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STUDENT STANCE: USEFULNESS OF CHOOSING SOCIAL MEDIA AS A MEDIUM TO IMPROVE STUDENT INTAKE IN PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

The entirety and focus of this study is to centre on the usefulness of social media as a platform in helping improve student intake in private universities in Malaysia. It was discovered that social media helps to recruit students faster and with a smaller cost at that. The past few years have seen the Malaysian higher learning institution suffer financially and it is then essential to study how student intake may help in improving the current dilemma of universities. This paper attempts to find the usefulness of social media as a platform to increase student intake in universities from a student stance by choosing the technique of focus groups. The results indicate that the student's feel that social media is crucial for student recruitment purposes and also a means to access information. Besides these, it also clearly helps in marketing activities, enhancing university reputation, creating exposure and reducing cost.

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1. Introduction

In the current world of rapid daily competition, all types of business industries are grappling with the realization that survival is an everyday issue. The education industry will always remain an integral part of society, however with many new development in education, many institutions of higher learning are required to buck up to survive. Universities especially often depend on its number of students to sustain itself against the mad rush of other higher learning institutions mushrooming. In Malaysia, the past decade has seen signs of small colleges and new turned universities in many parts of the country. It must be noted that, after the Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEI) being introduced and implemented in 1966, it has also made it possible for well-known overseas varsities like Curtin, Monash and Swinburne University, Nottingham in UK to set up their branch campuses in Malaysia. Moreover, according to Grapragasem et al. (2014), private HEIs are given a stamp of approval to function by themselves with only slight meddling by the education ministry in Malaysia. Despite that, private varsities are recommended to align their goals on par with the government in efforts of giving quality education and bringing change to the education landscape in Malaysia (Grapragasem et al., 2014).

Yet, it is becoming evident as we approach 2020 that private universities in particular are finding it difficult to hold the torch and run the race. One concern may also be the fact that private universities' contribution are being unnoticed in today's fight for change in higher education in Malaysia. However, one must not forget the reality of private universities consumption of subsidized loans by the government through the channel of National Higher Education Fund Corporation (PTPTN), as the government is aware that these institutions though private, account for almost half of the student and academic populations (Williams, 2018). A significant determinant of a university's survival and achievement is definitely its students who are its core customers. Lately the minimal focus to private HEIs is of concern because of the number of students and the public resources involved but even worse is the urgent need to address reform of the private sector because of significant financial distress which is impacting tens of thousands of students, graduates and staff (Williams, 2018).

2. Problem Statement

In the current world of rapid daily competition, all types of business industries are grappling with the realization that survival is an everyday issue. The education industry will always remain an integral part of society, however with many new development in education, many institutions of higher learning are required to buck up to survive. Universities especially often depend on its number of students to sustain itself against the mad rush of other higher learning institutions mushrooming. In Malaysia, the past decade has seen signs of small colleges and new turned universities in many parts of the country. It must be noted that, after the Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEI) being introduced and implemented in 1966, it has also made it possible for well-known overseas varsities like Curtin, Monash and Swinburne University, Nottingham in UK to set up their branch campuses in Malaysia. Moreover, according to Grapragasem et al. (2014), private HEIs are given a stamp of approval to function by themselves with only slight meddling by the education ministry in Malaysia. Despite that, private varsities are recommended to align their goals

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Williams (2018) states that the findings of several research implies that the private universities are facing difficulties and require assistance and aid and only then can they revive themselves and grow for the years to come.

One of the key benefits of using social media to generate more students into universities is using it as a marketing strategy. Mattson and Barnes (2009) offers proof that, currently quite number of organizations are already engaging with social media as part of their marketing strategy. The main role of social media is to help marketers to marketing effectively. Furthermore, nowadays, social media is one of the online interactive application that rapidly used worldwide, Nambisan and Nambisan (2008) and Shankar and Malthouse (2009). The application is based on user generated content that allows peer-to-peer communication and user participation. The strength and attractiveness of using social media lies in its ability to automatically segment the market and this makes it a success factor. The adoption of social media has cause a rise of market transparency and reduction of a marketer's traditional market power and control over both media and the communication phase which triggers the marketers to be more aware of its usage. As a result, they are forced to find new alternatives to reach and communicate with potential customers which are the new students (Parise & Guinan, 2008). For higher education institutions relationship marketing involves building and sustaining a relationship of value exchanges between the university and the three main customer groups: alumni, current students and future students. A customers' long-term loyalty is positively related to quality of these relationships (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001).

Information accessibility also influences the increase of student intake as from the students' viewpoint; social media be responsible for a communication platform built on information, truthful thoughts and experiences of students and alumni. Zeisser (2010) mentions that social media provides an opportunity to "tame the fundamentally unpredictable and serendipitous nature of word of mouth without losing what makes it so valuable in the first place—its authenticity". Moreover about authenticity, social media also has a time dimension pace of response that gives impact to future students' expectations and decisions when applying to a university. Nurlida (2009) stated, student's satisfaction towards their choice of the varsity is often reliant on the information they acquire from the varsity's features itself. Therefore, social media gives

an opportunity for university's staffs and students to deliver the information, which may firmly affect students' decisions.

Student recruitment seems to also be one of the advantages of using social media which in turn will increase the student intake. Mattson and Barnes (2009) concluded that universities always make use of social media when doing their activities in promoting their own brand especially in their student recruitment initiatives. The marketing team of universities can source for students and recruit them through social media. According to Rutter et al. (2016) the brand to consumers responsiveness is another factor of social media interaction, a good engagement with potential students can be generated when the university immediately and helpfully responds to any inquiry made by their customers. Their research reports that universities that interact frequently with their followers garner better student recruitment performance than universities that fail to interact, even when potential students cause them to do so. It is said that the higher the social media validation the higher level of student recruitment can be achieved.

Apart from these beneficial attributes, social media also helps student intake by helping highlight university reputation. In fact when universities manage to recruit students, eventually those students will help disseminate positive features of the university to their social media accounts and this will indirectly enhance university reputation. Students are among a demographic that is publicly affiliated with a multitude of consumer products, showing their assistance through social media following organisations and their brands or becoming brand community members. Sharma (2013) explains that recent studies indicate that universities in the US, UK and Australia have projected a drastic increase in the amount of organizations that use China's most influential micro blogging platform named Sina Weibo to reach out to Chinese students and use social media as an global recruitment tool. By using social media such as Twitter, Facebook or Instagram as a platform to recruit new student, this can make an easier way for university's administration to allow room for improvement.

In addition to the benefits earlier, cost efficiency is the other advantage of social media for student's intake. Now days, university's admin can save the budget of advertising by posting relevant promotional information through social media. The institution of higher education has the choice of paying to sponsor the post so that by using social media networks it reaches more clients and increase the student's intake. Back in the olden days, where traditional kind of advertisement is well known, most university spend a lot of money to print out banners, flyers and rent out a place to do a campaign to gain new student for their university. This will cause higher rate of payment and this will not guarantee the expected number of recruitment. Based on Aman and Hussin (2018), they said that updating status and posting online social networking data will increase the number of clients compared to traditional methods also usually sponsoring a post at low cost, much more cost-effective than traditional marketing, and other benefits are likely to gain more leads.

Lastly, the benefits of using social media as is to create awareness and share and exposure for the university itself by helping spread their name globally. As of January 2009, more than 175 million active users were recorded with the online social networking application Facebook around the world (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009). This show that social media is indeed one of the most used platform to interact around the globe thus, making university involvement within the social media is going to attract more international students to participate in local university. With more international students enrolling into the local

university, it will gradually increase the revenue and the ranking of the university as the main choice for them.

3. Research Questions

The main question that this study wants to address is the usefulness of social media towards improving student intake.

4. Purpose of the Study

Essentially today, private universities are facing many hardship and require financial assistance and only then can they revive themselves in the following years to come. It is pivotal then to look at how to improve student intake by using technology such as social media platforms for this reason.

5. Research Methods

In order to proceed and complete this study, a qualitative technique was conducted. This type of method are aptly used when seeking to discover in depth knowledge on a specific area of concern. Hence a focus group discussion was used for this study. Research was carried out on university students to evoke responses pertaining to the usefulness of social media as a platform to improve student intake in universities. The technique provides the benefit of ensuring researchers to gain thorough information and input from participants in a manner which is interactive.

The participants in this research were identified and chosen based on similar or commonality principles like their experiences with respect to the research domain. In a university climate, students are key customers and their stance on social media as a form to improve student intake is much welcomed for improvement purposes. Data used in this study were collected from a cohort of third year International Business students from College of Business Management and Accounting, UNITEN over their Semester 1 2019/2020. The focus groups took place in June 2019.

A focus group method was adopted for this study. Focus group or focus group interview is a qualitative technique for data collection. A focus group interview provides a setting for the relatively consistent group to reflect on the questions asked by the interviewer (Dilshad & Latif, 2013). The focus group strategy enables spontaneous information exchange, and expression of the participants' knowledge, and thoughts.

Participants participated in a focus group of six class members. The purpose of pursuing the focus group is to explore some of the usefulness of social media as a platform to improve student intake. Before the session begin, the researcher ensured that all participants were already exposed to social media platforms that exist and it was established that social media platforms such as facebook, twitter and Instagram were not an unfamiliar method for them. Students were notified and briefed about the aims and standard rules of focus group. Researchers asked for volunteers for each to be a leader of a group and gave a question guide to lead their groups. By advocating that volunteers led the groups, the effects of the researchers' bias on the eventual results of the study were reduced. Participants were asked to discuss their

responses to the questions. The questions are designed as short, open-ended, and one-dimensional (i.e. what were your thoughts like? Or can you provide me an example?) to evoke responses from participants.

6. Findings

The question addressed participants' perspective towards social media and required them to propose some usefulness or benefit of social media in improving student intake. The discussion evoked responses which eventually were put together into themes as per the table 01 below. Six themes emerged from their discussions through the focus group method.

Table 01. Usefulness of social media to increase student intake

NO	Themes	Benefits of social media to increase student intake	Frequency
1	Marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Numerous ways of advertising Easy to reach target (3) Proof of networking Stay connected to community 	6
2	Information accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide information about university (4) Get informed through Facebook & Instagram Receive feedback to allow room for improvement (2) 	7
3	Student recruitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Customer interaction with University (3) Increase engagement with customer (2) Gain potential customer (3) 	8
4	Exposure/awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Borderless platform to promote the University 	1
5	University reputation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promotes University wellbeing Brand reputation (5) 	6
6	Cost efficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduces advertising cost 	1

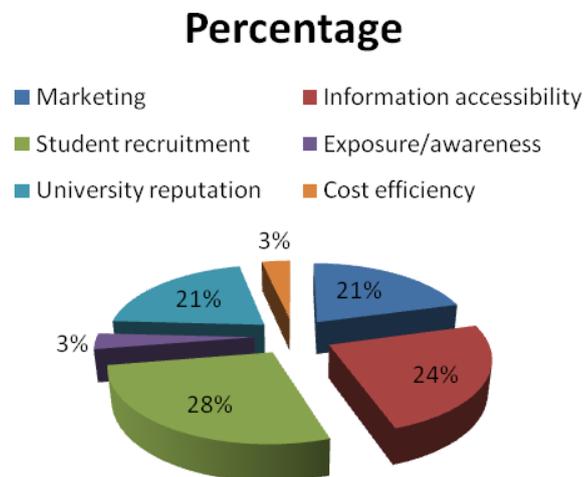


Figure 01. Usefulness of social media towards improving student intake

The core finding of this paper shows the six usefulness of using social media for the purposes of improving student intake in private universities. It is discovered that social media is the most relevant and apt tool used in today's era. From the analysis what is indicated is that students felt that social media helps increase student intake by student recruitment, better marketing, enhancing university's reputation, creating exposure/awareness, information accessibility and reducing the cost. These themes were discovered and are presented in Table 01 and Figure 01. The focus group study revealed that the majority of participants considered that social media can help with improving student intake by quickening the student recruitment process. Recruiters use the social media platform to search for potential talented candidates by visiting the professional or personal profile of the students (Bamokarh, 2017). The social media platforms such facebook and instagrams showcase many young and vibrant potential students. Millennials are prone to use these platforms for various reasons. This is followed by 24% of the respondents that the accessibility of information from social media would be useful to help increase student intake. Besides that, the respondents also felt social media would also assist greatly in marketing activities and enhance university reputation and this would directly contribute to increasing student intake. Marketing activities and university reputation were each at 21% as themes. This is then followed by 3% each for gaining exposure and cost efficiency if social media is used to assist in garnering student.

7. Conclusion

This research study shows the usefulness of social media and how it can help private universities in Malaysia to increase its student intake. This study involves students as key participants, hence their perspectives, thoughts, and proposals are acknowledged and put together to provide insight on improvements. The study generated results which discusses and identifies social media as a prominent tool in improving university issues such as low student intake. Future research may also focus on other aspects that may help universities improve student intake such as providing fund options, scholarships, various degree programs and so forth.

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