

Leveraging Influencer Marketing in Higher Education: Key Roles, Sectors, Platforms, and Influencer Types for Institutional Branding

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Article Info

Article history:

Submission June 23, 2025

Revised September 04, 2025

Accepted September 23, 2025

Published September 29, 2025

Keywords:

Influencer Marketing

Higher Education

Credibility

Social Proof

Social Media Platforms



ABSTRACT

The concept and strategies of Influencers marketing are often for tangible product or digital products over the years. However, the implementation of influencer marketing within service, especially the Higher Education (HE) sector remains underexplored, despite its success in other industries such as beauty, fashion, and e-commerce. **This study aims to bridge** the research gap by investigating the key roles, sectors, platforms, and types of influencers suitable for HE institutions. The objectives include identifying the roles of influencers in shaping perceptions and decision-making processes, determining the most effective sectors and platforms for influencer marketing in HE, and exploring the types of influencers best suited for promoting HE institutions. **Findings indicate** that credibility, trustworthiness, engagement, and social proof are critical influencer roles. **The most relevant** sectors are fashion, e-commerce, and health, while Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube emerge as the dominant platforms. Virtual influencers, micro-influencers, and niche influencers are identified as the most effective for HE campaigns. **These insights provide** actionable recommendations for HE institutions to strategically adopt influencer marketing, enhancing engagement with prospective students and strengthening institutional branding.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33050/sabda.v4i2.847>

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1. INTRODUCTION

Influencer marketing has emerged as a pivotal strategy across various industries, leveraging individuals with significant social media followings to promote products, services, or brands in several sectors such as hospitality, health industry, FMCG, fashion, and digital products or services [1–4]. This approach capitalizes on the credibility that influencers have cultivated with their audiences, leading to enhanced consumer engagement and purchasing behaviors [5]. Besides its impact across various sectors, influencer marketing also plays a significant role in the digital sphere, particularly with the rise of live streamers [6]. The empirical research findings reveal that customer experience significantly and positively impacts both influencer trust and influencer attachment, emphasizing the critical importance of engaging and immersive interactions [7]. Trust and attachment built with live streamers act as two pivotal mechanisms influencing consumer decision making. Interestingly, influencer attachment demonstrates a stronger effect on consumer purchase intention compared to influencer

trust, highlighting the value of emotional connections and authentic engagement in driving purchasing behavior in the digital landscape [8, 9].

This gap highlights the critical need for a systematic review that thoroughly examines the unique dynamics of influencer marketing within the context of educational institutions. Such a review would provide valuable insights into how this targeted marketing strategy can be effectively utilized to enhance student engagement, strengthen institutional branding, and attract prospective students in an increasingly competitive and digitalized educational landscape. By exploring the specific mechanisms, benefits, and challenges of influencer marketing in higher education, institutions can gain a deeper understanding of its potential as a tool for fostering meaningful connections and achieving strategic objectives. Importantly, this study positions its scope within a worldwide context rather than being tied to a single region. By drawing from Scopus-indexed literature across multiple countries, the review seeks to capture global trends and perspectives on influencer marketing in higher education. While regional variations may exist in terms of cultural dynamics and media usage, the emphasis here is on providing a comprehensive international overview of how influencer marketing is being conceptualized and applied in educational settings worldwide. This analysis would also bridge the existing knowledge gap, offering practical recommendations for integrating influencer marketing into the broader framework of digital marketing strategies tailored to the needs of higher education in general. Furthermore, in addressing these gaps, the current study wishes to explore two key research questions:

- RQ1: What are the key roles of influencer that are effective in higher education sector?
- RQ2: What are the key sectors and platforms for influencers that can be implemented in the higher education sector?
- RQ3: What type of influencers are most suitable for promoting institutions within the higher education sector?

Therefore, the research objectives of this study will cover:

- RO1: Identify the key roles of influencers that are effective in the higher education sector, focusing on their impact on potential students perceptions, behaviors, and decision-making processes.
- RO2: Determine the key sectors and platforms that influencers can leverage within the higher education sector, examining which sectors benefit the most from influencer marketing and which platforms are most effective for reaching prospective students.
- RO3: Investigate the types of influencers most suitable for promoting institutions in the higher education sector, including categories such as virtual influencers, micro-influencers, and niche influencers, to understand which types align best with the goals and audience of higher education institutions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite its growing prominence across various industries, influencer marketing has yet to be widely adopted within the higher education sector [10, 11]. While businesses and consumer focused industries increasingly leverage influencers to shape perceptions and drive engagement, higher education institutions appear slower to embrace this strategy. This reluctance may stem from the sector's traditional marketing approaches, which prioritize academic prestige and institutional reputation over innovative, influencer driven campaigns [12, 13]. Universities tend to focus primarily on broader strategies such as digital marketing and social media marketing while neglecting more nuanced approaches like influencer marketing [14]. Despite the proven effectiveness of influencer marketing in fostering social identification, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions in various sectors, higher education institutions rarely explore its potential in-depth. This oversight limits opportunities to leverage influencer marketing as a tool for enhancing student engagement, recruitment, and overall institutional visibility in a rapidly digitalizing world [14, 15]. Moreover, the perceived misalignment between influencer marketing and the values of higher education, such as intellectual rigor and credibility, further limits its implementation. Nevertheless, previous study suggests that strategically integrating social media marketing (source of influencer marketing) in many aspects including higher education could enhance student recruitment, alumni engagement, and brand visibility, particularly when influencers with strong credibility and alignment with institutional values are involved [16].

Influencers can generally be categorized into macro-influencers, who have large followings and significant reach, and micro-influencers, who cater to smaller, niche audiences with high engagement rates. While macro-influencers are often leveraged to enhance visibility, micro-influencers excel in creating authentic and meaningful connections with their audience, making them particularly effective in building trust and loyalty [17]. This highlights that micro-influencers, through their authenticity, niche-specific content, and ability to share exclusive insights, significantly influence brand engagement and brand love, which can ultimately lead to brand evangelism. Also, influencers rely heavily on their credibility to establish trust and foster loyalty among their audiences, which directly impacts purchase behavior [18, 19]. Credibility is built through a combination of authenticity, trustworthiness, expertise, and audience congruence.

Studies have shown that advertising disclosure whether influencers clearly indicate sponsorship or endorsements plays a crucial role in enhancing their perceived credibility, as transparency reinforces trust [20]. Additionally, influencer credibility has been found to significantly influence brand awareness, which mediates the relationship between credibility and purchase intention [20–22]. This means that as influencers build trust, they simultaneously increase awareness, which strengthens consumer loyalty and drives purchase decisions. Simultaneously, these concepts and strategies are rarely implemented in higher education sectors, where traditional marketing approaches still dominate [23].

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology, guided by the PRISMA framework, to ensure a transparent, replicable, and rigorous process in identifying relevant literature [24]. The SLR method systematically collects, evaluates, and synthesizes academic research to address specific research questions. By adhering to the PRISMA framework, the study incorporates a structured approach involving four key stages: identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion. These steps ensure that only high-quality and relevant studies are included, providing robust evidence to support the research objectives. In conducting the SLR, Scopus was selected as the sole database due to its reputation as a comprehensive and credible academic indexing platform. Scopus includes peer-reviewed journal articles from a wide array of disciplines, ensuring the quality and relevance of the literature. Its advanced search tools and metadata filtering capabilities make it ideal for systematic reviews, allowing precise identification of studies that align with the research focus. Furthermore, limiting the search to Scopus ensures access to internationally recognized publications, enhancing the reliability of the findings. The Scopus database was selected as the sole source of literature due to its extensive coverage of peer-reviewed journals in the fields of business, management, and education, as well as its reliable indexing and citation tracking features.

To maintain the relevance and timeliness of the analysis, only articles published in English after 2020 were considered, ensuring the results reflect current trends and developments in influencer marketing and higher education. The search strategy was designed to capture studies relevant to the research questions, focusing on the key terms "influencer marketing". The study does not include the keyword of "higher education" due to limitation of search results. Hence, boolean operators were employed to refine the query, maximizing the scope without compromising specificity. This initial search yielded 1,416 records. The exclusion of reports during the eligibility assessment phase aimed to ensure alignment with the study's objectives and methodological rigor. A significant portion of articles (N = 142) were excluded due to their focus on unrelated subject areas, such as business and management. Similarly, nine articles were excluded for using unrelated keywords, where terms like "Albert", "Advertising Law", and "Alcohol" should be removed from the consideration. Non-English articles (N = 3) were excluded to maintain consistency and accessibility in the analysis, while non-article publications (N = 1), such as book chapters or conference papers, were omitted for not meeting the criteria of peer-reviewed journal articles.

Articles published before 2020 were not excluded, as all retrieved records fell within the required timeframe and to keep the newest information about influencer marketing. Additional exclusions included 36 non-downloadable articles that could not be accessed despite retrieval efforts and two articles deemed irrelevant upon manual review due to their tangential focus. Or in other words these excluded articles are not aligned with the research questions and objectives of the study. This systematic process ensured the final set of 15 articles were highly relevant, peer-reviewed, and directly addressed the intersection of influencer marketing, where they can be related to higher education. These criteria enhanced the reliability and focus of the review by eliminating studies that were outside the scope or lacked accessibility.

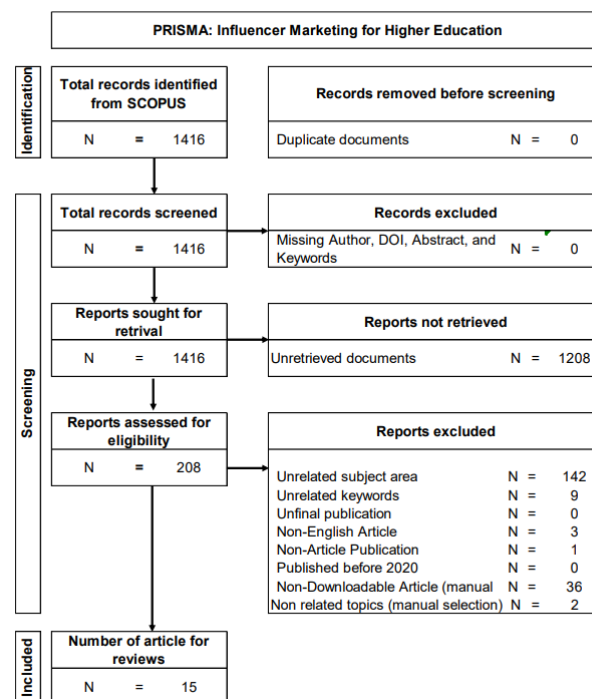


Figure 1. PRISMA Results of Influencer Marketing

Following PRISMA guidelines [25], duplicate articles were removed, and records with incomplete metadata, irrelevant subject areas, or non-downloadable content were excluded. Through a meticulous eligibility assessment, 15 articles were identified as meeting all inclusion criteria [26]. These articles were selected based on their direct relevance to the study's objectives, offering insights into the key dimensions of influencer marketing credibility and the characteristics of influencers suitable for higher education. This methodical approach ensures the findings are firmly grounded in credible and focused literature, addressing the gaps in existing research effectively. The details of the PRISMA method and the results, can be seen on the following Figure 1.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Key Roles of Influencers for Marketing in Higher Education After identifying 15 articles, explains the analysis of key factors of influencer can boost the positive respond from customers. The results of the analysis show that the credibility and trustworthiness of influencers are key factors in shaping consumer responses, particularly in higher education marketing. Influencers who are perceived as credible and trustworthy can significantly impact students decisions, as they provide authentic endorsements that resonate with prospective students. Multiple studies emphasize how trust in an influencer's message can influence the consumer's behavior and their perception of a higher education institution [8, 9]. When applied to higher education marketing, influencers who are seen as honest and reliable can effectively build trust with prospective students, helping them feel confident about their decision to apply or enroll in a specific program.

Engagement and emotional connection are also essential aspects of influencer marketing. The results indicate that when influencers engage their audience on an emotional level, they can foster a deeper sense of connection. Previous studies highlight that emotional engagement encourages followers to build relationships with influencers and, by extension, the brands they endorse [7, 29]. By using this analogy in the context of higher education, influencers who share personal, relatable stories about their experiences be it challenges, achievements, or moments of growth can connect with students on a more personal level. This emotional engagement can influence prospective students' perceptions of an institution, making them more likely to apply or enroll based on the influencer's positive portrayal of the university experience. Therefore, social proof and social influence also play significant roles in shaping consumer decision [28].

Table 1. Key Roles of Influencers to Consumer Behavior

No	Key Roles of Influencers on Consumer's Response	Mentioned in Articles	Key Authors
1	Credibility and Trustworthiness	9	[7, 9, 22, 27–32]
2	Engagement and Emotional Connection	8	[1, 9, 22, 27, 29–32]
3	Social Proof and Social Influence	5	[27–30, 32]
4	Product Involvement and Expertise	3	[6, 22, 28–30]
5	Content Authenticity and Transparency in Advertising	3	[18, 29, 30]

The results show Table 1 that people often rely on the experiences and actions of others when making choices, particularly in the higher education sector. As noted by previous studies, influencers who share success stories, testimonials, or personal experiences from other students or alumni can help prospective students feel reassured about their choice of institution [28, 30, 33]. Social proof is a powerful tool in higher education marketing because prospective students often seek validation from peers or individuals they admire. By showcasing influencers who are part of the university's community, whether they are students, faculty, or alumni, institutions can increase their credibility and appeal to prospective students looking for social validation.

The results also indicate that content authenticity and transparency in advertising are crucial factors that influence how effective influencer marketing can be. Influencers who present honest, transparent content highlighting both positive and negative aspects of their experiences are more likely to build trust with their audience. Previous studies also prove that the authenticity of content is paramount for maintaining the audience's trust and loyalty [22, 29]. As the implementation higher education sector, this means being transparent about the challenges students may face, as well as the benefits of attending a particular institution. Institutions that encourage influencers to share honest reflections about academic rigor, student life, and career opportunities can create a more authentic and engaging marketing message that resonates with prospective students. In the context of higher education, these results suggest that institutions should prioritize the credibility and trustworthiness of the influencers they work with [28, 34]. For example, universities can collaborate with well known alumni, respected faculty members, or successful students who are seen as reliable sources of information [35]. By using influencers who are trusted by prospective students, institutions can increase their chances of influencing the decision making process. This aligns with the growing importance of student centered marketing strategies in higher education, where prospective students seek authentic, trustworthy sources of information before making their decisions. Universities can leverage influencers to enhance their brand image and attract students who are looking for genuine experiences. Besides, universities can invite a well-known Professors worldwide, or influencer who are expert in his or her field such as Minister or entrepreneurs who can encourage students or candidate students.

Additionally, higher education institutions can capitalize on the emotional connection and engagement that influencers can generate. Institutions should encourage influencers to create content that resonates with prospective students on a personal level. This could include sharing their own educational journeys, struggles, and successes, which can help humanize the institution and make it more relatable. By focusing on emotional storytelling, universities can foster stronger connections with prospective students, increasing the likelihood of attracting applicants who feel emotionally connected to the institution. This approach reflects a shift toward more personalized, authentic, and emotionally resonant marketing in higher education, ensuring that prospective students view the institution as more than just a place of education but as a supportive and engaging community. This finding reflects the unique characteristics of higher education as a high-involvement decision, where students and parents perceive enrollment as a long-term investment. Unlike in commercial sectors such as fashion or beauty, where aspirational appeal often drives purchase, the effectiveness of influencers in higher education relies more heavily on perceived expertise, authenticity, and trustworthiness. This aligns with source credibility theory, suggesting that audiences in educational contexts respond more strongly to influencers who embody reliability and academic legitimacy. The Most Sector and Platform of Influencer Marketing and the Relation with Higher Education Therefore, in answering RQ2, the results also show the most sector, and platform to be used in influencer marketing. The study provide evidence that Influencers operate in the fashion and beauty industry, retail e-commerce (fashion, technology, and F&B), and health and wellness sector.

Table 2. The Key Sector of Influencer Marketing

No	Sector	Mentioned in Articles	Key Authors
1	Fashion and Beauty	8	[6, 7, 22, 27–31]
2	E-commerce Retail (Fashion, Technology, Food & Beverage)	7	[6, 9, 22, 29–31]
3	Health and Wellness	4	[6, 7, 28, 29]

Table 2 as show dominance of lifestyle-oriented sectors such as fashion and beauty highlights how influencer marketing traditionally thrives in aspirational and visually driven domains. However, the emergence of higher education within this landscape suggests a shift institutions are increasingly adopting consumer marketing logics to appeal to digitally native students. This overlap creates opportunities but also tensions while HE can learn from lifestyle marketing strategies, it must balance aspirational appeal with credibility and ethical considerations, which are less critical in purely commercial sectors. The results from the study reveal that influencer marketing is particularly effective in certain sectors, with fashion and beauty, e-commerce retail (covering fashion, technology, and food & beverage), and health and wellness emerging as the top three. In the fashion and beauty sector, influencers are highly influential in shaping consumer perceptions and behaviors, as their endorsements are often seen as aspirational and authentic. As noted in previous studies, the beauty and fashion industries thrive on influencers who can effectively connect with audiences, offering recommendations and lifestyle tips that resonate with consumers [9, 27]. Similarly, in e-commerce retail, particularly in fashion, technology, and food & beverage, influencers have been recognized as crucial in driving consumer engagement and increasing sales through targeted content, providing consumers with a more personalized shopping experience [22]. In addition to these sectors, the health and wellness industry also stands out as a major beneficiary of influencer marketing. As indicated by previous studies, influencers in this sector often have a profound impact on consumers by promoting healthier lifestyles, fitness routines, and wellness products [28, 29]. Their authenticity and relatability play a crucial role in encouraging audiences to adopt new health habits or invest in wellness products. The trust and emotional connection that influencers in this sector build with their followers make them key players in influencing consumer behavior, particularly when it comes to promoting wellness-related products and services [6].

Table 3. The Key Platforms to be Used in Influencer Marketing

No	Platform	Mentioned in Articles	Key Authors
1	Instagram	11	[6, 7, 9, 18, 27–30, 36]
2	TikTok	11	[6, 7, 7, 18, 27–32, 37]
3	YouTube	10	[6, 7, 9, 18, 28–32, 36]

Based on the Table 3 prominence of Instagram and TikTok is not merely due to their popularity among youth audiences but also because of their unique platform affordances. TikTok's algorithm driven discovery fosters organic reach and virality, while Instagram's visual storytelling supports identity construction and aspirational branding. In higher education, these affordances translate into opportunities to showcase campus life, student testimonials, and authentic peer voices. However, reliance on these platforms also introduces risks, as trends may shift rapidly, raising questions about sustainability and long-term impact. When it comes to the platforms used for influencer marketing, the study highlights Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube as the most popular choices. Instagram is consistently mentioned across several studies, with authors like [9, 38] recognizing its visual appeal and ability to foster strong engagement between influencers and their followers. Instagram's features, such as Stories, posts, and Reels, provide influencers with a diverse set of tools to connect with audiences. TikTok, with its growing popularity, is also identified as a powerful platform for influencer marketing, especially for targeting younger, trend-driven audiences. The platform's short-form video format and algorithmic content distribution make it ideal for viral marketing campaigns, as seen in studies by authors like [30]. Finally, YouTube remains a significant platform for influencers, particularly for long-form content that allows for deeper storytelling and product demonstrations. As highlighted by authors like [36], YouTube offers an opportunity for influencers to build a more personal relationship with their audience through in-depth tutorials, product reviews, and lifestyle content. Relating these findings to higher education, universities and colleges can use influencer marketing strategies effectively in promoting their programs and institutions. By collabo-

rating with influencers in the fashion, health, and wellness sectors, higher education institutions can position their programs as modern, innovative, and aligned with trends in those sectors. For instance, influencers with strong ties to fitness, wellness, or fashion could be used to market specialized programs such as fashion design, health sciences, or technology-focused courses. Influencers who resonate with the target demographic can help increase brand awareness and trust, making higher education institutions seem more approachable and relevant to prospective students. Regarding platforms, higher education institutions should prioritize platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube to maximize their reach and engagement. Instagram can be used to showcase student life, campus events, and academic achievements through visually compelling content. TikTok, with its younger audience base, offers a dynamic way to share real-time updates, campus tours, and student testimonials, all in a fun and engaging format. YouTube, on the other hand, could be ideal for offering detailed insights into programs, student stories, and alumni success through longer-form content. These platforms allow universities to present their offerings in a relatable and engaging way, ultimately influencing students' decision-making processes and enhancing their perception of the institution's culture and values.

The type of Influencers of Higher Education The results indicate that virtual influencers are the most frequently mentioned type of influencer across various sectors, particularly in the beauty and fashion industries. These influencers, created through CGI or animation, have become increasingly popular because they offer an opportunity to create a completely controlled brand persona that appeals to diverse audiences. Virtual influencers have the flexibility to represent different lifestyles, maintain consistency in messaging, and engage with followers in a way that real influencers cannot always achieve. Micro-influencers and niche influencers also show strong effectiveness, particularly due to their more personalized connections with their audiences, especially in specialized areas like beauty, fashion, and wellness [9]. When applying these insights to the context of Higher Education (HE), virtual influencers can be a novel tool for institutions looking to create an innovative, cutting-edge image. For example, universities could employ virtual influencers to represent their core values, interact with prospective students on social media, and provide a futuristic perspective on campus life or programs. These influencers can help make the institution appear more appealing to younger, digitally native students who are drawn to digital engagement. Virtual influencers, while not a direct representation of a real person, can build an identity around the institution that aligns with its modern, innovative values [39]. Micro influencers, on the other hand, can help universities reach more specific target audiences, such as students interested in particular fields of study.

These influencers often have a smaller but highly engaged following, making their recommendations seem more personal and credible [37]. For example, a micro-influencer specializing in a particular academic discipline such as business, technology, or the arts could speak directly to prospective students about the benefits of studying that subject at a given institution. This type of marketing would appeal to students who prefer a more personalized, authentic connection with the university rather than generic advertisements. Niche influencers offer another significant advantage in HE by connecting with students interested in specialized academic or extracurricular areas. Whether promoting sustainability programs, specific career paths, or unique study opportunities, niche influencers can ensure that universities reach prospective students who are genuinely passionate about these subjects. For instance, an influencer focusing on digital transformation or entrepreneurship could effectively market a business school's programs in these areas. By leveraging niche influencers, universities can ensure that their messaging resonates deeply with potential students who share similar academic interests or career ambitions, improving the chances of student enrollment.

Together, these types of influencers virtual, micro, and niche bring a strategic advantage to higher education marketing [27, 31]. They allow universities to build strong, authentic connections with potential students, enhance engagement through personalized content, and position themselves as forward-thinking institutions. By adopting influencer marketing strategies that mirror the successful tactics of sectors like beauty and fashion, universities can create compelling narratives that attract the next generation of students. The details of the results can be seen on the following Table 4.

Table 4. The Key Type of Influencers

No	Type of Influencer	Mentioned in Articles	Key Authors
1	Virtual Influencers	8	[6, 9, 22, 27–30, 32]
2	Micro Influencers	7	[7, 12, 30, 31, 37, 40, 41]
3	Niche Influencers	6	[6, 30, 31, 34, 36, 40]

In order to provide a clearer overview, Figure 2 presents a conceptual matrix summarizing the role of influencers in particular platform along with the selection of influencers within HEIs. The findings suggests that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) may draw meaningful lessons from the fashion and beauty as well as the e-commerce retail sectors, where influencer marketing has demonstrated significant effectiveness. The primary factor identified across these sectors is the role of credibility and trustworthiness, which emerges as the most critical driver of branding outcomes. For HEIs, this implies that influencer strategies should be anchored in building trust, particularly through platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, which have been shown to maximize reach and perceived authenticity. The adoption of virtual influencers may further strengthen institutional branding by projecting an image of innovation and consistency, while at the same time reinforcing credibility when complemented with endorsements from academic staff, alumni, or current students.

A secondary factor relates to the role of engagement and emotional connection, which complements credibility by fostering sustained interaction and relational depth. In this regard, the combined use of micro and niche influencers appears particularly effective, as demonstrated in consumer sectors where relatability and specialized expertise drive brand affinity. Platforms such as TikTok and Instagram are most suited for creating short-form, interactive content that resonates with prospective students, while YouTube offers opportunities for long-form storytelling that highlights academic experiences, student journeys, and institutional achievements. By strategically sequencing credibility as the foundation, followed by engagement as a relational amplifier, HEIs can adapt established influencer practices from other sectors to enhance student recruitment, institutional reputation, and long-term brand equity.

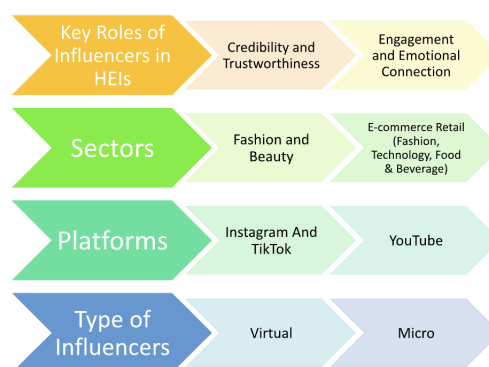


Figure 2. Synthesized Framework of Influencer Marketing Dimensions for Higher Education Institutions

The literature reveals contradictions regarding which influencer types are most effective. Some studies highlight micro and nano influencers as particularly persuasive due to their authenticity and closer engagement with audiences, while others emphasize the scalability and consistency offered by virtual influencers. This tension suggests that influencer effectiveness is context-dependent: in higher education, where trust is paramount, micro-influencers such as student ambassadors may outperform virtual or celebrity influencers. This observation points to the need for further comparative studies examining how audience trust moderates influencer impact in educational settings. Furthermore, prior studies on influencer marketing in education have been largely concentrated in Indonesia, China, and Russia, with a notable emphasis on fresh learners rather than postgraduate students [9, 27, 29]. Previous research has shown that similar patterns are evident in studies conducted in Indonesia, China, and Russia, where young learners also responded most positively to influencers perceived as credible and trustworthy, especially on Instagram and TikTok, with virtual influencers increasingly gaining recognition. This consistency across multiple regions suggests that these factors may represent core mechanisms in the effectiveness of influencer marketing in higher education.

5. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

This study extends the theoretical understanding of influencer marketing by contextualizing it in the Higher Education (HE) sector, a domain characterized by high involvement, trust, and long-term decision making. Unlike consumer goods where influencer impact is transactional, in HE effectiveness depends on credibility, emotional resonance, and alignment with institutional values. The research advances source credibility

theory in this context and highlights sectoral transferability, showing that strategies from industries like fashion or health can be adapted to education. It also contributes to influencer classification theory by identifying the applicability of micro, niche, and virtual influencers in services that require trust and commitment.

For marketing managers, the study provides actionable strategies. Institutions should prioritize authentic influencers such as micro influencers or student ambassadors over celebrity endorsements, as they better communicate institutional values and foster trust. Choosing the right platforms, particularly Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, is essential, with content formats like short videos, testimonials, or campus life insights proving effective. Cross sector collaborations, for example linking education with health or entrepreneurship, can expand reach and attract adjacent audiences. A data-driven, audience-centered approach can strengthen branding, boost enrollment intention, and enhance student engagement in an increasingly competitive education market.

Future research should empirically test the role of credibility and trustworthiness, especially on platforms like Instagram and TikTok and among young undergraduate audiences. Quantitative studies could measure the strength of these factors, while comparative and longitudinal research would clarify cultural influences and evolving platform dynamics. Testing in diverse regions such as Indonesia, Russia, and China would enrich cross-cultural insights and ensure strategies remain adaptable to varying educational contexts.

6. CONCLUSION

This study addresses a significant gap in the literature concerning the use of influencer marketing in the Higher Education (HE) sector. Hence, this study found that the most effective influencers roles play in the HE context are credibility and trustworthiness, engagement and emotional connection, and social proof. These roles can inspire the prospective students perceptions, behaviors, and decision-making processes, mirroring their importance in commercial industries but with unique implications in the HE domain, where trust and institutional reputation are paramount.

Thus, this study identifies that sectors such as fashion, e-commerce, and health provide a useful framework for understanding how influencer marketing can be leveraged within education. In terms of platforms, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are the most impactful, offering high engagement and relevance among target demographics. This study also highlights that virtual influencers, micro influencers, and niche influencers are best suited to HE marketing due to their ability to communicate targeted messages with authenticity and relatability. Together, these findings demonstrate that influencer marketing in higher education must be strategically tailored, recognizing the importance of message credibility, platform relevance, and influencer alignment with institutional values and student expectations.

By drawing lessons from more mature sectors, HE institutions can adopt influencer strategies that go beyond visibility to genuinely influence student choices and experiences. As such, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how digital influence mechanisms operate within the service-based, high-involvement decision-making environment of education.

7. DECLARATIONS

7.1. About Authors

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7.2. Author Contributions

Conceptualization: SP; Methodology: LA; Software: LA.; Validation: SP and LA; Formal Analysis: SP. and LA; Investigation: SP; Resources: LA; Data Curation: SP; Writing Original Draft Preparation: SP and LA; Writing Review and Editing: SP and LA; Visualization: SP and LA. have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

7.3. Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

7.4. Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

7.5. Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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