How consumers reconcile discordant food retailer brand images

BERESFORD, Paul and HIRST, Craig <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9684-3659>

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How Consumers Reconcile Discordant Food Retailer Brand Images

Dr Paul Beresford, Sheffield Hallam University

Paul Beresford is a senior lecturer who recently completed his doctorate exploring cultural branding approaches to the UK grocery market. Prior to joining academia, Paul occupied a range of marketing roles and was commissioned as Interdisciplinary Champion for a £1.27 million, HEFCE funded Food Innovation Project in 2007, which sought to deliver innovation in the food and drink industry. Paul was recruited onto the faculty of Sheffield Business School in 2010 and currently lectures in food marketing and branding.

Dr Craig Hirst, Sheffield Hallam University

As Senior Lecturer and brand practitioner, Craig Hirst feeds into marketing courses at the undergraduate and post graduate levels at the Sheffield Business School. He presently supervises a number of doctoral students whose projects focus on culturally mediated marketplace interactions and experiences.

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Abstract

This 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. Based on phenomenological interviews with ideographic analysis, this research draws on theories related to cultural branding and brand relationships, to demonstrate how consumers negotiate individuated brand meanings. It reveals how, in spite of normative marketplace discourses, consumers are able to reframe and negotiate personally relevant meanings suitable to their own lifestyles and life projects. In so doing, this study contributes to the literature by offering an account of how brand relationships are appropriated in negotiations with stigmatised brand images to make them relevant and suitable for hitherto incongruent market segments. The findings therefore hold relevance for grocery retail managers and other practitioners engaged with the management of low involvement and mundane brands, who will have a better understanding of the process through which such relationships manifest themselves in food retail switching behaviour.

Key Words: Discount Grocery. Food Retail Brands. Consumer Brand Relationships. Brand Image. Cultural Branding.

Summary Statement of Contribution

Researchers are beginning to understand how consumer brand relationships are constituted and the form that they take, but from our understanding this is the first time the process through which such relationships manifest themselves in food retail switching behaviour has been observed. Moreover, findings from this research reveal how these relationships

are appropriated in negotiations of discordant and stigmatised brand meanings and associations to make them relevant and suitable for hitherto incongruent market segments.

Introduction

This 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; 2014a). 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; 2014a). 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 who are switching from established big middle retailers (Arnould, 2005) to discounters in large numbers (Kantar, 2018, 2014a). In the UK, this market segment is commonly referred to as ABC1, which is a social grade that forms part of a classification system that was originally constructed by the National Readership Survey to understand variations in social class (NRS, 2019). Broadly defined the ABC1 category is made up of people who mostly hold white collar occupations in supervisory through to higher managerial and professional positions. Remarkably, by 2014 31% of Aldi UK customers were AB, who occupy the higher positions in this classificatory system. To put

3

this in perspective, immediately before the recession only 9% of Aldi UK customers belonged to the AB market segment (Kantar, 2014b). 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. Indeed, the press at this time became fixated about the significant pressures that Middle England was experiencing during this period, leading them to coin the concept of the Squeezed Middle (LexisNexis, 2015). Previous research which maps the Aldi brand discourse 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; Beresford & Hirst, 2016). Essentially, across a range of news media publications that reported stories of Aldi 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 over time, 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, and indeed desirable place to shop?

Research Aim

In addressing this question, this paper offers insight into the co-creative consumer practices and interpretive strategies used by middle-class consumers to reconcile and legitimize stigmatised food retailer brand meanings and associations. In particular, it explains the process through which consumers have negotiated and decoupled the Aldi brand from long-term conventional signifiers to forge personally relevant brand relationships that accommodate their lifestyles and life projects. As such the theoretical goal of this article is to extend understanding of brand relationship theory by showing how consumer brand relationships are negotiated and employed in grocery retail switching behaviour. Furthermore, by applying cultural branding as a theoretical lens to this analysis, the research reported in this paper offers new insights into how this perspective can be applied to low involvement and mundane brands, thereby extending its application from Holt's (2004) seminal work into iconic brands. By demonstrating the process through which consumers refashion brand meanings that better align with their identity investments and projects, the findings hold relevance for retail managers and other practitioners engaged with the management of low involvement brands, and discount grocery stores more specifically.

We begin our analysis by contextualising the phenomena in relation to key episodes and processes underlying the changes in the UK grocery market following the recession of 2008. Hereby we detail; (1) the key changes that unfolded over this period, and how the cultural orthodoxy of the grocery market was challenged and disrupted; (2) the birth of the

5

squeezed middle, which is broadly a media generated construct that was prevalent at this time which sought to frame and describe the experiences of the UK middle class; and (3) the growth of Aldi, including a review of their strategic objectives and marketing communications. We then expand on the analysis by outlining the theoretical framework that positions the study in relation to theories of cultural branding and brand relationships. Central to this theoretical positioning is that the consumers included in the sample for this study each offered a relatively unique and individuated account of their decision to switch to this retailer that were rich with symbolic meaning and socio-historic context. In total three consumer narratives are reported in the findings to clearly outline how these individuated relationships are constituted and the form that they take. What is more, in relation to Holt's (2004) thesis that suggests that societal disruptions act as significant catalysts for brand meaning co-creation, all our informants engaged in their negotiation of the brand following the 2008 credit crisis, which in itself brought the value proposition and meanings associated with the food retailers in the UK into sharp relief.

Context I: The UK Grocery Retail Orthodoxy (Pre-Recession 2008)

In order to make sense of the phenomena investigated in this research, it is paramount to understand the evolving grocery retail context in the UK immediately before the recession of 2008 to the present day. Prior to Aldi's turn to growth, Tesco was instrumental in shaping the cultural orthodoxy (Holt, 2004) of the UK grocery retail market.   At this time the UK economy was fueled by access to easy money through consumer credit that gave rise to consumption opportunities that were not previously available.   The use of credit became normalised (Penaloza & Barhart, 2011). Indeed, Credit Action reported that UK personal debt [including mortgages] stood at £1.47 trillion (Tressider & Hirst, 2012). On the back of this boom in credit, the UK experienced stable growth year on year, with GDP

running at over 3% for 2007 (ONS, 2014). Alongside relatively stable incomes through employment, more affluent consumers were buoyed by a booming housing market (ONS, 2014).

With 10 years of sustained GDP growth prior to 2007 (LSE, 2015) and consumers feeling financially secure, the UK grocery retail sector, dominated by the big four (Tesco, Asda, Sainsburys, Morrisons), was equally buoyant. With a clearly stable market, the market leader's share peaked at 32% in 2007/8, with the other three significant actors trailing not too far behind. Importantly, any exchanges in market share were broadly limited to these retailers.

Central to the positioning strategy of these retailers was the notion of 'everything under one roof'. A key element of this policy was that consumers were able to purchase weekly groceries alongside financial services, a bottle of champagne or a bike for the kids. This strategy manifested itself in the growth of out of town megastores with the big four retailers embarking on significant expansion plans. This was celebrated by the UK media in regular headlines and features such as *"Tesco plans six new stores in £100m deal"* (Daily Mail, April 23, 2007; LexisNexis, 2015). These megastores offered consumers an almost endless choice of food and non-food items with the market leader reportedly stocking up to 90,000 different SKUs in their stores (IGD, 2015). For example, at the time Tesco offered a bewildering array of 28 ketchup sauces while Aldi stocked just one ketchup, in one size (The Guardian, 2015).

Additionally, all the 'big four supermarkets' were operating an incentive culture whereby elaborate, and often complicated, promotional technologies such as multi-buys, would be marketed as ways for consumers to save money (Mintel, 2014).

Importantly, these approaches were deeply embedded marketing tactics in the UK grocery market; over time becoming shared, taken for granted assumptions associated with doing business in the UK grocery retail sector. What Holt and Cameron (2010) would define as a cultural orthodoxy.

Context II: The Birth of the Squeezed Middle

> *"We're the Squeezed Middle; not rich but not poor…families hit hardest by coalition"* (The Mirror, 27 September, 2011; LexisNexis, 2015).

With the onset of the credit crunch a period of prosperity came to an end for a large number of people within the UK, not least the middle class. News reports were rife with stories about income stagnation, growing inflation, a slump in house prices (which was reported as a barometer of consumer financial wellbeing) and subsequent curtailing of in-work benefits, alongside a sharp decline in the availability and access of personal credit (LexisNexis, 2015). The UK orthodoxy of consumerism which grew out of the preceding economic boom was now under significant threat. This was not only through the result of the recession, which in real terms would last for 12-18 months, but by the squeeze of austerity introduced as a key policy by the incumbent UK coalition government. Seemingly, the ability of UK consumers to purchase services and goods that had been the

norm prior to the recession was over. Burdened with significant personal debt, many of these consumers embarked on a period of de-leveraging and economising.

Against this backdrop, the concept of the Squeezed Middle emerged in the UK media. Originating in 2008 and then featuring more widely in 2009 in articles in the Guardian, Telegraph and Sunday Times (LexisNexis, 2015), this term became somewhat of a media obsession. In support of this research project, a systematic review of the UK news media, between 2008-2014, revealed that the construct of the Squeezed Middle was featured in 4118 separate media articles (All UK News Publications, LexisNexis, 2015).

As such, this term came to represent middle England and the anxieties and pressures experienced by the UK middle class at this time. It was reported that the Squeezed Middle represented a section of society who were considered to be most affected by the recession, through high inflation and tax rises, and incomes that were not keeping pace with inflation (FT, 2015; Economist, 2013). Accordingly, this construct was often operationalised by politicians to defend their policies in the period of austerity. However, who constituted the Squeezed Middle was a point of contention among the political classes and a precise definition remains unclear.

Context III: The Growth of Aldi UK

The beneficiaries of this case are the food discounters in the UK who are clearly outperforming the grocery market and taking significant market share at a time when the overall market is contracting (Kantar, 2014b). In particular, this research is reporting on Aldi, who since the recession, have grown their market share significantly, and more

importantly, managed to attract the middle classes who up to this point could be argued to be an incongruent target market.

Aldi opened its first UK store in 1990 trading as a limited line discount retailer, with approximately 1300 product lines in store (Aldi, 2014). Prior to the economic crisis Aldi's presence within UK grocery retailing was unremarkable. Alongside LIDL, the combined market share of the discounters stood at just over 4% (Kantar, 2014; Beresford & Hirst, 2016) which was tiny in comparison to that of the big four. Against conventional wisdom, and in contrast to the commentary about the Squeezed Middle running in the media, during the recessionary period Aldi's market position did not change at a time when a traditional discounter might expect to do well (Retail Week, 2011). In explanation, the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA, 2012) suggest that during the recession consumers were more risk averse which impacted their confidence leading them to seek out trusted brands rather than experimenting with new shopping experiences. This pattern continued for at least four years after the recession before the discounters began to experience any notable growth in market share. In relation to this, the simple explanation of consumers economising to manage stretched finances, does not sufficiently explain the resulting shift to the discount retailers.

Importantly, 2011 saw Aldi deliver its '*Like Brands Only Cheaper*' advertising campaign that sought to emphasise the relative quality of its product (Retail Week, 17 February, 2011). This campaign was developed around three key insights generated by Neilson; that (1) the majority of Aldi's existing consumers were disloyal; (2) consumers see manufacturer brands as being a benchmark of quality, and; (3) existing consumers lacked any emotional connection with the Aldi brand (IPA, 2016). Therefore, the objective of the

campaign strategy was to increase market share and loyalty from existing consumers. Messaging was subsequently based around low prices and product quality to drive repeat store footfall and purchasing. The campaign communications that were developed were comparator adverts based around staple product categories, with the aim of reassuring existing consumers of the value proposition. Additionally, the style of the communications offered an emotional connection through humour as they were based on everyday people and everyday observations, rather than any emphasis on aspirational categories per se (IPA, 2016).

As an integrated campaign, printed materials were distributed within stores and to consumers living close to Aldi stores to support the TV advertisements. The main objective of these materials was to reinforce the *Like Brands* message and to promote the limited availability of special buy products (The Times 100, 2016). Newspaper adverts reinforced the *Like Brands* campaign by demonstrating the amount of money shoppers could save if they swapped from buying manufacturer branded products from their existing grocery retailer to purchasing comparable products from Aldi. In addition to above the line promotions Aldi engaged in several targeted activities using below the line methods. These included social media; targeted emails to customers; third party awards and endorsements as well as public relations activity. Aldi effectively incorporated the use of Facebook and Twitter to increase advocacy of the brand by encouraging consumers to recommend Aldi to others. Examples include *'I love Aldi'* where advocates were asked to send virtual valentine messages to Facebook friends. In support of this, the Aldi UK website detailed key promotional messages and offers and sought to encourage user ideas for future advert content (The Times 100, 2016). Aldi effectively used third party endorsement by entering a wide range of its products into various grocery awards,

resulting in the retailer being awarded the 'Best Supermarket' by consumer watchdog Which?.

The objectives of the campaign were to achieve a year-on-year sales growth of 11%, which was exceeded for the year 2011. The campaign is credited with increased shopper basket size and frequency of visits (IPA, 2016). The campaign was also deemed successful by the industry and it secured the Gold Award at the IPA Effectiveness Awards (2012) and the campaign continued until the end of the research period.

Whilst successful in creating repeat purchases and loyalty from existing customers, what is now known from an analysis of the nature of the growth, is that Aldi also captured a significant share of an unanticipated market, the UK middle-class. Indeed, by 2014 half of Aldi customers were drawn from ABC1 socio-economic groups and a remarkable 31% were ABs (Kantar, 2014a). Whilst the growth of Aldi is attributed to effective marketing communications by industry observers, the advertising did not adopt a specific positioning strategy for the middle-classes, nor did any of the communications offer middle-class symbolism or messages in the content. This leaves a fundamental question about the efficacy of Aldi marketing communications during this period and its role in capturing the middle-class consumer.

With this being the case, a contracting recessionary environment, leading to consumers economising have been offered as simple alternative explanations for the success in securing middle-class patronage and growth in market share. Indeed, this is what is suggested in the Squeezed Middle thesis. However, this does not account for the migration of these consumers, or explain the processes through which middle-class

consumers are able to reconcile possible threats to existing identity projects and self-esteem, or how they manage potential anxieties that may be created by opting to shop at a discount food retailer (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). This argument also doesn't fully explain how a brand that is incompatible on the level of socio-economic relevance can suddenly become so meaningful. Especially when consumption has previously been conceived as a social process that is integral to and inseparable from a person's identity (Holt 1998, Belk, 1988; Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Indeed, it is widely reported that brands send meaningful social signals (Han, Nunes & Dreze, 2010) and that they can be understood as marketplace resources that consumers use to construct and negotiate identities (Holt, 2004). Moreover, as Ho and O'Donohoe (2014, p. 859 references in original), "suggests that… we display and use products [and brands] in the pursuit of self-esteem (Banister & Hogg, 2004)... [and that] we prefer products… with positive symbolic meanings aligned with our desired selves… [while avoiding]… those with negative symbolic meanings related to undesired selves (Karanika & Hogg, 2010)", this leaves a fundamental question about the compatibility and relationship between the Aldi brand and middle-class taste and sensibilities, which up to the present study has remained unanswered.

Theoretical Framework

This study is positioned in relation to theories of brands and branding deriving from connected disciplines coalescing around the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) tradition (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). This includes Fournier's work around consumer brand relationships (Fournier, 1994; 1998) 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), and;

- The meanings and stories inherent in brands "help to therapeutically redress cultural contradictions and anxieties salient to a particular socio-cultural group" (Thompson & Humphreys, 2014, p. 5);

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

In respect of this, supermarket brands can be understood as symbolic resources nestled within layers of cultural discourse that act to classify their users into sociological groups and which can be purposely used to bolster a gamut of consumer identity projects and lifestyles (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Arsel & Thompson, 2010). This in itself explains the apparent incompatibility that previously existed between Aldi and the middle-class consumer. There was simply a mismatch between the desired identities and values of this

segment of consumers and the meanings ascribed to discount retail prior to and immediately following the recession (Beresford, 2016). Consumer resource theory also draws attention to the ways in which retailer brands and products more generally are used to perform and resolve a range of life projects, existential concerns and anxieties (Arnould, Price & Malshie, 2006; Holt, 2002; Mick & Buhl, 1992; McCracken, 1987). For example, Arnould's (2005, p. 90) analysis suggests that supermarkets offer consumers a number of economic cultural resources "associated with frugality, thriftiness, value for money, or perhaps even perceived thinking costs", as well as many other cultural resources and marketplace myths (Arnould, Price & Malshie, 2006), relevant to a range of other consumer projects.

Mirroring work by Humphrey and Thompson (2014) this theoretical perspective also suggests that a brands meaning and value is more prone to change following significant socio-cultural disruptions, such as the one experienced in the grocery sector following the economic crisis (Holt, 2004; Holt & Cameron, 2010). The ideas around cultural branding also dovetail with Arnould et al's (2006) synthesis and extension of SDL (Service Dominant Logic) from a CCT perspective, in the sense that brands are co-created through a network of market actors, narratives and practices that are broadly framed and mediated by cultural contexts.

Cultural brand theory thus draws attention to the symbolic nature of brands. Hereby consumers do not identify with the functional value of brands per se, but rather the symbolic content they hold (Levy, 1959; Rook, 1985; Holt, 2004). In this way, brands act as a hub of cultural meaning encapsulating beliefs, value and ideologies relevant to particular groups (McCracken, 1986). However, Fournier's (1998) perspective draws

15

attention to the ideographic context of brand meaning and relevance. Rather than being containers of meanings that are shared equally across similar socio-cultural groups and market segments, consumers instead forge personally relevant meanings through their own unique interactions that are shaped around their lived experience. In this way, relationships with brands are individually negotiated to align with a consumer's identity and life projects in a given social context (Avery, 2012) as they unfold in the course of everyday life. As such brands are conceived as multiplex phenomena that are specified in many ways through the rich conceptual vocabulary brought to bear by individual consumers in their experiences. Additionally, and in relation to this research project, this school of thought acknowledges that consumers can foster strong relationships with the most mundane and low involvement brands provided their meanings resonate with the individual and their life world (Fournier, 1998).

Data Collection and Analysis

Ten long phenomenological interviews (McCracken, 1988) were conducted with recent switchers to Aldi and following the tradition of previous research adopting the extended case method (Fournier,1998; Holt, 2002), three of these were selected to best exemplify the ways in which individuated brand relationships are developed and manifest themselves. The remaining informants exhibited similar patterns of brand relationship development in a personalised and nuanced manner. All interviews were undertaken in the homes of consumers who reside in the suburbs of a large post-industrial city. Ethical approval was obtained from the faculties University Research Ethics Committee, Sheffield Business School, Sheffield Hallam University. The long phenomenological interview was adopted as it is deemed a powerful method for revealing consumer experiences, consumption patterns and motivations (McCracken, 1988). The goal of the interview

process was to capture the lived experience of these consumers, as well as their experiences of Aldi and the processes and resources through which they interpret and construct the Aldi 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). This included personal histories; family and interpersonal relationships; relationships to food; consumer resources and behaviour; and Aldi brand experiences. A convenience and snowball sample was used to recruit participants which resulted in significant variation across social and cultural categories including life stage, gender, and cultural and culinary capital (Holt, 1997; Naccarato & Lebesco, 2012). Participants were screened and selected based upon being self-designated middle-class and recent switchers to the Aldi UK brand. Interviews ranged from 1-2 hours in duration and were transcribed verbatim resulting in 112,995 words of raw data.

Following the approach of Fournier (1998) and Holt (2002) the transcripts were ideographically analysed. This is based upon the view that consumers forge individuated brand relationships through their own experiences and life world contexts. The aim is thus to generate a rich and detailed understanding about how each informants relationship with Aldi is constituted, as well as the meanings and associations personally ascribed to the brand. Interview transcripts were qualitatively coded utilising Nvivo software (version 10 for Mac) to identify key patterns with explanatory power related to the research aim. Each case is presented in depth to offer a nuanced and rich account of the informant's experience and engagement with the Aldi brand. In addition to this, a summary of the key factors shaping each informants brand relationship with Aldi, as well as the relationship

they have formed with the retailer is presented in Table 1. A brief biographical snapshot of

these consumers is also presented.

Informant Pseudonym	Biographical Information	Factors underpinning brand relationship formation	Brand Relationship with Aldi (Fournier, 1998)
Hanna	Married Educated to degree level New mother Managerial occupation Homeowner 35-44 age bracket Dual-income household	Price as a lifestyle enabler Location as a facilitator for switching Middle-class thriftiness Endorsing media stories Brand community legitimation Reflexive negotiation of stigma	Casual friend
Kerry	Single parent Educated to degree level Senior manager, education Homeowner 35-44 age bracket High discretionary income	Location as a facilitator for switching Family legitimation Product assortment as lifestyle enabler Cultural and culinary capital resources Reflexive negotiation of stigma Big middle retailer distrust	Compartmentalised Friendship
Michelle	Married Empty nester Professionally educated Health service administrator Homeowner, downsizer 45-54 age bracket Financially secure	Big middle retailer distrust Rejection of superstore orthodoxy Incremental experimentation with value proposition Family legitimation Monotypic myths, Aldi as hero	Committed partnership

Table 1. Aldi brand relationship case summaries

Case 1: Hanna. How middle-class frugality and thriftiness, mixed with media representations, legitimise discount food retailer brand patronage

Hanna is married and educated to degree level and is a relatively new mother with one young child and expecting her second. Hanna works in the public housing sector as a housing manager but is currently on paid maternity leave. With her husband they are paying down a mortgage to their own home, which is a three bedroomed semi-detached property in the suburbs of a large post-industrial city. Following the trend of late motherhood Hanna is comfortably within the 35-44 age bracket. Before settling into her career and marriage Hanna travelled when she was younger spending a year living and working in Australia, where she found living costs to be relatively high in comparison to her experiences of the UK. This alongside meeting her partner changed her desire to settle in this country.   Although at an early stage in her career and with a new and growing family, being from a dual-income household, Hanna feels relatively financially secure.

Hanna is a committed switcher to Aldi but occasionally flirts with other food retail brands (Fournier, 1998).   While doing the majority of her grocery shopping with the discounter, she visits other supermarkets and convenience stores to 'top up' where necessary. A stated reason for switching to Aldi was price, by confirming that the family needs to carefully allocate their budget to necessitate the wide range of lifestyle activities that they engage in. From the interview it became clear that this family values family holidays and activities centered around short breaks and day trips. Food is a priority, but in balance with a range of other proclivities. A rounded and engaging life is sought. Hanna also confirmed that the convenience and availability of the local store that recently opened was a factor in her

decision to switch to this retailer. Clearly, convenience was a trigger for engaging with the retailer in the first instance.

> *'... had that one not been built* [local store] *then ... I don't think I would have travelled to do a shop to find out what I found out in terms of the cost...now whether I would've picked up on what other people have said when they have said, 'Oh you know you should try* [Aldi UK]....'. [Hanna]

However, the stigma associated with discount food retail had not escaped Hanna's attention. She mentioned the negative, downmarket references associated with Aldi shopping and shoppers on numerous occasions. For example, in the following extract we can see that her husband's previous experience with the retailer was guided by discretion and secrecy. Shopping at this retailer, from his experience, was not something to share with others.

> '*I always remember* [husband] *saying when he was younger and they* [husband's family] *shopped there that he wouldn't tell his friends because he would be embarrassed by it. So he remembers a time when… you don't mention that you go to Aldi …*'. [Hanna]

However, Hanna has come to terms with these negative associations by downplaying their relevance in relation to more personally significant life projects. Any apparent anxieties are mitigated through exercising a frugal and thrifty approach to discount food shopping (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). For Hanna, this retailer offers the right range of high-

quality products of mostly comparable value to other retailers but at a significantly better price.

> *"…a really expensive one like Selfridges or Harrods or somewhere or Fortnum and Mason in there along with Aldi…and maybe something from Sainsbury's. And the Aldi ones were coming up as the best one, so…".* [Hanna]

Hanna's relationship with the brand is premised upon highly personalised value, and as a perceived *casual friend* (Fournier, 1998), she is happy with what the brand offers in relation to alternatives. Symbolically, this is a fitting retailer for thriftiness, not a down market provider, as recounted by her husband. While apparently settling on this view of the retailer through her own shopping experiences and the products themselves, the construction of the brand image is, to all intents and purposes, being negotiated in relation to the media and the growing number of news reports. Which, as other research has suggested, has been an active and central author in Aldi's evolving brand myth (Beresford & Hirst, 2016).

Following the arguments of Humphrey's (2013; 2014) that the news media is a significant mediator of cultural discourse, Hanna's commentary vividly reveals how her own perception and opinion of the retailer is shaped by the media and how the Middle England switch to Aldi is legitimised.

> *"Somebody had done a poll* [on Christmas Pudding] *…it was obviously on television…and I thought, 'Well, why would I pay…X amount* [to buy from] *Sainsbury's when actually people have tasted them all?'. It was on This Morning*

[UK TV Programme] *…in fact they'd done it a number of times…best champagne, best…gin as well … they did a taste test and Phillip Schofield and Holly Willoughby was tasting all the things and having to guess… And the Aldi ones were coming up as the best one … so…".* [Hanna]

Hanna engages with a range of popular media products from TV shows to women's lifestyle magazines.   Being regularly at home due to parenting, offers Hanna ample opportunity to engage with this broad range of media sources. In turn, Hanna then becomes a propagator of the myth and an endorser of the brand through sharing the stories and anecdotes in her social groupings. Hanna thus takes the role of brand author (Holt 2003; 2004) and contributes to the development and dissemination of the Aldi brand culture to her friends and associates.

" Oh, you know I got all this and it only came to X amount … discussing it with other people" [Hanna].

This brand community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) becomes a valuable vehicle for sharing and developing stories associated with the brand which collectively help to redress some of the cultural contradictions and experienced anxieties that are important and present challenges to Hanna's life project (Holt, 2004).   These interactions cement Hannah's decisions and views about the retailer, giving her a sense of belonging to a wider community of brand advocates. Cayla and Arnould (2008) suggest that such myths need to be shared to survive and be continuously re-appropriated by a social group, in this case Hanna's re-telling of the myth within her own social grouping works to further legitimise the brand.

Case 2: Kerry. How culinary capital and market knowledge mitigate stigmatised food brand associations

Kerry is a single, separated mother of two boys of primary school age. Recently separated she is presently negotiating the opportunities that single life affords. Kerry was very positive about her changed family situation welcoming the challenge of forging a new, less constrained identity. Originally from a stable family of comfortable means Kerry reported being well supported in her transition. Educated with an undergraduate degree Kerry is a full time Deputy Headteacher of a suburban primary school. She own's her own home, a mortgaged five bedroomed semi-detached property and is in the 35-44 age bracket. Whilst being a single parent, Kerry made no reference to financial insecurity during the interview process and from conversation it seems clear that her lifestyle interests are affordable through her discretionary means. Kerry first engaged with Aldi after a visit with her mother.

"I realised that it was good quality food and...it was a cheaper shop in the end. I think that it just matched other shops...there was a bit of snobbery about using Netto, wasn't there? But it wasn't like that". [Kerry].

Kerry's use of the term 'snobbery' was not openly defined, but hints towards the stigma associated with discount shopping. However, it is clear that Kerry's first experience with this retailer was positive. While the tone of her commentary suggested an element of surprise that this retailer wasn't 'like that', it is evident that prior to this introduction to Aldi, Kerry had an expectation of the overall experience being down market. In justifying

her stance Kerry conveyed further views of what a discount food retailer should be like. Recounting the Netto experience, she referred to

'how the shop was and its layout' and *'the people that were in there weren't always the nicest people, were they?'.* [Kerry]

Thereby, she was creating critical distance between her previous encounters with discount retailers and her own experience with Aldi. The drive to engage with Aldi, was in part, legitimised by family through initial trials and visits, and then similar to Hanna's case, was eased by the access to a new store in the right location. Kerry openly discussed how this new store facilitated the switching process by being situated in an affluent area. Therefore, her decision to shop here is not necessarily driven by convenience or price, rather it is about being in the right area with the right people. Social comparison is clearly exercised in this negotiation (Festinger, 1954). While the construct of lower price was mentioned by Kerry, it rarely emerged in the discussion as a driving factor in her consumption and decision to shop at this retailer.

Central to Kerry's commentary was evidence of a range of ongoing life projects that she was either presently engaged in or working towards (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). International and exotic travel, hosting of a book club and socialising with friends were all evident in her transcript. These were deemed important to Kerry and were central to her emerging independent lifestyle. One of the most evident themes emerging from the discussion was her own health and wellbeing. Regularly engaging in physical activity including running and employing a personal trainer, it was clear Kerry valued optimal fitness. This extended to her own diet and food consumption to the point of growing

produce for use in her dietary regime. Kerry was keenly focused on health-related issues and was not only open to sharing her interest in the topic, but also to demonstrating her acquired knowledge and skills which were developed as a result of her interests. Clearly, Kerry has accrued significant culinary capital to facilitate her lifestyle and leisure interests (Naccarato & Lebesco, 2012).

> *"...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].

Importantly, her engagement with Aldi did not appear to hinder or restrict this goal *"the only things that I've never been able to get there* [Aldi] *are kale and fresh beetroot"* [Kerry] in addition to some of the more specialist health foods and roots. This is in spite of Kerry having a very clear idea of what constitutes a healthy diet.

> *"I think that's to do with changing diet really* [Improved health]*....lots and lots of dark green...I have spinach every day and things like that ... and it's just...I think it's a massive thing really..."* [Kerry].

In spite of Aldi's limited product selection, in comparison to the big middle retailers, this is no barrier to enabling Kerry's lifestyle and culinary practices. In making her own products, albeit a healthy version thereof, and taking pleasure from scratch cooking, Kerry finds Aldi a compelling value proposition. All the ingredients she requires are available at this retailer.

"I made … lasagne the other night, but used courgettes for the pasta. I made the cheese sauce out of coconut milk and butter and ground flour ...I think it's about accepting that it's not going to taste like the real thing. You can bake and you can do all these things. But they're never going to taste like double chocolate chip muffins because they're made with all sorts of other things" [Kerry].

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). Culinary capital is a form of field specific cultural capital, much like that described by Arsel and Thompson (2010) in their analysis of the hipster lifestyle and contested identity politics. 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.

Overall, Kerry's account of the Aldi's brand suggests *Compartmentalised Friendship* (Fournier, 1998) mostly built around her interest around food and health. By providing the resources to meet the different contexts and identity projects that she is engaged in, the brand is clearly valued as an enabler. This brand relationship is not necessarily premised upon symbolism, nor based on class distinction per se, but as a facilitator to life projects (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). However, this being the case, by revealing her insight into

stories circulating about practices in this market, and emerging mistrust growing about the big middle retailers, Kerry began to construct an image of Aldi as a moral protagonist (Luedicke, Thompson & Geisler, 2010).   Thereby animating the brand with positive associations and symbolism far removed from the negative connotations expected at the start of her experiences with this retailer.

> *"Hang on. You know, the kind of light comes on …the likes of Tesco, the chief exec of Tesco,* [resigned] *yesterday…Sainsbury's struggling, all those in the middle of the road, supermarkets … people, maybe, started thinking, well, well, hang on a minute, we've got the wool pulled over our eyes … a little bit perhaps"* [Kerry].

Case 3: Michelle. How distrust and an emerging appetite for risk assuages identity conflict with discordant brand images

Michelle is a settled married mother of two children who have recently 'flown the nest'. This being the case the children are regularly welcomed back into the fold each week for family meals and celebration. It is clear that her family is a very strong thread running through Michelle's life project. Her children were a key priority. Professionally educated, Michelle is a health service administrator with a long rewarding career in the public sector behind her. Having recently moved to a detached bungalow with her husband and newly acquired dog, they have downsized from a large family home. The bungalow is situated in a green suburb with views to the countryside, but it was claimed that the home required some renovation to align with their taste. She is in the 45-54 age bracket.

Out of all the informants Michelle was the most enthusiastic supporter of Aldi. A real brand champion. During the interview Michelle was keen to repeatedly share the perceived virtues of Aldi in relation to her apparent mistrust of competing brands. Hereby linking clearly with the narrative recounted by Kerry, albeit to a more pronounced and detailed degree. Overall, Michelle expressed strong, negative feelings towards the mainstream retailers, characterising their approach as conspiring.

 "…I saw what was on television [Panorama Documentary] *…flippin' heck they're conning us...they are not pulling the wool over my eyes ... so then I started to scrutinise my bills and they* [retailers] *did it to me on a couple of occasions…if you go to Aldi, the price is what it is. That's the price"* [Michelle].

During the interview, Michelle was eager to share her feelings on the perceived injustice within the retail sector. There was a sense that, in this case, big middle retailers were deemed 'villains of the time'. In contrast, a clear duality exists for Michelle. In her mind, ALDI UK represents clarity and simplicity, aligning with what Cayla and Arnould (2008) classify as monotypic myths [stories lacking complexity and nuance]. In relation to theories of brand architypes, for Michelle, Aldi is the hero of this piece (Jung, 1968). While clear on the binary, in terms of specific nuance, Michelle's analysis of the big middle retailers was not limited to price and the feelings of conspiracy, but was also based on the broader shopping experience and the perceived monolithic nature of some of the superstores.

'I'd got so fed up with [big middle retailers] *… main thing for me was going to these massive superstores and it used to take me like three hours. And I'd go and*

the flipping aisle would have 53 types of washing powder. I don't want a choice of 53 types of washing powder. I use the same washing powder all the time. I could go to ALDI and there'd be like three choices of everything. You can whip around in like less than hour. That was massive to me, especially with working and being busy. That drove me mad. I don't want to have a choice' [Michelle].

Michelle's narrative presents a rejection of the retail superstore orthodoxy and based on this, using Fournier's (1998) terminology Michelle's brand relationship could be categorised as a '*rebound'*. However, while not necessarily being long term in nature due to her relationship with the brand recently developing, Michelle is now more accurately categorised as being in a '*committed partnership'*. This is due to the rich emotion, trust and enthusiasm that she displays for the brand and her commitment to the long-term future.

While she is clearly committed to this retailer her early experiences were more guarded. That is to say, anxiety and risk taking were evident in her initial appraisal of the brand. Michelle confirmed that she first engaged with Aldi when her daughter applied for a job at the new local store.

"When I started, I went in just to have a nosey at what she [daughter] *was doing and … then kept with it. I just started getting little bits and then I thought, 'I'm going to do a full shop.' I'm going to risk it and do a full shop … half the price and I've done it in an hour. How marvellous!"*

In her explanation of the term risk, Michelle was keen to confirm that this was not about *'being seen'* in terms of being socially evaluated, but rather anxiety around the quality of the food on offer in relation to the savings made.

Throughout the narrative, the construct of frugality was strong, but the quality of the produce was much more important.

> *"Food to us is very important, we like our food. We like good quality food"*
> [Michelle].

This statement was supported and evidenced by a general interest in food that was repeatedly shared in the interview. Michelle spoke extensively about her cookbooks, dinner parties, home brewing [limoncello] and pickling [chutney] as well as home cultivation [tomatoes, peppers, salads]

There was a strong sense of family within Michelle's narrative and the role of mother was central to her identity (Moisio et al, 2004). Michelle clearly saw herself as an enthusiastic facilitator of her family's happiness, well-being and prosperity. This involved food, eating together, celebrations, her childrens sports and careers, homes, holidays and pets, all emotionally constructed for the intra-generational learning and benefit of her family (Moisio et al, 2004). This is deeply embedded in Michelle's values, while confirming that she had a simple, financially modest upbringing, she proudly talked about the rituals of a proper meal (Jackson, 2009) and how her family engaged with food and dining when she was young.

"Very close [family] … *we used to sit and talk, evening meals all sit down together and talk and discuss your day, discuss your problems, so everything revolves around the kitchen table. So that's how I was brought up and that's how we brought our kids up"*. [Michelle].

As a mother, wife, producer and provider of food for the family, the associated risks from switching to the Aldi brand effectively exposed these roles to scrutiny (Moisio et al, 2004), however, based on her account it is clear that Michelle has made an effective transition by aligning her interests with the Aldi retail offer.

Discussion

Researchers are beginning to show how consumer brand relationships are constituted and the form that they take (Fournier, 1998: 2009; Avery, 2012), but from our understanding this is the first time the process through which such relationships manifest themselves in food retail switching behaviour has been observed. Moreover, the present research is showing how these relationships are appropriated in negotiations of discordant and stigmatised brand meanings and associations to make them relevant and suitable for heretofore incongruent market segments.

A synthesis of theories drawing from the literature related to cultural branding (Holt, 1997b:1998) and brand relationship theory (Fournier, 1998), combined with insight derived from theories of culinary capital (Naccarato & Lebesco, 2012) and taste (Arsel & Bean, 2012) have been deployed 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 marketplace 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. Furthermore, by drawing upon her abilities to produce from 'scratch' she deploys culinary resources and capital to negotiate the space required to be independent from the conventional meanings ascribed by the food marketplace in the UK. Michelle on the other hand, draws upon a rich seam of meanings and associations deriving from her reading of the UK media who were reporting stories of this retailer and the wider grocery market context at this time, which significantly influenced her food choices, consumption practices and patronage of Aldi.

Our informants are thus able to leverage their tastes, life projects and cultural sensibilities as a key mediator of brand meanings and images occupying this market regardless of whether they are related to skills accrued over a long period of time or from critical readings of popular cultural texts. 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).

The way in which the informants in this study leverage their resources, personal background and lived experiences to shape their interactions and form individuated brand

relationships (Fournier, 1998: 2009; Avery, 2012) with Aldi, is not dissimilar to Holts' hard-pressed informants drawn from the "socio-economic margins of American society" (Holt, 2002, p.73). 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 and material 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.

While remaining unreported in some of the cases described in this paper, the media was brought to bear in each interview to explain informant views and opinions of the retail landscape and changes thereof. Intriguingly, none of the informants made specific reference to the retailers' own communications at this time as an influence of their choices and feelings about the brand. However, consumers own experiences of their initial introduction to shopping at the retailer and location played a prominent role in introducing these consumers to the brand and their ensuing impressions. As did peer referrals and trusted reference groups, that in certain cases manifested themselves as localised brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Collectively these examples offer some insight into the social processes through which consumer switching and brand image mediation takes place.

What is clear from this study is that the news media paid significant attention to consumers in the middle-income bracket at the time of this study, widely reporting stories of pressured finances and insecurity (LexisNexis, 2015). Indeed, the Squeezed Middle narrative was a significant part of the cultural context following the recession of 2008 and many media and industry commentators suggest that the shift to the discounters was a consequence of this (LexisNexis, 2015). While it is conceivable that many middle-income consumers switched to the discounters to manage the pressures of squeezed incomes, the informants in this study did not report any experiences of this kind. Although managing household budgets, taking care of growing and mature families, and in some cases paying down mortgages, based on the idiographic accounts reported here, these informants are of comfortable means with discretionary income to spare. That is not to say that price was not a mediator of their experience and evaluations of the Aldi brand, and that of UK grocery more generally, but in these cases price was brought to bear in appraisals of value in respect of the overall retail proposition and grocery offer and its alignment with their own specific and unique goals and life projects. The notion of consumer value here is clearly contextualised to the life worlds and experiences of these consumers and this has a significant bearing on the way that they construct the image of this brand.

Conclusion

While the big four grocery retailers could be accused of innovation sluggishness (Holt & Cameron, 2010) in their inability to respond to the changes in the retail landscape, thereby allowing the discounters room to develop and take market share, there is much more at stake in this particular case. Indeed, according to numerous news reports, the big four appeared to be wedded to the traditional scientific marketing approach described by Holt and Cameron (2010). This strategic approach seemingly offered little sensitivity towards

the new, socio-cultural opportunities emerging within the grocery market. Undoubtedly the missteps of the big four, as well as the strategic actions of the discounters, placed Aldi in a position to capitalise on the changing mood and behaviors of the marketplace, not least in relation to the middle classes. However, while a clear beneficiary of the changes in the market, what all retailers seem to have neglected in this instance is the active role that consumers played themselves in this context. It is clear from this research that an element of Aldi's growing middle class consumer base are taking an active role in making the brand relevant for their own requirements. This research therefore contributes to a growing body of work in the CCT tradition that is revealing how consumers negotiate meaning and forge individuated relationships with brands. However, in contrast to current cultural branding scholarship, that broadly focusses on the processes involved in the creation of iconic brands (e.g. Holt, 2004), the findings from this research reveal how the theory associated with this school of thought, can be applied to understanding consumer relationships with low-involvement and mundane brands. As such, food retail marketers will in turn be able utilise this knowledge to more fully understand the broad range of factors that come in to play in shaping their shoppers' relationships with their brands that go beyond their own current roles and marketing activity. More specifically as the present paper offers an idiographic account of the strategies deployed by consumers to reconcile discordant images and make the choice to switch between brands., in reviewing these findings, retailers will hold a greater appreciation of the significant role that customers play themselves in these processes. Finally as this study offers some insight into the ways in which the stigma associated with discount grocery is being negotiated over time to attract previously incongruent target markets, managers may see this as an opportunity to capitalise on the growing appeal and relevance of this retail segment for a significant number of middle class consumers in the UK.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study reports three in depth case studies concerning switching behaviour to Aldi, we feel that the findings are transferable to other middle-class consumers in similar contexts. The way in which brand relationships were negotiated to assuage any contradictions that existed between our informant's identity and life projects was common across the wider sample included in this study, albeit to a lesser extent. This being so, the cases included in this paper were developed from responses shared by female informants and future work could include testimonials from males who may be engaged with a range of different life projects and pursuits. Previous research has examined the way in which different ideologies and cultural discourses inflect and shape how consumers respond to commercial narratives and brand stories (eg. Jayasinghe & Ritson, 2013; Holt, 2004). Therefore, future research could further explore how these socio-cultural discourses manifest in retail switching behaviour. Geographically the research was limited to one northern post-industrial city in the UK and there is a clear opportunity to examine whether local context comes into play in brand relationship formation. For instance, are middle-class consumers in large economically advanced metropolitan cities forming brand relationships with discount retailers in the same way. Finally, this paper presents ideographic accounts of brand relationship formation and does not account fully for the role of other brand authors (Holt, 2003) who may be playing an equally significant role in shaping the context for middle-class switching. Future research could therefore examine how the news media is influencing the meaning of discount grocery retail brands over time. We therefore encourage future researchers to explore some of these proposed themes to better understand the process through which consumers reconcile discordant food retailer brand images.

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