



The Impact of International University Transnational Social Media Brand Image on Student Brand Attitudes

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ABSTRACT

This paper aimed to examine the relationship between international university brand image and brand attitudes in transnational social media environment. The author analyzed the concepts of international university brand image on transnational social media; and expanded the dimensions of international university brand image in this context. Based on the Biel brand image model, a new model was tested using PLS-SEM analysis involving 390 respondents from China. In China's social media environment, among the four dimensions of international university brand image, university image and source country image significantly and positively affect Chinese students' brand attitudes. Student image and product or service image have no significant impact on brand attitudes. Based on the Biel brand image model, this study extended the understanding of brand image in the context of transnational social media marketing. It addressed the knowledge gap regarding how international university brand image relates to brand attitude on these platforms.

Keywords: International University Brand Image, Brand Attitude, Transnational Social Media

JEL Classifications: M

1. INTRODUCTION

With economic globalization, educational internationalization has become a global trend, and many Chinese students choose to study abroad (De Wit and Altbach, 2021; Liu et al., 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped global enrollment, pushing universities to rethink brand strategies and strengthen their online presence (Zaman et al., 2024; Maresova et al., 2020). Today, universities are not only educational institutions but also business entities, where branding plays a vital role in attracting students, securing resources, and shaping public perception (Azoury et al., 2014; Chen, 2016; Landrum et al., 1999). Research on university branding has grown, emphasizing brand image as a key driver of reputation and competitiveness (Buono and Fortezza, 2017; Stephenson et al., 2016; Delmestri et al., 2015). With the ubiquity of social media, universities increasingly leverage these platforms to reinforce their brands, making transnational social media branding an emerging academic field (Valerio-Ureña et al., 2020; Pringle and Fritz, 2019). Studies confirm that elements such as

logos and social media communication positively shape brand attitude and influence student applications (Foroudi et al., 2020; Bastedo et al., 2014). University core brands—mission, vision, and cultural identity—are stable and enduring, creating lasting advantages that are difficult to replicate. Against this backdrop, this study examines how international university brand image influences brand attitude among Chinese students on social media.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Impact of Social Media on University Branding

As observed by Kietzmann et al. (2011), social media is so powerful that it can easily determine or damage a brand's reputation and directly lead to brand success or failure. The emergence of social media and its current innovation and development have influenced organizations to discover effective and sustainable ways to communicate with consumer groups and attract potential customers. This new communication and marketing challenge extends to universities and educational institutions attempting to

influence the decision-making process of international students (Reddy, 2014). Due to the increasing role of social media in branding and marketing communication practices, creating a brand image through social media has become an excellent way for universities to communicate with potential students (Wijaya and Putri, 2013). Studies have shown that the content of university brand information on transnational social media has an important impact on the international university brand image (Fujita et al., 2017; Valerio-Ureña et al., 2020).

Social media has changed the traditional way of communication between university brands and students, enabling students to have both positive and negative impacts on university brand assets (Pringle and Fritz, 2019). Therefore, for universities, it is important to understand how to manage marketing activities on social media and build brand image by establishing a positive brand awareness (Dib and Alhaddad, 2015). Communicating with students through social media networks can strengthen the relationship between universities and students. It can be said that when universities convey their positive image to students through social media, students feel their value (Salem, 2020).

2.2. University Brand Image

As an important concept in the field of economics, a brand has always been closely linked to commodities. With its significant identifiable characteristics, it has become a powerful tool for consumers to identify commodities and services and distinguish them from competitors (De Chernatony, 1993). Brand image has been extended from the initial simple product identification to various social fields, including city brands (Kavaratzis, 2004; Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005), university brands (Alkhawaldeh et al., 2020), and other non-commercial brand types (do Paço et al., 2014; Dogra, 2007). As times change, the influence of university brands has become increasingly significant, and their position in the higher education ecosystem has become increasingly important (Dholakia and Acciardo, 2014).

A university brand can be considered as the total impression of images, emotions, experiences, and facts that a university has created in the public mind (Panda et al., 2019). It reflects the characteristics of the institution that distinguish it from other institutions, its ability to meet the needs of students, instills confidence in its ability to provide a certain type and level of higher education, and assists potential new students in making informed admission decisions (Nguyen et al., 2016).

There is a substantial amount of research on university brand image worldwide. In the study of measuring university brand image, some scholars have used brand models (Chen, 2016; Palacio et al., 2002; Panda et al., 2019; Sahin and Singh, 2017). However, existing research lacks a measurement model for international universities in transnational social media. In this study, the author will re-establish the university brand image model to measure its relationship with brand attitude.

2.3. International University Brand Image Model

Brand image has the characteristics of multi-dimensional combination, complexity, diversity and relative stability. Many

researchers have proposed different brand image models from their own research perspectives (such as Aaker model, Keller model, Krishnan model, Biel model). The starting point of the Aaker model is to explain the composition of brand equity. The Keller model explains the process of generating brand customer equity. The research perspective of the Krishnan model is different from the other three models, which deepens the understanding of brand association. The Biel model (Biel, 1993) is more suitable for empirical research. For luxury goods or special goods, due to their inherent characteristics, people have a certain understanding of these three images. Moreover, special goods belong to image brands, which establish competitive advantages by shaping a unique brand image. Therefore, using the Biel model to measure the brand image of special products has a direct guiding significance for corporate advertising themes, image spokespersons, and promotion methods. Biel (1993) posited that brand image is primarily reflected in three types of images: Company image, user image, and product/service image. Biel's model intuitively describes the constituent elements and influencing factors of brand image, making it more suitable for empirical research on brand image. Like all models, the Biel model also has its own shortcomings, primarily manifested in its lack of description of the interrelationships between the various components and its failure to consider the relative importance of the three factors. However, the Biel model is simple and intuitive. It systematically and comprehensively includes the constituent elements of brand image, although it is only suitable for analyzing certain product categories. Compared with the above models, the Biel model is more suitable for measuring the brand image of universities on social media.

Based on the Biel brand image model, this research designed an international university brand model for China's social media. The university brand image model transforms the company image, user image, and product/service image into university image, student image, and product/service image. The Biel brand image model cannot fully describe an international university brand image on transnational social media. It is widely believed that consumers form a country image by becoming familiar with products from different countries (Roth and Romeo, 1992). Country image can have a significant impact on consumers' product evaluation (Roth and Romeo, 1992; Tse and Gorn, 1993). Baldauf et al. (2009) investigated the impact of perceived brand equity and final brand profitability performance on retailers. The results indicate that the country image of a product has an impact on the perceived brand equity of retailers, and the country image of a product also has a strong positive impact on brand profitability performance. As the market becomes increasingly internationalized, the origin of products plays an increasingly important role in the decisions of sellers and buyers.

In this study, the author extended the Biel brand image model into four dimensions. After adding the element of Source Country Image to the Biel model, the author redesigned the international university brand image model for transnational social media. The model includes four dimensions: university image, student image, product/service image, and source country image.

2.4. Brand Attitude

Brand attitude consists of a consistent, positive or negative general assessment and related effective behavior that together constitute a measure of brand preference (Saydan and Dülek, 2019). Brand attitude serves as the foundation of consumers’ actions and represents a consistent reaction, either favorable or unfavorable, or a learned tendency towards a specific object (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1977). Kotler et al. (1999) define brand attitude as a personal evaluation, emotional feeling, and behavioral tendency that an individual maintains, which can be either favorable or unfavorable. According to Keller et al. (2010), brand attitude is the total or overall evaluation that consumers make of a product that has a brand.

Social media has become a core platform for university branding and communication. Brand attitude reflects the public’s (including students, parents, alumni, businesses and other stakeholders) overall evaluation and emotional inclination towards the university.

3. METHODS

3.1. Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis Development

Yoo and Donthu (2001) verified that brand image affects brand attitude in cross-cultural fields and is one of the foundational documents in the field of brand management. In an earlier study, Sung and Yang (2008) explored the positive impact of brand image on brand attitude in the study of higher education marketization. The research was conducted at four elite American universities. Shamsudin et al. (2022) investigated the impact of brand awareness, brand image and perceived quality on students’ enrollment intention in four private universities in Malaysia. Similarly, the positive impact of brand image on students’ enrollment intention was confirmed. This study provides a data-driven brand strategy basis for private universities in Southeast Asia. Saad et al. (2017) took the University of Northern Malaysia as a case study and pointed out through questionnaires and regression analysis that university brand image dimensions such as “sincerity, ability, and identity” significantly affect students’ behavioral attitudes. Marhareita et al. (2022) focused on the impact of social media marketing on brand awareness, image, and attitudes of educational institutions. The researchers conducted a questionnaire survey on the social media audiences of educational institutions in Indonesia and found that social media marketing indirectly affects user attitudes by shaping a positive brand image (such as innovation and inclusiveness). In previous studies, the relationship between university brand image and brand attitude was mostly studied in one country. And there are few studies in the social media environment.

This study conceptualized international university brand image from the perspective of transnational social media and explored the relationship between international university brand image and brand attitude. This framework was used to test the hypothesized relationships among the variables studied. According to the Biel brand image model, the international university brand image model for China’s social media is constructed in four dimensions: university image, student image, product/service image, and

source country image. The theoretical framework of this study is established as Figure 1.

Thus, the hypotheses were constructed as follows:

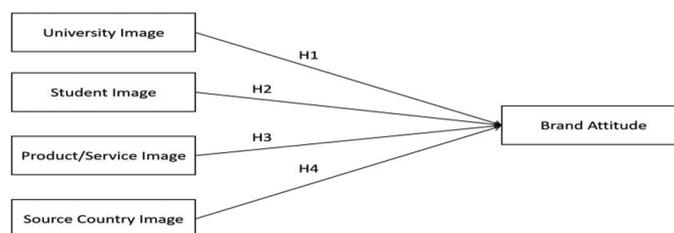
- H₁: University image has a positive effect on brand attitude
- H₂: Students image has a positive effect on brand attitude
- H₃: Products/service image has a positive effect on brand attitude
- H₄: Source country image has a positive effect on brand attitude.

3.2. Research Design

In China, students who wish to study abroad have diverse demands for international universities. The number of admissions to world-renowned universities is limited. Therefore, Chinese students do not necessarily choose the world’s top universities for further study. The international universities in this research were selected from the quacquarelli symonds (QS) university rankings using the equidistant sampling method in probability sampling. Systematic sampling is a sampling method that randomly selects sample units from the population at fixed intervals. It is simple and efficient and can better ensure the representativeness of the sample. In terms of university selection, ten universities were distributed among all rankings in 2022, from the 100th to the 1000th. The selected results need to avoid Chinese universities and try to make the selected samples distributed around the world. Therefore, the ranking of the first university is adjusted to 96th, and then one university was selected at every 100-rank interval, resulting in a total of 10 universities. The 10 international universities in the sample are Pennsylvania State University (United States), University of Otago (New Zealand), University of Porto (Portugal), National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University (Russia), Dongguk University (South Korea), Sofia University (Bulgaria), University of Oregon (United States), University of Zagreb (Croatia), Technological University Dublin (Ireland), and Yamaguchi University (Japan).

Quantitative methods allow researchers to test specific hypotheses and examine the relationship between two or more variables (Bougie and Sekaran, 2019). This study organized a questionnaire survey among students who are likely to receive further education opportunities. Respondents in this study were selected to meet two criteria. First, they have the possibility to continue their studies, even if they do not have the conditions to study abroad. Second, they had taken the National College Entrance Examination and were at least 18 years old. They are active on three popular China’s social media platforms: WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin. This study used a non-probability sampling method. The survey was conducted among undergraduate students and graduates of one university in China. The first group of respondents consisted of undergraduate and graduate students from Beijing Union

Figure 1: Relationship between international university brand image and brand attitude of TNHE



University, who were invited to complete the questionnaire. They then shared the questionnaire with their former classmates, forming a snowball sampling method. Snowball sampling is a non-probability method used to study hard-to-reach groups, where researchers start with a few participants who then recruit others from their networks, gradually enlarging the sample (Naderifar et al., 2017).

The questionnaire technique was applied in obtaining research data. After respondents have browsed all of the 10 international universities' social media information, they were asked to fill out a questionnaire. When conducting the survey, questionnaire star software was used to prepare the questionnaire, and a 5-point Likert scale was adopted. This is a widely used scaling technique in social science with extensive options for responses (Malhotra, 2009). All of the questions were translated into Chinese. The questionnaire was prepared using questionnaire star software and sent to respondents through WeChat. This study chose WeChat as the main communication channel for its central role in China's digital ecosystem and strong user engagement, while Weibo and Douyin focus more on public content and entertainment, with less effective private communication.

3.3. Research Instrument and Measurement Items

Self-administered questionnaire was used in this study. The measurement items for international university brand image were modified to suit the present study. The questionnaires for these items were derived and modified from the research of previous scholars.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Profile of Respondents

The questionnaire was designed using the software Questionnaire Star and distributed via WeChat. A total of 390 valid questionnaires were collected, all of which were valid. The data obtained are as follows:

Among the respondents, males accounted for 49.5% and females accounted for 50.5%, which was almost equal in gender. The age distribution is broad, with respondents ranging from 18 years to 26 years and above. The grade distribution is also wide, ranging from undergraduates to postgraduates, including students who are still studying and those who have graduated and are working. In this research, the wide age and grade distribution of respondents indicates that the sample has high age diversity.

The 10 universities ranked 96th, 196th, 296th, 396th, 496th, 596th, 696th, 796th, 896th, and 996th in the world were selected using equidistant sampling. Except for the top-ranked Pennsylvania State University, which had a high number of people choosing it, the other nine universities were chosen by the respondents, and the distribution is relatively even. This shows that when choosing a target university, ranking is not the most important factor that students consider when selecting a university for studying abroad. On the contrary, each university's brand image information on China's social media influences students' choices.

4.2. Descriptive Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistical analysis involves organizing, describing, summarizing, and interpreting the collected data (Morgan et al., 2004). This study used smartPLS (Ringle et al., 2024) to test standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis of the sample data to analyze its data distribution characteristics. The mean levels of the main variables involved in this study are within a reasonable range, and the standard deviations ranged from 1.146 to 1.375, indicating that the average dispersion of the sample data around the mean is not very large. From the perspective of skewness and kurtosis, the absolute values of the skewness of each variable are <1 , and the absolute values of the excess kurtosis are <1.135 . According to the normal distribution skewness standard proposed by Kline (2023), it can be considered that the sample data of this study is more in line with the requirements of normal distribution and is suitable for subsequent data processing.

4.3. Data Quality Evaluation

According to the standards of PLS-SEM (Hair et al., 2022), this study analyzed the reliability and validity of the data. To ensure the reliability of the sample, we calculated the Cronbach's α coefficient for each variable. The lowest Cronbach's α coefficient of each variable in this study is 0.916. Cronbach's α coefficient, modified α , and combined reliability all >0.916 indicating that the internal consistency of the variables is good. About AVE value calculation results, the constructs were all >0.79 . The loadings of all items on their corresponding constructs are significantly higher than those on other constructs. The cross loadings were clear, further supporting discriminant validity. Therefore, the reliability and validity of each measurement indicator meet the requirements, and the research model design is reasonable.

4.4. Hypothesis Testing

The interpretation degree of the model is based on the fitting coefficient R^2 (see Figure 2). R^2 should be between (0, 1), and the closer it is to 1, the stronger explanatory power of the independent variable to the dependent variable. The R^2 of BATT is 0.229, indicates that the explanatory power of UI, SI, PSI, and SCI for BATT in the model is 22.9%. There are many factors that influence students' attitudes towards international university brands (such as economy, family, and school location). The brand image of international universities on social media has limited influence on Chinese students, and 0.229 is within an acceptable range.

In the model, the independent variables include four dimensions of international university brand image. UI (University Image): 8 measurement items (UI1-UI8), factor loading range: 0.866-0.896. SI (Student Image): 4 measurement items (SI1-SI4), factor loading range: 0.888-0.926. PSI (Product or Service image): 3 measurement items (PSI1-PSI3), factor loading range: 0.910-0.949. SCI (Source Country Image): 6 measurement items (SCI1-SCI6), factor loading range: 0.862-0.911. Dependent variable BATT (brand attitude), 4 measurement items (BATT1-BATT4), factor loading range: 0.888-0.903. The structural path analysis is shown in Table 1.

5. DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTION

The path analysis reveals distinct levels of influence from four brand image dimensions on brand attitude (BATT). SCI (source

country image) emerges as the strongest predictor, underscoring the critical role of national reputation in shaping brand perceptions. UI (university image) exerts a moderate influence, suggesting institutional attributes like campus infrastructure or global rankings matter. The effects of SI (student image) and PSI (product/service image) were not significant, which means that student content displayed on Chinese social media and the product or service quality of international universities may not significantly change China’s students’ brand attitudes.

Source country image is a combination of consumers’ stereotypes, reputation, and overall perception of products from a particular country (Nagashima, 1970; Han, 1989). The strong SCI-BATT link aligns with the halo effect theory, where a country’s overall reputation disproportionately influences specific brand evaluations. From the perspective of cognitive pathways, the image of the country of origin, as an external cue, directly affects students’ inferences about the quality of university education. For example,

Table 1: Structural path analysis

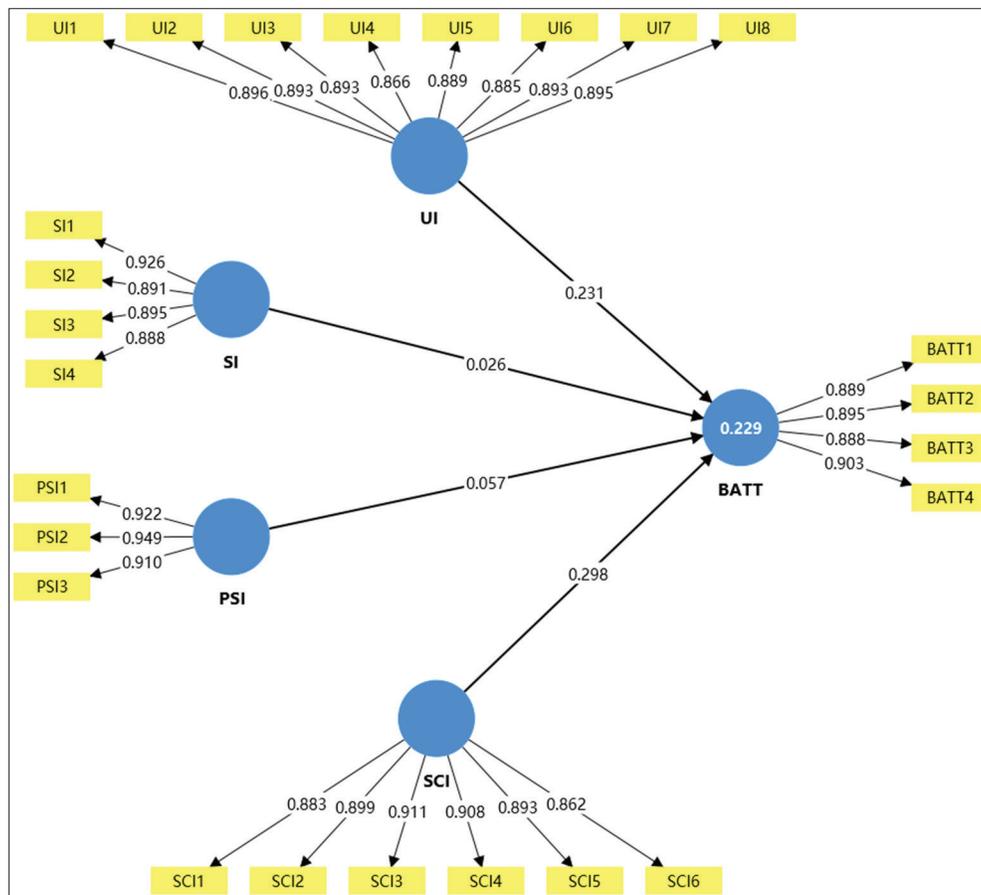
Hypothesis	Path	Path coefficients	Standard deviation	P-values	Conclusion
H ₁	UI->BATT	0.231	0.053	0.000	Supported
H ₂	SI->BATT	0.026	0.049	0.597	Unsupported
H ₃	PSI->BATT	0.057	0.054	0.292	Unsupported
H ₄	SCI- BATT	0.298	0.056	0.000	Supported

The larger the path coefficient, the stronger the explanatory power of the variable on brand attitude. Usually, a value >0.2 is considered to have a medium or above impact

universities from countries with high economic levels are easily endowed with the belief of “high academic quality” (Han, 1989; Roth and Romeo, 1992). From the perspective of the affective pathway, students’ emotions toward a country will be transferred to the university brand. Changes in political relations may lead to negative emotions toward foreign universities (Maheswaran and Chen, 2006). It is recommended that international universities optimize the image of their country of origin on China’s social media. They should approach this from the perspectives of professional authority construction, emotional symbol design, and behavioral guidance, avoid political sensitivity, and express national relations in a neutral manner to achieve a positive transformation of brand attitudes.

Foroudi et al. (2020) confirmed that brand logo and other image elements and social media communication have a significant positive impact on brand attitude. This study confirms that international universities are applicable in China’s social media environment. The university image triggers students’ differentiated emotional responses to the brand (such as trust and yearning) through brand cognition (such as popularity and association), which in turn affects students’ decision-making (Keller, 1993). It is recommended that international universities strengthen their historical accumulation and academic authority on Chinese social media. Establish a series of #campuslandmarks# topics on Douyin or Weibo, and use AR and other technologies to display immersive experiences of facilities such as libraries and laboratories.

Figure 2: Partial least squares algorithm result



In the research results, the image of international university students has a weak impact on Chinese students' brand attitudes. The possible reason is that individuals' perception of brands is affected by information channels, resulting in fragmented communication of international university student images. Or it may be because the stories of foreign university students lack uniqueness (such as similar activities and experiences), making it difficult to form differentiated memory points.

Product/service image has a weak impact on brand attitudes. It is recommended that international universities highlight employment and academic value on China's social media, publish graduate salary data and employment ratios of famous companies, and meet the utilitarian demands of Chinese families for education investment.

The new generation of students is more exposed to accessible information about universities around the world, making the selection and preference for a university closely tied to the university's brand image (Shankar Singh and Sahin, 2017). In order to attract more Chinese students, international universities should establish a dedicated transnational social media operation and management department. In social media operations, multiple accounts should be set up from the perspectives of universities, study abroad agencies, students, etc., and brand image information should be disseminated in various forms such as text, images, and videos. The management department should strive to ensure the accuracy of the disseminated information and avoid false information. Contradictory brand image information content from the same university should be avoided. With a powerful branding and unique corporate identities, higher education institutions can differentiate themselves from their competitors (Watkins and Gonzenbach, 2013). Highlighting the characteristics of international universities in brand image information and forming a unique brand positioning is necessary, as ranking is not an absolutely important factor affecting students' choices.

6. CONCLUSION

This study aims to explore how four key dimensions of international university brand image on transnational social media. The findings will help optimize digital communication strategies for higher education institutions.

Every foreign university has the opportunity to showcase its brand image information on China's social media, given the diverse needs of Chinese students. Comprehensively displaying the brand image of international universities on China's social media, can help enhance the university brand equity. According to Sudhana et al. (2020), university brand equity has a positive influence on brand attitude, which in turn affects students' enrollment intention. In a highly competitive market environment, international universities need to develop branding strategies, especially in the transnational social media context. As part of the chain structure, international university brand attitude can further influence students' enrollment intention as a dependent variable.

6.1. Theoretical Implications

At present, there are many studies on new media marketing of commercial enterprises and product brands, but there are few studies on the transnational brand image building of universities. It is necessary for universities to explore "transnational brand image building through social media" for global enrollment activities. This study enriches the theory of international university transnational social media brand image building and explores the international university brand image model in China by extending the Biel brand image model.

6.2. Practical Implications

Most international universities rely on past successes and reputations to attract future students. By doing so, they fail to harness the power and advantages that social media marketing brings to universities, both in engaging with current students and attracting potential students. Higher education is entering an increasingly digital environment. On the one hand, emerging educational platforms use social media marketing tools to engage with students, gain their trust, and build meaningful relationships with students around the world. On the other hand, social media applications have exploded and are used by various stakeholders. Transnational enrollment is of great significance to the survival and development of universities. The international brand image of universities is influenced by many factors. Currently, the content communicated through social media is an important factor. Therefore, the shaping and dissemination of the transnational brand image in social media play a vital role in the development of universities.

6.3. Limitations and Future Research

This study developed the application of Biel's brand image model in transnational social media and measured the impact on brand image from four dimensions, but did not fully consider the influencing factors of other aspects of university brand image. Other dimensions of university brand image in transnational social media can be explored in future research.

The target respondents of this study are those who receive higher education in China, and do not consider parents, classmates, and other related groups that have a significant impact on students' decisions to choose a foreign university. In terms of age level, high school seniors can be considered in the future, as the number of Chinese students studying abroad for undergraduate studies is also increasing.

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