Integrating Meanings of Ethnic Identity, Authenticity and Celebrity Endorsement to Establish Strong Fashion Brands

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Abstract

Brand identity, authenticity and quality foster consumer loyalty and may also sustain an ethnic culture, especially for countries of low popularity and in a financial crisis. However, their perceived meanings were not studied in correlation by existing literature, and so this paper proposes a new meaning: the ethnic brand identity which relies on authenticity. A grounded theory approach was chosen to interpret the conducted interviews with fashion designers, marketing managers and retailers to provide fresh insights about brand building and brand communication. Based on the findings of the current study, the ethnic brand identity is translated into traditional garments, uniqueness, positive emotions and authenticity. Producers and retailers of ethnic fashion products perceive it to be of high-quality production standards, traditional and regional production methods and folklore designing inspiration. The above aspects enforce consumer awareness and emotional engagement with the brand as long as they are adequately communicated, like through celebrity endorsement. Consumer awareness and loyalty can be achieved if designers communicate to the audience that they: collaborate with artisans, are helping local communities, produce fashion lines of high-quality and which are authentic ethnic brands.

Key Words: ethnic brand identity; ethnic fashion; brand identity; authenticity; brand communication; social media; celebrity endorsement

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1. Introduction

Ethnic fashion brands carry symbolic meanings and can be part of an ethnic heritage and culture. Ethnic identity for a fashion brand is when a fashion item has a cultural pattern or is made by an ancient artistic technique, which position it as unique in the global economy (Lee, 2016; Pop, 2016). While fashion has social and cultural meanings (Warner, 2013), celebrity endorsement is a tool used by marketers to positively affect consumer perceptions by attracting their attention to brands, or by increasing consumer awareness and purchase intention (Hsu & McDonald, 2002; Seno & Lukas, 2007). Celebrities are an effective tool as they can alter attitudes and behaviours and triumph over cultural and language limitations (Erdogan, 1999; Warner, 2013). By using social media for fashion brands, five positive meanings are constructed and established for the consumers: entertainment, interaction, trendiness, customisation and word of mouth, and so the brand is distinguished from others (Kim & Ko, 2012).

The current study therefore explores for the first time the building of a strong brand identity for products with an ethnic background and proposes the most efficient communication method for these fashion brands. This was necessary as ethnic brand communication through celebrity endorsement has not been studied within an ethnic identity context, particularly for a country which is facing low trust by other nations and a financial crisis. Consequently, the objectives of the current paper are to propose a new definition: the ethnic brand identity and also to propose to practitioners an effective way of positioning a new fashion brand as authentic and to be successfully communicated in competitive markets. In light of these objectives, this article explores whether fashion brands could be benefited if they are linked with an ethnic heritage and a celebrity endorser.

2. Literature Review

Identity relies on perceptions of who we think we are and which social groups we believe we belong to (Schermuly and Forbes-Mewett, 2016). Therefore, individuals construct and maintain their own identities, the way they see themselves, in relation to the group (Islam, 2014). Identity is also enhanced and expressed via consumption. Fashion brands disclose self-identity and self-concept, whereby they can set the foundations for building a group membership (Evans, 1989; Carroll, 2008), while consumers can express themselves to other members of the group through fashion and its symbols (Evans, 1989). For this reason, the clothing brands need to have a clear identity to differentiate them from other brands and sustain consumers for the functional benefits and emotional reasons (Fionda and Moore, 2009). With regards to clothes, one reason for wearing a certain brand could be to enforce the sense of belonging to certain social groups, and so the clothing will be recognized by other group members or other members of the social group will be wearing it as well (Ross and Harradine,
In other words, fashion brands are high-involved products which can be a means of cultivating and projecting self-image, social status and identities (O’Cass, 2004).

Ethnic identity is about the mutual element of a social group of people who share common historical background, ancestry, language and other symbolic aspects such as religion or nationality (Chattaraman & Lennon, 2008). However, ethnic identity cannot be found in nature as it is a cultural moral production and part of the social sustainable pillar (Barnard, 2007b; Bolis et al., 2014). A cloth with an ethnic identity can be an apparel with historic motifs of a social group, it can be traditional elements that signify a cultural heritage and disclose an ethnic identity (Eicher & Sumberg, 1995; Forney & Rabolt, 1986). Ethnic clothes therefore, set a bridge between the present and ancestral past of the consumers and provide a highly distinctive and symbolic style as a statement of ethnic pride (Henare, 2005; Wilson, 2007). An ethnic identity can set a good fashion brand story and a culturally rich retail environment that creates positive correlations to consumers resulting to engage them with the brand and so to increase consumers’ purchase intention (Chiu et al., 2012). However, this good brand story has to be communicated effectively to the audience.

A celebrity endorser is a public figure who promotes a particular brand in an advertisement or on social media, in order for the brand to gain consumer awareness and loyalty (Carroll, 2008; Hung, 2014). Celebrity endorsement is a global tool which has increased in power over the years (Onkvisit and Shaw, 1999; Boyed and Shank, 2004; Paek, 2005), due to the positive influence on consumers’ awareness, purchase intentions, brand recall and evaluation (Hsu and McDonald, 2002; Fionda and Moore, 2009). Celebrities act as powerful, influential forces of self-identity and aid the communication of brand identity to consumers (Carroll, 2008). Actually, consumers tend to compare themselves with out-group members, such as celebrities, by relating positive dimensions in order to enhance their identity and status (Haslam, 2004). On top, celebrity endorsement can be applied to attract consumers’ attention and create brand equity (Till, 1998). These meanings are constructed because celebrities carry symbolic meanings for brands and, therefore, cultural aspects are transmitted from a celebrity figure to a product or service (McCracken, 1989; Erdogan, 1999; Roy et al., 2012; Warner, 2013). In general, aside from credibility, consumers’ positive reactions towards celebrity endorsements are affected by certain characteristics of celebrities, such as trustworthiness, perceived expertise and attractiveness (Byrne et al., 2003; Henneberg and Chen, 2008; Mishra and Mishra, 2014). Consumers tend to believe that celebrities themselves like the product they are promoting, leaving aside the fact that it might be a paid endorsement (Freiden, 1984; Silvera and Austad, 2004).
3. Methodology

3.1 Research Questions

The purpose of this paper is to propose a definition of ethnic brand identity, to suggest how new fashion brands can establish their identity and also how these brands can be successfully introduced and communicated in competitive markets resulting to increase consumer awareness and emotional engagement with the brand.

3.2 Data

The phenomenon of celebrity endorsement for ethnic fashion brands has not been explored before and so a qualitative approach is proposed due to its exploratory nature (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2012). Qualitative research is able to explore identity aspects and the brand communication holistically, by investigating the social realities of each designer and celebrity endorser (Kerrigan & Hart, 2016). Data collection involved semi-structured interviews with fashion designers of Greek ethnicity or their retailers, such as museums and other cultural spots. Theoretical saturation was achieved after n=4 interviews with designers, n=2 interviews with marketing managers of luxury ethnic fashion brand and n=2 interviews with museums and foundations. The first author conducted all interviews, which were audio-recorded and transcribed. Data collection acquired during the summer of 2015, when capital controls had commenced in Greece. Permission for recording was sought before the start of each interview (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

4. Results and Discussion

A fashion brand can be successfully introduced to the market if it holds and illustrates an ethnic concept. Apart from that, having high aesthetics is also beneficial. If a brand is not just about aesthetics and design then consumers are also attracted by the story behind it. The brand therefore, would engage the consumers by providing them experiential memories as they will feel part of the story. Their identity will be expressed and reflected through this certain fashion brand choice.

“… the brand had a strong and very clear concept, which is why it was successful from the start... the concept which is Greek inspired sandals worked in our favour because it had an identity, it was not just sandals. Not just beautiful sandals, there was a story behind it…” (Female, Greek designer, Greece)

Apart from having a clear and explicit ethnic identity, fashion brands should also sustain their ethnic identity. A permanent ethnic identity is capable to position a fashion brand among others in the market.

“... I have the opinion that the distinction of a brand is very important and this has to be followed all the time... We created something so unique that can stand out of the rest in the market... ” (Male, Greek designer-fashion icon, Greece)
The positioning of a fashion brand among others in the global competitive market can be achieved if its uniqueness is highlighted and also if the brand is made of high quality raw materials from the country of origin.

“...what we are offering is quality... Most of our items are hundred percent (100%) silk. We have unique texture silk, which is our trademark. It cannot be seen elsewhere in the world... it’s so unique and sells because it is so different to the rest. Each of the products has much attention to detail…” (Female, Greek fashion blogger and marketing manager, Greece)

Authenticity of fashion brands with an ethnic identity is about having the country of origin as an inspiration and also high quality standards of production.

“... When I was young at school they were taking us to archaeological sites, which I loved, the museums also we had many classes about mythology... It was Greek sandals, inspired by ancient Greece with high quality and the design was commercial and feminine....” (Female, Greek designer, Greece)

“... a creator is influenced by one of our Greek ethnic items and they create by inspiration. By these, we have a wide range: the replicas of the classical items you expect to see in a museum and the modern ones, the inspired ones. Both are selling quite well...” (B. museum)

Authenticity relies also on traditional production methods for the fashion brands. Designers feel they should protect their ancestors’ production methods and sustain them through the years.

“... I love the Greek history and our civilisation and I like also our traditions, I love all the materials and techniques which we used to use...” (Female, Greek designer, Greece)

Apart from these aspects, choosing colours of the national flag has been perceived by designers as an element of authenticity for their brand. Since flags have always been depicting a certain national origin then, using a flag’s colours instantly transmits the message to the target audience that the brand originates from a certain country and so, its ethnic character is highlighted. As a flag can distinct a country from another one then, a brand can be distinctive among others.

“... we use the colours of our flag: blue and white... it had a very clear message that it was for commercial reasons... what we try to do with the T-shirt was to have a very clear and Greek modern image... We capitalised on the blue and white stripes, which was a trademark both for Melina and for Jean Paul Gaultier...” (M. foundation)

Finally, authenticity for ethnic fashion brands is about producing the brands in the country of origin. This way, designers feel that their products contain the ethnic character they would like to give to their brand and that they are supporting the local economy. Producing also in their country of origin means for the designers that they respect the tradition, the culture and the customs of their country. Authenticity and ethnic identity therefore relies also on Marketing and in particular on one of the Ps, the product. Designers chose to name their fashion products
after regions of the country of origin in order to highlight their ethnic character and increase the brand’s profitability.

“…we keep the Greek details, traditional wear and influences from different regions. Our products are linked with culture and are handmade… each product has been named after Greek regions, because we have been inspired by these regions to create the pattern… naming our products of Greek places it is a smart move, a marketing tool… So, everything is unique… a lot of handmade and ethical work… we could go to China to produce our jewellery or to other markets to have mass production but for us it’s about keeping it in house…” (Female, Greek fashion blogger and marketing manager, Greece)

Fashion brands apart from having a clear and solid ethnic brand identity need to communicate this identity to the targeted audience. In order to do so, designers have chosen the celebrity endorsement communication method. In addition, there has to be a “match” between the celebrity’s and product’s identity, as the celebrity itself has to like the product in order to promote it and to feel that there is an actual connection between the product and himself/herself.

According to the designers who have collaborated in the past with international celebrities, celebrities choose the fashion brands which they like to wear according to their taste and then make posts on social media.

“… you talk to their stylist and they always come back and ask for more. You know, we have seen them wearing them, so they really like them…” (Female, Greek designer, Greece)

“… the only way is if someone likes something and feels like wearing it and feels like posting it…” (Female, Greek designer, Greece)

In some cases celebrities are willing to help the introduction of a new fashion brand to the audience if this brand has a cultural heritage and an ethnic background as they feel that they are promoting and sustaining a cultural heritage.

“… they do it because they would like to help, they might like the product as well. I don't believe that if they didn’t like it they would do it, because they ask ‘what is this about?’…” (Female, Greek designer, Greece)

New designers who established recently a brand cannot always afford to pay for celebrity endorsement. If that is the case then, they rely on the aesthetics and the high quality of their ethnic fashion brand in order to be worn and communicated by celebrities.

“… I just sent a goody bag... because when I see someone wearing it, I know that he likes it, because he didn't have to be paid for…” (Female, Greek designer, Greece)

To sum up, the procedures of communicating a fashion brand of ethnic identity and gaining consumer awareness can be facilitated if the brand holds a stable and explicit ethnic brand identity which will be transmitted to the audience through celebrities and social media channels. The current paper proposes a definition for ethnic brand identity concerning fashion brands and
how this identity would introduce a new fashion brand and increase consumer awareness in the competitive global market.

Ethnic brand identity is perceived as a meaning which is structured upon traditional garments and accessories, uniqueness, positive emotions and authenticity. This identity has been explored in a certain ethnic context as existing research proposes that more ethnic identities should be studied (Evans, 1989; Moore & Birtwistle, 2004; Paek, 2005). With regard to authenticity, its meaning relies on high quality standards of the raw materials and production methods, on traditional production methods, the country of origin to be the inspiration for creating the fashion line, the production to be in the country of origin, the product’s colours to resemble the national flag’s colours, ethically sourced raw materials, well-fare production methods and also to name the products in the origin’s language.

However, this positive result could be gained promptly and straightforwardly if an integration of communication tools were applied, such as celebrity endorsement. Existing literature has been limited to research on celebrity endorsement within advertisements and not social media, especially regarding the influence of ethnic identity on fashion products, which has been ignored (Carroll, 2008). This paper explores the effect of celebrity endorsement on ethnic fashion brands whose country of origin is in a disadvantageous position due to its bad reputation. Celebrity endorsement has been studied for its potential ability to alter perceptions and stereotypes, either for the brand itself or for the country of origin. Celebrities carry meanings which are conveyed to brands and as a result affect consumers to construct meanings (McCracken, 1989; Roy et al., 2012; Warner, 2013). In Greece’s case, this involves gaining the support of consumers to alter the negative reputation of Greece in recent years, which has been caused by the European financial crisis. However, this procedure should not rely only on consumers, but on producers as well: the fashion designers and their retailers.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Some issues seem worthy of future inquiry, such as a long-term investigation or a more extensive study of additional brands and designers. A fruitful direction might be to carry out long-term research on the influence of ethnic fashion brands on Greece’s reputation. As the financial crisis is a situation which lasts for years, a study would need to take place over a long-term period. The effect of the fashion industry and celebrity endorsement would also be valuable to explore if the influence on the country is investigated over a long-term basis. Researchers could adopt a quantitative approach in doing so, as qualitative methods have been applied in this paper.

The study provides the first contribution to knowledge in this area, from which more brands, more designers and more distributors could provide further insight into the meanings of ethnic fashion brands and the influence of celebrity endorsement upon them.
References


