I Shop Therefore I Am: the Role of Shopping in the Social Construction of Women's Identities

Eileen Fischer, York University, Ontario
Brenda Gainer, York University, Ontario

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This paper examines the manner in which shopping activities -- including but not limited to the actual purchase of goods -- contribute to the shaping and reinforcing of women's self identities. The historical roots of women's participation in shopping are briefly explored. Studies of three types of shopping activities which are to varying degrees "the domain of women" -- wedding planning and shopping, Christmas gift shopping, and in-home party shopping -- are described, and themes relating to the social construction of women's self identities are explored. Some integrative comments and directions for future research conclude the paper.

INTRODUCTION

While studies of consumer behavior vary widely in their premises and foci, there is one assumption which is typical of most work to date. Although exceptions are beginning to occur (e.g. Hirschman 1987; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988), it is usually taken for granted that consumption is the same phenomenon -- experienced, rationalized and enacted in much the same way -- for men and women. Minor variations have sometimes been posited to occur based on differences in personality (e.g. Gentry and Doering 1977; Golden, Allison and Clee 1979; Kahle and Homer 1985; Scmitt, Leclerc and Dube-Rioux 1988) or sex differences in cognitive processing (e.g. Myers-Levy 1988). Rarely are the differences which are found using these approaches significant, and it has been suggested that whatever differences do exist are so minor that they warrant no further study (Roberts 1984).

We believe that there are important differences in the way men and women experience, rationalize, and enact consumption. We suggest that these differences are only now beginning to be understood since they are primarily culturally based. The methods required to appreciate them are therefore the interpretive techniques which have recently emerged in the mainstream of consumer research. We also contend that our understanding of male/female differences has been constrained by the persistent tendency to focus analyses on the objects consumed or the outcome of the purchase decision, rather than on the broader social processes and institutions involved in consumption.

To support our claims, and to begin the task of deepening our understanding of the gendered nature of consumption, we here report findings from our studies of wedding preparation and shopping, Christmas shopping, and home shopping parties. Each of these consumption venues is dominated by women. We have used depth interviews to study two, and participant observation to study the third, and have focused at least as much on the settings and processes of consumption as on the goods consumed. We want to stress that, in developing interpretations of these three "feminized" consumption activities, we have not ignored the role which men play in each. Where possible, we have interviewed men who are involved. Our characterizations of the three consumption venues as feminized, and our focus on the role of these activities in contributing to women's self identities, resulted from both our observations and interpretation of women and from a comparison of what we learned from female and male informants. To situate our research, we present a brief discussion of the manner in which shopping has become an important element of women's lives.

THE PLACE OF SHOPPING IN THE LIVES OF WOMEN

Since the early part of this century in North America, women have done most of the shopping for the majority of products consumed by households (Benson 1986, Campbell 1987, Leach 1981; Luxton 1980). Though consumer researchers have rightly stressed that women are not the sole decision makers (see, for instance, Davis and Rigaux 1974), women have been and, to some extent, continue to be the ones responsible for
much of the actual work of shopping. Moreover, just as women have been important to shopping, shopping has been important to women.

Shopping became a relatively major part of most middle class women's lives in the late nineteenth century (Benson 1986; Ewen 1977; Leach 1981). This fact has sometimes been construed as evidence of the self indulgence or down-right idiocy of women (Willis 1971). More sympathetic analyses have argued that shopping provided women with an otherwise scarce opportunity for leisurely socializing with other women (Benson 1986; Leach 1981; Wendt and Kogan 1952). Benson, for instance, argues that department stores were the equivalent for women of private clubrooms for men. Wendt and Kogan contend that, at a time when women without male escorts could not enter such public places as restaurants, they were warmly received in dry-goods and department stores. While the freedom to be allowed to shop and make purchases without benefit of male escort is hardly a pinnacle of emancipation, it is fair to suggest that shopping has been important in the lives of many women. As shopping began to provide an opportunity for women to break free from the confines of the home (Ewen 1985), shopping and other facets of consumption management were becoming a major aspect of women's work (Luxton 1980).

This prominence of shopping in the lives of women is of interest since it suggests that the activity will have more than a merely functional significance. The question we seek to address follows from this possibility. We wish to understand how contemporary women construe their shopping activities today. We chose to study three consumption venues which have been explicitly recognized as "gendered" (Le., primarily associated with one sex, in this case women) to gain some insights. Below we describe each venue, reviewing earlier literature pertaining to it, describing our study of it, and examining themes which emerged relating to construction of self identity. We end by synthesizing certain insights derived from the diverse settings.

WEDDING PLANNING AND SHOPPING

Smith-Rosenberg (1975) has argued that sharply differentiated gender roles common in mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century America lead to the development of single-sex social networks which were institutionalized in the rituals accompanying every important life event. Among the most important life events for men and women of that era -- as for those of the current era -- were weddings. Interestingly, Smith-Rosenberg identifies weddings as "one of the last female rituals left in twentieth century America" (1975, p. 22). It is perhaps ironic that the event which formalizes the relationship between a woman and man should be deemed a female ritual. Yet there can be little doubt that a majority of detailed wedding preparations -- including but not limited to shopping -- are typically viewed, in westernized countries, as both the responsibility and the prerogative of the female (Leonard 1980).

To study this consumption venue, we interviewed seven people -- five female, two male -- who were about to be married or who had been married for some time. Interviews ranged in length from slightly more than one hour to over three hours. The informants varied in age and in social class; as well, respondents with diverse religious affiliations were deliberately chosen. Questions centered on the nature of the ceremony, the types of preparations undertaken, the roles of each spouse and of the family, and any conflicts occasioned by the wedding. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and thematically analyzed; several themes appeared to be related to the construction or reinforcement of self-concept.

One such theme concerned the way in which making consumption choices was viewed as a reflection of the unique characteristics of the individual. The wedding ceremony is a public opportunity to express and reinforce one's distinctive self image. The process of selecting aspects of the wedding can serve as an exercise in self definition. For instance, many women indicated that the clothing selected for weddings is an important reflection of the self. For some, a traditional choice reflected personal style:

"I will wear a white dress. Not one of these black dresses that some of the brides today wear. I wanted one of the really nice dresses with a big skirt. I'm a traditionalist" (f, 24).

Another expressed herself by a lavish, impulsive, expenditure:

"I'm really a clothes horse. I've spent a lot of
money on clothes and so I wasn't going to skimp on my wedding day. I got my dress on sale. I still spent a tremendous amount but I got something I would have bought at full price. I really don't know how to explain it. It's totally irrational. I didn't expect to feel the way I did. When I went into the store and I tried on this dress it was the one I wanted to get married in. I loved it” (f, 23).

Other women rejected tradition in order to make a statement:

"I did not get married in a white dress, the traditional white dress. One of my best friends made my dress. She designed it; it looked like a caftan. It was a peachish tangerinish kind of color. We chose a color we thought would suit my complexion. White suits my complexion too, but I deliberately tried not to have a white dress because of all that it symbolized. I also wanted something that reflected my thinking about myself at the time, which was that I was a black female ready to take on the world” (f, 40). In addition to reflecting the personality and uniqueness of the bride, choices made and the process of making them reflect and reinforce important connections with others. Most notably, connections with the immediate family are highlighted. Many respondents echoed the sentiment of one who said: "the important thing is that [the wedding] is going to be a real family celebration” (f, 24)."

For the women we interviewed, this meant a great deal more than merely inviting family members to the ceremony. Connections with family were often stressed by involving parents, sisters, or in-laws in the planning and shopping process. For instance, one bride who feared her mother might be alienated because she was marrying into a family of a different faith tried to placate her by allowing her to take over some consumption decisions:

"My mother, she wanted all the bridesmaids to look alike. For me, I want them to look nice and I don't want them to look totally different as they are bridesmaids but I really didn't put too much investment in that. My mother pretty much chose, she found the dress maker, she was there choosing designs and they will look lovely” (f, 23).

Another bride left decisions to her father which reflected his talents, his tastes and his role in her life.

"There will be lots of music [at my wedding] and my father really likes music so I may get him to choose some of the selections” (f, 24).

Not every instance of involvement by parents or in-laws was welcomed as an opportunity to acknowledge and reinforce familial connections, however. Several brides felt their mothers or their in-laws overstepped their role as invited assistants, and interfered with the bride's plans. One complained of her mother-in-law deciding what dessert should be served at the wedding:

"I don't mind people making suggestions. That's fine. But it's not her wedding. It's our wedding. I've always held it against her, I guess, because it really bothered me because it was supposed to be our wedding, our day, and she ran most of it. I thought that I should be able to organize my own wedding” (f, 25).

This reinforces the importance of the wedding planning and decision making as a reflection of the bride's unique self, and the manner in which assistance from others is construed: as an opportunity for the bride to acknowledge her family, rather than for the family to assert its authority over her.

Connections with a valued tradition or heritage are also affirmed in women's wedding shopping and planning. For instance, one bride converting to the Jewish faith and being married in a Jewish ceremony where bridal attendants are less common than in Christian weddings said: "We still are having [bridesmaids] because . . . I'm not coming from nowhere. I have a history myself." (f, 23). Another said "I chose my dress to portray the African roots of my identity (f, 40)."

It should be noted that the planning of weddings also reflects the groom's heritage in many or most instances. This, however, is usually by the design of the bride rather than that of the groom. While some couples appeared to share certain aspects of the planning and decision making, in no case were the majority of the choices made by the groom rather than by the bride.

The importance of wedding planning and purchasing to male respondents simply seemed considerably less. As one put it: "I didn't have
any particular scenario that I preferred so I went along with my wife's choices” (m, 35). The bride typically had significant input into any decisions for which the groom took some responsibility, such as selecting an engagement and wedding ring. The reverse was not true. For instance, some brides did not want their spouses to see their wedding gown before the ceremony, let alone help to select it. The groom’s clothing, however, was often chosen by the bride. Some men expressed individuality not so much by picking what they would wear but by vetoing what they would not wear. A typical case was one groom who refused to wear a baby blue cummerbund his bride had selected. He compromised by wearing her alternate choice, a black one. Our interpretation is that grooms become almost an element of the bride's extended self (Belk 1988) in wedding ceremonies.

For women, both individuality and the familial and traditional linkages which serve to define self are reflected and reinforced through the planning and purchasing associated with weddings.

CHRISTMAS GIFT SHOPPING

Since Barnett's (1954) path-breaking study of Christmas in North America, the dominant role of women in the Christmas festival has been recognized. Recent work suggests that women continue to control the festival, in that they do most of the work involved (Caplow 1982) and, in particular, most of the gift shopping (Cheal 1987, 1988; Fischer and Arnold 1990). One explanation for this fact is that Christmas celebrates the communal values placed on home and family, and that women embody these communal values to a greater extent than men (Cheal 1987). A second explanation is that women are socialized to regard the work as part of their role, and accordingly feel a greater compulsion to be involved than do men (Fischer and Arnold 1990).

We studied gift shopping by conducting depth interviews with 6 men and 10 women who varied in age, stage in family life cycle, and social class. Questions discussed in each interview concerned both the shopping done and the gifts which were purchased. Interviews ranged in length from slightly less than one hour to more than two hours. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. The entire set was then analyzed to identify major themes. While a range of themes was detected, some which relate to the construction of self identity were particularly evident.

For women, gift shopping appeared to allow an expression of a familiarity with and love for others. For instance, one said:

"The kind of shopping I thoroughly enjoy is finding the right present for somebody for Christmas..." (f, 38).

Another detailed her efforts to match gifts to the personality of recipients and her frustration with her inability to judge everyone's tastes precisely and choose something appropriate for them.

"My sisters are very hard to buy for. I find that with my one sister, I just give her a gift certificate. I have for the last 3 years. I just pick one of her favorite stores and give her a gift certificate from there. . . . [For my other sisters] I can usually pick them something out and they'll like it. If I have to get presents, I prefer to get personal items" (f, 26).

This process of communicating regard for others is significant to identity formation since a communal orientation is culturally regarded as an essential aspect of femininity. Thus women can establish or reinforce their femininity by lavishing effort on the task, and by shopping for an extended familial and social network.

This point is reinforced by our observation that men stressed quite different sources of satisfaction from gift shopping than women, and shopped for fewer people. They tended to discuss self gratification such as the fun or excitement shopping could provide.

"Shopping is part of the build up to [Christmas]. As a generalization I don't get my jollies out of shopping. But Christmas is a little different. The shopping has something to do with getting the Christmas spirit. I do enjoy buying gifts. As long as it isn't too prolonged or painful" (m, 41).

This construal of shopping, which focuses on the pleasure of the shopper rather than that of the recipients, is much more consistent with the agentic orientation culturally associated with masculinity. Such gratification can be derived from shopping for only one or a very few people. While women may use shopping to develop and
reinforce their self-perceived femininity, men can
enact their masculinity through more limited
involvement in the event.

In addition to expressing femininity through gift
shopping, some women also appeared to construct
self identity by demonstrating competence or
expertise in their culturally assigned role as
shopper. This expertise was clearly a part of a
female self identity since it was in contrast to men
that women claimed this expertise. For instance,
one woman described how she had to nag her
husband to look for gifts and help him by
suggesting gift ideas. Her implicit concern for
differentiating her skills from those of her
husband is evident in the following interchange:

Question: What did you do before your wife
purchased your parents' presents?
Husband: It wasn't a problem. Back then I lived
with them. Now I'm not around as much and
don't know what they need.
Wife: But weren't you telling me you'd buy your
father a shirt and never see it on him?
Husband: Yes. Well no. The last couple of years
the things I've been buying he's appreciated.
Wife: But who's been around to help you?
Husband: Do you want to just carry on this
corversation? (Laughs) No, I admit it, I'm a
terrible shopper. I don't like it, I hate it. . . . I'll
let her do the shopping. I trust her taste.

Thus, for women, Christmas gift shopping
provides opportunities for reinforcing both their
femininity and their competence in a role
culturally allocated to women.

HOME SHOPPING PARTIES

The phenomenon of party shopping has recently
been introduced to the consumer behavior
literature by Frenzen and Davis (1990). One
aspect of the phenomenon virtually taken for
granted by these authors is that the overwhelming
majority of party shopping is done by women.
The explanation given for the success of this sales
venue is that there is a noneconomic utility
derived from the purchase of goods. The goods
themselves offer "acquisition utility" whereas the
social goodwill generated by the purchase creates
"exchange utility." While this explanation helps to
supplement the strict "rational economic man"
view of consumer behavior, it provides little
insight as to why party shopping is so
predominantly a female activity (Gainer and

To explore this consumption venue, we used a
participant observation technique. We attended a
total of five shopping parties, three for
Tupperware and two for Discovery Toys. Most
guests initially assumed we were with the dealer,
either to help her or to receive training as novice
dealers. During conversations with the guests we
made no attempt to hide the fact that we were
doing research in order to study party shopping.
We participated in any games that were held at
our parties, joined in conversation and bought
products. In order to minimize the intrusive effect
of our presence in groups that ranged in size from
8 to 15 women, we attended individually and did
not take notes or tape record any of the proceed­
ings. Instead we relied on very extensive field
notes which we wrote immediately after leaving
the parties. We supplemented these notes by
conversations with the dealers in which we
checked some of our perceptions as well as
factual information regarding individual purchases
and sales totals. Our field notes for each party
were transcribed and, as with the depth
interviews, subjected to thematic analysis. Again,
several themes related to women's self identity
emerged.

At all the parties we attended, nearly everyone
bought something or promised to do so in a few
days. Some bought multiple items, others only
"token" amounts, but with few exceptions the
women who attended accepted a "norm of
purchasing" despite the fact that several openly
expressed a lack of desire for the products. Three
obvious violations to the norm of purchasing did
occur: at one party, a woman who was out of
work, and who had never met the hostess or any
of the other guests but one, purchased nothing; in
two cases, close relatives of the hostess (a sister
and a sister-in-law) made no purchase and
indicated no intention of doing so. It was also
apparent that some guests who had been invited
to certain parties simply failed to attend; it may
be inferred that at least some of these people
wished to avoid making a purchase.

Our interpretation is that shopping parties allow
women to establish and maintain their place in
extra-familial social networks, or "small worlds."
While those who are closest to a hostess (e.g.
sister or sister-in-law) may not need to make a
purchase to signal their relationship to her, those who are less closely connected can signal their ties to the hostess by attending and making a purchase. When guests make purchases, the hostess accumulates points toward free merchandise. Thus each purchase is, in effect, a "gift" to the hostess. Those who fail to attend or to make a purchase may either be unconcerned about forging social ties with the hostess (as in the case of the guest who did not know the hostess) or may have other opportunities to achieve the same end (as in the case of close relatives who likely exchange gifts on other occasions). Thus, party shopping enables shoppers to define and solidify the "small worlds" through which women in particular are thought (Cheal 1987) to forge their identities.

We observed that shopping parties can also help to construct self concept in another way. Several women, as they made their selections during the parties, explained how specific family members would benefit from the purchase. For instance, one woman announced the items she was purchasing to another shopper and prefaced each remark with a phrase like "my kids can make hamburgers more easily with this press," "my kids love salads," or "my husband needs this when he barbecues." Another woman purchasing a large set of cupboard organizers stated that her husband hated messy cupboards. At the toy parties, several of the women buying the most costly items agreed that they were extravagant but "really educational." Clearly, many women viewed the purchases less as personal acquisitions than as tools helpful for executing their roles as family care-givers. Moreover, they took the party as a public opportunity to express their allegiance to this role.

Shopping parties were also used as a public opportunity to demonstrate skills in or commitment to executing the family care-giver role. Although most shoppers at each party performed the same domestic tasks, some acknowledgement of varying degrees of skill on the part of certain women seemed apparent. One woman remarked to the researcher that she shopped at parties because she found the advice and experience of the other shoppers beneficial. This woman described herself as not being a very "smart" shopper, unlike some of the others whom she pointed out as being quite "smart." At another party a woman who had a great deal of experience with the product made a point of telling the other guests what they should get after quickly putting in a large order herself. At the same time, there was an atmosphere of support and encouragement for the seemingly less skilled. Requests for advice were often made and, in complying, those with acknowledged skills appeared to welcome the less skilled into a kind of sorority of family care-givers. Both those who sought advice and those who gave it affirmed their shared membership in the role.

Home shopping parties appear, then, to allow women to define and reinforce their membership in socially allocated roles as well as their position in the small worlds of extra-familial social networks.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Across the three settings, distinct but related ways in which shopping contributes to the development and maintenance of women's self identities have been detected. In effect, several "layers" of identity are supported through various shopping activities. These layers range from the more personal and idiosyncratic, to the more public and socially circumscribed.

Wedding shopping in particular allows for the expression of the unique self. Although that self might be traditional, or defined in opposition to tradition, the consumption choices associated with weddings are clearly viewed by most brides we interviewed as an important expression of individuality.

At the same time, weddings allow women to recognize important linkages to their immediate families and to their traditions or histories. Similarly, Christmas gift giving allows women to define and support familial relationships, while party shopping allows women to signal membership in extra-familial networks. These connections constitute the relationships and the heritage which define women as individuals integrated into a specific system of social relations.

Christmas shopping and party shopping allow women to define themselves in an additional way -- as conforming to and excelling in socially prescribed roles. Meeting the needs and suiting the tastes of individuals by choosing appropriate gifts allows women to express their femininity.
Likewise, demonstrating how goods selected at parties help them fulfil family obligations allows women to show themselves to be good family care-givers. In both cases, there is evidence that some women use shopping to show themselves and others that they do not merely conform to a role but excel in performing it.

These various "feminized"shopping activities, then, are used by women in range of ways to construct and reinforce their self identities. We want to stress that we recognize each setting is unique; we are not attempting to collapse observations across the three. Rather, we regard each as a separate phenomenon which may bear some relationship to the others. To the extent that these phenomena are related, this analysis shows how women have gone beyond merely "doing the shopping" to using shopping as a significant form of self expression and an important cue to their self definitions as women.

It is likely that men also use certain types of consumption activities to express and define themselves. We contend, however, that the consumer activities central to the construction of men's self identities are different from those which figure prominently in the lives of women. The venues important to men -- like those important to women -- are undoubtedly the conditioned by historically situated practices and assumptions which are pervasive in our culture. Sensitivity to these practices and assumptions will be required to explore this topic further.

Future studies may probe more systematically the range of consumption settings in which a given individual participates, to learn which they draw self-defining meanings from and in what manner. Such studies must be sensitive not only to the gender related differences, but also to the flux of definitional processes as notions of gender evolve. This line of research should expand our knowledge, not merely of how consumers use goods, but of how they construe consumption processes and practices.

REFERENCES


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