Social Media in Higher Education: A Framework for Continuous Engagement

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ABSTRACT

Higher Education Institutes across the world have started using social media to reach out to the prospective students as well as to interact with current students and alumni. Social media improves the communication on one hand and helps in promotional and development activities on the other. Present work explores the integration of social media in different processes in Higher Educational Institutes. A student enters the institute with admission process and exits after completion of degree. While on the campus, a student is involved in curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. At the same time, a student participates in the communication with the fellow students and other corporate and social forums. In all of these activities, social media can play a prominent and vital role. However, the success of social media roles depends upon; how the different stakeholders are engaged. A comprehensive study has been carried out to identify the role of social media in different activities of the higher education institutes. These activities range from looking for the new students, engaging them on the campus and maintaining communication after they leave the campus. Implications from teaching-learning, administrative, marketing and communication perspective have been identified. A framework has been proposed to integrate the specific social media channels in different processes in the higher education institutes. The framework will be very much useful in developing successful social media campaigns for higher educational institutes as well as to effectively engage the stakeholders.

KEYWORDS

Higher Education, Information Systems, Media, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

Social media has emerged as a powerful medium of communication across the globe and its extensive use has changed the way, people communicate and interact online. Social media channels include the social networking sites, blogs, vlogs, instant messaging, and virtual communities. Beyond the boundaries of personal communication, social media is also redefining the ways in which organizations are reaching their audiences and communicating with the individuals (Hendricks & Schill, 2015). It has become an integral part of the strategies of almost all industrial sectors, and higher education institutes are also prioritizing social media to connect to a large audience. This can also be attributed to the fact that social media has become the primary means of interaction within the world for younger
generation, and this young generation is the primary audience for the higher education institutions. According to 2017 statistics, the average time spent by millennials users (people born after 1980) worldwide on mobile internet is 223 minutes per day, which has actually got doubled from 2012 to 2017 (Statista, 2017). This proves a strong dependence of young people on the internet as part of their daily line.

Higher Education environment is also experiencing a period of great change (Bolat & Sullivan, 2017). Alterations in student tuition fees, de-regulation of student number controls, value for money, trends towards large-scale marketing and viewing the student as the consumer are a number of changes being observed in higher education (Scullion & Molesworth, 2016; Tomlinson, 2015). Correspondingly, the Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) are looking forward to new and effective tools for marketing and internet based tools and technologies can prove very much vital in this. Technology not only makes it easy to obtain information, but also allows people to interact through cyberspace (Kusumawati et al., 2014). Nayar and Kumar (2018) have argued that Information and Communication Technology (ICT) removes the big constraints of time and space in higher education and enables access on anytime and anywhere basis. With the rising prominence of social media in recent years, many promotional tools like traditional print and broadcast media have faced major challenges like timeliness, convenience and cost effectiveness. That is why, a large number of HEIs have also embraced some forms of social media for promotional purposes. Prior to introduction of social media, higher educational institutions relied primarily on websites as a basic environment for engagement due to the interactive nature of the web (Kang & Norton, 2006). Traditional marketing tactics have always facilitated one way communication; however, social media provides organizations with the opportunity to engage in two-way communications with their audiences. In this regard, social media has the ability to “…facilitate dialogue among groups that wouldn’t easily be in conversation with each other- current students, prospective students, alumni, parents, and friends of the college…” (Bednar, 2013).

Communication is placed at the core of the human experience. Apart from the use of social media in marketing, it can also find applications in interaction, teaching-learning, awareness and communication. Social media enables educational institutions to provide stakeholders with information about institutional news, events, new policies, job vacancies, new research programs and alumni engagement in an easy and faster way. Social media provides a perfect platform for highlighting new courses and campus facilities in an attempt to attract more students. With majority of student crowd present on social media, it provides institutes a platform to promote activities, receive feedback and start conversations. It provides a better way to connect with parents and keep them up-to-date. Thus, social media serves as an important medium of connecting students, teachers, parents, alumni and other stakeholders. It also helps in reviewing user-generated comments and content related to all aspects of the provision of higher education services (Scullion & Molesworth, 2016). Undoubtedly the 21st century students are active, digital savvy and better choice makers, whose expectations, motives and experiences are socially constructed (Kandiko & Mawer, 2013). The social media landscape, therefore creates opportunities for HEIs to amplify psychological engagement with students and to increase influence by following student-to-student conversations (Ashley & Tuten, 2015).

**Growth of Social Media**

Social media is growing at a tremendous pace. More and more people, especially young generation, are using social media platforms to express their opinions on all aspects. Adoption of social media has been increasing in recent years and the number of worldwide users is expected to reach 2.9 billion by 2020 (Statista, 2017). Both the rapid adoption of social media and growth in the portable devices, have contributed to this transformation. The shift in communication has thus mounted up to a huge amount of user-generated content, such as views, sentiments, thoughts, news, locations, and preferences. The rise in social media users’ data is thus proportional to the rising need for organizations to monitor and use these data to their advantage. Through this user-generated data, decision-makers can have access to timely perception of the market’s mood and consumers’ attitudes towards an organization,
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