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As above, so below

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This phrase comes originally from occult literature. It refers to the ways in which two of our perceived worlds, the very big and the very small, seem to correspond. How the structures, patterns and movements of the micro atomic world appear to replicate those of the macro universe around them.

I have borrowed the phrase as my title because it neatly encapsulates the idea behind the paper: how movement of the big cultural waves (the paradigm shift) finds echoes and parallels in movements in the smaller world of products, services and brands. And vice versa also holds true: *as below, so above*. Either perspective can help to shed light and understanding on the other.

And because of this correspondence, why - and more importantly how - we as market researchers should constantly be aware of this larger movement however tight the focus of any particular project may seem to be.

The paper falls into three sequential sections:

First, what is paradigm shift and why it is so important

Secondly, what is the current pattern and its likely future direction? As examples I have picked evidence of the grand pattern (*'as above...'*) as it manifests itself in the fields of design, technology and leisure (*'...so below'*).

And finally, how researchers can and should use the grand pattern and its apparent direction to contextualise their specific consumer findings and develop more culturally grounded creative hypotheses and recommendations. And how, in turn, specific consumer responses can help to refine and detail the progress of the wider cultural shift.

What is paradigm shift?

A growing interest in semiotics and its sphere of influence - culture - has provided the market research industry as a whole with several useful new concepts. One of these now gaining wider acceptance and more general use is the concept of time-codes: *residual*, *dominant* and *emergent*.

Briefly to explain these for new readers:

residual codes are those now past or passing their sell-by dates (eg men giving up their seats to women, typewriters, cooking from scratch, etc)

dominant codes are those now in full flow (eg mobile phones, fantasy fiction, reality TV, etc)

emergent codes are the ones just beginning to make themselves felt; but particularly important in that they include tomorrow's candidates for the dominant role (eg ipod recording, 'Indianising' the call centre workforce, digital cameras, viewer control of TV programme timings, etc)

These code movements can be identified and classified by careful observation across any brand, product, media and/or everyday behavioural category, whether you are looking at shampoo packaging, holiday destinations or supermarket design.

But the movement of these codes from future to present to past is seldom if ever arbitrary or unique to its category. What is happening in one sector of the market is almost always reflected in some way in other sectors. The more you look, the more you find this to be so.

Which suggests that these specific sector movements are surface indicators of some larger cultural undercurrent; and this deeper movement constitutes the paradigm shift.

Paradigm shift is the cultural equivalent of continental drift. It is not a fast-moving phenomenon, but the slower process of a shift in a whole set (a paradigm) of interlinked cultural values, beliefs and attitudes; all moving in a broadly similar direction, away from one 'pole' towards somewhere else; sometimes the opposite pole, sometimes not.

The cultural paradigm at any one time is a consequence of the interaction of dynamic social forces: economic, technological, political, social, demographic all combining together to influence and in some ways re-shape the *zeitgeist* (the spirit of the age) and its expression through that society's own particular forms of 'popular culture'.

For example, in Britain, the forty years between the end of the war and the 1980s saw the shift away from the class system, away from dependence and 'society' towards greater egalitarianism, a stronger appeal to individualism and individual responsibility (and selfishness). The same shift dramatically changed attitudes towards authority: from a time when everyone supposedly knew his or her 'place' to one where all institutions and customs (governmental, parental, legal, political, etc) could and should be questioned and if necessary opposed.

And greater sexual freedom opened the way to a subsequent age of body consciousness and widened competitive physical display

This great shift brought about (and was correspondingly brought about by) such new cultural phenomena as, for example, Thatcherism, the rise of personal 'credit', the tabloid press, the end of social formality, the spread of irony and satire, sexual freedom, the TV soap, and the emergence of our contemporary consumer society. A paradigm shift is a complex set of moves, but it does evidence an underlying coherence as it changes.

We might summarise this postwar shift as follows:

<i>From</i>	<i>to</i>
Society	Individual
Class system	Egalitarianism
Dependence	Independence
Debit	Credit
Acceptance of traditional authority	Rejection of traditional authority
Formality	Informality
Mind	Body
Controlled consumer	Consumer control

The 1940s-80s shift has been thoroughly analysed and annotated and its etiology traced; but that is not the purpose of this paper. I am citing the period simply as a way of explaining the meaning of paradigm shift.

It is interesting to note in passing that this shift was made up entirely of 'pole-to-pole' movements; all the old values moved towards and gradually became their opposites; I call this swing *polarisation*.

But these cultural movements do not always follow this pattern. During the next (present day) stage of the shift, with which this paper is more concerned, there is no visible consistent polarisation of values; sometimes the trend is 'more of the same'. I call this trend *intensification*.

Today's paradigm

If we accept that paradigm shift is a movement that is going on all the time, albeit slowly, then we must obviously ask 'what's going on today?' and 'where are we heading?' We can't ignore these questions if we are truly to understand the cultural dynamics of the present and know where to look for clues to the immediate future.

It helps to understand today's shift by simplifying its components as much as possible. One key component (which is a potentially polarising switch) is the swing from *male* to *female* values. Most researchers are aware of this movement; it comes as no surprise. Its effects are seen in many product categories. But what may not be fully realised about it is the extent of its ramifications when it combines with other movements in the paradigm.

In the previous set of paradigms I listed the switch from 'controlled consumer' to 'consumer control': a clear polarisation. However, unlike a pendulum, this trend has not now reversed at all; rather it has developed into a powerful example of intensification; with some unexpected consequences.

Today's consumer faces a culture of *over-choice*. Economic globalisation, modern technological, marketing and communication skills have together created not only product and brand over-choice, but also *information over-choice*: an overwhelming plethora of TV channels and programmes, of books and magazines, of films, of news, opinion and gossip, of junk mail and spam. It has been estimated that it would take a hundred years for the average person today to read all the books published in any one year.

In this informational free-for-all, it was inevitable that popular culture would elect a tier of 'editors' to simplify, by prioritising and advising on the evaluation of so many options. Today these editors have multiplied: TV chefs, film and theatre critics, food writers, diet exercise and fashion gurus, book and programme reviewers, websites, compilers of bestseller pop charts, holiday and hotel ratings, must-have, must-do and mustn't-do lists.

This process we might label as a move from *consumer control* to *advisor control*.

Other important movements are taking place within today's paradigm. The consumer sophistication that came with consumer control has intensified (for well-documented reasons) into widespread *cultural cynicism*: of brands, of multinationals, of politics and politicians, of communicational spin in all its forms. From a combination of their sophistication and cynicism, consumers have developed sharp-eyed counter-strategies: sales-only shopping, credit-juggling, boycotts, litigation, etc.

These last two paradigm movements open up a very important new opportunity for brands. Brands are ideally placed to be 'editors'. Provided a brand can rise above perceived spin, achieve a position of genuine consumer trust and adopt a currently meaningful worldview, it is extremely well qualified for the role of expert consumer *advisor*.

There are also clear signs that the cultural individualism, so prized throughout the 1980s and 90s is undergoing something of a pendulum swing back towards

the emergence of a spontaneous getting-togetherness. Anti-war marchers, rugby supporters, new year and hogmanay celebrators seem to be satisfying a growing cultural hunger for this new kind of togetherness; one we might call *voluntary collectivism*.

Growing affluence of the 'middle market', strengthened by a degree of repleteness in the accumulation of 'things' has led to a desire to replace ownership with life experience (*'been there, done that'*)

This is having a powerful effect both on finding new under-exploited 'experience destinations', and also on developing the unique activities to be experienced once there (*everyone's got a camera, but I've taken mine potholing in Patagonia*).

From the earlier paradigm diagram, *egalitarianism* has blended via both polarisation and intensification into a pendulum swing I call *celebritisation*: the re-creation of what might be described as a new 'democratic' class-system, whereby 'celebrities' become the new aristocracy.

This aristocracy is a compound that includes people of genuine fame, via talent or skill; Andy Warhol's 15-minute celebrities; and a general cultural need for life-role models (in this latter, it overlaps into *advisor control*)

Finally, the earlier move from *mind* to *body* has also both intensified and now started to polarise into a variety of newly revived *spiritual* and quasi-spiritual forms: not so much orthodox religion (although that is there too), as alternative therapeutic belief systems, such as yoga, meditation and naturopathy,

Summarising these paradigm movements provides the (emergent) contemporary shift shown below:

<i>from</i>	<i>to</i>
Male perspective	Female perspective
Consumer control	Advisor control
Consumer sophistication	Consumer cynicism
Individualism	Voluntary collectivism
Owning	Experiencing
Egalitarianism	Celebritisation
Body-consciousness	Spirituality

To highlight some of the ramifications and interconnectedness of this shift, I have chosen three fields of activity that intersect with many markets, many brands and many products. They are *design*, *technology* and *leisure*. I hope to be able to show not only how these illustrate the grand pattern, but also how they interact with it and carry it forward.

Design

Semiotically speaking, straight lines are male, curves are female. Thus geometric shapes (rectangles, cubes, boxes, pyramids, etc) are gendered male, organic shapes (spirals, wavy lines, globes, nature-shapes, etc) are gendered female.

One of the most visible design signs of the past decade is the way traditional 'boxes' (the male form of geometric 'container': cars, cameras, computers, CD players, mobile phones, office blocks, civic buildings, etc) are being redesigned into curvy, more organic-looking shapes (female container forms).

The box was a symbol of complex science and technology contained in an accessible form (toolbox, gearbox, Box Brownie, black box, box of tricks, etc) It was also the product and projection of male-thinking 'experts': scientists, engineers and technicians.

The word 'box' itself has now degenerated somewhat into a metaphor for restrictive containment (being boxed in, pigeon-holed, Little Boxes, thinking 'outside the box', box clever, etc). Referring back to time-codes, we could say that the rectilinear box (other than in its role as a convenient form of outer packaging, transport and storage) is becoming a residual code.

In graphic design, the same 'femaling' process is at work. In magazines, squared-up illustrations and text-boxes share spread layouts with more organically-shaped visual clusters, flowing shapes, cursive typography and soft-edged boundaries.

In fashion, the rounded shoulders and soft outlines of leisure clothing are replacing, for both women and men, the sharp edges of the traditional male suit.

Colours are softening too and textures emerging. The (male) primary colours of much retail and domestic interior design are giving way to softer (female) pastel shades. And (female) sensuousness expressed via touch-sensitivity is coming into its own both in interior design and in clothing, replacing the polished 'smoothness' of traditional male surface design.

Textural awareness is an interesting blend between the *male-to-female* swing, coupled with the move from *owning* to *experiencing*. Of course anyone can 'own' a texture: a carpet, a settee cover, a curtain. And that ownership is, in the traditional sense, largely male. For the female, the sensuous experiencing of the fabric's texture against her skin is as important as who it belongs to.

Technology

Nothing in culture happens in isolation. Organically shaped products and packs came about both because a female design perspective called for them to appear and, simultaneously, because new plastics and sophisticated moulding techniques were able to provide them.

A female influence on technology is also becoming apparent in the process of visual and handling simplification. From male symbolism (control expressed via the complex graphic display of multi-functionality) as seen, for example, in traditional dashboard, camera and hifi design, technology is moving towards the 'smartness' of simplified control over complex function (eg digital cameras, Sky Plus one-button recording, the BMW simplified dashboard/centre stack, etc).

Advisor control is apparent in the frequency of best-buy lists: which car, which computer, which camera, which hifi system, etc both in consumer and specialist magazines.

And all the while technologically sophisticated computer games continue to invite players deeper and deeper into the world of virtual experiencing.

Leisure

Health centres. The female perspective on health and beauty has widened and deepened the high-exertion, it-only-works-if-it-hurts (male) gym culture into a softer, more inner-directed, more sensuous (female) low-exertion spa culture.

This has had a pronounced effect on the appearance and atmosphere of the health centre: the hot male heritage of the boxing gym has been replaced by the cool female heritage of the ashram.

Holidays. The previous shift saw the decline of the traditional mass package holiday (from *society* to *individual*) and its replacement by individual and tailor-made packages. With the help of the internet and smaller, more specialised tour operators, these mini-packages have developed quickly, both into special interest holidays (walking, cycling, safaris, music, photography, sketching, wine, gourmet, etc) and simultaneously into a wider geographical spectrum of destinations (India, South America, Far East, Pacific, Alaska, etc). At the same speed, the advisor function has developed in parallel, via magazines and newspaper features and lists, recommending to the over-choiced consumer their ten top world destinations, hotels, beaches, etc.

An emphasis on *experiencing* contributes an added dimension to this rich holiday mix: not just arriving, but while there finding instruction in windsurfing,

ballooning, parascending, jetfoiling, snorkelling, diving, riding, bungee-jumping, sightseeing, etc

How researchers can use all this

At the beginning of this paper, I pointed out that the shape of my argument works in two ways: *as above, so below* (using the grand pattern to contextualise individual consumer response) and *as below, so above* (using individual consumer response to highlight details and movements within the grand pattern).

It is this interchangeability that offers the qualitative researcher useful ways into the eye-opening world of paradigm shift.

Firstly, from a macro perspective

Remember that paradigm shift can influence a marketplace in one of two ways: *pro* or *con*. As in physics, every action creates an opposite (though not necessarily equal) reaction. Thus the growing strength of the female paradigm helped create a 'laddish' male counter-culture; *celebritisation* generates a counter-culture of gossip, paparazzi and image-busting; and consumer cynicism generates a desperately transparent attempt by some brands and companies to 'weasel' their way out of fair criticism (*they would say that wouldn't they*)

It would profit every researcher to observe and be especially sensitive to change and movement in the culture in which we all live. We should all, so to speak, carry at least an outline paradigm map in our heads on entering any research session; and use it to contextualise all consumer response by giving us a clearer picture of where any particular group of consumers is 'coming from'.

And from a micro perspective there are useful insights to be gained too.

Consumer response can help tell us just how far the paradigm time-line has reached, either in forward motion or in the generation of any counter-movement. It can indicate any gaps or 'cultural holes' that may have opened between known paradigm shift and consumer reality; such gaps being uniquely valuable as matrices for new product development.

Cultural paradigm shift is happening all the time. If my argument is valid, then it is inevitably bringing some influence to bear onto every marketplace and sub-market at all times, however focussed, specialised or unique operators in that marketplace may think it to be. And if this is so, then no researcher can sensibly afford to ignore such 'underarching' seismic movements.

You don't have to be semiotic...

