The UK Ceramic Marketing Strategy in Response to Globalization c1990-2010

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Since the late 1990s, ceramic exports from the Far East have surged, and UK ceramic brands have increasingly outsourced production in the Far East or Pacific Rim. The purpose of this paper is to outline changes in UK ceramic marketing, in the context of globalization theories and the work of scholars who have explored 'Country of Origin' debates, such as Papadopoulos *et al*., (2011), and Magnusson and Westjohn (2011). Using evidence drawn from oral interviews with UK ceramic retailers and ceramic manufacturers, this paper considers responses to the issues created by Far Eastern outsourcing apparent in the changing of marketing strategies. Kitchin and Tate discuss appropriate ways to collect oral evidence. Their 'Interview guide approach' was followed since this enables the interviewee to ask additional questions in response to a reply, for greater clarification (Kitchin and Tate, 2000, p.213-4). In addition, interviews are considered useful if research is aimed at acquiring information that reflects, 'experience, feelings and opinions' (Kitchin and Tate, 2000, p. 213).

As not all ceramic manufacturers have outsourced production to the Far East, and marketing has emerged that emphasizes 'place of origin', the question arises of whether these approaches are influenced by consumer demand. This research aims to show that reactions to outsourcing are more mixed than have been previously reported, and whilst some ceramic marketing might suggest a need to supply a certain niche, a strong attachment to maintaining Staffordshire production occurs for a variety of reasons.

To many writers the impact of globalization creates deterritorialization, and consumers are increasingly presented with homogenized commodities (King (ed), 1991, p.6; Tomlinson, 1999, p.106- 49). Taking their cue from Baudrillard, Lash and Urry's analysis of 'global sociology' argued that 'Objects are emptied out both of meaning (and are postmodern) and material content (and are thus post-industrial)' (1994, p.15). In theory, it becomes the role of advertising to attach imagery and meaning to the product (1994, p.14-5). Whilst Carroll *et al*.'s analysis of the organization of the UK Ceramic Tableware Industry argued that widespread outsourcing was inevitable because of competition (2002, p.341) this paper parallels a study by Respicio concerning the Nishijin textile tradition of Japan. Respicio explored issues raised by a craft orientated 'industry' undergoing shifts in production to cheaper places of manufacture (2007). The UK ceramic industry also has a distinctive regional identity and heritage particularly in Staffordshire, and significantly, on occasion, collectable dimensions. However, this research differs from Respicio's paper as it records the visual changes that have occurred in UK ceramic marketing.

Craft skills, the family nature of companies, and the place of production have all been central to the marketing strategies of UK ceramics before the rise of outsourcing, even though the styles of ceramic designs are typically cross-cultural. It was reported that in

‘the 1980s and 1990s (and perhaps earlier)’, ‘medium ranking firms’ were importing undecorated ware from Pakistan, Korea, and China (Rowley, 1998, p.27). In addition, Royal Doulton announced in 1995 the development of a manufacturing venture in Indonesia.

Broadly, six configurations of marketing have been identified as a reflection of outsourcing. One tendency has been to focus on the Staffordshire brand name, avoiding references to ‘place of origin’ on the backstamp, and to use only the detachable label or the packaging to indicate a Far Eastern or Asian place of manufacture. It is important to note that when Wedgwood first outsourced its porcelain ‘Home’ collection to Vista Alegre in 1995, the range was clearly backstamped ‘Wedgwood... made in Portugal’. Wedgwood used a detachable label approach when sourcing production in Indonesia (See Figure 1-3).

Fig.1. J.Wedgwood, designed by Jasper Conran at Conran, cup, earthenware, purchased 2009.

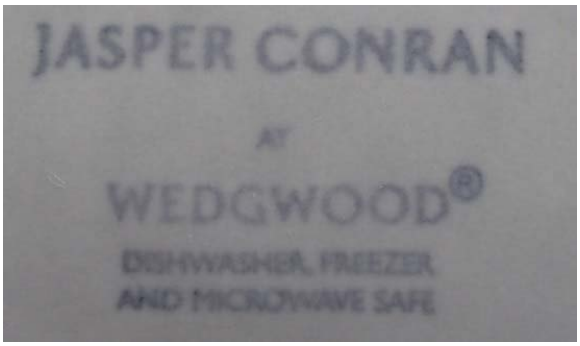

Fig. 2. Backstamp, ‘Jasper Conran at Wedgwood’.

Fig.3. Detachable label, 'Made in Indonesia'.

The next outsourcing example exists where the Staffordshire brand name and 'England' are provided within the indelible backstamp, but the detachable label, or the packaging indicates a Far Eastern place of manufacture. In the manner of Lash and Urry's view, the marketing (or backstamp) creates links with the UK. The word 'England' has in these circumstances come to signify the origin of the brand, rather than place of production. A Johnson Brothers' cup and saucer demonstrates this trend. The printed backstamp reads 'Johnson Bros England 1883' (the year the firm was founded), but the detachable label indicates that it was actually manufactured in China (Figure.4-6).

Fig.4. Johnson Bros 'Fresh Fruit', cup and saucer porcelain, purchased 2008.

Fig.5. Backstamp. Fig.6.Detachable label, indicating 'Made in China'.

A third more unusual trend is for Staffordshire brands, such as Churchill China, to declare in the indelible backstamp that the product was 'Made in China'. A fourth trend has been a shift from stating 'Made in England' to 'Designed in England' to reinforce UK links, without any indication of place of manufacture on detachable labels, or packaging. A fifth approach is to declare 'Decorated in England' which is a reflection of UK firms using imported white-ware, normally from the Far East. Finally, the sixth trend can be a more ambiguous approach whereby one Staffordshire company called, 'Rose of England China', stated on their packaging that mugs were 'Made in England', whilst the mugs themselves are individually marked 'Rose of England, Made in China' (Figure 7-8).

Changes in the organization of the UK industry were not imperceptible when considering actual marketing, and overall they have implications on both consumers and manufacturers. When the actual origins of UK ceramic brands became decidedly unclear, theoretically, this had an impact on manufacturers who were still producing in the UK. Alternatively, when detachable labels or the packaging indicated that the UK ceramic brand was outsourced, it raised the issue of how consumers responded to these changes. When *Tableware International* published an article concerning the 'country of origin' debate, opinions of UK ceramic retailers veered towards the 'place of manufacture' having limited importance to the consumer (*Tableware International*, 2008). Likewise, and corresponding to Churchill China's use of an indelible backstamp reading 'Made in China' on certain ceramic ranges, a representative of this Staffordshire company when interviewed, indicated that the place of manufacture was more of a concern to the older consumer (Interview 1). These views are more in accordance with Gabriel and Lang's definition of postmodern consumers who no longer search for the 'authentic' (2006, p.88).

However, as part of this research, an interview was undertaken with a retailer in a department store in north of England with a retailer selling Wedgwood, and other brands connected to this group. With regard to shifts in production to Asia, the opinion was that, '...I think they [Wedgwood] under- estimated the customer, and I think the customer is bothered where things are made...' (Interview 2). A central problem described by this retailer was the perception of Wedgwood's value. Prestigious UK ceramic products continued to be retailed at high prices, but because they were manufactured outside the

UK, the consumer perceived them as essentially the ‘same’ as the proliferation of cheap Far Eastern ceramic goods found in supermarkets. It appears, then, that consumers were not oblivious to the detachable labels used to indicate actual place of production.

Does this reaction to outsourcing (albeit to a high-status, heritage brand) explain why some other UK ceramic manufacturers have continued production in the UK? Emma Bridgewater is a Staffordshire-based firm that has remained profitable, and reviews have emphasized how ‘every piece is hand-made in Stoke-on-Trent, and Bridgewater, herself, has doggedly refused to outsource production overseas’ (Qureshi, 2010, p.14). Hervas-Oliver *et al.*’s analysis of ‘regional resilience’ has even asserted that Emma Bridgewater and Portmeirion (also based in Staffordshire) have ‘generally succeeded’ because of competitive design and marketing that ‘strongly associate’ the product to the region (2011, p.383). This parallels other interpretations of globalization that foresee local, regional

Fig.7. Rose of England China, Set of three mugs, Fig.8. Backstamp on actual mugs bone china, purchased in 2008. Packaging declaring declaring ‘Made in China’. ‘Made in England’.

cultures, heritage, identity and continuity becoming re-valued (Corner and Harvey (ed), 1991, p.24-6). Bridgewater markets a diverse range of surface patterns, often using hand techniques of decoration (Fig. 9-10).

Fig.9. Emma Bridgewater, sponge Fig.10. Backstamp for 2010. decorated, mug, earthenware, 2010.

In spite of the Bridgewater backstamp reading 'Hand made in Stoke-on-Trent', when husband and Co- Director of Emma Bridgewater was interviewed, the somewhat surprising attitude regarding place of manufacture was that:

'It is not the principal thing. We would sell the same amount if it were made in China.' (Interview 3).

In reality, maintaining production in Stoke-on-Trent stemmed from Bridgewater's desire to create jobs in the UK. Similarly, a Staffordshire firm called Royal Stafford Tableware has created backstamps that emphasize the Potteries and even surface pattern designs incorporating the phrase 'Made in Britain'. This is another example of a type of marketing strategy that has emerged reflecting the impact of globalization (Figure 11-12). However, the Managing Director of Royal Stafford, when interviewed, established that the motivation for continuing production in the UK stemmed from maintaining design and manufacturing agility issues, rather than a perceived consumer demand (Interview 4).

Fig.11. Royal Stafford Tableware, 'Britannia' Fig.12. Backstamp. range, tableware, earthenware, c2009.

Nevertheless, adding to the complexity of this area of research are cases where UK manufacturers and ceramic retailers are less contradictory regarding place of production, and this is of significance. If the ceramic manufacturer is involved in producing the collectable and commemorative category of ceramics, place of production can still be considered to be relevant. The production of collectable ceramics does not align with Lash and Urry's broad assumption that meaning can simply be added to the product wherever it was manufactured. Ironically, Baudrillard's observations regarding collecting behaviour suggested that here there was a greater propensity to search for 'authenticity, craftsmanship, hand-made products, native pottery...' and current research indicates that this tendency still persists (1996, p.75). Finally, it was found when interviewing certain manufacturers that the 'Made in England' backstamp was important for attracting consumers from their newer, growing export markets that are, paradoxically, in the Far East.

Adverse reactions to outsourcing were particularly the case with a high-status UK ceramic brand. Some caution is required if ceramic marketing strategies emphasizing 'place of origin' are assumed to be wholly influenced by an attempt to attract, what might be best described as, the 'Ethnocentric' consumer (Evans *et al.*, 2006, p.209-10). A stronger consensus between the views of retailers and manufacturers regarding a UK place of production depends on the type of ceramics produced, and whether it is aimed at

certain export markets. Overall, this individual case study highlights the value of recording actual attitudes in a period of rapid change, and demonstrates that even when examining an industry in isolation, generalizations should be avoided since approaches and attitudes can be contradictory.

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Interview 2: Wedgwood seller, department store, north of England.
Interview 3: Emma Bridgewater, Hanley. Interview with Co-Director.

Interview 4: Royal Stafford Tableware, Burslem. Interview with Managing Director.