

Brand Image. A cross-cultural perspective

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Abstract: *This article presents an empirical research of global brand image in four different cultural contexts: China, Romania, France, and the United States of America. Brand image is investigated considering Geert Hofstede's individualism scale, for four different global automobile brands and one local (national) brand (one for each country). Research shows that in collectivist cultures opinions are more homogeneous, and therefore brand image should be more prominent and coherently constructed than they are in individualistic cultures. The analysis showed that strong personality images are built rather in individualist cultures than in collectivist ones, and that national popular brand images are more prominent than global ones. Thus, brand image seems to follow an economic logic rather than the rule of dominant individual vs. group opinions.*

I. Brand image

Brand image, as a concept, is built on the broader concept of “brand”, the one element that is most widely studied in advertising research. Although there is no unanimously accepted definition of the brand, there is one common element in all definitions, the need of identification, of unique positioning of a product or a service. In the same time, researchers agree that any definition should include both tangible and intangible attributes of a product, in other words, both functional and emotional characteristics.

Nowadays, the term “brand” is used to refer to not only one special line of products, but also to the company that produces them, as well as the social image that the company tries to impose upon itself and its products (Danesi 2006). At the same time, the brand is perceived as an empty concept that is filled with meaning in time, with the repeated experiences of the consumers. The difference between a new product (with a name, a logo, and a design) and a brand is that, in the case of the brand, these elements were progressively filled in time with the consumers’ experience. Ideas related to the product accumulate and fill these elements with meaning. Thus the brand is born. (Holt 2003) Brand is, on the other hand, “a form of immaterial capital”, or form of “crystallized knowledge” (Arvidsson 2006); thus the brand encloses all that consumers do with it in their minds, as an additional value and profit. From this point of view, the brand is a “virtual” good, in the sense proposed by Pierre Lévy (1988), as something that exists as potentiality, without having the tangibility of what is *actual*, but having an existence nevertheless.

According to the American Marketing Association, a brand is “a name, term, symbol, or design, or a combination of them intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competition”. (Keller 1998: 2) Brands are intangible assets with no physical existence and whose value cannot be precisely determined, unless they become subjects of purchase transactions. From the consumers’ point of view, brands allow them to purchase safely in an increasingly complex world. A known brand helps reducing perceived risks, especially from a qualitative perspective (but not exclusively), as well as reducing post-purchasing cognitive dissonance. (Nandan 2005)

In its standard definition, brand image can be understood as the perceptions related to the brand, as they are reflected in the brand associations formed in the consumer’s mind. Brand associations are thus a very important aspect of the brand meaning as it appears in the consumer’s mind. (Keller 1998: 93) At the same time, associations are part of the brand identity. As for a person’s identity, brand identity offers a direction, a scope and a meaning to the brand. It is defined as the “unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create and maintain. These associations represent what the brand stands for and imply a promise to customers from the organization members.” (Aaker D. 1996: 68). The main difference between brand image and brand identity is that brand image shows the way *consumers* perceive brands, whereas brand identity is related to the way *strategists* aspire that the brands should be perceived.

In this article, we will use a restrained meaning of “brand image”, as the clusters of associations related to a brand. These associations are in fact either product-related attributes (generally unique for the type of product or service), or non-product-related attributes (they are related to the user’s imagery and usage in particular situations) (Nandan 2005: 267). In a different interpretation, product-related attributes refer to the “core” of the physical composition of a brand, while non-product-related attributes are outside the core and concern external aspects of the product or service involved in the purchase or consumption of the product/service. (O’Cass, Lim 2001: 43)

Among many problems of globalization, the need of *differentiation* and positioning on the market become more and more imperative. As a distinct and well shaped brand image creates a strong brand, many marketing activities of modern corporations focus on the construction of a distinct brand image, in order to create consumption behaviors based on brand preferences. In this context, developing a strong unique brand image, superior to other brands, is the main reason of investments in advertising.

Brand image is composed of associations related to different functional and symbolic attributes of the brand (Burmam, Schaefer, Malony 2008). This is the reason why the perception of brand image, built on associations in consumers' minds, is considered an important part of brand equity (Hsieh 2002: 47). Brand equity represents in fact the global value of a brand, a combination of brand-related assets, such as brand awareness, brand loyalty, perceived quality, and brand-related associations. (ASHE Education Report, 2005) From a functional point of view, the construction of brand image is based on the idea of what a brand can do for consumers, from a symbolic, economic, sensorial or utilitarian point of view (Hsieh 2002: 62)

Brand-related associations are intrinsically related to the culture where the brand, as an advertising sign, is decoded. Moreover, brands can become mediators of cultural and symbolic meanings. Brand-related associations have two distinct sources: on the one hand, the codified and communicated meanings, created by the brand originator, especially in early stages of brand development, and, on the other hand, derived meanings, created and attributed by the consumers as a consequence of their own experiences with the brand or of the shared experiences with (or from) other consumers. (Batey 2008: XV)

In a recent book on brands, *Brand Meaning* (2008), Mark Batey shows that we can talk about *primary brand meaning* (mostly equivalent to the denotative meaning of a brand), as well as *implicit brand meaning* (in a relative equivalence with the connotative meaning of a brand). Primary brand meaning and implicit brand meaning are two distinct concepts that are summed up in the global meaning of a brand, having a higher or lesser degree of intercorrelation. They both are like two distinct lenses through which one can look at a brand. Each of them underlines different brand attributes. The primary brand is determined by the benefits directly associated with the brand as well as its physical attributes. Implicit meaning consists of the emotional and psychological dimensions of brand attributes. (Batey 2008: 131)

II. Cultural spaces

This study is a cross-cultural research on global brands meanings. The cultures compared are national cultures, placed in different geographical spaces and situated all along the individualism scale as elaborated by Hofstede (1980): the USA, France, Romania, and China. The goal of this research is to investigate cultural differences, particularly from the perspective of the individualism vs. collectivism dimensions of cultures.

Hofstede argues that culture is *the software of the mind*, and in this context the distinctions between cultural spaces follow the logic of five fundamental coordinates: collectivism vs. individualism, social distance, femininity vs. masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term vs. short-term orientation. All individuals are similar, because of the biological constants, but they are different at the same time by what is unique to each person from a psychological point of view. At the same time, all individuals are social beings, therefore they learn from childhood how to survive in the social world, which implies dealing with five fundamental problems: identity, hierarchy, gender, truth, and virtue (Hofstede, Pederson, Hofstede 2002: 39), which correspond to the five dimensions of cultural spaces.

Research in the field of advertising, particularly research related to brand image and personality, is mainly focused on the individualism dimension in defining cultural differences in conceiving brand personality or associations. (Triandis 1989; Trafimow, Triandis 1991; Markus, Kitayama 1991; 2003; Han, Shavitt 1994; Aaker, Maheswaran 1997; Briley, Morris, Simonson 2000)

In this dichotomy, collectivistic cultures are those cultures where group interest is more important than individual interest, while in the individualistic cultures individual interest is the most prominent. (Hofstede 1991: 50). In collectivistic societies, the individual is integrated, since childhood, into social groups formed by the enlarged family (*ingroups*) that continues to protect the individual all his life, asking in return unconditioned loyalty. In these cultures direct confrontation with another person is considered rude and undesirable. In the same time, in collectivistic families, children learn to share everybody else's opinions, being in permanent harmony with the opinion of the group. Individual opinion virtually does not exist; it is predetermined by the group. In individualistic families, on the other hand, children are encouraged to think by themselves, in other words they learn how to build and work with individual opinions, which reflect their personality, a weak personality being the one which only reflects someone else's opinions. (Hofstede 1991: 59)

In collectivistic cultures there is a constant pressure to submission to the norms of the group or to social norms (Lam 2007), while in individualistic cultures personal goals are privileged, even if they do not necessarily encourage disrespect of the social norms. The distribution of individualistic and collectivistic cultures shows, according to Hofstede's analyses, the predominance of collectivism in Asian and South-American cultures, and of individualism in the North-American and West-European ones. Yet quite a few cultures are close to the middle of the scale, other variables being more relevant in their cases. (Triandis 1989)

The four spaces investigated in this study represent different zones of the individualism scale. The most recent studies (Hofstede, Hofstede 2005) show that they are situated in the following order: China, extremely collectivistic, score 20, situated on the 56-61 positions in the hierarchy of the 87 cultures analyzed, Romania, moderately collectivistic, score 30, occupying the 46-48 positions, France, moderately individualistic, score 71, situated on the 13-14 places, and USA, extremely

individualistic, score 91, situated on the first place on Hofstede's scale. The four cultures thus form a progression on the individualism scale, which will allow comparative relevant results.

Nevertheless, some considerations need to be made, in order not to consider the data presented as infallible. We believe that, especially for the collectivistic cultures, China and Romania, one has to keep in mind a certain relativity of the data, because, on the one hand, of the way the data were obtained (through estimations and replications, and not through the IBM standardized measurements), and, on the other hand, because in both cultures the recent history points to tendencies and changes towards some forms of individualism.

We appreciate that, even though Romanian society is in fact rather a collectivistic culture, the Western European influence becomes more and more visible especially at the opinion level, individual opinion is encouraged and appreciated in certain environments, although there is still a constant need for approval at the group level. On the other hand, Chinese culture has been suffering considerable changes since the 1949 communist revolution, toward a challenge of its collectivistic tradition. Nevertheless, even though it is less traditionalist, as a result of its Cultural Revolution, modern China still privileges group values, the need for harmony among opinions. The post-materialism that appeared as a reaction to the extreme materialism (severely attacked during the Socialist Revolution (the 1950s), the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and the Social Spiritual Civilizing Movement (the 1980s)), emphasizes the need of harmony between man and nature, as opposed to material gratifications specific to the so called "materialistic" period of modern China (Zhu, He 2004: 66), which opened the way to some individualistic influences in Chinese cultural identity. There is a growing body of literature showing that even among those segments having a very rapid modernization rhythm, there still exists a tendency of acting according to anticipated expectations of the others and to social norms, rather than according to individual desires and individual attributes (Chu 1985; Markus, Kitayama 1991). At the same time, Asian cultures in general (not only China, but Japan, Korea, and Taiwan also) are still considered collectivistic and traditional cultures. (Triandis 1989; Han, Shavitt 1994; Briley, Morris, Simonson 2000; Aaker, Benet-Martinez, Garolera 2001; Markus, Kitayama 2003).

III. Methodology

The instrument used in this research was the self-administered questionnaire (collectively for France, Romania, and China, and individually online for the US). The subjects are first year students at different colleges from well known universities in the four countries: University of Georgia (Athens, USA, 154 students), Institut Universitaire de Technologie (Toulouse and Tarbes, France, 166 students), NSPSPA and University of Bucharest (Bucharest, Romania, 150 students), and Northern Eastern University (Shenyang, China, 138 students). A total of 608 students completed the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was pretested on 25 students from each country, during the same period of time (August-November 2008), before the final versions were applied in any of the four cultural spaces. Therefore, the final versions of the questionnaire were elaborated based on the information obtained from the pretesting phase.

The data obtained from the pretest were used to build the final versions of the questionnaires, with a significant impact in the choice of the brands to be analyzed. Four of them were the brands that were the most frequently mentioned spontaneously in the four countries, as a response to a question that tested brand salience. In this way, the brands were chosen so that they should be recognized by potentially all the subjects in the four countries when filling the final questionnaires. They are Mercedes, Toyota, Porsche, Chrysler. The fifth brand was chosen for each particular culture, as the one that obtained the highest score among local brands mentioned spontaneously by the respondents, following the same logic of brand salience, which argues that, when asked to order brands that spontaneously come to mind, subjects will start with the most popular (Miller, Berry, 1998, 78). The national (local) brands were finally Zhonghua for China, Logan for Romania, Renault for France, and Ford for the US. All four brands are considered in the four countries as popular brands, not very expensive and widely used.

Developing an instrument in cross-cultural research supposes a few challenges, both theoretically and practically. One of the most obvious challenges is related to the translation/adaptation of the questionnaire. Although it can be created in more than one culture, such a questionnaire is usually constructed in one culture and then exported for translation and adaptation. (Harkness, Vijver, Johnson, 2003). In this case, the questionnaire was designed, in its main points, in the Romanian culture, even if, for brand personality and brand image questions, it was built upon American theoretical models. However, the choice of the global brands (the pretest phase) played an important role. Most of the questions were translated *ad-literam*, the only modifications were operated (adapted) in the demographics part, questions related to income, residence, religion etc. Translations were supervised by native speakers for the English and French versions, and translated entirely for the Chinese one. All supervisors and the translator for the Chinese version were professors or PhD students in mass communication field.

The hypotheses related to brand images and tested in this research are:

H1: The more individualistic a culture, the less prominent the brand image of global brands.

H2: The more individualistic a culture, the less prominent the brand image of local brands.

The logic of hypotheses follows the individualistic and collectivistic features related to expressing opinions. In collectivistic cultures, individuals are more pressured by the opinion of the group, and therefore they will tend to judge things in a more

homogenous fashion, while in individualistic cultures, individual (therefore not homogenous) opinions are valued and encouraged.

IV. Results and analysis

For brand image, the meaning of brands is constructed in two different ways: there is a primary meaning of the brand, which contains the benefits associated with it, and the physical attributes of the brand, and an implicit meaning, made up of emotional and psychological meanings of brand attributes and other associations. With no pretense of exhaustivity in meanings associated with brands, the attributes that respondents associated with the brands are part of two distinct categories: five attributes for the primary meaning (“money”, “reliability”, “quality”, “safety”, “comfort”), and seven attributes for the implicit meaning (“luxury”, “power”, “snobbism”, “tradition”, “style”, “family”, “adventure”). More about these items will be provided in the “limits of the research” section. For the moment we should say that they are conventionally chosen, with no intention of cover all the possible attributes related to automobile brands, but intending to show a detailed image of the way brand meaning is constructed in different cultures.

For Mercedes, there are important differences among the four cultures in the way primary meaning is constructed, not necessarily following the logic of the hypotheses. Here is a table with the weights of each attribute in the four cultures (“yes” represents the cases in which the attribute was chosen as associated with the brand, “no” for the cases where the attribute was not chosen).

Table I. Brand Image, Primary Meaning, Mercedes

Mercedes	China		Romania		France		USA	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
money	50.0%	50.0%	52.7%	47.3%	75.8%	24.2%	88.3%	11.7%
reliability	18.1%	81.9%	20.7%	79.3%	23.0%	77.0%	17.5%	82.5%
quality	25.4%	74.6%	46.0%	54.0%	53.9%	46.1%	55.8%	44.2%
safety	12.3%	87.7%	22.7%	77.3%	26.7%	73.3%	19.5%	80.5%
comfort	21.0%	79.0%	40.0%	60.0%	62.4%	37.6%	46.8%	53.2%

If we can talk about a pattern observed in the primary meaning, it seems to be opposed to the hypothesis H1. In individualistic cultures, the consensus about the attributes that construct the brand image is higher (in most cases) than for the collectivistic cultures. Three attributes are relevant for all four cultures, as meanings globally associated with Mercedes brand image, “money”, “quality”, “comfort”. In other words, although there are significant differences in the weights of the attributes, they are the more prominent in all cultures, and thus seem to define the Mercedes brand image.

Among the attributes that compose the implicit meaning of Mercedes brand, there is a relative homogeneity of relevant attributes:

Table II. Brand Image, Implicit Meaning, Mercedes

Mercedes	China		Romania		France		USA	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
luxury	19.6%	80.4%	57.3%	42.7%	80.6%	19.4%	89.0%	11.0%
power	17.4%	82.6%	23.3%	76.7%	31.5%	68.5%	37.0%	63.0%
snobbism	8.0%	92.0%	15.3%	84.7%	32.1%	67.9%	40.9%	59.1%
tradition	6.5%	93.5%	32.7%	67.3%	7.3%	92.7%	11.0%	89.0%
style (class)	41.3%	58.7%	60.0%	40.0%	53.9%	46.1%	70.1%	29.9%
family	5.1%	94.9%	2.0%	98.0%	3.0%	97.0%	6.5%	93.5%
adventure	0.7%	99.3%	2.0%	98.0%	1.2%	98.8%	3.2%	96.8%

There is a remarkable cohesion of opinions about the attribute “luxury”, perceived as relevant for most of the subjects in three of the four cultures (Romania, France, USA), and about the attribute “style” (for Romania, France, and USA, and a close to 50% score for China also). There is no obvious relationship between the degree of individualism and the degree of cohesion of the opinions. However, if a pattern can be noticed, it follows an opposite direction, the most individualistic cultures seem to create more salient (powerful) brand image.

There is, however, a relative homogeneity in the perceived importance of attributes in the four countries: there are totally insignificant attributes (“family”, “adventure”), as well as relatively significant ones (“power”, “snobbism”, “tradition”), in a hierarchy of the most prominent attributes (“style”, “luxury”).

For the brand Toyota, the primary meaning of the brand is less salient.

Table III. Brand Image, Primary Meaning, Toyota

Toyota	China		Romania		France		USA	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
money	14.5%	85.5%	5.3%	94.7%	4.8%	95.2%	1.9%	98.1%
reliability	19.6%	80.4%	34.0%	66.0%	41.8%	58.2%	76.6%	23.4%
quality	20.3%	79.7%	30.0%	70.0%	34.5%	65.5%	51.9%	48.1%
safety	14.5%	85.5%	29.3%	70.7%	29.1%	70.9%	63.6%	36.4%
comfort	23.9%	76.1%	29.3%	70.7%	32.7%	67.3%	39.6%	60.4%

In the American culture only, two of the attributes are chosen in more than 50% of cases, “reliability” and “quality”. For the other cultures, with the exception of the attribute “money” which seems not to be at all associated with the brand, all other four attributes are chosen as representative by a third of the respondents, with even lower percentages in the case of the Chinese culture.

As for the implicit meaning, the only attribute considered the most salient in all cultures is “family”, although, even in this particular case, only the American subjects associated the attribute to the brand in more than 50% of the cases. The French culture is situated close to the 50%, with 47.3% of the subjects associating the attribute to the brand Toyota.

Table IV. Brand Image, Implicit Meaning, Toyota

Toyota	China		Romania		France		USA	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
luxury	8.7%	91.3%	6.0%	94.0%	3.6%	96.4%	2.6%	97.4%
power	6.5%	93.5%	26.0%	74.0%	0.0%	100.0%	11.0%	89.0%
snobbism	3.6%	96.4%	0.0%	100.0%	1.2%	98.8%	0.0%	100.0%
tradition	13.0%	87.0%	6.0%	94.0%	7.3%	92.7%	22.1%	77.9%
style (class)	14.5%	85.5%	12.7%	87.3%	8.5%	91.5%	9.1%	90.9%
family	21.0%	79.0%	26.7%	73.3%	47.3%	52.7%	72.1%	27.9%
adventure	1.4%	98.6%	26.7%	73.3%	32.1%	67.9%	17.5%	82.5%

There is no proportionality (nor a reversed proportionality) for the homogeneity of opinions and the degree of collectivism of cultures, not for the primary brand meaning, nor for the implicit meaning. However, one can remark a homogeneity of the hierarchy in the four cultures, where there are totally irrelevant attributes (“luxury”, “snobbism”), and relevant attributes if compared to the other items (for example, the attribute “family” receives the highest scores, even if they are distributed along a wide range of percentages, from 21.0% in the case of China, to 72.1% for the USA).

Porsche seems to have the strongest brand image among the four global brands, especially for the attributes that compose the implicit meaning. For the primary meaning, the most salient attribute is “money”, with more than 50% of the options of respondents in three cultures, with the exception of China. A relatively homogenous value in the four cultures has the attribute “quality”, although in none of the cases the attribute is chosen by more than 50% of the respondents.

Table V. Brand Image, Primary Meaning, Porsche

Porsche	China		Romania		France		USA	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
money	35.5%	64.5%	54.0%	46.0%	89.1%	10.9%	87.0%	13.0%
reliability	2.9%	97.1%	18.0%	82.0%	15.8%	84.2%	10.4%	89.6%
quality	10.9%	89.1%	31.3%	68.7%	43.0%	57.0%	41.6%	58.4%
safety	7.2%	92.8%	8.7%	91.3%	11.5%	88.5%	3.9%	96.1%
comfort	11.6%	88.4%	23.3%	76.7%	32.1%	67.9%	18.2%	81.8%

For the implicit meaning, four attributes are clearly prominent in the individualistic cultures (France and USA), “luxury”, “power”, “snobbism”, “style”. However, only one is highlighted with more than 50% of the responses in one collectivistic culture (Romania).

Table VI. Brand Image, Implicit Meaning, Porsche

Porsche	China		Romania		France		USA	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
luxury	41.3%	58.7%	59.3%	40.7%	90.9%	9.1%	81.8%	18.2%
power	12.3%	87.7%	44.7%	55.3%	51.5%	48.5%	64.3%	35.7%
snobbism	8.0%	92.0%	20.7%	79.3%	58.2%	41.8%	57.1%	42.9%
tradition	3.6%	96.4%	12.0%	88.0%	13.3%	86.7%	11.7%	88.3%
style (class)	31.2%	68.8%	35.3%	64.7%	65.5%	34.5%	60.4%	39.6%
family	5.1%	94.9%	2.7%	97.3%	0.0%	100.0%	1.3%	98.7%
adventure	12.3%	87.7%	25.3%	74.7%	13.3%	86.7%	28.6%	71.4%

As a general trend, even if not observed for each and every attribute, the attributes are more prominent in the individualistic cultures. For the collectivistic cultures, very few attributes are related to the brand in more than 30% of cases (“luxury” and “style” for China, and “luxury”, “power”, and “style” for Romania). We must remark, though, that there is a general homogeneity of the hierarchies of the prominence of the attributes, with totally irrelevant attributes in all cultures (for instance “family”), relatively insignificant ones (“tradition”, “adventure”), and relatively significant ones (“luxury”, “style”).

The case of Chrysler seems to be at the opposite pole, if compared to Porsche. It presents the fuzziest brand image, with no prominent qualities, without totally insignificant qualities, both for the primary meaning and the implicit meaning.

Table VII. Brand Image, Primary Meaning, Chrysler

Chrysler	China		Romania		France		USA	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
money	31.2%	68.8%	46.7%	53.3%	34.5%	65.5%	7.1%	92.9%
reliability	11.6%	88.4%	22.7%	77.3%	26.7%	73.3%	23.4%	76.6%
quality	16.7%	83.3%	28.7%	71.3%	20.6%	79.4%	22.7%	77.3%
safety	11.6%	88.4%	20.0%	80.0%	21.2%	78.8%	30.5%	69.5%
comfort	12.3%	87.7%	24.7%	75.3%	35.2%	64.8%	26.0%	74.0%

For the primary meaning, the only relatively relevant attribute seems to be “money”, with the exception of USA. As for the other three global brands, the Chinese culture seems to build a weak brand image for all attributes.

The implicit meaning is constructed much less homogeneously if compared with the other brands, in the four cultures, with only one attribute having more than 50% of the responses, “family”, for USA, and different “most salient” attributes, with less than 50% for the other cultures. It has to be mentioned that the USA are the country of origin of the brand, and therefore a more prominent image was to be expected. However, with the exception of the attribute “family”, the brand image is weakly constructed in the American culture, for all other attributes; only “tradition” receives a moderate score. A lack of cross-cultural homogeneity in the hierarchies of the attributes can be noticed also.

Table VIII. Brand Image, Implicit Meaning, Chrysler

Chrysler	China		Romania		France		USA	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
luxury	26.1%	73.9%	48.7%	51.3%	22.4%	77.6%	10.4%	89.6%
power	15.9%	84.1%	23.3%	76.7%	12.7%	87.3%	5.2%	94.8%
snobbism	7.2%	92.8%	12.7%	87.3%	13.9%	86.1%	0.6%	99.4%
tradition	8.7%	91.3%	18.7%	81.3%	15.2%	84.8%	34.4%	65.6%
style (class)	18.1%	81.9%	40.7%	59.3%	17.0%	83.0%	16.2%	83.8%
family	4.3%	95.7%	6.0%	94.0%	38.2%	61.8%	57.8%	42.2%
adventure	1.4%	98.6%	14.7%	85.3%	17.0%	83.0%	11.7%	88.3%

A possible explanation of the fuzzy brand image for the brand Chrysler can be found in the difficult financial situation of the producing company, which has started to be discussed in the media in the same period of time when the questionnaire was completed.

National popular brands had relatively weak brand images, with few exceptions. For the primary meaning, only one attribute, for the French brand Renault, “safety”, received more than 50% of the respondents’ favorable opinions.

Table IX. Brand Image, Primary Meaning, National Brands

National brand	China		Romania		France		USA	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
money	9.4%	90.6%	2.7%	97.3%	3.6%	96.4%	2.6%	97.4%
reliability	13.0%	87.0%	6.7%	93.3%	31.5%	68.5%	46.1%	53.9%
quality	17.4%	82.6%	4.7%	95.3%	49.7%	50.3%	34.4%	65.6%
safety	13.8%	86.2%	11.3%	88.7%	50.9%	49.1%	43.5%	56.5%
comfort	15.2%	84.8%	23.3%	76.7%	44.2%	55.8%	30.5%	69.5%

There is a clearly more prominent image in the individualistic cultures, if compared with the collectivistic ones, for which, at least for the primary meaning, the percentages show a lack of consensus over essential qualities of an automobile brand.

As far as the implicit meaning is concerned, a few attributes are prominent. For USA and France, the implicit meaning seems to be strongly supported by two attributes, “tradition” and “family”, with more than 50% of respondents’ opinion associating them with the national brand. The attribute “family” is also associated by the Romanian respondents with the Romanian brand. For the USA, other two attributes build an important part of the brand image, at a moderate level, “adventure” and “power”. In the case of France, no other attribute (except for the two already mentioned) received a significant score. The Romanian respondents privilege the attribute “family”; the only other attribute with a relatively significant score is “tradition” (26.7%). All other attributes are totally insignificant. In the case of China, there are two relatively significant attributes (although with low scores), “tradition” and “family”, attributes constantly presented in the brand images of all brands for the Chinese culture.

Table X. Brand Image, Implicit Meaning, National Brands

National brand	China		Romania		France		USA	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
luxury	7.2%	92.8%	0.0%	100.0%	1.8%	98.2%	0.6%	99.4%
power	12.3%	87.7%	0.0%	100.0%	0.6%	99.4%	36.4%	63.6%
snobbism	0.7%	99.3%	0.0%	100.0%	0.6%	99.4%	1.3%	98.7%
tradition	36.2%	63.8%	26.7%	73.3%	63.6%	36.4%	68.2%	31.8%
style (class)	15.2%	84.8%	1.3%	98.7%	10.3%	89.7%	7.8%	92.2%
family	28.3%	71.7%	78.7%	21.3%	83.0%	17.0%	66.2%	33.8%
adventure	1.4%	98.6%	1.3%	98.7%	10.9%	89.1%	42.9%	57.1%

Overall, national brands seem not to have a strong brand image; the meanings are not very prominent, especially in collectivistic cultures. For the individualistic cultures, the brand images are more powerful. A possible explanation is related to the economic development level of the automobile industry in the four countries, American and French brands being considered more powerful brands than Romanian and Chinese ones, in general.

V. Discussion and Conclusions

A few remarks about brand images are generally valid. There are some attributes that are associated with the brands by the majority of the respondents in all four cultures; they draw common brand images for the global brands. They are situated in the common decoding zone, and show that global brands preserve a core meaning across cultures. Nevertheless there are important differences. There are some constants related to the cultures themselves. For example, in the case of China, the low percentages of brand associations in general seem to be a general cultural characteristic, a fuzzy image of the brands in general, possibly related to the socio-economic situation as well. We can also discuss a general trend, but not a strict rule, that inverse the direction

of the first hypothesis: in general, individuals of individualistic cultures are more likely to agree on brand associations and to create brand meaning than individuals in collectivistic cultures. The explanation is probably indirectly related to the degree of collectivism of the analyzed cultures, as long as one can talk about a correlation between economic wealth and the degree of individualism of cultures in general. So, a possible (if not probable) explanation is that in economically developed countries (usually individualistic countries), brand meaning is built on a strong brand image in general, due to the more prominent penetration of brands into individual choices of purchase of goods on the market in general, of automobiles in particular. As far as national brands are concerned, with the exception of China, the brand image is concentrated on very few attributes (one for Romania, two for France and USA), very prominent in the implicit meaning.

The first hypothesis has not been confirmed, but we can argue that it has been in fact reversed, global brand images are more clearly defined in individualistic cultures. Hypotheses H2 is also infirmed, national brands tend to behave just as the global brands, with stronger brand images in individualistic cultures.

As a general important finding, there is homogeneity in the choice of related attributes in the four countries for the global brands, both for the primary brand meaning and for the implicit meaning. In other words, a coherent migration of meanings from the country of origin of the brand toward other cultural spaces in the context of globalization can be inferred. However, regardless of the brand, the direction of the strongest brand meanings (and associations) goes from collectivistic cultures toward individualistic ones. Therefore, the most important factor is rather indirectly related to the individualism scale. If we can agree that there is proportionality between the individualism degree and the economic level of a country (Hofstede, Hofstede 2005: 114), then the economic factor is dominant in imposing brand images and determines a better cohesion of opinions in the more economically developed countries, through the fact that global brands are more present in everyday life of individuals, not only through advertising or media, but also by the fact that they are integrated in purchase decisions to a higher extent than in less economically developed countries.

From this point of view, the results of the research seem to confirm this economic logic. This is also true for the national brands. Moreover, for individualistic cultures, brand image of national brands seem to be more homogenous and powerful than for global brands, which could be explained, economically speaking, by the presence of national brands among the real purchase options of the respondents, mainly because of their cost. This economic logic is also supported by an analysis of the number and type of cars owned by the respondents. Only 0.37% of the Chinese students have a car (one subject of 138), 20% of the Romanian (30 of 150), 67.9% of the French students (112 of 165), and 77.9% of the Americans (120 of 154). Out of these, none possesses the national brand for China, 16.7% have a Logan for Romania (another 10% chose

“Dacia”¹, with no other explanation, and the brand Logan is the first in a hierarchy of owned cars), 36.6% for France (and also the first in a hierarchy of owned cars), and 10.7% for USA (and also the first in the same type of hierarchy). The case of China has its particularity, because only one student owns a car, a BMW; for the other three cultures, though, there is a clear preference for the national brand, as the favorite choice for the personal car. Although the results are not significant in what concerns the proportions of respondents having a personal car, because the respondents were all freshmen, and could not afford a personal car yet or did not even have a driving license yet, we believe that the comparisons remain relevant. Therefore, it is clear that the national brand is on the top of personal choices or possibilities by the fact that, even though they do not have a personal car yet, it is most probably that the students could afford the national brand before the global ones.

The economic logic should also be related to the modernization and the persistence of traditional values. Using the data from three successive research waves called World Values Surveys, offering data for 65 nations worldwide (representing about 75% of the cultures of the world), Ronald Inglehart and Wayne Baker (2000) argue that there is empirical evidence that even though values could and do change, they continue to reflect the cultural heritage of a society. In other words, the degree of economic development and cultural values are closely related to each other, and influence each other. This is the reason why we believe that economic, social, historical characteristics do play an important part in the cultural dimensions of different nations.

V. Limits of the Research

There are a few limits of this research that need to be discussed and explained. Most of them are due to the lack of resources. They can be clustered in three main categories: limits associated with the samples, limits related to the construction of the questionnaire, and limits related to the logic of research.

The first category concerns two aspects: on the one hand the choice of cultural spaces, on the other hand the choice of the samples inside the cultural spaces. Although the four cultures cover almost the whole range of degrees of individualism-collectivism and of geographical space, being thus representative from this point of view, results with higher degree of generalization could be obtained with a higher

1 Although for the Romanian culture the brand analyzed in this research is Logan and not Dacia (Logan being a type of Dacia). The respondents made the distinction between Dacia and Logan, in favor of the latter, which is explainable by the fact that they dissociate spontaneously Logan from the brand Dacia that is rather associated with the old models. The takeover of the Dacia Company by Renault led to a repositioning of the brand, which is now dissociated in people’s mind from “the old brand”, associated with less reliable models.

number of cultures, from other (not yet investigated) categories. What is now missing and would bring additional clarifications is a Southern-American culture, which would have represented not only a new geographic area, but also an extreme point on the collectivism scale. Little is known also about African cultures from the point of view of brand positioning. As far as the samples are concerned, although previous research argued that there were insignificant differences between students samples and representative samples at national level (O'Casey, Lim 2001), the generalization degree is reduced because of the convenience character of the samples investigated.

As far as the instrument is concerned, there are two issues to be mentioned. The ambition of this research was not to propose an exhaustive research of the brands, but rather to offer a first image of the way the meaning of global brands is constructed in different cultures. In this context, the choice of attributes of what we called brand image was conventional, following the logic of distribution according to the latest available literature in brand meaning research, primary brand meaning and implicit brand meaning. With more resources, a more representative list of attributes can be built. Preliminary research should analyze spontaneous associations grouped into factors and items through factorial analysis for each culture and, after a comparative analysis of the items, a common set of representative attributes for all studied cultures can be obtained.

Another issue related to the construction of the questionnaire concerns the choice of brands. It is obvious that an exhaustive list of brands in a certain industry cannot be analyzed. However, a preliminary research can investigate the salience of brands through the brand associations themselves. A special case of this research was the brand Chrysler, which proved to be prominent in the respondents' mind in the pretesting phase because of the media attention it received as a consequence of the financial situation of the company, which led to inconclusive results for this particular brand. This research showed that the relevant brand meanings are developed for powerful brand images. Therefore the pretesting phase should exclusively focus on strong brand images. Moreover, the logic of research questions or hypotheses should include also economic factors.

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