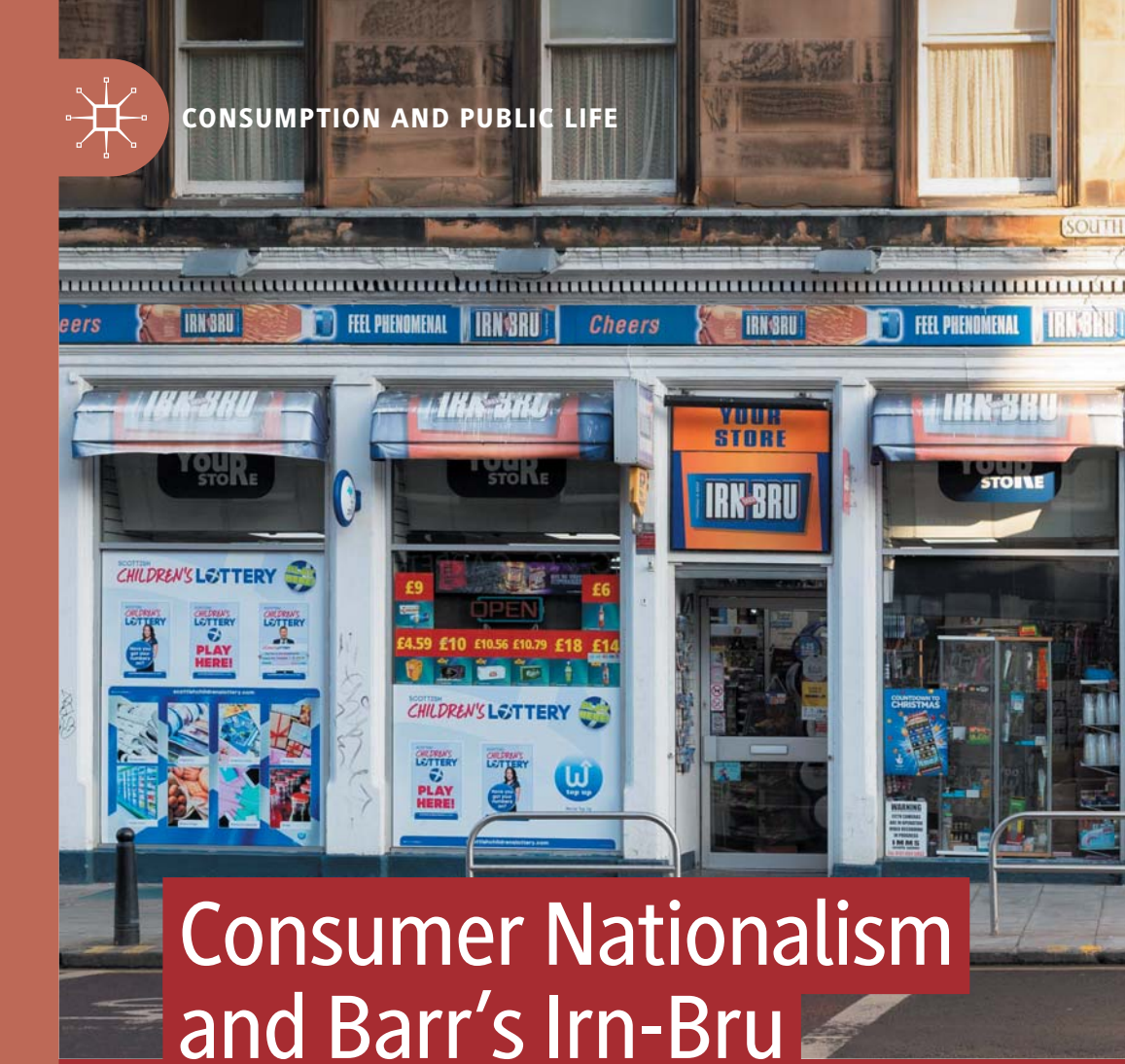

CONSUMPTION AND PUBLIC LIFE

Consumer Nationalism and Barr's Irn-Bru in Scotland

David Leishman

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Praise for *Consumer Nationalism and Barr's Irn-Bru in Scotland*

"Like its fellow totemic foods, haggis and the deep-fried Mars Bar, Irn-Bru is approached by non-Scots with a mixture of suspicion and bemusement, while for Scots it's a defiant—if also somewhat ironic—emblem of national pride. What's going on? There's clearly a lot more to this 'gawdy beverage' than a sugar rush and creative advertising. Delving into contradictory origin stories, marketing mythology and fast-moving currents of pop culture and political symbolism, David Leishman offers up 'Scotland's other national drink' as a compelling interdisciplinary case study displaying the capacity for food and drink to entangle itself with identity, authenticity, health discourses and twenty-first century understandings of globalisation and consumer nationalism."

—Donald Reid, *Lecturer in Gastronomy, Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, UK*

Contents

About the Author

David Leishman holds a degree in marketing from Strathclyde Business School, Scotland, and a Ph.D. in Scottish studies from Grenoble University, France. Since 2006, he has been senior lecturer in English applied to business studies at the University of Grenoble-Alpes. He has published a range of articles analysing how national identity is mediated through different forms of popular and consumer culture.

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Introduction

A Nation Forged in Iron

A map of the world highlighting the countries where the biggest-selling soft drink was a Coca-Cola product became a viral hit on social media in the UK in 2017 (Murphy 2017). At first glance, every single country across the entire world appeared a uniform red, underlining the global dominance of Coke. But there was one exception. The sole presence of a tiny, blue Scotland attested that one country at least had proved to be uniquely resilient to the juggernaut of consumer conformity that had assailed the rest of the world. The number one drink consumed there was identified as Barr's Irn-Bru, a locally made, orange-coloured soft drink with a sweet, tangy, indefinable fruit taste somewhat reminiscent of bubble gum. The map—subsequently adopted by the manufacturers for their own social media feed as well as being commented on in the mainstream media across the UK—contained numerous errors and doubtlessly overstated Coke's dominance in markets like Cuba or North Korea. Despite frequent articles that present Irn-Bru as the biggest selling soft drink in Scotland (see Murphy 2015), it also very possibly exaggerated Irn-Bru's actual market share in the country. Nevertheless, the map

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encapsulated the cultural importance of Irn-Bru consumption in Scotland, illustrating how this unique beverage is enthusiastically mobilised to convey questions of contemporary Scots' national identity.

According to popular mythology which draws both from the brand's official backstory and from popular legends around the invention of the beverage, Barr's Irn-Bru reportedly originated in Scotland in 1901 as Iron Brew, having been invented to preserve the vitality of thirsty steelworkers in Glasgow. On the bottle label and in print ads, early brand ambassadors are identified as "hairy Highland athletes", forging an indelible connection between national origins, industrial strength, cultural traditions and vibrant masculinity. Most of these stories are false, but that does not diminish their power. Today, the beverage is taken to represent the embodiment of a distinctive national character—an irreverent sense of good-humoured resilience in the face of adversity—and it remains uniquely popular in Scotland. Barr's Irn-Bru has its own official tartan, Andy Murray is photographed toasting his victories with it, and a crate of the beverage was reportedly chosen by Sir Sean Connery to represent his homeland as an exhibit for the Museum of Scotland (Murphy 2015). Suggesting further that the beverage enjoys the status of an institutionally supported vector of gastronationalism in Scotland (DeSoucey 2010), First Minister Alex Salmond successfully lobbied the EU not to clamp down on the use of the two key colorants present in the beverage which are suspected of causing hyperactivity in children ("First Minister raises a glass as Europe backs down on Irn-Bru colour ban" 2011). Despite the best efforts of its Scottish manufacturers, AG Barr plc, the beverage is frequently politicised. Campaigners on both sides of the 2014 independence referendum claimed Irn-Bru as their own and the influx of new SNP MPs to the UK Parliament in 2015 was accompanied by various news reports about the increased demand for Irn-Bru at Westminster (Efstathiou 2016). When in 2018 Barr's halved the sugar content in response to the "sugar tax" announced by the UK Parliament, the recipe change not only sparked a boycott by diehard Scottish fans to reinstate a "national treasure", the move was cited online by some as further proof of the need for Scottish independence to escape the influence of Westminster.

Barr's Irn-Bru is today mobilised from above and below to incarnate a form of authentic, modern Scottishness and the extent to which this brand functions as a totem of a nation's identity has few parallels in the world beyond Coke itself. Barr's Irn-Bru has been locally produced now for well over a hundred years. But if it can be proven that there was nothing intrinsically Scottish about a beverage which originated from outside the country and which borrowed its visual identity and marketing discourses from extra-national sources, then a number of questions arise.

Consumerism can relay discourses of national identity when consumers are invested in the purchase of "nationally produced goods and services" (Gerth 2011), but goods do not become national by simply being "produced" ex nihilo in a given location. They are the result of complex global value chains which involve procurement, logistics, promotion, marketing, distribution and so on. Within this framework, how do branded goods become inflected with national meaning to the extent that this obscures their transnational origins? When brands are seen as having some claim to national legitimacy what are the institutional and cultural forces which allow them to become further entrenched and culturally dominant (Malešević 2013: 130)? What are the ramifications of the origins myths and backstories which brands use to secure legitimacy in the apparently mundane, depoliticised domain of contemporary consumption? Through which performative acts do national consumers display agency to reclaim brand identities as part of their own individual and collective identities? Can the brands involved in consumer displays of national thought continue to promote bounded identities in a globalised capitalist framework exemplified by increasingly heterogeneous populations and homogeneous high streets?

Everyday Consumption and National Identity

For a while, it was suggested that globalisation heralded the growing irrelevance of the nation as a focus for society, culture and politics. However, the consensus today is that nations do continue to matter today (Billig 1995; Foster 1999; Calhoun 2007; Aronczyk 2009; Mihelj 2011). The

flows of goods, people and culture we experience daily in the developed world may have weakened the idea of the nation as a discrete, homogeneous entity, but a sense of national belonging remains a strong component of individual and collective identity. Alongside globalisation and the persistence of national thought, another defining feature of western consumer society has been the rise of what has been loosely termed promotional culture (Wernick 1991; Davis 2013). This refers to the dominant cultural presence of the marketing communications, branding and advertising which have come to play such an important role not only in business, but also in culture, society and politics. The aim of this book is to explore the connections between these forces.

Within a theoretical framework reliant on the concepts of "banal" and "everyday" nationalism (Billig 1995; Edensor 2002; Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008), this book thus seeks to address a phenomenon that has been loosely termed commercial nationalism. Volcic and Andrejevic use this term to refer to two related strategies, the first being the process by which state actors use commercial tools to promote the nation (2016: 2). The resulting studies on "nation-branding" such as those carried out by Kaneva have fruitfully highlighted the implications of this articulation of national interests in commercial terms (2016). However, our focus here is on the use of nationalist themes by commercial actors, the second of Volcic and Andrejevic's definitions for the term.

As Foster reminds us, it can be extremely useful to "look beyond the agencies of the state for sites where the nation as imaginative construct or narrative is made and made real" (Foster 2002: 6). This is particularly relevant in cases when there is a relative weakness of state power as it allows us to study how the nation is materialised in the absence of the "machinery of governmentality" (Foster 2002: 5). In the context of the multinational UK and a Scotland historically defined as a stateless-nation, this focus on the commercial construction of the nation (c.f. the state) will help avoid the unwarranted state-centred conflation of the two terms which Anthony Smith identifies as a common failing in studies of everyday nationalism (2008: 566–567).

Smith meanwhile cautions that focusing on everyday manifestations of nationalism favours an ahistorical reading of the nation (2008: 566). Many of the studies on nation-branding indeed concentrate on the

contemporary era, with a particular focus on how nations have adopted commercial modes of communication following the fall of communism (Kania-Lundholm 2016). However, Kania-Lundholm rightly warns against viewing commercial nationalism as a new phenomenon (2014), and one of our concerns has been to address questions of temporality and historicity, by charting how national identity has interacted with modern marketing techniques from their earliest appearance in the late nineteenth century. It is true that this approach does not allow us to venture outside of the temporality of modernism. But the study conducted here attempts to show the importance of discourses of continuity and the past in linking consumerism to nation-building, with the interplay of local, national and global forces forming the backdrop of consumerism well before the advent of today's globalised consumer society.

The area of commercial nationalism concerned with how nationalist themes are taken up by advertisers, producers and consumers has been termed more specifically "consumer nationalism" by Castelló and Mihelj (2018). The latter conclude that given its often overlooked political and cultural signification, nationalist consumption—and the social and economic factors which shape it—merit further study (2018). The societal and cultural impacts of such low-culture, vernacular, commercial forces have often been unjustly overlooked. The wider social role of advertising in particular is often neglected in serious study, despite advertising's ability to shape attitudes and contemporary social identities (Cook 2001: 185; Davis 2013: 3) and in spite of its avowed aim of causing changes in behaviour and thought. An impressive body of literature has meanwhile grown from Billig's study of banal nationalism (1995), with more attention being given to non-elite forms of everyday nationalism in the light of observations by Edensor (2002) and Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008). However, writing in 2016, Volcic and Andrejevic noted that still more needed to be done to assess the importance of "markets, commerce, and consumption" in the process of nation-building (Volcic and Andrejevic 2016: 3). Focusing here on the everyday dimension of consumer nationalism allows us to analyse the ways which elite, institutional, top-down forces (e.g. advertising undertaken by powerful commercial interests) continue to have a powerful role

to play in contemporary nation-building, but remain bound up in mass-mediated phenomena such as shopping, commodity consumption and social media use.

This books aims to further the study of brand-mediated national discourses, following the path led notably by Robert Foster's studies of Coca-Cola marketing on national identity in Papua New Guinea (1999, 2000, 2002, 2008). The question of how advertising interacts with discourses of national belonging has provided many interesting short case studies (Ryoo 2005; MacGregor 2003; Özkan and Foster 2005; Cormack 2008; Prideaux 2009) which have provided useful insight. However, Holt (2006) advises that, in order to fully understand how nationally iconic brands piggyback existing cultural values and interact with active consumers in complex, intertextual environments, long-scale studies charting their shifting values over time are necessary. This has been our approach here, following in the footsteps of works such as Marie Sarita Gaytán's *¡Tequila! Distilling the Spirit of Mexico*. This longitudinal approach is particularly useful when the post-modern reworking of earlier advertising paradigms (Holt 2002) and the self-referential elements of contemporary ads must be fully addressed to determine their wider social meaning. As consumers contribute to their own sense of national identity by talking about national identity and physically consuming "national" products, the consumption of a nationally inflected beverage also has a deeply cultural performative element (Foster 2000; Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008) which almost must be studied in turn.

Analysing Soft Drinks as Branded Goods

Our approach is based on discourse analysis, meaning that marketing communications such as ads are considered as complex, multi-modal sign systems. They derive their contingent, shifting meaning in a social context where economically powerful manufacturers and advertising agencies create ads, logos, labelling, brand identities, promotional events and so on in an attempt to create positive values around their product. But by relying primarily on affective, poetic and connotative effects, ads

do not have authoritative meaning that can be determined objectively by all (Cook 2001: 51, 103). Consumers show varying degrees of resistance to such codes and enough agency to ignore, misunderstand, forget or imagine alternative decodings for the ads they encounter.

Since these audio-visual and textual elements represent open, polysemic texts with a less direct effect on consumers, they have to be placed within a framework of cultural discourses and social relations more generally (Davis 2013: 40). Consequently, the under-the-radar effect of advertising and branding will be studied, not as an isolated discourse, but as one rooted in commercial and institutional power structures (Mihelj 2011). For example, the contingent nature of this form of branded identity becomes more apparent when the impact of the media acting as a relay for commercial press releases is taken into consideration, or when the supply chain for early twentieth century aerated beverages is integrated as a key factor in the choice between promoting local, national or imperial identities.

Whereas many published studies have dealt with the impact on national cultures of global brands, this book has chosen an iconic Scottish brand, the carbonated beverage Barr's Irn-Bru, in order to study how the nationally inflected marketing communications of an independent, local manufacturer can make a long-term contribution to national identity. The main corpus comprises the entire sweep of marketing communications connected to the beverage, from its late nineteenth-century inception as Iron Brew to its present-day existence as Barr's Irn-Bru.[1] In an attempt to present a fully-comprehensive study, we have sought to incorporate all the available print advertising for the drink as well as a study of all major billboard, TV, online and other promotional campaigns linked to the brand.

The physical nature of the product advertised is of itself extremely significant. As a foodstuff, Irn-Bru relates to DeSoucey's definition of gastronationalism (2010), whereby nationalism is used to market food, and food, in turn, is used to demarcate and sustain a sense of national identity. More particularly, the role of soft drinks in this

[1]The spelling "Iron Brew" will be used when referring to the earlier, generic class of drinks. Distinct, trademarked drinks such as IRONBREW or Irn-Bru will be referred to by their specific spellings.

process of consumer citizenship (Özkan and Foster 2005) is of particular interest, given that the simple make-up of the products—little more than flavoured sugar water—is in inverse proportion to the extensive marketing efforts deployed by their manufacturers to impute elaborate systems of value and identity to such products (Foster 2008: 22). Soft drinks are cheap, mass-market products capable of being pitched as products which can federate all members of society. Nevertheless, the focus of research intersecting localised identities and soft drinks branding has often been on the local inflection given to global marketing strategies implemented in a "transnational soft drink commodityscape" (Foster 2002: 155). In contrast, the impetus of this work is to focus on how a locally produced, locally owned, non-globalised soft drinks brand has had its own powerful role in nation-building, but also to show how even the most local of brands have been modelled by international flows of commodities, resources and ideas predating the current era of globalisation.

Finally, the legal and commercial dimensions of a competitive market sector have both had a visible impact on strategies which aim to promote distinctive, superior, discrete brand identities. This promotional impetus leads to attempts to affix these distinct, essentialised brand identities onto consumers both individually and collectively, leading to the conception of nations peopled by consumer citizens who possess both recognisable traits and a collective identity defined by "shared consumption practices" (Foster 2002: 66). With branded commodities imbuing nations with their paradigm of "discrete, bounded, intrinsically valuable" properties (Foster quoting LiPuma 2002: 84), a number of meta-discourses can subsequently be seen to underpin Irn-Bru's commodification of national identity: authenticity, superiority over rivals, local rootedness, embodiment of national character, fruit of national genius, historical continuity, distinctiveness, popular acclaim and so on. However, these discursive elements are indissociable from the wider cultural forces which have shaped the marketing of the beverage.

Situating Brands Within National Culture

Commercial goods may bear the simple imprint of identifiable national symbols, but consumer nationalism often goes far beyond the simple use of stereotypical visual codes. This involves the construction of wide-ranging identity discourses which draw on shared—although sometimes subtle and knowing—references to national history, heritage and culture. In turn, a brand that has successfully latched onto nationally relevant myths of belonging and identification can be considered truly iconic, particularly when it comes to be understood as encapsulating the nation (Holt 2004, 2006). Successful consumer nationalism is seen, then, to be a two-way process: goods bear the trace of national symbols and discourses, but the nation too becomes identified through a synecdochic connection with a branded product mobilised to symbolise the manifold complexities of the wider nation.

This book sets out to study Irn-Bru in Scotland in order to examine in more detail the contrived and contingent nature of consumer nationalism. Many of the mechanisms underpinning the commercial construction of nations are rooted in marketers' deliberate attempts to shape consumer behaviour, and one of the justifications of this work is to lend a more attentive ear to these discourses. As part of the process of analysing how brands come to mean something, placing commodities in a wider framework of social and economic power structures has to be complemented by this historical analysis of how meanings and values have been modified, accumulated and sedimented over time (Foster 2008: 13). With this in mind, this work draws on a wide range of sources and approaches as it endeavours to cover a broad temporal sweep of the commercial history of the brand which has come to be known as Scotland's "other national drink".

Advertising is fleeting by nature, which gives rise to several problems when we endeavour to analyse it (Cook 2001: 230–231). One practical challenge of studying branding and marketing communications is the availability of primary sources which largely exist in the form of ephemera such as bottle labels, trade catalogues and point-of-sale advertising. By definition, such material was intended to be disposable and its impermanence means that today it is often only available through

more indirect sources as archived trade publications or auction sites of collectable material. Public archives contain scant few early company letter books or other in-house publications, and even those listed can often turn out to have been lost by their corporate owners as firms close down or restructure.

In the course of this study, AG Barr plc graciously allowed me to meet senior management who answered multiple queries, conducted their own research and gave me access to documents such as early ads and memorabilia from the firm's own internal archive. This brought to light important elements of the brand's own history while simultaneously confirming the general observation that commercial organisations are largely the curators of their own histories. Consequently, many journalistic articles, corporate histories or studies of national brands (e.g. Foreman 2004) have tended to rely too exclusively on the officially sanctioned backstories circulated in corporate press releases. One of the rationales behind this work was that the historical role of commercial brands merited more through archive research if a truer understanding of national identity in a consumer society was to be achieved.

Due in part to the long-term diachronic nature of the analysis presented here, no anthropological study of the reception of advertising is attempted in this work—a commonly noted methodological failing of consumer and media studies grounded in textual analysis (Foster 2002: 106). While it is our hope that this could be a fruitful area for future studies, the nature of advertising as a calibrated, results-driven medium whose messages are pre-tested, revised and tweaked to ensure they are compatible with public tastes should be remembered. The durability over time of certain campaigns, or the short-lived nature of others, is a reasonable proxy by which we can indirectly judge the public reception and acceptability of the marketing communications analysed in the chapters ahead.

Chapter Outline

This work begins by studying the importance of discourses of origins in marketing in order to assess how brands come to represent an authentic, naturalised expression of national relevance in the present day. This is of

particular importance for Irn-Bru in Scotland. Not only has the beverage been produced independently in Scotland by the Barr family for over 120 years, but the manufacturers (now trading under the name AG Barr plc) have frequently used the themes of authenticity and origins in their branding to reaffirm the sense of the drink being distinctly Scottish in character.

The chapter thus assesses the relevance of discourses about commercial origins and historicity in contributing to a wider sense of national origins, where questions of fixity, primacy and certainty are paramount. The brand's actual transnational origins in an era of widespread commercial plagiarism are studied to contextualise arguments about authenticity and origins and to evaluate the processes of national myth-making underpinning the brand's cultural dominance. Later elements of the drink's backstory relating to its composition, properties and brand name are also studied to highlight the significance of urban legends and popular mythologies concerning the drink's origins and national credentials.

Chapter 2 examines the central tropes of health, strength and vitality conveyed in the brand's advertising. The aim is to consider how these generic themes allowed the brand to end up being considered an exemplar of national values and study how the brand maintained wider cultural relevance through discourses of collective and individual resilience. As both a vital mineral and robust building material, iron offers up primarily masculine connotations of strength due to its associations with the fields of sport and industry. This had a strong resonance in an industrialised country like Scotland. But the appearance of such drinks promoting vitality and athletic performance is put into a wider context by studying the early market for healthful beverages. The chapter also covers the military themes which were in evidence in wartime ads, and the importance of how industrial power evoked national identity in the late twentieth century. Finally, it addresses how discourses of national strength have been redeployed as a reaction against American cultural hegemony and reconfigured as a form of mental resilience which ascribes the ability to overcome adversity with good humour as a national trait.

To assess the wide-ranging presence of brands in everyday life and to study the mechanisms by which brands gain further prominence

and legitimacy, Chapter 3 studies the brand's presence in material culture (its physical rootedness in the fabric of the nation) and in popular culture (its presence in the media, the arts, and everyday behaviour). Billig and Edensor both underline the importance of understated national backdrops, prompting an enquiry into the way that intertextual networks are rooted in a physical and media environment. Barr's Irn-Bru began as a local, rather than national presence, but its footprint has expanded over time, allowing the brand to stand today as a symbol for the entire nation. Since soft drinks have a particular power to epitomise homely reassurance, Irn-Bru's ability to incarnate national familiarity and intergenerational stability is studied as well as its ability to structure national time, space and borders through ritualised consumption habits. For some, contemporary consumption practices and sign systems can be seen as exemplifying a postmodernist mash-up of empty, commercially-mediated symbols. But such everyday practices also illustrate the importance of performance and consumer agency in the context of a processual nation which is always being recreated as customers actively re-appropriate the resources of brand and national identity.

Studying some of the more overt national symbolism in commodity advertising further disrupts the purported opposition of banal versus hot forms of nationalism (Jones and Merriman 2009). The final chapter returns to the core question of national discourses in advertising to study how and why these may evolve over time over the course of a brand's history, gaining relevance and legitimacy even if they have been entirely absent at the start. This section also provides the opportunity to analyse how a brand's discourses about national identity can be offset by changing depictions of symbolic Otherness and how both articulations of identity will be conditioned by the commercial, cultural and political landscape of the day. For example, despite the introduction of specific Scottish motifs in Irn-Bru ads in the 1940s, they were underpinned by a strong British imperialist conception of identity for most of the twentieth century, giving way to new, urban, national-specific forms of identity only from the 1970s onwards. However, commercial identities are also mediated by commercial imperatives and the chapter addresses how national-specific advertising has to navigate the complexities of targeting consumers within the UK as a multinational state.

More exotic manifestations of Otherness in the drink's recent advertising are also assessed in relation to wider political and cultural debates about Scottish/English relations, attitudes to cosmopolitanism and the civic conception of Scottish identity. The chapter concludes by focusing on how the self-deprecatory and dual-voiced discourses which tend to characterise contemporary advertising can lead to a form of ironic ambivalence where any statement about the nation can simultaneously be both voiced and disavowed.

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