

Product Communication and the Nationalisation of Consumption

Veranstalter: Oliver Kühschelm / Franz X. Eder, University of Vienna; Hannes Siegrist, University of Leipzig

Datum, Ort: 01.10.2009–03.10.2009, Wien

Bericht von: Oliver Kühschelm / Florian Müller, University of Vienna

In his introductory remarks HANNES SIEGRIST (Leipzig) used the concept of mental mapping to analyse how consumers relate to nationalising product communication. Furthermore he highlighted the role of the state and more specifically of government intervention into industrial production. He traced the story of state-sponsored nationalising efforts back to the French Revolution when government tried to involve artists and industry in the promotion of sugar beet as an alternative to sugar-cane.

The first session focussed on „claiming traditions, staging territory, celebrating progress“. ROMAN ROSSFELD (Zurich) showed how chocolate made its way from an exotic good to a product closely associated with Swiss self-perception and the image of Switzerland abroad. The raw material originally came from everywhere but Switzerland, but the invention of milk and fondant chocolate by Daniel Peter and Rudolf Lindt in the 1870s and 1880s changed the rules of the game. Mass production democratized chocolate, which consequently lost its image of an aristocratic luxury product opposed to Swiss traditional food. Focusing on milk as an essential ingredient of chocolate, advertising also shifted away from exotic motifs. Around 1900 chocolate was increasingly tied to the Alps as a symbol for the pure and unspoiled, the elevated and the solid. The „Heidiland“-imagery became a mainstay of Swiss chocolate brands. OLIVER KÜHSCHELM (Vienna) talked about how the nationalisation of products participated in the construction of a new Austrian identity after World War II. He pointed out that products were a means to transform the nation from an abstract concept into a tangible reality; but with an ironic twist related to the betrayal of the promise of the nation as a transcendental signifier. Adapting

a scheme of four brand worlds (built on the oppositions between distance/proximity and past/future) Kühschelm analyzed the place of brands in the national imaginary. He also reconstructed the ups and downs of nationalising product communication in the Austrian case. While in the 1950s relating product attributes to the nation and to the national character was a pervasive phenomenon, since the 1960s this has gradually changed. In the late 1970s, as Fordist prosperity was coming to a close, product communication again became more nationally minded. Another revival of symbolic nationalism began in the 1990s when Austria entered the European Union. ARTEMIS YAGOU (Athens) explored Greekness in advertising. She distinguished several strategies of relating products to the Greek nation: 1. laying claim to an ancient heritage. While the appeal to Greek (and Roman) antiquity in order to bolster the prestige of a product is a well known feature not limited to Greek advertising, for a Greek audience it bears national significance. When Eros beautifies a pair of shoes or Diana turns cigarettes into a symbol of class, those ancient gods at the same time make the products distinctly Greek. 2. the display of patriotism, claiming for Greece a first-rate standing among European countries: An ad for a gas stove from 1948 shows a man dressed in a Greek costume that tells admiring spectators from other nations: „We have done better than you.“ 3. Greek craft is staged as superior to foreign industry, thereby also expressing a deep ambivalence in relation to modernity.

In the evening lecture KARL GERTH (Oxford) talked about nationalism and consumerism in China. He argued that consumerism played an important role in shaping Chinese nationalism. In the first decades of the 20th century with a weak Chinese state that lacked tariff autonomy a national products movement emerged that urged consumers to mind national interests in their shopping behaviour. Calls to buy national and to boycott foreign and above all Japanese goods did not stop at the propaganda level, but were accompanied by violent actions. One very telling image featured a national toothpaste as a canon firing at the war ship of foreign imperialists: Chinese consumer goods were conceived as embo-

diments of national strength. This idea has regained enormous appeal with China's late industrial development. Nowadays China has to cope with the requirements of the World Trade Organization and the challenge by multinational enterprises. Creating mighty Chinese brands that are attractive for national consumers but also able to compete on international markets is regarded as a matter of national security.

On the second day, in the first session LISA SUMNER (Montreal) followed the product communication of Seagram whiskey. The ads commissioned by the Seagram company illustrate the shifting discourses and contested directions of Canadian cultural identity. In the 1930s Seagram highlighted the British character of Canada as a symbolic means to counter US-influence. The emphasis on imperial ties to Britain faded with the growing internationalism and cosmopolitanism of the 1950s and 1960s. She argued that the relationship between the Seagram Company and Canadian nationalist efforts operated more through mutual enrichment, for both Seagram's and Canadian cultural and political cohesion, than simple commercial exploitation of nationalist sentiment. As with Canadian national identity in the face of the US, several speeches discussed how references to foreign cultures were used to resist a dominant other. KATRIN GENGEBACH (Leipzig) focused on nationalising European luxury in early post-war Japan. The country was facing a deep crisis of traditional values brought about by military defeat at the hands of the US. In the late 1940s a nostalgia for European culture gained ground while consuming American-style was widely regarded as „committing consumption“, and considered a threat to society. In fashion Japanese dressmakers revered above all French haute couture. American wastefulness was opposed to French elegance, which was seen as closer to Japanese values. With SANDOR HORVATH (Budapest) the discussion moved to a European case. Horváth spoke about the „Great Tree Gang“, a group of non-conformist youth in 1960s Budapest. Western consumer culture exerted a high attraction to those young people who nevertheless did not consider themselves as aping the West. They used references to the West as a means of con-

structing a Hungarian „We“ opposed to the socialist Hungary of the Kadar era. ULRICH ERMANN (Leipzig) then analysed the delegitimisation of nationalising strategies in a post-socialist setting. Due to the country's socialist past Bulgarian consumers do not regard nationally produced clothing as fashionable. Therefore a big international brand like Hugo Boss, although running production facilities in the country, avoids being associated with Bulgaria on the Bulgarian market. Even the big national enterprise „Rila Style“ does not want its brand to appear Bulgarian. As a brand name the company chose the Italian word „Battiballeno“ in order to profit from the Italian image as a producer of stylish clothes.

Another panel asked „What's driving the nation“. MANUEL SCHRAMM (Chemnitz) emphasized that although the histories of motorization and car manufacturing are well researched, comparative studies are still lacking. He discussed the role of small cars in post-war Western Europe. Although it was widely accepted that a modern European country needed its own car industry, important differences as to how the German Volkswagen, the Italian Fiat, the French 2CV, or the British Mini were staged as national icons can be observed. Whereas advertising was almost unnecessary in the sellers' market of the 1950s, the media and especially motor journals played an important part in making the small cars objects of national pride. However, the question of what consumers thought about those cars remains a question that cannot be answered by a treatment of sources from the media alone. LUMINITA GATEJEL (Berlin) presented on her research investigating how small cars worked as an „engine“ for future socialist economic development and as a symbol for a rising standard of living in Eastern European countries. Products like the DDR-Trabant were conceived as the socialist response to the Volkswagen using the same concept of an affordable „people's car“. Nevertheless, the production of „national“ cars often required importing Western car technology. The Russian Lada was based on the Fiat 124, the Romanian Dacia was built in cooperation with Renault. The Lada was nationalised with a reference to the Russian territory and its characteristic climate. In the Ro-

manian context the brand name „Dacia“ clearly reveals the effort to associate the car with the Romanian nation, though its French origin was never completely erased because it symbolized the idea of a closeness to French culture that served as a counter-balance to Soviet influence.

The third day opened with a session about „Housing national identity“. MIKAEL HARD (Darmstadt) focused on the Swedish „million programme“ from 1965 to 1974, a large scale housing scheme. This project was set against the background of social-democratic policies, but what made it distinct when compared to similar projects in other countries seems to be the close-knit cooperation between public institutions, cooperative bodies, and private industry. This largely accounts for its success in creating national standards, which in turn advanced the creation of national brands like Electrolux and Ikea. In an earlier panel BRITA LUNDSTRÖM (Stockholm) had focused on the joint effort of companies and the government in promoting modern Sweden abroad. Swedish-style modernity has been well known amongst consumers internationally for many years. While certain Swedish brands have achieved a global presence and private companies have tried hard to present Sweden as a land of free enterprise, this particular image of Sweden has been arguably unsuccessful abroad. NATALIE SCHOLZ (Amsterdam) spoke about discourses on furnishing the home in post-war Germany. Based on research in lifestyle magazines and popular films, she analysed the tensions between a claim to modernity and nostalgia for a furniture that was deemed to express German tradition. After heavily promoting a farewell to „German style“ from 1945 to the mid 1950s and an ensuing search for a modern West German design identity, in the late 1950s magazines reacted to the discontent of average consumers with international, functionalist style and increasingly featured stories about antique furniture.

Finally MAREN MÖHRING (Zurich) investigated the staging of spaghetti in post-war Germany. Her argument relied on the analysis of popular films like „Gitarren der Liebe“ („Guitars of Love“, 1954) that contributed to creating Italy as a „dream space“. Spaghet-

ti played a special role in such films because it was generally understood that it was difficult to eat properly, that is without cutting the noodles into pieces. German ability to consume spaghetti the ‘proper’ Italian way was portrayed in popular media as important to positively representing postwar German identity. A „good German“ should absolutely avoid attracting unwanted attention when travelling abroad. Eating spaghetti was also about becoming someone else by eating the food of the other, in this case the cuisine of Italians who were regarded as „the most playful nation of the world“. Spaghetti could serve as a symbol for questioning established rules of family and nation, as in the film „Wenn der Vater mit dem Sohne“ (When the father with the son ...“, 1955). The presentation pointed out that the integration of spaghetti into German cuisine implied creating a national habitus and it underlined the importance of the materiality of food.

The conference succeeded in bringing together cases from different national contexts and different spheres of daily consumer life. Similarities and structural analogies as well as the specifics of the observed cases were amply discussed. The conference also helped to identify open questions and methodological desiderata: Most talks heavily relied on the analysis of advertising and more generally of mass media communication, but the performance of those texts proved difficult to assess. The multimodality of product communication and the interaction of verbal and visual texts have to be carefully analyzed. Moreover product communication can be conceived in a much broader sense. Going significantly beyond the perspective of business and marketing strategies entails the necessity of including sources that reflect the views and experiences of citizen-consumers in a more direct way.

Conference overview:

WELCOME

Oliver Kühschelm, Univ. Vienna

INTRODUCTION

Hannes Siegrist, Univ. Leipzig
Consumption and Mental Mapping in Modern Societies

CLAIMING TRADITIONS, STAGING TERRITORY, CELEBRATING PROGRESS

Chair: Franz X. Eder, Univ. Vienna

Roman Rossfeld, Univ. Zurich

«High as the Alps in Quality»: On National Identity and the Rise of the Swiss Chocolate Industry, around 1900

Oliver Kühschelm, Univ. Vienna

Branded goods and the Construction of a National Self in Postwar Austria

Artemis Yagou, AKTO art and design College, Athens

Narratives of Heritage and Modernity. National Production and Consumption in Greek Advertising

KEYNOTE LECTURE

Karl Gerth, Merton College, Oxford

Variations on a Global Theme? A Comparative Perspective on Nationalism and Consumerism in Modern China

BRANDING NATIONAL IDENTITIES – (ONLY) A STRATAGEM OF COMPANIES?

Chair: Oliver Kühschelm

Brita Lundström, KTH Stockholm

The Brand of Sweden. Narratives Constructed by Nation and Companies to Promote a Swedish image in Historical Perspective

Lisa Sumner, McGill University, Montreal

Distilling Unity: Popularizing Canada in the International Imagination

CODING THE NATION BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

Chair: Franz X. Eder

Katrin Gengenbach, Univ. Leipzig

Nationalising European Luxury in Early Postwar Japan

Sándor Horváth, Academy of Sciences, Budapest

Aping the West, Consuming the Socialist Budapest

THE (DE)NATIONALIZATION OF ADVERTISING

Chair: Franz X. Eder

Ulrich Ermann, Univ. Leipzig

Modernisation through Fashion? The Geographies of the Marketing of Fashion Brands in

Postsocialist Bulgaria

WHAT'S DRIVING THE NATION?

Chair: Hannes Siegrist

Manuel Schramm, TU Chemnitz

Motorisation and Nationalisation. Small Cars in Western Europe, 1950-1970

Luminita Gatejel, FU Berlin

Volkswagens of the East. The Trabant, Lada and Dacia in the Crossfire of Western, National and Socialist Propaganda

HOUSING NATIONAL IDENTITY

Chair: Franz X. Eder

Mikael Hård, TU Darmstadt

Products for the Folkhem. The Swedish People's Home as a Consumption Junction

Natalie Scholz, Univ. Amsterdam

Something Old, Something New. National and International Dimensions of the Discourse on 'Modern Living' in West-Germany during the 1950s

FEEDING COMPLEX IDENTITIES

Chair: Hannes Siegrist

Maren Möhring, Univ. Zurich

Staging Spaghetti. The Medialisation and Italianisation of Food Consumption in the Federal Republic of Germany

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Tagungsbericht *Product Communication and the Nationalisation of Consumption*. 01.10.2009–03.10.2009, Wien, in: H-Soz-Kult 20.11.2009.