

SILVESTER TRENDS

BRITISH CONSUMER TRENDS OF THE LATE NINETIES

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Silvester Research spends a lot of time wandering the malls, estates and bars of Britain. Here are some new behaviour patterns the company has noticed recently:

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TRENDS?

In the nineties, the most interesting thing about Britain is the ABSENCE of trends.

Surveying Britain in the gloomy mid nineties, you would be hard pressed to detect many changes in consumer behaviour or attitudes since 1991.

In the seventies, huge changes in British food markets occurred, as a result of the arrival of freezers and the increasing proportion of women who worked.

In the eighties, real growth in disposable income, combined with the liberating effects of cheap air travel, the microwave and the video created a new 'lifestyle' based culture.

In the nineties, little seems to have changed.

CAR MILES PER HEAD OF POPULATION: GB

1980:	4,300
1985:	5,000
1990:	6,400
1991	6,400
1992	6,400
1993	6,400
1994	6,400

Source: Dept of Environment

Perhaps the best indicator of social change is changes in the population's mobility. During the eighties and seventies, the average number of miles Britons travelled in cars rose steadily, from 3,600 miles in 1970 to 6,400 in 1989 (Source: Department of the Environment), mirroring the move to a car based commuting and leisure lifestyle.

In 1990, the number of miles the average Briton travelled in a car plateaued. Today, Britons use cars no more than they did in 1989.

Air travel has also plateaued. In the seventies and eighties, the proportion of people taking foreign holidays rose dramatically. In the nineties, the travel business attracts fewer customers than it did in 1988.

In the nineties, Britain is a nation in suspended animation.

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So what trends are there in the nineties?

THE FEEL BAD FACTOR

In the nineties, the biggest lifestyle trend has to be *INSECURITY*. In most sections of British society, most people feel less secure than their counterparts of ten years ago.

Perhaps the only exceptions are those ABC1s aged 55+, who have retired on generous pensions. (Others, whose income relies on the interest generated by investments, have been caught out by low inflation.)

"Everyone I know seems to be delaying everything - marriage, babies, getting a bigger house. All they want to do is get rid of their mortgage."

Woman, 30s, London

"Round here, no one is very happy. These houses were worth £65,000 in 1990. Now they're worth £45,000."

C1 woman 25-34, East Anglia

“This Spring I’m going to Tenerife, then in May, it’s Morocco, and probably the Far East in the autumn. You have to see the world”

B Woman, 60

Those hit hardest are C1 workers, who see their hard won clerical skills eroded by information technology.

Career secretaries feel vulnerable as a new generation of managers do their own typing, and filing becomes a task for a 486.

Administrators feel vulnerable, as their staff relate more and more to corporate databases rather than their human bosses, for their instructions.

Management cannot pull the wool over their eyes. C1s have lived with computers for the past decade, as data entry clerks, secretaries and assistants. They can see precisely how their their jobs will disappear. And lacking uncomputerisable C2 manual skills, they have little scope to do much about it.

“All the young ones type their own stuff now. You never know what they’re doing.”

Secretary, 35

“They don’t even want me to fax stuff for them now. it all goes by email.”

Clerk, 30s

“There are very few secure jobs left. It’s just computers everywhere.”

Clerk, 30s

“It just keeps on coming in waves of redundancies. You know they want to slim down and keep on slimming down.”

Utility repair man

The understanding that computers are becoming smarter, and more networked, causes the fear to grow.

It is this perception that security of employment will get worse as time goes on, that keeps the 'feel bad factor' going, despite interest rate cuts and the bottoming out of the housing market.

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CASH THAT CAN FLOW

Out of insecurity has come a desire for large amounts of **LIQUID MONEY**. The most appealing financial product of the nineties has been the instant access deposit account.

Burned by falling house prices in 1991/2, Mr Average Briton went shy on investment, paid off his credit card, and started saving.

He's saving still.

He's considered alternatives to the deposit account, and dismissed them. Endowments have a bad name, he went off equities after the BP flotation, and he's now realised that even the value of his private pension can go down as well as up.

What about unit trusts? They've just hit a record high, but this is more due to the emergence of Tessa, with his maturing investment, rather than the average saver.

The average saver wants above all, security for his money.

As for risk investment, he keeps to small amounts of money, and products he understands. As a result in 1995, Mr Average Briton bought very few equity derivatives, but 1.6 billion lottery scratchcards.

The big opportunity remains therefore, for financial services companies, to invent products with the 'upside risk only' security of a deposit account, easy access, and innovative add on features.

Direct Line is in the lead here, with telephone savings accounts where interest at the next highest tier can be achieved, by pooling interest amongst family members.

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TOPLESS DARTS

Live TV's **TOPLESS DARTS** (11pm weeknights - only on cable) seems to be following the German channel 'Sat-1', otherwise known as 'the balloon channel' for its globular motif, into the realms of cult post pub viewing for lads.

Indeed, armed with four sport channels on satellite, plus repeats of the Sweeney on UK Gold, the young man finally has television in his own image.

The result? Custody of the remote control becomes a focal point for marital rows, as he monopolises the TV, and watches sport every evening from six until midnight.

"He doesn't care about me any more. It's just football, football, football."

Woman, 30

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HEALTHY EATING

DEEP FRIED CONFECTIONERY COUNTLINES are appearing on increasing numbers of Scottish chip shop menus.

Described as 'crunchy yet gooey' by their devotees, they join the deep fried pizza as a cult favourite.

"There's nothing quite like it."

"It's like the grease mixes with the caramel, and it goes all runny."

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THE POLENTA TENDENCY

POLENTA remains an extremely chic element of metropolitan restaurant menus, but to date is showing few signs of spreading into being staple AB at-home dinner party fare.

Will it, like rice in the seventies, and pasta in the eighties, grow and become a trendy carbohydrate, later to become kiddy stodge alongside French bread pizza, early in the next century?

Probably not - unless someone can invent a convenient way of preparing it.

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THE BABEPHONE

The **MOBILE PHONE** continues its rise as the most powerful agent of young female liberation since the winged sanitary towel.

If you've got a mobile phone, there's no more sitting by the phone waiting for Him to ring; nor do you have your parents vetting your callers for suitability.

The appeal of the mobile phone to young women is rather like the appeal of a fax to businesses.

When you are the only person who owns a fax, the machine is pointless. When all of your contacts have one, it is very useful.

When you're forty, and few of your friends have mobile phones, they are reasonably handy. But when you're a sociable twenty year old babe, and everyone you know has a phone, the phone is essential:

- You can plan your day as it happens. No more sticking to arrangements - you make them as the day progresses.
- If you want advice from your best friend on a relationship, you can get it at your restaurant table whilst your date goes for a pee.
- You can sleep over at your boyfriend's place without your parents panicking about where you are. And if they call you to check, you can claim that you're at your girlfriend's.

What are telecoms manufacturers doing about this trend? Most of their designs still appear to be aimed at 45 year old businessmen. *The designer GSM Babephone remains a gap in the market.*

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YOUTH NUMBERS UP

1996 sees the **number of 18 year olds** in Britain rise (slightly) for the first time in 13 years - good for the pub trade, if only marginally so.

And the mood of 18 year olds? Disillusioned, according to a recent report by the British Youth Council, which cites high youth unemployment and wages of less than £2.50 an hour for half a million 16-24 year olds as key factors.

"There's not much to do around here, even if you've got A-levels."

Lad, 19, Leicester

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CARD FEVER

The consumer's love affair with **loyalty cards** seems set to continue - perhaps filling those spare slots in the wallet left by all the store cards that they cut up at the beginning of the recession in 1991.

But will the number of loyalty card schemes available soon far outstrip the number of slots in the consumers wallet?

The way sales promotion works in Britain it would seem so. (Petrol stations handed out 180 million glasses in the late 70s/early eighties, before they accepted that motorists were bored with the ploy) Every supermarket seems now to have a scheme; a London hairdresser now offers *Hair Miles*.

Expect the schemes that survive to be the 'smart' ones. Like Tesco's Christmas offer for vegetarians, and British Airways' niche offers, aimed at customers who historically have flown only one way with them.

"There's no room for my Access any more."

Woman, London

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