

How to Cite:

Rajkumar, S. G., Saranya, E., Joseph, C. S., & Sudhahar, J. C. (2022). Influence of digital marketing in students' decision-making process for enrollment in higher education institutes in Coimbatore, India. *International Journal of Health Sciences*, 6(S2), 5339–5348. <https://doi.org/10.53730/ijhs.v6nS2.6344>

Influence of digital marketing in students' decision-making process for enrollment in higher education institutes in Coimbatore, India

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Abstract---Digitalization has resulted in a significant shift in marketing channels and consumer behaviors. Easy accessibility and convenience have made digital media a popular channel of information among the youth. The objective of the present work was to study the influence of digital marketing communications on students' decision-making process for enrollment in higher education institutes in Coimbatore, India. A well-structured questionnaire was used to collect data about several aspects of digital marketing and its usefulness while selecting a higher education institute. Most respondents agreed that the use of digital platforms while selecting a higher education institute helps in decision making because of factors like easily accessible information, easier admission process and online payment of fees. The study also found that most higher education institutes in Coimbatore use digital tools like advertisements on Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, and third party websites like College Dunia to share information. Despite the wide availability of digital information, respondents claimed that they would take advice from past and current students of an institute before coming to a

decision. This was primarily due to difficulty in getting reliable information about the institute and particular course details, and getting prompt response to queries on official websites. The findings of the present study can be used by higher education institutes in Coimbatore to enhance their digital media presence and increase their enrollment rates.

Keywords---digital marketing, higher education institutes, decision making.

Introduction

Digitalization has changed the way information is conveyed and perceived by viewers and information seekers. Digital media has penetrated our daily lives with smartphones, tablets and personal computers that are always connected to the internet. As of January 2021, India has 1.10 billion mobile connections, 624 million internet users and 448 million social media users. The number of internet users increased by 47 million while the social media users increased by 78 million between 2020 and 2021. Meanwhile the number of mobile connections in India increased by 23 million between 2020 and 2021 (Digital 2021: India, www.datareportal.com). These statistics indicate that the digital and social media has gained a high momentum with people preferring more interactive line of communication vis a vis the internet enabled social media.

Consequently, human interactions have changed drastically due to engagement on social networks. The rapid growth of web platforms has facilitated behavioral changes related to activities, habitats and interactions; resulting in organizations to re-strategize their marketing activities in the digital space (Tiago and Verissimo, 2014). This has resulted in the evolution of a consumer who not only seeks information at the touch of a button, but also intends to engage with a platform where information could be conveniently shared, reviewed, validated and used to their advantage (Dhote et al., 2015). Consumers depend on digital media not only for casual information seeking for entertainment or leisure but also as a significant platform for taking career decisions. The student community in India seeking higher education appears highly influenced by digital media as it empowers them to evaluate and compare information between different institutes before arriving at a decision.

Background/ Review of Literature

Digital marketing is an umbrella term for the marketing of products and services using digital technologies such as the internet, mobile phones, display advertising and any other digital medium (Sathya, 2017). Digital marketing has assumed a wide spread application across different sectors. Consequently, organizations and marketers are leaving no stone unturned to make their presence felt over social media using different digital marketing strategies. Bringing new challenges and benefits, digital media has changed the way organizations conduct their marketing activities (Arora &Sanni, 2019; Dwivedi et al., 2015, 2017; Hossain et al., 2019; Nisar et al., 2018; Wang &Herrando, 2019).

Empowered by the internet, digital marketing channels like websites, search engine optimization, search engine marketing, social media, email and mobile marketing can engage consumers at any time any place. When used strategically, digital marketing can result in customer satisfaction and an increase in perceived value (Chen et al. 2019; Pacauskas et al., 2018), co-creation (Kamboj et al., 2018; Rathore et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2017), brand loyalty (Laroche et al., 2013), and positive attitude (Shareef et al., 2018).

Digital marketing also has the ability to shape consumers' opinions and influence their decisions about the goods and services being advertised. Online information plays a significant role in consumers' decision making regarding important areas of life such as health, education and financial matters. Organizations can influence consumers' decision-making process by using a recommender engine, improving helpfulness of online reviews (Ismagilova et al., 2019), and advancing efficiency of recommendation systems (Srivastava et al., 2019).

Digital technologies are contributing to a major change in the practice, promise and operations of higher education (Crittenden and Peterson, 2019). By making academic information easily accessible, social media platforms are deeply correlated with students' admission related decision-making process (Alnaser A. et al., 2020). Apart from interactivity, aspects like addressability, relevance, a very high engagement quotient and a sense of empowerment have made digital platforms extremely popular for the young generation even for taking the most crucial decisions of their life (Dhote et al., 2015).

Hence, social media platforms have emerged as an important tool for higher education institutes in formulating strategies and reaching students for admissions and recruitment process. Since education is quickly moving from being a product driven to a market driven sector, enrollment growth is critically important for the sustenance of higher education institutes. Digital marketing helps them gain relevance among students who depend greatly on digital media and get nearer to potential clients. Barnes et al. (2010) found that higher educational institutes were outpacing the more traditional Fortune 50 companies in their use of social media to communicate with their customers. They found that in 2010, 8% of the Fortune 500 companies were blogging whereas 32% colleges and universities were using this digital tool to engage with students. Kuzma and Wright (2013) researched 90 universities in Asia, Africa and Europe for their use of social networking for recruiting and marketing and found that although institutes in some geographic areas use social media; it is important for them to incorporate it into their marketing programmes in order to better reach their intended audiences and provide for a more successful education experience for students.

Faculak (2012) found that admissions departments of educational institutes understand the significance of social networking sites and use them to their advantage to create and maintain an online community and recruit prospective students for enrollment. Oliveira and Figueira (2015) found two main aspects in their review- new empowered role of millions of social media users which the organizations fail to understand and engage with; and organizations are reluctant or unable to develop strategies and allocate resources to engage effectively.

Understanding the need for institutes to develop effective strategies and policy framework, Singh et al. (2019) proposed a conceptual approach and research model for universities/colleges to study the affect of demographic characteristics in the selection of higher educational institutes and the role of social media in reaching prospective students.

There are numerous reports on digital communication and branding as an effective way of reaching out to the target consumer but there are very few studies on its influence on consumers' decision making. Dhote et al. (2015) analyzed the effectiveness of digital marketing for education related decisions and found that there is a high degree of awareness with reference to digital medium among students seeking admission in higher educational institutes in Pune, India. They found convenience for readily available data and websites as platform for consumers to engage, review and ask questions were important attributes that influenced students. Stageman (2011) conducted a case study to understand how prospective students use social media to communicate with higher education institutes from the onset of application process up to the decision making. They found that the university-sponsored social media helped incoming students to establish two-way communication with university officials, build a network of friends, establish a personal identity and make a smooth transition to campus life. Thus, social media also helps students in adapting to the new environment even after a decision is made.

The objective of this work is to study the role of digital marketing on students' decision- making process for enrollment in higher education institutes in Coimbatore, India. Across the globe, higher education institutes are dealing with multi-faceted difficulties such as variations in the need of the demand, influential worldwide competition and decline in financial aid (Simoes and Soares, 2020). Consequently, they are focused on gaining high-quality resources and students. This requires a profound understanding of the sources of information that the students rely on when they apply for a higher educational institution. Students' recruitment practices also play a vital role in decision making and comprehending their attitude during decision making may help the higher education institute in formulating their marketing strategies (Dhaliwal M. et al., 2019).

This study emphasizes on the need to understand the important factors that facilitate students' decision-making regarding the institutes they are targeting for higher studies. This study studies the impact of digital marketing through various aspects like identifying preferred digital channels by the students, measuring student's attitude while selecting higher education institute using digital platforms, understanding the overall impact of digital tools in the decision making process for a student to choose a particular higher educational institute, different aspects and facilities that an institute must possess and finally to propose a digital marketing model for higher education institutes for effective decision making of aspiring students.

Research Methodology

In the present study, data were collected using survey research. The study pool consisted of students of higher education institutes in the Coimbatore district.

Coimbatore is an important education hub in South India and is home to many state-owned and private universities. Primary data was collected from 58 college going students to study their perception about and the impact of digital media in decision making process. The questionnaire used for the current study consisted of questions regarding the demographic profile of the respondents, factors considered while decision making (e.g., brand, alumni, social media, third party websites), social media platform preferred for information gathering, expectations from the institute (e.g., facilities, academic reputation), and usefulness of digital media during decision-making. Data analysis was done using the SPSS 24 software.

Results and Discussion

Usefulness of digital media

There are several deemed, private owned and government owned universities in Coimbatore district that offer higher education. In the present study, we found that around 43.10% of the respondents prefer deemed university for higher education while 27.59% prefer private higher education institutes and 29.31% prefer governmentinstitutes. This clearly indicates that deemed universities have been successful in reaching their target audience through their marketing strategies. 51.72 %respondents preferred online mode of admission process confirming that ease of admission process through use of digital portals for applications and payments is preferred by students. Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, Whatsapp were some popular social media platforms used by respondents for collecting information about a higher educational institute.

About 64.81% respondents stated that they would take advice from past and/or current students of an institute before making a final decision. Apart from alumni and current students, students preferred to take advice from family members followed by close friends and parents (Figure 1). This indicates that students do not completely rely on information gathered from social media.

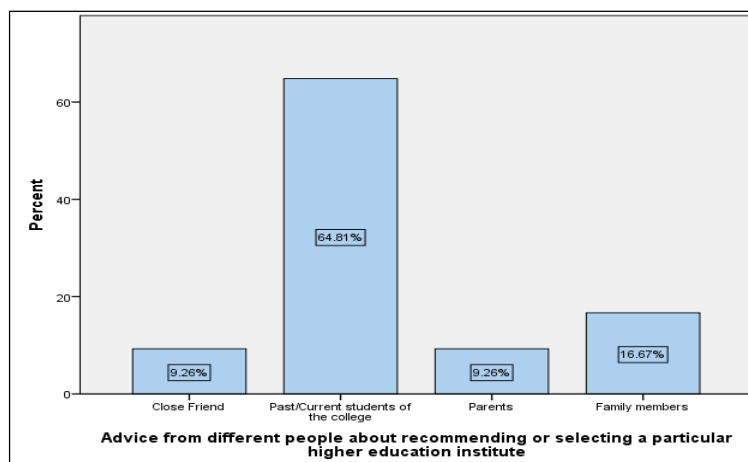


Figure 1: Preference for advice from different people for recommending a particular institute (Source: SPSS 24)

When asked if they had benefitted from the information gathered from different digital media, 34.48% respondents stated that they had highly benefited from the online/digital information (Figure 2). However, 32.76% respondents remained neutral about the benefits of digital information indicating skepticism among students about the authenticity of information shared on popular social media platforms.

Similarly, 34.40% respondents believed that digital platforms are extremely useful while selecting a higher education institute whereas 29.31% remained neutral about the usefulness of digital media in decision making (Figure 3). These results indicate that the level of usage of social media during decision making for enrollment in higher education institutes is variable amongst students in Coimbatore.

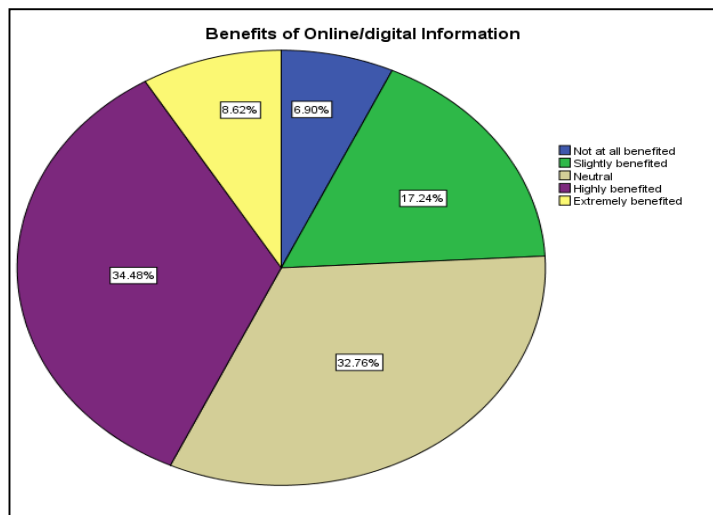


Figure 2: Benefits of online/digital information (Source: SPSS 24)

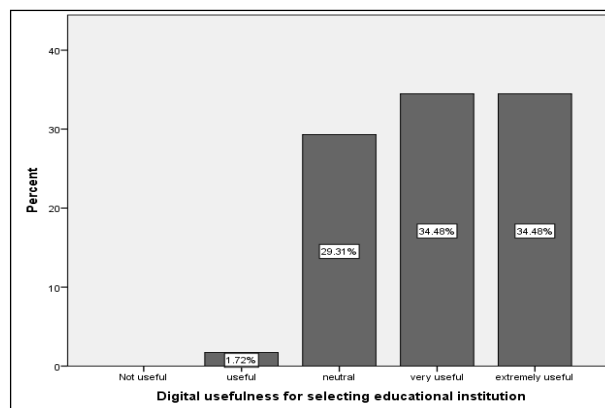


Figure 3: Usefulness of digital media (Source: SPSS 24)

Factors considered by students during decision making

Factors like brand, alumni, webinar, search engine, third party websites, social media and chatbot were analyzed for their importance during decision making for enrollment in a higher education institute (Table 1). Most respondents considered brand, alumni, search engine and chatbot results as important factors they considered while selecting an institute. Nearly 50% respondents remained neutral about third party websites. 39% respondents considered webinar facility as an important factor for selecting an institute. This clearly indicates the importance of e-learning in recent times when digital media has enabled institutes to increase their outreach by providing online lessons so that students can continue learning off campus. Meanwhile 37% agreed and 36% remained neutral about social media as an important factor while considering an institute for enrollment.

Table 1: Factors considered important by students while selecting a higher education institute (Source: SPSS 24)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Brand	51.7	34.5	12.1	-	1.7
Alumni	25.9	48.3	22.4	1.7	1.7
Webinar	13.8	39.7	34.5	10.3	1.7
Search engine	22.4	46.6	25.9	3.4	1.7
Third Party Websites	5.2	34.5	50.0	10.3	-
Social media	22.4	37.9	36.2	1.7	1.7
Chatbot	10.3	46.6	37.9	5.2	-

Benefits of using digital media

Most respondents stated that they had benefitted slightly by using digital media for comparing institutes, selecting a proper course, easier admission process, less time consumption, online payments and solutions to any queries raised (Table 2).

Table 2: Benefits of using digital media while selecting a higher education institute (Source: SPSS 24)

	Not at all benefitted	Slightly benefitted	Neutral	Highly benefitted	Extremely benefitted
Comparison made easy between college/university	46.6	37.9	10.3	5.2	-
Selecting a proper course	39.7	36.2	22.4	1.7	-
Less time consumption	29.3	43.1	19.0	6.9	1.7
Easier admission process	32.8	48.3	15.5	1.7	1.7
Online Payments	39.7	32.8	20.7	3.4	3.4

Solution for queries	27.6	41.4	29.3	-	1.7
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The low percentage of respondents who answered that they had highly/extremely benefitted from the use of digital media indicates that the institutes must work on their digital media strategy to reach prospective students and establish a conveniently accessible two-way communication channel with students.

Nearly 45% students believed that a period of more than a week after searching information about higher education institutes on digital media should be taken to apply. This was mainly due to students themselves facing difficulties in various aspects of admission. 29.7% respondents claimed they faced difficulty in getting overall information about the institute, 21.8% for course details, 20.8% for answers to queries and doubts and 18.8% for admission process. Only 8.9% respondents said that they found online fee payment difficult indicating that the aspect that is independent from the institute's administration posed least problems. This suggests that institutes must rework their digital media policy to reduce difficulties faced by prospective students while searching for the institutes credentials especially during decision-making. The institute's official websites must be regularly updated to provide valid information about the institute and courses offered and ensure quick response to questions posed on the website portal.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to study the impact of digital marketing on students' decision making for enrollment in higher education institutes in Coimbatore, India. Many students that participated in the survey remained neutral about the usefulness of digital tools during decision making. The undeniable growth of social media has introduced profound changes in society and in the communication management landscape. Organizations are rushing into social media networks to create a social presence in multiple channels without a clearly defined strategic approach that can foster the achievement of overall objectives (primarily higher enrollment rates). Most higher education institutes use digital media tools like Facebook, Google Ads, Instagram Ads, YouTube Ads and third party websites like College Dunia to share information with students. There is a need for institutes to increase their presence in platforms most trusted and preferred by students.

The findings of the present study indicate that although students use digital tools for gathering information, they do not rely solely on the online information and seek advice from past and/or current students before applying at any institute. We found that difficulties in getting overall information about the institute, course details, admission process and answers to queries and doubts exacerbate the wariness among students to depend solely on digital tools for decision making.

When used incorrectly or by unskilled professionals, digital marketing can affect organizations negatively (Aswani et al., 2018). Thus, it is important for organizations to develop social media competence (Braojos-Gomez et al., 2015). They should pay particular attention to aligning digital marketing strategy with their organizational objectives (Tafesse & Wien, 2018; Thorpe, 2018). The use

of digital media can provide new cost-effective marketing and promotion channels for higher educational institutes to reach prospective students. This study will help higher education institutes in Coimbatore to understand applicants' preferences while selecting an institute so that they can frame their marketing strategies in order to gain maximum digital media attention of admission seekers and exhibit their unique presence.

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