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# Languages of consumption in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

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## ABSTRACT

The articles in this special issue were written after an International Conference organised by the Universities of Basel and Antwerp in 2022. The conference's aim was to foster our knowledge of the languages of consumption while using a broad range of sources, languages and regions. The workshop highlighted the importance of various consumption practices, historical actors and their experiences through a myriad of sources and discourses. These vastly differing sources, regions and periodizations between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries offer different perspectives and insights into how languages of consumption developed in a period crucial for expanding and transforming consumer practices. By prioritizing empirical evidence over theory and historiography, a 'language of consumption'-approach has the merit to reassess the cultural values that are supposed to have accompanied critical consumer transitions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

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## Introduction

Decades of research into the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century consumer changes and their more significant consequences for the economy and society have yielded a large consensus: the late early modern period was a time of critical consumer transitions.<sup>1</sup> More and more, debates have converged towards the narrative of a material culture that became more diversified, reached larger segments of society and served multiple purposes in doing so, rather than predominantly targeting purposes of social positioning.<sup>2</sup>

Early modern historiography owes a lot to the research of probate inventories, documenting the fundamental shifts in patterns in the ownership of goods and, the entanglement of global trade with consumption. Furthermore, international trade, retail developments, luxury debates, sumptuary legislation and household accounts have been studied in depth. Yet, despite the libraries that can be filled with books on the subject, surprisingly, little is known about the 'cultural and mental frameworks' that accompanied these changes.<sup>3</sup> While the 'luxury debates' – which dialectically interacted with changing consumer preferences and with ideologies – have been studied, the

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consumer values related to specific household goods and daily consumer cultures are seldom systematically analyzed.<sup>4</sup> Hence, still too little is known about how cultural consumer values were actually constructed and how bundles of characteristics were woven around specific objects and groups of objects.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the mental processes that accompanied rapid changes in material culture and consumption, helping people to accommodate new goods and ‘materialize’ new ideas, are hardly mapped. Filling this gap in our understanding is essential since demand does not automatically come with supply: products, new or old, needed to be introduced and appropriated within social and cultural contexts. Thus, it is vital to understand the mental pathways that accompanied consumer changes properly.<sup>6</sup> In order to do so, this collection of articles engages with ‘languages of consumption’ in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is precisely the language of consumption that is able to open a window into the mental frameworks that both resulted from critical consumer transitions and drove them.<sup>7</sup>

The articles in this special issue were written after an International Conference organised by the Universities of Basel and Antwerp in 2022. The conference’s aim was to foster our knowledge of the languages of consumption while using a broad range of sources, languages and regions. The workshop highlighted the importance of various consumption practices, historical actors and their experiences through a myriad of sources and discourses. These vastly differing sources, regions and periodizations between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries offer different perspectives and insights into how languages of consumption developed in a period crucial for expanding consumer practices. In doing so, the articles voyage from auction advertisements in Antwerp, Amsterdam, and Paris via the probate inventories of the Three Leagues region, guild sources, and fashion magazines in Northern Italy to advertisements for foodstuffs in Basel and champagne in England.

### **The discourse of the probate inventory**

Many media contain valuable historical languages of consumption for such an exercise, including the advertisements, technical dictionaries, fashion magazines and visual representations under scrutiny in this issue. In order to learn from historical languages of consumption, a critical contextualization of the available sources is necessary. Probate inventories, for instance, might be the preferred sources for documenting shifting ownership patterns across time, space and society. In this special issue, Riccardo Rossi makes ample use of them to draw up material mobilities in the Alps region. Overall, probate inventories are of little use for properly understanding consumer motivations. Drawn up to protect minors or creditors and to facilitate the efficient processing of the heritage, they document critical features that help to identify objects, such as the ‘raw material’ of an item, its provenance, shape, size, decoration and sometimes even condition. The expertise of the notaries and officials drawing up probate inventories was, obviously, a bottleneck as well. Yet, overall, probate inventories seldom document the ‘cultural values’ attached to the objects at the moment of the redaction of the inventory. At the start of the eighteenth century, in probate inventories, silverware – for instance – was often described as *fashionable*. Still, even this cultural qualification probably served as an identification and as a marker of economic value in the first place.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the

second-hand value of fashionable plate was higher than that of outmoded objects, which probably were worth only their weight in raw material. The 'look and feel' of textiles in inventories of the Alps in Rossi's article were seldom detailed. In the language of probate inventories, objects were preferentially described by descriptors documenting their condition, such as 'worn out', 'new', 'good' and 'broken'. The significance of supplementary descriptors in inventories was almost entirely related to identifying things and the potential resale or recycle value of objects rather than the complex world of motivations that once inspired people to acquire and keep an object. Probate inventories were still the evidential sources of a prudent household economy, in which the secondary markets played a key role. Modifiers were also used as a means of identifying objects, hence the tendency to use them on a more regular basis to describe different textiles. However, 'it is difficult to read into this great cultural significance', as Overton cum suis already alleged.<sup>9</sup> While late eighteenth-century Italian inventories used 'new' to indicate the state of an object, Bettoni argues in this issue that 'new' as 'fashionable' appeared with greater frequency in the newspapers and fashion magazines of this period. So, several articles in this special issue eventually turned towards newspapers and newspaper advertisements as another major source for our knowledge of the language of consumption.

### Newspapers and the changing worlds of consumption

An increasingly literate audience purchased newspapers and pamphlets and read them (aloud). They were both mirrors and agents of changing cultures of consumption in the eighteenth century.<sup>10</sup> In 1758, Johann Hermann Knoop wrote a 'short education' on how to read newspapers. He explained what knowledge a clever reader should master, including basic geographical knowledge, correct reading order and how to think and talk about periodicals. He went on to praise the role of newspapers in society as a whole in providing all sorts of people with information that would otherwise not have been easily accessible to them. He saw advertisements as the example *par excellence* of this, for both professional salesmen looking for honest work and people looking for a good opportunity because, thanks to their wide distribution, no other medium reached as many people as newspapers did.<sup>11</sup> Newspaper advertisements informed potential consumers about products, places and people on an unprecedented scale, allowing them to grasp changing (visual) vocabularies.

Research has stressed that newspapers needed advertisements to survive and vice versa.<sup>12</sup> It is generally assumed that advertisements only became a force to be reckoned with in the mid-nineteenth century. In fact, they originated in the seventeenth century and developed substantially thereafter.<sup>13</sup> The first advertisements can be found in 1624 in Antwerp, where Abraham Verhoeven matched advertisements for books to the content of his newspaper; for example, he advertised books about the latest Catholic victories while publishing the latest reports about them. This practice was quickly adopted throughout the Low Countries. During the seventeenth century, these advertisements mainly concentrated on books, colonial goods like tobacco, notices about runaway servants and practical information such as barge schedules.<sup>14</sup>

The English press followed suit and started advertising, though still on a very modest scale at the time. Strikingly, English dailies generally enjoyed editorial freedom that many newspapers on the continent hankered for.<sup>15</sup> The first daily published on 19 May 1657

and devoted solely to advertising was *The Publick Adviser*.<sup>16</sup> Throughout the eighteenth century, advertisements can slowly but surely be found in most European newspapers. Before long, newspapers on both sides of the pond reflected the Atlantic World of Goods in an imagined community created by producers, distributors and consumers.<sup>17</sup> When we compare newspaper sales with the advertising revenue of the *Gazetteer* in the eighteenth century, we do notice a clear drop in the latter in summer, indicating that the notices especially targeted the social season (and perhaps its participants) in London. However, the many advertisements placed for and by servants suggest that newspaper readership was able to bridge different strata in society.<sup>18</sup>

English advertisements concentrated on a small range of branded goods, such as books, medicines and theatre plays.<sup>19</sup> The price of admission to the imagined community in the Atlantic World of goods was multi-layered and was not necessarily cheap, especially for sellers. Most countries had newspapers where advertisers had to pay for notices, and public estate sales in Paris, as described by Charris De Smet in this issue, are a notable exception. Unsurprisingly, the price affected the number of advertisements that were placed, and James Raven recorded an increase of 34% in advertisements between 1833 and 1834, just when advertising duties were reduced in England. This went hand in hand with a broader wave of relaxations in newspaper legislation from the first quarter of the nineteenth century onwards, including the removal of restrictions on newspaper size in 1825 and the lifting of Stamp Duty in 1836.<sup>20</sup> The latter caused a full-blown explosion in the number of printed newspapers and the start of the true boom in advertising. Before that, it would not have made sense to print newspapers that did not sell since stamp tax would still have to be paid on every issue, regardless of whether it was sold or not.<sup>21</sup> Every paper sold was required to bear a penny stamp, and a duty of two shillings was payable on every advert published. As a result, the flat advertisement rate for all papers had increased from two to three shillings, and most papers had added the stamp increase to their selling prices.<sup>22</sup> This did not stop advertisements from infiltrating the front pages of newspapers from 1750 onwards and occasionally even earlier.<sup>23</sup> Businessmen often co-owned newspapers so that they could place notices at reduced rates. Auctioneer James Christie, for example, co-owned the *Morning Post* for a while and book publisher John Bell promoted his own titles whenever he pleased when he co-owned the *Morning Post* as well.<sup>24</sup> Paying for advertisements or even newspapers was just one of the many investments retailers had to consider, together with shop window displays and interiors.<sup>25</sup>

Overall, however, eighteenth-century advertisements promoted producers and retailers and specific products such as books and patent medicines rather than a broad array of consumer goods.<sup>26</sup> Such advertisements did an excellent job reinforcing personal trust, a cornerstone of early modern retailing. The sellers' reputation was a valuable asset and certainly something to be invested in. For this reason, it was a recurrent theme in the advertisements, as Anna Reimann, Graham Harding and Barbara Bettoni point out in their contributions to this issue. As Miu and Miu have reasoned, the very least advertisements did, was how shopkeepers attempted to attract customers in a way they saw fit. Whether any notices fulfilled their announced intentions and, thus, shopkeepers could uphold the claims they made was another matter for the reader to gauge.<sup>27</sup> According to Jon Stobart, the keywords here, towards the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries, were politeness and respectability. Shopkeepers sold polite

goods, and shopping created a polite lifestyle.<sup>28</sup> Riccardo Rossi notes in his contribution that language was tied to individuals rather than locations, and people were flexible in switching language registers according to the context. For example, he saw that the Alpine mindset was dominant when people described their possessions in urban markets and that the urban registers were employed when Alpine goods were marketed to outsiders.

In order to uphold their reputation, sellers placed a lot of emphasis on correctly informing existing and new customers. This did not prevent advertisers from devoting space to the actual goods offered for sale. More and more (new) products required explanation due to developments, including the rise in disposable income, the growing consumer choice and the larger share of imported, often even global goods, available to a larger group of people. Consumers could be overwhelmed by choice and needed a way in which to make informed and sensible choices.<sup>29</sup> There were many forms that the language of consumption could be delivered through, namely, shop windows, trade cards, handbills and so on, but none were as efficient and cost-effective as advertisements.<sup>30</sup> Advertisements often focused on practicalities such as the availability of a wide range of goods, the shop's location and prices, for example. This extends to newspaper advertisements for impending household estate auctions, servicing the second-hand markets, which can usefully be processed to unveil changing consumer cultures, as is evidenced by De Smet and Blondé, Kole and Spliet. Despite the repetitive and often formulaic nature of such announcements, the rare use of modifiers is very instructive in identifying bundles of characteristics of objects that were deemed particularly worthy of being described in closer detail.<sup>31</sup>

### **Cultural and social constructions of value**

Historians of material culture and consumption have pointed out how, as time progressed, product design and cultural value grew at the expense of the 'intrinsic qualities' of material culture.<sup>32</sup> The explosion of geographically branded goods and food offers a good case to illustrate this. While in some cases, such an origin was an intrinsic quality marker as such, in others, the branding was essentially about adding cultural value.<sup>33</sup> Reimann found a similar dynamic in Basel, eventually leading to major friction between master bakers and a local entrepreneur, Abraham Wertenberg, concerning 'Karlsruhe rusk' in 1835. Wertenberg had imported the 'genuine' biscuits from Karlsruhe, and local bakers quickly copied them due to their popularity. This compelled Wertenberg to mention this fraud in an advertisement. The bakers were quick to reply that their products were at least as good as the originals and had the same benefits, and, unlike Wertenberg, they were authorized to sell baked wares.

Graham Harding takes this even further when documenting the extent to which the perception of champagne in nineteenth-century Britain was essentially little more than a cultural and social construction. Sparkling was a decisive feature of champagne, obviously, but nineteenth-century advertisements paid surprisingly little attention to the product qualities, especially the taste of champagne. Its value was thus socially constructed. While most authors of this volume empirically approach 'the language of consumption' by scrutinizing the vocabularies of consumption in – essentially written sources – Harding adds an important theoretical and even multi-sensory perspective.

Beyond the language used to describe the qualities of champagne across different sources, the sound of a popping cork may already be a ‘language’ in its own right. More importantly, the social construction of champagne favoured its role as an important language of consumption as well as sociability.

### Re-assessing consumer narratives

Perceptions, problems, philosophies, ideologies and sociologies related to our present-day consumer society have marked the historiographical agenda on consumption history in recent decades. To give but one example, advertisements are synonymous with billboards on Piccadilly Circus or Times Square, between social media content and product placement in TV shows and movies. They are filled with so-called buzzwords, relying on leading societal values to sell products, e.g. sustainability, organic, natural, etc. Intuitively, historians, driven by the central question, ‘How did we become a world of consumers?’ have the inclination to look for the historical roots and path-dependencies of present-day society. Recently, more and more voices have pointed out that the history of consumption and shopping should not just serve to explain the dominance of today’s consumer society.<sup>34</sup> By looking at the language of consumption in the eighteenth century, this issue does justice to the contextualization of the eighteenth-century consumer mentality without necessarily being trapped into modernist and teleological narratives.

A major narrative in the historiography of the past decades has been the alleged shift from intrinsic value to design and the breakthrough of affordable ‘new luxuries’ in the late early modern period. By re-assessing the language of consumption, several contributions in this volume also challenge the linearity of this transition model. In her contribution on precious jewels, Barbara Bettoni adroitly relativizes the chronological watershed often thought to have marked the difference between a luxury-driven Renaissance economy and late early modern consumer society.<sup>35</sup> In Renaissance Italy, ‘fake’ jewels were already appropriated into economic life. Still, in the course of the eighteenth century, *biggoteria*, from the French *bijouterie*, were added to this supply of populuxe jewels. Working with glass beads and copper allowed makers to cater to a whole new segment of society that wanted elegant ornamental articles that cost less, were easier to source and wear than precious jewellery, the so-called populuxe items of the eighteenth century.<sup>36</sup> Multiple frictions arose between retailers and local craft guilds, though the latter – increasingly – also adopted retailers’ strategies by including items for sale that were produced outside their workshops.

In contrast to precious jewels, these *bijoux* were more explicitly linked to concepts such as ‘fashionable’, ‘in the new’ ‘fashion’, and ‘in the best taste’. Eventually though, the jewels that were bought as part of dowries complied with the logic of an old luxury model, in which objects derived their conspicuous consumption potential from a large extent as stores of wealth rather than from responding to new aesthetic canons. These jewels, made from precious and genuine materials, responded to the logics of an ‘old luxury model’.

Bettoni’s costume jewellery allowed middling groups to afford fine accessories. This ties in with what De Smet discovered for eighteenth-century Paris, where advertising discourses for household estate auctions gradually moved away from elite-based,



distinction-promulgating aesthetics to bourgeois consumer values. Yet, much as old and new luxuries continued to co-exist, so did the discourses surrounding them. Paradoxically, the Parisian aristocracy also invested heavily in porcelain, pottery and ceramics. Whilst, the bourgeoisie sought distinction by investing in tapestries, jewels, and lavish gilded decorations, once the relatively exclusive domain of the nobility.

This blurring of consumer models, rather than a chronological transition from an ‘old’ to a ‘new luxury model’, is also apparent in the Low Countries. In their contribution to auction advertisements in Amsterdam and Antwerp, Bruno Blondé, Bas Spliet and Jeroen Kole argue that – paradoxically enough – consumer goods that usually are associated with the old luxury economy were becoming fashion- and design-sensitive, which is especially the case for silverware. In contrast, chinaware, often considered a fashion’s favourite among eighteenth-century tableware, could be considerably more attractive by being defined as ‘old’. Overall, moreover, in Amsterdam, Antwerp, Paris and London alike, aesthetic markers and an ‘economy of taste’ were of key importance.<sup>37</sup> Even in the Northern Netherlands, where modest consumption was part of the embarrassment of riches conundrum, the vocabulary of consumption contributed to the deepening of consumption inequalities in the eighteenth century.

In short, confronting the languages of consumption with major historical narratives is a fruitful and challenging exercise. This issue showcases the significance of discursive traditions and how conventions differ according to historical contexts and source materials. As such, this collection of case studies is putting standard narratives to the test. Upon scrutiny, the languages of consumption do indeed yield more complex, even different, vocabularies than standard consumption history accounts. As time progressed, the cultural construction of value grew in importance, and so did the language of consumption, which was an important agent of consumer attitudes.

## Notes

1. Kwass, *The Consumer Revolution, 1650–1800*; Trentmann, *Empire of Things*.
2. De Vries, *The Industrious Revolution*.
3. Kwass, “Ordering the World of Goods,” 87.
4. Berg and Clifford, *Consumers and Luxury. Consumer Culture in Europe 1650–1850*; Riello and Rublack, *The Right to Dress: Sumptuary Laws in a Global Perspective, c. 1200–1800*.
5. De Munck and Lyna, “Locating and Dislocating Value.”
6. Campbell, Colin, “Understanding Traditional and Modern Patterns of Consumption”; Styles, “Product Innovation.”
7. Lyna and Van Damme, “A Strategy of Seduction,” 100–121.
8. Blondé, “Cities in Decline.”
9. Overton et al., *Production and Consumption*, 115.
10. Cox and Dannehl, *Perceptions of Retailing*, 20.
11. Knoop, *Kort Onderwys*.
12. Harris, “London Newspapers,” 425.
13. Walsh, “Advertising and the European City,” 79.
14. der Weduwen and Pettegree, *News, Business and Public Information*, 2.
15. Barker, *Newspapers, Politics, and Public Opinion*, 181; Broersma, “Constructing Public Opinion,” 222.
16. Elliot, *A History of English Advertising*, 38.
17. Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, 295.
18. Barker, *Newspapers, Politics, and Public Opinion*, 32–33.

19. Walker, “Advertising in London Newspapers, 1650–1750”; Smith, *Material Goods, Moving Hands. Perceiving Production in England, 1700–1830*, 61.
20. Raven, *The Business of Books*, 346–47.
21. Barker, *Newspapers, Politics, and Public Opinion*, 120.
22. Haig, *The Gazetteer, 1735–1797*, 42.
23. der Weduwen and Pettegree, *The Dutch Republic*, 272.
24. Heyd, *Reading Newspapers*, 84; Raven, *The Business of Books*, 286.
25. Lesger, “Spaces and Places,” 59; Walsh, “Advertising and the European City,” 87; Coquery, *Tenir boutique*.
26. Smith, *Material Goods, Moving Hands. Perceiving Production in England, 1700–1830*, 61.
27. Mui and Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping*, 222–23.
28. Stobart, “Selling (Through) Politeness. See also Mitchell, “Practices and Processes,” 28.
29. Cox and Dannehl, *Perceptions of Retailing*, 91; Blondé and Van Damme, “Retail Growth.”
30. Walsh, “Advertising and the European City,” 87; Van Damme, “From a ‘Knowledgeable’ Salesman.”
31. Blondé, De Mulder and Stobart, “Aesthetics,” in print.
32. De Munck and Lyna, “Locating and Dislocating Value.”
33. Meyzie, *Réputation*; Stobart, “A World of Goods?”
34. Van Damme, “Reinterpreting Shopping in the Enlightenment: Retail Practices, Consumer Experiences, Governance,” 196–97; Welch, “Presentism.”
35. Blondé and Ryckbosch, “In ‘Splendid Isolation’”; Goldthwaite, “The Economic and Social World of Italian Renaissance Majolica.”
36. Fairchilds, “The Production and Marketing.”
37. For London see Blondé, De Mulder and Stobart, “Aesthetics,” in print.

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