

The Shopaholic, Consumer Culture, and Identity

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Sophie Kinsella's zany novels about shopaholic Becky Bloomwood hit the big screen in the spring of 2009. Unlike typical chick-lit or the run-of-the-mill romantic comedy, *Confessions of a Shopaholic* does not center itself around a love interest. Instead the protagonist, Rebecca "Becky" Bloomwood, is obsessed with shopping. While this trait may share some metatextuality with heavy hitters such as *Sex and the City* and *Legally Blonde*, *Confessions of a Shopaholic* is as dissimilar to these films as it is similar. Unlike Carrie Bradshaw (*Sex and the City*), Becky does not have an income large enough to bankroll her love of Manolo Blahniks. Nor does she have the family money of Elle Woods of *Legally Blonde* fame. Becky is legally broke. The *Shopaholic* book series takes the facets of chick-lit (sex, work, romance and the unpredictable nature of being an intelligent woman in the modern world) and pushes them out of the way to place the genre's backdrop of light-hearted consumerism front and center. "While sex has been all but denuded of its onetime taboos, candid talk about shopping and debt is a far touchier subject" (Colman). In this sense the series functions as a comical allegory for the last fifteen years when consumerism helped drive the world's economy to new heights. Becky's story stirs up prickly issues about the complex interplay of women, fashion, spending, and identity.

As with any adaptation, departures from the original plot create an intertextuality that shows differences in intention. Variances in plot are understood as a series of selections and amplifications of the original hypotext (in this case the *Shopaholic* book series) into the hypertext of the film adaptation (Stam). What must be investigated is which of the intertextual signals does the filmic hypertext pick up and which signals are ignored (Stam). The intertextual dialogue between the novels and film includes the relocation the story from London to New York City transforming Becky into an American, and alterations of Becky's love interest Luke, as well as Becky's own career path. The end of the film differs significantly from the books as well. These intertextual changes add up to create an image of women and consumerism that varies from the hypotext's intention.

The *Shopaholic* book series falls under the metatext of the popular genre of fiction most often referred to as chick-lit. Chick-lit novels tell clever, fast-paced stories about young women's messy journeys of personal and professional growth. The heroines gain self-knowledge and self-acceptance, and are thus empowered to take control of their relationships and professional lives (Butler). The genre's origins have been traced back to Jane Austen's work as well as the feminist awakening novels of the 1970s, thus tracing chick-lit's genealogy

as parallel to and part of the trajectory of the female bildungsroman (Butler). Preoccupations of mainstream U.S. feminism have resulted in the development of sub-genres. The *Shopaholic* series falls under the category of consumerism-lit within the chick-lit genre. Rather than read this expansion as simply more of the same, we might ask why issues such as consumption are popular topics in contemporary women's genre fiction. Moreover, how do adaptations of these texts into cinematic representations express feminism and consumer culture?

The film version of Kinsella's bestselling novels was directed by P.J. Hogan who has been praised for revising the romantic comedy with the unconventional *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997) as well as making a film adaptation of a beloved classic piece of literature; *Peter Pan* (2003). The film is a combination of the first two novels (*Confessions of a Shopaholic* and *Shopaholic Takes Manhattan*) and draws additionally from the third novel (*Shopaholic Ties the Knot*). Not just anyone can play a character as mad-cap as Becky and get away with it. Isla Fisher who, as *Rolling Stone* put it, is "professionally adorable" was cast to play the lovable consumer-mad Becky ("Confessions"). Fisher is best known for her previous work in *Definitely, Maybe* (2008) and *Wedding Crashers* (2005) in which she played wacky, but loveable romantic interests. This casting suggests a paratextual dialogue with the audience of "yes she's crazy, but we love her".

Both the books and the film show the lengths to which Becky will go to cover up her debt as well as the overwhelming urge she feels to shop. Unlike other well known chick-lit / romantic comedy heroines (e.g. Bridget Jones' *Diary*) Becky doesn't struggle with her weight, smoke or drink excessively. Her career and love life are not her central focus. She has one thing on her mind: bailing out her ship of debt (even as her stiletto habit keeps poking new leaks left and right). "It may seem like a bit of fluff, but it actually expresses a great deal of the ongoing cultural preoccupations and anxieties that have surrounded women and women's association with consumption and shopping," says Professor Rebecca Connor, an associate professor of English at Hunter College in New York who has traced the interaction of women and consumption in literature (Colman). Kinsella tapped into the zeitgeist of consumerism which is what makes the series relatable. Of the series Kinsella had this to say:

"I don't write books to bang home a message, I write to entertain and if a message comes out as well, then that's really great ... I've had responses from readers who have said, 'You know, this has made me think twice. This has made me change my ways.' So, I think it can help people too" (Murray).

It's hard to miss the message Kinsella is sending. The first book opens with letters inviting people to take out loans

and apply for credit cards which are quickly followed with more letters asking "Why haven't you paid off your loan?" As Becky says in the film adaptation, "They said I was a valued customer. Now they send me hate mail" (Hogan). Perhaps Kinsella put it best "This story is about someone who has too much credit thrust upon her too young, and she goes out and gets loads of lovely shiny things, then she goes bust and has to deal with it" (Colman).

The term shopaholic implies addiction. In fact that seems to be exactly what it is. Retail therapy is often joked about but for shopaholics, also referred to as compulsive buyers, consumerism is used as self-medication (Trussell). Their primary motivation arrives from the psychological benefits derived from the buying process itself rather than from the possession of purchased objects. Shopaholics are more likely to demonstrate compulsivity as a personality trait, have lower self-esteem, and are more prone to fantasy than the average consumer (O'Guinn). A shopaholic will fill their emptiness with objects they do not even need. That void may be from years of emotional or spiritual deprivation: fear that there's never enough, whether it's money, material objects, recognition, or love (Bridgforth). Consequences of compulsive buying include "extreme levels of debt, anxiety and frustration, the subjective sense of loss of control, and domestic dissension" (O'Guinn). Of course the positive feelings accompanying the compulsive buyers' self-medicating retail therapy only lasts until they need their next "fix". According to a Stanford University study, it is estimated that approximately 24 million individuals in the United States alone suffer from compulsive buying (Trussell). Becky Bloomwood exhibits many, if not all, of the symptoms of compulsive buying. This is most acutely expressed in the film version in which Becky succinctly explains her urge to shop, "When I shop, the world gets better, and the world is better, but then it's not, and I need to do it again" (Hogan). The hypertext of the film created an intertextual change to the hypotext with Becky joining Shopaholics Anonymous at the entreaty of her best friend Suze. In the novels Becky does not confront her shopping habit in this way. Presumably this was added to show Becky's addiction more distinctly. It also shows how shopping addictions affect numerous people from various backgrounds.

Notable screenwriter Tim Firth (2005's *Kinky Boots* and 2003's *Calendar Girls*) worked with Hogan to translate the novels' first person narration into something more suitable to the silver screen. Firth came up with the concept of the store mannequins talking to Becky rather than having a voice over of her inner thoughts in order to dramatize the temptation that she faces when entering consumer paradise (Murray). The mannequins act as sirens luring Becky to her doom as well as a physical embodiment of Becky's faulty inner voice. Far from being a silly piece of animatronics Hogan's mannequins show the fallacy of the consumer (Colman). When confronted with angry comments of fans, Hogan

explains that the mannequins also function as an element of fantasy. Hogan claims the original British title of the first novel, *The Secret Dream World of the Shopaholic*, was the motivation for incorporating the fantasy element (Murray).

Interestingly the fantasy elements of the novels and film have a basis in real life cases of compulsive buying. An individual with compulsive behaviors is apt to exhibit great capabilities of fantasy. It is believed that compulsive behavior coupled with fantasies of personal success and social acceptance allows individuals to temporarily escape negative feelings. Others feel that the fantasy element of compulsion is important in reinforcing compulsive behaviors by granting people the ability to mentally rehearse anticipated positive outcomes (O'Guinn). While shopping, Becky ascribes meanings to merchandise. To her the designer scarf is not only a scarf it is a way of defining herself and finding happiness. In the film the mannequins coax her into purchasing an expensive green Denny & George scarf. "The point about this scarf," they say, "is that it would become a part of a definition of you. Of your psyche." They insist that she'll be known as "The-Girl-In-The-Green-Scarf", a girl with confidence and poise (Hogan). Thus, the merchandise is not only about fashion, it is about claiming an identity.

In this way Becky's sense of self, as she receives it from the mannequins, comes implicitly from the conception of femininity created by capitalistic driven consumer systems (Muller). Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's theory of the development of the concept of self theorizes that the mirror stage represents the moment when the subject associates itself to an order outside of itself to which it will refer from then on (Muller). Using Lacan's conceptual mirror alongside Marxist terms, society, carrying its ideological imperatives, admits the subject into a culture compelling it to recognize and relate to the various images of the culture's identity. "To adopt these ways of understanding self-formulation is to recognize that we can never see ourselves other than in the images reflected back to us by society, which becomes, in effect, the mirror itself" (Muller). The mannequins, which serve as voice to society as well as Becky's thoughts, are also representations of the societal mirror Becky uses in order to gain an identity, i.e. place in the world.

The most notable change to the plot involves the ending. In both the book series and the film Becky is exposed as a fraud after she gains a reputation as a personal finance guru. As a result, her relationship with Luke ends and she sells her possessions in order to pay off her debt for a fresh start. However, the hypotext and hypertext vary over the outcome of Becky's relationship with Luke. In the novel, Becky moves to New York and becomes a personal shopper, a career she enjoys and succeeds at. It is only after Becky is secure and confident in herself that Luke comes back into her life. In the final scene of the second novel, Luke goes to see Becky at work and admits that he makes mistakes as well. The

two come to an agreement and figure out how to have a relationship in which they are equal partners. This is not the case in the film. In the hypertext Becky never becomes a personal shopper. Instead the audience receives a quick summing up of events in which Luke has given Becky a job at his new company. This new ending not only omits the novel's lesson of self-reliance, it also changes Becky's character to a damsel in distress.

With regard to the mise-en-scene, the film, *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, is filled with hues of pink and lilac. Becky is most often shown wearing bright eye-catching colors. Shots are framed in order to show off her wide-eyed excitement and surprise. The facial expressions and color choices make Becky appear childlike and naïve. The novels do not paint her as childlike, merely as slightly irresponsible. These filmic elements seem to align Becky with the protagonist Elle Woods of *Legally Blonde*. The metatextual alliance creates a sense that Becky cannot be taken seriously, just as Elle Woods was not taken seriously. Of course in *Legally Blonde*, Elle is redeemed by winning an important court case and proving her intelligence. Becky is stripped by such redemption by the inclusion of Luke's sweeping in to save the day.

Film adaptations of novels often change novelistic events for perhaps unconscious ideological reasons (Stam). The film *Confessions of a Shopaholic* was distributed by Touchstone, a subsidiary of the Disney Corporation. The process of Disneyfication often includes the incorporation of patriarchal ideology and conservative values which are seen as "common sense" (Mollegaard). It would appear that the intertextual dialog of the hypertext is in accordance with this belief. Becky is no longer a standalone heroine in charge of her own destiny, instead she must rely on Luke to give her a job and bail her out of the problems she created for herself. Becky goes through the steps of self-actualization just as she does in the hypotext although the final destination is greatly changed. It is a step backward instead of forward, back to the 18th century when Mary Wollstonecraft first pointed out the indignity suffered by women who must attach themselves to wealthy men (i.e. women "must marry advantageously...their persons often legally prostituted") (Dargis). The change in ending undermines the entirety of the film. Where we once had a strong independent, yet wacky, young woman we now have a helpless shopping addict who must rely on her love interest to save her from her own addiction. This ending creates a disjuncture from the original intention of the novels.

Both versions of *Confessions of a Shopaholic* are at once a fun romp through consumer culture gone wild as well as a commentary on women's relationship to consumerism. Usually dismissed as fluffy, romantic comedies can comment on the complex world women in Western society inhabit. Consumerism and societal pressures create a situation that is all too easy for people like Becky to fall into. The intertextual dialogue of both

the film and the novels match up very well until the close of the film in which Becky is denied the opportunity to gain a sense of self through her own means in favor of a conclusion that reinforces patriarchal values. Stripping Becky of her independence does a disservice to the Sophia Kinsella's authorial intent and sets up a dangerous precedent for young women. The departure from the original conclusion sends the message that it is not necessary to take responsibility for your actions. Happy endings result from a prosperous love matches not your own ingenuity or self-actualization. Messages such as this perpetuate the system from which Becky's problems stem, and makes it all the more likely for women to fall into the same situation; although these shopaholics will most likely have a similar happy ending.

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Critics of consumer culture have long represented shopping as something like. - shopping is like a drug for the masses - shoppers as passive consumers unable to resist the manipulations of advertisers, marketers, credit card companies. In a book titled *Carried Away: The Invention of Modern Shopping*, it traces the... Kinsella underlines Becky's faults, while also connecting them to larger cultural dynamics. *Confessions of a Shopaholic* offers a postmodern critique of two cultural logics: 1. The logic of addiction 2. The logic of confession. cultural logic. Consumer identity is the consumption pattern through which a consumer describes themselves. In consumer culture, people no longer consume goods and services merely for functional satisfaction. Consumption has become increasingly more meaning-based; brands are often used as symbolic resources for the construction and maintenance of identity. Consumers use brands and products to express their identities. Culture and identity. In this unit, you learn how to: • talk about different aspects of culture. and society • politely disagree with people's opinions • express feelings and opinions more emphatically • talk about useful objects in the home • discuss your own personal / national identities. Grammar • Emphatic structures. Vocabulary • Society and culture • Household objects • Expressions with thing. Reading • Foreign objects • National and individual identity. Listening • Society and culture in different countries • Feelings about British culture. Vocabulary Society and culture. A Work in