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IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT BUYING: INSIGHTS INTO THE MOTHER-DAUGHTER SHOPPING EXPERIENCE
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ABSTRACT
This qualitative investigation extends knowledge of consumer socialization with a special focus on the mother-daughter shopping experience. We surveyed women 18-70 about their shopping experiences with their mothers. The findings revealed that daughters gained skills and independence from shopping with their mothers, and the shopping time took on the nature of a ritual.

WOMEN AND SHOPPING
"Moments of intimacy are now to be found in the church of shopping." (Razer 2007, p. 15)
The importance of women to the retail industry is well established, and consumer culture theory has revealed some elements of women's shopping behavior. This qualitative investigation extends knowledge of consumer socialization with a special focus on the mother-daughter shopping experience. Retail experiences are relevant to consumer socialization theory that investigates "the process by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning in the marketplace" (Ward 1974).
Women typically make over 80 percent of buying decisions in the home (Gogoi 2005) and act as a family consumer gatekeeper. According to Moore, Wilkie, and Alder, mothers take "on the role of the family purchasing agent" (2001, p. 289). Further, of the over 190 million visitors to shopping malls in the U.S. (Keen 2008), the majority of shoppers are female. Women, of all ages, regularly shop together as a social experience as well as a practical necessity. Often small groups of mothers, daughters, and sometimes, grandmothers shop together.

Shopping and women are so tightly linked that Chung says: "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 connection is evidenced in the transition to extended trading hours and convenience shopping reflecting changed needs as women began to take on more roles outside of the home. The connection between women and shopping is so entrenched in our culture that shopping is institutionalized as "women's work." Historically, mothers have transferred shopping knowledge and expertise to their daughters in what often becomes a lifelong shopping partnership. This partnership extends beyond the transfer of skills and knowledge to the construction of identity. 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 importance of the mother-daughter shopping
experience extends well beyond feelings of self worth resulting from astute choice making and relates more to the value of the mother-daughter relationship acted out in a place of consumption.

**CONSUMER SOCIALIZATION**

Consumer socialization is defined as “processes by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace (Ward 1974, p. 2). Ward also posits that the models of consumer socialization need to include content of children’s learning about the marketplace and its interactions, the learning process, and how content and learning processes change over time. Our paper focuses on the third point, what is the impact of early learning experiences of the mother-daughter shopping experience on later behavior? We examine the mother-daughter activity or partnership from the lens of consumer socialization theory. We use an intergenerational focus on the most influential partnership in consumption: mothers and daughters.

**REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Ward, Wackman, and Wartella’s (1977) seminal study on consumer socialization observed that information-processing skills are transferred by observing parents’ behaviors and interacting with parents in consumption situations, which lead to the child being able to act as a consumer on his/her own. While Ward et al. (1977) refer euphemistically to parental influence, actually, it is the mother’s influence that shapes consumer behavior. As noted, shopping habits, product and store preferences, and techniques are passed on from generation to generation. Further, the influence in the shopping relationship is not uni-directional. Daughters also influence their mothers by ‘reciprocal socialization’ (Moore, Wilkie, and Alder 2001); and this process extends into the adult life of the daughter (Sorce et al. 1989). 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”.

The literature exploring parent-child shopping has focused primarily on interactions with young children (Darian 1998; Rust 1993) or adolescents (Belch et al. 1985; Martin 2009; Rust 1993). Darian’s (1998) study of decision making in clothing stores revealed that parents (primarily mothers) play a more active role in shopping than children do, and most parent-child shopping interactions were collaborative. Mother and adolescent daughter perceptions of the mall differ. Daughters have a more favorable view of mall variety and exhibit a greater desire to stay at the mall and return to the mall (Martin 2009). Mothers usually emerge as the primary influence agent for shopping (Darian 1998; Moore et al. 2001).
Previous research on mother-daughter shopping concentrated on early childhood and adolescence. Few studies examined the intergenerational effect in later life stages (Viswanathan et al. 2000); and there is little empirical work on shopping relationships in later adulthood. Further, the significance of shopping to developing, enhancing, and sustaining the motherdaughter relationship has not been investigated.

Our study answers the call from Haytko and Baker (2004) for exploration of the mother-daughter shopping experience and furthers our knowledge of consumer socialization. Minahan and Beverland (2005) examined underlying motivations for women shopping and the importance of the mall as a place for women, but did not examine socialization in detail. The objectives of our study are to enhance our understanding of consumer socialization, particularly to (1) gain knowledge of why mothers and daughters shop together; (2) find out what is valued in the shopping experience; and (3) hear accounts of how consumer habits, preferences, and experiences are transferred across generations.

METHODS
To address our objectives, we used a qualitative approach. We conducted 21, 40-60 minute personal interviews and 38 shorter E-mail interviews with women about shopping over a four-month period. Questions focused on whom they shopped with, why they shopped together, and what occurred during their shopping trips. Our sample was recruited via flyers and personal contacts of both authors. These appeals requested that women willing to share their opinions about shopping contact one of the authors for an interview. The age range of our sample was 18-70. The audio-taped interviews were transcribed and independently coded using thematic analysis (Miles and Huberman 1994).

In the next section, we provide a brief overview of the themes emerging from the data and illustrative quotes which highlight our findings. The data yielded several themes that we organized under four headings: Reciprocal Coaching, Mother-Daughter Bond, Gaining Independence, and Shopping Rituals. The first two themes have been discussed elsewhere (Minahan and Huddleston, 2008). Our focus for this paper is on Gaining Independence and Shopping Rituals. See Table 1. We now present a discussion of each theme and illustrative quotes.

RESULTS
Gaining Independence
The Gaining Independence theme illustrates that younger women use shopping as a way to establish their psychological and financial independence from their mothers: "I had my mom's credit card from a very young age. I was very responsible with it – not frivolous, and that may have been part of it, as the empowerment, and the independence of it". So while the mother was often fondly and appreciatively seen as “the pocketbook” subsidizing expenditure, it was seen as a symbol of changing levels of dependency.
on mom. Part of establishing one’s independence is reflected in the values that one holds. Several quotes disclosed that mother-daughter shopping experiences transfer values from one generation to the next. Despite the fact that she is now affluent, one respondent reminisces about price consciousness and shopping at thrift stores: “Okay. My mother was raised in the depression, and so from what I can gather, people who were raised in the depression, went without a lot of stuff, so one of their big prides in life later, is to be able to go and buy what they want, so one of her friends who was also raised in the depression, told me about this place in Los Angeles that’s right outside the airport, and it’s called ‘The Place,’ that is a resale shop, but it’s a resale shop of Beverly Hills socialites and movie sets and you know, they get rid of stuff, so I went, and my mother was just absolutely mortified that I went to this place. She says, ‘I can’t believe you’re shopping Goodwill.’ Well, no it’s not Goodwill, and I bought among other things a red leather trench coat that was the most, up until that time the most I had ever paid for a coat, which is $700, which is under the ordinary circumstances, $700 is a lot of money for a coat.” For another respondent, her mother’s shopping excursions to thrift shops transferred the value of frugality which remains a part of her identity: “Like, she likes Banana Republic. It doesn’t impress me much ‘cause The Limited’s my favorite, but growing up, we grew up on welfare, and we grew up in Flint, and so we would go to Goodwills all the time, and we learned how to shop at the Goodwills looking at the tags rather than the items though, and so you look and see [inaudible], stop, look at it, if it’s nice, pick it up. We went to rummage sales, too, garage sales, and I hated those.” She went on to say that, while this behavior has remained a part of her identity, she struggles to resist it, which signals a desire to be independent of mother’s influence: “Now I have to resist from stopping at rummage sales. Like, I want to so bad when I’m with my mom. I can’t, and so I saw this thing one day, I said, ‘Oh, stop,’ and I was like, ‘No, keep going,’ so I resisted doing that I think mainly ‘cause I don’t carry cash, no extra cash, but I could see myself doing it one day, but I haven’t done it yet [age 26].” As adolescents, it is quite natural to rebel against adult norms. Resistance to the way mother did things is another means to establish one’s independence, as reflected in this quote by a middle-aged woman: “Now, one of the things that I used to do that I don’t do so much anymore, is something that I got from my mother, and I figured out it was a really bad habit. My mother was very much into quantity because she didn’t have a lot when she was growing up, so if it was on sale, she would say, ‘Oh, this’ll make a cute little change.’ Of course, half the stuff never got worn, ‘cause it was junk, and so I had found myself doing that, ‘Oh, this’ll make a cute little change,’ but
then later I figured out, instead of having a merchant ‘cute little changes’ that you maybe that you really won’t wear, maybe you should have something that just knocks your socks off, so I tend not to do the cute little changes as much.”

Another interview revealed that one young daughter, by expressing her independence, was able to stop her mother making unilateral decisions about apparel and to become partners in the decision making processes of shopping: “After I had the first child, she refused to wear that, that that, and that, now I try to include her in as much of the decision making as possible.”

These quotes support Ward’s (1974) notion that consumer socialization learning does not necessarily ‘transfer intact,’ but rather is modified to fit the roles and situations acquired later in life.

**Shopping Rituals**

*Shopping rituals* highlight shopping as a source of inter-generational entertainment – enmeshed in a clearly articulated ritual that was described from preplanning the shopping trip to the mall visit to the après shopping relaxation. These rituals appear to be highly valued by both mothers and daughters. “Yea, I love shopping with my mother. It’s sort of like shopping with girl friends; it’s a social activity.” A septuagenarian recalled her shopping trips with her mother with great clarity and fondness. A younger woman remarked that shopping with mom “was enjoyable and I looked forward to it, and we’d have lunch with my grandma.”

A young mother described maintaining a similar ritual that she and her mother used to share when she was growing up: “Yeah, it was always, well even now shopping for groceries is my Tuesday night activity after Leah goes down, I put my i-Pod in and I grocery shopping and it is at Meijer’s so I get to like kind of look at some other stuff too. So it has always been, the only other person that I’ve really enjoyed shopping with on any regular basis has been my mom. She and I would always kind of, that was our girl’s night thing. I have four brothers, so for us it was really getting away from the males in our family, but I’ve never been kind of a group shopper.”

These rituals seem to cross socio-economic barriers. For example, shopping at thrift stores (nontraditional retail outlets) framed this participant’s memories of childhood rituals: “Like, my mom would get up on a Friday morning, and she’d have our map, and she’d circle the rummage sales that we were going to, and map out which ones we were going to first, and then she’d get our coffee, jump in the car and we’re all going to these rummage sales, and the highlight of the rummage sales for us was the toys that were cheap and getting snacks ‘cause sometimes they’d sell baked goods, and so that was something that we always did. Now as time progressed, my mom doesn’t rummage sale any more, but that was our whole childhood, and we got compliments in high school like, ‘Oh, that’s nice.’
And nobody ever knew we shopped at the Goodwill or rummage sales. They always thought we lived like in Grand Blanc, not in Flint, in the city, so, I guess I learned it from her. I never thought about that 'cause she would map out like the places we would go, she'd have her little map, it's early in the morning, she has our coffee, and we're in a car just rummage saleing."

Shopping rituals extend to the time shared together after shopping and offer the opportunity to prolong the experience. One respondent (still) shops with her mother on a weekly basis, after her mother finishes with her work obligations. These excursions usually last about six hours; and afterward, they would spend more time together evaluating their purchases:  

**Respondent:** "Yeah. Come home and go over what we bought."  
**Interviewer:** "Yes, tell me you got home, so you come into the house and what happens then?"  
**Respondent:** "And then we try on clothes like it's a mini fashion show. And then she'll say, do you like this, I don't like that or you know and then she'll be like, okay this is going in the return bin. So my mom is a big returner because she makes quick decisions in the store and then when she gets home she thinks about it. But me I'm vice versa. Okay I examine them in store, I don't like returning."

Other respondents said that they make special trips to visit their mother and go shopping. These events, based at the mall, are not about consumption:  

"But, with my mom, it is, you know, hey let's drive to the mall, and all of a sudden five hours passed and we are like, what happened. So we don't necessarily have anything we purchased, but it is very much a social process."

This confirms previous arguments that much of the shopping process is not about consumption but about "obtain some satisfying experiences rather than simply goods." (Haytko and Baker 2004, p. 67).

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

The objectives of our study were to (1) gain knowledge of why mothers and daughters shop together; (2) find out what is valued in the shopping experience; and (3) hear accounts of how consumer habits, preferences, and experiences are transferred across generations. Results of 59 personal and E-mail interviews yielded four themes. Mothers and daughters shop together to cement the motherdaughter bond and to prolong the experience and memories through cherished shopping rituals. Shopping together offers occasions for reciprocal coaching. One valued component of shopping together appears to be the means for daughters to gain independence from their mothers, but in a way that does not appear to threaten their relationship. In fact, childhood memories of shopping excursions, even in times of severe economic constraint, seem to be remembered warmly.

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. These results concur with Moore, Wilkie, and Alder (2001), who found that mother-daughter shopping was a pleasant time to be together. However, for our respondents, these shopping trips seemed to represent a deeper meaning than just a pleasant time; rather, these are experiences to be treasured and recalled fondly. Our study has revealed two facets of this paramount relationship, enacted in the shopping mall and shaping generations of women.

The data revealed that memories of shopping together confirmed its role in helping daughters gain independence and highlighted meaningful rituals that emerge from these experiences. Shopping as a ritual has been observed for many years. The author Bill Byrson talks about his childhood experiences in the 1950s Des Moines. He talks about how important Younkers Department store was to the town. It was a very large modern department store with ‘walking stairways’ (escalators) and a refreshment area known as the Tea Room “a place where doting mothers took their daughters for a touch of elegance while shopping”. “... young visitors were invited to reach into a wooden box containing small gifts, each beautifully wrapped in white tissue and tied with ribbon, and select one to take away as a permanent memento of the occasion”. (Bryson 2006, p. 28).

Even the popular press acknowledges the sentiment of shopping rituals. A recent Age article made the following observation about a mother and daughter shopping on Boxing Day: “I was so moved last year when I watched that mother and her daughter find their Boxing Day bargain. ‘Do you love it?’ asked the daughter. ‘It’s perfect’ said the mother. In this moment, standing in front of a discounted shirt, two peoples shared a real familiarity. The moment was chiefly the product of love.” (Razer 2007, p. 15).

The Daily Mail interviewed three daughters about their mothers. One daughter described her relationship with her mother: “And I really enjoy our 125 girly chats. We talk about what’s going on in our lives, career, relationships, and fashion. We go shopping together, go out to shows and dinner.” (Doris 2007, p. 56). This further confirms the role of shopping rituals acting as a relationship enhancer.

In relationship to consumer socialization theory, our findings lend support to Ward’s (1974) contention that what is learned in childhood may be an extension and elaboration of earlier consumer learning. Our data confirm the importance of shopping as a leisure activity that provides a context for daughters to gain independence. During childhood, parents (mothers) provide their children with opportunities to exercise independence through making purchases (Ward et al. 1977).

Feinberg, Mooli, and Rummel (1989) concluded that the mall is a social environment, and Green (1998) explored leisure as important to the development of friendships between women. Retail
spaces, such as malls, are arguably spaces for leisure and pleasure as part of the ongoing commodification of leisure. Leisure in this case, going shopping, is a space where women can undertake a “reworking of personal relationships” (Green 1998, p. 171). Many of our interviewees were in their late adolescence or mid life. In these life stages, says Green, identities are “re-made with some aspects being confirmed, others denied, and new facets added” (p. 172).

For some daughters trust was crucial to their development. The women interviewed often trusted their mothers to assist them in gaining the skills of shopping, as part of her nurturing role. They trusted that their mothers would be “very aware of the wants and needs” of their daughters and would assist them as best she could (Moore et al. 2001, p. 289). Yet the daughter would act out and gain more independence through the shopping experience by refusing to accept the mother’s decision making. This struggle for one’s own independence can be fraught with conflict and stress. Yet our results indicate that the shopping context is a safe place to act out one’s independence.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The range of ages in the sample group is both a strength and a weakness of this study. A sample more constrained around a tighter age range might have allowed us to reveal changes in values across the generations.

We took a generic view of the mother-daughter interaction and did not attempt to consider the influence of parental styles as studied by Carlson (1988). Our focus remained on identification of the over arching meanings of the shopping experience. Given the frequent writings by philosophers and analysts on the pathologies evident in the motherdaughter relationships, we were surprised that none of our interviewees discussed the ‘dark side’ of the experience. A larger sample might be required.

REFERENCES


Table 1: Themes and Quotes
Theme Quote
Gaining
Independence
".....because I want to feel like I don’t need my parents to do that, I can take care of it. I’m doing okay so I don’t need them to buy those things for me."
Consumer
Rituals
“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 City/Chicago as mother-daughter time."
Reciprocal
Coaching
“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.”
Mother-Daughter Bond
“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.”
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