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The Impact of International University Transnational Social Media Brand Image on Enrollment Intentions in China

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Abstract: This study examines how international university brand image communicated through transnational social media influences Chinese students' enrollment intention. Drawing on the Stimulus–Organism–Response framework and self-congruity theory, the study investigates the mediating role of brand attitude and the moderating role of self-congruity. A quantitative survey was conducted using snowball sampling, yielding 522 valid responses from Chinese respondents. The data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results indicate that brand attitude significantly mediates the positive relationship between international university brand image and enrollment intention. In addition, self-congruity positively moderates the relationship between brand attitude and enrollment intention, suggesting that favorable brand attitudes are more likely to translate into enrollment intention when students perceive a strong fit between the university brand and their self-image. This study contributes to the literature on international university branding by extending understanding of how transnational social media brand image affects enrollment decisions in the Chinese social media context. The findings also provide practical implications for international universities seeking to develop localized digital branding



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strategies to enhance student recruitment outcomes.

Keywords: international university brand image; source country image; transnational social media; brand attitude; self-congruity; enrollment intention; PLS-SEM.

跨国社交媒体中国国际大学品牌形象对中国学生入学意愿的影响

摘要：本研究探讨了通过跨国社交媒体传播的国际大学品牌形象如何影响中国学生的入学意愿。基于刺激-有机体-反应 (Stimulus-Organism-Response, S-O-R) 框架和自我一致性理论，本研究考察了品牌态度的中介作用以及自我一致性的调节作用。研究采用滚雪球抽样法开展定量问卷调查，共获得 522 份有效问卷。数据采用偏最小二乘结构方程模型 (Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling, PLS-SEM) 进行分析。研究结果表明，品牌态度在国际大学品牌形象与入学意愿之间的正向关系中发挥显著中介作用。此外，自我一致性正向调节品牌态度与入学意愿之间的关系，说明当学生感知到大学品牌与其自我形象之间具有较高契合度时，积极的品牌态度更有可能转化为入学意愿。本研究通过拓展对跨国社交媒体品牌形象如何影响中国社交媒体情境下入学决策的理解，为国际大学品牌研究文献作出了贡献。研究结果也为国际大学制定本土化数字品牌传播策略、提升学生招生效果提供了实践启示。

关键词：国际大学品牌形象；来源国形象；跨国社交媒体；品牌态度；自我一致性；入学意愿；偏最小二乘结构方程模型

1. Introduction

With economic globalization, educational internationalization has become a global trend, and many Chinese students choose to study abroad. 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. Research on university branding have grown, emphasizing brand image as a key driver of reputation and competitiveness [1-2]. With the ubiquity of social media, universities increasingly leverage these platforms to reinforce their brands, making transnational social media branding an emerging academic field [3]. Studies confirm that elements such as logos and social media communication positively shape brand attitude and influence student applications [4]. University core brand images—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 students' enrollment intentions among Chinese students on Chinese social media. The contribution lies in studying international university

brand image in the Chinese social media environment, with brand attitude as a mediator and self-congruity as a moderator.

2. Literature Review

2.1. University Branding on Social Media

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. Brand image has been extended from the initial simple product identification to various social fields, including city brands, university brands, and other non-commercial brand types. As times change, the influence of university brands has become increasingly significant, and their position in the higher education ecosystem has become increasingly important. 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. 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 [5].

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. 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. Studies have shown that the content of university brand information on transnational social media has an important impact on the international university brand image [3].

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. 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. 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 [6].

2.2. Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) Theory

The Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) theory, explains how environmental stimuli influence individual behavior through internal cognitive and emotional states. In this model, stimulus refers to external environmental factors such as advertising or social media content, organism represents individuals' cognitive and emotional reactions, and response denotes resulting behaviors or behavioral intentions, such as purchasing or sharing. Previous studies commonly apply an extended S-O-R model to examine causal relationships among these variables within a structured research framework [7]. Kim et al. [8] noted that the model is widely used to assess consumer perceptions and behavioral intentions in an integrated manner, while Ngah et al. [9] highlighted its flexibility in incorporating diverse variables. Overall, the S-O-R model is a practical and adaptable theoretical framework for analyzing complex interactions between environmental stimuli and human behavior across various research contexts. The S-O-R model has been widely applied to consumer decision-making, including in education contexts. It explains how external stimuli affect internal

psychological states, which subsequently shape behavioral intentions. Juhaidi et al. [10] examined how universities in Kalimantan, Indonesia, use Instagram activities to enhance student engagement and increase enrollment intention. The study investigates whether universities' social media activities can influence prospective students' emotional and behavioral responses, using the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework as the theoretical foundation.

2.2.1. International University Brand Image on Transnational Social Media

Social media platforms influencing students' study-abroad decisions have shifted over time and vary by regions. Instagram, YouTube, Facebook globally influence in specific areas. At the same time, China represents a distinct social media ecosystem dominated by domestic platforms, highlighting the need for universities to adapt marketing strategies to different regional and cultural contexts. University brand image is shaped by both tangible (functional) and intangible (emotional) factors. Prospective students may easily obtain factual information regarding campus infrastructure, facilities, location, or tuition fees through official sources. However, these tangible elements are often insufficient for making final enrollment decisions. As a result, students increasingly rely on perceptions shaped by brand image [11]. According to Panda et al. [11], university brand image is a multidimensional construct that includes key dimensions such as institutional heritage, perceived trustworthiness, and service quality—yet remains difficult to measure comprehensively.

University brand image on Chinese social media (such as official account content, alumni sharing, media reports, KOL promotion, etc.) is a typical external environmental stimulus (Stimulus), which directly affects the cognitive and emotional systems of Chinese audiences through information transmission. The pictures or short videos officially released by international universities are a kind of visual stimulus, triggering users' cognition of academic traditions. The UGC content released by KOLs or ordinary students will arouse the audience's yearning emotions. Stimuli need to be perceptible, differentiated and goal-oriented, and the social media brand image of foreign universities fully meets the requirements.

It is widely recognized that consumers form country images based on their familiarity with products and services originating from different nations. These country images significantly impact consumers' evaluations of product quality and desirability. For instance, Baldauf et al. [12] found that product-country image not only affects retailer-perceived brand equity but also has a strong and positive influence on brand profitability performance. As markets become more global, the country of origin plays an increasingly

important role in both seller and buyer decision-making processes. Further, Papadopoulos and Heslop [13], in their influential work *Product-Country Images: Impact and Role in International Marketing*, emphasized the strategic importance of country image in shaping international marketing outcomes and consumer behavior. In the higher education sector specifically, Herrero-Crespo et al. [14] examined how country image influences the dimensions of country brand equity, finding that it significantly affects both the perceived quality and the awareness of universities from a given country.

In summary, this study conceptualizes university image and source country image as two distinct external stimuli within the S–O–R framework. Communicated primarily through Chinese social media, these stimuli shape prospective students' cognitive and emotional responses, thereby influencing their perceptions and behavioral intentions toward international universities.

2.2.2. Brand Attitude

Brand attitude is defined as an individual's overall evaluative judgment—either favorable or unfavorable—toward a brand, shaped by both cognitive and emotional responses to brand-related stimuli [15]. As a multidimensional construct, brand attitude encompasses rational assessments of brand features (e.g., program quality, tuition, reputation), emotional reactions (e.g., trust, attraction), and behavioral tendencies such as application intention or recommendation.

The concept of brand attitude is well-established in marketing literature as a core psychological mechanism that links brand perception to behavioral outcomes [16]. According to Keller, brand attitude develops through consumers' understanding of a brand's functional and symbolic attributes, and serves as the foundation of brand preference and choice behavior. Jung and Sung [17] further observed a strong association between brand equity, brand attitude, and purchase intention across various consumer groups. As far as consumers are concerned, when there is a certain tendency of supporting behavior, they are very likely to engage in purchase behavior; on the contrary, if there is a tendency of opposing behavior, they are very likely to refrain from purchase behavior.

In this study, brand attitude refers specifically to Chinese prospective students' cognitive and affective evaluations of an international university's brand, as formed through exposure to brand-related content on Chinese social media platforms. In higher education branding, brand attitude plays a similar role, mediating the relationship between the perceived brand image of a university and students' enrollment intention [18].

2.2.3. Enrollment Intention

Enrollment intention, the response in the S-O-R model, is understood as a prospective student's

willingness or plan to apply to and attend a particular institution. Research has found that enrollment intention is not only influenced by rational factors such as tuition and rankings, but also by psychological impressions and emotional connections fostered via social media [8]. This underscores the importance of not just increasing brand exposure, but strategically shaping perceptions that lead to favorable attitudes and, ultimately, enrollment behavior.

Despite the growing body of literature on social media and university branding, most existing studies focus on Western platforms such as Facebook and Instagram [10], with limited attention given to how international universities construct and communicate their brand image within the unique ecosystem of Chinese social media. Moreover, few studies have explored how these branding efforts influence enrollment intentions through the mediating role of brand attitude. To address this gap, the present study adopts the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model, a well-established framework in environmental psychology that explains how external stimuli (S) influence behavioral responses (R) through internal psychological states (O). In the context of international university branding on transnational social media, the stimulus corresponds to the university's brand image as conveyed through digital content and interactions; the organism represents students' psychological processing of that stimulus, conceptualized as brand attitude; and the response reflects the resulting behavioral outcome—enrollment intention. By applying the S-O-R model to the Chinese social media and higher education context, this study seeks to provide new insights into how international university brand image affects prospective Chinese students' enrollment decisions through brand attitude.

2.3. Theory of Self-Congruity (TSC)

The Theory of Self-congruity (TSC) explains how consumers' self-image influences their brand preferences, evaluations, and purchasing behavior [19]. According to the theory, consumers compare a brand's user image with their own self-image, and a higher level of congruence—referred to as self-congruity—leads to more positive attitudes, stronger purchase intentions, and greater brand loyalty. Rooted in the concept of self-concept, which integrates individuals' perceptions and emotions about themselves, TSC emphasizes the interaction between product-user images and consumers' self-image, generating a subjective experience known as self-image/product-image congruity. Due to its strong explanatory power, TSC has attracted increasing attention in brand research and has been widely applied in areas such as tourism, retailing, advertising, and consumer psychology to understand consumer behavior and inform marketing strategies [20, 21]. Moreover, scholars suggest that brands should align with

consumers' desired self-image to enhance brand effectiveness and purchase outcomes [22].

Sirgy [19] pointed out that consumers view brands as part of their self-image and tend to purchase products and services that can reflect or enhance their self-image. This means that if a university is able to effectively resonate with students' self-image, values, and ideals through its brand messaging, students' identification with and loyalty to that university are likely to be enhanced. In addition, this theory can also be applied to the practice of university brand building, helping universities better understand the needs of their potential students and current student groups, thereby developing more effective brand strategies. Overall, self-congruity theory provides a valuable perspective that allows international university brands to resonate more strongly with target student groups, thereby gaining an advantage in a highly competitive market. Therefore, this theory has important guiding significance and application value for university brand research and practice.

3. Method

3.1. Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis Development

The research framework of this study is shown in Figure 1. The exogenous variables include university image and source country image on Chinese social media. These two factors will influence Chinese students' brand attitude and enrollment intention. In testing these relationships, students' attitudes act as mediators, and enrollment intention for international universities serves as the endogenous variable. Self-congruity acts as a moderator, which moderates the relationship between attitudes and enrollment intention. There are two theories used in this study: the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theory and Theory of Self-congruity (TSC).

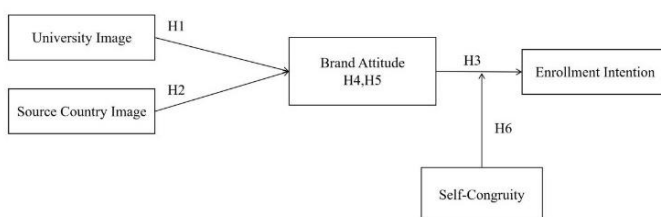


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework (The authors' elaboration)

Thus, the hypotheses were constructed as follows:

H1: University Image has a positive effect on Brand Attitude.

H2: Source Country Image has a positive effect on Brand Attitude.

H3: Brand Attitude has a positive effect on Enrollment Intention.

H4: Brand Attitude mediates the relationship between University Image and Enrollment Intention.

H5: Brand Attitude mediates the relationship between Source Country Image and Enrollment Intention.

H6: The positive relationship between Brand Attitude and Enrollment Intention is stronger for students with high Self-congruity.

3.2. Research Design

The international universities in this research were selected from the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) University Rankings using the equidistant sampling method in probability sampling. Several factors were considered when determining the number of universities to be selected, including the amount of information respondents typically searched for on three social media platforms, the maximum volume of information they could recall, and the total number of universities included in the QS World University Rankings. The core limitation of equidistant sampling is that the sampling results are highly dependent on the arrangement order of the individuals within the population. The QS World University Rankings dataset satisfies the conditions for applying equidistant sampling and is thus deemed appropriate for use by excluding Chinese universities and ensuring a broad geographic distribution. 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. To ensure diversity and manageability, the selection process began with the university ranked 96th, and then one university was selected at every 100-rank interval, resulting in a total of 10 universities. The 2022 QS World University Rankings featured 1,300 institutions (Quacquarelli Symonds, 2021). The selection followed the formula: $N = 1300$, $n = 10$, $k = 100$, with the sampled universities corresponding to the rankings: $\text{Rank} = 96 + 100n$, where $n = 0, 1, 2, \dots, 9$. The 10 international universities in the sample are Pennsylvania State University (United States, 96th), University of Otago (New Zealand, 196th), University of Porto (Portugal, 296th), National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University (Russia, 396th), Dongguk University (South Korea, 496th), Sofia University (Bulgaria 596th), University of Oregon (United States, 696th), University of Zagreb (Croatia, 796th), Technological University Dublin (Ireland, 896th), and Yamaguchi University (Japan, 996th).

Quantitative methods allow researchers to test specific hypotheses and examine the relationship between two or more variables. This study organized a questionnaire survey among students who are likely to receive further education opportunities. Respondents in this study were selected to meet the following criteria. First, they may pursue further education, even if they do not currently meet the requirements for studying abroad. Second, they had taken the National College Entrance

Examination. Third, they are active on three popular Chinese social media platforms: WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin. This study used a non-probability sampling method for students selection. Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling method [23]. Its primary limitation is sample bias. To mitigate this sample bias, this study employed a diverse set of initial samples. In terms of categorization, the authors selected a wide variety of respondents across different academic majors and educational stages: undergraduate students (spanning from freshmen to seniors, as well as fifth-year-plus students in specialized programs), unemployed and employed bachelor's degree holders, and graduate students (first through third years), as well as unemployed and employed master's degree holders. These "seed" respondents sought recommendations from former or current classmates, colleagues, neighbors, and friends within their social networks. These individuals may have varied significantly in terms of profession, age, and geographic location. Descriptive statistical analysis of the final results further confirmed the diversity of the sample.

The questionnaire technique was applied in obtaining research data. After respondents had 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. All of the questions were translated into Chinese. The questionnaire was sent to respondents through WeChat. This study chose WeChat as the main communication channel for its central role in Chinese 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 [24, 25, 11]. Specific measurement items are detailed in Appendix A.

4. Results

4.1. Profile of Respondents

The questionnaire was designed using the software Questionnaire Star and distributed via WeChat. A total of 522 valid questionnaires were collected during this survey. As invalid questionnaires are not tallied on the Questionnaire Star software, it is not possible to determine the total number of questionnaires distributed. The data obtained are as follows:

Among the respondents, males accounted for 49.62% and females accounted for 50.38%, 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. According to the IP addresses of the respondents, they are from more than twenty provinces in China.

Respondents selected one of the 10 international universities after browsing information about them on Chinese social media. 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 Chinese social media influences students' choices.

4.2. Descriptive Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistical analysis involves organizing, describing, summarizing, and interpreting the collected data. This study used smartPLS [26] 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 0.841 and 1.297, 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 and the excess kurtosis of each variable are less than 1. According to the normal distribution skewness standard proposed by Kline [27], 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, 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 0.864. Cronbach's α coefficient, modified α , and combined reliability all greater than 0.864 indicating that the internal consistency of the variables is good. About AVE value calculation results, the constructs were all greater than 0.540. 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.

Table 1. Synopsis of Measurement Model Assessment Outcome (The authors' elaboration)

Item	Factor Loadings	Cronbach's α	rho _a	rho _c	AVE
BATT	0.854	0.871	0.873	0.912	0.722
	0.823				
	0.866				
	0.855				
EI	0.860	0.864	0.866	0.917	0.787
	0.915				
	0.884				
SC	0.922	0.944	0.945	0.960	0.856
	0.912				
	0.932				
	0.934				
SCI	0.917	0.960	0.961	0.968	0.835
	0.922				
	0.923				
	0.916				
	0.912				
	0.891				
UI	0.632	0.878	0.894	0.903	0.540
	0.690				
	0.818				
	0.778				
	0.713				
	0.781				
	0.798				
	0.647				

Table 2. Fornell-Larcker Criterion (The authors' elaboration)

Item	BATT	EI	SC	SCI	UI
BATT	0.849				
EI	0.674	0.887			
SC	0.533	0.602	0.925		
SCI	0.682	0.609	0.574	0.914	
UI	0.422	0.321	0.303	0.472	0.735

Table 3. Heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) - Matrix (The authors' elaboration)

Item	BATT	EI	SC	SCI	UI
BATT					
EI	0.776				
SC	0.587	0.666			
SCI	0.744	0.668	0.602		
UI	0.467	0.352	0.317	0.496	
SC x BATT	0.431	0.176	0.443	0.296	0.211

To assess discriminant validity, both the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio were examined. As shown in Table 2, the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each latent construct was greater than its correlations with any other construct, indicating that the Fornell-Larcker criterion was satisfied. Additionally, all HTMT values, presented in Table 3, were below the threshold of 0.90, further confirming discriminant validity. These results demonstrate that the latent constructs in the model are conceptually distinct, and the measurement model exhibits adequate discriminant validity.

To further evaluate the measurement model, cross loadings and collinearity statistics were examined. Each indicator loaded more strongly on its assigned latent construct than on any other constructs, confirming acceptable discriminant validity. Additionally, all outer VIF values were below the conservative threshold of 5.0, with most values ranging between 1.4 and 2.9. In general, the measurement model has high reliability and validity, and the structural model meets the basic assumptions (no multicollinearity and satisfactory discriminant validity), providing a reliable basis for subsequent hypothesis testing (such as path analysis and moderation effect analysis).

4.4. Hypothesis Testing

Table 4 Relationship between Variables (The authors' elaboration)

Path	Coef. f.	t-statistics	p-values	Effect
UI -> BATT	0.103	2.373	0.018	Significant
SCI -> BATT	0.462	8.070	0.000	Significant
BATT -> EI	0.550	10.266	0.000	Significant
UI -> EI	0.056	2.330	0.020	Significant
SCI -> EI	0.254	6.514	0.000	Significant
SC x BATT ->EI	0.197	3.962	0.000	Significant

As the antecedents of brand attitude, SCI demonstrates positive influence ($\beta = 0.462, p < 0.001$), followed by UI ($\beta = 0.103, p = 0.018$). Moreover, SCI

and UI also have significant direct effects on enrollment intention, with SCI again showing the most substantial influence ($\beta = 0.254, p < 0.001$). Importantly, self-congruity (SC) significantly moderates the BATT \rightarrow EI relationship ($\beta = 0.197, p < 0.001$), indicating that the effect of brand attitude on enrollment intention is stronger for students who perceive a high level of alignment between their self-image and the university's brand image.

The interpretation degree of the model is based on the fitting coefficient R^2 . The R-square values indicate that the model explains 49.1% of the variance in brand attitude (BATT) and 57.9% of the variance in enrollment intention (EI), reflecting moderate to substantial explanatory power. The effect size (f^2) analysis reveals that brand attitude has a strong effect on enrollment intention ($f^2 = 0.487$), confirming its central role in the model. Self-congruity (SC) also shows a moderate direct effect on EI ($f^2 = 0.262$) and a weaker but significant moderating effect on the relationship between BATT and EI ($f^2 = 0.100$). Among the antecedents of BATT, source country image (SCI) exerts the most notable influence ($f^2 = 0.116$), while university image (UI) has negligible contributions, as reflected in their very low f^2 values.

Table 5 Mediation Effect (The authors' elaboration)

Indirect Relations	Coeff.	t-statistics	p-values	Mediating Effect
SCI \rightarrow BATT \rightarrow EI	0.254	6.514	0.000	Significant
UI \rightarrow BATT \rightarrow EI	0.056	2.330	0.020	Significant

To assess brand attitude (BATT) mediation effect, this study applied mediation analysis using SmartPLS. Specifically, indirect effects were calculated through bootstrapping (with 5,000 resamples) to determine the statistical significance of each hypothesized mediation pathway.

The results of the mediation analysis are presented in Table 5. Source country image (SCI) exhibits strong and significant indirect effect on enrollment intention via brand attitude ($\beta = 0.254, t = 6.514, p < 0.001$), confirming its central role in shaping students' decisions through symbolic brand perceptions. University image (UI) also shows significant but smaller indirect effects ($\beta = 0.056$, respectively).

Table 6 Moderation Effect (The authors' elaboration)

Hypothesis	Coeff.	t-statistics	p-values	Moderating Effect
SC \times BATT \rightarrow EI	0.197	3.962	0.000	Significant

SC \times BATT \rightarrow EI	0.197	3.962	0.000	Significant
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To test whether self-congruity (SC) moderates the relationship between brand attitude (BATT) and enrollment intention (EI), an interaction term (SC \times BATT) was constructed and included in the structural model. The moderation analysis was conducted using the product indicator approach in SmartPLS, with bootstrapping (5,000 samples) used to assess statistical significance. As shown in Table 6, the interaction term has a significant positive effect on EI ($\beta = 0.197, t = 3.962, p < 0.001$), indicating a positive moderating effect. This means that the influence of brand attitude on enrollment intention becomes stronger when students perceive a high level of alignment between their self-image and the university's brand image. Self-congruity thus acts as a symbolic enhancer in the decision-making process, amplifying the impact of favorable brand attitudes on students' behavioral intentions. H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, and H6 were all supported.

5. Discussion and Suggestion

The university image (UI)—including campus environment, historical traditions, visual identity, faculty quality, and cultural atmosphere—has a significant positive impact on Chinese students' brand attitudes in the context of branding on Chinese social media platforms, and it also indirectly influences enrollment intention through brand attitude. Within the S-O-R framework, university image functions as an external stimulus that shapes students' cognitive and emotional evaluations, which are then translated into behavioral intentions. Visual presentations of campus life, a positive academic atmosphere, and strong international rankings enhance students' emotional identification with the university, thereby increasing their willingness to enroll. This finding is consistent with prior studies showing that a high-quality university image strengthens brand attitudes and indirectly drives application behavior [4]. The results further confirm that these effects are applicable in Chinese social media environment, where university image stimulates differentiated emotional responses such as trust and aspiration through brand cognition, ultimately influencing decision-making. Accordingly, international universities should emphasize historical depth and academic authority in their Chinese social media strategies. In practice, universities should emphasize distinctive campus features, academic traditions, faculty excellence, and campus life through images, text, and videos. By presenting a professional, engaging, and credible image, they can better connect with Chinese students and strengthen their brand positioning in the competitive global higher education market, for example by creating themed content such as #campuslandmarks# on platforms like Douyin and

Weibo, and by using immersive technologies such as AR to showcase key facilities including libraries and laboratories.

Source country image (SCI) refers to consumers' overall stereotypes, reputation, and perceptions of a particular country, and its strong relationship with brand attitudes supports the halo effect, whereby a country's overall reputation shapes evaluations of its universities. Cognitively, SCI functions as an external cue that influences students' judgments of educational quality, with universities from economically developed countries often perceived as having higher academic standards. Affectively, students' emotions toward a country are transferred to its university brands, meaning that political tensions or negative international relations can generate unfavorable attitudes toward foreign universities. International universities should promote positive images of their home countries by highlighting academic strength, innovation, culture, and stability through localized content on Chinese social media. Because country image influences university brand perception, aligning institutional branding with national educational strengths can enhance authenticity and differentiation. In the Chinese context, cultural proximity is essential; showcasing China-related collaborations, Chinese students, and bilingual or intercultural stories helps reduce psychological distance. Credibility can be strengthened through partnerships with official or authoritative institutions, such as embassies or education agencies. At the same time, universities should be prepared to manage reputational risks by emphasizing academic independence, neutrality, and global diversity when geopolitical images fluctuate. Overall, culturally sensitive and locally tailored communication is key to building positive brand attitudes among Chinese students.

The analysis results based on cross-sectional survey data show that BATT significantly mediates the relationship between international university brand image (including UI and SCI) and EI. Brand attitude plays a key psychological role in this process. The brand attitude formed by students after acquiring relevant information from Chinese social media is positively correlated with their enrollment intention. This finding suggests that simply promoting university rankings or national favorability may have limited effect. A more effective strategy may be to focus on transforming this information into positive brand attitudes among students.

According to the results, students' self-congruity significantly strengthens the relationship between brand attitude and enrollment intention. This conclusion is consistent with previous research [19, 28]. Specifically, in a high self-congruence context, the effect of BATT on EI indicating a significant enhancement in the persuasiveness of brand attitude. When students feel that "this university matches my true or ideal self", they are more likely to translate positive brand attitudes into

actual application behavior. This finding validates the insight of Self-congruity Theory in higher education brand communication: students choose universities not only to assess "how good this university is", but also to ask "is this university right for me?" The higher efficiency in behavioral conversion occurs when both answers to these questions are positive.

6. Conclusion

This study investigates the effects of international university brand image on students' enrollment intentions via 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 Chinese social media, given the diverse needs of Chinese students. Comprehensively displaying the brand image of international universities and source country image on Chinese social media, can help enhance the university brand attitude. 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 social media marketing of commercial enterprises and product brands, but there are few studies on the transnational social media 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.

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 international universities.

6.3. Limitations and Future Research

This study measured the impact of international university brand image from two 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.

Appendix A

Table A1. Measurement Items of the Variables

Variables	Measurement Items
University Image(UI)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The natural environment of University X is good. 2. The University X's campus is very large. 3. University X has good facilities. 4. University X has a long history. 5. I can recognize university X's brand name by its logo or symbol. 6. University X has friendly and amiable staff. 7. University faculty are caring, reliable and competent. 8. University X has good university culture atmosphere.
Students Image(SI)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. University X' students have multiple abilities. 2. The students at university X are positive and upward. 3. I will have good job opportunities after graduating from university X . 4. I will have a good income after graduating from university X .

Products/ service Image(P/SI)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.University X has wide range of courses. 2.University X offers products and services that are good value for money. 3.University X has good employment prospects after graduation.
Source Country Image(SCI)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. University X in a safe country. 2. The country where university X is located is politically stable. 3. The country where university X is located has a high degree of democratization. 4. People in university X's country are friendly. 5. University X's country has high level of education. 6. Applying for university X and student visa is relatively simple.
Brand Attitude (BATT)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I feel good about university X. 2. University X is my favorable brand. 3. I will be proud when enrolling at university X. 4. I trust university X.
Self-congruity (SC)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The typical student who enrolls at university X matches how I see myself. 2. The typical student who enrolls at university X matches how I believe others see me. 3. The typical student who enrolls at university X matches how my reference group see myself. 4. The typical student who enrolls at university X matches how my reference group believe others see me.
Enrollment Intention (EI)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I would enroll at university X rather than any other foreign university available 2. I am willing to recommend others to enroll at university X 3. I intend to enroll at university X in the future

Note(s): University X denotes the university choice of the respondent.

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Author Contributions

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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• Data available on request due to restrictions, e.g., privacy or ethical: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to it may include respondent's personal information which is not suitable to be disclose.

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Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of this manuscript. In addition, the ethical issues, including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and/or falsification, double publication and/or submission, and redundancies have been completely observed by the authors.

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