

Report

Ringing the changes: the Royal Wedding and Britishness

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Scope

How has the sound of Royal Wedding bells affected perceptions of Britishness? Following on from his semiotic analysis of London 2012, Alex Gordon deconstructs the signifiers behind Wills and Kate's special day – and what they might mean for brands.

Why the Wedding, beyond the obvious consumer and media interest?

There are separate events that raised my interest in the topic. These have been prompted by the excitement around the upcoming Olympics, but the Royal Wedding coincided with the closure of the Olympics ticket lottery, the referendum on the voting system & the Scottish election, both of which could have led to a change in the British constitution. Although they're not necessarily connected I think taken collectively they're representative of a general inquiry into a changing Britain and what Britishness means.

All three events signal a rising debate about the need to create a more open and fairer Britain. Even though the AV was rejected, it signalled a public & political desire was a discussion about the meaning of choice and fairness in British culture.

Media and public discourse of the Royal Wedding was centrally about William and Kate's normality, how 'like us' they seem to be. The event was less about the Royal Family and the wedding, and more about Britain's 'fairness', 'sharedness' and 'aliveness'. The excitement of the crowd was as much about a relief that this is what Britishness might be, as it was about the spectacle of the day.

There are a number of people looking at what 'Britishness' means in the second decade of the 21st century and I think the timing of all these events is relevant. We've also come off the back of a series of semiotics projects looking at different emerging aspects of British society & culture. In general it is clear that as a nation, we've moved on from the uncertainties of the fin de siècle. We're no longer caught in the flux of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, there is now a greater attempt to settle the definitions of Britishness for the rest of the century. As those definitions gain acceptance & momentum, brands are going to have to respond accordingly.

Could you go into some of the signifiers of the Royal Wedding or of Prince William that represent emerging values of Britishness?

The first thing is the stage-managed look. William inherited a look from his father and changed it. He walks around with an open-necked shirt and rolled up sleeves, whereas we see Prince Charles wearing a buttoned-up shirt, a tie and a double-breasted blazer - clothes which create a barrier to the wearer, and signify a formal distance and closedness. These are very traditional British symbols. The fact that William dispenses with this formality and 'opens up' his shirt signals that he's open and accessible, not a repressed aristocratic apparatchik.

This can also be seen with Daniel Craig – another British icon - who transformed a suited and booted James Bond into a more open and casual version. One of the striking things about his character – certainly in *Casino Royale* - is that he's much freer to express his emotions towards the woman he loves. Bond never did that, ever. He was always repressed and formally detached. Both with William and Craig's Bond we see a new British male - open, expressive, accessible and informal.

The rolled-up sleeve is a classic dramatic device which was famously used by Argentine leader Juan Peron – who was actually a middle class man who wore suits, but rolled up the sleeves to go out among the people and redefine his role as a champion of the working man. William's rolled-up sleeve signifies that he's hardworking, not a member of the leisure class, the 'people's prince'. This is crucial at a time when the nation is in economic adversity.

In a sense he's signaling a change in the idea of Britishness. We can no longer count on our historical place on the world stage, and we have to keep working hard to ensure that we're still international players.

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quality and sophistication, rather than elitism, in addition to openness and informality."

Are there other elements that communicate this sense of changing, more egalitarian Britishness?

I think this has also come through with the Olympic games, the fact that tickets are available to everybody and that they are being distributed via lottery, rather than on a first-come-first-served basis, connotes that we are all entitled to participate in it.

Another brilliant piece of stage management was driving Kate back to the hotel in an Aston Martin after the afternoon reception. What's brilliant is that, one, he wasn't being driven, and secondly it was his dad's car – and it's quite common for people's first car to be their parents'. If it had been his own car it would have been problematic, however because it would have signaled the monarchy as a wealthy leisure class, but instead enabled them to code William as an 'ordinary bloke' borrowing a nice car to drive his wife in.

Aston Martin is a classic British brand. This act of driving a classic British car, along with his rolled up shirt sleeves, simultaneously represents Britain as based upon global awareness, expertise, high quality and sophistication, rather than elitism, in addition to openness and informality. Particularly as Britain is an island, and so physically closed off – these latter elements are increasingly important on the global stage. William as a signifier of an open accessible Britain, connected to the rest of the world not aloof and superior to it, re-defining its difference and uniqueness in terms of style, expertise & quality not heritage and detached authority.

It's an image that brands, especially luxury brands, are going to have to adjust to. Aston Martin has had two very different appearances in representing 'Brand Britain': Prince William and Daniel Craig's James Bond.

There is a danger, however. The more royalty become like us and have normal jobs, the less royalty becomes relevant. The public approval of the Royal Wedding signified William & Kate being 'elected' as future heads of state. In this 'royal republic' William (with rolled up sleeves, borrowed car, open-necked shirt, and easy-going accessible personality) has come to represent the kind of person that the British public would have voted for as head of state had there been such an election.

This is a reinvention which suggests that Britain can become a modern state without having to transform itself into a republic. It can hold on to traditions of the past but not be weighed down by them. It can transform ideas of authority into ideas of expertise and quality, all of which are important both in terms of manufacturing and in terms of brand positioning.

I think that all of these events come together to create a representation of Britishness that brands are going to have to access and engage with if they want to leverage Britishness as a relevant and beneficial element of their brand identity - rather than repeating outdated clichés.

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