Shopping and Female Identity in Sophie Kinsella’s Confessions of a Shopaholic and Shopaholic Takes Manhattan

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Introduction
Sophie Kinsella is one of the most renowned and bestselling Chick Lit writers whose representative works Confessions of a Shopaholic (2001) and Shopaholic Takes Manhattan (2002), as the titles indicate, deal with the issue of shopping obsession prevalent among many contemporary urban women, yet the representation of shopping in these two novels has drawn but little attention from critics. Collecting online feedback from readers, Jennifer Scanlon argues that shopping, as the top priority in many contemporary women’s lives, has become a new way for a woman to define herself while previously she is defined by her body and her relationship with man. Unlike Scanlon’s optimism, Vivian Ruize, drawing upon psychological theories, considers the protagonist Rebecca, the shopaholic, as a Compulsive Buying Disorder patient and criticizes Kinsella’s downplaying of the psychological dysfunction behind shopping addiction.

Based on the existing research, it is worthwhile to further explore how shopping contributes to female identity formation in the consumer society. Applying theories of
shopping and female identity to the analysis of Rebecca’s shopping enthusiasm, with
the shopping space and the shopping activity per se as the foci, this paper attempts to
unravel the role that shopping plays in the construction of female identity.

II. Shops: A Female Space of Escape

A woman’s identity is closely related to the space in the society. The domestic
sphere labels women either as “the Angel in the House” \(^4\) or “the mad woman in the
attic” \(^5\). In the 20\(^{th}\) century, more working places are opened to women. In the
consumer society, women are provided with more public spaces, department stores,
malls and so on. Addressing the significance of the shopping space for female
emancipation, Mica Nava notes,

Visiting the stores during this period became, then, an excursion, an exciting
adventure in the phantasmagoria of the urban landscape. The department store was an
anonymous yet acceptable public space and it opened up for women a range of new
opportunities and pleasure for independence, fantasy, unsupervised social
encounters even transgression. \(^6\)

Focusing on the rise of department stores, Nava asserts that they set free women from
the domestic sphere to the public sphere where they are free to venture independently
without being supervised, which is contributive to the build-up of subject identity.
For Rebecca, a contemporary professional woman, these shopping spaces not only
mean a greater scope of movement and a breath of freedom but also serve as terrestrial
escape from daily worries and pressure from work, livelihood and relationships. The
shopping space is a space of escape, a space of catharsis to alleviate her anxiety and
regain the self.

To understand how the shopping space abates Rebecca’s anxiety over her identity
as a modern working woman, it is necessary to examine the new feminine mystique
that she is faced with, one that may also puzzle Betty Friedan. In *The Feminine
Mystique* (1963), Friedan discovers a mystique among middle-class American
housewives. That is, behind the smiling face, deep down within them, there is a
sense of emptiness. She attributes the mystique, in a large degree, to women’s lack
of access to the working place, arguing that in spite of all the material comfort
secured from being the housewife, only through professional work can women form the
self and be truly happy. As a woman living in the 21\(^{st}\) century, Rebecca reaps the
fruit of the feminist movement. Well educated and working at a newspaper, as a
model of the "new woman", according to Betty Friedan's theory, she is supposed to live a fulfilling life. Yet another mystique turns up; being a professional woman entails many apprehensions and to cope with that, Rebecca resorts to the shopping space.

In other people’s eyes, Rebecca is an intelligent finance journalist. To meet the expectation of being a smart career woman, she tries to put up a magnificent front but in reality, her work never gives her the slightest sense of achievement or satisfaction.

I look around—and suddenly this mundane office life seems far too boring and limited for a creative spirit like mine. I don’t belong here, among fusty piles of press releases and grimly tapping computers. I belong out there, among the bright spotlights and cashmere cardigans of Ally Smith. [7]

Maintaining the image of a career woman with a decent job, Rebecca has to do what she is not interested in and endures the boredom. Luckily, out of office, she can flee to shops like Ally Smith, which she usually does after an exhausting workday. These shopping places, with bright light and racks of shiny goods, are a break from the mundane office. The tedious work is only one facet of her struggles. Being a financially independent working woman in the modern age, Rebecca is not forced to be caged within marriage for provisions from the husband, which from the feminist point of view, is a cornerstone for establishing a woman’s subject identity. However, what people expect of her is also raised. For instance, her parents constantly urge her to buy an apartment of her own, her neighbor’s son Tom being held up as an example. Being a self-reliant woman, she is expected to afford a house of her own like a man, whereas in reality, she rents an apartment with a roommate and her income is far from enough to purchase a house. Besides, her constantly failed relationships are another sore point.

As a country girl in the cosmopolitan city, London, Rebecca is eager for success, both personally and professionally, yet her pressure is multiple and her self-identity is shaky. And whenever she gets problems, she escapes to shops.

I’m craving the bright lights and warm air, the racks of merchandise, even the bleep of the cash registers. As I walk into Smith’s I feel my whole body expand in relief. There’s a thrill about walking into a shop—any shop—which you can’t beat. It’s partly the anticipation, partly the buzzy, welcoming atmosphere, partly just the lovely newness of everything. [8]

Shops cure all her wounds, “Oh God, the relief. The warmth, the light. This is
where I belong. This is my natural habitat [...] I feel a little whoosh of pleasure, like a firework going off. And for a moment, everything’s all right” [8]. For Rebecca, the shopping space has the healing magic, the reason of which can be enlightened by Jean Baudrillard’s analysis of the atmosphere of shopping centers. He explains that with modern technology and exquisite indoor decoration, shopping centers create a “perpetual springtime” atmosphere. [9] Literally speaking, it means that with air conditioning, fancy lighting, and vegetation and so on, shopping centers produce the illusion of being in everlasting congenial spring. Metaphorically, perpetual springtime indicates the utopian quality of shopping centers. Baudrillard’s observation implies that the shopping space encloses a paradise characterized by regularity, order and abundance. It blocks out chaos, lack and other unpredictable elements inevitable in real life. His idea about the nature of the shopping space is illuminating yet he fails to take into consideration the gender issue. Given the traditional dichotomy of gender roles, i.e. men being the producer and women the consumer, women are much more likely to visit shopping centers and enjoy the perpetual springtime atmosphere. As Ferrier Liz notices, the shopping space is one of the few places particularly designed for women in the patriarchal society.

For women there may be a sense of empowerment from their competency in shopping operations, their familiarity with the terrain and with what they can get of it. The space is designed to facilitate their shopping practice, and in our built environment there are few places designed for women. [...] In the shopping town, women have access to public space without the stigma or threat of the street. [11]

Combing Baudrillard’s and Ferris’s perspectives, it is reasonable to propose that the shopping space is a space for women. The utopian characteristic, the familiarity and the convenience promised by the space makes it an Adamless Eden. Rebecca indulges herself in its warm air, bright lights, and racks of shiny new merchandise, all of which produce order, comfort, joy, abundance and hope, things that are unattainable in reality. On the familiar terrain, among shining goods, “the injuries and wants of everyday existence could be soothed” [12]. Her boring work, her money problem and her failed relationships, all her professional and personal issues are driven out of her mind. The world of apprehensions is shut out. The troublesome Rebecca is gone, too.

To conclude, the shopping space is a female space of escape. It is where Rebecca runs away from all the pains in reality, releases her anxiety as a
contemporary working woman in a bustling cosmopolitan city, gains her female self and gathers strength to move on.

III. Shopping for Whom? And Who Pays?

Apart from the shopping space, the shopping activity per se also contributes to Rebecca's construction of the self. In shopping, she establishes her subject identity by satisfying her own desires and showcasing financial strength.

By convention, shopping is classified as an extension of domestic chore primarily shouldered by women, especially housewives. Daniel Miller compares shopping to a sacrifice ritual. According to him, women shop in order to offer goods to family members in particular the husband and children. Goods purchased become objects of devotion to demonstrate love. As he puts it, "Objects are the means for creating the relationship of love between subjects rather than some kind of materialistic dead end which takes devotion away from its proper subject-other persons." [13] From this perspective, it can be inferred that shopping reinforces the female stereotype as the "Angel in the House" who devotes herself to domestic labor, catering to family members' daily needs and comfort. For the housewife, happiness drawn from shopping is identification with traditional gender role. Rebecca does not fall into this category. In fact, commenting on her mother, Jane's shopping, she disapproves of the housewife shopping pattern.

Mum's terrible. She's always buying new stuff for the kitchen—and she just gives the old stuff to charity shops. New kettles, new toasters [...] We've already had three new rubbish bins this year—dark green, then chrome, and now yellow translucent plastic. I mean, what a waste of money. [14]

Both Jane and Rebecca love shopping, but the difference is that in most cases, Jane shops not for herself but for the family. Jane's shopping is of altruistic nature if valued in Miller's analysis. Purchasing kitchen utensils and other domestic articles helps her better fulfill her role as a devoted housewife. Rebecca, with a closet of new clothes that are never worn, declares that Jane has been spending too much on kettles, toasters, rubbish bins and so on and it is a waste of money. This reveals that in her mind, shopping is not supposed to be housework reflecting one's identity as a housewife. Rather, Rebecca's shopping mode echoes the female shopping practice in a postmodern consumer society as described by Colin Campbell, who observes that in the postmodern consumer society there exist two shopping patterns:
instrumental versus expressive dichotomy, with men inclined to see shopping as a purely purchase-driven activity related to the satisfaction of need, whilst women are more likely to view it as a pleasure-seeking activity related to the gratification of wants or desires. [15]

That is to say, in the postmodern consumer society, female shopping is no longer the purchasing of predetermined requirements automatically associated with domestic labor but is a leisure activity in its own right thus provides women with the opportunity to explore and gratify their wants and desires.

For Rebecca, shopping is a joyous journey of desire arousal and consummation. Take her purchase of a Denny & George scarf as an example. On her way to work, Rebecca notices that Denny & George is having a sale. As usual, she rushes into the store and immediately she is smitten with a scarf. “As I stare at it, I can feel little invisible strings, silently tugging me toward it, I have to touch it. I have to wear it.” [16] Her desire is aroused, followed by a strong drive to possess the scarf. It is an irresistible temptation as accentuated by “have to”. The moment she takes the scarf wrapped in a bag, she is carried away with exhilaration.

That moment. That instant when your fingers curl round the handles of a shiny, uncreased bag—and all the gorgeous new things inside it become yours. What’s it like? It’s like going hungry for days, then cramming your mouth full of warm buttered toast. It’s like waking up and realizing it’s the weekend. It’s like the better moments of sex. Everything else is blocked out of your mind. It’s pure, selfish pleasure. [17]

It is the zenith of desire consummation like stuffing food after days’ hunger or like reaching orgasm. Rebecca’s joy exemplifies what Mica Nava terms as the evocation of “voluptuous sensation” [18]. Nava argues that the aesthetic array, the seeing and touching of commodities in department stores evokes sensual pleasure in women. To a certain degree, it alludes to sexual desire. Shopping, in this view, acts as an outlet for female desire. In reality, modern woman as she is, Rebecca is still expected to be a desired object waiting to be courted by males. Her ex-boyfriend, James, breaks up with her exactly because she is too sexually aggressive, which is considered by James as wild and unfeminine. In shopping, she is free to go as wildly as she can and gratify her wants. The pleasure extracted from satisfying her own desires makes her feel powerful and occupy the subject position. Virginia Woolf once mentioned in a speech that when she wrote her first review and earned ten shillings and six pence, she bought herself a cat as a treat.
I have to admit that instead of spending that sum upon bread and butter, rent, shoes and stockings, or butcher's bills, I went out and bought a cat—a beautiful cat, a Persian cat, which very soon involved me in bitter disputes with my neighbors. [19]

Woolf sounds half-joking about spending her earnings on a gadget for herself instead of on the running of the house. Still, her point is that women have been socialized into the "Angle in the House", without an independent mind of her own and thus lose a sense of the self. On the contrary, for an economically independent professional woman, being able to afford to satisfy her own desires, be it a cat or in Rebecca's case, a scarf, brings a sense of power and control over the self.

Apart from fulfilling her wants, shopping is also an act of demonstrating her financial power. In Thorstein Veblen's view, women's conspicuous consumption practice falls into the category of "vicarious consumption" [20]. He notes that the major purpose of the consumption activities undertaken by women from the upper leisure class is to display the social and economic status of the husband or father. Just as he further elaborates, for males, the consumption and leisure by the wife and daughter "represents an investment on his part with a view to an increase of good fame" [21]. That is to say, a woman's purchasing power only serves as lens of her husband's or father's economic and social status. Her consumption is to construct males' identity as members from the affluent class. This indicates women's object position aggravated in the consumer society. Yet for Rebecca, shopping is an act of exhibiting her pride as a modern girl who is economically powerful to pay for herself, which facilitates the formation of subjectivity.

According to Rob Shields, under the background of consumerism, shopping is more than an economic activity or joyful pastime, rather it is a cultural event.

Everyday shopping activities are foregrounded as if on a theatre stage, to be observed by passers-by who may vicariously participate in the bustle and lively activity of consumption without necessarily spending money [...] A spectacle, then, which is marked by the exchange of looks and gazes, complements the theatrical display of goods and commodities. [22]

From Shields's perspective, during shopping, the consumer's shopping behavior constitutes a performance gazed at and interpreted by others, salespersons, shoppers and loiters and so on. Now that the shopping activity has become a performance, it is logical to deduce that the consumer is given a chance to communicate meanings through shopping. In shopping, Rebecca performs a financially powerful modern
woman. Her buying of a Vera Wang dress is a good case in point.

It just looked so completely movie-star perfect. Everyone crowded round to see me in it—and when I drew back the curtain, they all gasped.

And I just stared at myself, mesmerized. Entranced by what I could look like, by the person I could be. [....] As I signed the credit card slip, I wasn't me anymore. I was Grace Kelly. I was Gwyneth Paltrow. I was a glittering somebody else, who can casually sign a credit card slip for thousands of dollars while smiling and laughing at the assistant, as though this were a nothing purchase. [23]

The scene is like a theatrical performance. The Vera Wang dress is the magic costume carrying what Jean Baudrillard termed as “sign-value” [24]. According to Baudrillard, in a consumer society, commodities are purchased for the sign-value rather than use-value. The sign-value of commodities are “social meanings” including social class, financial power, taste, etc. [25] This implies that the consumer’s identity is constructed by the sign-value behind the purchased goods. The luxurious brand Vera Wang signals the wearer’s extraordinary economic power. Trying on and eventually purchasing the fairly costly Vera Wang dress in a casual way is like a show. Under the appreciative gasp and gaze of other shoppers and the assistant, Rebecca transforms from a commoner into a glittering someone else like Grace Kelly, a movie star, who is rich enough to ignore the high price of the dress and to use her purchasing power to possess the exquisite beauty brought by the dress. Even though Rebecca’s real financial situation is below the Vera Wang level, buying the dress, she performs and constructs a subject identity as an economically self-reliant modern woman, able to pay for herself great goods.

As analyzed above, shopping is Rebecca’s way of fulfilling her own desires and proving her economic strength, both of which is contributive to the establishment of her subject identity.

IV. Conclusion

In Confessions of a Shopaholic and Shopaholic Takes Manhattan, Sophie Kinsella celebrates, through the protagonist Rebecca, the constructive effect of shopping on the formation of female identity. She presents how the shopping space functions as an Adamless utopia where modern professional women are allowed to unburden themselves of daily apprehensions and release their identity anxiety, thus contributes to the recognition of the self. In addition, in shopping, by taking it not as a chore
naturally associated with the identity of housewife but as a leisure activity of consummating her own desires and by demonstrating her own financial power, woman realizes her female self.

Notes:

[1] Broadly speaking, Chick Lit refers to works that are written by young female writers, about contemporary women's life and struggles, with young women as the target readers. In the Oxford English Dictionary, "Chick Lit" is defined as "literature by, for, or about women esp. a type of fiction, typically focusing on the social lives and relationships of young professional women, and often aimed at readers with similar experiences". For more detailed information, see Oxford English Dictionary Online. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, http://dictionary.oed.com, 5 Feb. 2013.

[2] Jennifer Scanlon, "Making Shopping Safe for the Rest of Us: Sophie Kinsella's Shopaholic Series and Its Readers", Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture, http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/fall_2005scanlon.htm, 5 May 2013.

[3] Vivian Ruize, "Of Bridgets, Rebeccas, and Carries: Chick Culture Defines Women", Diss., Florida State University, 2011, p. 86.

[4] In "Professions for Women", Virginia Woolf notes that in the patriarchal society, women are made the "Angel in the House" who is confined in the domestic sphere, sacrifices herself and is devoid of an independent mind. (236) To become a professional woman, the first step is to kill the "Angel in the House", namely to get rid of the obedient, passive and self-sacrificing housewife stereotypes. (236) For more details, see Virginia Woolf, "Professions for Woman", in Leonard Woolf, ed., The Death of the Moth and Other Essays. London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1942, pp. 235-242.

[5] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar draw the concept, "the mad woman in the attic" from Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre, in which the mad wife Mason Berthar is kept locked in the attic. Gilbert and Gubar argue that the mad woman is an epitome of women's "rebellious impulses", which are repressed by patriarchy. (78) If a woman dares to challenge patriarchal rules, she is doomed to be treated as a monster or a mad woman that must be imprisoned in some way. For more information, see Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Mad Woman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979.

[6] Mica Nava, "Modernity's Disavowal: Women, the City and the Department Store", in Pasi Falk and Colin Campbell, eds., The Shopping Experience. London: Sage,
[7] Sophie Kinsella, *Confessions of a Shopaholic*. New York: Bantam Dell, 2001, p. 131.
[8] Ibid., p. 81.
[9] Ibid., pp. 236–237.
[10] Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. Trans., Chris Turner. London: Sage, 1998, p. 29.
[11] John Fiske, *Reading the Popular*. New York: Routledge, 2010, p. 18.
[12] Mica Nava, “Modernity’s Disavowal: Women, the City and the Department Store”, in Pasi Falk and Colin Campbell, eds, *The Shopping Experience*. London: Sage, 1997, p. 72.
[13] Daniel Miller, *A Theory of Shopping*. Cambridge: Policy Press, 1998, p. 128.
[14] Sophie Kinsella, *Confessions of a Shopaholic*. New York: Bantam Dell, 2001, p. 47.
[15] Colin Campbell, “Shopping, Pleasure and the Sex War”, in Pasi Falk and Colin Campbell, eds, *The Shopping Experience*. London: Sage, 1997, p. 169.
[16] Sophie Kinsella, *Confessions of a Shopaholic*. New York: Bantam Dell, 2001, p. 15.
[17] Ibid., pp. 29–30.
[18] Mica Nava, “Modernity’s Disavowal: Women, the City and the Department Store”, in Pasi Falk and Colin Campbell, eds, *The Shopping Experience*. London: Sage, 1997, p. 75.
[19] Virginia Woolf, “Professions for Women”, in Leonard Woolf, ed., *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*. London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1942, p. 235.
[20] Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Teddington: Echo Library, 2007, p. 36.
[21] Ibid., p. 40.
[22] Rob Shields, “Spaces for the Subject of Consumption”, in Rob Shields, ed., *Lifestyle Shopping: The Subject of Consumption*. New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 6.
[23] Sophie Kinsella, *Shopaholic Takes Manhattan*. New York: Bantam Dell, 2002, p. 251.
[24] Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. Trans., Chris Turner. London: Sage, 1998, p. 77.
[25] Ibid., p. 79.
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