

Water consumption research

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



Introduction I come from China and studying in London has enlightened me about some of the secrets of “capitalist society” particularly Tesco and Waitrose such as the popularity of fair-trade products. Observing the Western way of consumption often gives a bit cultural shock which made me rethink the Chinese way of consumption. For example, Evian is just a common bottled water brand here and is much cheaper than it is in China. If average residents’ income is taken into consideration Evian in China is really “luxury” (see appendix 1 for price comparison with Nestle). Even for white-collar workers in big cities like Beijing and Shanghai it would be a considerable cost if they choose only Evian as drinking water.

Bottled water is a ubiquitous commodity and its consumption continues to increase rapidly (Wilk, 2006). It is frequently studied with comparison to tap water or be criticized for single-serve disposable containers and not sustainable (Azoulay et al 2001; Doria 2006; Ferrier 2001). In China I was not a consumer of Evian as there were many cheaper alternatives. And I would not be surprised if some rich Chinese drink Evian every day.

However according to my memories some young people, who were students and did not earn money, claim that they were fans of Evian, who never forget to take one bottle of Evian when they had group activities, like taking an LV. It seems that this kind of behavior is a new way of ‘conspicuous consumption’ in everyday life which is definitely unsustainable (Wilk, 2006). On the other hand, irrational consumers just buy a product out of pulse and some of them are not aware of the forces that drive them to buy the product.

For these consumers the meaning of this bottled water is far beyond Marx’s

use-value is more concerned with the benefits sought from using a particular product. The customers seek different benefits from a particular and this significantly plays a major role in influencing their behaviour to buy such product (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010). For those people, what kind of magic does Evian have to get them pay for it? With this in mind, I suppose researching the ways in which people consume expensive bottled water while much cheaper alternatives are abundant would provide a stimulating focus.

This research aims to explore in the case of Evian consumption—the kind of meanings the consumer creates and find them in Evian. Through this consumption, what information about herself does she want to communicate to others? Also, this research aims to explore how consumer behavior is shaped in different cultural context. In conclusion—it will give suggestions about sustainable consumption.

Methodology

I conducted a semi-structured individual interview with a 22 years old Chinese female student—Zhu . When she was in China—she was a fan of Evian. While the interviewee did most of the talking in the conversation—I was also an active participant. If her answer was highly related to the theme—I would ask follow-up questions to generate further details (Roulston , 2008). This research aims to access the interviewee' s personal feelings about understandings about Evian consumption with detailed inquiry. Following a full transcription of the interview recording(see appendix 1)This research should be treated with limitations—as it is not as representative as social survey methodology. However—deeper insights can be gained from the

research through interviews. According to Struwig (2000), the major strength of conducting interviews in person is that first hand information about customer preferences is obtained.

Evian bottled water is not expensive here. Indeed it is quite common in European cities. Water is the most common consumption for the human being. Sustainable water consumption is crucial for every country. While bottled water is often criticized for its unsustainability (Wilk, 2006) it seems ridiculous that some Chinese consumers spend money on so expensive bottled water and developed a kind of “water fetish”. Thus, when consumers are willing to spend more money on a particular product that has a high price while there relatively cheaper alternatives, their consumption behaviors are likely to be analyzed with the theory of conspicuous consumption or they are regarded as irrational consumers (Wilk, 2006). Instead of the widely held belief that consumers are passive, it can be noted that these people are active and they create meaning from the information they have about the product. This research through in-depth interview method, without presumption that consumers are rational or irrational, seeks to explore the meanings the interviewee found in Evian.

Object which is a signifier together with meanings signified by it consist a sign

Sign = object + meaning = signifier + signified

Through understanding consumer's feelings and experience in Evian consumption I want to explore the symbolic meanings of this product in a certain social and cultural context as well as how these meanings have been constructed. This is important to sustainable everyday consumption because

people usually buy certain products as a result of the benefits they are likely to get from

How consumer endow meanings to the things they consume—compared to the advertising images of the product—what is playing a dominant role in consumer's behavior—How have Chinese consumers developed this fetish—What does Evian means to them—What kind of meaning do they attach to Evian— Overall, the research seeks to establish the main forces that drive the Chinese consumers to purchase the Evian product while there are numerous substitutes in the market that are relatively cheaper.

Basically—semiotics is the study of signs and their meanings. . According to Saussure—sign consists of the signifier— which is the form which the signs takes(the word brother)— and the signified— which is the concepts represents(the concept of brother). Influenced by Saussure's classic linguistic sign model—Baudrillard views object as a complex system of signs and significations in modern consumer culture. In contemporary society—people are symbol-using beings (Craib1998)—who are primarily“ employing consumer goods as ' signs' rather than as ' things' (Campbell—1997: 340)They create meanings and find them in consumer goods(Belk, 1995).

However— there is little research is about ' luxury' bottled water(Wilk, 2006). Evian consumption in China—is characterized by a transforming society where social value is shaping—unstable—and sometimes abnormal.

Criticizing Marx's concept of “ use-value”—Baudrillard(1970)argues that the symbolic value— or the sign value of an object is playing a dominant role in consumption because the prime value of the object is in

communication—rather than in use. Campbell (1997: 340) also suggests people ‘communicate information about themselves to others’ in consumption. It is increasingly agreed that people are aware of this kind of communication in contemporary society. In their ethnographic research—Douglas and Isherwood(1980)observes that people continually scan and read products for the information they need. In a more general way—they scan the society for this kind of information.

Empirical Findings

The interviewee started to drink Evian frequently after she had entered the university in China. She said she had consumed two bottles a day. When asked to recall the first time she knew about Evian—she described a scene happened when she was a middle school student.

“ Yes—I knew it when I was in the middle school.”

“ It was on a journey to Beijing with my parents. We were in a nice hotel—which was rated five-star. . I saw there was a bottle of water on the desk and I had it. However—the hotel charged us 30 Yuan when we checked out—the brand of the water was Evian. You know—30 RMB could buy a lot of snacks in 2005!”

From her description—this scene happened in a ‘luxury’consumption place – a five-star hotel. At the moment she drank the water—she did not realize this brand was so expensive. When she knew the price—she was surprised.

“ I was surprised. WAHAHA was 1 RMB at that time. I thought the brand was so luxury—which was sold in a luxury place.”

In the above quotation—Zhu mentioned another brand of bottled water- WAHAHA—which was very common in China and much cheaper than Evian.

Compared to the price of WAHHA and from her imagination caused by the luxury consumption place she made a conclusion that Evian is luxury. This was her first impression about Evian.

When asked to explain the reason she became a fan of Evian in the university she said she was influenced by a good friend.

“ I had a good friend we were in the same class in the university. I followed her.”

“ It seems only us. You know, my university is in Qingdao, which is not as fashionable as big cities like Beijing and Shanghai. I guess that’s one of the reasons that not so many people drank Evian.”

“ They said it was fashionable and unique.”

“ I guess most of them had heard about this brand as several classmates had asked me if I only drank Evian. So they must know this brand or they would not ask this question.”

When asked how many people in her class were consumers of Evian Zhu said only herself and her friend. However she supposed other students knew this brand because they had talked about Evian with her and said it was ‘ fashionable’and ‘ unique’. She also mentioned that the city of Qingdao where she did her undergraduate study was not ‘ fashionable’. It seems that ‘ fashion’is important to the interviewee.

When asked how many she knew about the history and background of this brand she said few about the information I asked but talked about the collection of Evian limited editions.

“ It’s from France maybe a small town there I can’t remember. It was said water in that town could be used as treatment to skin diseases.”

“ Evian also produces cosmetic. Do you know that Evian spray? Evian often cooperate with some famous artists and issue limited editions.”

“ Water? bottled water. Frankly the design of the limited edition bottles are very special.”

“ Because they are designed by famous artists ? I have one from Elie Saab? one from Issey Miyake.” Oh? I also have one from Jean Paul Gaultier!”

Her collection activity shows that shows that she consumes Evian brand of water in order to be conspicuous. She seeks to create identity from consuming the brand.

Discussion

Through the consumption consumer distinct from people drinking cheap and common bottled water? distinction. In addition, products are being transformed to signs of distinction during consumption (Bourdieu, 2003 {1986}). Through consumption of a particular product, it can be noted that the consumers can communicate different messages about it among themselves. If satisfied with the product, the consumers can invite others to try it.

To understand it? we should understand the product' s differences with others. The value of the product lies in its symbolic differences from other products. The other important thing to note is that consumers distinguish themselves from the others through the products they consume. The consumers often use the information they have about the product to purchase it.

Moreover, consumer has desire for identification and distinction. They meet this desire by seeking distinctive symbolic values from products. They

continually compare one product from others, making sure the difference exist. One of the most well-known distinction processes is Veblen's conspicuous consumption. Everybody has a desire to be unique. " Being is different from others or becoming distinctive among a larger group often results from signals conveyed by material objects that consumers choose to display" (Tian et al, 2001: 50). Thus, consumption can be conceptualized as a way of identity creation where the consumers choose the social groups they desire to belong to. Consumption too can be a source of status in the society.

Evian is a sign of wealth and taste. Through Evian consumption, consumer intends to convey the information to others.

Asked to describe the first time she knows about Evian, Zhu recalled a journey to Beijing with her parents nine years ago.

"...The hotel was nice, a five-star one. After checking in I was very thirsty. I saw there is bottled water on the desk of our room. I suppose it was given by the hotel and I drank. However, it cost my parents 40 Yuan. We were so surprised! 40 Yuan for a bottle of water?..."

As this quotation shows, consumer's first impression of Evian was expensive.

In a specific social and cultural context, Evian signified wealth and taste.

Through Evian consumption, consumer wants to communicate this information to others.

On one hand, consumers want to convey information about themselves to others. Evian can convey messages of wealth, taste and distinction.

Consumer also make herself belong to certain groups share the same value.

Communities, fans, reproduce the signs.

“ It would be embarrassing if the price of the bottle water that I bought were much cheaper than my friends. In other words, communication would become much easier by using the same or similar product. Especially for girls.”

On the other hand consumers are scanning the society for the people who share the same ‘ code’. Individuals constantly balance between individuality and interdependence (von der Lippe, 1998).

Symbolic values of things do not always stay the same. It should be discussed under specific social and culture context.

“ Well, when I purchase bottle water, you know, it will feel much confidence to buy such a “ special” product, especially hanging out with friends. That is not a way to show-off, but finding an approach to make yourself different from others. ”

From the quotation we can see that distinction plays a more important role in Evian Consumption. In the communication of distinction and identification, the products’ symbolic values are of prime importance (McCracken, 1988, Rocamora, 2002).

Conclusion

In contemporary consumption society consumers are surrounded by images or texts created by advertising and marketing. Consumers’ choice are influenced by consumption places, prices, cultural taste and many other factors. However, consumer’s feelings about one product are personal and different according to their life experience and memories. In other words consumers can find different meanings on one product. In this case the dominant meaning the consumer finds is ‘ distinction’.. Through

consumption she wants to be distinctive from others and conveys this information to others. For Zhu consumption is a way of communication as well as a way of identification. The reasons roots in her personal experience in which her classmates were distinctive from her through consumption. This case reflects the anxiety of consumption in contemporary China which is at a transforming stage from planned economy to market-led economy. In the past two decades Chinese have witnessed a huge shift in the abundance of consumer products. It seems that their desire of consumption has been released which sometimes in an irregular way. As Nancy and Aron (1998) observe Chinese' s consumption especially conspicuous consumption is a process of "I have to" - Have to show wealth have to show taste have to show differences from others.

In this case, according to the consumer, Evian is pure and healthy, but it is not the main reason for purchase. Consumer buys it for communicate with the society. They identify themselves through connecting self-images with symbolic meanings of products.

In this commercial society product is presented with brand cover images and so on by adverting and marketing. However, according to individual consumer what they have seen from the product may be different from each other. In another words people create meanings and find them in the products based on their life experience and memories but these meanings are personally different and variable. This can explain why when Evian goes into the supermarket but the consumer still think it is high-level as she has a memory of it.

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