

THE HAPPINESS OF GEN Y FEMALE AND MALE SHOPPERS

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***Abstract:** The purpose of this study is to explore the factors influencing Gen Y female and male shoppers. Based on the classical theories of happiness, several research questions are developed. The data were collected from 24 Gen Y Bangkokians in three focus-group panels. The study shows that the happiness of Gen Y female shoppers tend to come from the emotional and societal value of shopping, whereas the happiness of Gen Y male shoppers is likely to originate from the functional value of shopping.*

***Keywords:** Happiness, Life satisfaction, Quality of life, Well-being, Gen Y shopper, Female shopper, Male shopper*

1. INTRODUCTION

Gen Y in this study refers to people that are 18 to 34 years of age. Around the world, this segment of the market is approximately 2.25 billion, or 33% of the world population. In Thailand, Gen Y is approximately 14 million in size, or 20% of the Thai population. This large segment of the market is generally well educated and technologically savvy. They are among the heavy users of the Internet and social media. Therefore, their influences are well spread outside the family generally to their circle of friends, acquaintances, and sometimes to the general public through these new technological media. This segment deserves closer attention and careful study concerning the ways in which their lives as shoppers are happy and how they deal with the often unfelt pain of the deteriorating environment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Basically, the research questions are derived from theories related to happiness. The state theorists have proposed that a happy life is merely an accumulation of happy moments (Lewinsohn and MacPhillamy, 1974), (Chekola, 1975), (Lewinsohn and Amenson, 1978). Generally, these happy moments can occur in any aspect of life. However, in this study, the emphasis lays in the consumption aspect of life. Thus, the first research question which addresses the issue of shopping in particular is as follows:

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Research question 1: Please think about your happiest moment in shopping and would you please tell me about that moment?

Activity theorists suggest that happiness arises from behavior rather than from achieving goals – people’s lives will be happier to the extent that they are involved in interesting and involving activities (Frankl, 1959) and (Scitovsky, 1976). According to this view of happiness, the second research question is asked as follows:

Research question 2: Shopping can be considered as an activity in life. How do you feel about this activity?

The next research question deals with the assessment of the importance of shopping in an indirect way. The exact question that serves this purpose is as follows:

Research question 3: If there were no activity in life called “ shopping,” how would you feel?

Ultimately when you ask people why they want to know the meaning of life, their responses usually go something like, “Maybe I’ll be happier if I know why I’m here.” In other words, life cannot be happy without meaning. By the same token, things cannot create happiness without the meaning attached to them. The research question, which is an attempt to link the meaning of material possessions and happiness, is as follows:

Research question 4: Please think of the most meaningful thing that you possess and would you please tell me what it is and how it is meaningful to your life ?

Happiness can arise in the presence of pleasure and the absence of pain. As we all know, in our world now, one of the most discussed problems is global warming. Gen Y, which tends to like to be involved in important environmental issues, will have its own ways of tackling this problem. The next research question, which was designed to discover this agenda, is as follows:

Research question 5: Global warming is one of the world’s big problems. Would you like to help solve this problem? If so, how would you like to participate?

As shoppers, Gen Y can help solve the global warming problem by just simply buying green products. However, this approach turns out to be a complicated matter when oftentimes the environmentally-friendly products are more expensive than environmentally harmful products. Thus, the next research question, which is aimed at discovering Gen Y shoppers’ reactions to this issue, is as follows:

Research question 6: What do you think about buying environmentally-friendly products that are more expensive than environmentally-harmful products?

In the end, green products might be something that Gen Y may or may not like to pay for; it would therefore be interesting to investigate further exactly what Gen Y would agree to pay for. Therefore, the final research question is as follows:

Research question 7: What are you willing to pay for?

3. METHOD

The eligible respondents are Gen Y individuals that are 18 to 34 years of age. These participants are adults living in Bangkok and neighboring areas. There were 24 persons in total, which were divided into three focus groups. Eight females were assigned to be the participants in the first female focus group; eight males were assigned to the second male focus group; and the third focus group was a mixed group between four females and four males. Each focus group lasted about one hour.

4. RESULTS

The results from the three focus groups are as follow:

4.1. Female Focus Group

4.1.1. Please think about your happiest moment in shopping and would you please tell me about that moment?

Gen Y women do not like any hassles, for instance, waiting in long lines. Shopping makes people happy because they can buy things that they like. Some women look for the worth or value of the product they are buying. They do not mind spending time comparing the prices at different stores until they get the best buy. According to them, shopping is joyful when they can spend their leisure time relaxing. For them, shopping is a way of socializing with friends or enjoying themselves just by window shopping even if they end up not buying anything. A woman is happy with the nice decoration of the stores during the end of the year, plus the special sales. Marketing seems to be able to contribute to the happiness of women shoppers if items are put on sale and if good personal services are provided.

4.1.2. Shopping can be considered as an activity in life. How do you feel about this activity?

On the one hand, shopping can be viewed as an unpleasant activity when it is viewed as a compulsory task and it will become worse if one has a time constraint. It is viewed as a way for spending money, especially for those that want to be frugal. A negative emotion can be derived from shopping, for example, if one has a difficult time finding a parking space. On the other hand, shopping can be viewed as a pleasant activity, as a way of relaxing, seeing a lot of beautiful things, and as

a chance to glance at the things that one likes, for instance, technological products, clothing, seeing new things and learning by observing other people's behaviors.

4.1.3. If there were no activity in life called "shopping," how would you feel?

A first Gen Y woman that reacted to this issue thought that "no shopping" may be possible through self-sufficiency in the way that we can both produce and consume, and this is a way that we can bypass shopping. Another woman thought about the new form of shopping – online shopping. Other than that, we might get to a barter system, which is the exchange of one thing with another thing. Or else, everything has to be prepared for us so that we do not have to go shopping. One woman thought about the communist system where the government gives everybody the same things. In that case we cannot take shopping as a relaxing activity any more. Additionally, shopping was considered as designing "the color of life" by one participant because it provides us with a chance to choose the style of things that fit us. Otherwise, everybody might end up having the same things. This would lead to the loss of innovation and nothing would be developed, and there would be no competition. It would be boring. To be optimistic, without shopping, we can spend our time doing other activities and we may be more nature oriented. In fact, one woman said that when she did not have time for shopping for her clothes, she called the dressmaker to make them for her and had them delivered to her home. Regarding online shopping, a few Gen Y women were quite positive about this method of shopping because they did not have to be in a crowd and not have to spend time finding a parking space. Additionally, they felt that they were able to find interesting products via the Internet. One woman was more inclined to shop via the internet unless the products had to be tried on before buying. Another woman added that she could buy new styles and beautiful clothes at a cheaper price through the Internet. However, Internet shopping was seen to have a drawback – one woman that buys her clothes through the Internet found that the clothes that she got did not look like their pictures on the computer and they shrank. She suggests that it would be much better if people could find time for store-shopping. Additionally, credit cards cannot be used for paying through the Internet if we do not spend a certain amount.

4.1.4. Please think of the most meaningful thing that you possess and would you please tell me what it is and how it is meaningful to your life?

The meaningfulness of things for Gen Y women seemed to be big ticket items, for instance, cars, mobile phones, and computers. Basically, these items were considered meaningful because they are useful and have to be used every day and have become a part of their lives. One woman mentioned about pictures which reminded her of her early childhood period. Another woman attached meaning to the things that some important persons in her life gave her. One thought that a

degree, which is a reflection of the achievement in her study and that her parents could take a pride in, was the most important thing in her life. There was another woman who thought beyond herself as well – she thought that money was the most meaningful thing in her life because money can be used to create happiness for others.

4.1.5. Global warming is one of the world's big problems. Would you like to help solve this problem? If so, how would you like to participate?

All Gen Y women wanted to help solve the global warming problem. Basically, they want to participate by altering their behaviors in such a way that they preserve the environment. Their strategies included reducing, reusing, recycling, planting trees, and educating others. They also stated that they would like to reduce the usage of packaging, for instance, not asking for plastic bags after shopping. They also reduced the usage of energy or save energy, for instance, by reading outside the home where lights are not needed, using car pools, public transportation, the sky train, and using mass rapid transit. They also could reuse other persons' belongings by buying second-hand products. They also helped recycle products by separating the garbage into certain categories. In addition, one woman planted trees in the empty spaces at her home. Another woman attempted to educate youngsters to help protect the environment in order to create the multiplier effects.

4.1.6. What do you think about buying environmentally-friendly products that are more expensive than environmentally-harmful products?

The first Gen Y woman is very positive about buying more expensive products given that they are environmentally friendly. She thinks if the product can actually help preserve the environment, it will be worthwhile in the long run because the cost of recovering the deteriorating environment will be much higher. Or else, it cannot be recovered at all. A lot of women are willing to pay a higher price if the price is not much higher. One woman could tolerate up to a 20% higher price. Another woman was willing to pay up to a 50% higher price. If the price is much higher, let's say 100% higher, it is doubtful that they would make a purchase. However, one woman wanted to know that the products are green before buying them and felt that it should be clearly stated on the label that the product is environmentally-friendly, for instance, energy saving in the production process and using the recycled materials. One woman expressed herself as an environmentally-friendly person by choosing to buy green products and in addition she donated to green peace.

4.1.7. What are you willing to pay for?

For Gen Y women, there are several types of willingness to pay. The first type is the person that will pay for the products that she likes. The second type is the

person that will pay for the product that she likes by taking the price into consideration as well. The third type is the person that will pay for the product that she likes, and it has to be worth the price that she pays as well. The fourth type is the person that will pay for a necessary product; plus it has to be worth the price paid. The fifth type is the person that will pay for the thing that she likes, plus it has to be necessary. Sometimes, a Gen Y woman has to pay a very high price in order to buy a product for her customer just because that is what her customer wants.

4.2. Male focus group

4.2.1. Please think about your happiest moment in shopping and would you please tell me about that moment?

Gen Y men will be happy if they have free time and do not have to be in a hurry in shopping. However, they are not likely to buy so many things and their purchases are generally planned. They will have a specification of the things that they want in mind, and they will be happy when they can get the best buy. For instance, one man did not want to buy the luxury items. He knows exactly what style of clothes he wants and goes shopping for a bargain price. He feels happy when he is successful in getting the things at the price lower than he expects. A man will feel good when the things that he buys look more expensive than the actual price. Another type of happiness stems from buying rare products or a limited edition of the products. One man was happy when buying the things that he likes. A little caution expressed by this man was that we should like an attainable thing or not too high-priced products. If the price of the needed product is too high, a man will wait for the price to drop while another man will wait for a promotion event. One person suggested that his strategy was to take a look at that thing very often until his fondness for it far exceeds the price and he then ends up buying it. Another man was happy when he could try on things and may end up not buying them. One man equated the durability of the products he bought with their price to come up with the value that could make him happy. Another person wanted to compare the unit price and read the label on his own and did not want the salesperson to get involved very much.

4.2.2. Shopping can be considered as an activity in life. How do you feel about this activity?

Shopping can be viewed by a Gen Y man as a relaxing activity, with music in the background and a lot of cheerful persons surrounding us. These persons are seemingly friends that walk along with us. However, we will be happier if our goals are buying the things that we want. One man thinks that shopping has two important goals. One is shopping for planned purchases, and another goal is

shopping for gathering information. For instance, one might see a certain product from a website but also want to see it in reality. Shopping might be an activity for unplanned purchases as well. One man goes to the shopping center for eating but ends up buying a few things. However, another one mentioned that 80% of men go shopping for planned purchases. In addition, shopping can be taken as an educational activity. One can see various styles of sales presentations as well as new products.

4.2.3. If there were no activity in life called “shopping,” how would you feel?

The first reaction from a focus group participant was that we may not be able to survive after a week of no shopping if shopping includes buying necessary products. Another man thought that he would feel uncomfortable because his happiness comes from learning about the new products available in the market through shopping; it is a way to learn about our changing world. One man took this issue as if we were in a communist country – everybody has to be the same. According to him, people are different because we consume differently. Another man raised the issue of a new way of shopping through the Internet and this turned out to be a topic of discussion by a few participants. One man mentioned that buying through the Internet might not be so good because we cannot see the things; that is, we cannot touch them and that certain things may break during the transportation. One man was positive about ordering through the Internet because the product is widely available in the ordinary stores. That made it precious. Another man added that if we are not sure about the virtual store’s trustworthiness, we can try to order a minor thing at a lower price first. Additionally, we might have to check about the company’s existence with the Ministry of Commerce. In addition, another participant said that he had ordered more than ten items from e-bay and it worked out all right. On the other hand, another participant said that he ordered a backpack from e-bay for approximately \$US 100 but he did not get it. Another participant thought that even without shopping we can still barter or exchange products, and the products and technology still can be developed according to people’s needs.

4.2.4. Please think of the most meaningful thing that you possess and would you please tell me what it is and how it is meaningful to your life ?

A few Gen Y men attached meaning to the things that were associated with what they like to do in their free time. For one participant, it was a camera, for which it took him four years to save the money in order to buy and use it as an amateur photographer. For another participant, it was a high price badminton racquet because he likes to play badminton. This racquet was defective now but he still keeps it even though many persons want to buy this classical racquet from him. He said it would be a pity if he sold the racquet because he was quite proud

of possessing it. Another meaningful object was expensive Umbro football shoes because the person likes to play football. For another man, it was a musical instrument because he likes to play music. It is very durable and performs well even beyond five years. For Gen Y men, gifts from loved ones can be the things which are meaningful to them. The first example was a gift from one participant's lover, who turned his picture into a piece of art. Another man was very happy with the surprise gift of a very expensive bicycle which he dreamed of and was given by his father when he was in his lower secondary school. This bicycle represented the loving bond between his father and him. Although at the moment, the bicycle has become rusty and his father has already passed away, he still keeps it for his loving memory. Other meaningful objects had to do with the things that were meant to belong to that person. In this focus group, one man that went shopping with his friend wanted to buy his first watch. He liked the watch very much but he did not buy it at first because he wanted to compare it with some other choices. After two months passed, he met his friend, who told him that the watch was still around. At that time, he went to buy it right away. He thought he was lucky that it had not been sold. In addition, a meaningful object for a man can be something that will become a part of him, for instance, books that can shape his thinking and personality.

4.2.5. Global warming is one of the world's big problems. Would you like to help solve this problem? If so, how would you like to participate?

Most of the Gen Y men would like to help preserve the environment by saving energy by setting air-conditioners, for example, at the right temperature. We can also educate others about this matter. One participant said that the right temperature for an air-conditioner is 25 °c. A lower temperature would consume too much energy. A higher temperature, let's say 26-27 °c, would save energy. Another man, who drives several hundred kilometers per day, saves energy by planning his routes carefully and combining the nearby routes. Another means of energy saving for transportation is bicycling. Apart from that, another energy reduction strategy for preserving the environment is trying to put a lot of things in one plastic bag instead of several bags. It is even better if one can use a cloth bag instead because it can be reused. Similarly, one can take one's own mug for buying coffee from the stores. One suggested using the recyclable containers, for instance, paper cups instead of plastic cups. One person added that we may want to consider buying green products in our shopping or buying brands that exhibit corporate socially-responsible activities in such a way that preserves the environment.

4.2.6. What do you think about buying environmentally-friendly products that are more expensive than environmentally-harmful products?

Most of the Gen Y men hesitate to pay a higher price for environmentally-friendly products as compared to environmentally-harmful products. They will

ask for durability and the performance of the products in addition to their green aspect. It is better for green products to have comparable prices as well as environmentally-friendly properties. A bad example given was “Nam Thip”: a brand of environmentally-friendly bottled water. It is said that Nam Thip uses less plastic, which makes the bottle become soft. The company puts a label on their product that says that soft bottles are good because of the reduction in plastic usage. That is why it is good for the environment. A male focus group participant thought that the company reduced the plastic content because it wanted to reduce production costs but did not pass that benefit on to the consumers by reducing prices. This was taken as a win-lose example by that participant. Another example that he cited was a good example of a win-win situation. He mentioned that another brand of green tea called “Ishiton” reduced the safety seal, which is a plastic wrap on the lid of the bottle. This was considered a way to reduce the production cost of the company as well, but this company passes this benefit on to the consumers by reducing the price of their product, from 20 Baht per bottle to 16 Baht per bottle. However, there is a Gen Y man that was willing to pay up to a twenty percent higher price for green products as compared to non-green products.

4.2.7. What are you willing to pay for?

Gen Y men want to pay for value. This value includes satisfaction of their wants and needs, things of limited supply, things that can be transformed to be a part of themselves, for instance, books, entertainment, DVD, movies, musical instruments, and things that exhibit good performance.

4.3. Mixed focus group

4.3.1. Please think about your happiest moment in shopping and would you please tell me about that moment?

Gen Y women like shopping more than Gen Y men. Gen Y women are happy when things are on sale and they can get more things than they expect. They can enjoy themselves by taking shopping as a way to socialize with friends. In that way, it is also relaxing and they can even suggest the style of products to each other. They may end up buying a certain thing, for instance, shoes, very often. They will be happy if they can shop in a place that has a wide variety of products which are not expensive. Gen Y men do not particularly like shopping. They will shop for the things that they want, such as clothing. They will be happy when they can choose things without a time limit. Many of them like eating with friends and family and take shopping as a by-product.

4.3.2. Shopping can be considered as an activity in life. How do you feel about this activity?

Gen Y women view shopping as a relaxing activity as well as an activity for socialization with friends. They can take a look at things and even try on things like their friends. They are already happy when their friends can buy things, whereas they may end up buying nothing. Gen Y men tend to go shopping for necessary things and their shopping is generally planned. As an example, they may go for buying clothes when they do not have enough and buy shoes for replacement.

4.3.3. If there were no activity in life called "shopping," how would you feel?

Gen Y women think that without shopping, life would not be colorful. They would get bored and would not know where to go. Shopping is one of the stress-relieving activities. Towards this end, they may be able to enjoy seeing movies rather than shopping. On the positive side of no shopping, they can even save more money. On the negative side, Gen Y women think things may be stable and that there will be no competition. Gen Y men added that they do not particularly like shopping but without shopping they could not choose what they want. Further, there may not be any trends or things may not be changing. This includes clothing. If that happened women would dress the same all the time, which would be boring.

4.3.4. Please think of the most meaningful thing that you possess and would you please tell me what it is and how it is meaningful to your life ?

Gen y people tend to attach meaning to high-value items, gifts from important persons, and rare things. These valuable items include housing for security, land as an income-generating asset, mobile phones for working, chatting and playing games. Some people take better care of the gifts given by their parents than the things that they buy on their own. A wedding ring was cited as a meaningful thing for one man because there is only one.

4.3.5. Global warming is one of the world's big problems. Would you like to help solve this problem? If so, how would you like to participate?

Gen Y people are willing to help preserve the environment by changing their habits, including reducing the use of paper, plastic bags, electricity, and turning off the lights when they are not used. They also help by planting trees and making donations. However, helping by paying more in order to buy green products instead of non-green products is debatable. One man wanted to pay just a little more, whereas another man did not want to pay more. In addition, one woman thought that if she did help it might not have any big impact if others did not help as well. She suggested that it would be good to have a big campaign to persuade a

lot of people to do similar things; for instance, retailers may launch a campaign to reduce the usage of plastic bags. Another person pointed out that a campaign is more like an advertisement and that it may not last long. After a while, Thai people may not like to take any green actions because they like to be comfortable. A better strategy should be the “instillation” of an environmentally-friendly consciousness. Beyond the individual level, it was suggested that a company may want to assume corporate social responsibility in preserving the environment as well as reducing the price of green products. The government can also help by providing tax incentives.

4.3.6. What do you think about buying environmentally-friendly products that are more expensive than environmentally-harmful products?

When the higher price of buying green products as compared to non-green products came into play, most of the Gen Y people hesitated to buy those green products. One of the reasons given was that it would not be useful if other people did not do it. Another reason was that buying higher priced green products would not lead to the cooling of the world immediately. In other words, the impact of our actions cannot be clear. Although the overtone was buying cheaper products, a few persons were willing to pay more. One person was willing to pay a very little more, not more than a few Baht. Another person did not want to pay beyond a 30% higher price. One person added that if green products and non-green products were the same price, she would prefer to buy green products from the company that had engaged in a big corporate social responsibility campaign for preserving the environment. Examples of these companies were Siam Cement Group (SCG) and Double A.

4.3.7. What are you willing to pay for?

Gen Y people are willing to pay for what they like or things they consider necessary. One female participant stated that she would pay for necessary things if that is what she liked as well. One man wanted to pay for what was important to him at that time, for instance, edible products. Gen Y people can also pay for the gifts that they want to buy for others.

5. DISCUSSION

Gen Y men tend to take shopping seriously. They will more towards buying when it is necessary and plan ahead for what to buy. For instance, they will go shopping when they run out of clothes or shoes. That is to say, shopping is likely to have a functional value for Gen Y men. On the other hand, Gen Y women take shopping in a more leisurely way. They can be relaxed just by going window shopping and can enjoy shopping with friends. Shopping seems to be one of the means of socialization for Gen Y women, while eating seems to be one for Gen Y

men. Thus, shopping is likely to have an emotional value for Gen Y women. It is Gen Y women that are more oriented to the contribution to the society – they can spend their money making other people happy as well as donating to a charity like green peace. They seem to come up with various ways of changing their behaviors in an impromptu fashion in order to preserve the environment through the main strategies of reducing, reusing and recycling. They are also more willing to pay a higher price for environmentally-friendly products as compared to Gen Y men. Therefore, Gen Y women are likely take social value to heart more than Gen Y men.

The importance of shopping can be reflected in the discussion of the feelings of the focus group participants about the absence of the shopping activity. Shopping seems to be important for several reasons. First, it is considered as a “color of life” and relaxing. Second, it is an educational activity for the shoppers to learn about new products and sale presentations. Third, shopping provides choices and opportunities for comparisons. Fourth, without shopping, there would be no competition, things may stand still, and there would be no development.

6. CONCLUSION

Shopping tends to have more of a functional value for Gen Y men, a more emotional and social value for Gen Y women. Shopping is important because it is “the color of life” among other things. Gen Y men are more likely to try new ways of shopping through the Internet than Gen Y women. Further, Gen Y men tend to attach a psychological meaning to their material possessions, whereas Gen Y women tend to attach a functional meaning to their material possessions. For Gen Y people, the time barrier might make shopping unpleasant. Beyond necessity, Gen Y people are willing to pay for what they like.

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