

An exploratory study to identify the important factor of the university website for admissions during COVID-19 crisis

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Abstract :Universities have been using various Communications channels for promoting their brand. Chapleo et al. reported that the segment of Higher Education concerning branding is attracting increasing academic investigation. They also reported that scarce work has been done to investigate if universities are using their websites to proficiently communicate their brands. Universities, having very unique characteristics would be able to communicate very proficiently using their websites (Chapleo et al., 2011). In India, the challenge was particularly tough for enrolling the students in the academic year 2020-21. The lockdown due to the covid-19 pandemic started in March 2020. All the traditional approaches of University marketers were challenged (Rutter et al., 2017). The role of University websites suddenly became very important concerning reaching the prospective students for the upcoming academic year. Universities started experiencing that the singular approach of their efficiency of delivering academic content digitally was the key factor for the admissions into the academic year 2020-21. An exploratory study was undertaken to investigate how far University

websites are efficient in playing an important role in the admission decision-making process. Using the snowball sampling method 700 students, newly admitted into the academic year 2020-21 in various universities in Pune city of Maharashtra were approached. 200 responses were found effective for the study. The hypothesis testing yielded the result that a single or both parents earning family had a close association with the University website's usability towards admission decisions. The factor analysis was done to investigate the most important component on the University website conceded that faculty profiles and the opportunities for the students concerning employability and placements carried great importance towards admission decisions.

Keywords: University, Admissions, COVID-19, Website.

1. Introduction

India is one of the worst-hit countries by the covid-19 pandemic. As of 19th October 2020 Government of India confirmed that there were 75,97,603 cases of covid-19 and unfortunate 1,15,197 dates in India. The state of Maharashtra reported the highest number of cases of covid-19 ranging to more than 1.5 million. The states like Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh had a contribution of about 60% of the total covid-19 cases in India (WHO Report on India Covid19, 2020). According to the Ministry of Health Government of India as reported on their website it is important to stay away

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(about 1 meter) from a person who is showing any symptom. This indicates that social distancing was one of the major ways used to fight covid-19. This had a very serious impact on the day-to-day activities of the people. Many Industries like hospitality, transportation, tourism had a devastating impact on the covid-19 pandemic. The education sector was also one of the worst-hit segments of society. Yet the higher education and school education in India had shown resilience and agility to cope up with this pandemic (Government of India, 2020).

The lockdown due to the covid-19 pandemic that started somewhere in March 2020 in India. These two months of the Year March and April are typically the most important months where higher education institutions have their maximum marketing strategies employed to reach out to prospective students for the upcoming academic year. The lockdown and social distancing had a major impact on the established marketing strategies of the Higher Education Institutions and Universities across India and the globe. This sudden disruption in the marketing methods of most universities forced them to explore some of the untapped ways of promoting themselves. It became impossible to meet prospective students face to face. The entire activity of counselling face to face for admission purposes stopped completely. Which pushed Universities and HEIs to go completely digital with their marketing strategies. Universities found out that it was time to explore many of the digital platforms which were not explored in the past to reach out to the prospective students for the enrollments in the academic year 2020-21.

2. Literature Review

Since the last decade, the growth of Electronic Commerce has put websites in a key position. There has been substantial research in the past to measure the effectiveness of the websites in various contexts (Davis et al., 2019). The non-for-profit entities, unfortunately, neglected or have paid less attention to the importance of websites in the past (Astani et al., 2008). As reported by Astani et al. in the year 2005 that, higher education institutions and Universities have started paying attention to websites as an effective tool of promotion. It was reported that irrespective of the type of organisation, the structure of the website has to be made with the consumer at the centre. It is needless to say that universities must design websites that meet the requirements of the

customers and Consumers at the same time. It is a proven fact that aspiring candidates use websites as the initial tool and the most important one in their journey of decision making related to admissions (Astani et al., 2008). They also reported that higher education institutions need to pay more attention to the needs and the effectiveness of the design of the website relevant to their students. They concluded that universities need to make some fundamental changes to improve their website in the context of usability in terms of marketing and promotion (Saichaie & Morphey, 2014). Mustafa et al. reported that University websites need to be evaluated for their usability towards the students from admission related decision-making processes. They reported that there is a need to investigate the parameters which are more relevant to the students in the said context (Mustafa & Al-Zoua'bi, 2008).

As reported by Verkijika, Silas Formunyuy De Wet et al. (Verkijika & De Wet, 2020) in the fast-moving digital world universities around the world must find their ways to utilise the potential of their websites to the fullest. Websites are playing a key role in maintaining interactive pathways with many pairs related to University. It was also suggested by the author that the websites of universities must be used effectively to use the potential of the stakeholders. But others reported that websites of many universities were not found achieving the desired results. Many studies have reported that University websites are found to have broken links and irrelevant content.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Context

A survey method was used to collect the responses of the undergraduate students, who are admitted in the current academic year, that is 2020-21 in various universities in the city of Pune. The respondents were from various academic verticals like Engineering, Management, Liberal Arts, Science, Commerce, Social Sciences, Law, Fine Arts, Pharmacy, Media and Journalism etc. It was observed, that in this current academic year, which was especially challenging for the marketers of higher education i.e. at the university level, because of the covid-19 pandemic; there was hardly any information available as to which communication channel will play a vital role in promoting the programs offered by a specific University.

With some amount of previous knowledge and research, it was possible to some extent to identify which communication channels would be efficient enough to play a vital role in current academic years promotional activities. At the same time, it was observed that there is hardly any information available from the literature and research as to which factor you play an important role on a University website from a Student recruitment perspective.

3.2. Sampling

The responses for the research were collected in August and September 2020. The domestic students who have recently joined University for various undergraduate programs in the academic year 2020-21 were targeted. For the process of sampling, all the Indian students at the various state-private universities in the City of Pune were intercepted using an online survey. With a hyperlink to the online survey, the research questionnaire was shared using the snowball sampling method with all students through their class teachers. The language used in this research was exclusively English. A total of 930 students were reached out, from which 24.08% i.e. 224 responded to the survey. After due data censing only 200 responses were found eligible for further analysis (n=200). Out of 200 respondents, 183 used the Website before admissions-related decisions.

3.3. Methodology

SPSS (Statistical Package for social sciences) version 25 was used for the Statistical analysis. The analysis of Qualitative Data Variables was expressed using frequency and percentages. The Chi-Square test was used to find the association between various demographic variables with the research objective that is University Website. The p-values of less than 0.05 were considered significant. The detailed Factor Analysis was done to represent the output in the format of the Correlation Matrix, Communalities and Total Variance. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy was used along with Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. The outcome of the statistical test was represented using Component Matrix and Scree Plot.

4. Results

4.1. Profile of respondents

Gender		n	Percentage
	Male	132	66.0%
	Female	68	34.0%
Socio Economic Status	Upper Class	4	2.0%
	Upper Middle Class	94	47.0%
	Middle Class	89	44.5%
	Lower Middle Class	13	6.5%
Original Residence	Rural India	24	12.0%
	Urban India	176	88.0%
Employment Status	Both (Parents) Employeed	52	26.0%
	Single (Parent) Employeed	148	74.0%
Academic Level	Post Graduate	6	3.0%
	Under Graduate	194	97.0%
Faculty	Commerce	31	15.5%
	Engineering	1	0.5%
	Law	1	0.5%
	Management	167	83.5%

4.2. Statistical Analysis University Website as Communication Channel on Admissions Decision

Website Visit before Admission		n	Percentage
	No	17	8.5%
	Yes	183	91.55%
Program/Course Structure (n=183)	Not Effective	2	1.1%
	Somewhat Effective	2	1.1%
	Moderately Effective	27	14.8%
	Highly Effective	78	42.6%
	Very Highly Effective	74	40.4%
Infrastructure Related information (n=183)	Not Effective	3	1.6%
	Somewhat Effective	11	6.0%
	Moderately Effective	45	24.6%
	Highly Effective	66	36.1%
	Very Highly Effective	58	31.7%
Faculty Members (Teachers) Related Information (n=183)	Not Effective	4	2.2%
	Somewhat Effective	14	7.7%
	Moderately Effective	41	22.4%
	Highly Effective	74	40.4%
	Very Highly Effective	50	27.3%
Employability opportunities/Placement Information (n=183)	Not Effective	7	3.8%
	Somewhat Effective	9	4.9%
	Moderately Effective	45	24.6%
	Highly Effective	69	37.7%
	Very Highly Effective	53	29.0%
Scholarship Related Information (n=183)	Not Effective	11	6.0%
	Somewhat Effective	30	16.4%
	Moderately Effective	49	26.8%
	Highly Effective	55	30.1%
	Very Highly Effective	38	20.8%
Fees Related Information (n=183)	Not Effective	9	4.9%
	Somewhat Effective	22	12.0%
	Moderately Effective	43	23.5%
	Highly Effective	59	32.2%
	Very Highly Effective	50	27.3%

4.3. Factor Analysis

4.3.1. Descriptive Statistics

Information Factors on the Website	Mean	Std. Deviation	Analysis N
Program/Course Structure	3.20	.810	183
Infrastructure related information	2.90	.973	183
Faculty Profiles	2.83	.988	183
Employability opportunities and Placement Information	2.83	1.026	183
Scholarship Information	2.43	1.165	183
Fees related Information	2.65	1.147	183

4.3.2. Correlation Matrix

		Program/ Course Structure	Infrastru- cture related informati- on	Faculty Profiles	Employa- bility opportu- nities and Placeme- nt Informati- on	Scholar- ship Informati- on	Fees related Informati- on
Cor- relat- ion	Program/Cour- se Structure	1.000	.478	.612	.497	.443	.461
	Infrastructure related information		1.000	.611	.506	.358	.392
	Faculty Profiles			1.000	.546	.451	.422
	Employability opportunities and Placement Information					.599	.491
	Scholarship Information					1.000	.549
	Fees related Information						1.000
Sig. (1- taile d)	Program/Cour- se Structure		.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
	Infrastructure related information			.000	.000	.000	.000
	Faculty Profiles				.000	.000	.000
	Employability opportunities and Placement Information					.000	.000
	Scholarship Information						.000
	Fees related Information						

4.3.3. KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.848
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	434.254
	df	15
	Sig.	.000

4.3.4. Communalities

	Initial	Extraction
Program/Course Structure	1.000	.588
Infrastructure related information	1.000	.534
Faculty Profiles	1.000	.646
Employability opportunities and Placement Information	1.000	.643
Scholarship Information	1.000	.550
Fees related Information	1.000	.516

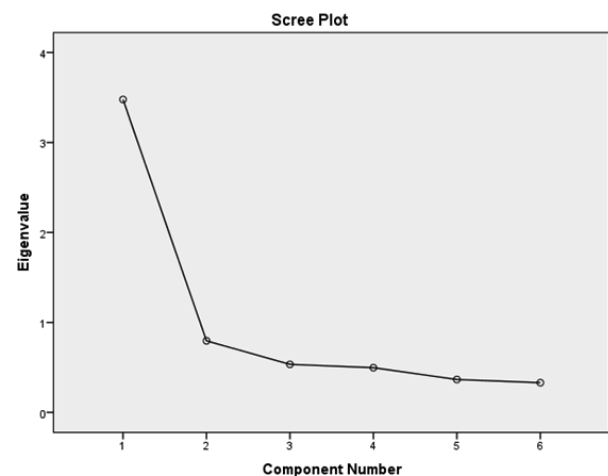
4.3.5. Total

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	3.478	57.964	57.964	3.478	57.964	57.964
2	.796	13.262	71.226			
3	.534	8.902	80.128			
4	.497	8.278	88.406			
5	.365	6.091	94.497			
6	.330	5.503	100.000			

4.3.6. Component Matrix

	Component
	1
Program/Course Structure	.767
Infrastructure related information	.731
Faculty Profiles	.804
Employability opportunities and Placement Information	.802
Scholarship Information	.742
Fees related Information	.719

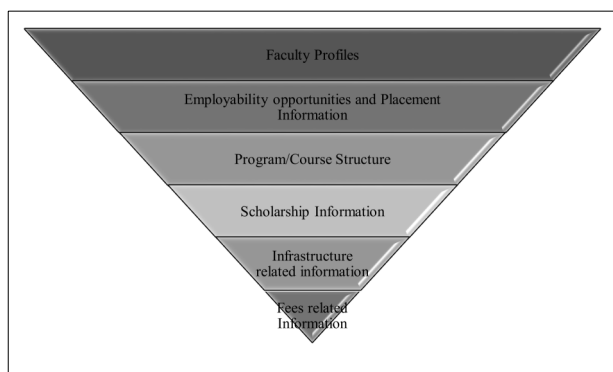
4.3.7. Scree Plot



5. Discussion and Conclusions

The marketers of higher education in India have been using many modes of communications to reach out to prospective students. There was an utter need for contemporary research in this pandemic situation of covid-19. It is widely known that the world is now divided into the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic era. After careful literature review, it was observed that over the last decade the way prospective students are interacting with the digital communication channels has changed dramatically. The data collected using a snowball sampling method of 200 respondents shows that 183 of them were keen to use websites as their important medium of information before they could make any admission related decisions. Though it was observed that the representation of the upper-middle class and the middle class was more in the sample but 91.5% of people quoted that they make use of university websites as an important tool for admission related decisions which indicates the popularity and importance of the university website. Respondents were asked as to what level the program structure, information related to infrastructure, information of faculty members, placement or employability opportunities at University, information related to scholarships offered, program fees were effective and which one of them was most effective while making admission-related decisions?

The factor analysis that was carried out to evaluate the most prominent factor after the University website indicated that, from the perspective of the students, fees related information was the least helpful factor while taking the admission related decisions. The information related to infrastructure and information



related to scholarship was placed as important factors. The information related to the program structure was ranked somewhere in the middle. The second top factor that was most relevant to the students while making the decision was the information related to the opportunities concerning employability and placement. But the most important factor which was ranked one concerning its utility while taking admission-related decisions was the profile of the teaching faculty members at the University.

6. Limitation and future scope

The limitation of this paper is that the research was conducted with students as the respondents and as the focus of the research. Whereas in India It is seen that at the undergraduate level the admission related decisions are largely influenced by the parents. Hence the process of admission related decision-making at the undergraduate level is not independent of the parents, who were not part of the sample in this research. In future, the study can be undertaken to understand the factors which are important to parents, while making these decisions. This will help to understand the correlation between the factors that are important to students as well as parents.

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