



Deviating from the Norm: the uneven diffusion of cultures of consumption

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How globalisation is changing consumption is a crucial and controversial question. Multinational and transnational production and the internationalisation of the cultural industries and media communication produce pressures towards the diffusion of common cultural consumption everywhere. Some see a process of Americanisation, others the spread of a cosmopolitan culture. Critics argue that local and national distinctions are not eliminated. When globalising forces collide with established, historically entrenched and local patterns of practice and taste, foreign elements may be adopted, adapted, transformed or rejected entirely. Our study sought to clarify accounts of the effects of globalisation by comparing trajectories of consumption norms in different countries, looking for signs of convergence and divergence. It charted the development of consumer cultures in four European societies and compared their experience with that of the USA.

KEY FINDINGS

There is no overarching tendency towards a homogeneous global culture of consumption. National societies exhibit far too much specificity and diversity for this to be the case. At the same time, however, there are no significant indications of increasing divergence within or between countries.

In general there is evidence of patterns fluctuating from country to country. Much of the observed change in behaviour can only be explained satisfactorily with reference to distinctive features of local and national institutional configurations. Globalization is not an all-encompassing process.

The evidence for Americanisation is weak, with the USA often lying at one of the extremes when compared with Britain, France, Norway and the Netherlands, though convergence in the future cannot be ruled out.

Internal differentiation based on socio-demographic divisions of gender, life course stage and social status continues to characterise consumption behaviour, though there is evidence of its re-structuring in the final quarter of the 20th century.

HIGHLIGHTS

Individualistic and instrumentalist explanations dominate in the study of consumption with the result that personal preference and freedom of choice provide the main frame of reference. This study adopted a distinctive, alternative approach, rooted in theories

of practice. The basic assumption is that consumption occurs as people appropriate items in the course of engaging in a particular practice. Being a competent and committed practitioner requires appropriation of the requisite services, possession of appropriate tools, and devotion of a suitable level of attention to the conduct of the practice. That is to say, activity generates wants, rather than vice versa. For example, the paraphernalia of the soccer supporter – team shirts, match tickets, newspaper reports, memorabilia, etc – are more directly the consequence of engagement in the practice of supporting a football team than they are of individual taste or choice. Such a view stresses the routine, collective and conventional nature of much consumption. One achievement was to demonstrate that the theoretical orientation toward practice can be applied sensibly to consumption at the national level to understand practices like eating, reading and travelling.

There is some support for most of the general and theoretical claims about the nature of the diffusion of consumer culture but none fit closely the evidence garnered in the study. There are a very few common trends, with people everywhere spending less time cooking, less money on food to eat at home, and devoting more time and money to eating out. But even then, the meanings are not the same. For example, eating out differs symbolically between countries, its greater status, in countries like Britain and France, attested to by allocation of large amounts of both time

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Global supply;
varied practice
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and money, especially amongst the most affluent and highly educated social groups. Norway, by contrast, despite being the richest country in the world, still mostly eats at home, there being little apparent social kudos to eating out.

There is no overarching tendency towards a homogeneous global culture of consumption. Within Europe, patterns of consumption vary, from country to country, and much of the observed change in behaviour, and the interpretation of its significance, can only be explained satisfactorily with reference to distinctive features of local and national institutional arrangements. In the Netherlands, considerable official concern is expressed about a decline in time spent reading. Yet the Dutch still read more than any other population, a legacy of past policy. The French, exceptionally, spend as much time on domestic meals in 2000 as they did in 1974. The British spend far more time than any other population travelling, there having been a substantial increase since the mid-1970s. That said, however, there are no significant indications of increasing divergence within or between the European countries.

American consumption patterns remain highly distinctive when compared overall to the European

experiences, with the USA often lying at one of the extremes in our specific comparisons. For example, Americans read less, spend less time eating at home, and make much less use of public transport (see Table 1). Nevertheless, we find little evidence of divergence in trends between America and Europe.

One indication of convergence around a unified and unifying consumer culture would be that differences in consumption based upon income, class, age, household type, etc would diminish, a tendency anticipated in accounts of postmodern culture. Internal differentiation based on socio-demographic divisions of gender, age and social status continues to characterise consumption behaviour. One telling example concerns the persistence of gender divisions in the area of food preparation and consumption. Women in all five countries in our survey cook much more and eat out less than men. Nevertheless, there is evidence of re-structuring in the final quarter of the 20th century. Men are cooking more, women a great deal less; and women are now spending almost as much time eating as men. Domestic food practice is becoming more similar for women and men, and for households of different types than it was in the 1970s. The presence of children and levels of education are becoming more significant predictors of behaviour.

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Table 1: Selected aspects of country differences in time-use and expenditure	Travel in 2000, single person households, expenditure				
	USA	UK	France	Norway	
% who spend on motoring	79	48	60	61	
% who spend on fares	23	43	41	52	
	Time spent eating at home, 2000, all households				
	USA	UK	France	Norway	Netherlands
Mean minutes per day	42	54	96	50	66
	Time spent reading, 2000, all households				
	USA	UK	France	Norway	Netherlands
Mean minutes per day	22	27	25	39	42

Table 2: Change in time spent reading. Mean minutes and participation rate for all reading, book reading, magazine and newspaper read- ing, five countries, various dates, respondents aged 16+	USA		UK		France		Norway		Netherlands	
	1975	1998	1975	2000	1974	1998	1971	2000	1975	1995
Mean minutes, survey population	31	22	22	27	24	25	28	39	54	42
Book	5	7	3	7	10	18	5	9	13	12
Magazines/newspapers	25	14	20	20	14	7	23	29	41	30
Mean minutes, participants only	77	87	34	46	54	71	48	62	56	47
Book	95	87	21	39	60	73	56	59	27	29
Magazines/newspapers	68	75	31	39	43	48	42	52	43	35
Participation rate %	40	25	66	58	44	35	60	63	97	90
Book	5	8	13	17	16	25	10	16	49	41
Magazines/newspapers	37	19	64	52	33	14	55	57	95	87
<i>(Weighted data)</i>										

More generally, the extent of social differentiation varies substantially between countries. Our evidence suggests that the UK and USA have witnessed high degrees of specialization in cultural practices: fewer people may participate in certain practices like reading, but those who do invest more time in that practice. Norway and the Netherlands, by contrast, present the opposite trend marked by remarkable cultural stability, homogeneity, and inclusion.

Much of our analysis was based upon evidence of time-use which proved very illuminating for the purpose. When using time-use and household expenditure as measures of resource allocation, most often changes occur in parallel such that similar trends are identified by each.

MESSAGES FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

This study describes long-run trends in the organisation of everyday life. It shows the value of putting topical aspects of consumption behaviour into a long-term perspective. In Britain to-day, for example, problems of youth socialization have been blamed on the decline of the family meal. But our research shows that contrary to popular belief, families are likely to eat together in much the same way as they would have done 30 years

ago. In 1975, 87 per cent of meals at home were eaten in less than 30 minutes, 12 per cent lasted 30 to 60 minutes and one per cent lasted more than 60 minutes. In 2000, 83 per cent of meals at home were eaten in less than 30 minutes, 15 per cent lasted 30 to 60 minutes and two per cent lasted more than 60 minutes. Despite dropping, on average, one meal eaten at home per week, people spend as much time over each meal at home in 2000 as they did 25 years previously. Our study also highlights the importance of putting national experience into a comparative perspective. To understand properly the social and cultural implications of economic and political globalisation requires cross-national comparative research. For example, there is public concern that people are reading less, anxiety appearing greatest in the Netherlands. It is believed that time spent reading has declined; that the reading of books has diminished most rapidly; that reading is increasingly concentrated in a small minority of the population in a 'reading class'. Consider Table 2. In France, the UK and Norway reading is increasing, and in France and the UK this is book as opposed to magazine and newspaper reading. 'De-reading' seems to occur to any great extent only in the USA, where significant reduction in time spent reading leaves only a small minority of its population engaging in the

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practice. Although less time (on average 12 minutes per day) was spent reading in the Netherlands in 1995 than in 1975, this is still the country where people read the most. The reason is institutional and historical. The Netherlands has a state 'literacy policy' with the objective of promoting 'a flourishing literary life in the Netherlands' and includes support of the book industry through the 'book price' scheme, extensive library provision and policies directed at promoting reading for leisure. State support for particular ways of organising everyday activities makes a difference.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The Diffusion of Cultures of Consumption: a Comparative Analysis examined trends in patterns of consumption in five countries. The project was funded by the ESRC/AHRC Cultures of Consumption research programme and ran from April 2003 to September 2005 (grant number: RES 143-25-0002). Two types of data, previously collected by others, were employed. The first derived from time-use surveys, which record how people allocate their time during the day. The second consisted of household expenditure surveys, which indicate how money gets spent. These data-sets allowed detailed decomposition of activities and identification of the behaviour of different groups and categories of people. We obtained data for the nearest years possible to 1975 and 2000, allowing us to explore change in time-use and expenditure in each of the countries. Applying a theory of practice required very detailed information about a

relatively small number of activities. The focus was on eating, reading and travel.

PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE

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- Warde A., Southerton D., Olsen W. and Cheng S-L. 'Time Use Surveys and the Changing Organization of Everyday Life in UK, 1975-2000', in Pantzar M., and Shove E. (eds.) *Manufacturing Leisure: Innovations in Happiness, Well-being and Fun* (Helsinki: National Consumer Research Centre, 2004). Also available as a PDF file: www.ncrc.fi.
- Warde A. 'Consumption and the Theory of Practice', *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 5(2) (2005), pp. 131-54.
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CULTURES OF CONSUMPTION RESEARCH PROGRAMME



The Cultures of Consumption Programme funds research on the changing nature of consumption in a global context. The Programme investigates the different forms, development and consequences of consumption, past and present. Research projects cover a wide range of subjects, from UK public services to drugs in east Africa, London's fashionable West End to global consumer politics. The £5 million Cultures of Consumption Programme is the first to bring together experts from the social sciences and the arts and humanities. It is co-funded by the ESRC and the AHRC.

The aims of the Cultures of Consumption Programme are:

- to understand the practice, ethics and knowledge of consumption
- to assess the changing relationship between consumption and citizenship
- to explain the shifting local, metropolitan and transnational boundaries of cultures of consumption
- to explore consumption in the domestic sphere
- to investigate alternative and sustainable consumption
- to develop an interface between cutting edge academic research and public debate.

For further details take a look at our website www.consume.bbk.ac.uk

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