
Conference at the University of Göttingen, March 26-28, 2015. Co-organized by the Institute for Social and Economic History, University of Göttingen, and the GHI Washington. Conveners: Gary Cross (Pennsylvania State University), Ingo Köhler (University of Göttingen), Jan Logemann (University of Göttingen). Participants: Hartmut Berghoff (GHI), Regina Błaszczyk (University of Leeds), Andrew Godley (University of Reading), Orsi Husz (University of Uppsala), Steffen Jahn (University of Göttingen), David Kuchenbuch (University of Gießen), Oliver Kühschelm (University of Vienna), Joseph Malherek (George Washington University), Mara Marginean (Romanian Academy, Institute of History), Giselle Nath (Ghent University), Kevin Rick (University of Marburg), Günter Silberer (University of Göttingen), Uwe Spiekermann (GHI), Guillaume de Syon (Albright College), Thomas Turner (London College of Fashion / Birkbeck College).

The history of marketing has a long tradition in the United States, and recently Europe, too, has begun to focus historical research on marketing, its techniques, and its 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, colors and 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 part of 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 highlighted the importance of the adaptation of marketing techniques in transnational exchanges since 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 encouraged 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. Viewing 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. Despite initially emerging 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 had adapted to broad changes in economic and social circumstances by the 1970s.

The keynote panel contrasted the costs of increased marketing for consumers and entrepreneurs and provided two important methodological perspectives for marketing history and consumer engineering. Andrew Godley based his arguments on the framework of institutional economics and transaction cost theory. He stressed the importance of the interaction between companies through their marketing professionals and the consumer of the final product. Here marketing communication is essential in fostering the necessary trust that can overcome the information asymmetries between the two parties. Without “market-making,” that is, articulating what a product innovation can do for the consumer, such potential markets can easily fail. For this, Godley used the example of the failure of some of Merck’s pharmaceutical innovations in the 1950s. Gary Cross 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 recordings 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 for marketing and new consumer engineering strategies. The keynote panel thus examined different “rationalities” for 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 during the postwar period in Western Europe and showed that product strategies had to be adapted to changing consumer attitudes. Orsi Husz’s analysis of IKEA and its kitchens showed how 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 not only 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 American phenomena. By looking at Adidas and the German sports footwear industry, Thomas Turner 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 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, rivalries between carmakers flourished. 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 emotional and rational qualities 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 in companies’ internationalization strategies.

The third panel shifted the focus from companies 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 focused her paper on William Pahlmann, an interior designer from the 1940s to the 1960s. Her research highlighted how interior designers like Pahlmann did not see themselves as direct “taste makers,” but as interpreters of existing tastes in the emerging American mass market in 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 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 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 its futuristic interior and the 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 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 American ideas were also connected with German business practices, showing that there is no simple, common narrative of consumer engineering or westernization. Oliver Kühschelm’s 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 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 that were apart from companies and individuals as actors in marketing processes. Giselle Nath 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 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 German ministries: to promote the growth of the German economy in the 1950s through individuals’ own rational choices. In contrast to the more activist consumer movement approaches of Hugo Schui, the state-established consumer association provided practical product information that consumers viewed as useful. The Verbraucherzentrale is one example of how important the state was as an actor in shaping consumption regimes and influencing consumer behavior. The final paper, by Günter Silberer, analyzed product testing performed 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 the different types of consumer engineering revealed the variety and complexity of direct and indirect methods for influencing consumers and consumption, calling for further research on the channels of consumer engineering.

Several contributions and discussions highlighted the high degree of transnationalism that was involved in the exchange of ideas and techniques on consumer and consumption engineering. The emergence of professional marketing research techniques and the resulting accumulation of knowledge about consumers were not only an outcome of companies’ and marketing experts’ activities; the
contributions also 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 had reached their “limits of growth.” In the end, the conference showed that the term “consumer engineering” and its meaning is multifaceted. Consumer engineering was first based on the belief that it was possible to actively manipulate a uniformed consumer, but it then evolved into a reactive instrument of a variety of actors who tried to master the challenges of increasingly complex and anonymous markets.

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