Digital information marketing initiatives: A study on central universities of northeast India

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to analyze the digital marketing initiatives taken up by the central universities of northeast India through their library websites to promote the use of their information products and services by their clienteles.

Methodology: For the present study, websites of nine central universities of northeast India have been surveyed for evaluation. All features of the websites have been examined. A checklist has been designed for collecting the necessary data. To analyze the results, simple statistical calculations were used.

Findings: It is found that the majority of the library websites (66.69%) have a direct link to the parent website, and they provide general information, such as library rules, library team/staff, about library, library staff directory, timing, library notices, news, and events. With regard to language, 77.77% of the websites used both English and Hindi languages. The majority of them also provide information about services such as OPAC, internet access, circulation, membership, current awareness service, reprographic service, anti-plagiarism, library orientation, and newsletter. However, the University Libraries under study are yet to exploit the full potential of the website as the clienteles are lagging behind the effective use of the same. The use of social networking sites by the libraries, as the study shows, is also not much encouraging.

Research limitations: The paper is limited to nine central university libraries of northeast India. Researchers in the future can take up other problems associated with private and state–owned universities in this regard.

Practical implications: Central universities of northeast India must come forward to improve their library websites featuring other portals and provisions to enhance in marketing their information products and other services in the digital environment to serve the community effectively.

Keywords: Digital marketing, library websites, central universities, northeast India, web 2.0.

1. Background

Marketing is considered an essential part of any academic library, but it is frequently not given enough attention (Higgins, 2017). Marketing of information products and services is an integral part of the management in academic libraries, as a way of increasing user satisfaction and encouraging the usage of resources by current and future potential users (Jestin & Parameswari, 2005). Moreover, "marketing" as a term and as a method still appears to be unfamiliar to many libraries and information workers. A non–profit organization such as a library is primarily engaged in programs rather than product development (Chandratre & Meghana, 2015). Marketing intended for libraries is referred to as "societal marketing" (Adeloye, 2003). In 1969, Kotler and Levy first introduced the concept of marketing for non–profit organizations. Kotler (1985) further explained the marketing concept and strategies for non–profit organizations such as libraries in the book 'Marketing for Non–profit Organizations'. According to him, "a non–profit organization such as a library is engaged in producing services rather than goods" (Jose & Bhat, 2007). The library model as a non–profit organization is evolving gradually. It has now begun treating its users as 'customers.' This may change the size of the library collection to the programs the library provides. Traditionally, marketing has been used primarily to promote library and information services and its diversified resources to ensure maximum usage.

Libraries are no longer the only providers of information in the context of the 21st century (Mi & Nesta, 2006). New technology has presented librarians and information workers with a significant problem in surviving and thriving in the digital age, while providing information searchers with a wide range of alternatives to meet their information demands. The user community has the opportunity to access to online information resources at anytime from anywhere. Therefore, libraries and information centers need to undertake marketing activities and strategies more than ever before (Jain, 2013). The World Wide Web provides libraries with significant opportunity to deliver valuable library and information services to customers as well as access to a wide range of electronic information resources and services. (Chisenga, 1998). A well–structured library website includes search tools (OPAC/Web OPAC), electronic reference services, certain specific features such as virtual bookshelves, customized home pages, and "qualitative and quantitative contents" so that the user can use it as a subject gateway and fulfil their needs (Detlor & Lewis, 2006). "The library community is also using this webpage for displaying their services and product in their institutions" (Arora, 2001).

In today's web–based environment, web–based information management systems have opened up new landscapes. They have become the first–hand pick of every organization due to its diversified features (Rah et al., 2010). Online textbooks, databases, tutorials, and a virtual library containing links to other relevant materials are all available through web–based library services. It offers an one–of–a–kind service that links to full–text publications while also integrating library housekeeping procedures, library regulations, and staff listings for quick assistance (Madhusudhan & Nagabhushanam, 2012). In this way, library websites

are meant to render opportunities for patrons to make use of the information available on the respective websites to accomplish their needs (Detlor & Lewis, 2006). Despite the rise of Web 2.0 apps and social media activity, the library website remains an important marketing tool for a variety of reasons. The usage of library websites has increased tremendously for most libraries in recent years (Potter, 2012).

Working with markets to actualize possible trades for satisfying human needs and wants is what marketing entails. To develop exchanges with target groups and meet their requirements, this process involves activities such as planning, organizing, pricing, marketing, and distribution of products, services, and ideas. When it comes to getting timely information, today's user has a lot of options. The rapid expansion of the internet has changed the scenario of information paradigm. Libraries must sell their services in accordance with the demands of their target market in order to remain relevant. Libraries must treat its users as 'customers,' and recognize that they exist to serve their customers. As a result, a library that understands the marketing idea will be the most accessible to its patrons. (Jose & Bhat, 2007). University Library plays a pivotal role in shaping the higher education system in any country by rendering services to its community. In the current digital era, university libraries are actively involved in the digital marketing of their products and services. In the northeast part of the Indian subcontinent, several universities, including central, state, and private universities, have been established so far. Central universities are playing a leading role in providing higher education and research in the region. There are currently nine central universities in the region. These libraries are playing an important role in providing information through digital marketing. In this regard, the present study attempts to have an understanding on the perspective through evaluation of their websites.

2. Literature review
A significant number of studies are found to be conducted in different parts of the world on digital information marketing as the following brief review shows. The reviewed literature is organized and arranged in chronological order.

Ahmed (2002) in his study on the Arabian Gulf countries, found that almost all libraries provide web-based services to users in some fashion, yet the majority of libraries made little attempt to provide online literacy training, live help, copyright papers, or online user surveys. Detlor & Lewis (2006) have pointed out that websites can provide academic libraries with the power and weaponry they need to beat competition websites and reclaim the trust of students, professors, and researchers. Kaur (2009) examined 22 library websites based on criteria developed from the extant literature and initial website investigation. She found that academic libraries are lacking in their promotional activities, and library websites are not fully utilized as a marketing tool and an enabler to reach out to the community to promote services and collections. Kaba (2011) analyzed 29 academic library websites of the United Arab Emirates and found that websites are not fully utilized for marketing library resources and services.

In their paper, Kaushik & Arora (2012) pointed out that the library websites are also used by the library community to display their services and goods at their institutions. They emphasized that web-based library services are updated versions of current services, whereas technology-driven library services are new services. Madhusudhan & Nagabhushanam (2012) have stated that websites are essential for information marketing, it provides online textbooks, databases, tutorials, and virtual library linkages to other relevant resources as just a few of the web-based library services. It provides a one-of-a-kind service that allows users to link to full-text publications while also including library housekeeping, rules, and staff lists. In a study, Jain (2013) revealed that in a traditional environment, marketing Library and Information Services (LIS) was difficult. Librarians and information workers now have additional channels to market library and information services thanks to social media (SM). Siddike & Kiran (2015) studied 16 academic library websites and concluded that academic library websites are underutilized for marketing library products and services, and the vast majority of libraries failed to offer online literacy classes, live help, copyright papers, or online user surveys. Abbas et al. (2016) found that university library websites in Pakistan are not completely developed in terms of using them as a marketing tool because of the lack of information, and absence of a collaborative interface with users enabling them to directly contact with end-users and get feedback for further advancement in the technical development of the library. Rahoo et al. (2018) identified the use of Web 2.0 tools for promoting library services and resources by the libraries of Higher Education Institutes of Sindh and stated that Facebook, Twitter, Wikis, RSS, LinkedIn, Blogging, YouTube and email groups are the web 2.0 tools considered appropriate for promoting different library services and resources in the university libraries. The study made by Baquee (2019) has found that in terms of library marketing, websites are not user-friendly enough. The essential requirement of libraries is a user orientation program, services for differently-abled users, research support, inter-library loan, discovery services, and so on, to which more attention should be paid. On the other hand, e-journals and OPAC/WEB-OPAC libraries have been given a higher ranking on library websites. On the other side, the website is frequently underutilized, and its potential is never realized.

Mahdiuon et al. (2020) pointed out that libraries must emphasize on marketing its services in regular basis with the application of Internet and Information Communication Technologies (ICTs). It is needed to apply the advantages of Web 2.0 tools in libraries to improve access to its users and also to promote information services. Several studies focused on the significance of improving library services through the use of Web 2.0 tools such as blogs, wikis, RSS (Really Simple Syndication), podcasts, and social networking sites (SNSs). Baber et al. (2020) studied marketing features on university library websites in Pakistan and examined 53 main (Central) library websites of public and private sector universities and found that the overall situation of university library websites in terms of marketing features is not good.

The above review has revealed the importance and usage of the website for the digital marketing of information in academic libraries of the university systems. Moreover, websites are not enough, and some libraries use Web 2.0 features to market their information by attaching the social networking sites in the homepage.

3. Objectives of the study
The present study has been taken up with the following objectives:

- To examine the features of the existing library websites of the universities under study.
- To assess the visibility of the library website, provision of languages used, the use of social networking sites, etc., in the websites.
- To analyze the marketing initiatives taken up by them to promote the use of their resources and services.
- To find out possibilities to improve the websites.

4. Methodology
For the present study, a wide range of literature has been reviewed, and a checklist has been designed based on the information obtained from previous research done in this area of study. The study has been conducted based on primary data collected (during 15th September to 15th October, 2020) from Nine Universities (see Table 1) of northeast India. Websites of these universities are the main sources of primary data in this study. Simple mathematical calculations using Microsoft Excel have been employed for the analysis of the collected data. The nine universities under study along with their URLs are given below:

Table 1: Central universities in northeast India

Sl. No	Name of the University	Name of the State	Websites
1	Assam University	Assam	www.aus.ac.in
2	Manipur University	Manipur	www.manipuruniv.ac.in
3	Mizoram University	Mizoram	www.mzu.edu.in
4	North–eastern Hill University	Meghalaya	www.nehu.ac.in
5	Nagaland University	Nagaland	www.nagalanduniversity.ac.in
6	Sikkim University	Sikkim	www.cus.ac.in
7	Rajiv Gandhi University	Arunachal Pradesh	www.rgu.ac.in
8	Tezpur University	Assam	www.tezu.ernet.in
9	Tripura University	Tripura	www.tripurauniv.in

5. Data analysis and interpretations

The data collected using the said checklist is analyzed, and the trends and patterns are interpreted as below.

5.1 Visibility of the library website

Visibility in a website is defined as the availability and existence of a direct or indirect link from the institutional home page. Direct links appear on the university website's main page, whereas indirect links appear on the university website's home page but are frequently found under facilities, services, and other categories. (Kaba, 2011). In the meantime, no link means the library has its website besides the main university website. Normally, the link available on the home page of a website is more visible than the other. The present study shows the following pattern.

Table 2: Website visibility

Sl. No	Criteria	Number (N=9)	Percentage
1	Direct link (on homepage)	6	66.67
2	Indirect link (under services, Facilities, etc.)	3	33.33
3	No link (separate domain)	0	0
	Total	9	100

Table 2 shows that six library websites (66.67%) out of the nine universities understudy had direct link, three (33.33%) has an indirect link under services and facilities, and there is no direct link.

5.2 Language of the webpage

Hindi and English are the main languages used in the web pages. Figure 1 shows that two (22%) out of the nine websites are presented in English language, while other seven (78%) use both English and Hindi languages.
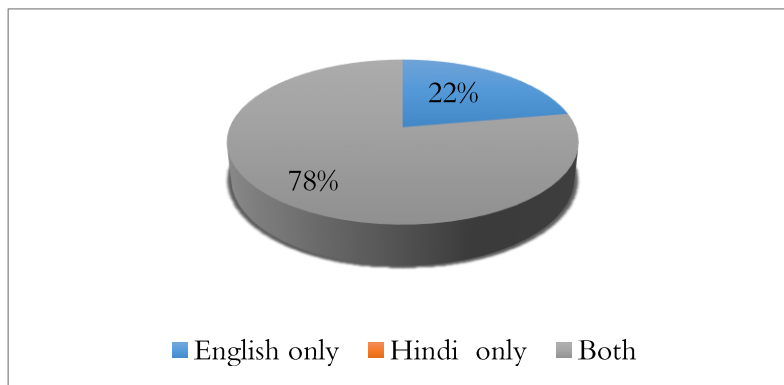

Figure 1: Language of the websites

5.3 General information

The general information provided by the websites are shown in Figure 2. It is found that out of nine websites understudy, six (66.67%) provide library rules, five (55.56%) provide the timing of the library. FAQ options are available in four (44.44%) of the websites; library statistics are available in two (22.22%) websites; library notices, news and events are available in five (55.56%) websites; information about library staff, about library, library directory is provided by six (66.67%) of the websites respectively, and floor guide is available in three (33.33%) of the library websites.
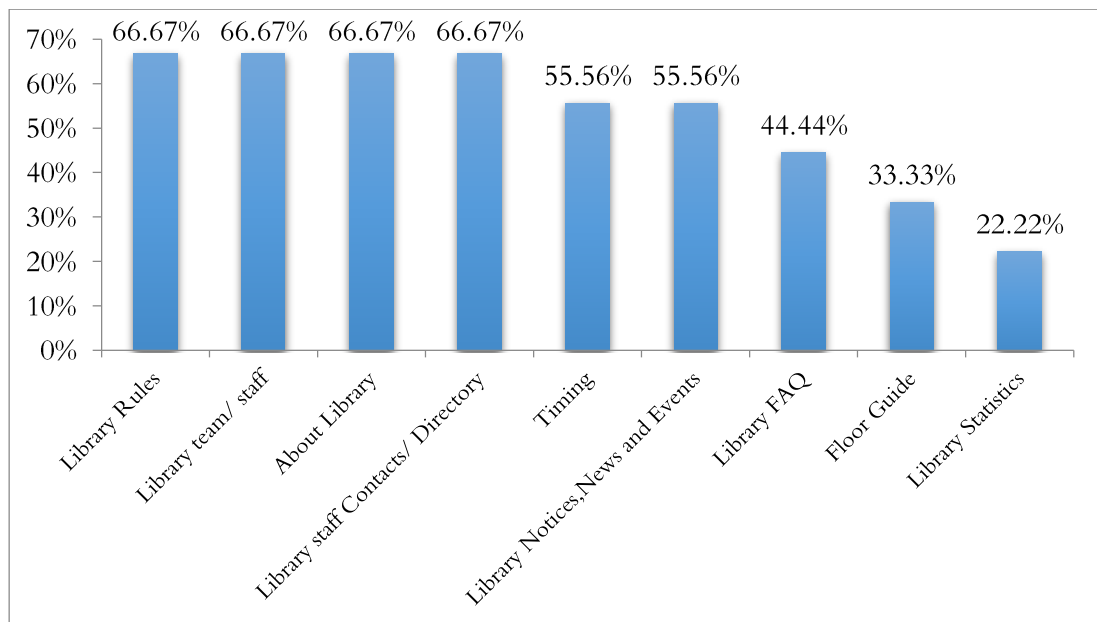

Figure 2: General information of library websites of central universities of northeast India

5.4 Services provided by the websites

Library services refer to the services given by a library for the use of books and the distribution of information to satisfy the needs of its users. (Hatua, 2015). The criteria under services include Circulation, Current awareness service, New Arrivals, Reprographic service, Reference service, Document delivery services, Institutional repository, Anti-plagiarism, Reading room, Internet access, OPAC, Email alert, Interlibrary Loan, Library Orientation, Newsletter, Membership, RFID, and Research Support.

Figure 3 shows that out of the total 17 services criteria, OPAC is one of the essential services a library can provide. Out of the total websites, 08 library websites (88.89%) provide OPAC service, followed by an internet access service with 07 websites (77.78%) that provide the service. It is also seen that 06 (66.67%) of the library websites provide circulation and membership service through websites, respectively. Services such as current awareness

service, reprographic service, anti–plagiarism, library orientation, and newsletter is provided by 05 (55.56%) of the websites, 04 of the library websites (44.44%) provide services such as reference service, institutional repository and email alert, three websites 03 (33.33%) provide document delivery services, interlibrary loan and research support, the lowest number of the website 02 (22.22%) provide new arrivals, and reading room respectively.
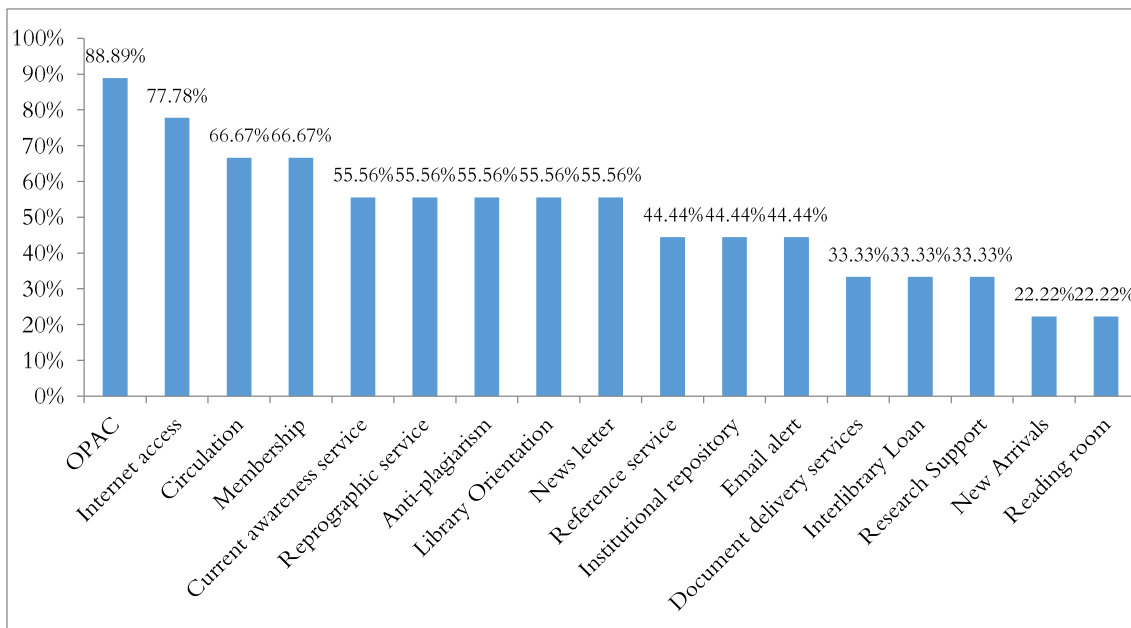

Figure 3: Showing services provided by the websites

5.5 Social Networking Sites (SNS)

Social networking sites are a useful tool for marketing information and services, and they give insight into a new way of marketing libraries. The same is also pointed out by Xia (2009) that libraries may effectively expand their offerings to more consumers by using Facebook Groups as well as other appropriate social networking platforms (Xia, 2009). Data analyzed in Figure 4 show that Facebook is the most widely used SNS by Library websites with five library websites, 55.56% of the 09 libraries under study are employing Facebook, it is followed by Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram with 02 of the nine libraries (22.22%) are using it.

6. Findings and discussions

The findings of the study reveal certain clues on the following aspects:

- The study of the visibility of websites of the universities has shown that the majority of the library website (66.67%) have a direct link to the parent website. For library website to be more visible, website should use direct link. A direct link means it is easier to find,
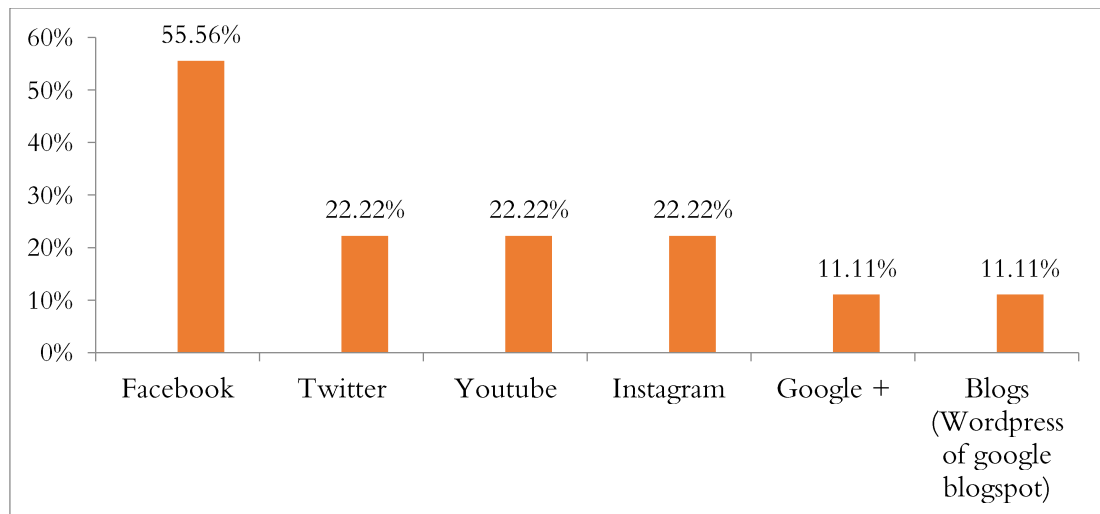
Figure 4: Social Networking Sites (SNS) used by universities

and indirect link is one or more click away from the homepage and is relatively less visible.

- The language of a website is an essential ingredient of a website in India. Even though most Central Universities are English medium, some students and Library users are of Hindi or regional language background. The study has found that the majority of the library websites (78%) use dual language (English and Hindi).

- General information as provided widely by the websites understudy mainly includes library rules, library team/ staff, about library, library staff contacts/ directory, etc. These are beneficial content playing an essential role in the digital marketing of the information products and services of the libraries.

- Information about services is widely visible with OPAC, Internet Access, and circulations services are among the most commonly provided services visible on universities' websites.

- Social networking sites are a boon for the marketing of information in the Digital era. In this regard, Facebook is the most widely used SNS, with (55.56%) Library websites providing it in the region.

7. Conclusion

The areas of libraries that require marketing are OPAC/WEB-OPAC, users orientation program, circulation, membership, current awareness service, inter-library loan, anti-plagiarism, services for differently-abled users, research support, discovery services, etc. and resources such as e-journals, archives, consortia, e-books, e-encyclopedias, institutional repositories, e-journals, and open sources databases. These can be marketed digitally using websites and social networking sites. However, the study discovered that university library websites are not effectively built for marketing, and that effective marketing requires strategy

in this regard. On the positive side, most library websites contain useful information; nonetheless, this is insufficient, and the websites might have included more thorough content. Social media are underused as Facebook is the most used SNS. Library websites are hardly using Social Networking Site such as Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. The websites of the central universities of the northeast region of India have to utilize more SNS through which digital information marketing can be done in a more effective way.

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