A history of shopping: the missing link between retail and consumer revolutions

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Abstract

Purpose. This paper aims to reconsider and reframe the relationship between retail and consumer revolutions, arguing that the two have too often been separated empirically and conceptually.

Design/methodology/approach. Reviewing a broad range of literature, the paper discusses the ways in which the historiography of retailing and consumption might be brought together by a greater focus on and theorisation of shopping.

Findings. The paper highlights equivocation in the literature about the extent to which retailing was transformed during the eighteenth century in response to consumer changes. Whilst some aspects were dramatically transformed, others remained largely unchanged. It draws on a rather smaller body of work to illustrate the ways in which shopping practices were instrumental in connecting shops and consumers, linking to the cultural world of consumption to the economic realm of retailing.

Originality/value. The key argument is that, if studies of shopping are to be useful in furthering our understanding of retailing and consumption, then we must theorise shopping more fully. In particular, the paper emphasises the insights afforded by notions of performance and identity, and by analyses of consumer motivation; arguing that these offer the opportunity to link shopping to wider debates over politeness, gender roles and even modernity.

Keywords - retail revolution, consumer revolution, shopping, modernity, performance, motivations

Paper type - conceptual

Introduction: retail and consumer revolutions

The literature on retailing and consumption in early-modern Europe is dominated by the twin pillars of the retail and consumer revolutions. As constructs of academic enquiry, they have proved to be remarkably durable – withstanding the **eroding** forces of revisionist perspectives – and continue to shape our interpretive frameworks today. Part of that durability comes from the fact that both are very elastic concepts.

Retail revolutions have been identified in a huge variety of times and places: from medieval selds to modern internet shopping. Originally, though, **the term** referred to the transformation of retailing from traditionally organised, local and primitive, to large-scale, nationally integrated and modern systems. Following Jefferys, this revolution is seen as comprising a range of new retail formats and practices, with multiples and department stores pioneering the use of advertising, fixed prices, ticketing and cash sales, window displays, and so on (Jefferys, 1954). These were seen as spreading rapidly through the second half of the nineteenth century, as a greater range of goods was sold in larger quantities to an expanding number of consumers. More recently, there have been attempts to uncouple retail revolution from ideas of mass retailing and mass consumption, and several studies have highlighted the spread of "modern" retail techniques in the eighteenth century (Fowler, 1998; Cox, 2000; Stobart and Hann, 2004). But the conceptualisation and theorisation of retail change remains the same. The forces for change are economic: reducing transaction costs; increasing the throughput of customers; out-bidding rivals for the best retail sites.

Consumer revolutions too are apparently manifold and geographically widespread. McKendrick argued that a consumer society was born in the eighteenth century; the off-spring of

newly prosperous parents who wished to display their wealth through the competitive consumption of a growing range of novel goods (McKendrick, 1982). Empirical analyses have confirmed a profound change in domestic material culture around this time. There was a shift from traditional, durable goods which operated, in part, as stores of wealth, to newer types and less durable items whose value was based more **on** their fashionability (Weatherill, 1996; Overton, 2004). This transformation, de Vries argues, was part of an industrious revolution, wherein households changed their patterns of work and consumption to engage with these new priorities (de Vries, 2008). These ideas have not gone unchallenged: McKendrick's emulation model – wherein consumption is aspirational and driven by a desire to copy social superiors – **has been** critiqued *inter alia* by those who emphasise socially horizontal cultures of consumption; whilst studies of material culture reveal changing patterns from at least the sixteenth century (Campbell, 1987; Veekman, 2002). But again, the core understanding of consumerism still centres on the ways in which consumption constructs and communicates identity: its theorisation is social and cultural.

Both revolutions have generated a huge amount of interest in recent decades, but there have been remarkably few attempts to **question** if and how they were related, or to explore the dynamic processes through which any inter-relationship might have been articulated. When we start to consider these things, a series of profound questions arise: were they causally linked and, if so, what is the direction of causality? Is it possible to have one "revolution" without the other? Should we look for links in economic, social or cultural terms, and what of the experience of the individual?

Linking consumption and retailing

McKendrick saw consumer and retail change as closely and causally bound together. The seminal *Birth of a Consumer Society* (McKendrick *et al.*, 1982) includes chapters on advertising, the marketing of ceramics, and the commercialisation of leisure, as well as the famous discussion of consumer revolution. The relationship was positive and mutual: retail transformation occurr**ed** in response to changing modes of consumption, yet promot**ed** the acquisition of novelties and fashionable goods. As their work is reassessed, however, so questions have been raised about the necessity of one for the other, and particularly about the extent of retail modernity in the eighteenth century. Blondé and Van Damme have recently argued that a consumer revolution in Antwerp occurred well in advance of any transformation in retailing (Blondé and Van Damme, 2007). Rather than innovative retail practices, what consumers needed was a trustworthy and knowledgeable shopkeeper who could guide them through the expanding world of goods.

Such arguments are rare in their explicit linking of consumption and retailing, but they echo doubts about the breadth and depth of any early-modern retail revolution. To take just a few examples: unlike their metropolitan counterparts, so famously condemned by Defoe, most provincial shops were simply furnished, with the emphasis on display rather than decoration. A typical provincial shop had shelves, counters and drawers, rather than cornicing, looking glasses and sconces; and only a small proportion **were** even provided with chairs. This appears to have been linked to a reliance on more traditional forms of selling. Sometimes this took place through the window – a practice which links back to market trading and to medieval shops, and remained a common way of serving poorer customers. On other occasions, it meant entertaining privileged customers in private backrooms. Even in the shop, interaction between the retailer and customer was close and intense, with most durable goods being bargained over before a price was agreed (Cox, 2000, pp.76-115; Berry, 2002; Stobart, 2007).

In terms of marketing techniques, the briefest glance through eighteenth-century newspapers reveals that retailers engaged in advertising from an early date. However, even towards the end of

the century, those placing advertisements formed a small minority and they generally produced rather formulaic notices (Coquery, 2004; Cox and Dannehl, 2007, pp. 67-96; Lyna and Van Damme, 2009). George Packard's use of innovative forms of advertising to promote his proprietary shaving products was very much the exception. Whilst many advertisements informed customers about new and novel goods, these were often available from traditional shops rather than spawning a plethora of novel retail outlets. Thus, china was sold by chandlers; tea and coffee could be bought from grocers, booksellers, milliners and the like; and Indian textiles, including chintzes and calicos, were available from established drapers and mercers. And we should not forget that many consumers also bought goods second hand, relying on traditional forms of retailing such as house sales or peddlers, or on informal transactions in taverns or on the street (Fontaine, 2008).

Retail modernity was apparently a patchy and variable phenomenon. If the early-modern period, and the eighteenth century more specifically, **were** a time of consumer revolution, much of the changing demand was apparently met through established modes of selling. And yet, if we look elsewhere in the literature, we can find many examples of a close relationship between the advent of new goods and new modes of selling. The so-called "shopping galleries" found in the commercial exchanges of seventeenth-century London were, from the outset, associated with certain modes of selling and a particular set of goods. Despite echoes of the much earlier selds, the emphasis was on novelty and fashion, and many of the booths were occupied by well-dressed female assistants who, for some commentators and consumers at least, formed a large part of the attraction of these places (Walsh, 2003; Peck, 2005, pp. 45-57). Another retail innovation with medieval **antecedents** was the showroom. Whilst much is made of Josiah Wedgwood's pioneering efforts in this area, many provincial retailers were laying out semi-private showrooms from at least the early eighteenth century. As with Wedgwood's famous York Street rooms, these presented novel and luxury or semi-luxury items in a new way: china was laid out on tables or in abstract displays, and furniture arranged in "rooms", as if ready for use. This link between novel goods and novel practices was still more pronounced in London toy shops, which were expensively furnished with mahogany display cabinets and velvet-lined chests of drawers. Their attraction was augmented by staging exhibitions of mechanical toys, miniatures or musical boxes; events which were advertised in the press and sometimes accompanied by catalogues (Stobart *et al.*, 2007, pp.16-9; Fennetaux, 2009, pp. 27-8).

These **innovative** retail techniques were clearly designed to stimulate demand for the novel goods being sold in these shops. They promoted the ideal of novelty, and thus fed into the more general valorisation of fashion and modernity. Much the same could be said of many newspaper advertisements. From the early eighteenth century, provincial newspapers carried notices which highlighted fashion and novelty as key selling points, even for relatively mundane items. Others stressed cheap or even fixed prices – an emphasis which suggests active competition for customers, and surprisingly modern retail practices (Cox and Dannehl, 2007, pp. 67-96; Stobart, 2008). Such dynamism involved decline as well as growth. Whilst the second-hand trade flourished through the eighteenth and much of the nineteenth centuries – a buoyancy made clear from the numerous advertisements for house clearances – traditional guild-regulated institutions such as the Friday market in Antwerp were increasingly replaced modern auction rooms.

Shopping: the missing link?

The largely unspoken dimension in all of these studies is shopping. The focus is firmly on what retailers did and on what consumers possessed; much less is said about the interaction between the two. This neglect is remarkable not least because it is through the act of shopping and the practices of shoppers that consumption and retailing come together. A fuller understanding of what people did

at this crucial moment of consumption would allow us to bridge this divide and bring us to the heart of both consumer and retail revolutions.

From the work that has been done in this area, it is apparent that shopping practices were varied, drawing on and feeding into both traditional and modern aspects of retailing and consumption. Close interaction with the shopkeeper remained a feature of much shopping throughout the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century. Depositions from court cases make clear both the extent and intensity of the interchange through which buying and selling were articulated, and the centrality of the counter to these processes. Indeed, the counter remained fundamental to shopping in many British department stores, where the emphasis was strongly focused on service-oriented selling – there were protests when they **were** removed from Whiteley's in the 1950s. If a personal relationship with the shopkeeper was symptomatic of primitive retailing systems, then retail modernity arrived very late in Britain at least.

Berry characterises the relationship played out over the counter as "browse-bargain" wherein the shopper played a key role in determining the final price of the goods (Berry, 2002). Again, this might be viewed as pre-modern: an unnecessary and unwelcome burden for the consumer, when fixed and ticketed prices made the transaction smoother and quicker. Yet the pressure for change came from retailers trying to reduce costs, rather than shoppers unwilling to engage in such sordid practices. It is clear that many consumers saw bargaining as a key attribute of the skilled shopper – part of what made shopping an important business for many early-modern housewives. One important corollary of this was that shoppers made active choices about what to buy**, and** from where. As shopkeepers' and household account books make clear, relative**ly** few consumers with good credit were reliant upon a single supplier; they made their decisions on the basis of availability, quality and price, often making direct comparisons and always drawing upon their previous experience and knowledge – or that of their friends (Walsh, 2008). Recent research has shown how these traditional sources were complemented in many households by printed advice manuals and by the growing array of information to be garnered from newspaper advertisements. Some included lists of prices that highlighted bargains and made comparisons easy; others promoted the shopkeeper's role as a guide through the complexities of choosing from the world of goods (Cox, 2000, pp. 102-07; Walsh, 2008).

Shopping was thus a serious business which faced consumers with important problems including locating supplies, judging quality and price, and securing credit. This links it practically and conceptually to retail systems and to retail histories. But it could also be a pleasure. Quite apart from the sociability of interchange with retailers and fellow customers, shopping was **a** leisure activity involving browsing, handling of goods and conversing with shopkeepers, but not necessarily buying. Such practices appear to have emerged during the later middle ages and were well established by the early seventeenth century. Indeed, the London exchanges were so closely linked with leisure shopping that it became a leitmotif in many contemporary plays. By the end of the eighteenth century, "shopping" was seen by some as synonymous with leisurely browsing (Peck, 2005, pp. 56-7; Stobart, 2008a, pp. 59-67, 87-96). These apparently modern practices did not necessarily require complex and costly furnishings, although these might heighten the attraction of the shop; nor did they need the freedom of movement and elaborate displays associated with modern department stores. Rather, they were dependent upon the economic and social mutuality of shopkeeper and shopper. The former drew some economic benefit from this browsing in terms of potential sales and the spread of knowledge about their shop and wares. For shoppers, it gave pleasure, heightened their skills and usefulness as knowledgeable consumers, and provided opportunities for mutual display. It

thus helped to create and mould their identi**ties**, as consumers, housewives or members of the leisured elite, or as fashionable dilettantes or flaneurs.

Conclusions: theorising shopping

Focusing on shopping brings together the practices and materiality, but also the motivations and mentalities of retailing and consumption. It offers a means of linking what are often essentially economic perspectives on retailing to the social and cultural world of consumption. However, for the history of shopping to fulfil this potential, and to bridge the gap between retail and consumer revolutions, two areas need to be addressed. First, traditional sources such as inventories and diaries need to be supplemented with greater and more imaginative use of other documents; not least household accounts and bills, which can provide detailed insights into the ebb and flow, and the social and spatial dimensions of shopping. Second, and more profoundly, we need **to** theorise more fully our conception of shopping.

There are many possibilities here. One fruitful avenue is the recent interest in performance and the construction of identity (Shields, 1992; Glennie and Thrift, 1996; Rappaport, 2000). In this light, shopping might be seen as a culturally purposeful activity wherein the consumer is an active and knowing agent, often consciously constructing their identity through their shopping practices as much as the goods purchased. Alternatively, it can be seen as intuitive and habitual: identity being created performatively through repeated action – the "ballets of the everyday". Another possibility is to explore the range of motivations which underpinned shopping choices, thus bringing together, and critically assessing, the economic rationality of retail theory, the emulation models of consumer history, and the systems of knowledge of cultural theory. Grounding these in the attitudes and actions of individual shoppers, we might draw on the work of Gregson and Crewe (2003), who suggest that consumers make their choices through economic necessity, a search for value (so-called "clever consumption") or an attempt to exert difference. These ideas centre on the shopper acting of and for themselves. Yet much shopping was undertaken for other people – a point which is central to Miller's theory of shopping. In this he argues that shoppers, especially **when purchasing** mundane items like food, are motivated by the needs of and their regard for other consumers: their loving, familial social group. In doing so, they construct and validate themselves through their role as careful, thoughtful and thrifty shoppers (Miller, 1998).

Of course, applying such models to historical contexts must be done with care. It must also be balanced by a concern with the practicalities and economics of shopping alluded to above (see also Miller, 1998; Walsh, 2008). They have the potential, though, to bring together histories and historiographies of retailing and consumption, not least by providing invaluable insights into the changing social, economic and cultural imperatives that underpinned shopping practices. Something of the potential of this can be seen in recent studies of shopping for second-hand goods (see Fontaine, 2008; Stobart and Van Damme, 2010). These have drawn on the ideas of Gregson and Crewe to demonstrate the varied and complex motivations of shoppers and to show how shifting rationales were linked to the fall and rise of different retail formats within the second-hand trade. Similarly, deploying notions of performance links shopping more closely to broader debates over politeness as a mode of behaviour and a social construct; shifting gender roles and relationships, and the changing spaces and venues constructed through and for such polite activities (Berry, 2002; Walsh, 2003; Finn, 2000; Stobart *et al.*, 2007, pp. 98-109; Vickery, 2009). A more fully theorised history of shopping can thus form both a means for exploring the relationship between consumer and retail change, and also a route into broader questions about the timing and nature of modernisation.

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