Royalty: Marketplace Icons

*Consumption, Markets & Culture*

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Abstract:

The term “royalty” connotes people who either occupy the role of monarchs in society, or who are related to these figures by blood or marriage. Although many royal houses around the world occupy a symbolic/ceremonial rather than a political role, royalty (and the “human brands” royal families contain) remain important sources of aspirational and conspicuous consumption. In this essay, we focus on how the British Royal Family Brand (BRFB; Otnes and Maclaran 2015) has remained the most visible and impactful royal variant in the world, even as its economic and political influence, and that of Britain, has waned. We discuss the influence of the BRFB in fueling consumption practices pertaining to commemorative purchasing and collecting, heritage management, perpetuating mass and social media narratives, supporting and perpetuating brands, and spawning and maintaining touristic trends. We observe that successful royal influence is due in part to the ability to leverage key universal narratives (e.g., the triumph of the underdog) and to tap into consumers’ desires to vicariously or actively engage with lifestyles typically accessible only to people who occupy the highest social stratum in their respective cultures. We discuss the implications of royalty on consumer culture, and suggest areas of future research.

Keywords: royalty, monarchy, brand, consumer culture, ritual, shopping, commemoratives

Royalty: marketplace icon

The term “royalty” connotes people who either occupy the role of monarchs in society, or who are related to these figures by blood or marriage. The most immediate kinship circle surrounding a monarch, often made visible through media (and increasingly, social-media) depictions of cultural rituals and ambassadorial events, is typically referred to as the “royal family” of a particular nation (e.g., “the Swedish royal family”). Many of the world’s monarchs have amassed great wealth; the King of Thailand is worth $30 billion, and the Sultan of Brunei $20 billion, with rulers of other Arab nations dominating the list of richest royals (Linshi, 2015).

In this essay, we focus primarily on the continued influence of the British royal family – or what we term elsewhere as the British Royal Family Brand (BRFB; Otnes and Maclaran, 2015). We are not the first scholars to conceptualize monarchy within the sphere of the branding discourse. Indeed, the corporate-management scholar John Balmer and his colleagues have pursued a rigorous stream of research that explicates the salience of conceptualizing monarchy as a brand. For example, they describe how “the Crown” (a term they use to apply to monarchy in general, although their research context is the Swedish monarchy) can be understood as a corporate brand that must consistently maintain and rejuvenate several essential elements in order to remain viable. The first of their “five Rs” that they articulate as core elements of the brand, “royal,” is by nature inherent, and therefore does not need to be managed. However, the authors argue that four others – regal, relevant, responsive, and respected – must be carefully attended to in order for a monarchy to remain popular and strategically viable – in other words, to survive (Balmer, Greyser, and Urde, 2006).

We build upon the work by Balmer and colleagues by arguing that instead of adopting an internal, brand-management focus, that the external influence and co-creation of monarchy-as-brands has been overlooked, but is clearly important for scholars interested in the consumer-culture implications of royalty. Furthermore, by adopting a lens that focuses primarily on the BRFB, we mean to highlight the most extreme case of how royalty can pervade global consumer culture. In so doing, however, we do not mean to imply the consumer-oriented activities, rituals, and tastes of other royals around the globe do not prove compelling to their citizenry, or to others around the globe. Royal weddings are a prime example: the 2011 royal wedding in Bhutan (with its total population of 700,000) featured traditional silk gowns that took months to create, spurred a two-day national holiday, and was the largest-ever media event for a nation that had only legalized television in 1999 (Williams, 2011). Of course, this coverage paled in comparison to the weeks-long media frenzies building up to the royal wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton in London’s Westminster Abbey. Estimated to have been watched by over two billion people around the world, it also was attributed to contributing £2 billion to the UK economy, even as its status as a bank holiday was purported to hurt British businesses (Wood 2011).

The wealth of the BRFB is assessed at a comparatively paltry $500 million, and its political clout has dissipated, replaced by a monarchy that essentially performs symbolic and ceremonial functions, Nevertheless, the British royal family continues to enjoy global, commercial, and consumer-cultural dominance. Its status is due to many factors, including its ability to boast of a continuous (but admittedly non-linear) dynastic bloodline of almost 1000 years, a strong support system in the form of the British aristocracy, Britain’s status as a premier world power well into the 20th century, and the economic and emotional ties of 53 former colonies of the British Empire through their continued membership in the British Commonwealth. Furthermore, one of the most resilient pillars that bolsters the BRFB is Anglophilia, especially that stemming from America (but also, increasingly from other nations that venerate heritage and conspicuous consumption, such as China).

Among other benefits of having access to Commonwealth members, the British royal family have made many goodwill trips (or “royal tours”) to its member states, which fuels media coverage of the often luxurious, exotic, or historically important events and destinations within the itineraries. From 1953-1997 the royal family relied on the *HMY Britannia* to transport them on many of their royal tours around the world. Consumer interest in the ship became readily apparent when it was decommissioned and renovated as a tourist attraction in Edinburgh’s Port of Leith. Since its opening in 1998, it has seen over 4 million visitors, and has been ranked the top tourist attraction in Scotland for ten years (“Royal Yacht Britannia, 2016”).

Recent trips by the Queen’s grandchildren also have broadened the appeal of the royal family, by turning the focus to the somewhat unpredictable “young royals” specifically (e.g., Prince Harry) or the “young royals in love” (e.g., William and Catherine, the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge), in areas such as Australia where pro-republican opinions often flare up. Tying the monarchy to global discourses that stem from universal forms of narrative like the fairy-tale genre (and the underdog romances and ultimate happy endings therein) not only helps fuel consumer interest and participation in the monarchy, but also in the firms and institutions that proactively perpetuate “prince and princessing” as well, such as the Disney corporation. Of course, the British royal family is not the only monarchy to capitalize on underdog-meets-prince (or princess) narratives. Recent variations on these narrative are also decidedly contemporized – as when Sweden’s Princess Victoria married her personal trainer, or when a commoner met Prince Frederik of Denmark in a pub in her native Australia, and married him and became Crown Princess Mary three years later.

Until the 19th century, when monarchies were the most popular political systems, authoritarian power typically rested with one (or perhaps two) rulers. With the spread of republicanism and the dissipation of power across governing bodies, only a few autocratic monarchies remain, and like the BRFB, many of those that remain (notably in Europe and Japan) exist as symbolic ceremonial institutions. These function primarily to reaffirm national values and to remind nations of their former glories. But of equal relevance to global royal-watchers is the fact that members of monarchic clans now serve as aspirational consumption symbols. Below, we highlight several important functions that royalty fulfills in the contemporary global marketplace.

First, royals – and specifically, their consumption practices – often serve as sources of emulation, even (or perhaps especially) for other monarchs. Mazrui (1967, p. 238) notes about the then-monarchies of many of the African nations in the 1960s that “the myth of [British] imperial splendor came to be so intimately connected with the myth of royalty that the link was conceptually inherited by the Africans themselves.” As a result, these monarchs strove to imitate the practices of the British monarchs – building sumptuous castles, staging of elaborate public rituals, and engaging in ostentatious consumption of coveted luxury brands.

Furthermore, the consumption discourses and practices supported by the world’s royalty still fascinate many people occupying all levels of sociocultural hierarchies. In 1981, for instance, when Lady Diana Spencer married Prince Charles, she chose a voluminous wedding gown with 275 yards of taffeta, tulle, and netting, a bodice and skirt bedecked with 10,000 mother-of-pearl sequins and pearls, and a 25-foot train (a record, even for a royal wedding gown). Broadcast to over 750 million people around the world, the event was credited with single-handedly reviving the moribund wedding industry. In many western countries, it had been stagnating due to a preference for simpler ceremonies traceable to the more bohemian tendencies of the “hippy generation,” and to a worldwide recession dating from the oil crisis of the mid-1970s (Otnes and Pleck, 2003). Diana’s fairy-tale wedding reinvigorated discourses around these events that likened them to a woman’s one day to be a princess, complete with the overwhelming gown, sacred venue, elaborate entourage, and other luxurious elements such as singular food, beverages, and décor.

Of course, Diana’s impact on consumption practices did not end there – for many, she proved to be a constant source of emulation (from a hairstyle rated one of the most iconic of all time to her couture-fashion sense) and admiration (for her charity work, her mothering skills, and the perception that she tried to persevere in a doomed marriage). Not surprisingly, many of Diana’s biggest followers were women, as is true of royal fandom in general. A former editor of a royal magazine informed us that he moved his entire shipping and handling operations for the magazine to Minnesota, because Diana fandom was most rampant among middle-class women in the American Midwest. However, Diana also attracted a huge following among gay men, no doubt spurred by her support of AIDS charities. Diana’s her childhood home of Althorp, also her burial site, serves as a touristic shrine to her. Tapping into consumers’ desire to immerse themselves in the mystique of monarchy-related phenomena, Diana’s brother Earl Spencer recently embarked upon a restoration of the gardens and grounds at the estate, including the island upon which Diana was laid to rest. He also opened the home for overnight guests in 2016; with some of the proceeds going to charity, he offered smaller rooms for $25,000 and “premium” rooms for $40,000 for a weekend stay (Agnew, 2016).

The proliferation of social media has made royal-emulative practices not only more visible, but more measurable as well. Consider that at just four months old, Princess Charlotte, the newest member of the BRFB, was credited with encouraging consumers to spend $5 billion on products associated with her layette, such as her swaddle blanket, cardigans, and other clothes glimpsed via media coverage (Kottasova, 2015). The “Charlotte effect” comes hot on the heels of the simultaneously salient “Prince George effect,” the “Kate effect,” and so on – a now taken-for-granted consequence for manufacturers (many of whom are overwhelmed by newfound demand for their products) who find their products featured in photos of the royals at work and play.

Highly cognizant that their roles now revolve more around brand ambassadorship than political diplomacy, BRFB members often highlight brands stemming from their own country, or from those they may be visiting. During William and Catherine’s 2016 visit to India and Bhutan, her wardrobe included items by favored British designers such as Alexander McQueen, as well as Indian designers based in London and Mumbai. As has been her custom since marrying into the royal family, Catherine has further democratized the ability of consumers to imitate some of her sartorial choices; on that trip, she sported a dress by the British High Street retail chain TopShop, and is also known for recycling mainstays in her wardrobe over many years.

Of course, the royals’ ability to fuel emulative consumption practices is not limited to clothes. In fact, sometimes their lifestyle choices even spawn broader cultural changes. Both Prince William and Prince Harry spurred global interest and participation in the practice of taking a “gap year” between high school and college (or after college; Lyons et al., 2012). The young princes’ decisions, as well as those of other members of the British aristocracy, has helped disrupt students’ traditional direct paths from high school to college in many countries. It also fuels desires for global travel and consumption experiences among the youth culture.

In truth, aristocrats (especially those actually residing at court) have engaged in such emulative practices for hundreds of years. Historically, monarchs often dictated what types of clothes and accessories courtiers could wear (or not wear; sumptuary laws prohibited the aristocracy from wearing certain colors and fabrics and restricting their use to royal families; Phillips 2007). In what may be one of the earliest examples of “human branding,” (Thomson, 2006) Elizabeth I encouraged her courtiers to wear cameo brooches that depicted her image (Sharpe, 2009). Likewise, Queen Victoria dictated the types of mourning crepe and the jet jewelry her ladies-in-waiting would wear, and the length of time they would dress in mourning, after the death of her husband Prince Albert in 1861 (Munich, 1996).

Notably, touristic practices such as spa and seaside holidays owe much of their popularity to emulation by the upper classes (and consequently, the middle classes, as cheaper forms of transportation became available) of royal vacation trends. The origin of spa holidays is traceable to the desire of the German royal family to seek respite in soothing waters, and this idea quickly became popular among most European royal families, and especially their British counterparts (although spas originated with ancient monarchs—specifically Roman emperors; Sigaux and White, 1966).

For many consumers, following the loves, lives, and luxuries associated with royal families serves as a pleasurable pastime. People can engage in a range of royal-related consumer practices from the inexpensive (e.g., collecting royalty-laden postage stamps that originate in Britain and the various Commonwealth states) to the highly luxurious (e.g., since Charles I’s reign in the 17th century, purchasing royal commemoratives created by venerated British pottery manufacturers including Wedgwood, Minton or Crown Derby; purchasing gowns worn by Princess Diana or jewelry given to Wallis Simpson by Edward VIII at auction), and from the sublime (a “Windsor Castle” package weekend at a luxury hotel) to the ridiculous (a miniature Queen whose signature purse is a solar battery that enables constant waving at her “subjects”).

This last category reveals the BRBF’s tolerance at being the target of a joke, in line with Britain’s cultural valorization and successful exportation of its various cultural forms of humor (Fox, 2005). The Queen’s most famous moment of the 21st century may in fact be her appearance in a skit for the opening ceremony of the 2012 Olympics. After she (and her famed corgis, a dog breed that surged in popularity once royal ownership became known) appeared in a cameo at Buckingham Palace with Daniel Craig playing the iconic James Bond, “she” (actually a stuntwoman) parachuted into Olympic Stadium with a Bond double, while the actual Queen enjoyed the moment with the other attendees. Indeed, among royal families the BRFB is unique in its willingness not only to serve as the butt of its own jokes (e.g., Prince Charles’s recent appearance delivering the weather forecast on television during a news program) but in accommodating a wide range of humor from external sources, ranging from gentle ribbing to satire. Compared to the most extreme counterexample, in Thailand, subjects can be jailed for violating “lèse majesté” – the law that prohibits people from speaking out against the monarchy. Streckfuss (1995; 449, 453) observes the rule is in place to prevent the erosion of “sacred national identity” and the “violation of royal dignity.” Imagine, then, what the punishment would have been for the journalists working for the British tabloid The Daily Mail, who ran a photo of Princess Anne falling off of her horse with the headline “Bottoms Up, Ma’am,” and “the angle of the camera and the…headline [drawing] attention to the curve of the tumbling princesses’ buttocks…tilted upwards for public entertainment” (Billig, 1988, 5).

One of the most interesting ironies embedded within the royal-consumption context is that while only a handful of people will ever actually occupy the monarchic stratum of the social hierarchy, the BRFB is clearly a democratized brand.. Fans of the brand who live all over the world, and who may never set foot in Britain, can indulge their passion by partaking of a steady diet of films, television programs, and social-media products. Recent royal cinematic blockbusters include *The Queen* (2006) and *The King’s Speech* (2010) which both delivered high box office revenues as well as celebrity star power, with Helen Mirren playing Queen Elizabeth I in the former and Colin Firth King George VI in the latter. Similarly, the American Showtime series *The Tudors* (2007-2010) proved hugely popular with audiences both sides of the pond, despite historical inaccuracies that meant critics and consumers who appreciated more authentic renditions of royal narratives widely panned the program. Featuring Irish actor and heartthrob Jonathan Rhys Meyers as young, fit Henry VIII, the liberty-taking series nevertheless was responsible for generating much interest in other characters such as Catherine of Aragon and Anne Boleyn, giving rise to a rash of new books on each.

In 2016, the year the Queen celebrated her 90th birthday (another evidence of her singularity—both her unofficial and official birthdays are marked on several different days around the world), programs such as the BBC’s *Elizabeth at 90: A Family Tribute* and the Netflix series *The Crown*, which focused on the Queen in her younger years, enthralled many royal fans. Furthermore, the newly-produced *Victoria*, which focuses on the queen’s relationship with Prince Albert, is already airing in Britain and will occupy the Sunday evening PBS time slot previously occupied by the highly successful *Downton Abbey* during its six-year run. Consumers can also indulge their passion for the BRFB with books across myriad genres – from the biographical, to the fictional, historical-fictional, and the juvenile. Many of these become bestsellers – especially if they promise behind-the-scenes glimpses of what Charles himself terms “the royal soap opera.” Andrew Norton’s *Diana: Her True Story* is an example of one such product that flew off of the shelves (it was later revealed Diana assisted the author).

Still others achieve literary acclaim – such as Hillary Mantel’s 2009 and 2012 *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up* *the Bodies* – the first two volumes of her trilogy about the court of Henry VIII, and winners of the prestigious Man Booker prize for literature. It is worth noting that members of the BRFB also have contributed to the royal canon – both Queen Victoria’s 1867 *Leaves from the Journal of our Life in the Highlands* and her second volume, , which focusing on the royal family’s life at Balmoral Castle in Scotland, were bestsellers. More recently, in addition to a children’s book, Prince Charles published *Harmony: A New Way of Looking at Our World*, in 2012. Once often derided for his staunch pro-environmental stance, in recent years the Prince has begun to look especially prescient, given the new emphasis on global discourses that advocate sustainable consumption.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from engaging in relatively passive mass- and social-mediated pursuits of royal narratives and practices are those consumers for whom engaging with monarchy and co-creating events to mark occasions embedded within the institution are almost a way of life. Consider Margaret Tyler, the owner of a bed and breakfast in London. Her collection of royal memorabilia (from inexpensive coffee mugs to chairs used at Charles’s investiture as the Prince of Wales) now numbers over 10,000 items, and has made her a mini-celebrity in her own right (Otnes and Maclaran, 2015). One ritual practice Margaret shares with many collectors around the world is that once a royal event (e.g., birth, wedding, death) is announced, she quickly engages in pilgrimages to shops in and around London to shore up on the associated royal commemoratives. (Although Margaret does not shop online, the plethora of online outlets that make such items available to collectors of items related to monarchies around the world has also helped fuel global royal fever).

In addition, Margaret is known for her parties to mark special royal celebrations such as the Queen’s birthday, weddings, and the like. Reflecting her adoration of Diana, for years she made annual pilgrimages to Althorp on the princesses’ birthday (Figure 1). Since retiring, Margaret and many of her friends often devote time to traveling to special royal occasions; she camped out for the birth of Prince George, and was captured by a *Daily Mail* photographer smiling at the front of the barricade as the Queen made her 90th birthday walkabout in Windsor, England in April, 2016. Margaret often acts as an informal brand ambassador for the BRFB, giving tours around her house that include an intriguing mix of royal history and gossip as she explains the origins of items in her collection. Through her own personalized experiences, she helps people relate to the royals in new ways as they listen to her narratives and explore her memorabilia.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

In addition to retailers and e-tailers, professionally managed heritage-related firms that leverage their royal ties to achieve financial and preservation-related objectives also help fuel the desire for royal-related commemoratives and experiences. One such concern, Britain’s Historic Royal Palaces (HRP), is a national charity charged with overseeing six famous royal properties (including Hampton Court Palace, Kensington Palace, and the Tower of London), and making sure the narratives and settings pertaining to these structures remain compelling to citizens and tourists. In 2014, HRP orchestrated an exhibit titled “Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red” – now entrenched in touristic discourse as “the poppies.” Between July 17 and November 11, 2014 (Armistice Day), hundreds of HRP staff, volunteers and renowned people (e.g., the Queen, Prince Philip, other members of the royal family and the Prime Minister) planted 888,246 ceramic poppies in the giant moat surrounding the Tower of London. Each commemorated the death of a citizen of the British Empire during World War I. As the torrent of poppies grew and became more colorful and aesthetically compelling, and as Armistice Day drew nearer, the British citizenry (and especially Londoners) began to realize the exhibit would be dismantled, and began to rally for HRP to make the installation permanent. However, one key element of the exhibit from HRP’s perspective was the fact that all of the poppies had already been sold on its website, with the proceeds to support military charities, and each ceramic flower to be mailed to its purchaser. Although more than five million people were estimated to have visited the exhibit both the Mayor of London and an orchestrated campaign by the tabloid *Evening Standard* bolstered the public’s demands that the exhibit continue, prompting one BBC commentator to comment that the poppies had themselves become a part of history. Ultimately, HRP’s actions supported that assertion. The charity created a traveling exhibit that saw a section of the exhibit installed on landmarks of other UK cities, and the exhibit drew huge crowds in Liverpool, Lancaster, the Scottish city of Perth. In addition, part of the installation became a permanent fixture at London’s Imperial War Museum.

Interest in consumption related to the BRFB also has helped several industries remain salient within domestic and global markets. In addition to the royal commemorative industries, George IV’s visit to Scotland in 1822, the first by a British monarch since the mid-1600s, revived the entire kilt-making industry, as well as inculcating the garment into Scottish national identity: “If a single occasion can be said to have determined the kilt as the national dress of all Scotsmen…[George’s visit] may be the moment” (Zuelow, 2006, 34).

Another key way the BRFB intersects with contemporary consumer culture is through both subtle and overt brand endorsement. Although family members are not directly paid for endorsing products and services, the Queen, Prince Philip and Prince Charles (and the late Queen Mother) all act as grantors of the Royal Warrant. This designation serves as a literal and symbolic seal of royal approval of a commercial product, service, or experience. . The practice dates from the early twelfth century (Heald, 2001). Other European monarchies (e.g., in the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Denmark, Sweden) as well as the Japanese imperial house, also bestow royal warrants. Monarchs and select family members typically award these honors to domestic brands, and the main benefit to manufacturers or retailers is that they are permitted to discreetly display the heraldic symbol of a particular royal, with a statement that begins, “By Royal Appointment to…,” and the grantor’s name following. In Britain, popular brands that prominently display the Royal Warrant include the gourmet food retailer Fortnum & Mason, the department store chain John Lewis, Twinings Tea, John Lobb, Ltd. Bootmaker, and the royal family’s favorite “chemists” (drugstore), D.R. Harris. Many men’s apparel retailers and tailors that bear Royal Warrants from Prince Charles and Prince Philip cluster on London’s Jermyn Street, a short walk from a veritable bonanza of royal real estate (e.g., the medieval St. James’s Palace, the Queen Mother’s former home Clarence House, and Buckingham Palace).

More unique to the BRFB is the fact that it also supports its own brand portfolio.. The best known of these is Duchy Originals, an organic food range Prince Charles created in 1990, the ethos of which encapsulates the prince’s passion for protecting the environment. A percentage of the profits support Charles’s charities. Since 2009 the brand has been in partnership with high-end supermarket Waitrose, which controls exclusive rights to manufacture and distribute the range (renamed “Waitrose Duchy Organic,” the line contains over 230 products sold in 30 countries). More recently, Charles leveraged his branding expertise to develop the Highgrove brand, named after his residence in Gloucestershire where an on-site shop sells an ever-expanding array of home and garden products. Highgrove shops has expanded to two locations in affluent areas of southern England. Like its sister brand, Duchy Originals, the brand reflects values synonymous with a British upper class lifestyle, emphasizing British craftsmanship, heritage and traditional ways of manufacturing.

Opening in 2011, Windsor Farm Shop is the newest royal retail venture. Akin to a “Royal Whole Foods” (Otnes and Maclaran, 2015, p. 180), the shop specializes in organic and local meats, cheeses, and produce—all either grown on the surrounding royal farms, or purchased from other local suppliers to meet demand. The shop also features aesthetically-pleasing bundles of royal-branded products to fuel high-end tastes for special-occasion meals, in combinations such as the Balmoral Hamper—all branded with the Royal Farms logo, the Duke of Edinburgh’s private enterprise. A café next to shop features high-end homemade delicacies, whose ingredients are again locally-sourced.

Also in 2011, the BRFB partnered with Laithwaites Wine Company, establishing a vineyard in Windsor Great Park with more than 16,500 champagne-variety vines. Choosing these grapes is especially fitting, since champagne owes its elevated status to a “market repositioning” by members of European royal houses. Rokka (2016) describes the progression of champagne “from a practically insignificant no-wine brand label in the fifteenth century to a holy elixir served and elaborated by Benedictine monks, to an ostentatious and seductive fashion item in the court of the Sun King Louis XIV….” (1). He notes many European monarchs – including French kings who drank champagne at their coronations in Reims – elevated the reputation of champagne as *de rigeur* at court. Until the French monarchy was abolished, most European courts were keen to integrate French royal practices, as these were considered the most elegant, aesthetically pleasing, and worthy of emulation. In fact, notes Rokka, overindulging in champagne was so intertwined with the image of the French court that the practice “started to highlight the decadence and looming decline of the [French] monarchs” (4).

In Britain (as in the rest of Europe) the popularity of champagne was sustained by its association with the jazz age and the escapism it provided from the horrific memories of the devastation wrought by World War I (Rokka, 2016). The British royal court saw the perpetuation of this jazz-age lifestyle through the carefree, conspicuous-consumption choices of the Prince of Wales (later Edward VIII). Although his reign was short-lived, the British public adored the glamourous and charismatic royal, and eagerly followed descriptions of his champagne-and-caviar-fueled parties and travels. It is perhaps fitting, then, that the new champagne enterprise of the BRFB should find its home near Windsor Castle where Edward VIII abdicated, and also in proximity of Fort Belvedere, his favorite residence and place to entertain, which is situated in the royal holding of Windsor Great Park.

Of course, sometimes confusion can arise over the question of whether a brand is “royal,” or whether it is not. Many firms around the world include the term “royal” in their name without permission. In most of these cases, the BRFB and UK government have no jurisdiction over usage rights. A quick Internet search reveals many such examples with the term appearing in many incongruous ways around the globe. For example, a chain of convenience stores called Royal Farms, first established in 1959 in Baltimore, Maryland, now has 162 outlets selling basic groceries and fast food. Royal Products, also US-based, offers a range of metalworking accessories online, while Royal Brands in New Delhi offers brand consultancy, business networking and event management. Historically, within Britain many manufacturers sought to liberally leverage images of British monarchs and their family members on packages, often lifting photographs or illustrations that had originated in newspaper articles, or even fine art. The Museum of Brands, Packaging & Advertising in London features prominent displays of brands that offer reverential treatment to the royals on their packages, as well as those that decidedly do not. The collection also reveals a trend of less-reverential royal treatment (e.g., an increase in caricatures), as well as royal images appearing on a broader swath of ephemeral products (e.g., from iconic British product categories such as confectionary, food and beverages to paper towels, soda, and staples—see Otnes and Maclaran 2015). Other manufacturers have created packaging that reflects a contemporary design aesthetic, while still linking their products to royalty (Figure 2).

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

Although the royal brand appellation may lead to confusion at times, one distinguishing feature of royalty that simply cannot be copied is its pageantry and ritual. Such public pomp plays a key role in maintaining and emphasizing the heritage dimensions of the BRFB, and in connecting spectators to the glorious and globally-dominant British Empire of yesteryear. People avidly consume the lavish spectacles occasioned by royal rituals. Specific cultural scripts dictate consumption and performance at coronations, royal weddings, jubilees, births, and deaths, and all public engagement and enterprise.

We have already mentioned the income generated by William and Kate’s wedding as evidence of the many marketplace opportunities that arise from such events. From the Victorian era on, the commemorative market burgeoned in conjunction with new manufacturing technologies and increasing industrialization. Queen Victoria’s long reign provided several key opportunities for public rituals, especially at the time of the Great Exhibition of 1851, Prince Albert’s death and Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee. Over the last six years, a steady stream of high profile royal events – the royal wedding (2010), the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee (2012), the births of Prince George (2013) and Prince Charlotte (2015) and the Queen’s 90th birthday party celebration – have given a major impetus to the British commemorative market.

While many people love the BRFB for the opulent lifestyle it embodies, of course there are many others who decidedly do not, and who see the brand as having outlived its usefulness (if indeed, it was ever perceived by some as useful). Earlier consumption-centered critiques of the monarchy ranged the tendencies of warrior-kings to seize property and people from subjects in order to perpetuate internal and external wars, to the gluttonous levels of lavish consumption that typified court life and the taxing of subjects to fuel such ostentation, to the more recent concerns that the British royal family does nothing but act as sumptuously-dressed do-nothings who are trotted out in times of crisis.

In short, the BRFB is frequently accused of being a waste of British taxpayers’ money, with liberal-leaning newspapers quick to headline any instances of overspending. In 2013, the UK parliament’s Public Accounts Committee queried why the BRFB had exceeded its allocated $45 million budget by $3.3 million (Farnham, 2013). In addition, critics point to the BRFB’s existence as a stark reminder of class divisions and outdated social hierarchies. For some, the BRFB’s public rituals are part of a “grand delusion” (Haseler, 2012, p. xi) that refuses to acknowledge Britain is no longer an empire or “a world of lords and ladies, palaces and thatched cottages.” Haseler questions whether the House of Windsor, in standing for inherited wealth and privilege, can really bring about any form of national unity in a world where inequality is growing daily more acute.

The members of the BRFB are well aware that to stay relevant they must try to ward off such criticisms and avoid being perceived as spendthrift, especially in times of austerity across much of Europe and beyond. The BRFB also realizes it must shore up perceptions that it serves a useful purpose, within and without the U.K. A key expectation in this respect is that its members will leverage their royal status to promote brand Britain on the world stage. To that end, Prince Andrew has stood down from his role as an international trade role for Britain – one that found him embroiled in dubious dealings, and accusations of practicing undue influence and consorting with criminals, as well as the nickname “Airmiles Andy.” Tactfully passing on his business ambassadorial roles to younger royals, he was also seeking to increase the relevance of his daughters Princesses Beatrice and Eugenie within the royal brand. In 2013, they drove around Berlin in a MINI to promote British industry across Germany. As part of the same “GREAT Britain” campaign, Prince Harry arrived at Milk Studios in New York City in a red double-decker bus, another powerful and iconic British symbol. Given their visibility, good looks, ability to engage with high-end luxury brands of clothing, cars, and travel destinations, the popularity of the young royals is likely to continue.

Thus, it seems that even with initiatives that threaten British identity (e.g., a resurgence of Scottish nationalism in the wake of Brexit) support for the BRFB not only seems globally entrenched, but is increasing. So what implications emerge for scholars and practitioners interested in deepening our understanding of the interplay of royalty and consumer culture within the field? First, plumbing the construct of the royals as human brands remains intriguing, because the story of royalty and its influence is rooted in the stories of how its individual members shape consumption discourses and practices. This topic has been studied historically (see Kevin Sharpe’s [2009, 2010, 2013] voluminous explorations of how various monarchs helped sell and manage the BRFB), and in more contemporary . Billig’s (1988, 11) comment that even if the public finds little issue with the institution of monarchy, “there are all manner of specific controversies about the conduct of its business and the character of its members” continues to be more or less salient, depending upon the particular time period in the royal chronology being plumbed, and could prove to be a topic that has relevance to other controversial human brands.

Second, other issues arise from studying the royalty as a marketing-related context – such as how a tainted or tired brand (as the BRFB has been during several periods throughout its history) might recover, and how different stakeholders can contribute to that effort. Furthermore, given the increasing diversity of the population in the brand’s “home base” of Britain (certainly the British Empire was ethnically diverse, but many immigrants now stem from non- Commonwealth areas), questions as to the loyalty of the BRFB’s consumers, and their expectations of it in turbulent social and political times, arise. Also salient would be continued comparative studies of what makes the BRFB so culturally salient, compared to royalty within other countries – an issue we explore elsewhere (Otnes and Maclaran, 2015). Furthermore, what will happen to the BRFB – or other elite, heritage-related, or royal brands – as potential forces that could dilute them continue to penetrate their boundaries (e.g., unrestrained satire and criticism via social media, the influx of commoners into royal bloodlines?). Furthermore, how can brands rooted in heritage, luxury, and other class-related and contentious constructs withstand criticisms of being bloated, dated, and out of touch?

Finally, focusing on topics that have long been of interest to consumer-culture scholars, such as the interplay of gender on royal consumption pastimes and practices, how various levels (e.g., personal, familial, regional, national) of identity shape people’s engagement with the royal marketplace, and consumer co-creation of micro- and macro-rituals and practices that celebrate or commemorate royal events– would all be worthy within the sphere of the royal consumptionscape. Specifically, the historical gendering of royal consumption as feminine may be undergoing a significant shift, given the visibility of BRFB members such as Princes William and Harry, who epitomize many of the elements of modern masculinity (especially those that used to be considered contradictory; e.g., military career man vs. lover of children). Furthermore, if the current line of succession holds, the next three British monarchs will be kings, counterbalancing the record-setting reign of Elizabeth II – and has been true in the past, there is no doubt that these monarchs’ own consumption-laden pursuits will revive interest in them among royal fans. We believe these and other topics are compelling, and hope we have inspired others to engage in the fascinating (and seemingly endless) study of the interplay of royalty and consumer culture. FIGURE 1: Margaret Tyler at AlthorpFIGURE 2: Queen’s 90th birthday packaging

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