13_2_30: EXPERIENCES, PERCEPTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS OF RETAIL EMPLOYMENT FOR GENERATION Y

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Structured Abstract

Purpose

This paper examines Generation Y, potential graduate entrants to UK retailing, in respect of their job experiences, career perceptions and initial employment expectations.

Design, methodology, approach

Utilising qualitative research methods, an exploratory study was undertaken with 33 students (all of whom fell into the category of Generation Y) from two UK universities.

Findings

The study found that many of the propositions contained within the Generation Y literature were reflected among participants in relation to their future career and lifestyle aspirations. This points to the need for retailers to carefully manage graduate expectations and experiences to ensure commitment to the sector.

Research Limitations/implications

Being an exploratory study, the results are not genralisable to the wider population. The findings frame a future longitudinal study on the retail careers of Generation Y graduates as they move from the anticipation to the encounter stage of their career development. This will seek to further explore the implications of Generation Y values, including those relating to diversity and equality which were not raised as an issue in this preliminary study.

Originality/Value

The findings of this research contribute to our knowledge of the career aspirations of Generation Y. It indicates to retailers some of the future recruitment and HR practices they might adopt to meet the needs of this generation of employees.

Keywords: Generation Y, retailing, graduates, careers, employment experiences, career expectations

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Introduction

In September 2006, 2.9 million people were employed in retailing (Office for National Statistics, 2007). This represents 10.7 per cent of the total number of people employed in all industries and services in the UK. Moreover, these official statistics are conservative as they exclude certain categories of workers such as those in self-employment, unpaid family workers, concessionaires, and those subcontracted retail jobs such as cleaning, catering and security. Thus, it is clear that retailing is a dominant and economically crucial industry to the UK economy (Office for National Statistics, 2006a; 2006b), both in terms of consumer spending and employment yet traditionally it has been perceived as offering poor employment conditions (Broadbridge, 2003a) and it has difficulty in attracting good quality managers (Commins and Preston, 1997). These negative perceptions and recruitment difficulties may be exacerbated by changes in young peoples' attitudes to work (Rolfe, 2001) and in career structures (Baruch, 2004a). This article draws together these twin strands of traditional issues and contemporary developments in its exploratory examination of a group of the so-called Generation Y's experiences, perceptions and expectations of UK retail employment. The paper begins by setting the context of the retail sector and its employment before moving on to examine the characteristics of Generation Y. There follows a discussion of generative primary work with 33 potential graduate entrants - an important element of Generation Y - to retailing. This centres on their retail work experiences, their perceptions of graduate careers in retailing and their expectations of initial employment in retailing. Key conclusions are drawn. Lastly, on the foundation of the exploratory work, a research design for a longitudinal study of

retail careers for Generation Y graduates in terms of their experiences, perceptions and expectations of UK retail employment is scoped.

Background: Nature of the retail sector and student perceptions

There have been dramatic developments within the UK retail industry over the past two decades. Market concentration, internationalisation, technological developments (including e-commerce), new store formats, customer service issues, category management and fierce competition are just a few of the advances within the industry. All of these compound to make for a more challenging and professional industry. The growth and increasing professionalisation of the multiple retailers in particular has provided various career opportunities for retail employees. Retailers require their managers to be bright, motivated, capable individuals with a range of personal and technical skills. As a response there has been a growth of graduate related posts within the industry. This has been accompanied by a growing range of undergraduate, postgraduate and post experience retailing programmes offered by UK higher educational establishments. However, the attraction and retention of graduate employees remains a key retailing issue (Broadbridge 2003a). Better understanding of potential graduates' experiences, perceptions and expectations may contribute to retailers making improvements in their recruitment and retention. An appreciation of significant employee characteristics is the bedrock of this.

Retailing is a sector that employs many women workers (Office for National Statistics, 2006b) although their dominance is in the non managerial positions. While women are employed in management, they are more likely to be represented in the

junior and middle management positions. The senior management and director level positions in retailing remain, with exceptions, largely male preserves (Schmidt and Parker, 2003). This is of relevance to the current research because in order to build future capacity within the industry, retailers need to draw on the talents of all of their managers. The career development of women and men managers is equally important in achieving this. Previous research has been conducted on the career development enablers and barriers experienced by managers in the retail sector (*c/f* Broadbridge, 1999; Maxwell and Ogden, 2006). Much of this work indicates that retailers can do more to make careers more gender equal.

Retailing has also traditionally been a youthful industry and many managers can reach senior positions at a relatively young age. It is also a sector employing many students who can combine their studies with the part-time opportunities offered. Recent demographic changes in the UK mean that retailers will increasingly be competing with other industries for a smaller pool of young people. Therefore, it is crucial that UK retailers are able to attract, retain and develop their graduate entrants. From their own perspective, retailers want to attract high calibre people who can be developed to operate and grow their business for the future. This is especially vital given the poor perception that retailing has traditionally received (Swinyard, 1981; Swinyard *et al.* 1991; Broadbridge 2003a), and the past difficulties retailers themselves have encountered in attracting good quality managers (Dawson and Broadbridge, 1988; Whitworth, 1995; Retail Week, 1996; Schmidt, 1996; Commins and Preston, 1997). Understanding the source of the poor perception that retailing receives, particularly as the industry has enjoyed rapid developments and professionalisation in recent years, is therefore important.

In a recent study of student perceptions of retail employment, Broadbridge (2003a) found that many students - potential graduate entrants to the industry - had a distorted view of the retail industry and the opportunities it can provide to graduates. Her survey study found that retailing was not viewed as a particularly attractive career. Students in Broadbridge's study (2003a) were polarised in their opinions about a career in retailing. Ten per cent regard retailing as a very appealing career opportunity, while a further 26 per cent consider it somewhat appealing. In direct contrast, however, another ten per cent view it as a very unappealing career option with a further 26 per cent considering it an unappealing opportunity. Twenty nine per cent of students remained ambivalent to the appeal of retailing as a future career option. Furthermore, when asked in an open ended question to state their preferred career choice, just 2.6 per cent stated it to be in the retail industry. Another study confirms this, finding that after getting a degree most students do not want to tell people they are managing a retail store (Retail Merchandiser, 2003). Despite advances in the industry over the past few decades then, it appears that the appeal of retailing as a career option has not changed since the work of Swinyard (1981).

One optimistic finding, however, was that students who had completed retail courses were significantly more likely to be favourable in their descriptions of retailing as a career (Broadbridge, 2003a). These students saw retailing as a more dynamic and challenging industry with opportunities for career advancement. This demonstrated the importance these vocational courses play in portraying a more diverse picture of the industry and its opportunities than is ascertained from other means. Of the opinions students generally held about a career in retailing, some

regarded it as challenging, interesting and having a good salary, while others considered it to be routine, boring, mundane, having poor working hours, a poor salary, lacking in prestige and poor advancement opportunities. These negative associations mirrored those by Curtis and Lucas (2001) who discovered that students' dislikes of working centre on the nature of the work itself. The most frequently cited attributes associated with a career in retailing (consumer oriented, people oriented, poor salary, limited advancement, poor working hours) found by Broadbridge (2003a) did not compare favourably to those associated with their preferred career (interesting, opportunities for advancement, challenging, rewarding, satisfying). These findings were similar to another study which found the factors that have a large impact on career choice were advancement opportunities, meaningful work, commitment to work-life balance and financial compensation (Retail Merchandiser, 2003).

Much misunderstanding of a career in retailing was attributed to previous job experiences (Broadbridge, 2003a). This is exacerbated by the growth of term-time employment, much of which is concentrated in the service industries generally and retailing in particular (Barke *et al.* 2000). Retail Merchandiser (2003) found that students with positive experiences in retail jobs felt positively towards a retail profession. Broadbridge (2003a) found those with retail work experience were three times more likely as those without retail work experience to assert they would *not* want a future career in the industry. Therefore the quality of student exposure to shop floor life can deter them from regarding the sector as a longer term career perspective. Perhaps not surprisingly then, head office jobs were perceived as more desirable than store management positions (Broadbridge, 2003b). The misconception of a career in retailing may also be attributed to poor communications between the retail industry

and prospective graduate employees (Broadbridge 2003a). Evidently, retailers are missing an opportunity at present to convey to the students they employ on a part-time basis the benefits of a longer term career in the industry. This underlines the importance of exploring potential graduate entrants' experiences of retail work and, consequently, their perceptions of initial graduate employment in retailing. Furthermore, to compete for future talented graduates, retail companies need also to be aware of the characteristics of their generation, Generation Y, and engage actively with them so that they meet their needs effectively. As Eisner (2005) states, the managerial implications of Generation Y's entry to the workplace are complex.

Characteristics of Generation Y employees

Generation Y is the collective term for those born between 1977 and 1994, who are also referred to as the Internet (or dot.com) generation, echo boomers, millenials and Nexters. It is alleged that Generation Y has different experiences and expectations from those older than them (Generation X, Baby boomers, Traditionalists). Many will have work experience from several jobs while being a student before entering full-time employment. They therefore might have clear expectations as to what they do and do not expect of their future careers. If that previous work experience has been in the retail industry, and has not been favourable (as found by Broadbridge, 2003a above), then this is potentially worrying for employers in the industry as they compete to draw on a future scarce labour resource. Other research has shown that students today are materially oriented towards using a degree to get a job, and are interested in vocational degrees and a lucrative career more so than previous generations (Rolfe, 2001). If undertaking a vocational degree,

students then expect to be fast tracked in that industry; otherwise they do not see the benefits of specialising their studies. Retailers, however, do not tend to acknowledge this and do not provide special consideration or exemptions for retail graduate entrants to the industry. This too serves to reinforce a negative perception of the industry.

There is little previous academic work on the characteristics and work expectations of Generation Y. Tables 1a and 1b provide an amalgamation of descriptors used to characterise this generation of people. As the tables demonstrate, Generation Ys have been described as well-educated, confident, passionate, upbeat, socially conscious and as having integrity (Retail Merchandiser, 2003). They are also technologically savvy, independent, self-reliant and entrepreneurial thinkers (Martin, 2005). Morton (2002) claims they want jobs that provide training, fair compensation and a positive company culture. They want bosses who are open and positive and who empower them (Morton, 2002). They thrive on change and uncertainty (Harris, 2006), challenging work and creative expression, and hate micromanagement (Martin, 2005). Martin (2005) claims that Generation Ys do want clear directions and managerial support but they also demand the freedom and flexibility to get the task done in their own way and at their own pace. While they work well alone, they work better together; they are more accustomed to team playing than previous generations. She argues that organisations need to customise training and career paths for this generation of employees (*ibid*). Generation Y employees expect to give and receive loyalty based on honesty and respect (rather than on time served with a company). They will show loyalty and dedication as long as they are achieving their goals but then they will go elsewhere for a new challenge (Kerslake, 2005).

Amar (2004) argues that the motivation that attracts, retains and engages younger employees is quite different from that of previous generations. He levels that there are three sources of work motivation: the job; the outcomes of the job (i.e. rewards and sanctions) and the organisational system (including policies, practices, culture, image position in its market and industry). The biggest motivator of the younger generation is the lack of controls on them as this frees their mind and allows them to engage in activities that bring about innovation. Job security is not a motivator and they do not expect long-term employment, which may fit well in the retail sector where there is often high job mobility. Baruch (2004b) argues that these employees seem to be less interested in a lifelong job, and more interested in challenging and meaningful assignments for their self-development. This needs to be taken into consideration by retailers in developing career opportunities for their graduate entrants.

Prior work suggests that both men and women Generation Ys seek a more balanced lifestyle between their work and non-work lives and have different expectations from their work role than Generation Xs and other older employees (Morton, 2002; Kerslake, 2005; Anon, 2006). More so than with any other generation, work for Generation Y is regarded as financing and complementing lifestyles (Kerslake, 2005; Anon, 2006). Morton (2002) suggests that they want to enjoy their work but not let it rule their lives. They will put in extra time for a worthy and necessary cause as an exception rather than a rule (Kerslake, 2005). They make the most of their free time. Employment flexibility is a way of achieving the work-life balance (Kerslake, 2005); therefore the management and culture of organisations

must support such flexibility (Maxwell, 2005). The long anti-social hours associated with retail management create a potential tension in the work life balance of this generation of future employees. Generation Y are said to be socially conscious (Anon, 2006), while Morton (2002) asserts that Generation Ys value diversity, equality and tolerance in both professional and personal aspects of their lives. Consequently they may challenge the disproportionate representation of women in retail management, as noted above, and be especially interested in career development enablers. Maxwell and Ogden's (2006) study of inhibitors to and enablers of career development for female managers in retailing may be instructive for Generation Ys. Thus Generation Ys are characterised by a number of distinguishing features. These features have a concomitant effect on their career expectations, as discussed next.

Career expectations of Generation Ys

A career involves a process of progress and development of individuals (Baruch, 2004a). Arnold (1997) defines a career as a sequence of employment related positions, roles, activities and experiences encountered by a person. Tymon and Stumpf (2003:17) state: 'We view a person's career as an ongoing sequence of educational and work activities that are meaningful to the individual and that add value to the organizations in which the individual participates'. According to Nicholson and Arnold (1989), career transition from higher education into employment goes through various phases: preparation or anticipation, encounter, adjustment and stabilisation.

The rapid developments in the retail industry have wide implications for the planning and management of careers at the point of graduate entry and in subsequent career development. There is though no one theoretical or disciplinary concept of careers. In researching the topic of experiences, perceptions and expectations of retail employment, it must be acknowledged that the structure of careers has changed (Baruch 2004a). Baruch (2004a) argues that the social context in which people grow and develop influences their values, norms and beliefs which, in turn, influence their career aspirations, career choice, and progress. With regard to their careers, Generation Ys have a drive for career success and security, craving opportunity and responsibility (Kerslake, 2005).

Traditional career structures, where a person made a series of upward career moves usually within a single company have, since the beginning of the 1990s, been supplanted by the boundaryless career (Arthur, 1994). More transactional and short-term relationships are common place nowadays and people now expect an organisation to serve them - rather than the other way round - which might only be for two to three years (Baruch, 2004a). Furthermore, as many organisations (including retailing) have downsized and delayered, so career paths have become blurred. People now expect to move between companies more than in the past. As a result, multidirectional career systems (Baruch 2004a) have emerged. Another theoretical approach is the protean career which was recognised properly in the 1990s (Hall and Mirvis, 1996). This approach focuses on the individual, not the organisation, who takes responsibility for their own career. Baruch (2004a) contends that it is not restricted to the realm of paid work or work and non-work domains. He also argues that along with the hierarchical ladder climb, other criteria are now held to be

important: inner satisfaction, life balance, autonomy and freedom. If we relate these criteria to Generations Ys, we can see parallels between them and the values Generation Ys hold. Arguably, these criteria need to be acknowledged and incorporated into the career structures of the future generation of retail graduates/ managers. However, despite new career formats emerging there is still evidence to suggest that promotion is still common in organisational life (Holbeche, 2003), and when thinking of careers, a traditional linear career structure is often considered the most successful and the most sought after. This has traditionally been reinforced by many organisational structures, cultures and remuneration packages along with definitions of success and commitment which uphold male based values (Tharenou *et al.* 1994; Sturges 1999) which may be opposed to the Generation Y's value of equality (Morton, 2002) as noted earlier. As wider structures of careers are changing, albeit with some enduring facets, it becomes important to explore potential retail graduate entrants' expectations of their initial graduate employment.

Research Design

To recap from the discussion above, three lines of enquiry relating to Generation Y - potential graduate entrants to retailing - provide the contours of this study, namely: their experiences of retail employment; their perceptions of graduate careers in retailing; and their expectations of initial graduate employment in retailing. The purpose of the exploratory research covered in this paper is to provide a baseline - a foundation - from which to develop a more in-depth, longitudinal study of Generation Y graduate careers in the retail industry. In taking a longitudinal approach, the prospective research attempts to explore all of the phases identified by Nicholson and

Arnold (1989), whereas the exploratory empirical research is specifically designed to relate to the anticipation phase of this model and examine, in turn:

- students' employment experiences in their retail jobs to date;

- students' perceptions of graduate careers in UK retailing; and

- students' expectations of initial graduate employment in UK retailing.

Given the exploratory and phenomenological nature of this phase of the study, a qualitative research approach was adopted to explore the extent to which Generation Y students have a shared set of perceptions relating to career aspirations and the attractiveness of the retail industry as a graduate destination (Creswell, 1998). Primary data was gathered from self-selected third and fourth year undergraduate students in two Scottish Universities (Stirling University [SU] and Glasgow Caledonian University[GCU]), both of which offer retail management or retail marketing degrees. These students have in common that they have retail employment experience, are on a programme offering a retail specialism, and they belong to Generation Y.

The research questions were drawn from the literature review and centred on the three lines of enquiry. Firstly, the employment experiences questions, for example, asked about views on working life/ conditions in retailing informed by work experiences; and attractive and unattractive feature of retail work. Secondly, the graduate career perception questions asked about meanings of the term career; views on career paths/ directions for graduate entrants; demands and rewards of graduate careers for example. Thirdly, the initial graduate employment expectations questions

asked about entry level jobs, training and development, work/ non-work trade-offs for example. Designed as open-ended questions, responses were probed but not prompted (Flick, 2002) to avoid any research bias.

A qualitative approach is appropriate for exploratory research where a phenomenon has hitherto been under-researched (Hussey and Hussey, 1997; Creswell, 2003). In order to generate rich data, focus group discussions were the selected medium of data capture (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). The first focus group discussion was treated as a pilot, with some minor modification subsequently made to the sequencing of questions. Securing student participation proved challenging, mainly due to assessment pressures and employment commitments. To increase participation rates, individual interviews supplemented the focus groups for student convenience. In total, views from self-selected 33 students (23 female and ten male) were accessed over eight mini focus groups discussions and two interviews. The majority of participants stated at the beginning of the episode of data capture that they would consider a career in retailing after graduation (and the majority of these stated an interest in contributing to on-going/ future research on retail careers).

It is acknowledged that the number of research informants is modest; however, given the exploratory nature of the research and its systematic research, the participation rate is considered satisfactory. While noting the importance of sampling in empirical inquiry, Robson (1999) points out that judgement is inherent in sampling. He asserts that this judgement is linked to 'the extent to which what we have found in a particular situation at a particular time applies more generally' (*ibid*, p135). Further, Anderson (2004: 211) states that 'there are no hard and fast rules about sample size

and selection…such issues require judgement and justification on the part of the researcher.' It is the judgement of the authors of this article that the sample size of the primary work is satisfactory, with a couple of justifications: the episodes of data capture strongly suggest the findings are typical, reflecting Robson's position above; and relatively small samples are not unusual in exploratory, qualitative research with the proviso that 'the findings must be treated as illustrative rather than representative' (Parker *et al.*, 1998:158). As the aim of this exploratory research was to generate insights to inform the later stages of the research design, the number of students involved in this part of the research is considered adequate and indeed reflects sample sizes of studies conducted elsewhere (Sturges,1999; Simpson, 2004; 2005; Dickmann and Harris, 2005; Lewis, 2005; 2006; Kirton, 2006; O'Donohoe and Turley, 2007; Constanti, and Gibbs, 2007; Cooke, 2007; Jack and Lorbiecki 2007).

Two of the researchers attended each focus group as a tool in interpreting the results (Parsons and Broadbridge, 2006). All focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and a protocol was followed in relation to ensuring student anonymity and comfort with material disclosed. Analysis was iterative, that is, moving back and forth between scripts, identifying potential similarities and differences and exploring emerging themes. The authors created themes by drawing on contemporary literature on the characteristics of Generation Y and this acted as a useful framework on which to analyse the findings. The following discussion of the findings is based on information garnered from the data capture and presented along the three lines of primary enquiry in sequence. Whilst the findings are reduced to a series of main points, validating quotations are included to allow the data itself to 'talk' by giving voice to the informants themselves. The source of each quotation is

identified by gender and place of study, either Stirling University (SU) or Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU). This is done to lend some complexion. Where the respondent affirmed he/she would <u>not</u> consider a career in retailing after graduation, this is indicated by the term 'non-retail'.

Findings

Experiences of Retail Employment

The informants' experience in retailing lies mainly in grocery and fashion/ footwear retailers as part-time employment. Other sources of retail employment included DIY, toy, book and charity stores. One informant described his retailing experience as taking place in food service retailing (Costa Coffee). Like Broadbridge's (2003a) study, the views uncovered in relation to their work experience are mixed, with many describing the retail working environment and conditions negatively. In particular, as these quotes illustrate, the working environment is reported as being characterised by poor pay and long hours, where employers demand too much flexibility:

> "..a fairly low paid job compared to working in call centres" (male, GCU)
>
> "It's hard work and you're not always paid for that" (female, GCU)
>
> "..[my employer is] really, really strict on break times and [gives] really low break times."(female, SU)
>
> "If you say you are flexible they give you 50 hours…if you just say I can only do my 12 hours, they say, 'you said you were going to be flexible' and just to punish you for not taking the full lot of hours they were trying to give you, you don't get any hours" (male, SU)
>
> "they'll bully you into extra hours" (female, GCU)

"It's physical work and work you are not always trained to do" (female, GCU)

Similar to the findings of Eisner (2005) it appears that there is a strong relationship between workplace satisfaction and perceived managerial competence (including their qualities). There is a widespread view that shop floor staff are put under a lot of pressure, for instance to meet sales targets, yet are often unsupported and undervalued by managers. Example quotations illustrate this:

> "You're always on the go with managers pressurising you to do different things – one minute saying this, the next minute do that…" (female, non-retail, SU)

> ".. managers and the assistant managers don't bother as much as they should about the people on the shop floor" (female, GCU)

> "..shop assistants, especially at the lower end, don't really get the respect that they deserve" (female, SU)

> "..you have to do it yourself if there is a problem, rather than getting a manager you have to try and deal with it yourself first." (female, SU)

A few positive aspects of retail experiences are also reported. For instance a male (SU) student highlighted, which is in tune with Kerslake's (2005) point on Generation Ys craving opportunity and responsibility, that : "you felt very empowered and your opinions mattered." Such positive experiences tend to stem from there being some good managers, reflecting Morton (2002) that Generation Ys want open and positive managers who empower them. Other positive aspects of working in retail include staff discounts, being part of a team and the pace of change, as these students articulate:

> "The most attractive thing…is the fact that it is an environment that is always changing and there are always new things" (female, GCU)

> "..being involved in a fast and dynamic industry where it's always changing. That appeals to me" (female, GCU)

Customer interaction is also mostly described as an attractive side to the job:

> "..sometimes serving a customer, the nicest customer in the world,...totally cheers you up" (female, SU)

> "You get to enjoy the banter between the customer and the seller…. It's contact with other people" (male, non-retail, GCU)

Further, where the students have experienced more than one retail employer, they are clearly able to contrast good employers with poor employers. For example, a female (SU) informant opined: "…Jenners is quite a high market store but at the lower end of the market I think you just get treated appallingly." So it seems that a poor experience can be offset by another, more positive experience.

Thus the student informants' experience in retailing are characterised by a number of negative and positive features. Notably, the students who indicated they would not consider retailing as a graduate career were negative about their experiences, mirroring Broadbridge's (2003a) findings. Nevertheless, poor experiences do not seem to be deterring most informants from contemplating a retail career reflecting an optimism that the type of retail jobs they will obtain following graduation will differ from those experienced in the encounter phase (Nicholson and Arnold, 1989). Still, there is clearly an opportunity for retail employers to make student labour experiences more positive to retain a greater commitment to the breadth of opportunities available within the industry. While noting the small number of students in this research, several characteristics of Generation Ys were evident in the experience line of enquiry: high education level, confidence (Retail Merchandiser, 2003), desire for fair compensation and a positive company culture (Morton, 2002),

and preference for challenging work and managerial support (Martin, 2005). Absent from the responses on experiences are comments on the values of diversity, equality and tolerance that are associated with Generation Ys (Morton, 2002). Possibly linked to this, none of the students' comments related to the defining retail employee characteristics of female and young employees, as identified earlier. On the basis of reflection on their retail employment experiences, the informants were able to express their views on graduate careers in retailing, as summed up by one student: "the work experience element gives you more of an idea of where you want go" (female, GCU).

Perceptions of Graduate Careers

The discussions moved on to consider at a broad level students' perceptions of graduate careers. When asked about what career means to them, rather than focusing on the level of remuneration, the majority of the respondents stressed the importance of having a job they enjoy. This finding reflects Morton's (2002) view on Generation Ys wanting to enjoy their work and Baruch's (2004a) argument that inner satisfaction is now held as important in careers. These extracts are illustrative on these points:

> "I think career success is being happy and feeling that you are making a difference" (female, GCU)

> "You will be happy in your career, you will be valued and you would be respected" (female, GCU)

> "When you are comfortable and have enough money that you can get what you want and also when you are happy getting up and going to work in the morning - doing something you enjoy" (female, GCU)

Moreover, the respondents do not want work to rule their lives, a finding in line with the characteristics of Generation Y (Morton, 2002). As one student put it:

"You don't want to be working all the hours of the day, you would have more suitable hours. Maybe not nine to five, but a better kind of balance than you would when you first started" (male, GCU). The point of work-life balance was picked up by the majority of the students, female and male alike, and is indicative of the values held by Generation Y (Morton, 2002; Kerslake, 2005). In the words of several informants, as examples:

"…it's [careers] becoming more about living your life now" (male, SU)

"I'm not after that fancy a life, just to be comfortable" (male, SU)

"I'd really wouldn't want to be this dad that works sixty hours a week and never saw his kids or his wife. Nothing is more important than that. (male, SU)

Overall, a five day 40 hour week was considered by most students as being a reasonable amount of hours to work. Corroborating research by Allen (2004), making a lot of money tends to be less important to Generation Y than enjoying a full and balanced life.

Views on how graduate careers in retailing may evolve show some preference for the traditional linear career progression model (Holbeche, 2003), as these comments show:

"A career means starting at a position low and ending up a lot higher than you were" (female, GCU)

"Career would be a job you go into and build up – maybe start off at a low level and then work up the career ladder into middle management and then onward into corporate level management and so in a step process you are gradually working your way up" (male, GCU)

However, despite having these idealised views of traditional careers, many are also fully aware that they will have to be flexible and focused to gain career success. There is some recognition that they may have to make deviations in their personal career paths to be successful. This open-mindedness is clearly articulated by some students:

> "You work out the route as you go but as long as you have got a set goal, the way you get there is kind of irrelevant as long as it's working towards that main goal" (male, GCU)

> "..for me it's quite an important part to learn how to be so adaptable and learn how to change and apply yourself but then I don't see it [retail] being a 15 year career. I see it as a short-term to get me somewhere else" (male, SU);

> - "I'll move to the other side of the world if it's a job that I want" (male, GCU)

Such opinions are indicative of several key characteristics attributed to Generation Ys, namely: drive for career success (Kerslake, 2005), taking personal responsibility for careers (Hall and Mirvis, 1996), independence (Martin, 2005), and interest in challenging and meaningful assignments for self-development (Baruch, 2004a).

A recognition of the need to consider multi-directional career systems, as defined by Baruch (2004b), is also evident in the findings. It seems to stem partly from an awareness of job insecurity at management levels within retail organisations due to delayering rather than from preference, as one student explains:

> "There's no security in these jobs… you could think, you know, you're doing fine – your sales are up – and all of a sudden they've just decided to cut this specific level out and you're in that level, there's nothing you can do about it" (male, SU).

Thus, as with the findings on employment experiences, examination of student perceptions of graduate careers in retailing link to much of the theoretical perspectives of Generation Y. This is seen in particular in the respondents' focus on enjoyment of, and self-development in, their careers (Baruch, 2004a), coupled with a drive for career success (Kerslake, 2005) and individual responsibility for careers (Hall and Mirvis, 1996). In contrast to the Generation Y literature however, there is evidence of a focus on traditional, linear career structures (Holbeche, 2003). With reflection on graduate careers in their entirety, the students were able to offer their views on their expectations of initial graduate employment.

Expectations of Initial Graduate Employment

Very few students, as in Broadbridge's (2003) study, said they wanted operational store management job, which resonated too much with the negative experiences of shop floor employment they have experienced as students. Instead, they talked about head office and specialist retail occupations such as category management, buying, visual merchandising, personnel management and marketing. For example, a female respondent (GCU) aims to be "a successful buyer for shoes with a successful company" while another at SU emphasised she would want to avoid the shop floor, "even as a manager". In the same vein, a male (SU) student stressed: "If I get involved in retailing it would be more to do with merchandising and things behind the scenes rather than actually being a store manager." Some also mentioned specific sectors of retailing such as music, sport, fashion and department store retailing. Some even had dreams of starting their own business which is in keeping with the entrepreneurial thinking noted by Martin (2005) as characteristic of Generation Ys. Also, a strong sense of individuality is driving a few to seek self-employment: "A lot

of the companies just want to clone you… that's what makes me want to have my own business" (female, GCU).

Some students felt that it is slightly easier to enter and progress in retailing compared with other industries; interestingly none of these students raised the issue of the disproportionate number of females progressing to senior management (Maxwell and Ogden, 2006). However, a clear concern among many respondents is that, although they might be able to perform retail jobs, they are competing alongside graduates with more generic degrees. Further, in line with the findings of Rolfe (2001), there is a clear concern that, despite accruing debt to gain their qualifications, graduates are also competing with non-graduates who join retail companies directly from school, i.e., that they are not sufficiently fast-tracked and that this is inequitable. Again indicative of Rolfe's (2001) results, some felt that their degree should get them appointed at a higher entry level and are concerned that this will not happen, as these students articulate:

> "You're talking about graduates starting at £16,000, I know people who left school...and went in at £13,000 and….after four years I'm only starting at £3,000 more. What is the point of that and I've taken on £12, 000 to£13,000 debt in that time as well" (male, SU)

> "I don't think you get the recognition quick enough....if you've got someone who's left school and they're on the stepping stones, it's going to take them about five years to get to the top. But you've spent four years at university studying and then they [retail employers] expect you to spend another year getting familiar with the basic shop floor. So by the time you've both come through, you are about on the same level, but you've gone to University, done all the studying, and they've [non-graduates] just worked their way through the company" (female, SU)

Another clear expectation of initial employment held by the students is to work for employers who are prepared to invest in their development in order to enable their career progression. Reflecting Morton (2002) on Generation Ys' desire for training are the following quotations:

"You expect them [retail employers] to have a training and development plan set for you" (female, GCU)

"I would like to be respected and supported [through training]" (female, GCU)

"I would expect some sort of training programme. I wouldn't expect to go into a position and be thrown in at the deep end. I would like some form of induction" (male, GCU)

"You never have nothing to learn especially in retailing as it changes all the time – fashions, products, etc – so training is important" (female, GCU)

Furthermore, students on a retail management programme in particular want to use the knowledge gained, and this seems to be suggestive of Generation Y's interest in the purpose of taking vocational degrees (Rolfe, 2001). As one student articulated:

"[I hope] not to be treated like a robot that they [retail employers] can just programme….you don't want to go into a job where they just treat you as a blank canvas and they train you to their way. You want to be able to put into practice what you've learned "(female, GCU)

Such remarks are consistent with the Generation Y literature describing expectations of graduates (Martin, 2005), in particular their appetite for challenging work and creative expression, and, possibly, a dislike of micro-management.

Yet another initial employment finding is that some respondents clearly expect they may have to move away to get jobs and to sacrifice their work life balance somewhat, at least in the short-term. These students' comments indicate this:

"I think when we start a job your work is going to be a lot more than your life" (female, GCU)

"I expect to be working three nights, weekends for the first few years in any job…roughly fifty hours" (female, SU)

"I'll work long hours for two or three years, however long it takes to get a secure job. You've got to be prepared to work so much at the start" (Female, GCU)

However, when the issue was explored in more depth, it became apparent that the students were being instrumental in apparent sacrifice as summed up by these comments:

"… you might be expected to do 60 hours… that would include Saturday and Sunday if they are your two busiest days…for a year or two that might be alright…if it was going to further my career, yes, but, if it wasn't – no." (male SU)

"You are going to have to make some sacrifices to get where you want to get. Like working more hours or putting your job first before your partner until you get where you want to be and then you can start saying that career is not as important as other things any more." (female, SU)

Therefore long hours would be exceptional and career purposive and this may reflect the characteristics of Generation Y (Kerslake, 2005). Work life balance concerns were raised during the course of the discussions as these quotes illustrate:

"My career is important but so is my relationship" (female, GCU)

"I want to separate work and leisure at some point, it's really important to me" (female, GCU)

"I don't see myself staying in retailing because retailers don't respect non-work time" (female, GCU)

Thus, the main features of the students' expectations of initial graduate employment in retailing appear to be reflective of the value systems of Generation Y individuals. Notably, these features are: hopes of a higher level of entry into their retail careers due to their having studied retailing (Rolfe, 2001); expectations of training (Morton, 2002); desire for challenging work (Martin, 2005); and short-term work/ life sacrifice, in working long hours, for personal career gain (Kerslake, 2005).

Conclusions and Future Research

Taking a major service industries sector, retailing, this paper sought to provide some understandings of young people's attitudes to employment in this sector. More specifically, through a series of group discussions and in-depth interviews with third and fourth year students at two universities, all of whom fitted the criteria of Generation Y, the research explored this generation's experiences of employment, along with their perceptions and expectations of a potential future career in this sector. The findings with regard to their experiences of retail employment largely reflect those found by previous research (Swinyard, 1981; Schmidt and Corbett, 19994; Commins and Preston, 1997; Swinyard *et a*l, 1991; Broadbridge 2003a). With regard to future expectation of graduate employment, many students would potentially consider a future career in the industry. Many of the findings correspond with the characteristics and value systems suggested by previous literature on Generation Y.

Collectively, the findings across retail job experiences, career perceptions, and initial employment expectations link to Amar's (2004) proposal of Generation Ys sources of work motivation stemming from the job itself, the outcomes of the job, and the organisation system. Respectively, these have been found here to centre in the main on: avoiding shop floor jobs; working primarily for personal enjoyment and career success; and working in a supportive culture and having training and development. They also demonstrate characteristics of Generation Y in their consideration to move jobs in order to experience new challenges (Kerslake, 2005). The participants believe that making personal sacrifices and working hard early on in their careers will pay off in the future in the form of challenging careers that command satisfying rewards. Once established in their careers, however, they expect a good work-life balance, and are no longer prepared to make the sacrifices thought necessary earlier in their careers.

However, the findings deviate from current theory in two potentially significant ways. First, there is a distinct absence of evidence that the Generation Ys who informed this exploratory study are concerned with the values of diversity, equality and tolerance. This is in contrast to Morton's (2002) assertion that Generation Ys are actively concerned with such values. This might be because they have not considered these issues in the context of their part-time employment experiences, but it is not to say these issues will not be brought to the fore once they are established in full-time graduate employment. Second, there is evidence that the Generation Ys ideally hope for linear careers, as opposed to focusing much more on multi-directional careers (Baruch, 2004b). Although these views of retailing may be distorted (*c/f* Broadbridge, 2003a), they - and indeed all the other findings - are

important in the context of the need for UK retailers to improve their performance in attracting and retaining graduate employees.

While one cannot make firm recommendations to retailers based on the findings of this small study, some broad managerial implications have emerged from the findings. For example, and supporting previous literature (Broadbridge, 2003a), it is apparent that if students are provided with more positive experiences in their part-time employment experiences, this might positively affect their decisions to enter the retail sector on graduation. Retailers need to consider fast tracking graduate entrants so as to make the sector more attractive in the first place. Coupled with this, would be for retailers to empower their graduate entrants earlier in their careers and promote this in their recruitment literature along with the training and development opportunities that will be available. Retailers (along with careers advisors and lecturers) could usefully educate Generation Y about the multi-directional career paths that retailing can offer, thus broadening their horizons and dispelling the myth that career progression is only measured linearly. Finally, retailers need to pay closer attention to the work-life balance concerns of Generation Y, and put in place mechanisms to more effectively manage these.

The success of this exploratory stage of the study is such that it has now been replicated in relation to the hospitality sector (see Barron et al, 2007). Moreover, the findings from this exploratory study have been used to design the next phase of this research. This involves a quantitative questionnaire survey to Generation Y students. The questionnaire will enable the authors to test the generalities found in the current research with the characteristics described in previous literature. This will provide a

more informed picture of the characteristics of UK Generation Y students. It will uncover whether students specialising in sectoral specialisms, such as retail, exhibit distinctive attitudes to work and career success. The initial stages of this quantitative research are reported in Broadbridge *et al*., (2007) and plans are underway to extend this research into America and Australia, thus providing a cross cultural analytical approach.

Beyond the preparation/ anticipation stage of career transition from higher education into employment (Nicholson and Arnold, 1989) that was the phase examined in this paper, we acknowledge that Generation Ys views may change over time, particularly once they have commenced their graduate careers. Hence a different methodological approach is required to better capture these changing experiences and opinions as they occur. In an attempt to address these issues the authors are currently developing a longitudinal study. This will generate findings on how the retail careers of Generation Y have progressed, and in particular how expectations and perceptions of the quality of working life in the industry have matured. It will build on the exploratory work conducted here and on the ongoing questionnaire survey on the preparation/ anticipation stage of career transition from higher education into employment. This longitudinal phase will track students through their initial encounter with retail employers as graduates during their period of adjustment and stabilisation (Nicholson & Arnold, 1989). Thus, it will enable us to trace the development of retail graduate entrants at crucial stages of their careers, and provide a richer understanding of the various phases of career progression over time. In turn, this will enable us to provide feedback and policy recommendations to retailers on aspects of their recruitment, development, retention and reward strategies.

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Table 1a : Characteristics of Generation Y

Characteristics	- Independent (Lockyer 2005; Martin 2005; Anon 2006) - Well educated (Retail Merchandiser 2003; Eisner 2005) - Confident (Retail Merchandiser 2003; Eisner 2005) - Upbeat (Retail Merchandiser 2003) - Passionate (Retail Merchandiser 2003) - Open minded (Eisner 2005) - Sociable (Eisner 2005) - Technically literate (Lockyer 2005; Martin 2005; Eisner 2005; Harris 2006; Foreman 2006; Anon 2006; Foreman 2006) - Dislikes slowness (Francis-Smith 2004) - Highly informed (Eisner 2005) - Likely to rock the boat (Eisner 2005) - Entrepreneurial thinker (Martin 2005) - Self reliant (Martin 2005) - Ethnically diverse (Eisner 2005) - Positive (Francis-Smith 2004) - Politeness (Francis-Smith 2004) - Curious (Francis-Smith 2004) - Energetic (Francis-Smith 2004) - Respectful of parents and grandparents (Francis-Smith 2004) - Financially empowered (Foreman 2006) - Invest conservatively (Foreman 2006) - Has lived with strong social stresors (Eisner 2005) - Want to be famous (Harris 2006) - Hopeful (Eisner 2005) - Talented (Eisner 2005) - Patriotic (Eisner 2005) - Collaborative (Eisner 2005) - Inclusive (Eisner 2005) - Civic minded (Eisner 2005)

Table 1b : Characteristics of Generation Y

Employment Terms & Conditions	Management Approach & Culture	Personal Career Development	Personal Values
• Employment flexibility (Kerslake 2005; Martin 2005); Want job flexibility (Foreman 2006); Flexible hours (Anon 2006) • Fair compensation (Morton 2002) • Performance related salary and bonuses (Anon 2006) • Programs for career development (Anon 2006); professional development (Eisner 2005) • Fast tracked and higher entry level(Broadbridge *et al* 2006); internal promotion (Broadbridge et al.) • Good working environment (Eisner 2005)	• Values teamwork (Martin 2005; Eisner 2005); Work with committed co-workers with shared values (Eisner 2005) • Work on parallel tasks (Eisner 2005) • Comfortable working alone (Martin 2005) • Freedom/ flexibility (Martin 2005); Being empowered (Morton 2002); Hates micro-management (Martin 2005) • Acknowledgement (Eisner, 2005; Martin 2005); Desires immediate feedback (Francis-Smith 2004); instant gratification (Eisner 2005) • Open and positive bosses (Morton 2002); clear directions and managerial support (Martin 2005) • Favours inclusive style of management (Francis-Smith 2004; Eisner 2005); Contribute to decisions in employment (Eisner 2005) • Positive company culture (Morton 2002)	• Interest in self development & improvement (Eisner 2005, Broadbridge et al, 2006) • Seeks training opportunities & professional development (Eisner 2005) • Drive for career success & security (Kerslake 2005, Broadbridge et al, 2006); Needs to succeed (Eisner 2005) • Desire for linear promotion (Broadbridge et al, 2006, Holbeche, 2003); less respect for rank (Eisner, 2005) • Reap their employer's benefits (Foreman 2006) • Needs to meet personal goals (Eisner 2005) • Crave opportunity and responsibility (Kerslake 2005) • Challenging work (Martin 2005; Eisner 2005); Creative expression (Morton 2005);	• Personal integrity (Retail Merchandiser 2003) • Balanced lifestyle (Morton 2002; Allan, 2004; Kerslake 2005; Anon 2006); Values home and family (Eisner 2005); Wants work-life balance (Eisner 2005); Work to live (Eisner, 2005) • Money isn't everything (Broadbridge et al 2006) • Diversity, equality & tolerance (Morton 2002); Values fairness (Eisner 2005) • Strong sense of morality (Eisner 2005); Fight for freedom (Eisner 2005); Socially conscious (Anon 2006; Eisner 2005); Volunteer minded (Eisner 2005) • Strives to make a difference (Eisner 2005) • Performing meaningful work (Eisner 2005) • Strong sense of company loyalty (Kerslake 2005)

• Willingness to sacrifice work-life balance in short-term for career gain (Kerslake, 2005; Broadbridge et al, 2006) • Provision of training opportunities (Morton, 2002, Broadbridge et al, 2006)	• Have high expectations of employers (Foreman 2006) • Thrive on change and uncertainty (Harris 2006)	• Strives to make a difference (Eisner 2005) • Having own business (Martin 2005) • Desire to use knowledge gained in degree (Broadbridge et al, 2006) • Prefer Head-office to customer-facing jobs (Broadbridge et al, 2006). • Individual responsibility for career (Hall & Mirvis, 1996, Broadbridge et al, 2006) • Achievement oriented (Eisner, 2005) • Taking personal responsibility for career (Broadbridge *et al.,* 2006) • Less satisfied with jobs and employers and more open to leave for something better (Eisner, 2005) • Wants instant gratification (Southard and Lewis, 2004) • Work experience (Broadbridge *et al.,* 2006)	• Embrace change (Foreman 2006) • Contributing to society (Allen, 2004) • Enjoyment of work. (Broadbridge et al 2006) • Goal oriented (Southard & Lewis, 2004; Foreman, 2006) • Meeting personal goals (Eisner, 2005, Broadbridge, et al, 2006).