

## **“That British Sound”: Nation as a Branding Device**

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**Keywords:** capitalism | global consumption | nationalness | semiotics | British sound

### **Article:**

**\*\*\*Note: Full text of article below**

# “That British Sound”: Talk of Nationalness in Global Capitalism

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## ABSTRACT

This article proposes the concept of “nationalness” to account for the persistent circulation of national labels as a tool of distinction. We argue that the concept expands on the traditional conception of nation as country of origin to include cultural notions of sensuous and aesthetic qualities that are semiotically tied to national “essence.” Nationalness connects products to nations not only through indexicality but also iconicity. It is made possible through “rhematization,” the process of appropriating signs whose interpretants are taken to be iconic. Talk of nationalness enables consumers to make sense of national labels in today’s world where the both ends of capitalism—manufacturing and consumption—are thoroughly global. Instead of confining our analytical focus to top-down national branding projects, we examine how consumers invoke the idea of a nation to describe their uses of industrial products. Our case study is the popular concept of “British sound” circulated among audiophiles. Drawing on online discussions of an internet community, the article shows that audiophiles refer to Britishness as a key mechanism to distinguish their consumption experiences from mass market consumption. We further show how the label “British sound” can be used to describe the experiences of consumer products that are no longer manufactured in Britain.

Scholars studying consumption have long argued that nations often act as brands writ large for consumers. In some cases, the cultural image of a nation is so bound up with a product that it is as much a nation that

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defines a product as a product that defines the character of a nation. Examples include French wine, German cars, Swiss watches, and Japanese electronics. Yet in consumption discourse, the notion of nation is still often, either implicitly or explicitly, taken to mean country of origin. This is obvious in many of the “Made in . . .” campaigns sponsored by nation-states (see below). The social life of a commodity nowadays, from production to consumption, is globalized through and through. The global connectedness of capitalism at both the manufacturing and the consumption ends has rendered any simple equation of nation with country of origin increasingly problematic. A typical “American” car manufactured by the Detroit’s Big Three—a Ford Fusion, for example—is designed by engineers in Germany, with parts made in China, and the whole vehicle assembled in Mexico (Howie 2010). This globalized process of manufacturing and consumption disrupts fundamentally the ways we conceive of a commodity as the product of a nation. For a while, social theorists have argued that reference to nations in the context of global capitalism will soon become passé. The globalization of consumer lifestyles will lead to the declining significance of “stable” identity categories like the nation-state. Traditionally stable frameworks for group and individual identity such as family, religion, class, and nationality will be weakened or abandoned (Zukin and Maguire 2004, 181). This is in keeping with the claim, common in literatures on globalization, that nation-states and borders weaken in an era of integrated economic and cultural production (Hobsbawm 1990; Bauman 1998; Beck 2006).

Yet much to the chagrin of theorists of globalization, the use of national labels in consumer talk persists. This article is an attempt to solve the puzzle: If globalization disrupts how we conceive of the commodity as a product of a nation, then why does the nation remain an oft-invoked category in consumer talk? The persistent and widespread use of national labels suggests that the concept has probably taken on new meanings unbeknownst to those who still equate nation with country of origin. This practical transformation of the meaning of nation encompasses some of the most important questions in studying the cultural meanings of consumption. What does the use of a country’s name mean in this age of globalized capitalism? How do consumers “invest” in the national label with meanings that go beyond the narrow definition of country of origin? In what ways do consumers justify the adjectival form of country names in describing products such as Italian clothes, German cars, or Japanese electronics when many of them are not manufactured in the countries named?

In this article we examine how national ideology and stereotypes persist in the interconnected economy of global capitalism. In so doing, we contribute to

an emerging literature in anthropology and sociology that sees nation branding as a complex sociocultural process operating within a competitive global marketplace (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; DeSoucey 2010; Kaneva 2011; Bowen and Gaytan 2012; Graan 2013). Our thesis is that the use of national labels in consumer talk has become increasingly detached from the meaning of countries of origin. We develop the concept of "nationalness" to communicate how consumers reimagine the nation in the context of global capitalism. In a globalized economy in which the principle of locality is sidelined or abandoned, national labels such as "British" or "American" have taken on broader and more layered meanings than the geographical territories to which they refer. A "nation" has taken on new meanings as commodities compete in a market oriented to the attraction of global, deterritorialized consumers.

We argue that the cultural meaning of nationalness is imbued with the symbolic power to reinforce consumption-based practices of "distinction" (Bourdieu 1984). We show the importance of symbolic, nonterritorial linkage between a product and its nation. Specifically, we look at the process through which desirable and undesirable qualities associated with a national label inform the meanings of consumption among consumers.

While many studies have addressed the topic of national branding, not enough effort has been made to see how "nation" is appropriated by consumers to describe their consumption experiences. Through a study of an online hobby community devoted to the pursuit of high-fidelity audio entertainment, we explore how consumers invoke nation to describe sound in a way that means much more than the country of origin. Consumers are well aware of the stereotypical and yet indexical nature of their characterization. Some of these stereotypes can be traced back to the ways nations are branded in product advertisement or defined in national and international trade laws. However, when they invoke different nations to describe their experiences of sound, consumers also reshape and recombine the meanings of nation. The process illustrates how new meaning is added iteratively to the semiotic process.

It is noteworthy that our argument is not primarily of a causal nature. Though we allude to some possible explanations in the course of our analysis, our focus is not about the social and historical causes of the persistence of national labels in consumption talk. Our argument is interpretive. A common error committed by many students of culture is to assume that there must be an unchanging meaning to some cultural concept just because people use the same word for it. This is precisely the error that our Peircean analysis can rectify. Communication is often facilitated by "degenerate" signs that are not maxi-

mally coherent and transparent (Parmentier 2014). We seek to understand the changing meaning of a national label as well as how nationalness has become the primary identifier through the mechanism of rhematization in the process of semiotic mediation.

### **National Labels and Global Consumption**

The use of national labels in the context of global commodity chains seems oddly obsolete. Scholars tend to account for the anomalies by explaining them as a consequence of large-scale, governmental campaigns from above. Most studies focus on the mass marketing campaign of national brands (e.g., the “Made in USA” and “Buy Australian Made” campaigns [O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy 2000]), where the state functions as an entrepreneurial subject (Graan 2013). The problem with these studies is that they see the success or failure of the circulation of certain national label as the outcome of government campaigns. Other work highlights the circulation of national labels via the state’s attempts to secure a nation brand and enforce intellectual property laws (Nakassis 2013, 118–19; Thomas 2013). Ultimately, these studies focus on national brands as an outcome of state-driven campaigns and overlook how national brands are appropriated at the receiving end.

Recently, sociologists have begun to study how national sentiments, defined loosely as a collective sense of longing and belonging, are appropriated for the marketing of a certain product. DeSousey coined the term *gastronationalism* “to signal the use of food production, distribution, and consumption to demarcate and sustain the emotive power of national attachment, as well as the use of nationalist sentiments to produce and market food” (2010, 433). The concept itself highlights the globalized nature of the process of creating, promoting, and sustaining national sentiments in food commodity. In their study of the gastronationalist rhetoric employed by both public and private actors in the tequila commodity chain, Bowen and Gaytan (2012) offer a more complex analysis of the phenomenon that goes beyond the study of mass marketing campaigns. Their study also highlights the role of power in the construction of the tequila heritage, as the Mexican state and tequila companies promote ideals of nationality at the expense of local farmers and their communities (Bowen and Gaytan 2012, 70).

But the works of DeSousey (2010) and Bowen and Gaytan (2012) remain focused on the inextricable ties between globalization and the nation, territorially defined. In particular, they show how gastronational narratives are organized around the concept of national soil, as ways to invoke emotive attachment

and to rally members around the "imagined community" of a nation (Anderson 1991). The term *gastronationalism* implicitly draws a line between food commodities and other types of commodities, treating the former as the seedbed of national discourse because of food products' ostensive link to the territorial soil of a nation. Hence, while the term rightly targets the relations between national narratives and global consumption that have continued to interest sociologists, it narrows the focus to the production of national identities through goods with special attachments to place (Trubek 2009). Examples of this group of studies include cheese, foie gras, fine wine, and tequila, all of which bear a strong relationship to place because they grow out of the soil (Trubek 2009; Whalen 2009; DeSoucey 2010; Bowen and Gaytan 2012; see also Pincus 2003).

Does the same dialectical relationship between global consumption and national label exist when one shifts focus to commodities that are not palpably associated with a place or a country? For example, are national narratives consequential in the consumption of mass-produced industrial products? Instead of confining our analytical focus to food and produce grown or fed on national soil, we want to push the envelope by examining the notion of "nationalness" in other types of commodities. The term *nationalness* refers specifically, then, to the transnational appropriation of attributed national qualia as a marker of distinction in consumption. Mass-produced industrial products such as cars or electronics are a difficult but potentially rewarding case to examine this socio-cultural process of forming and performing taste, defined as stratified categories of likeness and difference (Bourdieu 1984). Most mass-produced industrial products are nowadays produced in places outside of the nation with which a product is associated, as our earlier example of the Ford Fusion suggests. In this article, we attempt to understand how national labels are currently deployed in consumer narratives as the production process has become delocalized. Because we are interested in how national labels arise within a consumption community, our approach shares an affinity with recent anthropological work on the complexities of consumer appropriations of brands and commodities (Nakassis 2012, 2013; Thomas 2013). However, whereas that work illuminates the excess of meaning that undermines brand stability and coherence, we show how consumers can add meaning that reinforces brand coherence in the quest for distinction.

We also want to see how the label is circulated and appropriated globally. We focus not just on how a certain product is appropriated as a symbol for unity within a nation or is appropriated by consumers in local markets (Luvaas 2013) but also on how it is appropriated by people of other nations in the context of a global market. If nationalist ideology is to be of use in the now geographically

dispersed system of capitalist production and consumption and if it is grounded in the symbolic power that sustains the taken-for-granted pecking order of global consumption (Bourdieu 1984, 1989), such an ideology must be shared transnationally. How do consumers appropriate national labels that appeal to qualities of a certain foreign nation? For example, how do Americans understand or deploy the use of national labels such as British or German in consumption talk? To do so, we turn to the case of audiophiles residing in the United States and their appropriation of the label of “British sound” to describe their consumption experience of high-end audio equipment. We show that the meaning of this national descriptor has transcended the simple sense of a “place of origin.” It encompasses an appropriation of national qualities in a broader sense.

### **Semiotic Mediation**

In the course of answering the question, we look at two key semiotic mechanisms in connecting countries with commodities: indexicality and iconicity. The two concepts are well known to readers of Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce developed a clutch of related ideas that see all experience, in fact all mental activity, as mediated by signs; and by extension, we will argue, mediation by signs is essential for cultural understanding (cf. Mertz and Parmentier 1985). A Peircean approach is promising for its reflexive focus on the shaping of cultural concepts that we use to communicate meaning. In other words, for Peirce, the question of how a sign works as a sign and the question of how it is known to be a sign are two sides of the same coin. “A sign does not function as a sign unless it be understood as a sign” (*EP* 2.317). Cognition involves a process in which object and sign link up to each other in a relationship of mutual determination and representation (Parmentier 1994, 4–5). The strength of Peircean analysis is that it allows us to see how acts of explanation, justification, and elaboration are constantly evolving, communal activities. As people use existing signs to make sense of a changing reality (as in the case of our study), they grow the meaning of signs through their experience. In Peirce’s own terminology, he describes the most fruitful scientific reasoning as a form of abductive inference that can bring in new content. But even more interesting, he points out that “abductive inference shades into perceptual judgment without any sharp line of demarcation between them.” In other words, although less subject to our conscious control than abduction, perceptual judgments are themselves equally abductive: “it is the idea of putting together what we had never before dreamed of putting together which flashes the new suggestion before our contemplation” (*EP* 2.227).

In anthropology, the term *indexical* is often used as a rough equivalent to "pragmatic," to emphasize the primacy of local meaning, or more specifically, meaning generated from the context of use (Duranti and Goodwin 1992). For our present analysis, we would like to emphasize the other dimension of indexicality, which Peirce refers to in his writing as direct connectedness between the representing sign and the represented object. Peirce uses different phrases and terms to describe indexicality: "physical connection," "association by contiguity," and "real reaction." These descriptions all refer to a certain cause-effect relationship between an object and an indexical sign. Technically, indexicality is the first degree of "degeneracy" in fully triadic sign relations. A "reading" of a sign relation by an interpretant as indexical is to render that sign a "dicent" (*EP* 2.276; see Ball 2014).

Iconicity, on the other hand, represents by means of resemblance or similarity. Specifically, iconicity refers to similarity between an object's "intrinsic quality" and the iconic sign that represents it. An object is given meaning when it is said to resemble other more familiar objects (qua signs). Iconic signs are everywhere (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). An example of iconic sign would be a photograph of a celebrity in a newspaper—the photographed image resembles the real person.<sup>1</sup> For an icon to be an icon of something it represents, it must be seen as sharing some property in common with that object. In other words, iconicity highlights the resemblance or similarity between the two. A common example of iconicity is metaphor. Iconicity is the second degree of "degeneracy" in fully triadic sign relations. A first-order sign relation can be read by an interpretant as iconic. To do so is to render that sign a "rheme" (*EP* 2.276). We will show that rhematization—the semiotic process of "downshifting" (Parmentier 1994, 19) from a mode of first-degree degeneracy to that of second-degree degeneracy—allows national labels to continue to make sense in this globalized system of capitalist production and consumption.

We highlight two characteristics of iconicity. First, at the cultural level we are interested in, iconicity is a form of social knowledge, since the choice of metaphor is not random or simply driven by individual imagination but has to be developed and conventionalized. The transfer of ideas and assumptions in the creation of a parallel between a metaphor and the object it represents is a highly creative cultural process. Similarity or likeness might appear as an intuitive quality, but upon reflection it is an elusive concept. This elusiveness is most

1. Photographs are, of course, also indexicals, produced by the Object they represent. Peirce discusses photographs (*EP* 2.6). The authors thank the editor for pointing this out.

apparent in the case of poetic metaphors, when two seemingly different objects are said to be alike. The poet laments, “Life is but a walking shadow.” As we know, real life and shadow are different in many ways. A good iconic metaphor resonates with us by joining two different objects through implicit parallelism. The parallelism implicit in a metaphor invites us to see one thing as something else (in this example, the transient nature of life). It is a process that at once represents and interprets, a process where cultural imaginations are most vividly at work. Such imaginations are cultural because similarity or parallelism never simply inheres in objects (Gal 2013). Instead, the metaphor brings out, as Kenneth Burke (1969, 503) put it, the “thisness of a that, or the thatness of a this,” which is often highly conventionalized (Harkness 2013).<sup>2</sup>

Second, iconicity refers to the essence shared between a sign and its object. Iconicity comes in the form of statements that make reference to the inherent qualities of the object represented. Peirce uses the term *qualia* to describe qualities instantiated or embodied in entities or events (*EP* 2.272).<sup>3</sup> Iconic descriptions are discourses about qualia, that is, they refer to the decisive qualities of things. The validity of an iconic sign turns on the selfsame qualities that a sign and its object are purported to share. For example, a totem is iconic because it does not simply symbolize; it is also meant to manifest the essence of the tribe it represents. Or again, life is but a walking shadow. The metaphor makes sense to us because we can see both as sharing ephemeral qualities. An important implication of Peirce’s semiotic theory is that new meanings are created when a sign comes to be known as a sign. Thus, the process of signification is open-ended and forever growing, as signs and objects continue to acquire new meaning through the interpretive process. The significance of this insight will become apparent as we see consumers evaluate certain products through the sign of nationalness.

### The British Sound

To examine this process of sign mediation, we focus on a consumer good whose production process has been vastly transformed by the global search for inexpensive labor: British home audio equipment. Audiophiles use the phrase *British sound* to describe speakers and other audio equipment manufactured

2. Peirce’s own definition of metaphor, spelled out in his own technical vocabulary, emphasizes a similar point. He defines metaphor as “those which represent the representative character of a representamen by representing a parallelism in something else” (*EP* 2.274).

3. Qualitative properties like redness only appear to us in the form of things, e.g., an apple, and yet these properties can be abstracted “hypostatically” from any particular object (Parmentier 1994, 28–29).

from the postwar period to the present—some of them made in Britain, others not. In postwar Britain, many boutique British brands began as small “family factories” in the homes of some audio enthusiasts and engineering students. As certain models grew in esteem, they expanded and now occupy the high-end audio equipment market. These formerly boutique British brands continue to hold a certain cachet in the eyes of their diehard followers. Along the way, they moved their factories from the county towns of Britain to China and Southeast Asian countries where cheap labor is abundant. Many of the components of these British brands are no longer manufactured in Britain; and some of these companies are no longer headquartered in Britain. In what ways can the label “British” and, more broadly, national labels be appropriated as descriptors, given that connoisseurs are well aware of the slightly embarrassing fact that many of the “British” products they talk about are now made elsewhere?

Our study focuses on the various meanings of the phrase *British sound* as used by serious fans of home audio equipment, otherwise known as audiophiles. What is so British about British sound? In what ways can a social sign (Britishness) be justified to describe an audio sensation? On the face of it, audiophiles’ talk of sound is hardly an obvious site for understanding consumption from a cultural perspective. As a consumption activity, it is not the most conspicuous. Listening to music at home is by and large a very private experience. Audiophiles like to sit centered and alone in a room facing their loudspeakers, isolated from even the presence of their spouses and younger children. For this reason, home stereo equipment does not appear to be particularly amenable to family stories or personal tales. There are other items that more often anchor of communal histories or personal life stories—items that are designed to be public (e.g., a monument; cf. Swedberg 2005) or conspicuously homey (e.g., a mantelpiece or an antique cabinet chest) or practical (e.g., groceries; cf. Miller 2001). In fact, technical and jargon-filled conversations among audiophiles are quite intimidating for the uninitiated. In everyday life, people talk about sound as loud or quiet, high-pitched or low-pitched. The ways to describe the physical perception of sound seem quite limited and straightforward. Our common technical measurements of sound present a similar picture. Sound is measured in terms of its frequency (hertz) and pressure level (decibel). The former generally relates to pitch and the latter captures an objective correlate to our subjective human perception of loudness. Yet, audiophiles have developed a linguistic register that features an expanded technical vocabulary and specialized lexicon to articulate the subtleties of sound. Knowing how to talk the talk, that is, describing different aspects of the sound produced by high-end equipment, is an important

social ritual for entry into the audiophiles' world. Within an online hobby community, people are related by mastering certain terms and phrases, which cue specific areas of cultural knowledge and index one's membership in a social group. As such, talking the talk is crucial for people to do a certain lifestyle and to show that one belongs (Silverstein 2003, 2006). It is this performative nature of sound talk that makes it an interesting site for examining the cultural connection between beliefs about nationalness and cultural taste.

### **The Audiophiles as a Group**

In today's world where televisions are 3-D and home audio systems incorporate surround sound, two-channel stereo seems pathetically obsolete. It is, by many standards, an old technology. As early as the 1970s, most homes in the United States already owned a home stereo system (Shuker 2002, 219). Yet today, audiophiles continue to share a religious devotion to the pursuit of their dream sound. Robert Harley, editor-in-chief of *The Absolute Sound*, gives this definition of "high-end audio" in a popular guide he wrote on the subject: "High-end audio is about passion—passion for music, and for how well it is reproduced. High-end audio is the quest to re-create in the listener's home the musical message of the composer or performer with the maximum realism, emotion, and intensity" (2004, 1). Harley's reference to "passion for music" notwithstanding, audiophiles as a group are more obsessed with the music of sound than the sound of music—they are more concerned with the sound reproduced than the music that the sound recreates. It is not uncommon for audiophiles to keep playing the same dozen discs with different combinations of sound equipment to explore the beauty and subtle differences of sound.

The rapid growth of the Internet as a social medium has also made consumers' narrations of their consumption experiences more accessible to social scientists than ever. Indeed, online forums have become an increasingly common source of data (see, e.g., Cummings et al. 2002; Stewart 2005; Baumle 2009; Ignatow 2009) for sociologists. In this article, we explore the different aspects of the meanings of "British sound" by looking at how it is discussed in a major online forum for audiophiles, Audiokarma.org. There are many online communities of similar kinds (Audioholics, Audioasylum, diy Audio, Ecoustics, etc.), but Audiokarma is the largest and most active online forum of its kind. At the time of writing, it has a membership of nearly 201,000. The site itself is made up of more than fifty thematically organized forums, the majority of which offer opportunities to discuss components of home audio systems from headphones and speakers to turntables and home theaters. It also offers a marketplace, forums for organizing get-togethers, and off-topic forums that range from food to cars.

From what we can accessed publically, we know that the vast majority of the members seem to reside in the United States. There are also members who reside in different parts of the world, including Asia, Europe, Latin America, Canada, and Australia. We do not have precise knowledge of the social demographics of Audiokarma members. But their makeup is probably comparable to the clientele of other expensive, male-oriented hobbies. According to a readership survey conducted by *Stereophile* magazine (Atkinson 1992), whose readers are mostly connoisseurs of high-end audio equipment, the average household income of their readers was \$80,700 in 1992, which approximately converts to \$125,000 in 2010 dollars, as adjusted by the annual increase of Consumer Price Index during the period. They are an economically stable group, an important trait for a hobby that requires a considerable amount of disposable income. In the 1992 survey, 78 percent of that magazine's readers own their own homes. Also, nearly 72 percent hold professional or managerial positions. They are also exceptionally educated, with over 42 percent having studied for or obtained a postgraduate degree. How seriously do audiophiles take their equipment? To use the same *Stereophile* survey as a reference, among the respondents to the 1992 survey, the average total value of their hi-fi equipment was \$9,100, which would be worth \$14,100 in 2010 money, again when adjusted by Consumer Price Index (Atkinson 1992).<sup>4</sup> Their musical taste is firmly highbrow. Classical music, a minor genre nowadays in terms of sales, is the most beloved genre among this group (78 percent picked classical as their favorite genre, followed by jazz (67.6 percent) and rock (67.2 percent) (Atkinson 1992). Audiophiles love classical music also for audiophilic reasons. Most classical performances are recorded without the use of pickups and electronic synthesizers. Purely acoustically produced, classic presents the ultimate challenge for high-end vivid sound reproduction.

Revealing as the data are, the *Stereophile* survey conducted more than two decades ago is just a rough reference for us. We suspect that members of Audiokarma are more diverse socioeconomically. There are likely more young members and DIY enthusiasts who are members of the online community than readers of *Stereophile*.

## Methodology

Our analysis consists of an in-depth qualitative reading of the public threads on the site. We read all relevant threads created between June 2002 (when the forum was launched) and June 2011. In total, there are fifty-three forums, with

4. We obtained these figures using the calculator provided by MeasuringWorth.com.

themes that range from “Listening Spaces” and “Turntables” to “Cooking & Spirits” and “Sports & Outdoor Adventure.” Drawing on our personal knowledge and our inductive reading of website forums, we came up with a list of “sound” terms that are associated with national or regional origins. Among the most prominent are “British sound,” “American sound,” “German sound,” “Danish sound,” “Japanese sound,” “East Coast sound,” and “West Coast sound.”<sup>5</sup> After identifying these concepts, we searched the entire Audiokarma message board for instances where posters used a phrase such as “British Sound,” and we analyzed threads in which key words of interests were mentioned and discussed. “British Sound,” for instance, returned 826 results (as of July 21, 2011). Each result indicates that a specific post contains this exact phrase in question. Given that many threads contain multiple posts, we were able to read the entire population of posts containing the phrase.

To identify other instances where posters referred to the concept of national sound, we searched more broadly for the reference to “British Sound” by opening up the search to permit similar phrases and terms such as “British Monitor Sound” or “Britishness,” which refer to the concept of British sound without employing the phrase explicitly. We located discussions of these concepts across various Audiokarma forums, although the majority of our data comes from the “Speakers” forum, the largest forum at Audiokarma both in terms of number of threads and posts (45,904 and 563,175, respectively, as of July 21, 2011). Discussions of “British Sound” also took place in other forums on Audiokarma including “Turntables,” “Vintage Solid State,” “General Audio Discussion,” and “Members’ Home Systems.”

We pay special attention to how posters use and, in some cases, explain how they understand the phrase *British sound*. When quoting from these threads, we have chosen to present the quotes in their original form, without cleaning up typos or correcting spelling errors. We do so to convey not just what the opinions of the posters are but also the style in which they respond to comments raised by other members. The use of verbatim quotations should also aid any readers who have an interest in locating these quotations directly. The threads that form the basis of our analysis were not dominated by a few members alone. Certainly, some members were more frequent posters, but a large group of members posted messages.

5. A search for the phrases “East Coast” and “West Coast” produced substantially higher results (37,000 and 13,400, respectively, as of July 21, 2011). Given our particular interest in the national categories, we also read every thread in which “East Coast” and “West Coast” sound co-occurred with one of the national sound concepts.

### British Sound = British-Made Sound?

In this section, we will draw from threads where the concept of "British sound" is prominently discussed to probe the relationships between sound and national character. The phrase *British sound* is so often familiar among posters on the internet that it is difficult for outsiders to grasp its precise meaning. They communicate in the style of "inside dopesters," as though their audience consisted of people who knew as much about the subject (Becker 1986, 34).<sup>6</sup> For example, Lim, a poster seeking advice about acquiring a new pair of speakers, writes, "I have blown a pair of Celestion SL6s woofers and found hard to find replacement. Totally love the tonality and vocal but sadly, I have part with them. There is a certain 'magic' I can't describe about the tonality, British perhaps?" ("Which speaker next after Celestion SL6s?," CH Lim, post 1, August 5, 2008).<sup>7</sup> Having clarified the original poster's interest in tonality, another poster, Soundmotor, chimes in: "I started with SL6's, went to SL600's, then SL700's, then back to SL600si's [other models by the same manufacturer]. Also have a set of Monitor 100's which fall in-between the SL6 & SL600si's for sound quality. I really like the Celestions of this generation. . . . But that great, warm Brit sound of the 80's that was the hallmark." ("Which speaker next after Celestion SL6s?," Soundmotor, post 8, August 5, 2008). The thread above shows "British" as an adjectival label used to describe sound. Posters are familiar with it; yet as with most everyday terms, they do not attempt to define its meaning. *British* appears in conjunction with the adjectives *great* and *warm* to capture the transient impressions the sound creates on its hearers. But what exactly is British sound?

In the threads in which the term appears we discovered that one common way for an audiophile to communicate "British sound" to another member is not so much to define it but to name the brands that embody the sound. The manufacturer named by the poster above, Celestion, for example, was a popular British brand in the 1970s and 1980s. This way of talking is indexical in the most basic sense: the meaning of the phrase *British sound* is assumed to depend on the actual nature of particular pieces of audio equipment that serves as models or textbook examples. The selection of particular models or brands to represent "British sound" also suggests that the instantiation of indexicality is

6. The talk itself, loaded with what linguistic anthropologists call register characteristics, is, of course, a way to mark boundaries. They are a part of the cultural knowledge, the mastery of which is part of demonstrating identity and proving status (Silverstein 2006, 488).

7. Threads are cited parenthetically and contain the thread name, poster login, post number, and date.

culturally mediated. A certain product is picked over others to represent “British sound.”

This kind of indexical national labeling flourishes in an environment where it has become increasingly common for consumers to identify and associate goods with their country of origin. They are in keeping with the institutional history of product labels and branding, which laid the ground for the indexical association between the speaker’s sound and the speaker’s country of origin. In the United States, country of origin labels received state sanction in 1890, with the passage of the protectionist tariff acts. Pushed by northern industrialists, these acts mandated that “all articles of foreign manufacture, such as are usually or ordinarily marked . . . and all packages containing such or other imported articles, shall, respectively, be plainly marked, stamped, branded, or labeled in legible English words, so as to indicate the country of their origin; and unless so marked, stamped, branded, or labeled they shall not be admitted to entry” (Chang 2009, 295).

While these acts were likely intended to support domestically produced goods, there is also some evidence that these acts were an attempt to address the profusion of mislabeled or counterfeit goods (Chang 2009, 696–97; on counterfeit goods and brands, see Nakassis 2012). Throughout the twentieth century, these demands were clarified to address rhetorical ambiguities in the statutes and incorporate more goods such as food, as well as to address changing trade relationships and methods of production. Now it is common for trading zones such as NAFTA or the European Union to mandate when and how country of origin labels should be applied. But some countries, most notably England, do not currently require country of origin labels. This does not mean that all or even many of the products sold in these countries lack such labels but only that the state does not require them formally. These labels, as well as nationally coded brand identities (as is the case with speakers), can facilitate positive or negative assumptions about the goods on offer. For instance, one can think of quality German auto engineering or the superiority of Japanese to Korean electronics (Martin et al. 2011, 80).

A certain sound is British because it is produced by Britain, or more specifically, the sound is produced by British-made electronics, CD players, turntables, amplifiers, and above all, British-made loudspeakers. At first glance, calling a product manufactured by a British company British seems too obvious to warrant any further analysis. Yet, the move is semiotically significant. The proliferation of “country of origin” labels facilitates a process of semiotic downshifting in the context of global capitalism, the process that confers new meaning to a group of products. It is the same process that sees “Champagne”

(wine made from the grapes grown in a northeast province of France) as embodying the essence of "Champagne" (the wine that sparkles). In our case, the audiophile takes that which is "Made in Britain" to have the quality of "British sound." What emerges from this process is an interpretant that Peirce calls a "rheme," technically a sign that is apprehended to be an icon (*EP*; see also Gal and Irvine 1995).

Many posters suggest that British sound was made flesh in the products of premier British electronics manufacturers including Bowers & Wilkins, Celestion, KEF, Harbeth, Quad, Mission, Spondor, Tannoy, and many others. Their products are, or once were, designed in Britain, manufactured in Britain, and sold primarily in Britain. To recap, British-made speakers produce a sound whose qualities are apprehended as made by these products. But that subtle move from "the sound of British-made speakers" to "British sound" is a result of a rhematic interpretant—an index taken to be an icon (Gal 2013). What is "Made in Britain" embodies the British sound.

Yet the global nature of the capitalistic production system has unhinged the aforementioned semiotic unity. Too few British brands manufacture or assemble their products in Britain. Many of them carry the label "Assembled in China" or "Made in China." Some of these companies were sold to foreign (mainly Asian) investors and are no longer owned by British companies. Does it matter that speakers or amplifiers that produce "British sound" are no longer British made? As the manufacturing process has gone global in the past few decades, does that spell an end to national descriptors as useful labels for consumers? Facing growing ambiguities with the meaning of "British made," a problem that has accompanied country of origin labels from their inception (see Chang 2009), audiophiles venture two contrasting responses. The first response is to confine the use of "British sound" to British-made equipment of a particular era. They do so by defining "true" British sound as the British sound of a particular era, through the use of indexical words that point to specific equipment of a specific era—"that" British sound. The poster above, for example, talks about the speakers of a particular brand (Celestion) made in the era of 1980s as the exemplary embodiment of British sound. Other posters have talked about the vintage speaker designs of the 1970s, such as LS 3/5A, as classic examples of British sound.<sup>8</sup>

8. These responses indicate an elaborate notion of brand authenticity within some consumption communities, where different periods in the history of a brand may be more or less "authentic." In this case, "authentic" or "original" British sound refers back in time to a brand heyday and indicates how the contemporary brands have failed. This suggests a complex, temporally elaborated "aesthetics of brandedness"; on this issue, see Nakassis 2012, 704–6).

More interesting for our purpose is the second response of staying with the term while reconfiguring its meaning. We identify two ways of reconfiguring the meaning of British sound. The first is for audiophiles to expand the scope of indexicality. That is, products are connected to Britain not only as a geographical site, but to Britain as a place whose identity is animated by its key inhabitants and lived histories. A place is a multidimensional concept (Munn 2013). In the threads cited below, audiophiles make indexical connections that include equipment not “Made in Britain,” strictly speaking, but designed and made for British living environments.

A poster named Steve spells out such a cause-effect connection in another thread: “I think the . . . British sound . . . evolved from the British lifestyle, per say. Smaller houses and apartments, required smaller speakers and amps” (“That British sound . . . what does that mean?” gearhound, post 11, August 1, 2009). Later in the same thread, Steve’s viewpoint is echoed by another member, Marc, who writes, “There it is. It really boiled down to lifestyle. The British home is small and speakers 2ft off the wall was never going to happen. Many british speakers were designed to be flat against the wall to improve the bass of these small bookshelf monitors. . . . Point of the story, The British family wants great fidelity at low levels in small rooms with thin walls that have neighbors on the other side” (“That British sound . . . what does that mean?” marc\_mc, post 17, August 1, 2009).

British speakers, used in British houses and flats, were designed for small apartments with thin walls that minimized the need to project sound outward. The speakers do not have to, and indeed would do better not to, play loud. At the same time, a high degree of fidelity is revered. Posters’ discussions of fidelity recall the lines from British comedians Flanders and Swann’s famous “Song of Reproduction”: “All the highest notes neither sharp nor flat. The ear can’t hear as high as that. Still, I ought to please any passing bat. With my high fidelity.”

Other posters debate if British flats and houses are indeed separated by “egg crate” walls. Their depictions connect the British sound to a certain British cultural milieu and lifestyle. They argue that British manufacturers’ preference for bookshelf speakers has in part to do with protecting equipment from the “rising damp” caused by the wet British climate. A poster named Doug writes that older flats, still minute, were more substantially built: “The older houses in the England do not have ‘egg crate’ walls, although not massive, my house and my Mum’s house are very substantially built. Mine in 1936 and Mum’s in about

1949." And then Doug adds, "Rising Damp was a comedy program here!" ("That British sound . . . what does that mean?," Radfordman, post 24, August 1, 2009). After which he closes with a joke: "Don't forget about Lake Pahoe on Runcorn Avenue. Or was that Mr. Padgett? :D" ("That British sound . . . what does that mean?," Doug G., post 35, August 1, 2009).

The allusions to the title of the famous 1970s British sitcom *Rising Damp* and *Monty Python's* classic sketch simultaneously pokes fun at the notion of British sound with an iconic image of modern British culture. In other discussions of the British sound ("Best of the British," "That British sound . . . what does that mean?"), posters have jokingly alluded to Winston Churchill, British rock and roll, and British council housing to contextualize, that is, indexicalize their depiction of British sound. In many instances, posters assert an imagined affinity between British sound and other British cultural phenomena. A poster who is British but now lives in the United States expresses this British affinity with a quintessential American example: "There is something about Pink Floyd on vinyl through a set of British speakers. It's like maple syrup on pancakes" ("Vintage American vs. British speakers," moggi1964, post 50, March 18, 2011).

Material things such as design techniques that put foremost emphasis on flat frequency responses are so common in these products that they are also "British." Or, for example, the willingness and tendency to experiment with different materials for speaker cabinets or the use of certain driver designs (e.g., moving coil) are also said to characterize the philosophy of British designers. These propensities to address the technical challenges of designing high-end audio environment in some predictable ways constitute a cultural-technological "tool kit" (Swidler 1986) that signifies the legacy of British engineering. Its Britishness is further historicized when it is described as the product of major British institutions such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). A poster named Bart explains British sound by means of the following origins narrative: "A desire to have accurate reproduction in comparison with live studio or performance comparisons, evolved in conjunction with BBC engineering and broadcast growth and scientific inquiry on how to systematically design speaker components—from driver cones to materials, to cabinets). Many former BBC engineers and scientists had ties to commercial companies (KEF, Rogers, Harbeth, Spondor, Chartwell) that produced speakers based on sharing of newly created designs" ("East / West coast, British sound . . .?," mech986, post 20, March 26, 2007).

**Table 1. Indexicality: How Connections Are Made between British Sound and British Society**

Dimensions of indexicality	Examples
British brands	Arcam, Bowers & Wilkins, Celestion, Creek, KEF, Harbeth, Linn, Mission, Monitor Audio, Quad, Rogers, Spendor, Tannoy, and others
Locality	"Made in Britain" in specific factory locations, e.g., Ipswich
Cultural-technological toolkit	BBC engineering, British design philosophy, material preference
Living environment/lifestyle	Smaller houses, apartments
British inhabitants and cultural legacies	Abbey Road, Beatles, Churchill, Dire Straits, Monty Python, Pink Floyd, Rising Damp

Table 1 summarizes the different aspects of indexicality identified from the threads studied. In short, indexicality explains "British sound" by showing how a certain aural output can be traced back to everything British.

### How Does "British" Sound?

There is a second pathway to reumatization that gets around the sticky problem of country of origin. Audiophiles betstow highly anthropomorphized qualities of "Britishness" on certain type of sound. In doing so, they link "British sound" to distinctly British aesthetic values and qualities rather than its geographical location. In many of the same threads where audiophiles express indexical notions of British sound, there exists another, metaphorical language to describe Britishness. In order to reconstruct this metaphorical language, we examine a series of specific discussions about the meaning of "British sound," not just references to the cause-and-effect relations between British goods and British sound. These full-blown discussions of British sound tend to occur most often in threads where new members dare to ask what everyone already knows—what is British sound? In one thread, Nolan, who describes himself as a learner, started one such discussion in his first month after joining the forum. He asks: "I have seen mentioned \*That British sound\*. What does that mean?" He adds: "Not trying to ask dumb questions, just very curious." ("That British sound . . . what does that mean?," Nolan, post 1, July 31, 2009).

The thread comes closest to a collective attempt to spell out the specific meanings of the term for the audiophile community. The question from a novice prompts the community members to reflect on the meanings of British sound that have become condensed and taken for granted. Some posters offer a rather jargon-loaded explanation on how a certain sound becomes defined as

British: "I consider the 'British Sound' to be characterized by a smooth natural midrange and a sweet, but not prominent treble . . . IOW [in other words]: just the way reproduced music should sound" ("That British sound . . . what does that mean?," TerryO, post 4, August 1, 2009). Another poster describes British sound as: "very midrange oriented with ample 'rolled off' highs. The low frequencies are very contrived but deliver the goods in a unique way not having the listener to want more . . . at least so it seems when listening to my Kef 204's, 104/2's and Spondor SP-1's" ("That British sound . . . what does that mean?," tubed, post 6, August 1, 2009).

Even when offering technically-oriented descriptions, members unavoidably evaluate. As the first poster suggests, it is "Just the way reproduced music should sound." It also imputes a certain "character" to the sound, as reflected in the puzzling mixtures of adjectives—sweet but not prominent, contrived but not leaving people to want more.

Metaphors play a central role in articulating the sensation of sound, as the examples above show. Posters often rely on "natural" or "sensuous" metaphors that compare an audio sensation to other bodily sensations to describe sound (cf. Gal 2013). A poor amplifier, for example, may sound "bright," "tizzy," "edgy," "brittle," "grainy"—sound characteristics that quality audio equipment should avoid. On the other hand, nice sound can be described in many ways—"rich," "warm," "full," "sweet," "silky," and so on. These metaphors are "natural" in the sense that experience of one sensation (e.g., heat) is used to compare to the sensation described (sound), hence a certain sound can be described as warm or cold. Sound seems to invoke visual and other sensual images that people can relate to, a mechanism that is sometimes described technically as synesthesia. Other examples of borrowing words originally used to describe other sensations to describe sound include: warm/cold (heat), upfront/distant (distance), forward/laid-back (position), lean/full (physical body), loose/tight (physical grip), quick/slow (motion), airy/heavy (weight), agile/congested (movement), transparent/thick (appearance), sweet/dry (taste).

But as a metaphor "British sound" belongs to a different analytical type, one that literary scholars describe as "poetic." Metaphors are poetic in the sense that they draw parallels between two or more objects of a different kind. Although this metaphorical articulation of meaning deploys existing labels to describe and make sense of an otherwise indescribable experience, it is culturally innovative nonetheless. The innovation lies in the connection made, or in structuralist lingo, the metaphoric transformation involved in naming an entity (A) as another entity (B). For example, the metaphor "elephant in the

room” compares an obvious but unmentioned event to a huge animal. If the vividness of natural metaphors turns on the assumption that sensory experiences of different kinds can metonymically speak to each other (i.e., our different senses are in a way connected), poetic metaphors involve images that select, interpret, appraise, and translate drastically different experiences of one realm to another. As a form of iconicity, poetic metaphors are more interesting to us. There is an implicit sociology at work when a cultural object is chosen to represent an object of a different nature, in our case, a kind of audio sensation.

British sound sounds British because it embeds essential properties of Britishness. However, the quality of Britishness remains too abstract to grasp. In these cases, we see a tendency to anthropomorphize British sound. In the examples below, we can see how British speakers sound like the way British gentlemen behave and indeed talk. Adjectives used by posters to describe British sound—civilized, cultivated, polished, polite, refined, subtle, well-mannered—can be interchangeably applied to describe the British gentleman (Mason 1982): “British speakers usually are controlled and not in your face, kind of subdued to a degree. . . . I have some old as dirt B&W’s and I love the perfection and thought put into these things, the Brits generally don’t just screw drivers into boxes, they really put effort into engineering a balanced ‘proper’ sound, and lots of times to great effect, they vary like anything else. Some can be too polite, BUT some are brilliant! and some suck, but not as much as others makers. YMMV [your mileage may vary]” (“That British sound . . . what does that mean?,” mcgarick, post 3, August 1, 2009).

Similarly, a new owner of a pair of British Harbeth speakers makes the following remarks: “They’re not a speaker that jumps up for attention. You just kind of end up listening to them for a long time, then think ‘wow, that just sounded really nice’” (“My Harbeths are here!,” John VF, August 31, 2011, post 101). These remarks show how a product is revered for its elusive qualities, qualities that go beyond mere technical specifications. It is in this sense that the label “British” may be termed “meta-aesthetic,” that is, rather than being sensuous qualitative values characterizing specific features, they are appraisals and overt assertions that whatever they qualify has positive or negative aesthetic value (Munn 2013, 140). National labels are thus appropriated as a metasign (Gal 2013) that, by combining and unifying a set of otherwise dispersed qualities, typify social groups of particular aesthetic taste, and personae, along with their imputed characteristics (Agha 2007).

The image of the proverbial British gentleman underpins these attempts to describe British sound—the master of understatement, at ease in all circumstances, who never feels or causes embarrassment in any situation. One literally

hears a piece of culture when consuming British sound through a particular speaker. The cultural imagination turns on a certain admiration of Britishness circulated among the middle class in the United States—savvy but not flashy, nonchalant and laid back, articulate and composed.

### **From "That" British Sound to "This" American Sound**

Many contributors to Audiokarma reside in the United States.<sup>9</sup> Yet they have clear and often strong opinions on what British sound is like, even though just some of them are devotees of British sound. Why is that the case? Examining their discourses suggests that the label constitutes a common frame of relevance: That British sound constitutes an important alternative template of audio sound to this American sound with which they grew up. British sound is set up to make sense not only of equipment that sounds British but, equally important, equipment that sounds strikingly non-British. Although British sound is rarely compared with American sound explicitly (see below), it does serve as a discursive nodal point in the interpretative universe of audiophiles. Admirers or skeptics of British Sound reflect on American sound, and by extension, American culture in relation to British sound. Through mobilization of evaluative terms associated with British sound, perceived sonic differences are articulated as cultural differences, and vice versa.

If British sound is modest, gentle, laid-back, smooth, and contrived, American sound, is, by contrast, upfront, dynamic, aggressive, and in your face. Posters cast these differences almost strictly in terms of national character. For instance, one poster describes British sound in relation to a "JBL West Coast [American] type, bang your head Rock and Roll" sound ("That British sound . . . what does that mean?," mcgarick, post 3, August 1, 2009). In comparison, the British sound is "polite" and "proper." This distinction between the American as brash and the British as polite reemerges from time to time in more discussions. One poster characterizes American speakers "as anything that has a thick, gutsy Marshall amp/Jensen speaker quality" ("East vs. West Coast sound, what's up, really???", bootzilla, post 50, January 19, 2011).

To return to the "meta-aesthetic" character of national labels, audiophiles consider sound qualities not as isolated components, but in light of their expected national sound. Audiophiles seem to hold a different ideal for American sound. Consequently, when they praise American-brand speakers, they praise them for different qualities. If an audiophile describes a pair of American speakers as "gentle" and polite, it is unclear whether this is a good thing. By contrast,

9. By reading through the sampled threads we ascertained that many active members of the web community reside in the United States. This is based on the self-reported locations supplied by the posters.

it is definitely praise if the speakers are British. American speakers are not meant to sound gentle. They should sound “gutsy,” they should sound “punchy,” they should sound “dynamic,” even “brash.” The comparison allows us to see how nationalness works as a meta-aesthetic sign. Modesty becomes constriction. Politeness becomes timidity. Laid-back becomes boring. Members prefer to talk instead about the “incredible dynamic range” and “big soundstage” of American speakers (“Are all the best speakers made in the USA?,” thymant, post 145, December 21, 2008).

Much of this comparison happens indirectly. Posters seldom compare British sound directly to American sound, or vice versa. In the rare occasions that they do, they without exceptions paint the two as polar opposite of each other. A member named Nat makes the following comparison between British and American speakers, with the latter tends toward a “larger than life extravaganza”: “Perhaps cliches about national character play out here too—british speakers have tended to be smaller, more modest in their ambitions, and more focused on presenting a realistic window into a performance, rather than a larger than life extravaganza” (“Best of the British,” Nat, post 82, February 17, 2009). In a different thread, the same poster further explained this larger-than-life (American) versus modest (British) contrast by referring to a fundamental difference in audio design philosophy: “My strong impression is that american speakers were aimed at creating the impression that the orchestra was somehow in the room with you—so big scale and dynamics were important—whereas british speakers were aimed at creating a window to the original performance so a mental distance was introduced, meaning that ultimate volume didn’t matter so much, but with the sense of a window comes the sense of seeing, so imaging was very important” (“Vintage American vs. British speakers,” Nat, post 6, June 18, 2010).

The impression of American loudspeakers as powerful and dynamic was heavily promoted by the advertising industry in the late twentieth century. Perhaps the most famous expression of this power image can be found in Steve Steigman’s legendary “Blown-Away Guy” commercial poster in the 1980s. Though it was designed as an advertisement for Maxwell audio cassettes, the poster and its related TV commercial elevated the then popular JBL l100 (with its highly identifiable waffle foam grill) from a commercial success to the status of a cultural icon.<sup>10</sup> The speakers epitomize the kind of punchy, dynamic, and

10. One might also compare this to the iconic British advertisement image of “His Master’s Voice,” featuring a dog listening curiously to his master’s phonograph. This was taken up in the United States by RCA and Victor, in particular. We want to thank the editor for pointing this out.

in-your-face American sound that both literally and figuratively blows listeners away.<sup>11</sup>

Besides its dynamic and powerful quality, American speakers are also known for their innovative eccentricity, another quality that is often attributed to an American culture that views eccentricity as the outward expression of inner freedom. In the quotation below, a member picked three of his favorite speakers—Vandersteen, Ohm, and Magnepan. The three picks are all well-known among audiophiles. More important, they all deviated from the conventional two-way or three-way speaker designs and were considered eccentric designs when they first hit the market. Vandersteen used boxless mounting of drivers, that is, no wood veneer cabinet for the drivers; an Ohm loudspeaker resembled a large ice cream cone; and Magnepan used a planar driver system mounted in a panel to produce sound. As the poster suggests, it is their "non-traditional," "outside the box" character that made them great "American" speakers: "3 of my favorites are from USA - Vandersteen, Ohm and Magnepan. The British, Danes, Germans and many others from around the world also make great sounding speakers. But I must say that the 3 above excel in non-traditional designs that have definitely stood the test of time. My speakers are the only component that I have that's made in USA - I got a kick out of driving down to Brooklyn to pick up my speakers and talk to the designer! I'm not sure if Shahinian were mentioned, but that's another American company that thinks outside the box . . . :)" ("Are all the best speakers made in the USA?," zkzpb8, June 5, 2010).

### **Nationalness in Consumer Discourse**

The discourses of British and American sounds show how audiophiles impute distinctive characteristics to the sounds they hear via nationalness as a genre of metasign. Less frequently, posters will bring up speakers designed or built in other countries including Germany, Denmark, and Canada. When they speculate about the origins of sound and its relation to national characteristics,

11. These characterizations of Americanness reproduce, perhaps unintentionally, several clichés about American character. Such clichés begin with a kind of natural primitiveness, perhaps articulated most infamously by John Locke: "Thus in the beginning all the World was America" (1947, sec. 49, chap. 5, second treatise). Alexis de Tocqueville and Frederick Jackson Turner develop such descriptions, by contrasting American character with aristocratic Europe. For instance, in the introduction to *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville writes, "democracy in America, left to its inclinations and abandoned almost without hindrance to its instincts, has naturally given to its laws, the course it has imprinted on government on the control it has taken over public affairs" (2003, 24). In America, the course of political development occurs in the thrall of instincts and inclinations, without the restraints, obstacles, and refinements of Europe. Similarly, Turner characterizes the development of American institutions in terms of "winning a wilderness" and developing out of "primitive economic and political conditions" (1920, 2). This powerful, unruly, and naturally dynamic image of America comes through in audiophiles' description of American speaker qualities.

posters implicitly recognize the role that national character plays in establishing these taste categories, much like with the British sound. One poster asks, cheekily, “Ever notice how countries design their speakers to mirror themselves? American - Up front & in your face, British - Polite & laid back, German - Bright & brash, Japanese - Thin & bright?” (“East, West, and British,” gearhound, post 8, June 10, 2008).

Posters often assert a strong association between different sounds and national stereotypes. The Japanese emphasis on technical efficiency and prowess makes a technically superior (but soulless) sound. The American rock-and-roll spirit creates a roaring and dynamic sound, especially in comparison with British speakers that “won’t rock the house down” (“Vintage American vs. British speakers,” jaykoly, post 12, June 18, 2010). As stereotypical as these characterizations of nationalness are, posters do draw on them and use them as cultural markers to describe and to evaluate the sound they hear.

For example, some posters reference Japanese technological know-how and national *qualia* when they dismiss the popular but mass market-oriented (as perceived by audiophiles) equipment from Japan. As one poster puts it, although perhaps more dismissively than many other audiophiles, “Japanese speakers have not impressed many around the world. The Japanese love to design with software to take the human out completely. They pioneered this technique, but not many people like a speaker to sound that perfect” (“East, West, and British,” NotSure, post 6, June 10, 2008). In discussions, Japanese sound is described as exotic but sometimes unappealing. We see that posters often talk about Japanese speakers as if they share a common profile: high frequency-oriented, efficient, and innovative in a slightly off-the-wall way: “Japanese sound is usually tilted towards HF [high frequency] response. . . . Japanese speakers are very easy to drive and very efficient. Japanese designers use unusual materials a lot and unusual driver design” (“East, West, and British,” sealy, post 2, June 9, 2008). The example shows how nationalness serves as a meta-aesthetic anchor through which audiophiles differentiate among what, to untrained ears, sounds very similar. It also shows that denotation has an unavoidably discursive character. It is interesting to see how what is described as “innovative” in the American example above is now talked about as “unusual” in the Japanese case. The talk of technical efficiency echoes a certain set of associations between Japan, technology, and otherness. Indeed, the most common description of Japanese sound includes adjectives like “bright” and “sterile,” which stands in contrast to both British “warmth” and American “dynamism” in other discussions. Ironically, the most recognizable Japanese loudspeakers in the audiophiles community are a type of

speakers known for its intimidating look—the “Kabuki” speakers made by Japanese manufacturers in the seventies. Kabuki is one of the oldest forms of traditional dance drama characterized by its traditional all-male cast and elaborate make-up. The term, however, is appropriated to label a type of speakers characterized by their übermasculine, over-the-top look. A member offers the following definition: “A speaker, usually Japanese, that uses a large number of drivers or excess ornamentation to look fancy and expensive, instead of actually trying to sound good” (“Kabuki speakers,” John in MA, post 2, March 24, 2007).

Narratives about the Japanese sound, however, admit more conceptual fuzziness. There are many major stereo manufacturers from Japan. In the eyes of some audiophiles, some Japanese brands were not high-end equipment makers. But these popular brands have their own sounds, which complicates the discussion of Japanese sound. A poster writes, “I find Kenwoods to lean rich and dark, Marantz are known for a ‘two martini’ (warm, tubelike) sound, Yamaha are known for ‘natural sound’ (analytical, clean, minimal colorations), Denon supposedly bright, Hafler muscular, etc” (“80’s Japanese Power amps,” thedelihaus, post 9, February 6, 2007).

## **Discussion**

Back to our initial question: how do connoisseurs appropriate national labels in the shadow of a production regime that is thoroughly global? We identify two key semiotic processes of rhematization. One is to relate sound to a cultural sense of place, a sense of place that goes beyond physical boundary to include the material practices and lived histories. By linking a certain sound to British design, technologies, and social environment, audiophiles manage to meaningfully talk about “British sound” that is not made in Britain. The second pathway of rhematization occurs by abstracting a certain notion of Britishness from the sound audiophiles covet. Sound can be judged as “very British” or “not British at all,” regardless of their actual indexical connections or lack thereof. This process of rhematization produces an “image” quality of “British sound,” an image that is highly anthropomorphized. The sign functions as if it is a self-contained icon and the indexical aspect of “British made” is hence suppressed, if not completely erased.

The two types of linkages exemplify distinct semiotic syntaxes, as seen in some of the examples above. From a sociological standpoint, the two pathways also have contrasting implications. As a cultural process, the first is a particularizing move. It links the connoisseurship of high-fidelity music reproduction to the histories and people of a place. Connections to British society are

indexically drawn by referring to “British” technology and design philosophy. As shown, posters refer to a set of cultural-technological tools that they consider considered British. Even though British sound is no longer manufactured in Britain, its appreciation and enjoyment is placed in the context of a broader cultural consumption of thing British.

But it is the second move, a move to abstraction, that seems to have become increasingly appealing and widespread. The presence of iconic statements in the discussions of “British sound” suggests that audiophiles treat British sound in an essential, ahistorical way, not so much as a historical and social consequence of British society and technology. Our analysis also shows that Britishness is expressed through the ideal of the proverbial British gentleman—cultivated, refined, and subtle. Audiophiles juxtaposed “British sound” alongside other national labels (which also serve as metasigns) such as “American sound” and “Japanese sound.” They subsumed a set of qualities are subsumed under “British” as a marker of taste. Thus, nationalness is appropriated as a type of metasign that typifies social groups of particular aesthetic taste, and personae.

Nationalness is an important means of cultural distinction for two reasons. First, because it goes beyond the narrow definition of country of origins, it will likely remain a common means for connecting national imaginations to consumer products in this age of global capitalism. Today, an iPhone manufactured in China (the marketing term is *assembled*) is discussed matter-of-factly as the quintessential American product. Second, the metasign of nationalness allows one to extract the perceived qualia of a nation without entangling its histories and people. The circulation of packaged and stereotyped ideas of nationalness complements the abstract nature of global market exchange well. British audio equipment, now loosely defined, populates the middle- and high-brow market sectors. Our study shows that national narratives in consumer talk go beyond the role of fostering national identity or self-identification. In fact, the meaning highlighted by national labels featured in the context of global consumption may well deviate from the meaning generated by local national narratives. For example, local Swiss tend to see Swiss cultural identity as rustic and straightforward. Yet, the notion of Swissness presented through the lens of Swiss chocolate and Swiss watches is anything but rustic and straightforward. Indeed, in other quarters, Britishness is understood in starkly different, even contradictory, manner. For example, in the universe of American television reality shows, a British judge often assumes an unfriendly, difficult, straight-shooting persona far removed from gentleness—Piers Morgan in “America’s Got Talent,” Len Goodman in “Dancing with the Stars,” Nigel Lythgoe in “So

You Think You Can Dance," Nigel Barker in "Top Model," Gordon Ramsay of "Hell's Kitchen," and, above all, Simon Cowell of "American Idol" and "The X-Factor." Understanding nationalness as both a market construct and a resource for consumers is important for researchers to unpack the complex relation between national ideology and capitalism in a globalized setting.

### Conclusion

Rumors of the demise of national labels in this age of global capitalism have been greatly exaggerated. In this study, we demonstrate that the concept of nation is alive and well in consumer talk. Peirce's semiotic trichotomies help us understand how the concept has become ever more malleable and elusive to accommodate the new reality of today's globalized chain of production and consumption. The greatest semiotic challenge is to make a product manufactured outside of a describable place as a product of a specific nation. Through this study of British sound, we develop the notion of nationalness and show how the concept captures the way national labels are used to represent the qualia of nations in upmarket products. Through this semiotic process, national labels exemplify culturally defined qualities of either valued or disvalued kinds. In addition, nationalness becomes a metasign that underwrites the judgment of taste. Thus, Britishness takes on significance that extends far beyond the legal definition of country of origin.

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