

Influencer Partnership and Institution Performance of Private Universities in South-South, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of influencer partnership strategies on the institutional performance of private universities in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The increasing proliferation of private universities in the region has intensified competition for student enrolment, thereby creating financial and reputational pressures for many institutions. Despite the growing importance of digital marketing, particularly influencer partnerships, many universities have yet to fully adopt and formalize these strategies. The study therefore investigated the extent of adoption of influencer partnerships and their effects on student enrolment, financial sustainability, and institutional reputation. A survey research design was adopted. Primary data were collected from 247 respondents drawn from selected private universities in the South-South region of Nigeria using a structured questionnaire. The reliability of the instrument was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.72 to 0.81, indicating satisfactory internal consistency. Descriptive statistics, Karl Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analysis were employed to analyse the data and test the hypotheses. The descriptive findings revealed that private universities moderately adopt influencer partnership strategies, particularly through collaboration with micro-influencers, the use of trackable links, and allocation of marketing budgets for influencer campaigns. Correlation analysis indicated that the extent of adoption of influencer partnerships had a weak but statistically significant positive relationship with student enrolment outcomes ($r = 0.237$, $p < 0.01$), while its relationship with financial sustainability was weak and not statistically significant ($r = 0.021$, $p > 0.05$). The relationship between influencer adoption and institutional reputation was negative but statistically significant ($r = -0.241$, $p < 0.01$). Regression results further showed that the extent of adoption of influencer partnerships significantly predicted institutional performance ($\beta = -0.241$, $p < 0.05$), although the explanatory power of the model was relatively low ($R^2 = 0.058$). Additionally, the influence on student enrolment and financial sustainability did not significantly predict institutional

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performance. The study concludes that while influencer partnership strategies are increasingly adopted by private universities, their impact on institutional performance remains limited when implemented in isolation. The findings suggest the need for universities to adopt more strategic, well-integrated influencer marketing campaigns that align with institutional branding and long-term recruitment objectives. The study recommends that private universities formalize influencer partnership programs, strengthen campaign evaluation mechanisms, and prioritize credible influencers whose values align with institutional identity to enhance enrolment outcomes, financial stability, and institutional reputation.

Keywords: Influencer Partnership, Student Enrolment, Institutional Performance, Financial Sustainability, Brand Perception.

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of private universities in Nigeria since the early 2000s has significantly intensified competition for student enrolment (Ige, 2013). Although these institutions were established to complement the capacity limitations of public universities, many now face serious challenges, particularly low student enrolment, inadequate funding, and the need to continually strengthen their institutional reputation and visibility (Oyalabu, 2022; Aleru, 2024; Ogunode, Ugochukwu, & Ojo, 2025). Low enrolment levels pose a major threat to the financial sustainability and overall performance of private universities because most of these institutions rely heavily on tuition fees as their primary source of revenue (Oyalabu, 2022). As a result, effective marketing strategies have become increasingly important for improving institutional visibility, attracting prospective students, and enhancing overall organisational performance (Wijayanto, Rama, Jushermi, Rivai, & Deswita, 2024).

Marketing strategies in organisations, including universities, involve activities such as product design, pricing decisions, promotional campaigns, and distribution channels, all of which influence performance outcomes (Ebuzoeme, 2024). In the context of higher education, where services are largely credence-based and prospective students cannot fully evaluate quality before enrolment, marketing plays a crucial role in building trust, reducing uncertainty, and differentiating institutions in an increasingly competitive environment (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Consequently, universities are increasingly adopting innovative promotional approaches that enhance engagement with prospective students and strengthen institutional branding.

In recent years, digitalisation and the widespread use of social media platforms have transformed the marketing landscape in higher education. Universities can now interact directly with prospective students through interactive and personalized communication channels, moving beyond traditional one-way recruitment campaigns (Umiyati, Narimawati, & Syafei, 2024). Among these emerging strategies, influencer partnerships have gained significant attention as an effective digital marketing tool capable of enhancing brand awareness, institutional reputation, and conversion rates (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). Influencer partnerships involve collaborations between institutions and individuals with

substantial social media followings who promote the university's programs, campus experience, and institutional values to their audiences (Ibekwe, 2025). Because influencer-generated content is often perceived as authentic and relatable, it tends to attract greater trust and engagement compared with traditional advertising (Ajayi & Nwachukwu, 2025).

Despite the growing popularity of influencer marketing globally, many private universities in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria have yet to fully adopt, formalize, or strategically implement influencer partnership programs. These institutions continue to face challenges such as low student enrolment and financial instability, largely due to high operational costs and heavy dependence on tuition revenue (Oyalabu, 2022; Ogunleye & Adebayo, 2020). Although previous studies have established that social media marketing can positively influence student enrolment (Ibekwe, 2025), uncertainties regarding the return on investment (ROI), concerns about authenticity, and the risks associated with selecting inappropriate influencers often discourage universities from fully utilizing influencer partnerships.

Consequently, many private universities still struggle to attract sufficient numbers of students to meet their admission targets, resulting in sub-optimal institutional performance (NUC, 2019). Moreover, there remains limited empirical evidence that specifically examines how formal influencer partnership strategies influence key institutional performance indicators such as student enrolment, financial sustainability, and institutional reputation within the unique socio-economic context of the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria. This study therefore seeks to address this gap by examining the extent to which influencer partnerships contribute to the institutional performance of private universities in the region.

The general objective is to examine the influence of influencer partnership on the institutional performance of private universities in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The specific objectives are: to ascertain the extent of adoption of formal influencer partnership programs among private universities in the South-South geopolitical zone; to determine the effect of influencer partnership on student enrollment volume and growth in private universities in the South-South geopolitical zone; to assess the influence of influencer partnership on financial sustainability of private universities in the South-South geopolitical zone and investigate the relationship between influencer partnership and the institutional reputation/brand perception of private universities in the South-South geopolitical zone.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student Enrollment Volume and Growth

Student Enrollment Volume and Growth is the most critical metric for the immediate survival and scaling of a private university (NUC, 2019). The ability to consistently attract and retain students directly impacts all other performance indicators. Studies on social media marketing in Nigerian higher education show a significant positive effect on enrollment growth (Odunola & Agbonifoh, 2025). Influencer partnerships enhance Institutional performance (OP) through signaling, social proof, and relationship mechanisms that translate into measurable demand and reputation side outcomes.

Empirically, influencer credibility and parasocial interaction consistently raise brand attitudes and purchase/enrolment intentions (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020), while message value + credibility foster trust in branded content, an antecedent to downstream behaviours (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Recent evidence also shows influencer activity can expand brands' social networks during launches, a pathway to awareness and inquiry growth (Benevento, Mirabito & Bornemann, (2025). Meta-analytic synthesis confirms that influencer marketing has a positive overall effect on consumer behaviour, with effectiveness moderated by credibility, fit, and content quality (Pan, Chintagunta & Libai, (2025).

Financial Sustainability

Private universities are heavily reliant on tuition fees to fund operations, infrastructure, and academic programs (Ogunleye & Adebayo, 2020). Successful influencer partnerships, by driving enrollment and increasing the perceived value of the institution's offerings, directly contribute to a robust revenue stream and long-term financial stability. Performance contributions extend beyond intention metrics to commercial outcomes when campaigns are integrated and measured. A recent Journal of Marketing Research study outlines revenue generation logics for creator collaborations, and Marketing Science work on TikTok influencer videos links engagement features to predictable sales lift, indicating that well-designed partnerships can drive conversion and revenue, not just awareness (Beichert, Herhausen, Schögel, & Stahl, 2024; Yang, Mela, & Wilbur, (2025).

Institutional Reputation/Brand Perception

Institutional reputation is an intangible yet highly valuable asset for universities. It reflects the collective perception held by the public regarding the quality, prestige, credibility, and values of an institution. A strong reputation enhances a university's ability to attract prospective students, qualified faculty, and strategic partnerships, thereby contributing to its overall competitiveness and long-term sustainability. In higher education, where services are largely intangible and difficult to evaluate before enrolment, reputation plays a critical role in influencing students' choice of institution.

Influencer marketing has increasingly been recognized as a tool capable of shaping institutional brand perception. Campaigns that emphasize engagement, authentic storytelling, and real-life experiences tend to be more effective in building trust and credibility than those focused solely on promotional conversions (Wijayanto, Rama, Jushermi, Rivai, & Deswita, 2024; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Through relatable narratives, influencers can communicate aspects of university life such as academic quality, campus environment, and career opportunities in a manner that resonates with prospective students.

Positive brand perception ultimately contributes to improved institutional performance. When influencer content effectively communicates verifiable program quality, employability outcomes, and authentic student experiences, it can stimulate greater enquiries, increase offer acceptance rates, and strengthen the overall reputation of the university. Consequently,

influencer partnerships have the potential to serve as a strategic mechanism for enhancing institutional reputation and reinforcing the competitive positioning of private universities.

Influencer Partnerships

Influencer partnership refers to a strategic collaboration between a brand, such as a private university, and individuals who possess credibility, reach, and a loyal audience on social media platforms (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). These individuals, commonly referred to as social media influencers, use their perceived authenticity and personal connection with followers to promote products, services, or ideas. Research indicates that consumers, particularly younger audiences are increasingly skeptical of traditional advertising and tend to respond more positively to content shared by influencers they trust (Kutz, Espinal, Flynn, & Cheney, 2024). In this context, influencer credibility plays a critical role in shaping audience attitudes and trust toward a promoted brand. Studies have further shown that the relationship between influencer credibility and brand trust becomes stronger when there is value alignment between the influencer and the brand being promoted (Kukreja, 2024; Samanta, Amir, Gupta, & Pant, 2025). For universities, influencers function as powerful digital word-of-mouth agents who communicate institutional offerings such as academic programmes, campus life, and career prospects in a more relatable and engaging narrative (Kutz et al., 2024).

Influencer partnerships therefore involve structured collaborations with credible creators, including current students, alumni, faculty members, and trusted local micro-influencers whose audiences overlap with the target segments of prospective students. Social media influencers are defined in the literature as independent third-party endorsers who shape audience attitudes through persona-driven and networked communication (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011). Their persuasive influence is often explained through source-credibility theory, which emphasizes attributes such as expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness (Ohanian, 1990). Additionally, the “match-up” hypothesis suggests that the effectiveness of endorsements increases when there is a strong congruence between the influencer’s image and the brand being promoted (Kamins, 1990). Contemporary research also highlights the role of parasocial relationships one-sided emotional connections formed through repeated exposure to influencer content which make messages appear more personal and authentic, thereby increasing persuasion and behavioural intentions (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Labrecque, 2014; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

A growing body of empirical research demonstrates that influencer characteristics and campaign design significantly influence marketing outcomes. Studies across platforms such as Instagram and YouTube show that perceived influencer credibility and parasocial interaction positively predict purchase intentions and brand attitudes (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). More recent research adopting the elaboration likelihood model indicates that authenticity, informativeness, and perceived similarity between the influencer and the audience strengthen parasocial bonds, which in turn enhance brand credibility and behavioural intentions (Liu, 2024). Furthermore, research suggests that influencers with extremely large follower bases may sometimes appear less authentic, particularly when the promoted product or service does not

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align with their usual content. In contrast, micro-influencers are often perceived as more genuine and relatable, making them particularly effective in contexts involving complex or high-involvement decisions such as university choice (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017; Kay, Mulcahy, & Parkinson, 2020). Additional studies emphasize that content quality, interaction with followers, and community engagement are key factors that shape influencer credibility and behavioural responses among audiences (Belanche, Casaló, & Flavián, 2021; Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020). Meta-analytic evidence further confirms that influencer marketing generally produces positive effects on various marketing outcomes (Han, Tan, & Ooi, 2024).

Within the higher education context, these mechanisms operate through content that highlights campus life experiences, programme quality, and student success stories across platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. Prospective students increasingly rely on social media to gather information and reduce uncertainty when evaluating universities, often placing greater trust in authentic peer experiences than in institutional promotional messages (Isaacs, 2024). Research on social media use in higher education also suggests that conversational engagement such as two-way communication, comments, and peer validation enhances recruitment effectiveness. This implies that influencer-led and interactive forms of content may be more effective in attracting prospective students than traditional one-way institutional communication (Rutter, Roper, & Lettice, 2016).

INFLUENCER PARTNERSHIPS: DIMENSIONS

Credibility of the Endorser

Effective influencer partnerships begin with the credibility of the endorser, perceived expertise, trustworthiness (and sometimes attractiveness), and the match-up between the influencer's persona and the programme's positioning (Ohanian, 1990; Kamins, 1990). In higher education (a credence service), credible, costly-to-fake cues reduce uncertainty and signal latent quality (e.g., accreditation strength, employability pathways, labs/studios), so partnerships should foreground verifiable signals rather than hype (Connelly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2011; Erdem & Swait, 1998). Practically, universities should prioritise faculty–industry mentors, respected alumni, or sector creators whose competence maps cleanly to target programmes (e.g., health sciences, computing, creative arts).

Platform Choice and Engagement

A second dimension concerns the fit between the influencer's audience and the university's segments (age, location, SES, intended major), as well as platform choice and engagement quality. Beyond raw follower counts, decision-useful indicators include authentic engagement rate, audience integrity (low bot/ghost share), topical relevance, and geographic concentration (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). Parasocial relationships, one-sided yet intimate bonds with creators, can heighten persuasive impact when content is perceived as authentic and community-oriented (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Influencers are “human brands”; their identity–programme congruence and community norms shape trust and downstream behaviours (Ki, Cuevas, Chong, & Lim, 2020).

Creative Strategy

The third dimension is creative strategy, storylines that show rather than tell (day-in-the-life, lab tours, capstone demos, internship stories), transparent disclosures, and clear calls-to-action to enquiry/visit/apply with trackable links. Authentic, experience-rich content sustains credibility; disclosures, when clear, generally do not harm persuasion and can even enhance trust (Evans, Phua, Lim, & Jun, 2017; Boerman, 2020; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Universities should pre-agree content calendars and evidence artefacts (accreditation badges, graduate outcomes) and instrument posts with UTM/QR tags so enquiries and offers can be attributed and optimised across the funnel (Naik & Raman, 2003).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on two pivotal marketing and communication theories that explain the mechanism through which influencer partnership impacts institutional performance.

Diffusion of Innovations (DOI) Theory

The Diffusion of Innovations (DOI) Theory, developed by Everett Rogers (1962, 2003), explains how new ideas, practices, or products spread through communication channels over time among members of a social system. The theory emphasizes the role of communication, social influence, and opinion leadership in shaping the adoption of innovations. In the context of this study, the “innovation” can be viewed as the decision to choose or enrol in a particular private university, which is often a complex and high-involvement decision for prospective students. Within this framework, social media influencers function as opinion leaders or change agents who help disseminate information about the university to potential adopters (Rogers, 2003). Through their platforms, influencers provide personal evaluations, experiences, and recommendations that shape the perceptions of prospective students. Because influencers are often perceived as relatable and credible sources, their messages may carry more persuasive power than traditional institutional advertising. The DOI theory further explains that adoption occurs through a series of stages known as the innovation-decision process, which includes knowledge, persuasion, and decision. Influencer-generated content can first **create** awareness (knowledge) about a university, then shape favourable attitudes toward it (**persuasion**), and ultimately encourage prospective students to make the decision to enroll (Rogers, 2003). In this regard, influencers particularly micro-influencers with strong audience engagement can accelerate the rate of adoption by making institutional information more accessible, relatable, and trustworthy to potential students.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Potelwa, Phale, Koopman, and Ligaraba (2025) investigated the impact of social media marketing activities on university brand preference and word-of-mouth communication. The study employed an electronic survey involving 268 respondents and analysed the data using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). The findings revealed that social media marketing activities had a positive effect on brand attitude, while brand attitude significantly influenced both brand preference and word-of-mouth communication. However,

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the direct relationship between brand preference and word-of-mouth communication was not statistically significant.

Adegbuyi (2024) examined the effects of social media technology on student enrolment in selected private universities in Uganda. The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design and collected data from admissions officers, marketing staff, and students. Using quantitative analysis, the findings indicated that higher levels of social media technology sophistication were associated with increased enrolment intentions and actual student intake. This suggests that the effective use of social media platforms can significantly enhance university recruitment outcomes.

Dei (2023) explored the relationship between marketing strategies and student enrolment in private tertiary institutions. Using regression analysis, the study found that digital marketing and pricing strategies had the strongest influence on enrolment growth, while referral strategies played a complementary role. The findings highlight the importance of integrated marketing approaches in improving institutional competitiveness and attracting prospective students. Similarly, Singh and Rawat (2022) investigated the role of integrated marketing communication in student admissions within Indian private universities. Employing a cross-sectional survey and PLS-SEM analysis, the study revealed that coherence and consistency in marketing communication significantly predicted admissions performance, although the effect of communication frequency was found to be nonlinear.

Nguyen and Le (2022) examined students' perceptions of social media marketing activities and their influence on university choice. Using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), the study found that social media marketing positively influenced perceived value and students' intention to choose a university. However, this relationship was moderated by the perceived reputation of the academic program offered by the institution. In another related study, Oluwasola (2020) investigated the use of digital marketing communication strategies in promoting private higher education institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa, with a focus on selected private universities in Nigeria. The study adopted a mixed-methods approach combining documentary analysis and field insights. The findings showed that institutions with coordinated digital marketing strategies demonstrated higher levels of applicant engagement and conversion rates.

Gunarto and Hurriyati (2020) examined the role of experience value in building student satisfaction in higher education. The study surveyed 357 respondents across 32 universities and analysed the data using Structural Equation Modelling. The results indicated that co-creation between institutions and students significantly increased perceived experience value, which in turn enhanced student satisfaction. Similarly, Al-Thagafi, Mannion, and Siddiqui (2020) investigated digital marketing strategies used for university student recruitment in Saudi Arabia through a comparative analysis of five Saudi and five Scottish universities. The study identified differences in digital marketing maturity and highlighted best practices associated with stronger international recruitment performance.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a survey research design to investigate the influence of influencer partnership strategies on the institutional performance of private universities in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The survey design was considered appropriate because it allows the collection of quantitative data from a relatively large group of respondents and facilitates the analysis of relationships between variables such as influencer partnership, student enrolment, financial sustainability, and institutional reputation. The population of the study consisted of 248 respondents drawn from selected private universities in the South-South region of Nigeria. These respondents included individuals who are knowledgeable about institutional marketing activities and administrative operations. From this population, 247 respondents were selected to participate in the study, ensuring that the sample adequately represented the target population.

Primary data for the study were collected using a structured questionnaire titled “Influencer Partnership and Institutional Performance Questionnaire.” The instrument contained two sections. The first section captured demographic information such as gender, age, educational qualification, and years of experience, while the second section contained items measuring the extent of adoption of influencer partnerships and their influence on student enrolment, financial sustainability, and institutional reputation. Responses to the items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagrees to strongly agree.

The validity of the instrument was established through expert review to ensure that the questionnaire adequately measured the variables under investigation. The reliability of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha coefficient, which produced values ranging from 0.72 to 0.81, indicating satisfactory internal consistency. Data collected from the respondents were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation were used to summarize respondents’ perceptions of influencer partnership adoption and its outcomes. In addition, Karl Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis were employed to examine the relationships between influencer partnership and institutional performance variables and to test the study hypotheses at a 5% level of significance.

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Characteristics of the Respondents

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	197	79.8
	Female	50	20.2
	Total	247	100
Age	Below 25 years	39	15.8

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
	26-35	68	27.5
	35-45	86	34.8
	Above 46 years	54	21.9
	Total	247	100.0
Years of Experience	Less than One Year	14	5.7
	1-3	42	17.0
	4-6	56	22.7
	6 years and above	135	54.7
	Total	247	100.0
Highest Educational Qualification	Primary	-	-
	SSCE	-	-
	B.Sc.	21	8.5
	Master	122	49.4
	PhD	104	42.1
	Total	292	100.0
Student Enrolment	Less than 2000	-	-
	2000-3500	-	-
	3,501 – 6,000	107	43.3
	Above 6,000	42	56.7
	Total	292	100.0

Source: Author’s field work (2025).

The gender distribution of the respondents shows that the majority of the participants were male. Specifically, 197 respondents representing 79.8% of the total respondents were male, while 50 respondents representing 20.2% were female. This indicates that males constituted a larger proportion of the respondents involved in the study, suggesting that the population sampled may be male-dominated. With respect to age distribution, the results reveal that most of the respondents were within the middle-age categories. The largest group consisted of respondents aged 35–45 years, with 86 respondents representing 34.8%. This was followed by those aged 26–35 years, accounting for 68 respondents (27.5%). Respondents aged above 46 years were 54 (21.9%), while those below 25 years were the least represented with 39 respondents (15.8%). This suggests that the majority of the respondents were relatively mature individuals who are likely to possess adequate experience and understanding relevant to the study.

The distribution of respondents based on years of experience indicates that a large proportion had significant professional experience. The majority, 135 respondents (54.7%), had six years and above of experience. This was followed by 56 respondents (22.7%) with 4–6 years of experience, while 42 respondents (17.0%) had 1–3 years of experience. Only 14 respondents (5.7%) had less than one year of experience. This finding implies that most respondents had considerable work experience, which enhances the reliability of the information provided in the study. Regarding the highest educational qualification, the findings show that the respondents were highly educated. A significant proportion of the respondents possessed a Master’s degree, accounting for 122 respondents (49.4%), making it the most common qualification. This was followed by those with a PhD, which accounted for 104 respondents (42.1%), while 21 respondents (8.5%) held a Bachelor’s degree (B.Sc.). No respondents indicated Primary or SSCE as their highest educational qualification. This result suggests that the study largely involved highly educated individuals, which may contribute to more informed and credible responses.

Finally, the analysis of student enrolment size in the institutions shows that most of the respondents were drawn from institutions with relatively large student populations. 107 respondents (43.3%) were from institutions with 3,501–6,000 students, while 42 respondents (56.7%) were from institutions with above 6,000 students, representing the majority. This implies that the respondents were mainly from larger institutions with substantial student enrolment, which may influence institutional operations and management practices relevant to the study.

Table 1: Mean and standard deviation for the variables

S/N	Extent of Adoption	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Our university has a formal, documented policy/strategy for engaging social media influencers (SMIs).	3.51	0.547
2	We consistently use tractable links (e.g., UTM, QR codes) or unique promo codes to measure the direct inquiries/applications generated by influencers.	3.44	0.498
3	We routinely partner with micro-influencers (smaller, niche following) whose audience aligns with our target student demographic	3.68	0.561
4	We dedicate a specific budget line to formal influencer partnership campaigns.	3.54	0.533
Influence on Student Enrolment			
5	Influencer partnership has led to a noticeable increase in overall student enrolment volume over the last 12 months.	4.02	0.432
6	Influencer-generated content has effectively converted initial awareness (views) into actual application submissions (conversion rate)	3.46	0.531

S/N	Extent of Adoption	Mean	Std. Deviation
7	Partnerships featuring credible/expert influencers (e.g., alumni, faculty) significantly improve offer acceptance rates (yield).	3.73	0.529
8	The content created by influencers has resulted in more inquiries/applications from new geographic regions or student segments	3.44	0.498
S/N	Influence on Financial Sustainability		
9	The revenue generated from the increased student enrolment due to influencer partnerships exceeds the cost of the partnership (positive ROI).	4.09	0.541
10	Successful influencer partnerships have helped to create a more robust revenue stream, reducing financial instability	3.98	0.548
11	Influencer collaborations focusing on value (e.g., career outcomes) help justify the tuition fees to prospective students.	3.40	0.492
12	Tracking metrics from influencer campaigns helps us optimize marketing spend for better financial efficiency.	4.23	0.525
	Institutional Reputation/Brand Perception		
13	Influencer content, being perceived as authentic and trustworthy, has improved the public's brand perception of the university.	4.16	0.446
14	Our influencer campaigns effectively communicate the university's unique institutional values and prestige (reputation).	3.77	0.531
15	The influencers we partner with exhibit strong "match-up" fit with our university's brand identity.	3.59	0.493
16	Influencer-led storytelling (e.g., day-in-the-life, campus tours) significantly increases the emotional connection/trust prospective students feel toward the university.	4.14	0.671

Source: Researcher's Computation

Table 1 presents the mean and standard deviation of respondents' perceptions regarding the adoption of social media influencer partnerships and their influence on student enrolment, financial sustainability, and institutional reputation. With respect to the extent of adoption of social media influencer partnerships, the results indicate that universities are actively integrating influencer strategies into their marketing practices. The statement that the university has a formal, documented policy or strategy for engaging social media influencers recorded a mean score of 3.51 with a standard deviation of 0.547, suggesting that many institutions have begun formalizing influencer engagement policies. Similarly, the use of trackable links or unique promo codes to measure inquiries or applications generated by influencers had a mean score of 3.44 and a standard deviation of 0.498, indicating moderate agreement among respondents that such tracking mechanisms are utilized. Respondents also agreed that universities routinely partner with micro-influencers whose audience aligns with their target student demographic, with a mean score of 3.68 and a standard deviation of 0.561. Furthermore, the allocation of a specific budget line for influencer partnership campaigns

recorded a mean score of 3.54 and a standard deviation of 0.533, suggesting that institutions are increasingly recognizing influencer marketing as a formal component of their promotional budget.

Regarding the influence of influencer partnerships on student enrolment, the results show that respondents generally perceive influencer collaborations as beneficial in increasing student enrolment and engagement. The statement that influencer partnerships have led to a noticeable increase in overall student enrolment over the last 12 months recorded a relatively high mean score of 4.02 with a standard deviation of 0.432, indicating strong agreement among respondents. Similarly, the use of credible or expert influencers such as alumni and faculty to promote the institution was perceived to significantly improve offer acceptance rates, with a mean score of 3.73 and a standard deviation of 0.529. Influencer-generated content converting awareness into actual application submissions had a mean score of 3.46 and a standard deviation of 0.531, while the statement that influencer content has resulted in more inquiries or applications from new geographic regions or student segments recorded a mean score of 3.44 and a standard deviation of 0.498. These results suggest that influencer marketing plays an important role in expanding institutional reach and attracting prospective students.

In terms of financial sustainability, the results indicate that influencer partnerships contribute positively to the financial performance of universities. The statement that the revenue generated from increased student enrolment due to influencer partnerships exceeds the cost of the partnership recorded a mean score of 4.09 and a standard deviation of 0.541, indicating that respondents believe influencer collaborations yield a positive return on investment. Similarly, the view that successful influencer partnerships help create a more robust revenue stream and reduce financial instability had a mean score of 3.98 with a standard deviation of 0.548. The statement that influencer collaborations focusing on value, such as career outcomes, help justify tuition fees to prospective students recorded a mean score of 3.40 and a standard deviation of 0.492. Additionally, tracking metrics from influencer campaigns to optimize marketing spending for better financial efficiency recorded the highest mean score of 4.23 with a standard deviation of 0.525, suggesting strong agreement that performance tracking enhances financial decision-making.

Finally, the results relating to institutional reputation and brand perception indicate that influencer partnerships positively influence the public image of universities. The statement that influencer content, being perceived as authentic and trustworthy, has improved the public's brand perception of the university recorded a mean score of 4.16 and a standard deviation of 0.446. Respondents also agreed that influencer campaigns effectively communicate the university's institutional values and prestige, with a mean score of 3.77 and a standard deviation of 0.531. The alignment between influencers and the university's brand identity recorded a mean score of 3.59 and a standard deviation of 0.493, indicating moderate agreement. Furthermore, influencer-led storytelling, such as day-in-the-life content and campus tours, was perceived to significantly increase emotional connection and trust among prospective students, recording a mean score of 4.14 with a standard deviation of 0.671.

Correlation analysis of research variables

Table 2: Correlation analysis of research variables

		Extent of Adoption	Influence on Student Enrollment	Influence on Financial Sustainability	Institutional Reputation/Brand Perception	Institutional Performance
Extent of Adoption	Pearson Correlation	1				
	Sig. (2-tailed)					
	N	292				
Influence on Student Enrollment	Pearson Correlation	.237**	1			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000				
	N	247	247			
Influence on Financial Sustainability	Pearson Correlation	.021	-.324**	1		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.748	.000			
	N	247	247	247		
Institutional Reputation/Brand Perception	Pearson Correlation	-.241**	.083	.043	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.193	.504		
	N	247	247	247	247	
Institutional Performance	Pearson Correlation	-.241**	.083	.043	1.000**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.193	.504	.000	
	N	247	247	247	247	247

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Researcher’s Computation

Table 2 presents the correlation analysis among the major variables of the study, namely extent of adoption of social media influencer partnerships, influence on student enrolment, and influence on financial sustainability, institutional reputation/brand perception, and institutional performance. The Pearson correlation coefficient was used to determine the direction and strength of the relationship among the variables. The relationship between extent of adoption of influencer partnerships and influence on student enrolment shows a positive and statistically significant correlation ($r = 0.237$, $p < 0.01$). This indicates that as universities increase the

adoption of influencer partnership strategies, there is a corresponding increase in student enrolment outcomes. Although the correlation is relatively weak, the significance level suggests that influencer adoption has a meaningful association with enrolment performance.

The relationship between extent of adoption and influence on financial sustainability shows a very weak positive correlation ($r = 0.021$), which is not statistically significant ($p = 0.748$). This suggests that the level of adoption of influencer partnerships does not have a direct or significant relationship with the financial sustainability of the institution in this dataset. In other words, increased adoption alone may not immediately translate into financial sustainability benefits. The correlation between extent of adoption and institutional reputation or brand perception is negative and statistically significant ($r = -0.241$, $p < 0.01$). This indicates an inverse relationship between the adoption of influencer strategies and perceived institutional reputation within the context of the study. The implication is that higher adoption of influencer partnerships may be associated with a slight decline in perceived institutional reputation or brand perception, although the relationship remains weak.

Further analysis shows that the relationship between influence on student enrolment and influence on financial sustainability is negative and statistically significant ($r = -0.324$, $p < 0.01$). This suggests that increases in student enrolment through influencer partnerships may not necessarily correspond with improvements in financial sustainability, possibly due to increased marketing costs or other institutional expenses associated with enrolment growth. The relationship between influence on student enrolment and institutional reputation or brand perception is positive but not statistically significant ($r = 0.083$, $p = 0.193$). This indicates that while there is a slight positive association between enrolment outcomes and institutional reputation, the relationship is weak and not statistically meaningful.

Similarly, the relationship between financial sustainability and institutional reputation or brand perception is positive but not statistically significant ($r = 0.043$, $p = 0.504$). This suggests that improvements in financial sustainability are not strongly associated with changes in institutional reputation within the context of this study. Finally, the correlation results show that institutional reputation or brand perception has a perfect positive correlation with institutional performance ($r = 1.000$, $p < 0.01$). This indicates that improvements in institutional reputation are directly associated with improvements in institutional performance. The strong and significant relationship highlights the importance of institutional image and brand perception as key determinants of overall institutional performance.

Estimation of regression model

Table 3a: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.241 ^a	.058	.054	.331	.671

a. Predictors: (Constant), Extent of Adoption

Table 3a: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.241 ^a	.058	.054	.331	.671

b. Dependent Variable: Institutional performance

Source: Researcher’s Computation

Table 3a presents the summary of the regression model examining the effect of the extent of adoption of influencer partnerships on institutional performance. The results show a correlation coefficient (R) of 0.241, indicating a weak relationship between the extent of adoption and institutional performance. The R Square value of 0.058 implies that approximately 5.8% of the variation in institutional performance can be explained by the extent of adoption of influencer partnerships. The adjusted R Square value of 0.054 further confirms that the explanatory power of the model remains relatively low after adjusting for sample size and number of predictors. The standard error of the estimate is 0.331, which reflects the average deviation of the observed values from the regression line. The Durbin-Watson statistic is 0.671, suggesting the presence of positive autocorrelation in the residuals. Overall, the model indicates that while the extent of adoption contributes to explaining institutional performance, its explanatory power is relatively limited.

Table 3b: Analysis of Variance

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	1.655	1	1.655	15.114	.000 ^a
	Residual	26.829	245	.110		
	Total	28.484	246			

a. Predictors: (Constant), Extent of Adoption

b. Dependent Variable: Institution performance

Source: Researcher’s Computation

Table 3b presents the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) results used to determine whether the regression model is statistically significant. The results show that the regression model has a sum of squares of 1.655 with 1 degree of freedom, while the residual sum of squares is 26.829 with 245 degrees of freedom. The total sum of squares is 28.484 with 246 degrees of freedom. The F-statistic for the model is 15.114 with a significance value of 0.000. Since the significance value is less than the conventional threshold of 0.05, the regression model is statistically significant. This indicates that the extent of adoption of influencer partnerships significantly predicts institutional performance. In other words, the independent variable included in the model contributes significantly to explaining variations in institutional performance.

Table 3c: Coefficients of the Model

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
1 (Constant)	5.080	.301		16.895	.000		
Extent of adoption	-.329	.085	-.241	-3.888	.000	1.000	1.000

a. Dependent Variable: Institution performance

Source: Researcher’s Computation

Table 3c presents the regression coefficients showing the direction and magnitude of the relationship between the extent of adoption of influencer partnerships and institutional performance. The constant (intercept) of the model is 5.080 and is statistically significant ($t = 16.895$, $p = 0.000$). This value represents the expected level of institutional performance when the extent of adoption is held constant at zero. The coefficient for the extent of adoption is -0.329 with a standard error of 0.085. The standardized beta coefficient is -0.241 , and the t -value is -3.888 with a significance value of 0.000. Since the p -value is less than 0.05, the result indicates that the extent of adoption of influencer partnerships has a statistically significant effect on institutional performance. However, the negative coefficient suggests an inverse relationship, meaning that an increase in the extent of adoption is associated with a decrease in institutional performance within the context of this model. The collinearity statistics show a tolerance value of 1.000 and a Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) of 1.000, indicating that there is no multicollinearity problem in the model since only one predictor variable is included.

Table 4a: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.083 ^a	.007	.003	.340	.782

a. Predictors: (Constant), Influence on Student Enrollment

b. Dependent Variable: Institution performance

Source: Researcher’s Computation

Table 4a presents the summary of the regression model examining the effect of influence on student enrolment on institutional performance. The results show a correlation coefficient (R) of 0.083, indicating a very weak positive relationship between influence on student enrolment and institutional performance. The R Square value of 0.007 suggests that only 0.7% of the variation in institutional performance can be explained by influence on student enrolment. The adjusted R Square value of 0.003 further indicates that the explanatory power of the model remains extremely low after adjusting for sample size. The standard error of the estimate is 0.340, which reflects the average deviation of the observed values from the regression line. The Durbin-Watson statistic is 0.782, indicating some level of positive autocorrelation in the residuals. Overall, the results suggest that influence on student enrolment has a very limited explanatory power in predicting institutional performance.

Table 4b: Analysis of Variance

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	.197	1	.197	1.703	.193 ^a
	Residual	28.288	245	.115		
	Total	28.484	246			

Source: Researcher's Computation

Table 4b presents the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) results used to determine whether the regression model is statistically significant. The results show that the regression sum of squares is 0.197 with 1 degree of freedom, while the residual sum of squares is 28.288 with 245 degrees of freedom. The total sum of squares is 28.484 with 246 degrees of freedom. The F-statistic for the model is 1.703 with a significance value of 0.193. Since the significance value is greater than the conventional threshold of 0.05, the regression model is not statistically significant. This indicates that influence on student enrolment does not significantly predict institutional performance in this model.

Table 4c: Coefficients of the Model

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	3.526	.298		11.841	.000		
Influence on Student Enrollment	.106	.081	.083	1.305	.193	1.000	1.000

a. Dependent Variable: Institutional Performance

Source: Researcher's Computation

Table 4c presents the regression coefficients showing the direction and magnitude of the relationship between influence on student enrolment and institutional performance. The

constant (intercept) of the model is 3.526 and is statistically significant ($t = 11.841$, $p = 0.000$). This value represents the expected level of institutional performance when influence on student enrolment is held constant at zero. The coefficient for influence on student enrolment is 0.106 with a standard error of 0.081. The standardized beta coefficient is 0.083, and the t-value is 1.305 with a significance value of 0.193. Since the p-value is greater than 0.05, the result indicates that influence on student enrolment does not have a statistically significant effect on institutional performance. Although the coefficient is positive, suggesting a direct relationship, the effect is weak and not statistically meaningful. The collinearity statistics show a tolerance value of 1.000 and a Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) of 1.000, indicating that there is no multicollinearity problem in the model.

Table 5a: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.043 ^a	.002	-.002	.341	.787

a. Predictors: (Constant), FINANCIALSUSTAINABILITY

b. Dependent Variable: Institutional Performance

Source: Researcher’s Computation

Table 5a presents the summary of the regression model examining the effect of financial sustainability on institutional performance. The results show a correlation coefficient (R) of 0.043, indicating a very weak positive relationship between financial sustainability and institutional performance. The R Square value of 0.002 implies that only 0.2% of the variation in institutional performance can be explained by financial sustainability. The adjusted R Square value of -0.002 further indicates that the model has extremely low explanatory power after adjusting for the number of predictors and sample size. The standard error of the estimate is 0.341, which reflects the average deviation of the observed values from the regression line. The Durbin-Watson statistic is 0.787, suggesting the presence of some level of positive autocorrelation in the residuals. Overall, the model indicates that financial sustainability contributes very little to explaining variations in institutional performance within the context of this study.

Table 5b: Analysis of the Variance

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	.052	1	.052	.448	.504 ^a
	Residual	28.432	245	.116		
	Total	28.484	246			

a. Predictors: (Constant), Influence on Financial Sustainability

b. Dependent Variable: Institution performance

Source: Researcher's Computation

Table 5b presents the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) results used to determine whether the regression model is statistically significant. The results show that the regression sum of squares is 0.052 with 1 degree of freedom, while the residual sum of squares is 28.432 with 245 degrees of freedom. The total sum of squares is 28.484 with 246 degrees of freedom. The F-statistic for the model is 0.448 with a significance value of 0.504. Since the significance value is greater than the conventional threshold of 0.05, the regression model is not statistically significant. This indicates that financial sustainability does not significantly predict institutional performance in this model.

Table 5c: Coefficients of the Model

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	3.704	.315		11.761	.000		
Influence on Financial Sustainability	.054	.080	.043	.670	.504	1.000	1.000

a. Dependent Variable: Institution performance

Source: Researcher's Computation

Table 5c presents the regression coefficients showing the direction and magnitude of the relationship between financial sustainability and institutional performance. The constant (intercept) of the model is 3.704 and is statistically significant ($t = 11.761$, $p = 0.000$). This value represents the expected level of institutional performance when financial sustainability is held constant at zero. The coefficient for financial sustainability is 0.054 with a standard error of 0.080. The standardized beta coefficient is 0.043, and the t-value is 0.670 with a significance value of 0.504. Since the p-value is greater than 0.05, the result indicates that financial sustainability does not have a statistically significant effect on institutional performance. Although the coefficient is positive, suggesting a direct relationship, the effect is extremely weak and not statistically meaningful. The collinearity statistics show a tolerance value of

1.000 and a Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) of 1.000, indicating that there is no multicollinearity problem in the model.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the influence of influencer partnership on the institutional performance of private universities in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The growing competition among private universities and the increasing importance of digital marketing strategies make influencer partnerships a relevant tool for improving institutional visibility, student recruitment, and overall performance. The findings of the study revealed that private universities in the South-South region moderately adopt influencer partnership strategies as part of their marketing activities. The descriptive analysis indicated that universities increasingly collaborate with micro-influencers, utilize trackable digital links, and allocate marketing budgets for influencer campaigns. These practices demonstrate that institutions are gradually integrating influencer marketing into their promotional strategies. The correlation analysis showed that the extent of adoption of influencer partnerships has a weak but statistically significant positive relationship with student enrolment outcomes. However, the relationship between influencer adoption and financial sustainability was weak and not statistically significant. In addition, the study found a weak but significant negative relationship between the adoption of influencer partnerships and institutional reputation or brand perception. This suggests that although influencer partnerships may increase visibility, poorly aligned or improperly managed collaborations could potentially affect brand perception. The regression results further revealed that the extent of adoption of influencer partnerships significantly predicts institutional performance, although the explanatory power of the model remains relatively low. Similarly, the influence of student enrolment and financial sustainability on institutional performance was found to be statistically insignificant in the regression models.

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- i. Private universities should develop formal policies and structured frameworks for influencer partnerships. A well-defined strategy will ensure that influencer collaborations align with the institution's marketing objectives and brand identity.
- ii. Universities should prioritize partnerships with credible influencers such as alumni, faculty members, industry professionals, and micro-influencers whose audience aligns with the target student demographic. Proper influencer-brand fit can enhance trust and reduce the risk of negative brand perception.
- iii. Influencer marketing should not be implemented in isolation. Universities should integrate influencer partnerships with other digital marketing strategies such as social media campaigns, institutional websites, search marketing, and traditional promotional activities to maximize recruitment outcomes.
- iv. Institutions should strengthen campaign monitoring by using analytics tools such as trackable links, engagement metrics, and conversion indicators to measure the

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effectiveness of influencer partnerships and ensure a positive return on marketing investments.

- v. Influencer campaigns should emphasize authentic storytelling that highlights the university's academic quality, student experiences, facilities, and career outcomes. This will help build trust

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