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Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation Declaration Form

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Abstract

Purpose: Social media is a key construct in the process of global brand identity and its expression across cultures. Despite this, there is limited empirical and theoretical research on the role of social media platform affordances in the process of building cross-cultural global brand identity. In this dissertation, the role of social media in the construction of global brand identity is explored through digital cross-cultural branding strategies.

Method: This study implemented an interpretative social constructionist philosophy. The contents published by Nike, Coke, Uniqlo, and Samsung are examined from February to November 2025, comparing culturally contextualised meanings across the US, European, and Asian countries. NVivo-14 was used to facilitate qualitative thematic analysis on publicly accessible content published on TikTok, Instagram, and X.

Key findings: The key findings are as follows:

- Brands maintain their identity through anchored coherence rather than replication.
- Platforms define significant identity elements and authenticity.
- Localisation can vary from surface signals to reframing meaning, thus impacting risk and resonance.

Practical contribution: The study demonstrates how audiences play a crucial role in defining how a brand is perceived online. Meaning is interpreted differently by people in various ways. Additionally, their responses may have a more positive or negative impact on defining a brand as authentic. The brand managers can find a clear approach for cross-cultural social media branding from the findings. The approach is to have a few identity anchors and stick to them everywhere, such as values, tone of voice guidelines, or a signature story, and then make the implementation for each social media platform different. Make use of the formats and content styles that are native to each social media platform. Make sure that the visuals, language, and storytelling are consistent with what resonates with the respective cultures and what the people are comfortable with. Also, monitor the audience feedback.

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List of Abbreviations

CBBE- Customer-Based Brand Equity
FYP- For you Page (Tik-Tok algorithm-driven feed)
NVivo- Qualitative data analysis Software.
RQ- Research Question.
UGC- User- Generated Content.

Glossary

Brand Identity - The set of values, meaning and association that explain how the brand seeks to be perceived by its audiences in different markets.

Global Brand Identity - A brand's coherent identity that is recognised across international markets while allowing flexibility for cultural and platform-specific adaptation.

Cultural Localisation - The process of adapting brand content, tone, visuals, and narratives to align with the cultural expectations, values, and norms of specific regions.

Digital Branding- The strategic use of digital platforms, particularly social media, to communicate brand identity, engage audiences, and shape brand meaning.

Platform Affordances - The technical features and interaction possibilities offered by a social media platform that shape how content is produced, distributed, and interpreted.

Participatory Culture - A digital environment in which users actively contribute to content creation, interpretation, and circulation, influencing brand meaning through engagement and co-creation.

Social Construction of Meaning- The idea that brand meaning and authenticity are produced through interactions between brands, platforms, and audiences rather than being fully controlled by organisations.

The Role of Social Media Platforms in Building Global Brand Identity: Cross-Cultural Analysis of Digital Branding Strategies

1.1 Background and Rationale

The emergence of social media platforms has completely revolutionised the manner in which brands communicate with their audiences, particularly for international marketing. While companies look ahead to expanding their presence across borders, it becomes important for them to successfully adapt their brand identities locally while presenting a coherent global presence (Makri et al., 2019). This involves changes in messaging and visuals, storytelling to resonate with diverse cultural contexts. Social media, being dynamic and an interactive medium, presents a platform for brands to create customised content that can live up to local preferences, behaviours, and values (Wu and Li, 2018). Yet, the strategic balance lies exactly in how global consistency and local relevance are matched in digital branding strategies.

Over the years, TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook have become critical in determining brand perception for any brand across the globe (Alsaleh et al., 2019). Each platform has its distinctive traits. TikTok is all about short-form video content and going viral, Instagram is for aesthetically engaging content and stories, and Twitter is more about engagement with simple text. As these platforms are still evolving, on one hand, they create an opportunity to connect with consumers in many new ways, while on the other hand, they also test brands' abilities to maintain cohesion in branding. Brands have to tailor their content to local tastes but must do so without losing their core and global identity (Buzeta et al., 2024). This research addresses the vital gap in understanding international brands and their way of negotiating the complexities of cross-cultural marketing and digital branding. However, although substantial literature exists on the issue of digital marketing and brand management, there is limited focus on how brands adjust their identity and messaging specifically on social media platforms in different cultural contexts. By exploring this area, the study aims to provide valuable insights for businesses looking to refine their global branding strategies in the digital age.

1.2 Research Aim

This study aims to explore how international brands adjust their brand identity and digital messaging on social media across different cultural contexts to assess the effects of platform-specific features on brand perception across markets.

1.3 Research Problem

Global brands leverage social media platforms to maintain a consistent identity across different countries. However, it is often tricky for managers to do so because, although there is considerable flexibility to adapt to different contexts, there is little control over how the options, algorithms, and modes of interaction of social media platforms influence the comprehension of brand identity. This way, a brand might be perceived differently on TikTok, Instagram, X, and so on, even when a brand manager strives to create a consistent identity across these platforms. Previous scholarly research has focused on cross-cultural branding or platform communication, though rarely has research sought to illustrate the interaction between these two forces. Moreover, previous research has considered brand identity to be static. There has been less emphasis placed on how identity changes over time with the use of storytelling, visualism, and audience engagement inherent to platforms. Further, there is limited explanation on how meanings, emotions, and narratives are transformed across cultures, with variations of surface localisations such as translated text and symbols getting the most attention. Additionally, there are no sufficient explanations of the influence of design elements on the perception of authenticity and global brand identity consistency across regions. This study focuses to explore the issue of how global brands ensure recognizability while adapting content across platforms and cultures, and the response of the audience to the adaptations made on the varying platforms.

1.4 Research Objectives

- To investigate how international brands adapt tone, imagery, and storytelling for social media across cultures
- To assess how platform-specific features (TikTok trends vs. Instagram visuals, for example) influence brand perception
- To identify challenges in balancing global consistency with local relevance in social media branding.

- To explore how consumer behaviour and cultural preferences impact the success of digital branding for better engagement and loyalty

1.5 Research Questions

- How do international brands adapt their tone, imagery, and/or storytelling across various markets using social media?
- What is the effect of platform-specific features on global brand perception across different cultural contexts?
- How do cultural nuances influence how brands design their social media content for international audiences?
- What are the main challenges that international brands face when it comes to adapting their digital branding strategies to various social media platforms and cultural settings?
- How do localised social media campaigns affect consumer engagement and brand loyalty across different countries?

1.6 Significance of the Study

The study creates essential academic, practical, and social benefits. The research extends existing academic knowledge through its study of global branding and cultural adaptation and digital communication, which uses cross-cultural theory and platform affordance theory. The research results in a comprehensive understanding of digital brand identity management through its study of branding across various platforms and different cultural settings. The study results provide multinational marketing teams, brand managers, and digital strategists with practical recommendations. The study identifies effective adaptation methods and common errors that support the creation of branding methods that maintain brand consistency while adapting to cultural differences. The proposed practice-oriented model aims to guide decision-making in global social media campaigns. The research improves understanding of how people from different cultures communicate through digital platforms. Brand engagement in social and cultural dialogue leads to brand messages that shape cultural attitudes and social expectations, and consumer belief systems.

1.7 Scope of the Study

The researchers defined study boundaries to achieve a complete analytical examination while maintaining practical research limits. The research focuses on four international brands that operate in two or more global markets, that include North America, Europe, and East Asia. The researchers selected these regions because they display cultural differences and economic importance, and people in these areas actively use social media platforms. The study analyses three primary social media platforms, which include TikTok, Instagram, and X. Through their different communication systems and content presentation methods, the platforms create conditions that researchers use to study their distinct features. The investigation uses secondary sources, which comprise publicly accessible online content that includes social media posts, videos, visuals, captions, engagement data, and corporate materials about branding strategies.

1.8 Theoretical Framework

The research utilises an integrated theoretical framework that combines brand management, cultural theory, and digital media studies. Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model provides a foundation for understanding how brand identity and meaning are constructed in consumers' minds through awareness, associations, and emotional responses. The Brand Identity Prism developed by Kapferer enables brand identity assessment through its multiple identity dimensions, which show both internal brand values and external consumer perceptions. Hofstede's cultural dimensions framework helps researchers understand how different regions exhibit unique communication styles, values, and engagement techniques. The framework enables researchers to systematically assess the way cultural elements shape branding methods and consumer behaviour. Platform affordance theory serves as the framework that researchers use to study the way social media platforms' technological capabilities influence branding development, platform design elements and strategic communication methods.

2. Literature Review

Social media has created a dramatic shift in the strategic underpinnings of global branding, enabling international companies to communicate with culturally diverse audiences through dynamic, interactive, and highly customised means (Aktaş, 2025). In contrast to traditional advertising, which often features one-directional and standardised messaging, social media encourages real-time engagement, user co-creation, and flexible storytelling that is sensitive to local context. Multinational companies face the growing challenge of maintaining coherence for their global brand identity while ensuring cultural relevance and platform-specific resonance as they expand digitally (Alsaleh et al., 2019). This literature review critically synthesizes current theoretical and empirical scholarship on global branding, cross-cultural adaptation, and platform-specific digital communication. Furthermore, it directly integrates gaps in current knowledge into the discussion, highlighting the need for a multi-platform, intercultural investigation of how global brands construct, negotiate, and adapt their digital identities.

2.1 Global Brand Identity Foundations

2.1.1 Brand Identity as a Multi-Dimensional Construct

Brand identity has traditionally been conceptualised as an organised but dynamic system of symbols, values, and personality traits through which consumers distinguish one brand from another (Brodie, 2017). One of the most influential models is the Brand Identity Prism developed by Kapferer, which identifies six interrelated facets: physique, personality, culture, relationship, reflection, and self-image. Together, these dimensions outline the outward expression and inner entity of the brand (Spiga and Cardebat, 2024). It is a means of anchoring global branding by articulating how brands want to be perceived across markets. However, in digital ecosystems that rapidly circulate, interpret, and reshape content across diverse audiences, brands increasingly struggle to achieve stability along these many dimensions (Black and Veloutsou, 2017). The emphasis on coherence in the prism finds tension with the fluid, user-driven qualities of social media, pointing toward a need to reinterpret traditional branding frameworks for digital contexts.

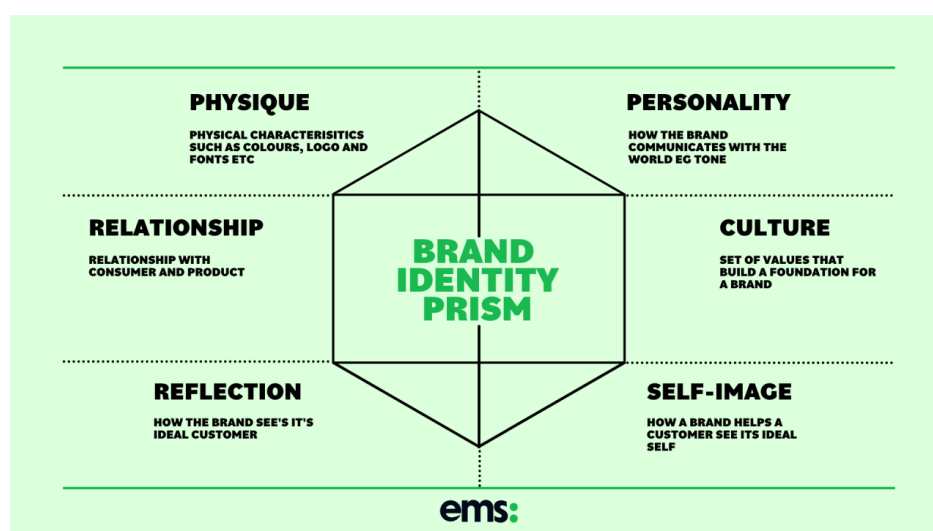


Figure 1. Kapferer Brand Identity Prism (Teja, 2023)

2.1.2 Consumer-Based Brand Equity

Complementing identity-based views, Keller's CBBE Model focuses attention on the consumer's psychological responses. This model posits that brand equity issues from awareness, perceived quality, associations, and loyalty—all created via consumer experiences rather than corporate interferences (Bunker, 2020). In social media spaces, these are created through sharing, commenting, remixing, and engaging in brand-issued challenges, among other interactive practices. Such engagements go beyond transactional marketing to generate relational, effective, and community-driven meanings. Thus, brand equity is a co-creation between the brand and its digitally empowered audience (Buzeta et al., 2024). This perspective underlines the imperative for global brands to shift away from uniform messaging and toward building engaging, culturally sensitive online relations. A recurring limitation of the existing literature is a reliance on applying offline branding theories directly to social media, without accounting for platform-specific user behaviour or algorithmic mediation. There is thus a limited understanding of how corporate-driven brand identity frameworks play out across interactive and culturally heterogeneous digital spaces.



Keller's Brand Equity Model – CBBE Model

Figure 2. Keller's Brand Equity Model (Bunker, 2020)

This theory underlines how brand perception must navigate the dynamics of a specific platform, thereby answering the question of how international brands adjust their tone, imagery, and storytelling across markets (RQ1). Furthermore, this theory explains the platform-specific perception of a brand (RQ2).

It purports that the equity of a firm's brand varies significantly across different platforms based on factors such as user engagement, the nature of the platform itself, and the audience's interaction with the brand.

2.2 Cultural Adaptation in Global Digital Branding

2.2.1 Cultural Variability in Message Interpretation

Culture has a significant impact on the way messages are interpreted and consumed by an audience. According to Jan et al. (2024), Hofstede's cultural dimensions of individualism-collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity-femininity help predict cultural communication preferences between regions. Japan, China, and South Korea are examples of collectivist societies that like messages focusing on community and shared values, while the US and Western

Europe are individualistic cultures that prefer narratives surrounding personal achievement and autonomy. Empirical evidence, according to Boštjančič et al. (2018), supports these distinctions: Asian consumers prefer discreet, symbolic, visual stories mirroring harmony, whereas Western markets like strong, emotive imagery. Examples are shown not only in visual elements but also in the use of humour, colour symbolism, tone, and the expression of authority. Thus, global brands have to understand and adapt these cultural codes while creating social media content. This is more than linguistic translation; it requires cultural sensitivity toward values, aesthetics, and communicative norms. Most of the literature about cultural adaptation refers to traditional advertising, but few cover cultural adaptation for dynamic, engaging, and fast-evolving social media environments; Makri et al. (2019) note this as a research gap. The importance of understanding cultural nuances in these digital ecosystems rises because brands increasingly participate in culturally diverse virtual communities.

Despite its widespread use for cultural adaptation studies, Hofstede's model has been criticised over the years for generalisation and a static view of cultures. According to critics, the model presumes that cultures are homogeneous and stable, a factor that does not align with the increasing hybridity and fluidity that characterise the emergent cultures in the digital era. Moreover, Hofstede's dimensions lack the aspect of cultural hybridity and intersectionality, without which brand identity would be little understood in today's globalised and digital world. In view of user-generated content and digital platforms challenging traditional models of cultural adaptation, there is an increasing need to rethink how brands navigate these changing dynamics. The combination of brand identity theory, cultural adaptation theory, platform affordances, emotional branding, and participatory culture offers a comprehensive framework in which to base global branding strategies. Brand identity theory underlines the importance of coherence across markets, while cultural adaptation theory emphasises the need for a modification of tone, imagery, and messaging to resonate with local cultures while core brand values remain preserved. The theory of platform affordances demonstrates how the characteristics of each digital platform necessitate the optimisation of platform-specific features within the content of each brand. Emotional branding underlines the need for the cultivation of emotional connections with consumers, a development that must be culturally relevant and coherent across platforms. Finally, participatory culture discloses how

user-generated content shapes brand identity into a dynamic relationship in which brands need to balance global coherence with local relevance. Taken together, these various theories underscore the need for brands to align with cultural nuance, platform-specific features, and consumer participation, all while sustaining a consistent, emotionally engaging brand identity across digital landscapes.

2.2.2 Localisation versus Global Consistency in Branding

One of the most discussed issues in international marketing refers to whether brands need to adopt a standardised global messaging strategy or make it country-specific. The classical viewpoint holds that global standardisation helps maintain brand coherence and reduces costs, while contemporary scholarship views cultural adaptation as a determining factor in relevance and engagement. Saari et al. (2022) have shown that effective social media brand communication often requires a hybrid or "glocal" approach, whereby core global identity is maintained through relevant messaging, tone, imagery, and narratives fitting cultural expectations. For example, it has been shown that large multinational brands in Asia and Europe make strategic changes in the emotional, linguistic, and symbolic content of their social media advertising campaigns to resonate with local audiences but retain overarching brand principles (Bekh, 2016).

However, the majority of empirical studies explore either platform-specific or region-specific cases, and thus, the literature says little about how global brands balance global identity with localised communication across various platforms. This is particularly relevant given the fragmentation of social media and the rapid evolution of digital consumer behaviour. The literature on global branding generally relates to tension between standardisation and either localisation or "globalisation" of brand communications. Whereas standardisation implies a coherent global identity of the brand across different markets, localisation would support the use of brand messages situated in the local cultural contexts. This tension is heightened in the digital era, where brands need to balance a desire for global coherence against the respect of cultural differences across regions. The debate continues because brands have to make a choice whether the global identity can ever resonate with the locals or if deeper customisation is required to create relevance and participation in every market.

The Brand Identity Prism by Kapferer shows how a brand's identity develops when a brand moves from a local to a global market. This happens, especially in the Culture dimension. Local brands, initially, are bound closely to regional traditions, values, and preferences, melding their identity in the light of specific cultural contexts. As brands expand globally, they strive for a balance between core brand values and cultural adaptation. This shift to global consistency from local would mean that the core identity of the brand-its values, personality, and culture- remains constant across markets, but product offerings, messaging, and marketing strategies can change to meet cross-cultural needs. For instance, McDonald's offers regionally tailored menus while maintaining its brand essence of fast, affordable food. For Coca-Cola, the message of happiness and refreshment is kept standardised across all cultures. It is challenging to find a balance between sensitivity to culture and brand consistency to ensure relevance and recognition across all markets.

The important point of debate is how a global identity can be maintained in the context of participatory media. In traditional branding models, consistency and control over the brand narrative proved extremely important. However, the rise of user-generated content and consumer interaction on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter affects this notion. In participatory media, where consumers contribute to brand narratives and share content, it is certainly more difficult to imagine brands maintaining an unchanging identity. This does pose questions as to whether a brand can, indeed, control identity or if it must move toward greater fluidity and co-creation, driven by consumer participation.

Another major challenge facing the ownership of identity by a brand comes through platform cultures. Every platform has its rules, culture, and user behaviour that dictate how brands are perceived and engage with audiences. As an example, the concentration of TikTok on vitality and user-generated content makes the platform less controlled and more collaborative than, say, Instagram, which ultimately centres around polished and well-controlled imagery from a brand viewpoint. And the more these cultures evolve on platforms, the question arises: can a brand own its identity, or is its identity ultimately dictated by the culture of the platform?

This would therefore suggest that brands must adjust their tone, imagery, and storytelling strategies to resonate with the various cultural contexts; hence, RQ3. It addresses how brands need to localise their content in culturally relevant ways that are presented while maintaining their core brand identity. This theory assists in the integration of cultural nuances in how brands design social media content for their international audiences. Research into cross-market brand communication underlines that different cultures have significant differences in narrative structures, tone, and visual styles. For example, Coca-Cola's global campaigns reveal that narratives across the world change to lean toward unity and community in collectivist societies, while in Western markets, they focus on individuality and empowerment. Similarly, Uniqlo adopts different messaging strategies, focusing on simplicity, minimalism, and functionality in Japan, while diversity and inclusion are key in the US.

As Morris (2022) explains, Nike similarly uses TikTok in Japan and Instagram in the US, leveraging the differences in platform dynamics and cultural context. In this regard, Nike exploits short-form video content and interactive trends peculiar to TikTok to connect with local youth culture in Japan, while using Instagram in the US to showcase lifestyle imagery and fitness culture function of how the affordances of different platforms bear on how brands tell stories. Other examples of platform and culture-driven adaptations include Samsung's localised content during product launches. When launching the Galaxy phone, for example, Samsung developed region-specific campaigns that tailored messaging to local cultural preferences. In Korea, the messaging focused on technology and innovation, but in the US, the messaging shifted to lifestyle and user experience. This is a good example of how the same product can be positioned differently based on cultural expectations. One of the strongest examples of cultural adaptation is the "Share a Coke" campaign from Coca-Cola. While the core idea of printing popular names on bottles remained consistent, the execution varied: in Western markets, first names were used to convey individualism, while in collectivist cultures like China and India, family names were chosen to reflect family values. Similarly, the "Life Wear" campaign of Uniqlo was adapted for China, the US, and Europe. These examples aside, empirical work is fragmented. Most studies adopt a single-brand, single-country comparative format rather than being multi-brand, multi-market analyses.

2.3 Platform-specific dynamics in digital branding

2.3.1 Affordances and Interaction Norms of Social Media Platforms

Social media platforms come with many differences regarding technological affordances, content formats, and norms of interaction. This shapes not only how users engage with content but also how brands must communicate to achieve impact. TikTok, fueled by short-form video and algorithmic vitality, incentivizes creativity, authenticity, and the act of participating in trends (Ibrahim and Aljarah, 2023). Co-creation then becomes a core branding mechanism, where a participatory culture invites users to replicate and reinterpret brand content. Instagram is all about aesthetic cohesion, visual storytelling, and aspirational lifestyles. Brands utilise Instagram to convey polished and identity-driven narratives through photos, reels, stories, and curated feeds. X allows for quick, text-based communication and provides immediacy, conversation, and public discourse. This, therefore, has evolved into a medium for real-time engagement, customer service, and brand voice development (Rangaswamy et al., 2020). The existing literature often isolates platform-specific studies-for example, only Instagram or only TikTok-without exploring how brands adapt their identity across different logic and audience expectations across multiple platforms. Given that many consumers usually engage with the same brand across channels, this fragmented approach creates lacunae in our understanding of how brand identity coherence is maintained-or indeed, challenged-across these multi-platforms.

2.3.2 Participatory Cultures and User Co-Creation

The participatory nature of social media is now a defining feature of the contemporary branding landscape. Buzeta et al. (2024) found that users, influencers, and online communities are increasingly significant creators of brand meaning, often more so than corporate communications. Participatory features, such as TikTok's and Instagram's duets, hashtags, memes, and user challenges, provide audiences with the power to reinterpret, remix, and redistribute brand content. This transforms brand meaning from a carefully controlled corporate construct into a negotiated cultural artefact. While co-creation enhances authenticity and engagement, it does so at risk. Users may generate content that runs counter to brand values or create viral interpretations not aligned with corporate objectives.

These dynamics place demands on brands to be flexible and culturally smart while retaining their foundational identity (Rehman et al., 2022). There is an ongoing discussion with regard to convergence versus divergence in cross-cultural social media behaviours. On one hand, the global nature of digital platforms might suggest convergence in social media behaviours, with audiences across cultures behaving similarly because of the influence of shared digital spaces and platform affordances. On the other hand, cultural differences may lead to divergence in behaviours wherein users in different regions interact with brands and media in ways shaped by local norms and traditions, as influenced by their values. This debate is crucial for understanding how global brands should adapt their social media strategies to account for both global trends and regional differences in user behaviour. Existing studies predominantly focus on the consumer cultures of the West, therefore leaving a significant gap in understanding how co-creation unfolds across culturally diverse digital environments. The platform-specific challenges come from studies that investigated how social media platform features (algorithms, interactivity, and user behaviour) pose challenges in developing digital strategies for brands (RQ4). Making this link between the theory and research questions more explicit strengthens the coherence between the theoretical framework and the objectives of the project.

2.3.3 Algorithmic Visibility and Its Branding Implications

The role of algorithms in shaping visibility, engagement, and content style, and thus brand identity formation, is immense. Gaining insight into how algorithms shape these dimensions is crucial for the understanding of digital branding dynamics. For instance, the TikTok FYP algorithm serves as one of the drivers for visibility and engagement on the platform, prioritizing content based on users' interaction and behaviour on the platform. In other words, trending audio and visual patterns and content types can reach mass visibility in no time. Brands on TikTok tap into this often by hooking onto popular trends, using viral audio clips, and designing content that fits the platform's short-form, high-engagement format. Such algorithmic curation supports rapid shifts in brand visibility; the FYP enables brands to reach a wider, better-targeted audience through organic discovery. On Instagram, the algorithm focuses on aesthetics and consistency. It's built to make sure the algorithm provides priority to visually appealing content, posting consistency, and engagement with the content.

Brands are, therefore, encouraged to stick to a consistent aesthetic, often using curated feeds and uniform themes that help ensure higher visibility of their feeds. Since the algorithm only rewards posts that quickly create more engagement, it requires brands to continually optimise the content for holding viewers' attention with delightful visuals and strategic posting schedules.

Social Networking (X), on the other hand, focuses on immediacy and text-based interaction. The algorithm is oriented toward real-time updates, trending topics, and immediate impressions via a tweet, retweet, or reply. This structure imbues branding on X, with brands needing to engage in on-time conversations, provide quick feedback to customer queries, and participate in live events or trending topics on the site. The communication is short-form and impactful, thus shaping how a brand communicates to its audience and builds a messaging that would resonate with the fast pace of the platform. These platform algorithms heavily shape how brands connect with audiences in terms of visibility, style of content, and even overall brand identity. The need for brands to morph their content to the demands of each algorithm significantly impels brand strategies to be flexible, responsive, and cognisant of the ever-evolving dynamics at play on each platform.

2.3.4 Influences and Cultural Intermediaries in Global Branding

In this regard, especially in the context of global branding, influences are at the centre of shaping brand identity on social media. Influence-brand collaborations have grown into an essential part of digital marketing strategies. Brands partner with influencers to reach particular audiences in a manner that is authentic and relatable. Such collaborations prove fantastically effective in cross-cultural contexts, where an influencer plays the role of a trusted voice between a brand and a local market. Through the established followings and cultural credibility, influences guarantee brands a special opportunity to tap into niche, culturally specific communities, thus creating more relevant and engaging content. Global brand ambassadors can be represented by the following: Kylie Jenner (US), who creates content for beauty and fashion brands; Chiara Ferragni-an Italian fashion and lifestyle blogger; Zach King, a US creative video maker and brand collaborator; Nikkie Tutorials, a Dutch makeup artist who has collaborated with global beauty brands; Nusret Gökçe, also known as Salt Bae, from Turkey, who rose to fame through food videos that went viral and collaborated with lifestyle brands; Liza Koshy, a US-based influence and actress who

has been involved in various collaborations; and Aimee Song, a US-based influence in the niches of fashion and interior design. They help brands reach a variety of cultural groups through strategic and genuine collaborations. Influences also play important cultural translation roles in global branding. They are cultural intermediaries who modify brand messages to conform to local customs, values, and trends. Influences transform a brand's tone, style, and messaging to resonate with an audience in a different cultural context, while staying true to the core identity of the brand. An influence in India might adapt a global brand's message to resonate with local cultural references, while another influence in Japan might tailor the same brand's message to conform to local aesthetic preferences for minimalism and subtlety.

This act of cultural translation ensures that the brand remains relevant and relatable across diverse markets. Authenticity and the trust associated with it form a very strong foundation in the realm of influence branding, especially when reaching out to audiences in diverse markets. In some cultures, authenticity can mean a path to brand trust, whereas in other cultures, the idea may be more aspiration or image-focused, based on status. For instance, in Western markets, authenticity could come through showing behind-the-scenes content or less polished, relatable images, while in the South Korean or Japanese markets, professional, high-quality content with messaging that is aspiration might resonate with audiences better. Influences who maintain credibility and authenticity within these varied cultural expectations will thus stand as vital elements in fostering trust and driving engagement across different regions. Thus, influences not only help brands expand reach but are also cultural intermediaries who adapt and translate brand messages for different cultural contexts while maintaining trust and authenticity. It is therefore central to global branding strategies in today's digital landscape.

2.4 Digital Branding Across Cultural Markets

2.4.1 Emotional Branding and Cross-Cultural Resonance

Emotional branding, or stories that would evoke mutual feelings and build rapport, is widely studied in traditional advertising; however, it has been underexplored in digital formats across different cultures (Nguyen, 2023).

It is suggested that emotional appeals vary in their power across global markets, with collectivist cultures responding well to emotionally harmonious narratives and individualistic cultures responding more to personal achievement and empowerment. In social media contexts, emotional branding is further complicated by user interactivity, emoji cultures, and participatory engagement (Phua et al., 2023). Emerging scholarship highlights that on platforms like TikTok, emotional resonance may be closely related to soundtracks, aesthetics, collective experiences, and trending challenges-those that significantly vary across cultural landscapes. This calls for more holistic studies that look at the intersection of culture, platform dynamics, and emotional branding (Shi and Shan, 2019).

Several limitations converge, i.e., branding theories such as Keller's CBBE and Kapferer's identity prism remain foundational but are insufficient when applied to highly interactive social media contexts that demand continuous adaptation (Trachuk et al., 2021). Second, research into cultural adaptation has often focused on traditional advertising rather than dynamic digital ecosystems, which reduces its applicability to fast-changing online behaviours. Third, existing research into social media is often platform-specific or region-specific, leaving unexplored how global brands adjust identity simultaneously across multiple platforms and cultural settings (Wu and Li, 2018). These various limitations cumulatively signal the need for a deeper, integrated analysis of how brands negotiate global coherence and local relevance in digital environments characterised by participatory cultures, algorithmic visibility, and platform-specific affordances (Mandler, 2019). These theories indicate a relation to RQ5 with regard to the influence that localised social media campaigns have on consumer engagement and brand loyalty across countries. The participatory culture of audiences also poses challenges for brands in executing global consistency with local relevance. This theory helps in understanding the importance of CGC in the formation of the brand identity on social media platforms for both engagement and brand loyalty (Özturan and Grinstein, 2022).

2.5 Conceptual Synthesis and Research Gaps

To strengthen the research gap section, several specific gaps were identified in the existing literature that directly align with the research questions:

- Gap 1: There is a lack of comparative multi-platform research on TikTok, Instagram, and X that looks at all three platforms together. Most prior works focus on a single site, thereby limiting our understanding of the ways in which brands adapt their approaches across multiple digital spaces (Shams et al., 2024). This gap connects with RQ1, which explores how international brands adapt their tone, imagery, and storytelling across different markets through social media.
- Gap 2: Despite growing interest in cross-cultural digital branding, few studies have utilised actual social media content. Most have been based on questionnaires or experiments under controlled conditions, thus missing the real-time user-generated content that constructs brand meaning across diverse cultural backgrounds (Ramadhani and Natalivan, 2023). This gap is related to RQ3: how cultural nuances impact the ways in which brands design their social media content for international markets.
- Gap 3: Traditional branding theories, such as the Brand Identity Prism by Kapferer and the CBBE by Keller, have very limited applicability in the participatory and algorithm-driven environments of digital platforms. The basis of these models is static, traditional notions of branding; they do not take into consideration the dynamic, interactive nature of social media (Mogaji and Nguyen, 2024). This gap relates to RQ2, which explores how platform-specific features affect the global brand perception across various cultural settings.
- Gap 4: There is a lack of understanding about how emotional branding differs across cultures, especially in light of short-form video settings such as TikTok. Emotional branding strategies may prove more effective in some cultural settings than in others, especially when applied in fast-paced, short-form video content (Rodrigues et al., 2023). This gap relates to RQ4, on the challenges faced by international brands in adapting their digital branding strategies to different social media platforms and cultural settings.
- Gap 5: There is a lack of comparative case studies that analyse both global coherence and local adaptation in digital branding. Most of the existing research treats these aspects separately, not taking into consideration the

tension that the brand faces in trying to balance its global consistency against local relevance (Casidy et al., 2022). This directly addresses RQ5, which explores how localised social media campaigns impact consumer engagement and brand loyalty across countries. By addressing these gaps, this study intends to contribute to the knowledge of digital branding across a multiplicity of platforms, cultures, and environments, therefore offering insights into how brands balance global consistency with local relevance in the digital age.

Past research has not sufficiently explained the mechanisms that enable global brands to balance consistency with seeming culturally relevant in their use of social media. This paper examines the mechanics that enable global brands to keep some anchors of identity consistent while making changes to tone, imagery, and narrative across the US, Europe, and Asia. This is relevant to global brands because it can help them seem more consistent, avoid the risks of ambiguity, and gain more relevance. Research has also differentiated platform effects from cultural effects. This study provides a comparison between TikTok, Instagram, and X to illustrate the influence of platform format on identity cues, along with cultural factors. This is important because it prevents the fragmented branding that occurs by using the same content across all sites. Earlier studies on the topic are found to focus on the perspective of the brand on its own brand identity. This study aims to explore the interaction between the audience and analyze it to determine how the meaning and authenticity of the brand are reinforced, reinterpreted, or challenged by the users, as it is of crucial importance to the management of the brand.

3. Methodology

In this chapter, the methodological approach is presented, which was used to explore the research questions of the study regarding the case of international brands adapting their global brand identity to different social media and cultural environments. It particularly considers RQ1 how brands are and will be changing tone, imagery and storytelling in social media across different markets; RQ2 how the features specific to the platform will affect global brand perception in different cultures; RQ3 cultural differences as a factor when designing social media content for international audiences; RQ4 the major problems brands meet when changing digital branding strategies across platforms and cultures; and RQ5 how localised social media campaigns influence consumer engagement and brand loyalty across countries. The research employs a qualitative, interpretative method that views digital branding as socially constructed and context-bound. Since social media allows for constant interaction and meaning-making between brands and consumers, the aim of the research design is to portray these very complicated processes in a given context. Thus, the chapter describes the philosophical approach, research design, sampling strategy, data collection methods, and the analytical approach (NVivo 14), together with ethical issues and the study's feasibility in relation to the dissertation's scope.

3.1 Research Philosophy

The research is grounded in philosophy through the lens of interpretivism, which is seen as the method of choice for the study of meanings, identities, and cultures in their continuous and context-dependent interactions. The core idea behind interpretation is that the social reality is not a solid ground but is interpreted by human beings, which is very much the case with branding as well. The branding process relies on symbolic communication and the audience's understanding of the brand's messages, mythologies, and values. Brand identity, therefore, is not static, but the process of evolving a brand identity through constant interpretation within the digital space is what is being researched here (Ihuraiht, 2022). The research, besides interpretative, gives support for social constructionists as an additional epistemological lens. Both perspectives are complementary, as the former tells the story of how the researcher seeks to comprehend the meaning while the latter is

telling the origin of that meaning: the social interaction, language, and joint activities are shaping knowledge and “reality” at the same time. Social media is chosen as a field of research since it is where users are very active in discovering meanings through various interactive behaviours - commenting, sharing, remixing, etc., that can either support, oppose, or modify brand stories (YAKAR et al., 2020). In this research, social constructionism serves the purpose of studying not only brand-created messages but also the very interactive processes by which brand meaning is created along with the audiences in the specific platform environments. This research is less accommodating for a positivist philosophy since positivism generally perceives a constant and measurable reality that can be identified through objective variables and tested using hypothesis-driven methods. Engagement metrics are not able to recognise the interpretive and culturally embedded meanings, which are the main part of brand identity work on social media, although they provide useful context. Besides, platform content is affected by varying norms, algorithms, and cultural references; thus, a purely variable-based approach would, in a way, simplify the symbolic and contextual nature of branding. Hence, a qualitative, interpretive, and socially informed philosophical position is the best one to understand how brand identity is constructed and negotiated in the culturally diverse digital environments.

3.2 Research Design

The dissertation is grounded in an interpretative philosophical approach, where brand presence on social media is seen as a meaning-making process that involves visual and verbal suggestions and is culturally interpreted by the users of the respective platforms. The thus defined study takes a qualitative and exploratory slant, which is the most appropriate for the investigation of the changing design advantages of the platforms as well as the emerging patterns of global digital branding. The methodology of the study is a multiple-case approach involving the four world's most well-known brands: Nike, Coca-Cola, Samsung, and Uniqlo, which allows the researcher to make systematic comparisons among different industries while using the same analytical framework. For the research, the data will consist of a secondary, publicly available collection of content that will be collected from official brand accounts on TikTok, Instagram, and X during the time period of February 2025

to November 2025; this data will comprise post visuals, captions, hashtags, visible engagement metrics, and a constant sample of user comments. The analysis will be conducted in NVivo by employing manual visual and textual coding, a detailed code-book for uniformity, and case-by-case comparisons (e.g., matrix coding) to assess how identity signals are manifested and modified among brands and across platform settings.

3.3 Data Collection Method

The secondary data is gathered from the respective social media accounts based on the brands Nike, Coca-Cola, Uniqlo, and Samsung on TikTok, Instagram, and X. The period for which data will be gathered will be February 2025 and will continue until November 2025. The posting will be done from the respective brand pages and will be captured via stable URLs and screenshots. The captions, hashtags, as well as the display indicators of the engaged audience will be noted. To improve methodological rigor, inclusion and exclusion criteria will be formally employed, with a specific and operational definition of what constitutes “cultural content” on these platforms. A set of inclusion criteria would include platform postings within the February and November 2025 period with traceable elements of brand identity and postings that can be normalised for regular collection. A set will be considered eligible if it has at least some traceable localisation indicators for regions specified as US, Europe, or Asia. Also included will be postings demonstrating rationality with at least traces shown via regionally prominent languages, regionally prominent postings with regionally specific statements and references within regionally specific posting times. It would include regionalism postings with regionally specific geospatial postings. It would include culturally specific imagery postings with usage as culturally specific postings within rationality regions. Also included would be postings targeting respective regions with rationality targeted postings with market-specific tags and calls-to-action for specific regions.

Eligibility would be exclusive if postings include user postings and postings that might be viewed as ephemeral and are not traceable. So, would postings be excluded that are variants and would be traceable postings convertible exclusively as paid postings? Also excluded would be postings traceable to a consistent posting method on respective brands. Any posting traceable quantifiable would be logged as

traceable, and postings traceable inadequately would be logged as traceable quantifiable. To determine regional contents, a transparent decision rule will be formulated. The main assignments will be done via regional brand accounts. The entries on these accounts will be labelled as either US, Europe, or Asia, depending on which region corresponds with the account list posting. But should brands make postings on other accounts, then regional labels will be verified using at least two additional criteria, which should include on-screen text, captions with regional languages , and on-screen region tags if applicable, region and market tags, and culturally specific mentions depending on which region and regional calendars fit.

The target data set will consist of about 120-150 postings, which will be adequate for the purposes of identifying thematic and stylistic features but still manageable within the scope of a qualitative coding analysis as conducted within an NVivo software framework and within the scope of the respective dissertation. To prevent an imbalanced set of results due to unrepresentative inclusion, the sample will be carefully set up with emphasis on maintaining a balance in a set of core variables. All postings will fall within the scope of February and November 2025. There will be an approximate equal split on platform usage, with about 40-50 postings per platform, and postings will be approximately evenly split on the four brands with about 30-38 postings per brand.

3.3.1 Unit of Analysis

In this research, the unit of analysis will be clearly specified for precision in data collection and analysis. A "post" will signify a single piece of content on each platform: a single TikTok video, a single Instagram post (including photos, videos, or Reels), and a single tweet on X. Each post will be treated as a separate data point for analysis. The captions of posts will also be included as text data, as they often contain key messaging and branding elements that help guide audience interpretation and engagement. Comments and likes on posts will similarly be coded to assess user engagement and sentiment: comments will be analysed for sentiment and relevance to the brand's messaging, while likes will be considered a quantitative measure of audience approval and engagement. For campaigns that have several posts or content on different platforms, or a multi-platform campaign with many different types of content like posts, videos, and hashtags, this analysis will consider

each post that is part of the campaign as an individual unit unless they are explicitly clustered to be treated as a single campaign unit. Brand bios or page descriptions will not be included in the analysis unless they directly pertain to the campaign or brand messaging being studied. This unit of analysis approach will ensure clarity and consistency in data coding and analysis and, hence, increase the methodological precision of the study.

3.4 Sampling Strategy

The research study will identify and select the social media content most relevant to the research objectives through purpose sampling. Purpose sampling applies in qualitative inquiry, where depth and relevance take precedence over statistical representation (Etikan et al., 2016). Social media post selection covers those exhibiting cultural adaptation, platform-specific engagement strategies, and identifiable elements of brand identity. Posts developed for different regional markets, like North America, East Asia, and Europe, have much potential to analyze how brands adjust their messaging according to cultural expectations. The sample frame comprises approximately 120 to 150 posts from the four selected brands across three social media platforms. This quantity of data is adequate for capturing thematic and stylistic patterns without being so overwhelming as to preclude detailed analysis within the time frame of the dissertation. Each unit of sampling—a single post, a short video, or campaign-specific visual—is analysed for its narrative content, visual design, linguistic elements, and engagement behaviour. The sample size for the quantitative content analysis lies between 120 and 150 posts, which is well-supported by the existing literature on content analysis and cross-cultural research.

Company	TikTok	Instagram	X	Total posts
Nike	16	14	12	42
Coca-Cola	12	11	8	31
Uniqlo	10	9	6	25
Samsung	12	11	14	37
Total	50	45	40	135

Table 1. Brand and Platform Specific Sample Size

To explain, Berger and Schwartz (2011) ran their studies on approximately 120 social media posts and found the sample size sufficient to capture the main patterns while guaranteeing robustness for the analysis. A sample of this size enables meaningful insights without being inordinately large and, as a result, remains manageable for the purposes of detailed qualitative analyses.

Cultural diversity remains central to this study, with the suggestion of Newman (2014) to select at least two cultures for each brand providing balance while reducing potential bias. By emphasising key cultural markets, for example, North America, Europe, Asia, and South America, this study aligns with the framework proposed by Hofstede (2001), which promotes diversified cultural contexts to explore the differences in communication and branding. Moreover, 3-5 posts per region are sufficient to reflect important cultural nuances and can remain manageable for analysis. Moreover, balancing the sample across the different platforms, TikTok, Instagram, and X, is important because each platform has its unique affordances and user engagement dynamics. Works like those by Lipschultz et al. (2020) have established that using multiple platforms provides a more holistic view of how brand strategies differ according to platform features. A sample size of 40-50 posts on each platform, as specified, will ensure research covers how content types and changes in algorithms influence strategies for brand communication. Finally, the various types of content formats, including images, videos, Reels, and tweets, hold great importance because failing to address these contents can lead to a bias towards a particular platform and cannot reveal the full expanse of brand communication strategies, as Keller and Swaminathan (2020) noted.

The final point is that purposive sampling is widely regarded as an efficient strategy in selecting posts on certain specified criteria, such as brand relevance, cultural targeting, and platform differences (Cohen et al., 2011). This targeted sampling strategy ensures that data emerging from this study will be representative and relevant to the research questions. In sum, this sample size of 120-150 posts is justified by the methodological considerations above for assuring a balanced, diverse, and manageable dataset that will offer useful insights into how global brands adapt their communication strategy across cultures and platforms. This dissertation adopts a multiple-case study design to examine how global brands construct and adapt brand identity across culturally diverse social media environments. A

multiple-case approach strengthens the study by enabling (i) within-case analysis of each brand's identity execution and (ii) cross-case comparison to identify shared patterns and case-specific differences. The selection of Nike, Coca-Cola, Uniqlo, and Samsung is theoretically driven rather than based on popularity alone. These brands provide strategic variation on dimensions central to cross-cultural digital branding and identity expression:

- **Category context:** sportswear, FMCG beverage, apparel retail, consumer electronics. This matters because category shapes how identity cues are communicated (e.g., lifestyle/values vs product/innovation narratives).
- **Brand meaning orientation:** Nike is strongly values/identity-led; Coca-Cola is heritage/emotion-led; Uniqlo emphasises functional-minimalist lifestyle positioning; Samsung is innovation/performance-led. This enables analysis of how different “meaning systems” are translated into platform-native storytelling.
- **Localisation pressure and global coherence:** each brand operates across multiple cultural markets, creating a relevant setting to examine how consistency is maintained while adapting messaging to local norms.

3.5 Data Analysis Strategy

The study's data analysis is based on qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis, using the supporting software NVivo 14. NVivo assists in the process of systematic coding and organisation of textual and visual data in a structured manner, hence enabling structured interpretation of complex multimedia content. NVivo is an important tool in this study, as it offers efficient and systematic ways of handling qualitative data through fine-grained coding and the analysis of extensive text, images, and videos. Its powerful functionality helps undertake a structured process for coding, which has been used consistently to categorise data and thus identify the emergence of key themes across the dataset. Using NVivo enhances rigour by automating parts of the coding process, helping reduce human error and bias, while it also offers advanced querying and visualisation tools to uncover patterns and relationships within the data.

The content analysis starts by closely looking at each social media post and covers features such as tone, imagery, cultural cues, and ways of storytelling. Color

schemes, symbols, gestures, composition, and typography are interpreted alongside textual components such as image captions, hashtags, and comments. Coding analysis proceeds in three steps: First, open coding develops initial descriptive codes by labelling segments of data that seem significant. These codes might pertain to expressions of brand personality, cultural references, engagement tactics, or platform-specific adaptations. Second, axial coding organises these initial codes into broader conceptual categories, such as cultural adaptation, global branding coherence, identity expression, or platform-driven storytelling.

Selective coding integrates these categories into overarching themes that provide coherent explanations of how global brands negotiate identity across platforms and cultures. Thematic analysis extends content analysis by identifying deeper patterns of meaning that transcend discrete pieces of content. Themes that are expected to emerge include the cross-market consistency of core brand values, the degree of localisation in message and imagery, the impact of platform affordances on narrative style, and the role of consumer participation in brand co-creation. NVivo supports a rigorous and organised thematic development process with tools such as matrix coding queries, cluster analysis, and cross-case comparison.

3.5.1 Cross-Platform and Cross-Cultural Analysis

A major part of the analysis encompasses a cross-platform comparison of how brands communicate across TikTok, Instagram, and X. It is very important to compare across platforms because each platform operates under different algorithmic mechanisms that guide content and audience behaviours. TikTok's trend-driven short-form videos, Instagram's emphasis on aesthetic storytelling, and X's text-based immediacy offer unique environments for brand communication. NVivo enables the researcher to classify data by platform, thus allowing for the systematic investigation of differences in brand expression and engagement. Besides cross-platform analysis, this research examines cross-cultural variation in how brand content is created for different regional markets. For example, content developed for Asian markets may reflect more collectivist cultural expressions, symbolic imagery, and community dynamic references, while content for Western audiences may use more individualistic themes and direct emotional appeals. Comparing these differences provides the opportunity for the study to assess the

degree to which brands balance global identity with localised messaging. The analysis is comparative (cross-case) and is also structured using Yin's replication logic. Each brand is first analysed as a standalone case (within-case), then compared across cases to assess:

- **Literal replication:** whether similar identity mechanisms appear across brands (e.g. recurring localisation patterns by platform), and
- **Theoretical replication:** whether differences align with expected contrasts based on category and meaning orientation (e.g. product-led vs values-led narratives).

This combination strengthens the study's explanatory power by linking cross-case similarities and differences to theoretically meaningful case characteristics.

Brand	Sector	Core brand meaning orientation	Theoretical aspect
Nike	Sportswear	Values/identity-led (aspiration, performance, empowerment)	Tests localisation of values-based identity while maintaining global coherence
Coca-Cola	FMCG beverage	Heritage/emotion-led (happiness, togetherness, rituals)	Tests how culturally embedded rituals and seasonal cues shape adaptation
Uniqlo	Apparel retail	Functional-minimalist lifestyle positioning	Tests subtle identity cues and "everyday life" localisation across markets
Samsung	Consumer electronics	Innovation/performance-led (technology, modernity)	Tests how product/innovation narratives adapt to local preferences and tech cultures

Table 2. Case characteristics and content sample profile

3.5.2 Visual Analysis Framework

The visual analysis will be operational through a structured coding process focusing on key visual elements that contribute to brand storytelling and cultural adaptation.

The following categories will be coded as shown in Table 3.

Visual dimension	Coding focus	Cross-cultural significance	Typical indicators
Colour symbolism	Dominant colours and colour combinations	Colours can signal different meanings and emotions across cultures	Red as luck/prosperity in China vs passion/urgency in Western contexts
Imagery style	Style type (minimalist vs elaborate; abstract vs realistic)	Regions may prefer different visual aesthetics and complexity levels	Minimal layouts; high-detail scenes; stylised vs photo-real visuals
Emotional tone	Overall mood (e.g., happy, calm, energetic, motivational)	Emotional appeals vary by region and shape brand connection	Smiling faces; action shots; calm scenes; motivational visuals
Cultural motifs	Local symbols and cultural references	Indicates localisation and cultural sensitivity	Landmarks; traditional dress; regional festivals/holidays
Gestures / body language	Meaning-bearing gestures and non-verbal cues	Gestures can be interpreted differently and may cause misreading/offence	Thumbs-up; hand signs; eye contact; posture; proximity
Typography	Font style and presentation (formal/informal; script/block; local language use)	Typography signals tone and cultural alignment	Serif vs sans-serif; script fonts; bold display fonts; local scripts

Table 3. Visual coding framework for cross-cultural social media analysis

3.5.3 Cross-Case and Cross-Cultural Comparison Framework

A comparison matrix will be drawn to compare the brand strategies for different markets and platforms, focusing on three key variables: platform, culture, and theme. The matrix will help in systematically comparing how brands adapt their messaging based on the affordances of the platform, cultural expectations, and campaign themes.

- Platform: The posts will be categorised in line with where they are taken from: TikTok, Instagram, or X. This will then make it possible to compare how features of each platform-for example, short-form video, visual aesthetic, and text-based interaction- influence brand communications.
- Culture: Posts will be sorted by cultural region; for example, North America, Asia, and Europe. This will allow cross-cultural comparisons that show how brands adapt their messaging to suit the different cultural contexts of the various markets.
- Theme: The primary theme of each post-empowerment, community, and innovation will be examined to explore how brands adapt their narrative strategy to align both with cultural values and with the dynamics of each platform.

Each post will be compared within the framework of the matrix, which allows subtle nuances in how cross-market differences manifest themselves in brand communications. For instance, a post on TikTok from Japan may focus on group harmony and make use of subtle colours, while its counterpart in the US might highlight individual empowerment using bold, energetic visuals. Inter-coder reliability will be checked to make sure that the coding is accurate and as free from bias as possible by re-reviewing a subset of the posts with a peer or colleague. This ensures consistency in the coding and objectivity in data interpretation. The integration of established frameworks and the application of best practices in coding will ensure the robustness and systematic nature of the analysis, hence reliable insights on how brands adapt their strategies across different cultural contexts and digital platforms.

3.6 Alignment Between Research Questions and Methods

Data collection and analysis are done while keeping in mind each of the research questions. RQ1 looks at how international brands adapt their tone, imagery, and storytelling across borders. For this purpose, the social media content of global brands on platforms like Instagram and TikTok will be gathered and then analysed by coding their tone, imagery, and storytelling techniques. Comparison of how these techniques change in different markets is done. In RQ2, focusing on the influence of platform-specific affordances on brand perception, the engagement metrics are assessed, including likes, shares, and comments, along with the features provided by a particular platform, such as the For You Page on TikTok. Quantitative data from engagement will be used to trace the dynamics of platforms that shape brand perception in various cultural contexts. RQ3 explores the cultural influence of brand design on social media content from brands operating in diverse markets, such as the US, Japan, and China. The cultural symbols, language, and content themes will be coded and compared to highlight how brands tailor their messaging to cultural preferences. RQ4 addresses the challenges faced by brands in adapting their strategies. Qualitative analysis will identify the key challenges in adapting to both platform and cultural specifics. Finally, RQ5 will look at the overall impact of localised campaigns on consumer engagement and brand loyalty by analysing engagement metrics and sentiment analysis across different countries. Repeat interactions and user sentiment will show, through tracking, how localised campaigns affect brand loyalty. Each method corresponds directly to the research question it aims to answer and therefore gives evidence through data analysis.

3.7 Ensuring Trustworthiness and Rigour

Trustworthiness needs to be ensured, taking into consideration that the research is interpretive in nature. The credibility will come through triangulation, considering a variety of data sources such as social media posts, corporate reports, and industry analyses that allow for the validation of interpretations against varied forms of evidence. Rich, detailed descriptions of content features will support transfer ability to enable readers to understand the cultural and platform-specific contexts shaping branding strategies. Dependability is enhanced by keeping clear records of the coding process, analytic decisions, and data management strategies in the form of

analytic memos and an audit trail. Reflexivity is carried through the analysis to acknowledge the researcher's own interpretive biases and maintain that cultural assumptions do not influence the interpretation of branding practices. Collectively, these elements establish a robust and transparent analytic process (Baker, 2018).

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Even though this study will rely exclusively on publicly available data, ethical considerations are still paramount. Social media content often includes user interactions in the form of comments, likes, and shares; personal information should not be revealed. The analysis will not include usernames, profile pictures, or any identifiable details of the users, and any quotations of user-generated responses will be anonymized. The research respects intellectual property by using brand materials for academic critique and comment only. Proper attribution will be maintained for all sources. Since there is no interaction with human participants, the ethical risk of this research is considered minimal. However, it follows institutional guidelines on the ethical use of online data to preserve integrity and transparency. The ethical considerations for this study are that all research practices meet academic integrity and respect for copyright and privacy.

All brand content analysed in this study is publicly available through the brands' official social media accounts. However, brand content may be copyrighted. In such a context, the study will operate under "fair academic use," which means the content is used for purely research purposes, and reproduction will be limited to brief excerpts, which will be necessary to conduct the analysis and will not affect the commercial value of the content. The Anglicization of user-generated comments is necessary to protect the privacy of individuals. For this purpose, identifiable user information will be removed or replaced by pseudonyms in such a way that no personal data is disclosed. Furthermore, user contents will not be downloaded or stored except for the analytical excerpts needed for coding and analysis. Similarly, any identifying information, like usernames, will not be kept at the end of the analysis process as mentioned in Appendix D.

3.9 Reflexivity Statement

In cross-cultural content analyses, interpretive bias also needs to be acknowledged. The cultural background of the researcher will inevitably affect the process of interpreting and analysing the brand content and user-generated comments, especially in examining the nuances and communications strategies across cultures.

Throughout the process, continuously writing down my impressions, thoughts, and reflections during the data analysis will be a practice to highlight these biases and avoid them. I will also keep an audit trail of my decisions regarding coding in order to demonstrate transparency regarding the analytical steps taken. Finally, I'll seek peer review of key interpretations and findings in order to reduce this risk further, inviting comments from colleagues with diverse cultural perspectives. This itself will help in keeping the analysis balanced and objective regarding the cultural nuances in the content and any bias that might be carried in the researcher's perspective.

Research Question	Research Objective	Data Source	Analysis Technique (NVivo 14)
RQ1: How do international brands adapt tone, imagery, and storytelling across cultures?	To identify cultural adaptation patterns in social media branding.	TikTok, Instagram, X posts from different countries	Qualitative content analysis; coding tone, visuals; thematic analysis
RQ2: How do platform-specific features influence global brand perception?	To examine platform affordances shaping branding.	Cross-platform brand posts; platform guidelines	Matrix coding query (platform and theme); cluster analysis
RQ3: How do cultural nuances influence brands' localized content?	To analyze cultural symbols, references, and narratives.	Posts from at least 2 cultures per brand	Thematic analysis aligned with Hofstede dimensions; pattern coding
RQ4: What challenges do brands face in balancing global consistency with local relevance?	To explore tensions between global identity and local adaptation.	Brand reports, campaign case studies	Cross-case comparison; conceptual mapping
RQ5: How do localized campaigns enhance engagement and loyalty?	To assess consumer responses to localized branding.	Engagement metrics, comments, media coverage	Sentiment coding, node frequency comparison, cross-region analysis

Table 4. Research Questions, Objectives, Data Sources, and Analysis Techniques (Source: Author's Own)

Table 4 demonstrates its consistent application to all brands through its identical organisational structure. First, the researchers will gather TikTok, Instagram, and X posts from multiple countries for each brand, which will be analysed through NVivo 14 to determine tonal, visual, and narrative elements that will demonstrate how different cultures developed their unique patterns of content creation (RQ1). The researchers will analyse brand content across different platforms through matrix coding queries, which combine platform data with theme information to demonstrate how platform characteristics impact worldwide brand image (RQ2). The researchers will choose two posts from each brand, which they will analyse through coding of local elements and through Hofstede-based thematic analysis, which will show the cultural aspects of regional adaptation to global content (RQ3). The research team will study brand reports and campaign case studies through cross-case analysis and conceptual mapping to determine the main conflicts between global brand identity and local market needs that need to be resolved (RQ4). The researchers will use engagement metrics, comments, and media coverage to determine if localisation increases engagement and loyalty by conducting sentiment analysis and node frequency comparison, and cross-region analysis to connect local content with customer response (RQ5).

4. Analysis

This chapter details how the study analysed social media branding content to address the dissertation's central aim: to evaluate how global brands construct and adapt brand identity across culturally distinct digital environments and platform affordances. Consistent with the interpretative and social constructionist stance established in the methodology, the analysis prioritises meaning, symbolism, identity cues, narrative framing, and culturally situated interpretation. It also recognises that social media branding is not only a “brand-to-audience” transmission but an interactive meaning-making process in which audiences can reinforce, reinterpret, or contest brand narratives through public discourse. The outcome of this chapter is a structured, evidence-led thematic map that is carried into the Discussion chapter to connect the observed patterns to theory on brand identity, localisation, and platform affordances.

4.1 Dataset and Analytical Units

The dataset comprises TikTok, Instagram, and X posts from the official brand-owned accounts for Nike, Coca-Cola, Uniqlo, and Samsung that are publicly accessible and were sampled during February 2025 to November 2025. Posts were considered as the unit of analysis and interpreted through the three interconnected layers: brand-authored identity communication (visual/video, caption text, on-screen text where captured, and hashtags), localisation cues (language, culturally salient references, place cues, and market markers), and audience meaning-making (a structured sample of public comments/replies where feasible). Only visible engagement indicators were recorded, and they were used to provide contextual support for the richness of the interpretation instead of measuring effectiveness in a metric-driven sense, as shown in Appendix A. The analysis is conducted to see cultural localisation through content features openly observable rather than inferred from national traits. Posts were considered localised when they included evidence of localisation (for example, language changes, event references pinpointed in regional calendars, place cues, culturally coded imagery, or campaign markers that were specific to the market). The regional classification (US, Europe, Asia) was applied conservatively, using official regional accounts when they were available and

cue-convergence rules when the region was not explicit, as shown in the code matrix in Appendix C.

This method allows the claim of localisation to be interpreted while at the same time minimising the chance of over-generalisation, as shown in Table 5.

Dimension	Levels	Analytical Perspectives	Rationale
Brand case	Nike; Coca-Cola; Uniqlo; Samsung	Compare identity orientations and localisation approaches across different product categories.	Helps identify whether identity cues and localisation depth vary by category (e.g., lifestyle vs functional positioning).
Platform	TikTok; Instagram; X	Examine how platform affordances (formats, algorithms, and interaction norms) shape identity execution and audience interpretation.	Supports platform-by-platform comparison of storytelling style, visual conventions, and perceived authenticity.
Region	US; Europe; Asia	Assess culturally situated meaning-making by identifying localisation cues and culturally coded references across regions.	Enables cross-cultural comparison of how audiences may interpret tone, imagery, and symbols differently.
Total posts	All cases combined (n = 135)	Establish sufficient breadth for within-case and cross-case thematic analysis across platforms and regions.	Improves robustness through coverage and triangulation, supporting clearer pattern identification.

Table 5. Dataset profile and comparative structure

4.2 NVivo Thematic Analysis

The analysis was based on a hybrid thematic logic, which blended theory-informed codes (brand identity cues, narrative framing, localisation tactics, and platform

execution) with inductively developed ones, capturing recurring platform-native conventions and cultural motifs. This helped highlight how the brand identity is signalled, the adaptation is performed, and the audience's response through public discourse. With the help of NVivo, the entire process was systematic throughout, from the very beginning when the sources were organised as shown in Figure 3. The pros and cons of sources were debated, and the final decision of which sources to use was arrived at after a thorough comparison across the brand, platform, and region was made.

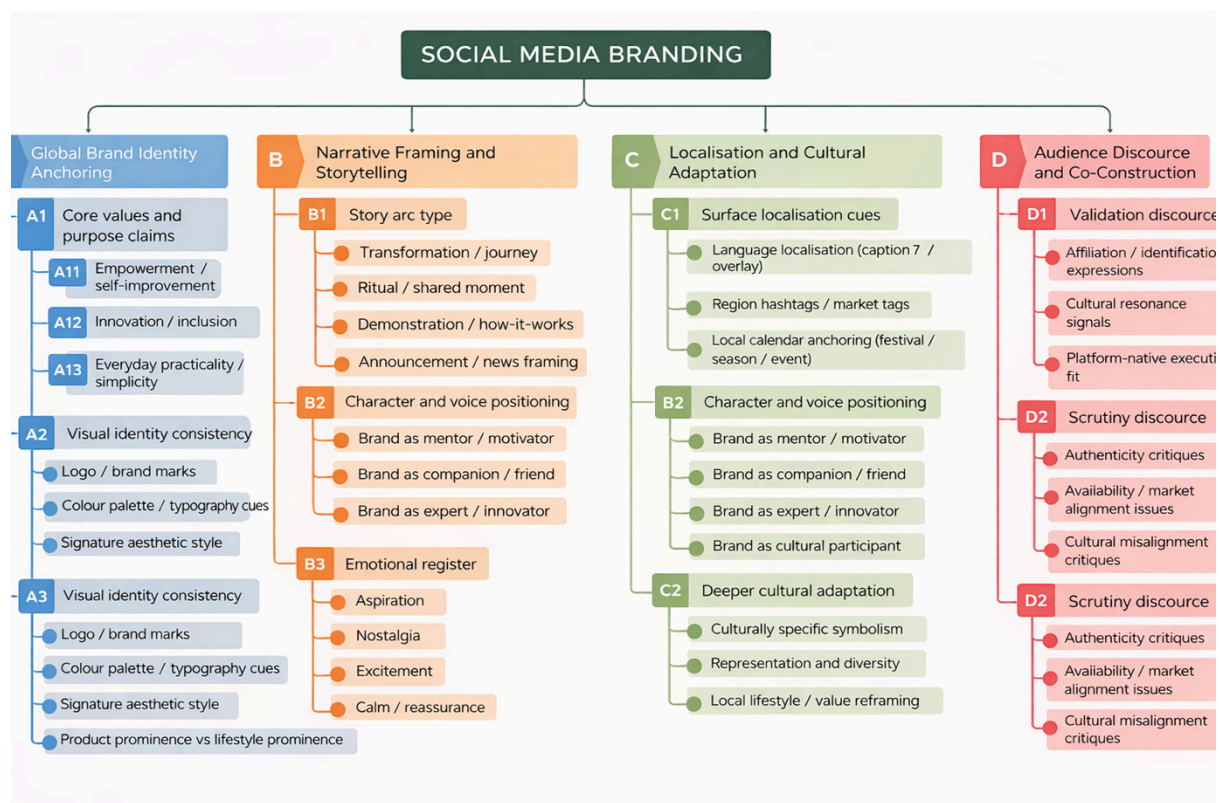


Figure 3. NVivo Code Tree Diagram (Source: Author's own)

After coding the material, evidence was reviewed and compared systematically across the aforementioned factors. The researcher relied on the code-book to maintain the trustworthiness of the qualitative analysis, so they first tested it with pilot coding and then recorded the decision rules for ambiguous categories (especially culturally coded imagery and the line between surface and deeper localisation of the content), and finally used memos to document the interpretative choices and translation handling where multilingual content turned up. Table 6 shows the final thematic structure that was used to guide the findings.

Audience discourse theme	Interpretive role	Implications for engagement and loyalty
Resonance and identification	Signals alignment with audience values and identity; audiences see the brand as 'for people like me'.	Strengthens belonging and affinity; supports repeat engagement and long-term loyalty.
Authenticity validation	Audiences assess whether localisation and brand claims feel credible and consistent.	Builds trust when positive; higher willingness to follow, share, and advocate.
Cultural friction / contestation	Highlights perceived mismatch, stereotyping, appropriation, or cultural insensitivity.	Can reduce engagement and damage sentiment; often requires timely clarification or adjustment.
Access / availability discourse	Connects brand meaning to market realities (price, access, distribution, inclusion).	Shapes fairness and inclusion perceptions; influences trust and continued participation.

Table 6. The theme structure used to organise findings

Theme 1: Global Identity Anchoring across Markets

In all instances, global coherence was upheld by a range of anchoring cues, which made each brand identifiable even if the superficial content elements changed. Among these anchors were the constant visual identity assets, the flexible tone boundaries, the recurring value propositions, and the narrative positions that were sometimes repeated. While the precise form of anchoring varied among the brands, the purpose was similar: anchors served as identity "constants" that minimized the chance of division among the regions and platforms. The identity anchoring was most evident when brands kept their distinctive stylistic signatures across different

countries but allowed local relevance cues to change. A brand, for instance, could keep its value stance and visual language intact while changing the cultural setting, language, and campaign markers to suit local contexts. This trend suggests that localisation, in reality, frequently functions as selective variation around a stable identity core rather than as complete reinvention. Concerning RQ1, the findings imply that international adaptation very often takes place through changes in emphasis and surface execution while core identity cues are preserved to sustain recognisably. A constant friction came into being every time identity anchoring met platform-native conventions. On highly participatory modes, consistency became a matter of sharing values and tone that were recognizable, rather than always using identical visuals, as shown in Figure 4. This suggests that the global brand identity might still be coherent, albeit the visible brand assets are not so strong, as long as the identity is clear through narrative stance and interaction style (RQ2).



Figure 4. NVivo Word Cloud (Source: Author's own)

Theme 2: The use of narrative framing as a mechanism linking identity and culture

Narrative framing became the most important way through which the brand identity recognised by the company was translated into a meaning that could be culturally interpreted. Although the brands in the dataset sometimes relied on a limited number of story frames, the emphasis, the imagery, and the emotional register differed from one market and platform to another. This means that the narrative frames were like "containers" for identity that could change: they held the stable brand meaning while being flexible enough to take in culturally important moments and platform-native storytelling forms. Identity was often linked to social meanings through value-forward frames, like empowerment and community, which were the most common ones when the brands aimed to be perceived as being culturally attuned rather than

simply present in a market. Ritual and togetherness frames were very often used when the brands benefited from associating themselves with shared moments and culturally anchored calendars, thus obtaining local relevance without the need for drawing extensive product-specific adaptations. Innovation and future frames enabled the construction of identity through demonstrations, capability narratives, and creator-led explanations, which were especially suitable for platform environments that reward showing and doing rather than merely stating. In relation to RQ1 and RQ3, the findings suggest that cultural nuance most frequently impacts branding through narrative emphasis, representational choices, and symbolic cues, rather than directly through national stereotyping. Thus, the analysis regards cultural adaptation as a series of interpretive decisions concerning what a brand foregrounds, how it represents people and place, and what symbolic references it employs to render identity meaningful in a particular context.

Theme 3: Localisation cues and depth of cultural adaptation

Localisation was present in the dataset in both its surface and deeper forms. Surface localisation involved easy-to-notice cues like language changes, hashtags of a particular region, drawing markers for the campaign, and mentioning local events as well as holidays. These cues often indicated the targeting of a particular market and the degree of cultural awareness, all the while keeping the core of the identity and narrative stance almost unchanged. On the other hand, deeper localisation was infrequent but had a greater impact on the analysis. It is composed of altering the local interpretation of identity by re-framing values, setting new representation standards, and using culturally specific symbols in different ways. The analysis shows that surface localisation is usually the first technique used to rapidly create relevance in multiple markets, especially where global content strategies need to be scalable. In contrast, deeper localisation is more common when brands deal with sensitive cultural topics, fulfil representation expectations, or use symbolic meanings that vary significantly across regions and thus require more nuanced handling. This provides evidence for RQ3 as it demonstrates that cultural nuances affect content design most via the levels of representation, symbolism, and narrative emphasis, rather than merely at the level of translation. Localisation kept boosting difficulties that were in line with RQ4. In cases where brands used cultural symbols without the proper context, the discourse of the audience would sometimes shift from resonance

to criticism, and thereby, the passing of authenticity judgements and the contests would become more noticeable. Another difficulty stemmed from the inter-relatedness of market access and availability and the audience's fair treatment, inclusive, or exclusivity perception linked to the meaning of the brand, especially when campaign messaging indicated that access was universal, but market conditions revealed otherwise.

Theme 4: Effects of Execution and Affordance Natural to Platforms

Affordances of the platform heavily influenced the cultural contexts in which the identity could be performed and consequently perceived (RQ2). TikTok accepted participation and the storyteller's coming from the platform and format conventions as the main identity. Brand identity in this context was often revealed through actions, demonstrations, and collaborations rather than through controlling visual signatures. Instagram allowed identity through curated aesthetics and visual coherence, offering brands a way to keep their visual identity stable while carefully incorporating localisation cues. X prioritises identity through conversation, declarations, and event-related commentary, which made it particularly good for branding and quick social alignment but not for long-term visual storytelling. The mentioned patterns reveal that the platform acts not only as a channel but also as a semiotic environment that gives preference to certain identity signals and ways of interaction. Therefore, global consistency can no longer be perceived as a mere case of content being uniformly replicated across platforms, but rather as an identity intent that is consistently applied through platform-appropriate forms. This resolves RQ2 by illustrating how the features specific to the platform determine the visibility of identity and the types of narratives that are encountered by the audience. The platform comparison in Table 7 is derived from the outputs from a Theme × Platform matrix coding query in NVivo.

Platform	Brand execution (identity and localisation)	Audience meaning-making
TikTok	Trend- and creator-led participation; local formats	Relatability; authenticity judged through format fluency
Instagram	Curated aesthetic storytelling; lifestyle/place cues	Aspiration; authenticity judged through consistency
X	Discourse and announcements; event/market cues	Negotiation/contestation; topical alignment

Table 7. Theme × Platform matrix coding query in NVivo

Theme 5: Audience meaning-making, engagement, and loyalty signals

The audience discourse was the main contributor to the brand meaning through the social interaction and the patterns resonating, validating, reinterpreting, and contesting. Comments and replies were often a public environment in which users accepted brand identity claims, claimed perceived authenticity, and redirected brand narratives toward practical issues like access, pricing, or market availability. Thus, the construction of identity was a co-production: the brand set the meaning cues, but the audiences determined how these cues were either stabilised or disputed (RQ5). Engagement indicators were seen as contextual rather than definitive. Commenting on the volume was high, and the discourse usually brought to light the greater negotiation of meaning, including strong artistic judgments and more implicit cultural fit assessments. This indicates that engagement can be analytically effective to the extent that it points out the areas where meaning-making is most apparent, but, at the same time, it cannot be interpreted straightforwardly as “success” due to platform algorithms and metric visibility limits. For RQ5, the analysis reveals that localised campaigns may lead to intensified audience discourse, which could, on the one hand, aid in loyalty through identification and shared meaning, and, on the other hand, cause more scrutiny when cultural or market promises are perceived by the audience to be misaligned with their experience. Table 8 presents the audience’s meaning-making comments through the analysis output.

Audience theme	Function	Engagement/loyalty link
Resonance & identification	Emotional alignment with brand	Builds belonging → loyalty
Authenticity validation	Confirms credibility of localisation/claims	Builds trust → loyalty
Cultural friction/contestation	Flags mismatch or appropriation concerns	Hurts engagement; needs response
Access/availability discourse	Ties meaning to market realities	Shapes fairness/inclusion perceptions

Table 8. The audience's Meaning-making Comments Analysis

4.3 Within-case interpretation: how adaptation works in each brand case

Through within-case analysis, it is evident that each brand identity orientation played a role in localisation and platform execution choice, and it prevented cross-case synthesis from reducing the differences that were meaningful. Nike's communication of identity was mostly values-oriented, with special reference to aspiration, performance, and community cues. Culturally, the adaptation was most evident in the choice of representations, contexts that were culturally resonant, and enactment that was platform-native, especially when creators and participatory formats heightened the cultural proximity.

Coca-Cola's identity came from heritage and emotion, and the values underlying it were togetherness, ritual, and shared moments, which gave a solid basis for localisation through calendar anchoring and celebrations that were culturally salient. Uniqlo was functional-minimalist and lifestyle-oriented in its identity, producing localisation that was subtler through seasonal cues, everyday routines, and pragmatic framing, with cultural specificity often expressed through context and styling rather than explicit cultural symbolism. Samsung was innovation- and capability-led in its identity, with adaptation often manifested through use-case framing, creator demonstrations, and partnerships that were regionally resonant and that positioned technology as locally meaningful rather than universally abstract. In these cases, the challenges of adaptation (RQ4) were most visible where the identity intent, platform conventions, and cultural symbols were in different directions. Brands had a choice between two strategies that were recurring, one being the maximum platform fluency and the other being the conventional identity markers, and one being the very surface localisation that was scalable, and the other one the deeper

localisation, which has higher interpretive risk but potentially stronger cultural resonance, as shown in Table 9.

Brand case	Dominant identity orientation	Common adaptation approach	Where challenges tend to arise
Nike	Values and identity-led	Representation and community framing; platform-native enactment	Authenticity scrutiny when symbolism appears misaligned
Coca-Cola	Heritage and emotion-led	Ritual and calendar anchoring; celebration narratives	Risk of over-standardised emotional framing across contexts
Uniqlo	Functional-minimalist lifestyle	Subtle contextual localisation; everyday utility	Reduced cultural legibility if localisation cues are too light
Samsung	Innovation and performance-led	Use-case localisation; creator demonstrations	Perceived disconnect between global claims and market access

Table 9. Within-case summary of identity orientation and adaptation tendencies

Cross-case synthesis reveals that global brands cling to the same identity by being expressive of their values, recognition through stylistic cues and repetitive narrative frames, but mainly through adaptability that is selective localisation and platform-native execution. Platform affordances mark the identity's legibility and thus, consistency is perceived as a consistent identity intent articulated through different semiotic modes. The nuances of culture have a major impact on branding when they influence the level of symbolism, the standards of representation and the priority in storytelling. Such influences become apparent to the audiences through judgments of authenticity and assessments of cultural fit that are voiced in public discourse. Hence, the findings propose that social media international branding is primarily a negotiated process involving the interdependence of identity anchoring, local relevance cues, platform conventions, and audience meaning-making.

5. Discussion

This chapter explains the findings in connection with the studies about the global brand identity, the cross-cultural adaptation, and the role of platform affordances in the communication through media. The international social media branding analysis calls for an ongoing meaning-making process where brands, to some extent, keep their identity while at the same time adapting their execution to different cultures and to the interaction logic of various platforms. It has been proven that global identity is both unchangeable and pliable to an infinite degree. It is provided through the durable cues and commitments, and then becomes apparent through the native platform forms that ask for culturally situated interpretation. Hence, localisation is better recognised as a continuum of meaning work that varies from the most superficial relevance signals to the most profound re-framing of the symbolism and the representation. Audience discourse complicates the managers' control even more since it plays the role of a visible site where brand meanings are affirming, negotiating, or contesting; thus, brand meanings are not only managed but also openly interact. The discussion clarifies what coherence looks like in platformed environments, how narrative frames support cross-cultural intelligibility, how platforms structure what identity becomes legible, and why authenticity judgements and engagement cues must be interpreted as social processes rather than straightforward indicators of success.

5.1 Coherence through identity anchoring

The interpretation of global brand identity as anchored coherence rather than uniform execution is supported by the findings. The brands in the studied cases, through their value positions, tonal limits, and identity cues, managed to be recognised even when they altered certain aspects like imagery, language, or setting. This means that a global identity can be kept up without standardising every creative choice, as long as the audience can tell the brand's meaning orientation and the way it communicates. This is in accordance with the brand identity approaches, which consider identity as a system of permanent associations and commitments rather than a collection of fixed creative outputs. It seems that the anchoring is working on different levels. One of the highest levels is the highly visible one where

brands use consistent assets, styling signatures, or visual grammars that are recognisable to stabilise their identity, mostly on those platforms where aesthetic coherence is given priority. Less visible but perhaps more solid ensuring of the brand's identity through narrative stance and tonal consistency, which can even last when the conventional brand markers are reduced in participatory formats, goes for a not-so-visible but advantageous level. The tremendous importance of this resides in the fact that the social media contexts may not give a uniform way of signalling identity. Some environments offer rewards for traits such as subtlety, co-creation, and immediacy, while others for polish and carefully crafted storytelling. Thus, identity anchoring is like a translation problem: the brand's core meaning has to be recognisable at all times while the form of expression changes according to platform conventions and culturally situated expectations. The results further suggest that identity anchoring is not merely a practice of reiteration but a matter of delineation. The coherence seems to be at its peak when brands set boundaries on what can be considered as variation that is acceptable. These limits can be observed through tonal discipline, through the recurring moral stance of brand narratives, and through the stable representational commitments that show what the brand does and does not represent. The risk of identity drift rising becomes one of the consequences when adaptation shifts these boundaries, and more audience commentary is likely to brand the company as inconsistent or strategically opportunistic. In this way, global brand identity on social media is similar to a regulated variation range: through the commitment to stability of meaning, recognisability is produced, while through the commitment to flexibility inside those commitments, relevance is achieved.

5.2 Narrative framing as the mechanism of cross-cultural intelligibility

The framing of the narrative was the primary mechanism that made identity understandable across culturally diverse contexts. Brands, according to the findings, seek the same story frames over and over that serve as stable interpretive structures. These frames are not just content themes, but they also govern how the brand positions itself, how it positions the audience, and what kinds of emotions and values are highlighted. The continuity of narrative frames throughout markets leads to recognisability, whilst the cultural specificity of narrative elements leads to perceived relevance. The main point taken from this pattern is that framing of

narratives is what allows brands to get through the difficulty of having to be the same and yet localised at the same time. The brand can still tell the same story, whether it is one of aspiration, of togetherness, of everyday utility, of innovation, or any other, but it will adapt the cultural content of that frame according to the specific market. This supports the view that global identity is often maintained through continuity in the type of story told rather than continuing with the literal elements of the story. A performance or aspiration frame may still be identified as the brand's "way of meaning," while the local setting, language, or representational cues change to make the story culturally understandable. A ritual or celebration frame may remain fixed while being linked to different cultural calendars and locally significant collective moments. A utility frame may remain unchanged while expressing cultural differences through lifestyle assumptions, seasonal cues, and routines. An innovation frame may continue to be the same while employing regionally relevant use cases to convert capability into local everyday life. From a semiotic standpoint, narrative frames act to cement meaning by bringing together signifiers in a manner that is understandable and interpret-able. Identity anchors are used as stable signs, while localisation works to alter the sign system around it, placing cues, cultural symbols, and representational norms to lessen interpretative distance. This method provides a non-existentialist route for talking about cultural nuance: instead of ascribing content differences to unchangeable national characteristics, cultural nuance is seen as the practical creation of meaning through symbols, representation, emotional registers, and assumptions about everyday life that differ depending on contexts. The results also imply that narrative frames impact the way audiences judge authenticity. The greater the similarity between the narrative frame and the culturally familiar script, the stronger the audience's inclination to regard the brand's identity as naturally and credibly so. Conversely, if the frame can be regarded as misaligned with cultural expectations, the audience will focus more on the brand's motives, thus producing the question as to whether the brand is truly culturally attuned or just instrumentally localising. Hence, narrative framing becomes a significant battleground where global identity and local legitimacy intersect.

5.3 Platform environments as meaning-making conditions

Majorly, that platform's structure brands meaning by influencing the semiotic form and interaction logic through which the identity is produced. The findings help to develop a sociotechnical interpretation of branding where platform affordances determine which cues are seen, what is allowed as a credible performance, and how audiences will judge the authenticity and relevance. This reinforces the argument that platforms are not just neutral delivery channels; they are environments that create meaning through interface features, the predominance of certain content formats, and participation that is influenced by cultural norms. Participatory short-form video platforms often give more importance to identity expressed through action, immediacy, and vernacular creativity. In this setting, the identity is often recognised through performance and not declaration. Brands show who they are by the way they participate: pacing, humour, trend alignment, creator collaboration, and the degree to which content seems native rather than imported. Conventional brand assets may lose their significance, and consistency is often maintained through narrative stance and tonality discipline.

This results in a unique governance challenge: the brand has to let the creatives be flexible to be fluent in the platform, while at the same time making sure that participation does not diminish the identity anchors. Curated visual platforms give priority to aesthetic coherence and controlled storytelling. These platforms enable brands to keep a steady visual identity and show global consistency with style, imagery norms, and representation that is gradually managed. The main benefit is that people will recognise the brand; the main drawback is that the brand will be distanced from its audience. If the smooth and controlled appearance is the main reason for seeking coherence, audiences might read the brand as less responsive or less culturally near, particularly in situations where participation and dialogue are the required forms of legitimacy on the part of the brand, according to culture. If fidelity is not reinforced by culturally aware framing and audience engagement, then it can become visually strong but relationally weak. Discourse-led platforms make it possible for the brand to choose what to comment on, how to position itself in public conversation, and how to respond to discourse. The visual identity plays a minor part; the communicative credibility and timing become more important. This creates a unique kind of exposure: the discourse environments can quickly amplify

consternation, and a misunderstanding across cultures may spread through quick reinterpretation.

These conditions of platform use imply that the same global identity may be interpreted differently across platforms because the criteria of evaluation are different: fluency in the format of participatory environments, coherence and taste in curated environments, and stance and responsiveness in discourse environments. The wider implication is that the idea of consistency must be elaborated as an identity intent that is intentionally expressed through the semiotic modes of the platform. Total content duplication can lead to a mismatch, which in turn will damage credibility and provoke a larger incidence of authenticity scrutiny.

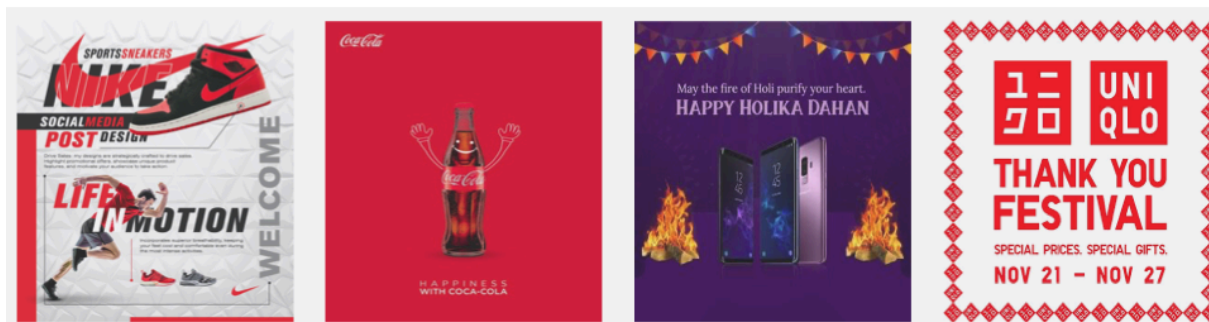


Figure 5. Social Media Posts of Selected Brands (source: companies' social media)

5.4 Localisation depth, legitimacy, and interpretive risk

The findings suggest that localisation is a continuum from the most visible signs to the biggest changes in meaning, and this continuum is crucial for cultural nuance and managerial difficulties in understanding. Surface localisation is made up of observable signals such as shifting languages, referring to culturally significant events, showing the place, using hashtags specific to the region, and calls to action that are market-specific. These signals can quickly and easily indicate the local context's importance and attention while keeping the identity meaning constant. The deeper localisation is when the changes are very much affecting the interpretation, e.g., re-emphasis of values, changes to representation standards, and using culturally specific symbols with heavy meaning attached to them. These changes can modify the audience's perception of the brand's stance and identity in that particular market. This differentiation helps to understand why localisation is not automatically a good thing, and it is a matter of strategy that is selective by nature.

Surface localisation could act as a legitimacy signal that shortens the interpretive distance.

It could mean that the brand acknowledges the local calendars and communication norms, which might be enough for routine content. However, surface signals can also be viewed as being superficial if the audience expects deeper cultural alignment, especially in markets where the issue of cultural identity is strongly tied to representation and symbolism. Deeper localisation may produce stronger resonance because it involves the meaning system more directly, but it also implies higher interpretive risk. At the same time, there is a possibility that symbolic signals can be understood from several angles, and the choice of representation may be criticised if it is thought to be stereotypical, exclusionary, or against the local norms.

Cultural risk is magnified by the global flow of information. A global audience can become involved in the same conversation even if the content is focused only on one area. What is culturally clear-cut in one context may be interpreted differently one way or the other, in another context, which can even lead to disputes. For instance, this is very serious for big companies because not only do platform algorithms have the power to force the disputes and disagreements over the different meanings to be heard, but also the comment sections allow for the conflict of interpretation to be shown. With the above being said, the implication is that the process of localisation should be seen as a legitimacy-risk calculus. Brands can gain by selecting depth in those cases where cultural relevance depends on symbolic alignment and representation, whereas they can easily apply superficial localisation in situations of high interpretive risk or where cultural distinctiveness is not a main factor of the message. This has become an even bigger challenge when content also needs to be platform-native: the same localisation decision may have a different effect in terms of the norms of the platform and the user interaction style that the platform promotes.

5.5 Authenticity as a socially produced judgement

Authenticity was one of the main criteria through which audiences perceived the execution of both localisation and platform. The results are in favour of an international interpretation of authenticity that sees it not as a property of the brand's motives but a judgement formed by the way the content is read, talked about, and

compared with expectations. The judgements of authenticity depend on cultural fit, platform fluency, and relational credibility.

Cultural fit evaluates if symbols, representation, and emotional register are in sync with local expectations and if it is not going to appear like an extraction or performance.

Platform fluency checks if the brand is behaving credibly in the platform conventions, including creator collaboration and content in the style of the vernacular. Relational credibility looks into whether the brand's implied promises are in line with the audience's experience, which includes access, availability, and fairness. This brings into perspective the reason why some localised content has resonance while other localised content faces scrutiny. When the cues are seen as meaningful and coherent, then the authenticity discourse can bolster the brand identity and may even strengthen loyalty-related signals. On the other hand, when the cues look weak or unconnected, the audience may view localisation as a tool, and, consequently, the discourse will move toward critique. Thus, authenticity becomes a channel through which audiences control the brand's legitimacy in multicultural contexts. Moreover, it is also the case that the authenticity judgment is determined by the audience's discourse visibility. The comment section acts as a public stage where the interpretations are accepted socially. Users rely on one another's interpretations, thus reinforcing specific meanings and possibly intensifying the criticism.

5.6 Audience co-construction and the meaning of engagement

One of the main conclusions of this research is that the brands' social media presence is co-constructed through a visible audience meaning-making process. Audiences do not just absorb the content, but they are involved in the process of giving it meaning by supporting stories, deciphering symbols, questioning motives, and bringing the focus back to real-life situations. This co-construction is of great analytical significance because it shows that global identity is not only formed through brand spelling hints but also through the talk that may either support or disrupt those hints. In this interpretative model, engagement cannot be treated as a clear-cut measure of effectiveness. A lot of interaction may denote the group's support and likeness, especially if the discussion is about people's identifying with

and validating the brand. On the other hand, high interaction may also mean that the audience's presence is mainly that of a scrutineer when they are arguing about the culturally 'right' brand fit or the perceived inconsistencies.

Consequently, the study indicates that engagement is best perceived as the phenomenon of meaning-making being visible rather than being just a metric of success. This, in turn, presents the theory of branding research using engagement as an outcome: the same volume of engagement may signify different trajectories of meaning depending on the cultural and platform contexts of the content. The co-construction interaction also explains why localised marketing campaigns might be a double-edged sword when it comes to customer loyalty. The loyalty signals come from among the audiences who incorporate the brand into their personal stories, claim their association with the brand, or openly support the brand's position. The danger comes when the audiences start to connect the brand's meaning with their perception of being excluded, not having equal access, or being misled, thus leading to a discourse that questions the brand's legitimacy and, consequently, the brand's image.

5.7 Managerial Implications

Global social media branding requires governance that protects global identity anchors while allowing platforms to adapt specific cultural elements based on their existing framework. The research shows that recognition depends on stable cues, which include consistent values and their signature tone and visuals. Effective governance needs to establish unchangeable standards which include core meaning commitments, tonal boundaries, and narrative stance. The system enables flexible "translation," which works across TikTok, Instagram, and X platforms. Our analysis demonstrates that localisation exists at different levels, which range from light cues like language and event markers to cultural symbols that have deep meaning. Brands should adopt a selective depth approach that uses scalable localisation for routine content and deeper localisation for culturally significant or high-risk contexts. The research shows that cultural friction causes businesses to clash with others because organisations need to conduct cultural and semiotic evaluations together with translation assessments. The research demonstrates that platform characteristics determine how people express their identity when they create content

on TikTok, choose visual styles on Instagram, and share information on X. Platform managers established particular rules that control how users understand their experience with the platform.

6. Conclusion

This study explored how global brands shape and sustain their brand identity on social media in the context of culturally diverse markets. The results reveal that global brand identity is not static or fully under the control of the brand. Rather, it is the result of the combined effects of platform factors, cultural expectations, and audience engagement. In all the cases, the brand's recognisability was secured by anchored coherence: the brand's underlying set of core identity beliefs was held constant, while the expression was varied to fit platform-specific formats and cultural nuances. The analysis demonstrates that the adaptation of tone, imagery, and narratives across different markets happens through the translation of the same identity anchors into culturally appropriate forms of expression. This translation happens either on the surface, involving aspects of tone, imagery, and narratives, or deeper, involving aspects of meaning, values, and cultural symbolism. This is important because, although deeper adaptation can positively contribute to the legitimacy of the brand, it can also create risks of interpretation if the execution is perceived to be inappropriate, preformative, and/or disconnected from the local culture.

Another reason why the same brand might be interpreted differently is the platform-specific contexts that shape the way brands are perceived. TikTok, for instance, is known to promote creator-led narratives, trend participation, and authenticity cues, which means that the audience is likely to judge the brand based on whether it “fits” the platform. Instagram, on the other hand, is likely to promote visual coherence, where the platform enables a strong sense of aesthetics, which is important for building brand consistency. X, however, is likely to promote real-time discourses, announcements, and position-taking, where the meaning of the brand is likely to be contested by the audience. Audience participation is a crucial aspect of the reinforcement or subversion of brand identity. Comments, responses, shares, and remixing are public spaces of meaning-making, where users verify, re-make, or contest brand meanings. This leads to authenticity being constructed as a social judgement, rather than a brand property. Thus, the findings of this study place digital

branding as a process of negotiation, whereby brands can establish identity anchors and narratives, but audience discourse and platform processes determine the acceptance, trust, or dismissal of these identity anchors.

In conclusion, this study makes a contribution to understanding global brand identity as being sustained through coherence at the level of commitments, with variation at the level of execution. It also offers a framework for thinking about localisation as a continuum from surface signalling to deep meaning reframing, and demonstrates the importance of platform-native execution for credibility in the fragmented digital space.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Coding Framework

Brand	Platform	Post (identifier and date)	Why it works as evidence
Nike	Instagram	Reel: “Introducing the A’One” (4 Feb 2025)	Clear identity storytelling through athlete-led narrative, with tone and imagery aligned to performance and empowerment; strong for showing how a global brand frames meaning through storytelling
Nike	Instagram	Reel: “Introducing NikeSKIMS...” (18 Feb 2025)	Demonstrates brand co-branding as identity extension; shows how global identity is negotiated through partnership storytelling and platform-native short video format
Nike	X	“It’s Good to be Green.” (9 Feb 2025)	Illustrates text-led cultural/event alignment and real-time brand voice; useful for affordance comparison against Instagram
Coca-Cola	Instagram	Post: “Showgirling.” (2 Oct 2025)	Strong lifestyle imagery and tone-of-voice cues; helpful for analysing visual identity anchoring with light localisation signals
Coca-Cola	Instagram	Post: “Can’t get more classic than a Coca-Cola with denim.” (25 Nov 2025)	Shows heritage/classic positioning through everyday styling; useful for identity anchoring and global coherence

Coca-Cola (Japan)	X	“Coca-Cola X Fes 2025” ticket post (10–12 Oct 2025, event framing)	Clear localisation through language, local pop-culture context and event marketing; strong Asia-region example
Uniqlo	Instagram	Post: AIRism Cotton Oversized long-sleeve (8 Mar 2025)	Illustrates functional-minimalist identity and everyday utility framing; good for showing subtle localisation (seasonality and lifestyle cues)
Uniqlo	Instagram	Reel: Uniqlo U S/S 2025 “Layers of Spring” (3 Mar 2025)	Shows seasonal narrative framing and aesthetic execution; useful for comparing Instagram affordances and localisation depth
Samsung	X (US)	Galaxy Unpacked invitation and “Experience Spaces” (July 2025)	Demonstrates platform use for event announcement and cross-city localisation cues; strong for platform affordance effects
Samsung	X (US)	Post referencing creator/fitness context with Galaxy Watch (12 Oct 2025)	Show’s creator linkage and lifestyle framing, plus platform-native cross-linking; useful for audience co-construction discussion

Table 10. Coding Framework for NVivo Analysis

- **Brand:** The companies used to analyse (e.g., Nike, Coca-Cola, Uniqlo, Samsung). It lets you compare how different brands manage global identity and localisation.
- **Platform:** The social media channel where the content appears (Instagram or X). This matters because each platform has different “affordances” (e.g., reels/visual storytelling on Instagram vs real-time text/discussion on X) that shape how branding is performed.
- **Post (identifier and date):** The specific item you sampled, labelled so it can be traced and referenced (format/type + title/short description + exact date). This is your evidence unit for coding in NVivo and for showing where your interpretations come from.
- **Why it works as evidence:** A short justification linking the post to the themes/RQs (e.g., identity anchoring, storytelling, localisation cues, platform-native execution, audience meaning-making). It explains exactly what the post demonstrates and why it is useful for analysis and cross-case/platform comparison.

Appendix B: Sample Extracts from Analysed Posts

Brand	Platform	Post (identifier and date)	Key analytical focus
Nike	Instagram	"Introducing the A'One" (4 Feb 2025)	Athlete-led storytelling; performance identity
Nike	X	"It's Good to be Green." (9 Feb 2025)	Text-led discourse; event alignment
Coca-Cola	Instagram	"Showgirling." (2 Oct 2025)	Lifestyle imagery; identity anchoring
Coca-Cola (Japan)	X	"Coca-Cola X Fes 2025" (Oct 2025)	Local language; pop-culture; event framing
Uniqlo	Instagram	AIRism Cotton LS (8 Mar 2025)	Functional minimalism; everyday utility
Samsung	X (US)	Galaxy Unpacked (July 2025)	Platform-native announcements; localisation cues

Table 11. Example of Sample Extracted from Social Media

Links

<https://www.instagram.com/reel/DFp0HvURbsa/>

<https://x.com/Nike/status/1888790113578086482>

<https://www.instagram.com/cocacola/>

<https://www.instagram.com/uniqlo/reel/DGwoZXDz0dz/>

<https://x.com/CocaColaJapan/status/1956224664143061232>

<https://x.com/SamsungMobileUS/status/1977445802344612217>

Appendix C: Code Matrix

C1. Cross-platform identity performance matrix (TikTok × Instagram × X)

Platform	Dominant identity performance	Typical localisation expression	Typical audience meaning-making
TikTok	Creator-/trend-led participation	Trend alignment, creator collaborations, locally salient formats	Relatability; authenticity judged by “platform fluency”
Instagram	Curated aesthetic storytelling	Lifestyle/place cues, selective language/event markers	Aspiration; authenticity judged by consistency
X	Discourse, announcements, event alignment	Event-linked messaging, market-specific campaign cues	Negotiation/contestation in replies; topical alignment

Table 12. Cross-Platform Identity Matrix

C2. Localisation depth analysis (surface cues ↔ deep cultural adaptation)

Level	Localisation type	Typical indicators	Primary purpose	Main risk
1	Surface cues	Language switch, hashtags, market CTAs, place tags	Quick relevance signal	Seen as superficial
2	Contextual anchoring	Local events/festivals, settings, local partnerships	Cultural legibility	Misread references

Level	Localisation type	Typical indicators	Primary purpose	Main risk
3	Representational adaptation	Casting, everyday-life scenes, norms of portrayal	Resonance/identification	Authenticity scrutiny
4	Deep symbolic adaptation	Culturally loaded symbols, values emphasis, rituals	Cultural legitimacy	Contestation/appropriation

Table 13. Localization Identity Depth

Appendix D: Ethical Approval Confirmation

- Use of publicly available social media content only
- No direct interaction with human participants
- No collection of private or identifiable user data
- Compliance with institutional ethical guidelines
- Low-risk, non-intrusive digital content analysis