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Expressing and defining self and relationships through everyday shopping experiences

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ABSTRACT

Despite a good general understanding of retail patronage behavior, knowledge related to the deeper meanings of shopping is still uncertain. Using phenomenological depth interviews, the authors of this study examine lived shopping experiences. The findings contribute to the theory on shopping by revealing that shopping helps define participants' individual selves, both the constraining self and the liberating self. Shopping also acts as a mechanism for consumers to define and negotiate their relationships with others. These findings are important because much of who consumers are and their relationships with others depend on their shopping experiences. The findings also have significant implications for the development of theory.

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1. Introduction

Prior research on shopping focuses on studying patronage behavior and developing shopper typologies. Most of these typologies have been based on variables such as shopping motivations, retail attribute importance, overall attitude toward shopping, and shopping frequency, just to name a few (Arnold & Reynolds, 2003; Westbrook & Black, 1985). Furthermore, most studies concentrate on understanding shopping behavior at a general level, using survey data and shopping-related attitude or motivation scales to segment shoppers into different categories. Few academic studies examine the meaning of shopping at a more personal level. While knowledge of patronage behavior is vast, a deep understanding of what shopping means to consumers is not yet clear. Some prior research has used qualitative approaches to understand shopping experiences (Miller, 1998; Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1990), yet little research focuses on the meaning of shopping at a personal and individual level.

In light of this gap, and responding to a call by Grewal, Levy, and Kumar (2009) for greater understanding of customers' experiences, the current study aims to probe deeper into the meaning of shopping and the role it plays in individuals' lives. Depth interviews enable examinations of the shopping experiences of 14 women; the results indicate

that shopping helps them define their individual selves and negotiate their relationships with others. These findings are important because in modern culture, so much of who consumers are and how their relationships are defined and negotiated depend on shopping.

2. Literature review and conceptual framework

One stream of research on retail shopping centers on shopper typologies and motivations. These studies that use qualitative approaches also serve to examine shopping behavior. An ethnographic examination of activities at a swap meet produced four themes: freedom versus rules, boundaries versus transitions, competition versus cooperation, and sacred versus profane (Belk, Sherry, & Wallendorf, 1988). In ritually exchanging gifts, consumers sanctify the purchase process for gifts (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989), such as taking shopping "pilgrimages." Thompson et al. (1990) use a phenomenological approach to describe everyday consumer experiences of contemporary married women. Rook (1987) uses a phenomenological approach to examine consumers' impulse buying. In a comprehensive examination of shopping, Miller (1998) developed an anthropologically based theory with three themes: shopping as making love, shopping as a ritual practice of sacrifice, and the subject/object relationship. Shoppers develop and imagine relationships as they select goods for purchase. Thus, shopping is about social relationships and the objects acquired serve to create and maintain these relationships.

The current study explores whether the act of shopping might help create and maintain relationships on its own, not just through the objects purchased. Although knowledge of shopping, shopping

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motivations, and shopper types is considerable, and various methods and approaches have been applied to study shopping, the need to understand what shopping actually means persists, including the role that shopping plays in modern-day consumers' complex lives. What is the significance of such behavior and its importance for understanding consumer identity and consumers' relationships? To clarify the significance and meaning of shopping experiences, this research relies on phenomenological, depth interviews.

3. Method

Depth interviews sought to answer two questions: "What do consumers experience when they go shopping?" and "What do shopping experiences mean to consumers?" The data consist of tape-recorded, verbatim transcripts of interviews conducted in the homes of 14 women (Table 1). The interviews totaled over 30 hours of conversation, resulting in more than 300 pages of single-spaced text. The first "grand tour" question asked, "Tell me about your shopping experiences." Participants could steer the discussion and unfold their own stories, minimizing the interviewer's influence. These conversations had a natural flow, and the interviewer only interjected follow-up probes when dialogue came to a halt.

Consistent with a hermeneutical analysis of the texts, a holistic understanding of each participant emerged from identifying essential meanings of shopping for that person, recognizing the interrelationships among those meanings, and allowing individual themes to arise (Hirschman, 1992; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). The analysis of each interview began by regarding it as an idiographic case, then progressed to more global interpretations grounded in the complete set of transcripts. By "relating parts to the whole" (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989, p. 141), the final themes express the meaning of shopping experiences in these consumers' everyday lives.

Two interviews stood out immediately as bipolar snapshots of shopping experiences. Beth unraveled a string of experiences testifying to her love for shopping; Emily narrated experiences that vividly illustrated that she hated to shop. Although 14 participants were interviewed, the evolving design process identified these women as opposites. The distance between them is compelling, and their experiences capture divergent points on a continuum of shopping. As Strauss and Corbin (1990) suggest, examining divergent points on a continuum can help delineate the phenomenon. An in-depth presentation of these two participants' contrary experiences and interpretations serves to illustrate the meaning of their shopping experiences at an individual

level. Thereafter, this article presents a thematic interpretation of all participants' shopping experiences.

4. Emily: A brief case study

Emily is a 40-year-old homemaker with six children between 6 and 23 years old. Her husband is a professional, and they live in a prominent section of a small town. Because Emily dislikes and avoids shopping, she was unsure whether she could help with the study:

I hate shopping... It's a terrible task to me. I don't enjoy it. I go to the same grocery store 99% of the time because I know where the things are in the aisle and I know what I'm looking for and I know what to expect. I don't do any of this checking the papers ... the bargains, and going from store to store. I find that more time consuming and irritating than to just go and pay a little extra because I can afford it, most of the time. So, you know, I don't know how I can help you.

In some respects, shopping is Emily's job. She is deeply committed to a traditional role of wife and mother, and therefore, she must shop:

I cook. I clean. I take care of the kids. I let somebody else decorate and worry about that kind of stuff.

Emily defines and manages her relationships with others through shopping. In particular, her description of shopping provides a glimpse into her marriage:

It becomes a hassle though. My husband hates crowds ... and so it's uncomfortable to go shopping with him. And yet, I feel bad if I go and spend \$400–\$500 for clothes for the kids ... without his approval.

The relationship between Emily and her children and sister also can be discerned:

Christmas shopping is becoming more and more difficult. Basically, we get gift certificates and make [the kids] pick out their own.... I don't buy for my sister. I couldn't please my sister if I tried.

So, Emily cannot please herself, her husband, her children, or her sister through shopping; even an anonymous Christmas gift for a coworker is wrong:

I worked for a little while at Nutrisystem.... They had a Christmas exchange ... and I saw a frame and I wanted to get [it] and then I decided, I really don't know how her house is decorated ... I didn't know her tastes well enough.

Thus, Emily suffers constant assaults on her self-worth:

I make my husband go shopping with me. Because, I'll bring home an outfit and he will go "Yuck." Well fine, I just won't do it myself.... I guess maybe that's why I don't like shopping, except for a specific thing.

Yet she also could describe a wide variety of shopping experiences, some positive:

Now my 20-year-old daughter, who's a college student, it's a little more fun now. She and I can go out shopping and looking at things, and it's more like visiting. But that's just going out and spending time together and while we're at it we're shopping through stores.

In general, Emily hates shopping, but in this instance, she is not shopping but just "visiting" with her daughter. Shopping for Emily is a social activity that often gets critically evaluated by others but also is part of her role, so she must control it to mitigate the damage to her self-worth:

My sister used to always love to go shopping and so we would go and she would try on clothes and try on clothes and I found the whole thing terribly boring. I let my mother pick out my clothes for me because I just

Table 1
Descriptive summary of the participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Marital status	Number of children	Current employment
Pamela	40	Married	2	Retail clerk
Emily	42	Married	6	Housewife, previously professional
Beth	35	Married	3	Housewife, previously worked in retail
Susan	44	Married	1	Retail clerk
Carol	42	Married	1	College professor
Jill	38	Married	2	Housewife, professional until first child
Trudy	52	Married	5	Business owner
Ann	38	Married	3	Manager
Lee	26	Married	1	Administrative assistant
Mary	33	Married	4	Business manager
Sherry	36	Married	1	Teacher's aide
Claire	48	Married	1	Teacher
Megan	22	Single	0	Just graduated from college, seeking position
Rebecca	61	Married	3*	Retired

* All three children were grown and did not live at home.

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