

## Language Branding: A Methodological Approach to Measuring the Brand of the Basque Language

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**Abstract:** This article introduces a pioneering concept in the field of language promotion: language branding. Branding mechanisms offer a novel framework for modernizing and enhancing linguistic planning efforts. Drawing on brand analysis theories from the commercial domain, this study develops a methodology to assess the brand image of languages. Addressing brand image is essential, as the construction of a language's brand can significantly influence speaker preferences. The research presents the first applied case by analyzing the brand image of the Basque language, a minority language supported by an organized revitalization movement with both institutional and grassroots backing. The study employs an innovative methodology rooted in branding literature, adapting it to the linguistic field through a combination of qualitative exploratory methods (focus groups) and quantitative brand measurement techniques (surveys). The Basque language brand is evaluated across several hierarchical dimensions: awareness, associations, attitudes, attachment, and activity. The results reveal that Basque enjoys a high level of emotional attachment among speakers. However, its brand associations remain heavily tied to a symbolic and mythical traditional imagery, which limits its perception as a practical tool for everyday communication.

**Keywords:** Basque, branding, ethnic culture, minority languages

The connection between linguistics and marketing is not a new concept. Researchers have employed psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic models to predict the effectiveness of foreign languages in advertising, primarily through experimental studies (Hornikx & Van Meurs, 2019), and to examine the influence of language on brand interactions—a field referred to as brand linguistics (Carnevale et al., 2017). Advertising, owing to its cultural underpinnings, often leverages the symbolic value of languages (Haarmann, 1989; Kelly-Holmes, 2016; Piller, 2003). Efforts to merge marketing and language promotion have also been explored (Domínguez, 1998; Jackson, 1988), with particular emphasis on their application in language planning and the promotion of minority languages (Ricarte Bescós, 2008).

However, one of the most distinctive aspects of this study is that no direct precedents exist in the international literature that analyze languages as brands or apply branding theories to languages. In contemporary society, branding—the process of creating and maintaining a brand—has expanded beyond private companies and commercial products, finding relevance in areas such as personal branding, sports teams, and even nation branding (Anholt, 2007; Fan, 2006; Quelch & Jocz, 2006). Branding is fundamentally about crafting specific narratives and associations in the minds of stakeholders, positioning the subject in relation to particular values.

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Although multilingualism policies are a central concern for lawmakers in regions such as the European Union, language promotion is typically addressed from educational or legal perspectives. While communication campaigns for language promotion do exist, they rarely incorporate strategic frameworks like branding. This study proposes that branding concepts can be effectively applied to the linguistic field, introducing a novel concept: language branding. Using definitions of brand image from key authors like Keller and Lehmann (2001) as a foundation, language branding can be defined as the perceptions that speakers have of a particular language, shaped by their experiences and knowledge of it. These perceptions are constructed based on the associations, ideas, and personal encounters with the language (Kotler, 2001).

In today's increasingly multilingual societies, driven by globalization and migration, the impact of language branding operates at multiple levels. The narratives and positive images associated with specific languages can significantly influence motivation to learn them and the likelihood of their use (De Luna & Suberbiola, 2008). The need to make linguistic choices arises more frequently as multilingual individuals navigate communication situations. These choices are influenced by various factors, including language ability, motivation, and usage patterns (Sánchez Carrión, 1991).

This research aims to achieve two primary objectives: (1) to design a tool for examining language branding by adapting marketing principles to the linguistic domain; and (2) to measure the brand equity of the Basque language. As outlined in subsequent sections, this study employs a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, including focus groups and a large-scale survey. The initial stage involved exploratory research through eight focus groups, which provided in-depth insights into the dimensions identified in the theoretical framework (awareness, associations, attitudes, attachment, and activity). Sociolinguistic context, language proficiency, and age were key considerations in forming these groups, which were designed to be homogeneous in terms of participants' place of residence, language ability, and age.

### **The Importance of Branding in Language Planning**

This research approach seeks to promote minority languages by integrating marketing and sociolinguistic expertise. Since Haver Cuerie (1952) first coined the term "sociolinguistics," the field of linguistics has experienced significant qualitative and quantitative growth. Scholars and educators widely agree that sociolinguistics examines the relationship between language and society, providing a novel lens for linguistic analysis, influenced by the methodologies of social sciences (Hernández-Campoy, 2014).

Language Policy and Planning (LPP) is among the most prominent areas of sociolinguistic research. Linguistic planning refers to deliberate efforts aimed at influencing individuals' behavior regarding the acquisition, use, or status of linguistic codes (Cooper, 1989). Fishman (1972) identifies four primary dimensions of linguistic planning: status planning (the position of a language in society), corpus planning (the structure and form of a language), language-in-education planning (teaching), and prestige planning (image). The latter is directly aligned with the marketing concept of brand image, underscoring the potential synergy between these disciplines.

Over the past forty years, significant progress has been made in understanding linguistic models, particularly concerning the macro-sociopolitical forces that influence the status, image, and usage of languages. However, this field has not advanced to the same extent as the commercial sector in promoting positive values and narratives. As Gazzola and Wickström (2016) argue, future research should adopt an interdisciplinary approach. This paper proposes a conceptual framework centered on language branding, with the aim of advancing the study of linguistic policy and planning to new horizons.

## **The Basque Language as a Paradigmatic Case Study**

This paper bridges the concepts of branding and language by introducing a novel idea without international precedent: language branding. It also takes the first step toward practical application by analyzing the brand of the Basque language, which coexists alongside two dominant languages, French and Spanish. The sociolinguistic context of the Basque language has been extensively studied, with renowned scholars contributing significant works in fields such as sociolinguistics (Gorter et al., 2014; Lasagabaster, 2005; Moriarty, 2010), education (Cenoz & Gorter, 2019; Cenoz & Santos, 2020; Gartziarena & Villabona, 2022), and media studies (Agirre, 2021; Agirreazkuenaga & Garai-Artetxe, 2019; Muguruza & Bereziartua, 2021). The Basque language serves as a paradigmatic example of successful revitalization (Baztarrika, 2019a).

As Baztarrika (2010) and Urla (2012) note, the social progress of the Basque language illustrates a clear case of language shift (Fishman, 1993) over the centuries. Basque experienced severe interruptions due to state policies aimed at eradicating it, particularly during Spain's dictatorship (1939–1975), when its use was prohibited and punished (Urla, 2012). The setbacks suffered by the Basque language up until the 1980s cannot be fully understood without considering the effects of linguistic oppression under Franco's regime. However, toward the end of the dictatorship, public demonstrations advocating for the Basque language gained momentum (Ortega & Manterola, 2024). These movements became especially significant following the establishment of Spain's autonomous communities under the 1978 Constitution, which allowed the Basque Autonomous Community (CAV) and the Chartered Community of Navarre to manage their own linguistic policies. In the CAV, Basque was granted official status under the 1982 Law on the Normalization of Basque Use, while Navarre adopted the Foral Basque Language Law in 1986.

According to the 4th Sociolinguistic Survey, over a 25-year period (1991–2016), the population of Basque speakers aged 16 and over in Euskal Herria increased by 223,000 people (6.1%). In 1991, there were 528,500 Basque speakers, accounting for 22.3% of the population (Baztarrika, 2019b). The Basque-speaking population in the CAV grew by 9.8% (212,200 individuals, from 24.1% to 33.9%), while Navarre saw a more modest increase of 3.4% (28,700 individuals). In contrast, the Northern Basque Country experienced a decline of 12.6% (17,900 individuals). This disparity highlights the need for effective language branding to support language planning efforts for Basque. Investing in the Basque brand is critical to sustaining and expanding its use and fostering greater knowledge of the language. The unequal evolution of Basque speakers across the three territories over the past 25 years underscores this necessity.

Modern challenges increasingly revolve around persuasion. In its 2008 report, *The Foundations for Language Policy at the Beginning of the 21st Century: Towards a Renewed Pact*, the Basque Advisory Council addressed the importance of the image and attractiveness of the Basque language. The council's 2012 Action Plan for the Promotion of Basque similarly identified motivation as a critical factor for language standardization in the years ahead, particularly in its relationship to language learning and usage. More recent analyses focused on younger populations further emphasize the importance of Basque's prestige as a key issue (Basque Advisory Council, 2016).

## **Branding as a Strategy to Project Imaginaries**

Traditionally, brands have been defined as a unique design, sign, symbol, words, or a combination of these, employed in creating an image that identifies a product and differentiates it from its competitors (American Marketing Association (n.d.); Kotler & Keller, 2016; Marketing Accountability Standards Board (n.d.)). However, marketing professionals have

observed that consumers differentiate products and services within the same category based on factors beyond names or logos. The key difference lies in the global perception of a product's or service's branded characteristics, which David Ogilvy (1985) described as the intangible amount of a product's attributes (Ogilvy, 1985).

Today, the concepts of brand and brand equity are central to modern marketing, with strategic brand management playing a prominent role in corporate decision-making (Aaker, 2013). Neumeier (2004, 2006) defines a brand as a person's perception of a product, service, experience, or organization. Branding, the process of building and maintaining a brand to attract and retain loyal customers, has become a powerful framework applicable to entities beyond products and services. If the image of a person (Khedher, 2014) or a city (Ashworth & Kavaratzis, 2009; Braun, 2012; Dinnie, 2011; Green et al., 2016) can be shaped through branding, it raises the question: can the branding of a language be similarly managed?

Consumers learn about brands through all brand-related interactions, whether initiated and controlled by marketers or not (Dubberly, 2001). These interactions, combined with consumer values, goals, needs, and expectations, shape brand perceptions and enrich the mental image of a brand with features such as thoughts, feelings, images, experiences, and beliefs (Brakus et al., 2009). This collection of features is stored in semantic memory, which operates as an associative network of nodes and links. Within this network, the brand node—the brand name—is associated with a wide range of information, from functional product or service features to abstract characteristics such as personality traits, visual imagery, sounds, and the sense of community built around the brand (Henderson et al., 1998; Keller, 1993).

Keller (1993) defined customer-based brand equity as the differential impact of brand knowledge on a consumer's response to marketing efforts. Brand equity manifests in consumer perceptions, preferences, and behaviors across various aspects of a brand's marketing (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

## Measuring Brand Equity

The varied conceptualizations of brands and their numerous dimensions have resulted in a wide range of methodologies for investigating brand equity. Zarantonello and Pauwels-Delassus (2015) provide a systematic compilation of these approaches in *The Handbook of Brand Management Scales*. One of the most widely recognized constructs in this field is “brand equity” (Keller, 2001; Keller & Lehmann, 2006), which serves as the foundation for this study's methodology to measure the brand of a language.

Building on Aaker's model (1991), Keller's brand equity framework outlines four core dimensions: brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty (Aaker, 1991, 1996; Keller, 1993, 2001). Brand equity can be measured either directly or indirectly, as demonstrated in the model of brand antecedents and consequences proposed by Keller and Lehmann (2006). Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity Model evaluates consumer perceptions through a hierarchical “Five As” framework: Awareness, Associations, Attitudes, Attachment, and Activity. These dimensions of the brand are examined in greater detail below:

- **Brand Awareness:** This dimension measures the extent to which consumers can recall or recognize a brand (Keller, 1993, 2008; Rossiter, 2014; Rossiter & Percy, 1987). Brand recall pertains to how well a consumer remembers a brand in specific situations, whether aided or unaided (Prashar et al., 2012). Recognition, on the other hand, emphasizes familiarity, as people tend to prefer things that appear familiar (Behe et al., 2017; Coates et al., 2006; MacDonald & Sharp, 2000). Brand awareness is a critical component of success, as it influences purchasing decisions (Khurram et al., 2018; Thoma & Williams, 2013), loyalty (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993 ),

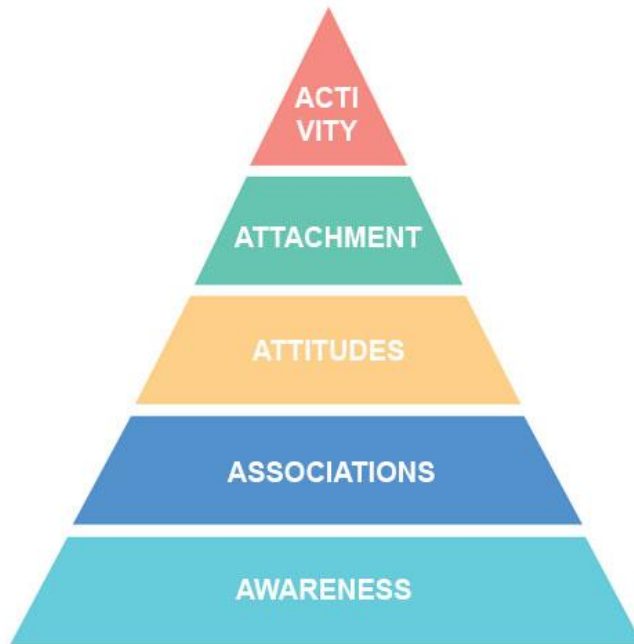
perceived quality (Huang, 2017), emotions (Rossiter, 2014), and trust-building (Kapferer, 2012).

- **Brand Associations:** These are the attributes, characteristics, or concepts that consumers link to a brand in their memory (Keller, 1993). Aaker (1991) defines brand associations as “anything linked in memory to a brand” (p. 109). These associations may be tangible, such as product characteristics, or intangible, such as brand values (Keller, 1993). Brand associations are instrumental in shaping a brand’s identity and perception (Aaker, 1996), influencing consumer attitudes and behaviors toward the brand and affecting loyalty and preference (Keller, 1993). This role of associations in building brand equity is well-documented in the literature (Hsieh, 2004; Walvis, 2008; Wansink, 2003).
- **Attitudes:** As described by Eagly and Chaiken (1998), attitudes represent our positive or negative evaluations of a person, idea, or object, expressed through feelings, beliefs, and behaviors. In the branding context, attitudes reflect consumers’ feelings, assessments, and behaviors toward a specific brand (Keller, 1993). Attitudes significantly influence decision-making and actions in diverse contexts, from consumer behavior to political participation (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1972). Effective brand attitude management involves creating meaningful, positive brand experiences and delivering consistent, relevant messages aligned with consumer needs and values (Keller, 1993).
- **Brand Attachment:** This dimension focuses on the emotional and affective connections consumers form with a brand (Park et al., 2010). Brand attachment extends beyond loyalty, reflecting a deep, enduring bond often compared to interpersonal relationships (Fournier, 1998). Such attachment evolves through dynamic interactions between the consumer and the brand over time. At its extremes, brand attachment manifests in “brand lovers” and “brand haters.” Brand lovers exhibit intense emotional connections, identifying with and committing to the brand (Carroll & Ahuvia, 2006). In contrast, brand haters experience negative emotions, such as aversion or disdain, often resulting from unmet expectations or conflicting values (Kucuk, 2019).
- **Brand Activity:** This dimension relates directly to the concept of brand equity, as it fosters consumer loyalty (Keller & Lehmann, 2006) and influences behaviors such as purchase intent (Ashil & Sinha, 2004; Chang & Liu, 2009; Yoo et al., 2000).

## Methods

In this section, we propose a framework for integrating branding into language planning through the Language Brand Value Model. This model builds on the theoretical foundations provided by Keller (1993, 2001, 2016) and Keller and Lehmann (2006), adapting their insights from branding to the linguistic domain. As discussed earlier, this model adopts a consumer-based perspective, which, in our context, focuses on speakers and potential speakers. Figure 1 illustrates the five dimensions that constitute a language’s brand, referred to as the “5 As”: Awareness, Associations, Attitude, Attachment, and Activity.

**Figure 1**  
*Speaker-Based Language Brand Value Model*



*Note.* Authors' adaptation of Keller (1993, 2001, 2016) and Keller and Lehmann (2006)

The dimensions of the Language Brand Value Model, adapted to the context of measuring language brands, are defined as follows:

- a) Awareness: The ability to recall a language. This reflects how likely the language is to come to mind in situations where its use is relevant.
- b) Associations: Features and images linked to the language in memory. These can be categorized into functional associations (practical consequences of using the language) and symbolic associations (imagery and symbolic values tied to the language).
- c) Attitudes: Evaluative judgments and emotional responses toward the language, caused by its associations.
- d) Attachment: The emotional connection speakers have with the language, reflecting the degree to which it forms part of their personal identity. The attachment continuum ranges from language lovers (Gilal, 2023) to language haters (Mushtaq, 2024).
- e) Activity: Behaviors associated with the language, including its use and involvement in actions that either support or oppose the language. At the extremes, these behaviors range from being active defenders to active opponents of the language.

## Research Design

This study employed an exploratory mixed-method design, consisting of two phases: a qualitative exploratory phase followed by a quantitative survey phase. During the exploratory phase, qualitative data was collected through focus groups. This phase aimed to gather preliminary insights to inform the development of the survey instrument used in the subsequent phase. Eight focus groups were conducted to identify key variables related to the Basque language brand, such as stereotypes, associations, and specific terms spontaneously mentioned by participants. These findings were instrumental in designing the questionnaire for the survey.

Each focus group was moderated by a researcher trained by the NIK research group to ensure consistency and quality in the discussions.

In the survey phase, a quantitative approach was implemented using a survey designed to measure Basque language brand equity. The survey questionnaire was developed based on theoretical insights and findings from the focus groups. Two types of questions were included:

- 5-point semantic differential questions (Osgood et al., 1957): These were used primarily to assess associations with the language and its speakers.
- 10-point Likert scale questions (Awang et al., 2016): These were applied to most other aspects, as recommended by Aztiker, for their suitability in telephonic surveys.

The survey targeted individuals aged 18 and older residing in the Basque Country. To collect responses, a mixed methodology was used: computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI, using a list of landline phone numbers) and computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI, for online data collection). This combined approach allowed for a broad and diverse sample, ensuring comprehensive insights into public perceptions and opinions regarding the Basque language as a brand.

### **Sampling and Data Collection**

In the exploratory phase of the research, a structured topic guide was developed to facilitate focus group discussions. The guide was designed to explore several key areas, including functional associations of the language. These associations were examined through questions and discussions that assessed whether the language meets participants' communication needs, considering their linguistic proficiency. For the Basque language, several factors were identified as potentially influencing the responses. These included its status as a native and minority language, often described as "our language," and its competition with dominant languages such as Spanish, French, and increasingly English. The Basque language was also recognized for its official status in parts of Spain but not in France, as well as its unique characteristics, including an undetermined origin and a history of persecution during Franco's dictatorship.

The discussions also addressed whether participants perceived the language as necessary for future use, whether it was sustainable over time (in terms of its risk of being forgotten), and whether it was considered easy or difficult to learn and use. Furthermore, the aesthetic qualities of the language were explored, with participants reflecting on whether they found the language beautiful, liked its sound, and felt positive emotions when using it. Finally, the concept of price was introduced, examining whether the participants perceived learning the language as expensive or affordable.

The sampling process involved the formation of eight homogeneous focus groups, each comprising six to eight participants, with a total sample size of 77 individuals. The focus groups were held in various locations across the Basque Country, including one group in Alava, one in Gipuzkoa, four in Bizkaia (due to its larger population), one in Navarre, and one in the Northern Basque Country. The groups were conducted in the language most comfortable for the participants, with six groups held in Basque and two in Spanish. To ensure representation across different age groups, participants were divided into the following age brackets: 18–22, 20–30, 30–40 (three groups), 40–50, 50–60, and 60+. Each focus group session lasted approximately two hours and was video-recorded for subsequent transcription and analysis.

The facilitation and analysis of the focus groups were carried out by two researchers who had been trained by the NIK research group. Each researcher moderated two focus groups and subsequently analyzed the data from these sessions. The focus groups took place between June 10 and July 15, 2019. The selection criteria for participants included the sociolinguistic context of their region (to account for varying percentages of Basque speakers), linguistic

proficiency, age, and population distribution. Bizkaia, as the most populous territory, was allocated four groups to reflect its demographic weight.

**Table 1**

*List of the 8 Homogeneous Focus Groups*

	Age	Territory	Basque speakers	Sociolinguistic context
Group 1	18-22	Alava	Yes	Spanish dominant
Group 2	20-30	Gipuzkoa	Yes	Basque dominant
Group 3	30-40	Bizkaia	No	Spanish dominant
Group 4	30-40	Bizkaia	Yes	Basque/Spanish
Group 5	30-40	Navarre	Yes	Spanish dominant
Group 6	40-50	Northern Basque Country	Yes	French dominant
Group 7	50-60	Biscay	No	Spanish dominant
Group 8	60+	Biscay	Yes	Basque dominant

For the second phase of the research, a quantitative survey was conducted using three different versions of the questionnaire: one in Basque, one in Spanish, and one in French. Respondents were given the choice to answer in the language they preferred. The questionnaires included independent variables for analysis alongside specific questions targeting the key research dimensions. The primary development of the questionnaire was undertaken by the NIK research group, informed by data from the focus groups and their theoretical framework. Aztiker, a professional research company, carried out the technical adjustments and adaptations. Before full deployment, the questionnaire was tested on a small sample to ensure clarity and understandability.

The survey was designed to analyze each of the five dimensions: awareness, associations, attitudes, attachment, and activity. To measure awareness, respondents were presented with various scenarios and topics and asked to associate them with a particular language. Functional associations were explored using a list of adjectives and activities, which respondents could link to the Basque language. For symbolic associations, participants were asked to select an adjective (e.g., traditional, quite traditional, quite modern, or modern) that best represented the Basque language. They were also asked to associate the language with specific relationships (e.g., father, mother, children, friends, or partner). Attitudes were assessed through statements such as “A lot of money is wasted on the Basque language” and “Basque should be protected at an institutional level,” on which respondents expressed their level of agreement. Attachment was analyzed using topics like “The Basque language is a fundamental part of who I am,” “A person who speaks Basque is different and special,” “I’d like to be able to speak more or better Basque,” and “I feel committed to defending the Basque language.” Finally, the activity dimension was measured through frequency-based questions, including statements like: “I have chosen a group or activity primarily because it was conducted in Basque,” “I try to start conversations with strangers in Basque,” “When people speak to me in Basque, I immediately switch to Spanish,” “I participate in activities to learn or improve my Basque language skills,” “I make a special effort to purchase products and services offered in Basque,” and “I feel it is important to pass the Basque language on to my children.”

The sample consisted of 1,188 participants from across Basque Country (Euskal Herria), which has a total population of 2,700,633 inhabitants aged 18 and older. These population figures were derived from the 2018 register of inhabitants in the Basque Autonomous Community and Navarre (INE) and the 2017 registry for the Northern Basque



Country (INSEE). The sample size corresponded to an overall error margin of  $\pm 2.9\%$ , with a confidence level of 95.5% and  $p = q = 50.0\%$  under the most adverse hypothesis.

The survey sample was designed to be representative, incorporating sociopolitical variables (gender, age, territory, ideological scale, and Basque nationalism scale) and sociolinguistic variables (mother tongue, linguistic profile, interest in the topic, and number of languages spoken). The sampling process was carried out in two stages to minimize selection bias. A minimum number of surveys was established for each town (130 towns, with the Northern Basque Country considered a single unit) to ensure basic representativity. The remaining surveys were distributed proportionally according to population weight.

A multi-stage sampling method was employed, which involved stratifying clusters within each region based on population size (five strata: towns with 2,000 or fewer inhabitants; 2,001–10,000; 10,001–50,000; 50,001–100,000; and more than 100,001 inhabitants). Primary sampling units (towns) were selected proportionally, and gender and age quotas were applied to the final sampling unit (individuals). Additionally, sociolinguistic regions were carefully considered to prevent overrepresentation of either Basque speakers or non-Basque speakers, ensuring balanced representation in the final sample.

**Table 2**

*Sample Obtained at A Confidence Interval of 95% for  $p=q$ .*

Territory	Sample obtained	Confidence interval of 95% for $p=q$
Northern Basque Country	134	8.6%
Navarre	265	6.1%
Alava	162	7.9%
Biscay	365	5.2%
Gipuzkoa	262	6.2%
Basque Country	1,188	2.9%

The distribution of surveys across territories, age groups, and gender is presented in the following breakdown:

**Table 3**

*Number of Surveys Per Territory Per Age and Gender*

Territory	Gender	Age				Total
		18-29	30-44	45-64	65+	
Northern Basque Country (south of France)	Women	7	11	28	34	80
	Men	6	6	23	19	54
Navarre	Women	18	34	46	49	147
	Men	21	23	46	28	118
Alava	Women	10	23	32	29	94
	Men	5	19	27	17	68
Biscay	Women	21	44	82	34	80
	Men	10	41	61	68	215
Gipuzkoa	Women	18	29	47	38	150
	Men	19	20	47	51	145
<b>Basque Country (overall)</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>235</b>	<b>231</b>	<b>681</b>
	<b>Men</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>204</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>507</b>
	Total	135	250	439	364	1,188

The data collection for this second phase of the research was conducted from October 2 to November 28, 2019. Surveys were carried out through both telephone and online methods. In the Basque Country and Navarre, data collection included both phone and online surveys, whereas in the Northern Basque Country, only telephone surveys were conducted. The telephone surveys employed the CATI (Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing) system, utilizing a list of landline numbers. Online surveys were self-administered via an internet panel comprising users aged 18 to 55 years old. Respondents were given the choice to complete the survey in their preferred language: Basque, Spanish, or French.

For both the exploratory and quantitative phases of the research, informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement. All collected data was anonymized for analysis purposes. Only one team member retained access to personal data to ensure traceability and to allow participants the right to withdraw their data from the study. However, no requests for data withdrawal were received during the research process.

## **Data Analysis**

In the exploratory phase of the research, the NVivo qualitative analysis tool was used to organize and classify participant responses into various nodes corresponding to the five dimensions of the brand (Awareness, Associations, Attitudes, Attachment, and Activity). The nodes were constructed using a script designed to guide the focus group discussions (see Annex II). The data gathered during this phase primarily informed the development of the questionnaire used in the subsequent quantitative phase.

For the quantitative phase, data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS software. To address sample imbalances relative to the population, weights were applied. The analysis respected the distinct purposes of the 5-point semantic differential scales and 10-point Likert scales, as explained in the research design section, ensuring they were not compared against one another. Cross-tabulations were created to analyze the relationships between independent variables (e.g., age, gender, territory, mother tongue, and language proficiency) and dependent variables, facilitating the interpretation of the data.

## **Findings and Discussion: The Basque Language Brand**

### **Awareness**

The Awareness dimension focused on identifying language-linked situations, topics, and interlocutors. In branding, awareness serves as the foundation for building a brand. The ability to recognize and recall a brand in various contexts is critical to brand awareness, as defined by key conceptual properties like brand recall and brand recognition (Rossiter, 2014; Rossiter & Percy, 1987). Similarly, in the context of language, association maps of situations, interlocutors, and issues help determine which language is chosen in a given context. If the Basque language is absent from an individual's thoughts in specific situations or with particular interlocutors, it is less likely to be used. Consequently, the study also gathered data on the perceived presence and evolution of the Basque language, as well as participants' opinions on whether its presence should increase or decrease.

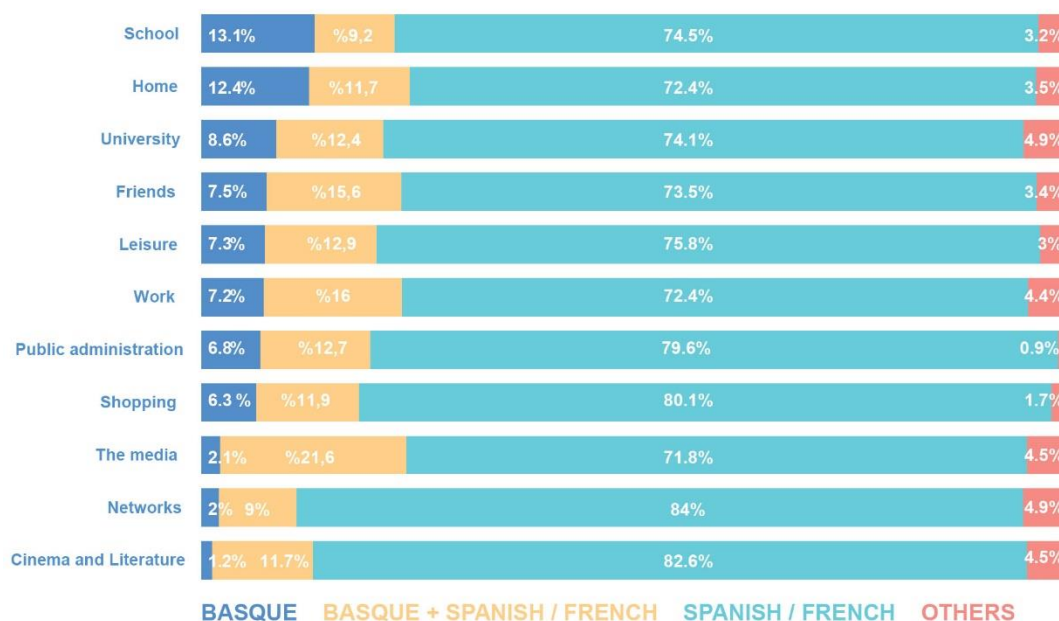
The data revealed that the Basque language has relatively low perceptual visibility across situations, issues, and interlocutors. This is significant because, just as brand awareness impacts consumer decision-making—where familiar brands are more likely to be chosen (Hoyer & Brown, 1990; MacDonald & Sharp, 2000)—languages that are more readily recalled are more likely to be used.

Associations linked to the Basque language highlighted school as the most frequently mentioned area (13.1%), followed closely by home (12.4%). A second tier of associations,

mentioned by 6–9% of participants, included university (8.6%), friends (7.5%), work (7.3%), leisure (7.2%), administration (6.8%), and shopping (6.3%). A third tier, with mentions below 2%, included media (2.1%), digital networks (2.0%), and cultural domains such as cinema and literature (1.2%).

The findings also reflect the bilingual reality of many Basque speakers. It is expected that individuals often associate situations with two or more languages, as shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**  
*Languages Related to Social Situations*



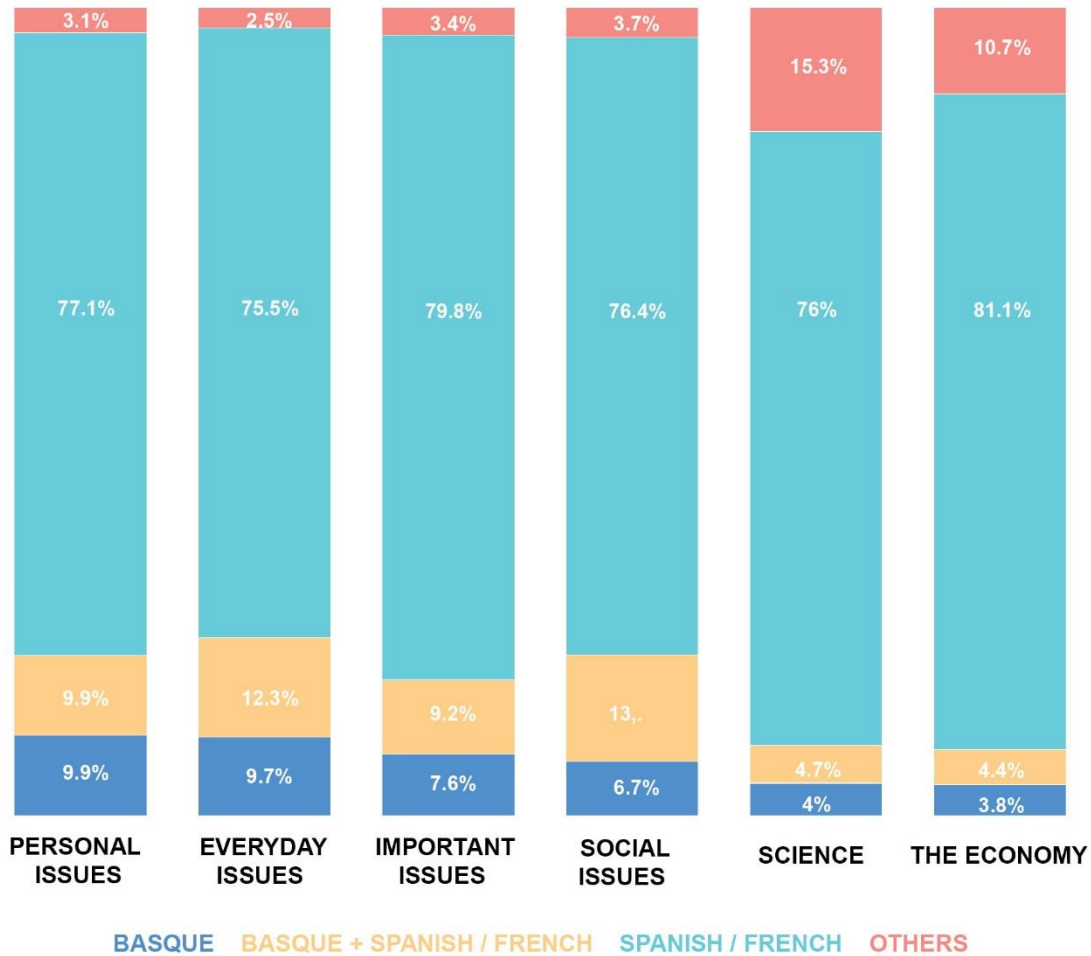
*Note.* Primary data from the survey.

When considering mentions of Basque alongside other languages, we observe notable changes in its presence across different areas of the social sphere. The Basque language shows stronger associations in areas such as the media (23.7%), at work (23.2%), and with friends (23.1%). However, significant gaps remain in cultural consumption domains, particularly in digital networks (11%) and in cinema, literature, and theater (12.9%).

In terms of subject matter, Basque tends to be more frequently associated with basic and everyday topics rather than specialized or complex areas. Specifically, 9.9% of respondents associated Basque with personal topics, while 9.7% associated it with everyday matters. However, the proportion of respondents who associated Basque exclusively with matters of personal importance dropped to 7.6%. Similarly, only 6.7% associated it with social issues, with the most notable declines observed in economic topics (4.0%) and scientific or technological issues (3.8%) (see Figure 3).

These findings highlight the uneven integration of Basque across different social and cultural domains, particularly its limited presence in specialized and contemporary fields such as economics, science, and technology.

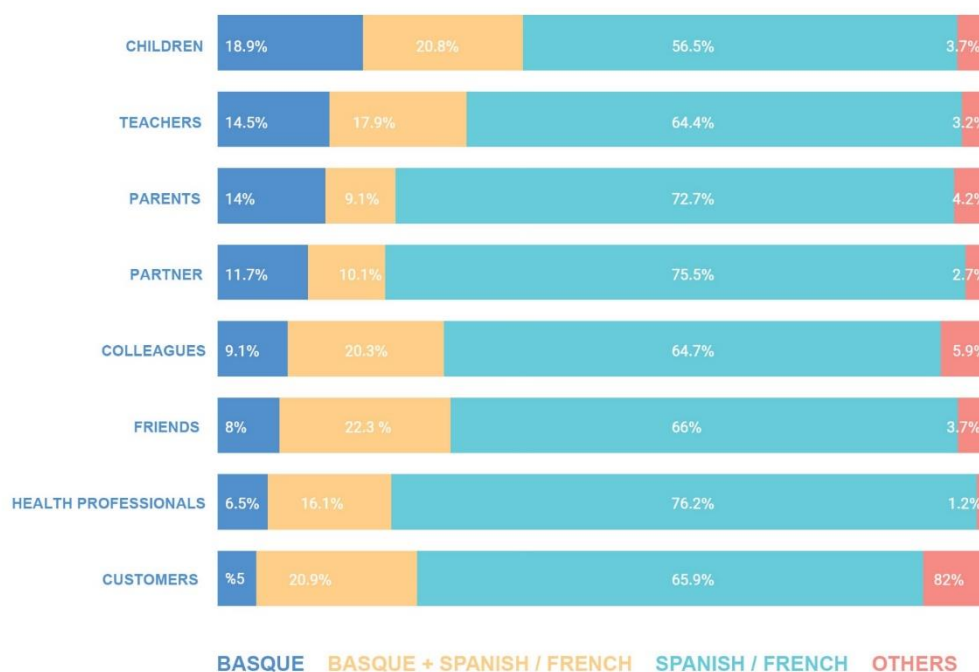
**Figure**  
*Issues Associated with the Basque Language*



*Note.* Primary data from the survey.

The analysis reveals a slightly altered ranking when considering the percentage of respondents who associate Basque alongside a hegemonic language (Spanish or French). In this context, Basque is most commonly associated with current affairs (22%), followed by social issues (19.9%), personal issues (19.8%), and important matters (16.89%). Nevertheless, science and economics remain the least associated categories, with significantly lower mentions of 8.7% and 8.2%, respectively (see Figure 3).

**Figure**  
*Languages That Are Associated with Each Type of Speaker*



*Note.* Primary data from the survey.

When focusing on interlocutors rather than issues or situations, monolingual associations with the Basque language appear stronger. This suggests that interpersonal relationships may offer an opportunity to enhance the perception and usage of Basque. Children emerge as the primary interlocutors associated with Basque (39.7%), underscoring the importance of language transmission across generations. However, the usage of Basque decreases in adult relationships, with 21.8% associating it with partners and 30.3% with friends.

Schools also play a critical role in the preservation and promotion of the Basque language, with teachers cited as the second most frequent interlocutors (32.4%). However, previous research indicates that the strong association of Basque with educational settings can inadvertently prioritize Spanish in the social relationships of young people outside of school environments. This dynamic highlights the potential challenges of expanding Basque usage beyond institutional spaces into broader social contexts.

### Associations

Brand associations, whether functional or emotional, are integral to shaping a language's positioning within society. In the case of Basque, the functional associations are divided into inherent characteristics of the language and the practical values derived from these traits.

#### *Functional Associations*

According to the study, the majority of respondents attributed several functional characteristics to Basque: it is considered a beautiful language (77.9%), difficult (70.7%), a

language with a future (69%), a rich language (65.8%), having practical value (44.9%), and being over-protected (34.5%).

The perception of Basque as a beautiful language (77.9%) is a positive attribute that can foster pride among speakers and attract new learners. However, relying heavily on its aesthetic value poses risks for a minority language, as it may limit its perceived practical functions and reduce its use to a symbolic level. This is a known phenomenon for minority languages, as highlighted in studies by O'Reilly (2003), Kelly-Holmes and Atkinson (2007), Paterson and O'Hanlon (2015), and O'Giollagáin and Caimbeul (2021). Alarmingly, nearly half of the respondents did not acknowledge the practical value of Basque, representing a significant weakness.

The perception of Basque as a “language of the future” (69%) is encouraging, though the quality of this perceived future is uncertain given the limited contexts in which it is used. On the other hand, the belief that Basque is difficult (70.7%) could deter potential learners. This perception is particularly problematic for a minority language, as it may serve as an excuse to avoid learning it. Furthermore, the low recognition of its practical value remains a concern, with over half of respondents failing to identify its utility.

Opinions about the level of protection Basque receives are mixed. While this divided perception might reflect its historical challenges, it may also indicate varying awareness of the organized efforts to promote the language.

In terms of practical applications, Basque is viewed as useful in several areas: school-related matters (75%), securing or maintaining a job (69%), informal interactions with friends (76%), and university studies (62%). Its role in social integration is also valued by 48.9%. However, its emotional and practical utility in specific scenarios shows variability. While 43.1% view it as valuable for emotional communication, fewer see its utility in contexts such as scolding children (47.7%), arguing (44.6%), telling jokes (43.8%), and expressing anger (40%). Its usefulness for insulting (28.9%) is particularly low. This mixed perception underscores challenges in promoting Basque as both a functional and symbolic tool for everyday interactions.

### *Symbolic Associations*

The symbolic attributes of Basque highlight its collective identity within the community. It is predominantly perceived as an authentic language (79.6%), traditional (68%), and beloved (53.7%). Few associate it with being artificial (7.7%), modern (12.1%), or hated (7.6%). These symbolic constructions reflect a positive, albeit somewhat conservative, image of the language.

When it comes to societal roles, opinions are more nuanced. While nearly half view Basque as integrative (46.2%) and unifying (41.6%), a significant portion associates it with exclusion (25%) and division (24%). These findings reveal the complex role Basque plays in fostering both community cohesion and social tensions.

Regarding the prototypical Basque speaker, most respondents described them as left-nationalist (60.7%), friendly (60.4%), and responsible (56.7%). A notable portion also associated Basque speakers with farming (53.9%) rather than urban lifestyles (12.9%). Traits such as traditionalism (49.6%) and tolerance (47.1%) were also prominent, though fewer associated speakers with innovation (13.2%) or dominance (12.7%). Ideologically, Basque speakers are closely linked to left-wing nationalism, reflecting the political and cultural dimensions of the language.

## Attitudes

Attitudes toward Basque reveal a combination of evaluative beliefs, feelings, and intentions shaped by associations. Most respondents demonstrated positive feelings when speaking Basque or hearing it spoken, with significant proportions reporting feelings of calm (61.9%), positivity (57.1%), respect (55.7%), and acceptance (50.7%). Negative feelings were primarily associated with respondents' inability to speak the language, with 40.3% citing this as a source of discomfort.

Institutional support for Basque was generally viewed positively. Half of the respondents (50.3%) disagreed with the notion that money spent on Basque is wasted, while 74.9% supported the idea that Basque should receive institutional protection. Nevertheless, 21.7% expressed agreement with the idea that resources allocated to Basque are wasted.

## Attachment

Attachment refers to the emotional bond formed with the Basque language as a result of associations and attitudes. This section examines how individuals identify with and adhere to the Basque language in general and in more specific contexts. The data provides insights into how much people like or dislike Basque, as well as the extent to which they consider it an essential part of their identity.

The data indicates that the most widely shared sentiment is the desire to learn more or improve proficiency in Basque, with 70.4% of respondents expressing this intention. Closely following this, 69.7% reported a general liking for Basque, while 59.5% stated that they feel connected to the Basque-speaking community. These three indicators show a broad, collective attachment to the language. However, the level of commitment to actively defending Basque drops slightly, with 49.5% agreeing with this sentiment. Moving further into personal identity, 38% of respondents agreed that Basque is a fundamental part of who they are, while 23.1% agreed to some extent. The largest group, however, stated that Basque does not play a significant role in their personal identity (38.9%).

When asked whether using Basque makes a person unique or special, the majority disagreed (49.7%), while only 26.6% believed that it does. Negative attachment, such as hatred for the language, is nearly non-existent, with only 4% expressing such feelings. These results suggest that while Basque is positively regarded in general, it is not broadly seen as a distinctive or defining feature of personal identity.

However, attachment weakens when moving from collective to individual expressions of connection. For instance, while more than half of respondents (59.9%) feel a connection to the Basque-speaking community, and 49.5% feel a strong commitment to defending the language. Moreover, when attachment is viewed through the lens of personal identity, the results become more polarized. Only slightly more than a third of respondents (38%) see Basque as a core part of who they are, and most people (49.7%) do not view it as a marker of personal uniqueness or specialness.

These findings highlight a critical challenge for the Basque language as a brand: while there is significant collective attachment and appreciation for Basque, its role in shaping individual identity is less pronounced. Efforts to strengthen the Basque language brand should consider strategies to deepen its integration into personal identity while maintaining its symbolic and communal significance. This dual approach could help solidify the emotional bond individuals feel with Basque, enhancing both its collective and personal value.

## Activity

Activity represents the actions taken by speakers in response to their connections and experiences with the Basque language, as explored through awareness, associations, attitudes, and attachment. This section examines proactive or reactive behaviors either supporting or opposing the Basque language.

The most significant activity related to Basque is passing the language down to children, with 61.7% of respondents identifying this as a key behavior. This aligns with the findings in the Associations section, where children were the most frequently mentioned group connected to the Basque language. Other pro-Basque activities are less prominent. For instance, participation in initiatives to promote the Basque language is reported by 32.4% of respondents, and efforts to consume products and services offered in Basque are undertaken by 31.0%. Behavioral actions related to conversational use of Basque rank similarly: 28.1% of respondents reported starting conversations in Basque, while 30.6% reported continuing to speak Basque when addressed in the language. Participation in activities aimed at learning or improving Basque is significantly lower, at only 16.6%.

While general support for the survival and transmission of Basque is high—reflected in the 61.7% prioritizing its transmission to children—the proportion of respondents who take a consistent, proactive stance in promoting the language is approximately one-third. This group (28-32%, depending on the specific activity) demonstrates a tangible form of "brand attachment," where strong emotional or ideological ties to the language translate into concrete actions.

However, a notable gap emerges when considering participation in learning or improvement activities, with only 16.6% engaging in efforts to enhance their Basque proficiency. Interestingly, this participation rate is even lower (6.2%) among non-Basque speakers or passive speakers compared to fluent Basque speakers, who are significantly more likely to take part in such initiatives. This pattern could reflect an underlying contradiction: Basque speakers, despite their proficiency, seem to feel a need for improvement or reinforcement, potentially pointing to a lack of confidence or a perceived gap in their fluency or usage.

Overall, while there is a clear willingness to pass Basque on to future generations, other proactive behaviors to promote the language, such as learning initiatives or consistent usage in daily life, lag behind. These findings suggest that increasing active participation and usage among all language groups, particularly passive and non-speakers, will be crucial for furthering the Basque language's presence and vitality.

## Conclusion

Before delving into the conclusions, it is essential to address the limitations of this study. Although the sampling methodology enables reliable affirmations with an acceptable error margin of  $\pm 2.9\%$ , this study captures only the image of the Basque language as perceived by Basque speakers. These are descriptive results, and any extrapolation regarding the applicability of this knowledge to changing attitudes toward or usage of the language must be understood as speculative, drawing on experiences from other branding fields.

The first significant conclusion is that it is indeed possible to analyze a language as a brand. Respondents did not object to viewing the Basque language through the lens of branding, and a clear set of characteristics aligned with Keller's (1993) classic model dimensions (awareness, associations, attitudes, attachment, and activity) emerged from the data. These findings, along with reflections on their implications, are discussed below.

The Basque language's awareness is relatively weak, as it does not spontaneously come to mind in diverse situations, issues, or interlocutors. It is primarily linked to the home, with



children as the most frequently mentioned speakers. However, connections with adults, such as partners or friends, are much weaker. Basque's associations with school and home are strong, but not as dominant as expected, and the language is mainly associated with informal and personal life rather than professional or academic domains, despite decades of university instruction in Basque.

Functionally, Basque is viewed as a pleasant but difficult language, while symbolically it is seen as authentic, traditional, and beloved. The perceived difficulty poses a barrier to its wider adoption, particularly for new learners, while symbolic perceptions, though largely positive, risk distancing Basque from practical, everyday applications. Basque's image as an authentic but old-fashioned language reinforces its mythical appeal but may undermine its utility in daily life.

Attitudes toward Basque are predominantly positive, with feelings of calm, respect, and acceptance associated with speaking or hearing it. However, the main negative sentiment is the lack of ability to use the language fluently, a challenge shared by a significant portion of respondents. Institutional efforts to support Basque are widely supported, with most respondents agreeing on the importance of protecting the language and rejecting the idea that funds allocated to its promotion are wasted. These findings reflect an overall positive attitude toward Basque, even as certain challenges, such as perceived inability and limited practical application, persist.

Attachment to Basque is strong in general, with most respondents expressing a liking for the language and a desire to improve their skills. However, attachment diminishes when viewed through the lens of personal identity. While many respondents feel connected to the Basque-speaking community, fewer see Basque as a core part of their individuality or as a source of personal uniqueness. While attachment to Basque is strong on a collective level, it diminishes when viewed through the lens of individual identity. This suggests that while Basque enjoys symbolic importance, it has yet to establish itself as a defining feature of personal identity for the majority of respondents.

This trend is further reflected in activity levels, where generational transmission is prioritized, but proactive efforts to promote or use Basque, such as participating in initiatives or consuming products in Basque, are limited to about a third of respondents. Participation in learning initiatives is notably low, even among those who feel limited in their linguistic ability. Fluent Basque speakers, more than passive or non-speakers, are disproportionately involved in such activities, suggesting potential gaps in confidence or fluency even within this group.

This study successfully applied Keller's branding model to evaluate the Basque language, offering actionable insights for policymakers. Extrapolating from branding experiences, it is clear that awareness—the foundation of the brand pyramid—is critical. Efforts to improve the Basque language brand should focus on increasing its presence in diverse situations, reshaping associations to highlight practical and functional value, and projecting Basque as a contemporary, everyday language. This approach goes beyond creating symbols of collective identity, positioning Basque as a desirable element of personal identity.

Future research could explore the brand images of competing languages, such as Spanish and French, to gain comparative insights. With such data, researchers could begin developing causal models to understand which dimensions or variables are most strongly associated with increased language usage, thereby guiding strategic interventions.

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