



From East to West, Startups Put to The Test

Exploring the implementation of brand identity by startups in an individualistic context vs. startups in a collectivistic context

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Abstract

Aim: Research in the field of communication science has clearly shown the influence of culture on, for instance, marketing or brand personality. However, when it comes to specifically looking at the interplay between brand identity and Hofstede's (1984) cultural dimension of individualism-collectivism, one will find a research gap. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to investigate startups with a cultural individualistic background and startups with a cultural collectivistic background regarding the extent to which the brand identity elements defined in the "brand identity planning model" (Aaker, 1996) are employed on the startup's websites.

Method: In order to answer the research question, a quantitative approach in the form of a comparative content analysis has been applied. In detail, a corpus of both individualistic and collectivistic startup websites was developed (n = 60), which were coded with a codebook based on the brand identity planning model (Aaker, 1996). The four operationalized constructs are: "brand as a product", "brand as an organization", "brand as a person", and "brand as a symbol".

Results: First of all, it was found that startups with an individualistic background, on average, were more present on all four constructs, suggesting a strong implementation of these elements. When it comes to the startups with a collectivistic background, a different observation was made. While the collectivistic startups showed, on average, a high implementation of the "brand as a person" and "brand as a symbol" constructs, they showed a lower implementation of the "brand as a product" and "brand as an organization" constructs.

Conclusion: The findings of this research study underline the relevance of filling the research gap underlying the interplay between brand identity and individualism-collectivism. This study adds to the scientific field by providing an overview of significant differences between individualistic and collectivistic brand identity and emphasizes that far eastern startups are aware of the importance of brand identity, however, incorporate differing perception of which elements are important and necessary to implement.

Keywords: Individualism, collectivism, brand identity, startups

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Introduction

It is not to doubt that organizations operate in a globalized world, making brands strive towards establishing a strong presence and connect with customers across different cultures. The question now is, which necessity goes along with the afore mentioned cultural differences? The answer is understanding the relationship between individualism-collectivism and brand identity becomes crucial, as it represents a relevant factor in shaping how brands are perceived by their target audiences. As pointed out by Geert Hofstede (1984), individualism-collectivism refers to the extent to which individuals prioritize personal goals and independence over collective goals and interdependence within their societal context.

However, a serious problem related to the topic of brand identity is the lack of research that connects it to the dimensions of individualism-collectivism. This gap in research is quite remarkable, particularly due to the way how cultural contexts shape people's attitudes, values, and behavior (Hofstede, 1984). Nonetheless, does even a good reason exist for this gap in research? This can clearly be answered with no since brand identity plays an important role in shaping customers perception and behavior towards the organization (Wallace et al., 2014). Moreover, different cultural contexts emphasize distinct values, social norms, and communication styles which can have a significant impact on consumers' perceptions and brand-related messages. Therefore, for a brand identity to be successful, it must connect with customers, distinguish the brand from its competitors, but also understand the implications of culture for brand identity (Aaker & Joachimstahler, 2000). By taking this into consideration, brand managers can effectively design brand messages across diverse cultural contexts.

Further, when looking at related fields, it becomes even more apparent how strongly organizational operations are influenced by diverse cultural contexts. By considering this and taking into account the fact that organizations underly the influence of cultural differences, it does not make sense that the effect of culture on brand identity is under-researched. Therefore, the goal of this bachelor thesis to address the abovementioned gap in research by investigating the relationship between individualism-collectivism and brand identity by answering the following research question: *To what extent does a difference exist between startups in an individualistic context vs. startups in a collectivistic context regarding the implementation of brand identity?*

By delving into relevant theories and empirical studies, this research seeks to provide valuable insights for the field of brand identity. Additionally, a comparative content analysis

between individualistic startups and collectivistic startups will be conducted. By investigating this topic, the bachelor thesis aims to shed light on the interplay between individualism-collectivism and brand identity, offering insights that can contribute to developing culturally sensitive branding practices. Further, this study's goal is to contribute to the broader understanding of how brands can control cultural diversity and develop meaningful connections with customers worldwide.

This bachelor thesis will begin by delving into the existing literature of brand identity and individualism-collectivism, to develop a foundation for the research. Following, the methods that have been operationalized for the purposes of this study will be explained. Lastly, the identified results will be listed, followed by a discussion that interprets the results and therefore concludes this paper.

Theoretical framework

Today's marketplace is highly competitive, therefore making companies constantly look for ways to differentiate themselves from their competitors, whilst additionally aiming at attracting new customers. This can be achieved through the strategy of brand identity, which encompasses a range of individual visual, verbal, and emotional cues that help to communicate the company's values, personality, and unique selling proposition. The individuality behind this is the key driver that helps in being distinct from other organizations. Hence, when it comes to brand identity it is all about setting up brand associations which then are being maintained by the organization (Aaker, 1996).

Brand identity is widely recognized as a relevant factor in shaping aspects like consumer behavior and purchase decisions, however, research is lacking behind when it is about the differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures regarding the effect on brand identity. Therefore, the purpose of this bachelor thesis is to compare western and far eastern startups and to examine the extent to which brand identity elements are implemented. The following theoretical framework will provide a conceptual basis for this study, drawing on relevant theories and models. It will begin by defining the concept of brand identity and describing the related brand identity planning model. Following, for this study relevant cultural dimensions of individualism-collectivism will be described and, lastly, connected to brand identity.

2.1 The concept of brand identity

The attention brand identity receives by both practitioners of the field and organizations has significantly increased over the past couple of years, which is due to the fact that professionals acknowledge the crucial role brand identity plays in the differentiation and management of brands (Aaker, 1996). This led to a large variety of definitions emphasizing the complexity of brand identity. According to de Chernatony (2010), brand identity represents the "the distinctive or central idea of a brand and how the brand communicates this idea to its stakeholders" (p. 53). This definition presents two elements, which are the idea of being unique and the importance of stakeholders. In other words, uniqueness refers to the idea that an organization develops a defining set of concepts which distinguishes it from other companies. Additionally, the stakeholder element represents a strategic perspective which is especially important when it comes to communicating the set of concepts to the outside world

(Coleman, 2011). The definition provided by de Chernatony (2010) also expresses that brand identity comes from the organization itself and is not, like the brand image, a customer constructed element. In line with this definition is the one provided by Aaker (1996), who states that brand identity is “what the organisation wants the brand to stand for in the customer’s mind“ (p.25). When looking at this definition, the role division between organization and customer becomes even more apparent.

2.1.1 The brand identity planning model

As already mentioned above, the concept of a brand’s identity refers to a distinct collection of associations that a company has to develop and uphold, to build a foundation of fundamental features that define the organization (Phillips et al., 2014). This process is quite unique for each individual company, making it difficult to point out a clear set of guidelines. However, Aaker (1996) developed a general typology of brand identity elements, referred to as the brand identity planning model. This model consists of four aspects, which are “brand as a product“, “brand as an organization“, “brand as a person“, and “brand as a symbol“.

Aaker (1996) named the first element of the brand identity planning model “brand as a product”, which refers, as the name suggests, to product related elements. These product elements include associations with the product, attributes of the product, perceived value and quality, associations with product usage, associations with user types, and perceived connection to a particular country (Aaker, 1996). This suggest, that when being encountered by customers, they are more likely to recall and remember the company behind the product, due to the exposure to brand specific product associations. In order to increase this effect, product attributes must be closely aligned with customer likings, as consumers have specific preferences. What customers value most in a product is a high degree of satisfaction as a result of maximized utility (Gwin & Gwin, 2016).

Next, the “brand as an organization” element can be described as the values and personality that define and distinguish the brand (Aaker, 1996). It emphasizes the competitive interest of a company because, unlike the “brand as a product element”, it can be used to be distinct from other organizations (Viana, 2022). Additionally, this dimension assigns specific organizational associations to a company, including community orientation in the sense of corporate social responsibility, perceived quality, innovativeness, concern for customers, and success. Hence, “brand as an organization” emphasizes commitment to customers and society

as a whole. It goes beyond the physical aspects of an organization, such as product or service information, and focuses more specifically on the qualities that shape image and reputation.

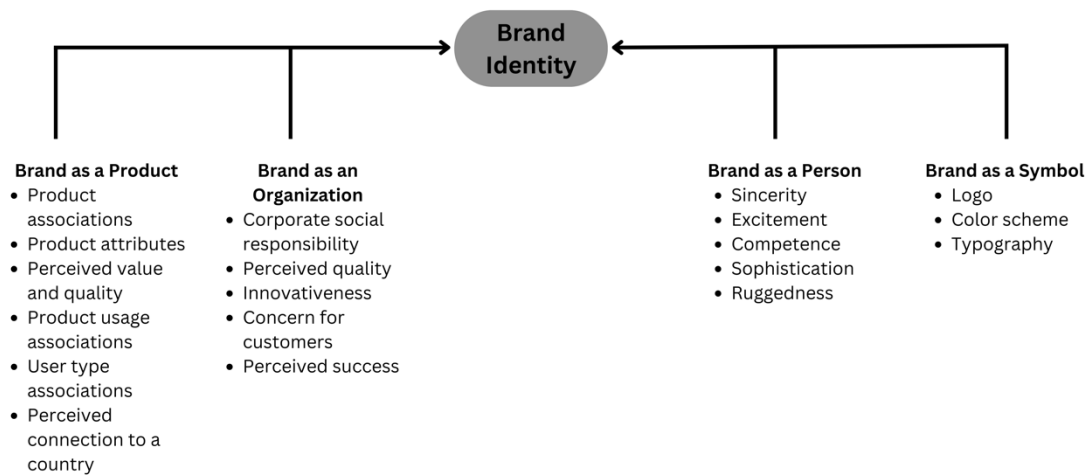
“Brand as a person” represents the third element of the brand identity planning model and compares a brand identity to human personality traits, since it makes it more relatable and understandable to consumers (Aaker, 1996). In line with this, Aaker (1996) also developed the so-called brand personality scale which emphasizes five human personality traits that can be related to an organization: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. Due to Viana (2022), these personality traits can be both perceived positively and negatively. However, this depends on how an organization develops and implements these traits. In the end, these associations constitute an organizational personality that makes a brand distinct from its competitors. Additionally, a brand personality may increase customer preference because it helps individuals to identify with an organization (Sirgy, 1982).

Lastly, the symbolism of an organization refers to its visual and sensory elements, including its name, packaging, logo, and other design elements (Aaker, 1996). For the development of an individual brand identity, the visual elements represent a key element, especially because it aids in gaining attention and being remembered by customers (Mohan & Sequeira, 2009). Hence, organizational symbolism can be seen as a self-expressive aspect of a brand that provides customers with value.

In sum, one can say that the development and implementation of brand identity depends on each individual organization, however, there do exist certain elements that support with understanding the construction of a brand's identity. The brand identity planning model sheds light on organizational thinking and the intentions of implementing the specific brand identity elements.

Figure 1

Interpretation of the brand identity planning model



2.2 Individualism-collectivism

As has been stated previously, the purpose of this bachelor thesis is to connect individualism-collectivism to individualistic and collectivistic startup's brand identity. This is crucial since, on the one hand, there is a gap in research regarding this relationship and, on the other hand, it is assumed that this study will help with understanding what kind of values and attitudes people have in diverse cultural contexts and how this is reflected in a brands identity.

However, it is necessary to delve into the existing literature of the field and to understand what the cultural dimensions of individualism-collectivism entail and what this implies for brand identity.

2.2.1 Individualism

Hofstede (1984) offered an early definition of individualism and referred to the term as a society in which loose ties between individuals are dominant and everyone solely looks after herself/himself. Additionally, individual societies, also described as loose cultures, have a great acceptance for deviation, meaning that there is a higher toleration for not completely being in line with societal norms (Triandis, 2001). The reason for this is, that a higher tolerance for deviation is mostly observed in heterogeneous societies in which multiple

normative systems exist. However, these definitions only provide a general perspective on what individualism entails. Therefore, the so-called concept of normative individualism was developed which is supposed to make this cultural dimension more understandable by dividing it into four elements: eudaimonism, freedom of choice, personal responsibility, and universality (Waterman, 1981).

Eudaimonism is an ethical approach which mainly is related to eudaimonia and is concerned with the idea of self-actualization, or in other words, the actualization of a person's human potential (Deci & Ryan, 2008). This means, that eudaimonia is part of striving towards being an ideal human. This ethical concept is especially important for individualism because it sets individual striving at the forefront and is a pushing factor when it comes to developing uniqueness and being distinct from other humans (Waterman, 1981). Additionally, this is in line with the definition provided by Hofstede (1984), who, as already mentioned, pointed out that individualism suggests to mainly focus on oneself. Further, the concept of eudaimonia can also be connected to brand identity. As Williams et al. (2022) state, "engagement with, and connections with, authentically purposeful brands may similarly help consumers achieve eudaimonic well-being, contributing to consumers' own purposeful and meaningful lives" (p.700). This quote underlines an individualistic perspective on brand identity, since it suggests how a positive brand perception may help individuals with achieving personal benefits.

Waterman (1981) emphasized that freedom of choice is building upon eudaimonism because when trying to develop one's full human potential, individuals must be free to choose which aspect is most promising to focus on. Additionally, when looking at the connection to an individualistic cultural background, as he states, it can be described by the absence of enforced limitations, suggesting that others are not required to support an individual in achieving personal goals. To further investigate and understand the concept of freedom of choice, Pattanaik and Xu (1990) developed three axioms: indifference between no-choice situations, strict monotonicity, and independence. The first axiom describes no-choice situations that suggest if an individual is faced with two sets of options that both only have one possibility, then there is no difference in the degree of freedom offered by these options. This means, that in order for freedom of choice to occur, a set of options must consist of multiple possibilities. Strict monotonicity, the second axiom, relates to this because it suggests that adding new options to an existing one will always increase the degree of freedom. Lastly, independence emphasizes that sets of options do not depend on other options, meaning that if a same option will be added to two different sets, the ranking of the

two sets will not be influenced by this and remains the same. When trying to connect freedom of choice to brand identity, it is important to consider the fact that organizations develop a distinctive identity to differentiate themselves from other companies (de Chernatony, 2010). This implies a market full of various brands with distinct identities, offering consumers the freedom to choose among various organizations and selecting the one that aligns best with their own desired self-image.

Following, personal responsibility has been identified as the third element of cultural individualism (Waterman, 1981). This element is closely linked to perceptions of freedom of choice, suggesting that a feeling of being able to act free will result in a feeling that ones actions are partially under control. In other words, personal responsibility means that individuals are responsible for the outcomes they experience, which makes it more likely that people take ownership for the outcomes of their behavior. In the context of individualistic cultures this implies that people's preference for being independent and focusing mainly on oneself goes in hand with taking responsibility for personal actions. Connecting this to brand identity, one interesting aspect to look at is corporate social responsibility. Lubowiecki-Vikuk et al. (2021) point out that consumers have the power of influencing CSR, especially through approval and commitment. This means, by supporting brands that prioritize, for instance, sustainability, individuals will feel they are taking responsibility for their brand related decisions and contributing to positive change.

Lastly, Waterman (1981) mentions universality as being the fourth element of individualism. Due to him, people in individualistic cultures are not seen as a means to an end for someone else, but rather as an end in themselves. In other words, individuals are inherent in who they are and value their personal autonomy more than serving external factors and/or purposes. Focusing on brand identity, one can say that it aims to create a distinct identity that is in line with target consumers (Aaker, 1996). Therefore, in individualistic cultures, where autonomy and valuing oneself as an end in themselves are emphasized, it is likely that individuals seek out brands that align with their unique identities and allow for the expression of individuality.

2.2.2 Collectivism

Collectivism is constructed by the exact opposite of what individualism entails, which are tight social groups "in which people distinguish between in-groups and out-groups; they expect their in-group (relatives, clan, organizations) to look after them, and in exchange for

that they feel they owe absolute loyalty to it” (Hofstede, 1984, p. 45). Moreover, collectivists aim at maintaining relationships which requires them to find resolutions in conflict situations, even though this might imply to ignore own preferences (Triandis, 2001). In other words, there is less focus on the autonomy of the self and a strong focus on viewing individuals’ identity as a part of the whole group.

Suh and Lee (2020) describe the essence of collectivism by focusing on four elements: self- perception, motivation, cognition, and emotion. When it comes to individuals’ self-perception with a collectivistic background, they tend to value interdependence more than being unique and distinct from other individuals in their environment (Suh & Lee, 2020). According to this, Chen et al. (1998) said that collectivists describe themselves in terms of the connectedness they have to others within the group. Vallaster and von Wallpach (2013) explain a co-creation process in their research in which consumers play an active role in the development of a brands identity. Since consumers prefer brands that align with their personal values, the concept of self-perception is likely to have an influence on the shaping of brand identity. The element of motivation refers to Triandis’ (2001) finding that collectivists prefer maintaining relationships by always trying to solve conflict situations. This means that people from collectivistic cultures do not want to be the reason for arising problems or for putting increased pressure on their social group. This may be achieved through not deviating from social norms and upholding success (Suh & Lee, 2020). In the context of organizations, this may be reflected within a brand identity that contributes to maintaining social norms and to the well-being of the collective. Next is cognition and due to the interdependent thinking of collectivists, individuals with this cultural background tend to focus more on the broader context rather than breaking it down into discrete components (Suh & Lee, 2020). As a result of only seeing the broad picture and not focusing on specific elements, collectivists are more inclined to have trust in contradictory information. Lastly, when it is about emotions individuals from collectivistic cultures tend to rely less on their personal feelings when evaluating their sense of happiness (Suh & Lee, 2020). Instead, they are more likely to consider their social environment when assessing personal emotions and may see the connection to others as a greater source of happiness. In the context of brand identity, this relates to companies that emphasize group benefits rather than focusing on advantages that could be achieved by individuals.

To conclude, collectivism is a cultural construct that prioritizes group harmony over individual autonomy. Looking at self-perception, motivation, cognition, and emotion, it becomes apparent how collectivists approach social interactions and what emphasis they put

on relationships. One can say, that collectivists prioritize their relationships with others, and tend to give their personal needs a less important role.

2.3 A cross-cultural perspective on brand identity

The aim of this study is to compare startups from individualistic and collectivistic backgrounds and to identify the extent to which they focus on specified brand identity elements. To get an understanding of brand identity in diverse markets, it is necessary to examine the existing scientific literature related to this. This section will focus on individualism-collectivism and its implications for brand identity, based on the brand identity planning model.

It is necessary to note that brands have a degree of significance beyond their physical appearance, mainly represented in their identity and personality. When it comes to brand identity and its variation in cultural contexts, it is important to understand that it is not only created by organizational managers, but also by consumers in an identity co-creation process (Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). In other words, consumers have an active role in the development of a brands identity, especially because of different needs and self-perceptions expressed by people that have an influence on how an organization presents itself (Aaker et al., 2001). There are significant differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures and in how people understand and react to external stimuli (Voyer et al., 2017). Therefore, it is not deniable that organizations are influenced by that and shape their brand identity accordingly.

When it comes to the brand identity dimension “brand as a product” one can say that social norms are a driving factor in influencing behavioral attention among individuals from a collectivistic culture, while people with an individualistic background are more influenced by addressing individual preferences and personal benefits (Han & Shavitt, 1994). For individualism, this entails that a brand should emphasize personalization and self-expression in all product related attributes, especially because consumers may be more inclined to buy products that reflect their individual preferences and differentiate themselves from others. In line with this, Kramer et al. (2007) found that individualistic consumers are more likely to be influenced by product recommendations that are adapted to their personal preferences. This is especially due to the fact that people from an individualistic culture prefer products that allow for personalization because they can be adapted to individual desires (Torrice & Frank, 2019). However, when looking at collectivism and product attribute preferences the direct

opposite can be observed, meaning that people are more positively influenced by a brand identity that communicates products focussing on social cohesion and shared experiences, especially because collectivists place a high value on social norms. For instance, Han & Shavitt (1994) found that product attributes communicated through collectivistic appeals and emphasized group benefits were more effective in South Korea. Additionally, Lee et al. (2007) compared websites of both American and South Korean clothing brands. It was found that the American apparel websites stronger tend to mainly provide information related to product purchases. This observation aligns with Hofstede's (1980) concept of individualism-collectivism, because when reflecting it to purchasing intentions, one can say that the self-centered nature of individualists makes them more interested in product information since it can be perceived as a personal advantage. In contrast, South Korean websites were found to be more inclined towards providing information that pertains to consumer's connections and relationships within their community which is, again, in line with Hofstede's (1980) description of individualism-collectivism because due to their group-oriented perspective collectivists are more interested in community-related information. The above given information leads to the following hypothesis (H1): *Startups with an individualistic background will exhibit a stronger emphasis on the "brand as a product" construct in their brand identity, compared to startups with a collectivistic background.*

Focusing on the "brand as an organization element", it becomes apparent that corporate social responsibility (CSR), for instance, plays an important role when it comes to communicating corporate values and showing concern for customers. Bhalla and Overton (2019) argue that culture has a large effect on the extent to which people value CSR and how it is covered in the media. For instance, Lee and Kim (2010) compared CSR activities between South Korea and the USA, or in other words, did a comparison between a collectivistic country and an individualistic country. It was found that CSR media coverage in the United States mainly focuses on economic benefits, which is due the fact that people in this country are self-centered and are more interested in personal advantages. However, in South Korean media the opposite could be observed, which is that benefits to society as a result of CSR are stronger emphasized. This can be explained by the instance that individuals from this cultural background are group oriented and perceive societal benefits as more important than personal advantages. Additionally, another important variable of the "brand as an organization" element is the extent to which consumers perceive a company as being innovative. Steenkamp et al. (1999) conducted a study on consumer innovativeness, which explains the extent to which individuals are willing to adopt and utilize new items and connected this to

individualism and collectivism. It was found that people with an individualistic background show a higher degree of customer innovativeness when compared to individuals from a collectivistic culture. This finding suggests that brands in an individualistic context should place a higher emphasis on innovativeness, since individualists are more recipient for that type of information. On the other hand, brands in a collectivistic context should highlight the company's role in fostering group harmony, social responsibility, and community connections. Based on the construct of "brand as an organization" this thesis aims at answering the following hypothesis (H2): *Both startups with an individualistic background and startups with a collectivistic background will perform similar on the "brand as an organization" construct.*

Next, when it is about trying to understand the implications of cultural differences for the "brand as a person" element, it makes sense to look at Aaker's et al. (2001) work who developed five dimensions of brand personality (sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, ruggedness) and compared those to individualistic and collectivistic cultures. It was shown that the elements of excitement, competence, sincerity, and sophistication were similar between individualistic and collectivistic cultures, suggesting that these traits hold universal appeal across cultures. However, a major difference was found within the element of ruggedness because it could not be confirmed in the Japanese culture. When looking at the term ruggedness, it encompasses traits including toughness or being adventurous which is not part of collectivistic cultures that prefer harmony and interconnectedness (Triandis, 2001). Based on this, one can say that the personality of a brand as a whole does not differ too much across cultures. However, due to the identified differences, individualistic brands should present themselves as being resilient and tough, while collectivistic brands should highlight their commitment to peacefulness and group orientation. Based on this, the third Hypothesis of this study (H3) is: *Startups with a collectivistic background will exhibit a stronger emphasis on the "brand as a person" construct in their brand identity, compared to startups with a collectivistic background.*

The "brand as a symbol" element is the last dimension of the brand identity planning model that has to be connected to the implications of individualism-collectivism. Gould et al. (2000) conducted a study focusing on Malaysian and US companies, specifically analyzing their websites regarding implemented design choices. For instance, the researchers found that the website of a Malaysian transportation company centered their website around one image of an impressively built building, while not making use of different colors and presenting large amounts of text. On the other hand, a website of an American transportation company

was analyzed, and it was found that less text has been implemented, especially because the first thing that became apparent were clickable thumbnails that would open further textual elements. Nonetheless, Gould et al. (2000) concluded that this does not suggest badly made design choices by the Malaysian website, but a reflection of the cultural background. While looking more specifically into this, the finding is in line with what Hofstede (1984) mentions about collectivism because having large blocks of text help collectivists in developing a relationship with an organization, reflecting their interest in collective goals and group orientation. Additionally, cultural differences within website design have been summarized by the concept of “cultural markers”, further underlining the attention this relationship receives in research. Due to Moura et al. (2016), the concept of cultural markers “refers to interface elements that are most used in some cultures and less in others, such as colors, graphics, layout, multimedia and others” (p.315). Due to the implications of the “brand as a symbol” construct, the last hypothesis (H4) this bachelor thesis will answer is: *Both startups with an individualistic background and startups with a collectivistic background will perform similar on the “brand as a symbol” construct.*

Methodology

3.1 Research design

Analyzing the potential effect of individualism-collectivism on the brand identity represented on startup websites, requires gaining deep knowledge of these websites and being able to identify the various brand identity elements. Therefore, a combination of both a qualitative and quantitative approach is incorporated for this study. In recent years, a combination of qualitative and quantitative research has been increasingly used by researchers, especially to broaden the range and enhance the depth of their studies (Sandelowski, 2000). To achieve answering the research question, the decision was made to operationalize the mixed-method technique in terms of a comparative content analysis. This approach allows for an objective analysis of this study, whilst gaining detailed insights into the concept of brand identity.

3.2 Procedure

The main purpose of this research study is to compare the brand identity of startups in an individualistic context and in a collectivistic context. The reason behind focusing solely on startups is grounded in the expectation that these companies prioritize product information over developing a comprehensive brand identity, which makes them more interesting to study due to the existing abundance of research on traditional organizations and the influence of culture. Comparing the startups was achieved through developing a corpus (Appendix A) consisting of 60 startup websites, or 30 websites for each cultural context, respectively. Additionally, to provide the study, and specifically the data collection phase, with a clear structure, the decision was made to not include startups of any branches, but to focus on companies with either one of the following attributes: technology, service, or banking. These three categories were chosen based on the fact that it was relatively easy to identify startups in these branches because there is a large number of companies operating within them. The startup websites from both individualistic and collectivistic contexts were assigned to either one of the categories.

3.3 Corpus

To develop the corpus that is needed for this research study, the first step was to develop a set of selection criteria, especially to prevent a random selection of companies since this would make comparisons more difficult. First, this study does not focus on any type of organizations but specifically on startups, meaning that the selected companies are relatively new, have experienced rapid growth, a strong sense for entrepreneurship, and see technology as one of their core elements. Another important selection criteria is that the startups either operate in an individualistic context or in a collectivistic context, due to the study's focus on those two cultural dimensions.

After gaining a clear understanding of what kind of criteria are important, the subsequent task involved operationalizing them and selecting eligible startups. This was primarily done through relying on the website "Crunchbase", which serves as a database offering business information about private and public companies. Crunchbase facilitates users with various specific filters, enabling a direct application of the created categories and criteria within the database's search engine. By doing so it could be ensured that the chosen startups align with the developed criteria, thereby avoiding the inclusion of irrelevant companies in the study. Additionally, the utilization of Crunchbase offered a significant advantage in terms of efficiency. Unlike alternative methods, such as relying on search engines like Google, Crunchbase eliminated the need to manually search for websites and look at them in detail prior to the initial analysis process. This means that it was not necessary to invest much time and effort in examining the websites to determine if they meet the selection criteria.

3.4 Codebook

The codebook can be seen as the primary tool for the content analysis, allowing systematic examination of the brand identity elements of the selected startups. The codebook consists of four main categories and each one consists of a number of subcategories. Developing the codebook included a literature review, the adaptation of Aaker's (1996) brand identity planning model, and pilot testing.

At the beginning of the codebook development process, an extensive literature review was conducted to get a deep understanding of brand identity and the underlying elements. The main focus of this literature review was to identify relevant dimensions and

subcategories that capture the essence of brand identity. A challenge in this regard was the fact that brand identity is quite unique for each organization, which makes it difficult to point out a clear set of elements. However, Aaker’s (1996) brand identity planning model was utilized as a foundational framework, especially due to its comprehensive coverage of brand identity dimensions. Based on this, the first variable is “brand as a product”, consisting of the following subcategories: *product associations*, *product attributes*, *perceived value and quality*, *product usage associations*, *user type associations*, and *perceived connection to a country*. Generally speaking, this variable is supposed to measure product attributes associated with a brand’s identity. In other words, “brand as a product” does not measure what a product specifically can do, but how it is perceived by its users. Next, “brand as an organization” consists of the sub-variables *corporate social responsibility*, *perceived quality*, *innovativeness*, *concern for customers*, and *perceived success*. This dimension has been utilized as a measure for organizational values and community concern/engagement. The third dimension of the codebook is “brand as a person” and, as the name suggests, identifies the organization as a person that has certain personality traits. Therefore, this dimension measures a company’s personality in terms of *sincerity*, *excitement*, *competence*, *sophistication*, and *ruggedness*. Lastly, “brand as a symbol” represents the fourth dimension of the codebook and concerns the visual elements of a brand’s identity, including *logo*, *color scheme*, and *typography*. It is important to note that the dimensions included in the codebook create a general picture of brand identity, since this study does not focus on one specific type of startups, but a larger number of startups. The codebook can be found in Table 1. Additionally, the filled in codebook showing the assigned scores for each startup can be found in Appendix A and Appendix B.

Table 1

Codebook including construct, variable, definition, and example

Construct	Variable	Definition
Brand as a product	Product associations	Mental associations between a product and certain attributes or concepts
	Product attributes	Specific features or qualities that differentiate a product from other
	Perceived value and quality	Consumer's assessment of a product's worth or benefits and its overall quality
	Product usage associations	Mental connections between a product and its typical or intended usage scenarios

Construct	Variable	Definition
Brand as an organization	User type associations	Mental connections between a product and the types of users or target market its intended for
	Perceived connection to a country	Consumer's perception of a product's association with a specific country
	Corporate social responsibility	The ethical and responsible behavior of a company towards society and the environment, beyond its legal obligations
	Perceived quality	Consumer's subjective evaluation of the overall excellence or superiority of a product or service based on their perception of its features, performance, and reliability
	Innovativeness	The ability of a company to create and introduce new ideas, concepts, products, or processes that bring about positive change and differentiation in the market
	Concern for customers	The extent to which a company prioritizes the satisfaction, well-being, and needs of its customers, demonstrating a genuine care and commitment to their interests
	Perceived success	Consumer's perception or belief about the level of achievement, popularity, or positive outcomes associated with a company
Brand as a person	Sincerity	The quality of being genuine, honest, and truthful in one's words, actions, and intentions
	Excitement	A state of enthusiastic and heightened emotion, characterized by anticipation, thrill, or a sense of adventure
	Competence	The ability, skill, or proficiency to perform a task or fulfill a role successfully, demonstrating knowledge and capability in a particular area
	Sophistication	The quality of being refined, cultured, or elegant, often associated with having refined tastes, knowledge, and an understanding of complex concepts
	Ruggedness	The characteristic of being robust, sturdy, and durable, often associated with products or individuals that can withstand rough or challenging conditions
Brand as a symbol	Logo	A distinctive visual symbol or mark that represents a brand, company, or organization, typically designed to convey its identity and create recognition among the target audience
	Color scheme	A harmonious selection and arrangement of colors used in a design or visual composition,

Construct	Variable	Definition
	Typography	aimed at creating a specific mood, enhancing visual appeal, and reinforcing brand identity The style, size, and arrangement of the brand's text elements

3.3 Analysis

Based on Aaker's (1996) brand identity planning model, the websites were analyzed regarding the extent to which they include the specific brand identity elements. Each category was assigned a code indicating the extent to which the elements were implemented: 0 (not implemented), 1 (to some extent implemented), 2 (fully implemented). This process resulted in a data set showing the startup specific scores for each individual brand identity sub-variable. Furthermore, a second data set was created by calculating a sum-score for each startup. This involved adding up the scores assigned to the sub-variables, resulting in a sum-score for each of the four brand identity constructs. These sum-scores provided a comprehensive measure of the overall brand identity strength for each startup, by also capturing the combined effect of multiple sub-variables. After the coding process, the last step was to conduct a descriptive analysis, meaning to compare the codes assigned to individualism with the codes assigned to collectivism to identify relevant differences and similarities. Lastly, a regression analysis was conducted to identify whether the differences between individualistic and collectivistic startups are significant.

3.3.2 Cohen's Kappa

To guarantee the reliability of the codebook and the validity of the whole study, a second coder was asked to code 10% of the selected websites. A sample ($n = 6$) based on the 60 websites was sent to the second coder, including the codebook consisting of the exact same constructs, variables, and definitions. Based on this, a Cohen's Kappa could be calculated, which depends on the extent to which the two coders agree and disagree with each other. This value was calculated generally for the whole codebook, and specifically for each individual construct (Table 2). In order for a codebook to be reliable enough, the Cohen's Kappa should be above 0.6, but ideally above 0.65. Since the calculated value for the overall codebook is 0.704, it can be said that it is reliable enough to draw valid conclusions from it.

Table 2

Regular Demographic/Informational Table

Construct	Cohen's Kappa coefficient
Brand as a product	0.71
Brand as an organization	0.79
Brand as a person	0.65
Brand as a symbol	0.63

Results

In the following sections, the results of the study will be presented. First of all, the table below shows the descriptive statistics for both individualistic and collectivistic startups, showing the mean, standard deviation, minimum score, and maximum score for each of the four constructs. This is followed by a descriptive analysis, meaning that both types of startups will be compared regarding the mean scores observed on each construct and, specifically, on each sub-variable. Additionally, the results of a regression analysis will be presented, in order to assess whether the differences between individualistic and collectivistic startups are significant. Lastly, Table 4 provides an overview of which hypotheses appeared to be true or false, based on the identified results.

Table 3

Descriptive statistics for individualistic and collectivistic startups, including min. and max. scores

Construct	Individualistic	Collectivistic
Brand as a product	8.43 (<i>SD</i> = 1.48) Minimum = 5; Maximum = 11	6.5 (<i>SD</i> = 1.83) Minimum = 3; Maximum = 9
Brand as an organization	7.03 (<i>SD</i> = 1.69) Minimum = 4; Maximum = 10	5.1 (<i>SD</i> = 1.86) Minimum = 0; Maximum = 9
Brand as a person	7.8 (<i>SD</i> = 1.21) Minimum = 5; Maximum = 10	7.13 (<i>SD</i> = 1.98) Minimum = 0; Maximum = 10
Brand as a symbol	5.83 (<i>SD</i> = 0.38) Minimum = 5; Maximum = 6	5.5 (<i>SD</i> = 0.97) Minimum = 3; Maximum = 7

Table 4*Support for hypotheses*

Hypothesis	True or false
H1: Startups with an individualistic background will exhibit a stronger emphasis on the “brand as a product” construct in their brand identity, compared to startups with a collectivistic background.	True
H2: Both startups with an individualistic background and startups with a collectivistic background will perform similar on the “brand as an organization” construct.	False
H3: Startups with a collectivistic background will exhibit a stronger emphasis on the “brand as a person” construct in their brand identity, compared to startups with a collectivistic background.	False
H4: Both startups with an individualistic background and startups with a collectivistic background will perform similar on the “brand as a symbol” construct.	True

4.1 Brand as a product

When looking at “brand as a product” for startups with an individualistic background the overall identified mean score is 8.43 ($SD = 1.48$) and when considering the maximum possible score of 11, one can say that this indicates a relatively high implementation of the “brand as a product” dimension. In detail, the most scores within the “brand as a product” category were achieved between 8 and 10, underlining the previous observation. Additionally, normalization was applied to the data to address the differing maximum scores in each category, allowing for a consistent comparison of the scores across the four constructs. By doing so it was possible to identify on which brand identity element startups focus the most. Regarding “brand as a product” for individualistic startups, it was found that the companies, on average, achieved 77% of the maximum possible score for the first construct.

In the context of startups hailing from collectivistic countries, the average score for the dimension of "brand as a product" was found to be 6.5 ($SD = 1.83$). This score is nearly two points lower compared to individualistic startups, indicating that the examined companies from collectivistic backgrounds placed less emphasis on the construct of "brand as a product." While looking more specifically into this, it was identified that the far eastern startups scored 59% of the maximum possible score for the "brand as a product" dimension, which is 17% less than the individualistic companies.

The findings above suggest a notable difference in the implementation of this brand identity dimension, highlighting the cultural influence on the development and inc of brand identity in startups. To further investigate the difference between individualistic and collectivistic startups regarding the "brand as a product" construct, a regression analysis has been conducted. The analysis proves that startups with a collectivistic background demonstrate a lower implementation of the "brand as a product" brand identity element compared to startups with an individualistic background. This finding is statistically significant ($\beta = -1.93$, $SE = 0.430$, $t = -4.50$, $P < .001$), suggesting that the null hypothesis can be rejected.

Additionally, it is important to investigate the specific sub-variables of each construct, especially to make more detailed interpretations. To begin, an interesting observation that was made within this dimension is that individualistic startups scored rather high on all subcategories, despite the "perceived connection to a country" variable. For this variable, the analyzed western organizations only achieved an average score of 0.2 ($SD = 0.1$), suggesting most individualistic startups included in the analysis do not have any indications on their website that they only operate in a specific country. Further, what stands out is that for the "perceived connection to a country" variable, the exact opposite was observed for startups with a collectivistic background. For these startups an average score of 1.3 ($SD = 0.15$) was observed, meaning that 65% of the startups fully implemented a specific connection to a country on their website, compared to 10% for the individualistic startups. A second interesting finding within this dimension is, that for individualistic startups the highest scores were observed for the variables that relate to product information, such as "product associations" ($M = 1.88$, $SD = 0.063$) or "product usage associations" ($M = 1.97$, 0.03). One can say that western startups put a high emphasis on product information because they can be easily retrieved from their websites. On the other hand far eastern startups implemented less product information on their websites, which becomes apparent by looking at the overall mean score of the first dimension (Table 4) or, for instance, the specific variables which are

“product association” ($M = 1.4$, $SD = 0.12$) and “product usage associations” ($M = 1.23$, $SD = 0.09$).

4.2 Brand as an organization

For the mean score achieved by individualistic startups on the “brand as an organization” dimension of Aaker’s (1996) brand identity planning model, analyzing the collected data revealed a mean of 7.03 ($SD = 1.69$) out of a maximum possible score of 10. In detail, western startups scored 70% of the maximum possible score, which is 6% less than for the first category. However, a difference of 6% does not allow to assume a lesser implementation of this category, compared to the first one. Additionally, this is emphasized by the fact that the most scores within this dimension were achieved between 7 and 9, which reflects rather high scores.

When examining collectivistic startups another significant disparity was observed, as they obtained a mean score of almost 2 points lower than individualistic startups did in the “brand as an organization” category ($M = 5.1$, $SD = 1.86$). More specifically, collectivistic startups achieved only around half (51%) of the maximum possible score, with the most scores centered between 4 and 6. When comparing this to the “brand as a product” category, the finding suggests that the “brand as an organization” dimension is even less implemented. Further, this observation was verified by the regression analysis that has been conducted. As observed for the previous construct, individualistic startups show a higher implementation of the brand identity element than collectivistic startups did. This finding is supported by the results of the regression analysis, that the null hypothesis can be rejected ($\beta = -1.93$, $SE = 0.459$, $t = -4.21$, $P < .001$).

When looking at the sub-variables of the “brand as an organization” dimension in detail, one can see that for western startups rather high scores were assigned to all sub-variables, despite the “corporate social responsibility” variable, which represents, when considering all four dimensions combined, the second lowest score that has been achieved by companies from an individualistic background ($M = 1.13$, $SD = 0.16$). Interestingly, the same goes for the collectivistic startups that have been analyzed because their achieved score is the second lowest one too ($M = 0.6$, $SD = 0.16$). For both types of startups, this indicates a rather low implementation when comparing this to other brand identity elements. However, the individualistic startups have a score over 1, suggesting an implementation to some extent, while one can say that the collectivistic startups barely included any information on CSR on

their websites. A second interesting observation made within the “brand as an organization” construct is, that the “concern for customers” variable for collectivistic startups is the only one with a mean score above 1 within this specific dimension ($M = 1.667$, $SD = 0.1$). Due to this, it strongly stands out that collectivistic startups seem to care a lot for their customers, while focusing less on the other elements included in this dimension.

4.3 Brand as a person

Focusing on the “brand as a person” dimension, out of 10 possible points, the startups with an individualistic cultural background achieved, on average, a 7.8 ($SD = 1.21$), indicating a rather high implementation. Additionally, these companies scored around three-fourths (78%) of the highest possible score that could be achieved, which is, as in the second category, 10. Conversely, far eastern startups scored rather high on this dimension with an average score of 7.13 ($SD = 1.98$). This implies that, similar to western startups, they obtained approximately 71% of the maximum possible score. Therefore, no significant difference between the two cultural backgrounds was observed in this category, suggesting a similar level of implementation of the brand identity elements within the “brand as a person” dimension.

This is also reflected in the data gathered through the regression analysis because it revealed the null hypothesis cannot be rejected, suggesting that there is no significant difference between the two groups ($\beta = -0.667$, $SE = 0.424$, $t = -2.57$, $P = .121$) Additionally, this means that the strength of the cultural influence varies between the four brand identity dimensions of the brand identity planning model.

Generally speaking, collectivistic startups, on average, scored the highest on the “brand as a person” dimension, suggesting a strong focus on presenting a certain brand personality. However, analyzing the collected data revealed an obvious outlier, which is the “ruggedness” sub-variable ($M = 0.6$, $SD = 0.11$). In comparison, the score achieved by western startups for this variable is more than twice as large ($M = 1.47$, $SD = 0.1$), even though it is still their third lowest score within the “brand as a person” category. This comparison reveals the low extent to which far eastern startups are perceived as being robust and resilient. Still, the highest average score was observed for this construct, emphasizing the importance collectivistic startups assign to brand personality elements. This becomes even more apparent by further examining the construct of “brand as a person”. Interestingly, it was observed that only in this context collectivistic startups outperform individualistic startups in three out of five sub-variables. Although these differences are not substantial, it is still

interesting that only within this construct did companies with a collectivistic background manage to obtain higher scores.

4.4 Brand as a symbol

The last category that has been analyzed for this study was the “brand as a symbol” dimension. For both categories an average scoring of almost 100% was identified. More specifically, out of 6 possible points that could be achieved, individualistic startups had an average score of 5.83 ($SD = 0.38$) and collectivistic startups had an average score of 5.5 ($SD = 0.97$). As has been the case in the previous category, no relevant difference could be identified within this dimension. In other words, based on the result of the regression analysis, the null hypothesis could not be rejected, meaning that there is no significant difference between western and far eastern startups regarding the “brand as a symbol” construct ($\beta = -0.333$, $SE = 0.191$, $t = -1.75$, $P = .086$) Additionally, the “brand as a symbol” category is the only one in which both types of startups achieved almost an average score of 100%. This suggests that the visual elements of startups play an important role in both individualistic and collectivistic startup, which is reflected in the high degree of implementation that has been identified.

In conclusion, for the “brand as a symbol” construct, no relevant differences were observed, meaning that both types of startups, on average, almost scored the same. However, when looking specifically into the sub-variables, it came to attention that for both individualistic and collectivistic startups, the lowest scores within this construct were assigned to the “color scheme” variable. Western startups had a mean score of 1.9 ($SD = 0.06$) and far eastern startups had a mean score of 1.77 ($SD = 0.08$). Considering the fact that these scores are rather high but still the lowest one in the “brand as a symbol” construct, one can say that both individualistic and collectivistic startups seem to perceive “brand as a symbol” as the most important brand identity element.

Table 5*Calculated mean score for each sub-variable of the brand identity planning model*

Sub-variables	Mean individualistic startups	Mean collectivistic startups
Product associations	1.87	1.4
Product attributes	1.3	0.5
Perceived value and quality	1.4	0.93
Product usage associations	1.97	1.23
User type associations	1.7	1.13
Perceived connection to a country	0.2	1.3
Corporate social responsibility	1.13	0.63
Perceived quality	1.3	0.96
Innovativeness	1.5	0.93
Concern for customers	1.73	1.67
Perceived success	1.37	0.9
Sincerity	1.73	1.77
Excitement	1.53	1.6
Competence	1.83	1.7
Sophistication	1.23	1.47
Ruggedness	1.47	0.6
Logo	2	1.87
Color scheme	1.9	1.77
Typography	1.93	1.87

Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to investigate startups with an individualistic background and startups with a collectivistic background regarding the extent to which brand identity elements are implemented on their websites. Therefore, a corpus of 60 websites was developed and extensively analyzed in order to answer the research question: *To what extent does a difference exist between startups in an individualistic context vs. startups in a collectivistic context regarding the implementation of brand identity?* One can say that making use of a comparative content analysis was the right decision, since it allowed to answer the research question and investigate the developed hypotheses.

5.1 Main findings

Analyzing the collected data revealed that individualistic startups indeed put a higher emphasis on product related information, in comparison to far eastern startups. Therefore, this study found support for H1. For instance, Kramer (2007) pointed out that individualistic consumers are more likely to be influenced by product information, since this reflects their strong focus on achieving personal benefits. The literature that previously focused on the congruence between marketing and culture revealed that a strong focus on product related information is less likely to be influential in countries with a collectivistic culture (Han & Shavitt, 1994). In line with this is the finding of this research study that individualistic startups notably appeared to focus more on including clear product information on their websites, compared to collectivistic startups. Additionally, this does relate to what Hofstede's (1984) collectivism dimension entails, which is that people with a collectivistic background are less interested in product information that help them to achieve personal benefits, but more in information that leads to group benefits.

Further, one can say that the collectivistic cultural dimension is strongly dependent on a country level, meaning that the related behavior and attitudes cannot necessarily be found in other parts of the world. As Hofstede (1984) points out, collectivism emphasizes the importance of loyalty to one's community or nation, indicating that people from collectivistic countries are strongly group oriented, however, mainly within their personal cultural context. This is reflected in the data that has been collected for the "brand as a product" dimension because far eastern startups scored rather high on the "perceived connection to a country"

sub-variable. In other words, it was found that most collectivistic startup websites mentioned that they only operate within a specific country. On the other hand, individualists generally prioritize individual goals and personal achievement, meaning that they have a greater inclination to explore opportunities beyond their home country. This is also reflected within the collected data since the individualistic startups almost scored 0 on the “perceived connection to a country” sub-variable. Based on this, the interpretation can be drawn that western startups prefer to be perceived as a global organization, whilst far eastern startups have a high preference for connecting their services to the country they operate in. This relates to what collectivism suggest, because while perceiving group orientation as being quite important, this mainly happens within the country of origin. There are many examples of services that verify this; the most prominent example might be the Chinese instant messaging service “WeChat”. According to Statista (2023) the platform has over 1.3 billion users and two-thirds of them live in China. When looking at similar services developed in the western world, for instance WhatsApp, the opposite can be observed since it is the most popular instant messaging service in over 100 countries (Business of Apps, 2023)

Next, it was hypothesized that both individualistic and collectivistic startups will perform similar on the “brand as an organization” construct. However, it appeared that H2 is false. While individualistic startups, as in the previous construct scored rather high, this was not observed for the collectivistic startups. Additionally, this is not necessarily in line with what literature found about collectivism because it suggests that brands with this cultural background would score rather high on the second dimension, especially because collectivism entails, for instance, a strong focus on CSR (Lee & Kim, 2010). Nonetheless, the analyzed collectivistic startups scored rather high on one of the variables, which is “concern for customers”. This means that the brand identity element of “brand as an organization” is not completely absent from collectivistic startup websites, however, a different focus is put on it.

When looking at the third hypothesis (H3), it was found that it is false too, meaning that collectivistic startups did not exhibit a stronger emphasis on the “brand as a person” construct. To be clear, it was found that no relevant difference does exist within the scores that have been achieved by both types of startups. In fact, both individualistic and collectivistic startups appeared to put a similar strong emphasis on this dimension. However, the collectivistic startups stood out more because when comparing the “brand as a person” dimension to the other ones, the highest achieved score for collectivistic companies was observed. This allows for the interpretation that personality is the brand identity element that

is perceived as most important by collectivistic startups. It can be assumed that this is due to the instance that collectivism stands for social conformity and thus positive behavior in social contexts (Hofstede, 1984; Triandis, 2001). Based on the literature review of this study, it was expected that western organizations would perform well in this category, due to Aaker's (2001) study that investigated brand personality and due to this, developed the dimensions that were included in this scale. It is important to mention that the collectivistic startups showed a notably high implementation on all sub-variables within the "brand as a person" construct, besides the "ruggedness" variable. Interestingly, Aaker (2001) compared the five personality traits to collectivistic startups and made the same observation that "ruggedness" is less represented in the collectivistic culture. This can be explained by considering that collectivists, besides wanting to be positively perceived by others, have a demand for modesty (Kurman, 2011). In other words, due to social influences collectivists may be inclined to downplay their actions and not express their own strength and resilience.

Lastly, this study was able to find support for the fourth hypothesis (H4), which is that both startups with an individualistic background and startups with a collectivistic background will perform similar on the "brand as a symbol" construct. In fact, both startups did not only score nearly the same on this dimension, but also achieved the highest average score when comparing to the other constructs. This suggests that this brand identity element is not significantly influenced by the cultural dimensions, meaning that both individualistic and collectivistic startups put the same strong emphasis on symbolism.

5.2 Theoretical implications

When combining the discussed literature and the research findings of this study, one can say that a contribution to the field of brand identity and culture was achieved. It is worth noting that a literature gap was identified when it comes to the relationship between individualism-collectivism and brand identity. The findings of this study, however, shed light on the interesting relationship between the cultural dimension of individualism-collectivism and brand identity. By investigating the relationship between culture and brand identity, this research expands the understanding of how this interplay functions. Further, while finding support for H1 and H4 in the scientific literature, there has also been deviation observed, regarding H2 and H3. While the implementation of brand identity elements for individualistic startups constantly appeared rather high, there were interesting differentiations observed for collectivistic startups. On the one hand, it became apparent that far eastern companies scored

lower on certain constructs than expected, for instance on the “brand as an organization” construct. On the other hand, this study revealed that this does not necessarily indicate a diminished interest in the overall construct. Instead, it emphasizes a stronger focus on specific sub-variables within the construct. What this implies for theory is, that brand identity is a complex concept that cannot only be investigated by considering general variables. It is important to break down these variables to get a clear understanding of the differences between cultures. By doing so, it can be prevented to make thoughtless assumptions and interpretations.

5.3 Practical implications

Besides the theoretical implications, practical implications can be drawn that might aid marketers and companies with operating in diverse cultural contexts. Understanding the relationship between brand identity and individualism-collectivism can help with making strategic branding decisions and improving brand perception among organizations target audience. When trying to be successful across borders, it should be kept in mind that not necessarily the same brand identity elements will be as effective as in the country of origin. This study revealed, besides some similarities, significant differences between individualistic and collectivistic startups. Based on the findings it can be said that when western startups aim to expand into far eastern markets, it is important to not solely put a strong emphasis on all elements that are mentioned in the brand identity planning model. In fact, it is necessary to consider cultural sensitivities and specifically focus on certain sub-variables. A good example for this is the “ruggedness” sub-variable of the “brand as a person” construct. As stated in the main findings section, collectivistic startups had a rather low score on this specific sub-variable while scoring high on the other sub-variables of the construct. This suggests that individualistic startups aiming for success in the far eastern market should not place as strong an emphasis on ruggedness as they might do in their country of origin. Overall, it is important to keep in mind that brand identity among startups indeed varies within different cultural contexts and it is necessary to adjust branding accordingly when aiming to operate across borders.

5.4 Limitations

Despite the fact that this study provides valuable insights into the field of brand identity and culture, there were two limitations identified. First of all, the codebook that has been developed is based on a brand identity model constructed by western academia. This suggests that the four elements of Aaker's (1996) brand identity planning model relate to individualistic companies and not necessarily to collectivistic companies. By also including a brand identity model developed by far eastern academia, and comparing them to each other, it might have been possible to identify more detailed similarities and differences.

The second limitation of this research study relates to cultural generalization, meaning that the general idea of individualism-collectivism has been incorporated. However, it may be that cultural dimensions and their influence on brand identity vary across different countries and regions. By focusing on more country specific cultural influences, this study might have resulted in more universally applicable findings.

5.5 Future research

Based on the limitations mentioned above, it would be interesting for future research to also implement a far eastern brand identity model. By doing so, a new perspective on brand identity could be developed, since low scores on a western model by collectivistic startups do not necessarily suggest that they focus less on brand identity. In fact, it may be the case that they simply focus on other elements that are not incorporated in the western understanding of brand identity. Additionally, future research could not only focus on individualism-collectivism as a general cultural dimension but investigate specific cultural contexts in more detail. Based on this, it may be possible to draw clearer conclusions regarding individualism-collectivism and the effect on brand identity.

Besides this, this research study mainly operationalized a quantitative approach combined with some qualitative examinations. However, mainly focusing on a qualitative approach by, for instance, making use of in-depth interviews, focus groups, or case studies could provide richer insights into what the specific brand identity elements actually mean for organizations and why they are perceived as either important or less important. This would also help in making clearer comparisons between individualistic and collectivistic startups.

Lastly, a future longitudinal study could be of great value, for instance, by operationalizing a research design that measures cultural values and brand identity elements

over time or considers recent events that might influence brand identity. This might also be interesting because it could help in controlling for moderation and seeing whether brand identity is mainly subject to cultural differences or certain events that either occur internationally or nationally.

5.6 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine the relationship between brand identity and the cultural dimensions of individualism-collectivism, by analyzing websites of startups and identifying to which extent certain brand identity elements are implemented. The four brand identity elements used for this are based on Aaker's (1996) brand identity planning model.

The results suggest that individualistic startups tend to implement all four brand identity elements on their websites. However, this was not observed for collectivistic startups since they scored only high on two out of four constructs. Nonetheless, further interpretations revealed that this does not mean far eastern startups are less concerned with their brand identity but have different priorities and preferences.

Based on this finding it is important to point out that further research is needed. This is due to the fact that a western model was used to compare individualistic and collectivistic startups. This revealed interesting findings, however, it only shows which brand identity elements are less important for far eastern companies and does not reveal which elements are considered as important beyond the brand identity planning model.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Corpus for individualistic startups

Technology	Service	Banking
https://www.spacex.com	https://www.uber.com/de/en/	https://stripe.com/de
https://slack.com	https://www.coursera.org	https://www.revolut.com
https://www.deepmind.com	https://www.airbnb.com	https://wise.com
https://openai.com	https://www.doordash.com	https://www.allpay.net
https://www.palantir.com/de/	https://www.duolingo.com/learn	https://traderepublic.com/de-de
https://nutspace.in	https://deliveroo.de/en/	https://securitize.io
https://stability.ai	https://www.blablacar.com	https://nuovopay.com
https://www.backmarket.com/en-us	https://www.kitopi.com	https://www.soldo.com/en-eu/
https://www.builder.ai	https://www.taprm.com	http://factris.com
http://bluedotcorp.com		https://www.tesla.com
https://cyber-insight.de		

Appendix B

Corpus for collectivistic startups

Technology	Service	Banking
https://www.hikky.co.jp/en	https://caddi-inc.com/en/	https://about.paypay.ne.jp/
http://www.netease.com	https://m.weidian.com	https://xueqiu.com
https://www.tencent.com/en-us/index.html	https://nota.io	https://www.antgroup.com
https://home.baidu.com	https://www.ctrip.com	https://paytm.com
https://www.mi.com/index.html	https://www.kakaocorp.com/page/	https://corporate.jd.com
https://www.zhihu.com/signin?next=%2F	https://www.gojek.com/en-id/	

Technology	Service	Banking
	Logivan	https://www.sushi.com
https://www.lazada.com.ph	https://www.ovice.com	https://toss.im/en
https://dioseve.com/en/home-en/	https://www.agoda.com/?cid=1844104	https://www.tngwallet.hk/en/home
https://udaan.com/	https://en.pinkoi.com	https://tonikbank.com
https://www.bytedance.com/en/	https://www.zenrooms.com	

Appendix C

Filled in codebook, showing the assigned scores for each individualistic startup

Startup (Individualistic)	Brand as a product	Brand as an organization	Brand as a person	Brand as a symbol
SpaceX	10	4	8	6
Stripe	10	10	8	6
Slack	9	9	7	5
Uber	8	8	10	6
Coursera	10	9	8	6
AirBNB	5	5	5	6
Revolut	9	8	9	6
Wise	9	8	8	6
Deepmind	7	7	7	5
OpenAI	9	7	8	6
Doordash	8	5	8	6
Palantir	8	6	9	6
Duolingo	8	6	8	6
Deliveroo	9	5	6	6
Blablacar	8	8	7	6
Nutspace	9	7	9	5

Startup (Individualistic)	Brand as a product	Brand as an organization	Brand as a person	Brand as a symbol
StabilityAI	7	8	9	6
Backmarket	6	8	9	6
BuilderAI	10	8	7	6
Bluedotgroup	8	7	9	6
Kitopi	10	5	6	6
TapRM	10	7	9	6
Allpay	11	6	5	5
Traderepublic	7	5	8	6
Securitize	8	7	8	6
Nuovopay	9	10	8	6
Soldo	10	9	8	6
Factris	5	4	7	6
Tesla	8	9	9	6

Appendix D

Filled in codebook, showing the assigned scores for each collectivistic startup

Startup (Collectivistic)	Brand as a product	Brand as an organization	Brand as a person	Brand as a symbol
PayPay	9	3	6	6
Hikky	6	4	7	6
Netease	8	4	8	3
Tencent	3	9	9	6
Baidu	7	8	9	4
Xiaomi	9	8	10	6
Zhihu	6	3	3	6
Caddi	4	4	8	6

Startup (Collectivistic)	Brand as a product	Brand as an organization	Brand as a person	Brand as a symbol
Weidian	3	0	0	6
Nota	4	4	5	4
Ctrip	9	6	7	6
Kakao corp	6	5	7	6
Gojek	7	4	8	6
Xueqiu	8	5	6	6
Antgroup	5	7	9	6
Agoda	6	6	8	6
Lazada	5	4	6	4
Dioseve	8	5	5	6
Logivan	8	5	9	6
Ovice	6	4	8	6
Paytm	9	7	8	6
JD	6	6	7	3
Sushi	4	3	7	6
Udaan	7	5	7	4
Bytedance	4	4	8	6
Pinkoi	8	6	8	5
Zenrooms	8	7	8	6
Toss	7	7	7	6
TNGWallet	7	4	7	6
Tonikbank	8	6	9	6