Digital Marketing Strategies for University Student Recruitments in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies in attracting students into the non-state higher education sector in Sri Lanka. Many students in Sri Lanka sit for Advanced Level Examination but a few of them enrol in the non-state higher education institutions due to the ineffectiveness of marketing strategies of these institutions. Hence, the objective of this study is to explore the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies for university selection, and the effectiveness of involvement excellence (which includes first impression, brand recognition, intuitive navigation, and application submission) arising from digital marketing strategies for university selection. This qualitative study utilised judgemental sampling to select marketing managers for conducting structured interviews as the data collection method. The collected data have been analysed through thematic analysis. Findings show the effectiveness of social media, optimised website design, and search engine optimisation for university selection and the effectiveness of involvement excellence consisting of first impression, brand recognition, intuitive navigation, and application submission experience for university selection.

Keywords: Digital marketing; social media; optimised website design; search engine

Introduction

The demand for high-quality education, technology improvements, and alterations in student inclinations, have turned non-state HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) towards digital marketing strategies for attracting potential students (Perera et al., 2022a, 2022b). Nevertheless, according to the statistics of the Department of Examination and Ministry of Education in 2020, 2021, and 2022, an insignificant percentage of students (8.89%, 6.79%, and 13.46% respectively) who faced G.C.E. A.L. (General Certificate of Education in Advanced Level) Examination has enrolled in non-state HEIs, which is not ideal for the higher education industry in Sri Lanka. Hence, it is completely unmistakable that there is an issue of the marketing strategies utilised by these institutions since a considerable percentage of those who faced the Advanced Level examination, have not enrolled in these institutions.

Moreover, previous researchers have proved that Sri Lankan non-state HEIs which do not utilise marketing strategies effectively to attract potential students though marketing could have been considered a potential method for the success of these institutions in the competitive business environment (Vaikunthavasan et al., 2019). Hence, this study investigates the effectiveness of the alteration from traditional marketing practices to digital marketing platforms within non-state HEIs in Sri Lanka, which depicts an insistent circumstance for research.

Furthermore, there is a critical knowledge gap on the genuine effectiveness of digital marketing strategies on the university selection. Though non-state HEIs allocate a considerable amount of finance for implementing digital marketing strategies, there is limited previous scholarly work which showcases their effectiveness in achieving the expected results (Balachandran & Kirupananda, 2017; Heffernan et al., 2018; Perera et al., 2020; Xiong et al., 2018). Hence, this study firstly fills this deficiency gap for validating the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies for the university selection among students through the exploration of marketing managers' perspectives on Sri Lankan non-state HEIs' digital marketing strategies.

Likewise, implementing digital marketing strategies leads to the involvement excellence which includes excellent first impressions, brand recognition, intuitive navigation, and application submission of the new students (Duran et al., 2022; Ghorbanzadeh & Sharbatiyan, 2022; Givi et al., 2023; Perera et al., 2023). By involving with the university through digital channels and technologies, students decide to select the HEI that aligns with their needs and preferences (Chowdhury & Alam, 2023; Meira de Azevedo, 2022; Qureshi et al., 2022; Rutter et al., 2016). Therefore, it is crucial to explore the effectiveness of involvement excellence of new students arising from digital marketing strategies for university selection. Hence, the study secondly fills the literature gap between digital marketing and higher education by focusing on the effectiveness of involvement excellence of new students within HEIs in the Sri Lankan context.

Henceforward, the objectives of this study are to explore the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies for the university selection within school leaving students and explore the effectiveness of involvement excellence arising from the digital marketing strategies for university selection among those students.

Materials and Methods

The key method chosen for this study included utilization of qualitative data which were collected through structured interviews. This method provided a sophisticated and deep understanding of the complexities of digital marketing strategies harnessed in the university selection procedure. Though there are altogether 24 non-state HEIs registered under the University Grants Commission, this study considered the 10 non-state HEIs which show the total enrolment of more than 1,000 students since the total enrolment number of the rest of the institutions are less significant. Hence, judgment sampling strategy was used to choose 10 marketing managers at these considered non-state HEIs. This strategy is judged to be the most apposite, considering the focused disposition of the study and the requirement for steered perceptions from those who directly engage in formulating digital marketing strategies. The selected marketing managers were above 35 years of age, had more than 8 years of experience in formulating and implementing digital marketing strategies, and had completed a Master´s degree of Business Administration. The structured interviewing aspect facilitated to interact with marketing managers and obtain their perceptions, encounters, and understandings. Henceforth, it was supportive in conducting interactive conversations to explore the reasoning behind the choiceand implementation of digital marketing strategies. A thematic analysis was followed to analyse data collected via structured interviews since this method systematically and rigorously identified persistent guides, themes, and tendencies within the collected data uncovering affluent and thorough understandings into the marketing managers' standpoints on the effect of digital marketing strategies on different scopes of the university selection. The thematic analysis process included familiarising with the data, preliminary coding, producing preliminary themes, assessing and improving themes, describing and labelling the themes, charting the data, diagramming the associations, analysing repetitively, and creating the

storyline. The thematic analysis procedure has been undertaken manually without the aid of a qualitative data analysis software. This process has led to the identification of themes as posting functions in social media, publishing necessary information on the website, optimistic viewpoint about search engine results, social media and website contribution for a positive first impression, social media and website influence on brand recognition, intuitive navigation experience on the website, and social media and website support for application submission.

Results and Discussion

The qualitative research design and thematic analysis of the study revealed seven themes driving the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies and involvement excellence arising from those strategies for the university selection in the non-state higher education sector of Sri Lanka. The identification of codes and themes has been summarised based on the Table 1.

Table 1. Thematic analysis results

Themes	Codes	Quotes
Posting functions in social media	Encounter actions	Respondent 1: "Whatever the function is happening, we are posting it in our social media pages, initially what we do is we are giving kind of a small heads up like this is happening now or something like that."
	Thorough function reporting	Respondent 2: "If we have functions, we post them in social media."
		Respondent 3: "If there is an alumni function or ambassadors come to the university, right? All the special things we are posting on social media."
	Optical storyline improvement	Respondent 4: "When we get the edited footages or edited images, then we publish those in social media pages."
	Regularity improvement	Respondent 5: "For major functions…normally we are publishing all our functions in the social media pages twice."
	Platform divergence	Respondent 6: "So, if you look at platforms, we would be using meta platforms, LinkedIn, Tik Tok, as our primary social media accounts."

Publishing necessary information on the website	Pre-emptive website modification	Respondent 1: "We are working on something different, so we will be refurbishing this website to something more research oriented very soon."
	Comprehensive course information	Respondent 2: "Each and every course is available on our website."
		Respondent 8: "If you go to a degree program on the website, you have the course content and you have all the other different things."
	Widespread detail publication	Respondent 3: "So, on the website we have published each and everything accordingly."
	Separate detail arrangement	Respondent 7: "We have separate sections for tools, alumni, research publications and staff profile, everything is there available in our website."
	Straightforward communication platforms	Respondent 10: "There is actually a contact form on the website where students can get the necessary details."
Optimistic viewpoint about search engine results	Pre-emptive approach to search engine optimisation	Respondent 1: "Anyhow we are keeping in touch with the search terms and all."
	Certainty in virtual existence	Respondent 2: "After A/Level if they search the website, our institution will appear."
	Realising algorithmic subtleties	Respondent 3: "I believe that we could put more effort to this because I think the search engines work with the algorithm. So, the algorithm works when we have a lot of things."
	All-inclusive enrolment method	Respondent 4: "We do like purely through SEO and employee search as well."
	Detection of search engine optimisation worth	Respondent 6: "SEO plays a big role."
	Dedication for website enhancement	Respondent 8: "For SEO what we do is, we have ensured that we maintain all possible information inside the website."

Social media and website contribution for the positive first impression	Engrossing online journeys	Respondent 1: "When it comes to social media and the digital campaigns, we have introduced this 360^0 walk through. Students can simply within couple of minutes, visit all the lecture halls, they can see the lab facilities and they can see the campus around using that."
	Website display of worth and provisions	Respondent 2: "Using our website, we show the values and advantages of coming to our institution. Also, there are so many facilities on the website for the visitors to find whatever they want about us."
	Tactical social media operations	Respondent 3: "We conduct social media campaigns and publish virtual ads to get the attention of new students and tempt them to join with us."
	Optical attractiveness and convincing storylines	Respondent 4: "To do the value proposition of our institution and show the advantages of joining us, we use attractive visuals, tempting messages, and excellent storytelling. Students really get impressed with these things."
	User-friendly website layout	Respondent 7: "Also, we use our website and improve its design to give a mind-blowing experience to the new students. They can easily find whatever they want to know about our institution without any difficulty."
		Respondent 10: "If I want to focus on university life, then I need to ensure that our students have access to sports, activities and all other things on the website."
	Thought leadership and academic substance	Respondent 9: "If I want to seem like a thought leader, in whatever the subject area, then I need to get my academic right content on that, put it on the site, put it on social media, get people to share, and all that."

Social media and website influence on brand recognition	Genuine acknowledgements and associate validation	Respondent 1: "Yes, in our website and social media, especially during the convocation period, we are getting student testimonials. We are getting around 30 to 40 videos and we publish them in social media and in YouTube."
	Optical attractiveness and transparent communication	Respondent 2: "To make our brand popular, we use excellent and attractive images and put understandable messages in social media and our website for the new students who are looking for higher education institutions to start their degree programs."
	Alumni accomplishments as brand strengthening	Respondent 3: "When we want to market a particular course, we always include details of a relevant graduate with his or her photo and his or her current career. This way, new students recognize our brand."
	Continuous brand depiction across digital channels	Respondent 4: "To ensure brand recognition, we continuously maintain our brand through our social media pages, online advertisements, and the website. We showcase our brand very well to the new students who are still thinking whether to join us or not."
	Alumni accomplishments as brand representatives	Respondent 5: "Since our brand is our graduate students, we always include information about our graduates who are successfully performing and getting quick promotions in the corporate sector. We publish these things in our social media pages, our website, and also in our online advertisements."

	Virtual existence enabling offline involvement	Respondent 6: "Most of our traffic comes through online and then it is converted into offline activities. So, I believe that the traffic or inquiries we get, have already realized that the brand stands strongly. So, we don't have to reinforce once the student is here."
	Novel utilisation of surfacing channels	Respondent 8: "We are promoting students to do Tik Tok videos in the campus and publish. So that we can highlight the student life and even though why we are very much focused on publishing our events that is also we want to highlight student life."
	Ubiquitousness of brand communication across digital channels	Respondent 9: "To make sure that new students recognize our brand, we showcase our brand in our website, Facebook, and other virtual ads."
Intuitive navigation experience on the website	Convenience of the website tabs	Respondent 1: "Website we can say, for the moment, in the current website, we have given the necessary tabs and all."
		Respondent 1: "So, and we have given the entire degree list under the prospect tab and they can browse not only that so, if they want to….the search bar is there and in the homepage itself we have mentioned the faculty names we have listed under one click so that they can select the particular degree programs and then the event calendar and the contact information to get any more details."

Convenience of the website links	Respondent 2: "So many links are given on the website under various categories. So, students can easily get what they are looking for."
User-friendly website interface	Respondent 3: "When it comes to website, user friendly interface is the best option. So we have very user friendly interface, even a small kid can use that when they see that it is a piece of website."
Supportive content on the website	Respondent 4: "Our website has all the relevant content, design components, and various menus which can support students to find anything quickly. This will give them a very big experience of our institution."
Useful menus on the website	Respondent 5: "We have all the menus on our website for anyone to see our courses, fee structure, module outlines, and many other details."
Availability of degree program content	Respondent 6: "We are fully aware of some sections like the program content...when you go there, you can see some tabs on the program specific page. So, you can browse through like these are the programs, these are the curriculums, without having to move around."
Decline of website mess	Respondent 8: "We have actually cut down a load of bulk on the website pages and then tried to put the rest of that."
Organized web page preparation	Respondent 9: "Our website has all the relevant web pages arranged in a specific order so that anyone can easily find information about our overall institution, degree courses, and admission protocol."
Availability of major prompt buttons	Respondent 10: "Constantly you have the "Apply" button as well as the "Learn more" button. Even the brochures you can download."

Social media and website support for application submission	Temptation and inspiration through social media and website	Respondent 1: "Through the digital campaigns we are inviting them and using this SMS and WhatsApp, we are inviting students to join with us. And then we are encouraging them to do this enrolment part." Respondent 1: "They have to do the applications online and the aptitude test we are conducting now online only."
	Ease of access through social media and website	Respondent 2: "Students can get access to our application portal through the website, or we have put the link in the social media pages too."
	Transparent guidelines and helpful communication feeds	Respondent 5: "Whenever any student needs help to submit the application, he or she can individually communicate with us through Facebook or WhatsApp, and one of our marketing team members is always there to help." Respondent 6: "The online application is in inquiry state. If they are interested, they can submit all the details."
	Personalised assistance and sequential instructions	Respondent 4: "Based on the progress of the students, we give customized support as well through our website." Respondent 7: "Once students enter into our online application portal, we automatically generate clear instructions for the students to follow step by step."
	Evidence-based method and campaign tracing	Respondent 8: "We have the application portal so from all our ads we direct them to that and we create unique links so that we know which campaign they are coming from." Respondent 9: "To support the new students to submit their applications, first of all, we advertise about our new intake to them through social media and website. There, we clearly mention how to apply, the application procedure, and the relevant link to the application portal on the website."

The results and discussion can be summarised as per the table below considering the two objectives of the study.

Table 2. *A Summary of the results and discussion*

Digital marketing strategy	Effectiveness for university selection	Effectiveness for involvement excellence
Social media	Promoting expressive associations with potential students	Improving positive first impression by conveying competitive advantages, academic services, and campus culture of HEIs
	Improving student attractiveness and keenness in the scenery of marketing	Increasing brand recognition by optically convincing substance, alumni accomplishments, continuous brand depiction, pioneering digital creativities, and ubiquitous brand communication
		Improving application submission through enhanced registration, aimed engagement, availability, transparent communication, customised assistance, and evidence-based investigation
Optimised website design	Exhibiting dedication for openness, convenience, and user-friendliness to students	Improving positive first impression by conveying competitive advantages, academic services, and campus culture of HEIs
		Increasing brand recognition by optically convincing substance, alumni accomplishments, continuous brand depiction, pioneering digital creativities, and ubiquitous brand communication
		Increasing intuitive navigation by promoting optimistic exchanges with potential students
		Improving application submission through enhanced registration, aimed engagement, availability, transparent communication, customised assistance, and evidence-based investigation
Search engine optimisation	Increasing virtual view for students, attracting potential students, and leading student enrolment	

The first objective of the study is to explore the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies for university selection within school leaving students. The following themes discuss the effectiveness of social media, optimised website design, and search engine optimisation in this scenario based on the study results.

By following an all-inclusive method for function fostering on digital channels, non-state HEIs can promote expressive associations with potential students, thus improving their attractiveness and keenness in the perpetually progressing scenery of marketing in the higher education sector, as explained by the theme of Posting functions on social media.

The theme of Publishing necessary information on the website points out that the rigorous attempts of non-state HEIs to broadcast relevant information on their websites exhibit a dedication to openness, convenience, and user-friendliness.

By incorporating search engine optimisation as a foundation strategy, non-state HEIs intend to increase their virtual view, attract potential students, and eventually lead enrolment. Nevertheless, this positiveness is calmed by the recognition of the energetic disposition of search engine optimisation and the continuing requirement for adjustment and modification to stay competitive in the digital arena, as revealed by the theme of Optimistic viewpoint about search engine results.

The second objective of the study is to explore the effectiveness of involvement excellence arising from digital marketing strategies for university selection among school leaving students. The following themes discuss the effectiveness of social media and optimised website design for involvement excellence which leads to university selection within the students.

The theme of Social media and website contribution for the positive first impression described that the effectual adoption of social media and websites performs a central role in forming an optimistic first impression about non-state HEIs among potential school leaving students. Engrossing online journeys, tactical operations, persuasive stories, and user-friendly website design successfully convey competitive advantages, academic services, and campus culture of HEIs, thus tempting students to go on board their learning passage with assurance and eagerness.

Through a tactical amalgamation of genuine recommendations, optically convincing substance, alumni accomplishments, continuous brand depiction, pioneering digital creativities, and ubiquitous brand communication, HEIs attempt to form a unique recognition in the digital landscape, thus placing themselves as favoured choices for higher education, as depicted by the theme of Social media and website influence on brand recognition.

By ranking transparency, availability, and user-focused design theories, HEIs intend to promote optimistic exchanges with potential students, eventually increasing their digital marketing efficacy in the viable learning sphere, as per the theme of Intuitive navigation experience on the website.

The theme of Social media and website support for application submission proves that HEIs can improve involvement with prospective students and modernise the application submission procedure, eventually cooperating to enhanced registration and institutional achievement, through aimed engagement, availability, transparent communication, customised assistance, and evidence-based investigation.

These thematic findings underscore the need for policymakers to improve utilisation of social media, website design, and search engines to attract many students for non-state HEIs, and improve the first impressions, brand recognition, intuitive navigation, and application submission experience within students for confirming the university selection.

Conclusions

This study based on marketing managers' perspectives, implies that social media, optimised website design, and search engine optimisation are the effective digital marketing strategies to attract Sri Lankan students into the non-state higher education sector. Also, students consider their involvement excellence consisting of first impressions, brand recognition, intuitive navigation, and application submission experience when selecting the right institution. Hence, the policy makers can invest more on launching their marketing campaigns through social media platforms, university websites, and search engines. Also, they can ensure excellent first impressions among the students through social media platforms and websites by including photos, videos, recommendations, and profiles about unique characteristics, academic courses, university life, and faculty achievements, and motivating engagement with the new students through surveys, games, competitions, and live question and answer sessions. Moreover, they can share their stories which highlight thriving alumni, student achievements, community engagement, and university leads for enhancing the brand recognition through social media and university websites. Furthermore, they can create a user-friendly website design including academic degree programs, admission criteria, and university resources which are easily accessible from the home page, create a logical order for the pages and sub-pages matching with student thinking patterns and common trails, and ensure that navigation menus and layout get adjusted effortlessly to various screen sizes to offer a steady user involvement across mobile devices. Also, they can further develop the application submission procedure available in the social media platforms and university websites so that students will not encounter any difficulties or time consumption when submitting the online application.

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