1. This PhD research contributes to consumer research and to the existing theories of alternative marketplaces within Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). The vintage collective in Glasgow will be explored through the use of Practice Theory, this will allow for the practice of vintage consumption to be placed at the centre of the research and for the development of a more active understanding of material culture and consumption.

2. In the tradition of CCT this research will employ an interpretive theoretical research perspective. An ethnographic methodology will be used to gain an understanding of the collective, viewing them holistically and in their natural context. Ethnography will be used to capture the characters and the essence of the collective, observation will be used to explore the consumption spaces and practices, and semi-structured depth interviews will be used to explore emergent themes with key players.

3. This research will use the context of the Glasgow vintage collective to explore conceptions of the self and community and the way that they intersect in practice. Pitched as alternative to the high street, vintage markets and outlets have flourished across the city. Observation will be carried out at vintage markets and stores and depth interviews with traders and consumers will be undertaken, along with a visual analysis of the materials used to market the collective.
Customer led marketing in Consumer Research - The Practice of Nostalgia in the Vintage Consumer Collective of Glasgow

1. Research Context

This PhD research explores the meaning and the significance of vintage consumption rather than just the availability of clothing outlets and markets. Through the use of practice theory and putting the practice of vintage consumption at the centre of the research, it will allow for the development of a more active understanding of material culture and consumption. It will also allow the researcher to explore how practices and consumption activities are a continuous, dynamic and interrelated process. Further the researcher aims to explore conceptions of the self and community in the vintage collective and the way that they intersect in practice.

The merit of conceptualising vintage consumption as a form of practice will be explored firstly. By looking at the complexities of vintage shopping intersecting with repertoires of meaning and procedure, and in showing how vintage consumption is constituted and reproduced, the researcher will aim to extend the scope of what is deemed material culture. By exploring practices as units of analysis, it will allow the researcher to more thoroughly appreciate the development of a single practice, the relationship between practices and the interconnectedness of practices in the consumer’s experience. The adoption of practice theory for the research also allows a focus on the centrality of materiality in society (Magaudda, 2011:20).

2.1 The Vintage Collective

The rise in the popularity and accessibility of vintage consumption both on the high street and online can be seen as changing the retail landscape. As Tungate (2008) states, ‘vintage’ is an attitude rather than a style of dress: “It’s a rejection of ‘exclusive’ yet global brands, an affirmation that cheap and unusual is better than expensive and everywhere - and a message to marketers that the fashion consumer of the future will be harder to snare” (Tungate, 2008: 245). The words ‘vintage’ and ‘thrift’ have been appropriated into mainstream marketing language by high-street brands and re-worked. Semantically this has implications for the tribe’s (Cova & Cova: 2002) associations with it as a concept, but is also representative of the constantly shifting marketplace and search for new forms of value in cultures of consumption. DeLong et al (2005:24) proposed that being ‘hooked on vintage’ is not a haphazard process but a rather complex process that involves the consumer possessing the relevant “aesthetics, taste, clever dressing, historical curiosity, and an ability to discriminate the authentic product, and revalue it in a new setting.” Vintage clothing could be seen as cultural commoditization as an item’s status is culturally shaped through a process of being withdrawn and introduced in a new setting (DeLong et al, 2005). This change or innovation in how the item is used or viewed requires the skill of being able to perceive its possibilities in a new setting. McCracken’s (1988) work compliments this idea as he asserts that the “combination and recombination take place until a concept and an aesthetic emerge that help give substance to a group’s wish to differentiate itself from the mainstream” (1988:136).

Drawing also on the work of Gregson and Crewe (2002), who explain that the vintage marketplace can be seen as empowering, endless cycles of re-enchantment, in which exchange significantly cannot be assumed to be the same as in the conventional
marketplace. The concept and construct of value is also significantly different than in
the traditional marketplace. Exchange value and use value are important criteria in the
selection of vintage pieces. The idea of re-valuing an item involves the individual
considering the use value of the piece: this may involve evaluating condition, quality,
price, skill involved in alteration, knowledge of the period. Value however, is not an
inherent characteristic of commodities but it is something that is open to active,
relational negotiation that is exposed through the interplay of consumer desire,
demand, knowledge and supply and is shaped by consumer differentiation.

2.2 The Collective

Ideas of community pervade CCT literature: from experience communities (Arnould
and Price, 1993), subcultures of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander 1995),
brand communities (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001), to virtual communities (Kozinets,
1999). These new conceptions of community within the consumption context show
consumers joining together to assert their unique preferences. This communal
gathering of consumers can have significant impact in the marketplace. This literature
will provide a valuable base for the research to be positioned around.

Consumers that share a lifestyle or consumption affiliation are often aware that they
belong to a separate tribe or subculture that holds certain values and beliefs; however,
the group often has no agreed name or distinct boundaries (Ahuvia et al, 2006). CCT
researchers believe that the creation of a subcultural or tribal lifestyle is often a
conscious and self-aware activity, as Ahuvia et al (2006) proposed, “As a society
modernises, it tends to become more focused on the aspirations/pursuits of the person
(as compared fundamental groups such as ethnicity, family, class). With this comes an
increased role of voluntary lifestyle groups in determining consumer behaviour”
(Ahuvia et al, 2006:40). These lifestyle groups will be explored in relation to the
Glasgow vintage collective.

3. Consumer Research & Practice Theory

Consumer research literature often focuses on the objects at the moment of
acquisition by the consumer, rather than how the consumer uses the objects. Practice
theory is concerned with the action carried out in this process (Hand & Shove:
2007:81). Consumption theory has moved on from the attention given to symbolic
meanings and the role in identity formation. Previous consumption studies have
focused on the symbolic and identity creation powers of items (McCracken 1988,
Featherstone 1990). Recent discussions have included a focus on the more mundane
aspects of consumption, proposing that there is more merit in the discussion of the
normally inconspicuous routines and systems (Gronow and Warde 2001). Many
theorists stress the symbolic as a signal of status and identity, in contrast in practice
theory it is implied that material is used directly in the reproduction of everyday life
(Shove et al, 2005). Practice theory focuses on the relationship between products,
competence and practice. It also stresses the importance of routine, collective and
conventional nature of consumption (Warde, 2005). Using practice theory to explore
consumption allows more abstract questions about the relationship between practices,
technologies and infrastructures to be posed. Further it allows probing into what the
consequences are for these relationships and the ‘fixity’ and ‘fluidity’ of patterns of
consumption and everyday consumer routines (Hand et al, 2005).
With regards to consumption, practice theory focuses on the sociology of consumption, on the collective ordering of consumption, the social construction of ‘need,’ how practices become ‘normal’ and how they change (Bourdieu 1984, Shove & Warde 2002, Warde & Shove 2008, Hand et al, 2005). Using practice theory to study consumption allows the researcher to conceptualise the emergent and co-constitutive relationship between object and the reproduction of shared discourses and the skills of consumption and differentiation.

4. What is Practice Theory?

From the mid-2000s through the work of Warde and Shove there is a perceptible shift in the view that what is involved in consuming and using things in practice is important in the discussion of consumption. They proposed that the relationship between materials and practices was deserving of more theoretical attention. Warde’s (2005) seminal paper on practice theory constructs an overview and discussion for the use of practice theory in consumption research. Warde (2005) argues that the term ‘consumption’ fuses together two contrasting ideas, of purchase and of using up. In this view, consumption is not in itself a practice, but could rather be conceptualised as a moment in almost every practice (Warde, 2005). The conventions and the standards of the practice steer the behaviour (Warde, 2005:137). Consumption can be argued to occur as goods are appropriated; this involves the consumer undertaking certain practices including knowledge to carry out these practices and the tools to engage as a practitioner (Warde, 2005). Warde suggested that, “practices, which are logically and ontologically prior to action, steer consumption” (Warde 2004). Warde (2005; 145) notes practices are the principle steering device of consumption because they are “the primary source of desire, knowledge and judgement.”

Further adding to the role of practice theory with regards to consumption, Shove and Pantzar (2005) define practices as involving the active integration of materials, meanings and forms of competence (Shove & Pantzar, 2005: 45). They focus on the failure in the consumption literature to convey fully what is involved in the way things are acquired, appropriated and subsequently utilised. Shove and Pantzar (2005) move the literature forward by conceptualizing consumers’ not as simple users but as active and creative practitioners. They view appropriation of things as just one dimension of practice. Shove and Pantzar (2005) with their study on Nordic walking aimed to move away from the discussion of symbolically focused theories of consumption, to re-evaluating consumers and the material dimension in which they operate. They place an emphasis on the non-human actors who share the focus along with consumers.

The practice requires a competent practitioner to possess the ability, competence and acquisition of relevant goods or services to carry out the practice with skill. Differing understandings, levels of competence and sphere of involvement generate behavioural differences in relation to practice. According to Reckwitz (2002:249-250) the consumer becomes not only a carrier of patterns of bodily behaviour, but also of certain routine ways of desiring, understanding and participating. Reckwitz notes, “the social world is first and foremost populated by diverse social practices which are carried by agents” (2002: 250).

Practices could be argued to enhance and promote the social bonds of the community. Bagozzi and Dholakia (2002:4) state “a person achieves a social identity through self
awareness of one’s membership in a group and the emotional and evaluative significance of this membership.” However, Schau et al (2009) argue differently that a feeling of membership is developed from the engagement of practices that sustain the reciprocation of collective resources. This echoes the work done around communities of practice (Wenger 1987). This idea of practice communities will be explored further in the research.

5. Emergent Research Objectives

The aim of the research is to explore the vintage collective in Glasgow. From the literature the following research objectives will be explored further in the data:

1. To explore the role of practices in the consumption experience of the collective.
2. To investigate the relationship between products, competence and practice.
3. To explore the conceptions of self and community in the collective.

6. Methodology

“The agenda of CCT (Consumer Culture Theory) focuses on the experiential and socio-cultural dimensions of consumption…the dynamics of which are not plainly accessible through experiments, surveys or database modelling” (Arnould & Thompson: 2005).

This research is deeply rooted in the field of CCT and is interpretive in nature. In the research the concept of consumer communities of practice is explored and this view places an importance of being part of, gathering and experiencing as a community. Therefore to gain an insight into this, the researcher will immerse themselves in the identified Glasgow vintage collective. As such, the research adopts an interpretive paradigm, with the aim of seeking “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) rather than a deterministically focused positivist perspective. This research employs an ethnographic methodology, as it will allow the researcher to access what consumers really do rather than what they say they do (Elliot et al, 2003:222).

Participant observation is at the forefront of the methods utilised, Agar (1996:163) describes that this is the essence of ethnographic methods, “you are directly involved in community life, observing and talking with people as you learn from their view of reality” (Agar, cited in Elliot et al, 2003:216). This observation is being carried out at fortnightly vintage markets. Semi-structured interviews are also being used to gain an insight from key characters in the collective. Visual analysis will also be employed through photographs and an analysis of the visual material used by traders to market the collective. Adopting an ethnographic approach allows the researcher to use a judgemental sample to explore the interactions and processes involved in the community. The seminal work of Belk et al (1989) in their ‘Odyssey’ paper describes that a naturalistic researcher moves along a continuum from passive to participant observation generating insights from each vantage point. This view of a continuum will help focus the research in & allow methods to change as the understanding of the field grows.
7. References


