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Misleading visual brand identity: Exploring consumer perceptions

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Keywords

Brand identity, visual identity, brand authenticity, brand image.

Purpose

Authenticity has emerged as an important dimension of branding, in which recent studies have sought to understand the attributes and the measurement of this construct. Yet despite these advances, our understanding of this dimension's relevance and influence on consumer perceptions remains limited. The purpose of this paper is to explore the influence of authenticity in relation to a brand's visual identity, and specifically examine consumer response to a misleading visual identity. To this end, we report the preliminary findings from a pilot survey that solicited the perceptions of high street consumers in response to a visual identity that expresses a misleading country-of-origin. The preliminary findings suggests that whilst consumers felt misled, there was little negative impact on the perception of the brand by its consumers. Early indications reveal that brand authenticity has less relevance to consumers in the fast fashion sector, where the value is placed on the style of the actual merchandise.

Theoretical background

The notion of authenticity within a brand context primarily referred to a product being a genuine, distinct from being counterfeit (Alexander, 2009; Napoli, Beverland, et al., 2014). Connected to this view, studies have demonstrated that authenticity is essential in establishing status in brands (Beverland, 2005; Gilmore & Pine, 2007). Subsequent research has sought to extend the focus from objects and products through to experiences and, specifically, the related issue of brand trust

(Grayson & Martinec, 2004). The apparent importance of these issues stimulated the pursuit of a more precise definition of these interconnected constructs and, crucially, a move towards the development of measures of brand authenticity and related emotional branding conceptualisations (Thomson, M., MacInnis, et al, 2005; Napoli, Beverland, et al., 2014). Nevertheless whilst our understanding of brand authenticity has increased, crucial gaps remain. Previous studies of authenticity have largely focused on luxury brands, rather than mass market. Furthermore the potential repercussions of misleading brand visual identities have not been sufficiently examined, which could have substantial bearing on the management of brands that are located outside of luxury market. Recent backlashes have focused on the own-label fictitious farm brands, exploited by a number of supermarkets (The Independent, 2016).

Method

The aim of the study was to understand consumer perceptions of a misleading country-of-origin brand, using SuperDry as the case for analysis. A key feature of the Superdry visual brand identity is the inclusion of prominent Japanese inscriptions situated above the primary logotype (see figure 1). An in-person survey, conducted by the authors, was administered on a mid-week afternoon outside the Superdry store in Leeds city centre. The survey involved 47 participants within the age range of 18 – 44 with a relatively equal split between males (49 per cent) and females (51 per cent). Participants were identified as they exited the Superdry store. The survey sought the following information: 1) to examine participant awareness of the country-of-origin of the Superdry brand; 2) to understand the perception(s) of the Superdry brand in a general sense and in relation to its country-of-origin; and 3) to seek clarification on the perceptions of the Superdry brand after raising awareness of the actual country of origin of the brand; 4) to assess the participants potential willingness to engage with the brand.

Findings

The preliminary findings from the analysis revealed that 31 out of 47 participants considered Superdry to be a Japanese brand. After explaining to these 31 participants that this brand was actually a British brand, 21 participants stated that they felt the brand was less authentic than previously thought. One comment stated that they seemed 'fake'. A further 11 of the 21 'less authentic' participants stated that this information could potentially make them reconsider their engagement with the brand. However the majority of the participants (26) stated that they were not concerned over the provenance of the brand and that, as one participant commented, they 'liked the product, whatever'. A similar view: '[the brand is] so less Japanese, but I'd still go there'. In further support of this view, one participant responded that 'a lot of these companies are owned by bigger companies that shoppers are unaware of'. It seemed that for Superdry consumers the country-of-origin of the brand and/or ownership of the brand was less relevant than the value they placed on the actual style of the products.

Discussion

These preliminary findings suggest that authenticity, as expressed through a brand's visual identity, was less important for consumers in some mass-market sectors. It also became apparent that in the case of the Superdry brand, the country-of-origin influence was less of an appealing factor for

consumers and merely a decorative, stylistic feature of the brand. The indications are that these findings appear to contradict earlier studies that have focused on the broader facets of brand authenticity, and therefore further research in the role of visual identity in expressing brand authenticity is required.

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