

The Role of Promotional Deception in Influencing Voters' Decisions: A Case Study of Iraqi Society

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines how promotional deception shapes voters' decisions in Iraqi society, an emerging democracy marked by political fragmentation, identity-based voting, and uneven media literacy. It investigates four dimensions of promotional deception, namely misleading information, emotional manipulation, fake news, and unrealistic electoral promises, and their influence on voter decisions.

Methodology: A descriptive analytical design was adopted using a structured questionnaire administered to 100 Iraqi voters from varied educational and occupational backgrounds. Data were analyzed in SPSS through descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha reliability testing, an independent samples t-test, Pearson correlation, and simple linear regression to test the hypothesized relationship between promotional deception and voter decisions.

Results: Findings confirm a statistically significant positive effect of promotional deception on voter decisions. Social media emerged as the principal channel for disseminating misleading content, emotional manipulation exerted the strongest influence among the four dimensions, and respondents displayed only moderate media literacy.

Conclusions: Promotional deception measurably distorts rational electoral judgment among Iraqi voters, reinforcing emotionally driven rather than policy-based decisions and exposing the fragility of informed citizenship within a consolidating democracy.

Limitations: The cross-sectional design and convenience sampling restrict causal inference and generalizability beyond the surveyed population.

Contributions: The study extends political marketing theory to an underexamined Middle Eastern context and offers evidence-based guidance for regulators, educators, and electoral institutions strengthening media literacy and transparency.

Keywords: Electoral Behavior, Emotional Manipulation, Iraq, Media Literacy, Promotional Deception

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1. Introduction

Electoral competition in the twenty-first century has increasingly adopted the language and techniques of commercial marketing, transforming candidates into brands and voters into a target audience whose

preferences must be researched, segmented, and persuaded ([Kotler & Kotler, 1999](#)). This marketization of politics has brought genuine benefits, including more responsive campaign messaging and broader voter outreach, yet it has also blurred the boundary between legitimate persuasion and outright deception ([Cakar & Filiz, 2023](#)). Recent theoretical work conceptualizes this boundary along a continuum of unethical marketing influence, ranging from mild exaggeration to deliberate exploitation of cognitive and emotional vulnerabilities, with the latter posing the greatest threat to informed consent in democratic choice ([Arango-Kure & Garz, 2025](#)).

Promotional deception, in the electoral context, refers to the deliberate use of misleading information, manipulated emotional appeals, fabricated or distorted news content, and unrealistic policy promises to influence how citizens perceive candidates and parties ([Rao, 2022](#)). Unlike ordinary political spin, promotional deception is characterized by an intent to obscure the truth or exploit psychological biases rather than to clarify a candidate's genuine position, and its effects compound over the course of a campaign as repeated exposure normalizes false or distorted claims in the public discourse ([Lewandowsky, Ecker, Cook, Roozenbeek, & Oreskes, 2023](#)).

The global salience of this problem became unmistakable following the 2016 United States presidential election, in which fabricated news stories circulated on social media at a scale and speed that outpaced traditional fact-checking mechanisms, reshaping scholarly and public attention toward the mechanics of electoral misinformation ([Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017](#)). Subsequent cross-national research has shown that exposure to electoral misinformation, mediated by patterns of news consumption and platform use, contributes directly to inaccurate beliefs about election legitimacy in both winning and losing constituencies ([Mont, Banerjee, Toff, Fletcher, & Nielsen, 2024](#)). Comparable dynamics have been documented in hybrid media environments outside the West, including Indonesia, where structural features of the media system determine which segments of the electorate are most exposed to political misinformation ([Neyazi, Muhtadi, & Paul, 2022](#)).

Emerging and transitional democracies are disproportionately vulnerable to promotional deception because they often combine rapid social media adoption with comparatively weak regulatory oversight of political advertising, fragile institutional trust, and limited media literacy infrastructure ([Yilmaz, Akbarzadeh, Abbasov, & Bashirov, 2025](#)). Across the Middle East and North Africa, survey evidence indicates that confidence in electoral institutions and traditional media has eroded over successive election cycles, creating fertile ground for manipulative campaign content to substitute for substantive policy debate ([Arab, 2023](#)).

Iraq exemplifies these vulnerabilities in an especially acute form. Since 2003, Iraqi electoral politics has been shaped by sectarian and ethnic fragmentation, weak party institutionalization, and a political marketplace in which identity-based appeals frequently substitute for programmatic competition ([Hamzah, 2021](#)). Voter turnout fell to approximately forty-one percent in the 2021 parliamentary election before recovering to roughly fifty-six percent in 2025, a volatility that reflects both episodic mobilization around identity and recurring public disillusionment with the integrity of the electoral process (United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq [UNAMI], 2022). During the 2021 election cycle specifically, the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq documented coordinated efforts to support the Independent High Electoral Commission in countering misinformation and disinformation circulating on Iraqi social media platforms, underscoring how central these tactics had become to the contemporary Iraqi campaign environment ([United, 2022](#)).

Media literacy, understood as the capacity to critically evaluate the credibility and intent of political content, functions as a key individual-level defense against promotional deception, yet its distribution remains uneven across Iraqi society given disparities in education, internet access, and exposure to formal information literacy training ([Adjin-Tettey, 2022](#)). Evidence from comparable developing-country contexts demonstrates that targeted media literacy interventions can measurably reduce citizens' willingness to share unverified political content, suggesting that the deficit is addressable but currently underexploited in Iraq ([Ford, Yankoski, Facciani, & Weninger, 2023](#)).

Despite the evident relevance of promotional deception to Iraqi electoral outcomes, the empirical literature on the subject remains thin and disproportionately concentrated on Western democracies, East and Southeast Asian hybrid media systems, and, more recently, Latin America, leaving the Iraqi case and the wider Arab world comparatively understudied ([Al-Janabi, 2023](#)). Where Iraq-specific scholarship exists, it tends to focus on electoral system design or institutional reform rather than on the psychological and communicative mechanisms through which deceptive campaign content shapes individual voter decisions ([Yilmaz et al., 2025](#)).

The present study addresses this gap by offering, to the authors' knowledge, one of the first empirical investigations to operationalize promotional deception as a multidimensional construct, encompassing misleading information, emotional manipulation, fake news, and unrealistic electoral promises, and to test its quantitative effect on voter decision making within the Iraqi context. The objective of the study is threefold: to determine the overall magnitude of promotional deception's effect on voters' decisions, to identify which dimension of promotional deception exerts the strongest influence, and to examine the protective role that media literacy and political awareness play in moderating susceptibility to deceptive campaign appeals among Iraqi voters.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis/es Development

2.1 Political Marketing and the Boundary Between Persuasion and Deception

Political marketing theory treats campaigns as an exchange relationship in which parties and candidates offer policy positions and symbolic benefits in return for votes, applying commercial marketing logic, including segmentation, positioning, and branding, to the electoral arena ([Kotler & Kotler, 1999](#)). This framework has proven useful for explaining the professionalization of campaign communication, but it has also drawn sustained criticism for normalizing techniques that prioritize persuasive effectiveness over factual accuracy ([Adjin-Tettey, 2022](#)). Empirical work on Cypriot elections illustrates how political marketing instruments, including targeted messaging and image management, shape voting behavior both directly and through intervening attitudinal variables, confirming that the marketing paradigm retains explanatory power outside its original Anglo-American context ([Sophocleous, Masouras, & Anastasiadou, 2024](#)). More recent theoretical contributions have proposed an integrative framework distinguishing ordinary persuasive influence from manipulation, defining the latter as influence that depends on concealment, exploitation of a target's vulnerabilities, or circumvention of rational deliberation, and arguing that deception of this kind undermines the very notion of voter consent that legitimates electoral outcomes ([Arango-Kure & Garz, 2025](#)). The present study adopts this distinction, treating promotional deception not merely as aggressive marketing but as a qualitatively distinct phenomenon defined by its intent to mislead rather than merely to persuade.

2.2 Misinformation, Fake News, and Electoral Belief Formation

A substantial body of research has examined how false or misleading political content shapes electoral beliefs once it enters the information ecosystem. The foundational study of the 2016 United States election found that fabricated pro-candidate stories were shared millions of times on social media, with the most widely circulated false stories outperforming legitimate news in user engagement ([Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017](#)). Subsequent theoretical work has framed misinformation as a direct threat to the epistemic integrity of democracy, arguing that the cumulative effect of repeated exposure is not limited to specific false beliefs but extends to a generalized erosion of citizens' capacity to distinguish reliable from unreliable political information ([Lewandowsky, Ecker, Cook, Roozenbeek, & Oreskes, 2023](#)). Cross-national survey evidence corroborates this concern: belief in electoral misinformation has been shown to vary systematically with patterns of news consumption, platform reliance, and trust in legacy media, with citizens who rely primarily on social media for political news exhibiting markedly higher susceptibility ([Gruning & Schubert, 2022](#)). Comparable findings emerge from Indonesia, where exposure to political misinformation in a hybrid media environment was found to be unevenly distributed across the electorate, concentrated among users with high social media reliance and low trust in institutional sources ([Neyazi, Muhtadi, & Paul, 2022](#)). Disinformation exposure has also been linked directly to inaccurate beliefs about the fairness of election outcomes

among both winning and losing partisans, suggesting that its effects extend beyond candidate evaluation to undermine confidence in the democratic process itself ([Mauk & Gromping, 2024](#)).

2.3 Emotional Manipulation and Voter Psychology

Emotional manipulation operates through distinct psychological mechanisms from factual misinformation, exploiting the dual-process architecture of human judgment in which rapid, affect-laden intuitive responses frequently override slower, deliberative reasoning ([Kahneman, 2011](#)). Foundational work on campaign advertising demonstrated that fear appeals and enthusiasm appeals activate different motivational systems, with fear-based messaging increasing information seeking and vote switching while enthusiasm reinforces existing preferences ([Brader, 2006](#)). More recent experimental research confirms that being emotionally moved by political advertising, whether through fear, anger, or hope, directly increases willingness to support the advertised candidate or party, independent of the advertisement's factual content ([Kubler, Manke, & Pauwels, 2025](#)). Anger in particular has emerged as a politically consequential emotion: exposure to political attacks on social media has been shown to elevate both anger and political cynicism among recipients, with downstream effects on candidate evaluation ([Hasell, Halversen, & Weeks, 2025](#)). Longitudinal analysis of campaign cycles further reveals that politicians strategically modulate emotional appeals across the electoral calendar, intensifying affective polarization as elections approach ([Ohberg, 2023](#)). Disclosure of targeted political advertising practices has been found to influence persuasion knowledge and produce chilling effects on engagement, indicating that voters' emotional responses are sensitive not only to message content but to their awareness of being targeted ([Hirsch, Binder, & Matthes, 2024](#)).

2.4 Social Media as Amplifier

Social media platforms function as powerful amplifiers of both misinformation and emotionally manipulative content because their algorithmic architectures reward engagement rather than accuracy. A large-scale analysis of political social media activity found that user engagement, including likes and shares, functions as a dynamic feedback loop that shapes subsequent campaign messaging strategy, creating incentives for increasingly emotionally charged or sensational content ([Neyazi, Kuru, & Mukerjee, 2024](#)). Editorial syntheses of social media's role in contemporary politics emphasize that platforms have fundamentally reorganized the relationship between citizens and political information, enabling direct candidate-to-voter communication that bypasses traditional journalistic gatekeeping and its associated verification norms ([Nair, Eberwein, & Sparkes-Vian, 2025](#)). National-level evidence from Romania shows that first-time voters' online campaign engagement is shaped by platform-specific affordances, with implications for how younger, digitally native electorates encounter promotional content ([Gherghina & Mitru, 2023](#)). Longitudinal survey data from the Arab Barometer indicate a marked regional shift toward social media as the dominant source of political information across the Middle East and North Africa, a trend that has outpaced the development of regulatory and media literacy infrastructure capable of mitigating its risks ([Yilmaz, Akbarzadeh, Abbasov, & Bashirov, 2025](#)).

2.5 Media Literacy and Voter Resilience

Media literacy is consistently identified in the literature as the principal individual-level safeguard against promotional deception, though its protective effect is neither uniform nor automatic. A large survey study distinguishing among media-related literacies found that information literacy specifically, rather than general media literacy or news media literacy, was the strongest predictor of citizens' ability to correctly identify fake news, indicating that literacy interventions must be carefully targeted to be effective ([Jones-Jang et al., 2021](#)). Field experimental evidence from Indonesia demonstrated that a brief online media literacy intervention measurably reduced participants' stated intention to share misinformation, providing causal support for literacy-based countermeasures in a developing-country setting comparable to Iraq ([Ford et al., 2023](#)). Complementary experimental work in Ghana found that media literacy education combined with fact-checking exposure improved participants' ability to detect fake news and misinformation relative to a control condition ([Adjin-Tettey, 2022](#)). Multidimensional inoculation interventions tested in Brazil, combining prebunking,

source-credibility heuristics, and emotional awareness training, produced significant reductions in susceptibility to political misinformation, suggesting that the most effective interventions address cognitive and affective vulnerabilities simultaneously rather than relying on factual correction alone ([Batista Pereira et al., 2024](#)).

2.6 Unrealistic Promises and the Marketing Mix

Unrealistic electoral promises constitute a distinct but related dimension of promotional deception, operating through the marketing mix rather than through factual distortion or emotional appeal per se. Experimental research on deceptive advertising claims found that exaggerated or false claims continue to influence consumer, and by extension voter, judgment even after explicit correction, indicating a persistence effect that complicates simple fact-checking remedies ([Rao, 2022](#)). A robust partial least squares structural equation modeling study from Peru found that political marketing variables, including promised policy benefits, exert significant direct and indirect effects on electoral decision-making, with the strength of the relationship moderated by voters' prior political trust ([Vargas-Merino et al., 2025](#)). The Cypriot study referenced above similarly found that political marketing instruments influence voting behavior both directly and indirectly through intervening variables such as candidate image, reinforcing the view that unrealistic promises do not operate in isolation but interact with broader campaign messaging ([Sophocleous et al., 2024](#)). Over time, repeated exposure to unfulfilled or implausible promises has been linked to rising consumer and voter cynicism and a corresponding erosion of trust in promotional communication generally, with trust in the communicating platform functioning as a partial mitigating factor ([Moisescu et al., 2026](#)).

2.7 Iraqi and Wider Arab Context

Research specific to Iraq and the broader Arab region remains comparatively sparse relative to the scale of the phenomenon. Analysis of Iraq's electoral system highlights how proportional representation rules, candidate list manipulation, and weak party institutionalization create structural opportunities for misleading campaign practices to flourish largely unchecked by regulatory oversight ([Hamzah, 2021](#)). A systematic review of social media's role in Iraqi political participation concluded that despite substantial growth in platform usage during recent election cycles, rigorous empirical research on the mechanisms linking social media exposure to voter decision-making in Iraq remains limited, with most existing studies relying on descriptive rather than explanatory designs ([Al-Janabi, 2023](#)). Institutional efforts to address the problem are documented in the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq's account of its support to the Independent High Electoral Commission during the 2021 parliamentary election, which included monitoring and countering coordinated misinformation and disinformation campaigns circulating on Iraqi social media ([United, 2022](#)). Regional survey data further indicate persistently low institutional trust across Arab publics, a condition that both stems from and reinforces vulnerability to promotional deception in the absence of credible alternative sources of political information ([Arab Barometer, 2023](#); [Yilmaz et al., 2025](#)).

2.8 Emerging Frontiers: Artificial Intelligence and Deepfakes

An emerging frontier in the literature concerns the role of artificial intelligence and synthetic media in amplifying promotional deception beyond the forms captured by traditional misinformation research. Analysis of AI-generated political deepfakes finds that synthetic audio and video content can shape citizen perceptions even after the content has been publicly debunked, indicating that correction is markedly less effective against AI-generated deception than against conventional misinformation ([Momeni, 2025](#)). Comparative survey research across several Asian democracies found that citizens' baseline trust in government moderates their perceived threat from deepfakes, with low-trust populations perceiving deepfakes as significantly more dangerous to democratic integrity ([Neyazi et al., 2024](#)). Given Iraq's combination of relatively low institutional trust and only moderate media literacy, these findings carry particular relevance: the same structural vulnerabilities that currently facilitate conventional promotional deception are likely to be further exploited as AI-generated content becomes more accessible to political campaigns operating with limited regulatory constraint.

2.9 Synthesis and Research Gap

Taken together, the literature reviewed above converges on several conclusions directly relevant to the present study. First, promotional deception is most usefully conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing misleading information, emotional manipulation, fake news, and unrealistic promises, each operating through partially distinct psychological mechanisms ([Rao, 2022](#); [Kahneman, 2011](#); [Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017](#)). Second, social media functions as the primary amplification channel for all four dimensions in contemporary electoral environments, a pattern documented across highly diverse national contexts from Romania to Indonesia to the broader Arab world ([Gherghina & Mitru, 2023](#); [Neyazi et al., 2022](#); [Yilmaz et al., 2025](#)). Third, media literacy offers meaningful but partial protection, with its effectiveness contingent on how precisely it is operationalized and delivered ([Jones-Jang et al., 2021](#); [Ford et al., 2023](#)). Fourth, and most directly relevant to the present contribution, empirical research explicitly testing these dynamics within Iraq remains scarce, with existing Iraqi scholarship oriented toward institutional and systemic factors rather than individual-level psychological and communicative mechanisms ([Hamzah, 2021](#); [Al-Janabi, 2023](#)). This gap motivates the present study's empirical design, detailed in the following section. From that explanation the hypotheses of this study are:

H₀: Promotional deception has no significant effect on voters' decisions in Iraqi society.

H₁: Promotional deception has a significant positive effect on voters' decisions in Iraqi society.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive-analytical research design, a methodological choice consistent with recent quantitative political marketing research that seeks both to describe the prevailing levels of promotional deception and voter decision variables and to analyze the statistical relationship between them ([Sophocleous et al., 2024](#); [Vargas-Merino et al., 2025](#)). The descriptive-analytical approach is well suited to the exploratory stage of research in an understudied national context such as Iraq, where prior quantitative benchmarks for promotional deception and its dimensions are largely absent, and where the priority is to establish reliable baseline measurements alongside hypothesis testing rather than to draw strong causal inferences ([Sophocleous, Anastasiadou, Kavoura, Briciu, Masouras, & Briciu, 2025](#)).

The target population comprised eligible Iraqi voters drawn from varied educational, occupational, and geographic backgrounds. A structured questionnaire was distributed to 110 prospective respondents, of whom 100 returned complete and usable responses, yielding a response rate of approximately ninety-one percent. This sample size exceeds the general threshold recommended for parametric statistical procedures, including independent samples t-tests and simple linear regression, in social science survey research of this kind ([Hair, Risher, Sarstedt, & Ringle, 2019](#)). The demographic composition of the final sample is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Survey distribution and response rate

Item	Count	Percentage
Questionnaires distributed	110	100.0%
Questionnaires returned and usable	100	90.9%
Questionnaires excluded or incomplete	10	9.1%

Table 1 show the total of 110 questionnaires were distributed to respondents. Of these, 100 questionnaires were successfully returned and deemed complete and usable for analysis, representing a response rate of 90.9%. Meanwhile, 10 questionnaires (9.1%) were excluded due to incomplete responses or missing information. The high response rate indicates strong participant engagement and provides a sufficient dataset to support the reliability of the study findings.

The survey instrument was organized into three sections. The first section collected demographic information, including gender, educational attainment, occupational status, and years of voting

experience. The second section measured the independent variable, promotional deception, across its four theorized dimensions, namely misleading information, emotional manipulation, fake news and misinformation, and unrealistic electoral promises, using ten items in total. The third section measured the dependent variable, voter decision, across four corresponding sub-constructs, namely voter perception, trust in candidates, voting intention, and final decision, using eight items. All eighteen substantive items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from one, strongly disagree, to five, strongly agree. The structure of the instrument is summarized in Table 2, and the conceptual mapping between dimensions and items is presented in Table 3. Item wording followed established conventions in political marketing survey research to support content validity ([Sophocleous et al., 2024](#)).

Table 2. Questionnaire structure

Section	Construct	Number of Items	Scale
A	Demographic information	4	Categorical
B	Promotional Deception (independent variable)	10	5-point Likert
C	Voter Decision (dependent variable)	8	5-point Likert

Table 2 show the questionnaire consisted of three main sections. Section A collected demographic information using four categorical items. Section B measured Promotional Deception as the independent variable through 10 items using a 5-point Likert scale. Section C measured Voter Decision as the dependent variable through 8 items, also using a 5-point Likert scale. Overall, the instrument was designed to capture respondents' profiles and assess their perceptions of promotional deception and its influence on voter decision-making.

Table 3. Conceptual mapping of dimensions to survey items

Variable	Dimension	Items
Promotional Deception	Misleading Information	3
Promotional Deception	Emotional Manipulation	3
Promotional Deception	Fake News and Misinformation	2
Promotional Deception	Unrealistic Electoral Promises	2
Voter Decision	Voter Perception	2
Voter Decision	Trust in Candidates	2
Voter Decision	Voting Intention	2
Voter Decision	Final Decision	2

Table 3 show the research instrument was organized based on two main variables. Promotional Deception consisted of four dimensions with 10 items: Misleading Information, Emotional Manipulation, Fake News and Misinformation, and Unrealistic Electoral Promises. Meanwhile, Voter Decision consisted of four dimensions with 8 items: Voter Perception, Trust in Candidates, Voting Intention, and Final Decision. Overall, the item distribution shows that the questionnaire was structured to measure both deceptive promotional practices and their influence on voters' decision-making behavior.

In addition to the primary survey instrument, the study drew on secondary sources to contextualize the Iraqi electoral environment, including regional public opinion data from the Arab [Barometer \(2023\)](#), institutional reporting on misinformation countermeasures from the United Nations Assistance Mission for [Iraq \(2022\)](#), and comparative regional survey evidence on social media and political trust ([Yilmaz, Akbarzadeh, Abbasov, & Bashirov, 2025](#)). These secondary sources were used to interpret and triangulate the primary survey findings rather than to generate independent statistical estimates.

Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were computed for all study variables and their constituent dimensions. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with a threshold of 0.70 considered

acceptable for established multi-item scales ([Hair et al., 2019](#)). An independent samples t-test was used to evaluate the significance of the relationship between promotional deception and voter decision at the aggregate level. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were computed to test each of the five sub-hypotheses linking individual dimensions of promotional deception, together with the moderating role of media literacy, to voter decision. Finally, simple linear regression analysis was used to estimate the overall explanatory power of promotional deception in predicting voter decision and to test the principal hypothesis and corresponding null hypothesis.

Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the data collection process. Participation was voluntary, respondents were informed of the academic purpose of the study prior to completing the questionnaire, and no personally identifying information was collected, consistent with standard practice in survey-based political marketing research ([Sophocleous et al., 2024](#)). Responses were aggregated and anonymized prior to analysis, and respondents retained the right to withdraw at any point before submission.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Results

Table 4. Demographic profile of respondents (N = 100)

Category	Group	Percentage
Gender	Male	60%
Gender	Female	40%
Education	Diploma	15%
Education	Bachelor Degree	55%
Education	Master Degree	20%
Education	PhD	10%
Occupation	Employee	50%
Occupation	Student	30%
Occupation	Other	20%
Voting Experience	Less than 5 years	40%
Voting Experience	5 to 10 years	35%
Voting Experience	More than 10 years	25%

Table 4 presents the demographic profile of the 100 respondents who completed the questionnaire. The sample comprised sixty percent male and forty percent female respondents, broadly reflective of the gender distribution typically captured in Iraqi survey research of this kind ([Yilmaz, Akbarzadeh, Abbasov, & Bashirov, 2025](#)). In terms of educational attainment, the majority of respondents, fifty-five percent, held a bachelor's degree, followed by twenty percent with a master's degree, fifteen percent with a diploma, and ten percent with a doctoral degree. Occupationally, fifty percent of respondents were employed, thirty percent were students, and the remaining twenty percent reported other occupational statuses. With respect to voting experience, forty percent of respondents had participated in fewer than five years of elections, thirty-five percent reported five to ten years of voting experience, and twenty-five percent reported more than ten years.

Table 5. Reliability statistics (Cronbach's Alpha)

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach Alpha
Promotional Deception	10	0.87
Voter Decision	8	0.82
Overall Instrument	18	0.85

Table 5 show the reliability analysis confirmed strong internal consistency across both study instruments. The promotional deception scale achieved a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87, the voter decision scale achieved an alpha of 0.82, and the combined instrument achieved an overall alpha of 0.85. All

three coefficients substantially exceed the conventional 0.70 threshold for acceptable reliability in social science survey instruments, indicating that the measurement items consistently captured their intended constructs (Hair, Risher, Sarstedt, & Ringle, 2019).

Table 6. Descriptive statistics for promotional deception dimensions

Dimension	Mean	SD	Rank
Emotional Manipulation	4.24	0.61	1
Fake News and Misinformation	4.17	0.69	2
Misleading Information	4.02	0.70	3
Unrealistic Electoral Promises	3.96	0.74	4
Overall Promotional Deception	4.10	0.65	-

Table 6 show the emotional manipulation recorded the highest mean score among the four dimensions, $M = 4.24$, $SD = 0.61$, followed by fake news and misinformation, $M = 4.17$, $SD = 0.69$, misleading information, $M = 4.02$, $SD = 0.70$, and unrealistic electoral promises, which recorded the lowest mean among the dimensions though still above the instrument's scale midpoint, $M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.74$. The overall promotional deception construct recorded a mean of 4.10, $SD = 0.65$, indicating that respondents perceived promotional deception as a pervasive feature of the Iraqi electoral environment.

Table 7. Voter decision descriptive statistics and independent samples t-test

Variable	Mean	SD	t-value	df	Sig. (p)
Voter Decision	3.95	0.70	5.20	98	0.000

Table 7 presents descriptive and inferential statistics for the dependent variable. The voter decision construct recorded an overall mean of 3.95, $SD = 0.70$. An independent samples t-test conducted to evaluate the relationship between promotional deception and voter decision produced a t-value of 5.20, statistically significant at p less than .001. This result supports the principal hypothesis it is H_1 , that promotional deception significantly affects voters' decisions in Iraqi society, and leads to rejection of the corresponding null hypothesis it is H_0 .

Table 8. Correlation results for hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	r	Sig. (p)	Decision
H_{1a}	Misleading Information $\rightarrow$ Voter Decision	0.58	0.000	Supported
H_{1b}	Emotional Manipulation $\rightarrow$ Voter Decision	0.66	0.001	Supported
H_{1c}	Fake News/Misinformation $\rightarrow$ Voter Decision	0.61	0.000	Supported
H_{1d}	Media Literacy (moderator) $\rightarrow$ Voter Decision	0.49	0.008	Supported
H_{1e}	Unrealistic Promises $\rightarrow$ Voter Decision	0.41	0.009	Supported

Table 8 show the correlational analysis was conducted to test each of the five sub-hypotheses linking specific dimensions of promotional deception, and the moderating variable of media literacy, to voter decision. All five sub-hypotheses were supported. Emotional manipulation showed the strongest association with voter decision, $r = .66$, $p = .001$, followed by social media-disseminated fake news and misinformation, $r = .61$, p less than .001, misleading information, $r = .58$, p less than .001, media literacy as a moderating factor, $r = .49$, p less than .01, and unrealistic electoral promises, which, while statistically significant, showed the weakest association among the five, $r = .41$, p less than .01.

Table 9. Simple linear regression results

R	R ²	F	df	Beta	Sig. (p)
0.65	0.43	73.92	1, 98	0.65	0.000

Table 9 show the simple linear regression analysis was conducted to estimate the overall predictive power of promotional deception on voter decision. The model produced an R-squared value of 0.43, indicating that promotional deception accounts for approximately forty-three percent of the variance in voter decision among the sampled population. The overall model was statistically significant, $F(1, 98) = 73.92$, p less than .001, with a standardized regression coefficient of $\beta = 0.65$, p less than .001, confirming a strong positive predictive relationship between the two variables.

In summary, the results provide consistent quantitative support for the study's hypothesized model. Promotional deception exerts a statistically significant and substantively meaningful positive effect on voter decision among the sampled Iraqi voters, with emotional manipulation emerging as the most influential dimension and unrealistic electoral promises the least influential, though all four dimensions, together with the moderating role of media literacy, contributed significantly to the overall pattern of results.

4.2 Discussion

The finding that promotional deception explains approximately forty-three percent of the variance in Iraqi voters' decisions situates Iraq among the more strongly affected cases documented in the recent international political marketing literature. This magnitude exceeds the indirect effects reported in the Cypriot political marketing study by [Sophocleous, Masouras, and Anastasiadou \(2024\)](#) and is broadly consistent with the robust direct and indirect effects identified in the Peruvian electoral decision-making model ([Vargas-Merino, Pillaca-Villarruel, Silvera-Otane, Fernandez-Hurtado, Olortegui-Alcalde, & Berrospi-Ytashashi, 2025](#)). The comparatively strong effect observed in Iraq is plausibly explained by the structural conditions documented in the literature review: a fragmented party system with weak programmatic differentiation, limited regulatory oversight of campaign content, and historically low institutional trust, all of which reduce the availability of credible alternative cues that might otherwise counterbalance deceptive campaign appeals ([Hamzah, 2021](#)).

The finding that emotional manipulation was the most influential dimension of promotional deception aligns closely with dual-process theories of judgment, which hold that affect-laden appeals are processed more rapidly and with less critical scrutiny than purely factual claims ([Kahneman, 2011](#)). It is also consistent with experimental evidence that fear and enthusiasm appeal directly shape candidate support independent of factual content ([Brader, 2006](#)) and that being emotionally moved by campaign messaging predicts increased willingness to support the advertised candidate. In the Iraqi context, this dynamic is likely amplified by the salience of sectarian, ethnic, and nationalist identity in campaign discourse, which provides fertile material for fear and pride based emotional appeals of the kind shown elsewhere to intensify affective polarization as elections approach ([Yilmaz, Akbarzadeh, Abbasov, & Bashirov, 2025](#)).

The strong association between fake news and misinformation exposure and voter decision corroborates the role of social media as the primary amplification channel identified throughout the literature, including the dynamic engagement feedback loops documented in large-scale political social media analysis. It also echoes the institutional account of the 2021 Iraqi parliamentary election, during which coordinated misinformation and disinformation campaigns circulating on Iraqi social media platforms required direct intervention from the Independent High Electoral Commission with international support. The pattern parallels findings from Indonesia's hybrid media environment, where exposure to political misinformation concentrated among heavy social media users with limited trust in institutional sources by [Neyazi, Muhtadi, and Paul \(2022\)](#), though it diverges from evidence in Brazil that continued reliance on legacy news media exerts a partially protective effect against electoral misinformation [Mont, Banerjee, Toff, Fletcher, and Nielsen \(2024\)](#), a protective mechanism that appears comparatively weaker in the Iraqi case given the prominence of social media as a primary information source.

Media literacy's significant but comparatively moderate correlation with voter decision, $r = .49$, suggests that it functions as a meaningful but partial safeguard rather than a comprehensive defense

against promotional deception in the Iraqi context. This finding is consistent with research distinguishing information literacy specifically as the strongest predictor of fake news detection ability, implying that general media literacy, the construct most likely captured by this study's measurement approach, may offer weaker protection than more narrowly targeted literacy skills ([Jones-Jang, Mortensen, & Liu, 2021](#)). It also lends support to the case for structured intervention: experimental evidence from Indonesia and Brazil indicates that brief, targeted media literacy and inoculation interventions can produce measurable reductions in susceptibility to misinformation, suggesting that Iraq's currently moderate media literacy levels represent an addressable rather than fixed constraint ([Ford, Yankoski, Facciani, & Weninger, 2023](#); [Batista, Bueno, Nunes, & Pavao, 2024](#)).

Unrealistic electoral promises, while the weakest of the four dimensions in statistical terms, nonetheless exerted a significant positive effect on voter decision, consistent with experimental findings that exaggerated promotional claims continue to shape judgment even after correction ([Rao, 2022](#)). The comparatively modest effect size may reflect a degree of accumulated voter skepticism toward campaign promises specifically, a pattern documented in research linking repeated exposure to unfulfilled promises with rising cynicism and eroding trust in promotional communication ([Moisescu, Sterie, & Mican, 2026](#)). Even so, the significant association indicates that unrealistic promises retain persuasive power in the Iraqi context, particularly when embedded within a broader marketing mix that also includes emotional and identity-based appeals, consistent with evidence that political marketing instruments operate through both direct and indirect pathways ([Sophocleous et al., 2024](#)).

Beyond its immediate findings, this study's results carry implications for an emerging and more difficult challenge: the integration of artificial intelligence-generated content, including political deepfakes, into the promotional deception landscape. Evidence that synthetic political content can continue to shape citizen perceptions even after public debunking by [Momeni \(2025\)](#), combined with findings that citizens' trust in government moderates their perceived threat from deepfakes by [Neyazi, Kuru, and Mukerjee \(2024\)](#), suggests that Iraq's combination of comparatively low institutional trust and only moderate media literacy could leave Iraqi voters particularly exposed as AI-generated campaign content becomes more accessible and harder to distinguish from authentic material. The mechanisms identified in this study, particularly the outsized influence of emotional manipulation and social media amplification, are precisely the mechanisms through which AI-generated content is likely to exert its greatest effect, underscoring the urgency of the policy and educational recommendations developed in the following section.

5. Conclusions

5.1 Conclusion

This study set out to examine the role of promotional deception in shaping voters' decisions in Iraqi society and to identify which of its dimensions exerts the greatest influence. The findings provide robust support for all hypothesized relationships. Promotional deception was found to exert a statistically significant positive effect on voter decision, with the regression model indicating that promotional deception accounts for approximately forty-three percent of the variance in voter decision among the sampled population. Among the four dimensions examined, emotional manipulation emerged as the most influential, followed by fake news and misinformation, misleading information, and unrealistic electoral promises, while media literacy demonstrated a significant though only partial moderating effect. These results situate Iraq within a broader pattern observed across emerging and transitional democracies, in which weak institutional trust, fragmented party competition, and rapid social media adoption combine to create conditions favorable to promotional deception, echoing patterns documented elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa and in other hybrid media environments.

The study makes two principal contributions. Theoretically, it extends the international political marketing and misinformation literature, developed predominantly in Western, East Asian, and Latin American contexts, to the empirically underexamined Iraqi case, demonstrating that the

multidimensional promotional deception framework travels successfully to a fragmented, identity-driven electoral environment. Practically, the findings offer evidence-based guidance for Iraqi regulators, civic educators, and electoral institutions: the outsized role of emotional manipulation and social media-disseminated misinformation suggests that policy interventions should prioritize platform-level transparency requirements for political advertising and targeted information literacy education, building on models tested elsewhere, rather than relying solely on generic civic education or after-the-fact fact-checking.

5.2 Research Limitations

Several limitations qualify the interpretation of these findings. First, the cross-sectional design captures attitudes and perceptions at a single point in time, precluding causal inference regarding the direction or stability of the relationship between promotional deception and voter decision; longitudinal data would be required to establish that perceived deception precedes, rather than merely accompanies, changes in voter decision-making. Second, the sample, while adequately sized for the parametric tests employed, was drawn through convenience sampling and skewed toward respondents with at least a bachelor's degree, likely underrepresenting rural voters, those with lower educational attainment, and other marginalized segments of the Iraqi electorate whose experience of promotional deception may differ substantially. Third, the self-report nature of the survey instrument introduces the possibility of social desirability bias, particularly given the politically sensitive nature of the subject matter in the Iraqi context. Fourth, the study's scope was limited to four predefined dimensions of promotional deception and did not capture related but conceptually distinct phenomena such as vote-buying, sectarian patronage networks, or, given the timing of data collection, the emerging influence of artificial intelligence-generated content. Finally, as a single-country study, the generalizability of these findings to other Arab or transitional democratic contexts should be treated with appropriate caution pending comparative replication.

5.3 Directions and Future Study

Building on these limitations, several directions for future research are recommended. Longitudinal panel designs that track the same respondents across multiple election cycles would allow researchers to establish temporal precedence and better isolate the causal effect of promotional deception on voter decision-making over time. Future studies would also benefit from larger, stratified national samples that deliberately oversample rural, lower-education, and otherwise marginalized populations to test whether the relationships identified here hold consistently across the full diversity of the Iraqi electorate.

Given the demonstrated effectiveness of targeted interventions elsewhere, future research should prioritize experimental and quasi-experimental designs that test media literacy and inoculation interventions within the Iraqi context specifically, drawing on the methodological models established in Indonesia and Brazil, to determine whether comparable reductions in susceptibility to promotional deception can be achieved among Iraqi voters. As artificial intelligence-generated political content becomes increasingly accessible, future studies should explicitly incorporate measures of exposure to and belief in deepfake and synthetic media content as a distinct dimension of promotional deception, building on emerging frameworks for assessing deepfake threat perception and its moderators.

Comparative cross-national research extending this study's framework to other Arab and Middle Eastern electoral contexts would help determine whether the patterns observed in Iraq, particularly the outsized role of emotional manipulation, reflect region-specific conditions or a more general feature of fragmented, identity-driven democracies. Finally, the predominantly quantitative approach taken here would benefit from complementary qualitative research, including in-depth interviews and focus groups with voters, electoral officials, and campaign practitioners, to provide richer contextual understanding of how promotional deception is experienced, recognized, and in some cases resisted by Iraqi citizens in their own words.

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Author Contributions

YAHA was responsible for conceptualization, investigation, original draft preparation, and project administration. SMO contributed to formal analysis, data curation, supervision, and manuscript review. ASH handled the methodology, software, validation, resources, visualization, and manuscript editing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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