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‘Unofficial’ Presence of Higher Education Institutions in India on Social Media: Good or Bad?

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Abstract. The objective of this paper is to analyze the unofficial presence of Universities in India on Social Media with a focus on Facebook and Twitter. Content analysis was used in terms of quantitative approach. A checklist was developed as the main research instrument based on other checklists and questionnaires. It was observed that all the selected institutions have online presence, however, some are very active online and some have static presence. One third of the institutions are on social media and surprisingly one-fourth has unofficial accounts on social media. Government institutions as compared to Private have larger unofficial presence on social media. Unofficial presence on Social Media can be a concern for higher education institutions in terms of security and branding.

Keywords: Website; Higher Education; Social Networking Site; Interaction

1 Introduction

Online presence has never been as crucial for higher education as it is now. The projection of providing information is now been shifted to engaging students and other stakeholders online. The social media revolution has certainly entered education, carrying with it the notion that users add value through its participation [8]. The importance of social media in academics can be clearly observed in institutions in US and UK. By 2011 all the top institutions in US came on social media, Facebook and Twitter being prominent.

Digital presence is becoming an integral part of higher education in India too. Being a developing nation, India has approximately 700 higher education institutions (HEI). Though majority of the Universities have web presence in terms of website but limited universities are present on Social Media. Like in developed nations, Facebook and Twitter too are the leaders among the other social networking sites when it comes for higher education institutions in India. It has been observed that unofficial accounts on Social Networking Sites of many Universities have been created and University administration has no control over these accounts.

With an objective of analyzing the unofficial presence of Universities in India on social media this paper focuses on the research question of ‘Why do the Universities have unofficial accounts on social media and what are the concerns related to it?’

Reader may not get confused with this piece of research with role of social media for higher education. This paper is an attempt to understand concerns and issues Universities might have to face because of unofficial presence.

2 Related Work

Online presence of higher education institutions is on rise as it enhances learning, communication and engagement. Institutions are paying attention to their website and presence on social media. Every digital platform is different in terms of nature, features and projection [7]. Hence, it becomes important for higher education institutions to focus on all these platforms differently.

In past one decade there have been a number of studies on digital presence of higher education institutions from different directions. Majority of the papers from India and overseas are focusing on how academicians and students are employing social media and website [1] [6]. [5] have come to a conclusion that for Higher education institution’s branding, social media plays a key role. The branding of HEI helps them in building their identity and image among their key stakeholders – students, parents, institution partners and society at large. The uprising competition for students and program recognition as well as demand for financial support tools prompt the higher education institutes to use strategic and planned PR and to allocate more efforts for communication in the internet [16]. In a longitudinal study for three years on “rules of engagement in the online world” it was found that colleges and universities in USA continue to embrace social media [2]. The higher education institutes attract and connect to their various stakeholders: students current and prospective, alumni, recruiters, Industry collaborators, International collaborators etc. through their brand communities on various social networking sites like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Blogging and Podcasting. It has also been identified through research that the communities which do not facilitate interaction and engagement tend to lose their audience. Study by [2] shows in a national sample of 456 of four-year accredited U.S. institutions that 100% report using some form of social media, with Facebook (used by 98%) and Twitter (used by 84%) being the most prominent.

Social media is considered to be an essential part of Web 2.0 technologies. Use of social networking sites for education has been a popular topic. Some [12] studied the use of social networking sites by undergraduates, graduates, and faculty members at Yonsei Institution in Seoul, South Korea and [9] found that the youths at age group of 13-14 years based on gender, ethnicity and parental income, were using social networking sites more than at age group of 20-23 years. There have been studies on social media in higher education in different countries like in Oman [1], Dublin [14], USA [4].

3 Research Method

This study made use of content analysis methodology for the quantitative method. India has approximately 700 higher education institutions (including Government and private). 300 plus academic institutions for the present study were selected by combining the data from three reliable data sources: economics times (<http://articles.economictimes>), outlook (<http://www.outlookindia.com>) and India today (<http://indiatoday>). No ranks were given to the institutions. The following steps listed were carried out:

- Browsed through the 320 institutions websites to check the level of website and presence of social media.
- Social networking sites were independently searched to see the number of unofficial accounts of the institutions. By unofficial it is meant that these accounts/pages on social media of the institutions are not created and maintained by the institution but by someone else and hence, institution has no control over its content.

Unofficial presence on social media of Universities in India was noted during the period of January 2016 through March 2016. The data was entered into an Excel spreadsheet, data was compiled and results reported.

4 Results

Total 320 websites of Universities in India were studied, out of which 300 were valid (approx 96%). Websites which were either not opening or were redirected to other websites were considered invalid. Out of these 300 Universities 71 have unofficial accounts on social media.

After analyzing the unofficial accounts and pages further, it was found that most of accounts on social media are created by alumni or the present students of the institute. Digging deeper, data reveals that more than 90 per cent of unofficial accounts are of Government institutions (64 out of 71) and rest of Private institutions. Therefore it is eccentric to see that government institutions have more presence on social media unofficially as compared to officially.

The websites of these 71 universities were visited to check their online presence. Websites were analyzed to see at what stage they currently are at: *Information* stage where website provides basic information. The second stage *Interaction* provides a web site with some form of interaction with its stakeholders. *Transaction* stage provides monetary transactions available to its stakeholders. It was found that only two university websites are at Information level which includes one Government and one private university. Majority of the universities are at interaction level. More than 90 per cent of Government university websites are interactive. These institutions are interacting with its stakeholders in some way. These shows the universities are engaging its stakeholders through website but are still not present on social media. 3 out of 71 university websites are at the transaction level. These institutions, along with interaction, provide transactions, primarily student fee submission.

4.1 Visiting Unofficial Social Networking Sites of HEI

As already stated above 71 of 300 universities have unofficial accounts on social media. More than 95% of these accounts/ pages are either on Facebook or Twitter only. 69 Universities out of 71 have unofficial Facebook pages (Table 1) where 62 are Government and only 7 are private universities. These pages are formed after 2010. 50% of them have more than 10, 000 likes which implies people are aware about the account and are following it. These accounts are also very active in updating status. Mostly the news is related to the institution only which might include alumni achievements. Moreover, these accounts engage its followers. Some statuses have 'comments' and 'likes' both. Two out of 69 Websites share same information with Facebook page (news updates only). Both these Websites are Government websites.

Table 1: Details of Unofficial Pages and Accounts on Facebook and Twitter

Unofficial Page/ Account	Facebook	Twitter
Total number of Institutions	69	18
Government (Govt.)	62	17
Private (Pvt.)	7	1
More than 10, 000 likes	35 (Govt. = 32; Pvt.=3)	-
More than 1000 followers	-	8 (All Govt. HEI)
Date of formation	after 2010	2009-2011
Regular updates	43 (Govt. = 38; Pvt. = 5)	7 (All Govt. HEI)
Not functional	26	11

As compared to Facebook, only 18 universities are present on Twitter unofficially. Same as in Facebook, majority of the unofficial presence on Twitter is of Government HEI. It must be also noted that 26 of these universities Facebook pages and 11 of twitter accounts are not functional (24 of Government and 2 private). Except one all the HEI that have unofficial twitter accounts also have unofficial Facebook pages. It has also been noticed here that the accounts with more followers/likes have regular updates and vice versa.

5 Discussion

This section confers some useful insights from the above results.

A large number of universities that are present on social media unofficially have interactive websites. These universities are engaging its stakeholders in some way. Unofficially too these universities are active on social media. Therefore, it would be better to have an official presence on social media and synchronize the content with its website. This will strengthen the online presence of the University.

It has also been noticed that there are Government universities that are at a higher level of website i.e. Transaction level and still are not on Social media. Digging deeper it was found that there are two primary reasons behind it. First, in Government Universities it is a long process to get approval [13]. Second, in these universities social media presence is not on their strategic goals.

There are Universities having more than one unofficial page. When searched for the University on social media several pages appear and it becomes difficult to find the authentic one. If the unofficial page on social media is made by alumni of the University then this shows high level of loyalty and eagerness to be connected online. This also shows that apart from administration of the University, others are also promoting the University. Any positive comment or news will improve the image of the University. According to [11] through social networking sites not only organizations can engage its stakeholders but also gain competitive advantage by marketing and creating awareness on social media.

On the contrary, unofficial presence on social media can be a matter of concern. As the university has no control over the content, any incorrect information can go against the image of the University [10]. The unauthorized administrator of the unofficial social media account can upload negative comments, news or images about the institution [15]. The result being aspirants and other stakeholders might be misguided.

6 Conclusion and Future Research

This is one of the first studies which explore the unofficial presence on social media of higher education institutions in India. The results from this exploratory study indicate one fourth of the surveyed top 300 higher education institutions in India have unofficial social media presence, Facebook being the leader. Previous studies have shown how Web 2.0 technologies are being used by institutions. This paper analyses and highlights pros and cons of being on social media unofficially.

As seen in this study majority of the universities are at interaction level and have unofficial social media presence. It is important for these universities to engage their stakeholders online not only through website but through social media.

For future research, a framework on digital strategy for higher education can be a useful research topic where all the departments of an institution are related and integrated and move towards online presence.

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