

IT'S A FAMILY AFFAIR: MOTHERS, DAUGHTERS AND SIBLINGS SHOPPING EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we explored accounts of mothers, daughters and siblings shopping experiences. We used Consumer Socialization Theory (Ward, 1974) to frame a qualitative analysis of shopping behavior. We conducted 8 personal interviews and 7 passive observations of mothers, daughters and siblings shopping together. Our results yielded a continuum of mother and daughter shopping experiences as well as reports of fun, upbeat sibling shopping stories. Changes in family structure, such as divorce, resulted in family shopping pattern changes.

Keywords: consumer socialization; mother, daughter, sibling, shopping

WOMEN AND SHOPPING

Any study of purchase decision making will reveal that it is women who make the vast majority of these decisions (Goboi 2005). As well as directly influencing decision making, women are the ones who do the shopping. Of the over 190 million visitors to shopping malls in the U.S. (Keen 2008), the majority of shoppers are female. However, shopping outcomes extend beyond purchasing and are often a social and family experience, with small groups of mothers, daughters, and sometimes grandmothers shopping together. The intersection between women and shopping has been very strong for centuries. One author made this observation: "The history of shopping can predominantly be regarded as the history of women. As one has changed or evolved, the other has reacted or adapted." (Chung, 2001). This dynamic connection can be seen in the evolution of the retail industry, from the development of convenience shopping to the emergence of lifestyle malls. These changes reflect the way retailers evolved to meet women's needs as they assumed more roles outside of the home. Historically, mothers have transferred shopping knowledge and expertise to their daughters in what can become a lifelong shopping partnership. Thompson (1996) confirms that identity construction for women involves their roles as shoppers. Many cultures "portray a woman's self-worth as a function of her shopping skills and the astuteness of her consumer choices" (Douglas 1994; Thompson 1996). We argue that the mother-daughter shopping experience influences psychological dimensions such as feelings of self worth that result from astute choice making. We propose that mother-daughter shopping experiences influence the quality of the mother-daughter relationship as it is acted out in a place of consumption.

Mothers usually act as gatekeepers for the purchase of products and services. In this role they often become consumer educators to their daughters and, often, their granddaughters (Neeley, 2005). These daughters represent the next generation of gatekeepers and will have huge future purchasing power. Further, daughters often imitate their mothers brand and shopping preferences (Moore et al., 2002), thus both manufacturers and retailers have an interest in understanding this important shopping dyad. It is reasonable to assume that mothers have an influence during mother-daughter shopping trips (e.g. where to shop, what to buy, price sensitivity, etc.) and that this influence will be carried on by their daughters.

In previous work, memories shared by mothers and daughters shopping together were reminiscent of positive experiences (Minahan & Huddleston, 2009). The findings revealed that daughters gained skills and independence from shopping with their mothers, and the shopping expedition took on the nature of a ritual. We were surprised that none of the interviewees discussed the 'dark side' of the experience. We believed that a larger sample might be required to provide a richer collection of reminiscences. The literature exploring the mother daughter relationship in shopping is scant. Popular culture, however, contains many references to conflict in the mother-daughter relationship. There is evidence of this conflict in a plethora of popular press books on how to address the maternal-daughter conflict (e.g. *I'm Not Mad, I Just Hate You*). Yet, there is limited academic literature on conflict between daughters and their mothers when shopping together (Saunders, Samli and Toquier, 1973). This is despite a wider body of studies of consumer socialization in general. Specifically, qualitative published research has not considered the memories of young women in early adulthood (18-mid-twenties) as they were socialized as consumers by family members, in particular their mothers (Minahan and Huddleston, 2009). We propose that the experiences of adult young women shopping with their mothers are not always perceived positively by this specific age group. This paper extends the work of Minahan and Huddleston (2009) by undertaking further research into the mother daughter shopping relationship. The paper commences with a discussion of the consumer socialization literature as it relates to shopping; then a discussion of the research methods followed by a discussion of the findings relating to a continuum of good and bad interactions. We then add a further finding relating to siblings and shopping. We conclude with a discussion of the practical and theoretical implications of this research and opportunities for further research.

CONSUMER SOCIALIZATION THEORY

Consumer Socialization Theory (Ward, 1974) refers to the processes by which consumer skills, knowledge and attitudes are developed. Dursun (1993) in Hayta (2008) identifies five methods by

which parents teach their children to become consumers: 1) prohibit certain activities; 2) advise on consumption; 3) exchange ideas on consumption decisions; 4) provide examples to the child by their own behaviors; and 5) allow the child to learn by his own experience (p. 173). Three themes emerge from the consumer socialization literature. First, the family is a key consumer socialization agent, noted as having the strongest influence on the socialization process (Hayta, 2008). This influence extends to siblings. As children observe their parents' buying behavior (mothers especially), they learn to act independently as consumers (Ward, Wackman and Wartella, 1977). While the bulk of the consumer socialization literature focuses on the mother-child relationship, one study (Cotte and Wood, 2004) examined inter and intra-generational influence on innovative behavior. Although intergenerational influence appears to be dominant, sibling influence on innovative behavior is also positive and significant. Nancarrow, Tinson, and Brace's (2008) study of the mother as the consumer socialization agent found that older siblings and other agents added to the consumer learning process of the younger siblings.

Second, socialization is often a two-way process, particularly as children age; this process has been identified as reciprocal socialization (Moore et al., 2001). For example, reciprocal influence occurs between teenagers and their parents, especially when it comes to choices in technology (Moore, Wilkie, and Lutz, 2002). Third, the literature suggests that changes in family structure or situation, such as divorce or mother entering the workforce, can change the dynamics of consumer socialization. Single women head about 25% of households in America (Hamilton, 2001; *Working*, 2009). After divorce or separation, finances, emotional support, and time spent working outside of the home typically change for single mothers and their family unit (Hamilton, 2009; Pocock & Clarke, 2004). Shopping patterns can change due to lack of time and financial resources.

These consumer socialization themes led us to pose the following research questions:

- R1: What types of negative shopping experiences occur between mother and daughter?
- R2: To what extent do older or younger siblings participate in shopping socialization? What is the nature of memories of siblings shopping together?
- R3: Does a change in family structure result in corresponding changes to shopping patterns within a family?

METHODS

Our exploratory study used multiple data collection methods to triangulate the investigation. We used inductive and deductive analysis of grounded theory qualitative techniques (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 1995) and audio-taped eight interviews of mothers and daughters and observed dyads in the shopping mall. These interviews included one mother-daughter dyad and one triad. Respondents were recruited by the authors and interviews ranged from 15 minutes to an hour. One author observed seven mother and daughter dyads in their natural shopping settings to explore the verbal and non-verbal communication of the mother and daughter shopping experience.

The observations took place at five different retail store formats on a Thursday, Friday, and Saturday during October and November, 2009. Observation times ranged from five to 45 minutes for the dyads. Each dyad was followed until they had left the store or made a purchase. For the interviews we used ethnographic line-by-line open coding to accumulate textual and analytical themes (Emerson et al., 1995). To code the recorded interviews, we reconstructed them into Microsoft OneNote memos and listened to the audio recordings twice to openly code recurring themes. We used Microsoft Word for coding the passive observer field notes and began focused coding.

SHOPPING TRADITIONS: A CONTINUUM

Each interview was opened with the question, "Tell me about shopping traditions with you and your mother." We had a variety of responses to this question. Some mothers and daughters initially said they did not recall specific mother-daughter "traditions":

"I'm not quite sure we had any shopping traditions. We stopped school shopping together when I was about 13...When my daughters were younger, we went school shopping together, but that stopped as teenagers" –Kelly, 56 (Anna's mother)

Some comments reflected such traditions did exist and were warmly remembered:

hum, yeah we like to go shopping at Christmas time and get things that were needed for the family. And sometimes we'd start our shopping, especially right after Christmas we'd start collecting things, both of us tended to do that. And have things on sale to give the next year. Then sometimes we'd go out the last minute and pick up something extra after we got everything wrapped and put under the tree we'd decided we wanted a little more or something. We like to shop together. -Mary Jo, 64

A number of these recollections about shopping together were less positive, sometimes because of financial constraints.

"Um, the only traditions, as far as shopping with my mother I can remember is going to the grocery store. We didn't go out clothes shopping much or anything. We couldn't afford it, so, just the grocery store." -Meredith, 56

"Ah, well me and my mom don't really have a shopping tradition, it is more the tradition would be not to go shopping with her. Um, she doesn't like going shopping and if she does, she has to have somebody with her." - Alexis, 19 (Meredith's daughter)

When they spoke about mother daughter shopping traditions, we also heard some direct examples of mothers trying to teach their daughters lessons through shopping, in other words, consumer socialization in action. One mother recalls trying to teach her daughter to give to others:

"...and there were traditions that I started with her when she was young as we would go shopping and pick names off a Christmas tree and fulfill whatever they wanted and then get them wrapped. Because at the time you could wrap them and take them to the store, back to the store and they would hand them out. And she was six, seven, eight years old when I started that with her. Showing her that there was more than just herself that had wants and needs." - Mary Jo, 64

A daughter describes how her mother taught her to compute savings:

"She'd take me to the grocery store and she would try to make me figure out like when things were on sale how much it was for each thing or how much money I would save..." -Kristen, 28

During the interviews, a line of questioning was used to uncover details about negative aspects of mother-daughter of shopping. One dyad explained their differing shopping styles and self-centered actions of the mother. Shopping with this mother was like a form of punishment. Shopping as punishment appears to have been passed down from the grandmother:

"...I remember one time she (her mother, Meredith, 58) told me, actually her mother used shopping as punishment. She went out one night and went to a party and came home and was hung over the next day and her mother took her out to go shopping as punishment while she was hung over... One time I had to go to the hospital and ended up getting a morphine IV and to get rehydrated. And after I was done, she decided that it was a good time to go to Sam's Club while I'm hopped up on morphine. And I literally passed out on the cart, standing in Sam's Club and we were there for an hour and a half. It was supposed to be a quick trip for one thing...She says, 'Oh well, we're not going to be there all night.' But we usually are. We can spend up to three hours for one store. If we have multiple stops, it will take all day; from early afternoon until 9 or 10 at night; until the stores close." - Alexis, 19 (Meredith's daughter)

The daughter conveys that shopping is not fun and she would like to be in and out of the stores quickly. She could remember one positive story about shopping with her mother and indicated that she will shop with her father twice as often as with her mother.

The observations revealed both verbal and non-verbal negative mother-daughter shopping interactions. For example, the negative side of shopping was exposed as a notion of "shopping as punishment" elicited in the personal interviews. In one observation there was nothing kind or gentle about the mother's blatant disapproval of her daughter's selection of merchandise. The mother was openly hostile towards the daughter during their time in the store.

SHOPPING WITH SIBLINGS

Four of the eight respondents recall shopping with siblings and these memories appear to be remembered in a more positive, sometimes playful light than memories of shopping with their mothers. One mother describes shopping with her sister:

Stephanie (44): Oh yeah, my sister and I shop together and we have a lot of fun, actually...well we make fun of people too. And I don't know, 'cause usually when we go shopping we are out of town, so we can be silly and goofy and wear silly things around and it just doesn't matter because no one knows us.

Kristin (28), mother of twins describes taking her younger sister shopping:

"Oh, usually once a month and it is usually when they are going to baby-sit for me, and I'm buying groceries (child in foreground) to supply them for the weekend".

Interviewer: And so you mostly take your sister to grocery stores?

Kristin: "Yeah, we usually go to Meijer. Well last year for high school and stuff or I don't know, college this year, we went to the mall a lot. We went up to Lansing just to go prom dress shopping. I had to take a day off of work."

One respondent recalled a shopping trip with her brother:

"We just went to Best Buy Tuesday, no Monday. My brother was in need of a washer and a dryer and a TV. He does not charge things, he just writes a check for everything that he wants and would like to get in and out. And we had a quite interesting salesman, he reminded of us like Napoleon Dynamite, he was very interesting and we ended up being there like an hour when we walked in and new exactly what we wanted." –Anna , 27

These quotes reflect perceptions of shopping with siblings as something enjoyable and entertaining, even when a shopping trip takes longer than expected, as in Anna's experience.

FAMILY CHANGES AND SHOPPING

Almost all our respondents had experienced the effects of divorce and thought that shopping had changed for them after the divorce. We posed questions such as, "Has shopping with your daughter changed since your separation from your husband?" These respondents each had similar answers that included, "there was no money" or "I had to work more." We found that for both divorced and non divorced families, older siblings may take on more responsibilities in buying groceries or taking younger siblings shopping:

"Mom would send me up to get the steak, bread, or milk and eggs. Nothing major. She still had that responsibility. She didn't put that all on me. I watched my younger brother so I had that responsibility. Other than that, I think she just kind of did the grocery shopping how I do now, after work, and she would bring home groceries at about 3 am." –Cami, 35(Parents divorced)

"My sister took me prom dress shopping because my mom did not have time." – Alexis, 19 (Still married, Meredith's daughter)

DISCUSSION

Our study expanded on Minahan and Huddleston (2009) and Saunders et al (1973) to document mother-daughter shopping traditions. We uncovered a continuum of shopping accounts, ranging from warm memories to unpleasant occurrences. Similar to the Saunders et al. (1973) study, we found more harmony than conflict in mother-daughter shopping. However, in some instances, shopping with mom was an extremely negative experience. Unlike previous work (Moore et al., 2009; Cotte and Wood, 2004), we did not hear accounts of inter-generational influence where daughters affected their mothers' shopping behavior. The daughters in our sample were 19-29, so perhaps this influence does not occur until later in life when daughters have firmly established their independence. Ward's (1974) consumer socialization framework is supported with this additional qualitative research that delves into the specific workings of the family as a socialization factor. We heard specific accounts of how mothers deliberately tried to influence their daughters via the shopping experience as Dursun (1993)

suggests by advising them on consumption (computing savings) and providing examples to the child by their own behaviors (charitable giving).

The siblings in our sample shopped together, validating Nancarrow et al. (2008). Most sibling shopping scenarios we heard were fun, even playful. Perhaps when siblings shop together, it is a “safe haven” to act silly, have fun and simply be oneself without the fear of parental criticism. Interestingly, we did not hear siblings talk about directly influencing one another’s shopping decisions. The sibling shopping experiences tended to focus on the entertainment value of shopping together.

As expected, changes in family structure through divorce changed family shopping patterns (Pocock and Clarke, 2004; Hamilton, 2009). Family structure changes often resulted in the older children taking more responsibility for grocery shopping, fulfilling this task to assist the working mother. In some cases, in the mother’s absence, the older siblings took younger ones shopping for school clothes or to make purchases for memorable events such as prom.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Our results illustrate a continuum of shopping experiences with family members. Implications for retailers and marketers regarding the positive experiences are relatively straightforward. Retailers can promote togetherness, provide spaces to interact, and use mother-daughter or sibling dyads in promotional campaigns to encourage family shopping trips. For the negative side of mother-daughter shopping, the implications are more complex and less straightforward. It is difficult to see how retailers can provide an environment that will mitigate conflict. The area of theory related to family conflict in retail situations has not been studied for many years. Saunders et al (1973) undertook the only study we could locate that dealt with mothers and daughters, and the focus was on 7th grade girls and their mothers. The impact of conflict on the shopping experience and choices is one that could contribute to the consumer socialization literature in understanding under what circumstances conflict occurs (e.g. related to product, expenditure, store choice).

With qualitative work, there can be a vast amount of information discovered during interviews, observations, and immersion (Emerson, et al, 1995). This study provided rich details (Emerson, et al, 1995; Berg, 2009) about shopping experiences of mothers, daughters and siblings. While not reported in this paper, several daughters mentioned shopping with their fathers; the father daughter relationship may provide avenues for future research.

The mother-daughter dyad could be further explored by conducting focus groups. The use of a moderator and video recordings would add another dimension to the data by observing body language and facial expressions of respondents (Berg, 2009). It would be interesting to interview the dyads together; as our team interviewed them apart. Passively observing the dyads indicated that in addition to verbal communication, non-verbal communication may be of importance in the consumer socialization process. Using a critical incident (Grove & Fisk, 1997) approach to uncover conflict in mother-daughter shopping experiences is a method that might reveal more of the “dark side” of shopping than we found in our interviews. Further qualitative research could be gathered by accompanying women on shopping trips to observe and ask questions directly about the experience.

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