Ethnographic Study of Students of Symbiosis Institute of Telecom Management (SITM) and the SITM culture

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Abstract

Background/Objectives: Every B-school has distinct traits, more so for an institute offering a niche program. This ethnographic study examines such characteristics of students of Symbiosis Institute of Telecom Management (SITM).

Methods/Statistical Analysis: The study started with a series of semi-structured interviews of twenty alumni of SITM located pan-India and abroad, having a work experience in the range of two to twenty years. The interviews were targeted to encourage the alumni to reminisce about their memories of two years spent at SITM. The resultant narratives were then codified firstly with open coding and then with axial coding.

Findings: Six main traits emerged – viz. international telecom seminar (‘Communique’), annual telecom forecast (‘Prevision’), various projects (research project, summer project, other projects), vast syllabus and hectic schedule, lighter moments at SITM and finally the alumni rapport – related to the grooming process of SITM students. The final outcome of study i.e., the theme of well-rounded grooming of a student emerged when the traits were compared and contrasted in an iterative manner.

Applications/Improvements: This study is centered around one specific B-school. Hence, bringing out more such studies – each for a particular institute – would provide a wholesome picture of the community called B-school.

Keywords: Ethnographic Study, Ethnography, Qualitative Research. SITM, Student culture, Symbiosis

1. Introduction

Academic institutes offering postgraduate programs in business management, referred to as B-schools in this study, have been moulding the careers of aspiring managers of tomorrow. The nomenclature of degree and the specializations offered vary widely across such B-schools. Program titles exhibit different titles like master of business administration, post-graduate diploma in management, master of marketing management, etc. and apart from the traditional specializations like finance, marketing, systems and human resources, newer niche areas have been on the rise like operations, banking, analytics, mass communications, etc. Courses offered – both required and optional – and their coverage make the contents and the delivery methods like teaching, lab, demo, hands-on, cases mark the pedagogy adopted by that institute. Entry criterion, research and placements are a few more factors to reckon. Besides, ranking of the B-school also constitutes one more factor of differentiation.

Coming specifically to Symbiosis Institute of Telecom Management (SITM), the B-School operating in niche area like Telecom, approaches to managing uncertainty include, as suggested by1, various aspects of new technologies that keep on emerging. Phrases like Net Generation suggested by2 and Digital Natives have been used to describe a new group of students coming into universities, which are basically different from any others seen before3. Moving forward4 suggests that Digital Natives are said to look for receiving information quickly; be adept at

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processing information rapidly; prefer multi-tasking and non-linear access to information; have a low tolerance for lectures; prefer active rather than passive learning, and rely heavily on communications technologies to access information and to carry out interactions. Besides, as suggested by adaptive e-learning systems employ software agents in asynchronous modes for various non-dependent process activities and as software agents act independently, such integrated approaches are expected to increase the efficiency. So, e-Learning and computer-based simulations are also incorporated in SITM.

As far as Indian context is concerned, while discussing the challenges and opportunities in management education in India, in assessed the present status of management education in India. The key issues are found for bringing efficiency, sufficiency and equity in the overall system of higher education including management education. A conceptual framework is put forth by with respect to Knowledge Management (KM) in B-schools in India. With a focus on issues and concerns of management education in India, investigates major issues and concerns and concludes that today we need good and active managers for the development of country.

The research question of this ethnographic study is to understand the culture of Symbiosis Institute of Telecom Management (SITM) students. This culture has been an incessant and indelible flow carried forward batch after batch with the vigour and spirit of unity by the students. It has several currents and torrents of both academic and non-academic nature. Academic aspects are syllabus, pedagogy, etc., and the non-academic ones are hostel life, lighter moments, etc. The paper has kept student at the centre and accordingly takes into account all the points that boost the knowledge and in turn add to the employability of students.

On this backdrop, a qualitative inquiry was undertaken at SITM with a view to appreciate the culture of the institute in terms of classroom delivery, events, hands-on, assignments, submissions, presentations, research projects, summer internships, contribution of alumni and also the lighter moments away from serious study. This ethnographic study focused on all these aspects of grooming of students and the details of method, findings and interpretation follows.

2. Method

An ethnographic research was thought fit, as the common thread of SITM culture runs across all the past and present students. A list of sixty students was drawn from the alumni base of nearly two thousand. Initially, each alumnus was requested for a free-form write-up describing their two year sojourn at SITM. Response was received from twenty alumni and their broad demographic distribution is shown in Table 1.

The responses served twin purposes viz., gaining their first-cut free-form thoughts and feelings about their studentship, and building up the atmosphere of approachment among these alumni. Social media triggers were used to reach out and connect with them, wherever necessary. Reading and re-reading of these reminiscences helped in three ways: Firstly, in a single reading itself the commonalities started emerging pointing toward the peculiar characteristics radiating the SITM culture; secondly, strong and sustained characteristics were found making frequent appearances due to their relevance, utility and appeal; and thirdly, some practices that were otherwise gone into oblivion were resurrected.

A questionnaire-cum-checklist was drawn up to seek the inputs on some specific points like pedagogy, syllabus, session schedule, summer internship, research project, etc. Twenty existing students of SITM were picked up, sensitized toward the ethnographic method and were briefed about the study-on-hand. The exposure draft of

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the questionnaire-cum-checklist was thrown open for their review. Being SITM Students themselves for the past one year, their views on certain points like lighter moments at hostel were helpful. These students were then assigned the task of interviewing the alumni on a one-on-one basis. Within each pair of interviewer from the existing batch and interviewee from the past batch, the narrative of interviewee was given to the respective interviewer to read and prepare for interview by scribbling the clarifying questions to be asked. Consider as an example an expression ‘Overall personality of an individual takes a sea change in SITM, during the course, especially if you are a fresher or straight out of your graduation college’. This statement points toward the personality development taking place during the post-graduation, but lacks the clarity and needs more expansion and pinpointing. With such discerning, the questionnaire-cum-checklist got tailored for each respondent. The second round of seeking the responses from the alumni then started with semi-structured interviews over telephone with the help of questionnaire-cum-checklist. This round yielded better response with improvisation on two counts: Augmentation of new points that did not occur to the respondents in the first round and clarifications sought on the vague mentions from their first version.

3. Discussion

These transcriptions were then subjected to open coding. Most of the earlier conjectures now started crystallizing as explained in the next section. Some expressions of interviewees firmed up, while some other statements were marked for deletion due to their insignificant nature. A couple of examples of such deletion are as follows: ‘Coming from BE (Electronics and Telecom) back ground, SITM was a natural choice for me’, ‘Grooming started from the moment I stepped out to board the train to Pune’. Such husk was considered neither relevant nor representative and hence was simply ignored during the coding exercise. After several passes of perusal, the first list of codes came up. Subsequently, an axial coding was undertaken with a search for specific patterns surfaced in the list of codes. The focus of research was thus aimed at expressions of respondents that were more of SITM culture. Such aspect of culture, which would potentially assume the label of ‘categories’ included – viz. international telecom seminar also known as (aka) Communique, annual telecom forecast aka Prevision, various projects (research project, summer project and other projects), vast syllabus and hectic schedule, lighter moments at SITM and finally the alumni rapport. Further, these potential categories seem to fall under a pertinent head or theme of ‘well-rounded grooming of a student’ emerged when the characteristics were compared and contrasted in a repetitive manner.

At this point, faculty members were brought on the scene to ascertain the correctness and completeness of the transcriptions generated out of ex-students’ interview taken by existing students. Having gone through the narratives and spotted some doubts and scope for amplification, these faculty members interacted with respondents 1-on-1 for clarification, expansion of some points, other issues where students could not interview. This step strengthened and validated the process. The coding of data was then revisited in the light of changes in the transcriptions. Various categories thus arrived at are Syllabus and Pedagogy, Telecom Forecast, Telecom Seminar, Various Projects, Lighter Moments and Alumni Involvement. These categories and some illustrative expressions from the respondents that gave rise to the categories are presented here.

3.1 Category 1: Syllabus and Pedagogy

This category addressing the core of any educational institution was highly held by the alumni in keeping with who suggested “key elements” like syllabus, exam, and pedagogy merge in such studies. As can be seen from various expressions of alumni: ‘NT’ praises the course coverage, ‘Curriculum was a perfect mix of business, finance, telecom and marketing; It was pretty exhaustive’, while ‘SS’ vouches for the delivery methods, ‘Lectures/Practical/Discussions: Designed with a more practical approach, value added with “experience lecturers” from Industry stalwarts’. ‘SB’ talks of the speed that was better appreciated down the line in career, ‘The pace was quick, but measured and sustained. It was perhaps the first exposure to what our professional life was going to be like’. Likewise ‘GH’ remembers, ‘Assignments and submissions would come at short notice and so keeping pace was difficult; Two years at SITM taught me time management’. ‘AB’ fondly recollects, ‘If a meeting time is 9:00, the SITM meeting time is 8:45, which still propels us to be on time for the meeting’ and similarly ‘GP’ records another important aspect that groomed for professional life, ‘lots of exposure to public speaking and other ‘soft’ skills – very helpful in professional life’. This view is seconded by ‘CK’
with his statement, ‘the biggest gain to my personality was in building the confidence to make and deliver presentations. This is something that really helps you grow in your career’. Yet another statement ‘multi-cultural/ ethnicity students, language, helped a lot in my professional life’ of VG2 throws light on the way of grooming up which is liked by ‘AS’ as conveyed in his assertion, ‘Studying. Well that would be an incorrect term to use, it was growing up at SITM that happened to me, to us as a batch’.

A couple of different expressions are also presented here to throw light on two facets of SITM culture: One is inspiration that is embodied in the expression of ‘SS’, ‘The competitive spirit kicked off, when I first saw the “Hall of Fame” board that listed year wise toppers of the college’ and another ‘Some like me jumped into the start-up wagon because of the faith our professors showed on our capabilities’ is an acknowledgement of the conviction built in pupil by the professors.

3.2 Category 2: Telecom Seminar

This flagship event of SITM (these days called as ‘Communique’) started in 1997 as National Telecom Seminar (NTS), graduating in 2009 to an Asian Telecom Seminar (ATS) and finally culminating into an International Telecom Seminar (ITS) in 2011. For the sake of this paper, a generic term ‘telecom seminar’ has been used. This event embraces several activities that are adored by students due to an enormous opportunity it offers as a live demo of a project management.

‘SN’ recollects how he and his batch-mates managed to ‘organize first of its kind of Telecom Seminar which brought Industry Leaders and Academia on the same stage’. Adding further, ‘SB’ says, ‘Guest lectures by experienced and eminent professionals from diverse backgrounds were a big draw and gave us real-life corporate stories of success and failure and the opportunity to assimilate meaningful lessons and shape our opinions and beliefs’. ‘NT’ reminisces, ‘We took the brave step and took the seminar to next level Asian Telecom Seminar’. Exquisite exercise of telecom seminar is applauded by ‘SB’ with the expression, ‘Annual Telecom Seminar was a unique experience– it left us with rich lessons in managing projects’ and it is endorsed by ‘CK’ when he tells, ‘Being a part of organising the national telecom seminar was a great learning experience’. It would be interesting to note the extrapolation made by ‘AB’ in her expression, ‘Taking part in [confluence, an event in a company where she works] reminds me of the ITS seminar event preparation despite the submission deadlines.

3.3 Category 3: Telecom Forecast

The cynosure of the telecom seminar is the annual forecast ‘Prevision’ for the telecom sector that involves many verticals that are primarily from telecom domain and also some secondary domains not in the thick of telecom. Some of the most favourite verticals are Global Telecom, Indian Telecom, Value Added Service (VAS) and Mobility, Broadband, Telecom Technologies, Communication Infrastructure, Consumer Electronics, etc. Started in 2003, this annual prediction has been enlightenment for students because a team of students developed to know about the past trends as well as the prediction for the next year for the above said verticals. Students find it as a ‘T’ model, where a vast expanse of telecom is studied and in-depth study of some niche domains within telecom is undertaken by students under the guidance of faculty members. The study is then perused by a consulting company in telecom space.

Twelve years gone by, but ‘SS’ still remembers, ‘As the first head of the Forecast team in SITM, it was a wonderful experience when the final work gets showcased as a flagship session within the International Telecom Seminar’. There are several alumni like ‘NT’ who candidly acknowledge, ‘Activities like Prevision helped us grow in confidence and knowledge’. Some others like ‘SS’ go one more step ahead to say, ‘Events committee made me learn entrepreneurship, conduct professionally with celebrity and industry delegates. It equipped me to be self-dependent, take ownership and better my multitasking skills’. Perhaps one of the most fascinating and forthright comment comes from VG1, ‘I had zero telecom background, and learnt everything about networks/Telecommunication at SITM. Biggest lessons that I personally learnt: You have to make your own destiny’.

3.4 Category 4: Various Projects

In suggests B-schools should be more radical in applying the techniques of business strategy, which they teach to students, to reconsider the way they teach. In line with this point, SITM exercises a rigorous suite of projects that has to be undertaken by students over and above their regular sessions. These projects come in multiple flavours, viz. Research project, summer project, and other projects like drawing up a business plan for competitions.
3.4.1 Summer Projects

This is a unique opportunity for students to mingle with the industry for two months of vacation in-between the two years. They get practical, hands-on work experience that prepares them better for the corporate life and career. During this span of two months, SITM has almost no control over the day-to-day working of these students, who are fully under the control of the concerned company that offered them internship. Their summer project reports are however put to the rigour of assessment of the written report as well as evaluation of their verbal presentation once they are back to SITM.

It is a daunting task as spelt out vividly by ‘GP’, ‘summer training (brutal reality): Harsh welcome to the real world. Leaving the comforts of classrooms behind’. However, from the point of view of the work experience, ‘SS’ recalls, it was a wonderful experience to work in a domain of choice and city of preference’. Students exploit this chance for improvement not only on the front of professional knowledge and skills, but also prepare for some other events while they are away from college. That is why ‘DB’ suggests, ‘Spending around a month out of campus doing research, missing classes and assignments, incredible support from the batch-mates and the faculty members, resulting in representing my college at an international seminar’. Another outlook has been well summarised by ‘ND’ with his candid comment on concretization of theoretical concepts learnt at college, ‘… seeing them being implemented in real life through live projects done during summer and …’

3.4.2 Research Projects (RP)

Apparently a scary word, research has become a common place task for most of the corporate as they are to undertake certain applied research for judging the market, getting the pulse of clientele, etc. As many managers are expected to supervise such a research project at least occasionally, research project has been one of the components in the overall syllabus. Initially getting a bit nervous with the research methods and the related statistical understanding, students quickly assimilate the knowledge and strive to put it into practice by way of RP.

This point is interpreted from many students’ expressions, e.g., ‘ND’ recalls, ‘The curriculum had been always a mix of theory and pragmatic perspectives which enables one to not only understand the principles of management, economics and technology but seeing them being implemented in real life through live projects done during summer and research work in the curriculum.’ ‘NT’ goes one step ahead and acknowledges, ‘… not only helped in placement, but also getting Good Research Projects, Guidance …’ ‘CK’ exemplifies the utility value of RP, ‘RP on Information security is what I based my career on. The research project, according to me, is an excellent opportunity to connect with the industry’. ‘SB’ appreciates the well-balanced pedagogy, ‘interestingly, but thoughtfully, the course was not only about classroom-studies and academic assignments. These were methodically interspersed with outdoor trips, research projects, summer internship …’. Perhaps the culminating remark comes from ‘SS’ where he declares, ‘SITM RP has attracted the highest no. of views over the social media’.

3.4.3 Other Projects

Enthused with the inputs received and encouraged by the faculty members authoring several papers to reputed journals, students also learn to run an extra mile. Going beyond the set courses, credits, marks and grades, they embark on many projects transcending the curriculum. These projects – which are neither summer projects nor research projects – make students well-rounded personality and groom them better for their next stage of life and career, as can be seen from several expressions of alumni. ‘AS’ says, ‘B-Plan competition as a part of evaluation for the curricula and then had the CEO of Idea Mumbai circle at that time come on a casual class to judge the final presentation. That kind of validated that I had a business plan which would work.’ ‘ND’ appreciates, ‘Subjects including both domains of technology and management blend technology and business very nicely’. AJ invites attention to the fact, ‘At SITM, college events use to always be more of academic nature unlike other colleges but they really taught me how the business world moves and what professionalism is’. Similarly, ‘DB’ attributes the qualities he values and has acquired at alma mater, ‘Constant drive to excel, be it for a presentation next day, to an assignment, to the examination, or to the interviews …’. Students do remember and regard the strenuous daily chore, as told by ‘SB’, ‘Most of the days were long – classes although the classes got over by late afternoon, we invariably had work at hand to consume our evenings and sometimes till late nights in discussion groups’. Students are also expected to work on some committees that add substantial value to their poise, as told by ‘VG2’, ‘lasting impression was that of a placement coordinator during the first year. It opened
me up to get better facing rejections at times and succeeds in others. In every situation, maintaining balance, and controlling emotions was the key takeaway. This is in line with observation ‘The study on emotional intelligence has suggested that the training in these skills is essential for preparing people for career as well as personal success and fulfilment’, made by 11.

Lastly, attention needs to be solicited to inter-college, inter-university competitions that bring the best of students to the fore. ‘SS’ therefore recalls, ‘the event that gave a mega turn to our lives was the AIMA Student Management Games (no less than Hunger Games), it gave a big boost after being the Zonal champions by defeating the big-wigs of MBA B-schools’.

### 3.5 Category 5: Lighter Moments

If all that has been stated above tends to give an impression that everything has been dry, dull and drab, this section would dispel that notion. There are many occasions where the so-called seriousness of studies goes overboard making way to the fun and frolic. These boding moments spell their cast for several years, when down the line past students segregated with differing locations and professions stay tuned to the single thread – SITM alumni. Besides, it will not be out of place to mention that while many such opportunities are initiated by students themselves, some ways and means are devised by SITM to promote the fraternity among the pupil.

One such activity planned by SITM during the first week itself is an outdoor camp. ‘SB’ recalls, ‘… an early visit to the ‘Moral Rearmament Camp’ at Panchgani, a hill-top resort at about kilometres away from the campus. As posited by 12 participation in and attitude toward school physical education of youth showed a positive correlation with ego-resilience and psychological well being. That weeklong visit with our new batch-mates, outside of regular academic sessions and discussions, helped build strong bonds in a very short time and also gave us early insights into the importance of maintaining a healthy balance between work and other aspects of life’. Student’s affinity and association continues beyond college life as vividly described by ‘DB’, ‘Late night celebrations in the hostel on birthdays and spending long hours sitting and discussing issues of marketing, branding, technology and sometimes, life.’ ‘CK’ goes ahead to highlight the longevity of such empathetic bonds saying, ‘Friends for life - The bonds formed here have been some of the strongest bonds and have lasted over the 13 years. This is probably the biggest gain from the SITM campus experience’.

### 3.6 Category 6: Alumni Involvement

Finally, we come to the trait which puts the whole story on an unending continuum, viz. alumni giving back to their alma mater. As aptly stated in one of the old scriptures, it is hardly on-fourth of knowledge that a disciple acquires from Guru. The second quarter comes from self-study; the third from discussion among the learners and finally, the fourth from the experience of life. Having realized this, SITM has been cashing on every single opportunity to facilitate mixing and mingling of existing students with past students, as the third and fourth quadrants can be best learnt by the former by interacting with the latter. Needless to say, the experience sharing by alumni brings with it a familiar and pleasant sense of belonging.

The above point is iterated with simplicity by ‘VJ’ when he remembers, ‘good support from alumni helped us’. Gratefully mustering his feelings, ‘AS’ asserts, ‘Not to forget the opportunity we got to interact with Alumni and CEO, MD, VP’s of large companies’. ‘NT’, too, follows the suit saying, ‘… Alumni Interaction, …everything was designed to achieve this objective’ and then quickly adds weight saying, ‘The college (SITM) had Alumni in all the leading Telecom companies pan India and even abroad’. ‘GH’ tells that in 2001 the offer letters to many of the passing out students were withdrawn by their corporate employers due to sudden shakeout in the wake of dot-com bubble burst. In his words, ‘All the affected batch-mates were employed within a month thanks to the recommendations and efforts by our seniors’. This chain of giving thus continues on and on and it has been assured by ‘VG2’ in his quote, ‘to this day I wish to give back to the school and impart whatever I have learnt to budding talents’.

### 3.7 Emergent Theme – ‘SITM Culture’

Considering above discussion that throws light on crystallization of the six categories – syllabus and pedagogy, telecom seminar, telecom forecast, various projects, lighter moments and alumni involvement – and also keeping in view the research question, viz. to understand the culture of SITM students, the next point that comes up finally is maturation of the theme that explains how the theme emerged from the said six categories.

The first category ‘syllabus and pedagogy’ provides the course coverage/contents consisting of technological
and managerial topics and also asserts that it is a perfect mix of business, finance, telecom and marketing. The soft skills like public speaking and understanding people and personalities are covered and discussed by alumni. The practical approach has also been narrated with an observation that it helps in preparing for professional life. The quick pace, flexibility and discipline has also been figured out in the dialogue with alumni. IT is therefore nicely summed by ‘NT’, ‘SITM being a college focused in telecom domain, the entire curriculum was custom designed to make future telecom leaders.

The second category ‘telecom seminar’ has been appreciated by alumni as an opportunity to shape their personalities to make then well-rounded with inputs from industry stalwarts. The categories two and three are thus built upon the first foundational category of ‘syllabus and pedagogy’. The changing scale and improvisation brought about in this seminar year-after-year points to the sustaining culture that helps in enrichment of such activities, as aptly prompted by ‘SB’, ‘annual telecom seminar was a unique experience– it left us with rich lessons’.

Started as one of the ingredients of telecom seminar, now prevision at the category 3 ‘telecom forecast’ stands tall as a force to reckon with. An in-depth study, plotting the trends, making well-thought conjectures, confirming the projections with industry… all these tasks of telecom forecast have been completely institutionalized by SITM with the guidance of faculty members and continuity provided by seniors.

Category 4 ‘various projects’ comprising a host of projects helps a well-rounded development of students by way of putting them to field-work during summer internship and poses a challenge of research – using either traditional/ classic methods within academia or applied survey involving some industry. This category has become an integral part of SITM culture inasmuch as every single batch right from early years has got the benefits of these two types of project.

As if to ensure that SITM does not become ‘all work and no play’, fifth category ‘lighter moments’ offers several opportunities to students to break away from serious studies and take a plunge into sheer pleasure. This takes many forms like Food-n-Fun, a cultural program, an out-bound program as well as social service of teaching the kids in the nearby rural school, blood donation camp, etc. These SITM-designed events are further augmented by students’ own initiatives like birthday bash and other celebrations.

Finally the last category ‘alumni involvement’ brings the SITM culture to a full circle by past students’ participation, may it be guest lectures, mentoring in groups, helping by mock interviews for placement, contributing to the syllabus reviews, qualitative enrichment by accepting the membership of internal quality assurance cell. That is why ‘AS’ recaps, ‘Studying … Well that would be an incorrect term to use, it was growing up at SITM that happened to me, to us as a batch’.

4. Conclusion and Future Enhancements

This study highlights a spectrum of colourful ethos of SITM students, like values inculcated, passion for excellence, a sense of belonging, multi-threaded learning, a couple of events that have been persistently making ripples for over a decade and so on. This runs as a fine yet strong thread that binds and holds together the SITM alumni. With SITM in its twentieth year, some of the old alumni are in their mid- or late-forties. Still, the enthusiasm with which they keep in touch and contribute to their alma mater is amazing. Batch after batch, the baton is passed on to the newcomers and when it is time for them to hand over baton they have attained all the pre-requisites that it takes to be called SITM alumnus. Besides, unlike the baton used in athletics that gets jaded with wear and tear, this baton is always on a developmental curve like an alluvial land.

There are two areas for further improvisation: First, the culture of no community can be caught in a small paper like this, may it be an ethnic tribe, a professional guild, or a self-help group of people bound by some common feature. SITM-student is not an exception and hence possesses several other shades and hues, textures and granularities. It will therefore be worthwhile to expand this paper into a full-blown monograph so that justice could be made to all aspects of SITM culture. Such an elaboration may bring out some other feature of SITM that might have been left out in the present exercise. Secondly, the present paper revolves around just one single academic unit called SITM and that is both strength as well as limitation of this articulation. In13 has rightly observed that the student body of most universities is diverse, reflecting factors such as socio-economic conditions. In addition, there could be geo-political differences, too. In14 observes the German business schools have distinct historical roots and differ considerably from higher
education in business management sciences developed in other European countries. This may result in some variance from what is stated in this paper. Another limitation is that it narrates a story of a specific unit which would, in almost all probability, be different than other entities in academia, as each institution has its own unique story to tell. Hence, bringing out more and more such studies – each revolving around a particular educational organization – would help provide a grand and holistic picture of the community called B-school.

5. References