Using Social Media for Marketing Public Libraries' Collection and Services in Pakistan: Current Practices, Challenges and Future Prospects

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Abstract

Social media has emerged as a popular marketing tool. The present study explored the current practices of social media marketing in public libraries. It also identified the barriers which hampered the usage of social media for promoting library collection and services. We employed a qualitative approach and conducted 10 interviews with librarians from public libraries of Lahore. The findings showed that public libraries' use of social media for marketing purposes is at its infancy stage. The interviewees reported a number of personal, administrative and infrastructural hurdles which hampered the effective use of social media for promoting public library collection and services. A number of strategies are also discussed for an enhanced and effective social media use in public libraries. This study is one of the first attempts to understand the phenomenon of social media for marketing in public libraries.

Keyword: Marketing, Public Libraries, Pakistan, Social Media, Facebook

Introduction

Social media has the potential to help libraries and information centers to build far deeper ties with their users. Social media has emerged as a popular marketing tool for public libraries; enabling them to reach out and communicate with users online. Social media are users-based interactive channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others (Carr & Hayes, 2015). Potter (2012) believes that social media refers to any online platform that allows

users to share and exchange content. That content may consist of actual digital items or simply opinions, news, and perspectives. Kietzmann et al. (2011) further explains that Individuals, communities, and companies can utilize social media to share, produce, discuss, and alter user-generated or online-uploaded material by using Web-based, desktop PCs, and mobile technologies. They bring about significant and inclusive changes in the way corporations, groups, communities, and individuals communicate. The process of empowering individuals to advertise their websites, products, or services through online social networks and tap into a much wider population that may not have been available through traditional means is known as social media marketing (Weinberg, 2009).

According to Pashootanizadeh and Rafie (2019) use of social media networks in the library promoted engagement, creativity, and collaboration. They further explain that numerous studies showed the positive relationship between brand loyalty and appearance on social media. Moreover, they believe that social media is- and can be- a viable marketing tool in any organization. Public libraries are not an exception. Potter (2012), Ramsey and Vecchione (2014) mentioned that, as a minimum, most libraries should be on Facebook and Twitter, because our users expect us to be there. But the digital divide between countries may show different findings, especially in developing countries. Besides, there are some barriers like filtering, lack of Internet skills and undesirable availability of telecommunications networks which should be considered (Erdoğmuş & Cicek, 2012). Therefore, the main purpose of this research was to explore the current scenario of social media marketing by public libraries in Pakistan.

Literature Review

Knowledge and local history repositories are two terms used to describe public libraries. The mission of public libraries is to serve the unique needs of their local communities (Bashir, et al., 2015). We have seen that, public libraries facing major cut of budget due to certain economic issues. In this scenario social media platforms can be effective tools to promote their services and build positive image among community. According to Bashir (2020) due to the tremendous developments in technology, public libraries have seen stunning changes in the twenty-first century. However, there is a need to market the resources that libraries have (Patil & Pradhan, 2014). Library professionals are increasingly using social media, with the majority believing it is a useful communication tool. Library science academics have paid close attention

to social media use in libraries, as it has emerged as a vital medium for communicating with users. Prior research has looked into several areas of social media use in public libraries, such as social media content, stakeholder views, and effective social media use tactics (Bashir, et al., 2018; Joo et al., 2018). Roy (2009) believed that marketing is not only a necessary activity in public libraries, but it is also an important part of the professional service concept. Throughout the past, public libraries showed a clear commitment to informing the public about library services and involving the public in strategic planning procedures.

Ameen (2015) indicated that in this era of information explosion, marketing is essential for public libraries. It assists them in obtaining the resources they require, building goodwill among stakeholders, and optimizing the utilization of their resources and services. The usage of social media in libraries has attracted much interest from researchers. Social media has evolved as an important platform for communicating with library users. Several studies have looked into various areas of social media use in public libraries, such as social media content, stakeholder views, and methods for effective social media use for library resource and service marketing (Joo et al., 2018; Ameen, 2015; Mahmood & Richardson, 2013; Roy, 2003).

Library professionals' attitude toward social media marketing is positive, according to Khan and Bhatti (2012), and the usage of social media is vital for recruiting online users, distant learning, and knowledge exchange. Cloud computing apps in libraries had gained increasing popularity in recent years, and it appears that the library should consider marketing its services more frequently over the internet, to get greater access to its users and promote information services (Bashir & Warraich, 2023; Muruli, & Gireesh, 2013).

Furthermore, they explain that these apps have been widely used for information gathering and dissemination, collaborative learning, and online social and professional connections. According to Islam and Habiba (2015) social media tools assist in making connections between library members and mashing up library services and products to make them more visible. Social media is an extremely effective new mode of communication and the use of social media is steadily expanding. In nations like Pakistan, marketing through social media applications hold great potential and obstacles as well. The benefits of social media can be utilized as a way to communicate in libraries. To market new library materials or projects, social media offers a new sort of connection (Burkhardt, 2010). Libraries can use social media to promptly reply to user inquiries, increasing their reputation as a responsive and collaborative institution (Ramsey & Vecchione 2014). Several studies have been undertaken to investigate

library social media marketing. However, the majority of these investigations were carried out in university libraries (Harrison et al., 2017; Chu & Du, 2013; Amarakoon & Amarakoon, 2012). Hence, there is need to explore application of social media marketing with reference to public libraries.

Statement of the Problem

By understanding and engaging with their target audience, through social media campaign libraries can enhance their online visibility, and promote their social utility and value. Despite the importance of marketing in attracting and retaining readers, a lack of comprehensive understanding regarding the application of marketing principles in Pakistan's library system is present in the local literature. Moreover, despite the potential benefits of employing social media for marketing, public libraries of Pakistan appear less involved in social media marketing. Hence, it is interesting to find out the reasons and challenges working behind. Prior literature also reported that the implementation of effective marketing strategies in public libraries posed significant challenges that need to be addressed. The present study is designed to understand how and why these public libraries are using social media tools for marketing their services and collections. It further explores the challenges of employing social media for marketing public libraries services and collection and to increase their visibility in the communities.

Research Questions

RQ1. What types of social media marketing activities are currently in practice by the public libraries in Pakistan?

RQ2. What are the barriers faced by the public libraries in using social media to promote their collection and services in Pakistan?

RQ3. What kinds of strategies can public libraries employ for better social media marketing and promotion?

Research Design

The present study employed a qualitative approach to conduct the study. An interview guide was developed after consulting the relevant literature on the topic. Professional librarians from eight public libraries situated in Lahore were purposely selected. The public libraries from Lahore were selected for the following reasons. First, Lahore is the second largest city of

Pakistan with highest number of public libraries. Secondly, Lahore is a modern and developed city and its public libraries are comparatively more developed and resourceful. Moreover, except one, all other public libraries in Lahore are run by the same one authority called, "Directorate of Public Libraries" and have more or less the same type of issues.

List of professional librarians working in these libraries were prepared along with their contact numbers. Approximately, 24 professionals were working at the time of data collection. The authors contacted them through phone, e-mail or Whatsapp in order to have their consent for interview. After conducting ten interviews, we felt data saturation, hence data collection was stopped. We did not mention librarians or libraries' name to keep anonymity. Telephonic interviews were conducted and audio-recorded. Notes were also taken during the interview. All the interviews were lasted for 20-25 minutes. Thematic analysis was performed manually to answer the posed questions. The findings of data analysis are presented in the next section.

Findings

This section will present the analysis of qualitative data collected through interviews. The findings are presented after three headings: i) current marketing activates using social media; ii) barriers faced in social media marketing; iii) strategies for social media marketing

Demographics of the study participants

The demographic characteristics such as gender, age, experience and qualification of the study participants from the public libraries are presented in table 1. The data presented demonstrate diversity among the study participants.

Table 1

Demographic characteristics of the participants

	Interviewees
Gender	
Male	4
Female	6
Age Range	
Up to 25	2
26-30	3
31-35	2

36-40	2
41 and above	1
Experience	
Up to 5	2
6-10	5
10-15	2
15-20	1
Qualification	
Master	6
MPhil	4

Current Marketing Activates Using Social Media

The participants were asked to mention the official page or group of their library on social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Linked In, Blogs, Whatsapp etc. All the participants responded affirmatively by mentioning their official page of Facebook and Whatsapp groups with users. Only a few also mentioned Twitter. However, Facebook was the most mentioned platform. They were further asked to mention what kind of activities they usually post on these platforms. It was found that public libraries especially small ones were less involved in any kind of social media marketing. They were less aware and willing to implement this concept in their respective libraries. A few librarians from a couple of large libraries talked about utilizing social media for marketing purposes.

However, several activities such as new arrival announcements, library timings, library rules, OPAC and other library services were mentioned. Librarians from larger set up mentioned that they post up-coming events such as exhibitions, lectures, seminars, talks by eminent scholars, and book fairs. They also usually posted news and pictures of these events later on. Sometimes, social media is used to share the meetings picture and decisions related to users' concerns. Similarly, a few libraries formed their Facebook and Whatsapp groups with users and shared relevant material, news and updates over there. They also replied and chatted with their users through Facebook chat. It is important to mention that almost all the respondents mentioned that they turned to social media since last four or three years particularly during COVID-19. Smaller public libraries were found less using social media for interacting with their users even during COVID-19 period.

Barriers Faced in Social Media Marketing

It was asked to mention the issues and barriers they usually faced in applying social media marketing concept in public libraries. A long list of issues was reported and categorized into:

1. Administrative issues
2. Less awareness and willingness of staff
3. Lack of skills
4. Poor infrastructure

It was reported that public libraries have to face certain administrative issues in this regard. For instance, firstly, they were directed to get approved the content of every post from Director General (DG) of public libraries form the office of directorate. It was a time and efforts consuming task which involves a lot of documentation, reporting and procedural delays. Keeping this in view, libraries posted only those posts which were very important. Secondly, there was a lack of strategic planning and inconsistent policies on the part of higher authorities also impeded the use of social media. The participants told that during COVID-19, DG laid high emphasis on using social media to respond users' queries, to deliver possible library services and to interact with users. However, such emphasis was dwindling now a day.

Furthermore, it was reported that majority of the library staff particularly experienced people were less aware of benefits of using social media, hence less willing towards its usage. It is due to their lack of familiarity and skills of personal use of social media. Moreover, poor information technology infrastructure and physical facilities were also major issues. For example, a librarian from a large public library said that during electricity failure; heating, cooling and Internet connectivity discontinued due to the absence of any alternate system.

Strategies for Social Media Marketing

The following strategies were suggested by the participants:

- Awareness campaigns should be arranged to make library staff familiar with the importance and benefits of using social media for promoting library collection and services.
- There should be training programs for developing library professionals' skills of using social media effectively.

- Administrative policies with regard to posting content on social media should be friendly.

- Sophisticated IT infrastructure and uninterrupted supply of physical facilities should be ensured by providing more funding and needed support.

Significance of the Study

Marketing in public libraries is not only an essential activity but also supports the core philosophy of professional library services. In the current digital era, using social media to promote public libraries has become increasingly important. Social media platforms provide an excellent opportunity to reach and engage wider audience, and promote library services effectively. Marketing plays a key role in the public libraries visibility and growth by offering numerous benefits. Effective marketing strategies enhance awareness and visibility, ensuring that the community is well- informed about the library's resources, programs, and services; which facilitates the community to be more engaged and involved with the library. Being the first study with reference to public libraries of Lahore, the results of this study will hopefully raise awareness among the public librarians regarding the use of social media for marketing their services for creating and maintaining a strong positive image. Moreover, the results of this study will serve as a guideline for further research in future, as it has addressed an untouched area and reports original research.

Conclusion

The present study explored the current practices of social media marketing in public libraries. It also identified the barriers which hampered usage of social media for promoting library collection and services. The findings indicate that use of social media for marketing purposes in public libraries is at embryonic stage. The use of social media is inconsistent, irregular and less interactive. During COVID-19, some of large public libraries used social media for connecting users. A number of administrative, infrastructural, personal, and behavioral issues were discussed. Awareness campaigns, training programs and social media friendly administrative policies would contribute to develop a culture of interactive and regular communication between libraries and users.

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