Shopping with mum – mother and daughter consumer socialization

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Abstract

Purpose – *Responding to calls for a greater understanding of consumer socialization in young people, this paper aims to investigate daughters' perceptions of shopping with their mothers. It seeks to provide insights into the significance of the retail shopping experience for young women.*

Design/methodology/approach – *This exploratory study is based on 30 online and three face-to-face interviews with young women aged between 20 and 22. The authors asked the young women who they shopped with and why and to recount some of their best and worst shopping experiences. The interviews were coded and analysed to reveal several recurring themes. This paper reports only on data relating to shopping with their mothers.*

Findings – *The four major themes that emerged from the interviews with the young women were: gaining independence; trust in mother; the bank of mum; quality time with mum.*

Research limitations/implications – *The sample is limited to young women in a Midwest university in the USA. Attitudes to consumption and shopping and the mother daughter relationship are culturally derived and may differ in other contexts.*

Practical implications – *Women are critical to the retail industry and make the bulk of buying decisions for the family. Daughters represent the next generation of this major market force. Marketers and retailers must be cognizant of the power of this relationship.*

Originality/value – *This paper is the first to report on the daughter-mother shopping experience, with daughters' perceptions of this experience and the outcomes of the consumer socialisation that occur.*

Keywords *Consumer behaviour, Skills, Shops, Women, Family roles, United States of America*

Paper type *Research paper*

I like shopping with girlfriends but I like shopping with mom best (K, 21).

The connection between women and shopping is so entrenched in our culture that shopping is institutionalized as ''women's work''. Historically, mothers transfer their shopping knowledge and expertise to their daughters in what often becomes a lifelong shopping partnership. The 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. It is noted that 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 daughter-mother shopping experience extends well beyond feelings of self worth resulting from astute choice making and relates more to the value of the daughter-mother relationship acted out in a place of consumption (the shopping mall) and beyond to the home.

Shopping as a ritual has been observed for many years. The author Bill Bryson talks about his childhood experiences in the 1950s Des Moines. He talks about how important Younkers Department store was to the town. A very large modern department store with ''walking stairways'' (escalators) and a particularly important refreshment area known as the Tea

Received October 2009
Revised February 2010
Accepted April 2010

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).

A *Daily Mail* article interviewed three daughters about their mothers. One daughter described her relationship with her mother. ''And I really enjoy our 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 is further confirmation of the role of shopping rituals acting as a relationship enhancer.

Apart from the social acknowledgement of the importance of daughter and mother shopping experiences, there has been some academic research into the shopping behaviour of young female consumers and their mothers (Haytko and Baker, 2004; Neeley and Coffey, 2007). This qualitative investigation extends knowledge of consumer socialization with a special focus on the daughter-mother shopping experience for young women.

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 (1974, p. 3) posits that models of consumer socialization need to include content of children's learning about the marketplace and its interactions, the learning process and how the content and learning processes change over time. We examine the daughter-mother activity or partnership through the lens of consumer socialization theory. In particular we use an inter-generational focus on the most influential partnership in consumption: mothers and daughters.

Ward *et al.*'s (1977) study on consumer socialization observed that consumer behaviour information processing skills are transferred by observing parents' behaviours and by interacting with parents in consumption situations, which lead to the child being able to act as an independent consumer. While Ward *et al.* (1977) refer euphemistically to parental influence; actually, it is the mother's influence that shapes consumer behaviour. 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, in a process called ''reciprocal socialization'' (Moore *et al.*, 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 notes that there has been little consumer research that disaggregates the family communication into smaller units such as ''father-son or father-daughter'' (John, 1999). An exception is the Al-Zu'bi *et al.* (2008) study which examined father's consumption communication structures and disaggregated communication patterns into father-son and father-daughter structures (but not daughter-mother).

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). Mothers usually emerge as the primary influence agent for shopping (Darian, 1998; Moore *et al.*, 2001). 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. One study (Nairn, 2008)

investigated internet web sites focused on children, but did not address the parent-child shopping relationship.

None of the aforementioned studies address the significance of shopping to developing, enhancing and maintaining the daughter-mother relationship. Our focus is on the daughter-mother shopping experience before, during and after a visit to a shopping centre. We answer the call from Haytko and Baker (2004) for exploration of the daughter-mother shopping experience, and we further our knowledge of consumer socialization in young consumers. The objectives of our study were to enhance our understanding of consumer socialization in young women. In particular to:

- gain knowledge of why mothers and daughters shop together;
- find out what is valued in the shopping experience; and
- hear accounts of how consumer habits, preferences and experiences are transferred across generations.

Methods

To address these objectives, and with a lack of prior studies we used a qualitative approach to identify what the young women were saying about shopping with their mothers and to develop themes to guide future research Young women in a large class at a Midwestern University received a general invitation to complete an on line questionnaire about shopping. From that invitation, we conducted 30 online and three face-to-face interviews with young women aged between 20 and 22. This sample group has many years experience in shopping with their mothers. Three participants were interviewed face to face early in the project and later a general invitation was issued to a group of 130 completed the survey. The interview questions were very broad, focusing on who they shopped with and why, as well as to recount some of their best and worst shopping experiences. This paper addresses the responses relating to who the women shopped with and why. The focus was the experience of shopping malls as the primary site for retail consumption for daughters and mothers (Martin, 2009, p. 49). The audio-taped interviews were transcribed. Then both the on-line and audio-taped interviews were independently coded by the investigators and analysed to reveal several recurring themes which we organized under four headings:

1. trust in mother;
2. the bank of mum;
3. quality time with mum;
4. gaining independence.

We now present discussion of each theme and illustrative quotes.

Results

Trust in mother

For some daughters trust was crucial to their development. The young women interviewed often trusted their mother to assist them gain the skills of shopping, as part of the maternal nurturing and training role. The daughters also trusted that their mother 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).

One of our interviewees was clear that she shops ''with my mom because she always gives her honest opinion about the clothes I try on'' and another interviewee values the experiences as ''my mom will give me advice on what looks good on me''. Yet another young woman spoke about liking to shop by herself as she didn't have to ''worry about someone lying to me. If I had to shop with someone I would choose my mom''.

The bank of mum

For young consumers approaching adulthood the question of who pays can be significant. Several of our interviewees reported that one major value of the daughter-mother shopping experience was that the mother would often pay for purchases.

As reported by one interviewee ''I like to shop with my mom because she will pay for things''. Another interviewee noted: ''and so now like I have my own car and my own money so it's like I'm still like, mum do you want to go out shopping on Saturday?'' Interviewer: ''You take her?'' Respondent: ''Yeah, she has more cash than I do''. While this respondent clearly enjoyed shopping with her mother, she was also aware of the fact that mum is in a financial position to buy things for her as a generous act of love and support.

Quality time with mother

There was evidence that the time spent with their mother was highly valued, indeed valued about something beyond the buying and consumption experiences. One young woman noted ''. . .it's usually more about spending time together than just shopping''.

Shopping rituals extend to the time shared together after shopping and offer the opportunity to prolong the experience. One respondent 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.

This respondent has learned about the market place and return behaviour as a result of her experience shopping with her mother (Ward, 1974)

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.

These observations confirm 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).

Gaining independence

This theme illustrates that younger women use shopping as a way to establish their psychological and financial independence from their mothers. While there are benefits in the ''Bank of mum'' there was also benefits to be gained in learning how to be a responsible consumer, managing their purchasing well and enjoying the sense of maturity that went along with the use of a parental credit card. ''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''. Another young woman indicated that she does not use store credit because ''my mum is very, like, strict.'' This daughter is living on her own at university, yet she maintains the financial management values instilled by her mother. So while the mother was often fondly and appreciatively seen as ''the pocketbook'' subsidizing expenditure, shopping with mother was seen as a symbol of changing levels of dependency on her. Part of establishing one's independence is reflected in the values that one holds. One quote disclosed that daughter-mother shopping experiences transfer values from one generation to the next.

> . . . 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.

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. These daughters have acquired knowledge about becoming responsible consumers from their mothers are now acting it out in their own lives.

Discussion and conclusions

Young adult daughters shop with their mothers for several reasons. Not surprising, they like it when ''mum pays for things''. But this is only one of several motivations revealed in our study. Our findings have revealed facets of this paramount relationship, enacted in the shopping mall and shaping generations of women. Mothers and daughters shop together to maintain and develop the daughter-mother bond, and prolong the experience and memories through cherished shopping rituals. Shopping together offers occasions for gaining independence, in a trusted and valuable environment with their mothers. 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 *et al.* (2001) who found that daughter-mother 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.

The data revealed that memories of shopping together confirmed its role in helping daughters gain independence. Our results did not reveal any consumption that was compulsive and leading to debt (Penman and McNeill, 2008). Indeed the gaining of credit facilities was regarded as a responsibility by two young women. Apart from a process of gaining independence, our data highlighted meaningful rituals that emerge from the daughter-mother shopping experiences. Sometimes only one theme emerged from the narrative; at other times an interviewee would note several themes as being relevant for their shopping relationship with their mother. For example ''I shop with my mom because she will sometimes pay for things and she also gives me an honest opinion on the way things look on me''.

We can position our findings in relationship to consumer socialization theory. The 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 observe how to shop and what to buy. Children put that learning into action by exercising their independence through making purchases (Ward *et al.*, 1977).

Feinberg *et al.* (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 early adult life. These life stages, says Green, are where identities are ''re-made with some aspects being confirmed, others denied and new facets added'', (Green, 1998, p. 172). Green reports that the daughter may act out and gain more independence through the shopping experience by refusing to accept the mother's decision making. Interestingly any sense of a struggle for independence was not revealed in this study. The lack of any reference to conflict and stress was surprising and noted as an area for further study.

Implications

Our findings confirm that mothers play an active role in socializing their daughters for shopping and other consumption experiences (Lachance and Choquette-Bernier, 2004; Neeley, 2005).

The data revealed that as daughters move to being ''outside the nest'' (Penman and McNeill, 2008), the shopping relationship between mothers and daughters continues to be important.

Our results provide a myriad of unique customer insights that can be considered by marketers, advertisers and retailers when developing retail marketing strategies for shopping malls, advertising and promotions, in-store environments and on line infrastructure. Advertisers may extend promotions beyond the traditional mothers' day activities and focus on the ''togetherness'' dimension of shopping. For marketers and advertisers, the daughter-mother 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 daughter -mother pairs to promote products. Considerations of the daughter-mother relationship may include advertising and promotion in non-store locations that subtly and discretely promotes the value and quality of the brand to the mother, who then, in turn, may communicate that value to her daughter(s).

Property developers could provide spaces for mothers and daughters in the store in addition to food court areas. Some stores are already undergoing renovations to TTM (target the mom) (Holmes, 2009). For example, Aeropostale is widening the aisles of its newly designed stores because, according to the Executive Vice President: ''We're cognizant of the mom and the impact that mom has'' (Holmes, 2009, p. B8).

Shopping centres and retailers may want to acknowledge the ''Bank of mum'' and take into consideration the person who is paying the bill for the goods. The daughter may be the consumer but in many instances we found that the mother is the financer of the goods purchased. According to a retail analyst, ''parents are controlling more of the dollars being spent and any retailer that is doing a good job at drawing parents is going to gain share'' (Holmes, 2009, p. B8).

Our data analysis, complemented by existing literature, has demonstrated that the daughter-mother 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, i.e. ''This generation of women consumers will lead you to the next''. Popcorn implies 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 (or peanut butter and jelly) 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. Retailers can capitalize on these feelings as well.

Future research

Marshall and Reday (2007) demonstrated that patterns of knowledge and power are changing with youth usage of internet sites and further research could investigate the nature of the daughter-mother shopping relationship when using the internet for shopping. Future research could also undertake an ethnographic approach as suggested by Moore-Shay and Berchmans (1996). This approach would enable us to gain deeper understanding of cross-generational consumption communication and how these influences develop. We note that the young women interviewed displayed positive experiences with their mothers and shopping. Further research may reveal a ''dark side'' of the daughter- mother bond and coaching as well as the influence of other female such as friends and relatives in the shopping experience.

In addition to cross-generational communication there is a need, particularly for global retailers, to understand cultural differences in the mother-daughter shopping relationship. For example Kaur and Singh (2007) have undertaken work into the shopping motives of Indian youth. What is clear is that further analysis will reveal more of the cardinal significance of this bond to the study of consumer socialisation.

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