Engaging Social Media Influencers to Foster Academic Integrity in Irish Higher Education: A Reflective Analysis and Strategic Action Plan

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Abstract

This reflection paper explores the potential of social media influencers (SMIs) to promote academic integrity within Ireland's higher education sector. It draws upon experiences from previous academic integrity events in Ireland. The paper presents an analysis of the impact of SMIs on the student population in Ireland and advocates for a strategic collaboration between higher education institutions (HEIs) and SMIs to reinforce academic values among students. This innovative approach is underpinned by a target audience framework for SMI communication strategies, highlighting the essential role of multi-stakeholder initiatives in sustaining academic integrity. The paper follows a reflective structure, incorporating personal insights, evaluations, and an action plan to effectively integrate SMIs into academic integrity campaigns within HEIs.

Keywords: Academic Integrity, Social Media Influencers, Higher Education, Ireland, Reflective Analysis.

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

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This reflection paper focuses on the critical issue of promoting academic integrity within the realm of higher education in Ireland. Ireland's National Academic Integrity Network (NAIN) describes academic integrity as "compliance with ethical and professional principles, standards, practices and consistent system of values, that serve as guidance for making decisions and taking actions in education, research and scholarship" (NAIN, 2021). Grounded in the author's participation in the QQI (2023) NFQ 20th Anniversary Conference, as well as in previous engagements with initiatives organised by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and NAIN, the paper reflects on insights garnered from these events. Specifically, it aims to explore the innovative concept of leveraging social media influencers (SMIs) to enhance awareness of, and adherence to, academic integrity among students in Ireland. The conference, an invite-only event, featured an array of workshops and talks by prominent figures in the field. A particularly noteworthy session was titled "Building Trust Through an Academic Integrity Champions Network," which delved into strategies for reinforcing trust in qualification systems.

Building on the foundation of these engagements, this paper extends the author's prior research on the influence of SMIs on young people in Ireland. The research explored the susceptibility of Generation Z to the impact of SMIs, using the SUSIS (SUSceptibility to being Influenced by Social Media Influencers) Questionnaire and the HEXACO-PI-R 60-items personality inventory (honesty-humility [H], emotionality [E], extraversion [X], agreeableness [A], conscientiousness [C], and openness to experience [O]) to assess the interplay between personality traits and the influence of SMIs (Alves de Castro, 2024).[1] Gen Z is the cohort born between 1995-2012 that tends to socialise through social media channels, a habit that has considerably modified their time use patterns and their social interactions in all spheres (Dunne et al., 2010; Borau-Boira et al., 2022). This study revealed that certain personality traits, such as Honesty-Humility and Conscientiousness, are associated with decreased susceptibility to the influence of SMIs (Alves de Castro, 2024).

A thematic analysis of this research revealed several key insights into how SMIs impact the attitudes and behaviours of Generation Z in Ireland. The findings show the significant influence of SMIs over this population, particularly in shaping their purchase intentions, habits, lifestyle, and the information they receive. Three key drivers – parasocial relationships, trust, and relatability – play a crucial role in this influence (Alves de Castro, 2023b). These findings underscore the potential of SMIs as pivotal figures in promoting academic integrity within the Irish higher education sector, as the

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1   The SUSceptibility to being Influenced by Social Media Influencers (SUSIS) Questionnaire was specifically designed to assess young people's susceptibility to SMI influence. The questionnaire consists of 25 validated items measuring key constructs such as parasocial relationships, consumer trust, and perception of influencers (Alves de Castro, 2024). Additionally, the HEXACO-PI-R 60-item personality inventory was used to assess personality traits, particularly focusing on Honesty-Humility and Conscientiousness, which have been linked to reduced susceptibility to influencer persuasion (Alves de Castro, 2024). The study employed Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to validate these measures and their interrelationships (see Alves de Castro, 2024 for full methodological details).

research demonstrates a high degree of influence over the sample population living in Ireland. By leveraging their influential reach, SMIs can serve as conduits for fostering a culture of integrity within the higher education sector in Ireland. The role of SMIs has expanded beyond marketing and entertainment, permeating various sectors, including education (Azevedo, 2023; Carpenter et al., 2022; Collado-Alonso et al., 2023; Gurung, 2024; Lu, 2023; Meyers, 2017; Nava, 2024).

Parasocial relationships refer to the one-sided connections that individuals form with media personas, where the audience feels a sense of intimacy and friendship without actual reciprocal interaction (Kowert & Daniel, 2021). These relationships are especially prevalent among Generation Z, who engage extensively with SMIs across various platforms (Närvänen et al., 2020). Research indicates that the authenticity and community engagement exhibited by SMIs foster these parasocial bonds, leading followers to perceive them as trustworthy sources of information and guidance (Breves & Liebers, 2022; Saini & Bansal, 2025). This trust is crucial, as it can significantly influence followers' attitudes and behaviours, including their ethical decision-making processes (Breves & Liebers, 2022). For instance, when SMIs advocate for ethical practices or share personal experiences related to integrity, their followers are more likely to internalise these values and reflect them in their own actions (Breves & Liebers, 2022).

When followers perceive similarities between themselves and the influencer, it enhances the persuasive impact of the messages conveyed (Ahmed et al., 2024; Du et al., 2023). This perceived similarity can lead to increased identification with the influencer, making followers more receptive to adopting the behaviours and attitudes promoted (Ahmed et al., 2024; Du et al., 2023). In the context of academic integrity, if an SMI shares relatable content about the challenges of maintaining honesty in academic pursuits and provides strategies to overcome them, followers may feel empowered to emulate these behaviours (Ahmed et al., 2024; Du et al., 2023; Khan, 2024). The sense of shared experience and understanding can motivate students to uphold ethical standards in their own academic endeavours (Khan, 2024).

The application of these mechanisms is particularly pertinent to academic integrity campaigns. Leveraging SMIs who have already established trust and relatability with their audience offers a peer-influenced model. This approach can be more effective, as messages delivered by trusted and relatable figures are more likely to be internalised (Liu & Zheng, 2024). By collaborating with SMIs who advocate for academic integrity, institutions can tap into existing parasocial relationships to foster a culture of honesty and ethical behaviour among students.

Academic dishonesty is influenced by multiple factors beyond students' values or attitudes toward education. Research suggests that external pressures such as demanding work schedules, financial constraints, and long commutes can reduce

students' available study time, making them more likely to engage in dishonest academic behaviours (Bretag et al., 2019; McCabe et al., 2012). Psychological factors, including fear of failure, performance anxiety, and lack of confidence, also contribute to cheating as students struggle to meet academic expectations (Brown et al., 2020; Eaton, 2022b). Furthermore, institutional shortcomings, such as limited access to academic support, unclear integrity policies, and inadequate engagement with students on ethical decision-making, can foster an environment where academic misconduct becomes normalised (Harper et al., 2021; Eaton & Hughes, 2022b). These factors highlight that cheating is not merely a moral issue but a broader structural and psychological challenge.

Recognising these underlying causes is essential in designing effective academic integrity campaigns, particularly those involving SMIs. SMIs can address these challenges by promoting effective time management techniques, discussing their own academic struggles to normalise help-seeking behaviours, and raising awareness about institutional resources that students might otherwise overlook. Without incorporating these considerations, an SMI-led campaign risks reinforcing punitive narratives that alienate students instead of encouraging ethical behaviour. By integrating an understanding of the root causes of academic dishonesty, SMI-based interventions can be more supportive and impactful, aligning with students' real-world challenges rather than solely appealing to moral responsibility.

Currently, the need to promote academic integrity is highlighted all over Europe, with one example found in the project called "Academic Integrity as Key Competence for Sustainable Development and United Nations SDGs (AIKUNSDG)" (Khan, 2024). This pioneering global initiative brings together experts, early career researchers, educators, and students to highlight academic integrity on a global scale as a key competency for sustainable development. The project aims to develop a deeper understanding of how academic integrity values can map to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), thereby framing these values as essential competencies for global citizenship and sustainable progress (Khan, 2024). Therefore, this demonstrates the need to spread the word about academic integrity to all countries. This article explores the extent to which SMIs could help to amplify these efforts, leveraging their reach to instil academic integrity, thus creating knowledge for a better world (Ramsbotham et al., 2017).

Academic misconduct is not unique to Ireland but is part of a global challenge that threatens the credibility and reputation of educational systems worldwide, and raising awareness among HEIs' students might mitigate or reduce this issue (Hackett et al., 2024). In response, the Irish quality assurance and qualifications authority recognised the need for a comprehensive strategy to address this problem beyond mere regulation (QQI, 2024). The approach involves creating an environment conducive to cultural change, where strategic initiatives in academic integrity education and awareness can

flourish (QQI, 2024). The national strategy aims to embed a culture of integrity by fostering collaboration among HEIs, developing key resources, and engaging leaders and staff through the NAIN. This initiative emphasises the dynamic nature of academic integrity, requiring ongoing monitoring and adaptation to effectively counter the evolving tactics of cheating providers (QQI, 2024). The vision is to cultivate a well-informed community of learners and educators who can uphold the principles of integrity and resist the allure of academic dishonesty, thereby reinforcing Ireland's commitment to educational excellence (Hackett et al., 2024). Leveraging the influence of SMIs, as confirmed by the author's research, could significantly raise awareness of academic integrity among young people enrolled in Irish HEIs linked to the above strategy.

Reflective Model

This introduction sets the stage for an exploration of the subject matter, aligning with the objectives of reflection as outlined in the Gibbs Reflective Model. Gibbs' Reflective Model (1988) is a widely recognised framework in the field of reflective practice that helps individuals analyse and learn from their experiences. This model is used to guide the process of reflection, enabling deeper insights and opening up possibilities to improve future actions based on past experiences. In this article, the author is guided by Gibbs' Reflective Model in order to build his critical thinking and writing.

Gibbs' reflective model is a structured approach that breaks down the reflective process into six distinct steps:

1. Description: The first step involves describing the specific experience or event in detail.

2. Feelings: Individuals are then encouraged to explore their emotions and reactions during the experience.

3. Evaluation: This step involves assessing the positive and negative aspects of the experience and identifying what worked well and what could have been improved.

4. Analysis: Individuals delve deeper into the experience, considering the reasons behind their actions and the impact of their decisions.

5. Conclusion: Based on the analysis, individuals draw conclusions about the experience and what they have learned from it.

6. Action Plan: The final step of this process involves creating an action plan for future situations, outlining how to apply the insights gained from reflection to improve one's actions.

Gibbs' Reflective Model (1988), with its structured and iterative approach, offers a detailed framework for dissecting experiences. This model is particularly useful for this paper as it provides a systematic cycle of critical writing and thinking allowing for a nuanced analysis of each step from planning to execution. Gibbs' six stages encourage a thorough scrutiny of actions and outcomes, essential for a topic where ethical considerations play a significant role. The structured nature of Gibbs' model helps pinpoint specific areas for improvement and aids in the formulation of actionable strategies moving forward. Notably, Gibbs' model has been effectively employed in the literature, underscoring its applicability to fields requiring ethical rigour and continuous improvement (Adeani et al., 2020; Markkanen et al., 2020; Sekarwinahyu et al., 2020). The selection of Gibbs' model provides scope for a detailed reflection on aspects of implementing SMI strategies in educational settings.

Therefore, the use of Gibbs' Reflective Model (1988) in this paper ensures a structured and systematic approach to analysing the role of SMIs in promoting academic integrity. By following the six stages of the model, this reflection provides a comprehensive exploration of both theoretical and practical considerations in leveraging SMIs for educational campaigns. This structured approach allows for critical evaluation of the effectiveness of SMIs in shaping ethical behaviours and highlights actionable insights for HEIs seeking to integrate influencer-based strategies into their academic integrity initiatives.

The subsequent sections will delve into the description of the events, personal feelings and evaluations, a thorough analysis, and culminate in a conclusion with an action plan, thereby encapsulating a comprehensive reflective journey.

Description

In exploring the theme of "The promotion of academic integrity practices through Social Media Influencers" within the context of higher education in Ireland, it is pertinent to consider my background as a researcher focused on the impact of social media influencers on the student population in Ireland. My previous studies have illuminated the profound attachment, relatability, trust, and parasocial relationships that young people in Ireland form with their favoured social media influencers (Alves de Castro, 2023b). This concept aligns with the broader recognition of social media influencers as the new opinion leaders of the digital world, a notion widely supported in contemporary research (Belanche et al., 2021; Ryan, 2014; Vaidya & Karnawat, 2023).

Through my participation in various academic integrity conferences and events, I have witnessed the significant efforts made by higher education institutions in Ireland to uphold and promote academic integrity (NAIN, 2023). The concept of academic integrity, as defined by the Australian Government's Tertiary Education Quality and

Standards Agency, encompasses values of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility in the academic community (TEQSA, 2023). The suggestion I am proposing here is a collaboration between the HEIs in Ireland and social media influencers to further these principles, especially considering the prevalent online presence of the student population.

Supporting this suggestion, recent studies provide a compelling backdrop. For instance, the 2021 Sign of the Times survey by Behaviour and Attitudes Research and Insight, involving 1000 participants, highlighted that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Gen Z in Ireland increasingly turned to platforms like TikTok and Instagram for escapism, with 82% engaging more frequently with these platforms. This increased online presence coincides with reported mental health challenges, with 70% of this demographic feeling that the pandemic had worsened their mental health (Behaviour and Attitudes Research and Insight, 2021; Reaper, 2021). Furthermore, the Digital News Report Ireland 2020, conducted by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University, reveals that Gen Z in Ireland is increasingly relying on social media as their primary news source, with this trend growing by three percentage points over five years (Kirk et al., 2020). Notably, 71% of Gen Z use smartphones as their main device for accessing news, an increase of 18 percentage points over the same period (Kirk et al., 2020).

Having outlined evidence of the extent to which the use of social media has increased among the cohort of interest in the *description* step of my reflection, the next step involves an explanation of my *feelings* about how SMIs can help to promote academic integrity among this cohort.

Feelings

Reflecting on the concept of integrating social media influencers (SMIs) to promote academic integrity in higher education in Ireland, my feelings are predominantly positive and hopeful, yet tempered with a sense of caution. The potential of leveraging SMIs, given their profound influence on young adults, particularly those in the Gen Z demographic, resonates with me as a researcher who has explored the impact of digital media on youth behaviour and attitudes.

The 2021 Sign of the Times survey findings, emphasising the significant online presence of Gen Z on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, particularly during the pandemic, align with my own understanding of this demographic's digital behaviour (Behaviour and Attitudes Research and Insight, 2021; Reaper, 2021). This understanding fosters a sense of anticipation about the potential effectiveness of collaborating with SMIs in academic integrity campaigns. Additionally, the insights from Digital News Report Ireland 2020 into Gen Z's news consumption patterns via social media further strengthen my belief in the efficacy of this approach (Kirk et al., 2020).

Alongside this enthusiasm, there is a sense of responsibility and the need for careful planning and execution. The findings from Dawson and Sutherland-Smith's (2018) study on improving marker accuracy in detecting contract cheating highlight the nuanced and challenging nature of academic integrity issues. Their research brings to the forefront the complexity of the issue and the need for multifaceted strategies that go beyond mere detection and punishment. My feelings are therefore influenced by an awareness of the potential risks and ethical considerations involved in using SMIs for educational purposes. While their influence is undeniable, it is crucial to ensure that the messages conveyed align with the values of academic integrity and are delivered in a manner that is authentic and respectful of the educational context. The responsibility to maintain the credibility and integrity of such campaigns is significant and not to be taken lightly. This blend of excitement about the possibilities, while being cognisant of the challenges, reflects what I think is a balanced view that recognises the importance of thorough planning and the need for a collaborative approach between educators, institutions, stakeholders and influencers to ensure such initiatives' effectiveness and ethical soundness.

Evaluation

Evaluating the idea of using SMIs to promote academic integrity in Ireland's HEIs, I find it to be a potentially effective strategy. This assessment is heavily influenced not only by the extensive use of social media channels associated with the cohort of interest, but also by my own research (Alves de Castro, 2023a). The relatability, trust, and parasocial relationships that young individuals develop with SMIs are key drivers of their influence (Alves de Castro, 2023b). These elements could be pivotal in effectively disseminating messages about academic integrity. The notion of SMIs as more credible sources of advice than traditional celebrities, as found in the research conducted by Djafarova and Rushworth (2017), further supports the potential efficacy of utilising SMIs in academic integrity campaigns (Alves de Castro, 2023b).

This *evaluation* must also consider the complex nature of contract cheating in academic environments, however. Improvements in marker accuracy for detecting contract cheating underscore the multi-dimensional nature of the challenge of maintaining academic integrity by demonstrating that while technological and methodological advancements can enhance detection capabilities, they alone are insufficient to address the broader issue. Dawson and Sutherland-Smith (2018) have shown that enhanced marker accuracy reveals a reactive rather than proactive approach to combating academic dishonesty. As methods of cheating evolve, so too must detection techniques, which only highlights one facet of a complex set of challenges that include ethical education, policy development, and fostering a culture of integrity within academic institutions (Bretag et al., 2019). Furthermore, McCabe, Butterfield, and Trevino (2012) argue that despite advancements in detection technology, the

persistence of cheating suggests that deeper cultural and systemic changes are necessary to effectively combat academic dishonesty. This complexity underscores the need for a comprehensive strategy that goes beyond detection to include preventive measures such as curricular integration of ethics, development of honour codes, and the active cultivation of a community committed to integrity. Given this complexity, it is important to recognise that while SMIs can play a significant role in awareness and prevention, they are but one part of a broader strategy that must include training for academic staff and the development of robust detection mechanisms.

Moreover, the ethical implications of leveraging SMIs for educational purposes must be carefully considered. Ensuring that the content promoted by SMIs aligns with the educational values and ethics of academic integrity is crucial. The influence wielded by SMIs should be harnessed responsibly, with clear guidelines and strategies to avoid potential misuse or misrepresentation of academic standards.

Successfully recruiting SMIs for academic integrity campaigns requires careful selection and relationship management. Not all influencers may be willing or suitable to engage in such initiatives, as their brand identity, audience expectations, and personal values influence their willingness to advocate for academic ethics (Freberg et al., 2011; Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). Higher education institutions must identify influencers whose content already aligns with educational topics, and ethical discussions. Establishing productive relationships involves providing clear incentives, whether in the form of financial compensation, professional recognition, or alignment with their personal brand growth (Abidin, 2016). Furthermore, long-term engagement strategies should be built on trust and mutual benefit, including ongoing collaboration, institutional support, and co-creation of content that resonates authentically with both the influencer's audience and academic integrity objectives. Without a structured and well-managed partnership, the effectiveness of SMI-driven integrity campaigns may be limited, as influencers must genuinely believe in and advocate for the message they are promoting.

Concluding my *evaluation*, the use of SMIs to promote academic integrity in Ireland's higher education sector appears to be a promising approach, provided it is implemented as part of a comprehensive, ethically guided strategy that complements traditional academic integrity measures.

Analysis

The concept of utilising social media influencers (SMIs) to promote academic integrity in higher education presents a multifaceted challenge that warrants a comprehensive analysis. Here, I propose this as a potential future research topic. Drawing upon insights from several chapters of the book *Academic Integrity in Canada: An Enduring*

and Essential Challenge, edited by Eaton and Hughes (2022b), and my own research, several critical themes and considerations emerge:

- *The Essential Role of Academic Integrity.* As Eaton and Edino (2018) emphasise, academic integrity lies at the heart of scholarly work and the dissemination of knowledge. Its preservation is crucial for maintaining the credibility of higher education institutions. This fundamental value aligns with my research, which shows the potential for SMIs to influence young people's attitudes and behaviours, thereby offering an innovative avenue for reinforcing academic integrity among students.

- *Contract Cheating and External Pressures.* The commodification of knowledge points to the rising trend of contract cheating and the external pressures that undermine academic integrity (Eaton, 2022a; Gray, 2022). This aspect is particularly relevant as SMIs can play a role in countering these pressures by promoting a culture of integrity and ethical academic practices among students. Contract cheating, while not necessarily the most prevalent form of academic dishonesty, is among the most serious due to its premeditated nature, the involvement of third parties, and the challenges it presents for detection and prevention, making it a critical focus for academic integrity research, and therefore I focus on this issue (Harper et al., 2021; Eaton, 2022b).

- *Addressing Academic Integrity in Various Disciplines.* The book's introduction also addresses the issue of academic integrity across different disciplines, including design-based fields and professional programmes (Eaton & Hughes, 2022a). This diversity suggests that any strategy involving SMIs should be adaptable and sensitive to the specific needs and challenges of various academic areas.

- *Engaging Multiple Stakeholders.* The promotion of academic integrity is not solely the responsibility of academic institutions or educators. It requires the engagement of multiple stakeholders, including students, to support institutional missions of integrity (Hunter & Kier, 2022). SMIs, as influential figures, can act as bridges between these stakeholders, facilitating a more integrated and collaborative approach to promoting academic integrity.

- *Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives and Pedagogical Approaches.* Hamilton and Wolsky (2022) also highlight the importance of multi-stakeholder initiatives and pedagogical approaches to foster academic integrity. This suggests that, to be effective, the use of SMIs should be part of a broader strategy that includes educational campaigns, quality assurance frameworks, and institutional culture change initiatives.

Analysis of the critical themes identified above underscores the potential effectiveness

of using SMIs to promote academic integrity in higher education. However, it also highlights the need for a comprehensive, nuanced approach that integrates multiple stakeholders and adapts to the diverse landscape of academic disciplines. This strategy should be ethically sound, align with the core values of academic integrity, and be implemented as part of a broader institutional effort to foster a culture of integrity.

For instance, studies like that by König and Maier (2024) suggest that while green influencers can significantly impact sustainable consumption patterns, their influence is most pronounced when they reach audiences not already predisposed to their message. This highlights a potential challenge of "preaching to the choir," where messages might resonate less with those already aware or indifferent due to alignment with the influencers' attitudes. Applying this to academic integrity, it suggests that SMIs should be carefully selected to ensure they resonate with a broader student demographic, not just those already inclined to value integrity. Additionally, the effectiveness of such campaigns often hinges on the authenticity and credibility of the influencers, suggesting that any initiative to promote academic integrity should involve influencers who are genuinely committed to educational values and can communicate them in a relatable manner. This approach could mitigate the risk of backlash, e.g. due to a perception by students of being patronised, and ensure that the campaign's message effectively fosters a culture of integrity across diverse student groups.

Conclusion

The exploration of leveraging social media influencers to promote academic integrity in higher education institutions concludes with a recognition of the multifaceted nature of this approach. The critical analysis, grounded in both my research and academic discussions, illustrates the complex interplay between young individuals' engagement with SMIs and the promotion of academic integrity values.

The concept of academic integrity, as highlighted in *Academic Integrity in Canada: An Enduring and Essential Challenge* (Eaton & Hughes, 2022b) is central to the very essence of higher education, representing the core values and truths that academic institutions strive to uphold and disseminate (Brown et al., 2020; Eaton & Edino, 2018; Hendy et al., 2021). However, with the rise in incidents of academic misconduct and the challenges posed by contract cheating, artificial intelligence, and commodification of knowledge, the integrity of the academy faces increasing threats (Chibry & Kurz, 2022).

When considering ways to approach these challenges, it becomes evident that the influence of SMIs on young people, especially those belonging to Gen Z, can potentially be harnessed to promote academic integrity effectively. My research underscores the power of SMIs in influencing their followers, driven by factors like parasocial

relationships, trust, and relatability (Alves de Castro, 2023b). These influencers, due to their credibility and the authentic connections they establish with their audience, can play a pivotal role in disseminating the values of academic integrity.

However, this approach requires careful consideration and strategic planning. The content shared by SMIs should align with the ethical standards and educational goals of higher education institutions. Moreover, it should aim to foster a deep and lasting understanding of academic integrity principles among students. Initiatives like "Promotion of Academic Integrity through a Marketing Lens for Canadian Post-Secondary Institutions" suggest that multi-stakeholder approaches are vital in sustaining and supporting academic integrity (Teymouri et al., 2022). This initiative aimed to leverage marketing strategies to enhance the promotion of academic integrity beyond traditional educational methods. By utilising data on academic misconduct to identify trends, institutions can develop tailored interventions that address specific challenges. Teymouri et al. (2022) emphasise engaging students through familiar digital mediums, such as social media, to foster a deeper understanding of academic integrity principles. Drawing on relationship marketing principles, the initiative sought to build strong, mutually beneficial relationships between institutions and students, thereby cultivating a culture of loyalty and commitment to integrity. This approach encouraged institutions to shift from merely managing academic misconduct to fostering a culture where academic integrity is a core value, shared by all members of the educational community. By integrating marketing techniques, institutions can effectively communicate the importance of academic integrity, creating a supportive environment that encourages ethical behaviour and decision-making among students (Teymouri et al., 2022).

Revisiting my research on the influence of SMIs on young people in Ireland (Alves de Castro, 2024). It is important to consider how personality traits might affect the effectiveness of influencer-led academic integrity campaigns. My findings suggest that students with lower Honesty-Humility and Conscientiousness scores are more susceptible to the influence of SMIs (Alves de Castro, 2024). This implies that SMI-driven campaigns promoting academic integrity could be particularly impactful for students who may be more inclined toward academic misconduct due to lower inherent conscientiousness or ethical awareness. However, this also highlights the need for carefully tailored messaging that can reach and resonate with students across different personality profiles. Future initiatives should explore how SMIs can frame their communication strategies to ensure engagement with those most at risk of unethical academic behaviours, thereby maximising the impact of these campaigns.

In conclusion, the concept of integrating SMIs into academic integrity campaigns within higher education institutions is a novel approach that has yet to be extensively explored in academic literature. While there is substantial research on the role of SMIs in marketing and consumer behaviour, their potential influence on educational

outcomes, particularly in promoting ethical behaviour and academic integrity, remains largely uncharted territory. This innovative idea presents an opportunity to harness the persuasive power of SMIs to instil values of integrity among students, leveraging their significant reach and relatability. Given the lack of existing research or experiential projects in this area, it is imperative to conduct a pilot study or research project to assess the feasibility and effectiveness of this approach. Such an initiative would provide valuable insights into best practices, potential challenges, and the overall impact of SMIs on fostering a culture of academic integrity within higher education institutions. The following Action Plan outlines a proposed strategy that could be implemented if the pilot study demonstrates a positive impact.

Action Plan

SMIs might be a key component in promoting academic integrity within HEIs in Ireland. HEIs could partner with and manage this strategic collaboration that is generally through paid media. To incorporate SMIs effectively, I propose the following steps:

1. *Identification and Outreach*. Identify key social media influencers who align with the values of academic integrity and have a strong following among the target audiences, particularly learners and academics. Reach out to these SMIs to form partnerships. HEIs need to recruit and select those influencers, bearing in mind that a local influencer might be more impactful. Therefore, the management of these SMIs and campaigns are the responsibility of each HEI.

2. *Collaborative Content Creation*. Work with SMIs to create content that resonates with their audience and conveys the importance of academic integrity. This content could range from informational videos to discussion panels and Q&A sessions. Each HEI will create and manage content strategies based on its mission, values, future goals, location, and cultural characteristics.

3. *Training and Resources for SMIs*. Provide SMIs with training and resources to ensure they have a deep understanding of academic integrity issues. This could be facilitated through webinars, information packs, and collaboration with experts from the HEIs, NAIN, and QQI.

4. *Campaign Strategy Development*. Develop a campaign strategy in collaboration with SMIs that leverages their platforms for maximum impact. This strategy should include key messages, hashtags, and calls to action that encourage engagement and spread awareness. HEIs could use their marketing department and faculty to manage and develop campaigns.

5. *Guidance and Collaboration with the HEIs, QQI, and NAIN*. Ensure that the SMIs' content and campaigns are in line with the guidance from the HEIs, QQI, and the

objectives of NAIN. Collaboration might also include joint initiatives or campaigns that feature both influencers and representatives of higher education.

6. *Monitoring and Evaluation*. Track the reach and impact of SMI-led social media campaigns. Use analytics to assess engagement levels, the spread of messaging, and the overall perception of academic integrity within the community. Marketing experts in the department of marketing at the HEIs could do the monitoring and evaluation. This requires technical knowledge of digital marketing analytics.

7. *Feedback and Adjustment*. Use the data collected from monitoring to refine the approach with SMIs. This includes adjusting messages, targeting different aspects of academic integrity, or engaging with new influencers. Additionally, if overwhelming feedback from students suggests that the approach does not resonate with them, a broader review should be conducted to assess its overall effectiveness and explore alternative strategies for promoting academic integrity.

8. *Recognition and Reward*. Implement a system to recognise and reward the contributions of SMIs in promoting academic integrity. This could include public acknowledgement, certificates of appreciation, or features on the HEIs' and QQI/NAIN's platforms.

9. *Sustainability*. Develop a long-term plan for the continued involvement of SMIs in academic integrity initiatives. This might involve creating a network of SMIs committed to promoting integrity beyond the lifespan of a single campaign. However, the sustainability of such initiatives will depend on the effectiveness of initial pilot projects. If pilot ventures demonstrate a positive impact, such as increased awareness and student engagement, then HEIs can invest in scaling up these collaborations. Conversely, if outcomes indicate limited effectiveness, a reassessment of the strategy will be necessary to determine alternative approaches to fostering academic integrity.

10. *Reporting Mechanisms*. Set up mechanisms for learners and other stakeholders to report instances of academic dishonesty that are either detected on social media platforms or reported through social media channels. This could include advertising contract cheating services online. SMIs could play a role as watchdogs for academic integrity by raising awareness about these issues, guiding students on how to report violations, and discouraging engagement with dishonest practices. However, their role would be primarily advocacy-based rather than direct enforcement, ensuring they align with institutional integrity efforts.

The integration of SMIs into academic integrity campaigns within Irish higher education institutions might offer promising potential but requires careful consideration of the willingness and readiness of SMIs to engage in such initiatives. While SMIs possess

the unique ability to reach and influence a broad audience, particularly among Generation Z, their involvement hinges on aligning their personal brand values with those of academic integrity. Research indicates that SMIs can effectively engage young audiences through relatability, trust, and parasocial relationships, making them valuable allies in promoting ethical behaviours (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). However, not all influencers may be willing to commit to educational campaigns that may not directly align with their usual content or audience expectations (Freberg et al., 2011).

The key to success is likely to lie in strategically selecting influencers who already express an interest in educational content or ethical issues and providing them with adequate training and resources to communicate the importance of academic integrity authentically (Veirman et al., 2017). Additionally, developing collaborative content that resonates with their style and audience can foster genuine partnerships (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011). Although the potential benefits of incorporating SMIs are significant, their participation should be seen as part of a comprehensive approach involving various stakeholders, including educators, students, and institutions (Abidin, 2016). By creating an environment that supports SMIs in delivering impactful messages about academic integrity, the higher education sector can leverage their influence to foster a culture of integrity that resonates with students. This approach not only enhances the reach of academic integrity initiatives but also encourages a deeper, more lasting understanding of ethical principles among learners (Marwick, 2015).

The proposed target audience framework for SMI communication strategies, as depicted in Figure 1, embodies a comprehensive multi-stakeholder approach crucial for sustaining and supporting academic integrity within higher education institutions in Ireland. This framework categorises key stakeholders into distinct segments, each critical to the success of the initiative. These segments include learners, professional services staff, institutional management, NAIN's network members, academics, researchers, policymakers, and other stakeholders, reflecting a strategic and inclusive approach to communications. For instance, learners, both national and international, are direct recipients of the ethical values promoted through this potential initiative, while professional services staff support operational objectives crucial for executing these strategies. Additionally, institutional management and NAIN's network members could facilitate governance and continuity, ensuring a potential alignment of SMI campaigns with institutional goals and ethical standards. Academics and researchers are pivotal in grounding these communications in evidence-based practice and ongoing scholarly work, while policymakers and stakeholders ensure regulatory compliance. This strategic approach is reflective of Teymouri et al.'s (2022) advocacy for multi-stakeholder initiatives, emphasising that sustained support and active engagement from all parties are crucial in embedding academic integrity deeply within the educational culture.

FIGURE 1

Target Audience Framework.

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