Consumer Socialization: the Mother and Daughter Shopping Experience

Stella Minahan, Deakin University
Pat Huddleston, Michigan State University

Abstract
As part of a broader study of women and shopping, we found that many women often talked about shopping with their mothers. We pursued this theme and explored the mother and daughter shopping experience. We position this work within the literature of consumer socialization. The objectives of this part of the research project were 1) gain knowledge of why mother and daughters shop together and 2) uncover what is valued in the shopping experience. Interviews were conducted in person and supplemented using email. The women were aged 18-70. The women provide accounts of how consumer habits, preferences and experiences are transferred across generations. We found that the bonds between mother and daughter relationship are acted out when shopping and the reciprocal coaching occurs.

Mothers and Daughters and Shopping
Women in contemporary society assume the role of shopping agents or gatekeepers for the family; they exert tremendous spending power, making over 80 percent of buying decisions in all homes (Gogoi, 2005). This role is so entrenched in our culture that shopping is institutionalized as “women’s work”, as part of the nurturing of the family. Mothers accept the responsibility for transferring their knowledge of shopping to their daughters. Shopping is regarded as a life skill that is transferred implicitly and explicitly across the generations. It is not uncommon to see three generations of women enjoying a day out shopping; where the focus is not only on shopping but also on spending time with one another. Research suggests that mothers play a more active role in the consumer education of their children than fathers and co-shop more often with daughters than sons (Lachance and Choquette-Bernier, 2004; Neeley, 2005). The skills of shopping are taught directly by the mother. Daughters also absorb knowledge of shopping through passive observation of the mother’s approach to the store and to choice and the shopping experience. The shopping habits, product and store preferences and techniques are communicated by both parties. The influence in the shopping relationship is not uni-directional. Whilst mothers are known to teach their daughters to shop, daughters also influence their mothers, in a process called “reciprocal socialization”. This process extends into the adult life of the daughter as Sorce, Loomis and Tyler (1989) report in their study of adult children who participate in the consumer decision making processes of the elderly parents. Socio-cultural and economic perspectives highlight the connections between shopping and women. Chung notes that the histories of women and shopping are tightly linked (2001).

The majority of the over 190 million visitors to shopping malls in the USA (Keen, 2008) are female. Often small groups of mothers, daughters and, sometimes, grandmothers shop together. While consumer theorists (Bellenger and Moschis 1982; Carlson and Grossbart 1988; Mandrik et al. 2005; Moore-Shay and Lutz 1988; Sorce et al. 1989) have explored the importance of intergenerational relationships, John (1999) notes that there has been little consumer research that disaggregates the family communication into smaller units such as “father-son or father-daughter”. Further, few studies relate to the intergenerational effect in later life stages (Viswanathan et al. 2000). Minahan and Beverland (2005) examined
underlying motivations for women shopping and the importance of the mall as a place for women. They noted the mother and daughter phenomena but did not explore it further (Minahan and Beverland 2005). This study addresses the call from Haytko and Baker (2004) for exploration of the mother and daughter shopping experience, and furthers our knowledge of consumer socialization. The objectives of this study were to 1) gain knowledge of why mothers and daughters shop together and 2) uncover what is valued in the shopping experience.

**Methodology**

To address these objectives, we used a qualitative approach. Our sample was of women with a spectrum of ages ranging from 17-70. We recruited initially through notices on social networking sites that lead to many referrals. We conducted 21, forty to sixty minute personal interviews and 38 shorter e-mail interviews for more geographical remote participants. The sampling technique was part of the larger study and aimed to provide a range that reflected the population breakup in the USA. The interviews consisted of a number of directed questions as to shopping habits followed by a number of open ended questions about the experience of shopping. The in person interviews were held at a time and place to suit the interviewee. Some interviews were held in malls, others were held in coffee shops and diners. Interview questions focused on whom they shopped with, why they shopped together and what occurred during their shopping trips. The age range of our sample was 18-70. The audio taped interviews were transcribed and independently coded. We provide a brief overview of the themes emerging from the data and illustrative quotes, which highlight our findings. While the data yielded four themes, because of space limitations, we will discuss only two of the four major themes that emerged from our data; ‘the mother and daughter bond’ and ‘reciprocal coaching’.

**The Mother and Daughter Bond**

Many mothers and daughters go shopping to be together away from the household routines. From childhood through to adulthood women spoke nostalgically about shopping with their moms. The shopping trip was very much about the building and maintenance of this special relationship. Sometimes the shopping excursions would be all-day marathon type events that focused on both shopping and being together. A thirty-something mother said wistfully:

“...when I was growing up, I used to spend all day Saturday at the mall with my mom, and that was like a really nice activity, and I mean all day. We would get there when the mall opened and we were probably there until five, and now I couldn’t do that.”

Another young mother reminisced:

“I remember my mom came down to see me when I was down in school. I went to school in Ohio. It was about an hour out of Columbus, Ohio. And she came down for the weekend and I don’t think there was anything going on at school, she came down and she said, okay, I have to go shopping and she was saving up, there was certain items she had to buy. So we decided to go down to Columbus for the day. We spent, I think we got there at about 10 in the morning and we left when the stores closed at 9:00. That was the longest I’ve ever done and also the most expensive shopping trip we’ve ever had together. Because we were buying some big items and, you know, some expensive jewelry. It was more than she and I, we are not, we really are not that big of spenders and we just like to experience kind of thing.”

2
Even women who generally dislike shopping saw it as a way to connect with their mother:

It (shopping) is a necessity. Not a pleasure. The pleasure is spending time with my mom. And that she is enjoying it. So I enjoy it."

Another respondent echoed this sentiment:

“Now that both kids are in college I never use shopping as a way to be entertained or pass time. I’m in and out as quickly as possible. One thing I didn’t mention before is that when my daughter comes home from college we definitely use shopping as a bonding time. We also plan yearly trips to New York/Chicago as mother and daughter time. This is never done with my son.

This pleasure at the mall can create special memories.

” There was a little kiosk that we would always go to in the mall and get malted milk balls which are my mother’s favorite and to this day I can’t see malted milk balls without thinking of my mom”.

Our interviewees spoke positively about the relationship building and maintenance of the mother and daughter bond and indeed talked about how they learnt from one another in what we have termed reciprocal coaching.

**Reciprocal Coaching**

This theme captures the ways in which mother and daughter inform one another’s purchases and shopping habits. The coaching develops the child’s shopping skills, while at some (unspecified) point in time, role reversal may occur, with the child becoming the teacher. One mother described how she involved her four-year old daughter in selecting her clothing while shopping on-line:

“Shopping online we just sit together at the computer and I can pull up the pictures and explain to her how it’s going to fit. You know, basically there’s no snaps, no zippers, it’s going to be very comfortable, then she chooses… then she’ll accept it and chooses the color she likes.”

This particular quote is illustrative of the direct instruction and persuasion strategies identified in the literature (Palan and Wilkes 1997; Neeley, 2005). These strategies are designed to create a unilateral gain for the persuader, in this case the mother.

Another woman spoke of her need to shop with her mother when she was making expensive purchases.

“High involvement clothing purchases, I need to do with my mom, and no one else there will do. I am not very good at making decisions, so I need her there to tell me everything.”

Eventually, role reversal occurs, with the daughter coaching her mother. One respondent, who meets her mother several times a year to go shopping, related this experience:

“(I’m) just coming off a week’s vacation, instantly I would say she’s (mother) the one, she’s not really going for anything in particular and I become her personal shopper. I see things
and “this looks like you, try it on”…. But I just kick right into shopper mode for her, help her find, she likes Chico’s so we’ll go to Chico’s and I can go and when I travel I go in Chico’s and immediately pick up (items), this is her, this is her, send her a little package.”

The daughter will coach the mother on brand and style choices, a reversal of what occurred when the daughter was younger.

The maternal influence can remain even after the death of the mother, as one 50 year old remarked that she shopped “with my mom on my shoulder”. These findings appear to support a reciprocal socialization effect, i.e. influence of parents on children and children on their parents. Glass, Bengston and Dunham (1986) in their intergenerational study of attitude similarity found that children influenced the attitudes of their parents and these influences remained throughout the lifespan. Specifically, our results support the finding that the vast majority of adult children offered information and advice to parents on purchase decisions, with daughters having greater influence than sons (Sorce, Loomis & Tyler, 1989). Other researchers (Moore, Wilkie & Lutz 2002:29) established a reverse flow of intergenerational influence (IG) related to brand equity. “Virtually every daughter reported elements of IG shopping style and preference, including having learned to enjoy (or not enjoy) shopping.

Discussion and Findings

Our findings confirm the active role mothers play in socializing their daughters for shopping and other consumption experiences (Lachance and Choquette-Bernier, 2004; Neeley, 2005). The interviewees show that the mothers accept the role of socialising and undertake this education from when the daughter is as young as four years old. The interviews also confirm that as the daughter gains shopping skills and experience she will then coach her mother.

These results concur with Moore, Wilkie and Alder (2001) who found that mother and daughter shopping was a pleasant time to be together. However, for our respondents, the shopping trips seemed to represent a deeper meaning than just a pleasant time; rather, these are experiences to be treasured and recalled fondly.

“I typically shop with my mom. Because we enjoy spending time together and I trust her opinion on what I am buying or shopping for. She has a good eye for what looks good and what looks bad. …. But one of my favourite trips was when I went to Chicago with my mom for the weekend just to shop!”

In a study of intergenerational influences (IG) on brand equity, Moore, Wilkie and Lutz (2002:26) found that IG influences had the capacity to “create special emotional bonds between the daughter and a particular brand”. While our study did not focus on product brands, it’s logical that shopping excursions, when and where brands are selected, have the capacity to forge these bonds as well.

Our study has highlighted the importance of the mother and daughter relationship as acted out in the shopping centre. The experience of shopping is shared by mothers and their daughters throughout all life stages, from early childhood, through adolescence, two shopping together as adults through to the role changes that occur when the daughter begins to support and guide the aging mother. The relationships provided a wealth of memories for both women as they recall the myriad of experiences that they share in the shopping centre. The experiences can be hilarious, sad, quirky, poignant, revealing of many of the multidimensional nature of the
mother and daughter relationship. Two facets of this paramount relationship are enacted in the shopping mall and lead to shaping generations of women. The data revealed that the relationship between mother and daughter is critical to the shopping experience at all life stages.

**Practical Implications**

Our research offers marketers, advertisers and retailers insights that can be of value when developing retail marketing strategies for malls, advertising and promotions, plus in store and on line infrastructure. Advertisers might wish to extend promotions beyond the traditional mothers’ day activities and focus on the “togetherness” dimension of shopping. Property developers could provide spaces for mothers and daughters in store as well as in food courts. For marketers and advertisers, the mother and daughter relationship is full of wonderful scenarios from the sublime to the ridiculous that can be used to promote brands and products. Other marketers might want to use models of mother and daughter pairs to promote products. The mother and daughter/daughter relationship extends over many decades, through generations and is not limited by time or place. The award winning TV series The Gilmore Girls is an example of three generations of women who display a broad panorama of the sometimes funny, sometimes poignant complexities of their relationships with their mothers. Yet this model of generations of women is not used much in advertising and promotions.

The analysis of our data, complementing existing literature, has demonstrated that the mother and daughter relationship is of major significance to retailers and marketers. The futurist Faith Popcorn confirms the loyalty of the female customer and extends that idea with one of her “Truths” for marketing to women, ie. *This Generation of Women Consumers will lead you to the Next*” What Popcorn is saying is that there is a very strong connection between one generation of women and the next generation. There is no stronger bond between humans than that between mother and child. We learn about the world through our mothers. They provide us with our earliest experiences of food and drink, play and comfort. In the home we come to associate certain brands of good with the comfort provided by the mother. The warm drink before bed, the cereal in the mornings, the vegemite sandwich in the lunch box, the snack after school, are all provided by the mother figure. The memories and associations with this feeding can be very powerful and marketers have used these feelings to their advantage in brand marketing. This paper has demonstrated the importance of this bond as enacted in the shopping experience. The mother and daughter relationship is recalled with great clarity by the interviewees. And the connection with shopping is evident at all life stages, indeed beyond the grave for one woman. In particular we have demonstrated that the reciprocal coaching is evident in the mother and daughter relationship and can provide opportunities for marketers to acknowledge the strength and longevity of this bond.

**Future Research**

For future research Moore-Shay & Berchmans (1996) suggest an ethnographic approach to gain deeper understanding of cross generational consumption communication and how these influences develop. We note that the women interviewed displayed positive experiences with their mothers and shopping. Further research may reveal a darker side of the mother and daughter bond and coaching as well as the influence of other female such as friends and relatives in the shopping experience. What is clear is that further analysis will reveal more of the cardinal significance of this bond to the study of consumer socialisation.
References


Keen, Judy (2008, February 4). "Rewards offered for clues in Ill. Mall killings." USA Today, 3A.


Mandrik, Carter A., Edward F. Fern, and Yeqing Bao (2005), "Intergenerational influence: Roles of conformity to peers and communication effectiveness.," Psychology & Marketing, 22 (10), 813-32.


