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Branding Remembrance: The Symbolic and Material Imaginaries of the Poppy

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*“Branding Remembrance:
The Symbolic and Material Imaginaries of the Poppy”*

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Abstract

Given the centrality of collective memory in identity-building processes and common perceptions of national belonging, this project explores the social significance of national memorialisation through the corporate-like design and promotion of its symbolic and material 'brand'. By drawing upon Melissa Aronczyk's (2013) work on *Branding the Nation* and Michael Billig's (1995) concept of *Banal Nationalism*, this paper develops the concept of *banal nation branding* - namely the naturalised 'advertising' of the imaginative presence of the nation in everyday life. Within this theoretical framework, the Remembrance Brand promoted by the Royal British Legion is treated as a national sub-brand of Britain that provides a privileged symbolic and material vehicle to explore the banal promotion of national affiliations through the collective experience of war (past, present or future). By methodologically conflating marketing research and critical discourse analysis, this paper assesses the ongoing commodification of collective memory (and the national identity associated with it), the way it reflects contested politics of representation in Britain, while sketching a sanitised and trivial idea of war. The study concludes that although the Legion has made substantial efforts to shape a more generationally relevant, gender-equal and ethnically inclusive brand, inclusiveness *within* the nation is offset by the subtle promotion of division *between* nations. As a matter of fact, the Remembrance Brand banally fosters and perpetuates a culture of war sacrificialism, which ultimately blurs the distinction between *banal* nation branding and the indirect promotion of *hot* nationalism.

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1. Introduction

The Royal British Legion (RBL) launched the first Poppy Appeal in 1921 as part of a national fund-raising campaign aimed at supporting veterans and civilians directly affected by the First World War. Since then, every year millions of people across Britain have pinned the red flower to their lapel during the first two weeks of November leading up to the Armistice Day (today known as the Remembrance Day or Poppy Day), which falls on the 11th of November. Official commemorations take place on the nearest Sunday to the 11th, Remembrance Sunday - a solemn occasion “to remember and honour those who have sacrificed themselves to secure and protect our freedom” (RBL, 2017a).

The symbolic use of the poppy is inspired by the poem “In Flanders Fields” by John McCrae (1919), a Canadian army doctor whose verses moved the spirit of the post-war public. Poppies, as originally conceived, were hand-made by wounded soldiers at the Poppy Factory, symbolically called ‘the Factory of Remembrance’ - now a *living memorial* in the London suburb of Richmond (Gregory, 1994). In 1922 the success of the first Poppy Appeal exceeded the Legion’s expectations: publicity posters reading ‘Buy a Poppy for Remembrance Sake’ appeared all over Britain and around 30 million poppies were sold (Saunders, 2014: 119). By the late 1920s, wearing the red flower had already become a central part of the public ritual of remembrance and almost a moral obligation towards the collective trauma of war still so fresh in the collective memory of the nation. Yet, as post-war pacifist movements started to gain momentum, questions over the tendency of the poppy to embody jingoistic sentiments and its inability to symbolise the regret over war casualties started to emerge. Most notably, in 1926 the Peace Pledge Union created a white version of the symbol, a visual pledge against war whose motto ‘No More War’ inscribed in the black centre of the flower replaced the prosaic ‘Haig Fund’ of the red precursor (Saunders, 2014: 157). However, just as the white poppy grew evermore popular, a new world conflict soon unfolded, thereby revitalising the significance of - or perhaps the need for - the remembrance poppy in Britain. After 1945, the symbol effortlessly became the emblematic protagonist of acts of remembrance, not only in commemoration of the two world wars but also of the British conflicts that followed.

Today, the fundraising appeal of the Legion represents one of the most successful charity campaigns in Britain and its red symbol is a banal accessory and urban adornment of the autumn. The image of the poppy as a fragile but resilient flower that grows out of the broken

ground of battlefields, both mirrors and calibrates national sentiments of loss, grief and healing. The Legion - self-proclaimed as ‘the national custodian of Remembrance’ - is the storyteller of such national tale of collective memory. By directing and zooming into the various scenes of commemoration, the charity makes the red poppy the guest of honour at times and an unnoticed participant at others. However, while its blood-red petals are firmly rooted in the national psyche of Britain as a bitter yet comforting symbol, in the last couple of years a recognised social pressure on public figures to wear the poppy, acts of rebellion against its geopolitical resonances and the increasing commodification of Remembrance have generated a new curiosity around the significance of the symbol. There are indicators that Remembrance-tide is destined to become a divisive matter, in what is after all a rather polarised society between reinvigorated nationalist sentiments and myths of a global village.

With this in mind, taking advantage of the momentum given by the 1914-1918 anniversary and the extensive preparation for the Armistice centenary coming up in 2018, this study considers how the promotion of the Remembrance Brand, formally trademarked by the Legion in 2001 (GovUK, 2017), shapes multiple symbolic and material imaginaries of collective memory. More specifically, I will look at how the strategic re-qualification of the brand of the poppy offers an entryway to contemporary dilemmas of belonging and articulates conflicted instances of *banal nationalism* - the theoretical pillar of this project formulated by Michael Billig (1995) as the naturalised reminder of national affiliations in everyday life. The choice of the word ‘branding’ is not accidental; drawing from Melissa Aronczyk’s (2013) work, I refer to the careful design and corporate-like promotion of the Legion’s trademark, as well as the production of critical discursive formations. Here, the term ‘brand’ is not solely interpreted as a logo or the mere product of marketing campaigns, but also as every symbolic impression and material gesture that insinuates everyday life.

By looking at the branding of national memorialisation, this project will treat banal nationalism as the starting point of this research rather than as the observable, and perhaps rather obvious, outcome. Through the lenses of national memory, I aim to explore already existing core social dynamics of banal nationalism and look at the intricate discourses they bring about. In this regard, I do not aim to criticise the concept and the value of national remembrance *per se*, most simply I am interested in the consequences of the particular design and discursive exercise of its symbolic and material brand. To address such queries, the project gravitates around three key research questions:

- 1) What does the brand designed by the Legion stand for and how is it promoted?
- 2) How do the branding strategies of the charity both reflect and shape national identity politics?
- 3) How are we asked to “rethink Remembrance” (RBL, 2017b) today and what geopolitical imaginaries is this likely to shape?

The paper is thus organised as follows. In the next chapter, I will review the literature exploring national memory, national symbolism, and nation branding - this will provide the reader with the theoretical toolkit informing the discussion and help me work through the significance of the poppy as a portable *souvenir* of the past, a contested identity symbol, and the iconic logo of a carefully designed brand. This will be followed by a discussion over the qualitative methods I adopted to empirically investigate the branding of Remembrance, including the theoretical and methodological challenges I faced and how these influenced my research design. In the fourth chapter, I will finally analyse the Legion’s branding of Remembrance and critically interpret its discursive implications. More specifically, the chapter will look at the the progressive commodification of collective memory (or a particular version of it); it will assess and problematise the efforts of the brand to reflect an ever-changing national identity; and lastly it will explore the way the brand contributes to shape a culture of war sacrificialism, progressively distorting the original message of Armistice Day.

It will be concluded that while the Legion has made significant efforts to promote a friendly and inclusive brand *within* the nation, the constitutive nature of the brand, as well as its instrumental use, subtly perpetuates division *between* nations. This conclusion matches well the academic curiosity that pushed me towards the investigation of banal nationalism in the first place. As a student in migration studies, I aimed to expose the discursive formation of the collective national ‘we’ through the critical deconstruction of the signalling of *our* symbols, *our* wars, *our* sacrifices, in the belief that a deeply-rooted and taken-for-granted national(ist) thinking is already the *cause* of the contemporary panic over the migration of ‘aliens’, and not only its current *reaction*. The rise of far-right parties makes exclusionary geopolitics extremely evident and observable, however the antecedent and propaedeutic construction of a ‘national self’ and a ‘migrant other’ remains largely hidden behind its banality.

2. Literature Review

While media and online commentators have been widely interested in the significance of the remembrance poppy, the rigorous lenses of academic research have overlooked the many investigative patterns offered by the contested ubiquity of the symbol. The (limited) existing literature that empirically engages with the material and symbolic activity of the ‘national custodian of Remembrance’ helped narrow down the focus of this project and exclude some aspects of British rituals of memory that I had initially considered but have been at least partly explored by other authors - such as, the sacred and religious character of Remembrance (Elgenius, 2005); the geopolitics of the poppy in its various versions, from the white to the purple poppy (Imber and Fraser, 2011; Thorogood, 2015); the conspicuity of the annual ‘Remembrance Show’ in its mediatic, political and cultural manifestations (Andrews, 2011; Harrison, 2012).

While there is still plenty of room for further research on these topics, the branding of Remembrance is still an academically unexplored field, which allows me to adopt a fresh approach to banal nationalism and potentially unveil the naturalised predominance of social branding in our commercial era. This chapter, then, reviews and critically engages with the relevant theoretical concepts that helped me make sense of the Legion’s branding of national memory, by conceptualising the poppy as 1) a material and symbolic object of memory; 2) a symbol of banal nationalism; and 3) the contested logo of the Remembrance Brand.

2.1 Remembrance and Memorialisation

In 2014 in a speech regarding the marking of the centenary of the First World War, Professor Hew Strachan (2014) notes that nowadays “remembrance is quite simply not the right word.” Remembrance and memory are often used interchangeably, nevertheless there exists a subtle distinction between the two that is crucial to the framing of contemporary commemorations, and hence to this research. Today, the act of *remembering*, meant as the direct reminiscence of the past, has essentially been replaced by a process of memorialisation - as Rémi Dalisson (2013) puts it, “11 Novembre: du souvenir à la mémoire”. While the direct recollection of the past is ‘only’ filtered by one’s own understanding of what happened, memorialisation is

filtered through one's *imagination* of that very understanding, facilitated by the inventive exposure to images, stories and representations of the past passed down through generations. In this regard, a crucial element of the process of working through collective traumas such as wars is the ability to re-imagine, sanctify or forget in every act of remembrance, inevitably leading to the creation of multiple (hi)stories of memorialisation. As a result, collective memory becomes an ever-unfolding reinterpretation of the past and a reflexive reworking of the present, coming to mirror and embody the needs of the contemporary, whether that be nostalgic, grieving or forgetful (Cherry, 2006).

From being the sole prerogative of psychology, memory has been now generously explored in sociology (see Jedlowski, 2001), cultural studies (Connerton, 1989; Lachmann, 2004), and finally human geography (Bennett and Bennett, 2000; Hoelscher and Alderman, 2004). Wachtel (1986: 216) remarks that “[t]he preservation of recollections rests on their anchorage in space” and, largely drawing on the work of Maurice Halbwachs (1992), cultural geographers have explored the materialisation and the mapping of memory in specific urban settings (Dwyer, 2000; Till, 2001; Crang and Travlou, 2001), in the abstract space of collective imaginaries (Edensor, 1997, Gillis, 1999), intimate dimensions of private and personal mourning (Bondi, 2015; Robinson, 2005; Maddrell, 2009 and 2016), or even in the virtual spaces of the internet (Danilova, 2015). In his influential essay “Between Memory and History” (1989), Pierre Nora reflects upon the way memory has a history on its own that evolves through time. As a result, according to the author, *milieux de mémoire* (environments of memory) are replaced by self-conscious *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) through a reflexive organisation of the past in the present: “We must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations ... because such activities no longer occur naturally” (Nora, 1989: 2). Sites of memory include museums, cemeteries, monuments and squares, as well as the discursive and material rituals involved in their production, distribution and visualisation (Johnson, 1995).

Although Nora's dichotomy between 'true' and 'modern' recollection of the past is somewhat problematic (see Withers, 1996), the author notes that in contrast to direct reminiscence, modern memory needs to rely on the traces of the past, and that material remnants come to haunt our imagination (Nora, 1989: 9). The obsession with material traces is generally aimed at validating our reminiscences and at searching for a tangible connection with the past, so that material links can be translated into emotional ones. In the case of the poppy brand, for instance, this search for material connection is rather evident through the commercialisation

of items containing the earth, the metal or the artillery shell fuses recovered from major battlefields. On the same note, in *Specters of Marx* (1993: 9) Derrida argues that “nothing could be worse, for the work of mourning than confusion or doubt: one has to know who is buried where.” With reference to the tradition of Remembrance in Britain, Inglis (1993: 22) argues that the loss of many soldiers abroad “caused a rupture in long-established patterns of grieving, which had traditionally taken place around the dead body and the grave”. The erection of memorials and the resourcing to rituals such as the tomb to the Unknown Soldier, reflect the need for a symbolic and material visualisation of the past in acts of mourning and remembrance (Mosse, 1990; Raivo, 1998; Atkinson and Cosgrove, 1998).

Memorials, however, are never just “containers for the past”. Rather, as Till elegantly puts it, “[t]hey are fluid mosaics and moments of memory, matter, metaphor, scene and experience that create and mediate social spaces and temporalities” (2005: 8). Along the same lines, in a psychological analysis of the relationship between subjecthood and urban spaces, Freud notes the way London’s memorials provoke an on-the-spot contemplation of and confrontation with the past (Cherry, 2006). In this sense, sites of memory are inseparable from the physical space in which they are situated. However, what if these *lieux de mémoire* are portable and ubiquitous like the remembrance poppy and its brand? Geographers have vastly explored the symbolic materialisation of memory by mainly focussing on fixed sites, and while Nora (1989: 22) introduces the notion of ‘portable’ *lieux de mémoire* himself, the way the physical mobility of ephemeral objects of memory can be mirrored by the flexibility of their symbolic significance and material usage is largely overlooked. Portable objects that are heavily charged with allusive meaning can carry the same evocative power of fixed sites of memory, but can also represent a moving reminder and an accessible visualisation of the past. In this transportable picture of memorialisation, the act of wearing and carrying the poppy around, as the expression of the individual and/or collective will to preserve the past is a highly ‘mobile’ practice in both its symbolic and material form.

2.2 Symbolism and Banal Nationalism

Since the end of the First World War, British culture has developed a ritualistic language of memorialisation and today the maintenance of national *sites* of memory, whether fixed or mobile, naturally leads to a discussion over “the complex ways that nationalist imaginations,

power relations, and social identities are spatially produced” (Till, 2003: 290). Throughout history, collective memorialisation has played a key role in processes of nation-building – this section will thus explore the way the formation of national identities becomes visible through banal symbols of belonging.

The *imaginative geographies* of a shared past described in the previous section set the context to the formation of modern national identities, as well as the space for their contestation. Edward Said (2000: 179) comments that the convergence of place, memory and power provides “a coherent identity, a national narrative, a place in the world”. Within the wide literature on processes of nation-building, scholars have long debated the *media* through which ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson, 1991) become self-aware and national identities are ‘invented’ (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) and learnt (Gellner, 1983; Renan, 1990; Miller, 1995). As in any other learning process, visual aids are highly effective tools to enhance the edification of national identities, and national emblems - such as flags, anthems and coats of arms - play a significant role in the envisioning of those alleged invisible bonds that tie fellow nationals together (Jenkins, 2007). Due to their semiotic facility the material and visual presence of national symbols, like the poppy, not only offers the visual proof of common rituals but also provides the context in which the performative living within the same community acquires value (Edensor, 2002).

Symbols are a mere representation of something else and as such they are empty containers until individuals fill them up with meaning (Hall, 1997: 19). Since there is no inherent emotional or cognitive connection between symbols and whatever they stand for, such semiotic process has to be learnt (Geertz, 1973: 216) - this individual sense-making naturally implies that collective symbols will mean different things to different people, at different times (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008). Along the same lines, Sperber (1975: 48) argues that the interpretation of a symbol is not a revelatory analysis or the elucidation of the content, role and purpose already encoded in it, rather it is the creative process of elaboration. In other words, symbols provide the opportunity and the semiotic channel to create meanings, without being meaningful *per se* (Quinn, 1994: 5). This mechanism implies that for instance, while the poppy might look identical on people’s lapel, it does not necessarily show a common understanding of the significance of the symbol, nor does it signal a coherent identity behind it.

Regardless of their meaning, national symbols might become so visually integrated into the ordinary picture of the nation that they can almost disappear into the background. This leads me directly to Billig's (1995) notion of 'banal nationalism', namely a reminder of national affiliation that is *observable* but often not *observed* in the everyday life of the nation. The author argues that national identity is not "an intermittent mood in established nations, it is the endemic condition" (Billig, 1995: 6), so deeply ingrained in everyday thinking and practices that rarely captures our attention. Symbolic representations that 'flag' the presence of the nation on a daily basis - from the use of deictic language to prosaic expressions of national fandom - are no longer registered as geopolitically relevant and, to borrow Billig's words, they are only "mindlessly remembered" (1995: 144). Consequently, although it might be tempting for national leaders to enforce obeisance towards national symbols as part of a nation-building strategy, as Shevtsova (2003) points out, this move generally proves to be rather counter-productive. For instance, in recent years so-called 'poppy fascism' - a term coined by journalist Jon Snow (2006) to indicate the recognised social pressure, especially on public figures, to wear the red flower - not only has created further division over the significance of remembrance, but has also made people suddenly suspicious of the value of a symbol that perhaps they were not questioning or even paying attention to before.

Authors criticising Billig's theory (see Sutherland, 2005; Skey, 2009; Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2014) are concerned with the lack of complexity of his empirical evidence, limited in terms of both quantity and quality. Michael Skey (2009) influentially notes that Billig does not problematise enough the way individuals themselves reproduce the nation through 'banal' acts, for instance via the subjective endorsement of visual objects. Moreover, while Billig (1995: 7) firmly notes that "banality is not synonymous with harmlessness," Jenkins (2007) maintains that defining mundane nationalism as 'banal' can be misleading or epistemologically limited to help our understanding of the everyday relationships between common-place and national affect. The fact that something is perceived as ordinary does not necessarily imply its emotional banality, and for instance, as Wiltegren (2014: 4) comments, "the background presence of a flag might be anything but banal in the emotional sense". Finally, Reicher and Hopkins (2001: 3) argue that an accurate investigation of banal nationalism should go beyond Billig's considerations. Scholars should challenge the default assumption between such symbolic signals and identity formation, as well as interrogating the way banal national signals can mobilise 'hot' nationalist sentiments - as it will be further explored, this critique will be particularly relevant in the analytical work of this project.

In light of this emerging body of critical literature, which remains hugely indebted to Billig's work, this project hopes to learn from and contribute to the intellectual heritage of banal nationalism, by adopting a fresh approach to the investigation of national imaginaries and bringing to academic attention the case of the Remembrance Brand – an omnipresent instance of banal nationalism in Britain.

2.3 Nation Branding and Material Culture

The study of collective memory and national identity explored in the previous sections brings about questions over authority (Trouillot 1995, Gillis, 1999) and, as Connerton (1989:1) notes, “control of a society's memory largely conditions the hierarchy of power.” When national memory, or any other important aspect of national identity, is treated as a brand and its property rights are given to branding experts - equipped with marketing tools and systems of production and distribution - new prospects of power and persuasion inevitably emerge. The study of the sociology of national brands thus provides a key platform to explore processes of identity-building and sentiments of national belonging (Holt, 2006). Building on that, this section looks at Aronczyk's (2013) theory of nation branding and its relationships with material culture - this will help me devise and develop the concept of *banal nation branding*, as well as defining my theoretical framework.

It is worth pointing out that here the word 'brand' is interpreted in both marketing and sociological terms. The word is not simply used to indicate a logo or the mere product of marketing campaigns, but also “every word, action and image that you put out into the public” (Aronczyk, 2009: 20). In marketing terms, the outward expression and the overall communication of a brand is called *brand identity* (Nandan, 2005). The brand identity typically reflects the efforts of the brand owner to create a specific perception in the mind of the audience - this mental impression that the user forms and elaborates is called the *brand image* (ibid). The latter does not necessarily correspond to the former, and the brand image might come to present or lack certain interpretative aspects that have escaped the 'control' of the brander. In this regard, brands represent critical discursive formations that own their very existence to the claims made in their name. Consequently, a brand can be interpreted as a composite set of symbols, holding the same epistemological and allegorical implications explored in the previous section. Since brands generally present additional eloquent

elements compared to the single symbolic entities that composite them, their message as intended by the brander is potentially less ambiguous. By contrast, ‘mute’ or ‘plain’ symbols, like the poppy, hold the ability to (incoherently) group different views and interpretations under the same symbolic umbrella.

In her work on *Branding the Nation* (2013), Melissa Aronczyk looks at how national imaginaries are increasingly developed and learned through the corporate-style design and promotion of a national brand. Given the central role played by collective memory in shaping a nation’s identity, by taking inspiration from Aronczyk’s work, I will treat the Remembrance Brand promoted by the Legion as a national (sub)brand, and the ‘national custodian of Remembrance’ as its brand owner. After all, as Aronczyk (2009: 27) puts it, “if branding is the genre of the contemporary age, those fluent in the language - branding experts - become the translators, and their expert knowledge the frame of reference.” When the *banal* promotion of the nation passes unnoticed, the project of branding may appear particularly sinister as a form of ‘occult advertising’ of the nation, here defined as *banal nation branding*. With reference to the branding of Remembrance, this concept is meant to indicate the ordinary flagging of the nation, by exalting the importance of remembering the collective (military) past of the nation and support its future.

Conflating branding strategies with processes of national-building does not mean to elide core differences between the individual as a citizen and as a consumer, nor does it intend to fit complex social dynamics into simplistic economic paradigms and pre-ordered marketplace scenarios. In this regard, it is worth noting that here consumption, and more specifically the consumption of collective memory, is interpreted as a multi-layered set of active, dialectical, social relations which depend on existing social dynamics while creating new ones (May, 1996). In the context of nation branding, then, emblematic commodities like the poppy can represent a privileged ‘material vehicle’ (Foster, 2006: 297) to explore contemporary geopolitical dynamics of material culture. Building on that, Foster (1999: 279) claims that the production of national material culture has begun to shift from essentially political rituals to the commercial ones of the marketplace. While this position possibly exaggerates the ability of the market to generate persuasive national identities (Edensor, 2002: 120), it remains particularly relevant when observing the commodification of important aspects of the nation, such as collective memory.

Such focus on national material culture does not intend to disregard how factors such as gender, class and ethnicity all contribute to shape identity through material objects. Rather, it means to suggest that objects, just like people, are often conceived as belonging to nations or to specific national brands (Edensor, 2002: 114). The activity of branding is increasingly in vogue among established nations, backed by the growing aestheticisation of consumer culture across the consumption spectrum (Ellingsen and Johannesson, 2011). The relationship between visibility and visibility is crucial to the practitioners of (banal) nation branding, who attempt to fill the gap between the brand identity of the nation and its image (Aronczyk, 2013). Effective visual branding is conducted through the persistent use of particular visual elements and unique logos, like the poppy. While authors such as McCracken (1988) claim that symbolic consumption should be understood by looking at the visual affinity between identity and consumption, this can potentially result in reifying, simplistically interpreting or unjustifiably over-thinking the intimate relationships between people and objects (see Appadurai, 1986; Miller, 1987).

In this regard, scholars of material culture (see Fiske, 1991; Campbell, 1995; Miller, 2005) would probably question my decision to focus on the construction of national brands from above (i.e. production), rather than their formation from below (i.e. consumption). It is crucial to clarify, however, that by focusing on the brander rather than the consumer, I do not mean to consolidate the (misleading) idea that consumption is actually ‘produced’ by a branding mastermind, nor to infer that it is possible to adequately understand the consumer’s identity by looking at the way brands are centrally designed. I am well aware that the idea of communication through consumption is rather problematic (see Campbell, 1995), and as such I do not mean to speculate about the *image* of the Remembrance Brand. Rather, I aim to explore the potential implications of the promotion of a specific *identity* of the brand - this choice will be further motivated in the following chapter focussing on the methodological design of this research.

3. Methodology

3.1 Pilot Research

Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008: 556) propose a ‘wait-and-listen’ approach to explore the way mundane nationalism marks its presence in everyday life. However, when I first became (academically) interested in the social significance of national memorialisation in the UK, I thought that the systematic observation of commemorative rituals and the careful recording of naturally occurring conversations would have not gotten me any further than the ‘pub-like’ discussions on the poppy I normally engaged in. Moreover, while the overwhelming presence of the remembrance poppy on people’s lapel, taxis and schools provided a rich visual narrative and represented a key source of empirical data, mere observation and methods of visual literacy would have not helped me to effectively break into people’s worldviews - after all, the ubiquity of the poppy provides only an *image* and not the *imaginary* behind it. Material culture scholars (see Nicely, 2009; Megoran, 2005) have convincingly proposed ethnography as a privileged research method to unveil popular geopolitics, unfortunately due to the timing of the research the conduct of proper ethnographic research was already not possible.

At the end of November, then, when poppies were already disappearing from the urban setting, I conducted pilot interviews (n= 10) in the belief that a conversational approach would have granted me access to common perceptions of national memorialisation, or at least introduce me to the ‘heart of the matter’ (Schostak, 2005). As I conducted my pilot interviews (guided and open-ended conversations), I was faced with two major empirical and theoretical challenges that largely influenced not only the methodological approach I eventually adopted for the conduct of this project, but also its very research focus. First, by interpreting the poppy as a symbolic instance of banal nationalism and a taken-for-granted accessory of the autumn, I was attempting to query something I expected to go unnoticed. Inevitably, as soon as I asked respondents to reflect upon the significance of the symbol, I automatically gave cognitive visibility to something I claimed to be invisible in the first place.¹ Second, the ten respondents I interviewed provided ten very different understandings of the symbolism of remembrance. Due to the limited scope of an MSc dissertation, then, an

¹ This assumption was also ‘confirmed’ by one of the interviewees who affirmed: “I did not question it [the remembrance poppy]. I thought it looked nice, I didn’t necessarily know what it meant. You would wear it ‘cause everyone was wearing it” (see Appendix 5).

interview-based research would have run the risk to either homogenise the plurality of people's views and experiences, or to obtain rather inconclusive findings.

As a result, to preserve the academic rigour and credibility of this study, which is limited in time and means, I decided to only focus on the brander of Remembrance, and not on the consumer. I contend that the consumption and the production of social brands do not stand isolated in opposition, but are entangled in the same dialectical relationship; consequently, the consideration of both the brander and the consumer would have allowed for a complete grasp of the whole picture. However, I hope that the insights brought about in this study can shed light on the relevance of banal nation branding through the lenses of memorialisation and inspire the conduct of complementary studies addressing the national consumer audience.

3.2 Critical Discourse Analysis

Branding significantly depends on the development, ordering and communication of particular discourses (Fitchett and Caruana, 2015). Consequently, if branding is discursively organised, then critical discourse analysis represents a key methodological tool for the deconstruction of branding strategies and the analysis of the social communication of marketing (Ellis *et al.*, 2011).

As the activities of branders have pervaded many aspects of social life, in the past two decades critical discourse analysis has acquired centrality in marketing research and consumption studies, relying on approaches broadly inspired by material culture scholars (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). As Dittmer (2010: 285) notes, researching the role and implications of discourse formation means to denaturalise dominant social relations. In this regard, Thompson (2004) urges consumption and marketing researchers to abandon agnostic positions and critically unpack the assumptions behind the discursive promotion of the taken-for-grantedness, or what potentially would become taken-for-granted (Rose, 2012). Inevitably, this type of analysis opens up questions regarding the economic, political and social function of branding through the critical evaluation of 'material discursive intra-actions' (Barad, 2000).

Finally, critical discourse analysis is interested in the passive and active play of both verbal and nonverbal language, in terms of its presence, absence and practical usage (Waite, 2010). This approach naturally lends itself to the investigation of the 'banal'. By adopting a Foucauldian approach, I tested the analysis of what the Remembrance Brand says against what it potentially omits (Fairclough, 2003). This helps to question the way taken-for-granted geopolitical understandings are constituted and communicated (Dittmer, 2010).

3.3 Interviewing

By relying on my personal network, I arranged an interview with the Centenary Campaign and Marketing Manager² of the Royal British Legion. The complementary role of interviewing served to gain a first-hand understanding of the official stand of the charity, learn about future directions of the brand, and ultimately corroborate the qualitative data I had already collected. Being an elite/expert interviewee, my respondent was speaking on behalf of the whole charity. Consequently additional accounts would have hardly brought about new insights, while my insistence could have exacerbated the collaboration with the Legion.

The conduct of an open-ended and semi-structured interview - or 'guided conversation' - has guaranteed mutual understanding with my respondent (Dörnyei, 2007) and allowed me to freely navigate through different research topics while always keeping sight on the main focus of the study (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). Berg (2007) suggests to rely on a simple checklist to make sure to go through all the salient points, while safeguarding the natural flow of the conversation. Before the interview, a copy of my checklist was shared with my respondent, along with an information sheet (further discussed in person) and a detailed consent form (see Appendix 3). This turned out to be extremely useful, since the interviewee, who had the chance to familiarise in advance with my research topic, came 'prepared' to our meeting and brought additional material to share with me.

² The interviewee requested to remain anonymous.

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

I have triangulated my approach by using primary and secondary research. I relied on online commentaries and blogs, newspaper articles, online videos featuring ceremonies of Remembrance (BBC 2013a and 2016) and short video inserts about the significance of the poppy. Moreover, I have attempted to immerse myself into the project by visiting war memorials across London, as well as the Imperial War Museum. This wide range of sources have been indispensable to help me identify and untangle the discursive tension surrounding the branding of Remembrance. However, the Royal British Legion's marketing material and 'promotional swag', its website(s), social network profiles and YouTube channel, as well as my visit to the PopIn Centre in London, have represented my major source of primary data.

The 2017 audience research and the internal strategy briefings that the Royal British Legion has generously agreed to share with me have been of unique importance. This material, which is not publicly available and could have not been obtained otherwise, granted me access to insider-knowledge on the current strategies of the brand, the plans for future campaigns and projects, and the marketing goals of the Legion as internally discussed within the charity. For the purpose of this study, the audience research issued by the Legion has provided me with more insight on the brand producer than it has on the consumer. Yet, it is worth considering that similar consumer research might be used to investigate popular culture and public opinion on national Remembrance by future studies focusing on the consumption side of the sociology of the brand.

The collected data were organised according to a thematic framework, which allows the theory to deductively guide the research and the data to inductively shape its analytical route (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006: 82). I created a thematic map which helped me to visualise my findings and coherently organise them. Through a second analysis of my data, I re-elaborated my thematic groups to ensure that the collected material would 'speak' for itself (Strauss and Corbin, 2008). Consequently, I managed to discern the recurrent aspects of the branding of Remembrance that seem to play an important role in the formation of symbolic and material imaginaries. This work has ultimately translated into the thematic structure of the analytical chapter that follows.

4. Analysis

The Remembrance Brand is both a *concept brand* - namely, it promotes the preservation of the abstract and symbolic value of collective memory - and a *commodity brand* - as it is associated to an actual service and trademark supporting ex-servicemen and women (Briciu and Briciu, 2016). This dual nature of the brand is well encapsulated by the poppy, which is both a potent *lieu de mémoire* symbolically reminding of the past, as well as an actual marketable product generally available through a small monetary donation. Building on that, the role of the Royal British Legion as both the brander and the ‘national custodian of Remembrance’ can reveal complex imaginaries of banal nationalism, while shedding light on the way today’s national memorialisation is placed within the commercial realm of modern political economy.

In the past twenty years, the Remembrance Brand has carefully mirrored events of popular geopolitics and its identity has been attentively designed around the context, goals and challenges of modern memorialisation. In 2009, for instance, the prosaic ‘For their sake, wear the poppy’ campaign was hazarded after the Iraq war, while a heavily family-oriented strategy was adopted in 2013, when families were reuniting after British troops withdrew from Afghanistan. Most recently, preparations for the 2014-18 centenary have marked the beginning of the new strategy of the Legion, which culminated in 2016 when the public was invited to “rethink Remembrance” (RBL, 2017b). In this regard, in 2014 the Legion’s Marketing Director, Gary Ryan, affirmed: “From a PR perspective there’s no better time to make changes to our marketing than over the next two years” (Joseph, 2014). Then, I would add, there is no better time to start reflecting upon the social implications of such changes.

With this in mind, while acknowledging that the Legion has launched a new Remembrance ‘collection’ every year (as most branders do), in this analytical chapter I will critically assess the strategic ‘makeover’ of the brand since 2014, by attempting to unpick the material and symbolic discourses that its specific design and promotion potentially bring about. More specifically, I will look at the progressive commodification of the Remembrance Brand; the way its design calibrates modern understandings of Britishness (whatever that means, if anything at all); and the shift from a message of ‘Never Again’ to the perpetuation of a culture of war sacrificialism and triumphalism.

4.1 Remembrance for Sale?

While the poppy has long been an iconic national symbol and Remembrance Day marked on the national calendar, the Legion formally trademarked its brand in 2001 (GovUK, 2017), whereby inaugurating the marketing orientation of its strategy. With this in mind, this section looks at the relatively recent ‘poppification’ of Remembrance - namely, the visual protagonism of poppy-inspired products and the year-round promotion of the brand - as the critical result of the progressive corporatisation and (charitable) commodification of Remembrance fiercely pushed by the Legion in the last few years.

The poppy enjoys an impressive recall rate (97% according to the Legion’s website), yet in 2013 the Remembrance Brand ranked lower than newer bereavement military charities, such as Help for Heroes, in the Charity Brand Index (Third Sector, 2013). Consequently, in anticipation of the key commemorations of the 2014-2018 centenary, the Legion launched a pivotal commercial strategy that largely marked the merchandising shift of the Remembrance Brand. A new Head of Trading, E-commerce Director and Events & Campaigning Manager were recruited, new commercial partnerships were created and order fulfilment services were outsourced (ECOMD, 2014). In 2014, the brand was relaunched under the LIVE ON™ trademark, in the hope to convey a refreshing image and emphasise the welfare work the charity carries out throughout the year but is not so well-known for (RBL, 2017c). Around the same time, the online ‘Poppy Shop’ went live, quickly becoming a key platform of retail that today sells a whole new range of products - from pieces of clothing (such as “I Love Poppy” t-shirts), home gifts (“Mini Poppy Jute Bag will have you looking good and feeling great”) and sport fandom accessories (“Premier League Poppy Pins: Show your support for both your team and troops”) (Poppy Shop, 2017).

The #PoppySelfie campaign, the ‘Poppy Rocks’ compilations, the Poppy Ale (donating 10p to the Legion for every pint you pour) are all examples of the innovative promotional solutions employed by the Legion. And as the Daily Mail notes, “[i]f you feel that paper and plastic is a little bit last year, there is plenty of scope to update your poppy before Remembrance Day” (Kisiel, 2010). The design and distribution of the new Poppy Pin came to almost replace the ubiquity of the cheap assemblage of plastic of the traditional poppy (Rawlinson, 2014) and the Legion itself describes the pin as their most successful product: “[T]he perfect culmination of product and brand” (Vizard, 2017). The so-called ‘bling poppies’ - fine jewellery and limited design collection also available on the Poppy Shop for

up to £750 - attracted strong media attention, as they were endorsed by high profile figures and featured heavily in TV entertainment shows such as X Factor and Strictly Come Dancing (Rawi, 2011). Remembrance Festivals themselves were turned into entertainment show, where glamorous artists annually perform prior to the two minute silence (Andrews, 2011).

As part of this growing commercial strategy, throughout the years the Legion has also developed and progressively strengthened meaningful corporate partnerships. ‘Cause related marketing,’ as advertised on their website, is described as the chance to link external corporate products to the Remembrance Brand, representing a commercial opportunity to “help increase sales, build customer loyalty, retain or recruit customers” (RBL, 2017d). In 2016 alone, Sainsbury’s (a core ally of the charity) raised over £3.2 million for the Legion through store collection and poppy inspired merchandise (RBL, 2017e). Moreover, in 2014 the retailer’s yearly Christmas TV advertisement was produced in partnership with the Legion and told the story of the 1914 Christmas Day truce between British and German troops in ‘No Man’s Land’ (Sainsbury’s, 2014). On the one hand, the moving advertisement sends out the hopeful message that ‘even in war there is humanity’, on the other it depicts a romantic idea of one of the most brutal battlefields of the conflict, and a charitable image of Sainsbury’s. While being described as “possibly [...] the best Christmas advert of all time” (Pocklington, 2014), the promotional video made the top 5 most complained adverts in 2014. The Advertising Standards Authority (2014) received 823 complaints (none of which were upheld) objecting to the way war history had been co-opted by a supermarket with the ‘shameful’ complicity of the Legion.

In light of this diversified commercial strategy, in 2014 the Legion won the ECMOD Direct Commerce Awards (2014), in 2016 it received the Enterprise Award in the third sector and LIVE ON™ was voted as the UK’s most trusted brand (Third Sector, 2016). More importantly, the commercialisation of the brand lead to a double digit increase in income and order value (ECOMD, 2014). To use the words of the Head of Retail Trading, John Norton, the charity has sought “to create more varied products to take us into more places so more people can find out a bit more about what we do” (Vizard, 2017). Beyond the fundraising potential of this commercial diversification, the insinuation of material objects naturally contributes to the symbolic aim of the ‘national custodian of Remembrance’ to spread portable objects of memory. However, while the plain poppy has no immediate, practical function in the everyday life of the wearer and its role is almost entirely symbolic, fashionable or practically functional merchandise that simply happens to be poppy-themed

arguably distract the consumer from the evocative image of the nation, lacking the same symbolic potential of a simple pin. In this view, such objects become an even more banal and stretched reminder of the nation and its collective memory. This might accentuate the distinction between the distribution of portable *lieux de mémoire* and the sale of simple commercial objects available in the Poppy Shop.

Despite that, Norton comments that the charity only took a “light approach” to retailing and marketing so far, and this new merchandising turn “should not commercialise Remembrance” (Vizard, 2017) like some critics pointed out (see Samuel, 2010; Wallop, 2014). After all, the Legion is simply keeping pace with the dominant culture of consumerism to raise funds for a cause the consumer supposedly supports. Interestingly enough, however, in the most recent version of the Legion’s website, the online visitor is faced with two options: to “donate” or to go to “the Poppy Shop”, each respectively matched by a love-heart and a shopping cart icon. The consumer, thus, is given the option to generously *embrace* the value of remembrance or to *buy* it. However, can the consumer actually buy memory, or even the national identity associated with it? If national traditions are ‘invented’ (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983), in the modern era of commercialisation they could arguably also be sold and bought. In their most recent strategy briefing, the charity explicitly seeks new ways to ensure that the public actually *owns* a personalised piece of remembrance and “get everyone to 2 degrees of separation from a personal connection to WW1” (Good Innovation, 2017: 5). As part of the ‘Every Man Remembered’ project, the consumer will be able to shop for a piece of remembrance as well as a personal war story to go with it.³ For instance, the Passchendaele 100 Poppy Lapel Pin - limited item produced for the centenary commemoration of the battle on July 2017 - not only is materially made of “the very essence of the battlefields that the brave men fought upon” (Poppy Shop, 2017), but also comes with a Commemorative Certificate illustrating the story of a fallen British soldier - 60,083 Passchendaele pins for the 60,083 soldiers who died in the battle.

With this wide commercialisation of the brand, since 2011 - when the factory in Kent began the mechanisation of production - most poppy items are now produced at industrial scale or outsourced to the charity’s partners (Saunders, 2014). Consequently, the ‘enchanted’ idea of wounded soldiers behind the production of objects of remembrance has been delusioned and,

³ While this paper was being finalised, as part of the Every One Remembered project, the Legion launched a new virtual platform on which the user can specifically search someone to remember or be matched with one. On the page, it is also possible to view where those being remembered died or are buried, creating an interactive map of national memory.

contrary to popular belief, even the vast majority of ‘traditional’ poppies are no longer hand-made by veterans. In this regard, an article published in the *Legionary* - the magazine of the Canadian Legion - remarks the crucial difference between veteran-made and factory-made poppies: “The disabled veterans in Vercraft and the Red Cross workshops are creating true memorials, while a poppy replica produced under ordinary commercial competitive conditions is nothing more nor less than an artificial flower” (quoted in Saunders, 2014: 134). The ‘emotional dryness’ of industrial production can potentially create an affective rupture between the producer materially making the object and the consumer. Only the Richmond factory remains still active as an almost entirely symbolic site of memory visitable by tourists. In this way, the visitor can still appreciate the material affection of the symbol through the preservation of its *fetishised* modes of production.

Building on the last point, it is worth noting that the symbolic significance of *objects of memory* should not disregard the material relations that make symbolic imaginaries available as products in the first place (Dwyer and Crang, 2002). As a matter of fact, not only memory assumes a marketable form, but also the economic attains a new symbolic materialisation. In this context, the individual is no longer simply wearing a collective symbol of commemoration, but also consuming what is essentially advertised and packaged as a commercial product. In light of the non-duality between commercial and symbolic production, then, the question is what piece of the nation is contained in the Remembrance ‘product’ and what imaginaries the package that the consumer is banally buying actually contains - this will be explored in the following two sections.

4.2 The Brand’s Politics of Representation

For some, the increasing commodification of Remembrance discussed in the previous section jeopardises the ability of the poppy to be a meaningful part of the national material culture. For example, some of the Remembrance jewellery mentioned above are actually sourced from China, consequently the absence of the label *Made in Britain* can potentially disrupt the ability of such products to also stand for a hypothetical *Brand Britain*. This section, then, analyses the extent to which the material and symbolic imaginaries of the Remembrance Brand banally mirror, signal and shape national rituals of identity-building and modern politics of representation in Britain.

The UK does not have an official national day that unites the whole country and currently, in the search for one, Remembrance Sunday is one of the most quoted candidates (BBC, 2013b). As a matter of fact, British culture provides a powerful language of collective memory that still draws from the three traditional institutional pillars of the nation: the monarchy, the armed forces and the Established Church. According to Elgenius (2005), national commemorations are most powerful when religious elements are present, due the ‘sacredness’ of patriotic sacrifice and the religious symbolism of death. The grave music played by the massed bands (such as Beethoven’s Funeral March and Purcell’s Dido’s Lament); the silent and solemn behaviour of the participants, the official funeral clothing of public representatives all manifest the sacredness of this collective secular funeral. The red poppies on the chest of all participants emphasise the unity among the living and the red wreaths on the war memorials signal the connection with the dead. Today, this ceremonial ritual of collective mourning still offers the (challenging) context to the Legion’s work currently aiming to reinvent the identity of the Remembrance Brand: “Forward, not backward looking. Life, not death affirming. Hopeful, not despairing” (RBL, 2016).

In the attempt to update and rejuvenate the brand identity, the charity’s core strategy for the five years leading to its own centenary in 2021 aims to make Remembrance more generationally relevant and more ethnically inclusive. The Legion is well aware that most of its supporters tend to be over 70, white and male and this affects the perception of the brand. The ‘Women at War 100’, for example, seeks to highlight the historical contribution of the female corps and auxiliary work during the Great War, while giving adequate attention to new generations of service-women (RBL, 2017f). However, if the significance and the work of the Legion has to carry on in the future, the engagement of young people represents a priority in the Legion’s approach to the centenary, especially in light of the inevitable and forthcoming extinction of the old guard of veterans. The challenge for the charity is to emotionally connect young people, who are distant from the idea of war, to new generations of young soldiers, who do not face mandatory conscription and fight in wars that the public do not always approve of (see Gribble *et al.*, 2015). With this goal in mind, by way of example, the awareness videos released in 2016 - as part of the ‘Rethink Remembrance’ campaign (RBL, 2017a) - overimpose the stories of old veterans with those of younger soldiers, in the attempt to shift the empathy from the former to new generations of veterans on which the Legion currently spends £1.7 million a week (Vizard, 2017).

In light of the evolving politics of representation in multicultural Britain, moreover, the dominant narrative of memorialisation has been challenged and new efforts have been made to bring back to memory minor battles, as well as the contribution of foreign nationals who fought alongside Britain. The ‘custody’ of Remembrance invested to the Legion is defined in the Royal Charter as applying to those “on active service to the Crown” and this extends to the Commonwealth Forces and the citizens of Commonwealth ancestries now living in the UK (McCulloch, 2017). While older memorials, like the Thiepval Memorial, often omit the names of black South Africans who contributed in the war, the Legion seems committed to ensure that UK BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) groups enjoy their equal right to have their fallen remembered. In this regard, Nigel McCulloch (2017), current Head of Remembrance and former National Chaplain to the Legion, in a conference on *Remembrance, Memory and Commemoration*, noted: “If Remembrance is to continue in a meaningful way, it must become more honest about history and true to the realities of the UK’s richly diverse society. At present, we acknowledge we’re not getting it right.”

The most recent audience research issued by the Legion intentionally seeks the opinion of BAME groups and highlights responses such as “The British Legion was just for the whites. But we all bleed” and “The front page is always a white man. They were the heroes. They saved the world. It’s like the movie Independence Day” (Good Innovation, 2017). The research, moreover, emphasises that Muslim respondents are particularly divided over Remembrance and do not feel confident in buying or wearing a poppy due to current conflicts and hostility - “It’s very us and them. It brings back all the UKIP feelings. It doesn’t unite. It separates people.” This should be no surprise given the delicate balance of Muslim integration in the post 9/11 climate, that largely draws upon the increasing perception of a ‘clash of civilisations’ (Huntington, 1993). These tensions are calibrated in the politics of Remembrance managed by the Legion, as well as in the contested politics of the poppy in popular geopolitics. For instance, in 2011 an activist from Muslims Against Crusades was arrested and fined for burning a poppy outside the Royal Albert Hall during Remembrance celebrations, as an act of protest against the British military occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan (Guardian, 2011). This episode was later counteracted by a poppy-rich demonstration organised by the English Defence League (EDL), far-right group opposing “global Islamification” and standing “for English cultural norms” (EDL, 2017).

In prevision of the commemoration of the centenary, the Islamic Society of Britain (ISB) has joined the Legion in the commitment of easing these tensions and raising awareness about the

loss of Muslim lives alongside those of (white and Christian) British soldiers (Gadher, 2013). In 2014, in occasion of the centenary of the first Muslim soldier being awarded the Victoria Cross for Bravery, fashion student Tabinda-Kauser Ishaq, in collaboration with the ISB and the integration think-tank British Future, launched the first Poppy Hijab (Kenny, 2014). The headscarf - today on sale in the Poppy Shop for £22 - is meant to encourage those British Muslims willing to take part in Remembrance and raise awareness and appreciation about the 400,000 Muslims that fought alongside British soldiers. The Poppy Hijab effectively shows how the Legion has at least formally included the idea of 'Muslimness' in the material culture of national remembrance. However, as any highly symbolically charged symbol that evokes imaginaries of national belonging, religion and politics, the poppy headscarf has received some criticism from the Islamic community itself (BBC, 2013b). The item has been accused of perpetuating islamophobic attitudes, by suggesting that Muslim women need to visually 'prove' their loyalty to Britain and its rituals of remembrance.

The Legion maintains to oppose any exclusionary sentiment of remembrance and xenophobic understandings of the poppy products. Building on that, the charity claims that the centenary has also led to greater awareness over the joined efforts of non-Commonwealth Forces that were under British Command, those who operated with British assistance and former Allied Powers during the war: "The ability of Remembrance to draw nations together is powerful" (RBL, 2017g), adding that this cohesive power of memory is even more relevant today in light of the changing relationships of Britain with the rest of the continent. However, even granted that the Legion actually decides to share the domestic stage of Remembrance with the other nations and their casualties, it is still all about the memory of Britain and the friends of Britain, as one would naturally expect from a national, rather than a universal, brand. In this regard, the 'What We Remember' page on the Legion's website reads: "The Legion advocates a specific type of Remembrance connected to the British Armed Forces, those who were killed, those who fought with them and alongside them" (RBL, 2007h). Consequently, one should ask whether it is Remembrance to 'draw nations together,' or war to draw national allies closer.

Building on the last point, the Brand consistently flags *our* country, takes pride in *our* sacrifices, mourns *our* victims who bravely fought for "*our* ways of life and freedoms" (emphasis added) (RBL, 2016). This language constantly signals the imaginative presence of the nation. As it will be further seen in the following section, the words 'proud', 'sacrifice', 'bravery' are closely associated with the brand, not only by the language and discourses

directly employed by the Legion, but also by the people to whom they offer a platform to share their stories. Such patriotic resonances might not merely depend on the specific brand design promoted by the Legion year after year, but on a broader shift in the current culture of memorialisation.

4.3 Military Branding: Banal and Hot Nationalism

Billig (1995: 7) affirms: “In the case of the Western nation-states, banal nationalism can hardly be innocent: it is reproducing institutions which possess vast armaments.” When Armistice Day was first introduced after the First World War, it was meant to express a committed sentiment of ‘Never Again’. However, as the memory of old conflicts slowly disappears from the experience of the living, the Remembrance Brand has assumed new tones (Harrison, 2012). People are now asked to show gratitude and respect, while orderly pinning their poppy to “Support our Troops”. Building on that, this section will explore how the Remembrance Brand promotes a war culture of national sacrificialism and triumphalism, inevitably blurring the lines between banal and hot nationalism.

For the marking of the 2018 centenary, the Legion is currently looking for the development of a core theme, what they internally call the ‘Big Idea’. According to The Armistice 100 Brief (RBL, 2016), the message of the ‘Big Idea’ should be: 1) “Respectful for the service and sacrifices made”; 2) “Thankful for their contribution to our way of life and freedoms”; 3) “Inspired by their example”. The plan already involves ‘Thank You’ and ‘Hope’ campaigns, to show the gratitude for past and present sacrifice and send a message of hope for the future - a key aspect of the brand that is currently not sufficiently communicated according to their research. The campaigns will highlight how some of the lessons, achievements and creative expressions of the Great War are still relevant today: “Through the horrors of war some of the most beautiful pieces of music, art, poetry and literature have been produced” (Good Innovation, 2017). By highlighting the positive fruits generated as the result of harrowing conflicts, however, the Legion risks romanticising, if not even celebrating, the idea of war without ever condemning it. The charity declares to be strictly non-political and neutral regarding the causes and consequences of conflict, most simply “its concern is for those who have served the nation, often at great cost and sacrifice” (RBL, 2017g).

The ‘non-political’ silence of the charity over the nature of war is often a rather critical choice, and most of all a political one. By way of the example, the 2014 track song of the Legion reinterpreted (or perhaps ‘silenced’) the spirit of the original song ‘No Man’s Land’ (RBL, 2017i), arguably to fit the apolitical attitude as well as the commercial end of the Remembrance Brand. The song was originally conceived to build up a climax ending with the denunciation of war, however the Legion’s version left the most sentimental verses of the first part of the song, while cutting the following verses from the second half:

Do all those who lie here know why they died? / Did you really believe them when they told you ‘The Cause?’ / Did you really believe that this war would end wars? / Well the suffering, the sorrow, the glory, the shame / The killing, the dying, it was all done in vain, / For Willie McBride, it all happened again, / And again, and again, and again, and again.

The author of the original piece, who does not own the rights to the song, admitted that the Legion’s version negates the strong anti-war intention of the original lyrics, while giving a sentimentalistic tone to the story of ‘the glorious fallen’ from 1916 (Bogle, 2014). Subsequently, a petition was launched on *change.org* requesting that the Legion apologise for their reinterpretation of the song, which was critically labelled as “syrupy” and “jingoistic” (Banks, 2014).

It is somewhat ironic that an inspirational brand that exalts the bravery of ex-military personnel, never questions, or at least contextualises, how and why these soldiers need their support. To contrast such politically agnostic position, the Legion puts under the spotlight personal stories that potentially sentimentalise ‘loss’ and ‘sacrifice’ in the eye of a general public, who is already largely anaesthetised to modern and distant wars. For example, the selected citation reader at the Festival of Remembrance in 2016 was Beth, a 10-year-old girl who composed the poem “Why Do You Wear a Poppy Beth?.” The final verses of the poem read:

It is because of their sacrifice, / That we are free, you see / To proudly fly our Union flag, / For all the world to see. / And it’s because of those still fighting, / In wars across the world, / That I can sleep safely in my bed, / Free from any cares.

The poem carries on explaining that she wears the poppy “with pride” in honour of her father who died while serving in the Royal Navy: “Because my Daddy, my hero, bravely gave his life” (RBL, 2017). The Legion’s website, however, clarifies that Beth’s father died on a submarine while still in Southampton shot by a fellow seaman. Finally, it adds that Beth, a

Sea Cadet herself, and her two elder brothers, also in the Royal Navy, are now proudly following their father's footsteps.

The Legion affirms that they are simply trying not to show people as mere victims and they are offering a platform to tell stories that come directly from the veteran community. However, by only voicing those who are understandably trying to emotionally cope with the unfortunate consequences of war - perhaps by writing a poem about their heroic father - the Legion is contributing to create a culture of war sacrificialism, heroism and triumphalism. This potentially gives space for young people, such as Beth and her brothers, to project a role for themselves in the new war culture and take part in it. In this regard the act of telling some stories, singing certain verses, showing specific perspectives and omitting others is fundamentally a *political* act. Moreover, it is also worth noting that the Legion is actually giving space to highly politicised, if not political, matters. One of the 'Stories' on the Legion's website, for instance, tells of the Queen's unveiling of the Afghanistan and Iraq war memorial, reporting Sir Michael Fallon's (Secretary of State Defence) words celebrating the monument as "a permanent reminder of the contribution and sacrifice [...] towards the security of the United Kingdom and the interests of Iraq and Afghanistan" (RBL, 2017j). On the same page, a video produced by the Legion captures soldiers telling of their 'proudest' moment in war, such as: "When I first engaged with Iraqi people they saw us as saviours, they saw we were there to help them and save them" (RBL, 2017j).

Tensions over the progressive militarisation of the Remembrance Brand come to the forefront when looking at the Legion's sponsorship from some of the global leaders in arms retail. Lockheed Martin UK, one of the largest arms company worldwide specialised in the development and production of long-range nuclear missiles, has sponsored the Young Professionals' Poppy Rocks event in 2014 (WhitePoppy4Peace, 2014). Thales, a French arms company with a track record of supplying the world's most oppressive autocracies, has adorned the London underground station at Westminster with a poppy-themed hoarding (Smith and Burnett-Stuart, 2014). The UK's largest arms producer, BAE Systems, which this year has sponsored the annual Poppy Ball and annually hosts its own fund-raising events, has been a long-standing 'platinum corporate sponsor' of the Legion (ibid). On top of that, in 2012 the then president of the charity, Lieutenant General Sir John Kiszely, resigned after a press report accused him of using the charity's network to lobby on behalf of arms companies and recorded him while describing the Remembrance Day as a "tremendous networking opportunity" for arm dealers (Smith and Burnett-Stuart, 2014).

According to critics, by accepting such sponsorships, the Legion is indirectly validating the business of war and it is ironic that a charity that helps the victims of weaponry would take money from their producers. In response to early criticism about BAE's sponsorship - which is now maintaining a lower profile – the former Corporate Communications Director of the charity, Stuart Gendall, commented: "The British armed forces require equipment and BAE supplies much of that equipment. Without the best-quality tools to do the job, we would be remembering a few more casualties of conflict" (Tweedy, 2002). Of course, a few less on the British side potentially means a few more on the other, but this seems acceptable according to the internal hierarchy of death of the nation. Moreover, due to these debates, accepting such sponsorships is arguably poorly strategic from the perspective of banal nation branding, since suddenly the least 'romantic' sides of war, namely actual weaponry, become more visible and questionable in the mind of the public. On the one hand, this could reduce the popularity of the Remembrance Brand, given that banal nationalism has to only be passively upheld, while the 'hot' nationalism - towards which the new militaristic tones of the brand seem to point - requires a more active support and belongs to a narrower political spectrum. On the other hand, however, by making the banal less banal, this militaristic shift could also ease the transition from banal nationalism to 'hot' national activism. Despite that, the Legion declares that the brand is intended to be "[s]tirring and emotional, but NOT celebratory, jingoistic or militaristic" (capitalisation in the original) (RBL, 2016), while currently seeking feedback from respondents that would more closely identify with the white poppy.

This cultural shift of the Remembrance tale from 'Never Again' to the militaristic tones of war heroism is somewhat mirrored and confirmed by the appearance of a new major charity competitor on the market since 2007, Help for Heroes (H4H). The military charity has already reached £36.5 million in total income and has quickly won the support of the public. Their website shows almost exclusively white, and predominantly male, young military personnel and the words 'sacrifice,' 'bravery' and, of course, 'heroes' largely dominate. In this regard, the charity 'clarifies': "Help for Heroes considers anyone that volunteers to join the Armed Forces, knowing that one day they may have to risk all, is a hero. It's that simple" (H4H, 2017a). They also have their own online shop, which today sells over 500 branded articles, since "we knew the public would like to 'wear their support'" (H4H, 2017b). However, even the items on sale have a different tone if compared to the Legion's friendly poppy-themed collection: the Union Jack features almost on every item, if only through the predominantly red, blue and white colours, along with 'fearless' logo t-shirt, military-

patterned clothing for kids, and medal-shaped stationary. Contrary to the decorum and tact required from the 'national custodian of Remembrance', Help for Heroes is more entitled to proudly wave the flag of Britain. However, once again, this makes the banality of the poppy more effective, and the national(istic) sentiments of Help for Heroes more visible.

As Tamir (1993: x) notes: "The sanctification of suffering fosters hatred and mistrust, and - worse still - a backward-looking politics that perpetuates conflict." Religious patriotism and the celebration of the *glorious* men and women who have fought and are still fighting for 'Queen and Country' not only sanitises and glosses the real misery of conflict, but creates a subtle war propaganda. It basically tells the public that regardless of personal views on the causes of war (of which the charity does not want to talk), 'you ought to support our heroes, hence their wars'. However, as the Ex-SAS soldier, Ben Griffis, notes, arguably "[t]here is nothing heroic about being blown up in a vehicle, there is nothing heroic about being shot in an ambush and there is nothing heroic about the deaths of countless civilians" (WalesOnline, 2013). This is not the same as directly promoting confrontation between nations through the design of a patriotic brand. However, metaphorically speaking, in this case banal nation branding looks a bit like designing the sport uniform for the national team: players do not know whether they will end up playing or simply sit on the sidelines, but they will be ready to compete in the name of the unique jerseys they are wearing.

5. Concluding Remarks

After having considered from a theoretical perspective the significance of *lieux de mémoire* and the relevance of identity symbols in processes of nation-building, by taking inspiration from Aronczyk (2013) and Billig's (1995) work, this paper has developed the concept of *banal nation branding* - namely, the naturalised 'advertising' of the imaginative presence of the nation in everyday life. Within this theoretical framework, the Remembrance Brand promoted by the Royal British Legion and its iconic poppy logo have been used as a privileged symbolic and material vehicle to explore the discursive implications of the marketing of national memory and the 'collective sacrifice' of war. More specifically, by methodologically conflating marketing research and critical discourse analysis, this paper has attempted to denaturalise the imaginaries communicated through the design and corporate-like promotion of the brand, as a marketable *lieu de mémoire* that calibrates constructions of national identity, while sanctifying the popular support of 'our' troops.

This project has appreciated that, in anticipation of key commemorations, the Remembrance Brand has three major goals: the engagement and the participation of individuals from different backgrounds; the engagement of young audiences; a greater, and perhaps new, understanding of the relevance of remembering the fallen and supporting the living. Based on the analysis of this project, while the Legion affirms that the Remembrance Brand has "no political, religious or commercial meaning", I contend that: 1) the Remembrance Brand is not only highly politicised, it is *inherently* political; 2) while it is not a religious symbol, it promotes a form of sacred patriotism and 3) it is both commercialised and fetishised in its material and symbolic form.

The brand's banal signalling of *our* nation, *our* memory, *our* dead inevitably helps create a reassuring sense of inclusion *within* the (ethnically diverse) national community. However, inclusion by definition implies exclusion and national brands and symbols, whether they remain banal or not, necessarily come to embody both sides of the coin - the Remembrance Brand and the poppy are no exception. By trivialising and glossing the idea of war, the brand perpetuates a militaristic culture that ultimately blurs the distinction between banal nation branding and the subtle promotion of antagonistic sentiments of 'hot' nationalism.

As in any paradigm of power exercise, the ability of persuasion of brands represents a double-edged sword which largely depends on their design, exercise and ultimately

perception. The critical observations of this paper do not mean to ‘condemn’ the Legion as the dedicated brand owner of Remembrance; most simply, this project has attempted to highlight and denaturalise the potential imaginative implications of banal nation branding through the marketing of Remembrance in the changing cultural context of memorialisation and nationalism. And while this paper has not attempted to advance any normative account on the management of national memorialisation, the full appreciation of the insights it brought about invites for further empirical engagement with the role of branding expertise in the shaping of fundamental popular imaginaries of material culture.

This study could reveal useful for researchers interested in social marketing and the sociology of brands, or by practitioners involved in the production, management and promotion of national *lieux de mémoire*, such as the Royal British Legion itself. As already mentioned, one of the main limitations of this study is that, due to the timeframe of the project and its limited means, it has not integrated ethnographic methods into the research design and it has only focused on the production of national imaginaries through material and symbolic branding. The critical reflections of this paper, however, can hopefully prompt the conduct of complementary and further studies that will empirically engage with the brand *image* of Remembrance from the consumer perspective, and not just its *identity*.

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