



LINKEDIN ADVERTISING IN THE EDUCATION SECTOR Analysis of the Main Spanish Universities' Advertising Campaigns on this Social Network

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ABSTRACT

The use of social media advertising allows for a significant increase in reach, the ability to target audiences with precision, direct interaction, and enhanced capabilities for measurement and data analysis. Ads on LinkedIn are designed to reach a relevant audience with an interest in knowledge, academia, job opportunities, and collaborations. This research analyses the advertising actions carried out on LinkedIn by Spanish universities with the largest number of students in Spain. The findings of this study provide insights into the innovations and trends that the main educational brands are adopting in online advertising.

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1. Introduction

The utilisation of social media advertising facilitates the attainment of a considerable degree of reach, the execution of precise targeting, the facilitation of direct interaction and the enhancement of measurement and data analysis capabilities. LinkedIn Ads facilitate the delivery of advertisements to a relevant audience with an affinity for knowledge, academia, job opportunities and collaborations. LinkedIn Ads allows for the targeting of advertisements based on a number of specific criteria, including the user's level of education and training, professional interests, job title and position, industry and sector, job function and seniority, and the size of the company the user works for. LinkedIn currently boasts over one billion members in 200 countries, 60 registered companies, and over 133,000 schools registered on its platform (LinkedIn, n.d.).

In Spain, digital advertising has for the fourth consecutive year been the primary recipient of investment volume within the context of controlled media. In conclusion, the data indicates a growth of 7.6% in 2022 in comparison to the previous year. A 10.1% increase was observed in social media advertising in 2022 compared to the previous year (Infoadex, 2023).

1.1. Improving Learner Satisfaction Through Social Media Marketing Activities

The utilisation of social media marketing has become a pivotal strategy for engaging with the emerging digital-native cohort, namely Generation Z, as they commence their tertiary education. It is evident that social media marketing activities exert a discernible influence on the brand value of an educational institution, particularly in terms of prospective students' behavioural engagement. It is of the utmost importance that social media content and posts prioritise awareness of the institution and project a favourable image of it. As dimensions of brand equity, brand image and brand awareness play an essential mediating role in social media marketing activities and users' behavioural engagement (Ruangkanjanases et al., 2022). The implementation of social media marketing strategies has been demonstrated to exert a favourable and substantial influence on the perceived value of the student demographic. The efficacy of a university's social media marketing strategy is reflected in the perceived value of higher education among prospective students. Nevertheless, although social media marketing has a positive influence, it is not a sufficient factor in itself in influencing students' decisions when choosing higher education institutions (Auliarahman and Sumad, 2020). The level of student satisfaction and the perceived quality of the education provided are of significant interest to all stakeholders, including students, higher education institutions and policymakers. It can be posited that social media marketing activities may play a pivotal role in enhancing the perceived quality of education among students, which in turn may lead to an improvement in their satisfaction. While higher education institutions' social media marketing activities do not have a direct effect on student satisfaction, they do have a direct effect on the perceived quality of education (Demircioglu et al., 2021).

The utilisation of social platforms is of paramount importance for the attraction of prospective students, as well as for the communication with and retention of current students. It is common practice for universities to utilise social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube as a means of communicating with their student population and promoting their academic programmes. The exclusive use of university websites is not as effective as a standalone strategy. However, when coupled with the strategic integration of social media, it can prove to be an effective tool for attracting prospective students, as evidenced by Salem (2020).

In order to compete for qualified students, it is essential for the university to gain an understanding of the process of choosing candidates, as well as the sources of information used. As the use of technology by teenagers becomes more prevalent, prospective students are increasingly turning to the Internet and social networks as sources of information. The role of social networks in the decision-making process of the technology-savvy millennial generation is significant. Nevertheless, the most valuable information for this demographic is information pertaining to student life and university activities. Conversely, course offerings, enrolment, scholarships, admission deadlines and career services are perceived as less valuable information, which they can find in printed materials or on websites (Kusumawati, 2018).

1.2. The Use of Social Media for the Purpose of Student Recruitment

It is evident that prospective students continue to rely on conventional forms of marketing, such as institutional websites and printed materials. However, there is a growing recognition of the pivotal role that social media plays in their decision-making process. It is not sufficient for universities to merely have a social media presence; rather, they must engage with these platforms in a meaningful and strategic manner. It is imperative that social media be incorporated into integrated marketing plans (Benedict et al., 2019). The innovative functions of social media present a challenge for those responsible for managing higher education institutions, who may lack experience in this area. Universities around the globe employ social media as an outreach platform for their marketing and recruitment initiatives. While the results are not entirely consistent across regions, it is evident that a significant proportion of universities in Africa, Asia, and Europe have employed Facebook as a recruitment platform, with figures ranging from 77% to 94%. The use of Facebook and LinkedIn is prevalent across all geographic locations, whereas the usage of platforms such as Twitter and YouTube exhibits inconsistency (Kuzma & Wright, 2013). In the context of the ongoing pandemic, higher education institutions are increasingly turning to online platforms to disseminate information about their services. This shift is driven by concerns about the potential loss of control over reputation and the constrained budgetary resources previously allocated to these efforts. Universities typically utilise social media for the purpose of communicating with their current and prospective student bodies, as opposed to showcasing their activities as research and teaching centres (Ismail, 2021). In certain contexts where the purchase of technological equipment is more costly, digital marketing media in the private university sector similarly aim to build customer loyalty through interactive communication, updating information of interest and strengthening the institution's image. This is done with the aim of positioning the university in the market and making prospective students feel a greater affinity with the university. However, universities are constrained in these contexts to the utilisation of electronic banners on web pages and are disinclined to promote the deployment of alternative complementary tools such as email marketing or interactive blogs, largely due to the prevailing economic challenges (Sosa Tota and Useche Aguirre, 2017).

In the European context, private universities adopt a more proactive approach to advertising than their public counterparts. This is due to the fact that public universities are not constrained by the same limitations as their private counterparts in terms of attracting students, given that they enjoy a higher level of recognition among prospective users. There is a positive correlation between the level of advertising activity and the number of applications received by private universities. The advertising activities of these universities are primarily oriented towards generating interest in their educational programmes, as opposed to increasing brand recognition. Furthermore, a seasonal pattern in advertising strategies has been identified, coinciding with the pre-enrolment period (Gunina et al., 2019). In the context of Meta Ads, the advertising activity of Spanish private universities is primarily oriented towards eliciting interest and requests for information about their academic programmes, with relatively limited references to innovation and research. The universities with the highest number of students enrolled in undergraduate and graduate studies are the most prolific users of Facebook Ads and Instagram Ads solutions. In pursuing this strategy for attracting students, advertisements tend to present academic degrees, university logos/branding, and students as central elements. They are presented in a simple image format and aimed at specific landing pages of the educational programmes or native forms integrated into these social networks (Abuín Vences and García Rosales, 2022).

Effective advertisements are characterised by a higher volume of clicks, impressions and reach, which exponentially increases the potential for attracting students to various training programmes. Such advertisements facilitate interactions with the content, thereby encouraging prospective students to engage with the organisation's main website as the intended destination for clicks. The most efficient advertisements are those that incur higher costs in absolute terms, yet achieve higher viewability, reach, and share results in relative terms. Therefore, organisations that do not make a minimum investment in social media advertising are failing to exploit the full potential of these platforms for information management, thereby limiting their visibility and reducing their chances of attracting new users and potential customers. However, digital advertisements are rendered ineffective when observed by non-human bots, resulting in the generation of fraudulent impressions or clicks. It is therefore evident that

click-through rates (CTR) are not a reliable indicator of engagement or effectiveness (Cordero-Gutiérrez and Lahuerta-Otero, 2020). In addition, universities must consider other metrics, such as cost per lead (CPL), cost per request for information about their educational programmes, and cost per student acquisition (CPA).

2. Methodology

This work represents a continuation of the analysis previously carried out by Abuín Vences and García Rosales (2022) on the use of Meta Ads in higher education. This study examines the utilisation of LinkedIn as an advertising platform by the Spanish universities with the highest student enrolment. This research is based on an explanatory or verifying content analysis, which has enabled inferences to be drawn regarding the dissemination, operation, and content of the publications made on these platforms. A cross-sectional content analysis was conducted to enable a comparison of the advertising publications made from the corporate accounts of the main Spanish universities.

The latest data from the Ministry of Universities (2023) indicates that the total number of students enrolled in the Spanish University System (SUE) during the 2022-2023 academic year was 1,722,247. The majority of students enrolled in the Spanish University System (SUE) were pursuing undergraduate studies (78.6%), while 16.0% were enrolled in master's programs and 5.4% in doctoral programs. The sample for this study comprises advertisements published on the professional networking platform LinkedIn, linked to the official accounts of the ten public universities and the ten private Spanish universities with the highest number of students enrolled in undergraduate and graduate studies, the first levels of university studies. The sample is thus constituted by the publications made from the accounts of the following public universities: The universities included in the sample are the National University of Distance Education (Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia. UNED), the Complutense University of Madrid (Universidad Complutense de Madrid. UCM), the University of Seville (Universidad de Sevilla. US), the University of Granada (Universidad de Granada. UGR), the University of Barcelona (Universitat de Barcelona. UB), the King Juan Carlos University (Universidad Rey Juan Carlos. URJC), the University of Valencia (Universitat de València. UV), the University of the Basque Country (Universidad del País Vasco. UPV), and the University of Malaga (Universidad de Málaga. UMA), as well as the autonomous University of Barcelona (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. UAB). Additionally, the sample comprises the publications disseminated from the accounts of the following private universities: Additionally, the following private universities were included in the sample: Open University of Catalonia (Universitat Oberta de Catalunya. UOC), International University of La Rioja (Universidad Internacional de La Rioja. UNIR), Ramon Llull University (Universitat Ramon Llull. URL), European University of Madrid (Universidad Europea de Madrid. UE), and Saint Anthony Catholic University of Murcia (Universidad Católica San Antonio de Murcia. UCAM). Additionally, the sample includes the publications disseminated from the accounts of the following private universities: Francisco de Vitoria University (Universidad Francisco de Vitoria. UFV), Catholic University of Valencia Saint Vicent Martyr (Universidad Católica de Valencia San Vicente Mártir. UCV), University of Navarra (Universidad de Navarra. UNAV), CEU Cardenal Herrera University (Universidad CEU Cardenal Herrera. CEU-UCH) and University of Deusto (Universidad de Deusto. UD). The number of students from affiliated centres has not been included in the sample, as each university follows its own recruitment strategy.

Table 1. Spanish public and private universities with the largest number of students

	Character	Number of pupils
National University of Distance Education	Public	125.527
Complutense University of Madrid	Public	48.008
University of Seville	Public	47.930
University of Granada	Public	41.897
University of Barcelona	Public	39.302
King Juan Carlos University	Public	37.234
University of Valencia	Public	35.789
University of the Basque Country	Public	34.994
University of Malaga	Public	29.686

	Character	Number of pupils
Autonomous University of Barcelona	Public	27.428
Open University of Catalonia	Private	51.866
International University of La Rioja	Private	24.940
Ramon Llull University	Private	13.290
European University of Madrid	Private	12.136
Saint Anthony Catholic University of Murcia	Private	11.979
Francisco de Vitoria University	Private	10.779
Catholic University of Valencia Saint Vicent Martyr	Private	10.044
University of Navarra	Private	9.506
CEU Cardenal Herrera University	Private	9.138
University of Deusto	Private	8.513

Source: Prepared by the authors, based on data from the Ministry of Universities (2023).

This study is concerned with the analysis of paid posts on the professional networking platform LinkedIn, published between 1 June 2023 and 31 December 2023. The former date marks the commencement of LinkedIn's data collection on advertisements, while the latter date represents the period during which the analysis was conducted. The analysis was conducted on a total of 395 advertisements.

This paper presents an analysis of the formats and orientation of advertisements in circulation on the days indicated above, the copies and images used, and the estimated number of impressions of the publications. Furthermore, in accordance with the methodology proposed by Papadimitriou and Blanco Ramírez (2015), the categories of "education and research", "education and innovation", "research and innovation" and "education, research and innovation" were considered for the classification of the advertisements. Additionally, the core elements of the images and content of the advertising texts were analysed, including the presence of students, academic programmes, careers, logos or brands, global reach, faculty and other academic staff. In order to conduct this research, we utilised LinkedIn's ad library, which encompasses fundamental details regarding active advertisements on the platform, including the advertiser, format and content. In the case of advertisements targeting the EU, the library also includes data on impressions, targeting and the dates of each advertisement's activity.

3. Objectives

The principal objective of this study is to analyse the advertising campaigns conducted via LinkedIn Ads by the most prominent university institutions in Spain with the highest number of enrolled students. Furthermore, the following specific objectives are pursued within the context of this research project:

- To ascertain whether there are discernible discrepancies in the content and format of advertisements employed by public and private university institutions.
- To examine whether there is a positive correlation between social media advertising activities and the number of enrolments at the selected universities.

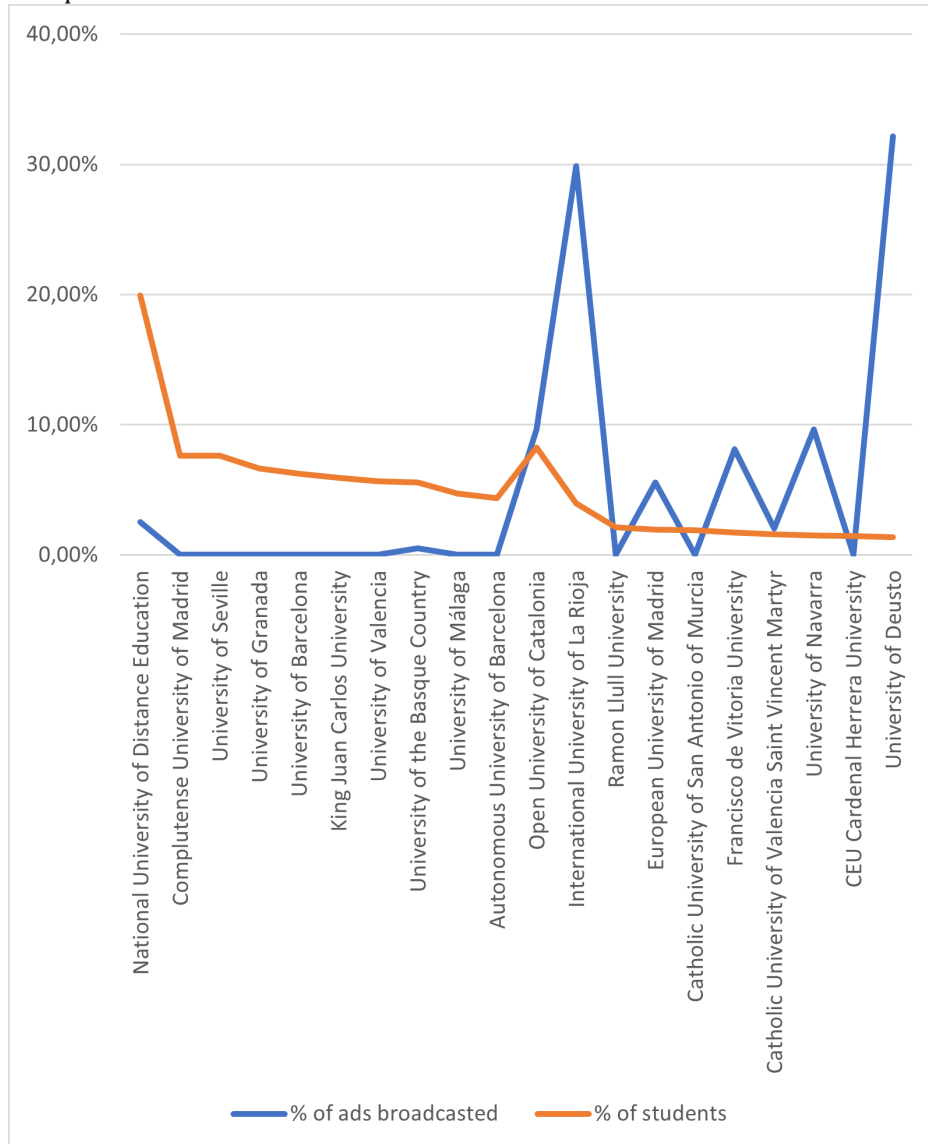
4. Results and Discussion

A total of 395 LinkedIn advertisements were published by the universities under analysis between 1 June 2023 and the end of the year. Of the total number of postings, 96.96% (383) were from private universities, while 3.04% (12) were from public universities.

During the specified period, the University of Deusto disseminated 32.15% (127) of the advertisements analysed, the International University of La Rioja 29.87% (118), the Open University of Catalonia and the University of Navarra 9.62% (38 each), and the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria 8. A further 10% (32) were the European University of Madrid, 5.57% (22) the National University of Distance Education, 2.53% (10) the Catholic University of Saint Vincent Martyr, and 2.03% (8) the University of the Basque Country. Conversely, the remaining universities analysed did not disseminate any advertisements

on the LinkedIn advertising platform during the same period: the Complutense University of Madrid, the University of Seville, the University of Granada, the University of Barcelona, the King Juan Carlos University, the University of Valencia, the University of Málaga, the Autonomous University of Barcelona, the Ramon Llull University, the Catholic University of Saint Anthony of Murcia and the CEU Cardenal Herrera University.

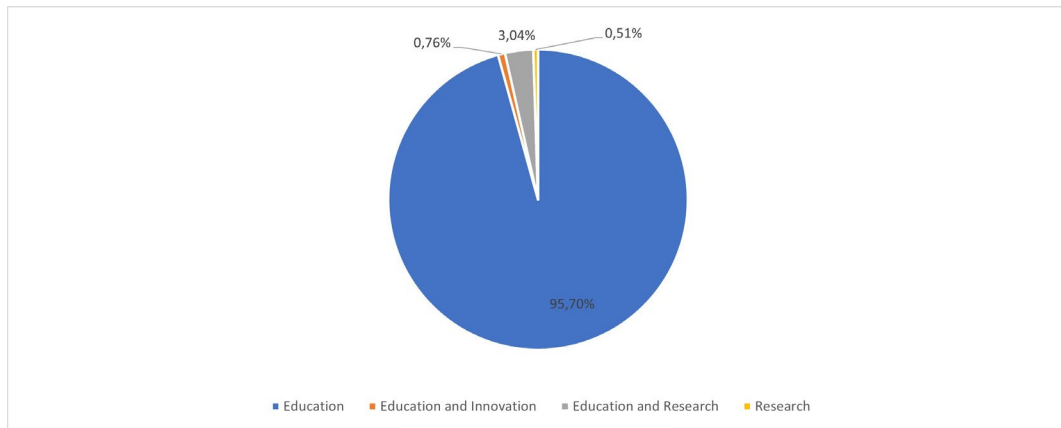
Graph 1. Comparison between the number of students and the number of advertisements published.



Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

The data obtained does not allow for the assertion that the number of publications made is proportional to the number of students enrolled. Notwithstanding, the two private universities with the largest number of students enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, the Open University of Catalonia and the International University of La Rioja, are among those that have engaged in the greatest degree of publicity through advertisements on LinkedIn. In the case of public universities, this trend is more clearly observable. Among the public universities included in this study, the National University of Distance Education had the largest number of students enrolled in these academic levels. It also had the highest number of paid advertisements on the social network LinkedIn. The University of Deusto, a private institution with the lowest number of students enrolled at these levels, demonstrated the greatest level of activity on the advertising platform.

Figure 2. Categories of advertisements published



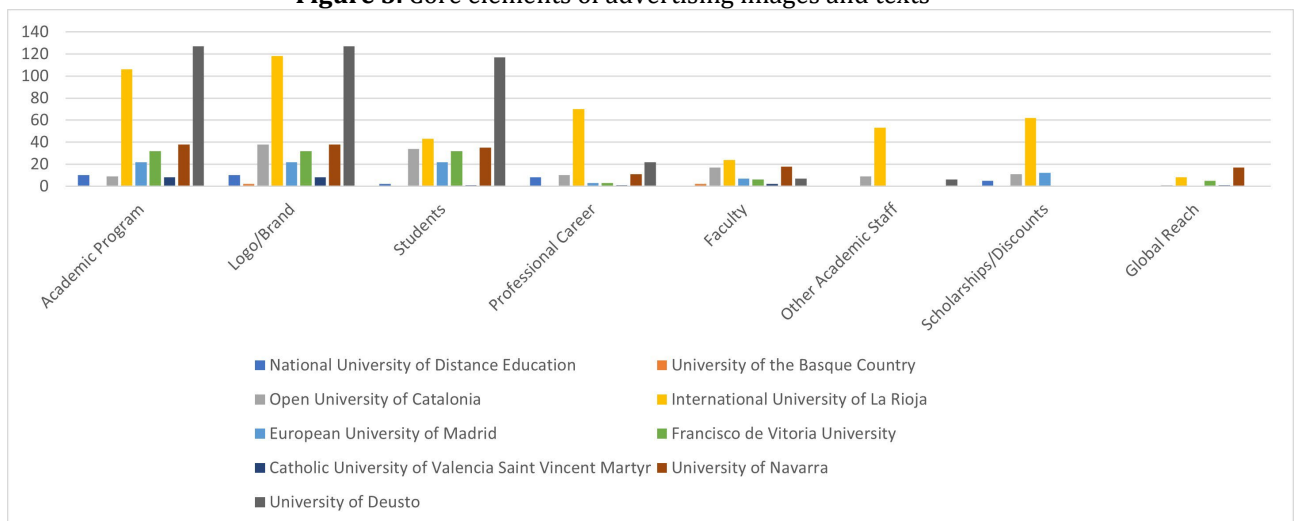
Source: Own elaboration, 2024

The majority of published material from universities focused on the dissemination of academic information without any reference to research or innovation. The category of education was identified in 99.49% (393) of the advertisements that were subjected to analysis. In 3.04% (12) of cases, the advertisements were accompanied by references to research, while in 0.76% (3) of instances, they made mention of innovation. A mere 0.51% (2) of the publications under examination made exclusive reference to the research category.

The University of the Basque Country, the Open University of Catalonia and the University of Navarra were the only institutions to make any reference to research, with mentions of this category in 100% (2), 23.68% (9) and 7.89% (3) of their messages, respectively. In the case of the University of the Basque Country, mention was made of this category in publications that highlighted the institution as the Spanish public university with the lowest verified carbon footprint per person. At the Open University of Catalonia, the term was referenced in job advertisements pertaining to research positions, whereas at the University of Navarra, it was mentioned in advertisements concerning training programmes that provide access to doctoral studies.

The category of innovation was referenced in only two of the advertisements published by the University of Navarra and one by the National University of Distance Education. These messages pertained to education and were concerned with teaching innovation.

Figure 3. Core elements of advertising images and texts



Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

The university logo/brand, the academic programme and the students were the most frequently occurring central elements in the advertising images and texts. The logo/brand was utilised in all instances (395), the academic programme in 89.11% (352) of cases, the students in 72.41% (286) of

cases, and the career in 32.41% (128) of cases. The aforementioned four elements were employed for the purposes of advertising the academic offer, reinforcing and increasing brand awareness, and projecting an image of the pupils as students at the university or future qualified professionals.

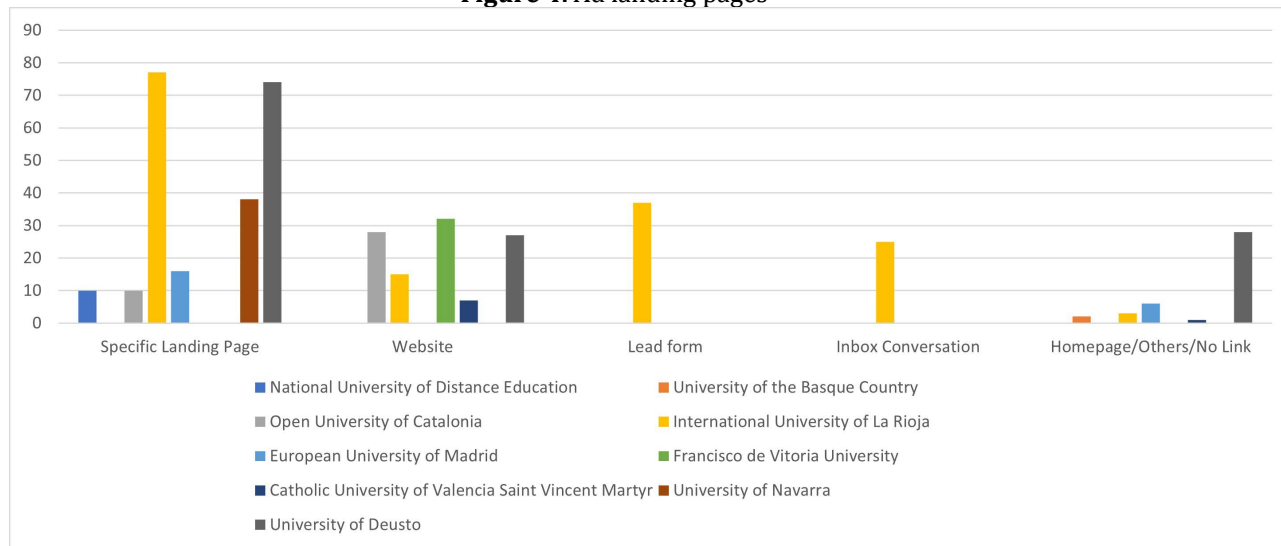
In addition to the aforementioned resources, the National University of Distance Education, the European University of Madrid, the International University of La Rioja and the Open University of Catalonia included information regarding financial assistance and/or price reductions in their advertisements. This was the case in 54.55% (12) of their publications, 52.54% (62) of their publications, 50.00% (5) of their publications, and 28.95% (11) of their publications, respectively.

In proportion to the number of advertisements published, the University of the Basque Country, the University of Navarra, the Open University of Catalonia and the European University of Madrid were the most likely to make references to their teaching staff. This was the case in 100% (2), 47.37% (18), 44.74% (17) and 31.82% (7) of their advertisements, respectively.

The International University of La Rioja, the Open University of Catalonia and the University of Deusto referred to other academic staff in order to highlight the benefits of studying at their respective universities and to establish a discourse aimed at attracting students. This element was employed in 44.92% (53) of the advertisements, 23.68% (9) of which made use of it, and in 4.72% (6) of the advertisements. In particular, the International University of La Rioja employed this resource in approximately half of its publications to capture the attention of potential students with personalised messages initiated by figures such as Eva Asensio, Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Business and Communication and Director of Academic Innovation, and Lola Arranz, Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Law of this institution.

The University of Navarra, the Francisco de Vitoria University and the Catholic University of Valencia Saint Vicent Martyr were the institutions that most frequently employed the use of global reach in their messages. This element was present in 44.74% (17), 15.63% (5) and 12.50% (1) of the publications produced by these institutions, respectively. This resource was employed primarily to attest to the legitimacy and global scope of the degrees under consideration.

Figure 4. Ad landing pages



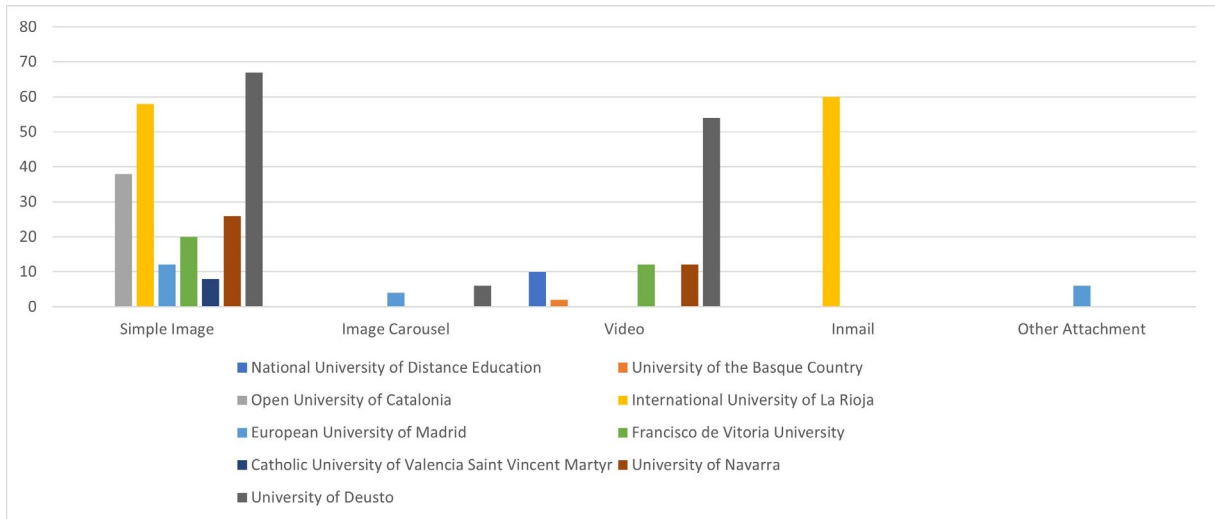
Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

Most of the advertisements published directed readers to a specific landing page, which provided information about the advertised training programme or details of online and face-to-face information sessions about the university's academic offer. A total of 56.96% (225) of the advertisements analysed were directed to a landing page. Nevertheless, 27.59% (109) of the publications directed the user directly to a web page with a top menu and navigation access to other sections of the website. This is less effective for conversion than a landing page, as it presents a lack of clear direction. Additionally, these pages seek to attract prospective students through the integration of forms. A mere 9.37% (37) of the advertisements exhibited a native form on this social network, while 6.33% (25) displayed an inbox conversation within the platform itself. The remaining paid advertisements directed users to the

university's homepage, provided information about the training programmes, or lacked a link altogether.

The most common destination for advertisements from the National University of Distance Education, the International University of La Rioja, the European University of Madrid, the University of Navarra and the University of Deusto is a targeted landing page. The Open University of Catalonia, the Francisco de Vitoria University and the Catholic University of Valencia Saint Vincent Martyr tend to direct their advertisements to websites. In the case of the University of the Basque Country, all advertisements direct users to the institution's homepage.

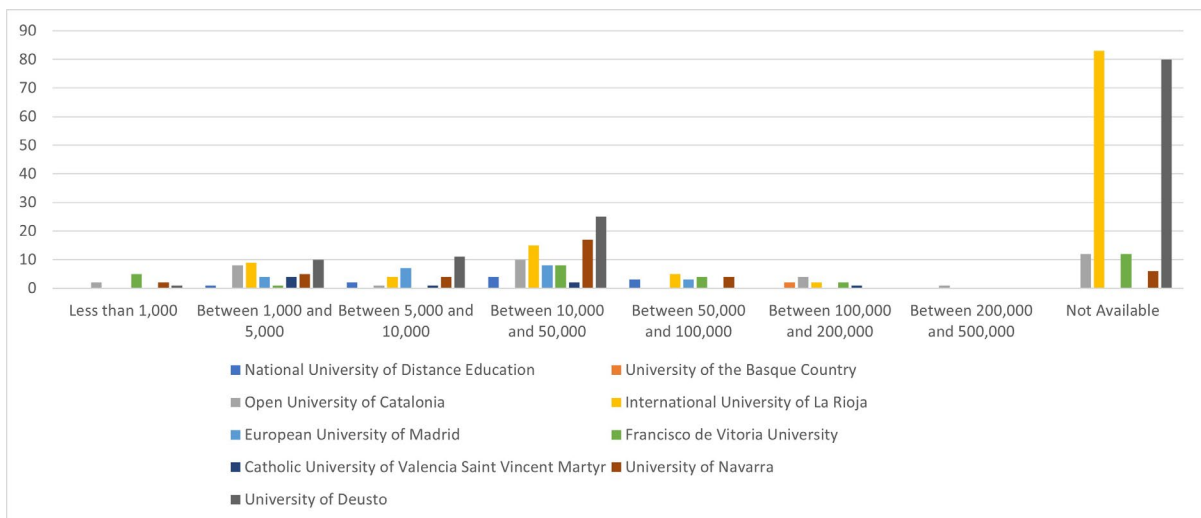
Figure 5. Format of advertisements



Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

The most prevalent format employed by academic institutions was the single image advertisement, with video representing the next most common. Most paid publications (57.97%, 229) employed a simple image format, while 22.78% (90) featured a video. The image carousel, employed in 2.53% (10) of the advertisements, and other attachments presented as dossiers in 1.52% (6) were observed to have minimal prevalence. The simple image format was the most prevalent in the paid advertisements of the universities under analysis, with the exception of the International University of La Rioja, which employed the direct message/Inmail to users of the social network. This approach was taken in order to facilitate dialogue between the institution's academic and teaching staff and potential students.

Graph 6. Ad impressions



Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

Impression data is not available for most of the publications distributed by four of the five universities with the most active ads during the study period: the International University of La Rioja, the University of Deusto, the Francisco de Vitoria University and the Open University of Catalonia. LinkedIn's ad library only provides this information for ads targeted at the European Union, so these universities also tended to target their ad campaigns at other regions. The University of Navarra, also one of the most active on the platform, tended to show its ads between 10,000 and 50,000 times. Specifically, it did so in 44.74% (17) of its publications.

With the exception of the University of the Basque Country, which showed its ads between 200,000 and 500,000 times, most of the ads observed in the universities with the lowest number of active publications on LinkedIn Ads had fewer than 50,000 impressions.

5. Conclusions

This paper presents the latest trends that leading educational brands in Spain are implementing in their online advertising strategy, specifically in LinkedIn Ads. Universities are using this platform with the aim of increasing their student numbers and improving their public image.

Private universities show greater advertising activity on this platform than public institutions, with a more proactive attitude in targeting prospective students and requesting information about their academic programmes. In line with what has been observed in previous studies on the Meta Ads platform (Abuín Vences and García Rosales, 2022), most publications by Spanish universities on LinkedIn Ads also limit themselves to promoting their academic offer, without referring to other related areas, such as research or innovation. These last two areas are rarely mentioned, and when they are, they are linked to the training programmes advertised.

The most common format used to promote this content is the simple image publication, mostly targeting specific landing pages with information about the educational programmes, online and face-to-face information sessions about the university's academic offer. The academic programme, the logo/brand and the students are the central elements of the LinkedIn ads, with the aim of highlighting the academic offer, reinforcing and increasing brand awareness and projecting an image of the pupils as students of the advertised university or as future qualified professionals. However, the main difference with the use of other advertising tools is that universities use this professional social network to establish a personalised discourse aimed at attracting students from the profiles of the academic staff of the institution, through the direct message/Inmail format that is characteristic of LinkedIn.

However, there is room for improvement, as about one in three ads lead to web pages, which as such have some user exit points, as they have a top menu and navigation access to other sections of the site. There is little use of LinkedIn's native forms or the ability to start an inbox conversation via direct message. In addition, the direct message/inbox format, which is useful for bringing the institution closer to potential students through academic staff, is not used by all universities.

Future research should test these findings against performance data for campaigns, ad groups and custom audiences in ad accounts. As this research has certain limitations, it acknowledges recent trends in the use of LinkedIn Ads by the education sector in Spain, but does not analyse their effectiveness, which is crucial for optimising conversions and consequently increasing enrolments and student numbers.

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