



Female consumers: Decision-making in brand-driven retail

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ABSTRACT

This article is a theory-building exploratory study conducted to investigate how female shoppers make meaning in a branded-retail store shopping experience. This study extends research on retail consumers' decision-making and the retail shopping experience using hermeneutic phenomenology. The authors conducted in-depth interviews with respondents, who were self-identified customers of a leading intimate apparel retailer. The results suggest that consumers' retail shopping decision-making incorporates a complex set of interactive components that are brand-driven and simultaneously affect and are affected by the interaction of in-store shopping and retail setting. The findings show a rich understanding of the consumer decision-making process is achievable by including the actual in-store experience, consumers' prior contextual experiences and expectations regarding retail visits.

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1. Introduction

The breadth of products, brands and retail channels available to the American consumer continues to increase. Retail stores display tens of thousands of SKUs in a variety of categories; displaying all brand extensions requires multiple shelves and even multiple aisles. The range of brands, line extensions and product information has complicated consumer decision-making strategies. Research on consumer decision-making in a retail context has focused on two primary approaches; the shopping, selection and decision processes and in-store retail atmospherics. Regarding customer shopping, selection and decision-making, researchers such as McDonald (1998) and Michon, Chebat, and Turley (2005) focus on customer characteristics, including demographics, shopping attitudes, emotions, and budget to help explain the decision-making process. With respect to retail atmospherics, researchers examine store atmospherics such as fragrance, music, brightness, texture, color, temperature and smoothness and their impact on consumer perceptions (Greenland and McGoldrick, 1995; McGoldrick and Pieros, 1998; Turley and Chebat, 2002; Turley and Bolton, 1999; Terblanche and Boshoff, 2005).

Gobe (2001) acknowledges the emerging importance of brand in the retail experience. This paper extends that view and posits a similar view in terms of decision-making and the resulting interaction. Most research examines retail atmospherics in isolation. Although the results are

intriguing and enlightening, developing a richer understanding of brand-driven retail shopping and consumer decision-making through a holistic and qualitative consumer-focused approach is possible. Qualitative methods are not new to retail atmospheric studies. Baker, Parasuraman, Grewal and Voss (2002) use both qualitative and quantitative methods when evaluating multistore atmospherics. Underhill (1999) utilized retail anthropology, consisting of reviewing in-store video tapes to investigate customer shopping behavior.

This paper utilizes in-depth interviews as a methodology for capturing the meaning of consumer experiences. The paper chronicles the narratives of female consumers of a leading intimate apparel, retail brand. Female consumers are the most influential consumer segment in the American market, yet are understudied to the point of being ignored (Warner, 2005). The aim of this investigation is to uncover information that will increase knowledge about the formulation, evolution, and execution of the female consumers' decision-making process.

The organization of this paper includes; an overview of the retail consumer decision-making process, a rationale for delving deeper into consumers' thoughts and decision processes, a description of the data collection method, and an explanation of the research methodology. Following the methodology discussion, the data is analyzed and summarized. The paper closes with conclusions and future research suggestions.

2. Consumer retail decision-making

Richarme (2004) summarizes a variety of theories including Utility Theory (Von Neumann and Morgenstern, 1944), Satisficing Theory (Simon, 1979) and Prospect Theory (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979) that address consumer decision-making that marketers use to

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understand the shopping experience. Two specific concepts emerge, consideration and involvement (Richarme, 2004). Early research viewed consumers as rational beings, attempting to maximize their well-being. Current theories suggest a plethora of motivations that describe decision-making as a more complex process (Myers, 1962; Zaltman, 2003). Consumers are influenced by multiple forces and they purchase with multiple objectives, both characteristics affect decision-making (Armstrong and Kotler, 2006; Blackwell et al., 2001; Carpenter and Fairhurst, 2005). McDonald (1998) recognizes a duality of decision-making, acknowledging both rational and emotional components of the experience. Although marketing researchers seldom recognizes the duality, it is well accepted among social scientists.

Contextual factors, not all of which are conscious, influence the retail shopping process, including selection and purchase. Consumers, when asked to recall prior actions are more likely to explain their behavior with rational arguments rather than call on their subconscious, emotional impulses (McDonald, 1998). Olshavsky and Granbois (1979) acknowledge that in observational studies, many consumers shop without following the choice model processes, theorized by many researchers. Zaltman (2003) posits that 95% of consumer choice is based on subconscious processing.

An additional factor in consumer decision-making in a retail environment is the recognition of the role of store sales personnel. Reynolds and Arnold (2000) note that effective sales people not only influence the shopping process but also may influence the consumer to switch their store patronage. Consumers may abandon one retailer to follow specific sales and service personnel to a new retailer. Terblanche and Boshoff (2005) support the importance of sales personnel. The shopping process can be affected by an emotional relationship between shopper and salesperson, typically not accounted for in the literature.

Researchers have discovered many factors that influence decision-making. Rajagopalan and Heitmeyer (2005) and Bennett and Hartel (2005) acknowledge that culture impacts consumer decision-making. Consumers have a need to identify with and fit in their culture. Hyllegard et al. (2005) indicate that simple demographics (age, gender and income) affect consumer decision-making. Bakewell and Mitchell (2003) describe generational differences in female shoppers. Moore, Wilkie, and Lutz (2002) note the influence of older generation consumers on their children, specifically daughters purchasing the same household product brands as their mothers. Arnould (2000) suggests that shopping serves as an act of love, indicating the emotional involvement affecting the decision-making process. Thus, the consumer decision-making process is complicated and the models built with psychological, social and environmental factors are not easily revealed.

3. Retail environment and atmospherics

A second approach to understanding the consumer decision-making process is to examine atmospherics (store environment). Babin and Attaway (2000) demonstrate that the physical retail atmosphere can effectively increase the shopping experience. Chebat, Chebat and Vaillant (2001) investigate the impact of music while Michon, Chebat and Turley (2005) examine the influence of scent as well as customer density. Bitner (1992) acknowledges that physical surroundings play a significant impact on customer satisfaction. Fulberg (2003) posits that retailers fail to effectively take full advantage of this phenomena, and suggests that retailers can create environments that engage multiple sensory stimulations — sound, sight, smell, and tactile to enhance the shopping experience. Wesley, LeHew, and Woodside (2006) link store type and location to different decision-making strategies. Sharma (2001) discusses the value of sales personnel in the shopping experience. Carpenter and Fairhurst (2005) acknowledge that retail shopping is both hedonic and utilitarian and that the hedonic aspect plays a role in consumer satisfaction and loyalty. Underhill (1999), also makes several observations regarding store atmospherics: placement of perfume counters, quality of dressing rooms, positioning of products on

shelves, etc., all of which impact decision-making. The retail atmosphere plays a significant role in consumer decision-making and is worthy of consideration when investigating brand-driven retail shopping.

4. Methodology

The authors utilized a diverse methodological approach and multiple frameworks to produce a comprehensive interpretation and analysis of the data. Qualitative methods developed by Strauss and Quinn (1997), D'Andrade (1981), and Tyler (1969), hermeneutic-phenomenology, developed by Schutz and Luckmann (1973) and interpreted by Van Manen (1990), and in-depth interviewing, as described and prescribed by Seidman (1998), were used as methods of inquiry and as guides for data collecting and analysis.

Although these forms of inquiry are diverse (Spiegelberg 1982; Zaner and Ihde 1973) common principles exist that inform this research. These principles include understanding the phenomena from the inside, comprehending the meaning of everyday experiences and providing credible insights of our social world. Other research approaches in marketing frequently make use of experimental or artificially created test situations. The approach in this paper is to meet consumers where they are naturally engaged.

A phenomenological study entails the research of a phenomenon by obtaining verbal descriptions based on perceptions of this phenomenon: aiming to find common themes or elements that comprise the phenomenon. This study uncovers and describes the elements (texture) and the underlying factors (structure) that comprise the experience and the meaning of being a decision-making retail consumer. According to Creswell (1998), a phenomenological study describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about the phenomenon.

Creswell (1998) describes the role of the researcher as an instrument of data collection who gathers words or pictures, analyzes them inductively, focuses on the meaning of participants, and describes a process that is expressive and persuasive in language (p. 14).

5. Data gathering

The study employs Seidman's (1998) three-interview series model as well as Van Manen's (1991) conceptualization of hermeneutic-phenomenology because of practicality, coherence, sense of creativity and structured forms. Van Manen's approach favors the articulation and importance of context and the need for the development of creative approaches and procedures when carrying out research studies. The goal is to bring out an understanding and awareness of self within the context of the study boundaries.

All data were collected via one-on-one interviews, using informal, unstructured and undirected conversation. Apart from specific data such as demographic information, questions directed at the participants varied from person to person. The collection of data was divided into three stages (Seidman, 1998); the interviews are designed to yield two complementary types of information: a first-person description of the participant's history in context and contextual details of the participant's lived experience. Stories describing the usage of the retail brand's products in the participant's consumption repertoire were elicited. During the interview, the researcher strives for elaboration based on participants' own words (e.g., expressions describing consumer-product interaction). During the interviews, the researcher probes for further elaboration. Each interview stage has a specific purpose.

5.1. Stage one interview

Stage one involves obtaining each participant's life history, focusing on experience as a female consumer in relation to the retail brand. The first interview seeks information about participants as well

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