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Men and Shopping: The Emerging Generation Gap

Abstract

Although consumer research has given attention to gender, examinations of male shopping styles have been ignored. Using exploratory interviews with male consumers in Australia we examine men’s shopping styles, underlying motivations, and sources of (dis)satisfaction. We identify two key findings: men from different generations have different attitudes to shopping, with younger men displaying more feminine approaches to shopping, and regardless of an expressed interest in shopping, male shopping styles lack the emotional attachment and connection to the shopping activity.

Keywords: gender, men, shopping behaviour, merchandising and retail atmosphere

Gender and Shopping

For some, shopping is an activity that is considered a leisure activity, an escape from the routine chores of daily life, while for others it is a burden (Shao, Baker & Wagner, 2002). The shopping environment contains a number of cues that consumers respond to differently. These different responses can be partly attributed to gender (Minahan & Beverland, 2005). Faith Popcorn and Liz Marigold has created eight marketing rules designed around the fact that “women and men are as different shopologically as they are biologically” (2000, p.17). Gender differences have important implications for retailers because they are believed to influence shopping style, desire for and response to in-store design cues, participation in shopping per se, and desire for and response to retail salesperson selling approach (Caterall & Maclaran, 2002; Underhill, 2000). We respond to Costa’s (1994) call for research into how, why and in what way gender influences consumption behaviour, by examining the male shopping experience.

Gender differences in shopping behaviour are often explained with reference to biological and socialization differences. Biological explanations attribute gender differences to variations in sex chromosomes, emotional make-up and brain lateralization (Gentry, Commuri & Jun, 2003; Hupfer, 2002; Putrevu, 2001). These differences can explain men’s reactions to in-store cues. For example, in relation to aspects of the store environment males are more influenced by functional design aspects such as space and architecture than females (Baker, et al., 1992; Baker, et al., 1994; Bitner, 2002). Baron-Cohen (2003) found that male brains were “systemisers” and more spatial in nature. Underhill (2000) found males preferred to gather information on their own from written materials and could leave the store without ever dealing with a salesperson. Males also moved faster through store aisles, and spent less time looking (Underhill, 2000).

In contrast, a socialization perspective states “gender is the symbolic role definition attributed to members of a sex on the basis of historically constructed interpretations of the nature, disposition and role of members of that sex” (Gentry, et al., 2003, p.1). Palan (2001) distinguishes gender and sex, referring to “sex” as an individual’s
biological sex and “gender” as the psychological features associated with biological sex that are socially constructed. Hine (2002) found men rank shopping as one of their least favorite leisure activities because men did not feel they achieved anything through shopping. Men have different priorities, preferences and attitudes that result in different gender-driven responses, decision processes and purchase outcomes (Barletta, 2003). However, Otnes and McGrath (2001) found the opposite in their examination of men’s perceptions of shopping and their shopping behaviour, concluding “the contrast between male and female shopping styles is not actually as marked as the expressed rhetoric would lead us to believe” (p.172). Otnes and McGrath (2001) did find that women were more positive about shopping than men and many men still view shopping as “effeminate”, but males engaged in such “feminine activities” as alternative evaluation, bargain hunting, browsing behaviour, enjoyment of shopping and some admitted to “shopping like a lady”.

The reality may be that males and females are becoming more similar in shopping behaviors and what they want from the shopping experience compared to the traditional perceptions, which will have implications for retailers.

Methodology

As the literature is inconclusive we chose an exploratory, qualitative method (Sekaran, 1992). Eight men were interviewed during 2003. In-depth interviews were chosen that enabled response to be connected to the individual (Malhotra, Hall, Shaw and Oppenheim, 2002). The interviews were semi structured consisting of grand tour questions and floating prompts and “planned prompts” to encourage open responses in an unobtrusive and non-directive manner (McCracken, 1988). Respondents were encouraged to relate stories of their shopping experiences, likes and dislikes, and were asked to refer to actual stores and situations they have encountered. The interviews were taped, transcribed and then coded by both authors prior to analysis (inter-rater agreement was above 90%). Results were analyzed using open and axial coding procedures (Strauss and Corbin 1998), and we tacked backed and forward between the transcripts and the relevant literature as a means of theory generation (Spiggle 1994). We selected interviewees between 20 and 60 years of age, who shopped regularly and who had a disposable income.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shane</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>John</td>
<td>51</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scott</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>58</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Bruce</td>
<td>52</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tim</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Fred</td>
<td>59</td>
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Findings: The Male Shopping experience

The majority of males shopped out of ‘necessity’ rather than for ‘leisure’ and whenever possible tried to ‘get in and out’ as quickly as possible. For example: “I’ve got my few stores that I go into and buy stuff from, because I only go shopping when I need something. I don’t go because I want to. I do it through necessity rather then
choice.” (Scott, 23) The respondents had little interest in shopping as an activity: “If I think about my wife and daughter, shopping for them is a completely different experience. It’s recreation. To me, it’s not and so they are willing to put up with what I would find intolerable.” (Bruce, 52) Bruce’s passage identifies his lack of interest in shopping as an enjoyable act in and of itself. For Bruce, as for others, the process of shopping was of little value; rather value came from acquiring the product they needed to achieve other more important goals. For example: “It’s a waste of time. Sorry, it’s a means to an end. I want something, I know what I want so I go and get what I want and get out. There are better things to do with my time.” (Bruce, 52)

“They specialize in the music that I want and there’s nowhere else that has it. It’s such a place that I have to go, it doesn’t necessarily matter how they treat me.” (Ben, 27) Ben’s passage identifies his low expectations of service, but more importantly, that sales staff attitude and behaviour simply have little value to him. This was despite the fact that Ben was one of only two males interviewed that enjoyed shopping. For example: “the more money I had the quicker I would spend it.” Ben loves browsing particularly in music stores and boutique stores for their unique offerings. Nevertheless, Ben exhibited the same behaviour in-store and attitude to the value of shopping as our other respondents (with the exception of Shane below). Shopping behaviour such as Ben’s relates to a tendency by men to get the purchase completed as soon as possible and to get on with other activities not related to shopping:

“I like to get in and get out, whether it’s functional or whether it’s an entertaining or enjoyable purchase. So I’ve still got in the back of my mind the clock is ticking, other things to do, you know, so spending a day walking around the shops doesn’t do a great deal for me at all, unless I’ve got clear purchases in mind.” (Tim, 40)

In contrast to the other respondents, Shane enjoys shopping and has high expectations of salespeople. His passage identifies his understanding that he is different and relates this a generational change. For example:

“There are very different levels of men and women. Like I think there’s a major demographic and psychographic influence that’s been influenced in different types of men and different types of women, so I don’t, the similar age group and similar sort of fashion conscious and spunky men and women in their mid 20’s would expect the same level of service but then the gap of when the man is 50 and the woman is 50, the 50 year old woman would probably expect more than the 50 year old man. Service is important for me anyway.” (Shane, 21)

Shane mentions the influence the generation may have on the shopper’s attitudes, suggesting younger males may be just as into shopping and style as younger females, compared to their older male counterparts who were brought up in a different time and do not have the same involvement and interest in shopping. Some of the younger males expressed that they “love shopping”, although only Shane, the youngest by six years adopted more feminine shopping behaviors (cf: Otnes and McGrath, 2001) and were very similar to females in their attitudes, finding it enjoyable and only being restricted by financial considerations. Older males did not display this same enjoyment of shopping. However, males do seem to lack the emotional connection to shopping that females possess, they are not as affected by the experience and it does not fulfill any larger need for them other than acquiring a product. Overall, although
one respondent displayed shopping behaviors similar to that of females’, the majority does not enjoy shopping and do not gain as much from the experience as females.

In fact, the majority of our respondents confirmed one stereotypical view of male shopping habits. Tim describes his shopping style as “get in and get out” confirming the stereotype of the “grab and go” male (Otnes & McGrath, 2001). Time is also an issue for Tim because he is aware there is always “other things to do” and shops for a purpose with “clear purchases in mind.” “The time delays bother me enormously. Once I’ve made up my mind that I’ve spent the amount of time in the store, then I want to clear out” (Peter, 58).

Based on the above passages, most of the respondents do not consider shopping to be an enjoyable leisure activity, see it as “a waste of time” and whenever possible want to “get in and out” in the shortest time possible. Many of the interviewees mentioned they “have better things to do with their time” than spend time browsing through a shopping centre which they find “boring.” These respondents confirm Campbell’s (1997) findings of the male as a “purpose shopper.” It is also clear that men require a less intrusive sales process, whereby the salesperson does little more than process the sale. For example: “No interaction at all. I am not interested in their opinion or what they think is good. I always find once they start suggesting things, you have sort of got them on board then and then you feel more inclined to have to buy something and that’s what I hate.” (Ben 27) Ben’s passage indicates he sees little value in salespeople; rather he would respond more positively to signage and a functional layout that enabled him to find his desired products as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Despite the functional view of shopping and the disparagement of the activity, there were positive aspects of the shopping experience that our respondents took pleasure in. Consistent with a transactional approach to shopping, many of the interviewees expressed their enjoyment “haggling” with prices and got a thrill from trying to “turn the deal in my favour.” For example:

“The thing I actually like about supermarket shopping is how much I can swing the deal in my favour, so I’m quite a good bargain shopper.” (Tim, 40)

“I like stores where, I just like to haggle, I love to play around with prices. I do it for fun actually.” (Ben, 27)

Ben engages in this “haggling” for “fun” and loves being able to “get the best price.” It is his way of turning his shopping into an enjoyable experience by turning it into a type of “game.” Our respondents gain pleasure in shopping-related activities and often turn shopping into a challenge where they try to get the best price. The fact Tim turns even his supermarket shopping into one of these games to make it enjoyable, is an indication of their love of a bargain. Shopping for these men is about the process of making a deal where they are trying to get the best outcome, in this case the price of their purchases. There was also the tendency to view the purchase as an “investment”:

“Respect the fact that you are spending money with them, just recognizing that you’re bringing your hard earned cash to them and you have a choice of places to spend it,
Tim mentions the fact that the salesperson should “respect” that you are making an “investment decision.” The purchase he is “investing” in is taken very seriously as he is spending his “hard earned cash”. Tim also mentions that there is “a choice of places to spend it” so the sales personnel should make an effort to make him choose to spend with them. Ben also took this view: “But at the end of the day still sort of convey that attitude that even if you come up a couple of times to look at something, that they are still as helpful or understand that you are making a choice.” (Ben, 27) Ben and Tim view the purchase decision as an “investment” of their “hard earned cash” and do not take the process lightly. They expect the salesperson to be professional and “respect” their right to choose, and provide them with the information necessary to make the best decision. Although they profess little love for the activity of shopping, our respondents nevertheless take the business aspect of shopping seriously, suggesting they may be less amenable to experiential strategies using in-store atmospherics.

Conclusion, Implications and Future Research

Overall males tend to be methodical in their shopping habits. Their relationships are more of a business rather than a personal nature. The act of shopping and the sales personnel are a “means to an end” serving as a vehicle for them to satisfy their needs. They do not gain a large amount of pleasure from the experience. It has been proposed that males and females may be converging in their shopping behaviors (Otnes & McGrath, 2001). The males in this sample possess different attitudes towards shopping and approach the activity very differently to females, which led to differing needs of the shopping experience. Age influences males’ motivations in the shopping experience as some of the younger males in the sample possessed positive attitudes towards shopping, had different needs and found pleasure in the activity. Nevertheless, men still have less emotional attachment to the shopping process than females (identified in Minahan and Beverland, 2005). Also, we find support for both biological and socialization views of gendered shopping behaviour. The findings have implications for retailers. The opportunity is there for retailers to provide a shopping experience that suits men old and young. Our findings show, for older men in particular, a wish to engage in a business like activity, where investments are made and deals done that may include some negotiations or ‘haggling’ to reach a conclusion. In store information packs, auction formats and sales staff empowered to ‘do the deal’ will appeal to men. Another area to consider is how au fait men are with the processes of shopping. Many men are not educated in ways of shopping and need some basic skills and knowledge such as what size measures exist and how and when to hunt for bargains. The emerging generation gap requires retailers to provide a richer and more entertaining experience for the younger male shopper.
References


