

# Britain's caring consumers

CONSUMERISM CAN ALSO BE ETHICAL AND CARING

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**B**RITAIN TODAY IS A NATION of über-consumers. Britons are top in Europe when it comes to unsecured debt. Shopping, leisure and tourism are expanding by leaps and bounds. In politics, New Labour has put consumerism at the centre of public service reforms. Some commentators see this as a dangerous trend. Affluence has made people selfish, fat and short-sighted, they say, eroding both civic life and moral responsibility. We have become addicted to a 'buy now, pay later' lifestyle, caring less and less about either personal bankruptcy or global meltdown.

But this is a distorted view that misses how and why consumption is changing. Our research finds Britain retaining a distinct culture of consumption. To most people, consumption is connected to caring – caring about their family and community, about animal welfare and distant producers, as well as about their own pleasures.

In fact, when it comes to public services like health and social care, most people want to be treated as members of the public, not consumers. Consuming, both private and public, is about more than shopping.

Britain shares in some international trends. Like consumers elsewhere, Britons are eating out more. But it is striking how differences between cultures of consumption continue even in our global age. Better-off British and French people spend more time and money on eating out than their American counterparts. Food here carries greater social status.

People in Britain also read more than they did 30 years ago – 27 minutes a day instead of 22 – while the trend in the US has been the opposite. But behind these averages lurks an interesting picture: fewer people read overall, but those who do, read more, especially men, the educated and people in retirement or without children.

Consumption involves habits and routines, from watching TV or gardening to having a daily (often twice daily) shower or spending weekends on DIY projects. A quarter of British adults enjoy home improvement, a phenomenon that cannot be understood as simply a choice at the point of purchase or an expression of status distinction. With the help of non-drip paints and power tools, consumers take on new DIY projects. Far from being passive dupes, many are becoming skilful craftsmen.

To what extent are consumers now in the driver's seat? Has the rise of more assertive consumers in the commercial sector spilled over into public life more generally? Some patients, for example, want to be active consumers. They print out medical reports from the internet and switch doctors if they feel badly treated. But just as many are passive, relying on the professional to have the knowledge and make the decisions for them.

More generally, New Labour's attempts to make public services more consumerist has had mixed results. In health and social care, most users reject the idea of being a consumer. They want skilled people they can trust, but they believe public services are different from going

shopping. Many worry about the consequences of choice on their multiple relationships with services as users, taxpayers, members of the community and carers.

The last 20 years have seen the rise of an increasingly affluent ageing consumer. Only 30 years ago, retired people lived differently from the rest of the population, mostly poor and cut off from the brave new world of consumer durables. That gap has narrowed dramatically. Recreation and leisure spending have become more similar, and so has the ownership new technologies.

Of course, not all people in their later years live a fun-packed lifestyle. Some are poor or suffer from ill health. But the broad trend of convergence is significant, as the baby-boomer generation now entering retirement picks up homes in the Mediterranean and seeks to live out the material dreams of their childhood, when their parents first took them on cheap charter flights to Italy and Spain. That Britons are now richer and consume more than at any time in the past does not necessarily mean they

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care less about others or about public life. Four out of five households in Britain own their homes and sit on a growing asset. If they chose, they could easily spend it in Monte Carlo or on designer clothes, through mortgage equity withdrawal. Yet most are suspicious of using housing wealth for luxury consumption.

More and more Britons go to farm shops, buy organic or grow their own food. They care about the health of their children, about taste and their community and about the environment. Appeals to personal responsibility and lifestyle change, however, produce ambivalent responses: many feel that as individuals they can have little impact on global environmental problems.

Even media consumption is breeding less apathy than people think. Four out of five Britons watch the news as a matter of habit. The problem is not that people are not interested in politics, it is that they distrust politicians.

Consumption in private and public life is a central concern in Britain in 2007, stretching from public service reform and the rise of ethical consumerism to debates about sustainability. It is tempting to see all this as new. But much builds on a longer history of morals and changing lifestyles. It was in the 19th century that citizens first came to flex their muscles as consumers. What makes our times different from a century ago is that then to be a civic consumer meant to defend free trade not fair trade.

Consumers today continue to care about the world they live in. What they find more difficult is to think of themselves as 'citizen-consumers' in the same breath. ■