

A Lifetime of Consumer Brand Experiences: A Grounded Theory Approach

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between the dynamic stages that arise in consumers' lives, and the brand choices they make throughout their entire lives. Using a Classical Grounded Theory approach, researchers analysed qualitative data gained from 42 in-depth interviews in six product categories - cars, TV sets, financial services, mobile phone providers, toothpastes and breakfast cereals. Researchers discovered distinct stages in consumers' lives that influence the brand choices they make within a product category. Understanding when these re-evaluations occur, along with what drives new decisions, gives marketing practitioners the opportunity to acquire new, or re-capture 'lost' customers. Such knowledge is an asset for marketers, as it offers insights into the future purchasing behaviour of current or potential customers.

Key Words: consumer behaviour, marketing research, consumer socialisation, market orientation

As consumers, we come across a wide variety of brands over the course of our lives. As children, we consume brands that our parents choose, but our grandparents spoil us with different brands. As young adults, we rebel and try other brands. But when we feel nostalgic, we buy our childhood brands. We negotiate brand choices with our partners and dictate brand preferences to our kids. We retire and finally buy the brands we always wanted. Tracing consumer brand experiences over a lifetime uncovers an unprecedentedly deep understanding of when and why consumers are most likely to change their brand preferences - useful information for marketing practitioners to obtain.

Inspired by the theme of 'Managing for unknowable futures', in this paper, researchers use a qualitative research methodology to trace the past, present and future history of consumers' experiences with all brands in an entire product category. In 42 in-depth interviews (each 1 to 1.5 hours long), researchers analyse consumer experiences across six product categories: two packaged branded goods (breakfast cereals and toothpastes), two durables (TV sets and automobiles) and two services (mobile phone and financial service providers).

This research came out of the authors' observation that consumer behaviour literature to date is primarily confined to a relatively short observation period. Panel data research uses short time periods no longer than 3-5 years (eg. Kahn, Kalwani & Morrison 1986), while most survey research is limited to a single brand choice situation or a brand switching occasion (eg. Keaveney 1995). Moreover, most

brand switching studies focus on occasions when a brand has failed to meet consumer expectations. Yet, recent research has indicated that such brand fault scenarios represent only about half of the entire brand defection incidences (Bogomolova & Romaniuk 2009). The other half is caused by non-brand related reasons, such as changes in personal circumstances, moving cities and countries, getting married, changing jobs, lifestyles or tastes. However, very little is known about the drivers behind those instances - what are the life stages and circumstances that prompt consumers to change their brand preferences?

A lack of comprehensive academic knowledge on the subject prompted authors to adopt the Grounded Theory approach, which allows the development of theoretical knowledge through a robust and thorough investigation of large amounts of qualitative data. This approach gives researchers unparalleled richness and depth of information about a lifetime of consumers' brand experiences. It provides findings that have not been covered in other consumer behaviour studies. Additional contribution of this work lies in illustrating a rigorous process of conducting a Classical Grounded Theory approach (CGT henceforth) in a marketing context - an objective that has been long called for in the literature (Goulding 2005; Rindell 2009).

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

Having reviewed a body of knowledge on CGT from its roots (Glaser & Strauss 1967), variations (Strauss & Corbin 1990; Glaser & Strauss 1999) and practical applications in marketing literature (Goulding 1999, 2000a; Malshe & Sohi 2009; Rindell 2009; Andronikidis & Lambrianidou 2010), the authors decided on the following research process in undertaking a CGT approach. To address concerns about the lack of substantive theory in CGT research (Suddaby 2006), the researchers reviewed a substantial body of prior knowledge in consumer behaviour (East, Wright & Vanhuele 2008; Sharp 2010), brand switching and defection (Keaveney 1995; Colgate & Hedge 2001; Gerrard & Cunningham 2004; Lees, Garland & Wright 2007) and brand choices and preferences (McAlister & Pessemier 1982; Andreasen 1984; Cobb-Walgren, Ruble & Donthu 1995; Mathur, Moschis & Euehun 2003) to identify a gap in this literature. The gap identified was a lack of understanding in how

consumer brand preferences change over a longer period of time than previously observed in the literature.

A relatively large body of knowledge exists within the field of consumption and lifestyle changes. From marital status (Wells & Gubar 1966; Wilkes 1995; Mathur, Lee & Moschis 2006), birth of a child (Wells & Gubar 1966; Mathur et al. 2006) or death (Gentry, Kennedy, Paul & Hill 1995), it is generally accepted that changes in a consumer's life impacts upon their purchasing or spending behaviour (Wilkes 1995). However, these findings relate to the adoption of new products and services as a result of a change in consumer needs.

The issue of brand preference changes is a relatively under researched topic. The most prominent studies in this area are those of Anderson & Zeithaml (1984) and Mathur et al. (2003). These studies examined the change in consumer brand preference as a direct result of a change in lifestyle. Both papers show evidences that a change in lifestyle can correlate with a change in brand preference. However, these studies focussed on specific, predetermined points in time (i.e. marriage) that occurred in the past six months (Andreasen 1984) or the past six to twelve months (Mathur et al. 2003).

Therefore, drawing on several substantive areas of enquiry (consumer brand choices, brand switching and defection, and consumer life stages), this study aims to explore a lifetime of consumer brand experiences, taking into account all of the vast, unique and unexpected changes that occur within consumers' lives. This study will be amongst the first to examine brand preference change as a function of consumers' life stages.

DATA COLLECTION

The aim and scope of this research dictated the use of a qualitative data collection method. The data was collected in Australia in April/May 2010 through 42 in-depth interviews, each 1 to 1.5 hours long. The one-to-one face-to-face in-depth interview setting allowed inquiring for further information on consumer behaviour (Wallendorf & Belk 1989), which uncovered and mapped consumer experiences with many brands (De Ruyter & Scholl 1998).

The research was conducted across six product categories: toothpastes and breakfast cereals (packaged goods); TV sets and automobiles (durables); mobile phone and financial service providers (services). Each respondent was questioned about two of the categories of their choice. In order to address concerns over possible memory failure or bias, the study used prompt cards representing every brand's packaging or logo to assist informants with brand recall.

The respondents were asked about brands they are currently using, brands used in the past (which are not part of their brand purchase repertoire anymore), brands they may try in the future and brands never tried before. For each of the brand experiences, the respondents were probed for rich details of the underlying reasons for these decisions and factors that prompted the choices. The interview covered questions including: *"tell me about your experiences with this product category"*, *"why did you stop using this brand?"*, *"why did you start using this brand?"*, *"which brands have you never used and why?"*, *"please arrange the brands in some order or grouping that would represent your experiences with this product category"*.

THEORETICAL SAMPLING AND CONSTANT COMPARISON

The research used a snowballing respondent recruitment technique, a method that involves asking participants to refer other individuals to participate (Goodman 1961). This resulted in a wide representation of demographic segments, broadly representative of the Australian population based on gender, age, income and household size (see Appendix 1).

As per CGT, data was collected and analysed simultaneously (Goulding 2000a, 2005; Corbin & Strauss 2008). This process gave rise to theoretical sampling, which stipulates future sampling is based on emerging trends (Goulding 2000a, 2000b; Corbin & Strauss 2008). For example, in the car category, initial interviews identified a difference between the opinions of younger and older respondents in relation to which criteria they considered important when choosing a car brand. This finding prompted researchers to seek more participants of those demographics to verify and further explore the findings. A relatively large (for a qualitative study) sample size, allowed researchers to

stay in the field long enough until new data stopped emerging (known as theoretical saturation), with all conclusions being thoroughly interrogated (Malshe & Sohi 2009).

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

In line with the CGT approach, the process of data analysis was undertaken at the same time as data collection. The researchers made use of the following classic techniques to capture the raw data:

- Audio recordings of each interview, followed by transcriptions of the main themes;
- Photographs of the 'maps' of brand experiences respondents created during the interview by grouping the cue cards that represented the brands in the product category (see Appendix 2);
- Writing memos about non-verbal reaction (cards first picked, last picked, pushed away, 'cuddled' etc).

Subsequently, researchers wrote memos summarising each respondent's experience in the product category. These memos were then combined using an open coding technique to develop a research journal, which summed up the observed patterns and the emerging themes from the data. The following is an extract from a researcher's journal, written directly after an interview:

The key factor in car choice – it has to be different (not the usual mundane Fords/Toyotas etc). She always had this preference – it was not something she developed over the years. Interestingly, this preference (as she realised during the interview) was also driven by her past and the experiences of her family. While being very poor, her family drove \$500 cars. These would break all the time and without any mobile phones, it was actually quite a dangerous experience. So, this is something she experienced in her childhood and does not want to go back to.

Contrarily, once her father changed his career and became a successful financial adviser, he now drives a \$100K car and her mum buys new cars every few years. So this change gave her the opportunity to experience expensive, nice and different cars – something she likes very much. It has

become a symbol of the new life of her family – so this influences her decisions to buy unusual, more expensive and European cars.

Her own family now (with her husband and two children) is middle class – so she cannot afford those cars that she wants and that her parents can now afford. This creates a conflict between the cars she wants and the cars her own family can realistically afford.

RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY

To ensure the integrity of the findings, this study followed a number of presets. First, the research was conducted under a triangulation. With a team of researchers conducting the interviews, multiple interpretations of the data was achievable, eliminating possible interpretation biases, along with comparing field notes for quality control checks (Wallendorf & Belk 1990). In addition, regular team debriefing sessions were held, in which the researchers exchanged memos, images and experiences, which allowed other researchers the opportunity to observe data with fresh eyes, ensuring no important information was overlooked (Wallendorf & Belk 1990).

During interviews, the researchers probed respondents on emerging ideas, with their responses recorded in the respondents' own words (Sykes 1990). In addition, at the completion of the interview, respondents were asked to comment on their own 'maps' and any key themes (member check technique) to ensure the researchers account of the events and understanding of the reasons behind those decisions were correct. Negative case analysis was also undertaken to identify cases that did not fit the major pattern (Wallendorf & Belk 1990). Explanations for those phenomena were sought.

Finally, respondents' choices observed in the current study fit with those known from the general consumer behaviour literature (eg. East et al. 2008; Sharp 2010). This match indicates the results' validity. Furthermore, the findings are consistent with literature on each of the product categories. For example, in the mobile phone category, researchers discovered similar patterns in satisfaction and switching tendencies found in Bolton (1998), and in the automobile category, findings fit with the consideration set proposed by Sambandam and Lord (1995).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Breakfast Cereals

The impact of life stage changes on brand preference was particularly evident in the breakfast cereals category. Most respondents had a category of childhood brands that usually included two sub-categories - *'brands I have always been given at home'* (usually lower priced, healthier options) and *'brands I have been treated with'* (special occasions or at grandparents house).

"[In] primary school it was very much mum's decision, and we were always pretty basic: Cornflakes, Rice Bubbles... She chose them because they looked like healthier options. We never had any sweet brands in the house... But at my grandparents house we always did... That was always a treat." -

Female 34 y.o.

Interestingly, these childhood brands tended to go out of favour when consumers went through adolescence. Respondents explained this behaviour by the desire to try something new (or something they always wanted but their parents would not allow) or the desire to eat healthier as their lifestyle became more sedative (e.g. office work).

"... When it was my choice and my money, then I could buy what I liked... Buy the ones you weren't allowed to have! I could do what I like." - Male 40 y.o.

On Honey Wheats: *"It's a kid cereal... [Would you buy it now as an adult?] Probably not. Mainly because it's coated in sugar and you're probably not meant to have that in a cereal!"* - Female 24 y.o.

However, as life continued, these childhood brands would usually come back to respondents' brand repertoires when they had their own children or even grandchildren.

"Froot Loops. Yea, had that as a kid. [Have you brought it recently?] No... It would be more like a treat than a breakfast I could eat everyday... Unless I was buying it for kids or if I had kids coming over, I'd probably get that." - Female 24 y.o.

Financial Services

A similar brand preference change was also seen in the financial services category as consumers got older. All interviewed consumers admitted that their first ever bank account was opened by their parents (usually with the brand their parents banked with at the time).

“I’ve used Commonwealth Bank since I was really little. I got a Dollarmite account when I was at school. And that was probably because of the fact that my parents who were with Commonwealth as well.” - Male 22 y.o.

However, in most cases, this first bank experience has never resulted in any long-term relationship. The account itself has been closed or just abandoned, and consumers switched to another bank.

“I just remember doing something through school with banking [Bank SA]... [Do you still use them?] No, I don’t... I was only young. That’s what my parents used to give me. I bank with Savings & Loans now.” - Female 26 y.o.

Explanation of this behaviour lies in the development of consumers as independent decision makers. Starting a first serious job or having a need for a first loan usually prompts consumers to take charge of their financial dealings. This new-found independence implies that consumers re-evaluate their existing bank and look for other opportunities or deals. At the same time, young consumers critically evaluate the decisions of their parents (and this usually brings realisations of whether or not they should trust the advice of family members).

“I’ve seen in my family that we have made good decisions about our finances, and bad decisions, very bad decisions... And I’ve made bad decisions about finances from who I have listened to... My family are happy to offer advice... I’ve learnt to create a mind for myself and not [follow] those people, as that got me in a bit of strife.” – Female 26 y.o.

Cars

Another category where changes in consumer life stages had a great impact upon brand choice was the car category. This effect was partly related to the shift in criteria that consumers used when choosing a car brand. That is *'what I can afford'* and *'what suits my image'*, to what is *'value for money'* and *'is practical'*.

For many respondents, their first ever car was a car they got or bought (with a great discount) from a relative. That car was usually one the respondent would not choose for themselves (because of the car's image), but limited financial resources meant they had to take what was available.

"I ended up getting a 92' Corolla which was an older style car, but it was a real sort of bomb... I didn't actually do a lot of looking around for it. We actually brought it off Grandma." - Male 21 y.o.

Respondents' second or third cars were usually a different brand and something they have chosen themselves (having achieved more financial freedom). This choice was usually centred around *'what do I want to be seen driving'* (within budget constraints). Decisions during this stage of life tended to be influenced by peers and social groups.

"For me, image is everything. There's no second, it is all about image... I would rather drive around in a BMW then drive around in a Camry... The Holden is a car I have now for its cheapness, fit out and is easily serviceable... But my [next] car will be a BMW." – Male 38 y.o.

The next life stage encountered was when consumers met a long-term partner and/or started a family, in which the criteria for car choices changed yet again. During this period, consumers start to make more planned, practical decisions, taking into consideration functional requirements (what the car is going to be used for) and future plans.

"I started to get a little bit annoyed with the two doors... I was thinking 'one day when I settle down and have my own kids, this car will have to go because it is not practical anymore'... My husband said

'the car I buy now will eventually replace your Mitsubishi Mirage, then we will upgrade to a bigger family car'. We plan ahead.' - Female 32 y.o.

Mobile Phone Providers

Similar findings were found in the phone category. Typically, the first mobile phone provider respondents had was made by their parents, a brand which was subsequently re-evaluated when respondents achieved increased 'freedom' of choice.

On Telstra: "My mum bought it for me for as a present. I think she originally bought credit for me, for the first year or so, than I bought credit because I had a job from when I was 15... I stayed with it until I was about 20. [Then I] moved to Virgin. I just did a bit of shopping around and noticed that it was a lot cheaper." - Female 22 y.o.

Toothpaste

In interviews about toothpaste, some respondents reported that as children, they were given different brands (usually cheaper) than the brands they buy for their families now. The most common explanation was that they did not want to 'save' on their health; instead, they preferred to buy what they perceived to be a higher quality product. In addition, private label rejection was highest in the toothpaste category.

"When we were growing up, I reckon we had Aim in the house... It is a bit cheaper. [How did you feel as a child about that?] Fine, but as an adult I purchase something different. [What was your first independent purchase?] Probably Colgate or McLean's... Definitely I think because they are better quality. - Female 33 y.o.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The implications of this paper are two-fold. Firstly, this article demonstrates an application of the Grounded Theory approach, a relatively unknown and underused methodology in marketing literature.

Secondly, this paper contributes to the under researched topic of brand preference changes over a consumers' lifetime. The Grounded Theory approach allowed researchers to collect and analyse large amounts of qualitative data, uncovering new, and in many ways unique, knowledge about consumer brand choices over their lifetime.

This study identified particular stages in consumers' lives when they re-evaluate brands previously bought, acknowledging when these re-evaluations occur and what the driving force behind such decisions are. Such instances relate to a change in consumer's life stage and/or roles. This knowledge gives marketers the opportunity to acquire new customers, or indeed, win back customers previously thought to be lost (the aim of every brand looking to grow). Interestingly, it was found that the brands performance plays a minor role in this re-evaluation process.

As children, consumers are given brands by their parents. However, when consumers start to make their own independent decisions (around adolescence), there is a tendency to get away from the brands they have been given by their parents. This is an opportunity for marketers to acquire new customers, as these customers are more likely to try and consider different brands. In this period of a consumer's life, brand choices become symbols of independence - a theme marketing managers can use in their marketing communications to expand their customer base.

In the later stages of consumers' lives (when they start their own families), brand choices change again to include more practical and 'family' brands - the ones that consumers used to have when they were young. This tendency to return back to forgotten brands is another opportunity for marketers to re-acquire customers, perhaps with communications about family traditions, and nostalgic feelings about brands that have served a generation of consumers.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Limitations of this research relate to its scope. While 42 adults were interviewed, all respondents, at the time, were residing in Australia. Moreover, all the brands under investigation were only brands available to Australian consumers. To produce more generalisable results, multiple countries should be

examined, both in population and available brands. In addition, the current study lacked a significant sample size of those over 50 years of age. Any future research should incorporate a larger cohort of this population. In addition, echoing the calls in the literature (Goulding 2005; Rindell 2009), the researchers encourage future studies to approach research questions from new, exiting and unconventional methods in marketing research, such as the Grounded Theory approach.

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APPENDIX 1

Table 1 - Respondent Demographics

No.	Sex	Age	Category 1	Category 2
1	F	25-34	Financial Services	Breakfast Cereals
2	F	25-34	Breakfast Cereals	Toothpaste
3	M	25-34	Automobiles	TV Sets
4	F	35-44	Breakfast Cereals	Mobile Phone Providers
5	M	35-44	Breakfast Cereals	Automobiles
6	M	35-44	Breakfast Cereals	Toothpaste
7	F	45-54	Financial Services	Toothpaste
8	F	45-54	Breakfast Cereals	Financial Services
9	F	25-34	Mobile Phone Providers	Breakfast Cereals
10	M	18-24	Automobiles	Mobile Phone Providers
11	F	18-24	TV Sets	Financial Services
12	M	25-34	Financial Services	Automobiles
13	M	55+	Automobiles	TV Sets
14	F	25-34	Toothpaste	Financial Services
15	F	25-34	TV Sets	Automobiles
16	F	25-34	Automobiles	Breakfast Cereals
17	F	35-44	Breakfast Cereals	Toothpaste
18	F	45-54	Financial Services	Automobiles
19	M	25-34	Automobiles	Financial Services
20	F	55+	Breakfast Cereals	Financial Services
21	F	25-34	Automobiles	Financial Services
22	M	25-34	Mobile Phone Providers	Toothpaste
23	F	45-54	Breakfast Cereals	Financial Services
24	F	18-24	Breakfast Cereals	Toothpaste
25	F	25-34	Breakfast Cereals	Toothpaste
26	F	18-24	Mobile Phone Providers	Financial Services
27	M	18-24	Breakfast Cereals	Financial Services
28	F	18-24	Breakfast Cereals	Toothpaste
29	F	55+	Financial Services	Toothpaste
30	F	55+	Breakfast Cereals	Toothpaste
31	M	35-44	Breakfast Cereals	Toothpaste
32	F	18-24	Financial Services	Mobile Phone Providers
33	F	35-44	Automobiles	Mobile Phone Providers
34	F	18-24	Breakfast Cereals	Financial Services
35	F	25-34	Toothpaste	Mobile Phone Providers
36	M	35-44	Automobiles	TV Sets
37	F	35-44	Automobiles	Breakfast Cereals
38	M	25-34	Automobiles	Mobile Phone Providers
39	F	55+	Breakfast Cereals	Toothpaste
40	M	25-34	Automobiles	Financial Services
41	F	35-44	Breakfast Cereals	Financial Services
42	F	35-44	Breakfast Cereals	Mobile Phone Providers

APPENDIX 2

Figure 1 - A selection of respondent made 'maps'

