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A phenomenological study of home baking: The ‘Rebirth of Romanticism’ and the rise of the craft consumer

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Abstract

This paper investigates home baking as an instance of ‘craft consumption’ (Campbell, 2005) against the backdrop of rising participation in the phenomenon of home baking and the increasing importance of emotion in consumption defined as the ‘Rebirth of Romanticism’ movement (Gray, 2011). Phenomenological interviews conducted with a sample of 14 home bakers indicate that pleasure, authenticity and simplicity all play an important role in bakers’ experiences, lending support to Gray’s argument that a ‘Rebirth of Romanticism’ can be discerned within this context of contemporary consumption. Moreover, our findings reveal that pleasure is linked in part to the opportunity to engage in ‘manual labour’, an activity missing in the professional working lives of our consumer sample. These preliminary findings add depth to Campbell’s (2005) theoretical conceptualisation of the craft consumer. Further research focusing on different contexts such as DIY and gardening are needed in order to assess the robustness of the concept of the craft consumer and the status of the Rebirth of Romanticism.

Introduction

Home baking is very popular in the UK: in 2007 sales of home baking products totalled £457m (Mintel, 2010) and in 2010, the estimated revenue from home baking was £576m (Mintel, 2010). Why is home baking so popular? The emergence of the phenomenon seems to be due to a number of factors. Gray (2011) argues that there is a resurgence of a romantic ideal linked to the historic Romanticism period, which is driving contemporary consumption. Contemporary consumers are actively seeking and increasingly valuing tradition, authenticity, nature and simplicity, and we would suggest that home baking provides consumers an opportunity to satisfy these desires.

Up until now however, the focus of the majority of scholars’ work in relation to the Rebirth of Romanticism has been largely theoretical. By contrast, de Solier (2013) argues that the role of empirical research is fundamental in understanding consumers’ lived experiences and consumption as practice. She further asserts that consumption cannot be simply classified as part of ‘materialism’ or ‘consumerism’ (p.11). De Solier (2013) highlights the sophisticated and challenging nature of consumption and the value of empirical research in helping to untangle the complexity of consumption. It is our contention that since anti-consumerist feelings are rising (de Solier, 2013 and Humphery, 2010), marketers would benefit from greater understanding of the multifarious and contradictory aspects of contemporary consumption and that home baking provides an appropriate context for exploring these issues and developing insights.

The aim of the study is to identify why bakers bake. The study investigates amateur bakers’ experiences taking heed of any anti-consumerist sentiments that might be expressed. The focus of the study is not on the baked goods *per se* but on the relationship between bakers and

their baked goods, between the individual and the products: the production and consumption relationship. In order to provide theoretical grounding for the study, the historic Romanticism period and the new romanticism in marketing movement is examined together with Campbell's (2005) concept of the craft consumer in the following section.

Conceptual grounding

Romanticism, a literary and cultural movement (1750-1850) started in Britain and spread across Europe. It was a time when many poets and writers chose to assert their own individuality and creativity (Butler, 1981; Cranston, 1994). Osborne (1970) cited by Day (1996) points out that the Romanticism era accentuates 'genius, creative imagination, originality, expression, communication, symbolism, emotion and sentiment' (p.207). Holbrook and Olney (1995) wrote about the romanticism movement from a Consumer Research perspective before Gray (2011) identified the romanticism in marketing movement. The romanticism in marketing movement seems to be emblematic of a change in contemporary consumers' personal values and behaviour alongside their quest for authenticity. Consumers are looking for security and respite through purchasing and are looking to step off the treadmill of life. In a similar way to how the Romantics of an earlier era sought refuge from a disenchanted culture, today's consumers could be seen to be embodying introspection, a fixation with nature and moving towards experiential and hedonic consumption (Osborne, 1970; Holbrook and Olney, 1995).

Interest in nature, valuing authenticity and the pursuit of difference and tradition are all key indicators of the resurgence of the romantic ideal, as asserted by Gray (2011) and Bloom, (2010). These factors are discernible in the recent revival in staycations, with men and women choosing to stay in the UK for camping holidays. Indeed, the Camping and Caravanning Club reported that bookings over the Easter weekend in 2011 were up by 43 per cent on 2010. We suggest that these factors might also underpin the recent resurgence of interest in home baking. Campbell (2005) claims that baking in addition to DIY and gardening are all forms of craft consumption. He further asserts that craft consumers do not represent a new social category so much as an additional image of contemporary consumers; one which sees consumers using their skills and creativity to fashion their own consumption experiences.

What is meant by the craft consumer and why is it relevant today? Campbell (2005: 27-8) defines the craft consumer as 'a person who typically takes any number of mass produced products and employs these as the 'raw materials' for the creation of a new 'product', one that is typically intended for self-consumption' (p.28). He suggests that craft consumption represents a 'principal mode of individual self-expression' (p.38). Scholars have argued that craft consumers purposefully control the consumption process as a means of creating or maintaining their self or way of living (Featherstone, 1991). However, Campbell (2005) argues that craft consumers do not seek to maintain or create identity; they already have a strong and clear identity. Craft consumers engage in a distinctive mode of consuming and bring 'skill, knowledge, judgment, love and passion' to their craft (p.27).

The next section provides a brief overview of the methodology before the results and conclusions are presented.

Methodology

The approach is based on individual phenomenological interviews since they are seen as the best means of capturing an individual's experience through their eyes (Kvale, 1983; Moustakas, 1994; Pollio *et al.*, 1997). Traditional research methods such as surveys and structured interviews do not allow the researcher to capture adequately consumer experience as Hudson and Ozanne (1988) and Belk *et al.* (1988) all assert, mainly because these methods focus on cognition and logical communication.

Phenomenological interviews were conducted with a sample of 14 home bakers selected through a snowballing technique. Each interview lasted approximately 1.5 hours and was recorded using a digital recorder. Recordings were then played through at least twice before transcripts were typed up and analysed. The sample was relatively diverse; the age range of participants was from 26 to 46 years old and participants were all professionals. The majority of participants indicated that they had started to bake seriously in the last three years.

The researchers respected work by McCracken (1988), Thompson *et al.* (1989) and Moustakas (1994) who argue that researchers should create a comfortable environment where participants are happy to speak freely. Grand tour questions were asked to make the participants feel at ease before specific questions to encourage them to recount their baking experiences.

Each transcript was read individually in isolation and sections were related to the whole transcript, following the approach taken by Bleicher (1980) and Thompson *et al.* (1989) and a collection of broad themes were identified. After each transcript had been thoroughly examined, the researchers began to look at the interrelationship of different themes between the different transcripts of the participants.

Analysis of Findings

The findings suggest that hedonic and experiential consumption play an important part in bakers' experiences. Hedonic feelings when baking were expressed in all 14 transcripts, seen clearly through the use of words such as 'enjoyment', 'happy', 'pride' and 'chuffed'.

For example, Victoria had a very emotional view of baking, as she explained, *'if you don't enjoy it, don't do it...I enjoy baking and that's why I do it'*.

Patricia commented, *'When I start baking, I expect it to turn out how I imagined it. Rarely do I have any baking disasters. I feel pride after I've baked'*.

The dominance of bakers who value reflection and satisfaction is notable in our sample. Bakers driven by self expression also feature in our findings; the significance of simplicity and tradition is important, lending support to the 'Rebirth of Romanticism' movement and the drive towards seeking pleasure for simple enjoyment.

Anna mentioned: *above all, I feel satisfied that I've made something, that I've created something that has turned out well and that the family have pleasure in eating'*.

Charlotte, for instance said, *'I'm generally fairly happy'*.

A few bakers could be described as practical in the sense of enjoying making things. They tended to be traditional, family-centric and suspicious of big business. They are not materialistic and baking appeals to them because it is an opportunity to return to tradition. It is a fairly practical and immersive activity in which things are often 'made with love' for the family.

Specifically, the sample of contemporary bakers spoke of their satisfaction at practising manual labour during the baking process, a key component of the craft consumer. The process was seen to be crucial for five bakers in the sample as the following quotes indicate:

Stephanie said: *'The process is what is important...I enjoy the physical labour part of it. I think so much of what I do professionally and all the rest of it, you know I don't get an opportunity to build a wall, you know paint something, what I do is intellectual rather than physical'*.

She continues: *'And also, it's very familiar to me. Um, I suppose it's controllable. Generally speaking, I know what the outcome is going to be...the process is what's important'*.

Freya also explained: *'My job is really technical as I'm an Engineer...I really enjoy the baking process'*.

One baker, Matthew, explained: *'I like having the freedom to be able to do it when I want to...'* The relationship between bakers and baked goods is formed by place and space but also by time. The interest in productive leisure is strong for this sample of contemporary bakers and it is interesting to note the emphases of production and consumption in baking compared to their working roles.

The majority of bakers discussed the importance of authenticity and the theme occurred in 12 of the 14 transcripts. These participants saw authenticity as something that could not be made available commercially. These consumers valued comfort, tradition and simple activities and baking acts as the embodiment of these characteristics. Chris had strong feelings about the misuse of authenticity in product labelling. He explained:

'What tends to distress me is when something claims to be authentic and original or traditional and you know damn well it's not'.

Chris' comments are indicative of the anti-consumerist feelings that were prevalent in many (though not all) transcripts.

Individual bakers design, make and consume their own products. It could be said that baking is a productive leisure activity involving skills and practicality, supporting Gandolfo and Grace, (2009) who discussed the importance of creating crafts by hand, as a means of returning to physical manual labour and taking control of the production process. These consumers are relishing baking and other productive leisure activities because it gives them an opportunity to acquire and express their knowledge and control the [baking] process. The identities of bakers in this sample seem clear and strong. Victoria said: *'I love it and that's why I do it'* – Victoria shows a strong and genuine self which supports Campbell (2005) and the need for craft consumers to express themselves through productive leisure activities. Our

findings therefore dispute de Solier's work (2013) on self formation through productive leisure and consumption. Admittedly, lifestyles of craft amateurs are hybrid and fluid but identities are not transient here.

Conclusions and suggestions for future research

Our findings challenge the views of Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) in that escapism and the pursuit of difference were important and very real to our contemporary bakers. That is to say our participants did not engage in fantasy – instead the experience of baking provided participants with the physical means to escape the 24/7 work culture. In this sense, the bakers' experiences reflect Osborne's view of Romanticism (cited by Day, 1996) which embraces originality and self expression.

The findings contribute and build on consumer behaviour, sociology and psychological literature to date by providing empirical support to the argument made by several authors (Raymond, 2003; Bloom, 2010; Gray 2011) that there is a 'Rebirth of Romanticism' movement.

Our work develops understanding of the changing lifestyles and values of contemporary bakers at an individual level, exploring what is important to them and identifying the importance of the elements of 'crafting' in this context. Our findings strongly support Campbell (2005) who wrote about the importance of self-expression for craft consumers and the importance of the manual process of baking.

This research deploys a conceptual framework and studies home baking as the context. The results would no doubt vary if DIY or gardening was the context. Also, using an increased diversity of amateur home bakers could offer researchers further insights, for example, those that bake but who also buy ready-baked commercially available goods could be included to develop marketers' understanding of contemporary consumers and their relationship with authenticity. The 'Rebirth of Romanticism' could be examined further through the means of a cross country study. It would give marketers a greater understanding of how widespread the world of the craft consumer, the Rebirth and provide a comparison of different consumer cultures. The influence of gender and class within the Rebirth would also further add to the robustness of the contemporary consumer trend identified and further de Solier's research (2013) into the dichotomy in consumption and production and the creation and maintenance of a self in the postmodern society.

Heads of Marketing in retail organisations need to take into account this sub segment of contemporary consumers because they represent a significant market opportunity. Our findings show that this group of bakers are looking to create something authentic and simple. Authenticity is something which cannot be labelled in a supermarket. The findings indicate that there appears to be a strong market for baking courses and baking kits. The act of producing a baked good and consuming the homemade good are crucial elements to this group of bakers; retailers could pilot a scheme whereby they would invite contemporary consumers to bake their own produce on their premises. The sample of contemporary bakers also said that they baked homemade goods because they know what they contain. One suggestion would be therefore that retailers could tap into contemporary consumers' appreciation for diversity, creativity and authenticity by offering a wider choice of

ingredients from around the globe in-store. Another suggestion is that manufacturers could produce raw products with fewer ingredients and a focus on good quality rather than cheaper and complex ingredients. This paper provides a comprehensive understanding of contemporary bakers and offers suggestions to enable marketers to successfully reach this group.

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