Thrill of the Hunt: Thrift Shopping For Pleasure

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - By taking a hedonic perspective this paper challenges the existing utilitarian conceptualization of thrift and thrift shopping in marketing. In general, thrift shopping is defined by participants of this study as shopping in second hand settings, such as estate sales, auctions, garage sales, but especially in thrift shops. Traditionally, thrift shopping is conceptualized in marketing as a shopping process with an economic function that takes place in formal retail settings. The image of thrift shops is one of a dark, smelly, disorganized junk stores. Furthermore, in the marketing literature on the concept of thrift, such as the literature on deal-prone consumer and frugal lifestyles, we find that the consumer is portrayed as a rational human being who only spends in order to satisfy basic needs. Thrift is only studied from the economic perspective on savings, deals and budgets where thrift consumption represents present sacrifices for achieving long-term goals. The hedonic aspects of thrift, especially in the context of spending (shopping) are missing from the existing literature.

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The hedonic outlook in this study is influenced by the work of Miller (1998) and Campbell (1987). From the anthropological literature, Miller (1998) argues that shopping is all about savings: consumers go shopping to have the experience of saving money! As a result, he suggests that thrift should be studied in the experience of spending (shopping) as an end in itself. Campbell’s (1987) theoretical conceptualization of pleasure as a quality of experiential consumption derived by consumers’ imagination and fantasy is also used in analyzing the process of thrift shopping. Led by these two perspectives, thrift shopping and thrift are examined through a qualitative study conducted through observations and interviews in a thrift store in a Midwestern town. The data collection process and data interpretations are guided by Burke’s dramaturgical framework. Overall the data is collected through twenty hours of observations and 3 in-depth interviews. The overall findings of this study present thrift shopping as a money saving activity from which consumers derive experiential and social benefits.

Based on Burke’s dramaturgical framework, the findings of the study are presented in three stages. The first stage, the scene, represents the ways in which the retail store, through product placement, item categorization, product supply, and price strategies, structures the shopping activity and consumers’ experiences within the store. Thrift stores display their items in broad generic categories. Items are first categorized on gender, then item type (e.g. coats, pants), and lastly on size. Further items are sometimes thrown randomly in the store one over the other. Disorder is also created by placement of products of different categories next to each other, e.g. glass wear next to women’s wear. Debranding, the generic categories of product display, and the disorganized setting create a unique retail environment where certain aspects of products are hidden (e.g. brands, styles) representing the products as anonymous. These unknown aspects of the environment create a stimulus for experiencing pleasure because it opens to the pleasure-seeker’s imagination and day-dreaming. Furthermore, anonymity becomes useful in a second hand retail setting in order to help eliminate the ‘past history’ of these resale items and present them as neutral and new. Consistent with Campbell’s (1987) the neutralization makes it possible for the product to always serve as novel stimuli, hence providing experiences not previously encountered in reality.

Price emerges as the center of the discussions surrounding thrift shopping. Because thrift stores are a formal retail environment, their prices are set and are not negotiable. But there are a number of weekly sales promotions that consumers take part in, such as a 50% discount keyed to the color tag of the week. Even more, at the end of the week each discounted item is priced at 99 cents. These sale promotions focus the thrift shopping process on searching for the best bargains and the best deals, a big part of which is the price discounts which are in average from $4 per item reduced to 99 cents.
The second stage is the act, the process of thrift shopping. Thrift shoppers engage in a number of activities while shopping, such as searching, examining, 'price games', aesthetic evaluations, socializing, and role playing. Consistent with previous work on flea markets (Sherry 1990), searching and examining are the two main thrift shopping activities where consumers engage in endless and systematic search of item's material, brand, style, color, price, etc. The disorganized, ambiguous ambience in the thrift stores conditions thrift shopping as a search activity for what Campbell calls the "unknown object of desire" that is hidden among the garbage. Thrift shoppers tend to search every corner of the store each time they shop. The different price discounts offered weekly by the store provide the stimuli for 'price hunting games'. Thrift shoppers engage in what they call "hunting for the jewel" where searching, examining, and illegal hiding of clothes takes place in order to find the jewels of their efforts.

The last stage is the outcomes that consumers derive from thrift shopping. Thrift shopping is like shopping for surprise: "you never know what you are going to find". Thrift shoppers do not have a specific idea of what they are looking for when going shopping. The wide variety of anonymous items, displayed as new and neutral waits to be discovered by the thrift shopper, who hopes to be lucky to find the missing pieces of the puzzle. Moreover, thrift shopping allows consumers to indulge their fantasies for mass produced and premium brands, antiques and collectable items, special clothing materials, designs, and luxury items. These highly valued items purchased for little money are considered great bargains. Consumers are often attracted to thrift shopping because of "the thrill of the hunt"; the endless search and longing for that particular "gem" hidden somewhere that the expert shopper manages to buy for just 99 cents.

The thrift store environment emerges as an autonomous field of action in which pleasure is related to the extent to which consumers are able to undertake the shopping as they please, providing them with the illusion of control. Pleasure in thrift shopping stems directly from the freedom which shoppers have in just looking as well as employing the other sensory registers. Thrift shopping is an activity where ends are discrepant from the means: from this money saving activity consumers derive experiential and social benefits. Thrift shopping emerges as a process that allows consumers to obtain both thrill and pleasure benefits, whereas normal shopping does not really provide these possibilities.

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I began perusing local thrift stores to the dismay of my albeit progressivel³ Filipino father. Rummaging through donated goods didn't exactly scream success, the currency of which we were still negotiating as newly landed immigrants to Canada. He imposed a ban. Little did he know that thriving would become a sacred family activity ten years down the line, and that the ban, doomed from the beginning, would be short-lived. Like all nascent thrillers, I started out with less vision than a newly hatched turtle. I grabbed anything and everything that resembled the pieces I was seeing in m

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