
Can consumers be predicted or are they unmanageable?

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Abstract

This paper examines how well theories of consumer behaviour allow prediction of the consumption of tourism and hospitality products and services. Given the changing demographic and psychographic profile of consumers in the UK, it is proposed that a multitude of theoretical paradigms may be necessary to explain different aspects of consumer behaviour in different contexts. Post-modern concepts of hyper-reality and simulation have particular but limited application to understanding of the hospitality or tourism consumer. It is concluded that ideas derived from relationship marketing offer the most potential for producers of hospitality and tourism products and services. These include continuous re-invention of the product, and the development of lasting and trusting relationships between supplier and consumer. Technological innovations can support relationship building.

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Introduction

The broad purpose of this paper is to examine how well theories of consumer behaviour enable prediction of the behaviour of consumers with respect to tourism and hospitality products and services. It is set against the background of some fundamental changes in the demographic and psychographic profile of consumers in the UK. In particular the population is ageing and has adopted a changed value set as a result of war, economic crisis, terrorism, and increased antagonism to governments, global businesses and organisations. At the same time, and with the help of technological innovations such as data warehousing and data mining, companies have attempted to gain greater insight into the prediction of consumer purchase behaviour, but with only limited success. It is argued this may be because the theories on which an understanding of consumer behaviour is based may themselves be inadequate or the basic assumption that consumer behaviour is constant and so can be predicted may be unsound. A brief overview is given of post-modern approaches to consumer behaviour and the application of ideas such as hyper-reality and simulation to the experience of the hospitality or tourism consumer (Williams, 2002). In conclusion, it is proposed that a multitude of paradigms is necessary to explain different aspects of consumer behaviour in different contexts.

Demography

The latest census shows the UK now has more people aged over 60 than under 16 (Census, 2003). There are five times more people aged over 85 than in 1951. The population aged over 50 is set to rise from 20 million to 27 million by 2025. One analysis suggests the over 50s have 80 per cent of UK wealth and 40 per cent of spending; approximately £240 billion in 2001 (Edwards, 2002).

Growth in the ageing population has helped to fuel a rise in the number of one-person households. Average household size has fallen to 2.36; 30 per cent are one person households and 30 per cent of the adult population are single, reaching 50 per cent in London. One quarter of households are pensioners only (Census, 2003). Partly because of the ageing of the population, and partly because of an increase in younger people living alone, the number of single people living alone will rise from 11 million currently to 16 million by 2010, so that by that time the number of single households will predominate (*The Guardian*, 2003).



The consequence of more older and single people in the population is that many of the ideas about consumer behaviour will be irrelevant since they are based primarily on populations of young to middle-aged people living in family units. However, although the population over 50 is 20 million this does not mean it is one segment. As we age we individualise and become less of a clone of our peers, hence, there are a mass of ways to segment the mature market (Starkey, 2002).

Changing values

In the last 18 months consumers have developed a changed value set. The economic crisis, corporate scandals such as Enron, the war in Iraq, and terrorist incidents in America and Bali have made people concerned about security, survival, and their family. This is coupled with increased scepticism about government, big business and celebrities, together with growing concerns about health. To Faith Popcorn, America's trend expert, 2003 is the year when some of the basic human needs will impact most on the consumer marketplace, including love, family, food and vanity (www.faithpopcorn.com). She argues that in countries such as America and Australia, where obesity is a growing problem (sic!), people will become sufficiently concerned to hire food coaches to develop individualised and customised healthy eating lifestyles. Antagonism against big business, particularly global companies, (which Faith Popcorn calls econtoppling) and concern with healthy eating will put further pressure on big companies such as McDonalds which have seen falling profits for the last two years and the possible closure of 175 restaurants in ten countries.

A world-wide community has emerged as a result of the McLibel trial in the UK. A site was created on the Web – www.mcspotlight.org – which had 1.75 million hits per month, a total of 65 million hits by March 1999. It has become the heart of a world-wide movement in opposition to McDonalds, as well as other global enterprises like the World Trade Organisation (Ritzer and Oviatt, 2000).

Fast food has become associated with health scares and obesity with the result that it has been superseded by fast casual with chains such as Prêt à Manager doing particularly well in the US, with fast service of healthy food in a casual environment (despite McDonalds having acquired a stake in it!).

Another prediction is that the pressure of war, the desire to "live now" prompted by September 11, and the perceived tainting of the single minded pursuit of money will all combine to mean people will put more value on family and friends at the

expense of work. Evidence quoted by Mullins (1996) showed that of 7,000 managers surveyed, 36 per cent worked more than 50 hours per week but most wanted to be able to work a four-day week and wanted increased commitment from their company to their personal life. This would be good news for restaurants, hotels and travel organisations with the implication people will spend more time and money on leisure activities.

The impact of war and terrorism on travel and staying away from home is significant. The number of visitors to Bali dropped 60 per cent between October and November 2002, following the terrorist attack on a night club, and is predicted not to recover for several years. In February 2003 holiday bookings in the UK were down 20 per cent on the previous year and as a consequence British Airlines planned to shed 13,000 jobs by March 2004, later revised to September 2003. People are conscious of the fact that terrorists attack the tourist trade as a major objective. Disruption of the tourist trade in mainland UK was a major objective of the IRA campaign in the 1980s and 1990s. They attacked Heathrow airport, mainland railway stations, Harrods department store and other tourist attractions (Rojek, 2000). In 1997 an Islamic terrorist group killed 58 foreign tourists and four Egyptians at Luxor in Egypt, which still has an impact on the tourism trade in that country.

Within particular segments of the population, consumers appear suspicious of the whole paraphernalia of marketing, advertising and attempts to manipulate their behaviour, which is part of a reaction against spin by politicians, and the power of big business. For example, recent research shows that people over 50 dismiss manipulative promotions which are full of hype and emphasise age related benefits in a patronising way, just as older people find the stooping "elderly people" road sign offensive. A study by Millenium, an ad agency which specialises in campaigns aimed at the older generation, showed 86 per cent of 350,000 respondents over 50 found current adverts irrelevant to them (Starkey, 2002). Instead, they respond to value for money and product features. Brands which capitalise on 1960s attitudes are especially preferred (Silvester, 2003) and brand loyalty prevalent. However, there is also a body of evidence from both the UK and US that older consumers are just as likely as young to try new products and they are the fastest growing group of internet users (Starkey, 2002).

Similarly, much younger consumers, the so called generation X and millennium consumers born since 1982, have an equal antagonism to manipulative promotion (Soloman *et al.*, 2002). In fact, there is some suggestion this generation (Y?) expect to be able to tell the business what to do.

Contrary to most predictions of consumer behaviour, the more information there is about something wrong with a product, the more this generation will buy it; sometimes referred to as paradoxical juxtaposition. This group engage in a mass of two way communications via e mail and mobile phone, so they expect to be able to interact with a company and interrogate a product before purchase (Rach, 2000.)

New approaches to information

People are not only becoming increasingly unconvinced by the spin of politicians and other sources of official information but they have the same view about promotional messages from those selling products or services. Unofficial or independent sources of information, so called garage influentials, are now seen as more important and trustworthy in enabling consumers to reach a view before a purchase decision and then giving the opportunity for the consumer to add their own view after the purchase. Examples of complaints procedures and running reviews of restaurants are provided by Stewart (2002) and fat-guy.com. Fiona Stewart set up a Web site in Australia which collects customer complaints. This generated 135,000 in the first six months and now has 10,000 regular users. Fast food and education are among the most complained of topics. Companies are told the complaints and given five days to respond.

The fat-guy Web site contains reviews of restaurants and fast food operations from around the world. Here are a couple of examples of reviews, the first an article about eating out in England:

The cramped design of most modern dining rooms makes the fact the owners want you in and out in the least time possible screamingly obvious. The only way they could make it plainer would be to install remote controlled cattle prods in the seats and get the waiters to shout obscenities two inches from your face when your time is up.

In another case there are a series of reviews of a new hamburger joint in New York which serves the most expensive at \$41 dollars, which is claimed to be:

The world's most decadent hamburger, hand massaged on beer fed kobe beef, lobster mushrooms and micro greens on a parmesan twist roll.

The reviews, for example, describe it as "genuinely lousy, mushy, grey thing of loose consistency and little flavour" or "a press release masquerading as a meal".

Word of mouth spread of information also has a new meaning. Shops in Tokyo, already hit with a depressed economy, have another problem to contend with, business running out of their doors. They are victims of "keitai clubs" – professionally run mobile phone chat line groups that inform members the instant there is a bargain in the town. The club might send a text message saying a particular food outlet will be selling rice balsa at half price in the next half hour; the shop will be mobbed in a few minutes and empty in a few seconds. Groups such as 7-eleven have started to use the keitai groups to shift stock as it nears its sell by date; they are therefore able to undercut outlets like McDonalds or KFC (Lewis, 2003).

Technology

The latest approach to understanding customers is through creating customer insight (CCI). This allows segmentation of customers in relation to what technology they use and how they use it. Copious quantities of data can be collected about consumers from requests or purchases made via the internet, e mail, text messages, and mobile phones and from checkout information. Data warehousing makes it possible to get a range of consumer data all in one place including the tracking of customer purchases and behaviour over several years. Data mining makes it potentially possible to predict future response to a promotion or a new product by analysis of past behaviour and hence to create focussed and tailored marketing activity (Hirschowitz, 2002). In addition to conventional ways of segmenting customers in the marketplace, it also makes it possible to personalise a campaign for each person in the segment. Really intelligent websites may make it possible to vary a campaign for each customer, depending on data gathered during an interaction.

A second technology can be called pervasive computing, which links WAP (wireless application protocol) technology, palm pilots and interactive TV (Miles, 2000).

At the moment most internet transactions are from desk-top devices but in future this will be replaced by transactions made by a customer from mobile devices at any time of day or night and from any country. At present, most Web-based transactions with retailers are between 10 pm and 1 am, which extends the time for selling but also the demands on reacting to the consumer.

However, at present despite all these technological innovations and millions of dollars spent on software to create customer relationship management (CRM) there is evidence that the snazzy technology has simply disappointed

customers faster and more efficiently anytime, anywhere (Sandberg, 2002). This may be because the companies which use these approaches do not understand sufficiently what the technology can do (Miles, 2000), or because the understanding of consumers given by the data explosion may give no great insight. What might be needed is a more extensive insight into consumers from looking at consumer behaviour by use of video, tracking purchase behaviour and observing how Web sites are used (Miles, 2000). It is also the case that very little research has tried to find out what customers think of CRM and other related technologies. What there is suggests that customers who do business with one company over a time do not necessarily see themselves as being in a relationship, or certainly not a positive one. People saw themselves to be on an unequal footing with companies, and felt the need to be on their guard or take the offensive at times (Harker, 2002).

Technology generally may also serve to distance the consumer from the service which the company is trying to provide. For instance, recent research by Mintel shows call centres are dramatically failing to meet customer expectations. Of 2,020 adults questioned in recent research just 5 per cent never experienced a problem with call centres. The biggest complaint (60 per cent of adults) is the time spent waiting on hold. Callers were frustrated by various aspects of service related to automated phone systems (IVR – interactive voice response) where the synthetic voice does not provide effective routing of the call. Waiting on hold can be over 15 minutes before connection to a live service agent, which can then lead to call abortion and frustration; 33 per cent of callers have hung up while in a queue (Mintel, 2002).

Theories of consumption or consumer behaviour

The finding that despite technological advances and increasingly sophisticated methods of market research we are often unable to predict or define consumer purchases or behaviour implies the ideas or premises on which the understanding of consumers is based may be suspect. It may also be the case that some of the emergent consumer groups in society, the grey market and the youth market, may not behave in the same way as the traditional groups perceived to make up society. Marketing and advertising agencies often base their views of consumer trends on those of 18–45 year olds living in multiple occupancy groups, because that is the age group employed by such agencies (Edwards, 2002).

Theories of consumer behaviour can be broadly divided into three areas:

- (1) Those that assume the consumer is an information processor who engages in a rational, scientific, deliberate and cognitive process leading to a purchase choice (Nicosia, 1966; Howard and Seth, 1969; Arnould *et al.*, 2002; Peter *et al.*, 1999; Solomon *et al.*, 2002).
- (2) Those that assume that a lot of consumer behaviour is learned and as a result much is a result of habit (Foxall *et al.*, 1998; Foxall, 1992; East, 1997; Ehrenberg, 1988).
- (3) Those which take a post-modern perspective and assume the consumer does not follow rules, is unlikely to be predictable, and may change their purchase strategy from occasion to occasion (Williams, 2002; Gottdiener, 2000).

The American approach to consumer behaviour is to assume someone assembles all the alternatives, applies logical rules of self interest, uses careful cognitive processing, and gives equal attention to each option, before making a purchase. The most well known example of this model is in the book by Blackwell *et al.* (2001), now in its ninth edition.

This obviously applies to many purchase decisions, especially those taken infrequently or involving high value products, such as buying a house or a holiday. Although I go to the same part of Spain for many holidays the choice of which airline to take depends on price, availability and flight times, and hence on a logically thought through decision.

In contrast, British authors, who come from an economics or psychology background, show that a lot of consumption depends on habit or follows the laws of learning. When consumers do consider alternatives they usually consider only one at a time and usually take the first alternative which is adequate; thought processes are often better explained as heuristic mechanisms rather than logical processes and behaviour is often a response to the consumer's environment which initiates many of the cognitive processes which may occur (East, 1997). Most days where I purchase my lunch is a matter of convenience and habit but is also crucially affected by who else is eating lunch and what they choose.

Post-modern perspectives on consumption accept that consumers are much more fickle and changeable than either of these first two perspectives:

Consumers have never been so unpredictable; hence consumer research is incapable of providing insights required by market decision makers (Thomas, 1997).

Buyers use a variety of decision strategies to choose among alternatives and the strategies are context dependent. Buyers use different rules for different occasions (Carpenter *et al.*, 1997).

A consumer no longer represents a centred, unified, consistent self image, but a fragmented and fluid set of self images. Conceptualizing the consumer as a member of a relatively static market segment is increasingly difficult (Firat and Shultz, 1997).

As an example, I can make the decision to act like a backpacker and travel from Saigon to Nha Trang on a cramped overnight train which takes 12 hours, but a few days later act like an executive and fly back to Saigon in luxury, in one hour, at ten times the cost of the train.

Sociological and anthropological interpretations of consumption argue that a prime purpose of it is for people to differentiate themselves. Veblen (1899) first introduced the idea that consumers are conscious and empowered agents who use the symbolic system of consumption as a way to establish class differences and personal identities. Bourdieu (1984) has introduced the notion of *habitus*; that individuals and social classes utilize unconscious dispositions and classificatory systems to differentiate themselves from others.

In the case of tourism Mullins (2000) describes the emergence of a new breed of traveller, a "new middle class" interested in the search for authentic holidays in developing countries. Many third world destinations are still viewed as untouched and off the beaten track and appreciated by the few. As such, travel to them confers on the traveller a certain distinction, "of social position by virtue of the symbolic meanings attached to the certain types of activities in particular third world places".

In other words, the signs or signals attached to products or services become more important than the things themselves. This is a view first suggested by the French sociologist Baudrillard (1998) who argued that people buy signs or symbols which accord with their self image or their aspiration in terms of self image.

Taking this to an extreme Ritzer (1999) has argued that cruise ships, themed restaurants or theme parks become the "cathedrals of consumption" which have a quasi-religious nature. By being in those places people take on the signs and symbols of what they buy in the form of food or leisure.

Williams (2002) has recently chronicled how the significance of simulations and hyper-reality are a key attraction to the consumer and how there are plenty of examples to illustrate this in the world of tourism and hospitality. For instance, the Yorvik Centre at York is a mix of a museum and theatre which is meant to suggest authenticity, but in fact, nothing is. Las Vegas is full of simulation, such as the Luxor casino and hotel which replicates ancient Egypt. The food courts in Sheffield

Meadowhall simulate a Mediterranean setting. Many themed restaurants attempt to recreate foreign locations or simulate theatrical events with the waiters following a set script.

However, it can also be argued that a second rationale to explain the same phenomenon is that companies in the hospitality and tourism industry have simply provided more products to sustain profitability. They have created more customised products for consumption and in so doing have commodified people and places. Quoting Mowforth and Munt (1997), Mullins (2000) argues that despite the seemingly softer nature of new ecologically-aware forms of tourism, individual representatives of the new middle classes, such as backpackers and independent middle class travellers, are just as culpable in the commodification of tourism as those who go on package tours.

In the view of postmodernists there is no surprise that the consumer is not consistent in their behaviour and does not fit the stereotypes that segmentation strategies would have us believe.

Gabriel and Lang (1995) make the fundamental point that there are different types of consumer, not in the sense of different segments, but rather that one consumer can vary their type from time to time or even within one act of consumption. They list a catalogue of consumer types with the consumer as chooser, communicator, explorer, identity seeker, hedonist, artist, victim, rebel, activist, and citizen. They foresee the consumer as more of a mercurial character such that attempts by marketers, producers, and social scientists to define the consumer will become untenable. Consumption is more of an opportunistic act, and the providers of market goods are increasingly unable to target their products to consumers in rational and systematic ways.

Part of the problem for organisations which seek to control or predict the consumer is that the consumer refuses to be reduced to a singular and predictable figure. McDonaldized organisations seek to control the consumer whether the consumer wants it or not. Fast food restaurants and many other highly rationalised systems have strict codes and practices and constrain the options of the consumer. Such rationalized organisations assume the consumer will behave in predictable ways and have set up their systems on this assumption; an unmanageable consumer is therefore an anathema (Ritzer and Oviada, 2000).

It may be that both the older and very young consumer may for different reasons be less susceptible to McDonaldization. The cultural capital and greater assets of older people may lead

them away from standardised products and services, to restaurants with fine cuisine, holidays which are tailor made, or hotels which emphasise personal attention and service. The very young may react against McDonaldization because of the semiotics it represents; certainly in recent demonstrations against capitalism and corporate enterprise McDonalds itself has often been the subject of attack.

Williams (2002) argues from a postmodernist analysis that what hospitality organisations have to do is forget market segmentation and aspects of traditional marketing theory. They need, instead, to provide enough variety, change, and updating of their offering, so that individuals can consume in whatever way they wish and without reference to a standardised expectation.

Conclusion

This paper attempts an overview of changes in the consumer population. It argues the structure of the population is changing with a dramatic increase, in particular, of people over 50. Values in society have also changed with some rejection of politicians, global business and manipulation by the media or advertiser, so that, for instance unofficial sources of information become of greater significance. Attempts to use technology to track consumer purchases and hence predict future behaviour, appear to have been less successful than hoped. For all these reasons we appear to have less grip on why people buy particular goods or services than might have been expected after 40 years of research.

What is explored in this paper is whether this is because inadequate theories of consumer behaviour have been used to try and predict future behaviour. Although complex decision making or merely habit are involved in many purchase decisions, it appears that increasingly the consumer is less predictable and less of a machine than some existing theories would imply. As a further complication, both the older and younger consumer fit less with what existing theory is useful. Post-modern views of consumer behaviour suggest the lack of prediction in consumer behaviour models may be simply because the consumer is unpredictable and may change their decision strategies from occasion to occasion and within one purchase sequence. This knocks on the head much of current marketing theory and in particular the assumption consumers will behave like other consumers within a particular market segment.

In the world of hospitality also raised is the issue, derived from anthropological and

sociological theory, as to whether consumers respond to a product or service itself, or to the signs and symbols derived from the object. The tourism and hospitality industry provides many examples where hyper-reality or simulation is provided as the consumer experience, ranging from themed restaurants to historical simulations in attractions management. As yet it appears we have cursory understanding of what models of consumer behaviour best describe consumer response to such things.

This uncertainty about the predictive power of current methods and models of consumer behaviour also leads to uncertainty about how to improve on and research better predictive ideas. However, there is some hope.

Relationship marketing (RM) has replaced CRM, which rather than push the product or service at the consumer attempts to create temptation, continuously reinvent the offering, and build a lasting and trusting relationship (Batterley, 2002). New methods of ethnographic market research involve watching consumers and then the provision of anthropological interpretations of their consumption patterns (James, 2002). Williams (2002) lists a whole range of possible research strategies which might be employed in this area of work.

The final conclusion is that consumers are less predictable than we thought; a range of paradigms or models may be necessary to understand the variety of behaviours engaged in by individuals in different contexts.

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