A phenomenological study of home baking: The ‘Rebirth of Romanticism’
and the rise of the craft consumer

Introduction

Home baking is very popular in the UK: in 2007 sales of home baking products totalled £457m
and in 2010, the estimated revenue from home baking was £576m (Mintel, 2010). Why is home
baking so popular? The emergence of the phenomenon seems to be due to a number of factors.
Campbell (2005) suggests that in late modern capitalist societies we have seen the gradual
development of craft consumption (a category that would include home baking alongside DIY
and gardening), since this provides ‘an oasis of personal self-expression and authenticity in what
is an ever-widening ‘desert’ of commodification and marketisation’ (p37). Whilst Gray (2011)
argues that there is a resurgence of a romantic ideal linked to the historic Romanticism period,
which is driving contemporary consumption. Thus, contemporary consumers are actively seeking
and increasingly valuing tradition, authenticity, creativity and self-expression, nature and
simplicity, and we would suggest that home baking provides a context in which consumers are
able to fulfil such desires.

Up until now however, the focus of the majority of scholars’ work in relation to both the craft
consumer (Campbell, 2005) and the Rebirth of Romanticism has been largely theoretical. By
contrast, de Solier (2013) argues that empirical research is fundamental in understanding
consumers’ lived experiences and consumption as practice. She further asserts that consumption
cannot be simply classified as part of ‘materialism’ or ‘consumerism’ (p.11), and instead
highlights the sophisticated and challenging nature of consumption and the value of empirical
research in helping to untangle its complexities. It is our contention that since anti-consumerist
feelings are rising (de Solier, 2013 and Humphery, 2010), marketers would benefit from greater
understanding of the multifarious and contradictory aspects of contemporary consumption and
that home baking provides an appropriate context for exploring these issues and developing
insights.

The aim of the study is to identify why bakers bake. The study investigates amateur bakers’
experiences taking heed of any anti-consumerist sentiments that might be expressed. The focus
of the study is not on the baked goods per se but on the relationship between bakers and their
baked goods, between the individual and the products: the production and consumption
relationship. In order to provide theoretical grounding for the study, the historic Romanticism
period and the new romanticism in marketing movement is examined together with Campbell’s
(2005) concept of the craft consumer in the following section.

Conceptual grounding

Romanticism, a literary and cultural movement (1750-1850) started in Britain and spread across
Europe. It was a time when many poets and writers chose to assert their own individuality and
creativity (Butler, 1981; Cranston, 1994). Osborne (1970) cited by Day (1996) points out that the
Romanticism era accentuates ‘genius, creative imagination, originality, expression, communication, symbolism, emotion and sentiment’ (p.207). Holbrook and Olney (1995) wrote
about the romanticism movement from a Consumer Research perspective before Gray (2011) identified the romanticism in marketing movement. The romanticism in marketing movement seems to be emblematic of a change in contemporary consumers’ personal values and behaviour alongside their quest for authenticity. Consumers are looking for security and respite through purchasing and are looking to step off the treadmill of life. In a similar way to how the Romantics of an earlier era sought refuge from a disenchanted culture, today’s consumers could be seen to be embodying introspection, a fixation with nature and moving towards experiential and hedonic consumption (Osborne, 1970; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Holbrook and Olney, 1995).

Interest in nature, valuing authenticity and the pursuit of difference and tradition are all key indicators of the resurgence of the romantic ideal, as asserted by Gray (2011) and Bloom, (2010). However, these factors are also central to the concept of the craft consumer. What is meant by the craft consumer and why is it relevant today? Campbell (2005: 27-8) defines the craft consumer as ‘a person who typically takes any number of mass produced products and employs these as the ‘raw materials’ for the creation of a new ‘product’, one that is typically intended for self-consumption’ (p.28). While some scholars have argued that consumers purposefully control the consumption process as a means of creating or maintaining their self identity (Featherstone, 1991; De Solier 2013), Campbell (2005) argues that craft consumers do not seek to maintain or create identity; they already have a strong and clear identity. Instead, craft consumers engage in a distinctive mode of consuming in which they bring ‘skill, knowledge, judgment, love and passion’ to their craft (p.27) in order to engage in ‘creative acts of self-expression’ (p24). Campbell (2005) asserts that craft consumers do not represent a new social category so much as an additional image of contemporary consumers; one which sees consumers using their skills and creativity to fashion their own consumption experiences.

The next section provides a brief overview of the methodology before the results and conclusions are presented.

**Methodology**

The approach is based on individual phenomenological interviews since they are seen as the best means of capturing an individual’s experience through their eyes (Kvale, 1983; Moustakas, 1994; Pollio et al., 1997). Traditional research methods such as surveys and structured interviews do not allow the researcher to capture adequately consumer experience as Hudson and Ozanne (1988) and Belk et al. (1988) all assert, mainly because these methods focus on cognition and logical communication.

Phenomenological interviews were conducted with a sample of 14 home bakers selected through a snowballing technique. The researchers contacted the head of a local baking group who was very happy to be involved. Further participants were subsequently sourced via twitter after the participant announced the study to her followers. Each interview lasted approximately 1.5 hours and was recorded using a digital recorder. Recordings were then played through at least twice before transcripts were typed up and analysed. The sample was not particularly diverse in that
the age range of participants was from 26 to 46 years old and they were all professionals. The majority of participants indicated that they had started to bake seriously in the last three years.

The researchers respected work by McCracken (1988), Thompson et al. (1989) and Moustakas (1994) who argue that researchers should create a comfortable environment where participants are happy to speak freely. Grand tour questions were asked to make the participants feel at ease before specific questions to encourage them to recount their baking experiences.

Each transcript was read individually in isolation and sections were related to the whole transcript, following the approach taken by Bleicher (1980) and Thompson et al. (1989) and a collection of broad themes were identified. After each transcript had been thoroughly examined, the researchers began to look at the interrelationship of different themes between the different transcripts of the participants.

Analysis of Findings

The findings suggest that hedonic and experiential consumption play an important part in bakers’ experiences. Hedonic feelings when baking were expressed in all 14 transcripts, seen clearly through the use of words such as ‘enjoyment’, ‘happy’, ‘pride’ and ‘chuffed’. For example, Victoria had a very emotional view of baking, as she explained: ‘if you don’t enjoy it, don’t do it...I enjoy baking and that’s why I do it’. Patricia commented, ‘when I start baking, I expect it to turn out how I imagined it. Rarely do I have any baking disasters. I feel pride after I’ve baked’.

The dominance of bakers who value reflection and satisfaction is notable in our sample. Bakers driven by self expression also feature in our findings; the significance of simplicity and tradition is important, lending support to the ‘Rebirth of Romanticism’ movement and the drive towards seeking pleasure for simple enjoyment. Anna mentioned: above all, I feel satisfied that I’ve made something, that I’ve created something that has turned out well and that the family have pleasure in eating’. Charlotte, for instance said, ‘I’m generally fairly happy’ when referring to the process of baking and the end result.

A number of bakers in our sample tended to be traditional, family-centric and suspicious of big business. They are not materialistic and baking appeals to them because it is an opportunity to return to tradition. It is a fairly practical and immersive activity in which things are often ‘made with love’ for the family. Indeed, many of our bakers could be described as practical in the sense of enjoying making things. For example, Freya commented, ‘I feel really good being able to make things, I can adapt flavours and it gives me a great sense of achievement, you know, giving my family something they enjoy’.

Five bakers in the sample spoke specifically about the satisfaction they derive through practising manual labour as highlighted in the following quotes:

Stephanie said: ‘The process is what is important...I enjoy the physical labour part of it. I think so much of what I do professionally and all the rest of it, you know I don’t get an opportunity to build a wall, you know paint something; what I do is intellectual rather than physical’. She
continues: ‘And also, it’s very familiar to me. Um, I suppose it’s controllable. Generally speaking, I know what the outcome is going to be…the process is what’s important’.

Freya explained: My job is really technical as I’m an Engineer…I really enjoy the baking process. It’s creative so it’s different from my job. It’s my time to be me and relax.’

Matthew, mentioned: ‘I like having the freedom to be able to do it when I want to…’

The relationship between bakers and baked goods is formed by place and space but also by time. The interest in productive leisure is strong for this sample of contemporary bakers and it is interesting to note the emphasis on creativity, freedom and the manual aspects of the process of home baking in comparison to their professional working lives.

The majority of bakers discussed the importance of authenticity and the theme occurred in twelve out of the fourteen transcripts. These participants saw authenticity as something that could not be made available commercially. These consumers valued comfort, tradition and simple activities and baking acts as the embodiment of these characteristics. Chris had particularly strong feelings about the misuse of authenticity in product labelling. He explained: ‘What tends to distress me is when something claims to be authentic and original or traditional and you know damn well it’s not’. Chris’ comments are indicative of the anti-consumerist feelings that were prevalent in many (though not all) transcripts.

Individual bakers design, make and consume their own products. It could be said that baking is a productive leisure activity involving skills and practicality, supporting Gandolfo and Grace, (2009) who discussed the importance of creating crafts by hand, as a means of returning to physical manual labour and taking control of the production process. These consumers are relishing baking because it gives them an opportunity to acquire and express their knowledge and control the [baking] process.

Moreover, the identities of bakers in this sample seem clear and strong. Victoria said: I love it and that’s why I do it’ – Victoria shows a strong and genuine self which supports Campbell’s (2005) assertions regarding the motivations of craft consumers to express themselves through productive leisure activities. Our findings would therefore seem to dispute de Solier’s work (2013) on self formation through productive leisure and consumption. Admittedly, lifestyles of craft amateurs are hybrid and fluid but identities are not transient here.

Conclusions and suggestions for future research

This research deploys a conceptual framework, which draws upon the notion of a Rebirth of Romanticism within contemporary consumption together with the concept of the craft consumer, and studies home baking as the context. The results would no doubt vary if DIY or gardening provided the context. Nonetheless, our findings contribute to and build upon consumer behaviour, sociology and psychological literature to date by providing empirical support to the argument made by several authors (Raymond, 2003; Bloom, 2010; Gray 2011) that there is a ‘Rebirth of Romanticism’ among contemporary consumers. Moreover, our findings challenge the views of Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) in that whilst we found escapism and the pursuit of
difference were important, this was very real to our contemporary bakers. That is to say our participants did not engage in fantasy – instead the experience of baking provided participants with the physical means to escape the 24/7 work culture. In this sense, the bakers’ experiences reflect Osborne’s view of Romanticism (cited by Day, 1996) which embraces originality and self expression.

In addition, our work develops understanding of the lifestyles and values of contemporary bakers at an individual level, exploring what is important to them and identifying the significance of the elements of ‘crafting’ in this context. Our findings strongly support Campbell’s (2005) assertions regarding the centrality of self-expression (as opposed to the creation of self-identity) for craft consumers as well as the importance of the knowledge, skills, creativity and love that participants bring to the process of baking. The manual aspect of baking (in comparison to the more intellectual requirements of their jobs) clearly affords a great deal of pleasure and satisfaction to the amateur bakers in our sample and we feel that this empirical finding adds depth to Campbell’s (2005) theoretical conceptualisation of the craft consumer.

Heads of Marketing in retail organisations need to take into account this sub segment of contemporary consumers because they represent a significant market opportunity. Our findings show that this group of bakers is looking to create something authentic and simple. Authenticity is something which cannot be labelled in a supermarket. The findings suggest that there could be a strong market for baking courses and baking kits. The act of producing a baked good and consuming the homemade good are crucial elements to this group of bakers; retailers could pilot a scheme whereby they would invite contemporary consumers to bake their own produce on their premises. The sample of contemporary bakers also said that they baked homemade goods because they know what they contain. One suggestion would be therefore that retailers could tap into contemporary consumers’ appreciation for diversity, creativity and authenticity by offering a wider choice of ingredients from around the globe in-store. Another suggestion is that manufacturers could produce raw products with fewer ingredients and a focus on good quality rather than cheaper and complex ingredients.

This paper provides a preliminary understanding of contemporary bakers and offers suggestions to enable marketers to successfully reach this group. In terms of future research, we would suggest that a more diverse sample of amateur home bakers could offer further insights, for example, those that bake but who also buy ready-baked commercially available goods could be included to develop marketers’ understanding of contemporary consumers and their relationship with authenticity. The ‘Rebirth of Romanticism’ and the craft consumer could be examined further by focusing future studies on different contexts such as DIY and gardening. This would permit academic assessment of the robustness of these concepts as well as providing marketers with a more detailed understanding of the values and motivations underpinning craft consumption and the Rebirth. Finally, the influence of gender and class within the Rebirth would also further add to the robustness of the contemporary consumer trend identified and further de Solier’s (2013) research into the dichotomy in consumption and production and the creation and maintenance of self within contemporary consumer society.
References


