

Sociocultural brand revitalization

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Sociocultural Brand Revitalization: The Role of Consumer Collectives in Bringing Brands Back to Life

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Introduction

In 2005 two entrepreneurs bought the trademark of a Finnish brand that was in serious decline. The brand was Reino & Aino, a traditional house slipper that had been in production with no change in its design since the 1930s. This risky venture was based on a belief that there was something inherently valuable in the brand and its heritage. Nonetheless, with no real budget or clear strategy for growth and with most of the world poised on the brink of a major economic recession the future should have looked bleak. And yet, something unexpected started to happen. Despite the lack of traditional marketing activity on the part of the company, sales started to increase to such an extent that figures rose from 50,000 pairs sold in 2005 to 500,000 in 2010. The brand had been resurrected and brought back to life by igniting the cultural imagination of the Finnish people. It is this sociocultural brand revitalization process which forms the crux of this paper.

The Finnish Context

Finland offers an interesting cultural context for the examination of brands and in this particular case, the revitalization of brands. Historically, it is a country located both geographically and culturally between East (Russia) and West (Sweden); a country on the edge; at the frontier, or on the margins of the core spaces of Europe (Browning and Lehti 2007). For centuries Finland was part of Sweden and then Russia, only gaining its independence at the beginning of the 20th century. These historical conditions, according to Anttila (2007), have made cultural myths especially important to support the idea and construction of the Finnish nation state even today. These myths can be traced back to nationalist movements, the first of which began in the 19th century and connected Finnish

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3 national imagery with the “common folk”, with rural peasants and folk traditions (Anttila
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5 2007). Other cultural myths of Finnishness tapped into the untamed nature of forests and
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7 lakes, a strong sports culture, and the myth of David and Goliath, or: “little Finland” standing
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9 up to “big Russia” in World War II. During and after World War II, the country suffered harsh
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11 economic conditions and material scarcity which led to values of frugality, utility and the
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13 Protestant ethic becoming central to Finnish consumer culture and sense of national
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15 affiliation (Anttila 2007; Huttunen and Autio 2010; Ryyanen 2010).
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21 Gradually from the 1960s onwards, Finland began to urbanize and the culture
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23 became more fragmented as a consequence of significant changes including joining the EU
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25 in the 1990s (Anttila 2007; Ryyanen 2010). The rapid drive towards globalization from the
26
27 1980s onwards came to be viewed by many as a threat to the unique culture of Finland,
28
29 which in turn resurrected a desire for national symbols that were familiar and culturally
30
31 meaningful (Ryyanen 2010). Finnish companies such as Nokia, Finnair and Neste were
32
33 quick to take advantage of their country-of-origin connection, building on tradition whilst
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35 simultaneously presenting Finland as progressive, responsible and technologically advanced
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37 (Ryan 2008). Against this background of Finnish pride, identity and loyalty we illustrate the
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39 Reino & Aino brand’s transformation from a traditional utility product worn by a small and
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41 distinct consumer segment, to a brand rich in diverse meanings and diverse consumer
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43 groups.
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50 We begin with a review of the literature on brand revitalization from a socio-
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52 cultural perspective. This is followed by details of a longitudinal qualitative study of the
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54 Reino & Aino brand, its owners and its consumers. Through analysis of the findings we
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56 introduce a conceptual model of sociocultural brand revitalization, containing four key
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phases. We identify major trigger points for each of the phases, based on both company and consumer actions. In so doing we contribute to the literature in three ways. First our study offers a sociocultural brand revitalization scenario that highlights the interplay between the actions of consumers and the company. Second, we examine the interaction between the symbolic meanings associated with the brand and the practices employed by consumers. Third, our study offers insights into the relevance of national identity in creating brand meaning.

The brand revitalization gap

Despite the vast amount of work on various aspects of branding theory and practice, somewhat less attention has been paid to the potentially powerful management option of bringing dead brands back to life through the process of brand revitalization (Brown, Kozinets and Sherry 2003; Ewing, Jevons and Khalil 2009). In 2003 Brown *et al* described the need for research into brand revitalization as urgent. But, the majority of studies remain within the marketing management view of the company as controllers of the brand who, through the application of marketing strategies are able to renew and revitalize old or declining brands (for examples of these see Bellman 2005; Cattaneo and Guerini 2012; Hudson 2011; Light and Kiddon 2009; Thomas and Kohli 2009; Wansink and Gilmore 1999; Wansink and Huffman 2001). From this perspective consumers are assigned a predominantly passive role or treated simply as potential targets of marketing communication.

In approaching the problem of brand revitalization, this paper relies instead on a sociocultural branding perspective (Brown *et al.* 2003; Diamond *et al.* 2009; Saltzer-

Mörlling and Strannegård 2004; Schroeder 2009). This position reinforces the notion that brand meaning is no longer solely within the company's control, but is co-created in the market. It is generally accepted that brand meaning is important for consumers' pursuit of identity and social value (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001; Schau, Muñiz and Arnould 2009). Brand meaning is further shaped in a dynamic process where consumers' interpretations and the sociocultural context have a significant impact on the resulting "brand image" (Cayla and Eckhardt 2008). Brown *et al.* (2003) suggest that in order for a brand to be successfully revitalized, it should be able to arouse memories and stories in consumers' minds, inspire a longing for community, communicate something that endures, and contain contradictory aspects. More recently, Diamond *et al.* (2009) described brands as multidimensional systems or gestalts. Hence, meanings abound in a continuous reciprocal interplay within the brandscape (Salzer-Mörlling and Strannegård 2010) or "cultural space where brand meanings are developed and circulated within an ideological setting" (O'Reilly and Kerrigan 2013 p.778). Holt (2004; Holt and Cameron 2010) has developed a model of cultural branding based on case studies of several iconic brands. The cultural brand strategy consists of identifying and addressing a current social disruption, collective anxiety or desire of a nation (Holt 2004, p. 6). The contradiction may be changing masculine identity (in the case of Budweiser or Harley Davidson) or the battle against social discrimination through willpower (in the case of Nike). Many American brands have benefited from employing myths related to national identity such as the American dream, self-made man or frontier ideals of masculinity (Holt and Cameron 2010). Brands can enact a cultural strategy through employing identity myths and taking advantage of ideological opportunities successfully in their marketing mix, using subcultures as their "source material" (Holt and Cameron 2010, p. 187). Such a strategy can be successfully utilized also to "revitalize incumbent brands"

(ibid. 196). According to Holt (2004), however, the role of managers is essential in this process, because while consumers are the ones experiencing and sharing the myths through buying the brand, he argues that consumers cannot do it on their own. In his analysis, strategically planned brand communications are a precondition for identity value and customer appropriation of brand meanings. Other studies of branding from a cultural perspective emphasize the role of consumers as authors of brand meanings.

Previous work has focused on brand user innovation (Berthon *et al.* 2007; Berthon *et al.* 2009; Kozinets, Hemetsberger and Schau 2008; Pitt *et al.* 2006). Accordingly creative consumers modify and adapt market offerings often for the love of experimentation, providing in the process a rich vein of ideas for companies that wish to encourage and enable such activities. Pitt *et al.* (2006) argue that brands move from closed to open, where both brand meanings and the physical format of offerings become more interactive and emergent, blurring the line between buyers and sellers. In this sense, the notion of consumption collectives emerges as important in the life of the brand.

Consumption collectives can be defined as collectives of consumers who share the same consumption objects and/or practices, engage in loops of learning and create and co-produce content surrounding the brand (Kozinets *et al.* 2008). Various forms of consumer collectives have attracted considerable attention from marketing academics in recent years, although terms remain somewhat ambiguous and interchangeable (Goulding, Shankar, and Canniford 2013; Thomas, Price and Schau 2013). For some, drawing upon classic sociological studies, contemporary consumer groups are viewed as subcultures bound together, often by temporary experiences and activities through which strong interpersonal bonds are formed (e.g. Goulding *et al.* 2009; Kozinets 2001; Schouten and

McAlexander 1995). Others perceive the brand as the focal point that binds the group together and acts as a source of linking value (Cova 1997; Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001; Schau *et al.* 2009). More recently, the notion of consumer tribes has emerged to explain the actions of consumer collectives who are members of multiple transient tribes (Cova *et al.* 2007), who may have little in common outside of the collective experience and are not necessarily bound by a common appreciation of a brand (Goulding *et al.* 2013). These studies highlight the ongoing and shared construction and negotiation of meaning in a collective context which, we suggest, is vital for the process of brand revitalization. Importantly, it is within the context of consumer collectives that the creativity and co-creative role of consumers is unleashed (Fournier and Avery 2011; Kozinets *et al.* 2008; Muñiz and Schau 2005; Schau *et al.* 2009).

Consumption as practice

This paper moves toward an integration of the symbolic with consumer practices in order to suggest a more holistic conceptualization of brand revitalization (Schau *et al.* 2009; Warde 2005). The practice view complements the symbolical and communicative aspects of consumption by focusing more on performances and routines of everyday life. Accordingly, what emerges is a focus not only on brand meanings as such, but the ways in which brands are used and their meanings realized in various forms of consumption (Arvidsson 2005). This allows brands to serve as platforms for the productive activities of consumers (Lury 2004). They are not merely seen as semiotic resources, but as fluid and constantly changing objects that consumers define and redefine within their consumption practices (*ibid.*).

A central argument here is that brands cannot exist without being enacted: i.e., brands only become brands as consumers use them in their practices. These practices can be more or less designed by companies through their marketing activities. Nonetheless, because of consumers' productive capacities and unanticipated ways of using brands, they can never be fully dictated to or have meanings and actions imposed on them. Brand management, then, is about "enabling or empowering the freedom of consumers so that it is likely to evolve in particular directions" (Arvidsson 2005 p.244).

Methodology

Data collection and analysis

In approaching the phenomenon of the revitalization of the Reino & Aino brand, the initial guiding question was; *why and how this brand suddenly became popular again* without a clear marketing strategy and virtually no marketing budget. The research process was longitudinal and characterized by an emergent, inductive approach to theory building, where data guides theoretical insights and generates further questions (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser 1978). The idea was to enter the field with an open mind and let theory emerge from the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967) whilst using the extant literature to sensitize but not dictate early interpretations (Goulding 2002). Several different data generation methods were used and theoretical sampling dictated the people, places and contexts investigated. This now established approach in marketing (Goulding 2002; Spiggle 1994) differs somewhat from other qualitative sampling techniques in that sample numbers and respondents are not specified at the start. Rather it is the narratives, ideas and insights generated from talking, first to those people most likely to have experience of the

phenomenon under investigation, which then provides opportunities to extend the research to other user groups and other relevant contexts, armed with preliminary theoretical insights. One requirement of theoretical sampling is that data collection only ceases when no new insights emerge from the data. In line with this approach data were collected and interpreted simultaneously, early in the process. The tool for this was constant comparison which involves early transcription of texts and other materials, the search for commonalities and differences, and the identification of patterns and themes. New sources of data were then selected based on these emerging insights. Fundamentally, the aim was to construct and develop theoretical insights grounded in empirical data that could add a new dimension to our understanding of the phenomenon (Glaser and Strauss 1967). As part of the process a research diary was used throughout to track conceptual development (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser 1978). The research process is depicted in Figure 1.

- INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE-

Initial contact with the company was made in 2009 when the revitalization process was ongoing and the entrepreneurs were curious about what was happening. The first author started to explore the phenomenon by becoming immersed in the context; interviewing the brand owners, analyzing company documents, newspaper stories and online data. This exploratory work was the first step in a longitudinal study with data collected over a four year period spanning the years 2009 to 2013 with follow up interviews with the company executives in 2015. Consumers were recruited from emailing lists and Facebook groups, from the researcher's own social networks and by directly approaching people on the street who were wearing the slippers. The interviewees spanned the age spectrum ranging from teenagers to people in their 80s. This interview data clearly

identified heterogeneous brand meanings and illuminated some of the rich consumption practices.

Other data took the form of participatory observation of various consumer groups in an array of situations including private and public spaces. For example, at teenagers’ ice hockey practice, at an elderly care home and at an advertising agency where employees wore the slippers while at work. Ideas for observing these particular sites were inspired by the interviewees. The researcher also spent time in the company’s newly opened retail outlet, observing customers, recording memos, and conducting interviews with customers and staff. To complement the data, further interviews were conducted with the brand owners and other actors including an author who had collected consumers’ stories about the brand, a local journalist, and a museum curator who had organized an exhibition about the brand and its history. These observations were captured on camera, and notes were recorded in memo form (Harper 2002). These notes and images were later reflected upon and written into the ongoing diary. Additionally, the development of the phenomenon was followed in the media and on social media, and three books related to the company’s story were used as further material for analysis.

A summary of data collection is given in Table 1.

[INSERT TABLE 1 AROUND HERE]

Analysis and interpretation of data were simultaneous and iterative throughout the process and involved interplay between data and theory through constant comparison of the various data sets. Data were grouped into themes in order to develop a conceptual analysis (Spiggle 1994) through axial coding and theoretical abstraction (Glaser

and Strauss 1967). As a result, the focus on symbolism and practices emerged as important in explaining the revitalization of the brand. It became apparent that changing brand meanings was closely connected with changing consumption practices, and there was a dynamic interaction between these two whereby they converged to revitalize the brand. Importantly, the fluid, evolving and flexible interplay between company actions and consumer creativity emerged as central to the resurrection of the brand. Willingness, on the part of the company, to listen to their consumers and allow them to create new brand related meanings, facilitated the formation of consumer collectives in which consumers enacted similar practices and meanings. These then rippled out and were appropriated and subsequently altered by other, emergent collectives. In effect this consumer-centric management approach, aligned with consumer creativity and imaginative play, were central to the brand revitalization process.

Findings

Through the process of analyzing the Reino & Aino brand, we constructed a conceptual model of the brand revitalization process. This illustrates firstly, how both the company and the consumers actively participated in the process and second, the interplay between meanings and practices. The process consists of four phases: 1) Sleeping brand 2) Reappropriation 3) Diffusion and 4) Convergence. McCracken (1986, p.71) argues that cultural meaning is always in transit. We suggest that this mobility of cultural meaning is the basis for revitalizing brands. We also build on recent research arguing that ambiguity and complexity may be advantageous to brands, helping them to thrive (Brown, McDonagh and Schultz 2013; Diamond *et al.* 2009). In discussing our data, we focus on the complex meaning transition processes and the mutual adjustment which takes place between these

actors, leading to ultimate convergence of voices and a revitalized brand which can be co-developed further.

1. *Sleeping brand phase*

The first phase may be referred to as the “Sleeping brand” phase, where the brand was characterized by passivity, inactivity and stagnation. Reino & Aino’s roots go back to the 1930s when the product was first launched. At the time it addressed a real need - to keep feet warm in drafty countryside houses in a country where over half the population lived in rural areas and worked on the land. The brand was thus targeted at the general adult population of Finnish consumers, especially farmers and farmers’ wives as well as the older generation often living in the same household.

Manufacturing the slippers continued throughout the period of industrialization and urbanization of Finland after World War II. But, as people’s lifestyles changed as a result of migration to city apartments and shifts in employment patterns away from agriculture and the land, to manufacturing and the service sectors, the design and marketing of the slippers stagnated and they became outdated. Sales declined, peaking at times of gift giving such as Mothers or Fathers’ Day, but rarely exceeding 50,000 in any given year. Gradually the brand came to be associated with elderly people who continued to retain at least, in part, the rural lifestyles that the younger generations had abandoned. In the late 1980s production was moved to Eastern Europe due to structural changes in the economy and to keep production costs down. The Reino & Aino brand was consequently relegated to playing a minor role in the company's product portfolio and as such was assigned minimal marketing support.

Bringing the brand home: In 2005, two people working for the company, one a factory manager and the other a product designer decided to start their own company by purchasing the trademark. Both had a genuine vision of creating a brand that was above all, Finnish. One of their first actions was to move production back to Finland and recapture the country-of-origin brand identity. This strategic decision can be identified as the key trigger point for the initiation of the brand revitalization process. However, it was also a brave and risky decision, taken at a time when many Finnish companies, traditionally thought of as inherently Finnish such as the Marimekko clothing brand and Iittala glassware, were simultaneously moving production outside of Finland to Eastern Europe and China with the resultant job losses and insecurity that accompanied such actions. In this sense it resonates with Holt and Cameron's (2010) "resuscitating reactionary ideology" tactic which consists of pushing back new ideologies and addressing current social anxieties. Marlboro and Jack Daniels have done this by resuscitating working-class frontier masculinity. In the case of Reino and Aino, consumers were concerned about globalization's increasing negative impact on the Finnish economy and employment. Hence, consumers responded favorably to this action. However, unlike American brands that had extensive marketing communications budgets and creative agencies to help them, Reino & Aino did not employ any formal communication strategy. Instead, the media played a significant role in telling the story. Moving production back to Finland was portrayed as a 'heroic' deed on the part of a small company, providing Finnish people with jobs in the face of growing unemployment and increasing outsourcing overseas. Such actions reinforced the brand as genuinely and authentically Finnish. From here, this connection with national identity started to operate as a platform for strong and diverse emotional meanings which people began to ascribe to the

brand. When interviewing the brand owners, they themselves emphasized the national aspect as vital:

They [the slippers] really represent the whole country, from ten different places in Finland where the product is put together. So, they are really truly Finnish, (Brand owner, interview).

“Finland’s national slippers, the Reino & Aino, don’t seem to suffer any decrease in popularity....”We only sell Finnish products manufactured by ourselves” says the CEO... (Newspaper article)

The owners also modified the product early on, highlighting their Finnish association by adding a small Finnish flag to the slipper (Figure 2).

[INSERT FIGURE 2 AROUND HERE]

The brand as nostalgic trigger: It soon became evident that this resonated in the minds of consumers, evoking nostalgic sentiments connected to the brand’s cultural heritage:

They are just so Finnish...homely, they remind you of the spirit of the countryside and the 1950s when the men came home from the war. Many of them had frozen feet and it was difficult for them to wear any other shoes (Arja, interview).

I guess it is related to supporting Finland and the Finnish origin of the slipper. We don't want things that are just cobbled together and made in any European country....They are ours and we want them to be ours, a Finnish thing, a traditional thing (Field work interview).

Here this 'Finnish' brand came to be associated with history, with nostalgia, with tradition, with ownership and with national identity and pride. For example, the war referred to by Arja, is an important part of Finnish national and historical identity and this connection with the brand serves as a strong link to the past. As such, even though the brand was sleeping and these meanings not yet fully realized by a wide audience, they were still highly emotive and waiting to be awakened. Therefore, for the brand revitalization

process to start in earnest, the company's financially risky decision to manufacture in Finland was essential to ensure that the brand be regarded as truly authentic.

Reappropriation phase

In the second phase of the revitalization process, the role of consumers became increasingly important. The first consumer groups to re-adopt the brand were families. Many consumers reflected on their early experiences of wearing the slippers as a family, as a starting point for their renewed interest. Given the brand's heritage the slippers served as nostalgia triggers evoking feelings of warmth and security:

Everyone has always worn Reino & Aino slippers [at my family's summer house]. They bring back such warm and happy memories ...digging the flower bed and wreaking havoc in my mum's allotments, heating the sauna and just running around. Everyone, Mum, Dad, and Granny used to wear Reinos. There used to be a pile of them and everyone would just wear whichever pair fit them. (Malla, interview)

Here consumers built on previous existing practices related to the brand while at the same time introducing new meanings (from utility to symbolizing family connectedness). The brand also became a symbol of inter-generational transfer as people started to wear the same slippers as their loved ones:

I think it's fun that I wear the same shoes as my grandpa...the same shoes he has been wearing. This is one thing that connects us, wearing Reinos. (Pekka, interviews)

Reinos are a bridge between generations. It is about transmitting the Reino tradition, the cultural tradition that one has held in high esteem and received from somebody else. It has become the symbol for that transfer (Reporter, interview)

The personal, emotional and nostalgic sentiments expressed in these narratives highlight the fact that national identity was no longer the only emotional signifier. Family

connectedness started to grow around the brand as they became increasingly symbolic of family love and home. For example, the brand in the next narrative served to connect a mother and a daughter.

A woman is buying Reinos to send to her daughter who is studying in Germany. The daughter told her that it was cold in her apartment. The mother took considerable time to choose the 'perfect' pair for her and said that she hoped she would continue to wear them when she returned to Finland. (Field notes).

The brand as ritualized gift giving: In turn other close groups started to appropriate the slippers, creating new meanings and instigating rituals featuring the brand. Rituals are a form of “social action devoted to the manipulation of cultural meaning for purposes of collective and individual communication and categorization” (McCracken 1986, p. 78). By engaging in rituals, consumers are able to both affirm, evoke, assign and revise brand meaning in their daily lives (ibid.). In the following narrative we hear how one group of friends modified the gift giving practice previously associated with elderly relatives, to signify key turning points in their own lives.

Our circle of friends has made it a habit for some years now to give Reino slippers to someone turning 30, if not sooner, at least when a man becomes a father, he gets a pair of Reinos (Online discussion board message).

Here the brand is used to mark significant rites of passage, or ritualized events that signal the transition from one status to another (van Gennep 1960). The onslaught of maturity or the major milestone of becoming a father is recognized and celebrated through the gift of the brand as symbolic of this transition. They may, therefore, be seen as an aid or symbolic resource used to signify and navigate the complex mediation of selves on the threshold of transition between two socio-cultural identities (Cody and Lawlor 2011). For others the brand signified endurance, commitment and love. For instance, one young

couple, who had exchanged a pair as a gift to each other, wore the slippers together to symbolize their romantic relationship:

Wearing the slippers creates a sense of belonging together and there are also some romantic feelings attached to it [laughing]...we have been joking about how we will be wearing them together even when we are an old couple in the retirement home. (Helmi, interviews)

According to Mauss (1925) gift giving is a fundamental social system. It signals social solidarity and is located within a system of structured gift exchange and social relationships (Giesler 2006). What we note in this couple's practice, is that the slippers as gift represented more than just an exchange of objects. They were a manifestation of agapic romantic love (Belk and Coon 1993). Objects such as these slippers help "to create a coherent self-narrative out of potentially disjointed material" (Ahuvia 2005 p.183). They are part of the structuration of intimacy through which individuals communicate feelings of love and affection to those close to them (Cheal 2011). As a result of this process meanings become altered in the light of personal narratives and desires. For example, before, perceptions of the brand centered on associations with aging and decline - slippers = old age = retirement home = end of life. But, given in a particular context, these were resignified to mean slippers = old age = endurance = loyalty = togetherness.

The brand as symbolic family: However, brand enthusiasm was not confined to friends, family or lovers. While the slippers as gift came to signify strong emotional feelings in intimate contexts, their use and meaning was also appropriated in other less personal contexts such as the workplace. As well as individuals adopting the slippers as comfortable office shoes, one advertising agency came up with the idea of buying each of their employees a pair. They also set up a shelf in the office for storing the slippers at the end of

the day (Figure 3). This afforded the slippers physical space and signification. Similar to the rituals of “going out” in which goods help consumers transition between the home environment and outside world (McCracken 1986, p.79), this encouraged a ritualized process of discarding everyday footwear at the start of the working day in favor of a more communal, non-hierarchical and commonly shared brand which fostered a sense of common identification.

[INSERT FIGURE 3 AROUND HERE]

This sense of identity or workplace community, according to the director, lay at the heart of the company's philosophy:

We aim to create a sense of family because family is a strong community. There is no better model for a company than a family. A family will stand up for each other and fight for the right things. (Janne, interviews)

It is interesting to note the analogy of the family in this case. Of all the various types of community, in most societies the family is possibly the strongest and most enduring. Unlike neo-tribes (Maffesoli 1996), family members do not oscillate between their own and other families as a fully committed member; there is loyalty, identification, history, strong bonds and a sense of kinship which serves the most basic of human needs - the need to belong (Baumeister and Leary 1995). By wearing and fostering the brand in the office, workers shared a symbol that acted as a common signifier of empathy, protection and belonging - *'a family will stand up for each other'*. This workplace collective's engagement with the brand also served to feed the philosophy of the company as a family - a paternalistic/maternalistic approach to management (Hogg and Terry 2001), with the brand

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2
3 at the centre of its social agenda. Moreover, this was not the only company who adopted
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5 the brand in the workplace.
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9 *Listening to consumer voices:* Drawing from core meanings of tradition and old
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11 age but interpreting them in new ways (ritual, love, and family belonging) as well as using
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13 them in different contexts (at work instead of at home), consumers appropriated the brand
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15 for their own use. However, the core meanings and practices were not lost in the process,
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17 rather they were used as a basis from which to build something new. The company also
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19 supported and promoted reappropriation by recognizing the important role of generational
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21 transfers, for instance.
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26 “The long history of Reino & Aino brings memories, positive memories about
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28 fathers and mothers, grannies and grandpas...people we look up to have worn
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30 them. And the grannies and grandpas and also parents like to buy them as gifts
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32 for their children”. (Brand owner, interview)

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34 In response to this, the company introduced children’s and babies’ models (First Step Reinos
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36 in 2009) in order to support the gift-giving practices in two directions (children to parents to
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38 children). This also enabled children to wear their own slippers instead of borrowing their
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40 parent’s.
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43 “The children’s slippers were the first. We estimated that we would be able to
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45 sell 20 000 pairs but they were sold out much quicker than we anticipated...”
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47 (Brand owner, interview)

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49 Another innovative step on the part of the company was the collection of consumers’ brand
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51 stories which they solicited and documented in book form.
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54 “When we started writing the Reino book during the summer of 2007,
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56 newspaper advertising was used to ask people to send their memories and
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58 experiences of Reinos. Tens of stories were received, from all around Finland.
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60 (reporter, interviews)

The company also began to engage in activities with a variety of Finnish charities including a children's hospital, a care home for war veterans and mother and child shelters. In so doing they firmly aligned themselves with altruistic values that extended beyond commercial interests, gaining in the process greater credibility and new customers:

"A family comes in to pick out Reino slippers for their 5-year-old daughter. The father tells me that a while ago he and his wife read in a newspaper that the company had made a donation to a good cause and afterward they started to give Reinos to their friends as presents." (Field notes)

Essentially, this phase is characterized by building on traditional values, history, heritage, nostalgia, family, and close contact groups. The role of the company is less about 'selling' the brand and more about building a strong, positive and importantly, national brand/company reputation and identity. What we do not see here are aggressive marketing campaigns aimed at brand awareness or even repositioning of the brand. On the contrary, there are subtle interactions between brand owners and consumers. There is recognition of the core values of their existing and expanding consumer base and an intuitive timely response in terms of product modification and new meaning creation. Importantly, although the company are not highly visible in the process, their actions and the result of their actions are, particularly when taken up by the media. This external objective validation adds further support to the authenticity of the brand. During this stage the owners also resisted the temptation to 'impose' meanings on the brand, relying instead on stories and meanings ascribed by consumers which in turn resulted in word of mouth and diffusion of meanings and practices which characterize the third phase.

3) Diffusion phase

During the diffusion phase new meanings and practices started to spread further and diversify. This phase was important because it meant crossing the boundary from insiders to followers who want to be part of a valued cultural phenomenon represented by the brand (Holt and Cameron 2010, p. 243). In this case meanings were constructed and practices enacted that crossed boundaries of formal identifiable groups based on age, gender or social class:

I notice that the customers at the Reino store do not seem to be of any particular age or type. So far, I've encountered young women with their babies, teenagers, families buying everyone a pair of the slippers and some elderly people getting another pair to replace their worn-out ones. (Field notes)

Diffusion of brand meanings: The key trigger point here appeared to be that following family adoption of the brand, children started wearing the slippers to school and in other public places. For them, wearing the slippers became a fashion statement, demonstrating group membership, and personal style as bricolage, by mixing and matching clothes with the slippers to create a unique look.

Well, yes they are ugly. But basically, because they [slippers] are so ugly, they are almost cool. That's what's special about them. . (Pekka, interview)

In a similar vein Murray (2002) suggests that using fashion to express symbolic statements of membership assumes that semantic codes are open discursive systems. Consumers can therefore construct styles by selecting opposing meanings available within their discursive space. Berger and Heath (2007) adopt a position that looks at why consumers seek to diverge from others arguing that it is not necessary to be unique, but to signal particular identities to the broader social world. Very quickly, these symbols of identity spread to other, often unlikely groups. For example, celebrities and well-known figures also began to

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3 play a role in extending brand use amongst their fan base. One of these was a Finnish folk
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5 singer, Kari, who reported his commitment to the brand in various magazine interviews.
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9 I have ensured that everyone in my family's four generations has the Reino
10 slippers to use all the time ...Reino slippers are the best shoes I have ever
11 worn. They are comfortable on your feet because they don't pinch. (Cultural
12 materials)
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14 Extending brand use through advocates: Kari, in his advocacy of the brand,
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16 highlights the intergenerational adoption of the slipper within the family unit ensuring
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18 brand recognition, brand use and brand longevity. In his narrative we not only hear the
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20 voice of an existing enthusiast, but also the prospect of socialized consumers of tomorrow.
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22 The slippers were also reportedly used by young musicians such as Ville Valo, the lead singer
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24 of Finnish "love metal" band HIM. Newspapers reported this as one of the reasons behind
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26 the "new popularity" of the brand among young people. Essentially, unpaid advocates have
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28 been found out to be important for cultural branding (e.g. in the case of Jack Daniel's
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30 whiskey) because they provide credibility, authenticity and more impact than hired
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32 spokespeople (Holt and Cameron 2010, 59). And so the popularity and use of the brand
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34 continued to grow and diversify with established communities adopting the brand as their
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36 symbol. For example, a village committee organized a 'Reino' running competition where
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38 participants were grouped by their slipper size rather than by age or gender (Figure 4).
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46 [INSERT Figure 4 AROUND HERE]
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50 The diffusion phase was further aided and accelerated by the growth in social
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52 media. Photographs of Finnish tourists wearing the slippers at famous overseas landmarks
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54 such as the Arch de Triumph or Grand Canyon started to appear on Facebook. This further
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3 accelerated awareness and stimulated even more diverse practices while reinforcing the
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5 brand's association with Finnish identity.
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9 Seeding new practices: These diverse practices and multifaceted symbolic
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11 meaning can be mutually beneficial for both consumer and brand owner. As people start to
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13 use products in their everyday lives, they become increasingly attached to them. This means
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15 that over time the objects gain significance in mediating several different activities and
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17 relationships (Epp and Price 2010). Hence, there is also greater potential for a plurality of
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19 meanings around the brand. Once adopted, the Reino & Aino brand began to spread and
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21 seed new practices. For instance, in the village who organized the Reino & Aino running
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23 contest, the village committee created a new practice of giving each newborn villager a pair
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25 of slippers as a welcome gift. Additionally, a Reino & Aino themed motorcycle club was also
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27 established in the locality. As brand use spread, fans of the brand started buying several
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29 different pairs for different occasions further diversifying practices and meaning.
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36 To support the diffusion phase, the company started to co-operate with the
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38 celebrities that were using their brand. For instance, they invited two musicians to co-design
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40 their own slippers with the company. In addition, together with a group of artists they
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42 produced a record called the "Love Story of Reino & Aino", donating profits to charity.
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46 4. Convergence phase 47 48 49

50 Investing in the brand: The co-creative spirit: During the convergence phase,
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52 the practices and meanings created by different parties began to translate into new core
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54 meanings and practices. The spread of brand use, the emergence of new consumer groups
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56 and the concurrent increase in sales resulting from these multifaceted meanings and
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practices, enabled the brand owners to invest in product design and bring new colors and slightly modified models to the market. During this stage different consumer groups and communities became particularly important as the brand became a source of linking value (Cova 1997). But, even more important from a brand ownership perspective was that these voices were listened to and responded to. This more visible and active co-operation and co-creation was the catalyst for the convergence phase. In addition, consumer's feedback was sought and noted

Our customers monitors these things. They often call us asking “Are you aware that in this and that store, they sell illegal copies of Reino & Aino? They report it to us and they report it to the media. (Brand owner)

Further, the company actively sought brand-related stories by organizing a social media contest where the audience could vote for an event or deed that best symbolized the brand’s spirit. The winner could then choose a charity to which the company would donate 5000 euros and for voters, there was a lottery for a Reino themed motorcycle and a year’s worth of gas. Here, the voices of the brand owner and consumers combined to co-create a platform for further development while safeguarding the integrity and authenticity of the brand. In this final stage the brand owners started to adopt a more interactive and reciprocal position, organizing their own events and engaging in different kinds of activities ranging from charity events and campaigns to establishing a loyal customer club. As a result they managed to leverage new meanings by welcoming consumer involvement in branding and marketing. To facilitate further adoption of the brand as a community symbol, they now offer, for instance the option to customize slippers (Figure 5).

[INSERT Figure 5 HERE]

This opportunity was taken up by sports teams, hobby groups, families and organizations, with their own colors and logos inserted on the slippers. The company has also invested in building a web store (www.reinokauppa.fi) through which they are now able to sell customized slippers. Whilst distribution had previously been through independent retailers (with the exception of the factory outlet), today they have direct access to customers through the web store which is also a more cost-effective operation. Moreover, while consumer groups still organize their own events, there are now more shared activities. Indeed sponsoring consumer groups' contests and events was one way for the company to be involved without taking too much of a leading role and being seen to subvert consumer creativity:

I think it is part of the core of Reino that the commercial aspect is downplayed, so people feel that it is their common property because it has always been there.... in my opinion, this is why these communities have emerged. They have not originated from us. We have no reason to control them. (Brand owner, interviews)

Figure 6 shows the process of sociocultural brand revitalization with the trigger points identified for each of the four phases.

[INSERT FIGURE 6 AROUND HERE]

In summary, in order to move from "Sleeping brand" to "Reappropriation", it was crucial for the company to re-establish the association with national identity by bringing the production back to Finland. Next, families whose members already had memories of the brand, Reappropriated it and acted as early adopters. The company promoted this by introducing children's sizes to facilitate inter-generational transfers and shared practices related to the slipper's status as a love object. The trigger point for moving from this phase

to the Diffusion phase was when younger generations took the brand outside of its traditional domestic sphere, and started wearing them to school, for sports and as fashion statements. The brand’s popularity soon spread and the slippers were adopted by other consumer groups. Finally, the move to the Convergence phase was triggered by the company taking a more active role in establishing their own events, loyalty club as well as developing the business by setting up a web store. These transformations in the brands success were largely a result of listening to and co-creating with various consumer collectives. They were also based on an oscillating interplay between low and high visibility on the part of the owners - of knowing when to step back and operate behind the scenes, and when to come to the fore as visible active partners in the mutual process of co-creation and co-production.

Discussion

The Reino & Aino case provides several important insights for understanding sociocultural brand revitalization. To begin with, we stress the fact that ultimately, consumers play a key role in determining the success or failure of a brand and as such should be given due consideration as stakeholders. Miller and Merrilees (2013) stress the importance of total stakeholder, both internal and external, involvement in the rebranding process, placing the emphasis on corporate values. Yet they do not include the consumer in this. Holt’s (2004; Holt and Cameron 2010) approach to cultural branding is also mainly centered on companies as the initiators of the process. Our study therefore bridges the theory of cultural branding with theory on consumer collectives in explaining the brand revitalization process. As this, and other research has shown, consumers construct meanings around brands that may differ from those intended by the brand owners and as

such have an important role to play in the co-construction of brand meaning (Kates 2004). Fournier and Avery (2011) argue that open source branding occurs when a brand is embedded in a cultural conversation whereby consumers gain an equal or greater input than marketers into how the brand looks and behaves: "open source branding implicates participatory, collaborative, and socially linked behaviors whereby consumers serve as creators and disseminators of branded content" (p.55). This calls for companies to be active listeners, to be willing to relinquish control, to entertain and even employ parody when appropriate. All of which implies risk. However progressive organizations need to actively co-create brand meanings by developing customer-centric branding strategies which may require going against the grain of contemporary brand management practice (Berthon *et al* 2009). Reino & Aino, through their willingness to listen, learn, adapt and develop their products to serve the needs of their various markets, provide an example of a company who have taken this approach to heart with great success.

Our findings also emphasize the interplay of practices and meanings in creating and revitalizing brands. This approach goes beyond the semiotic level that has already been well developed in previous research, and shows how brand revitalization takes place through practices and material arrangements as well. According to Schau *et al* (2009) practices have a common anatomy which consists of 1) understandings (cultural templates such as the Finnish nation and core values); 2) procedures (performance rules such as times and places - workplace, sport/games, competitions - associated with the consumer ritual); 3) engagements (emotional projects or personal rituals such as gift giving and love tokens). Practices are socially shared and learnt in a group setting whether it is a family, workplace community or a sports team. The Reino & Aino brand not only served as the value link

between members of a single community, but also facilitated a connection between and across various collectives through the construction of new meanings and practices. Indeed the brand can be seen as “social glue” and value link (Cova 1997). It can be argued therefore, that for sociocultural brand revitalization to be fully realized, consumption collectives are essential. They provide important platforms for innovative practices to emerge and spread. They operate as conduits through which new practices and meanings flow, because there are numerous links that connect members (Shove, Pantzar and Watson 2012). These collectives constitute a site within which consumers learn to enact different practices. In order for commodities to become brands and brands to have relevance in consumers’ lives, people need to engage with them actively. Consumption collectives offer a way to do so. In the case of Reino & Aino, the consumption collectives are heterogeneous but have porous boundaries which opens the door to a wide variety of possibilities for creative engagement. In effect the catalysis becomes the brand’s power to act as a symbolic resource for the whole collective.

Finally, our findings reinforce the notion that brands and material objects can play a role in the construction, maintenance and expression of national identities. For example, Diamond *et al*’s (2009) study of the ‘American Girl’ brand of dolls, books, dolls clothing and accessories showed how they personify a particular nostalgic vision of American history and a nationalistic ideal. The case of the former East Germany after reunification also illustrates how objects and brands from recent history serve as a link between past and present. By first adopting and then rejecting western brands in favor of old, familiar East German brands that had almost become obsolete, consumers constructed narratives of national identities as a form of resistance in the face of oppositional

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3 nationalistic practices (Bach 2002; Berdahl 1999). Ultimately, as these studies show, and our
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5 work supports, the meanings of brands may become appropriated, resignified and
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7 reinvented in the light of cultural and national preferences and norms (Dong and Tian 2009).
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11 The Reino & Aino brand encapsulates many Finnish values and behaviors, from
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13 ideals of Finnish rurality and nostalgia to creative, modern youth culture. In Finland, as in
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15 many countries, nationalism and the nation state continue to co-exist with globalization and
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17 cosmopolitanism in the sense of being free from local, provincial or national attachments. In
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19 a way this has resulted in a weakening of national identity, yet the need to maintain a sense
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21 of national belonging remains (Aslami and Pantti 2007). National identity in this sense may
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23 be seen, in part, as a quest to define boundaries in the face of ongoing globalization (Paasi
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25 2002). As argued by Thompson and Arsel (2004), hegemonic brandscapes are structured by
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27 discursive, symbolic, and competitive relationships to dominant global brands. In such
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29 situations, brands that are seen as anti-corporate and authentic and that have communal,
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31 less profit-driven and national values can thrive. A sense of national belonging, however,
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33 does not occur in a vacuum. It needs to be triggered and nurtured through a series of
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35 discursive and symbolic means such as myths, national stereotypes, national landscapes,
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37 national self-images, the media and patterns of consumption (Anderson 1983; Aslami and
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39 Pantti 2007). In today's consumer society popular cultural products are often greater
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41 markers of national identity than those fundamentally associated with nation and identity
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43 (Aslami and Pantti 2007; Holt 2003). Rather than traditional symbols and acts such as flag
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45 waving, consumption and the meanings attached to it results in what Billing (1995) refers to
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47 as banal nationalism, a concept rooted in the mundane practices of daily life. The slippers
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49 discussed in this case are representative of this 'banal' national identity. They have become
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3 rooted in daily practices and are expressive of many Finnish values, whether real or
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5 imagined.
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9 **Conclusion and implications**

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11 This study has focused on sociocultural brand revitalization and highlighted
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13 both consumers' and brand owners activities in the process. As such our findings go some
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15 way towards bridging the gap between the company as central and controlling (Holt 2003;
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17 Holt and Cameron 2010) and consumer-centric approaches that privilege consumer
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19 sovereignty in determining brand meaning (e.g. Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Muñiz
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21 and O'Guinn 2011; Goulding *et al.* 2013). Moreover, we have focused on practices in
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23 addition to the semantic and discursive level of meanings when considering the (re)-shaping
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25 of brands. From this perspective, brands obtain their meaning not only through a process of
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27 cultural negotiation, but also through activities and objects which are linked with specific
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29 practices. Finally, we offer insights into the role of national identity in the creation of brand
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31 meaning.
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40 With regard to the managerial implications of our work, while our context is
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42 Finland, and we have focused on a Finnish brand, we suggest that the stages we have
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44 outlined are applicable beyond this immediate context. We argue that a declining brand
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46 may not always be a worst-case-scenario for a company. By adopting an open and inviting
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48 approach toward how the brand is used, and carefully tracing and following subtle signs of
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50 new practices and meanings emerging in the market, companies may support and
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52 encourage sociocultural brand revitalization. A brand that is slumbering may even be more
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54 inviting to consumers as a platform for contradictory and innovative activities. Without the
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company's "fingerprint", the brand is more open to reinterpretations and redefinitions. By supplying consumption collectives with relevant resources to complement their practices, companies may facilitate and enable the sociocultural brand revitalization process. Identifying and cultivating linkages that are out of the ordinary and unexpected can further increase interest in the brand. Based on our findings, companies should carefully consider when they should be passive followers and when they should take a more active role in developing their brand.

Whilst we argue that the stages we propose have wider applicability beyond the Finish context, we also recognize that further work needs to be conducted in more diverse cultural contexts in order to take it to the stage of theory testing. However, our purpose was not to develop a universal theory of brand revitalization that would apply in all cultural contexts. Such an objective is not in line with interpretive research which is based on the critical relativist research philosophy (Anderson 1986). Rather, the logic of interpretive research is to provide "a cultural analysis of the meanings and actions that emerge in a given social context" (Thompson and Arsel 2004, p. 640). We have explicated the cultural conditions that have enabled the sociocultural brand revitalization process to take place in one particularly insightful context and suggested new theoretical linkages between previous managerial perspectives to cultural branding (Holt 2004; Holt and Cameron 2010) and consumer collectives (e.g. Schouten and McAlexander 1995) as well as between discursively oriented and practice-oriented perspectives to meaning-making. In the future, this perspective could be further developed by taking into account materiality to an even greater extent (Miller 1987, 2005; Orlikowski and Scott 2015). Future research might explore other types of consumer-led brand revitalization processes in other cultural

contexts. Furthermore, research focusing on the mechanisms of contagion occurring during the revitalization process and how companies can facilitate it would be valuable in order to understand similar phenomena in more detail.

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Type of data	Amount of data	Description of data	Use of data
	28 interviews, approx. 21 h of recorded material	Interviews of consumers (19 people) age 15-80; 12 women and 7 men; average duration 45 min; interviews with entrepreneurs (3 times; average duration 1 hour) and other stakeholders (5 interviews, 1 hour)	Helped to make sense of the consumer practices and meanings related to the brand by different kinds of people of all ages. Allowed an in-depth inquiry into how consumers perceived the brand in their own activities and how they created meanings for it.
Ad hoc and informal interviews	Dozens of interviews related to observations, their duration ranging from 5 to 30 minutes	Interviews conducted with consumers during fieldwork at the Reino store, at the consumer-organized and company-organized events	Provided support for the interview data. Strengthened the understanding of meaning changes and complemented the observational data in consumer-organized events, because the interviewees could account for their practices and actions also verbally to the researcher.
Field notes and observations	54 pages	Fieldwork conducted at discrete company-organized and consumer-organized events (altogether approx. 1 week)	Participant observation facilitated the contextualized understanding of consumer practices and the objects and surroundings where these practices are enacted in order for the meaning change to take place.
Cultural materials	Dozens of online and offline articles, photos, advertisements, leaflets, the	Articles and books written about the company in the media along with the photos published with these and the company marketing materials.	Provided a broader sociocultural background for analyzing the case of Reino & Aino and the meaning changes taking place throughout the study period.

	Reino books (3)		
Online discussion board and fan group data	Dozens of blog posts, discussion board messages, Facebook fan group messages	Data from approx. 20 different online forums where the brand was discussed during the study period	Provided support for the interview data and fieldwork, strengthening the interpretations.
Research diary	100 pages written in black notebooks as well as word files on the computer	Reflective research diary that helped to develop theoretical insights on the Reino & Aino case	In line with the principles of grounded theory, helped track the emergence of theoretical ideas and their development. Helped to document the experiences of the researcher first hand.
Photos and video	300 photos and 10 hours of video material	Photos and video taken by the researcher and by consumer community members (downloaded from their websites)	Worked as a memory repository for the researcher, helped to illustrate and visualize the data.

FIGURE 1 The research process

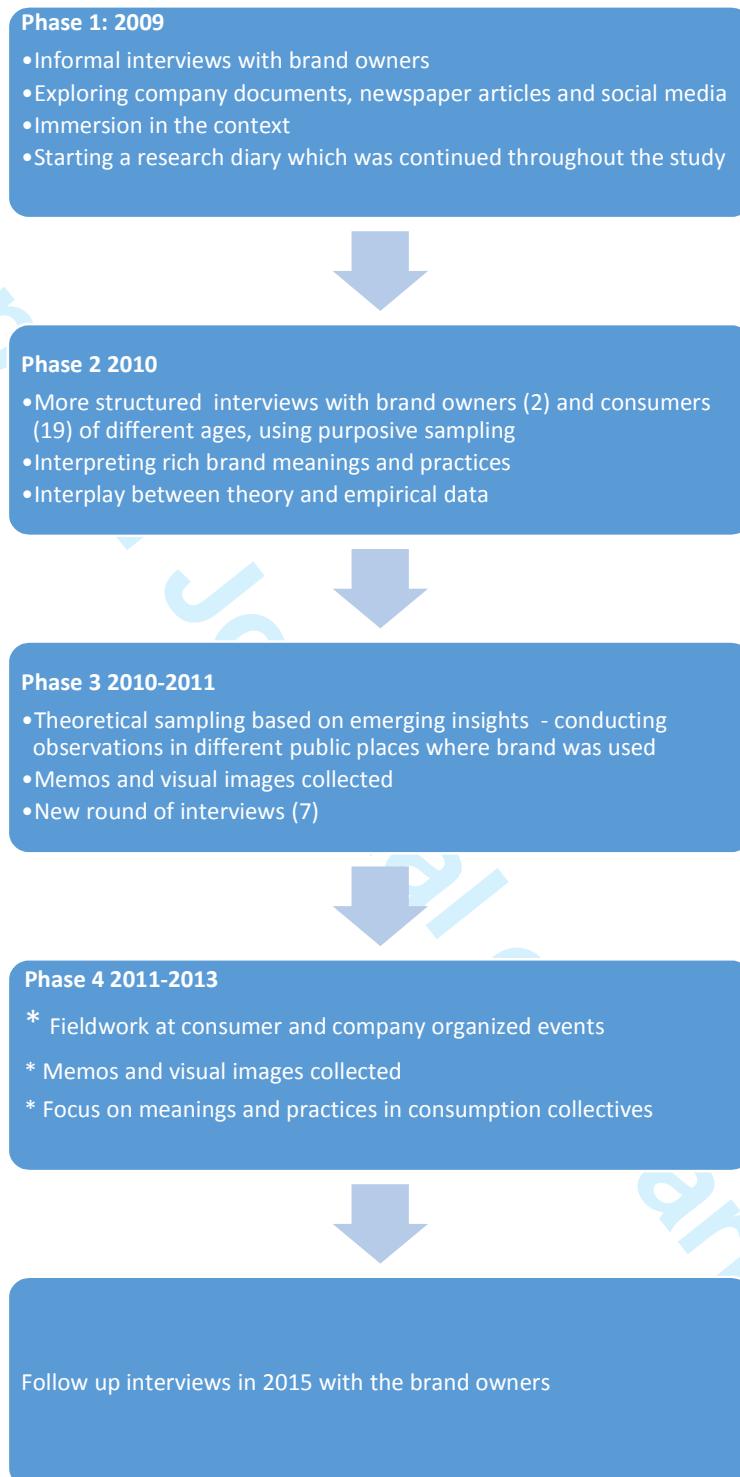




Figure 2: The Reino & Aino slippers
130x113mm (150 x 150 DPI)

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Figure 3: A shelf of employees' slippers
276x368mm (150 x 150 DPI)



Figure 4: The Reino & Aino running contest
221x166mm (150 x 150 DPI)

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Figure 5: Customized slippers
233x110mm (96 x 96 DPI)

FIGURE 6: The Cultural Brand Revitalization Process – key trigger points

