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Come on Wales – outrage over Mars support for England football team is storm in a tea-break

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Danny Welbeck: not resting, playing. Nick Potts / PA Archive/Press Association Images

Author



John Jewell

Director of Undergraduate Studies, School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University

Welsh football fans are up in arms. They are calling for a boycott of Mars bars after claims that the confectionery super company has “snubbed” Wales and its fans by flaunting its support for England in the forthcoming European championships.

The problem is that for Euro 2016 Mars has pledged allegiance to the England team to the exclusion of Northern Ireland and Wales – who have, remember, qualified for their first major tournament

since 1958. Welsh fans protest that themed Mars bars are offensive to the sensibilities of football fans across the country. On Twitter there were some calling for the removal of said bars from Welsh stores.



Sweet nothings

Unlike many of my compatriots, I refuse to be offended by this. This is manufactured outrage, nurtured, developed to satisfy the demands of a 24-hour news culture. The actual wrapper (probably deliberately) carries no reference to any particular team and, as I argued on BBC Radio Wales when interviewed about the issue, once again the mainstream media merely trawled Twitter to find examples of indignation. There are obvious dangers in overplaying this: a few raised voices on social media does not an upset nation make.

This is relevant because, as the excellent Leon Barton states: “Welsh nationalist sentiment runs far higher amongst the nation’s football fans than it does in the general populace.”

That said, it’s undeniable that some were genuinely offended and saw Mars’ actions as arrogant and provocative. Proof again, if further proof were needed, that England was seen as the whole of Britain and that Wales did not matter one iota.

Old enemies

For me, this row is about cultural identity. And though, as Raymond Williams pointed out some time ago, in terms of the relationship between England and Wales, we have moved on somewhat from the old perspectives of England as conqueror, coloniser, exploiter and big neighbour, some tensions still exist. From time to time these surface and illustrate that Welsh identity is still defined in opposition to Englishness.

But this is a situation is not unfamiliar to Mars. Before the World Cups of 2006 and 2010 similar stories broke in Scotland. In 2010 they were criticised by the Association of Tartan Army Clubs for “changing the packaging artwork to feature a St George’s Cross and the Auld Enemy’s Three Lions badge”.

In response to the current furore a spokesman for Mars UK said:

Our new #Believe campaign is all about tapping into the excitement and buzz of the biggest football tournament of the year. We have a partnership with The FA, but the spirit of the #Believe campaign extends beyond that, to Wales and across the home nations, to encourage fans to get behind their country and show that they #Believe they have what it takes to do well.

This is an evasive, not to say patronising, piece of PR – but it actually gets to the heart of the matter. Mars is hoping that all UK supporters buy their chocolate and support as they say, “their country”. Mars is not explicitly anti-anyone – but it is, most definitely, pro-England. They have a partnership with the English FA which began in 2009.



Believe? In whom, ask Welsh people. John Jewell, Author provided

Mars is at present one of England’s “official supporters” (alongside the likes of Nike, Lucozade, M&S and, interestingly, German supermarket Lidl) who pay a seven-figure sum each year to guarantee the use of the official Three Lions emblem on packaging and England players in promotional campaigns. Such deals are lucrative for the FA. The lead sponsor of England is Vauxhall and in 2011, the FA and Vauxhall signed a three-and-a-half-year agreement that Marketing Week magazine claimed was worth “up to £6m a year”.

Size matters

Mars has spent widely on its England publicity. The flagship of the campaign is a Henry V-style pastiche featuring Harry Kane, Danny Welbeck and Jamie Vardy.



In the one-minute ad we see various signifiers of English culture make their way across the Channel to the bemusement of a few stereotypical Frenchmen. It's supposed to be light-hearted, of course, but the main intention is to tap into the goodwill and expectancy of fans ahead of the tournament. Mars wants to place itself at the centre of the fan experience – the theory is that the sporting environment, live or otherwise, delivers the consumer to the advertiser in precisely the right state of mind to be receptive to persuasive messages and constant presence.

The unpalatable fact for those in Wales who are disappointed at Mars' behaviour is that it probably doesn't matter at all to the company. England are Mars' concern and the Scottish episodes in 2006 and 2010 indicate that the company is prepared to live with a little flak if it can reach its target audience.

Private companies are generally motivated by little more than the making of money – they have no moral obligation to act as cultural arbiters. Mars pay England a lot of money for access and the inescapable fact is that there are more than 50m people in England and only 3.1m in Wales. That's the bottom line.

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