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The evolution of the empowered consumer

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Abstract

Purpose – An oral history to examine the evolution of the empowered consumer and brand consciousness from 1918 to 1965 as a critical analysis of mass consumer culture in Britain.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors trace the changing experience of consumer empowerment and importantly show oral testimony (oral history) as a method able to reveal the complexities of this experience.

Findings – Women locate increased choice and responsibility within changing marketing and retailing systems (including self-service, branding and the media). The authors show how increased choice and responsibility was often experienced (at least initially) as challenging or confusing.

Originality/value – The study identifies that empowerment is a complex or paradoxical process. It provides empirical support for a growing number of claims that have challenged the linear benefit assumptions given to increased choice arising from classic economic theory and outline a model of the paradox of the evolution of the empowered consumer.

Keywords Brands, Retailing, Innovation, Consumer behaviour

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Contemporary social theory is now focusing on consumption as playing a central role in the way the social world is constructed and brands play a "key role in giving meaning to life through consumption" (van Raaij, 1993). It has been argued that consumption can be conceptualised from cultural, social, and psychological perspectives as being a prime site for the negotiation of conflicting themes of freedom and control through the consumption of symbolic meaning within a consumer culture (Elliott, 1997). A recent study has not only 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). How did consumer culture develop over time and when and how did the importance of symbolic meaning supplant simple functional utility? Has it been a case of economic development empowering the consumer through the provision of ever-greater choice or is it more complex and contradictory than that?

The development of 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

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studied food shopping and the change from small local counter-service shops to large supermarkets (Adburgham, 1989; Davis, 1996). Usherwood (2000) locates the major changes as occurring in the early 1950s when economic conditions started to improve and the lifting of building restrictions meant that larger supermarkets could be built. With the change to self-service came the need for pre-packaging and pre-selling of goods, and with the advent of commercial television in 1955 advertising could be used to "turn the relaxed viewer of yesterday evening into this morning's purposeful and brand-conscious customer" (Sales Appeal, 1955). From its inception, the self-service supermarket became an arena for brands to compete for the attention of the consumer without the direct intervention of the sales assistant (Bowlby, 1997). Responsibility was no longer retailer-defined. For the first time women became responsible for their consumption choice and could be considered active or empowered consumers (Keat *et al.*, 1994). Women's new found sovereignty placed an emphasis on the cognitive prominence of the brand, or levels of brand awareness. However, previous studies have used various forms of documentary evidence and what is missing is the voice of the consumer. Using oral histories we seek to describe the evolution of the empowered consumer. Oral history identifies the meaning ordinary people have given to brands and brand choices throughout their lives. Focused on generating and archiving consumer (life) histories this approach takes the ordinary and everyday remembered experiences of shopping to collate consumption biographies that can be used to inform a critical (re-) analysis of the development of consumer culture and consumer empowerment. Our attention is 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 examine the change from rational choice to symbolic consumption.

Brands in historical perspective

The historical development of branding and branded goods is located in relation to changes in the production, distribution and retailing of goods, and to demographic and economic shifts (Pavitt, 2000). Starting in the late eighteenth century, brands gradually came to dominate the consumption sphere and by the end of the nineteenth century wide-scale distribution was well established, heavy use of marketing communications were commonplace (Styles, 1993; Carrier, 1995) and legislative protection for trademarks was available (Pavitt, 2000). The development of brand consciousness has been producer-initiated. The move from loose to pre-packaged goods which started in the UK in the 1880s with tea, coffee, spices, soap and sugar established the still-familiar brands of Cadbury, Bovril, Oxo and Rowntree (Shaw, 1992). This in turn led to retailers stocking more than one brand and transferring the responsibility of choice from the retailer to the consumer.

From a consumer view point we can expect individuals to have a wide range of emotional responses to the growth in consumer choice that came about with retail change (Elliott, 1997, 1998). Brands are considered to be decision heuristics. They can be used as markers of functional performance to inform rational consumer choice, or, as in modern consumer societies where sign value is prioritised over use value (Baudrillard, 1988) individuals can use brands as resources to construct and communicate their identities (Bauman, 2001; Belk, 1985; Giddens, 1991; Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998; Gabriel and Lang, 1995). Brands in this way can facilitate

non-rational consumption choices, or choices where the functional utility of branded goods is not considered. Brand consciousness matures, becomes more complex, and has a greater impact on consumers' lives as the significance of the brand moves from a functional marker of quality and performance to become an important symbolic, emotional and cultural resource (Elliott, 2001; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander *et al.*, 2002).

The origins of consumer culture began in the consumption of the Bourgeoisie in late nineteenth century Europe (Veblen, 1995; McKendrick *et al.*, 1982; Laermans, 1993; Richards, 1990) and spread to America where early mass consumer culture is located between 1914 and 1920 (Bocock, 1993; Fox and Lears, 1983; Harris, 1991). In Europe, the emergence of mass consumer culture is considered a post-war phenomenon (Bocock, 1993; Usherwood, 2000). 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. While consumers' personal experiences can be used to inform a critical analysis of the development of consumer culture these have largely been a research topic of the late twentieth century. For example, a concentration of phenomenological-orientated studies of consumer culture resides in the use of brands in symbolic consumption, but these date mostly from the 1980s to the present day, and do not consider early consumer culture, or explore the subjective experiences and processes of consumer empowerment. One exception is Coulter *et al.* (2003) who examine brand commitment in two postsocialist countries. While this is an important and interesting investigation it provides only a very limited basis to inform our understanding of early consumer culture, brand consciousness and the evolution of empowered consumers in the UK and/or other market-economies which occurred at a different time period and context.

This paper details findings from an on going study which seeks to understand the evolution of empowered consumers and the development of brand consciousness. Our study is grounded in the lived experience of women and introduces oral history techniques (Atkinson, 1998; Roberts, 1995; Thompson, 1988) to trace the development of brand consciousness from the memories of women from the years after the First World War through the 1930s and the Second World War up to the early days of the "affluent society" and modern consumer culture in the UK (Bedarida, 1991; Benson, 1994). From the reported shopping experiences of women who lived through the post-war changes in retailing this study will explore the role of brands (Pavitt, 2000) and the media (Hobson, 1995; Ohmann, 1996) in facilitating women's ability to cope with burgeoning consumer choice, and indicate how brand-related behaviours have changed the social and cultural life world of the women we interviewed.

Methodology

Oral history provides the "opportunity to explore what people did, what they thought at the time, what they wanted to do and what they think about it now"

(Mallinson *et al.*, 2003, p. 775). It is also the only historical method that allows the historical researcher to intervene directly in the generation of historical evidence relating to the recent past. It is as such much more than, and should not be confused, with personal biography (Lummis, 1987). At a theoretical level oral history has much in common with an interpretive consumer research approach. There is not a strict subject-object split. The researcher and interviewees are seen to co-create the oral transcript, which has much in common with interactive introspection (Ellis, 1991) and the more recent introduction of co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1996) to consumer research (Edwards *et al.*, 2005). Differences between ontology and epistemology are collapsed and this is seen as a strength rather than as a weakness (Arnold and Fisher, 1994; Shankar *et al.*, 2001).

Individual life narratives are the building blocks of oral history where people's memories are used as data. The use of life narratives were popularised as a basis for academic study by Freud and psychoanalysis but have a much longer tradition as a primary methodology in anthropological fieldwork (Atkinson, 1998). Life narratives allow researchers to hear people's memories about their past and its impact on their present. It is linked with narrative theory and the "narrativization of experience" (Mishler, 1995) which recognises that we are socially and culturally (Gergen and Gergen, 1988), or perhaps genetically (Bruner, 1986), conditioned to use stories to structure, make sense and create meaning of our lives and past experiences. Narrative has had an important but relatively limited use in marketing management and consumer research (for review see Shankar *et al.*, 2001). 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 *et al.*, 2001), narrative has not been used as a historical method to better locate and understand consumer history.

Generating life narratives is achieved through in-depth interviews and relies on retrospective recall. The role of the interviewer is to stimulate personal recall and the narration of first hand experience. The interviewee narrates for historical purposes stories about their involvement with and meaning given to a particular topic structured by life events and changes.

Oral history offers a unique data contribution. Insight can be gained when people recount their experiences divorced in time from the emotional intensity and popular ideologies of the past and this is used together with other historical data which has also been "set down at different times and were subject to different personal biases, contemporary pressures and social conventions" (Lummis, 1987, p. 155).

Using oral history techniques this study captures the rich and varied experiences and interpretations of developing brand consciousness as memories from 22 women. Our study traces women's 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 marriage, where they bore the primary responsibility for household purchases and where entry into the labour market often as store assistants or with involvement in the manufacture of consumer goods brought them into contact with the market and market media.

The sample is based on pre and post-war age cohorts, women born between 1910 and 1937 and women born between 1938 and 1950. Women in the first age cohort

became active consumers in what we may think of as a pre-consumer society. Women in the second age cohort made their consumption choices as teenagers and young adults against a rapidly developing consumer culture.

Our informants have lived in a wide diversity of locations and the childhoods and early adulthood experiences captured in this study records life in large urban cities and smaller rural towns and villages. At the time of our interviews the informants lived in rural and small urban towns and villages in Wales and the South-West of England. As children and adults our informants came from working class and middle class social backgrounds.

Extended life story interviews of 1-3 hours took place in the informants' homes surrounded by their personal possessions and memory cues (Gunter, 1998; Rubin, 1995). The interviews adopted a biographical approach beginning with early childhood memories of shopping for clothing, presents and special occasions purchases, and household goods, medicines, and foods. Our informants re-lived as stories their consumption life histories from childhood to the present day. Records of their lives including photographs, special goods they had purchased and still cherished, shopping receipts and surprisingly shopping lists were shown and discussed with the interviewer. The interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Oral history is concerned with modes of representation and archiving that ensure that oral evidence can be re-used and re-interpreted at different times and from different perspectives (Jones, 1994; Lummis, 1987). Although interpretation is an important part of communicating the consumers' voice, the commitment of oral history is to retain as much as possible of the original verbatims and seek to record the authentic voices of ordinary consumers rather than to reduce the data through excessive analysis in pursuit of an illusory positivistic objectivity. In the words of Clifford (1985, p. 7) "Ethnographic truths are thus inherently *partial*"; at a later stage we will compare the findings with other data sources (e.g. mass observation) but we favour story-telling over analysis. Indeed, oral history is used to corroborate other data sources but it is not bound to this. By capturing the subjective experience of ordinary people one significant contribution of this approach has been to look behind the public representation of a particular time and to seek out private memories, which include everyday talk, comparisons and narratives (Johnson and Dawson, 1998; Mallinson *et al.*, 2003). Oral history is also seeks out inconsistencies in "factual data" or official interpretations of data that arise when subjective experience has been omitted and then is considered (Harvey and Riley, 2005).

Data analysis was interpretative and iterative, and used pattern coding and analysis to identify emergent themes (Reason, 1981; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Huberman and Miles, 1994). In the next section we discuss the emergent themes from the interview data.

Main findings

Frugality as a way of life: the rational consumer and deprivation

Our interviewees held clear and detailed memories of shopping with their mothers going back as early as 1918 and shopping alone from the early 1920s. Frugality was a way of life up to the 1960s where self-sufficiency divorced individuals from the market and war-time rationing precluded free and full consumer choice. Our analysis shows that the deprivation of the 1930s and 1940s shaped a rational consumer who focused on material benefits and used brands as markers of functional performance.

War-time rationing was a sustained period where choice was absent for clothing, food, items and household products. Brands were absent from consumer consciousness and people were content to have what was available:

> You just couldn't go and buy it when you made up your mind, it was a case of when you were lucky, on the spot when it came in, you dived for it, because a limited number came in and if you were lucky you were lucky. That was for saucepans, bowls, buckets, anything in that line. Clothes were on coupons. I can't remember how many coupons you used to have, but you were allowed so many coupons. When I was getting married it was a case of grab a coupon here and grab a coupon there from anybody who'd like to give you one, to get enough clothes together. Meat, that was on ration. I can't remember how much meat anybody had. I know I used to go in the butcher's and order a joint of pork or something for about half a crown, and my mum had to do that for 6 of us, make a meal with whatever she was lucky enough to get (Informant 17, born 1926).

Even after the war consumer choice was limited:

> I think post-war, obviously you couldn't buy very much at all. I can remember my mother had to make all our clothes and they tended to be made from remnants, bits of other fabric, and I never had a dress made of one fabric, I had sleeves made of another fabric, because you just couldn't get things (Informant 19, born 1943).

While rationing limited consumption and choice, the depression also meant people could only buy what they could afford and our informants born before the late 1930s told us how they and their mothers maintained households by growing their own food, preserving vegetables and fruits for the winter months, and making clothes and other forms of self-sufficiency:

> We made a lot of our own clothes. My mother used to cut down my father's pyjamas and trousers for the younger boys and for her grandchildren, because we couldn't afford new clothes. I remember having a coat made for me by a lady who was a dressmaker and I was very proud of that, it had to last a long time. It was a mustard coloured cloth with a brown, velvet collar. We even knitted swimsuits, if you can believe it, which sagged dreadfully when we went in the water. During the war there was some material made available from parachutes that had come down and they were like nylon. I suppose it was our first introduction to nylon. And my mother made me a bikini to swim in, but horror of horrors, when you get in the water they become transparent, so I came home with a red face and said, "mum, will you line it with something," so she got some old blue material out and put a lining in it (Informant 10, born 1934).

For our informants the consumption practices and habits learnt through the war years and the depression laid the foundations for their subsequent and current consumption behaviours. Our informants told us how their consumption practice remained simple and possibly boring given the proliferation of choice and possibilities now available:

> We were self-sufficient, we really were. Of course, we grew vegetables and fruit and everything, and bottled it all. People sorted vegetables – I never did do that, though some people did, sorted beans and things. But if you bottled it to make it into jam, it lasted the whole year. And we used to put carrots into sand and turnips and things like that, and like that they would keep for a long time out in the shed. And I still live boringly simply, even now, because it's the only way I know how to (Informant 5, born 1919).

Rationing was not the only reason for a lack of choice. In shops, goods were not pre-packaged and their source was not identified nor displayed by retailers:

> And there would always be bacon slicers in the shops, so there'd be great flitches of bacon hanging up and bits would be hacked off this and then it would be put into this bacon slicer and you'd get whatever thickness you'd want and they would then slice the bacon, rather like they slice ham and stuff now. But in those days it was hand turned …… I can remember seeing them tapping it out on brown paper, and they would sort of tap it out like this. I can remember seeing them. And they were very neatly folded at the top and folded over, and perhaps a bit of string put round. You don't get that now. And sugar would be in blue bags. Butter and cheese would be on a big block and a hunk would be cut off with butter patters, the wooden butter patters, and then on a marble slab it would be cut into the amounts you wanted, shaped, and plonked on the scale, taken off, a little bit more cut off and a little bit more. And, of course, during the war paper was short, so mostly you did your own basket or something to put the things in (Informant 8, born 1928).

Manufacturer brands were largely out-with consumer consciousness and daily lives. Where consumer brands were considered this was almost exclusively in terms of functional performance. Brands were the reserve of special occasions or seen to be the purchases of the extremely wealthy:

> So there still wasn't a great choice of things. I do remember that Huntley and Palmers were very good biscuit manufacturers, and Jacobs, which are still going today. But those were good makes … they were better quality, the taste was better. It's the same as things you buy today, you get what you pay for. If you buy a cheap packet of biscuits in the pound shop I don't suppose they taste so nice. Unless they were a brand make, they wouldn't taste so nice as Huntley and Palmers would. That's what you get for brand names, usually anyway, you get better quality (Informant 18, born 1930).

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:

> … you only had Ovaltine if you were a bit poorly or something. Mother would say, "I'd better make you some Ovaltine". Gruel we had when we were young, made with fine oatmeal, and that was a good standby, because you didn't get all the cereals for breakfast – porridge or gruel is all I remember. And if you had a poorly chest, you had a cough, more often than having any cough mixture – although at a young age I drank the cough mixture – we would have what was called Thermogene wool. Oh, it was so tickly, it wasn't nice, and it was thick and it was orange coloured, and mother would cut a square off the Thermogene wool and put it on our chest before our vests went on, and that was supposed to ease your chest and your cough. Or we'd be rubbed with hen's fat. When you had a chicken you saved the fat that came out of it when you cooked it and kept it in a jar, covered … Oh, the thing you bought if you were poorly, right from when I was young – and I was still buying it when Janet was a baby – was Fennings's Fever Cure. Thinking about it now, it was a little bit bitter – not bitter bitter, but it was a little bit sharp, and you only had to give a weeny little bit in a teaspoon and that was to reduce the fever if you had a temperature with a baby or a child or anything (Informant 1, born 1911).

Taking responsibility for choice: retail innovations and self-service

Retail process innovations, including the self-service format and large supermarkets, increased choice. Self-service gave consumers new freedom and control over the shopping process and pre-purchase evaluation of products. They could hold, examine the texture and weight of products and packaging, and smell products before they

committed to a purchase, but self-service required women to take responsibility for their consumption choices. Self-service fundamentally changed the shopping practices of women. It was also the catalyst that brought about a broadening in women's brand knowledge:

> And then also, yes, the supermarkets, things came in and you could see the different type of things that were available, the choices became much, much more. And stock was different (Informant 21, born 1949).

Women's reactions and interpretations of self-service were varied. All our informants remarked that choice increased. However, they also told us how initially they felt ill-equipped to manage the transition from retailer defined choice to choosing for themselves. They lacked the skills to choose for themselves and felt that the once familiar shopping environments were strange and somewhat alienating. Our informants describe how they had to learn or re-learn how to shop in the self-service environment. They describe these experiences as peculiar, bewildering, strange and confusing. They no longer waited "dutifully" to be served but had to take responsibility for choosing themselves.

> But there was a big event in Croydon [a London suburb] in that the Sainsburys at West Croydon suddenly decided to show us how to do self-service . . . I remember queuing up outside and a sort of commissionaire type standing in the door saying "right, let's have another 5" and we'd go in with our baskets. And because of the choice and the different ways of doing things I remember being bewildered and thinking what do I need to buy? . . . and it was bewildering. You stood and looked at all these things, and all you had to do was put your hand out and get hold of it and put it in your basket. And that was extraordinary at the time, quite extraordinary. And I think of people much older that I was at the time – because I'm talking of me being in my late 20s- but people middle-aged and older would have found it totally confusing because they were used to going and saying, right Mr Smith, I want a pound of this, or a quarter of that, and having it given to them. But after a bit we realised we could choose not only the variety we wanted but also the price we wanted to pay (Informant 20, born 1930, talking about the 1950s).

> And once everything started coming back into the shops they all started to modernise. I can remember going in the first self-service shop and it was most peculiar, helping yourself to things. You used to go and dutifully wait your turn and they quite often had seats around to sit on and wait to be served, and then the assistant would run around and get everything for you (Informant 19, born 1943).

> It seemed very funny, of course, picking up a basket and helping yourself. Well, it felt very strange at first to have to do that. You just walked around and you got what you had to get really. It doesn't stay in my memory really for very long, what we did used to do (Informant 18, born 1930 quote when respondent is aged 28).

While we might expect that expanded choice would be welcomed by consumers and embraced as a behavioural, cognitive and symbolic freedom in the shopping process many of our informants 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:

> It is better in a way, but there's almost too much choice now, there's so much of an array of stuff in the shops that you don't know what to choose really . . . Well, I think if you are on a fixed income it was all too easy. When you had to go into a shop and somebody comes up and serves you, you had your written down list and you'd say a pound of butter, I want a pound of bacon that sort of thing, an you stick to it. But when you go around self-service and everything is there on the shelves, you grab this and grab that, and when you get to the check-out you think, oh my God, I haven't got enough money in my purse – which was a bit frightening when you are very limited with what you can spend. Also with young children in tow it wasn't a good thing. If you were behind the counter then children couldn't touch anything, but in a self-service place I remember going around with my daughter and she'd grab this and grab that . . . It's obviously better, I'm not saying it's not better. As I say, with less choice I think in some ways it was a good thing – if you didn't see it, you didn't want it (Informant 18, born 1943).

Not all women reacted this way. Some reported that they were excited and enjoyed this expanded choice, but this was a qualified freedom. They also report that this freedom to choose gave them less sense of control over their expenditure and family budgeting:

> I can't remember how much a weekly shop was, but it wasn't a lot, you'd be lucky if it was £10 – and I think I spent about £25! And Andrew said I can't see what the saving is. "Oh, beans are cheap, we'll have some of them." "Oh, look at this, they've got towels, aren't they lovely, we'll have a couple." To go and save money, I spent twice as much. But it was big and there was so much choice, and it was just wonderful compared to the small little Tesco's (Informant 22, born 1950).

In dealing with the freedom of choice offered by the self-service environment, respondents began to rely on brands and to pay premium prices. Our respondents show that brands choice was no longer based on functional performance criteria:

> I like Heinz tomato soup . . . I don't like the home brands. I can remember his dad once went to a factory where they made jellies and he said all the jellies come off conveyor belts and they're all exactly the same, he said one lot go and they get wrapped in Marks, and another lot go and they get wrapped in Tesco's, and another lot get wrapped in another label, and he said they're all the same jellies. But I wouldn't have it, I like particular . . . And he said it's the same with everything. But I do, I think Heinz tomato soup is different from everybody else's (Informant 22, born 1950).

Exoticism was one non-functional aspect of increased choice and the proliferation of new products and brands. Many of our informants told us how they were introduced to "foreign" foods, such as chilli con care, and also learnt to cook in new ways using, for example, Coleman packet sauces. They were also introduced for the first time to convenience foods. For some of our informants this enabled them to provide more than one food choice at meal times while for others they told us how branded convenience foods enabled them to return to work and the leave minor food preparation tasks involved in convenience brands to children:

> That's a change in food. Before I left home Mum started buying Vesta things to give us something exotic, so we'd have Vesta Chow Mein – and it was very exotic – the beef curries, and paella, and risotto. The risotto was the nicest and I can't find that today. We had that at home, so that was between 1965 and '68 really before I left home mum was buying these Vesta packet meals, again because it was a new thing. My mother worked full-time, so if she was in a hurry or of she'd said to my brother or I can do the meal, we would sometime do one of these. But again, because we had fairly good appetites in those days, they didn't tend

> to be big enough, so you'd buy a couple of them maybe, but then it was more expensive than actual cooking. So it was a rarity and it was a treat. But John and I used to fight over who did the Vesta Chow Mein. You used to have to heat up the oil really hot and chuck them in and they's sort of fizz up like poppadoms today, and we used to fight each other to do this (Informant 19, born 1948).

The birth of symbolic consumption

Before the "affluent society" and the 1960s some branded goods such as cigarettes were used as to signify social status. Our respondents explained how they emulated the luxury possessions of the upper classes:

> . . . it was a very good make – if you had a Silver Cross pram you were something. But, as I said, the huge, great big ones were usually for people with lots of money and royalty and things like that, they had the very big, high prams. And then the ones like I had for my daughter, that was Silver Cross, but it was lower than that (Informant 18, born 1930 referring to the late 1950s).

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. Here, 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.

Brands were identified with particular lifestyle group affiliations and women sought to buy those brands that would enable group inclusion:

> And then when I started earning money I could buy my own, which I did. It was wildly exciting. I bought an absolutely lovely little pair of brown suede shoes. I was a Mod. They were flat shoes and I thought they were so pretty and I used to love them (Informant 21, born 1949).

There was status marking by women's choice or lack of ability or skill to choose retail brands:

> . . . although the shoe shop I worked in (Corbins) was the cheap end of the thingy, so surprisingly I didn't used to buy things in there. Well, I suppose, thinking about it, it's funny isn't it? Thinking about it, it's probably because I was being a bit snobby. It was called Corbin's, the shoe shop, and people that came in there weren't very well off, I think they were probably on the social, and they'd have things like what we call Provident cheques that would be issued to them and they were allowed to shop in various shops with these Provident cheques and Corbin's was one of them. So you'd get people coming in with these Provident cheques for school shoes and things like that. There were some shoes that I quite liked when they came in, but I'd always hike off down the road and go to the others (Informant 21, born 1949).

Our informants were sensitive about the social inclusion and exclusion of branded consumption. They often talked about their observations and their status position within this new framework. They express conflicting feelings of status-pride and discomfort. For our informants this was not a usual or obvious order of things. They remark how young people today seem much more adept and comfortable with

the proliferation in status-marking made visible by the brands they consume and their ability to make branded choice. For our informants 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.

The media was found to have an important role in facilitating symbolic consumption. By the mid 1950s our informants' aspirations to enjoy the opportunities of consumer culture were partially realised but only after substantial saving or sacrifice. More often our informants felt brands, and particularly fashion brands, were beyond their reach:

> It (Miss Selfridges) was all Biba and Mary Quant, just what I thought was the in thing. Everything Twiggy was wearing. I used to buy *Honey*, it was a monthly magazine, and it was all Twiggy then. And the clothes that she wore were available there, so that was the place to go, they had the latest thing. And you had to have a new dress every time you went out... And then working in the dressmaker's, we used to make all the clothes for the Jews. There's a big Jewish community in Liverpool and we used to make all the dresses for the Blue and White Ball, which is the biggest. And they used to pick from *Vogue* magazines, so we had all the latest magazines, so in our dinner hour or tea breaks we used to look through and see the latest things. And we used to make a lot, we all used to get together and make things ... we'd copy the style (Informant 22, born 1950 talking about the late 1960s).

Window displays were also very helpful sources of style ideas:

> ... we would go window-shopping, we would go into town and have a look round all the shops. So we used to meet up and we'd go round and see what was in fashion. We knew where the decent material shops were, there were a couple of departmental stores that had very good material fabric and patterns, and we used to drool and dribble over the patterns and buy them and take them home and create stuff ... So I used to have to look at the pictures very carefully to think, oh yes, I think I can do that. Say, oh look, we could do that, that's only A-line, or that's okay, I'll be able to put that sleeve in, oh yes, I see I could do that. And then you'd go and find the material that was acceptable (Informant 21, born 1949).

To participate in consumer culture, women emulated brands by adapting the self-sufficiency skills they had learnt from their mothers. Marketing media and particularly magazines helped women to understand and then participate in the brand symbolism of consumer culture. Magazines, radio advertisements and window displays were important in facilitating women in their understanding and growing sophistication of the symbolic meaning of branded goods.

Conclusion

This oral history has traced the evolution of the empowered consumer and brand consciousness from 1918 to 1965. It has examined the changing experience of consumer empowerment and shown how an oral history approach is able to reveal the complexities of this experience.

The women in our study locate increased choice and responsibility within changing marketing and retailing systems (including self-service, branding and the media). Through an analysis of their life narratives we have shown how increased choice and responsibility lead to a significant change in the lives of women and the management of their households as exemplified by the introduction of branded convenience and frozen foods, the increased importance of symbolic brands to membership and exclusion of lifestyle groups, and changing shopping practices. Significantly our

women also describe how increased choice and responsibility was often experienced (at least initially) as challenging or confusing. Many of our informants described how they had to learn to become skilled and confident in self-service environments and the symbolic system of brands.

The development of brand consciousness through our oral history has been shown to be 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 empowerment. The women in our study have shown us how brands became a means by which to negotiate the explosion of choice that came about with the self-service format and which later became an important resource for the construction of self-identity. We have traced the change from frugality and rational choice to symbolic consumption and shown how the brand has been redefined from a trademark of functional quality to become an important symbolic resource for lifestyle choices and social stratification. War-time rationing was seen as a critical experience where choice was absent. This had long-lasting effects on consumer behaviour. Women found the introduction of choice and variety as exciting but also strange and alien. They also felt inexperienced in their understanding and use of symbolic codes. Women born after the war, who grew up in a period of rapidly growing prosperity, more easily developed a brand consciousness that is largely symbolic and non-rational.

Discussion

Oral history has proved useful to provide phenomenological insights into the subjective experience of empowerment and the process of becoming an empowered consumer. A commonly held assumption by those focused on empowering customers is that consumers will perceive any increase in choice (i.e. control in the market place) as a benefit (Wathieu *et al.*, 2002; Schwartz, 2004). The roots for this assumption lie in the axiom of classical economic theory where having more choice and helping consumers make choices (often by providing information) is presumed to maximise consumer utilities and hence benefits. Our study provides some initial empirical support for Wathieu *et al.* (2002) and Schwartz (2004) who have suggested that empowerment is not always straight-forward but may encounter difficulties and concerns before any benefits are truly realised. Our study has shown how brands became means by which to negotiate the explosion of choice on the supermarket shelf and later became an important resource for the construction of self-identity. However, increased choice and responsibility for consumption has not always been easy or welcomed by our informants. We contrast some of the positive and negative aspects of these changes in Table I where a paradox model of consumer empowerment is outlined.

Evolution of consumer culture entails	
Positive aspects	Negative aspects
Pleasures of choice	Loss of simplicity
Rising expectations	Loss of community
Reassurance of brands	Responsibility for choice
Excitement of new brands	Loss of contentment
Acquiring status markers	Loss of self-sufficiency

Table I. A paradox model of the evolution of the empowered consumer

Fitchett and McDonagh (2000) suggest that the purpose of the market and marketing activities should be to provide an equilibrium mechanism between the corporation and the consumer, and in this sense we consider that the development of brand consciousness is balanced between both poles of power in the marketplace; partly to the benefit of organisations, but also having benefits for the consumer. We believe that the benefits and the dis-benefits provided by symbolic brands is a very fruitful area for further research. Also, 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.

Eylon (1998) has stressed that it is important to view empowerment as an infinite resource and a process of change rather than view empowerment through a static mode of analysis and see it as the re-distribution of power and control over resources. Empowerment is a subjective experience that requires consumers to be confident and trust their skills and abilities (Eylon, 1998). While structural-context resources, such as a move to self-service and increased choice, are an important and a likely necessary condition for empowerment our study concurs with Eylon (1998) who has identified that structural-context resources cannot alone lead to empowerment. Our findings highlight that skills and confidence with structural-context changes are a crucial to realise a sense of consumer empowerment. We have also shown that oral history is useful to view the changing subjective experience of the consumer empowerment process and more importantly how it is able to capture the complexities or paradox of subjective experience.

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