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Factors Affecting Branding in Digital Media Instagram Among Students at the University of Baghdad, Iraq

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to investigate the factors affecting branding on Instagram digital media among students at the University of Baghdad, Iraq. Utilizing a qualitative research method and data analysis through interviews with 25 experts in the field of branding and digital media, this research identifies the key factors contributing to digital branding on Instagram. The quantitative section of the study focused on the student population of the University of Baghdad, Iraq, comprising 8,000 individuals. Based on Morgan's table, the sample size was determined to be 366. The validity and reliability of the study were assessed using expert evaluations and Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The interview results were analyzed and categorized through primary and secondary coding, which ultimately led to the identification of factors in five main categories: causal factors, including audience needs and consumption patterns, advertising opportunities on Instagram, and effective content production; intervening factors, such as the importance of content creation and audience engagement, political and socio-cultural factors, and the visibility of produced content; contextual factors, including competitiveness in branding and content production, brand positioning, and economic and social influences on customer purchasing; outcomes, including building trust and audience loyalty, increased sales and revenue, and meeting customer expectations while maintaining interaction and trust; and strategies, which encompass trust-building and engagement with the audience, aligning with audience culture and values, and leveraging technology. These factors can be considered significant in the process of digital branding on Instagram among students at the University of Baghdad, Iraq.

Keywords: Brand, Branding, Digital Media, Instagram

Introduction

The accelerated integration of digital technologies into everyday life has profoundly reshaped how individuals and organizations interact, communicate, and develop brand identities, particularly on platforms like Instagram, which now serves not merely as a social outlet but as a central space for branding strategies [1]. Instagram, with its image-centric interface and interactive features, offers unparalleled opportunities for businesses, entrepreneurs, and even individuals to build and manage a digital brand. The convergence of visual storytelling, user engagement tools, and algorithmic visibility has transformed Instagram into a potent branding environment, leading to the emergence of digital branding as a strategic imperative.

Digital branding refers to the strategic use of digital platforms to communicate a brand's identity, values, and promises to its target audience [2]. This process is distinct from traditional branding in that it is deeply embedded in user interaction,

social connectivity, and real-time content dynamics. Unlike static brand messages of the past, digital branding thrives on responsiveness, narrative continuity, and visual appeal, making platforms like Instagram uniquely suited for its deployment [3]. The effectiveness of digital branding on Instagram is strongly influenced by factors such as content design, influencer engagement, user-generated content, and the ability to establish emotional connections with the audience.

Recent research has focused increasingly on the role of Instagram in shaping customer perceptions and purchasing behavior through visual and emotional cues. Pathak and Kaushik (2024) found that content strategy on Instagram is a critical driver of consumer engagement for digital brands, especially when it aligns with the audience's lifestyle and preferences [4]. Similarly, studies have demonstrated that well-curated Instagram content can foster higher brand recall and greater customer trust, which are essential for cultivating long-term loyalty [5]. Branding, therefore, is no longer confined to corporate control—it is co-constructed by users, influencers, and algorithms.

Personal and entrepreneurial branding on Instagram has gained prominence as individuals and startups seek to capitalize on the platform's reach. Dehyadgari et al. (2023) identified multiple entrepreneurial branding drivers using a data mining approach, emphasizing interaction, audience targeting, and trend responsiveness as core components [6]. Personal branding on Instagram also involves curating a coherent digital persona that aligns with audience expectations and niche communities [7]. According to Azin and Salehzadeh (2018), personal branding strategies are most successful when they leverage authenticity and visual storytelling to establish emotional connections with followers [8].

In this evolving landscape, brand engagement is no longer limited to traditional customer interactions but involves complex dynamics of visibility, trust, and digital storytelling. Khalili and Hemtani (2018), in their case study on Dunkin' Donuts, demonstrated how Instagram content can significantly influence brand perception and audience loyalty when narratives are consistent and aligned with brand identity [9]. Similarly, Karbakandi and Ghasem Aghaei (2020) emphasized the mediating role of digital branding between customers' social experience and purchase intentions, noting that platforms like Instagram offer immersive environments conducive to brand influence [10].

Urban branding efforts also highlight Instagram's potential beyond commercial contexts. Moradi and Hesabi (2020) explored how cities such as Bushehr have utilized branding techniques via Instagram to influence the mental image of tourists and residents alike, demonstrating the platform's role in shaping not only product perceptions but also spatial and cultural narratives [11]. Similarly, Molaei et al. (2022) investigated social media's role in facilitating urban interactions and found that platforms like Instagram support multilayered communication that enhances both individual and collective identity formation [12].

Understanding branding on Instagram thus requires a multidimensional approach that considers cultural relevance, technological affordances, and strategic communication. As noted by Zulkifli Abd and Safira Safiee (2015), effective branding on Instagram necessitates both visual coherence and strategic adaptability to platform-specific trends and audience expectations [13]. This adaptability includes responsive content strategies, engagement with local and global influencers, and the use of platform analytics to optimize visibility and resonance.

Moreover, recent discussions in the literature have expanded the concept of digital branding to encompass emotional, psychological, and communal aspects of consumer behavior. Saeedi et al. (2020) emphasized the importance of co-creating branding strategies with input from both marketing and entrepreneurship experts on Instagram, reinforcing the collaborative nature of digital brand development [14]. Miles and Mangold (2004) also proposed a conceptual framework for employee

branding that has implications for personal branding on digital platforms, where internal stakeholders play an essential role in shaping public brand narratives [15].

This comprehensive theoretical and empirical backdrop underscores the growing academic and practical interest in Instagram-based branding. While previous studies have examined content strategies, influencer marketing, audience interaction, and algorithmic impacts, there is a growing need to localize this knowledge within specific cultural and institutional contexts. Particularly in developing countries and transitional societies, Instagram serves not only as a branding tool but also as a vehicle for social identity expression, market expansion, and economic participation.

Iraq presents a unique context in this regard. With the rapid penetration of smartphones, increasing internet access, and a predominantly young population, Instagram has become a key platform for communication and entrepreneurship. However, research on how digital branding functions in such environments—especially among university students, who are both content producers and consumers—remains scarce. Understanding the drivers of branding success on Instagram among students can provide critical insights for educational institutions, small businesses, digital marketers, and policy makers seeking to harness the transformative potential of digital platforms.

Accordingly, the present study aims to identify and analyze the key factors influencing branding on Instagram digital media among students at the University of Baghdad, Iraq.

Methods and Materials

The present study adopts a mixed-methods approach and is conducted in two phases. In the qualitative phase, the research is fundamental in terms of purpose and developmental in terms of outcome, employing qualitative data. In the second phase (quantitative), the study is explanatory in purpose and considered developmental-applied in terms of outcome, utilizing quantitative data. The research strategy in the second phase (quantitative method) is a survey design.

The first and most important step involved designing a branding model on Instagram digital media, with the aim of identifying and determining the dimensions and components necessary for constructing such a model. The qualitative data were analyzed using: (1) open coding, (2) axial coding, and (3) identification of core categories including causal conditions, intervening conditions, contextual conditions, strategies, and consequences.

At this stage, the study reviewed the list of influencing factors on the digital branding model (on Instagram) based on the existing literature. The qualitative research population included scholars, experts, and specialists engaged in virtual networks, particularly the Instagram social network. The sampling method was purposive. The snowball technique was used during the interviews, and the interview process was concluded after reaching theoretical saturation, which occurred when the data became repetitive. A total of 25 experts were interviewed.

The quantitative phase population included 8,000 Instagram users among students at the University of Baghdad, Iraq. Based on Morgan's sample size table, a sample of 366 participants was determined, and the questionnaire was distributed accordingly.

The data collection instrument for the qualitative phase was the interview. Exploratory data were collected through expert interviews. In line with the selected approach, qualitative data analysis was performed using three coding techniques: open, axial, and selective coding. In the open coding stage, which is the first step, texts were coded and conceptualized paragraph by paragraph. Initial concepts were manually extracted.

In the second stage, during axial coding, the concepts and categories identified during the open coding phase were recombined and interlinked. Subcategories were extracted during this process. The researcher grouped the concepts and categorized them into subcategories based on commonalities, similarities, or semantic overlaps.

In the subsequent stage, which involved a detailed review of the data from the previous two phases, the researcher manually classified the main categories based on the subcategories obtained from axial coding. Finally, in the selective coding phase, the core category or central phenomenon was identified.

Data reliability was measured using Cronbach's alpha coefficient:

Table 1.

Reliability of Branding Dimensions

Dimensions	Cronbach's Alpha
Causal Conditions	0.88
Intervening Conditions	0.78
Contextual Conditions	0.85
Outcomes	0.83
Strategies	0.79

Descriptive analysis (frequency and percentage) of demographic data (age, gender, and education) was performed using SPSS version 22. To examine the factors influencing Instagram digital branding, structural equation modeling software (SMART PLS) was utilized.

Findings and Results

In the qualitative phase of the study, 25 experts in the field of branding and the Instagram social network participated. In the quantitative phase, 367 students from the University of Baghdad took part as the study sample. Among these, 192 participants (52%) were male and 174 (47%) were female. Regarding education level, 86 participants (23%) held an associate degree, 101 (27%) held a bachelor's degree, 93 (25%) held a master's degree, and 86 (23%) held a doctoral degree. In terms of age, the highest frequency was observed in the age group of 31–40 years, comprising 109 participants (29%).

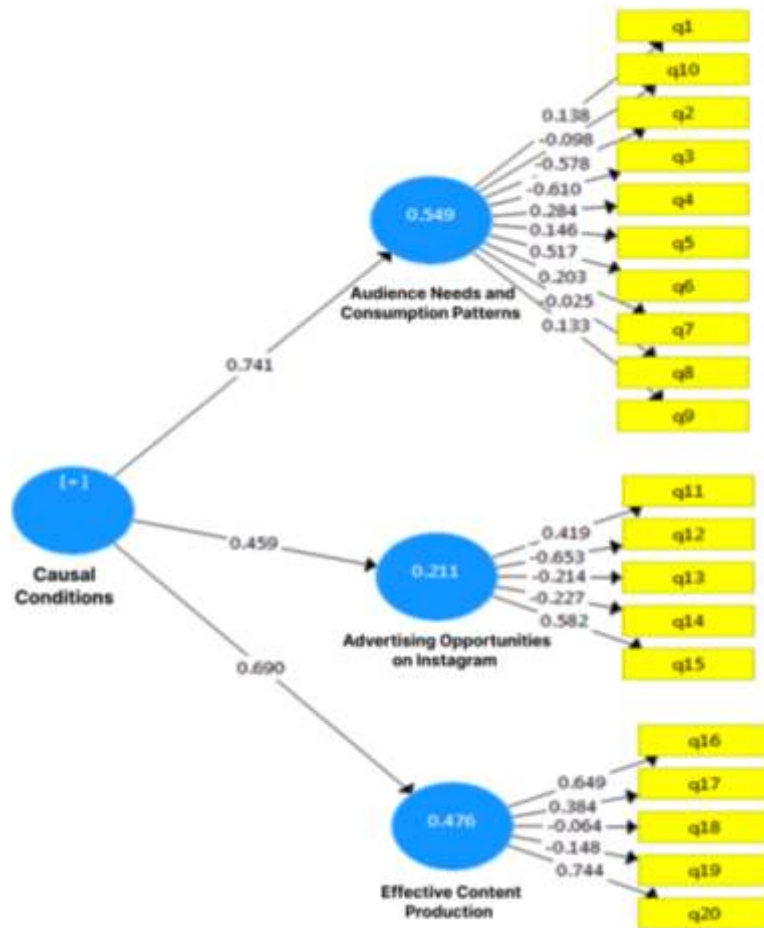
Initially, after conducting interviews with experts, a detailed analysis of the concepts was performed, and the themes were coded. In the second phase, using open coding, primary and secondary concepts were categorized.

Table 2.

Sub-Concepts and Indicators of the Concept of Causal Conditions

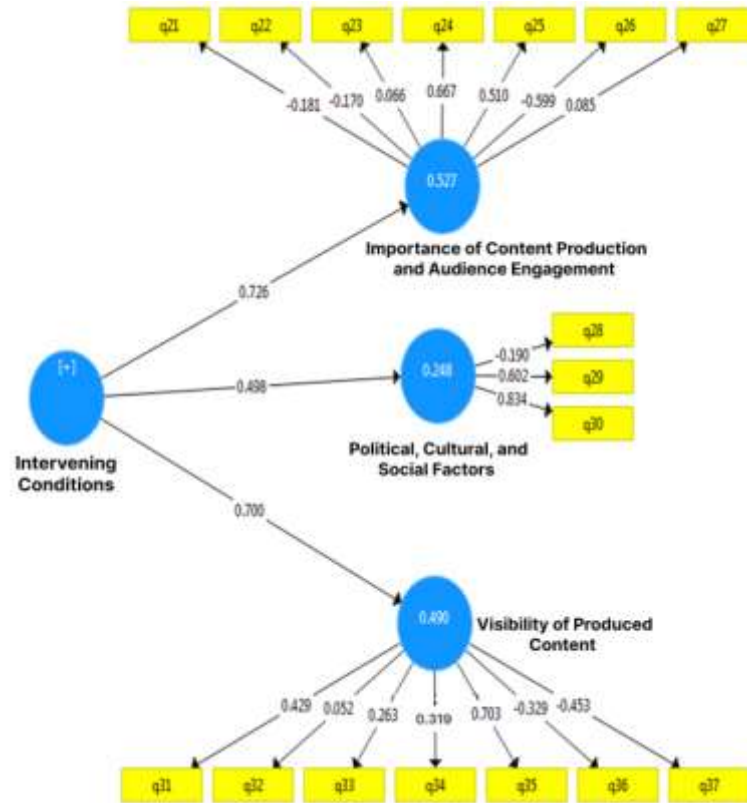
Sub-Concept	Code	Indicator
Audience Needs and Consumption Pattern	A1	Extensive time spent on social networks and Instagram
	A2	Increasingly competitive and serious environment in the Instagram digital market
	A3	Popularity of the Instagram platform among users, especially youth, for visibility
	A4	Changing consumer behavior due to peer reviews on product information
	A5	Excessive dependence of brands on Instagram's algorithm
	A6	Enhanced brand–audience interaction due to growing active user base on Instagram
	A7	Increased audience trust in online information
	A8	Growth in internet access, smartphone usage, and e-commerce
	A9	Changing perceptions and roles of digital media as external factors influencing Instagram branding
	A10	Achieving objectives through purposeful presence on the Instagram platform
Advertising Opportunities on Instagram	A11	Targeting brand advertisements based on criteria such as geography, age, and interests
	A12	Promoting sales on Instagram through advertising campaigns and seasonal discounts
	A13	Negative user reactions to targeted ads and repetitive content
	A14	Ensuring brand compliance with local and international advertising content regulations
	A15	Strong visual content and ease of use for establishing audience engagement

Effective Content Production	A16	Strengthening audience trust through transparent and engaging content, converting them to loyal customers
	A17	Impact of Instagram's algorithm changes on cost-effective access to branded content
	A18	Creation of engaging content using tools such as augmented reality filters, targeted ads, AR filters, and interactive features
	A19	Brand positioning through content that meets audience needs
	A20	Identifying niche audiences through Instagram analytics

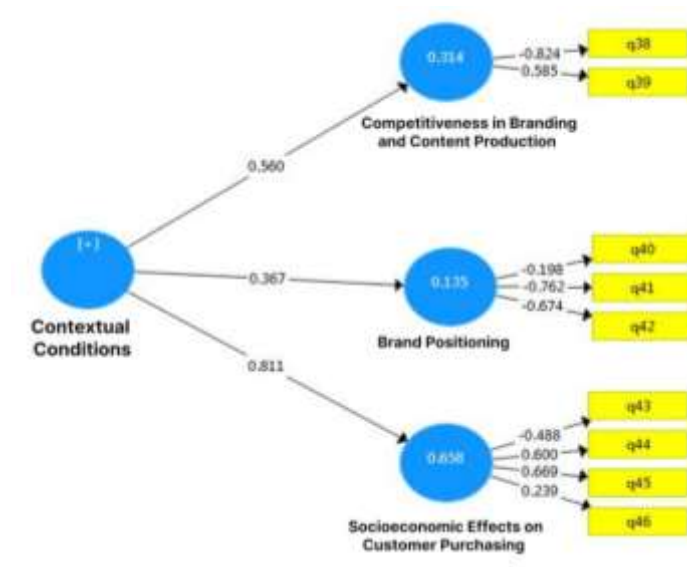
Figure 1.*Second-Order Factor Model of Causal Conditions***Table 3.***Sub-Concepts and Indicators of the Concept of Intervening Conditions*

Sub-Concept	Code	Indicator
Importance of Content Production and Audience Engagement	M21	Considering audience interests and producing content accordingly
	M22	Importance of content quality, aesthetics, and visual appeal on Instagram
	M23	Audience interest in brand authenticity on Instagram
	M24	Integration of brands into users' everyday lives on Instagram
	M25	Instagram's algorithm favoring engaging and attractive content
	M26	Enhancing emotional connections with the audience and increasing engagement and customer acquisition through educational content
Political, Cultural, and Social Factors	M27	Offering competitively priced products and seasonal discounts to attract more followers
	M28	Governmental policies hindering branding by regulating internet access and limiting advanced advertising tools
	M29	Negative impact of social and cultural conditions on audience needs and expectations
Visibility of Produced Content	M30	Alignment of content with local cultural values and identity
	M31	Gaining visibility through tools such as Stories, Live, and IGTV
	M32	Intense competition among brands and rising audience expectations from branded content
	M33	Accessing the largest target market at minimal cost

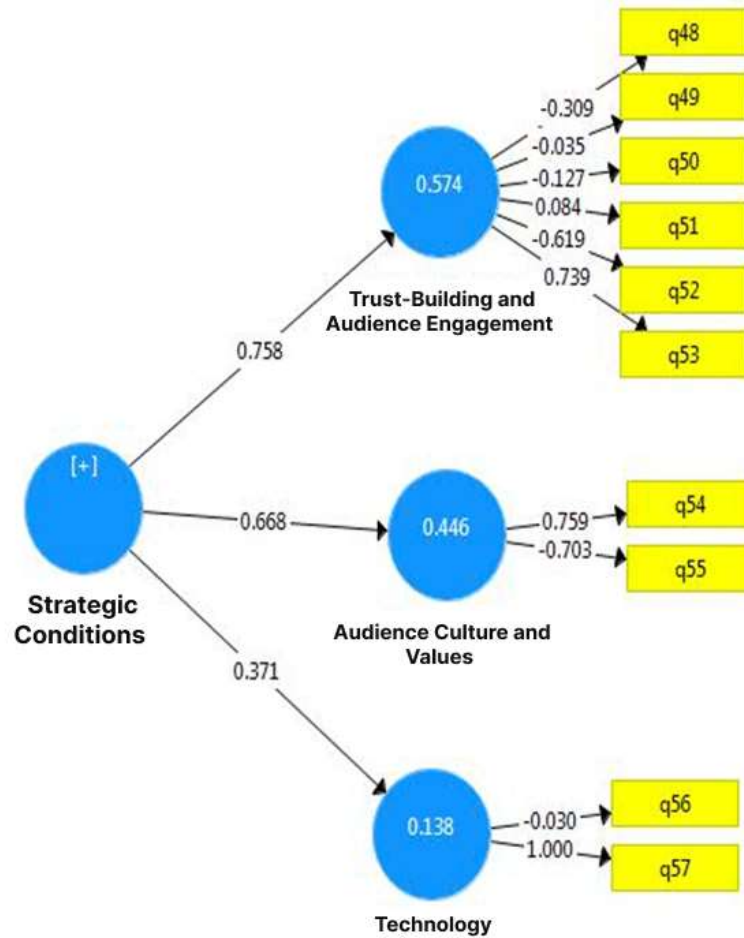
M34	Delivering higher quality content through Instagram's interactive algorithms
M35	Highlighting interactive content and improving brand visibility via Instagram algorithms
M36	Brand neglect of audience culture and needs
M37	Designing technically-informed strategies that align with local norms using analytical data

Figure 2.*Second-Order Factor Model of Intervening Conditions***Table 4.***Sub-Concepts and Indicators of the Concept of Contextual Conditions*

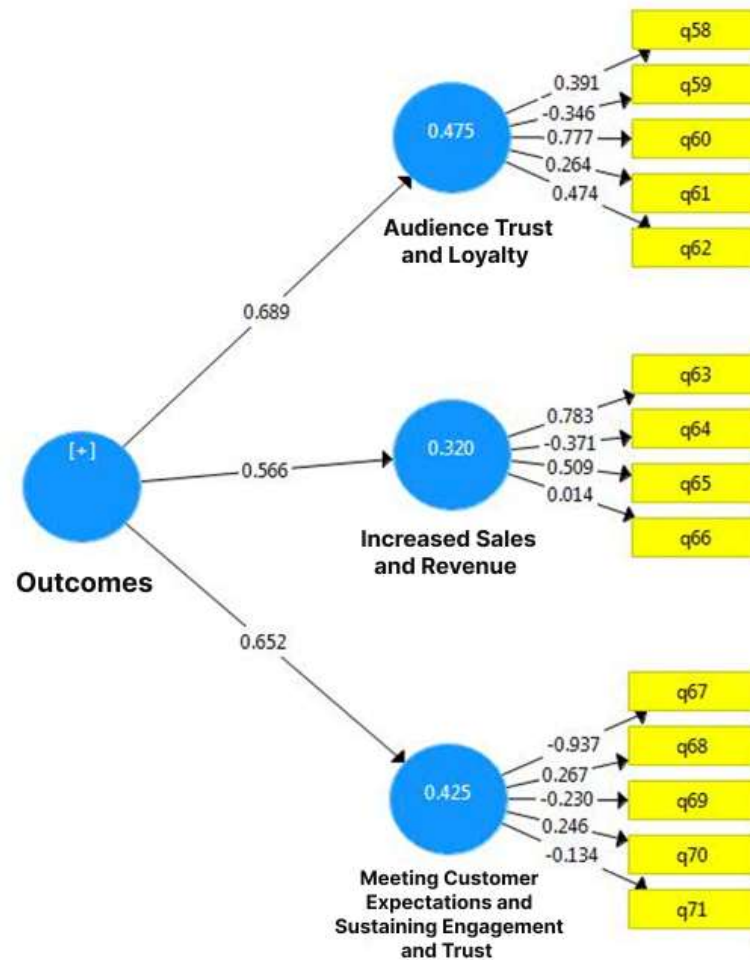
Sub-Concept	Code	Indicator
Competitiveness in Branding and Content Production	Z38	Intense competition and presence of brands ranging from small to large, driving creativity to capture attention
Brand Positioning	Z39	Enhancing engagement through creative strategies such as organic, unique, and compelling content
	Z40	Use of local influencers and execution of innovative campaigns to strengthen brand position
	Z41	Continuous performance data analysis and strategy adjustments to optimize content reach
	Z42	Producing original and creative brand content
Socioeconomic Effects on Customer Purchasing	Z43	Impact of social and economic events on consumer behavior
	Z44	Decreasing attractiveness of Instagram due to the emergence of new platforms
	Z45	Economic and social issues affecting customer purchasing power
	Z46	Negative impact on digital brand interactions due to reduced purchasing power or internet outages in some regions
	Z47	Diminished user attention to promotional content due to a preference for more authentic and transparent experiences

Figure 3.*Second-Order Factor Model of Contextual Conditions***Table 5.***Sub-Concepts and Indicators of the Concept of Strategic Conditions*

Sub-Concept	Code	Indicator
Trust-Building and Audience Engagement	R48	Selecting local influencers aligned with the brand's values
	R49	Showcasing behind-the-scenes brand activities and sharing authentic customer experiences
	R50	Creating interactive and challenging content tailored to audience needs and interests
	R51	Earning audience trust through reliable services, product quality assurance, and transparency (investment in trust-building)
	R52	Utilizing indirect branding
	R53	Employing storytelling to foster emotional connections with audiences
Audience Culture and Values	R54	Producing content aligned with audience culture and needs, and adapting to local requirements
	R55	Ensuring that brands respect intellectual property rights
Technology	R56	Attracting audiences through short webinars via Instagram Live or offering online quizzes
	R57	Using Instagram's technical features such as polls, quizzes, and culturally/socially relevant challenges

Figure 4.*Second-Order Factor Model of Strategic Conditions***Table 6.***Sub-Concepts and Indicators of the Concept of Outcomes*

Sub-Concept	Code	Indicator
Audience Trust and Loyalty	P58	Gaining customer trust and strengthening market position through active and consistent presence
	P59	Direct product sales and increased income via online features and targeted advertising
	P60	Increasing brand awareness and enhancing brand recall among audiences
	P61	Boosting sales through trust-building by doing purposeful and ethical work
	P62	Maintaining trust and positive interactions by adhering to advertising regulations and data protection practices
Increased Sales and Revenue	P63	Facilitating purchasing and accessing new markets through online stores and targeted promotions
	P64	Increasing sales and attracting new customers
	P65	Fostering customer loyalty and boosting sales by producing high-quality content and maintaining consistent communication
Meeting Customer Expectations and Sustaining Engagement and Trust	P66	Strengthening market position through sustainable interactions and deep audience relationships
	P67	Retaining audiences and reducing costs through effective and principled branding
	P68	Continuously evaluating content quality and incorporating audience feedback into strategy development
	P69	Enhancing audience trust and engagement by providing suitable content and addressing expectations
	P70	Assessing content quality based on feedback and improving strategic direction
	P71	Using user interaction data, click-through rates, and conversion rates to improve strategies

Figure 5.*Second-Order Factor Model of Outcomes*

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of the present study revealed that Instagram branding among students at the University of Baghdad is shaped by multiple interconnected factors, which can be categorized into five domains: causal conditions, intervening conditions, contextual conditions, strategies, and outcomes. In the domain of causal conditions, the findings indicate that audience needs and consumption patterns, along with Instagram's inherent advertising opportunities and effective content production, are fundamental to initiating and maintaining branding efforts. The students' engagement with Instagram is largely influenced by their trust in peer-generated content, desire for platform-specific interactivity, and the relevance of content to their lifestyle, indicating a deep alignment between platform affordances and user behavior. The effective use of Instagram algorithms to enhance visibility, coupled with the strategic design of content aligned with the needs of the audience, contributes to brand differentiation and engagement, especially within the university student demographic.

The results align with previous studies that emphasize the importance of user-centered content creation in Instagram branding. For instance, Pathak and Kaushik (2024) demonstrated that content strategies tailored to user interests significantly enhance engagement and brand affinity [4]. Similarly, Heydari Dastjerdi and Javaheri Zadeh (2021) noted that content aesthetics, relevance, and frequency are decisive in determining audience response on Instagram, especially in niche markets

such as interior design [5]. The present findings confirm that user trust, formed through the visibility of authentic and frequent content, is a driving factor behind Instagram branding success. This is further supported by the work of Azin and Salehzadeh (2018), who found that personalized and engaging narratives play a crucial role in personal branding among younger Instagram users [8].

In terms of intervening conditions, the study identified factors such as the importance of content interactivity, cultural compatibility, and political constraints that mediate the effectiveness of branding activities. The strategic use of Instagram's features such as stories, live streams, and reels plays a critical role in gaining content visibility and enhancing brand credibility. However, content success is also constrained by sociopolitical variables, including internet restrictions and limited access to advertising tools—factors particularly relevant in Iraq's context. These findings are consistent with Zulkifli Abd and Safira Safiee (2015), who emphasized the need for culturally sensitive and technically adaptable branding strategies on Instagram [13]. Furthermore, Saeedi et al. (2020) highlighted how regulatory frameworks and content moderation policies can act as either enablers or barriers to digital brand growth on social media platforms like Instagram [14].

Content production and visual storytelling also emerged as key strategic levers in enhancing audience trust and brand loyalty. The results show that brands and individual users who focus on emotional storytelling, transparency, and audience engagement through real-life narratives are more successful in building long-term connections. These observations are echoed by DeLane (2022), who argued that digital branding relies heavily on the alignment of brand values with user expectations through content narratives [2]. Additionally, Karbakandi and Ghasem Aghaei (2020) found that digital branding plays a mediating role between social user experience and purchase intentions, reinforcing the notion that branding outcomes are largely influenced by emotional resonance and content alignment [10].

The contextual factors in the study, including brand competitiveness, use of influencers, and socioeconomic pressures, were shown to influence both the design and reception of Instagram branding efforts. The findings revealed that competition on the platform incentivizes brands to adopt more innovative and creative content strategies. This is in line with Moradi and Hesabi (2020), who found that urban branding efforts depend heavily on the ability to craft distinctive and emotionally resonant narratives that stand out in saturated digital environments [11]. Similarly, Molaei et al. (2022) stressed that competitive digital landscapes require organizations to continuously adapt their strategies based on real-time audience data and behavioral trends [12]. In the context of the University of Baghdad students, this suggests that digital branding efforts must incorporate adaptive content strategies that are informed by continuous feedback and trend analysis.

Strategic actions identified in the research included the use of local influencers, investment in trust-building, and leveraging technological tools for content delivery. These approaches not only enhanced content visibility but also reinforced user-brand emotional bonds. As illustrated in the findings, brands that utilized Instagram features such as polls, challenges, and live interactions witnessed higher audience engagement and stronger loyalty. Designerpeople (2020) supports these findings by emphasizing the role of interactivity, transparency, and content innovation in digital branding success [3]. Furthermore, storytelling and the use of behind-the-scenes content emerged as effective tactics for enhancing trust, which echoes Miles and Mangold's (2004) conceptualization of branding as a socially embedded process influenced by both internal and external brand agents [15].

The outcomes of Instagram branding as observed in this study include increased trust and loyalty, higher sales and revenue, and improved audience-brand interaction. These outcomes are reflective of a successful alignment between brand

content and user expectations. Dehyadgari et al. (2023) emphasized that user engagement and loyalty are the result of personalized branding approaches that integrate consumer behavior analytics with creative storytelling [6]. The present research similarly found that brands that continuously evaluate their content quality and incorporate audience feedback are more likely to sustain engagement and trust. These findings are also in line with Azizi et al. (2017), who highlighted the role of data-driven insights in refining branding strategies and responding to evolving market dynamics [7].

The emphasis on user experience, cultural resonance, and adaptive storytelling in the branding process suggests that Instagram branding is a dynamic and multidimensional endeavor. The strategic insights gathered from students' experiences indicate that branding is not merely about visibility but about cultivating a shared value system between brand and audience. This notion is supported by Talehi and Barkhordar (2024), who explored the role of social media in influencing purchase intentions through brand equity and found that strategic content alignment and emotional storytelling play critical roles in shaping user perceptions [1]. The findings of the current study reaffirm that Instagram is not simply a marketing tool but a participatory space for co-creating brand meaning.

Despite the richness of these findings, the study is subject to certain limitations. First, the data were collected exclusively from students at the University of Baghdad, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other demographic or cultural contexts. The specificity of the Iraqi sociopolitical and digital infrastructure further narrows the scope of applicability, as factors such as access limitations, political constraints, and cultural values may differ significantly across regions. Additionally, the qualitative interviews, although rich in insight, relied on subjective interpretations of branding experts and may be influenced by personal biases or disciplinary orientations. The self-reported nature of the quantitative responses also introduces the possibility of response bias.

Future research should seek to expand the demographic diversity of the sample by including participants from multiple universities, regions, and cultural backgrounds. Comparative studies across countries with differing levels of digital infrastructure and media freedom could provide a broader understanding of how Instagram branding operates under varying sociopolitical conditions. Additionally, future studies could employ longitudinal designs to examine how branding strategies evolve over time and how algorithmic changes on Instagram impact brand visibility and engagement in the long term. Exploring cross-platform branding dynamics by including other social media environments such as TikTok or X (formerly Twitter) could also enrich the theoretical landscape of digital branding research.

For practitioners, the results of this study suggest the need to adopt culturally sensitive, emotionally engaging, and data-driven branding strategies on Instagram. Brands should prioritize trust-building through transparency, authenticity, and consistent interaction. Leveraging local influencers who resonate with the audience's values, investing in content analytics, and staying updated with platform changes can significantly enhance brand performance. Finally, institutions such as universities and startups in developing regions should recognize Instagram as a strategic tool for identity formation, community engagement, and value co-creation.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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