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The Influence of Social Commerce and Influencer Marketing on Student Enrollment: An Empirical Study of Private HEIs in Indore

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Abstract: ***The landscape of higher education marketing is undergoing a seismic shift from traditional "billboard-to-campus" funnels to dynamic, social-first ecosystems. This study investigates the impact of social commerce and influencer marketing on student enrolment decisions within private Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Indore, focusing on M, SA and AI. Utilizing a quantitative approach with 278 survey responses, the research analyses platform preferences, trust levels, and the effectiveness of social commerce tools like "Apply Now" buttons and Live Q&A sessions.***
Statistical analysis reveals that YouTube is the primary platform for educational information (60.8%), followed by Facebook and LinkedIn. While students show moderate trust in "Campus Tours" (u = 3.45), there is a significant scepticism regarding influencer transparency, with a mean score of 4.39 indicating that students believe influencers hide negative aspects. Pearson correlation analysis showed a weak positive relationship (r = 0.152$) between trust in influencers and final enrolment intent, suggesting that while influencers build awareness, final decisions are moderated by institutional credibility and peer validation. The paper concludes with strategic recommendations for HEIs to bridge the "credibility gap" through authentic student-led content and transparent social commerce integrations.
Keywords: Social Commerce, Influencer Marketing, Student Enrollment, Higher Education, Indore, Digital Marketing, Gen Z.

I. INTRODUCTION

The global higher education sector is witnessing a transformative shift in how institutions communicate with prospective students. In the era of Web 3.0, the traditional "linear" enrolment funnel—moving from a billboard to a website and then to a campus visit—is being replaced by a dynamic, social-first journey.

Two dominant forces driving this change are Social Commerce and Influencer Marketing. While social commerce integrates shopping functionalities directly into social platforms, influencer marketing leverages the trust and reach of content creators to shape consumer perceptions. India possesses one of the world's largest higher education systems, and the demand for professional courses has surged alongside economic development. This has led to intense competition, particularly among private HEIs, to attract talented students. These institutions are increasingly moving away from traditional media toward performance-driven digital strategies. Students are no longer passive consumers; they are active "social shoppers" of education, seeking peer-validated content and real-time engagement.

A. The Indore Education Hub

Indore, the commercial capital of Madhya Pradesh, has emerged as a premier educational hub in Central India. With a high density of private universities like M, SA and the AI, the city presents a unique competitive field. These institutions represent different academic orientations—from technical excellence at M to healthcare focus at SA and entrepreneurship at AI.

B. Problem Statement

Despite the heavy investment in digital marketing, there is a lack of empirical evidence regarding how social commerce and influencer marketing truly influence student choices in a localized context like Indore. Institutions face a "credibility gap" where paid reviews and misinformation can lead to a "dissatisfaction gap" between digital expectations and campus reality.

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C. Objectives of the Study

1) To identify the most influential social media platforms for students seeking HEI information in Indore.
2) To evaluate the level of trust students, place in educational influencers and student vloggers.
3) To analyze the effectiveness of social commerce features (e.g., "Apply Now" buttons, Live Q&A) on enrolment intent.
4) To examine the correlation between influencer trust and final enrolment decisions.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Social commerce is the integration of social media and e-commerce functionalities. In the context of HEIs, this translates into a "Social Enrollment Funnel" where institutions turn a "Like" into a "Lead" without the student leaving their favourite app. Recent studies highlight that social commerce boosts brand visibility through authentic and relatable content. Influencer marketing in HEIs involves partnering with credible individuals—student vloggers, alumni, or niche academic coaches—to sway perceptions. Research by Umesha & Shruthi (2026) suggests that while influencers enhance purchase intention, their effectiveness depends heavily on transparency and ethical practices. In the Greek sector, studies have shown that influencer marketing yields up to 11 times higher ROI than traditional banner ads due to higher conversion stemming from credibility.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) suggests that the persuasiveness of digital content depends on the level of "thinking" a consumer devotes to it. For students, this elaboration process is often triggered by "Success Proxies"—such as seeing an alumnus working at a Fortune 500 company on LinkedIn. While broad studies exist on digital marketing, localized empirical research on the intersection of social commerce and influencer marketing in Indian tier-2 cities like Indore remains scarce. This study fills that gap by analysing specific institutional cases (M, SA, AI).

III. METHODOLOGY

A quantitative research approach was adopted to examine the relationship between digital marketing strategies and student enrolment behavior. A descriptive research design was chosen to collect detailed information about current student perceptions. Primary data was collected through a structured questionnaire distributed via Google Forms among students in Indore. A total of 278 valid responses were obtained. The sample included students from diverse backgrounds:

- Management (BBA/MBA): 109 respondents.
- Medical/Pharmacy: 107 respondents.
- Engineering (B.Tech/M.Tech): 47 respondents.
- Liberal Arts/Law/Others: 15 respondents.

A. Instrumentation

The survey instrument utilized a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) to measure variables such as:

1) Trust in student vloggers.
2) Impact of placement reviews.
3) Utility of "Apply Now" buttons.
4) Perception of influencer transparency.

B. Data Analysis Techniques

Data was analysed using Python-based statistical tools. The analysis included:

1) Frequency Distribution: To map platform usage and demographic clusters.
2) Mean Score Analysis: To evaluate the average sentiment toward different marketing interventions.
3) Pearson Correlation: To test the strength of the relationship between trust in influencers (Variable X) and enrolment intent (Variable Y).

IV. RESULTS AND STATISTICAL INTERPRETATION

A. Social Media Platform Usage

Contrary to the initial assumption that Instagram would dominate educational updates, the data shows a clear preference for video-based and professional platforms:

Platform	Frequency	Percentage (%)
YouTube	169	60.8
Facebook	41	14.7
LinkedIn	35	12.6
Instagram	22	7.9
Telegram	**11**	**4.0**

YouTube's dominance suggests that students prefer "long-form" authentic content, such as detailed campus reviews and placement audits, over the ephemeral nature of Instagram reels for serious academic decisions.

B. Mean Score Analysis of Key Variables

The mean (μ) scores provide insights into student attitudes toward digital interventions:

Variable / Statement	Mean Score (μ)
"Influencers sometimes hide the negatives"	4.39
"I checked if a post is 'Sponsored' before trusting"	3.87
"Seeing Live Q&A sessions on Instagram helped clear doubts"	3.85
"The 'Apply Now' button makes application easier"	3.74
"I prefer interacting with counsellors via WhatsApp/Social Media"	3.73
"Influencer's review of placement packages influenced me"	3.59
"I trust a student vlogger's 'Campus Tour' more than brochures"	3.45

The highest mean (4.39) indicates a high level of consumer scepticism. Students are aware of "Paid Review Bias" and actively look for "Sponsored" disclosures (3.87). However, interactive features like Live Q&A (3.85) and Social Commerce tools (3.74) are viewed positively as utility-enhancing features.

C. Pearson Correlation Analysis

The relationship between Trust in Influencers and Final Enrollment Intent (as measured by the utility of "Apply Now" buttons) was calculated:

1) Pearson Correlation Coefficient (r): 0.1522

An r-value of 0.15 indicates a weak positive correlation. This suggests that while influencers are effective at the "top of the funnel" (building awareness and interest), they are not the sole drivers of final enrolment. The decision to enrol is a high-involvement process likely moderated by other factors such as parental advice, official accreditation (NAAC/NIRF), and physical campus visits.

V. DISCUSSION

The study identifies a "Trust Paradox." Students prefer student-led "Campus Tours" over official brochures (3.45), yet they overwhelmingly believe influencers hide negative information (4.39). This highlights a need for **Radical Transparency**. HEIs in Indore, like M and AI, must shift from scripted influencer campaigns to unscripted alumni-led storytelling to bridge this gap. The findings support the shift toward a "Social Enrollment Funnel". Features like "Apply Now" buttons and WhatsApp-based counseling are now expected standards. For institutions like SA, which rely on legacy and trust, leveraging the "Trust-Based Influencer Marketing" model through medical alumni can humanize the brand more effectively than traditional ads. Management students (the largest demographic in the study, n=109) showed higher engagement with "creative" influencer strategies, while engineering and medical students preferred data-driven content like placement audits and infrastructure walkthroughs.

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VI. IMPLICATIONS

1) Leverage YouTube for SEO-rich Content: Given YouTube's 60.8% dominance, institutions should focus on "reality checks," placement audits, and deep-dive faculty interviews rather than just short reels.
2) Implement Disclosure Transparency: Since students actively check for "Sponsored" tags (3.87), HEIs should encourage influencers to provide honest, balanced reviews to increase long-term credibility.
3) Enhance Social Commerce UX: Simplify the path from "social discovery" to "admission lead" using integrated forms and real-time WhatsApp bots.

This study adds to the Balance Theory and Theory of Planned Behavior by demonstrating that in the higher education context, the influencer's "name recognition" is less important than "perceived authenticity" and "information quality".

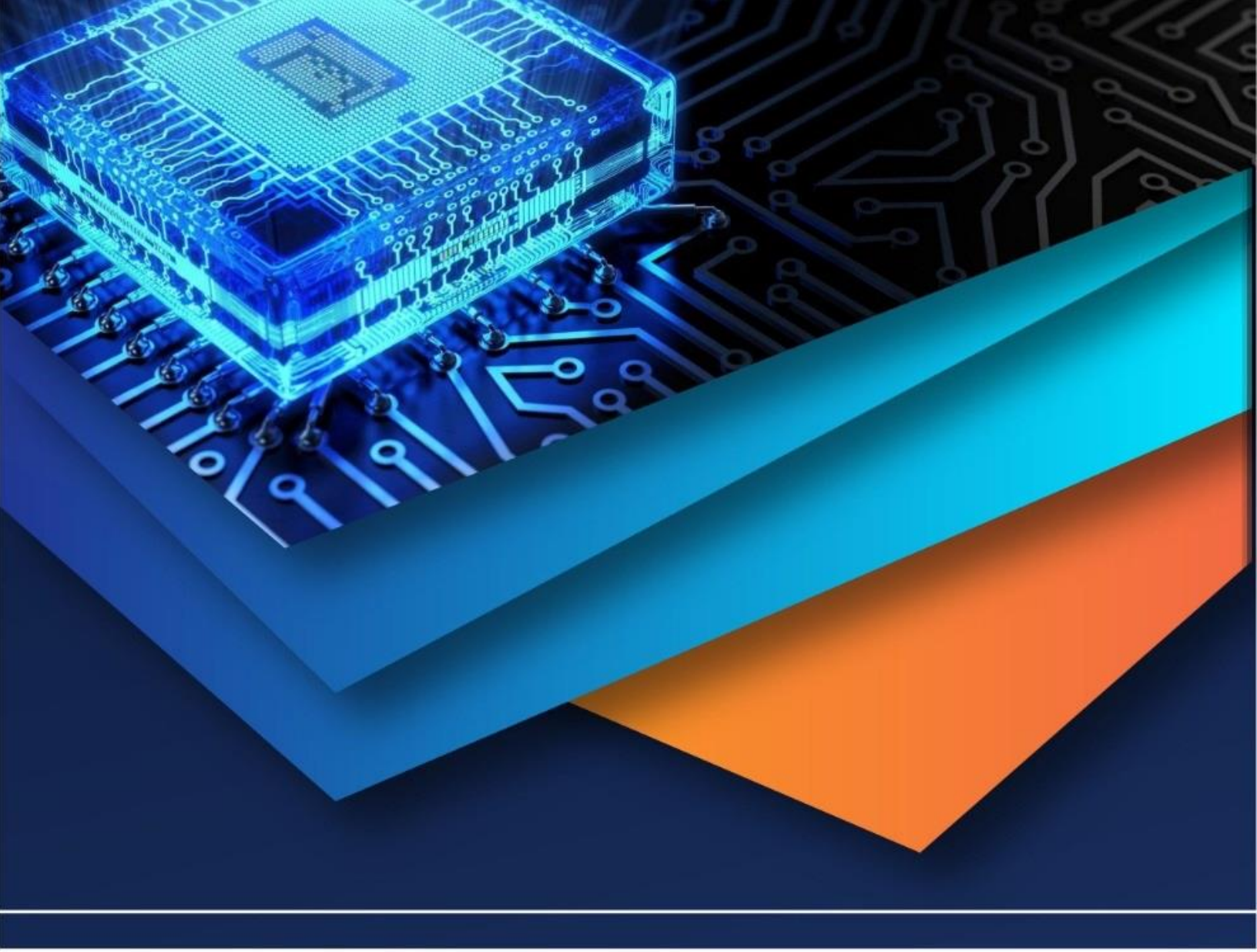
VII. CONCLUSION

The influence of social commerce and influencer marketing on student enrolment in Indore is significant but nuanced. While these tools have successfully revolutionized the "discovery" phase of the enrolment journey, they face a growing challenge from a more "discerning" and "sceptical" Gen Z audience. Private HEIs in Indore must move beyond the "Paid Review" model toward a Community-Driven Branding model, where current students and alumni act as authentic micro-influencers within specialized niche communities.

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