Evolution of Brand Consciousness: Retail Change and Intergenerational Factors

Background

A recent study has demonstrated that ‘to be a consumer today means happiness and freedom’ but also points out that there are countervailing feelings of a pressure to consume when living in a consumer culture (Benn 2004). But how did consumer culture develop over time and when and how did the importance of symbolic meaning supplant simple functional utility in brands?

Perhaps understandably, empirical evidence of early mass consumer culture is relatively scarce. Consumer culture in the UK through the twentieth century has been studied from a number of standpoints, including a focus on the department store (Nava 1996) and on the crucial role of women (Winship 2000). Other approaches have studied food shopping and the change from small local counter-service shops to large supermarkets (Adburgham 1989; Davis 1996). Where it has been studied, documents of production flows and of other market technologies such as advertisements of branded goods form the basis of analysis which omits the voice of the consumer. Consumers’ personal experiences can be used to inform a critical analysis of the development of consumer culture but these have largely been a research topic of the late Twentieth Century. There exists a significant gap in our understanding of early consumer culture because the voice and experience of the consumer has been omitted from published accounts.

Oral research tools have formed the bedrock of empirical knowledge in consumer research but are used almost exclusively to examine contemporary issues (Coulter et al 2003), to the effect that most researchers fail to take account of the historical foundations of their theories. Studies in the consumer research discipline that have incorporated an historical focus have been limited and important (e.g. Smith and Lux 1993), but have concentrated on more easily accessed historical evidence (i.e. documents and other archive materials) to neglect the literary roots and narrative practices of historiography where oral approached are most valued (Iggers 1997). Furthermore, although narrative has been recognised as ideally suited for longitudinal studies of consumption behaviour, and we have been asked to embrace the narrative perspective as ontological rather than analytical (Shankar, Elliott and Goulding 2001), narrative has not been a useful historical method to better locate and understand consumer history. Oral history (Atkinson 1995; Roberts 1998; Thompson 1988) identifies the meaning ordinary people have given to brands and brand choices throughout their lives. Focused on generating and archiving consumer (life) narratives this approach takes the ordinary and everyday remembered experiences of shopping to collate consumption histories Oral history is ripe for recognition and inclusion in the consumer research and we have sought to use it to inform a critical (re-) analysis of the development of consumer culture and consumer empowerment.

There is very little understanding of the impact of interpersonal relationship or of intergenerational influences on brand choice (Coulter et al 2003), and the complexity of the interaction of family relationships with brand consciousness. A recent US
study (Moore, Wilkie and Lutz 2002) provides some foundations for this but it only covers mother-daughter dyads and has only limited phenomenological insights. Intergenerational influence is unsurprisingly of interest to organisations developing brand strategies for consumers goods, and beyond brand theory, it also has the potential to inform the theory and practice of relationship marketing. There exists an opportunity to both trace the evolution of brand consciousness throughout the twentieth century and simultaneously to advance our understanding of generational differences in brand consciousness and importantly the role of intergenerational influence in brand choice.

Objectives

There are two main objectives to this study. The first is focused on the consumption of brands, how brands are implicated developing twentieth century consumer culture in the UK, and the influence and impact of the family on brand consumption, meaning and use. The second objectives is methodological and seeks to practice cross-disciplinary inquiry, and to do so by exploring the usefulness of oral history to consumer research. Specifically in this study we set out to:

- Add to a small but recognised body of historical enquiry in marketing and consumer research where the voice of the consumer has to date been omitted. To introduce consumer life narratives as an important by neglected research technique and in so doing make explicit the working assumptions of oral-research methods that are unquestioningly accepted in consumer research and which are revealed when introducing and working with a related humanities discipline (history).

- To capture (archive) the voices of consumers in early twentieth century before these are lost forever and then link these with the voices of 2 subsequent generations.

- Understand when and how brands moved from functional markers of quality and performance to become important symbolic, emotional and social resources.

- More fully understand the role and interaction of brands and the media to changes in post-war retailing and in doing so understand how self-service formats were important to the transformation/mutation in brand meaning and consumption behaviour.

- Describe how the explosion in consumer choice since the war has influenced and changed women’s lifestyles and how this varies across 3 generations of women.

- Explain intergenerational influences on brand choice and the complexity of the interaction of family relationships with brand consciousness within family groups that span 3 generations. This will provide a longitudinal perspective of the impacts of retail development and the marketing technologies of brands and the media.
All these objectives have been achieved and further details are contained within the remaining body of this report as methodological inquiry and innovation, findings, current and expected publications, other dissemination activities, and research impacts.

A further aim of our work is to explore how themes and theoretical contributions from this study can be operationalised quantitatively to enable a subsequent large scale study to be conducted across Britain. Significant work has already been completed but this aim has not yet been finalised. We still require some further analysis to be completed looking at cross-generational issues in the data and to submit a grant application to support this work. A grant submission to ESRC is expected in 2008. Both current grant holders have the required quantitative expertise but we plan to extend the research team so as to include other faculty from disciplines other than Marketing who are also working on brands and retail innovation in the UK.

Methods

Using oral history techniques this study captures the rich and varied experiences and interpretations of developing brand consciousness as the shopping life-narratives of 59 women in 20 families spanning 3 generations. The grandmothers, mothers and their daughters that make up our three-generational sample all live in the Midland UK. One significant objective of this study was to place on record consumer voices from the early twentieth century and to trace these voices across generations. The sample is as such a key objective of this study which has been successfully met. The sample was more difficult to achieve than expected and as such participant recruitment consumed a relatively larger proportion of time than had been anticipated. Identifying 3 generations of blood-relative women where the youngest was over 18 years old and no longer living at home was in itself quite difficult. Moreover, often families were identified but had to be excluded because of the health of the grandmother, the geographical distance of one generation (one node living outside the Midlands), unexpected illness of themselves or another family member, changes to employment commitments, and the busy lives of all generations. There was however generally a high level of interest among families who were approached to participate in the study. Recruitment was achieved in 2 phases and employed a range of techniques including face to face mall intercept, public notices in libraries and local shops, contact with various women’s groups such as the WI, personal network referrals, and press releases from the University of Leicester and Warwick press offices that appeared in local daily newspapers across the Midlands. The press release and personal network referrals produced the majority of recruitment leads and represents 85% of the final sample. The press release was used in recruitment phase 2 only and relied on presenting some early insights into the study. It was very successful securing those families required to complete the sample of 20 families but also identifying a further 8 families who would be willing to participate in an extension of this study.

For the women in our 20 families we record their consumption experiences from childhood, where they had little responsibility for choosing goods purchased for the household and accompanied their mothers shopping activities or ran errands for
grocery provisions, to early adulthood and often marriage, where they bore the primary responsibility for household purchases. The 20 family-sets varied in their current residential proximity allowing those living in the same or adjacent towns and cites to be contrasted with those geographically dispersed and less able to shop together, share household responsibilities and have regular home visits. Several methods including depth-biographical interviews, pantry-interviews and accompanied-shopping trips were used to generate life-history narratives that yielded in excess of 190 hours of oral record, 100 pages of field notes, 12 consumer diaries, and pantry photographs. Specifically 78 in-depth interviews and 5 co-operative inquiries show women’s reactions to increased brand choice and how knowledge of brands was developed and passed down through generations. Methodological innovation and extension represents an outcome of our study not outlined in the grant proposal. These result from early phases of the project where it was apparent from a more detailed engagement with relevant theory that the opportunity existed to extend the oral history method to include techniques from elsewhere in social science. It also came about because the recruitment of family-sets took longer than anticipated by month 7 of the project term. Methodological innovation ensured depth within the limited number of participants recruited in the first 7 months of the study, and given the richness gained from these methodological extensions were applied to 50% of the final sample.

There are 2 methodological innovations. First, pantry-based interviews formed a second interview that extends beyond the commitment to one interview of 1-3 hours outlined in the proposal. Participants narrated their kitchen cupboards detailing the brands, their significance and their storage. Photographs of cupboards and brands formed part of this interview. The second methodological extension consists of 5 co-operative inquiries (Heron 1996). Our study as such serves to demonstrate how this method, which has mostly been used in health sciences to date, can usefully be extended to an oral history approach, and gives additional support for the method to be incorporated into consumer research more generally (Edwards et al 2005). The data archive completed in the study is therefore much larger and has greater depth than was specified in the grant proposal.

Participant consumption narratives and co-operative inquiries were digitally recorded and archived as MP3’s. They were transcribed verbatim and analysed drawing on the principals of narrative theory (Shankar et al, 2001; McAdams 1996). Twelve months entitled maternity leave (Jan 06 to Jan 07) by the principal grant holder changed the scheduling outlined for the study and had most impact on the data analysis. When maternity leave commenced the design of all fieldwork techniques (interviews, pantry interviews, and co-operative inquiry) were complete, the full sample of respondents had been recruited but the interview fieldwork for 30% of the sample had not taken place. The impact of this was that the iterative design for data analysis could not continue during the maternity period. The importance of an iterative sequencing to analysis is most evident in the earlier stages of data collection and field work. Our study achieved iterative analysis of 50% of the data prior to maternity leave. The impact of not following an iterative analysis for the whole data set was a delay in analysis of the data. This problem is resolved by re-scheduling of dates for research conference attendance that also arose due to maternity leave as well as the scheduling of the dissemination seminar at the
The archive collated by this study represents a significant contribution. It captures and preserves consumer voices from early to late twentieth century that might otherwise not have occurred. It stands as a resource for this study to critically examine the origins of consumer culture and evolving brand consciousness in the UK but will also enable future researchers to use and re-interpret these findings in the context of future times when the meanings and significance presented in these oral archives might have a change in emphasis. This remains one of the important functions of oral history and why attention is placed on archiving and consent (Lummis 1987). To place this contribution in context it is worth noting that there are a few oral histories on shopping but these have often been framed from the retailer perspective (e.g. Mullins and Stockdale 1994) or have not been in the European context (e.g. Humphrey 1998; Witkowski and Hogan 1999). There have been some limited studies to embrace an oral history approach or report consumer phenomenological data from early periods of the twentieth century but these have all been limited in some important aspects. For example retail experiences during wartime rationing are captured by Mass Observation but war time was a period of limited choice and retail innovation. Others similarly are limited because they do not contain qualitative or a depth of data to cover the thoughts, attitudes and reflections of consumers but rely on purchase data alone, they are not based in the UK or Europe, and finally they do not track families.

Results

Oral research tools in terms of historical method are conspicuous in their absence in consumer research. We have reported this as revealing a methodological paradox for a discipline where it is common place to talk to consumers, capture their speech, and ask for their opinions, attitudes and experiences as part of depth interviews, focus groups, questionnaire responses and/or as experimental subjects. Our study in this way has made explicit the working assumptions of oral-research methods that we unquestioningly accept in consumer research and which are revealed when introducing and working with a related humanities discipline (history). For example, in history there has been significant theoretical debate concerning memory and recollection that is inescapable when oral evidence forms the basis of empirical data. This debate has not been public in consumer research and our book chapter and conference presentation reports, discusses and goes some way to resolve and position these issues for consumer researchers (Elliott and Davies 2006, Davies and Elliott 2005). Furthermore, although narrative has been recognised as ideally suited for longitudinal studies of consumption behaviour, and consumer researchers have been asked to embrace the narrative perspective as ontological rather than analytical (Shankar, Elliott and Goulding 2001), we highlight how narrative has not been a used as a historical method to better locate and understand consumer history. Our study and findings present one attempt to highlight and remedy this.

Oral-history highlights the importance of archiving consumer voices to enable future historical re-inquiries of our theories thereby making the only limitation to future consumer history one of living memory (Lummis 1987). We conclude that at a
theoretical level oral-history is resonant with interpretive studies and CCT and propose that oral-history has the potential to contribute in a prospective as well as retrospective way to the call for theoretically diverse re-inquiry in consumer research (Wells 2002; Wilk 2002; Thompson 2002).

Our study also shows that oral-history methods can usefully be extended to a longitudinal context (Davies and Elliott 2007). The ease and utility of oral history applied to cross generational objectives are contrasted in this paper with our researcher-reflections on methodological authenticity and practical aspects of using these multiple methods. Tracing and comparing the dynamics of brand consciousness and brand choice we show that brands and brand knowledge function as symbolic bridges and barriers between generations. There are also behavioural consistencies and inconsistencies across generations in storage and display of brands locates how familial influences and tensions are mediated in part through brands. Furthermore our findings reveal how some brands hold an assumed familial significance that is not shared within the family-set, and we are continuing to explore the dynamics of this.

Our study and dissemination to date shows how oral history methods enables the critical re-examination and location of theories demonstrating its contribution to our discipline. For example, our study provides a critical re-interpretation of consumer theory focused on the origins of mass consumer culture in the UK. We show that the development of brand consciousness is associated with a movement from the community-located consumer with little sense of choice in many aspects of life, to the individual /family decision maker for whom consumption is a major arena for lifestyle choices and later self-identity. We also stress the significance self-service retail innovation as particularly notable here (Shaw et al 2004, Bowlby 2000). Of particularly significance we show that for ordinary people mass consumer culture is far from mature in the 1960s as has been suggested by studies that have not included consumers’ recollected phenomenological experience (Bocock 1993; Usherwood 2000).

Our study highlights that manufacturer brands were largely out-with consumer consciousness and daily lives until after the depression and war. Where consumer brands were considered this was almost exclusively in terms of functional performance. Brands were the reserve of special occasions or were seen to be the purchases of the wealthy. Patent medicine brands were also widely recognised. Prior to the introduction of the National Health Service visits to the doctor were prohibitively expensive and buying medicines over the counter from chemists was common place. Consumers paid high prices and used patent medicine brands as a form of emotional reassurance.

Our findings show that it was only in the post-war period that consumer sophistication and the symbolic importance of branded goods was reported as a significant experience for our women. This led to new forms of lifestyle and social stratification, group membership, and exclusion. Through brands women began to evaluate others by the brands they could afford. They also began to use brands to value themselves. Beginning in the 1970’s we witness for the first time brands becoming fundamental to the symbolic project of self in the working classes, locating symbolic consumption on a mass scale rather than limited to the middle and upper classes. There was status
marking by women’s choice or lack of ability or skill to choose retail brands. Our participants were sensitive about the social inclusion and exclusion of branded consumption. For them it was a new experience to have many social distinctions and groupings. They had to negotiate who they were and how they did or wanted to fit in. Our study therefore re-interprets and provides an historical grounding for late twentieth century theories on symbolic consumption and the dynamics of social inclusion and exclusion centred on consumption and brands.

One particular focus of our study has been to examine the experience of women faced with taking responsibility for their shopping decisions. We describe how female consumers dealt with and learnt to cope with unprecedented product alternatives and brands and have examined the change from rational choice to symbolic consumption, and the role brands played in this. Our oral history shows that retail innovation, and in particular self-service, was a major catalyst in the development of brand consciousness in the mid-twentieth century. Sainsbury’s plc opened its first self-service supermarket in Croydon in 1950 and by the 1960’s many grocery stores had moved to a self-service format. Other studies have begun to trace the adoption of self-service in the UK (Shaw et al 2004; Bowlby 2000) and our interviewees concur that, particularly for the grocery sector, self-service is a post-war consumer phenomenon. The self-service format was new to the grandmothers who were used to counter-service, was introduced when the mothers in our study were children or teenagers and for the daughters in our study self-service was something that had always been the ways shops are and had been. Our work shows that the impact of retail innovation, and in particular the introduction of self-service in the mid-twentieth century, has been under played in branding and symbolic consumption theories to date where major attention and significance has been given to the roles of the media and advertising, in the study of brands, materialism and the importance of brands for the construction of self-identity. The lived experiences of women recorded and reported in our study goes someway to question these theories and to suggest that a broader range of issues is ripe for investigation. In this way our study also serves to show the problems that arise in contemporary analyses of branding and brand theory that lack historical, and historically-based empirical, understanding. Our on-going analysis of three generations will seek to further these initial findings by providing a longitudinal perspective on the impacts of retail development and the marketing technologies of brands and the media.

We might expect that expanded choice would be welcomed by consumers and embraced as a behavioural, cognitive and symbolic freedom in the shopping process but many of our participants report that they found increased choice far from immediately empowering. They felt anxious and over-whelmed by the possibilities of choice. Rather than enriching the shopping experience and giving women more control over their grocery provisions the abundance of choice was found to be limiting and almost described as a type of momentary paralysis. In dealing with the freedom of choice offered by the self-service environment, respondents began to rely on brands and to pay premium prices. We conclude that consumer empowerment is a complex or paradoxical process and our work provides further empirical evidence for an embryonic but growing number of studies (for example, Davies 2006, Wathieu et al 2002, Schwartz 2004) that challenge the linear benefit assumptions given to increased choice arising from classic economic theory. Our study shows that choice agents or shopping consultants are not new to the consumer experience but in
fact were common place with the introduction of self-service as a means to aid women navigate an increasingly complex market place. We also offer an historical location and example to ground contemporary and future investigation into consumer choice and responsibility (freedom) offered by modern and future retail technologies (innovation). Our study concurs with Eylon (1998) who has identified that structural-context resources, such as a move to self-service and increased choice are an important and likely necessary condition for empowerment but that they cannot not alone lead to empowerment. We highlight that skills and confidence with structural-context changes are a crucial to realise a sense of consumer empowerment. From these conclusions we have developed and published a Paradox Model of Consumer Empowerment in the European Journal of Marketing:

Table 1: A Paradox Model of the Evolution of the Empowered Consumer

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evolution of Consumer Culture Entails</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Positive Aspects</td>
<td>Negative Aspects</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pleasures of choice</td>
<td>Loss of simplicity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rising expectations</td>
<td>Loss of community</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reassurance of brands</td>
<td>Responsibility for choice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Excitement of new brands</td>
<td>Loss of contentment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acquiring status markers</td>
<td>Loss of self-sufficiency</td>
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Consumption and particularly household purchases have long been the domain of ‘women’s work’ (Glenie and Thrift, 1996; Winship 2000; Usherwood, 2000; Zweiniger-Barielowska 2000). What has remained under-explored is how the explosion in consumer brand choice and the rise in brand consciousness in post-war Britain changed women’s lifestyles. Self-service and large supermarkets are shown in our study to have lead to a significant change in the lives of women. It gave women, often for the first time, the opportunity to choose and to take responsibility for choosing. It also changed the way they managed their households as exemplified by the introduction of branded convenience and frozen foods, the introduction of exotic and foreign foods and their ability to share household cooking and food preparation tasks with older children often giving them the opportunity to employment.
Activities

We have presented our study progress and findings at 2 conferences and will be presenting it at a third in October 2007. The timing of conference and dissemination (see outputs below) reflects a period of 12 months maternity leave when the grant and study was on hold and necessary re-scheduling was required and agreed by the ESRC.

- Our first conference presentation at the Interpretative Consumer Research Workshop in 2005 was used as a platform to position oral history within the consumer research canon.
  

- At the CHORD/ABH conference in July 2007 we presented our findings on the evolution of brand consciousness and our critical re-interpretation of early mass consumer culture in the UK to a diverse audience of academics from across the social sciences and arts who hold an interest in the history(ies) of their disciplines.
  

- At the Association of Consumer Research Conference in October 2007 we shall present findings relating to the intergenerational analysis of our data to an international audience of consumer researchers.
  

Outputs

- Publications arising from our study include a book chapter and a journal article:
  


- Oral and typed transcripts and photographic data have been submitted to the UK Data Archive.

- Academic publications and conference abstracts have been deposited with ESRC Society Today/Regard.

- A dissemination seminar will take place on 26 September 2007 at the Museum of Brands, Packaging and Advertising in London. Delegates will include academics, business practitioners, consumer and advice organisations, and museum educational representative. Supporting materials will be deposited with ESRC Society/Regard.
Impacts

Our work has attracted interest from a number of brand consultants and we expect this to be extended with our planned dissemination seminar. The play write and actress Chris Oram has looked at and discussed with us our oral histories. Her play ‘Mama Says’ resonates with the oral histories in our archive and will be showcased as part of the dissemination seminar taking place on 26 September 2007. We are discussing with the opportunity to showcase a temporary exhibition of our oral histories to complement the permanent exhibition at the Museum of Brands, Packaging and Advertising with the view for a permanent record of our oral histories to accessible here.

Future Research Priorities

- To operationalise a large-scale quantitative study across Britain specifically to explore themes of empowerment and intergenerational dynamics of brand consumption. A grant application to support this is planned for 2008.
- To extend our oral history of brand consciousness beyond the UK to include in the first instance other European countries, and a partner in France has already been secured for this purpose. Pilot work already completed in China (city and rural) suggests that the oral history approach would be usefully extended to other countries who have a different and more rapid/intense experience of burgeoning consumer choice and mass consumer culture.
- The ‘cost of thinking’ (Shugan 1980) has been found to lead to the increased use of heuristics in decision processes for low-involvement goods, and an exploration of how costs of thinking may have a counterpart in choosing between high-involvement brands may uncover some interesting processes which evolve over time.
- To develop the use of co-operative inquiry methods in consumer research, particularly in the area of young people and their choices between symbolic brands.
References


REFERENCE No. RES-000-22-0863


Nominated Outputs
