

Exploring how artificial intelligence can be used effectively in student recruitment marketing

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1. Introduction

In recent years, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have been forced into an increasingly competitive environment. This is attributed to a range of factors, such as globalisation, competitiveness, increased focus on rankings and declines in public funding (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Miottoa, Del-Castillo-Feitob, Blanco-González, 2020). LJMU's Undergraduate applications have declined in recent years. For September 2024 entry applications and acceptances fell 10% year on year (LJMU Web Hub, 2024). This decline is higher than the overall sector, which had a 1.1% increase in applications (UCAS, 2024). This growth was fuelled by higher tariff HEIs, which increased student numbers while medium and lower tariff institutions dropped.

The concept of Artificial Intelligence (AI) was first introduced by seminal writers McCarthy et al. (1955). AI refers to “a machine that behaves in a way that could be considered intelligent, if it was a human being” (McCarthy, 2007, cited in Mehta et al., 2022). Thormundsson (2023) estimates that chatbots, image generating AI and mobile applications will be the major trends improving AI in the coming years, however there is a lack of research into the application of AI in HE marketing. This research aims to fill this gap by researching how AI can be used in HE digital marketing to influence the recruitment of students. This is of interest to HE marketing professionals looking for ways to innovate, improve their marketing practices and increase student recruitment figures.

2. Research objectives

The study is entitled ‘How can Artificial Intelligence be used in Higher Education digital marketing to influence the recruitment of students?’ It aims to: explore different ways that AI is used in HE digital marketing, such as personalisation, segmentation, content generation, machine learning and automation; apply the theory of Connectivism to digital marketing in HE to explore how it can be used to personalise the audiences’ experience and improve brand experience and reputation; and apply the theory of Anthropomorphism to determine how the recruitment of students can be influenced through personalising AI technology.

3. Literature Review

According to Wong et al. (2022), the term digital natives was coined by seminal writer Prensky (2001) when referring to a generation whose lives are closely knitted to mobile and function best when connected. Generation Z are known as the ‘net generation’ or ‘digital natives’ who have grown up in a technology-rich environment who expect HEIs to have a clear brand presence. This results in a need for HEIs to improve their marketing and branding strategies to enhance their reputation and develop greater understanding of student consumer decision-making (Angulo-Ruiz et al., 2022) and to be innovative, rather than generic (Hung and Yen, 2022).

Thormundsson (2023) estimates that the global AI market will show strong growth in the next decade, with its value expected to increase twenty fold by 2030, to US\$100 billion. According to the literature, AI can be used for a variety of marketing tasks, such as sales forecasting (Sohrabpour et al., 2021), understanding customer preferences (Brito et al., 2015), programmatic advertising targeting (Chen and Feng, 2021) and chatbots (Haristiani, 2019). Anthropomorphism is the tendency to attribute human-like characteristics, such as intentions, emotions or motivations, to non-human agents (Seeger and Heinzl, 2018). Meanwhile, Connectivism explores how internet technologies such as web

browsers, search engines, online forums and social networks contribute to new avenues of learning (Siemens, 2006; Downes, 2006).

This research presents an opportunity for LJMU to improve its share of the UK student market as recruiting new students is key to its aim to: “be a university chosen by highly motivated and talented students” (LJMU Strategic Plan, 2030) and overall target to recruit 25,000 students (LJMU Web Hub, 2024). It is also an opportunity for LJMU to harness the use of AI technology to make its marketing more effective and connect with its main target audience comprising Generation Z and digital natives.

4. Research Design

The study will be completed using multi-phase research with embedded design and the research method is qualitative research conducted using interviews, online observations, focus groups and diary keeping. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) define qualitative research as a strategy based on meanings expressed through words and images, rather than numbers.

The research will be sequential in consecutive phases where one stage of the research feeds into the next. Using a sequential design means that the data accrued could affect the future course of the research (Berry, 2015). The research is sequential because the use of AI in marketing is currently new and dynamic and it is necessary to first establish a clear image of the concept. Conducting interviews with marketing professionals first will enable the author to build an understanding of the subject area from the outset. Netnography and ethnography (Kozinets, 2010) will be conducted second to understand the phenomenon further and gain knowledge of more recent developments in AI and to develop a framework to demonstrate how digital marketing and AI can be used to influence the recruitment of students. The final stage will be focus groups to enable the researcher to go more in-depth and to test and validate the marketing framework with current LJMU students. The author is also keeping a diary to capture insider research findings throughout the study.

5. References

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