

4½ Lessons About Consumption: a short overview of the Cultures of Consumption research programme

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Britain today is a nation of über-consumers. Britons are top in Europe when it comes to unsecured debt. Shopping, leisure and tourism are expanding by leaps and bounds, as is the national waistline. The Blair government tried to cultivate more ‘confident consumers’ and to make public services more consumer-oriented. Many commentators, by contrast, paint a picture of an increasingly materialistic society of selfish and careless consumers. Are private pleasures hollowing out public life? Are affluent societies becoming like the United States? What are today’s cultures of consumption really like, in Britain and the rest of the world?

Five years ago, the Cultures of Consumption research programme set out to examine these questions. Its 26 projects have looked at the changing dynamics of consumption, past and present, and implications for the future. Our research has examined a range of major subjects, from consumer politics to the rise of London as a global fashion city, from the impact of new financial services on consumer behaviour to customer services in China, from how people spend their leisure time in affluent societies to how they feel about choice and voice in public services.

LESSON 1: DIVERSITY CONTINUES IN OUR GLOBAL AGE

Globalisation does not mean global convergence. There is no evidence that we are moving towards a shared global consumer culture. A look at how people spent their time in Britain, the United States, France, Norway and the Netherlands over the last twenty-five years reveals on-going divergence.¹ Across these countries people spend more time eating out, but the French still spend 96 minutes a day eating at home, more than twice as much as Americans (42 minutes; UK 54 minutes). Contrary to popular belief, British families today spend as much time eating together as they did in the 1970s. Reading patterns, again, show the limits of Americanisation. Only in the United States is reading declining. In Britain and France people read more books now than thirty years ago.

Local values and habits remain important. Multinational retailers entering the Chinese market have had to engage with demanding consumers with high expectations of customer service.² ‘The customer is god’, as one supervisor put it. Nor has globalisation automatically led to ‘McJobs’ and de-skilling. In China, foreign investment has increased both management skills and job security in the retail sector.



**Bowing practice before the store opens
(Chengdu, 2004)**

Source: Jos Gamble

Even in a single product, like Italian coffee, which has spread across the globe, drinking cultures remain diverse.³ In Italy, cappuccino is a morning drink, served luke-warm in a 6oz. cup ready to drink; in Britain, it comes in 8oz. cups, to be sipped leisurely while chatting with a friend at any time of day; while in the United States, people walk off with a 12oz. take-away mug. The spread of Khat beyond East Africa reveals similar divergence. Khat leaves are chewed for their stimulant qualities in Britain and Holland as well as in Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda, but they are prohibited in Tanzania, Saudi Arabia, and in the United States and Sweden.⁴

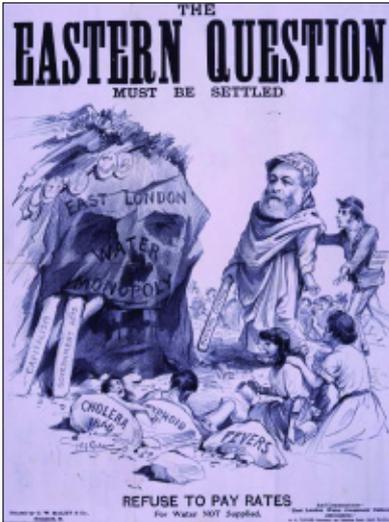
Historical perspectives are helpful. In

Britain, the ‘Swinging London’ of the Sixties came to symbolise the colourful and dynamic world of a new consumer culture. Some of this is subsequent myth.⁵ *Alfie* and other contemporary films saw the city as drab and viewed independent young women and their fashionable desires with suspicion. Boutiques on Carnaby Street and the King’s Road were part of a larger geography of fashion that rested heavily on the wholesale sector, older supply chains, and affordable property prices. These historically grown, local connections are now being replaced by more separate structures of elite-based ‘world fashion cities.’

LESSON 2: CONSUMERS ARE CITIZENS, TOO – SOMETIMES

It is wrong to see consumers and citizens as natural opposites, one private, the other public. In fact, it was battles over civic rights and duties that forged a stronger consumer identity in the first place.⁶ In Victorian Britain, citizens rallied as consumers to demand cheap and constant flowing water for their baths and WCs. Private comforts and public politics were intertwined. More recently, battles over water and privatisation in Latin America and Africa have created a new arena of

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East London Water Defence Association poster, 1898

Source: The National Archives: PRO, copy 1, 143, folio 165

global consumer politics.⁷

Television and the internet have saturated the media landscape. It is tempting to blame them for the decline in political participation – such anxieties about the numbing effect of entertainment and new media are as old as civic life itself. The reality looks different, once we ask how people actually consume media. In the United Kingdom, media mostly helps sustain a sense of public connection.⁸ Most people see it as their duty to keep up with what's going on in the world. 80 per cent watch the news regularly. Two thirds say they are interested in politics. The problem is powerlessness and politicians: over half feel they have no say in politics, and only one in five trusts politicians to tell the truth.

The identity of the “consumer” continues to have its limits. Attempts to apply an economic model of the rational, individual consumer are fraught with problems. Our research shows that Britons are increasingly assertive and less deferential in their relationships with public and professional services. The growing availability of information on the internet has made many more assertive, wishing to be treated as informed equals by their GPs and financial advisors.⁹ At the same time, users dislike being treated as ‘consumers’ of health and social care or policing. Less than five per cent of users and providers identify themselves as ‘consumers’ – most prefer ‘member of the public or local community’.¹⁰ People, too, are not just concerned about their own needs. They also care about how the service works for others. People want better services, but choice also create anxieties, especially about new inequalities. The government’s focus on ‘confident consumers’ has historical

precursors, such as the Design Council originally founded in 1944 to educate a more informed and discriminating consuming public.¹¹ Choice is not entirely new either – public service users always had some choice. In spite of the growing types of consumer choice, many users still prefer to be clients, deferring to professionals.¹² Many users want providers to take the lead, but only after they have been listened to. Voice is as important as choice, and the two may pull people in different directions.¹³

LESSON 3: CONSUMERS CARE

In early modern societies, how and what people consumed was closely connected to local networks of employment and influence. A gentry family like that of Alice Le Strange in early seventeenth-century England employed a dozen servants to cook, clean and carry goods.¹⁴ Tailors made clothes, lent money, and provided information about the latest fashion. Everyone recognised consumption as a crucial source of patronage and power. Since then, the ties between consumers and producers have become less direct and visible. Still, it would be a mistake to presume that how people buy, use, and discard things is any less social today, or that consumers in affluent societies are self-centred individualists. Markets and morals are not separate worlds or historical eras.

The HOME and FOOD are two areas that especially reveal the caring impulses at work. Britons today hold more wealth in their homes and spend more freely from their assets than ever before. Flexible mortgages give people a chance to use equity withdrawal like a cash machine. Is this encouraging reckless consumerism? Some go on holiday or a shopping spree, but most are careful and competent consumers, not ‘duped debtors’.¹⁵ They use flexible borrowing to modernise their home, build an extension, and build up an asset for their families. Public policy should recognise



Banking on housing; spending the home

Source: Susan Smith project

and utilise this existing pool of financial knowledge and prudence. At the same

time, the growing dependence on a single investment raises a difficult challenge for the state, financial services, and an ageing population.

More and more people in Britain get their food from ‘alternative’ food networks such as farm shops and organic box schemes, or even adopt sheep in Italy via the internet.¹⁶ For some it is about connection



A stall at Bristol Farmers' Market

Source: Laura Venn

to the land and to growers, for others it is about health and about the pleasures of cooking previously unheard of vegetables like kallaloo. We tend to associate choice with fully stacked shelves in supermarkets, but for many of these alternative consumers it is the farm shop that stands for choice.

How people think and feel about food and animals has major repercussions for the commercial sector.¹⁷ Chicken is a recently acquired popular taste in Britain, dating from the 1960s. And yet, consumers express nostalgia about chicken ‘the way it used to be’. Free-range and organic production is spreading. In response to concerns about the pace of industrial farming, retailers have slowed down the chicken chain. Emotions, memory, and identity are assuming growing importance in the food sector.



Modern day chicks in a hatchery

Source: Peter Jackson

The significance of trust and the active contribution of consumers in transforming the geographies of consumption, however, are not new. In nineteenth-century America,

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consumers played a central role in the commercialisation and industrial standardisation of horticulture.¹⁸ Consumer testimonials and knowledge built trust and brand loyalty.

New tastes had important implications for the environment, too. Before the rise of synthetic chewing gum, people chewed chicle. Chicle extraction led to the clearing of vast forest areas in Mexico's Yucatan. Today, regulatory measures and product certification remain obstacles to more sustainable production of natural gum.¹⁹

Ethical consumerism is sometimes seen as a retreat from 'real' politics, a soft politics in the lower key of individualist lifestyle. This fear may be unwarranted. One case study in Bristol finds that ethical consumerism functions as a pathway into broader political engagement. The potential of ethical campaigns to change individual life-style, however, must not be overrated. These campaigns are more effective at the collective level, such as the creation of Fairtrade cities. As individuals, people feel easily overwhelmed by appeals to change their own lifestyle to save the planet.²⁰ Conventional attacks on consumerism backfire if they assume consumers are manipulated and have "false needs" or if they imagine a return to some mythical "natural" way of life. It might be more effective to place a positive emphasis on the sensual and spiritual pleasures of a different lifestyle, say, one less dependent on cars, noise, and traffic jams.²¹

LESSON 4: PAY MORE ATTENTION TO DIVERSITY

Consumer cultures are highly diverse and stratified. Homogenous models of 'consumer society' or 'mass consumption' have passed their sell-by date. Developed societies are internally segmented in different ways—in the United States, for example, most people are reading less but the few people who like reading do more of it; in Norway and Netherlands, by contrast, leisure patterns are more shared. Status remains important in Britain, but it is wrong to presume that the social elite just likes elite culture. People with high levels of education and status are more likely to participate in low-brow as well as highbrow cultural activities—omnivores who like cinema as well as opera. Low status groups are more likely to be cultural univores.²²

In the United Kingdom, the baby boomer generation born immediately after the Second World War have carried the new experiences of the '60s, such as popular music and greater travel abroad, with them as aging consumers. Cosmopolitanism is a central part of their identity.²³ They think

of themselves closer to their children than their parents, and they believe in spending their wealth rather than in saving and passing it on. In the 1960s older people's consumption patterns differed sharply from the rest of society. Since then, the ownership of consumer goods has converged.²⁴ Still, baby boomers are not a homogenous generation. They are differentiated by income, housing, health, identity, and values.



Britain's ageing population: actively pursuing increased years of consumer culture

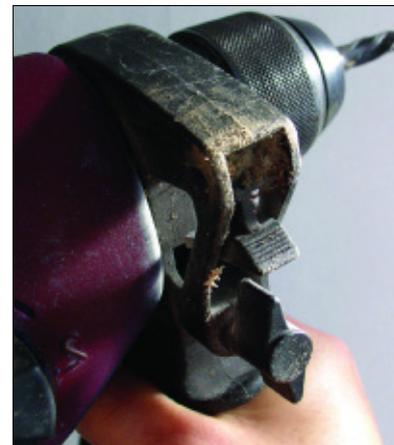
Source: Martin Parr/Magnum

Cosmopolitanism is closely linked to level of education. Similarly, children's consumer culture is not all of one piece. Fashion is a vital marker of identity; already six-year olds know what is 'cool'.²⁵ Generational boundaries are blurring. But evidence also points to regional and social differences: some children resist fashion, and rural children care less about fashionability than whether what they wear is suitable for a particular purpose.

LESSON 4½: FOLLOW PRACTICES, NOT INDIVIDUAL CHOICES

A focus on individual choice is of limited value to understand the dynamics mentioned above. Some economists and psychologists have revised the conventional model, stressing that rationality can be 'bounded', that choice can be 'myopic', and that people can feel more intensely about losses than about gains. These are steps in the right direction but do not go far enough. A lot of consumption is habitual. Taking a shower or a bath, having a certain breakfast routine, watching television or pottering about in the garden—these are all forms of consumption but hardly activities that people 'choose' each time afresh, be it in a rational or myopic fashion. They are routines that have histories that emerge, evolve, mutate, and die. And they are not just individual. They are practices where human skill and ambition come together with materials and technologies—and

sometimes come apart. New technologies like digital cameras or speedy plumbing sets do not just respond to a prior demand but give rise to new practices and needs.



Rather than simply meeting needs, products are actively implicated in creating new practices

Source: Matt Watson and Elizabeth Shove

Several projects in the **Cultures of Consumption** programme have begun to explore the practices of habitual consumption, their histories, rhythms, and disruptions. One has advanced a new theory of the active role of 'stuff' in our lives.²⁶ It is a path that has a lot of mileage for future research.

RESEARCH PROJECTS

Cultures of Consumption consisted of 26 research projects in the social sciences, arts and humanities:

- 1 The Diffusion of Cultures of Consumption: a comparative analysis;** Professor Alan Warde, School of Social Sciences, University of Manchester.
- 2 Multinational Retailers in the Asia Pacific;** Dr Jos Gamble, School of Management, Royal Holloway, University of London.
- 3 The Cappuccino Conquests: a transnational history of Italian coffee;** Professor Jonathan Morris, History, University of Hertfordshire.
- 4 The Khat Nexus: transnational consumption in a global economy;** Professor David Anderson, St Antony's College, University of Oxford.
- 5 Shopping Routes: networks of fashion consumption in London's West End 1945–1979;** Professor Christopher Breward, Deputy Head of Research, Victoria & Albert Museum and Professor David Gilbert, Department of Geography, Royal Holloway, University of London.
- 6 Liquid Politics: the historic formation of the water consumer;** Professor Frank Trentmann; School of History, Classics and Archaeology, Birkbeck College,

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- University of London.
- 7 **The Commodification of Water: social protest and cosmopolitan citizenship;** Professor Bronwen Morgan, Faculty of Social Sciences and Law, University of Bristol.
 - 8 **Media Consumption and the Future of Public Connection;** Professor Nick Couldry, Department of Media and Communications, Goldsmiths College, University of London.
 - 9 **Consuming Services in the Knowledge Society: the internet and consumer culture,** Professor Angus Laing, School of Business and Management, University of Glasgow.
 - 10 **Creating Citizen-Consumers: changing relationships and identifications;** Professor John Clarke, Faculty of Social Sciences, The Open University.
 - 11 **Towards a Participatory Consumer Democracy: Britain, 1937–1987;** Dr Lesley Whitworth, Design History Research Centre, University of Brighton.
 - 12 **Modes of Consumption and Citizenship in the UK Welfare State;** Professor Martin Powell, Health Services Management Centre, University of Birmingham.
 - 13 **Cultures of Consumption and Consumer Involvement in Public Services;** Professor Johnston Birchall, Department of Applied Social Science, Stirling University.
 - 14 **The Housewife in Early Modern Rural England: gender, markets and consumption;** Dr Jane Whittle, Department of History, University of Exeter.
 - 15 **Banking on Housing; Spending the Home** Professor Susan Smith, Department of Geography, University of Durham.
 - 16 **'Alternative' Food Networks: (re)connecting consumers, producers and food?;** Dr Moya Kneafsey, Geography Subject Area, Coventry University.
 - 17 **Manufacturing Meaning along the Food Commodity Chain;** Professor Peter Jackson, Department of Geography, University of Sheffield.

- 18 **Seed Money: the economics of horticulture in nineteenth-century America;** Dr Marina Moskowitz, Department of History, University of Glasgow.
- 19 **Chewing Gum: transnational histories of consumption and production;** Professor Michael R. Redclift, Department of Geography, King's College London.
- 20 **Governing the Subjects and Spaces of Ethical Consumption;** Dr Clive Barnett, Geography Discipline, The Open University.
- 21 **Alternative Hedonism and the Theory and Politics of Consumption;** Professor Kate Soper, Institute for the Study of European Transformations, London Metropolitan University.
- 22 **Social Status, Lifestyle and Cultural Consumption;** Dr Tak-Wing Chan, Department of Sociology, University of Oxford.
- 23 **Boomers and Beyond: intergenerational consumption and the mature imagination;** Dr Rebecca Leach, School of Social Relations, Keele University.
- 24 **From Passive to Active Consumers in Britain 1963–1998;** Dr Paul Higgs, Centre for Behavioural and Social Sciences in Medicine, University College London.
- 25 **New Consumers? children, fashion and consumption;** Professor Christopher Pole, School of Social Science, Nottingham Trent University.
- 26 **Designing and Consuming: objects, practices and processes;** Professor Elizabeth Shove, Department of Sociology, Lancaster University.

OUTPUTS

The **Cultures of Consumption** research programme ran from 2002 to 2007. Activities included policy seminars and public debates, exhibitions and educational materials, workshops and international conferences. Our many publications include books, articles and working papers. For full details of activities, resources, and other documents go to www.consume.bbk.ac.uk

Books include:

- John Brewer and Frank Trentmann (eds), *Consuming Cultures, Global Perspectives* (Berg, 2006).
- Nick Couldry, Sonia Livingstone and Tim Markham, *Media Consumption and Public Engagement* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
- John Clarke, Janet E. Newman, Nick Smith, Elizabeth Vidler and Louise Westmarland, *Creating Citizen-Consumers* (Sage, 2006).
- Elizabeth Shove, Matt Watson, Martin Hand Hand and Jack Ingram, *The Design of Everyday Life* (Berg, in press).
- David Anderson, Susan Beckerleg, Degol Hailu and Axel Klein, *The Khat Controversy* (Berg, 2007).
- Kate Soper and Frank Trentmann (eds), *Citizenship and Consumption* (Palgrave Macmillan, in press).
- Michael R. Redclift, *Chewing Gum* (Routledge, 2004).
- Christopher Breward and David Gilbert (eds), *Fashion's World Cities* (Berg, 2006).
- Frank Trentmann (ed.), *The Making of the Consumer* (Berg, 2006).

Articles include:

- Claudia Baldoli and Jonathan Morris (eds), 'Made in Italy: Consumi e identità collettive in secondo dopoguerra', Theme Issue of *Memoria e Ricerca*, XIV(23) (2006).
- Jos Gamble, 'Multinational Retailers in China: Proliferating "McJobs" or Developing Skills?', *Journal of Management Studies*, 43(7) (2006), pp.1463–1490.
- Richard Simmons, Johnston Birchall and Alan Prout, *User Voice: Hearing the Public in Public Services* (National Consumer Council, 2006).
- Shu-Li Cheng, Wendy Olsen, Dale Southerton and Alan Warde, 'The Changing Practice of Eating: Evidence from UK Time Diaries, 1975 and 2000', *British Journal of Sociology*, 58(1) (2007), pp.39–61.
- Food Stories* (2007), An interactive educational website: www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/foodstories.



CULTURES OF CONSUMPTION RESEARCH PROGRAMME



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