

A new study of shopper culture  
examines the role of shopping  
in everyday life.

# Culture of. Shopping

BY MEG KINNEY

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When President Bush tells the nation “I encourage you all to go shopping more” as a suggestion for showing patriotism during a time of war (press conference, December 20, 2006), maybe the nature of shopping has changed.

When human beings trample other human beings the day after Thanksgiving (ironically) just to get a game console, maybe the nature of shopping has changed.

When a grassroots movement meanwhile also promotes the day after Thanksgiving as “Buy Nothing Day,” maybe the nature of shopping has changed.

The realization that shopping was getting cast in a specific—yet broader—cultural context made me curious about the role of shopping in modern American life. I began sticking pins in the cultural map wherever the presumably banal act of everyday shopping took on strange significance.

Suddenly, clues were everywhere. Hollywood movies depict the supermarket as a destination for a romantic encounter (there are countless examples). Bar codes in fine art. Weekly, babies ride in carts and toddlers push plastic mini carts. The class implications of high-concept retail expansion occurring alongside low-income retail expansion.

*Per capita*, Americans have 21.8 square feet of retail space; in China, a country three times our population, there is less than one square foot of retail space per person.

Not to mention that an unprecedented number of advertising messages are suggesting we can save the world and ourselves simply by going shopping—dolphin-safe tuna, free-trade coffee, concentrated laundry detergent, pink-ribbon cure finders, sweat-shop-free T-shirts, greenhouse-gas credits...

The American landscape is replete with literal and figurative messages that urge us to shop—everywhere, every day. *In America, consumerism is culture.*

So much of the last decade in marketing has talked about how much consumers—and their media choices—have changed. However, less of the conversation has centered on how *consumerism* has changed.

After all, according to a recent *POP Times* count, there are more than 700 individual in-store retail-network companies today. That’s a lot of new screens, pixels, and printable surfaces at the point-of-purchase.

In a December 2006 HUB article, *Art of Shopping*, I applauded that the industry is doing much to advance the science of shopping (PRISM and the “in-store GRP”), but worried that the “art” part of marketing at retail was not evolving at pace.

As retail environments become media channels, it is imperative that there be thought leadership for creative experimentation with messaging. These are

new creative units in store and new media experiences. To simply digitize POS or edit a 30-second spot to a flat-screen in-store seems shortsighted about the in-store opportunity.

Concluding that innovation would best be served by a fresh lens on shopping, the Integer Group invested in a “Shopper Culture Study” to inspire industry dialogue.

The study was a purely qualitative research endeavor. We weren’t looking for answers; we were more curious about the questions.

What questions do we, as marketers, need to be asking to truly explore the possibilities for connecting with and converting shoppers at retail?

Throughout 2006, we conducted three phases of fieldwork with “highly involved” shoppers in four varied geographies. Our participants completed workbooks, conducted trip audits, welcomed us into their homes, and shopped with and for us. We collected more than 100 hours of video footage.

What follows is a top-line of our conclusions. We pursued three areas of exploration around everyday shopping, which was defined as any product you purchase or replace in one month’s time. We focused on food, drug, and mass-retail formats.

**What role does shopping play in modern lives?** It is a blunt generalization, but most marketers of “everyday” brands tend to frame shopping as a task-based, convenience-driven, functional activity—shopping as drudgery and chore, something to be made logical and practical. Somewhere along the way, we managed to disassociate shopping from the rich texture of life.

This is not to deny that pragmatism is part of purchase decisions, but it is to say that consumers seem to place a larger emotional significance on shopping than marketers do.

We believe shopping is a hybrid activity that we call “productive leisure.” Surely it is not all play, but it is not all work, either. We found that shoppers hold out hopes and expectations for emotional reward from everyday shopping.

Pam Danziger, in her recent work, asserts that “the shift toward the retail experience is the greatest shift to occur in retail in the last century.” Our study concurs. “Productive leisure” points to a whole set of emotions that surround the act of acquiring as equal to, or in some cases greater than, the products themselves.

This is a shift change in how marketers think of meaning.

Typically, we talk about meaning as an outcome of the brand once it is used. We propose that meaning is derived from the experience of shopping, as well.

For years, anthropologists have drawn a link between shopping and personal identity. It is not only a form of self-expression but also a way for consumers to connect to their communities and their relationships with others.

Our learning underscores the point that perhaps we, as marketers, have underestimated the emotional importance of everyday shopping.

**What if** the psychological rewards of the shopping *experience* were used to connect at retail?

What could this mean for a low-involvement or commoditizing category? For the discipline of shopper marketing, this opens up whole new emotional territory for messaging, merchandising, and multi-branded campaigns.

**What relationship do Americans have with everyday shopping?** Our analysis led to two different ways to characterize how consumers relate to shopping: shopping as a muse and shopping as a master.

- *Shopping as a muse.* In this relationship, shopping is opportunity-oriented. Shopping is about

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ideas and inspiration. The store environment is highly influential; the trip, very sensorial. For those in a muse relationship, the hallmark of a successful trip is the unplanned purchase. This purchase is guiltless; it delivers a sense of spontaneity and possibility. Shopping matters because it connects you to the world. The store is like a trusted editor.

• *Shopping as a master.* Here, shopping is outcome-oriented. It is single-mindedly about saving money and finding deals. Shopping is about mastery and triumph. These trips are intensely planned; the hallmark of a successful trip is the receipt and the percentage saved. The idea of saving money is highly emotional for these shoppers; it matters because it makes them feel wise in the world. The store is like a worthy challenger.

Interestingly, these relationships delivered their emotional “high points” at different times along the trip. Those in the *muse* relationship are most engaged and receptive during the store experience.

On the other hand, those in the *master* relationship are all about the “before” and the “after.” They engage in the pre-game rituals of coupon clipping and circulars; the end of the trip holds tremendous satisfaction when the final savings are determined.

**What if** we began to approach the in-store media mix differently and used each tactic to cue specific emotions? What if we re-conceptualized FSIs/coupons as pre-game rituals for the deal hunters? What if we re-conceptualized displays as points-of-inspiration for the idea seekers?

**Is shopping the new activism?** While Americans may not be demonstrating their politics on the steps of City Hall as we once did, the question of shopping as a form of political expression bears asking—especially given the hot topics of sustainability and corporate social responsibility.

Shoppers today are not changing all of their buying behavior simply because it’s good for society.

However, they are beginning to wonder why profit and purpose cannot go hand-in-hand.

There is clearly a “tipping point” when pragmatism trumps cause. But once all things are relatively equal in our expectations of a product or place to shop, shoppers will—and do—make social responsibility part of the consideration set.

As marketers, we must acknowledge several realities. Social responsibility is a mainstream conversation, and shoppers are increasingly aware of manufacturing and supply-chain practices.

Equally, 21st century shoppers understand the concept of buying power; they believe that small purchase decisions are capable of change-making in the world. Shoppers are feeling guilt and seeking redemptive options. Most important, shoppers are looking to brands and retailers to make everyday shopping a responsible activity.

**Consumerism is culture.** In-store marketing as a discipline and retail media as a strategic

part of the marketing mix are rapidly evolving.

Not only are we getting more sophisticated about measurement, but digital in-store technology is also opening up a whole new creative frontier.

Everyday shopping is an intrinsic part of who we are and how we connect as a society.

Exploring the emotions of shopping can positively impact retail experiences *and* brand sales. If we are to capture the opportunity fully, we must look at the role of shopping in culture with a much wider lens. ■

## Exploring the emotions of shopping can positively impact retail experiences and brand sales.



**MEG KINNEY** is executive vice president of strategic planning at **The Integer Group**. If you are interested in the full presentation of “Shopping Culture Study: An Exploration of America’s Relationship to Shopping,” please go to [www.mentalchewinggum.typepad.com](http://www.mentalchewinggum.typepad.com).