

'Granny Would be Proud': On the Labours of Doing Vintage, Practices and Emergent Socialities

Katherine Duffy, University of Strathclyde, UK

Paul Hewer, University of Strathclyde, UK

Juliette Wilson, University of Strathclyde, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper unpacks the ways in which consumer and seller practices construct the vintage marketplace. In this discussion the role of material objects and practices, the way that they intersect in vintage consumption, and how these vintage fashion objects are (re) used in this second-hand marketplace are explored. Discussion is based on ethnographic observations over a ten-month period at a twice monthly vintage market, 'Granny Would be Proud' in Glasgow, Scotland UK and in-depth interviews with key market practitioners. This was combined with visual analysis to explore the staging of the marketplace and the context of such practices. Our findings are organised in a number of themes that are important in understanding the practices of the vintage marketplace: vintage as a social practice, practicing the 'vintage look' and vintage as a skilled practice. In exploring these emergent themes the centrality of the practices in the construction of the marketplace is also illustrated.

The first outward sign that there is anything taking place in this side street restaurant is the crochet sign that hangs above the entrance exclaiming 'Granny Would be Proud Vintage market'. On the second level of the restaurant, in the eaves of this converted cinema, is a mixture of vintage clothes, jewellery, bags & briefcases, china & crockery. Rails of vintage furs, denim shorts and tea dresses fill the space, with tables laid out for stallholders with memorable finds, suitcases brimming over with silk scarves & neckties. People move from stall to stall and back again, excitedly chattering with friends. Vendors smile politely as people enter their area & try to engage with the people for a minute or two before they move on. There is a busy, bustling atmosphere, food smells waft from the restaurant below, stallholders drink tea & coffee from vintage china from the restaurant, 1940s and 50s music plays in the background and people wander about the stalls, rummaging, lifting, inspecting, coveting, new found treasures. (Fieldnotes, January 29th 2012)

INTRODUCTION

Vintage is a global phenomenon, from Decades in Los Angeles, Rellik in London to the Saint-Ouen markets of Paris. Vintage is often held as being in stark contrast to the perceived homogenised culture of mainstream fashion (Tungate 2008; Palmer 2005; Entwistle 2000 a) however through the rise in popularity and accessibility in the marketplace, vintage is changing the consumption landscape. In this paper vintage is conceptualised as a set of practices, of the actions of consumers that are tied to notions of belonging (Warde, 2005: Murphy & Patterson, 2011), of in essence the performance of 'doing vintage'. There has been much discussion of how practitioners mobilise knowledge, but far less focus on how this knowledge is apportioned into their practices (Magaudda 2011). This paper acknowledges this gap and explores the practices involved in producing and sustaining the vintage marketplace. Coming from the Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Schau et al. 2008) approach in which markets are seen as social and cultural constructs, the marketplace is unpacked with a focus on the collective effort needed in constructing the vintage market. The paper begins with a theoretical exploration of vintage and how it links to prior consumption studies and the materiality of the practice, before outlining the ethnographic methods employed in the marketplace: observation, visual analysis and depth semi-structured interviews with consumers and sellers, and then pro-

vides an empirical account of the 'doing' of vintage. Our findings and discussion highlight the emergent themes of the practices of vintage: the social nature, the skill involved and the enactment of vintage. These are explored and related to existing consumption theory.

Vintage is not new as a concept: second-hand markets and the trading of clothing has been a constant presence. It is a concept that has been explored in the consumption literature from flea markets (Belk et al, 1988; Sherry, 1990), charity shops and car boot sales (Gregson & Crewe 2002), ideas of thrift shopping (Bardhi 2003; Bardhi & Arnold 2003), to alternative spaces of consumption (Belk et al. 1999; Roux & Korchia 2006; McGrath et al. 1993). The vintage turn in consumer culture cannot be explained in terms of simple nostalgia, it must be perceived in conjunction with aesthetics, style, fashion and social collectives. One way to conceptualise vintage is to anchor it in terms of the postmodern experience, of consumers who are alienated and desire to return to a romantic, creative past (Campbell 2005). Vintage could also be depicted as a form of consumer politics, of "virtuous consumption" (Chatzidakis et al. 2004) or could be considered as a form of consumer resistance (Brownlie and Hewer 2009). With regards to history, vintage could be anchored quite neatly in discussions of nostalgia and a yearning for an idealised past, however nostalgia here is unpacked not with regards to Holbrook and Schindler's (1994) 'real' or 'stimulated' debate, but nostalgia as a learned emotion, of Goulding's 'vicarious' nostalgia (Goulding, 2002:542.) McRobbie asserts that the retro phenomenon is part of the nostalgia enthusiasm for bringing history into an 'ahistorical present' (1988). Similarly, vintage must give a nod to its retro predecessors and finds its footing clearly in Brown and Sherry's (2003) 'Retrosapes.' This synthesis of past and present, the 'retro revolution', highlights that retro and vintage are related, they are both strategic ways of employing the past in the fast paced consumer present.

This paper adopts a material culture approach to the exploration of consumption practices as it emphasizes the intersection of cultural and social practices around vintage objects. Building on Miller's (1998) material culture approach to shopping and Dant's (2005) sociological perspective which argues for a more in-depth focus on the 'material stuff of life', this approach suggests a consideration of the social and cultural meanings of the object, rather than considering the meaning as inextricably linked to the object (Miller, 1998). The framing and the performance of the consumption sphere have been previously explored in marketing and in particular in the service landscape. However in these accounts the literature fails to discuss the role that objects play in the staging of the marketplace. Parsons' (2009) work on antiques moves this argument forward by positing that value is staged and that the presentation of objects and the narrative built around them is a key communicator in achieving this framing. In applying this material culture perspective, it is argued that the narrative of the object cannot be separated from the vintage object itself.

METHODOLOGY

This study used an ethnographic approach to attempt to capture how the practices of vintage consumption were undertaken in a market space and the materials, meanings and competences of the actors within that space. The findings presented reflect ten months absorption by the researcher in the vintage scene, specifically a vintage mar-

marketplace. The participants were identified through a snowballing technique. This sample features three stallholders, two vintage consumers, who are regular market visitors and, one vintage clothing storeowner who is also a regular visitor at the market. The ethnographic interviews (McCracken, 1988 b) were used to gain an emic perspective of vintage behaviours and practices through their stories and descriptions of their own and others behaviour. The interview data supplemented the observational data and provided practitioner perspectives on the actions and practices of 'doing vintage' in the marketplace.

VINTAGE AS A SOCIAL PRACTICE

Building on Gregson and Crewe's (1998, 50) perspective of consumption as never purely an economic endeavour but as "eminently social, relational and active, rather than private, atomic or passive," in the marketplace of Granny Would be Proud, the vintage transaction was seen to be a highly personalised exchange. This was echoed in the interviews with notions of 'being in the club' and 'community' permeating them. Vintage consumption from the observations was both an individualistic and collective act that enlivened the market space. The development of practices in the marketplace, similarly to Schau et al's (2008) brand communities, led to the exchange of collectively valued goods. From the observations, the building of relationships and these sharing practices formed a large portion of the interaction between consumer and stallholder and through this dialogue could be seen to grant status in the marketplace to both. In this way it was seen as testing emotional practices, such as commitment to vintage as a lifestyle. Acceptance by the collective meant that these sharing practices benefitted individuals and also created consumption opportunities: stallholders kept stock to the side for consumers that they knew or mentioned other items that they had that may interest returning customers. These notions were highlighted in the interviews Jess explained how this relationship even encouraged her to buy more:

"It definitely makes me go back there because I know she is nice ...they will hold onto something while you go to the bank or they will give you advice or their opinion on something, they might be lying but you tend to feel like they are probably quite truthful."

This dynamic interaction seemed to aid both consumer and seller in the exchange. As Jess highlights the consumer receives personal attention adding to the experience of the exchange and the seller is able to sell their item and start to build a role of expert in the marketplace. The personal nature of this exchange was illuminated again by Louise who described how when selling her vintage homeware pieces she likes to "get a feel for the customer," and to "try and understand their vintage style and preferences" so as to make recommendations and know what they would be comfortable with. This role that is adopted in the exchange of expert and consumer unfolded across the interviews with the stallholders taking pride in this position of authority in the market. The building of a relationship between stallholders and consumers and the subsequent acceptance into the vintage community was marked by the time spend over the interactions around the exchange. This relationship and interaction of the stallholder and consumer were intrinsic as to how the objects would be viewed in their new lifecycle, as illustrated through our field notes:

"In most of the market stalls, the stallholder seems to acknowledge the consumer walking past or stopping to look at their items with a smile or a nod or looking up from what they are doing at least. Some don't look up or glance at consumers and it seems like unless the consumer has seen something that has caught their attention, they don't bother to stop." (Researcher field notes, March 25th 2012)

From this extract it is depicted that the interaction although apparently basic, seemed to set the norms for the possible exchange and group acceptance. Stallholders asked the consumer questions about their style and influences and where they normally find vintage objects. This dialogue provided a means for stallholders to present their objects to a consumer and enabled them to engage in a discussion around the object's history. This ultimately aided the stallholder in navigating a use value and potential in the mind of the consumer.

Stallholders often described their consumers as friends and these friendships seemed to be longstanding with some spanning years. They were relationships that although built around an exchange were spoken about in affectionate terms. This friendship in some instances seemed almost strategic, in that being friendly with a stallholder ensured that the consumer was able to find out about other stock that they had, when they would next be selling at the market and the stallholder acted as guide as to where to source the best vintage items. They appeared to be friendships based on a shared understanding of aesthetics and style similarities but also of gaining advantage and knowledge in the marketplace. In exploring this relationship with Tina, she spoke of building up almost familial relationships with the consumers she worked with:

"It is my business but I love working with people for months on creating something that will mean so much to them but it always shapes me as well...it is important that you have the same vision and share a vintage aesthetic...long afterwards I still like to have a drink with them as we have been so much part of each other's lives."

Tina conveys esteem around these relationships with consumers she highlights the time and involvement with each other, the idea that they both invest so much in each other around the exchange – in both a personal and a monetary way. She also illuminates the idea of the importance of the shared 'vintage aesthetic', that this similarity in how they view the world, their style preferences and appreciation of the vintage scene is key in the development of this relationship.

These basic exchanges in the marketplace were often followed up with encouragement to 'befriend' each other on Facebook. This move onto a further online connection enabled the consumer to obtain information about when the fairs were occurring, but it also more significantly represented a lasting, tangible social connection that resulted from this initial exchange. In this way the stallholders acted like gatekeepers to the vintage scene and community. Michael highlighted the idea that this online platform allowed for an interaction and acceptance of vintage tastes that was hard to find before the Internet provided ways of connecting with similar people:

"I think social networking has a lot to do with it, say you had a particular thing for vintage clothes, you would maybe meet other people who liked vintage clothes at the vintage clothes shop but the chances of hitting it off with them or going for a pint with them were pretty slim... because now people can express their interests up front on Facebook and places like that, there is more interaction with people, with groups that are like-minded..."

This extract conveys that social media acts as a coordinator of the marketplace; it connects tribes (Cova 2002) that may have been unable to connect without this medium. It also serves as a way to market the events of the marketplace to an interested audience. This is crucial as the 'Granny Would be Proud' market was not a permanent fixture: it occurred every two weeks. In this way social media facilitates the marketplace, this allows knowledge of the marketplace to reach a potentially interested audience. Molly comments on her use of social media to find out information about markets: *"Of a weekend I normally just look on Facebook to see what markets are on that day or I will have seen friends or the organisers posting about an event during the week and I will then remember to stop by."*

In this way, social media reaffirms the physical connection for Molly and also allows for the community to move online. It takes these notions of social exchanges and the desire to be part of 'the club' to a more visible, tangible state.

The importance placed on the practices of a shared aesthetic and the social demonstration of these practices around the exchange, portrayed a social investment in the object from both stallholder and consumer in which the value is constructed. The stallholder acts as gatekeeper to this vintage community and the friendliness of the interactions steers the exchange. Each practice encouraged deeper commitment to the vintage collective. The development of relationships and shared understandings suggested that the constitutive elements of vintage are social in character. In considering this, this paper demonstrates that 'vintage' in the Granny Would be Proud marketplace was a social construct. This can be seen in the meaning and subsequent value attached to individual possessions (Belk et al. 1988), the provision of this value and the concept of vintage could be argued to be a social practice.

PRACTICING THE 'VINTAGE LOOK'

The production of 'the look' of the vintage marketplace was seen to be key to practitioners and suggested concepts of authenticity, acceptance and stylisation. The marketplace was not permanent and the active process of creating the physical marketplace that took place every two weeks involved consideration of the staging of the event. The creation of 'the look' was produced critically as a way to create a feeling for the market. This well managed atmosphere was a mechanism for stallholders to show their own personality within the vintage context but also to act as a framing of their aesthetic vision. This striving for 'the look' also ties in with the consideration of the socialites of consumption, as the achievement of this was also crucial for the staging of the stall, but also significantly for both the stallholder and consumer. The creation of 'the look' was seen as key in gaining access and approval in the marketplace (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: 'Practicing the vintage look' in the marketplace



"The sellers arrive and are greeted with a brown table and a lamp, on returning an hour later; they bring the space to life with ornate, embroidered table cloths, rose adorned cake stand holders overflowing with costume jewellery, tweed suits and silk scarves hanging over the walls, suitcases brimming with goods at the foot of the table..." (Researcher notes, March 4th 2012)

Extending this notion further to the construction of the marketplace, the stall and the stallholder must also achieve a certain look

to gain credibility in the marketplace. The vintage look was seen to add to their reputation and either attracts or detracts consumers from engaging with them. This proposes that the personal nature of the transaction and the focus on the aesthetics was key and again stands in contrast to views of exchange as a simple process. This highly personal and social nature of the interaction can be seen to affect value construction as the excerpt above highlights, achieving acceptance and building a relationship, if even for the time that the interaction occurs, shapes both the consumer and the stallholder's views of vintage. Building on the idea that the object has a complex history or "social life" (Appadurai, 1986) that the consumer is not necessarily aware of but that through interaction with the exchange with the seller can be created, rather than diminishing potential value, appeared to add to the consumer desire for the object. The central concern of stylisation also highlights again the fluidity of vintage and that far from being fixed, the production of 'the look' can affect the way that the vintage objects are seen.

Practitioners spoke of the "camaraderie" and "community" of vintage, and this conveyed forms of sociality tied to their consumption practices. The vintage marketplace can be viewed therefore as a performance of community value, which is a collective and social undertaking and in which negotiations over objects, use and ultimately price, are intimately woven into the social. By this account, while appearing individualistic, vintage consumption must also be understood as a communal form of consumption whereby the reclamation of social relations and the enlivenment of social spaces are made possible through the marketplace. As expressed by Michael:

"There is no doubt about it, there is a community thing going on, I think this is what will keep the thing going..."

And further added to by Louise:

"Vintage is a lifestyle and not just how you choose to shop: it is about a way of seeing the world but also I suppose how you see your friendships. Yes, I sell at markets as my job, but it is something that I love, when I am up at 4 am to go to a house clearance or car boot sale on a rainy Glasgow November morning, what I think about is selling that object, discussing with the customer about the item, building a relationship with them and thinking about what new lease of life they will give it... I love those interactions...I have made so many friends in this line of work and I always thought that I was alone in how I valued vintage stuff over new things..."

Vintage here is considered as more than a consumption habit, it is a way of connecting and finding shared values in a busy consumer present. In this way it acts as a bridge to shared interests, values and practices. Consumption can therefore be viewed as a way to connect to others. In conceptualising consumption in this way it allows for an understanding of the complex emotional and social relations that unfold in the marketplace. The vintage marketplace can be perceived as a space for social relations and one in which the practices of 'self-fashioning' are used as a medium for self-differentiation and identification within the vintage collective (Rafferty, 2011).

Vintage as a skilled practice

The skills of vintage consumption have long lost their roots of necessity and the apparent stigmas of economic thrift. The act of vintage is tied to activities such as finding, examining, evaluating, haggling, socialising and interacting. In the vintage marketplace there was a cache and cultural capital in being able to uncover hidden 'treasures' that differed from the mass production approach of the high street. This talent for spotting potential treasures was heralded as a revered skill in the community. Sellers expressed the necessity of 'getting a feel for things', and of knowing what is wanted in the marketplace. Ideas of expertise and knowledge were mentioned fre-

quently with regards to negotiating the marketplace. One of the key resources in the stallholders achieving acceptance and subsequently success is in their knowledge of the marketplace. This includes both where to source the items and also an understanding of what will be desired by the current marketplace audience. This skill is revered as Alice illustrated:

“What I love doing is raking through all the crap and finding, I mean sometimes you don’t, it is not always there, but it is like finding gold when you do.”

This idea that Alice personally finds each individual object that she sells, gives her great pride and for her it played an important role in the creation of vintage. She observes that this ability to find comes from years of experience. She is disparaging of newcomers to the marketplace that think it will be an easy way to make money. This highlights elements of communities of practice (Wenger 1998) as knowledge of rules and procedures must be present for acceptance into the vintage community. Alice highlights emotional elements of practice as she values the time spent on finding vintage objects as representative of their commitment to the vintage aesthetic. Her extract also highlights some of the ways in which vintage is achieved, of the importance of being able to ‘see’ something in an object that has been abandoned as potential stock and a worthy commodity. It also illustrates the notion that her finding is not necessarily driven by market demand, but that through this active process and knowledge, the stallholders create market demand. This notion was echoed throughout the interviews as stallholders expressed the necessity in the active processes of vintage: of ‘missions’, ‘rummaging’ and ‘finding’, illustrating the physicality and labours of ‘doing vintage’:

“It is a lot of work sourcing, going to car boot sales, jumble sales, auctions, house clearances. I mean often bidding on whole lots at auction with the hope of finding a couple of good things that can be used.” (Tina)

Tina’s excerpt highlights the active nature of searching and trawling through items to find something that she thinks is useable. In considering the objects of these processes, in order to become a thing of value, a transition in how the object is viewed must be achieved. This is an important consideration when considering a marketplace that is constructed on the basis of items being re-seen and re-evaluated. DeLong et al.’s work (2005, 24) moved this proposition forward and assert that being ‘hooked on vintage’ is not a haphazard process, but rather it is a complex process that involves the consumer possessing the relevant “aesthetics, taste, clever dressing, historical curiosity, and an ability to discriminate the authentic product, and revalue it in a new setting.” Many of the stallholders revealed that the way to learn about finding objects and unearthing value in objects was through the practice of buying and selling. In this way vintage can be conceptualised as a doing process, one in which over time the necessary skills and values are developed.

By the very nature of the vintage markets, objects were seen as rare and hard to find, this uncovering of objects added social capital to the finding process. In introducing the discarded objects back into the consumption sphere, the stallholders had to undertake the practice of ascribing a value to the objects. For stallholders in the Granny Would be Proud marketplace this act of placing a monetary price on objects was difficult for all the interviewees to put into words, with Louise commenting it was “like a black art”. Unlike a traditional marketplace, monetary prices were not highly visible in the vintage market.

When discussing the idea of value in the vintage marketplace, Michael suggests that by its very nature, vintage was fundamentally elusive:

“I’ve stopped so much valuing them on the age of them, its not like antique value, its not that, it is intrinsic, the quality, rarity and the look of them...it is the how unique or individual they are...how irreplaceable they are” (See Figure 4).

Figure 4: The Transience of value - Michael and his vintage glasses that he selects before each market



Michael’s excerpt demonstrates that vintage far from being a fixed construct is open to active negotiation based on skill and knowledge practices. As a skilled practitioner he is able to unpack the contained value in the objects and present them again to the marketplace. In this way value can be seen as an embodiment of capital. The stallholders also demonstrated knowledge both of the network in which they functioned but also of particular objects and their origins. Vintage goods by their nature have characteristics that have merited their inclusion in a second or third cycle of exchange. The meaning attributed and value constructed around the object are created and manipulated by marketplace practitioners. Vintage consumption can be seen as culturally and socially shaped through practices as the object’s status is created through a process of being withdrawn and introduced in a new setting (DeLong et al, 2005). This transition in how the item is viewed requires the skill of being able to perceive its possibilities in a new setting. This mirrors notions in McCracken’s (1988) early work of the possibility of objects, of the “combination and recombination take place until a concept and an aesthetic emerge that help give substance to a group’s wish to differentiate itself from the mainstream” (1988, 136). Vintage objects have a history to them, which could potentially be seen to add or detract from their value. The stallholder to increase the value, for example through nostalgia or styling, could elaborate these histories of previous consumption cycles on. Conversely they may attempt to rid the object of its history

through rituals of mending and cleaning of the object (Parsons 2008, 2009). Vintage can be seen therefore not as an inherent characteristic of the object, but as a result of emotional and social relationship, in which consumption is the result of this engagement. In this way, vintage consumption is embedded within the objects and in the practices and also around being able to appreciate and see the potential in these objects which became key for acceptance in the collective.

CONCLUSIONS

As this paper sought to reveal, consumption spaces such as those devoted to vintage represent fields in which the conventions of the traditional marketplace are transformed and altered. Vintage here speaks of a form of making space: making space for oneself; making space for others; making space for *fun, fantasy and emotions* (Holbrook and Hirschmann 1982). Vintage social spaces speak of a longing for alternative worlds; alternative modes of consuming and exchanging. Drawing on the practice theory lens allowed a re-thinking of marketplace dynamics, comprehensions of knowledge application and understandings of vintage. This exploratory study of the vintage collective in Glasgow has depicted that the knowledge of the marketplace is central to in negotiating the boundaries of this marketplace. For a successful exchange there needs to exist a knowledge of the object, a competence on the part of the practitioners and also the performance of forms of intimacy with such objects and the social.

It is thus clear that the vintage marketplace is an intimate, personalised, lived experience that brings with it social and personal elements to the exchange. Vintage appeared to be a way of looking at objects, of interacting around these objects and building relationships based on shared appreciations for knowledge and skill. As demonstrated from the emergent themes, vintage consumption can be conceptualised as an embodied practice that is socially and contextually constructed.

Vintage is constructed as 'other', as an alternative to the mainstream, of being different and doing things differently. Vintage is thus the ultimate form of 'bricolage', of recycling styles; it allows the consumer to play with the stylistic norms, gender boundaries through fashion. Wearing vintage clothing can be seen as a way to escape the confines and dictates of the modern marketplace. Or as Reynolds (2011: 194) proclaims about vintage, the individual acts as a 'curator of their own life-in-style'. In accordance with Thompson and Hayko's (1997) work, vintage allows consumers to use fashion to self-define, to construct a personal discourse of their history and to negotiate the dynamics of the social. Finally, the concept of time and its appreciation is tied to vintage from the outset. By the very definition of vintage given at the start of the paper, the second-hand object is conceptualised as 'vintage' only through a certain amount of time passing. The discussion highlighted that the learning of 'doing vintage' is a social endeavour and is bound by the time commitment given to this learning. In this way vintage could be considered a form of 'learned nostalgia' (Goulding, 2003). Our analysis reveals that vintage must also be understood as a form of embodied practice. It is a preference for a time that has long since passed but that is brought back to the modern consumption sphere through the revival of interest around an object. Vintage in this way allows for an unlocking of an imagined past in every wear of an item. The marketplace has facilitated a community based on these shared ideals and aesthetics. It has created a consumption space in which the community's preference for the past, be it a 1950s china tea set or 1980s checked flannel shirt, has been cultivated through practices and their associated forms of understanding; that is a practice of finding and possessing a sensibility to the past and its elusive charms amidst a hectic and ever-changing consumer present.

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