

‘A commodity of good names’: the branding of products,
c.1650-1900

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Abstract

Historians of consumption have perpetuated a specific reading and interpretation of early modern commodity branding, in which the relationship between proprietary interest and final consumer has been privileged. In addition, its primary goal has been portrayed as a means of differentiation in a market of homogenous goods. As such, ‘branding’ has been established as a nineteenth-century phenomenon, which resulted from the advances in industrial technology that enabled mass production to take hold. Similarly, historians have been content to adopt the view promoted by present-day marketing agencies and scholars, that ‘branding’ was fairly simplistic in purpose and function until after the Second World War.

In contrast, this thesis uses an interdisciplinary approach to combine a plethora of non-textual material culture and documentary evidence to demonstrate that commodity marking practices were of a more diverse nature than has been acknowledged, both prior to, and throughout, the industrial revolution. Multiple identities marked, read and appropriated these symbols upon products. In so doing, this thesis complicates the established historiography of consumption. It also integrates commodity branding into wider histories, including the construction and display of personal identity, as well as contributing towards interpretations of state formation, ‘nationhood’ and governmentality.

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