

Effectiveness of Digital Marketing in Education: An Insight into Consumer Perceptions

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Abstract

The media consumption in India has gone through several unruly variations. Statistics reveal that we currently have over 350 million internet users in the country and about 80 % of the population is active through their smartphone devices. On the basis of user base and revenues for most global internet companies India is one of the largest markets. Internet is where the population spends maximum time especially young students and working executives, with the digital advertising spends accounting for a growth of over 2200 crore in December 2013 thus making it one of the most powerful brand communication platforms in the current scenario. Urban¹⁵ suggests that "Digital marketing uses the internet and information technology to extend and improve traditional marketing functions". It has a wide spread application across sectors, however in the current context with proliferation digital and social media have gained enormous popularity and are integral parts of the decision making of young students seeking higher education. Digitalization has changed the way information is conveyed and perceived by viewers/information seekers. At times the information conveyed through digital media may not be authentic and legitimate creating a scope for misleading the target audience. The paper aims to study how digitalization can mislead thus influencing decision making among a certain Target group taking Education Industry as a sample. It seeks to supplement the claim by relevant data of an institute to evaluate whether the information provided for marketing purpose is legitimate enough to take crucial decisions.

Keywords: Decision, Digitalization, Digital Marketing, Digital Media

1. Introduction

As per a published report in Business Standard March 2014 we are now spending more of our lives surrounded by digital media with smartphones, tablets, and PCs that are always connected to the internet. The report further tracks how Marketers have kept pace with their audience and are spending more than 20 per cent of their ad budget on digital marketing. It claims that while the total market for advertising is growing at 3 per cent per year, advertising on digital media is growing by more than 10 per cent. The current scenario has witnessed the evolution of a consumer who not just 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.

Figures December 2013 as sourced from the BI Intelligence, IMAI, Nielsen Story IDEATELABS state that India constitutes a total population 1,283,810,000 comprising 137 million and 48 million rural that includes 1/120 Tablet Users 1 / 10 Mobile Internet Users 1 / 13 Social media users 1/6 Internet Users. The IMAI report states that as on December 2013 there are 205 million Internet users in the country which are expected to reach 405 million by 2015 thus endorsing for the increased significance of digital communication. The statistics points out towards a visible shift from traditional above the line communication to a more interactive through the line communication like digital / social media which has gained high momentum in the current scenario. Digitalization has changed the way information is conveyed and perceived by viewers/information seekers.

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It is not just limited to casual information seeking for entertainment or leisure but has become a significant platform for taking crucial career decisions. However unlike traditional media where credibility and authenticity are the major USP's at times the information conveyed through digital media may not be authentic and legitimate creating a scope for misleading the target audience. The convenience and easy accessibility are attributes that have made digital media a popular channel among the growing youth population in the country. Especially the student community in India seeking higher education appears highly influenced by digital media due to the fact that it empowers them to evaluate and compare information between different institutes before arriving at a certain decisions.

2. Background and Review of Literature

Digital marketing has assumed a wide spread application across sectors, however in the current context with proliferation digital and social media have gained enormous popularity and are integral parts of the decision making of young students seeking higher education. It is normally observed that user generated content is perceived to be more authentic and trustworthy¹⁰ as compared to firm generated content and has greater impact on overall perception of a brand in consumer's mind¹². Social media marketing is defined by various researchers some of the definitions which are relevant from the perspective of this study are discussed in the following section. While Gunelius (2011) clearly focuses on the branding aspect of social media marketing defining it as "any form of direct or indirect marketing that is used to build awareness, recognition, recall, and action for a brand, business, product, person, or other entity and is carried out using the tools of the social Web, such as blogging, micro-blogging, social networking, social bookmarking, and content sharing". The marketing perspective is highlighted by Philip⁵ describing social media marketing as "a social and managerial process by which individuals and groups obtain what they need and want through" Solis and Breakenridge¹⁴ have postulated about social media as opposed to traditional media, involves a shift in the way people discover, read, and share news: from broadcasting to a many-to-many communication model.

Ford² assumes digital communications as less prevailing but very influential than traditional forms of communication. Urban¹⁵ suggests that "Digital marketing uses the internet and information technology to extend and improve traditional marketing functions".

Simon, Roth and Madden⁴ have made the list exhaustive by adding mobile marketing, blogs, Search ads, online communities to the existing list of mediums for digital marketing. One of the elements which may justify these viewpoints could be the fact that Unlike Traditional media Digital offers multiple engagement platforms with a very easy accessibility.

According to Wertime and Fenwick¹⁷, Digital marketing constitutes variety of mediums such as web, Internet, email and viral marketing, mobile platform, gaming, user-generated content, digital signage and Internet Protocol Television etc. Social media for digital marketing medium Smith¹³ is an addition to "existing mediums of communication". Lazer and Kelly⁶ define social marketing as "concerned with the application of marketing knowledge, concepts, and techniques to enhance social as well as economic ends. It is also concerned with the analysis of the social consequences of marketing policies, decisions and activities." As per studies aspects of Interactivity apart, addressability, relevance a very high engagement quotient and a sense of empowerment has made it an extremely popular

platform for the young generation even for taking some of the most crucial decisions of their life. Literature offers an overview of the current state of research on information quality in the youth and digital media context. Studies also point towards the growing dependence of youth in creating and disseminating content on the digital media. The broad reasoning for this could be a lesser flexibility interactivity convenience and control vis-a-vis traditional communication platforms rendering the users an ability to evaluate the information quality facilitating a better decision making. As further suggested by studies "online information plays a significant role in decision-making, including decisions in important areas of life such as health, education, and financial matters (Pew Internet/Lenhardt, Madden, and Hitlin, 2005). While majority of literature broadly focuses on the positive experiences of digital media indulgence frequently delving into the significance of digital media platform as an "information source" there is however very less reference to the ability of digitally accessible content to either mislead or influence decision making of youngsters.

Fogg and Tseng (1999, p. 83) suggest that “educators and educational institutions, among others, have framed efforts to teach people to avoid making mistakes in credibility judgments with the heading of “information quality.” It is generally observed that user generated content is perceived to be more authentic and trustworthy¹⁰ as compared to firm generated content and it has greater impact on overall perception of a brand in the consumer’s mind¹². Findings of a study conducted by Torres and Weber (2011) indicate that “very young users tend to select links from a search results page that are prominently displayed, included advertisements and sponsored results. The importance of topicality is also highlighted in the frustrations experienced by youth during the search process, such as sites with misleading titles, irrelevant material, the sheer amount and disorganization of information available on the Internet, and the inability of students to know whether they had found “all the information” (Large and Beheshti, 2000, pp. 1075, 1077). Lange and Ito (2010, p. 261) describe how youth who are interested in creative production join social websites, forums, and websites geared towards specialized creation activities (such as fan fiction, anime music videos, or photo manipulation), and how such communities always had “mechanisms in place for creators to learn from one another”. These mechanisms included hierarchies (including greater esteem for proven experts at creation), discussion forums, simple ratings, competitions, top video lists, and form feedback templates. to having peers provide ad-hoc advice and assistance). Lange and Ito describe all creators participating in giving and receiving feedback, and in the process improving their creative craft. As aptly observed by Dr. Russell¹¹ in his Paper “Deceptive practices are easier to carry out electronically than using traditional practices because it is a relatively simple task to make one’s self appear legitimate on-line. Dr Smith in his study further elaborates that it is very easy to disguise viewers in the web or online media as identity can be easily hidden and location can be easily changed if illegitimate activities start to become evident Literature also elucidates the concept of “misleading” by reflecting the importance of internet which permits the boundaries between information, advertising and entertainment to be indistinct. Further tricking of the viewers to believe the content to be reliable and trustworthy is done by adding appealing

graphics and audio-visuals, which are actually for the sake of advertising purpose. Overall though Branding and communicating digitally is an effective way of reaching out to the target consumer yet literature does not throw much light on the consumer decision making influences but it observes that identification of misleading content is crucial to regulate since the practices of deception and misleading are very difficult to quantify. All the above researches have focused on digital communication from a technical perspective detailing on the use of internet and the ability to conveniently create and access information. The marketing perspective from the consumer point of view was found to be missing. Our study which is exploratory has considered perceptions of the Consumers in the Target group 21- 25 years, seeking higher education.

3. The Reasons for the Study were:

- i) The widespread use of Digital promotion in Education sector.
- ii) The relevance of understanding the perceptions of consumers regarding Effectiveness of the medium was felt due to the increased influence of young students seeking information on the digital media for taking this crucial decision.

4. Objectives of the Study

To study and analyse

- a) The consumer perception with reference to digital media communication
- b) The factors influencing decision making related to academics.

5. Methodology

Data was collected from a homogeneous sample comprising of 150. Post consistency the sample size narrowed down to 110. Based on the study objectives of measuring effectiveness of digital media on overall consumer decision making a questionnaire was designed and administered online. The methodology adopted was an exploratory research to get a better insight from the TG perspective where in the questionnaire covered following broad aspects of decision making.

- Consumer Perception.
- Consumer Preferences.

- Customer experience.
- Influencing factors and authenticity.

Different attributes were used to formulate the questionnaire in order to collect appropriate data for achieving the objective of this study. Achieving accuracy in this research requires in depth study regarding the subject. As the primary objective was to study the customer perception from digital and social platforms, the research methodology adopted is primarily focused on primary data through which the most recent and accurate piece of information could be collected. Exploratory research was adopted so that the factors underlying decision making could be derived thus creating a scope for further research and analysis.

6. Data Analysis Findings and Inferences

6.1 Generic and Purchase Decisions

Social media/Digital media awareness is very high, at least in the age group of 20-30 which was the target population for this research, 98% of the respondents use digital media for getting some or other kind of information out of reference group influence emerged as the driving factor for 55% of the digital media usage.

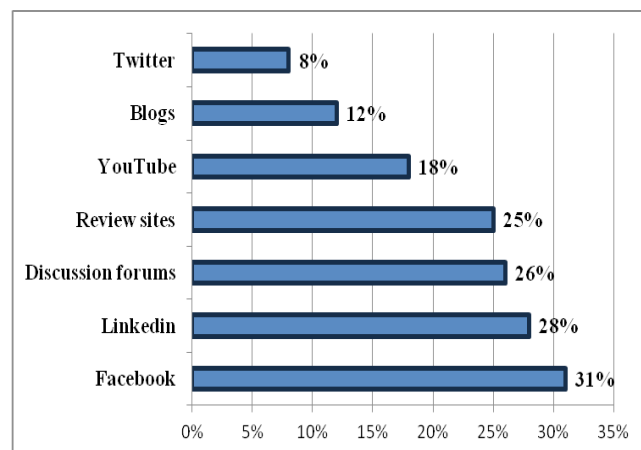


Figure 1. Generic and purchase decisions.

If we consider effectiveness of various media without any constraint of particular decision making, Facebook is considered to be effective by 31% of the respondents closely followed by LinkedIn, Discussion forums and review sites on an average 27%. Twitter is considered as effective by very few respondents (8%) (Figure 1).

Before deciding on the purchase 94% of the respondents referred to Google or other search engines, 68% checked company websites where as 65% referred review sites and e-commerce portals. Twitter was the least referred medium. As per the analysis only 2% of respondents referred to Twitter before taking purchase related decisions. For employment decisions LinkedIn (73%) was the most preferred medium over Facebook (29%), Twitter(13%), YouTube (18%) however company website and search engines (85% and 82% respectively) appeared to be the most preferred choice in case of decisions related to seeking employment.

6.2 Education/Admission Related Decisions

The search engine optimization and Institute website are very important for the elevated visibility of the Institution. For 'admission related decisions' Institution website (93%) is preferred over all other mediums closely followed by search engines (84%). Moderately referred mediums are review sites, blogs, discussion forums which are on an average referred by 63% of the respondents.

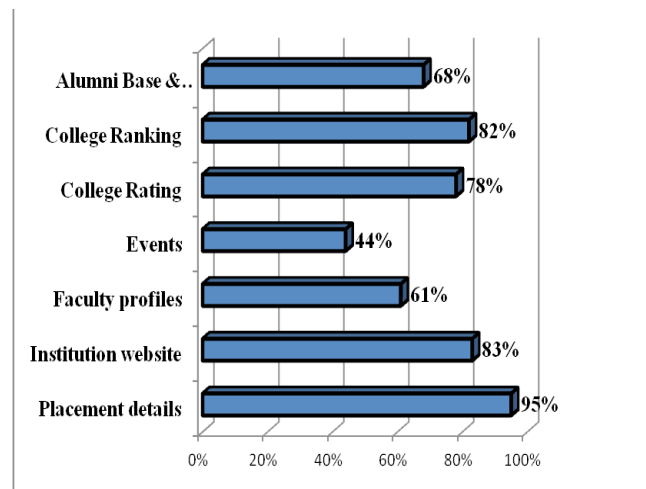


Figure 2. Education/Admission related decisions.

Digital marketers should display the relevant Ads so as to enhance the viewer's experience, motivating him to click on the Ad. While searching about specific course or institute, various advisements are displayed as a result. 68% respondents observe the advertisement's relevance to his/her need. 51% of the respondents take a judgment on whether the advertisement is free or paid before clicking on it. One of the criteria for this could be Position of the Ads, which is observed by 49% of the respondent.

Institution Placement record is one of the most significant factors for education related decisions and are referred to by 95% of the respondents. Other important factors include Institution website (83%), college ranking (82%), college rating (78%), Alumni base and profiles (68%), faculty profiles (61%). Events happening at the institution are the least referred factor (Figure 2). In order to influence the target group an Institute needs to Brand itself strongly by enhancing its visibility in each of the above mentioned areas projecting precise and updated information in an appealing manner.

6.3 Awareness and Knowledge about Digital and Social Media

Though 55% of the respondents get positively influenced by content present on social media, only 39% think that the content is convincing and 29% think that the information on various platforms is accurate. This clearly indicates that 16% of the respondents get influenced even if the content is not convincing and 24% of the respondents get influenced without having knowledge about accuracy of the information. 54% of the respondents think that digital media content helps in taking crucial decisions whereas 65% of the respondents believe that people tend to change their decisions because of digital media influence. However survey results reflect that only 48% have actually changed their decision in the past due to digital/ social media influence. Though almost all the respondents considered digital media as effective, when asked about ambiguity of content and incomplete information on digital media, 44% of the respondents believed that the content is ambiguous and incomplete. Digital and social media and related content should be 'Relevant, convenient, and credible'. We decided certain parameters to check convenience of use in terms of digital media like faster access to information, preferred time, time involved in availing information and live interaction etc. The Digital media are perceived convenient on an average by 79 % of the respondents. Convenience as indicated by the respondents is the ability to carry on something useful with ease. Convenience can be in terms of accessibility, time required etc. Overall effectiveness of digital media were analyzed based on parameters such as influential content, up-to-date content, appealing nature, interactivity associated, issue addressed, relevance, evaluation capability, always available nature, convenience, networking ability. On the mentioned parameters

digital media's effectiveness was found to be 76 % i.e. average rating of 3.80 on the scale of 1 to 5. So far as digital media is concerned 'Credibility' was found to be the biggest concern. Respondents were asked questions depicting their credibility in digital/social media content. The parameters selected for examining credibility were accuracy, authentic sources, content crosschecking with other resources of information, hesitation to provide information on the digital/social media platforms. Another important factor was how many prefer traditional media over digital media based on critical nature of decision on a scale of 1 to 5, credibility was rated as 2.7. Blogs and review based websites are gaining popularity now-a-days because of the ease of access of information and also ease of evaluation based on others opinions. But to what extent does it provide unbiased or fair information? 41 % of the respondents were not confident on whether the information was providing a neutral point of view. 54 % were of opinion that it was biased. While only 14 % are in favour of digital/social for providing unbiased information Respondents were asked about the digital media being misleading indirectly through certain parameters like ambiguity, incompleteness, legitimacy, biasness, fake content, and ability to deceive viewers by creating false impression, ability to control the information, the sequence and possibility of fraud etc. Average rating comes out to be 3.55 that means it is perceived misleading 71 % of the times. After using Digital/Social, 77 % of the respondents said that they are likely to continue using these media because of the convenience and ease provided. Apart from the fact that they will continue to use it, some of them also mentioned that they would refer it to other to aid them in decision making process.

7. Scope and Limitations

The geographical scope of the study was restricted to Pune city. The study being exploratory in nature, the sample size was restricted to 150 consumers (student group). Focus was mainly on analyzing effectiveness of digital marketing for education related decisions, the generalizations drawn are only indicative and not conclusive. However there is a scope for future research where gender wise influences of digital marketing for various other decisions can be studied.

8. Implications

The findings of the empirical study indicate that there is a high degree of awareness with reference to digital medium among the target group studied and the medium is in Consideration set of the target consumer, with a reasonable influence even while taking crucial decisions like admissions for higher education. However relevance of the content, convenience and the credibility aspects play a pivotal role in decision making. Clearly indicating that academic institutes need to furnish strong credible support and statistics on important aspects like Placement records and alumni data which again are prominent parameters while selecting an institute avoiding fake content, ambiguity in content, outdated content, incompleteness, and biasness. 'Reference group' influence plays a crucial role and is one of the deciding factors hence testimonials of alumni, existing students as well as industry experts need to be the focus. Another attribute that emerged in the study was convenience where required data is easily available and the website also provides various other platforms for the Consumers to engage, review and ask questions. Convenience can also be enhanced by lending a better browsing experience to the consumer online as well as providing him alternate offline support. To conclude digital media certainly plays an important role in decision making for students in particular and if the 3 major attributes are taken care of it can lead to a better word of mouth and enhanced Brand building.

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