

# Advertising to the herd: how understanding our true nature challenges the ways we think about advertising and market research

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The dominant view of the consumer as an individual should be replaced with the more accurate model of the consumer as acting as part of the herd. Evidence for this is gathered from a variety of scientific fields. The paper concludes that moving to the herd model will allow researchers to provide more accurate and useful insights into consumer behaviour. This paper was joint winner of the Best New Thinking award at the 2003 Market Research Society Conference.

## Introduction

This paper is born out of a feeling that something is not right with the way the word 'consumer' is used nowadays. This word must surely be one of the most frequently used in the lexicon of advertising, marketing and research language. Yet it has not been subject to the huge attention or to the rigour of analysis as has the word 'brand'.

(Valentine & Gordon 2000)

*This* paper is charged with the same sense of dissatisfaction. A feeling that there is more to be said about the subject. A frustration with the current models (including that proposed by Valentine and Gordon's insightful paper) for missing some big and important truths about how human beings are. And the belief that these 'missing truths' might contribute to a significantly more insightful and effective approach to marketing and market research.

In particular, we suggest that *the most important characteristic of mankind is that of a herd animal*, not a lone individual. Despite our

(culturally determined?) protestations to the contrary (and the effort that has been made over many years to understand the mechanisms of the individual human), *we are who we are and do what we do as a herd, not as individuals*.

This point of view is supported by learnings from a range of fields: from evolutionary psychology, socio-biology and social psychology, 'small world' geometry and network mathematics, from long-forgotten studies of self-reporting and the newer thinking of the Latin School of Societing. The evidence for the herd perspective (and against the individualist one) is necessarily woven together to encompass all of the key issues.

We believe this perspective is able to shed new light on many phenomena which researchers and planners repeatedly encounter and debate (like rapidly changing and stable markets, the value and mechanics of mass advertising and the debate about relationships between behaviour and attitudes). The paper concludes with an examination of the challenges this perspective offers to all researchers. As Steven Pinker (2002) puts it in the introduction to his latest bestseller:

If I am an advocate, it is for discoveries about human nature that have been ignored or suppressed in modern discussions of human affairs... Why is it important to sort this all out? The refusal to acknowledge human nature is like the Victorians' embarrassment about sex, only worse: it distorts our science and scholarship, our public discourse and our day-to-day lives.

Business needs our skills and insight but we must let go of this kind of embarrassment if we are to ensure that we continue to be as relevant as we would like to be.

### *The sound of the crowd*

On a dark and rainy Valentine's night in 1988, the French football coach, Michel Platini, brought a youth team to Highbury in north London to play a friendly match. At the time, Arsenal FC were not the cosmopolitan crew that they are today (with more than half a dozen leading French players in the team and a French manager); nor were the crowd as comfortable with 'abroad' as many of them now are. Arsenal in the 1980s were the dour practitioners of British Football captured by Nick Hornby in *Fever Pitch*: masters of the cynical crunching tackle, the hands-in-the-air-all-in-a-line offside trap and the 89th-minute goal.

However, on that wet February night it took just 30 minutes for the entire stadium to ring to the unusual chant, 'Qui est le bastard [*sic*] dans le noir?', a piece of abuse (as so many football chants are) aimed at the

referee to question (as so many football chants do) his parentage. Those who were at the game report extraordinary feelings of elation and belonging, but no one can remember who started the chant or how they themselves came to pick it up and share it with their neighbours.

How did this behaviour start on that particular evening? Why this chant and not another (or silence or prolonged whistling at a series of bad decisions)? Why did so many thousands of damp and cold football fans join together in this way without so much as a song sheet, a choirmaster or any kind of instruction to do so? Why did it make them feel so good?

### *Crowds are scary*

Crowds are always unpredictable and mercurial. They can generate enormous feelings of well-being and shared identity; equally, they can be enormously destructive and irrational. Crowds are ‘contested’, and to those interested in maintaining order, dangerous and scary.

Indeed, much of the psychological and sociological literature about crowds and crowd behaviour highlights the negative aspects. More so when crowd politics (e.g. Nazi Germany) or football crowds are the particular subject of a study.

Yet being together and interacting with other human beings is – we argue – essentially human: more human than being a lone and isolated individual. It is what we are largely designed for. It is *who we are* – whatever our culture or we ourselves would like to think (and both of these point misleadingly in the opposite direction to the truth). We are a ‘we’ species, labouring under the illusion of ‘I’.

### **The dominance of the individual**

Western culture has been dominated by the notion of the individual. Moral philosophers and popular sages have repeatedly encouraged us to ‘be our own person’ to ‘remain unswayed by the “passions” [i.e. lack of logic and consideration in the thinking] of the mob.’ Since the Age of Enlightenment explanations of what it is to be human have been dominated by the notion of the individual. For generations, decent men and women have struggled to understand the mechanics of the mind of the individual human and pondered on the ethics of the right or wrong behaviour for individuals. Indeed, the latter half of the twentieth century saw repeated attempts to make sense of individuals’ behaviour in the light of mass political movements such as National Socialism and Communism.

Since the rise of psychology as a separate discipline from that of philosophy, we have continued to devote most of our struggle to the individual brain 'machine'. For example, while the cognitive and behaviourist schools disagreed violently on some matters (see, for example, Chomsky's (1959) savage review of Skinner), they were both primarily concerned with understanding the individual's internal processes. While much was learned about abstract unobservable mechanisms such as memory, learning and problem solving, the premise was still that the individual was the proper locus of study for generalised rules about all humans.

The 'processing-unit' view of individual humans and their cognitions has in fact provided an open door for the invasion of information science constructs into academic psychology departments. In particular, it made it easy to apply learnings about how individual machines process information into explanations of how individual humans do so. Marketing still works very strongly from this metaphor – marketing likes a machine!

Consider our obsession as marketing researchers with 'learning', 'recall' and 'awareness'. Consider also our use of the term 'stimulus' material (stimulus being important to both the Behaviourist and Cognitivist schools) and our abiding obsession with transmitting messages (of a rational or emotional kind). Consider also how many of the 'framework' models (identified by Hall and Maclay (1991)) which we use to explain how advertising might work can be explained in behaviourist or cognitivist terms – they too are largely concerned with how an individual processes and/or responds to new information or emotional inputs.

### *The rise of neuroscience*

Sigmund Freud (see Gardner 1993), the father of psychoanalysis, started his career as a neuroscientist but he realised that the tools of turn-of-the-century neuroscience were ill-developed for the ambitions he had for understanding how and why people do things. In recent years however, neuroscience has made significant advances which have changed our understanding of how individual human brains work for us to do what we do – Steven Pinker is just one of those academics to have penned bestsellers on the subject.

In this area, British market researchers are ahead of the rest of the business world and the broader popular culture – at least on conference platforms, if not in practice. In the last three years a number of excellent market research papers have used neuroscience as the basis for new thinking. Heath, in various works, has highlighted how much of what an

individual does (and stores) is done at low levels of consciousness and suggests some methodological innovations for advertising research. Gordon (2001, 2002) demonstrates how out of date our information-processing paradigm is from a thorough review of learning to date. In particular, Damasio's depiction of the brain as 'emotionally' rather than 'rationally' wired is central to the new model of mind. Fletcher and Morgan (2000) suggest some useful challenges to our practice as researchers from applying the learning from neuroscience and evolutionary psychology with their new model of the brain.

However, each of these shares one feature with all that has gone before: *he or she focuses on the individual* (albeit sometimes an individual embedded in a larger group) on the basis that the individual is the proper level of granulation for study of human behaviour. That individuals think, feel and act as individuals (whether in response to stimulus or conditioning or just because they 'want to'). While this may seem to make a great deal of common sense and reflect what individuals tell us, it is by no means the whole or even the most important part of who we are. Nor is the evidence that an individual offers as reliable as it seems.

### *The unreliable individual – why should I believe you?*

The psychological literature contains a host of evidence that an individual's accounts of his/her behaviour are not to be trusted, however uncomfortable we find this and however much we try to ignore the truth behind our discomfort. It is over a quarter of a century since the unreliability of our self-reports was first properly catalogued by Nisbett and Wilson (1977), and even longer since the importance of the actions of other human beings in determining an individual's behaviour and beliefs was documented (see, for example, Asch (1956) on conformity and Bem (1967) on self-perception). Indeed, verbal accounts of attitudes and opinions (the kind of thing we love to collect and measure, largely because we can) are now often understood by many<sup>1</sup> not to be the precondition of future behaviour but instead the function of previous behaviour. Very often they are justifications to ourselves or others of our own behaviour.

As Jeff Goldblum puts it in the 1980s college reunion movie, *The Big Chill*:

[Post-]Rationalisations are more important than sex – you ever gone a week without one?

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<sup>1</sup> For example the work of Festinger on the notion of Cognitive Dissonance and the work of Ehrenberg *et al.*

Even the notion of the unified self (an assumption which we all rely on to run our lives) has been exposed as a necessary fiction.

Each of us feels that there is a single 'I' in control. But that is an illusion that the brain works hard to produce ... the brain does have supervisory systems in the prefrontal lobes and anterior cingulate cortex, which can push the buttons of behaviour and override habits and urges. But those systems are gadgets with specific quirks and limitations: they are not implementations of the rational free agent traditionally identified with the soul or the self.

(Halligan & Oakley 2000)

The individual has been shown to be variously unreliable, unaware of his or her behaviour or motivations, easily influenced by others, capable of significant self-deception, and so on. Perhaps the individual decision-maker, reliable or otherwise, is not the beginning and the end of all that there is to know about who we are, why we do what we do and how we do it. Perhaps there is more to tell – even something more reliable than the account of the individual subject would suggest.

## **Man the herd animal**

### *Horse whispering and other herd insights*

Monty Roberts is an extraordinary man and an extraordinary horseman. His Join-up™ programme is a completely different approach to what is otherwise called 'breaking-in' a horse – in other words, making a horse wear a bit, bridle and saddle and willingly take the weight of a human being. The success of the approach has earned Monty both fame and friends throughout the horse world.

His secret lies neither in brute force nor in 'whispering' or any other kind of arcane knowledge or trickery. It is based simply and clearly in understanding the herd-nature of all horses: if a wild horse is excluded from the herd it becomes (and feels) vulnerable; to be static is also to be vulnerable. Horses, Monty would suggest, are programmed as herd animals and programmed to respond when their herd-membership is threatened. So he uses movement and herd-leader body language to encourage the horse to 'want to be with you', to want to do what you want, no matter how unnatural it feels (and one would imagine, little would be more unnatural to a horse than wearing a bit, brace and saddle). He teaches what he calls 'intelligent horsemanship' to young and old around the world and works with the horses of the rich and the powerful.

‘Think like a horse, not a human’ is one of his mottoes, ‘Don’t push against the horse nature’ is another.

How would this approach apply to human beings? Not at all, you may think. Horses are dumb animals and man is man, a wholly more sophisticated beast with consciousness, rationality and all that the individual perspective values so highly. Monty believes otherwise. He has applied the same basic thinking to juvenile delinquents – understanding their need to belong to a herd, their need for movement and so on. With some (claimed) success, because he believes that at heart we too are herd animals.

But is this any more than the fancy of an old cowboy? Is it based in anything more about mankind than the coincidence of Monty himself? Is there any evidence to support the claim?

#### *Diverse evidence for man as a herd animal*

The support for Monty’s point of view comes from at least four sources:

1. Social psychologists who have traced the importance of social influence on an individual’s behaviour and attitudes.
2. Evolutionary psychologists who see much of our mental abilities as adaptations for life as social animals.
3. The Latin School of Societing whose work on tribes and tribal encounters adds an essential missing layer to understanding consumer behaviour.
4. ‘Small World’ geometry and its power to explain through networks how things really seem to happen (rather than how individual accounts would suggest that they do).

#### *How our minds and deeds are influenced by others*

Social Conformity (how an individual’s views and behaviour change under the influence of others) was once a hot topic in academia but has more recently fallen out of fashion. It is as well to recall some of the more striking findings about how others can exert influence over our behaviour and feelings.

Musafer Sherif’s (1936) classic paper on normative behaviour highlights how individuals’ perceptions can be easily influenced by group responses. He conducted an interesting experiment with moving light sources in darkened rooms. When subjects announced their reports publicly, their reports tended to converge or ‘norm’. Asch (1956) made similar findings with lines of different lengths (in this case the sole subject spoke after the other ‘stooge’ participants). Schachter and Singer (1962) also used a

'stooge' experiment to show how our emotional states can be strongly and directly affected by other people's presenting emotional state. In their case, a subject was given an injection of an adrenaline-like substance and then left in a room with a 'stooge' participant. Afterwards, whatever extreme emotional state the stooge appeared to have experienced, the subject claimed also to have experienced with just as great intensity as that observed in the 'stooge'.

The scale of group influences on an individual were at one time all the rage in academia: phenomena such as the 'risky shift' and 'group polarisation' were all identified as unusual group effects on individual opinion. How few research practitioners bear these in mind today.

However, more recently many social psychologists have made a much bolder claim: *that cognition is as much a social as it is an individual activity*. In a review of the subject Levine *et al.* (1993) suggest that:

Although some might claim that the brain as the physical site of mental processing requires that we treat cognition as a fundamentally individual and even private activity, we are prepared to argue that all mental activity – from perceptual recognition to memory to problem solving – involves either representations of other people or the use of artefacts and cultural forms that have a social history.

In other words, *thinking*, conscious or otherwise, accurately reported or not, *may be best understood in the group rather than at the level we normally work at – the individual*. How might we make sense of this? Thinking must be – surely? – something that is done by the individual, because there is not such a thing as a collective brain.

One biological clue lies in the 'mirror neurones', the collection of cells in the part of our brain which are concerned with our visual field and learning. The function of these cells appears to be to enable us to discern movement of other creatures, to extrapolate their next move and then to interpret the others' intentions. These seem highly involved in the appreciation of the visual arts (Ramachandran & Hirstein 1999), and appear to be essential to such phenomena as empathy: as any movie-goer knows, any of us (not just the PM) can 'feel another's pain, anger or happiness'. But this kind of mechanism also provides us with the means to negotiate highly crowded social spaces. Consider, for example, that more than 100,000 people walk up and down London's Oxford Street every day. Why do so few of them collide?

The ability to interpret others' behaviour also seems to be essential to our ability to learn *without* experience (a key advantage in a social animal;



few other creatures, even among our closest primate relatives, can do this). Bandura (1986) suggests that we learn at least as much from others as from our own experience:

Observers can acquire cognitive skills and new patterns of behaviour by observing the performance of others. The learning may take varied forms, including new behaviour patterns, judgemental standards, cognitive competencies and generative rules for creating behaviours.

These highly developed abilities to think about and interpret the behaviour of others are just some of the most obvious examples of how much of our mental capabilities seem to be particularly helpful in making us more successful in the herd. It is difficult not to see us as herd animals.

#### *Why design a human animal that way?*

Evolutionary psychology seems to offer us some useful explanations of who we are because it does not deny our evolutionary past or our (inherited) animal selves. It seeks to understand modern brain functions and human behaviour, not only in terms of our ancestors' brains (whose residual functions we can still trace in the physical structure of modern humans and compare to those of our more distant but surviving cousins), but also in terms of the historical context in which the physical brain and its capabilities have evolved.

Of course one of the problems for evolutionary psychology is that things are often very complicated. Some at least of the explanations are debatable (and some of the political extrapolations downright unpleasant), but the picture evolutionary psychology provides of mankind is by and large credible.

One of the central conclusions is that *man is a social animal*: while common sense and anthropology would reject the loner as a sustainable model for the human animal (a tribe of hermits is unlikely to survive for long), evolutionary psychologists see man as a social being by design. Or rather, *a social being by adaptation*. A social being whose last major evolutionary adaptations are at least 100,000 years old – adaptations which seem to be based on some 'intention' to make us even more successfully social.

For example, Dunbar (1996) has suggested that the our brains have grown so much bigger (in relative terms) than those of our evolutionary cousins because we are the most social of primates: the degree and number of human social interactions require a much more developed (and thus larger) brain. Dunbar and Pinker (1994) suggested that our highly developed mental capabilities for language evolved precisely because we needed more successful and longer-lasting social interaction. Our current

mental capability for communicating complicated concepts has its roots in the 'stroking' or 'grooming' mechanisms which are found both in people who have had no human contact in key years of development and in other animals – a means for basic interaction between individuals in a group. When one considers the importance of gesture, tone and (only relatively small amounts of) content in the effective interpersonal communication of modern-day humans, language is indeed best seen as a sophisticated and layered development which helps us be more effectively social, and not as first and foremost an 'information transmission' skill.

Not all aspects of who we are prove so easy to explain using the tools of evolutionary psychology. Sometimes the ends are difficult to discern from the means. For example, why would self-esteem (and the need to maintain it) be such an important and typically human trait? How could this – so often destructive and painful – phenomenon be useful to the human animal?

Many studies have supported the thesis that humans tend to seek situations that support a positive view of themselves and avoid the opposite. Equally many studies have shown the importance of high self-esteem in dealing with stress and the strong connection between low self-esteem and depression, although a simple causal relationship is not yet established. Others again that have shown how our reports of our actions or motivations for acting can be adjusted to maintain a positive (or sometimes negative) view of ourselves. Others again have shown how self-esteem is important in achieving in the face of adversity – our popular mythologies are full of stories of those whose self-confidence leads them to ignore the scale of the challenges they face.

Mark Leary and his colleagues (1995a,b) have explained self-esteem as one of those examples of dissociation of mechanism and design that populate the world of evolutionary psychology, whereby the effect on an individual of a particular mechanism does not correspond to its function. They suggest that the mechanism may well be about the individual's self-esteem but its purpose or 'hidden design' is to encourage group sustainability – to help us be more successful social animals. According to Leary *et al.*, self-esteem acts as a measure to me of how successful I am at being accepted by the group – I feel good if I am widely accepted; I feel less good when I lose the approval of the group. While some critics suggest that this explanation works better for teenagers and those finding their way in human society, it does ring at least partially true.

The important thing here is that while there appears to be an obvious social benefit to some of our inherited behavioural tendencies, the benefits of many aspects of our individual behaviour do not seem to, but still do,

result in social behaviour. As Kennedy and Eberhardt (2002) put it:

Evolution does not have the technology to program group formation directly, but can only motivate individuals in such a way that social groups result. Thus a low-level behavioural tendency, distributed across members of a population, can create a society or culture whose power and accomplishments far exceed the sum of the parts.

While we can observe and measure the individual and their mechanisms – and even distinguish between the mechanism and ‘the phenomenology’ of the mechanism (i.e. what it feels like to a subject experiencing the mechanism), it is the combination of a number of individuals acting according to these simple mechanisms that can create something as surprisingly rich and robust as a group.

For the evolutionary psychologist, our brains have evolved for a number of reasons but the effect is the brain of a social animal, one with a number of curious functions.

### *The Latin theory of societising*

Not all those involved in marketing work from the premise of the individual. A recent paper entitled ‘Tribal marketing’ (Cova & Cova 2002) reviews the work of a number of practitioners and theorists who make up what is termed the Latin (i.e. Mediterranean as opposed to Northern) School of Marketing (Figure 1).

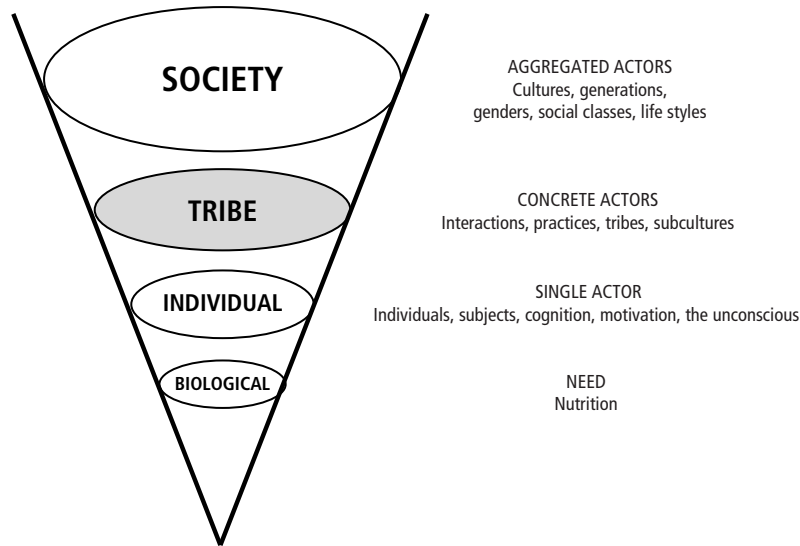
The underlying belief that prompted Cova and Cova’s paper is that we are social animals first and individuals second. Indeed, the authors propose that this ‘*pre-modern [sic]* imagination ... which values notions contrary to progress, such as community, locality and nostalgia’ is reasserting itself in the social dynamics we observe around us.

This school posits an important missing level of understanding human behaviour between the individual consumer and that of markets or segments. This they call ‘tribal’ behaviour.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The construct is derived from anthropological study of primitive peoples but with very different characteristics to the original anthropological phenomenon:

- no central power to retain order
- no rules to enforce social order
- not driven by rationality or rational notions but by shared emotion
- not geographically or ethnically based
- inherently unstable, small-scale, often temporary
- not limited by the boundaries of modern society
- not fixed but in constant flux



Source: Cova & Cova (2002) Adapted from Desjeux (1996)

**Figure 1** The Latin School: levels of observation of consumption

This kind of human behaviour is all around us and yet something we market researchers stumble on only from time to time because we are not consciously looking for it. Cova and Cova (2002) endorse Ostergard and Jantzen's (2000) view that the consuming individual as a tribe member:

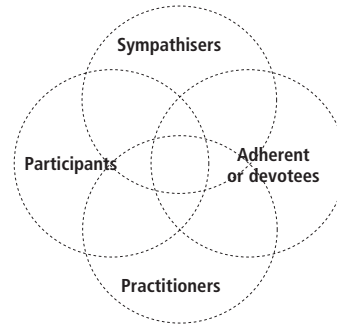
Exists beyond the emotional and narcissistic project described in the consumer research category ...the individual is no longer viewed as an independent self who is trying to collect ever more experiences. Instead of being based on personal emotions, the consuming individual is a member of a tribe, where the product symbolism creates a universe for the tribe.

The authors cite a number of examples from Continental Europe – the Lomo tribe (based on the social usage of a low-grade Russian camera, the Lomo) and inline skaters in Paris. Importantly, they distinguish between 'brand communities' (built and controlled by brands and brand owners) and tribes that happen to be supported by brands (e.g. Citroën supports 1500 Citroën enthusiast sites on the web and Ricard has long supported players of pétanque, their clubs and competitions around the south of France).

This model also suggests that because tribes are fluid (rather than fixed), not subject to limitations of space or ethnicity, nor to the control of any outside force, tribe members can play different roles at different times

(Figure 2). They can adopt one or more of four roles within the tribe and move between these – an echo of Valentine and Gordon’s ‘endlessly moving consumer’ model, surely?

People can also be part of a number of tribes at the same time and can join or leave at any time. But our ‘Northern’ marketing approach continues to overlook this important area for human behaviour – it remains unconsidered and unexamined, with the notable exception of youth marketing.



Source: Adapted from Cova & Cova (2002)

Figure 2 The roles of tribe members

### *Small world thinking and baking*

Thus far, we have traced evidence in three different fields of the study of human behaviour that supports the theory that the most useful way to understand humankind and human behaviour is to see humans as social animals. The power of influence that other individuals can have over a subject, the social effect of the design of our human mental capabilities, and our tendencies to join together freely in groups that share passions and emotions – all these demonstrate our species’ social nature.

All three fields of study have one further shared theory that unites the idea of man-the-herd-animal with that of the necessarily ignorant individual: that it is the interaction between individuals, and not just their individual agency, that determines what we do and why we do it. Individual agents may *feel* or *think* that they are acting as individuals, but it is the interaction between individuals (with their tendencies and processes) which creates the outcome. Schelling (1978) cites the example of where an audience for a lecture choose to sit: they bunch together according to some simple but often unexpressed shared rules (‘Don’t ever sit at the front or you’ll get asked a question!’) and where others are sitting.

People are responding to an environment that consists of other people responding to *their* environment, which consists of people responding to an environment of other people’s responses.

(Schelling 1978)

In Monty Robert’s terms, it is the herd not the horses which decides what the individual horses do.

This is an uncomfortable conclusion for those of us who spend our time speaking to individuals (or paying other interviewers to do so on our behalf) or even forcing individuals into a temporary and false group (which we know will be subject to false interactions and misleading biases). The new model puts this challenge to us: why study the ingredients for a cake when you could study the interaction between the ingredients which happens during baking?

So can we study the baking – the interaction between individuals that makes the cake? Is it possible?

Thanks to the advent of computer science and a new kind of geometry known as ‘small world geometry’ (see, for example, Buchanan 2002), which lies at the heart of new network mathematics, it is now possible to simulate the interaction of individuals with specific behavioural tendencies to high degrees of accuracy. Sufficient indeed to support the view of the social psychologists cited above: that intelligent human cognition is best understood as a social rather than an individual process.

### *The study of connections – six degrees of separation*

The new geometry is concerned with connections rather than individuals. It is often explained through Stanley Milgrim’s (1967) famous letter experiment which sought to understand the web of personal connections across the USA.

Milgrim selected a random set of individuals in Nebraska and Kansas and invited them to help get a letter forwarded to a stockbroker friend of his in Boston. However, he did not supply the participants with the address of the stockbroker but asked them to forward to someone they personally knew and felt would be socially ‘closer’ to the stockbroker. The result of this experiment was startling: most of the letters made their way rapidly and successfully to their intended recipient but with only very few steps between sender and recipient – not hundreds but six or so. Milgrim’s ‘six degrees of separation’ shows how connected we really are with each other; how quickly something can travel across the smaller groups in which we live.

The important principle here is that it is not the strong links that bind a network together (e.g. those with whom we spend most of our time) but the weak links (those whom we know only vaguely). Studies of jobseekers (Granovetter 1973, 1983) tend to support this strange and counter-intuitive phenomenon: we are more likely to receive help from those we vaguely know rather than those we know well. Thus some points on any

network are more important than others: some connect (through weak links) to many others and provide links from small groups tied by strong links to other small groups.

This simple geometry seems to be both useful and practical: the thinking has since been applied to explain all kinds of complex phenomena (weather patterns, the human brain and perhaps most famously, the spread of diseases), for both those things that are in rapid change (e.g. share prices) and those that change very little over time (power grids).

It is now possible to develop network algorithms which explain accurately how things can be stable for a long time and then erupt into a series of big and sudden changes. When applied to human behaviour (as in Gladwell's (2001) description of the fluctuating patterns of STD infection in Baltimore and the rebirth of Hush Puppies), the mathematics are strikingly accurate and illuminating.

*Initial conclusions: 'the truth is out there ...'*

We are more usefully understood as group creatures (i.e. individuals whose actions are determined by the interaction of group members rather than our own volition), whose programming leads us to interact; more so than we would like to think. More so than our culture would have us believe and more so than our individual-based models of understanding and study can admit.

As the arch-behaviourist Skinner (1971) puts it, 'to be for oneself is to be almost nothing'.

The questions for market researchers arising from this new paradigm are twofold:

1. How can our understanding of 'man the herd-animal' help explain the phenomena which we study for our clients (such as long-term stability in market share or sudden changes in behaviour)?
2. How should we change the way we use our tools to make the greatest contribution to our understanding of human-herd behaviour? What guidelines should we set for methodological issues, sample design and interpretation?

## **How does the herd-perspective help explain the phenomena we study?**

### *Things that don't change*

One of the least discussed phenomena of the modern marketing world is how little things change. Only Ehrenberg (e.g. 1997, 1998) and others have made much of this. Most of us are instead concerned with how to change things – how to deliver the double-digit growth that our shareholders or our clients demand.

While the herd-perspective is indeed useful to explain how things change rapidly and suddenly (certainly economists have used it for such things), does it also have something to tell us about why markets tend to be stable in structure, why the big brands of 20 years ago continue to be big brands today, or why smaller brands find it hard to make headway against the status quo?

Ehrenberg's own explanation is that a large part of our purchasing behaviour is habitual rather than considered: an individual's next purchase is largely determined by his/her previous purchases (again a self-determining individual agent model).

But what if a large part of an individual's purchasing behaviour is determined by what other individuals do (or are thought to do), both now and in the past. What if *my* choice of Brand A is really *our* choice of Brand A? If buying Brand A is something that 'we' do? Take the classic Coke–Pepsi example of where product preference (as indicated by blind taste tests) is overcome by either habit (Ehrenberg) or the 'power of the brand' (what we might call the Interbrand School). Isn't the herd a better explanation for the strange phenomenon? We buy Coke even though as individuals we prefer the taste of Pepsi, because buying Coke is something that *we* do.

### *Disruption, Amex and the herd*

This might also offer some means of providing mechanical explanations for disruption and other challenger brand theories, e.g. communication (something which they sorely need!). Rules are best understood as something which a group or herd follows rather than just something pertaining to an individual. By disrupting the rules of a category, it might be that we are acting on the herd's shared assumptions. Or trying to.

It might also explain the continuing appeal of herd-based propositions in communication: from exclusion propositions (such as David Ogilvy's



famous ‘American Express card is not for everyone ...’) to what is sometimes described as the ‘500 million flies can’t be wrong – eat s\*\*\*’ strategy. Why do consumers in many different locations continue to respond positively to such appeals if not because of their herd-nature?

### *Advertising that changes things*

Rightly or wrongly, advertising is often thought of as something that changes things – how it might do so has been explained any number of ways over the years. But most explanations still persist with a notion of advertising as something which is *done to* an audience and most methodologies reflect this notion of the passive receiver. That said, the central challenge of Lannon and Cooper’s (1983) landmark paper (that the real question to ask about how advertising achieves its effect should be what the consumer does with advertising) was still presented only in terms of the individual consumer thinking and acting on his or her own.

While the individual perspective is useful in explaining some of the mental mechanisms (for example, the recent ITV-sponsored study (Beattie 2002) highlighted the importance of gesture and movement in television’s power to affect us), this is merely part of the answer. Indeed this particular mechanism in the brain is the same as that described above as being essential to us being herd animals. Can the herd-perspective bring anything new to our frameworks of how advertising works?

Two phenomena – ‘word of mouth’ and ‘advertising as publicity’ – both point to advertising as something that, sometimes at least, works in the context of groups rather than individuals.

### *Word of mouth*

We have long suspected that word of mouth is powerful. Recent studies (e.g. Kamins *et al.* 1997) suggest that this accounts for more than 80% of the influence on an individual’s actual purchasing behaviour, with only 10% due to the direct impact of marketing activity on the individual. As Malcolm Gladwell (2001) puts it:

Advertisers spent the better part of the 20th century trying to control and measure and manipulate the spread of information – to count the number of eyes and ears that they could reach with a single message. But ... the most successful ideas are those that spread and grow because of the customer’s relationship with other customers – not the marketer’s to the customer.

Consider, for example, those examples of advertising that themselves enter culture – that become the subject of our conversations or make up our shared vocabulary, from Budweiser’s ‘Wazzup?’ to the repeated success of deliberately populist advertising – Supernoodles, ITV Digital, Walker’s Crisps, anything by John Webster of BMPDDB, and even the PR use of party political poster campaigns to raise the morale of party workers.<sup>3</sup> But this is not a new phenomenon – it may well be that powerful mass communication has always had this herd effect, that this has been the central source of its power – the *suitability to be used by the herd for the herd’s purposes* (whatever those might be).

Going one step further, it is interesting to note that – despite our best efforts – the message is rarely novel or in itself particularly clever. It would seem that it is other elements that get advertising talked about. John Philip Jones (2001) provides surprising support for this in his assertion that the most important factor in determining the success of a piece of advertising is the creative element (what civilians call the interesting bit), and not the finely tuned strategic elements. Robert Heath’s low-involvement processing model would also seem to support this – the things which seem to create long-term value are often (to us) insignificant executional details.

### *Advertising as publicity*

Related to the idea of advertising itself being talked about by the herd is the construct of ‘advertising as publicity’, a notion developed by Ehrenberg *et al.* This view suggests that advertising is rarely directly persuasive but merely something that draws attention to a brand and thus prevents the brand being forgotten. In her paper, ‘Why advertise Guinness in Ireland?’, Rachel Kennedy (2001) highlights the difference between ‘talking points about the brand’ of the publicity model and ‘reasons to buy the brand’ of the various persuasion models. Why have talking points if not to share with the rest of the group?

The publicity model itself would seem to be built on the notion that advertising can – even for large and stable brands – work through the herd: it draws the attention *of the herd* towards the brand and stops it being forgotten *by the herd*. The examples of tribal advertising cited by Cova and Cova (2002) would also seem to support this view; Salomon and Ricard are both examples of brands which have deliberately given something to their respective herds rather than tried to control them.

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<sup>3</sup> See Earls (2002) for a discussion of the use of political advertising in the UK.

Finally, the salience model (see Hall & Maclay 1991) is not a million miles from this explanation of how advertising might achieve its effect, albeit still construed from the individual perspective.

At a time when business has fallen out of love with mass marketing, the herd perspective provides a useful distinction between advertising and one-to-one communication: one is with (and by means of) the herd, the other to individuals. Mass (advertising) communication is not a more expensive version of one-to-one communication – it is communication with and by means of the herd.

### *Changing the game*

What changes does this model demand of how advertising practitioners go about their business? First, it suggests a rethinking of the language (out goes the individual whose mind or behaviour is to be changed and all the dreadful stereotypes which populate creative briefs). In particular, it highlights the real need for understanding the herds in which people consume (see below). Second, it points to a new currency of media planning (from cost per exposure to how much influence on a herd can be bought for the money). Third, it points to herd-ability rather than persuasiveness as a key measure of creative work – whether an ad or a message or a brand will be picked up and passed around a group.

And finally, it points to a truth that many of us have secretly suspected for years: that is difficult to predict the effect of advertising a priori. If it is difficult to predict the effect of any activity on groups of individuals, then how much more so if the issue is the effect on the interacting individuals who make up a herd. As when we cast a pebble on a pond, we can choose the pebble and the pond and even how we throw the pebble, but we cannot control the ripples and the way they interact.

The difficulty for market research practitioners lies elsewhere – in the implications for the tools, methodologies and assumptions we have

**Table 1** Key changes in advertising practice

Individual model	Challenge	Herd model
Target consumer (most valuable unit)	Act as part of herd	Consumer herd (most influential members)
Persuasion of individuals	Irrelevant	Herd-ability
Individual exposure/£	Irrelevant	Network influence/£
Mechanical predictability	Complexity	Network unpredictability

learned as market researchers. Fortunately, there are alternatives and new tools that can help us.

### Issues for market research and market researchers

There are a number of big problems for market research posed by this new conception of human beings. In fact, so many that some readers might believe this paper is arguing for a total abandonment of all market research activity.

This is not the case: if we can evolve and develop the tools of our trade, market research can still play an important role in the understanding of how things happen and provide guidance in business decision-making (business will not need this less).

However, because the changes implied by this new way of thinking are both conceptual, methodological and highly practical, this paper will content itself with the higher-order challenges and changes required.

**Table 2** Summary of proposed changes in MR practice

Individual model	Challenge	Herd model
Study of individuals	Unreliable/necessarily ignorant	Study of herds
Individual responses	Irrelevant	Herd responses
Liking, etc.	Unreliable	Energy/'herd-ability'
Individual sampling	Not all members equal	Sampling by member typologies
Single source	Partial misleading view	Bricolage
Certainty	Unpredictability of outcomes	Informed opinion

### *Problems with individual subjects and what they tell us*

The first and biggest challenge for us lies in accepting the necessary unreliability of self-reporting ('ask-answer') in market research practice. The unreliability of self-reports has been so well documented but so widely ignored by practitioners. Just because the answer seems so plausible, does not mean it is true. Just because opinions seem to be so important doesn't mean they are. Remember the Jeff Goldblum syndrome! Let's stop asking silly questions of unreliable witnesses or at least stop listening to the answers.

Just as important is to embrace the necessary ignorance of the individual about how they respond and why. They are part of the herd and not aware that their interaction with other herd members is so important in

determining their actions. Indeed, they are likely to believe that their decisions as individuals are all-important and will resist strongly the suggestion of how things really work, not least because of the ‘necessary fiction of the self’, but also because of a false herd belief which most of us work from (our culture is extremely pro-individual and anti-herd).

These two issues cut a swathe across most of what we do for a living – most of us spend our time asking opinions from the necessarily ignorant and use their unreliable verbal self-reports to justify our conclusions. It is rare nowadays to attend a qualitative research debrief without verbatims! Indeed, some practitioners still do little else but report what was said.

### *A new focus: understanding herds through bricolage*

Instead, let us spend more time understanding – as the Latin School suggests – the networks or ‘tribes’ within which individuals live. Let us understand the roles they play, the way that network works and how to influence it. If the herd thesis is correct, then this is the real subject for the study of consumption, not the individual or the aggregation of individual behaviour into ‘markets’ (see Figure 1).

Unfortunately, the problems with individual subjects (their necessary ignorance and the unreliability of their accounts) present more fundamental challenges to our basic research methodology because they question the nature of much of the data we are collecting. How can we go beyond ask–answer if it is so flawed? How can we find things out if all the data we collect are riddled with error?

One approach is to pursue a strict behaviourist line in our research – observing and measuring only what people do, rather than bothering with their internal processes. While we may feel more comfortable with the purity of such an approach to data, it will not tell us very much or help provide us with the tools to develop what we do.

More useful perhaps is what has become known as ‘bricolage’ – a composite and multi-disciplined approach to studying consumer behaviour. Using the tools of traditional market research (qualitative and quantitative), desk research, anthropology, semiotics and whatever else seems more capable of shedding light on the issue being examined. Reducing our dependence on one methodology has another important benefit – it allows us to piece together a fully rounded view (not dependent on what individual respondents say or do in the context of the study), rather than one partial and distorted perspective. It would also produce a more interesting and stimulating working experience for each research

specialist – a series of collaborations and co-authored studies would become the norm rather than the exception in our working lives.

### *How can we tell?*

Within each and every methodology that involves ask–answer research (both quantitative and qualitative) are some more practical assumptions about how things work which the herd thesis also challenges. We need new indications of success for the herd-perspective.

How, for example, do we expect to be able to tell if something (an ad or product or design) is going to work or not? Currently we consider indications such as the individual subject's *liking, interest or preference* for what we have put in front of them – we even listen to what they claim they will do in the future because these are the ways we think we can detect future behaviour. If individuals are both unreliable and ignorant, should we not satisfy ourselves with examining the 'energy' generated by an idea, ad or product. Does this seem the sort of thing that we (the experts in human nature) consider to be capable of causing a network effect (i.e. stimulating the network which is made up of all the individuals)? Energy – a version of the 'whole body response' (discussed in Earls 2002) – is often palpable to those of us who listen hard enough but it is and always will be difficult to discern whether energy is good or bad energy. Whether a particular thought, product or ad will – in the real world – create a positive network effect or otherwise is going to be difficult to discern.

Energy may be a sufficiently loose indicator for a qualitative practitioner to work with, but quantitative practice demands more highly developed readings of response to enable measurement. Such thinking will no doubt also be of great use to qualitative practitioners: we also need to heighten our understanding of what the verbal and other clues of likely network effect are. Some learning could be had from examples of the flexible scales developed by Hall and Partners, e.g. 'creates the impression that this is a brand for whom a lot is going on nowadays', but this is unlikely to be sufficient. Better understanding of network effects requires further study to develop further and better measures and indicators of likely network effects. Why not consider calling respondents back two weeks after the group to find out what was discussed with friends, family and other tribe members?

### *Sampling the herd*

We should also rethink our approach to sampling – network thinking demonstrates that not all herd/network members are equal. Some are more important than others in influencing the herd's behaviour – they provide the hubs which link other network members, not because of their attitudinal influence (as per the 'opinion former' model) but because of their multiple links with other network members.

One practitioner who has experimented with this approach is Anne Stephens of Yellowwood Consulting in South Africa. She claims success in developing ways to identify these 'connectors' and other network member typologies described by in Gladwell (2000) and has applied these tools to both qualitative and quantitative recruitment. If her initial success can be replicated by others, we might well have the means to understand how to influence the important members of the networks within which we all live.

### *The certainty of uncertainty*

And finally, the hardest of all truths for us to swallow from the network world: the certainty of uncertainty. Networks, like herds, are inherently unpredictable – because they are based on the interaction between individuals and because many things can influence how they interact (not just the input that we are worried about), it is always going to be difficult to tell the likely future behaviour of a network.

The pragmatic planner perhaps knows this better than the market researcher with a methodology to sell, but the planner often has a particular agenda to advance (this ad, this product or this strategy). Many writers have written in other contexts about the difficulty of interpreting today's responses as indicators of future behaviour, Wendy Gordon's herbal tea example being the best known in MRS papers. But maybe it is time we embraced uncertainty and the limits of our predictive skills. To paraphrase Tim Ambler, 'If I could tell the future from today's data, I would put all my marketing budget on the horses!'

We all know how difficult it is to predict the future but, because we are more valued by our clients and colleagues if we swallow our concerns and let them use our market research conclusions *as if they were predictive*, we all do it. In private, we researchers are often prepared to admit to this, but we find it terribly difficult to admit it in front of others. Perhaps it is time for the MRS Code of Conduct to act on this: we could insist that all members introduce our own version of the kind of health warning that Bill Schlackman and his original US partners put on every page of their debriefs:

These findings are not predictive and are our own interpretations based on a limited number of interviews with a (small) sample of probably unreliable individuals who may or may not be representative of the population at large and whose interaction may or may not reflect how other networks of individuals may react in the future.

## **Conclusions**

This paper has argued that we have overlooked an important – the most important – part of what it is to be human: we are herd animals. It has also argued that this omission seriously undermines the value of our discipline, that for whatever reason we have persisted in holding on to our individualist-based view of humanity, we are failing to live up to the standards we aspire to in providing business with the means for informed decisions about the future.

Fortunately, the evidence for our herd nature is everywhere and pointers (if not the complete toolkit) are being advanced by a number of sources. Neuroscience, network thinking and the work of the evolutionary psychologists are providing a lot of clues between them.

But perhaps the clearest evidence that we need to change is provided on the football terraces. How is it that an individual member of the official England Supporters club could persuade thousands of people to lift above their heads – in unison – small cards from beneath their seats to form a gigantic flag of St George during the national anthem? And to adopt this as part of every subsequent match build-up as a ready-made ritual for England supporters?

Not because that individual has access to any of our market research tools or frameworks for thinking, but because he instinctively understands our herd nature and the ability of the herd to do things together, instinctively and without instruction.<sup>4</sup>

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