A WEBSITE BRAND ANALYSIS OF ROMANIAN COMPANIES FROM AUTOMOTIVE INDUSTRY

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Abstract: *The present study proposes an innovative analytical approach on branding and cultural concepts, looking at the correlation between them and the way the culture has an important contribution to the brand strategy of an organization. This pilot study has strictly focused on branding in the online environment and the objective of the research consists in applying the content analysis method on the official brand websites of different organizations, having a corpus of 50 companies in automotive industry, with the subsidiaries activating in Romania. The research instrument (i.e., the analysis coding scheme) evolved having as reference the cultural dimensions defined and presented by Geert Hofstede and adapted to the online environment.*

Key words: *culture, brand, virtual environment, Web 2.0, automotive industry.*

1. Introduction

In a more and more technology focused era it is essential that the managers who lead the company activities project their activities to some extent into the cyberspace. Every organization, no matter the profile, domain, activity and dimension, should be present in the online environment, offering endless possibilities of communication and interaction with the clients and potential or existent partners.

The present scientific approach has the purpose to test the applicability and the analysis of the brand strategies of the organizations in the virtual medium, studying the predominant components of organizational culture reflected through the web pages and the adaptability of the cultural dimension of Hofstede to the online environment.

Having our reasons and arguments anchored in the existing literature, we will present the importance of the existence or development of a brand for a company, mostly the multinational ones, but also the benefits of their presence in the virtual space.

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2. Brand Management in the Organizational Context

The term "brand" is used more and more in the corporate or organizational activity as well as for individuals or their personal aspects of life. Many authors have defined the brand notion and at the same time they described it using a wide variety of characteristics. To explain clearly the aforementioned concept, we will present a more ample definition, but which, in our opinion, has a higher relevance for this discussion: "A brand, just like a person, has a personality and all you know or think about it is the result of its own identity and image. The brand identity is just its own presentation, conceived in such a manner as to gain a positive image in the public`s mind. Actually this is the presentation the company is making for itself, or the brand that includes name, logo, slogan, colours, shape and even sounds. Therefore all that the brand presents to the public, all that people see and hear about a brand, is a part of its identity. It could be said that the brand is like a person, has a name, a look, clothing and a behaviour that makes someone`s identity" (Drewniany and Jewler, 2009, p. 53). By adding another key component to the brand, the linking or the relation with the publics, Bogdan (2010, p.32) argues that: "Brand is a long term relation in a group of audience and a product, job, idea etc., relation based on a rational and emotional mixture that has the final purpose to add more value to a business."

In addition, every brand is seen in a certain way by consumers and this perception can be negative, as well as positive. Not just a product, a service or a company can be branded, but also a county, a state, a person, an event or even a building. Branding is a significant characteristic of each element mentioned above and not just that, but even an identity. Creativity, strategy and simplicity are just a few characteristics that forego the success of the brand notion. A rather common confusion is to mention the fact that the product and brand can be equated, giving them the same meaning. This is incorrect, because between the two concepts there are a few significant differences: first of all a product can become a brand, a brand can never be a product, we buy a product for what it is, but we choose a brand for what it represents, brand is positioned in the consumers mind, whilst a product is on the shops shelves, the life of a product is finite, whilst a brand has no limit, and another important difference is that the product can be counterfeited, whilst the brand is unique (Cărămidă, 2009, p.17).

According to Kapferer (2008, p. 174), who had the intention to delimit other two concepts related to brands – image and identity, we can accept the explanation that takes into consideration that "brand image is on the receiver's side. Image research focuses on the way in which certain groups perceive a product, a brand, a politician, a company or a country. The image refers to the way in which these groups decode all of the signals emanating from the products, services and communication covered by the brand. Identity is on the sender's side. The purpose, in this case, is to specify the brand's meaning, aim and self-image. Image is both the result and interpretation thereof. In terms of brand management, identity precedes image."

Therefore, before creating the brand image, it is necessary that each organization define its own mission, objectives, highlight the offer, and what exactly wants to deliver to those interested in their brand, and then create a positive perception of this one.

Brand isn`t just a predetermined symbolic embodiment, but the very image, including the impression that consumers have about the product, service or organization. From here we can deduce three brand categories: positive, if the perception is good, neutral, if there isn't a clear perception and negative if the perception is weak. If the brand strategy is well

designed, built and put into practice, it will generate a positive effect concerning the relation between the client and the organization, between the provider and the organization, but specially inside the company between employees and managers.

Exposure shows the way in which the company is undertaking its own identity, highlighting the values and the objectives of the firm, making it available to the audience through different channels of mass communication, including the official website. The content and the structure of the site, the information provided are essential for generating a positive perception of the user, a pleasant web experience that will generate and consolidate the reputation of the company. In addition, if the brand will differ from others and offers the costumers unique and relevant characteristics, then the brand will become memorable and visible to potential consumers, strengthening an efficient management of impressions in the new dynamic Web 2.0 online environment: "In contrast to Web 1.0, Web 2.0 gives less power to the system creators, transferring it to the users". (Ritzer, 2011, p. 319).

Modern corporations invest time and resources in trying to build and maintain a favourable and a positive image for the consumers. According to Connolly-Ahern and Broadway (2007, p. 343), to achieve their goals regarding the desired image, "corporations employ a variety of communications for image building purposes, including public relations, advertising, event sponsorships, sales promotions and shareholder communications. In the 21st century, the corporate Web site has emerged as one of the corporation's most essential image building tools. However, all kinds of communications with a corporation's publics constitute a very important and strategic form of impression management."

In addition, "impression management is the goal-directed activity of controlling information about a person, object, entity, idea or event. All people and corporations engage in impression management in an attempt to increase the chances that they will be able to fulfil their financial and social goals, secure cooperation or support from others, vie effectively with or discourage competitors, and avoid the consequences of negative actions." (Connolly-Ahern and Broadway, 2007, p. 343).

Also, "impression management includes attempts to control the perceptions that others form of an individual or firm by influencing the likelihood that a perceiver will make certain attributions. Observers actively make sense of their worlds by interpreting symbols with socially constructed meanings" (Grove and Fisk, 1989; Grayson and Shulman, 2000 *apud* Winter et al., 2003, p. 310).

Therefore, companies as well as individuals are trying to send messages that will bring them an advantage that will contribute to the formation of preferential impressions. "An important aspect of impression management is feedback. Corporations require information from their publics to gauge the relative success of both their actions and their images." (Connolly-Ahern and Broadway, 2007, p. 344).

3. Culture – the Software of the Mind and the Analyzed Dimensions

In our modern society the preoccupation regarding the efficiency level, the performance and of course the quality of the organization has a major significance, and the organizational culture represents a very special factor in companies' adaptability to the existing competitive environment, just like branding. A powerful brand will influence the organizational culture and the individuals, in a way that every employee will behave as

belonging to the organization. Taking this into consideration, we will discuss in the third part of the present research the theories of culture, especially the organizational culture.

Hofstede *et al.* (2010, p. 5) view culture as a software of the mind, shared by all the members of a social group, a society, initially taking into consideration the national culture. The authors referred above explain that "the sources of one's mental programs lie within the social environments in which one grew up and collected one's life experiences. The programming starts within the family; it continues within the neighbourhood, at school, in youth groups, at the workplace, and in the living community." (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010, p. 5).

Thus, analysing the theoretical background, several theorists have proposed that cultures vary along different dimensions. Among them, Hofstede's (1980) and Hall's (1976) cultural typologies have been extensively used in cultural studies (*apud* Karaçay-Aydın *et al.*, 2010, p. 97). According to Hofstede (1980), national cultures differ along four main criteria which are power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity-femininity and individualism-collectivism.

Among these dimensions, (1) individualism indicates how society reinforces individual or collective achievement and interpersonal relationships. High individualism suggests that individuality and individual rights are paramount within the society. Individuals in these societies may tend to form a larger number of looser relationships. Low individualism typifies societies of a more collectivist nature with close ties between individuals, reinforcing extended families and collectives where everyone takes responsibility for fellow group members.

(2) Power distance dimension indicates equality, or inequality, between people in a country's society. A high power distance suggests tolerance of inequalities of power and wealth within the society. These societies are more likely to follow a caste system that does not allow significant upward mobility of its citizens. A low power distance suggests the society de-emphasizes differences between citizen's power and wealth, stressing equality and opportunity for everyone.

(3) Uncertainty avoidance emphasizes a society's tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity – *i.e.* unstructured situations. High uncertainty avoidance suggests a low tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. This creates a rule-oriented society that institutes laws, rules, regulations, and controls in order to reduce uncertainty. Low uncertainty avoidance suggests less concern about ambiguity and uncertainty and more tolerance for a variety of opinions. The society is less rule-oriented, more readily accepts change, and takes more and greater risks.

(4) Masculinity dimension characterizes how society reinforces, or does not reinforce, traditional masculine roles of achievement, control, and power. High masculinity suggests a high degree of gender differentiation. Males dominate a significant portion of the society and power structure, with females controlled by male domination. Low masculinity suggests the country has a low level of differentiation and discrimination between genders, treating females as equal to males (adapted from Murphy and Scharl, 2007, p. 299).

On the other hand, Hall (1976) proposed that cultures also differ to the extent to which contextual information is important for effective and satisfying communication. Hall (1976) categorized cultures as high- and low-context based on dimensions of communication and understanding. According to Hall (1976), in high-context cultures communication is comprised of simple messages with deep meaning. High-context

communication tends to be more indirect and more formal. While high-context communication is fast, efficient, and satisfying, time must be devoted to the formulation of the language to be high-context. The tendency in high context cultures is to provide less information in the verbal part of the message. This is in line with the generally accepted rule that what is not being said can carry more meaning than what is being said. In contrast, low-context cultures value facts and directness. Communication is expected to be straightforward, concise, and efficient in describing what action is expected. (Karaçay-Aydın *et al.*, 2010, p. 98).

Furthermore, a decade later after his initial theory, Hofstede (1991) introduced a fifth dimension, long-term orientation, but this value is controversial (Fang, 2003) and sometimes omitted from Internet research (Callahan, 2005) (*apud* Murphy and Scharl, 2007, p. 298), describing the future or the actual planning methods or activities, new visions, the generation of changes, new investment projects.

In researching organizational culture, common values and members behaviours of every organization are critically important. According to Bogdan, "Every time an employee interacts with a customer/ consumer, the company has the opportunity either to strengthen, or to weaken the brand`s promise. Most of the times the employees do not assume the brand or the brand promise, either because they do not understand it, either because they do not believe in it and cannot deliver it. The companies that have employees that believe in the brand have more success and they generate a higher level of loyalty. That is because they are inspired by a common sense of identity and a unique purpose of the business" (2010, p.114).

4. Framework for Analysis

Agabrian (2006), in his study "Content Analysis", alleges: "content analysis is a collecting and organizing information technique in a format that allows researchers to make assumptions about the characteristics and the meaning of the messages (written and verbal) and the social communication artefacts" (p. 22). In this context, we chose to use this technique of study and the application of the research instrument (the analysis coding scheme) derived on the basis of the cultural dimensions proposed by Hofstede and readapted to the Web pages. Iluț (1997) presents us a general definition, according to which the content analysis is "a method that refers to the quantitative analysis of the documents, aiming to highlight the themes, trends, attitudes, values or patterns of association of some themes and their evaluations (of attitudes and values). It was also called the quantitative treatment of a symbolic qualitative material" (p.135).

At this stage we reviewed the criteria defined by other authors in their own coding schemes of analysis (Wurtz, 2006, Murphy and Scharl, 2007, Karaçay-Aydın *et al.*, 2010, Baack and Singh, 2007, Robbins and Stylianou, 2003, Ahmed *et al.*, 2009), adapting these values to our own specificity and objective of study, as this decision for the methodological process is explained by Hwang *et al.* (2003): "Researchers generally need to develop their own coding scheme for analysing content, although sometimes researchers can adopt existing coding schemes established by their peers. Human intuition can intervene in the process of developing coding schemes. Although all research is subject to some human intuition, the process of content analysis allows relatively more room for the researcher's intuition than do some methods such as surveys or experimental designs." (p. 13). After this step was completed, the coding scheme was

defined and presented in the following table.

Analysis coding scheme of the selected web sites   Table 1

Analyzed Dimensions	Website Characteristics
High power distance	Structured and limited information
Low power distance	Detailed information
Low uncertainty avoidance	Simple menu Descriptive options Assistance facilities Colors/ Sounds/ images correlated to text
High uncertainty avoidance	Complex menu (Numerous menu bars or buttons) Non-existence of assistance facilities
Individualism	One person images
Collectivism	Groups images
Masculinity	Precise information addressed to a specific public Navigation brings control obligations (registration request) Graphics and animated elements Visitors frequency
Femininity	Emphasis on the site esthetics Text adopts a more poetic language Communication fields
Short term orientation	Simple and comprehensible mode of expression Easy navigation
Long term orientation	More complex information content, information diversity High level of information understanding, resulting in a more complicated, complex navigation

The sampling was based on a predefined purpose, regarding multinational companies, with a bureaucratic organizational design, originating from the same industry, the automotive one, but also including an aeronautic company. The corpus of the research included 50 important companies on the Romanian market, by accessing their official websites: Hirschmann, Schaeffler, Hutchinson, Dräxlmaier, Marquardt, SKF, Quin Automotive, Elba Automotive, Autoliv, Kromberg & Schubert, Premium Aerotec,Yazaki Automotive, Takata, RKB Bearing, ELJ Automotive, Hella, Federal–Mogul Powertrain, Preh, Timken, CIE Automotive, Faurencia, TRW Automotive, Leoni, Johnson Controls, Wabco, Stewo, Eberspächer, Brandl Maschinenbaum, Webasto, Star Transmission, Mahle, Valeo, Sumitomo Group, Automec, Kautex, EYBL Automotive, Global Safety Textiles, Key Safety Systems, Gropo Antolin, Gestamp Group, Pirelli, Delphi Packard, Diedienne, Dura Automotive, Continental Powertrain, HUF Group, Rὄchling Group, Kendrion, Plastic Omnium Group, and Stabilus.

5. The Results and their Interpretation

After collecting all the data from the individual coding schemes, we observed a general tendency of low power distance, a general fact that connotes the company`s transparency in online environment and the orientation to the customer by building direct relations on a larger period of time. In another words, in the case of the multinational companies from the automotive industry, the individuals take efforts to equalize the power distribution and

to justify the arising disparities. The power distance dimension was operationalized in the following indicators: contact information (88% of the companies analysed), organization`s history (66% is presented on the website), the company mission and evident defined objectives (94% of the companies present them on their site).

The uncertainty avoidance dimension is low, as it is defined by a complex menu (78% of the cases), the presence of rich media (100%), assistance facilities during navigation (44%), and the presence of privacy policies (68%). These aspects show in general the fact that the companies selected for this study avoid as much as possible the uncertainty in the online environment.

The individualism dimension has a lower rate in the analysis (see Figure 1), and was defined by: pictures with one person (32%), different personalities from the organization (48%), while the collectivism form is more prevalent: group images, mostly photographs of the company`s employees (58% of the cases), the management board of the organization (60%), awards and honours received (48%). Thus, we conclude that these organizations are performance-oriented, both economically, but also on personal and professional development of the entire group of employees.
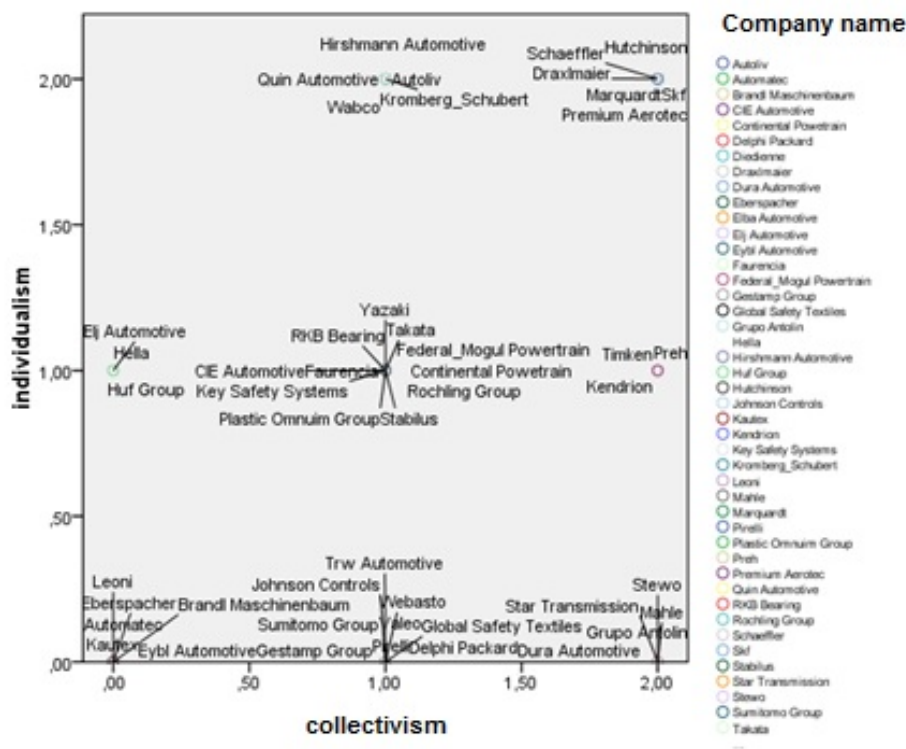

Fig. 1. *Score distribution to individualism-collectivism dimensions*

Generalizing across all companies surveyed, we can say that these denote rather feminine than masculine cultures: fields of communication (54% of the brands' websites appear to be available for dialogue with those who visit their page); the language used in cyberspace is friendly, in 100%. Masculinity was represented by: asking for personal information during navigation, including user registration on the site (74%); the existence of a section dedicated to investors (56% of websites analysed).
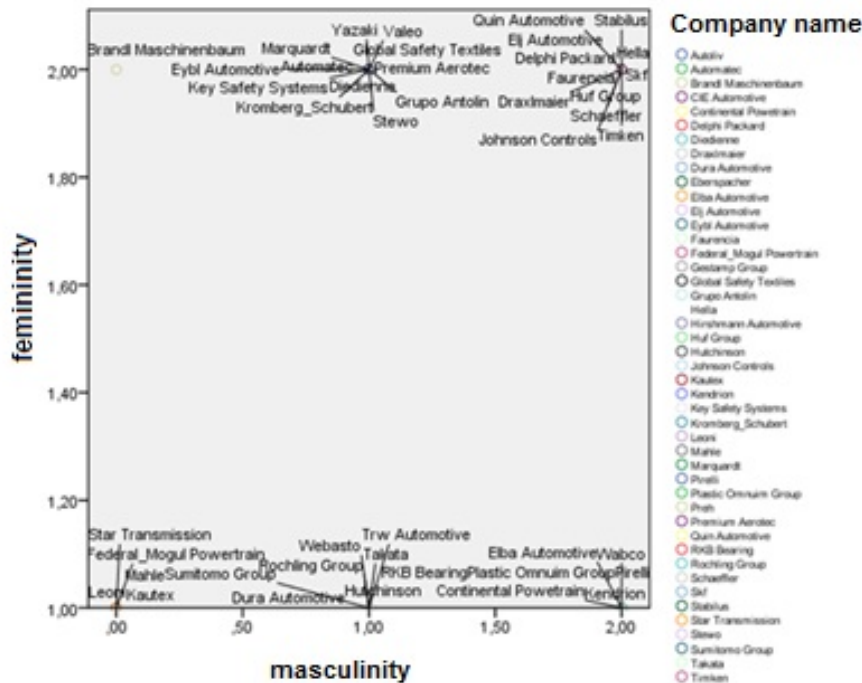
Fig. 2. *Score distribution to femininity-masculinity dimensions*

In addition, according to the results obtained the orientation is a long term one, on the 50 sites selected we found, in large proportions, the following characteristics: company vision (64%), searching tab (40%), site map (64%) and the information`s accessibility option, regarding the content comprehension level (100%). Long term orientation refers, in those cases, to future orientated behaviors, like: planning, new investments, expanding, and improvements.

6. Study Limitations and Future Research Directions

Taking into account the information`s dynamic character found on the website's interface (see Florek *et al.*, 2006) and the fact that these can change synchronically and non-synchronically in relation to the users' interactions in the new Web 2.0 (see Ritzer, 2011), these aspects can determine a true challenge for the researchers engaged in such scientific initiative. Another limit encountered during the research process takes into account the fact that some selected multinational companies don`t have a unique site in the selected country, but the reference is made to a global site of the brand. A future research direction could take into consideration other questions or assumptions: if the brand strategies have reached their predetermined targets in relation to the real perceptions of the specialized users, what the brand creators want to communicate and what perception will be produced, "to analyse the occurred change in comparison to the Web 1.0, where the users experience was to `scan things` (to consume) produced by others" (Ritzer, 2011, p.320).

7. Conclusions

The technological evolution, the access to an interconnected global network called Internet has also produced changes in the organizations communication strategies. In the previous Internet era, the producing methods, the verbal manifestations were statistic, and the consumer had the passive witness role, concerning the brand`s communicated message, but after that the brand strategy`s structure was unstandardized and shaped or moulded appropriately to the virtual environment`s own dynamic. In this way, the user gained an active role, having the possibility to get involved (after the emergence of the Web 2.0 environment), so that "because of the interactive character and the user generated content, Web 2.0 websites are, in general, more humanized and more fluid than the Web 1.0 sites, that are more static" (Ritzer, 2011, p.319).

That way we can observe the transfer phenomena made over the years, in the sense that if the pre-online branding process accentuated distinctive, unique and definitive characteristics of the product, service or organization, the new brand perspective emphasizes the importance of the communication channel, which becomes a central point in building and exposing or promoting a brand. Certainly in the future we will experience new technologies and innovations that will generate a new change and the need of adaptation of the brand process both online and offline.

The present research is relevant as far as the company's performance activities are concerned, because of the fact that the online branding process is very important nowadays for the organization`s life, and the continuous updated Web content, followed by future improvements, will grow brand equity and it will bring an added value to the brand capital, ensuring customer satisfaction, or of those who access and interact with the websites.

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