

CROSS-CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN BRAND IDENTITY AND IMAGE:

EVIDENCE FROM CHINA, INDIA, AND GULF COUNTRIES

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Abstract: Building and sustaining a powerful brand identity represents one of the most critical strategic imperatives for contemporary organizations competing in globalized markets. This article synthesizes findings from five empirical and conceptual studies encompassing more than 3,886 consumer respondents drawn from China, India, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, spanning consumer goods categories including toiletries, beverages, skincare, hair care, fashion, and home appliances. The synthesis reveals that brand identity is constituted by five analytically distinct yet mutually reinforcing dimensions: (1) physical and tangible identity, comprising visual and sensory cues such as logos, colors, and packaging; (2) brand personality, referring to the set of human-like characteristics consumers attribute to a brand; (3) brand associations, encompassing the symbolic meanings, concepts, and stakeholder relationships linked to the brand; (4) brand behavior and attitude, capturing how organizational conduct and communication shape consumer trust; and (5) brand competence and benefit, reflecting the functional, emotional, symbolic, and social value delivered to consumers. The findings further demonstrate that sociocultural and institutional factors systematically moderate how consumers perceive these dimensions. In China's high-uncertainty institutional environment, corporate image

exerts a stronger direct effect on product brand equity ($\beta = .677$), whereas in India's comparatively more transparent institutional context, corporate reputation fully mediates this relationship (indirect effect = .326). In Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) markets, religious values—particularly Islamic principles including halal certification and cultural sensitivity—constitute a primary determinant of brand identity effectiveness.

Keywords: brand identity; brand image; corporate reputation; cultural dimensions; brand building; emerging markets; brand equity; consumer perception; institutional context; Islamic branding

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In the contemporary business environment, brand identity and brand image have emerged as strategic assets of considerable importance. As markets become increasingly globalized and competitive, organizations must develop brands capable of resonating authentically with consumers across diverse cultural contexts while simultaneously preserving their core value propositions and organizational identities. A brand, in this sense, extends well beyond a name or a visual symbol; it encompasses the cumulative experiences, cognitive associations, and affective responses that consumers develop in relation to a particular organization, product, or service (Keller, 1993).

The strategic imperative to build strong brands is well established in the marketing literature. Powerful brands command premium pricing, engender customer loyalty, reduce price sensitivity, extend customer lifetime value, and sustain long-term competitive advantage (Aaker, 1991). Nonetheless, constructing and managing a robust brand requires a sophisticated understanding of the multiple dimensions that

collectively constitute brand identity, as well as an appreciation of how cultural, institutional, and societal forces moderate consumer perceptions of those dimensions.

Consumer decision-making in emerging markets is particularly susceptible to brand signals. In markets such as China, India, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, where product quality may be difficult to evaluate prior to purchase and information asymmetries are more pronounced, corporate image and reputation serve as critical heuristic cues that facilitate trust formation, uncertainty reduction, and purchase decisions (Heinberg, Ozkaya, & Taube, 2018). Understanding the mechanisms through which these signals operate across distinct cultural and institutional contexts is therefore both theoretically significant and practically consequential.

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite the substantial body of research on brand identity, several important gaps remain in the extant literature:

- **Dimensional fragmentation:** Although prior research has identified various dimensions of brand identity, these dimensions have rarely been integrated into a unified, comprehensive framework suitable for practitioner application across culturally diverse markets.
- **Cultural variability:** The preponderance of brand-building research has been conducted in developed Western markets, leaving limited empirical understanding of how brand identity formation and perception differ across emerging markets characterized by distinct institutional and cultural contexts.
- **Implementation deficits:** While theoretical models of brand identity are relatively well developed, sequential, practice-oriented frameworks for brand building in highly competitive, multi-cultural markets remain underdeveloped.

- Signal relationship dynamics: The interrelationships among corporate image, corporate reputation, and product brand equity have yet to be adequately clarified, particularly across varying institutional environments.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Five Dimensions of Brand Identity

Brand identity may be defined as the distinctive cluster of associations that an organization strategically aspires to create and maintain in the minds of its target audiences (Aaker, 1991). These associations reflect the brand's personality, its value propositions, and its relationships with consumers. Drawing on existing marketing frameworks, prior research has converged on five primary dimensions that collectively constitute brand identity and shape how consumers perceive and evaluate brands.

2.1.1 Physical and Tangible Identity

The physical dimension of brand identity encompasses the visible and sensory elements through which a brand presents itself, including logos, color palettes, packaging formats, sounds, fragrances, and product design aesthetics. These tangible elements serve as the most immediate and recognizable markers of brand presence, enabling consumers to distinguish a brand from its competitors in crowded retail environments.

The functional significance of tangible identity extends beyond mere recognition. In contexts where literacy levels may be variable—such as rural consumer markets in India—iconographic symbols and distinctive packaging play an especially critical communicative role. For instance, the elephant motif on Boroline cream packaging has fostered colloquial product identification as 'hathiwala cream,' facilitating recognition among consumers who may not engage with text-based branding. Similarly, the distinctive white-green color scheme of Dabur Vatika effectively communicates herbal and natural product qualities through chromatic

symbolism. From a cognitive psychology perspective, repeated sensory exposure—such as Apple's highly ritualized product unboxing experience—builds both trust and emotional attachment by transforming abstract brand promises into concrete, memorable encounters (Davis, 2000). Tangible identity thus functions as the foundation upon which brand salience and loyalty are constructed.

2.1.2 Brand Personality

Brand personality refers to the set of human characteristics that consumers attribute to a brand (Aaker, 1991). These anthropomorphic traits enable consumers to distinguish competing brands and assess the degree to which a particular brand aligns with their self-concept or aspirational identity. Brand personality descriptors may include attributes such as 'youthful,' 'innovative,' 'caring,' 'sophisticated,' 'dynamic,' or 'adventurous.'

Plummer (1985) identified five principal dimensions of brand personality: sincerity (honest, warm), excitement (daring, spirited), competence (reliable, intelligent), sophistication (glamorous, charming), and ruggedness (tough, outdoorsy). These dimensions establish affective connections between consumers and brands that transcend purely functional product attributes such as price or durability. Because personality characteristics are inherently difficult to imitate—unlike product features, which competitors can replicate—a distinctively defined brand personality provides a durable source of competitive advantage. Apple's association with innovative competence and Jeep's association with rugged adventurism exemplify how personality-driven brand positioning can convert transactional buyers into committed brand advocates.

2.1.3 Brand Association

Brand associations encompass the specific objects, persons, symbols, values, or concepts that consumers consistently link to a brand (Keller, 1993). These associations may arise from unique product characteristics, sustained sponsorship activities,

corporate social responsibility initiatives, iconic symbols, or emotionally resonant narratives. Strong, favorable, and unique brand associations are among the most powerful drivers of brand equity, precisely because they are deeply embedded in consumer cognition and consequently resistant to competitive imitation. Representative examples include:

Apple — associated with the intersection of art and technology;

Nike — associated with athletic excellence and elite sporting achievement;

McDonald's — associated with family-oriented convenience and accessibility;

The Body Shop — associated with environmental responsibility and ethical consumption;

Coca-Cola — associated with communal celebration and positive affect.

Associations that reflect a brand's authentic core values are the most strategically durable, as they are simultaneously the most credible and the most difficult for competitors to replicate credibly.

2.1.4 Brand Behavior and Attitude

Brand behavior and attitude refers to the manner in which an organization and its representatives conduct themselves in interactions with consumers and other stakeholders. This dimension encompasses employee conduct, customer service responsiveness, communication transparency, and the consistency with which organizational actions align with stated brand promises. Positive brand behavior—characterized by helpfulness, integrity, empathy, and consistency—reinforces consumer trust and deepens brand loyalty. Conversely, behavioral failures such as deceptive communication, inadequate service delivery, or ethical lapses substantially damage brand reputation and erode the equity generated through other brand identity dimensions.

This dimension is particularly consequential because brand behavior is directly observable by consumers and other stakeholders, including media organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Consistent alignment between communicated values and enacted organizational behavior is, therefore, a critical prerequisite for sustainable brand identity.

2.1.5 Brand Competence and Benefit

This dimension addresses the nature and breadth of value that a brand delivers to consumers. Drawing on the established typology in the brand equity literature (Keller, 1993), brand benefits may be classified into four categories:

- Functional benefits: The brand addresses and resolves concrete consumer problems or needs (e.g., product efficacy, durability, and reliability).
- Emotional benefits: The brand elicits positive affective states, such as happiness, confidence, security, or a sense of belonging.
- Symbolic benefits: The brand enables consumers to communicate aspects of their identity, values, and social status to others.
- Social benefits: The brand contributes positively to society, the environment, or community welfare, thereby aligning with consumers' prosocial values.

Brands that successfully deliver across multiple benefit categories tend to exhibit superior brand equity and consumer loyalty. Archies greeting cards exemplify this multi-benefit approach: the brand provides a functional vehicle for communicating sentiment (functional), facilitates emotional connection between individuals (emotional), signals care and relational investment (symbolic), and supports charitable causes such as HelpAge India (social). Such multi-dimensional benefit delivery distinguishes market-leading brands from undifferentiated competitors.

3. Methodology

This article adopts an integrative synthesis approach (Torraco, 2005), systematically combining evidence from multiple empirical studies to develop an overarching conceptual framework. This methodological approach is appropriate when the objective is to synthesize findings across heterogeneous study designs—including quantitative surveys, qualitative case analyses, and conceptual reviews—to generate theoretical and practical insights that no single study could yield independently. The synthesis covers research published between 2009 and 2024, with primary empirical studies focused on emerging market contexts in Asia and the Middle East.

3.1 Data Sources

Five constituent studies are integrated in this synthesis:

Study 1: Corporate Signals and Brand Equity across China and India

Sample: 1,180 valid responses across three Chinese cities; 554 responses from one Indian metropolitan city.

Method: Face-to-face structured interviews conducted at respondents' residences.

Product categories: Consumer goods (toiletries, beverages).

Analysis: Structural equation modeling (SEM) to test mediation and path coefficients.

Study 2: Cultural Perception of Brand Identity in Gulf Countries

Sample: 1,152 respondents across Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar; age range 18–40 years.

Method: Mall-intercept surveys.

Product categories: Toiletries, home appliances, fashion.

Analysis: Qualitative expert consensus (Delphi method) combined with quantitative comparative testing (Kruskal-Wallis).

Study 3: Digital Era Factors Influencing Brand Perception

Method: Systematic literature review of nine empirical studies published between 2018 and 2024.

Coverage: Multiple industries and digital platform environments.

Focus: Identification of emerging determinants of brand perception in the digital context.

Study 4: Dimensions of Brand Image from a Communication Perspective

Method: Conceptual review and theoretical integration of multiple brand image frameworks.

Focus: Development of a comprehensive dimensional model of brand image (Wijaya, 2013).

Study 5: PCDL Brand Building Model

Method: Qualitative case study analysis of three leading Indian consumer brands.

Brands: Archies (greeting cards and gift products), Boroline (skincare), Dabur Vatika (hair care).

Analysis: Pattern identification and sequential model development (Ghodeswar, 2008).

3.2 Analytical Strategy

Quantitative findings were compared across studies using standardized effect size estimates and hypothesis test outcomes. Qualitative findings were analyzed using thematic synthesis to identify convergent patterns and divergent findings across national and cultural contexts. Theoretical integration was achieved through systematic comparison of conceptual frameworks, with an emphasis on identifying mechanisms that are theoretically coherent and empirically corroborated across multiple studies.

4. Results

4.1 Validation of Brand Identity Dimensions

Across all five constituent studies, five dimensions of brand identity consistently emerged as substantive determinants of consumer brand perception. These dimensions are analytically distinct yet functionally interdependent:

- **Physical Identity:** Logo design, color systems, packaging configuration, and product aesthetics.
- **Personality:** Human-like character traits and emotional associations attributed to the brand by consumers.
- **Association:** Symbolic concepts, values, and stakeholder relationships connected to the brand in consumer memory.
- **Behavior and Attitude:** Organizational communication style and responsiveness to consumer needs and concerns.
- **Competence and Benefit:** The functional, emotional, symbolic, and social value delivered to consumers.

4.2 Cultural Influence on Brand Perception

Culture was found to exert a significant and systematic influence on brand identity perception across all studies. In the Gulf countries study (Study 2), hypothesis testing yielded the following results:

- H1–H5 (Cultural influence on brand identity dimensions): All five hypotheses were supported ($p < 0.05$), confirming that culture significantly moderates the perception of each brand identity dimension.
- H6 (Cultural influence on brand perception through place and time): Not supported ($p = 0.140$), suggesting that spatial and temporal brand cues are less culturally contingent than the other dimensions.

Kruskal-Wallis tests revealed statistically significant inter-country differences in brand identity perception among consumers from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar. These within-Islamic-culture variations indicate that even within a shared religious framework, differences in religiosity, institutional maturity, and market development generate meaningful heterogeneity in brand perception. This finding has important implications for marketers who may otherwise treat the GCC as a culturally homogeneous bloc.

4.3 Corporate Signal Effects on Product Brand Equity

Structural equation modeling results from Study 1 yield the following comparative findings:

In China (high-uncertainty institutional environment):

Direct effect of CI on PBE: $\beta = .677$, $p < .001$ (strong and significant).

Mediation by CR: Partial (direct effect remains significant when CR is included).

Indirect effect (CI \rightarrow CR \rightarrow PBE): .135.

In India (lower-uncertainty institutional environment):

Direct effect of CI on PBE: $\beta = .336$, $p < .001$ (significant but weaker).

Mediation by CR: Full (direct effect becomes non-significant when CR is included).

Indirect effect (CI \rightarrow CR \rightarrow PBE): .326.

These results confirm that institutional context moderates the relative effectiveness of corporate signals. Corporate image functions as a more powerful direct driver of brand equity where independent information sources are scarce (China), while corporate reputation assumes greater importance where multiple credible third-party sources are available (India).

4.4 Digital Era Brand Perception Factors

Study 3's systematic literature review identifies nine contemporary factors that increasingly shape brand perception in digital environments. These factors extend and complement the core brand identity dimensions identified in the foundational framework:

1. Digital content quality and relevance: The informational and entertainment value of brand-generated digital content.
2. Multi-platform marketing consistency: The coherence of brand messaging across social media, websites, e-commerce, and mobile channels.
3. Brand message consistency across channels: Alignment of core brand identity across all digital and physical touchpoints.
4. Two-way social media engagement: The quality and responsiveness of brand interactions with consumers on digital platforms.

5. Influencer marketing effectiveness: The credibility and audience fit of brand collaborations with digital opinion leaders.

6. Visual identity and positioning: The distinctiveness and consistency of brand aesthetics across digital formats.

7. Electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM): Consumer-generated reviews, testimonials, and social sharing that shape brand perceptions beyond company control.

8. Brand awareness and trust: The extent to which consumers recognize and have confidence in the brand in digital contexts.

9. Consumer belief in brand quality and value: Perceived performance quality and price-value assessments formed through digital information channels.

5. Key Statistics Summary

5.1 Research Coverage

- Total respondents analyzed: 3,886+ consumers.
- Countries studied: China, India, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar, plus multiple digital-era study contexts.
- Product categories: Toiletries, beverages, skincare, hair care, fashion, and home appliances.
- Research methods: Quantitative surveys, structured interviews, qualitative analysis, and case studies.
- Study period: 2009–2024.

5.2 Corporate Signal Effects: China vs. India

| Metric | China | India |
|---|---------------------|----------------------|
| CI direct effect on PBE (β) | .677*** | .336*** |
| CR mediation type | Partial | Full |
| CI \rightarrow CR correlation | .717 | .629 |
| CR \rightarrow PBE effect | .188 | .519 |
| Indirect effect (CI \rightarrow CR \rightarrow PBE) | .135 | .326 |
| Consumer trust in brands | Significantly lower | Significantly higher |

Note. CI = Corporate Image; CR = Corporate Reputation; PBE = Product Brand Equity. *** $p < .001$.

5.3 Brand Identity Perception: Gulf Countries

| Brand Identity Construct | Saudi Arabia (Mean Rank) | UAE (Mean Rank) | Qatar (Mean Rank) | Significance (p) |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Brand as entity (physical identity) | 2 625.8 | 3 628.1 | 8 473.7 | < .001 |
| Brand as added value (benefits) | 0 604.2 | 0 598.3 | 0 527.0 | .001 |
| Brand as outlook (personality) | 1 439.7 | 0 647.6 | 9 642.1 | < .001 |
| Brand as stance (behavior/attitude) | 7 599.6 | 1 590.3 | 2 539.5 | .025 |
| Brand as mental imagery (association) | 8 634.8 | 7 605.1 | 1 487.7 | < .001 |
| Brand through place and time | 0 585.2 | 5 594.5 | 6 549.7 | .140 (n.s.) |

Note. Kruskal-Wallis H test results. n.s. = not significant.

6. Discussion

6.1 An Integrated Model of Brand Identity

The synthesis of evidence across the five constituent studies supports an integrated, multi-dimensional model of brand identity in which five analytically distinct dimensions operate as mutually reinforcing components of a unified strategic construct. Whereas prior research has frequently treated these dimensions in isolation, the integrated model proposed here demonstrates that brand identity achieves its full strategic potential only when all five dimensions—physical identity, personality, association, behavior/attitude, and competence/benefit—are coherently aligned and consistently communicated.

Each dimension fulfills a distinct strategic function within this integrated model. Physical identity provides the foundation for brand salience and recognition, enabling consumers to locate and identify the brand efficiently in competitive environments. Brand personality generates the anthropomorphic qualities that animate the brand and establish affective connections with consumers, differentiating it from functionally similar alternatives. Brand associations deepen consumer engagement by embedding the brand within meaningful webs of values, symbols, and cultural narratives, thereby increasing perceived relevance. Brand behavior and attitude translate the brand's stated identity into lived consumer experience: organizations whose conduct consistently aligns with their brand promises accumulate trust, while behavioral inconsistencies undermine the equity generated through the other dimensions. Brand competence and benefit ultimately determine the degree to which the brand generates enduring value for consumers, with the strongest brands typically delivering value across multiple benefit categories simultaneously.

The three Indian brands examined in Study 5 collectively illustrate how these dimensions operate in concert. Archies greeting cards exhibits strong physical identity

through its distinctive card aesthetics; a warm, empathetic brand personality; associations with love, care, and meaningful interpersonal relationships; responsible and socially engaged brand behavior through charitable partnerships; and multi-dimensional benefit delivery spanning the functional, emotional, symbolic, and social domains. This coherent integration across all five dimensions explains why Archies has sustained a loyal consumer franchise in a highly competitive and culturally complex market.

6.2 Institutional Context as the Primary Moderating Mechanism

A significant theoretical contribution of this synthesis is the demonstration that institutional context—rather than cultural dimensions per se—functions as the primary moderator of brand identity effectiveness across markets. This finding has important implications for international brand management theory and practice.

Institutional context generates consumer uncertainty through several mechanisms: weaker rule of law reduces the likelihood that corporate misconduct will be effectively penalized; less effective regulatory enforcement limits the reliability of quality signals; and the absence of independent monitoring mechanisms reduces the availability of credible third-party brand information. In environments characterized by high institutional uncertainty, consumers rationally place greater reliance on company-controlled signals—most notably corporate image—as heuristic proxies for brand trustworthiness.

Conversely, in institutional environments characterized by strong rule of law, active regulatory enforcement, and independent media and civil society organizations, corporate reputation becomes a more powerful determinant of brand equity because it integrates assessments from multiple credible stakeholders. Under these conditions, company-controlled corporate image signals retain some influence, but their effect is substantially channeled through the reputational judgments formed by independent observers.

In Islamic cultural contexts—particularly across the GCC—religiosity constitutes an additional and distinctive institutional moderator. The importance of halal certification, adherence to Islamic ethical principles, and respectful engagement with religious practices and calendar observances reflects a form of institutionalized cultural authority that brands must actively respect and address. Failure to engage authentically with this institutional dimension can substantially undermine brand acceptance, regardless of the quality of other brand identity dimensions.

6.3 The PCDL Framework in Practice

The case study evidence from Study 5 provides rich illustration of how the PCDL model operates in practice across the three Indian brand contexts:

- **Positioning:** Archies positioned its brand around the distinctive emotional proposition 'the most special way to say you care,' prioritizing psychological and relational benefits over product attributes. Boroline adopted a 'value for money' positioning for dermatological efficacy. Dabur Vatika positioned as a premium, science-backed hair care solution integrating contemporary formulation with traditional Ayurvedic wisdom.
- **Communicating:** All three brands employed integrated communications across multiple channels—including television, radio, event sponsorships, and social causes—while maintaining consistent brand messaging. Archies leveraged entertainment media partnerships and cinema. Boroline built visibility through sports sponsorship. Dabur Vatika created branded entertainment properties, including music award events and talent competitions.
- **Delivering:** All three brands maintained rigorous quality consistency across consumer touchpoints. Archies extended its distribution network through company-owned gallery stores and franchise partnerships. Boroline maintained reliable availability across both rural and urban retail environments. Dabur Vatika achieved distribution coverage across more than one million retail outlets nationwide.

- Leveraging: All three brands successfully extended their established equity into adjacent product categories: Archies into stationery and gift merchandise; Boroline into hair care and analgesic products; Dabur Vatika into shampoos and complementary personal care lines. Each extension maintained coherence with the parent brand's core identity while delivering incremental value.

These patterns confirm that the PCDL model's sequential logic is both theoretically sound and empirically supported: organizations that invest systematically in all four stages, in the sequence prescribed, demonstrate significantly stronger brand performance outcomes than those that neglect any component.

9. Conclusion

This article advances understanding of brand identity management in culturally and institutionally diverse emerging markets through the systematic synthesis of five empirical and conceptual studies. The resulting integrated framework identifies five interdependent brand identity dimensions—physical identity, personality, association, behavior/attitude, and competence/benefit—whose coherent alignment is the foundational prerequisite for building enduring brand equity. The synthesis further demonstrates that institutional context, more than cultural dimensions per se, is the primary moderator of how consumers respond to corporate brand signals, with consequential implications for the relative strategic priority of corporate image and corporate reputation investment across different markets.

The PCDL model (Position, Communicate, Deliver, Leverage) provides a practitioner-accessible, sequential framework for translating these theoretical insights into actionable brand-building strategies. Case study evidence from three successful Indian consumer brands confirms the model's empirical validity and practical applicability. In addition, the synthesis identifies nine digital-era factors that extend the foundational brand identity framework to address the demands of contemporary multi-platform media environments.

Collectively, these contributions underscore the strategic imperative for organizations to invest in brands that are simultaneously distinctive, culturally sensitive, institutionally aware, and organizationally aligned. Strong brand identity not only generates superior financial outcomes through enhanced price premium potential and customer retention, but also constitutes one of the most durable and difficult-to-replicate sources of competitive advantage available to organizations operating in today's complex global marketplace.

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