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**The Brand Image Perception of the Students in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq: The Importance  
of Advertisement, Social Media, and Personal Factors**

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**Abstract**

Aim of the study is to investigate the effects of advertisement, personal factors, and social media on the university brand image. Accordingly, 481 questionnaires have been collected from 3 private universities in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Collected data was evaluated using hierarchical regression analyses. Based on the results of the study, it has been observed that advertisement is the most important factor on the brand image for the university students. Secondly, social media has unignorable effects on the brand image. It was already observed that although its significant, personal factors are least important on the brand image.

**Keywords;** Brand Image, University, Kurdistan, Advertisement, Social Media, Personal Factors

**1. Introduction**

Today, one of the most important factors in the university choice of potential university students is the university brand image. Previous research has found that the images of universities formed by prospective students greatly influence their choices (Wilkins and Huisman, 2014). Therefore, the development of brand images, whether a public university or a private university, significantly increases the selection rate by potential students (Budur et al., 2018). Accordingly, universities should have a sustainable brand image strategy to gain a competitive advantage in this time of intense competition to compete and be permanent in this education market. Brand image is a multidimensional structure caused by customers' cognition, emotion, symbol, values, and attitudes, and it's an important part of brand equity because it communicates the brand's value to them (Demir, 2020; Malik et al, 2012). The image, according to Kotler (2001), is the set of beliefs, thoughts, and impressions that a person has about an object. As a result, when we talk about brand image, we're talking about the brand's mental representation based on individual customer beliefs, ideas, and impressions. It seems inevitable that university administrators and the university's marketing department should conduct research on the factors affecting the brand image and take sustainable measures, based on the importance of the University's brand image. In this study, three factors their effects on university brand image were investigated: social media, advertising, and personality. In this research, the effects of these factors on each other and the university brand image were

measured. Age and manner of life, purchasing power and income, lifestyle, and personality and self-concept are all personal aspects. Because of personal variables, each learner is totally self-contained in his or her state set. Age, gender, family history, and ethnicity are all factors to consider (Panda, et al 2019). One of the most important factors that universities should consider when creating and developing their image is personal factors, which are very influential in the decisions of potential students during the university selection stage (Budur et al., 2021; Foroudi, et al 2019). Personality is a set of traits that each human has, which is the result of the interplay of the individual's psychological and physiological features and produces ongoing behavior (Mohammed et al., 2020). According to Roth (1995), the self-concept is related to the picture that an individual has - or wishes to have - and communicates to his surroundings. These two ideas have a big impact on people's lives, both in elections and in everyday life. In this region chosen as the study area, high school graduates face the problem of choosing a university every year and the characteristics of each student clearly affect their decisions. Brand images of universities are one of the most important factors that high school graduate students take into account in the decision-making process about which university they will study at (Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990; Torlak et al., 2021). Therefore, the things that universities should consider when building and developing their brand images, personal factors affecting brand images and how to use these factors in the most efficient and effective way and introduce the university to their potential students (Sallam, 2014). Since this geography and surrounding regions, which are chosen as a field of study, there any industry hasn't been developed, it is very important for people in this region to study at the university and get a diploma. Families in particular both encourage and challenge their children to study at university and get a diploma. Because the diploma their children receive is seen as a boast, and a status indicator for families in this region.

As Panda et al asserted that customers often buy different goods or services at different ages, for example a customer does not purchase the same goods or services in 20 or 70 years. Customers' behaviors, interests, environments, lifestyles, values, and actions progress throughout their life (Torlak et al., 2019). Ismail & Spinelli. (2012) expressed that factors affecting the purchasing decision process will also affect the university selection process, allowing students to explore various alternatives (Demir, 2019). An individual's family life cycle will also have an impact on value, lifestyle, and purchasing behavior. Purchasing power has a significant impact on purchasing behavior and purchasing process based on income and capital (Demir and Mukhlis, 2017).

There is an enormous competition among universities in this region to attract more and more intelligent students, thereby enabling them to enroll in their universities. Consequently, universities use many different methods to show their qualities, differences and advantages to these potential students and to convince them. For example, they use many different social media platforms and various advertising methods to reach them.

Today, companies use different advertising methods to attract the attention of the target market and influence their behavior (Budur, 2018; Demir et al., 2021). In today's world, the most suitable way for companies to reach their target customers is the print media, which is the most appropriate advertising method; such as magazines and newspapers, called print media advertising, and digital media such as, mobile ads and advertising social media (Arbouw et al 2019). Online advertising is one of the cheapest and fastest advertising methods in today's world where new information channels are rapidly developing to reach potential and real customers (Demir et al., 2021;

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Driesener&Romaniuk,2006). Companies in today's competitive world aim to reach their customers through as many various channels as possible, such as multi-channel and cross-channel marketing, sales, and interactions (Demir, 2019a). According to Malik et al. (2013), enterprises differentiate their products or services from competitors to make them more appealing to target customers in a competitive market. This study was conducted on the university brand image, social media, advertising, and potential students' personal factors which are among the factors that can affect the prospective students in the selection of universities in this region by students. In the study, the effects of personal factors, social media and advertising on each other were also studied. Social media refers to the means of interaction between people in virtual communities and networks in which they exchange information and ideas. One of the most popular and effective marketing strategies is social media marketing (Rutter, Roper & Lettice, 2016). Social media is used by over 2.8 billion people globally, giving it a tremendous platform for marketing businesses and products. The Internet has advanced rapidly, having a considerable impact on social life and communication habits (Foroudi, Gupta and Foroudi, 2019; Torlak et al, 2021b). Companies in the digital age use any advertising approach, particularly social media advertising, to draw real and potential customers' attention to their products. Universities are understandably enthusiastic about social media. Students today use social media sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram to communicate and share their experiences. Given the rapid growth of new information channels, online advertising is becoming one of the cheapest and fastest advertising tactics for reaching potential and actual clients (Fiaz et al 2019; Abdullah & Fatah, 2020; Rashid et al., 2021). Brand image is a crucial term in consumer behavior because people choose brands and products based on their perceptions of the brand image (Sasmita& Suki, 2015). In this study, university brand image and some factors that are affecting it; social media, advertising, and personal factors were investigated. In recent years, brand awareness has become a key management objective, as firms have realized that their brands are among the most important intangible assets they own (Alkhaldeh et al 2020). According to Cheung et al. (2019), the effectiveness of brand activities, which are becoming increasingly important in the higher education sector, it seems like a matter of time in our global world, with the effect of internet and social media, that a university can be distinguished from other branded universities. This study can be a guide for potential university students and student parents in this region in choosing a university in terms of the importance of some factors affecting university brand image and the importance of university brand image in university selection.

### **2. Literature Review**

A brand is a symbol that lingers in the minds and hearts of consumers, evoking a sense of meaning and emotion in relation to the product. As a result, a brand is more than just a logo, name, symbol, trademark, or label on a product (Sultan and Wong, 2019).

Many academics have recognized the concept of branding for universities since the mid-1990s. Since then, branding has expanded beyond products and services and has begun to be employed in a variety of institutions (Kirmani& Zeithaml, 1993). Because of the increased capacity of students in universities, university branding has become a significant issue. As a result, university competition is becoming more intense, as the supply of spots outnumbers the demand (Aspizain, 2016; Jaf et al., 2015). According to Graeff (1996), higher education institutions (HEIs) are being pushed to develop

more competitive marketing strategies as a result of increased competition in the industry. In order to build university marketing strategies, HEI must first comprehend the university selection process. The decision process and physical behaviors of an individual during the appraisal, purchase, use, or rejection of consumer products and services are referred to as purchasing decisions (Clayton & Heo, 2005). (2011). Undergraduate students' behavior, attitudes, and experiences are influenced by their student lifestyle. According to Low and Lamb (2000), the student rarely makes the ultimate decision because the selection process is likely to entail conversation between students, parents, consultants, professors, friends, relatives, and institution officials. According to Wijaya & Putri (2013), search engine advertising is a helpful kind of advertising from the perspective of the consumer because the keywords and the marketing message are matched when the relevant search term is submitted. According to Sultan and Wong (2019), social networking sites are web-based services that allow people to check in on a limited system and express a group of people to share personal or academic information. Marketing experts discuss the issues of branding in higher education, but they do not need to have a shared understanding of the brand's objectives. As a result, stakeholders, particularly in universities, are asked to label events in order to pique interest and set their organization apart from current educational trends (Budur et al., 2019; Sasmita & Suki, 2015). Because internet-centric marketing is so prevalent nowadays, it's easy to overlook how critical product and service identification via social media is for all of us.

Furthermore, unlike spontaneously occurring word of mouth, word of mouth advertising is intentionally influenced or pushed by organizations (e.g., 'seeding' a message in a network, paying frequent customers for engaging in WOM, and employing WOM 'agents'). Cheung and colleagues (Cheung et al., 2019). The emotional aspects that identify a company's or its products are referred to as brand image, and it has a significant impact on consumer purchasing behavior (Wijaya & Putri, 2013). Consumers choose a product not only for its use, but also for the image associated with it and for the brand's recognition among other users. It is critical for schools to project a distinct brand image to pupils. Students', families', and society's choices are influenced by educational brand image. Today's university trends are focusing on marketing and branding programs, making a university not just a higher education institution but also a company. According to Meenaghan (1995), brand image or brand name has a significant positive association with consumer purchasing behavior, and students are brand sensitive and favor branded products. The majority of today's university competitions are aimed at attracting the best and brightest students. As a result, universities have been working to improve their image and improve their rankings in university rankings, and they have spent millions of dollars to do so, because students are brand aware and prefer branded products. Regardless of their companies' marketing strategies, marketers' primary goal is to influence consumers' perceptions and attitudes in order to create a brand image in the consumer's mind and promote the consumer's actual purchasing behavior, resulting in increased sales, market share, and brand equity. University brand image and satisfaction can impact the sharing of positive experiences and recommendations to other students (Jaf et al., 2021; Malik et al., 2013). Increased market competitiveness is a top concern for marketing managers since branding in the education sector has lately been a fast-growing management concept, and implementing this idea in the most productive and successful way is a top priority for marketing managers.

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## 3. Research Hypothesis

Hypothesis -1

H1: Social media affects university brand image

Hypothesis -2

H2: Advertising affects university brand image

Hypothesis -3

H3 : Personal factors affect university brand image

In this study, social media, advertising, and personal factors are independent variables while university brand image dependent variable.

## 4. Methodology

This study was carried out based on the data collected from 3 private universities and 3 public in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Data were collected quantitative as primary and qualitative as secondary. Secondary data collected from extensive literature review from many resources such as published papers, books, internet resources, libraries.

For a thorough comprehension of the items presented in the survey questionnaire, primary data was collected using survey questionnaires generated in three languages: English, Arabic, and Kurdish. The respondents were given the questionnaire in the language they preferred to respond in. To pick the respondent from the entire population, the stratified sampling method of probability sampling was utilized. A stratum was chosen based on a cluster of pupils, from which respondents were chosen at random.

**The resources used in the preparation of survey questionnaires;** Mahyari, P. (2010). The effectiveness of marketing communication within the immersive environment (Doctoral dissertation, Queensland University of Technology), Hanaysha, J. (2016). The importance of social media advertisements in enhancing brand equity: A study on the fast-food restaurant industry in Malaysia. *International Journal of Innovation, Management, and Technology*, 7(2), 46. Cho, E. (2011). Development of a brand image scale and the impact of lovemarks on brand equity, Hardesty, David M., Jay P. Carlson, and William O. Bearden (2002), "Brand Familiarity and Invoice Price Effects on Consumer Evaluations: The Moderating Role of Skepticism Toward Advertising," *JA*, 31 (2), 1-15. Obermiller, Carl and Eric R. Spangenberg (1998), "Development of a Scale to Measure Consumer Skepticism Toward Advertising," *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 7 (2), 159-186. Obermiller, Carl, Eric Spangenberg, and Douglas L. MacLachlan (2005), "Ad Skepticism," *JA*, 34 (3), 7-17.

## 5. Research Findings

Validity and Reliability

In this section, the validity and reliability of the questionnaire was analyzed.

Table 1: Results of EFA

	Extraction	1	2	3	4	Extracted Variance
Brandimage19	.579	.719				32%
Brandimage12	.705	.668				
Brandimage18	.668	.659				
Brandimage20	.599	.657				
Brandimage14	.583	.654				
Brandimage10	.479	.594				
Brandimage21	.409	.573				
Brandimage13	.483	.567				
Brandimage22	.484	.558				
Brandimage6	.535	.556				
Brandimage17	.450	.546				
Brandimage2	.497	.542				
Brandimage11	.556	.476				
Brandimage9	.571	.428				
Advertising4	.615		.753			9%
Advertising12	.600		.710			
Advertising10	.417		.664			
Advertising11	.469		.660			
Advertising8	.562		.559			
Advertising9	.551		.548			
Advertising5	.480		.526			
Advertising6	.473		.514			
Advertising7	.539		.483			
Advertising8	.584		.446			
PersFac4	.501			.808		6%
PersFac6	.501			.802		
PersFac7	.487			.753		
PersFac8	.455			.750		

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PersFac3	.458			.729		5%
PersFac9	.571			.548		
SocialMedia4	.532				.758	
SocialMedia6	.533				.593	
SocialMedia5	.396				.556	
SocialMedia3	.455				.543	

Initially, the EFA analyses was tested. To do this IBM SPSS software was utilized. Given in table 1 there are cluster of each item under the planned factor. It was observed that each item was sufficiently clustered under the defined latent variable. Furthermore, it was observed that Brand image explained the 32 % of the variance on the questionnaire, whilst Advertising explained 9% of the variance, Personal Factors explained 6% and Social Media explained 5% of the variance on the questionnaire. As a result, all questionnaire has explained 52% of the variance, which is acceptable due to it is above 50 %.

Table 2: Reliability

Latent Variables	Cronbach's Alpha
Brand Image	0.92
Social Media	0.82
Advertisement	0.88
Pers. Factor	0.87

Table 2 explains the reliability results of each factor. Given in the results, brand image held coefficient value of 0.92, social media 0.82, advertisement held 0.88, and personal factors represented 0.87 reliability value. Therefore, it can be concluded that each dimension has sufficient reliability level because they hold values above 0.7.

**Hypotheses Results**

In this section, the hypotheses of the study were tested. Hierarchical regression analyses method was used to test the hypotheses. By this way, it was aimed to see the impact of each dimension on the brand image by means of adjusted r square.

Table 3: Results of R square

Model Summary									
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the	Change Statistics				
					R	F	df1	df2	Sig. F



				Estimate	Square Change	Change			Change
1	.664 <sup>a</sup>	.441	.440	.54149	.441	378.091	1	479	.000
2	.784 <sup>b</sup>	.615	.614	.44966	.174	216.625	1	478	.000
3	.807 <sup>c</sup>	.650	.648	.42912	.035	47.837	1	477	.000

a. Predictors: (Constant), Advertisement

b. Predictors: (Constant), Advertisement, SocialMedia

c. Predictors: (Constant), Advertisement, SocialMedia, PersFact

Table 3 shows the overall adjusted R square as well as the adjusted R square of each independent variable separately. Based on the results, it was observed that advertisement, social media, and personal factors explained 65% of the variance on the brand image. However, it was observed that advertisement explained 44% of the variance, social media 17%, and personal factors explained only 4% of the variance on Brand Image.

Table 4: Coefficients of Regression

Coefficients <sup>a</sup>						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.238	.101		12.243	.000
	Advertisement	.638	.033	.664	19.445	.000
2	(Constant)	.288	.106		2.714	.007
	Advertisement	.321	.035	.335	9.262	.000
	SocialMedia	.568	.039	.532	14.718	.000
3	(Constant)	.126	.104		1.217	.224
	Advertisement	.331	.033	.345	9.986	.000
	SocialMedia	.454	.040	.425	11.244	.000
	PersFact	.160	.023	.213	6.916	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Brandimage

Given in the table 4, coefficient values of each independent variable on the Brand image was shown hierarchically. Model number 3 in the table shows the standardized coefficient values of advertisement, social media, and personal factors. It is revealed from the results that social media holds highest coefficient value on the brand image with 0.43, second highest coefficient was seemed

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to be advertisement with coefficient value of 0.35, and personal factors was the least influencing dimension on brand image with coefficient value of 0.21.

Based on these results, it was revealed that although the social media had the biggest influencing factor on the brand image according to its coefficient value. Besides, it is not the most important factor comparing to advertisement effect. The reason is that although advertisement has less coefficient value by means of influence on brand image comparing to social media, it explains more than double variance on the brand image in comparison with the social media effect. Lastly, it was observed that personal factors had the least impact on the brand image.

### 6. Conclusion

Aim of the study was to investigate the effects of advertisement, personal factors, and social media on the brand image. Accordingly, 481 questionnaires have been collected from 3 private universities in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Collected data was evaluated using hierarchical regression analyses.

Based on the results of the study, it has been observed that advertisement is the most important factor on the brand image for the university students. Secondly, social media has unignorable effects on the brand image. It was already observed that although its significant, personal factors are least important on the brand image.

This is because society in Kurdistan region of Iraq is more collectivistic rather than individualistic. In this regard, they consider the social influences and information from the social sources with utmost care.

According to these results, it is suggested the administrator of the private universities should give importance on social media communications that they can increase the awareness of their students in terms reputation and the image of the university.

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