

Branding, Culture, and Political Ideology: Spanish Patriotism as the Identity Myth of an Iconic Brand.

The limits between consumption, culture, and ideology tend to blur in current branding. Brands have entered the cultural and social arenas, where they function as identity symbols carrying worldviews. Since McCracken related consumption to culture and anthropology (1988), the relationships between brands and culture stand out as a relevant part of brand management studies (Fernández Gómez, 2013). In this context, cultural branding provides a theoretical framework that links the symbolic value of consumption with its social and ideological dimensions. According to Heding et al., cultural branding “is all about what culture can do for brand value creation” (2009: 216). The meanings attached to products and brands spring from cultural contexts, and consumption becomes mingled with social relationships. This approach understands brands as artifacts that are simultaneously drawing from, and subject to, cultural dynamics, thus being affected by external changes (Heding et al., 2009).

Brand meanings may be of such relevance that they go beyond the commercial realm: according to Batey, certain brands “break out of their category and into the culture. The meaning and importance they hold for consumers come to reside less in their category context and more in the socio-cultural context” (2016: 175). Since the meaning of consumer goods comes primarily from culture, consumption turns into a coded socio-cultural activity. According to Oswald, “the symbolic function of goods is moderated by cultural codes and conventions [...]. When symbolic associations become entrenched in culture by means of habit or convention, they form codes that regulate behavior, perception, and social organization in cultural contexts” (2012: 48). Cayla and Arnould link the symbolic dimension of branding with the concept of “cultural forms”:

To talk of brands as cultural forms is to acknowledge that branding is a specific form of communication, which tells stories in the context of products and services, addresses people as consumers, and promises to fulfill unmet desires and needs. In other words, branding is a specific symbolic form, a particular way of talking about and seeing the world (2008: 86-87).

The notion that branding implies “talking about and seeing the world” is taken to the extreme in one influential perspective in cultural branding: Holt’s theory of iconic brands.

Iconic brands

Douglas B. Holt formulated the concept of “iconic brand” to explain the mechanics by which brands draw on, and reflect, the culture surrounding them. The iconic brand relies on the notion of “cultural icon”, that is, “a person or thing represented as a symbol, especially of a culture or movement; a person, institution, and so forth, considered worthy of admiration or respect” (Holt, 2004: 11). Cultural icons are symbols that people have accepted as shortcuts for representing relevant ideas—for instance, Ronald Reagan has become an icon that sums up American conservatism, in the same way as Greenpeace symbolizes the environmentalist movement. In this line, Holt understands the iconic brand as “an identity brand that approaches the identity value of a cultural icon” (2004: 11). As to the functions served by this kind of brands, Torelli et al. identify

three definition characteristics of a brand rich in cultural symbolism, or an iconic brand: (1) it symbolizes culturally relevant values, needs, and aspirations; (2) it is connected to diverse elements of cultural knowledge including values and other cultural icons; and (3) incidental exposure to an iconic brand can bring to mind its attendant cultural meanings (2010: 116).

Holt defines cultural branding as “the set of axioms and strategic principles that guide the building of brands into cultural icons” (2004: 11). Brands that evolve into cultural icons are capable of representing collective identities, thus expressing what consumers want to be (Holt, 2004: 4-6).

The power of icons relies on their ability to satisfy specific needs in specific contexts (Holt, 2004). Therefore, the theoretical premise of cultural branding is that society is affected by cultural changes, or “cultural disruptions”, which work as sociological soils for iconic brands: “when disruptions hit, iconic brands must invent their myth, or they fade in relevance” (Holt, 2004: 23). For instance, this happened when the British General Post Office was turned into an iconic brand in the interwar period “by responding to anxieties in British society generated by social tension and fears of decline” (Heller, 2016: 358). Iconic brands address cultural tensions by generating an “identity myth”:

icons come to represent a particular kind of story —an identity myth— that their consumers use to address identity desires and anxieties. [...] Icons perform the particular myth society especially needs at a given historical moment, and they perform it charismatically (Holt, 2004: 2).

Societal anxieties stem from a mismatch between ideological orthodoxy and the reality lived by consumers; iconic brands’ identity myths “smooth over these tensions, helping people create purpose in their lives and cement their desired identity in place when it is under stress”. Consequently, “brands become iconic when they perform identity myths: simple fictions that address cultural anxieties from afar, from imaginary worlds rather than from the worlds that consumers regularly encounter in their everyday lives” (Holt, 2004: 8). More specifically, the essence of an iconic brand relies on the myth’s storytelling: “Myths are imaginative stories and images that selectively draw on history as source material, which function to continually re-imagine and revitalize the nation’s ideology” (Holt, 2006: 359).

Brand myths rely on “populist worlds,” that is, social groups that express a distinctive ideology through their activities. Perceived by the public as authentic ideologies which are free from power and wealth motivations, populist worlds are potent cultural sites which are built into iconic brands (Holt, 2004), thus predisposing consumers towards cherished folk values. Myths also provide “identity value” for consumers—thus, brand narratives help building consumer identity (Holt, 2004: 3-4). High levels of identity value are considered to have positive effects on other aspects: according to Holt, iconic brands “enjoy intense customer loyalty and superior sales and profits, and garner loads of free media coverage” (2016: 46). Moreover, the fact that populist worlds are far from the mainstream indicates another feature of iconic brands: their role as cultural “vanguard”. Iconic brands do not imitate orthodox culture, but work as innovative agents that advance ideas and determine the way audiences act and think. In other words, iconic brands do not draw on mainstream trends; they change the mainstream by challenging cultural orthodoxy and seeking inspiration even on rebel, fringe sectors. The notion that brands “help to change culture at a deeper level, influencing how people understand themselves in relation to the nation’s ideals” (Holt,

2004: 85) relates to one of the most enticing implications of cultural branding: the role played by ideology on iconic brands.

Cultural Branding and Ideology

Ideology is key in cultural branding: “Not only managerial, but also ethical, political and philosophical discussions rage in the cultural approach alongside research into what extent consumers can or cannot liberate themselves from consumer culture” (Heding et al., 2009: 212). Since ideologies are part of the culture, political-ideological debates are therefore an integral part of the symbolic stock used by brands, to the extent that, as Holt (2006) has pointed out, brands act as ideological parasites. This is exemplified by Jack Daniel’s and the ideology of American rugged individualism: in a context of crisis of masculinity related to the Cold War and nuclear peril anxieties, Jack Daniel’s brought rugged individualism back through the symbolic stereotype of the Old West gunman (Holt, 2016).

One of the political ideologies used in cultural branding is patriotism, a concept which has been variously defined. Nevertheless, there is an agreement on the meaning of patriotism as a basically affective phenomenon consisting of love for one’s nation (Huddy and Khatib, 2007). Patriotism is conceptually close to nationalism, which can be defined in a broad sense as the belief that the nation is the axis of political organization. However, other definitions of patriotism and nationalism tend to differentiate both concepts, on the grounds that patriotism is seen as love of country, and nationalism as love of country that implies to denigrate others. On the other hand, patriotism is affectively associated to country-based, non-instrumental values and symbols, whereas national identities are more related to the way one sees his/her place on society (Wolak and Dawkins, 2016). Notwithstanding nuances, it must be noted that these ideologies are deeply related to branding. Patriotism has been used by political propaganda and commercial branding alike, to the extent that national ideology can be propagated through marketing (Schrag, 2009). Nationalism understands the nation as an “imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign”, in the well-known expression of Anderson (2006: 6)—and Holt refers to understanding the particular role played by iconic brands in narrating Anderson’s notion of the imagined nation, thus highlighting the role of national ideologies/myths in the development of American iconic brands (2006). Moreover, the patriotism-branding link may be related to nationalist consumption, which can be regarded as a form of political consumerism (Castello and Mihelj, 2018). The linking of nationalism and consumption is a multifaceted phenomenon that relates to the building of national identity through consumption (Kaptan, 2016), the attachment of national significance to goods and services (Castello and Mihelj, 2018), or the sense of belonging provided by consumer nationalism (Fozdar, 2018). National flags count among the symbols used by consumer nationalism, since they work as modern totems stating national identity (Cerulo, 1993; Castello and Mihelj, 2018). As instruments of nation-building, flags foster social identity and belonging (Annabell and Nairn, 2019). The branding case study we introduce in the next section perfectly embodies such a patriotic sentiment.

Research object and aims

In addition to the American branding cases studied by Holt, such as Jack Daniel’s or Mountain Dew, the cultural approach has been tested with regard to national brands

from countries like the United Kingdom (Heller, 2016) or Italy (Testa et al., 2017). In this context, there is a lack of cultural branding studies focusing on a country like Spain, and, more specifically, a lack of studies that focus on patriotic myths and nationalist ideologies in Spanish brands.

This paper aims to shed light on the way a Spanish commercial brand channels cultural values in a context of societal tensions and national crisis. In doing so, we aim to illustrate how a commercial advertiser is able to act as an iconic brand by conveying a national identity myth. Our study object draws its symbolic quality from a national myth market. We focus on the Spanish fashion brand Piel de Toro (“Bull Skin”) and the patriotic identitarian response with which it addressed the Catalan separatist movement in contemporary Spain—and, more specifically, the response conveyed through the 2017 campaign “Orgullosamente Españoles” (“Proudly Spanish”). Holt’s theory of iconic brands is useful for this case for several reasons. To begin with, the campaign exemplifies step-by-step the axioms guiding the theory. On the basis of a societal tension, the brand formulates an identity myth through a brilliant communication campaign, hence playing the role of cultural vanguard. Moreover, “Proudly Spanish” achieved positive pecuniary effects—a cornerstone of Holt’s theory. In a context where cultural innovation can launch and reinvigorate businesses (Holt and Cameron, 2012), iconic brands harmonize symbolic and monetary aims, just as the campaign conveyed a political message and sold clothes in the Catalan market at the same time. On the other hand, the campaign illustrates a tension underlying Holt’s theory: iconic brands may champion new ideologies, but they do so because such innovative ideas have been previously advanced by other cultural forms (Holt, 2006). In this line, “Proudly Spanish” shows that iconic brands can be simultaneously parasitical and proselytizing. Moreover, our review of the literature on patriotism/nationalism indicated that identity is a central issue; Holt’s theory (2005) relates to the way brands provide identity through symbolic means, thus fitting Piel de Toro’s effort to boost Spanish identity.

“Proudly Spanish” communicated a particular set of nationalism-related values, that is, an overtly political message. This relates to a second research aim: to fill the existing research gap regarding the patriotic positioning of Spanish brands.

Method

We rely on Holt’s brand genealogy method, whose basic idea “is that brand symbolism should operate similarly to other cultural products, such as novels, films, actors, athletes and politicians” (2006: 359). Brand genealogy combines the close examination of a nation’s cultural discourses and social changes with a textual analysis of a brand’s performance, hence mixing macro and micro understandings of a brand and its context. Additionally, the genealogical approach takes into account the most significant episodes in the life of a brand (Testa et al., 2017: 1496), as well as intertextuality, thus considering “the relationships between brands and other mass culture as well as collective consumer influences”. In this regard, constructions and representations of the studied phenomenon must be presented and interpreted (Canniford and Karababa, 2013). These objectives can be met through different data-gathering techniques and sources, such as information about the brand’s marketing activities, advertising, oral histories with brand managers, interviews with brand loyalists, and information about the brand’s representations in popular culture. Data can be gathered from a diverse array

of media, from newspaper and magazine journalism to advertising to films and novels (Canniford and Karababa, 2013).

As to how this approach was carried out in our research, we perform a socio-historical study of cultural changes (Testa et al., 2017) which focuses on a descriptive analysis of the evolution of Spanish patriotism which takes into account political trends that have influenced nationalism. By doing so, we are charting the pathways by which a concept has become a powerful discourse and a popular expression of identity in contemporary culture (Canniford and Karababa, 2013). Our data also include information about the brand's trajectory over time, as well as an in-depth analysis of the 2017 advertising campaign we focus on—advertising, it must be noted, is one of the communicative forms taken by consumer nationalism (Castello and Mihelj, 2018). Given that Piel de Toro is a relatively new brand that lacks the popular culture presence attained by brands like Alfa Romeo through entertainment outlets (Testa et al., 2017), we have chosen other types of popular media to observe the brand's representation in culture, such as newspaper and magazine journalism. As to the brand managers' perspective, a semi-structured interview was conducted with Victoria Tellado Jiménez, who worked as marketing director between 2010 and 2014, and developed Piel de Toro's brand image as it is known today. Tellado's interview—which took place on 20 March 2019—also provides valuable insights into the brand's history. Published interviews with two CEOs of the company and brand ambassadors were also added to the data sources. The managers' perspective was complemented with the viewpoint of experts, which is useful for ascertaining the cultural implications of brands. In this regard, a focus group was organized with five participants: four university teachers, and one fashion expert and PhD student. All participants are experts on communication, fashion, and/or branding, and all of them reside and/or work in the Andalusian province of Seville, thus providing an in-depth knowledge of the brand's cultural context. The focus group took place in Seville in March 14, 2019, it lasted for 105 minutes approximately, and its development was fluid and collaborative.

Results

The “Proudly Spanish” campaign took place in a context characterized by the historical evolution of patriotism in Spain and sensitiveness due to the association of nationalist messaging with Franco and fascism, which would frame Piel de Toro's performance in 2017.

Genealogy and revival of Spanish patriotism

In Europe, patriotism has always been an element of the discourses of the national-populist extreme right, which has made national identity its ideological mainstay. This is in line with the historical evolution of Spanish patriotism, which has formed an integral part of the far right's worldview since the 1930s, extolling the National Catholic discourse of the dictatorship of General Franco in the wake of the Spanish Civil War (Casals Meseguer, 2003). Therefore, during the last years of Francoism and the transition to democracy patriotism was identified with the defense of National Catholicism. After the promulgation of the 1978 Constitution, explicit nationalism disappeared from the discourse of the majority of politicians, except for those of the

extreme right and some of the spokesmen of the Popular Alliance (Núñez Seixas, 2004: 122-123) – a party which would eventually become the conservative Popular Party (PP). Due to the authoritarian connotations that it had acquired, Spanish nationalism “had to undergo an implicit purge and to disguise itself in many different forms” (Balfour and Quiroga, quoted in Rodríguez Ortega, 2016: 630), patriotism being practically conspicuous by its absence in the mainstream public discourse (Núñez Seixas, 2010: 17). In particular, “the Spanish left shunned the use of such national symbols as the country’s red-and-yellow flag and sometimes even the name of the country itself” (Bassets, 2015). Despite being excluded from the public sphere, since the mid-1990s Spanish patriotism has been extolled by conservative sectors, adopting different forms and promoting common symbols. Conservative patriotism has also highlighted Spain’s glorious past, its new course being exemplified by the Transition, while stressing that Francoism is now water under the bridge (Núñez Seixas, 2004).

In the twenty-first century, the foundations for re-legitimizing patriotism would be laid in the sphere of soccer, a tremendously popular sport in Spain. Soccer would give new meaning to patriotic feeling when the supporters of Real Madrid “started singing ‘I’m a Spaniard, Spaniard, Spaniard’ on top of their lungs. This tune had been omnipresent in the post 2008 Euro and post 2010 World Cup street rallies in Madrid, in which thousands of ecstatic supporters celebrated Spain’s triumphs” (Rodríguez Ortega, 2016: 631). The social and political consolidation of regional nationalisms (Núñez Seixas, 2010: 20) has also been a fundamental factor behind the revival of Spanish patriotism. Although the political tensions deriving from Basque nationalism have existed for decades, the radicalization of secessionist nationalism in Catalonia during the current decade has posed one of the major challenges facing those defending the unity of Spain. In this context, 1 October 2017, the day on which the Catalan government tried to hold a referendum to decide whether or not this autonomous community should be an independent state in the guise of a republic, may be regarded as the clarion call for the revival and revitalization of hard-core Spanish patriotism.

This neo-nationalism was championed by Ciudadanos, a pro-market party opposing Catalan nationalism whose leader Albert Rivera referred to “modern patriotism” (quoted in Esteban, 2017) a few weeks after the referendum. Proof of the patriotic radicalization and the social tensions generated by rekindling old conflicts between the Right and the Left, is that both the Francoist system and General Franco himself – both having been cast into oblivion even by the conservatives – have come back to public debate. At any rate, this show of Spanish traditionalism reached its climax on 7 October 2018, when the extreme right party Vox gathered over 9,000 supporters at a rally held in Madrid (Lambertucci, 2018; Sangiao, 2018). During the rally, the party’s secretary general Javier Ortega-Smith took a leaf out of Donald Trump’s book when he declared, “Together, we will make Spain great again” (quoted in Lambertucci, 2018: 18). The rise of Vox, which obtained remarkable results in regional and national elections in 2018 and 2019, is inextricably linked to the revival of patriotism, and it is imposing an ultranationalist agenda on the rest of the mainstream right-wing parties.

Piel de Toro: a historical approach

In the context of the evolution of Spanish patriotism, the element that makes it possible to regard Piel de Toro as a nationalist brand is the 2017 “Proudly Spanish” campaign. However, culture and ideology are not absent from the brand’s history.

Piel de Toro (PdT hereafter) is a clothing and accessory brand originating from the city of Seville (Andalusia), which started out in 1995 as a sports clothing brand keyed to surfing and a young target audience. In 2008, the Rodríguez Burgas de Brioude family – the surname of the French mother of the company’s current owners – gained control of the company, integrating it into the Azabache investment company. The parent company was founded over half a century ago and has also interests in the real estate, health, farming and finance industries (Freire, 2014). After being purchased by the Rodríguez Burgas de Brioude family, the company radically changed its clothing, points of sale, and brand communication, engaging a group of marketing and advertising professionals in 2010 to redesign its image. Before long, the company had quadrupled its sales thanks to its international expansion. The first shops with the current style were opened in Seville and Madrid in 2010 and, at the beginning of 2015, the company launched its virtual store (Foro de Marcas Renombradas Españolas, 2015). At present, it has over twenty establishments in Spain and is in the process of entering Middle Eastern, North African, and Latin American markets, with points of sale in ten countries (*INTERECONOMIA.COM*, 2017; Foro de Marcas Renombradas Españolas, n.d.), a number that is on the increase and indicates PdT’s global potential.

The brand’s audience are professional men and women aged between 30 and 45 years old, family people and nature lovers with a healthy lifestyle linked to sports. According to Óscar Rodríguez Burgas de Brioude, “Our aim is to become a benchmark Spanish brand like Polo Ralph Lauren in the USA or La Martina in Argentina” (quoted in Freire, 2014), to the point of attempting to identify it with Spanish fashion per se: “Whenever people think about Spanish fashion, we want them to think about Piel de Toro” (Francisco Javier Burgas de Brioude, in Foro de Marcas Renombradas Españolas, 2015). In this context, patriotism is key in the brand’s semantics: according to Victoria Tellado, former brand manager at PdT, all

our marketing actions were aimed at conveying the same [traditional Spanish] values [...]. We have always [with stress] defended the values of Spain. We are a brand very closely associated with our country. That is, we would like to share the same values as Spain, as our country. So, we have never been afraid of showing, saying or feeling this (personal interview, 2019).

The brand recognizes that it is tinged “with Spanish colors and allusions”, being loyal “to its own iconography”, and with an omnipresent logo and icon: the bull (Piel de Toro, n.d.). This visual element rests on the symbolic power of the figure of the bull, which relates to the capacity that certain images have for capturing the essence of a nation (Delgado, 2010). In Spain, the bull – a symbol of power and royalty – has a long tradition dating back to the religions of the first Mediterranean civilizations (Pitt-Rivers, 2002: 355-356). Moreover, the bull’s hide is intrinsically linked to Spanish history, for the Iberian Peninsula has been described in terms of its formal likeness to it (García Bellido, 1986: 53). Linked to culture and traditions, the bull has become the embodiment of Spain—and also of Andalusia, where PdT comes from. Together with the bull, the red-and-yellow Spanish flag, a key national symbol since 1785, has always been present in the brand (Freire, 2017).

These symbols indicates a deliberate desire to attain iconic status. If in Holt’s theory icons serve as symbols, PdT deliberately intends to serve as a symbol of Spanish culture. However, it was not until September-October 2017 that the brand’s activism moved up a couple of gears.

The “Proudly Spanish” campaign

Piel de Toro launched its “Proudly Spanish” campaign in Spain’s major cities a few weeks before the referendum held in Catalonia on 1 October. In the campaign’s design, allowances were made for both financial and political motivations – in the words of Francisco Javier Rodríguez Burgas de Brioude, “to do something about what was happening in Catalonia” (quoted in Rivera, 2017). The campaign also aimed to position PdT “as the only truly Spanish international brand”, according to Cayetano Martínez de Irujo, Duke of Arjona and PdT’s Head of Institutional Relations (quoted in Villarino, 2017). Although the brand stressed that the campaign was not meant to be controversial and that it had been planned in the spring of 2017 (Bustamante, 2017), “Proudly Spanish” was launched in Seville on 12 September 2017, just one day after the celebration of Catalonia’s national holiday, and in Barcelona on 13 September, just one day before the start of the referendum campaign (Escobar Martí, 2017). These temporal coincidences underscore the basis of iconic brands: the existence of cultural tensions, of which PdT was fully aware. Martínez de Irujo has confessed that he is flabbergasted by the independence process, which he has termed “an illegal revolution” (quoted in Bustamante, 2017). In this case, the reaction to the tensions deriving from the Catalan independence process was reflected in the appearance of the campaign’s principal advertisement on bus shelters in Barcelona, including those in Plaza de Catalunya, a symbolic place replete with history. For this advertisement, PdT used the Seville singer José Manuel Soto, who was already associated with the brand, and very active on social media defending the unity of Spain and attacking the separatists, even going so far as to call them “xenophobic” (*INTERECONOMIA.COM*, 2017; Escobar Martí, 2017).

Following the canons of cultural branding, PdeT resorted to an identity myth as a response to cultural tensions. In an interview published in November 2017, the brothers Rodríguez Burgas de Brioude explained the brand’s ideological stance vis-à-vis the independence movement: “Proudly Spanish” would be

an adequate declaration of intent for both the brand and the present circumstances. Besides products, brands should also contribute something else to society and, in this respect, our desire has been to take a stance and convey that Spain is a great country, for which reason we feel proud to be Spanish (quoted in Extradigital Andalucía, 2017a).

Tellado also referred to the idea of reacting to a problematic situation, when, in relation to “Proudly Spanish”, she considered that “there are many Catalans among the population who have been forgotten and who are against independence” (personal interview, 2019). Although the campaign included several advertisements, the main one was a poster depicting José Manuel Soto, in a PdT shirt, smiling into the camera with his thumb, its tip painted with the colors of the Spanish flag, in the air. Thus, the flag – which invariably appears in other images used in the campaign – was one of the symbols employed to generate identity value in the face of social unrest. The flag also appears in the poster, accompanied by another symbol: the bull, displayed in both the brand name and its logo. Additionally, the rhetorical structure of the advertisement’s copy equates the brand with the nation, “A nation? Spain, a brand? ... Piel de Toro. Seville. Proudly Spanish” (Image 1).

IMAGE 1 HERE

The concept of pride is relevant to the history of Spanish patriotism, since, though it predates the mainstreaming of ultra-nationalism triggered by Vox and other parties, the brand identified a cultural rift through which unorthodox ideologies were reemerging. According to the brothers Rodríguez Burgas de Brioude: “If there were an ideal moment

for launching this campaign, that would be now because there is currently a much greater sensitivity towards our values” (quoted in Extradigital Andalucía, 2017a). Tellado also appreciated the good timing of this patriotic assertion: “It is our brand philosophy. Sell Spain, sell joy, sell our values, sell the flag, sell who we are. So, it really exploited a very timely moment to make itself known, gain visibility and generate publicity” (personal interview, 2019). Following the principles of cultural branding, the core concepts of unity and pride are framed in the context of a populist world based on collectivist, folk, and non-commercial values: a harmonious, close-knit Spain which is not silenced by the shadow of its National Catholic past.

With a campaign based on traditionally heterodox ideas, and in accordance with the theory of cultural branding, PdT was aware of the pioneering role that it was playing in the context of the Spanish-Catalan standoff: “The flag is now in fashion and, being slightly chauvinist, we have been the first to fly the Spanish flag in Catalonia and are convinced that we have helped it to be seen on the streets” (Francisco Javier Rodríguez Burgas de Brioude, quoted in Rivera, 2017). In this sense, it is possible that there had been an evolution in the ideological risk level accepted by PdT: for Tellado, who managed the brand from 2010 to 2014, it can be counterproductive for a brand to embrace minority ideologies; nonetheless, the brand was willing to go against the ideological flow in 2017.

This leads us to the effects of the campaign. Besides triggering a flood of reactions on social sites, and despite having been reproduced in the media, thus gaining plenty of visibility (*El HuffPost*, 2017), the campaign provoked the indignation of many Catalans supporting independence (Extradigital Andalucía, 2017b) and engaged a number of consumers. Although there were negative messages, the brand estimated that the overall balance as regards the reaction on social media had been very favorable (Extradigital Andalucía, 2017a). Branding effects were also remarkable (Freire, 2017), and the company’s decision-makers indicated that brand awareness had also increased: “It has been an extraordinarily visible campaign, it has placed us on the map for many people who did not know us, but who have identified with us” (Francisco Javier and Óscar Rodríguez Burgas de Brioude, in Extradigital Andalucía, 2017a). Pertaining to the economic dimension, at the beginning of October 2017 *El Confidencial* reported that the company had quintupled its sales in Catalonia since the crisis of 1st October and, more specifically, online sales in the region had risen by 9 per cent (Rivera, 2017) – figures that prove Holt right when claiming that cultural branding provides free media coverage and generates financial profit.

Media representation

The media coverage received by the brand reinforced its cultural influence. Many newspapers and online media covered the campaign (Extradigital Andalucía, 2017a), from traditional mainstream media like the conservative newspaper *La Razón*, to leading digital-native outlets like the libertarian-conservative *Libertad Digital* to the extreme right-wing *La Gaceta*. Catalan newspapers such as *ElNacional.cat* also gave the campaign a look in (Escobar Martí, 2017). Besides the general press, “Proudly Spanish” was mentioned on websites and publications specializing in entertainment/humor (Señorasque.com, 2017), media and marketing (Extradigital Andalucía, 2017b), or economy (Larrouy, 2017).

What is remarkable is that the media reflected the basic mechanics of cultural branding: on the one hand, the existence of social tensions; and on the other, the ideological response via an identity myth – as the conservative daily *ABC* helpfully

summarized, it was “an ad campaign loaded with patriotism when the Catalan secessionist challenge was in full swing” (@L. M. R., 2017). *Periodista Digital* (2017) underscored that the campaign was an attempt at combating Catalan secessionism; and the right-wing tabloid *OKDIARIO* referred explicitly to the referendum of 1st October (Durán, 2017). For its part, the leading online news outlet *El Confidencial* rightly observed that the campaign “acquires a political meaning in the current context in Catalonia” (Villarino, 2017). Regarding the identity myth, the media tended, by and large, to emphasize that “Proudly Spanish” had brought patriotism to Catalonia, flooding cities such as Barcelona: *OKDIARIO* mentioned the presence of the flag and the bull in the adverts (Durán, 2017), and *INTERECONOMIA.COM* remarked that “Piel de Toro has filled Barcelona with Spanish flags” (2017) – a patriotic tsunami similar to that described in *La Razón* (2017) or *El HuffPost* (2017). *La Voz libre* (2017) spoke explicitly of “an ad campaign replete with patriotism”, *El Español* commented that the campaign could be mistaken for “a political statement” (Bustamante, 2017), and in *El Mundo* there were references to “pro-Spanish ads” (Miranda, 2017). With less enthusiasm than the moderate and ring-wing media – the majority in Spain – the alternative left-wing news outlet *insurgente.org* (2017) interpreted the campaign as an action of the extreme right and Spanish nationalism, while the Catalan pro-independence newspaper *NacióDigital* (2017) claimed that the campaign was of a “unionist nature”.

Branding and patriotism: an expert assessment

In addition to media representation, the study of the reception of PdT’s campaign is enhanced by the viewpoint of experts on communication and fashion. In this regard, the expert focus group – which began with the screening of a presentation of “Proudly Spanish” in order to help its members to comment on it during the session – has provided evidence for considering the scope and limits of the brand’s iconic status. To start with, the experts pointed to a general context in which brands are closely related to culture – for professor and fashion expert Gloria Jiménez, brands are interested in implementing actions that enable them to participate in the public conversation. Regarding connotations, the participants unanimously agreed that there had been many cases of ideologically positioned brands. However, some of them stressed that ideological positioning works for a brand provided that “beforehand there have been certain indications that it will indeed work” (associate professor Marina Ramos), thus revealing a certain conditioning character when specifying the ideology. In the case of “Proudly Spanish”, for Concha Pérez-Curiel – in charge of the MA program in Entrepreneurship, Media and Fashion at the University of Seville – the campaign could provoke the same reaction in people supporting nationalism, before indicating that in all likelihood it would not represent all the Catalan constitutionalists, and that the brand might even “lose them”. This idea is related to something that cultural branding expert María del Mar Rubio-Hernández pinpointed as an issue pertaining to the adoption of the “almost identity-related” values expressed by the brand. In particular, she claimed that “the brand’s values are associated with that idea of patriotism, all things Spanish, the flag, and they reflect this in everything, in the visual identity, they reflect it in this case in their products”. In other words, the experts believed that the brand had created an identity myth.

According to cultural branding, an identity myth depends on social tensions and identifying an opportunity in myth markets. All the participants perceived the campaign’s political objective as a response to Catalan separatism, reaching the

conclusion that advertising manages to insert itself in fields with which it had not been traditionally associated: politics and ideology. Accordingly, it was suggested that the campaign was a response to certain social tensions. Ramos held that the fact that brands respond in that way actually provides a competitive edge, since they manage to strengthen their position in certain small market segments that need to express themselves: “nowadays, brands need that political discourse [...] provided that it is genuine”. Fashion expert Laura Manzano underscored the brand’s capacity to detect a political-social opportunity when identifying the existence of a Spanish audience who felt “silenced” and “attacked for saying what they really felt”, before suggesting that the brand presented itself as a medium of expression providing them with “channels through which they can reinforce their opinions, their values”. Manzano compared the brand with other vehicles through which the public could participate in social and political life, indicating that the “silenced” individuals

are discovering those vehicles, that is, on the one hand, a political party that represents them, [and on the other] brands with which, for example, they can identify visually [...] and it is curious because if before it was apparently considered as something bad, now people say it without beating about the bush.

The existence of cultural anxieties relates to an issue on which there was a general consensus: the situational convenience of the campaign was no accident. Similarly, for them nor was the campaign’s temporal context, in spite of the statements released by the brand. According to Ramos, “as Spain has become polarized, I believe that they [PdT’s management] have leveraged this. They have taken advantage of the fact that there was a group of people who were dormant [...] the traditional right, as it were, that has always existed [...]. Suddenly, they have discovered vehicles, people who have spoken out”. This assessment relates to the possibilities that the campaign offered for highlighting opinions hitherto concealed, a recurrent topic throughout the focus group session.

As to the ideological content of the identity values to which “Proudly Spanish” appealed, Manzano claimed that the brand had managed to convert “a traditional value into a lure for that particular campaign”. The issue of patriotic feeling in Spain and its possible link to dictatorial National Catholicism was also broached, the participants voicing their doubts as to whether or not Spanish nationalist values or symbols had been stripped of authoritarian connotations. Ramos metaphorically expressed that Spain was immersed in a “centrifugal process” through which thanks to football or the generational change, symbolic elements such as the flag had been gradually divested of their Francoist associations. Nonetheless, the general opinion was that there was still a long way to go before those links to Spain’s patriotic symbols were severed once and for all. One of the reasons noted was that the monarchy or Francoism had a long and deep-rooted tradition in Spain and could not be easily forgotten. The controversy arising from this may be associated with another concept of cultural branding: the vanguard role. Manzano declared that the campaign had encouraged the voicing of opinions regarded as politically incorrect or unpopular, understanding that the brand’s managers “are channeling that frustration”; a frustration that had not had mainstream support before then. In this sense, and beyond the detection of opportunities, the experts generally agreed that the brand had anticipated recent political trends represented by ultraconservative parties like Vox.

When asked about the cultural icon concept and its application to PdT, the participants tended to recognize the company as an iconic brand for a specific sector of the population, but not for Spanish consumers as a whole, since the symbols used would

correspond to a patriotic feeling which is currently being reshaped. On the other hand, and notwithstanding the fact that the appeal to identity values was understood as a positive aspect for the brand's success, Pérez-Curiel claimed that the strategy could have a negative effect on the image of Spain's international fashion brands since it might undermine the values of Spanish fashion; nevertheless, this expert acknowledged that the strategy had worked well for PdT.

Discussion and conclusion

The phenomenon of iconic brands sheds light on the cultural value of commercial discourses, and the power they have to provide consumers with identitarian links. These brand-mediated links include nationalist and patriotic appeals. In Spain, the “Proudly Spanish” campaign by patriotic fashion brand Piel de Toro has taken to the extreme, both literally and metaphorically, the notion of a brand wrapped in the flag. Regarding Holt's theory, PdT brings to light the main axioms guiding the building of an iconic brand, i.e. exploiting a pre-existing societal tension, formulating an identity myth, showcasing a brilliant communication campaign, playing the role of cultural vanguard by appealing to populist worlds, and achieving positive effects. In so doing, the Andalusian company can be added to the list of brands that project a national identity to deal with social issues. However, although the generally enthusiastic media coverage and the effects of the campaign would indicate that the brand is attaining iconic status, experts express a more nuanced viewpoint whereby PdT would be a cultural icon for a particular consumer segment. The PdT campaign also illustrates how identity myths respond to politically-driven cultural anxieties—in this respect, the analysis of media coverage and the experts' opinions conclude that “Proudly Spanish” was overtly political. In the same way that Coca-Cola responded in the 1970s to a national trust crisis in the US, PdT has addressed a national crisis in Spain by developing a narrative of pride and national unity. In a context of economic uncertainty and political fragmentation, the media interest aroused by “Proudly Spanish” indicates that national narratives are sustained by the need to unify, synthesize and bestow a transcendental meaning to what is heterogeneous and uncertain (Delgado, 2010).

As Katsanis observed, “The behavior of brand marketers is affected by general societal trends. These trends include shifts in values, culture, or ideology” (1994: 5). By addressing a cultural shift that has reinvigorated patriotic feelings, the case of PdT exemplifies the capacity of iconic brands to deal with national anxieties (Heller, 2016), as well as Cayla and Arnould's notion of brands promising to fulfill consumers' unmet desires and needs. Although other brands have positioned themselves regarding the Catalan issue (Larrouy, 2017), no other than PdT has formulated its identity myth with such clarity. In this sense, the campaign illustrates how brands “succeed in becoming powerful cultural symbols when they tag along on emerging myth markets led by far more potent cultural forms” (Holt, 2006: 374). By grasping a change in the cultural climate that coalesced in politics, sports, and the media in the 2010s, the brand simultaneously tagged along on the myth market and acted as cultural vanguard by showcasing the Spanish flag. In this regard, PdT has not changed its ideological positioning; it has just exhibited it through an advertising masterstroke.

According to Holt, populist worlds “have their own idioms and idiosyncratic cultural codes” (2004: 65). PdT erects its populist world by drawing on coded symbols that appeal to the Spanish patriotic imagination: Southern traditionalism, the red-and-yellow flag, the bull, and even the name of the country itself—the fact that the

campaign highlighted “Spain” is consistent with the idea that “consumers assign value to products based on their place of origin” (Hull, 2016: 125). Thus, this case shows that the symbolic function of goods is driven by codes embedded in the culture. Additionally, the brand has subtly conveyed the notion that Spanish proud must be declared unabashedly, far from political correctness—not by coincidence, both managers and experts acknowledge that the campaign has given voice to formerly silenced sectors. The lack of political correctness has provided a wide media coverage and support from certain groups; however, it also allows mindless complacency about how good and enjoyable it is to be Spanish (Delgado, 2010), and contributes to the mainstreaming of a type of nationalism which has traditionally been the flagship of far-right forces (Núñez Seixas, 2004). The notion that commercial brands could be sweetening, if not whitewashing, formerly authoritarian ideologies, is an enticing point for research and debate.

To sum up, the study of iconic brands emerges as a research area that contributes to our understanding of the interaction between branding, consumption, and culture. Our paper has focused on the ideologies that can be conveyed by commercial culture, thus providing a first step in the direction of studying Spanish iconic brands, as well as the influence of societal tensions on national and/or global markets. The case of Piel de Toro illustrates the way cultural tensions are used by brands in specific contexts, and opens a window to studying the impact of national myths on consumer-brand identification. By offering insight on brands’ ideological messages, this paper sheds light on how advertising works at the crossroads of consumer culture, politics, and branding—an enticing cross-disciplinary realm where brands can be analyzed as overtly political actors which draw on identities, and where the fashion market, in particular, exemplifies the intermingling of consumer choices and political preferences.

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