The Influence of Digital Marketing on the Student Recruitment Process in the Private Higher Education Sector in Perú

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Abstract

The general objective of this research was to analyze the influence of Digital Marketing on the student recruitment process in the Private Higher Education Sector in Peru. To do this, the current context of the Higher Education Sector in Peru is described, and the dimensions of digital marketing are explored. The methodology used is mixed since interviews with digital marketing managers from Peruvian universities with a business focus were conducted, and 380 surveys aimed at students from the same universities were conducted as a sample. Furthermore, the data collected through surveys were reviewed, processed, and analyzed using SPSS statistical software. Finally, based on quantitative and qualitative research, it was observed that there is a positive correlation between the student recruitment process in the Private Higher Education Sector in Peru and the application of digital marketing tools, as supported by numerical evidence.

Keywords
Digital Marketing, student recruitment process, Higher Education Sector, CRM, Social Network.

1. Introduction
Marketing is a fundamental axis to the economic growth of organizations. Zambrano (2018) defines marketing as the process by which companies create value for final consumers and establish powerful relationships with them. Over time, technological and cultural changes have impacted the development of a new type of consumer, characterized by being multichannel. In his intervention at the National Marketing Congress in 2017, Isabelle Castelain, director of digital marketing and channels at Citibanamex, points out that nowadays, consumers are even more demanding than before. That multi-channeling has changed the experience that companies must offer to the final consumer. Also, in 2020, a worldwide survey conducted among digital marketing leaders found that the most significant challenge in executing digital marketing strategies was providing personalized experiences (Statista, 2022). Furthermore, the arrival of new technologies such as the internet and social networks has changed the global scene, making the market a field that goes far beyond a geographical space and cyberspace, the stage of new commercial confrontations in the world (Meléndez, 2018; De Xena, 2012).

This technological revolution led to the appearance of the entitled "Digital Marketing," which Enriquez (2021) defines as the active and intelligent application of technology to contribute to marketing activities, increasing new customers and withholding the existing customers; additionally, it applies to selling strategies through digital media such as social networks and new technologies where there are constant interactions and feedback with users. It's important to mention that digital marketing is not only an exclusive tool for companies that intend to achieve a rapprochement between the offer and demand of products and services. Currently, it's also necessary to apply digital marketing techniques and procedures in the educational market, to which schools, institutes, universities, and other training centers belong. If educational institutions introduce digital marketing strategies, they can achieve an efficient position in the market for better recruitment of students and greater retention of them, optimally revealing the attributes, benefits, and characteristics of their educational product or service (Enriquez, 2021). In "The digital strategy to connect with digital youth," Prieto (2014) emphasizes the importance of a digital marketing strategy aimed at promoting universities' educational services worldwide. This is evidenced in reports from the Statista portal (2022), where they prove that in 2020, the internet advertising expenses in Latin America

grew by 7.7% compared to 2019. Likewise, more than four out of five people in Chile, Uruguay, Puerto Rico, and Peru actively used social media in January 2021.

Regarding the demand for university education in Peru, in 2018, 19.8% of young Peruvians between 17 and 24 years old were registered in a university representing 1.3 million people (Molina, 2019). In addition, a technical report in Peru in 2021 revealed that 90.9% and 85.7% of the population from 19 to 24 years old and from 12 to 18 years old, respectively, are the most significant users of the internet and social networks (INEI, 2021). As we can see, there is an excellent opportunity for private universities in Peru that seek to improve student recruitment processes by implementing digital marketing strategies, since the age group to which their marketing efforts are directed are the most active users on digital platforms. Therefore, universities must adapt and apply new strategies and technologies that allow consumers to understand the quality and efficiency of the educational work (Enriquez, 2021). An organization that resists change in the future will not be able to survive in a highly fragmented and increasingly competitive market.

This research's primary motivation is to analyze digital marketing's influence in recruiting students in private universities with a business focus in Peru. For it, you will see a five main part structure. The first chapter belongs to the approach and diagnosis of the problem. The second chapter focuses on the conceptualization of the main terminology. Chapter three develops the contextual framework and state of the art, followed by chapter four which defines the methodology to be used to analyze the correlation under study. Finally, the fifth chapter corresponds to the implications and conclusions drawn from the development of the investigation.

1.1. Objectives

1.1.1 General Objective
Describe how digital marketing influences the process of student recruitment in private universities with an entrepreneurial or business focus in Peru.

1.1.2 Specific Objectives
- Describe how social networks are related to the process of student recruitment in private universities with an entrepreneurial or business focus in Peru.
- Describe how email marketing is related to the process of student recruitment in private universities with an entrepreneurial or business focus in Peru.
- Describe how SEO and SEM are related to the process of student recruitment in private universities with an entrepreneurial or business focus in Peru.
- Describe how content marketing is related to the process of student recruitment in private universities with an entrepreneurial or business focus in Peru.
- Describe how relationship marketing is related to the process of student recruitment in private universities with an entrepreneurial or business focus in Peru.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Marketing
The American Marketing Association (2017) defined marketing as "an activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large" (American Marketing Association, 2017). In other words, marketing is the way of transmitting structured information and data about products or services to customers or possible customers. In addition, marketing is a series of operational and management activities with the function of planning, operating, promoting, and guiding customers. Marketing aims to target the customer through market segmentation and create customer relations through customer satisfaction. (Sherlekar & Sharad, 2009). Moreover, Zambrano (2018) defines marketing as the process by which companies create value for final consumers and establish powerful relationships with them. Therefore, if managed strategically, marketing can become a fundamental axis in the economic growth of organizations, indistinctive of the type or the sector where it is applied. As stated by Kannan (2017), further research on the specific marketing dimensions that best adapt to each business environment can be made in order to have adequate guidance on how to elaborate a marketing strategy or plan effectively.

2.2 Digital Marketing

The digital revolution has transformed the way consumer reacts to business strategies. From the awareness of the daily events in the morning newspaper to the modernization of social networks, people's perception has been adapted by a technological bubble, whose arrival has limited customers to a digital platform (Ghotbifar, 2017). Consequently, businesses have implemented a series of strategies that are carried out through virtual platforms to offer an interactive, targeted and measurable way of influencing consumers. This strategy is known as Digital Marketing (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). Digital marketing has become an essential tool for an increasingly strong competitive market. Given the immersion in the digital age, the use of digital tools has increased the efficiency in reaching potential consumers (Kannan, 2017).

2.2.1 Social Networks

Social networks are the most popular online communication tool today. It allows people to build an extensive and interactive network of contacts (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). This digital communication tool is an efficient tactic for companies since it offers the possibility of promoting, informing, and being connected with their clients in real-time (Leonardi, Huysman, & Steinfield, 2013). The wide dissemination of information and connectivity with people generates greater efficiency of social networks and platforms.

2.2.2 Email Marketing

According to Muñiz (2014), Email Marketing is associated with the use of email for informational and commercial purposes. Email marketing is described as a technique of personal approach to the client through a direct channel, enabling the immediate supply of information. The budget required to carry out email marketing campaigns is very small compared to conventional means. Additionally, the results achieved from an email marketing campaign can be presented in much shorter periods than in the case of traditional marketing. It is a minimally invasive tool that usually shows excellent results (Reul, 2021).

2.2.3 Search Engine Marketing (SEM)

Search Engine Marketing or Search Engine Optimization (SEO) campaigns are growing to the point of being essential to digital marketing strategies. It is the way to expand the visibility of a web page through conventional means such as unpaid search results (Gunjan, 2012). The process starts with a review and change that generates more effective existing keywords to then pass on to the major search engines. SEO focuses on academic, video, local, and image searches. The process of optimization through SEO encompasses content release and HTML coding to optimize the value of the web page for certain keywords and proper indexing (Liu & Nain, 2006).

2.2.4 Content Marketing

Content marketing is one of the most used digital marketing tools. It refers to the data of the website or portal of the company. The purpose is to create things that encourage the user. Content with which the user can sympathize and, consequently, carry out some effect for the benefit of the brand (Giraldo, 2021).

2.2.5 Customer Relationship Marketing (CRM)

The company needs to determine the right customer and their lifetime value to appropriately allocate marketing resources and create a relationship with the customer (Castronovo & Huang, 2012). The components of a CRM are associated with the production of valuable mainstream data to provide knowledge. Information from a dynamic customer database is collected, examined, transmitted, and used to profile the customer. Consequently, with this data, the company can understand, direct and segment customers to create value and increase their loyalty (Fierro, 2017).

2.3 Student Recruitment Process

The student recruitment process refers to the several stages a prospective student undergoes until becoming an official student at a Higher Education Institution (Hossler, 1999). Some authors like Perna (2005) and Turner (1978) have also conceptualized the student recruitment process as the "enrollment funnel" and "admissions funnel" respectively. Additionally, Bontrager (2004) has stated that the "enrollment funnel" contributes to a deeper understanding of the student recruitment process, offering a conceptual framework for the steps a prospective student goes through during the recruitment process, from initial contact to final enrollment. On this note, and according to the conceptual framework of the "enrollment funnel" mentioned by Turner (1978) and Perna (2005), the five distinct stages prospective students move through on their path to enrolling at a university or any other HEIs, start by (1) prospective student, followed by (2) inquirer, (3) applicant, (4) admitted student, and finally (5) enrolled student. Moreover, Perna (2005) compares the process to the metaphor of a narrowing funnel. This illustration offers a better understanding of the student recruitment process undergone by HEIs, as they start by reaching out to a large pool of prospective students, with the number of prospects progressively

decreasing at each successive stage regarding who applies, gets admitted, and officially enrolls (Perna, 2005). **Table 1** details each of the five steps of the process recently mentioned:

Table 1**.** The 5 Stages of the Enrollment Funnel

Stage 1 - Prospective Students
Copeland (2009) defines a prospective student as a potential suspect that falls within a HEIs target market since he or she might enroll in a study program in the future. According to Botranger (2004), the focus of marketing communications during this stage is to create awareness and interest in the final consumer. Gerdzhikov (2015) sums up by stating that the goal is to motivate suspects to inquire for extra information regarding the HEI.

Stage 2 - Inquiries
Following the next stage of the funnel, students move from being potential suspects to becoming inquirers. According to Copeland (2009), inquirers differ from prospective students in the fact that they have expressed an interest in a HEI. As an initial contact with the institution has occurred, an inquiring student is at the information search and opinion-forming stage. At this stage, marketing efforts should be focused on satisfying the needs of the inquirer, using persuasive messages that showcase the value the institution offers. Also, Hossler (1999, states that the objective is to convert inquirers into applicants.

Stage 3 - Applicants
Once the decision to apply at a HEI has been made, a prospect or inquirer officially turns into an applicant (Copeland, 2009). Here, students search for relevant information regarding the application process. Therefore, marketing strategies should be focused on convincing applicants to enroll once they get admitted, as they usually apply to several different institutions. At this stage, the HEI could start building a positive relationship with the student by providing support or guidance during the application process (Gerdzhikov, 2015).

Stage 4 - Admitted Students
Admitted students are applicants that have been accepted into a study program. Copeland (2009) suggests that this is a crucial stage in the recruitment process. Here, admitted students evaluate and compare the value offered by the different institutions where they have been accepted. The variables considered by students at this stage include information about financial aid, accommodation, and other services (Hossler,1999). According to Gerdzhikov (2015), marketing efforts should be focused on identifying the key factors that will positively influence the enrollment decision.

Stage 5 - Enrolled Students
Once the decision is made, the final stage of the enrollment funnel is reached, and the prospective student has officially turned into an enrolled student (Copeland, 2009; Gerdzikov, 2015). As Maringe & Gibbs (2009) suggest, marketing strategies start focusing on retention and offering a quality student experience.

2.4 Digital Marketing in Higher Education Sector

As stated previously, the technological revolution led to the appearance of the entitled "Digital Marketing" and its consequent proliferation and adaptation to different industrial sectors all around the globe. On the same wavelength, marketing strategies in the Higher Education Sector have changed drastically since the introduction of digital marketing tools in the student recruitment process. According to Motta & Barboza (2018), the influence of digital marketing in Higher education is sustained by the high percentage of educational institutions' marketing budgets invested in online marketing activities. Additionally, the increased use of social media around the world has basically forced the presence of universities on social media. However, it is important to highlight the fact that being on social media does not mean just having a university page there. HEIs have the responsibility to be active in it, allowing and motivating students to communicate with each other and the university. According to Weiss (2008), university platforms can provide a basis for an engaging user environment. Additionally, Constantinides (2011) states that social media are ideal extensions for relational marketing activities due to their collaborative and interactive. To sum up, Alexa et al. (2012) state that digital marketing offers universities the possibility to provide the information that best adapts to prospective students´ needs, allows suspects to communicate with the enrolled student and improves corporate image and reputation.

2.5 Research Framework

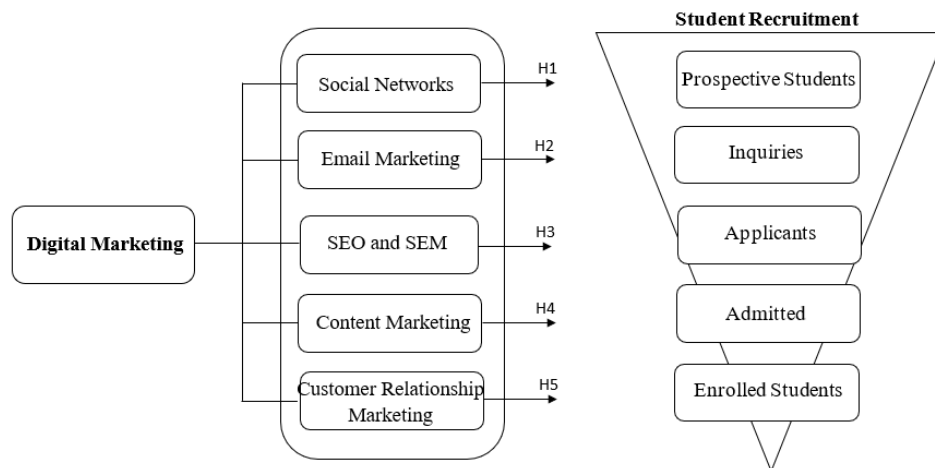Referring to the literature above, **Figure 1** demonstrates the proposed conceptual framework for this study.

Figure 1: Research Framework. Adapted from: Clark, M. et al. (2015) and Blas Soles, T. (2019).

3. Methods

The study was carried out through a non-experimental and cross-sectional design. On this note, Hernandez-Sampieri & Mendoza (2018) points out that a non-experimental design is carried out without variable manipulation and only focuses on observing the situations as they develop in their environment. **Table 2** presents a summary of the research problem and hypotheses.

Table 2. Data summary

Main problem	Hypothesis	Variables
Describe how digital marketing influences the process of student recruitment in private universities with an entrepreneurial or business focus in Peru.	H: There is a positive relationship between digital marketing and student recruitment in private universities with an entrepreneurial or business focus in Peru.	Dependent Variable (Y): Digital Marketing Independent Variable (X): Student Recruitment Process
Secondary problems	Hypothesis	
Describe how social networks are related to student recruitment in private universities with an entrepreneurial or business focus in Peru.	H1: There is a positive relationship between social networks and student recruitment in private universities with an entrepreneurial or business focus in Peru.	
Describe how email marketing is related to student recruitment in private universities with an entrepreneurial or business focus in Peru.	H2: There is a positive relationship between email marketing and student recruitment in private universities with an entrepreneurial or business focus in Peru.	
Describe how SEO and SEM are related to student recruitment in private universities with an entrepreneurial or business focus in Peru.	H3: There is a positive relationship between SEO and SEM and student recruitment in private universities with an entrepreneurial or business focus in Peru.	
Describe how content marketing is related to student recruitment in private universities with an entrepreneurial or business focus in Peru.	H4: There is a positive relationship between content marketing and student recruitment in private universities with an entrepreneurial or business focus in Peru.	
Describe how customer relationship marketing is related to student recruitment in private universities with an entrepreneurial or business focus in Peru.	H5: There is a positive relationship between customer relationship marketing and student recruitment in private universities with an entrepreneurial or business focus in Peru.	

The main theme of this study is to determine how digital marketing influences the process of student recruitment for private universities with an entrepreneurial or business focus in Peru. The research presents two variables that we will seek to relate; these are Digital Marketing (independent variable) and the student recruitment process (dependent variable). However, the primary objective of this research is to demonstrate that our hypothesis is true and thus be able to include this work as a support for success in the private Higher Education sector in Peru. To address the problem in question, some dimensions that encompass the variable of digital marketing were proposed. **Table 3** presents the variables and dimensions used in this study.

Table 3. Variables and Dimensions

Variables		Dimensions
Independent	Digital Marketing	Social Networks
		Email Marketing
		SEO & SEM
		Content Marketing
		Customer Relationship Marketing
Dependent	Student Recruitment Process	Enrollment Funnel

The research had a quantitative and qualitative correlational approach. The process undergone is presented in **Figure 2**.
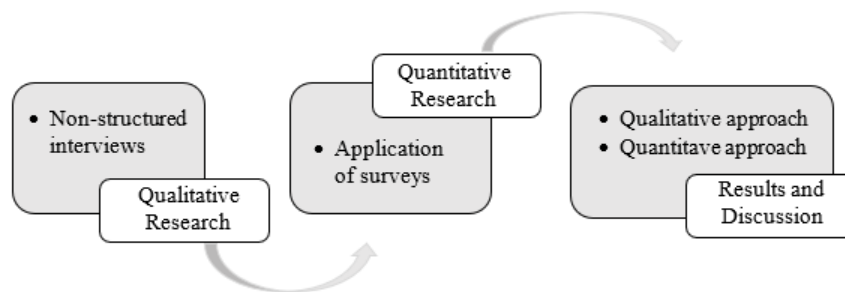

Figure 2: Research Process

As we can see in Figure 2, quantitative research consists of analyzing the relationship between two variables, for which data are collected through the application of surveys. The population is composed of 31729 students applying to San Ignacio de Loyola University (USIL), Pacific University (UP), and ESAN University in 2021 (SUNEDU, 2022). These three Peruvian universities were selected because they are private and have an entrepreneurial or business focus. The finite population formula was used, resulting in a sample of approximately 380 students from these universities. The data collected were concrete, robust, and reliable using the Likert scale. **Table 4** specifies the Likert scale of 1-5 used for the present study.

Table 4. Likert Scale

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Very poor	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

Once the survey and data were reviewed, reliability was sought through Cronbach's alpha. Using Minitab statistical software, the analysis was carried out to validate the relationship of the variables described above. The results were supported by the qualitative information collected by carrying out interviews with digital marketing managers from the sector.

4. Data Collection

For data collection, the first interviews were conducted with three marketing managers from the sector. Moreover, the survey instrument was used to collect the quantitative data necessary for the research. When delimiting the population of students applying to the three private universities with an entrepreneurial or business focus in Peru selected, a sample of 380 students was found. Once the information was collected, it was validated that the surveys were answered correctly to avoid sending additional surveys and reducing bias. After the collection process, SPSS statistical software was used to check the correlation of the variables and the validity of the survey results.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Qualitative Results

Table 5. Main Qualitative Findings

Variables	Dimensions	Number	%	Importance
Digital Marketing	Social Networks	3	100	Without having been specifically consulted about each dimension, we can observe that the digital marketing managers interviewed mentioned in almost 100% of the cases the digital marketing tools identified previously.
	Email Marketing	2	67	
	SEO & SEM	3	100	
	Content Marketing	3	100	
	Customer Relationship Marketing	3	100	

Table 5 shows the importance that the marketing managers interviewed for this work give to each dimension of digital marketing identified. We highlight the topics of Social Networks, SEO & SEM, Content Marketing, and Customer Relationship Marketing, which were mentioned numerous times throughout the three interviews. On the other hand, Email Marketing was not mentioned by one of the managers, suggesting it is not relevant to their digital marketing strategy.

To complement the correlation found using SPSS statistical software, other factors were taken to evaluate in the interviews. When asked about the reason why they started using digital marketing tools as a part of their student recruitment strategy, all three agreed that applying digital marketing tools was the only way in which they could measure accurately if their actions were working. They argue that with a strategy based on traditional media such as radio or television, one can only aspire to infer whether the actions are working or not, much less be able to measure the actual return on investment. With digital marketing tools, the three universities achieved to follow the complete student recruitment process from the moment the student is just a lead until it is officially enrolled in the institution, and even measuring results in real-time throughout the entire process. Other potential benefits of the use of digital marketing tools that were mentioned in the interviews include a much-needed cost and time-reduction of processes in the marketing department, allowance to reach and attract a greater number of leads or prospective students, and development of a greater capacity for segmentation. Despite the advantages digital marketing tools offer in comparison to traditional media for student recruitment purposes, digital managers mentioned that dependence on digital platforms could lead to possible negative outcomes as costs would continue to increase over time. Therefore, the three interviewed digital managers suggest that, if possible, private higher education institutions in Peru need to start thinking about building their own platforms in order to reduce the financial impact of future cost variations in the digital world and, in general, to make better use of their marketing budget. Finally, when asked about their predictions regarding the role of digital marketing in the next five to ten years, marketing managers from the three universities selected agreed that as advantages outweighed the disadvantages, the tendency still indicates an exponential increase in the use of digital marketing tools for student recruitment purposes.

5.2 Quantitative Results

The statistical analysis was performed using SPSS statistical software. Frequencies and digital graphics were used to specify the data and for the descriptive statistical percentage analysis of the variables and their respective dimensions. The main results are shown in **Table 6** for the Digital Marketing variable and in **Table 7** for the Student Recruitment Process variable below.

Table 6. Frequencies of the Digital Marketing variable

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Accumulated percentage
Always / Very Good /Strongly Agree	109	28.7	28.7	28.7
Often / Good / Agree	173	45.5	45.5	74.2
Sometimes / Regular / Undecided	68.7	18.1	18.1	92.3
Rarely / Poor / Disagree	20.1	5.3	5.3	97.6
Never / Very Poor / Strongly Disagree	9.2	2.4	2.4	100
TOTAL	380	100	100	

Table 7. Frequencies of the Student Recruitment Process variable

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Accumulated percentage
Always / Very Good /Strongly Agree	106	27.9	27.9	27.9
Often / Good / Agree	174.5	45.9	45.9	73.8
Sometimes / Regular / Undecided	65.3	17.2	17.2	91
Rarely / Poor / Disagree	21.8	5.7	5.7	96.7
Never / Very Poor / Strongly Disagree	12.5	3.3	3.3	100
TOTAL	380	100	100	

Additionally, the Ryan-Joiner normality test (similar to the Shapiro Wilk normality test) was used to determine the distribution of the observed data. **Table 8** shows the reliability presented for each variable by measuring Cronbach's Alpha.

Table 8. Cronbach's Alpha

Variable	Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Digital Marketing	2-13	0.8030
Student Recruitment Process	14-17	0.7920

Consequently, the correlation between variables and dimensions is analyzed using Spearman's Rho. First, the correlation between the global variables is analyzed, followed by an analysis of each digital marketing dimension.

Table 9. Spearman's Rho Correlation for Digital Marketing and Student Recruitment Process

		DV: Proceso de captación de alumnos
IV: Marketing Digital	Rho de Spearman	0.528
	Sig. (bilateral)	.
	N	380

**The correlation is significant at the level of 0.01 (bilateral)

Table 10. Spearman's Rho Correlation for Digital Marketing Dimensions and Student Recruitment Process

Correlations							
Dimensions		D1	D2	D3	D4	D5	VD
D1: Social Networks	Spearman's Rho	1.000	0.264**	0.183**	0.241**	0.228**	0.319**
	Next. (bilateral)	.	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	380	380	380	380	380	380
D2: Email Marketing	Spearman's Rho	0.264**	1.000	0.396**	0.258**	0.280**	0.344**
	Next. (bilateral)	<.001	.	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	380	380	380	380	380	380

D3: SEO & SEM	Spearman's Rho	0.183**	0.396**	1.000	0.244**	0.248**	0.278**
	Next. (bilateral)	<.001	<.001	.	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	380	380	380	380	380	380
D4: Content Marketing	Spearman's Rho	0.241**	0.258**	0.244**	1.000	0.485**	0.366**
	Next. (bilateral)	<.001	<.001	<.001	.	<.001	<.001
	N	380	380	380	380	380	380
D5: Customer Relationship Marketing	Spearman's Rho	0.228**	0.280**	0.248**	0.485**	1.000	0.376**
	Next. (bilateral)	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	.	<.001
	N	380	380	380	380	380	380

Note: **The correlation is significant at the level of 0.01 (bilateral)

As can be seen in both **Tables 9 and 10**, the results show a positive correlation, accompanied by an "acceptable" level of significance in both variables.

For the case of the general hypothesis, a result of $r = 0.528$ and $p = 0.000 < 0.01$ is obtained; therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected, and the alternative hypothesis is accepted, where it is specified that digital marketing is significantly related to the student recruitment process. The same occurs with the correlation values obtained between the dimensions of digital marketing and the dependent variable, where the general result was a positive correlation within the range [0.278,0.376]. This is also supported by some authors, such as Enriquez (2021), when he mentions that educational institutions, by implementing digital marketing strategies, can position themselves efficiently in the market for better student recruitment and retention and achieving to spread the word and make known the attributes, benefits and key characteristics of their educational product or service. Here it is important to highlight the fact that the marketing managers interviewed mentioned that traditional media is still used by Peruvian private universities as a means to spread brand awareness and for institutional communication purposes. Being this one of the reasons why the tendency of the coefficient of correlation found is to be moderate rather than strong.

6. Conclusion
In conclusion, through analysis and discussion, the relationship between digital marketing and the student recruitment process was studied. The work contributes by studying the dimensions of digital marketing and the link with the student recruitment process followed by Peruvian private universities with a business or entrepreneurial focus. Finally, the study found that the social network, email marketing, SEO & SEM, content marketing, and customer relationship marketing dimensions of digital marketing have a positive and significant relationship with the student recruitment process. Highlighting the fact that the correlation between the main variables without any dimension distinction is even higher. In addition, this has been supported by three marketing managers who point out that digital marketing tools influence the student recruitment process by reducing department costs and time dedicated to following a lead, allowing to reach and attract a greater number of prospective students, and providing a greater capacity for segmentation and measurement of results in real-time. All of these are key factors in the success of any marketing strategy. Therefore, it was concluded that digital marketing and its dimensions are related to the student recruitment process.

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