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Catalan as a brand: A study of perceptions of Catalan using the language branding model

ABSTRACT

The prestige of languages is one of the factors that influence their acquisition, use and status. Drawing on analytical frameworks from communication studies, the language branding model proposes analysing the 'brand' of minority and minoritized languages, using branding tools both to assess their current condition and to design action-oriented interventions. Following the model's application to Basque, this study advances its adaptation to the specific features of Catalan, examining the model's five dimensions: Awareness, Associations, Attitudes, Attachment and Activity. This research employs focus groups with participants born in Catalonia and elsewhere, sampled by place of birth, age cohort, initial language and geographical area. The analysis explores perceptions, attributes and the social value of Catalan language. The findings validate the model and yield key insights into public perceptions of Catalan, examined here for the first time as a brand.

KEYWORDS

brand image
minority language
minoritized language
languages prestige
language attitudes
social value
focus groups

INTRODUCTION

Languages are not only instruments of communication; they are social objects whose symbolic content and associative networks can shape their use. Each language possesses a brand image that will, in part, influence speakers' everyday choices and usage. This is especially salient in multilingual communities, where speakers deploy one language or another according to situational demands (Boix-Fuster and Vila 1998).

In Catalonia, there is a widespread perception of the importance of Catalan for professional advancement and social integration (Centre d'Estudis d'Opinió 2024). Nevertheless, eight in ten Catalan speakers switch to Spanish when addressed in that language (Plataforma per la Llengua 2021). In addition, only 8.6 per cent of foreign residents in Catalonia regularly use Catalan (Generalitat de Catalunya 2025a). Plataforma per la Llengua (2025) contends that Catalan is minoritized and calls for stronger public action to defend the language.

This article's overarching aim is to explore the brand image of the Catalan language, adopting a multidisciplinary and innovative approach that applies communication theories (branding) to an object of study more commonly examined within sociolinguistics.

The specific objectives are: (1) to apply branding theories to the study of perceptions of the Catalan language; (2) to identify, for the first time, the attributes society uses to describe Catalan and (3) to examine similarities and differences in perceptions between locally born and non-local populations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Branding applied to language

Language Policy and Planning (LPP) is a consolidated field within sociolinguistic research, concerned with the deliberate management of language use and development. According to Cooper (1989), language planning encompasses intentional actions aimed at influencing how people acquire, employ or perceive the status of particular linguistic codes. Fishman (1972) distinguishes four principal dimensions: status planning (the social position conferred on a language), corpus planning (its structural and normative development), educational planning (its integration into schooling) and prestige planning (image). This last dimension – prestige planning – shows a notable conceptual convergence with the notion of branding and offers an opportunity to investigate language image through a communication-theoretic lens.

Classical branding theories (Keller 1993; Aaker 1996) have for decades been applied successfully to the assessment of the intangible value of commercial brands, and the conceptual framework has been extended to other domains such as nations (Anholt 1998) and cities (Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2005; Kasapi and Cela 2017) within the rubric of place branding (Govers and Go 2009). Further extensions include personal branding (Gorbatov et al. 2018) and sports branding (Richelieu and Korai 2012).

Other studies have also proposed an interdisciplinary approach that combines the two research traditions addressed in this study: branding and sociolinguistics. Pasamar (2006) explores the relevance of sociolinguistic and cultural competence in communication and language learning, focusing on the use of audio-visual advertising as both a didactic and an analytical tool. On the other hand, aiming to better understand how persuasion operates in advertising within bilingual societies, Van Hooff et al. (2023) examines the

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relationship between advertising effects and sociolinguistic factors in Catalan institutional health campaigns.

Garai-Artetxe et al. (2025) evaluated the brand of the Basque language based on the characteristics that the inhabitants of the Basque Country attribute to it, adapting the 5As model from branding literature. Lehmann et al. (2008) argued that brand dimensions studied by various authors (Aaker 1996; Fournier 1998; Keller 2002, 2008; Keller and Lehmann 2003) could be consolidated under a '5As' model: Awareness, Associations (including image and beliefs), Attitudes, Attachment (including what some models call loyalty) and Activity (encompassing purchase, consumption and positive word-of-mouth metrics). Within this language branding framework, the 5As are defined as follows:

Awareness: The extent to which a brand is recalled both spontaneously when a product category is named (indicating its salience in that domain) and when prompted from a list (indicating its general notoriety). Applied to languages, respondents are asked which language(s) they associate with particular social situations (at home, at work, at school, etc.) or topics (science and technology, business, etc.).

Associations: A broad range of functional and symbolic associations, typically specific to the market in which the brand competes. In language branding, this also includes functional ones (i.e. for which activities or topics a language is used: to debate, to insult, to find a job, etc.) and symbolic ones (e.g. 'rural', 'traditional', 'artificial', 'divisive'). It also examines the attributes ascribed to the stereotypical speaker.

Attitudes: Questions designed to gauge the target public's overall stance towards the brand. In language branding, beyond general attitude towards language, emotions are assessed such as feelings of competence/incompetence, pride/shame or insecurity linked to language use, as well as the degree of desired institutional protection.

Attachment: Called loyalty in some models, this captures affective bond, personal identification and the desire to maintain a long-term relationship with the brand. In language branding, it assesses the extent to which speakers regard the language as part of their personal identity, whether using it makes them feel special, whether they wish to know it better, and whether they feel committed to its defence.

Activity: In some models treated as a component of loyalty (activism), referring to concrete actions in favour of the brand. It measures, for instance, whether users purchase the brand, would pay a premium for it, defend it publicly or recommend it to others. In language branding this includes whether people are studying the language, engaging in activities that promote its use, favouring products or services that employ it, intending to transmit it to their children, or defending it when hearing negative remarks.

In the study conducted using this methodology (Garai-Artetxe et al. 2025), respondents described Basque as a beautiful, rich, authentic and traditional language, one with a future and several practical uses – in education, for obtaining or maintaining employment and for social integration. The typical speaker was portrayed as a nationalist, left-leaning, friendly and responsible person, often associated with farming. In addition to these associations, the final diagnosis of the Basque language brand reflected a weakness in the

dimensions of awareness and activity (it is not particularly relevant in many situations, and its use is moderate), but a strength in attitudes and attachment (it is a beloved language that evokes strong identification and a desire to belong to its community of speakers).

The Catalan case

To examine the brand image of Catalan through the lens of communication studies, it is necessary to contextualize the language within its sociopolitical geography. Catalan is an official language, along with Spanish, in three autonomous communities of the Spanish state (Catalonia, the Valencian Community and the Balearic Islands), official in the Principality of Andorra, and spoken in other regions (France – Roussillon and Northern Catalonia – and Italy – Alghero). It extends across some 68,730 km² inhabited by 13,740,000 people in four countries: Andorra, Spain, France and Italy (Generalitat de Catalunya 2019).

For much of its history, between the eighth and tenth centuries, monolingualism in Catalan was the social norm, until the spread of Spanish became generalized by the late nineteenth century. The Franco dictatorship (1939–75) prohibited the use of Catalan in public and private life. With the advent of democracy (1978), the restoration of Catalan's official status and ensuing legal measures fostered its presence in education, public administration and the media. After the dictatorship, 'specific multilingual education systems were implemented across Spain, which gave a prominent role to Catalan, Basque, and Galician as languages of instruction in compulsory education in the respective areas where these languages are spoken' (Comajoan-Colomé et al. 2025: 4). In the twenty-first century, despite these advances, challenges persist – notably immigration (Vila 2008), new technologies and digital consumption (Rius 2025; Martori Muntsant and Fernández Lombao 2023) and institutional obstacles to full recognition at the European level (Generalitat de Catalunya 2019).

Catalan identity is a multifaceted, dynamic concept, closely intertwined with history, language, demography and social perceptions within Catalonia, and constructed and negotiated in the context of Catalan–Spanish bilingualism (Davidson 2022). Soler-Costa (2009) notes that population-level bilingualism enhances social cohesion, although it can at times generate tensions.

In the view of Generalitat de Catalunya:

Catalan shares some characteristics of so-called minority languages, such as the near absence of monolingual speakers (and thus a bilingualised population); the fact that the territories in its linguistic area belong to larger states in which another language is the majority; and limited presence in certain spheres of social life.

However, Catalan cannot be regarded as a minority language, since it differs from such languages in several respects that place it among Europe's medium-demography languages:

- By virtue of its legal status.
- By its demography.
- By its sociolinguistic situation.
- By its linguistic infrastructure.

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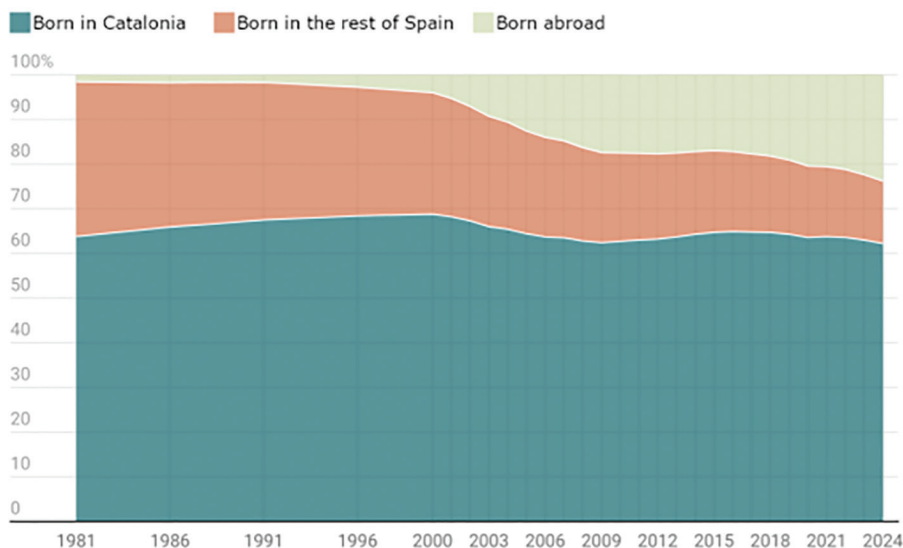
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Accordingly, the community of Catalan speakers is considered medium-sized, a classification intended to move beyond a strict majority/minority dichotomy based solely on quantitative criteria (Casesnoves et al. 2018). In this vein, Riera-Gil argues: ‘When the majority/minority dichotomy is put in context, it does not seem to be suited as an analytical tool both for categorizing languages and for determining their communicative or instrumental weight’ (2019: 181). Determining whether a linguistic community is medium-sized takes into account socio-economic development and the degree of sociolinguistic vitality, in addition to demographic weight between 1 and 25 million speakers (Vila 2013; Casesnoves et al. 2018). On this basis, Catalan would be comparable to languages such as Czech, Danish, Hebrew or Estonian.

Nevertheless, according to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, it is – besides medium-sized – a minority language (España: Jefatura del Estado 2001). The United Nations considers the Catalan linguistic community a linguistic minority (Human Rights Council of the United Nations 2020). Catalan is a minoritized language that has not attained full recognition, as set out in the ‘Pacte Nacional per la Llengua’ (Generalitat de Catalunya 2025b).

With respect to demographic change, according to Idescat (2025a) Catalonia has 8,012,231 inhabitants: almost two-thirds (62.2%) were born in Catalonia, 14% elsewhere in the Spanish state and 23.8% abroad. Since 1981, Catalonia’s population has grown by more than 2 million. In relative terms, the share born in Catalonia has remained around 63%. The share born in the rest of Spain has steadily declined since the early 1980s, from 34.4% in 1981 to 14.6% in 2023. In parallel, the foreign-born population has risen from 1.5% in 1981 to 23.8% in 2024 (see Figure 1).



[Long description](#)

Figure 1: Percentage of the population by place of birth in Catalonia, 1981–2024. Source: Generalitat de Catalunya (n.d.b), citing Idescat, based on the INE Continuous Municipal Register.

In line with this demographic trajectory, the use of Catalan as a habitual language has followed a downward trend (Idescat 2025b): in 2003, 46% of the population identified Catalan as their habitual language; by 2008 this had declined to 36%, followed by a period of stabilization (with surveys in 2013 and 2018); and in 2023, 33% of the population uses Catalan as their habitual language, while among those aged 15–29 the figure falls to 29%. This points to a delicate situation, which leads to a ‘linguistic emergency’ (Plataforma per la Llengua 2024: 3).

The decline in habitual use of Catalan is attributed largely to factors such as international immigration, globalization and the dominance of Spanish in urban, media and digital domains. Catalan tends to become the habitual language only for a marginal share of the migrant population, thereby exacerbating sociolinguistic inequalities grounded in origin (Massaguer Comes 2024). A positive image of the language (a strong brand) could help to reverse this trajectory of use.

Other studies have analysed the linguistic confidence in Catalan and Spanish of school and high school students in multilingual social settings (Bretxa et al. 2016), using the framework of the Willingness to Communicate (WTC) model (Clément et al. 2003), which examines the factors influencing the choice between two available languages (first and second). Attitudes towards Catalan and Spanish were also investigated, with a focus on students and the transition from primary to secondary education (Comajoan-Colomé et al. 2025).

Regarding the Catalan language, other topics studied include the links between languages and identities in multilingual settings (Riera-Gil 2019) and the linguistic rights and duties of immigrants in Catalonia, analysed from a multidisciplinary approach linking policy and sociolinguistic analysis (Riera-Gil 2022).

Building upon previous studies, this research using branding theories contributes to and enhances the debate on how the Catalan language is perceived from a multidisciplinary point of view, which will impact on language use and choice. This research will expand upon the Garai-Artetxe et al. (2025) study – the only one conducted in this field – by adding insights into the study of minority and minoritized languages in Spain from the branding approach.

METHODOLOGY

We conducted a qualitative study based on focus groups, a well-established technique in the social sciences that enables the observation of otherwise latent aspects of community members (Soriano 2007). Eight focus groups, each comprising between six and eight participants, were organized with segmentation by place of birth and age; details are provided in Table 1.

In total, 59 individuals took part (52.5 per cent women and 47.5 per cent men). Participants in the *Latin America/ 30–49 years* group came from Argentina, Colombia, Peru, Chile and Venezuela. Those in the *Rest of the world/ 30–49 years* group came from Croatia, France, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Ukraine and Ghana. Finally, members of the *Foreigners schooled in Catalonia/ 18–29 years* group may have been born in Catalonia (one person), in the rest of Spain (one person) or in other countries (Poland, Russia, Cuba and Uruguay), but have immigrant parents. Among the locally born groups, two had Catalan as their initial language and two had Spanish. Initial language is

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Table 1: Focus groups by place of birth, initial language and language used.

No.	Group (label)	Place of birth	Initial language (L1)	Language used in the group
1	Latin America/ 30–49 years	Abroad (Latin America)	–	Spanish
2	Rest of the world/ 30–49 years	Abroad (non-Latin America)	–	Spanish (1 participant began in Catalan and switched to Spanish)
3	Foreigners schooled in Catalonia/18–29 years	Abroad/ Second generation	–	Catalan (3) and Spanish (3)
4	Rest of Spain/ ≥60 years	Rest of Spain	–	Catalan (1) and Spanish (7*)
5	Catalonia – L1 Spanish/18–29 years	Catalonia	Spanish	Catalan
6	Catalonia – L1 Catalan/30–49 years	Catalonia	Catalan	Catalan
7	Catalonia – L1 Spanish/30–49 years	Catalonia	Spanish	Catalan
8	Catalonia – L1 Catalan/ ≥50 years	Catalonia	Catalan	Catalan

*Spanish with occasional Catalan expressions.

understood as the language used predominantly during childhood at home (Tenorio Segarra 2013; Fabà-Prats and Torres-Pla 2020).

Two discussion guides were prepared. One was used with participants born outside Catalonia – whom we refer to as non-local (Groups 1–4) – and the other with those born in Catalonia – locally born (Groups 5–8). Each focus group lasted approximately one hour and thirty minutes and was held on 7, 8, 14 and 15 October 2024. Participation language was freely chosen between Spanish and Catalan (see Table 1).

As detailed in Table 1, Groups 1 and 2 were conducted predominantly in Spanish. In Group 2, one participant initially spoke Catalan but transitioned to Spanish upon realizing the rest of the group was more comfortable with that language. In Group 3, the language distribution was split, with half of the participants speaking Catalan and the other half Spanish. Mutual comprehension was perfect, as all participants had completed their schooling in Catalonia. Group 4 comprised older participants who had thus lived in Catalonia for a long period. Although most spoke primarily in Spanish, with some Catalan expressions, one participant contributed entirely in Catalan.

For the groups consisting of participants born in Catalonia (Groups 5–8), the language of discussion was consistently Catalan, despite it not being the first language (L1) for half of them.

The variables considered in the design to ensure internal homogeneity within the groups were: place of birth, age, year of arrival, territorial area, knowledge of Catalan and L1. The demolinguistic area of residence was a key variable in configuring the groups, as in the Catalan context it is highly relevant

whether participants reside within or outside the Barcelona Metropolitan Area (AMB). The AMB comprises 36 municipalities, including Barcelona city and its surrounding areas.

Groups 1–4 were formed by participants residing exclusively in the AMB, a high-immigration area. In contrast, Groups 5–8 included participants from across all of Catalonia, incorporating criteria for territorial diversity: at least one participant was included from AMB municipalities, at least one from other municipalities in the province of Barcelona, and at least one each from the provinces of Girona, Tarragona and Lleida.

RESULTS

The findings are presented according to the five dimensions (the 5 As). Table 2 provides a summary of the most frequently mentioned attributes and the groups in which they were raised.

Table 2: Summary of the attributes mentioned.

Dimension	Attributes mentioned in the focus groups	Groups
Awareness	School	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
	Public administration	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8
	Girona	1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8
	Rural settings: small towns, inland regions	1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8
	Work	2, 5, 6, 8
	Family	5, 6, 7
	Culture	5, 8
	City council	1, 3
	Small shops	2, 3
	Castells	6, 8
Associations (functional)	TV3 (Group 8)/ Bola de Drac (Group 6)	6, 8
	Useful for:	
	• finding a job/the labour market	1, 3, 4, 5, 7
	• connecting with people	1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8
	• connecting with/getting to know Catalan culture	1, 2, 3, 5, 8
	• obtaining employment in the public administration	2, 4, 5, 7, 8
	• bilingualism	6, 7, 8
	• procedures with the public administration	6
	Rich (vocabulary, expressiveness)/enriching/diversity	4, 5, 6, 7, 8
	Beautiful	2, 3, 4, 5
Comparison with other languages	Related descriptors of ‘beautiful’: sweet; pleasant; elegant; soft; harmonious	4, 7; 3; 6; 5; 3
	Difficult (effort/overcoming)	1, 2, 4
	English and Spanish are more international	1, 3, 5, 7, 8
	English and Spanish afford more job opportunities	1, 5, 6, 8
	Spanish for getting angry, arguing, scolding, insulting	5, 6, 7, 8

Table 2: Continued.

Dimension	Attributes mentioned in the focus groups	Groups
Associations (symbolic)	Culture	1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
	Politicized outside Catalonia/by the Spanish right	1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8
	Territory (roots/land/rootedness/home)	3, 4, 6, 7, 8
	Identity	1, 4, 5, 6
	Minority	3, 4, 6, 8
	Tradition (traditional/historical)	3, 4, 6, 8
	Similar to other languages (a mixture of French and Spanish)	1, 2
	Barrier/limiting	1, 2
Stereotype of Catalan speakers	Pleasant/friendly/welcoming/inclusive/diverse/respectful/affable	1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8
	Cultured and intelligent	1, 3, 4, 7, 8
	Well-mannered	4, 5, 7, 8
	Open: transparent/tolerant/approachable	5, 6, 7, 8
	Proud (of who they are, of Catalonia, of speaking Catalan)	1, 2, 3, 4
	Pro-independence; left-wing (left-wing only noted in Group 2)	1, 2, 3, 4; 2
	Closed	2, 3, 4
	Traditional/conservative	3, 5
Attitudes	Positive attitude to children's learning	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
	Richness	1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8
	Pride/richness/luck/privilege	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
	Embarrassment, discomfort	1, 2, 3, 4
	Foster/preserve/maintain culture	5, 7, 8
	Joy when addressed in Catalan	6, 7, 8
	Integration	1, 2, 3
	Positive attitude towards one's own learning	1, 3, 4
	Initial shock/surprise	1, 2, 4
	Negative attitude towards someone speaking Catalan to non-speakers	3, 4
	Closeness	5, 8
	Comfort/ease	5, 6, 8
Attachment	Inclusion/integration	2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8
	Identity	5, 7, 8
	Exclusionary	1, 2, 3
	Rapprochement	1, 4
Activity	Learning/studying the language	1, 3, 4

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

With respect to the Awareness dimension, we examine the domains with which Catalan and its use tend to be associated. In every group, school is foregrounded – especially positioning Catalan as the formal language used by the teaching staff and the language of homework, though less so in playground or leisure spaces. At the primary school level there is a strong consensus about the use of Catalan; awareness declines in secondary education; and at university opinions diverge, with Spanish far more present than in compulsory education. This consensus regarding the use of Catalan at school is reflected in numerous statements:

At school they speak Catalan 100 per cent.
(Group 1)

I think I began to grasp what Catalan was when my daughter started school.
(Group 2)

At my school, the teaching staff use Catalan, whereas most pupils and families are Spanish-speaking.
(Group 8)

Beyond schooling, public administration is unequivocally associated with the use of Catalan by all groups. In particular, non-local participants (Groups 1 and 3) tend to single out the City Council as the place in which Catalan is used, as the administration closest to citizens. Among locally born participants with Catalan as their first language (Groups 6 and 8), the use of Catalan is viewed as an obligation on the part of the administration:

It's true that everything from the City Council comes in Catalan, and at first, when you're integrating, it's quite difficult.
(Group 1)

For all official procedures, Catalan without doubt.
(Group 5)

The administration – clearly; and I think it's their duty.
(Group 6)

There is also an awareness of Catalan as a working language, especially in the locally born groups, as illustrated by: 'At work the day-to-day is 99 per cent in Catalan' (Group 6).

Whereas Catalan is linked to official and formal spheres (school, administration, work), Spanish is associated with friends, leisure and entertainment:

With all my friends and my group, it's always Spanish.
(Group 3)

In entertainment, I probably consume more Spanish than Catalan.
(Group 5)

Locally born participants additionally associate Catalan with family and culture. In the cultural sphere, those with Catalan as their first language

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(Groups 6 and 8) link it with *castells*¹ and with TV3 (Catalonia's public broadcaster) content. Catalan is not associated with social networks or digital platforms, but rather with traditional media – especially among the older groups. Finally, in geographical terms, all groups connect Catalan with the Girona region, as well as with rural settings, small towns and inland areas. Non-local groups (2 and 3) also link Catalan with small local shops.

Turning to Associations, we distinguish between functional attributes (what the language is like or what it is for) and symbolic attributes (the symbols with which the language or its speaker is linked). Functionally, Catalan is perceived above all (reported in all groups) as a useful language for various purposes. By number of mentions: useful for connecting with people (six groups); useful for finding a job (five groups); useful for connecting with and getting to know Catalan culture (five groups) and useful for obtaining employment in the public administration (five groups). This sense of utility is reflected in remarks such as:

to find a job they ask for it in virtually every advert.

(Group 2)

it opens many doors because in many places they're now asking for C2.

(Group 3)

especially if you want to work in the administration, they require Catalan.

(Group 4)



Long description

Figure 2: Word cloud of the most frequently mentioned associations in the focus groups. Courtesy of the authors.

However, this association weakens when participants compare Catalan's utility with that of other languages – specifically English and Spanish – both of which are perceived as more international and as offering greater employment opportunities: 'I think both are very important – English more for work – but Spanish is the language spoken by the largest number of people because, apart from Spain, there are many countries in the Americas where people speak Spanish' (Group 3).

For locally born participants, Spanish is also perceived as more useful than Catalan for getting angry, arguing, scolding and insulting: 'in Spanish insults sound more serious' (Group 6).

The next most frequently mentioned characteristic to describe Catalan is rich (five groups), understood as having an extensive vocabulary; it is therefore perceived as an enriching and diverse language that affords broad expressiveness in discourse. This is followed by beautiful (four groups) as the third most recurrent descriptor, with other, less frequent terms including sweet (two), pleasant (one), elegant (one), soft (one) and harmonious (one).

Finally, to conclude this set of functional associations, it is important to note the perception of Catalan as a difficult language that requires effort (three groups, all non-local). Among non-local participants not schooled in Catalonia (Groups 1, 2 and 4), this difficulty is accompanied by a sense of achievement, as Catalan represents a new language for them.

With respect to symbolic associations, Catalan is perceived as politicized, especially from outside Catalonia:

Outside Catalonia, speaking Catalan can project a different image – perhaps a more political one. I have family elsewhere in Spain and, yes, when I go there and speak Catalan with a relative, they look at me a bit oddly, as if to say: why are you speaking Catalan if you're in Spain? I don't think it should be like that.

(Group 5)

when people on the right demand more Spanish and all that – that's politics, because they're demanding more Spanish in a place where Catalan is the first language.

(Group 1)

Two further symbolic attributes most frequently linked to the Catalan language are culture (six groups) and territory (five groups). The latter connects with notions such as rootedness, land, roots and home. In half of the focus groups, Catalan is described as identity-defining, minority and historical/traditional. The perception of minority – debatable in academic terms – appears primarily among groups with Catalan as a first language:

I'd describe it as a minority language.

(Group 6)

it's minority; not many people speak it, unlike Spanish, which is spoken in many countries by very large numbers of people.

(Group 8)

Regarding identity and tradition, Catalan tends to be portrayed as a fundamental, defining element of Catalonia:

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Catalan also defines the identity of a region; without Catalan, Catalonia wouldn't be the same, and it's very important so as not to lose our origins.

(Group 8)

Catalan is spoken out of tradition and because some people have done so all their lives.

(Group 5)

The most salient divergence between those born in Catalonia and those born elsewhere is that the latter group perceives Catalan as 'Frenchified' (a mixture of French and Spanish) and as a barrier that can limit communication.

As for the stereotype of a Catalan speaker, most groups characterize this person as pleasant (six groups) – someone easy-going, affable and respectful. The next most frequent descriptors are cultured/intelligent (five groups) and well-mannered (four groups): 'I associate them perhaps with the middle class – more culturally educated or better mannered' (Group 7).

They are also perceived as traditional and conservative (two groups). A notable contrast emerges between locally born and non-local participants: for the locally born, the Catalan speaker is open, transparent and tolerant (Groups 5–8), whereas for foreign-born the Catalan speaker is closed (Groups 2–4). Moreover, in all allochthonous groups (1–4) the Catalan speaker is seen as pro-independence and proud to be Catalan:

if someone comes along who only speaks Catalan, [...] the image that comes to my mind is that they vote for Catalan independence.

(Group 3)

they have a sense of belonging.

(Group 2)

In Group 2 specifically, this pro-independence person is also viewed as being on the left, though this idea does not recur in the other three non-local groups.

Turning to attitudes towards the language, Catalan is viewed as a richness by most groups, both among those born in Catalonia and among migrants – especially those from outside Spain:

It's cultural wealth.

(Group 5)

For me it's a richness, an added value.

(Group 2)

Across all non-local groups, participants mention feelings of embarrassment and discomfort when speaking Catalan, and they also report initial surprise on first hearing it:

I won't deny it – the first time someone spoke to me in Catalan I was surprised; I didn't know the language and didn't know how to reply.

(Group 1)

It's a bit of a shock at first – you don't understand anything. Over time that shock eases, but at the beginning it's hard.

(Group 4)

Those born outside Catalonia note that Catalan is difficult to pronounce; nevertheless, when they speak it they feel proud (pride and a sense of achievement), integrated into Catalan culture, and part of the community:

It makes you feel you belong here.

(Group 2)

For me, knowing Catalan is a challenge on the one hand, and on the other a way of showing respect – it's like a symbol of respect for the city, for the community that welcomes you.

(Group 1)

Indeed, positive attitudes are prominent: in nearly all groups (seven), the language is seen as a source of privilege, pride, luck or good fortune, particularly by virtue of speaking more than one language. In all groups there is a positive attitude towards children learning Catalan (eight), and among migrants there is also a positive attitude towards learning it themselves (three):

For me, learning Catalan is something new, a source of pride – and it's my third language.

(Group 1)

I'd say it's an advantage over people who only speak one language – something to be proud of and another tool for communication.

(Group 5)

Those born in Catalonia associate the use of Catalan with comfort and ease (three groups). For those with Catalan as a first language, its use is described as natural; for those with Spanish as a first language, its use is linked to tradition.

Participants born in Catalonia also highlight the closeness the language affords (two groups) – it creates stronger bonds with interlocutors – and they feel joy when addressed in Catalan (three groups). Catalan is further associated by locally born groups with fostering, preserving and maintaining culture (three). Participants also report delight and gratitude when a foreign interlocutor speaks Catalan: 'It's really exciting when you see someone trying to learn the language' (Group 6).

Regarding the Attachment dimension, in seven of the eight groups Catalan is viewed as an instrument of integration/inclusion. Among most locally born groups, the language is also linked to identity (Groups 5, 7 and 8).

However, among non-local groups the idea of the language as a vehicle for integration/inclusion and community rapprochement coexists with the perception that it can be exclusionary in some contexts (three groups). This exclusion manifests as feeling left out in social situations because one does not speak Catalan well, or because its use may isolate others who do not master it: 'I felt rejected by a friend' (Group 2).

Conversely, in the group of foreigners schooled in Catalonia (Group 3), Catalan is highlighted as a factor of integration and welcome in the classroom.

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Relatedly (and connected to attitudes), learning the language elicited positive feelings: they grasped it quickly and felt supported. Also, within the attachment domain, migrants regard Catalan as a tool for social integration and for belonging and community connection (three groups):

It's fundamental for full integration.

(Group 2)

It has been important for integrating here, and I think it's important for preserving society.

(Group 3)

The integration–exclusion contrast is the facet of attachment that links the individual to the community. On the more individual plane, Catalan is perceived as a marker of identity only among those born in Catalonia (three groups): 'Catalan also defines a region's identity. Without Catalan, Catalonia wouldn't be the same, and it's very important not to lose our origins' (Group 8).

In short, among migrants the language emerges as a vehicle of integration/exclusion/rapprochement in relation to community and belonging, whereas among those born in Catalonia it appears as an element of personal and collective identity.

Finally, the Activity dimension captures behaviours – proactive or reactive – that in some way support or oppose the Catalan language. The most salient activity is studying and learning Catalan. This was widely reported by non-local participants (three groups), who stated that they had undertaken training courses:

I studied it as soon as I arrived – B1 and B2 through the City Council's free courses. It was the first thing I did, to sign up.

(Group 1)

I've studied it with the free courses [...] I was interested in learning it – to feel more a part of Catalonia.

(Group 2)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In line with the main aim of this research, this study offers an initial exploration of the image of the Catalan language as a brand, and identifies the principal attributes associated with it.

With regard to the first specific objective, branding theories (Aaker 1996; Fournier 1998; Keller 2002, 2008; Keller and Lehmann 2003; Lehmann et al. 2008) have been applied to the study of perceptions of the Catalan language. This has been undertaken through the implementation, in the case of Catalan, of the 5As model adapted to the evaluation of the Basque language brand by Garai-Artetxe et al. (2025).

As for specific objectives 2 and 3, the following sections outline the main attributes that society employs when referring to the Catalan language, as well as the similarities and differences in how the language is perceived by native-born and foreign-born residents.

Awareness emerges as a key dimension, indicating the domains in which individuals are more disposed to speak – or to hear – Catalan. The connection

between Catalan and administrative–institutional settings and formal education appears clear, especially in primary schools, as other studies also suggest (Bretxa et al. 2016; Comajoan-Colomé et al. 2025). Catalan is likewise strongly associated with Girona and with rural environments (in which Catalan is more commonly spoken than in cities and Barcelona’s metropolitan area), which form an important part of its brand image.

The results further suggest that city councils and small neighbourhood shops may constitute crucial points of contact with Catalan for migrants and could be leveraged as touchpoints from a branding perspective.

For locally born participants, family and culture are salient, including the public broadcaster (TV3) and the anime *Bola de Drac* (Dragon Ball). The latter – already discussed in relation to other languages such as Basque (Muguruza and Bereziartua 2021) – has left an indelible mark on the brand (image) of most languages that are official only in parts of the state. In the 1990s, *Federación de Organismos y Entidades de Radio y Televisión Autonómico* (FORTA) jointly acquired broadcasting rights to *Dragon Ball*, commissioned translations into the autonomous languages, and aired the series before it became available in Spanish. This contributed to developing a more positive attitude towards the language, as the Muguruza and Bereziartua (2021) study exemplifies with the Basque case, and remains a vivid point of recall – an enduring branding lesson that should not be forgotten amid a global struggle for linguistic diversity on the internet (Rius 2025).

With respect to functional associations, the data indicate that Catalan sustains positive associations and is regarded as useful across different spheres – at least until respondents are invited to compare it with other languages, at which point its perceived utility declines. In addition, those born in Catalonia tend to associate Spanish with emotionally charged interactions (insulting, scolding, quarrelling) which is troubling from a branding standpoint, as it implies a low emotional utility of the language, a pattern also observed in the case of Basque (Garai-Artetxe et al. 2025).

The language’s relative absence from key moments of personal identity is compounded by its linkage to formal settings (as observed under awareness) – administrative procedures, bureaucracy, work and school – leaving private-life situations on the margins of the Catalan usage. We therefore conclude that Catalan-language is over-associated with formal domains and comparatively distant from spaces of leisure and entertainment.

In the realm of symbolic associations, the language’s close connection with politics stands out – problematic from a branding perspective. Excessive politicization can erode the language’s image by narrowing its cross-cutting appeal to broad social groups, and it is to be expected that actors with an interest in damaging that image will seek to keep the language in the political arena. From a branding viewpoint, this is tantamount to a latent reputational crisis, liable to surface at any time.

The archetype of the Catalan speaker is generally positive (pleasant, cultured, well-mannered). Even so, an unsettling cleavage emerges: locally born participants tend to view Catalan speakers as open and tolerant, whereas non-local participants associate them with being more closed, proudly Catalan and pro-independence. The political colouring of the language and its speakers parallels the Basque case (Garai-Artetxe et al. 2025), where the Basque speaker is identified as nationalist and left-wing.

Although there is no academic consensus for classifying Catalan as a minority language – and scholars of Catalan sociolinguistics describe it as

medium-sized and minoritized – participants in several focus groups do perceive it as minority.

Turning to attitudes, while it is encouraging that the language is associated with richness, good fortune and pride, certain views appear only among the locally born (joy, comfort, closeness) and others only among those born outside Catalonia (surprise, embarrassment or discomfort, and even rejection of someone who speaks Catalan to a non-speaker). In relation to this, Pasamar's (2006) study highlighted the importance for language learners of understanding the cultural and social dimensions associated with its use. It also showed that a negative perception of the 'brand' (the language) or of its stereotypical speaker may be perceived by non-native speakers as a barrier to sociocultural adequacy.

This duality in associations and attitudes recurs under attachment: the idea of Catalan as part of one's identity appears only among locally born participants. Tying personal identity to the brand can lead to more active 'consumers' willing to engage in co-creation processes around the brand's identity (Black and Veloutsou 2017). On the other hand, the research by Van Hooft et al. (2023) argues that when a communicator adapts a message by using the receiver's first language (L1), the latter perceives this as a recognition of their identity, which in turn elicits a more positive response towards the communicator. From the standpoint of language branding, this attachment is desirable, intense and as cross-cutting as possible.

Within the same domain (attachment), a contradiction emerges among non-local groups: while they see Catalan as an instrument of integration, they also experience it as exclusionary. Given the growing weight of migration in Catalonia, it will be crucial that migrants' image of Catalan tilt towards integration (rather than exclusion), in order to increase interest in learning and using the language and to reverse the decline in Catalan usage noted in the theoretical framework.

As for activities in support of the language, only learning Catalan stands out among non-locals. It would be worthwhile to determine whether there are segments of the population not born in Catalonia who do not consider learning Catalan, and why. No other forms of pro-language activism are mentioned by locally born groups – potentially a concern given the current linguistic emergency.

From a branding perspective, these contradictions and perceptions present in the Catalan population are, potentially, weaknesses to be mitigated or strengths to be leveraged through targeted communication campaigns. This article contributes novel insights into the image of Catalan – examined for the first time through a branding lens and with a multidisciplinary approach – of practical value for language planning and for the language's future.

Future work should quantitatively study the issues raised in this discussion, with attention to migration flows and, in particular, to young people's perceptions, given the challenge posed by the consumption of digital content in majority languages.

ETHICAL STATEMENT

This article was researched and written to the standards of Intellect's Ethical Guidelines: <https://www.intellectbooks.com/ethical-guidelines>. No approvals or subject consent were required.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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FIGURE LONG DESCRIPTIONS

Figure 1: Figure 1 shows the evolution of the percentage of population by place of birth in Catalonia, from 1981 to 2024. It shows how the percentage of people born abroad increases from 1981 (when it was only 1.5%), especially from 2000 and with the highest rate in 2024 (23.8%). The share born in the rest of Spain has steadily declined since the early 1980s, from 34.4% in 1981 to 14.6% in 2023. Finally, the chart shows that the share of population born in Catalonia has remained around 63%.

Figure 2: The word 'cloud' shows that the word 'useful' is the most frequently mentioned association in the focus groups. There are other frequently mentioned associations, as the chart points out, such as connect, culture, rich, politicized, territory, people, people, work, minority, identity, beautiful, tradition, difficult or sweet.