

Brand Heritage

Interview with Fabien Pecot

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Fabien Pecot is a Lecturer in Marketing at the University of York (UK). He joined York after completing his Ph.D. from Aix-Marseille Graduate School of Management IAE in 2016. His research interests focus on brands' representations of the past and more particularly on the concept of brand heritage. Fabien was invited as a visiting scholar at ESPM in February 2020.



IJBMT: Hello, we are here with professor Fabien Pecot; from the University of York, and we are going to talk today about brand heritage. Thank you very much for being here with us

Fabien Pecot: Thank you for inviting me.

IJBMT: It's a pleasure. First of all, I would like you to tell us: what is brand heritage?

FP: Brand heritage is a resource for brand managers, it is a dynamic construct that is made of both the inherited and the borrowed past. This construct is used by managers with a view of reinforcing the brand identity and a view of being transmitted to the next generations. That's quite a lot of things that we can unpack.

First, it's a resource that is available; it means that not all managers would decide to use it. It's a strategic decision to use this resource or not. Then, it's a mix of inherited and borrowed past. It means that you can combine in brand heritage both what you received from previous managers, what you find in your archive, like the figure of the founder of an old factory. That is, the brand inheritance. But there are also things that you can borrow, for example, you would have a trend that was famous back when the company was founded, and you work towards the appropriation of this trend, making it yours. And finally, I think we talk about heritage and not history because it suggests the idea of reinforcing the brand identity and of being transmitted, so it's not just about the past. It is the past with a purpose, it is the past for the benefit of the present and future brand identity.

IJBMT: Interesting. And what is the difference or how is the difference between brand history and brand heritage?

FP: That's a very academic discussion, in my understanding history and heritage are two different ways of looking at the past, of representing it. The past is something that is very strange and very interesting, we cannot ignore the past, but we cannot experience it either. So we face this very strange "animal" that we know is everywhere, and yet we can't see it in first hand. We have to rely on representations.

I understand history to be one representation of the past. One representation of the past that is driven by scientific methods, by the desire of getting to some sort of truth. It is a different question if history can actually get to some kind of truth, but the intention is scientific and is driven by truth. The intention of heritage does not really care about truth, at best it is concerned with believability; the intention behind heritage as a representation of the past is very much about reinforcing the present identity. That's true in marketing, that is true in other disciplines. Now if we apply this to marketing, it means that brand history is something that you would do with a historian, somebody who would go into your archive and try to understand what really happened with your company. Brand heritage is a nicer, more positive sometimes, way of looking at your past. You would only include things that you consider to be positive, that you believe to be able to reinforce the present brand identity, to reinforce your strategy. So, if I take an example, a lot of German brands which existed back in the 30's or in the 40's have done business, more or less actively with the Nazi regime. This is obviously not something that they would like to incorporate into their brand identity today, so I would not say that this is something part of their heritage; however, undoubtedly this is part of their history.

IJBMT: Oh, yes. And when can we talk about corporate heritage branding, and when can we talk about brand heritage?

FP: The difference between the corporate and the product level is very important in the brand heritage studies in marketing. I am myself more involved in research of the product brand



heritage or the heritage branding of the product level. Colleagues and most particularly John Balmer and Mario Burghausen have pioneered and developed research at the corporate level; corporate heritage, corporate heritage identity. Their work looks primarily at the way companies are managed; how the top management, how the marketing management will have this consciousness, this awareness of having heritage, having a special place in the community, having a special place with different stakeholders, having a sense of responsibility. They have conceptualized “stewardship” to designate the managerial mindset that characterizes these corporate heritage brands.

The kind of work I would do alongside colleagues such as Altaf Merchant and Greg Rose would be more on the perception of consumers, how consumers perceive heritage when is manipulated in the marketing mix. For instance, how do consumers perceive the use of the founding date in an advertising or a packaging . To give some examples, the first stream of research on corporate heritage would be interested in the way P&G or LVMH handle the discourse around the heritage and their history, primarily internally and then externally. And we would look at brands like Fairy, or we would look at brands like Don Perignon or Mœt Chandon, and look how they manipulate their brand heritage in the mix, with the view of influencing consumers perception.

IJBMT: And how can we relate brand heritage with legitimacy?

FP: Legitimacy is an important concept, and interestingly there is not a lot of research that has been done in marketing. You would find more research articulating the past, history and legitimacy, in others disciplines, such as in business history, around the concept of rhetorical history, and in sociology as well. I think it as a very interesting concept, because who is responsible and who is legitimate to build a brands heritage?

We said that brand heritage is a construction, so who is going to construct it? And who is going to impose their views on what the heritage of the brand is? Because you can say intuitively, yes that is the brand manager; but why only the brand manager? It could also be a CEO, or it could be people sitting at the board, the owner, the family, previous owners, it could also be the employees, could be suppliers, customers, the stakeholders could have a say. But in the end, I think one view tend to prevail, and it will depend on the legitimacy of this person; or this group of people.

IJBMT: And what about authenticity and heritage?

FP: For me, brand heritage is a resource used in the marketing mix, and this resource tends to influence the perception of authenticity, of the brand being authentic. And more than that, talking about authenticity also relates to questions of credibility. I have done some work on the cognitive outcomes of brand heritage, and you will find that emphasizing on the heritage of the brand in the marketing mix, in the logo, or in adverts tends to increase perception of the brand being more credible, being more reliable, being more authentic, being of better quality. Brand heritage in that sense would be an antecedent of perception of authenticity, credibility and quality.

IJBMT: And legitimacy as well?

FP: I would say that legitimacy is a question that we would put when we study the construction of the brand heritage internally rather than consumers perception.

IJBMT: Oh, I see. And nostalgia would enter in this concept?

FP: It is very interesting that you ask this question about nostalgia. Because I consider nostalgia to be a consequence of seeing brand heritage signals or brand heritage stimuli; but unlike authenticity, it is not a cognitive reaction, it would be a rather affective one, an affective response to brand heritage. So you have known the brand for a long time, and you haven't used it for a while, and then you see a packaging that has not changed (that is a decision to maintain the brand heritage visible), this pack really looks like the one when you were a kid, that would trigger feelings of nostalgia, and it would probably reinforce the attachment and the relation that you have with this brand.

IJBMT: When should we use brand heritage? If I was a manager?

FP: As in many other cases, the baseline answer is: it really depends. But I am going to try to tell you what the latest research tells us. I think one concept that is very important when using brand heritage is the familiarity that consumers have with your brand. I think there are two main scenarios that we can talk about.

The first one is people know the brand, you are in this situation of high familiarity; I think you can use brand heritage in this case to reinforce the hedonic perception of the brand. Because you are likely to trigger more nostalgia, you are more likely to generate attachment and reminding this connection you have with this group of consumers.

Then, there is a second reason you might want to use brand heritage: that would be the scenario where you are not known. Let's say you are exporting to another country; in this case, you might want to use heritage to establish the credibility of your brand. Compensating the lack of information, the lack of knowledge people have about the brand. I will take an example; I have found in Brazil the brand Granado. And I believe Granado is using heritage in Brazil to reinforce the connection with Brazilian consumers. But if Granado was to export in France or Europe, for example, it could use its heritage to establish the credibility as a legitimate competitor to other more established brands.

IJBMT: And how can we emphasize the brand heritage?

FP: I would say this is a frontier now in terms of research. We know about the effects, and we are looking more into how we use it. So far we know about different cues, the most obvious one is the founding date; you know, the "since 1840" on the packaging or logo and adverts.

That is the obvious cue, and we have some research on recently by Pizzi and Scarpi , in Italy. They found that the founding date is a reliable predictor of brand heritage. So, the founding date is a reliable predictor; using it is a good way on emphasizing brand heritage. But there are so many other ways of doing it. And in the paper I published with Altaf Merchant, Pierre Valette-Florence and Virginie de Barnier in Journal of Business Research in 2018, we did not manipulate the date, but graphic design elements: using the handwritten signature, for example, using a certain font, or using images of the headquarters. And we found that all of these will influence the perceived heritage of an otherwise unknown brand. More research is needed in these graphic elements, but I would say you have dates, we also have keywords from generation to generation etc., and then you have graphic designs and visual elements.

IJBMT: Thank you very much, it really was a pleasure to have you here talking about brand heritage.

FP: Thank you very much.



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