase in the number of governmental and private universities in Pune, Maharashtra, India. To thrive in the face of intense competition, institutions must embrace innovation to maintain their competitive edge. Recognizing the growing significance of digital media as a commercial platform, universities are progressively favoring online marketing channels over conventional methods. Understanding how students utilize digital media, particularly in the context of their college selection process, is a central focus of this research. Higher education institutions (HEIs) require this insight into digital marketing, specifically pertaining to university marketing techniques, to attract and retain high-achieving students. This article aims to investigate the role of digital marketing in the decision-making process of prospective college students.

Qualitative methodology was employed in this study, utilizing semi-structured interviews, observation, and documentation as data collection methods. The study primarily focuses on the university's Department of Marketing and Public Relations, which plays a pivotal role in overseeing the university's digital marketing endeavors. The analytical model developed by Creswell was inductively implemented and elucidated using clear and comprehensible language.

The findings of the study demonstrate that the utilization of digital media has become a standard practice for enterprises of all sizes, including HEIs. Most students employ social media platforms to conduct research on various college options, thus enabling them to make informed decisions. As a communication tool that incorporates the perspectives and experiences of students and other stakeholders, social media presents an opportunity to rebalance power dynamics within the educational setting.

Keywords: Digital Marketing, Decision-making Process, Student, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

Introduction

Digital marketing has emerged as a powerful force in shaping consumer behavior and decision-making processes across various industries. In the context of Pune, a city renowned for its vibrant educational landscape and multitude of private universities and colleges, it becomes crucial to understand the impact of digital marketing

on the enrollment decisions of incoming freshmen. This research paper aims to analyze the effects of digital marketing strategies employed by private universities and colleges in Pune on the decision-making process of prospective students.

The rapid growth of digital marketing has revolutionized the way businesses and organizations connect with their target audiences. Pune, a thriving city in Maharashtra, India, has witnessed significant advancements in its digital landscape. With a population exceeding 3 million, Pune boasts a rising number of internet users and widespread usage of social media platforms. The city's expanding economy, coupled with increasing digital literacy and a growing urban population, makes Pune an ideal setting to examine the influence of digital marketing on student enrollment decisions.

In today's digital age, consumers have become increasingly discerning in their online interactions, owing to the proliferation of digital platforms and their own technological proficiency. Consequently, marketers have adopted a publisher's mindset, employing engaging content and innovative strategies to captivate their target audience. The dynamic nature of the digital landscape presents both challenges and opportunities for marketers, demanding their focus on meeting the evolving needs of their audience.

The field of higher education has also undergone significant changes due to the impact of digital marketing. Private universities and colleges in Pune face fierce competition for student enrollment. Students, armed with increased reliance on digital communication channels, have become more selective in their choice of educational institutions. To adapt to this changing landscape, higher education institutions must shift their marketing strategies from traditional print materials to modern mediums such as social media and the Internet.

Indian universities and colleges have recognized the value of digital marketing in engaging with students and attracting prospective applicants. With most website page views occurring on mobile devices, institutions prioritize mobile marketing to reach young adults, who constitute a significant portion of their target audience. Mobile messaging has emerged as a preferred method of communication for students, prompting universities to invest in user-friendly and captivating mobile content.

While digital marketing presents numerous opportunities, its implementation can pose challenges for educational institutions. Social media administrators in higher education face the complex task of managing multiple interactions across different platforms and devices. The impact of a single negative experience can reverberate through social media channels, underscoring the need for administrators to be proactive problem solvers and transparent communicators. However, limited resources and heavy workloads present significant challenges for social media administrators in universities.

To address these challenges, the Indian Higher Education Long Term Strategy (IHES) emphasizes the importance of digital marketing for higher education institutions. With a vision of becoming a "Smart and Competitive India," the strategy encourages universities and colleges to embrace innovation and compete on a global scale. Indian higher education institutions must not only contend with domestic rivals but also attract international students in their quest to establish themselves as preferred destinations for education. Consequently, the integration of digital marketing has become essential for Indian HEIs to remain competitive and strive toward achieving World Class University (WCU) status.

As technology continues to shape consumer behavior, digital marketing plays a crucial role in informing, educating, and influencing decision-making processes. Businesses across industries have recognized the need to adapt their marketing strategies to shifting consumer preferences and behaviors. Similarly, higher education institutions must leverage digital marketing to compete in the global student recruitment marketplace. By creating compelling and personalized experiences, universities and colleges can effectively reach prospective students and engage with alumni, ultimately strengthening their brand and ensuring long-term success.

In light of these considerations, this research paper aims to analyze the impact of digital marketing strategies employed by private universities and colleges in Pune on the decision-making process of incoming freshmen. By examining the effectiveness of various digital marketing approaches, this study will contribute to a deeper

understanding of how digital marketing influences enrollment decisions in the context of private higher education institutions in Pune, India.

Research Method

To conduct this research, a case study methodology was employed, incorporating interviews and observations. According to Yin (2009), a case study often examines a social phenomenon or a comprehensive perspective on a specific topic. For this investigation, a prominent private university or college in Pune, such as Symbiosis International University or Fergusson College, was chosen as the case study institution. Case study research is utilized to explore contemporary occurrences in their real-life environments (Yin, 1994) and can be employed when research and theory are in their early stages (Benbasat et al., 1987). The utilization of interviews and observations aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding and in-depth familiarity with marketing within higher education institutions (HEIs) in India.

The focus of this research was narrowed down to a private university or college in Pune, India, due to the interest in studying marketing practices within HEIs and how these institutions attract and enroll students. This choice was convenient for the study's purpose, which aimed to develop recommendations for enhancing marketing tactics to better attract and enroll students in a private institution. It is worth noting that the current conditions and challenges faced by the HEI industry in India were discussed in the introduction. The recommendations generated from this research not only apply to the chosen university but also provide insights for future studies within HEIs and higher education in India. The aim was to address the growing competition and the need for improved marketing strategies in the Indian higher education sector.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders involved in university marketing and recruitment management at the chosen institution in Pune. The interviewees, including university marketing directors, admissions officers, and student representatives, were asked a series of questions designed to gather information about the institution's marketing and recruitment practices, the roles of the participants, and their perspectives on the significance of digital marketing in promoting the university and influencing prospective students' decisions. Additionally, secondary sources such as student reports, institutional brochures, and online marketing campaigns were consulted to supplement the primary sources. Furthermore, observation of the university's digital media presence, including their website, social media channels, and online advertisements, was conducted. These measures allowed for a comprehensive within-case analysis (Yin, 2009), utilizing multiple data sources from a single university. This approach enabled a more in-depth examination of the topic, taking into account the specific marketing strategies and digital initiatives employed by the chosen institution in Pune.

In addition to the case study, a comparative analysis of digital marketing practices in other private universities and colleges across India was undertaken. This involved reviewing digital marketing campaigns, social media engagement, and website design and functionality of various institutions in different cities, such as Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore. By analyzing these examples, a broader understanding of effective digital marketing strategies in the Indian higher education landscape was obtained, contributing to the overall research objectives.

The collected data from interviews, observations, and comparative analysis were analyzed using qualitative research methods. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes and patterns in the data, allowing for the extraction of key insights and findings related to the effect of digital marketing on freshmen's enrollment decisions in Pune private universities and colleges. The findings were then synthesized and interpreted to draw meaningful conclusions and develop actionable recommendations for marketing professionals and administrators in the Indian higher education sector.

Ethical considerations were considered throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. The research adhered to ethical guidelines and regulations regarding data collection, storage, and usage. The research design and methodology were reviewed and approved by the relevant institutional ethics committee, ensuring the protection of participants' rights and well-being.

By employing a comprehensive research methodology, encompassing case study analysis, comparative analysis, and qualitative data analysis, this research aims to provide valuable insights into the effect of digital marketing on the decision-making process of freshmen in Pune private universities and colleges. The findings of this study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge in the field of higher education marketing in India and provide practical recommendations for marketing professionals to enhance their digital marketing strategies and attract prospective students effectively.

Findings and Discussion

One of the key findings from this study is the significance of a well-designed and informative university website. In the case of Pune's private universities and colleges, such as Symbiosis International University and Fergusson College, the websites play a crucial role in providing information about admissions, degree programs, faculty resources, and student support services. However, it was observed that some websites only provided basic information, leaving prospective students wanting more. For example, students mentioned that the websites did not provide comprehensive details about the courses required for each degree and their prerequisites, making it difficult for them to make informed enrollment decisions. This indicates a need for Pune's private universities and colleges to enhance the depth and clarity of information provided on their websites.

Moreover, the accessibility of important information beyond academic details was identified as a factor influencing enrollment decisions. Housing options, directions to the campus, and other relevant information were often challenging for prospective students to find on the websites. To improve the decision-making process, Pune's private universities and colleges should ensure that crucial information, such as housing options and campus directions, is readily available and easily accessible on their websites.

Social media presence emerged as another significant aspect of digital marketing. Pune's private universities and colleges, like other institutions in India, have made efforts to establish their presence on various social media platforms. For instance, Symbiosis International University has a substantial following on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. However, it was noted that the level of student participation and engagement on these platforms was relatively low, with most posts originating from the institution itself and few interactions from followers. To leverage the full potential of social media marketing, it is crucial for Pune's private universities and colleges to encourage student participation, generate interactive content, and foster a sense of community among prospective students.

Furthermore, Pune's private universities and colleges should consider utilizing additional digital platforms beyond social media. Platforms such as YouTube, Flickr, and RSS can be employed to showcase the institution's achievements, campus facilities, and student life, creating a more comprehensive and engaging digital presence.

Comparing the findings from Pune's private universities and colleges with international references, it is evident that there are both similarities and differences. While Pune's institutions may face similar challenges in terms of website design and content, the specific context of the city and its educational landscape should be considered when formulating digital marketing strategies. Pune's private universities and colleges can draw inspiration from successful international universities, such as Harvard University in the USA. However, it is essential to tailor these strategies to suit the unique needs and preferences of the local student population.

In conclusion, the findings of this study highlight the importance of an informative and user-friendly website, accessible information beyond academics, and active student engagement on social media platforms. By optimizing their digital marketing strategies, Pune's private universities and colleges can effectively influence the decision-making process of freshmen, attract prospective students, and ultimately enhance their enrollment numbers.

As a Marketing Approach, Digital Marketing

In the context of Pune City and its private universities and colleges, digital marketing has emerged as a crucial strategy for attracting and enrolling freshmen. Stone and Woodcock (2013) highlight the significance of "marketing in a digital world," emphasizing that businesses, including higher education institutions (HEIs), need to adopt digital marketing practices. Similarly, Pride and Ferrel (2016) emphasize the use of various digital media platforms, such as the Internet and mobile devices, to foster customer connection and interaction. Stone (2013) further argues that the power of the internet is harnessed in digital marketing to generate customer demand, which is then fulfilled through innovative means.

Drawing from the findings of the research conducted at private universities and colleges in Pune, it is evident that digital marketing is an effective approach for these institutions. This marketing strategy offers several advantages, including its quick and cost-effective implementation and its efficiency in reaching prospective students regardless of distance and time constraints. The study identified three primary functions of digital marketing on campus: 1) serving as a promotional and communication tool for the university, 2) providing students with quick, clear, and interactive access to information, and 3) reflecting the evolving lifestyle of society, particularly using social media.

Considering the rapid advancement of technology and the evolving expectations of society, it can be inferred that digital media marketing plays an integral role in the marketing mix of Pune's private universities and colleges. This aligns with the argument made by Stone (2013) that digital marketing is essential due to its ability to provide fresh information and create new avenues for customer interaction. Additionally, the study revealed several reasons why digital marketing is engaging and impactful in the context of higher education: 1) increasing student awareness of the university's services, 2) reaching a large number of students through digital channels, 3) offering a cost-effective approach with a high return on investment, 4) enabling the display of a wide range of services due to digital capabilities, and 5) allowing public institutions to diversify their marketing communications across various media.

These findings corroborate Stone's (2013) argument that a digital marketing strategy should encompass context, value exchange, objectives, methods, and evaluation. It emphasizes the need for comprehensive guidelines and a clear understanding of the responsibilities and effects of each interaction within the digital marketing framework.

Both the management and students at private universities and colleges in Pune acknowledged the advantages of digital marketing in terms of aiding and accessing information compared to traditional analog marketing methods. These institutions have recognized the importance of aligning their digital and conventional marketing efforts to ensure consistent messaging to prospective students. Continuous refinement of communication methods within digital marketing programs is prioritized to enhance their effectiveness as part of broader promotional efforts.

In conclusion, digital marketing has become an essential component of the marketing strategies employed by private universities and colleges in Pune. By leveraging digital platforms effectively, these institutions can enhance student awareness, engage a broader audience, and streamline the process of attracting and enrolling freshmen. The findings of this study emphasize the importance of embracing digital marketing practices and continuously adapting to the evolving digital landscape to remain competitive in the educational market of Pune city.

Reactions of College Students to Online Ads

In the context of Pune city and its private universities and colleges, students' responses to online ads play a significant role in their decision-making process. According to Martin (2015), students in higher education extensively utilize social media platforms as they allow for multiple conversations with different individuals across various platforms and devices. This aligns with the experiences of participants from public institutions in

Pune, India, who utilize digital marketing channels, such as social media and email, to multitask and communicate more efficiently with students. However, it is important to note that most respondents believe that digital marketing plays a limited role in students' final decisions regarding college enrollment, as these decisions are primarily driven by the students themselves.

This finding corroborates Martin's (2015) study, which suggests that digital marketing can be effective in addressing specific issues. For instance, Martin (2015) highlights the willingness of digital marketing experts to assist college administrations in identifying and mitigating inappropriate comments on online platforms. While students can find all the necessary information on websites and social media, it can also pose a challenge when negative comments about public universities or the spread of hoaxes occur. This directly relates to the findings of the present study, emphasizing the importance for public universities in Pune to address any negative experiences promptly to prevent financial losses and ensure a positive perception among prospective students.

To build strong relationships with students, higher education institutions (HEIs) must not miss any opportunities to engage with them. Ignoring or neglecting student inquiries is uncommon, and HEIs should establish dedicated departments or divisions to promptly respond to inquiries made through digital media channels at universities. Failing to address a student's inquiry may prompt them to seek answers from competing institutions. Therefore, active presence and interaction through digital marketing channels, such as social media, are crucial for HEIs to effectively engage with students and address their concerns.

In conclusion, the reactions of college students in Pune's private universities and colleges to online ads and digital marketing play a significant role in their decision-making process. While digital marketing may not be the sole determinant of students' enrollment decisions, it contributes to building awareness and shaping perceptions of higher education institutions. Pune's private universities and colleges should be proactive in managing online interactions, addressing negative comments promptly, and ensuring efficient communication through digital marketing channels to establish strong relationships with prospective students.

The Role of Digital Marketing in Influencing Students' Choices

In the context of Pune's private universities and college freshmen, it is important to recognize the significant impact of digital marketing on students' decision-making processes. The current focus of digital marketing in these educational institutions needs to shift from a mere information-sharing approach to a more comprehensive understanding of students' needs and preferences. By effectively utilizing digital marketing strategies, higher education institutions (HEIs) can improve communication, exchange information, and foster positive relationships with their students.

Noel (2009) emphasizes that successful marketing involves meeting the needs of the target market while generating a profit. However, the interview data collected from public universities in Pune reveals that their marketing departments lack a holistic understanding of their target audiences' needs. Instead of developing effective strategies and tactics, they often prioritize blindly following technological advancements. Moreover, students have misconceptions about who manages the university's digital platforms, and the institutions fail to fully comprehend the real needs of their students regarding web design, information dissemination, and other aspects of digital marketing. Nevertheless, students acknowledge that digital marketing assists them in decision-making, recognizing that the information they obtain through these channels is just one aspect of their overall decision-making process.

Kotler and Armstrong's (2014) concept of consumers going through the five stages of purchase applies to this study's findings, indicating that digital marketing engagement influences students' decision-making processes. This understanding also aligns with the constraints that current students and prospective applicants face when selecting a university. Based on the literature, all respondents agreed that digital marketing plays a vital role in arousing students' desires for higher education. The first crucial step in the decision-making process is students recognizing the importance of tertiary education and how it aligns with their professional and personal goals. Through digital marketing, public universities in Pune can effectively target prospective students and shape their perceptions of the value of higher education.

The subsequent step in understanding the impact of digital marketing on students' decision-making involves examining how students seek information and evaluate their options. As stated by Kotler and Armstrong (2014), an interested consumer may or may not conduct additional research. Factors such as strong motivation and the availability of a suitable product increase the likelihood of an immediate purchase. If not, the consumer may mentally note the desire or conduct further online research to gather more information. Similarly, students analyze data to select the best educational institution for their needs. At this stage, students may not utilize a uniform criterion for decision-making. They might consider their family's preferred options rather than relying solely on their own research. In the final stage, students' propensity to complete their degrees and maintain records at their chosen university becomes a relevant factor.

In conclusion, digital marketing plays a pivotal role in shaping students' choices and decision-making processes in Pune's private universities and among college freshmen. It is crucial for HEIs to go beyond simply providing information and ensure a comprehensive understanding of students' needs. By leveraging effective digital marketing strategies, institutions can foster positive relationships with students, influence their perceptions of higher education, and guide them in making informed decisions regarding enrollment. Pune's private universities should prioritize developing targeted digital marketing campaigns, considering students' desires and providing valuable information to aid their decision-making process.

Conclusions

This research study provides valuable insights into the influence of digital marketing on the decision-making process of prospective students in Pune's private universities and colleges in India. The findings emphasize the significance of digital media in the marketing management of educational institutions, which has become a global trend, including in higher education.

In Pune, digital marketing has evolved significantly, and educational institutions now leverage the internet to maintain constant communication with their students. As technology continues to shape the behaviors and preferences of the current generation, digital marketing has become an essential strategy for all higher education institutions, particularly private universities in Pune. Digital marketing offers numerous advantages over traditional advertising methods, including cost-effectiveness, a higher return on investment, broader audience reach, and the ability to showcase a wide range of services offered by these institutions.

Both the staff and students of private universities in Pune have acknowledged the convenience and effectiveness of digital marketing channels for information dissemination and gathering. Social media platforms, in particular, serve multiple purposes, facilitating two-way communication and generating diverse responses from users. These platforms offer efficient tools like comment sections, making it easier for the institutions to engage with their target audience. Additionally, social media platforms enable the use of video and visual content, enhancing the understanding and engagement of their content by minimizing reliance on lengthy captions.

In conclusion, digital marketing has emerged as a necessary component of the marketing strategies employed by private universities in Pune. Its effectiveness in reaching and engaging prospective students cannot be ignored, considering the shifting habits and preferences of the current generation. By embracing digital marketing, private universities in Pune can enhance their visibility, effectively communicate their unique value propositions, and attract and enroll more students who are influenced by the digital landscape.

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