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The impact of culture on brand perceptions: a six-nation study

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine how cultural differences affect the perception of a brand.

Design/methodology/approach – A study was carried out in six countries among different involvement groups. The study uses Hofstede's cultural dimensions and Aaker's brand personality dimensions to see if brand perceptions of a product are similar among all six countries.

Findings – This study provides clear evidence that a same brand is perceived differently in different cultures in spite of its identical positioning. This means that if a firm wishes to achieve the same brand perception in different countries, the firm needs to create brand positioning strategies that emphasize the characteristics that enable consumers to perceive the product in a similar way.

Originality/value – This paper examines the perception of a single brand in the context of cultural dimensions in a global setting – in particular in six countries on three continents.

Keywords Brand identity, Brand management, Brand image, International marketing

Paper type Research paper

An executive summary for managers and executive readers can be found at the end of this article.

Introduction

Firms have long used brand personality as a way to create a point of differentiation between their products from their competitors' products (e.g., Halliday, 1996; Aaker, 1997) and as a way to create brand equity (Phau and Lau, 2000). By consuming a brand with a certain "personality," buyers of this product are able to express themselves (Belk, 1988) or at least some dimensions of themselves (Kleine *et al.*, 1993). Furthermore, close identification with the personality of a brand also helps influence consumer choice and usage (Biel, 1993). Moreover, Plummer (1985) asserted that brand personality can serve as a unifying factor in selling to global markets. Consequently, in marketing across cultures, many firms create marketing strategies that emphasize a standardized brand personality. Through the use of advertising, packaging, symbols, and other imagery, firms

seek to develop a brand personality that is consistent among brand users and non-users.

In a market that is culturally homogeneous, the creation of a brand personality that is perceived similarly by both users and non-users is quite plausible because the people share similar cultural meanings. In culturally-heterogeneous markets, a brand's personality may not be perceived in a manner consistent with how a firm has designed it to be because cultural differences could influence the cultural meaning different markets assign to the brand (Phau and Lau, 2000). This lack of congruence could consequently affect the success of a firm's global marketing strategy as a consistent global image seems to be a requisite for a global brand to succeed (Cateora and Graham, 2007).

Phau and Lau (2000) suggested that understanding cultural meaning in the context of brand personality requires linking it to the cultural dimensions identified by Hofstede. As new products from various companies in many different countries are introduced to virtually all of the world's markets almost on a regular basis, it has become imperative to study whether consumer perceptions of a brand personality of a product are consistent throughout all the markets a firm is serving.

In this situation, global companies must consider the extent to which brands with an identical position are perceived in an

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identical manner, as well as the extent to which a different cultural background influences the way in which brands are perceived. This question is particularly significant because it also determines the success of a brand in a particular country or cultural sphere. Despite the importance of this influence, relatively little is known about the process by which the culture affects attitude and behavior (Aaker and Maheswaran, 1997).

The present paper deals with the question of how far cultural differences influence perception, as expressed by level of consumption. Furthermore, this paper seeks to establish whether there is a relationship between consumption and perception of brand personality, and if so, whether this perceptions differs among the six countries under study.

Background literature

Brand personality

Brand personality is a central component of brand identity (Aaker, 1996) and can be defined as the set of human characteristics connected to a particular brand name (Aaker, 1997). Thus, brand personality takes on an additional function, so to speak, which allows the consumer to bond with a particular brand in the same manner humans bond with other people (Wee, 2004). Brand personality, like human personality, has many dimensions. Aaker (1997) identified five dimensions of brand personality: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness.

Perception of the brand personality is determined by each contact with the brand, regardless of whether contact is direct or indirect. The characteristic features are created by transferring personality features of the typical brand consumer to the brand itself. On top of this, it may also take on the characteristic features of the manufacturer's management and staff. When this transfer takes place, the brand is personified and is given a soul (Aaker, 1997). Furthermore, this procedure transposes the characteristics of those people connected with the brand directly to the brand itself (McCracken, 1989). An example of this is Apple Computer's Steve Jobs who is seen as unconventional and hip (compared to other Chief Executive Officers of major corporations); Apple's products are regarded as cutting edge and hip.

The choice of what human characteristics to imbue a brand is made by marketing managers (Fournier, 1998). However, since human beings act and think in different ways as a result of their cultural backgrounds, it is quite possible that the brand personality created may resonate only in the market that has a similar culture as the marketing manager. Consequently, the success of a firm's global marketing strategy may vary depending on how congruent the cultures of the other markets are in comparison to the culture of the marketing manager – all the more reason to take this factor into account when creating a brand personality.

Various investigations show that cultural differences can influence the way in which a brand personality is perceived (Aaker and Maheswaran, 1997). Moreover, there are also cultural differences in terms of the perceived significance of the brand personality. For example, it is probably generally true to say that the personality of a brand is accorded greater

important in individualistic countries than in collectivistic countries (De Mooij, 2003). Evidence of this may be found in Aaker *et al.*'s (2001) study that showed 'ruggedness' dimension missing among members of a collectivist society.

Cultural differences

The relevant literature contains many definitions of culture. It is however undisputed that the culture of human beings influences their decisions and behavior (Hill, 2002). Culture is made up of many different components, such as language, religion, values and standards (Hill, 2002). These parameters influence the way in which individuals perceive different things, resulting in one of the main functions of a culture, namely the structure in which people perceive and evaluate different things (Hall, 1989). Applied to marketing measures, this can mean that brands may be better received by the people of a particular culture if they are congruent to the cultural perceptions of that culture.

One of the tools used most frequently in studies of culture is Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions. While there have been questions as to the reliability and validity of Hofstede's indices (e.g., Spector *et al.*, 2001; Van de Vijver, 2002; Bearden *et al.*, 2006) as well as their applicability to individual-level analysis, the absence of an alternative scale as comprehensive as Hofstede's indices, left us with little choice but to use Hofstede's indices. Moreover, to ensure comparability, it was deemed necessary to use Hofstede's indices. The following paragraphs provide a synoptic presentation of the cultural dimensions according to Hofstede on which the present investigation is based[1]. Table I encapsulates the different dimensions and their characteristics.

Collectivism/individualism

Hofstede (1980) describes this dimension as one of the core values that define the form and harmony in which an individual lives together with society. Collectivist societies have a very narrow social network, reflected in a way of life that is characterized by large families and responsibility of the individual toward the group. By contrast, individualistic societies give priority to the rights of the individual. This has a direct effect on brand management (Hofstede, 1994). The greater pressure to conform that prevails in collectivistic countries can affect consumer behavior. The members of individualistic cultures on the other hand are characterized by their pursuit of self-realization and individual freedom and are less likely to be pressured to buy brands that do not self-expressive. This is not to say that there is no pressure to conform in an individualistic society and vice versa, rather there is more latitude for consumers to act independently of others. Current thinking sees individualism and collectivism as bipolar, but rather as dimensions that can quite easily exist alongside one another (Malhotra, 2001).

Masculinity/femininity

Hofstede distinguishes between masculine and feminine countries (1980) according to two basic issues: gender role allocation and the characteristics attributed to each sex. Societies that are ascribed a high degree of masculinity prize such values as competition, power, success, performance

Table I Hofstede's cultural dimensions

Dimension	Low	High
Individualism	Narrow social network, responsibility for the group	Priority to the rights of the individual
Collectivism	Individual is relatively independent of group peer pressures	Group awareness, decision-making process takes place within the group
Masculinity	Differences between the sexes are very small, high value of "female" characteristics values like teamwork	Very traditional male and female roles
Power distance	Professional rank and position are not so important	Professional rank and position have an impact on private life
Performance orientation	People work to live	People live to work

orientation, and income. These cultures live with very traditional male and female roles. By contrast, in feminine countries the differences between the sexes are very small. In these cultures, "female" characteristics, such as teamwork, sacrifice for others and living standards are valued. Consumer behavior in masculine cultures is characterized by status buying and a high degree of acceptance for advertising. Men make the decisions on larger purchases, while women are mainly responsible for buying foodstuffs. In smaller feminine countries, however, advertising is not very popular, particularly when it conveys masculine values (De Mooij, 1998).

Power distance

Hofstede (1994) interprets this dimension mainly as a measure of how inequalities, which are present in every society, are dealt with in a particular country. In countries with a large power distance, a person's rank and position in his professional life are more important than in countries with a small power distance. Countries with a large power distance only have a small middle class and a wide range of incomes. Furthermore, the hierarchical structure of society is encouraged by the prevailing body of thought in these societies. An additional characteristic of a large power distance is that this position in a person's professional life is also transposed to the individual's personal life.

Performance orientation

This dimension is used as a measure of the way in which people relate to success and material things. In countries with a high performance orientation, the population lives to work and success is the only thing that counts, whereas countries with low performance orientation attach less importance to work and more to life in general. In these cultures, the people and their environment are more important than a successful professional career.

Relationship between attitude and behavior

In marketing, attitude plays a special role. This is due particularly to the fact that numerous investigations have been able to confirm the effect of marketing instruments on attitude and, in addition, there is an alleged relationship between attitude and behavior – the so-called attitude-behavior hypothesis. The AB-hypothesis maintains that attitude determines behavior, and thus that purchase probability depends on a positive attitude. The behavior prediction provided by this model, however, can be strengthened by additional factors, such as social and personal standards, as well as habits (Petty *et al.*, 1991).

Two models on this subject are generally known. The first is the "theory of reasoned action", established by Ajzen and Fishbein, which assumes that individuals consider the consequences of their actions before taking a decision. The intention to implement an action or not is based in this case on the attitudes of the individual towards this action and his/her conceptions of prevailing standards. This theory has proved highly successful to date when applied to a wide spectrum of different behavior patterns (Petty *et al.*, 1991). In 1991, Ajzen expanded this theory to include the "perceived behavioral control" factor to obtain the model. The second theory recognized in the relevant literature is Fazio *et al.*'s (1989) "expanded theory of reasoned action". Fazio alleges that the greater part of behavior is spontaneous and that attitude guides behavior in an automatic process. Fazio argues that this occurs in particular under two specific sets of circumstances (Berger and Mitchell, 1989): firstly, if the attitude is accepted spontaneously thanks to the sheer presence of the object of the attitude (Fazio *et al.*, 1989); secondly, if perception of the object under consideration is changed for the better or the worse and thus, the qualities of the object emerge accordingly (Petty *et al.*, 1991),

The discussion of attitudes and behavior is important as we seek to link levels of consumption to perceptions of brand personality.

Research questions and propositions

The literature presented above deals with the subjects of brand personality, cultural differences, and the relationship between attitude and behavior. Building on this, our first two propositions investigate whether there are differences between the individual consumer groups, both in their perception of a brand's personality and on the cultural level. While these propositions, particularly the first one, may seem intuitive, the concept of cultural similarity in global markets requires that we ensure that there are, in fact, cultural differences. Hence, we propose that:

- P1. Differences can be discerned in the cultural attitude between individual groups of Red Bull consumers.
- P2. Differences can be discerned in the perception of Red Bull's brand personality between individual consumer groups although the brand was positioned identically in the individual markets by the manufacturer.

Based on the assumption that there are differences between the consumer groups, the present investigation analyses whether the attitude towards a brand has any influence on purchasing behavior and on the amount consumed:

P3. There is a relationship between the perception of a brand personality and the amount consumed. This relationship contributes towards explaining the perception of brand personality.

In this context, it is also interesting to establish to what extent there is a relationship between the amount consumed and the differences in the brand perception of the various consumer groups from different cultures. Consequently, we propose:

P4. There is a relationship between cultural dimensions and the perception of brand personality. This relationship contributes to explaining how different cultural dimensions may lead to different perceptions.

Methodology and results

The energy drink brand Red Bull was selected for this investigation because it is very well known worldwide within its target market and because the manufacturer has tried to position this brand in the same way all over the world. Red Bull was established in 1984 by the Austrian, Dietrich Mateschitz, after he came across an energy drink in Thailand in 1982. Sale of the product began in Austria in 1987, and in the 1990s, the company started to expand, in Europe initially, then worldwide. In those years, Mateschitz invested over one third of the company's total revenue in marketing the product to create a global brand that is generally regarded as a success. Today, Red Bull is promoted and sold in over 100 countries worldwide and also sponsors sporting, cultural, and all sorts of other events.

Data collection and sample characteristics

The sample consisted of college students in the 16–35 age group in six countries: Austria, Germany, Netherlands, Singapore, the UK, and the USA. The selection of college students as the sample population was driven by research that indicates that young people were more open to new ideas and innovation and that they were more similar to their peers worldwide in their wants and needs than other age groups. Moreover, this sample is consistent with the declared target market of Red Bull. The random samples looked at functional equivalents. The similarities in demographic characteristics among the different samples reduced the likelihood that differences in the results could be from other variables than the culture of that country. Thus, comparisons can be made between the individual countries (Malhotra *et al.*, 1996).

Students were asked to complete questionnaires. The questionnaire included measures of perceptions of brand personality, measures of cultural dimensions, attitudinal scales, and demographic information. Measures of brand personality and cultural dimensions were based on the work of Aaker and Hofstede respectively. The questionnaire also contained questions relating to Red Bull. The items were arranged in the same order for all six countries and also contained the same design. In order to guarantee comparability, the questions were all translated into the target language and then translated back into the source language. To ensure that the investigation would provide sound data, the people surveyed were asked first of all in a filter question whether they are familiar with the energy drink referred to in the questionnaire and how often they buy it.

Almost everyone asked in all six countries was familiar with Red Bull. The only substantial difference was in the average amount consumed. An overview of the demographic structure of the random samples is provided in Tables II and III.

Results

As far as the cultural background of the individual countries is concerned, clear differences certainly became apparent in the course of the present investigation (see Tables IV and V). Particular attention should be paid in this connection to the differences in terms of the cultural dimensions masculinity/femininity (Netherlands v. other countries), individualism (Austria and Germany v. the UK, the USA and Singapore) and power distance (Austria v. Netherlands and the USA).

The evaluations conducted on perception of the brand personality dimension of excitement yielded considerable differences between the six countries under investigation. Red Bull was connected most with the excitement dimension in Austria, while Singapore showed the least approval of this dimension (see Tables VI and VII).

The analyses show that there are considerable differences among the consumer groups in terms of their attitude towards the brand personality, as well as in the cultural dimensions (Tables VIII and IX, Appendix Tables AI and AII). These differences also become apparent in a comparison of the six countries. Here, only a few cases show similar values in the countries under comparison. In Austria, consumers of Red Bull have a significantly greater perception of all five dimensions of the brand personality than non-consumers do. In Singapore, on the other hand, this only applies to the sophistication dimension. In fact, sophistication is a

Table II Demographic data on the people surveyed (UK, Singapore, Austria)

	UK	Singapore	Austria
Number of people surveyed	172	100	100
Percentage of men	48.3	55.6	55.1
Percentage of women	51.7	44.4	44.9
Average age (years)	20.5	20.7	22.3
Degree of familiarity with Red Bull (%)	100	98	99
Average consumption of Red Bull over a two-week period	0.451	0.081	0.391

Table III Demographic data on the people surveyed (Germany, Netherlands, USA)

	Germany	Netherlands	USA
Number of people surveyed	102	104	130
Percentage of men	52.0	49.0	43.8
Percentage of women	48.0	51.0	56.2
Average age (years)	23.9	22.4	21.7
Degree of familiarity with Red Bull (%)	100	99	99
Average consumption of Red Bull over a two-week period	0.271	0.221	0.161

Table IV Comparison of countries in terms of cultural dimensions (UK, Singapore, Austria)

	UK			Singapore			Austria		
	Mean	SD	α	Mean	SD	α	Mean	SD	α
Individualism	2.19	0.791	0.425	2.23	0.998	0.482	3.65	1.040	0.533
Collectivism	4.08	0.826	0.368	3.51	1.051	0.297	4.19	1.047	0.359
Power distance	5.14	1.327	0.650	5.72	1.235	0.524	6.10	1.153	0.662
Masculinity/femininity	5.35	1.013	0.435	5.21	1.231	0.364	5.40	1.424	0.518
Performance orientation	3.24	1.113	0.489	2.80	1.056	0.622	2.50	1.120	0.717

Notes: Scale: 1 = strongly agree; 7 = strongly disagree; α – Cronbach's Alpha standardized

Table V Comparison of countries in terms of cultural dimensions (Germany, Netherlands, USA)

	Germany			Netherlands			USA		
	Mean	SD	α	Mean	SD	α	Mean	SD	α
Individualism	3.94	0.903	0.486	3.10	1.051	0.541	2.07	0.781	0.413
Collectivism	3.72	0.719	0.177	4.00	0.891	0.449	3.96	0.831	0.400
Power distance	5.20	1.043	0.529	4.75	0.908	0.528	4.95	0.924	0.533
Masculinity/femininity	5.24	1.334	0.477	4.80	1.214	0.531	5.92	1.033	0.303
Performance orientation	3.35	0.850	0.609	3.33	0.863	0.584	2.99	0.887	0.495

Notes: Scale: 1 = strongly agree; 7 = strongly disagree; α – Cronbach's Alpha standardized

Table VI Comparison of countries in terms of the brand personality dimensions (UK, Singapore, Austria)

	UK			Singapore			Austria		
	Mean	SD	α	Mean	SD	α	Mean	SD	α
Excitement	3.28	0.725	0.788	3.70	0.725	0.709	2.62	1.163	0.908
Sincerity	5.12	0.849	0.778	4.36	0.903	0.752	4.49	1.076	0.819
Competence	3.99	0.799	0.634	3.37	0.900	0.767	3.72	1.126	0.839
Sophistication	4.82	1.017	0.720	4.71	1.073	0.768	4.35	1.195	0.777
Ruggedness	4.15	1.269	0.692	2.70	1.087	0.711	3.61	1.016	0.636

Notes: Scale: 1 = strongly agree; 7 = strongly disagree; α – Cronbach's Alpha standardized

Table VII Comparison of countries in terms of the brand personality dimensions (Germany, Netherlands, USA)

	Germany			Netherlands			USA		
	Mean	SD	α	Mean	SD	α	Mean	SD	α
Excitement	2.91	0.829	0.807	3.11	0.873	0.812	2.88	1.007	0.883
Sincerity	4.99	0.942	0.878	4.39	0.762	0.733	4.60	0.893	0.797
Competence	4.29	1.036	0.818	3.94	0.858	0.709	3.72	0.929	0.779
Sophistication	4.68	1.106	0.788	4.51	0.894	0.632	4.13	0.990	0.765
Ruggedness	4.30	0.964	0.462	3.30	1.076	0.613	3.65	1.072	0.681

Notes: Scale: 1 = strongly agree; 7 = strongly disagree; α – Cronbach's Alpha standardized

Table VIII Results of the significance-test of the mean values (consumer v. non-consumer) (UK, Singapore, Austria) (*t*-test)

	UK	Singapore	Austria
Excitement	**	n.s.	***
Sincerity	n.s.	n.s.	*
Competence	***	n.s.	***
Sophistication	***	**	***
Ruggedness	n.s.	n.s.	**
Individualism	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Collectivism	**	n.s.	*
Power distance	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Masculinity/femininity	n.s.	***	n.s.
Performance orientation	*	n.s.	*

Notes: *** significant on the 1 percent level; ** significant on the 5 percent level; * significant on the 10 percent level; n.s. – not significant

Table IX Results of the significance-test of the mean values (consumer v. non-consumer) (Germany, Netherlands, USA) (*t*-test)

	Germany	Netherlands	USA
Excitement	n.s.	***	**
Sincerity	**	n.s.	**
Competence	***	*	**
Sophistication	***	**	***
Ruggedness	**	n.s.	n.s.
Individualism	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Collectivism	n.s.	*	n.s.
Power distance	n.s.	n.s.	***
Masculinity/femininity	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Performance orientation	n.s.	**	***

Notes: *** significant on the 1 percent level; ** significant on the 5 percent level; * significant on the 10 percent level; n.s. not significant

dimension that is perceived more by consumers than by non-consumers in all six countries. A striking aspect is that all dimensions, with the exception of ruggedness in the USA (however this difference is not significant), are perceived more by consumers than by non-consumers in all six countries. With the exception of Singapore, the differences are largely significant. As far as the culture is concerned, the performance orientation dimension is that one that really stands out. Here, consumers differ significantly from non-consumers in four countries. This allows us to conclude that consumers appreciate the performance-enhancing effect of Red Bull.

The discriminant analysis of the brand personality dimensions shows significant results for the UK (at a level of 1 percent), Austria (at a level of 10 percent), Germany (at a level of 5 percent), the Netherlands (at a level of 5 percent) and Singapore (at a level of 1 percent). The analysis for Singapore is not significant. So there are significant differences between consumers and non-consumers in terms of brand personality in nearly every country investigated. It is quite clear that the sophistication dimension makes a substantial contribution in separating consumers and non-consumers in all countries under investigation. In the UK and

Germany, this applies further to the competence dimension, and in Germany and the Netherlands to the excitement dimension. The ruggedness dimension separates the two groups very clearly in Singapore and the USA: The significance of sophistication is presumably linked to the fact that this dimension is not part of the human personality, although many people do aspire to it (Aaker, 1997).

The discriminant analysis of the cultural dimensions shows significant results for Singapore (at a level of 10 percent) and the USA (at a level of 1 percent). The analysis is not significant for the four other countries.

Discussion and managerial implications

The differences in cultural perception by different consumer groups are easily discernible if we compare the average values. In the UK, Austria and the Netherlands; the dimensions collectivism and power orientation differ significantly, whereas a review of the results for Singapore show that only masculinity is a distinguishing factor. On the other hand, the consumer groups in the USA show significant differences in power distance and performance orientation. Overall, the results can certainly be considered as confirmation of *P1* in Austria and the UK.

If we look at the results for *P2*, the picture is similar. In all six countries there are relatively large differences between the consumer groups, most of which are significant (see Tables VIII, IX and X). In the UK and the Netherlands, the results show significant differences in the dimensions excitement, competence and sophistication. Austria shows significant differences in all five dimensions, while in Germany and in the USA four dimensions differ significantly. Thus, we can conclude that the consumers in Austria differ significantly from those that do not drink Red Bull. This is particularly apparent in terms of the excitement and sophistication dimensions. The smallest difference in perception in Austria was found in the ruggedness dimension, although the difference here is also relatively large and thus, significant. The least significance is found in Singapore, where only the sophistication dimension shows significant differences. As a result, *P2* can be considered confirmed, at least for five countries.

P3 deals with the relationship between the dimensions of brand personality and amount consumed. In the UK, the competence dimension contributes very much to explaining the differences. This can be taken as a sign of the significance of this characteristic for people who drink Red Bull. The excitement and sophistication dimensions also have a positive influence. It is interesting to note here that the two dimensions competence and excitement have been pushed considerably in Red Bull advertising campaigns and seem to appeal particularly to the UK public. The other dimensions – sincerity and ruggedness – have a non-significant influence. In Austria, the sincerity variable creates the wide gap between groups. The excitement, competence and sophistication dimensions also have a positive effect in distinguishing the two groups, whereas ruggedness is almost neutral. Germany shows similar results to Austria, with the exception that ruggedness shows a positive influence and excitement is not significant. The Netherlands and the USA show highly

Table X Discriminant analysis of the brand personality and cultural dimensions

	UK	Singapore	Austria	Germany	Netherlands	USA
Excitement	0.037 **	−0.419	0.494 ***	−0.680	0.997 ***	0.286 **
Sincerity	−0.460	−0.154	−0.366 *	−0.150 **	−0.400	0.199 **
Competence	0.942 ***	0.198	0.291 ***	0.640 ***	−0.213	0.013 **
Sophistication	0.560 ***	1.235 **	0.661 ***	0.755 ***	0.705 **	0.804 ***
Ruggedness	−0.344	0.762	−0.083 **	0.272 **	−0.295	−0.628
Significance of discriminant analysis	$p = 0.002$	$p = 0.202$	$p = 0.081$	$p = 0.023$	$p = 0.037$	$p = 0.006$
Individualism	−0.055	0.041	0.069	−0.574	0.129	0.169
Collectivism	0.700 **	0.187	0.523 *	−0.062	0.424 *	−0.288
Power distance	−0.190	−0.373	0.128	0.856	−0.056	0.397 ***
Masculinity/femininity	0.372	1.037 ***	0.357	0.170	0.229	0.352
Performance orientation	0.570 *	−0.499	0.502 *	0.407	0.724 **	0.825 ***
Significance of discriminant analysis	$p = 0.155$	$p = 0.051$	$p = 0.226$	$p = 0.669$	$p = 0.240$	$p = 0.002$

Notes: *** significant on the 1 percent level; ** significant on the 5 per cent level; * significant on the 10 percent level

positive influences on excitement and sophistication. Ruggedness is not significant in either country. Overall, the results show that $P3$ applies to Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, the UK, and the USA.

$P4$ concentrates on the cultural dimensions and their contribution to perception of brand personality. In Singapore, masculinity makes the largest contribution, despite Singapore not being a very masculine country. For the USA, performance orientation is the best distinguishing factor between the two groups, followed by power distance. Following Hofstede's theory, the USA shows the second highest power distance rate when comparing the six countries of this study. Thus, we can also state here that $P4$ can be rated as correct for Austria and the USA. $P3$ and $P4$ can not be confirmed for countries where the results of the discriminant analysis were not significant.

The results clearly indicate that there are differences in perceptions of the brand personality of red Bull among the six countries investigated in this study. The relevant question to be answered now is what implications can be derived from the results discussed and put to use in brand management?

This study provides clear evidence that the same brand is perceived differently in different cultures in spite of its identical positioning. This means that if a firm wishes to achieve the same brand perception in different countries, the firm needs to create brand positioning strategies that emphasize the characteristics that enable consumers to perceive the product in a similar way. For example, if the desired characteristic is "sophistication" and a market does not see the brand as sophisticated, then a firm has to create brand and promotional strategies that emphasize 'sophistication.' By doing this, brands would be positioned with clear differentiation according to cultural differences.

Conversely, a firm may choose to emphasize a characteristic that is desirable in a particular market but not necessarily as desirable in other countries in order to make the brand more relevant to that market's self-concept. However, this can lead to an inconsistent brand image – a key tenet in global marketing that advocates standardization.

The issue of "differentiation versus standardization" then comes into play. While a differentiation approach to creating

brand personalities for culturally-different markets may be more market-oriented, a standardized approach requires a set of strategies to influence consumers' perceptions of brands to align them with how the firm wants its brand to be seen globally. If we include the criterion of whether such considerations serve any useful purpose, we must also ask whether such strategies are economically viable.

Limitations and directions for future research

In view of the relatively small random sample size in each case and the limited number of countries (although the survey included countries from three continents – America, Asia, Europe) on which the present investigation was based, the results can, of course, only be applied to a limited extent. It would thus be wise to conduct a more extensive investigation on this topic, both in terms of the size of the random samples taken in each case and also in terms of the countries covered by the investigation, in order to obtain more generally applicable answers to the question of cultural influence on the perception of brand personality.

Moreover, the study was not able to isolate the effect of country-of-origin. Perceptions of the brand personality may have been influenced by knowledge that Red Bull is an Austrian product and consequently by whatever perceptions/images the samples had about Austria.

Note

- 1 The long-term orientation dimension was not included in the study to make it comparable to previous studies.

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Appendix

Table A1 Comparison of countries, divided in consumption groups, in terms of brand personality and cultural dimensions (UK, Singapore, Austria)

	UK						Singapore						Austria					
	Consumer		Non-consumer		All		Consumer		Non-consumer		All		Consumer		Non-consumer		All	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Excitement	3.11	0.823	3.40	0.921	3.28	0.788	3.48	0.466	3.74	0.755	3.70	0.725	2.21	0.863	2.86	1.249	2.62	1.163
Sincerity	5.02	0.913	5.18	0.793	5.12	0.849	4.20	0.596	4.38	0.945	4.36	0.903	4.23	1.038	4.65	1.075	4.49	1.076
Competence	3.73	0.749	4.18	0.782	3.99	0.799	3.14	1.007	3.41	0.882	3.37	0.900	3.31	1.060	3.95	1.104	3.72	1.126
Sophistication	4.57	1.016	5.02	0.978	4.82	1.017	4.19	0.923	4.80	1.076	4.71	1.073	3.91	1.168	4.61	1.143	4.35	1.195
Ruggedness	4.01	1.198	4.21	1.132	4.15	1.269	2.45	0.754	2.74	1.131	2.70	1.087	3.35	0.868	3.76	1.069	3.61	1.016
Performance orientation	3.07	1.101	3.38	1.110	3.24	1.113	2.90	1.041	2.78	1.069	2.80	1.056	2.24	1.054	2.66	1.142	2.50	1.120
Individualism	2.20	0.874	2.18	0.726	2.19	0.791	2.36	1.082	2.23	0.995	2.23	0.998	3.42	1.025	3.77	1.042	3.65	1.040
Collectivism	3.92	0.840	4.20	0.798	4.08	0.826	3.36	0.949	3.51	1.069	3.51	1.051	3.92	0.937	4.32	1.083	4.19	1.047
Power distance	5.09	1.296	5.18	1.356	5.14	1.327	5.71	1.410	5.73	1.211	5.72	1.235	5.92	1.059	6.19	1.205	6.10	1.153
Masculinity/femininity	5.29	0.987	5.40	1.035	5.35	1.013	4.32	1.187	5.38	1.186	5.21	1.231	5.10	1.297	5.56	1.474	5.40	1.424

Notes: Scale: 1 = strongly agree; 7 = strongly disagree

Table AII Comparison of countries, divided in consumption groups, in terms of brand personality and cultural dimensions (Germany, Netherlands, USA)

	Germany						The Netherlands						USA										
	Consumer			Non-consumer			Consumer			Non-consumer			Consumer			Non-consumer							
	Mean	SD		Mean	SD		Mean	SD		Mean	SD		Mean	SD		Mean	SD						
Excitement	2.77	1.071		2.97	0.712		2.91	0.829		2.71	0.842		3.25	0.844		2.50	0.877		2.99	1.024		2.88	1.007
Sincerity	4.63	0.978		5.13	0.894		4.99	0.942		4.26	0.603		4.44	0.809		4.23	0.831		4.68	0.880		4.60	0.893
Competence	3.82	1.048		4.47	0.979		4.29	1.036		3.30	0.902		3.70	0.748		3.36	0.782		3.80	0.920		3.72	0.929
Sophistication	4.17	1.132		4.89	1.032		4.68	1.106		4.14	0.790		4.64	0.897		3.58	0.988		4.28	0.944		4.13	0.990
Ruggedness	3.94	0.882		4.44	0.964		4.30	0.964		3.13	1.098		3.36	1.069		3.75	1.065		3.64	1.077		3.65	1.072
Performance orientation	3.23	0.986		3.40	0.791		3.35	0.850		3.01	0.707		3.45	0.886		2.46	0.716		3.14	0.882		2.99	0.887
Individualism	3.97	1.013		3.93	0.862		3.94	0.903		2.85	1.017		3.20	1.059		2.00	0.720		2.09	0.804		2.07	0.781
Collectivism	3.72	0.649		3.72	0.749		3.72	0.179		3.74	0.712		4.09	0.939		3.88	0.873		3.97	0.824		3.96	0.831
Power distance	4.96	0.982		5.29	1.058		5.20	1.043		4.64	0.923		4.77	0.896		4.54	0.800		5.07	0.928		4.95	0.924
Masculinity/femininity	5.09	1.310		5.29	1.348		5.24	1.334		4.70	1.085		4.81	1.244		5.68	1.091		5.99	1.022		5.92	1.033

Notes: Scale: 1 = strongly agree; 7 = strongly disagree

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Executive summary and implications for managers and executives

This summary has been provided to allow managers and executives a rapid appreciation of the content of the article. Those with a particular interest in the topic covered may then read the article in toto to take advantage of the more comprehensive description of the research undertaken and its results to get the full benefit of the material present.

For cultured brand managers: same brand, different perceptions

Brand management tends to focus, as its bottom line, on the consistency of the offer. Brand managers like the values of the brands they manage to be understood and bought into by the customers they serve. Two people discussing their brand may express themselves in different ways, but would essentially be describing the same thing – whether the brand has positioned itself as “cool” or “traditional”, “sporty” or “Bohemian”, or whatever.

Simultaneously, for many brand managers the drive towards creating and managing global brands is increasingly their *raison d'être*. It increases massively the size of the market from national or regional ones and paves the way for revenue growth.

Now any successful novelist will tell you that once published their novel ceases to be theirs. It takes on a life of its own. It means different things to different people. Songwriters will say the same. Once people take their work to their hearts they internalize its message. What the work means to a struggling actor in Los Angeles is different from what it means to a successful banker in Hong Kong.

And this is the rub for brand managers. They don't control perceptions of their brand, even though their job description might suggest that this is precisely what they are there to do.

Six nations, one methodology, one powerful drink

Culture creates marked differences in how brands are perceived, even when brand positioning strategies are

identical. This is a conclusion of a study carried out in six nations – Singapore, the UK, the Netherlands, the USA and Austria – by academics from California State, Temple, Trier and Fribourg universities in the USA, Germany and Switzerland.

Their choice of countries seems somewhat eclectic. Their choice of methodology tried and tested. They combine Hofstede's cultural dimensions with Aaker's brand personality dimensions in order to understand the impact of culture on brand personality – brand personality being the set of human characteristics that get assigned to a brand.

College students provided the sample population – however, given that the brand under consideration was the Red Bull energy drink and the 16–35 age range of the sample is their target audience, then maybe it's not a bad basis for a sample. It is interesting too that Red Bull originated in Thailand before becoming popular in Austria (heavily adapted for local tastes), before going on to be popular around the world. So there is a parallel between the evolution of the brand and the countries within the research sample, of sorts.

A non-alcoholic drink, Red Bull is also popularly mixed with Vodka in drink combinations such as the Jagerbomb, popular with students – so again, not a bad audience for a survey. In 2006 3 billion cans of Red Bull were drunk in 130 countries. It is a powerful drink indeed.

A little cultural difficulty

Now our inner alarmed parent might conclude that students are the same the world over, especially when it comes to a drinking culture. Those who have sought to revive their sons and daughters at the end of Freshers' Week may feel this more deeply than others. Debunking myths such as this can be one of the joys of objective research. Those of us who have reached such lazy assumptions are wrong.

This study found marked differences in perceptions of the Red Bull brand in the different countries in which the students were based, despite the fact that Red Bull's brand managers' brand positioning strategy is the same in each. For example, in the UK the messages of competence and excitement pushed by Red Bull work better than in any of the other countries. In Austria “ruggedness” resonates, in America and Germany the combination of “sophistication and excitement”, and in Singapore it's “masculinity”, despite masculinity not being a particularly Singaporean thing, according to cultural dimension research.

So identical positioning of an identical product does not lead to identical perceptions of the brand. In different cultures it will be viewed differently. So what are the implications of this for brand managers?

To begin with, recognize that there will be differences in perceptions and adopt strategies that will enable your customers and prospective customers to view your brand in similar ways. It may seem counter-intuitive, but to get people to see the brand in the same way different approaches need to be adopted. To illustrate the point, what might be considered “sophistication” in one country may well not be elsewhere.

Or, alternatively, a different strategy would be to forget about the brand being the same thing to all people. Identify desirable characteristics in different markets, which coincide with authentic aspects of the brand, and develop different positioning for different marketplaces. In both cases, it needs clear thinking, based upon local understanding and knowledge.

“Think global, act local” you might say, if it didn’t feel like such a cliché to say so!

(A précis of the article “The impact of culture on brand perceptions: a six-nation study”. Supplied by Marketing Consultants for Emerald.)

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