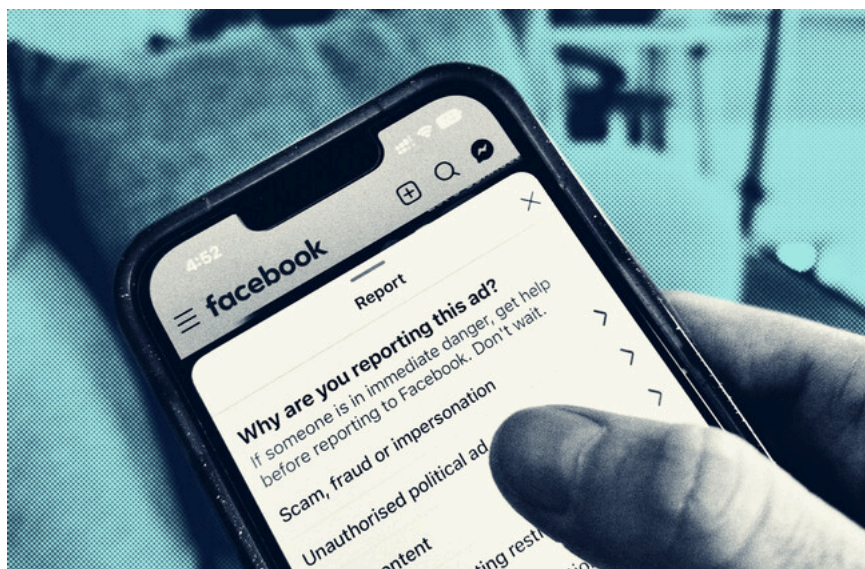




INVESTIGATES SCAM ADS

'Never order off this site': Massive web of fake shops targeting Irish Facebook users uncovered

The Journal Investigates reveals that almost 100 pages have attempted to scam shoppers with more than 50,000 Meta ads.

12.06am, 21 Aug 2025 ↗50.1k

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WHEN PATRICK AND Eileen Morgan closed their decades-old boutique at the end of May, they took to Facebook to thank their customers for their loyalty by offering discounts on the Dublin store's remaining stock.

"You were not just customers, but a part of our lives, and for that we are endlessly thankful," the couple wrote in a paid-for post on the platform.

"Before we close our doors for good, we want to give something back: we're holding an incredible clearance sale with massive discounts! Take this final chance to own a piece of our story."

The post, which featured an image of the couple outside their now-shuttered business, linked to a website for a store called Morgan Dublin that contained items whose prices had been slashed by more than 70%.

But there was a catch: Patrick and Eileen Morgan were not real people, and Morgan Dublin does not exist outside the internet.

The website is one of hundreds of similar pages that are part of a global scam, in which fake online stores lure unsuspecting social media users to pay for clothes and other items that are low quality or that never arrive.

A handful of these fake stores have been covered already by *The Journal*, and have been the subject of complaints to The Irish Times' Pricewatch column and RTÉ's Liveline.

In a new investigation, *The Journal Investigates* has now uncovered almost 100 pages that have falsely presented themselves as legitimate Irish stores, as well as hundreds more targeting users in at least 14 other countries.

These pages masquerading as Irish shops have posted more than 50,000 ads on Facebook between them, potentially targeting millions of social media users.

The websites are all hosted on the e-commerce platform Shopify, and use the same methods to trick customers around the world into buying what they think are high-end goods that are actually much flimsier items that tend to come from Asia – if they arrive at all.

Most of them are run by people outside the countries where they claim to be based, and this investigation found evidence that a majority of the websites masquerading as Irish are based in the Netherlands.

What's more, Meta is profiting from these scams by hosting paid ads for hundreds of fraudulent stores on Facebook and Instagram, despite community standards and ad policies which **prohibit scams and deceptive practices**.

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'Irish' stores

During the course of this investigation, *The Journal Investigates* found 95 individual websites that masqueraded as Irish fashion retail businesses.

They did this by including Irish names or locations – like Dublin, Cork or Kildare – in their URLs to present themselves as a home-grown retailer.

But the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission warned that these types of pages are likely breaking the law by misleading customers with fake information and by omitting details about their business.

“Businesses are also not allowed to mislead consumers into making a purchasing decision that they wouldn't otherwise make by providing false information or omitting critical details,” Gráinne Griffin, Director of Communications at the CCPC, said.

She urged anyone who believes that a company is misleading consumers to make a report to the CCPC if the company is Irish, and to the **European Consumer Centre** if the company is based elsewhere in the EU.

Facebook and Trustpilot reviews from customers who ordered from the websites we found often recounted similar negative experiences, and included a spate of complaints from people saying they had been scammed.

A Facebook review for a page called Morgan Dublin, left on 12 May, complained that the product was “nothing like what was advertised”, with the reviewer leaving a picture of a leather boot on the website shown beside a lower quality plastic boot that they received.

Another person left a Facebook review for a different page called Murray Dublin, posted last October, in which they complained that their order came from China and they had no chance of getting a refund.

“[I] ordered a quality leather handbag got a cheap plastic crap one that you would not pay €3 [for at] a market stall,” they said.

Similar reviews for different pages on Trustpilot made the same complaints.

An individual who left a one-star review for a store called Aidens Kildare, posted in April of this year, described the goods they received as “cheap Chinese

rubbish” which looked “nothing like as falsely advertised”; they added it would have been too expensive to return the item they bought.

The websites we found tended to follow similar patterns, like URLs that had a similar format, combining Irish names with places in Ireland, which were often separated by a hyphen (e.g. murray-dublin.com, oconnor-kildare.com).

Of the 95 websites we found, 80 URLs referenced a place in Ireland – particularly Dublin, Kildare, Cork and Galway – which added to the impression that they are based here.

Occasionally, some pages included a physical Irish address on their website or Facebook page; but Google Maps searches of these addresses showed that no businesses by these names were based where they claimed.

Though the focus of this investigation was primarily on stores that pretended to be Irish, we discovered hundreds of similar pages targeting users in the same way in other countries. We found shops that claimed to be based in the UK, the US, Canada, Australia, South Africa, Spain, France, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Switzerland, Denmark and the Czech Republic.

Many of these websites may still be falling foul of the law in Ireland, as the CCPC’s Gráinne Griffin explained that strict consumer protection laws apply throughout the EU – even for businesses based outside Europe that advertise here.

“EU and Irish consumer protection law includes requirements on the information that must be provided to a consumer,” she said.

Another link between the websites is that they ostensibly sell clothes and fashion accessories, and have listed themselves as fashion retailers on social media; many claimed that their prices were being cut because of a sale event.

Advertisement

They have all been designed using a common template and hosted on Shopify, an e-commerce platform that allows businesses to build online stores from a template, rather than having to hire an independent developer to build a website from scratch.

Shopify is used by legitimate businesses, but is also popular with scammers because it is relatively easy to use and fake websites can be created quickly.

Several pages have been taken offline and could only be found via internet archiving services like [the Wayback Machine](#), which allow users to see what a website previously looked like if someone has saved a snapshot of it from a point in the past.

Though many of the pages have been removed, those we could visit looked incredibly convincing and did not show obvious signs of being fraudulent.



A screenshot from the website Ruby & Maeve, a boutique that claims to be based in Kerry

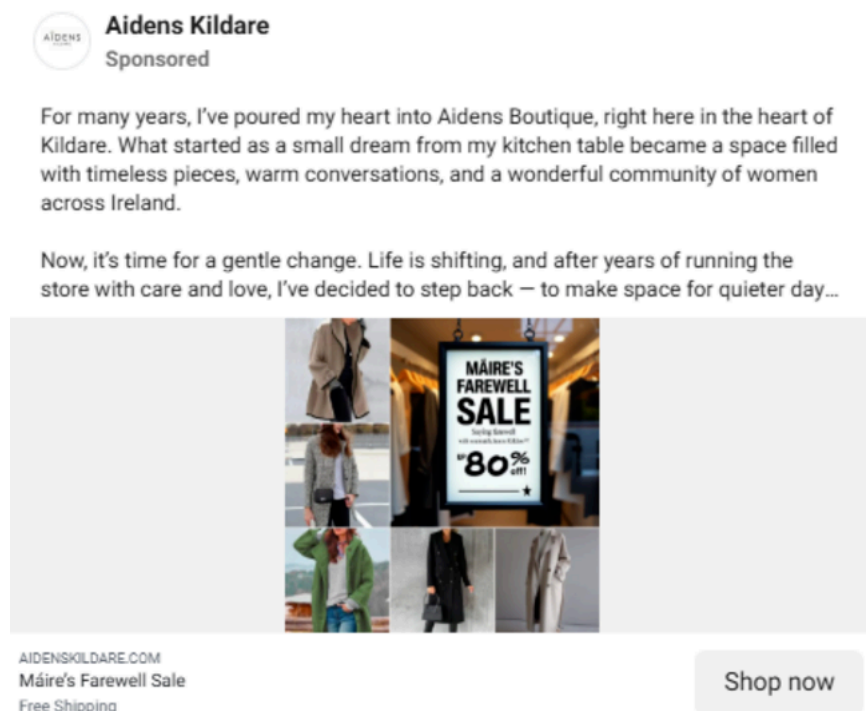
The stores we investigated looked like regular online clothes shops, with a wide range of men's and women's items for sale, individual names and images for each product, options to choose different sizes or colours, and images of the products being worn by models.

All the websites we visited included mundane details to make them seem more convincing, like pages outlining a terms of service and privacy policy, while several included back-stories about when they were founded or who they were run by.

However, in many cases where websites posted images of their 'owners' with a back-story about the business, these images were generated using artificial intelligence or were stock images that had been lifted from other websites.

Google Reverse Image searches also show the same images of models wearing clothing being used on multiple websites, including instances where stores claimed to be based in different countries.

Crucially, all the websites we visited sought to impress a sense of urgency upon shoppers by suggesting their discounts were time-limited or only available to those who got them first; some included countdown timers claiming an ongoing 'sale' would end in hours.



A Facebook ad for Aidens Kildare, which claimed to be hosting a closing-down sale IMAGE: Meta Ad Library

Some included opening hours and contact details, including phone numbers, to make them appear like they had a bricks-and-mortar presence in Ireland.

Businesses that sell online are required to provide details like their physical address, phone number and email – though many of the websites we found either didn't do this, or provided addresses and phone numbers that were not legitimate.

"If these details are not easily available on a website, then that is a serious red flag that the company is not what it seems," the CCPC's Gráinne Griffin said.

Reviews left on the Facebook and Trustpilot pages for many of the stores show a litany of complaints from people claiming that the goods are delivered from Asia rather than coming from Ireland.

This is a supply chain model known as drop-shipping, whereby the seller acts as a middleman and never stocks the goods at all, but orders and gets them delivered (sometimes from a different country) on behalf of the buyer.

Drop-shipping is a business model that is used by some legitimate retailers to help them provide a wider range of goods without having to stock larger items, but it is also misused by scammers to make easy money through fraudulent online activity.

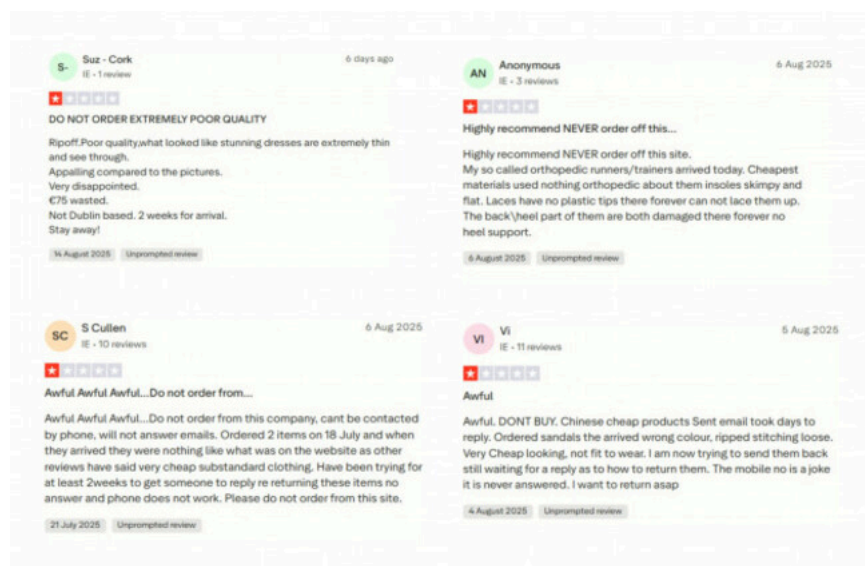
As part of the scam, the shop 'owner' makes money by charging a standard rate for goods that are much cheaper (and generally lower quality) when ordered from abroad, but which the buyer thinks they are getting directly from the 'shop'.

The practice is not illegal in itself, but the fraud arises where a shopper thinks they're buying from stores that claim to be based in Ireland (which may rely on a fake back-story to draw people in), and when the items sold are of poorer quality than advertised.

A number of the pages also feature fake reviews, either as part of the website's own layout under a banner that read things like 'What our customers say' or via screenshots of five-star Trustpilot reviews that do not correspond to actual reviews.

In reality, the Facebook and Trustpilot pages of most of these websites are littered with negative reviews that highlight how the products that get delivered are different to those being sold, that there is no facility to return them, or that the goods never arrive at all.

The use of fake back-stories in social media ads may also fall foul of the EU's Digital Services Act, which requires platforms to take active steps to prevent this kind of content.



A sample of negative Trustpilot reviews for one of stores IMAGE: Trustpilot

Social media scam

Because the fraudulent online drop-shipping stores have no physical real-world presence, it's unlikely that most people will organically seek them out as part of their regular browsing habits.

The website operators are therefore heavily reliant on social media ads to promote their online stores.

Through searches on Meta's ad library, *The Journal Investigates* discovered 91 corresponding social media pages for the 95 stores that claimed to be Irish.

In a small number of cases, multiple Facebook pages were set up that linked to the same 'Irish' website, while no social media pages could be found for a handful of others.

From these fake Facebook and Instagram profiles, scammers attract the attention of social media users by paying for posts that promote eye-catching offers for discount clothes or other fashion items.

These ads often contain images of fake shops or owners to make them appear more authentic, though the images are often generated by artificial intelligence.

The text in the ads also seek to lure people in via back-stories that suggest the 'shop' is selling discounted goods after a crisis event or because it is clearing its stock because it is closing down.

Social media users who see these ads might think they are one off, but when we compared different ads from different Facebook pages, we spotted signs that suggest they could be part of a wider network

Many of the ads often used the same text, with multiple pages saying they were stores closing "after X wonderful years" and "with a heavy heart", and others promoting products by saying "our best-seller is back in stock".

Several different stores also advertised items of clothing with male and female names; for example, sets of male clothing called 'Niall' and dresses called 'Alice'.

Meta's ad library also shows the extent to which the company has profited from these fraudulent ads.

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It shows that the 91 social media pages for 'Irish' websites that we investigated have collectively posted more than 50,000 ads between them to date.

It is not possible to see how much was spent on individual ads, but even if the advertisers spent a minimum of \$1 on every ad, Meta will have earned more from those ads (over \$50,000 or €42,600) than it did from all but two of Ireland's **top 'political' advertisers in the last 90 days.**

Despite Meta policies that prohibit scams and deceptive practices, the majority of these ads were not removed by the company (though a number of them were).

Who is behind the pages

The 95 websites and their 91 accompanying social media profiles also showed how the scam may be a concerted global operation.

This is not just because the scam targets people in different countries: the structure of the online stories and apparent location of those behind them suggests a significant international dimension.

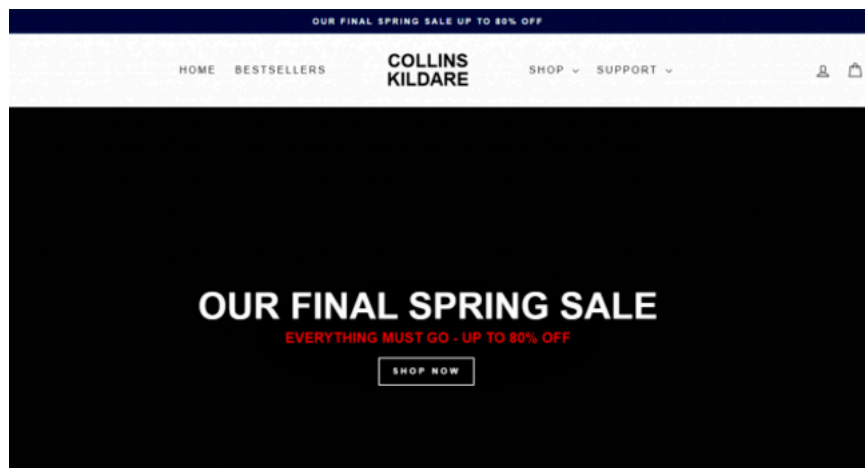
Facebook transparency information, which reveals where those running the pages are based, provides clues that the online shops are being run from abroad, despite pretending to be Irish businesses.

Just one of the 91 social media pages we investigated had an administrator that was based in Ireland – and that page also had admins based in Bolivia and India.

Although data was not available for all of the other pages, we found administrators based in 26 other countries, ranging from Afghanistan, to Serbia, to the United Kingdom, to Mexico.

A total of 36 out of the 91 pages had admins based in the Netherlands, while there was also a concentration of pages being run from south-east Asia (including from Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines), where **an increasing number of scam operations are being uncovered.**

Not only were these pages being managed from abroad, but several of them ran ads that were paid for by the same person despite the stores having a different name; for example, an actor running the store Collins Kildare also paid for ads for two more stores called Nolan Kildare and Kate and Liam Dublin.



The former homepage of Collins Kildare, which encouraged shoppers to avail of discounts as part of a 'final sale'

There were other signs that these fraudulent pages were set up as part of a wider international scam.

Many of the pages had previously been set up under different names, according to Facebook transparency information that can be found on individual pages.

In some cases, it's possible to see how these pages were re-branded versions of profiles belonging to fraudulent drop-shipping websites that operated in other countries.

For example, a Facebook page for Ciara-cork.com shows that it was first set up in July 2024 under the name NovaLouise Danmark, which corresponds with the name of a website that has attracted similar Truspliot complaints as other fraudulent drop-shipping websites.

The page, which has more than 12,000 followers, later changed name to Ciara Cork on 18 October 2024, and began running ads under that name two days later.

In total, 31 of the 91 'Irish' Facebook pages we looked at had been set up under a different name.

Other pages have also been updated so that they redirect to completely new stores which target shoppers in countries outside Ireland.

One example is Mohony Dublin, which could be found via the URL mohony-dublin.com September 2024 when it claimed to be a shop based in Dublin.

However, we found that inputting the same URL into a browser now leads to a new store called Butik Radecka Gydnia, which claims to be an entirely different boutique based in the Polish city of Gydnia.

The Journal Investigates was also able to piece together similarities between a number of Irish-appearing and international websites through an analysis of their source code.

Source code essentially contains the instructions for how a website is laid out and how it performs certain functions, though it occasionally reveals where a website is based or other identifying information like a specific Google Ad profile IDs.

Our analysis of source code found further evidence indicating a Dutch element to the scam: of the 95 websites we could access via an active URL or through online archiving tools like the Wayback Machine, 63 said they were hosted in the Netherlands.

Other stores were found to be based in Austria, Belgium, Finland, Italy, the UK and the United States.

Just two websites claimed to be hosted in Ireland, and listed specific physical addresses on their website.

However, Google Maps shows both of these addresses were separate residential properties in Dublin; one of these online stores had 'Cork' in its URL and the other provided a landline contact number whose area code corresponded with parts of Cavan.

Meta investigation

The Journal Investigates contacted Meta to ask what actions the company was taking against the pages advertising fraudulent drop-shipping websites and those who are behind them.

A company spokesperson suggested that those responsible are "driven by ruthless cross-border criminal networks that use sophisticated schemes" to target social media users, and that it was continuing to invest in technology to tackle them.

They also said Meta was partnering with banks, government and law enforcement to stop those responsible, and that the company is now investigating pages and ads which *The Journal Investigates* provided to the company as part of its queries.

Some of the relevant pages have since been removed, though a number remained active at the time of publication.

The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission says that any consumer who thinks they have been scammed should immediately contact Gardaí to report the issue.

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