



Translating Consumption: the process of constructing demand in a consumer electronics firm

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Structure of the presentation

- Project rationale and research design.
- Driving demand: producer push or consumer pull?
- Imagining the consumer: the inevitability of innovation and selective sampling.
- Conclusions.



Main Aims

- Question consumer sovereignty: what is the role of producers in driving demand?
- Investigate the processes underpinning the normalisation of consumption and the escalation of demand.
- Explore the role of different actors (manufacturers, retailers, consumer, marketers, NGOs) in shaping the meanings and uses of products.
- Move beyond individualised accounts of behaviour change.



Multiple qualitative methods

- *In-depth interviews* with manufacturers, retailers and consumers.
- *Participant observation* of shopping practices at retail locations.
- *Product use diaries* to explore the socio-technical worlds associated practices which the product is linked in to.
- *Home visits with participants* to explore their everyday product use.



“So there’s always engineers who sit round the table and have ideas about prototypes and strong ideas about the world and what people would want and often it’s not that clear cut, in fact sometimes it’s plainly wrong”



“After 5 years many of our information appliances have failed...because of the new infrastructure required which deviated from the pc – the devices were not seen as compatible enough by the consumer”



Imagining the consumer

- The inevitability of innovation.

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“It (the product) is still all in the future because it sometimes takes a long time for the future to manifest itself”

“...timing is another one. If you're a little bit too early then too bad! Like the hand held PDA which started out really well and could synchronise but was a little too early for technical adoption and then the big companies take over”

“The thing is if you're too early it's very painful at times because you've got all these ideas and then somebody five years down the line goes and does it. And it works but it's a zeitgeist and it moves on because nothing we do here is indispensable, we just contribute to the culture and the - like I said - the zeitgeist”



“...you have to have something as a place-holder, to kick against, to depart from. You can't just ask consumers what they want because they want...they don't really know, they haven't thought about it but if you have ideas they think 'oh yeah that would be good'. [...]...people do come up with great ideas but only once you have something to talk about, so it's not that consumers are clueless – that's the last thing I want you to think – but they need a focus because it's a way of thinking about things”



Imagining the consumer

- The inevitability of innovation.
- The researcher as consumer.



“So...I like to have an impassionate view around it all but on the other hand it helps to see; ‘yeah I know people who sit there on their social networking site’ – it just makes it come more alive so you have some anecdotal evidence to put in”

“I...do you have children? So anybody with 14 year old girls will know that on the computer, it can be hours of it but it is all messenger, Bebo...”

“So I know from the guys here who bought one, they just take it everywhere; into the kitchen, by the telly”

“...for me the netbook has become my laptop...I take it everywhere. It’s the lack of weight which is absolutely brilliant so I don’t mind taking it home in a bag and it not coming out, I don’t think ‘God that was a waste’”



Imagining the consumer

- The inevitability of innovation.
- The researcher as consumer.
- Emphasising the creative user.



“...we had two age groups; one 11-12 and the other 13-14 years old and they were vastly different; the younger ones were a bit more traditional, more likely to use email rather than chat and used Disney games whereas one class further were interested in totally different games. [...]. (We focused on the older kids because) I think we were just much more gripped by how the older kids used it; I hate the word sexy but it was much more interesting what they did with it than the younger ones and we also started to feel that their use was in the direction of the mobile phone and intensive users”.



Imagining the consumer

- The inevitability of innovation.
- The researcher as consumer.
- Emphasising the creative user.
- Emphasising the intensive user.



“On the other hand sometimes you might look for somebody who is a bit of a caricature just to get a very...someone who is not typical but who would use the technologies to the hilt just to get the feedback – a bit like when we work with artists; they are in no way typical of the normal consumer but they do push the boundaries. So as long as you keep in mind that they are not typical and that maybe you might be a bit too early but at least they would use as many features as they could and probably invent a few in the process. And that’s a useful tool to advance things...”



Conclusions?

- A number of ways in which the consumer is imagined to complement the strategy and goals of the firm.
- Firms still play a key role in defining consumer needs.
- Need for research and policy to move beyond individual behavior change.



Thank you

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