



IMPACT OF ONLINE MARKETING STRATEGIES ON STUDENTS' DECISION-MAKING FOR HIGHER EDUCATION: THE MODERATING ROLE OF INFLUENCER MARKETING

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Abstract

This study explores the influence of online marketing on students' university selection decisions, with particular attention to the moderating role of social media influencers. The primary objective is to understand how digital marketing efforts shape students' choices regarding Higher Education Institutions, especially when influencer-driven content is involved. To achieve this, a quantitative research design was employed, using a structured questionnaire to collect data from 100 students in Uttarakhand, India. The sample comprised senior secondary students as well as first-year undergraduate and postgraduate learners.

Methodology- Data analysis was conducted using PLS-SEM 4.1.03, enabling an in-depth assessment of the relationships among the key variables. The structural model was applied to test the proposed hypotheses, while the measurement model validated the reliability and accuracy of the survey instrument.

Findings- Findings reveal that online marketing has a significant impact on students' decision-making when selecting Higher Education Institutions. Additionally, social media influencers substantially strengthen this relationship, amplifying the effect of digital marketing efforts. These results highlight the combined importance of direct online promotional strategies and influencer-led engagement in shaping students' educational choices. Overall, the study emphasises the expanding role of digital and influencer marketing in guiding young individuals' decisions within the higher education landscape.

Keywords: Online Marketing, Digital Marketing, Influencer Marketing, Students' Decision-making, Higher Education Institutions

1. Introduction

Online marketing, also referred to as digital or internet marketing, encompasses the array of strategies and techniques employed by businesses and organisations to promote their products, services, or brand through digital channels. It involves harnessing the power of various online platforms and technologies to engage a targeted audience, spark their interest, drive website traffic, generate leads, and ultimately achieve business objectives. As noted by Brosnan (2012), the term "digital marketing" was first coined in the 1990s, though, at the time, the emphasis was primarily on customer-focused advertising. However, between 2000 and 2010,

the concept evolved as new social media and mobile technologies emerged.

In recent years, online marketing has surged in prominence, fueled by the widespread adoption of the internet and the rapid evolution of digital technologies. It offers numerous advantages over traditional marketing approaches, including a wider reach, highly targeted advertising, cost- efficiency, data-driven insights, and deeper customer engagement. The shift to digital has fundamentally transformed the way businesses connect with their audience and pursue growth.

Digital marketing leverages cutting-edge technologies and online channels such as websites, email, databases, mobile and wireless platforms, and digital television to conduct marketing activities. Its primary focus lies in achieving profitable customer acquisition and retention by deepening insights into customer profiles, behaviours, value drivers, and loyalty triggers. By harnessing this understanding, digital marketing emphasizes personalised, targeted communication and online services tailored to meet the unique needs of customers. This focus on interaction and relationship-building distinguishes online marketing from traditional offline marketing strategies (Chaffey, 2007).

2. Evolution of Online Marketing

Digital marketing has evolved rapidly due to technological advancements, shifting consumer preferences, and the emergence of new online platforms. Over time, these factors have shaped key developments that transformed how businesses connect with audiences.

Foundational Phase: Internet and Web 1.0 (1990s)

Digital marketing originated in the early internet era, when websites were static and primarily used to provide basic information to users (Kirti S, 2016).

Search Engine Growth and SEO Expansion (Early 2000s)

As search engines—especially Google— became widely used, businesses started prioritising search engine optimisation (SEO) to improve their online visibility (Chaffey & Smith, 2017).

Social Media Transformation (Mid- 2000s)

Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube reshaped digital marketing by allowing brands to interact with users more personally and build online communities (Qualman, 2013).

Mobile Shift and Technological Advancements (Late 2000s–2010s)

With the rise of smartphones, marketers shifted focus to mobile-friendly strategies, including apps and responsive design. Later, content marketing and data-driven decision-making became essential (Strauss & Frost, 2017; Pulizzi, 2015).

Modern Trends: AI, Automation, and Influencer Marketing (2010s–2020s)

Artificial intelligence and automation tools improved personalisation and efficiency in campaigns, while influencer marketing and video content emerged as dominant promotional methods (Barker & Barker, 2017; Brown, 2018).

3. Scope of the study

The scope of this study is to analyze the influence of online marketing strategies on students' decision-making while selecting higher education institutions. In today's digital age, students increasingly depend on online platforms to obtain information about universities, courses, rankings, infrastructure, and placement opportunities. The study focuses on how these digital channels shape students' perceptions and guide their choices regarding higher education.

In addition, the study examines the moderating role of influencer marketing in influencing the relationship between online marketing strategies and students' decision- making. With the rising popularity of digital influencers, educational content creators, and student vloggers,

influencer marketing has emerged as an important factor in building trust and shaping opinions. This research seeks to understand how aspects such as influencer credibility, relatability, and content engagement affect students' responses to the online marketing efforts of higher education institutions.

1.

4. Objectives

1. To understand the influence of online marketing on students' decision-making when choosing higher education institutions.
2. To know the Moderating role of Influencer Marketing in Online Marketing and Students' Decision- Making in the selection of Higher Education Institutions.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive research design supported by purposive sampling. The sample included students from the management department, specifically first- year BBA and MBA students, along with doctoral candidates. An online questionnaire was distributed to 160 students, out of which 100 provided complete responses. The questionnaire items were adapted from established literature. Data analysis was performed using SPSS 23.1 and SmartPLS 4.1.0.3. Following the SEM approach recommended by Anderson and Gerbing (1988), the analysis was carried out in two phases: assessment of the measurement model and evaluation of the structural model. SmartPLS SEM was utilized to examine both components. The demographic profile of the participants revealed that 75% were female and 25% were male. Additionally, 65% of the respondents were undergraduate students, while the remaining 35% were enrolled in postgraduate programs.

4. Review of Literature

a. Online Marketing & Higher Education

Digital marketing enables quick, direct interaction with target audiences through social media, offering fast feedback, easy measurement, and cost-effective results— unlike traditional marketing, which is slower, more costly, and less responsive. As technology grows, digital media provides strong opportunities for educational institutions, allowing them to creatively share information worldwide through engaging content like videos on various online platforms (Gondane, 2021). Social media platforms now play a key role in students' admission decisions, prompting universities to use these channels to strengthen their recruitment efforts and engage with potential applicants. As higher education shifts from a product-driven to a market-driven environment, attracting more students has become essential for institutional survival. Digital marketing helps institutions reach wider audiences and stay relevant to tech-savvy students. Barnes et al. (2010) noted that universities use social media more actively than major Fortune 50 companies; their study showed that in 2010, 32% of colleges and universities used blogs for student engagement, compared to just 8% of Fortune 500 firms. Dhote et al. (2015) reported that students seeking admission to higher education institutions in Pune, India, showed a high level of awareness about digital media. This explores how digital marketing impacts students' choices regarding admission to higher education institutions. Globally, these institutions face several challenges, such as changing student expectations, rising international competition, and declining financial resources (Simoes and Soares, 2020). Stageman (2011) carried out a case study to evaluate how students engage with higher education institutions on social media from the application stage

through to their final enrollment decisions.

b. Influencer Marketing

Consequently, “Influencer marketing refers to a form of marketing where marketers and brands invest in selected influencers to create and/or promote their branded content to both the influencer’s own followers and to the brands’ target consumers” (Yodel 2017). Influencer marketing can raise brand awareness, build credibility, and boost customer engagement; it has become a crucial component of marketing strategies for many Indian businesses (Siddiqui, Z. M., & Hassan, M. U.,2021). Online personalities who have a large audience across various social media platforms, like YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, or personal blogs, and possess the ability to influence their followers' opinions or actions, are referred to as social media influencers (Agrawal 2016; Varsamis 2018). By 2022, the influencer marketing industry in India was worth more than 12 billion Indian rupees. It was expected to expand at a compound annual growth rate of 25 per cent over the following five years. The market value was also projected to reach 28 billion Indian rupees by 2026 (The Statista Report).

c. Students’ Decision-Making

The decision-making process for selecting higher education institutions (HEIs) is typically multifaceted and influenced by a variety of personal, academic, and environmental factors. Students usually start by gathering information on potential institutions, focusing on factors such as academic reputation, course offerings, and campus facilities. According to a study by Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015), prospective students often seek information from multiple sources, including institutional websites, social media, online reviews, and word-of-mouth from peers or family members. These online platforms provide students with detailed insights into programs, faculty, and campus facilities, often leading to more informed choices (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011). Moreover, personalised advertisements and social media engagement help institutions create a more interactive and appealing image for potential students (Soutar & Turner, 2002). A study by Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015) found that digital marketing not only attracts students but also helps create a brand identity that resonates with prospective students' aspirations and needs.

d. Definitions

(Chaffey 2000) - *"The application of the internet and related digital technologies to achieve marketing objectives"*.

(Kotler & Armstrong, 2009) - *"Digital marketing is a form of direct marketing which links consumers with sellers electronically using interactive technologies like emails, websites, online forums and newsgroups, interactive television, and mobile communications."*

(Chaffey, 2019) - *"Digital marketing is achieving marketing objectives through applying digital technologies and media."*

(Sudha & Sheena, 2017)- *"process of identifying and activating individuals who influence a specific target audience or medium, to be part of a brand's campaign towards increased reach, sales, or engagement"*.

(Yodel, 2017)- *"Influencer marketing is a type of advertising in which businesses and marketers pay carefully chosen influencers to produce and/or distribute their branded content to the influencers' own fan base as well as the brands' target audience"*.

5. Theories

a. User Gratification Theory

Hornik and Schlinger (1981) explain through the Uses and Gratifications Theory that people

seek information based on their social and psychological needs. These motivations shape how individuals choose and use different media platforms, as they prefer the ones that best fulfil their specific expectations and personal requirements.

b. Signalling Theory

Boulding and Kirmani (1993) explain through signalling theory that customers often experience information gaps throughout the decision-making process, from assessing options before purchase to evaluating products after use. Because of this information asymmetry, firms can create a competitive edge by offering clearer, more reliable, and higher-quality information to their customers.

c. Source Credibility Theory

According to Hovland et al. (1953), Source Credibility Theory. Expertise and trustworthiness are the two primary cornerstones of credibility. The source credibility theory has been used by several influencer researchers to explain how the credibility of influencers influences consumer behaviour due to marketers' growing interest in the new category of endorsers, or influencers (Christodoulaki 2018; Vrontis et al. 2021). To explain how influencers' perceived credibility affects the efficacy of influencer campaigns in terms of consumer attitudes and actions, researchers

employ the source credibility hypothesis (Djaforova & Rushworth, 2017).

Trustworthiness- According to Hovland et al. (1953), trustworthiness is the extent to which the recipient feels that the communicator is reliable and that the source's statements are moral and truthful.

Expertise- McCroskey (1966) defined source expertise as the capacity or qualification of a source, including the source's knowledge or abilities, to make particular assertions about a particular subject or issue.

6. Theoretical background and Hypothesis development

a. Online Marketing and Students' Decision-Making

H1: Online Marketing positively influences the Students' Decision- Making regarding the selection of Higher Education Institutions.

Mishra and Madaan (2020) explored the role of online marketing in Indian university admissions, finding that elements such as student videos, hashtags, web design, mobile marketing, virtual tours, and platforms like WhatsApp significantly influenced students' choices. Less effective channels included Snapchat, streaming services, and LinkedIn ads. The study concluded that private universities could refine their admissions strategies by focusing on the more impactful digital tools (Mishra & Madaan, 2020). Other studies support these findings. Kumar, Kripalani, and Sharma (2021) noted that over 80% of students acknowledged the influence of digital marketing on their awareness and engagement with institutions, with websites being a favoured source of information.

Gondane and Pawar (2021) observed that 70% of Nagpur students secured admissions through digital marketing, with higher awareness among female students. These studies collectively emphasise the critical role of digital platforms in modern student recruitment (Kumar, Kripalani & Sharma, 2021; Gondane & Pawar, 2021).

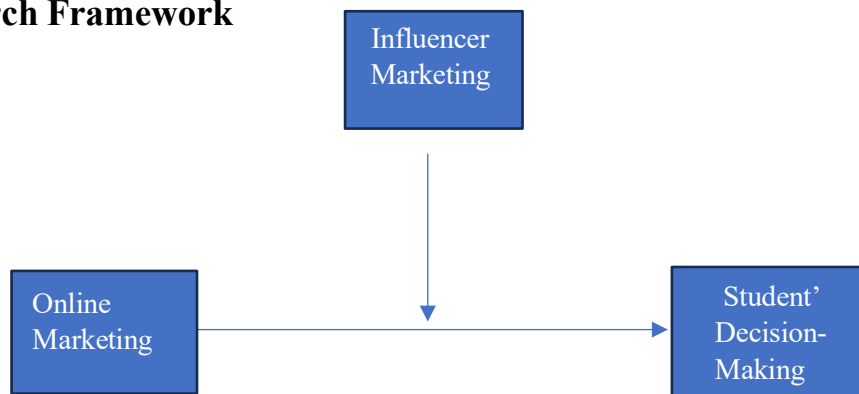
b. Influencer Marketing and Students' Decision-Making.

H2: Moderating role of Influencer Marketing on Students' Decision- Making regarding selection of Higher Education Institutions

Influencer marketing can help businesses navigate the complexities of modern marketing by

increasing sales, building trust, and raising brand awareness. Student decision-making is greatly influenced by influencer marketing, particularly in the field of online marketing. Because they are digital natives, students are greatly influenced by social media platforms, where influencers serve as reliable resources for advice and information. Influencer marketing strategies have become a key approach in targeting the student market segment. Research findings indicate that influencers have effectively communicated brand and product values to students, influencing their decision-making process. (Julianti et al.,2023). This study pinpoints the essential elements of fashion influencers-likeability, familiarity, trustworthiness, and similarity—that have a major impact on students' purchase intentions. The relationship between these variables and purchasing decisions is mediated by students' attitudes. These insights assist marketers in choosing influencers who successfully mould student attitudes, which in turn influences their fashion industry purchase decisions (Tsarashafa & Qastharin,2021).

7. Research Framework



8. Results:

Fitting measurement models

The PLS-SEM approach has been applied to fit measurement models by evaluating reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

a. Reliability Analysis

Hair et al. (2020) established a 0.60 threshold for acceptable outer loadings. Some items, including two from Online Marketing (OM1 = 0.562, OM3 = 0.505), two from Decision-making (DM2 = 0.534, DCM5 = 0.342), and one from Influencer Marketing (IM4=0.388) fell below this standard and were removed.

b. Convergent Validity

Convergent validity was assessed using SmartPLS by calculating outer loadings, AVE, and Composite Reliability. AVE values above 0.50, factor loadings over 0.60, and CR above 0.70 confirmed validity, as per Hair et al. (2020). Students' Decision-Making has been retained with a Cronbach Alpha Value of 0.688 because the AVE value is more than 0.5. The findings of this assessment are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: “Outer loadings, reliability analysis and AVE”

Variable	Items	Factor Loading	Cronbach’s Alpha	Reliability	AVE
Online Marketing	OM2	0.755	0.711	0.837	0.632
	OM4	0.80s4			

	OM5	0.824			
Influencer	IM1	0.778			
Marketing	IM2	0.712	0.714	0.803	0.577
	IM3	0.786			
Students	DM1	0.865			
Decision-	DM3	0.615	0.688	0.776	0.540
Making	DM4	0.714			

Fitting the structural research model

c. R Square

This criterion is essential for evaluating the validity of the study's conceptual model. According to Cohen's recommendation, an acceptable R² value should exceed 0.26 (26%) for explained variance. The results of this evaluation are shown in Table 2.

	R-Square
Students Decision-Making	0.422

d. Hypothesis results

Table 3: Hypothesis Results

Hypothesis	T-Value	P-Value	Result
IM-> DM	3.542	0.000	Supported
OM-> DM	5.163	0.000	Supported
IM x OM-> DM	2.050	0.040	Supported

9. Discussions

The study found that online marketing has a significant influence on students' decisions in the selection of higher education institutions ($\beta = 5.163$), indicating it as a key factor in the decision-making process. These results are in line with the findings of (Gondane and Pawar, 2021)

The second hypothesis posits that Influencer marketing moderates the link between online marketing and students' decision-making. The ($\beta = 2.050$) suggests that influencer marketing strong the relationship between online Marketing and Students' Decision-Making. These findings are in line with previous research (Julianti et al,2023).

Additionally, shows the positive relationship between Influencer marketing and Students' Decision-Making in the selection of Higher Education Institutions with ($\beta=3.542$).

10. Conclusion

The results demonstrate that online marketing plays a significant role in shaping students' educational choices. Institutions that employ focused digital strategies—such as social media outreach and online advertisements—are better positioned to attract student attention and influence their decision-making. Moreover, influencer marketing was found to be an important moderating factor. Endorsements from influencers add authenticity and relatability to digital campaigns, thereby strengthening their overall impact on student perceptions.

Overall, the findings highlight the importance of developing strong online marketing approaches supported by influencer partnerships. Such combined efforts are essential for effectively engaging prospective students and guiding them in selecting suitable Higher Education Institutions.

Limitations and Scope for Future Research

Several limitations in the current study must be considered. Firstly, the sample size is inadequate compared to the overall population, necessitating further research to validate the findings. Additionally, varying perspectives within the statistical community on this topic may influence the results. Furthermore, the findings are limited to management students in Uttarakhand. Future research could provide a more thorough investigation of the types of online marketing platforms affecting students and broaden the scope beyond management students.

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