Shopping – Differences between Genders or Differences in Interests?

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ABSTRACT

This working paper addresses differences and similarities between male and female shopping behaviour. It hypothesises that the differences in shopping behaviour between men and women are not related to biological gender, but to differences in interests, which may be related to differences in personality. It also acknowledges that this still has to be determined. For this purpose, the background literature is discussed and a preliminary study is outlined. A preliminary analysis suggests that overall men and women indeed conceptualise shopping very similarly, but at the same time there are also both men and women who stereotype themselves as a “stereotypical male or female shopper”.

The present paper’s main interest is in the reasons why there are group-based differences in how people shop. Although there are gender differences in shopping preferences and activities, these differences in male and female shopping behaviour are hypothesised to have much more to do with differences in interests and maybe even differences in personality than in any intrinsic difference between men and women. Therefore, this planned research will look at the non-gendered nature of shopping, or in other words we will examine how different groups of people shop for different bundles of goods and services, as well as their different preferences and styles of shopping. It has to be said at the same time however, that the extent to which these map onto gender-based groups still has to be determined.

In order to address these issues regarding shopping we need to know what shopping actually is. Shopping can have many different functions for many different people. It can range from shopping as a type of leisure activity where the individual enjoys just shopping around looking for nothing in particular – i.e. the recreational shopper (Bellenger and Korgaonkar, 1980) – to shopping being considered a work type activity where the individual doesn’t enjoy the activity very much and only engages in it when absolutely necessary as a particular product is needed at the time – called the convenience shopper (Bellenger and Korgaonkar, 1980). However there does not appear to be any agreement on the definition. It has been widely recognised that shopping is an activity that nearly every human being participates in one way or another (Bergadaá, Faure, & Perrien, 1994). Consequently people should have an idea what shopping means to them.

Turning now to the nature of the group-based differences in shopping, there is a literature on shopper typologies, which were developed with an emphasis on the individual and his or her shopping experience. Most of these studies were conducted using either one-to-one or
telephone interviews and others used questionnaires. Overall the literature on consumer/shopper typologies was a very helpful and necessary research agenda at the time and even still is so now, as the different typologies offer a widespread terminology for describing ways in which consumers consume and also what consumers are like (Holt, 1995).

Shopper typologies address a number of different variables, but what seems to be missing is the gender variable. Within the consumer behaviour literature it has been a well-established fact for several years that men and women shop differently, or in other words that shopping is a ‘gendered’ activity. For example Lunt and Livingstone (1992) argued that at least in industrialised countries shopping is very much a gendered activity, meaning that men and women have very different roles to play, and that they would make very different decisions. Additionally, Lunt and Livingstone (1992) and later Miller (1998) made a case that the actual act of shopping seemed to be much more part of the woman’s domain, while the man’s role was to take care of monetary issues. Similarly, Campbell (1997) showed that women are much more interested in the activity than men are, and that they also much more likely to have a much more positive attitude to the activity than men do. However, later research (Otnes and McGrath, 2001 and Bakewell and Mitchell, 2004 amongst others) then showed however that men and women’s shopping behaviour is actually not that different, and also that men’s shopping behaviour should not be ignored. Otnes and McGrath (2001) were among the first researchers to explore the male shopping experience in more detail and identified three stereotypes of men’s shopping behaviour. These are: “grab and go,” “whine and wait,” and “fear of the feminine.” The ‘grab and go shopper’ is one who does not want to waste a lot of time in the process of shopping. This shopper knows what he wants, and therefore does not need to spend much time looking around therefore he goes to the store buys what he wants and leaves. The ‘whine and wait shopper’ is the disinterested shopper who endures (but does not enjoy) the process, while someone else does the shopping (most likely the partner). ‘Fear of the feminine’ refers to a dislike by men of doing anything that could be considered as a female activity.

Bakewell and Mitchell (2004), also classified men as an important consumer group and explored their consumer decision-making styles using Sproles and Kendall’s (1986) Consumer Styles Inventory. This study found that unlike the above-mentioned stereotype that men do not enjoy shopping, men in 2004 do take part in the shopping process. More interestingly however, these researchers also raised the point that focusing on biological sex instead of gender identity and gender role could be problematic in explaining this recent shift in male consumption patterns. They suggest that further research is needed to investigate how perception of gender roles and gender identity can influence especially male shopping behaviour.

As implied before the main argument of this paper is that the gendered nature of shopping can be challenged. We approached the topic with the initial hypothesis that shopping is not a gendered activity and this suggests that an answer needs to the following question needs to be found: If shopping is not a gendered activity, why do people have different interests in shopping? Is it primarily a reflection of
interests, or could it be a reflection of personality factors?

As mentioned before shopping is an activity that most human beings participate in. From young children to older people, there is no exception; everyone has some kind of experience with the activity. Obviously, this will be to a much different degree depending on how old one is. Younger children are usually involved in shopping only in the company of their parents, whilst older children and teenagers can often be found ‘hanging out’ in shopping malls with each other (Anthony, 1985). Once one has outgrown the teenage years there can be yet another change in the social context of shopping behaviour, as one goes from shopping with friends, to shopping with a partner to shopping with one’s own family. One could argue that as a person goes through the life cycle there can be several changes in how that person shops (including when, who with and other factors). The setting of where and how this ‘shopping activity’ happens might differ from culture to culture (e.g. traditional market instead of a supermarket), but the essential structure of the activity should not differ much for everyone. It should also be true for men and women (even though the perception of the activity might be different for both genders).

Because shopping plays such an essential role in all people’s lives it makes it an interesting and important issue in the psychology of everyday life and a suitable research problem. Many researchers before have looked at different aspects of consumption behaviour, but only few if any have looked at what shopping actually is. What do people think shopping is? Is it merely the exchange of money for goods? Or do other things need to be involved as well to make the activity shopping? And what could these other aspects be? Are they the same for both men and women?

Other questions that come to mind in this respect are: do men and women really have such different views of what the activity is? Even though the approach is quite different, deep down it might still be classified in the same terms (i.e. as the same activity).

This pilot study was designed to answer some of these questions, and to find out what people think shopping is. In this sense this study will also be a development of the ‘natural history’ of shopping, meaning that it will establish several things, namely what shopping is, where it is done, and by whom. Asking participants directly to list the sorts of activities that fall under the heading ‘shopping’ was considered to be the best place to start.

From basic cognitive psychology we know that when people are asked to generate members of a category they are very likely to name the most typical members first (Mervis, Catlin and Rosch, 1976). Similarly typical members of a category should be recalled quicker and more easily than atypical members of a category (Rothbart, Sriram and Davis-Stitt, 1996).

Therefore this study involved participants filling in a short online survey which asked them to list either “types of shopping” or typical shopping activities. The answers to the first question make up a list of all the activities people consider to be shopping, and the answers to the second question give more information about what people do while they are out shopping.
A preliminary analysis of the results in this study shows that the most typical shopping activities mentioned across both men and women are food shopping, clothes shopping and record/CD shopping. Things people mentioned they do while they are out shopping varied a lot between all the participants. The most interesting finding at the moment however is that there are still quite a few people who see themselves as a “stereotypical male or female shopper”.

It is difficult to draw any further conclusions at this point, as this research is still in a very early stage. Further analysis of the current results and further work in line with this research will be necessary to inform the conclusions that can be drawn from it. As a final note we should also recognise that this may be a problem where the parameters are changing over the years, as societal and other factors involved are rarely static.

REFERENCES


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