

Consumer normalcy: Understanding the value of shopping through narratives of consumers with visual impairments

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Abstract

This paper extends our understanding of the symbolic and experiential value of shopping. By exploring the narratives of consumers with visual impairments, *consumer normalcy* is shown to be an important value of shopping implicit in discussions of shopping experiences. The informants often achieve *consumer normalcy*, which they reveal consists of four dimensions: participating or being-in-the-marketplace (I am here), achieving distinction through the marketplace (I am me), demonstrating competence and control (I am in control), and being perceived as an equal in the marketplace (I belong). The *consumer normalcy* construct reveals to readers how shopping experiences contribute to identity and the tension between acceptance by others and individual agency. Reality differs between informants, but their collective realities inform how consumers realize their self and consumption aspirations by shopping.

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It is generally accepted that shopping in terms of physical visits to retail venues, and therefore active participation in the marketplace, offers tangible and intangible benefits to consumers (Sandikci and Holt 1998; Zeithaml 1988). Empirical work in the positivist tradition has demonstrated two distinct factors in shopping motive typologies: hedonic and utilitarian (Babin et al. 1994), also referred to as recreational and economic (Bellenger et al. 1977). “Being-in-the-marketplace,” having the immediate experience of a marketing venue, recently has emerged as another important benefit of shopping (Sherry 1998, p. 9; see also Chin 1998; Sandikci and Holt 1998; Sherry 1990). That is, in addition to shopping to solve problems or for pleasure, postmodern researchers recognize shoppers are motivated to co-create, with marketers and designers, an experience that is desirable, just for the sake of it (Sherry 1990).

The extant literature informs an understanding of the symbolic meanings derived from retail shopping. Yet, how shopping affirms a person’s identity or place in society has received scant attention, but seems fundamental to the study of the symbolic value of shopping. Consumers use the out-

come of shopping (commodities and special possessions) to extend the self (Belk 1988) and that process of self-extension is predicated on the assumption that people are able to generate and acquire possessions for themselves (Pavia 1993). Just as products set the stage for roles consumers perform (Solomon 1983), the retail servicescape sets the stage for the roles a shopper performs (Solomon et al. 1992; Bitner 1992). Consumers learn through socialization the appropriate signs, behaviors, and language which should be displayed in their shopper role; and the appropriate use of knowledge in their shopper role is an important aspect of their identity development and maintenance (Peñaloza 1994). In the marketplace, consumers can try on identities as readily as they can try on clothes, and yet marketers do not understand how consumers value shopping with respect to its role in their process of self-definition.

Most discussions on the value of shopping have been developed within populations of primarily middle-class, able-bodied, Caucasian consumers (for an exception see Chin 1998). However, a variety of scholars in the marketing field have argued that exploring the lived-world of consumers in different subcultural groups may yield unique insights into consumer behavior (e.g., Chin 1998; Hill 2002; Hill and Stamey 1990; Kates and Belk 2001; Peñaloza 1994). There

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is no a priori reason to believe that shopping behavior and its value in a given subculture is different per se, but there is reason to believe that shopping behavior and its value may be more salient.

In the case of the present research, marketers almost always assume consumers will use some type of visual information in the shopping environment to serve themselves: They will look for the price on a can of peas, choose coordinating pieces of clothing for a wardrobe, or signal a waiter as he passes. In addition, with the exception of goods with credence attributes, consumers are presumed to evaluate their marketplace encounters with some amount of visual information. (Is this product the one I wanted? Does this color look good on me? Is the amount shown on the deposit slip right or wrong?) That is, the implied presumption behind most exchanges and much of the marketing and retailing literatures is that consumers acquire and use visual information to participate in marketplace encounters and make consumption choices. When retail stores are designed, the assumed state of affairs is that consumers are sighted and visually attuned to labels, colors, lighting, point-of-purchase displays, point-of-sale information, and merchandising. These visuals, like images in advertisements, provide a symbolic system that is assumed to be cognitively processed by consumers as they move through the shopping environment (see e.g., Scott 1994).

Nearly one in five consumers in the United States has a mental and/or physical disability, making people with disabilities the single largest minority group at nearly 50 million (Waldrop and Stern 2003). Of these, about four in 100 have a sensory disability of sight or hearing (Waldrop and Stern 2003). Visual impairments range from severe (no light vision) to some visual stimulation, yet still being considered legally blind. Many legally blind people are impaired to the degree that reading signs and other printed materials and/or distinguishing landmarks and faces is difficult, if not impossible.

Given the nature and design of most marketplace activities, a consumer with a visual impairment may have to make accommodations to shop. For example, a consumer with a visual impairment may have to arrange for transportation to and from the marketplace and may want to request assistance from a service provider, paid reader, friend, or family member once he/she arrives. That is, the marketplace imposes a number of substantial barriers to shopping for a consumer with visual impairments. These barriers certainly can be and are overcome by using a variety of adaptive responses to the marketplace (Baker et al. 2001), but why is it worth the effort to shop?

It is not at all surprising that consumers with visual impairments would want to shop; after all, shopping is part of the everyday life of consumers (Miller et al. 1998; Underhill 1999). Little has been written inside the marketing literature about how consumers shop to create or maintain their identities or about how consumers with visual impairments perceive and respond to the marketplace. The purpose of this paper is to develop an understanding of the symbolic and

experiential value of shopping that is implicit in the narratives of consumers with visual impairments by showing how specific individuals personalize the shopping experience to create and manage their identities.

The paper contributes to the literature in three primary ways. First, it extends our understanding of the value of shopping, yielding a perspective about identity that is not apparent in other empirical investigations on the value of shopping. Second, it explores the retail servicescape as a public space, and investigates how successful that public space is in providing the benefits desired by consumers with visual impairments. Third, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 mandates that people with disabilities be given access to public accommodations and services, and this paper helps the reader understand in part *why* the legislation was implemented.

The paper begins with a brief review of the literature that documents the importance of shopping to individuals and to consumer culture. Next, an existential-phenomenological study, designed to help the reader empathetically understand the particular narratives of informants who have visual impairments, is described. After providing an interpretation of a symbolic value of shopping missing from the literature, namely *consumer normalcy*, implications for theory and retailing practices and policies are offered.

Background

Shopping in everyday life

Shopping is an important ritual in the everyday lives of consumers (McCracken 1988a). That is, shopping rituals constitute a normal, everyday activity (Miller et al. 1998). Shopping is a "... social action, interaction and experience which increasingly structures the everyday practices of urban people" (Falk and Campbell 1997, pp. 1–2) and may well be the driving factor in modern life (Miller et al. 1998).

Shopping provides the opportunity for individuals to engage in self-construction, where one's self is changed because of a shopping experience (Crawford 1992; Falk and Campbell 1997; Sandikci and Holt 1998). That is, the shopping experience may fundamentally change the way an individual thinks about him/herself and his/her capabilities in the marketplace and as a person (Crawford 1992; Sandikci and Holt 1998). For example, a person can examine products and see what they might like to buy at some point; through this process, they realize who they are and who they might become (Crawford 1992). Or, a person, such as someone in grief, may use shopping as a form of therapy to help reassemble a sense of self (Gentry et al. 1995). Thus, the marketplace, and all of the consumer behaviors that occur within the marketplace, help to formulate a person's identity, that is, who I think I am and how I think others view and judge me (Solomon 1983).

Shopping also affords consumers with the opportunity for social interaction, which helps achieve social integration and

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