FACTORS INFLUENCING HEIs TO ADOPT SOCIAL MEDIA AS A MARKETING COMMUNICATION TOOL

Muhammad Awais Mehmood¹, Qaiser Rashid Janjua²*, Muhammad Akram³, Syed Harris Laeeque⁴, and Faisal Aftab⁵

ABSTRACT

This research aims to identify the factors influencing Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) to adopt Social Media (SM) for marketing communication. The research was conducted through a qualitative study by interviewing SM managers of selected Pakistani HEIs. Data was analyzed using NVivo 11 to identify emerging themes. The findings revealed several internal and external factors encouraging HEIs to adopt SM marketing. Internal factors reflected the internal dynamics or beliefs within the HEIs that encouraged them to use SM for their marketing communication, whereas external factors were environmental changes, not in direct control of HEIs, but believed to contribute towards their decision to use SM. The internal factors included the belief of applicants, increased interest of senior management towards SM, perception of cost-effective promotional tool, induction of young staff, perception of SM as a modern communication tool and move towards paperless communication. The external factors included SM preference as a mode of communication, declining value of traditional marketing communication tools, E-Life inclination, presence of competitors & unofficial SM accounts of HEIs and their self-driven nature. This study draws focus towards the underlying intentions of HEIs for their SM presence and compares these motivations with other organizations. This has enabled filling in the gaps in the literature regarding the roots of SM marketing in the context of HEIs. From a practical perspective, the findings of this study will enable HEIs to compare their SM motives with other industries. A major difference found was the absence of motivation on the part of HEIs to use SM. This is in contradiction to other industries that put relationship building with customers as one of the primary motives to use SM.

Keywords: Social Media Marketing; Inbound Marketing; Outbound Marketing; Marketing Communications; Higher Education Marketing.

¹ Assistant Professor, Bahria Business School, Bahria University, Pakistan. Email: mamehmood@bahria.edu.pk
² Assistant Professor, Air University School of Management, Air University, Pakistan. Email: qaiser.janjua@mail.au.edu.pk
³ Assistant Professor, Bahria Business School, Bahria University, Pakistan. Email: makram@bahria.edu.pk
⁴ Assistant Professor, Bahria Business School, Bahria University, Pakistan. Email: harrislaeeque@hotmail.com
⁵ Associate Professor, College of Business Administration, Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, KSA. Email: faaftab@iau.edu.sa

*Corresponding Author
INTRODUCTION
Marketing communication has for long relied on several traditional approaches revolving around the concept of advertising on media like TV, magazines, newspapers and radio (Keller, 2009), but the consumers have started developing barriers across such traditional forms of communication due to its forced exposure strategy (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014). These approaches also lost their supremacy due to the following of basic information-sharing model for years with lesser entertainment and consequently engagement of customers (Fransen, Verlegh, Kirmani, & Smit, 2015). The technology has also enabled them to opt-out of such marketing communication (Aldahdouh, Nokelainen, & Korhonen, 2020). The increased control in the hands of consumers has forced marketers to create more interactive communication approaches, in order to pull the audience. This has resulted in the division of marketing communication into two streams: namely outbound marketing and inbound marketing.

Outbound marketing encompasses traditional communication options revolving around the push concept with intrusive communication modes such as telemarketing, direct mail, trade shows, TV/Radio/Print ads and emails blasts (Halligan & Shah, 2010). On the other hand, inbound marketing involves options that could engage the audience through their content strategies using SEOs (Search Engine Optimizations), SM blogging, photos & infographics, videos & podcasts (Opreana & Vinerean, 2015). Inbound marketing, versus outbound marketing, is considered an effective way to reach consumers, in today’s world, with a comparatively lesser budget. It is based on the concept of interactivity and engagement. The underlying theme is to pull customers towards marketing communication rather than pushing marketing communication towards them.

Social Media (SM) marketing has emerged as an important inbound marketing option to engage customers in the value creation and marketing communication process (Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014). It involves the use of SM platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc., to reach out to customers where they naturally spend their time to pick upon what they are thinking and to talk about the services a firm has to offer (Evans & McKee, 2010). Several internal and external influencing factors are believed to encourage organizations to adopt SM for their marketing purposes (Lagrosen & Josefsson, 2011; Lagrosen & Grunden, 2014; McCarthy, Rowley, Ashworth, & Pioch, 2014; Eagleman, 2013; Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014). But there is a dearth of knowledge to understand these motivational factors in the case of Higher
Education Institutes (HEIs), which are seen adopting SM for their marketing communication. This study, therefore, tried to understand these influencers in the case of HEIs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Factors Influencing Adoption of SM as a Marketing Tool
Adoption of any new technology is an important decision for organizations (Hall & Khan, 2003). There exist several studies that highlight the factors motivating organizations to adopt social networking sites as a marketing tool. These factors primarily revolve around internal and external dimensions having their own level of influence over the decision of SM adoption. Internal factors are those forces that were considered innate to the organizations resulting in the adoption of SM whereas external factors are forces outside the control of an organization but affecting the decision of embracing this technology as a marketing tool.

External Forces
Declining Response Rate towards Conventional Marketing Tools
According to Friedrich et al. (2010), due to declining returns from the traditional mode of communications and services for marketing purposes, it has become very important for marketers to consider alternate options to better connect with a generation that is more digitally socially networked. Recent research on branding has started questioning a funnel approach by marketers where the majority of marketing expenditure was being incurred in TV and print media advertisement for building awareness about brands, taking customer towards consideration, interest development and later purchase decision (Kotler, Keller, Koshy, & Jha, 2009). According to this model, after purchase, the customers would isolate themselves from the purchase process. But what we see in reality is that customers have become more important after the purchase decision, by helping brands do advocacy which was not possible with conventional marketing communication tools. Heavy investments in traditional paid media, in the initial stages of purchase decisions, are now being questioned. There are clear indications to focus more on means that can drive advocacy for brands after purchase, including digital and SM (Edelman, 2010).

Customers are Easily Accessible on SM
According to Tsimonis and Dimitriadis (2014), there is a change in demographics as the existing population is more technology savvy compared to their previous generations. The technology-savvy generation, which apparently seems to have led organizations to adopt SM, has created a new group of customers. After generation X, Y, Z and millennials, SM has given
birth to a new generation in the concept of consumer behaviour, i.e., Generation ‘C’. The connotation of ‘C’ was initially limited to the term ‘content’ that has now been further expanded to include several terms including constant connectivity, collaboration, change, co-creation, chameleons, cyborgs, and curiosity. But in short, generation C is explained as connected collective consumers hatched out of SM (Pankraz, 2010). These are individuals that show tribal behaviour using online technologies talking about topics that are popular and considered interesting for discussion. For marketers, it then becomes important to understand the trends and hot topics of discussion to relate to them using the same set of topics and discussion. This generation is striving to gain credibility based on their opinions, ideas, observations, and thoughts. They reflect a bee-like swarm behaviour, mobilizing their discussion and thoughts in accordance with the trends of the time. This is perhaps challenging the efficacy of relationship marketing at the individual level and encouraging organizations to think more in community terms. According to Freidrich et al. (2010), this generation would be spending most of their waking hours on SM. They are living multiple roles (99 lives), making their life busier than before (Aaker & McLoughlin, 2014). Forums such as SM provide them with an important outlet to converse and connect.

**Preferred Source of Information Versus other Communication Options**

SM is believed to be more reliable compared to traditional communication tools such as print media, TV advertisements, banners, etc. (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014). It is fast gaining a reputation as a priority medium to gain information regarding products and services and therefore offering organizations new opportunities to maximize their profits (Verhoef & Lemon, 2013; Sabate, Berbegal-Mirabent, Cañabate, & Lebherz, 2014). It is being seen as a better alternative to traditional word-of-mouth due to its reach and access (Sabate, Berbegal-Mirabent, Cañabate, & Lebherz, 2014). It is helping organizations shape the opinions of their customers by generating discussions that can result in positive word of mouth. Strong word of mouth, online, also termed as electronic word of mouth, has been highlighted as a strong marketing tool in many previous studies (Cheung, Lee, & Rabjohn, 2008; Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2008; Cheung & Thadani., 2012; Rosario, Sotgiu, Valck, & Bijmolt, 2016), with strong impact on brand image and purchase intentions (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012). It may not be wrong to say that people seem to base their decision regarding products and services, on recommendations and real-life experiences of people, which they gather online from other consumers (Sabate, Berbegal-Mirabent, Cañabate, & Lebherz, 2014).
The utility of this concept in customer purchase decisions can be seen in the Social Feedback Cycle explained by Evans (2010). During the regular purchase process, the steps generally involved include awareness, consideration, purchase, use and advocacy. The use of SM is facilitating the process of advocacy by enabling the consumers to share their opinions at a forum that is much more advanced in its reach and accessibility. People, therefore, find this as a more comprehensive platform to seek information regarding different brands and products (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014).

**Competitor’s Presence on SM**

According to Dahnil et al. (2014), the pressure from the business environment has influenced many organizations to venture into SM technologies to collectively discover and unleash their potential for marketing purposes. Competitor’s analysis has been seen as one of the most important dimensions of the organization’s strategic thinking process. This, apart from insight into your competitor’s actions, allows the business to pick any changing trends through the competitor’s move (Aaker & McLoughlin, 2014). The adoption of many new technologies has been influenced by the thought that your competitors are also adopting them (El-Gohary, 2012; Ifinedo, 2011). Despite the focus on achieving a level of differentiation by companies, they still regularly strive to adopt features that may offer them points of parity (POPs), with their competitors, to neutralize the effect of competitor’s Points of Differences (PODs). SM adoption by many companies is therefore associated with this phenomenon, where the SM presence of competitors has influenced businesses to adopt it for their communication strategies (Dahnil, Marzuki, Langgat, & Fabeil, 2014; Aaker & McLoughlin, 2014).

**Internal Forces**

**Relationship Building with Customers**

Michaelidou, Siamagka and Christodoulides (2011) highlighted desire towards relationship building as one of the important reasons for organizations to adopt SM as a marketing tool, especially in the case of small businesses. This relationship is being developed through customer engagement, as a result of online connection, that companies are able to attain through SM (Sashi, 2012). For years companies have been trying to understand their customer wants and changing needs. Due to fast growing reach of SM, it has provided a central point of contact to organizations to engage with their customers and to learn what they have to say about them, the products, and services. According to Hansen, Shneiderman and Smith (2011), SM has enabled billion of users to develop trillions of connections. These connections ultimately help
build relationships and allow organizations to tap into their customers’ world where they were not allowed to tread before (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011).

Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy and Silvestre (2011) analysis regarding various functional blocks of SM shows relationship building as the dominant functional block of the honeycomb framework, primarily in the case of Facebook. This suggests that the features of Facebook allow the development and nourishment of relationships at the organizational level, which is supported through Facebook’s ability to allow its stakeholders to easily share their thoughts, ideas, and experiences on this platform.

Obtaining Customer Feedback
The Michaelidou, Siamagka, and Christodoulides (2011) highlighted the desire towards relationship building as one of the important reasons for organizations to adopt SM as a marketing tool, especially in the case of small businesses. This relationship is being developed through customer engagement, as a result of online connection, that companies are able to attain through SM (Sashi, 2012). For years, companies have been trying to understand their customer wants and changing needs. Due to the fast-growing reach of SM, it has provided a central point of contact to organizations to engage with their customers and to learn what they have to say about them, their products, and services. According to Hansen, Shneiderman and Smith (2011), SM has enabled billions of users to develop trillions of connections. These connections ultimately helped build relationships and allowed organizations to tap into their customers’ world where they were not allowed to tread before (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011).

Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy and Silvestre's (2011) analysis regarding various functional blocks of SM shows relationship building as the dominant functional block of the honeycomb framework, primarily in the case of Facebook. This suggests that the features of Facebook allow the development and nourishment of relationships at the organizational level, which is supported through Facebook’s ability to allow its stakeholders to easily share their thoughts, ideas, and experiences on this platform.

Cost-Effective Promotion Tool
According to Tsimonis & Dimitriadis (2014), SM marketing is considered a cost-effective option for promotion vis-à-vis its global reach. Haysa, Pageb & Buhalisb (2013) in their research on SM as a marketing tool, in the context of Destination Marketing Organizations (DMO), suggests that organizations are generally under pressure to cut their expenses to offer
better value to their customers in such competitive times. This phenomenon can be generalized to many other industries, especially after the economic recession. Instead of spending heavily on marketing budgets, DMOs are looking for more cost-effective means to reach their customers. SM is therefore seen to meet this requirement. The viral nature of unpaid communication between peers, persuading users to discuss, share and socialize, is shaping its utility as a viral marketing tool (Paquette, 2013).

The potential of SM, as a cost-effective marketing tool, has also been accepted in the sports industry. National Governing Bodies of sports in New Zealand prefer using SM, as it is considered to be a reliable and cheap way to communicate with fans (Eagleman, 2013). They believe that SM is probably now the only cost-effective way to reach many fans at a personal level on a regular basis. Nik Pearson, manager of media relations for Toyota and Lexus in the UK, also highlighted the same potential of SM by confirming that they “see it as a strong, cost-effective method for conversing directly with the customer” (Anderson, 2013).

Increased Interest of Management in Adoption of SM as Marketing Tool

The top management’s personal interest and acceptance of SM marketing benefits are resulting into its formal adoption as a marketing tool (Haysa, Pageb, & Buhalisb, 2013). The word of mouth regarding the strong potential of SM is fast spreading within the business communities. It has gone past the stages of exploration and has achieved more popularity amongst the management of organizations.

The seriousness of management can be well gauged by observing the focus organizations have started placing towards managing SM affairs. A dedicated staff is being hired to look after SM activities (Fischer & Reuber, 2011). Senior management in organizations is now hiring dedicated teams intending to improve the quality of content versus its quantity (Pradiptarini, 2011). The key six roles that have been defined in one of the SM marketing reports (Sales Force Marketing Cloud, 2013) includes SM Managers, Community Managers, Social Strategist, Editor, Content Creator and Content Producer. All these roles are considered important and therefore recommended to be reflected in any SM team.

Increase in Market Share

According to Michaelidou et al. (2011), one of the most influencing factors in terms of the adoption of SM as a marketing tool is the belief, at the end of the organizations, that it will allow them to increase their customer base. Firms see SM as a cheap and yet more effective alternate for promotion in the era of financial crunch (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014). But it is
not just helping reduce costs but also considered to increase sales. The social feedback loop clearly shows the role SM can play for organizations in terms of advocacy of their products and services that ultimately affect the purchase decision of their customers (Evans & McKee, 2010). Dell claimed to earn $3 million more in 2009 due to their presence on Twitter. Sony announced a $1 million increase in their profits due to their SM activities on Twitter account (O’Flynn, 2010). Such numbers are further strengthening the belief in the ability of SM to help organizations increase their market share.

**RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

All the above influencing factors have encouraged various organizations to adopt SM as a marketing tool for their communication purpose. There exists sufficient evidence that shows the adoption of SM by the university sector in Pakistan (Mehmood, Aftab, & Mushtaq, 2016). This clearly shows the investment of time and money on part of HEIs to utilize SM as a Marketing Communication tool. However, there is a lack of research that can investigate the underlying reasons for the adoption of SM by HEIs. This study will therefore try to fill this gap by exploring the perspective of HEIs in Pakistan for the adoption of SM as a marketing tool, by addressing the following two questions:

a) **What internal influencing factors are encouraging HEIs to adopt SM as a Marketing Communication Tool?**

b) **What external influencing factors are encouraging HEIs to adopt SM as a Marketing Communication Tool?**

**METHODOLOGY**

The nature of this study is exploratory, requiring a realism perspective based on the experiences of those who are living that reality. It was therefore a qualitative research methodology was adopted with in-depth interviews as the selected method of data collection. In Pakistan, the adoption of SM is a comparatively new phenomenon. It was therefore considered important to look for the most informed participants (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012) who are responsible for managing SM affairs in HEIs. In total fifteen in-depth interviews were conducted with SM managers of seven selected HEIs of Pakistan. The universities selected were considered more active in their SM usage on basis of the number of likes and followers. These universities were selected from the four cities of Pakistan that are identified as most active in their SM usage (i.e., Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore & Peshawar) (Qureshi, 2016). The findings of the study were analyzed using NVivo 11 software.
Respondents’ Profiles

Out of the 15 interviewees, 9 were male and 6 were female respondents. All respondents were in the management category having a minimum experience of 2 years and a maximum of 10 years, with an average experience of 4.58 years, at the same organization. The HEIs had used different titles against the given designations, not necessarily communicating the seniority including SM Manager, Manager Brands, Marketing Officer, Dy. Registrar (PR & Communications), Marketing Officer, Director Public Relations, Public Relations Officer, etc. Since there were no standardized titles given against the responsibility of managing the SM accounts of the selected HEIs, therefore the term SM managers have been used to represent input from this stakeholder. The individuals interviewed not only included those responsible for executing SM based communication but also individuals responsible for planning and policymaking in this regard. HEIs had assigned the responsibility of managing SM affairs to young staff. Most of them were in the age bracket of 25 to 35 years.

Interviews with SM managers provided insight on SM adoption by the Pakistani HEIs. Pakistani HEIs are at the infancy stage in terms of their SM presence. It was therefore considered that SM managers, who were responsible for executing SM strategy of their respective HEIs, will provide a more realistic, detailed, and close to the socially constructed reality they are experiencing while establishing rigor.

The insights gathered from the SM managers were converted into written transcripts. Line by line coding of these transcripts enabled identifying several open codes, which were translated into axial codes and then ultimately themes to serve the purpose of this study.

RESULTS

Factors Influencing Adoption of SM by Pakistani HEIs

To understand the intentions behind any action, it is important to learn the factors that influence the action in the first place. Not only it is helpful to develop an understanding regarding the reasons for the existence of any phenomena but also to comprehend actions associated with it. The replies obtained from SM managers were profoundly studied to look for the reasons that motivated HEIs to venture into this mode of communication. Two main themes emerged from this analysis:

a) Internal Influencing Factors
b) External Influencing Factors
Internal factors are the innate forces or changes within HEIs that were highlighted by SM managers as the reason for their adoption of SM. External factors were the environmental forces, external to the HEIs, which were directly not in their control, but have made them venture into SM communication.

### Table 1. Summary of Qualitative Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Themes</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internal Influencing Factors</td>
<td>Enhanced Market Share</td>
<td>More admissions through SM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Increase in applicants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Increased information sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Increased student engagement on SM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increased Managements Interest</td>
<td>Regular follow-up of SM by management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Senior management using SM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Constant push to post on SM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Increased awareness in management regarding SM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cost-Effective Promotional Tool</td>
<td>Affordable mass marketing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Expensive traditional media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Global reach at low cost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Young staff leading to the</td>
<td>HEIs recruiting more staff (Young)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>adoption of SM</td>
<td>Computer Savvy generation in HEIs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Enhance IT skills of young staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SM Presence makes you Look Modern</td>
<td>Future of marketing communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>New communication technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Positive impression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Move towards Paperless Communication</td>
<td>Environmentally friendly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Corporate Social Responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cost Savvy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>E-communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External Influencing Factors</td>
<td>Preferred mode of</td>
<td>Easy student access on SM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>communication by students</td>
<td>Generation-C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fast communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Increased student traffic on SM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Traditional communication</td>
<td>Expensive traditional media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>media losing value</td>
<td>Bureaucracies involved in traditional media comm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SM offers communication on Go</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SM offers better response time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>People living E-Life</td>
<td>E-socialization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>99 Lives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>24/7 connectivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Competitors on SM</td>
<td>Competitive Push</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>PR-war between HEIs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Presence of unofficial SM</td>
<td>Students running University accounts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>accounts of HEIs</td>
<td>Absence of online voice of HEIs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fake SM Pages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-Driven Media</td>
<td>Rolling communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>No boundaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Viral communication</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: This Study*
CONCEPTUAL MODEL

**Internal Influencing Factors:**
- Belief that SM presence will increase market share
- Increase in Management’s Interest towards SM
- Cost effective promotional tool
- Young staff leading to adoption of SM
- Makes you look modern
- Move towards paperless communication

**External Influencing Factors:**
- Preferred mode of communication by students
- Traditional communication media losing value
- People living E-Life
- Your competitors are using SM and you should too
- Presence of unofficial SM accounts
- Self-driven media

**Figure 1.** Factors Influencing Adoption of SM by Pakistani HEIs

**Internal Influencing Factors**

**Belief that SM presence will increase Market Share**

Universities have always longed to increase the pool of applicants to allow them to be more selective in their recruitment drive and ensure the quality of students. As highlighted by one of the SM managers: ‘*We even have now started an alumni series on our SM where we are bringing the graduates of BU to tell their life experience as a student at our university and how they have benefited as a result of studying with us. Through such endorsements, we are trying to increase our number of applicants and consequently the improvement in intake quality.*’

The literature has highlighted how several renowned companies like Sony and Dell have managed to increase their sales and ultimately profits due to their active SM presence (O’Flynn, 2010). This belief was prevailing amongst the SM managers of Pakistani HEIs who perceive SM as a tool to help them increase the number of applicants. Many SM managers highlighted that they are under constant pressure from various academic departments during the admission campaign to put more and more content pertaining to their programs, with the belief to increase the number of applicants.

In several selected HEIs there did not seem a formal mechanism to measure the effect of SM presence on a number of applicants, but in large departments within the universities believed
that SM presence is a great way to increase numbers. To support this claim, generally, HEIs are looking at applicants’ trends, which although cannot give you a complete picture due to many other factors that are playing their role but does give a general indication regarding SM’s positive role towards increasing the number of applicants. This has also been highlighted as one of the performance measurement criteria of SM presence. Some HEIs, obtain feedback from students during orientation time, to know how they got to know about university’s admissions. These SM managers communicated encouraging results quoting almost approximately 50% of students from the new intake obtaining information on admissions on SM. This was considered by them a high percentage for any specific form of the communication channel.

**Increasing Management’s Interest in SM**

The absence of senior management’s understanding and interest in SM has been highlighted as one of the limiting factors towards early adoption of SM in past. But it has now reshaped itself into one of the strong influencing factors for the adoption of SM by Pakistani HEIs. Management is not only now demanding presence on SM but also active management through official SM accounts with regular follow up. The same factor has also been highlighted as an important factor contributing towards the adoption of SM for marketing purposes (Haysa, Pageb, & Buhalisb, 2013). As said by some of the SM managers:

‘In our university, the management regularly follows up on the SM activities up till the Vice-Chancellor level. My own Director very regularly also follows up on the SM activities.’

‘There is also now a push on part of the management as well. For example, whenever we are finalizing the admission advertisement the management tells us to make sure it is also posted on SM. Whenever there is any important news, they tell us to put that on SM. So, the factor that management has also realized the importance of SM, has contributed towards adoption of SM by [university name].’

While the above replies do reflect developing interest on part of senior management of the HEIs to run and use SM, but it does not show if this seriousness is being converted into a strong willingness to invest time and money in SM management. The lack of sufficient resources available to several SM managers and the non-willingness of senior management to invest in SM affairs has also been highlighted as the limiting factor towards optimal utilization of SM.
This increase in interest is conflicting with other influencing factors, such as the one explained ahead, inhibiting some HEIs to invest in SM affairs.

**Cost-Effective Promotional Tool**

SM has paved its way as an important choice for promotion purposes due to its global reach and inexpensive nature. HEIs, which had been generally skeptical in terms of their marketing investments, see this as an important cost-effective tool to communicate with their target audience. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why it has caught the attention of their senior management lately. There is a massive increase in usage of SM by the young generation; many of them are studying in HEIs. Students have been highlighted as the prime target audience of the SM by Pakistani HEIs. With students having pre-existing strong SM presence, it became easy for HEIs to access them by tapping this free resource to send across their information in a more targeted way.

This factor is very much in line with the study of Tsimonis and Dimitriadis (2014) where they highlighted that firms see SM as a cheap and yet more effective alternate for promotion during the financial crunch times (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014). The same stands true for the HEIs in Pakistan. But it may not be wrong to say that this perception of SM has also hindered the willingness on part of senior management to invest in SM management in the case of some universities. This aspect has been highlighted as one of the limiting factors contributing towards the non-optimal utilization of SM by some of the SM managers interviewed for the study.

**Young Staff Leading to Adoption of SM**

According to SM managers, the increase in the HEIs in Pakistan has led to an increase in the demand for staff. This has consequently pushed universities to recruit young people, due to the non-availability of the required number of experienced staff. This group of young people, whether faculty or admin, is more computer savvy and has more understanding of the potential of the SM. This has been therefore highlighted as one of the most prominent reasons for the adoption of SM by the Pakistani HEIs. As said by one of the respondents:

‘One of the factors that influenced the use of SM was the hiring of young staff. The push for use of SM was never that much from the end of the senior management but more from our side.’

This young group of people in academia relies actively on SM to promote their activities. Some SM managers highlighted this as a challenge on their part where now almost every second person in the university is asking them to post content pertaining to their activity on Facebook.
This is although a positive sign in terms of its utilization but is highlighting the difficulty in terms of selection of SM content while keeping all stakeholders happy!

**SM Presence makes you Look Modern**

Whenever a new iPhone is on market, we see many people simply buying it for the sake of associating themselves with new technology. Perhaps it makes them look smart, modern, and trendy. According to SM managers, people use various brands to reflect upon their own self based on associations held regarding that brand. These associations play a strong role in the development of brand equity. This highlighted motivation for the adoption of SM certainly shows one of the strong associations people have developed with the SM, simulating a positive response towards its usage by Pakistani HEIs. ‘Presence on SM makes you look modern!’ is a strong reflection of the brand equity held by SM in the country.

**Moving toward Paperless Communication**

With organizations becoming more aware of their societal role as socially responsible corporates, there is a desire on part of senior management of the HEIs in Pakistan to engage in activities and actions that can play a positive role towards the community. The same approach is reflected in HEIs preference for SM, where some SM managers have highlighted the adoption of SM as a move towards going paperless in future. This motivation exists from the perspective of not only being environmentally friendly but also cost-savvy. SM has provided HEIs with a way to communicate online with their stakeholders to promote their programs, services and share information about important events and activities taking place on campus. According to SM managers, physical notice boards have probably become irrelevant for the students of today, who are relying on SM to obtain information of important announcements regarding their university.

**External Influencing Factors**

**Preferred Mode of Communication by Students**

Communication models have constantly evolved over the years due to advancements in technology. It has resulted in several available options for communication to the existing generation including letters, newspapers, telephones, radio, TV, mobiles, emails, websites, SM, online forums, etc. While this evolution has not eliminated any mode of communication yet, including communication through letters, but certainly has reshaped preferences. It is quite visible that the young generation is primarily seen communicating through SM. This factor has
also been highlighted by SM managers of Pakistani HEIs who believe that their prime audience, i.e., students; are more easily accessible on SM.

Educational systems are fast adapting to a more holistic model of learning involving students’ engagement outside the classrooms (Ansari, & Khan, 2020). With a growing number of students, sharing information pertaining to these activities is a big challenge for HEIs. According to SM managers, academic departments now rely more on SM for communicating information about any of their events. There seems an existence of a common belief and trust on part of HEIs that SM will ensure the delivery of their message to the student community. The students in Pakistani HEIs are exhibiting traits of Generation ‘C’ suggested by Freidrich et al. (2010) where they are spending most of their waking hours on SM.

**Traditional Communication Media losing Value**

Tsimonis and Dimitriadis (2014) results regarding SM marketing shows a declining response rate towards conventional communication modes for promotion purposes including TV, newspapers, radio, etc. This belief is shared by the SM managers of the Pakistani HEIs who can also see the declining value of traditional communication media. Few, while understanding the anonymity of the interview, shared that the advertisement placed in newspapers are primarily being done to satisfy the existing belief of some of their senior management regarding its value for marketing purposes that they themselves don’t feel now. Traditional media, especially newspapers, which had been used by HEIs for years for their promotion and branding purposes, is seen as more complicated and expensive to deal with, by their Marketing and Public Relations heads, compared to SM.

**People living E-Life**

If we say that SM has changed the way people live their lives, it may not be wrong (Eze et al., 2020). Due to SM, we see people socializing differently. We talk online, share online, interact online, connect online and even now meet people online. One of the interviewees highlighted that senior dignitaries have started relying on SM to connect with their audience. Due to perhaps the phenomenon of 99 lives (Aaker & McLoughlin, 2014) where people are busy with so many chores of life, SM is perhaps the only solution for their need to stay connected with friends, relatives, and customers/clients (in case of businesses). Another respondent shared an example of a Chinese Ambassador meeting people in Islamabad on Twitter as a case to show how people have started living an e-life.
Competitors on SM

Competitor analysis is considered as one of the most important elements of external analysis to help companies decide their future course of action (Aaker & McLoughlin, 2014). Reaction to any competitor’s move by adopting the same practice may be seen as aggression to convert competitor’s POD (Point of Difference) into POPs (Points of Parity) or a cautioned approach of following the path that has already been taken by someone. Even within the Higher Education sector, this has been highlighted as one of the motivating factors to adopt SM.

‘...there are many other universities locally and internationally that have their SM accounts. So, this sort of encouraged us and pushes us to follow the lead and also have an SM presence.’

This influencing factor is in line with the study by Dahnil et al. (2014), where the pressures from business environments, in the shape of competitors’ actions, are encouraging many businesses to adopt SM. Previous studies by El-Gohary (2012) and Ifinedo (2011) also show similar behaviour of firms in case of adoption of new technologies that are mostly influenced by competitors moves. The urge to stand abreast with the ongoing trend is therefore encouraging HEIs to ensure their SM presence, so as to diffuse this as POD and communicate the category membership that reflects the part of a group of those organizations that make use of such technologies to connect with their customers.

Presence of unofficial SM Accounts of HEIs

The findings above highlighted that SM is not a new phenomenon for the HEIs as many of them have had the SM presence since 2005-06. But this presence was not being managed or controlled on part of the HEIs. Students while studying in a university would make SM accounts for their institute and put pictures, videos, and content to highlight university activities, news and events and use it for the promotion of events within their domain. Such unofficial accounts had been actively used by the students to put across their opinion regarding any activity or action by the university. With many unofficial accounts operating under the name of the universities, the interviews revealed that management of these universities felt the urge to have an official SM presence to have an online voice.

‘There were many fake pages and unofficial pages of our university, and these pages will create confusion based on their content. So, our official SM presence took care of the students’ requirement’
**Self-Driven Media**

Another highlighted reason, which also perhaps add to the cost-effective nature of SM, is its ability to run on its own, due to its attractiveness amongst the young community, and ease of sharing content within friends’ and family circle. SM is seen as a beast that runs itself. As said by one of the respondents:

‘Well, of course, there are different types of students, but I think that SM is a kind of thing that attracts all kinds of students it has serious things it has lighthearted stuff as well I think it is an animal that runs itself’.

The content once placed on SM has no defined boundaries in terms of its reach. When you put a post on SM, it is not only viewed by the firsthand users of that content but also by their friends and family, when they share it on their timelines. This multiplying viral effect of SM is self-driven and goes on till it reaches a point where the content receiver is not interested in the information shared. While the direct investment of the HEI was in their original post, the later organic spread of that content is completely self-driven.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The findings of the study have provided insight regarding the roots of SM marketing in the context of HEIs by identifying factors that are influencing HEIs to adopt SM. This insight draws focus towards the underlying intentions of HEIs for having SM presence. Many of these are in line with the previous studies conducted in various contexts (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014; Dahnil, Marzuki, Langgat, & Fabeil, 2014; Michaelidou, Siamagka, & Christodoulides, 2011). Internal motivations have been primarily driven by the perceived reality that SM will help HEIs increase the number of applicants, offer a more cost-effective promotional tool, project an image of a modern institute, and move towards paperless communication. Further, internal factors include an increase in management’s interest in SM technology and induction of young faculty/staff in Pakistani academia. While the earlier is showing the change in the psychological attitude of senior management towards technologies such as SM, the latter specifically brings to attention the changing demographics in academia of the country. Both these factors also seem inter-related where an increase in presence of young faculty/staff is enabling change in the mindset of senior management of HEIs towards SM adoption.

The external influencing factors for the adoption of SM are primarily driven by its perception as a preferred mode of communication by students. Students have started living an e-life on social networks where they connect and interact with their friends, relatives, and acquaintances.
The presence of competitors on SM is also pushing HEIs to adopt it as a communication tool so as to stay amongst the league of institutes that are open to such modern communication technologies. It is perceived as self-driven media that has a global reach. Any information once placed on SM can take any shape and reach unlimited boundaries. There is tremendous ease through which one can make forums and blogs on SM to talk about HEIs. The management in HEIs, therefore, felt that they must also keep their presence in this field through official accounts.

These internal and external factors cannot be termed mutually exclusive. An increase in management’s interest in SM is also driven by the fact that it is seen as a cost-effective promotional tool. The paperless communication environment, which is resulting because of more reliance on SM, rather than written paper notices, is helping HEIs reduce their communication costs, making it a preference for communication. The self-driven nature of SM forums is resulting in reduced efforts and ultimately cost on part of HEIs to share information about their programs, services, and achievements. Any information placed on SM can spread quickly around the globe with little effort, in terms of both time and money, through the sharing functionality of SM, resulting into a reduced cost of communication.

Some of these highlighted motivations are apparently converting into certain limitations affecting the optimal utilization of SM by Pakistani HEIs, including the perception of SM as a cost-effective tool. This perception is inhibiting senior management of some HEIs to invest in SM affairs. As a result, these HEIs are producing sub-standard content with limited resources for content designing, uploading, and following on students’ queries.

A very startling and visible element in the interviews with the SM managers was that none of them talked about relationship building with students as a motivation to adopt SM. All selected HEIs are using Facebook primarily with little support from the Twitter account in some cases. Keitzmann et al. (2011) has highlighted relationship building as the prominent functionality block of Facebook. But this prominence was not at all visible in the case of HEIs, reflected through SM managers’ response, which is using this very platform, but apparently from the perspective of information sharing and image building. Previous studies have shown that firms adopt SM with the view to obtain feedback from the customers regarding their products and services and strengthen the relationship (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014; Michaelidou, Siamagka, & Christodoulides, 2011; Evans & McKee, 2010). While obtaining students’ feedback has been highlighted as one of the objectives of SM usage, by SM managers, it has
not been stated as the reason why they adopted it as a communication tool. This shows the absence of desire to strengthen the relationship with students as a dominant reason for SM adoption. This highlights a matter of concern for HEIs, not only from the perspective of the absence of visible desire to connect with students but also in terms of possible incompatibility of the preferred SM tool with their existing rationale behind SM adoption. If awareness through sharing of information and image building is the only motivation behind SM adoption, then using a platform that enables relationship building shall be reconsidered. With a prominent Facebook presence, HEIs need to try to see how they can make use of this tool to strengthen the relationship with their students, which may already be happening but perhaps not in a planned way.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Identification of the internal and external influencing factors of selected HEIs to adopt SM adds to the missing literature of the roots of SM marketing within the context of HEIs. This understanding is considered important for any future research in the domain of SM in HEIs. The comparison is drawn above regarding motivation for the adoption of SM with other organizations has also enabled expanding the existing literature on factors influencing the adoption of SM marketing by different organizations. The identification of internal and external influencing factors for the adoption of SM by the selected HEIs draws attention to the need for HEIs to review their justifications for SM presence and compare it with other industries. In the case of Pakistani HEIs, the apparent positive difference is a massive influx of digital technologies in the country that has increased the effectiveness of SM communication. On the downside, willingness, and desire to obtain students’ feedback and engage them in the value creation process is limiting them to optimally gain from their SM presence. If presence on SM is primarily about promotion and advertisement of university only, then perhaps investment in traditional marketing communication tools may bear more fruits for HEIs. There is no point in adopting a two-way communication tool with a one-way communication strategy. The cost-effectiveness of this platform while may be a plus point but shall not make HEIs myopic regarding the true purpose of two-way communication on SM.
REFERENCES


