

## **Who Shops Like I Do? Shopper Identities and Shopping Approaches Among Grocery Store Customers**

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Modern retailers spend considerable resources to build master brands to use as vehicles for attracting their target customers. While an important part of this brand building consists of textbook attributes such as physical location, store atmosphere (physical design, employee service quality etc), price and promotion, and assortment strategy (Ailawadi & Keller 2004), many brands develop – or are purposely developed into – more qualitative retail personalities or store images that target customers are expected to feel an affinity towards (Fournier 1998; Ailawadi & Keller 2004). Closely related to the above view of the retailer as a brand, extensive research in marketing and consumer behavior has shown that what we choose to buy and consume is a reflection of our perceived identity and the identity we want to project to others (e.g., Reed et al 2012). Typically, consumers are assumed to select products or brands that relate strongly to the consumer’s sense of self or identity (e.g., Escalas and Bettman 2005; Bhattacharjee et al 2014).

In the context of retailing, research on self-congruity has studied how consumers gravitate towards stores that either are perceived to have typical shoppers that relate to the consumer's self (e.g., Sirgy et al. 2000; O'Cass & Grace 2008), or that have a perceived personality that is congruent with that of the consumer (d'Astous and Levesque 2003). In the former approach, consumers would tend to shop at stores where "people like me/my ideal me/my social me/my ideal social me... shop." In the latter approach the focus lies on the perception of the store itself, e.g., for premium organic stores "I think Whole Foods is a classy brand, and I am a classy person, so I will shop at Whole Foods." Both the self-congruity and store personality approaches have found some empirical support (Sirgy et al. 1991, d'Astous and Levesque 2003).

An implicit assumption in much of the research on consumer selves and brand or store choices is that consumers strongly relate to only one option in a particular product category. For example, a consumer may be a "Mac-person" or a "PC-person" but likely not both at the same time. Research by Fournier (1998) does, however, show that consumers can have several "relationship partners." Research on store choice behavior in general, and grocery shopping in particular, also shows that consumers typically use several stores for the same type of merchandise with limited exclusive loyalty (e.g., Mägi 2003). For example, consumers may cross-shop between Costco and Whole Foods even though both stores carry many of the same product categories. Yet, it would be difficult to conceive of a personality that would be congruent with that of both Costco and Whole Foods. If consumers use a variety of stores in their overall grocery shopping routines, the role of self-congruity with

specific stores becomes less clear. However, that does not necessarily mean that grocery-shopping behavior is unrelated to consumers' self-perceptions or identities.

It is also possible that how we see ourselves, and how we want to be seen by others influence *how* we shop. Research on smart shopper feelings (Schindler 1989, 1998), suggests that certain consumers derive psychological benefits from using coupons, and related price incentives. Conversely, some consumers avoid the use of coupons, at least in certain situations, in order to avoid looking cheap (Ashworth et al 2005). Since Stone's (1954) study on shopper typologies, a long line of research has looked at the heterogeneity in how consumers approach the task of shopping, either by identifying segments of consumers with different approaches to shopping (e.g., Williams et al. 1978), or incorporating individual differences variables such as price consciousness (Mägi, 2003; Zielke 2014). Given that money is important for most people, albeit in various ways, money related behaviors, including shopping, could potentially be considered a reflection of a person's identity.

Even if identity might primarily drive how consumers shop, different store formats, or retail brands, may be a better or worse fit with certain identities. For example, hard discount stores have been found to elicit emotions such as enjoyment, shame or guilt among customers where enjoyment and a good value perception are found mostly for customers that are highly price conscious (Zielke 2014). Low price conscious customers suffer more from certain guilt emotions and suspicions of inferior quality and trickery, which directly or indirectly affect their shopping intentions.

While there are significant amounts of research focusing on the one hand on consumer identities and consumer choice, and on the other hand the role of price in grocery shopping, limited research has looked at consumers' price related identities and their effects on grocery shopping in general, and store choice in particular. If grocery shopping patterns are important for consumer identities for at least some consumers, that may also mean that the behavior of reference groups (Reed, et al. 2012; Escalas and Bettman 2003; Escalas and Bettman 2005) – in this context consumers with similar or different shopping behaviors – will have an effect on behavior. The level of grocery shopper-identity salience could also be an important determinant of e.g., the strength of affinity to a particular store, or time invested in price-search activities. Together with other research on, e.g., smart shoppers, this indicates that shoppers who prefer “premium” stores may have a markedly different shopper identity from those who frequent “discount” stores. This may be quite fruitful to pursue further despite some initial efforts by Willems & Swinnen (2011).

The purpose of this study is to explore shopper identities and trace their impact not only on store patronage and retail brand affinity but also on possible reference group perceptions and store avoidance (“where do people like not shop”). We will carry out a literature study to elaborate on these research questions, propose hypotheses and a method to examine them empirically.

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