Effectiveness of social media marketing in the enrolment of management students in college and university: an exploratory study

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Abstract: This research delves into the social media habits and perceptions of prospective management students, offering a qualitative lens through in-depth interviews with 35 prospective students using purposive sampling. Data from two Indian states were meticulously gathered, transcribed via Microsoft Otter.ai, and analysed with NVIVO 10 through a thematic approach. The study uncovers that these students leverage social media for various purposes: promotion, advertisements, reviews and rankings, college brand awareness, job and internship searches, college selection, and alumni networking. The insights gained illuminate how higher education institutes (HEIs) can amplify their online presence and forge meaningful connections with prospective students, alumni, and other stakeholders, effectively showcasing their resources and enhancing engagement.

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1 Introduction

Higher education institutes (HEIs) have been instrumental in enhancing education in India, creating a value-based society, and preparing students for 21st-century problems. To face such difficulties and make the most of possibilities, the Higher Education Department has worked hard to strengthen the educational system and taken creative initiatives to open up new pathways for students by providing need-based market-oriented education (John, 2013; Kusumawati, 2019). The Ministry of Education (MoE) targeted to achieve 50% GER by 2035 (MHRD, 2020). Indian management education demand has increased due to education sector expansion. Management education in India has several obstacles, but with the government's focus on digital India and skill India, the Indian higher education industry is predicted to thrive. Skilled managers who can lead firms to success are in demand as the Indian economy grows and more startups and global corporations set up shop in India (Grewal et al., 2022; Shukla, 2013). The All-India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) reported that during the past ten years, there has been a considerable increase in the number of business schools (B-schools) in India. Over 13,000 B-school and MBA departments can attest to the significant global expansion of management education, with India accounting for one-third of these institutions. To achieve international standards, there is, nonetheless, a critical requirement to raise their quality and pursue excellence (India Council For Technical Education, 2018). Universities are adopting social media policies and practices, not only for marketing but also for relationship building, career management, and learning (Begde, 2018; Dhaliwal et al., 2019; D'Uggento et al., 2022; Gill and Malhotra, 2019).

In recent decades, digital technology has rapidly changed communication techniques, models, and channels in different industries. Social media is an online forum where people may exchange ideas, opinions, and information with like-minded people (Aichner et al., 2021). The uniqueness of social media broadens how students may enhance their experiences in higher education. Many individuals in India now use social media and the Internet for their studies, jobs, education, entertainment, communication, banking, and online shopping (Saurabh and Sairam, 2016). In a dynamic learning environment, social media tool is one of those factors that has huge scope in academic communication (Camilleri, 2020). Institutions promote, advertise, and market their services through social media techniques (Bose, 2016). Social media is an effective instrument with the capacity to increase contact between students and the institution (Safori and Rahman, 2019).

Due to the demand for bright employees and growing contributions from the service industry, India has experienced enormous growth in the field of advanced management education enterprises. In the past ten years, management training has evolved dramatically in higher education. However, due to shifting environmental conditions,

administering these educational institutions, more notably management institutes, has grown more challenging (Arumugasamy et al., 2016; Kwok and Yu, 2013).

Existing literature extensively explores the use of social media in higher education but lacks a specific focus on its application within management education. This study aims to address this gap by examining how prospective management students in the eastern zone of India utilise social media. Although many studies analyse social media usage broadly, there is a noticeable scarcity of research that identifies specific platform preferences among prospective management students.

The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with 35 prospective students to understand the phenomena which are bearing a unique contribution to the existing body of knowledge. The data is processed through the computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) i.e., NVIVO version 10.

2   Literature review

2.1   Marketing of higher education institutes and social media

Social media has emerged as a pivotal platform for marketing products and services in India, facilitating the promotion of activities and the exchange of information and feedback (Guha et al., 2021; Verma, 2020). This platform promises enhanced connectivity for the education sector, linking students, teachers, parents, alumni, and other stakeholders (Erisher et al., 2014; Keasberry, 2018). Consequently, it has garnered significant interest from researchers, academicians, and practitioners. The rapid penetration of social media among stakeholders reflects its growing importance.

Business firms are increasingly allocating budgets for social media to effectively communicate with and reach target customers (Dhaliwal et al., 2019). Research has provided insights into the use of social media as a promotional tool in higher education, particularly in Malaysia (Safori and Rahman, 2019). Platforms like Facebook enable cross-communication among peer groups (Saurabh and Sairam, 2016). Studies highlight both the positive and negative aspects of social networks in society. Social media significantly contributes to academic development by promoting educational institutes through outbound marketing. While it cannot replace traditional promotional techniques, it serves as a valuable platform for information sharing, branding, word-of-mouth publicity, and customer engagement (Boateng and Amankwaa, 2016; Foster et al., 2015).

This study aims to identify the factors that lead to customer engagement with brand-related messages on higher educational Facebook pages, focusing on the perception of social media as a communication tool for lecturers and students. Findings indicate reluctance among students to use social media for educational communication in Malaysia and Jordan (Safori and Rahman, 2019). Social media also plays a role in sharing information about events, links, internships/jobs, and announcements related to instructional design and technology, thus influencing learners' awareness and professional growth. Existing literature indicates that many higher education instructors actively use social media for personal reasons while recognising its potential in teaching activities.

There is an understanding that students also utilise social media for learning purposes. Educational institutions need to engage actively on social media to create followers among intellectuals, alumni, professionals, and leaders within the educational industry.

Despite the abundance of studies on social media applications in higher education from both India and abroad, there is a paucity of research specifically addressing management education. Researchers such as Saurabh and Sairam (2016) and Bose (2016) in India, as well as Safori and Rahman (2019) in Malaysia and Jordan, provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of social media in business applications. However, the specific focus on management education remains underexplored. This study seeks to bridge this gap by examining the usability of social media tools among prospective students.

2.2 Research gap

Existing literature extensively explores the use of social media in higher education but lacks a specific focus on its application in management education. This study aims to fill this gap by examining how prospective management students in the eastern zone of India utilise social media. While many studies analyse social media usage broadly, there is a scarcity of research identifying specific platform preferences among prospective management students.

2.3 Research questions

1 What are the primary motivations for the consumption of social media information amongst prospective students?

2 How do prospective management students in the eastern zone of India consume social media tools for educational purposes?

3 Research methodology

Given the dearth of studies on the usage of social media tools among prospective management students, it is pertinent to understand this phenomenon in an exploratory manner. To achieve this, the researcher decided to conduct a qualitative study. Qualitative research allows for a deep and comprehensive understanding of the research topic. While it has faced criticism for its subjectivity and verbatim characteristics (Maxwell, 2016), it is precious when exploring new or complex areas where little is known (Creswell and David Creswell, 2018). This approach is ideal for uncovering the nuances of social media consumption among prospective management students in the eastern zone of India.

3.1 Data collection method

To gather rich and detailed data, in-depth interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method. In-depth interviews allow researchers to explore individuals' experiences, perceptions, and beliefs about a particular phenomenon. This method enables researchers to delve deeply into the thoughts and feelings of participants, providing rich insights into their subjective experiences (Creswell and David Creswell, 2018).

3.2   Development of the interview guide

An in-depth interview is a qualitative research method aimed at obtaining detailed information about a topic from a stakeholder's perspective. This approach explores respondents' views, experiences, feelings, and perspectives, often used at the beginning of a research project to refine its focus and questions (Boyce and Neale, 2006). The interview guide was meticulously developed (Annexture-B) to ensure alignment with the literature and research objectives. It was designed to explore the key themes and categories identified in the literature review, specifically focusing on the consumption patterns and platform preferences of social media among prospective management students.

3.3   Sampling technique

Purposive sampling was adopted to collect samples from 10 colleges and universities from the zone Bhubaneswar and Kolkata of India. Purposive sampling is a non-probabilistic sampling method where researchers deliberately choose specific participants or cases based on predetermined criteria that align with the research objectives. It is commonly used in qualitative research to target individuals or groups who possess the desired characteristics or experiences relevant to the study (Creswell and David Creswell, 2018).

4   Data analysis

There were 44 prospective students are expressed interest in taking part in the study. The interview consent was taken for the time and availability of the prospective student before a week. Few participants were found to be unsuitable due to timely availability. However further investigation left a total of 38 (86.36%) respondents who were interviewed. However, only 35 (79.54%) samples are deemed fit for the analysis and the remaining transcripts are discarded due to lack of clarity of audio of transcripts. The in-depth interview questions approaches were adopted to extract the most insights possible from the process (Creswell and David Creswell, 2018). The interview took place over one month via Google Meet and the Zoom platform in English. The length of the interviews varied from 25 to 25 minutes. Each interview was recorded and transcribed using transcription software (Microsoft Otter.ai). After conducting the interviews, the audio and video recordings were downloaded and carefully reviewed. Subsequently, the recordings were transcribed into text files by listening to the audio-video recordings.

The transcribed data were processed using CAQDAS, specifically NVIVO version 10. Each transcript was coded individually, utilising various quotations from the interviews. To ensure inter-author reliability, the codes were cross-checked among the researchers. The data analysis procedure made considerable use of NVivo software to ensure the rigour and efficiency of the research findings as suggested by Kaurav et al. (2020), Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2011).

Considering the demographic profile of the prospective students the median and mode age of the respondents is 21 years. The minimum and maximum ages are about 19 and 27 years respectively. The larger respondent falls in the age group of 22 to 24 years which contributed about (38.89%) of the whole. The next is 19 to 21 and 25 to 27 which

contributed about (37.50%) and (23.61%) respectively. The respondents comprise 44.44 and 55.56% of female and male respondents respectively. The age group of 19–23 presented the highest percentage and the age group of 25–27 contributed about 65.71 and 8.57% respectively. Finally, the cities of Kolkata and Bhubaneswar each contributed around 42.86 and 57.14% respectively.

The thematic research approach is crucial as it allows for the identification and analysis of patterns within qualitative data, providing deeper insights into complex phenomena. This approach helps in uncovering underlying themes and relationships that might not be immediately apparent. Additionally, it facilitates the development of a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter, guiding informed decision-making and strategic planning (Percy et al., 2015).

Figure 1 Tree map from interview transcripts
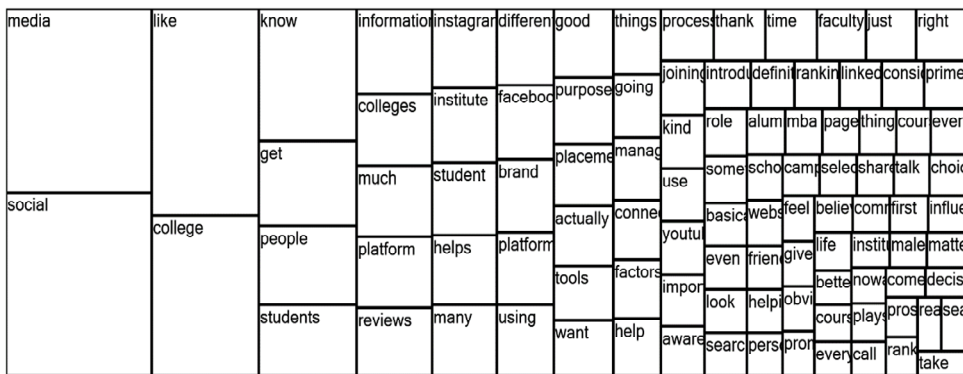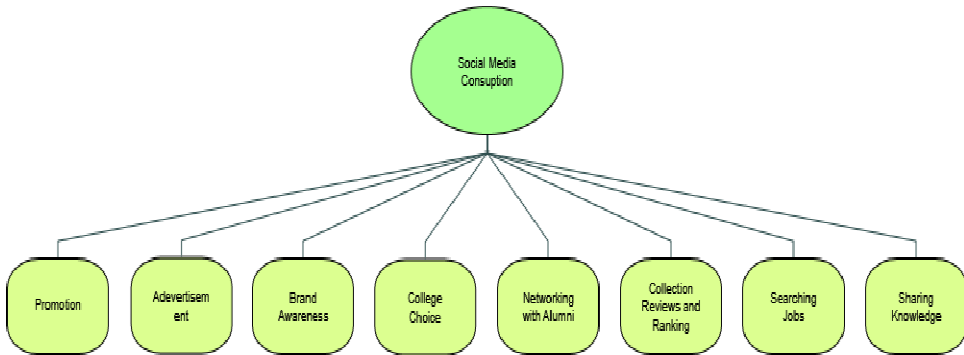

Source: Compiled by authors

A tree map is a diagram that visualises hierarchical data as a collection of stacked rectangles of varying widths, sizes, and shapes. The size of each rectangle corresponds to the quantity, based on frequency and percentage. The tree map is adjusted to fit the available space, with larger rectangles typically positioned toward the top left and smaller ones toward the bottom right (NVivo Help, 2020). Figure 1 depicts the tree map produced by this analysis, which depicts various aspects of social media consumption among prospective students. It depicts that social media helps to get various information related to college and university.

Figure 2 depicts the various purposes of social media consumption among prospective students. Thematic Analysis is considered the most appropriate for any study that seeks to discover using interpretations (Alhojailan and Ibrahim, 2012). It allows the researcher to associate an analysis of the frequency of a theme with one of the whole contents. Thematic Analysis is capable to detect and identify, e.g. factors or variables that influence any issue generated by the participants (Kaurav et al., 2020; Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2011).

The mindmap Figure 2 portrays seven main themes which are extracted from the thematic analysis conducted by using NVivo 11 plus. The sample of the extraction of themes and codes is attached in Appendix A. It consists of the open or axial code, main themes or nodes, their sources and references from the depth interview transcripts on an aggregate basis. To achieve reliability the researcher adopted Cohen's Kappa statistics and achieved 92 percentage of agreement with the co-author. Cohen's Kappa is one of

the commonly used statistical measures to assess intercoder reliability, especially in situations where coders are assigning categorical codes to items. It takes into account the possibility of agreement occurring by chance and provides a more robust measure of agreement than a simple% agreement (McHugh, 2012).

Figure 2   Purposes of social media consumption amongst prospective students (see online version for colours)

Social Media Consumption

Promotion — Adevertisement — Brand Awareness — College Choice — Networking with Alumni — Collection Reviews and Ranking — Searching Jobs — Sharing Knowledge

Source: Extracted from NVivo output

Figure 2 depicts seven dimensions of social media consumption among prospective students. The prospective students consume social media tools as a steady diet for promotion, advertisements, collection of reviews and ranking, college brand awareness, searching for jobs and internship information, college choice, and networking with alumni.

5   Discussion

The in-depth interviews with prospective students provide valuable insights into their use of social media for promoting and selecting HEIs. The tree map analysis from the NVivo output, shown in Figure 2, highlights various dimensions of social media consumption among these students. Key aspects include its role in promotion, advertisements, collection of reviews and rankings, college brand awareness, searching for job and internship information, college choice, and networking with alumni.

- The significance of reviews emerged as a crucial factor, highlighting the sources and impacts of reviews on participants' perceptions of universities or courses. Online recommendations from peers and influencers were particularly influential, prompting an exploration of the platforms with the most impact and the credibility factors behind these recommendations. The analysis also examined how universities and courses are perceived through social media branding, considering the elements shaping these perceptions and their alignment with students' actual experiences. Additionally, the effectiveness of social media in promoting courses and related information was assessed, revealing insights into the content that resonated most with prospective students and how social media influenced their understanding of course structures and requirements.

- The mind map of thematic analysis illuminates seven distinct dimensions of social media consumption among prospective students, providing a nuanced understanding of their intricate engagement with these platforms. Prospective students, akin to a steady diet, use social media as a primary source for collecting academic and admission-related information, ensuring they stay abreast of program details and institutional updates. Additionally, social media serves as a dynamic space for the collection of reviews and recommendations, guiding their decisions on colleges and courses see Appendix A. The figure also underscores the platform's role in creating awareness about college brands and shaping perceptions through content consumption. Beyond academic considerations, social media becomes a valuable tool for job and internship searches, offering opportunities for networking with potential employers and staying informed about industry trends. Furthermore, prospective students leverage these platforms for continuous learning, knowledge sharing, and connecting with alumni, thus building a comprehensive network that extends from educational pursuits to professional growth.

The findings from the in-depth interviews and analyses have significant managerial implications for HEIs. Firstly, the central role of 'social media' in discussions highlights its importance, urging HEIs to strategically leverage these platforms for communication and outreach. Given that prospective students actively seek information and connections through social media, HEIs should maintain active, informative profiles to effectively engage with their audience.

The emphasis on terms like 'help,' 'students,' and 'searching' suggests that HEIs can enhance their online presence by providing comprehensive and accessible information, aiding students in their decision-making processes. The importance of 'selection', 'promotion', and 'brand' underscores the need to cultivate a positive and compelling brand image through social media, influencing the selection process. HEIs should carefully curate content to align with their values and strengths.

The recognition of specific platforms like 'Instagram', 'LinkedIn', 'YouTube', and 'Facebook/Meta' indicates that institutions should tailor their content to the unique features of each platform, ensuring a multifaceted and engaging social media experience for prospective students. Insights from the Tree map analysis further emphasise the need for HEIs to actively manage their online presence, focusing on information dissemination, fostering positive reviews and recommendations, and strategically branding themselves to align with student perceptions.

Additionally, acknowledging social media's role in job and internship searches and alumni networking suggests that HEIs can enhance their career services and alumni engagement initiatives through these platforms, fostering a holistic educational experience. Overall, the managerial implications underscore the importance for HEIs to strategically embrace and navigate the dynamic landscape of social media to effectively connect with and attract prospective students.

5.1 *Future scope of the study*

Future research should longitudinally track social media trends among prospective students, considering demographic variations and emerging technologies. Comparative analyses across demographics and qualitative assessments of HEI content impact can offer tailored communication strategies. Exploring the influence of emerging platforms

and cultural nuances will further enhance understanding. This focused research aims to adapt HEI strategies in the dynamic landscape of digital communication. To complement the qualitative findings, a future study could adopt a quantitative approach to validate the result in more efficient way.

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Table A1   Annexture A

Sl. no.	Open code/axial code	Main theme/nodes	Sources	References
1	I get to know about a college, I look forward to what kind of faculty they have, what kind of because that only that all things come from their social media or maybe on their website output, or how engaging their website is to look forward to deciding because if Institute is well designed and well planned, it will help a student for the same purpose	Promotion	24	25
2	B-schools or any MBA school, are using social media and the broader interactive the social media is the get to have a more vital perspective about it. So, I think that it influences the admissions also like students' choice of the selecting the B School	Advertisement	28	36
3	I think when I was when I got shortlisted for my institute, I went on different social media platforms if I named them, one was Paglguy only, and the other was social media then I connected to LinkedIn, like I connected to a few of the alumni and the students who are actually in the campus. So, I talk to them I get to know about the campus faculty committees and everything. So, I think that has played a major role and every student does that	Collection of reviews and ranking	29	38
4	I think that social media is excessively important when it comes to brand awareness these days because everyone is using social media and most people are using social media to get this awareness	College brand awareness	29	35
5	LinkedIn purposes you can get What do you call exposure to many people it is a global platform in which many experts many things that are you make your profile, you take other people's profiles and you see which sector they are experts in also helps in job searching job links and which job which company is the right choice for you. Plus, you get linked to many people who have their details written their specifications, their expertise and everything	Searching jobs and internship information	14	15
6	The most powerful one is YouTube. Like when you have to go through the pages of YouTube to the college and university and you get a video for five minutes and you understand the topics, it is a which help to inclined towards a college and university	College choice	23	27

Table A1   Annexure A (continued)

Sl. no.	Open code/axial code	Main theme/nodes	Sources	References
7	Before entering the institute, new students, like new students who are going to start the session, tend to connect with the alumni, as we used to contact Illuminate through LinkedIn and other platforms too. So yes, it is helpful for both as well as Institute and students	Networking with alumni	21	29

Annexure B

Interview guide structure

The guide was prepared by discussing with the faculty guide and insights from the study of Boyce and Neale (2006). The authors agreed to develop the interview guide in the following manner.

1 Introduction

  Purpose of the study

  Assurance of confidentiality

  Consent to record the interview

  Participant's demographic details (age, gender, education level)

  General internet and social media usage.

2 Social media consumption patterns

  Frequency and duration of social media use

  Types of content consumed on social media

  Purposes of using social media (e.g., information seeking, entertainment, educational purposes).

3 Platform preferences

  Preferred social media platforms

  Reasons for preferring certain platforms over others

  Specific features or functionalities of preferred platforms that enhance their user experience.

4 Engagement with educational content

  Types of educational content consumed on social media

  Sources of educational content (e.g., institutional pages, educational influencers)

  Engagement behaviours (liking, sharing, commenting, following educational pages).

5   Perceptions and attitudes

Perceptions of the effectiveness of social media as a tool for educational purposes

Attitudes towards using social media for learning and information gathering

Concerns or criticisms about using social media for educational purposes.

6   Closing

Additional comments or insights

Thanking the participant for their time and contribution.