

## Corporate Image of Banks: Comparative Study in Bulgaria and Romania

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### Abstract

Topics related to corporate brand image and the way customers perceive the brands are widely spread and gain a lot of attention among academics and practitioners as well. All specialists, who are engaged in the area of communication process and who convey messages to the target audiences, often ask themselves questions as follows: “What happens with the brand attitude after the advertisement” and more important: “How does that change influence on the real customer behavior?”. Despite the large number of publications, still the field of corporate image measurement in the banking industry seems less researched. Banking environments are challenging, with increasing competition. In addition to this, bank services are quite specific - they are intangible and require great engagement when the final decision is made. Due to the above mentioned, the present paper examines how two different advertising campaigns for UniCredit Bulbank and Bancpost Romania convey different attitude and form different images in customers’ minds. Brand image perceptual mapping study in the period of 20-31 July, 2018, is conducted. The main purpose was to find out what types of images, related to human characteristics acknowledge people for the tested advertisements. The study also shows how people assess the advertisements and to what extent they change their attitude towards the banks after they saw them. The target audience in the survey includes people, aged between 25-55 y/o, active banking users, urban population, as included are both countries (Bulgaria and Romania). The final purpose of the study is to give suggestions how to improve the advertising messages in the banks when it comes down to image dimensions and attributes from customer perspective. The implications also indicate the level of importance of customer surveys when it comes down to advertising campaigns.

**Keywords:** Corporate brand image, Marketing Research, Corporate image advertising.

**JEL classification:** M31, M37.

### 1. Introduction

The topic related to advertising of financial services is quite crucial and important to be discussed due to the following reasons: (1) financial adverts create awareness of existing and new products; (2) they provide information about the product/service characteristics in terms of conditions for usage and all needed rational characteristics for the customers’ final choice. Last, but not least, the adverts of banks enhance the reputation, educate bank customers, remind customers about the bank, and establish certain corporate brand perception in the customers’ mind.

The objective of the present study was to find out what are the different brand personality features which are recognized in two corporate image bank advertisements. Little empirical research could be outlined for that area, despite the fact it is quite important. From one hand, such research could support the companies to see how the different advertisements develop certain images in customers’ mind which at later stage, influence on their behavior. From other hand, the comparative perspective puts the question about the adverts which are adapted for the different regions in Europe and the success of that activity. As it is obvious from the research data, people recognize different brand personality characteristics for the advertisements. Based on that, they have different attitude towards the banks, which probably influence on their final choice.

Due to the fact that within the paper, prominent part is put for the concepts of corporate brand image with focus on brand personality features, some information about the concept is recommended to be presented. Presented also are the main differences between the

interchangeable concepts for brand image, reputation, and identity, due to the fact the brand personality itself is quite important aspect within the whole model of brand management (see figure 1).

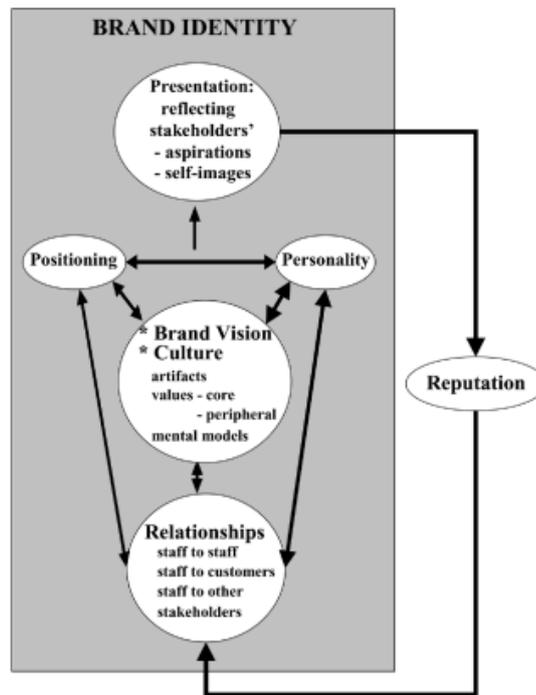


Figure 1. Identity reputation gap model of brand management

Source: De Chernatony, 1999

## 2. Corporate brand image concept

There are various definitions for the corporate brand image as it is important to notice the difference between brand image and corporate brand image. The brand image is related to all perceptions held by customers about company's specific products and services. Corporate brand image as a concept includes the result of the interaction of all experiences, impressions, beliefs, feelings and knowledge people have about a company (Worcester, 1997, p. 147). Both brand and corporate image could be presented from personification perspective and that's the main focus within the following report.

The brand's emotional characteristics are represented by the metaphor of personality, which evolves from the brand's core values. Personality traits are further developed through associations with the "typical user" imagery, endorsers and consumers' contacts with the company's employees (Aaker, 1997).

Brand personality refers to a brand's ability to appeal to consumers based on the human characteristics associated with it (Babin and Harris, 2013). Consumers, to a certain extent have relationships with brands. Namely these personality traits associated with the brand are important in the formation and maintenance of brand/consumer relationships (Babin and Harris, 2013) which is obvious also within the current project.

Managers therefore need to ensure that a brand's personality is conveyed consistently by both its employees and external communications. Another influential source for a brand's personality is its positioning and for it an integrated approach to branding can help reinforce the synergy between these. Effective corporate branding defines a business's personality. Customers who can relate to a company make an emotional attachment. Strong connections lead to high customer loyalty, increased profits and beneficial word-of-mouth advertising.

Based on the empirical data, we could conclude that corporate image itself has two main aspects: related to the rational perspective (these are all elements which people easily recognize) and emotional (all feelings which provoke the brand to the customers' mind). The corporate brand image can be viewed both as independent variable (it influences on the customer's choice) as well as dependent variable (it is based on the customer experience and impressions on the bank). No matter of the differences between both concepts, all research review for that topic show that both play important driving force for the customer choice, satisfaction and loyalty.

### **3. Corporate brand image, identity and reputation**

When we discuss corporate brand image it should be reviewed another two important concepts, namely the brand identity and the brand reputation. The link between the companies, their identity, everything related to the brand (indicators like awareness, loyalty, attitude, associations, and activities) influence on the image as well as the consumer attitude. Each company has its own identity which influences on the brand as whole and key indicators related to it: brand awareness, associations, attitude, loyalty, brand preference.

Based on the literature overview it becomes clear that brand identity is recognized to be the antecedent to brand image. In his book, *The New Strategic Brand Management*, Kapferer (2004) conceptualized brand identity as the brands particular vision, aims, values. Balmer (1998) shared Kapferer's' position but viewed brand identity from a corporate perspective.

According to him, "brand identity articulates the corporate ethos, aims and values and presents a sense of individuality that can help to differentiate the organization within its competitive environment".

According to another definition, corporate identity could be outlined as the sub-set of organizational values with which a company wants to identify itself to all its audiences (Johnson and Zinkhan, 1990; Zinkhan et al., 200 1; Van Riel, 1995). No matters of the definitions laid down are the company values, and they derive from certain company attributes, which could be recognized as company brand personality features.

Brand image, identity, all these concepts are interchangeable to some extent. In addition to identity, comes also the concept for the corporate reputation. In contrast to a brand's image, which reflects current, changing perceptions, a brand's reputation is more stable and represents the distillation of multiple images over time (Fombrun and van Riel, 1997). Gray and Balmer (1998) understand corporate image and corporate reputation, as an equal criterion and give them the same level of importance and link them as similar issues. From their perceptions through corporate communications corporate identity affects the corporate image and reputation in similar way. No matter of the different concepts and interpretations, we could outline that all of them are related to certain feelings and emotions which could be recognized within the communication campaigns of the companies, including the banks as well.

### **4. Research specifics, methodology and main objectives**

In order to best represent how advertising form different brand images and features, a cross-national survey was conducted. The data was gathered through the online panel of two marketing research agencies, located in Bulgaria. A self-administrated structured questionnaire was developed using the online platform Survey Gizmo. All results are calculated using SPSS.19, as descriptive statistics, multiple response and compare means are used for data analysis. The study consisted of bank customers in Bulgaria and Romania; with equally distributed sample size (total numbers of 208 participants are included in the project).

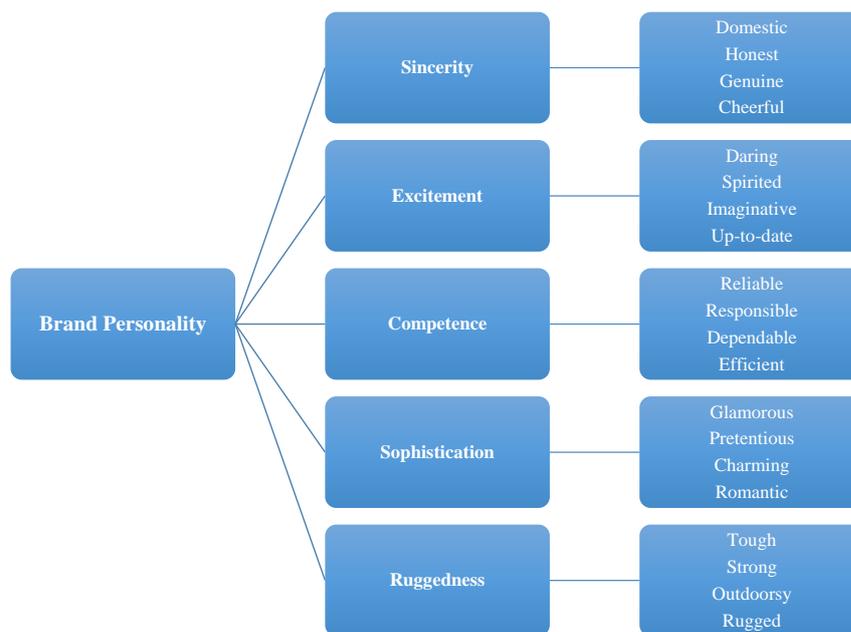
The tested advertisements could be found in the following web addresses:

- Spot 1: UniCredit Bulbank: Banking that matters, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LNfcWWsoFws>
- Spot 2: Bancpost Corporate Movie, equilibrium, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XiIaxcejous>

As specific objectives of the survey, we could outline:

- To find out the important features for the customers when they form their attitude towards the banks in general;
- To reveal how people perceive both brands as a person based on the tested advertisements;
- To research to what extent they recognize Aaker brand personality dimensions for the tested adverts;
- To give recommendations and summary based on the research results;

For the brand personality features, used as a basis is the brand personality model of Jennifer Aaker (see figure 3). Within her model, we could outline the following dimensions where for each of them certain human features could be recognized. For the purpose of the survey and having in mind the present report represents financial adverts, some of the traits are pre-formulated in different way, but keeping the sense for the main dimensions they reflect.



*Figure 2. Brand personality Dimensions model*

Source: Aaker, 1997, pg. 347

## 5. Main results

The first topic presented is the main factors that influence on the customer attitude as a whole towards the banks. As it becomes clear from the numbers, both target groups (Bulgarians and Romanians) form their attitude based on strongly rationale factors like the loan conditions and their transparency (see table 1). What is interesting to notice here is the difference between Bulgarians and Romanians in terms of indicators related to the advertisements and the provided customer experience. Romanians at greater extent declare important for them is the interesting customer experience in comparison with Bulgarians (average score of 3.25 for Bulgarians

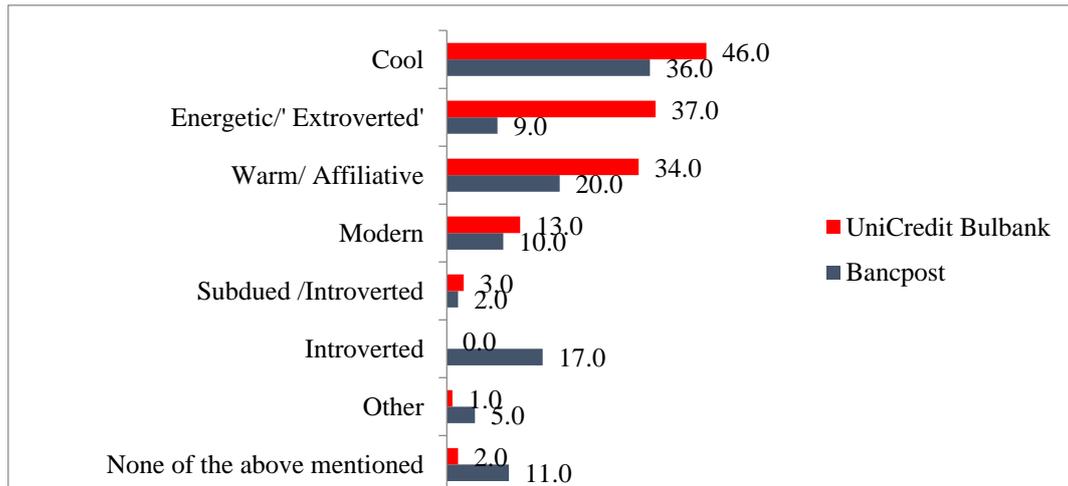
versus 4.17 for Romanians). In addition to this, the banks to be advertised as well as the advertisements to be creative seem to be more important for Romanians in comparison with Bulgarians. These numbers put the question about the different psychological profile of both nations which should be taken in mind from all specialists, engaged in advertising. The question is important due to the fact that very often, we observe advertisement creative which is adapted for particular market, but not created having in mind these specifics. As it is obvious from the gathered data, this should not be neglected while making different advertisements.

**Table 1. Factors influencing on the overall attitude towards the banks in general  
(where 1 is the least important and 5 is the most important factor)**

Indicators	BG	RO
<b>Question: How important for you are each of the following statements, when you form your attitude towards the banks in general? Where 1 is "Not important at all" and 5 is "Very important"</b>	<b>Average scores</b>	
To be aware of the bank ( to have experience with it, not only to know it by name)	4,30	4,04
To recognize the bank products/services among others	3,94	4,21
The bank to be the first that comes to your mind	3,27	3,81
The bank to provide you feeling for credibility	4,28	4,53
The bank to provide interesting customer experience to its clients in the office areas	3,25	4,17
The bank to be, with good positive reputation among your friends/relatives	3,85	4,20
The bank to provide transparent loan conditions	4,57	4,67
Most of your friends to agree that this bank offers best loan conditions and services	3,37	3,64
The advertisements for this bank to be creative	2,72	3,67
The advertisements for this bank to be different from those for competing banks	2,73	3,51
The bank to be intensively advertised	2,46	3,44
The treatment received from the personnel of the bank to be kind and polite	4,51	4,61

Source: Author own research results

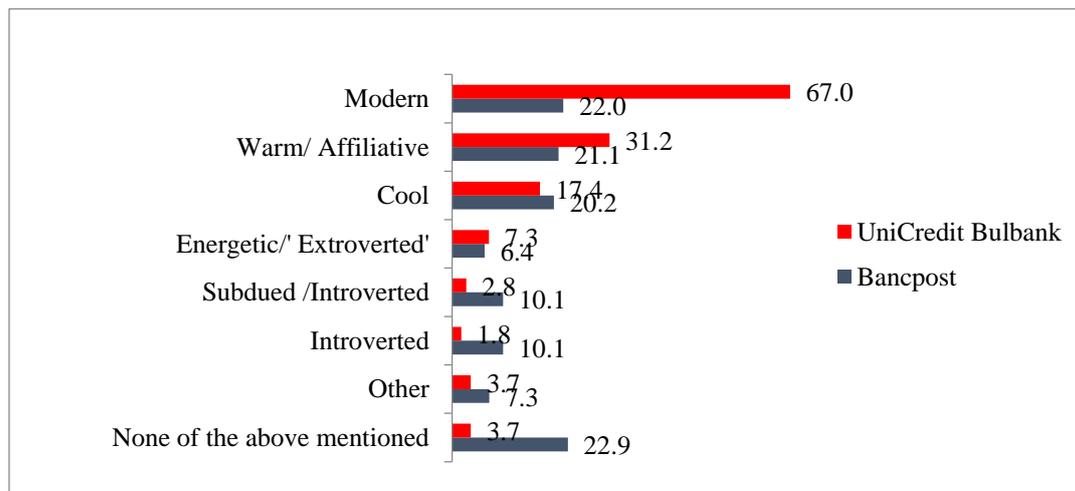
As it was discussed above the paper, the brand as a person is interesting indicator to be researched; customers are more likely to choose brands which are close to them as people. The conducted research showed that we observe significant difference within the tested spots in that area among Bulgarians and Romanians. For Romanians, both advertisements represent cool person, but to greater extent the positive features are recognized for UniCredit Bulbank advertisement (see figure 4). UniCredit Bulbank (UCB) brand could be described as energetic, warm, and to some extent modern person, while Bancpost brand seems introverted based on the video. It also makes impression the percentage of people who point out the answer “none of the above mentioned” for Bancpost spot - 11 % versus 2 % for UniCredit Bulbank spot. That shows that Bancpost brand image is not so focused and clear in comparison with UCB in customers’ minds – probably, more difficult they would connect to the brand.



**Figure 3.** *If you have to imagine the brand as a person, what will be the characteristics of that person, having in mind the ad you just saw? (Romanians)*

Source: Author own research results

Bulgarians point out the same feature as even more they recognize UCB brand as modern in comparison with Romanians. Among Bulgarians, the percentage of people who declare they did not recognize any of the features is about 23% for Bancpost advertisement in comparison with UniCredit Bulbank.



**Figure 4.** *If you have to imagine the brand as a person, what will be the characteristics of that person, having in mind the ad you just saw? (Bulgarians)*

Source: Author own research results

If we observe Aaker brand dimensions and see the answers only for Romanians in terms of the tested advertisements, UniCredit Bulbank brand has traits for sincerity and competence, while Bancpost advert seems more sophisticated in comparison with UCB spot. Traits related to ruggedness are also more likely to be recognized for Bancpost spot in comparison with UCB (see figure 5).

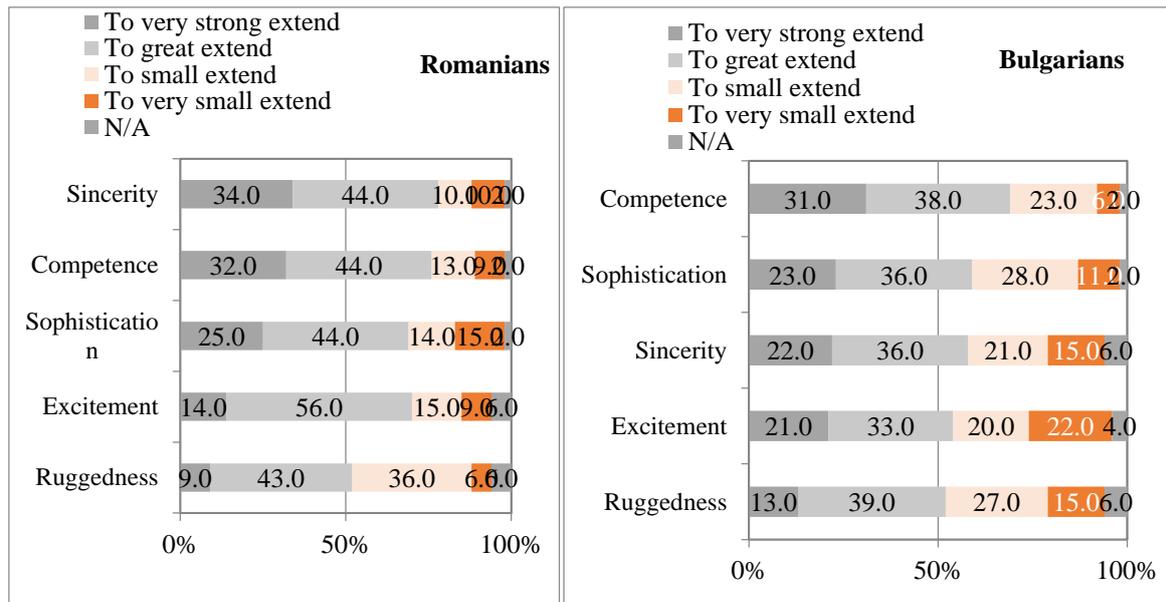


Figure 5. According to you, what are the human characteristics associated with the brand, having in mind the ad you just saw? (UniCredit Bulbank)

Source: Author own research results

In terms of the particular traits, related to the brand, for Romanians, genuine, innovative and distinctive are the main human features which distinguish in positive way UCB spot. For Bancpost brand, the features that are most commonly recognized are traditionalist, as well as pretentious. For Bulgarians, “up- to-date” register the highest average score for UCB brand and that’s the main difference between UCB and Bancpost brand. To a greatest extent for Bulgarians, Bancpost brand in comparison with UCB brand is pretentious (see table 2). In short, if we take in mind Aaker brand personality main dimensions based on that results, we could conclude that for Romanians UCB brand is a person who involves sincerity and to some extent excitement, while for Bancpost that feature is sophistication.

Table 2. For each of the following attributes, please tell us to what extend do you agree, disagree that the advertised brand is: (Where 1 means completely do not agree and 5 completely agree)

Romanians	UniCredit Bulbank ( average)	Bancpost ( average)	Difference between UCB and Bancpost spot
Pretentious	3,12	3,34	-0,22
Up-to date	3,71	3,15	0,56
Genuine	3,91	3,15	0,76
Innovative	3,93	3,17	0,76
Revolutionary	3,62	3,00	0,62
Reliable	3,58	3,21	0,37
Traditional	3,33	3,49	-0,16
Fashionable	3,69	3,03	0,66
With best loan conditions	3,45	3,07	0,38
For all people who need financing	3,71	3,28	0,43
Distinctive	3,70	3,01	0,69
Liberal	3,62	3,02	0,60
Socially responsible	3,78	3,32	0,46
Prestigious	3,81	3,32	0,49
Honest	3,77	3,26	0,51
Bulgarians	UniCredit Bulbank ( average)	Bancpost ( average)	Difference between UCB and Bancpost spot
Pretentious	2,84	3,28	-0,44

Up-to date	4,07	3,12	0,95
Genuine	3,83	3,04	0,80
Innovative	3,92	3,08	0,83
Revolutionary	3,30	2,87	0,43
Reliable	3,77	3,19	0,58
Traditional	3,35	3,31	0,04
With best loan conditions	3,42	2,87	0,55
For all people who need financing	3,69	3,02	0,67
Distinctive	3,57	3,13	0,44
Liberal	3,46	2,97	0,49
Socially responsible	3,50	3,02	0,48
Prestigious	3,81	3,13	0,68
Honest	3,51	3,09	0,42

Source: Author own research results

Different advertisements not only convey different human features to the customers, but they influence on the overall attitude towards the banks. Related to that indicator, Romanians seem even more reflected by the ads, for them we observe the strongest positive change – about 62% percent of the respondents declare they have much better, somewhat better opinion on the bank after they saw the ad. This percentage for Bancpost is 29%. Among Bulgarians that is not so strong as a feeling, but again 44.9% declare positive impact on the overall attitude towards the bank after they saw the advertisement of UCB. For benchmark that percentage is 23.8% when it comes down to Bancpost spot.

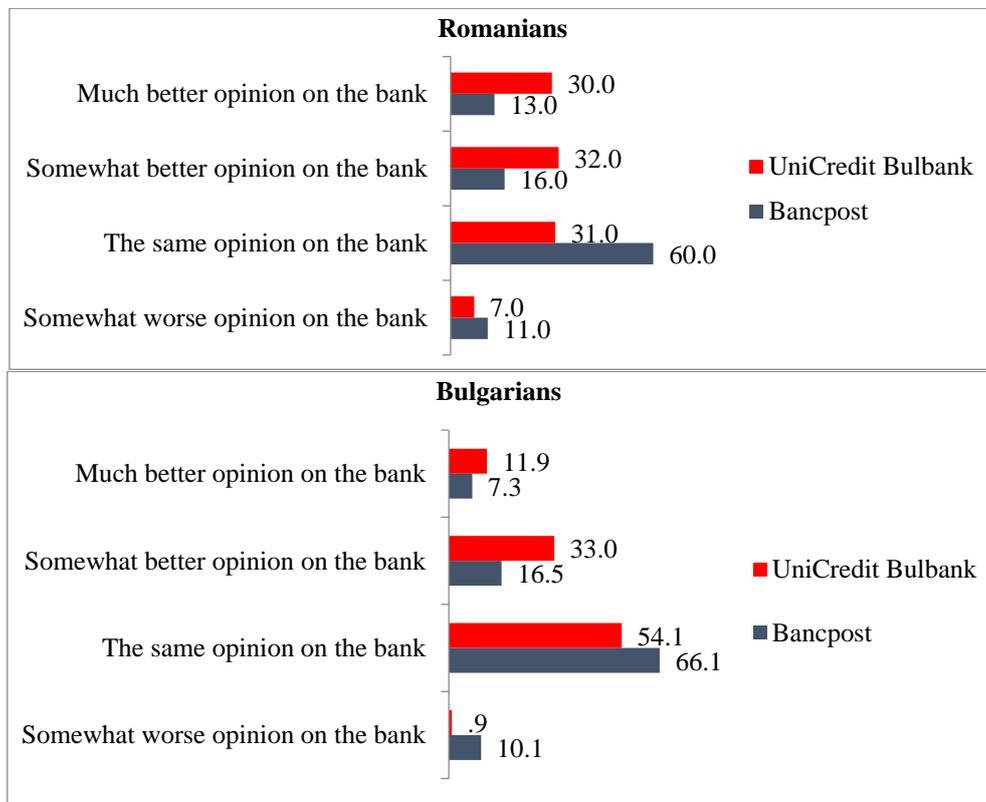


Figure 6. Having seen this clip, would you say you have...?

Source: Marketing research

## 6. Conclusion

Based on the conducted survey we could summarize that the traditional marketing approach will no longer work, customers will become more and more pretentious while choosing and the importance for the advertising will become even more significant. The practice to use one and the same creative within different countries should be very carefully used especially in the area of banking advertising. Banks provide intangible products to their clients, their advertisements should be even more creative, and they should convey traits of positive and sincere brands. The present research has its valuable insights to the financial sector by encouraging them for the improvement of their corporate images campaigns. For further research, it will be quite useful qualitative technique also to be added within the methodology in order to derive customer in-depth insights about brand personal trait and their influence on the attitude and final choice.

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