

## **How Consumers Utilise Cultural and Culinary Capital Resources to Reconcile Discordant Food Retailer Brand Images**

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### **Published version**

HIRST, Craig and BERESFORD, Paul (2019). How Consumers Utilise Cultural and Culinary Capital Resources to Reconcile Discordant Food Retailer Brand Images. In: 14th Global Branding Conference (Berlin), Berlin, Germany, 8-10 May 2019. (Unpublished)

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# **How Consumers Utilise Cultural and Culinary Capital Resources to Reconcile Discordant Food Retailer Brand Images**

**Key Words: Discount Grocery. Cultural Capital. Culinary Capital. Brand Image. Cultural Branding**

## **Context and Introduction**

This working paper is positioned in relation to the evolving market conditions of UK grocery retail and offers insight into the consumer led co-creative processes underlying the switching behaviour to discount food retailers by middle class consumers. Since the global credit crises, this sector has experienced sweeping change and disruption (Holt, 2004); a shakeup that has seen the established oligopoly of competitors lose significant ground to previously weaker market actors. Most significantly, during a period of overall market contraction food discounters have grown substantially to take market share from previously impenetrable incumbents (Kantar, 2018). ALDI in particular is clearly outperforming the sector, improving its position from 2.5% market share to 6.9% between 2007 and 2017 (Kantar, 2018). While the numbers involved in these market exchanges are noteworthy in and of themselves, it is who lies behind the statistics that is of most surprise and interest to this study. That is to say, a key feature of this growth is the behaviour of middle class consumers (ABC1) who are switching from established big middle retailers (Arnould, 2005) to discounters in large numbers (Kantar, 2018). Remarkably, by 2014 31% of ALDI customers were AB. To put this in perspective, immediately before the recession only 9% of ALDI customers belonged to the AB market segment (Kantar, 2014). Arguably what is occurring in this case is unprecedented, whereby consumer behaviour in this context contradicts established theories of market segmentation and brand positioning, in the sense that the discount retailers are beginning to appeal to incongruent target audiences.

While price sensitivity and economising resulting from both real and perceived threats to consumer financial security have been offered as explanations for this behaviour (Beresford, 2016), as has the role of ALDI's own brand communications (IPA, 2016), these don't account for the role that consumer identity and self-esteem plays in this process. Previous research which maps the ALDI brand discourse overtime has shown that this retailer carried negative brand associations which were often tied into a class based narrative of struggle and shame

(Hirst & Beresford, 2017). Essentially, across a range of news media publications that reported stories of this retailer prior to and immediately following the credit crunch of 2008, most represented this retailer as downmarket and distasteful; a brand image that is clearly at odds with UK middle class sensibilities and preferences (ibid, 2017).

While this research also shows how the media played an active role in repositioning the brand as being inclusive and legitimate for the middle classes overtime, it does not account for the role that consumers themselves played in this process. Against a background of stigmatised brand images and narrative irrelevancy, how and in what ways have middle class consumers in the UK reconciled the apparent discontinuities between the image and their identities to find this retailer an acceptable, indeed desirable place to shop?

### **Research Aims**

This paper offers emerging insights into ongoing research that is exploring the co-creative consumer practices and interpretive strategies used by middle class consumers to reconcile and legitimize stigmatized food retailer brand meanings and associations over time. In particular it aims to explain how both cultural and culinary capital resources are used to negotiate and decouple the ALDI brand from its long term conventional signifiers.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In order to make sense of the phenomena investigated in this research, the study is positioned in relation to theories of brands and branding deriving from Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) as well as socio-cultural works in the tradition of service dominant logic (Arnould, Price & Malshie, 2006). In particular, the theoretical framework herein draws heavily on the ideas pioneered by Holt (2004) in his treatise of cultural branding, which maintains that:

- The market consists of variegated and meaning laden cultural and symbolic resources that consumers engage in identity projects
- Brands channel and allow for the individual and collective expression of ideological meanings

- The cultural and symbolic meanings of brands are shaped in relation to how they are represented by a broad range of stakeholders in an ongoing struggle (Geisler, 2012). These stakeholders include but are not limited to the news and other media sources, consumers, popular culture and politics (Holt, 2004).
- The meanings and stories inherent in brands "help to therapeutically redress cultural contradictions and anxieties salient to a particular socio-cultural group" (Thompson and Humphreys (2014: 5)

In accordance with this framework, food retail brands, including that of ALDI are made relevant or irrelevant, desirable or undesirable in the course of these representations in culture, rather than purely by "the strategic actions of marketing management per se"(Thompson & Humphries, 2014: 5).

## **Method**

Following the research tradition of CCT (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), 10 long interviews (McCracken 1988; Luedicke, Thompson & Giesler 2010; Holt & Thompson 2004) have been conducted with ALDI UK shoppers in the suburbs of a large post-industrial city to gain insight into their brand relationships (Fournier, 1998) and how these are constituted (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). A convenience and snowball sample was adopted that resulted in significant variation across social and cultural categories including life stage, gender, cultural and culinary capital (Holt, 1997; Naccarato & Lebesco, 2012). This reflects McCracken's (1988) notion that long ethnographic interviews should seek informant heterogeneity. The interviews range from 1-2 hours in duration and were transcribed verbatim.

This method has been adopted because the long, phenomenological interview is deemed a powerful method for revealing consumer experiences, consumption patterns and motivations. No other method is more revealing. (McCracken, 1988). As the goal of the interview process was to capture the lived experience of the brand relationships of the informants and how they interpret and construct the brand, an emergent dialogue was encouraged and interviews were informant led (Thompson, Locander & Pollio 1989; 1990). Whilst unstructured in nature, a simple interview protocol was deployed and structured around a range of cultural and social categories relevant to the research aims (McCracken, 1988). These include personal histories;

family and interpersonal relationships; relationships to food; consumer resources and behaviour. While ongoing, data is being thematically analysed to identify key reoccurring patterns in the consumer transcripts. The interpretation of findings is being developed in relation to key theoretical concepts described below.

### **Findings and Emerging Insights**

This research is beginning to draw upon a synthesis of theories of Cultural Capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Holt, 1997b:1998), Culinary Capital (Naccarato & Lebesco, 2012) as well as theories of Taste (Arsel & Bean, 2012) to make sense of the data produced from this study.

Collectively, when compared against key patterns deriving from the analysis, these concepts are helping to explain how consumers in this sample are able to negotiate culturally informed boundaries between the negative associations of ALDI, in order to shape individuated meanings that are relevant to their own self conceptions, preferences and lifestyles. In particular those interviewed in this research seemingly create critical distance between themselves and the discourses circulating in the food market place by leveraging their motivations, personal backgrounds, and know how as crucial resources in this process. Kerry for instance finds shopping at ALDI to be an enabler of a wide range of life projects and activities both within and outside of the culinary sphere. While Jimmy on the other hand, draws upon a rich seam of meanings and associations of growing up on a farm which significantly influence his food choices, consumption practices and patronage of ALDI. Furthermore, by drawing upon their abilities to produce from 'scratch' these consumers deploy culinary resources and capital to negotiate the space required to be independent from the conventional meanings ascribed by the food marketplace in the UK, as well as from other imagined consumers who are not in possession of these skills.

*"...making your own nut milk, you soak almonds overnight and strain it, two tablespoons of peanut butter, almond or cashew butter, but one that has got nothing added, add spring water, some dates and a bit of vanilla essence, mix it up and you've made nut milk...nothing added... [Kerry]*

Our informants are thus able to leverage their tastes and cultural sensibilities as a key mediator of brand meanings and images occupying this market. They engage with the brand in a multitude of ways, rather than a single coherent value system as suggested by orthodox marketing theory (Holt, 1997a: 340)

Like economic capital, cultural and culinary capital are resources which are unequally distributed in a population and which shape consumption experiences, frame tastes and structure choices (Holt, 1998; Naccarato & Lebesco, 2012). These forms of capital also act to socially classify those making these choices as well as those engaged in related consumption practices (Arsel & Thompson, 2010, Holt 1994). However, while one focuses on the social and cultural field more broadly, the other is focussed purely on the culinary field, food behaviours and consumption practices. In this respect culinary capital is a form of field specific cultural capital, much like that described by Arsel & Thompson (2010) in their analysis of the Hipster lifestyle and contested identity politics. In both cases, capital is constituted and made available to consumers through knowledge, skills and abilities, as well as interpretive frameworks and strategies which are transcribed in consumer taste (Arsel & Bean, 2012) and consumption practices (Holt, 2004). All of which are deployed in this particular case.

In the way the informants in this study leverage their capital to shape their experience and form individuated brand relationships (Fournier , 1998:2009; Avery, 2012) with ALDI, they are not dissimilar to Holts (2002, p.73) hard pressed informants drawn from the "socio-economic margins of American society". Or indeed, Kozinet's (2002) participants of the burning man festival, and Star Trek fans (Kozinets, 2001). In each of these cases, in spite of prevailing normative marketplace discourses defining the cultural context in which these consumers occupy and consume, they are able to reframe and negotiate personally relevant meanings suitable to their own personal circumstances, lifestyles (Holt, 1997 ) and life projects (McCracken, 1986). Crucially, a la Holt, (2002), our informants are both reflexively and creatively resistant. By combining their manifold cultural resources in relation to their goals and aspirations, they are able to filter out and refashion meanings that are both personally significant and suitable for constructing and leading legitimate and satisfying middle class lifestyles.

### **Theoretical and Practical Implications**

Upon completion, this research has the potential to contribute to a growing body of work in the CCT tradition (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) that is revealing how cultural capital shapes consumption (Holt, 1998), structures brand image (Holt & Cameron, 2011) and is used to negotiate and bolster consumer identities (Arsel & Thompson, 2010) . More specifically it offers an account of how culinary capital and taste seemingly plays a similar role in these

processes and outcomes for food brands and consumer choices, and how this may dovetail with theories of cultural branding (Holt, 2004) more generally. Practically it is beginning to offer insight into the ways in which stigmatised retail brands may be negotiated overtime to appeal to previously incongruent target markets.

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