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When Smallville met Metropolis:
Learning to Shop in an Unfamiliar Environment

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ABSTRACT

Through the stories of five women, we explore new skills, beyond thrift (Miller, 1998), that ‘need to be learned’ in the new environment of a discount designer outlet centre in a small, rural town. We present early theories as to why shoppers, confident in different environments, appear hesitant in the new outlet. We look at strategies used to claim the outlet and find appropriation is achieved through fictitious stories, vicarious consumption and non-threatening purchases - such as items for others and household products - items not heavily imbued with symbolic cues. We suggest this limited appropriation may be due to low cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984).

INTRODUCTION

The opening of a discount designer outlet centre in a small, rural town provides a new shopping experience for local inhabitants. This ethnographic study looks at early reactions to the centre and suggests a new light in which we might consider the act of shopping itself. Miller (1998) locates skill in shopping for grocery items as being solely related to thrift. Our study reveals dimensions beyond thrift that ‘need to be learned’ when shopping for designer brands at a new destination retail shopping centre. We present some early theories on why it might be that shoppers, confident in different environments, might appear more hesitant in the new outlet and suggest that the explanation may lie in the notion of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Finally we look at some of the strategies used by our respondents to learn how to shop in the new environment.

SMALLVILLE

Rathdowney is ‘a resolutely old-style Irish village, honest and comfortable about itself. It unselfconsciously marks times past’ (Boland, 2002). The town has a population of 1,200 people located in the midlands of Ireland. Rathdowney is located close to, but not on, major roads connecting three main cities - Dublin, Cork and Limerick. There is little passing traffic and no tourism. Employment is mainly in blue-collar occupations – a local meat-processing plant and lead and zinc mines located outside of the town.

The main street of the town, once Georgian, is now a mixture of building styles. The centre of the town is marked by a square and by the meat-processing
factory (once a brewery). Most business in the town is family run and the street, which was once predominate ly commercial premises, is now a mixture of businesses and private residences as people retired but remained in the same houses. This gives a feeling that the town is economically depressed; although many respondents claimed that it had become more prosperous in the recent past.

There is a single clothes shop in the town - a family owned business that stocks a little of everything. They supply school uniforms and sporting clothing, male and female formal and informal clothes, children’s clothes and shoes.

There is no tradition of immigration or real emigration in Rathdowney. Historically, the two main industries, the brewery and the textile factory, provided employment for men and women so, unlike many towns in rural Ireland, local people stayed. There was some emigration, usually to the UK, but again, nothing on the scale that would have been seen elsewhere. I was repeatedly told in interviews that “everybody knows everybody here”. Very recently, however, there have been three small-scale housing developments and Rathdowney has experienced some inward migration and there is a sense that change is underway.

“When we moved here, it was a very closed place. The amount of times I was called a blow-in when we came first. There was employment here, you see, with the brewery, so nobody moved away. If you married a girl from Roscrea then that was like marrying a Romanian today. Somebody from very far away. In 25 years, it has opened up a lot.” (Katy)

AND THEN METROPOLIS CAME TO THE OUTSKIRTS OF TOWN….

Rathdowney was chosen by Morrisons Development (now owned by AWG) as a site for the first large-scale designer outlet in Ireland. Designer outlets offer branded merchandise at a discount to high street retail prices. Typically, the discounts are in the region of 30-70% and the merchandise is previous season or slow moving stock. Morrisons explain the decision to locate in Rathdowney as a result of the town’s proximity to three of the four largest cities in Ireland and the presence of a large pre-existing industrial footprint. Irish planning law inhibits the development of large greenfield sites for retail purposes. The outlet, Brand Central, finally opened in October with a small number of the shops occupied. At the time interviews were conducted (September to December, 2001) only two stores – Joseph, a Bond Street store stocking designer brands and Suits You, a men’s store with a small range for women – could be described as stocking clothes of interest to these particular respondents. This paper reports findings from an on-going longitudinal study. The study is ethnographic in style and uses multiple methods including participant observation, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. We are interested in how local residents view Brand Central, if the outlet has changed residents perceptions of their town Rathdowney, and how the outlet has changed residents perceptions of shopping and their shopping practices.

The Participants

Informants were recruited using a number of different methods. Some were personally known to one of the authors, others were recruited through the local development association. One
of the authors also attended a jobs fair run by the outlet management company in the local area and asked attendees for contact details if they were willing to participate in follow up research. The data presented below was gathered from a series of interviews. Karen and Mary have been friends since their late teens and asked to be interviewed together. All of the other respondents were interviewed separately (See Table 1).

Karen is very brand aware, outgoing and when we spoke first she was planning to return to work by taking a job in the outlet when it opened. She spoke in detail about shopping, clothes and brands. When she talks about a shopping experience, Karen is talking about clothes.

Mary is very self-contained, less talkative than Karen often allowing Karen to speak for her. Mary also intended to work in the outlet but ended up choosing to work in a local supermarket instead as the hours suited her better. Mary mentions shopping for clothes, clearly enjoying it but her real pleasure is in shopping for household goods.

Paula was heavily pregnant when interviewed and gave birth days after we spoke. It was noticeable that she viewed shopping for clothes as something that was on hold for her at the moment but was something to which she would return after the baby was born.

Michelle had just celebrated her fortieth birthday, when interviewed, and it was clearly on her mind. She is very conscious of not having much money at the moment as she and her husband have recently renovated the family home, adding a huge extension.

Katy is a self-confessed avid shopper and is a bargain hunter. Like Karen, she can give very specific details on clothing purchased, remembering exact prices and discounts. Katy moved to the town about twenty-five years ago.

REACTION TO THE CENTRE: APPROPRIATION AND MAKING IT YOUR OWN

Spain (1993) identified a tendency for long time residents in rural communities to welcome development of any kind and that certainly proved to be the case here. Beyond merely welcoming the outlet, respondents are proud of the new development – Paula spoke of “something to show off”; Mary thought it was “beautiful” while Karen talked about “priding out of” the outlet. Even Michelle, who was the least enthusiastic of all respondents, admitted that “…But then sometimes, when I think about it, it just makes me stop and I’m speechless. It amazes me that someone would do that here”.

There is no doubt that the arrival of the shopping centre was seen as exciting – “I was so excited when I heard about it first, I couldn’t wait for it to start” (Karen, First Interview). Paula described it as “unreal”. The centre was also seen as an experience rather than a mere location. Paula, when asked about her motivation in undertaking a retail course, explained – “I decided to do the course because I was excited over Brand Central coming to Rathdowney and I wanted to be part of it. And being pregnant, I felt like, okay, I’m not really going to be fit to work for a while but I still wanted to do the course […] But when it came up, I just decided to go with the flow and I didn’t want to be left out of the Brand Central idea. You know, it’s nice to have a leg in, as they say. And you
know, I mean, I wanted to be part of this big experience as well. You know, it was fantastic.”

Paula’s sense of missing out on a wonderful experience was even more poignant when she talked about the experiences she imagines those who participated in the course must have had:

“One of the girls I know done the course, she was there bringing in all the gear for a week before the shop opened. And you know, she’ll always remember the time that Brand Central opened in Rathdowney. She was part of it, you know [wistful].” (Paula)

Clearly, Paula felt it important to be part of the experience. The option of working there was not a realistic one for her, with five very young children. So, it seems that she decided to take a different route – belonging, not as an employee but rather as a customer.

“I have been shopping in it almost every day. Just to see what’s new and you know it is lovely to go in there […] And it’s lovely just to go in there for a browse around […] it’s just lovely going around and seeing what’s on offer and there are some brilliant offers.”

BECOMING COSMOPOLITAN / BECOMING LOCAL

"Becoming a citizen of the world is often a lonely business. It is, in effect, a kind of exile from the comfort of local truths, from the warm nesting feelings of patriotism, from the absorbing pride in oneself and one's own…” (Nussbaum, 1996 in Thompson and Tambayah, 1999)

In many ways our respondents are direct counterpoints to the cosmopolitans discussed in Thompson and Tambayah (1999). These are not the active consumers of cultural difference reflecting on their consumption experiences neither are they locals content with their parochial experience (Hannerz, 1990) - at least not anymore. Both Thompson and Tambayah (1999) and Holt (1998) reconceptualise Hannerz’s notions of what it is to be cosmopolitan to incorporate the notion of high and low cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1994). Holt (1998), looking at US consumers, found the cosmopolitan versus local distinction very much related to cultural capital.

Whether the contrast between the town and the outlet is conceptualised as one of the local versus the cosmopolitan or as high versus low cultural capital, the local population is aware of the juxtaposition that the centre represents. While in the field, many respondents expressed incredulity that Rathdowney had been chosen. Prior to opening, and in the early stages of operation, the outlet was specifically located outside of the town - referred to as “above” or “up there”. Paula, who was fulsome in her praise of the outlet, admitted that she was glad that it is located outside of the main centre of the town so that it does not interfere with the “old town”. In fact, for her this is “ideal”. Michelle also saw the outlet as outside of Rathdowney, distinguishing between the need to go in to town and going to the outlet.

Yet, there was a sense that the outlet was also seen as belonging to Rathdowney. Many informants recounted stories of local involvement in the centre at a senior level, stories that were later revealed to be exaggerated or even completely fabricated. These stories, despite being known fictions, were important to Rathdowney residents to make tangible
links with the outlet. In this way, the outlet was made to ‘belong’ to the town and the residents were given ‘introductions’ and had vested interests and concerns with the outlet.

Perhaps, most telling of all is the local reaction to a colour piece in a national newspaper describing the town and the outlet. While less than fulsome in praise for the outlet itself, it is clear that the purpose of the story is to establish the contrast between the town (local) and the outlet (cosmopolitan). The town is portrayed in less than glowing terms with the journalist complaining that she ‘…feels a bit disoriented […] as if I’m far west instead of deep inland’ and pointing out the distinguishing features – local shops closed for lunch, home made produce, out of date advertisements, unavailability of prepaid mobile phone cards – of local life (Boland, 2002).

The local community was quick to react to the piece – letters of complaint appeared in local and national newspapers, the issue was given extensive coverage in local media, was raised by politicians in local government meetings and a national radio show was contacted. Defending the honour of the town, locals rejected suggestions that the town of Rathdowney and the residents as consumers were not appropriate or capable of integrating designer fashion and metropolitan tastes (Finucane, 2002). Finally, it seemed significant that those chosen to defend the town's honour were people who had moved to the area from elsewhere, rather than those who had lived there all their lives. Perhaps the local population felt that it was not capable of a defence of the cosmopolitan.

Karen viewed the outlet as having had a more dramatic impact on the town that any of the other respondents – perhaps because it has had a dramatic personal impact for her as she has returned to the labour force after 20 years in the home. She claimed that “The town now is really the outlet, the town itself is up in the outlet now, in Brand Central” (Karen, second interview). This clearly represented an improvement for Karen, and perhaps a move towards the cosmopolitan - she reported returning to Rathdowney following a shopping trip elsewhere and driving past the centre. “[I] came back in the Johnstown Road and to see the Christmas lights, sure you wouldn’t see the likes of it in a city.” (Karen, second interview)

SHOPPING NEWBIES?

All of the respondents seemed conscious that their local shopping experience was different to shopping in the outlet. When asked about the local clothes shop, they talked about friendliness and personal service (all), willingness to order goods for particular customers (Paula) and mentioned the proprietors by name. In contrast, when discussing the outlet all respondents mentioned atmospherics and features such as music (Paula), air conditioning (Michelle), a café (Paula, Katy, Mary) and general layout (Michelle) were seen as significant. These all marked the centre as different to the local shopping experience.

“With this, it’s a beautiful new building. It’s well set out, it looks gorgeous, absolutely beautiful. It’s very cheerful to go into music in the background and the general atmosphere is very very good. It’s exciting, exciting for us” (Paula) and even Michelle, who claimed to be indifferent first commented on how impressed some work colleagues were –
“but [they] were again, impressed by the outlay [layout], you know, the outlay and the whole thing itself, you know. The shops, the corridors, the main corridor whatever, that that was nice, the air conditioning good and you know, the heat in the shops that it wasn’t really overpowering which it can be in a lot of shops.” (Michelle)

For respondents, shopping prior to the opening of the outlet was not confined to Rathdowney. Their shopping stories also involved outshopping (Miller and Kean, 1997; Miller and Soyoung 1999) – that is shopping outside of the local community – but as with Holt’s low cultural capital consumers (1998) the women remained in the locality, choosing to shop within a 45 minute drive of Rathdowney.

It would be unfair to assume that the women interviewed were unfamiliar with branded clothing, yet they seemed uneasy with Joseph. In fact Karen, in particular, is hugely brand conscious and could describe her favourite Paul Costelloe suit in great detail, pausing only to explain how Costelloe was Princess Diana’s favourite designer. Mary, who appeared less brand conscious, is very aware of the brands stocked locally – helping Karen (the brand queen!) to remember the branded jeans she buys for her sons and remarking on a particular Lisa Lovell suit that Karen had purchased. All respondents, except Paula, could name their favourite boutiques and shops, if not particular brands.

UNFAMILIAR WITH THE OUTLET

It became obvious in the course of the interviews that there was something beyond the notion of skill that Miller (1998) identified when looking at grocery shopping. Karen and Mary certainly believed themselves to be competent shoppers, yet they were uncomfortable with reporting on the outlet. Both Karen and Katy mentioned, prior to interview, that they were the ideal people to interview about shopping, yet all of the interviewees suggested that they were not the best people to interview about the outlet. Mary was reluctant to undertake a second interview as she had found employment outside of the centre and so felt herself unqualified to comment. Paula wondered aloud what she would be able to tell me about Brand Central – this, despite having been there nearly every day since it opened. Michelle actually denied that she had been to the centre at all in order to establish her lack of expertise, although she later mentioned at least three occasions that she had been there. All respondents took pains to stress that they were not expert shoppers in the context of Brand Central and worried that they might be giving me ‘wrong’ information.

As the interviews continued and respondents spoke about their shopping experiences it became clear that the notion of “skill”, and more importantly of learning, was very much on respondents’ minds. This was particularly true of Paula, who felt that she would become accustomed to the more negative elements of her new shopping experience - “Well, it’s impersonal I suppose all right but it won’t be when we get used to it. It’s just so new and vibrant that it’s exciting for us.”

Paula seemed to believe that she could ‘learn’ ways to make the centre seem less formal. She spoke in even more detail when she considered the brands available in Brand Central “It’s a complete new experience in shopping, something we’re not used to really. You know, and, there are so many unusu[al]…so many lovely labels
and designs that, you know, we’re not used to. And it’s completely new education for us as regards to clothes.”

LEARNING ABOUT BRANDS?

The implication here being that the unfamiliarity is not because of the brands themselves, as might be suggested by “unusual”, but rather is a result of her own lack of knowledge of those particular brands and styles of clothing. When asked about her use of the term “education”, Paula explained – “well it is, because I mean, we wouldn’t be used to a lot of the clothes. You couldn’t imagine yourself going around in them but it’s nice to branch out and…”

While in the field, that element of unfamiliarity was echoed by other respondents who regularly questioned me on brands and shops that were rumoured to be opening. One respondent even visited a store in Dublin (FCUK) to check prices and to work out “who it would appeal to” (Katy). The notion of being novices in the designer sphere was particularly true when respondents talked about Joseph. Their unfamiliarity was exacerbated by the fact that there is no other Joseph store in Ireland. Karen actually worked in Joseph and distinguished between locals and visitors - “locals are mainly looking, people coming from outside know the stuff, know Joseph and are there for the mark down.” (Karen, second interview)

Paula did not mention brands at all during her interview – with a single exception. All of the other respondents mentioned either favourite brands or favourite retailers in their shopping outside of the outlet. Paula never did. She talked about shopping locations in terms of convenience only - she chose to shop in her hometown, as her mother would be available to mind her children. Yet, Paula was taken with a pair of boots. Clearly, they were seen as exotic – “There’s fabulous boots there all right, most unusual colours like purple and tan where I think you would look a bit unusual going up the streets of Rathdowney in a pair of them. [laughs] But sure why not? Yeah, the younger generation won’t think that anyway I’m sure.”

Later when pressed about the most outrageous thing she had found in the centre, we talked about the boots again. “Well I thought the ah, I thought the boots actually, purple and tan were outrageous really [laughs] I could imagine my husband saying “My God” but, you know, when I think of it why not?”

And then she found someone with more courage! – “I was delighted, a fella was here one day and he told me that his mother was after buying a pair of boots and I said what are they like. Well, he said, they were purple. And his mother now would be seventy. And I was delighted. I thought fair play to her, you know. Absolutely, [she is from Rathdowney] and all her family are.”

And then, finally, Paula got to her first, and only, mention of a brand. “I think they were [hesitates] Prada boots, which would be beautiful. The leather is so soft in all these boots.”

Paula was hesitant in naming Prada. It was clearly a departure for her to think in terms of brands and there was a real sense that she is practising the use of the brand name. Finally, there is a clear sense that Paula sees this a learning process. She said that she was not tempted to buy her Prada boots – “Well,
not at the moment, but I will be in the future.”

LEARNING HOW TO BE A CONSUMER?

Echoed through the interviews and the field notes is the notion of a particular type of customer who ‘belonged’ or would find something in the outlet for themselves. Karen described her customers as – “Well dressed people, really very well spoken people, lovely people altogether.” Michelle described the kind of person who might find go shopping in the outlet, but was very clear that this was not her - “I noticed that now the first day of the opening in it. There were a few people there now [...] literally pencil thin people. And like, they had the nice tweeds and the nice knits and I could see them [...] I’d say it [Joseph] is the kind of a shop too that you could sort of go through the rails, you know. But I’d say now what would come in in [size] sixteens would be very limited, do you know?”

While my field notes record fitting on an unusual Alexander MacQueen jacket and – “The assistant who had been folding clothes at a nearby table came over to admire the jacket. She said that she loved the jacket and had been admiring it since it came into stock. It was her ‘butterfly jacket’, and she admitted that she had been wondering ‘what sort of person would buy the jacket’. She said that you had to be a particular kind of person – her sister for example would never wear the jacket – but if you were that kind of person, it was fabulous. She then looked embarrassed and went away.”

When speaking of her customers, Karen is adamant that they are “all sorts” yet when pressed it is the more exotic that she mentions – the man whose father ran a clothes shop (clearly more expert in brands), the sculptor and artist, the fashion models who returned to shop having participated in a fashion show, the couple from Dublin and the gentleman who bought the green velvet jacket for the Ascot race meeting.

TRYING IT OUT (PRACTISING BUT NOT ON THEMSELVES)

Unfamiliarity with the brands on offer for women seemed to make our respondents unhappy with shopping for themselves. Some of our respondents had possible or desired purchases – Paula’s Prada boots and Michelle mentioned a handbag – but nobody had purchased anything personal. Even Karen, who had purchased a new “rigout” for her Christmas party, had actually left the outlet in her lunch hour to go to the local clothes shop to do so.

In common with many others in the town, all respondents had purchased household items from The Design House. In fact, the household shop had been forced to close two days after its opening as it ran out of stock. The queues on the opening day were thirty minutes long, yet many shoppers were purchasing single items, often very small things (such as tea-towels). These purchases were never referred to by brand and the concept of thrift was very much present when they were discussed. The only luxury household item mentioned in field notes was an item costing over IR£500, which was stolen from the shop. Respondents variously reported this as a Persian rug and a hand made, feather filled quilt, indicating some of the discomfort and unfamiliarity we saw with branded clothing. In general, however, our respondents felt themselves competent shoppers for household items and they
did not need, or use, brand as a cue for these items.

There was one other purchase that respondents reported – pick’n’mix sweets. Paula, in particular, was impressed by the sweets and visits the shop every time she is in the outlet. It seems to hold reminders of her childhood -

“A fabulous selection of sweets. Oh, everything. It reminds me of Woolworths years ago. They used to have all kinds of sweets. A place where you have loads of different kinds of sweets.”

It seems then that our respondents had no difficulty in shopping for items where they felt that brand cues were not relevant (both the sweets and the household items); where they believed themselves to be competent shoppers (household items) or where they had prior experience of the product (sweets). The issue, therefore, was not difficulty in purchasing anything from the outlet, but rather in purchasing items more heavily imbued with symbolic cues.

Purchase of clothing for family members did not seem to be a problem either. Both Karen and Paula reported purchasing clothing for their husbands. Karen had also been shopping with her youngest son. Many of the women reported men’s suits as the best saving and I was repeatedly told this while in the field, despite the fact that this was a blue-collar area where suits are rarely worn. When pressed on why this might be, Karen laughed and said

“Men like to have a nice suit to be laid out in…[laughs] but also if we were going somewhere…or for a family funeral…[laughs again]” (Karen, second interview)

We believe that the women were engaging in vicarious shopping - not shopping for family members out of love or sacrifice as Miller (1998) suggests, but rather using shopping for family members as a way of gaining experience in the new retail environment. Michelle actually went one step further in suggesting clothing and footwear for strangers - people she had seen in Brand Central on the opening day.

“There were a few people there now [...] literally pencil thin people. And like, they had the nice tweeds and the nice knits and I could see them[…] There was a couple of pairs of boots and you could see them going nice with it or they had nice knitwear things now the first day in it, sort of jackets. But it depends on what colour…they were in browns and cream. There was one woman that I noticed, then somebody I saw with a nice black jacket on her, just sort of edge-to-edge with a slight little swing and I could see her, you know, getting a good bit of wear out of it. Now, she was a low size person. [I wonder] whether she bought it or not the same day.”

So, it seems that these women had no difficulty in shopping for their partners or for their families in Brand Central. They could purchase household goods without any concern. The one area with which they felt uncomfortable was purchasing clothing for themselves.

**LEARNING TO SHOP**
(I.E. APPROPRIATE SHOPPING PRACTICES AND EXPECTED ACTIVITIES)

While most of the learning stories focused on becoming familiar with the brands, the outlet itself or the new, more fashionable clothes, Karen, in her capacity as a sales assistant, was also learning about new ways to shop.
“Another thing I’ve noticed is couples. I can’t get over the amount of boyfriends or partners who go shopping with their girlfriends or wives and giving their judgement on their clothes. You know, admiring what their wife or partner is wearing, complimenting them, asking their opinion.” (Karen, Second Interview).

Mary agreed. “well, you see you wouldn’t see it in Rathdowney. [...] More so you’d see it in Portlaoise, Kilkenny” [two large shopping towns, both about 30 miles from Rathdowney] and both agreed that this behaviour is practised by “people from outside” (Mary and Karen, Second Interview).

Another element that surprises Karen is the use of mobile phones as part of the shopping process. She said that before working in Joseph she “[...] would have no time for ones messing on their mobile phones” but since starting work, she realised “it is part of the act now, part of the scene.” Karen went on to say that customers are choosing purchases for themselves based on advice given over the phone and suggesting purchases to others.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of our paper has been to present a tale of five women as they embark on, what is for them, a new shopping experience. Through their stories, it becomes clear that there are additional skills, beyond thrift, required to shop in a designer outlet. We believe that our respondents' awareness of their own lack of competence in reading and using the symbolic codes embedded in fashion brands is a deterrent to their purchasing on their own behalves. The perceived gap between the designer brands retailing at the outlet and our consumers might be best conceptualised within a cultural capital framework. Our respondents are not unaware of this gap and we have identified a number of strategies that are being used to develop the required shopping skills. These include claiming the retail space as local through real and perceived relationships and the use of ‘fledgling’ or amateur shopping excursions that have begun with household goods and shopping for others.

It will be interesting to watch how the shopping behaviour of all five women evolves over time. In addition, the ethnographic study will broaden to look at other groups – particularly younger women and younger and older men. In terms of theory, it is our intention to broaden the conceptualisation of learning and to examine possible schema which might provide more insight into the behaviour of respondents on adapting to their new shopping environment.

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