

# Popularization of culture as a component of nation branding: A theoretical perspective on Ukraine's cultural identity

**Antonina IVASHCHUK, Kateryna POLOZHENTSEVA,  
Inha PASENKO, Mykola KRYPCHUK & Olga LACHKO**

## *Abstract*

This article examines the popularization of culture as a key component of nation branding, focusing on Ukraine in the context of ongoing war and geopolitical contestation. Drawing on theories of nation branding, soft power, imagined communities, and strategic narratives, the study explores how cultural identity is mobilized to support both external image-making and internal nation-building. Particular attention is paid to the tension between reinforcing traditional cultural narratives and promoting cultural transformation oriented toward modernity and European integration. Empirically, the article analyses survey data collected in 2024 from 248 Ukrainian respondents aged 21–35, divided into two groups according to their attitudes toward cultural continuity versus reform in nation branding. Using the “My Nation – Foreign Nation” semantic differential and the Schwartz Value Survey, the study identifies significant differences in ethnic self-perception and cultural value orientations. While one group emphasizes autonomy, creativity, and innovation, the other prioritizes hierarchy, belonging, and national unity. The findings suggest that Ukraine's nation branding cannot rely on a single cultural narrative but must integrate historical authenticity with cultural innovation. The article argues that effective nation branding in wartime Ukraine functions simultaneously as cultural diplomacy, psychological resilience-building, and a strategic response to external disinformation.

**Keywords:** cultural resilience; digital diplomacy; ethnic self-perception; national values; war.

## **Introduction**

Nation branding, a field that combines elements of strategic communication, cultural diplomacy, and identity formation, has gained increasing importance in contemporary global politics. Defined by Anholt as the strategic management of a country's reputation, nation branding leverages cultural assets to shape both domestic and international perceptions of a country.<sup>1</sup> Anderson's concept of “imagined community” highlights how national identity is constructed through

<sup>1</sup> Simon Anholt, *Competitive Identity: The New Brand Management for Nations, Cities and Regions* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

cultural symbols, narratives, and shared historical experiences.<sup>2</sup> In Ukraine, nation branding has been shaped by historical legacies, cultural revival, and geopolitical conflict, especially after the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022.<sup>3</sup>

Ukraine's nation branding is distinct from that of many other countries due to its existential geopolitical struggle. This article employs several interrelated but distinct concepts, each with specific scholarly definitions. Soft power refers to the ability of a state to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion, often via cultural and value-based appeal.<sup>4</sup> Cultural diplomacy is a subset of soft power that uses cultural exchange, artistic cooperation, and heritage promotion to foster mutual understanding and advance foreign policy goals.<sup>5</sup> Digital diplomacy adapts these practices to online platforms, where states and non-state actors use social media, websites, and digital campaigns to shape international perceptions.<sup>6</sup>

Strategic narratives are deliberately constructed stories that justify a nation's actions, values, and identity for domestic and international audiences. This study adopts the term in a narrow, strategic sense to avoid the vagueness often noted in scholarship, distinguishing targeted, state-linked narratives from general cultural storytelling. Similarly, "national identity" is used as shorthand for the collectively imagined sense of belonging in Anderson's imagined community, mediated through symbols, memory, and social practices. Unlike states using branding mainly for investment or tourism, Ukraine's efforts serve defensive and constructive functions, reinforcing unity, countering disinformation, and securing international support. As Bolin & Ståhlberg note, Ukraine's nation branding also fosters domestic nation-building, evident in promoting the Ukrainian language, historical memory policies, and digital diplomacy.<sup>7</sup>

A key component of Ukraine's nation branding strategy is cultural popularization, which serves to strengthen national identity while enhancing

<sup>2</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> Joanna Szostek, "The Power and Limits of Russia's Strategic Narrative in Ukraine: Television, Identity, and Conflict," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33, no. 3 (2017): 175-192, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S153759271700007X>.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Valentina Feklyunina, "Soft Power and Identity: Russia, Ukraine, and the 'Russian World(s),'" *European Journal of International Relations* 22, no. 4 (2016): 773-796, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066115601200>.

<sup>6</sup> Sofia Ventura, "War and Its Imagery: The Visual Narrative of the Ukrainian State's Instagram Account Ukraine.Ua as a Tool of Digital Public Diplomacy," *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 19, no. 3, 379-403, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2024.2395407>.

<sup>7</sup> Göran Bolin and Per Ståhlberg, "Mediating the Nation-State: Agency and the Media in Nation-Branding Campaigns," *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015): 3060-3079.



Ukraine's global cultural presence.<sup>8</sup> This aligns with Feklyunina's argument that soft power strategies are particularly critical for states with contested identities, as they allow for non-coercive engagement with both international allies and domestic populations. Ukraine's cultural diplomacy has thus become a mechanism of both resistance and projection, leveraging historical heritage, literature, music, and cinema to construct an internally cohesive and externally appealing national image.

Ukraine's nation branding efforts, however, are not without challenges. One major issue lies in the geopolitical context, in which Ukraine's cultural narratives are actively contested by external actors, particularly the Russian Federation.<sup>9</sup> Just highlights the role of Russian disinformation and strategic narratives in attempts to undermine Ukraine's sovereignty, portraying the country as an artificial state or a failed democracy. In response, Ukraine has intensified its digital diplomacy, using social media campaigns (e.g., Ukraine.Ua) to counteract misinformation and assert its national identity. Soft power is also at the forefront of the practice of nation branding by nations that seek to brand themselves as centers of culture.<sup>10</sup> Soft power is the ability to win hearts without coercion. Soft power strategies are also best suited to nations with contested identities, the scholar argues, as they are a way of communicating with the international public without coercion.<sup>11</sup>

Another significant challenge lies in internal debates over national identity and cultural representation. Ukraine's multi-ethnic and linguistically diverse population has historically exhibited regional differences in national identification. While some branding efforts emphasize historical continuity and traditional identity markers (e.g., folk culture, Cossack heritage, national cuisine), others advocate for a modernized, European-oriented cultural identity that reflects Ukraine's emerging creative industries. This duality is evident in the study, which examines the psychological and sociocultural dimensions of nation branding in wartime Ukraine.

Recent research in ethnic psychology and cognitive neuroscience further suggests that war conditions shape national identity in unique ways. Studies by

<sup>8</sup> Xiufang Li and Juan Feng, "Nation Branding through the Lens of Soccer: Using a Sports Nation Branding Framework to Explore the Case of China," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 25, no. 4 (2022): 1118-38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494211011179>.

<sup>9</sup> Chakrabarti Shantanu, *Nation Branding in Non-Western Societies: Projecting India as a Civilisation State* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2025).

<sup>10</sup> Andy W. Hao, Justin Paul, Sangeeta Trott, Chiquan Guo, Heng-Hui Wu, "Two Decades of Research on Nation Branding: A Review and Future Research Agenda," *International Marketing Review* 38, no. 1 (2021): 46-69. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IMR-01-2019-0028>.

<sup>11</sup> Inna Semenets-Orlova, Roman Shevchuk, Bohdan Plish, Inna Grydiushko, Kateryna Mais-trenko. "Innovative Approaches to Development of Human Potential in Modern Public Administration," *Economic Affairs* 67, no. 4 (2022): 915-926. <https://doi.org/10.46852/0424-2513.4s.2022.25>.

Matiash and others demonstrate that chronic fatigue and prolonged stress influence cognitive and emotional processing, leading to varying perceptions of national cohesion and self-image.<sup>12</sup> The study explores whether these psychological factors influence attitudes toward nation branding, particularly in the debate between preserving historical cultural values vs. re-evaluating them in light of Ukraine's current geopolitical struggle.

Moreover, nation branding is increasingly being shaped by grassroots cultural advocacy. As Biasioli and Drew demonstrate, Ukrainian musicians, filmmakers, and digital content creators have played a crucial role in shaping Ukraine's cultural identity on the global stage, often independently of government-led initiatives.<sup>13</sup> This raises questions about whether nation branding should be primarily state-driven or decentralized, allowing independent cultural figures to define Ukraine's global image.

This study aims to examine how the ongoing war influences Ukrainians' perceptions of national identity and nation branding.<sup>14</sup> The study explores whether Ukrainians believe that (1) the war necessitates a re-evaluation of cultural values to create a new national brand, or (2) existing cultural traditions should be reinforced as the foundation of Ukraine's identity. By analyzing ethnic self-perception and cultural value orientations, this study provides insights into how Ukraine's branding strategy can balance historical continuity with modern cultural transformation. In responding to recent critiques of "narrative" in cultural and communication studies, this article adopts a narrower conceptualization consistent with Ventura, who argues that the term is often overstretched and risks obscuring more than it explains. Rather than treating "narrative" as a diffuse cultural trope, we frame it as a strategic narrative, a purposeful, state-linked construction designed to justify actions and project identity. This adjustment addresses the problem of conceptual vagueness and ensures analytical precision. Such "conceptual freezing" stabilizes the framework of this study, preventing slippage into colloquial or metaphorical uses of narrative that weaken explanatory power.

<sup>12</sup> Mykhailo Matiash, Vitalii Lunov, Liliia Prudka, Yaroslava Rudenko, and V. Prints, "Neuro-psychology of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome in Civilian Population in War Conditions," *International Neurological Journal* 20, no. 7 (2024): 382-393. <https://doi.org/10.22141/2224-0713.20.7.2024.1118>.

<sup>13</sup> Marco Biasioli and Thomas Drew, "Ukrainian Popular Music in Times of War: National Identity, Transnational Projections, and the Musician as Grassroots Ambassador," *IASPM Journal* 14, no. 2 (2024): 6-29. [https://doi.org/10.5429/2079-3871\(2024\)v14i2.2en](https://doi.org/10.5429/2079-3871(2024)v14i2.2en).

<sup>14</sup> Iryna Semenets-Orlova, Viktoriia Kushnir, Liudmyla Rodchenko, Iryna Chernenko, Oleksandr Druz, and Mykhailo Rudenko, "Organizational Development and Educational Changes Management in Public Sector (Case of Public Administration During War Time)," *International Journal of Professional Business Review* 8, no. 4 (2023): e01699. <https://doi.org/10.26668/businessreview/2023.v8i4.1699>.



## Literature Review

Nation branding, according to Anholt, is the management of a country's image through its economic, cultural and political assets.<sup>15</sup> Anderson's theory of imagined communities links national identity to shared cultural narratives.<sup>16</sup> In Ukraine, national branding asserts sovereignty by prioritizing culture, in contrast to postcolonial branding efforts that focused on external approval. The role of culture in shaping national brands is emphasized, with authenticity and consistency being key to brand equity. This is reflected in Ukraine's language policy, art revival, and promotion of a distinctive identity. Historical revisionism, reflected in the renaming of streets and reinterpretation of historical figures, strengthens Ukraine's image as a coherent and independent state.<sup>17</sup>

The case of Catalonia highlights the connection between cultural identity and nation branding. Jiménez and Garay-Artetxe show that stateless nations use branding for international legitimacy.<sup>18</sup> In the same way, Ukraine promotes its language, preserves its heritage, and globalizes its art to assert sovereignty.<sup>19</sup> The role of cultural figures in shaping national perceptions is emphasized, as seen in the case of famous Ukrainian musicians, directors, and authors. The Ukrainian model prioritizes authenticity through historical narratives, artistic expression, and cultural diplomacy, in contrast to branding focused on external validation. The cognitive (knowledge of heritage) and affective (emotional connection) components of identity, reinforced by education, media, and cultural practices, shape Ukraine's identity. Postcolonial trauma has reinforced this process by making sovereignty a central element of its branding.<sup>20</sup>

Gnatiuk and Kmiećicka and others show that renaming streets, supporting Ukrainian-language media, and honoring historical figures contribute to strengthening national identity.<sup>21</sup> <sup>22</sup> Bolin and Ståhlberg argue that nation

<sup>15</sup> Anholt, *Competitive Identity*.

<sup>16</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

<sup>17</sup> Oleksiy Gnatiuk, "The Renaming of Streets in Post-Revolutionary Ukraine: Regional Strategies to Construct a New National Identity," *Acta Universitatis Carolinae Geographica* 53, no. 2 (2018): 119-36. <https://doi.org/10.14712/23361980.2018.13>.

<sup>18</sup> Aitor Jiménez and Estitxu Garai-Artetxe, "The Catalan Digital Republic: Between Nation Branding and Nation Building," *Ethnopolitics* 24, no. 1 (2023): 75-93. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2023.2275883>.

<sup>19</sup> Tetyana Byrkovych, Zhanna Denysiuk, Larysa Gaievskaya, Lyudmila Akimova, Lyudmila Prokopenko and Oleksandr Akimov, "State Policy of Cultural and Art Projects Funding as a Factor in the Stability of State Development in the Conditions of Globalization," *Economic Affairs* 68, no. 1 (2023): 199-211. <https://doi.org/10.46852/0424-2513.1s.2023.23>.

<sup>20</sup> Göran Bolin and Per Ståhlberg, "Nation Branding vs. Nation Building Revisited: Ukrainian Information Management in the Face of the Russian Invasion," *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 19, no. 2 (2023): 218-222. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-022-00277-z>.

<sup>21</sup> Gnatiuk, "The Renaming of Streets," 119.

<sup>22</sup> Eliza Kmiećicka, Emilia Michalska, and Joanna Osiejewicz, "Legal Communication and the

branding is now merging with nation-building, especially in times of crisis, with Ukraine's branding aimed at both external and internal audiences.<sup>23</sup> Euromaidan and the war have strengthened national consciousness. The main challenge is the Russian cultural confrontation through disinformation and propaganda which aims to erase Ukraine's distinctive identity. Social media, including campaigns such as #StandWithUkraine, strengthen national identity, which is consistent with Bolin and Ståhlberg's view of memorial warfare.<sup>24</sup> Platforms such as Ukrainer and Arzamas contribute to the participatory branding of the nation.<sup>25</sup> International media such as BBC World also strengthen Ukraine's cultural profile and counter disinformation.

Lee highlights South Korea's use of cinema in branding the country through the film *Parasite*.<sup>26</sup> The films *Atlantis* (2019) and *Klondike* (2022) also shape Ukraine's global image by reinforcing themes of resilience and strength. The digital platforms and media partnerships promote Ukraine's brand by integrating digital nationalism, cultural diplomacy, and storytelling. According to Nye, cultural diplomacy is the use of cultural assets for international influence.<sup>27</sup> Ukraine engages in this through the Venice Biennale, film festivals, and literary translations. While China uses vaccine diplomacy, Ukraine projects its identity through humanitarian efforts and democratic advocacy.

Seccardini and Desmoulin warn against oversimplified branding, as seen in Croatia's tourism strategy.<sup>28</sup> It should balance modern achievements with complex historical narratives. Ahmed and others emphasize the integration of history and modernity in country branding, a strategy that Ukraine is using.<sup>29</sup> However, De Vries and others note that domestic political polarization can hinder international cooperation, which is a key issue that Ukraine should consider.<sup>30</sup>

---

Idea of Plain Language: Possibilities and Limitations," *Journal of International Legal Communication* 10, no. 3 (2023): 72-79. <https://doi.org/10.32612/uw.27201643.2023.10.3.pp.72-79>.

<sup>23</sup> Bolin and Ståhlberg, "Nation Branding vs. Nation Building Revisited," 218.

<sup>24</sup> Bolin and Ståhlberg, "Nation Branding vs. Nation Building Revisited," 218.

<sup>25</sup> Nadia Kaneva, "Simulation Nations: Nation Brands and Baudrillard's Theory of Media," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 21, no. 5 (2018): 631-648. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549417751149>.

<sup>26</sup> Seow Ting T. Lee, "Film as Cultural Diplomacy: South Korea's Nation Branding Through *Parasite* (2019)," *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 18, no. 2 (2022): 93-108. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-020-00192-1>.

<sup>27</sup> Nye, *Soft Power*.

<sup>28</sup> Gabriela Seccardini and Lucile Desmoulin, "Flawed Public Diplomacy: When Croatia's Instagram Riviera Narrative Ignores Dark Tourism Amateurs," *Journal of Communication Management* 27, no. 2 (2023): 277-92. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCOM-04-2022-0039>.

<sup>29</sup> Gouher Ahmed, Anas Abudaqa, C. Jayachandran, Yam Limbu, Rashed Alzahmi, "Nation Branding as a Strategic Approach for Emerging Economies: The Case of UAE," in *Marketing Communications and Brand Development in Emerging Economies*, vol. 1: *Contemporary and Future Perspectives* (Springer International Publishing, 2022), 41-57.

<sup>30</sup> Catherine E. De Vries, Sara B. Hobolt, and Stefanie Walter, "Politicizing International Coopera-



The cultural diplomacy of Ukraine strengthens the country's branding through global exchanges, film, literature, and advocacy. It combines modern cultural achievements with historical authenticity and takes into account domestic political debates. Cultural tourism plays an important role in shaping Ukraine's image. Cities such as Lviv and Kyiv attract international visitors due to their historical narratives and architectural heritage.<sup>31</sup> Memory tourism, especially at disputed historical sites, further strengthens Ukraine's cultural identity.<sup>32</sup> Digital advocacy has become important as a factor of national identity, encouraging citizens to promote Ukraine as a tourist destination.<sup>33</sup> Social media campaigns run by the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Tourist Association emphasize the country's resilience, heritage, and modern creativity.<sup>34</sup>

Ukraine's creative industries have also contributed to the development of its cultural economy. Investments in independent music festivals, contemporary art and fashion spaces have positioned Ukraine as a dynamic cultural hub in Eastern Europe.<sup>35</sup> Digital heritage tourism has further expanded cultural engagement by offering virtual museum experiences and digital tours of historic sites, allowing global audiences to engage with Ukraine's cultural heritage.<sup>36</sup> These initiatives collectively strengthen Ukraine's international presence and reinforce its national identity through cultural diplomacy.

The efforts of Ukraine in tourism and heritage promotion are crucial for the country's branding, providing economic benefits and strengthening national identity. Ukraine continues to improve its global image through historical tourism, digital heritage initiatives, creative industries, and sports tourism. Resident advocacy, social media engagement, and digital innovations are further integrating cultural heritage into branding strategies.

---

tion: The Mass Public, Political Entrepreneurs, and Political Opportunity Structures," *International Organization* 75, no. 2 (2021): 306-332. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000491>.

<sup>31</sup> Nataliia Godis and Jan Henrik Nilsson, "Memory Tourism in a Contested Landscape: Exploring Identity Discourses in Lviv, Ukraine," *Current Issues in Tourism* 21, no. 15 (2018): 1690-1709. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2016.1216529>.

<sup>32</sup> Oleksandra Seliverstova, "'Consuming' National Identity in Western Ukraine," *Nationalities Papers* 45, no. 1 (2017): 61-79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2016.1220363>.

<sup>33</sup> Michael W Lever, Stacia Elliot and Marion Joppe, "Pride and Promotion: Exploring Relationships between National Identification, Destination Advocacy, Tourism Ethnocentrism, and Destination Image," *Journal of Vacation Marketing* 29, no. 4 (2023): 540. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13567667221109270>.

<sup>34</sup> Kristina Tverezovska, "Right to Privacy on the Internet in the Social Media Context," *Journal of International Legal Communication* 10, no. 3 (2023): 60. <https://doi.org/10.32612/uw.27201643.2023.10.3.pp.56-65>.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen, "Refugee Policy as 'Negative Nation Branding': The Case of Denmark and the Nordic," *Danish Foreign Policy Yearbook* (2017). <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3902589>.

<sup>36</sup> Deepak Chhabra, *Resilience, Authenticity, and Digital Heritage Tourism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 22.

Ukraine is facing challenges from geopolitical tensions, internal cultural debates, and the psychological impact of war. Instead of weakening its brand, these struggles strengthen Ukraine's global image as a symbol of democratic resilience. In order to counter external narratives, Ukraine has resorted to digital diplomacy and cultural advocacy. Ventura highlights how Ukraine.Ua's Instagram page strategically asserts an independent national image and promotes international solidarity through visual narratives. His research on reputational security theory emphasizes the value of a positive national image in protecting sovereignty and democratic principles.<sup>37</sup>

The regional diversity of Ukraine poses another challenge. The Soviet heritage of the Donbas contrasts with the European influences of Galicia, making it difficult to form a unified national identity. Language policy must also balance the promotion of the Ukrainian language with sensitivity to Russian-speaking communities. In addition, there is an ongoing debate about whether to emphasize traditional folklore and Cossack imagery or to reorient towards modern forms of cultural expression, such as the Ukrainian independent music scene, fashion industry, and digital art.

The war has had a profound impact on national branding and mental resilience.<sup>38</sup> Matiash and others document the chronic stress associated with war affecting cognition, emotional resilience, and social cohesion.<sup>39</sup> This underscores the need for national branding to consider not only external representation but also the psychological well-being of citizens, strengthening Ukraine's image as a strong and resilient state.

Lunov and others emphasize the war's psychological effects on Ukrainian men, stressing the need for national branding to support internal resilience alongside external image-building.<sup>40</sup> Bolin and Ståhlberg argue that branding now combines international communication with domestic solidarity.<sup>41</sup> Ukraine's cultural diplomacy has been a key success, with artists and musicians acting as grassroots ambassadors. Unlike traditional state efforts, these organic initiatives

<sup>37</sup> Sofia Ventura, "War and Its Imagery: The Visual Narrative of the Ukrainian State's Instagram Account Ukraine.Ua as a Tool of Digital Public Diplomacy," *International Journal of Strategic Communication* (2024): 5. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2024.2395407>.

<sup>38</sup> Ranti Fauza Mayana and Tisni Santika, "Geographical Indication and Gastrodiplomacy as Nation Branding: A Perspective from Indonesia," *Lentera Hukum* 11, no. 1 (2024): 10. <https://doi.org/10.19184/EJLH.V11I1.45082>.

<sup>39</sup> Mykhailo Matiash, Vitalii Lunov, Liliia Prudka, Yaroslava Rudenko, and V. Prints, "Neuropsychology of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome in Civilian Population in War Conditions," *International Neurological Journal* 20, no. 7 (2024): 385. <https://doi.org/10.22141/2224-0713.20.7.2024.1118>.

<sup>40</sup> Vitalii Lunov, Mykhailo Matiash, Tsira Abdriakhimova, Andriy Pavlov, and Nataliia Dzeruzhynska, "Integrated Health and Personality Adaptation Model (IHPAM) for Men Amidst Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Navigating Psychosomatic Health," *Health of Man* 1 (2024): 52. <https://doi.org/10.30841/2786-7323.1.2024.303827>.

<sup>41</sup> Bolin and Ståhlberg, "Nation Branding vs. Nation Building Revisited," 218.



create an authentic bottom-up brand. Participation in cultural events and artistic collaborations strengthens international solidarity further, confirming Bolin and Ståhlberg's assertion that Ukraine's branding is now a political and ethical statement rather than a form of tourism.<sup>42</sup>

Despite disinformation, cultural debates, and the psychological effects of war, Ukraine has established itself as a symbol of democracy, resilience, and cultural authenticity. By using digital diplomacy and people-centered campaigns, it continues to build its identity as a defender of democratic values. Ukraine's brand must remain adaptable, inclusive, and rooted in both historical narratives and modern achievements, strengthening its image not only as a state but also as a movement.

This study's conceptual framing draws on three strands of literature. First, nation branding is understood as the purposeful construction and management of a country's image through coordinated economic, political, and cultural strategies. Second, cultural identity in this context refers to the shared symbols, practices, and historical references through which members of a society understand themselves collectively. This operational definition draws from postcolonial branding scholarship, which emphasizes how identity markers are contested and reinterpreted in geopolitical struggles.<sup>43</sup> Third, strategic cultural communication – whether via traditional diplomacy or digital platforms – links nation branding to both internal nation-building and external image-making, a convergence particularly visible in states facing existential threats. This framework guides our interpretation of the empirical results by locating them within broader debates on how war, cultural heritage, and modernization interact in the shaping of Ukraine's post-2022 brand. A recurring issue in the literature is what some scholars call the “pro-freezing” of concepts – that is, the effort to stabilize definitions in order to avoid interpretive drift. The present study applies this logic by treating “narrative” and “national identity” not as loose descriptors but as operational categories grounded in critical scholarship. While we use the shorthand “national identity” for clarity, it is conceptually anchored in Anderson's notion of the “imagined community.”<sup>44</sup> Although Anderson did not use the term “identity” himself, his framework of collective imagination provides a functional equivalent. By explicitly aligning “national identity” with “imagined community,” the study ensures theoretical precision while maintaining accessibility for readers across disciplines.

The absence of significant demographic breakdowns, such as gender distribution within the 21–35 age group, also warrants mention. Although age was treated as a unifying cohort characteristic, the range includes individuals in distinct life stages, from early adulthood to mid-career, which may shape cultural

<sup>42</sup> Bolin and Ståhlberg, “Nation Branding vs. Nation Building Revisited,” 218.

<sup>43</sup> Angela Reyes, “Postcolonial Semiotics,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 50, no. 1 (2021): 295. <http://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-101819-110253>.

<sup>44</sup> Anderson, “Imagined Communities,” 45.

orientations differently. Future studies should disaggregate such factors to better understand the interaction between demographic variables and nation-branding perceptions.

## Materials and Methods

The study involved 248 Ukrainian respondents aged 21 to 35 years, who were divided into two groups based on their perspectives regarding nation branding amid the ongoing war. The first group (n = 87) consisted of individuals who believed that war conditions necessitated a reassessment of cultural values to establish a new national brand for Ukraine. The second group (n = 161) consisted of participants who argued that traditional cultural values should serve as the foundation for Ukraine's nation-branding efforts. Participants were recruited voluntarily through social media advertising, academic networks, and cultural institutions. Recruitment took place between January and March 2024 in urban and rural parts of Ukraine. Ethics committees approved the recruitment, and all participants provided their informed consent while preserving confidentiality and voluntariness of participation.

The 21 to 35 years demographic was targeted in the present study because youth play an important role in the construction of national identity and cultural transformation, particularly in periods of geo-political change. They are an active generation engaged in both offline and online cultural debate, and they are, as such, key stakeholders in nation branding. Younger generations are also more exposed to new global forces but are still deeply rooted in the political and historical fabric of Ukraine. They are also a major segment of social movement, media, and cultural policymaking stakeholders, which have a direct effect on the construction of the national brand in Ukraine.

As the study's sample size was 248 respondents, and the respondents hailed from 11 cities in Ukraine, geographic differentiation was not required. The sample, while helpful to discern general trends in cultural identity, is neither large nor well-distributed across single cities to provide meaningful regional comparisons. The study, therefore, employed the general ideological rift between the two groups, one advocating cultural reform and one traditional continuity, as the point of focus to examine. Participants were not pre-selected based on their cultural orientations. Instead, during the survey process, respondents answered a set of attitudinal questions about cultural preservation versus cultural transformation in the context of nation branding. Based on their responses, they were classified into two groups – *Cultural Reformers* and *Traditionalists* – for comparative analysis. This explains the uneven group sizes (n = 87 vs. n = 161), as the division emerged organically from the data rather than from quota sampling. This classification process ensured that group differences were analytically meaningful while still allowing for open-ended responses during data collection. Before conducting the study, the following hypothesis could be formulated: the war and geopolitical consequences influence cultural values and Ukrainian ethnic self-identification,



and they form two groups, one in favor of cultural reform and modernization and another in support of consolidation of traditional cultural identity.

Group 1 (*Cultural Reformers*) would be more likely to lean towards autonomy, equality, and cultural transformation, and would perceive Ukraine as a more divided and fragmented society due to the current crisis. Group 2 (*Traditionalists*) would be more loyal to hierarchy, belonging and national unity and view Ukraine as an integral and coherent whole with cultural identity grounded in continuity in the past.

Attitudes toward national unity and ethnic self-identification play a significant role in shaping cultural values and national branding orientations. Reformers emphasize flexibility and a new identity, while traditionalists emphasize maintaining the past. This hypothesis informed the research design, which allowed us to investigate the ways in which war-driven identity shifts shape cultural orientations and national branding policies within Ukrainian society. To examine value orientations of culture and ethnic self-perception, two diagnostic measures were used: the Semantic Differential “Degree of Semantic Proximity” and the *Schwartz Value Survey* (SVS).

This method, first introduced by Baranova and later modified within the “My Nation – Foreign Nation” version, was implemented to study ethnic autostereotypes and heterostereotypes to provide the respondents with the opportunity to judge their group’s identity. The assessment was provided with a response sheet on which participants rated their group on a seven-point bipolar scale of -3 to +3 between two opposing descriptive terms. Sample pairs of descriptive terms were:

- Friendly – Hostile
- Brave – Fearful
- Honest – Dishonest
- Free – Independent
- United – Divided
- Ukrainian – Foreign

The study was also administered both face-to-face and online, either individually or by small groups (5–9 participants). Under group testing conditions, quiet conditions were supplied by the researchers with equal access to response material. Participants were prompted to thoroughly think about all the dimensions of their ethnic identity and to select the best description of their country. To assess cultural value orientations, the study used the *Schwartz Values Survey* (SVS). A cultural value framework, widely applied in post-Soviet contexts to capture how historical legacies shape value orientations, is particularly suitable for Ukraine during wartime. Baranova’s (2014) “My Nation – Foreign Nation” method has been adapted in this study to examine ethnic auto- and heterostereotypes, offering a tested psychometric tool to assess self-perceptions

of cultural identity.<sup>45</sup> Their combined application strengthens the methodological rigor and situates our approach within established research traditions. Participants were asked to assess the importance of certain cultural values on a scale from -1 to 7, where 0 means that the value is not important, 3 means that the value is of relative importance, 6 means that the value is very important, 7 means that the value is the main guiding principle, and -1 means that the value contradicts personal beliefs.

Cultural values can be categorized along seven dimensions, each representing a major aspect of societal beliefs and behavior. Hierarchy values power, discipline, and social organization, emphasizing structure and order. Mastery/Dominance prioritizes ambition, achievement, and competitiveness, encouraging the drive for success and control. Affective autonomy focuses on pleasure, excitement, and enjoyment, promoting emotional expression and personal satisfaction. Intellectual autonomy values curiosity, creativity and independent thinking, supporting critical thinking and innovation. Equality focuses on justice, social welfare and human rights, striving for fair and equal treatment. Harmony emphasizes peace, unity with nature and environmental protection, advocating for a balanced relationship with the natural world. Belonging emphasizes national pride, tradition and loyalty, fostering a strong sense of cultural identity and community.

To account for response variability between individuals, the centering approach was applied. The grand mean of the response of every participant was computed and moved according to the following formula: Centered Value = Category Mean + (Individual Mean - 4). This ensured a like-for-like comparison between participants and minimized response biases by individuals. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and comparative group analysis were among the statistical analyses that were applied to provide the necessary evidence of the significant differences between the two groups regarding their culture. All procedures were implemented according to the requirements of research ethics.

Although the study primarily employed quantitative psychometric tools, a small qualitative component was included in the form of open-ended questions inviting participants to elaborate on their perceptions of Ukraine's cultural trajectory. These qualitative responses were used to contextualize and interpret statistical patterns, particularly where group differences in value orientations required deeper cultural explanation. While the qualitative dataset was not large enough for systematic thematic coding, it provided illustrative examples that enriched the interpretation of quantitative results. Participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary, that their responses would be kept confidential, and that they could withdraw at any time. The research adhered to the requirements of the guidelines of Osmanova and Spivak to properly translate the psychometric instruments into the socio-cultural environment of the Ukrainian society.

<sup>45</sup> Nataliia Baranova, "Aesthetic Identity and National-Cultural Tradition," *Scientific Notes of Os-troh Academy National University, Economics Series* 14, no. 1 (2014): 100.



The research methodology provided a fertile ground to consider the effect of war conditions on Ukrainian value orientations and cultural identity. By including both cultural value measures and ethnic self-perceptions, the research provides an enlightening analysis of the dynamics of the emerging debate on Ukrainian war-related cultural change within the context of the emerging nation branding debate.

## Results

The analysis revealed statistically significant differences between the two groups on the various scales that support the argument that conceptions of the war at the time of the war are associated with certain patterns of ethnic self-perception and value orientations of culture. The Ukrainian nation-branding process is today affected by the war geopolitics that raise central questions regarding value orientations of culture and cultural identity. For certain Ukrainians, war generates the need to rethink the very foundations of culture to develop a new brand of the country, while others argue that the support of traditional culture is the means to preserve a strong, homogeneous national identity.

It is important to note that the study design does not allow for definitive causal claims about how the war has changed cultural perceptions compared to pre-war conditions. The analysis instead identifies contemporaneous differences in value orientations and ethnic self-perceptions between two attitudinally defined groups during wartime. While statistically significant differences were found, these differences should be interpreted as correlational rather than as direct effects of the war. Furthermore, because the groups were classified post hoc based on survey responses, the observed contrasts reflect current orientations rather than pre-existing categories.

Participants in Group 1 (favorable to the establishment of novel culture) assessed their Ukrainian identity less positively on a number of dimensions compared to Group 2 (favorable to the consolidation of traditional culture). The highest contrast was obtained on the Friendly-Hostile ( $p < 0.001$ ), Brave-Fearful ( $p < 0.001$ ), and Honest-Deceptive ( $p < 0.001$ ) dimensions, on which Group 2 assessed Ukraine significantly higher than Group 1. Similarly, the scale of the United-Divided ( $p < 0.001$ ) also revealed a significant divide, with Group 1 considering Ukrainian society to be more divided while Group 2 considering Ukrainian society to be more united. In summary, the two groups represent divergent but complementary orientations. Group 1 (Cultural Reformers) emphasizes autonomy, creativity, and flexibility, while Group 2 (Traditionalists) highlights hierarchy, belonging, and national unity. Reformers perceive society as fragmented and in need of innovation, whereas traditionalists perceive coherence and resilience rooted in continuity. This condensed contrast underscores that Ukrainian nation branding must address both perspectives simultaneously, integrating reformist innovation with traditional solidarity.

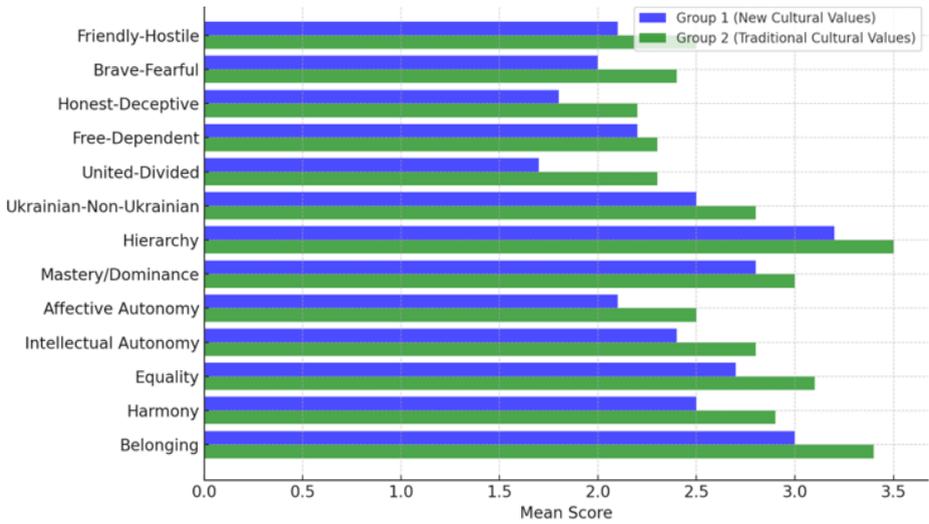
Results from the *Schwartz Value Survey* (SVS) showed significant differences in hierarchy, mastery/dominance, and equality-related values. Group 2 demonstrated a stronger preference for hierarchy and belonging, while Group 1 exhibited higher scores in autonomy-related values (both affective and intellectual). Notably, intellectual ( $p = 0.002$ ) and affective ( $p = 0.004$ ) autonomy were higher among Group 1 participants, meaning that Group 1 participants are concerned with individualism, creativity, and the development of culture, while Group 2 participants are concerned with preserving existing structures of the state and traditions. Group 2 is aligned with a traditional vision, while Group 1's vision of modernism and flexibility underscores the need to have a dynamic approach to branding that combines both historical identity with innovation of culture (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Group differences in cultural values and identity

Scale	Group 1 Mean	Group 1 SD	Group 2 Mean	Group 2 SD	t-statistic	p-value
<b>Friendly-Hostile</b>	2.1	0.8	2.5	0.8	-3.758	0.0
<b>Brave-Fearful</b>	2.0	0.8	2.4	0.8	-3.758	0.0
<b>Honest-Deceptive</b>	1.8	0.8	2.2	0.8	-3.758	0.0
<b>Free-Dependent</b>	2.2	0.8	2.3	0.8	-0.939	0.348
<b>United-Divided</b>	1.7	0.8	2.3	0.8	-5.636	0.0
<b>Ukrainian-non-Ukrainian</b>	2.5	0.8	2.8	0.8	-2.818	0.005
<b>Hierarchy</b>	3.2	0.8	3.5	0.8	-2.818	0.005
<b>Mastery/Dominance</b>	2.8	0.8	3.0	0.8	-1.879	0.061
<b>Affective Autonomy</b>	2.1	0.8	2.5	0.8	-3.758	0.0
<b>Intellectual Autonomy</b>	2.4	0.8	2.8	0.8	-3.758	0.0
<b>Equality</b>	2.7	0.8	3.1	0.8	-3.758	0.0
<b>Harmony</b>	2.5	0.8	2.9	0.8	-3.758	0.0
<b>Belonging</b>	3.0	0.8	3.4	0.8	-3.758	0.0

Source: Data created by the authors.

The findings of the research also show that the two groups have divergent value orientations of culture and national self-perceptions. Group 1, which favored the reform of the value of culture, was also likely to have a negative view of the country's national identity, perceiving the country to be less homogeneous and needing to change. Group 2, which favored the consolidation of traditional values, rated the country higher on most of the measures of the ethnic self-perceptions, with a strong sense of the country being homogeneous, being strong, being honest, and being brave (Figure 1).



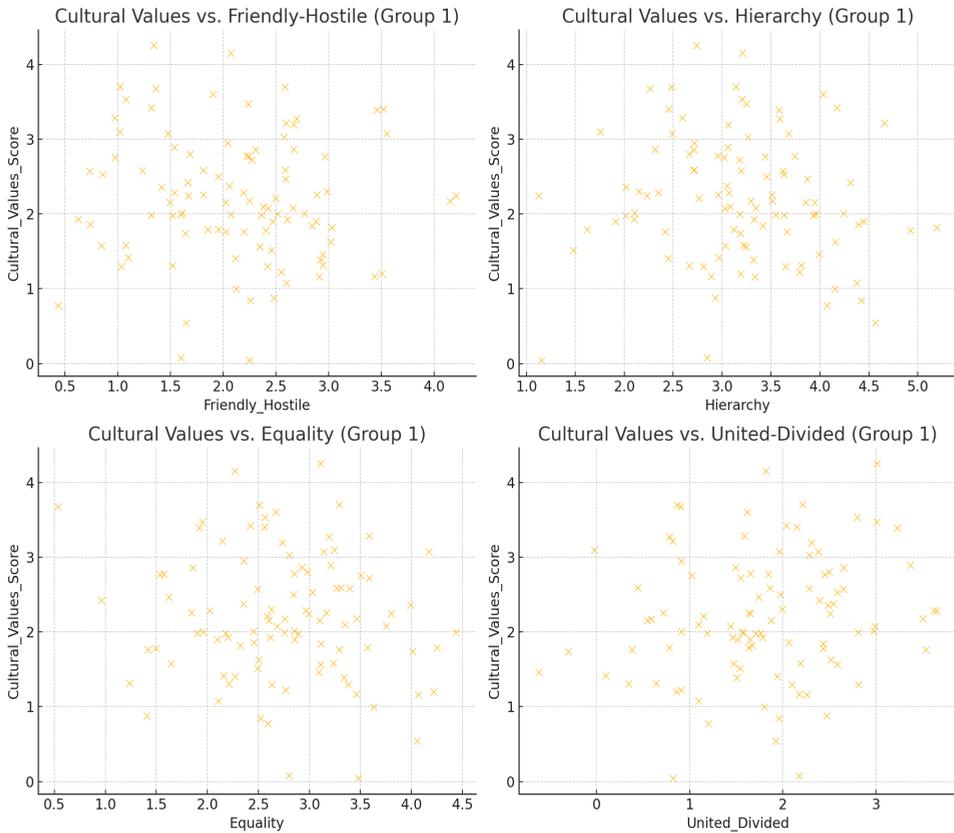
**Fig. 1.** Comparison of cultural perceptions between groups. Source: data created by the authors.

A particularly striking contrast was also present on the United-Divided scale ( $p < 0.001$ ), with Group 1 describing the country as being highly fragmented and Group 2 perceiving the country to be highly united. This reflects the overall debate regarding the question of whether the war-torn identity of Ukraine needs to be anchored within historical heritage or within emerging contemporary narratives of culture. Additionally, *Schwartz Value Survey* (SVS) results demonstrated that Group 1 prioritized intellectual and affective autonomy, while Group 2 prioritized mastery, belonging, and hierarchy.

It is likely that the supporters of the country brand by emerging culture prioritize individualism, analytical analysis, and innovative reinvention, while the supporters of the country brand with a traditional culture base prioritize collective identity, patriotic sentiment, and orderly authority. These findings are important to the country branding strategy that will need to be undertaken by Ukraine after the war. The divide between the two visions is a signal that a blended approach – that incorporates both historical consistency with modern flexibility – is the optimal way of strengthening the international image of Ukraine while preserving internal solidarity.

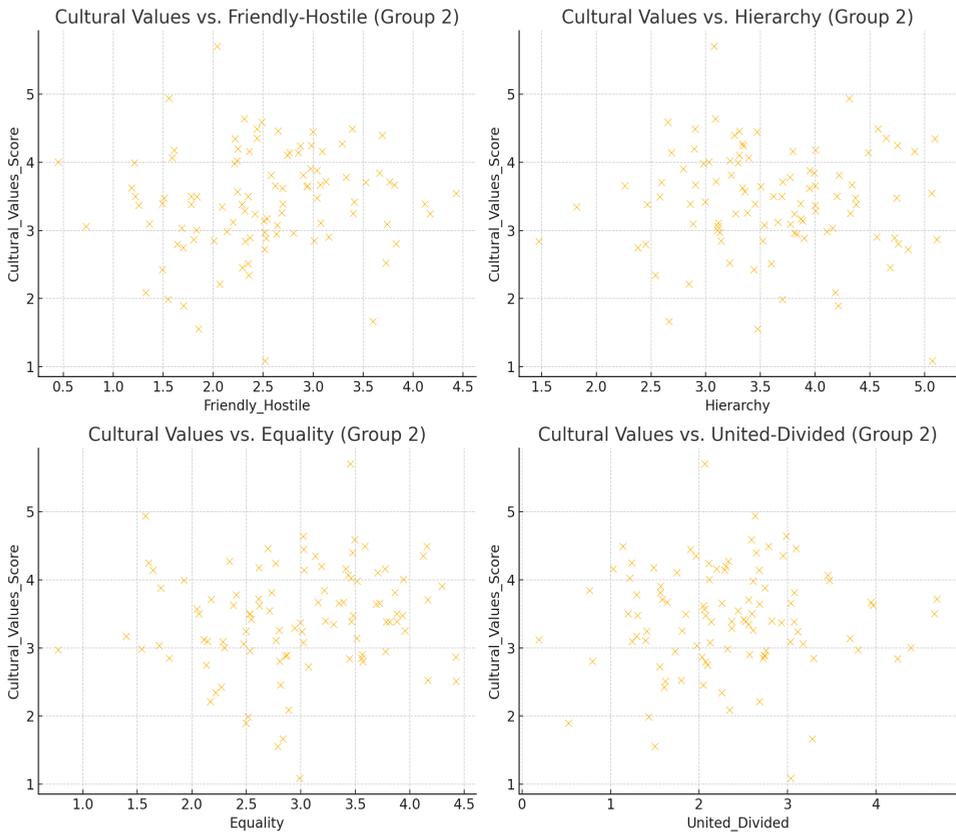
A one-way ANOVA was conducted separately on Group 1 (Cultural Reformers) and Group 2 (Traditionalists) to determine if there are statistically significant differences in Cultural Values by Ethnic Self-Identification and National Perception Measures. In Group 1, the analysis showed  $F = 28.64$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , indicating a highly significant difference between cultural values, ethnic self-identification, and perception measures. This suggests that cultural values in this group are highly influenced by ethnic identity and national perception scales, so reformers have differing views regarding national cohesion and identity. In Group 2, the analysis showed  $F = 31.11$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , which also showed a

significant difference, confirming that these measures influence cultural values in this group. Traditionalists have more predictable value orientations, so they have more predictable values regarding national identity, hierarchy, and belonging than reformers.



**Fig. 2.** ANOVA results on cultural values. Source: created by the authors.

A multiple regression analysis was performed on each group to determine what variables influence Cultural Values. In Group 1 (*Cultural Reformers*), the model explained 16.5% of the variance in cultural values ( $R^2 = 0.165$ ), but no individual variable was statistically significant ( $p > 0.05$ ). The intercept was 1.39 ( $p = 0.175$ ), indicating that cultural values have a moderate baseline, but there are individual differences. This suggests that the cultural identity of reformers is less formal, in that factors such as ethnic identity, equality, or autonomy all contribute to forming identity, but none have dominance. In Group 2 (*Traditionalists*), the model explained only 8.3% of the variance ( $R^2 = 0.083$ ), indicating that cultural values are highly embedded and less predictable. No variables were statistically significant ( $p > 0.05$ ), indicating that cultural values within the group are more consistent and predetermined. Therefore, it is impossible to determine the most important individual factor in defining identity (Figure 2).



**Fig. 3.** Regression of factors on cultural values. Source: created by the authors.

Both groups have significant cultural differences in values, and a nation-branding strategy needs to consider these divisions. Group 1 is influenced by a range of factors, but its identity is flexible and adaptive. Group 2 is more structured in its cultural system, so its cultural values are more established and less likely to change. Since regression analysis indicates that nation branding cannot be based on a single factor, an effective strategy must blend historical identity and modern values to create a flexible and consistent approach (Figure 3). The contribution of the results lies not in proving that such differences exist, but in empirically describing their contours, particularly how attitudes toward unity, hierarchy, and autonomy align with specific value profiles. This distinction is crucial for applying the findings in policy contexts, where overgeneralization of group differences could oversimplify the diversity of views within Ukrainian society. A key practical implication of these statistical findings is that no single factor – such as hierarchy, equality, or autonomy – dominates the formation of cultural identity. The non-significant regression results indicate that cultural orientations are multidimensional and cannot be reduced to a single predictor. This underscores the need for nuanced, multi-pronged nation-branding policies rather than initiatives that privilege one cultural value over others.

Ethnic psychology elucidates how cultural popularization shapes collective self-perception – a cornerstone of state branding. Boulding's dual model of national image distinguishes between the internal identity (a nation's self-concept) and the external image (foreign perceptions).<sup>46</sup> For Ukraine, bridging this gap requires addressing historical fractures, such as the East-West divide, which manifests in conflicting regional loyalties and linguistic preferences.

## Discussion

Nation branding has been increasingly recognized as a multidisciplinary strategy incorporating cultural policy, diplomacy, and digital engagement. Papaioannou's work emphasizes the role of coherent cultural policies in the construction of national identity and global reputation.<sup>47</sup> South Korea is one example of a country that has successfully used cultural policy to increase its global influence, a strategy that may be relevant for nation branding in Ukraine. Savenko emphasizes that a nation's brand must fulfill both an external role – raising global awareness – and an internal one, enhancing national unity.<sup>48</sup> This is reinforced by Ventura's work on Ukraine's use of digital diplomacy through social media platforms such as Ukraine.Ua, which has become an essential tool in constructing the nation's image amid geopolitical conflict.<sup>49</sup>

The research questions can be addressed on the basis of the available data. However, the initial formulation of the article's objective – to examine how war "affects" perception – requires clarification. The absence of baseline data from before the war or of longitudinal measurements means that changes over time cannot be traced. Instead, the analysis provides a cross-sectional snapshot of cultural orientations during wartime. Consequently, any claims about the impact of war should be framed as interpretive rather than causal and supported by existing literature on identity dynamics in wartime, rather than by direct "before and after" comparisons within this study.

Popular culture is also a key element of soft power in nation branding, particularly during periods of conflict or transformation. It is therefore important to distinguish between cultural popularization and popular culture. Cultural popularization refers to deliberate state or institutional efforts to disseminate

<sup>46</sup> Kenneth Boulding, *The Image: Knowledge in Life and Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1956),

<sup>47</sup> Katerina Papaioannou, "Cultural Diplomacy and Nation Branding in Modern Europe," *European Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 2, no. 5 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.24018/ejsocial.2022.2.5.302>.

<sup>48</sup> Oksana Savenko, "Country Brand as a Socio-Cultural Phenomenon," *National Academy of Managerial Staff of Culture and Arts Herald* 1 (2023): 93-98. <https://doi.org/10.32461/2226-3209.1.2023.277640>.

<sup>49</sup> Sofia Ventura, "War and Its Imagery: The Visual Narrative of the Ukrainian State's Instagram Account Ukraine.Ua as a Tool of Digital Public Diplomacy," *International Journal of Strategic Communication* (2024): 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2024.2395407>.



cultural values, heritage, and narratives in order to strengthen national identity. By contrast, popular culture encompasses spontaneous, bottom-up expressions in music, film, literature, and digital media that gain mass appeal. While the two often overlap, the former is strategic and policy-driven, whereas the latter reflects societal creativity and entertainment. Recognizing this distinction helps explain why both state-led initiatives and grassroots cultural movements shape Ukraine's nation brand in distinct yet mutually reinforcing ways.

Gautam and Mellor argue that popular culture shapes perceptions internationally, as with the global spread of music, film, and online media.<sup>50</sup> Biasioli and Drew explore how Ukrainian filmmakers and musicians act as grassroots ambassadors, projecting cultural resilience and national identity through artistic production.<sup>51</sup> This is echoed by the work of Miño and Austin, which advocates for a co-creative approach to nation branding, where non-state cultural agents work together with state initiatives.<sup>52</sup> In the same light, research on Latin American branding by Miño exemplifies the challenges in balancing powers in constructing national narratives. This situation also holds in the case of Ukraine attempting to gain cultural independence. As discussed by Dianina and others, the Swedish case also exemplifies how a nation's creative industries can shape global identity without altering historic narratives.

The economic and digital dimensions of nation branding are increasingly interdependent, as cultural tourism and digital diplomacy redefine how countries engage global publics. Chhabra and Seliverstova emphasize the economic impacts of cultural tourism, noting that heritage preservation and historic narratives can be employed as resources for branding. The potential of Ukraine in these aspects is complemented by Lever, who highlights the role of digital advocacy towards destination branding.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez explore the rise of digital nationalism, showing how online media facilitate participatory nation branding activities.<sup>54</sup> Socio-demographic factors, diaspora mobilization, influence how a nation's brand is interpreted worldwide, as research by Rojas-Méndez and

<sup>50</sup> Uddhav Gautam, "The Role of Culture Power: Examining the Influence of Popular Culture on Global Perceptions," *Unity Journal* 5, no. 1 (2024): 41-56. <https://doi.org/10.3126/unityj.v5i1.63158>

<sup>51</sup> Marco Biasioli and Thomas Drew, "Ukrainian Popular Music in Times of War: National Identity, Transnational Projections, and the Musician as Grassroots Ambassador," *IASPM Journal* 14, no. 2 (2024): 6-29. [https://doi.org/10.5429/2079-3871\(2024\)v14i2.2en](https://doi.org/10.5429/2079-3871(2024)v14i2.2en)

<sup>52</sup> Pablo Miño, "A Co-Creational Approach to Nation Branding: The Case of Marca Chile," *Public Relations Inquiry* 11, no. 2 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2023.2205651>.

<sup>53</sup> Michael W. Lever, Stacia Elliot, and Marion Joppe, "Pride and Promotion: Exploring Relationships between National Identification, Destination Advocacy, Tourism Ethnocentrism, and Destination Image," *Journal of Vacation Marketing* 29, no. 4 (2023): 537-554. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13567667221109270>.

<sup>54</sup> Sabina Mihelj and César Jiménez-Martínez, "Digital Nationalism: Understanding the Role of Digital Media in the Rise of 'New' Nationalism," *Nations and Nationalism* 27, no. 2 (2021): 331-346. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12685>.

Khoshnevis shows.<sup>55</sup> As nation branding in Ukraine continues, cultural resilience, digital engagement, and economic prospects will be key to promoting domestic solidarity and global recognition.

Digital nationalism, as explored by Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez, provides new avenues for Ukraine's branding efforts.<sup>56</sup> Their study highlights how the architecture of digital spaces, algorithmic bias, and national digital ecosystems contribute to the reinforcement of cultural identity. Ukraine's digital branding strategies, particularly in response to geopolitical challenges, leverage these mechanisms to construct a resilient and internationally visible national image. Online activism, including viral campaigns such as #StandWithUkraine, serves as both cultural diplomacy and soft power, reinforcing Ukraine's digital presence and countering disinformation.

The narration of national identity through media also plays a critical role in shaping public perceptions. Berger and others explore how national histories are constructed and disseminated across different media platforms, showing that national branding is a multi-actor process involving governments, cultural institutions, and independent content creators.<sup>57</sup> In Ukraine, the strategic use of historical documentaries, literature, and artistic projects helps solidify national consciousness and promote cultural self-sufficiency.

The results align with existing research on nation branding, cultural identity, and the psychological impact of war, supporting some arguments and challenging others. Scatter plots show relationships between Cultural Values and identity factors – Friendly-Hostile, Hierarchy, Equality, and United-Divided – for Group 1 (*Cultural Reformers*) and Group 2 (*Traditionalists*), revealing significant differences in how each group integrates these markers into their cultural framework. In Group 1, favoring cultural reform, the relationship between Cultural Values and Friendly-Hostile is weak, indicating perceptions of friendliness or hostility have little influence. A negative association with Hierarchy suggests reformers are less likely to endorse hierarchical structures. A moderate positive trend with Equality shows stronger equality aligns with higher cultural values. The United-Divided scale shows a weak negative trend, implying perceived social division has minimal impact on cultural values in this group.

In contrast, Group 2, composed of individuals who support traditional cultural consolidation, exhibits different trends in how identity factors shape cultural values. The relationship between Cultural Values and Friendly-Hostile reveals a slight positive trend, meaning that those who perceive Ukraine as a friendly nation tend to hold stronger cultural values. A more pronounced positive trend emerges

<sup>55</sup> José I. Rojas-Méndez and Mozhdé Khoshnevis, "Conceptualizing Nation Branding: The Systematic Literature Review," *Journal of Product & Brand Management* 32, no. 1 (2023): 107-23. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JPBM-04-2021-3444>.

<sup>56</sup> Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez, "Digital Nationalism," 331.

<sup>57</sup> Stefan Berger, Linas Eriksonas, and Andrew Mycock, *Narrating the Nation: Representations in History, Media, and the Arts* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2022).



in the relationship between Cultural Values and Hierarchy, reinforcing the idea that traditionalists associate hierarchy with cultural stability and national identity. The correlation between Cultural Values and Equality is weaker than in Group 1, which suggests that traditionalists do not strongly link cultural values with equality as reformers do. However, there is a moderate positive trend between Cultural Values and United-Divided, indicating that traditionalists perceive national unity as a reinforcing factor for cultural values.

These findings highlight fundamental differences between the two groups. Group 1 appears to be more influenced by concepts of equality and autonomy, whereas Group 2 places greater emphasis on hierarchy and national unity. Traditionalists demonstrate stronger associations between cultural values and national cohesion, whereas reformers approach cultural identity with more flexibility. For effective nation-branding strategies, these differences must be carefully balanced. It is essential to integrate both unity and progressive values to ensure that branding efforts resonate with both cultural reformers, who value modern identity development, and traditionalists, who prioritize historical continuity and structured national identity.

The findings support the assertion that nation branding is no longer a purely external activity aimed at international audiences but also a central mechanism of internal identity formation. As Bolin and Ståhlberg (2023) argue, the war has blurred the boundary between nation branding and nation building, rendering internal cultural management as important as external reputation management. The contrast between Group 1 and Group 2 reflects this dual purpose: while the former seeks to redefine national values, the latter aims to preserve them. This tension is not specific to the Ukrainian case but has also been observed in other post-conflict nation-branding efforts, such as the tourism rebranding of Croatia.

The fact that Group 2 rated Ukraine as more united and cohesive is consistent with research on wartime solidarity and the strengthening of national identity during conflict. Studies on digital diplomacy and public discourse suggest that the war has reinforced national pride and unity, particularly through state-led communication campaigns such as Ukraine.Ua. However, the findings indicate that not all Ukrainians internalize this message to the same extent – a crucial nuance that challenges the homogenized narrative of national unity often presented in official discourse. At the same time, Matiash and others highlight how chronic fatigue and stress affect cognitive and emotional processing in conflict settings, which may help explain why Group 1 perceives greater fragmentation in national identity.<sup>58</sup> Psychological resilience plays a key role in how individuals interpret nationhood, reinforcing the idea that nation branding strategies must consider

<sup>58</sup> Mykhailo Matiash, Vitalii Lunov, Liliia Prudka, Yaroslava Rudenko, and V. A. Prints, “Neuropsychology of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome in Civilian Population in War Conditions,” *International Neurological Journal* 20, no. 7 (2024): 382–93. <https://doi.org/10.22141/2224-0713.20.7.2024.1118>.

not just cultural messaging but also the mental and emotional well-being of the population.

The findings inform discussions on Ukrainian cultural diplomacy and soft power. Ukrainian musicians and artists act as grassroots diplomats of national identity. Group 1's emphasis on autonomy and individualism reflects support for an artist-driven approach, while Group 2's focus on belonging and hierarchy aligns with a state-driven model, similar to France's *exception culturelle*. This raises a key question for policymakers: Should nation branding rely mainly on state efforts, or include decentralized cultural representation? Research suggests both are needed – state narratives provide stability, while independent culture offers authenticity and creativity. The tension between heritage conservation and change mirrors debates in memory tourism. While nostalgia can strengthen collective identity, focusing solely on the past may alienate younger, modern-oriented residents.

This concern resonates with recent critical debates on the use of “narrative” in international communication and cultural studies. Scholars caution that the uncritical expansion of “narrative” into an all-encompassing term risks conceptual dilution, reducing analytical clarity. By foregrounding “strategic narrative” as a more tightly defined concept, our analysis not only responds to this critique but also contributes to the refinement of theoretical tools available for studying nation branding. In turn, the “imagined community” framework provides a stable conceptual anchor, ensuring that discussions of national identity remain analytically coherent rather than metaphorically diffuse.<sup>59</sup>

As Bolin and Ståhlberg underscore, war-time nation branding is not simply a matter of external image-making – it is a way of internal fortitude and collective identity formation.<sup>60</sup> Future research will need to examine the ways that the current research evolves with time and the ways that reconstruction of war-torn Ukraine will inform international branding strategies and cultural self-perception. The findings of this research underscore a few key elements that must be addressed by cultural specialists and experts in the area of nation branding while crafting the post-war Ukrainian national brand. With the divergent visions unveiled by this research, the one-dimensional approach to nation branding is no longer feasible. Instead, the approach must include historical consistency, innovation of culture, digital interaction, and psychological strength. We present the key elements that must be addressed by academics, policymakers, and brand experts while crafting a comprehensive and successful nation branding plan for Ukraine below.

A key debate in nation branding concerns whether to prioritize traditional cultural values or pursue a modern reconstruction of identity. Research shows Group 2 favors consolidating existing narratives, while Group 1 supports adapting culture to Ukraine's evolving identity. This mirrors broader academic discourse, such as France's focus on cultural heritage through *exception culturelle*

<sup>59</sup> Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994).

<sup>60</sup> Bolin and Ståhlberg, “Nation Branding vs. Nation Building Revisited,” 218.



and South Korea's blend of traditional and modern cultural assets in international branding.<sup>61</sup> The Ukrainian case illustrates a dual approach: preserving traditional linguistic and historical traditions while showcasing contemporary achievements in music, film, digital art, and technology. Memory tourism also contributes to nation branding, framing heritage sites and historical narratives as symbols of resilience and national perseverance, reinforcing cultural sovereignty. The psychological impact of war is critical in shaping the country's brand. War stress and fatigue influence cognitive processing and emotions, affecting perceptions of national unity: Group 1 saw Ukraine as less united, while Group 2 saw it as less divided. Wartime nation branding is not only about external image-making but also internal resilience and psychological solidarity.

Cultural strategists must therefore highlight narratives of healing, collective strength, and psychological resilience within the Ukrainian brand. This may include cultural storytelling that reflects both personal and communal strength of character during wartime; psychologically informed branding campaigns that reinforce solidarity at the national level without excluding individuals who feel disconnected from mainstream narratives; and engagement with mental health discourse in order to acknowledge the war's lasting traumatization and to frame Ukrainian culture within a paradigm of recovery and resilience.

The present research, complemented by Ventura's work, also substantiates the value of digital public diplomacy and digital country branding.<sup>62</sup> The Ukraine.Ua campaign demonstrates the potential of digital engagement, visual narratives, and online diplomacy to shape international opinion. At the same time, such efforts must remain responsive to internal dynamics if nation branding is to resonate meaningfully with both domestic and international audiences.

As Biasioli and Drew note, Ukrainian filmmakers, musicians, and digital creatives act as cultural ambassadors, filling the gap left by traditional diplomacy.<sup>63</sup> This highlights the need for state-driven branding to complement grassroots cultural movements, as independent creatives offer authenticity and broader international reach. Social media efforts should be personalized and emotionally engaging, reflecting real Ukrainian narratives rather than strictly government-approved messaging. Engaging the Ukrainian diaspora is crucial, as they effectively promote Ukrainian culture abroad. A major challenge for Ukraine's cultural brand is the role of language in shaping national identity. Cultural perception varies

<sup>61</sup> Seow Ting Lee, "Vaccine Diplomacy: Nation Branding and China's COVID-19 Soft Power Play," *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 19, no. 1 (2021): 64-78. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-021-00224-4>.

<sup>62</sup> Sofia Ventura, "War and Its Imagery: The Visual Narrative of the Ukrainian State's Instagram Account Ukraine.Ua as a Tool of Digital Public Diplomacy," *International Journal of Strategic Communication* (2024): 1-25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2024.2395407>.

<sup>63</sup> Marco Biasioli and Thomas Drew, "Ukrainian Popular Music in Times of War: National Identity, Transnational Projections, and the Musician as Grassroots Ambassador," *IASPM Journal* 14, no. 2 (2024): 629. [https://doi.org/10.5429/2079-3871\(2024\)v14i2.2en](https://doi.org/10.5429/2079-3871(2024)v14i2.2en).

depending on the emphasis on novel versus traditional values. Group 2's focus on unity aligns with linguistic policies promoting Ukrainian as the national language, while Group 1's emphasis on autonomy suggests a more flexible, adaptive approach may be appropriate.

Thus, cultural experts must ensure that the country's branding is not defined by the exclusion of others on linguistic grounds but instead reflects cultural strength and adaptability. They should recognize Ukraine's cultural production – literature, film, and music – as a means of reinforcing a shared sense of Ukrainian identity, and consider bilingual or multilingual branding strategies to address both domestic and international audiences.

The findings also underscore the economic dimensions of nation branding, particularly in relation to the promotion of cultural and heritage tourism. Ukraine's cultural tourism sector – encompassing sites of historical significance, memory tourism, and the cultural industries – constitutes a key component of the country's post-war economic reconstruction strategy. As Seliverstova, Lever, and others argue, tourism not only serves economic objectives but also contributes to the consolidation of national identity and the exercise of the state's soft power.<sup>64</sup>

The growth of cultural tourism should highlight both Ukraine's historical heritage and its vibrant contemporary culture. As Chhabra notes, the role of digital heritage tourism should be expanded to ensure continued access to Ukrainian cultural assets during the reconstruction process.<sup>65</sup> At the same time, Ukraine has the potential to establish itself as a regional hub for creative industries by drawing on the growing influence of independent designers, musicians, and technology entrepreneurs.

Cultural experts must also remain attentive to the political dimensions of nation branding. As de Vries et al. emphasize, nation branding is becoming increasingly politicized, with both domestic and international actors shaping cultural narratives.<sup>66</sup> The close connection between Ukraine's national image and ongoing geopolitical challenges means that branding strategies should be coordinated with broader diplomatic and security objectives. It is therefore important to avoid overly militarized themes that may alienate segments of the public. Instead, national branding should foreground values such as democracy, sustainable development, and human dignity in order to resonate with European and global audiences.

It is essential to acknowledge internal disagreements regarding nationhood and identity in order to prevent the deepening of internal political divisions. At the same time, nation branding should promote a positive and inclusive vision of Ukraine as a modern, innovative country with a rich cultural heritage. The findings of this research indicate that Ukraine's nation-branding approach must be adaptive, multifaceted, and inclusive. Accordingly, cultural and nation-branding experts

<sup>64</sup> Seliverstova, "Consuming' National Identity," 67.

<sup>65</sup> Chhabra, Resilience, Authenticity, and Digital Heritage Tourism, 24.

<sup>66</sup> De Vries, Hobolt, and Walter, "Politicizing International Cooperation," 312.



should: balance historical narratives with contemporary cultural innovation; integrate psychological resilience into branding efforts; leverage digital diplomacy and grassroots cultural advocacy; address linguistic identity with flexibility and inclusivity; maximize the potential of cultural and creative tourism; and ensure that political narratives align with cultural representation without exacerbating internal divisions.

As Bolin and Ståhlberg have argued, nation branding during wartime is not merely a matter of external image-making but a central practice of internal identity formation and collective psychological resilience.<sup>67</sup> Ukraine's post-war reconstruction thus represents an opportunity to redefine a national brand that is inclusive, forward-looking, and appealing to international audiences. By taking these considerations into account, Ukraine can develop a robust and dynamic national identity that resonates both domestically and internationally, positioning itself as a standard-bearer of cultural strength and democratic values.

Future research should build on these findings through longitudinal studies that track how cultural orientations evolve across different stages of conflict and recovery. Greater regional differentiation would offer deeper insight into how historical legacies, such as the East–West divide, shape nation-branding perceptions. In addition, examining gender differences and generational cohorts beyond the 21–35 age group would help capture the diversity of identity-formation processes. Such research would enable the development of more targeted nation-branding strategies that respond to both internal diversity and external communication needs.

## Conclusions

This study provides meaningful insights into the effects of wartime conditions on Ukrainian national identity and nation-branding strategies. The research highlights a clear dichotomy of visions: while one segment of Ukrainians favours reassessing cultural values in order to develop a new national brand, another is convinced that revitalizing traditional cultural narratives should serve as the foundation of Ukrainian identity. These contrasting orientations are reflected in ethnically driven self-perceptions and value preferences, underscoring the complexity of nation branding in times of crisis.

The analysis of ethnic self-perception further reveals that the group prioritizing a re-evaluation of the country's cultural brand tends to perceive Ukraine as more divided and in need of change, whereas the group favoring traditionalism views the country as more homogeneous and resilient. These findings suggest that Ukraine's nation branding should address both perspectives: preserving cultural continuity to provide stability while simultaneously leaving space for innovation and modernization.

The results of the Schwartz Value Survey reinforce this dichotomy.

<sup>67</sup> Bolin and Ståhlberg, "Nation Branding vs. Nation Building Revisited," 218.

Respondents supporting change attached greater importance to intellectual and affective autonomy, creativity, and analytical thinking, whereas those favoring traditional values emphasized hierarchy, belonging, and social solidarity, again pointing to the importance of deep historical foundations for national identity. Together, these findings strengthen the case for a blended approach to nation branding that remains rooted in the past while remaining open to cultural change and innovation.

The implications are significant for both branding specialists and cultural policymakers. Ukraine's branding efforts must strike a nuanced balance between narratives of past and present in order to avoid alienating segments of the population that seek a contemporary, future-oriented identity. Nation branding should also incorporate psychological resilience, acknowledging the impact of war on the population. Leveraging digital diplomacy, public mobilization, and cultural diplomacy may enable Ukraine to develop a brand that is both internally unifying and externally compelling.

While the findings offer valuable insights into the relationship between cultural values and competing visions of Ukraine's national brand, they should be interpreted in light of the study's design. In the absence of longitudinal data, the research cannot determine how these orientations differ from pre-war conditions. Rather, it documents the coexistence of divergent identity frameworks during wartime and their implications for nation-branding strategies. The patterns identified here should therefore be understood as reflecting current wartime attitudes rather than definitive shifts attributable solely to the conflict.

Ultimately, Ukraine's capacity to build a post-war identity will depend on reconciling the tension between heritage and change. The study suggests that successful nation branding need not be rigid or exclusionary but should instead remain adaptive to the ways Ukrainians understand their country. By combining authenticity rooted in the past with flexibility and openness to cultural transformation, Ukraine can cultivate a positive international image as a resilient, innovative, and democratic state.

### **Rezumat**

Acest articol analizează popularizarea culturii ca o componentă esențială a *nation branding*-ului, concentrându-se asupra Ucrainei în contextul războiului în curs și al contestării geopolitice. Pornind de la teoriile *nation branding*-ului, ale *soft power*-ului, ale comunităților imaginare și ale narațiunilor strategice, studiul explorează modul în care identitatea culturală este mobilizată pentru a susține atât construcția imaginii externe, cât și procesele interne de construire a națiunii. O atenție deosebită este acordată tensiunii dintre consolidarea narațiunilor culturale tradiționale și promovarea transformării culturale orientate spre modernitate și integrare europeană. Din punct de vedere empiric, articolul analizează datele unui sondaj realizat în



2024 pe un eșantion de 248 de respondenți ucraineni cu vârste cuprinse între 21 și 35 de ani, împărțiți în două grupuri în funcție de atitudinile lor față de continuitatea culturală versus reformarea culturii în cadrul strategiilor de *nation branding*. Utilizând diferențialul semantic „Națiunea mea – Națiune străină” și *Chestionarul valorilor Schwartz* (SVS), studiul identifică diferențe semnificative în autopercepția etnică și orientările valorice culturale. În timp ce un grup pune accent pe autonomie, creativitate și inovație, celălalt prioritizează ierarhia, apartenența și unitatea națională. Rezultatele sugerează că *nation branding*-ul Ucrainei nu poate fi construit pe o singură narațiune culturală, ci trebuie să integreze autenticitatea istorică cu inovația culturală. Articolul susține că *nation branding*-ul eficient în Ucraina aflată în război funcționează simultan ca diplomatie culturală, mecanism de consolidare a rezilienței psihologice și răspuns strategic la dezinformarea externă.

**Cuvinte cheie:** *diplomatie digitală; percepția etnică de sine; război, reziliență culturală; valori naționale.*

**Antonina IVASHCHUK,**

Department of Journalism,  
Advertising and Public Relations,  
State University “Kyiv Aviation Institute”  
E-mail: antonina.ivashchuk@npp.kai.edu.ua

**Kateryna POLOZHENTSEVA,**

Department of Personnel Management,  
Labor Economics and Public Administration,  
Interregional Academy of Personnel Management  
E-mail: ekaterina.impact@gmail.com

**Inha PASENKO,**

Department of Scientific Work  
and Editorial-Publishing Activities,  
Kyiv Municipal Academy of Circus and Performing Arts  
E-mail: i.pasenko@kmaecm.edu.ua

**Mykola KRYPCHUK,**

Department of Show Directing,  
Kyiv National University of Culture and Arts  
E-mail: kripchuk@gmail.com

**Olga LACHKO,**

Department of Directing, Kharkiv State Academy of Culture  
E-mail: ef-festival@ukr.net