

Consumer Engineering: Mid-Century Mass Consumption between Planning Euphoria and the Limits of Growth, 1930s-1970s

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The history of marketing has a long tradition in the United States, and recently Europe, too, has come into the focus of historical research on marketing and its techniques and effects. Yet we still know little about the mechanisms that connected producers and consumers with regard to communications and market strategy. This conference aimed to investigate the connection between consumers and producers and their effects on marketing strategies and techniques. The term „consumer engineering“ emerged during the economic depression of the 1930s in the context of marketing experts' efforts to find new ways of making goods desirable. These experts tried to promote consumer spending through new product innovations, color patterns or by better understanding consumers' psychology. Although the term is frequently associated with the emergence of American mass consumer society, the conference set out to go beyond an American perspective in order to explore the transnational effects of consumer engineering as a stage of an accelerating „fast capitalism“ that created new forms of marketing and product engineering which spread across Europe and other parts of the world.

In his introductory remarks JAN LOGEMANN (Göttingen) highlighted the importance of the adaptation of marketing techniques in transnational exchanges, as the standards and tastes of European consumers differed from those of their American counterparts. Mid-century marketing experts – many of them transatlantic émigrés – viewed the consumer as a „malleable object,“ and en-

couraged companies to devise new strategies and methods to „engineer“ the tastes of „new“ consumers. Within this context, the conference asked who the principal actors involved in consumer engineering were and which economic and social factors influenced the development of marketing techniques between the 1930s and 1970s. Regarding marketing as a „social technique,“ the conference asked how successful and influential the so-called consumer engineers were and how they shaped marketing techniques, product design, and the consumption patterns of society. A central goal of the conference was to reconstruct the specific conceptions of modern markets on which consumer engineering was based and how such notions shaped the genesis of the modern mass consumption society. The conference also examined the transnational character of consumer engineering and marketing research. Although it first emerged in the United States, was it a peculiarly American phenomenon? To date, little is known about the temporal dimension of consumer engineering and its evolution from the 1930s through the 1970s. Trying to fill this gap, the conference traced a change in perspective from efforts in direct and outright consumer manipulation towards a notion of informed and empowered consumers and examined how the marketing profession adapted to broad changes in economic and social circumstances by the 1970s.

The keynote panel contrasted the costs of accelerated marketing for consumers and entrepreneurs and provided two important methodological perspectives for marketing history and consumer engineering. ANDREW GODLEY (Reading) based his arguments on the framework of institutional economics and transaction cost theory. He stressed the importance of the interaction between companies with their marketing professionals and the consumer of the final product. Here marketing communication is essential to forge trusting relationships that overcome information asymmetries between the two parties. Without „market-making,“ that is, articulating what a product innovation can do for the consumer, such potentially existing markets may easily fail. For this, Godley provided the example of the market failure of

some of Merck's pharmaceutical innovations in the 1950s. GARY CROSS (State College) offered a consumer-oriented perspective by focusing on the cultural history of marketing and consumer engineering. Examining the example of the entertainment goods industry, he stressed that the phonograph and music records led to an acceleration of the process of commodification, resulting in shorter product life-cycles, rising expectations of novelty, and the creation of a specific „teenage culture“ in the United States. Cross highlighted that the large social influence of what he called „fast capitalism“ led to new challenges in marketing and new consumer engineering strategies. The keynote panel thus examined different „rationalities“ of consumer engineering. There was strong agreement that the consumer must not be viewed as the spineless and uninformed object of marketing. Instead, the communicative relationships between the actors have to be taken into account. Finally, the keynote speakers suggested that although consumers may not always know what they want, collectively they have a lot of power and influence on the supply side, limiting the influence of the „consumer engineers.“

The second panel focused on business strategies in the postwar period of Western Europe and showed that product strategies had to be adapted to changing consumer attitudes. ORSI HUSZ's (Uppsala) analysis of IKEA and its kitchens showed that IKEA's marketing and kitchen design based on functionality was a distinct response and critique of American mass consumer capitalism. The design of IKEA products was not only influenced by concepts of Taylorism but also by social welfare politics. The „classless IKEA kitchen“ can thus be seen as the outcome of a socio-political vision that was influenced by companies and commercial marketing, but also by state agencies. The following two papers underlined that accelerated product innovation and efforts of consumer engineering were not only an American phenomenon. By looking at Adidas and the German sports footwear industry, THOMAS TURNER (London) showed that the traditional athletic-shoe manufacturer Adidas, in contrast to American manufacturers, embraced new synthetic materials and production techniques for shoes

from the 1950s through the 1970s, constantly widening the range of shoes that were being offered. Even small improvements were marketed within a framework of technological progress to attract new buyers. Adidas also enhanced its market share by collaborating with state sports organizations that promoted recreational activity in the general public, thereby „making“ the consumers for Adidas. These findings show that techniques of consumer engineering can be seen as responses to the challenges of increasingly differentiated and individualized markets and consumer demands.

The German automobile industry witnessed similar differentiation processes between 1950 and 1980. INGO KÖHLER (Göttingen) discussed the emergence of professional and scientific market research as a central force behind modern product strategies with a consumer-oriented view. He explained that, as consumers began to „trade up“ the model range and as markets reached saturation in the late 1950s and 1960s, rivalry between carmakers kicked in. This prompted firms to engage in consumer research to create brand loyalty. However, a sales crisis beginning in the 1970s showed that the carmakers' power to „engineer the consumer“ was limited, leading to a lifestyle marketing approach, which stressed both emotion and rationality of brands and models. The discussion following the papers showed that in addition to producers and consumers, intermediaries such as state agencies and umbrella associations come into the market-making process and have to be incorporated in further research on consumer engineering. Further emphasis was placed on the fact that the rise of market research and its professionalization played an important role for companies' internationalization strategies.

The third panel shifted the focus from the company to individual actors or „consumer engineers“ and these actors' perceptions of their own roles. These perceptions were often influenced by transnational exchanges and emigration, as individuals linked their backgrounds with new experiences abroad to create new styles and visions. REGINA BLASZCZYK (Leeds) focused her paper on William Pahlmann, an interior designer of the

1940s to 1960s. Her research highlighted that interior designers like Pahlmann did not see themselves as direct „taste makers,” but as interpreters of existing tastes in the emerging American mass market of the postwar decades. With his specific „eclectic style” of combining old forms with modern materials Pahlmann became an intermediary for DuPont, integrating its synthetic materials into home furniture. He is one of those actors whom Blaszczyk calls „fashion intermediaries,” who developed new markets for companies. Taking the example of Victor Gruen, a Jewish architect and designer with a background in the socialist milieu of „Red Vienna,” JOSEPH MALHEREK (Washington D.C.) showed the influences of émigrés on the conception of new places of consumption in America during the 1940s and 1950s. Gruen promoted the idea of „planning” the shopping experience and imagined shopping malls as separate places of consumption and communal spaces of newly built suburbs. Examining the supersonic Concorde aircraft, GUILLAUME DE SYON (Reading) argued that in order to make this technological innovation profitable European marketers created a whole image around the Concorde, incorporating the notion of speed into futuristic interior and airport terminal design for a unique „Concorde-experience.” Through a specially designed experience consumers of Concorde bought not only a flight, but a distinct social and economic „image.” This shows that marketers increasingly created „imagined” or „virtual” places of consumption, in part as a strategic response to economic crises.

The fourth panel focused on the links between consumer engineering and broader concepts of social engineering before and after the two World Wars. Marketing frequently dovetailed with more general mid-century efforts to influence, shape or „rationalize” social behavior. UWE SPIEKERMANN (Washington D.C.) stressed the importance of German business journals such as *Verkaufspraxis* (published from the 1920s to the 1940s and from the 1950s to the 1960s) to get more insight into the transnational elements of marketing history. These journals propagated American methods of rationalizing production and sales. At the same time the Amer-

ican ideas were also connected with German business practices, showing that there is no simple, common narrative of consumer engineering or westernization. OLIVER KÜHSCHELM’s (Vienna) paper on Buy-National Campaigns in Europe showed the power of products and product marketing to shape identities and imagined communities. State campaigns to establish nationalistic consumption as a moral category in European countries like Britain, Austria, and Switzerland regarded the consumer as a socially relevant actor. Examining Romania in the 1950s, MARA MARGINEAN (Bucharest) asked how products and their visualization were used to legitimize the communist state. The marketing of products that were regarded as „necessary” to satisfy people’s needs focused on utility in order to create an image of improving health and comfort within a communist system. „Prestige brands” were allowed a certain degree of individuality while satisfying „necessary” needs in a functional way, allowing the state to legitimize its power. The panel showed the political dimension of consumer engineering, highlighting the political desires for the adaption of new marketing techniques which states – much like corporations – utilized in order to achieve political and economic goals.

The final panel examined consumer movements, their responses to accelerated marketing, and their own efforts regarding consumer engineering. The emergence of consumer movements highlights the importance of new institutions in marketing apart from companies and individuals as actors in marketing processes. GISELLE NATH (Ghent) presented the example of two competing Belgian consumer movements and their product testing to show the importance of such actors as a counterweight to corporate consumer engineering. While testing products is a rather technocratic process, both consumer movements became engaged in politics when trying to „educate the consumer.” KEVIN RICK (Marburg) traced the historical roots of the German consumer association (*Verbraucherzentrale*) and its efforts to organize collective action on the markets. These consumer advice centers were established as a means to achieve a political goal set by Ger-

man ministries: rational choices of individuals to promote growth of the German economy in the 1950s. In contrast to the more activist consumer movement approaches of Hugo Schui, the state-established consumer association provided practical product information that was regarded as useful by the consumers. The *Verbraucherzentrale* is one example of how important the state has been as an actor in shaping consumption regimes and influencing consumer behavior. The final paper, by GÜNTER SILBERER (Göttingen), analyzed product testing done by the *Stiftung Warentest*, the German product testing association established in the 1960s. Silberer highlighted the indirect influence of such product testing on consumers. The test results were often circulated in an indirect, mouth-to-mouth fashion. With these results, Silberer questioned the direct influence of *Stiftung Warentest* on consumer engineering, while at the same time showing that the product tests – designed to create rational and informed consumers – were also an important and influential tool for companies' marketing strategies.

The conference explored a broad spectrum of actors engaged in consumer engineering as a variant of modern marketing, ranging from individuals and businesses to civic associations and nation states. Hartmut Berghoff noted that the provocative term „consumer engineering“ provides a good starting point for further research and could be used as a heuristic tool to explore the spheres of actors engaged in marketing as a social technique. It became clear that consumer engineering is not as straightforward as the term „engineering“ suggests. The explorations of different ways of consumer engineering showed the variety and complexity of direct and indirect ways of influencing consumers and consumption, calling for further research on the channels of consumer engineering.

Several contributions and the discussions highlighted the high degree of transnationalism that was involved in the exchange of ideas and techniques of consumer or consumption engineering. The gathering of knowledge about the consumer and the emergence of professional marketing research techniques were not only an outcome of companies' and marketing experts' activities; the contribu-

tions demonstrated the political elements of consumer engineering and highlighted the importance of new institutions such as consumer movements for marketing and consumer engineering from the 1950s through the 1970s. At economic turning-points during the time period under consideration, the „consumer engineers“ were important actors when businesses and economies reached their „limits of growth.“ In the end, the conference showed that the term „consumer engineering“ and its meaning have a double-faced character. Consumer engineering was first based on the belief that it was possible to actively manipulate a uniformed consumer but then evolved into a reactive instrument of a variety of actors who tried to master the challenges of increasingly complex and anonymous markets.

Conference overview:

Introductory remarks:

Jan Logemann (Göttingen)

Keynote Panel: Consumer Engineering and Innovations: Costs and Benefits

Andrew Godley (Reading), Cost of Market-making Innovations: the Business Perspective

Gary Cross (State College), What does „Fast Capitalism“ Mean for Consumers?

Panel II: Business Strategies in Postwar Western Europe

Chair: Hartmut Berghoff (Washington D.C. / Göttingen)

Orsi Husz (Uppsala), Swedish Kitchens – Social Engineering and the Consumer

Thomas Turner (London), Old Sports, New Shoes: Product Innovation, Consumer Engineering, and the Consumption of German Sports Footwear, c. 1950 – c. 1980

Ingo Köhler (Göttingen), Market Research as a Means of Consumer Engineering

Panel III: Designing Places of Consumption

Chair: Alexander Engel (Göttingen)

Regina Blaszczyk (Leeds), Engineering VIP Interior: William Pahlmann and the Aesthetics of Individualism in Postwar America

Joseph Malherek (Washington D.C.), Shopping Malls and Social Democracy: Victor

Gruen's Postwar Campaign for Conscientious Consumption in American Suburbia

Guillaume de Syon (Reading), Concorde and Consumers: Engineering Desire for a Technological Icon, 1959-1979

Panel IV: Social Engineering and Rationalizing Consumption

Chair: David Kuchenbuch (Gießen)

Uwe Spiekermann (Washington D.C.), Organizing Sellers – Rationalizing Society: Victor Vogt's Verkaufspraxis and the American-German Flow of Practical Business Knowledge, 1925-1943

Oliver Kühschelm (Vienna), Engineering Patriotism? Buy-National Campaigns from Austria, Britain and Switzerland, 1910-1970

Mara Marginean (Bucharest), Rationalized abundance. Visualizing well-being in Romania during the 1950s

Panel V: Consumer Movements and the Response to Consumer Engineering

Chair: Steffen Jahn (Göttingen)

Giselle Nath (Ghent), Belgian Consumer Movements between Hopes for Modernist Engineering and Countercultural Critiques

Kevin Rick (Marburg), „The Consumer Crusader“: Hugo Schui and the German Consumers' Association. An Example of a More Activist Approach to German Consumer Organization?

Günter Silberer (Göttingen), Engineering an Empowered Consumer by Publishing Consumer Reports?

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