

Exploring Branded Nationalism, Consumer Ethnocentrism and Cultural Imperialism

Prachi Sadhwani (218971515)

Professor Estée Fresco & Nicholas Fazio

CMDS 3700 – Advertising: Media and the Development of Consumer Culture

December 4, 2023

Exploring Branded Nationalism, Consumer Ethnocentrism and Cultural Imperialism

In order to examine and explain the relationship between nationalism and consumer culture, I created a short animated video presentation for my multimedia project. This video project was a combination of realistic, scrapbook graphics and voiceover explanations with the aim of diving into the history of capitalism and consumerism in Canada and how this history helped shape the Canadian national identity. Furthermore, the presentation utilised 'Roots Canada' as an example of a (somewhat) Canadian business/brand that marketed and sold its products by taking advantage of national identities with the intention of making a profit, a concept known as branded nationalism (Sadhvani, 2023). In this paper, I would like to further explore the topic of Canada's history with capitalism in regard to the effects that branded nationalism has on consumers as well as how cultural imperialism allows for these Western national identities to be sold so easily to non-Western countries.

Branded nationalism is a concept that involves brands marketing/selling their commodities by strategically using icons, symbols, and imagery that represent a country's identity in order to instil feelings of national pride within their consumer (Carstairs, 2006). The idea of branded nationalism was conceptualised by Dr. Catherine Carstairs (2006) in her paper titled "Roots Nationalism: Branding English Canada Cool in the 1980s and 1990s". In this paper, she highlighted the ways in which the history of capitalism in Canada and the marketing strategies implemented by 'Roots Canada' led to the company's growing success over the last 50 years. Moreover, Dr. Carstairs' paper (2006) focused on explaining how Canadian nationalism hasn't faded but has been replaced with a new form of nationalism that is seen in – and communicated by – the commodities being produced in the country since the early 1980s (p. 235).

People are compelled to purchase products that evoke certain feelings of national pride for several reasons. Firstly, social identity theory asserts that individuals have several

“selves” that relate to groups. These connections are so important that we think of ourselves not just as “I,” but also as “we.” In addition, we favour others whom we feel share the same identity—even if that identity is superficial and virtually meaningless (Solomon, 2020, p. 490). As human beings, people have a need to belong to a community, and to have a connection with others. This need for connection and community can leave people susceptible to “exploitation”, often when it comes to advertising and marketing strategies (Bader, 2006, p. 582). When Canadian brands/businesses try to sell products by implying that the commodity will instantly make them feel part of a community, consumers would be more inclined to buy them. As consumers purchase products that are heavily associated with a country’s identity (whether its symbols, imagery or icons), they feel like they belong to that country and community.

Secondly, consumers sometimes prefer to buy products created locally than those from international brands. This is a concept known as ‘consumer ethnocentrism’ (Shimp & Sharma, 1987, p. 280). Individuals from a certain country (called the in-group) hold the belief that commodities embedded with national symbols/icons are superior to those produced or sold in any other country (called the out-group) and become “objects of pride and attachment” (Shimp & Sharma, 1987, p. 280). To some extent, consumer ethnocentrism also includes the fact that some consumers believe that it is immoral to purchase foreign commodities. This is because these consumers believe that by buying locally produced products, they are stimulating and helping the economy by generating income and creating jobs (Belisle, 2011, p. 50). These feelings of superiority and responsibility often encourage consumers to buy commodities associated with a country’s identity and culture. Brands like Roots Canada capitalise on the idea of consumer ethnocentrism by showcasing the ways in which their products are local. For example, Roots has a dedicated section on its website called “*Made in Canada*” to highlight its Toronto factory (*Made in Canada*, n.d.).

Consumer ethnocentrism has been especially prominent in Canada since the late 19th century. Department stores like Eaton's would frequently boast how their businesses were "purely Canadian" with no foreign capital investment and claimed that their practices were beneficial to humankind since they helped develop communities (Belisle, 2011, p. 51). By stating so, department stores were encouraging people to aid the progress and development of their nation through purchasing their commodities. Moreover, in the late 20th century, political powers and nationalists alike were concerned that Canada was becoming too Americanized. Individuals believed that American media and commodities were ruining the country's chance at being its own cultured and stable society (Carstairs, 2005, p. 237). This fear that the settler Canadian people had about losing their culture and heritage to the Americans fueled the desire to support businesses and brands that represented the Canadian image and identity. In turn, Canadian brands would specifically market their products with elements of national identity in order to soothe these anxieties (Belisle, 2011, p. 69).

Having commodities communicate messages of national identity and having products imbued with national pride and belonging relates to the idea of commodity fetishism. Commodity fetishism is a term coined by Karl Marx to describe the idea that goods communicate social relationships between things rather than the relationships between people (Fresco, 2023, slide 14). Commodity fetishism involves the notion that the real producers behind commodities are hidden and only the messages being conveyed by a product – usually about social class – are seen. Additionally, Leiss et al. (2018) explore the idea of commodity fetishism further and states that goods often function as communicators of social status, i.e. goods become communicators of meaning instead of satisfiers of wants (p. 170). For instance, an individual owning an item of clothing with Canadian symbols like a maple leaf or the Canadian flag would convey the idea that they are part of the Canadian community regardless of their nationality. The chapter goes on to point out that the most important aspect

of consumerism is the “interpretation of what satisfaction means” to the consumer (Leiss et al., 2018, p. 170). In the case of branded nationalism, businesses try to advertise their products as if they will satisfy the consumer’s desire to belong. Belisle (2011) points out that department stores capitalised on the people’s desire to belong to a community and their fear of being excluded from society (p. 74). Through newspaper advertisements and their product catalogues, department stores reassured consumers that by owning certain products, they would be able to communicate social status and establish the fact that they belong to a certain community and class – thus, encouraging consumerist tendencies (Belisle, 2011, p. 46).

Using national identity to market commodities has its advantages and disadvantages, especially in a Canadian market. As aforementioned, branded nationalism helps foster community and connection, which means that people are more likely to be inclusive. However, as seen in Dr Donica Belilse’s paper (2011) and the aforementioned multimedia project, branded nationalism historically targeted White Anglophone Canadians (since this group was seen to be the “real Canadians”) and often disregarded other cultures in this melting-pot of a country (Belisle, 2011, p. 64). Indigenous peoples and people of colour were often labelled comical and alien and often used as icons of amusement in advertising as a way to sell commodities (Belisle, 2011, p. 67). On the other hand, using nationalist ideologies in marketing and advertising could create a hostile environment in which people go to extreme lengths to prove that they are more Canadian than others, and to claim superiority over other cultures and peoples. This could include purchasing more commodities to communicate their national pride or branding themselves with national imagery (like tattoos and clothing). Ironically, this “holier than thou” way of thinking seems to align with American culture which is what the above-mentioned Canadian nationalists were afraid would occur with the permeation of American mass media and commodities in the country (Carstairs, 2006, p. 237).

This idea that Canadian culture (or any culture) is superior to all other cultures is related to the concept of cultural imperialism. Cultural imperialism is the idea that the culture of a singular community, country, or institution is better than any other culture and therefore, has an influence over these cultures ('Cultural Imperialism', 2016, p. 690). In a postcolonial world, the term cultural imperialism refers to the fact that Western cultures are still perceived as superior to non-Western ones. Western cultures (like Canada) still assert cultural dominance over others, which leads to Western media and commodities being popular in non-Western cultures. For instance, in the multimedia video project, I explored the idea that Canadian brands like Tim Hortons were excelling in India. Tim Hortons' first Indian location opened in Delhi on August 11th, 2022 and the response from the Indian community was incredibly positive, with lines going out the doors (Short, 2022).

While the exact reason for the branch's opening success is unknown, it is reasonable to explore its connection to cultural imperialism. North American cultures often put themselves on a pedestal in the media which, in turn, influences people in non-Western cultures to believe that those cultures are better. For example, the United States claiming that their "freedom" is something to be envied ('Cultural Imperialism', 2016). Similarly, Indians would believe (to some extent) that Canadian culture is superior to their own (or, at the very least, be curious as to why Canadians think their culture is better). Thus, they are influenced to purchase commodities from a Canadian brand like Tim Hortons in order to feel included in Western cultures. Additionally, Western brands alter parts of their commodities and marketing strategies with the aim of catering to a different culture. They seek to make profits by using non-Western cultural elements to sell Western commodities and brands, which is also known as "McDonaldization" ('Cultural Imperialism', 2016, p. 691). In the example of Tim Hortons, items including pork and beef are excluded (to fit in with religious norms) and items like the Chicken Tikka Croissant are included. The Indian menu for Tim Hortons'

includes 'Maple Dip Donut' and 'Maple Peach Tims Shake', neither of which are currently offered in Canada, however, make reference to the stereotypical 'Maple' imagery associated with Canadian culture (*Tim Hortons | Menu*, n.d.). It is also worth mentioning how Western brands can often change how their commodities are presented to consumers as a way to convince them that the Western culture is better than it actually is. At Tim Hortons India locations, dine-in customers are served food in red, glass plates or wooden platters to give people a sense of luxury (Pasricha, 2022).

In regards to cultural imperialism, Antonio Gramsci, an Italian philosopher and critic, argued that media and culture had such power over people that it could be used to influence workers to “buy into a system that is not economically advantageous to them” (‘Cultural Imperialism’, 2016, p. 691). He describes hegemony of culture as those who can “control” culture and can assert cultural power. With increasing globalisation, Gramsci states that there is a rising likelihood that one culture will dominate all others and possibly overtake local cultures (‘Cultural Imperialism’, 2016). Economically, Western countries are more developed than non-Western ones. Therefore, the cultures of Western countries are rather easily affordable for the people in those countries. For example, Tim Hortons’ branding is formulated in such a way that it allows them to compete with other “premium brands” like Starbucks through high prices (meanwhile Tim Hortons is cheaper than Starbucks in Canada) (*Tim Hortons | Menu*, n.d.). Western cultures are rather expensive for individuals in non-Western countries to be a part of but the media has idolised Western culture so much that people often feel shame when excluded from it.

To conclude, the analysis of the history of capitalism within Canada – in both this paper and the multimedia video presentation – reveals the complex psychological, economical, and cultural relationships that exist between national identity and consumerism. The concepts of branded nationalism and consumer ethnocentrism explain the reasoning

behind consumers experiencing feelings of pride and satisfaction when they buy products that feature symbols, icons, and imagery that relate to a country's national identity. By purchasing commodities that communicate the idea that the consumer belongs to a specific community – in this case, the Canadian community – consumers are able to fulfil their need for community as well as their desire for connection while subduing their fear of being excluded and shunned from a particular culture or society. The relationship between national identity and consumerism within Canada allows for individuals to feel superior to other countries and cultures. This paper further illustrated the implications of these feelings of cultural superiority on a global scale and how it leads to the phenomenon of cultural imperialism through the example of Tim Hortons' branches in India. While this essay has taken a deep dive into the history of consumerism and capitalism in Canada and how nationalistic branding has affected consumers both domestically and globally, it is critical that we think about alternatives, if any exist, that are ethical and culturally sensitive. Ultimately, national identity, connection and community should come from our relationships with people and the country itself, instead of our relationships with material items imbued with messages of pride and satisfaction.

References

- Bader, M. J. (2006). The psychology of patriotism. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 87(8), 582–584. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20442088>
- Belisle, D. (2011). Retail nation: Department stores and the making of modern Canada. *UBC Press*, 58–94.
<https://books.scholarsportal.info/uri/ebooks/ebooks3/upress/2013-08-25/1/9780774819497>
- Carstairs, C. (2006). Roots Nationalism: Branding English Canada Cool in the 1980s and 1990s. *Histoire Sociale*, 39(77), 235–255.
- Cultural Imperialism. (2016). In *Understanding media and culture* (University of Minnesota Publishing Edition, pp. 690–698).
<https://open.lib.umn.edu/mediaandculture/chapter/13-7-cultural-imperialism/>
- Fresco, E. (2023, September 18). *Capitalism, colonialism, and consumption* [Powerpoint slides]. <https://eclass.yorku.ca/mod/resource/view.php?id=2564020>
- Made in Canada*. (n.d.). Roots. <https://www.roots.com/ca/en/made-in-canada.html>
- Leiss, W., Kline, S., Jhally, S., Botterill, J., & Asquith, K. (2018). Goods as Communicators and Satisfiers. In *Social Communication in Advertising* (4th ed., pp. 170–191). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315106021-7>
- Pasricha, P. (2022, August 29). *I tried Tim Hortons' India menu for the first time as a local & this is my honest opinion*.
<https://www.narcity.com/tim-hortons-india-menu-taste-test-honest-opinion>
- Sadhwani, P. (2023, November 12). *The 'Roots' of Canadian capitalism*. [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1E3ukBhD4Pw>

Shimp, T. A., & Sharma, S. (1987). Consumer ethnocentrism: Construction and validation of the CETSCALE. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 24(3), 280–289.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/3151638>

Short, H. (2022, August 11). *India's first Tim Hortons draws massive lines on opening day (Photos) | Dished.*

<https://dailyhive.com/vancouver/tim-hortons-india-opening-day-massive-lines>

Solomon, M. R. (2020). *Consumer behavior: buying, having, and being* (13th ed.).

Pearson.

<https://www.vlebooks.com/vleweb/product/openreader?id=none&isbn=9781292318>

[202](#)

Tim Hortons | menu. (n.d.). <https://timhortonsindia.com/menu-list>