

## **Brands, Brand Communications and National Identity**

*Sandy Bulmer, Massey University*

*Margo Buchanan-Oliver, University of Auckland*

### **Abstract**

There is clear evidence from literatures outside the marketing discipline that advertisements affect the nation and national identity, but it is unclear from a marketing perspective what the relationship is between national identity and the brands that are advertised. This paper briefly reviews the social context of brands, marketing communications and brand narratives, self and social identity and marketer generated materials, national identity and consumer research and offers an alternative lens to provide a richer view of the role of brands in consumers' lives than has been reported to date. We argue that brands affect national identity, offer an agenda for research into the relationship between brands and national identity, and discuss the implications for branding research.

Keywords: brands, national identity, advertising, narratives, marketing communications

## **Brands, Brand Communications and National Identity**

### **Introduction**

Consumers' experiences and uses of brands (rather than brand owners' intentions) is an area of study in the marketing literature which is theoretically underdeveloped and there are calls for research to develop a greater understanding of brands (Ballantyne and Aitken 2007; Brodie, Glynn and Little 2006; Jevons 2007; Keller 2003) especially using new perspectives. Brands are known to be used by consumers for purposes other than the persuasive and mostly commercial ones intended by brand owners (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998; O'Donohoe 1994; Ritson and Elliott 1999). Through their brand marketing communications, brands offer stories, narratives and cultural myths that consumers draw on. There is strong evidence to suggest that consumption of brands and the cultural symbolism surrounding brands has a role to play in the expression of self-identity and in fostering community (Cova 1997; Firat and Dholakia 1998; Muñiz and O'Guinn 2005; Schouten and McAlexander 1995).

The role of advertising and the media in producing nationalism and informing the process of conceptualising a nation is widely accepted in cultural studies, political science, journalism and mass-communication literature – see, for example, Askew and Wilk (2002); Frosh (2007); Millard, Riegel and Wright (2002); Moreno (2003); Prideaux (2009). However, whilst there is a body of research relating to the role of brands in so-called brand communities (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001) there are very few studies, apart from Kates (2004), addressing how brands impact on other forms of community – and there is little to suggest how brands affect national identity. National identity continues to be a creditable and relevant contemporary form of personal and community identification. Furthermore, a well developed and strong sense of national identity has the power to be a productive and enabling force within society. Despite the trend towards globalisation and the suggestion that consumers increasingly have an external focus and a global outlook (see, for example, Levitt 1983) paradoxically, the processes of globalisation are partly responsible for an apparent increase in the importance and significance of ethnic and national identities.

Given the clear evidence from other literatures (cited above) that advertisements affect the nation and national identity then what is the relationship between national identity and the brands that are advertised? This paper briefly reviews the literature on the social context of brands, marketing communications and brand narratives, self and social identity and marketer generated materials, national identity and consumer research and presents a new approach towards understanding brands and how consumers use them. We argue that brands affect national identity and offer an agenda for consumer research into the poorly understood relationship between brands and national identity.

### **Brands and their Social Context**

Brands can be studied and understood as reputation signals; trust mechanisms; heuristic frames; and, as in this paper, as symbols (Holt 2002). From a consumer research perspective, consumers do more than buy brands. They display them, use them as social markers and talk about them; thus this paper is particularly concerned with symbolic and experiential dimensions of brands, rather than the dimensions of brand identity, functionality, sustainability, differentiation and value creation, and delivery (Jevons 2007). The goods and brands one consumes help define the self and therefore can help in the quest to be someone different and to be part of a group (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). The depth and power

of the consumed brand's symbolic meaning within a social group can be seen when teenagers insist on wearing particular branded trainers that symbolise their desired personality, characteristics and reference group affiliation (Chaplin et al. 2005). Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001, p.412) proposed the existence of brand communities in which there are connections between consumers and social relations between admirers of a brand. They suggest that brands are important to societies of consumers and communities negotiate their own brand meanings; they do not necessarily accept marketers' intended presentations of brands.

Quality experiences, stories and lifestyles are often sought by consumers, rather than the functional dimensions of products and services. Cova (1997) introduced the idea of the linking role of goods and services and suggests that the most valuable goods and services are those that in some way permit and support social connections. Products such as the *Warhammer* strategic battle game and services such as mobile phone messaging are obvious illustrations of this point. Taking this a step further, we consider the linking value not only of products and services but the distinctive and unique brands that wrap around them. Cova claims that emblems and locations facilitate and affirm community. Experiential brand places or brandscapes such as flagship stores, themed retail outlets and virtual spaces are examples of signs and sites as envisioned by Cova, which facilitate community. Brand is central to the consumption experience and brand narratives can function as a script for the unfolding experience of consumption (Carù and Cova 2003). Thus, brands are able to unite consumers within communities and to assist them in developing a sense of belonging.

### **Marketing Communications and Brand Narratives**

Another particular connection between brand and society, the iconic brand, is described by Holt (2004). Iconic brands are embedded in culture and appropriate existing cultural myths, uniquely integrating them into their brand identities. However, Holt does not go far enough; rather than being restricted to the few, special iconic brands that Holt identifies, we argue that cultural myths and stories of importance to the nation are embedded in all sorts of brands and not only those heritage brands with local roots. There are those brands which blatantly use patriotic appeals to stimulate buying behaviour; however, this is not the type of brand narrative that we are referring to. It is our contention that many brands speak strongly of what it is to be a New Zealander using less obvious means and anecdotal evidence suggests that, in the New Zealand context, both Toyota and Adidas (whose Japanese and German origins respectively are widely known) are brands that have successfully incorporated stories into their communications that are directly relevant to New Zealand national identity.

Brands are experienced by consumers in their purchase and usage but it is less commonly considered that brands are also experienced through marketing communications (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998). Advertising and other brand communications are a cultural resource that is consumed – like movies, fine art and literature. Rather than conceptualising the consumer as an information processor, Ritson and Elliott (1995) theorise the readers /consumers of an advertising text as active co-creators; that is, they work with the text to come up with personally relevant meanings; new meanings are generated that depend on personal experiences and the intended uses of those meanings. Thus, brands offer brand stories which potentially play a role in reinforcing and building personal and community identity.

## Self and Social Identity and Marketer Generated Materials

In this paper we conceptualise national identity as a type of social identity. The literature on identity suggests that the self is, and can only be, socially constructed. Furthermore, we have multiple selves. We belong to multiple groups or communities and our social identity is an extension of self identity. Various social situations trigger us to act and think according to our personal, family or national level of self. Benedict Anderson (1983) in his book *Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* makes the point that many communities (and all nations) are necessarily imagined; members of communities are unknown to each other but imagine the group they belong to and the shared rituals, traditions and responsibilities. Belonging to the group requires an act of imagination; what is shared is a consciousness.

Recent literature, particularly referencing Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005), has pointed towards the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace and cultural meanings, and thus the role of brands in creating and re-creating a sense of self, personal purpose and belonging. Most important is an understanding of the link between consumption and the drive to establish identity(ies) within consumer culture. Commentators suggest that contemporary life has given rise to a number of new problems “for selfhood and collective community” (Arnould and Price 2000, p.140). These existential issues are conceptualised in the post-modern literature as flowing from the condition of fragmentation, whereby “traditional institutions which formally provided the basis of identity disintegrate” (Goulding 2003, p.154). Consequentially, the insignificance of individuals’ lives, stemming from a sense of disconnectedness from traditional communities, gives rise to a need for greater self-fulfilment and thus consumers are identity seekers and makers, even using marketer generated materials for the project of the self (Arnould and Thompson 2005).

## National Identity and Consumer Research

National identity is a form of identity that engenders a sense of self-respect, belonging and security. It is not the subject of many articles in marketing and consumer research literature; however, in wider academic literature there are a number of journals devoted to this topic – for example, *National Identities* and *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture*. Marketers, particularly in the United States, might consider that national identity is an outdated concept, of no relevance to their business plans. However, it is interesting to realise that national identity is a matter of serious public concern in many places; in the European Union (old, new and would-be states); in countries newly independent of either USSR or Yugoslavia; in cessionist would-be states such as Scotland, Wales, Catalonia, Quebec; and, of particular relevance in the Australian and New Zealand context, in post-colonial nations, which includes much of Africa and other countries of the British Commonwealth. Furthermore it has been recognised by governments as a potent facilitator of positive social capital, hence the interest by governments in developing and enhancing a strong sense of national identity (Aldridge 2002).

Within the consumer research, branding and wider marketing literatures there are reports of country of origin effects and nation/place branding. However, the potential of brands to affect national identity and to play a role in consumer identity projects relating to the national community have not been previously identified.

## Existing Models Relevant to Brands and National Identity

There are two existing models that provide a useful framework for considering how brands affect national identity. Firstly, the Social Model of Brand Creation (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2005) addresses the formation of brand meanings as a combined result of marketer production activities, processes of accommodation and negotiation between the producer and individuals and finally the formation of common and personal meanings as the result of social activities, particularly talk about a brand. Secondly, the effect of brands on the construction of self and social identity is addressed by Elliott and Wattanasuwan's (1998) model of Consumption and the Symbolic Project of the Self (adapted from Jenkins 1996). In this model the authors identify mediated and lived experiences of brands as impacting on the self. The self is informed by interactions with others and thus national identity, as one important form of identity, might be expected to be affected by brands and to be comprehended communally and singularly.

## Implications for Branding Research

As the wider literature suggests, advertising affects national identity and we have made the case that the effect of brands on national identity simply have not been accounted for in the literature. We concur with other researchers who suggest that there is much unknown about the role of brands in consumers' lives and that if further progress is to be made in understanding brands there need to be studies of consumer experiences of brands in a social context. There is little evidence to suggest how consumers use brand narratives for their own purposes or how brands are used in sustaining community.

We note the calls for further study of socially situated experiences of customers as outlined by Peñaloza and Venkatesh (2006) and Schembri (2006) in their discussion of services. These authors take an emic view of markets; that is to say, markets exist because of the ways that consumers socially interact rather than existing as an independent construct. Furthermore, regarding the social construction of markets - value is "*constituted by marketers and consumers in their activities and discourses via an enacted process, a social construction that takes place prior to, during and after the actual exchange and use(s) take place*" (Peñaloza and Venkatesh 2006, p.303). By considering brands in a social context, using emic accounts and personalised constructions of meaning rather than the more common, culturally-neutral etic accounts provided by detached observers and researchers, future branding research may provide insights that can be used to improve brand experiences and add value.

The study of consumers' lived experiences of brand and national identity and more particularly, how brands affect national identity is a worthy new idea for extending understanding of branding. Future research should consider how consumers experience national identity in brand communications and what the social processes are that affect national identity through brand experiences. From this, researchers might develop theory linking brands and national identity by investigating social mechanisms and brand resources used in negotiating and building national identity; generate insights through studying the lived experiences of consumers within a social context and expand knowledge of what consumers do with brands, how they use marketing communications in their lives and what the relationship between brand experiences and national identity is; offer more detailed understanding of the value offered by brands to consumers and the role of marketing communications in creating value for consumers and brands; extend and develop conceptualisations of the social construction of markets; and extend understanding of brands and cultural myth beyond the iconic brands' conceptualisation.

The practitioner relevance of studying how consumers experience national identity in brand communications is in the provision of a clearer understanding of how aspects of marketing communications can impact on brand value; contribution to understanding global brand marketing communications; within a specific national context, offering a better understanding of the factors that contribute to stable national identity and therefore impact on government policies of building national identity for economic and stability purposes; generating insights that make for improved brand experiences that resonate with aspects of national identity; providing insights for brand owners into leveraging brands further through intensifying brand messages and enhancing consumer reception. In summary, the findings of such studies should have relevance to both researchers and practitioners beyond any particular national market context and should contribute, at the broadest level, to a richer view of the role of brands in consumers' lives than has been reported to date.

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