

## Role of media in decision-making: What helps students join a business school

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### Abstract

Self-financed colleges are transforming the education sector in India. Strategies to attract students resemble those of companies wooing customers. Various modes of promotion have increased reach. Shanti Business School used different media, promotional materials and interaction to attract students. It achieved reasonable enrolment for its undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. A study with 210 students was conducted to understand impact of medium of promotion in influencing students to take admission in SBS. It indicated that mass media are weak influencers. Traditional media like word-of-mouth and social media are becoming more important. Students cross checked this information with online media so institutes' websites should be updated regularly. Marketing and admissions teams are other key opinion leaders, followed by profile of faculty members, scope of internships and placements and infrastructure that sway family and friends who are major influencers. WhatsApp, Facebook and YouTube are the most preferred social media platforms.

**Keywords:** Decision-making, business school, media exposure, social media, admissions marketing, word-of-mouth

### Introduction

The Indian education system has changed a lot over the past few years. Gone are the days when it was a social service of the government and the government educational institutions were the only options to struggle to secure admission. Today, with large number of self-financed education centres, especially in urban and fringe areas, the competition is stiff. Now the institutions have to market themselves and attract students so that they join them. All the marketing theories and strategies that are used by the corporate world are now being used by private educational institutes as well.

Like the private companies, these private educational institutions to go through the same economic insecurities, the ups and downs of the economy, competition from other players in the field. Unpredictable manners of students and their parents have an impact on their enrolment and, in some cases, their existence. As a result, most educational institutions have now started using mass media to attract students. Since the target group of these institutions (now talking about colleges) who are more into internet or online communication, they are using a combination of all media – traditional media like group presentation an individual counselling, mass media – print, radio, and TV, and new or interactive media of online and social media, to achieve this end.

We talk of a specific case of Shanti Business School, a private business school in the city of Ahmedabad, Gujarat, which prepares students mainly for three programmes; two years Post Graduate Diploma in Management (PGDM), and two years Post Graduate Diploma in Management – Communication (PGDM-C); and three years undergraduate programme of Bachelors of Business Administration (BBA) where the authors of this paper work. The School could achieve reasonably good enrolment for its UG and PG programmes. They came from different places in India and their exposure to SBS promotion also varied greatly.

The outcome of all the promotion efforts was evaluated at the end of the admission season. It was observed that while a huge amount of money is being used to advertise SBS through combination of media, there is a certain amount of confusion as to which medium influences the decision of a student to join a college. Hence, a study was conducted on the newly admitted students of SBS, a private business school in the city of Ahmedabad, Gujarat.

It was at this point of time that a question was raised about what effects one or the other medium of promotion has helped influencing the mind of the students who took admission in SBS. To answer this question, it was thought to launch a study to find out contribution of one or the other media with following objectives:

### Objectives

The study aimed to find answers to the following questions:

1. Of all the mediums of communication, which ones are the most effective in influencing the decision-making process of the students?
2. What is the process through which students come to the conclusion of joining the b-school?

### Limitations of the study

1. Being a case study, the focus was on only one private business school, based in Ahmedabad.
2. The universe as well as sample was taken from students of BBA and PGDM.

### Review of Literature

Though not an extensive body of knowledge was found on the topic, some work has been done to understand students' preferred medium of communication as Web 2.0 has altered the way the web generation communicates. Researchers, both from India and abroad are trying to understand how colleges

are using internet, and more specifically social media, to attract students for admission in their institutions. There is a term strategic enrolment management that was first coined by John Maguire in 1970 (quoted by Pandey and Yadav, 2012) [8]. According to him, strategic enrolment management should be used not only to address the issue of admission but also marketing, retention of students, and financial resources. After conducting a study on the effectiveness of communication mediums in attracting new students, the study concluded that hoardings and personal contact was the most effective combination in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India.

Hayes, Rushman and Walker did a study in 2009 (quoted in Miller, Wardrope and Bridges, 2011) [7] in which 72 percent of students USA said that they preferred interacting with admission staff online rather than meet them face to face. In the study conducted by Miller, Wardrope and Bridges (2011) [7], it was found that students now prefer instant messaging compared to e-mails. Barnes and Mattson (2008) [3], on the other side, found that college blogs are a very effective way of being in touch with students in USA. Around 41% of universities from the United States of America have a blog of their own. Their study also concluded that most colleges today are using social media to attract students. They found that online behaviour can and will influence the decision of students as 89% of admissions departments felt that social media was "somewhat important" for getting more students. But the study also showed that virtual interaction has not replaced face to face communication completely. Students still want to have a face to face interaction with an advisor and a professor.

In another study by Barnes and Mattson (2009) [4], the results were that more and more colleges are using internet and social media to attract students and online behaviour and social networking has a far reaching effect on the decisions taken by young people. In order to engage the prospective students, colleges must use cognitive, emotional and behavioural (Raman and Pramod, 2014) [10] dimensions. Of these three, the emotional dimension can easily be captured by using social media. Among the colleges covered by this study, 61 per cent used social media for admissions. This study also emphasises the need to have a vibrant and informative blog. The researchers used a regression model to prove that blogs and discussion forums have the maximum effect on admissions.

But one needs to look at a combination of traditional and new media. Ashok, Apoorva and Suganthi (2015) [1] found that in urban areas, television, social media and websites have the maximum impact, text messaging has temporary effect and pamphlets have no impact. This shows that though organisations continue to use all media for reaching out to students, the degree of effectiveness and the return on investment in terms of attracting a large number of students varies from media to media. While all studies – both

international and national – have tried to examine the efficacy of advertisement in attracting students, there is a gap in knowledge of how these media influence the young minds and how do they arrive at the decision of joining or not joining an institute.

Since the study focuses on a private management institute, the authors hope that the results of this study will be applicable to all private business schools that are a part of this fiercely competitive market. However, it may not be applicable to colleges of other disciplines or the government run institutions as the dynamics and the background of students may differ.

### **Research Method**

This study attempts at investigating the different media preferred for decision-making by students to select an institution of higher education, especially a business school, at the bachelors and masters levels. Cross-sectional research design with questionnaire as a tool was used to study 210 respondents of a private business school in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India. Students of BBA (Bachelors in Business Administration), PGDM and PGDM-C (Post Graduate Diploma in Management and Post Graduate Diploma in Management - Communication) programmes joining the private b-school in July 2015 were selected as respondents.

### **Research Design**

Cross-sectional research design was used in this study to determine students' decision-making process to join the b-school based on their media exposure. The quantitative approach helped in understanding which medium works best to attract students. It also gave insights on new media emerging for this purpose. All 210 of the incoming students of 2015 were part of this study of which 99 were Under Graduate (UG) and 111 were Post Graduate (PG) students.

### **Development of Tool**

A questionnaire with close and open ended questions was used as a tool. Students were asked questions regarding their first point of information, next step, opinion makers, motivation factors and media use. Respondents were also asked to rank their top three choices as motivating factors that led to the decision to join the b-school.

### **Results and Discussion**

#### **Findings**

The first point of information for both UG and PG students was referrals from people who promoted admission in the institute (61% for PG Graduate and 48% for UG students), followed by information through online (not so for the Post Graduate students) as the second source. Conventional forms of marketing via print, outdoor and audio-visual media were not among the popular choices.

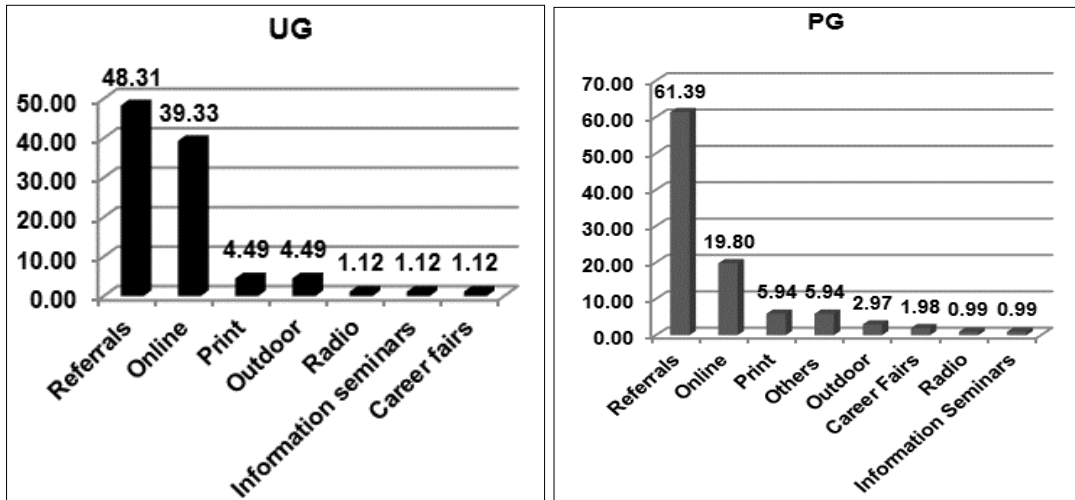


Fig 1: First point of information about the private b-school

Since referrals were such a large part of first point of information for the private b-school, it was further analysed according to the actual source.

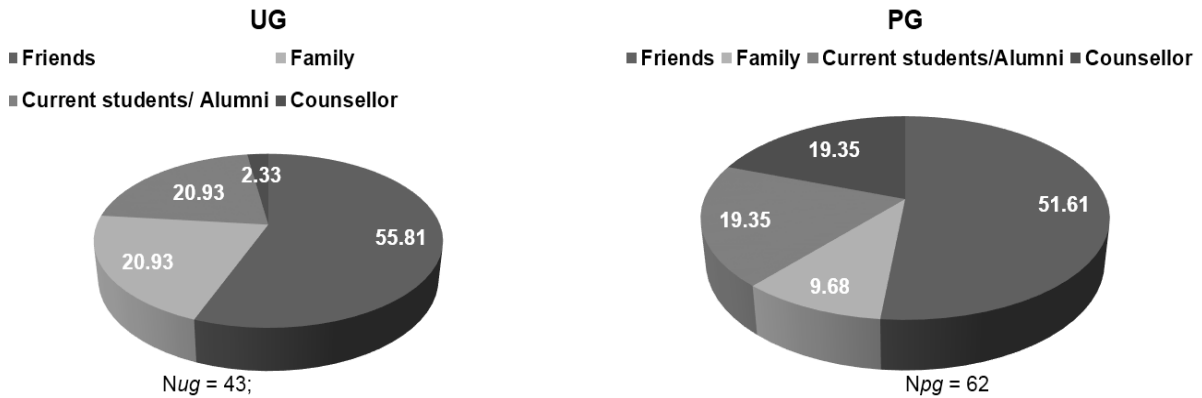


Fig 2: Distribution of referrals

Friends made up for more than half the referrals for both UG and PG students. While family and current students/ alumni were equally important for UG, current students/ alumni and counsellors held the same position for PG students. It was

interesting to note that although family held some importance for older students, it was less than half in the distribution as compared to undergraduates.

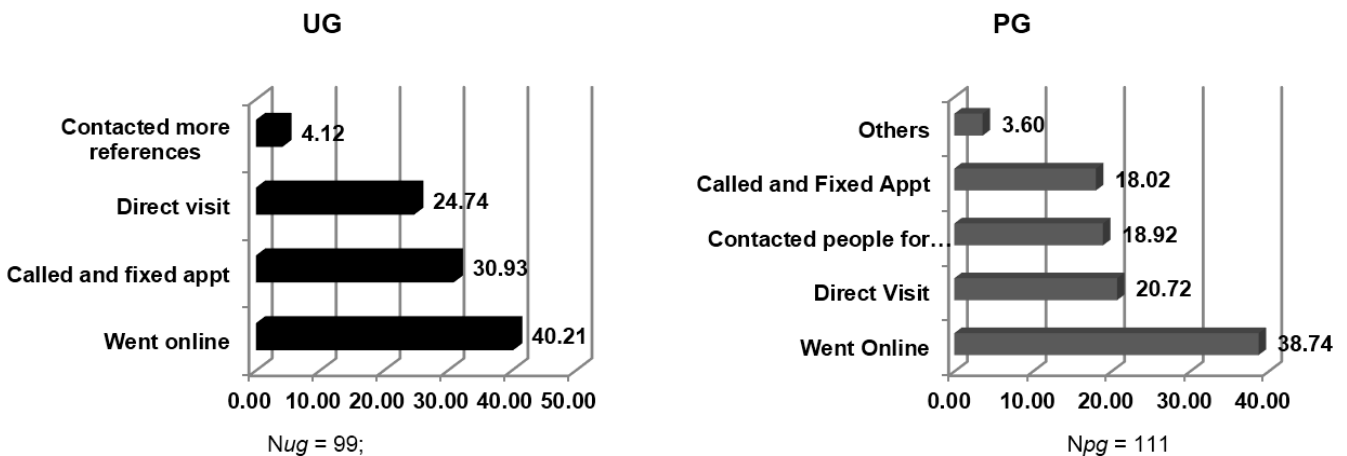


Fig 3: Second step of decision-making process

The second step of the decision-making process was investigated next. More than one-third of the respondents went online to find more about the b-school as their second step in decision-making. While younger students called and fixed

appointments with the institute’s representative(s), one-fifth of the PG students preferred to visit the institute on their own. They contacted people for references more than calling and fixing appointments.

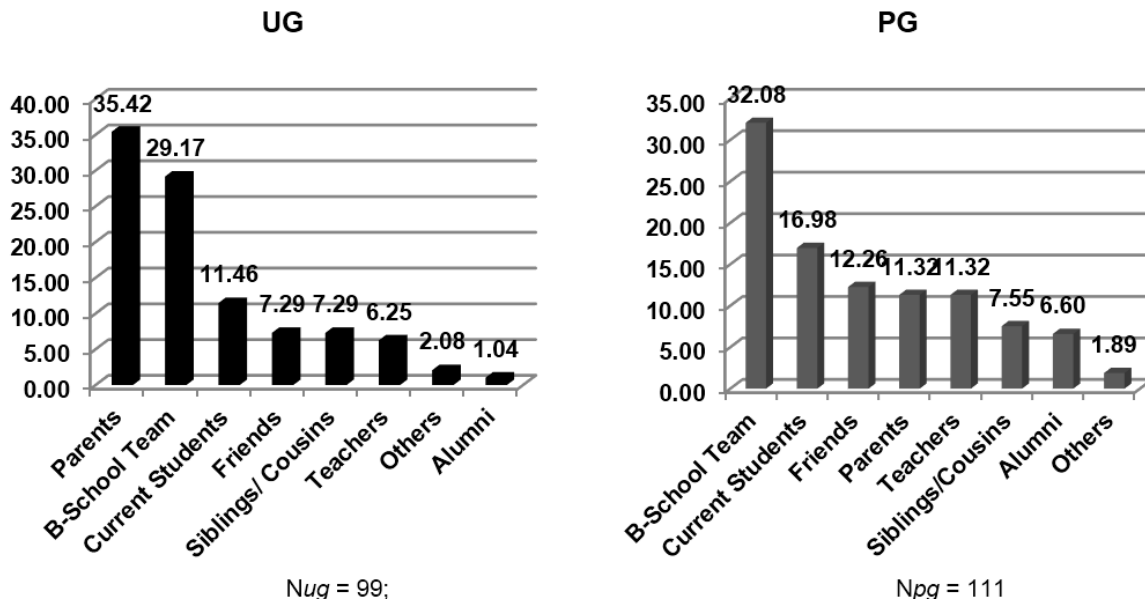


Fig 4: Key opinion leaders

Parents featured at the top as key opinion leaders for students interested in graduation. On the other hand, they were nowhere in the top three for older students, for whom the private b-school’s team for marketing and admissions were the most important opinion leaders. The same team was also the second influencer for UG students. Current students of the b-school were also considered by both candidates as key opinion leaders.

The study team also inquired and weighed the motivational factors in the decision-making process. It was found that qualification and quality of the faculty members and offer for placements were at the top. The other important factors that helped the b-school were its infrastructure, internships, curriculum, and the b-school’s team.

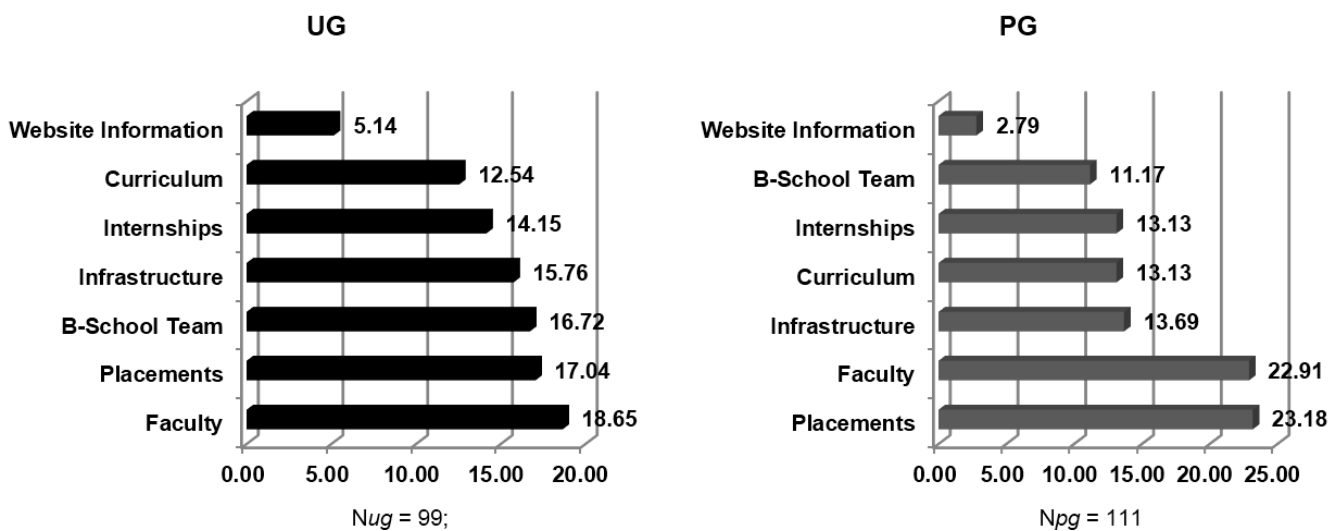


Fig 5: Motivational factors

Since the study wanted to find out the levels of importance ascertained to these factors, respondents were asked to rate

their top three choices which gave some remarkable insights. These are presented below:

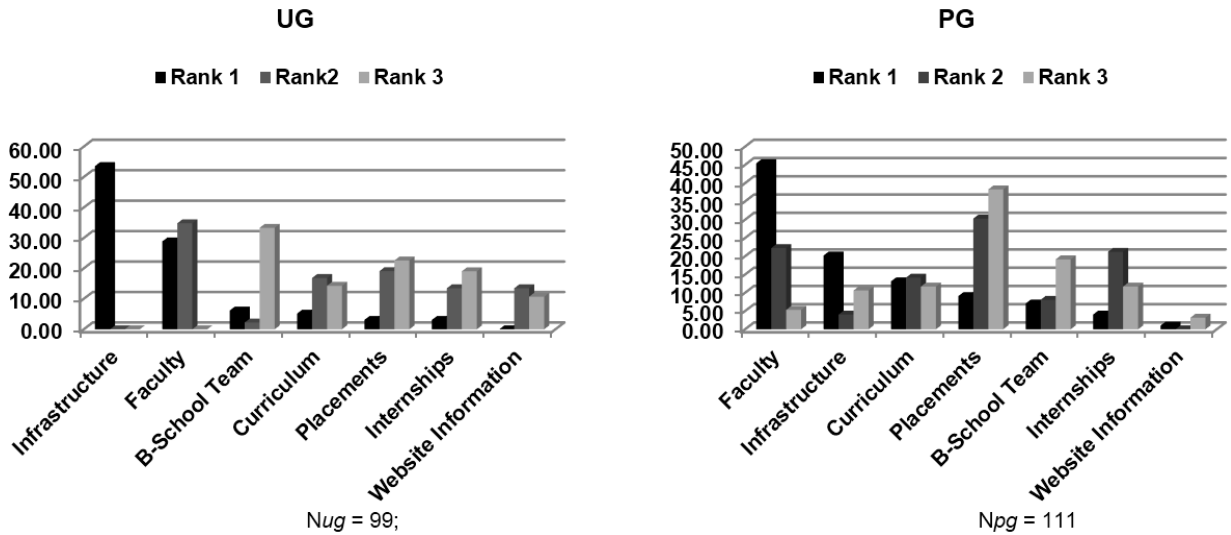


Fig 6: Most important motivational factors

UG students considered infrastructure the most important motivational factor, followed by faculty members and the college team. However, faculty members – ranked number one – and placements which found importance at second and third place were the most important motivational factors for students pursuing the PG courses.

The study wanted to ascertain the awareness levels of PG aspirants regarding their PGDM-C course, some exclusive questions were only asked to the PG students. The inquiry focused on awareness, source of information and details of referrals. It was interesting to find that nearly two-thirds of the respondents were aware about the PGDM-C course.

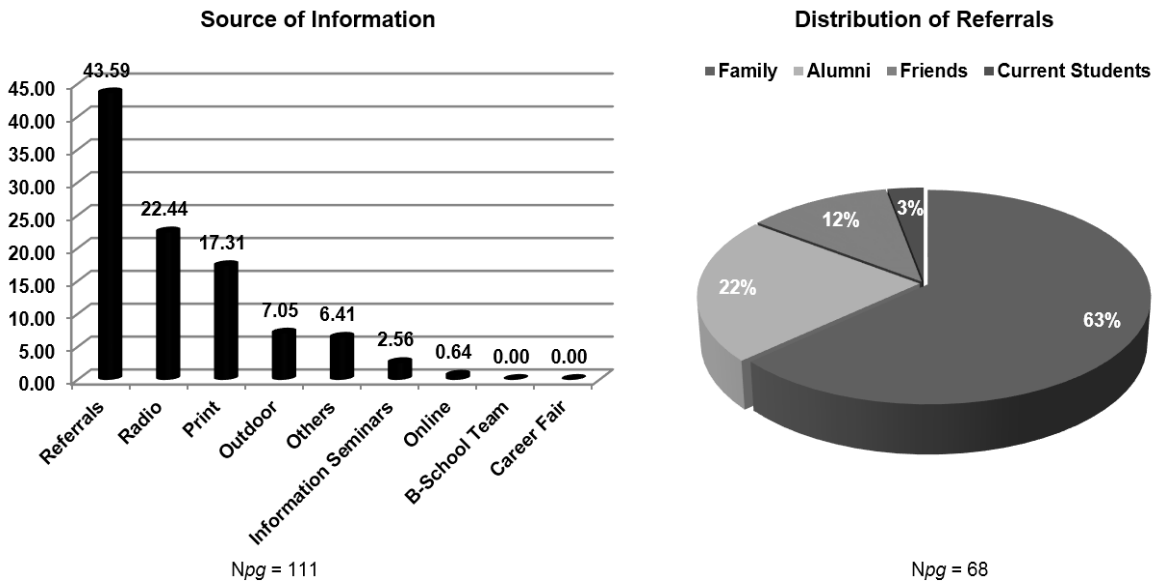


Fig 7: Awareness about PGDM-C course

Referrals were once again the most cited source of information and their distribution was similar to the earlier one. Family were more than two-thirds of the distribution followed by alumni and friends. Surprisingly, radio (22%), print (17%) and

outdoor (7%) media featured heavily as other sources of information for this course. The subsequent questions were asked about the respondents’ social media usage and its demographics.

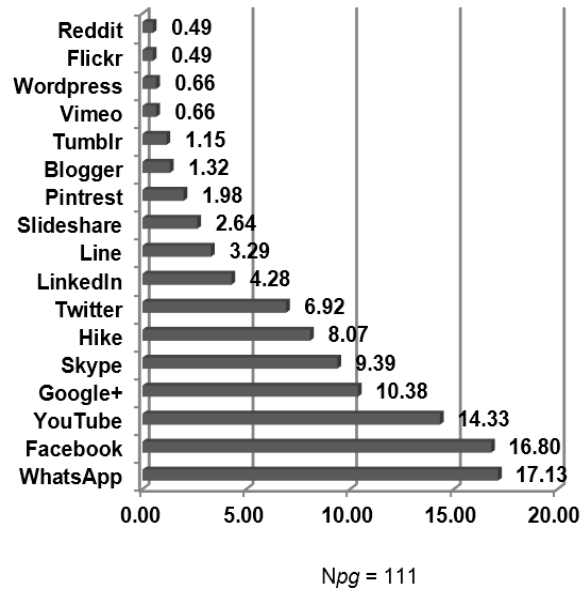
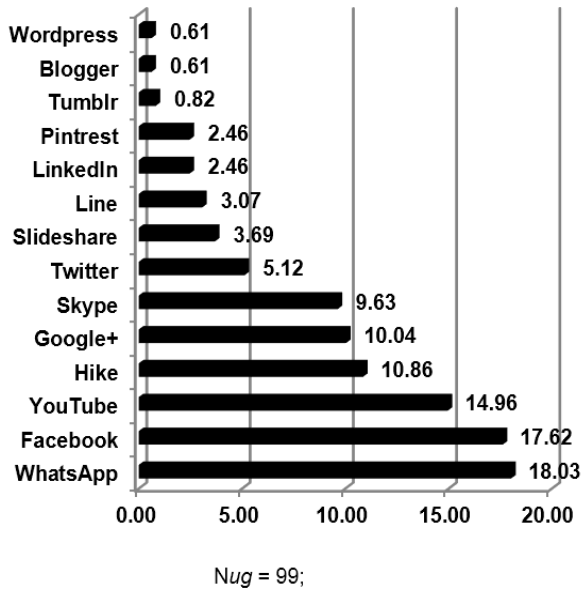


Fig 8: Social media usage

The top three social media platforms were WhatsApp, Facebook and YouTube. The b-school already has presence on these platforms; however given their high usage, it only makes sense to devote additional resources to them in the future. Other applications and websites that were popular among the respondents were Skype, Hike, Google+, Twitter and LinkedIn.

In terms of demographics, the average age of UG students was 18 years and that of PG students was 21 years. Majority of the respondents were males – UG, 62% and PG, 71% students. This trend was also found in schooling medium where more than two-thirds were from English medium – UG, 93% and PG, 71% students. 47% students were from state board and

45% were from central boards - nearly equal proportions in BBA. In the PG courses, state board was the schooling background of more than half (58%) of the respondents. The rest of the students pursuing their masters came from central (27%) and others (15%) boards.

Half of the participants in both UG and PG courses came from Ahmedabad, Gujarat. In the BBA programme, one-third of the students came from other cities of Gujarat and the rest from outside Gujarat. The opposite was the scene for students of the PG programmes where one-third came from outside Gujarat instead. When place of residence was cross-tabulated with different steps in the decision-making process, some fascinating insights were arrived at.

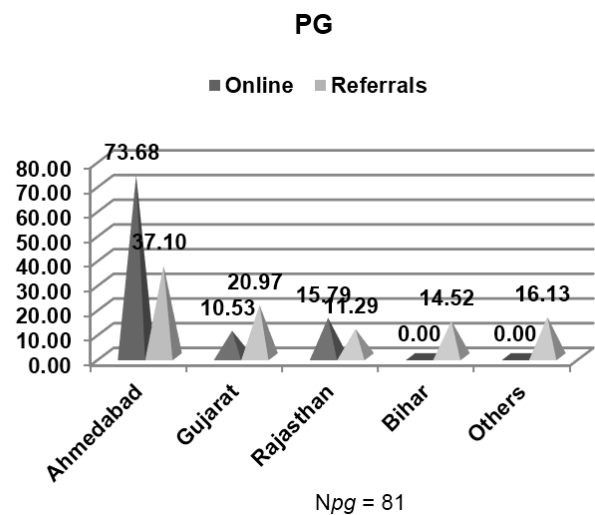
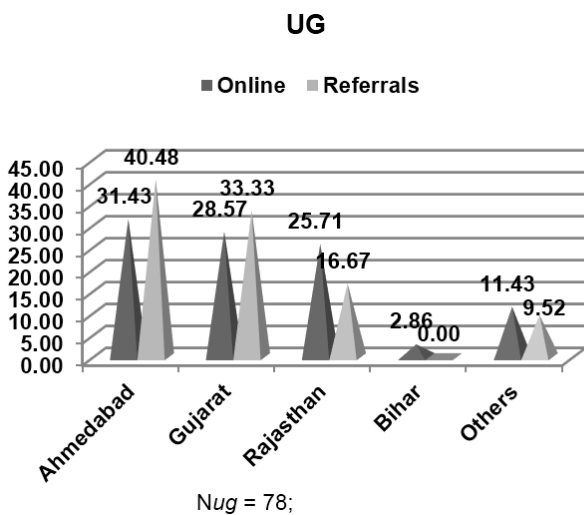


Fig 9: Residence and first point of information

For BBA students from Ahmedabad (41%) and other cities of Gujarat (33%), referrals were the preferred first point of information, while from Rajasthan (26%) this was online. However, for PG students, especially from Ahmedabad (74%)

online was the preferred medium and for those from other cities of Gujarat (21%), referrals were more preferred than online as the first point of information. Distribution of referrals was further studied.

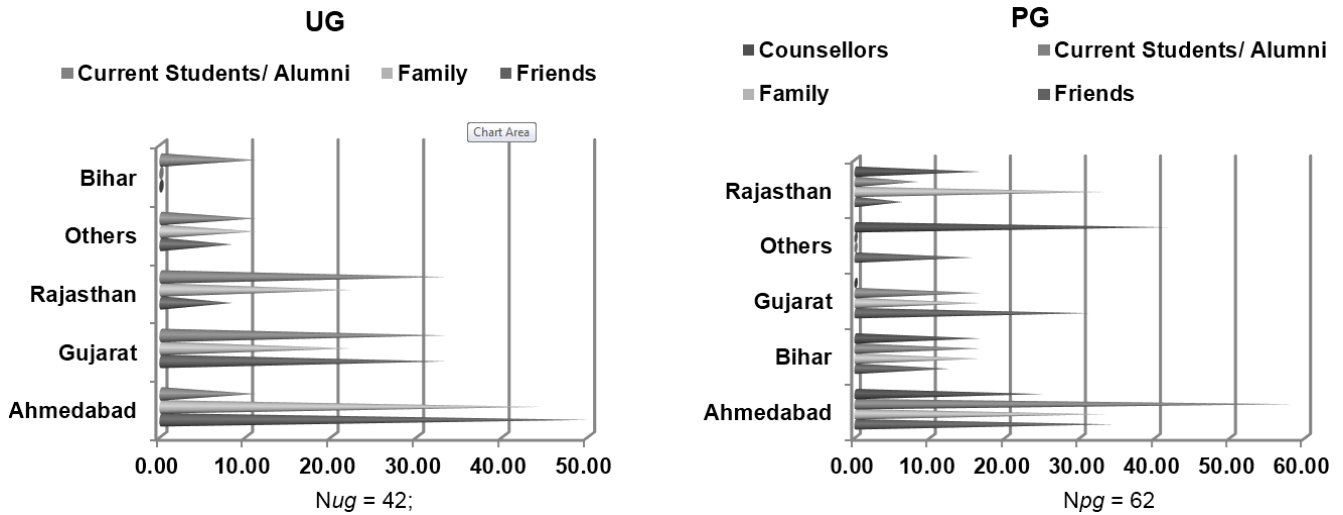


Fig 10: Residence and distribution of referrals

Friends (50%) and family (44%) were the most important points of reference for those residing in Ahmedabad. Friends and current students/ alumni (33% each) were given importance by those from other cities in Gujarat. Current students/ alumni were the most important referral for students

from Rajasthan at the UG level (33%) and at the PG level (58%) as well. Students from Bihar at the PG level favoured current students/ alumni, family and counsellors equally. Those from other cities in Gujarat depended on friends more than anyone else.

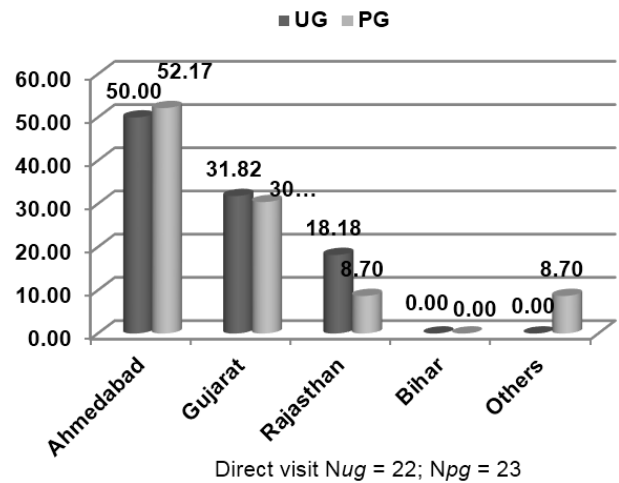
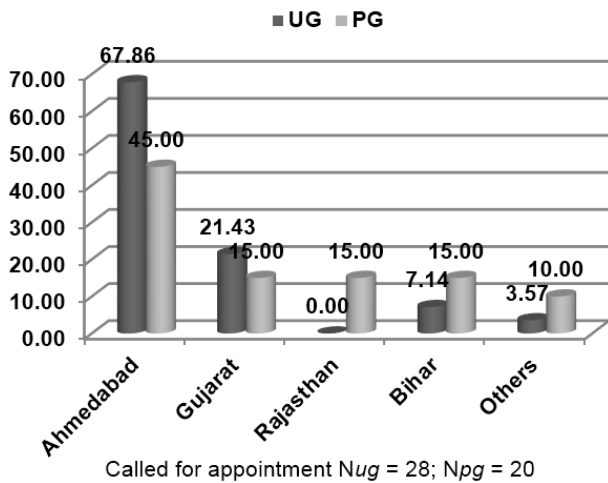


Fig 11: Residence and second step

Nearly two-thirds of UG aspirants from outside the city called and fixed an appointment as their second step in the decision-making process while nearly half in the PG level did the same in case of residents of Ahmedabad. Conversely, direct visit to the campus was more popular as a second step among candidates for masters (52%) and bachelors (50%) from the same residential background. The surprising finding was that students from other cities of Gujarat – nearly one-third each – as well as Rajasthan also dropped in for a direct visit more than calling for an appointment. It seems that their on-campus friends who are current students have motivated them to visit the campus.

**Conclusion**

This study has given a clearer picture of the kind of media preferred for decision-making by students to select an institution of higher education at the bachelors and masters levels. Traditional media, although important for visibility and

presence in the market, are weak influencers in the decision-making process. Unconventional media like word-of-mouth or referrals has a strong influential value. Digital and social media are becoming more important with each passing day. It is imperative that the college has an up-to-date website since that is where most students go to for detailed information about the institution, courses, curricula, faculty members and other motivational factors for decision-making. WhatsApp, Facebook and YouTube are the most preferred social media platforms. These are new media platforms which need extensive presence and continuous engagement for attracting students for admissions, especially in private b-schools. The marketing and admissions teams are effective opinion leaders, which may also sway family and friends who are major opinion leaders themselves. Faculty members and placements along with infrastructure and internships are also important motivational factors.

### Acknowledgement

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