

Social Media as an Enabler in Extending Higher Education Services in India

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ABSTRACT

In the present age of extreme disconnectedness and distractions in the physical world, social networking sites in the virtual world have become indispensable channels for human interactions. While the physical world imposes worldly boundaries of acquaintance, location and time and on us, the online virtual world disposes the same by giving us the power to connect with anyone, anywhere and anytime.

Communication via the social media platforms in the virtual world is far more instant and cost effective than in the physical world. Around three billion people across the globe are actively using online social networking sites to connect, communicate and collaborate.

With more and more adults linking to social media every passing day, the online platform has morphed into the omnipotent way the 21st century interconnects and communicates. Quite expectedly, higher education institutions around the world have also started acknowledging the power of social media in disseminating knowledge and quality services to their patrons. The current usage of social media in educational space, however, remains more or less partial, ad hoc and experimental. To bridge the divide between urban educational centres of excellence and remotely located students in India, it is necessary that tapping into students' social media addiction be considered in an objective manner to create value for students and stakeholders.

Through extensive review of existing literature on the use of social media in international higher education universe, this paper attempts to –

- a. *Create a better understanding of social media tools available today*
- b. *Present a conceptual framework for optimal social media usage in higher education institutions in India to maximize learner participation and institutional success*

Keywords – Higher Education, Social Media, Social Networking, Accessible Education, Virtual Libraries

I INTRODUCTION

“Man is a wanting animal and rarely reaches a state of complete satisfaction except for a short time. As one desire is satisfied, another pops up to take its place. When this is satisfied, still another comes into the foreground, etc. It is a characteristic of the human being throughout his whole life that he practically always desires something” (Maslow, 1970).

Homo sapiens are the only species whose quest for creating something new and more valuable has ever remained unsated. Information, one of the fundamental building blocks of human civilization, has been an area of extreme experimentation and importance for humans. They have always attempted to make information more accessible, understandable, accurate and timely. Information, therefore, has gone through numerous broadcasting transitions since its origin. It has moved from verbal communication to print propagation, from print propagation to electronic dissemination, and from electronic dissemination to digital transmission. By virtue of its unbelievably fast and cost effective internet services, digital technology has completely revolutionized the process of collating, synthesizing, storing and promulgating information.

Of all the internet services available to people today, social media enjoys the maximum human involvement. According to the recent social media statistics furnished by Statista, around three billion active users (Statista, 2018) around the world use social media sites to connect with friends and family, form groups/forums on the basis of commonality of interests, receive and share real time information, make friends, voice ideas and concerns, give reviews and seek assistance, find employees and employers, advertise and sell products to targeted segments, and above all to entertain themselves.

Social Media sites have created a sub-biome within our biological biome. Ever since Time Magazine declared it as the 'Person of the Year' in 2006, Social Media has completely revolutionised the global digital technology space. The one 'outstanding' feature that has acted as a catalyst in the exuberant growth of social media across the globe is 'mass socialisation', the potential to harness the power of the collective actions of online user communities rather than individual users (Shirky, 2008).

Statista, an online site reporting social media usage across the globe, has projected that by 2019, there will be around 260 million social media users in India, up from close to 168 million in 2016 (Statista, 2018). With 22% of its population hooked to social media, majority being the young adults, India has become the epicentre of social media activity in the world.

As with great power appears the necessity for utmost diligence, one of the key questions that faces us in terms of social media adoption and usage in India is – Is Indian youth using the social media responsibly? Is social media adding any value to their lives or is it just a source of further distraction and addiction? A study conducted on internet addiction among Indian students (16-18 years old) answers the question by projecting that dramatic increase in the use of social media in the recent years has led to pathological and addictive use (Nalwa & Anand, 2004).

Though addiction of any kind breeds more disaster than benefit, social media addiction among youth has the capacity to yield substantial value if higher education institutes assume more power over the highly potent social media platform. The use of social media by urban centres of learning can support innovative teaching methods associated with concepts like syndicated content, learning as a creative activity, peer-to-peer learning, creation of personal learning environments, and non-formal education. Social media can be used as a powerful tool by teachers to help students become more actively involved in their education.

Current social media atmosphere in India is presenting ample opportunities to the academia to create a pool of innovative ideas and generate quality content through a free flow of knowledge. Prudent adoption of social media by educational institutions can change the role of teachers to that of facilitators for gaining knowledge rather than dispensers of knowledge. The resulting social transformation between the teacher and the student will strengthen the bond of creative collaboration and widen the spirit of higher learning, thereby magnifying the outcome of the entire education system.

We have reviewed existing literature on the use of Social Media in international higher education universe. Books, reports, statistical analyses, academic journals, online news articles, blogs etc. on the subject have been used as the basis to build the insights presented in this paper. This paper attempts to create a better understanding of the diverse set of social media tools available today and to project their optimal use in educational environment. Through this paper, we hope to inform institutions of higher education in India about various social media practices prevalent in educational institutions in other parts of the world that can be used to tap into the growing student base and create knowledge and profit based synergies

The first section of the paper traces the roots of Social Media. The second section highlights the ways in which Social Media is currently being used in extending regular classroom programs globally. This sections also presents ways to fine-tune the use of Social Media in higher education institutions in India. The third section of the paper examines the cases of current and prospect usage of social media in ensuring success of library services in India. The fourth section briefly presents the conceptual framework to weave in social media tools in the educational framework. The fifth and the final section summarizes the findings presented in the previous sections and presents the concluding remarks.

II THE SOCIAL MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

2.1 Social Media and Social Networking

The term ‘social media’ can be defined as a new type of shared media that is participatory in nature. It gives everyone an opportunity to participate and contribute in the creation, organization, distribution and use of information. Social media lets everyone share content with people and gives the power to people to re-share the original content with their online connections (Cohn, Michael, 2011).

Social media, the vehicle for interactive communication, has an important sub-category – social networking. Social networking is a social assembly of people who are joined by a common interest. Powell defines social networking as “a community in which individuals are somehow connected through friendship, values, working relationships, idea and so on” (Powell, 2009).

Dasgupta and Dasgupta define social networking as “A set of people who are part of the organization or society who collaborate, share their thoughts and create groups of people with similar behaviour or responsibilities, through social networking platform” (Dasgupta & Dasgupta, 2012).

Boyd and Ellison define social networking sites as “Web-based services that allow individuals to: (a) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system; (b) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a

connection; and (c) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site” (Boyd & Ellison, 2008).

One of the most important definitions of social networking comes from Farkas (Farkas, 2007), who defines social networking as social software which facilitates: (a) communication, collaboration, and community building; (b) syndication, sharing, reuse, or remixing; and (c) learning from and capitalizing on others’ behaviour and knowledge.

2.2 Types of Social Media

There are hundreds of social sites today and there is no well-defined way to categorize all of them. On the basis of common usage, social media sites are generally sliced into three sections: (a) Social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, Google+, Myspace etc.); (b) Microblogging sites (e.g. Twitter, Tumblr etc.); and (c) Social bookmarking sites (e.g. Diigo, Delicious etc.)

In addition to the three main categories listed above, there are image sharing social sites (e.g. Instagram, Flickr etc.), video sharing social sites (e.g. YouTube, Vimeo etc.), professional interest social sites (e.g. LinkedIn etc.), biblio-social sites (e.g. GoodReads, LibraryThing etc.), and the list continues. One of the major challenges in clear classification of social sites is their dynamic nature, which makes social sites prone to crossing and sub-crossing categories. Twitter, for instance, was originally a microblogging site but now it allows people to share videos like YouTube using Vine Videos. Twitter, in this case, has clearly crossed the microblogging and video sharing categories.

Fig. 1 highlights the another categorical view of various social media services: (a) Text searching (folksonomies); (b) Interactive sharing; (c) Media sharing; and (d) Content delivery



Fig. 1: Categorical view of social media services

2.3 Social Media Usage

Social media is the fastest populating sub-biome in our biological biome. According to eMarketer Report (2013), The number of social network users around the world rose from 1.47 billion in 2012 to 1.73 billion in 2013, an 18% increase. In 2017, the global social network audience totalled 2.55 billion. Pew Research Center report (2018) highlights that in the United States alone, 88% of young adults (18- to 29-year olds) use social media sites daily. The same report shows that 71% of college students use Facebook and 74% of college students use YouTube on a daily or weekly basis.

According to a more recent report from Statista, there are around 3.03 billion across social media users around the globe. The social media is adding a new user to its list of active users every 15 seconds. Consequently, the number of social media users has increased by 121 million from June 2017 to September 2017. According to the same report, India is the fastest growing country in terms of social media usage. In July 2017, there were around 250 million Facebook users in India (more than any other country, including the United States).

Fig. 2 below presents important information on the use of social media in the world.



Fig. 2: Social Media Statistics – 2018 (Statista, 2018), (100 Social Media Statistics You Must Know [2018], 2017)

III SOCIAL MEDIA IN EXTENDING HIGHER EDUCATION

3.1 Review of Literature

In order to gather knowledge on the emerging social networking services to share information in education, literature on the related topic has been reviewed which also highlights the use of social media in education.

According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), Social Networking which started as a hobby for some computer literature people, has become important tool for learners all over the world to share information. Ajjan and Hartsthorne (2008) in their findings indicate that faculty members felt that web 2.0 technologies could improve student's learning, their interaction with faculty and with other peers, their writing abilities and their satisfaction with the course.

UNESCO (2008) in their report indicated that an astonishing number of students had started using social networking technologies for educational purpose. Foulger et al. (2009) state that innovative digital communication tools surpass traditional means of social interaction. Roblyer et al. (2010); Moran et al. (2010) found that social media sites are valuable tools for collaborative learning and sharing. Ping and Issa (2011) expressed that Web 2.0 technologies may encourage better interaction amongst students and between students and the tutor. Findings of Baruch and Hershkovitz (2012) suggest that social networking sites promote knowledge sharing, thereby facilitating informal learning.

3.2 Existing social media practices in global higher education institutions

Social networking offers umpteen number of benefits to the student community. It helps them develop their communication skills, express their views without inhibitions, enhance their technical skills, increase their participation in group projects etc. It helps in reducing stress and increasing satisfaction level among students. It allows each student, both slow and quick, to study at his own pace thereby helping the student to understand and retain the subject better.

Keeping in view the benefits of using social media in education, teachers and lecturers around the world are using social networking sites to communicate with students and their parents (Suraweera, et al., 2010). They are using social networking platform to:

- Create chatroom forums to extend the conventional classroom beyond its four walls.
- Create discussion threads to initiate and facilitate discussion on varied academic topics.
- Post assignments, tests and quizzes.
- Post alerts about important deadlines.
- Post answers to students' queries and concerns.
- Assist students with homework and assignments outside of the classroom setting.

- Create student blogging space to help students improve their writing skills.
- Showcase student work via pictures and videos (to appreciate their work and encourage further participation).
- Connect with students' parents online.
- To seek feedback from and provide feedback to students and their parents.

3.3 Social media as an enabler is extending higher educational programs in India

Social networking services hold the potential to become useful tools that can trigger the revolution in the field of education in India, if we channelize their usage in the right direction to meet the requirements of knowledge and information exchange. "These tools have the capability to exchange information at a lightning speed, extend learning out of classrooms, and improve and develop education both at the level of students and teachers" (<http://www.edweb.net>). Fig. 3 summarises the impact of using social media services to enhance the process of learning.

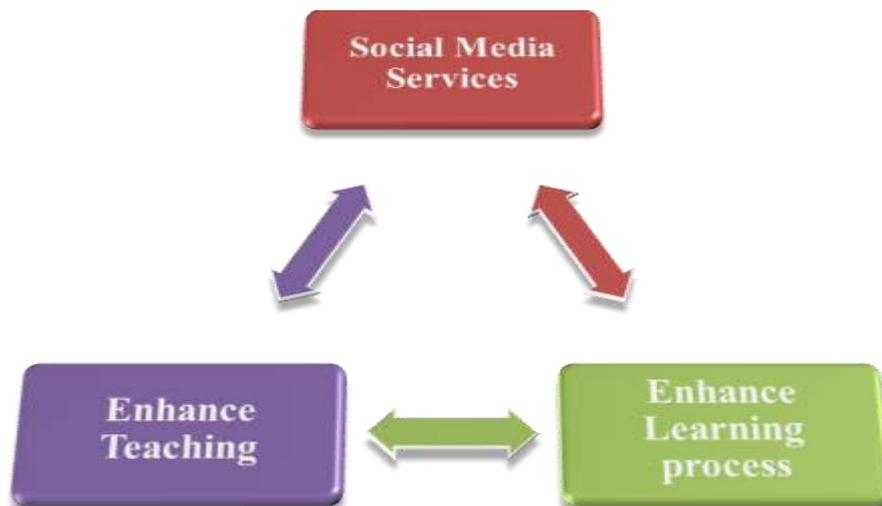


Fig. 3: Social Media in Enhancing Learning Process

In order to connect with the vast majority of urban as well as remotely located students, teachers in India need to make a transition from traditional formal learning approach to modern informal learning approach. Modern informal learning approach based on the use of social media in education will help make education in India far more accessible, personalized, creative and collaborative. Fig. 4 below presents a comparison between traditional and modern approached to learning.

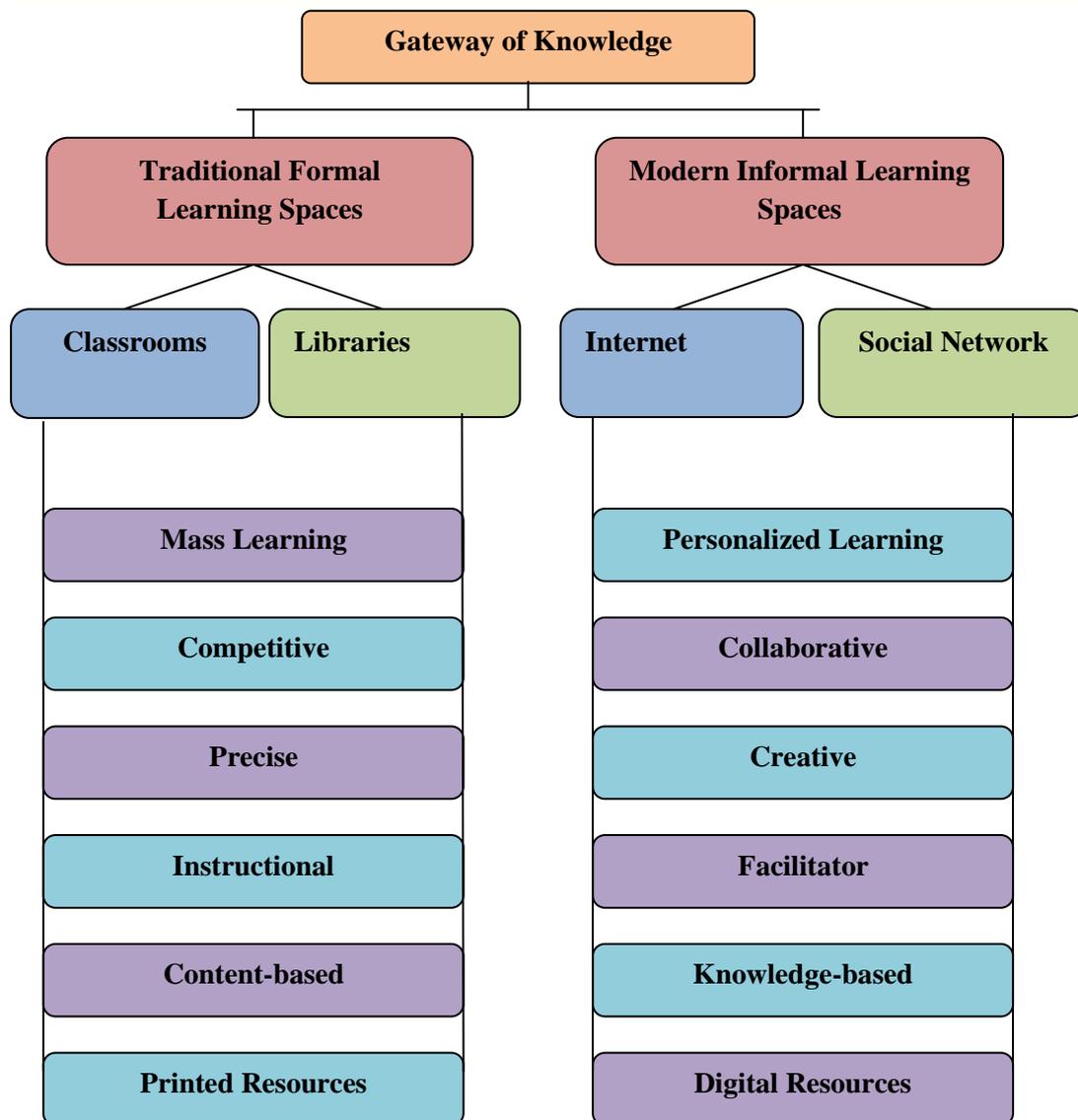


Fig. 4: Traditional Learning vs. Modern Learning Approaches

There are tremendous educational benefits of using social media for teachers and students. Through the use of social media services like social networking, teachers can create and participate in the events that make a difference for their students and their institutions. Additionally, the administrators and staff members can also participate in professional development programs without leaving their offices/places of work. The use of social networking services can facilitate the teaching/learning process by sharing information in ways enumerated below:

- Teachers can create groups of their students according to the courses they teach.
- Teachers can post assignments for students and students can submit their homework and view their grades and any comments the teachers may have posted about their assignments.
- Teachers can post lecture videos on platforms like YouTube to help students access the lecture outside the class.

- Teachers and students can create calendar of events and assignments as required. Alerts can be created to keep everyone posted on the upcoming deadlines.
- Teachers and students can create digital libraries for their important files for easy access.
- Teachers can post messages on the “Wall” and allow students to ask questions/ seek clarifications.
- Teachers can post quiz programs for their students which can be attempted by them.
- Teachers can connect with their colleagues and students online. They can form joint discussion groups to share ideas about lesson plans, teaching strategies and project development, etc.
- Teachers can create parent accounts to allow parents to know their children’s assignments, grades and also send alerts to parents about college/school events, missed assignments and other important messages.
- Teachers can use social media sites like Facebook and Twitter to showcase students’ work.
- Teachers can create connection forums to share ideas with and receive feedback on various teaching methodologies from teachers in India as well as abroad.

IV SOCIAL MEDIA IN EXTENDING LIBRARY SERVICES

4.1 Review of Literature

Academic researchers and authors describe a library as a collection of information resources with the specific purpose of obtaining, preserving, and making available recorded knowledge (Ayiah & Kumah, 2011). The effectiveness of a library in delivering its responsibilities is determined by its efficiency in providing relevant information to its users in a timely manner.

Earlier, the librarians could conduct their activities and deliver their responsibilities within the high and soundproof walls of the library building, but the scenario has changed today. With the wildfire-like changes in public communication in the recent times, it has become indispensable for the librarians across the globe to adopt as well as to adapt to digital online technology as a means of service delivery. Mansor and Idris (2010) in their study indicate that most of the librarians have positively accepted and brought the idea of web 2.0 applications.

As more and more people are switching to social networking sites, it has become crucial for the librarians to tap into various social media platforms to connect with their existing as well as prospect users. Khan and Bhatti (2012) recommended the use of Facebook, Wikis, LinkedIn, Blogging, YouTube online social networking services for servicing clients and marketing library services. Ayiah and Kumah, in their research paper on the use of social networking tools in libraries (2011), note that social networking tools add the elements of timeliness and cost effectiveness to the existing service delivery model in libraries.

4.2 Existing social media practices in global higher education institutions

Libraries acquire, store and disseminate information across the entire spectrum of education. Social networking services have the potential to mobilize the library services among students, teachers and professionals. Presence

of libraries in social networking software makes the library more visible and vibrant for virtual access of information. The user can now discover as well as access knowledge spontaneously.

In many libraries across the globe, web 2.0 technology is being used to extend virtual library services to facilitate the faculty as well as the students. “The user is connected to explicit information through published and hosted information sources by professionals and information bodies” (Chakravarty and Chopra, 2013).

Interlinking network services among libraries/information organizations, the faculty, and the students is becoming increasingly prevalent as libraries can build their user communities online for sharing tacit knowledge by means of people-to-people communication. The library collection is thus becoming more interactive and fully accessible. The web 2.0 tools like wikis, blogs, podcasts are being employed successfully in various libraries to build reference resources, provide user friendly platform for queries and suggestions, provide instant clarifications to users, highlight new additions/resources, enhance indexing, and market library services etc. Some of the leading international universities have, in fact, established social networking walls, which are mostly used to:

- Announce library programs/events.
- Share guidelines on using basic search tools.
- Build FAQ’s on use of library.
- Paste new arrivals on the wall and promote existing and new content.
- Send brief updates to patrons.
- Interact with other libraries.
- Offer and request for book reviews.
- Seek feedback to improve and enhance library services.

4.3 Social media as an enabler is extending library services in India

With 356 million 10-24 year olds, India has the world’s largest youth population (India has world’s largest youth population: UN report, 2014). Youth constitute around 28% percent of India’s population, which is a rare scenario. 2014 UN report says, “Never before have there been so many young people. Never again is there likely to be such potential for economic and social progress. How we meet the needs and aspirations of young people will define our common future” (India has world’s largest youth population: UN report, 2014).

With the alarming penetration of social networking services in youth’s lives in India, social networking has become one of the major communication tools to ‘connect’ with the Indian youth. Use of social media by librarians to connect with their users has already become a mainstream thing in various countries. A study from 2012 (Chu & Du, 2012) showed that 71% of the surveyed libraries in Asia, North America and Europe were using social media tools and an additional 13% were getting ready for social media adoption. Indian libraries have also started making way for the inclusion of social media tools but the uptake, so far, has been relatively slow and experimental.

To make the most of the social media boom, libraries in India must start using social media services to: (a) enhance teaching and learning; (b) manage collections; (c) promote library services; and (d) connect with libraries/librarians within as well as outside India.

Social media services can be used in Indian libraries to:

- Reach the maximum number of users (students as well as teachers) in their homes simultaneously, thereby tackling the space and time constraints
- Guide users on the use of library facilities and services
- Seek feedback on the library and its services (for evaluation purposes)
- Publicize library services and events (for greater visibility)
- Encourage support and collaboration in building academic collections and research content
- Connect with other librarians to keep abreast of library best-practices and industry news

Librarians in India can use various social networking sites likes Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram etc. to communicate with distant users and:

- Post about upcoming library events.
- Update users on existing as well as newly added content/resources.
- Provide information on various books and research materials.
- Provide links to online library resources.
- To seek and provide book reviews.
- Share video content and write-ups on the use of library facilities (e.g. online library tours) and reading material.
- Initiate and facilitate book discussions.
- Share ideas with and receive feedback from users and other libraries to create more user centric and interactive library services.

V CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A well-focused forum like “Vidyakriti” (URL of the site: www.vidyakriti.com and URL for directly accessing the forum : www.vidyakriti.com/forum) (Fig. 5, Fig. 6) has been specifically designed and developed to supplement educational values through information sharing. Information sharing through forum is multi-dimensional and multi-layered. This forum will provide a convenient platform for open discussions, posting articles on a wide range of subjects, thereby allowing better social interaction and building a sound knowledge base. This forum will complement the institution’s website more effectively as it will motivate informal learning through fruitful interaction and information sharing between the academic community, educationists and the students. This forum will also provide links to: (a) other useful educational sites; (b) article uploading areas; and (c) institution’s social networking sites.

The members included can be the representatives from all dimensions of higher learning. Any interested user can register on this forum after agreeing to all the formalities required to join the forum. After authenticating the user ID and password one can get logged into the forum. Groups within the forum like - general discussions, college information, book reviews, subject discussions, current news, academic activities - can be created and managed by the administrator. One can openly join any of the concerned forums. Posting new topics, viewing posts, posting replies, editing posts, deleting posts, formatting posts, inserting images etc. are some of the functions embedded in the sample forum. It is purely customized *i.e.*, developed and designed to fulfill the need. The various designing software used for the forum are Photoshop, Flash and languages used are PHP (Hypertext Preprocessors) Dreamweaver, MySQL (Database) and PHP bb Forum, HTML (Hypertext Markup Language).



Fig. 5 Vidyakriti

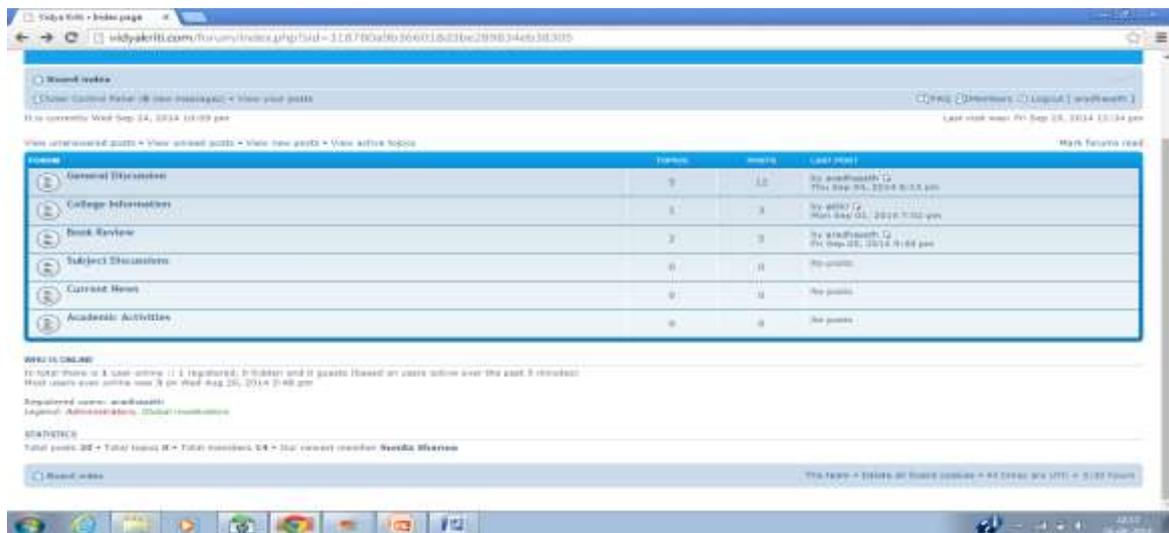


Fig. 6 Vidyakriti Sample Forum

VI CONCLUSION

Social media has definitely created a niche for itself in the field of education. There are numerous benefits of using social media as an educational and library tool in India as:

- Low usage and maintenance costs
- Little training requirements
- Direct delivery of information to users (time effective)
- Enhanced user interaction and engagement
- Ability to post and receive of instant feedback
- Enhanced inter-institutional communication
- Mass marketing and promotion

India, with 28% of its population in the age bracket of 10-24 years, requires a strong medium to connect urban centres of educational excellence with city as well as remotely located students. Social media, being used by 67% of Indian youth every day, has the potential to morph from an addictive medium to a knowledge facilitating medium. Traditional formal learning approaches are no longer competent enough to keep our connected youth engaged. In order to serve our youth more effectively and demonstrate value to the community, Indian higher education institutions will have to “ramp up engagement in areas beyond academic or formal learning” (Philips, 2015)

There are a few obstacles and inhibitions in the uptake of social media in education space too. Privacy issues, exposure to unsuitable material, chances of bullying and harassment by peers, miscommunication etc. are some of the major concerns” (<http://conference.ifla>) but all the concerned users have to realize that it is an innovative effort to transform information sharing in higher education institutions in India. This endeavour can help us achieve educational excellence and bridge geographical gaps. Social media usage can bring us bigger victories than temporary concerns, which can be dealt with by having appropriate privacy and usage policies in place.

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