

Capturing the essence of a corporate brand personality: A Western brand in Eastern Europe

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Abstract

This study focuses on the positioning of a Western brand (McDonald's) in an Eastern European market (Slovenia), and shows how corporate communication efforts can influence consumer perceptions of brand essence. In order to ensure the long-time viability of a brand's equity, preserving and reinforcing its essence is of primordial importance. A method is presented for identifying those characteristics of the personality of a corporate brand that make up its essence. Such a tool is suitable for refined corporate positioning, because it not only shows which corporate characteristics form the essence of the corporate brand, but also shows why they are so essential.

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INTRODUCTION

Fifteen years after the fall of the iron curtain, many Western multinational companies are rapidly entering the East European market.¹ Multinational companies such as McDonald's, Microsoft, P&G, Beiersdorf, Unilever and Nokia have stable operations in East European coun-

tries. Marketing managers have a strong interest in globally harmonising the image of their brands. At an increasing rate, they are standardising logos, brand names and advertising across countries, in order to communicate a consistent image across different countries. Even if brand communication is identical across countries, it is

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not self-evident that consumers in different countries hold similar images of the brand. The same product can have different functions across countries. For instance, fast food consumption is shown to be contingent on the cultural meaning of the social setting of eating.² Moreover, a consumer's image of a brand is based on a multitude of information, often beyond the control of marketers. Marketing communication is just a part of the whole picture, and brand images are strongly influenced by reports in the popular (business) press, by consumers' experiences with a brand, and by word-of-mouth.³ Given these heterogeneous sources of information, it is important for companies to have a solid understanding of how consumers actually perceive the essence of their brand. This is an extra challenge to the key aim of corporate brand management, which is to secure loyalty from the different audiences with which a brand communicates.⁴

The processing of marketing information depends on former market experiences of the customers.⁵ In particular, having a Western country of origin may be a brand feature of high salience for consumers in Eastern European markets. In general, 'Western' has been perceived as a favourable brand attribute. Batra *et al.* state⁶: 'It is possible that the apparent increase in demand across the world for certain well-known brands such as Coca Cola and Levi's is largely because they are seen by consumers ... as symbols of the freedom and affluent lifestyles of the West'. In Eastern Europe, this also appeared to be the case shortly after the fall of communism. In 1993, Ger *et al.* state⁷: 'Status goods are nearly inevitably foreign. This was true before the revolution, but then scarcity made such goods very hard to acquire. Now it is more a matter of their greater cost, plus their continued associa-

tion with foreign lifestyles, that imparts status to their owners'. The favourability of the 'Western-icanness' might, however, have turned into a liability today. In 2005, Coulter *et al.*⁸ observe in Hungary: 'Consumers had access to a marketplace with new product and brand choices, and their reactions to this new cultural order included a mixture of desire, ambivalence, skepticism, and confusion'. Given these developments, and given the aforementioned heterogeneity of signals consumers receive about a brand, it is highly desirable for marketers to know the consumer perception of brand essence. Of specific interest is to investigate which meaning the corporate brand attribute 'Western' has nowadays in the changing environment of the East European market.

To address these issues, we present a theoretical framework that provides insight into the essence of brands. We first introduce the concept of brand essence within the broader context of brand identity, and elaborate upon the concept of essence from a consumer perspective. In our empirical section, we apply these concepts to the positioning of a quintessentially Western brand (McDonald's) in an East European country (Slovenia). We investigate Slovenian consumer perceptions of the essence of the McDonald's brand, and illustrate how these perceptions can guide brand communications.

BRAND ESSENCE AS A TOOL FOR MANAGEMENT

Scholars have developed a rich set of conceptual tools that help managers to define a positioning strategy for their brand. One of the basic building blocks for brand strategists is brand identity, which is the set of brand associations that



the brand strategist aims to create or maintain.⁹ Typically, brand identity consists of 6–12 dimensions, which are likely to remain constant over time and context.^{10,11} Within this set of dimensions, the most important element is the brand essence. This essence is often captured by a brief phrase, ‘a single thought that captures the soul of the brand,’¹² and this is linked to all of the core elements of the brand’s identity, like a hub is linked to the spokes of a wheel.^{13,14} In the long run, the value of a brand can only be maintained if such adjustments reinforce the essence of a brand for consumers.^{15,16}

Consumers are full-blown partners in the co-creation of brand essence and import of meanings from beyond the marketplace.¹⁷ But how do we establish what consumers perceive to be the essence of a brand? The current marketing literature has little to offer for brand managers, who are constantly faced with the challenge of renewing their brand without loosing its essence and alienating its customers; and there is a need for comprehensive and dynamic models that reflect the relationship between brand information that consumers receive and their current brand representations of the brand.¹⁸

In the next section, we develop a consumer-based approach to corporate brand essence. We approach this issue from the point of view of the brand’s personality: personality traits are often used to design and communicate a brand positioning and are readily translatable into appealing communication.¹⁹ In order to illustrate our approach to the essence of corporate brands, we will investigate how customers in Slovenia view the personality of McDonald’s. Our results will be translated into recommendations for brand management. In addition, we will intro-

duce a number of suggestions for further research.

CORPORATE BRAND ESSENCE: THE ROLE OF PERCEIVED CAUSALITY

Although a general agreement exists that brands can be conceptualised as sets of characteristics, views on how those characteristics hang together are not that well articulated. Brand personality can be seen as the set of human characteristics associated with a brand²⁰ which is connected in consumer memory to numerous other brand features.²¹ To organise these associations, consumers have ‘naïve theories’ that (causally) link the different characteristics of the brand.²² For instance, a study of German local energy providers showed that customers attached great importance to the ‘local’ character of the company, because they felt that a ‘local’ company was better able to understand and meet the expectations of customers. ‘Local’ was perceived to be causally linked to ‘customer orientation’.²³

Such ‘naïve theories’ can help us trace the essence of brands. The principle is straightforward: consumers perceive brand characteristics (like ‘local’ and ‘customer oriented’) to be related to each other, and these causal relations form a network of associations around the brand. In this network, some characteristics matter more than others, because they are perceived to ‘cause’ a larger number of the other characteristics. Similar to the view of brand essence as the hub that connects the spokes of brand associations, the characteristic (or characteristics) that consumers perceive to cause the largest number of other characteristics can be regarded as brand essence from a consumer perspective.^{24,25} Operationalised in this manner, brand essence becomes a property that resides within the customers



of a brand, and can be measured and tracked.

To further develop this conceptualisation of brand essence, we rely on Ahn's theory of essence,²⁶ which is rooted within cognitive psychology. In line with Murphy and Medin,²⁷ Ahn argued that people's ideas about reality often take the form of 'naïve theories', in which various characteristics of an object are causally related. Ahn found that people generally attach greater importance to the characteristics that they perceive to underlie one or more other characteristics. A characteristic that is perceived to cause a greater number of characteristics is perceived to be more 'essential' to a concept. Van Rekom *et al.*²⁸ applied Ahn's²⁹ proposition in a marketing setting, and found that the more consumers believed a characteristic to cause the other characteristics of the brand, the more they perceived that characteristic to form the essence of that brand. In this way, brand essence can be measured by establishing the causal relationships between all features. Thus, the entire causal structure of a brand's identity is mapped. This 'map' shows managers *why* certain characteristics are seen as essential. The causal approach may prevent marketers from making serious mistakes when they (re)position their brands. For instance, Camel successfully built up a market share featuring a rugged man, who travelled miles across the jungle in order to get his cigarette. In 1990, the brand completely changed its character, moving from the 'rugged' and 'outdoorsy' character to a funny looking plush camel that was perhaps 'relaxed' and 'funny', but in no way rugged and tough. This betrayal to the brand's identity had disastrous consequences: within four years, Camel's market share had eroded by more than 50 per cent.³⁰

INVESTIGATING THE ESSENCE OF A CORPORATE BRAND: THE CASE OF MCDONALD'S SLOVENIA

For managers in charge of corporate communication, the key question, now, becomes: how likely are consumers to incorporate information that has been communicated by the organisation into how they see the brand. In particular, one may ask, to what extent do the features that an organisation communicates about itself penetrate into its essence. If this happens, consumers will start to see communicated features as core features of the brand, and this implies that, even though consumers may build their own theories about the brand, there is still a fair degree of malleability of the brand for the marketer.

The setting for this research was Slovenia. McDonald's Slovenia was founded in 1993 as a subsidiary of McDonald's Corporation (USA). Today McDonald's Slovenia, which strictly follows the global corporate philosophy, has 16 restaurants, with more than 650 employees, who serve, according to their own figures, 20,000 people a day (Table 1).

In Autumn 2005, McDonald's Slovenia started a new marketing communication campaign with an advertisement that was extremely fast-paced. The main communication tools were television, press, internet and SMS. The target groups of this campaign were youngsters, students and scholars, aged 14–25 years. When the campaign, which is a part of a broader McDonald's campaign under the slogan 'i'm lovin' it', was out for about two months, the research project took off. We will first describe the qualitative phase, in which we establish the brand characteristics that might be relevant. We next describe a survey in which we investigated the essence of McDonald's in Slovenia and the role communication

**Table I** Development of McDonald's Slovenia

Year	Number of restaurants	Number of guests per year	Number of employees	Income in SIT (240 SIT=1 EURO)
1993	1	100,000	75	30,000,000
1994	3	850,000	120	300,000,000
1995	5	1,900,000	190	750,000,000
1996	8	2,600,000	310	1,300,000,000
1997	9	3,800,000	360	2,100,000,000
1998	11	4,000,000	450	2,300,000,000
1999	14	4,100,000	540	2,500,000,000
2000	15	4,400,000	570	2,800,000,000
2001	16	4,500,000	600	3,050,000,000
2002	17	4,600,000	650	3,300,000,000
2003	17	4,700,000	650	3,500,000,000
2004	17	6,500,000	650	3,500,000,000
2005	16	6,300,000	600	3,520,000,000

Source: We thank Mc Donald's Slovenia for this information.

may have had in the formation of this essence.

The features for the questionnaire were gathered in street intercept interviews in the centre of Ljubljana. Thirty persons, aged between 15 and 25 years, were asked what person McDonald's would be, if it was a human being. They provided up to five key words per person. Additionally, they were asked to provide up to five key words for human characteristics they associated with McDonald's recent communication. We checked whether they had ever worked for McDonald's and excluded former employees. Eleven characteristics were mentioned by four or more respondents: fast, happy, interesting, pushy, kind, lively, young, communicative, open, relaxed and sociable (Table 2). These words were taken as the input characteristics for the questionnaire. Two characteristics were added: the feature 'successful' was added, as McDonald's strongly emphasises this feature in its own communication,³¹ as well as 'Western'. This last characteristic was deemed to be relevant, as Slovenia is one of the countries in Eastern Europe

that has lived a long time under a communist regime and we were especially interested in the question of which role the Western-ness of the corporate brand plays in the minds of Slovenian consumers.

The essence of each characteristic was derived as follows. The questionnaire included 13 tables (one for each characteristic) on which consumers could rate their perception of the relations between that characteristic and the 12 others. The order of the characteristics was randomised. Each table contained a list of 12 statements like this: McDonald's is [characteristic A], because McDonald's is [characteristic B]. For example, the table for the characteristic 'sociable' included 12 statements like 'McDonald's is sociable because McDonald's is communicative'. For each combination, respondents could check one of the following answers: 'no, on the contrary', 'these two characteristics are unrelated', 'I agree, but this does not apply to Mc Donald's', 'Yes, I agree'. These answers were used as input for a measure of perceived causation of each characteristic. The responses were coded according

**Table 2** Averages and standard deviations for characteristics of McDonald's

	Qualitative results*		Quantitative results**,***			
	McDonald's	Campaign	Liking	Communication	Perceived necessity	Causality
Fast	8	2	3.54 (1.07)	3.71 (1.34)	5.17 (1.95)	4.49 (4.09)
Happy	6	7	3.39 (1.11)	4.02 (1.08)	4.52 (1.81)	5.67 (4.26)
Interesting	0	5	3.10 (1.20)	3.48 (1.17)	4.37 (1.91)	3.82 (4.43)
Pushy	5	4	2.66 (1.32)	3.00 (1.57)	4.37 (1.85)	1.53 (5.74)
Kind	14	10	2.93 (1.21)	3.10 (1.36)	4.20 (1.87)	2.17 (4.72)
Lively	5	5	3.23 (1.23)	3.79 (1.20)	4.75 (1.88)	5.16 (4.42)
Youthful	3	7	3.15 (1.03)	3.88 (1.14)	4.53 (1.79)	4.92 (4.68)
Communicative	4	3	3.49 (1.12)	3.66 (1.21)	4.61 (1.97)	5.75 (4.49)
Open	3	4	3.36 (1.08)	3.86 (1.08)	4.46 (1.73)	5.81 (4.50)
Relaxed	1	4	3.27 (1.13)	3.97 (1.07)	4.21 (1.74)	5.25 (4.57)
Sociable	3	4	3.33 (1.09)	3.99 (1.07)	4.28 (1.69)	5.78 (4.54)
Western	0	0	2.77 (1.27)	3.40 (1.34)	4.70 (1.96)	3.53 (4.46)
Successful	1	0	3.30 (1.10)	3.74 (1.20)	4.60 (1.79)	4.32 (4.58)

*The numbers represent the numbers of respondents mentioning the respective feature.

**The highest ratings have been rendered in bold typeface.

***The numbers between brackets represent standard deviations.

to the scheme developed by Van Rekom *et al.*³²: 'yes, I agree' was coded as 1, while 'No, on the contrary' was coded as '-1', because in this case one characteristic would impede the realisation of the other characteristic. The two other options ('these two are unrelated to each other', and 'I agree, but this does not apply to Mc Donald's') were coded '0'. Although these two options are not identical, they both reflect instances where a feature neither causes nor inhibits the other feature. It is noteworthy that the first option ('these two are unrelated to each other') comprises nearly 80 per cent of the zero scores in this coding scheme. The 'causal status' of each characteristic was computed for each respondent, by summing all 12 answers (-1, 0 or 1) for a single characteristic.

In addition to this construct, we took a direct measure of the perceived necessity of each feature for Mc Donald's. 'Perceived necessity' is related to the degree to which a characteristic causes the other charac-

teristics of a brand.³³ When one brand characteristic causes many other characteristics, the elimination of this feature implies that the consumer's whole image of the brand is likely to change. Since such a feature is highly essential, consumers will have the impression that the brand is no longer the same brand.^{34,35} To measure perceived necessity we asked respondents: 'Would Mc Donald's still be Mc Donald's without [characteristic A]?' ('1'=absolutely still McDonald's, '7'=absolutely no longer McDonald's).³⁶ Additionally, we assessed to what extent respondents liked the different features, by asking: 'Please indicate how much you like [characteristic A] of McDonald's ('1'=I don't like it at all, '7'=I like it very much).

We also wanted to know to what extent consumers perceived that the marketing communication influenced their perception of the brand, therefore we asked them to what degree they thought McDonald's emphasised each of the 13 features in its communication. ('1'='McDonald's does



not emphasise this feature at all', '7'='McDonald's emphasises this feature very much'). Respondents were asked whether they had working experience at McDonald's and in what media they had been confronted with communication from McDonald's, in order to make sure that everybody had been confronted with communication from McDonald's and that nobody had worked as an employee for McDonald's. As all respondents had seen communication from McDonald's, and none had worked for it, no respondents were excluded on this ground.

RESULTS

Students at several courses at the University of Ljubljana were invited to participate in the research project. They filled out the online questionnaires on a voluntary base. The website was contacted 550 times. Two hundred and forty-seven respondents filled in the questionnaire, which implies a response rate of 45 per cent. A student sample was thought warranted, as they belong to the age group targeted by McDonald's. Except for eight respondents, all had seen the television campaign, and these eight exceptions knew McDonald's from other media—so everybody had been confronted with communication from McDonald's. Table 2 lists the means and the standard deviations from the measures described above.

Table 2 shows that 'open' is the most essential feature of McDonald's in Slovenia, causing on average 5.81 other features per respondent. It is closely followed by 'sociable' (5.78), 'communicative' (5.75) and 'happy' (5.67). For every person, we calculated the correlations between the degree to which that person perceived McDonald's to emphasise that feature, the perceived necessity of the features, and the degree to which they

believed each feature to cause the other features. Before averaging, correlations were subjected to a Fisher-*r*-to-*Z* transformation. The average of these transformed values was then transformed back into a group-level correlation coefficient.³⁷ Overall, perceived necessity shows a significant correlation with the causality of the characteristics: $r=0.23$ ($p<0.001$). More causal features were liked more ($r=0.37$, $p<0.001$) and respondents perceived a strong link between the marketing communication of McDonald's and the causal status of the features ($r=0.46$, $p<0.001$).

For managers, the most interesting hands-on information is the pattern of causal relations among the characteristics. Table 3 shows the average agreements with all the relations among the characteristics. The only characteristic that conflicts with the others appears to be 'pushy', which conflicts most with 'kind' (rating of -0.23). Table 3 offers detailed information about the degree to which each characteristic depends upon any other, but the most insightful information can be distilled by drawing the overall cause map of respondents. We choose a cut-off level in such a way that the overall pattern becomes clear, while preventing the map from becoming too full and cluttered. In Table 3, six relationships had agreement ratings of 60 per cent or higher and 34 relationships had agreement ratings between 50 per cent and 60 per cent. Figure 1 represents a map of causal relationships.

Figure 1 shows that 'open' sits like a spider in its web of meanings: because of its high causal status, it is at a central position in the figure, and is connected to many other concepts. 'Open' also seems to be a very good starting point for a communication strategy: it implies directly that McDonald's is 'communicative' and



Table 3 Overview of all causal relationships between the characteristics of McDonald's Slovenia

	Consequences												
	Fast	Happy	Inter- esting	Pushy	Kind	Lively	Young	Communi- cative	Open	Relaxed	Sociable	Western	Successful
Fast													
Happy	0.27												
Interesting	0.10	0.32											
Pushy	0.27	0.05	0.03										
Kind	0.00	0.25	0.25	-0.04									
Lively	0.33	0.49	0.53	0.09	0.51								
Young	0.46	0.56	0.51	0.13	0.19	0.44							
Communicative	0.43	0.48	0.63	0.24	0.30	0.52	0.41						
Open	0.47	0.51	0.48	0.27	0.30	0.48	0.44	0.60					
Relaxed	0.32	0.58	0.48	0.25	0.32	0.44	0.50	0.47	0.56				
Sociable	0.36	0.58	0.49	0.24	0.38	0.50	0.56	0.52	0.61	0.57			
Western	0.38	0.23	0.22	0.53	0.02	0.23	0.18	0.32	0.34	0.31	0.26		
Successful	0.45	0.46	0.34	0.38	0.11	0.31	0.32	0.37	0.40	0.37	0.38	0.49	

The relations in italics have agreement scores of 0.50 or larger and have been adopted in Figure 1.

The relations in bold and italics have agreement scores of 0.60 and larger. These are the bold arrows in Figure 1.



method uncovers consumer 'naïve theories' about why a certain feature makes up the essence of a brand. We found a significant correlation between the perceived necessity of the feature of a brand and its causality, which is in line with earlier findings.⁴⁰ A positive finding for marketers in the field of corporate brands is that our respondents saw quite a strong link between the communication emphasis of McDonald's and their own perception of the essence and the liking of specific features. It seems that marketing communication is still a strong voice in the noisy choir of corporate brand-related signals.

Approaching essence via the causality of the features produces a more fine-grained differentiation between the various characteristics that make up brand identity. As illustrated by Table 3 and Figure 1, the present approach provides detailed information about how and why consumers perceive coherence between certain characteristics. In doing so, our method not only shows which characteristics are most essential, but also why they are so central to the corporate brand. The resulting cognitive maps give managers hands-on information on how to optimise their brand positioning.

Our study also shows that Western corporate brands should be quite careful in communicating their Western origin in East European countries. Figure 1 shows that to many Slovenians, the mere fact that a company is 'Western' implies that it is pushy. A further advantage of the method presented here is the fact that the complete pattern of coherence is established per respondent. This implies that if marketers have reasons to assume the existence of different segments in the market, causal maps can be drawn for every separate segment, allowing a precise targeting of each of the market segments. This is of specific importance for global corporate

brands that want to fine-tune their communication strategies for different national markets.

CONCLUSION

We present a method for charting the essence of corporate brands, which helps managers choose fine-grained positioning strategies that help ensure the long-term value of their corporate brand. The key success factor is that our method can pinpoint what the essence of a brand is in consumer eyes, and the causal pattern of relations between the characteristics of the brand helps managers to find effective ways to reinforce this essence. In the long run, brands that remain true to their essence have a better chance to maintain a favourable position in the consumer's mind. Brand managers can therefore benefit from a keen understanding of the essence of their brands, in order to develop marketing strategies that emphasise rather than conflict with this essence.⁴¹ Our method not only shows which features are most essential, but also why these are most essential. We also found that what consumers believe to be essential about the brand bears a relation with what the brand communicates, and would place further research into this area high on our agenda. Knowledge about consumer theories on why a brand is as it is, with information about which characteristic depends upon which other characteristic, can be used to create appealing and persuasive marketing communications that capitalise on these causal links.

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- (41) Keller, ref. 15 above.