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**IMAGE AS A FACTOR FOR INCREASING THE COMPETITIVENESS OF THE
COMPANY ON THE MARKET**

521.04. MARKETING AND LOGISTICS

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CONCEPTUAL RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

The actuality and importance of the problem addressed. As the economic activity of businesses becomes global, companies have the task and obligation to compete in a much more competitive environment, where issues such as the image that companies create both internally and externally become crucial. A company with an inferior image does not position itself distinctively in the market and thus cannot gain a sustainable competitive advantage over its competitors, and the lack of competitive advantage leads directly to the disappearance of the company from the market. At the present stage, competing in the market is a challenging task. In addition to the fact that a company must make a continuous effort to streamline its operations to maintain its competitiveness, it also must compete with other companies that carry out similar, and in some cases even identical, activities. Increased competition has led to a much wider range of products and services which makes it even more difficult to make a purchasing decision. Today's consumer has dozens and hundreds of similar offers, communicated through similar channels, to choose from. This speaks of an identity crisis among companies lost in the crowd, or in other words, a lack of a distinctive image to facilitate purchasing decisions. Developing strategies aimed at the sustainable development of a company's image in the market, exploiting opportunities and using the tools offered by marketing science and practice can make a crucial contribution to strengthening a distinctive image in the mind of the consumer that influences the purchasing decision, so that the company can gain and maintain sustainable competitive advantages.

Description of the situation in the research area. Relevant to the present research was the work dealing with aspects related to the evolution of the concept of image reflected through the prism of corporate identity: Newman W. (1953) uses the term image, comparing human personality with corporate image [24, p. 15]. Mitchell A. (1982) redefines the concept with a simplistic definition, later updated by Keller K. (1993) and Kotler P. (2001) [p. 21, p. 946]. De Chernatony (1999), approaches the concept of image as a reflection of corporate identity, studying it from both an organizational and marketing perspective [10, p. 159]. Dutton J. and Dukerich J., approach image strictly from an organizational perspective [13, p. 520] and then Alvesson M. puts forward a definition that encompasses both aspects [2, p. 375]. Balmer J., Greyser, S. (2003), discusses corporate identity, presenting five types of identity where two or more identities can co-exist if they are effectively managed [4, p. 58]. Davies G. (2007) presents the enterprise image from two perspectives (employees, consumers) [8], Aaker D. (2009) links image to enterprise identity [1, p. 140]. In the Republic of Moldova, the subject of corporate image is insufficiently researched, being

tangentially addressed by Mitnițaia L., Belostecinic G. In the context of economic competitiveness, image is addressed as a source of competitive advantage by authors such as Gary E., Balmer J., Belostecinic G., Guțu C., Bragoi D. [4, 5]. Porter M. (2008) defines the competitive environment [22], Graham J., Nigel F., Piercy B (2017) address the characteristics of resources creating competitive advantage [22], and Collins D., Montgomery C. perceive image as a source of competitive advantage difficult to imitate [8]. Regarding tools and methods for measuring corporate image, the literature is ambiguous, with no consensus among specialists on how to conduct the measurement. Dowling (1993), Riel C. (1997), Flavian et al put forward a multitude of methods that are either structured (surveys) or unstructured (ZMET technique, projective techniques, etc.) [12]. In studying the image, the researcher must consider the characteristics of the audience, the purpose and nature of the research, the visual identity of the company and the relationships that exist between its identity types.

Following the study of the literature in the field (part of which is mentioned above), **the scientific problem** was identified: the lack of clarity and knowledge of the concept of image as a source of competitive advantage in the Republic of Moldova, which led **to the formulation of the research question**: how can we measure the image of an enterprise and what are the sustainable strategies for developing and strengthening the competitiveness of the enterprise through image?

The aim of the paper is to develop methods of analysis and management of the image of enterprises that result in strategies that effectively use marketing tools to increase competitiveness.

Research objectives:

1. Identify and delineate conceptual approaches to image and identity.
2. Examine image as a source of competitive advantage.
3. Identify the tools and methods for image measurement.
4. Investigate the competitiveness of the Republic of Moldova in the global competitive context.
5. Delineate the specifics of the competitiveness of the clothing sector through the prism of image.
6. Analyze and evaluate the image of local brands Iuvas, Maicom, Vasconi.
7. Develop strategies to improve the image of companies.

Research hypothesis. *Analysis and evaluation of a company's image by the target audience could help to make marketing strategies more effective to increase the company's competitiveness in the market.*

In *analysis and evaluation*, we include methods of data analysis and interpretation adapted to the local context, which provide a clear picture of how the target audience, represented by consumers, perceives the image of the company.

Research methodology. The given research is interdisciplinary, descriptive, applied with logical-deductive and quantitative approaches. The following methods were applied to conduct the research: scientific abstraction, analysis, synthesis, observation, questioning, data collection, statistical methods of data processing and analysis, quantitative and qualitative interpretation.

Scientific novelty and originality. It lies in the research of the concept of image and identity of the enterprise in the context of economic competitiveness and in the advancement of an operational framework (process) of strategic image management based on which the enterprise will continuously improve the competitiveness of the enterprise through image.

The important scientific problem solved in the research is to identify and develop methods and techniques of image measurement that consider the specifics of stakeholders and to put forward an operational framework for strategic image management that includes guidelines for strengthening the competitiveness of enterprises in the Republic of Moldova to make marketing activity more efficient.

The theoretical significance of the research is highlighted by the in-depth study of all the constructs defining the concept of image and the ambiguity of the term in the literature.

The applied value of the work is represented by the analysis of the competitiveness of the clothing sector, the development of methods for measuring the image of the enterprise, the evaluation of the image of the domestic brands Iuvas, Maicom, Vasconi and the development of an operational framework for strategic management of the enterprise image.

Main scientific results submitted forward.

1. Theoretical and methodological aspects of image, identity, competitiveness, and strategies to increase the competitiveness of the enterprise through image.
2. Tools and methods for measuring the image of enterprises in the Republic of Moldova.
3. Directions for increasing enterprise competitiveness through strategic management of enterprise image.
4. Sustainable strategies to improve the image of the enterprise on the market.

Approval of scientific results. Research results have been presented in eight publications, in peer-reviewed journals, in national and international conference proceedings with participation and in other papers specific to scientific fields.

Implementation of scientific results. The results of the scientific approach have been implemented in practice within the company Iuvas SRL, the PR and Communication Department of the University Divitia Gratiae, within the subject Marketing Management taught to the master students at the International Institute TCMI, Austria, within the business trainings organized by the company Advanced Consulting SRL in cooperation with the Swiss organization COM International.

Summary of the thesis chapters. The content of the thesis includes annotations in Romanian, English and Russian, introduction, three chapters, general conclusions and recommendations, bibliography (113 sources), seven appendices. In total, the thesis contains 156 pages of basic text (up to Bibliography), thirty-four figures and forty tables. The results of the thesis were published in eight scientific papers.

Keywords: marketing, image, identity, brand, competitiveness, competitive advantage, measurement methods, Republic of Moldova, positioning, competitive strategies, integrated communications.

THESIS CONTENT

Chapter I - Theoretical and methodological approaches to the image and competitiveness of the company on the market - includes a theoretical study of the concept of image as a component of marketing activity in the historical context and highlights the essential elements that define the concept of image in relation to company identity. Being a little researched field in the Republic of Moldova, the concept of image has been highlighted in the context of similar notions and definitions that are often contradictory. Understood as a sensory reflection in the human mind, image can be a decisive factor in assessing how the consumer identifies with the company. The term corporate image was first used in 1953 by Newman W. who compared the human personality with the corporate image. Since that time, the concept of image in business has developed within the emerging sciences, particularly in the fields of communications, management, and marketing of organizations. If we look at the evolution of the concept of image, it comes from fields such as graphic design, where the emphasis was on choosing the right name, how this name is illustrated and displayed, how the logo is designed, the colors used and all the elements that make up the corporate visual identity of an organization. It also includes marketing communications such as brochures, leaflets and, more recently, websites, official social media pages, etc. Within a company's marketing activities, communication includes all marketing tools designed to convey the company's offer to the market. The purpose of marketing communication is to persuade or influence the consumer to buy the company's products/services by presenting them as the best solution to meet the consumer's needs compared to those offered by competitors.

In today's context, the concept of image takes on a much broader meaning, since everything a company does or does not do has an impact on the perception, performance, products, and services it offers. Thus, when viewed from a marketing perspective, corporate image management becomes a management tool for building and communicating a corporate identity. In image management, the integrated approach conveys the identity of the organization, which is made up of all its constituent parts. While image is interdependent on a company's reputation, the former depends on beliefs, attitudes, impressions, and other variables that derive from company information, employee attitudes and organizational philosophy. From the above definitions, it can be concluded that image is a set of perceptions created in the minds of stakeholders and is the basis on which a company's identity, preferences, positive or negative attitudes conveyed by the company are formed. Regarding the psychological connotation of the term, image is the tendency to reduce a large number of meanings into frames, conclusions or stereotypes that aim to simplify

the individual's relationship with the environment. A company's image, which reflects its identity or what the company itself represents, is created by projecting an identity to influence purchase intentions, willingness to invest, or willingness to interact with the company [16, p. 218]. In the literature, the term identity is viewed from both an organizational perspective and a marketing perspective, which focuses more on corporate identity. De Chernatony L. argues that organizational identity, in general, refers to what organizational members perceive, feel, and think about any organization and is seen as a collective, shared understanding of the values and distinctive characteristics that the organization possesses [10, p. 159]. We have identified that a company can create and strengthen a sustainable competitive advantage by effectively managing how it is perceived, and this can be achieved through corporate identity [10, p. 161]. Through this, companies demonstrate certain differentiating characteristics to all stakeholders, thereby creating a powerful differentiator, a tool for creating long-term dependency relationships and a reliable mechanism for delivering value. By creating, maintaining, and reinforcing value based on a strong, distinctive, and unique identity, a company can achieve strategic goals and gain a competitive advantage over competitors [11, p.443].

In our study of the marketing literature, we found that few authors consider internal organizational aspects when referring to the concept of organizational image. Compared to the marketing literature, the organizational literature focuses exclusively on internal elements. Authors such as Dutton J. and Dukerich J. have defined image as "how members of an organization believe they are seen by others" [13, p. 520]. Another approach by which image can be defined is the ideal corporate image. The definitions provided in the organizational literature differ from those in the marketing literature, as the latter focuses more on external company images that are developed by stakeholders (consumers, suppliers, etc.). In marketing terms, an image is a construct formed from the audience's impressions, which is shaped to fit the audience. This implies that the image can be deliberately manipulated by management to be perceived by external audiences. At a conceptual level, we have pointed out that corporate image is analogous to brand image. Both involve the consumer's point of view and represent an overall assessment in terms of beliefs, moods, and feelings. Studied from the psychological and behavioral point of view of the consumer, image is a processing of information, but when combined with corporate identity, we highlight the critical differences between these concepts. Corporate identity is usually studied from a managerial perspective, where the main objective is to convey how the company wants to be perceived by the

public. On the other hand, corporate identity is the result of how the public has processed the information about the company that it has internalized.

Enterprise identity management also generates a number of benefits for employees. Identity serves as a force for motivating employees and gaining a higher level of employee support. Corporate identity also allows employees to adapt more easily to the organizational culture and serves as an integrating force in mergers and acquisitions [19]. According to Balmer J. and Greyser S., corporate identity should not be seen as a monolithic phenomenon, but as a phenomenon consisting of several types of identity. In their view, a company can have several identities and they can co-exist if they are effectively managed [4, p. 58]. At the same time, Balmer J. and Greyser S. put forward five types of identity: actual, communicated, conceived, ideal, desired. Table 1 presents a summary of identity concepts.

Table 1. Concepts of identity through the 5 types of identity

Concept	Doctrine origins	Description	Link to the five types of identities
Corporate Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Marketing Communication Graphic design 	The combination of attributes that differentiate a company.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Current Communicated Designed Ideal Desired
Corporate branding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Marketing Economics Strategy 	Derived from a company's identity and framed in a positioning statement that highlights the brand's tangible and intangible attributes. Brand reputation serves as a company's bond with key stakeholders.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Current Communicated Designed Ideal Desired
Image and reputation of the company	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Marketing Economics Social psychology Strategy 	The organization's perception of an individual, group, or groups at a point in time (image), over time (reputation) and the added value gained from a good reputation (esteem).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Designed
Total corporate communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Marketing and communication 	The multitude of ways the company communicates: <i>Primary</i> - product performance, organizational behavior. <i>Secondary</i> - advertising, PR, graphic design, sponsorship, and other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communicated

		forms of controlled communication. <i>Tertiary</i> - word-of-mouth.	
Corporate personality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Marketing Psychology Organizational behavior 	Focus on the organizational culture of the company with the involvement of the founder's personality in identity formation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Current Desired
Organizational identity/identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organizational behavior 	Focus on organizational culture by emphasizing employee commitment to the company.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Current
Corporate culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organizational behavior 	The mix of values and subcultural groups that is a major element of an organization's real identity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Current
Organizational leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organizational behavior 	The role of founders and leaders in shaping company identity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Current Desired
Organizational history	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Business history Reputation studies 	The continuing importance and influence of historical roots on the company.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Current Designed Communicated Ideal
Corporate strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategy 	Game plan of the company.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ideal
Company structure and architecture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategy 	Relationships between the parent company and other business units.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Current Ideal
Visual Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Graphic design 	Company visual identification system applied to products, uniforms, buildings, machinery, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Current Communicated Ideal Desired

Source: adapted by the author based on Balmer J., Greyser S. [4]

A company's ideal identity should be the focus of all corporate communications. One problem that Balmer J. and Greyser S. highlight when referring to identity types is that due to lack of alignment between all identity types, companies can face identity problems [4, p. 250]. Since company image reflects stakeholders, stakeholders also have a different impact on the five identity types (Table 2).

Table 1.2. Impact of stakeholders on identity types

Identity type	Involved stakeholders
Current	Internal (all those who make up the organization).
Communicated	Internal (marketing communications, marketing department).

	Company marketing partners (marketing agencies, communications). Media (those who interpret the company).
Designed	External audiences (customers, consumers, financial communities, society, financial institutions, etc.).
Ideal	Internally (strategic planning departments, top management). External (financial analysts, regulatory/legislative bodies).
Desired	Internal (CEO, company board).

Source: adapted by the author based on Balmer J., Greyser S. [4]

Image is interdependent on company reputation and depends on beliefs, attitudes, impressions, and other variables derived from company information, employee attitudes and organizational philosophy. Kapferer J. links a company's identity to its image, arguing that image is the result of company identity (Figure 1). When a company expresses its organizational identity, it uses cultural symbolism to present an image that will be interpreted by others. If the company's projected image is contextualized through cultural heritage, the interpretations that external audiences make are contextualized according to their culture. If most members engage in the same organization, the culture-image-identity system holds [17].

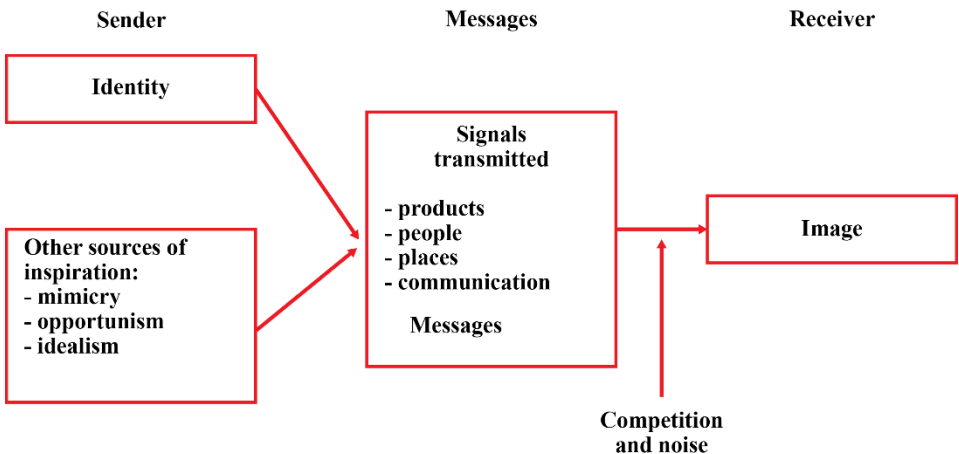


Figure 1. Company image (from identity to image)

Source: adapted by the author after Kapferer J. [16]

Addressing company image in the context of economic competitiveness, we have highlighted that by effectively managing a company's image assets, it can gain certain competitive advantages.

The marketing activity of a company is intended to create superior value for the consumer, thus creating profitable relationships with the consumer [7, p. 15]. The value that a company creates is manifested in high-performance technologies, impeccable service, brand differentiation and more.

If we look at corporate image through the lens of economic competitiveness, it is shaped and communicated to gain competitive advantage. Starting with corporate identity, which through marketing communication creates and shapes the image of the company, this image leads to competitive advantage. Thus, the organizational objectives of the company are both to create a desirable image among the company's stakeholders and to build and maintain a formidable reputation. The competitive environment in which the firm operates can be understood through a systematic analysis of Porter's five forces, and the sustainable competitive advantage that the firm can exploit must be unique to the firm, create value for consumers and be difficult for competitors to obtain or imitate. In this context, one of the main conclusions about image is that it is a hard asset to imitate and provides a solid basis for competitive positioning in the market.

A review of the literature on measuring corporate image and the methods used shows that there is currently no consensus among experts and practitioners on the methodologies that should be used in this process. Methods vary in their structured or unstructured nature, but the focus should be on attitude scales, questionnaire design and data collection. The lack of a universal image measurement method underlines the fact that the image needs to be analyzed and measured through the lens of stakeholders. Thus, in image research, the researcher needs to consider the characteristics of the audience, the purpose and nature of the research, the visual identity of the company and the relationships that exist between the five types of identity. In this regard, the following chapter investigates the competitiveness of the Moldovan light industry through the lens of the image of enterprises in the garment sector, based on which a model of corporate image analysis is developed.

In Chapter II - Competitiveness of the light industry in the Republic of Moldova through the image of the enterprises in the clothing sector, we analyzed one of the oldest and most prosperous branches of the national economy. In the Republic of Moldova, the textile and clothing industry has experienced steady growth after World War II but suffered considerable losses with the transition to a market economy. At the present stage, this branch of industry is on the strategic development agenda as a key branch of the economy, due to the significant and competitive advantages present on the Moldovan market. Thus, light industry accounts for 20% of the volume of exports, 86% of which are exported to EU countries and 14% are consumed by the

local market. In addition to its significant contribution to exports, light industry supports a labor market of 29,000 workers [3]. Most jobs are in rural areas and filled by women. The competitiveness of textile products made in the Republic of Moldova is the result of high-quality finished products, ensured by modern quality control systems, timely fulfilment of orders and fast delivery to all markets, both in the EU and the CIS. Since 2005, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-funded project "Enhancing Competitiveness and Enterprise Development" (CEED) was launched in the Republic of Moldova to increase competitiveness in the most promising sectors of the economy. Through the program, companies were assisted in using certain marketing and sales techniques, merchandising, store planning and color matching to strengthen the image of local products. Several producers have opened their own stores in the country's major cities, such as Chisinau, Balti, and Cahul. Companies such as Tricon, Iuvas, Maicom, Vistline have launched clothing collections under their own brands.

We have shown that the garment sector has benefited enormously from Moldova's good geographical position near the European market. In the last five years, turnover in this sector has accounted for more than half of the turnover of the entire light industry. At this stage, Moldovan companies enjoy a number of unique advantages that further stimulate the growth and development of this sector. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, the garment sector counts about 406 enterprises, of which twenty can be considered large enterprises, 143 SMEs and 243 micro-enterprises. Of the total number, 77% are local companies, 14% are foreign-owned companies and 8% are joint ventures [6].

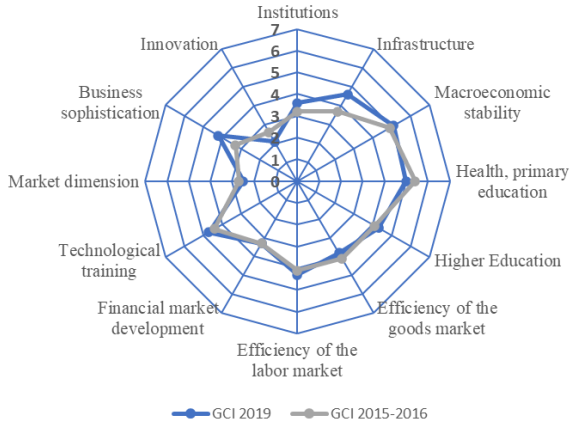


Figure 2. Evolution of Moldova's competitiveness pillars in 2019 compared to 2015-2016
 Source: author's elaboration based on World Economic Forum [25, 26]

An analysis of the competitiveness of the garment sector in the competitive context of the Republic of Moldova was conducted where the main competitiveness indicators were analyzed and the gaps or deficiencies that reduce competitiveness were identified. We analyzed the evolution of the pillars of competitiveness of the RM in dynamics, where current trends were identified (fig. 2).

Analyzing the pillars of Moldova's competitiveness in the regional context (Figure 3), we concluded that compared to neighboring countries, Moldova ranks lowest in the pillars of infrastructure, education, market size and innovation. Although in the last 5 years the infrastructure pillar of the Republic of Moldova has seen some improvements, being ranked not far behind the neighboring countries, the situation in the market size pillar is poor. Moldova is ranked 127th out of 141 positions and faces a big problem in terms of production. The best ranked country is the Russian Federation in sixth position, followed by Romania in 41st position and Ukraine in 47th position.

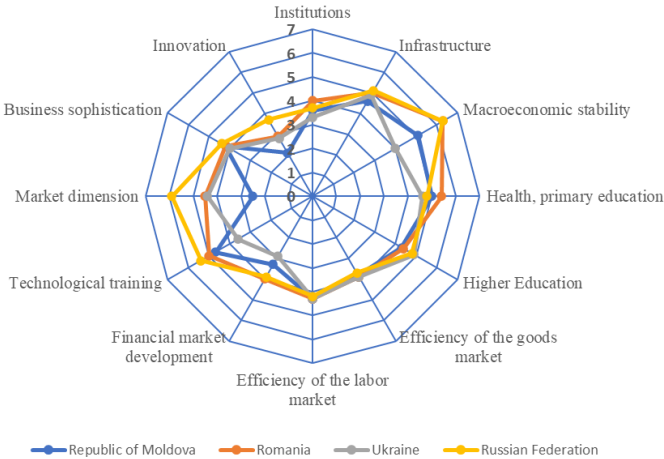


Figure 3. Analysis of the pillars of Moldova's competitiveness with neighboring countries (2019)

Source: author's elaboration based on World Economic Forum [26]

The competitiveness of Moldova's garment sector was analyzed using Michael Porter's "Five Forces of Competitiveness" model, mentioned in the first chapter of the paper. The results of the analysis show that competition in the local market has become much more pronounced in recent years. The risk of new market entry is moderate. The development of economic activities in this area requires small investments compared to other industries. Also, the modernization and upgrading of plants operating in this sector does not require major capital investments. In the last

10 years, more than 150 new companies have been registered, so that in 2020 there will be more than three hundred companies operating in the clothing sector in Moldova. The threat of substitute products: considering the realities of the local market, buyers of Moldovan garments have had access to products from abroad, often with poorer performance, but with aggressive marketing and attractive prices, long before domestic products appeared on the market. Customer bargaining power: the greater the power of customers to demand lower prices and/or better-quality products, the harder it is for producers to make a profit. According to data and analysis conducted by the Moldovan Investment Agency, the garment sector is export-oriented where for the last few years the export share of total manufactured goods is 80% [81]. As regards suppliers, namely the raw material needed by the clothing sector, Gutium T. states that "although the Republic of Moldova is an agrarian country, it does not have a specialization in the field of growing flax, hemp, and/or cotton crops" [15]. Local producers are reluctant to grow these crops due to the lack of a processing industry to take the raw material from farmers and market it to clothing companies. For this reason, local producers must import the raw material, which reduces the competitiveness of the sector. Rivalry between players: since 2010, the Moldovan clothing industry has seen a marked increase in production volumes due to rising demand, particularly on the foreign market.

In the analysis of the Moldovan garment industry, we also used the Porterian diamond model (Fig. 4) which allows the analysis of competitiveness factors at the microeconomic level. It includes the following elements: firm strategy, production factors, demand conditions and related industries.

We concluded that although there is no universal and well-defined method for assessing the competitiveness of enterprises, by looking at the sector to which it belongs, we can get a clear enough overview. Analyzing the global competitiveness indices in dynamics at country level, Porter's 5 forces model and Porter's diamond model, we can observe the dynamics of competitiveness of the garment sector in the Republic of Moldova.

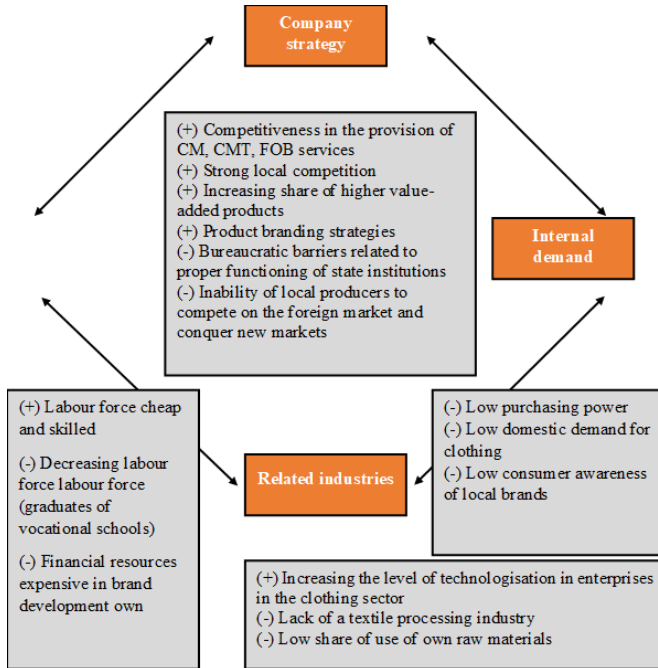


Figure 4. Analysis of factors of competitiveness of Moldovan clothing enterprises using the Porterian Diamond Model

Source: developed by the author

In analyzing the image of the three garment companies, we developed a questionnaire, the purpose of which was to study the image of local clothing companies (with a focus on the brands Iuvas, Maicom, and Vasconi) by identifying the perceptions, attitudes, opinions, and behaviors of buyers towards Moldovan clothing brands. The aim of the study was to identify the perceived image that the public has towards domestic clothing companies, to study their image in the market and to identify a number of factors that can lead to increasing the competitiveness of domestic clothing manufacturers. The questionnaire contained thirty-three questions and was distributed electronically. The data was collected during January-February 2021, when a state of public health emergency was declared in the Republic of Moldova due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. 252 respondents completed the questionnaire. The collected data were subsequently processed, validated, and interpreted using IBM SPSS statistical software. Following the interpretation of the data we can conclude that the attitude towards local brands is very favorable, the respondents know the local brands and are ready to purchase the products if they meet several criteria, including

product quality, style, price, and image of the manufacturer. One of the most important conclusions from the study of these three competitors is that to some extent they are all perceived the same (Fig. 5), where the most predominant brand associations are: Moldovan, family, convenience, and affordability.

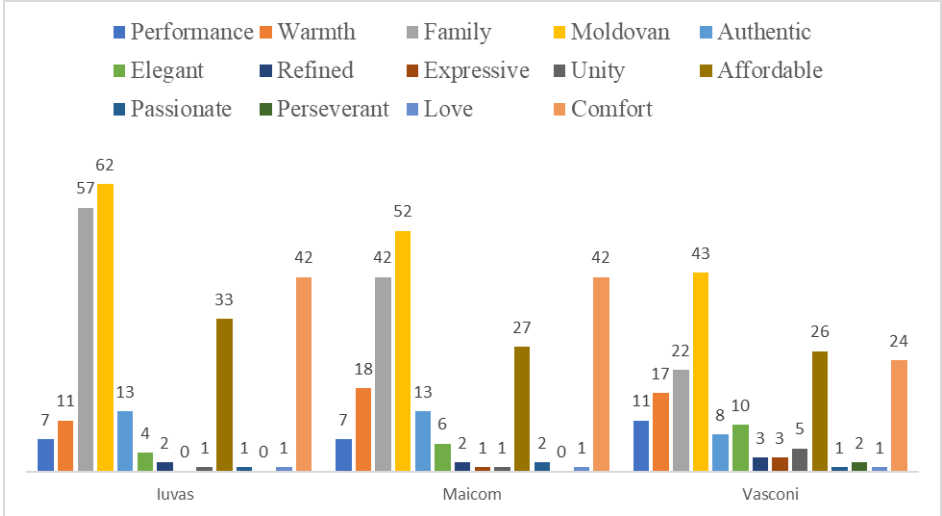


Figure 5. Brand associations for Iuvas, Maicom, Vasconi brands

Source: developed by the author

All three companies included in the study had a negative NPS score which highlights that these companies need to make a considerable effort in improving their service, product range, and models. By analyzing company image through the lens of consumer associations, we gain a deeper understanding of how companies need to develop their marketing strategy and mixes, which are addressed in the next chapter of this paper, which presents sustainable strategies aimed at strengthening companies' competitiveness using the concept of image.

In **Chapter III - Sustainable strategies to develop and strengthen the competitiveness of enterprises through image**, we have highlighted the crucial role that branding and integrated communications play in the development of the corporate image. The corporate image management process starts long before the design and creation of the company's visual attributes such as logo, slogan, color palette used, style of business units, etc. It starts with the vision, the mission of the company which should be reflected in the leadership and culture of the company. The determination of the company's vision and mission results in the company's corporate identity

or personality, tangible characteristics that are manifested through the corporate culture, values, and behavioral norms within the organization. The corporate identity also defines the organizational style, which is the way the company conducts its business, how it uses financial, material, and human resources in its work. Corporate identity also represents the system of communication channels, symbols, elements, colors, logos that reflect the personality of the company. The corporate identity must reflect the company's vision and mission. Once the character is defined, the company must decide how and in what way it will communicate this to its target groups. The way it is communicated and the In order to continuously improve the company's competitiveness through a proactive approach to image, we have developed and put forward an operational framework for strategic corporate image management (fig. 6), based on 4 steps, aimed at strengthening and improving the company's image so that image assets serve as a source of sustainable competitive advantage.

The first stage involves the entire leadership/management team of the company and aims to define the corporate identity with which the company wants to be associated in the market. Once the desired corporate identity has been established, there follows an assessment of the company's marketing alignment, an activity that is the responsibility of the marketing department and which tracks the degree of marketing alignment among the company's top management, marketing department and employees. Following the enterprise marketing alignment assessment, it is up to the enterprise leadership team to analyze areas of alignment/non-alignment, to use the information gained from the enterprise identity assessment and to define the desired image.

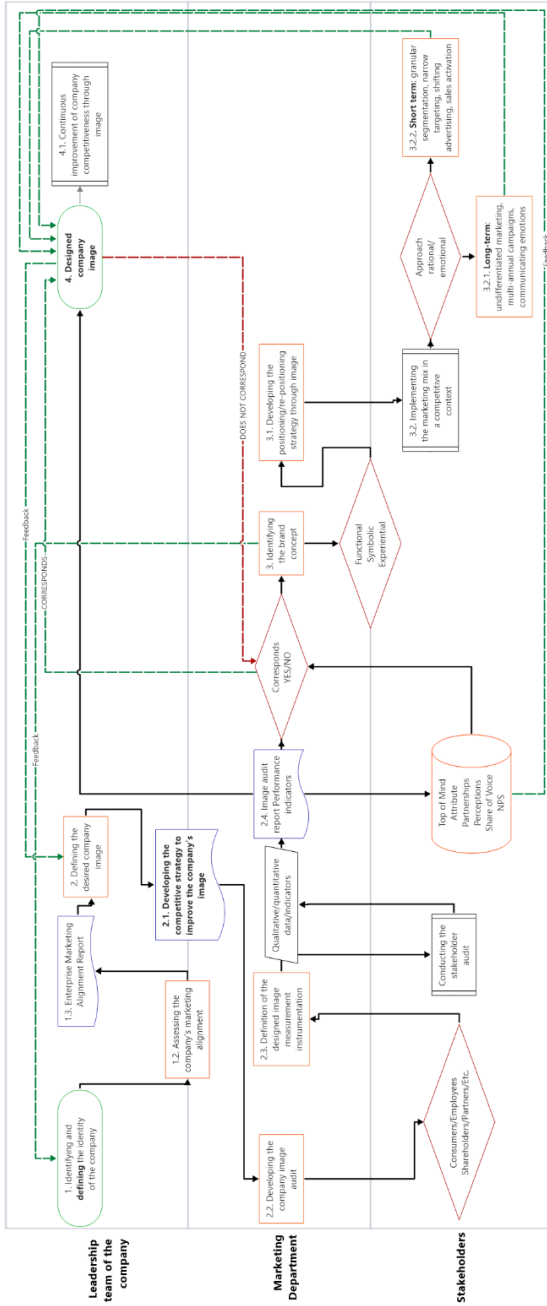


Figure 6. Operational Framework for Strategic Corporate Image Management
Source: developed by the author

The second stage continues with close collaboration between the management team and the marketing department and involves developing a competitive strategy to improve the company's image. The marketing department's task is to develop an image audit of the company among stakeholders (consumers, shareholders, partners, employees, etc.). The marketing department defines the image measurement tools designed and conducts the audit among stakeholders. This process results in obtaining data, qualitative and quantitative indicators on the basis of which an image audit report will be generated reflecting among other indicators such as top of mind, attributes, associations, perceptions, share of voice, NPS score, and others.

The third stage involves identifying a brand concept based on which the company wants to position itself in the market. This can be functional, symbolic, or experiential, depending on the field of activity and the types of products and/or services the company offers. The brand concept should be chosen according to the stakeholders and should lead to the development of a positioning/repositioning strategy through image. The given strategy is the basis on which the marketing mix of the company is developed and implemented in the competitive context. The marketing toolkit on the promotion and communication side must be applied considering the strategic objectives of the company in both the short and long term. In the short term, the company pursues a targeted approach, using narrow segments, changeable advertising, all aimed at activating sales and increasing volumes. In the long term, enterprise marketing involves an undifferentiated approach, with multi-annual campaigns that do not aim to activate sales, but to communicate emotions, designed to form certain associations, long-lasting perceptions in the minds of stakeholders.

As consumer needs and the market as a whole change, brand concept development becomes particularly important. Through positioning strategies in the development stage, company management can convey a consistent and unique image in relation to the competition, which directly influences the company's financial performance and provides a strong competitive advantage. Subsequently, the image can be strengthened in the consolidation phase by extending it to new complementary products. Thus, successful initial image development can have a long-lasting effect both on the lifecycle of a brand, which implies a constant volume of sales, and on the company's other products. The image of new products enhances the image of the developed brand, creating synergy effects.

Once the image is launched, developed, and consolidated, the costs associated with launching new company products are lower and the time it takes to go from launch to development

is shorter. By implementing such an operational framework between companies, they increase their brand viability in the market. Ultimately, it is the consumer who can put an end to the existence of a brand if its concept is no longer of interest and value. When the value of the brand concept changes, the company has two alternatives. The first alternative is to change the brand concept, which leads directly to repositioning the company. Changing the concept is a challenging task because it requires changing perceptions that are deeply ingrained in the minds of consumers. The second alternative is to withdraw the brand from the market and introduce a new brand whose concept is in line with current market trends.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As part of the marketing activity, image has become increasingly important and is implemented and adapted in most areas of business activity. This investigation on the use of the concept of image as a factor for increasing the competitiveness of the company on the market of the Republic of Moldova underlines the importance and topicality of developing and implementing competitive strategies aimed at differentiating and distinctively positioning the company in the mind of the consumer. The evolution and importance of image is due to companies that, because of improving their image, have come to dominate the market by occupying a distinct place in the mind of the consumer. With many companies conducting similar activities, marketing similar products and providing similar services, the image they reflect and promote is a good solution for differentiating their offer. Whether consciously or unconsciously, by the very activity it conducts in the marketplace, a company is placed in a frame of reference by the consumer who uses its products or services. If companies approach image in an unconscious way, with a reactive attitude to everything that is going on around them, then this has a negative impact on company performance and competitiveness. The goal of corporate image management is to strategically and intentionally communicate a desired image that reflects the company's identity and once implemented, gives the company a sustainable competitive advantage. The results of the given research demonstrate the achievement of the proposed goal, where the solved scientific problem lies in the clarification, sorting and ordering of image concepts and in the development and implementation of strategies for the development and consolidation of the image of companies in the Republic of Moldova, which contributes to the application of marketing concepts in order to increase the competitiveness of companies on the market.

Thus, to summarize the objectives proposed in this paper:

1. We have identified and delineated the conceptual approaches to the concepts of image and identity by highlighting all the component parts, such as: corporate branding, image, reputation, communication, total corporate communications, corporate personality, corporate identity/organizational identity, corporate culture, leadership, corporate strategy, organizational architecture, and visual identity. To define all the elements and characteristics of the image, it is proposed to define the corporate image as a construct formed by the impressions of an audience, made to correspond to a certain audience. This automatically implies that the management team can intentionally manipulate a company's image to make it more suitable for external audiences.
2. We examined the concept of image as a source of competitive advantage if it is understood and communicated properly. Achieving competitive advantage through intangible assets such as image requires a holistic and integrated approach involving all employees in the company, regardless of their hierarchical position.
3. We have identified and specified image measurement tools and methods. Based on this analysis, we found a lack of a specific methodology to guide image measurement and highlighted several guiding principles in the process of developing the company's own image measurement methodology such as:
 - Audience characteristics
 - Identification of methods appropriate to the target audience
 - Personalized approach to stakeholders
 - The specifics of the company's visual identity
 - Interdependence between existing identity types
4. The analysis of the competitiveness of the Republic of Moldova in the global and regional competitive context allowed to identify the strengths and threats faced by light industry companies. We analyzed the pillars of Moldova's economic competitiveness in dynamics, identifying areas that require further efforts to improve.
5. We have delineated and studied the specifics of the competitiveness of the clothing sector through the prism of image at branch and company level. The Moldovan clothing sector was analyzed through the five forces model, which drives competition, identifying rivalry between players, bargaining power of suppliers, bargaining power of customers, new entrants in the market and the danger of substitute products. We also analyzed the factors of competitiveness of Moldovan garment enterprises using the Porterian Diamond Model. The

results of the analysis allowed me to identify opportunities aimed at increasing the competitiveness of the sector in general and the companies.

6. We measured and evaluated the image of the local brands Iuvas, Maicom and Vasconi, highlighting the current situation of these brands in terms of perceived image and the elements that need to be improved to develop marketing strategies and design marketing mixes that meet consumer needs.

7. We have developed an operational framework for image management consisting of four steps that facilitates the development of competitive strategies for developing the image of enterprises in the Republic of Moldova, emphasizing the role of branding and integrated marketing communications. We have proposed a holistic concept that is related to the personality of the company (the heart, mind, and body of the company), where the company must show enthusiasm for consumers, be creative, disciplined, agile and open to collaboration. We have promoted a change of perspective on the traditional organizational structure, with the consumer and their needs at the top of the list. We demonstrated that image management is a process that starts with the selection of an overall brand concept (functional, symbolic, experiential), which is then launched, implemented, and strengthened over time. We have proposed a set of guiding principles for long-term corporate image management such as:

- Awareness of the impact of automated decision-making on purchasing decisions
- Shifting the focus from rational messaging designed to drive/activate sales in the short term to emotional priming that aims to strengthen brand image in the long term by creating emotional associations with the brand.
- Systematic measurement and evaluation of perceived image and brand equity.
- Dynamic analysis/monitoring of price elasticity as an indicator of long-term business performance.

In line with the research findings, we propose the following practical recommendations:

1. To businesses in the Republic of Moldova: every company operating on the market has an image in the mind of the consumer, which can be good if the company manages it proactively and bad if it is managed reactively. To make the most of the benefits of good image management, companies need to make a retrospective analysis of the elements that make up their identity, use these elements

in the process of developing strategies for positioning and re-positioning the company in the market, constantly monitor how they are perceived by stakeholders.

2. To the Light Industry Employers' Association: to take into account the specificity (identity) of each company to be promoted under the From the Heart umbrella brand. At this stage, based on the results of the study on the brands: Iuvas, Maicom and Vasconi, we find that all of them lack a distinct image in the consumer's mind, being associated to a considerable extent with the same attributes, following the image transfer from the umbrella brand. The manifestation of corporate identity under the From the Heart umbrella brand is up to each individual brand and this manifestation must result in a good perceived image. We therefore believe that the umbrella industry employers' association should draw up certain eligibility criteria to be met by companies wishing to gain greater exposure on the market once they are part of this umbrella brand.

3. To clothing companies: be initiative-taking and feel the consumer's pulse. Defining marketing as a win-win relationship between consumer and company, the consumer is more than willing to give constructive feedback on the company's products, and all the company must do is listen. We also recommend the implementation of the company-wide image management operational framework, which will result in the continuous improvement of the company's competitiveness.

4. Marketing specialists and consultants: in developing marketing campaigns and communications, maintain a "healthy" balance between the two systems or approaches that demand a response from the consumer (rational and emotional system). With the rise of online marketing and sophisticated response measurement tools, marketers are prioritizing short-term sales stimulation (system 2) which has a negligible impact on brand perceptions, leading to a lack of long-term sales growth. Thus, emotional guidance (system #1) with a long-term focus will lead to a more competitive brand, with a better perceived image, with "healthy" sales growth, manifested by a reduction in price sensitivity among consumers.

5. Marketing departments and the heads of these departments: as spokespersons for consumers, members of these departments have a moral obligation to instill this attitude in all departments of the organization. The company's image is the result of all consumer interactions with the company. A marketing department that operates on the principle of "Customer is King" must communicate to all members of the organization that everything that happens within the organization is marketing. The image of the company depends to a considerable extent on the efforts that are made by the staff in this department.

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1. Articles in scientific journals

1.1. in journals from other databases accepted by the ANACEC

1. **MALANCEA, I.** *Imaginea brandurilor autohtone Iuvas, Maicom și Vasconi prin prisma indicatorului Net Promoter Score.* In: Scientific Journal „Economica” Nr.3(117), 2021, p.62-70, [ISSN 1810-9136](https://ibn.idsi.md/ro/vizualizare_articol/140209#). Category B, Available: https://ibn.idsi.md/ro/vizualizare_articol/140209#

2. **MALANCEA, I.** *Instrumente și metode de măsurare a imaginii întreprinderii pe piață.* In: Journal of Science, Innovation, Culture and Art „Akademos” Nr.3(62), 2021, p.61-70, [ISSN 1857-0461](https://ibn.idsi.md/ro/vizualizare_articol/140209#). Category B, Available: https://ibn.idsi.md/ro/vizualizare_articol/140209#

3. **MALANCEA, I.** *The Role of Branding and Integrated Communications in Strengthening Corporate Image.* In: Научный журнал «ИННОВАЦИОННЫЕ НАУЧНЫЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ» Nr. 12-2(14) 2021, p.291-301, ISSN 2713-0010. Available: <https://www.elibrary.ru/item.asp?id=47690919>

2. Articles in the proceedings of conferences and other scientific events

2.1. in the papers of scientific events included in other databases accepted by the ANACEC

1. **MALANCEA, Iurie.** *Poziționarea companiilor prestatoare de servicii profesionale în Republica Moldova.* In: „Conducere prin valori – o soluție pentru succes”, International Scientific and Practical Eurasian Business Conference on 1 April 2017, Divitia Gratiae University, p.73-87, ISBN 978-9975-53-814-5

2. **MALANCEA, Iurie.** *The Role of identity in the formation of image.* In: International Scientific Symposium of Young Researchers 27-28 April 2018, 16th Edition, Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova, p.91-97, ISBN 978-9975-75-926-7. Available: https://ibn.idsi.md/vizualizare_articol/89857

3. **МАЛАНЧА, Юрий.** *Роль идентичности и имиджа в контексте интегрированных коммуникаций.* В: «Инновации и технологии в цифровом мире: от угроз к возможностям», Международная научно-практическая конференция Eurasian Business Conference, 18 мая 2019, Университет Divitia Gratiae, p.25-40, ISBN 978-9975-3391-2-4

3. Other specific works and achievements in different scientific fields

1. FOTEA, Ioan., NEAGOIE Daniel., **MALANCEA, Iurie.** *Cercetări de Marketing 1-a ediție.* București, Editura Economică 2019. 222 p. ISBN 978-973-709-865-8

2. БОТЕЗАТ, Елена-Аурелия., **МАЛАНЧА, Юрий.** *Основы Маркетинга 1-е изд.* Chișinău, Editura Universității Divitia Gratiae 2021. 300 p. ISBN 978-9975-3489-5-9

ADNOTARE

Malancea Iurie

Imaginea ca factor de creștere a competitivității întreprinderii pe piață

Teză de doctor în științe economice,

Chișinău, 2022

Volumul și structura tezei. Teza include: introducere, trei capitole, concluzii generale și recomandări, bibliografie din 113 titluri, 7 anexe, 156 de pagini text de bază (până la Bibliografie), 34 de figuri și 40 tabele. Rezultatele obținute sunt publicate în 8 lucrări științifice.

Cuvinte-cheie: marketing, imagine, identitate, brand, competitivitate, avantaj competitiv, metode de măsurare, Republica Moldova, poziționare, strategii competitive, comunicări integrate.

Domeniul de studiu: Științe economice.

Obiectul cercetării: este prezentat conceptul de imagine și identitate în activitatea de marketing, aplicat în creșterea competitivității întreprinderii pe piață.

Scopul cercetării: constă în elaborarea unor metode de analiză și gestionare a imaginii întreprinderilor care să rezulte în strategii care utilizează eficient instrumentarul de marketing în creșterea competitivității.

Obiectivele cercetării: identificarea și delimitarea abordărilor conceptuale ale conceptelor de imagine și identitate; examinarea imaginii ca sursă de avantaj competitiv; identificarea instrumentelor și metodelor de măsurare a imaginii; investigarea competitivității Republicii Moldova în contextul concurențial global; delimitarea particularităților competitivității sectorului de confecții prin prisma imaginii; cercetarea și evaluarea imaginii brandurilor autohtone Iuvas, Maicom, Vasconi; elaborarea strategiilor de îmbunătățire a imaginii întreprinderilor.

Noutatea și originalitatea științifică: rezidă în cercetarea conceptului de imagine și identitate a întreprinderii în contextul competitivității economice și în înaintarea unui cadru operațional (proces) de gestionare strategică a imaginii în baza căruia întreprinderea va îmbunătăți continuu competitivitatea întreprinderii prin imagine.

Problema științifică importantă soluționată în cercetare: *Problema:* lipsa clarității și cunoașterii conceptului de imagine ca sursă de avantaj competitiv pentru o întreprindere. *Întrebarea de cercetare:* cum putem măsura imaginea unei întreprinderi și care sunt strategiile sustenabile de dezvoltare și consolidare a competitivității întreprinderii prin imagine? Au fost identificate metode și tehnici de măsurare a imaginii care țin cont de specificul părților interesate și s-a propus un cadru operațional de gestionare a imaginii care include directive strategice de consolidare a competitivității întreprinderilor din Republica Moldova în vederea eficientizării activității de marketing.

Semnificația teoretică a cercetării: este evidențiată prin studierea aprofundată a tuturor constructelor ce definesc conceptul de imagine și a ambiguității termenului în literatura de specialitate.

Valoarea aplicativă a lucrării: este reprezentată prin analiza competitivității sectorului de confecții, elaborarea metodelor de măsurare a imaginii întreprinderii, evaluarea imaginii brandurilor autohtone Iuvas, Maicom, Vasconi și elaborarea unui cadru operațional de gestionare strategică a imaginii întreprinderii.

Implementarea rezultatelor științifice: s-a realizat în cadrul întreprinderii Iuvas SRL, a departamentului de PR și comunicare a universității *Divitia Gratiae*, în cadrul disciplinei *Managementul Marketingului* predat masteranzilor *Institutului Internațional TCMI*, Austria, în cadrul instruirilor de afaceri organizate de compania *Advanced Consulting SRL* în colaborare cu organizația Elvețiană *COM International*. De asemenea, rezultatele investigațiilor științifice au fost comunicate la conferințe științifice naționale și internaționale și prin publicațiile științifice în reviste de profil.

ANNOTATION

Malancea Iurie

Image as a factor for increasing the competitiveness of the company on the market

PhD thesis in economics,

Chisinau, 2022

The volume and structure of thesis. The thesis includes introduction, three chapters, general conclusions and recommendations, bibliography of 113 titles, 7 annexes, 156 pages of text (till Bibliography), 34 figures and 40 tables. The results are published in 8 scientific papers.

Keywords: marketing, image, identity, brand, competitiveness, competitive advantage, measurement methods, Republic of Moldova, positioning, competitive strategies, integrated communications.

Field of study: Economics.

The object of the research: the concept of image and identity in the marketing, applied towards increasing the competitiveness of the enterprise on the market.

The purpose of the research: to develop methods of analysis and management of enterprise image that will result in strategies that effectively use marketing to increase competitiveness.

Research objectives: identification and delimitation of conceptual approaches to the concepts of image and identity; examination of image as a source of competitive advantage; identification of tools and methods of image measurement; investigation of the competitiveness of the Republic of Moldova in the global competitive context; delimitation of the peculiarities of the competitiveness of the clothing sector through the prism of image; research and evaluation of the image of local brands Iuvas, Maicom, Vasconi; elaboration of competitive strategies for the improvement of the image of enterprises in the Republic of Moldova.

Scientific novelty and originality: lies in researching the concept of company image and identity in the context of economic competitiveness and advancing an operational framework (process) for strategic image management on the basis of which the company will continuously improve the competitiveness of the company through image.

The important scientific problem solved in the research: *Problem:* lack of clarity and knowledge of the concept of image as a source of competitive advantage for a company. *Research question:* how can we measure the image of an enterprise and what are the sustainable strategies to develop and strengthen the competitiveness of the company through image? Methods and techniques of image measurement that consider the specifics of stakeholders have been identified and an operational framework for image management has been proposed that includes strategic guidelines for strengthening the competitiveness of enterprises in the Republic of Moldova in order to make marketing activities more efficient.

The theoretical significance of the research is evidenced by the in-depth study of all the constructs defining the concept of image and the ambiguity of the term in the literature.

The applicative value of the paper is represented by the analysis of the competitiveness of the clothing sector, the development of methods to measure the image of an enterprise, the evaluation of the image of the local brands Iuvas, Maicom, Vasconi and the development of competitive strategies to strengthen the image of the enterprise.

The implementation of the scientific results: within the leadership of Iuvas LLC, the Public Relations and Communication Department of *Divitia Gratiae University*, within the *Marketing Management* subject taught to the master students of the *TCMI International Institute*, based in Austria, in business trainings and workshops organized by the company *Advanced Consulting LLC*, in collaboration with the Swiss organization *COM International*. The results of scientific investigations have also been communicated at national and international scientific conferences and through scientific publications in relevant journals.

АННОТАЦИЯ

Маланча Юрий

Имидж как фактор повышения конкурентоспособности предприятия на рынке

Кандидатская диссертация по экономике, Кишинэу, 2022

Объем и структура диссертации. Диссертация включает введение, три главы, общие выводы и рекомендации, библиографию из 113 наименований, 7 приложения, 156 страницы основного текста (до библиографии), 34 рисунков и 40 таблиц. Результаты работы опубликованы в 8 научных статьях.

Ключевые слова: маркетинг, имидж, идентичность, бренд, конкурентоспособность, конкурентное преимущество, методы измерения, Республика Молдова, позиционирование, конкурентные стратегии, интегрированные коммуникации.

Область исследования: Экономика.

Объект исследования: концепция имиджа и идентичности в маркетинге, применяемая для повышения конкурентоспособности предприятия на рынке.

Цель исследования: разработать методы анализа и управления имиджем компаний, результатом которых являются стратегии, эффективно использующие маркетинговые инструменты для повышения конкурентоспособности.

Задачи исследования: выявление и разграничение концептуальных подходов к понятиям имиджа и идентичности; рассмотрение имиджа как источника конкурентного преимущества; определение инструментов и методов измерения имиджа; исследование конкурентоспособности Республики Молдова в глобальном конкурентном контексте; разграничение особенностей конкурентоспособности сектора одежды через призму имиджа; исследование и оценка имиджа местных брендов Iuvas, Maicom, Vasconi; разработка конкурентных стратегий развития имиджа предприятий Республики Молдова.

Новизна и научная оригинальность: исследование концепции имиджа и идентичности компании в контексте экономической конкурентоспособности и продвижении операционной структуры стратегического управления имиджем, на основе которой компания будет постоянно повышать конкурентоспособность компании.

Важная научная проблема, решенная в процессе исследования: *Проблема:* отсутствие ясности и знания концепции имиджа как источника конкурентного преимущества предприятия. *Вопрос исследования:* как можно измерить имидж предприятия и каковы устойчивые стратегии развития и укрепления конкурентоспособности компании с помощью имиджа? Определены методы и способы измерения имиджа, и предложена операционная структура управления имиджем, включающая стратегические ориентиры для укрепления конкурентоспособности предприятий.

Теоретическая значимость исследования подтверждается глубоким изучением всех конструкторов, определяющих понятие имиджа, и неоднозначностью термина в литературе.

Практическая значимость диссертации представлена анализом конкурентоспособности сектора одежды, разработкой методов измерения имиджа предприятия, оценкой имиджа местных брендов Iuvas, Maicom, Vasconi и разработкой конкурентных стратегий для укрепления имиджа предприятия.

Внедрение научных результатов: в компании Iuvas SRL, на кафедре связей с общественностью и коммуникаций университета *Divitia Gratiae*, в рамках предмета "*Управление маркетингом*", преподаваемого магистрантам *Международного института ТСМ*, Австрия, на бизнес-тренингах организованных компанией *Advanced Consulting* в сотрудничестве со швейцарской организацией *COM International*. Результаты научных исследований также были представлены на национальных и международных научных конференциях и в научных публикациях в соответствующих журналах.

MALANCEA IURIE

**IMAGE AS A FACTOR FOR INCREASING THE COMPETITIVENESS OF THE
COMPANY ON THE MARKET**

521.04 MARKETING AND LOGISTICS

Summary of the PhD thesis in economics

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