An investigation of the Impact of Instagram Advertising on the Decision-Making Process of International Students Considering Third-Level Education in Dublin.

Research Proposal

MSc. In Marketing

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Abstract

This study investigates how Instagram ads affect international students' choices considering going to college in Dublin. As digital communication changes the way people choose to learn, Instagram, which is visual and engaging, is a vital tool for drawing potential students. The main goals of this study were to look into how digital communication with schools affects students, how Instagram helps bring international students to Dublin, how Instagram ads affect international students' choices of university and course, and how much international students interact with Instagram. The study uses conversations with potential students to show that Instagram significantly impacts student decisions through visual material, interaction with school profiles, and personal recommendations. These results show how vital strategic Instagram marketing is for educational organizations and give valuable tips for making digital marketing plans more effective. This study helps us understand how the role of social media is changing in marketing for foreign education and gives schools a way to improve their outreach.

Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

National College of Ireland
Research Students Declaration Form

Name: Alby Yolanda Rivera Malpica

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Degree for which thesis is submitted: MSc in Marketing

Title of Thesis: An investigation of the Impact of Instagram Advertising on the Decision-Making Process of International Students Considering Third-Level Education in Dublin.

Date: 10 – August - 2024

Material submitted for award

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An investigation of the Impact of Instagram Advertising on the Decision-Making Process of International Students Considering Third-Level Education in Dublin.

Your Name/Student Number	Course	Date
Alby Yolanda Rivera Malpica	Research Methods & Dissertation (SoB PGT)	10/08/2024

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AI Acknowledgment

This section acknowledges the AI tools that were utilized in the process of completing this assignment.

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N/A	N/A	N/A
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This section provides a more detailed description of how the AI tools were used in the assignment. It includes information about the prompts given to the AI tool, the responses received, and how these responses were utilized or modified in the assignment. **One table should be used for each tool used**.

No use of AI	
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Additional Evidence:

No use of AI

Additional Evidence:

No use of AI

Acknowledgements

I thank God for His strength and wisdom, which have inspired and supported me.

My beloved husband, I thank you for your patience, constant support, and unconditional love. Thank you for every cup of coffee you made me during the long nights of work and for every word of encouragement. This achievement would not have been possible without your support and understanding. You are my gift!

To my parents and sisters, thank you for your love and unwavering support. Even though we live far away from each other, our hearts are still close. "One for all and all for one"

I sincerely thank my supervisor, Michael Bane, for his support and patience; I want to be like you when I grow up!

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Introduction

Digital contact has changed how schools interact with prospective students in recent years. Because they are visible and engaging, social media sites like Instagram have become very important to this change. People are talking a lot about the new generation of internet applications grouped under the word "social media" and making money from them. Tuten (2021) describes social media as digital interactions, distribution, cooperation, and development between digitally linked people and groups and classifies it as "Social Media Marketing" (SMM). Recent studies have investigated the elements of SMM that influence consumer purchasing inclinations (Alalwan, 2018; Nasir et al., 2021), and SMM allows users to freely connect with other participants and organizations and share content, potentially generating comments and reviews, ratings, photos, etc. generated by users (Alalwan, 2018).

Therefore, this social media platform is one of the most critical avenues for brands seeking the attention of potential customers (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2022). Since the main topic of my study is how advertising on Instagram affects the decisions of international students who are considering going to third-level schools in Dublin, it is crucial to include trustworthiness as one of the factors under investigation (Tullberg, 2008)

Advertising on Instagram is unique in that it can target specific groups of people and uses visual content such as photos, videos, and paid posts that appear naturally in users' feeds (usually called native advertising) (Ting et al., 2015).

Since digital platforms emerged, they have changed how students learn about schools. In the past, people who wanted to become students relied on brochures, campus tours, and other student recommendations. Today, however, digital means of contact make it easier and faster to obtain information. A 2023 study by Statista says that Instagram has over 1.3 billion monthly active users, making it a popular way to reach potential students (Statista, 2023). Universities can connect with students more dynamically and engagingly now that they can use digital communication to offer virtual tours, live Q&A meetings, and customized material.

People worldwide know Dublin for its excellent schools and lively arts scene. Increasingly, universities in the city use Instagram to showcase its best features and attract students from other countries. Research from Higher Education Marketing-2023 shows that Instagram is ideal for showcasing the student experience, such as university life and academic possibilities, which are very important to students when making decisions (Higher Education Marketing, 2023). Instagram's visual content and focused advertising tools allow Dublin universities to tell

exciting stories and connect directly with people around the world who might be interested in studying there.

How international students interact with Instagram material can say a lot about how well it works as a marketing tool. A study by the Pew Research Center in 2022 found that many young people use Instagram for many things, such as finding educational material and connecting with others (Pew Research Center, 2022). The platform's features, such as Stories and IGTV, allow users to communicate in many ways, such as directly with university representatives and current students. With so many people using it, it seems that Instagram is a great way to keep students engaged and help them talk to each other.

Research problem

It is still unclear how Instagram affects the choices of Dublin's international students regarding schools. People agree that Instagram is a valuable tool for digital marketing, but no one has investigated how different aspects of advertising on Instagram affect students' choices in depth. It is essential to look into how ads and content on Instagram affect how people think about colleges and academic programs in Dublin and what kinds of ads work best on Instagram to bring in international students. For educational institutions to change how they communicate with students, finding out how interested international students are in education-related content on Instagram is also essential.

This study fills in the gaps left by the lack of detailed studies that look at how Instagram can be used as a digital marketing tool to help foreign students decide that Dublin is the best place to go to college. The goal is to fill in this gap and come up with results that can help schools improve how they use Instagram to communicate with potential foreign students. The results will help universities in Dublin change how they do digital marketing to make themselves more appealing in a very competitive global market.

Justification of the study.

There have been more and more international students over the last few decades. Ireland has more than 8.880% of all international students globally, making it 13th out of all EU member states (OECD, 2020). Anyone can connect to the Internet and learn anything they want. After social media came along, digital marketing became very important (West, 2021). It was decided to do this study because social media, especially Instagram, is becoming increasingly important to international students when choosing where to go to college. Because Instagram is a visual tool many young adults use, universities in Dublin need to know how to use it to promote their

schools and bring in international students. This study is critical because it shows how Instagram marketing tactics can affect choosing a course and university. This will help schools improve campaigns and become more visible in the global market. The study will also add to what is already known about digital marketing in education by looking at how students use social networks and how those networks affect their choices in school.

Research Questions

This study aims to discover how Instagram ads affect international students' decision to attend Dublin University. Since more and more teenagers and young adults are using social media, it is essential to analyse how these sites affect their decisions about school. The study is based on these types of questions:

1. How does digital communication with educational institutions affect students' perceptions and experiences?

2. To what extent does Instagram contribute to attracting international students to universities in Dublin?

3. What elements of Instagram advertising influence students' decisions about which university and course to choose?

4. How engaged are international students with education-related content on Instagram?

Literature Review

1. Introduction

Given social media's growing impact on global communication, it is essential to analyse the explosive growth of international students in Ireland is essential and provides a solid foundation for this study. Ireland is a popular place for international students to attend diverse schools due to its attractive international rankings and ability to attract many different cultures (Cuthbert, 2023).

Colleges and universities use Instagram to showcase potential international students their unique programmes, academic prowess, and college life (Al-Kandari, et al., 2016). They want to connect with potential students worldwide through exciting stories, images and material that people can interact with (Bridget Turner Kelly, 20023). Ireland's place in foreign education is examined including how colleges and universities use Instagram to attract international students and make their academic standing more visible. This will underscore how educational institutions approach social media in their efforts to attract students from around the world.

Contemporary social media platforms have changed many things, including how schools target and communicate with potential students (Quijada, et al., 2022). Instagram has become a particularly valuable and effective marketing tool among the many digital platforms (Huey & Yazdanifard, 2014). It stands out because it can physically connect with a wide range of people worldwide. Some of the main things that make this work are using visually appealing content (Vries, et al., 2012), personalising content for users with algorithms (Ribeiro, et al., 2015), using influencers and brand ambassadors to reach specific groups of people (Lou & Yuan, 2019), and making segmented advertising campaigns that let schools directly reach their target audience (Schultz & Peltier, 2013).

The first part looks at the effect of social media today, including why it is so common and how it appeals to Millennials and how these platforms influence and direct their behaviour when contemplating third level. This chapter will examine Instagram's scope and it is proficiency for getting Millennials attention and how it can be utilised to persuade this group in their contemplation and selection of third level institutions.

It is said that marketing on social media in the educational arena is constantly evolving due to the increasing hyper competitive nature of this marketplace (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2019). This study looks at how Instagram affects recruiting students, mainly how this platform affects the

choices of international students seeking to study in Ireland. It also examines how Instagram can facilitate the customer journey one takes in making their college choices.

2. Ireland's Position in International Education.

Research in third-level education in Dublin is essential at this time due to the increasingly competitive nature of this sector as well as different types of educational possibilities for international students. Academic programme growth and international university partnerships have increased international student mobility choices. These improvements have led foreign students to seek more study places (Gutema & Pant, 2023; Netierman, et al., 2022). Ireland is known for having reputable schools and a strong job market in many fields, including business, finance, IT, big data, medical technology, engineering and digital marketing (Cuthbert, 2023). There are three main types of education that international students in Ireland typically pursue: higher education (tertiary), higher education (post-secondary), and language education (English) (Department Of Justice-Irish Migration, 2024). Health and Wellness (17.0%) are the next most studied group, after Business, Administration and Law (20.3%) (Cuthbert, 2023). Out of the 130 schools that can give student visas, 78 (60%) are in Dublin. As it can see, there are a lot of foreign students in Dublin and the areas around it (IrishImmigration, 2024). Focusing this research on third-level education in Ireland, particularly Dublin, allows us to explore how educational marketing strategies can impact the decision-making of international students and provides a critical perspective on how competitive educational institutions are positioning themselves to attract and retain a growing global student population.

This study focuses on third-level education because, as explained in the text, it plays a crucial role in making Irish higher education institutions more diverse, attracting students from different nationalities and cultures. All Irish universities and technology schools offer this level of education under the 'Education in Ireland' brand, led by Enterprise Ireland and supported by the Department of Education and Skills (Department of Education and Skills, 2019). There is a need to create alliances with universities in other countries to foster academic collaboration, share resources, and attract international students, which improves the educational quality and global reputation of Irish institutions (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Knight, 2018). The Department's policies discuss a plan to focus on certain partner countries, showing the importance of the third level in promoting Irish education abroad, as these collaborations and international recognition boost the attraction of global students (Department of Education, 2024; (Hudzik, 2011;). Enterprise Ireland has 34 overseas offices, and its main office is in

Dublin. It also has an office in New York and works with colleges, schools and educational agents to help companies enter key markets (Finn & O'Connell, 2012).

The number of international students in Ireland has grown from 12.4% in 2021/22 to 13.7% in 2023. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) says that international students increased from 31,720 in 2021–22 to 35,140 yearly. HEA data gives an overview of the last seven years by showing how many students were registered, what they studied, where they came from, how they got to college, how many graduated, and what their skills were (O'Shea, 2023). With 14.5%, students coming from the United States closely followed by India at 13.5%, and China at 11.3% (Higher Education Authority, 2023).
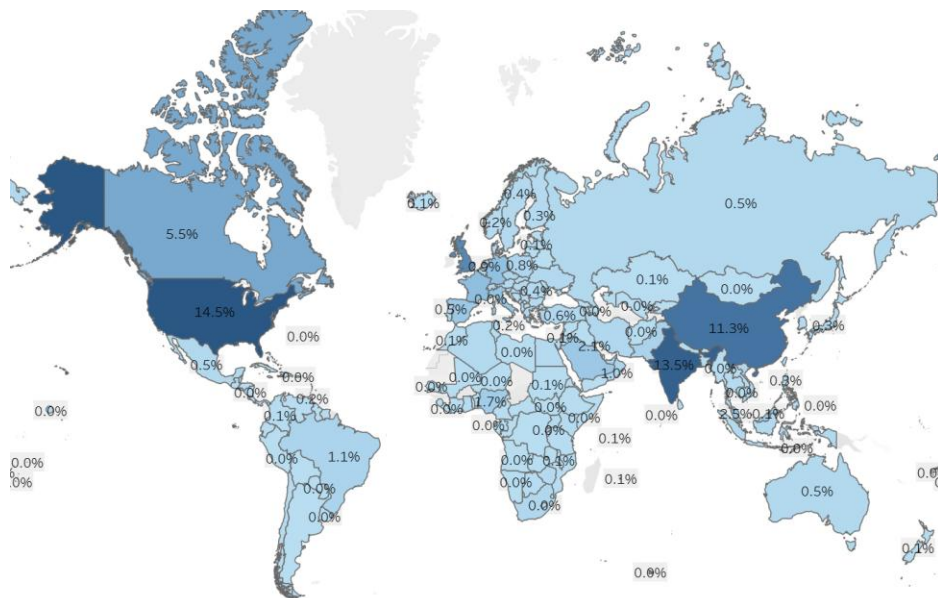
Figure 1. (Higher Education Authority, 2023)

3. The Evolution of Marketing Communications

Because social media is so prolific/ubiquitous, it has become an essential business tool (Rugova & Prenaj, 2016). However, this change from a primary conversation tool to a complex business tool has happened slowly (Gancho, 2017).

Figure 2 shows a graph that Armano made in 2009, showing how marketing messages have changed over time. It makes it clear that things have changed in the business field on the web since Web 1.0 came out in 1991 (Bryan, 2011). Before Web 2.0, marketing was primarily

inactive and low-engagement (Aghaei, et al., 2012). Web 2.0 has changed that by making marketing more engaging, hyper-connected, and proactive. Web 2.0 also makes it possible for people, consumers, technology, and brands to connect through conversations and networks that are made by everyone (Armano, 2009). Because of these changes, standard advertising tactics no longer work. According to Berthon et al. (2012), Web 2.0 is the technical framework and base that makes collective media possible and makes it easier for people to create content. In this way, Web 2.0 makes making and sharing information through social media possible. Additionally, Web 2.0 allowed social media and users to change how it is used in ways other than the original intent (Berthon, et al., 2012). Additionally, Dinesh (2017) says that as the number of people using social media has grown, so has their dislike of ads. Because of this, paid ads on social media are not reaching as many people as possible.

Figure 2. (Armano, 2009).

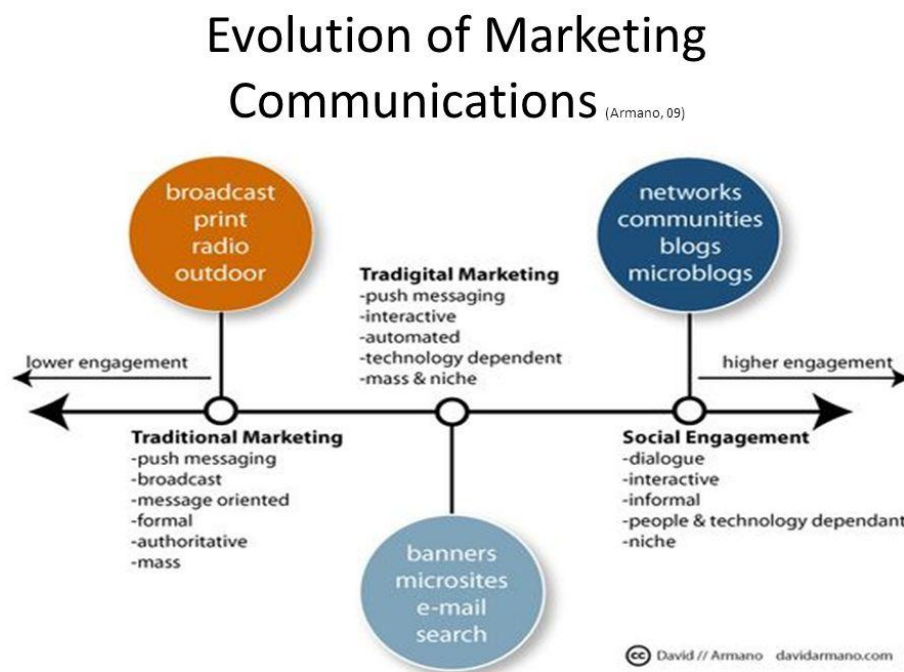"Millennials have twisted traditional marketing," Daniel Newman wrote in 2015, clarifying that it does not work with these particular age groups anymore. It is now necessary to move from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0, the digital way for customers and companies to talk to each other. The growth of the internet has also influenced these changes.

Digital natives prefer digital communication, so marketing techniques have migrated to social media (Adeola, et al., 2019). This shows how broadband internet and cell phones have changed marketing since 1993 (Faraj, et al., 2004). With 8.9 billion smartphones (Taylor, 2024) and 5.44 billion internet users, technology has fundamentally altered how we interact, think, purchase, work, and communicate (Petrosyan, 2024). Despite the shift away from traditional print and radio, some generations still use them (Chaney, et al., 2017) resulting in 'Traditional' marketing communications as defined by Armano (2009)

The diagram by Armano (2009) shows how marketing interactions have changed from the disruptive traditional approach using 'push' methods towards collaborative 'engagement' approaches that add value allowing for dialogue and interaction via blogs, forums, and online communities. Florenthal's (2019) supports Armano (2009) suggesting that marketers must adapt their advertising to appeal to tech-savvy, hyperconnected, and sceptical consumers, many of whom utilize social media. Adler further commends this view of the significance of social interactions and human relationships, which now include digital interactions and connections for Millennials.

The diagram's show how technology gives consumers more options for engagement and collaboration, such as instant messaging or video communication, which Millennials and centennials expect (Llopis-Amorós, et al., 2019). Digital natives lead the gap between traditional and contemporary technologies, whereas sceptical Millennials want more advanced marketing communications than sales pitches (Gilal et al., 2019; Naumovska, 2017). Traditional marketing concentrates on conveying brands' messages to consumers, while current marketing is more customer-oriented since businesses reward loyal customers (Rakic & Rakic, 2017).

The exponential growth of the Internet has accelerated these changes, with over 5.44 billion users worldwide (Petrosyan, 2024) and 94% of Irish households connected (Central Statistics Office, Ireland, 2023). Digital advertising is rising, while print and radio are falling (Core, 2018). Ireland invested €958 million in digital advertising in 2023, 11% more than the previous year. Digital display advertising grew by 15% to €589 million, driven by video, digital audio and paid social networks. Search advertising grew 4% to €314 million that year (IabIreland, 2024).

4. Social Media's Influence Today

Peters et al. (2013) state that social networks come from sociology and communication sciences. Scientists see them as ways to send data, but sociologists see them as structures built on complicated relationships. Peters et al. (2013) say that they are a way of communicating in two ways that include both points of view. Cooper (2019) says that social networks are places where people can share their material differently, making it easier to talk to each other and share ideas.

Social media has become a dynamic tool that allows two-way interaction through various applications and websites, allowing content to be shared innovatively based on the principles of the Web. 2.0 (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Constantinides & Fountain, 2008). Blackwell et al. (2017) state that SM is based on platforms for collaboration and co-creation, meaning that anyone, any group, or any organisation can post information online and share, co-create, talk, and participate (Abeza, et al., 2020) Many people are familiar with SM sites like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok (Blackwell et al., 2017; Utz & Breuer, 2019). Increasingly, these sites significantly impact how consumers behave, such as how they source information, what they buy, how they talk to each other, and what reviews they leave after a purchase (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

People often think social media marketing is cheaper than traditional advertising (Evans, et al., 2010). Still, it is important to remember that making good content and working with well-known celebrities can cost a lot (Huang & Benyoucef, 2017). There is no doubt that SMM works and gives a better return on investment, but the costs should not be ignored (Lal, et al., 2019).

In order to comprehend how Instagram ads might affect a buyer's choice, it needs to know about trust and how safe people think the site is (Ziadkhani Ghasemi and Palment, 2019). If people do not believe the platform because they fear privacy and data manipulation, advertising will likely suffer (Estrada-Jimenez et al., 2016). So, one needs to understand these processes deeply to determine how well social media marketing strategies work in higher education.

5. Exploring Social Media Preferences among Millennials.

In recent years, the use of social networks has grown exponentially, reaching more than 60% of the world's population, approximately 4.8 billion people (We Are Social, 2024). Instagram has stood out significantly in this panorama, projecting to reach 2 billion monthly active users

in 2023, the highest figure among all social platforms. This growth is sustained with a compound annual rate of 6.7% between 2019 and 2023, surpassing its direct competitors (Dixon, 2023).

Although TikTok has gained popularity among teenagers (Patel & Binjola, 2020), studies such as Piper Sandler's indicate that Snapchat and TikTok are more popular than Instagram among this demographic (Piper-Sandler Companies, 2020). However, Instagram remains the favourite of Millennials, who value its unique features such as Stories, IGTV, and its integrated shopping function, facilitating interaction and commerce within the application (Green et al., 2018; Instagram.com, 2024).

Instagram is also distinguished by its high user interaction rate, with an average of 1.22% interactions per post, considerably higher than other networks such as Facebook and Twitter (NetBase Quid, 2024). Although Facebook and WhatsApp are widely used among Millennials, Instagram stands out for its ease of use and visual appeal, aspects crucial for this demographic group (MK, et al., 2020).

Several studies support the relevance of Instagram among Millennials and Generation Z, who show a significant preference for this platform compared to other social networks (Constantoglou & Trihas, 2020; Zote, 2024). Content Science (2023) indicates that 72% of Millennials have increased their use of social networks in the last year and that these platforms influence their purchasing decisions. These findings support the choice of Instagram as a central tool for studies such as ours, "An investigation of the impact of Instagram advertising on the decision-making process of international students considering third level education in Dublin." Instagram's ability to influence through attractive visual content and its high interaction with users position it as the ideal platform to achieve our study objectives and marketing strategies.

6. Instagram

Instagram founders Mike Krieger and Kevin Systrom created it in 2010 as a way for people to share images and videos (Nelson, 2015; Ting et al., 2015). With the Instagram application, people can edit, post and share their images and videos (Mattern, 2017). Additionally, users can meet others, document their lives, express their creativity, and talk about their interests (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). The company operated on its own until Meta bought it in 2012. Meta bought Instagram because it was the main reason many other investors wanted to buy it

(Nelson, 2015). It was also an intelligent business move to take advantage of the platform's rapid rise in the social media market (Thomas & Bhat, 2022).

Instagram is a valuable marketing tool, as shown by its significant effect on user behaviour. According to Instagram.com (2024), 75% of users act on an idea sparked by an Instagram post, and 60% say they find new products on Instagram. Meta Instagram had 1.21 billion monthly active users in 2021, more than 28% of all internet users worldwide. Reports from Dixon (2023) that were carried out through Statista show that by 2025, 1.44 billion people will use the social network every month. This is the same as 31.2% of all Internet users worldwide (Dixon, 2023). (Figure 3).

Number of Instagram users worldwide from 2020 to 2025
(in billions)
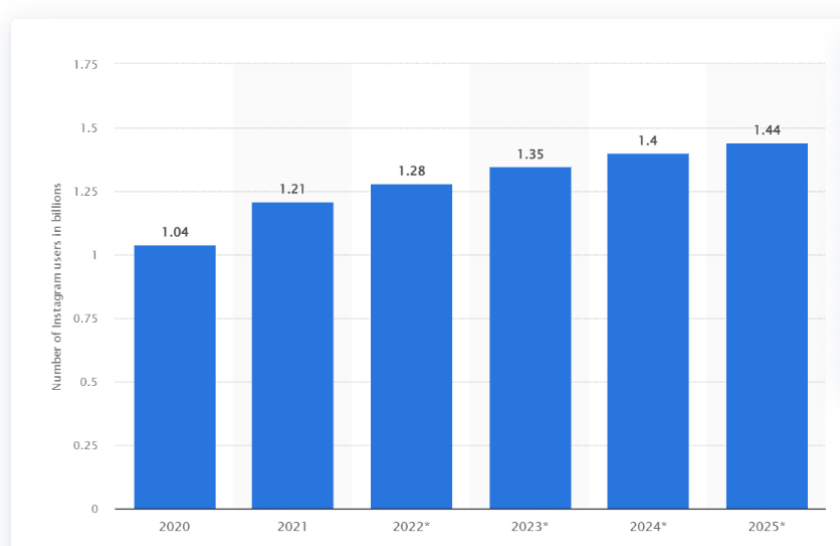
Figure 3. (Dixon, 2023)

The report by Oskar Mortensen (2024) shown in figure 4, highlights the impressive growth of Instagram since 2013. Its user base has gone from 110 million to an expected 2.4 billion by 2024. With this steady growth, the platform has shown that it can get and keep people, making it one of the most important social networks in the world. It has been downloaded about 3.8 billion times, and 96.6% of its daily active users see ads that work. This makes Instagram a valuable app for both users and marketers(Mortensen, 2024). Compared to other social media platforms, Instagram has maintained consistent growth year after year. For example, Facebook has more than three billion active users daily. It was the first social network with over one billion registered accounts (figure 5). Facebook, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and

Year	Users (millions)
2013	110.000.000
2014	200.000.000
2015	370.000.000
2016	500.000.000
2017	700.000.000
2018	1.000.000.000
2019	1.210.000.000
2020	1.435.000.000
2021	1.690.000.000
2022	1.960.000.000
2023	2.115.000.000
2024	2.400.000.000

Instagram are all owned by Meta Platforms. In the third quarter of 2023, Meta Platforms said

Platform	Number of active users in millions
Facebook	3,065
YouTube	2,504
Instagram	2,000
WhatsApp[1]	2,000
TikTok	1,582
WeChat	1,343
Facebook Messenger	1,010
Telegram	900
Snapchat	800
Douyin	755
Kuaishou	700
X/Twitter	611
Weibo	598
QQ	554
Pinterest	498
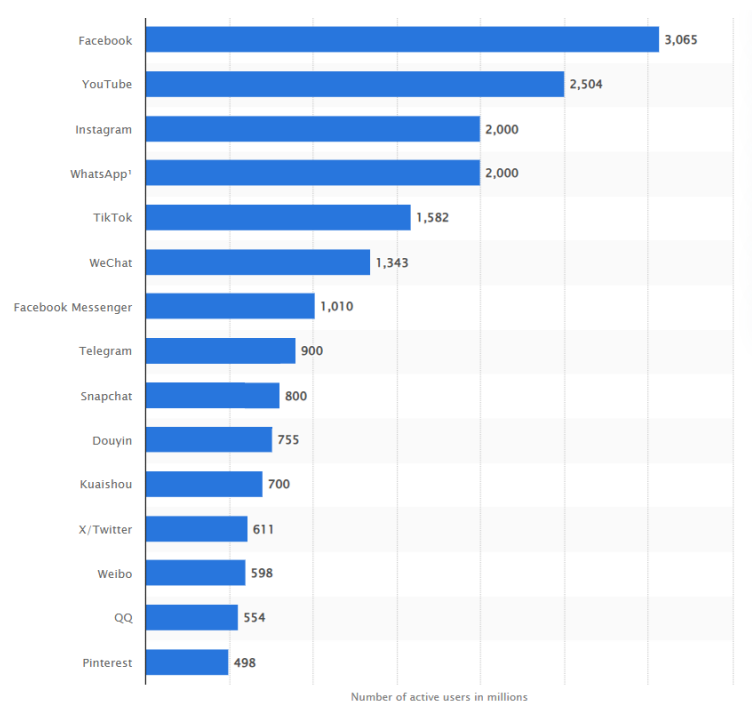
its core family products had about four billion daily users. Even though Instagram has not grown as quickly as some new platforms, its ability to stay essential and keep adding users shows how strong and valuable it is as a significant social media site (Dixon, 2023).

Figure 4. (Mortensen, 2024).

Figure 4. (Dixon, 2023)

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When Instagram added stories in 2016, this new feature made the app even more popular, especially among Millennials (Belanche, et al., 2009). Stories caught young people's attention and tested Snapchat's features (Amâncio, 2017). This success changed how brands interact with their customers and showed how social platforms affect market trends and how people think about companies in the digital age (Sosiawan & Wibowo, 2021). Raj et al.'s (2024) recent study showed that 91% of Millennials regularly use Instagram, which shows how important the site is to their buying choices. This information is crucial for understanding why Instagram is now an essential part of digital marketing.

The idea of interaction is at the heart of what makes Instagram so appealing. The literature says that people use Instagram for many things, like making friends, keeping information, expressing themselves, avoiding reality, and spying on others (Lee, et al., 2015). Sheldon and Bryant (2016) also found other factors, such as being aware of different people, keeping records, and giving the impression of being "cool" and creative. The fact that these reasons exist shows how dedicated Instagram users are to the app. To get a fuller picture, it helps to connect these reasons with academic ideas about why people use social media. For instance, Armano's model (2009) can help us figure out how Instagram's unique features and ability to keep users interested help to promote engagement marketing.

Personalisation and innovation, two of Instagram's unique features, are crucial for keeping users interested. Kang and Wei (2020) talk about how important it is for people to express themselves and be creative on the platform. Also, Hu et al. (2014) showed that putting users into groups based on their photos can help find popular picture themes and put users into groups based on how they like to post. With this ability to customise, Instagram can give each user a better experience, which makes it more appealing. The site connects with different people and offers appropriate material, strengthening its leading place in engagement marketing.

7. Social Media Marketing.

Collaborative platforms have changed how people engage online in the Web 2.0 era by making it easier for people with similar interests to get together and share their thoughts and experiences (Berthon, et al., 2012). This dynamic has generated a unique perception of authenticity and credibility, as recommendations from ordinary users are seen as more honest and authentic due to the lack of direct commercial interests, as documented by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010).

Social media marketing (SMM) uses computers and social networks to make, share, and send valuable deals to the people who matter to a business (Tuten, 2023). Companies need to handle it both ways because it helps them talk to customers, advertise their products, raise the value of their brand, and build customer trust (Saravanakumar & SuganthaLakshmi, 2012). According to Moorman (2019), SMM is used for marketing, branding, customer service, relationship management, business, and market research. It helps clients and companies communicate more easily. It attracts public attention and affects the client's choice (Tuten, 2023).

However, the influencer trend has made it harder to tell if something is real on Web 2.0 sites. There are a lot of influencers who have financial ties to brands and businesses. This can cause advice to be skewed to make them look fair when they are getting paid (Abidin, 2016). More and more people are paying attention to these actions because they can hurt the reliability that these platforms try to keep up. Both platforms and influencers need to be open about their business ties to keep users' trust. This way, reviews can be trusted, and users can make intelligent choices based on their knowledge of the background of the recommendations (Abidin, 2016; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Social media's rise has dramatically changed how companies stay in touch with their users. Still, many industries have not yet fully utilized SMM and know little about using digital marketing for brand building (Sundaram, et al., 2020). Understanding these changes in marketing is essential so that they work in the long run. A Sprout Social Index study (2019) found that only 10% of customer service questions on social media receive a response, highlighting the need for better management.

8. Consumer Journey

In order to better understand how Millennials engage with media and messaging in particular marketers turn to models such as customer journey mapping which shows the series of events that customers go through when they connect with a company (Rosenbaum, Otalara, and Ramírez 2017). This model usually represents three phases of the purchasing process: pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase (Micheaux & Bosio, 2019; Rosenbaum et al., 2017).

A customer journey map is organised as a flow of stages representing the customer experience in the pre-service, service, and post-service phases. Each stage is impacted by the customer's

past experiences and one or more contact points that affect the customer's experiences in the future (Figure 5) (Micheaux & Bosio, 2019). Personas are typically the starting point for developing customer journeys (Stickdorn, et al., 2018). According to Micheaux & Bosio's (2019) study, the value of the customer experience at each contact point affects how well the connection is regarded, affecting how committed the touch point is. These touch points can happen through both online and physical channels. Customer journey maps can incorporate storyboards, visual representations of emotional journeys, and information from essential agents. It also stresses the importance of getting customer feedback constantly so that things can keep improving and ensure that the whole trip is consistent and enjoyable. Meyer and Schwager (2007) say that this method helps us see and understand the order of a customer's direct and secondary interactions with a product, service or brand, while Berry, Carbone and Haeckel (2002) say these contacts can lead to good, bad or neutral situations.

Figure 5 (Micheaux & Bosio, 2019).

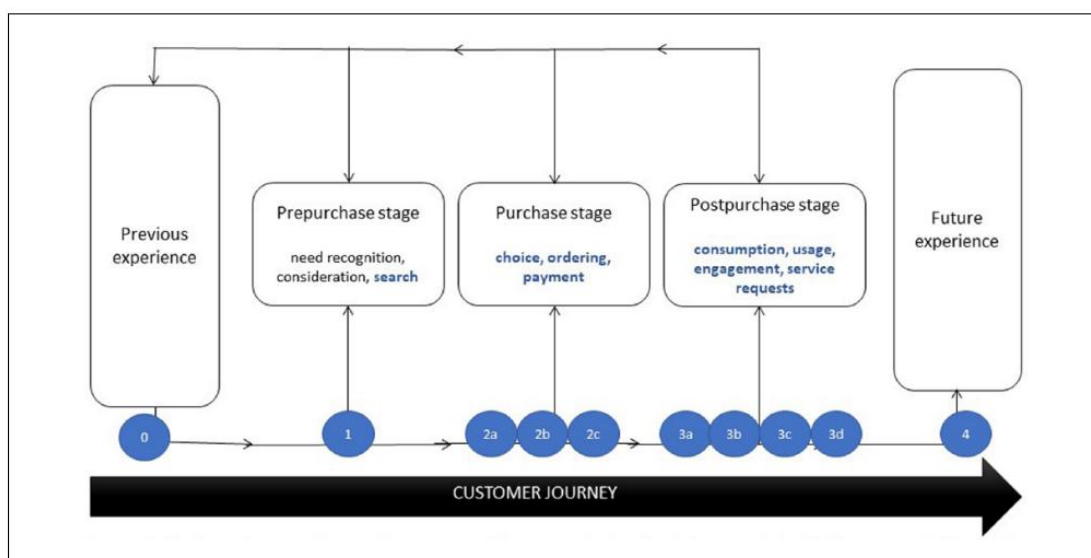By figuring out these touchpoints and messages, businesses can ensure that their marketing plans better meet customers' wants and expectations at every stage of their trip. This point of view is especially helpful for understanding how foreign students looking for classes in Dublin deal with various forms of media and messages from the time they start researching to the time they leave the service.

9. Mapping the Customer Journey of International Students Choosing Dublin as Their Destination

The Customer Journey Mapping model by Micheaux and Bosio (2019) gives us an organised understanding of how customers feel about a brand at every point of contact. Its method works exceptionally well when looking into how Irish schools' Instagram advertising affects their ability to get international students. It lets us track and study students' feelings and moments while interacting with ads. It can use this model to map the whole student journey, from when they see an ad to when they decide to register. This will help it improve its marketing methods and draw more international students.

Pre-purchase stage.

People in this phase decide what problem or need they want to solve and start looking for information that will help them (Micheaux & Bosio, 2019). Kotler and Armstrong (2020) say this process includes actively looking for options, weighing features and benefits, comparing prices, and reading other users' words. Companies can boost final purchases by using marketing strategies that provide valuable and convincing information, fostering customer relationships (Kotler & Armstrong, 2008)

For international students, the pre-purchase part of the decision-making process starts with learning about and researching their educational choices (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003). Kotler and Keller (2016) highlight the importance of brand recognition and early details in this phase. In the academic context, Knight and Morshidi (2011) emphasize that digital marketing efforts, including content on social networks and participation in educational fairs, are crucial to generating a positive perception of institutions. Instagram, in particular, offers a visually appealing channel that facilitates initial awareness and motivates students to investigate further.

During the research stage, students start to investigate their choices actively. During the search stage, consumers look for product accessibility, information provision, searchability, information content, navigation, ease of use, social support, and complete information to satisfy their product demands (Liang & Lai, 2002). During this time, social media and sites like Reddit are significant for getting information. These platforms allow students to interact in online communities, share research, stories and expectations, and receive recommendations from peers who have undergone similar processes (Xiong, et al., 2018). Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) state that online comparison tools and informational events help students better understand

their options. Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003) highlight the importance of comprehensive workshops and guides for detailed evaluation. Also, international students use databases, chat applications, and social media to obtain specific information about study programs, research opportunities, and ways to connect with current students and faculty (Gibbs, 2002).

The Zero Moment of Truth (ZMOT) is a significant part of the decision-making process for international students considering studying in Ireland. Google coined the term "ZMOT" to describe when people look for information online before purchasing. This used to happen in stores, but now it can be done from home with the help of Internet tips (Google, 2011). According to Statista (2024), the site lets students look at pictures and videos of student life in Ireland, college grounds, and important events. This helps them imagine what their future education might be like. Pew Research Centre (2021) says that user-generated posts, like comments and stories from current and former students, give an accurate and convincing picture of what studying in Ireland is like. (Auxier & Anderson, 2021).

When students reach the choices discovery stage, they examine different schools and academic programs and try to find similarities and differences between them (Nguyen, 2014). Here, the accessibility of content and the quality of information play crucial roles (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Studies suggest that when students choose a university, the reputation of the school has a substantial impact (Ivy, 2010). Liang and Lai (2002) say that this phase also deals with problems that make people want to buy, like social suggestions, ease of use, navigation, visual appeal, reviews and ratings, and social communities.

Most of the research that has been done so far on the experiences of international students has looked at why they choose to study abroad, what they expect and need, and what they believe are the benefits of education abroad (Lillyman & Bennett; 2014; Lawton, et al., 2013). Existing literature suggests that students have an excellent opportunity to meet people from many different countries (Brown & Holloway, 2008), increase their confidence and sense of responsibility for their education (Warring, 2010), broaden their perspectives, and grow as individuals. as they become independent thinkers and agents of change (Campbell, 2010).

Another critical step is the requirements evaluation, where students consider the entry requirements, the level of education, and the chances for personal and professional growth (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Instagram and other social networks facilitate this evaluation by

offering detailed content about educational programs, student testimonials, and guides about the requirements (Reyes, 2023).

In the institution interaction stage, students often participate in virtual events and information sessions to gain a deeper and more personalized insight into institutions (Tomai, et al., 2010). Clarke et al. (2018) observe that Irish educational institutions have adopted internationalization practices and strategies to support international students. In this situation, social media is significant because it provides straightforward information (Gibbs, 2002). However, ICOS' "International Student Forums 2018" report revealed that international students in Ireland are often unaware of institutional support initiatives, which may indicate communication problems or disinterest on the part of students (The Irish Council for Internati onal Students (ICOS) , 2019). Although there is a lot of information about the reasons for studying abroad, less research is done on the challenges faced during the process. Qualitative studies show that Chinese students, for example, face difficulties with language and learning styles, which can affect their well-being (Bailey, 2006; Gatwiri, 2015; Gang et al., 2009). On the other hand, research on the internationalization of higher education in Ireland indicates that institutions are implementing inclusion practices and integration strategies to improve support for international students (Clarke, et al., 2018).

Finally, in "advising and support," students look for information about scholarships, other ways to get money, and other support tools. Social media allows students to access information about funding and scholarship opportunities quickly and affordably and also facilitates access to supportive communities where students can share experiences and advice (Redman & Wilkinson, 2009). Furthermore, existing literature suggests that effective counselling and support during this stage is crucial to ensuring a successful transition to the educational environment (Bodycott, 2009).

Purchase stage.

Even though it is not the main topic of this paper, the buying phase is essential because it is when students officially decide to apply to college. This includes paying entry fees, completing online forms, and sending the required papers. Currently, technology can help with registration issues by making the process easier with web-based information systems and payment methods (Ocka Dharma Putra et al., 2020; Raharjo et al., 2022). Digital tools, including emails and chat groups, make it easy and quick for students and university teachers to talk to each other

(Ambrose & Ambrose, 2013). This contact not only makes the application process more accessible but also gives students and their families peace of mind by making sure that all their concerns are taken care of quickly (Paul, et al., 2021).

Post-Purchase:

Similarly, the phase after the purchase is not the main focus of this paper, but it should be looked at to get a complete picture of the customer trip. After a student is accepted to college, there are a few last things they need to do to prepare for school. This includes ensuring they have a place to stay and a student visa (Bhojwani, et al., 2020). Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), 2024, says that orientation and welcome programmes are essential to help foreign students get used to their new home by teaching them about student life, studies, and the area's culture. This period also requires trip planning and adjustment to live abroad. Campus and city visits and presentations about student life and the academic system are characteristic of college introduction programmes. These programmes help students feel welcome and ready

10. Social Media Marketing's Perform in the Education Sector.

There is substantial proof that more and more students do not visit universities before they sign up because they make their choices based on what they see and hear online. In this situation, internet activities are essential for promoting education worldwide. Enterprise Ireland has shown that this approach works by using social media to promote Irish higher education courses. Mr. Tintori says that the results show that schools and universities that put a lot of money into web and digital marketing do a better job of getting students. However, only 22% of global institutions have put more money into digital marketing in the last two years, and 13% do not have an official digital plan. However, colleges and universities in the UK, US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand put more money into digital marketing than colleges and universities in Ireland. Irish universities need to spend more in this area (TERMINALCUATRO, 2018) (Kelly, 2018). However, it is still essential for them to do so if they want to take advantage of the current chances to get international students.

Schools need to change with the times now that we live in a digital world. Ireland has steadily increased the number of international students since 2013. About 33,000 international students came to Ireland in 2015, 38,000 in 2017, and over 45,000 in 2019, bringing in €385 million annually (The Irish Council for Internati onal Students (ICOS) , 2019). Increased demand for

good education and the appeal of Ireland as a place to go to school are both factors in this growth. However, O'Brien (2020) says that the country depends significantly on employment agents, which might slow its progress compared to other nations. Thanks to its effective social media marketing, Australia has become a top destination for international students. Facebook, Instagram, and WeChat campaigns have raised Australia's profile worldwide and brought in millions of students, bringing in 37.6 billion Australian dollars in 2018 (ICEF Monitor, 2019; Australian Trade and Investment Commission, 2019). Ireland depends a lot on employment agents, which could slow its growth (O'Brien, 2023) even though it has more international students and makes €385 million a year since 2013 (O'Reilly, et al., 2013). A more robust and targeted digital marketing strategy like Australia's could help Ireland become better known worldwide and attract more international students.

According to a statistics report by Erudera (2023), in the ten years between 2011/12 and 2021/22, the number of international students in Ireland increased by 187.9% (Figure 7).

Year	International Students
2021/22	30,437
2020/21	25,383
2019/20	28,726
2018/19	28,275
2017/18	25,630
2016/17	24,025
2015/16	23,242
2014/15	20,698
2013/14	16,508
2012/13	13,162
2011/12	10,571
2010/11	11,466
2009/10	9,563

In 2022, there were 30,437 international students in further education schools in Ireland, the highest number since data was first collected. In 2021/22, the United States had around 4,504 international students in Ireland, making it the country with the most students from other countries (Erudera, 2024).

11. Using of Instagram by Some Universities in Dublin.

Several well-known schools in Dublin use this platform to showcase their physical presence, academic programmes, and student life, emphasising what makes them unique. Here is a look at how five of Dublin's best universities and colleges—Trinity College Dublin, University College Dublin, Dublin City University, Technological University Dublin, and National College of Ireland—use Instagram to connect with international students and inform them about their competitive positioning/advantages.

As a straight look at their tactics and approaches on this social network, the official Instagram accounts of each school were used to make this comparison:

Trinity College Dublin (@trinitycollegedublin)
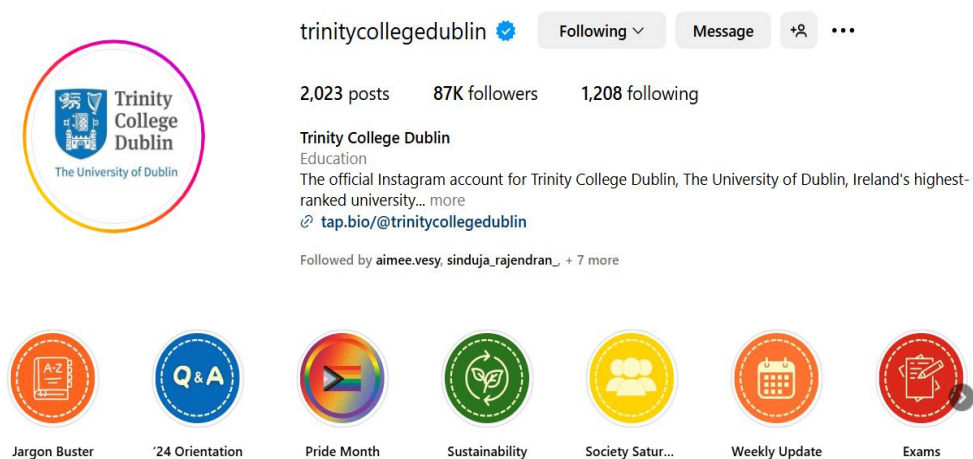
Fig. 3

Number of followers: 87K

Spotlight on Instagram: History and vibrant campus atmosphere.

Main Attraction: Historic campus and academic prestige.

University College Dublin (@ucdglobal)
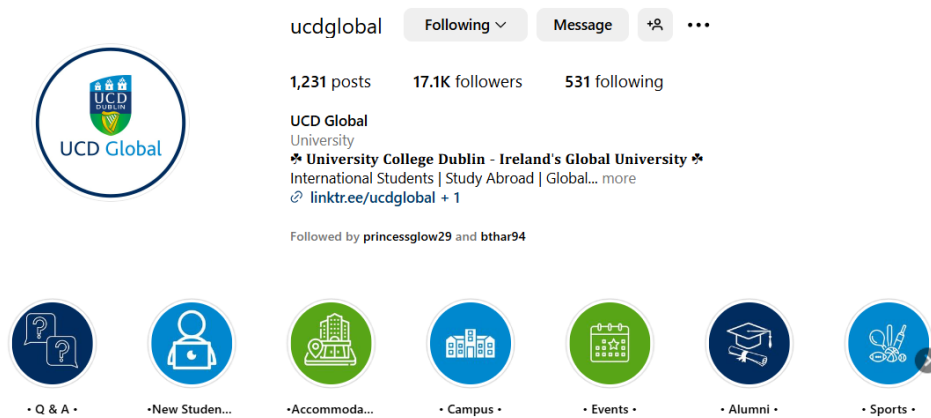
Fig. 4

Number of followers: 17,1K

Focus on Instagram: Academic programs, modern facilities and student testimonials.

Main Attraction: Modern infrastructure and inclusive environment.

Dublin City University (@dublincityuniversity)

Fig. 5

Number of followers: 36K

Instagram Focus: Active student life, sporting events and community activities.

Main Attraction: Participatory community and sense of belonging.

Technological University Dublin (@tudublin)
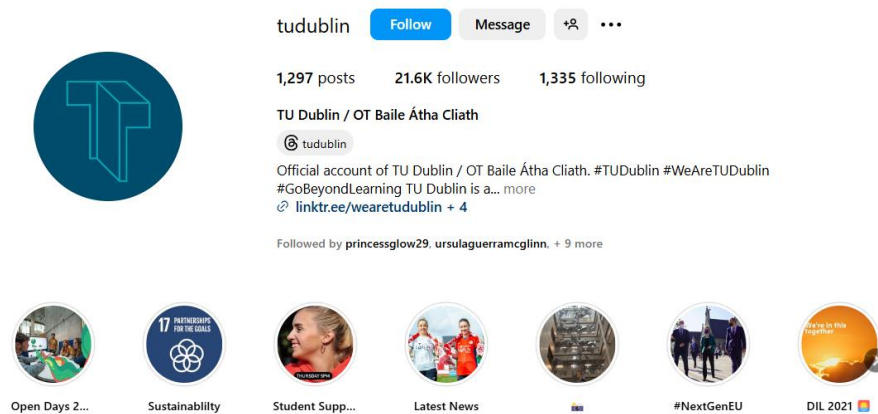
Fig. 6

Number of followers: 21.6K

Focus on Instagram: Technical programs, specialized installations and innovative projects.

Main Attraction: Innovation and focus on technological and vocational careers.

National College of Ireland (NCI) (@ncioncampus)

Fig. 7

Number of followers: 11.7K

Focus on Instagram: Career-oriented programs, campus events, and industry collaborations.

Main Attraction: Focus on career-oriented education and professional opportunities.

12. Conclusion

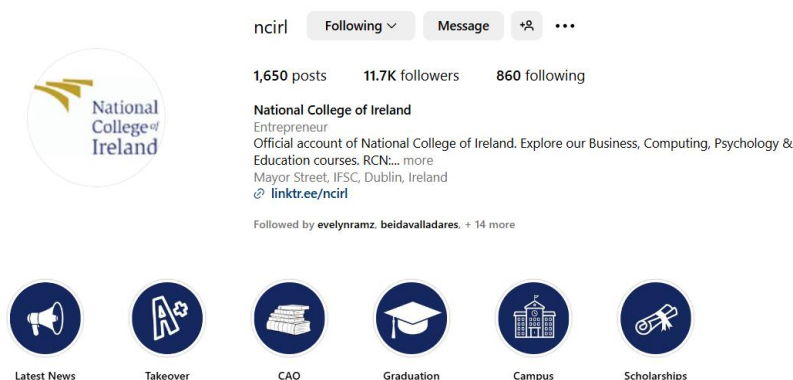The literature review shows that social media, especially Instagram, has dramatically changed how colleges and universities promote and recruit international students. Because of this change, Ireland has been able to improve its standing in the field of international education. Universities in Dublin have started using digital marketing strategies geared towards millennials, who like to look at visual sites to learn about different school choices.

Social media marketing has changed over time, making talking to leads more directly and familiarly easier. However, how well these strategies work depends significantly on how well they can create exciting and valuable information. With its focus on pictures, Instagram has become a meaningful way to show what life is like for students and what schools have to offer powerfully.

Micheaux and Bosio's (2019) customer journey mapping approach is necessary to fully grasp how international students use digital platforms while making choices. It is possible to use social networks to help it figure out what it needs, find information, and weigh its options. This map shows how Instagram posts can affect each stage of a student's life. During the customer pre-purchase stage, social networks are essential for figuring out what they need, finding information, and weighing their choices before they buy. Instagram lets schools show off their programmes in ways that make prospects feel connected to them, which can change how they think about and choose a school.

Even though social media marketing has benefits, more is needed to understand how it affects people's decisions to study abroad. Universities in Dublin have devised creative ways to use Instagram, but more research is required to determine precisely what materials and factors work best. In other words, it still needs to understand fully how digital platforms affect the choice of studying abroad. In the future, researchers should investigate how cultural and geographical factors influence these choices and how well social media marketing tactics work. This is why the suggested study is mostly about how Instagram ads influence international students' choice of schools in Dublin. It will also look into how students interact with different kinds of content on Instagram, like pictures, videos, and stories. Lastly, the things in Instagram ads that make international students want to investigate school options in Dublin will be studied. With these goals in mind, it can fill in the gaps in our knowledge and improve digital marketing plans for schools.

Research Objectives and Methodology

Research Objective:

The study focuses primarily on how advertising on Instagram impacts the decision-making of international students considering studying in Dublin. Social media is becoming an essential means of promotion and communication (Al-Thagafi, et al., 2020), and collaborative and technological strategies are necessary for educational marketing, says Hsueh (2018); therefore, it is required to understand how these sites can impact the choices international students make. This research examines issues relevant to a master's in marketing, emphasising how social media, particularly Instagram, affects the selection of study locations, benefiting both Ireland and students.

A comprehensive analysis will assess the impact of digital media and Ireland's handling of student recruitment. According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), social media can potentially alter the attraction of international students and is a critical component of contemporary marketing strategy.

Objectives of the study:

- Examine how digital communication with educational institutions affects students.
- To assess the contribution of Instagram in attracting international students to Dublin.
- Determine the elements that impact Instagram advertising on university and course choices.
- Investigate the degree of interaction of international students on Instagram.

Methodology Introduction

The qualitative approaches employed in this study for the collection and analysis of data will be presented in this chapter. The research design will be explained, and the selection of these methods will be justified. In addition, the study's ethical considerations and limitations will be discussed. The primary goal is to examine in-depth how Instagram advertising impacts international students' decision-making considering tertiary studies in Dublin.

Research Philosophy

As shown in Figure 10, the fundamental theoretical perspectives in research are pragmatism, interpretivism, positivism, and realism. These perspectives are essential to establishing the conceptual framework and approach of the study. Saunders et al. (2009) recognize these four approaches. On the other hand, Quinlan (2011) adds other approaches, such as symbolic interactionism, hermeneutics, and constructivism.
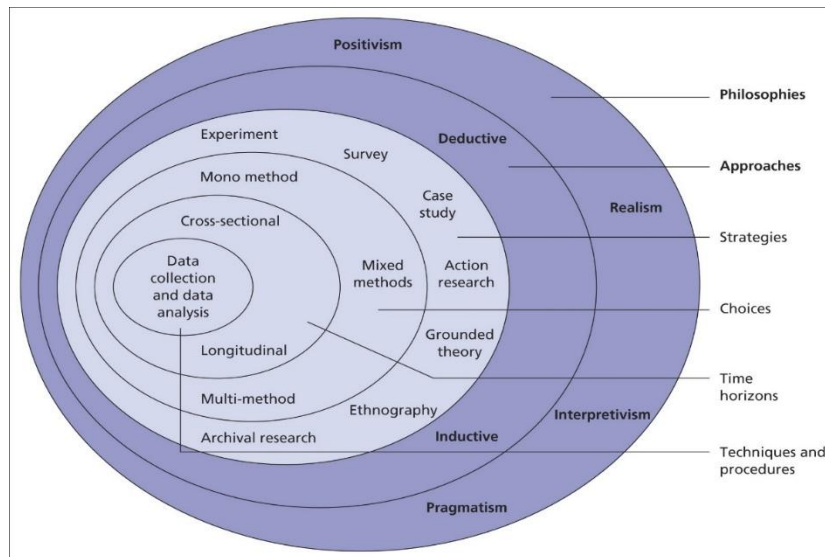
Philosophy and the advancement of knowledge are intertwined. Regarding a research challenge, the goal is to identify the ideal research philosophy that will investigate the researcher's approach to achieving a more satisfying outcome in a constantly changing and dynamic technological environment (Saunders, et al., 2009). The research onion is a metaphor that Saunders et al. (2019) used to show all the different parts of research, such as approach, philosophy, methodological choices, data collection and analysis techniques, etc.

For this research, the interpretive approach is most suitable for understanding how advertising on Instagram affects the decisions of international students considering studying in Dublin. Regarding subjectivity and the impact of personal perceptions on knowledge construction, interpretivism focuses on understanding individual experiences and perspectives. To fully understand the phenomenon, Greene and McClintock (1991) argue that capturing diverse perceptions is essential; however, Mack (2010) and Dudovskiy (2016) admit that this method can be subjective and limit the generalizability of the results. This research aims to examine how international students perceive and respond to advertising on Instagram, providing a nuanced perspective on its impact on educational decisions.

Research Approach

The two main research approaches, inductive and deductive, are explained below. The deductive method tests previous theories to determine how data relate to current theory (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This method implies that the researcher starts from a defined theoretical position. In contrast, the inductive approach creates new theories by interpreting qualitative data from small samples without a previously established theoretical position (Saunders, et al., 2016).

Rather than testing pre-existing theories, an inductive approach study aims to create emerging theories from the data collected. According to Creswell (2013), the purpose of qualitative research is to understand complex phenomena and develop new perspectives based on the experiences and perceptions of participants. This research uses an inductive approach to analyse how Instagram advertising affects global students' decisions. Using qualitative methods to gather their experiences and perceptions in a detailed and rich manner, the study aims to develop new theories about how advertising strategies on Instagram affect students (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Research Design and Method

The impact of Instagram advertising on international students' decisions in Dublin is analysed using a qualitative method. According to Schwandt (2014), research analysis involves breaking down phenomena into their fundamental components to understand how they interact. Qualitative analysis looks for patterns and meanings in textual and contextual data, such as interview transcripts. Quantitative analysis, on the other hand, focuses on numerical data (Ahmad, et al., 2019).

Although many previous studies have employed quantitative methods to analyse the impact of social media advertising, this research is ideally suited to the qualitative approach, as it provides a comprehensive understanding of individual perceptions and experiences related to Instagram advertising. This method focuses on analysing data in its social context rather than calculating specific variables to investigate subjective and complex phenomena (Creswell, 2007; Thomas, 2003).

Qualitative Study

One way to tell the difference between quantitative and qualitative studies is to look at the difference between numerical data (like numbers) and non-numerical data (like pictures or sounds) (Saunders, et al., 2016). Qualitative research aims to find out what things mean and how topics relate to participants' views (Pearlson, et al., 2019).

Interviews are used as a qualitative method to find out why some parts of Instagram ads are essential for international students in Dublin.

Research on the impact of social media advertising has focused on quantitative methods such as the importance of understanding the impact of social media advertising from a qualitative perspective to uncover personal motivations and attitudes that affect academic decisions is highlighted in recent research, such as Belanche, Casaló, Flavián, and Guinalíu (2018). This qualitative method will provide a detailed understanding of how Instagram ads affect the perception and choice of educational institutions and can serve as a basis for further quantitative research investigating broader patterns based on these findings.

Research Strategy - depth interviews

According to Saunders et al. (2016), qualitative methods with small samples and an interpretive perspective provide more affluent and detailed data than quantitative methods with large samples. As these allow for a more nuanced understanding of the phenomena studied, this qualitative methodology focuses on in-depth interviews with small samples. This method was chosen for the study in question because, according to Saunders et al. (2016), in-depth interviews offer more profound and contextual insights.

Time management" and "dual exploration" are two fundamental advantages of in-depth interviews, according to Brenner, Brown and Canter (1985). The possibility for the researcher and the participant, guided in part by previously prepared questions, to investigate a specific topic together is known as a "dual exploration". Compared to other techniques, such as focus groups, the length of the interviews, ranging from 45 minutes to 2 hours, allows for a complete analysis in a relatively short time

According to Quinlan et al. (2015) and Morris (2015), however, high time demands, and potential researcher bias are significant disadvantages of in-depth interviews. Preparing, conducting, and transcribing interviews is a laborious and time-consuming process. Researcher

bias can also affect results because the interviewer's perceptions influence how they interpret responses (Saunders, et al., 2016).

Sampling - Sampling method and technique

This study used non-probability convenience sampling to select participants based on how easy it was for them to participate and their readiness to do so (Etikan, et al., 2016). This popular low-cost method facilitates rapid data collection (Acharya, et al., 2014). As a complete census was impossible, sampling was used to make data collection more accessible and accurate (Saunders, et al., 2016). The researcher is employed by a company that provides foreign students access to third-level courses in Ireland. An email was sent to the respondents directly, establishing direct contact and asking whether they would be interested in participating in the research.

Time horizons

Time horizons, which might be cross-sectional or longitudinal, are the subject of the penultimate level of the research onion (Saunders, et al., 2016). Longitudinal research gathers information at several intervals over a lengthy period, enabling observations of the phenomenon's evolution over time. On the other hand, a cross-sectional study gathers data at that moment to analyse a phenomenon (Bryman, 2016). A cross-sectional temporal horizon was chosen due to the study's limitations and breadth. Data were collected over three weeks, with one interview per participant.

Data Collection

The researcher's unanticipated COVID-19 infection prevented the in-person interviews from occurring as scheduled. Instead, they were carried out using Zoom, which made the research possible without any significant hiccups. The interviews were arranged over three weeks in July 2024 to optimise convenience and availability, considering each participant's desired schedule. The duration of each session ranged from forty to one hour and ten minutes.

The purpose of the well-crafted, open-ended questions was to delve deeply into how Instagram advertising influences the choices made by overseas students thinking about attending tertiary education in Dublin. The research on the relationship between social media advertising and consumer behaviour served as the basis for the question guide. To guarantee descriptive

validity, thorough notes were taken throughout the interviews, and the talks were recorded using Zoom and the Voice Memos mobile app. After that, the tapes were transcribed for in-depth examination. To protect the privacy and security of the data, every participant provided informed consent for the recordings and ensured that all data were removed after the research (Huberman & Miles, 2002).

Data Analysis

A grounded theory technique was used for data analysis, which is particularly helpful in research when a preexisting theory is not tested, i.e. where there is no preexisting theoretical framework, according to Collis and Hussey (2009). This method aligns with the definition of grounded theory provided by Chapman et al. (2015), which defines it as "an inductive method for developing theories based on data" (p. 202). Rather than evaluating preexisting theories, grounded theory develops ideas from the data gathered (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As a result, the analysis of this study is on recognising and creating new ideas based on the information collected.

Thematic methods also make it easier to analyse qualitative data by spotting reoccurring patterns and themes—a process essential for creating a thorough knowledge of the phenomena being studied (Tuckett, 2005). According to Miles and Huberman (1994), this technique enables a comprehensive and systematic analysis that aids in developing ideas from the data, guaranteeing an accurate and pertinent portrayal of the material.

Four individuals were included in the study, all graduates or third-level students in schools in Dublin, Ireland. Two demographic characteristics were also included during data analysis: age group (A), gender (B), and name of school (C).

Demographic A:

Age	No. Participant
32	1
34	1
36	1
37	1

Demographic B:

Gender

■ Male ■ Female
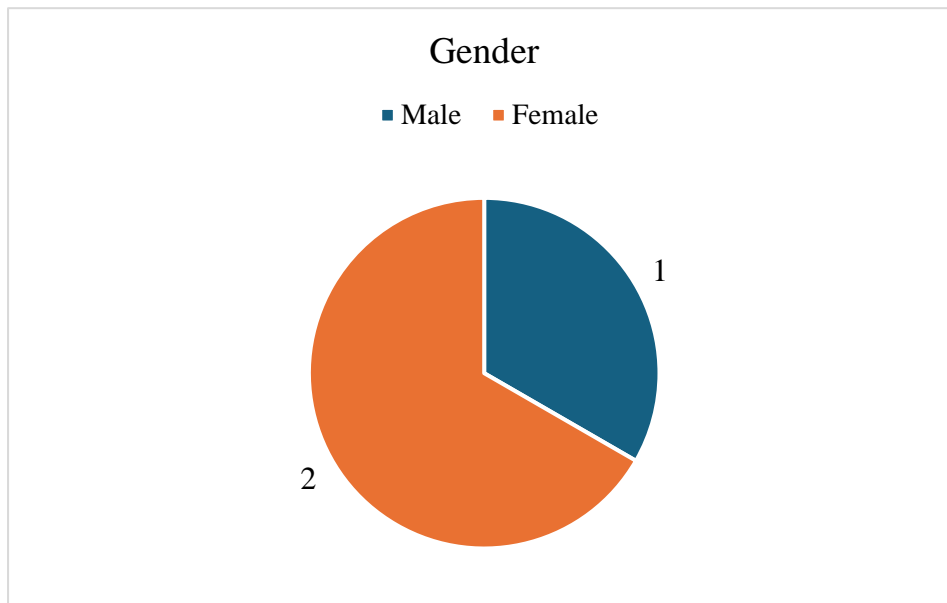
Demographic C:

College	No. Participant
Dublin Business School	2
CCT College	1
National College of Ireland	1

Ethical Considerations

The NCI ethics form took ethical concerns about user data, consent, and data security seriously and made them stand out. People who took part were given information and had to sign an informed consent form before they could take part. Participants were told that their information and involvement would be kept secret. No personally identifiable information was gathered, and answers could not be taken back after they were sent. Concerns were sent to the researcher's

email address, but no replies were found. According to NCI rules, data will be kept for up to six months after the thesis is turned in and destroyed.

Research Limitation

Some problems with this study need to be considered when figuring out what the results mean. To begin, chance sampling was used, which means the results may not be accurate for all international students considering going to college at the third level in Dublin.

The researcher contracted COVID-19, preventing in-person interviews. Zoom and mobile phone interviews replaced face-to-face sessions. This may have altered the interaction, information gathered, and answer interpretation. Participants ' replies may have been unclear without non-verbal communication, like facial expressions and body language.

These limits provide important context for the study's findings and essential information about the parameters and possible boundaries of the investigation.

Finding/Result

The objective of this chapter is to provide a thorough analysis and discussion of the main conclusions drawn from the in-depth interviews that were done for this study. Several recurrent themes among the participants in the survey of the attitudes and decision-making process of overseas students pursuing higher education in Dublin were found. These topics will be methodically covered in this part, along with noteworthy statements from the interviewees to show how Instagram advertising affects their choices about higher education in Dublin. The primary goal of this investigation is to evaluate the impact of Instagram advertising on international students' decision-making in this setting.

Research Objectives

- Examine how digital communication with educational institutions affects students.

Interview Questions

1.Could you tell me about your journey when thinking about college/3rd Level (pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase)? 2. How did you first become aware of colleges, especially when considering studying abroad? 3. What places or media did you use to gather information?

1. Could you tell me about your journey when thinking about college/3rd Level?

The data-gathering approach was centred on participants' thoughts about third-level education in Ireland. Every respondent discussed their pre-, during-, and post-purchase decisions in detail, emphasising elements such as the institution's standing, price, and word-of-mouth recommendations. Their remarks and experiences, which emphasise the factors influencing their choices, are included below.

Pre-Purchase:

Interviewee 1: *"I was looking for the best option to study a master's degree in digital marketing in Dublin" (...) "After checking a free reviewing my budget, I opted for Dublin Business School".*

Interviewee 2: *"I looked up degrees, universities, and costs online, but a friend suggested an agency to me"* …

Interviewee 3: *"All started when my English courses finished" (…) "I looked for an option where I can improve my professional skills".*

Interviewee 4: *"I did a lot of research on the programmes available for NCI, DBS and Griffith College, their cost, the subjects on each one and the locations of their campuses".*

Factors that influence decisions:

Research shows that reputation and academic excellence are important considerations for interviewees 1 and 4. This is consistent with findings that suggest students consider institutional reputation when choosing a university (Ivy, 2010). All interviewees cited cost as a crucial factor; interviewee three even noted the necessity of obtaining a bank loan. Respondent 2 indicated that price and discounts were the main elements that influenced his selection. This statement aligns with the claims made by Maringe (2006) and Briggs (2006) that students weigh program quality and cost before making a final choice.

Interviewee 2 heavily emphasised personal recommendations, which is consistent with studies by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) stressing the value of word-of-mouth. Personal recommendations and the experiences of friends and family are significant variables influencing the decisions of international students, according to Wilkins et al. (2012). However, Interviewee 1 considered recommendations from alums, supporting Gibbs' (2002) claims that international students use databases, and ways to communicate with teachers and fellow students.

Interviewee 3 selected his diploma, nonetheless, due to the flexible schedule that enabled him to work and study concurrently: *"This diploma was the most accessible, as it was only for one year and three days a week, so I was able to combine it with my job".*

Enrolment Process:

Interviewee 1: Described a smooth and well-explained purchasing process by DBS staff. *"The DBS people explained to me in detail all the course content"*

Interviewee 2 Was assisted by an agency that facilitated the enrolment process. *"The agency helped me with the entire process."*

Interviewee 3: Faced financial difficulties but managed to enrol. *"It was very difficult for me because of the amount of money I had to pay."*

Interviewee 4: Attended a presentation at IBAT College and paid for the course over the summer after being accepted. *"When I heard they were offering a new Business degree, I attended a presentation by the marketing department."*

These findings emphasize how crucial it is to make program material easily understandable, streamline the enrolling process, and consider students' financial and professional demands to draw and keep potential students at educational institutions. For students to be able to make educated judgments, there must be openness regarding academic programs and related expenses (Briggs, 2006). Additionally, according to Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015), expediting the registration process can enhance the educational experience for students and lessen the burden of bureaucracy. Economic conditions and chances for professional growth are major deciding factors when selecting an academic institution, so students' financial and career demands must be considered (Chen, 2008; Maringe & Carter, 2007). Prospective students are more likely to be drawn to universities that provide flexible study alternatives and financial support (Wilkins, et al., 2012).

2. **How did you first become aware of colleges, especially when considering studying abroad?**

Interviewee 1: *"I visited some universities, and looked for information on their websites and Facebook and Instagram."*

Interviewee 2: *"I did some research on the Internet, I remember typing this into Google: 'universities in Dublin', (…) 'programs to study in Dublin', and then I looked for the profiles of these universities on Instagram."*

Interviewee 3: *"I started looking for different options to study on various websites, and I remember also asking some friends about their experiences studying abroad"* (..). *"Then, I went to the university that interested me to get more information in person."*

Interviewee 4:*"Through the agency that helped me get to Ireland, I only followed their Instagram accounts."*

Interviewee 1 uses a combination of information sources. This includes online research and physical visits, reflecting a holistic approach that suggests students seek information through multiple channels to make informed decisions (Gacel-Ávila, 2005; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Interviewee 2's approach focuses on online searches and social media. This method is supported by research showing that digital platforms are instrumental in the decision-making process for studying abroad, with 79% of students using the Internet to research options (Pew Research Center, 2002).

Interviewee 3 combines online research with the value of personal recommendations and physical visits. Academic literature supports the importance of personal networks and visits in evaluating educational options (Chen, 2007). However, Interviewee 4 uses a specialized agency and social media to obtain information. The use of agencies is consistent with studies highlighting their crucial role in advising international students (Bodycott, 2009).

All four interviewees want to use digital tools like websites and social media to learn more about learning abroad. This process is becoming increasingly digitalized (Alzougool, et al., 2015). Three of the answers, though, talked about personal suggestions and visits, which shows how vital first-hand experiences, and "word of mouth" are as valuable tools for making decisions (Lo, 2012). Also, mentioning specialized organizations brings up an important, if less common, choice that provides personalized help and guidance, highlighting how important they are for students seeking job guidance in their academic choices (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006).

3. What places or media did you use to gather information?

Interviewee 1: *"University websites, forums but mainly Facebook and Instagram, at the time, TikTok wasn't a big thing like it is today"*

Interviewee 2: *"Google and Instagram, I always look for reviews on Google and websites like Studentcrowd.com"*

Interviewee 3: *"Google, LinkedIn and different school websites"*

Interviewee 4: "*School websites and Instagram"*

The first person interviewed said they used educational websites and groups but mainly got their news from Facebook and Instagram. This choice is because these social networks are popular and allow people to connect with essential communities and new material (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). The second person interviewed used Google and Instagram to look for reviews on sites like Studentcrowd.com. Forbes (2024) says that Google will remain the most popular search engine and review site (Haan, 2024). Sites like Studentcrowd.com offer helpful reviews. The third interviewee found a job and general information on Google, LinkedIn, and school websites. The fourth interviewee talked about school websites and Instagram, according to Educational Data (2023), mixing official data with visual information and recent reviews.

Research Objectives

- To assess the contribution of Instagram in attracting international students to Dublin.

Interview Questions:

4.In your opinion, what factors are essential to capture your attention in these messages or posts? Consider timing, tone (credibility, like-minded other students), visuals, the channel where the message is delivered, and other criteria. 5. Is social media an essential source for finding out about colleges? If so, could you describe a particularly appealing campaign you remember (visuals, text, timing, author/influencer)?

4. **In your opinion, what factors are essential to capture your attention in these messages or posts? Consider timing, tone (credibility, like-minded other students), visuals, the channel where the message is delivered, and other criteria.**

Interviewee 1: "*Listening to alumni talk about their experiences was one of the best parts."*

Interviewee 2: *"The first sentence and the image accompanying the ad are very important to me."*

Interviewee 3: *"We need it to be clear, precise, and based on statistics to make the best decision."*

Interviewee 4*: "I like texts that are honest and kind"*

Interviewee 1 says that recommendations from alumni are significant in building trust. Reasoning what Petty and Cacioppo (1986) claim, personal stories and real experiences help people identify with the message and make it seem more real. Interviewee 2 says that the opening comment of the advertisement and the supporting image are significant. Cognitive

psychology studies have shown that these visual elements significantly impact how people understand the message (Chung & Lee, 2020).

Interviewee 3 endorses what Wathen and Burkell say that timing is essential for good communication and that messages based on data sent at the right time make the material more trustworthy (Wathen & Burkell, 2002). Interviewee 4 agrees that timing is important but also says honesty and a pleasant tone are essential. Honesty and using back-ups to make things seem more real are necessary for good communication (World Health Organization, 2007).

Overall, interviewers' reflections show that trustworthiness, imagery, timing, and the right tone are essential for capturing and keeping people's attention, which aligns with communication theory and marketing psychology.

5. **Is social media an essential source for finding out about colleges? If so, could you describe a particularly appealing campaign you remember (visuals, text, timing, author/influencer)?**

Interviewee 1: *"Social media is very important for Colleges to promote their courses"*

Interviewee 2: *"The use of social media is an excellent way to get information not only about colleges, but about any product or service"*

Interviewee 3: *"One of the most powerful tools to post important information of any type"*

Interviewee 4: *"I consider it to be quite important"*

The interviewees' analysis shows how valuable and flexible social media can be for reaching potential students and advertising educational programs. Interviewee 1 talked about how it can get many people and divide them into groups, which aligns with studies that show it can promote things (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Interviewee 2 stressed how valuable social media is as a source of general knowledge, which backs up research showing how it affects buyer decisions, such as education-related (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Also, Interviewee 3 said that using influencers and multimedia content like videos and audio works well to attract students. This shows how vital social influence and multimedia formats are in recruiting students, which has been studied extensively (Freberg, et al., 2011).

Even though most people have a good view of social media, some don't remember specific efforts. Respondent 1 says they saw *"lots of ads after doing some research on Google,"* which shows that social media can track what people look for online and show them relevant ads. This fits with focused marketing, which says that making ads more relevant to specific people makes them more effective (Lamb, et al., 2013).

Respondents 2 and 4 do not remember specific campaigns, which could mean they saw too much information, or the campaigns didn't affect them that they remembered. This is looked at in research on "*ad blindness*," which is when people ignore advertising because there are so many (Drèze & Hussherr, 2003).

Research Objectives

- Determine the elements that impact Instagram advertising on university and course choices.

Interview Questions:

6. How do you use Instagram? 7. Would Instagram be your social media platform of choice, and why? 8. How would you use Instagram to find information about colleges abroad? 9. What appeals to you about Instagram when searching for information about international colleges? 10. What type of Instagram posts (informative, inspirational, personal) and content (posts, stories, advertisements) did you find most helpful or influential when considering third-level programmes in Dublin? Could you share specific examples?

6. How do you use Instagram?

Interviewee 1: *"I use Instagram every day to stay informed about news, social events, what my family and friends are doing."*

Interviewee 2: *"Every day, I see stories from friends, from accounts that I follow and that interest me, and in those interactions, I find ads for things that catch my attention and others that do not."*

Interviewee 3: *"Instagram is the best way I have to stay in touch with my family because I am far from them" ("...") "It's the best tool I have to read news quickly and share it with my friends" ("...") "Every day I check it during the day and save the information that I consider important for me or my friends."*

Interviewee 4*: "Every day."*

The fact that all the people who were asked said they use Instagram every day shows how important it has become to them. A 2019 Pew Study Center study shows that many people use social media sites more than once a day.

Person 1 said they use Instagram to stay updated on news and social events. Person 3 said, *"It is the best tool I have to scan news and share it with my friends."* Because users can stay in touch through posts and stories (Ellison, et al., 2007), this shows how Instagram has become a meaningful way to share news and stay in touch with people who live far away. Interviewee 2 said they clicked on ads and told us that Instagram can also be used to look for things and services. This is proof of how useful social media advertising is since ads can be shown to groups of people based on what they do and what they like (Alalwan, 2018).

The results show that Instagram can be used for everyday jobs, like making calls, reading the news, and dealing with ads. These different ways that people use Instagram show how important it is to them and how they have made it a part of their daily lives to meet many needs.

6. Would Instagram be your social media platform of choice, and why?

Interviewee 1: *"I would say Instagram and Facebook are my favourite choices when it comes to social media."*

Interviewee 2: "*Yes, because it has different ways to use it like talking to my friends."*

Interviewee 3: *"Yes, Instagram is my favourite since it is all videos and photos, this is helpful for me."*

Interviewee 4: *"I would say it is my second favourite platform. TikTok would be my first."*

The answer from Interviewee 1 shows that both like Instagram and Facebook. This duality means both have valuable and helpful things to offer the person. A study by We Are Social and Hootsuite (2023) says that Facebook is the most popular social network globally, while Instagram is the fourth most popular. This may explain why the person being interviewed liked both.

Interviewee 2 talks about how Instagram can be used in many ways. Not only does the site let people talk to each other, but it also gives people news and information and gives them ways

to have fun. The fact that Instagram can combine different types of content into one app is one of the things that makes it appealing to users, according to a study from 2023 by Statista.

Respondent 3's answer shows how visual Instagram is and how it works with other websites and apps. One crucial feature that makes the experience better for users is the ability to read news and save it to read later. A study from the Pew Research Center in 2022 shows that many people in the US who use social media also use Instagram to keep up with news and current events. The answer from Interviewee 4 likes TikTok better than Instagram, which shows how popular TikTok is becoming, especially among young people. It has increased and is now one of the most downloaded apps in the world.

7. How would you use Instagram to find information about colleges abroad?

Interviewee 1: *"Instagram and Facebook are my favourite options, "I Would look for video or hashtag related to the topic in order to gain information about the programmes I am interested in"*

Interviewee 2: *"First I look for information on the Internet, then I go to Instagram to check out information, see posts from schools, universities"*

Interviewee 3: *"I would look for the school's website" and ("...") "Instagram is like a big index of the actual website."*

Interviewee 4: *"It would be an opportunity to get a glimpse of the campus."*

Based on what the interviewees said, Instagram is a vital tool for finding information about colleges abroad because it is easy to use and has a lot of visual content. Interviewee 1 talks about how much he likes this social network and Facebook. He says that the large amount of visual material on these sites makes it easier to make academic decisions. This fits with studies that show social networks significantly affect school choices. Interviewee 2 talks about a two-step search process: first, he looks for schools on the Internet, and then he looks for them on Instagram, where he gets a more accurate and emotional feel for them, backed up by reports from QS Top Universities.

Interviewee 3 also sees Instagram as a visual addition to official university websites. It is becoming increasingly common for schools to keep active accounts on Instagram to show real-

time college life and events. Finally, Interviewee 4 talks about how Instagram can provide a rich visual experience that lets potential students "see" the school before making a choice. This quick and visual method can have a significant effect on choosing a college, which backs up a study that shows how important social media is for educational research and helping international students make decisions.

8. **What appeals to you about Instagram when searching for information about international colleges?**

Interviewee 1: *"How creative an informative post can be... it needs to capture the audience's attention and engage as much as possible."*

Interviewee 2: *"The visual aesthetics... it is so important for community managers to do a good job... a profile that is not aesthetically pleasing... does not attract attention and looks unprofessional.*

Interviewee 3: "*The information... can influence my final decision when choosing it: the topics, the veracity of the information, and the way of publishing it."*

Interviewee 4: *"The reels are about interviews with people who work at the school"*

The first person interviewed talks about how important it is for educational posts to be creative. The second person interviewed talks about how professional and well-designed the page is. The third person we talked to stresses the importance of correct and helpful knowledge. The fourth person interviewed says he's interested in reels with talks with university staff.

The answers show that creative content, beautiful images, correct information, and changing content are the main things Instagram users look for when they want to learn about foreign universities. Managing your Instagram page well and posting professional, engaging content can significantly affect how potential students see you and their choice to enrol.

These results align with other research that shows how vital visual marketing and brand management are for swaying people's decisions on social media. For instance, Rutter, Roper, and Lettice's (2016) study found that how something looks on social media is a critical factor in how people see it and how likely they are to buy it.

What type of Instagram posts (informative, inspirational, personal) and content (posts, stories, advertisements) did you find most helpful or influential when considering third-level programmes in Dublin? Could you share specific examples?

Interviewee 1: "I would say that stories with Student testimonials and post sharing more in deep information about the courses"

Interviewee 2: "Mostly informative posts, when it comes to taking a course abroad, what you want most is to have information about the processes, visa..."

Interviewee 3: "When they ask former students about their current roles or employments. They talk about the way the school helped them to be where they are."

Interviewee 4: *"The informative posts"*

The first person we talked to said that stories with student reviews and posts with a lot of information about the school are helpful. The second person interviewed stressed the importance of valuable posts, especially those about routine tasks and needs. The third person interviewed liked hearing from former students and getting specific information about how to get a job. The fourth person, on the other hand, said very quickly that informative posts are the best.

The answers show that posts with helpful information and testimonials are the most influential kinds of Instagram content for Dublin students considering going to college. Sharing stories and posts with comments from present and past students makes the information more personal and real. Also, posts that explain how to apply for a visa, what it costs, and how the official process works are significant for international students. These results are in line with a study that says accuracy and detailed information are essential in digital communication for education. Focusing on this material can help educational institutions reach more people and be more useful on Instagram (Aesaert, et al., 2014).

Research Objectives

- Investigate the degree of interaction of international students on Instagram.

Interview Questions:

9. How did your interaction with ex-student and current students via Instagram influence your decisions when selecting a third-level programme in Dublin?

Interviewee 1: *"Former students give their opinion from their experience, I think they do not gain anything recommending a college that is not trustworthy"*

Interviewee 2: *"I have Seen posts, stories, and following other students and graduates from the colleges I was considering had a big influence on my decision"*

Interviewee 3: *"It would have been crucial as I could have been influenced by watching their type of posts related to their student life"*

Interviewee 4: *"It did not."*

A look at the answers shows that people have different thoughts on how Instagram affects the choices of third-level programs in Dublin. The first person interviewed thinks that testimonials from alumni are helpful and honest, which gives them credibility. The second person interviewed says that learning about other students' experiences through posts, stories, and following profiles was very important to their decision. The third person interviewed says that even though they weren't on Instagram then, the platform could have played a significant role in their decision by showing them helpful material about college life. On the other hand, the fourth person interviewed said that interacting with former and present students on Instagram did not affect their choice. Based on these results, Instagram can strongly sway students' choices through real testimonials and personal experiences, but it works differently for each person. This fits with research that shows how vital user-generated material and social contact are in making decisions about education (Feng, et al., 2019).

Discussion

As the study's results are discussed, it becomes clear how important Instagram is to international students considering going to school in Dublin. According to Ivy (2001) and Maringe (2006), reputation and academic quality are still very important when choosing a university. However, the literature review shows that social media, especially Instagram, has dramatically impacted how students find and understand educational information. Studies that show the effect of institutional status (Chen, 2007; Maringe & Carter, 2007) back this up. The idea of prestige and academic ability is still a deciding factor. That said, Instagram has become a meaningful way to show off and judge these traits in the modern world.

Continuing as a reference to literature, the customer journey planning method used by Micheaux and Bosio (2019) can help us figure out how digital platforms affect how students make choices. According to this model, social media is critical during pre-decision because it allows students to figure out what they need, find helpful information, and weigh their choices. Instagram makes this easier by letting students connect with real-time and visual material, which can change how they feel about a school and their choice of school. The stage is a great way to show what life is like for Dublin students and a place to have fun and talk to others. According to the study of the data, academic standing and cost are still the most important factors, but digitalization has changed the way decisions are made.

 The data shows that Instagram has become an essential part of student's daily lives, not only to connect with others but also as a primary way to get information for school and see ads. This fits with new research that shows how technology has changed how people find information and make decisions in the education field (Pew Research Center, 2021; GlobalWebIndex; Alalwan, 2018). Even though people increasingly use digital tools, the study's results show that human suggestions and word of mouth are still significant factors in choosing a school. Mazzarol & Soutar (2002) and Wilkins et al. (2012) say that recommendations from students and friends are still substantial. This shows that human experiences are still an excellent way to get information, even in this digital age. This study also clearly shows that the cost of schooling and funding options are essential. Cost is still a significant factor in international students' decisions about where to go to school, which aligns with what other research has found (Chen, 2007; Maringe & Carter, 2007). This is still an essential part of the choice to study abroad, showing how important it is to think about money and chances. Because it is visual and can offer a complete experience, Instagram stands out as a vital tool for finding

information about schools. People in the study liked how flexible Instagram was, saying they used it not only for fun and conversation but also to get news and information about schools that was useful to them. This observation supports the growing trend of schools keeping active social media accounts. This gives potential students a fuller and more honest picture of what to expect (Pew Research Center, 2022). Others, like TikTok, which has proliferated and is now popular with younger people (Global Digital Report 2023), are also becoming more of a threat. TikTok's success shows how the social media scene is changing. It indicates that new apps can quickly grab users' attention and offer alternatives to well-known platforms like Instagram. The study shows that both Instagram and Facebook are still popular places to look for educational material because they have a lot of visual content and can provide an engaging experience. This visual method makes it easier to make decisions about school and gives students a better idea of schools before committing to one. Because Instagram can combine different types of material into one app, it is beneficial for studying and making educational decisions.

According to the results, Instagram has become an important place to look for academic knowledge. Even though Instagram faces more competition from other social media sites, it is so popular because it lets people communicate, have fun, and learn simultaneously. However, in the future, researchers should look into how cultural and geographical factors affect people's decisions to study abroad. They should also see how well social media marketing strategies fill in knowledge gaps and improve digital marketing strategies for schools.

Conclusion

This study aimed to discover how Instagram ads affect the choices of international students considering going to college in Dublin. The results clearly show the factors influencing school choice and how digital contact, primarily through Instagram, plays a considerable part.

One of the main goals was to investigate how students are affected by internet contact with schools. It was found that reputation and academic ability were the most critical factors in choosing a university. Most people interviewed thought these things were essential, which backs up previous research that showed how much an institution's image affects international students' choices. Also, the cost of education and funding options become essential, demonstrating the need for affordable and accessible choices to attract international students.

Another goal was to determine how much Instagram helped bring international students to Dublin. The results show that this site is the best way to learn about learning abroad. Instagram is popular because it is easy to use and has a lot of shared visual material. This makes it easier for students to connect with groups and find helpful information. Even though human visits and suggestions are still important, there is a clear shift toward making decisions digitally.

Another goal was to find out what factors affect advertising on Instagram when choosing colleges and classes. Using the right visuals, time, and tone is essential for getting and keeping people's attention. People who were interviewed stressed how vital the first review and the advertising picture that went with it were and the proper contact timing to make the content more trustworthy. A nice tone and honesty are also crucial for good communication.

Lastly, it investigated how many international students connect on Instagram. The study of the interviews shows how helpful and flexible Instagram is for reaching possible students and promoting school programs. Most people interviewed said they used Instagram daily, indicating that many use the app. This shows how Instagram can be used in two ways: for work and keeping up with personal and social events. Instagram stories

are a great way to stay connected with friends and favourite accounts and for businesses to get their names out there.

It is also emphasized that Instagram can be used to communicate and get news. People who were interviewed said they used it to stay in touch with friends and family and to learn about news and events. This ability to teach and communicate makes it more useful in everyday life.

The results show that Instagram is a popular and helpful tool people value because it mixes communication, entertainment, news, and information. Recent studies have shown that combining different functions and making material visually appealing is essential for how popular something is on social media. In addition, competition from other platforms like TikTok shows how quickly new social media sites can grab users' attention and decide which ones they like best.

Advertisements on Instagram and other digital platforms are a big part of attracting international students to Dublin. These ads work well with other essential factors like reputation, cost, and personal suggestions. Universities and colleges should use these results to make their marketing tactics better fit the wants and needs of international students.

Recommendations for future research

The research conducted for this thesis provided helpful information to the researcher on how Instagram ads affect international students' decisions to go to university in Dublin. However, the following suggestions are made for future studies so that we can get a completer and more detailed picture of the phenomenon:

• Increase group size: The current study had some sample size and variation issues. It is suggested that studies be conducted with a more extensive and more varied group of international students to get a more general picture. Including students from various areas and backgrounds could give a more accurate and complete picture of how Instagram ads work.

• Quantitative research: This study focused on a qualitative analysis, which allowed us to learn more about how the subjects felt and what they had experienced. Still, quantitative methods could be used in future studies to confirm and develop the results. More information on the effects of Instagram ads could be obtained from surveys, controlled studies, or statistical analysis. This would allow for a more thorough assessment of how they affect decision-making.

• Cross-platform comparisons: Examining how other social media sites besides Instagram affect people could improve the study. If you examine Instagram alongside other social media sites like Facebook, TikTok, or LinkedIn, you might be able to find patterns and differences in how ads on each site perform and how they affect school choice.

• Extensive analysis: Extensive studies could give a more dynamic picture of the decision-making process by examining how the impact of Instagram ads changes over time. One way to get a better sense of the factors at play would be to examine how students' opinions about advertising change from the beginning to the end of the decision-making process.

• The effect of AI and personalization: AI is becoming increasingly crucial in personalizing ads. Future studies could examine how advanced ad personalization techniques on Instagram affect the choices international students make. Similarly, looking at how

recommendation systems and targeted ads affect choices could help us understand how well these strategies work and what they mean.

The suggestions made here can help guide future studies and help us learn more about how social media advertisements affect university choice for international students.

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