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The Savannah Hypothesis of Shopping (It IS all about sex after all)

By Charles Dennis and Andrew McCall

Retailing is big business; both in terms of the billions in turnover and in the ever increasing battle for a greater share of our leisure time. Understanding and anticipating customer behaviour and motivation is a key component of any successful consumer facing enterprise. Retailers know that the way men and women behave when they shop is different, but do they really understand why? And would it help them be more successful if they could uncover the underlying causes?

One theory is it's about survival of the fittest

Predicting human behaviour is a complex process dependent in part on instinctive, physiological, rational and emotional considerations. Arguably, all of these are just chemistry – think of the adrenalin 'fight or flight' reflex. But why does brain chemistry affect our actions? According to evolutionary psychologists, the answer is 'survival of the fittest.'

This axiom is no stranger in the retailer's vocabulary. But in a literal context away from city analysts and like-for-like sales, to context 'survival of the fittest' we need to step back four million years. Back then there was an ice age that caused the African forest to retreat and tree dwelling apes were forced to adapt to living on the open savannah or face extinction. For males, survival and finding a mate meant becoming good hunters whilst the females needed to excel at gathering the best food for the family. The Savannah Hypothesis holds that human psychology has been shaped by the need to evolve and adapt in order to survive. And no wonder that this behaviour has become ingrained: of the continuum that represents the evolution of the human race, ninety eight per cent has seen humans as hunter-gatherers.

'It started with body painting, ornaments and fur'

In consumer societies, gathering may have translated into comparison shopping, and hunting into earning money to support the family. According to Dr. Geoffrey Miller, (then) of University College London, 2001: 'It started with body painting, ornaments and fur' According to Dr Miller, for females, shopping for fashion items is a form of sexual signalling. Women must keep giving off these signals to prevent their mates from straying. So is shopping all about sex after all?

To answer the question the authors sought to find out whether male and female shopping styles differ because of context and culture or because of evolution. Does the Savannah Hypothesis apply to shopping? Are women better shoppers because they have evolved that way or will men catch up on their shopping effectiveness and enjoyment as the gender equality and the cultural context gap narrows?

Women are ‘better shoppers’ making an average 10 percent cost saving over men

Male and female shopping styles certainly differ. Even in the US where gender equality in the workplace is greater than most other countries, differences in shopping style can still be clearly observed. The US female style involves searching, comparing, finding the best value and taking pride in shopping as an activity (Underhill 1999). This pride is justified as on average, women make 10 per cent better cost savings than men, making them the ‘better shoppers’ (Denison 2003). Women have a more positive attitude to shopping and see the activity as a satisfying experience in itself. For women, shopping is a leisure and social activity in which they are more involved and through which they can express love for their families and their social network (Miller 1998). Women shopping together spend nearly twice as long in a shop as men shopping with women or other men (Underhill 1999).

Men use brands as symbols of economic power

On the other hand, men see shopping as a mission and tend to go straight for what they want in a purposeful way (Underhill, 1999). For men, the focus is on the speed of the shopping process, achieved by sticking to familiar brands (also used by men as symbols of economic power) and by either visiting a familiar store and buying quickly or by being indifferent to which store is selected (Bakewell and Mitchell, 2004). Male emotional response to shopping comes at ‘the kill’ – the actual moment of purchase when their heart rate quickens. The stereotypes are not 100 percent accurate but in the UK have been found to apply to 80 percent of women and 70 percent of men. (Denison 2003).

This discussion is part of the ongoing ‘nature vs. nurture’ debate. Early in 2005, the Brunel Business School, Brunel University undertook preliminary UK-based research to explore the differences in shopping styles across cultures. The objective was to explore whether female and male shopping styles were significantly different between high and low context cultures as the first step to proving that shopping behaviour is determined by evolution. The results would help retailers determine the underlying causes of gender shopping styles. If cultural, then the gaps would diminish over time. If evolutionary, then it is clear that retailers need to develop new strategies to engage with the vast majority of men by providing a new retail environment that recognises and delivers shopping methods that answer (for the first time) their inherited habits and preferences.

The cultural context

Rather than minimising the influence of culture on shopping that has received attention from researchers such as Miller (e.g. Miller, 1998) we look for possible differences between women and men in shopping styles across different cultures and thus draw inferences on the possible evolutionary influence.

People in so-called ‘high-context’ cultures tend to use personality and social setting in communicating. Decision-making takes longer because it uses less tangible information. On the other hand, people in ‘low-context’ cultures tend to take explicit meanings at face value. Decisions rely on fewer sources of information and thus tend

to be quicker. Eagly and Wood (2002) have pointed out that sex differences tend to be reduced in societies where women and men have similar status – i.e. low-context cultures such as Scandinavian ones. Extending their argument to shopping, if shopping styles did vary across cultures, then high-context cultures might be expected to be associated with more social, time consuming, feminine shopping styles; low-context with more transaction orientated, faster, masculine ones.

The Research

A questionnaire was constructed based on previously reported elements of feminine and masculine shopping styles. Respondents were segmented according to cultural context and were drawn from ten different cultures or ethnic origins including high context cultures such as Greek, Chinese and UK Asian and low context cultures including Danish and UK Jewish.

Boys will be boys

The findings support the main hypothesis that the differences between female and male shopping styles, reflecting the gatherer and hunter roles, are not significantly different across various national cultures. Even though there were significant differences between female and male shopping styles, particularly those reflecting the ‘gatherer’ (comparison shopping) role, the differences between females and males were not significantly different between high and low content cultures. This compares with a previous qualitative finding that there may be differences in retailing styles between high and low-context cultures, with a more market bazaar style in the high context cultures (Dennis 2005). The study found that the difference was not reflected in the femininity/masculinity of the shopping styles. The results can be interpreted as supporting the Savannah hypothesis of shopping. On the basis of these preliminary results, female and male shopping styles appear to be evolutionarily rather than culturally determined.

Male Order

Even though this research needs to be extended to a larger sample representing a wider range of national cultures, the early indications provide an interesting set of clues for global retailers looking for competitive advantage.

In May 2005 *The New York Times* reported that a new Ohio-based shopping mall, the Epicenter, was to provide shoppers with a handheld electronic device called a “Buypod”, offering what the founder of the group developing the Epicenter terms “a merger of internet capabilities with traditional retailing”. Customers will be able to load their credit card details into their Buypod, enabling them to scan the labels of items they are interested to buy for delivery direct to their homes if they choose. This innovation would seem to combine the live shopping format with the efficiency of internet shopping historically preferred by males

Earlier ideas of how to appeal to men have tended to involve creating distractions from the central shopping activity. In the UK in 2004, Marks & Spencer trialed Christmas crèches for men in a number of stores with the intention of providing a

break for men who were being accompanying partners on shopping trips. The entertainments on offer included TV, remote control bikes and Scalextric cars.

Earlier initiatives from the Lakeside Shopping Centre in 2000 and the Mills Mall in West Yorkshire both opted for computer games, internet access and newspapers. A bar in Hamburg launched its own male kindergarten, or 'Maennergarten' in 2003 in a widely reported move to encourage women to drop off their men whilst they shopped.

Whilst effective at minimising the distress to men who are forced into shopping trips they don't enjoy, the bigger opportunity for retailers would seem to be to engage these men in the shopping activity on their own terms. In December 2004, the St. James Shopping Centre in Edinburgh announced that it was installing plasma screens that would show Sky Sports and Sky News and hi-tech, interactive pods that would provide up-to-the minute information on the centre's activities. Birmingham's refurbished Bull Ring shopping centre also has interactive kiosks linked with its plasma screen network. Whilst interactive kiosks are arguably a step in the right direction, to date the content lacks the ability to really hook the male shopper as it concentrates on centre and local information rather than shopping mechanisms.

The discussion of gender shopping styles where men are 'systemisers' provides a number of clues as to the success of internet shopping amongst men and the rise of interactive screen technology in the shopping environment. If technology can help engage men in the shopping process by enabling them to locate the goods they want faster and more effectively – observed goals of the male shopping psyche - then there is an argument for including internet style shopping – possibly with immediate fulfilment - in physical retail environments. The other major activity men and women undertake online is to research purchases before making decisions. Creating new retail experiences that appeal to men could involve bringing that systemising research activity closer to the point of sale in an enjoyable way – for example by installing internet enabled "kiosks" on the sales floor

If the differences in the way men and women shop are indeed evolutionary as we suspect, they will continue to be rejectors of the traditional shopping experience. And with no let up in the speed at which new retail developments are springing up clearly we need to understand what will entice more men away from the Savannah and into the mall.

Future research

This research may be entertaining, but it also has a serious side. People who are happy tend to be ill less often and to live longer. Our latest work shows that pleasure is one of the most important aspects of shopping. And innovations like screen technology can help by catering for eclectic shopping styles. So it really is 'retail therapy'! With concrete health and wellbeing benefits on offer, Brunel University want to move on from the exploratory stage to a more thorough test of the Savannah Hypothesis of Shopping. This will entail increasing the numbers of respondents to thousands, so the search is on to find a sponsor

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