

The Impact of Branding in higher education: The Case of Ireland and its postgraduate international Students'

Research dissertation presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of **MSc in programme Global brand management.**

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submitted for the degree of: **MSc in Global Brand Management** is the result of my own work and that they were reference made to the work of others, due acknowledgement is given.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, my rocks those without whom all of this would have never been possible. They allowed me to pursue my studies in another country and supported me mentally and financially and for that, I am more than grateful.

Acknowledgements

A special thank you to my husband, for being there for me all the way long, for pushing me to continue to strive and for always letting me know that I am capable.

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Abstract

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Minadjeynebelle Konaté

For decades, the term "brand" has primarily been associated with corporate branding and business contexts. However, with the increasing competition and internationalization of higher education establishments (HEEs), the significance of branding has extended to the education sector. Recognizing this evolving landscape, the present study aims to evaluate the impact of branding in higher education, specifically focusing on postgraduate international students in Ireland, and its benefits for HEE managers. Within this study, the concepts of branding in higher education, service marketing, and student perception are thoroughly examined. The complex nature of the university model in relation to branding and its importance to students are explored, seeking a deeper understanding of their perceptions. Adopting a quantitative approach, a survey was utilized to collect data, reaching a sample size of 102 respondents, whose responses were meticulously analyzed. The findings shed light on the predominant trends in students' perceptions of branding. Both the existing literature and the empirical results validate the importance of branding. Notably, a vast majority of respondents (90%) recognized and valued branding symbols such as logos, emphasizing the significance of their utilization. Furthermore, they expressed agreement regarding the necessity for HEEs to establish a strong brand identity and maintain a robust presence on social media platforms.

While the link between branding and student recruitment was established, it was not as robust as initially hypothesized by the author. However, the findings suggest that branding does play a role in students' decision-making processes to some extent. It is important to note that other factors, such as the campus environment, faculty members, and institutional websites, emerged as influential considerations for prospective students. Consequently, HEE managers are encouraged to allocate their efforts accordingly. The originality of this research lies in its focus on Ireland as the chosen country and its exclusive examination of a specific population, namely postgraduate international students. Although branding in higher education has been discussed in various countries, this study uniquely addresses the Irish context, offering valuable insights to HEE managers and all stakeholders within the Irish third-level education sector.

Keywords: Branding, Branding in higher education, Service marketing, international students

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List of Abbreviations

HE	Higher education
HEE	Higher education establishment
PR	Press relations
EU	European union

1 Introduction:

1.1 Overview

This dissertation focuses on exploring the impact of branding in higher education establishments in Ireland on postgraduate international students and its implications for HEE management.

The concept of branding encompasses various aspects of marketing and involves creating a distinct identity for a business in the minds of its target audience and consumers (Benett and Ali-Choudhury, 2009). In the context of higher education, branding plays a crucial role in maintaining the image and quality of teaching and learning provided by HEEs throughout an individual's educational journey (Amzat, 2015).

International students, as defined by the Higher Education Authority (HEA, 2020), are students whose prior address before commencing their studies was outside of Ireland.

Their decision to pursue higher education abroad is influenced by various factors, including the branding efforts of educational institutions.

This research aims to examine the importance of branding in the higher education sector and its impact on the decision-making process of postgraduate international students when choosing an institution to attend. In marketing terms, the service provided by HEEs is the curriculum and educational experience, with the students being the customers or consumers.

By collecting data through a specifically designed questionnaire targeting this demographic, the author seeks to address the research questions down below:

1. How important is branding in the business model of higher education establishments?
2. To what extent does branding serve as a significant means of international student recruitment?

Analyzing the data collected through the questionnaire will enable the author to explore potential correlations between an institution's branding model and prospective students' choices of whether to attend or not. The findings will shed light on the role of branding in influencing students' decision-making processes and will contribute to the existing body of knowledge on this subject.

This research is valuable not only for HEE managers but also for the broader educational community and stakeholders involved in higher education in Ireland. Understanding the impact of branding on postgraduate international students' choices will inform strategic decision-making and enable institutions to develop effective branding strategies that attract and retain students.

1.2 Research purpose

Competitiveness in the sector of higher education is increasing due to overall changes such as an increase in the influence of stakeholders (Supe *et al.*, 2020), the internationalization of the sector (Altbach and Knight, 2007) and many others. All these factors led to an interest in the subject that gave birth to tons of literature. Considering the interest of the topic and the opportunity for Ireland (as an international student herself) the author decided to conduct research on that topic. The research aims to highlight the importance of branding in the Higher education (HE) sector and its benefits for its stakeholders. The author will emphasize adapting the general/corporate branding model to the sector of HE and the consumer's (postgraduate international students) perception of branding and brand identity.

The word “branding” is a really broad marketing concept which is tailored to the needs of each type of different product and/or service.

In the particular case of HE, it is a sector that has known growth and rising competition. Therefore, the establishments in their management perspectives had to include branding and use it as a tool to attract and differentiate from their competitors (Harshani Perera *et al.*, 2022).

Not much literature has been found on branding in HE in Ireland and the current state of it, but some interesting figures and facts have been found. In the country, third-level education is provided either by universities, colleges, technological institutions, or private institutions.

Universities and technology institutes are funded by the “Higher education authority” and are by nature cheaper (in terms of college fees) than private institutions (HEA.ie, 2022).

1.3 Significance of the study

There are two main justifications and reasons as to why this research is necessary and why it is going to be done:

The first reason is to benefit the various stakeholders of the HE sectors. With the growing competition, and the internationalization of the sector, branding has become for managers a powerful tool. A mean to attract prospective students (Benett and Ali-Choudhury, 2009) to improve student loyalty (Helgesen and Nettet, 2007) and also to retain current students (get undergraduates to pursue a post-graduate in the same establishment).

Determining the effect of branding on the choices of the students will demonstrate to these establishments the profitability behind it. That will allow managerial decisions to become more marketing oriented.

The second justification is to participate in the research on that topic. There is a lot of literature on corporate branding and branding in education like the texts that the author will cite across the literature review but not so much specific to Ireland. Indeed, the literature found by the author that will be mentioned in this paper will be from British and other European sources but nothing directly from Ireland. And we want to answer those questions in that specific country.

Why decide on postgraduate international students in Ireland in particular?

Because the country has a wide diversity of students, and became a popular destination for non-Irish students, particularly after the Brexit referendum. Indeed, in 2016, 1,934 applications were recorded from European students which rose to 6,383 in 2022 and the increase was significant in 2020/2021, the year during which the UK officially left the European union (Schengenvisa.info, 2022).

Also, according to the central applications office, one of the consequences of Brexit was Ireland picking up a share of “degree-seeking European students” (Kc overseas education, 2023).

But Ireland is not only popular with European students, In fact, non-European students make up more than half of the international students in the country (Icef monitor, 2019) they are also a bigger economic opportunity as their fees are higher.

This dissertation is going to specially target the postgraduates as the country hosted over 25,000 non-Irish -students in 2021 and 40% of those students pursued at masters or PhD level (Applyabroad, 2022).

1.4 Structure of the study

This dissertation is structured into six chapters. Every chapter begins with an overview of the section and its key topics.

The first chapter is about introducing the dissertation, defining the terms, announcing the topic, and the research objectives and explaining why the study is being done.

The second chapter of the literature review gives a better understanding of branding in higher education. It contains a sum-up of the findings in the literature on related topics to the dissertation. The chapter is concluded with a theoretical framework picturing the most significant findings of the research.

The third chapter tackles the research methodology of this paper. An explanation of the strategy is given and the process of collecting data. Quantitative data was chosen and a deductive approach. For this research, a survey was sent out and data was collected that way.

The presentation and discussion of the data gathering will be the subject of the fourth chapter. The analysis of the primary data examined the reliability, validity and assumptions of the researcher based on the survey's answers.

In the final chapter, implications and limitations are spoken about. Reflexions about the study are made as well as recommendations for the industry and for future research on the topic.

2 Critical literature review:

2.1 Overview

Like many other sectors, branding has evolved over the years. And from a result of growing attention to the subject, much literature and research have been done on its evolution.

The branding that we know now started to emerge in the 16th century and most of the contemporary branding theories started in mid 20th century due to the arrival of mass media at the time (Hampf and Lindberg-Repo, 2011).

Research specifically in the HE sector is abundant. Branding has grown rapidly in this increasingly competitive sector (Harshani Perera *et al.*, 2022). The reasons for that competition are many but two factors that can be mentioned are globalization and the increase in the choice of institutions (Tsui and Yi, 2007).

Also, a key literature finding is that two main perspectives from authors have been determined, one is consumer based. The students, their choices and perception such as (Benett and Ali-Choudhury, 2009) (Bock *et al.*, 2014) (Finn and Darmody, 2017) ...and the other institution based and how the institution brand would benefit in the likes of (Chapleo, 2014),(Ghodeswar, 2008) or again (Harshani Perera *et al.*, 2022).

This section will highlight key points and findings on Branding and related subjects. Going through an overview of branding and an explanation of the concept, tackling branding specifically in HE, brand awareness, service branding. And getting an insight on the student perspective by reviewing their choices, their perceptions and specifically looking at the population that is going to be studied (postgraduate international students in Ireland)

2.2 A definition of Branding

To define branding comprehensively, it is first crucial to understand the concept of what a brand is. Numerous authors have presented various definitions of a brand, capturing different aspects and perspectives. One way to define a brand is as the amalgamation of its name, goodwill, and reputation. Another definition describes a brand as the perception people hold about an organization, institution, person, or product, influencing their

overall experience with that entity (Gibby, 2013). Additionally, a brand can be seen as the culmination of experiences and relationships that establish a connection between the organization and its stakeholders(Sharma *et al.*, 2013).

Considering the diverse range of definitions and viewpoints found in literature, a brand can be distilled into simpler components: a name, reputation, experience, and positioning. These elements collectively contribute to shaping the essence of the brand.

With this understanding, we can proceed to define branding. Branding is a process that involves crafting a name, a distinctive image, a reputation, and an experience for customers (Amzat, 2015). In essence, branding encompasses the strategic efforts aimed at sustaining and enhancing a brand's attributes. While the term "branding" was originally associated with the business sector and commercial products, it emerged as a tool within the educational setting to meet the satisfaction of its "buyers" (i.e. the students) (Amzat, 2015). Over time, branding has evolved into a modern paradigm grounded in cultural engineering and personalization, offering customers products or services that embody their ideals(Chapleo, 2015).

Branding according to research has become a means to create a strong and enduring connection between the educational institution and its students, aligning their values and aspirations.

2.3 Branding in HE

Research on Branding in the sector of higher education has been extensive. Authors such as (Benett and Ali-Choudhury, 2009) (Bock *et al.*, 2014)(Javani, 2016) have attempted to define the three components of branding in the particular sector of HE:

1-The covenant, which is the promise concerning the brand's benefits that these HEEs put forward.

2-The quiddity is the set of distinctive features that sets the brand apart and reflects its nature

3-The symbolic and external representation is the external communication used by the brand that describes it

Each one of these components has specific uses to it (Benett and Ali-Choudhury, 2009), The covenant(1) helps HEEs to build strong brands and increase their market awareness among potential students; The quiddity (2) helps in the recruitment of high-caliber faculty and administrators; and finally the symbolic and external representation (3) helps the HEE's to differentiate themselves from competitors and gain market shares.

Other authors have also given more general definitions of branding in HE. The concept entails “what” the establishment is, what it “stands” for and furthermore what purpose it will serve in the future (Waeraass and Solbakk, 2008).

All of that requires consistency, commitment, and precision from the internal stakeholders (managerial decision-makers).

Branding in education is really different from commercial branding and has its own complexities and realities as stated before (Chapleo, 2015).

As it evolved for all kinds of sectors, branding also did in the education field.

Indeed, most HEEs are becoming more market oriented. As a result of that, some of them are investing in branding to enhance their brand image (Benett and Ali-Choudhury, 2009).

Universities and other institutions increasingly recognize that knowledgeable prospective students are now more prone to base their college choices based on the institution's brand identity (Nguyen *et al.*, 2019). This is one of the reasons that lead them to make more efforts in that sense. Not only that but there is also high competitiveness in the sector that has been demonstrated by many authors such as (Benett and Ali-Choudhury), (Supe *et al.*), (Ghodeswar)...

In terms of the challenges that are faced in the sector, the main one is the complexity of higher education as a service that has been described in the literature in terms of the special characteristics that the sector possesses (Clark *et al.*, 2019):

The intangibility: Indeed, HE offers mainly academic curriculums, knowledge and only intangible concepts, it is impossible to evaluate what you get before consumption (Mourad, 2010).

Therefore, HE branding must pay attention to the intangible aspects of the educational services they provide (Williams and Maktoba, 2014).

Knowing that to reduce the perceived risk associated with the service, branding is used as reassurance to students (El Gazzar, 2012).

The complex brand architecture: Most HEEs are composed of sub-brands, multi-campus and different entities that need their own communication model (Clark *et al.*, 2019)

The corporate branding model: another challenge that has been found in the sector, is the inability to monitor brand perception from different perspectives which led to the statement “university may be too complex to be encapsulated by one brand or identity definition” (Waeraass and Solbakk, 2008).

Indeed, literature has shown that the simplistic use of a classical corporate model is not fitted for HE and a need for a specific model for the sector is evident (Chapleo, 2014).

Approaches such as experiential brand and internal branding have been discussed as having a level of applicability, but it was stated that more empirical research needed to be done on it.

2.4 Brand awareness

The development of the internet and technologies today changed the way brands communicate. Especially with social media that has facilitated the buying experience (Constantinides and Zinck Stagno, 2011). From all over the world, customers can learn about a brand, and access specific features and characteristics of any product, or service proposed (Bohara *et al.*, 2022).

These changes have led marketers to focus more on their brand and make them known by the world.

Brand awareness can be defined as simply the recognition of a brand. (Macdonald and Sharp, 2002).

This element is essential for the communications process as without it nothing else can occur. Indeed, for a consumer to buy from a brand, they must, first of all, be aware of it (Macdonald and Sharp, 2002).

Literature has shown that brand awareness assumes an imperative role in the consumer's decision-making process (Bohara *et al.*, 2022), Mulyono (2016) stated that consumers prefer that brand which they are aware of rather than ones they are not.

An old study mentioned by (Macdonald and Sharp, 2002) confirmed the importance of “top of mind awareness”. The study found out that the higher the brand in a consumers mind (unaided recall) was, the higher the purchase intention was.

Indeed, there is a strong tendency to purchase the brand from those who recognize the brand (Mulyono, 2016).

In higher education, brand awareness is essential as it influences the decision-making process of the student (Bohara *et al.*, 2022). It creates familiarity between the brand and the customer which might decrease the perceived risk of the purchase (Bohara *et al.*, 2022). Especially with HE as the purchase is considered “high risk” as it impacts the student in the long term (Benett and Ali-Choudhury, 2009).

Macdonald and Sharp (2002) tackled the fact that brand awareness should be an important goal of the marketing communication of any firm as it has numerous functions. They pursued this by saying that brand awareness is one of the major brand assets and that it adds value to a product/service. That being said, it has been discussed in the literature the difficulty to demonstrate the value behind brand awareness to managers (Macdonald and Sharp, 2002). That is due to the existing pressure in the organizations in which management teams are expected to provide short term profit results.

2.5 Service branding

The service sector is referred to in the literature as complex and heterogeneous (Macdonald and Sharp, 2002).

In product branding, the packaged item is the primary brand however with services, the company is the primary brand (Berry, 2000).

That is why service branding is usually seen as more complex than product branding as a service compared to a product is intangible (Waeraass and Solbakk, 2008) and also because it requires a bigger effort for the brand itself.

That last issue is lesser big of an issue for “strong brands” as they have the capacity to enable their customers to visualize and understand better intangible products through their message and communication (Berry, 2000) which results in reducing the consumer's perceived monetary risk before the purchase of a service.

Now regarding the specific sector or higher education here, service branding is seen as an important matter in the field of education and has become part of the strategic thinking of higher education leaders in their brand promotion.

Indeed, service branding, in HE aims to clarify « why the institution exists » and put in all the efforts to provide the best offer possible to the consumers (Chapleo, 2015).

As the sector of HE became less state-funded and more financially oriented, a shift had to be made on the importance of the customer (Margison, 2004). Indeed, with less state aid, universities had to manage their own fates and university leaders became aware of the benefits of investing in their brands(Javani, 2016).

This shift resulted in a huge amount of literature on service branding in education and specifically on the student's importance. Them being customers towards the HEE. And more and more of these institutions increased their marketing efforts and focus on student satisfaction (Budd, 2017).

A debate also has emerged on the accuracy of the term employed regarding students in this context. For instance, Tight (Tight, 2013) as observed the range of terms to represent students such as customer, consumer... And he came up with the conclusion that none is accurate. A student is not a customer nor a consumer as students are not only recipients but also an actor in their education and unlike other services, the benefit of that degree is not immediate.

2.6 post-graduate students' choices

Having an understanding of postgraduate choices and criteria for university selection is essential for a successful long-term marketing strategy for higher education (Adefulu *et al.*, 2020). This knowledge is especially crucial for Higher Education establishments (HEE) managerial teams and marketers who aim to attract and engage prospective students effectively.

The process of making choices regarding higher education has been extensively explored by various authors, and it has been acknowledged as a complex topic (Moogan and Baron, 2003) primarily due to the multitude of factors involved.

The decision-making process for Higher Education (HE) choices has even been described as "high risk" (Benett and Ali-Choudhury, 2009) as the choice in the long-term can affect the student's future career plans.

The factors influencing HE choices can significantly vary from private to public settings, from one country to another, and even between undergraduate and postgraduate students (Moogan and Baron, 2003).

Within the existing literature, several factors have been identified as influential, such as "future job prospects," "staff expertise," and "course content" (Lee *et al.*, 2019). When the study was made on Vietnamese students, what came out as more important factors were "facilities and services" "program" and "price".

It is essential to note that the significance of these factors can vary depending on the research context and the specific angle of the study (Lee *et al.*, 2019).

In addition to these factors, the literature has also revealed criteria that are closely related to the subject of branding (Tsharna, 2023). For instance, a significant survey known as the "QS International Survey" was conducted, which stands as the world's largest survey of prospective international students. The primary objective of this survey was to gain insights into the role of social media and brand presence in students' decision-making processes when selecting universities.

When asked about the most useful sources of information when researching a university, a significant majority of respondents highlighted the website and general online search as the top sources (Figure 1). This emphasizes the importance of an institution's online presence and the role of digital platforms in influencing students' decision-making processes.

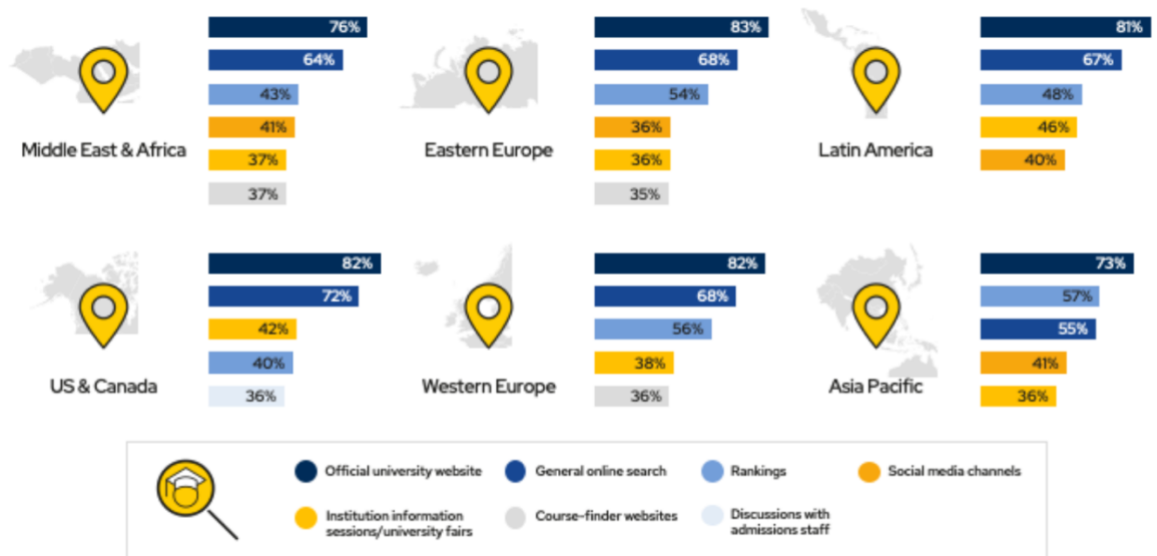


Figure 1: Most useful sources when researching a university: (QS.com, 2022)

The topic of branding impacting students' choices was also discussed by Rutter *et al* (2016) who noted that the student demographic is highly engaged and affiliated, often expressing their support for brands through online interactions such as following brand accounts or participating in online communities. This highlights the significance of branding and its ability to create a sense of connection and loyalty among prospective students.

HEE's social media presence and websites also play a crucial role in shaping students' final choice of institution (Constantinides and Zinck Stagno, 2011). Prospective students seek information on these platforms, relying on the content provided to make informed decisions about where to pursue their higher education.

Furthermore, branding holds immense importance for marketing managers, as it influences students' decision-making processes (Macdonald and Sharp, 2002).

2.7 Internationalization of Higher education

Higher education is undeniably one of the most globalized activities in today's world (Rutter *et al.*, 2016).

In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift towards increased globalization within the higher education sector (Altbach and Knight, 2007). This shift is reflected in the

offering of exchange programs, study abroad opportunities, and dual degree programs in collaboration with different universities. These initiatives aim to provide students with diverse learning experiences and exposure to international perspectives.

All those processes of globalization have led to an increase in study-related travelling (Finn and Darmody, 2017). Students now have greater opportunities to pursue their education in different countries, immersing themselves in new cultures and horizons. This has created a need for higher education establishments to develop policies and implement effective marketing techniques to attract international students.

The globalization of higher education has also brought economic implications to the forefront. International students, often pay higher tuition fees compared to domestic students. As a result, they represent a financial benefit for educational institutions.

2.8 Internationalisation of HE: the case of Ireland

International students play a significant role in the internationalization of higher education in Ireland. The term "international student" refers to a student who is internationally domiciled, excluding Erasmus and other exchange students (HEA.ie, 2022).

As stated before The higher education system in Ireland comprises various types of institutions, including institutes of technology, private colleges, and other state-aided structures (Citizensinformation.ie, 2022).

In 2010, the Irish government launched an internationalization strategy for the education sector, aiming to uphold the international profile of the country and enhance its attractiveness to students from around the world (Finn and Darmody, 2017).

This strategy aligned with a global trend and a concept that was gaining weight across Europe (Finn and O'connell, 2012).

Here is some key information about postgraduate international students in Ireland:

The population's growth: Over the years, Ireland has witnessed a significant increase in the number of postgraduate international students. This growth can be attributed to several factors, including the reputation of Irish universities, the quality of education offered, and the Brexit (Kc overseas education, 2023)

Diverse Nationalities: Postgraduate international students in Ireland come from a wide range of countries (HEA.ie, 2022).

Economic Impact: Postgraduate international students bring significant economic benefits to Ireland. They contribute to the local economy through spending on tuition fees, accommodation, living expenses, and other related costs (Finn and Darmody, 2017).

Here is a table showing the number of postgraduate students in Ireland for the year 2021/2022 and their programs.

	Higher Diplomas	PhD	Postgraduate Certificates	Postgraduate Diplomas	Postgraduate Occasionals	Research Masters	Taught Masters	Total
Northern Ireland	18	73	28	41	11	13	202	385
Great Britain	31	125	47	71	19	22	346	660
(Other) EU	125	504	191	287	78	88	1,398	2,670
Non-EU	458	1,845	699	1,052	285	321	5,121	9,781
Unknown	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	632	2,546	965	1,452	393	442	7,066	13,496

Figure 2: International postgraduate students in Ireland: based on (HEA.ie, 2022)

Based on the information collected on the higher education authority of Ireland's website, they were 13,496 international postgraduates in Ireland for the year 2021/2022. The information collected from the Higher Education Authority of Ireland's website indicates that there were 13,496 international postgraduate students in Ireland during the academic

year 2021/2022. These students were enrolled in various programs, including higher diplomas, PhDs, and masters. This number will serve as the sample population size for data collection purposes.

2.9 Conceptual framework

This conceptual framework has been developed based on the literature found to answer the research questions efficiently and help in the data-gathering process.

Research questions:

How important is branding in HEE's business model?

To what extent is branding a significant means of international student recruitment?

The goal is to provide a framework suitable for the HE sector, that will benefit management as well as the students.

The author has observed different tendencies in terms of literature covering branding in higher education. Some authors focused more on student's perception, their wants, needs and the choices they make and why they make them like (Benett and Ali-Choudhury), (Finn and Darmody) (Budd)...While others focused on upcoming issues in the educational field like the upcoming competition (Ghodeswar, 2008), the internationalization of the student market (Altbach and Knight, 2007) or again the unfitted corporate model for the sector (Clark *et al.*, 2019).

These tendencies led to finding a duality that will become key elements of our framework. On one side the HEE managers and on the other the postgraduate international students. These two parties have an interdependence as each of them needs the other one.

Both parties have their own issues:

HEE Managers:

- Internationalization of the market (with huge student mobility)
- High competition arising

International postgraduate students:

- The crucial choice of establishment they must make
- Factors affecting that choice such as” career prospect” “job opportunity” (Lee *et al.*, 2019) or “brand presence” (QS.com, 2022) of the establishment
- Moving abroad in an unknown setting

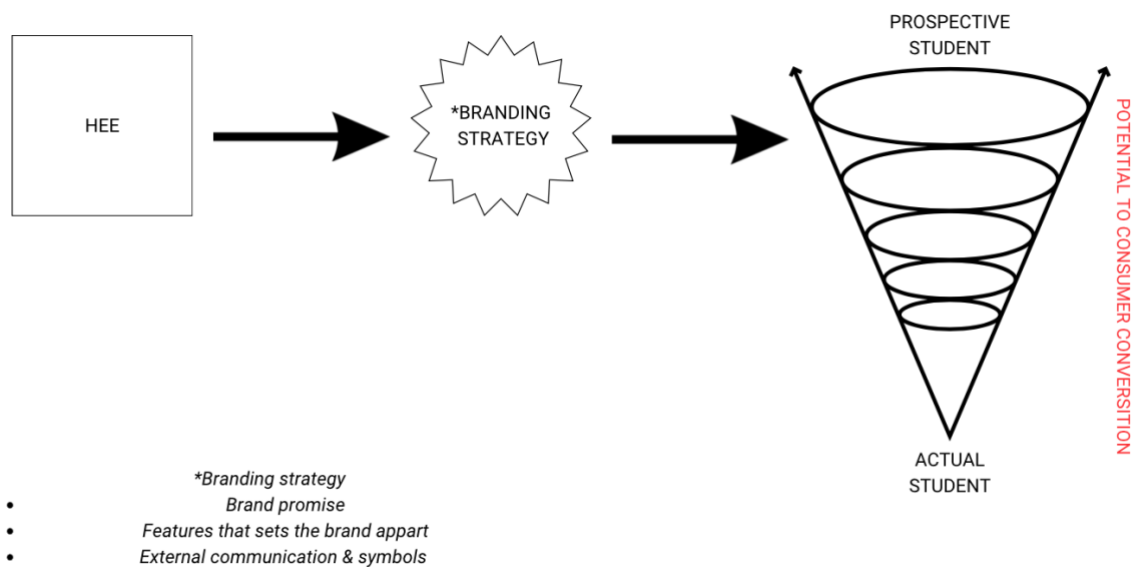


Figure 3: Conceptual framework-source: author's own

2.10 Literature conclusion:

The literature highlighted that branding is a vast subject of interest in marketing and has been the subject of many writing over the years. It also evolved from being strictly used in the corporate sector to opening to new sectors such as higher education.

Different themes related to branding were explored such as service branding and brand awareness but specifically branding in HE.

Branding in higher education has grown rapidly with increased competition (Tsui and Yi, 2007) which has led institutions to “fight back” by using branding as a strategic tool (El Gazzar, 2012).

HEEs use it as leverage and an incentive to attract students and especially international students since the education market is more and more globalized now. This section tried to understand more of the student's perceptions.

The researcher also had an insight into the population that is going to be studied, postgraduate international students in Ireland to know them more and assess them in a better manner through the data gathering questionnaire.

3 Research methodology and design

3.1 Overview

This section will provide an understanding of the main components of research. The author will discuss the context of the research, the research methodology and its designs going through the different layers of the research onion (Figure 4) on research methodology and design.

This model was developed by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (Saunders *et al.*, 2007) and simply explained as the reflection of the different decisions you will need to make when developing a research methodology. The onion should be read outside to inward (Phair and Warren, 2021).

The summary of the findings will set the ground to justify the author's choice of going for a quantitative mono-method research using a survey with a positivist research philosophy.

3.2 Context of the research

Ireland provides an interesting context for the study of branding in higher education. The country is home to many establishments such as universities, institutes of technologies, private institutions and others (Finn and O’connell, 2012). At the same the post Brexit situation made the country a prized destination for international students (Kc overseas education, 2023). Surprisingly, not so much research has been made on the sector of branding in higher education in Ireland, the author saw there an opportunity to contribute to the research. The population observed will be the postgraduate international students of Ireland, the research processes will be explained in the rest of this research methodology chapter.

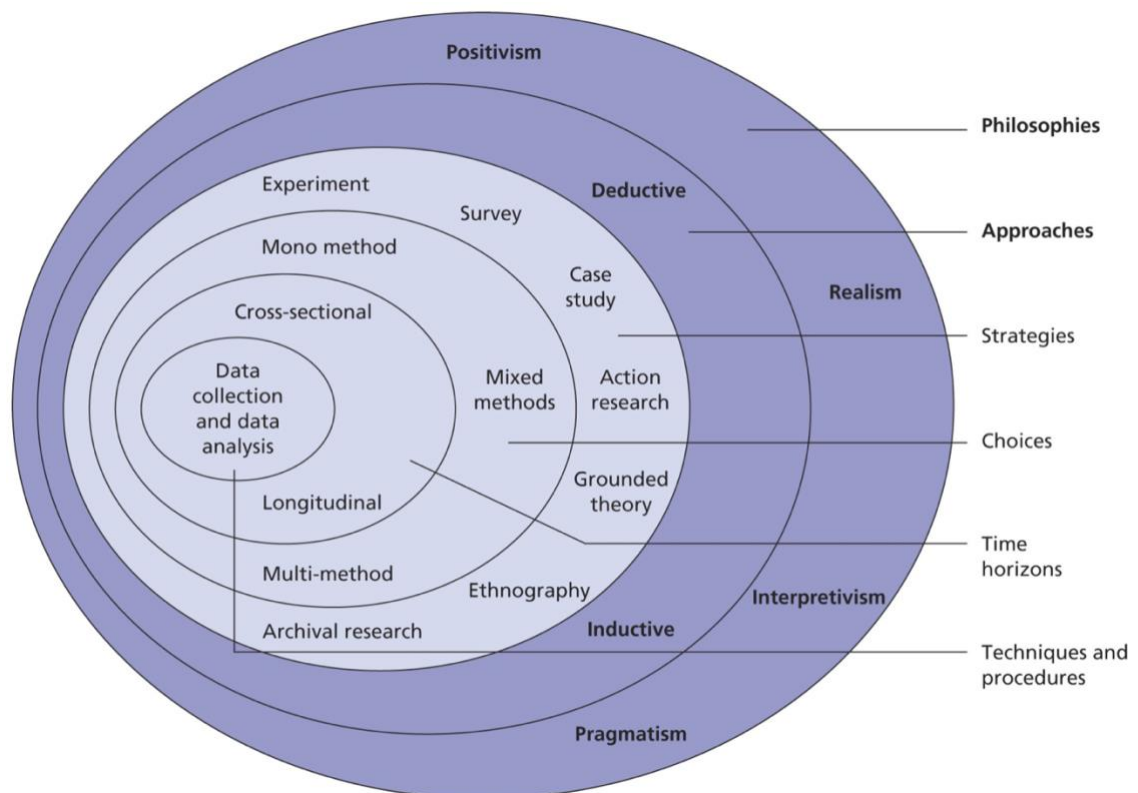


Figure 4: The research onion: (Saunders et al., 2007)

3.3 Research Methodology

This section will provide a comprehensive review of the findings on the topic of research methodology.

In simple words, Research methodology refers to how the researcher designs a study to ensure results regarding the aims, objectives and research questions (Warren and Jansen, 2020).

This component clarifies and shapes the study's goals and requirements to fit the research needs (Ziemba *et al.*, 2013)

It is considered an important element as it helps establish the research structure with elements like the approach, the strategy or again the research philosophy (Al Kilani and Kobziev, 2016)

Its main purpose is to give a clear idea of what methods and processes are going to be used and to discuss research problems for them to be addressed.

The choice of research design is done considering three elements, philosophical assumptions, the strategy of inquiry and specific research methods (Creswell, 2003). These elements will be discussed in the rest of this chapter.

3.4 Research Philosophy

This section will provide a comprehensive overview of the research philosophies present in the research onion, namely Positivism, Realism, and Interpretivism. It will discuss the strengths and limitations of each philosophy and provide justification for the choice of philosophy for this particular dissertation.

Research philosophy is the belief in how the data collected should be gathered, observed, and used (Adetunji, 2020). It serves as the foundation for justifying the choices made in the research process and establishing the credibility of the study (Saunders *et al.*, 2015). The choice of research philosophy for this dissertation is based on the available theory and literature

The starting point in understanding research philosophy is "Ontology," which pertains to the core beliefs about the nature of reality it explores the existence and relationships of various aspects of society (Jupp, 2006).

We also have to mention here "epistemology" which in terms of research philosophy the assumptions we make about the kind or the nature of knowledge (Richards, 2003).

Among the various research philosophies, the focus will be on the chosen philosophy for this dissertation:

Ontology	Epistemology	Axiology	Typical methods
Real, external, independent	Scientific method		
	Observable and measurable facts	Value-free research	
One true reality (universalism)	Law-like generalizations	Researcher is detached, neutral and independent of what is researched	Typically deductive, highly structured, large samples, measurement, typically quantitative method of analysis, but a range of data can be analysed
Granular (things)	Numbers		
Ordered	Causal explanation and prediction as contribution	Researcher maintains objective stance	

Figure 5: Ontology, epistemology, axiology and typical research methods associated with positivism research philosophy: (research-methodology.net, 2008)

Positivism :

This philosophy is the one chosen for this dissertation:

Positivism can be described as the traditional scientific approach to research. It assumes that phenomena can be studied as objective facts, and the relationships between these facts can be established as scientific laws (Crossan, 2013).

It is a method where the researcher is unbiased, limited to data collection and an objective analysis (Hiller, 2016). Indeed, optimistic researchers tend to maintain an appropriate distance with the respondents and avoid as much contact as possible (Adetunji, 2020)

The positivist approach involves an unbiased researcher who collects data and conducts an objective analysis (Hiller, 2016). Positivists prioritize factual knowledge acquired through observation and consider it more reliable than other types of data (Atta-Asiedu, 2022).

The author has carefully considered the implications of positivism, as with any other philosophy, and weighed its suitability for the study. In examining the role of branding in higher education and its impact on international students' choices in Ireland, it is crucial to consider the large and heterogeneous population under study (postgraduate international students in Ireland) and ensure as much objectivity as possible in interpreting the data.

The choice of a quantitative research method is more convenient in this case, as it allows for larger sample size and a comprehensive overview of the diverse population within a short time frame. The advantages of the positivist approach include the ability to generalize findings across different populations, make quantitative predictions, and conducting unbiased value-free inquiries (Johnson *et al.*, 2007).

Despite the advantages, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of positivism, such as the potential difficulty for the researcher to remain completely detached and unbiased, as well as the abstract nature of the results that may obstruct direct application to specific situations ((Johnson *et al.*, 2007; Atta-Asiedu, 2022)).

After reviewing the literature and considering the strengths and weaknesses, the choice of positivism remains justified for this study. Its characteristics of generalization, prediction, transparency, and unbiased inquiry align with the topic and approach the author wishes to pursue. Additionally, the use of a quantitative approach through a questionnaire allows for a large number of responses in a short period of time, facilitating comprehensive data analysis.

3.5 Research Approaches

A research approach can be defined by being an orderly approach taken towards the collection and analysis of data in order to get information from them (Al Kilani and Kobziev, 2016).

Two approaches are here mentioned in our research onion. Inductive and deductive.

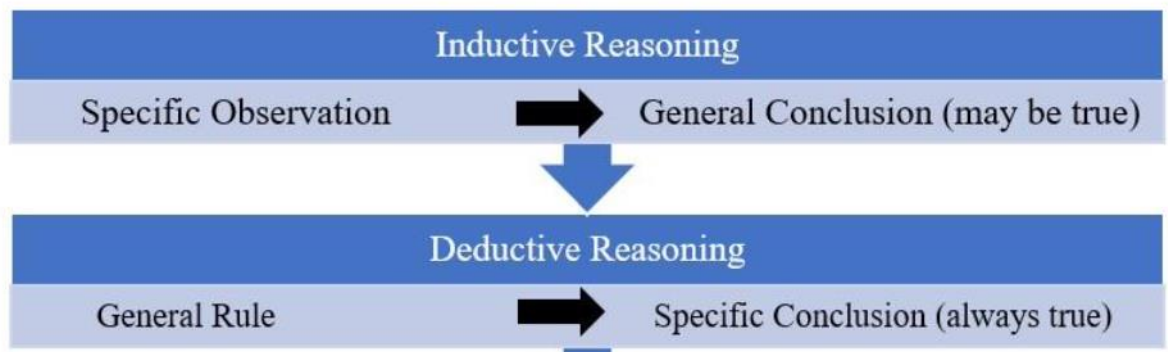


Figure 6: Inductive vs deductive: (Saunders et al., 2015)

In order to choose the more suitable for research, two main factors are important. First the characteristics of the topic and second the time to conduct the research (Creswell, 2003).

Trochim (2006) refers to induction as moving from the specific to the general while deduction begins from the general and ends with the specific.

The deductive researcher works from a theory to a hypothesis to data to add to or contradict the theory whereas the inductive one uses the participant's views in order to build up broader themes and generate a theory from it (Creswell and Plano, 2007).

Often in research, the deductive method is used for quantitative and the inductive for qualitative (Soiferman and L, 2010).

According to the literature found, the choice for this research was set on a quantitative deductive approach for many reasons:

First of all, a quantitative approach aims to use statistical data to make a connection between what is known and what can be learned through research (Soiferman and L, 2010) and that is what needs to be established in this research on the relationship between postgraduate international students in Ireland and HEE branding.

Secondly, an important factor that determined the choice is that in the deductive approach, steps are taken for any misconception to be minimized, the author must be as neutral as possible whereas in the inductive approach, the author clearly identifies their personal stance (Creswell and Plano, 2007).

For this dissertation, the questionnaire (Appendix xx) is as neutral as possible, and the personal stance of the author is not given or indicated in any way.

3.6 Research strategy

In the research onion, 6 strategies are mentioned. They are associated with authentic and valid information gathering and deliver appropriate solutions for the research.

Here is a table presenting them:

Research Strategy	Definitions
Experiment Research	This is the production of a research project that investigates the anticipated effects. It also measures the correlation between these factors collected and interpreted on the basis of the results predicted.
Action Research	It tends to concentrate on a reflective process that is a systemic practise that evaluates the practitioners' professional practise and experience.
Interviews*	it is the most common tool used for data collection. As interviews allow rich information and insights from various outlets to be collected, accessed and interpreted.
Case Study Research	This strategy enables the researcher funnel a broad research into a manageable topic or to test an existing theory in the field of study.

Grounded Theory*	This is a type of methodology of research which is systematic and qualitative in nature and which follows an inductive approach in which the research data are a prerequisite for the study. Information from an interview can for example be transcribed, coded and then collected based on the factors common among the interviewees.
Survey	This is used and quantitative data can be empirically analysed. This requires the production of a representative population sample
Ethnography	This examines people's closely observed society and economic processes. This type of study focuses on interpreting meaning and significance in the study from the perspective of individuals being studied.

Figure 7: Research strategies and definition: (Adetunji, 2020)

In this research, the author will focus on the survey/questionnaire strategy due to various reasons:

Its main advantage is the flexibility of the method (Al Kilani and Kobziev, 2016). Indeed, a questionnaire can be sent from anywhere to anywhere in the world and the respondent does not have any constraints and can answer anytime.

Also, the researcher had to take into account the time at disposal (Creswell, 2003) which is really short, and this method does not require a lot of time as all the data can be gathered really shortly.

The survey is the most prevalent quantitative tool in order to explain a social phenomenon (Gulver, 2020).

The advantages of the questionnaire are that it is suitable for sampling and gives more accurate generalisability (Gulver, 2020).

The questionnaire is composed of 20 questions, mostly close end ones.

The survey was elaborated on Word, sent for review to the supervisor then imported through "Google Forms" online. The link was also and sent out to Facebook groups of international students in Ireland, on LinkedIn, to universities' social media pages...

3.7 Research choices

In addition to the research philosophies discussed earlier, the research onion also encompasses different research choices, mono method, mixed method, and multi-method.

The Mono method refers to a research approach where the researcher gathers either qualitative or quantitative data based on the decisions made during the study (Adetunji, 2020).

In the case of this research, the mono method was employed as the research process has a whole significantly influenced the data collection process.

The choice of the mono method aligns with the nature of the research and the specific objectives of the study. By utilizing a single method, the researcher is able to focus on a specific approach that best addresses the research questions and objectives.

This allows for a more targeted and in-depth analysis of the chosen research topic (Trochim, 2006).

Furthermore, employing a mono-method approach ensures consistency and coherence throughout the research process. By selecting and adhering to a single method, the researcher can maintain a clear and structured research design, facilitating a more rigorous and reliable study.

It is worth noting that the choice of research method, whether mono, mixed, or multi-method, depends on the research objectives, the nature of the research questions, and available resources (Creswell, 2003). Each method has its own strengths and limitations, and researchers need to carefully consider which method best suits their research aims and objectives.

In the case of this research, the use of the mono method was judged appropriate and advantageous. It allowed for a focused and comprehensive investigation of the research topic, ensuring that the data collection and analysis were aligned with the overall research process.

3.8 Conclusion

In conclusion, the research methodology plays a crucial role in designing and conducting a study to achieve its aims, objectives, and research questions.

It encompasses various elements such as research philosophy, research approaches, research strategies, and research choices.

The chosen research philosophy for this dissertation is positivism, which aligns with the objective and quantitative nature of the research. Positivism assumes that phenomena can be studied as objective facts, and it prioritizes factual knowledge acquired through observation.

The research approach chosen for this study is a quantitative deductive approach. This approach aims to establish connections between known information and what can be learned through research. It also emphasizes minimizing misconceptions and maintaining neutrality, which is crucial for this study on the relationship between postgraduate international students in Ireland and higher education institution branding.

The research strategy employed in this study is the survey/questionnaire strategy. This strategy offers flexibility, as questionnaires can be easily distributed and completed by respondents from anywhere.

Finally, the research choice in this study is a mono method. This choice ensures consistency and coherence throughout the research process, enabling a focused and comprehensive investigation of the research topic.

4 Data collection

4.1 Overview

This dissertation aims to answer two research objectives:

How important is branding in HEE's business model?

To what extent is branding a significant means of international student recruitment?

And, to test the following hypotheses:

H1: Branding is an important aspect of HEE's managerial decisions.

H2: Brand presence is a key factor in an international student's decision-making regarding their choices of establishments.

The data collection will focus on one specific population: Current Postgraduate international students in Ireland. It includes Any male or female that is non-Irish and is currently enrolled as a post-graduate student in an Irish HEE (the year 2022/2023 or 2023/2024).

As mentioned earlier, a mono method and quantitative approach will be used with a detailed survey that will be sent to all those that fit the description of the population. The answers will then be analysed. As said before, this method is quick and efficient and allows us to have answers from people wherever they may be.

To reach out best to our population, the survey will be sent out on professional networks such as LinkedIn and on Facebook groups of international students in Ireland.

4.2 Sampling

When conducting a survey, the question of sampling becomes crucial. Researchers need to consider how representative the collected data is of the entire population under study. Since analyzing the entire population is often impractical in terms of time and resources, sampling becomes necessary. (Walliman, 2005).

Since researchers do not have the time nor the resources to analyze the entire studied population, there is a need to select a sample (Taherdoost, 2018).

Using the correct sampling method leads to reaching the correct target (Gulver, 2020).

In the choice of the sampling method, it should be considered that two main methods exist, probability sampling and non-probability sampling :

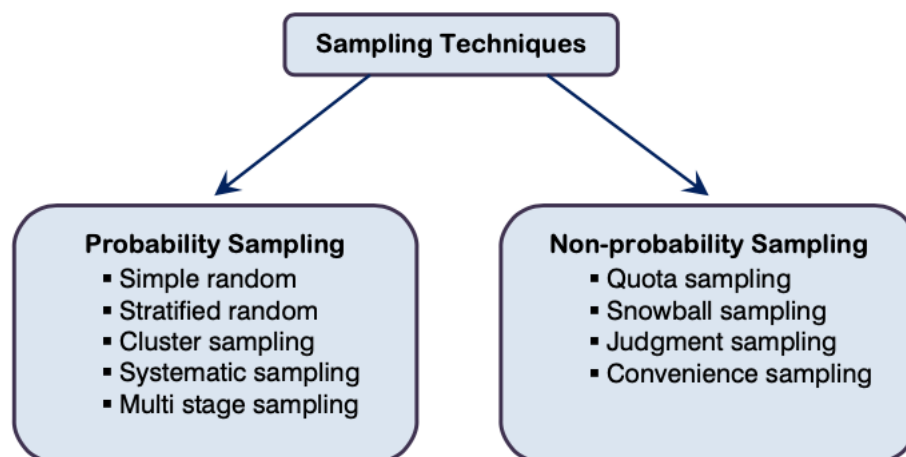


Figure 8: sampling techniques:(Taherdoost, 2018)

The sampling techniques that will be used for this dissertation are the non-probability sampling techniques called “Convenience sampling” and snowball sampling”

The convenience technique is the one in which the researcher announces the survey and the population targeted decides whether they want to participate or not whereas the snowball sampling uses a referral system where the ones that answer also refer people they know (Stratton, 2021).

The convenience technique tends to be favoured by students as it is less time-consuming and it is inexpensive (Taherdoost, 2018). It also tends to overcome some of the limitations associated with research (Taherdoost, 2017). For instance, using friends and family as part of the sample. As part of this study, the author is a part of the population studied (a postgraduate international student in Ireland) therefore convenience technique can help.

Regarding the snowball method, it is often used for groups with the same characteristics (Stratton, 2021) such as societies, inaccessible professions... Here international postgraduate students of Ireland will be the group we will be interested in. As students know well other students (classmates, friends...) it will be easy for them to refer many people for the survey.

By employing both convenience sampling and snowball sampling techniques, the researcher can gather data from a diverse range of participants within the population of interest. These methods offer practicality and the potential for reaching a broader sample within the available resources and time constraints.

It is important to note that while convenience sampling and snowball sampling have their advantages in terms of convenience and expanding the sample size, they also come with limitations (Taherdoost, 2018). These include potential biases, such as self-selection bias in convenience sampling and the risk of homogeneity in snowball sampling. However, given the specific research objectives and available resources, these sampling techniques are deemed suitable for this dissertation.

4.3 Primary data collection

Sample size calculation

The data collection will be focused on one population that we have mentioned before, Current Postgraduate international students in Ireland.

This primary data collected provides an in-depth reflection of students' motivations and perceptions towards branding.

The main objective was to establish a link between HEE brand presence and post-graduate international student enrollment.

The population size was estimated to be 13,496 people as that was the number of international postgraduates in Ireland for the year 2021/2022 (HEA.ie, 2022).

After finding the total population size, the author had to calculate the sample size. Indeed, the sample size is a significant feature of any empirical study (Taherdoost, 2017), the author had to calculate it in order to determine the number of respondents required for the survey.

Using an online sample calculator (calculator.net, n.d.), and the formula for sample size calculation (in figure 9 just below)

Error Margin	5%
Z	1,96
Proportion Master (p)	52%
Standard error	25%
Pop size	13 496
Sample size	383

$$n = \frac{z^2 \times \hat{p}(1-\hat{p})}{\epsilon^2}$$

Figure 9: Population sample calculation: author's own

To determine that sample:

An error margin of 5 % was chosen. That is usually an acceptable percentage in social research (Taherdoost, 2017).

Then the value Z represents the level of confidence regarding the accuracy of the survey findings. Here again, the researcher went with the typical level of confidence chosen in research which is 95 % (0.05: which gives a Z value of 1,96) (Taherdoost, 2017)

A 95 % level of confidence means that 95 samples out of 100 will represent the true population value within the margin error (5% here).

Regarding “P”, it is the percentage of your sample having the same characteristic as (Barlett *et al.*, 2001). Here characteristic chosen was the number of postgraduate international students in a taught master, 7,066 (cf: fig x) P here is equal to 52 %, then the formula to calculate the variance (the square standard error) is $(P *(100-P))$ (Taherdoost, 2017) which makes the 25 % (cf: fig xxx).

All these calculations led to the ideal sample size of 383 respondents.

Data collection strategy

All the data gathering process took place online as the researcher was not in Ireland at the time.

The first step of the process was making a list of all the places to find the population studied online. The main channels used were:

- Word of mouth as the author herself is an international post-graduate student
- Facebook groups (of international students in Ireland)
- Establishment pages (institutions all over Ireland)
- LinkedIn

The questionnaires were sent to all those places and using the convenience and snowball techniques, the researcher also sent some questionnaires to individuals directly and they had the choice to answer or not.

Questionnaire outline

The questionnaire sent out to the participants consisted of 20 questions and was structured into 3 distinct parts:

1: Respondent's profile: this section was composed of 7 questions and had for objective to get demographic information about the respondent. Questions like the age, gender, and province they study in that will be beneficial in cross-analysis.

This section also contained the only open-ended question of this question which is "Give a definition of branding". This question was asked to see if the respondents really were informed on the topic, they were answering questions on.

2: Branding in HEE's business model: this section was composed of 10 questions regarding the research question "How important is branding in HEE's business model". Questions about HEE's brand identity, top features of an establishment and online advertisement were asked. It dealt with concepts reviewed in literature such as brand awareness, service branding and branding in HE

3: Branding for student recruitment: this section was composed of 3 questions regarding the research question "To what extent is branding a significant means of international student recruitment?". This section intended to make link with the literature found on students' perception and branding in HE.

Total completion of the survey was estimated to be 7-10 minutes.

4.4 Ethical issues

Tackling now issues of research ethics, scientific research mental efforts and practices in revealing information. The researcher is responsible for examining the reflection of the

results and making statements about the results. For these reasons, Ethical issues are taken into account (Kucur, 2020).

This research is not observing any fragile population (the elderly, young children...) or any.

cultural/religious group that could feel discriminated against and/or offended by our questions.

To be as ethical as possible, here are some guidelines that were followed throughout the data-gathering process:

-All participants were informed about the conditions of participation. They were informed about the right to privacy and the right to withdraw. They also had the possibility to access to the results on demand (cf: appendix xxx)

-Acquiring data solely related to the study: No questions irrelevant to the study were asked to the respondents

-The respondents had their anonymous status preserved (no name or surname was asked for in order to answer the questionnaire)

4.5 Access issues

Access to pertinent information and the relevant source is necessary for the research (Saunders *et al.*, 2007). In this regard, the author contacted via groups as mentioned in the data collection section and individuals. The goal was to send double the sample size.

4.6 Approach to data analysis

To understand the correlations between the findings, the answers to the survey made on google forms were collected and put into an Excel sheet. Graphics were then made to represent the results. The research objectives were matched with the answers received.

In the survey, there was one open question where the respondents were asked to give “a definition of branding”. This question was asked just to verify if the respondents were familiar with the subject. The answers to this question are separated from the statistical analysis and are discussed critically in the findings section.

4.7 Potential Outcome of your research

This study will assess the extent to which postgraduate international students in Ireland give importance to the branding of their HEE and to what extent the notion of branding is important to the HEE’s ecosystem.

Its aim is to prove a correlation between branding and international student recruitment.

The reason why this research is important is that the subject of branding has a lot of literature supporting it, and students-related subjects too. But nothing combining both has been done regarding Ireland (there are plenty in other European countries, especially in the U.K).

After Brexit, Ireland became a “substitute” for a lot of European students (Schengenvisa.info, 2022) and this study also aimed to maximize the potential of this newly prized destination.

As a list of other stakeholders, this paper could appeal to:

-Establishments managerial and admission teams: Helping them to retain prospects and actual students

-Marketers: highlighting the importance of branding in the education sector, might create more job opportunities for people working in marketing in the education field

-The International students: by interviewing them, analyzing their responses, and interpreting them, we are giving them the opportunity to express their needs and to enhance their current/future experience as a student in Ireland.

-The Irish government, as international students are a huge opportunity and reflect an economic and political statement and image of the country

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter has addressed the importance of sampling in conducting surveys for research purposes and the sampling methods that will be used in this dissertation which are snowball and convenience sampling. Data collection also have been dealt with in regards to sample size calculation, to the strategy adopted and an outline of the survey have been given. Ethical and approach issues have also been addressed and the chapter ended with a preview to data analysis and the potential outcome of the research expected by the author.

5 Presentation and discussion of the findings

5.1 Overview

In this chapter, the survey results are presented, providing a comprehensive overview of the collected data. The findings are accompanied by visual figures, including graphs and charts, to support the numerical information and enhance the understanding of the results. Following the presentation of the survey results, the author goes into the statistical analysis and interpretation of the data. This analysis allows for a deeper understanding of the key findings of the research study.

One significant finding of the study is the level of student engagement with the university brand.

Another crucial aspect explored in the research is the importance of brand awareness. The survey results provide valuable insights into the level of brand awareness among postgraduate international students in Ireland.

Additionally, the research investigates the significance of branding in students' overall perception of their educational institution. By analyzing the survey data, the author explores how branding elements, such as brand identity and online advertisement, influence students' perceptions and shape their attitudes towards the HEE. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the role branding plays in shaping students' experiences and perceptions in the higher education context.

5.2 Findings

This chapter serves as an important step in interpreting the findings and deriving logical conclusions based on the data collected. The presentation of the findings encompasses a detailed analysis of the survey results obtained through Google Forms, employing various visual aids such as graphs, charts, and tables created using Excel. The interpretation of these findings is carried out in alignment with the insights gained from the literature review and the conceptual framework.

By systematically addressing the research objectives and questions, the findings provide a comprehensive foundation for a logical and thorough discussion. The analysis takes into account the relevant literature, which provides a theoretical context for understanding and interpreting the results. This integration of the literature review and the conceptual framework with the empirical findings ensures a stronger examination of the research topic.

Through this process, the findings are carefully examined, allowing for meaningful conclusions to be drawn. The researchers can identify patterns, trends, and relationships within the data, enabling them to make informed inferences and logical deductions. The findings, therefore, serve as a valuable resource for addressing the research objectives and answering the research questions posed at the outset of the study.

By mixing the empirical evidence with the theoretical foundations, the researchers can develop a coherent and comprehensive understanding of the research topic

Section 1 of the survey (demographics and profiling)

A total of 102 questionnaires were completed between the 9th and the 20th of May 2023. To ensure that questionnaire was filled by the exact target group, profiling questions such as “In which province do you study” (which province in Ireland) and “What program are enrolled in” were asked. All 102 of the respondents met the criteria of the population.

It was important to first analyze our respondent's profiles and their demographics:

The very first question asked to the respondents was “What is your age range?”. The main objective of this question was to avoid an unwanted demographic (minors for instance). And also, for statistical purposes.

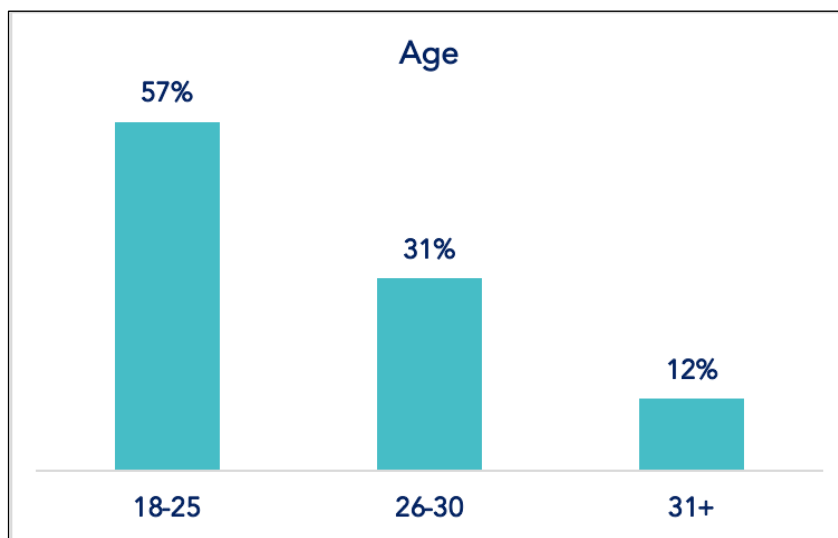


Figure 10: Survey results-age group: based on author's research.

Three categories of choice were given. It is shown in the graphic that most of the respondents are in the range of 18-25 years representing 56,86%, followed by the 26-30 group with 31% and the students over 30 years old representing 12%. This information could help if tendencies related to age wanted to be demonstrated.

Now regarding gender, the next question asked was “What is your gender? ». Three options were given: “male”, “female”, and “other”. Of the 102 respondents, to identify gender 44% identified as male and 56% as female.

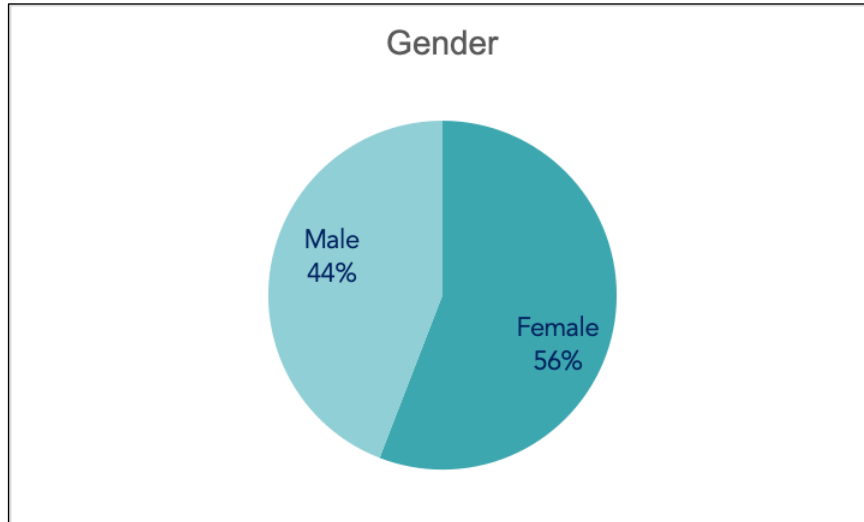


Figure 11: Survey results-gender: based on author’s research.

We can observe that these proportions create a slight inequality between genders but that does not impact the study.

Following up with the next question of the questionnaire “Where are you from?”, respondents had to select their continent/geographic zone of origin (Figure 12).

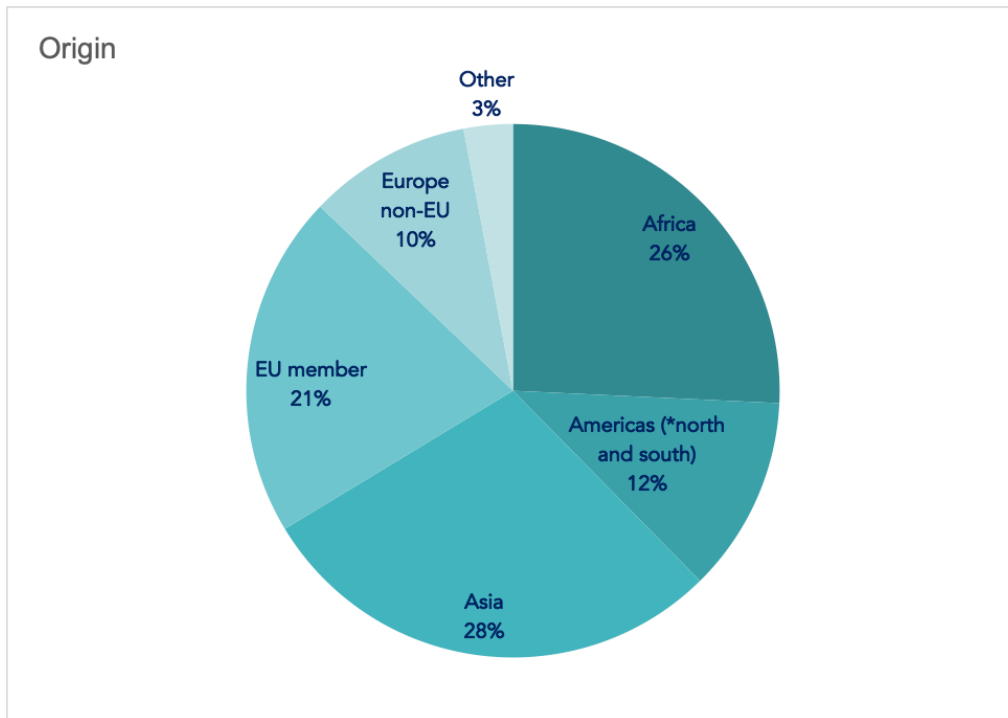
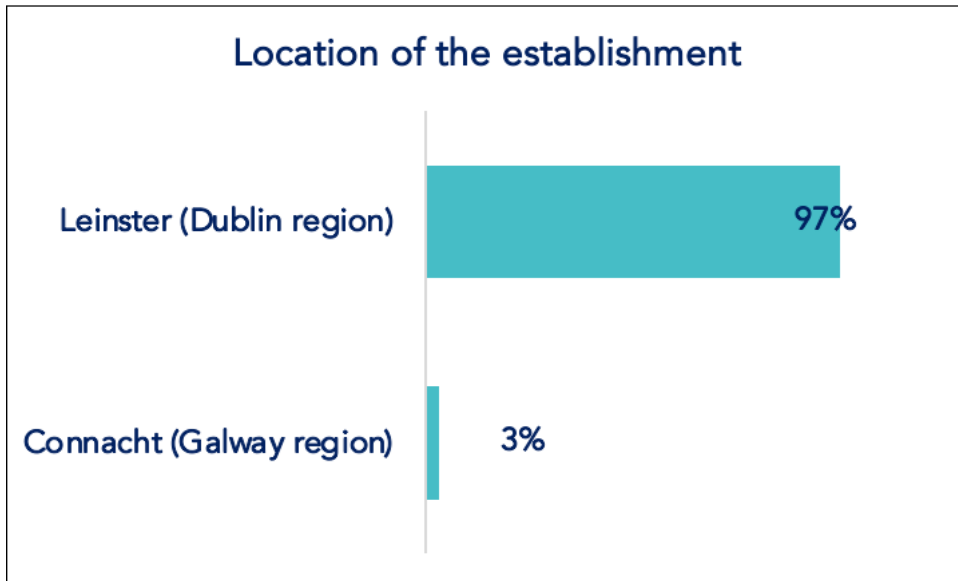


Figure 12: Survey results-origin: based on author’s research.

The tendency of finding shows a fair balance between Asia, Africa, and Europe (EU) representing respectively 28%,26% and 21% of the respondents. Americas and Europe (non-EU) are slightly behind with 12% and 10 % and then there is 3% of “other”. This can be an indicator for HEE management to not only focus on one segment as the international postgraduates in Ireland are from various backgrounds.

In the profiling section still, students were asked “In which province do you study?”. Giving them the option of the 4 provinces of Ireland and without surprise 97 % studied in the region of Dublin and 3% in the province of Connacht. Although questionnaires were sent to people from establishments all over Europe. This result confirms the HEA (higher education authority) that more than half of all international students were studying in Dublin (HEA, 2020).



The next question asked was regarding the program the students were enrolled in.

The respondents were asked, “Which program are you enrolled in?” 48 % of them answered a master’s degree and 32% other degrees such as higher diplomas, postgraduate certificates or postgraduate occasional and then 17% and 3% for postgraduate degrees and postgraduate diplomas (Figure 11). This diversity in program also allows a more in depth zoom on one specific program for further studies.

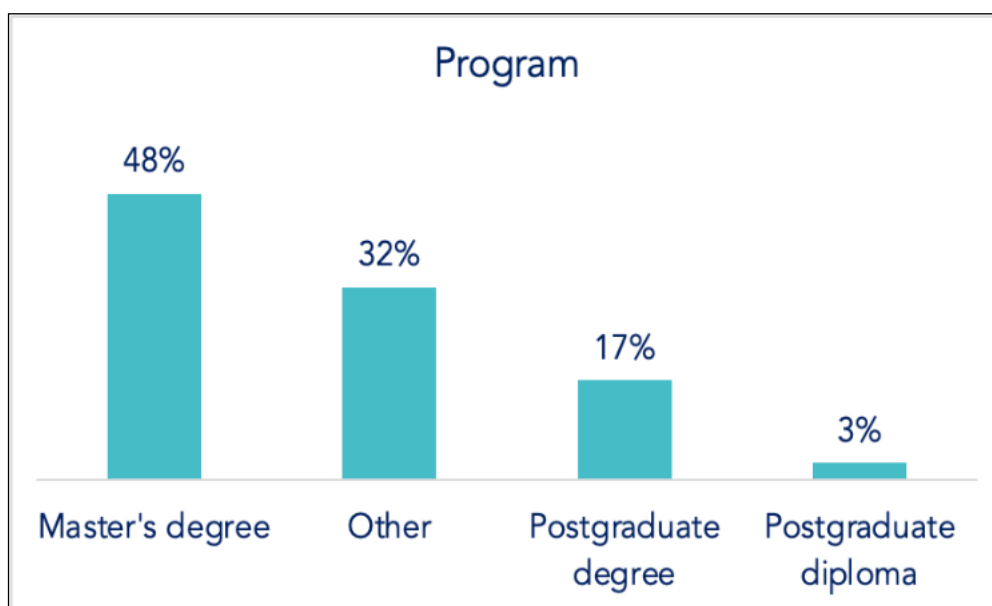


Figure 11: Survey results-program: based on author’s research.

The last question of the first section is the only open-ended question of the questionnaire. The respondents were asked “Do you know what branding is?” and if their answer was “Yes” they had to give a definition of the term.

The goal of this question was to evaluate the awareness of branding in the postgraduate international student community and to determine if the respondents were knowledgeable about the subject they were dealing with in the questionnaire.

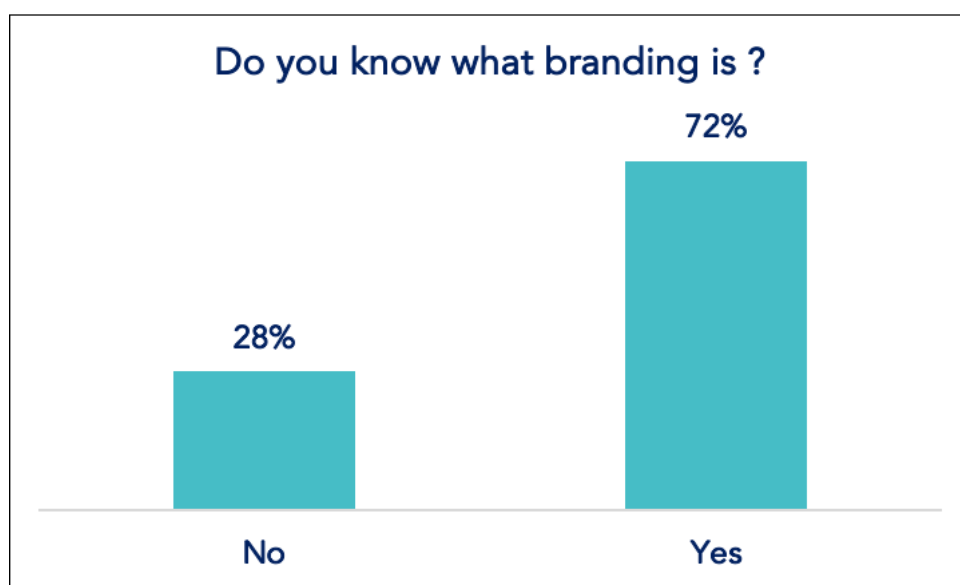


Figure 12: Survey results- knowledge of the concept: based on author’s research.

72 % answered “yes” and gave a definition of branding in their own words. The definitions will be reviewed in the discussion section.

Section 2 of the survey (Branding in HEE’s business model)

The second part of the questionnaire had for objective to determine whether “branding” is important for HEEs in the perception of the respondents. It is composed of 10 questions regarding branding symbols and social media presence.

The first question was “Would you recognize your establishment’s logo in the streets?”. The goal of the question was to determine if the respondents (postgraduate international students) were cautious or the symbols of their establishments and if branding efforts were noticed. In other terms to assess the importance of brand awareness.



Figure 13: Survey results- logo: based on author’s research.

We can see in figure 13 that 90% of the respondents would be able to recognize their establishment’s logo and only 10% won’t be able to.

In the same line, the next two questions were “does your establishment have a motto?” and “if yes, do you know it”. For the same reasons as the previous question. The motto is a distinctive element of a brand and the question’s goal was to assess whether respondents were informed of their establishment’s brand identity.

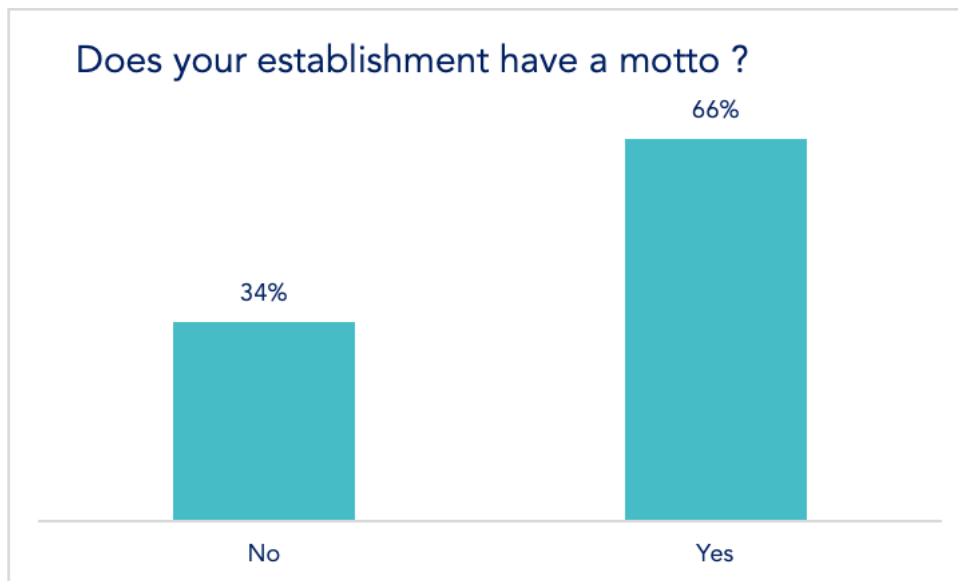


Figure 14: Survey results- motto: based on author's research.

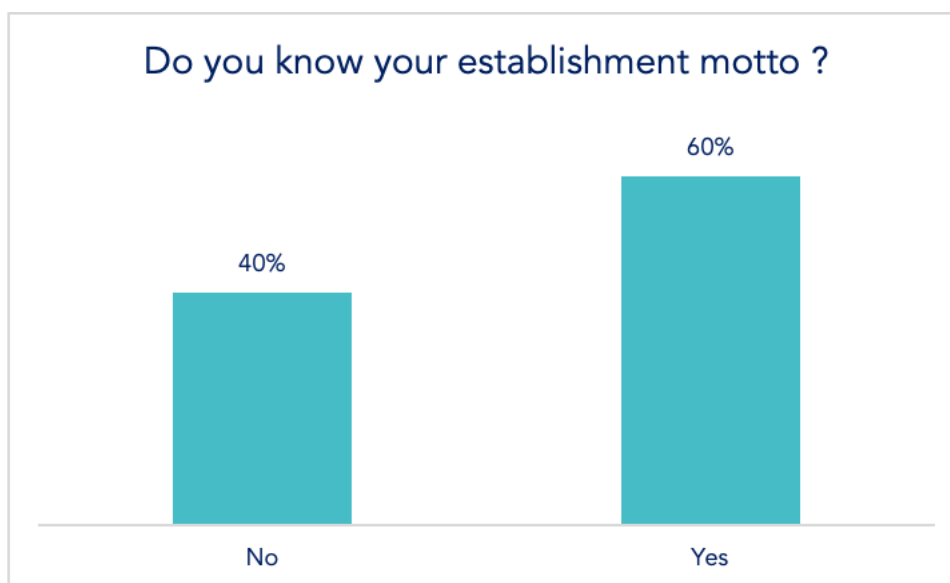


Figure 15: Survey results-knowledge of motto: based on author's research.

From the results, we can see that 66% of the respondents have an establishment with a motto (Figure 14) and of the 66%, 60% do know what the actual motto is (Figure 15). Meaning they could recognize or mention it.

The next question is a multiple-choice answer, regarding the features of an establishment. The respondents had to select from the option (Figure 16) the “Top 2 features of their

establishment” that are not curriculum related. The options given are based on the literature and decision-making factors discussed by (Lee *et al.*, 2019) and (Tsharna, 2023). The aim of this question was to establish a correlation between student’s preferences in branding features.

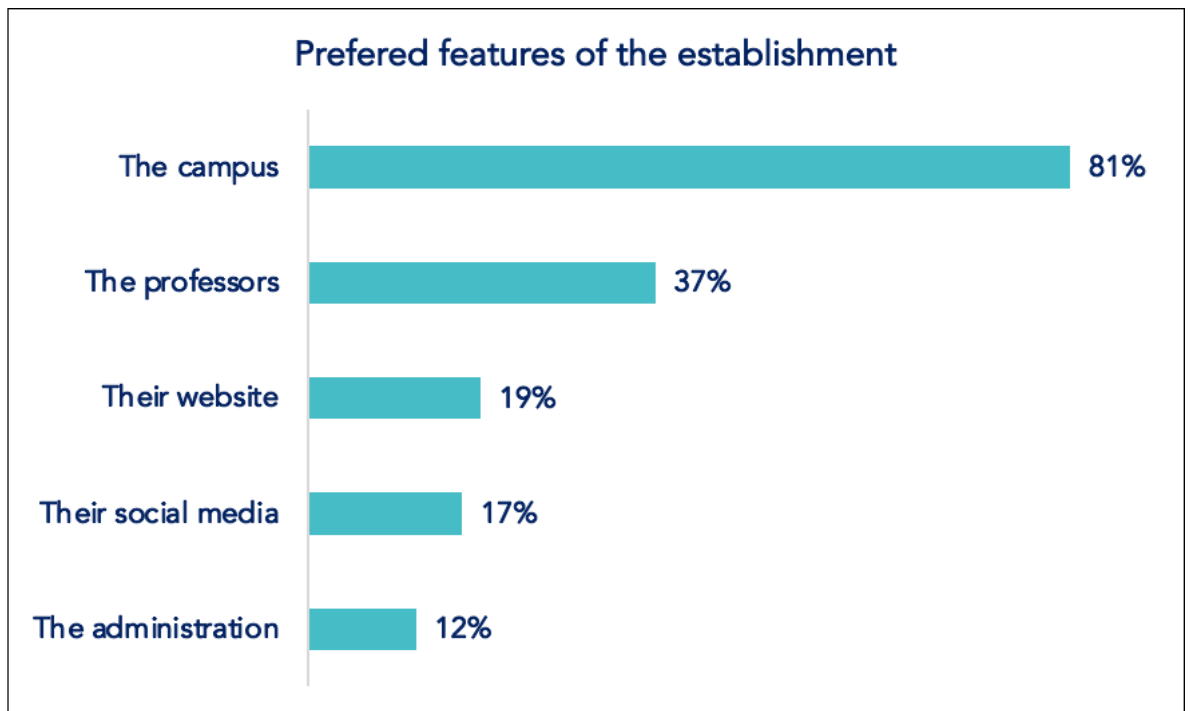


Figure 16: Survey Results-Preferred establishment features: based on author’s research.

Each of the respondents gave two answers and this graphic shows in percentage the frequency in which each criterion was selected. “The campus” is the top criterion and on each two answers its frequency is 81%. Followed by” the professors” and “The website.” With respectively 37 and 19 % and the last two criteria are “Social media” and “The administration” with 17 and 12% (Figure 16).

This question was followed by “Does your establishment advertise a lot online” and “If "yes" do you think it is a good thing? If "no", would you like them to do it more often?”. The goal here was to have the opinion of the respondents on their establishment being present online.

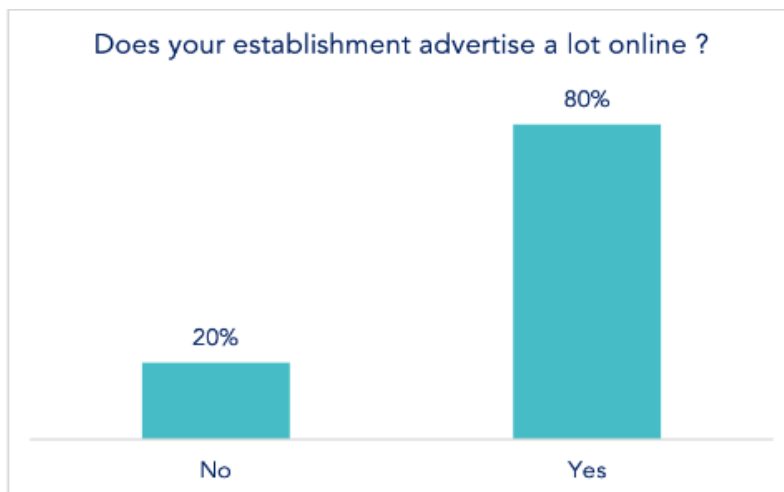


Figure 17: Survey Results-HEE’s online advertisement: based on author’s research.

If "yes" do you think it is a good thing? If "no", would you like them to do it more often?	%
No opinion on the subject	19%
No they don't but I would want them to	3%
No they don't and I don't want them to	0%
Yes they do and I think it is a good thing	75%
Yes they do, and I think it is not a good idea	4%

Figure 18: Survey Results-HEE’s online advertisement opinion: based on author’s research.

For 80 % of the respondents, their establishment advertised “a lot” online (Figure 17) and from this segment 75% thought that is a “good thing” and only 4% tough “it is not a good idea (Figure 18). For the other segment whose establishment does not advertise a lot online, no one was against the idea (0%) and “% were for it. Also, a total of 19% of respondents that were neutral and had “No opinion on the subject”.

The next question was “Do you consider social media an important tool of communication” and had as its objective to determine the importance of this tool and how

much HEE managers should take it into consideration. Four options were to choose from “strongly disagree” “disagree” “Neither agree nor disagree” “Agree” and “strongly agree”. These possibilities were given to have a more in-depth nuance than just “yes” or “no”.

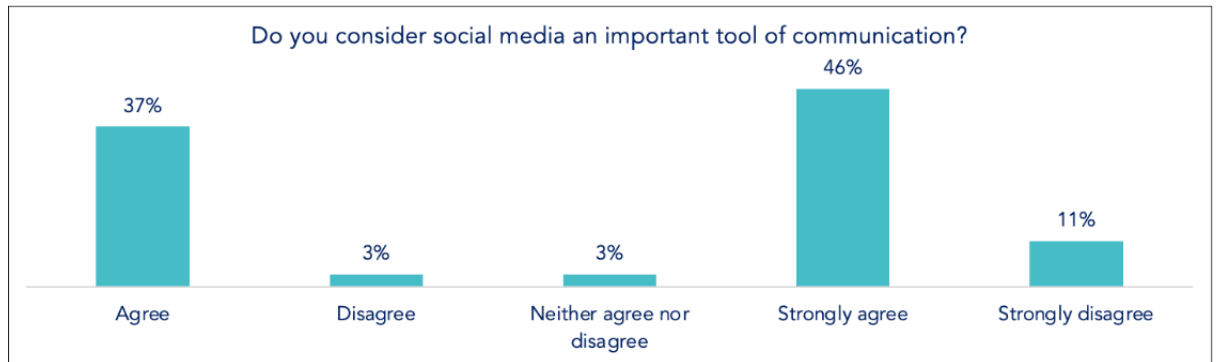


Figure 19: Survey Results-social media as a tool: based on author’s research.

It can be observed in Figure 19 the majority (46%) of the respondents strongly agree with the statement followed by 37% who “agree”. 3% have a neutral opinion and another 3% “Disagree” while the rest of the respondents (11%) strongly disagree with the statement.

Still trying to assess the importance of branding in HEE, the next question “Do you follow your current establishment on at least one of their social media?” wanted to show the importance of online presence for HEE brands.

And the underlying question to that was a justification of why they followed the establishment (Figure 21).

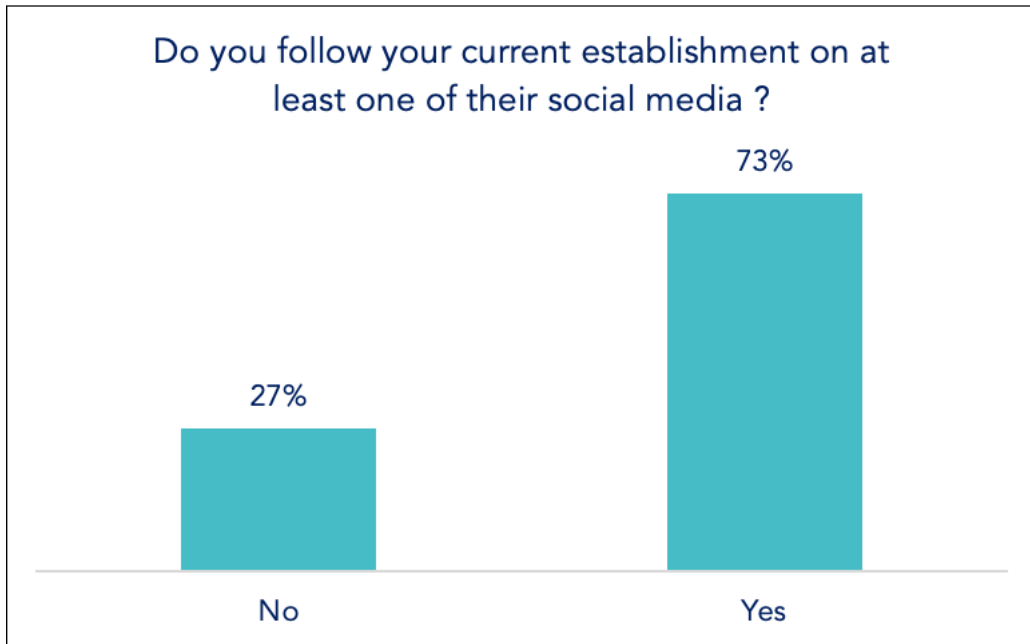


Figure 20: Survey Results-Following establishment online: based on author’s research.

Justification of following establishment social media	Percentage
Other	11%
To be a part of "school life"	4%
To get day to day information	49%
To get day to day information, Other	12%
To get day to day information, To be a part of "school life"	24%

Figure 21: Survey Results-Reasons for following establishment online: based on author’s research.

The results show that 73% of the respondents follow their current establishment on at least one of their social media against only 27% who don’t (Figure 21). And those who do follow their establishments online had 4 options for answers and could select multiple ones.

The reason that came up the most (49%) was “To get day-to-day information.”

The last question of the second section still regards social media and aims to show the opinion of students towards HEE using this channel. The question is the following “In your opinion should HEE be present on social media?”

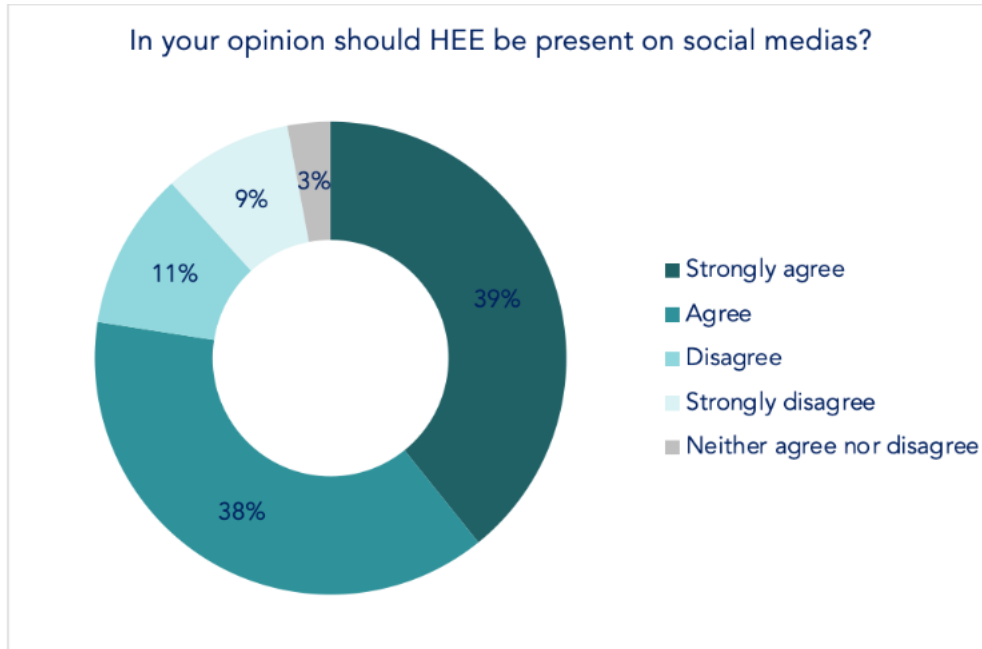


Figure 22: Survey Results-HEEs social media presence: based on author’s research.

The majority (39%) strongly agreed with the question followed slightly behind by 38% who “agree”. 3% of neutral responses then 11% of people who disagreed and 9% who “strongly disagreed”.

Section 3 of the survey (Branding and student recruitment)

The aim for this section was to verify if there is a correlation between “branding” and “student recruitment” by having the perception of postgraduate international students on the topic.

The first question asked was “Can the brand presence of an establishment be an incentive for you?”. To see if that factor could play a direct role in the decision-making process

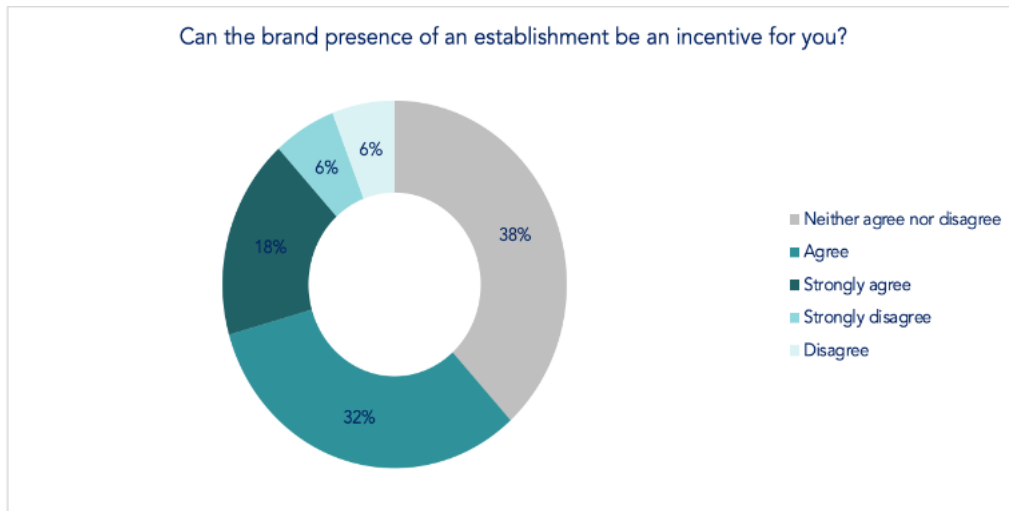


Figure 23: Survey Results-brand presence: based on author’s research

It can be observed that 18% of the respondents “strongly agreed” while 32% “agreed”. The bigger proportion (38%) had a neutral opinion while the score for “disagree” as well as “strongly disagree” is 6%.

The next question was directed to student recruitment and social media presence and the respondents were asked “Would you still have chosen your establishment if they didn't have any social media presence? ».

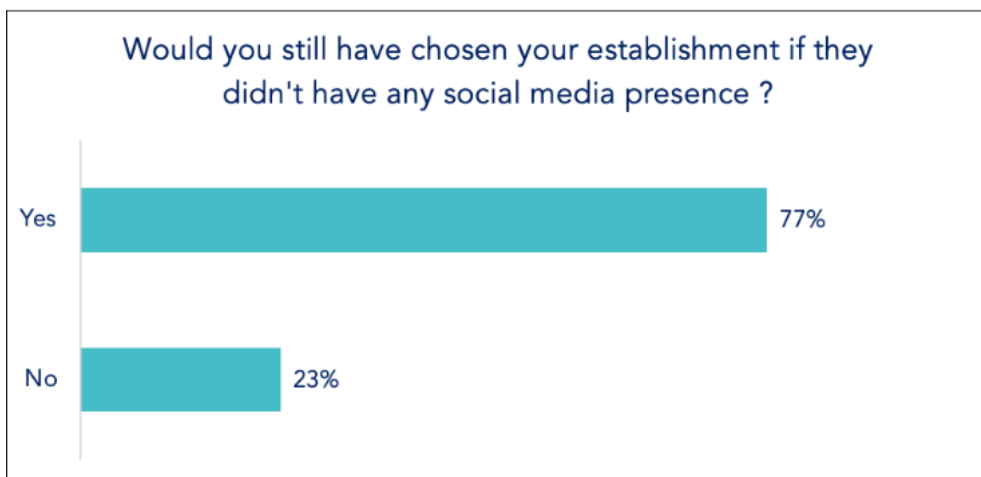


Figure 24: Survey Results-choice and social media based on author’s research.

With a proportion of 77% of “yes” and 23% of “no” for this question.

And finally, the last question was “How did you hear from your current establishment? » To direct managerial decisions (for HEE’s) in the most efficient way. Knowing which channels give students access to your institution is crucial.

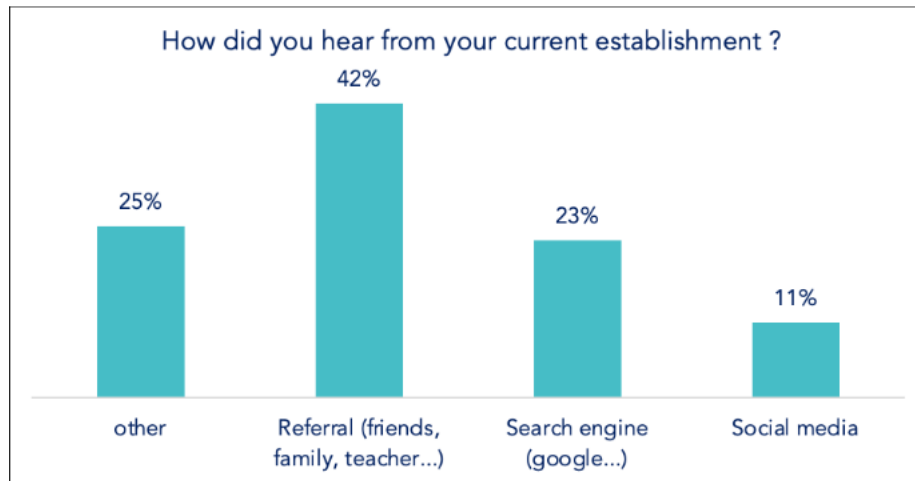


Figure 25: Survey Results-channels: based on author’s research.

The big majority of the respondents heard about the establishment they are in through referral of family and friends while 23% thanks to search engines and 11% with “social media”. It is important to note that there is a big proportion of “other” (25%).

5.3 Discussion

The aim of this research study was to measure and assess the impact and importance of branding in the higher education sector, specifically for Higher Education Establishment (HEE) management and postgraduate international students. To collect the necessary data, a survey was designed using Google Forms and distributed through various channels, including international students' Facebook groups, establishment pages, and word of mouth.

From a potential sample size of 383, a total of 102 respondents participated in the survey, as illustrated in Figure 9. The responses were collected and transferred to an Excel sheet for observation and analysis.

The analysis of the survey results was conducted based on relevant literature and two specific research objectives.

Firstly, the chapter discusses the profiles of the respondents. The surveyed population showed diversity in terms of gender, age, origin, and program enrollment. Figure 11

demonstrates a balanced representation of male (46%) and female (56%) respondents. The age range of the participants varied from 18 to over 30 years old, as depicted in Figure 10. In terms of origin, the majority of respondents hailed from Asia (28%), followed by Africa (26%), and Europe (EU) (21%), as shown in Figure 12. These findings indicate a diverse representation of international postgraduate students in Ireland and hold relevance for HEE managers who should consider cultural nuances in their communication and branding strategies.

After gathering demographic information, the respondents were asked to provide their own definition of branding. The aim was to analyze their perceptions and knowledge of the concept and compare them with the literature. Several definitions were selected, reflecting a positive sentiment towards branding. For instance, one respondent described branding as "all the elements and signals that embody a brand," aligning with the explanation provided by Amzat (2015). Another respondent stated that branding entails creating a positive perception about a person or entity, similar to the perspective shared by Sharma et al (2013). The majority of respondents provided positive definitions of branding, indicating their awareness and understanding of the concept.

Having established general information about the respondents and their perceptions, the research objectives were addressed. The first objective aimed to determine the importance of branding in the HEE's business model. The literature review emphasized the significance of branding in the higher education sector for various reasons, including competitiveness and internationalization. The survey results supported this claim, as Figure 13, 15, and 19 demonstrate that respondents were mostly aware of the concept of branding and acknowledged its importance in the HEE sector. Additionally, the recognition of branding elements such as logos and mottos by the respondents signifies the effectiveness and significance of a strong brand image and brand awareness. This finding aligns with Macdonald and Sharp's (2002) assertion that brand awareness should be a key goal of marketing communication for any firm, including HEEs. Furthermore, the importance of social media presence for HEEs and the role of brand presence were established, with 73% of respondents following their current establishment on at least one social media platform (Figure 20). This finding aligns with Rutter et al.'s (2016) observation that students, as a demographic, openly affiliate with brands by following them online. Consequently, it can be affirmed that the majority of respondents

support their establishment's brand. Hypothesis H1, stating that "branding is an important aspect of HEE's managerial decisions," can be validated based on the literature and survey responses.

The second research question aimed to determine the extent to which branding serves as a significant means of international student recruitment. The theoretical framework and literature review provided supporting evidence for branding as a decision-making factor, albeit with some authors emphasizing other factors unrelated to branding, such as career prospects, program quality, and price. The survey results reflected this mixed perspective, suggesting that branding can to some extent accompany student recruitment by influencing their decision-making process. However, it is important to note that branding alone cannot serve as a standalone student recruitment tool. Findings indicated that factors such as the campus environment, professors, and the establishment's website were considered more important in the decision-making process, as highlighted by respondents (Figure 16). Thus, H2, proposing that brand presence is a key factor in international students' decision-making, is refuted. Brand presence is one of many factors influencing the decision-making process, with branding elements like brand awareness and online presence impacting students positively.

5.4 Conclusion

The concept of "Branding" especially in the sector of higher education is complex and the perception of the population of the subject can be influenced by various factors. Some tendencies were presented in the findings and discussed in the light of the literature.

The quantitative survey had questions that primarily focused on branding in higher education, student perception and student recruitment to find out if there was a correlation between those terms.

The diverse profiles of the respondents demonstrated the representation of international postgraduate students in Ireland and highlighted the need for cultural considerations in

communication and branding strategies. The survey results supported the importance of branding in HEEs, including the recognition of branding elements and the significance of brand awareness and social media presence. However, it was also acknowledged that branding should be considered alongside other factors in student recruitment, such as the campus environment and faculty. These findings provide valuable insights for HEE managers, guiding their efforts in developing effective branding strategies and attracting international students.

6 Concluding Thoughts on the Contribution of this Research, its Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

6.1 Overview

In this part of the dissertation, a summary of the findings as well as suggestions for future studies are presented. Also, difficulties experienced during the study and limitations of the work are mentioned.

6.2 Contributions and Limitations of the Research

This research paper contributes to the literature on branding in higher education and its implications for postgraduate international students in Ireland. The study was carried out from the perspective of the students and complemented with literature on the perspective of HEEs as organisations.

Students' perceptions of branding, its importance to the sector and its implications in student recruitment were understood. This study can be used to understand the role of branding in the sector of education, and international postgraduate students' behaviour regarding decision-making HEEs in Ireland.

One of the limitations of this work is that the subject was extremely specific to a country and to a specific population in that country, therefore, finding relevant literature on branding HEE in Ireland was extremely difficult as the subject was almost not covered.

Also, an important factor is the number of respondents (202) for the quantitative data analysis which is inferior to the ideal sample size ((382). A higher number of respondents decreases the margin of error, and access to more data increases the reliability of the study.

Lastly, Retrospectively, at the end of the dissertation process the author realized a “missed” opportunity in terms of population to investigate and data gathering. Indeed, this study could have gone a deeper way in analysing the perspective of the students as well as HEE managers and conducted interviews to review their practices of branding and its impact in their opinion.

6.3 Recommendation for practices

The higher education (HE) sector is undergoing a significant shift toward a more market-oriented approach due to increasing competition within the industry. Moreover, there is a growing trend of internationalization in the sector, driven by students' increased mobility and willingness to travel outside their home countries for education. In this context, it is crucial for HEE management teams to gain a deeper understanding of students' perceptions and preferences to inform strategic decision-making.

The findings of this research underscore the importance of branding for HEEs. A significant proportion of the surveyed respondents noticed and recognized distinctive symbols of brands, such as logos and mottos. This highlights the need for HEEs to invest efforts in building strong and distinctive brands that capture students' attention and enable them to differentiate themselves from the competition.

By establishing a strong brand presence, HEEs can enhance their visibility and attractiveness to prospective students.

Additionally, the research emphasizes the significance of social media presence. The survey results indicate that having a robust presence on social media platforms is crucial for HEEs to effectively engage with prospects. A well-planned and executed social media strategy can facilitate direct communication with potential students, provide valuable information, and create a sense of community. To leverage the power of social media, HEEs may benefit from employing a community manager with expertise in the field of

education. This individual can effectively navigate social media channels, interact with prospective students, and develop engaging content tailored to their needs and interests. Furthermore, the research highlights the importance of considering cultural backgrounds and diversity in communication strategies. The postgraduate international student scene in Ireland is characterized by a diverse mix of age groups, genders, and ethnicities.

Therefore, when conveying messages and information, it is crucial for HEEs to take into account these cultural considerations and tailor their communication to resonate with different sub-groups of the student population. By adopting a culturally sensitive approach, HEEs can foster a sense of inclusivity and better connect with prospective students from various backgrounds.

In conclusion, the research findings emphasize the need for HEE management to embrace branding as a strategic tool. Building strong and distinctive brands, harnessing the power of social media, and considering cultural diversity in communication are key recommendations derived from this study. By implementing these recommendations, HEEs can enhance their competitive advantage, attract a bigger number of prospective students, and create an engaging and inclusive educational environment.

Regenerate response

6.4 Recommendation for future research

This study deals exclusively with postgraduate international students in Ireland and their perception towards branding in higher education collected through a quantitative survey.

Further studies should investigate the perception of HEE management by collecting data on them to have a truly dual prospective study. And to a certain extent also include the topic of HR in literature and in the data collection process to analyse in depth the correlation of branding with student recruitment.

Also, various methods of data collection should be used, to complement the survey, structured interviews and focus groups can be added to get a deeper analysis of the findings.

6.5 Conclusion and Reflections

In conclusion, this study was conducted with the aim of exploring the concept of branding in higher education, assessing its importance, and understanding postgraduate international students' perceptions of branding in the context of Ireland. The research objectives were addressed, providing valuable insights into the topic.

However, it is important to acknowledge the challenges encountered during data collection. Obtaining data from the target population proved to be challenging, as there is often a lack of clear separation between undergraduate and postgraduate international student groups on social media platforms and institution pages. Additionally, a significant number of individuals who received the survey chose not to participate, resulting in a smaller sample size. These limitations should be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings of this study.

To obtain more robust and comprehensive results, future research should consider conducting a more in-depth investigation using diverse perspectives. Exploring the topic from various angles, such as incorporating the viewpoints of academic staff, alumni, and industry professionals, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of branding in higher education. Additionally, employing mixed methods research designs that combine qualitative and quantitative approaches can offer deeper insights into the topic. Despite these limitations, the findings of this study suggest a positive inclination of postgraduate international students towards the role of branding in higher education. It is evident that branding holds significance in the eyes of these students, as they recognized and associated themselves with distinct brand elements. This emphasizes the importance for higher education establishments to invest in building strong and recognizable brands that can effectively attract and engage prospective students.

In conclusion, this research contributes to the existing literature on branding in higher education, specifically focusing on postgraduate international students in Ireland. It sheds light on the importance of branding and provides recommendations for HEE management, including the need to establish distinctive brands, maintain a strong social media presence, and consider cultural diversity in communication strategies. By

implementing these recommendations, HEEs can enhance their competitive edge and effectively connect with a diverse range of prospective students.

In summary, this study adds to the understanding of branding in higher education and its impact on postgraduate international students. However, further research is warranted to overcome the limitations identified in this study and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. By continuing to explore and refine our understanding of branding in higher education, institutions can better meet the needs and expectations of postgraduate international students, contributing to their overall educational experience and success.

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Appendices

Appendix A- Quantitative Survey Questionnaire

*Note that the questionnaire was conceived on a French device, therefore some indications are in French but do not impact the comprehension of the questionnaire.

Branding in higher education: The case of post-graduate international students in Ireland

I am a student of Master of Science in Global Brand Management at Griffith College Dublin. I am conducting this research for my dissertation. The purpose of this research is to measure the importance of branding in higher education for Post-graduate International students in Ireland.

The survey is anonymous, and all identifiable information will be used solely be used for the purpose of this study.

Please answer as truthfully and accurately as possible.

**Those under the age of 18 are not eligible to complete the survey.*

You have the right to withdraw; you can send an e-mail to "minadjeynebelle.konate@student.griffith.ie" in case you wish to withdraw, have any questions or want copies of the results.

Thank you so much for your time and participation.

* Indique une question obligatoire

1. What is your age range? *

Une seule réponse possible.

- 18-25
- 26-30
- 31+
- Option 4

2. What is your gender? *

Une seule réponse possible.

- Female
- Male
- Other

3. Where are you from ? *

Une seule réponse possible.

- Americas (*north and south)
- Africa
- Asia
- Europe non-EU
- EU member
- Ocenia
- Other
- Autre : _____

4. In which province do you study ?

Une seule réponse possible.

- Connacht (Galway region)
- Leinster (Dublin region)
- Munster (Cork region)
- Ulster (Linns region)
- Autre : _____

5. Which program are you enrolled in ? *

Une seule réponse possible.

- Postgraduate diploma
- Postgraduate degree
- Master's degree
- Phd
- Other

6. Do you know what branding is? *

Une seule réponse possible.

- Yes
- No

7. If yes, give a definition in your own words

8. Would you recognize your establishment's (the place you study at) logo in the streets? *

Une seule réponse possible.

- Yes
- No

9. Does your establishment have a motto? *

Une seule réponse possible.

- Yes
- No

10. If yes, do you know it ?

Une seule réponse possible.

- Yes
- No

11. What are the top 2 features of your establishment (not curriculum related)? *

Plusieurs réponses possibles.

- The campus
- The administration
- The professors
- Their website
- Their social media
- Other

12. Does your establishment advertise a lot online ? *

Une seule réponse possible.

- Yes
- No

13. If "yes" do you think it is a good thing? If "no", would you like them to do it more often? *

Une seule réponse possible.

- Yes they do and I think it is a good thing
- Yes they do, and I think it is not a good idea
- No opinion on the subject
- No they don't but I would want them to
- No they don't and I don't want them to
- Autre : _____

14. Do you consider social media an important tool of communication? *

Une seule réponse possible.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

15. Do you follow your current establishment on at least one of their social media ? *

Une seule réponse possible.

Yes

No

16. If yes, why ?

Plusieurs réponses possibles.

To get day to day information

To be a part of "school life"

Other

17. In your opinion should HEE (higher education establishments) be present on social medias? *

Une seule réponse possible.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neither agree nor disagree

Agree

Strongly agree

18. Can the brand presence of an establishment be an incentive for you? *

Une seule réponse possible.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

19. Would you still have chosen your establishment if they didn't have any social media presence ? *

Une seule réponse possible.

- Yes
- No

20. How did you hear from your current establishment ?

Une seule réponse possible.

- Search engine (google...)
- Social media
- Referral (friends, family, teacher...)
- TV
- other

