BRAND IMAGE PERCEPTIONS ACROSS CULTURES: A STUDY OF SYMBOLIC AND FUNCTIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

Laura Salciuvien, Pervez N. Ghauri, Audra I. Mockaitis and Claudio De Mattos

Long-term strategies aiming at a successful brand image positioning depend, in part, on how the unique attributes that correspond to the core values and tastes of consumers in different countries manifest themselves (Hsieh, Pan, & Setiono, 2006). Companies that match their brand image to consumer values will more easily attain a competitive advantage over those that do not (Hofstede, Steenkamp, & Wedel, 1999). A brand’s image creates associations with a consumer’s culture and his/her daily surroundings; managers need to know and understand those particular brand associations that best appeal to their consumers with respect to their values (Hsieh, 2002; Brangule-Vlagsma, Pieters, & Wedel, 2002).

With the enlargement of the European Union, the debate about the convergence of consumer perceptions and tastes has become even more important (Shintaro, Charles, & Jonathan, 2007). Although previous studies have investigated factors of brand image management, few of them have explored the role of personal values in brand image perceptions of consumers. Moreover, as with many other marketing concepts, much of
what is known about brand image is based primarily on studies conducted in Western countries. As suggested by Patterson and Smith (2003), “while it is well understood that there is a high level of importance accorded the role Western cultures have played in building consumer behaviour models, it would seem there is little manifest interest in validating their explanatory powers in markedly different cultures” (p. 108). Indeed, little research exists on “consumer reactions in the new European Union member countries” (Vida & Reardon, 2008, p. 36). Hence, our study addresses this under-researched area. More specifically, it examines how personal values affect perceptions of brand image in relation to the functional and symbolic attributes of the brand in different cultural contexts.

Specifically, our study aims to provide answers to the following questions:

1. How do consumers perceive a brand image and how these perceptions are related to consumer values?
2. Which specific consumer values correlate with specific attributes of a particular product and brand image in each country?
3. How perceptions of brand image attributes differ in each country?

By assessing the extent to which personal values affect brand image perceptions in two EU countries, one in Eastern Europe (Lithuania) and the other in Western Europe (Denmark), our study responds to recent calls in the literature to foster cross-cultural research by testing existing marketing concepts in new countries (Burgess & Steenkamp, 2006; Yaprak, 2007). Thus, our study aims to further our understanding about how brand image attributes in different cultural contexts are perceived and how those perceptions, as a function of consumer personal values, differ.

The chapter is structured as follows. We first review existing knowledge on key issues involving brand image and link this to consumer values. The methods, findings and discussion follow in the next section. The chapter ends with the conclusions, implications for international marketing practice and guidelines for further research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Brand Image

The concept of brand image has received considerable attention in marketing (Batra & Homer, 2004; Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000; Roth, 1992; Thompson, Rindfleisch, & Arsel, 2006; van Reijmersdal, Neijens, & Smith, 2007;
van Rekom, Jacobs, & Verlegh, 2006), yet there is still little agreement on its definition and operationalisation in the literature. As Dobni and Zinkhan (1990) observed, despite the frequent use by scholars of the term “brand image,” its definitions in the literature tend to focus on different elements. It is possible to group definitions of brand image into different categories. For example, brand image has been defined as (a) an attitude extending its meaning beyond the physical product (e.g., Reynolds & Gutman, 1984) and (b) perception, relating brand image to psychological aspects of a product’s tangible attributes (e.g., Keller, 1998). One generally accepted view is that brand image can be defined as perceptions regarding a brand as reflected by the cluster of associations that consumers connect to the brand name in memory (Herzog, 1963). This is consistent with an associative network memory model. Thus, “brand associations are the other informational nodes linked to the brand node in memory and contain the meaning of the brand for consumers” (Keller, 2003, p. 66).

Drawing on Allen (2001) (holistic evaluation), Keller (1998) (strength, favourability) and Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis (1986) (functional, symbolic and experiential), we hold that a brand image consists of the collection of perceived functional and symbolic associations (attributes) that vary in strength and favourability in accordance with consumer values. Thus, as part of the overall branding strategy, a brand’s image must manifest itself by incorporating those attributes that consumers prefer in a specific cultural context. Attributes defining a brand have consequences for the individual, and these reinforce individual values. Symbolic brand image attributes are associated with symbolic and intangible benefits offered by a brand, such as status, group membership or self-image. Functional brand image attributes relate to the tangible benefits offered by the brand, such as the ability to perform certain functions or a high level of technical standards. Moreover, attributes allow consumers to achieve specific benefits, and consumers attach their personal values to brand benefits in considering what the brand can do for them (del Rio, Vazquez, & Iglesias, 2001). In other words, consumers prefer brands, the values of which correspond to their own values (de Chernatony, 2002).

The Role of Personal Values in Consumer Behaviour

Consumer behaviour literature recognises values being a powerful force shaping consumers’ motivations, lifestyles and product choices. This topic has received extensive attention over the past three decades
(Honkanen, Verplanken, & Olsen, 2006; Marandi, Little, & Sekhon, 2006; Gullestrup, 2006). However, value studies have also been constantly criticised for their fragmented nature and inadequate value conceptualisation. As Fulton and Lipscomb (1996) point out “few studies offer a clarification of the value concept and several researchers have noted ambiguity in the use of terms of value or values” (p. 25).

One of the main difficulties in defining values is the disagreement on what constitutes a value and what value priorities are (Reisinger & Turner, 2003). For instance, Rokeach (1973) differentiated between “instrumental” and “terminal” value dimensions. According to Vinson, Scott, and Lamont (1977), values stimulate motivation for behavioural response in respect to product attributes. In addition, Schwartz and Bilsky (1987) suggest five central features of values: “values: (a) are concepts or beliefs, (b) about desirable end states or behaviours, (c) that transcend a specific situation, (d) guide the selection or evaluation of behaviour and events, and (e) are ordered by relative importance” (p. 551). On the basis of previous work, we hold that “values are generalised, relatively enduring and consistent priorities for how we want to live” (Zetterberg, 1998, p. 995) and how we want ourselves to be perceived.

**Relating Brand Image Perceptions to Personal Values**

One stream of research suggests that consumer perceptions of brands are based on consumer needs (see Maslow, 1959). Needs are determined by personal values and certain values are considered as more important to consumers in one country than in others (Kim, Forsythe, Gu, & Moon, 2002). Consumers try to satisfy functional needs by searching for functional brands (Park et al., 1986). Functional brands, as asserted by Bhat and Reddy (1998), fulfil immediate and practical needs. Symbolic needs such as self-enhancement or self-image are fulfilled by symbolic brands (Thompson et al., 2006).

Another stream of research proposes that brands can have different attributes to be related to perceived brand image benefits (Bhat & Reddy, 1998). Allen (2001) states that functional brand image attributes are of utmost importance for consumers. Thompson et al. (2006) go further and argue that a focus only on functional attributes of brands will not guarantee long-term competitive advantage in international markets as the brand should meet emotional consumer expectations as well. Therefore, perception of the brand image has become separated from its original use, and it is
attached with new, emotional and symbolic perception such as heightened self-esteem, beauty or happiness (Firat, 1991; Zaltman, 2003).

Two further points are important in the context of this study. First, D’Andrade (1986) outlines the contemporary shift in culture theory from the view of culture as patterns of behaviour to one of culture as knowledge, meanings and symbols. This shift has important implications. For example, Ricoeur (1969) reports that symbols do not simply arise from societal conventions or culture. Second, consumers might have different preferences for brands in different cultures. For example, Arnould, Price, and Zinkhan (2004) state that brands should reflect cultural meanings in concrete forms by providing associations with tangible benefits.

On the basis of an investigation of studies addressing brand image and personal value issues, we assert that brand image perceptions are inextricably linked with the inner characteristics of consumers, namely personal values. Despite previous research in the field of brand management, scholars have rarely explored how brand image is perceived from the consumers’ perspective or offered explanations as to what is preferred by consumers in view of their personal values. Therefore, our study addresses these issues.

METHOD

In respect to sampling procedures, the guidelines for two sampling levels namely the unit of analysis and the selection of countries (including the number of countries, market size and geographic distance) in cross-cultural studies were closely followed (Craig & Douglas, 2006; Reynolds, Simintiras, & Diamantopoulos, 2003; Sinkovics, Penz, & Ghauri, 2005; Sekaran, 1983; van de Vijver & Leung, 1997).

We chose to conduct our study on mobile telephone brands. Mobile telephones are noticeable and visible consumer products and carry an element of fashion. These combined with technical product attributes may have an influence on brand choice. The products chosen contain associations of both a “symbolic” and “functional” attributes for consumers (Bhat & Reddy, 1998). Since price plays an important role in consumer perceptions (Kim & Kramer, 2006), this study intends to minimise the influence of price on consumer perceptions, as it includes only those respondents who purchased a mobile telephone for the negligible prices of 11.1 (0.33 Euros) or 1DKK (0.16 Euros) when signing a long-term contract with a telecommunication company.
Table 1. Sample Characteristics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Sample Size</th>
<th>Percent of Females</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Undergraduate students in business</td>
<td>20–23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>54.3</td>
<td>management and administration</td>
<td>20–24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We conducted surveys in both Lithuania and Denmark because both the countries have a relatively similar market size (populations of approximately three and a half million in Lithuania and five million in Denmark). Lithuania and Denmark are relatively close geographically (Dunning, 1993) and are relatively culturally homogeneous (Hofstede, 2001). Data were collected only from respondents who have had previous experience in purchasing these products and sufficient knowledge about leading brands, as they have tried more than one brand in the mentioned product group.

To control for homogeneity of demographics, the sample is composed of university students. We wanted to survey consumers that are most attractive to the particular product and are between the age of 20 and 30. The use of students should ensure sampling equivalence that is usually required in cross-cultural research (Kumar, 2000). Students are representatives of typical mobile phones consumers (Lages & Fernandes, 2005). As suggested by Cunningham, Young, Lee, and Ulaga (2006) “while students might not be representative of the populations of their respective countries, they are representative of a consuming population with influences of their respective culture” (p. 197). Table 1 summarises sample characteristics.

We distributed 800 questionnaires in each country under investigation. Before distributing the questionnaires, we explained the main purpose of the study to the students and gave them the opportunity to participate in a lottery. This can explain the relatively high response rates of 19.6% in Lithuania and 18.7% in Denmark. After a careful inspection, a total of 290 valid questionnaires, that is, 150 questionnaires from Lithuanian students and 140 from Danish students were deemed appropriate for use.

Measures

The survey questionnaire was developed carefully following the requirements for conducting a cross-cultural study (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2005). First, due to the risk of cultural accommodation when using English-language
questionnaires in cross-national surveys (Harzing, Salciuviene, & 31 countries collaborators, 2005) and in order to avoid misinterpretation of some items, an original English version of the questionnaire was translated into both Lithuanian and Danish. The questionnaire was back translated by bilingual translators (Brislin, Lonner, & Thorndike, 1973). Second, in order to detect possible discrepancies in meaning (Nijssen & Douglas, 2004; Salzberger & Sinkovics, 2006) and ensure comprehension and conceptual equivalence (Craig & Douglas, 2000), all measurement items were carefully inspected by bilingual translators. Finally, a pre-test of the questionnaires was conducted with small groups of Lithuanian- and Danish-speaking respondents in both countries.

Constructs were measured on 5-Likert scales ranging from 1 (completely disagree/completely unimportant) to 5 (completely agree/very important). A consumer personal values scale was derived from Lages and Fernandes (2005), and respondents were asked to indicate what use of their brand allows them to achieve in their lives. The items for the perceived brand image benefit scale were derived from Allen (2001), Allen and Ng (1999), Bhat and Reddy (1998), Martinez and de Chernatony (2004) and Sweeney and Soutar (2001). Respondents were asked to indicate the extent of importance they place on items pertaining to the functional and symbolic benefit of their own brand of mobile phone (Table 2).

Our measures were purified by means of a series of confirmatory factor models (Gerbing & Anderson, 1998). Our initial analysis indicated that all items loaded significantly for the Danish sample. Few items did not load significantly for the Lithuanian sample. To continue the analysis, these items were eliminated. The results of confirmatory factor analysis for the final scales indicated a good model fit in both countries. All items had high loadings, and they all were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). The chi-square, goodness of fit index and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) indicated satisfactory fit for both countries. Cronbach’s alpha coefficients were acceptable for both countries and ranged from 0.74 to 0.76.

Measurement invariance was tested with confirmatory factor analysis using multi-group analysis. The results indicate that the same factor structure is appropriate for either sample. Thus, configural invariance is established for the Danish-Lithuanian comparison (RMSEA = 0.031; Bentler’s comparative fit index [CFI] = 0.96). As expected, full metric invariance was not established in this study (Reardon, Miller, Foubert, Vida, & Rybina, 2006; Steenkamp & Baumgartner, 1998). As suggested by Stain, Lee, and Jones (2006), “in practice, full invariance of all parameters
**Table 2.** Operationalisation of the Variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables/Items</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Consumer personal value scale</strong></td>
<td>Lages and Fernandes (2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The use of my brand allows me to achieve</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More harmony and stability in life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater family security</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More tranquility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More respect from others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The feeling that the world is more agreeable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More social recognition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An inspirational, exciting and adventurous life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A higher integration into my group</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better relationships (e.g. social and family)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengthened friendship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How important are each of the following aspects with regard to a brand of the mobile phone?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think that this brand gives me an image of someone important</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This brand changes my image in other people’s eyes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This brand reflects my success in life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My friends choose it</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to send SMS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical functions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is a good phone for a good price</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: The table summarises items that were retained in the final scale. Deleted items are not included.*

and even invariance of only key parameters is difficult to obtain” (p. 251). According to Horn (1991, p. 125), metric invariance is “a condition to be striven for, not one expected to be fully realized” (in Reardon et al., 2006, p. 125). Reardon et al. (2006) consider “full metric invariance as scientifically unrealistic” (p. 125). Since this study does not “compare means of measures across countries, scalar invariance was not tested” (Reardon et al., 2006, p. 125; Steenkamp & Baumgartner, 1998, p. 80). The study’s aim is not to compare absolute perceptions of brand image attributes in different countries; therefore, differences in stylistic responding (Reardon et al., 2006; Baumgartner & Steenkamp, 2001) were also not assessed. Finally, multicolinearity was assessed, and the results satisfactorily indicated
that multicollinearity is not an issue here (variance-inflation factor [VIF] < 5, as suggested by Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006).

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The effects of personal values on brand image perceptions were tested using regression analysis. For the Danish sample, the results indicate that the peaceful life value dimension has a significant effect on perceptions of both symbolic attributes ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.05$) and functional attributes ($\beta = 0.20$, $p < 0.05$). This dimension explains 43% of variation in perceptions of both symbolic and functional attributes. This was not so for the Lithuanian sample. For the Lithuanian sample, the results indicate that the peaceful life value dimension has a significant effect on perceptions of symbolic attributes ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.05$) only. The total variance explained is 36%. The other two dimensions of personal values (social recognition and social integration personal values) have no significant effects on brand image attributes in each country. These values do not influence brand image perceptions possibly because brands of mobile phones do not aid towards social recognition or integration as other more expensive high involvement shopping goods might do (e.g., BMW automobiles).

We also aimed to assess how brand image was perceived and whether the symbolic and functional attributes of brand image were truly perceived by respondents as distinct. Testing these perceptions values were not taken into consideration. As a result, $t$ tests ($p < 0.05$) on the factor scores indicate significant differences between the perceptions of symbolic and functional brand image attributes of mobile telephones in each country. Additionally, for the Lithuanian sample, the symbolic brand image attributes of mobile phones are highly important, whereas functional attributes are moderately important. For the Danish sample, respondents report that they find symbolic attributes more important than functional ones.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Despite the stream of research of brand management studies, consumer brand image perceptions that are a function of consumer personal values have received insufficient attention in the marketing literature. In addressing this shortcoming, we investigated the effect of consumer values on
perceptions of brand image attributes in a context of two EU countries: one Eastern European-Lithuania and another Western European-Denmark. Our findings indicate that specific consumer personal values influence brand image perceptions in the market of mobile phones.

Our findings suggest that the functional and symbolic attributes represent brand images of mobile telephones. The symbolic attribute explains consumers’ perceptions as regards intangible and symbolic benefits offered by brand of mobile phones (e.g., status, role in a group), whereas the functional attribute explains consumers’ functional evaluations of brand image of mobile phones (e.g., practicality, usefulness). In respect to the symbolic brand image attributes, the results indicate that respondents in each country score higher on symbolism without taking into consideration personal values. A high score on the symbolic attribute indicates a preference for recommendations by friends regarding what to buy and fashionable, expensive brands; these should also correspond to their self-image. Although the functional brand image attributes are important in each sample, the respondents score lower on this dimension compared with the symbolic one. A lower score on the functional attribute indicates that a choice of practical and useful products is of secondary role. Although our finding of two distinct brand image attributes was expected, it is consistent with the notion that brand image comprises both symbolic and functional attributes (Allen & Ng, 1999; Kivetz & Simonson, 2002).

Our results also reveal a significant effect of consumer values on perceptions of brand image attributes. On the one hand, Lithuanian students favouring peaceful life values over social recognition and social integration values expect brand image to convey the symbolic benefits. On the other hand, Danish students favouring peaceful life values over social recognition and social integration values expect brand image to convey both the symbolic and the functional benefits. The variations in effects indicate that brand image perceptions vary among respondents. These findings are in line with the notion that personal values play an important role in consumer perceptions and provide a deeper understanding of consumers (Kim et al., 2002; Marandi et al., 2006).

In respect to the effect of personal values in brand image perceptions, we draw two conclusions on the basis of our findings. First, although the literature suggests diverse conceptualisations of brand image, our findings are similar to those of Bhat and Reddy (1998), Kivetz and Simonson (2002) and Martinez and de Chernatony (2004) that brand image consists of two brand image attributes and the symbolic and functional attributes of the brand may represent images of mobile telephone brands. Second, exploring
the conceptualisations of personal values, our results support the notion that personal values influence perceptions (Brangule-Vlajšma et al., 2002; Honkanen et al., 2006; Marandi et al., 2006). An assessment of how specific values affect brand image perceptions of mobile telephone brands provides an indication of the extent to which those perceptions differ among respondents.

Through the understanding of how brand image is perceived from the consumers’ perspective, companies can build a relevant brand image that will convey specific benefits offered by brands. Such knowledge will aid the process of strategic decision-making regarding the adaptation or standardisation of brand image and its maintenance in a cross-cultural context. Hence, the results of our study provide a more informed and systematic basis on which to develop brand image positioning strategy by providing a framework for selecting relevant brand image attributes.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH SUGGESTIONS

The relative impact of personal values on brand image perception can be of interest to brand managers, as the consideration of these factors can lead to more successful brand image formation strategies for the Lithuanian and Danish markets. Our results suggest that brands of mobile phones can be positioned in terms of the functional-symbolic reciprocity in view of consumer values for Danish market, whereas the symbolic positioning in view of consumer values is suggested for Lithuanian market. Understanding the issue that symbolic and functional attributes are perceived as multidimensional facets of brand image and that different attributes are influenced by specific consumer values may point to those variables that brand managers need to influence when managing brand image in the long run and developing more effective brand positioning strategies that are culturally adapted.

Although it is difficult to predict all relationships between consumer values and perceptions of brand image attributes, to the extent that this has been done in our study, we have demonstrated that it is worth taking into consideration the application of other strategies than those of standardisation only, even in such small markets as Lithuania or Denmark. Value-based consumer segmentation can be an option. Another point is that three-attribute brand image management may not always be necessary (Park et al., 1986), as
our study has reported that only two attributes are associated with the brand image of mobile telephones. If companies continually extend the geographical area of their business activities, the degree of acceptance by the local consumers should be one of the major determinants of the success or failure of their operations. Therefore, the decision by companies as to whether they standardise, and thus neglect cognitive characteristics of local consumers, or adapt brand image locally is a central strategic one (Hsieh et al., 2006).

Our study has several limitations that suggest future research directions. First, our study focuses on well-known brands in one product category of high-involvement shopping goods. Thus, caution is warranted when attempting to generalise the findings to less familiar brands for different product categories. Next, our study was conducted in two countries and the targeted respondents were students. Thus, young people in the sample might bias the findings, as the older generation might hold different values that influence their perceptions of brand image attributes in different ways, especially in the region that was the Soviet Union. Finally, our study does not include a sender–receiver communication model, or a consideration of advertising design.

Thus, further research would provide us with additional insights into the field. First, research needs to be extended to other Eastern European countries in order to generalise the results to these markets. Such a study would offer a deeper insight into the consumers’ perceptions and personal values in new countries that are joining the European Union. Second, our study includes relatively small and homogeneous countries; thus, future studies should include countries with significant ethnic minorities. Third, other studies could focus on other types of products and brands with which consumers are less familiar. Finally, cross-cultural studies that take into account consumer preferred communication modes or consumer response to advertising campaigns would also add to furthering our understanding of consumer brand image perceptions.

REFERENCES


