

## **How can the Defence Forces enhance brand equity through a digital marketing strategy that leverages association with its academic partners?**

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The field of marketing has seen an evolution in the way brands communicate with consumers, how consumers communicate with brands and how consumers communicate with one another (Rogers, 2021). The Defence Forces is poised to adopt a digital culture through digital transformation, innovation, and technology, affording countless opportunities to enhance its brand and support recruitment. This paper focuses on the wider educational benefits associated with the organisation and examines how the Defence Forces can enhance brand equity through a digital marketing strategy that leverages association with its academic partners. The article examines the literature of prominent scholars and experts in the marketing field, led by Kotler and Keller's Strategic Brand Management theoretical framework (2012) and supported by current digital marketing trends and insights, resulting in several thought-provoking findings.

This paper identifies that the alternative pathway to third-level education offered through a career in the Defence Forces is not widely associated and identified with the Defence Forces brand, along with its partnerships with third-level academic institutions in Ireland. Interestingly, seventy per cent of the survey respondents indicated that they were unaware of the transition year work experience programme occasionally held by the Defence Forces. Post-primary schools would welcome more information with some students missing this valuable opportunity due to a lack of awareness. Research further indicated that the Defence Forces digital presence on social media platforms has limited penetration amongst post-primary schools in Ireland. Based on the findings from the analysed data and literature, this paper suggests several digital marketing practices for the Defence Forces to expand its digital presence through a comprehensive omnichannel approach, thereby enhancing its brand equity and supporting recruitment.

A strong brand can enhance awareness of the Defence Forces by creating a positive impression of the organisation within the market. A well-known and respected brand can lead to an increase in the applicant pool, attracting higher quality applicants and enhancing recruitment



for the Defence Forces at a time when there is a shortage of personnel within the organisation. According to Keller (2012), brand awareness directly correlates to brand equity, and the marketer must shape how consumers think and feel about your product or organisation. The pathway to further education offered through the Defence Forces, provides a distinct opportunity to enhance brand equity and support recruitment for the organisation. This paper examines the area of digital marketing, focusing on brand management and enhancing brand equity for the Defence Forces, in a dynamic digital landscape. Digital marketing enables the Defence Forces to reach a wider audience than traditional marketing methods, targeting potential customers in different segments of the market. Wider reach enhances brand visibility and awareness which in turn improves brand equity, crucial at a time when personnel numbers continue to decline year-on-year in the Defence Forces.

### **Background and the Research Problem**

The research provided in this paper has evidenced that the pathway to third level education is not widely associated with the Defence Forces. By creating visibility of its partnerships with academic institutions the Defence Forces can enhance its association with academia and attract potential candidates who value education and learning. This offers a new pathway for post leaving certificate students who may not be aware of the wider benefits of Defence Forces membership, supporting recruitment for the organisation. The Tánaiste and Minister for Defence and Foreign Affairs, Micheál Martin, recently highlighted at a Dáil Debate; “the military authorities advise that the strength of the Permanent Defence Forces on 31 December 2022 was 7,897”, serving personnel (Martin, 2023). This is despite a government commitment in the 2015 White Paper on Defence (WPD) to maintain an establishment of at least 9,500 serving personnel, which the defence policy context in part one will further analyse.

Companies cannot connect with all customers in broad or diverse markets. They need to identify the market segments that they can leverage to their advantage. It is essential to have meaningful data and insightful information of customer behaviour, and to strategically analyse the characteristics of each market segment (Keller and Kotler, 2016). Smart Insights held an annual Digital Trends Summit in July 2022, where marketing experts and practitioners gave advice based on market research and insights. Richards pointed out that organisations must have customer centric focused campaigns (2022). Organisations must understand their audience, use actionable insights to find ways to get close to the consumer and build a connection with an audience, driving an emotional response. Rogers contends that social media marketing helps brands to create, nurture and build relationships with consumers, thereby enhancing brand equity. She further contends that brands include the generation of timely and relevant content via social media platforms as part of strategic marketing initiatives (2021). Wider reach through social media platforms, targeting specific segments of the market can enhance brand visibility and awareness which in turn improves brand equity and can support recruitment for the Defence Forces.

### **The Research Aim**

The primary aim of this paper is to answer the following research question: how can the Irish Defence Forces enhance brand equity through a digital marketing strategy that leverages association with its academic partners, contributors to professional military education for the

organisation and support recruitment for the Defence Forces. To support the paper in answering this question, three subordinate research questions have been developed.

- (i) Is there awareness of the alternative pathway to third-level education offered through the Defence Forces across Ireland's post-primary schools?
- (ii) Is the Defence Forces segmenting and targeting its market fully within its digital marketing to enhance recruitment for the organisation?
- (iii) What digital marketing practices can enhance brand equity for the Defence Forces?

Marketing theoretical frameworks and research, supported by current trends and insights, have guided and structured the trajectory of this research.

### **Relevance to the Irish Defence Forces**

Marketing in the digital age takes deliberate, reinforcing steps in the process of implementing effective digital decisions. Digital transformation in marketing is about harnessing the digital enterprise. (Deloitte, 2023). The Commission on the Defence Forces, with the government's high level action plan for its implementation, has prioritised digital transformation within its transformation agenda. The Defence Forces stand among countless competitors vying for talent in a well-educated and diverse workforce, where competitive advantage over peers is critical, to support recruitment. Candidates are more likely to be interested in working for a company that they perceive has a strong reputation for education, innovation, and employee satisfaction.

The time is pertinent to enhance brand equity for the Defence Forces and raise awareness of the valuable opportunities inherent in the organisation through leveraging association with its academic partners. Benioff, chairperson, and Co-CEO of Salesforce contends, "Every digital transformation is going to begin and end with the customer, and I can see that in the minds of every CEO I talk to" (2023). A relevant strategic research focus was taken on Kotler and Keller's strategic brand management process introduced in Part Two. This has guided efforts to understand how brand equity can be enhanced for the Defence Forces, as part of an integrated digital marketing strategy, leveraging association with its academic partners to support recruitment for the organisation. According to Gonzalez, an integrated digital marketing strategy ensures a vision that is aligned with every department while gaining a powerful online value proposition and enhancing brand equity (2017).

## **PART ONE: Literature Review**

Part one will discuss and conduct a critical review of literature to address the research question: how can the Defence Forces enhance brand equity through a digital marketing strategy that leverages association with its academic partners, contributors to professional military education for the organisation and support recruitment. The scope of the review will start broadly to underpin the defence policy driving the research, build understanding and give context to the theories and concepts being discussed. It will then narrow to a more

focused review of the strategic digital environment and marketing literature. It will bring the reader up to date on the range of ideas and knowledge that have been established on the topic, identifying contrasting, and opposing views as well as identifying any gaps in the current knowledge. This will provide context for the focus of this research through the identification of key themes within the academic literature. It is important that the Defence Forces employ a targeted digital marketing strategy to enhance its brand equity and make it stand out among its competitors. This will enhance recruitment prospects as the personnel establishment of the Defence Forces is currently under strength. It is therefore, not meeting the government commitments outlined in the WPD, which this part will further explore.

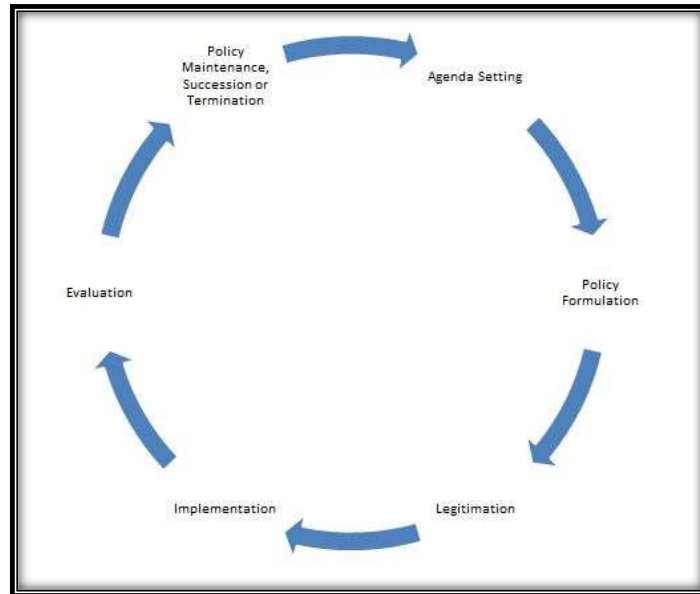
Hart (2018) maintains that the main theories identified should be reviewed and analysed, to develop a greater understanding of the topic and achieve the research objectives. The literature review will begin with an introduction to the strategic digital environment with a focus on digital culture and the relevance of digital transformation and innovation to the research, making explicit links to the Defence Forces. Analysis will follow of the marketing theory and theoretical frameworks that form the foundation for the theoretical approach to the research aim. The evaluative critique of the broad body of literature on the research question will fall from the theoretical frameworks. Finally, the review will conclude with a summary and identification of the main ideas, conclusions, and themes. Being conscious of the wealth of literature in the marketing and branding domain, a selective and pragmatic approach was taken in choosing the literature for review.

### **Ireland's Defence Policy**

There are several wide-ranging interpretations of policy in the literature. The policy-making process has been identified as,

The making of public policy has been defined as the process by which governments translate their political visions into programmes and actions to deliver outcomes – from election manifestos to programmes for government. (Ferris 2015, p. 87).

Cairney describes policy analysis as the identification of a policy problem and possible solutions. He posits a description of the policy-making cycle illustrated in figure 1.1 as comprising six stages (2021).



**Figure 1.1: Policy Making Cycle**  
**Source: Cairney, (2013).**

The WPD provides the defence policy framework up to 2025. It made a commitment and set an agenda that,

Over the course of the White Paper the Government are committed to maintaining a PDF establishment of at least 9,500 serving personnel ... As a matter of policy, the Government believe that the military forces of the State should appropriately reflect and integrate the demographic of the population as a whole. (Department of Defence 2015, p. 75).

To fundamentally answer the research question posed we must understand why the Defence Forces needs to draw awareness to its brand in accordance with defence policy. The most recently published Department of Defence and Defence Forces annual report indicated that as of 31 December 2021 the strength of the Permanent Defence Forces (PDF) stood at 8,468 personnel. The report further indicated that “In order to attract personnel to the Defence Forces, Recruitment and Competitions section engaged with the recruitment demographic (18-27 years) and pre-recruitment demographic (under 18 years) through various platforms” (Department of Defence & Defence Forces, 2022, p. 55). The 2019 and 2020 Defence Forces and Department of Defence annual reports were also reviewed for comparative purposes and although the recruitment demographic was not reported the strength of the Defence Forces has continued to decline year-on- year.

The Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces recently addressed the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence where he pointed out,

One of my priority considerations, over the last number of years, concerns the recruitment and retention of personnel, our most valued resource. Our capability to deliver the required military outputs in a dynamic threat environment and in

times of crisis rests on the sustained availability of sufficient personnel ... it has been challenging over the past number of years to grow sufficient numbers to keep pace with higher levels of exits. (Clancy, 2023, p .6).

Should the Defence Forces not meet its recruitment target, difficulties may arise meeting the required military outputs requested by government.

#### *The Commission on the Defence Forces*

The Commission on the Defence Forces, set out in the programme for Government, undertook a significant body of work on the future of the Defence Forces, delivering a report in February 2022. The Commission recommended greater transparency and visibility of the wider benefits of membership of the Defence Forces, which should become a central feature of future recruitment campaigns and be supported by external expertise (Commission on the Defence Forces, 2022). This concept will be explored through innovation framework theory later in this part. The Commission also proposed a focused recruitment campaign targeting innovative recruitment efforts, as part of proactive measures. Furthermore, no evidence was presented in the literature to suggest that the Defence Forces has fully targeted and segmented the market to reflect the demographics of the population; this will be further explored in this part.

#### *Professional Military Education Strategy*

The Defence Forces published its first formal Professional Military Education Strategy from 2021-2024 which recognises the importance of its key strategic collaborative partnerships with inter alia Maynooth University, Carlow Institute of Technology, Cork Institute of Technology, National Maritime College Ireland (NMCI), SOLAS and the Technical University Dublin (TUD). It points out that partnerships must be enabled and continuously develop, as they play a vital role in recruitment strategy implementation through linking existing career pathways with standards and educational outcomes (Defence Forces, 2021). No evidence was presented in the literature to indicate that the Defence Forces is leveraging association with its academic partnerships, to meet recruitment policy objectives, presenting scope for further research.

### **The Strategic Digital Environment: Digital Culture and Digital Transformation**

The next section reviews the literature with a view to analyse the strategic digital environment and establish themes that can enhance brand equity for the Defence Forces, to support recruitment. The emergence of technology, and the overwhelming human need and reliance on the internet and social media platforms, has dramatically changed the world in which we live. In April 2022 there were more than five billion internet users worldwide, which is 63.1 percent of the global population (Stastica, 2022). Of this total, 4.7 billion or 59 percent of the world's population were social media users. Ireland featured among the top three countries in the world with the highest internet penetration rate, along with the United Arab Emirates and Denmark (*ibid*).

Digital culture has been described as an element that both enables human knowledge, values, and beliefs to be created and protects them (Ronchi, 2009). The traditional manner of business is fast becoming obsolete, with advanced technological capabilities reshaping the culture and policies of organisations. Digital transformation is becoming more commonplace, with changes to business and organisational activities, processes, and models. Research shows

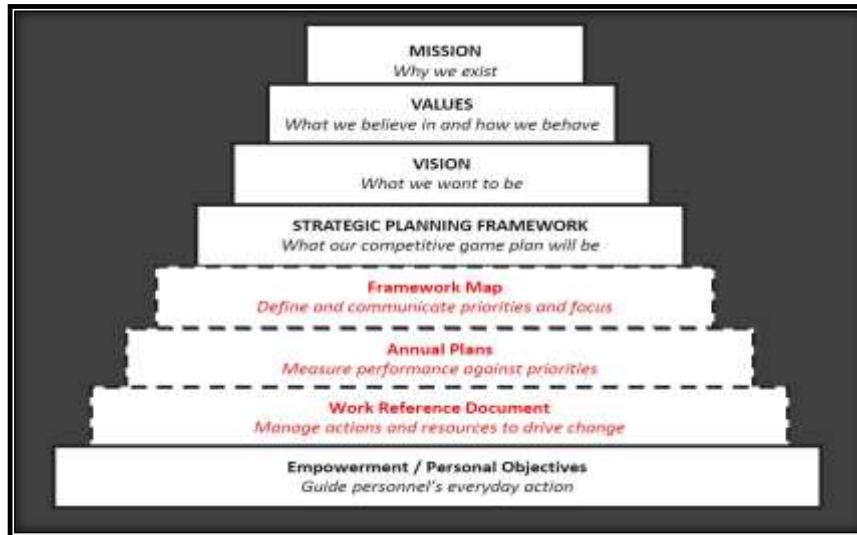
the importance of fostering a positive, productive digital culture in the workplace, with 87 per cent of organisations citing it as a top challenge (Buchanan et al., 2016). Hand, through an examination of how digital technologies and techniques are being unfolded into the fabric of specific institutional and broader cultural environments, examines how digital media is increasingly involved in cultural, social, economic, and political issues (2016). Hand further maintains that shifting towards a digital culture “involves engagement with novel business practices in relation to that interactive digital culture out there” (2008 p.1).

### *The Defence Forces and Digital Transformation*

The culture of the Defence Forces is expected to undergo a period of digital transformation under recommendations by the Commission (Commission on the Defence Forces, 2022). The High-Level Action Plan for the Commission report established additional resources to progress the implementation of its recommendations, to include a Digital Transformation Officer to lead a digital transformation programme (Department of Defence and Defence Forces, 2022). The literature reviewed presented several definitions of digital transformation, of which two have been selected due to their relevance to digital marketing and the research question. Fitzgerald et al. describe digital transformation as the use of new digital technologies such as social media, mobile technology, analytics, or embedded devices to enable major business improvements including enhanced customer experiences, streamlined operations or new business models (2014). An alternative view in the literature by Solis et al. define digital transformation as the realignment of, or new investment in, technology and business models to engage digital customers more effectively at every touch point in the customer experience lifecycle (2014). Solis, having conducted further research in digital transformation, posits that it is time to set the vision, move with charted, incremental measures and reimagine how digital transformation can develop the future of work (2021).

### *A View on Strategy*

Kraus et al. maintain that a well-established area in the literature on business processes is constituted around strategies (2021). The mere experimentation with, and implementation of, digital technologies is insufficient for transformation because digital strategies additionally must be formulated (Sebastian et al., 2017). Some researchers argue that digital transformation requires an alignment of a company’s multiple strategies to a digital business strategy, combining both business strategy and IT (Bharadwaj et al., 2013; Matt et al., 2015). An alternative view in the literature contends that an independent digital transformation strategy is essential (Hess et al., 2016). Mintzberg posits that at times strategies must be left as broad visions, not precisely articulated, to adapt to a changing environment, emphasising the importance of flexibility as it pertains to strategic planning (1994). As strategic requirements fall out from policy, the Defence Forces strategic planning framework is included for reference, as any potential targeted digital marketing strategy to enhance brand equity should align itself within the context of this framework (see figure 1.2). In support, Mullins and Walker indicate that marketing plans should be integrated with the company’s strategies, available resources, and capabilities, and are not created in a vacuum (2013).



**Figure 1.2: Strategic Planning Framework**

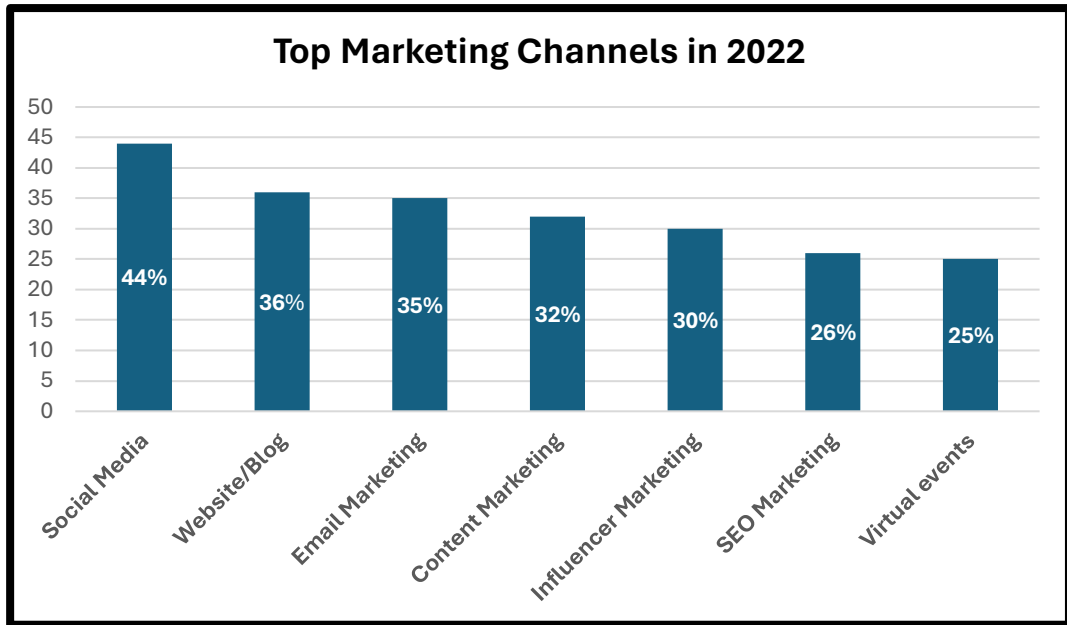
**Source: Defence Forces, (2022).**

### *Social Media Trends*

Inamdar points out that a recent study conducted by Deloitte maintains that focusing on customers is an important sign of digitally transformed organisations (2022). The leaders in such organisations consider the customer's perspective first, aligning internal and external processes toward every touchpoint in the customer life cycle. A brand's online presence, particularly their social presence, can be an asset that builds brand equity, adding value to the consumer and the brand (Brandwatch, 2016). This is a reality in the rapidly evolving consumer landscape, where marketers need to keep their finger on the pulse and develop practical solutions to match the media consumption habits of their customers.

The literature reviewed on digital transformation emphasised the importance of social media to engage with digital customers, enhancing the customer experience, thereby contributing to further awareness of the brand, and enhancing its equity. According to a report into emerging trends in marketing and marketing benchmarks, social media marketing continued to lead the way as the top marketing channel in 2022 (see figure 1.3). The more innovative and creative, the more likely a post is to start a trend or go viral (HubSpot, 2022). The Defence Forces social media policy points out "when utilised correctly, social media can be a powerful communications tool and can be used in both a personal and professional communications capacity" (Defence Forces, 2019, p. 2).



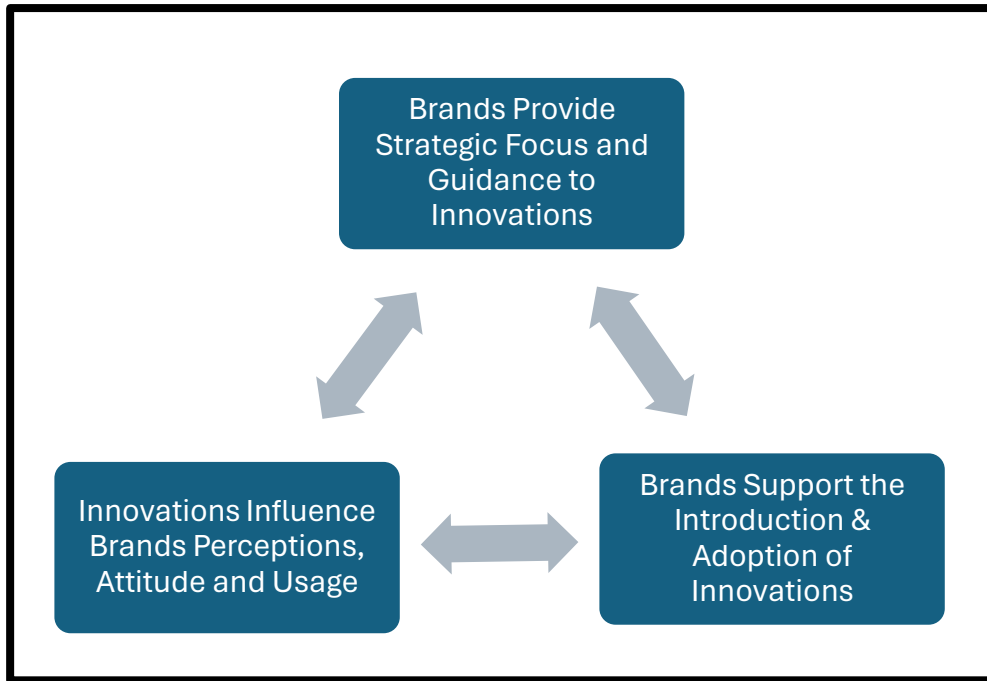


**1.3: Top Marketing Channels in 2022**

**Source: HubSpot, (2022).**

## Innovation

The importance of innovation as it relates to recruitment, digital transformation and social media has been highlighted throughout this research. The interplay between brand and innovation management is under researched in the literature, however, Brexendorf et al. posit an interesting theoretical framework of brand and innovation interdependency (2015), (see figure 1.4). It contends that brand and innovation management are strongly interrelated and mutually dependent. Strong brands are not only supported by innovation but are also an important path to and source of innovation. Kotler and Keller point out that skilful marketers are updating classic practices and inventing new ones to find creative and practical solutions to innovative marketing realities (2016).



**Figure 1.4: The Brand-Innovation Virtuous Cycle**

**Source: Adapted from Brexendorf et al. (2015).**

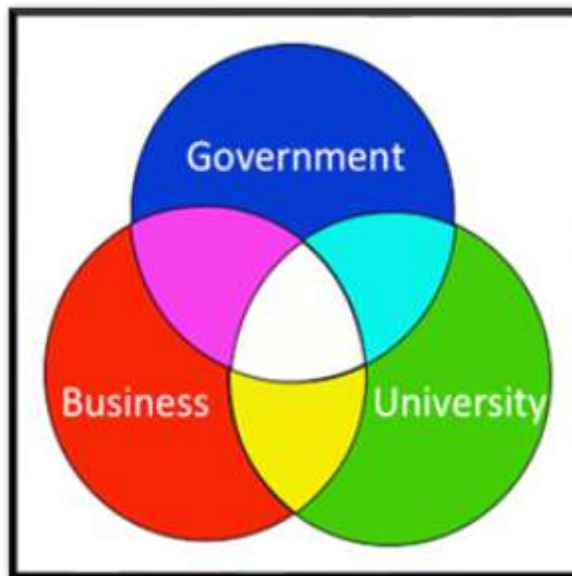
### *Innovation and the Defence Forces*

In recent years, innovation as a concept has garnered traction within the Defence Forces and is ably supported by an enhanced innovation focus in Irish government policy. There are several interpretations of innovation in the literature reviewed, which as a concept can often be misconstrued or misinterpreted, thus leading to poor implementation. To provide a consistent approach, the government of Ireland's innovation strategy defines innovation as "the creation of a new and viable offering that adds value" (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2020). Our Public Service 2020 establishes the overall strategy for development and innovation in the Public Service to 2020 and beyond. One of the headline actions includes innovating for our future, with several actions within this pillar including promoting a culture of innovation in the public service (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2017).

The Department of Public Expenditure and reform has taken the lead in the development of Ireland's inaugural Public Service Innovation Strategy. This strategy prioritises citizen centric innovation through engagement and communication with citizens and users. Furthermore, it prioritises transformative innovation through the development of strategic insights for future trends and requirements (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2017). The Department of Defence and Defence Forces Strategy Statement from 2021-2023 lists innovation as a high-level defence policy goal and acknowledges its importance in the development and maintenance of capabilities (Department of Defence and Defence Forces, 2021). The literature has acknowledged that innovation can positively impact brand awareness and brand equity. A report into marketing trends for 2022 indicated that an increasing number of digital audiences are seeking out brands that are authentic, transparent, and innovative (HubSpot, 2022).

### *The Triple Helix Model of Innovation*

The Department of Defence and Defence Forces, through its newly established Research, Technology, and Innovation unit, has developed strategic themes in line with the Defence Strategy Statement. The unit is developing a Defence ecosystem to develop progressive partnerships with Defence governments, European institutions, academia, and industry. This is posited in the literature as the Triple Helix Model of Innovation, and represents the dynamic interactions between academia, industry, and government in becoming more innovative (see figure 1.5). Through innovation framework theory, each sector is represented by a circle (helix), with overlapping interactions (Etzkowitz, 2008). The Defence Forces is not only enhancing knowledge generation through innovation but also enhancing brand awareness through its external collaboration, with further potential to engage this model. The Defence Forces has embraced innovation and supports a culture where all staff are inspired, empowered, and enabled to innovate. An alternative view posited in the literature by Hoeffler contends that pivoting towards innovations creates uncertainties and risks that can impact adoption and decision-making in organisations (2003). Senge posits a needed change of thinking in organisations, where learning organisations are created to nurture innovation and personal growth (2006).



**Figure 1.5: Triple Helix Model for Innovation**

**Source: Adapted from Etzkowitz, (2008).**

### **Context: Marketing Theory**

Digital transformation, digital culture, social media, and innovation have transformed how brands engage with customers. The era of digital is transforming the economics of marketing, with innovative ways of doing business emerging at an accelerated pace. Getting recognition

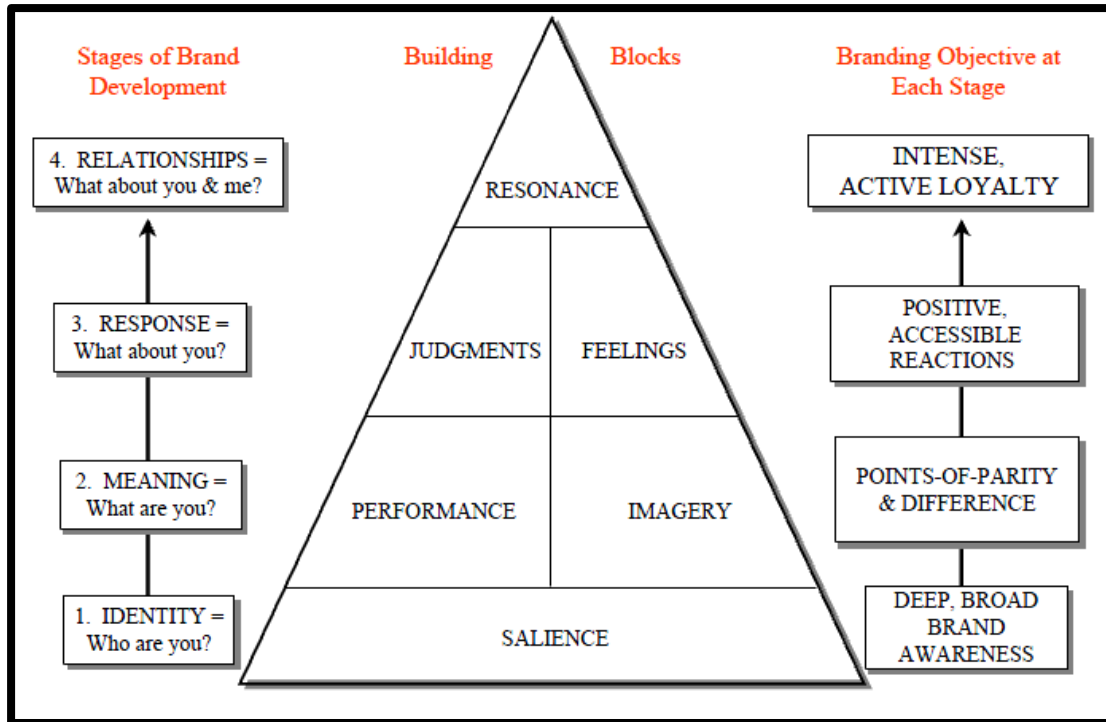
for a brand, building brand relationships, and creating, measuring, and managing brand equity can be challenging to achieve in a fast-paced environment. The literature supporting the marketing theoretical frameworks underpinning brand management have been chosen for analysis to give context to the various marketing and branding concepts and how they can be applied during the research. This will provide an in-depth understanding, give further relevance to the Defence Forces, and establish how the organisation can engage with its target customers and enhance brand equity. This section of the literature review has also analysed insights into the psychology of marketing and building emotional connections to the brand.

### *Brand Equity*

The brand has been defined in a myriad of diverse ways over many years. Much of the literature concurs with the American Marketing Association (AMA) who defined the brand in 1960 as; a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them which is intended to identify the good or services or one seller or a group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors. It is inherent that the brand has developed over time and with that other branding concepts have arisen. The concept of brand equity arose in the 1980s, raising the importance of the brand in a marketing strategy. As Keller et al identified, "Customer-based brand equity occurs when the customer has a high level of awareness and familiarity of the brand and holds in their memory some strong, favourable and unique brand associations" (2012, p.59). Keller posits a brand resonance pyramid illustrated in figure 1.6 to frame this concept. The brand resonance model views brand building as an ascending series of steps, from the bottom to top. Each step is dependent on successfully achieving the objectives of the previous one, with the overarching aim to achieve brand equity (2020).

- i. Ensuring customers identify the brand and associate it with a specific product class or set of needs.
- ii. Firmly establishing the brand meaning in customers' minds by strategically linking a host of tangible and intangible brand associations.
- iii. Eliciting the proper customer responses in terms of brand-related judgment and feelings.
- iv. Converting customers' brand responses to intense, active loyalty.

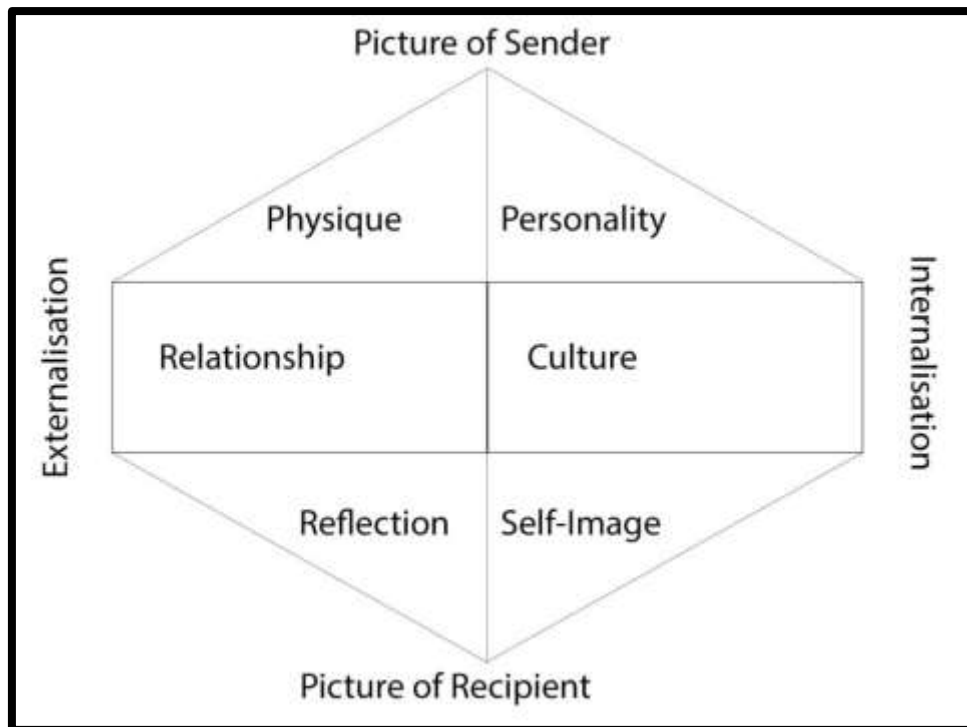
(Keller, 2020, p. 451).



**Figure 1.6: Brand Resonance Pyramid**

Source: Keller (2020, p. 451).

An alternative framework to develop brand equity, includes Kapferer's brand identity prism illustrated in figure 1.7. It enables the strengths and weaknesses of the brand to be assessed using the six aspects of the prism. It possesses internal and external sides determining limits to the development of brand equity. Analysis of the literature as it applies to outside-in, and inside-out brand approaches will give further context and understanding to this framework further explored below.

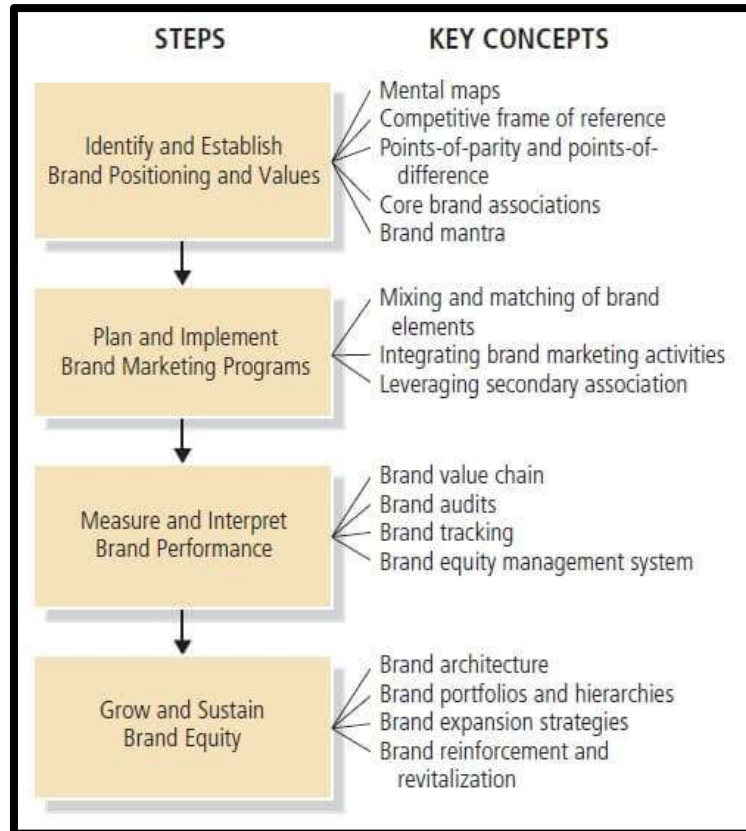


**Figure 1.7: Brand Identity Prism**

**Source: Adapted from Kapferer, (2008).**

### *Theoretical Framework*

Kotler and Keller advocate, that marketers of successful 21<sup>st</sup> century brands must excel at the strategic brand management process (2016). This involves combining the design and implementation of marketing activities and programmes, to build, measure and manage brands to maximise their value. Keller et al. outline the strategic brand management process of combining steps and concepts that involve the design and implementation of marketing activities to build, measure and manage brand equity (2012). The steps illustrated through figure 1.8 include identifying and establishing brand positioning, brand planning and implementing brand marketing, measuring, and interpreting brand performance, and growing and sustaining brand value.



**Figure 1. 8: Strategic Brand Management Process**

**Source: Kotler and Keller, (2012, p.43).**

It is inherent that Keller's strategic brand management approach is a comprehensive theoretical framework, having been reviewed in the context of this research. It is a wide-ranging framework and incorporates key concepts for improving short, medium, and long-term brand decisions. Planning and implementing brand marketing programmes has been identified as the phase of the framework for further analysis, with emphasis being placed on leveraging secondary associations with the Defence Forces' academic partners to enhance brand equity. This will provide awareness of the alternative pathway to third-level education offered through the Defence Forces and support recruitment. The analysis highlights the need for further research on market segmentation, as an element of the brand positioning step. Segmenting, at its most basic, refers to the separation of a group of customers with diverse needs into subgroups of customers with similar needs and preferences (Gavett, 2014). This element in line with the research question has been further explored in the literature and will be discussed in detail in the next section.

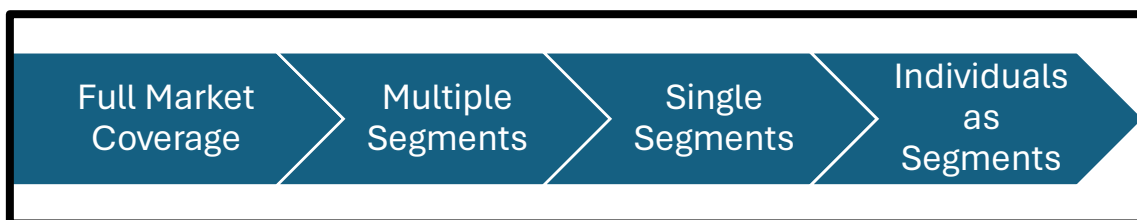
Malhotra et al. have identified leveraging co-followership patterns on social media to identify brand alliance opportunities, having conducted recent research on the trends. They contend that brand extension strategies such as co-branding are instrumental in increasing awareness and brand equity. They have produced the following definition of cobranding as "a brand alliance strategy to bolster reach, awareness, and sales potential by tapping the

prospective customers of partnering brands” (2022, p.17). Obtaining broader insights into the identification of cobranding opportunities across diverse categories would generate meaningful information for brand owners. The article introduces a contention from Rosnowski who notes, “By mashing up two bona fide brands, especially in diverse industries, the impact can be exponential” (2022, p.17). Leveraging secondary association (i.e., effectively linking to other entities) will ensure customers identify and resonate with the brand, which Keller’s brand resonance pyramid has illustrated.

#### *Market Positioning and Segmentation*

Keller et al. (*ibid*) have defined brand positioning as the act of designing the company’s offer and image so that it offers a distinct and valued place in the target customer’s mind. As identified in the research, Cravens and Piercy contend that targeting and positioning strategies consist of identifying and analysing the segments in a market, deciding which segments to target, and designing and implementing a positioning strategy for each target (2013). This was corroborated by Mullins and Walker who have developed a brand positioning process for preparing the foundation of marketing strategies (2013). The process involves an examination of the link between market segments and the current position of brands. It is inherent that the strategic brand management process would benefit from market segmentation, identifying and connecting with customers in tandem with brand positioning. Wendy and Langmaid further contend that the relationship of the customer to the brand provides a foundation for the brand positioning and will optimise its competitive position (1988).

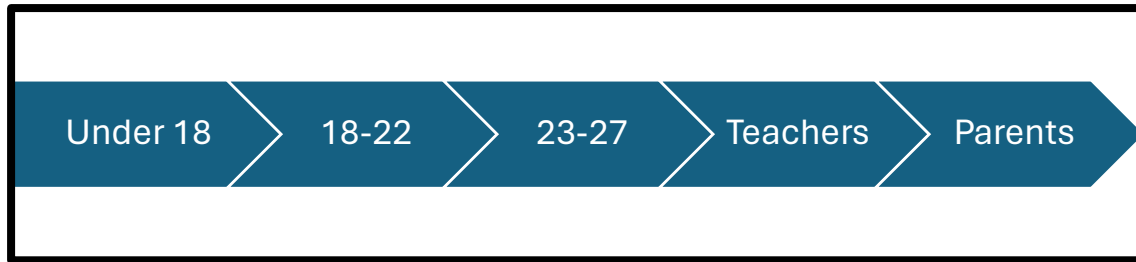
Kotler and Keller maintain that once market segment opportunities have been identified, it must be decided how many and which segments to target. They point out “marketers are increasingly combing several variables in an effort to identify smaller, better-defined target groups” (2016, p. 284). To determine the optimal position of a brand, organisations can gain an advantage from understanding how their market can be segmented and tailoring their marketing strategy towards each segment. Figure 1.9 identifies the possible levels of segmentation as identified in the literature, followed by an illustration in figure 1.10 of multiple market segments for the Defence Forces. This emphasises the importance of market segmentation and positioning a brand towards the right target market to enhance equity.



**Figure 1.9: Possible Levels of Segmentation**

**Source: Adapted from Kotler and Keller, (2016).**





**Figure 1.10: Example of Multiple Market Segments for the Defence Forces**

**Source: Author, (2023).**

### **Adolescent Career Choices**

Selected literature was reviewed, to facilitate a perspective on adolescent career choices and decisions. Research conducted by Ryan on adolescent career decision-making maintains that this is an important period where a young person must make critically important decisions (2020). Ryan further supported the view of Featherman who observed that it is during adolescence that choices about whether to enter the workforce directly after secondary school or whether to proceed to third-level education are made. A Research in Higher Education report maintains that parents have been found to greatly impact the career selection process of their children. This report further revealed that encouragement from teachers has the greatest influence on children from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Alcott, 2017). Marketing psychology with a focus on social proof theory can also have a significant impact on adolescents which the next section of this part will explore.

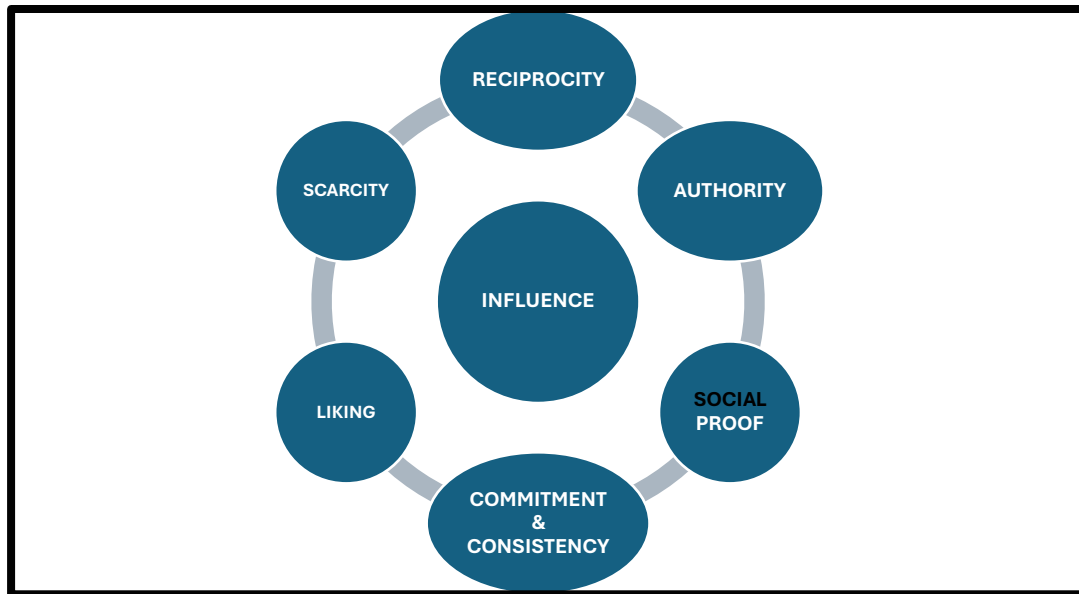
### **The Psychology of Marketing**

Soules contends that persuasion is a technique applied to the psychology of influence (2015). Adolescents consumed by social media are continuously targeted by influencers who embed persuasive messages in their posts and videos, making emotional connections to their audience. Based on current insights around influencer marketing, this concept can ably assist the growth trajectory of a brand. Duke explains that influencer marketing is a

Form of paid marketing where brands hire people with large social media followings to promote their products... By working with the right influencers, you can reach new customers and expand your brand's reach in ways traditional advertising simply cannot. (Duke, 2022, para. 2).

Cialdini has posited six principles of persuasion illustrated in figure 1.11 connected with marketing psychology (2006). One of the principles looks at the area of 'social proof' theory and the psychological effect it can have through social influencing where adolescents are heavily influenced by the actions of others. Another principle, 'liking' maintains that we are persuaded more easily by people we like and find attractive (Soules, 2015). The Influencer

Marketing Hub contends that social proof and liking as forms of marketing psychology can enhance brand equity through influencer marketing (2022).



**Figure 1.11: Principles of Persuasion**

**Source: Adapted from Cialdini, (2006).**

The Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces recently pointed out that a new recruitment strategy has been developed for the Defence Forces which includes an 'enhancing marketing effectiveness' theme (Clancy, 2023). Young people are highly active on social media and by creating engaging and interactive experiences through digital platforms it can enhance brand awareness and assist recruitment efforts for the Defence Forces.

### **Building Emotional Connections to the Brand**

Heding et al. maintain that the subjective understanding of brand equity can be connected to the customers' perception of the brand and is strategically valuable for brand management (2009). This argument is incorporated in a scientific seven brand approach conceptual framework, developed by Heding et al. (*ibid*). Based on research conducted between 1985 and 2006, it examines how different approaches result in quite different outcomes and why. Their approach further supports the importance of building connections with the customer to drive an emotional response. This concept, taking digital culture into consideration, is explored by Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick who maintain the quality of digital experience is based on a combination of rational and emotional factors that influence customer perceptions of a brand online (2016). Wendy and Langmaid argued over thirty years ago that to understand brand personalities, customers were asked to project personalities onto brands, imaging them as people and using their association skills (1988). This was a clever and enabling technique in qualitative market research using customer imagery, where the brands would come alive and resonate with the customer. It has now evolved into the concept of influencer marketing, which can be integrated into brand marketing programmes to enhance brand equity.

### *Outside-In Brand Management Approach*

The literature reviewed has strongly advocated that brands need to adopt an outside-in brand management approach in keeping the customer central to build and sustain brand equity. Rust has explored the nature of outside-in marketing and contends that it is most effective for focusing on customer satisfaction since insights about customer needs and wants move bottom up through an organisation (2020). This supports Mullins and Walker contention that marketing strategies should be integrated with the overall strategy of an organisation and not in isolation (2013). In research carried by Rust, the topic of redefining the outside is broached. He acknowledges that “traditionally, we have thought about the outside as individual human customers. In the future this will be less true. Increasingly, firms are marketing to Alexa or Siri, or the Google search engine” (1997, cited in Rust 2020:103). This reinforces the importance of keeping pace with digital transformation and innovation - key components to enhance brand equity.

In reviewing further literature, D'Amato contends that brands need to adopt an outside-in brand management approach (2015). Successful brands will place customers at the heart of their business, pulling the outside in, to work for them. He further examines the concept of becoming a citizen brand by getting the employee to work for the brand through listening and engaging with customers and monitoring every recruitment opportunity the brand has. He argues that a brand confident enough to engage in debate and speak openly with customers will gain their respect and loyalty. Through analysis and review of the literature, this resonates with Heding et al. subjective understanding of brand equity and its connection to the customers' perception of the brand (2009). Sharp contends that understanding the memory structures or perception already built of the brand is of importance and organisations need to ensure their advertising refreshes these structures (2010). Measuring and interpreting brand performance, a step within the strategic brand management process, offers a useful concept to measure what memory structures exist. Performance can be measured through brand audits, brand tracking and brand equity management systems.

### *Inside -Out Brand Management Approach*

An alternative view by Mitterer and Brice ascertains that conventional brand building is implemented in response to external stimuli such as competitor products and services, legislation, emerging technologies, alongside other factors (2007). It is argued that inside-out branding takes these aspects into account whilst also focusing on what needs to happen within the organisation to create a robust brand. The concept denotes the placement of values, culture, and people at the centre when creating and sustaining brand equity. This is possible, given that they are alive within an organisation and can be experienced at every touch point of the customer journey. This research recognises that elements from this concept can be connected to outside-in marketing where people are central to the strategy, therefore building stakeholder relationships and brand equity at every step of the customer journey. It is argued that the interchange between inside and outside has important consequences and research shows that good organisations, focusing on both branding concepts, can be successful (Anderson et al., 1997).

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this Part, theoretical insights have been generated, along with pertinent themes and practical issues identified, supported by defence policy to give context to the research question. Digital transformation and a culture of innovation provide countless opportunities for the organisation to enhance its brand equity, now and into the future. Leading marketing academics and current marketing trends were evidenced to offer an essential overview of the branding sphere. It introduced concepts in the marketing field of brand management, to enhance brand equity and support recruitment efforts for the Defence Forces. The literature considered how brand equity can be created and managed through the identification of brand resonance and identity models and the strategic brand management theoretical framework. A common thread apparent in the literature focused on the importance of segmenting the market to effectively position a brand in the mind of its target audience while building emotional connections. This is further supported by leveraging secondary associations to enhance brand equity. A gap in research and practice exists in this area for the Defence Forces, particularly in relation to awareness of the wider educational opportunities, and therefore it has guided this research. Part two will now address the methodology and methods that have been used to achieve this.

## **PART TWO: Methodology**

When selecting the appropriate research design, it was necessary that the methodology chosen should meet the scope and aims of the research. Adopting mixed methods supported the research allowing several perspectives to be analysed, both within and outside the Defence Forces.

### *Research Methods*

Saunders et al. define research methods as “the techniques and procedures used to obtain and analyse research data, including for example questionnaires, observation, interviews, and statistical and non-statistical techniques” (2009, p. 595). Mixed methods are defined as “the class of research where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study” (Burke and Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 17). The most suitable methods appropriate to address the research question, were semi-structured interviews and questionnaires.

### *Sampling*

The literature evidenced in part one offered a broad overview of the policy driving the research and the pertinent themes, however, the semi-structured interview allows lived experiences rarely covered in literature to add to the conversation. The challenge of uncovering these experiences in a limited pool of interview candidates was overcome using a purposive sampling method, or as Bryman describes, “the researcher samples on the basis of wanting to interview people who are relevant to the research question” (2008, p.458). Expert sampling has been selected to guarantee a broad overview from a variety of perspectives. This is a type of purposive sampling technique that is typically used when research needs to glean knowledge from individuals that have expertise. In the absence of a standalone marketing department, two interviewees were selected for semi-structured interviews, from Public Relations Branch and Recruitment Branch in the Defence Forces (see table 1.1).

| Name                | Appointment                                                                            | Organisation   |
|---------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|
| Lt Col Eugene Cooke | Director Public Relations Branch,<br>Chief of Staff Branch                             | Defence Forces |
| Comdt Lisa McMahon  | Officer in Command, Recruitment<br>and Competitions Section, Human<br>Resources Branch | Defence Forces |

**Table 1.1: Interviewee Profile Table**

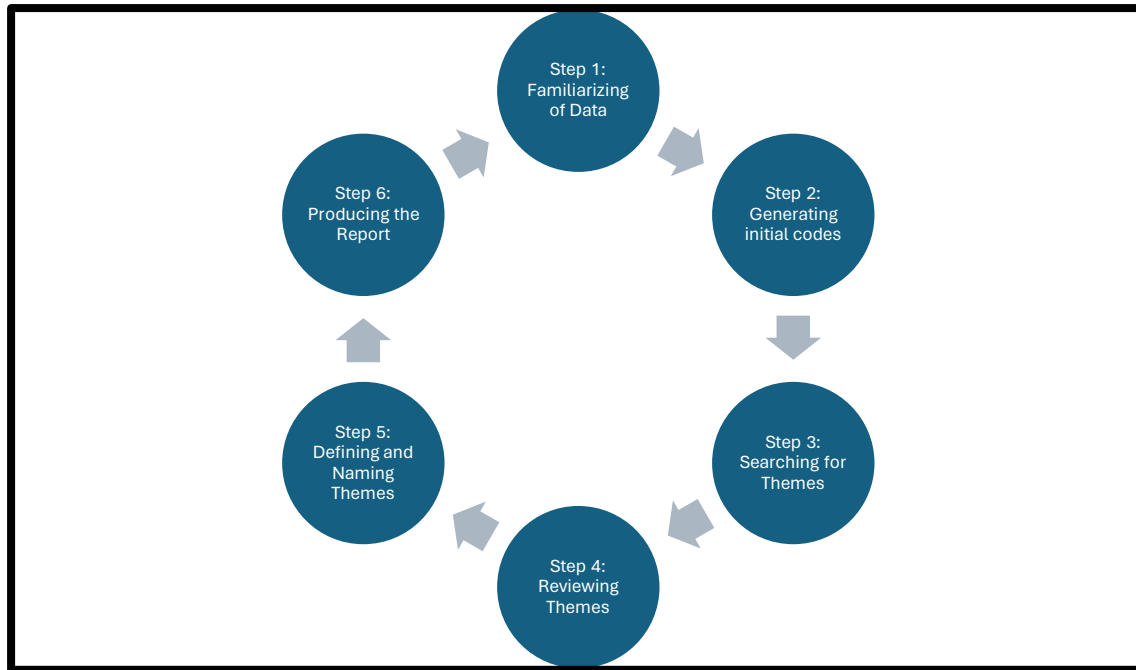
To garner quantitative data in relation to the research question, a focused market survey was utilised as part of the data collection strategy. This focused survey created through Microsoft Forms was sent to a nationally representative sample of post-primary school guidance counsellors n=200 throughout Ireland. The post-primary schools chosen included DEIS schools,<sup>1</sup> mixed schools, all-girls and all-boys' post-primary schools.

#### *Data Analysis*

The data which was collected through a mixed method approach naturally generated substantial amounts of information which were filtered and processed into a manageable format. The dimensions of the theory evidenced in the literature generated themes and provided clues as to what the data might reveal while also introducing dimensions unexplored in the literature. Braun and Clarke's qualitative, interpretivist model of data analysis outlined in figure 2.1 was employed to analyse the collated data. Thematic analysis enabled the cross-referencing of research data extracted from the semi-structured interviews and survey with the literature where appropriate. Exploratory data analysis emphasises the use of diagrams to explore and understand data, and is useful for identifying relationships (Saunders et al., 2009). This factor was considered in the data analysis extracted through the quantitative data collection.

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<sup>1</sup> In the 2021/22 academic year there are 884 schools (687 primary and 197 post-primary) in the DEIS programme serving over 180,000 students (Department of Education, 2022).



**Figure: 2.1 Thematic Analysis.**

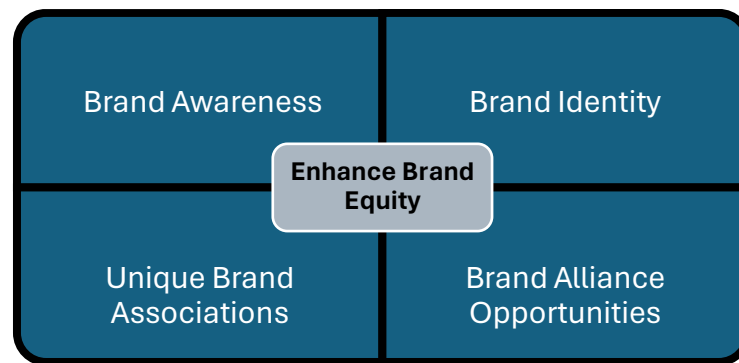
**Source: Adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87).**

### **PART THREE: Findings and Analysis**

The focus of this part is to present the findings of the research and analyse the data collected from the market research survey and semi-structured interviews in support of the research question; how can the Defence Forces enhance brand equity through a digital marketing strategy that leverages association with its academic partners, contributors to professional military education for the organisation and support recruitment. The findings from the mixed method research have provided valuable insights to support the research question, generating further knowledge in this field for the Defence Forces. The data collected has provided focus on the 'so what' of the research - can the Defence Forces enhance brand equity and thereby support recruitment for the organisation. The survey results illustrating the key findings will be supported by graphical depictions of the data through-out this part. Furthermore, the findings will support the three subordinate research questions, developed to support the central question.

- (i) Is there awareness of the alternative pathway to third-level education offered through the Defence Forces across Ireland's post-primary schools?
- (ii) Is the Defence Forces segmenting and targeting its market fully within its digital marketing to enhance recruitment for the organisation?
- (iii) What digital marketing practices can enhance brand equity for the Defence Forces?

The key components contributing to enhanced brand equity, evidenced in the literature are illustrated in figure 3.1. This has been included to frame the mixed method research findings and support the pertinent themes that emerged from the literature.



**Figure 3.1: Brand Equity**

**Source: Author, (2023).**

### **Post-Primary School Guidance Counsellor Survey 2023**

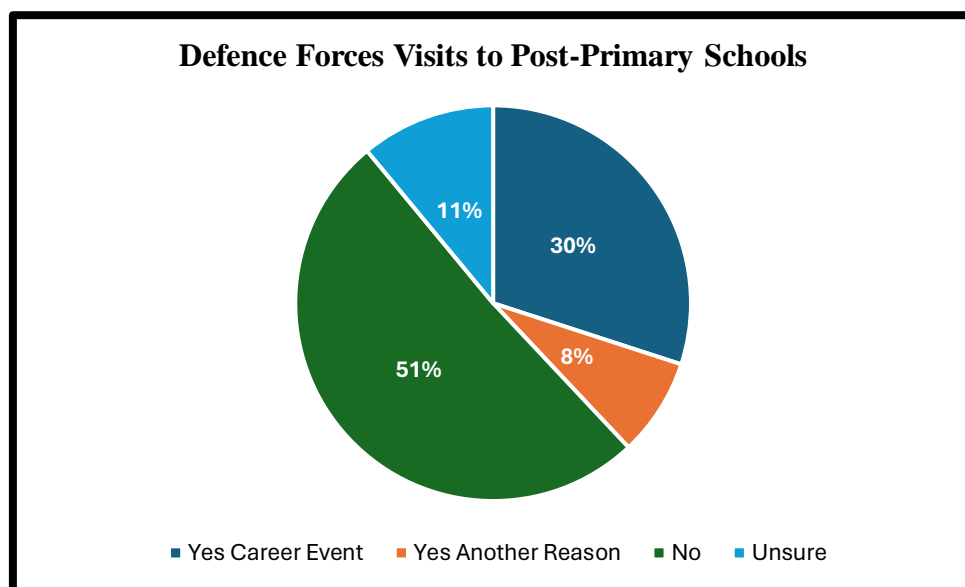
Research was conducted through an online survey across a nationally representative sample of post-primary school guidance counsellors n=200 throughout Ireland. The general focus of the targeted research survey was to ascertain the level of awareness associated with the Defence Forces within the post-primary schools. The focus on the survey then narrowed, to establish if there is knowledge associated with the alternative pathway to third-level education offered through the Defence Forces in support of the first subordinate research question. The survey participants were asked if their post-primary school is a member of the DEIS programme. 58 per cent of respondents indicated that their school was not within the programme, 23 per cent indicated that their school is a member of the programme and 19 per cent of respondents were unsure if the school is a member of the programme or not. The relatively high number of unsure respondents may indicate some schools are awaiting acceptance to the programme. Participants were also asked to identify if their school is mixed, an all-girls or an all-boys school. 81 per cent of respondents indicated a mixed school, 13 per cent an all-girls school and 6 per cent an all-boys schools. Both questions were asked to enable a more in-depth analysis of the survey results in relation to engagement, knowledge and awareness of the opportunities associated with the Defence Forces, within DEIS schools and gender specific schools.

### **Brand Awareness**

According to Keller, brand awareness directly correlates to brand equity, and the marketer must shape how consumers think and feel about your product or organisation (2012). Participants were asked several focused questions to gain insights into the level of brand awareness of the Defence Forces within post-primary schools across Ireland. Participants were asked if their post primary school is located near a Defence Forces military installation, including an army barracks, air corps base or naval service base. 55 per cent of respondents indicated that their school is located near a military installation, 43 per cent of respondents

indicated that their school is not located near a military installation and 2 per cent of respondents were unsure if there is a military facility nearby. A mixed post-primary school in Co. Carlow pointed out that “Kilkenny Barracks is 30 minutes away” indicating awareness of Defence Forces installations beyond the county boundary of some post-primary schools. Interestingly when asked, the same participant indicated that members of the Defence Forces have visited their post-primary school. This indicates brand awareness has been driven by a physical footprint of Defence Forces members at this school.

To further establish brand awareness the participants were asked have members of the Defence Forces ever visited their post-primary school illustrated in figure 3.2. 51 per cent of respondents indicated that their school never received a visit from the Defence Forces, 11 per cent of respondents indicated that they were unsure while 38 per cent of respondents indicated that they have received a visit from members of the Defence Forces for a careers event (30%) or another reason (8%).



**Figure 3.2: Defence Forces Visits to Post-Primary Schools**

Commandant Lisa McMahon, the Officer in charge of Recruitment Branch, DFHQ was asked has Recruitment Branch ever targeted parents of the recruitment demographic or the school guidance counsellors in any specific recruitment campaigns. She explained,

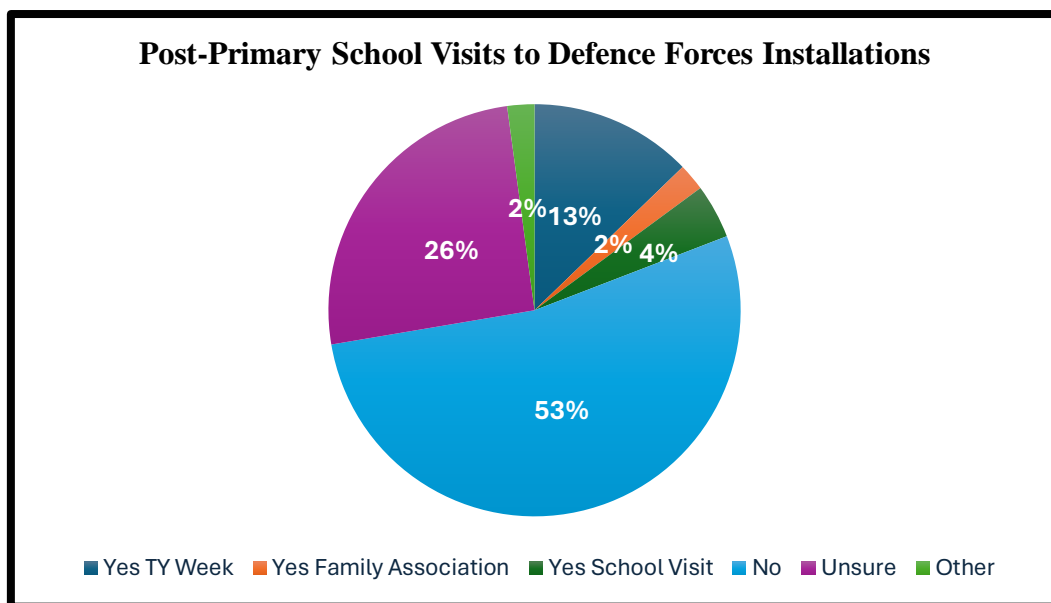
With regards to the careers guidance teachers we go to the annual Irish career’s guidance counsellor’s conference.... We have a database of emails, we will send information to the Irish career guidance counsellor’s central email and the principal’s association central email. If they wish to share this information but that is key information that we want the gatekeepers<sup>2</sup> to have.

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<sup>2</sup> Gatekeepers is a term Recruitment Branch uses to describe those who influence the career decision making of adolescents e.g., parents, teachers, school guidance counsellors.



While the findings acknowledge Recruitment Branch's engagement with the Irish career's guidance counsellor's conference and principal's association, 55 per cent of respondents have indicated that their school is located near a military installation, yet only 38 per cent of respondents have received a visit from members of the Defence Forces. Furthermore, the participants were asked have students from their post-primary school ever visited a Defence Forces installation. 53 per cent of respondents indicated their school had not visited a Defence Forces installation, 26 per cent of respondents were unsure. 21 per cent of respondents had reason to visit including 13 per cent for a transition year work experience week, 4 per cent through an arranged school visit, 2 per cent through family association and the remaining 2 per cent visited for another reason (see figure 3.3).



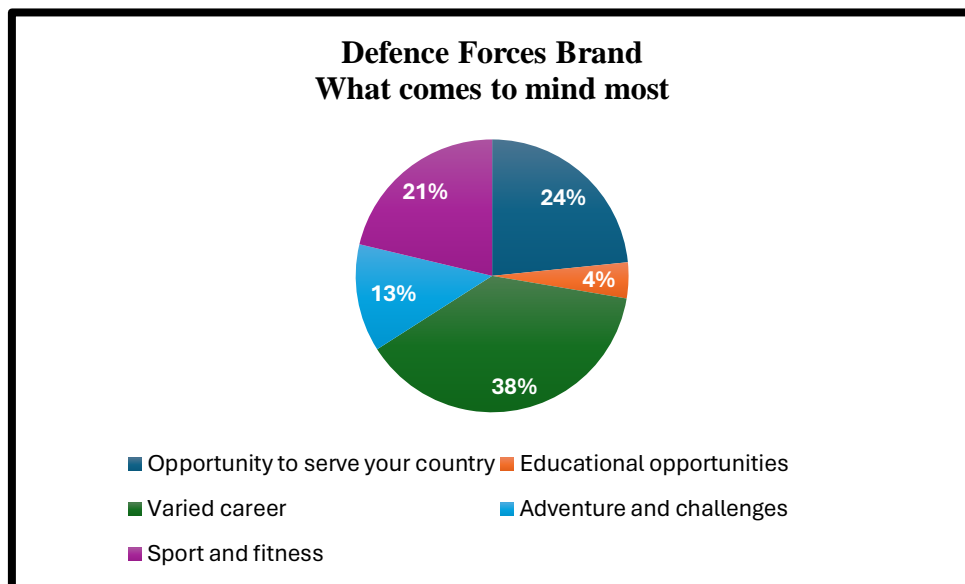
**Figure 3.3: Post-Primary School Visits to Defence Forces Installations**

Participants were asked if they are aware that the Defence Forces occasionally holds work experience for transition year students. 70 per cent of respondents indicated that they were unaware of the transition year work experience programme, 28 per cent were aware and 2 per cent were slightly aware. An all-boys school in Dublin indicated "Yes but I would welcome more information". A mixed school in Monaghan pointed out, "Yes. Occasionally, should be more regular. Also, if the Reserve Defence Forces were more active in schools, this would be of great benefit." An all-girls school in Cork maintains, "I have seen some information on the Defence Forces website. It said to contact the 'manpower' officer which seems very male orientated and was off putting. A mixed school in Dublin indicated "No. If I knew this earlier, I would have loved to participate". The survey findings have indicated there is a need to generate greater awareness of the Defence Forces and enhance its visibility through

increased engagement with post-primary schools, a recommendation that the next part of the research will introduce and explore further.

### **Brand Identity**

Keller's brand resonance pyramid evidenced in the literature maintains that certain objectives must be met to achieve brand equity. This includes "ensuring customers identify the brand and associate it with a specific product class or set of needs (Keller, 2020, p.451). Participants were asked when you think of the Defence Forces what comes to mind the most. Five options were presented with the option to pick one of the following; opportunity to serve your country, varied career, sport and fitness, educational opportunities and adventure and challenges. The findings, illustrated in figure 3.4, indicate that only 4 per cent of respondents associate educational opportunities when they first consider the Defence Forces brand, indicating that educational opportunities are not a core brand association.



**Figure 3.4: Brand Identity**

Lt Col Eugene Cooke, the Director of Public Relations Branch (PRB) in the Defence Forces was asked, do you think the Defence Forces could enhance brand awareness through wider knowledge of the alternative pathway to education that the organisation provides? He explained,

I do agree with you it was one of the things that struck me when I came into the job first. We did have a number of engagements with the media around the education possibilities within the Defence Forces and pathways.... trying to get that message out there that we do provide various levels of education to various levels within our organisation....But for me, there's absolutely real value in us getting the message out, the education opportunities and Defence Forces, it's one of the big positives.

On a similar point McMahon, the Officer in charge of Recruitment Branch, was asked if she thinks that the Defence Force recruitment demographic, including, the parents and teachers are aware of the alternative pathway to third-level education that the organisation provides. She pointed out,

No, when we go to school talks, unless we have been there before a lot of the guidance teachers or the teachers themselves are unaware of the opportunities that are available within the Defence Forces. So it is a big thing that we will try to formalise in the coming years is our school visits campaign. A lot of parents and teachers are unaware of what the Defence Forces can offer regarding third- level education.

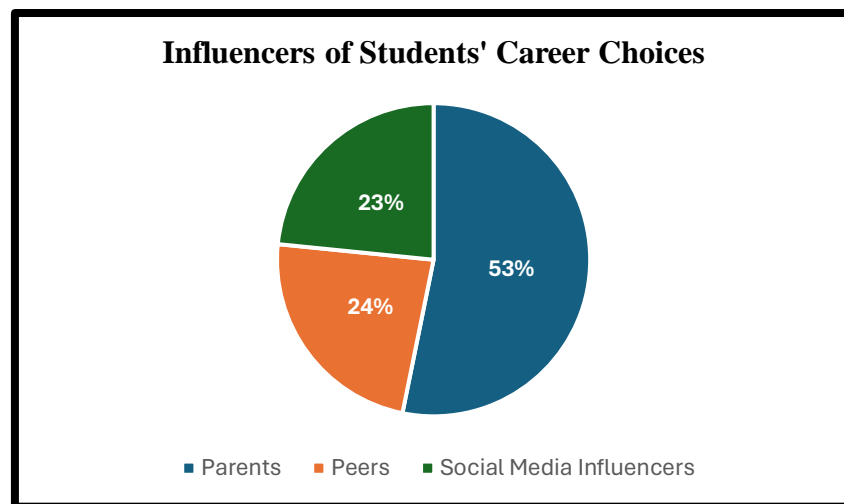
The survey participants were asked: Do you believe post-primary school students would be motivated to join the Defence Forces if there was greater awareness of the educational links it has with third-level academic institutions in Ireland? Over 74 per cent indicated that greater awareness of the educational link would be worthwhile motivating students to consider the Defence Forces as a viable career choice. A mixed school in Kerry maintains, "It is a hard one to answer. Yes, in some cases perhaps. However, I also feel this generation want things immediately if that makes sense. So, if the option was there for them to go straight to third-level, they will take it." An all-boys school in Dublin believes, "Yes their parents might be more supportive". A mixed school in Sligo highlighted that "Yes I think you need to visit schools". A mixed school in Laois maintains "Yes, a recruit came to our school and met students. It was brilliant. I would love more awareness and would love to bring my students to a barracks/camp". An all-girls school in Kilkenny indicated that "Yes possibly but the expectation to transfer to third-level immediately after the Leaving Cert is the norm".

A mixed school in Monaghan indicated "Yes. Until 2022, it was difficult to get the Defence Forces to visit the school, even reply to an email invitation. The Navy visited last year, and it was a great success, in terms of interest and further research by students". A mixed school in Sligo explained "Yes. Third-level can be very expensive for some and subsequently not very accessible. To be able to avail of further and higher education as a member of the Defence Forces could be very appealing for some". An all-boys school in Waterford points out "Yes - we have 1100 all-boys in my school, we would like to organise a Careers fair in October and would love to get the Defence Forces present".

Having analysed the data some clear themes emerged from their responses. When the Defence Forces have visited a post-primary school, it has been positively received and generated greater awareness and further research of the Defence Forces among adolescents, however more engagement would be welcome by schools. It seems, there is a lack of clarity around the mechanisms for requesting visits and educational opportunities. Pivoting the educational benefits and cost-saving measures towards parents may generate support and awareness of the Defence Forces in this market segment. However, it is apparent the current generation want things immediately including the expectation of an immediate transition to third-level education.

### *Brand Identity and the 'Parents'*

It was evidenced that parents have been found to impact the career selection process of their children and encouragement from teachers has the greatest influence on children from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Alcott, 2017). The survey participants were asked, who influences the career choices of students in Ireland today. Four options were presented with the option to pick one of the following; parents, teachers, peers, and social media influencers. 53 per cent of respondents believe that parents are the main influencers, 24 per cent of respondents maintain that peers have the most influence and 23 per cent contend that social media influencers have an impact on the career choices of students in Ireland today (figure 3.5). Interestingly none of the respondents selected teachers despite 23 per cent indicating that their school is a member of the DEIS programme, differing from the literature evidenced. The findings have further emphasised the importance of generating awareness of the wider educational benefits of the Defence Forces with a market focus on parents.



**Figure 3.5: Influencers of Students' Career Choices**

In support of the second subordinate research question McMahon, the Officer in charge of Recruitment Branch was asked, has Recruitment Branch ever targeted parents of the recruitment demographic or the school guidance counsellors in any specific recruitment campaigns. She explained, "We use print media and radio adverts to engage with them. We don't get any feedback on it, because there is no way they can provide feedback on it really unless we do surveys." It was evidenced that to grow and sustain brand equity the ability to measure and interpret brand performance is essential. Key concepts include brand audits, brand tracking and a brand equity management system. (Kotler and Keller, 2012). Measuring and interpreting the impact the Defence Forces brand has on its target market is essential to identify where gaps exist and where improvements can be made. Director of PRB Cooke

pointed out, “We do a public perception survey<sup>3</sup> at least once a year. Identifying is our message out there effectively that's what we are trying to achieve with that.”

### **Unique Brand Associations**

It was evidenced that, “Customer-based brand equity occurs when the customer has a high level of awareness and familiarity of the brand and holds in their memory some strong, favourable and unique brand associations” (Keller et al. 2012, p.59). Participants were asked are you aware of any associations/partnerships between the Defence Forces and third-level institutions in Ireland? 74 per cent of respondents indicated that they were not aware, 15 per cent of respondents indicated awareness and a further 11 per cent indicated some knowledge of partnerships between the Defence Forces and third-level institutions (figure 3.6). An all-girls school in Kilkenny had a high level of awareness and pointed out “Yes - University of Galway, UL and TUD and SETU Carlow. An all-girls school in Cork maintains, “Not really but I know how to get more information if a student was interested”. McMahon, the Officer in charge of Recruitment Branch was asked if the Defence Force recruitment demographic, including the parents and teachers are aware of the alternative pathway to third-level education that the organisation provides explained that,

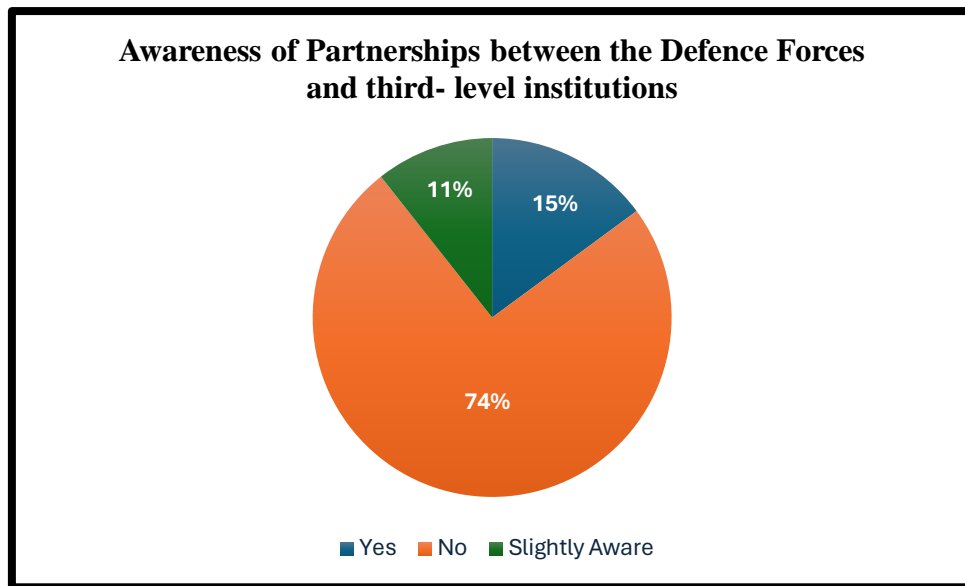
So, it is a message we need to get out there...One of my plans was to get a Defence Forces prospectus out and have a chat to the Defence Forces Registrar<sup>4</sup> about it. But again, it's just another one of the projects that we're working on. That is going to take a bit of time, but we think that's something along the lines of a prospectus that we would send out to every school and would give career guidance teachers a better idea of what we offer.

Participants were also asked would your post-primary school be interested to learn about the wider educational benefits of Defence Forces membership. 85 per cent of respondents indicated that yes, they would be interested, 9 per cent were unsure and 6 per cent were not interested. A mixed school in Dublin contends, “I think so and I believe it'd be a great addition for transition year students to partake in”. The findings have clearly indicated that educational links with third-level institutions is not a unique brand association for the Defence Forces, leading to recommendations that the next part will introduce and explore further.

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<sup>3</sup> Empathy Research were engaged to conduct the most recent public perception research for the Defence Forces in 2022.

<sup>4</sup> The Defence Forces Registrar is a senior officer employed in Training and Education Branch Defence Forces HQ who leads the design and delivery of accredited academic programmes of education across the Defence Forces.



**Figure 3.6: Awareness of Academic Partnerships**

### **Brand Alliance Opportunities**

It has been evidenced that brand extension strategies such as co-branding are instrumental in increasing awareness and brand equity. Malhotra et al. define cobranding as “a brand alliance strategy to bolster reach, awareness, and sales potential by tapping the prospective customers of partnering brands” (2022, p.17). Brand alliance opportunities can take many forms and can include leveraging co-followership on social media which means collaborating with other users or brands who have a similar target audience to expand reach and enhance brand visibility and awareness. When asked does PRB collaborate with Recruitment Branch in relation to the use of social media platforms and engagement techniques, the Director of PRB Cooke explained,

We have coordinating conferences with them once a month so we both know what each other is doing, and that our work is mutually supporting as well... The social media handles and accounts I run are the primary ones for the organisation. There are subordinate accounts, that competitions section, do run...We are quite open that they use our accounts and handles for their material to get it out as we have much more followers than they have. So, the answer is yes.

While the data collated has identified that the Defence Forces is leveraging co-following on social media platforms internally, it was also positive to note that plans are integrated and not created in a vacuum.

### *Leveraging Secondary Association through Co-Branding*

Further data was analysed from the research to answer the research question, can the Defence Forces enhance brand equity through a digital marketing strategy that leverages secondary association with its academic partners, contributors to professional military

education for the organisation and support recruitment. It was recently reported in the Irish Examiner that,

The Defence Forces are set to spend €140,000 on branded merchandise, including silicone wristbands, insulated coffee cups, mobile phone Pop Sockets, and shopping trolley tokens. The goods which also include protein shakers, leather notebooks and a range of clothing will feature the military logo and slogans including “BE MORE” and “Strengthen the Nation”, according to newly published tender documents (McDonagh, 2023).

It was evidenced that Cialdini’s principles of persuasion can heavily influence marketing psychology which includes the principle of reciprocity. Giving out branded merchandise to the relevant audience is a common way of demonstrating the reciprocity principle of persuasion in marketing. This can create a positive association with the brand and increase the likelihood that people will associate and resonate with the brand. The interviewees were asked has the Defence Forces considered co-branding its branded merchandise with an academic institution, for example Maynooth University or another academic partner. McMahon, the Officer in charge of Recruitment Branch pointed out,

I know we haven't explored co-branding... I think there would be lot of caution around it. And there has to be a lot of checks so the message does tie in with whoever you're co-branding with. We're such an institution, it would be hard to call, and I think it would be hard to co-brand.

Cooke the Director of PRB explained,

Have we looked at branding with another organisation? No, we haven't....Certainly from time to time I am considering what I can do around how we collaborate with commercial entities by public procurement guidelines.

It appears from the data gleaned from the semi-structured interviews that several barriers exist to enable physical co-branding of merchandise with an external academic institution. This includes an ‘institutionalised’ culture compounded by stringent public procurement guidelines, a conclusion the next part will further explore.

#### *Leveraging Secondary Association through Innovation*

Brexendorf et al. posit an interesting brand-innovation virtuous cycle. They maintain that strong brands are not only supported by innovation but are also an important path to and source of innovation (2015). The Director of PRB was asked has his branch used innovation to enhance brand equity for the Defence Forces. He pointed out,

Let us talk about one that we are involved in today, we commissioned a centenary book, which was written by an academic Eoin Kinsella. We also collaborate with third-level institutes in terms of the Defence Forces annual review...Last year, we collaborated with University of Galway, the previous year

Maynooth University and again, it's an academic journal that we publish once a year, where we give an opportunity for both our own people and people external to the organisation to discuss defence matters.

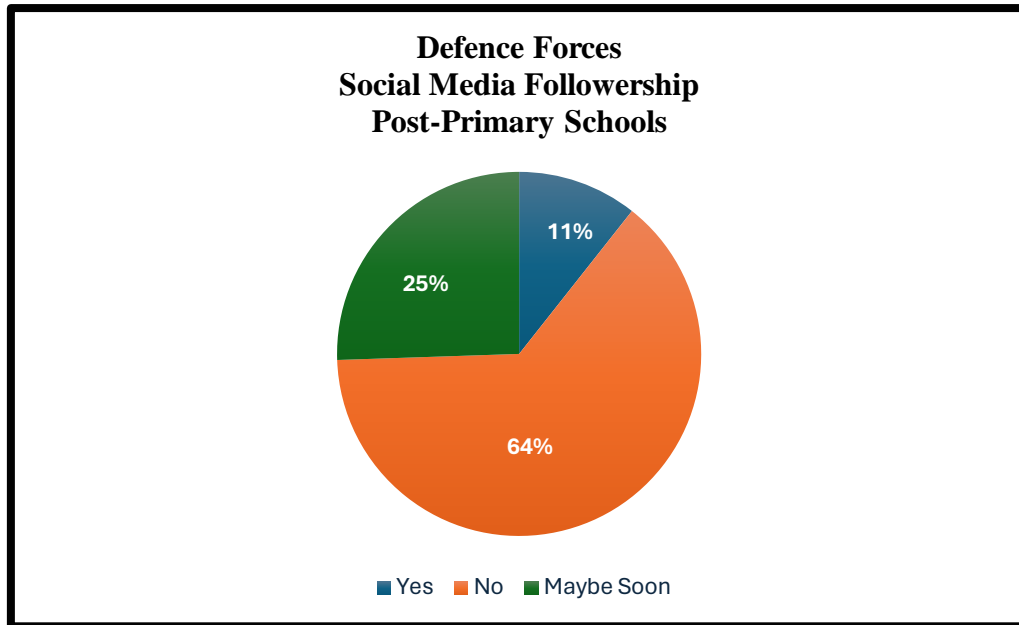
The brand-innovation virtuous cycle contends that innovations influence brands perceptions, attitudes, and usage. The Defence Forces is not only enhancing knowledge generation for the organisation through innovation but also enhancing brand awareness through its external collaboration. The dynamic interactions with academics, government and industry through the centenary book and the Defence Forces Annual Review are prime examples of the Triple Helix Model of Innovation evidenced. This represents an opportunity to enhance brand equity for the Defence Forces through a unique brand association with academia. A report into marketing trends for 2022 indicated that an increasing number of digital audiences are seeking out brands that are authentic, transparent, and innovative (HubSpot, 2022). Focusing innovative digital content to the relevant audience, will be explored through recommendations in the next part.

### **Social Media Platforms**

Four central themes have framed my findings and analysis thus far providing answers to the first and second subordinate research questions. The pertinent themes have included brand awareness, brand identity, unique brand associations and brand alliance opportunities, all essential components to enhance brand equity. The themes of social media platforms and digital transformation will be analysed and presented, in support of the final subordinate research question, what digital marketing practices can enhance brand equity for the Defence Forces?

Survey participants were asked if they know where to access information on the Defence Forces. 68 per cent of respondents indicated they recognise where to access information on the Defence Forces and 32 per cent of respondents indicated that they are unaware of where to access information on the Defence Forces. Participants were also asked if their post-primary school follows the Defence Forces through its social media platforms. 11 per cent of the survey respondents indicated that their post primary school follows the Defence Forces on social media. The remaining 89 per cent of respondents do not follow the Defence Forces on social media but 25 per cent would consider it soon (figure 3.7). Rogers contends that social media marketing helps brands to create, nurture and build relationships with consumers, thereby enhancing brand equity. She further contends that brands include the generation of timely and relevant content via social media platforms as part of strategic marketing initiatives (2021). When asked about his priorities for generating positive awareness of the Defence Forces brand in his area of responsibility and if he has the resources to achieve this Cooke the Director of PRB pointed out,

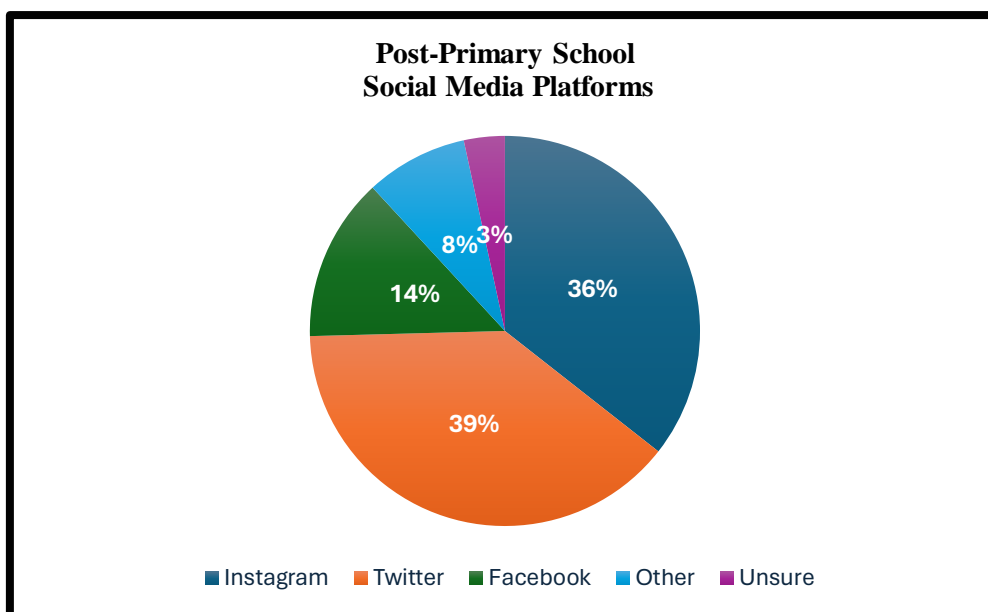




**Figure 3.7: Defence Forces Social Media Followership**

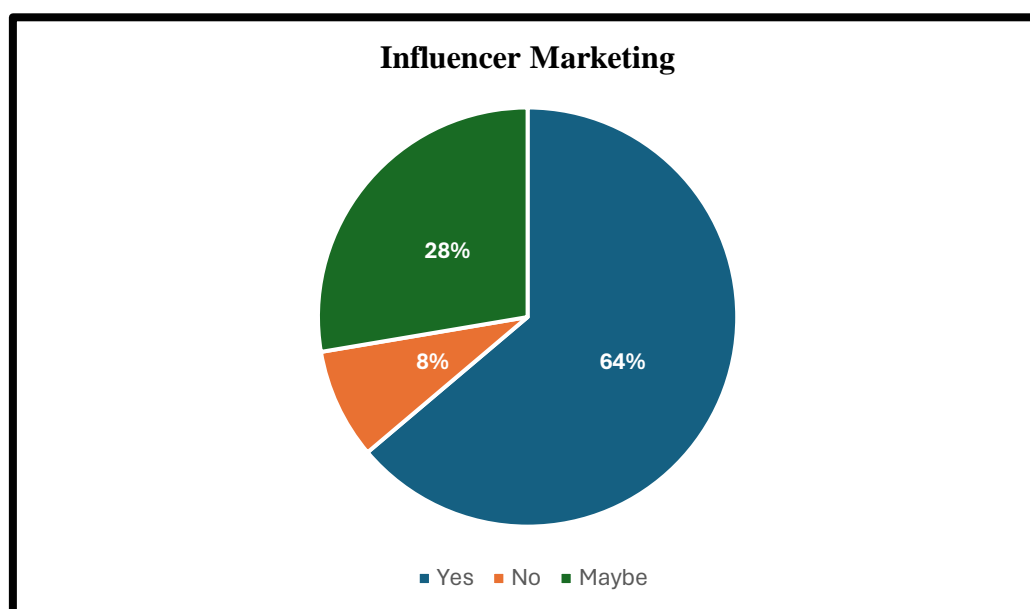
What I could see a need for, is separating out the social media work that we do from the press office giving it potentially its own section or certainly a standalone staff member. At the moment, I have a press officer, who also does social media and does very well, in terms of we win awards for our social media every year. But I would prefer to have a press officer and a social media manager rather than one person doing both.

Survey participants were asked what social media platforms, does your post-primary school use. The findings, illustrated in figure 3.8, indicate that close to 100 per cent of post-primary schools surveyed use some form of social media platform to communicate with students and their parents. Twitter and Instagram stand out as the most popular social media platforms used by the respondents.



**Figure 3.8: Post-Primary School Social Media Platforms**

To gain further insights on social media trends among the teacher demographic participants were asked their preferred platforms if they use social media. 68 per cent of respondents answered Instagram for this question. Furthermore, participants were asked do you consider post-primary students to be persuaded through influencer marketing. 64 per cent of respondents indicated yes, 28 per cent answered maybe and 8 per cent did not consider post-primary students to be persuaded through influencer marketing (figure 3.9).



**Figure 3.9: Influencer Marketing**

As evidenced influencer marketing accounts for 30 per cent of the top marketing channels in 2022 (HubSpot, 2022). The Director of PRB was asked has the Defence Forces engaged in

influencer marketing to generate wider awareness of the brand. Cooke, the Director of PRB pointed out,

We did and we used the Irish dancers the Gardiner Brothers<sup>5</sup> on a collaboration. We were targeting the TikTok demographic, onto our account. That's why we use them. And it was extremely successful.<sup>6</sup> However, interestingly, it didn't go down particularly well with certain sections of our internal audience...We went around and briefed afterwards, what we were doing and why we were doing it.

Participants were asked about the most popular social media platforms used by students in their post-primary school. The data, illustrated in figure 3.10 revealed that Snapchat (31%), TikTok (23%) and Instagram (19%) are the top three most popular social media applications used by students. McMahon, the Officer in charge of Recruitment Branch also pointed out, “the engagement with the recruitment demographic is on social media. They don’t like calls, they don’t like email just direct messaging on social media platforms.” Social media and influencer marketing can ably assist the growth trajectory of a brand and must be adequately resourced to keep pace with digital transformation.

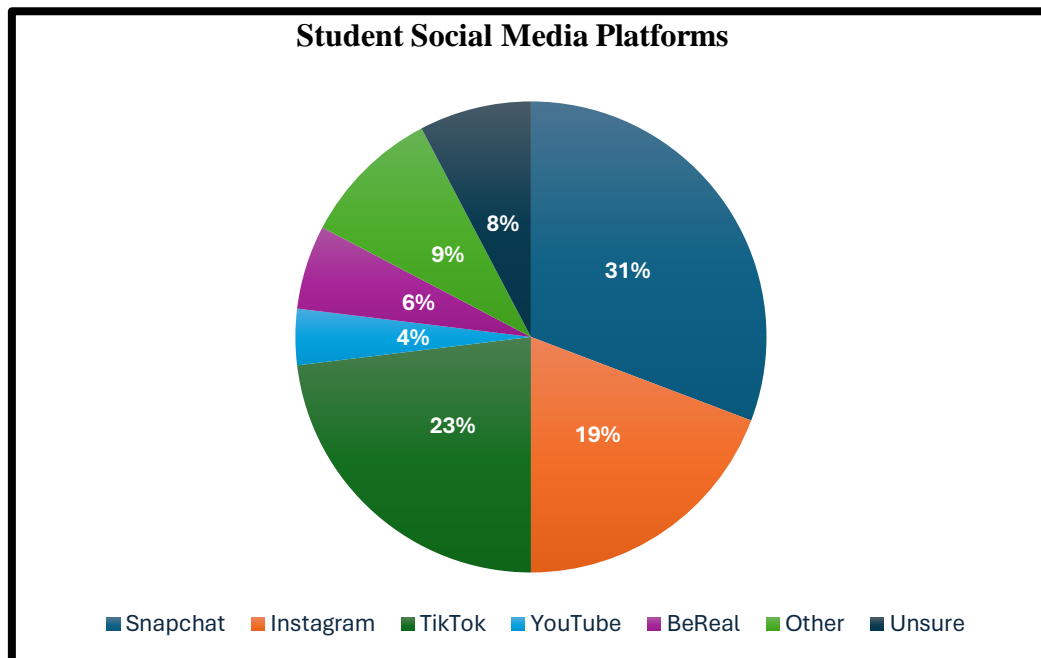


Figure 3.10: Student Social Media Platforms

### Digital Transformation

Fitzgerald et al. describe digital transformation as the use of new digital technologies such as social media, mobile technology, analytics, or embedded devices to enable major business

<sup>5</sup> The Gardiner Brothers have 350 million views on social media and have recently had brand collaborations with McDonalds and Red Bull, amongst others (Gardinerbrothers, 2023).

<sup>6</sup> Data analytics indicated, >100k views across TikTok & Instagram, >5k new followers on TikTok and Instagram, 67% of viewers were 18-24 years (Defence Forces, 2023).

improvements including enhanced customer experiences, streamlined operations or new business models (2014, p. 2). McMahon, the Officer in charge of Recruitment Branch was asked, how digital transformation can enhance recruitment for the Defence Forces. She pointed out “the website has to improve for the gatekeepers. They are more likely to go to the website from the research that we've done on this demographic, which does a lot of research on YouTube.” As part of the survey a link to the Defence Forces website was sent to participants. They were asked to rate out of five if they consider the official website to be mobile optimised and user friendly, enhancing their knowledge of the organisation. The results indicated a 3.51 average rating for the website.

When questioned, how do you think the Defence forces can enhance its brand through digital transformation going forward, Cooke the Director of PRB pointed out,

I think in the first instance, in terms of our use of social media, traditionally we have been very good using those platforms. I think we got in very early in terms of serving a public body. I've already mentioned our use of TikTok has proved extremely successful. This year in terms of digital transformation we've adopted an internal communications App for our internal audience.

A viewpoint evidenced in the literature on the inside-out brand management approach focused on what needs to happen within an organisation to create a robust brand. The concept denotes the placement of values, culture, and people at the centre when creating and sustaining brand equity (Mitterer and Brice 2007). An effective internal communications platform within an organisation can promote employee engagement and, encouraging positive experiences to be shared externally. This will be further explored through recommendations in the next Part.

## **Conclusion**

This part has presented the findings from the primary research under the framework of thematic analysis. This enabled the data collected from the focused survey and semi-structured interviews to be analysed supporting the pertinent themes deduced in part one. The following key points have emerged from the research.

It emerged that post-primary schools throughout Ireland would welcome greater awareness of the Defence Forces through increased school visits by members of the organisation and through visits by students to military installations, along with clear guidance on how to request such visits. Furthermore, activity by the Reserve Defence Forces in post-primary schools may enhance awareness of the Defence Forces brand.

There is a lack of awareness of the transition year work experience programme occasionally run by the Defence Forces for transition year students. Post-primary schools would welcome more information with some students missing this valuable opportunity due to a lack of awareness.

The generic use of the masculine gender as it relates to the term ‘Manpower’ Officer, on the Defence Forces official website is discouraging schools from applying for the transition year work experience programme. According to the European Parliament expressions such as manpower should be discouraged (2018).

The alternative pathway to third-level education offered through a career in the Defence Forces is not associated and identified with the Defence Forces brand along with its partnerships with third-level academic institutions in Ireland. It emerged that awareness of the educational link would be worthwhile, motivating students to consider the Defence Forces as a career choice.

It emerged that the Defence Forces is not segmenting and targeting its market fully in an overarching organisational digital marketing strategy. The results have shown that parents have the greatest influence over the career choices of students in Ireland today. The Defence Forces is missing an opportunity to interpret brand performance and build brand equity in the absence of targeted digital marketing for the 'parents' market segment.

Regarding digital transformation close to 100 per cent of schools use social media platforms to communicate with students and their parents, yet only 11 per cent of the survey respondents indicated that their post-primary school follows the Defence Forces on social media. This indicates, the Defence Forces digital presence on social media platforms has limited penetration amongst post-primary schools in Ireland.

Part four further explores these findings in consideration of the research aim identified, draws informed conclusions, and offers recommendations for the Defence Forces to consider. Recommendations for future research have also been made.

## **PART FOUR: Conclusions and Recommendations**

The aim of this research was to establish how can the Defence Forces enhance brand equity through a digital marketing strategy that leverages secondary association with its academic partners, contributors to professional military education for the organisation and support recruitment. Generating greater awareness of the educational benefits offered through a career in the Defence Forces, will ensure that potential candidates identify the brand and uniquely associate it with education supporting recruitment at a time when personnel numbers are low within the organisation. This part provides a summary of the key findings and conclusions, offers recommendations to the organisation, identifies the strengths and limitations of the research and suggestions for further research.

### **Summary of Findings and Conclusions**

This section will present a summary of the key findings answering the primary and secondary questions posed as part of this research.

#### *Brand Awareness*

The survey findings have indicated there is a need to generate greater awareness of the Defence Forces and enhance its visibility through greater engagement with post-primary schools. This is a gap that has not been referred to in the literature. It emerged from the survey that 38 per cent of post-primary schools throughout Ireland have received a visit from members of the Defence Forces and only 21 per cent of post-primary schools had visited a military installation. When the Defence Forces have visited a post-primary school, it has been positively received and generated greater awareness and further research among adolescents. Nonetheless, post-primary schools would welcome greater awareness of the

Defence Forces through increased school visits by members of the organisation and visits by students to military installations, along with clear guidance on how to request such visits. 70 per cent of respondents indicated that they were unaware of the transition year work experience programme occasionally run by the Defence Forces. Post-primary schools would welcome more information with some students missing this valuable opportunity due to a lack of awareness. The generic use of the masculine gender as it relates to the term 'Manpower' Officer, on the Defence Forces official website is discouraging schools from applying for the transition year work experience programme. It further emerged that more activity by the Reserve Defence Forces in post-primary schools may enhance awareness of the Defence Forces brand.

#### *Brand Identity -Educational Opportunities*

It was evidenced that, "Customer-based brand equity occurs when the customer has a high level of awareness and familiarity of the brand and holds in their memory some strong, favourable and unique brand associations" (Keller et al. 2012, p.59). The findings, indicate that only 4 per cent of respondents associate educational opportunities when they first consider the Defence Forces brand, indicating that education is not a core brand association. Over 74 per cent of respondents indicated that greater awareness of the educational link would be worthwhile motivating students to consider the Defence Forces as a viable career choice. Pivoting the educational benefits and cost-saving measures towards parents, evidenced to have the greatest influence over the career choices of students in Ireland today, may generate support and awareness of the Defence Forces in this market segment. The Defence Forces is lacking the ability to interpret brand performance and build brand equity in the absence of targeted digital marketing for the 'parents' market segment. 74 per cent of respondents indicated that they were not aware of any associations/partnerships between the Defence Forces and third-level institutions in Ireland. It was evident that wider awareness of the educational opportunities would be a positive addition for the transition year work experience programme. It was revealed the current generation want things immediately including the expectation of an immediate transition to third-level education. The most recent education indicators for Ireland have revealed the transition rates from post-primary to higher education include 43.4 per cent DEIS schools and 69.3 per cent non-DEIS schools (Government of Ireland, 2023).

#### *Digital Transformation*

The brand awareness findings highlighted that digital marketing alone cannot solely enhance brand equity for the Defence Forces and students benefit from in person contact with members of the organisation. The generation of enhanced brand awareness through visits is therefore essential to build and sustain brand equity for the Defence Forces. It has been evidenced, "that brands include the generation of timely and relevant content via social media platforms as part of strategic marketing initiatives (Rogers, 2021). The findings have identified how leveraging secondary association through co-branding and innovation can enhance brand equity for the Defence Forces and create unique brand associations and brand alliance opportunities. The findings have indicated that close to 100 per cent of schools use social media platforms to communicate with students and their parents, yet only 11 per cent of the survey respondents indicated that their post-primary school follows the Defence Forces on social media. This indicates the Defence Forces digital presence through social media platforms has limited penetration across Ireland's post-primary schools. 64 per cent of

respondents indicated that they consider post-primary students to be persuaded through influencer marketing. It was evidenced “by working with the right influencers, you can reach new customers and expand your brand's reach in ways traditional advertising simply cannot” (Duke, 2022). The Defence Forces recently engaged in a successful influencer marketing campaign targeting its recruitment demographic resulting in increased followers on its social media platforms. Based on current marketing trends and insights both social media and influencer marketing are among the top marketing channels evidenced (HubSpot 2022).

### **Research Strengths and Limitations**

The main strength of this research was that it provided a new and relevant perspective into enhancing brand equity for the Defence Forces, through digital marketing with a particular focus on the alternative pathway to third level education offered through the Defence Forces. This is at a time when the organisation has prioritised recruitment and is embracing a significant pivot in terms of digital culture and digital transformation. Future studies could build on this with engagement with the marketing departments of third-level academic institutions to gain an external perspective on co-branding.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are made to enhance brand equity and support recruitment for the Irish Defence Forces.

#### *Plan and Implement a Brand Marketing Programme*

Establish an innovative and fully resourced post-primary school visits campaign to include parents, teachers, and students with a specific focus on the educational benefits associated with a career in the Defence Forces, links with third-level academic institutions and the transition year work experience programme. This campaign should be supported with valuable video content and innovative interactive tools such as augmented and virtual reality. It is also recommended that the co-branding of official Defence Forces merchandise with its academic partners is explored as part of the recommended campaign.

#### *Digital Transformation-Official Website Updates*

It is recommended that the mechanism to apply for visits to and from the Defence Forces is enhanced. This includes the creation of a visit request web form, easily accessible, with an automatic receipt acknowledgement on both the Defence Forces and Department of Defence websites. A new dedicated visits page on the Defence Organisation websites should be ably supported with relevant video content, on what to expect from a visit. Any website updates should be supported by Search Engine Optimisation (SEO). The language on the website should be audited for biased or gendered terms and the term ‘labour force’ is offered as an alternative to ‘manpower’.

#### *Broaden Digital Reach through an Omnichannel Comprehensive Approach*

It is recommended that the Recruitment Branch email database of post-primary schools, principal's association and guidance counsellors is regularly updated. Email marketing should

be leveraged, through frequent emails with innovative and creative content promoting the educational benefits of the Defence Forces to schools.

It is recommended that the Defence Forces broaden their digital reach to post-primary schools through social media platforms and increase influencer marketing, promoting collaborations with its academic partners. Assigning a separate qualified individual to social media management is recommended. It is recommended that the newly launched innovative internal communications platform is used to promote engagement with the internal audience on educational opportunities. This can promote employee engagement and collaboration encouraging positive experiences of the brand to be shared externally, enhancing brand equity and supporting recruitment.

### **Further Research**

This study uncovered several themes worthy of further research on the topics of digital marketing, strategic brand management, innovation and education. Continuous research in this area will ensure that the Defence Forces is regularly apprised of best practice, current trends, and insights to enhance its digital culture, innovation and digital transformation, rapidly evolving and dynamic paradigms for the organisation. Engagement with third level academic institutes outlined in the Professional Military Education Strategy<sup>7</sup> is worthy of further research to gain an external perspective on co-branding. There is scope for Irish educational researchers to research the alternative pathway to education offered by a career in the Defence Forces. This may address the attainment gap between DEIS and mainstream students in attending higher education (Government of Ireland, 2023). There is scope for the Defence Forces to consider offering their courses through the Central Applications Office (CAO) but this requires further research.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The opportunities that exist in the Defence Forces for professional military education are remarkable. Further education is a unique selling point that can enhance the Defence Forces brand and makes it stand out in the market. Many post-primary students have an expectation to transfer to third-level education immediately after their Leaving Certificate but they, their parents and teachers do not associate an alternative pathway to third-level education with the Defence Forces. The time has come to generate awareness of the unique brand associations between the Defence Forces and its academic partners. Awareness of the pathway to further education offered through the Defence Forces provides a distinct opportunity to enhance brand equity and support recruitment for the organisation. This work has been driven by my interest in marketing and my desire to contribute to its improvement in an organisation that strives for academic excellence.

***Please note that this views expressed in this article are those of the author alone and should not be taken to represent the views of the Irish Defence Forces, the Command and Staff School or any other group or organisation.***

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<sup>7</sup> This includes Maynooth University, Cork Institute of Technology, National Maritime College Ireland (NMCI), SOLAS and the Technical University Dublin (TUD) (Defence Forces, 2021). It is recommended that any research with academic institutes is done in collaboration with the Defence Forces Registrar to ensure all academic partners are captured.



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