Surrogate Brands
- The pull to adopt an 'Other' nation; via sports merchandise

by

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Abstract

A growing number of consumers are choosing to wear sporting merchandise, from an 'other' nation – whom they have no geographic or ethnic affiliation with. In addition, nation sports branding appears to have scaled pandemic heights; by reaching fever pitch, when actively carrying its message across boarders. Consumer preferences are being driven past simple behavioural characteristics; towards more transient psychographic and emotional constructs. In short, nation branded sporting uniform is no longer viewed as demanding restrictive monogamous loyalty. Ownership of a uniform largely suggests exclusivity and encouraged competition. However, manufactures, national teams, athletes and sponsors are entering symbiotic brand relationships - where they are actively seeking publics, open to multiple adopted nationalities. This phenomenon draws consumers towards embracing temporal national identities, which are converted into an over-arching cross-border identity; ultimately gifting sports brands more significance. The following paper explores consumers' entry into relationships with another nation, in preference to their own - in manner that has been likened to a form of surrogacy; by the authors. The aim is to stimulate further thinking in a field; which transcends national and cultural boundaries - in the interests of developing new insight, and to provide a platform for marketers to develop more effective communications.

Keywords

Sports branding, consumer behaviour, cross-culture, national identity, denationalization

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1. Introduction

Branding by its nature draws from intangible benefits; that can offer a 'fat free' approach by recycling existing assets and extending them to a host of cultures. The purpose of this paper is to critically review current brand literature and explore how the emergences of cross-cultural, national and ethnic relations have impacted on the relevance and efficacy of a brand; particularly in sports merchandise. If brand thinking is to continue to progress in its importance, then theoretical frameworks should in turn aim to respond to consumer emotions; by demonstrating defined and tangible value.

2. Brand Creation and the Consumer

Keller (1993[1], 1998[2]) classifies brand associations into three major categories: attributes, benefits and attitudes. It has been suggested that a brand in turn gains a personality, of sorts. Freling and Forbes (2005)[3] conclude that a brand's personality "helps (at least in the consumer's mind) to define the consumer's image". The key factor is in recognising that "the creation of personality is a 'joint venture' between the brand's management and the consumer." Hayes, et al (2006)[4] also describe a brand as an "active relationship partner". So much so that their findings suggested that "attractive brands, like attractive people, may be perceived as possessing certain relationship advantages compared to those perceived as less attractive." This assertion seems to suggest that consumers firstly have what could be described as a full-blown relationship with a brand and secondly research which explores how consumers view brands, away from just passive products and services; carries more relevance.

Echoing these sentiments, Doyle (1994)[5]states that the core concern of marketing should be in the "decommoditisation" of products. In doing so Collins (2001)[6] states that there is an avoidance of consumer indifference. By merit of a brand gaining a memorable and favourable market position therefore; this intangible component appears to be central to both the brand and the consumer. Previously, Miller (1995)[7] argues for a materialist understanding of consumption that recognised the choices and the constraints which shape consumer behaviour in its widest sense. Chevron (1998)[8] went further in asserting that "the concept of a 'brand' and that of a 'product' are diametrically opposed in many ways."

Collins (2001) used Miller's premise to assert that "brands and branding represent important issues for analysis, because they have a capacity to (re)constitute reality insofar as they make certain representations of reality more-or-less persuasive and/or attractive." In support of this, Klein (2000)[9] went on to argue that the Nike "swoosh" is now one of the most requested tattoos in the USA. The suggestion therefore is that branding and especially those of sports manufacturers, have powerful significance. Consumer behaviour points towards a movement, where brands are being embraced by them, as part of their own value system and as a preferential means to help define their own identities; across cultures. Aaker (2007)[10] states that categorization theory is a useful tool in understanding the process and objective of influencing. As an extension of this underpinning, can be taken as a basis for creating brands. It "provides coherence to knowledge and judgements about nearly all aspects of daily life – including people, issues, products and brands" (Aaker 2007).

Christensen (1999)[11] found that a sizeable number senior managers, believed the weaknesses of many methods outweighed their strengths; when attempting to search for innovation in product ideas. They put weaknesses down to there being not enough of a focus on considering consumer preferences. These factors may in turn pose problems when looking to further shape brands. Christensen asserts that consumers tend to scan across categories for something that will "do the job best". The suggestion is that this 'something' will also encompass the brand. Following this, del Rio, et al (2001)[12] found that one generally accepted view draws from an associative network memory model, where consumer perceptions are "reflected by the cluster of associations that consumers connect to the brand name in memory." Here, the level of abstraction between brands and their brand associations becomes of significance, "that is, by how much information is summarized or subsumed in the association."

3. Culture, Ethnicity and Branding

Gong, et al (2004)[13] state that "Unfortunately, many Western marketers" have, "mistakenly" believed that it is hard to group Chinese youth into a distinct segment; based on psychographics – (whilst understanding that Chinese youth have different values to those of "Old" Chinese culture). "Others mistakenly perceive that these youths, do not share similar interests with Western counterparts and thus should not be included as part of the global youth market." Gong, et al conclude that these Chinese youth "worship brand names, and chase fashions and trends." Whilst the focus of this paper is not exclusively to examine

Chinese youth; it can be deduced that there are likely to be similar inadequacies and traits; when understanding other cultures and nationalities. Whitelock and Fastoso (2007)[14] in reviewing existing literature on international branding, found that very few African and Latin American countries have been objects of research and that large areas of the Asia-Pacific and Sub-Sahara region have so far not been researched.

It could be argued that countries which have inhabitants that share additional cross-border value systems, such as sport; may allow for further grouping and comparisons. Dawar and Parker (1994)[15] analysed the "existence, relative importance, and absolute magnitude of signal use" in connection with branding, "across thirty nationalities including China, Hong Kong, and Singapore." They concluded that the "variances in the use of quality signals are independent of culture and are likely to be driven by individual factors". These findings lend weight to the possibility of looking at common defining cross-national and ethnographic attitudes. Having stated this, it could be equally argued that they in fact contradict, or confirm aspects of the previous findings by Gong, et al. The issue of contention seems to be in the necessity of a brand strategy to encompass components that address consumer beliefs; rooted in cultural ethnicity and their relationship with the intangible components of a brand.

Nonaka (1991)[16] when looking at how tacit knowledge can be converted into the explicit, suggests that it is a process of "finding a way to express the inexpressible." Nonaka went onto conclude that "Unfortunately, one of the most powerful management tools for doing so is frequently overlooked: the store of figurative language and symbolism that managers can draw from to articulate their intuitions and insight." As branding draws upon both language and symbolism, it is felt that these sentiments can be carried through; whilst trying to decipher what stakeholders actually think and feel. In addition, there is reason to suggest that whilst Nonaka's theoretical framework and observations can be applied universally; their practical execution and expression may differ across cultures. As a point of reference, Nagashima (1970)[17] surveyed US and Japanese businessmen's attitudes towards foreign products. This research confirmed that "the national image of any particular country could vary across different cultures, e.g., 'made in England' was found to be significantly more prestigious in Japan than in the US." In addition Ward, et al (1986)[18] confirm that consumption behaviour varies from one culture to another. They comment on how "family orientations and behaviours differ markedly across cultures". These studies would suggest

that consumer's behaviour towards a brand does in fact alter - according to the influence of cultural, environmental and ethnographic factors.

4. When Brands brush with culture

Lelyveld (2001)[19] referred to Timberland's surprise at "being hot in the urban community with no marketing at all…no one was more surprised by the phenomenon than the company itself". In addition, this community was of a different ethnographic makeup; than their perceived core market. Further to this, more rationally based product purchases, such as Islamic Finance; have also seen similar effects. Knight (2006)[20] reported that banks offering such products have attracted white British non-Muslims. Malaysia also states that "up to 25% of Islamic accounts are opened by non-Muslims" (Knight 2006). It could be argued that this is surprising - considering that these financial products are non-interest bearing and whilst they may be considered a necessity to someone following the Muslim faith; begs the question why others would want to adopt them; especially when economic gain seems to take a back seat. In contrast, Tommy Hilfiger knowingly adopted an approach with strategically "focused on young urban African Americans to imprint his brand with a street hipness"; with the intention of using this to reach "a broad audience of all ethnicities" (Dye 2000)[21].

In each of these cases, a core branding message remains intact; but intangible emotional components have been changed (knowingly or not) - to satisfy the demands of multi-ethnic / multi-cultural audiences; either by the consumer, or brand architect. Brown (2001)[22] comments that that whilst modern consumers are marketing savvy, the key to success lies in *Retromarketing* - by creating markets as opposed to serving them. This suggests that gains lie in being able to predict accurately, current cognitive and conative consumer behavioural patterns. Therefore a national sports team brand should also have the potential to tap into new market opportunities; which have previously been thought of as being discrete.

5. Discussion

A consumer appears to create an alter-ego through the adoption of another nation's brand. The intention being that this represents a facet of their emotional state. Whilst there may be several reasons for them doing so; for the purposes of this paper the authors would like to restrict the focus of discussion towards the desire for affiliation outside of their immediate socio-cultural settings. In doing so a long-term affiliation with an 'other' nation should evolve and eventually assimilate itself into the consumer's host culture; in a fluid manner. In

addition, sponsorship brands on sports uniform demonstrate elements of complex sub-surrogacy – acting as lubricating catalysts; towards driving consumer preference and creating new market segments. The relationship between a consumer's behaviour and brand identity as defined by Keller (1993, 1998); Freling and Forbes (2005); and Hayes, et al (2006) earlier in the paper, suggest that brands represent a clear and convergent distillation of values and ideals. A rate determining step in brand efficacy lies in drawing from instantly recognisable symbolism that enhances existing qualities. The pull to cash in on an 'other' nations' uniform is driven by perceptions of existing personal, team and host societal deficiencies; which could be addressed by affiliating themselves with superior 'others'.

By the very nature that sports kit is a uniform, used to identify an individual; wearing such an item sends a clear declaration of competitive intent to onlookers. In doing so this behaviour (of wearing one team's kit) acknowledges that a phenomenon may be occurring in stages by: firstly, complex situational specific loyalty traits demonstrated by the consumer; secondly, a shift of the consumer away from the traditional raison d'être of a nation having its own team - namely that it is to serve predominantly its own nationals; thirdly, a pluralistic commoditisation of national sports identities, driven collectively by consumers, teams, brand manufacturers and population migrancy; and finally, nationality sharing a symbiotic relationship with sports branding.

Poli (2007)[23] argues that "the concept of denationalization was first used in the 1970s in economic studies as a synonym for privatization". Poli considers there to be two factors of major importance, when applying this term to professional sport: Firstly the "increasing migratory movements, partially provoked by professional sport itself, and the increasing tendency towards naturalizations of sportsmen and nationality changes. The second form is linked to the global broadcasting of images and information and to the increasing possibilities to identify with teams and sportsmen representing geographical entities on different scales (from the town to nation-states), located thousands of miles away from the supporter's place of residence."

Building on this, the view held by the authors is that whilst denationalization may apply to athletes who choose to represent a given nation; it does not necessarily apply to consumers to the same degree. By their very essence, consumers will maintain their own distinct ethnicities and territorially specific national identities. These resulting occurrences are therefore like

grafted shoots, branching off from healthy ethnic and national roots. Within these phenomena the suggestion is that rather than migrancy leading to a zero-sum gain through surrogacy; it does in fact contribute towards a creation of wealth, spearheaded by the creation of new market segments. This shift may however result in societal dissonance, which could in turn undermine the rationale behind having a branded national team that draws from unique brand attributes. The authors suggest that societal dissonance has a limited role, due to the situationally specific nature of supporting an 'other' team been – a standpoint supported by Carvel (2004)[24] Manzoor (2005)[25] and Howe (2006)[26]; which was in response to Lord Tebbit's suggested general sentiment; embodied in his 'Cricket Test' analogy.

An example of this can be seen when examining support for the former French football captain Zinedine Zidane. Non-French nationals from especially Algeria, other Muslim countries, and the Islamic faith, have expressed support for the French team, because of him. Their justification has stemmed not just from the footballing abilities of Zidane and the team; but also from the fact that they identify with Zidane as a worthy role model sharing the same faith and the same ideals. Whist Zidane was born in France; his parents were born in Algeria. Within the Muslim faith, nationality and lineage is defined by an examination of the parents' country of origin, ethnicity and those of several previous generations. A Reuters article in 2006[27] quoted a fan as saying "Zidane is a hero. He grew up in France but all Algerians have to be proud of his career. He has honoured Algeria and set an example of what Algerian youth should be." Interestingly, these views seem to contrast with some negative perceptions, held by the same groups on wider French society. France experiences challenges with community cohesion and civil unrest, especially amongst the French Algerian community. There has also been severe criticism from the Muslim world, about France's laws restricting Muslim women from wearing the hijab (headscarf) in state schools, but yet support for its football team.

From another perspective, a Scottish football fan for example, may in the absence of their own team competing, support England in their matches. It is possible that this support would not extend to the purchase of an England shirt. The suggestion here is that a larger geographic or cultural distance may be required; in order to maintain the individual's own distinct cultural identity and over-arching values. The rationale behind this is that if the gap is significant enough; then onlookers are unlikely to confuse the individual as being completely

part of that ‘other’ nation; apart from in a sports setting. As a result, fans may be more likely to purchase a piece of that ‘other’ kit, for example.

However as a contrasting point of reference, Jamaican football kit has been particularly popular amongst Japanese youth. Whilst this supports the idea of association with a distinctly different culture; Jamaica’s football team is perhaps not significant in its sporting achievements. In 2007 despite Jamaica losing to Japan 4-0, Jamaican kit continues to grow in popularity amongst the Japanese. A reason for this may point towards the cross-fertilisation and potential brand extension enjoyed by sport, through other fields, such as musical excellence. Bilateral relations between Japan and Jamaica, on a diplomatic and commercial level, have encouraged such cultural exchanges (embassy of Jamaica, Tokyo, Japan)[28]. Tomlinson (2006)[29] interviewed Jamaican artists as part of a BBC report on this phenomenon and quoted Sohjah as saying, "fans in Japan are crazy about the music, they don't just want to hear the songs, they want to talk like Jamaicans, walk like Jamaicans, and sing like us... it shows us that music is much bigger than what we're seeing here in Jamaica.” These would appear to point towards national sports kit having the potential to draw from and represent more wide-ranging brand values; outside of their immediate field.

6. Conclusion

There appears to have emerged a three-fold consensus; that branded sports merchandise is:
Firstly, analogous to an individual in possessing comparable attributes. Secondly, subsequently engaged in continually evaluated symbiotic and surrogate relationships - which champion inclusion and tend towards denationalization. And thirdly, consumed in a manner which clearly labels the wearer as wanting to be associated with that team; in preference to others. This open declaration contains within it an element of consumer competitive intent, which is greater than in non-sports brands. Following these, the authors identified a phenomenon which they assert allows them to formulate a fourth position. Namely, sports brands create or extend market segments; through surrogacy and denationalization.

Furthermore trends suggest a revolutionary growth in the number of consumers affiliating themselves with ‘other’ national teams; with whom they share an emotional, rather than an ethnic or tangible national tie. The authors’ position is that these relationships are akin to a form of surrogacy; with all parties looking to satisfy their respective needs. The weight that is attached to these components may be selective, reciprocal or intrinsic to an over-arching

value system. Following this, the suggestion has been that the critical consumer paradigm is one which stems from their self-defined cultural framework. As in cases of surrogacy, neither the root cause, nor the outcome undermines an established core identity. Rather surrogacy is a means by which extra gains can be made. In the case of 'branded' sportswear, an increase in sales revenue. Therefore the idea of denationalization is not so much a driver, but perhaps a by-product of individuals seeking to express their own cultural and ethnic identities in continually progressive ways; which increases sportswear consumption.

In the face of increased consumer migrancy, the relationship between ethnicity and nationality, appear to be driving exponential diversity in sports brand consumption. These factors are in turn redefining brand attributes, benefits and attitudes in the eyes of consumers. Therefore if brand architects are unable to gain true insight into these phenomena; they risk sub-optimising meaningful brand expression and ultimately future gains. In addition there is a risk that existing segmentation criteria may begin to lose their depth of classification; in order to preserve consumer homogeneity. As a result, it is suggested that further studies be undertaken exploring why consumers are choosing to use an increasing number of 'other' nation branded sports merchandise; as a vehicle for expression. Key areas worthy of further examination include; the relationship between ethnicity/nationally and consumers, crossed referenced against their chosen surrogates; cultural and geographic distances; and the relationship between national and club team support.

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