

The Peculiar Popularity of Dreadnoughts: A Memetic Re-examination of Battleship Consumption

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Marketers often ask "why do good products fail." *The Dreadnought Race*, however, can inform marketers about why poor products succeed. In 1905, the British Royal Navy started a revolution with her new battleship *Dreadnought*. Dreadnoughts then became a wildly successful naval product worldwide. The ensuing 'battleship race' has long been regarded as a critical factor in the onset of World War I (C.f. Keegan 1998; Padfield 1974), and a contributor to Japan's decision to attack the United States in World War II (Evans and Peattie 1997). However, traditional marketing and historical analysis do not justify the market popularity of this product category. A new theoretical perspective helps us detangle these historical mysteries. Memetics, the science of the imitation of ideas, can be usefully applied to dreadnoughts to explicate their peculiar popularity.

Dreadnoughts did not deliver on their technological promises, nor were they cost effective. Technologically, their effectiveness was limited by problems with long-range gunnery. In addition, dreadnoughts were plagued with systems failures and explosions. Financially, they led to the weakening of Britain's navy and cost other world powers heavily. England managed to support her building program and maintain numerical superiority in dreadnoughts by cutting back spending on other areas – bases, maintenance, etc.. From 1906 to 1912, naval expenditures among the major powers rose 46.5% (U.S. Congress 1919). The Dreadnought Race also had elements of conspicuous consumption, becoming an independent source of international conflict. "Everybody" who wanted to be "anybody" in naval power had to have at least one dreadnought – including, eventually, Turkey, Chile, and Greece.

From a marketing perspective, the dreadnought phenomenon can be analyzed using the Diffusion of Innovations model (Rogers, 1983). Rogers (1983) posits four factors influencing the spread of an innovation – "benefits, compatibility, simplicity, and trialability" (Lynch, 1996, p. 32). The dreadnoughts met none of these criteria, yet the ship type nevertheless experienced widespread diffusion. Dreadnoughts' actual benefits were questionable – they never fulfilled their technological promise and they failed to stabilize international relations. The *Dreadnought* was purposefully incompatible with existing flotillas, and upgrading was so costly that navies

could not purchase necessary peripherals. The ships also committed navies to tactics and strategies based on accurate long-range gunnery, a system not completely worked out until the widespread adoption of radar during World War II. Dreadnoughts also were not simple – they required advanced technological abilities to build, and operating them brought new hazards. Finally, they were not easily trialable – it required many months and millions of dollars (of that time) to build a dreadnought. Given the lack of naval clashes between capital ship navies at the time, the tangible benefits of dreadnoughts were not easily observable either.

Thus from both the historical and the marketing perspectives the Great Dreadnought Race is puzzling. In standard history, Mahan's Navalism pops up unannounced and remains unexplained. Theories of technological revolution and innovation (Kuhn 1962, Rogers 1983) also don't explain the phenomenon. Such "beliefs for which hard evidence is lacking" (Cowley 1997, p. 14) are the province of memetics, to which we now turn to shed light on the mystery of the dreadnought's popularity.

Three memetic concepts help explain the dynamics of the Dreadnought Race. The first, Imitation, says people will copy whatever appears popular (Blackmore 1999). For memetic purposes, appearance is just as good as substance (Blackmore, 1999). In the case of navies or international politics, popularity translates to power. Given limited resources, expenditures are focused toward the program with the greatest apparent power. The *Dreadnought* was perfect for this role – it looked frightful, the name sounds powerful and protective. England "looked like" she was on top, naval power "looked like" the way to get there, and dreadnoughts "looked like" the ultimate in naval power. Naval leaders and the public in all the modern and modernizing countries wanted their own *Dreadnoughts*.

The second concept, Proselytizing, is the deliberate spread of memes through persuasive communication. Powerful, trusted, popular sources of communication are called "meme-fountains" (Blackmore 1999). Alfred Thayer Mahan, "the prophet of sea power," was such a source. His *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History* (1890) exhibited weaknesses in both analysis and style, yet virtually overnight naval authorities worldwide were gripped with the conviction that it was correct. Both time

and money were inexorably turned toward development of the battleship fleet.

The third concept is that memes that cause Anxiety are more likely to get replicated because they cause adherents to "proselytize" more. Weapons races are inherently anxious phenomena. Any potentially superior new technology must be fully considered, analyzed, and a response formulated.

Finally, we propose a new memetic mechanism, Perfectibility, to explain how cyclical product improvements may serve the purposes of memetic replication. As with many products, dreadnoughts went through a series of evolutions which promised that the next generation would solve all the problems of the existing one. In memetic terms, if a more perfect version of a meme can be hoped for, that meme may be more replicable. While this may be a case of memetic evolution, whereby successful memes exhibit variability and the best variations prevail, Perfectibility is also a strategy to preempt inoculations by competing memes. In marketing, dissatisfied consumers may exhibit growing interest in competitive offerings. One way to keep customers loyal is to hold out hope for a new and improved version that will address all their dissatisfactions. In memetic terms, we are telling people to wait for the next generation "phenotype." Candidates for defection from the dreadnought meme were numerous: submarines, the Army, non-submersible torpedo craft, "compact" battleships, and eventually aircraft carriers. Yet every four or five years, for fifty years, new designs would appear for the "new and improved" dreadnought which, like the original, would make everything previous to her obsolete.

Memetic analysis shows promise for other contexts where traditional marketing theory does not entirely explain the phenomena. It should also be useful in the analysis of public policy, global politics, and military strategy.

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