

Global vs. Local: A Study of Cross-Cultural Advertising in the Automotive Industry

Alisa KASIANOVA

University of Pannonia, Hungary

László KOVÁCS

Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary

Abstract: In the modern globalized world, international companies advertise their products and services to linguistically and culturally diverse audiences; therefore, they need to consider the cultural peculiarities of their target markets. This study explores and compares linguistic and cross-cultural advertising solutions of international car manufacturers Volkswagen and Fiat. A total of 457 advertisements were analyzed using semiotic analysis of visual and verbal elements reflecting Hofstede's cultural dimensions. Customers' reactions to specific advertisements were also studied through semi-structured interviews to evaluate the effect of the companies' advertising solutions. The results show that Volkswagen and Fiat use different linguistic and marketing methods of advertising adaptation and rendering Hofstede's cultural values. While some universal customer attitudes were identified, the results revealed the importance of culturally sensitive advertising and the role of social contexts.

Keywords: Intercultural communication, advertising, Hofstede's cultural dimensions, semiotics, culture

1. Introduction

Nowadays, with the development of technologies and the increasing pace of globalization, social media advertising has become an important element of international companies' marketing. Social media platforms allow advertisers to instantly reach their potential customers in different corners of the world. While the increasing popularity of social media platforms allows for a broader customer reach, there are certain challenges, which still need to be addressed. Among them is the influence of cross-cultural differences on customers' perception of advertising.

There are multiple works which explore the connection between advertising language and cultural differences (Douglas & Craig, 2007; Whitelock & Chung, 1989). While earlier research focuses on traditional advertising, the present study aims to explore the influence of cross-cultural differences in a more modern social media context. Considering the peculiarities of Facebook as a platform for research, as well as the advertising trends and social context of the cultures in question, we provide fresh insights into the role of cultural adaptation in contemporary advertising.

In this research, we analyze and compare cross-cultural Facebook advertising of two international automobile companies—Germany-based Volkswagen and Italy-based Fiat. By studying the posts of the two companies targeting three separate markets (German, Italian and Hungarian customers), we explore how the brands manage their cross-cultural advertising linguistically (using verbal and visual semiotic signs) and culturally (referring to different cultural values). Additionally, we study the influence of context on advertising and explore the reaction of potential customers through qualitative analysis.

1.1 Advertising and Culture: Standardization and Adaptation

Culture significantly influences both advertising strategies employed by companies and consumers' purchasing behavior (Anholt, 2000; Bekimbetova et al., 2021; Ellis, 2021). Recently, the adaptation of advertising to the demands of the target culture was proved effective and positively affecting audience's reactions (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2010). As a result, there has been a growing interest in understanding the cultural influence on advertising.

Culture can be described as a complex system of shared values, norms, and beliefs, which affect various aspects of consumer behavior, such as decision-making and product preferences (Bekimbetova et al., 2021; De Mooij, 2021; Ellis, 2021). Consumer behavior encompasses the processes involved in selecting, buying, and using products to fulfill needs and expectations (De Mooij, 2021). Besides, cultural differences in the worldview can influence the way customers perceive brands (Kovács, 2019). Thus, understanding cultural values that drive customer behavior can help companies create more engaging and persuasive advertisements (Ellis, 2021). Social factors, such as motivation, emotions, and other behavioral drivers also play a role in shaping consumer actions (De Mooij, 2021).

When advertising globally, companies traditionally choose between standardization and adaptation strategies. Standardization refers to using consistent advertising messages and methods across different markets, based on the idea that fundamental human needs and advertising goals are universal (Gülmez, 2019; Pagani et al., 2015). On the other hand, adaptation involves tailoring advertising strategies, language, and style to fit the cultural, linguistic, and contextual needs of specific regions (De Mooij, 2021; Pagani et al., 2015). This approach is driven by the recognition that cultural differences can significantly influence how advertisements are received and understood.

Recent studies show that culturally adapted advertisements tend to be more persuasive and relatable than standardized ones (Ellis, 2021; Hornikx & O'Keefe, 2009). Companies often conduct detailed research into consumer behavior and cultural values to create effective messages tailored to specific markets (Karkhanis, 2019). For example, advertisements in cultures that emphasize health and wellness may focus on organic or health-related products (Ellis, 2021).

To summarize, while both strategies have their advantages, the growing importance of cultural awareness has made adaptation a key focus in international advertising. In this research, we analyze the approaches of Volkswagen and Fiat to managing their advertising for three target audiences—Germany, Italy and Hungary—and explore how their advertising solutions resonated with potential customers.

1.2 Operationalization of Culture: Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory

Culture is a complex phenomenon, which can be studied using different approaches. For structured cross-cultural comparisons, scholars tend to use cultural dimensions models like Hofstede's (1980), Trompenaars's (1993), and the GLOBE (2004). Trompenaars's model, for example, outlines five key value orientations that describe cultural differences and how people approach problems. The GLOBE model, developed by House et al. (2004), expands on this by identifying nine cultural dimensions that influence leadership and organizational practices across countries. While the GLOBE model provides valuable insights into cultural and organizational dynamics, its focus on leadership rather than consumer behavior makes it less specific for analyzing advertising effectiveness.

In contrast, Hofstede's model is a widely known and frequently applied theory of cultural dimensions. The theory was originally developed in organizational settings: Hofstede conducted research among the employees of an international company, IBM (Hofstede,

1980). His model outlines six dimensions that reflect cultural differences across countries, helping to explain variations in behavior, communication, and business practices. These dimensions provide insight into how cultural attitudes shape preferences and behaviors, which is crucial for effective communication, especially in advertising.

The following dimensions were identified within Hofstede's model (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede et al., 2010):

Power Distance: This dimension measures how power is distributed in society. In high power distance cultures, hierarchy and authority are respected, whereas low power distance cultures value equality and decentralized decision-making (Hofstede, 2011, p. 9).

Individualism vs. Collectivism: Individualistic cultures prioritize personal goals, individual rights, and self-reliance. In contrast, collectivist cultures emphasize group cohesion, loyalty, and shared responsibility (Hofstede, 2011, p. 11).

Masculinity vs. Femininity: Masculine cultures value competitiveness, achievement, and material success, while feminine cultures emphasize quality of life, care, and nurturing relationships (Hofstede, 2011, p. 12).

Uncertainty Avoidance Index: This dimension refers to a culture's tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty. High uncertainty avoidance cultures prefer clear rules and structure, while low uncertainty avoidance cultures are more comfortable with risk and change (Hofstede, 2011, p. 10).

Long-Term vs. Short-Term Orientation: Cultures with a long-term orientation focus on future rewards, persistence, and long-term planning. Short-term oriented cultures focus more on immediate gratification and respect for tradition (Hofstede, 2011, p. 15).

Indulgence vs. Restraint: Indulgent cultures encourage the pursuit of happiness, leisure, and indulgence in desires. Restrained cultures impose stricter social norms and discourage excessive enjoyment (Hofstede, 2011, p. 16).

Based on a large amount of data collected from more than 100,000 employees – representatives of different cultures—Hofstede described more than 70 cultures based on the identified dimensions. Figure 1 demonstrates the up-to-date scores of Germany, Italy and Hungary on Hofstede's cultural dimensions, as of 2023.

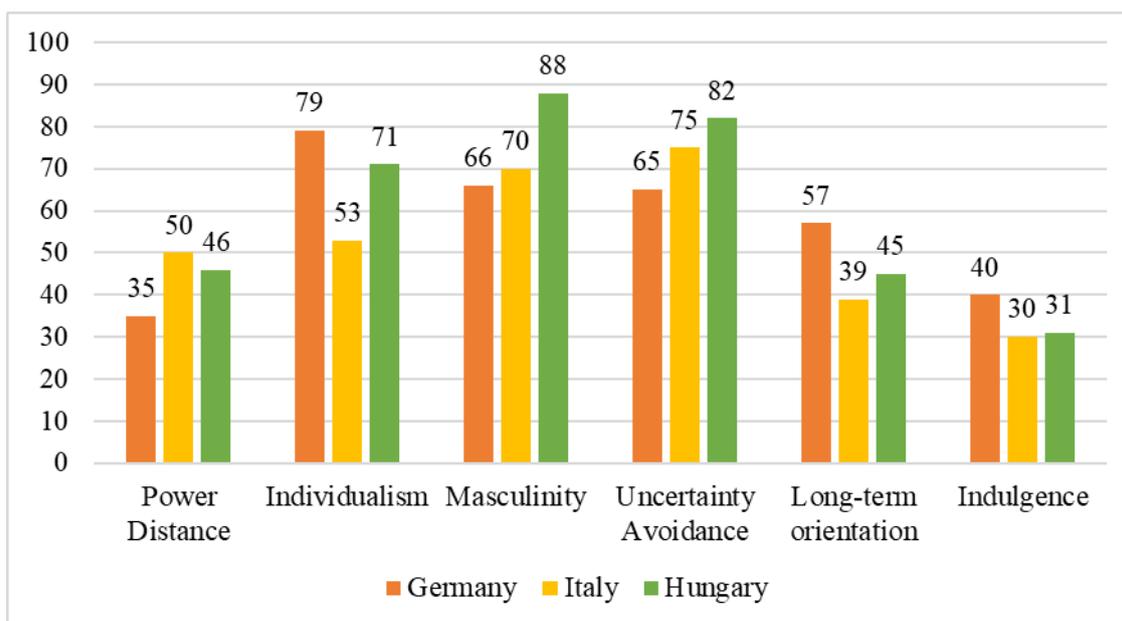


Figure 1. Cross-Cultural Comparison of Germany, Italy and Hungary (The Culture Factor, 2023).

Despite the frequent application of Hofstede's theory in academic and business contexts, the model has faced significant criticism. One of the concerns is that the theory was developed in the 1980s, raising questions about its relevance in a rapidly changing world (McSweeney, 2002). Additionally, scholars argue that Hofstede's framework is overly rigid, as it does not account for the fluidity of culture or the ways in which cultures influence each other (Spencer-Oatey, 2000). Critics also highlight that the model's reliance on survey data from IBM employees may limit its generalizability (McSweeney, 2002; Signorini et al., 2009).

To address these limitations, we apply Hofstede's framework cautiously, acknowledging its weaknesses and adapting it to the context of contemporary cultural analysis. First, we do not rely solely on the scores provided by Hofstede; instead, we integrate insights gathered through semi-structured interviews with representatives of the three cultures under study. Furthermore, contextualizing the findings enables us to connect the results of our semiotic analysis and interview responses with globalization processes and the socio-economic realities of the cultures in question. Therefore, while Hofstede's dimensions serve as a valuable foundation, they are complemented by more nuanced, context-sensitive methods to achieve a deeper understanding of cultural influences in cross-cultural advertising.

1.3 Semiotic Approach

To identify Hofstede's cultural dimensions in advertising, this work adopts a semiotic approach to examine both the visual and verbal components of advertisements. This method allows for the connection of these components to the cultural values outlined by Hofstede.

The semiotic approach was chosen for this research for several reasons. **First**, the study focuses on the meanings behind advertising messages, including culturally sensitive meanings. Semiotics, as the study of signs, symbols, and their interpretations, provides an opportunity to explore advertising messages on a deeper level (Chandler, 2022). By uncovering these meanings, it becomes possible to link them to specific cultural dimensions.

Second, in modern social media advertising, it is essential to consider both textual and visual elements, as they are frequently used together and complement each other to convey a unified message (Minaeva & Madinyan, 2023). Semiotics deals with various types of signs, including text, images, sounds, gestures, and even spatial arrangements. Therefore, adopting a semiotic approach allows for an in-depth analysis of verbal and visual components in combination, revealing how these elements interact to communicate cultural meanings (Kasianova, 2021; Suphaborwornrat & Punksirikul, 2022).

In the analysis, alongside the textual and visual elements of Facebook posts, we treat **emojis** and **hashtags** as visual and verbal semiotic signs respectively. Both elements are widely used in online advertising, each serving distinct but complementary functions.

Emojis are graphic symbols representing objects, people, emotions, actions or ideas (Rodrigues et al., 2017). Their primary function is to add emotional depth to messages and enhance their appeal, making communication more engaging and relatable (Shi & Wan, 2022). Research indicates that emojis positively influence consumer engagement, increasing interest in products and boosting purchase intentions (Das et al., 2019).

Hashtags perform multiple functions in digital communication. They categorize topics, improve search, and facilitate online community-building by reflecting shared interests and values (Zappavigna, 2018). Hashtags are also powerful tools for raising awareness and mobilizing support for social causes, as seen with movements like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo (Ta'amneh & Al-Ghazo, 2021; Zulli, 2020). In advertising, hashtags play a promotional role, increasing brand visibility, enhancing audience engagement, and influencing purchase intentions (Shi & Wan, 2022).

This research pays special attention to how potential customers from different cultures perceive emojis and hashtags as components of advertising. Understanding cultural perceptions of these signs allows us to evaluate their effectiveness and role in conveying advertising messages across diverse audiences.

Based on the theoretical foundation of the study and the identified research gaps, it is possible to formulate the following objectives of the study:

- (1) To analyze how Volkswagen and Fiat adapt their Facebook advertisements for German, Italian and Hungarian target cultures.
- (2) To explore the connection between current social processes and cultural values reflected in social media advertising.
- (3) To explore how potential customers from Germany, Italy and Hungary evaluate the effect of social media advertisements representing different cultural values and symbols, as well as different advertising solutions.

By addressing these objectives, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how semiotic elements—such as text, visuals, emojis, and hashtags—communicate cultural values in social media advertising, and how they may influence customers' reactions.

2. Methodology

2.1 Sampling and Data Collection

The advertising samples for the semiotic and cultural analysis were collected from the official German, Italian, and Hungarian Facebook pages of Volkswagen and Fiat. Advertisements from Volkswagen published between 1 January and 30 June 2022, included 96 German, 57 Italian, and 117 Hungarian posts. For Fiat, 50 Italian and 38 German posts from the same six-month period were analyzed. Hungarian posts, due to irregular posting, were collected within 18 months (1 January 2022, to 30 June 2023), resulting in 99 posts. The total of 457 Facebook advertisements were organized into six groups based on company and language: German, Italian, and Hungarian posts for both Volkswagen and Fiat. Each entry included details such as car model, captions (original and translated into English), screenshots of the images, publication date, access date, hashtags, and emojis (if used).

In this research, we focus on **verbal** and **visual semiotic signs**. Verbal signs refer to words, phrases and hashtags in the captions of advertising posts (or within the image), while visual signs include objects, characters, colors, design styles, logos, emojis and the arrangement of image or video elements (Berman & Blakeman, 2009; Moriarty et al., 2015). These elements were analyzed holistically, considering the interplay between verbal and visual communication to understand the cultural messages conveyed.

Facebook was chosen as the platform for this study due to several reasons. Compared to other platforms like Instagram and Twitter, Facebook offers a more balanced format. For example, while Instagram prioritizes visuals and often sidelines textual elements, Facebook equally integrates both modalities, which aligns with the study's goals. Besides, compared to other social media, Facebook has a broader audience, which reaches 1 billion active users per day, and provides a wider age range and cultural diversity of the user base (Laor, 2022; Ziyadin et al., 2019). These factors make Facebook an ideal platform for analyzing the interplay of visual and textual elements in culturally diverse advertising.

2.2 Semiotic Analysis

In the semiotic analysis of advertisements, the first step involved identifying both visual and verbal semiotic signs within each post. Visual elements were analyzed alongside verbal signs to understand how they work together to communicate specific messages.

The semiotic analysis was conducted using Hofstede's cultural dimensions as a framework. This approach allows for an in-depth examination of how cultural values and societal norms influence the interpretation of signs within the advertisements. To ensure the reliability of the analysis, double coding was employed, with multiple coders independently analyzing the data and comparing results to establish intercoder reliability. This process helped to validate the consistency and objectivity of the findings.

2.3 Semi-Structured Interviews and Thematic Analysis

To complement the semiotic analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the responses of potential customers to cultural values represented in advertisements, as well as specific verbal and visual elements. Ten participants were recruited from Germany, Italy, and Hungary (three German, four Italian, and three Hungarian). Recruitment was conducted through social media and academic networks, ensuring diverse participants with varying exposure to Facebook advertising.

In order to organize and anonymize the interview data, a special coding system was developed. Table 1 below represents the participants' codes together with their demographic information.

Table 1. Interviewees' Coding System and Demographics.

German Participants	Italian Participants	Hungarian Participants
Interviewee G1—female, 28 years old	Interviewee I1—male, 21 years old	Interviewee H1—male, 23 years old
Interviewee G2—female, 35 years old	Interviewee I2—male, 21 years old	Interviewee H2—male, 33 years old
Interviewee G3—female, 27 years old	Interviewee I3—female, 29 years old	Interviewee H3—female, 26 years old
	Interviewee I4—female, 23 years old	

Interviews, lasting 30–40 minutes each, were conducted both in-person and online, depending on participants' preferences. Recordings and transcripts were prepared upon participant consent. The interviews addressed general opinions about automobile as a product and brands under study, followed by the analysis of specific advertisements in participants' native languages.

Responses were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. This approach is widely used in linguistic and marketing research for its depth and flexibility (Gubrium, 2012).

Thematic analysis emphasized cross-cultural differences in responses, focusing on emotional reactions and the perceived effectiveness of cultural values and semiotic signs, such as hashtags, emojis, and culturally sensitive symbols.

3. Methodology

3.1 Volkswagen: Confident Character

The semiotic analysis of Volkswagen advertising demonstrates that some of the cultural values were equally dominant in the advertising targeting all three cultures. Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of Hofstede's cultural dimensions in Volkswagen's advertisements across Germany, Italy, and Hungary.

Figure 2 shows that Masculinity, Long-term orientation, Indulgence and High Uncertainty Avoidance appear to be the most common values in German, Italian and Hungarian advertising. Below, we describe the main themes and exact verbal and visual signs representing these dimensions, as well as identify cross-cultural differences in the company's linguistic and advertising solutions.

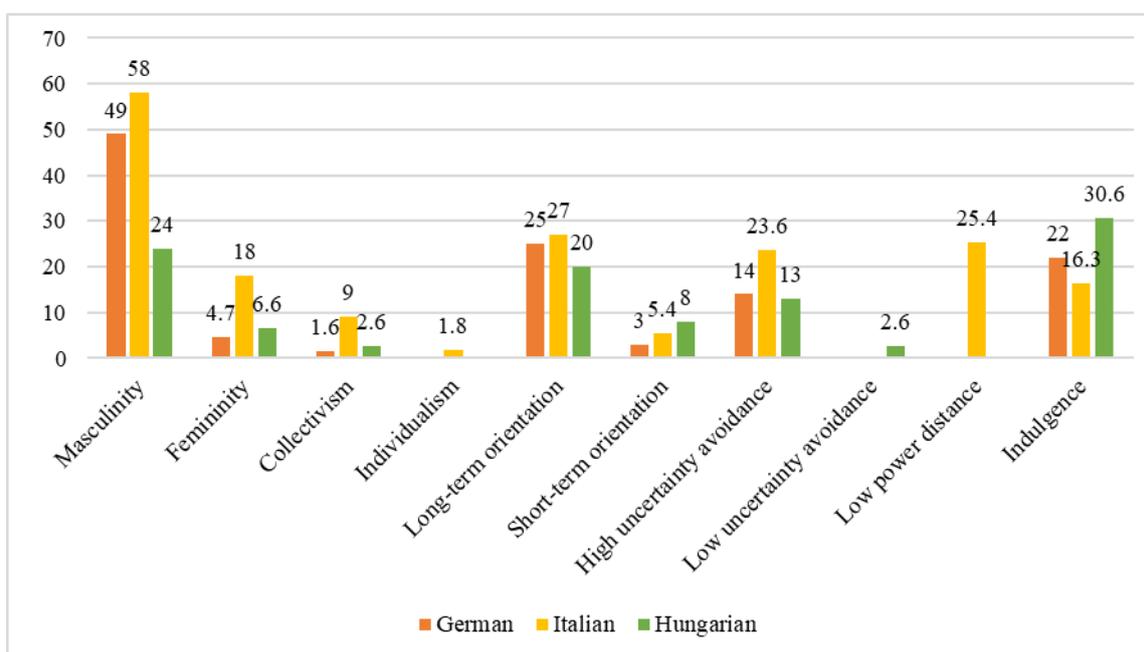


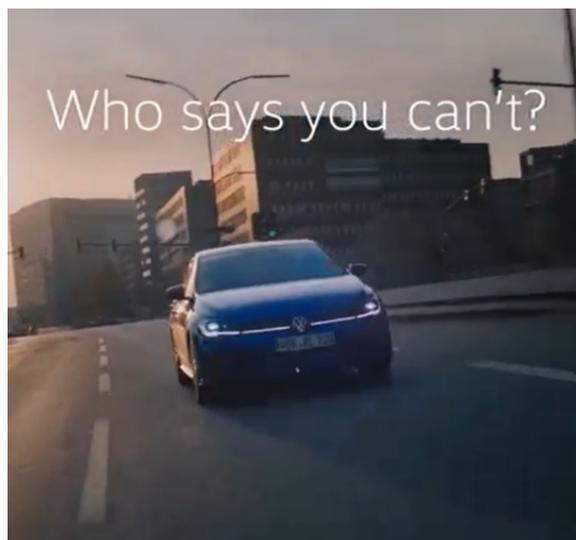
Figure 2. The Percentage of Volkswagen Advertisements Representing Different Cultural Values.

Masculinity dominated in all three cultures, emphasizing power, performance, success, and confidence:

- (German) Performance-Maschine [performance machine]
- (Italian) SUV Coupé Volkswagen è solo per chi ama distinguersi [Volkswagen's first SUV Coupé is only for those who like to stand out]
- (Hungarian)...minden szögből magára vonja a tekintetet [...attract attention from every angle]

In the case of all three cultures, a car was also compared to a human being, displaying human character features traditionally described as masculine (Selbstbewusster [self-confident], Egy nem mindennapi egyéniség [An unusual personality]).

Regarding visual signs, a common feature of masculinity was the depiction of an automobile in motion, symbolizing power and speed. This visual representation aligns with de Mooij (2021, p. 133)'s characteristic of masculinity as "big and fast are beautiful". Scheme 1 shows a car in the middle of an empty road, in motion, accompanied by the caption "Who says you can't?", reinforcing the idea of power and overcoming obstacles.



Scheme 1. Speed and Motion in a “Masculine” Advertisement (<https://www.facebook.com/VolkswagenIT/videos/326007999526461/>, accessed on 25 March 2025).

Emojis were also used frequently to contribute to the “masculine” image of the brand. For example, the emoji of “flexed byceps” (“💪”), referring to strength, was frequently used in “masculine” advertisements:

- (Hungarian) A dolgozó csapat létszáma ma is teljes és mindenki munkára kész! 💪 [The busy team is still full and ready to work!]

In the case of German and Italian target audience, Long-term orientation was the second most frequently used cultural dimension (and the third in the case of Hungarian target audience). Long-term orientation was primarily reflected through the ideas of environmental care. The company emphasized its concern about environmental issues and underlined the use of sustainable technologies in automobile manufacturing:

- (Italian) più tecnologia, meno emissioni [more technologies, less emissions]
- (Hungarian) A jövő az okos megoldásokon és a fenntarthatóságon alapul [The future is based on smart solutions and sustainability]

Additionally, Long-term orientation was reflected through the idea of innovativeness and being open to new technological solutions:

- (German) Verwandlungskünstler, der die Zeichen der Zeit neu interpretiert [quick-change artist that reinterprets the signs of the times]
- (Italian) una nuova idea di mobilità [a new idea of mobility]
- (Hungarian) A teljesen új Volkswagen Taigo a trendeket ismeri [The completely new Volkswagen Taigo knows the trends]

Volkswagen consistently conveyed the message to each target audience that its advanced technologies and modern features provide opportunities for enjoyment, thus referring to Indulgence. The brand promotes the idea of experiencing the pleasure of driving and highlights the importance of fun and positive emotions:

- (German) Freiheit, die fasziniert [Freedom that fascinates]
- (Italian) Il gusto di viaggiare aumenta ad ogni sosta [The pleasure of traveling increases with each stop]

Less frequently, the company appealed to the values Femininity, Collectivism and Short-term orientation. Femininity, which was more frequent in Italian-language advertising, was reflected through the ideas of comfort and focus on relationships and feelings:

- (German) Familientaugliche [family-friendly space]
- (Italian) Più spazio anche all'amore [More space for love too]
- (Hungarian) Több kényelem, nagyobb belső tér [More comfort, more interior space]

A theme unique to Italian and Hungarian-language advertising was representing a car as “mobile” home, creating cozy feeling with its technologies and comfort.

- (Italian) Per sentirti sempre a casa ovunque tu sia [To always feel at home wherever you are]
- (Hungarian) ID. Buzz, amivel mindenhol otthon érezheted magad [ID Buzz, which makes you feel at home everywhere]

Visually, Femininity was reflected through depicting people spending time together and sharing enjoyable moments. Scheme 2 demonstrates a couple wearing matching T-shirts with an image of a car, referring to the idea of feelings and the “uniting” power of the brand.



Scheme 2. The Focus on Feelings and Relationships (<https://www.facebook.com/VolkswagenMagyarország/photos/a.393280880690620/5121532531198741>, accessed on 25 March 2025).

Collectivism in Volkswagen advertising was mostly rendered through the ideas of a car being a driver’s companion and providing an opportunity for people to feel part of a group and share positive emotions.

- (German) Der Tiguan Allspace ist bei fast jedem Ausflugsziel [The Tiguan Allspace is your perfect companion]
- (Italian) Per sentirti sempre a casa... basta avere la compagnia giusta [To always feel at home... all you need is the right company]
- (Hungarian) tökéletes partner a munkában [perfect partner at work!]

High Uncertainty Avoidance was rendered through the emphasis on the safety and well-being of the customers. The company emphasized safety and reliability as the priorities of the company:

- (German) bringt euch... zuverlässig ans Ziel [reliably gets you to your destination]
- (Hungarian) Balesetmentes közlekedést kívánunk! [We wish you an accident-free ride!]

Low Power Distance and High Uncertainty Avoidance were frequently reflected in Italian-language advertising, particularly in the series involving celebrity ambassador Francesco Totti, an Italian football player promoting Volkswagen’s electric ID range. In these posts, Totti integrates with Volkswagen’s engineers to explore and explain the technical advantages of electric mobility. The dimension of Low Power Distance is highlighted by making electric vehicles accessible to everyone, underlined by hashtags #ElettricoPerTutti [Electric for

everyone] and #ElettricoPerTotti [Electric for Totti]. High Uncertainty Avoidance is conveyed through the idea of discovery and expert opinions; each post focuses on specific car features like autonomy, charging systems, and navigation. The settings of the series (Volkswagen laboratory) also contribute to the idea of scientific exploration and trustworthiness (Scheme 3).



Scheme 3. The Use of Settings for Rendering Reliability of the Brand (<https://www.facebook.com/VolkswagenIT/videos/287133470266716>, accessed on 25 March 2025).

To summarize, Volkswagen campaigns shared common cultural values but showed slight variations in less dominant themes. The company followed the strategy of advertising adaptation: while keeping a consistent image of the brand as reliable and efficient, advertisers used unique visual and verbal signs in each campaign. For example, German-language posts were often followed by technical details of the advertised model, while the unique feature of Hungarian-language advertisements was the active use of emojis and hashtags.

3.2 Fiat: Italian Lifestyle and Better Future

The focus of Fiat advertising was the idea of sustainability and the creation of a better future, aligned with the themes of Long-term orientation. Similarly to Volkswagen, Fiat emphasized the “masculine” qualities of the brand and its contribution to the relaxed lifestyle and Italian “dolce vita”. Figure 3 illustrates the percentage of Fiat posts referring to different cultural values of Hofstede.

Long-term orientation was the most frequent idea in the advertising for all three target audiences. Within this cultural value, the unique idea of Fiat was the contribution to a better future:

- (Italian) Il nostro impegno a lungo termine per un futuro migliore [long-term commitment to a better future]
- (Hungarian) nézd meg hogyan kezdhetsz egy szebb holnapot még ma [see how you can start a better tomorrow today]

While the idea of building a better future is generalized, reflecting the mission and perspective of the brand, the company specifically expressed its concern about the environment and underlined the use of sustainable technologies in car manufacturing (similarly to Volkswagen’s green advertising):

- (German) Mit offenem Dach in Richtung Nachhaltigkeit! [With an open roof towards sustainability]
- (Italian) Abbassa la capote e alza il livello di sostenibilità [Lower the top and raise the level of sustainability]
- (Hungarian) FIAT 500e károsanyag-kibocsátás nélkül játszik [FIAT 500e plays without emissions]

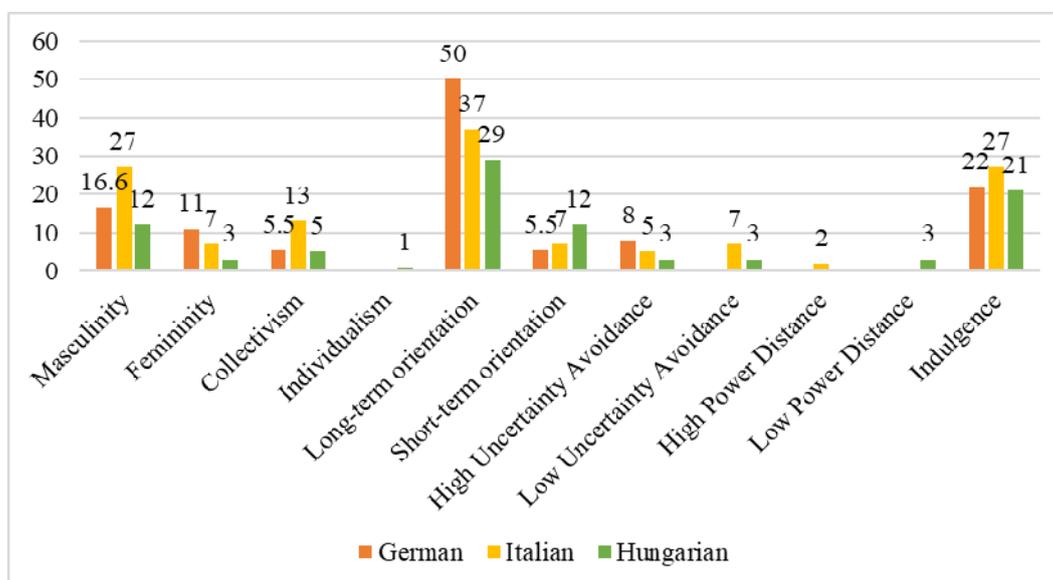


Figure 3. The Percentage of Fiat Advertisements Representing Different Cultural Values.

In Hungarian advertising, the company frequently used hashtags related to sustainability and green marketing: #zeroemission, #emobility, #electriccar.

As for the visual representation of Long-term orientation, red color was an important visual sign in all three advertising campaigns. This color was associated with the Fiat RED model, which used environmentally friendly technological solutions. Reflecting the name of the model, red color was used as the symbol of sustainability and love for the planet.

Green color as a common symbol of sustainability and environmental protection was also used in several posts. Scheme 4 demonstrates the green advertisement with visual transition from dry and grey land on the left to the green modern city on the right, reflecting the course of the company towards sustainable future.



Scheme 4. Visual Representation of Green Advertising (<https://www.facebook.com/Fiat.Magyarország/posts/pfbid02by2tX6pLAL6YmxTr8erWq4UYg8v4jPNStBo2iqgv9ggsGmtTpRXnjCBJeDcqt8zRl>, accessed on 25 March 2025).

In addition, emojis were frequently used to contribute to the ideas of sustainability and green future. For example, posts representing electric models of Fiat often included the “Lightning” (⚡) emoji. Other emojis, such as the planet (🌍), recycling symbol (♻️) or DNA (🧬) visually emphasized the ideas related to innovation and sustainability.

Indulgence was the second most common dimension in Fiat advertising for all three target cultures (together with Masculinity in the case of Italian culture). Indulgence was represented through the ideas of enjoyable driving experience and a relaxed lifestyle. From the linguistic point of view, marketers frequently used the expression “dolce vita” [sweet life], reflecting the Italian laid-back attitude to life:

- (German) genieß die Natur und echtes, italienisches Dolce Vita [enjoy nature and true Italian dolce vita]
- (Italian) Vivi il sogno italiano [live the Italian dream]
- (Hungarian) Az 500 és 500X Dolce Vita télből a nyárba repít [The 500 and 500X Dolce Vita take you from winter to summer]

Other examples refer to the idea of pleasure, enjoyment and freedom:

- (German) Genieße dein Leben in vollen [Enjoy your life to the fullest]
- (Italian) e vivi il lato più spensierato delle tue avventure urbane [and experience the more carefree side of your urban adventures]
- (Hungarian) élvezd a szabadságot! [enjoy the freedom!]

Visually, the company reflected the idea of freedom, enjoyment and adventure through depicting Fiat cars among picturesque landscapes and using bright color schemes (Scheme 5).



Scheme 5. The Representation of Indulgence in Fiat Advertising (<https://www.facebook.com/Fiat.Italia/posts/pfbid0qNoqS7NnwdT1eAqkR8nWCnWBJHeEVBep6VC2TzTdb7XPbGF2yNWrSdDmCjqnTaqPl>, accessed on 25 March 2025). Italian: Uno stile tutto Italiano—“An all-Italian style”.

In Hungarian-language advertising, the idea of dolce vita was also expressed through emojis referring to Italian culture, such as a famous Italian gesture of pinched fingers, representing disagreement or disbelief (👉), and an Italian flag (🇮🇹).

Less frequently, Fiat advertisers referred to the ideas of Femininity, Collectivism, High Uncertainty avoidance and Short-term orientation. The ideas of Femininity and Collectivism,

which were more common in German and Italian advertising, represented feelings and emotional bonds as the priority of the company:

- (German) aber für uns drückt die Farbe (RED) am besten Gefühle aus [but for us the color (RED) best expresses feelings’]
- (Italian) Un lungo viaggio diventa divertente quando è condiviso [A long journey is fun when it’s shared].

Short-term orientation was more evident in Hungarian advertisements and referred to the respect towards traditions and history of the company:

- (Hungarian) Hihetetlen, de 30 évvel ezelőtt jelent meg az első generációs Punto. #custom #heritage #heritage #oldtimer #oldbutgold [Incredibly, the first generation Punto was released 30 years ago. #custom #heritage #heritage #oldtimer #oldbutgold]

Additionally, the company refers to holidays and traditions, such as International Women’s Day:

- (Hungarian) A hölgyek és a FIAT kapcsolata nem tegnap kezdődött. Boldog nőnapot kívánunk! #retro #womensday #women #húsvét #easter [The relationship between the ladies and FIAT did not start yesterday. Happy women’s day! #retro #womensday #women #húsvét #easter]

In terms of the adaptation/standardization strategy, it is possible to notice the difference between the approaches of Volkswagen and Fiat. Fiat advertisers frequently created standardized posts, using similar visual signs (such as red color) and verbal elements (such as the ideas of “better future” and “dolce vita”). Schemes 5 and 6 demonstrates a standardized post with similar visuals and message, which was translated into Italian and Hungarian language.

At the same time, in some cases, advertisers adapted their ideas to each target culture. Scheme 8 demonstrate two advertisements featuring Fiat 500 as the best-selling electric car in April in Italy and Germany. In each case, advertisers used specific symbols of the culture—Italian and German flags and Colosseum and Brandenburg Gate on the background—in order to make the message more expressive and attracting attention.

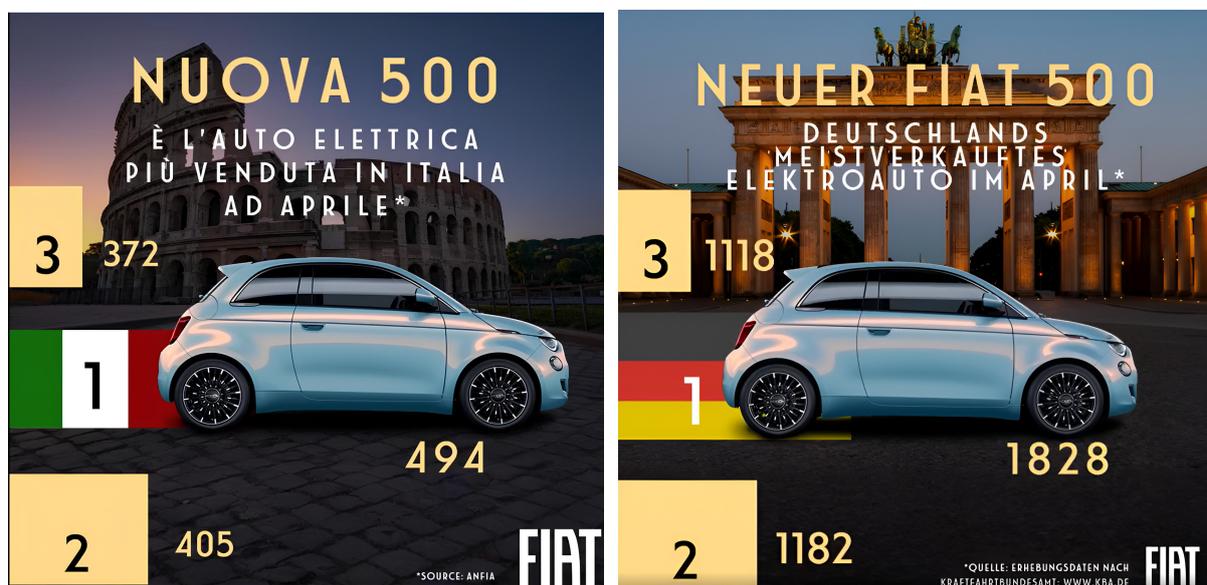
While the semiotic analysis demonstrates the advertising solutions of the companies, it is also important to explore the perception of advertising by potential customers across the three cultures. The next part of the article presents the thematic analysis of interviews with the German, Italian and Hungarian participants.



Scheme 6. Follow the Way Towards Sustainability (<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10159015790969302&set=pb.100064830667110.-2207520000>, accessed on 24 March 2025). Italian: Segui la strada verso la sostenibilità—“Follow the way towards sustainability”.



Scheme 7. Standardized Posts in Italian and Hungarian Language (<https://www.facebook.com/Fiat.Magyarország/photos/a.157684231058691/2087447801415648/>, accessed on 24 March 2025). Hungarian: Kövesd az utat a fenntarthatóság felé—“Follow the way towards sustainability”.



Scheme 8. Visual Cultural Adaptation (<https://www.facebook.com/Fiat.Italia/videos/429887761902977/>, <https://www.facebook.com/FiatDeutschland/videos/920137488875502/>, accessed on 24 March 2025). Italian: Nuova 500. È l'auto elettrica più venduta in Italia ad Aprile—“New 500. It is the best-selling electric car in Italy in April”.

German: Neuer Fiat 500. Deutschlands meistverkauftes Elektroauto im April—“New Fiat 500: Germany’s best-selling electric car in April”.

4. Advertising Effect across Cultures

To explore the effect of the advertising solutions of Volkswagen and Fiat, in-depth interviews were organized with representatives of German, Italian and Hungarian culture. The interviews included general questions exploring the participants’ attitudes towards the brands and an automobile as a product, which allowed for comparison of brand perception and expectations across cultures. Participants were also shown sample advertisements in their respective languages, reflecting different cultural values of Hofstede, as well as various linguistic and marketing solutions used by the companies. They were encouraged to share

their opinions and feelings about the posts in general, focusing on any verbal and visual elements that they found especially appealing. Additionally, interviewees were asked questions relevant to their cultural context, such as gender roles and environmental issues.

4.1 Brand Attitudes and Product Expectations

The interviews with German, Italian, and Hungarian participants revealed consistent perceptions of Volkswagen and Fiat as car brands. The German brand Volkswagen was widely associated with reliability and high quality (“advanced in technology” (Interviewee G3), “German quality” (Interviewee H2). In contrast, Fiat was described as an affordable, family-oriented brand, valued for its practicality and affordable price (“Italian beauty” (Interviewee G2), “very cheap” (Interviewee I4). Some of the female participants characterized Fiat as having a feminine quality, attributing this to its compact design.

When asked about the most desirable qualities of a car as a product, the interviewees provided varying responses. Both German and Hungarian participants tend to pay attention to the safety and reliability of the car, while Italian interviewees underline the importance of the style and design (for example, appealing color), as well as its smaller size for practical reasons (difficulties with parking in Italy). For all participants, affordable price of the automobile was among the most important conditions for purchase. Additionally, female German and Hungarian participants expressed their interest in environmental aspects of driving and the preference for green technologies used in an automobile.

It is possible to conclude that the impressions of German, Italian and Hungarian interviewees correlate with the brand images created by Volkswagen and Fiat. At the same time, there were some cultural and gender variations in terms of the desired car qualities.

4.2 Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions in Advertising: Most Attractive Themes and Motives across Cultures

As a part of the analysis, we collected the opinions of the interviewees about the advertisements containing verbal and visual features of some of the cultural values of Hofstede used most frequently by Volkswagen and Fiat. The sample advertisements represented the following cultural values: Masculinity/Femininity, Collectivism, Long-term/Short-term orientation, High Uncertainty avoidance, Indulgence.

4.2.1 Masculinity

The “masculine” advertisements presented to interviewees reflected traditionally masculine qualities, such as confidence and power. German respondents showed mixed reactions to such posts, with Interviewee G1 acknowledging that these themes are still often associated with men but can increasingly apply to all genders. She remarked, “there would still be on average more people who would say it’s more important for men than for women to get ahead and be successful”. Interviewee G2 linked the concept of power with male target audiences.

In the Italian context, the slogan “Who says you can’t?” (Scheme 1) used in a Volkswagen post did not strongly resonate with Interviewee I3, who commented, “it doesn’t really ring any bells”. Besides, several interviewees stated that they do not associate Fiat with traditionally masculine characteristics.

Hungarian interviewees generally reacted positively to advertisements featuring power and confidence, with Interviewee H1 noting, “It shows off the professionalism, I guess, that they are really serious about what they are doing”, and Interviewee H3 adding, “I feel like it mostly

targets a male audience”. On average, interviewees reacted more positively to posts representing masculinity in Volkswagen campaign, rather than similar ideas in Fiat advertising.

4.2.2 Femininity

The “feminine” advertisements selected for the study focused on themes of relationships, care, and family bonds. For example, a German-language advertisement posted on Saint Valentine’s Day featured couples enjoying romantic moments with the help of Volkswagen’s technological solutions. All respondents agreed that the advertisement targets couples and younger people. Interviewee G1 noted that the company’s message “goes beyond just the car,” indicating that the Volkswagen values relationships and bonds.

The Italian-language Volkswagen advertisement referred to the concept of a car as a home and spending time with loved ones, which received generally positive reactions. Interviewee I1 commented that the idea of home and family “goes straight to the heart of the consumers”, and Interviewee I2 added, “We spend a lot of time with the family”. Participants reacted in a more neutral way to the ideas of love and romantic relationships. Interviewee I3 underlined that the romantic settings of a post may appeal more to female customers.

Hungarian participants reacted positively to advertisements representing relationships and family bonds, emphasizing the sense of connection created by these posts. Interviewee H1 noted, “I feel like I am more motivated to get a car now, to maybe travel with somebody”, and Interviewee H2 added, “It shows some kind of passion”.

4.2.3 Collectivism

Collectivism was represented through advertisements emphasizing companionship and being a part of a group. Posts featuring a dog as a symbol of friendship and loyalty were shown to representatives of each target audience. Interviewee G1 interpreted the company’s message as equating a car to a friend, noting, “maybe the car is going to be your friend just like your dog.” However, Interviewee G3 had a more neutral reaction to the image of a dog used in the post, saying, “it doesn’t make a difference if it’s the man alone or the dog”.

For the Italian-language campaign, the image of a dog was perceived positively, with Interviewee I3 commenting, “good emotion, good vibe, friendship”.

Hungarian respondents similarly associated the image of a dog with friendship and companionship. Interviewee H3 especially highlighted the positive emotions from the idea of family symbolism in advertising: “I like that they use the idea of a family car”.

4.2.4 Long-Term Orientation: Focus on Sustainability

Advertisements emphasizing long-term orientation through green advertising were positively received across all groups. German respondents found these posts appealing, especially to younger audiences, who are seen as more environmentally conscious. They also highlighted the association of the green color with sustainability, adding to the effectiveness of the messages. Additionally, women were perceived as more likely to resonate with sustainability themes.

Italian participants connected green advertising with progress and technological advancement, appreciating the slogan “Volkswagen way to zero” as a symbol of a shift toward zero pollution. They noted Italy’s increasing focus on sustainable solutions, with younger audiences being particularly receptive to the theme.

Hungarian respondents shared a positive outlook toward environmentally-friendly car solutions. They expressed a preference for electric or less harmful vehicles, provided they

were financially feasible. This demonstrates a growing acceptance of sustainability-focused advertisements across different cultures.

4.2.5 Short-Term Orientation

Advertisements reflecting short-term orientation highlighted cultural traditions or company history through retro styles or classic car models. Italian and Hungarian interviewees responded most positively to such advertisements, in contrast to German participants, who demonstrated a preference for more innovative and forward-looking messages.

An Italian advertisement published on the 6th of January featured a Christmas stocking symbol associated with Epiphany (Epifania), which resonated with all Italian interviewees. Interviewee I3 remarked, “The symbol of Epiphany is immediately recognized, a very Italian theme”. Interviewee I4 added that Italians are nostalgic by nature and often appreciate classic car models, reflecting their cultural connection to tradition.

Hungarian participants similarly valued advertisements emphasizing historical and classic elements. Interviewee H1 observed, “I guess they are trying to... grow awareness towards the classics so that we appreciate them, enjoy them more”. These reactions suggest that incorporating cultural heritage and nostalgic themes can effectively engage audiences in Italy and Hungary, aligning with their appreciation for tradition.

4.2.6 High Uncertainty Avoidance

Advertisements emphasizing High Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI) focused on aspects of safety, technical explanations, and the mechanisms of car models. German respondents had mixed reactions to the technical language used. Interviewee G1 noted that such details “would maybe be useful to, you know, put it into context,” while Interviewee G2 suggested that explaining technology could appeal more to younger audiences interested in innovations. Both Interviewees G2 and G3 emphasized the need for additional support from experienced individuals to interpret complex technical information. Clearer explanations and realistic visuals were preferred, as highlighted by G1: “I prefer more realistic-looking adverts” and “it would be maybe helpful for advertising purposes to show what that means”.

Safety-focused advertisements generally received positive feedback across all three cultures. In Germany, respondents particularly valued messages prioritizing health safety, with G1 describing it as “a very strong point to make to people”.

Italian-language posts representing high UAI promoted hygiene and health in the post-COVID context. While Interviewee I2 dismissed such details as unnecessary, I3 considered them a “good strategy for the company”.

Hungarian participants also appreciated safety-oriented messages, associating them with the brand’s reliability and responsibility. As Interviewee H1 explained, “a car is like not just an object or a property, it’s a responsibility as well”, while H2 praised the effort companies put into ensuring product safety: “They put a lot of energy and care into the product they are selling you”. Overall, safety and health themes were seen as effective strategies for building consumer trust across all target groups.

4.2.7 Indulgence

German respondents reacted positively to advertisements highlighting the themes of enjoyment and escaping daily routines. They interpreted the message as portraying Volkswagen not merely as a means of transport but as a source of freedom, and driving pleasure. Interviewee G1 suggested that such advertisements might appeal particularly to women with family responsibilities, who may desire a break from routine. While acknowledging that Germans tend to be reserved and restrained in their approach to leisure, G1 proposed that the concept of “adventure” could resonate with the German audience. Similarly, G3 emphasized the importance of freedom and independence, qualities she associates with driving.

The association of car advertisements with specific lifestyles elicited mixed reactions. Fiat’s post referring to “dolce vita” lifestyle and featuring vibrant colors and picturesque landscape (Scheme 5) received mostly positive responses depending on regional context. For example, Interviewee I2 felt the campaign “describes perfectly” the Italian lifestyle. Interviewee I3 added that “It is not too much, and I like that the car is depicted in Italian settings.”

Hungarian respondents also appreciated the indulgent themes in car advertisements, associating them with travel and exploration. Interviewee H1 remarked, “They really emphasize the idea of traveling and seeing sights. Yeah. Maybe I will buy a Volkswagen now”, while H2 admitted, “I started daydreaming about traveling now”. Overall, advertisements that evoked freedom, relaxation, and enjoyment resonated strongly across all groups, though cultural nuances influenced individual interpretations.

4.3 Potential Customers’ Reaction to Specific Verbal and Visual Signs

4.3.1 The Use of Emojis and Hashtags in Advertising

Most interviewees responded positively to the use of emojis in advertising, underlining that they add a relatable and emotional element. For example, Interviewee I1 commented, “using emojis, you remember that there is a human being behind that”, while Interviewee I2 noted that emojis “add some color”. However, opinions varied regarding their effectiveness. Interviewee G1 suggested that emojis target younger audiences, whereas Interviewee G2, who uses emojis in informal communication, found them unnecessary in advertising: “it doesn’t look like the effective way”. Several interviewees (G3, I4, H3) emphasized that emojis can be effective only when used thoughtfully, as excessive use may distract from the company’s message.

Similarly, interviewees provided different opinions on the use of hashtags. Some interviewees did not find them particularly useful. Others, such as Interviewee G2, viewed hashtags as helpful for enhancing search: “It was really helpful for me to find some product by hashtag”. Italian participants did not generally use hashtags in personal communication but acknowledged their value in improving search algorithms. Hungarian interviewees showed varied use, with some rarely employing hashtags and others using them occasionally. Overall, perceptions of emojis and hashtags in advertising were not strongly influenced by cultural differences, with individual preferences playing a larger role.

4.3.2 The Attitudes towards Specific Cultural Symbols in Advertising

The use of cultural symbols in advertising elicited mixed reactions among respondents. A German-language Fiat advertisement featuring Fiat 500 as the best-selling electric car in

Germany included the German flag and the Brandenburg Gate in the background. Interviewee G1 criticized this approach, stating, “I feel like it’s a bit too obvious basically what they’re trying”.

Similarly, the inclusion of Italian symbols, such as the Italian flag and the Colosseum, in Fiat advertisements divided opinions. While Interviewee I2 appreciated the patriotic imagery, I3 found it excessive, arguing that Fiat’s association with the Cinquecento already conveyed a strong Italian identity: “I know that Fiat and Cinquecento is a very Italian-imagined Italian picture. I linked Cinquecento to Italia too.”

However, the broader idea of *dolce vita*, representing a relaxed Italian lifestyle, resonated strongly with most Italian respondents. Three out of four interviewees described references to the Italian lifestyle as more subtle and, therefore, more appealing. This suggests that nuanced cultural messaging can be more effective than overt symbolism in evoking positive associations.

5. Cross-Cultural Advertising in Context

The analysis of Volkswagen and Fiat advertising and linguistic strategies reveals distinct approaches to shaping brand image and influencing consumer decision-making. While there are similarities in customer expectations from a product, cultural differences influence how specific values and themes resonate with audiences.

Interview data indicate that quality and performance are universally valued attributes in cars. However, cultural nuances shape brand perceptions. For instance, German, Italian, and Hungarian respondents highlight the importance of indulgence-themed advertisements, reflecting a shared desire for enjoyment and satisfaction. These trends align with economic development, which links wealth to shifts in consumption patterns. Economically developed cultures prioritize leisure and status products (Guo et al., 2018), while restrained cultures, like Hungary, show a growing interest in lifestyles associated with indulgence as aspirations rather than realities (Sokolova, 2015).

Another goal of the interviews was to identify which cultural values reflected in advertising were the most appealing to the potential customers. The “indulgent” values, such as freedom and enjoyment, evoked the most positive reactions in interviewees. While the idea of a relaxed style resonated with Italian interviewees as something representing their culture (the concept of “*dolce vita*”), German and Hungarian interviewees saw such posts as inspiring. From the contextual perspective, it is possible to underline the role of globalization in cultural convergence: it fosters the use of standardized advertising messages, such as the ones emphasizing happiness and satisfaction that resonate universally (De Mooij, 2021). At the same time, divergence ensures that local cultural symbols retain significance, enhancing resonance with target audiences (Billore et al., 2020; De Mooij, 2021). For example, in addition to posts representing Indulgence, Italian participants noted the appealing messages referring to the concept of home, family, and traditions (the aspects of Femininity, Collectivism, and Short-term orientation), while German and Hungarian interviewees preferred posts referring to practicality and innovativeness (representing Long-term orientation and High Uncertainty avoidance). This duality highlights the importance of messages that balance global appeal with cultural specificity.

Hofstede’s Masculinity vs. Femininity dimension offers insight into traditional gender roles in advertising. Masculinity is associated with competition and achievement, while femininity emphasizes care and modesty. Both companies predominantly referenced masculine ideals in their advertisements. Interviewees linked themes of achievement and success to male consumers and emotional or family-focused messages to female audiences. At the same time, social science research highlights evolving gender roles. Mid-20th-century

advertising reinforced traditional roles (McDonald et al., 2020), but feminist movements and shifting norms have since challenged these stereotypes (Iacoviello et al., 2021). In Germany, transitions towards gender equality have redefined traditional breadwinner roles (Jurczyk et al., 2019). Similarly, Italian society associates femininity with resilience and ambition, while Hungary's younger generations increasingly reject traditional attitudes (Fényes et al., 2020).

The interview responses reflected the evolving nature of gender roles, with male participants reacting positively to both masculine and feminine themes, and female participants showing a similar openness to both dimensions. Notably, some male respondents expressed a stronger appreciation for concepts traditionally associated with femininity, such as home and family, indicating a shift away from clear gender-based preferences in advertising appeal.

Finally, sustainability has become a central theme in advertising, reflecting growing environmental awareness. Modern advertisements use green imagery, terms like "recyclable" and "sustainable," and powerful language to promote eco-conscious consumer behavior (Johannessen et al., 2010; Liu & Liu, 2020). Global environmental challenges, such as climate change, drive governments and companies to prioritize ethical practices (Johannessen et al., 2010). European consumers increasingly consider sustainability in purchasing decisions, particularly in car manufacturing (Niceforo, 2023).

Interviewees from Germany, Italy, and Hungary emphasized the importance of green technologies, though their preferences varied. For instance, logistical concerns (the scarcity of charging points) led one respondent to favor a conventional engine (Interviewee I4), while others (Interviewees G1, G2, G3, H2) expressed greater interest in environmentally friendly solutions. This reflects a broader cultural shift toward sustainability and ethical consumption.

In conclusion, consumer expectations and cultural values influence brand perceptions and advertising effectiveness. While globalization promotes shared values like quality and performance, cultural distinctions shape preferences for specific themes. Additionally, evolving gender roles, increased environmental awareness, and even cross-regional differences within one culture (such as in the case of Italy) demonstrate the complexity of social, cultural, and economic factors in modern marketing.

6. Conclusions and Implications for Further Research

The research demonstrates that Volkswagen and Fiat implement distinct strategies for cultural and linguistic adaptation or standardization in their advertising campaigns. While both brands refer to similar values across cultures creating a unique brand image, cross-cultural variations were also identified. The interviewees' responses highlight the dual influence of cultural convergence and divergence: some cultural values were universally appealing, while others revealed culture-specific preferences.

The study has several limitations that can be addressed in future research. First, expanding the sample size and including greater demographic diversity may provide deeper insight into gender and age-related influence in advertising perception alongside cultural differences. Besides, regional differences within a single culture, particularly evident in the Italian context, may also become the foundation for a more complex study on localized advertising and linguistic strategies.

Declaration of Interest

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose. The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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Author Note

Alisa KASIANOVA is a doctoral candidate of the Multilingualism Doctoral School at the University of Pannonia, Hungary, where she received her Master's degree in Applied Linguistics. Her main research areas include intercultural communication, visual and verbal semiotics, marketing linguistics and business communication.

László KOVÁCS (Ph.D.) is the head of the Department of Business Communication and Marketing at Eötvös Loránd University, Faculty of Social Sciences (Hungary). His main research areas include the linguistic and cultural aspects of marketing and branding, and word and brand associations.