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Maintaining the Myth of the Monarchy: How Producers Shape Consumers' Experiences of the British Royal Family

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We explore how the myth of the monarchy is reproduced in contemporary consumer societies, by looking at how producers shape consumers' experiences of the British Royal Family (BRF) brand. Drawing on interviews with producers, we identify five key experiential themes that producers create for consumers as they engage in maintaining and modifying, the myth of the monarchy. These are: 1) storying the monarchy: telling tales of people; 2) keeping history alive: creating links between past and present; 3) event management: pomp and pageantry; 4) the role of place: creating a persona for each palace; 5) creation and sustainability of sub-myths.

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SYMPOSIA SUMMARY

Commercial Mythology and the Global Organization of Consumption

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SESSION OVERVIEW

How does commercially-mediated mythology organize the frameworks in which consumer choices unfold? Can its influence be measured? This session aims to develop answers to these theoretical questions rendered compelling by “the proliferation of the imaginary made possible by the new” global media- and brandscapes (Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst 2005). Why myth? Myth offers a way of studying cross-cultural consumption that is consistent with CCT’s distributed view of culture (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Further, ethnologists have long recognized that myth is a distributed cultural phenomenon not coterminous with geography or society (Leach 1967; 1970); and, there is some evidence of this in consumer culture (Brannen 1992). And finally although Barthes’ (1970/1957) explicitly theorized the significant ordering role of myth in consumer culture, scholars have not tapped his insights to explain how myth may organize consumption on a global scale.

This symposium session delivers on the theme of spanning and bridging. The authors deploy qualitative and quantitative methodologies and theoretical orientations, representing diverse scientific traditions in consumer research to the substantive topic of consumer mythology and market outcomes. Mythology is shown to be a non-reductionist way to operationalize cross-cultural research. Mythology is shown to transcend the brand context. Still its impact on brand involvement can be measured. The session should be of interest to those scholars interested in branding, cross-cultural research, consumption meanings, and multi-method research.

What is commercially mediated mythology? It is harnessing myth to commercial purposes via the marketplace. Previous work on consumer mythology (Holt and Thompson 2004; Thompson 2004; has not always provided clear definitions of commercial myth or has used the term rather more fluidly than desirable. Thus, one purpose of this session is to contribute to the conceptual development of this construct. In general, myth may be qualified in terms of the following characteristics (Georges 1968; Leach 1967; Lewi 2003; Stern 1995):

1. A myth is a foundational story or system of related stories perceived to be age-old. Myth imposes sense and order on experience and is believed to encode time-proved verities. Actors in mythic stories face cosmic or epic challenges such as the tales of Gilgamesh, the story of Job, or the very human Jesus in *The Passion of the Christ*.
2. Myths are anonymous, shared, and to survive must be continuously re-appropriated by a social group, as in the recycling of Cinderella tales through many successful American films, e.g., *Princess Diaries*, *Ella Enchanted*, and *Maid in Manhattan*, or in the Chanel myth among fashion subculture insiders (Lewi 2003).
3. Myths integrate social groups by proposing meaning for social life and outlining appropriate modes of conduct. Myth helps people understand their place in society, as in utopian myth (Kozinets 2001), dystopian myths (Kozinets 1997), or gnostic myth (Thompson 2004).
4. People think myths compelling and “believable;” in some sense, “it could happen.”
5. The heroes who populate myths tend to be monotypic, shorn of psychological complexity and nuance. They

incarnate powerful forces. Archetypes such as the man-with-no-name in Clint Eastwood’s classic westerns or even James Bond fascinate us because they are absolute.

6. Myths are dynamized by compelling binaries: good-evil, high-low, nature-culture, life-death, day-night, science-nature, and so on. The male-female binary, for example is central to the mythology of Goth consumer sub-culture (Goulding, et al. 2004).

A small stream of influential research and practitioner targeted texts have tapped into the ways in which brands become mythical resources and the impact of such brands on consumer behavior and other marketing outcomes (Atkin 2004; Lewi 2003; Vincent 2002). The most thoroughgoing treatment in English is Holt (2003a). Holt outlines a general theory of brand iconicity in which brands are viewed as exemplifying classic mythic characteristics (although points 4 & 5 are not so germane to his analysis). Moreover, iconic brands, rather like totemic objects (Leach 1967) render myths more accessible, more easily appropriated, and these facts together help to explain iconic brands marketplace success. However, the myths iconic brands resolve are existential contradictions people feel between their own lived experience and society’s prevailing ideologies, rather than classic mythic binaries. Perhaps more central to our session is Holt’s contention that brands compete in what he calls “myth markets:”

“a myth market is as an implicit *national* conversation in which a wide variety of cultural products compete to provide the most compelling myth. The topic of the conversation is the national ideology, and it is taken up by many contenders” (Holt 2003b, 44, emphasis added).

In contrast, in addition to clarifying the nature of global consumer myth, the second contribution of this session is to argue that myth markets play a significant role in organizing and structuring the choice-making work of consumers that transcends the brand context (paper by Pauline and Cele). Our third and final contribution (papers by Yuliya et al. and Søren and Dannie) is to argue that some myth markets are transnational globalscaping phenomena, constituent of global commercial ideoscapes (Appadurai 1990; see Tissiers-Desbords and Arnould 2005’s work on beauty products in France), and thus transcend the national context central to Thompson (2004) and Holt’s work (2003b).) Thus in this session we seek to build insights to extend mythic analysis of the type pioneered by Thompson (2004) and Holt and Thompson (2004) globally.

The paper by Pauline and Cele on the British Royal Family (BRF) myth explores how myth is produced and kept relevant in contemporary consumer societies, by looking at how producers shape consumers’ experiences of the British Royal Family (BRF) brand. The authors’ paper also illustrates the ways in which mediatized and commercialized places and events simultaneously fuel a secular myth market via particular narrative elements, and a trade in BRF merchandise and BRF sanctioned goods and services. The paper by Søren and Dannie examines one of the most fundamental myths of contemporary consumer culture, the myth of the self-actualizing consumer. The authors unpack the origins and dimensions of this mythic construct as a central organizing dynamic in consumer culture. If the paper by Pauline, Cele and Eileen focus

on the production of global mythology, and that of Søren and Dannie dimensionalizes one of consumer culture's foundational myths, the paper by Yuliya, Robin and Linda focus a S.E.M.-based assessment of the impact of a global brand myth as a central tool for self-actualizing consumer identity projects and brand involvement. Eric Arnould leads a discussion of the further potential for deploying the myth construct in explaining global consumer trends and outcomes.

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

"Maintaining the Myth of the Monarchy: How Producers Shape Consumers' Experiences of the British Royal Family"

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Cele Otnes, University of Illinois

Eileen Fischer, York University

The myth of the monarchy around the globe often begins in childhood, with fairy stories of magnificent castles peopled with wealthy kings and queens, Prince Charmings and Sleeping Beauties. These archetypal figures are deeply rooted in our psyches, shrouded in mystery and allure, and fuelling our imaginations. Indeed, within marketing, we can offer no higher accolade than to acknowledge the customer as "king", the notion of the "sovereign" consumer.

In this paper, we explore how the myth of the actual monarchy is kept alive and relevant in contemporary consumer societies, by looking at how producers shape consumers' experiences of the British Royal Family (BRF) brand. Our rationale for conceptualizing the BRF as a brand stems from Balmer, Greyser, and Urde's (2004) argument that the monarchy should not be regarded solely as a political institution, but is conceptually comparable to a corporate brand that offers consumers tangible benefits. These include providing consumers with a respected and shared symbol of nationalism, helping them engage in national "togetherness", and fostering a sense of identity based on a shared history, culture, and traditions. Moreover, conceptualizing the BRF among all extant monarchies is especially appropriate, because although it no longer plays any real political role in the United Kingdom, 53 countries still claim allegiance to the British Commonwealth (wikipedia.org, 2006). Furthermore, many manufacturers in a plethora of industries (e.g., tourism, film, publishing, china and ceramics) produce goods, services and experiences specifically designed to enhance consumers' knowledge and enjoyment of the BRF, and depend on consumers' interaction with the BRF brand to remain viable businesses. "By Special Appointment to HRH" is a much sought-after endorsement that gives a product or service perceived "sovereignty" within its particular category.

In 2005, we conducted depth interviews with retailers of memorabilia (who were interviewed multiple times), editors of newspaper columns and magazines devoted to royalty, and curators of royal palaces (a total of eight informants). Interviews focused on how and why these producers believed the myth of the monarchy was so compelling to consumers, and their roles in supporting and encouraging the co-creation of meanings around goods, services and experiences related to the BRF. Our axial coding and pattern recognition of the text resulted in our identification and interpretation of five key themes in the experiences that they create for consumers around the BRF brand, as they engage in maintaining and, in some instances, modify, the myth of the monarchy. These are:

1) Storying the Monarchy: Telling Tales of People

In making royal attractions (i.e. palaces and other venues associated with the monarch) accessible to the public, the emphasis

is on the use of narrative to build a relationship with consumers and give them co-ownership of the myth. Royal buildings become repositories for stories about the relationship between monarchs and their people, the various tensions therein, and how, together, they have shaped society. A recent exhibition in the Tower of London, "Gunpowder Treason", tells the story of Guy Fawkes' plot to overthrow the king in 1605. The present BRF is seen as only one chapter in this story of the monarchy.

2) Keeping History Alive: Creating Links between Past and Present

This use of narrative that according to Vincent (2002, p. 19), "connects the consumer and the brand in a kind of existential bond", concentrates on bridging the past and present, juxtaposing the old with the new (Brian May playing "God Save the Queen" at the Queen's Golden Jubilee celebrations), and making it relevant for today's consumers (Guy Fawkes as the first terrorist). This helps the myth of the monarchy to remain timeless.

3) Event Management: Pomp and Pageantry

Keeping royal rituals alive and, in some cases, inventing new ones is important (Billig 1992). The public celebrations that surround these events—coronations, silver and golden jubilees, birthdays, anniversaries, and marriages—present perfect opportunities to create commemorative collections and other types of memorabilia that re-enchant consumers. Like "brandfests" (McAlexander et al. 2002), these events not only offer consumers experiences that re-connect them to the core values and traditions of the monarchy, but also allow their own personal stories to interweave with those of the BRF brand.

4) The Role of Place: Creating a Persona for Each Palace

The creation of a unique sense of place for each of the royal symbolizes the monarch's extraordinary wealth, but also evokes different facets of the myth of the monarchy: the Tower of London is powerful, intriguing, ancient; Hampton Court is majestic, romantic, and flamboyant; the Banqueting House is dramatic, exuberant, and revolutionary; Kensington Palace is feminine, fashionable, and stylish; and Kew is intimate, domestic, and intense. These personae provide the backdrops against which various embedded stories are played out.

5) Creation and Sustainability of Sub-Myths

The media-centered nature of much of the storytelling aspects around the BRF often creates sub-myths, as in the case of Diana, Princess of Wales, a mythic figure in her own right with a mythic sub-text of "The Cinderella Princess". Now new sub-myths are starting to grow around her sons, Princes William and Harry. In these ways the myth of the monarchy remains a never-ending story, a still unfolding mystery.

In these various ways, producers together build the BRF brand narrative (Holt 2004), thereby re-circulating and up-dating the myth of the monarchy for contemporary consumers. According to Holt (2004), brand myths resolve key societal tensions at particular periods in history. Perhaps the real lure of the monarchy for today's consumer, confronted by the "tyranny of choice" (Schwartz 2004), is actually in the *lack* of choice that this concept offers. One does not choose a monarchy; its legitimacy is conferred from above (the divine), rather than from below (the people) (Fitzgerald 2007). Thus, despite existing within a largely secular society, producers of the BRF experience represent and reinforce the monarchy's quasi-sacred properties and mythic potential.

“The Global Myth of “Me”: Self-Actualization and Identity Practices in the Contemporary Global Consumptionscape”

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This paper takes its point of departure in possibly one of the most fundamental myths of contemporary consumer culture, the myth of the self-actualizing consumer. The central narrative of this mythology is that the goal of human existence is, as formulated by Nietzsche (2005 [1888]) in *Ecce Homo* “to become what one is”, through the unfolding of the true and natural self via self-actualizing activities and therapies. In this way, the myth of self-actualization unites the two core marketplace mythologies, the Romantic and the Gnostic, suggested by Thompson (2004).

Part and parcel of the project of modernity is an accelerating process of individualization as rigid social structures disappear as frames for identity. The notion of the individual becomes an institutional feature of what it means to be (a) modern (consumer). The myth of self-actualization intensified and diffused on an increasingly global scale through the combination of the popularity of psychology and new-age orientation towards Eastern philosophical and religious practices among Western cultural movements of the 1960s and 70s. Paradoxically the focus on individual emancipation and self-realization of this ostensibly anti-capitalist movement fits the core ideology of consumer culture (Jackson Lears 1983).

The commercialization of the myth of self-actualization takes two forms: a general and a specific one. The general form is the way in which all kinds of references to the role of products, brands and consumption in consumers’ self-enhancement and self-actualization is prevalent in modern commercial vernacular and form the mythological basis for one of the substantial research streams of consumer culture theory, termed “Consumer Identity Projects” (Arnould and Thompson 2005). The specific form, on which we will focus here, is the huge and growing self-actualization industry communicated through self-help books, courses, coaching, personal branding etc. and, increasingly, through life style programming on TV. This could also be called the marketplace mythology (Thompson 2004) of self-actualization, a particular commercial rendition of modern regimes of self governance (Belk, Ger and Askegaard 2003).

Why do we talk about self-actualization as a myth? Because the self-actualizing industries’ discourse often evokes the heroic monadic self that is trying to liberate itself from Society’s constraining social norms and expectations (see elements 3,5 and 6 above). Self-actualization is thus linked to a Rousseau inspired anthropocentrism of unspoiled, immediate natural state of being as against unnatural technologized society. Of course, the modern idea of the individual is not an a-historical concept (Dumont 1980). But the basic function of the myth in society is exactly to naturalize that which is culturally instituted, thereby legitimizing it and providing it with a status of profound truth (Barthes 1970/1957). When the ancient Greeks proclaimed *Gnothi seauton* (know thyself), they did not advocate a modern concept of self-actualization but reminded the people that they should reflect on their own place in the world in relation to the Gods and the social order. Thanks to the myth of self-actualization, we understand this credo very differently.

The myth of consumer self-actualization is part of modern management paradigms and global capitalism’s quest for a flexible work-force and the constant self-development of the individual as an attractive employee in a post-industrial economy. The generalized myth of self-actualization is thus found in the sphere of production as well as in the sphere of consumption. The consequence of this is a myth and identity script which promotes the idea

of an unfinished self (Bauman 2004). In the myth of self-actualization the subject stands in an instrumental relation to the self-identity both in the role of employee, consumer and, one might hypothesize in the intimate sphere of family-making and procreation.

One may argue that humanistic psychology with its focus on self-actualization in the tradition of Maslow (1954) and Rogers (1961), has developed into the most prevalent popular psychology and, thus, a cornerstone of a modern lifestyle (Smith 1997). According to Brinkmann (2005), there are three major consequences of this humanistic ethic: hypostasis, therapeutization, and subjectivization. *Hypostasis* indicates that the self becomes conceived in material terms as a resource or a commodity, an object for consumption as in working with one’s self through a mind- and body regimes: controlling one’s caloric intake and one’s exercise level or managing one’s fashionability in terms of clothes, shoes, hair and make-up. *Therapeutization* refers to the degree to which life becomes a therapeutic project and is linked to consumer culture in the general idea that products and brands are there to help the consumer cope, to solve problems occurring in daily social life. *Subjectivization* is indicative of a tendency to consider moral values as inner and private rather than externally given and is reflected in the philosophy that “the customer is always right”, that the ultimate judgment of the appropriate character of some kind of solution rests on the acceptance of the user/customer/client.

We will illustrate the global character of the myth of self-actualization with an example from Nepal. The example is based on a set of depth interviews with Nepalese yoga institute owners as well as yoga practitioners in Kathmandu. Furthermore, secondary data was collected in the form of advertisements for yoga institutes and magazine and newspaper articles about the local yoga market. The modernization of the Nepalese middle classes led to a sharp decrease in yoga practice since it was associated with archaic (non-modern) religious cultural practice. Today, the meaning of yoga in the context of Nepalese middle class youth is changing from a religious to a secular one. The practice of yoga is gaining renewed popularity among the Nepalese youth as a symbol of modernity, endorsed by Western celebrity yoga practitioners such as Sting and Madonna. Yoga classes are now found in the urban health and fitness centres where they are positioned and marketed as a way for the self-actualizing consumer to live a life of physical and mental health and balance not as a lived practice of a pre-modern local culture but as part of the myth of what it means to be a modern consumer.

“Buying into the Global Myth: A Cross-National Investigation of Building Identity Through Brands”

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Linda Price, University of Arizona

According to Holt, Quelch, and Taylor (2004), consumers look to global brands to create an “imagined global identity,” a transnational “global myth” of belonging anchored in consumer culture. A premise of this research is that branded products are a preeminent source of mythic and symbolic resources for consumer identity projects (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Holt 2002; 2004). In prior research, we questioned the premise that branded products are omnipresent resources for consumer identity through an examination of consumers in Hungary and Romania. We found consumers’ involvement with branded products is framed by their ideological positions about consumer culture, and varied, nuanced, and socio-historically situated (Coulter, Price, and Feick 2003).

In our present research, we examine whether and how a transnational global brand myth drives consumer involvement with branded products among youth in the U.S. and Romania. Our

research in these two countries enables us to compare the ideological buy-in to consumer culture between young American consumers and Romanian consumers who recently have witnessed an explosion of branded products touted as tools of personal identity actualization. We are particularly interested in: 1) whether a belief in the global brand myth fuels the use of branded products as central tools for identity projects, and 2) whether branded products serving as tools for identity drive involvement with branded products. Our research also assesses other relevant variables that might contribute to involvement with branded products (Coulter et al. 2003). Our present work is grounded in depth interviews with young people in Romania and the U.S., but in this abstract we restrict attention to the results of survey responses of 218 American ($M_{\text{age}}=21.01$, $SD_{\text{age}}=1.74$) and 287 ($M_{\text{age}}=19.93$, $SD_{\text{age}}=1.25$) Romanian young adults.

Based upon our depth interviews, extant literature, and initial brainstorming related to content and translation issues, we developed multi-item 7-point scale measures of our constructs of interest. Items were translated from English into Romanian and then back-translated by two native Romanian speakers. We assessed global myth using three items: "Buying global brands make me feel like a citizen of the world," "Purchasing global brands makes me feel part of something bigger," and "Buying global brands give me a sense of belonging to the global marketplace" ($\alpha_{US}=.86$; $\alpha_{RO}=.82$; Holt et al. 2004). To measure consumers' use of branded products as expressions of personal identity, we developed five items each to assess self-identity, group-identity, and status. The second-order latent factor measurement model of personal identity resulted in an acceptable fit (χ^2/df ratio=2.24, CFI=.95, TLI=.94, RMSEA<.05, Hoelter=268 at $p=.05$), with factor loadings ranging from .86 to .98 for the countries, and indicative of configural invariance; the model exhibited full metric and partial scalar invariance (Steenkamp and Baumgartner 1998). The reliabilities for the 15-item scales were: $\alpha_{US}=.94$ and $\alpha_{RO}=.92$. Consumer ethnocentrism was measured using six items ($\alpha_{US}=.88$; $\alpha_{RO}=.79$; Klein, Ettenson, and Morris 1998; Shimp and Sharma 1987); cultural openness was measured using four items ($\alpha_{US}=.90$; $\alpha_{RO}=.81$; Sharma, Shimp and Shin 1995), and country-of-origin was measured using four items ($\alpha_{US}=.92$; $\alpha_{RO}=.90$). All scales exhibited configural, metric and scalar invariance. In addition, we computed a measure of involvement with branded products as an average of a respondent's answers about the importance of a brand name related to ten durable and non-durable products (such as, soda, chocolates, personal care items, automobiles, and TVs.)

Our measurement model yielded an acceptable fit: χ^2/df ratio=1.72, CFI=.92, TLI=.91, RMSEA<.04, Hoelter=316 at $p=.05$, and exhibited configural, metric, and scalar invariance. Our across-country z-test comparisons of latent means indicated that Romania had significantly higher means ($p<.05$) for global openness ($M=5.46$; $M=4.83$), country-of-origin ($M=3.51$; $M=2.63$), and involvement with branded products ($M=5.44$; $M=4.99$), whereas the U.S. had a significantly higher mean for using branded products to reflect personal identity ($M=3.70$; $M=3.10$). Strikingly, there were no significant differences between the two countries on ethnocentrism ($M_{US}=2.53$; $M_{RO}=2.36$) and global myth ($M_{US}=3.41$; $M_{RO}=3.13$).

In both the U.S. and Romania, global myth predicts the use of branded products to communicate personal identity, which in turn, predicts involvement with branded products. Additionally, across the data sets, ethnocentrism and cultural openness predict the extent to which consumers make brand choices based on their country-of origin, and women reflect more cultural openness than men. But, the structural models differ in some respects. More complex paths between antecedent and dependent measures are present in the US

model than in the Romanian one. In the U.S., cultural openness has a stronger effect than ethnocentrism on global myth, and ethnocentrism also impacts the use of branded products to reflect personal identity. In Romania, concern for a brand's country-of-origin has a direct effect not only on personal identity, but also involvement with branded products. In our presentation we detail the implications of these findings and directions for future research.

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