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Abstract: The rapid expansion of social media and instant messaging applications, such as WhatsApp, has transformed how individuals and organizations communicate and engage. This think piece explores the potential of integrating WhatsApp as a customer relationship management (w-CRM) tool within the education sector to foster and sustain long-term relationships among students, teaching staff, and non-teaching staff. By leveraging real-time features and the widespread use of WhatsApp, educational institutions can create a more interactive and dynamic learning environment, benefiting all stakeholders involved. The literature highlights the importance of establishing clear frameworks for mutual engagement and interaction and the potential of w-CRM to improve communication between students' families and educational institutions. There are potential risks associated with the pervasive use of WhatsApp, and call for future research to explore strategies for mitigating these risks while maximizing the benefits of w-CRM in the education sector. Longitudinal studies are recommended to evaluate the long-term impact of w-CRM on stakeholder relationships, student outcomes, and overall institutional performance.

Keywords: social media; WhatsApp; education; customer relationship management (CRM); mobile learning

Introduction

Social media has become integral to modern life, particularly for the generation, often called Generation Next (James and Levin, 2015). As users of social media platforms, individuals can share multimedia content, interact with others, and create their materials (Statista, 2015). The remarkable expansion of social media has led to the growing prominence of social customer relationship management (CRM) systems over traditional ones (Malthouse et al., 2013).

Researching social media-based CRM practices is a burgeoning area of interest for scholars and academics (Ahani et al., 2017). In the existing literature, social CRM is described as utilizing at least one type of social media platform, such as Facebook, Hike, Instagram, LINE, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube, Viber, WeChat, or WhatsApp, to foster and sustain long-term relationships with customers (Ainin et al., 2015). Numerous service firms and institutions worldwide have adopted social media-based CRM practices to address various business challenges (Abedin, 2016). This shift in the business landscape presents significant opportunities for the stakeholders involved.

Education, a crucial service sector, is poised to benefit substantially from advancements in information and technology (Malhotra and Bansal, 2017). It is essential to recognize that education's core function is communicating the right information to the right people at the right time and place (Williams 2022; Ingleby et al. 2022). Innovations in mobile technology have the potential to revolutionize education affordably and effectively. Various smartphone-based instant messaging (IM) applications, particularly WhatsApp, have transformed communication methods (Choudhary et al., 2015). As a result, WhatsApp has become a leading IM application (Hashim et al., 2015) and is highly popular among students and teaching and non-teaching staff (Bouhnik and Deshen, 2014).

However, the utility of WhatsApp is contingent on users' intentions, whether constructive or destructive (Kumar, 2015). Existing research has examined the advantages and disadvantages of using WhatsApp for internal communication in business. However, this think piece takes an exploratory approach, focusing on WhatsApp-customer relationship management (w-CRM) within

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the education context. I argue that WhatsApp has a significant role as a w-CRM tool in strengthening educational relationships.

WhatsApp

WhatsApp is a popular social media platform and is widely used as an instant messaging (IM) tool globally (Bansal and Joshi, 2014). It is one of the most popular smartphone-based social media messenger platforms, boasting over 1.3 billion monthly active users worldwide as of July 2017 (Statista, 2017a). This versatile IM app for smartphone users relies on the internet for content transmission (WhatsApp, 2014). It currently supports sending and receiving various media types, such as text, videos, photos, location, documents, status sharing, and real-time voice and video calls (Karapanos et al., 2016).

WhatsApp's increasing prevalence has transformed how people communicate and share information, opening up new avenues for businesses and organizations to engage with their audiences. The education sector, in particular, can leverage this platform to foster better communication and collaboration among students, teachers, and administrative staff.

Educational institutions can use WhatsApp as a w-CRM tool to strengthen stakeholder relationships by facilitating timely and efficient communication. For instance, schools and colleges can create groups for specific classes, clubs, or departments, allowing instant sharing of announcements, assignments, and updates. Additionally, faculty members can provide academic support, address student queries, and engage in meaningful discussions through the platform, fostering a more interactive and dynamic learning environment.

Moreover, WhatsApp can be an effective feedback channel for educational institutions, allowing students and staff to voice their concerns, opinions, and suggestions, leading to continuous improvement and growth (Williams 2022). This real-time feedback can help institutions swiftly identify and address issues, enhancing stakeholder satisfaction and trust.

The widespread use of WhatsApp as an IM tool offers significant potential for the education sector to harness w-CRM strategies to bolster relationships and improve communication. By embracing this technology, educational institutions can foster a more connected and engaging learning experience, ultimately benefiting all parties involved.

When examining the education sector, I argue that there are three primary groups of individuals involved: students, teaching personnel, and non-teaching personnel. These groups are integral to the functioning and success of any institution or university.

Students

A recent study by Malhotra and Bansal (2017) examined undergraduate and postgraduate students at the College of Veterinary Science, Guru Angad Dev Veterinary and Animal Sciences University in Ludhiana, Punjab, India. They found that over 90% of these students utilized WhatsApp Messenger for academic purposes, such as chatting and sharing images, videos, and documents. However, the study highlighted the potential risks of WhatsApp usage, as it can distract students from engaging in other activities. Despite its addictive nature, Choudhary et al. (2015) argue that WhatsApp, when used strategically, can significantly benefit the education sector. The primary aim of the present study is to investigate how WhatsApp can be integrated with a CRM system for productive use.

The widespread availability of affordable smartphones with internet access has led to the pervasive use of WhatsApp Messenger, particularly among students. Bukaliya and Rupande (2013) found that approximately 95% of students own smartphones and actively use WhatsApp, a finding corroborated by Malhotra and Bansal (2017). Students predominantly use WhatsApp to connect with friends, family, and classmates. Some students also interact with faculty and non-teaching staff through the platform, although this largely depends on their interpersonal relationships and whether they choose to share their WhatsApp numbers. Students generally desire to establish connections with faculty and non-teaching staff, which benefits them academically. However, these staff members often need help sharing their WhatsApp numbers with students for personal reasons. While this

choice is understandable, it is worth noting that WhatsApp could serve as a valuable tool for effectively and efficiently addressing the needs of their student "customers."

Staff

WhatsApp is widely embraced by teaching staff, as it enables greater accessibility and facilitates real-time communication. Educators often prefer to create or join WhatsApp groups comprised of their peers, colleagues, family members, friends, and relatives. Typically, people join groups that align with their social, cultural, and lifestyle preferences and needs—a tendency applicable to everyone. While most faculty members avoid engaging with students on WhatsApp and maintain a degree of separation, the platform can serve as an effective medium for interaction. Aburezeq and Ishtaiwa (2013) found that WhatsApp can improve student-instructor communication. Therefore, fostering interaction between faculty and students on WhatsApp could enhance understanding and relationships, provided that non-teaching staff establishes and manages a clear framework for mutual engagement.

It is common for faculty and students to engage in a blame game, which ultimately harms the institution and the students themselves. Faculty members often criticize students for dishonesty and lack of attendance in classes. When instructors send information about classes, assignments, presentations, events, and other academic activities via email, students may fail to complete the tasks within the stipulated time frame, claiming they have not received the message promptly. Occasionally, students argue that they attempted to discuss the task with the faculty but could not find them in their office. Using the real-time online features of WhatsApp, faculty and students can observe each other's activities, which may help bridge the gap and strengthen their connection (Williams 2023). The challenge is determining how WhatsApp can be employed as a w-CRM to foster and maintain mutually beneficial relationships among all parties.

Admin

Non-teaching staff are vital in the educational sector (Cain, 2015). As central stakeholders connecting students and teaching staff, their primary challenge is creating an educational system and environment that facilitates seamless interaction between faculty and students. Non-teaching staff are also responsible for various essential tasks that contribute to the successful operation of an educational institution, including collecting tuition and examination fees, disbursing salaries, managing examinations, overseeing transportation facilities, performing administrative duties, and maintaining and repairing institutional buildings and infrastructure. Regrettably, limited research is available on the role of non-teaching staff in education.

Non-teaching staff serve as a bridge between students, faculty, and college management, necessitating an efficient communication system to support their efforts. W-CRM, or WhatsApp-based CRM, could be effective, depending on how adeptly non-teaching staff utilize it. WhatsApp has become the most widely accepted social media platform across various age groups, not solely among students (Karthikeyan et al., 2015). Implementing w-CRM would allow non-teaching staff to remain connected with students' families, enabling family members to easily receive feedback about their children. It has been observed that students often need to provide accurate information to their parents about class attendance and exam results. Sometimes, students may even collect tuition fees from their parents without depositing the funds with the institution. Such issues often result in conflicts among students, their families, and faculty members, which non-teaching staff must address. W-CRM can be an effective tool for managing and resolving these situations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the integration of WhatsApp as a w-CRM tool within the education sector holds significant potential for fostering and sustaining long-term relationships among students, teaching staff, and non-teaching staff. This research has explored the constructive application of WhatsApp within the education industry, highlighting its potential to enhance communication and collaboration

among various stakeholders. By leveraging the real-time features of WhatsApp, educational institutions can create a more interactive and dynamic learning environment, ultimately benefiting all parties involved.

The short communication underscores the importance of establishing clear frameworks for mutual engagement and interaction among students, teaching staff, and non-teaching staff. This would ensure that the platform is used effectively to address the needs of the institution's student "customers." Furthermore, the implementation of w-CRM has the potential to improve communication between students' families and educational institutions, allowing for better monitoring of student progress and addressing conflicts that may arise.

By embracing w-CRM and adapting to the ever-evolving technological landscape, educational institutions can enhance communication and relationships, ultimately contributing to their success in a highly competitive and interconnected world. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the potential risks associated with the pervasive use of WhatsApp, such as distraction and privacy concerns. Therefore, future research should explore strategies for mitigating these risks while maximizing the benefits of w-CRM in the education sector. Additionally, longitudinal studies are warranted to evaluate the long-term impact of w-CRM on stakeholder relationships, student outcomes, and overall institutional performance.

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