

Future of Higher Education Marketing: A Case Study on Leveraging Influencer Impact on a Changing Immigration Landscape

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Abstract: The University of Hertfordshire is at a crucial juncture. Its recent successes depend heavily on international students. However, tightened UK immigration laws now threaten to sharply reduce international enrollments. This creates a direct risk to the university's revenue and the broader economy in the United Kingdom. To ensure its existence and future, the university must strive to attract more domestic students. Without solid evidence, depending just on student ambassadors for marketing is no longer enough. This study argues that Online Influencer Marketing (OIM) is an effective but underrated strategy for higher education in the UK. Research from Sweden, Canada, Australia, and Portugal demonstrates the transformative impact of OIM on the higher education industry. However, its use in the UK higher education industry is still restricted. This research aims to achieve three key goals: (1) to assess the importance of OIM in UK higher education, (2) to identify influential voices and target audiences for the University of Hertfordshire, and (3) to detect the best social media platforms and content strategies for positive outcomes. The findings indicate that OIM emerged as the third most prominent market trend, with UK audiences responding positively to Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI) and non-mainstream digital personas, with micro-influencers and industry experts proving particularly persuasive in the United Kingdom context. Instagram is identified as the most effective platform for engagement, and authenticity, language, and the content's temporality are the most essential factors in content creation that followers consider. The integration of OIM can also help offset the adverse effects of policy changes and promote positive outcomes. It can also help buffer against negative changes in immigration policy and spark innovation in academic research and marketing. Based on these results, the University of Hertfordshire and similar institutions should integrate Online Influencer Marketing into their student recruitment plans to boost domestic enrollment and support resilience and sustainable growth.

Keywords: Online Influencer Marketing, Higher Education, University of Hertfordshire, Student Recruitment, Social Media Strategy, Online Marketing

1. Introduction

The University of Hertfordshire (UH) has a well-established history spanning over 70 years and a notably diverse student population, with international students accounting for nearly half of its approximately 32,000 enrolments (University of Hertfordshire, 2023a; 2023b). This strong international presence has contributed significantly to the institution's financial sustainability and global reputation, evidenced by UH's receipt of the King's Award for excellence in internationalisation and a reported 330% growth in international sales over six years (University of Hertfordshire, 2024a). However, recent UK immigration policy changes implemented in January 2024 restrict international students' ability to bring dependents, except those enrolled in postgraduate research or PhD programmes (gov.uk, 2023). Early evidence indicates substantial declines in study visas and postgraduate enrolments, raising concerns about the financial resilience of UK higher education institutions that depend heavily on international tuition fees (Statista, 2023a; The Guardian, 2024). In response, this study proposes a strategic focus on increasing local postgraduate enrolments, particularly among Generation Z and Millennial cohorts, who are highly engaged in digital environments (Dolot, 2018). Although UH currently uses social media platforms and student ambassadors as influencers, its online influencer marketing (OIM) remains underdeveloped (University of Hertfordshire, 2024b). Expanding OIM by adopting evidence-based influencer strategies may enhance UH's attractiveness to local postgraduate students and mitigate the financial impacts of restrictive immigration policies (Statista, 2023b).

1.1 Research Questions

1. What is online influencer marketing in the context of the higher education industry in the UK?
2. What is the target market and the appropriate influencers
3. Which are the suitable social media platforms, and how to create compelling content?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Online Influencer Marketing (OIM)

Online Influencer Marketing (OIM) is a digital strategy in which brands collaborate with influencers to engage targeted audiences and build trust (Fobs, 2018). Although the term “influencer” gained prominence in 2019, the practice has historical roots in early brand endorsement by figures such as Wedgwood and Coco Chanel (Levin, 2020). OIM integrates word of mouth and celebrity endorsements within content-driven social media environments (Fobs, 2022). The expansion of social media has increased accessibility to influence, making OIM a cost-effective and impactful marketing tool, with growing institutional recognition and investment (Cornwell & Katz, 2021).

2.2 Electronic Word of Mouth (EWOM)

Online Influencer Marketing (OIM) is conceptualised as a digital extension of traditional word-of-mouth (WoM) marketing (Bakker, 2018). Prior studies suggest that OIM is perceived as credible and accessible due to the authenticity of online reviews (Huete-Alcocer, 2017). However, the transparency of social media may facilitate the spread of misleading content and negative electronic word of mouth (eWoM), requiring institutions to carefully select influencers and monitor shared content to manage reputational risk (Özdemira et al., 2016).

2.3 Influencer

Influencers are individuals who are compensated for producing social media content and who can shape audience opinions and behaviours (Campbell & Farrell, 2020), Figure 1, while Lammenett (2019) proposes an alternative classification framework into consumer advocates, employee advocates, and social advocates, focusing on their relationships with brands rather than follower size. Although top influencers can generate substantial income and strongly affect consumer behaviour, influencer marketing involves reputational risks and higher complaint rates, highlighting the need for careful influencer selection and ongoing evaluation, particularly in educational settings (Statista, 2023c).

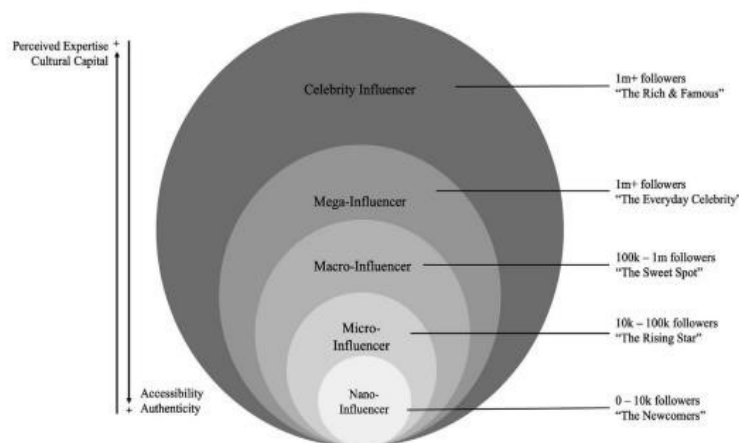


Figure 1: Types of Influencers (Source: Campbell and Farrell, 2020).

2.4 Target Audience

Existing literature emphasises the importance of engaging multiple higher education stakeholders, including parents, students, alumni, and institutional representatives, through personalised marketing strategies (Bashir et al., 2023). Effective marketing should focus on audiences most likely to engage, using customised approaches aligned with their preferences (Chen, 2023). Digital platforms enable advanced audience segmentation; however, UH’s current strategy focuses solely on prospective students, indicating a strategic gap (University of Hertfordshire, 2024d).

2.5 Social Media in the UK

The rapid advancement of technologies, including the Internet of Things (IoT), Internet of Everything (IoE), mobile applications, and social media platforms, has increased the complexity of digital marketing (Arora et al., 2019). Social media, closely linked to influencer marketing (IM), enables celebrities and ordinary users to influence audience attitudes (Haenlein et al., 2020). In the UK, 82.2% of the population, particularly Millennials

and Gen Z, are active social media users, averaging 151 minutes daily, with many aged 25–34 and 29% holding at least a bachelor’s degree, making platforms effective for higher education marketing (Statista, 2024a).

2.6 Theories Related to OIM

2.6.1 The Influence Maximisation Model

It concentrates on identifying the most influential individuals within a social network to maximise the dissemination of information (Chen et al., 2009). Precisely selecting target groups, influencers, and platforms is vital for successful outreach.

$G = (V, E)$ G-Given social network, V-users, E-influencers

2.6.2 Social Exchange Theory

It explains that online interactions involve mutual rewards and costs, where influencers offer engaging content, and followers respond through interaction (Kim & Kim, 2021). This emphasises the importance of influencer suitability and platform features.

2.6.3 The Source Credibility Model

It states that trust in influencers depends on their authenticity and expertise, which shapes attitudes and behaviours (Kim & Kim, 2021). Choosing credible influencers and platforms is essential for building trust and achieving marketing objectives. Together, these theories direct the identification of influencers, the selection of platforms, and the creation of trustworthy content to optimise the effectiveness of OIM campaigns.

2.7 Research Gap

The literature on Online Influencer Marketing (OIM) is primarily qualitative, drawing on in-depth interviews with influencers and brand managers in countries such as Sweden, Canada, Australia, and Portugal (McMullan et al., 2022). Some studies have employed surveys and experiments focusing on followers, including research by Södergren & Vallström and Kim and Kim (2021), such as Belanche’s (2021) online experiment with influencer Zoe Sugg. Despite these contributions, a significant gap exists regarding OIM in the UK, particularly within higher education. Current research lacks empirical and theoretical insights into how OIM could address declining international student enrolments, highlighting the need for foundational studies.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Philosophy and Methodology

This study adopted an interpretivist approach to explore social phenomena, enabling empathetic understanding of individuals’ behaviours and attitudes towards OIM rather than focusing on generalisable variables (Pulla & Carter, 2018). An inductive approach was used to generate theories from qualitative data collected from secondary sources, reflecting the exploratory nature of the research (Kironko & Odoy, 2020). A case study method was applied to examine IT in real-world contexts (Kironko & Otieno, 2020), with qualitative analysis employed, excluding variable relationships or quantitative techniques (Lavarda & Bellucci, 2022).

3.2 Data Collection Method

The study relied on secondary data collected by others for different purposes (Saunders et al., 2019). The types of secondary data, as introduced by Saunders et al. (2019), were adapted to the study as follows:

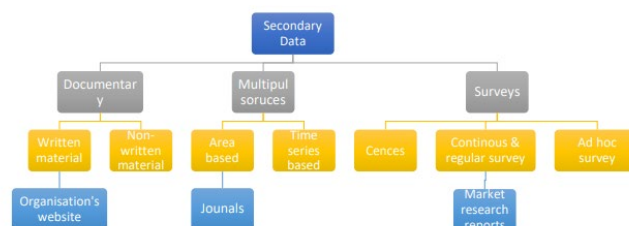


Figure 2: Types of Secondary Data (Source: Saunders et al., 2019)

The study utilised secondary data collected by others for various purposes (Saunders et al., 2019). As illustrated in Figure 2, a qualitative research design was adopted, offering flexibility and an inductive approach suited to the study’s objectives. Thematic analysis was employed to systematically examine the data, following Clarke and Braun’s (Finlay, 2021) six-phase framework. Data analysis was conducted using the open-source tool Taguette, with supplementary manual coding for graphical sources to ensure comprehensive and accurate analysis.

The six-phase framework to conduct thematic analysis (Clarke and Braun, 2013) is: Get familiar with the data, the researcher intensively reads selected academic journals and checks other sources such as reports and websites, Produce initial codes, look for themes, evaluate themes, Interpret and name themes, Report writing

3.3 Justification of the Methodology

The thematic analysis was conducted with reflexivity, transparency, and active engagement to ensure rigour, accountability, and reliability (Finlay, 2021). Ethical guidelines were followed by using reputable sources, avoiding personal data, and providing proper attribution (Saunders et al., 2019), with all methods and limitations clearly disclosed.

3.4 Limitations of the Methodology

The case study at the University of Hertfordshire had limited generalisability (Yin, 2018) and was vulnerable to researcher bias. Data collection methods were constrained by time and resources (Saunders et al., 2019), and dependence on secondary data impacted relevance and quality (Saunders et al., 2019). Thematic analysis was prone to researcher bias and lacked standardised guidance (Nowell et al., 2017). Future research should include primary data and diverse methods to improve reliability.

4. Findings, Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Descriptive of Secondary Data

The study selected 13 secondary data sources, including journals, survey reports, a website, and conference proceedings, prioritising validity and quality to meet the research objectives. Journal Impact Factor (JIF) was the primary criterion, serving as an established measure of scientific excellence and research quality (Paulus et al., 2018).

4.2 Theme Identification

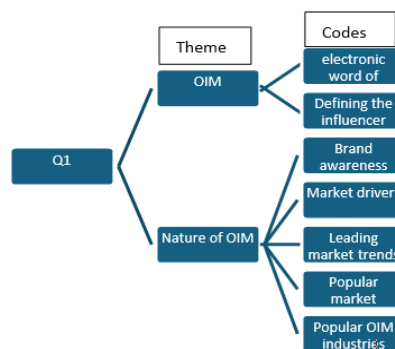


Figure 3: OIM and its nature

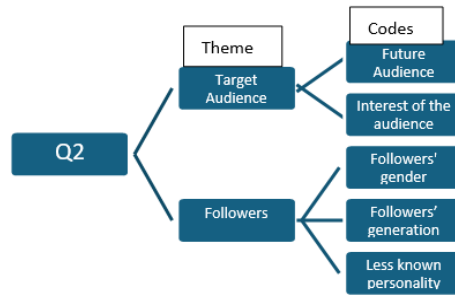


Figure 4: Target Audience

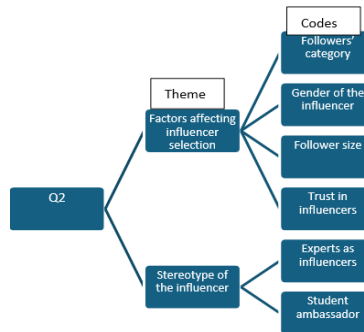


Figure 5: Influencer appropriateness

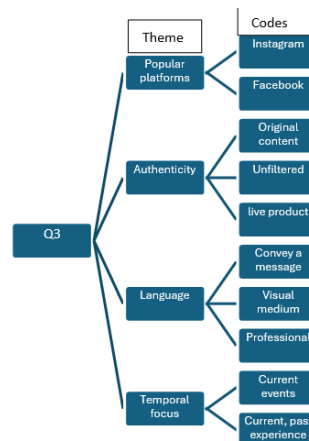


Figure 6: Social media appropriateness

Themes can be identified as above, based on different research questions. Figures 3–6.

4.3 Key Findings

The key findings of the study are as follows.

- Avatar or Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI) can be implemented as OIM
- Brand awareness is the main motive of OIM
- Followers are attracted more towards Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI)
- Followers prefer to follow less-known characters
- Micro-influencers are more effective than other influencers with a larger follower base
- Trustworthiness is the key criterion to follow for an influencer
- Experts are suitable for the education and higher education industry in the UK
- Instagram is the most popular and effective social media platform in the UK
- Authenticity, language, and temporality of the content are the most critical factors in content creation

4.3.1 Market Trends

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly accelerated the consumption of influencer content as social media became a primary channel for communication and entertainment (Kaya, 2020). By 2023, Online Influencer Marketing (OIM) had emerged as the third most prominent market trend in the UK, following artificial intelligence and video content, and had gained recognition from both industry and academia (Joshi et al., 2023). Video-based influencer content is identified as the most effective OIM format (Rohde & Mau, 2021). While influencer marketing is widely used in sectors such as fashion and lifestyle, its application in UK higher education remains limited. However, international studies suggest the OIM's potential effectiveness in higher education, highlighting the need for further research in the UK context (John et al., 2022; 2021; Bashir et al., 2023).

4.3.2 Avatar or Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI) for OIM

This study extends influencer marketing beyond individual personalities to include groups and computer-generated (CGI) avatars, an area underexplored in prior research (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; McMullan et al., 2022). Recent studies show that virtual influencers can appear engaging and authentic, supporting social exchange theory and their effectiveness in digital marketing (Audrezet & Koles, 2023). Growing consumer interest in CGI personalities, including animals and human-like avatars, further highlights their potential (Wang, 2021). Given the University of Hertfordshire's recognised expertise and strong UK rankings in animation and digital creation, adopting CGI influencers is both feasible and promising, creating new opportunities for online influencer marketing and future research in higher education (University of Hertfordshire, 2024c; 2024e).

4.3.3 Brand Awareness

The study's findings restated that the primary goal of OIM is to increase brand awareness. Brand building through OIM has been a most attractive area of research among scholars such as Okonkwo and Namkoisse (2023) and Čarnogurský and Ilavská (2021). Brand building can enhance knowledge by recommending products that drive sales. Again, this has been proven by the University of Hertfordshire (University of Hertfordshire, 2024d).

4.3.4 Audience Targeting and Segmentation

The findings indicate that the University of Hertfordshire (UH) primarily targets undergraduate and postgraduate students, with limited focus on other stakeholders, including alumni, corporate professionals, staff, and academics. Existing studies highlight the importance of engaging parents and higher education representatives, as well as the influence of reference groups on student decision-making (Bashir et al., 2023). Although the target audience could not be fully identified due to data limitations, follower characteristics provided valuable insights.

4.3.5 Preference for Less-Known Characters by Gen Z and Millennials

A recent study found that 84% of followers, mainly male millennials and Gen Z, now prefer content from lesser-known personalities. This contrasts with Lee and Jang's (2013) earlier research, which emphasised the dominance of public figures. The shift indicates that using virtual or CGI lesser-known characters could better engage local students at UH. The increasing appeal of these personalities is a key finding (Lee & Jang, 2013).

4.3.6 Selecting an Influencer Based on Gender

Research suggests female influencers are often perceived as more attractive, particularly in beauty-related contexts, while male influencers are associated with technology and gaming (Lokithasan et al., 2019). However, other studies report no significant relationship between influencer gender and audience attraction (Hudders & Jans, 2022). Given that higher education is not inherently gendered, this factor was not examined; future research may clarify gender effects on avatar visual media influence.

4.3.7 Effectiveness of Micro-Influencers

Research indicates that micro-influencers (1,000–100,000 followers) are often more appealing and effective than large-scale influencers, as they are perceived as more credible and relatable (Coelho, 2019). Large follower counts may reduce perceived brand uniqueness and weaken brand attitudes (Veirman et al., 2017). Micro-influencers' transparency enhances parasocial interaction, suggesting UH should carefully evaluate influencer type, a proposition warranting further research (Liu et al., 2021)

4.3.8 Trustworthiness of Influencer

Trustworthiness is consistently identified as the most critical criterion in influencer selection, strongly shaping followers' confidence (Kim & Kim, 2021). While attractiveness may be considered, only trustworthiness significantly influences trust in influencer content. Trust also mediates expertise, homophily, authenticity, and brand loyalty, though maintaining consistent trustworthiness among human influencers remains challenging.

4.3.9 Experts as Influencers

The study concludes that teachers, lecturers, and professors are the most effective influencers for promoting universities such as UH due to their expertise, credibility, and high levels of trust. Existing research supports the influential role of educators in higher education marketing, highlighting their authenticity and credibility (Salvador & Pechuán, 2023). Although student ambassadors have increased social media engagement (Rofls, 2021), engagement alone does not indicate overall marketing effectiveness. The findings suggest that both real and virtual academic experts strengthen university messaging through the source credibility model. Given UH's lack of formal evaluation of student ambassador outcomes, the study recommends a careful reassessment of current influencer strategies.

4.3.10 Social Media Platform – Instagram

The findings confirm that Instagram is the most widely used social media platform in the UK and functions as a complex socio-technical system rather than a simple application (Leaver et al., 2020). Instagram content is often perceived as trustworthy, enhancing brand perception and social presence (Jin et al., 2019). The platform has also become the primary space for content creators and commercial engagement (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020). Although UH already prioritises Instagram for brand promotion, this result fulfils research question three by identifying Instagram as the most suitable platform for online influencer marketing.

4.3.11 Content Creation

Content creation is central to conveying messages in online influencer marketing (OIM), with authenticity, language, and temporality as key factors (Pringle & Fritz, 2019; Audrezet et al., 2020). Authentic content, such as live videos or real-life scenarios, fosters trust and reliability, expressed through intrinsic motivation and integrity (Audrezet et al., 2020). Language, including words, images, and videos, enhances engagement, particularly on platforms like Instagram and Twitter (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021). Temporality, including timing and duration, shapes effectiveness, as seen in ephemeral content like Instagram Stories (Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020). Poor timing can amplify misinformation (Shin et al., 2018). Together, these elements strengthen social exchange, though further research is required.

5. Conclusion

This study explored Online Influencer Marketing (OIM) and its potential for the University of Hertfordshire (UH) to attract more local postgraduate students. The findings show that while UH currently relies on student ambassadors, this approach may not be the most effective. Evidence suggests that engaging higher education experts or using emerging technologies, such as computer-generated or avatar influencers, could provide stronger results. The research highlighted how OIM has evolved from traditional word-of-mouth communication to a dynamic, digital-driven strategy, accelerated by social media and the COVID-19 pandemic. Millennials and Generation Z were identified as the key audience, showing a preference for authentic, trustworthy content and micro-influencers who offer expertise. Instagram emerged as the most effective platform, with authenticity, clear language, and timely content being essential for engagement. The study faced limitations, including reliance on secondary data and time constraints, which may have introduced bias and limited in-depth analysis. To strengthen future marketing strategies, UH should conduct primary research to understand postgraduate students' perceptions of OIM, evaluate the effectiveness of student ambassadors, and explore the use of CGI influencers. These steps will help UH refine its marketing, enhance engagement, and remain at the forefront of innovative digital marketing practices.

Ethics Declaration

This research is based exclusively on secondary data obtained from publicly accessible sources that are legitimately available for use without requiring permission. An initial review confirmed that sufficient secondary

data were available to address the research questions. As the study did not involve human participants or the collection of personal data, formal ethical approval was not required.

AI Declaration

AI tools, including ChatGPT and Perplexity AI, were used to assist with summarising existing literature and refining written expression. Grammarly was used for grammatical and language corrections. These tools supported clarity and presentation only; all analysis, interpretation, and academic judgment remain the author's own. English is the author's second language.

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