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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN GRADUATE STUDENT RECRUITMENT: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The beginning of the Internet in the 1990s has changed the landscape for business worldwide. The company has expanded its online presence to engage new customers more effectively. As a result, social media is becoming the driving force connecting companies and potential customers. Social media has also been actively used to recruit new employees. Some research has been done in this area, citing the value of the relationship between social media and employee recruitment. But there is no academic paper exploring the use of social media for university student recruitment at the undergraduate or graduate level. Universities currently use social media to connect with their alums. This paper is based on the case study of a small private university where they used social media tools to attract graduate students. They used success criteria beyond click rate to calculate the return on investment for their efforts. They saw each click as their opportunity to click with a potential student and tell them their institutional value proposition. Data analytics collected in this process will be shared in this paper.

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Introduction:-

Graduate student recruitment has received very little attention in the literature. Most of the research has been qualitative and has been focused on the factors related to student choice. While graduate student enrollment in the United States has stayed relatively stable over the past ten years, demographic shifts and the anticipated need for doctorally qualified faculty due to massive pending retirements cause concern. This research aims to understand how to use social media to attract new graduate students. This research paper is a case study based on a moderate size university's experience using social media for graduate student recruitment.

United States National Enrollment Landscape

The majority of growth in fall 2016 continues to be in programs leading to master's degrees, which comprise 82.5% of degrees awarded in 2015-16. In addition, the number of graduate certificates awarded by institutions participating in the survey increased by 11.8% between 2014-15 and 2015-16, suggesting that a growing number of students see the value in these micro-credentials. The Council of Graduate Schools has reported that approximately 23.4% were underrepresented minorities, including American Indian/Alaska Native (0.5%), Black/African American (11.8%), Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander (0.2%), and Hispanic/Latino (10.9%), among first-time U.S. citizens and permanent resident graduate students in the Fall of 2016. They have also reported that over one year period from 2015 to 2016, the number of graduate applications has also increased in all areas. The average annual increase was most significant in health sciences (23.2%) and most minor in biological sciences education (3.1%) between fall

2015 and fall 2016. Consistent with recent trends, graduate applications in arts and humanities decreased 6.2% between fall 2015 and fall 2016.

The Council of Graduate Schools survey also shows that the first-time graduate enrollment of international students decreased 0.9% between fall 2015 and fall 2016. It is the first decrease since 2003, though the five-year average annual increase (7.8%) and ten-year average annual increase (7.4%) rates remain high. In contrast, first-time graduate enrollment for U.S. citizens and permanent residents increased 3.2%. Conversely, the **total** graduate enrollment increased by 2.4% for international students and decreased by 0.1% for U.S. citizens and permanent residents over the same fall 2015-2016 period.

Social Media and Recruitment

Social media so far has been successfully used for the recruitment of employees. According to Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), 84% use social media for new employee recruitment. Cost and instantaneous reach to millions of potential candidates is the main reason given by almost all employers for using social media. Social media can be what human-to-human word of mouth used to be in earlier times. As more and more universities increase their social media presence, they also use them to connect with prospective students. According to a survey conducted by qs.com, about 50% of students in the United States see social media as an essential platform to connect with potential universities compared to about 70% in Asia and 61% in Europe. They also found that likely students still like to communicate with a natural person and visit the campus after first contact through the social medium. So it appears that the role of social media lies in adding value, rather than replacing more 'official' or formal channels, to show prospective students a different side of an institution. Social networks can also allow prospective students to get a feel for daily life and connect directly with peers. A lively social media presence can be an excellent way to present an institution as open, welcoming, and up to date with a strong community.

Digital Recruitment at our University

In March 2017, the Dean of Graduate program requested \$24,000 from the Strategic Planning team to pilot a digital recruitment effort focused on expanding the student base by using social media. The strategic planning team at this University provides one-time funding for the initiatives with the potential for revenue growth for the University. This request from Graduate Studies for \$24,000 was for financing a short-term digital marketing and optimization strategy to generate leads that will build enrollment in graduate programs for the summer and fall of 2017.

Various digital strategies have already been employed to achieve these short-term goals. While these digital efforts had increased traffic to all of the programmatic web pages, few serious prospects to the various graduate programs have been identified via this "push" marketing. They had also launched a highly targeted social media campaign (Facebook and Instagram), utilizing the physical and e-mail addresses of some 3,400 accepted undergraduate students. They wanted to replicate the same for the graduate programs. The funding request was for the first phase of the proposal, and given a successful outcome; they tried to launch the second phase and extend the effort to include all recruitment – undergraduate, transfer, international, graduate on-campus, graduate online, health sciences, graduate international. The strategic planning team approved one-time funding for the project starting April 2017.

Methodology:-

The outcome of Internet growth has been the presence of information abundance in recent years. This has changed how businesses and customers find each other in the digital world. The purchasing power has rapidly shifted from the sellers to the buyers. The buyers now have much more access to the information about the product before they even talk to a salesperson. This makes it essential for a business to develop its online presence.

While having a digital presence is essential, it is equally necessary for a business to have a robust lead generation strategy to capture the interest of its potential customers amongst all the information noise. Generating a lead essentially means attracting a stranger to your business and making them a potential customer before passing their information to sales for the final conversion. In this case study, we developed a lead generation strategy to capture leads for different graduate programs offered at the University.

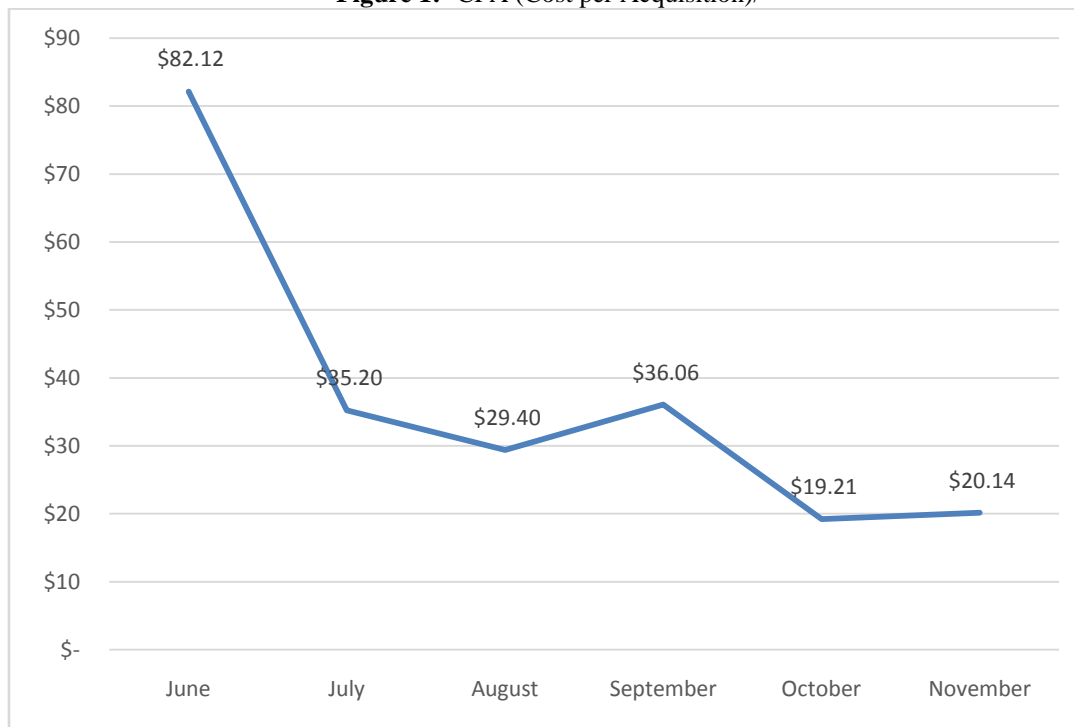
The strategy involved three steps – research, development, and optimization. The first step, analysis, involved data collection on our audience and our offering. For this, we listed out the features or the value proposition of our graduate programs. This included information on our accreditation, rankings, class experiences, scholarships, etc. We then linked the value propositions to the benefits they will get after completing their degrees. The gifts were associated with the quantitative market data on median salaries, projected job growth, and employer hiring statistics

for industries related to the graduate degree. All this data is of no value unless presented to a potential customer clearly and organized. This is where we developed specific landing pages for each of our graduate programs. These landing pages gave the crucial information and included a lead form for the visitors to fill out. To increase the number of form submissions and the conversion rate, we also provided the visitors with free brochures of the programs as incentives.

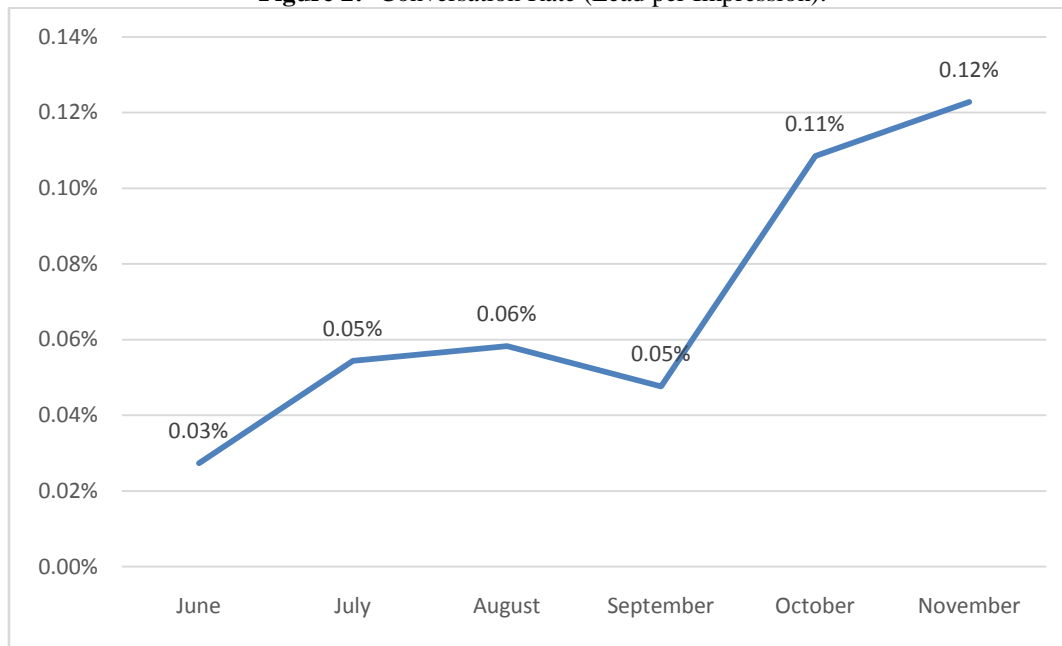
The second step of the strategy included the development of digital advertisements for the different graduate programs. These ads were designed keeping in mind the demographics of our target audience. While this audience included the people interested in pursuing the particular program, it also had the likely people to follow it. The targeting for the latter depends on various factors such as age, current employment, income, and interests. In addition, since these ads run across social networks, they must stand out in the people's news feed. For this, we designed creatives that included images related to the program along with a clear message and the value proposition. We also had CTA (call-to-action) buttons that would take the user to the landing page of that program.

The final step included optimizing the ad campaigns to reduce the overall CPA (cost per acquisition). After running the campaigns for a few weeks and collecting their data, optimization was done. The first step was to record the average CTR (click-through rate) of the ads, representing the percentage of people clicking on the ads after viewing them. The next step was to determine the conversion rate of the landing pages, which means the percentage of people filling out the lead form on the page. This data gave us an overview of the average number of ad impressions required to generate a lead. Finally, we designed multiple ads with slight variations in their message and, using conversion tracking, determined the best performing ads for each campaign. This helped us save money on low-performing ads, reducing the overall CPA. Figure 1 shows the average CPA for one of our campaigns for six months. We gradually reduced the CPA from \$82 to \$20 during this period.

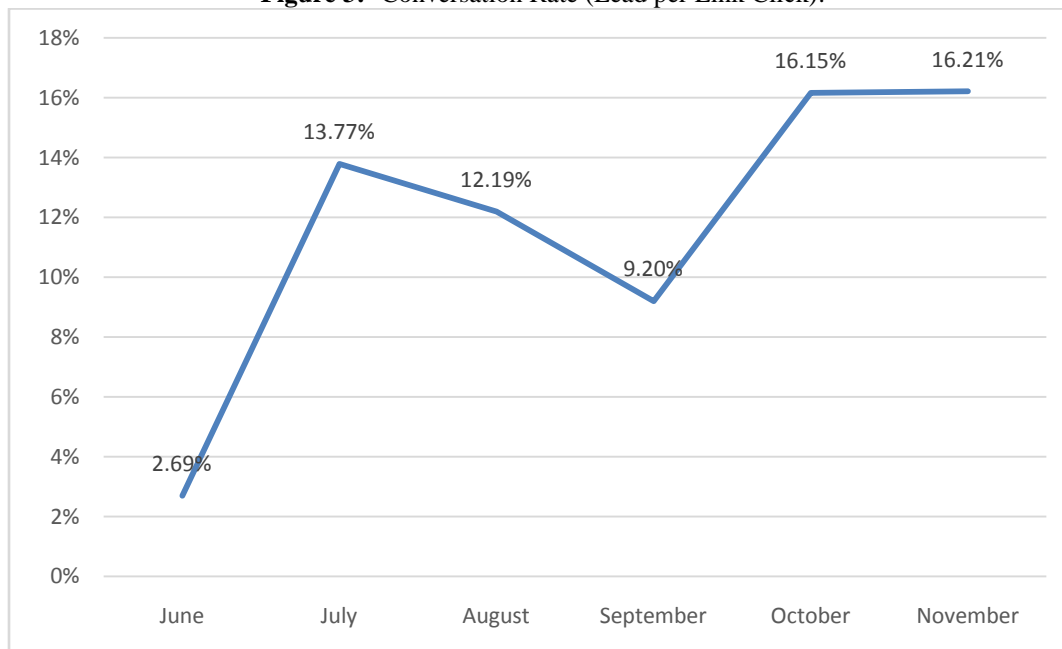
Figure 1:- CPA (Cost per Acquisition)/



We could also increase the conversion rate for every ad impression during the same period. For example, figure 2 shows a conversion rate of 0.03% per impression in June 2017, which increased to 0.12% by the end of November 2017.

Figure 2:- Conversation Rate (Lead per Impression).

The tracking also helped us perform data analytics to determine the behavior of the users on our pages. This included metrics such as the number of new users, the pages they visited, bounce rate, average time spent on each page, etc. We also developed the heatmaps of the landing pages to determine the areas of the page with the most users interaction. For example, we recorded the sections where people clicked or tapped the most and the page scroll depth percentages. This data enabled us to optimize our landing page content by removing the redundant data and placing the critical information on the most viewed sections. Figure 3 shows how the conversion rate for every link click increased from 2.6% to 16.2% between June and November 2017.

Figure 3:- Conversation Rate (Lead per Link Click).

Furthermore, we could develop remarketing ads with each page visit getting tracked. The purpose of remarketing is to show ads to only the people who have previously shown interest in your business, which in our case, was determined by the visits to our landing pages. Since the remarketing audience has a higher likelihood of conversions, these campaigns helped reduce the overall CPAs.

While generating leads is a crucial step, what drives actual revenue is the conversion of a lead into a sale. To ensure that the lead is not lost after it is generated, we use another digital marketing strategy in automated e-mails. These e-mails are sent to the leads when they fill out the form containing more information about the program and the application process. Using the data from the lead form, we personalize the subject and body of the e-mail, which tends to increase the open e-mail rate. Furthermore, being able to track the number of times each lead has opened their e-mail, we can estimate the level of interest of the lead in the program. A higher e-mail open rate for a lead indicates a higher interest in the offering, which means a higher potential to convert. Our analysis reported an average e-mail available rate of 38.46%, much higher than the industry average of 13.5%.

Conclusion:-

The case study results in this paper show that using social media as a recruitment strategy can help universities target individual students. The social media-related recruitment strategies and interventions positively impact the inquiry process, recruitment events, and acceptance process. The social media strategy shows the University's efforts at actively recruiting graduate students and increasing graduate enrollment by being more persistent and purposeful with interaction with new students. Social media also helps universities get their name out to a broader audience.

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