



Patriotism as a Lifestyle (Brand)

SPECIAL COLLECTION:
PATRIOTISM

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

As noted by historian Cecilia O’Leary (1999), there has long been an “ethically questionable but mutually beneficial alliance between commerce and patriotism” in the US (p. 16). This can be seen, for example, in advertisements promoting sales around “patriotic holidays” such as Memorial Day, Independence Day, and Veterans Day. Veterans have long played a role in this alliance by using their veteran status to promote themselves and their own companies, playing to the patriotic impulses of civilians. This article focuses on a more recent development in this alliance, that of “lifestyle brands” founded by US military veterans which target other veterans, their families, and people who claim to support veterans and the military. Like other lifestyle brands, these veteran-owned companies attempt to embody the attitudes and values of their founders and customers. Specifically, this article examines the products, packaging, advertising copy, and other relevant marketing materials of Grunt Style (apparel) and Black Rifle Coffee Company (coffee and related branding merchandise), both founded by US Army veterans. These veteran-owned companies use their founders’ veteran status as part of marketing and branding strategies that emphasize the companies’, and therefore their customers’, patriotism, and in doing so reveal how they understand contemporary American patriotism.

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Entrepreneurs who are military veterans have long used their veteran status to distinguish their businesses from their competitors. Typically, they run small, local businesses such as barbers or contractors and use military imagery and slogans to show their veteran identity. They may ask their customers to support veteran-owned businesses or charities, and engage a sense of patriotism to drive customers their way. But as small, local firms, they have little to no reach outside their community. The ease of internet marketing and sales has allowed more businesses, including veteran-owned business, to expand the reach of their customer base. In these national markets, the competition is more intense. To stand out, a veteran-owned business needs to emphasize what makes it different, namely their military-veteran ownership.

In this article I examine two veteran-founded companies, Grunt Style and Black Rifle Coffee Company, their styles of patriotic messaging and marketing, and how they use patriotism as a foundational principle for their lifestyle brands. Lifestyle brands typically refer to companies that attempt to position themselves in their respective markets as unique by focusing on an idealized lifestyle of their customers and an imagined community made of these customers. “It is about establishing relationships with a community of like-minded people. Lifestyle branding is more about positioning a brand based on lifestyle variables (interests, passions, or tastes) than on traditional variables like socio-economic position, age, or location” (Pérez del Castillo et al, 2020, p. 368). As lifestyle brands, these veteran-founded companies use the stories of their respective founders, employees, and customers to market themselves and their products as being made by and for American patriots. They turn this into a distinct perspective that allows them to stand apart from their non-veteran competition, and they make this perspective and background story tangible through their products and corporate communications.

These veteran-run companies use patriotism as a foundational marker of their customer community. Patriotism for these companies, in a sense, becomes another product, and one that requires conspicuous and constant display. Organizing a company’s marketing strategy around a particular lifestyle or community has been a common, if not widely studied, practice since at least the 1980s (Helman & de Chernatony, 1999). Typically, this marketing approach happens in industries such as fashion and athletic gear because of the lack of features that would distinguish between different companies selling the same products (Berger & Heath, 2007). Grunt Style and Black Rifle Coffee Company use their veteran-founded identity to connect veterans and non-veterans alike in what they envision as a larger community of American patriots and use their founders’ veteran status as evidence

of their patriotic credentials. This marketing activity raises questions as to how patriotism is imagined, military veterans’ roles in how customers understand patriotism, the appropriateness of veterans “selling” patriotism, and the need to display it constantly.

In order to show how these companies utilize patriotism to create their brand image, I examine some of each company’s products and their corporate communications to include marketing, communications from the respective founders, and other online communications. Both companies use their respective websites to advertise their principles in addition to their products. Visual sociologist and communications scholar Luc Pauwels (2012) argues that websites have become sites of cultural expression for many communities whether they are personal websites or corporate ones. Therefore, studying a company’s website is studying the company itself because the design of a website can be instructive in learning what a company’s values are, how its leadership wishes it to be seen by outsiders, and how the leadership sees the company. Web presence is even more important with companies such as Grunt Style and Black Rifle Coffee, which operate predominately without physical stores. These companies use their websites and social media accounts to present themselves to the world, sell their products, connect with customers, and allow their customers to interact with the company.

The following sections introduce the two brands, Grunt Style and Black Rifle Coffee Company in more detail, describe what lifestyle brands are and how they work, and establish why Grunt Style and Black Rifle Coffee Company should count as lifestyle brands. I then offer a more general discussion on what it means for a company to try to sell patriotism as a “lifestyle.”

THE COMPANIES

GRUNT STYLE

Started in 2009 by former Army non-commissioned officer and Drill Sergeant Daniel Alarik, Grunt Style is the most popular veteran-themed apparel brand in terms of sales. They are not alone in this market and have competition from other veteran-themed apparel companies such as 9-Line Apparel and Ranger Up, but they are one of the first and largest. Alarik began Grunt Style (GS) by designing and selling screen-printed T-shirts out of the back of his car at Ft. Benning, Georgia. The designs ranged from general slogans about the US and the Army to more irreverently humorous ones. Initially only selling screen-printed graphics T-shirts, GS has expanded to other apparel and branded products as well. By 2017, the company had sold over \$100 million in products and had over 300 employees (Rockefeller, 2017). More recently, GS has faced a cash crunch along with

some other managerial problems, according to reporting by local journalists (Lingle, 2020b). In 2018, Alarik sold his ownership stake to a group of investors who replaced him as the head of the company (Garcia, 2020b). In an attempt to professionalize GS's management and production while retaining the aspects of the veteran brand, the new owners hired a CEO with experience in the retail apparel market while leaving the "Grunt Style look" the same (Garcia, 2020a; Lingle, 2020c). For his part, Alarik describes this as him being fired and forced from his company (Garcia, 2020b; Lingle, 2020a), a claim the company denies (Grunt Style, 2020a).

Everything GS produces has military themes, some more obvious than others. These themes are meant to appeal to military members and veterans along with civilian supporters of the military. The name "Grunt Style" incorporates the term "grunt," which is given to members of the infantry. It is simultaneously a derogatory term meant to acknowledge infantry members' harsh lives while in the service and a term of pride used by the infantry as a symbol of how hard those in infantry have it compared to "POGs," that is, "person other than grunt." GS's products range from T-shirts and other clothing items to branded coffee mugs and beer glasses. Most of the designs that appear on these other products first appeared on their T-shirts.

The most ubiquitous features on GS T-shirts are their logo and various displays of the American flag. The company's logo is two crossed muskets, the name "GRUNT STYLE" above the muskets, the initials "US" to the left of the muskets, the numerals "1776" to the right, the initials "GS" below the muskets, and below that, text reading "THIS WE'LL DEFEND," the official motto of the US Army. This logo appears on all the company's products; for their T-shirts, the design is generally on the left sleeve. The designs GS screen prints on the front and back of the shirts vary greatly as the catalog of designs changes multiple times each year. GS adds new designs and discontinues poor performers. The themes of GS's designs are generally pro-American and pro-military and typically incorporate humor.

BLACK RIFLE COFFEE COMPANY

Evan Hafer, a US Army Special Forces veteran, founded Black Rifle Coffee Company (BRCC) in 2014. It has grown and maintains a devoted following among members of the military, veterans, and first responders (Castrodale, 2017). BRCC imports raw coffee beans, roasts them at their roasting facilities in Manchester, Tennessee, and Salt Lake City, Utah, which is also home to their headquarters, and ships them all over the US and worldwide. While mostly selling online, several outdoor equipment stores also sell their coffee and apparel. Currently, they are developing their own retail operations and franchise agreements with independent coffee shops (Castrodale, 2017). In addition to selling roasted coffee, BRCC also sells coffee-related accessories (e.g., hand

grinders, mugs, French presses) and branded merchandise, mostly apparel for which they do the screen-printing in-house.

BRCC's branding is based on military and more general gun-related themes. To begin, their logo is designed to look like the view of a rifle scope with the initials BRCC inside of the scope. It is a circle with straight lines extending inside from top, bottom, left, and right dividing the circle into quadrants. These lines almost, but do not reach the middle of the circle. In each quadrant are one of the initials of the name, "B" and "R" on the top, and "C" and "C" on the bottom. The "B" and the left "C" are mirrored as to be facing away from the center of the design.

BRCC's general gun theme is also reflected in its products' names: "AK" for their espresso roast, "Gunship" for a light roast, "Beyond Black" or BB for a dark roast, and another light roast called "Silencer Smooth," which goes by the (problematic) initials SS. Almost all of BRCC's coffee products have an image of some sort of firearm on the packaging. For the most part these images are variants of the M-4, a short-barreled rifle used by most of the US military. Some exceptions are: (a) the "Gunship," which has an image of a helicopter; (b) the "SS," which has an image of a handgun that is fitted with a silencer; and (c) the "AK," which appropriately has an image of an AK-47. They also have products with names related to civilian first responders such as "Five Alarm" (firefighters) and "Thin Blue Line" (police). To further their themed branding, their single-serve coffee pods for Keuring and similar makers are referred to as "rounds," and their larger bundles of multiple different roasts are called "supply drops."

BRCC and GS use a "Lifestyle Brand" marketing strategy to position themselves in their respective markets. They promote a particular way of living through their products as exemplified through their founders' and customers' stories, how they present the image of their (idealized) customers and community, and how they engage with their customers. Lifestyle brands operate in many different markets, but mostly in fashion, as companies in this industry often need to distinguish themselves from their competitors (Berger & Heath, 2007). The innovation in lifestyle branding that both GS and BRCC have made is to define their community around a more generalizable sense of patriotism instead of a specific way of living. They offer their own particular "brand" of American patriotism and define how it should be imagined and performed. In the next section I explain more fully what lifestyle brands are and show how BRCC and GS function as lifestyle brands.

LIFESTYLE BRANDS

Brands have long been an important part of marketing and business communications. A brand serves as the mark of

a company and how one identifies the producer of any product from sportswear to soft drinks and cars to colleges. The brand identity allows a producer to differentiate their products from those of their competitors and works as a shorthand to help consumers make informed choices. Beyond the ready identification of what company made a product, consumers often emotionally identify with brands, and sometimes quite strongly, a fact that has long been studied by business scholars (Schmitt, 2012). “Lifestyle positioning” for a brand has been used as a marketing technique for several decades, especially in product categories with few “functional differences” between producers by “connecting with consumers on a more personal level” (Chernev et al., 2011, p. 79). That is, when a company makes a product that is functionally the same as others (e.g., coffee or T-shirts), it may try to distinguish itself from its competition through an emotional appeal about the type of people who buy their products rather than an argument about the superior quality of their product. While lifestyle brands have been around for decades, there has been scant literature about them until the last two decades, mostly from business and marketing scholars as well as practitioners (Austin & Matos, 2013). This dearth of literature makes comparative studies of lifestyle brands somewhat difficult due to a lack of consensus on what qualifies as a lifestyle brand. It has only been recently that scholars have attempted to rigorously define what makes a brand a lifestyle brand (Pérez del Castillo et al., 2020).

First published in 2013, business and management scholars Stefania Saviolo and Antonio Marazza wrote one of the first managerial guides to lifestyle brands. Because it was written as a “guide” for others in business and marketing, it essentially gives a step-by-step process for establishing a lifestyle brand. This organization makes Saviolo and Marazza’s (2013) guide a useful text to examine how lifestyle brands work and what makes a company a lifestyle brand. One of their main contributions was to identify different types of brands that rely heavily on image, of which lifestyle brands are just one type. This distinction is helpful because it clarifies the types of companies that can be described as a lifestyle brand, which can make comparative studies easier in the future. They coined the description “symbol-intensive brands,” a brand that is “adopted not only for its functional characteristics, but above all, for the symbolism and significance it transmits, allowing a consumer to express his or her identity, to signal status or manifest a sense of belonging to a group” (p. 1). These symbol-intensive brands offer “social emotional” benefits, which allow their customers to connect with a larger group identity, particularly one defined by the brand itself. In other words, the social emotional benefits offered by these brands are the outward identification with

a particular group in addition to a feeling of membership within that group (Pérez del Castillo et al., 2020, p. 370).

There are several different types of these symbol-intensive brands, according to Saviolo and Marazza (2013), based on the brand’s scope (i.e., how broad or narrow the target demographics are) and the type of benefits the brand offers (e.g., does the brand fulfill functional or emotional needs; pp. 35–36). For example, Apple, Disney, and Nike are symbol-intensive brands because their identity and their logos are as important as their products. People buy these products not just because of their quality, but also for the association with the brand. Of course, these companies and other symbol-intensive brands need to maintain high-quality products to avoid tarnishing the brand’s image and causing harm to the brand’s reputation. This focus on image spills into other parts of the brand identity, such as when the company or an executive of one these symbol-intensive brands get caught up in a personal or political controversy that taints the image of the brand among certain target audiences.

Not all symbol-intensive brands are necessarily lifestyle brands. Lifestyle brands operate in a space that has “social emotional benefits” and do not try to limit the “scope” of their customer base (Saviolo & Marazza, 2013, pp. 35–39). This distinguishes them from “cult brands” (which lifestyle brands are often confused with), which are high on social-emotional benefits but narrower in customer scope. Cult brands try to limit their customer base to a specific slice of the buying public, assuming that once too many people buy it, it no longer has the same draw of being unique or desired. Lifestyle brands, however, move away from being a cult brand, not just by appealing to a larger demographic, but also by offering others a chance to identify with a particular group (Saviolo & Marazza, 2013, p. 47). “These are brands that are the bearers of an ideology, which dictates the rules, or that indicates a way of life, and are able to express it in an original way” (Saviolo & Marazza, 2013, p. 48). Also, like cult brands, lifestyle brands generally develop from a visionary leader who sees a need for their product and message. Both also feature the founder as a user of the products (Pérez del Castillo et al., 2020, pp. 365–368). What moves a brand from a cult brand to a lifestyle one is wanting to spread the message to as many as possible and increase membership of their idealized community. These types of brands often have a call to action or rallying cry to expand the reach of the movement (Saviolo & Marazza, 2013, pp. 48–49). The rest of this section further explains the concept of lifestyle brands while using examples to demonstrate how GS and BRCC fit the lifestyle brand category and how they use a concept like patriotism as their proposed “lifestyle.”

There are other companies that sell screen-printed T-shirts and mail-order coffee—these would be the

“functional characteristics” of GS and BRCC. What sets these two companies apart from their competitors are the stories of their respective founders’ connection to military service, a use of military symbols, and messages in their products supporting and promoting militarism and patriotism. These marketing strategies allow customers to express their identity and connection with a community of veterans and American patriots through their consumption of these companies’ products. Both GS and BRCC put their brand on as many products as possible, so they already count as “symbol-intensive brands.” GS also regularly features non-apparel products made by other companies that feature the GS logo, and a small but significant portion of BRCC’s website and sales is devoted to non-coffee branded merchandise, which they mostly produce themselves. They both attempt to embody military/veteran culture in their products, but they never actively limit their customers to only military members and veterans. For example, GS advertises on their website that “You do not have to be a veteran to wear Grunt Style, but you do have to love freedom, bacon and whiskey” (Grunt Style, n.d.). While GS maintains that their products are inspired by their military service, they are willing to let others connect to the lifestyle of their products, regardless of service background. They claim that through these products their customers can exhibit a certain level of military pride and patriotism: “We provide more than just apparel, we bolster a lifestyle. **PRIDE IN SELF, IN MILITARY, AND IN COUNTRY**” (Grunt Style, n.d.).

BRCC also connects the purchase of their products with a community of patriots and a way of living; “Black Rifle Coffee Company is a veteran-owned coffee company serving premium coffee to people who love America” (Black Rifle Coffee Company, n.d.). They also directly connect their military service with how they run the company and make their coffee, and connect all of this to their customers. Moreover, they use this connection to let their non-military customers into their group by means of supporting veterans and first responders, “We develop our explosive roast profiles with the same mission focus we learned as military members serving this great country and are committed to supporting veterans, law enforcement, and first responders. With every purchase you make, we give back” (Black Rifle Coffee Company, n.d.). GS and BRCC want their customers to know that even if they are not veterans, buying their products will connect consumers with military and veteran communities and allow these customers to identify as patriots. Again, GS and BRCC are not “cult brands” because they do not try to limit their customer base to other veterans and military members. They both actively and vocally invite others into the “veteran lifestyle” and a “community of patriots” through the purchase of their products and the display of their logos.

According to Saviolo and Marazza (2013), lifestyle brands have three distinct features or “cornerstones:” the background, the manifesto, and the expression (p. 62). While any one of these components may be present in other symbol-intensive brands, only lifestyle brands contain all three.

THE BACKGROUND

The background includes the brand’s credo and stories about the brand, its founding, and its followers. The credo operates as the organizing principle for the brand. It “is a founding element of any strategic thinking for a lifestyle brand” because it provides the perspective the brand has on the world and can even specify the brand’s ideology and the type of world the brand desires (Saviolo & Marazza, 2013, pp. 62–63). For GS and BRCC, their credos are based on patriotism. American patriotism covers the products and written marketing materials of BRCC and GS. The mission statement for BRCC provides a clear example of the company’s credo: BLACK RIFLE COFFEE COMPANY / SERVES COFFEE AND CULTURE / TO PEOPLE WHO LOVE AMERICA (Black Rifle Coffee Company, n.d.).

GS has a similar message on their website’s “About Us” page: PRIDE IN SELF, IN MILITARY AND IN COUNTRY / WE TAKE PRIDE IN EVERYTHING WE DO AND INSTILL THAT PRIDE TO OUR CUSTOMERS (Grunt Style, n.d.). Both companies emphasize patriotism and pride in their communications strategies. A review of the public communications of these companies shows their consistent attempts to insert some sort of message about loving America or being a proud patriot.

Stories about the brands, its founders, and its customers make up the other part of lifestyle brands’ backgrounds. These stories need to be relatable to the potential customers because they reflect the brand’s image (Saviolo & Marazza, 2013, pp. 63–64). Like other lifestyle brands, both BRCC and GS have stories of their founding and their founders which are meant to inspire others and exemplify the credo of their companies (Saviolo & Marazza, 2013, pp. 78–81). On BRCC’s “About Us” page, Hafer is featured in a four-minute video (also posted on their YouTube channel) that discusses his service in the US Army Special Forces, his love of coffee, and how the two connect.

Every deployment I went on, I was taking small-batch roasted coffee with me. I modified our gun trucks on the invasion of Iraq so we could grind coffee and put it through a French press. People would wake up in the morning to the sound of my grinder. My team leader and I, every morning, we would “cheers” to our coffee. It was a special bond over something as insignificant as brown water. But

great coffee was one of those things where, if you started your day with it, it just made your day that much better. (Black Rifle Coffee Company, 2018, 2:36–3:09).

During this moment in the video, the viewer sees Hafer, wearing BRCC branded clothing, being interviewed in front of large coffee roasting machines, interspersed with still images of Hafer in the Iraqi desert—some by himself, some with other members of his Special Forces team. The images show Hafer and others in and around military equipment, sometimes wearing combat gear, sometimes just in T-shirts, and most pictures depict them as dirty and dusty. Some of these still photos show Hafer with a cup in his hand or preparing a French press coffee maker. His love of coffee and his life in the military in war are presented as the same. In fact, according to Hafer, he needed coffee to help him through the war. He also explains that going to war made him a better person. This connection between the founder's experience and their company's product is vital to lifestyle branding (Pérez del Castillo et al., 2020, p. 365; Saviolo & Marazza, 2013, pp. 78–81).

The stories of GS founder Daniel Alarik are not featured prominently on the website, but this may be due to legal fights between him and the new GS management, as reported in local press (Garcia; 2020c; Lingle, 2020b). Nevertheless, Alarik's imprint is present in all the company's products (Rockefeller, 2017). He began the company making the designs himself, screen-printing them on T-shirts, and then selling them out of the trunk of his car in Ft. Benning, Georgia. The style of designs that he initially made still influences the newer GS designs. They are generally military-themed, full of irreverent humor, and use a subdued color palette. In interviews and other appearances, he often emphasizes the importance of his military experience and its impact on how he ran his company.

In a 2018 TEDx talk, Alarik discusses how his experience as an Army Drill Sergeant gave him valuable lessons on how to manage a team and be a corporate leader (Alarik, 2018). While he is not explicitly trying to do marketing for GS, his self-identification with the brand effectively turns the talk into an 18-minute advertisement focusing on the company's culture as an extension of his experiences as a leader in the Army. He argues that his respect for his employees and their ability to be mission-focused came from having great Army leaders to emulate. This claim of Alarik's is problematic given reports of former employees accusing Alarik of creating a hostile workplace with a "frat house work environment" that included harassment and misogyny (Lingle, 2020c).

Hafer has appeared on Fox News to give his perspective

as a leader of a veteran-owned company. While these appearances are never explicitly to sell coffee, he naturally uses the time to promote BRCC's credo to a potentially receptive audience. Shortly after President Trump announced limitations and outright bans on allowing refugees into the US in January 2017, the ubiquitous coffee retailer Starbucks announced that it made a goal of hiring 10,000 refugees to help them integrate into American society (Schultz, 2017). Hafer and BRCC responded by announcing a "Boycott Starbucks" campaign, rebranding the chain as "Hipsterbucks," and promising to hire 10,000 veterans. This was quickly picked up by Fox News and other conservative outlets. They picked up the slogan "Veterans Before Refugees" as a rallying cry and hashtag to bring similar-minded consumers to their cause. This slogan would have already been familiar to others, as it had been used previously by some, including GS a year earlier (Grunt Style, 2016). The BRCC team used this moment to advertise their growth agenda. Hafer claimed in an interview that the company had been planning this growth strategy months earlier and had just decided to use the Starbucks announcement to promote a slogan, which would help generate publicity for the company (Linehan, 2017). Hafer and BRCC learned from the traction gained by "Hipsterbucks" that Starbucks provided a convenient, public enemy to battle on conservative news outlets.

On November 29, 2019, after it was first reported that a Starbucks employee in Oklahoma City wrote "PIG" on the drink tag for a uniformed police officer, the official BRCC Twitter account asked for information about the officer and where he worked (Black Rifle Coffee Company, 2019). BRCC then gifted coffee and other products to the officer and his department. Hafer and Mat Best, BRCC's executive vice-president, then made appearances publicizing what BRCC did in connection to the matter. They appeared on Fox News morning show "Fox and Friends First" to discuss their donation and their support for the police (Parke, 2019). Hafer told the hosts "I think this is that West Coast elitist, progressive culture that continues to encroach into American corporate values," referring to the Seattle-based Starbucks (Parke, 2019). Through this interview, Hafer and Best were able to market the company's credo to a receptive audience, further building their brand and recruiting additional customers.

THE MANIFESTO

A lifestyle brand has an original and distinct perspective that sets it apart from others. Manifestos for lifestyle brands contain "lifestyle propositions" and "lifestyle codes." These propositions and codes, according to Saviolo and Marazza (2013), are more than a company's mission statement or vision. Rather than being a statement of

the company's goals as many mission statements are, lifestyle propositions are unique and distinct perspectives on the world, and the lifestyle codes are what makes these perspectives immediately recognizable (Saviolo & Marazza, 2013, p. 65).

A lifestyle brand's proposition is based on the company's credo and the founder's original vision. The proposition is established and promoted through stories about the brand to support the brand's credo and vision. Unlike a mission statement, a lifestyle proposition will rarely, if ever, be printed or clearly defined. Rather, a lifestyle proposition is gleaned from marketing materials, corporate communications, and interviews with the founder or company executives (Saviolo & Marazza, 2013, pp. 67–70).

Patriotism is core to the lifestyle proposition for GS and BRCC and not merely an advertising feature. To sign up for GS's email newsletter, potential customers are asked to "SIGN-UP FOR PATRIOTISM AT YOUR FINGERTIPS!" (Grunt Style, n.d.). At the bottom of each "biography" page for BRCC's executive team they state, "Black Rifle Coffee Company is a SOF [Special Operations Forces] Veteran-owned coffee company, serving premium coffee and culture to people who love America." (Black Rifle Coffee Company, n.d.). Purchasing from these companies, according to them, is tantamount to identifying as a patriot and a member of their idealized community of patriots.

Lifestyle codes can include logos, patterns, or a particular style of a product. The codes work as outward signs of the lifestyle proposition. They are what allow someone at a distance to immediately recognize the brand by sight. For GS, their logo on every product offers a readily identifiable sign of their company. They also have a particular style of humor in their designs related to either the military or a more generalizable patriotism. Even their most patriotic messages sometimes contain irreverent humor, such as T-shirts that boast "FREE AS F*CK!" By design, there is little subtlety in their designs, although some designs require knowledge of military life to fully understand the punchline. For BRCC, their logo appears on all their products, and every product aligns with a general gun theme.

The products both companies offer also contain patriotic themes and/or messages. Much of BRCC's packaging has red, white, and blue or camouflage-color palettes and often features multiple American flags. With only a handful of exceptions, every GS T-shirt has an American flag. Sometimes the flag is featured prominently, but most of the time it appears on the right sleeve. The designs printed on GS shirts are varied as new ones are regularly added and less popular ones are discontinued. While many are military- or gun-related humor, a significant number are patriotic-themed featuring various American-flag related

motifs, references to defending the country, and harming America's enemies. The "CREED" shirt displays "THIS WE'LL DEFEND" on the front and the back features a series of words centered, each on their own line, "CREED FAMILY AMERICA GUNS BACON MILITARY NUNCHUCKS WHISKEY." Another shirt contains the text "AMERICAN BY BIRTH BASTARD BY CHOICE," and a women's T-shirt with the text "WORKING REMOTE" surrounding an outline of a military drone.

THE EXPRESSION

The expression is how the manifesto becomes tangible to others through the brand's communication activities and marketing, interactions with consumers, and products. The expression of a lifestyle brand contains narratives or other stories about using the brand, which reflect the proposition and adhere to the codes, rather than using typical ad copy to persuade (Saviolo & Marazza, 2013, pp. 72–73). In other words, marketing materials for lifestyle brands show the idealized customer using or enjoying the products in an appropriate setting.

Common advertising techniques such as statements about price or product quality may not even be necessary for a lifestyle brand. Many of the images used on BRCC and GS's websites show their products in use—for both companies this often means in the presence of firearms or in an outdoor environment. The people featured in their advertisements and photos on their websites are typically employees of the respective companies and not professional models. Using "in-house" talent furthers the image of the company embodying by placing idealized versions of its consumers (the companies' owners and workers) at the forefront (Saviolo & Marazza, 2013, pp. 71–72). The expression of the product is then what the product looks (or sounds, feels, etc.) like, the meaning attached to that, and the emotions evoked by the product. For GS, the aesthetics and the message are direct and based on the specific design of a T-shirt. Therefore, the emotional response to their products changes based on the specific design. For BRCC, the expression comes through their packaging, naming of products, and their ancillary-branded merchandise.

The next part of the expression, expression through interactions, can be seen in how the company communicates with its customers and how those customers talk about the company. Lifestyle brands rely heavily on their customers to act as "brand ambassadors," or people who represent the brand to others who may not be exposed to the brand's marketing (Pérez del Castillo et al., 2020, p. 371). As with many symbol-intensive brands, lifestyle brands use social media sites to facilitate these types of interactions. Both GS and BRCC maintain active presences on popular sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, as well as smaller sites

like Gab, which is popular with conservative political groups. They also encourage their customers to post photos using their products and share those customer-produced images on their own pages. Social media is vital to the success of lifestyle brands. According to some in the fashion industry, the latter could not exist without the former (Pérez del Castillo et al., 2020, pp., 369–374).

PATRIOTISM AND/AS CONSUMERISM

GS and BRCC have adopted a lifestyle brand marketing strategy to promote their products. They do this using the veteran identity of their respective founders and employees, designing their products around generalizable themes of military pride and patriotism, and affirming a particular form of patriotism as the driving force of their companies and community of customers. As a marketing strategy, this has proven successful. Thus far, I have discussed patriotism as it is *used* by these companies, but I have said little about what patriotism *means* for them.

In his argument for the defense of patriotism from extremists, political philosopher Steven B. Smith (2021) claims that patriotism is “the most fundamental political virtue” (p. 4). Patriotism is typically described as political loyalty to and pride for a country. It is differentiated from nationalism, which entails loyalty to a country as well as hostility towards that country’s enemies (Smith, 2021, pp. 5–9). Drawing from Hegel, Smith states that patriotism “is a quiet virtue, which does not demand continuous acts of heroic self-sacrifice, but rather a willingness to be ‘tried and tested in all circumstances of ordinary life’” (2021, p. 52). The line between patriotism and nationalism is permeable—a patriot can turn into a nationalist based on outside influences (Li & Brewer, 2004). The fact that patriotism is a powerful force is clear, but its nuances are still debatable (Parker, 2010, p. 97). For example, previous scholarship on patriotism in the US has shown that patriotism can be affected by things as varied as one’s religiosity (Ishio, 2010) or the diversity of one’s community (Wolak & Dawkins, 2017). Additionally, patriotism is not stable; it is constantly shifting throughout history in tune with the changing political climate (O’Leary, 1999, pp. 4–9).

What makes BRCC and GS unique is they are not simply using patriotic appeals to sell their products; they are demonstrating and selling patriotism as a way of life. These companies present patriotism as a “lifestyle,” something to be enacted and performed not just believed or felt. Further, their advertising and other corporate messaging suggest patriotism needs to be on constant display. Using patriotism as part of a marketing strategy, however, may encourage narrow understandings of it. And while using

patriotism to sell products is distasteful for some, it does have precedents in the US.

In the immediate aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, merchants sold “patriotic kitsch” to people visiting “Ground Zero,” the sites of the terrorist attacks in New York City (Sturken, 2007). This was met with a wide array of responses from outright hostility that these sellers are profiting off tragedy, to acceptance and a nuanced respect for their entrepreneurial spirit (Hurley & Trimarco, 2004, pp. 61–68). Regardless of how people responded to these vendors, this patriotic kitsch and the fact that people were found to be making money off of it was seen to be problematic itself.

The objects sold by street vendors after the 9/11 attacks worked as stand-ins for discussions about the events of 9/11. Cultural studies scholar Marita Sturken (2007) argues that they worked to avoid discussions of the reasons that led to these acts of terrorism and the US’s reactions to it. She claims that these types of consumer objects create a “tourist” relationship with history and are part of a “culture of comfort.” The only message they served was “be a patriot, support the US” with no engagement as to the reasons why. This patriotic kitsch let consumers express a connection with or support for the victims of the terror attacks in the form of purchasing souvenirs. But arguably this demonstration of support is more for the consumer rather than the survivors or victims, as many reported to be buying for the sake of their own memories of their visit (Hurley & Trimarco, 2004, pp. 63–66).

The vendors selling the patriotic kitsch also played a role in the marketing of patriotic symbols as tokens or souvenirs. They were alternatively labeled as “ghoulish disaster-profiteers” or that they were “bravely pursuing the American dream in the face of terrorism” for their role in selling patriotic souvenirs (Hurley & Trimarco, p. 54). A subset of the vendors were US military veterans (many of whom had been living in homeless shelters prior to working as vendors) who were able to use the veteran status to help their operations in a couple different ways. First, as veterans, they were able to obtain vendors licenses from the city government for free and receive them much faster than their non-veteran competitors. Second, they used their veteran status as part of their sales pitch by drawing potential customers to their tables, not just because of their patriotic wares, but also because these customers recognized them for their military service (Hurley & Trimarco, 2004, pp. 54–56).

The immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks is not a unique incident of using patriotic appeals to attract customers. Using patriotism to both sell products and craft an identity steps in line with how patriotism has been understood throughout US history. While not officially

sanctioned by the government, this kind of marketing is rarely discouraged. Going back to the early days of the US, there has long been an “ethically questionable but mutually beneficial alliance between commerce and patriotism” (O’Leary, 1999, p. 16). Prior to the First World War, the federal government took little role in promoting patriotism unlike its European contemporaries. Instead, the government left promoting and even defining patriotism to veterans’ groups and businesses (O’Leary, 1999, pp. 49–50). Rather than being an issue of crafty merchants taking advantage of patriotic impulses, the US government benefited from private and commercial promoters of patriotism to help establish the government’s legitimacy, especially after the Civil War (O’Leary, 1999, pp 6–8). In this way, veterans and businesses played an important role in promoting and defining American patriotism.

The Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), composed of Civil War veterans from the Union armies, went as far as establishing patriotism as a civic religion in the US with the Union veterans as its “priests” (O’Leary, 1999, pp. 51–54). Religious studies scholar Peter Gardella (2014) states that religion is something that “binds” a community together (emphasizing the Latin root word). Religion is not a shared set of beliefs; it is the symbols, ideas, and practices that keep the community together. A civil religion, therefore, is made up of the symbols, texts, practices, and sacred sites of a country (Gardella, 2014, pp. 5–6). So, the veneration of texts such as the Constitution, pilgrimages to places like the National Mall, and the practices around the flag are all part of the US civil religion (Gardella, 2014; Marvin & Ingle, 1999). Following the Union veterans of the GAR, schoolteachers later took on a role in spreading patriotism (Gardella, 2014, pp. 85–88; O’Leary, 1999, pp. 172–193). Similarly, after the 9/11 attacks, schools once again became the place for patriotic education (O’Leary & Platt, 2001).

Commercial promotion of patriotism, along with promotion through veteran organizations, schoolteachers, and newspaper editorials, was read as natural and populist in a way that it would not have been if pushed by the federal government. In fact, many aspects of the early US (e.g., regional differences and local loyalties, a weak central government, a diverse population with a wide range of political rights) prevented a more homogeneous idea of patriotism from developing (O’Leary, 1999, pp. 11–15). Different ideas behind the meaning of patriotism allowed different groups and regions to celebrate and demonstrate their support for the US without being forced to adopt unfamiliar beliefs or practices. This multiplicity of patriotisms even allowed formerly enslaved people to express patriotism as part of their abolitionist beliefs (O’Leary, 1999, pp. 15–23). Businesses and other local

organizations were best positioned to meet the patriotic sentiments of their constituents.

How Americans express patriotism has changed over time. It is natural for companies that make apparel or other consumer goods to understand the changing “fashion” of patriotism and how to market to it. In the cases of BRCC, GS, and other lifestyle brands that share a similar marketing approach, their “style” of patriotism can be responsive to changing market preferences. The seemingly exaggerated approach to how these two companies (especially GS) discuss patriotism, military service, and the country cannot be explained as only irony or jest. Rather, the companies are taking cues from other successful, hyper-patriotic displays common in popular culture, particularly conservative news media (Peck, 2019). The “hyper-patriotism” that Fox News stars such as Sean Hannity often express are part of a certain “working-class taste politics” used to distance themselves from other taste cultures who would see it as “tacky” (Peck, 2019, p. 142). This is not to say that all of GS’s and BRCC’s customers are politically aligned with Fox News; however, it can be argued that they share a cultural fashion sense. It is possible a different visionary leader with a different type of imagined customer base could create a similar branding enterprise using patriotism but with a different set of taste politics.

The respective founders of BRCC and GS both had the bulk of their service during the Post 9/11 period. Their understanding of patriotism may be defined by Scanlon’s (2005) understanding of Post 9/11 patriotism: high on show, low on substance. BRCC and GS enact two principles of patriotism at play in the immediate period after the September 11th terror attacks—conspicuous consumption and conspicuous displays of patriotic symbols. First, being a good consumer is considered being a good American. Rather than going through rationing or higher taxes to support the nation now at war, patriotic Americans were asked after the 9/11 attacks to increase their consumer debt to support the economy. Importantly, this was not just an opportunistic attitude adopted and promoted by retailers such as Walmart; this message came from the Office of the President (Scanlon, 2005, pp. 175–176). Second, it’s not enough to just *be* a patriot by doing the right things, one must *show* that they are a patriot for everyone to see (Scanlon, 2005, pp. 178–179). This means that patriotism is not good enough if it is not performed in some way publicly.

Embedded in any definition of patriotism is a sense of pride in the country. BRCC and GS argue explicitly that the pride of patriotism, and the pride of being a patriot, is the governing principle (or lifestyle proposition) of their brands. GS, in particular, has several products that emphasize one

of their taglines, “Pride in self, in military, and in country” (Grunt Style, n.d.). Some critics may see their products, and even their customers, as being boastful or even chauvinistic (Niöse, 2015). But for these companies and their customers being proud of something means not being afraid or ashamed to show it. GS and BRCC both show—through their products, web presence, and interviews—that they believe that patriots display their patriotism because patriotism is not just an attitude or belief, it is a lifestyle.

CONCLUSION

“What does patriotism mean to you?” asks a video posted on GS’s website on Thanksgiving Day, 2020. The video begins showing a pickup driving on an open road with two flags flying from poles attached to the truck bed: the American flag and one featuring the GS logo. Over the rock music in the background the narrator asks “What is patriotism? What does it mean? To many, it’s being proud of the greatest nation on Earth.” Until this point, the video seems to fit along with the credo of GS; however, the tone changes. “But it’s more than pride. Patriotism is about respect and responsibility.” The video continues with quick shots showing people wearing GS products, including what appears to be a meeting with GS’s new CEO Glenn Silbert. The video continues with messages of inclusivity and service to the greater good of the country and the community (Grunt Style, 2020b). Perhaps this video shows a shift in how GS understands itself and its relationship with patriotism. Other newer videos on the site emphasize the importance of diversity and respect among the GS employees (Grunt Style, 2021). This may be a subtle way to address the accusations of a hostile workplace allegedly encouraged by founder and former CEO Alarik (Lingle, 2020c).

Shortly after he was released on bail, Kyle Rittenhouse, accused of murdering two people at a Black Lives Matter protest in Wisconsin, was pictured wearing a BRCC T-shirt (Stauffer & Curtis, 2020). Knowing BRCC’s support for previous conservative cause *célébres*, the company was asked about the connection. BRCC then released a boilerplate statement saying that they do not interfere or take stances on pending criminal procedures (Black Rifle Coffee Company, 2020). This caused a predictable backlash from customers of BRCC who accused the company of being “woke” and abandoning their conservative principles. For his part, Hafer seemed confused by these reactions. On November 23, 2020, he appeared on former NRA spokesperson Dana Loesch’s radio show defending his company’s position but also trying to state his personal support for Rittenhouse (Loesch, 2020). However, the

damage to BRCC’s conservative credentials had been done, at least temporarily (Weill, 2020).

One of the more disturbing aspects of these companies is how many of their customers wore their GS and BRCC gear to the January 6, 2021 riots at the US Capitol (Lingle, 2021). It is unknown if they were old fans of the companies or if they just saw the designs as being in line with their beliefs without knowing anything about the companies. Either way, the messaging of BRCC and GS appealed to these Capitol rioters enough for them to show up at the scene wearing this gear. GS quickly and unequivocally distanced themselves from the Capitol rioters while BRCC held its silence (Lingle, 2021).

FUTURE RESEARCH

In this article I was not able to look at the full range of products and media produced by GS and BRCC. Future research should include close textual analyses of their product lines (e.g., the designs on GS’s T-shirts) and written materials (e.g., BRCC’s *Coffee or Die* blog). Additionally, companies such as GS and BRCC should be included in broader management and marketing research on businesses who adopt the lifestyle brand approach. It remains to be seen if their success in using the lifestyle brand model is sustainable.

These are both relatively young companies facing inflection points as they attempt to grow their businesses. It is still unknown if new management at GS be able to purge the company culture of its alleged toxic work environment while maintaining the “look” and other lifestyle codes of the company without their veteran-founder Alarik at the helm. Likewise, will BRCC be able to recover from the blowback among many of their base customers they experienced when they publicly distanced themselves from accused murderer Rittenhouse? Also, will they be able to maintain the lifestyle and culture they wish to promote as they expand and begin to open more and more retail locations, or will they have to moderate their image? Regardless of the long-term fates of Grunt Style and Black Rifle Coffee Company, patriotism will continue to be a profitable enterprise.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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