

# **What effect is the media having on how people view and hear about the Catholic Church in Ireland?**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The clerical sexual abuse scandals in Ireland has done untold reputational damage to the Catholic Church in Ireland. During and after the scandals, the media provided the Catholic Church with a grovelling platform as it tried to placate the Irish public. The media used their position to negatively portray the Catholic Church to the Irish people. The aims of this research are to examine what effect is the media having on peoples view towards the Catholic Church in Ireland, and to explore how people are now hearing about the Catholic Church in Ireland. The research, conducted using a quantitative data led study, consisted of a ten-point questionnaire. A total of 217 participants responded to the questionnaire. The sample was random and was made up of students from Dublin Business School and employees from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Dublin. The results showed that participants think the media is having a negative effect over their views of the Catholic Church in Ireland. The results also showed that participants are now mainly hearing about the Catholic Church through the media. The conclusion of this research is that the media is having a negative effect on people's views towards the Catholic Church in Ireland, and most people are now hearing about developments in the Catholic Church through the media.

## INTRODUCTION

When referring to religion in this text, this research will draw upon Geertz's definition of religion:

*"a religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing those conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic"* (Geertz, 1986, p90.).

When referring to the media in this research, a much simpler definition will be draw upon:

*"the mass media is the main means of mass communication, such as television, radio, the Internet and newspapers, considered collectively"* (The Chicago School of Media Theory", 2019, para.1).

### The Media and Religion

The study of the phenomena of religion and the media is a rather recent concept. Studies of these phenomena become linked by the cultural artefacts that identifies them. When religion gets studied as a discipline, its history also gets explored. The studies of religion look at: its ideologies, its politics, and its rites. This aims to discover or get a better understanding of its belief system. The very same gets said of the studies of the media. If one was to study the media, one might study its history, its technological advances, its commercialisation, and its politics. This is all done with the aim of unearthing its contextual meaning. If we look at religion and media from a theoretical standpoint, they're quite similar as studied disciplines. Yet the two studies have been historically isolated from each other (Morgan, 2013).

This distance between the topics of media and religion has led to somewhat of a disparity in society. It's stated that the media presumed that religion had disappeared from Post-modern societies. The media believed this happened between the French Revolution and Marx's famous quote that *"religion remains the opiate of the masses"* (Morgan, 2013). As secularisation swept nations, the media assumed that religion would go into hiding. The media believed secular states would increase and people would become distracted from religious teachings (Morgan, 2013). These nations would be unable to detract from the media's tantalising visual and audible wares, and therefore religion would simply vanish from our society. This school of thought although

popular, is somewhat problematic. The simple reason being is that religion has not vanished from our society (Morgan, 2013).

So where has religion gone? Looking at the distribution of religion across Europe, in relation to Christian faith. A study carried out by the Pew Research Centre in 2018 shows a potential decline in the Christian faith by 2050. The study projects that Christianity will drop from 75% in 2010 to 65.2% of the European population in 2050. That's a decline of almost 10% in two years! Despite this dramatic reduction in Christianity, the study projects that the Islamic, Hindu, Sikh, and Buddhist faiths are all set to increase significantly across Europe ("Europe: Religion Demographics and Statistics, 2018, Para. 1). Using the Islamic faith as an example. Pew Research Centre states that by 2050, there will be an increase in 5% in Islamic beliefs in Europe ("Europe: Religion Demographics and Statistics, 2018, Para. 1).

Considering these figures, and with certain religious beliefs on the rise, the media studies still refuse to pander to religion's power. The media still embraces The Secularisation Thesis (Morgan, 2013).

## **The Secularisation Thesis**

The Secularisation Thesis in its simplest form assumes that organised religions would lose their relevance with the progression of modernity in our society. (Barbalet, Possamai & Turner, 2012, p.65) states that the progress of modernity invokes a rise in sovereign states, it facilitates the rise of capitalism, and it harbours the advancement of empirical sciences. Early advocates of the idea of The Secularisation Thesis abdicated the theory as an arm of Enlightenment Triumphalism. As the theories of Secularisation came under fierce attack, its defenders trying desperately to empirically defend its roots, inadvertently exposed its weaknesses. Even today, many attack The Secularisation Thesis under the arguments that society never had a golden age of faith. It simply never existed! (Barbalet, Possamai & Turner, 2012).

(Casanova, 1994, p.65-66) offers an interesting alternate viewpoint on The Secularisation Thesis. He identifies social and cultural shifts in our society that he named the "de-privatisation of religion". The de-privatisation of religion looks at how religion has abandoned the private sphere and entered the public one. (Casanova, 1994, p.65-66) stated that religion now enters our public domain by way of civil society and the media. Through these mediums, religion now actively takes part in the process of discursive legitimation, contestation, and public debate (Barbalet, Possamai & Turner, 2012).

## **The Media and Secularisation in Ireland**

Has the media in any way contributed to the secularisation of the Irish population? (Donnelly & Inglis, 2009, p.1) argues that secularisation of the Irish people is seen on a macro structural level. It's at this level that the Catholic Church has lost its ability to control how media institutions are reporting on it. (Donnelly & Inglis, 2009, p.1) also states that the Catholic Church has lost its influence at a micro level too. This is reflected in the levels of participation and trust among the Catholic Church's own followers. Notwithstanding the declines in religious adherence, the media has also been quietly eroding the Catholic Church's symbolic dominance in Ireland. This has contributed to a loss of the Catholic Church's influence in Irish State policy and in its involvement in the running of Irish social institutions. It could be said that the Catholic Church's overall loss of social influence and social prominence in Ireland is contributing to some level of secularisation amongst the Irish populous (Donnelly & Inglis, 2009).

Despite all the above, there has been little empirical research conducted that proves that the media are influencing secularisation in Ireland. The lack of research in this area is linked to a noticeable absence of any theoretical model on which to study secularisation in Ireland. If a theoretical model is developed, it could be used to link macro level structural changes to the micro level patterns of religious beliefs in Ireland (Donnelly and Inglis, 2009).

## **The Catholic Church and the Media in Ireland**

(Fogarty et al, 1984, p.8) states that in the past Ireland remained an outstandingly religious country. This was based on the unprecedented level of Irish people's beliefs, practices and deep levels of prayer. The Catholic Church has played a pivotal role in the formation of Irish society. The Catholic Church has been at the forefront of Irish people's morals and beliefs for centuries. At one time in Ireland, most, if not all Irish citizens lives were influenced or affected by the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church seeped into every Orpheus of the family home and the community. It also edged into the offices and policies of The State, The Education System, and The Health Services (Larkin, 1964).

In Irish society in the twentieth century, the Catholic Church wielded far more influence than the media. During the second half of the twentieth century, that very influence started to decline. Institutions in Ireland that bolstered the Catholic Church's teachings and ethos's began a quiet revolt. This backlash came as a move against the sustained influence the Catholic Church had on public life in Ireland for so long. This revolution started around the 1980s in Ireland. It occurred when The State decided to change its policies and social legislation. The State decided that its secular liberal-individualist social legislation did not always have to align with the Catholic Church's teachings or suggestions (Conway & Kilcoyne, 1997).

Not only did The State challenge the Catholic Church, but the media did as well! The media's messaging during the second half of the twentieth century started to oppose religious virtues upheld for so long by the Catholic Church. Virtues such as, humility, piety, self-denial and chastity were all challenged by the media. These virtues which remained at the heart of the Irish family for so long, were now fair game for the media. And so, the media's quiet revolt against the Catholic Church in Ireland began (Conway & Kilcoyne, 1997).

## **Religiosity in Ireland 1980s to 1990s**

(Donnelly & Inglis, 2009, p.3) conducted a study of religiosity in Ireland. The purpose of this study was to investigate trends in religiosity in Ireland. The study used EVS data examined three different periods of time in Ireland. The study analysed changes in church attendance and religious adherence during 1981, 1990, and 1999. In 1981, media reporting on the scandals in the Catholic Church was somewhat infrequent if non-existent. In 1990, the media started reporting on some cases of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. Then in 1999, the media started reporting frequently on scandals in the Catholic Church.

Results of the study showed that church attendance in Ireland remained stable throughout the 1980s. The mean attendance in 1981 was 3.44. Attendance also remained stable throughout the 1990s. 3.44 was the mean average of attendance during this time. However, a noticeable decline in attendances started to occur in 1999. The mean attendance average in 1999 was now down to 2.19. A variable was also used in the study. The variable was trust in the Catholic Church. A score of 0 would show no trust, and a score of 3 would be high degree of trust. Over three different time periods, change in the levels of trust occurred. For instance, in 1981, the mean score for trust was 2.28. This dropped to 2.11 in 1990 and then dropped again in 1999 to just 1.80. The study was also compared with other European countries. This was to assess if similarities occurred across different regions with similar fates and similar issues.

The study uncovered changes in church attendance from the early 1980s to the late 1990s. However, the study did not directly link the findings to media reporting or media influence at the time (Donnelly & Inglis, 2009). (Donnelly & Inglis, 2009, p.18) states that the question must always be asked! If the media had never reported on the clerical sexual abuse scandals, is it likely that church attendance and attitudes towards the Catholic Church would have remained unchanged?

The noticeable absence of any solid research into media influence over views of the Catholic Church in Ireland was one of the driving forces for this research.

## **The Ryan Report**

A pivotal moment for media reporting on the Catholic Church in Ireland was the release of The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse Report. This was to become known to the public as the Ryan Report. The Ryan Report contained shocking incidents of systemic sexual and emotional abuse of young men and boys by Catholic priests in Ireland (Ryan, 2009). Shortly after the release of the Ryan Report, the Catholic Church went into damage control. (Conway & Kilcoyne, 1997, p.78) suggested that the media became the vessel for the Catholic Church's grovelling efforts as it tried desperately to hide, and then to atone for the sins of the perpetrators of clerical sexual abuse in Ireland. The media took advantage of the Church's begging bowl and shifted the fulcrum of power and prominence in its own favour. With this new power, the media in Ireland started to have more influence and more of a say in the shaping of morality in Ireland. The Church had now taken a back step to a new dominant institution in Irish society. Using this new found power, the media immediately started coercing new institutions into using their services. These institutions included: The State, The Education, and The Health Services (Conway & Kilcoyne, 1997).

## **Attitudes towards the Catholic Church in Ireland in the 2000s**

In September 2011, a study was carried out in Ireland by Amárach Research on behalf of the Iona Institute in Ireland. They posed several questions to participants about their attitudes towards the Catholic Church in Ireland. A key question asked during the research was: What are some of the reasons why you say you have an unfavourable opinion of the Catholic religion? The participants had a choice of five sub categories to define their answers. The answers given by participants from the study are show below:

Child abuse – answer for 56% of respondents.

History/structure – answer for 23% of respondents.

Cover ups – answer for 18% of respondents.

Loss of trust – answer for 6% of respondents. (Iona Institute, 2011)

The results showed that the clerical sexual abuse scandals in the Catholic Church had a significant impact on the values and beliefs of Irish Catholics (Iona Institute, 2011). (Donnelly & Inglis, 2009, p.5) suggests that the media using these scandals had begun to challenge and scrutinise the Catholic Church beyond rational debate and public discussion in Ireland. This had a significant influence on religious adherence in the Catholic Church in Ireland.

## Religions Uses of the Media

It's well known that the media has an incessant appetite to report on developments in the Catholic Church in Ireland and religious affairs around the world. This reporting at times can often have a negative tone. Take for example, the Daily Mail's reporting on the Druid Network. The Druid Network acquired charitable status in 2010. The aims of the Druid Network were to advance their belief system in both England and Wales. Shortly after they received their charity status, a Daily Mail reporter – Melanie Phillips, wrote an article entitled '*will someone please tell me this is all a joke*'? The article went on to claim that the Druid Network was a cult as opposed to an organised religion (Phillips, 2010). Despite frequent negative coverage, the Catholic Church and religions around the world still seem to embrace the media at some level.

(Hoover, 2010, p.1) states that the media now acts as a vessel to religions to communicate their belief systems. Through this vessel, both the media and religion have become more connected than ever. A study by (Ward, 2015, p.19) looked at that the Salem Communications Evangelical Network. The study revealed that the network streamed religious content across the internet, generating over fifty-nine million views to its website. It currently has a Facebook page of thirty-four million users. It also has a total of nine million email subscribers. (Hoover, 2010, p.12) suggests that religions have now adapted their own forms of communication. From its days of TV evangelists of the 1980s, to its current vessel of internet-based platforms, religion is now joining the communications revolution. In contemporary society, it's now rare to hear about religion without some reference to the media. The media has now become a pivotal source for religious information and evangelical content. Niche religions are also jumping aboard various media outlets. They too are using the media as a vessel to also promote their belief system (Lynch & Mitchell, 2012).

An example of niche religion using media would be The Virtual Pooja. The Virtual Pooja is a Hindu based website. It provides spiritual experiences for its users. These services include horoscopes, online dating services and religious spiritual holidays. People can even visit temples in South East Asia for an authentic Pooja experience. The Virtual Pooja is an example of how niche religions now also use the media as a communications tool alongside mainstream religion. The Pooja does this in both an economic and consumeristic fashion. This change in the communications strategies of religions are in vast contrast to previous times when religion existed only in the personal beliefs and the conscience of the individuals. Examples such as the Virtual Pooja are now radically changing this practice (Lynch & Mitchell, 2012).

As with niche religions, the Catholic Church also embraces the media. For instance, in 2015, Pope Francis or as he is known on Twitter as @Pontifex became the third most followed world leader on Twitter. The account, which was set up in 2010, is the first time that any Pope has had a global communications channel. The account does not actually belong to Pope Francis, but rather it embodies the spirit of the Supreme Pontiff (Narbona, 2016). The Vatican has also adopted many new media platforms in its outreach. There are now hundreds of online Catholic based mobile phone Apps and of course an official Vatican website complete with its own set of widely followed social media platforms (Bills, 2017).

## **The Mediatization of Religion**

It's been argued that religious communications are now becoming increasingly mediated by an overtly secular and largely autonomous media industry. These somewhat faceless media entities are shaping the belief system of religions to suit their own narratives. The media are also starting to subsume many of the social functions once performed by religious institutions (Lövheim & Lynch, 2011). (Lövheim & Lynch, 2011, p.111-117) states that in the past many religious faiths had a superstitious element to them. These were often denounced by scholars as a form of low culture appealing mostly to people of a lower intellect. However, the media's interest in the superstitious or supernatural has seen a surge in TV shows promoting these metaphysical forms. The popularity of the supernatural and the superstitions has helped the media to further legitimise these phenomena. This has led directly to a challenge and a commodification of the cultural and superstitions elements of religions. These elements that religious institutions guarded, owned, and held on to for centuries, are now commodified, branded and repackaged by the media for distribution to their audiences (Lövheim & Lynch, 2011).

Mediatization on a societal level remains a serious challenge for religious institutions. (Hepp & Krönert, 2008, p.3) states that religious institutions are struggling to situate themselves in a prominent position in the media age. Mediatization is slowly stripping religions of their sacred spaces. The media channels that religions are using to communicate are becoming increasingly commercialised spaces. Religious institutions are now finding themselves communicating in a space of fierce product competition and are increasingly at risk of being branded in the commercialised spaces of media outlets.

## **The Media and the Religion – A Theoretical Post Modernistic Approach**

Scholars and academics studying the media and religion have often looked at their changing relationship from a post modernistic perspective. For instance, (Hoover & Lundby, 1997 p.179) states that the media in a post-modern society has taken over the many social functions that religious institutions once played in our society, Functions such as community building and rituals are now subsumed by the media in a post-modern society. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.98-104) states that society constantly conceptualises our daily social life. This conceptualisation revolves around the social fields that exist in society. Pierre Bourdieu believed that habitus dominates our social spectrum. He argued this habitus gets structured by the institutional players in our society. These players in a post-modern society are now both the media and religious institutions. Bourdieu's concept offers an interesting paradigm in the analysis of these institutions (Donnelly & Inglis, 2009).

The French theorist Jean Baudrillard offers an interesting theoretical approach from a post modernistic perspective. In his study of society, Jean Baudrillard showed how people in a post-modern environment are only communicating at a surface level. Much of our communication

becomes derived from the commodification of mediated images. He named his type of surface level communication Simulacrum (Merrin, 2005). Theories such as Simulacrum may not be mainstream or widely believed. Yet for religion in the media there may be implications. Religious institutions often use both metaphoric and symbolic communications in their outreach to the public. They implore their flocks to live through their doctrine. Theories such as Simulacrum could challenge both religious authority and religious legitimacy in society (Hoover, 2010).

Looking at the decline of religions through media influence. An interesting paradigm to explore the links between a decline in religious faith and media influence will draw up the position of (Taylor, 2007). (Taylor, 2007, p.58) stated that when the pillars of a religious society are in decline, this can lead to a deeper scrutiny of religious practice. A result of this scrutiny can lead to a decline in levels of belief. This paradigm is used to build a general hypothesis on the connections between religious decline and the media's use of this decline in a post-modern age of the unbelief of Transcendent Reality.

## **Noticeable Gaps in the Research**

It's worth noting that there are several gaps in this research. Research into the area of the Catholic Church and the media in Ireland has tended to focus on the clerical sexual abuse scandals within the Catholic Church. Previous research looks more at the impact the scandals had on church attendance as opposed to people's views towards the Catholic church. Previous studies also do not look at media reporting during the scandals or explore if the media's reporting had any impact of people's views of the Catholic Church at the time. There is also yet to be any conclusive research on how the media portrays the Catholic Church in Ireland, or if media reporting is influencing people's views of the Catholic Church in Ireland. There is a distinctly noticeable absence of any theoretical framework that the relationship between the media and the Catholic Church can be measured on. An interesting area of research could be the levels of control the media now have over mediated message and symbolic communications in Ireland. A potential study could also be conducted into the area of the media's influence on shaping morality in contemporary Irish society.

## **Research Rationale**

(Lynch & Mitchell, 2012, p.5) states that the media reacts in somewhat of deregulatory fashion towards religion. They state that the media is now controlling how religion is becoming interpreted within our society. These interpretations are becoming beyond the control of the religious institutions.

The aims of this research are to uncover what effect is the media having on peoples view towards the Catholic Church in Ireland, and to explore how people are now hearing about the Catholic Church in Ireland. A data led research questionnaire posed questions to participants

seeking their views on media influence and how they hear about the Catholic Church in Ireland. This method of data collection was undertaken to underpin the general research hypothesis: that the media is having a negative effect on how people view the Catholic Church in Ireland, and the media is now the main vessel for communication developments in the Catholic Church in Ireland.

Previous studies into the area of the media and the Catholic Church in Ireland have neglected studying the area of media influence and how the media communicates the Catholic Church in Ireland. An absence of any in-depth study was one of the main rationales for this research.

The results of the research showed that most participants think the media is having a negative influence over people's views towards the Catholic Church in Ireland. The results also showed overwhelmingly that most people are now hearing about developments in the Catholic Church in Ireland through the media.

## **Conclusion**

Another important aim of this research is to also add value to the studies of the media and the Catholic Church in Ireland. It's evident from the literature above that there is a decline occurring in the Christian and Catholic faiths across Western Europe and in Ireland. This could be attributed to the Secularisation Thesis, but it's worth investigating if the media is having any influence in this decline? It's clear throughout this research that the media is having some impact on the views people have of the Catholic Church in Ireland. It's also evident that the media has now become the main vessel for how people hear about the Catholic Church in Ireland. The Catholic Church's adoption of nearly all forms of modern media including social media shows that they are using the media as a vessel for their communication. However, the level of control the Catholic Church have over their message seems to be getting eroded as the media becomes one of the main actors in contemporary society.

## METHODOLOGY

*‘Here you are born one thing or the other, Protestant or Roman Catholic, just as you are born a boy or a girl ‘ (Birmingham, 1912, p.86).*

### Method

The method chosen to undertake this study was a small quantitative data study. The research was used to gauge participant’s thoughts on the media and the Catholic Church in Ireland and to ascertain how participants hear about developments in the Catholic Church in Ireland. The main research question being: what effect is the media having on how people view and hear about the Catholic Church in Ireland? The quantitative approach was deemed most suitable to this research as it allowed access to a large demographic of participants in Irish society.

It's stated that, the media acts in a deregulatory fashion with how it deals with religion. Thus, studies in the area of media and religion are usually done from a cultural and sociological angle. A quantitative led study is useful in helping gather evidence to bolster the theory of mediatisation (Van Zoonen, 2012, para.16). The quantitative led data study gathered rich data on the topic of the media and the Catholic Church in Ireland. The data collected underpinned the overall research hypothesis: that the media is having a negative effect on how people view the Catholic Church in Ireland, and the media is now the main vessel for communication developments in the Catholic Church in Ireland.

### Materials

The materials used for this study was a questionnaire consisting of ten questions. Most of the questions focused on the media and the Catholic Church in Ireland and whether participants think the media is having an effect on how people view and hear about the Catholic Church in Ireland? The questions asked in the research were mainly framed around the Pope’s visits to Ireland in 1979 and 2018. These events were used as a basis to seek people’s opinions if the media influenced the attendance at both events. The Pope’s visits were also used to look at the influence of the media on views about the Catholic Church from a historical perspective. In question five and six of the questionnaire, two images from the Pope’s visits to Ireland in 1979 and 2018 were placed alongside each other. These images were used to show participants the decline in attendance between both events in 1979 and 2018. They were also used as a visual aid to help participants get an idea of the type of imagery that was released by the media during each visit. The data from the questionnaire was taken directly from Survey Monkey in graph form which can be seen in the results section of this research.

## **Participants & Sampling Method**

Collecting rich data for this research was critical, not only to add to the research, but also to underpin the general research question. For this reason, the questionnaire was submitted to the general public. This was in the hope of gaining a strong sample from different genders, age groups and religious faiths across Irish society.

The participants for this study came from three different demographics. The first was part time students in Dublin Business School. The students consisted mainly of third- and fourth-year students. The students were from the social science degree intake in Dublin Business School. The second group of participants were employees based in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The third group of participants were from random WhatsApp groups. The participants chosen were a good range of ages, genders and religious faiths. The sample consisted of 217 participants.

The data collected painted a robust picture of participants opinions around the general research question. I added multiple-choice answers such as: agree or disagree to get a deeper idea of participants perceptions of the media and the Catholic Church in Ireland.

## **Data Analysis / Procedure**

It was decided that it was not necessary to enter the data into the SPS system. The reason being is that the aim of this research was not to find any correlations or connections. The data was taken directly from Survey Monkey. The data was exported into Microsoft Excel and then presented in graph from in the findings section of this research. Descriptive Statistics were used throughout the findings. The variable in the research was people's opinions on the media and the Catholic Church in Ireland.

## **Ethical Considerations**

There were several ethical considerations during this study. These concerns were upheld and adhered to throughout the entire research process. Some of the concerns are noted below. Firstly, the questionnaire was completely anonymous. It did not ask for any personal or identifiable data. It did not seek exact age or any piece of information that may identify the participants. The questionnaire was not compulsory for participants.

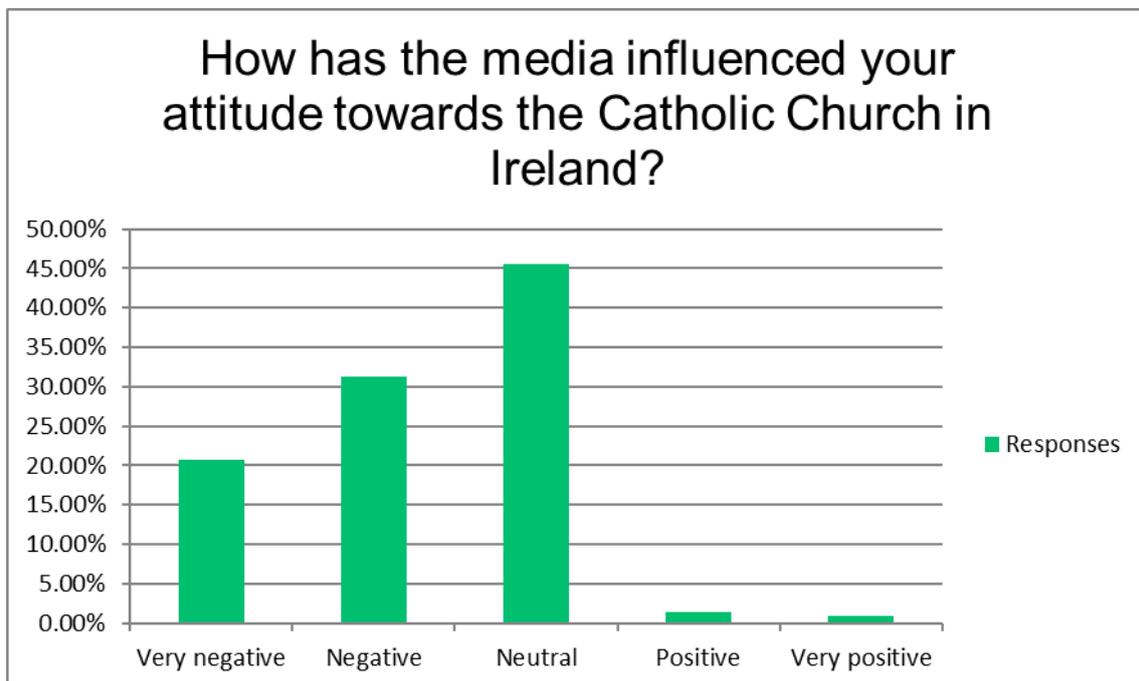
The questionnaire was posted in the Whatsapp groups of two Dublin Business School social science groups. The questionnaire was also posted on the Department of Foreign Affairs

internal bulletin board. The questionnaire was not sent directly to any participants. Another important ethical consideration was to avoid any leading or sensitive questions. The questionnaire did not seek people's opinions on the Catholic Church, or the media. That data stored securely and was deleted on completion of the research.

## RESULTS

Throughout the process of this research Descriptive Statistics were used to analyse the data recorded. Many common findings emerged from the data. The main findings of this research are displayed below for examination.

**Table 1** *Showing media influence towards the Catholic Church in Ireland.*

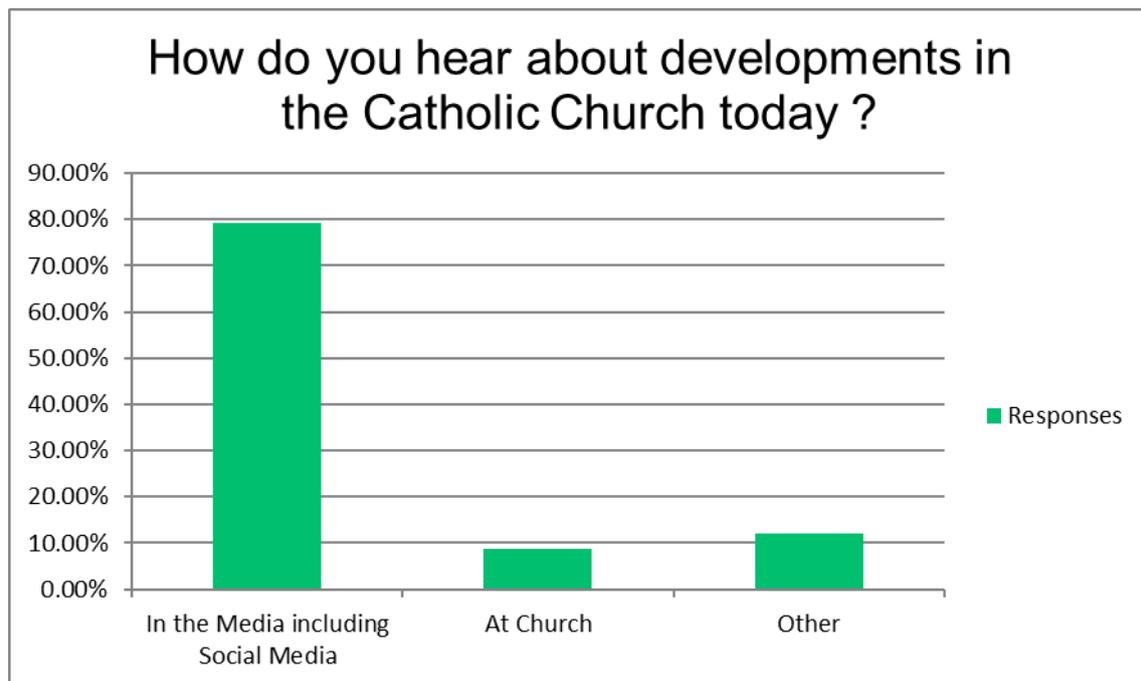


From the data obtained above, 20.74% of respondents found that the media has influenced their attitude towards the Catholic Church Very Negatively. This percentage accounted for 45 responses. The Negative response was 31.34%, 68 people who responded. Both negative responses counted for 52.08% of the overall responses supporting the general research hypothesis. The negative responses could also be attributed to numerous factors such as the media's reporting on the scandals in the Catholic Church or the recent traction of many liberal anti-religious movements such as: The Repeal the 8th Campaign, the LGBT and equality movements.

Interestingly, the Neutral responses came in at 45.62% with 99 people responding in this fashion. This is an interesting result and could be related to more independent thought in our society or a distrust of mass media and the recent fake news scandals.

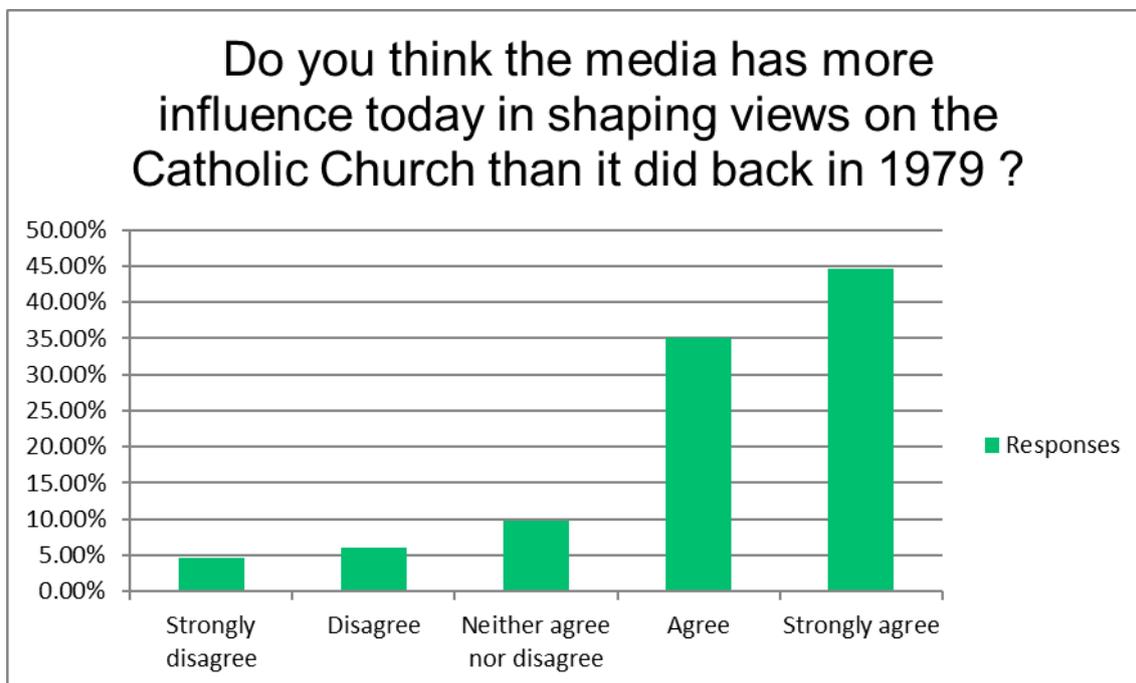
The lower percentages of respondents were the positive responses. The Positive response had 1.38% of respondents with 3 respondents in total. The Very Positive response was lower again at just 0.92% of some 2 responses. It's clear from that data above, that a high number of respondents, 113 people, feel the media portrays the Catholic Church in a negative fashion supporting the research hypothesis. The total number of respondents was 217.

**Table 2 Showing how people hear about developments in the Catholic Church in Ireland.**



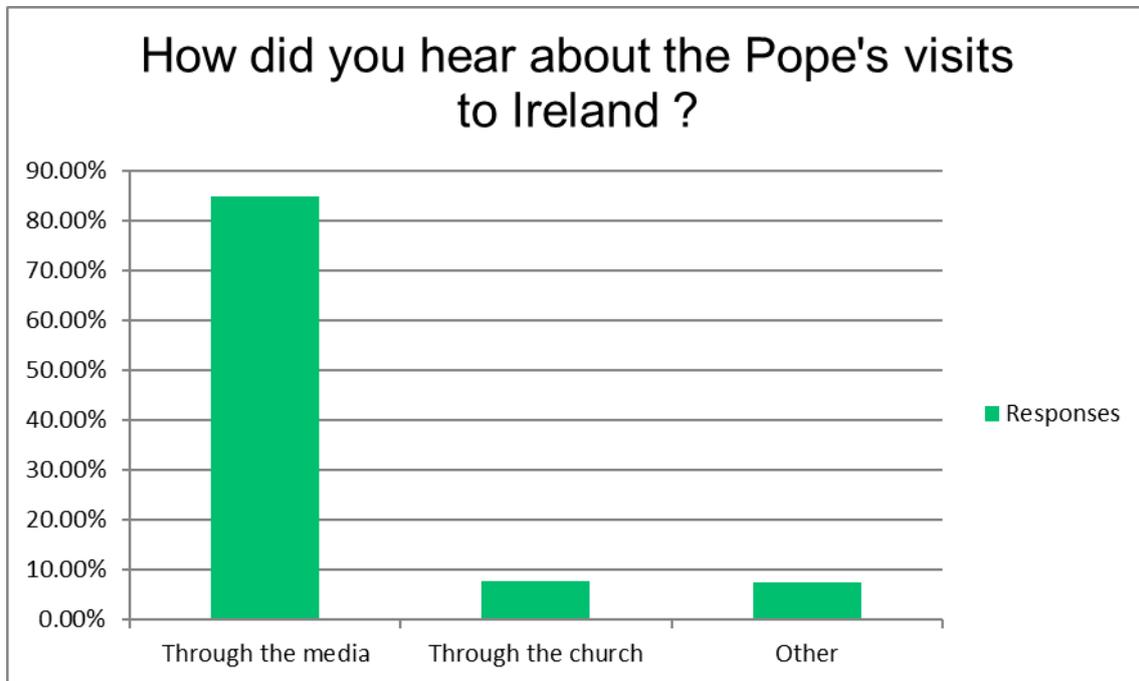
With regards to people hearing about the Catholic Church in Ireland. The results above show most people are hearing about the Catholic Church through the media in Ireland. A staggering 79.25%, 172 responses, hear about the Catholic Church in Ireland Through The Media Including Social Media. The At Church response came in at just 8.76% with just 19 responses. The Other response came in at 11.98% with 26 responses. Total number of respondents was 217. Again, this data supported the hypothesis of people hearing about the Catholic Church through the media in Ireland.

**Table 3 Showing media having more influence shaping views in 2018 as opposed to 1979.**



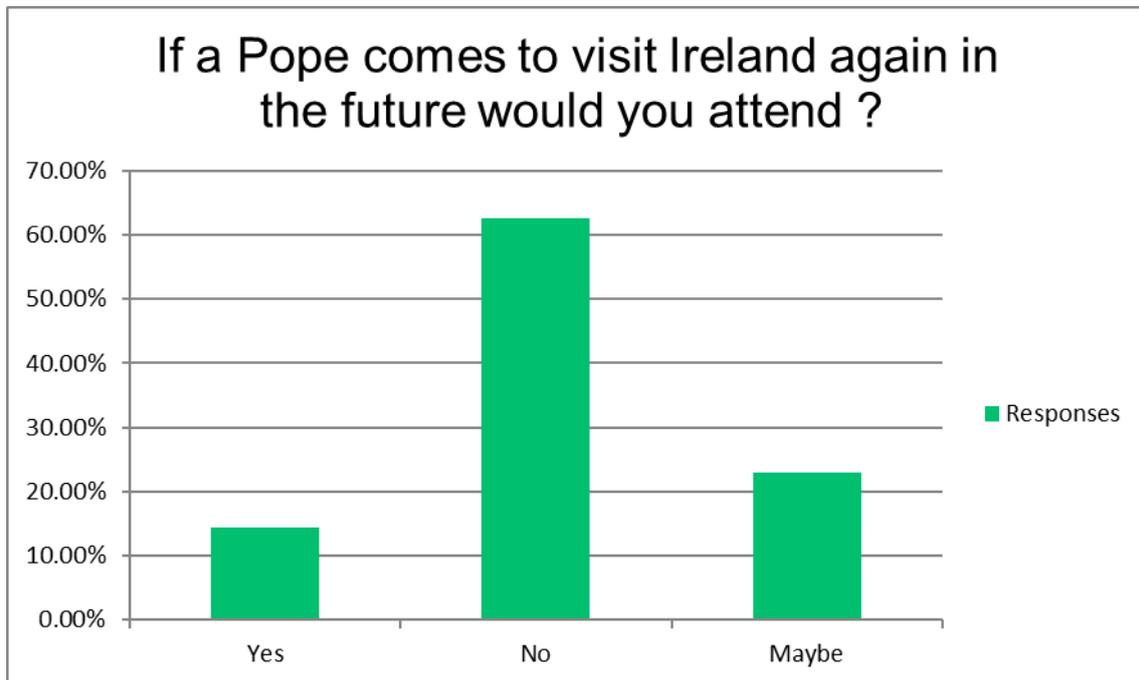
This question was asked to seek views on media influence from a historical perspective. With regards to media influence in 2018 as opposed to 1979 when the Pope first visited Ireland. The number of respondents who Strongly Agreed that the media has more influence in shaping views in 2018 was 44.70%. This accounted for 97 responses. The number of respondents who Agreed was 35.02% with 76 respondents. The Neither Agree, nor Disagree, fell shorter at just 9.68% with 21 responses. The Disagree response, and the Strongly Disagree response came in at 5.99% and 4.61%, with 13 and 10 responses respectively. It's clear that most think the media has more of an impact in shaping views in 2018, then in 1979. The total number of respondents was 217.

**Table 4 Showing how people heard about Pope's visit to Ireland.**



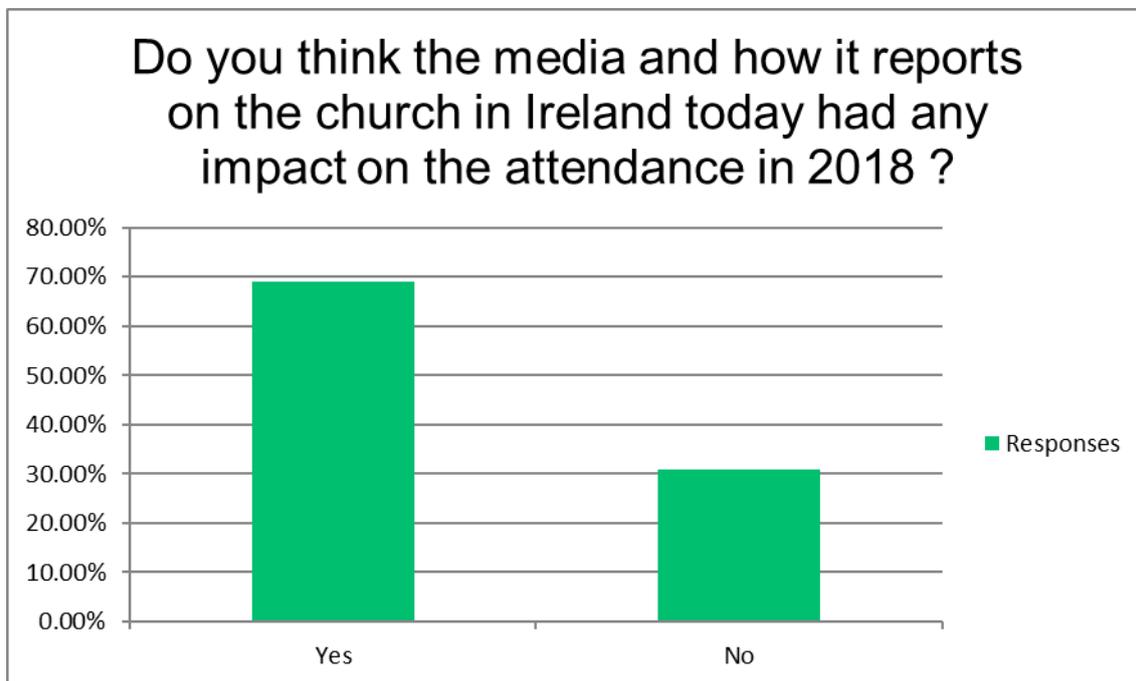
The data above shows how respondents heard about the Pope's visit to Ireland. 84.79% of 184 responses heard about the event through The Media. Through The Church response came in at just 7.83% of some 17 responses. The other response was 7.37% with 16 responses. This data supported the hypothesis of people hearing about the Catholic Church through the media in Ireland. The total number of respondents was 217.

**Table 5 Showing would people attend a future visit of the Pope to Ireland.**



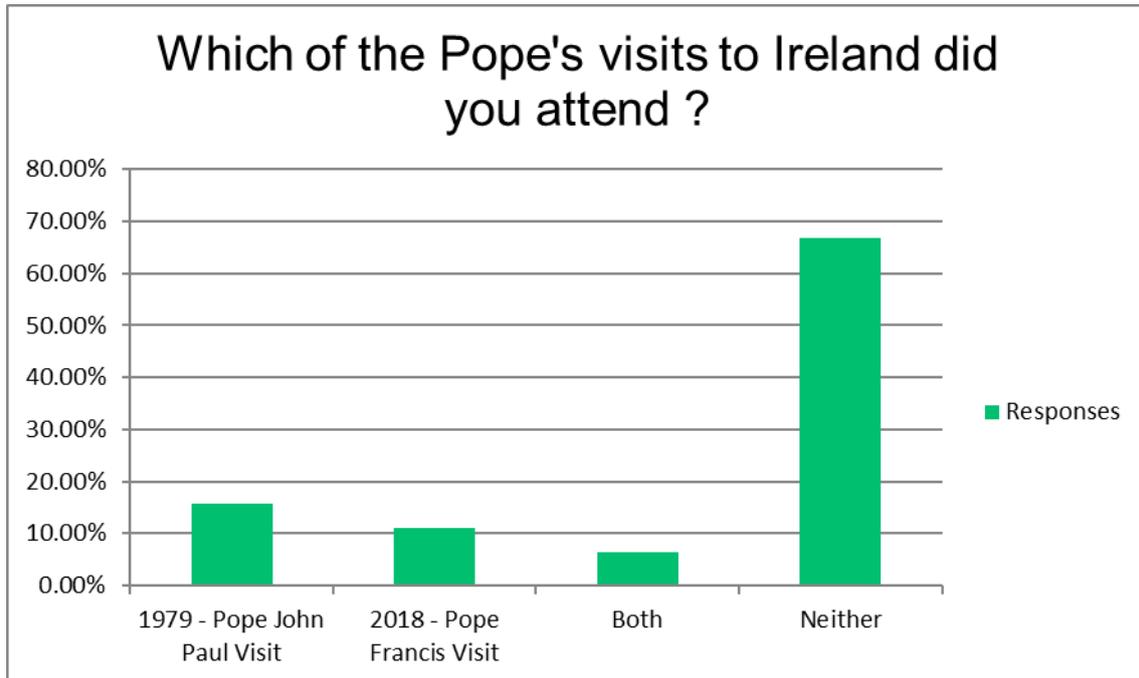
The results above show that most people would not attend a future Pope visit to Ireland. The results showed that 14.29% of respondents, 31 people in total, would attend if a Pope comes to Ireland in the future. 62.67% of respondents, some 136 people, would not attend and 23.04% or 50 people might attend if a Pope was to visit Ireland in the future. This data could be an importance piece of research in relation to religious adherence in the Catholic Church in Ireland. The total number of respondents was 217.

**Table 6 Showing media impact on attendance at Pope Francis visit to Ireland in 2018.**



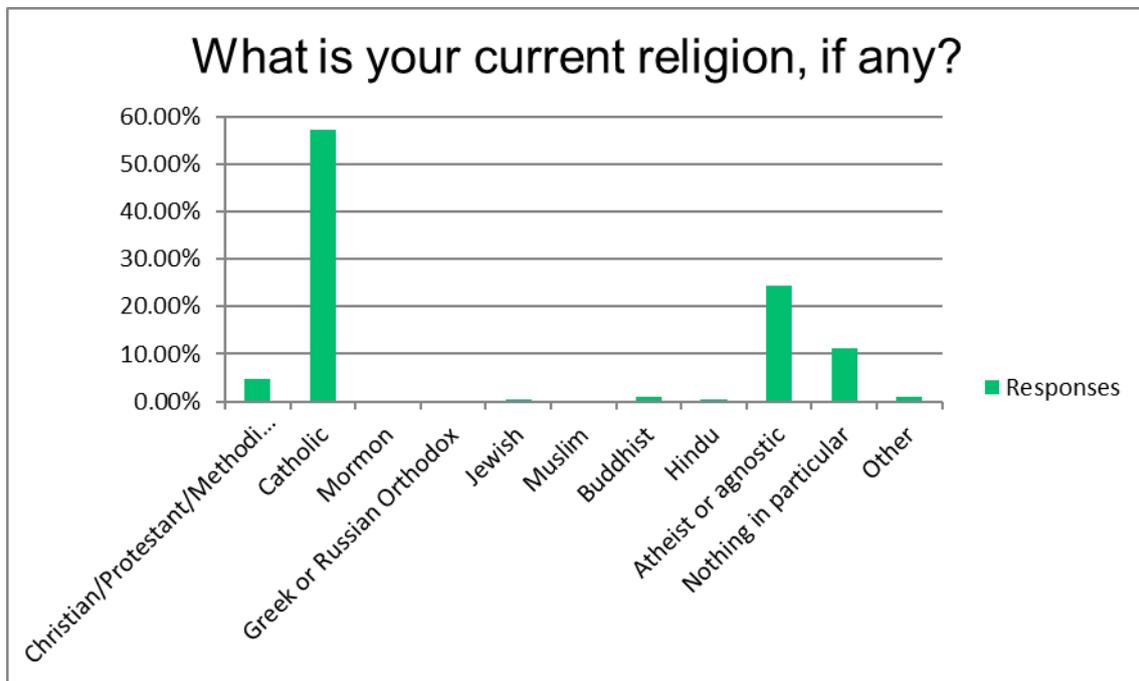
Another interesting finding was the impact the media had on people attending the Pope Francis visit to Ireland in 2018. 69.12% of respondents stated Yes to the question of media influence on attendance. 150 responses. The number of people who thought the media has No influence was 30.88% with 67 responses. The total number of respondents was 217.

**Table 7 Showing attendance at Pope's visits to Ireland.**



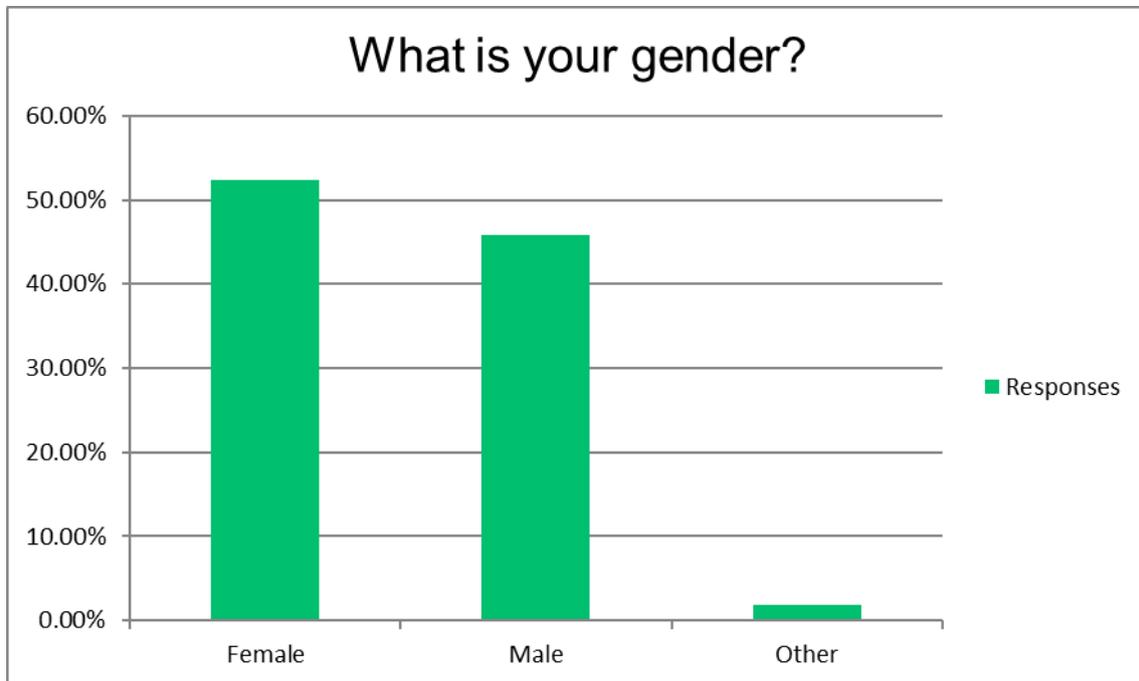
Regarding attendance at the Pope's masses held in Ireland. 15.67% of respondents, 34 respondents, attended the Pope John Paul's visit in 1979. In 2018, 11.06%, 24 respondents, attended Pope Francis Visit. 6.45% with 14 responses attended both and, 66.28%. Of 145 responses attended neither. This data could be reflective of changing patterns in religiosity in Ireland. The total number of respondents was 217.

**Table 8 Showing current religion.**

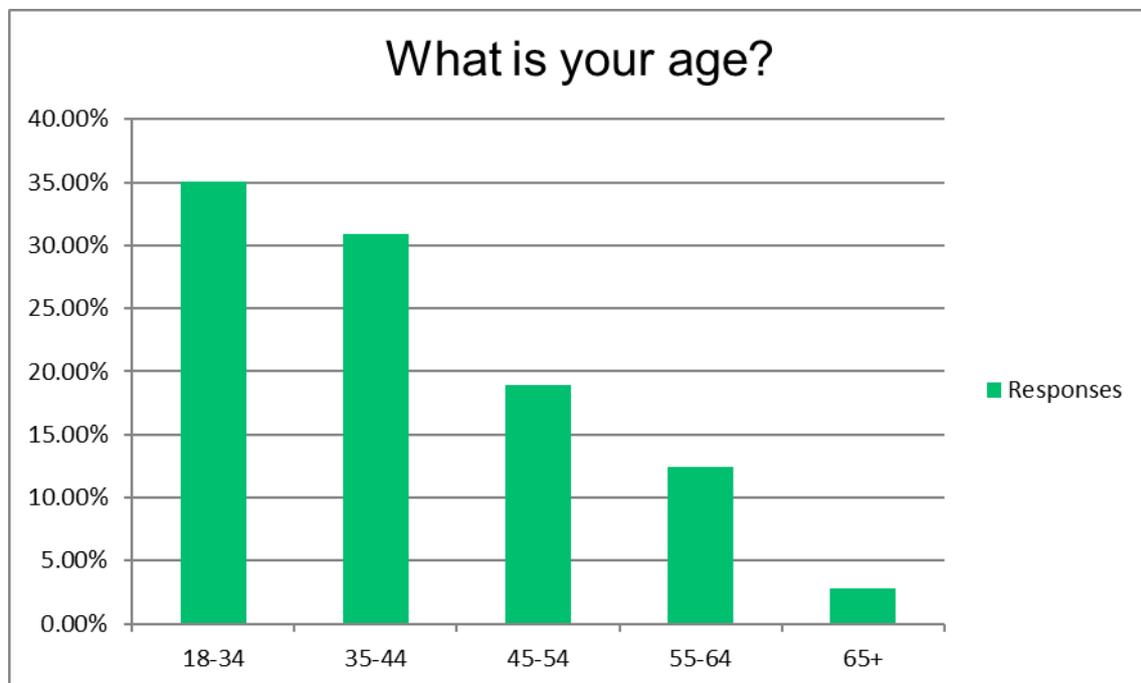


The results above show that most of the respondents were of the Catholic faith. The results also showed the following faiths below:

The number of Christian / Protestant / Methodist / Lutheran / Baptist was 4.61% with 10 responses. The Catholic faith was the highest at 57.14% at 124 responses. The Mormon, Greek or Russian Orthodox was 0.00%. The Jewish faith was 0.46%. With 1 response. The Islamic faith was 0.00%. The Buddhist faith was 0.92% with 2 responses. The Hindu faith was 0.46% with just 1 response. The Atheist or Agnostic choice was 42% with 53 responses. The option of Nothing or no faith was 11.06% with 24 responses. The choice of Other was 0.92%. From the data above the Catholic faith was the most predominant choice. This makes for interesting results especially considering the research hypothesis. The total number of respondents was 217.

**Table 9 Showing gender.**

The gender profiles of respondents were almost equal. The number of Female responses was 52.31% with 113 responses. The number of Male responses was 45.83% with 99 responses. People who identified as Other came in at 1.85% with a total of 4 responses. The gender balance was almost equal which adds good balance to the research. The total number of respondents was 216 with one skipped response.

**Table 10 Showing age.**

The age profiles of respondents were balanced also. The number of 18 -34 olds was 35.02% with 76 responses. The number of 35-44-year olds was 30.88% with 67 responses. The number of 45-54-year olds was 18.89% with 41 responses. The number of 55-64-year olds was 12.44% with 27 responses. The number of 65+ year olds was 2.76%. This represented a balanced age profile of the respondents. The total number of respondents was 217.

The overall hypothesis is media influence on the views and how people hear about the Catholic Church in Ireland. The results of this study show that the overall hypothesis was supported. It's clear that most participants agreed that the media is having an impact on their views towards the Catholic Church in Ireland. It's also clear that most are now hearing about the Catholic Church in Ireland through the media. Another interesting element that emerged was the media's influence over religious adherence in the Catholic Church by impacting the attendance at the Pope Francis visit to Ireland in 2018. Another interesting finding was the comparison and increase of media influence in 2018 compared with 1979 when the Pope first visited Ireland.

## DISCUSSION

The aims of this research are to uncover what effect is the media having on how people view and hear about the Catholic Church in Ireland. The results of this study showed that the media has a negative influence on people's views on the Catholic Church in Ireland. The results also showed that people are now hearing about developments in the Catholic Church in Ireland mainly through the media. The Catholic Church has played an immense role in influencing the thoughts and beliefs of Irish people. In more recent times this influence has started to decline slightly. The media has been slowly encroaching on this void and gaining more power and influence over Irish society than they had in previous times (Donnelly & Inglis, 2009). The symbolic domination of the Catholic Church in Irish society is also being challenged, as with the church's input into Irish State policy and influence over Irish State institutions (Donnelly & Inglis, 2009).

One of the first findings to emerge in this research was the influence the media are having over people's attitudes towards the Catholic Church in Ireland. The results showed that the media has influenced people's views on the Catholic Church negatively in Ireland. (Donnelly & Inglis, 2009, p.24) states that the media and The State in Ireland are now intruding into the affairs of the Catholic Church. This has been leading to a demise in the Catholic Church's authority and it has also been linked to transformations in Irish religiosity resulting in negative perceptions of the Catholic Church in Ireland (Donnelly & Inglis, 2009). It has been stated that the Catholic Church has now lost its monopoly over Irish society and its morality (Donnelly & Inglis, 2009). The media being aware of this decline has started to slowly shift public opinion and control the narrative on the Catholic Church in Ireland. It's doing this by slowly becoming the fourth estate in Irish society. It's also coercing religious institutions such as the Catholic Church to embody its services (Donnelly & Inglis, 2009).

The sexual abuse scandals has done untold reputational damage to the Catholic Church in Ireland. The 2011 research carried out by Amárach Research on behalf of the Iona Institute, showed that a high number of people in Ireland now viewed the Catholic Church unfavourably due to these scandals. The Catholic Church's responses was to try to use the media as grovelling platform seeking forgiveness from the Irish public from the sexual abuse scandals (Donnelly & Inglis, 2009). As the Catholic Church losses ground and influence, they have found it increasingly hard to ward off potential interference from non-religious institutions. With the media and The State having more influence than the Catholic Church in Ireland, both have now become dominating players in Irish society. One of the implications for the Catholic Church with regards to its role with The State is that the Catholic Church now holds no more immunity from prosecution like they had in the past, The State now treats the Catholic Church as they would any other legal institution (Donnelly & Inglis, 2009).

A case in point would be that of the case of Colm O'Gorman. In 1998, Colm O'Gorman brought proceedings against Fr Sean Fortune for damages for sexual abuse carried out against him as a child. In its defence, the Catholic Church tried to claim diplomatic immunity from the allegations. The courts found that the Catholic Church was akin to any other social group. The Catholic Church admitted negligence and settled out of court for over €300,000. The media began immediately reporting on the case. These once sacred institutions were now viewed as profane

organisations by the media who began to dismantle, investigate, document and report on their activities. The State no longer provides immunity to the Catholic Church (Donnelly & Inglis, 2009).

Another finding that emerged through this research was how people are hearing about developments in the Catholic Church in Ireland. The findings showed an overwhelming result stating that nearly all participants hear about developments in the Catholic Church through the media. This also included hearing about Pope Francis's visit to Dublin in 2018. Could this be attributed to the media's influence? Or could it be related to the Catholic Churches' use of the media?

(Helland, 2000, p.205 - 224) has looked at the history of online religion. Helland's research highlighted religion's first forays into the online spectrum. Helland's research identified that religion first began with online bulletin boards offering followers a platform to post and share their religious views. This was one of religions first technological advances into spreading its message (Helland, 2000). For instance, in 2015, Pope Francis became the 3rd most followed world leader on Twitter. A staggering achievement and a sign of the Catholic Church's adoption of online messaging platforms. Also, there are now hundreds of thousands of online Catholic based mobile apps, and of course the official Vatican website, complete with its own set of largely followed social media platforms (Bills, 2017).

The Vatican has stated the following on its online website.

*“ The Church has a two-fold aim regarding the media. One aspect is to encourage their right development and right use for the sake of human development, justice, and peace—for the up building of society at the local, national, and community levels in light of the common good and in a spirit of solidarity ”* ("The Church and Internet", 2019, para. 7).

The Vatican also states on its website that it has taken a fundamentally positive approach to the media. It's clear that the Catholic Church now proactively uses modern forms of media to communicate to the public. The Catholic Church is no longer relying on just the pulpit alone to deliver its messaging.

A finding that was also evident in the research was the influence the media are having over the Irish public from a historical perspective. Most of the participants in the research agreed that the media has more of an influence in 2018 as opposed to 1979 when Pope John Paul first visited Ireland. Looking at the media and the Catholic church's relationship in Ireland from a historical perspective. The media started making inroads into Irish society sometime around the 1980s. The year 1995 in Ireland saw a dramatic improvement in Ireland's economy. This in turn increased profits in media organisations, media companies increased, new titles appeared, and organisations changed hands at a dramatic. Around this time, globalisation started to appear in Irish society. The next five years from 1995 to 2000 saw radical changes in the media landscape in Ireland. A massive increase was seen in both the technological advances and involvement of non-national media organisations in the Irish environment. Around this time Ireland had some 200 + broadcast channels with over 98% of them originating outside of the country (Horgan & Flynn, 2001).

So, what role does the media play in influencing opinions today as opposed to 1979 in Ireland (Hoover, 2010, p.12) suggests that the media has become infected by the discourses of

post modernity. The media now has influence in blurring the lines between public and private space in society. (Hoover 2010) suggests that the theories of Globalisation play apart as the local, national and global are now more connected than before. The media at its roots tries to bring those three elements together, making the private sphere public and vice versa (Hoover 2010).

Another finding that emerged from this research was whether people would attend a future visit of a Pope to Ireland. The study showed that most participants would not attend a future visit by a Pope to Ireland. (Weber & Gerth, 1977) looked at the modern world by the advances of rationality in society. The evolution of social institutions which over time have become more specialised are now subsumed into logic of reality. (Weber & Gerth, 1977, p.xxvi) states that the modern man is trapped. He is trapped in a prison of rationality. This progressive disenchantment maybe forcing us to scrutinize the very foundations of religion and thus leading to lower levels of participation and belief. (Donnelly & Inglis, 2009, p.26) suggests that these changes in attitudes towards religion are down to a decline in our belonging or our lack of institutional participation with the Catholic Church in Ireland. The Catholic Church has lost its ability to control the social fields of The State, The Media and the Health and Educational institutions. This has in turn become a critical aspect of the secularisation of Irish society in a post-modern society.

It is also important to look at a theoretical model of how the media are acting as agents of change for religion. (Hjarvard & Stig, 2008, p.4) suggests that religion has now become subsumed under the logic of media. The media have become the prime communicators and the primary sources of religious ideas. These ideas also include the form of ‘‘banal religion’’. The media is now shaping our religious imagination aligning it with popular forms of culture and environment. The media have also subsumed the social functions of religious institutions and now they are trying to steer both our morality and sense of community (Hjarvard & Stig 2008). (Hjarvard & Stig 2008, p.3) looked at a framework for trying to understand the concept of how the media acts as agents of change for religion. The core concept of his framework is the concept of mediatization – the media becoming an independent institution in society. The implications for other institutions such as religion, are that they are completely dependent on the media to communicate with society and even with other institutions.

An interesting alternative to the media controlling religious communications is the theory of Post modernity from the perspectives of the breakdown of society and culture. Post modernity or modernity refers to various forms of social life and the social organisations that existed after the seventeenth century which became almost worldwide in its influence. (Giddens 2013) stated that this new type of social system could be viewed as an "information society" or the "consumer society". For centuries, culture was seen independently from everyday life. People would regularly go to museums, art galleries, exhibitions and so forth. (Baudrillard & Gane, 1993) states that the media broke the distinction between society and culture. The social environment is no longer a separate entity. Television, mobile phones and computers are all around us and are now easily accessible. Society consumes images and messaging whenever and wherever people are located.

The French theorist Jean Bullrillard once stated that:

*“ if post-modernism exists, it must be the characteristic of a universe where there is no more definitions possible. It is a game of definitions which matters...they have been deconstructed, destroyed...it has all be done. The extreme limit of these possibilities has been reached...all that are left are the pieces ”* (Baudrillard & Gane, 1993, p.94)

Baudrillard also look at the signifying system that encompasses the entire Western cultural experience. He stated that this system amalgamated history, culture, relationships, meanings and experiences. These experiences are transformed into signs that take over and replace the mediate experience, how society communicates, our interpersonal relationships, and a large variety of meanings and messages. The result of this is the expansion of the media's realm to encompass an overall media sphere on our society (Merrin, 2005).

## **Limitations and Future Uses of the Research**

The limitations of this study were its small sample size of just 217 participants. It's important to consider that a larger sample may not reflect the same sentiments seen in this research. The research was also limited by the fact that very few studies have been carried out on the media's relationship with the Catholic Church in Ireland. There have also been very few studies into the area of the levels of power and influence the media have in Ireland. The research regarding the relationship between the media and the Catholic Church in Ireland mostly explores the reputational damage caused to the Catholic Church by the sexual abuse scandals in Ireland and its impact on church attendance. Another limiting factor would be religion's sheer complexities. It's been stated that religion is too complex to be quantified or classified, or even measured at all! Quantitative methods rely on simplified data which cannot be accurately used within the non-positivist epistemological framework.

## **Future Uses**

The future uses of this study could be to look at the level of influence and control that the media has over Irish society. It's evident from this research that the media are now the main outlet for information about the Church in Ireland. This research could be used to show how the media can shape both the morality and rationality of a society. Another future use for this study would be for its uses in studies around the declining levels of religiosity and religious adherence in the Catholic Church in Ireland.

## **Conclusion**

It's clear from this research that the media is influencing people's views negatively on the Catholic Church in Ireland. It's evident that the recent clerical sexual abuse scandals have done untold damage to the Catholic Church's reputation in Ireland. The media's relentless communication of the sexual abuse scandals in the church has contributed significantly to this

decline in the church's popularity in Ireland. It could say that at some superficial level the media are shaping the morality of Irish society.

It is also clear from this research that most people in Ireland are now hearing about developments in the Catholic Church directly through the media. This gives the media more control and choice on how it wants to portray the Catholic Church across its platforms in Ireland. The media has now positioned itself as the fourth estate in Irish society and the Catholic Church must now simply try to use the media's domination to seek forgiveness from its sins and try to redeem itself and repair its damaged reputation with the people of Ireland.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **The Catholic Church and the Media in Ireland.**

- 1: What is your gender?
- 2: What is your age?
- 3: What is your current religion, if any?
- 4: Which of the Pope's visits to Ireland did you attend?
- 5: How did you hear about the Pope's visits to Ireland?
- 6: Do you think the media and how it reports on the church in Ireland today had any impact on the attendance in 2018?
- 7: How has the media influenced your attitude towards the Catholic Church in Ireland?
- 8: How do you hear about developments in the Catholic Church today?
- 9: Do you think the media has more influence today in shaping views on the Catholic Church than it did back in 1979?
- 10: If a Pope comes to visit Ireland again in the future would you attend?