

The European Union brand and its appeal to young Europeans – an in-depth perspective from Romanian student

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Abstract. *In the context of globalization and economic crisis, the European Union is facing a series of challenges on a political, economic and identity level, due to the fact that the pillars on which the EU stands no longer satisfy the demands and necessities of the European citizens (Dobrescu and Palada, 2012; Habermas, 2012). As a result, “the foundational myth of the European Union as a vehicle for peace, stability and economic growth is apparently losing its appeal, particularly among younger generations of Europeans” (Kaina and Karolewski, 2009, p. 35). The youth represents an important resource for the European Union and at the same time a major concern, taking into consideration the political and economic trends that have determined them to experience “a general crisis of trust and values” (Future Lab Europe, 2013, p. 7).*

Therefore, this paper aims to identify the way in which European identity is defined in the case of Romanian students. Our main concern is to understand what is determining them to act and feel as members of the European community and, essentially, to identify or not with the EU brand. In this regard, we used a qualitative approach to explore whether the attachment to the European Union is grounded on emotional or utilitarian bonds by taking into consideration the following aspects: attitudes towards the European Union, values, identity markers of the EU brand. Results of the study indicate that at this point, the EU brand has a major scarcity of substance and relevance for Romanian students.

Keywords: branding, European identity, Europeanization, European citizenship.

JEL Classification: F02.

1. Introduction

It has always been stated that „globalization has transformed the relationship between state, market and society” (Wang, 2005, p. 24). This fact coincides with the loss of political legitimacy of the nation-states to their citizens and on the international political scene detrimental to political and economic constructs such as the European Union. The European Union represents an artificial construction with the role of representing the political, economic and social interests of Europe at a global scale, but in the current context the fundamentals that stay at its core aren't relevant anymore to the needs and aspirations of European citizens. Despite the European political elites' efforts of transforming this „Union of diversity” into a commercial brand, EU has failed to fulfill its promise towards its citizens.

Our paper draws on the branding literature in order to understand and convey the basic principles that stand behind the process of brand building. The underlying idea is that in order to build a successful brand, and by extension, in order to a EU brand, the process needs to go beyond basic PR or marketing, as successful branding transforms simple products, services or nations into something more by appealing to the emotional dimension with which individuals could identify. This process is even more interesting and challenging when it comes to the young individuals, as they are seen as 'game changers', and as they put a lot on emphasis on interactive relation with brands. In this sense, “Europe's task is to find a new post-modern *raison d'être* which inspires its own populace and appeals to the wider world as well” (van Ham, 2001, p. 122).

2. Literature review

2.1. The power of brands

Brands and brand building have become buzzwords in today's society and the literature on this subject is flourishing day by day. Due to the nature of our capitalist society, brands gain in importance and power, as they become an integrated part of our lives, as they represent a capital for any business and as they have the power to shape and determine the opinions of consumer. Hence, for any company or institution is essential to build a strong identity and “create associations that can drive market positions, persist over long time periods, and be capable of resisting aggressive competitors” (Aaker, 1991, p. 7). In a world characterized by the free market and high competition is only normal for brands to become so central.

When it comes to discussing what a brand is, specialists offer slightly different perspectives. Kapferer (2004) postulates that brands can be characterized as the integral collection of a consumer's experiences. Other specialists (Kotler and Armstrong, 2008; Aaker, 1991) affirm that brands help consumers associate the goods they want to buy, as are perceived as reflecting the quality of the products. For this reason, brand associations “have been established using product attributes, names, packages, distribution strategies, and advertising” (Aaker, 1991, p. 7). Additionally, Van den Bergh and Behrer (2011) assert that brands are setting the goals that people want to achieve and that building a

brand implies an extensive knowledge of the people's drivers, desires and needs. All these definitions have a common ground: they put emphasis on the consumer and on building an emotional connection. Similarly, Kotler et al. (2010) state that the consumers should be perceived as a whole entity – taking into account all his/her feelings, needs and values. All these elements provide the basis on which business can build their competitive advantage and define their personality and identity. In this sense, Aaker (1991, p. 13) puts forward the idea that “what a business *does* can (...) usually is easily imitated”, while establishing what a business *is* cannot be imitated, hence, defining what a business is allows the competitive advantage to persist in time, bring profits and provide value. Consequently, taking all these factors into account a successful brand should be authentic, should use emotions that appeal to the consumers in order catch their attention and should communicate and convey the same values and interests with their target audience. In other words, it's all about the experience and the dialogue that the brand manages to establish with their consumers and, as Huntely (2006, p. 154) illustrates, consumers want “products that are ‘nice’, ‘well-designed’, ‘good quality’, ‘long-lasting’ and ‘reliable’”.

Furthermore, specialists (Huntely, 2006; Tapscott, 2009; Van den Bergh and Behrer, 2011) show that the young generation (individuals aged 18-35) are even more interested and involved when it comes to brands. Hence, brands for the young generation are an extension of themselves, and when it comes to choosing a certain brand they seek for the best quality, functionality, uniqueness and speed. Additionally, the young generation is inclined to seek familiar, valued brands due their belief that brands offer them social status (Tapscott, 2009; Huntley, 2006; Sutherland and Thompson, 2003; Van den Bergh and Behrer, 2011). Once with the proliferation of new technologies and the amplitude of the new media, brands had to become flexible and open to dialogue, as communication no longer follows the traditional pattern. At the present moment, through the use of social media brands should engage their consumers into an interactive, two-way communication. In this sense, Shih (2009, p. 89) points out that “smart marketers are inserting themselves into these conversations with dynamic and memorable interaction opportunities with their brands”. Moreover, the young generation has grown up into a capitalist system that determined them to perceive “the sphere of consumption as a place to develop personal identity, connect with friends, make choices, influence others and dictate terms” (Huntley, 2006, p. 158), and for this reason it is essential for brands, nowadays, to promote a two-way communication, to provide quality, reliability and authenticity (Huntely, 2006; Van den Bergh and Behrer, 2011).

Nowadays, we do not only use the term *brand* in relation with a product or service offered by a certain company. We use branding and brands when we speak about building a certain identity for ourselves, as individuals, or when we build the identity and image of a nation state. Hence, we can also speak brands that can have a certain social value, in terms of the contribution to the “public wellbeing through the development of socially beneficial new products and services” (Hilton, 2003, p. 49). If we bring into discussion branding for a nation state or even to the EU, as a political, social and cultural project, then the same basic principles apply to them as discussed above. Referring to nation branding Linsay (2002) explains that it involved a totality of feelings, associations and expectations. In the same time, some specialists (van Ham, 2001; Guțu et al., 2009)

concur that needs to be built as a participative process in cooperation with the civil society, as it is a process that implies more than slogans or old-fashioned ad campaigns. The nation brand, just as any other brand, needs to inspire confidence, to appeal to the emotional and to give people a sense of identity. At the same time, when building a nation brand one must take into consideration its reputation. In this sense, Anholt (2007, p. 8) explains the reputation “affects the way people inside and outside the place think about it, the way they behave towards it, and the way they respond to everything that’s made or done there”. In the same time, Van Ham (2001) points out that image and reputation are becoming essential parts in brand building and the nation brand, just as any other product or service, depends trust and satisfaction.

Taking into consideration the EU, Ljunberg (2006) states that presently at the European level there are two brands that coexist: one that is based on history, tradition and common values and cultural diversity; and one that refers to Europe as an artificial construction defined by political institutions, treaties and the common market. The problem raised here is that in order to build a common brand at the European level is that of the overlaying these two brands. Brands focus on values and emotions that consumers associate them with (van Ham, 2001), these elements being needed as well when building a European brand. Europe’s brand can be defined as unity in diversity, since it we share a common history, marked by the two world wars that led to the cooperation of states in order to put an end to conflicts and ensure peace and security for its citizens. The EU brand is defined by unity and compromise, in the same time, this fact bringing and highlighting conflicts in terms of identity. In this sense, van Ham (2008, p. 129) points out that the “globalization and the harmonizing effects of European integration put further pressure on territorial entities to develop, manage, and leverage their brand equity.” In this context, the cooperation between member states is a difficult exercise, that involves on the one hand compromise, and on the other hand, a common general purpose that is to augment the Union’s competitive power at a global level. In this sense, Anholt (2007, p. 26) states that a strong brand can be built “when governments have a good, clear, believable and positive idea of what their country really is, what it stands for and where it’s going, and manage to coordinate the actions, investments, policies and communications”. Extending this to the EU, we can infer that the Union must have a common action plan and coordinate all its efforts in order to build a successful brand. The EU competitive advantage will be reached through a deep cooperation of at the economic, political and social levels.

3. Research design

This article aims to analyze at an empirical level the way that European identity is defined when it comes to Romanian students. Hence, we focus on identifying what determines them to act and feel as members of the European community. Essentially, we are interested to discover whether Romanian students identify or not with the EU brand and in this respect we have concentrated on the following research questions:

RQ1: How is European identity framed in the case of Romanian students? Do they internalize a civic or a cultural sense of their Europeanness?

RQ2: What is the impact of the current economic, political and social context on young generation's sense of belonging to the European community?

RQ3: Are the positive attitudes of Romanian students towards the EU driven only by pragmatic interests or are they, also, linked to emotional bonds?

In order to address these research questions we adopted a qualitative approach, and consequently, conducted 3 focus groups. Our sample comprised 24 students, aged between 19 to 30 years, enrolled in Bachelor degree programs at the following public learning and research institutions: College of Communication and Public Relations- The National School of Political Studies and Public Administration; respectively, Faculty of International Business and Economics - Bucharest University of Economic Studies.

Following Bruter's model (2003, 2004) of interpretation of European identity, the grid for our analysis is twofold: on the one hand, the *civic dimension*, refers to identification with the European Union as a political institution (citizenship, symbols of political integration, trust in European values and institutions), while, on the other hand, the *cultural dimension* indicates identification with Europe as a cultural community (the existence of a common European culture and history, shared memory, feeling closer to fellow Europeans than to non-Europeans). The *civic dimension* comprises several questions regarding: the rights and duties of European citizens; democratic values of the European Union (equality, freedom, security, justice); political and civic engagement; symbolic meaning of the Constitution; European institutional architecture; supranational system of governance and the problematic of the sovereignty of the nation-state. The *cultural dimension* reference questions are constructed by taking into consideration the following aspects: the role of student exchange programs in fostering a sense of belonging to the European community; the role of European institutions in promoting intercultural dialogue and tolerance; the effects of the Europeanization process on national identity and national culture.

4. Results and discussion

In regard to the *civic dimension*, for Romanian students, the status of European citizenship does not give them any sense of pride and their membership towards the European community is often correlated with their personal interests and benefits that derive from their European citizenship, such as: mobility, job opportunities and security: *It gives you safety in addition to being a Romanian citizen and we all know how things work here (Mihai); There are a lot of economic and social benefits and this is what counts for us as young people (Bogdan); There are a lot of economic advantages: you can travel without passport, you can work in a different country... But, being a European citizen doesn't make me more special and I don't define myself in this terms (Ana).*

At the same time, most of the respondents emphasized the fact that they have limited knowledge of their rights and duties as European citizens, due to the deliberate lack of

information driven by political and also economic interests, on behalf of mass media, national politicians and EU officials: *Romanian politicians have no interest in enlighten us, to make us more aware of our rights and Europe doesn't do anything about it (Radu); I am only partially informed of my rights and duties as European citizen and that is because I wanted to be informed about this aspect, and not due to some political initiatives in this sense (Andreea); I haven't noticed any information campaign concerning my rights and responsibilities as a European citizen and if there had been the message didn't got to me (Alina).* This lack of information can be translated into an urgent need for European institutions to become more transparent and also, more focused on young generations' concerns: *From my point of view, only a small amount of information concerning European public policies is being communicated and the information aren't necessarily of interest to me (Alexandra); Transparency is always welcomed by the masses and it would stop corruption (Radu).*

When it comes to the level of trust in European institutions, participants stated that the role of the EU as guardian of all European citizen interests and welfare is only symbolic, highlighting the prevalence of economic and historical cleavages that continue to divide Europe: *At a theoretical level, European institutions should protect our interests, but in practice they don't. I think that European institutions are built to serve group interests, especially financially ones (Mihai). There is a big difference between theory and practice. In theory, European institutions should ensure the welfare of all citizens of the member states, but in practice this doesn't happen. The laws and policies applied are only for the benefit of the most important (Radu), European institutions represent the interests of European citizens, but only part of them and this is the case with the important member states of the EU that have more benefits (Alexandra).* Conversely, for some of the participants, European institutions, especially European Parliament, play an active part in shaping the political agenda by taking into consideration not only European elites interests but also citizens needs and requirements: *I heard a lot of cases with MEPs and their political initiatives to protect human rights. I think they are doing a good job (Bogdan), European institutions favor the interests of political elites but, at the same time, take into account the citizens interest too. It's a vicious circle: they are constrained to do that in order to obtain our vote (Ana).*

Although most of the respondents are supporters of democracy as a model of governance, they are discontent with the way that is represented at the European institutional level. Furthermore, in line with the current research in this field (European Commission Report, 2013) European's Union label as promoter of peace and democracy is losing its appeal among young Europeans: *It's not European Union's business to establish peace and political order between countries (Alexandra); If we go back in history will see that Europe isn't really an example of peace, freedom, solidarity and equality... the Union's image as promoter of peace is only a disguise (Gabriela).* On the other hand, several respondents highlighted the fact that in the current political crisis and redrawing of borders between Eastern and Western Europe, European Union should reinforce its role as a promoter of democracy and security at a continental level: *EU should interfere in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. For all European citizens freedom is important and European Union's role is to defend it (Alina). In the current international context,*

European Union should act as a decisive factor and to really show what it stands for (Radu).

Despite the fact that Romanian students support democratic values, they are not interested in European elections. Nevertheless, in terms of their relation to politics, students emphasize the lack of trust in Romanian politicians and the political offer that does not match their interests: *I don't think I'll vote in the next European elections. Romanian MPs care only about their personal and political interests and not Romanians' people interests (Mihai); The results on European elections aren't important to me at all. Basically, it doesn't matter who wins because they are all the same and Romanian politicians can't make an important statement on the European political scene (Maria); Our political parties have lost their identity, political doctrine and tradition as historical parties. You don't have where to choose from to represent Romanian people in European Parliament (Daniel).* Conversely, for a small part of the respondents, voting represents the main form of political participation and at the same time a moral obligation of every Romanian citizen. Voting is perceived as the best way for influencing political decision at the national and European level and to make citizens' will and voice heard: *I think my opinion counts. For me it is important to vote (Alexandra); Every vote counts, every individual counts. Every citizen should see voting as an obligation and a responsibility not only towards his own country but also to himself. This is the right thing to do (Bogdan).* Although most of the participants on this study do not embrace a certain political doctrine, this does not imply political apathy. On the contrary, young Romanians are informed on political and social matters and, at the same time, choose to express their opinions through different forms of civic engagement such as online petitions or being members of NGOs. In this regard, social networks such as Facebook represent an important source of information that also enables students to engage in civic activities: *Through social networks you get to be informed and to debate important matters that affect us all (Calin), On Facebook I got to see a series of events that lead to social accountability. There are certain social actions that I have already adhered to: planting trees, signing online petition for Rosia Montana (Bogdan); I use social networks as a source of information but I try to stay away from demonstrations or social actions that involve violence (Alexandra).*

Romanian students' views upon the necessity of establishing a European Constitution are divergent and coincide with different perspectives concerning the political status and model of governance of the European Union. On the one hand, some of the respondents have positive attitudes towards the EU and believe in the future of the European project despite current economic challenges. For them, European Union can take shape of an idealistic concept, only by creating a European federal state: *If we really want to be united, then we should have a Constitution that should apply to all European citizens. We should leave behind old fashioned mentalities and be more open minded (Bogdan), If EU wants to be a super state then it would be right to have a European Constitution. It would be right to be like in SUA: a common Constitution but specific laws for different states (Calin); I think that EU should have a Constitution because it would determine European citizens to be aware of their status and to know their rights and duties (Ana).* On the other hand, the emergence of a European Constitution is perceived as a threat towards the

political legitimacy and territorial integrity of the nation-state: *We must remain a sovereign state. Every country should have its own Constitution. We would lose our values and identity and step by step all frontiers will be destroyed (Alexandra); A European Constitution would mean that we are all the same, a single nation. What would that mean for our children, not to know their own language?! EU just wants to dominate us for our resources (Bianca).*

By reference to the *cultural dimension*, most of the respondents emphasize the fact that although European people share a common history, a common culture doesn't exist, Europe being defined as a melting pot of cultures, traditions, values and languages: *It's obvious that there is no European culture and historically speaking, all major cultures are individualized but there will always be minor cultures that can be assimilated such as ours (Andreea); There is a historic bond but a civilization cannot take shape on basis of cultural differences (Andrei).* The respondents state that unity in diversity remains not only the main feature of the European project, but of Europe itself: *Europe is a mix of different cultures by which historic customs of all countries are being preserved (Radu); All European states are so different, not only from a cultural point of view, but also when it comes to people, mentalities. It is very important to be united, to imagine ourselves that we can build a better future only if we pass our differences (Alina).*

The preservation of national traditions and values are of great importance for Romanian youth, as they shape their identity. In this context, the process of European integration represents a threat to the national culture and the spirit of Romanian people. At the same time, the European integration constitutes a different form of globalization that leads to uniformization of cultures: *We don't know who we are anymore: Romanians or Europeans...they want us to forget our history and traditions (Mihai); We have lost our values. We had a different lifestyle, different traditions, we lost our pride in being Romanian (Alexandra).* An interesting take on the matter is offered by three of the respondents stating that in the communist period, unity and national distinctiveness were best preserved, although this came with a high price: loss of freedom. Conversely, other respondents emphasize the plurality of European cultures and diversity of Europe suggesting that unity in diversity still remains the pillar for further integration: *I believe that culture belongs to everybody and we should learn from each other (Alina); I do not perceive Europeanization as a threat, more as a bonus, because it helps us develop as nation (Bogdan); The European Union represents a cultural union. You, as a citizen, have direct access to other cultures. Bonds are formed between people, ideas and traditions, as long as you are open (Anca).*

Romanian students embrace post-materialist values such as: freedom of expression, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for diversity and human rights. Despite the recognition of the efforts of the European Union to promote tolerance and intercultural dialogue between different nations and their citizens, the majority of the respondents state that European economic and social crisis has generated discrimination between the pillars of Europe (England, Germany, France) and nations that are at the periphery of Europe, be that at a geographical or symbolic level: *We are not equal and we all have problems with each other. For example, we don't like Hungarian people or the British and Germans*

don't like us that much (Calin); For the most powerful European countries, I think that tolerance is not a core value, it is promoted only at a discursive level (Ana); Europeans are tolerant only in theory, but in practice we see it every day how it works. If we want to find a job in other country they don't treat us as their equals (Mihai). One of the respondents, by comparison with the United States of America - the bastion of tolerance and freedom- states that European mentalities and not only geographical barriers are the ones that divide the European continent: *Americans are more tolerant and they have a long history that made them become more tolerant than Europeans. Europe is a long way from learning its lesson (Daniel).*

For the participants on this study, cultural exchange programs such as ERASMUS are conducive for promoting tolerance at a continental level: *This type of cultural exchange programs are very important because the change can happen only with the help of young people and getting to know them, their lifestyle and their culture (Alina), Through Erasmus program you have the opportunity to meet people of different nationalities, their culture and at some point you can learn to tolerate them even if they are considerably different (Bianca), I think that Erasmus promotes equality between European countries and their citizens and helps in changing old mentalities (Bogdan).* In accordance with this perspective, cultural differences serve not as psychological barriers but as basis for processes of social inclusion.

5. Conclusion

The European economic crisis has highlighted a series of vulnerabilities of the European project and has also generated a lack of confidence in the future of the EU. Despite this, most of the respondents emphasized the fact that the European Union is much more than an idealistic concept, it's a necessity. Results on this study indicate that the efforts of the European political elites in building a political union by following the pattern of formation of the nation-states (through cultural and political symbols, European political system etc.) have not determined an emotional attachment on behalf of Romanian students towards the EU. On the contrary, most of the participants on this study define their membership towards the European community mainly through their personal interests and benefits that are relevant to their needs and aspirations.

At this point, the EU brand has a major scarcity of substance and relevance for Romanian students. This fact can be translated through the disinterest of young Romanians in adherence to their civic and moral obligations as European citizens especially in terms of political participations in democratic processes. For most of the participants on this study, a federal Europe is perceived as a threat towards national identity and to the territorial and political legitimacy of the nation-state. Also, despite the fact that young Romanians are supporters of democracy, for them EU entails only at a discursive level the promoter of peace and democracy at a continental level.

Results on this study indicate that Romanian students internalize a civic sense of their Europeanness but, at the same time, they define their membership towards the European community through a cost-benefit relationship.

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