



Experiences of brands and national identity

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ABSTRACT

Other disciplines know that brands affect national identity, but marketing has barely examined this relationship. We explore the conceptualisation of brands as symbolic and experiential resources from which consumers construct identity narratives. National identity is justified as a construct relevant to contemporary consumers and brands; more than shared culture, national identity encompasses feelings of belonging. We investigate consumer perspectives of how experiences of brands affect national identity. Life history narratives and friendship pair interviews were used to address how national identity is experienced in brands, and which and why brands impact national identity. Findings demonstrate the contribution of brands to consumer feelings of belonging, and of being part of a national community. Common brand consumption practices and shared appreciation for important stories embedded in brand communications assist in linking individuals with the same national identity. This research contributes to understanding brands, especially how consumers use and derive value from them.

Executive Summary: National identity is a particular social imaginary identity and is a creditable, relevant contemporary form of identity which is essential for maintaining self-respect, belonging and a sense of security. Despite the fact that there is little mention of nations or national identity in marketing literature, it is striking to note that advertising is regarded as playing a central role in conceptualising the nation. Given that brands are typically the sponsors of such advertisements and that brands are partially consumed and experienced via their advertisements we ask, what is the relationship between brands and national identity?

The objectives of this qualitative study in New Zealand were to determine how national identity is experienced in brands and to identify which brands make people feel the way they do about their own national identity in the New Zealand context. We found that frequently advertised local and multinational brands were identified as brands that make people feel the way they do about their own national identity. Heritage brands, that do little advertising or whose marketing communications could not be recalled, also contributed strongly to national identity. The common factor amongst all these brands was the provision of stories that were relevant to the brand and that resonated with participants.

From a practitioner perspective our study provides evidence of a link between brands and national identity and points to the importance of brand owners understanding how their brand stories affect consumer usage and purchase of brands, and impact on brand value.

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1. Introduction

Despite the fact that there is little mention of national identity in marketing literature, it is striking to note that advertising is regarded as playing a central role in conceptualising the nation (see, for example, Askew and Wilk, 2002; Frosh, 2007; Millard et al., 2002; Moreno, 2003; Prideaux, 2009). Writers in the fields of cultural studies, political science, journalism and mass-communication are in no doubt: “advertisements sell more than products; they sell values, ways of life, conceptions of self and ‘Other’” and ideologies

including capitalist consumerism, imperialism, racism and patriarchy (Hogan, 2005, p. 193). We know that brands typically bring about such advertisements. We also know that brands are partially consumed and experienced via their advertisements. This raises the question of what the relationship is between brands and national identity. More specifically, from a consumer perspective, how do experiences of brands in everyday life affect the sense of national identity, of feeling and belonging to an imagined national community?

There are many unanswered questions regarding brands and national identity. Little is known about the ways that consumers use brands for their own national identity projects. This consumer-centric issue is quite different to the more widely researched

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matter of nation and place branding (see, for example, Anholt, 2005; Dinnie, 2008; Kotler and Gertner, 2002; Olins, 2002). The motivation for our study comes initially from a clear gap in the literature; in essence, other disciplines know that brands affect national identity but the branding and consumer research literature has barely recognised this relationship or examined features of it. Thus, research into this unexplored dimension of brand is expected to contribute to better understanding brands, particularly regarding how consumers use them and derive value from them.

In the sections that follow we provide a review of the relevant literature and explore the conceptualisation of brands as symbolic and experiential resources from which consumers construct narratives of identity, in particular, national identity. National identity is justified as a construct worthy of study, relevant to contemporary consumers and brands. The research methodology is reported and we discuss the results of in-depth interviews addressing the two research questions; how is national identity experienced in brands? And which brands make people feel the way they do about their own national identity in the New Zealand context? Finally, the practitioner implications from our findings and directions for future research are presented.

2. Literature review

2.1. Branding

Many scholars and researchers deploying diverse methodologies have contributed to understanding concepts of branding (see, for example, Aaker, 1991; Fournier, 1998; Kapferer, 1997; Keller, 2003; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). Approaches to the study of brands are grounded in four different disciplines—namely economics—brands as reputation signals; sociology—brands as trust mechanisms; psychology—brands as heuristic frames; and cultural disciplines—brands as symbols (Holt, 2002). Recent publications (see, for example, Stern, 2006) investigate historical definitions and conceptualisations of brands thereby drawing attention to gaps exposed by the classification of brand research. Analysis of the literature highlights that, what a brand does, how it is used and what role it plays for consumers and brand owners is not fully comprehended. Certainly, as Keller (2003) and others suggest, there are significant gaps in our understanding of brands and what consumers do with them.

2.2. Consumption and identities

Products and services are used in consumption activities that permit/support social connections and communities, according to the literature. When considering the building of social identities, particularly community identities, Cova (1997) identified the *linking value* of products and services, contributing to “*establishing and/or reinforcing bonds between individuals*” (Cova and Cova, 2001, p. 70). An extension of this argument is to consider the linking value, not only of products and services, but of the distinctive and unique brands that wrap around them. Cova's (1997) ideas, of consumption drawing people in communities together, overlap with Elliott and Wattanasuwan's (1998) conceptualisation of brands as symbolic resources used in identity projects. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding the possibilities of brands being able to unite consumers within communities and to assist them in developing a sense of belonging. Further still, the consumer potential of brands in affirming and enhancing group identities, such as national identity, is underdeveloped.

2.3. Experiential and symbolic resources from brand communications

Consumers are known to use brands for their own purposes, for example, in social signalling (Kates, 2004; Pettigrew, 2002; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) and image management (Elliott, 1994). Such brand purchase and usage experiences (called, lived experiences of brands by Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998) are relatively well understood. However, complementary experiences of brands, through consumption of advertising and other marketing communications have not received as much attention in the literature. Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) proposed that these two types of brand consumption experiences play a part in the symbolic project of the self. Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) also proposes that various resources for identity construction are provided by marketer generated materials. Thus, brand communications are conceptualised as a symbolic resource used in the search for, and construction of, identities (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998).

Mediated brand experiences (through consuming brand advertisements, etc.) are able to supplement consumption by providing a story, and articulating loosely constructed thoughts about a brand (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998). This story is part of the interplay between brands and individuals (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2005). In their Social Model of Brand Creation, Muñiz and O'Guinn (2005) consider the level and nature of ‘brandtalk’ between members of online communities, particularly focusing on the dissemination of rumours within strong online brand communities. In summary, they suggest contextually relevant brand meanings are generated when consumers interact with brand stories and other people.

Brand owners are increasingly moving away from hard sell mass media communications and the use of visually spectacular stories has become commonplace in contemporary marketing practice (Goldman, 1995; Phillips, 1997; Schroeder, 2002; Scott, 1992, 1993, 1994). Apart from Muñiz and O'Guinn's (2005) model, little has been published regarding how brand stories are incorporated into consumers' lives. While Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) modelled a relationship between brand stories, self and social identity projects, this has not been explored to any significant extent in the literature. This research specifically focuses on the relationship between brand stories and a particular, overarching type of social identity, national identity.

2.4. National identity

National identity is a term which has entered the lexicon in modern times (since the development and conceptualisation of nation in the 18th and 19th centuries) and is used indiscriminately to mean all sorts of things. Within this study, national identity is considered a socially constructed phenomenon that assists the individual to understand his/her place in the world and is characterised by the belief that there are commonalities which unite members of a nation (Kirloskar-Steinbach, 2004). National identity is not just about shared culture; it is about the *feeling* of belonging (Grimson, 2010).

The conceptualisation of national identity in this study draws on the theories of psychology and sociology, of self concept and collective identity—in particular Social Identity Theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979). National identity is a form of collective identification that serves the purpose of binding people together within a community, giving them a sense of membership of a cultural or ethnic group. National identity is not a fixed view of tangible characteristics, but a self view of the nation (Connor, 1994). It is most unlikely that a group of fellow community members will feel and imagine exactly the same thing—there is “no such thing as the one and only national identity” (de Cillia

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