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Gendered Perceptions of Ideal Retail Service Venues

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The realms of the popular press and consumer myth have presented polarized and stereotyped images of male and female shoppers. Men and women are portrayed as living (and shopping) in separate worlds. Women are "born to shop" and "shop 'til they drop" in pursuit of fashion, color, and variety; while men are thought to avoid malls like a plague and inhabit a gray and navy world of sports, trucks, and sweatsuits. Several comic strips, such as "Cathy" or "For Better or For Worse," play on this scenario, while a popular book proclaims that "Men Are From Mars; Women are From Venus" (Grey 1992). While female shoppers have proven to be a group yielding rich insights on shopping (Otnes, Kim and Lowrey 1992; Otnes, McGrath and Lowrey 1995; Sherry and McGrath 1989), there has been restrained research interest both in male shopping behavior and in the differentiation of gendered behaviors in the retail context.

The study presented here had the following objectives: First, it sought to identify components of an idealized shopping atmosphere and experience for men and women. Secondly, its goal was to clarify the perception of male and female shopping behaviors from the perspective of each gender. Lastly, the study provides insight into how male and female shopping behaviors are differentiated in both reality and in the ideal.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

This research was conducted at Consumer Corners, the pseudonym for a regional outlet mall of formidable proportions. Fieldwork was completed between October, 1993 and January, 1994. During this period of time the author and a research assistant observed and interacted with a variety of shoppers, both male and female, as the informants prepared for and observed the Thanksgiving, Christmas and Hanukkah holidays, and indulged in pre- and post-holiday tasks and markdowns.

To study the shopping behavior of Consumer Corners' shoppers and to specifically target the understudied male shoppers, we employed a multi-method approach using five qualitative techniques. This approach is similar to methods used for other interpretive studies within our discipline. These methods are detailed as follows:

1. We conducted interviews with shoppers using a survey format. To this end two forms of projective methodologies were employed with a sample of male and female shoppers contacted in
a mall-intercept situation. McGrath, Sherry and Levy (1993) detail both the theory and analysis of such projective methods. Informants were given a $5 coupon for use at any of the mall’s restaurants as an incentive for their cooperation-in essence, a free lunch.

2. We observed and documented observations of shoppers within the confines of the mall, with special attention being paid to male shoppers.

3. We followed the process of Shopping With Consumers, as protocolled by Omes, McGrath and Lowrey (1995). Two male and two female informants each let one author accompany them on two shopping excursions and participated in three in-depth interviews related to their shopping behavior.

4. Interviews were conducted with twelve store managers to supplement survey, depth interview and observational data, and to serve as a form of member check. Only part of the results of this in-depth study of shopping are reported here. Of current interest are the results of one projective instrument in which informants were asked to detail a dream that they had about their "ideal" store.

INTERPRETIVE SUMMARY AND THEMES

Through the use of a projective dream story-telling technique, a number of male and female shoppers at a large regional mall detail their ideal shopping venue. These consumer fantasies demonstrate gender differences, provide insight into how people shop within the construction of their ideal context, and describe attributes and specifics that make these stores "ideal." Most intriguing is the finding that, although men and women fantasize significantly different types of settings as ideal, and there is evidence of gendered shopping behavior, when projected into their individual ideal formats men and women tend to behave and explore the retail ambiance in a similar manner.

There are a series of themes that are repeated in the stories of both men and women that shed light upon characteristics and consumer behaviors in an idealized retail setting. They are enumerated below, and, where appropriate, gendered differences are highlighted.

1. Abundance. Shopper dreams are filled with a cornucopia of goods. Stores are envisioned containing not only exactly what shoppers want, but lots of what they want. The profusion of merchandise yields a plethora of choices, even a glut of materiality. Such plenty in the retail context alludes to personal opulence and property, given the fantasized resources to acquire them. Although all shoppers eschew a dearth of goods, men and women envision them organized in different ways. Males appear to describe and gravitate toward simpler, less-busy-looking settings, while women envision a myriad of merchandise available to them all-at-once which they can reconfigure into their personal mosaic.

2. Ambiance. All shoppers appear to be sensitive to the nuances of the immediate retail environment, and several expressed preferences
for specific surroundings. In general, men and many women expressed a preference for environs that exuded a feeling of comfort, solace, and peace. Perhaps this was a direct reaction to the marketplace stereotype of crowds and rushed acquisition. The description of a setting in which the informant receives soothing succor parallels an idealized home environment. Perhaps modern day shoppers, as citizens of the 90's, fantasize of a marketplace that sells a snippet of contentment and soothing serenity they cannot find in their private lives and domicilies. Rather than "coming home" to escape distress, they are willing to go out.

At the other extreme, there were a notable group of women dreamers who enjoyed a frenetic and more visually and physically stimulating retail environment. They both enjoyed and were energised by a high level of activity and vitality in the marketplace. These women drew both strength and amusement from an animated and vigorous setting.

3. Play. Descriptions of an idealized shopping experience contain elements of a frolic or romp through a setting designed to amuse the shoppers. They toy and trifle. The task of acquisition is frequently secondary to amusement, enjoyment and entertainment. They play with merchandise, salespeople, and sometimes other shoppers. Any "work" of shopping in the sense that tasks are to be accomplished appears to be quickly set aside in their ideal shopping environment, as once on site the focus of their dream description is adventurous exploration. In these ideal retail settings, both men and women shoppers are nostalgically transformed to their earlier role as children in resolute pursuit of fun.

4. Self-Indulgence. The ideal stores of both men and women are replete with creature comforts, evidence unconstrained behaviors, and generally condone the unconventional. As would be expected in such dream scenarios, the respondents' personal wants and whims are the focus of and central to the story. These ideal descriptions posit the construct of retail service to the extreme, in which the individual respondent represents an ultra-niche to be served in an unquestioning, unrelenting, and organizationally undisciplined manner.

In summary, the findings of this study indicate that both commonalities and differences exist between male and female shopping behaviors and between their projected ideal shopping settings. When either gender is in a store that is characterized as "ideal," shoppers linger, browse, enjoy touching and "playing" with merchandise, and savor visual and aural atmospherics. All shoppers yearn for individualized attention and a level of service that may lie beyond conventional and appropriate. Ideal stores for men and for women can differ significantly, with many men choosing to streamline the average shopping setting. At the same time, many women accept existing shopping settings as the mean and dream about marginal changes that would allow them to examine and incorporate greater numbers of items with greater facility into their personalized shopping agenda.
REFERENCES


