

Digital Marketing Communication Strategies and Its Impact On Student Higher Education Decision Making Process – A Review Of Relevant Academic Literature

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the Indian education sector especially the university student admissions and enrolments to a great extent. The rise in competition among the higher education institutions for student admissions and enrolment makes them invest a huge amount of ad spends in Branding, Advertisement & PR activities. This research paper highlights the impact of Digital Marketing Communication Strategies which helps in leveraging the Student Admission Decision Making Process, especially during the coronavirus pandemic. The increasing usage of the internet by students recommends that higher education institutions need to make use of digital media to reach out to prospective students for admission and enrolment by feeding in continuous and engaging user-generated content through text, images, infographics, videos, and podcasts. It is also noted that there is a drastic shift in traditional decision-making to digitalized decision-making. The article emphasizes that both prospective students and university marketers should effectively use digital marketing communication tools. The article suggests strategies and conclusions to manage the corona crisis and structuring a conceptual model to increase admissions by using digital marketing communications as the primary promotional tool.

Keywords: Digital Marketing, Student Admission, Decision Making Process, COVID-19, Higher Education

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INTRODUCTION

We can all vouch that digital, mobile, and social media have become an indispensable part of everyday life for people all over the world. Digital Trends 2020 report (The Next Web, 2020) showcases that more than 4.5 billion people now use the internet and more than 3.8 billion use social media. Nearly 60 percent of the world's population is already online, and the latest trends suggest that more than half of the world's total population used social media in 2020.

Statistics projects that India (Statista, 2020) is the second largest online market in the world having 560 million internet users and being ranked behind China. By 2023, it is expected to have 650 million internet users and 450 million social network users in India. The notable metrics is that India has the largest Facebook user base as of 2020.

University of Massachusetts Dartmouth in 2019 conducted a survey and infers that most of the

fortune 500 companies use some form of social media as part of their marketing. Google and Compete in 2012 did a US-based study and found that nine in ten enrolled students had used the internet to research higher education institutions, with one in ten exclusively using online sources of information (Education Technology, 2014). Studies show that the rise in the digital usage by the younger generation is the key to attract them via internet search, mobile and social media.

This clearly portrays that India is growing fast in the digital scenario especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, and people are becoming habitual of using the Internet and Digital Media and as the evolution of human society, the improvement in Communication processes and Digital Convergence opens innovative opportunities and challenges for Marketing in the online realm. Subsequently, the Internet has moved ahead to play a significant role in the

Consumer Decision Making Process. The literature review aims to project noteworthy aspects with respect to the role of the digital in decision making, impact of the internet on Consumer Behaviour, Post Purchase Behaviour, and the Consumer Decision Making Process in the education sector.

Objectives

The present literature paper focused on the following objectives:

- To showcase various digital marketing communication strategies that helps in student's higher education decision making.
- To highlight the impact of COVID-19 on decision making and its effect on university admissions
- To propose a model for continuous engagement using digital marketing for effective decision making

Methodology

Data and information presented in current study are collected from various reports prepared by national and international agencies on digital marketing, decision making, and student admissions. Information is collected from various authentic websites. Some journals and e-contents relating to impact of COVID-19 on the above said variables are studied.

Digital Marketing and Decision Making

Digital Marketing involves the effective usage of internet and digital channels for the promotion of a business, product, service, or brand. Digital Marketing Communication channels include Search Engine Marketing (SEM), Search Engine Optimization (SEO), Social Media Marketing, Email Marketing, Website, Online Portals, Online Reputation Management, Content Marketing, Push Notifications, Influencer Marketing etc. These channels not only ensure that the brand is strengthened but also it helps to target to the right audience. Digital Marketing Communications are cost effective, results can be tracked using Google

Analytics, instantaneous feedback through SMS services, available as open source and has a high conversion rate as compared to that of traditional marketing. It has an increased customer satisfaction and experience, increased customer retention and drives revenue through personalization. Digital marketing through web and google analytics (Rohan Samsona, Dr. Mita Mehtab, Prof. Arti Chandanic, 2014) helps in measuring the click counts, visitor reports, etc which tracks the ROI and meets the performance goals.

Website

Website is the primary source of digital promotions for every product, service, or brand. If the website has a good design look and feel, speed navigation, informative, user friendly and easily understandable it can easily capture the attention of the target audience. The first website (livescience, 2012) was live on August 1991 and was created by Tim Berners-Lee. The term world wide web, commonly known as the Web, is an information system where documents and other web resources are identified by Uniform Resource Locators, which may be interlinked by hypertext, and are accessible over the Internet. The number of people using the Internet is growing exponentially world over. The Internet is a virtual library containing unlimited factual & information. Anyone can publish and access this information. The websites can be edited and managed by user friendly content management tools like WordPress, Joomla, and Drupal. Syracuse C.Y. in February 2013 writes in the contractor magazine that 51 % of consumers search for product information, 49 % search for brand information, 45 % do product comparisons and 27 % do price comparisons in search engines. Websites are used to gain information (Thomsen, 1995) and helps in increasing their

decision making. The reputation and prestige power of the brand (Sallot, L. M., Porter, L. V., & Acosta-Alzuru, C, 2004) increases by the usage of official websites.

Search Engine Optimisation

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) helps to increase the visibility of the website for relevant searched in the Search Engine Results Pages (SERP). The leading search engines include Google, Yahoo, Microsoft Bing, and Baidu. Consumer decision making becomes easy when there is more visibility of the website in the search results. SEO is the collection (Sharma, Butler, Irwin, & Spallek, 2011) of information to enhance the site's quality and perceptibility on SERP. As part of their marketing (Yuksel, Milne, & Miller, 2016) strategies MNCs like Apple, Amazon, and Microsoft use SEO to promote their products and services. Search engine optimization forms the first step in digital marketing. SEO is organic and does not involve any payment to the search engines unlike that of SEM. There are two types of SEO namely On-page SEO and Off Page SEO. On Page SEO is based on content on the website and Off-Page SEO relies on backlinking and social bookmarking. Dye in 2008 mentions that it is extremely competitive to bring the website in the first page of the search engine results page. Higher educational institutions as part of their marketing initiatives must regularly upgrade their SEO for better ranking of keywords when searched.

Search Engine Marketing

Unlike SEO, search engine marketing (SEM) is a process of marketing a business, brand, product, or service through paid advertisements that appear in the search engine results pages (SERPs).

The commonly searched keywords related to the business and which brings more traffic to the website will be identified through tools like Keyword Planner. The identified keywords are usually bid against competitors and this helps in positioning the website in the first page of the SERP. There are majorly two types of paid ads which are text ads and image ads. Pay Per Click (PPC) or Adwords are Google's paid advertising campaigns. A study by Chien Minfang (2011) in China infers that search engine marketing contributes to information search which is ideally the stage two of the decision-making process. According to the report by (Kenshoo, 2020), Voice Search is increase on the rise. Alexa and Google Home smart speakers are being increasingly purchased these days. The study infers that 20 percent of searches will have keywords like "best", "how", and "best". We can conclude that more than ever before consumers want answers in a simple way and adopting search engine marketing strategies will match the gap. Google adwords to have the right Ad extension for higher click through rate (CTR). Few catchy ad extensions include link to USPs like placements, infrastructure, scholarships and finally to apply now as part of the digital marketing campaign for higher educations. Two landing pages can be created and using A/B split testing the performance can be evaluated.

Social Media Marketing

As per a report by social media examiner in 2020, marketers suggest that social media is the most important promotional tool for their businesses (socialmediaexaminer report, 2020). 86 % of marketers conclude that social media efforts have increased exposure to their brands and 78 % of marketers say that social media has increased traffic. Social

media marketing also generates prospective leads, increases the fan base, improves sales, and opens door for business partnership. The report provides us an insight on the commonly used social media platforms where Facebook has a share of 94% followed by Instagram by 76%. LinkedIn has a share of 59%, Twitter has 53% share, YouTube has 53% share, Pinterest has 25% share followed by Messenger Bots, Snapshot and Tok-tok. The two top platforms used by marketers are Facebook and Instagram. The report highlighted that Facebook dropped from 69% and Instagram grew from 16% in 2019. It is also seen that marketers are more interested to learn Instagram for their promotional campaigns. During this COVID-19 crisis we have come across a lot of online webinars and video marketing campaigns. YouTube video, Facebook video, IGTV Instagram video, LinkedIn video & Twitter video. Instagram stories & Facebook stories capture the audience immediately. YouTube and Facebook Live streaming has gained more insights these days as people can engage, interact, and chat directly. When it comes to paid social media advertising 40% marketers prefer Facebook advertisements followed by 41% of marketers using Instagram advertisements. The report also talks about the ROI of organic social media activities and infers that only 30% marketers agreed that they can measure the organic social activities. The organic reach has declined to a great extent as per the survey taken.

Email Marketing

Email marketing (The Balance, 2016) is a type of digital communication strategy where consumers are targeted with advertisements and promotions through electronic mails to attract them leading to purchase of the product. Email marketing helps in lead nurturing via

marketing automation in the sales funnel. According to Fahim Iftikhar and Imran Khan (2017) email trigger is done when a consumer views a product, service, or brand in the digital space. A product offer or discount coupon is sent to the consumer via Email to create purchase intents and to simulate them on searching for more research and do comparisons on the product. Once the consumer is satisfied with the search results the final purchase is executed. If the consumer is satisfied with the product, he may be interested to give a good review on it. Sahni, Wheeler, and Chintagunta (2016) infers that personalized email contents creates an impact on individuals to increase their views towards the email. Personalization reduces unsubscription of emails. Business2Community (2019) projects the 59% of consumers are influenced on their purchase decisions through email marketing.

Online Education Portals

Some of the leading online educational portals, publishers and search engines in India include College Dunia, Careers360, Shiksha, College Dekho, MingleBox, GetMyUni, HT Campus, MBA Universe, College Search, etc., A review by Gaurav Tiwari in 2020 predicts that there are more than 660 recognised universities with 35000 colleges in India which has a student count around 315 million students. With such intensity of options in colleges and courses it becomes very difficult and at the same time competitive for higher educations to position themselves. The above-mentioned online portals facilitate the students and parents who are decision makers to compare, review and has a call-to-action button that leads to admissions webpage. The portals are very informative and provides details about the university or

college, courses, fees, scholarships, admissions procedures, entrance examination notifications, placements, faculty, photo gallery, rankings, accreditations, current events, and hostel. These education search engine portals help in identifying the perfect combination of the university and course planned to study for the students. The portals rely on content marketing strategies and work on an effective search engine optimization process over the years to rank organically in the search engine results pages.

Retargeting

Retargeting is a digital marketing process (Retargeter.com, 2017) that attracts consumers who have visited a website and has not taken a purchase decision. The digital marketer targets the consumers again by showcasing discounts, promotions and offers for the products on other third-party websites and social media channels using paid and sponsored advertisements. These are also called as programmatic marketing which works on algorithms based on various factors like interest, demography, etc. According to Fahim Iftikhar and Imran Khan (2017) retargeting is cookie-oriented technology which relies on Java Script to follow the prospects all over the digital space. It is a smart and efficient marketing tool that works best for digital marketers. Hurley (2016) states that to improve the effectiveness of advertising, marketers work on retargeting where it targets specific customers who already visit the online store. Retargeting uses metrics and analytics to retarget the consumers and engages them towards making the purchasing behavior.

Mobile Marketing

Mobile Marketing is one of the most trending digital marketing

communications strategies used in the current scenario with the rise of new platforms like SIGNAL, TELEGRAM and WHATSAPP Business. Consumers are targeted through Mobile such as SMS, MMS, Mobile applications, etc. (Marketo.com, 2017). Watson, McCarthy and Rowley (2013) inferred that mobile marketing is the cheapest form of digital marketing and also stated that 90% of the world's population can be easily reached through smart phones. Yan and Zhou (2011) in their study mentions that mobile marketing is based in communication of viral messages on the product to the consumers with the usage of mobile marketing techniques. These days almost everyone has a smart phone with internet, and this becomes all the easier to promote and advertise products through mobile marketing. OTT platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, HotStar, InShorts, and TikTok attract brands to advertise in these channels.

Online Reputation Management

In the (Robbin ten Dolle) recent years' reputation management has become completely digital with the increase in social media which helps in instant responses and crisis management. Online Reputation Management can deal with the content in all digital platforms efficiently to maintain the goodwill and reputation of the brand. The negative image of the brand can be dealt with constant digital reputation management and made positive. During the student decision making journey it is important to build a strong online reputation of the brand through all social media platforms and review channels like Quora. The study infers that prevention of negative image of the brand can be done through effective online reputation management.

Influencer Marketing

Stefan Zak, Maria Hasprova (2020) writes that influencer marketing enables consumers to take decisions in their purchase journey. Popularity, expertise, and reputation of the influencer makes them take decisions. Digital branding and social media help in this influencing the consumers to a greater extent. New consumers can be reached easily using influencer marketing. Brands should be careful in using the right influencers in

promoting the product or service. Alumni students who are famous are good influencers for the prospects who are planning to join the university.

Decision Making Process involves a 5-stage model of consumer decision making which involves five steps that consumers consider before buying a product or service. A digital marketer must understand these five steps to advocate the consumer to buy the product, communicate effectively to consumers and close the sale.

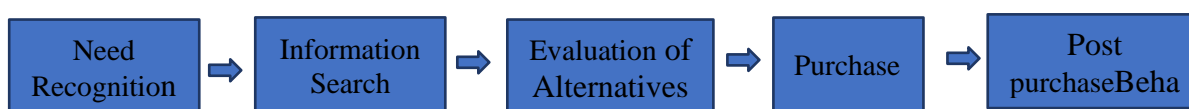


Figure 1: Five-stage model of the consumer buying process.

Need Recognition

Need recognition is the very first stage of the decision-making journey where consumers realize their needs. Marketers (Alina Stankevich, 2017) on creating an imbalance between consumers' present status and their preferred status will initiate the consumers to buy a product or service. Marketers can also help the consumers identify their need by triggering relevant options. This is feasible especially in the online platforms like social media and google searches where the options are shown based on the consumers interests and likes which is driven by artificial intelligence and is based algorithms. Newsletters and social media can facilitate the consumers need in this stage.

Information Search

Information search is the second stage in the decision-making journey where consumers start on an information search about the different alternatives that they can purchase to satisfy the need.

Information Willman-Iivarinen, H ((2017) can be acquired from asking friends and family about their experience with the brand or from personal memory in using the brand before. Research, surveys, blogs, reviews, television, internet, social media, radio, OOH advertisements, brochures and websites will give them a clarity on their information search journey. SEO and PPC advertising will help in gathering information for the consumer in the open sources through search engines like Google, Yahoo, & Baidu.

Evaluation of Alternatives

The next stage of the decision-making process is to evaluate the available alternatives for a purchase is made. Attributes like cost of the product, quality, reliability, life, warranty, brand, etc are evaluated with similar products. This is the stage where the consumer finalises his/her purchasing notion. psychological attributes. The existing psychological attributes (Smith, A.D., and Rupp, W.T., 2003) of the consumer is affected by the

experience gained through the evaluation of alternatives stage. Online reviews and comparisons can facilitate the consumer journey in this stage.

Purchase

Soon after evaluation is done the consumer decides to buy the product or service in this stage. The decision implemented here based on the need, information search and evaluation of alternatives. For low (Alina Stankevich, 2017) value products like daily groceries the time delay in decision making is less whereas in high value products like purchasing a house the time delay is more which is understandable. Online purchase may not be tangible but reduces the time in buying a product or service.

Post Purchase Behaviour

The fifth and final stage measures the satisfaction and dissatisfaction levels of the consumer on their evaluation and experience on the product or service purchased. If the consumer finds that the product is line with the promise made, he becomes an ambassador for the product and factor of loyalty plays a role here and becomes a contributor for other potential buyers in their stage two of their decision-making journey which increases the chance of the product of being bought by many. According to Lingli Wang (2019), social influence helps consumers rationalize purchase decisions and has an impact on planned purchases and post purchase evaluation too.

Neha Jain (2014), in her research titled "E-Marketing and the Consumer Decision Making Process" suggests that Consumer Decision Making Behaviour has changed dramatically in the past decade. These days, consumers have the option to order any product online in ecommerce websites like Flipkart & Amazon. People have

replaced newspapers and have subscribed to online new feeds. The study was conducted across five industry verticals: Automobile, Banking, IT, Education and FMCG and inferred that Automobile, Banking and FMCG are the verticals demonstrating a high Website Attribute Index (WAI). The results of the study shows that majority of the consumers prefer Online Services for purchasing products.

Rekha Dahiya and Gayathri (2017) in their research paper on Digital Marketing Communication and Consumer Buying Decision Process: An Empirical Study in the Indian Passenger Car Market have used a mixed methodology approach by collecting primary data from 784 respondents in Delhi region using proportionate sampling area wise. The test of significance used were One sample Wilcoxon Signed Rank, one sample binomial test and chi-square tests. The study inferred that at least one digital channel of communication was used while buying a car. The most used digital channel of communication are websites while buying a car followed by social media platforms. It is seen that in each stage of car buying decision making process right from 'need recognition' to 'post purchase' was 'significantly' affected from digital marketing communication. The 'evaluation' stage is the most affected stage. The results inferred that digital marketing communication helps in triggering need recognition in high involvement product category like car. The results also established that consumers feel positive towards digital communication, get affected from other customers' reviews and express their post-purchase feeling over digital platforms.

Attributes influencing consumer behaviour in online medium

Online consumer behaviour relies on certain attributes in the lines of psychological, social, personal, and cultural areas. According to Gupta (2015) in his doctoral thesis has compared and analysed the various attributes affecting traditional shopping and online shopping. He

inferred the benefits of online shopping over traditional shopping in his research.

Table 1: Analysis of The Attributes Affecting Traditional VS. Online Shopping

S. No.	Traditional shopping	Online shopping
1	Choices are less	Variety of choices
2	Immediate gratification soon after the purchase	Gratification after delivery of the products.
3	Instant delivery of the products.	Delivery of products takes 3-4 days depending on the logistics and availability
4	Purchase involves time	Reduces time in purchase
5	Bargaining is possible in an offline store	Bargaining is not possible in an online purchase
6	Tangibility of the products can be felt by the consumer	Touch points of the product cannot be felt

Source: (Gupta, 2015)

Impact of COVID 19 on University Admissions & Enrolment

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the university admissions to a greater magnitude. There is slow paradigm shift towards MOOC and online learning, especially in the western countries. During the pandemic board examinations as well as entrance examinations for professional courses such as medicine and engineering had been postponed several times. Examination results were withheld, and university admissions were delayed, and the migration of students were also limited to a greater extent for admissions as students preferred to study in nearby colleges. Universities and other educational institutions have been closed since 16th March 2020 when the government announced a countrywide lockdown to contain the COVID-19 outbreak. Universities were advised to use ICT tools for teaching and learning purposes. UGC has proposed guidelines and SOPs on reopening the university and colleges post lockdown due to the pandemic. The new academic session had a delayed start from November 01, 2020. The QS coronavirus survey (2020) projects that 59% of respondents have stated that coronavirus has affected their plans to study abroad and 55% of respondents now intend to delay or defer their admission until next year.

The mobility and government restrictions have been a bane during the pandemic.

Impact of COVID 19 on Decision Making Process

In the recent months, our approach towards decision making has drastically changed. COVID-19 has not only affected the health of millions but has also affected the decision making and communication strategies. During this time, decision making (Deloitte report 2020) is solely based on fact-based approach which involves gathering information to assess different options. Students during their higher education decision-making journey rely on reviews, insights, and metrics and this has increased in the pandemic situation as students are not able to directly visit the campus.

Digital Marketing and Student Admissions Decision Making

Students these days spend more time online on the internet. They use the internet to take decisions to buy a product, to know about services and to even review about brands. Digital Marketing Communication channels help students to decide on the course and college they would like to join soon after school. Digital tools like the university websites, social media platforms, google analytics, and online educational portals

help in analysing, comparing, suggesting, and reviewing the colleges, faculty, infrastructure, admissions information, and courses the students plans to pursue.

Andriani Kusumawati(2018) in his article on the impact of digital marketing communication process on student choice of higher educational institutions clearly stated that digital marketing has not been effectively used by university marketers and by students who are planning to pursue higher education. This research was conducted to evaluate the student decision making process of a university in Indonesia using digital marketing. The study concludes that digital marketing tools has a positive effect on students' decision making in selecting a university or higher educational institution. The study inferred that based on the information provided on university Website, Twitter, and Facebook students chose higher educational institutions.

From the article on a study on effective digital marketing strategy in education sector at Bangalore city, Afzal Basha (2019) showcases his empirical findings that 43% of admission decision were taken on seeing the university website, 24% of respondents decided their higher education from various official social media handles of the university, 7% from education guidance websites, 8% from search engine optimization, 9% from online reviews, 5% from email marketing and 3% from videos. From a Likert scale analysis Afzal Basha (2019) infers that 51% of students agree that digital marketing communications had been the most important factor for selecting the college and course of study.

The main rationale (Vikas and Pooja, 2019) to propose digital marketing as the primary tool for decision making is that students spend more time on mobile and internet these days other than other traditional media platforms like television & radio, online promotions and advertisements are highly effective when compared to that traditional advertisements, prospects use online platforms for searching courses and colleges, parents have started reviewing colleges and courses based on its

website and online presence, students compare colleges and courses on the basis of their online presence, these days universities use internet for application and query handling and last of all foreign nationals seeking admissions in a different country survey, research and review the university and college website.

Digital Engagement is the Key

Afzal Basha (2019) in his research on effective digital marketing strategies for educational sector in Bangalore infers that the university website, social media, and mobile apps are very important for the student engagement activities. For continuous interaction 29% of students preferred social media, 23% preferred the university website, 17% preferred mobile applications, 11% prefer videos, 2% prefer education guidance websites (College Dunia, Shiksha, College Dekho, Careers360), 7% by SEO, 8 % prefer online reviews and 3 % prefer Email Marketing. Keisha Croxton (2019) has proposed the usage of User generated content (UGC) to engage and interact with students and suggests that it the best way to showcase the energy of the university. According to Keisha Croxton User generated content is 76% more trustworthy than traditional advertising. Using standard hashtags in Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram will increase the reach, impressions, and visibility. Contests and hashtag campaigns will increase the page hits, likes and followers.

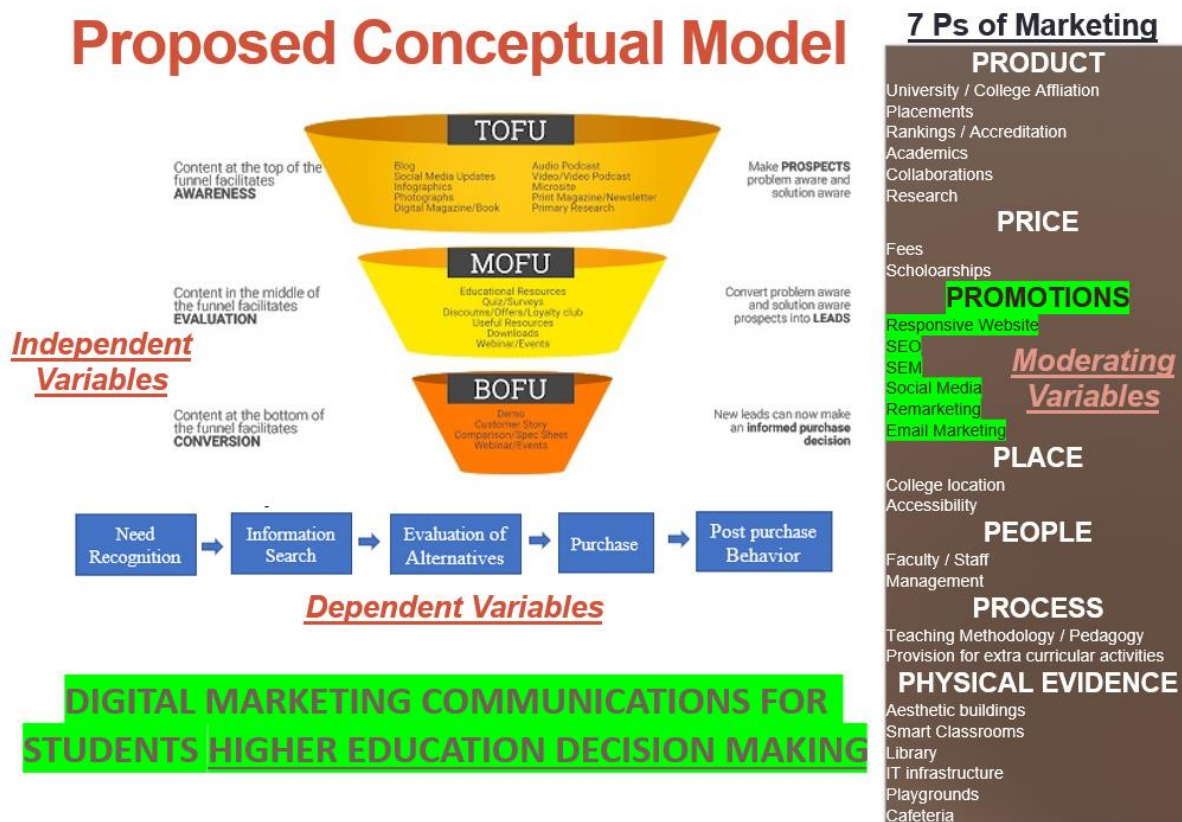
Technology enabled Admissions

With the invasion of technology and innovation the admissions and enrolment process has been more systematic and works on SAAS platforms powered by Artificial Intelligence, Big Data and Machine Learning. Companies like No Paper Forms, Extra edge, LeadSquared are some of the leading admissions and marketing automation software. We live in a world that moves in a supersonic speed and totally relying on digital platforms. Gone are the days of traditional pen and paper entrance examinations, offline

counselling, and hardcopy application form filling. Especially during the Post-Covid 19 pandemic scenario it becomes more important on the usage of technology, innovation in the digital platforms for university admissions and marketing. Krishnamoorthy A, Srimathi (2019) concludes that online applications and online fee payment are preferred by the students and parents in during the enrolment process. They infer that technology has contributed to the complete admissions process starting from website providing information on the course and college, responsive features like social media, easy messaging, enquiry forms, lead management, call centre, online OMR, online entrance examination, online counselling, online enrolment, fee payment and refund.

Conceptual Model

The below conceptual model is proposed to showcase the impact of digital marketing communication strategies for the student’s higher education decision making. The model is a combination of the 7Ps of marketing which has attributes on student’s decision making linked to it along with the decision-making parameters in various levels based on the continuous feed of user generated content from all levels in the marketing funnel that is top of the funnel - TOFU, middle of the funnel - MOFU and bottom of the funnel -BOFU. Continuous digital engagement on levels of the decision-making process right from need, information search, evaluation, purchase, and post purchase are needed for effective conversion. The study proposes the model for higher education institutes who are willing to adapt digital marketing as part of their marketing spends and strategy which lead to increased admissions.



Source: Computed by the authors

Figure 2: The conceptual framework model was created from the extant literature collected.

CONCLUSION

Higher education decision making has always been a topic of discussion for decades. With the invasion of digital marketing communication strategies, students are engaged with constant user generated content which makes them persuade in their digital marketing journey especially during the COVID-19 pandemic scenario. The recent advancements in machine learning and artificial intelligence will enhance the complete decision-making journey. As the entire world is moving towards a digitally relied on scenario it is a must that all educational institutions must be readily adaptable to accept the changes in digital technology and should change accordingly. The study aims to recognise the need, want and requirement of the student and positioning the right choices in front of them for easy decision making.

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