Cross-cultural differences in brand image perception

– An exploration of the Volvo brand

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Abstract

Problem – International companies need to become more aware of differences within cultures and consumer behavior to stay competitive in today's business environment. Even though international companies aim to communicate the same image of global brands across different cultures, the image of those brands may still be perceived differently due to differences in cultural values.

Purpose – The aim of this master thesis is to explore if and how the image of one global brand differs across cultures and between genders. Specifically, the focus is on investigating how individuals from three different countries, namely Sweden, China and the United States perceive the image of the global brand Volvo. In order to indicate differences, Hofstede's (2001) cultural taxonomy is relied upon, which help explain and understand possible variations.

Methodology - To fulfill the purpose of this thesis a qualitative research approach was applied. Twelve in-depth interviews were conducted with participants from Sweden, China and the United States. To facilitate the data analysis, the main steps of thematic analysis was used.

Results: The analysis yielded that a global brand can have different meanings for individuals in different countries, and that culture can influence the way individuals perceive a brand. The respondents from Sweden and the United States displayed considerable similarities in brand images portraying Volvo as a high quality car recognized for being safe, reliable, durable and practical as well as delivering high comfort. Moreover, the brand was strongly associated with family, providing value in terms of functional aspects. Similarly, the Chinese respondents conveyed an image of Volvo as a high quality car being safe and reliable; however, emphasized the brand value in terms of propensity to signal high status. Volvo was portrayed as an expensive, upscale and attractive brand, mainly driven by men. Further, the study found that associations differed slightly between the genders within the Chinese sample. The desire and excitement of driving a Volvo as expressed by the Chinese females seems partly to be influenced by the associations to men as main users of the brand. In light of this, Volvo seemed to carry a rather different meaning to the female respondents, perceived as more exciting.

In light of this, the study shows that cultural and gender differences are of importance for localized market communications. By identifying differences and similarities in wants and needs between cultures as well as between genders, marketers are able develop local executions for each market's needs.

Conclusion – Overall the research study provides useful insights for businesses and marketers who seek to market their brands in foreign countries. Specifically, it emphasizes the importance of adapting communication strategies and activities in accordance with the cultural specifics in the target market.

Key words: Brand, brand image, brand associations, brand perception, brand identity, brand personality, culture, intercultural communication, cultural dimensions, marketing, marketing communications

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1. INTRODUCTION

Brands play an integral part in companies' marketing strategy. Apart from being an important marketing component to the manufacturer, they are also a rich source of information for the consumer (Grace and O'Cass, 2005). Firms have long used brands in order gain consumers' awareness and distinguish their products from those of other competitors. For consumers, brands can have a number of functions. The brand name can guide consumers when making their choices as well as it summarizes the information about a product's characteristics. It can also function as a signature of the manufacturer. Furthermore, the brand name enables for people to express their individuality through their purchases (Usunier and Lee, 2008).

In order for companies and marketers to develop and maintain strong brands, the need to know how to engage with consumers through powerful and effective communications is crucial. According to Tian and Borges (2011), communication is the one of the most important functions to master in order for businesses to be successful in today's competitive markets, especially for companies doing business internationally.

The establishment and marketing of brands in different countries has increasingly become a challenging task for businesses and marketers who also need to take into consideration cultural differences as a factor that is likely to influence how individuals perceive brands. This means that global brands necessarily do not have to be perceived similarly across cultures. Even though global marketing strategies are implemented and brand identities clearly defined, the meaning that is attached to or transmitted through a brand name cannot fully be captured by the marketer, since culture shapes a person's and society's values, norms, social practices and beliefs (Lustig and Koester, 2010). As a result, people in different cultures may have different wants, needs and usage patterns for products.

In light of this, an important first step to include before implementing any marketing programme is to establish what the brand stands for in the consumers' minds. This enables for marketers to create communication strategies and activities according to the desires and tastes of the target consumers. A lot of research has focused on the consumer with the aim to uncover brand knowledge structures, i.e. the meaning about a brand stored in consumer memory (Keller, 2003). This has also included using the concept of brand personality, defined as *"a set of human characteristics associated to a brand"* (Aaker, 1997, p. 347). The concept has been applied in order to better understand the emotional and symbolic meanings that consumers attach to brands, which further help marketers to create the most appropriate and effective marketing strategies. According to Keller (1998, p. 92), the image that consumers have about the brand in mind, defined as *"the perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory*" (Keller, 1998, p. 92), needs to be examined regularly as it reveals the brand's current situation in the market and provides a basis for future marketing planning.

Subsequently, the present thesis seeks to investigate how the image of one global brand is perceived by individuals in different national cultures. The study provides insights into the cultural factors that are important for international firms and marketers in terms of devising effective marketing communications across cultures.

1.1.   Background of the Research and Choosing the Subject for the Study

This study focuses on the automobile brand Volvo, which was chosen for the reason that the brand is well established in the international market. Thus it is assumed that individuals in the countries selected for this study know the brand well enough to be able to rate its brand image. The product category was chosen as it is recognized for satisfying different consumer needs, where both tangible and intangible aspects play an important role in consumer decision-making. Furthermore, Volvo has been subject to a number of acquisitions, and has been exposed to different cultures that display differences in their values and beliefs (cf. Hofstede, 2012). Taking into consideration the brand history (see below), it is of particular interest to investigate to what extent the brand image differs or are similar between individuals from the three national cultures that have also been involved in the development of Volvo. These include Sweden, the United States and China.

1.1.1 Volvo History

Volvo Car Corporation (VCC), or *Volvo Personvagnar AB* (in Swedish) was founded 1927 in Gothenburg, Sweden, and is today a well-known manufacturer with a long history of innovations. VCC began as a subsidiary of the Swedish ball bearing factory, AB Svenska Kullagerfabriken. The construction of cars started with the company owners, Assar Gabrielsson and Gustaf Larson, who focused on safe vehicles that could withstand Sweden's harsh climate and poor road conditions of that time. The brand name 'Volvo' which is Latin for "I roll" came to symbolize the company. The ancient chemical symbol for iron was chosen as the logotype, used to represent "Mars, the God of War". As most weapons were made of iron at that time, the iron badge of the car was supposed to create associations with the Swedish iron industry (Volvo Cars, 2012a).

VCC was part of the Swedish Volvo Group until 1999 when the company was sold to the American automaker, Ford Motor Company. The new company integrated Volvo into a collection of premium brand cars, the Premier Automotive Group. In 2010, VCC was acquired by the Chinese automotive company Zheijang Geely Holding Group, and China is nowadays referred to as Volvo's second home market (Volvo Cars, 2012b).

1.1.2 Volvo's Brand and Market Communication

Volvo's reputation relies on strong values such as quality, safety, environmental care and design (Volvo Cars, 2012c). These values are illustrated in the Volvo brand pyramid as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: The Volvo brand pyramid (Volvo Cars, 2012d).

The top of the pyramid shows the area in which Volvo Cars has a competitive advantage, namely safety. Modern Scandinavian design and environmental care are values that set Volvo Cars apart from other competitors. The base of the pyramid includes requirements of Volvo Cars as a premium brand; premium quality, customer experience and driving dynamics (Volvo Cars, 2012d). The focus on safety started with the founders and their famous quotation laid the foundation for the core values.

> *'Cars are driven by people. Therefore the guiding principle behind everything we make at Volvo is – and must remain – safety'* (Volvo Cars, 2012e)

Since then Volvo has been a huge contributor to the auto industry with the development of safety innovative technologies. For example, Volvo Amazon and PV544 were the first in the world to be introduced with three-point safety belts. Other examples of safety achievements by Volvo include the padded instrument panel (1960), seat belts in the rear (1967), rear-facing child seat and child proof door locks (1972). Other safety innovations have followed and safety continues to be an integral part of Volvo design. Urde (2003) argues that Volvo can talk about safety with higher credibility than its competitors thank to its track record, even though other car manufacturers possess the same competency and have adopted the same product innovations. Furthermore, Volvo Cars also has its own Road Traffic Research Team that investigates accidents in order to find ways to build safer cars (Volvo Cars, 2012e).

Care for environment is also stated as one of Volvo's values. Not only was Volvo first in the world with safety innovations, but Volvo has also boasted a couple of environmental world-firsts including Volvo Genuine Exchange Parts - a remanufacturing parts system, (1945) and the three-way catalytic converter and Lambda-Sond (1976). Today, the environmental strategy for Volvo goes under the umbrella name of DRIVe which is a program that includes all the initiatives relating to environment (Volvo Cars, 2012f).

Quality and design are also emphasized as important to Volvo. According to Volvo Cars design philosophy, a car should be easy to understand and use, and functionality is as important as beauty (Volvo Cars, 2012g). The Volvo iron mark, which has been present in all Volvo cars is said to symbolize strength and endurance as well as reflect the heritage of constructing safe cars (Volvo Cars, 2012h). Furthermore, Volvo defines Scandinavian design as levels of craftsmanship, elegant simplicity and functionalism.

It is clear that branding is a complex process for marketing managers to handle especially in the face of an increasingly globalized market place. Even though marketing strategies and activities are implemented with the intention to create and maintain a brand that is perceived similarly by consumers, the image of the same brand might still be viewed differently due to differences in consumers' values, beliefs and attitudes.

For Volvo, the need for a brand revival became evident after the transition from Ford to the Chinese Geely. On April 1st 2011 Richard Monturo was appointed Vice President for Global Marketing at Volvo Car Corporation (Volvo Car Group, 2011) with the task to "sharpening" the Volvo brand. In 2011 the global brand strategy called "Designed Around You" was introduced. The vision was to become the world's most progressive and human luxury car brand at the same time as linking to the heritage of building safe and dependable cars (Volvo Cars, 2012b).Thus, at the same time as Volvo relies heavily on its core values the intention is to strengthen its perception as a luxury brand as it expands in the global market. In 2012 VCC appointed Jeremy Shu-How Lin, a Chinese-American NBA (National Basketball Association)

star, to a global brand endorsement contract over a period of two years. According to VCC, the Jeremy Lin endorsement is going to help the company further enhance its brand image and business performance globally, especially in the key markets USA, China and other Chinese speaking countries.

After the introduction of the global brand strategy it is of particular interest to investigate how people across different cultures perceive the image of Volvo. The need to understand the meaning that consumers attach to a brand becomes important for international marketers who can adjust their communication programs according to the desires and tastes of the consumers. Different wants and needs for products might lead to companies having to reconsider how to position their brand and create positioning strategies appropriate for the target market. For example, the automobile company Ford used different positioning strategies for its Galaxy minivan in Britain and in Germany. The Galaxy was positioned in Britain as the luxurious "nonvan" in order to appeal to both soccer moms but also executives. In Germany, where Volkswagen was popular, Ford had to position the Galaxy as "the clever alternative" (Aaker and Joachimstaler, 1999). One way of exploring differences in consumer behavior is to conduct a brand image analysis, which is focused on eliciting consumer opinions.

1.2 Previous Studies on Marketing Communications

Tian and Borges (2011, p. 112) describe marketing communications as a two-way interactive communication since "marketers deliver information to the markets they gather, collecting, interpreting, and putting this information to use." They further argue that relying on one-way-communication may lead to a loss in business.

Early models of the communication process inferred that communication was one-way (e.g. Klapper, 1960; Shannon and Weaver, 1949). Wilbur Schramm (in Steinberg, 2007) developed what is today accepted as the basic model of mass communication as shown in Figure 2 below. In his description of the model he argues that communication is incomplete until the sender receives feedback from the recipient. Important is that the communicator can adjust the message or provide additional information in case the recipient is not clear about the intended meaning. Schramm's model describes communication as a dynamic interaction in which both the communicator and the recipient are active in message exchange, i.e. both parts encode, transmit, receive, decode and interpret messages. By emphasizing the importance of feedback, the process becomes two-way instead of linear (Steinberg, 2007).
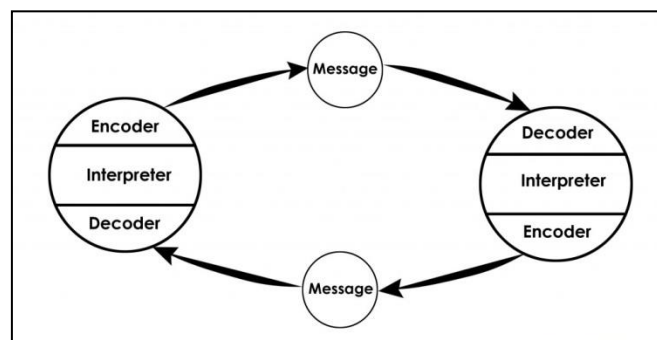

Figure 2: Schramm's model of communication. *Source: Steinberg (2007, p. 56).*
Adjusted by the author.

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The importance of understanding consumer wants, needs and usage pattern for products is crucial for marketers to successfully create appropriate communication strategies in different markets. In other words, receiving feedback from consumers creates opportunities for businesses to succeed in the national and international marketplace. Keller (2009, p. 141) defines marketing communications as "the means by which firms attempt to inform, persuade and remind consumers – directly or indirectly – about the products or brands they sell". Thus, marketing communications can be said to represent the voice of the company and its brands. (Keller, 2009). Keller describes the marketing communications mix as consisting of eight major modes of communication (see Table 1).

1. Advertising	Any paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods or services by an identified sponsor.
2. Sales promotion	A variety of short-term incentives to encourage trial or purchase of a product or service.
3. Events & experiences	Company-sponsored activities and programs designed to create daily or special brand-related interactions.
4. Public relations & publicity	A variety of programs designed to promote and or protect a company's image or its individual products.
5. Direct marketing	Use of mail, telephone, fax, email or Internet to communicate directly with or solicit response or dialogue from specific customers and prospects.
6. Interactive marketing	On-line activities and programs designed to engage customers or prospects and directly or indirectly raise awareness, improve image or elicit sales of products and services.
7. Word-of-mouth marketing	People-to-people oral, written or electronic communications which relate to the merits and experiences of purchasing or using products or services.
8. Personal selling	Face-to-face interaction with one or more prospective purchases for the purpose of making presentations, answering questions and producing orders.

Table 1: Major communication types. *Source: Keller (2009, p. 141).* Adjusted by the author.

For companies who seek to market their brands in foreign countries need to take into consideration factors such as culture, language, socioeconomic conditions, technological development levels, government regulations and so on, functioning as invisible barriers. A dilemma that constantly arises with marketing communications is whether to globally or regionally standardize or locally adapt (Egan, 2007). Some international companies have to differentiate their product, others the message that is linked to the brand and sometimes both in order for the brand be successful in the target market. A truly standardized brand can reach economies of scale in distribution and production, lower marketing cost, keep consistent in brand image and leverage ideas fast and efficiently. However, with a standardized approach differences in consumer needs, wants and usage patterns for products, consumer response to marketing mix elements and many other factors are ignored (Keller, 2003). De Mooij (2010) suggests six strategies for companies to internationalizing their brands, as described below.

1) Cultivate established local brands (develop a national brand into an international one)
2) Global concept, local adaptations (develop one concept for the world that can carry local products with local values)
3) Create new brands (recognize a global need or wants and develop a new product)
4) Purchase local brands and internationalize
5) Develop brand extensions (extend a brand name to other related categories)

6) Employ a multi-local strategy (products and marketing strategies are localized according to markets).

Many companies work with the global-local strategy (global concept, local adaptations). McDonald's for example uses this strategy as it offers different menus in different countries accompanied by locally determined messages. However, the central product offering is supported by globally recognized brand themes (Egan, 2007).

Another important issue that marketers need to be aware of when creating marketing strategies is how a brand is perceived and evaluated by male and female consumers. According to Kim et al. (2006, p. 423), "gender has been and continues to be one of the most common forms of segmentation used by marketers in general and advertisers in particular," this as males and females are likely to differ in information processes and decision making. For instance, a study carried out by Seock and Bailey (2008) found that males prefer brands, which are convenient to them, i.e. emphasize on functional benefits whereas females prefer brands which can provide excitement. Another study conducted by Cuneen and Clausen (1999) found that it is more difficult to promote and sell products to females in male-dominated sports industry due to the gender image used. This shows the necessity to understand how a brand is perceived by both male and female consumers in the target market and create marketing strategies according to the different desires and tastes. For instance, in terms of car purchases, male consumers might be targeted through technical aspects whereas women might be targeted through the emotional appeal, all depending on the wants and needs in the target market.

1.3 Research Aim

The purpose of this study is to explore how the current image of one global brand is perceived across three national cultures. Specifically, the focus is to compare how the Volvo brand is viewed in Sweden, the United States and China to establish to what extent the brand image perceptions are aligned.

The implications of the research will be relevant for international companies who want to increase the knowledge about cultural differences in order to market their brands abroad more effectively.

1.4 Research Questions

In view of this, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the images of the Volvo brand as perceived by individuals across three national cultures, namely Sweden, China and the USA?
2. To what extent do these images differ between men and women across these national cultures?
3. How are cultural and gender differences concerning brand images of importance for localized market communication?

1.5 Scope of Study

Since branding is a very broad area, the research has been narrowed down to include theories relevant to brand image research. As the study intends to use qualitative methods, and to facilitate simplicity and focus within this context, it was decided that only one global brand would be investigated in three national cultures with participants from all three of these cultures.

1.6 Thesis Overview
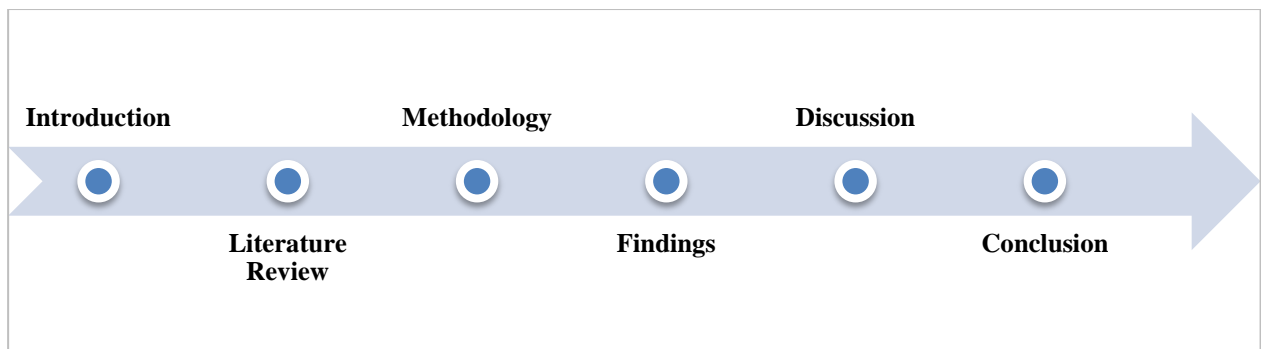
Figure 3: Thesis overview

Introduction:	The thesis is structured into six chapters as illustrated in Figure 2 above. The first chapter introduces the reader to the context of the research, followed by a description of the background and reason for choosing the subject. The problem formulation is stated and the research question posed.
Literature Review:	In the second chapter, theories relevant to brand image research are presented. Concepts of brands, brand image, brand identity, brand personality, culture and cultural dimensions as described by previous cross-cultural research are introduced to the reader. The increased understanding of the concepts will contribute to the literature and the theories.
Methodology:	In the method chapter the choice of research approach is presented followed by a description of the data collection method, sample selection, data analysis and issues related to credibility of the research.
Findings:	This chapter presents the results of the analysis of the interviews in terms of outlining the main findings of the research study.
Discussion:	This chapter discusses the study findings in light of the theories from the literature review. Further it describes the main implications for practice and suggests the focus for future research within the area of brand image research.
Conclusion:	The thesis ends with concluding remarks while also outlining the main contribution of the research as a whole.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter provides an overview over the most relevant theories related to marketing and culture. In essence, brand image and associations, brand identity, country of origin and brand personality are important factors that determine the brand image (e.g. Keller, 1998; Aaker, 1991). In addition, culture plays a critical role. Based on this, the study relies upon a cultural framework to explain and further the understanding of what role culture plays in the associations towards a brand.

2.1 Brand

Keller (2003, p. 3) adopts the American Marketing Association's company-oriented definition of brand as a "name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competition," a definition that has been widely adopted by several marketing researchers (e.g. Aaker, 1991; Kotler et al. 1996). Ambler (1992) defines a brand from the perspective of the consumer as the promise of the bundles of attributes that someone buys that provide satisfaction. The attributes that make up a brand he argues may be rational or emotional, real or illusionary, tangible or invisible.

According to Keller (2003, p. 4-5), a branded product can be a physical good as well as a service, a store, a person, a place, an organization or even an idea.

2.2 Brand Equity

Brand equity is regarded as a very important concept within marketing, which describes the overall value that the brand holds in the customer's mind. Customer-based equity can be translated into the set of associations that surround a brand, defined as "*the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand*" (Keller, 1993, p. 1). A brand has positive customer-based brand equity when consumers respond favorably to it. This depends upon a combination of recognition, associations and judgments made by the consumer (Keller, 2008). Brand equity can thus be regarded as an indicator of the success of the brand. As the source of brand equity is customer perceptions, it is important for managers to be able to measure and track it at the consumer level.

2.3 Brand Image and Brand Associations

As a brand is more than a product, consumers also attach a variety of associations to the brand in mind. The brand specialist, David Aaker (1991, p. 109) defines brand associations as "anything linked in memory to a brand." The brand associations altogether form the brand image the consumers have about a certain brand, described as the *"perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory"* (Keller, 1998, p. 92). Brand associations are important for marketers to be aware of as they use the associations to "differentiate, position and extend brands, to create positive feelings and attitudes towards brands, and to suggest attributes or benefits of purchasing or using a specific brand" (Low and Lamb, 2000, p. 351).

Conceptual models have been developed in order to assist marketers to better understand consumers' brand knowledge structure (e.g. Aaker, 1991). Keller (1998) developed a brand

image model, which proposes that brand image results from the favorability, strength, uniqueness and types of brand associations held by the consumer, as demonstrated in Figure 4. He argues that the associations can be formed by marketing programs or by direct experience with the brand; it can be created by the firm itself or other commercial sources, from word-of-mouth as well as from name or logo. The brand can also be associated with a company, a channel of distribution as well as with a person, place or event. (2008, p. 56). Keller classifies brand associations into three categories: attributes, benefits and attitudes. Brand attributes are defined as descriptive features that characterize a product or a service whereas benefits are described as personal value and meaning that consumers attach to the product or service attributes, i.e. what consumers think the product can do for them.

Benefits are separated into three categories, these being functional, experiential and symbolic. Functional benefits are directly linked to the functions performed by the product or service, which provide value for the customer. Experiential benefits relate to what feelings the product or service evoke. For instance, a consumer can feel excited in a BMW, or energetic when drinking coke. Symbolic benefits relate to needs for personal expression. The third category, brand attitudes are defined as the consumer's overall evaluations of a brand. Keller argues that direct experience with the brand creates the strongest brand attribute and benefit associations. Other studies (e.g. Grace and O'Cass, 2005) have identified other brand dimensions that provide meaning in the association to certain brands, such as for instance country-of-origin and word-of-mouth, which cannot be found in Keller's (1998) model.
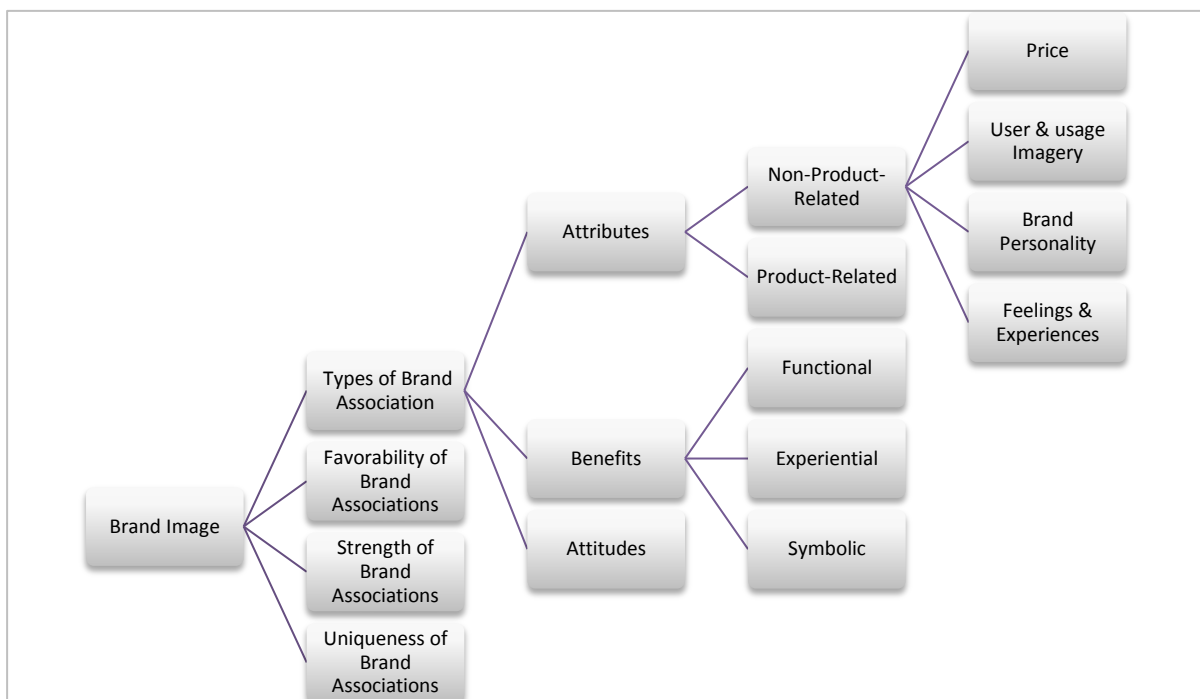
Figure 4: Brand image structure by Keller (1998, p. 94). Adjusted by the author.

2.4 Brand Identity

Brand identity and brand image are closely connected. However, in contrast to brand image brand identity refers to the company's perception of the brand and how the company or the brand strategist wants the brand to be perceived by the consumers. According to Aaker

(1996), a brand identity should provide direction, purpose and meaning for the brand. Therefore, brand identity is the one of the main drivers for brand equity. Aaker (1996, p. 68) defines brand identity as:

'a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain. These associations represent what the brand stands for and imply a promise to customers from the organization members.'

A brand identity planning model was developed by Aaker (1996) in order to help companies to make sure the brand identity has texture and depth. Aaker describes brand identity as consisting of a core and an extended identity. The core identity is described as the central, timeless essence of the brand which is likely to remain constant during change whereas the extended identity includes elements that provide texture and completeness to the brand. As illustrated in Table 2, the core and extended identity are influenced by four perspectives. From this point of view, Aaker wants brand strategists to consider the brand as a product, organization, person and symbol. Furthermore, the brand identity should help establish a relationship between the brand and the customer, this by generating a certain value proposition such as functional, emotional and self-expressive elements.

Brand as Product	Brand as Organization	Brand as Person	Brand as Symbol
Product scope	Organization attributes (e.g. innovation, consumer concern, trustworthiness)	Personality (e.g., genuine, energetic rugged)	Visual imagery and metaphors
Product attributes	Local vs. global	Brand-customer relationships (e.g. friend, adviser	Brand heritage
Quality/Value			
Uses			
Users			
Country of origin			

Table 2: The brand identity system. *Source: Aker (1996, p 79)* adapted by the author.

2.5 Country-of-Origin (COO)

Many factors influence customers' perception of a brand and its quality. One such factor is the place where the brand is manufactured, referred to as country-of-origin (COO). Research has shown that country associations play an important role in purchasing decisions (e.g. Wang and Yang, 2008). According to Kotler (2002, p. 250) customers hold certain images of countries in their mind, which can emerge as a result out of the country's "geography, history, proclamations, art and music, famous citizens and other features." Whereas some country images are fairly consistent across consumer nationalities (the image of the robustness with German products, the image of Korean products as cheap and so on) there are also perceptions of COO that are not shared by people of different national cultures, which can be due to differences in relationships between countries (Usunier and Lee, 2008). For instance,

Hsieh (2002) found that brand image perceptions generalize across markets that are similar on the basis of national characteristics, cultural dimensions and level of economic development.

Many brands have strong national ties, manufactured in countries known for their expertise in certain product categories, and thus are believed to come with a higher quality. For instance, Chanel perfume is strongly linked to France; Swatch watches to Switzerland, Mercedes Benz and BMW to Germany and on so on. Studies have found that brands from countries with favorable images tend to be more accepted and consumers are also willing to pay more for those brands than brands from countries with less favorable images (e.g. Koshate-Fisher et al. 2012). However, becoming strongly linked to a specific country or region can also create disadvantages. According to Keller (2008) actions associated with the country may color people's perceptions. For example, problems may arise if the company decides to move the production elsewhere.

2.6 Brand Personality

Personality has proved to be useful for analyzing consumer behavior for brand choices as it reveals how consumers feel about brands, rather than what physical characteristics they associate with them (Aaker, 1997). A brand with a distinctive personality thus can be said to become alive for the consumer. Several studies (e.g. Aaker, 1997, Rojas-Mendéz et al., 2004, Murphy et al. 2007) show that research respondents have been able to ascribe personality traits to brands. Aaker (1997, p. 347) defines brand personality as being *"a set of human characteristics associated to a brand"* which includes demographics such as gender, class and age as well as personality traits. Like a person, a brand can be perceived as being for example young, cheerful, active, feminine, intelligent and so on. However, in contrast to a human's personality, brand personality does not behave like human beings. The perception of their personality can for example derive from the people using the brand as well as from the product itself. Factors related to the product which can affect the perceptions of a brand personality can be influenced by product category, package and price whereas non-product-related characteristics include factors such as user imagery, sponsorships, symbol, age, country of origin, company image and celebrity endorsers (Aaker, 1996). In light of this, how a brand's personality is perceived by the consumers has a lot to do with how the brand is positioned in the market.

J. L. Aaker (2001) noted that the personality associated with a brand tends to vary to some degree, not only because of the variations of individuals' needs and socialization, but also because of individuals' self-views. Several studies (e.g. Sirgy, 1982; Phau and Lau, 2001) have focused on the relationship between brands and consumers in order to find out what function brand personality has on consumer behavior. The self-congruity theory provides the explanation that consumers tend to choose brands that they feel possess personalities that are similar to their own self-concept (Graeff, 1996). In other words, consumers make brand choices based on the perception they have of themselves, their identity. According to Aaker (1996) the self-identity can be their actual identity or the ideal self, the person they would like to be. For example, Aaker describes Nike as an aspirational brand, with a personality described as spirited, stylish, and healthy. For some people wearing the Nike brand, it can be a statement of who they aspire to be like rather than their current self-image.

2.6.1 Measuring Brand Personality

Scales for measuring brand personality originate in the field personality psychology. A well-known scale for measuring brand personality was developed by Jennifer Aaker (1997). The brand personality scale (BPS) is based on American consumers' perception of commercial brands. In order to explain the respondents' ratings of personality traits Aaker developed five dimensions according to which brands can be described, namely sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness. Each dimension consists of facets that represent the character of the dimension. The first dimension, *sincerity* has the facets down-to-earth, honest, wholesome and cheerful. The second dimension, *excitement* consists of the facets daring, spirited, imaginative and contemporary as illustrated in Figure 5 below.
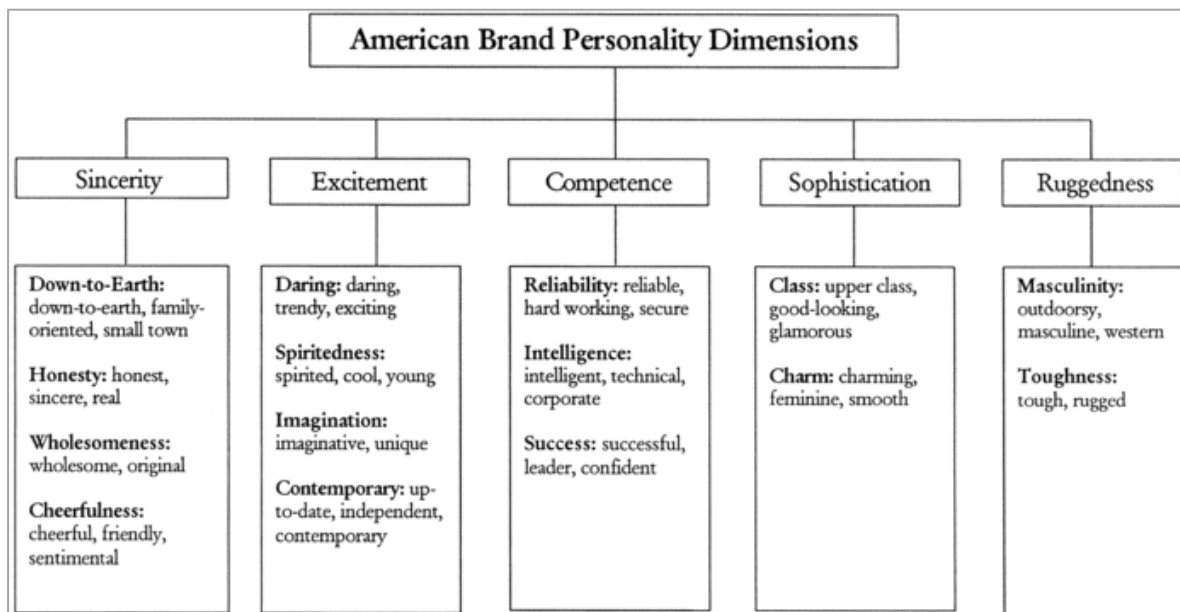
Figure 5: Five American brand personality dimensions and their facets. *Source: Aaker et al. (2001, p. 494).*

Aaker et al. (2001) conducted additional studies in Japan and Spain in order to test the generalizability of the scale. The studies found that some dimensions share similar meaning across cultures whereas other dimensions are culture-specific. Both in Spain and Japan a "peacefulness" dimension replaced the "ruggedness" dimension. Also, a "passion" dimension emerged in Spain instead of the "competency" dimension found in the USA. Other cross-cultural studies have been conducted to examine the structure of brand personality dimensions. For example, Sung and Tinkham (2005, p. 342) found that USA and Korea share similar brand personality structures, but also two culture-specific dimensions to each culture emerged. The emergence of culture-specific personality dimensions suggest that even though companies want their global brands to be connected with a specific personality, consumers across cultures still attach different personality traits to the same brand. In line with this, McCracken (1986) argues that brands can carry and communicate cultural meaning and represent the values and beliefs of a culture.

Although the brand personality scale is widely recognized it has also been questioned. For instance, Azoulay and Kapferer (2003) have argued that Aaker's framework merges dimensions of brand identity rather than measuring brand personality. According to Smith et al. (2006), the interactions consumers have with brands cannot fully be captured by Aaker's

brand personality scale. Even though the framework has been criticized, the BPS is according to Ekini (2006) the most comprehensive instrument for measuring brand personality. In this study the framework will be used in order to better understand the research participants' feelings and attitudes towards the brand. The BPS will be applied to test whether the traits provided by the respondents find correlation in Aaker's (1997) brand personality dimensions and to what extent the dimensions differ across the national cultures.

2.7 National Culture

Understanding cultural differences is key to global marketing including branding. This highlights that marketers need to be more aware of the cultural values and beliefs that people from different cultures may hold. The American anthropologist and cross-cultural researcher Edward T. Hall (1959) defines culture as "the way of a life of a people, or the sum of their learned behavior patterns, attitudes or material things." That culture is a learned set of human behavior patterns and not given by nature is supported by Lustig and Koester (1999, p. 30) who define culture as "a learned set of shared interpretations about beliefs, values, norms and social practices, which affect the behaviors of a relatively large group of people." There are many definitions of the concept of culture and many of these tend to focus on culture as a collective whole and less on the individual perceptions. Within the context of marketing factors such as age, gender, nationality, work style, social status, wealth and language influence the way an individual sees and judges the world (Dake, 1991), thus should also be taken into consideration when planning marketing activities.

2.7.1 Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

The Dutch social psychologist and researcher of cross-cultural marketing communication, Geert Hofstede, has developed the most widely cited model for categorizing national cultures. This framework is based on a large qualitative research project where differences in national cultures were investigated across more than 50 cultures. (Hofstede, 2001). Hofstede collected data from business employees working in a multinational corporation (IBM) between 1967 and 1973. From the analysis of the responses Hofstede identified four dimensions that describe value perspectives between national cultures including: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism and masculinity/femininity. A fifth dimension, long-/short-term orientation, was added later on.

Hofstede's work has won recognition among researchers and academics throughout the years. According to Bond (2002, p. 1) "Hofstede has become one of the most widely cited social scientists of our time." However, arguments have run against his study. The framework has been questioned and criticized for its validity and reliability. For instance, McSweeney (2000) claimed that nations are not appropriate units for analyzing cultures as they cannot be divided by borders. Others have argued that one single company cannot represent an entire culture (Sondergaard, 1994) as well as the research is outdated and of no modern value today. However, although the study has been criticized, it is significantly larger than many others that have been surveyed in the area of cross-cultural studies. According to De Mooij, expert in the field of marketing and culture, and Hofstede (2010) the framework has proved to be a useful instrument for understanding differences in consumer behavior across cultures and the model has been applied to a number of areas within global branding and advertising. Furthermore, Phau and Lau (2000) argue that in order to understand cultural meaning in the context of brand personality, Hofstede's cultural dimensions serve as a great help. As this study seeks to investigate how individuals across three national cultures perceive the image of

one global brand, which is partly achieved by using the concept of brand personality, Hofstede's framework will be applied in this thesis. The five cultural dimensions are described in further detail below.

Power Distance

The distribution of power in one culture can differ significantly to that of another. Power distance relates to the degree of equality and inequality between people in a society. Societies with large power distances accept and expect that power is distributed unequally and everyone has his or her rightful place in a social hierarchy. Powerful authorities, hierarchical structures and status inequalities are characterizing features in large power distance cultures, whereas low power distance cultures believe in equality between people, i.e. there should be no difference in social status, wealth and power (Lustig & Koester, 2010, p. 114).

Uncertainty Avoidance

The uncertainty avoidance dimension is described by Hofstede (2001, p. 61) as "the extent to which members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations." Cultures sensitive to uncertainty and ambiguity try to establish more structure by implementing rules, regulations and rituals, whereas cultures low in uncertainty avoidance have a high tolerance for ambiguity and do not try to control the future, but rather accept it. (Lustig & Koester, 2010, p. 116).

Individualism vs. Collectivism

In individualistic cultures independency is encouraged and one's identity is in the person, i.e. people are 'I-conscious.' In individualistic societies ties between people are loose: each individual is expected to look after him/herself and his/her direct family. On the collectivist side, people are 'we-conscious' and from onward on are born into groups. Ties between individuals are strong and the group is expected to take care of its individual members who might consist of family, extended family, cast and so on. In exchange for loyalty they will protect each other (Hofstede, 2012).

Masculinity vs. Femininity

Cultures differ when it comes to gender expectations. Hofstede divides the cultures into masculine and feminine ones based on the degree to which a culture values masculine or feminine behaviors. A masculine society is characterized by clearly distinct gender roles where men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success. The dominant values in a masculine society are achievement and success and achievement must be demonstrated (De Mooij and Hofstede, 2010). Whereas role differentiation is large in masculine societies, in feminine cultures the gender roles overlap. Both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender and concerned with quality of life.

Long Term vs. Short-Term Time Orientation

The fifth dimension was added after the original four dimensions, initially called the Confucian dynamism. This dimension refers to a person's point of reference about life and work, defined as "the extent to which a society exhibits a pragmatic future-oriented

perspective rather than a conventional historic or short-term point of view" (De Mooij and Hofstede, 2010). Values included in the long-term orientation are perseverance, ordering relationships by status, thrift and so on, whereas short-term orientation is described with values such as steadiness and stability as well as respect for tradition.
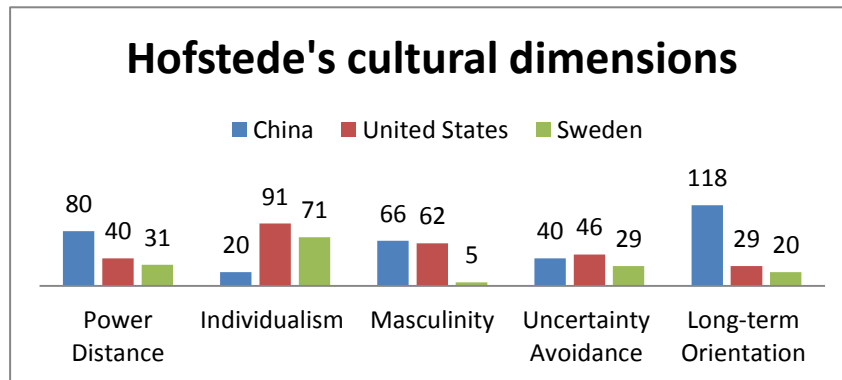
Figure 6: Indexes of five dimensions of cultural differences among China, Sweden and the United States. Source: Hofstede, 2012

2.7.1.1 Culture-Related Consumer Needs and Motives according to De Mooij

Hofstede's model has been applied in order to explain consumers' preferences for cars. According to De Mooij (2010) the dimensions of masculinity/femininity and uncertainty avoidance are important in consumers' motives for choosing cars. De Mooij found that cultures that score low on both uncertainty avoidance and masculinity (cf. Sweden) have a preference for safety to protect the family and value for money. In this cultural cluster safety and functional aspects are often more important than design and technology. In contrast, cultures with the configuration high masculinity and weak uncertainty avoidance (cf. USA, China) have status needs and prefer big cars with powerful motors and prefer sturdy sport utility vehicles. Moreover, the importance of 'international image' she noted was related to collectivistic cultures scoring high on power distance, serving as a status motive. Further, De Mooij found that a high price delivers status in collectivistic cultures, as a high price is associated with quality and quality also contains social meaning to members in these cultures. Thus, a high price might not only signal high quality but also social status, prestige and belonging. Another factor, 'enjoyment to drive' was found to be more important to people in high individualistic cultures, reflecting pleasure seeking. Preference of cars of European make she found was related to long-term orientation, whereas design was a factor preferred among members in high power distance cultures. De Mooij also found design to be related to individualism, a feature important to express individuality. Her analysis further revealed that 'environmental friendliness' was a motive for small power distance cultures, whereas 'engine performance' and 'price' were factors especially important in short-term oriented cultures.

3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the research approach, data collection strategy and data analysis method. It ends with briefly discussing the credibility issues of the study.

3.1 The Research Approach

Qualitative research has a long history in marketing (cited in Keller, 2008, p. 355) and is commonly used to explore consumer brands and product perceptions. Keller (2008) describes qualitative research techniques as relatively unstructured measurement approaches that allow for a range of possible consumer responses. He specifically proposes that the most effective way to profile brand associations is to devise free associations tasks. By using free association tasks marketers have been able to identify the range of varying associations that reside in the minds of the consumers as well as they have been able to uncover the strength, favorability and uniqueness of brand associations. For instance, the associations that first come to customers' mind are considered to be stronger and more likely to affect customer decision rather than those associations that are revealed later. Moreover, the comparison of associations with competitive brands can reveal a lot about the brand's uniqueness. Also, the favorability of brands can be elicited depending on how customers phrase their associations. According to Green and Wind (1975), the responses to free association questions can help marketers clarify the range of possible associations and assemble a brand profile.

Since the respondents' subjective views of the world are of interest for the study; uncovering how individuals feel about a certain brand, i.e. their thoughts, opinions and attitudes the free association task as described by Keller (2008) is deployed.

3.2 Data Collection Method

3.2.1 Interviews

Twelve individual in-depth interviews were carried out in order to uncover the respondents' perceptions of the Volvo brand image. According to Mack et al. (2005) in-depth interviews are useful for learning about the perspective of individuals and an effective method for getting people to talk about their personal feelings, experiences and opinions. An advantage of using in-depth interviews is that this method provides more detailed information than many other methods such as for example pre-structured questionnaires, i.e. the respondents can elicit information, which is otherwise hard to capture relying on pre-determined questionnaires. Furthermore, by conducting interviews differences in cultural values can be detected as they enable for the researcher to gain insight into how people interpret and order the world (Mack et al., 2005).

3.2.1.1 Interview Guide

The interview guide was divided into six different parts. The first part started with a free association task where the respondents were asked what first came to their minds when recalling the brand name. The second part focused on unveiling respondents' brand awareness, thus questions were asked about the history, the country of origin, symbols associated with the brand and sponsorships. The third part covered questions aimed to uncover respondents' familiarity with the brand. The respondents were asked to describe their first encounter with the brand as well as their previous experience(s) with Volvo, this in order

to discover possible emotional and social linkages to the brand. The fourth part focused on unveiling images the respondents had of typical brand users, including gender, age and profession, this in order to gain a better insight into how the brand be used and by whom in each of the three national cultures. The fifth part covered questions intended to uncover possible emotions attached to the brand. The respondents were thus asked to describe the experience of driving a Volvo. The sixth and last part focused on brand personality. Here, the respondents were asked to think of Volvo as a human being and ascribe the brand personality traits.

As people might have difficulties expressing their views on a certain brand image or personality of a brand, projective techniques (cf. Hofstede et al. 2007) were relied upon. Morrison et al. (2002, p. 63) define projective techniques as involving *"the use of stimuli that allows participants to project their subjective or deep-seated beliefs onto other people or subjects."* Following this, the respondents were asked to think of Volvo as a person and ascribe the brand human personality traits. Additionally, they were asked to compare the brand to animals, occupations, activities and celebrities and provide reasons for their choices. This enabled for the researcher to collect as rich and robust data.

3.2.2 Interview Procedure

According to Mack et al. (2005) in-depth interviews are usually conducted face-to-face as this method can take advantage of social cues. However, this method is not always applicable due to geographically disparate research participants. As the current study required respondents to be located in their respective countries at the time of the interview, face-to-face interviews could only be conducted with respondents from Sweden. Communication channels such as the online messenger service *Skype* and the Chinese online instant messaging provider, *Tencent QQ,* enabled for synchronous communication to take place between the researcher and the respondents located in the United States and China. These services allow users to communicate with peers by voice, instant messaging and video. Kvale (1996, p. 161) emphasizes the importance of using communication tools that capture visual aspects when conducting an interview as facial expressions and bodily posture provides richer contexts for interpretation. Following this recommendation, a web camera was used to the extent possible. However, disturbances in the Internet connection from time to time resulted in bad sound quality and delays in the conversation. To make sure the sound quality stayed intact the interview many times had to proceed without the use of a web camera. To guarantee that no information went lost all interviews were recorded. Whereas on Skype a call recording tool was used which integrates into *Skype* and records audio mode, the face-to-face-interviews as well as the interviews conducted via *Tencent QQ* were recorded with the help of a smartphone to which an audio recording application was downloaded.

3.2.3 Language

The interviews were conducted in the languages English and Swedish. In some cases the respondents had difficulties expressing their views on the topic due to limited proficiency in their second language. In order to overcome language barriers and reduce the risk of misunderstandings the respondents were allowed to use an online dictionary. Whereas most of the interviews were conducted using English, three respondents felt more comfortable carrying out the interview in Swedish. The interviews conducted in Swedish were first transcribed into Swedish and afterwards translated into English. Translating from one language to another can be difficult as well as decrease the validity of the data gathered. In order to make sure the interviews were interpreted and translated correctly some respondents

were consulted during and after the translation process and asked to give their approval of the written content.

3.2.4 Participants

To ensure diversity of the sample four respondents mixed in gender, from each of the three countries USA, Sweden and China were selected to take part in the study. The age group ranged from 24 to 30 years. An important criterion for the study was that the respondents were 'born and bred' in the cultures of interest for the research; this to make sure associations were connected with respondents' home countries and not influenced by any other culture. Furthermore, the study required the respondents to be able to communicate in the languages English or Swedish. Also, the respondents had to be aware of the Volvo brand; however, the study did not require them to have driven Volvo before. Demographics of the respondents are stated in table 3 below.

Person	Nationality	Gender	Age	Location	Brand Familiarity
U1:	American	Male	25	Chicago	Driven Volvo
U2:	American	Male	24	Chicago	Never driven Volvo
U3:	American	Female	24	Chicago	Never driven Volvo
U4:	American	Female	24	Chicago	Volvo owner
C1:	Chinese	Male	26	Tianjin	Driven Volvo
C2:	Chinese	Male	28	Taiyuan	Never driven Volvo
C3:	Chinese	Female	26	Tianjin	Never driven Volvo
C4:	Chinese	Female	25	Tianjin	Never driven Volvo
S1:	Swedish	Male	30	Gothenburg	Driven Volvo
S2:	Swedish	Male	25	Gothenburg	Never driven Volvo
S3:	Swedish	Female	27	Gothenburg	Driven Volvo
S4:	Swedish	Female	25	Gothenburg	Volvo owner

Table 3: An overview of the study participants

3.2.5 National Cultures

The research focuses on three national cultures; one European culture, one Asian culture and one North American culture. Individuals from the United States (Chicago), Sweden (Gothenburg) and China (Tianjin and Taiyuan) were asked to take part in the study. In large countries there may be huge regional variations, thus the intention of the study was to focus on individuals that came from the one and same area. The three countries were selected for a couple of reasons. First of all, they display differences in cultural values. Secondly, the countries have all been a present part in the development of the Volvo automobile brand, thus it is assumed the respondents know the brand well enough to be able to rate its brand image.

3.3 Data Analysis

The method of analysis consisted of searching for themes and subthemes across the data set to find repeated patterns of meaning which could help to answer the research questions. This approach is often referred to as thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that the application of thematic analysis can be divided into six different phases. The first step is to get familiar with the data collected before starting to generate initial codes. By producing codes data gets organized into meaningful groups. These are later analyzed and clustered into potential themes. When sorting different codes into themes visual representations are suggested as a help to find relationships between codes. The next phase deals with reviewing all themes and the collated coding extracts to make sure they form a coherent pattern. The entire data set is re-read to make sure that the themes work in relation to the data set, and to code any additional data within themes that might have been missed.

| 1. Familiarising with data | 2. Generating initial codes | 3. Searching for themes | 4. Reviewing themes | 5. Defining & naming themes | 6. Producing the report |
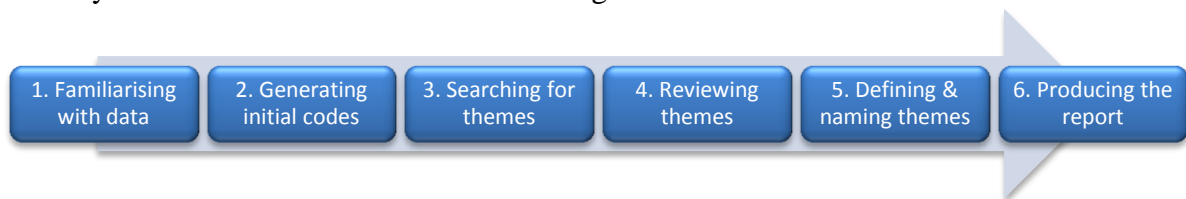
Figure 7: Phases of thematic analysis. *Source: Based on the guide of Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 35)*

By using the main principles of thematic analysis it was possible to discern important themes and categories with regards to how the respondents perceived the Volvo brand. Importantly, it provided a systematic way of structuring, grouping and labeling the interview data. In addition, it helped to work up from more specific categories to larger ideas and concepts.

Brand Personality Measurement

To understand the distinct brand personalities as perceived by the respondents and to be able to make a cross-cultural comparison, the brand personality scale developed by Aaker (1997, p. 354) was used as a measurement tool. Care was taken to interpret the statements provided by the respondents in order to bring traits together to build a concept. An online dictionary (www.britannica.com) was used as a help to identify words synonymous to Aaker's dimensions and facets. Sometimes the respondents already used the exact term that could be found in Aaker's list and in other cases terms could not be found in the list, but the author had to match the spoken expression. The assumption was that the more traits that could be linked to one dimension the more determined was this dimension for the way the brand is perceived. The personality traits identified were further arranged in tables. Different colors were used to differentiate the dimensions from each other. Traits belonging to the competence dimension were colored blue; traits in the excitement dimension were colored red and so on (see Appendix 1).

3.4 Credibility of the Research

Credibility of any research is important, and especially in qualitative studies. While validity and reliability measures are commonly used in quantitative research, these do not apply in qualitative type of studies. It has been suggested that researchers should find other ways on how to assess the quality of qualitative research in terms of reliability and validity. According to Roberts et al. (2006, p. 43) reliability in qualitative research can be viewed as the trustworthiness of the procedures and the data gathered. Furthermore, it addresses the extent to which the results of a study or a measure are repeatable in different circumstances. Trustworthiness is described by Shenton (2004) consisting of four different criteria; credibility, conformability, dependability and transferability.

3.4.1 Credibility

According to some researchers ensuring credibility is one of the most important factors in establishing trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004, p. 64). Credibility refers to whether the interviewees will accept the interpretations that were made from the data, i.e. how congruent the findings are with the reality.

In order to increase credibility the respondents were asked the same set of interview questions. Beforehand, the interview schedule was pre-tested on a random sample, this in order to probe for the questions relevance for the study and to make sure questions were comprehensible and perceived similarly across the sample. As some interviews were conducted in Swedish, translation work had to be performed. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and thereafter translated. To ensure that translations of the data were interpreted in accordance to what the interviewees disclosed the recordings were carefully listened to and notes were taken during and after the interviews.

3.4.2 Conformability

The concept of conformability is described as *"the qualitative investigator's comparable concern to objectivity"* (Shenton, 2004, p. 72). In other words, the researcher should not let the own predispositions affect the data, but the study's findings should be a result of the experiences and ideas of the respondents.

During the interview the intention of the researcher was to let the respondents express their thoughts and beliefs without being interrupted or affected in any way by the beliefs held by the researcher. Furthermore, in the analysis of data, the researcher tried not to admit any personal predispositions.

3.4.3 Dependability

According to Shenton (2004, p. 63) researchers should strive to enable for future investigators to repeat the same study. This requires study processes to be explained and reported in detail. In order to increase the dependability for the study, the interview guide was disclosed (see Appendix 2)

3.4.4 Transferability

To allow transferability of the study, it is important to describe the context of the work. The demonstration of the applicability of the results determines whether or not the results can be transferred to another setting (Shenton, 2004, p. 63). However, since qualitative projects tend to work with small numbers of particular environments and individuals, it is argued that it is impossible to demonstrate that findings are applicable to other populations (Shenton, 2004, p. 69). In this study, Sweden, China and the United States were selected to represent European, Asian and North American cultures. The research was narrowed down to include four regions in each of the three countries.

3.4.5 Validity

Trustworthiness includes the concept of validity. According to Whittemore et al. (2001) there is a challenge of establishing validity criteria in qualitative research as the researcher has an influence on the study, thus the scientific process becomes incorporated with subjectivity and creativity (p. 1). In order to maintain high validity all twelve interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, this in order to obtain and project as accurate picture of the interviewees and their statements as possible. The interview guide was also tested to check whether it needed to be refined. In addition, the main strategy to ensure validity in the study was to follow the steps of thematic analysis to ensure that the analysis was grounded in the data.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Before the interviews were carried out the interviewer reassured the research participants that all information provided would be kept confidential. The participants were informed about the nature of the study and the approximate length of the interview. The interviewer asked for the permission to record the interview, which all respondents agreed upon. The respondents' names included in the paper are fictitious.

4. FINDINGS

Based on the analysis, brand image perceptions across the three national cultures Sweden, USA and China reflect seven main categories: user imagery, price, design, quality, brand heritage, brand feelings and brand personality. These are described fully below.

4.1 User Imagery

This category, user imagery describes the image the respondents have of the typical Volvo user. When the respondents were asked to name *stereotypical users* of the brand, the responses were differed across the national cultures. The Swedish respondents were able to mention several types of brand users, which were linked to different types of car models. For instance, senior citizens as well as younger males were two types of users, which were strongly connected to older Volvo car models. Further, the respondents associated 'hillbillies' (raggare in Swedish) as one stereotypical user. The hillbillies were described as 'people in the outskirts with passion for cars'. In addition, while older Volvo car models were perceived to be driven by young males, senior citizens and hillbillies, newer car models came to be associated with families and companies. Noteworthy is that all Swedish respondents referred to Volvo as reflecting the three V's: Villa (house), Vovve (dog) and Volvo. Thus, it seems Volvos symbolizes an essential part of the Swedish average family. This is neatly illustrated by one Swedish female respondent:

> *'I wouldn't buy it [Volvo] right now (...) but let's say in a couple of years when it's time to found a family and have children, a station wagon car would be a good choice, a bigger and better vehicle, then I might consider buying a Volvo.'*

The American respondents also seem to perceive Volvo as the ideal family car, this as families were associated to as the only and stereotypical user. In addition, the majority seemed to agree on that Volvo user is the mother in the family. The Chinese respondents, on the other hand, came to associate Volvo users in China with successful and wealthy, upper class, middle-aged men. The description of the stereotypical user differed significantly from the characters described by the Swedish and American samples. One Chinese male described the typical Volvo user as follows:

> *'Ok, first of all, if I see anyone who drives a Volvo and I thought he must be – he must have many money, and have a happy life and he can purchase and achieve anything he wants or dream of.'*

		Old Volvo models			New Volvo models		
		Senior citizens	Younger generation	Hillbillies	Families	Companies	High class
SWEDEN	S1:		�ख	✖	✖	✖	
	S2:			✖	✖		
	S3:	✖	✖	✖	✖	✖	
	S4:	✖	✖	✖	✖		
CHINA	C1:						✖
	C2:		✖		✖		✖
	C3:					✖	✖
	C4:					✖	✖
USA	U1:				✖		
	U2:				✖		
	U3:				✖		
	U4:				✖		

Table 4: An overview over brand image perceptions: user imagery

4.2 Price

Price is a recurrent theme which also differs across national cultures, especially in terms of the meanings that is ascribed to it. The Swedish and American respondents described the brand as somewhat expensive, but still considered the price to be reasonable. This seems to be linked to the underpinning perception that Volvo offers good value for money. One American respondent expressed:

> 'I think that everyone knows Volvo. I don't think many people have a bad opinion about it. I think (...) it has a reputation for quality and for being good for your buy, you know, good value.'

The Chinese respondents, on the other hand, considered Volvo to be an extremely expensive brand, aimed to the upper social classes of society. Here, it should be noted that the Chinese respondents seem to have only newer car models in mind when referring to the brand, whereas the Swedish and American respondents included both new and older vehicles in the associations. Even though the majority of the Chinese respondents refer to Volvo as being as expensive as luxury brands such as BMW or Cadillac, Volvo is not associated with luxury. One female claimed it would take her ten to fifteen years of savings to be able to afford a Volvo car. Another respondent argued that Volvo was a brand way too expensive for 'normal' people. There was even the perception that the high price made it difficult for women to afford the vehicles, thus women are less likely to be associated with Volvo ownership.

	Sweden	**China**	**USA**
Price	Reasonable	Expensive	Reasonable

Table 5: An overview over brand image perceptions: price

4.3 Design

Design of cars was frequently talked about in relation to brand image perception. The design was talked about most in terms of the exteriors including size, shape and image. The Swedish respondents considered the exteriors to be a characterizing feature that set Volvo apart from other brands. The majority associated the Volvo car with the word 'boxlike', regardless of what model they were talking about. Further, other words used to describe the design included *neutral* and *low profile*. From this perspective the Swedish respondents seem to consider the exterior design as acceptable rather than appealing. One male respondent expressed his opinion of the exteriors as follows:

> *'It doesn't really stand out much (...) you don't buy a Volvo to make a statement. That's the thing – I don't think people like stare at me driving on the road. Of course a new Volvo looks alright, but I don't think it's like "wow".'*

The majority of the American respondents associated Volvos with being large size station wagons. Even though there existed a perception of the exteriors as dull the majority of the respondents emphasized the positive aspects by driving a car, which did not attract much attention. Thus, the exteriors were met with mainly positive associations. One female addressed the boxy shape of the cars, which she argued added a certain sort of retro chic to the brand, as expressed:

> *'I think the big thing about Volvo is definitely the looks of the cars, not so much in recent years, but how they got that really like iconic kind of box silhouette.'*

In contrast, the majority of the Chinese respondents seem to perceive the exterior as a feature that makes the brand stand out. In fact, they were the only ones that expressed excitement over the design. Overall, the Chinese respondents described the look of the cars using attributes such as *attractive, beautiful, good-looking* and *wonderful*. Noteworthy is that the respondents in this sample were the only ones that did not use the word boxy in the description of Volvo. Interesting is that the respondents emphasized the large size of the cars that seemed to be an extremely important feature adding value to the brand. There was even the impression that Volvo cars came with a bigger size, as expressed by one female:

> *'It's [Volvo] big. It's bigger than other cars. I think bigger, the size. The size is impressive.*

Design			
	Volvo Car Models	Size	Exteriors
Sweden S1:	Station w. / XC70/ 240	Large, big, clumsy	Low profile, neutral ,boxy
S2:	Station w. /740/S80/S60	Solid	Neutral, boxy
S3:	Station w. 740		Stylistically pure, neutral
S4:	Station w.	Big, solid	Low profile, boxlike
China C1:	SUV's /XC60	'Very, very big'	Classic, boring
C2:			Beautiful, attractive
C3:		Impressive	"Love the outlook"
C4:		Big	Wonderful
USA U1:	SUV's		Unique, sleek, boxy
U2:	Sedans		Low profile, boxy
U3:	Land cars	Small	Low profile
U4:	Station wagons		Boxy

Table 4: An overview over brand image perceptions: car design

4.4 Quality

Another important theme that emerged from the analysis concerns the quality of the vehicle, which seems to have different meanings in respondents' minds. The Swedish and American respondents frequently referred to the vehicles as safe, spacious, reliable, durable, and practical. Safety was frequently mentioned as a characterizing feature for Volvo. Similarly, the American respondents describe Volvo as a safe, stable, reliable and practical vehicle. Further, the large size seems to provide value to the respondents in terms of comfort as Volvo was associated to as perfectly suited for longer journeys, the space considered one important feature that made Volvo the perfect transportation vehicle. One Swedish male argued that firms often decide to purchase Volvo cars due to them being practical, solid, durable and reliable as well as they are spoken well of, as illustrated in the below extract:

> 'There are a lot of people driving Volvos as taxi drivers and there's a reason for it, because they're fairly well made for it, I mean, (...) they're spacious, they don't break that easily (...), they're pretty reliable, they handle the Swedish climate well, and you know, they're fairly well spoken of.'

Although the majority of the Chinese respondents refer to Volvo as a high quality vehicle, being safe and reliable, non-functional aspects were put more emphasis on rather than attributes related to the primary function of the vehicle. For instance, the safety feature did not seem to be perceived as a factor that added significant value to the brand as it was less frequently referred to. One respondent even had the impression that Volvo put too much focus on safety technology. What appears to be more important to the Chinese respondents is instead related to symbolic aspects. For instance, the big car size seems to be one desirable feature, not only in terms of delivering comfort, but important in terms of signaling high status. Another factor that is likely to influence the respondents' perception of the quality seems to have a lot to do with the high price, as expressed by one respondent:

> 'You know, a car might show the status of the company, so sometimes companies would like to purchase a higher price, - a higher quality car that represents them. So at that time when I saw this, I think Volvo is a good car.'

	Sweden	China	USA
Quality	Safe, reliable, practical, durable, comfortable	Safe, reliable, solid, expensive	Safe, reliable, practical, durable, comfortable

Table 6: An overview over brand image perceptions: quality

4.5 Brand Heritage

Another theme, which emerged in the analysis, and appears to influence the image of the brand, is the brand heritage. The Swedish respondents described Volvo as having a special place in the heart of the Swedish consumers, which they believe have a lot to do with the country-of-origin. There was even the perception that Swedes stay loyal to the Volvo brand because of its Swedish origins. Volvo was even referred to as Sweden's national pride. The majority of the American respondents shared the same view of the heritage adding a kind of value to the brand. Europe, Scandinavia and even Gothenburg were referred to when recalling the brand name, which were met with only positive associations. One male illustrated his understanding of the brand heritage by saying:

> *'I think the biggest thing its probably knowing that it's a European car. You assume it comes with a certain level of you know, quality, engineering and comfort and luxury.'*

Although the majority of the Chinese respondents referred to Europe as the brand origin, there also existed a perception of the brand as American. Nevertheless, it seems that the knowledge about the cars being imported from a foreign country adds value and uniqueness to the brand, this since the respondents expressed excitement and curiosity over the foreign heritage. One female expressed this view by saying:

> *'A family member who drove this car [Volvo] told me that this car is imported from foreign countries, so it's very good, you know. So, that's my positive concept of Volvo.'*

	Sweden	China	USA
Brand Heritage	"Sweden's national pride"	European, Western, "foreign brand "	European, Scandinavian, Swedish

Table 7: An overview over brand image perceptions: brand heritage

4.6 Brand Feelings

This section describes the respondents' emotional responses with respect to the brand. The findings from the interviews reveal that the brand evokes feelings of safety across all three nationalities. The Swedish respondents demonstrated their understanding of Volvos as secure cars by referring to the safety measures and statistics where Volvo had been rated high on car safety. Others referred to the reputation of Volvos as safe vehicles. One respondent demonstrated his understanding of safety by referring to technologies innovated and developed by Volvo. Also, the weight and stability of the car seemed to produce a feeling of security as expressed by a female:

> *'They are no small, neat cars [Volvos] but it's a feeling – and I think that's what feels safe, the fact that it is a big and solid car. If I were to crash or drive off the road it would stand a whole lot compared to my crappy Peugeot for instance.'*

Similarly, the majority of the American respondents described Volvo as a high quality brand and referred to the way the car was constructed and engineered with safety in focus. The safety feature seemed to contribute to a feeling of security which resulted in the driver trusting the brand. One male respondent argued that Volvo was able to provide him with a driving experience where he did not have to worry about the actual car he was in, but instead enjoy a smooth ride. This is reflected in the following quote from an American driver:

> *'It [Volvo] will work fine. You're not gonna have any problems with it, but it's just gonna get you there. You're not gonna think about "Oh, I'm having so much fun driving this car" or something.'*

The feelings induced within the Chinese respondents were of a different kind. Even though the majority of the respondents were not familiar with the brand, they were asked to imagine how it would feel like driving a Volvo and try to describe the feeling. First of all, every one of the respondents described a feeling of success where driving a Volvo would make them feel admired by the public. The majority also referred to the large size of the car as contributing to a feeling of security. Moreover, feelings of excitement were expressed; especially the females seemed to be more excited about driving a Volvo than were the male respondents. One female argued that it is cool for girls to drive large size vehicles, Volvo not being an exception, as illustrated below.

> *'I think men choose a larger size, but more and more females, they like to have one [Volvo] like that. It's cool for girls to drive a larger car than before.'*

	Sweden	China	USA
Brand Feelings	Security	Success, excitement, security	Security

Table 8: An overview over brand image perceptions: brand feelings

4.7 Brand Personality

This section describes the human characteristics that the respondents attribute to the brand, which was achieved by the use of projective techniques.

When asked the respondents to personalize Volvo the Swedish and American respondents seemed to share the same view of Volvo as a mature person; a down-to-earth and dependable father figure. The personality seems to be perceived as dull. One Swedish female expressed her understanding of Volvo as a person to spend time with; however, stressed that activities had to be planned in advance as Volvo lacked impulsiveness and spontaneity. One Swedish female expressed her understanding as follows:

> *'When I think Volvo I think family father – I think peaceful (...). If Volvo was a person I think safe, orderly, neat (...). It's almost like he would be a bit patriotic, a bit proud (...) but at the same time moderate somehow, an average person, no one who stands out.*

The American respondents also perceived Volvo as a character that did not have a desire to stand out, which was demonstrated by the use of words such as *modest, calm, unassuming* and *sensible.* When asked to compare Volvo to a celebrity the majority had difficulties to imagine Volvo as a famous person due to the calm and peaceful character that was depicted as one not wanting to be seen out in public. Furthermore, the foreign heritage was addressed as one important factor that seemed to influence the personality considerably; especially the American respondents were able to provide rich associations to country-of-origin. One American male had a view of Europeans being *punctual, hardworking* and *dependable*, traits he also ascribed Volvo. Another American female described Volvo's personality as equivalent with the personality of Scandinavians, as illustrated below:

> *'Very stable and reliable. If this person tells you they're gonna do something they're gonna do it right and they're gonna do it on time and you won't get any inconsistencies (...) you know what to expect from them, they're not gonna surprise you, but they're not gonna disappoint you either.'*

When asked the Chinese respondents to personalize the brand, the majority came to think of a businessman. The foreign heritage was addressed, not only in terms of personality, but the brand was also ascribed physical attributes. For instance, one respondent describes Volvo as a man with fair skin, born in a country, which displays differences in both language and culture in comparison to China. Furthermore, the majority portray Volvo as a good-looking man who dresses nicely and pays attention to his appearance in general. The majority also addresses the relationship they consider themselves to have with Volvo, which appears to be of a distant kind. Associations reveal that Volvo is perceived by the majority as a highly respected and admired person, illustrated by the use of traits such as *famous, popular, successful* and so on. One female even compares Volvo to the Prime Minister of England, which does not only reveals a view of Volvo as having a high position in the society, but also is England referred

to as a country very different from China with a different language and different culture. Another female expresses her view as follows:

> *'I think I just know him and – but he may not know me. (…) I think he is very famous and known by lots of people. And maybe my relationship, I and Volvo, it has a long distance.'*

Whereas the majority of the Chinese respondents considers differences in social class to be the main reason why a closer relationship cannot be established, one male respondent has a completely different understanding, and addresses differences in cultural values as the main reason why he is not able to identify with Volvo. The personality is described according to the image he has of 'the typical European guy,' whom he describes as an independent person who values things in life, which set itself apart from the Chinese lifestyle. One example is illustrated in the below extract:

> *'(…) he does things step by step, according to his plan (…) and he keeps dividing his personal life and his working life (…) He's working very hard and (…) after work he enjoys himself.*

4.7.1 Comments on Personality Dimensions

The result of the analysis shows that the traits identified from the interviews can be linked to a number of Aaker's (1997) brand personality dimensions; however, traits were also identified that did not find correspondence to this original framework. Therefore, an additional dimension was added by the author (named peacefulness) where items such as *low profile, moderate, modest, calm, sensitive, peaceful* and so on were clustered to build a new concept (see Appendix 1).

The study found that all respondents showed strong associations to facets that are connected to Aaker's (1997) competence dimension. Comparing personality dimension across the three national cultures, the Swedish and American respondents experienced Volvo through the dimensions "competence, sincerity and peacefulness" whereas the Chinese respondents ascribed the brand traits, of which most could be linked to the dimensions of "competence, excitement, sophistication and ruggedness," as illustrated in Table 8 below. Traits were also identified in the Chinese interview data that can be linked to the sincerity and peacefulness dimensions; however, these traits occurred in a smaller amount and were not mentioned by all respondents, thus are ranked later in the list (see Table 8).

Traits, which only occurred in a small amount or were mentioned by a minority of respondents were not considered to influence the personality considerably. For example, only one Swedish respondent provided a trait, which according to Aaker (1997) belongs in the excitement dimension (cf. Table 9). However, as no one else in the Swedish sample provided traits of similar kind, this is not believed to have a major impact on their overall personality perception.

	Sweden	China	USA
1.	Competence	Competence	Competence
2.	Sincerity	Excitement	Sincerity
3.	Peacefulness	Sophistication	Peacefulness
4.		Ruggedness	
		(Peacefulness, sincerity)	

Table 9: An overview over brand image perceptions: brand personality

4.7.2 Summary of Findings

The study provides rich data regarding *user imagery, brand feelings, price, design, quality, brand heritage, brand feelings* and *brand personality*. The findings show that the brand image within one country is quite similar, but that between some national cultures, differences occur as illustrated in Figure 7. The measurement of personality traits in Aaker's (1997) brand personality scale clearly confirms the variations in brand image perceptions.

	SWEDEN	CHINA	USA
USER IMAGERY	Senior c., young guys, families, companies	Successful men	Families
PRICE	Reasonable	Expensive	Reasonable
DESIGN	Boxy, stylistically pure, neutral, low profile	Wonderful, attractive, beautiful, classic	Boxy, neutral, sleek
QUALITY	Safe, reliable, durable, practical, comfortable	Safe, reliable, solid, expensive	Safe, reliable, durable, practical, comfortable
BRAND HERITAGE	Swedish	Western, foreign, European	European, Scandinavian, Swedish
BRAND FEELINGS	Safety	Safety, success, excitement	Safety
BRAND PERSONALITY	Competence, sincerity, peacefulness	Competence, excitement, sophistication	Competence, sincerity, peacefulness

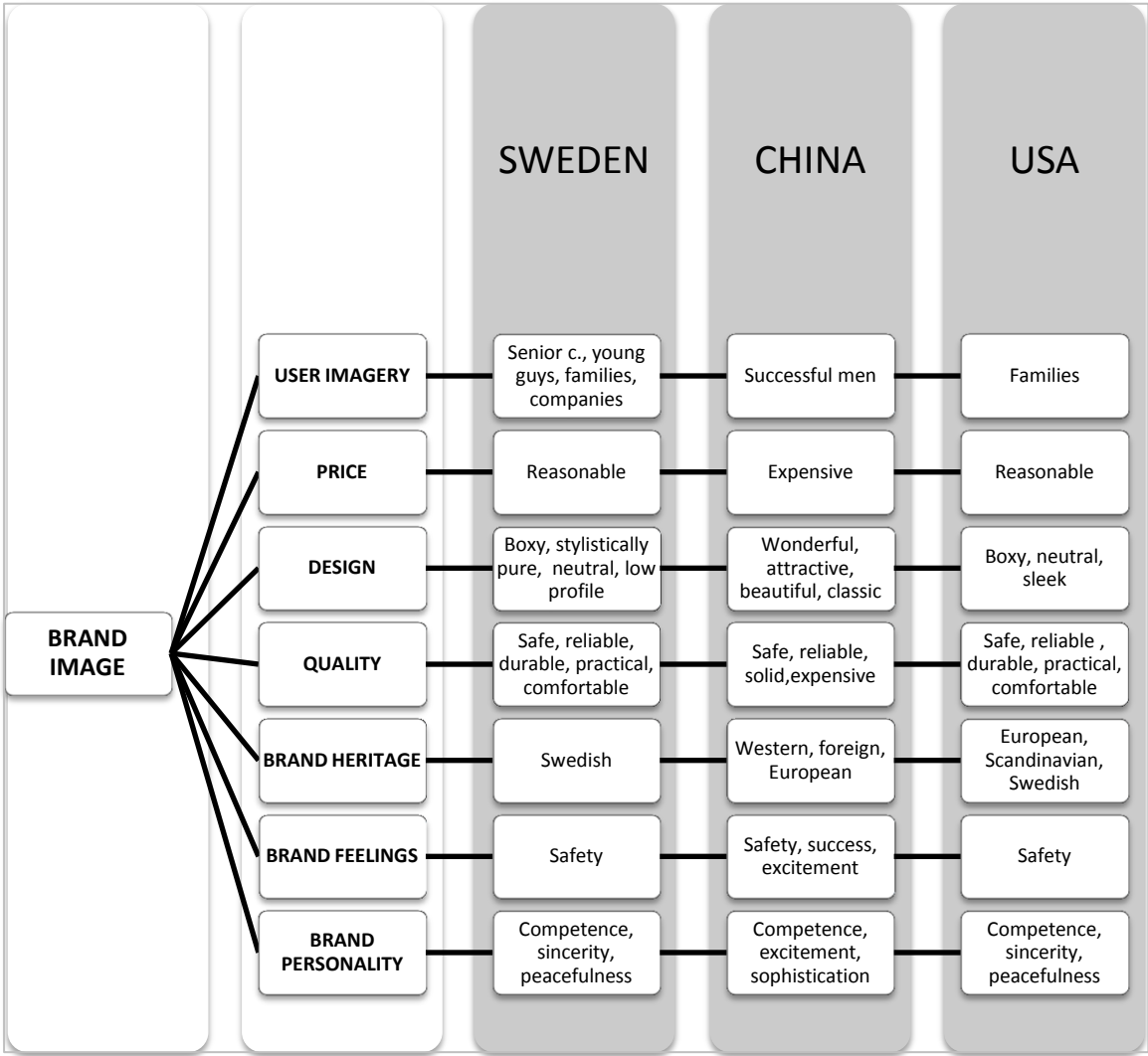(BRAND IMAGE connects to all of the above attributes)

Figure 8: Summary of findings

5. DISCUSSION

This study set out to investigate the image of Volvo as perceived by individuals across the three national cultures, Sweden, China and the United States and to what extent the brand images differ across the three samples. The variations in brand associations clearly indicate that respondents have different images of the same brand in mind.

Overall, the Swedish and American respondents display considerable similarities in the perception of Volvo, whereas the image conveyed by the Chinese respondents indicates that they share a different understanding of the same brand. The associations towards the brand also differ across the samples. Interesting is that the Swedish and American respondents' associations are linked to their own personal experience with the brand with the Swedes displaying the richest associations. The Chinese respondents, on the other hand, refer to Chinese consumers and their purchase behaviors in general, thus provide less information about their own personal beliefs. Taking into account that the Swedish respondents are more familiar with the Volvo brand (see Table 3), it is expected that they will have more concrete and elaborate associations than the Chinese respondents. This falls in line with Keller's (1998) theory that direct experience with brands creates the strongest brand attribute associations.

While the Volvo brand evokes positive associations, the study also shows attributes are perceived differently across national cultures. Noteworthy is that the Swedish and American respondents place greater emphasis on attributes which directly associate to functionality such as safety, quality and stability of the car. The Chinese respondents, on the other hand, emphasize the brand value in terms of propensity to signal high status. This finding mirrors Hofstede's (2001) research in which the dominant values in the Chinese culture are achievement, competition and success. As achievements must be demonstrated brands typically appeal to social status needs.

The importance of status can also be interpreted according to Hofstede's (2001) theory of China as a high power distance society. Cultures scoring high on this dimension believe that inequalities amongst people are acceptable, thus are often characterized by hierarchies and class differences. As a result, brands in such societies often function as tools to demonstrate one's position and social status, and as argued by De Mooij and Hofstede (2010) the social status must be clear for others to show proper respect. In light of this, it is likely that in China many global brands serve the purpose of satisfying social status needs.

Further, there is strong evidence that sex role differentiation is prominent in the Chinese culture. Taking into account that the Chinese male and female respondents refer to men as brand users – money raised as an issue why women are not frequently seen driving Volvos – indicates that men dominate a considerable portion in the Chinese society in terms of power structure. This is in line with Hofstede's (2001) theory of China as a masculine society characterized by clearly distinct gender roles. However, it should also be noted that Volvo cars seem to be popular among the female population and according to the Chinese females, gain more recognition among female drivers than previously. One interesting observation is

that the Chinese females seem to attach a slightly different meaning to Volvo, where the brand is able to deliver an extraordinary driving experience providing the driver with excitement. In fact, unlike the male respondents the female respondents mention the word 'cool' in their description of how the brand makes them feel. Also, the large car size, frequently mentioned by the females, seems to be an important contributor to the increasing interest in the brand as this feature was often addressed as a positive attribute.

The way the Swedish and American respondents describe Volvo as *low profile,* indicates that the brand is not considered to symbolize a high status image. As both Sweden and the United States score low on the dimension of power distance (Hofstede, 2001) and are characterized as cultures that believe in an equal distribution of power, brands are not likely to serve the purpose to demonstrate a certain position in society. In addition, Sweden is described as a feminine society where modesty is highly valued and standing out from the crowd less desirable (Hofstede, 2001). The Swedish respondents' emphasis on the functionality of the brand is then likely to reflect the values of their own culture. Further, this is also in accordance with De Mooij's (2010) findings that feminine cultures with a low score on the dimension of uncertainty avoidance consider functional aspects of a car to be more important than for example design and technology.

Noteworthy is that the American respondents found the low profile image to add value to the brand. Considering that the United States scores high (66) on the dimension of masculinity, one might expect that the respondents in this sample would have a preference for cars that reflect the values of their own culture, i.e. prefer vehicles that are able to display their "successes" and achievements, hence attract attention. De Mooij (2010) found that cultures with the configuration high masculinity and weak uncertainty avoidance (cf. USA and China) prefer big cars with powerful motors such as sport utility vehicles, which signals status. Even though the majority of the American respondents came to associate Volvo with large size vehicles, the cars were not considered to signal status in terms of attracting attention, but rather valued for its high quality.

What is somewhat surprising, especially since the Swedish and American respondents describe Volvo as a brand with a dull design, is that the majority of the Chinese respondents share an understanding of the design as beautiful. Not only is the exteriors perceived more favorably by the Chinese respondents, but also the fact that the cars are imported from a foreign country seem to have a positive influence on the overall perception of the brand. Taking into account De Mooij's (2010) findings that long-term oriented cultures have a preference of cars of European make, it is likely that the respondents' knowledge of the fact that the cars were imported from Europe contribute to the image of the vehicles eye catching and exciting. Furthermore, De Mooij (2010) also found that members in high power distance and collectivist cultures (cf. China) have a preference of cars with an 'international image' functioning as an indicator of status. Considering that "Scandinavian design" is stated as one of Volvo's core values (Volvo Cars, 2012g), the heritage is an important and visible component in Volvo's communication, hence should be regarded as factor that might add uniqueness to the brand.

Furthermore, it seems the car size also adds a certain kind of value. Clearly, the findings show that Chinese respondents prefer large size cars, which supports De Mooij's (2010) findings that cultures with the configuration high masculinity and weak uncertainty avoidance (cf. China) prefer big cars as they are considered to signal status.

The price is another factor that is likely to influence the brand image. Bearing in mind the fact that the Chinese respondents are the only ones that perceive Volvos as extremely expensive cars, assumingly this has a major impact on how respondents perceive the brand, and most likely contributes in the image of Volvo as a status symbol. This would fall in line with De Mooij's (2010) findings that a high price delivers status in collectivistic cultures, which is because a high price also signals quality, social status, prestige and belonging.

Overall, the associations provided by the respondents that came to shape the brand image support the theory within Keller's (1998) model of brand knowledge that the associations consumers have of a brand in mind can be formed by both product related as well as non-product related attributes. Interesting is that the respondents seem to be aware of most of Volvo's core values, even though features such as safety, design and quality are not always perceived in a similar way. Noteworthy is though that there is a lack of associations with regards to the environmental issues. Considering the fact that care for the environment is stated as one of the core values (Volvo Cars, 2012f), it is somewhat surprising that this dimension did not seem to be prioritized among the respondents.

The disclosure of personality traits helped to further understand the respondents' feelings and attitudes towards the brand. Noteworthy is that all respondents described the brand personality according to the image they had of Swedes/Europeans, which indicates that the country or region where the brand is manufactured plays an important role in the brand image perception. Whereas most associations towards brand heritage seems to be of a positive kind, one Chinese male addresses differences in cultural values as an obstacle why he is not able to identify with Volvo. The description of Europeans as dependent people, strictly separating between work –and private life mirrors Hofstede's (2001) research of Sweden as an individualistic culture. It shows that the country from which the brand originates also can bring forth negative associations.

The current study found that most of the traits provided by the respondents can be linked to Aaker's (1997) brand personality scale. The traits provided by the Swedish respondents, which were clustered into the *peacefulness* dimension resembles values important in feminine cultures where modesty is highly valued (cf. Hofstede, 2001). The same dimension also emerged in the American sample. Previous studies (e.g. Aaker et al., 2001) found ruggedness to be a culture-specific dimension for the United States; however, the same results were not obtained in the current study. Taking into account that the American respondents viewed Volvo as a low profile brand not considered to attract much attention, the peacefulness dimension might serve to represent this view. The dimensions of *excitement, sophistication* and *ruggedness* that emerged in the Chinese sample indicate that the Chinese respondents attach a meaning to Volvo, which are more in line with the needs of their own culture,

reflecting values important in masculine and high power distance societies (cf. Hofstede, 2001).

The findings show that there are both similarities and differences in brand images across the national cultures with the biggest discrepancy between the Chinese and the Swedish and American respondents. Overall, this study shows that one global brand can have different meanings to people in different cultures and that culture can influence the perception of a brand, in line with McCracken's (1986) study that brands can communicate cultural meaning.

The differences in brand image perceptions clearly indicate that it is important for international businesses and marketers to adjust their marketing programs according to the consumer culture, and develop local executions for each market's needs. In addition, by identifying differences in brand images between males and female consumers, it creates opportunities for marketers to communicate an image that appeal and satisfies the demands and needs of both genders. The present study shows that the Swedish and American respondents – both males and females – display considerable similarities in brand image perception, whereas within the Chinese sample, the females seem to share an understanding of Volvo as a brand that is able to evoke feelings of excitement.

Although the study does not display significant differences in brand images within each of the three samples, it shows that males and females can attach different meanings to one and the same brand, thus marketers need to pay attention not only to cultural but also to gender differences in the markets where the brand operates in order to create appropriate marketing strategies.

5.1 Practical Implications

The findings from the research study provide useful insights for businesses and marketers who seek to market their brands in foreign countries. It shows the importance of firstly seeking information about and understanding the cultural specifics in the target countries before implementing marketing strategies and activities. Brand image research, which put the consumer in focus, is advantageous for marketers who can better understand how consumers use and think of products, their desires and tastes. When businesses and marketers understand what reside in the minds of the consumers it opens up possibilities for them to create communication strategies that appeal to the target audience. For instance, advertisements that position products as status symbols might be more effective in large power distance societies; whereas ad campaigns in high masculine cultures might be more successful when emphasizing values such as competition and performance. Further, the concept of brand personality can help companies understand how brands express and represent themselves in different countries, which creates advantages for marketers as it enables for them to position the brand in a way that fits the consumer culture. This study shows the necessity to adapt communication strategies to the culture of the consumer.

5.2 Limitations

The main limitation of the study is the size of the sample and the representativeness of the sample to their represented cultures. 12 participants took part in the study, which is a relatively small number. If a greater number of participants would have been used, the generalizability of the findings would have increased. Furthermore, only one cultural framework is applied in this study, namely the cultural model developed by Hofstede (2001). In consideration of this, the findings of the study might be limited as the cultural dimensions may not have captured all details and facets that were present. Nevertheless, the author found that Hofstede's cultural framework was the most relevant model for the study as it has been applied to a number of areas within global branding and used by many researchers. Another limitation was the researcher's involvement in the study. However, as a qualitative study is heavily dependent on the researcher's interpretation a certain degree of subjectivity is unavoidable. Also, a limitation concerned the language barrier in conducting interviews via Skype. It would perhaps have been more beneficial to provide the respondents with the interview questions before carrying out the actual interview. In this way they respondents if not comprehending some questions or words would have been able to rely on the written communication. In addition, the inconsistency in respondents' familiarity with the brand (see Table 2) might have an influence on the results.

5.3 Suggestion for Future Studies

In view of the findings of this research, it is clear that more studies are needed to further explore brand image perception across national cultures. Firstly, future studies should investigate more closely how culture actually influences brand perceptions. Interesting would be to conduct a more extensive study in terms of size of the samples and in terms of the national cultures covered by the study. Also, it would be beneficial to conduct a study including a larger number of brands. Besides the application of Hofstede's (2001) five cultural dimensions, future studies could use other cultural frameworks that have been developed (e.g. Hall, 1976; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1994; Schwarz, 1992). Furthermore, it would be ideal to apply a mixed method approach, i.e. using both qualitative and quantitative data to ensure that future studies are generalizable.

6. CONCLUSION

The key objective of this study was to investigate how the image of one global brand, namely Volvo, is perceived across three national cultures. To fully address the research questions: *What are the images of the Volvo brand as perceived by individuals across three national cultures, namely Sweden, China and the USA? To what extent do these images differ between men and women across these national cultures? How are cultural and gender differences concerning brand images of importance for localized market communication?* a qualitative research approach was applied. Twelve participants from Sweden, the United States and China were interviewed providing a rich picture of how the Volvo brand image varies across cultures.

The findings from the study show that there are both differences and similarities in the brand image perception of Volvo with the biggest discrepancy between the Chinese and the Swedish and American respondents. The different images of the same brand can be explained in terms cultural differences, as most associations were found to reflect values and beliefs in the national cultures investigated, based on the application of Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions.

The Swedish and American respondents conveyed an image of Volvo as a low profile and traditional brand with a wide and loyal customer base, recognized for its high quality, the cars able to deliver safety, reliability, durability, stability, comfort and practicality. In light of this, Volvo was strongly associated to as the ideal family car, providing value in terms of functional aspects. In contrast, the Chinese respondents shared an image of Volvo as an expensive, upscale and attractive brand, mainly driven by men. Further, the brand value was emphasized in terms of propensity to signal high status.

The comparison of image perceptions by means of Aaker's (1997) brand personality dimensions provided a richer understanding of respondents' feelings and attitudes towards the brand. The results show that all respondents perceive Volvo as a *competent* brand. However, differences could also be detected in brand personality perception. Whereas the Chinese respondents further experienced Volvo through Aaker's dimensions of *excitement, sophistication* and *ruggedness*, the Swedish and American respondents provided traits, of which most could be linked the *sincerity* and *peacefulness* dimensions, the latter added to Aaker's (1997) original framework.

The differences in brand images including the variations in brand personality structures clearly indicate that the Swedish and American respondents share similarities in brand images, whereas the Chinese respondents attach a completely different meaning to the same brand. Hence, the research shows that one global brand can have different meanings to people across national cultures as a result of differences in values and beliefs. Further, the study found that the associations differed slightly between the genders within the Chinese sample where the female respondents shared a view of Volvo as more exciting in comparison to their male counterparts.

The study provides important implications for international businesses who seek to market their brands in foreign countries. It shows the importance of seeking information about and understanding the wants and needs of the target consumers, which also includes identifying

differences and similarities between genders. When marketers understand the cultural context in which the brand operates it opens up possibilities for them to adjust their marketing programs according to the consumer culture and develop local executions for each market's needs.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Brand Personality Scale

Appendix A
A BRAND PERSONALITY SCALE
(Means and Standard Deviations)*

Traits	Mean	Standard Deviation	Facet	Facet Name	Factor Name	Mean	Standard Deviation
down-to-earth	2.92	1.35	(1a)	Down-to-earth	Sincerity	2.72	.99
family-oriented	3.07	1.44	(1a)				
small-town	2.26	1.31	(1a)				
honest	3.02	1.35	(1b)	Honest			
sincere	2.82	1.34	(1b)				
real	3.28	1.33	(1b)				
wholesome	2.81	1.36	(1c)	Wholesome			
original	3.19	1.36	(1c)				
cheerful	2.66	1.33	(1d)	Cheerful			
sentimental	2.23	1.26	(1d)				
friendly	2.95	1.37	(1d)				
daring	2.54	1.36	(2a)	Daring	Excitement	2.79	1.05
trendy	2.95	1.39	(2a)				
exciting	2.79	1.38	(2a)				
spirited	2.81	1.38	(2b)	Spirited			
cool	2.75	1.39	(2b)				
young	2.73	1.40	(2b)				
imaginative	2.81	1.35	(2c)	Imaginative			
unique	2.89	1.36	(2c)				
up-to-date	3.60	1.30	(2d)	Up-to-date			
independent	2.99	1.36	(2d)				
contemporary	3.00	1.32	(2d)				
reliable	3.63	1.28	(3a)	Reliable	Competence	3.17	1.02
hard working	3.17	1.43	(3a)				
secure	3.05	1.37	(3a)				
intelligent	2.96	1.39	(3b)	Intelligent			
technical	2.54	1.39	(3b)				
corporate	2.79	1.45	(3b)				
successful	3.69	1.32	(3c)	Successful			
leader	3.34	1.39	(3c)				
confident	3.33	1.36	(3c)				
upper class	2.85	1.42	(4a)	Upper class	Sophistication	2.66	1.02
glamorous	2.50	1.39	(4a)				
good looking	2.97	1.42	(4a)				
charming	2.43	1.30	(4b)	Charming			
feminine	2.43	1.43	(4b)				
smooth	2.74	1.34	(4b)				
outdoorsy	2.41	1.40	(5a)	Outdoorsy	Ruggedness	2.49	1.08
masculine	2.45	1.42	(5a)				
Western	2.05	1.33	(5a)				
tough	2.88	1.43	(5b)	Tough			
rugged	2.62	1.43	(5b)				

Figure 9: Brand personality scale by J.L. Aaker (1997, p. 354).

Swedish perception of Volvo's brand personality

S1 (male)	S2 (male)	S3 (female)	S4 (female)
Dependable	Secure	Experienced	Competent
Experienced	Reliable	Firm	Consistent
Persistent	Family-oriented	Intelligent	Experienced
Reliable	Friendly	Leader	Intelligent
Secure	Nice	Orderly	Knowledgeable
Low profile		Persistent	Neat
Moderate		Reliable	Orderly
Masculine		Secure	Organized
Down-to-earth		Serious	Persistent
Family-oriented		Stable	Reliable
Friendly		Charismatic	Responsible
Mature		Calm	Secure
Practical		Low profile	Successful
		Mundane	Calm
		Peaceful	Low profile
		Relaxed	Moderate
		Compassionate	Sensitive
		Considerate	Masculine
		Family-oriented	Balanced
		Friendly	Down-to-earth
		Honest	Friendly
		Humble	Family-oriented
		Mature	Mature
		Nice	Practical
		Polite	Wholesome
		Practical	
		Sincere	
		Sympathetic	
		Thoughtful	

Table 10: Individual brand personality perceptions and dimensions according to Aaker (1997) and the *peacefulness* dimension added by the author.

Competence: Blue
Excitement: Red
Peacefulness: Green
Ruggedness: Black
Sophistication: Orange
Sincerity: Purple

Chinese perception of Volvo's brand personality

C1 (male)	C2 (male)	C3 (female)	C4 (female)
Consistent	Intelligent	Ambitious	Intelligent
Confident	Leader	Independent	Leader
Hardworking	Responsible	Reliable	Reliable
Independent	Secure	Stable	Secure
Organized	Successful	Successful	Successful
Punctual	Cool	Active	Cool
Reliable	Popular	Energetic	Popular
Secure	Unique	Famous	Unique
Successful	Low-profile	Popular	Masculine
Active	Masculine	Unique	Strong
Curious	Strong	Masculine	Tough
Outgoing	Western	Outdoorsy	Western
Popular	Attractive	Western	Good-looking
Unique	Good-looking	Good-looking	Sophisticated
Gentle	Sophisticated	Upper class	Upper class
Low-profile	Upper class		
Peaceful	Family-oriented		
Relaxed	Friendly		
Restricted			
Masculine			
Outdoorsy			
Elegant			
Handsome			
Sophisticated			
High class			
Balanced			
Down-to-earth			
Honest			
Friendly			

Table 11: Individual brand personality perceptions and dimensions according to Aaker (1997) and a *peacefulness* dimension added by the author.

Competence: Blue
Excitement: Red
Peacefulness: Green
Ruggedness: Black
Sophistication: Orange
Sincerity: Purple

The American perception of Volvo's brand personality

U1 (male)	U2 (male)	U3 (female)	U4 (female)
Experienced	Consistent	Consistent	Consistent
Hardworking	Dependable	Dependable	Hardworking
Intelligent	Hardworking	Logical	Intelligent
Professional	Intelligent	Rational	Meticulous
Reliable	Punctual	Reliable	Persistent
Secure	Reliable	Calm	Punctual
Serious	Responsible	Laid-back	Reliable
Successful	Low profile	Low profile	Secure
Low profile	Outdoorsy	Outdoorsy	Stable
Modest	Down-to-earth	Down-to-earth	Talented
Unassuming	Family-oriented	Friendly	Cautious
Down-to-earth	Friendly	Practical	Low profile
Family-oriented	Honest		Relaxed
Friendly	Nice		Sensible
Nice	Practical		Down-to-earth
	Wholesome		Family-oriented
			Friendly
			Helpful
			Honest
			Mature
			Practical

Table 12: Individual brand personality perceptions and dimensions according to Aaker (1997) and a *peacefulness* dimension added by the author.

Competence: Blue
Excitement: Red
Peacefulness: Green
Ruggedness: Black
Sophistication: Orange
Sincerity: Purple

Cross-cultural comparison of brand personality traits

Sweden	China	USA
Consistent	Ambitious	Consistent
Confident	Confident	Dependable
Competent	Consistent	Experienced
Dependable	Dependable	Hardworking
Experienced	Hardworking	Intelligent
Firm	Independent	Logical
Intelligent	Intelligent	Meticulous
Knowledgeable	Leader	Professional
Leader	Organized	Punctual
Logical	Punctual	Rational
Neat	Reliable	Reliable
Orderly	Responsible	Responsible
Organized	Secure	Secure
Persistent	Stable	Stable
Rational	Successful	Successful
Reliable	Active	Talented
Responsible	Cool	Cautious
Secure	Curious	Calm
Serious	Elegant	Laid-back
Stable	Energetic	Low-profile
Successful	Famous	Modest
Charismatic	Outgoing	Relaxed
Calm	Popular	Sensible
Low profile	Unique	Unassuming
Moderate	Gentle	Outdoorsy
Mundane	Low-profile	Down-to-earth
Peaceful	Peaceful	Family-oriented
Relaxed	Relaxed	Friendly
Sensitive	Restricted	Helpful
Masculine	Masculine	Honest
Balanced	Outdoorsy	Mature
Compassionate	Rugged	Nice
Considerate	Tough	Practical
Down-to-earth	Western	Truthful
Family-oriented	Attractive	
Friendly	Elegant	
Honest	Good-looking/ handsome	
Humble	Sophisticated	
Mature	Upper-class	
Nice	Balanced	
Polite	Down-to-earth	
Practical	Family-oriented	
Sincere	Friendly	
Sympathetic	Honest	
Thoughtful		
Wholesome		

Table 13: Personality traits and dimensions according to Aaker (1997) and a *peacefulness* dimension added by the author.

Appendix 2: Interview Guide

     Warm up
     Demographics

1. **Free association task**
   What comes first to your mind when I say Volvo?
   Why?

2. **Brand awareness**
   History, symbols, sponsorships, country-of-origin etc.

3. **Brand familiarity**
   When was your first encounter with the brand?
   Stories?

4. **User imagery**
   Age, gender, profession, hobbies etc.

5. **Brand feelings**
   Can you describe the experience of driving a Volvo?
   How do you think people around you perceive you while driving a Volvo?

6. **Brand personality**
   Volvo as a person
   Volvo as a celebrity
   Volvo as an occupation
   Volvo as an animal
   Volvo as an activity