A Means-End-Chain analysis of pub visits in Belgium

Bert Weijters (*)
Steve Muylle
Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School

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(*) Contact author:
Bert Weijters
Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School
mailto:bert.weijters@vlerick.be
Tel: +32 9 210 9876 - Fax: +32 9 210 9875
Reep 1, BE-9000 Gent, Belgium

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Introduction

Going for a drink is a popular leisure activity in Belgium as in many other European countries. Slightly more than half of Belgian adults aged 18-75 years visit a pub at least once a month (Glorieux et al. 2005). However, there are clear indications that there is no reason for complacency from the part of pub owners, brewers, and other stakeholders in this sector. The number of pubs has seen a steady decline over the last years, going down from 25,099 in 1998 to 18,590 in 2006 (www.statbel.fgov.be/). Similar to The Prince of Whales’ “Pub is the hub” campaign in Britain (cf. www.pubisthehub.uk), in Belgium too non-profit organizations have been fighting to save the country’s fast-disappearing local pubs. These efforts strongly suggest that pubs have a social function to fulfil. On the other hand the downward trend in the market indicates that the social function of pubs may be decreasing in importance and/or may be fulfilled in other ways. Anecdotic and proprietary evidence suggests that the negative trend is especially apparent among young adults, defined as people aged 18 through 30 years. These consumers appear to visit pubs less often than previous cohorts used to do.

Research objective

The research objective of the current study was to identify what goals young adults want to realize by going for a drink. We study this issue at two levels, assessing (1) why consumers go for a drink, and (2) why consumers select a specific pub. From a managerial perspective, we want to identify goals that are fulfilled by going for a drink (to assess what substitutes might be available to consumers), as well as attributes of pubs that may make it more or less attractive than other pubs.

Conceptual background

Means-End Chain theory

Means-End Chain (MEC) theory clarifies the mechanism by which values guide consumer behaviour. In particular, MEC theory states that consumers select offers (products/services) with attributes that are instrumental in achieving their desired consequences. These consequences are desired in as far as they relate to consumers’ values. MEC has a long history. Gutman and Reynolds (1979) introduced the concept, with a focus on qualitative in-depth understanding of consumer motives. Reynolds and Gutman (1988) made MEC well-accepted by providing a hands-on description of how to conduct, analyze and use MEC interviews. MEC has been a popular and ever-evolving research domain since (e.g., Kaciak and Cullen 2006).

MEC theory is closely related to MEC interviewing techniques. In a MEC interview, also frequently described as a laddering interview, respondents identify attributes and attribute levels of a product (e.g., strong taste), link the attribute levels to one or more consequences (e.g., feel pleasure) and to one or more values (e.g., hedonism). Respondents are probed to link the subsequent Attributes (A), Consequences (C) and Values (V) by repeatedly asking the question “why is that important to you?” and by means of additional probing techniques (cf. Reynolds and Gutman 1988). Based on the resulting MEC’s, researchers can better understand what a consumer tries to achieve by consuming a product/service. From a practical perspective, MEC’s can provide indications of what attribute levels are important to consumers and why.
**Personal values**

The importance of personal values in predicting and understanding consumer behaviour has been proven in theory and practice (Kamakura and Novak, 1992; Steenkamp & Burgess, 2002; Steenkamp, ter Hofstede, & Wedel 1999). The relevance of personal values has been clearly indicated by Kamakura and Mazzon (1991): “Values provide potentially powerful explanations of human behavior because they serve as the standards or criteria of conduct […], tend to be limited in number […], and are remarkably stable over time […].” In line with this, several authors have called for a focus on consumer motivations and goals in marketing research (Ratneshwar, Mick & Huffman, 2000; Reynolds and Olson, 2001; Baumgartner, 2002). Insight in the values driving consumption is a useful base for the formulation of product development, positioning and advertising strategies (Reynolds and Olson, 2001).

We focus our attention on the Schwartz Value Survey (1992, 1995), because it has been extensively validated across cultures and because it provides a framework that is nearly exhaustive. Schwartz and Bilsky (1990) outline five formal features of personal values: “[Personal] values (a) are concepts or beliefs, (b) pertain to desirable end states or behaviours, (c) transcend specific situations, (d) guide selection or evaluation of behaviour and events and (e) are ordered by relative importance.” Schwartz (1992), and Schwartz and Sagiv (1995) define a set of 10 motivationally different types of personal values recognized across cultures and include them in a coherent circular structure; see Figure 1. Adjacent value types serve similar general goals. Opposing values have motivational meanings that relate to opposing interests. These relations are reflected in two basic dimensions.

**Figure 1: Schwartz’ (1992) typology of values**

![Schwartz' typology of values](image)

The vertical dimension (self-enhancement minus self-transcendence = resultant self-enhancement) opposes values emphasizing acceptance of others as equals and concern for their welfare (universalism and benevolence) to those emphasizing the pursuit of one’s own relative success and dominance over others (power and achievement). The horizontal dimension (conservation minus openness to change) opposes values emphasizing security and tradition to those emphasizing hedonism and self-direction. The two dimensions intersect at the origin, which represents the absence of values.
change = resultant conservation) opposes values emphasizing own independent thought and action and favoring change (self-direction and stimulation types) to those emphasizing submissive self-restriction, preservation of traditional practices and protection of stability (security, conformity, and tradition). Hedonism values cannot be univocally assigned to self-enhancement or openness to change and constitute the fuzzy border between these poles of the basic value dimensions.

**Method**

**Respondents**

We conducted means-end chain interviews with 65 respondents, all aged between 18 and 30 years (M = 23.0, SD = 2.8) and living in the Ghent area (Belgium). In our sample, we had 35 women. 32 respondents were students, the others were working.

**Instrument**

A topic guide served to structure the interviews. The topic guide consisted of two major parts. In a first part, respondents were asked to think about pubs and to identify the main attributes that set apart different pubs. In a second part, respondents then identified attributes, consequences and values related to specific pubs. Thus, the interviews led to means-end chains comprising attributes, consequences and values.

**Data collection**

The interviews took place at the respondents’ place and were recorded with a digital audio recorder. Before conducting the interviews, the interviewers got a two-hour training session on MEC theory and practice. All interviewers were students in a post-graduate marketing management programme.

**Data analysis**

In line with the MEC approach, we performed a content analysis on the interview transcripts as detailed in Reynolds and Gutman (1988). In particular, every element was assigned a label A, C or V (for attribute, consequence or value). As a point of reference in coding the values, we used the Schwarz value survey. Next, we constructed A-C-V ladders. The ladders were then summarized in an implication matrix, in which we coded how often each element led to each other element. Based on this implication matrix, we constructed a Hierarchical Value Map.

**Findings**

We obtained 239 ladders with an average length of 3.1 elements per ladder. In coding the data, we made two departures from the Schwarz value typology: (1) social recognition is used in stead of power and achievement values, as social recognition is a more specific value that is situated on the border between power and achievement, and social recognition seems to describe best what respondents intended; (2) although sense of belonging is part of the value domain security in the original typology, for the current study it seemed appropriate to distinguish between sense of belonging and the remainder security values.
The resulting hierarchical value map is shown in Figure 2a (here all links that occurred at least twice are shown) and a simplified map is shown in Figure 2b (here all links that occurred at least 8 times are shown).

Discussion

Key findings

The main attributes young adults consider when going for a drink relate to social and atmospheric elements. As for the social setting, consumers seem to look for a combination of having familiar people around, as well as unfamiliar people that nevertheless are somewhat related (similar interests, similar profile, e.g., age) or aspirational (people one wants to be associated with). As for the atmospheric elements, again many consumers are looking for a combination of familiarity (cosy interior) with stimulation providing elements (good music, a setting that is somehow different). The offerings (assortment of drinks) and the service provided were also often mentioned, and were commonly traded off against price. Finally, some hygienic factors came up, most notably a preference for spaces that were not too smoky, and clean facilities (especially toilets).

At the consequence level, a few clear central nodes appear in the hierarchical value map. Interaction with friends clearly plays a pivotal role, together with relaxation and feeling at ease, combined with enjoyment. Meeting new people and having new experiences were also often considered as positive consequences of visiting a pub. The importance of avoiding irritation suggests that many pubs do not provide satisfactory quality yet.

In order of importance, the following values were referred to most frequently (the %’s indicate in what percentage of ladders the value was encountered): hedonism (21%), security (15%), stimulation (13%), sense of belonging (11%), social recognition (10%), benevolence (8%), self-direction (8%), and conformity (5%). This indicates that going for a drink is a relatively balanced leisure activity that combines hedonism and stimulation with feeling secure (in the sense of being in a secure environment and being part of a group). Figure 3 summarizes the importance of the different values.

In summary, at all levels of analysis, we find that pubs offer social leisure by striking a balance between familiarity/security and stimulation.
Figure 2a: Detailed hierarchical value map of ‘going for a drink’ / pub choice
Figure 2b: Selective hierarchical value map of ‘going for a drink’ / pub choice
Theoretical implications

Whereas Schwarz’ theory (1992, 1995) implies that values at the openness pole and values at the conservation pole are antagonistic, our findings suggest that consumers may try to realize both type of value in the same consumption behaviour. Specifically, it was quite common for respondents to prefer a cosy setting (security) where they can then meet new people (stimulation), or to only go where there are many familiar people (sense of belonging, security) to have new experiences (see a concert, try new drinks,…). The openness-conservation axis has been related to optimal stimulation level in previous research (e.g., Steenkamp, ter Hofstede, & Wedel 1999). In this research stream, the focus has been on resultant conservation, suggesting that consumers tend to either lean towards the openness pole or the conservation pole, resulting in inter-individual differences in innovativeness. Our findings suggest another perspective on the openness-conservation axis, in that consumers may try to strike a balance between secure and stimulating elements in one consumption experience, thus fulfilling both types of needs by means of integration.

Practical implications

More than anything, success of pubs depends on their function as a social meeting place. This implies that any change in attendance will tend to result in a cascade effect, where ‘nothing attracts a crowd like a crowd’. This effect is likely to play for the whole branch as well as for individual pubs. Consequently, the main asset of pubs is their current customer base. These customers have to be used as a communication channel by (1) optimizing their level of involvement with the pub, (2) engaging them in generating word-of-mouth and member-gets-member-like campaigns.

A major challenge for individual pub owners is to strike a balance between creating a secure environment that at the same time provides a stimulating experience. Suggestions from our respondents include having both a cosy corner and a party
corner in one and the same pub. Also, consumers tend to feel socially insecure when entering a pub (feeling like being checked out, not being sure who will be there). This leads many consumers to meet up at someone’s place before going to the pub, or even without going to the pub at all. Pub owners may want to make sure consumers can enter the pub in a minimally conspicuous way and create a space where it feels comfortable to sit alone (by providing diversion like comics, newspapers,…, if only to signal “it is ok to be here alone”).

Finally, it is somewhat worrying that in time of decline of the sector, hygienic factors are not consistently satisfactory still. A very specific problem in this domain is air quality, with several respondents complaining about having to smoke passively and ending up with garments smelling of smoke. Whereas pub owners fear a smoking ban enforced by law, the current findings indicate that some consumers might consider this a plus. However, it should be noted that smokers tend to not mention ‘smoking allowed’ as a relevant attribute as at the time of data collection (October 2008), smoking was still allowed in all pubs in Belgium (not in eat cafés however).

**Limitation and future research**

The current study is limited in scope in different ways: geographically, demographically and in terms of consumption context. Generalizability is therefore necessarily limited. However, our findings have practical relevance by pointing out key success factors for pubs, and they have theoretical relevance by providing an interesting case where consumers integrate value realization of antagonistic values in one consumption experience. Future research should aim to (1) try and replicate our findings in different settings, and (2) translate our findings in testable hypotheses and empirically test them.
References

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