

Why Women Love to Shop

Men Hate It, New Research Shows, Because They Are Hunters, Not Gatherers

OPINION By LEE DYE Dec. 9, 2009—

You see it in every shopping mall: men sitting outside the clothing store waiting for the wife to come out. Why is it that women love to try on every pair of shoes before deciding whether to buy anything at all, and men want to get out of the mall seconds after they get in?

It's all in the genes, according to Daniel Kruger, an evolutionary psychologist at the University of Michigan. Kruger argues that it's natural for women to love to shop and men to hate it because of our evolutionary past.

Men were the hunters in our ancestral cultures, so when they find a satisfactory specimen, whether it's an elk or a pair of shoes, they want to shoot it and get out before it gets away.

Women, by contrast, were the primary gatherers in early hunter-gatherer cultures, so they feel a need to check every berry on the bush to make sure they're getting the best deal.

That's why, during this holiday season, you're likely to see a lot of men cooling their heels, and a lot of women shopping until they drop. It's mandated (or should we say human-dated) by the evolutionary progress that guided us out of the woods and into the mall.

Kruger, who normally studies gender differences in such things as relationships and roles, is the lead author of a research paper, "Evolved Foraging Psychology Underlies Sex Differences in Shopping Experiences and Behaviors," in the December issue of the *Journal of Social, Evolutionary and Cultural Psychology*. The idea behind the research began during a trip across central Europe with his wife and a few of their friends.

'Man Hunt, Woman Tend Cave'

"We had been visiting quaint little villages in the middle of winter, when there weren't many tourists, and when we reached the tourist mecca of Prague, the guys

wanted to go and see all the historical sites and the girls wanted to go shopping," Kruger said in a telephone interview. "We (the guys) couldn't imagine why they would want to do that."

There ensued a "heated discussion," he recalled, after which the guys checked out the cultural attractions and the girls went shopping.

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"When they came back with all the purchases, it was almost like a conquest, an expedition," he added. "They wanted to show us all the wonderful things they had found."

The women, it seems, had gone gathering, and the men, of course, had gone hunting, culturally speaking. Surely, he thought, there must be a deeply rooted reason why girls are so different from boys, even when it comes to shopping.

When he returned to the Ann Arbor campus, Kruger and a research assistant, Dreyson Byker, also a male, began poring over the anthropological literature to see if they could find parallels between the ancestral cultures from which humans have continued to evolve, and the current citadel of modern society, the shopping mall.

Briefly stated, they found that early hunters, which were usually men, could use the sun to determine directions, like east or west, and likely followed Euclidian navigation, meaning they understood enough about the world around them to go quickly to the beast of prey, slay it, and return home by the shortest route. Sort of like the way a guy picks out an anniversary card.

Gathering Is Social, Hunting Is Solitary

Ancestral women, however, did most of the gathering, so they navigated by knowing which berry patch was the most productive last season, even if they didn't know the difference between east and west, and they probably gathered food alongside other female members of the tribe, so gathering, like today's shopping, was probably a social event. As Kruger noted in his study, "Gathering is much more conducive to socialization than is stalking game."

One reason, the study notes, is "Keeping quiet is much less important when stalking vegetables" than when hunting an elephant.

The researchers recruited 467 undergraduate students to take part in an experiment. They were asked which among many statements applied to them.

"When in a large unfamiliar shopping center, I try to get my bearings as quickly as possible" (obviously a hunter.) Or "I like to see a large assortment of colors and styles, and then I can pick the ones that are most like what I want" (a gatherer.) And so on.

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In the end, Kruger said, they found "strong and striking" parallels along gender lines between the skills that would have aided ancestral hunters and gatherers and modern day shoppers. In other words, the men wanted to kill and get out. The women wanted to look around a little more, continuing the search for that special berry patch.

There was, however, one area where the data did not entirely support the hypothesis. The men didn't really think they were out for the kill when asked about shopping. Apparently, there's a lot of difference between the Serengeti and the shopping mall.

But by and large, Kruger insists, the data strongly supported the idea that modern women use skills dating back to their days as gatherers while on shopping expeditions. And men really are still on the hunt. All these centuries later, he adds, that difference persists. Not always, of course. Some men love shopping, and some women hate it, he noted, but the masses generally conform to his expectations.

Why should anyone care? Kruger hopes this bit of knowledge will help some men and women understand the differences between the genders a little better, thus easing the trauma of shopping. That's apparently already the case in parts of Europe.

"In Germany, they have sort of a day care center for men," Kruger said. "They have a place where they can hang out, drink beer and play with power tools while their partner goes shopping."

As a male, I think that makes a lot of sense.