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Consuming royalty: promotional narratives and the British royal family

Introduction

The death of Queen Elizabeth II in summer 2022 heralded a new era for the British royal family. Under the Queen, the British royals became a branding powerhouse, estimated to have contributed tens of billions of pounds to the UK economy (Balmer; Hirwani). The British royal family is unique in its manifestation in consumer culture, both in the UK and around the world (Otnes and Maclaran). During Elizabeth II's reign, royalty became a cultural commodity, penetrating the UK's promotional landscape in almost all industries—from fashion, to automotive, to food and beverages. The Queen herself became a meticulously crafted personal brand with a worldwide appeal. Whether this consumer draw will continue following her passing is something that has seen widespread speculation by British and international media and academics.

Balmer candidly remarks that with the death of Queen Elizabeth II, “the UK has not only lost a peerless constitutional monarch, but also one of the country's greatest brand assets. The new King has significant shoes to fill” (para. 21). Undoubtedly, the new head of the British royal family is facing considerable challenges; not only in replacing one of the most revered royals in British history (Gander), but also in doing so in a period when the monarchy has come under increasing scrutiny. Ranking fifth in terms of popularity among the British royals in the second quarter of 2023—behind the late Queen, William, the Prince of Wales, Princess Anne and Catherine, the Princess of Wales—there has been prevailing scepticism, particularly among the younger population, as to whether Charles will make a good king (YouGov A,B). While support for the monarchy remains high in Britain overall, it is significantly lower than in earlier decades. This is particularly true for younger adults, whose enthusiasm for the monarchy has consistently fallen in recent years. In the UK, “the crown is still popular overall, but there are deep generational divides” (Smith para. 1). Compared to older generations, younger Britons are not convinced that the monarchy is good for the country or that the public taxes spent on the royal family constitutes good value for money (Coughlan). Almost a third of young adults even express embarrassment by the British monarchy (Smith). This negative attitude is higher among younger ethnic minority Britons (Abraham).

Considering these challenges, this paper investigates the British royal family as part of the UK's promotional culture *post*-Queen Elizabeth II. Interested particularly in the promotional narratives aimed at young adults, two research questions are guiding this investigation:

- (i) How do brands establish a royal connection as part of UK digital advertising?
- (ii) What current promotional narratives are crafted around royalty in the UK?

Advertising is a major cultural actor in societies, capturing the zeitgeist and allowing inferences on collective ideals, social perceptions and cultural patterns (Leiss et al.; Basbug; Olsen). The ideas, desires and even fears that advertising undoubtedly plays upon are a major part of a society's culture, or at least of the sub-culture formed by the target audience. The contents of adverts are an expression of what advertisers have found in search of the addressee. Advertising is a continuum, comprising evaluations in terms of what is currently perceived as important, desirable or undesirable by members of society. It amplifies and affirms contemporary patterns of behaviour and reveals cultural standards (Goffman; Schmidt and Siems). Considering the effort and money devoted to exploring potential consumers, it seems very likely that advertising reflects the dominant values, norms, role expectations, prejudices, fears, dreams and needs of their target group with considerable accuracy. Therefore, whilst advertising, like any other form of media, might not fully reflect all aspects of a society, it can be assumed that it largely picks up and conveys contemporary ideas and developments; or at least those relevant to the target group(s). It therefore provides insight into the mental image and expectations of its intended audience. As an investigation involving promotional social media content, advertising, in the context of this study, provides a snapshot into the current discussion surrounding royalty among young adults in the UK.

Study design

A media content analysis of social media adverts was conducted, spanning from 30 April to 8 May 2023. This investigation period encompassed a full calendar week leading up to the coronation of King Charles III on 6 May, as well as the coronation bank holiday granted by the UK government, which encouraged Britons to host and attend celebratory street parties throughout the country (GOV.UK A,B). Instagram was chosen due to its popularity with younger adults in the UK and its wide appeal to a broad spectrum of brands (Dixon; Dencheva).

For the collection of the sample, undergraduate students were recruited. All 68 volunteers, aged between 20 and 25 years, were based in Greater London and regularly used Instagram for leisure purposes, interacting with the app on average at least once a day prior to the study. The group of volunteers was slightly more female (54%) and included almost exclusively British nationals from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Instructions for data collection were kept intentionally vague, with students being asked to “use your Instagram as usual and monitor your account for promotional content that, in your opinion, references the British monarchy”. References could be part of the visual elements, captions and/or hashtags of sponsored posts, stories and reels. Students were asked to take screenshots of relevant adverts and upload these to a shared cloud folder, hosted by the University of West London.

During the investigation period, the group of students were targeted by over one thousand sponsored advertisements perceived as relating to the British monarchy. After discounting duplications and variants—e.g., repurposed content in different media formats—171 unique advertisements from 89 brands were included in this study.

How brands establish a royal connection

Unsurprisingly, the upcoming coronation was the most frequently mentioned reference to the British monarchy during the investigation period. It featured prominently in the visuals of advertisements, often taking the form of the official coronation emblem. Additionally, captions and hashtags as part of the sponsored post and reels frequently alluded to the coronation. Symbols of royalty, including crowns, were commonly used, although they tended to be more stylised than photorealistic in nature. Particularly popular among brands was the incorporation of the crown emoji, both in the visual elements and captions of their posts.

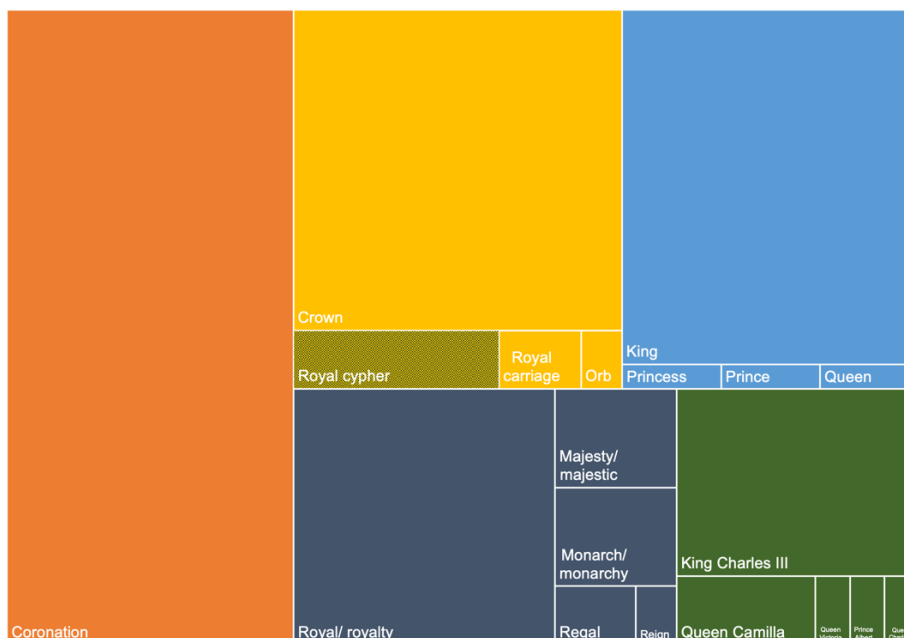


Figure 1: References to the British monarchy within advertising and their frequency, clustered according to the nature of the reference—events (orange), insignia/symbols (yellow), royal and princely titles (blue), generic terminology/synonyms (purple), and specific person identifiers (green). Due to its nature, “royal cypher” can be clustered as both symbol and personal identifier.

Regarding named members of the current royal family, the mentions were primarily limited to King Charles III and Queen Camilla. In most cases, references remained abstract and impersonal, employing more generic terms associated with the monarchy, such as “royal”, “majestic”, or “regal”. Royal and princely titles were largely used without specific identifiers for whom they referred to. Although no other members of the current royal family were featured, historical references found their way into the advertisements, with mentions of Queen Victoria, Queen Charlotte and Prince Albert.

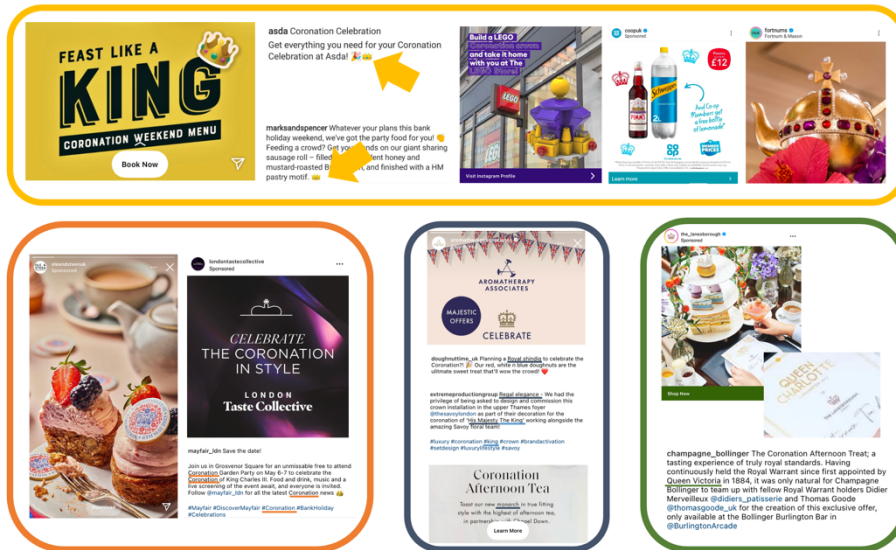


Figure 2: Collage of example references to the British monarchy

Promotional narratives crafted around royalty

During the investigation period, four distinct promotional narratives were identified targeting younger adults leading up to the coronation and throughout the coronation bank holiday weekend.

King for a day: buying one's way into royalty

The most common narrative observed focused on the concept of royalty as a marker of excellence and indulgence. This narrative was driven by two underlying principles: Firstly, it centred on trustworthiness, with a strong emphasis on assuring consumers that the products and services being promoted are of superior quality, offer excellent value for their money, and will deliver an experience befitting royalty. Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, the overarching message revolved around attainability. At its essence, it was implied that anyone can experience a taste of royalty, even if only for a day, and the brands are there to assist in making this aspiration a reality.

This narrative featured across a wide spectrum of industries, spanning from accommodation and food services to retail. Notably, these were not exclusively premium brands; this narrative was also very much embraced by more affordable high street and online brands. For instance, the upscale eatery chain, *The Ivy*, offered "An experience fit for a King" in the run-up to the coronation. As part of a multi-image campaign, they featured close-ups of lavishly decorated dining tables and bejewelled customers indulging in the restaurant's coronation-themed foods and drinks. Similarly, the high-end department store *Harvey Nichols*, with its historical ties to the British royal family, invited patrons in a sponsored reel to "Toast [the] new monarch in true fitting style with the highest of afternoon tea". Meanwhile, even more affordable brands boldly touted their products with similar claims. London-based restaurant, *The Avocado Show*, announced in a sponsored reel a special menu for its customers to "Feast like a King" during the coronation weekend, and premixed cocktails brand *Nio* proclaimed their Dry Martini, which they reveal is the King's favourite cocktail, as "Fit for a King, fit for you!" The framing of products and services as suitable for royalty is central to this narrative, suggesting that the rigid social class system of the UK might be temporarily porous, allowing everyone to access the lifestyle associated with royalty in the lead-up to the coronation.

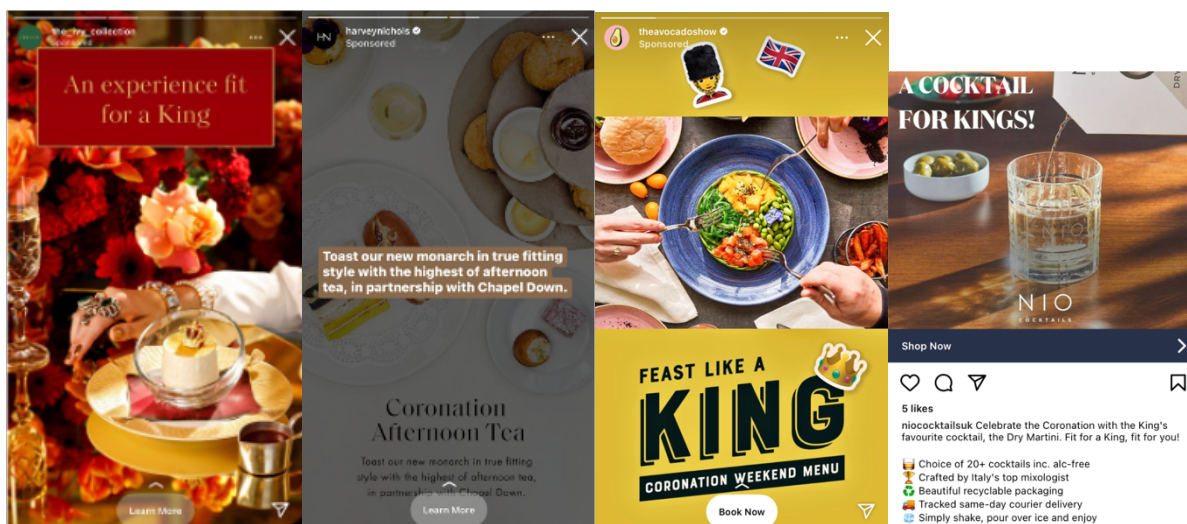


Figure 3: Examples of the first narrative, 'King for a day'

Let the commemoration begin—the right way!

In the promotional stories of this narrative, brands extended a helping hand to consumers to navigate the intricacies of celebrating a new monarch. After all, so the promotional consensus, a coronation is a rare event and guidance might be required as to how adequately to commemorate the special occasion. One way of doing this was by assisting in making the right choices regarding food and beverages when hosting or attending a coronation celebration party. Unsurprisingly, this exclusively involved showcasing what the brands behind the sponsored posts had to offer. English liqueur maker *Pimm's*, for example, confidently asserted that "Throwing a party fit for a king doesn't need to be difficult", if Pimm's is on the menu. Similarly, British supermarket chain *Waitrose* encouraged their audiences to "Throw a right Royal Party", with the help of their "royally delicious, limited-edition range" of traditional British baked goods.

This narrative equated royalty with specific items that hold a special significance and should not be missed. Much like the first narrative, these items enable the purchase of royal status for a limited time and elevate an otherwise ordinary event to something more regal. However, in contrast to the previous narrative, this status is less self-centred in nature, with the primary focus being on how to appropriately celebrate the occasion in honour of the new King. Posts were also more inclusive of all ages, marking the monarchy as something that the whole family can enjoy and ought to celebrate. It is worth noting, however, that, at times, even brands appeared uncertain about how much royal celebration the youngest members of a family can genuinely appreciate. For instance, in a multi-image sponsored post, German discount supermarket *Aldi* suggested a selection of "Coronation crafts" intended to spark activities throughout the coronation weekend, with the copy subtly implying the necessity to "Keep the kids busy this long weekend".

Some brands approached the narrative of commemoration from a retrospective angle, emphasising the historic significance. For example, the designer outlet shopping centre *Bicester Village* encouraged consumers in a short video to visit its location on London's doorstep to shop and create "your own royal souvenir"—showcasing a variety of potential memorabilia, including printed postcards featuring a bear dressed in the new King's royal cypher. Similarly, the British heritage fashion brand *Hackett* promoted a limited-edition pocket square adorned with the royal cypher as part of their coronation celebration, inviting audiences to "Own a piece of history". Instead of providing guidance on how to celebrate on the day, these branded posts stressed the cultural significance of the coronation—an extraordinary occasion worthy of remembrance and preservation of cherished memories.

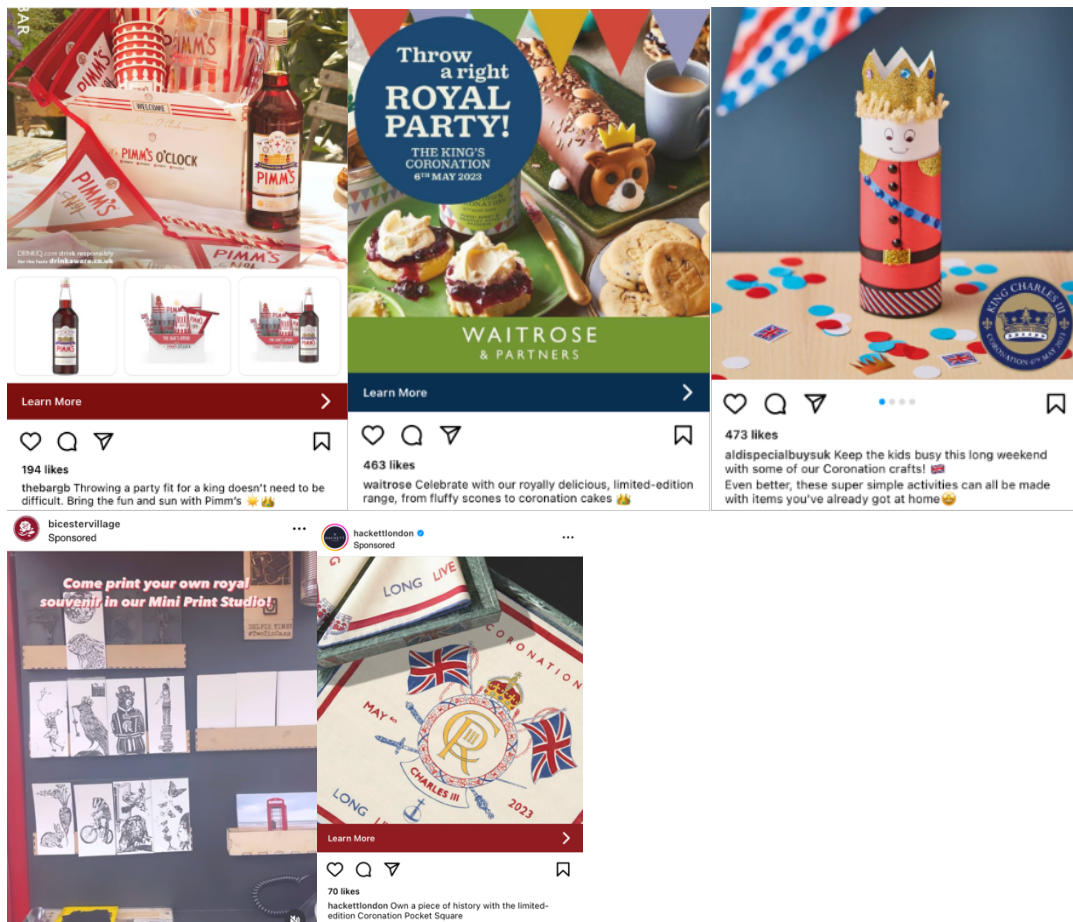


Figure 4: Examples of the second narrative, 'Let the commemoration begin'

A royal takeover: embracing the monarchy

Brands tend to keep a close eye on safeguarding their intellectual property, encompassing the use of their visual identity, brand name and product designs (Beverland). The third narrative somewhat breaks with this norm, allowing royalty to occupy the same space in promotional communications, or even temporarily taking over a brand identity. The incorporation of royalty occurs at various levels within the advertisements, including the modification of visual identities. By way of example, in a sponsored post by *Transport for London*, the local government body overseeing the UK capital's public transport system, the iconic roundel symbol underwent several adaptations, allowing alterations to one of Britain's most recognisable logos (Lawrence). Departing from its traditional colour scheme, the royal version featured a multicoloured design mirroring the different train lines on the network, with an addition of a golden crown to commemorate the "Coronation of Their Majesties King Charles III and Queen Camilla".

More commonly, brands extended this royal presence to the product level, including packaging or even the product itself. For example, Swiss chocolatier *Läderach*, in a sponsored post, promoted a special edition of one of its chocolate taster boxes, the "King Coronation max". This box featured a crown-shaped cutout designed to showcase the various chocolate flavours, promising an "unforgettable taste experience". Beyond merely incorporating royalty into their product, many brands created special editions to commemorate the royal event. This was particularly prominent in the food sector, where both large and small brands showcased their creations in sponsored posts and reels. For example, major British retailer *Marks and Spencer* introduced a special edition of its iconic caterpillar cake, affectionately known as Colin, bedecked with a chocolate crown and jewels. *The London Taste Collective* encouraged audiences to "raise a royally good cocktail" in celebration of the bank holiday weekend, featuring a special cocktail adorned with the silhouette of the new King in cacao dust. Meanwhile, the online bakery *Biscuit Boutique* unveiled a series of biscuits and chocolates adorned with royal crowns, carriages and the official coronation emblem.

With brands big and small considering the upcoming event valuable enough to temporarily set aside established business rules and wholeheartedly embrace the monarchy, this narrative encourages consumers to also rejoice in the British royalty, if only for this special occasion.

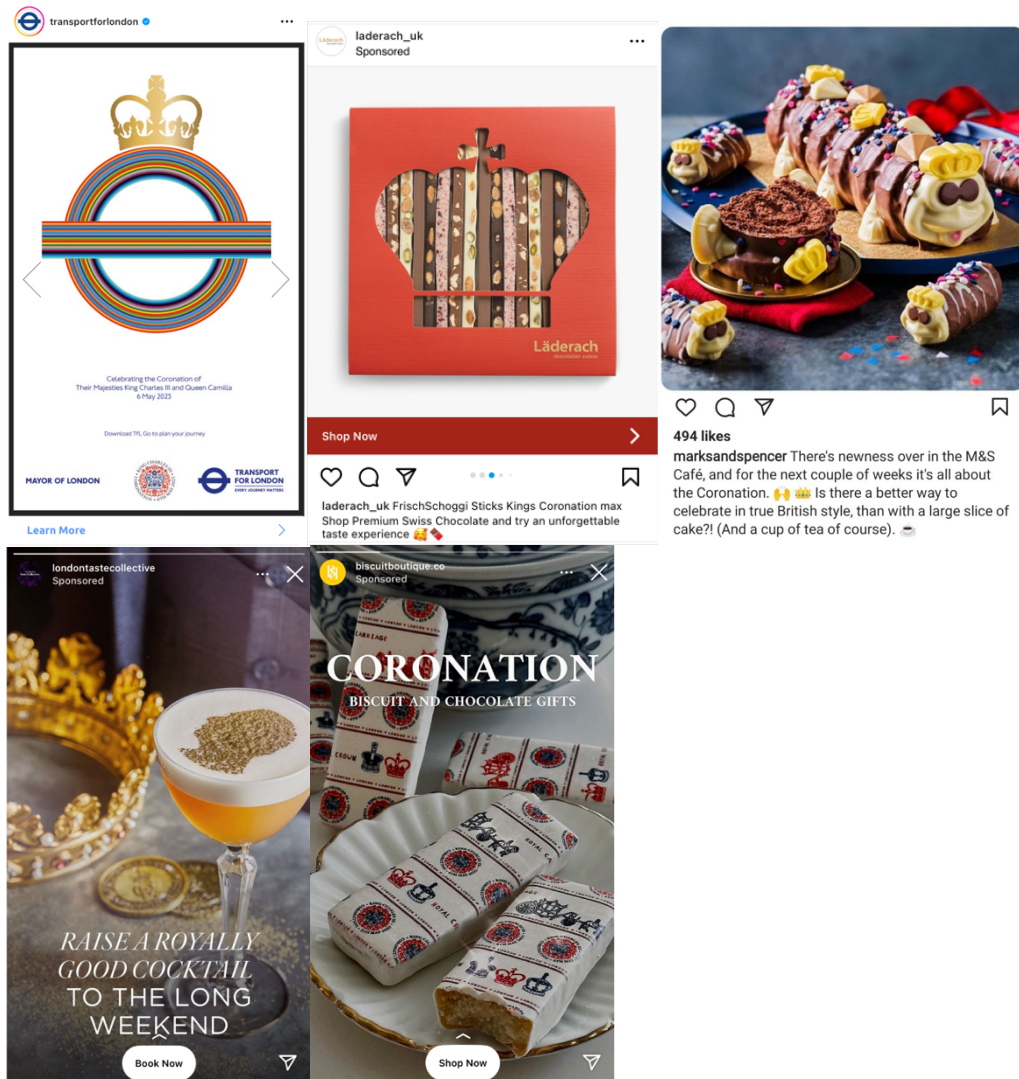


Figure 5: Examples of the third narrative, 'A royal takeover'

A new king? That's heir-larious

Although less common than other narratives in the sample, some brands employed humour to engage the audience while weaving the British monarchy into their promotional storytelling. This narrative served to acknowledge the coronation without appearing overly to promote the monarchy itself, a distinction that sets it apart from all other narratives. Varying from the tame to the more irreverent, the narrative spanned various industries, including hospitality, food and public transport; predominantly leaning towards the more affordable end of the spectrum.

For instance, the American fast-food chain *Burger King*, operating under the name *Hungry Jack's* in Australia and known for its tongue-in-cheek social media marketing, aimed to connect with younger adults in the lead-up to the coronation through a multi-ad campaign centred around the impending royal event. In a sponsored video reel, *Burger King* showcased a time-lapse sequence of employees removing the word 'Burger' from their prominent Leicester Square branch signage in central London, leaving only the word 'King' between the burger bun slices of the logo. The caption humorously read "From one king to another". Around the same time, *Burger King* also introduced a limited edition of its iconic paper crown in select branches, dedicated to the coronation of King Charles III. In a series of slice-of-life shots within a multi-image sponsored post, young adults were seen donning the crown with the caption casually stating: "Think our crown looks better tbh [to be honest]". Beyond the play on

the brand name, the humour lies in the contrast between the opulence associated with royal banquets and courtly riches and the everyday nature of a fast-food chain. This tongue-in-cheek approach may be perceived as gently poking fun at the monarchy, positioning both the brand and its customers on an equal footing with the new King, playfully ribbing royal titles and insignias while elevating the consumer rather than focusing on the celebration of the new monarch.

However, most brands took a less irreverent approach to their promotional narratives, infusing humour in connection with the monarchy primarily through minor wordplay. For instance, the UK's train network service *National Rail* announced in a reel that customers can "Get a King Charles III off rail travel with Railcard" and Swiss coffee system brand *Nespresso* declared that "coffee has dethroned tea as the nation's favourite drink". In a similarly tame fashion, the Swiss confectionery brand *KitKat* shared a sponsored post featuring a rare three-finger version of its iconic chocolate treat. The caption read, "Thanks for the extra break, Sir", alluding to both the additional bank holiday granted in the UK in celebration of the coronation and the brand's well-known slogan.

At the heart of this narrative is the idea that brands do not feel the need to tread lightly when it comes to the royal family. Much like with other celebrities and public figures, the British royals are fair game for humour, albeit predominantly in a light-hearted manner that does not cross boundaries.

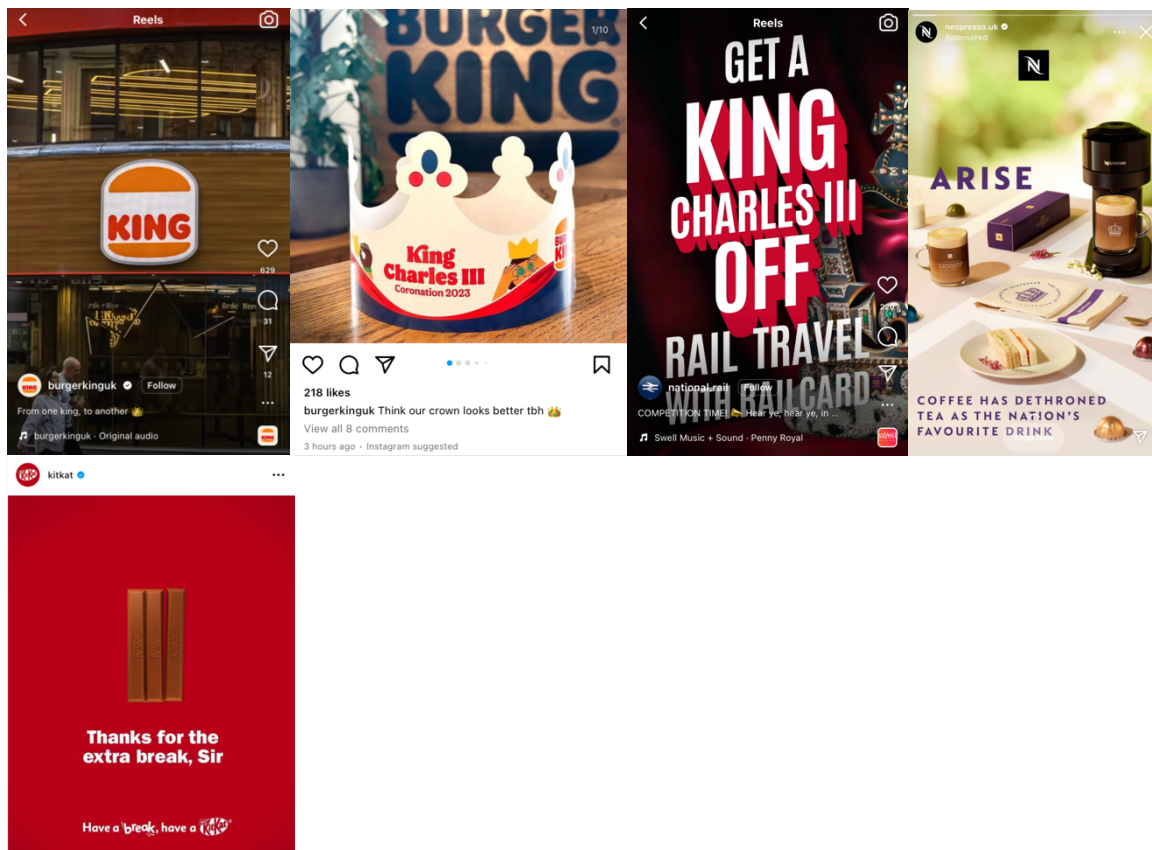


Figure 6: Examples of the fourth narrative, 'A new king? That's heir-larious'

Concluding remarks

Despite anchoring the investigation around the coronation, which centres on the anointment of a king and queen, only little attention is given to the persons behind the titles—that is, Charles and Camilla. During the investigation period, there is a noticeable duality of royalty, different from previous decades. Compared to the meticulously crafted personal brand of the late Queen Elizabeth II, royalty, in the context of the promotional narratives, is more about the institution rather than the sovereign and the royal family. Along with this goes a marked shift in emphasis, away from royalty as part of the UK's social class system and towards a lifestyle—one that can be attained by everyone, albeit only with the assistance of brands. This reflects in the different promotional narratives, where the focus often lies on decreasing the distance between royalty and the public, while still celebrating the monarchy.

But not all has changed, the narratives identified as part of this study are all largely still positive in nature. Even in cases where humour is used to poke fun at the monarchy, lines are never crossed, and the tone remains light-hearted. The wide variety of brands from different industries also suggests an on-going appeal of royalty and the monarchy among younger adults, including younger ethnic minority Britons—at least during the extraordinary circumstances of the coronation. This study presents valuable original insight into an important event in British history. It remains to be seen how these narratives might change over time and unfold outside of special royal events.

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