practice. Although less time (on average 12 minutes per day) was spent reading in the Netherlands in 1995 than in 1975, this is still the country where people read the most. The reason is institutional and historical. The Netherlands has a state ‘literacy policy’ with the objective of promoting a flourishing literary life in the Netherlands and includes support of the book industry through the ‘book price’ scheme, extensive library provision and policies directed at promoting reading for leisure. State support for particular ways of organising everyday activities makes a difference.

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CULTURES OF CONSUMPTION

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- to explain the shifting local, metropolitan and transnational boundaries of cultures of consumption
- to explore consumption in the domestic sphere
- to investigate alternative and sustainable consumption
- to develop an interface between cutting-edge academic research and public debate.

For further details take a look at our website www.consume.bbk.ac.uk or contact

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How globalisation is changing consumption is a crucial and controversial question. Multinational and transnational production and the internationalisation of the cultural industries and media communication produce pressures towards the diffusion of common consumption everywhere. Some see a process of Americanisation, others the spread of a cosmopolitan culture. Critics argue that local and national distinctions are not eliminated. When globalising forces collide with established, historically entrenched and local patterns of practice and taste, foreign elements may be adopted, adapted, transformed or rejected entirely. Our study sought to clarify accounts of the effects of globalisation by comparing trajectories of consumption norms in different countries, looking for signs of convergence and divergence. It charted the development of consumer cultures in four European societies and compared their experience with that of the USA.

KEY FINDINGS

There is no overarching tendency towards a homogeneous global culture of consumption. National societies exhibit far too much specificity and diversity for this to be the case. At the same time, however, there are no significant indications of increasing divergence within or between countries.

In general there is evidence of patterns fluctuating from country to country. Much of the observed change in behaviour can only be explained satisfactorily with reference to distinctive features of local and national institutional configurations. Globalization is not an all-encompassing process. The evidence for Americanisation is weak, with the USA often lying at one of the extremes when compared with Britain, France, Norway and the Netherlands, though convergence in the future cannot be ruled out.

Internal differentiation based on socio-demographic divisions of gender, life course stage and social status continues to characterise consumption behaviour, though there is evidence of its re-structuring in the final quarter of the 20th century.

HIGHLIGHTS

Individualistic and instrumentalist explanations dominate in the study of consumption with the result that personal preference and freedom of choice provide the main frame of reference. This study adopted a distinctive, alternative approach, rooted in theories of practice. The basic assumption is that consumption occurs as people appropriate items in the course of engaging in a particular practice. Being a competent and committed practitioner requires appropriation of the requisite services, possession of appropriate tools, and devotion of a suitable level of attention to the conduct of the practice. That is to say activity generates wants, rather than vice versa. For example, the paraphernalia of the soccer supporter – team shirts, match tickets, newspaper reports, memorabilia, etc – are more directly the consequence of engagement in the practice of supporting a football team than they are of individual taste or choice. Such a view stresses the routine, collective and conventional nature of much consumption. One achievement was to demonstrate that the theoretical orientation toward practice can be applied sensibly to consumption at the national level to understand practices like eating, reading and travelling.

There is some support for most of the general and theoretical claims about the nature of the diffusion of consumer culture but none fit closely the evidence garnered in the study. There are a very few common trends, with people everywhere spending less time cooking, less money on food to eat at home, and devoting more time and money to eating out. But even then, the meanings are not the same. For example, eating out differs symbolically between countries, its greater status, in countries like Britain and France, attested to by allocation of large amounts of both time
Findings: Devising from the Norm: the uneven diffusion of cultures of consumption

Global supply; varied practice

Photo: Jon Wilson

varied practice

Global supply;

23

That said, however, there are no significant indications of increasing divergence within or between the European countries. American consumption patterns remain highly distinctive when compared overall to the European experiences, with the USA often lying at one of the extremes in our specific comparisons. For example, Americans read less, spend less time eating at home, and make much less use of public transport (see Table 1). Nevertheless, we find little evidence of divergence in trends between America and Europe.

One indication of convergence around a unified and unifying consumer culture would be that differences in consumption based upon income, class, age, household type, etc would diminish, a tendency anticipated in accounts of postmodern culture. Internal differentiation based on socio-demographic divisions of gender, age and social status continues to characterise consumption behaviour. One telling example concerns the persistence of gender divisions in the area of food preparation and consumption. Women in all five countries in our survey cook much more and eat out less than men. Nevertheless, there is evidence of re-structuring in the final quarter of the 20th century. Men are cooking more, women a great deal less, and women are now spending almost as much time eating as men. Domestic food practice is becoming more similar for women and men, and for households of different types than it was in the 1970s. The presence of children and levels of education are becoming more significant predictors of behaviour.

and money, especially amongst the most affluent and highly educated social groups. Norway, by contrast, despite being the richest country in the world, still mostly eats at home, there being little apparent social kudos to eating out.

There is no overarching tendency towards a homogeneous global culture of consumption. Within Europe, patterns of consumption vary from country to country, and much of the observed change in behaviour, and the interpretation of its significance, can only be explained satisfactorily with reference to distinctive features of local and national institutional arrangements. In the Netherlands, considerable official concern is expressed about a decline in time spent reading. Yet the Dutch still read more than any other population, a legacy of past policy. The French, exceptionally, spend as much time on domestic meals in 2000 as they did in 1974. The British spend far more time eating at home, there having been a substantial increase since the mid-1970s.

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Preceding Table 1: Selected aspects of country differences in time-use and expenditure.

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Preceding Table 2: Change in time spent reading.

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Preceding Table 3: Change in time spent reading.

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There is no overarching tendency towards a homogeneous global culture of consumption. Within Europe, patterns of consumption vary from country to country, and much of the observed change in behaviour, and the interpretation of its significance, can only be explained satisfactorily with reference to distinctive features of local and national institutional arrangements. In the Netherlands, considerable official concern is expressed about a decline in time spent reading. Yet the Dutch still read more than any other population, a legacy of past policy. The French, exceptionally, spend as much time on domestic meals than any other population travelling, there having been a substantial increase since the mid-1970s.

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Nevertheless, we find little evidence of divergence in trends between America and Europe. Much of our analysis was based upon evidence of time-use which proved very illuminating for the purpose. When using time-use and household expenditure as measures of resource allocation, most often changes occur in parallel such that similar trends are identified by each.

MESSAGES FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

This study describes long-run trends in the organisation of everyday life. It shows the value of putting typical aspects of consumption behaviour into a long-term perspective. In Britain to-day, for example, problems of youth socialization have been blamed on the decline of the family meal. But our research shows that contrary to popular belief, families are likely to eat together in much the same way as they would have done 30 years ago. In 1975, 87 per cent of meals at home were eaten in less than 30 minutes, 12 per cent lasted 30 to 60 minutes and one per cent lasted more than 60 minutes. In 2000, 83 per cent of meals at home were eaten in less than 30 minutes, 15 per cent lasted 30 to 60 minutes and two per cent lasted more than 60 minutes. Despite dropping, on average, one meal eaten at home per week, people spend as much time over each meal at home in 2000 as they did 25 years previously. Our study also highlights the importance of putting national experience into a comparative perspective. To understand properly the social and cultural implications of economic and political globalisation requires cross-national comparative research. For example, there is public concern that people are reading less, anxiety appearing greatest in the Netherlands. It is believed that time spent reading has declined; that the reading of books has diminished most rapidly; that reading is increasingly concentrated in a small minority of the population in a ‘reading class’. Consider Table 2. In France, the UK and Norway reading is increasing, and in France and the UK this is book as opposed to magazine and newspaper reading. ‘De-reading’ seems to occur to any great extent only in the USA, where significant reduction in time spent reading leaves only a small minority of its population engaging in the

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<th>UK</th>
<th>France</th>
<th>Norway</th>
<th>Netherlands</th>
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<tr>
<td>% who spend on motoring</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>41</td>
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<tr>
<td>% who spend on fares</td>
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<td>48</td>
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### Table 2: Change in time spent reading

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<tr>
<td>Mean minutes, survey population</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>27</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mean minutes, participants only</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>46</td>
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<td>Book</td>
<td>95</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>39</td>
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<tr>
<td>Magazines/newspapers</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>33</td>
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<th>Participation rate %</th>
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<tr>
<td>Book</td>
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<td>Magazines/newspapers</td>
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Findings: Deviating from the Norm: the uneven diffusion of cultures of consumption

Methodology

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Project team: Alan Warde Dale Southerton Wendy Olsen Shu-Li Cheng

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