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The purpose of this study is to develop an in-depth understanding of the female experience of shopping for home furnishings and the role of the Internet in this process. The three primary objectives guiding the current study were: (a) to examine the concept of "home" within the female home furnishings shopping experience; (b) to explore the use of multiple channels within the home furnishings shopping process; and (c) to investigate the meanings that home furnishings have for female consumers.

Six female home furnishings consumers representing different lifestyles and life stages comprised the sample. A phenomenological research approach was used to gain insight into the home furnishings shopping process. A combination of interview and journal responses formed the basis of data collection. Data were analyzed for commonalities and differences across participants' experiences. Three levels of interpretation were developed through the data, including personal narratives, thematic interpretation, and consideration of theoretical contributions.

Findings indicate that the home reflects each participant's personality, personal values, and what is important about time spent at home, whether alone or with family and friends. Shopping for home furnishings is a complex experience that reflected the participants' lifestyles and life stages, the similarities and differences in their decision-making considerations, and the role that the retailer plays in taking the final step of the decision-making process and purchasing furnishings for the home. Findings reveal what home furnishings objects mean to the participants, and how the process of acquiring them

reveals common issues faced by consumers seeking to create their own concept of home. Although this study provides an in-depth understanding of women's experiences with an overlooked product category – home furnishings – it also points to several areas of potential future study.

HOME SWEET HOME: AN EXPLORATION OF WOMEN'S  
HOME FURNISHINGS SHOPPING EXPERIENCES

by

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Approved by

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Committee Chair

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To my husband and best friend, Tony – I do not know where I would be without your constant love, support and encouragement. You inspire me to go after every dream I have for my life, and I'm so thankful to have you as my partner along the way. To my little pups: Mika, Ripley and Latte – thank you for loving me regardless of all the days and nights I didn't have time to play. And to my fellow graduate students and friends from CARS – I could not have asked for better friends to share this experience with me. I will never forget our endless cups of coffee, simultaneous nervous breakdowns, and inside jokes. Thank you all for making my graduate school experience one that was not only filled with blood, sweat, and tears, but a whole lot of laughter, too.

APPROVAL PAGE

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

“There’s no place like home.” This well-known phrase spoken by Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* expresses an emotion that many feel about the role that a home and its furnishings play in the human experience. Purchases for the home, and particularly furniture, have great significance for consumers (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981) as they often attach special meaning and affection to items in the home. Moreover, historical study provides evidence of the use of home furnishings dating as far back as prehistoric times (Litchfield, 2004). In addition to creating functional seating, tables, cupboards, and beds, there is evidence of early decorations for the home such as tapestries, carpets and other accessories. Home furnishings are not only used for their practical benefits, but are also used to communicate something about one’s personal interests, values, personality, and even culture (Belk, 1988). For example, a person who sees himself or herself as an outdoorsman might decorate his or her home with heavy, lodge-like wooden furnishings and animal heads mounted to the walls. On the other hand, a New York City couple might see themselves as trendy, upscale business people and decorate their home to reflect a more modern sensibility.

Implicit in the notion of furnishing one’s home is the idea that humans are consumers who purposefully choose the objects with which they surround themselves, typically by shopping for particular items. For many consumers, shopping is a leisurely

pastime that serves many emotional and social needs, in addition to the practical aspects of buying products and services (Babin, Darden & Griffin, 1994). However, the emergence of the personal computer and the World Wide Web has opened an entirely new channel for retailers to expand that experience for consumers. In *The Futurist* magazine, Samuel Bleecker (1995) predicted that the “Meta-Mart” would drastically change how Americans buy, sell and distribute goods, as well as make it less necessary for consumers to leave their homes to shop. Bleecker (1995) also accurately predicted that “retail stores will no longer be competing with their nearest neighbors but with well-financed and technologically sophisticated nationwide corporations” (p. 19). Although initially the new technology was complex and expensive, retailers who have embraced a multi-channel strategy are reaching the most consumers; recent market research has shown that 78% of shoppers now use multiple channels to make a purchase (Charlton, 2010).

Indeed, today’s consumers have more options than ever before in deciding what, where, and when they want to buy. From books and DVDs to cars and homes for sale, consumers can now shop for and buy virtually anything on the Internet. In fact, online retailing accounts for \$142 billion in total sales in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). It would seem that shopping for home furnishings, an \$89.5 billion industry in the U.S., would be no exception (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). However, studies have shown that not everyone who shops online for home furnishings *buys* home furnishings online. The reasons cited for this have largely focused around avoiding risk, including credit card fraud, privacy, security concerns, as well as poor website design and functionality

(Ahuja, Gupta & Raman, 2003; Andrews & Boyle, 2008; Connolly & Bannister, 2007; Ernst & Young, 2001; Grandon & Ranganathan, 2001; Horrigan, 2008; Molesworth & Suortti, 2001; Rajamma, Paswan, & Ganesh, 2007). While market research has shown that home furnishings consumers *are* browsing/researching these purchases online before ever setting foot in a brick and mortar store, online sales for furniture lag behind other industries (Carroll, 2008). Some studies suggest this may be because furniture is considered a high involvement, experiential product by consumers (Browne, Durrett & Wetherbe, 2004; Zeng & Reinartz, 2003), which carries a greater risk overall.

In the early days of research on online consumption, it was assumed that men were more likely to use the Internet to make purchases. Over time, that assumption has changed. Recent studies have shown that the gender gap in Internet usage has disappeared (Chien-Huang & Shu-Fen, 2008; Colley & Maltby, 2008; Fox, 2006; Jackson, Zhao, Kolenic, Fitzgerald, Harold, & Von Eye, 2008; Lee, 2011; Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). Moreover, according to a *Harvard Business Review* study, women are responsible for as much as 94 percent of all home furnishings purchases (Silverstein & Sayre, 2009), and consequently, women are the most frequent online shoppers for home furnishings as well (French, 2009; French, 2011). This dissertation therefore explores the experiences of women as they shop for home furnishings, including the role of the Internet in this process.

As discussed in depth in Chapter III, a phenomenological approach was employed to study the topic. Women's experiences served as a locus for gaining a reflexive understanding of the self as expressed through the act of shopping for home furnishings.

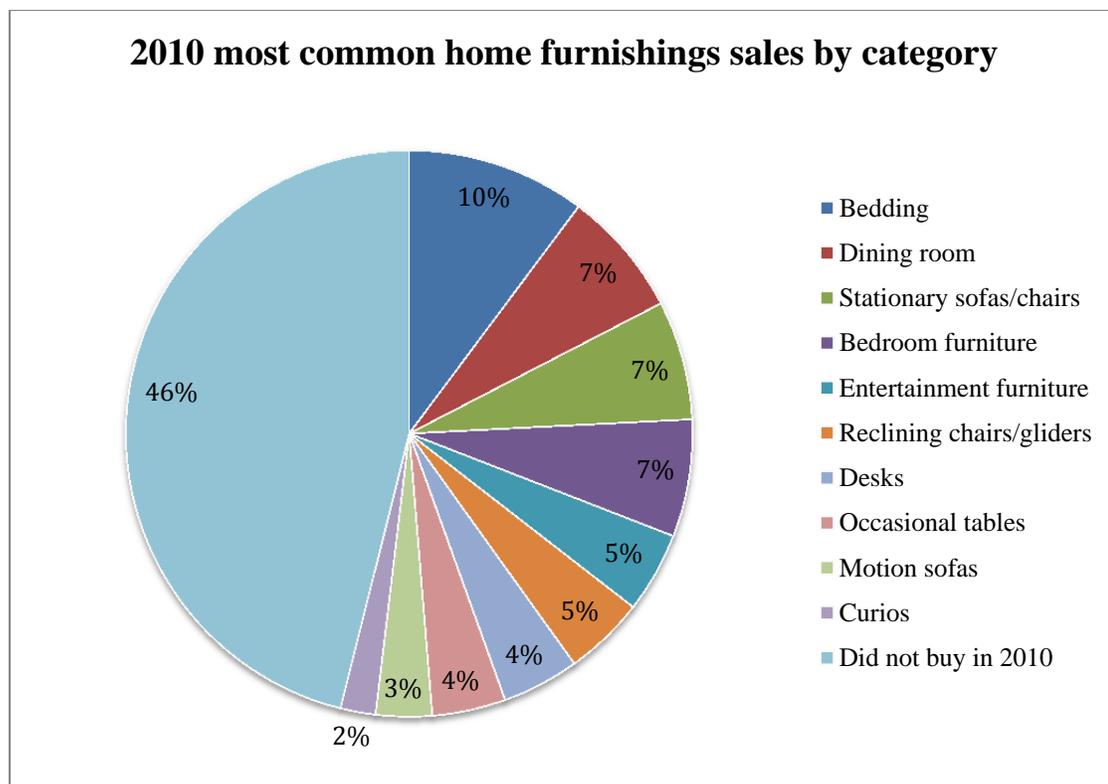
This includes the use of home furnishings as a tool for self-expression. Thus, the guiding question of this research was: *What is it like for female consumers to shop for home furnishings?*

### **Background**

The term “home furnishings” is used to describe a myriad of objects, typically furniture, that are intended to support everyday life, such as beds for sleeping; chairs or sofas for sitting; bookshelves and chests for storing or displaying objects; and tables that provide surfaces that make tasks more convenient, such as eating a meal with one’s family (Litchfield, 2004). Furniture has also evolved into a kind of decorative art form, and designers use a variety of materials such as wood, metal, textiles, bamboo, rock, plastic and glass to achieve specific aesthetics. Home furnishings as a category has also been extended to include various accessories such as rugs, lamps, artwork, linens, pillows, mirrors and more.

Home furnishings are often very important purchases for consumers (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). Consumers place value on home furnishings most frequently because of the memories they call forth of other people, occasions and relationships. Furthermore, home furnishings can serve as a part of an individual’s extended self — the home and its furnishings serve as a “symbolic body” for the family (Belk, 1988). Just as an individual may use apparel or other personal possessions to help define the self, a family is likely to use furnishings and shared family possessions to define a “family self” for its members (Belk, 1988, p. 152).

As shown in Figure 1, the most frequent furniture purchase is bedding, such as mattresses and boxsprings, which are mostly functional purchases that are not viewed as a reflection of an individual's personality (French, 2011). The next three most common home furnishings purchases are dining room furniture, upholstery, and bedroom furniture (French, 2011). Products in these categories are most often purchased not just to furnish, but to personalize a home. Therefore, this dissertation focused on women's experiences with shopping for these types of products. It should also be noted that, as depicted in Figure 1, the largest percentage of those surveyed did not buy furnishings in 2010.



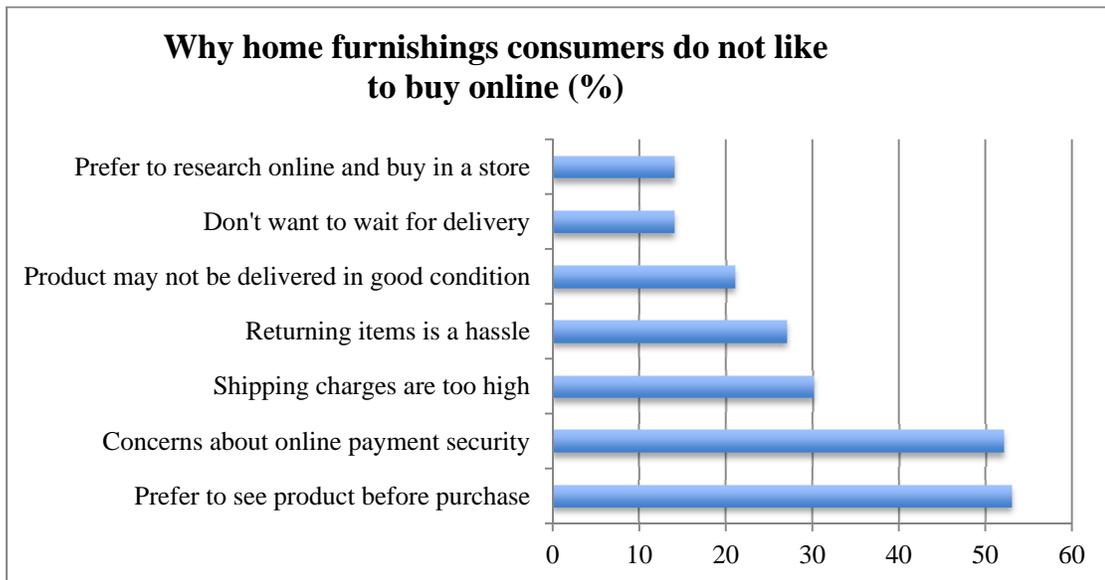
*Figure 1. Most Common Home Furnishings Purchases by Category: 2010.*  
 Source: French, D. (2011, April 2). Bedding and sofas bought the most in 2010.  
*Furniture Today, 2.*

The reasons for this are arguably a result of the downturn in the national economy, as the home furnishings industry has been steadily declining in sales since 2007 (French, 2011). This percentage not only includes those consumers who did not shop for home furnishings, but it also includes those who did shop, but did not buy for whatever reason. Consequently, one of the goals of this dissertation was to understand why this may occur within the home furnishings shopping experience.

Before the emergence of the World Wide Web, home furnishings consumers had to rely primarily on their local furniture stores and catalogs for information about available styles and products. However, the Internet has now become one of the most powerful sources of information, giving consumers a much more comprehensive view of products, and, in turn, they are entering retail stores armed with greater confidence (Horriagan, 2008; Wasserman & Richmond-Abbott, 2005; Zeng & Reinartz, 2003). As a result, the Internet has made the information search, as part of the decision-making process, much more efficient and effective. However, some think that the Internet may not be an appropriate tool for evaluating “high touch” products such as furniture (Browne, Durrett & Wetherbe, 2004; Zeng & Reinartz, 2003). While some products appeal primarily to one of the five senses, other products require a combination of sensory input to make a final decision. For example, the Internet may be a sufficient tool for judging the style, functionality, and price of a sofa, but the only way to judge how comfortable it will be is to actually sit on it.

Many studies of consumer behavior have examined the concept of product involvement, which refers to consumers’ feelings of inherent needs, values, interests, and

enthusiasm toward product categories (Horrigan, 2008; Molesworth & Suortti, 2001; Smith & Rupp, 2003; Zaichkowsky, 1985). Research has shown that the more expensive and involved a product is, the more consumers will engage in an active information search and will consider a greater variety of alternatives in their decision-making (Horrigan, 2008; Shim, Eastlick, Lotz, and Warrington, 2001). The extent to which the Internet facilitates this extensive search, specifically with regard to the home furnishings shopping process, is not known, but recent market research (French, 2011) has shown that the most common reason consumers do not purchase home furnishings online is that they need to see the product in person prior to purchase (see Figure 2).



*Figure 2. Reasons Why Home Furnishings Consumers Do Not Buy Online.*  
Source: French, D. (2009, October 17). Web proves to be key shopping, buying tool [Special supplement]. *Furniture Today*, 1-6.

Because women are the primary purchasers of items for the home (Davis, 1971; Silverstein & Sayre, 2009), it is important to understand how they experience online shopping, and what role the Internet plays in their decision-making process for home furnishings. Market research shows that women *are* using the Internet to shop for home furnishings products in lieu of visiting as many stores as they used to (Linville, 2000). Yet, as will be discussed in Chapter II, no academic research has specifically investigated this topic, though some studies have focused on the experience of online shopping in general.

### **Purpose and Objectives**

The goal of this research was to develop an in-depth understanding of the female experience of shopping for home furnishings and the role of the Internet in this process. During the winter of 2010, preliminary qualitative research with 15 female home furnishings consumers revealed several issues important to the decision-making process that were then used to inform the objectives of the present study. These issues included the participants' notions that the home is a place where they should be able to be as close to their true selves as possible. To that end, the participants reported that the furniture they choose helps them make the space more meaningful, and the furnishings are closely tied to how they see themselves and the roles they play in their families. Without that symbolic reinforcement of "family," the home lost much of its comforting and nurturing qualities. Due to their busy lifestyles and time constraints, many participants chose to use the Internet to search for home furnishings product information, compare prices, and narrow down their choices. However, participants felt that the need to "touch and feel"

the product before purchase was more important than any convenience that purchasing online would offer, but using the Internet to search for information helped them feel more confident and knowledgeable to take the next step in the decision-making process in the store.

Based on the preliminary study as well as the literature on the topic, three primary objectives guided the current study and were used to address the purpose: (a) to examine the concept of “home” within the female home furnishings shopping experience; (b) to explore the use of multiple channels within the home furnishings shopping process; and (c) to investigate the meanings that home furnishings have for female consumers.

Understanding what drives individuals to make buying decisions has been attempted by many researchers. However, little to no academic research has addressed the home furnishings consumer’s decision-making process, and what role, if any, the Internet plays in this process. Therefore, the importance of the home and the home furnishings decision-making process was explored from the participant’s perspective.

### **The Methodological Framework**

A methodological framework that allows for an exploration of concepts relevant to the understanding of female home furnishings consumers was used based on phenomenological notions of lived experience. According to Merleau-Ponty (1962), a phenomenological worldview tells us something about the way humans experience life, and he argued that phenomenological science allows us to develop a deeper understanding of human existence as we experience it in everyday life. Van Manen (1990) states that lived experience is the starting point and ending point of

phenomenological research, and the purpose of phenomenological reflection is to try to grasp the meaning behind a particular behavior or phenomenon. Because the methodological process of phenomenology begins with studying lived experience, rather than scientific processes (Kvale, 1996), shopping for home furnishings is examined as a lived experience in the current study. Moreover, the phenomenological approach provided the opportunity to better understand the meaning of this experience for female consumers. Thus, in asking the question, *What is it like to shop for home furnishings?* a phenomenological framework was necessary to reveal the essence of the experience as understood by the participants.

Two methods were used to address the specific objectives and to reveal the meanings of participants' lived experience. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant to better understand the link between home furnishings and the self, the shopping process, and the role of the Internet in this process. As part of the interview process, observation was used to explore participants' online shopping process. That is, participants were asked to illustrate how they use the Internet to shop for home furnishings at different home furnishings retail websites. Finally, participants were asked to keep an online journal to chronicle their home furnishings shopping experiences, which provided insight into their decision-making process.

Understanding how consumers make a decision is a challenging task because there are many complex factors that affect what we buy, when we buy, where we buy, and why we buy products, and this challenge extends to the online decision-making process as well. Some researchers (Cowart & Goldsmith, 2007; Erdem & Swait, 1998;

Kahn, 1995; Kim & Lennon, 2008; McAlister & Pessemier, 1982; Nelson, 1974; Shim, Eastlick, Lotz, & Warrington, 2001; Zaichkowsky, 1985) have tried to explain and predict consumer behavior through economics-driven models but have failed to account for the many emotional and social influences that affect the buying process (Solomon, 2009). Moreover, researchers (Bettman, Johnson, & Payne, 1991; Bunn, 1993; Dempsey, 1978; Ho, Tang, & Bell, 1998; Howard & Sheth, 1969) have typically looked at the buying process as a rational one in which consumers systematically weigh the advantages and disadvantages of each alternative. Consequently, the majority of the academic research conducted on this topic has been of a quantitative nature. However, consumers do not always follow a logical progression through these steps, and the decision-making process is shaped by a number of other factors, including marketing efforts, socio-cultural influences, psychological factors, personal questions, post-decision behavior, and experience (Dittmar, Long, & Meek, 2004; Hausman, 2000; Tadajewski & Wagner-Tsukamoto, 2006; Wolfinbarger & Gilly, 2001). Qualitative research can help to uncover some of the reasons why consumers may or may not follow the entire decision-making process, or why they might skip some steps in the process altogether (Friend & Thompson, 2003; Thompson, Pollio, & Locander, 1994; Wolfinbarger & Gilly, 2001).

### **Scope and Significance**

Home furnishings are an important part of consumer expenditures because they are used for more than just their practical functions in the home. Home furnishings are also used to express a person's identity, or a "family self" in cases of more than one person living in the home (Belk, 1988). Because women are typically the ones who make

the purchasing decisions for the home, this study focused on the shopping process for home furnishings as experienced by women. This dissertation sought to understand the complex nature of shopping for home furnishings and how the participants experience the decision-making process.

Overall, many women find the shopping experience not only practical, but fun and socially satisfying (Babin, Darden, & Griffin, 1994; Dholakia, 1999; Eisenberg, 2009; Silverstein and Sayre, 2009), and that sentiment is extending to online situations as well (Leiblum, 2001; Slyke, Comunale, & Belanger, 2002; Sorce, Perotti, & Widrick, 2005). However, it should be noted that the term “shopping” is used frequently throughout the extant literature to describe how consumers search for and purchase goods and services online, thus “shopping” is often used as an umbrella term that encompasses the entire decision-making process. This includes the information search, the physical act of going online, browsing or window shopping, comparing prices or evaluating alternatives, brand recognition, security concerns, buying, and consumer satisfaction/dissatisfaction after the purchase. However, for the purposes of this dissertation, “shopping” is used to describe the subjective process of seeking product information and evaluating alternatives, whereas “buying” is the objective act of actual purchase. One of the reasons this distinction is important is that some consumers use the Internet for information gathering but prefer to buy offline (French, 2009; French, 2011; Horrigan, 2008; Wasserman & Richmond-Abbott, 2005; Zeng & Reinartz, 2003). Moreover, this distinction is particularly important when it comes to different product categories — especially when the product is viewed as a high-involvement, big-ticket

purchase such as home furnishings.

This dissertation provides a detailed study of the decision-making process in order to yield clearer insights regarding gender issues in home furnishings consumer behavior, such as the role(s) the female plays in the family dynamic, shopping motivation and enjoyment, and the consumer power that females frequently exhibit online (Catalyst, 2011; Foroohar, 2010; Silverstein & Sayre, 2009). Accordingly, if online retailers have a better understanding of what their customers are using their website for or what triggers customers' decision to buy, retailers could more effectively tailor their websites and marketing efforts to meet their customers' needs. Because this study relates to the *experience* of the participants, the act of "shopping" includes all aspects of the decision-making process, not just product purchase.

By exploring the home furnishings shopping experience, this research sheds light on the online decision-making process for home furnishings consumers. Experiences of participants in the online shopping environment are considered in relation to their overall goals in furnishing their homes and their perceptions of the importance of the objects they choose. This is a subject area that has been largely neglected by academic research, yet because of the home's significance in the human experience, it is a topic in need of exploration. Additionally, this study provides an avenue for further study of the use of home furnishings in the creation of an extended self (Belk, 1988), as well as the complex nature of shopping for and constructing an individual's personal vision of the home.

Considering the importance of home furnishings to consumers, the lack of academic research regarding consumer behavior is a major gap in our overall knowledge.

Additionally, there is a need to address the emotional and subjective factors that influence home furnishings shopping and buying online, a gap that can be filled by qualitative approaches to the topic. As this dissertation illustrates, research about consumers' perceptions and experiences through in-depth interviews can yield rich information about their shopping preferences and obstacles, which would be useful for retailers, and particularly those looking to enhance their online presence.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I discussed how home furnishings are an important part of the human experience because of the role such items play in expressing self. I also discussed how the shopping experience is a central focus of this study, and how the Internet is influencing the decision-making process for many consumers, though some choose not to buy products online. Women are primarily responsible for almost all purchases for the home, but how they experience the shopping process for home furnishings is unknown. I also discussed why a phenomenological framework is therefore needed to gain insight into the home furnishings shopping process, and described the methods that will be used to explore this topic. Finally, I explained why home furnishings are an important part of consumer expenditures, why the current study was needed, and why it makes a significant contribution to the literature. In the next chapter, the research purpose and questions are framed by a review of the relevant literature.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **THE LITERATURE THAT INFORMS THE RESEARCH**

This chapter explores the body of literature that informs this dissertation. The goal of this study was to understand what it is like to shop for home furnishings. To that end, in this chapter, the research purpose is first situated within a sociological framework, in order to understand how the meaning of products and our identities are constructed socially, how consumer power in America is on the rise and how the Internet is changing consumer culture, as well as how gender roles have constructed the concept of consumer power specifically for females. Next, an examination of the literature that frames the shopping process as an experience, the decision-making process within that experience, and the role of the Internet in changing the traditional channels used in decision-making is provided. Furthermore, how these concepts have been tested primarily with models such as the Theory of Planned Behavior is discussed. Finally, the literature that explores the meanings of products, specifically products for the home, and how women experience the shopping process is examined.

#### **A Sociological Theoretical Framework**

The behavior of consumers has been studied by researchers in a variety of disciplines (Holbrook, 1987; MacInnis & Folkes, 2010). Social scientists, in particular, have been studying human behavior for many years using two basic approaches: the micro level of studying individual behavior and the macro level of studying societal

behavior (Glock & Nicosia, 1964). Traditionally, the term “consumer behavior” has been attributed to the study of the behavior of single individuals, and the term “consumption behavior” has been used to describe the behavior of “the mass or aggregate of individuals,” which is often studied by economic analysts. Sociology has historically given more attention to exploring individual consumer behavior, such as the focus of this dissertation.

Glock and Nicosia (1964) defined the study of consumer behavior as “a focus on the decision processes of the individual consumer or consuming unit, such as a family” (p. 51). However, social scientists have largely neglected the study of home furnishings consumers, even though these consumers can function both as individuals and as family units. Studying how consumers shop and buy home furnishings is arguably important at both micro and macro sociological levels. At the societal level, there is also very little academic research that attempts to understand the consumption behavior of home furnishings consumers. Factors such as social mobility, lifestyles, ethnicity, cultural values, family dynamics, and disposable income are certainly relevant and valuable to a discussion about home furnishings consumption, and such knowledge is helpful in providing a context for consumer behavior studies (Nicosia & Mayer, 1976).

It is important to study the behavior of consumption groups to be able to predict future behavior or purchase patterns, as consumer research has traditionally focused on the decision-making process of the individual. However, this study seeks to understand the consumer at a micro-consumer behavior level in order to better understand the individual experience of shopping for home furnishings. While Glock and Nicosia (1964)

argue that sociologists should be equally concerned with macro-level studies, they admit that at its best, macro-level research can only partially explain behavior. In-depth (micro-level) research is required to interpret relationships between variables, as well as sociological and psychological considerations, which are addressed in this study through the use of a phenomenological approach.

Micro-level studies of consumer behavior address the sociocultural, experiential, symbolic and ideological aspects of consumption (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Furthermore, sociological studies can investigate individual changes in values, attitudes, and behavior that result in a consumer culture (Zukin & Maguire, 2004). This manner of looking at research led to a theoretical perspective known as Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), which contributes to consumer research by illuminating the cultural dimensions of the consumption cycle. CCT views culture as described by Geertz (1983), “the very fabric of experience, meaning and action” (p. 145), and calls for consumer researchers to broaden their focus to investigate “the neglected experiential, social and cultural dimensions of consumption in context” (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 869). Moreover, the sociological approach that frames Consumer Culture Theory strives to link individual meanings to different levels of cultural processes and structures in the context of the marketplace, and it highlights the concept that consumption is not plainly rational. This approach was especially useful for the current research as it sought to understand the meaning of the shopping experience for home furnishings consumers and the meaning that those home furnishings have for them. As this study investigates the sociocultural, experiential, symbolic and ideological aspects of shopping for home furnishings, a micro-

level sociological framework was most appropriate.

Although several disciplines have influenced the study of consumer behavior (Holbrook, 1987; MacInnis & Folkes, 2010), a sociological perspective in consumer research is useful for the current study in that it offers insight into how human beings construct meaning from the objects with which they choose to surround themselves. According to Rochberg-Halton (1982), theoretical interest in this topic centers around two approaches: symbolic interactionism and structuralism. According to both theories, meaning forms the very basis of society with the sign or symbol as the basis of meaning; a person acts toward items based on the meaning those things have for that person, and these meanings are constructed through interaction with others (Damhorst, 2005; Johnson, Yoo, Kim & Lennon, 2008; Kaiser, 1997; Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992).

Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992) proposed that the way in which people dress communicates something about age, gender, social class, school affiliation, or religion, but ultimately it depends on each person's subjective interpretations of those items of dress to construe meaning. Furthermore, meanings that a person attributes to various outward characteristics of dress are based on his/her socialization within a particular cultural context and on the improvisations the person exercises when applying learned meanings of dress within specific social situations (Johnson, Yoo, Kim & Lennon, 2008; Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992; Roach-Higgins, Eicher, & Johnson, 1995). These concepts can be easily transferred to the notion of the home and what it contains, communicating something about the people who live in it (Belk, 1988), and that meanings about the home are culturally dependent.

Several researchers assert that individual men and women experience consumption as a project of forming, and expressing, identity (Belk, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Damhorst, 2005; Moynagh & Worsley, 2002; Nava, 1997; Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992; Zukin & Maguire, 2004). Just as one's dress is said to be influenced by the culture or society in which one lives (Belk, 1988; Campbell, 1996; Damhorst, 2005; Roach-Higgins, Eichen, & Johnson, 1995), a person's home can be said to be influenced in the same way. Blumer (1969) proposed that "the meanings of things are directly attributable to the social interaction one has with others" (p. 4). Moynagh and Worsley (2002) support this idea and describe how consumers are driven to create an identity for themselves in relation to others. As the authors state,

People make statements as to who they want to be through their appearance, their homes, their cars and their clothes. People use consumption to give themselves a sense of belonging and an affinity with others who make similar statements to themselves. (p. 294)

Similarly, Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992) assert that while identities are uniquely personal, they are at the same time completely social because they are socially constructed. Shopping, therefore, is an important part of the consumption process as it entails choosing items that the consumer feels best reflects himself or herself within a specific culture or society. Because the items hold much symbolic meaning, the process of shopping for those products also has meaning, which should be explored. This study attempted to gain a deeper, more holistic understanding of what it is like to shop for home furnishings and relied on a sociological framework to situate this study within the

context of the American household of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This context opened the doors to a relevant discussion about changing consumer power, including online power, and the female consumer's power in the home, which is discussed in the next two sections.

### **Consumer Power in Online America**

Consumption is a significant and growing part of American culture (O'Guinn & Belk, 1989; Zukin & Maguire, 2004; Zukin, 2004). Since World War II, the role of "citizen" in the United States has shifted from that of "citizen as worker" to "citizen as consumer" (Zureik & Mowshowitz, 2005, p. 48). This shift has largely been due to the expanded availability of consumer credit, which increased from 2.5% of U.S. gross domestic product in 1943 to 18.5% in 2003 (Zureik & Mowshowitz, 2005). Power has steadily shifted from the unions to the individual consumer, and the U.S. economy is now largely dependent on its citizens' consumption. Some social theorists have even pointed out that consumption is presented not as an option but as a duty of the consumer-citizen (Baudrillard, 1998; Bourdieu, 1984). One example of this patriotic duty to consume was days after the tragedy of 9/11/01, when then President George W. Bush encouraged Americans to "Enjoy America's great destination spots. Get down to Disney World in Florida. Take your families and enjoy life, the way we want it to be enjoyed" (Bush, 2001, para. 21).

But what *kind* of power do consumers have? French and Raven (1959) provided one of the best-known classifications of five different bases of social power, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

*Types of Social Power*

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<u>Type</u>	<u>Description</u>
Reward power	The ability to reinforce a desired behavior by either creating positive consequences or removing negative ones.
Coercive power	The ability to punish unwanted behavior.
Legitimate power	Based on an inferior actor's internalized values and roles that prescribe that the more powerful actor has a legitimate right to influence the inferior party and that the latter has an obligation to accept this influence.
Referent power	Occurs when an actor serves as an object of identification for others, usually as a consequence of respect and esteem.
Expert power	Based on one actor's assumption that another actor is better informed. May make the inferior party accept the expert's information as given facts and act accordingly.

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Source: French, J., & Raven, B. (1959). The bases of social power. In D. Cartwright (Ed.), *Studies of Social Power* (pp. 150-165). Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research.

In the context of the consumer-retailer relationship, consumers have reward and coercive power, as they are able to reward or punish a retailer with their purchase decisions, as well as their word-of-mouth recommendations or complaints (Hirschman, 1970; Kucuk, 2008). Consumers also have legitimate power in directly influencing marketing, both in product and price policy, as well as expert power, based on the possession of information on quality and price in markets (Pitt, Berthon, Watson, & Zinkhan, 2002; Rezaabakhsh, Bornemann, Hansen, & Schrader, 2006). According to

Denegri-Knott, Zwick, and Schroeder (2006), consumer empowerment occurs when the consumer “is free to act as a rational and self-interested agent. Consumer power is magnified when consumers combine resources and skills to make producers do what they would not do otherwise” (p. 963).

In the “traditional” economy (pre-Internet), suppliers had more power over the market process because they were typically in control of the information about their products, prices, services, and terms of trade, and that information can be biased toward the suppliers’ interests. Consumers often had to rely on the suppliers’ statements, making the supplier the “expert” (Rezabakhsh et al., 2006). Furthermore, consumers’ ability to affect change via positive or negative responses was minimal unless they formed large consumer groups, which was certainly more of a barrier in a pre-Internet marketplace.

Consumer power has been changing, however, since the rise of Internet communication, with one of the trends being the shift from producer power to consumer power. Internet technology has helped consumers to realize a higher level of market power and exercise influence over which businesses they do (and do not) want to support (Kucuk, 2008; Lindbeck & Wikstrom, 1999; Moynagh & Worsley, 2002; Pires, Stanton, & Rita, 2006; Pitt et al., 2002; Rezabakhsh et al., 2006; Zureik & Mowshowitz, 2005). As Murphy (2000) states: “We’re witnessing the greatest transition of power in history, one that will take power away from the mightiest corporations and social institutions and give it to ... consumers” (p. 1). The dramatic increase in the quality and quantity of information available online is a significant source of increased consumer power as it is available anytime and anywhere. Consumers are now able to trade product information

and evaluations with each other regardless of time or location, and they can form communication networks based on shared interests regardless of geography (Lindbeck & Wikstrom, 1999; Pitt et al., 2002; Rezabakhsh et al., 2006). Consequently, these changes put more power in the hands of consumers than suppliers.

Mass customization has also transformed consumers' attitudes regarding choice, and the Internet is becoming a key vehicle for helping them choose (Lindbeck & Wikstrom, 1999; Moynagh & Worsley, 2002). According to Pires, Stanton, and Rita (2006), the degree of consumer empowerment depends on the number and quality of available choices, along with "consumer market knowledge, a consumer's ability to search for and gather new market information, and a consumer's ability to take advantage of alternative value propositions" (p. 939). The authors suggest that the Internet has provided all of these opportunities for consumers, and the more consumers become comfortable with online technology, the more power consumers will hold in the marketplace.

As mentioned previously, consumer power benefits greatly from consumer-opinion platforms. Not only are consumers able to better control the amount of information they can acquire about a product, but Internet culture also allows them to participate in electronic word-of-mouth communication with friends, family, and even complete strangers (Denegri-Knott, Zwick, & Schroeder, 2006; Pitt et al., 2002; Rezabakhsh et al., 2006). In addition to providing one-to-one communication among consumers, the Internet also fosters one-to-many and many-to-many communication, regardless of time, distance or location. This allows consumers to not only address

product recommendations or complaints, but also participate in discussion forums regarding unethical or harmful business practices relative to specific retailers, companies, or brands, which gives the consumer more power to affect change (Kucuk, 2008). Some studies have indicated that consumers read these Internet communications primarily to save time during the search phase of the decision-making process (Chang, Cheung, & Lai, 2005; Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2004; Horrigan, 2008; Kohli, Davaraj, & Mahmood, 2004; Soopramanien, Fildes, & Robertson, 2007), and this in turn has influenced corporate decision processes. Lindbeck and Wikstrom (1999) suggest that the increased information level of online consumers has three major implications: (a) comparative price information allows households to save money and increase price competition among suppliers; (b) households are better informed as to how well the available product varieties fit their individual preferences; and (c) consumers' increased information about the quality of products lend market success to high-quality products and push low-quality products out of the market in the long run (pp. 12-13).

Based on these studies, the consumer is clearly exercising more power in today's retailing world. This is especially relevant to the present study, as home furnishings consumers have more product choice and information available to them than ever before. Whereas in the past consumers had to rely on their local home furnishings store to supply new products and set trends and price points, consumers can now shop for home furnishings in virtually any place on the globe. So how does having more power in the process of shopping for home furnishings affect their experiences? Does America's consumer culture influence the meanings of one's home and the items consumers choose

to furnish it with? This dissertation sought to understand the deeper meanings behind experiences consumers have in shopping for home furnishings, and how the concept of increased consumer power may impact the shopping process.

### **Female Consumer Power in the Home**

The power of women as consumers is also a relevant sociological consideration for the present study. A study by Boston Consulting Group (Catalyst, 2011) revealed that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, women are responsible for \$12 trillion of the overall \$18.4 trillion in global consumer spending. More specifically, women are responsible for between 75-94% of all purchases for the home (Catalyst, 2011; Scott, 1976; Silverstein & Sayre, 2009). The reality that many women have joined the workforce, become single parents, or are now highly educated will undoubtedly influence the results of this (or any) study, so we must not overlook the cultural context of participants' experiences. In this section, I begin with an examination of the home as women's particular "domain." I then discuss how women's roles have (or have not) changed, and how societal changes have influenced women's consumer power in the home.

A quote by Simone de Beauvoir (1959) raises appropriate questions for the present study:

But it will be asked at once: how did all this begin? It is easy to see that the duality of the sexes, like any duality, gives rise to conflict. And doubtless the winner will assume the status of absolute. But why should man have won from the start? It seems possible that women could have won the victory; or that the outcome of the conflict might never have been decided. How is it that this world has always belonged to the men and that things have begun to change only recently? Is this change a good thing? Will it bring about an equal sharing of the world between men and women? (p. 17)

How did women become responsible for the home and children while men provided the resources? How, and in what kinds of situations, do women exercise power? How do women help to create, shape, and change the world in which they live? There has been some debate suggesting the existence of truly egalitarian societies in world history, but the predominate model finds women excluded from political and economic activities and assigned less authority and influence in their roles as wives and mothers (Coontz, 1992; Rosaldo & Lamphere, 1974; Sanday, 1974). These designations stem from early forms of human civilizations, which found it advantageous to differentiate the activities of men and women. Hunting large animals and defending land or property could be dangerous and involve extensive travel, so it is possible that women were excluded from these activities because they had to be able to produce milk for the children to ensure survival (Rosaldo, 1974). Sanday (1974) suggested a similar explanation by stating that traditionally, a woman's energy was spent on reproduction, which limited her energy available for providing sustenance and defense; those responsibilities fell to men, which gave them the power of gaining and controlling resources.

Despite this perspective that "male" equals control and dominance, and "female" equals support and caring, it is unclear why these early roles should remain with us today. In fact, women today have *added* to, not exchanged, responsibilities within the family unit. Instead of sharing roles more equally with males, women tend to still have primary responsibility for the home and children, regardless of whether they are also working full-time to bring in resources (Davis, 1976; Green & Cunningham, 1975; Hochschild, 1989; Pleck, 1983; Scott, 1976; Szinovacz, 1980; Townsend & O'Neil, 1990; White, 1999;

Wiersma, 1990; Zhang & Farley, 1995).

In the early 1900s, women were beginning to join the industrial workforce and concurrently gaining social power through trade union activity, the campaign to secure nationwide prohibition, and the women's suffrage movement (Searles & Mickish, 1984). Regardless, social change was met with great resistance and fear, and some civil court judges still defined females as the property of males and thereby forfeited civil and personal rights with marriage. Feminist historians emphasize the influence of department stores and supermarkets for strengthening women's independence (Bowlby, 1985, 2000; Nava 1997). By providing a reason —shopping — for women to appear unescorted in public, as well as arranging safe spaces like restrooms and tea rooms where women could gather or sit alone, department stores also made it possible for women to leave the domestic space of the home and play a much more important role as consumer (Wolff, 1985).

As the feminist movement gained strength in the 1970s, so did the role of the female as a consumer. During that time, Green and Cunningham (1975) explored the changing perception of female's roles as applied to purchasing goods and services, including home furnishings, for the family. Women who were considered more "liberal" (those who had joined the workforce, or who had greater autonomy in their marriages) had greater authority when it came to purchasing decisions for the home (Green & Cunningham, 1975, p. 331). Moreover, regardless of whether the families in that study were considered conservative, moderate, or liberal, women played a strong role in purchasing decisions regarding furniture. Similarly, a study by Shuptrine and Samuelson

(1976), which was a partial replica of an earlier study (Davis, 1971), confirmed the original study's findings that, while men played the dominant role in purchasing automobiles, women played the dominant role in home furnishings purchases. These studies show the increasing place of women as the driving force behind consumption, including home furnishings purchases, and that traditional descriptions of women as simple housewife are outdated and inadequate in today's society and economy (Catalyst, 2011; Davis, 1976; Scott, 1976; Silverstein & Sayre, 2009).

According to Silverstein and Sayre (2009), "women now drive the world economy," controlling about \$18 trillion in annual consumer spending, creating a growth market that is larger than China and India combined (p. 46). Income and labor statistics indicate that women are working and earning more than ever before (Catalyst, 2011). Education is a factor both in women's incomes and their spending habits, as higher education leads to higher median salaries as well as increased expenditures. Green and Cunningham's (1975) early research shows that women in upper income families enjoyed more decision-making power than their middle or lower income counterparts, while later research suggests that most Internet shoppers are also college educated and are of a higher socio-economic status (Yang & Wu, 2007).

More specific to the topic of this dissertation, Silverstein and Sayre (2009) posit that women account for approximately 94% of all purchases for the home. However, very little research has attempted to understand what it is like for them to shop for home furnishings. Women still feel "vastly underserved" when it comes to both the workplace and the marketplace (Silverstein & Sayre, 2009, p. 48; Scott, 1976). Women feel constant

pressure in regards to time, work, home and family, and the majority feel that businesses should better support the need for products, services, and solutions that are designed specifically for them and marketed directly to them (Foroohar, 2010; Scott, 1976; Silverstein & Sayre, 2009).

A sociological perspective provides an appropriate framework for addressing the sociocultural, experiential, symbolic and ideological aspects of the home furnishings shopping experience. Furthermore, this framework helps to uncover the meanings that participants place on the shopping process and the items they choose to bring into their homes. The introduction and subsequent adoption of Internet technology has given consumers, especially women, more social power than ever before. The reality of women's roles, especially within a family dynamic, is that they are responsible for not only meeting their own needs, but are still taking on the role of majority housekeeper, grocery shopper, and interior decorator (Herrmann, 1995). In spite of such trends, academic research has neglected to focus on home furnishings consumers and particularly the shopping process as experienced by women. Based on the literature discussed here, it is fair to suggest that women would greatly appreciate any time-saving or convenience benefits that shopping online may provide, including during the home furnishings shopping process. Therefore, the sociological framework is useful for exploring their decision-making process as part of the overall shopping experience. The next section discusses shopping as an experience, including motivations for shopping, the decision-making process, and how the Internet is part of this process.

## **The Shopping Process as an Experience**

While early cultural critics of consumerism labeled shopping as a superficial, inconsequential activity, a growing number of social scientists have shown that shopping is a multifaceted exchange experience that is steeped in meaning (Berger, 2005; Cook, Yamin, & McCarthy, 1996; Nava, 1997; Oh & Ardit, 2000). As an experience, shopping for products is “deep, creative, laden with responsibilities, and richly polysemic with diverse meanings” (Oh & Ardit, 2000, p. 78). It is with this perspective that I review the literature that explores the shopping experience, including consumers’ shopping motivations, the decision-making process within the shopping experience, how the Internet has influenced the decision-making process, how these concepts have been tested in the extant literature, and how they influence this dissertation about the home furnishings shopping experience.

### **Shopping: What Are We Really Getting?**

It is quite an understatement to say that to understand what, why, where, when, and how we buy is a very complex undertaking. Sociological theorist Max Weber (1958) stated that Calvinism and “the Protestant ethic” were the driving forces behind capitalism. He said the Protestant ethic provided a hard-working workforce, and that it justified consumption as something that God wants people to do. While Weber’s ideas suggest a religious or sacred nature to the act of consumption, Baudrillard (1998), on the other hand, argued that there is an element of compulsion or sense of duty in all forms of consumption. Douglas (1997) took still another perspective and posited that social relationships are the determining factor in consumption preferences and behaviors, while

Berger (2005) states that one reason we shop is “to have our existence acknowledged” (p. 67).

The concept of “shopping” has a gendered nature to it. Nava (1997) argued that the negative perceptions that our culture has of shopping behavior is largely due to the notion that shopping is a practice that has been and continues to be dominated by women. As mentioned previously, women in the early 1900s were increasingly seen shopping in department stores, as men were primarily confined to their places of employment. Nava (1997) suggests that the lack of supervision and women’s expanding freedoms provoked men’s fear and anxiety toward shopping. Thus, it is argued that the gendered nature of shopping is at least partially responsible for its marginalization as a “serious” field of study (Nava, 1997; Oh & Ardit, 2000). However, many researchers have shown that shopping can be an essential part of the human experience (Arnold & Reynolds, 2003; Babin, Darden & Griffin, 1994; Berger, 2005; Belk, 1988; Carpenter, Moore, & Fairhurst, 2003; Cook, Yamin, & McCarthy, 1996; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Friend & Thompson, 2003; McCracken, 1988; Spies, Hesse, & Loesch, 1997; Thompson, Pollio, & Lacander, 1994; Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1990).

It is important to note that shopping is only one part of the consumption process, and it is an activity that many avoid (Hawks & Ackerman, 1990; Moye & Giddings, 2002; Turley & Chebat, 2002). Thus, one way of exploring the phenomenon of shopping is to examine the motivations that explain why consumers engage in shopping behavior. Research about shopping has often focused on the utilitarian aspects of the shopping experience (Arnold & Reynolds, 2003; Babin, Darden, & Griffin, 1994; Batra & Ahtola,

1991). However, when Tauber (1972) examined the fundamental motivations of shopping behaviors through depth interviews, he found that shopping behavior is motivated by a variety of psycho-social needs beyond those related to the need for the product being purchased. Those needs included several personal and social needs, including the opportunity to enact a culturally prescribed role, provision of self-gratification, learning about new trends, fashions and innovations, obtaining physical exercise, social interaction outside the home, and obtaining increases in social status (Tauber, 1972). Thereafter, hedonic motivations for shopping were explored and defined by Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) as “those facets of consumer behavior that relate to the multisensory, fantasy or emotive aspects of one’s experience with products” (p. 92). In other words, hedonic motivations for shopping include experiencing fun, amusement, fantasy, and sensory stimulation (Arnold & Reynolds, 2003; Babin, Darden, & Griffin, 1994). Although studies have explored the shopping motivations of consumers of various products both offline and online (Arnold & Reynolds, 2003; Babin, Darden, & Griffin, 1994; Beldona, Morrison, & O’Leary, 2005; Rohm & Swaminathan, 2004; To, Liao, & Lin, 2007), research has not explored the motivations that home furnishings consumers have in shopping for this particular product category, even though home furnishings are a necessary part of every consumer’s home.

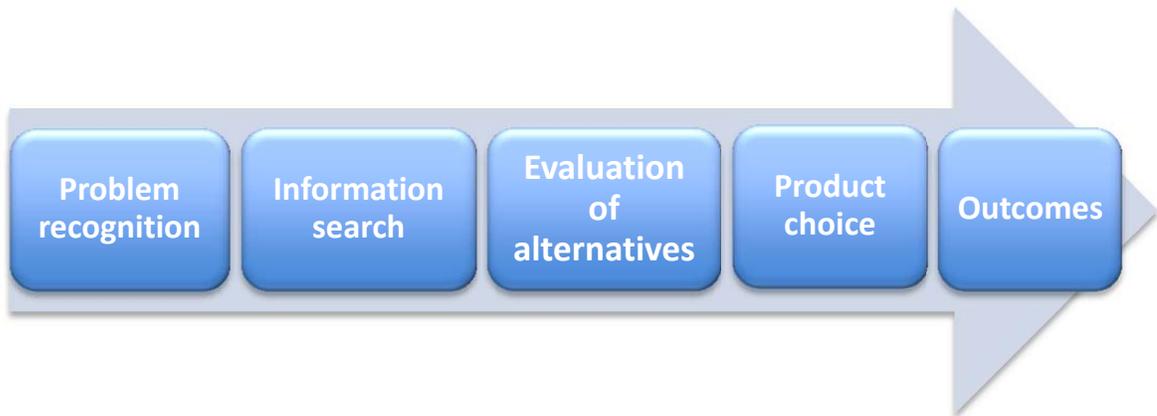
Women in particular view shopping as both practical *and* recreational. Jansen-Verbeke (1987) explored the concept of shopping as a leisure activity for women and found that shopping in an attractive and diversified environment is important to making it a fun activity for women. Jansen-Verbeke (1987) also states that females’ shopping

intentions are complex, as they involve the following constructs simultaneously: buying, window-shopping, price/goods comparison, idea forming, and even recreational exercise (p. 73). While these constructs were imagined in a traditional shopping situation for Jansen-Verbeke's study, it is interesting to note that with the exception of recreational exercise, the Internet arguably has the ability to perform all of those functions faster and more effectively than a traditional brick and mortar retailer. However, the Internet *is* used for recreational experience, just not recreational exercise. I will return to the topic of motivations and constraints of online shopping later in the chapter.

### **Decision-making within the Shopping Experience**

Much of the extant literature on shopping deals with consumers' decision-making processes. Solomon (2009) describes the decision-making process as a series of steps leading up to a purchase. The five steps, as shown in Figure 3, are: (1) problem recognition, (2) information search, (3) evaluation of alternatives, (4) product choice, and (5) outcomes/post-purchase evaluation. A consumer purchase is a response to a perceived problem, and problem recognition occurs when a consumer acknowledges the difference between his or her actual state and an ideal state. That recognition leads a consumer to seek information to solve the problem. The second step in the process, information search, is the process by which consumers "survey the environment for appropriate data to make a reasonable decision" (Solomon, 2009, p. 330). Information sources can be both internal and external: internal information is derived from personal experience and memory of product alternatives; external information is obtained through observation, advertisements, and other people. Evaluation of alternatives is the step in the

decision-making process by which consumers narrow down the purchase options by deciding which criteria are most important and which option involves the least amount of risk. Finally, the consumer decides on which product will best solve the existing problem.



*Figure 3. Steps in the Decision-Making Process.*

Source: Solomon, M. R. (2009). *Consumer behavior: Buying, having and being*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall.

Although consumers do follow these steps in the process for many purchases, it does not explain *all* consumer decision-making. Consumers are not always rational in their purchases, as evidenced in cases involving impulse buying or “variety seeking” behavior (Kahn, 1995; McAlister & Pessemier, 1982; Solomon, 2009). However, as a general rule, consumers tend to search more when the purchase is important or expensive (Erdem & Swait, 1998; Nelson, 1974; Shim, Eastlick, Lotz, & Warrington, 2001; Zaichkowsky, 1985; Zeng & Reinartz, 2003).

Purchases are driven in part by how confident the consumer feels regarding his or her decision, and this confidence begins at the information search step of the decision-

making process (Loibl, Cho, Diekmann, & Batte, 2009). Information search has been described as the degree of attention, perception, and effort directed toward obtaining information related to consumer products and services (Beatty & Smith, 1987).

Consumers with high confidence in their abilities to judge products report significantly longer information searches than those who feel they need the opinions of others (Newman & Staelin, 1971). Furthermore, in evaluating alternatives, consumers' decisions often hinge on perceived quality (Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1995). If product quality is not easy to evaluate, consumers perceive a higher risk in the purchase of that product. Consequently, consumers use familiar brands or stores to help mitigate risk (Carpenter, Moore, & Fairhurst, 2003; Chen-Yu & Kincaid, 2001).

As the current study explores the shopping experience for home furnishings consumers, it addresses whether the participants feel confident in their buying decisions, and whether the amount of information to which they have access affects their shopping and buying confidence. Moreover, when evaluating products such as upholstery, which can be difficult to ascertain in terms of quality, it is necessary to consider how confident consumers feel in their purchasing decisions and with the shopping process as a whole.

### **The Internet's Influence on the Decision-Making Process**

Before the emergence of the World Wide Web, home furnishings consumers had to rely primarily on their local furniture stores for information about available styles and products. Studies from a few decades ago indicate that pre-purchase information search was a relatively limited activity for consumers, even in the case of "major durables" such as furniture (Claxton, Fry, & Portis, 1974, p. 35; Katona & Mueller, 1955; Newman &

Staelin, 1971). Furthermore, consumers had to rely on information that was often biased or incomplete (Lindbeck & Wikstrom, 1999; Moynagh & Worsley, 2002; Zeng & Reinartz, 2003). In the case of home furnishings, in the past the average consumer visited six stores before making a purchase (French, 2011). However, traditional methods of shopping have continued to meet more resistance as the consumer base has gotten older, busier, and increasingly time-crunched (Burke, 2002; Cowart & Goldsmith, 2007; Moyer & Giddings, 2002). Consequently, the widespread adoption of the personal computer and Internet access has changed the way consumers engage in the shopping process. From books and music to pets and automobiles, the Internet has changed how many Americans shop for a variety of products (Bleeker, 1995; Kim & Lennon, 2008; Horrigan, 2008). As a result, between 78-82% of shoppers now use multiple channels throughout the decision-making process (Burke, 2002; Charlton, 2010; Horrigan, 2008; Zeng & Reinartz, 2003).

Online shopping motivations include both utilitarian and hedonic dimensions (Childers, Carr, Peck, & Carson, 2001; Cowart & Goldsmith, 2007; Wang, 2010; Wolfenbarger & Gilly, 2001), so what are the major benefits of shopping online? Perhaps most importantly, even for those consumers who do not *buy* online, the Internet has become one of the most powerful sources of information for consumers, giving them a much more comprehensive view of the product, and they are entering retail stores armed with much more confidence (Burke, 2002; Zeng & Reinartz, 2003). By lowering search costs for consumers, the Internet can improve the quality of their purchase decisions. Freedom from physical contact with sales staff has also been found to positively affect the use of the Internet for information search (Jepsen, 2007). Market research suggests

that home furnishings consumers now only visit an average of 2.5 stores before making a purchase (French, 2009). Because the Internet has made the information search step of the decision-making process much more efficient and effective, it may take the place of more traditional pre-purchase information searches, such as visiting several stores to determine available styles and compare prices (Jepsen, 2007; Kim & Park, 2005; Peterson & Merino, 2003). Other studies have shown that Internet shoppers like the convenience of shopping anytime and anywhere, the ability to purchase unusual items, the ease of comparison shopping, and in some cases, lower prices (Browne, Durrett, & Wetherbe, 2004; Burke, 2002; Horrigan, 2008; Jepsen, 2007; Wolfinbarger & Gilly, 2001; Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Malhotra, 2000).

Not only is shopping online an efficient way to browse products and compare prices, but it is also an enjoyable experience for many consumers. Just as store atmosphere and mood can affect a consumer's satisfaction with a physical store (Spies, Hesse, & Loesch, 1997), attitudes toward a company can be positively influenced when a consumer has an engaging and fun experience online (Childers, Carr, Peck, & Carson, 2001; Goldsmith & Bridges, 2000; Kim & Park, 2005; Monsuwe, Dellaert, & de Ruyter, 2004). Moreover, the concept of the optimal mental state of "flow" is most often used to discuss compelling and immersive shopping experiences; however, Mathwick and Rigdon (2004) linked this state of mind to the performance of goal-directed online activity, specifically information search. In this case, flow was described as a state in which the challenge at hand (product/information search) is balanced with the skills needed to navigate the Internet. The authors showed that on-going search behavior in

flow can act as recreation, providing enjoyment and escape for the consumer. These and other studies suggest that the Internet is not only a useful and powerful informational tool, it helps to make the search process an enjoyable part of decision-making (Horrigan, 2008; Kim & Forsythe, 2007; Lee & Chen, 2010; Mathwick & Rigdon, 2004; Wolfinbarger & Gilly, 2001).

Browne, Durrett and Wetherbe (2004) investigated the feelings consumers have toward online shopping versus shopping in a traditional brick and mortar location. The results of their study showed that the Internet is heavily used as an information-gathering tool to aid the consumer in determining which store and which product is the best fit for the consumer's specific and individualized needs. Of the study's 605 participants, 73% said that they prefer to buy in store, even though 50% said they prefer to learn about products online (Browne et al., 2004). This study provides support for the importance of a brick and mortar store for big ticket items, such as automobiles, appliances, and furniture. Based on this study, the strongest advantages that online shopping offers is its convenience of shopping from home, shopping at any time, and the ability to get hard-to-find items. Finally, a study by Horrigan (2008) confirmed that while the Internet is a valuable research tool for online shoppers, purchases are more often than not consummated offline.

Having access to a wealth of information is not the same thing as being able to evaluate the alternatives (the second step in the decision-making process). One of the significant factors affecting the decision-making process is the nature of the product itself. Therefore, the Internet may not be an appropriate tool for evaluating "high touch"

products, such as home furnishings, because they often require personal inspection and a higher level of involvement (Horrihan, 2008; Molesworth & Suortti, 2001; Smith & Rupp, 2003; Zeng & Reinartz, 2003). This is the point at which many home furnishings consumers may be lost online — they simply cannot move past this stage because they need “to touch the grainy leather of a sofa, experience the smell of the hide, feel the softness of the upholstery, and see the color nuances of the tan” before they can make a decision about home furnishings (Zeng & Reinartz, 2003, p. 112).

Shim, Eastlick, Lotz, and Warrington (2001) discovered that the role of information search in the decision-making process for “search goods” (low involvement products) was a strong predictor of online sales, but not for “experiential goods” (high involvement goods). With search goods, consumers are able to assess the quality and value of products prior to purchase. With experiential goods, the quality and value of products are more difficult to assess until the consumer has actually used or experienced the product (Darby & Karni, 1973; Klein, 1998). This fundamental difference in product type is a possible reason why many consumers who shop online do not *buy* online.

Although apparel, like home furnishings, is another product category that calls for several sensory evaluations, apparel sales have had great success online. This is due to the relative ease of product returns and the presence of physical retail stores nearby, which is not often the case with furniture (Browne, Durrett, & Wetherbe, 2004), suggesting that home furnishings consumers will be more likely to seek brick and mortar stores to further enhance the decision-making process for more involved or experiential goods. The biggest disadvantages for online consumers, however, is the inability to touch

products prior to purchasing, unknown security of the transaction, and items may be difficult to return (Browne et al., 2004; Molesworth & Suortti, 2001; Smith & Rupp, 2003; Zeng & Reinartz, 2003). Browne et al. (2004) also suggest that consumers of big-ticket items need the security of being able to talk to a salesperson, which is a common drawback to online shopping.

These studies suggest that home furnishings consumers might look online for product information, but need to see the product in person before purchasing. It would be interesting to ascertain whether home furnishings retail websites that incorporate instant messaging, online phone capabilities with a salesperson, or room planning software to help consumers visualize how the furniture will work in their homes may fair better online than those that do not. In addition, it is possible that providing free fabric swatches and samples of the stained wood used in particular pieces of furniture may be ways to assuage consumers' concerns.

**Challenges to online decision-making.** There are few concerns regarding the Internet as an information-only source for consumers, mostly due to the fact that the consumer can validate or invalidate one source of information using a myriad of other sources online. However, when it comes to the other stages of the decision-making process, one of the biggest hurdles that online retailers face is the conundrum of trust versus risk. What makes a consumer trust a specific online retailer? Past experience? Good service? Ability to make contact with a “real” human at some point during the transaction? It stands to reason that an online retailer with a nearby brick and mortar store has an advantage, in that the consumer can go to the store if any trouble arises. Online-

only stores may have a greater challenge, as consumers may not feel completely comfortable without the ability to deal with a representative of the company face-to-face.

As previously mentioned, consumers enjoy the convenience of immediate, available comparisons of prices, goods and services online. Furthermore, online shopping has an advantage over brick and mortar stores in merchandise selection, hassle reduction, pragmatism, and responsiveness (Rajamma, Paswan, & Ganesh, 2007). However, many consumers indicate that the disadvantages of online shopping include security fears, delayed gratification, impersonalization of shopping, and the lack of return policies and customer service (Rajamma, Paswan, & Ganesh, 2007; Smith & Rupp, 2003). Similarly, Wang, Chen, Chang, and Yang (2007) found that “interesting and complete” online content for consumers helped the information search process, as it allowed them to get a full understanding of the offerings of a specific company (p. 301). However, technical concerns such as proper bandwidth and the lack of personal service were also mentioned as challenges to utilizing online shopping for purchases.

Connolly and Bannister (2007) found that two variables — perception of vendor integrity and the consumer’s previous experience — have the strongest effect on the development of trust in the online environment. The study describes integrity as the act of behaving in a consistent, honest manner, so an online retailer must ensure that his or her interaction with a consumer is as concise and clear as possible to avoid misunderstandings that could result in bad experiences and distrust. Furthermore, having a website that is user-friendly gives the impression that the business is competent and able to handle any problems the consumer may have (Connolly & Bannister, 2007;

Molesworth & Suortti, 2001). Lim and Dubinsky's (2004) research points to merchandising characteristics as especially important — consumers tend to focus on product information when evaluating online retailers. This finding supports other research wherein online shoppers typically used detailed textual information rather than visual cues when shopping online (Rajamma, Paswan, & Ganesh, 2007).

Similarly, a consumer's technical savvy also has an effect on trust (Connolly & Bannister, 2007). Overly complex websites may be more likely to work improperly or frustrate the user, thereby giving the consumer a negative impression about the company. The online shopping experience is affected by the user-friendliness and aesthetics of the website, including the effort required to navigate the site, its interactivity, and the perceived fun of shopping on the site (Chang, Cheung, & Lai, 2005). Furthermore, Connolly and Bannister (2007) made the connection between a company's technical efficacy and their trustworthiness. That is, consumer distrust also can occur when problems arise within the purchasing protocols of a website. Such problems can stop the decision-making process in its tracks and a sale is lost.

Bhatnagar, Misra and Rao (2000) outlined some key factors of online shopping behavior dealing with the concept of risk. Using a survey, the authors found that as product risk increases, the likelihood of purchasing on the Internet decreases, as financial risk increases, the likelihood of purchasing on the Internet decreases, and as consumer experience on the Internet increases, the likelihood of purchasing on the Internet increases (Bhatnagar, Misra and Rao, 2000, pp. 100-101). Overall, the researchers asserted that the risk involved with shopping online outweighs the convenience it affords

consumers in most product categories, and that “Internet stores have a long way to go before they become a viable threat to traditional outlets” (p. 104).

However, some of Bhatnagar, Misra and Rao’s (2000) findings may no longer be accurate as more consumers have become comfortable with Internet shopping in the past five to ten years (Lennon, Kim, Johnson, Jolly, Damhorst, & Jasper, 2007), and consumers who have previously shopped online have less risk perception (Hansen, 2008; Soopramanien, Fildes, & Robertson, 2007). In one of the rare qualitative studies in this field, Andrews and Boyle (2008) revealed how subjective the concept of risk is to consumers and suggested that the mass media exerts a significant influence on consumers’ construction of this perceived risk. However, the authors posit that interpersonal communication sources are influencing the likelihood of an individual adopting online transaction activities (Andrews & Boyle, 2008; Garbarino & Strahilevitz, 2004). For example, although women perceive a higher level of risk in online purchasing than men, having a site recommended by a friend leads to both a greater reduction in perceived risk and an increase in willingness to buy online (Garbarino & Strahilevitz, 2004).

Consumer satisfaction also plays a role in the decision-making process for online shoppers, and the literature suggests several ways that retailers might mitigate risk factors. Kohli, Devaraj, and Mahmood (2004) asserted that the problem that online retailers need to address is no longer one of search capabilities, but of ease of online transactions, and especially helping consumers make proper decisions. Spending time aiding consumers in the decision-making process helps to develop a consumer’s trust,

which leads to repeat business and referrals. Kohli, Devaraj, and Mahmood (2004) attempted to ascertain the impact of decision support capabilities on the decision-making process. They propose decision-making be viewed according to phases such as an intelligence phase (information gathering about the problem situation); design phase (identifying various alternatives by which the problem can be solved); and choice phase (choosing the best alternative that meets the criteria). When online retailers provide support during the choice phase of the decision-making process, both consumer time-saving and consumer cost-saving were achieved. When these two savings occur, consumer satisfaction becomes much greater. Similarly, other studies have suggested that retailers can mitigate risk and increase consumer satisfaction online by providing exceptional website functionality in terms of time savings, reliability, easy transactions, good selection, in-depth information, providing warranties, easy return policies, and the “right level” of personalization (Bechwati & Xia, 2003; Eggert, 2006; Ha & Lennon, 2010; Pavlou, Liang, & Xue, 2007; Wolfinbarger & Gilly, 2003). In other words, online retailers that support consumer decision-making processes will attract more new customers and have a better chance of keeping existing ones.

**The effects of decision aids.** Haubl (1999) examined the effect of decision aids on consumer decision-making in online shopping. Decision aids are website features used in online shopping that allow the consumer to locate and compare different products in order to make a better informed purchasing decision. Haubl (1999) compared two such decision aids: the information agent (IA), which is a computer program that helps the consumer who is involved with the initial screening of their alternatives; and the

comparison matrix (CM), which organizes product information to allow the consumer the opportunity to better compare product choices. The research showed that decision aids are quite important when it comes to successful decision-making for the consumer. Both decision aids resulted in positive outcomes. The IA resulted in a reduced search effort for the consumer, increasing the quality of their purchase, and resulting in more satisfactory decisions. The CM led to increased numbers of detailed product alternatives for the consumer, while allowing the consumer to compile a smaller list from which to make a decision. Similar studies have corroborated these findings (Haubl & Trifts, 2000; Wang & Benbasat, 2009).

Decision aids can also increase the complexity of the decision-making process, as in the case of product recommendations. On websites such as Amazon.com, where products are recommended to the consumer, the complexity of the purchase interaction was found to actually increase, whereas when individuals do not follow the recommendation, their search is more streamlined and shorter (Senecal, Kalczynski, & Nantel, 2005). In this case, higher complexity indicates a more deliberate purchasing behavior and satisfactory outcome.

Whether or not retailers try to sell their products online, the studies discussed in this section suggest that even if home furnishings retailers embrace and promote their websites only as an informational tool for their customers, they stand a much better chance of reaching consumers because of the high degree of information search that consumers engage in online. This dissertation addresses the degree to which the participants value the Internet as an integral part of their decision-making process for

home furnishings, and to what degree the product category influences this process.

**Who is the typical online shopper?** E-commerce is certainly not limited to a select few — while online sales only represented 1 percent of total retail sales in 2000, it has risen to almost 4 percent in 2010 (or approximately \$142 billion), according to U.S. Census data. Some studies have examined who is shopping online, and whether individuals that shop online display different traits than those who prefer more traditional modes of shopping. For example, Kau, Tang, and Ghose (2003) provided an early typology of online consumers based on survey responses by more than 3,700 Internet users. The survey explored the respondents' information-seeking patterns, as well as their motivations for and concerns about shopping online. The authors developed six clusters of online shoppers: *on-off shopper*, *comparison shopper*, *traditional shopper*, *dual shopper*, *e-laggard*, and *information surfer*, as shown in Table 2 (Kau, Tang, & Ghose, 2003, pp. 149-150). The authors took a more holistic view of examining the online shopper by combining demographic information with psychographics, navigation expertise, shopping experience, and other factors to identify and explain the clusters (Table 2). The clusters indicate that women were slow to embrace the Internet as a shopping channel, or even as a tool for information gathering.

Table 2

*Typology of Online Consumers*

<b>Cluster</b>	<b>Typical demographic</b>	<b>Description</b>
On-off shopper	Single, gender distribution is equal, and in the age group of 15-24 years	Likes to surf the Internet and collect information, but prefers to shop offline. Experienced in online surfing and looking for good deals.
Comparison shopper	Gender distribution is 2/3 male, and 25-29 years old	Compares product features, prices and brands before making a buying decision. Also looking for sales or good deals
Traditional shopper	All different age groups, with a higher proportion being 40-49 years old	Buys from brick-and-mortar store and does not shop online for comparative information or bargains.
Dual shopper	Single, male, 15-24 years age group	Likes to compare brands and product features online, but is not overly concerned in “getting a deal.”
e-Laggard	Slightly more likely to be female, 35 years or older	Lower interest in seeking information online, but more than the traditional shopper.
Information surfer	Married, with 1/3 of the group in the age group of 15-24 years	Enjoys viewing and clicking on banner advertising, looks for promotional offers, and has good navigation expertise and online purchase experience.

Source: Kau, A. K., & Tang, Y. E., & Ghose, S. (2003). Typology of online shoppers. *The Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 20(2), 139-156.

While research in the late 1990s and early 2000s likely helped both online and offline retailers to better understand their target customer and customize their marketing efforts accordingly, it may be that these clusters have shifted as Internet adoption has

increased over time. A study by Jayawardhena, Wright, and Dennis (2007) revealed five distinct shopping orientations for online consumers: *active shoppers*, *price sensitives*, *discerning shoppers*, *brand loyals*, and *convenience oriented*. The price sensitives were revealed to be the largest cluster, and convenience as the second largest. Overall, the authors posit that online consumer orientations are not much different than those in the traditional marketplace, but that multi-channel retailers have a higher market share of e-retail. Moreover, Jayawardhena, Wright, and Dennis's (2007) study challenges previous studies that suggest the online consumer is a wholly different kind of consumer (Dholakia, 1999; Kau, Tang, and Ghose, 2003; Wu, 2003).

On the other hand, Cowart and Goldsmith (2007) found that online apparel shoppers are typically hedonistic, recreational, and impulsive shoppers. It is not particularly surprising that these traits emerge in online shoppers, as the individual can receive instant gratification by access to products at any time and anywhere. However, this finding is in contrast to older research that suggests hedonistic shoppers prefer in-store shopping for the social experience and emotional benefits (Jansen-Verbeke, 1987; Rodgers & Harris, 2003). Cowart and Goldsmith's (2007) study revealed that individuals who are more budget conscious preferred face-to-face shopping because they could search for the best price on their own and physically find the "prize."

The contradictions in these studies show the complex nature of understanding consumer shopping behavior, particularly when that process is spread across different retail channels. Studies suggest that home furnishings consumers use the Internet heavily for information search but carry out the rest of the decision-making process in a physical

store. In order to understand the shopping experience for female home furnishings consumers, we need to understand the decision-making process as a part of that experience. As discussed earlier, the shopping experience is replete with psychological, socio-cultural, and environmental factors, but research exploring these concepts is lacking. The next section discusses how consumer behavior is most commonly tested, using quantitative methods, and how more research using a qualitative perspective is needed to enhance the body of literature on this topic.

### **Theories Used to Test the Decision-Making Process**

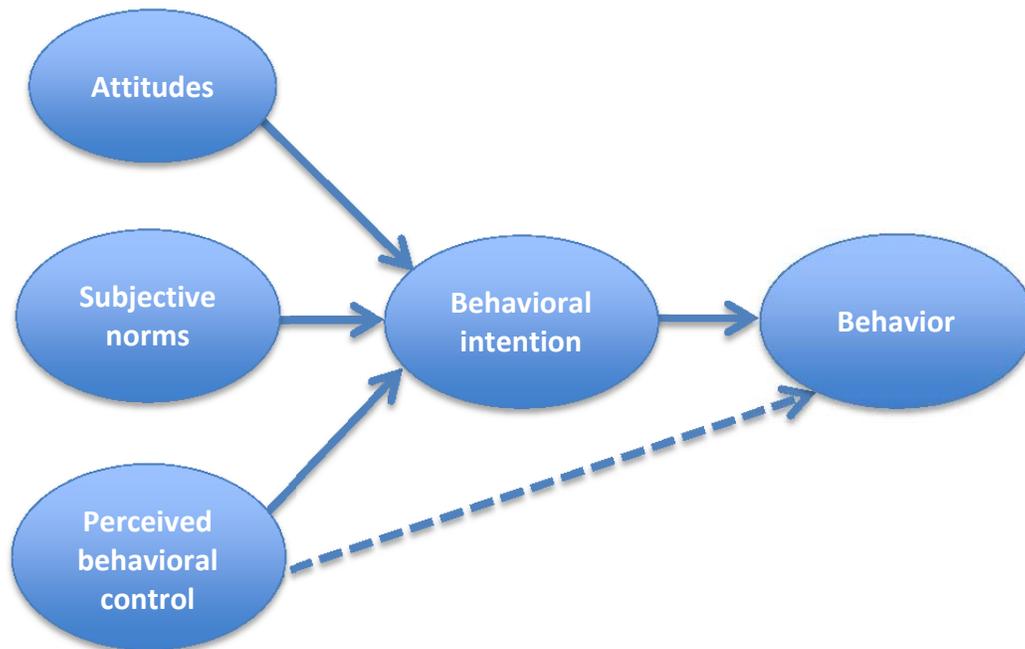
As demonstrated previously, the decision-making process is an important part of the shopping experience. However, consumers' shopping habits have changed in the past 15 years, as using the Internet during at least some part of the decision-making process has become common (Burke, 2002; Charlton, 2010; Horrihan, 2008; Zeng & Reinartz, 2003). As a result, researchers have been investigating how the Internet has affected the decision-making process. The following section addresses some of the relevant theories that are often used to test consumer behavior, as well as how these theories can provide a background for understanding the shopping experience for female home furnishings consumers.

**Theory of Planned Behavior.** One popular theory that is used to study attitudes, intentions and behaviors in consumer behavior is the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). The theory was proposed by Icek Ajzen (1985) as an extension of the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), which he proposed with Martin Fishbein (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). In addition to attitudes and subjective norms, which comprise the Theory of

Reasoned Action, TPB added another construct to TRA to account for situations not completely under the individual's control — perceived behavioral intention.

TPB states that the intention to perform an action is the result of three factors: attitude toward the action, which involves whether or not the action is seen as positive or negative; the subjective norm, which gives the individual an idea of how others will react to the action; and perceived behavioral control, which is a person's perception of their ability to perform a specific behavior. The Theory of Planned Behavior asserts that positive attitudes and subjective norms, along with greater perceived control, increase the likelihood of one's intention to act (see Figure 4).

One of the strengths of the Theory of Planned Behavior is its broad applicability. Because of its easy-to-adapt constructs, the theory has been applied successfully to many different fields, including health, sports, and consumer behavior, to name a few. For example, Ramus and Nielsen (2005) used the Theory of Planned Behavior as a theoretical framework to investigate the range of beliefs held by consumers about Internet grocery shopping. The seven outcome beliefs determined by the study — convenience of shopping, range of available products, enjoyment of the experience, social aspects, personal service, price, and technical aspects — allowed the researchers to understand consumer beliefs about Internet grocery shopping, which can help online retailers to better serve their customers.



*Figure 4. A Model of the Theory of Planned Behavior.*

Source: Ajzen, I. (1985). From intentions to actions: A theory of planned behavior. In J. Kuhl & J. Beckman (Eds.), *Action-control: From cognition to behavior* (pp. 11-39). Heidelberg, Germany: Springer.

Similarly, Wang, Chen, Chang, and Yang (2007) also examined how the Theory of Planned Behavior could be used to understand online consumer behavior. Many of their results were similar to those of the Ramus and Nielson (2005) study; for example, it was found that consumer attitudes and perceptions of control during online shopping were a much greater influence on consumer behavior than were subjective norms, which had little to no influence. Furthermore, the findings highlight the importance of comprehensive online content for consumers as it allows them to get the full picture regarding the offerings of a specific company. As with the Wang et al. study, technical concerns such as bandwidth were an important factor for the online consumer. In

addition, the lack of personal service was also mentioned as a negative factor when utilizing online shopping.

In another study, George (2004) used the Theory of Planned Behavior as a tool to examine the relationships among beliefs about online privacy and trustworthiness, as well as beliefs about perceived behavioral control and the expectations of important others (subjective norms). In this study, the three things shown to influence most people in the case of online shopping are trustworthiness of the Internet or website, previous experience, and self-efficacy (the belief in the ability to accomplish a task).

Kim and Park (2005) sought to understand and predict consumer shopping behavior in a multi-channel retail setting and used the Theory of Planned Behavior to test attitude shifts toward the online store. The results of the survey revealed that consumers' attitudes toward a traditional (offline) retailer positively predicted their attitude toward the online presence of that same company. This study is helpful in understanding how consumers might use the Internet as an extension of their traditional shopping behavior rather than being completely committed to shopping one way or the other (Kim & Park, 2005).

The Theory of Planned Behavior is particularly relevant to the present study in that it deals with human behavior and incomplete volitional control. That is, the present study seeks to understand a specific component of human behavior — shopping for home furnishings — which involves elements of incomplete volitional control. While the aforementioned studies show that attitudes, perceived behavioral control and past experiences affect consumers' online behavior, some studies have shown that subjective

norms do *not* play a significant role in measuring consumers' intentions to search online or purchase online (George, 2004; Pavlou & Fyngenson, 2006; Shim, Eastlick, Lotz & Warrington, 2001; Wang, Chen, Chang, & Yang, 2007).

**Other theories that test decision-making.** Products can be further classified into two distinctive types – search versus experience – on the basis of related attributes or benefits (Erdem & Swait, 1998). Attributes or benefits such as taste, aroma, color, and texture exemplify experience qualities of a product, while attributes that are evaluated by objective measures or physical properties (e.g., length or width) illustrate search qualities of a product. Experience products cannot be evaluated until the product is experienced directly, whereas search products can be evaluated prior to purchase if information regarding dominant attributes can be obtained through an information search (Nelson, 1974).

Shim, Eastlick, Lotz and Warrington (2001) proposed and tested a model of Online Prepurchase Intentions to study the predictors of intention to use the Internet for both information search and purchase of search goods. Their model was derived from Klein's Interaction Model (1998) and the TPB. The authors illustrated that attitudes, subjective norms and past behavior were significant indicators of the intention to use the Internet to search for information, which in turn significantly influenced online purchase intention. However, the researchers suggested that the antecedents that predict the Internet purchase of search goods are different from those that predict the purchase of experience goods; this is useful for this dissertation, which explores whether the results revealed by the Shim, Eastlick, Lotz and Warrington study (2001) can also be applied to

experience goods such as home furnishings.

Other models, such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the Online Shopping Acceptance Model, the decomposed TPB, and Roger's Innovation Model have similarly been used to address online consumer behavior. While there are differences between the theories, all are models that analyze beliefs and aim to predict consumers' Internet behavior and intentions. For the purposes of this study, however, it is insightful to examine how researchers have attempted to study consumer behavior in order to provide some direction for the present research. The application of these theories helps to lay a foundation for designing a more in-depth study of the consumer experience.

**Product category matters.** The Theory of Planned Behavior may be helpful in revealing a consumer's intentions, but actual behavior is something that is generally more difficult to measure. Furthermore, general beliefs about online shopping are not applicable to all product categories. Although the Theory of Planned Behavior offers a general understanding of how attitudes can affect behavior, it is not capable of uncovering the reasons why consumers develop certain attitudes, nor does it shed light on the reasons why consumers might enjoy shopping for and buying certain products online and not others. Goldsmith and Flynn (2004) studied levels of consumer involvement in the apparel product category and found that just because consumers may be Internet shoppers does not mean they will make actual purchases online. The researchers suggested that "product category differences in shopping exists, so that what is true in general may not be true in every instance. Thus, studies of online shopping for specific products are justified in order to provide detailed knowledge of these aspects of

electronic commerce” (Goldsmith & Flynn, 2004, p. 93). Consequently, the concept of involvement is one that may offer insight into understanding the shopping experience of home furnishings consumers.

Many studies of consumer behavior have analyzed the concept of product involvement, which refers to the feelings of inherent needs, values, interests, and enthusiasm toward product categories (Zaichkowsky, 1985). These feelings are evidenced in consumer tendencies to attach more importance to specific products and to have more knowledge about specific product attributes and brands. When a product is perceived as high involvement, consumers will engage in a more active information search and will consider a greater variety of alternatives in their decision-making. On the other hand, when a product is perceived as low involvement, consumers will interpret relatively less differentiation between alternatives (Lastovicka, 1979). For example, when purchasing a new car (a high involvement product), consumers will usually spend time familiarizing themselves with not only price, but many of the other details of the car such as color, sound system, interior design, and the number of cup holders, as well as consult others’ opinions or consumer reports about the car. On the other hand, few consumers would spend this amount of time to gather information about which toothpaste (a low involvement product) to use. For low-involvement products, consumers exhibit little preference for a specific brand and instead consider low price to be a critical product attribute (Rothschild, 1979).

As mentioned previously, Shim, Eastlick, Lotz, and Warrington (2001) discovered that the role of information search in the decision-making process for search goods (low involvement products) was a strong predictor of online sales, but not for experiential goods (high involvement goods). In general, home furnishings could be considered a high involvement, experiential product as consumers typically do not buy sofas, bedroom furniture, or recliners very often, nor can they truly evaluate those products until they experience them directly. Furthermore, home furnishings are typically big-ticket items that require more careful consideration than less expensive goods.

Thus far, there has been a vast array of literature addressing the shopping experience, the decision-making process both online and offline, and a variety of issues related to these topics. However, there is virtually no research that combines these areas with a focus on the home furnishings consumer. Furthermore, nearly all of the studies discussed thus far employ quantitative methods. More qualitative research is needed to develop a holistic and comprehensive understanding of the consumer in general and particularly the female home furnishings consumer. That is, because shopping is a complex phenomenon, it should be studied with the intent of gaining deeper insight into the psychological, social and emotional factors that play a role in the process (Belenky et al., 1986; Belk, 1988; Crawford & Marcek, 1989; Gergen, 1985). This gap in the literature gave impetus for the current study, as I used a qualitative approach in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the shopping experience of female home furnishings consumers, including what this experience means for them.

## **Meaning and the Female Shopping Experience**

### **The Meaning of Products**

As discussed earlier in this chapter, shopping is a meaningful part of the human experience, but value is also embedded in the products themselves. That is, the value of an object goes beyond its inherent properties; its value lies in the judgments we make about it (Simmel, 1978). Things are a way to define who we are to ourselves and to others (Belk, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Dichter, 2002; Mehta & Belk, 1991). Things convey symbolic messages, referring to the nature and (actual or desired) status of the relationship between human beings (Wooten, 2006) and are signs of social bonds (Goffman 1971).

Appadurai (1986) argued that the only way we can really analyze “things” is to look at them in their social “lives,” in the way they are acquired, used, revered, cherished, given away, or disposed of. These ideas are evident in our daily lives by our judgments of objects we own: a shirt that has no more monetary value than another may be a “favorite” simply because of the memories it calls forth, or a plastic miniature replica of the Eiffel Tower that may be worth only a few coins takes on great meaning to its owner because it was a gift from a loved one. Some people put so much meaning in items that they cannot bear to part with them, as in cases of hoarding (Frost & Steketee, 2010). In some non-Western societies, things are even thought to possess a life of their own (Appadurai, 1986), and in some tribal societies described by Mauss (1990) things were considered as having a spirit, communicating messages from the person originally in possession of the thing to its recipient and current owner.

Things also play an important role in our societal life. Bourdieu (1984) discussed the role that things play in sustaining social and economic structures, marking social status and positions of authority. Similarly, McCracken (1990) examined objects in the context of cultural significance, and posited that goods can hold meanings related to class, gender, age, and occupation.

The objects that we hold dear not only mean something *to us*, but they say something *about us* (Belk, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Dichter, 2002; Mehta & Belk, 1991). In regards to the importance that products have in the human experience, Dichter (2002) writes,

The objects which surround us do not simply have utilitarian aspects; rather they serve as a kind of mirror which reflects our own image. Objects which surround us permit us to discover more and more about ourselves. (p. 91)

Similarly, Belk (1988) argued that before social scientists can attempt to understand consumer behavior, they must first understand the meanings that are inherent in the things consumers possess.

...knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally, we regard our possessions as parts of ourselves. That we are what we have is perhaps the most basic and powerful fact of consumer behavior. (p. 139)

Belk's (1988) conception of the term "extended self" helps to explain how consumers use objects as a reflection of identity. He suggests that these meanings are not static over the course of a person's life; the meanings change as the person ages,

experiences new things, develops new perspectives, and creates new memories. Things also help to construct and reinforce our cultural or ethnic identity, both for the individual and in a community (Kim & Arthur, 2003; Mehta & Belk, 1991).

### **The Meaning of “Home”**

Heidegger (1962) described a dwelling as the fundamental characteristic of the human condition. He argued that most humans need a place in which they can be “at home,” and that the construct may be seen as almost universal in human society. Houses (essentially, “roofs”) may be the most basic symbols of humanity, reflecting our human condition as dwellers. Similarly, Lawton (1990) stated that the important aspects of the dwelling are its meaning, its history, the emotional responses it evokes, and the symbolism of the physical structure.

As the home itself is an important facet of human existence, it should be no surprise that purchases for the home, particularly furniture, have great significance for consumers. In a study by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981), furniture was at the top of the list of things to which the respondents attached special meaning and affection. In the study, the authors interviewed 82 families — including children, their parents, and grandparents — in order to explore which objects in the home held the most meaning. Interestingly, the significance of home furnishings goes far beyond the emphasis on comfort and enjoyment mentioned by the youngest group in the study; in fact, the older the respondent, the more significance he or she placed on the furnishings. The researchers found that consumers place value on home furnishings most frequently because of the memories they evoke of people, occasions and relationships. Only 5

percent of the meanings attached to furniture were strictly utilitarian, or solely focused on the usefulness of the item (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). Belk (1988) extended Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton's (1981) research by exploring how furniture serves as a part of an individual's extended self, stating that the home and its furnishings serve as a "symbolic body" for the family. Lamott (1993), in response to photographs of home interiors by Catherine Wagner, describes the deep meanings that the objects in the home hold for its inhabitants:

These interiors, these surfaces, reveal so much about who we really are, what we love, how we live, what we yearn for — and the gulf between that and what is. In the most mundane objects and settings ... we see the mixture of humor and irony and love and compassion and loss and sadness that makes up our lives. (p. 13)

The importance of the home and the items within is perhaps most clearly evident by studying consumers who have lost such things. In a study of homeless women living at a community shelter, Hill (1991) explored the lives of several women who lost their homes due to tragedy, substance abuse, domestic violence, or mental illness. He discovered that not only did the women come to depend on the shelter for the basic essentials of a home, but they also developed an emotional interdependence, as the women came to view each other as a kind of family. The few possessions of these homeless women — such as photographs, religious medals, or items associated with previous jobs or skills — held significant symbolic value for them, as they often reminded them of happier times or served to inspire them to look toward the future. Hill (1991) found that these items "helped the guests cope with their current circumstances

and served to restore and maintain their sense of self” (p. 306). The women also frequently fantasized about future homes because of their desire to personalize a space.

It is through an understanding of the importance of the home in the human experience that the current study was framed. Not only does the physical structure of the home have great significance in our lives, but the items we surround ourselves with have special meaning to us. We use these things to reflect who we are, who we were, and who we want to be.

### **The Meaning of the Female Shopping Experience**

Because of women’s dominance in purchasing items for the home (Silverstein & Sayre, 2010), it is important to know how women experience shopping, as well as the meanings that they attach to the process and to the products they choose. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, women are commonly associated with both the concept of the home and that of shopping (Davis, 1976; Green & Cunningham, 1975; Hochschild, 1989; Nava, 1997; Pleck, 1983; Scott, 1976; Szinovacz, 1980; Townsend & O’Neil, 1990; White, 1999; Wiersma, 1990; Wolff, 1985; Zhang & Farley, 1995). However, women’s roles in the consumption process were often trivialized and marginalized in both mainstream media and academic research. For example, in a 1952 edition of *The Saturday Evening Post* article titled, “I Just Don’t Understand Women,” Knight, a male author wrote,

Okay, you guys — take an average woman. You will agree that her destiny in life is to have babies and shop... An average, upper-class, intellectual woman, having coffeed her husband good-by in the morning, reads her newspaper from the back,

and on a good day finds an advertisement offering to give away handbags for \$9.95. Immediately she goes cuckoo. (p. 25)

Many women have certainly reported enjoying the shopping process (Eisenberg, 2009; Silverstein & Sayre, 2009), but that does not necessarily minimize its importance, particularly in the context of the family. Female consumer experiences are shaped by broad cultural factors such as gender roles, religious and ethnic traditions, social settings, mass media images and product symbolism (Belk, 1988; Hirschman, 1988; McCracken, 1988; Thompson, Pollio, & Locander, 1994). In addition, women often bear the responsibility for shopping not only for themselves, but for their children, aging parents, and many times for their spouses as well (Eisenberg, 2009). Consequently, it is the female head of the household that determines the products, including home furnishings, that best reflect the “family self” (Belk, 1988).

One of the few qualitative studies available in the literature uncovered three themes related to the shopping experience for women: being restricted/being free from restrictions, being in control/being out of control, and being captivated/being deliberate (Thompson, Pollio, & Locander, 1994). When it came to family necessities, the study’s participants felt comfortable making those decisions by themselves, but for personal luxury items they experienced anxiety, afraid to make a poor decision. To alleviate that anxiety, the participants sought help from friends, by trusting an expert, or by shopping with a spouse. As the authors suggest “the choice to relinquish some freedom [of choice] was itself an act of free choice” (Thompson, Pollio, & Locander, 1994, p. 358).

Clearly women have complicated feelings when it comes to shopping. Satisfaction with the experience can largely depend on who she is shopping for, the type of product involved, price points, and level of concern about making a mistake. It would seem logical that those concerns would increase as the level of product involvement and price increased, so shopping for home furnishings might be an uneasy task for some female consumers. On the other hand, because home furnishings could be considered as family consumption rather than personal, perhaps women feel greater confidence in knowing what to choose.

Another important reason to study women's shopping experiences in particular is that women have been found to process information differently and value material possessions to a greater extent than their male counterparts (Bakewell & Mitchell, 2006; Dittmar, Long, & Meek, 2004; Mitchell & Walsh, 2004; Peter & Olsen, 1999). Males and females do share some of the same decision-making characteristics, such as brand consciousness, perfectionism, being confused by overchoice, and impulsiveness (Bakewell & Mitchell, 2006; Mitchell & Walsh, 2004). However, males typically use a more simplified decision-making style than females in order to reduce the complexity and time of the shopping task, and this can lead to males making purchasing decisions too quickly. Bakewell and Mitchell (2006) suggest that this may be because males still perceive shopping as a feminine activity.

Dittmar, Long and Meek (2004) offered a comparison of gender differences in both online and conventional buying motivations. The researchers conducted two studies, one qualitative and one quantitative. The qualitative study consisted of 113 written

responses to open-ended questions, which then informed the quantitative study (a questionnaire completed by 240 consumers). Results of the Dittmar, Long and Meek (2004) study showed that the gender gap in online shopping that has been previously shown in academic research is rapidly shrinking, and though men's attitudes generally stay the same in both conventional and online environments, women's do not (Dittmar, Long, & Meek, 2004). For women, the functional benefits of conventional buying — “economy, convenience, and efficiency” — transition easily to online buying, but the social-experiential aspects that are lacking in online shopping are a significant drawback (Dittmar, Long, & Meek, 2004, p. 441).

While the early literature found more reluctance on the part of women to adopt online shopping as compared to men, the tide seems to be turning. Women now shop online just as much as men (Colley & Maltby, 2008; Lee, 2011). Moreover, specific to the present study, recent market research shows that women are using the Internet to shop for home furnishings products in lieu of visiting as many stores as they used to (French, 2009).

**Women and online shopping.** Perhaps it is because of their increasingly busy schedules that more women now choose to shop online. For example, in a study of women and shopping enjoyment, Jansen-Verbeke (1987) found that that women with children under the age of 13 are typically less likely to leave the home; it is this group of women that could be viewed as a primary target for online shopping. Because the sample contained a large number of working women, though it predates the Internet, findings suggest that this consumer might appreciate the increased speed and convenience now

available through online shopping. Moreover, Friend and Thompson (2003) found that excessive pressure or perceived negative treatment by salespeople can make consumers distrustful, annoyed, or intimidated by the retailer. Even though the attraction of shopping at brick-and-mortar stores is the social and relaxing benefits it provides, harassment or negative feedback from sales staff could lead some women to shop online instead (Browne et al., 2004).

In order to understand why women enjoy the Internet as an alternate shopping channel, Wolfinbarger and Gilly (2001) conducted a focus group study of 64 females and divided Internet shopping into two categories: experiential/hedonic shopping and goal-oriented/utilitarian shopping. Experiential shopping was marked by a “thrill of the hunt” type of experience that further draws the shopper into the process, typically resulting in impulsive shopping behaviors; goal-oriented or utilitarian shopping is transaction-oriented and is utilized by individuals who want to make an online purchase quickly and without distraction (Wolfinbarger & Gilly, 2001). It is important to note that home furnishings consumers could conceivably fit into either category, as some women may enjoy the process of finding ideas for decorating the home and others may be more intent on finding a specific product as quickly as possible. Wolfinbarger and Gilly (2001) suggest that online shoppers have a greater internal locus of control, which suggests that their personalities are more goal-oriented. The most important factors for this type of shopper are convenience and accessibility, selection, availability of information, and lack of sociality.

Yang and Wu (2007) revisited the decision-making styles of each gender but switched the focus to the online environment. The results of their study, based on the Consumer Styles Inventory Scale, revealed six factors that affect the decision-making style of a consumer, as shown in Table 3 (Yang & Wu, 2007, pp. 87-88). This study's findings were similar to previous studies that examined decision-making styles and gender, but in traditional shopping environments (Bakewell & Mitchell, 2006; Mitchell & Walsh, 2004). One important factor to consider is that Yang and Wu (2007) did not approach online shopping as recreational or hedonic for consumers; they took a predominately utilitarian view of shopping and their survey questions revealed as much. The researchers assumed that online shoppers have more of a "work" mindset, so they tend to be more resolute in their purchases. Furthermore, findings suggest that those who shop online will pay more for the convenience and timeliness involved in Internet shopping (Yang & Wu, 2007). Specific gender differences found in the Yang and Wu (2007) study suggest that decision-making among females is more likely to be focused on "novel-fashion consciousness," meaning fashion and style are very important factors in their online purchasing behavior. This finding is particularly important to the present study, in that home furnishings are considered fashion merchandise, and it may be that women will similarly focus on novel-fashion consciousness when shopping for furnishings online.

Table 3

*Decision-Making Styles of Consumers*

Perfectionism Consciousness	Value the quality of a product; try to get the very best or perfect choice; usually try to get the best overall quality
Brand Consciousness	Value the brand of a product; well-known national brands are best for them; think most expensive is best
Novel-fashion Consciousness	Early adopters; like to buy fashionable and novel goods; wardrobe is up to date; attractive styling is important
Confused by Overchoice	Worry about too much information about products; all the information they get on different products confuses them; too much info distracts from the right purchase; the more they learn the harder the decision becomes
Brand-loyal Consciousness	Once a favorable brand is found, they will buy over and over and stick with it
Impulsiveness	Internet shoppers impulsive when buying > regret impulsiveness = careful planning before purchase

Source: Yang, C., & Wu, C. C. (2007). Gender and Internet consumers' decision-making. *CyberPsychology & Behavior, 10*(1), 86-91.

Rodgers and Harris (2003) further examined gender related to online shopping and sought to understand why women did not shop online as often as men. Specifically, their survey of 227 online consumers indicated that males are 2.4 times more likely to shop online than women (Rodgers & Harris, 2003). Overall, perceptions of online shopping were less favorable among women; they had a greater level of distrust than men and did not find the process as satisfying as their male counterparts (Rodgers & Harris, 2003). Their findings correspond with a later study by Janda (2008), which found that

gender still plays a role in online purchase likelihood. Concerns about privacy and online information credibility were significant factors for the females surveyed, yet they had no effect on the likelihood of online purchase for males. However, Rodgers and Harris (2003) did suggest that these findings could be skewed based on the actual products that each gender tends to shop for. At the time of the study, males tended to shop for CDs and magazines, while women shopped for clothes and beauty products. The females' product choices were high involvement, which may explain why they did not find online shopping to be as satisfying.

Because women have less trust when it comes to online shopping and they do not always connect emotionally to the online shopping experience, these factors may affect how they use the Internet when shopping for home furnishings — a typically big-ticket and high involvement product. Therefore, Rodgers and Harris (2003) recommend that websites use a smooth writing style, facilitate ease of returns, and create opportunity for dialogue between buyer and seller. Such foci may help female home furnishings consumers feel more comfortable with online shopping, but it is unknown if such changes would ultimately affect their purchase behavior.

Colley and Maltby (2008) indicated a change in the adoption of online shopping among females when they reported findings of slightly to significantly more online use by women than in previous years' research. They reported that women have very positive views of Internet use given the social elements that have recently become very popular, such as networking sites, blogs, and sites for shopping advice. Women also frequently mentioned using Internet sites to make new friends, meet partners and renew old

acquaintances, supporting the notion that women's focus on interpersonal orientation influences their overall Internet behavior (Colley & Maltby, 2008).

As of 2011, women now *outnumber* men online, and the majority of shoppers on highly successful retail sites such as Zappos, Groupon, Etsy and Gilt Group are female (Lee, 2011). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), women oversee over 80% of consumer spending, or about \$5 trillion dollars annually, and Ad Age (Morrison, 2010) reports that women in the U.S. now buy online *more* often than men, with 12.5% of female internet users making an online purchase in February 2010, compared to 9.3% of men.

Because younger generations have grown up with more exposure to online retailing than their parents or grandparents, they also tend to be more confident in their online shopping abilities (Seock & Bailey, 2008). In a study of college students' apparel shopping orientations, findings revealed that this generation accesses the Internet more often than other population segments and uses the Internet regularly for information search. Female respondents also conducted a greater number of information searches than their male counterparts. However, in accord with previous research, Seock and Bailey (2008) also found that a high level of online search did not necessarily lead to online purchase behavior.

**Shopping for the home.** While much attention has been given to the study of consumer behavior for fashion apparel merchandise, little academic research has been devoted to the process of shopping for fashion merchandise for the *home*. Mills (1983) performed one of the first lifestyle analyses of female consumers' home-fashion

purchasing behavior and explored the importance of information they used. Mills's (1983) study of 6,240 female shoppers identified six lifestyle segments representing female consumer behavior for home fashion: *leaders*, *followers*, *socialites*, *neutrals*, *independents*, and *rejectors* (pp. 19-20). There was a significant correspondence between the home-fashion attitudes expressed and their consumer behavior; for example, the home-fashion "leaders" were shown as innovators and confident, active shoppers who will expend greater effort in shopping various department and specialty stores to gather information and enjoy the entire process. In contrast, less-involved home-fashion consumers are more utilitarian in their shopping and tend to dismiss the notion of shopping for enjoyment and the importance of home fashions in general (Mills, 1983).

Applying Mills's findings today, it would stand to reason that the leaders/innovators in home-fashion shopping would be the consumers who use the Internet to gather information about trends to complement the entire shopping process. However, it is possible that the convenience and private nature of Internet shopping may better attract the neutrals and independents, who gave moderate to low ratings on shopping enjoyment. It may be unlikely that the online element will help to boost the minimal importance rejectors placed on home fashion. It should be noted that Mills' (1983) definition of "home fashion" included a large variety of items — such as gourmet/designer housewares; kitchen, bath and bedroom textiles; tabletop accessories; draperies; carpets; decorative accessories; and furniture. As discussed in Chapter I, this dissertation defines "home furnishings" based on the top selling categories in 2010 (with the exception of mattresses): sofas and upholstered chairs, recliners, formal and casual

dining, entertainment furniture, master bedroom and office furniture.

Market research since 2008 indicates that the majority of home furnishings consumers are using the Internet to shop. ComScore estimates that 60% of consumers who buy home furnishings in retail stores conducted online research beforehand (French, 2009), and eMarketer (2009) estimates that retail store sales influenced by online research are three times higher than total e-commerce sales. Additionally, a 2009 survey by PriceGrabber reported that 91% of all online furniture shoppers planned to conduct research online the next time they shopped for home furnishings, but the vast majority plan to make the purchase in a retail store (French, 2009). Interestingly, according to French (2009), the percentage of consumers researching home furnishings online was fairly evenly spread out between the ages of 18-54.

These studies show that before the widespread adoption of the Internet and portable electronics, female consumers clearly viewed shopping as both practical and recreational. The social elements of shopping were important, as was the need to be the decision-maker regarding items for the home. But how do these expectations translate into the reality of being a woman and a home furnishings consumer in today's society? Has the importance of the social elements of traditional brick and mortar shopping been replaced by the convenience that online shopping offers to increasingly time-crunched and/or working women?

Although a few studies exist on women's shopping behavior online, and there is much research about online shopping in general, little to no academic research has addressed the complex nature of shopping specifically for home furnishings, either on- or

offline. Extant research discussed here shows that humans place a great deal of significance on furniture objects in the home. Thus, it is important to uncover the process they go through to decide which items will not only meet their functional needs, but their personal and emotional needs as well.

### **Gaps in the Research**

Attempting to understand what drives individuals to make buying decisions has been an issue investigated for decades by many researchers. However, little to no academic research has addressed what it means to buy home furnishings. The purpose of this chapter was to articulate the sociological framework of this study, to examine research exploring the importance of home furnishings and the dominant role of the female as home furnishings consumer, discuss literature on the Internet's impact on shopping and the decision-making process, as well as literature on common traits of online shoppers, and review research that explores how female consumers in particular participate in the shopping experience.

This study examines consumer behavior at the micro or individual level in order to address the sociocultural, experiential, symbolic and ideological aspects of consumption (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Females have traditionally not had much social power, but changing societal roles, expectations and the exponential growth of the Internet has dramatically increased the amount of power that the female consumer has to make a choice, through access to product information, price options, or available alternatives. Moreover, the explosion of online social networking has had a significant impact on consumption via positive and negative word-of-mouth communication. Thus,

cyberspace is key to understanding how female home furnishings consumers, the most powerful consumer segment, shop today.

Furniture is an important part of our lives, and we attach a significant amount of emotional value to the things we purchase for our homes. The diffusion of Internet access has led many consumers, including those for home furnishings, to go online to search for product information, but academic research has not addressed its role in the decision-making process for home furnishings consumers. The decision-making process is complex and is often researched using quantitative methods. However, quantitative studies have failed to account for the many emotional and social influences that affect the buying process. Decision aids are helpful in streamlining the process for consumers, but perceived risk is still a hurdle, especially when it comes to high-price, high-involvement items.

Research indicates that if retailers embrace and enhance their websites to facilitate the information-search step for consumers, it could bolster their offline stores. However, the decision-making process is shaped by a number of factors, including marketing efforts, socio-cultural influences, psychological factors, personal questions, post-decision behavior, and experience (Andrews & Boyle, 2008; Friend & Thompson, 2003; Garbarino & Strahilevitz, 2004; Horrigan, 2008; Molesworth & Suortti, 2001; Seock & Bailey, 2008; Smith & Rupp, 2003; Thompson, Pollio, & Locander, 1994; Zeng & Reinartz, 2003.) Therefore, the current study holistically addresses the home furnishings buyer experience using qualitative methods, which is discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Overall, many women find the shopping experience not only practical, but fun and socially satisfying, and thanks to recent advancements in social media, that sentiment is extending to online situations as well (French, 2009; Lee, 2011). However, the term “shopping” is used frequently throughout the extant literature to describe how consumers search for and purchase goods and services online. In this way, “shopping” is often used as an umbrella term that encompasses the entire decision-making process. A clearer distinction is needed between online information search, ideas, and enjoyment and the actual experience of purchasing online. Extant research could better reflect the transition from shopping behavior to the decision to purchase. One of the reasons this distinction is important is that some consumers use the Internet for information gathering but prefer to buy offline (French, 2009; Horrigan, 2008; Molesworth & Suortti, 2001; Smith & Rupp, 2003; Zeng & Reinartz, 2003), particularly when it comes to different product categories and when the product is viewed as a high-involvement, high-price purchase such as home furnishings. Furthermore, a more in-depth study of the experience of home furnishings consumers would likely yield clearer results regarding the specific issues they face throughout the buying process, such as concerns about product quality, financial risk, and the anxiety over the possibility of making a mistake. Ultimately, if online retailers have a better understanding of what their customers are using the website for, or what triggers customers’ decision to buy or not buy, retailers could more effectively tailor their websites and marketing efforts to their customers’ needs. In the next chapter, I explain the qualitative research design used in this study in order to address some of the fundamental gaps that exist in the extant literature.

### **CHAPTER III**

#### **METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study seeks to explore the phenomenon of home furnishings consumption by addressing the question: *What is it like to shop for home furnishings?* As discussed in Chapter I, this study approaches the topic of shopping for home furnishings through the methodological framework of phenomenology, and by integrating the concepts of furniture as extended self with theories related to the decision-making process and sociological concepts related to female consumer power. As demonstrated in Chapter II, this research fills a gap in knowledge regarding women's lived experiences with shopping for the home, the link between the furnishings in a home and creation of a family "self," and the use of the Internet in the home furnishings decision-making process. The relevance of these concepts, their connection to the questions that frame the study, and how they inform the methods that were used to collect data are discussed in this chapter. A description of the participant sample and the approach to analysis are also provided.

I begin with a general discussion about phenomenology and its uses specific to interpretive inquiry. Included in this discussion are epistemological and methodological factors involved in a phenomenological approach to the study of lived experience. I then explain the procedure used to conduct the study, including participant selection and methods employed to collect the data.

The second part of this chapter includes discussion of the three levels of interpretation that resulted from the data analysis: personal narratives, thematic analysis, and theoretical considerations. A review of each level is discussed, including an explanation of how the interpretation was forged through a hermeneutic approach to analyzing the data.

In the third part of the chapter, I discuss the theoretical considerations that influence the methodological approach. First I examine the concepts of meaning and identity, and how home furnishings are viewed as both meaningful and as a means of expressing the identity of an individual and/or family. I then consider sociological concepts regarding consumer power, specifically female consumer power, and how these concepts are used to understand the home furnishings shopping experience. Also discussed are the concepts of low versus high involvement, and search versus experiential goods. Last, I explore how these concepts are used as a guide for gaining a more in-depth understanding of the decision-making process as experienced by female home furnishings consumers.

### **Exploring Lived Experience through Phenomenology**

Phenomenological theory grew from the work of social theorists Husserl, Weber and Shultz (Jax, 1989), who stressed the need for researchers to take on the role of the person or group being studied in order to develop a holistic understanding of human beings. Heidegger (1962) linked hermeneutics to phenomenology and theorized that knowing and understanding are ontological questions, and ontology, as a phenomenology of “Being,” becomes a hermeneutics of existence. Gadamer (1975) further echoed these

ideas by positing that the only way we can understand human behavior is to look beyond what we do to the reasons behind those actions, and that interpretation is the explicit form of understanding. Phenomenology, therefore, asks the question, “What is this experience like?” It does not attempt to explain or control the world, but rather “to gain insightful descriptions of the way we experience the world ... which brings us in more direct contact with the world” (van Manen, 1984, p. 1).

According to Merleau-Ponty (1962), a phenomenological worldview differs from positivism in that it tells us something about human subjectivity. Phenomenological science thus re-achieves “a direct and primitive contact with the world” as it is immediately experienced (van Manen, 1990, p. 36). Phenomenology seeks to develop a deeper understanding of human existence as we experience it in everyday life (van Manen, 1990). Van Manen states that lived experience is the starting point and ending point of phenomenological research, and the purpose of phenomenological reflection is to try to grasp the meaning behind the behavior or phenomenon. The assumptions underlying a phenomenological study shape the way the researcher views the world and what is knowable, and an interpretive or qualitative ontology (such as that of phenomenology) posits that there are multiple realities that are socially constructed by individuals (Merriam, 1998).

Qualitative research, consequently, was created out of a need to understand what these multiple realities mean (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Epistemological assumptions address the question: *How do we come to know the world through these realities?* For phenomenology, understanding meaning behind phenomena is the epistemological goal.

The researcher serves as the primary instrument for data collection, and the methodology he/she uses embodies the ontological and epistemological assumptions. More specifically, the methodological process of phenomenology begins with studying lived experience, rather than scientific processes (Kvale, 1996). Thus, in this dissertation, shopping for home furnishings is seen as a lived experience, and the phenomenological approach offered the opportunity to better understand the meaning of this experience for female consumers.

### **Participants**

Because understanding the home furnishings shopping experience was the primary goal of this research, I explored the decision-making process as it is experienced by female consumers. That is, to understand what women experience when choosing furnishings for their home, we must begin with what it is like for those going through the process.

Because women are responsible for the majority of purchases for the home (Silverstein & Sayre, 2009), the sample was limited to female participants. Six participants were selected for this study. The women were of differing ages and life stages. Although furniture is a necessary component within the human experience at all ages, women ages 21 and older were recruited for the study. The minimum age of 21 was chosen because it is improbable that teenagers and young adults under 21 are responsible for buying home furnishings, but as young adults graduate from college or begin their own families, their responsibilities for furnishing a home or apartment increase.

To recruit potential participants, members of a home furnishings women's leadership organization were asked to pass along an email from me that asked for participants. Those who wished to volunteer were asked to respond to me directly. Participants were selected based on the various age cohorts they represented related to life stages that likely spur new home furnishings needs: singles living on their own; married with no children; married with newborns/young children; married with older 'tweens and teens; and empty nesters/mature consumers. Each woman agreed to commit time to voluntarily participate in the study, and were either currently shopping for or had made a major home furnishings purchase sometime in the past three months.

## **Methods**

As discussed, a qualitative methodology was employed because it allows the researcher to gain a deeper insight into the participants' own perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Different qualitative methods often share similar functions and can be used together through a multi-method approach (Merriam, 1998). This allows the researcher to have multiple points of contact to collect data with the participants, which also serves to strengthen the core validity of the study by helping to establish credible propositions. In this study, two specific methods were used to collect data: (1) in-depth interviews and online journaling.

The in-depth interview is more or less a conversation with a specific purpose — the researcher engages the participant in order to gain a deeper understanding that focuses on the fundamental bases of action (Daines, 1989). The interview ultimately tells a story about the lived experiences of the participant (Kvale, 1996). Therefore, interviews

provide an ideal structure for gathering qualitative data. The data collection tool used in this study was the in-depth interview because it provided a focus on the participants' real, lived experiences, while allowing the researcher to ask follow-up questions and clarify the meanings of the responses (McCracken, 1988).

A total of five to seven hours were spent interviewing each participant. To ensure a systematic approach to the interview data collection process, I followed an outline containing several open-ended questions (Merriam, 1998). These questions were based, in part, on previous experiences with conducting interviews during preliminary research. Every question was followed by a number of probes to acquire more detailed information (see Appendix A: Interview Schedule). For example, the first question asked respondents to describe their last major home furnishings purchase. The probes associated with this question were: "What did you buy? Where did you buy it? What did you like about that particular piece?" The meanings the respondents place on the furnishings in their homes and how those furnishings contribute to an expression of their own personalities and values, as well as the emotions involved, was crucial to understanding their perspectives as consumers. The interviews were conducted in participants' homes during late 2011 and early 2012, and were audio-taped with the permission of the participants (see Appendix B: Consent Form).

McCracken (1988) recommends that a demographic questionnaire be completed in conjunction with interviews. This is useful in providing background details, or a context, for the participant's story. It also helps to familiarize the researcher with each participant's roles and responsibilities, work experience, disposable income, and any

cultural factors that may play a role in her experiences. Home furnishings are often purchased at times of change in lifestyle or age, such as when a couple marries, has children, or after children are grown and have left the home. Gathering demographic information from the participants allowed me to explore links between a participant's shopping experiences and her lifestyle. The demographic questionnaire is included as Appendix C.

Online journaling, the second method used in this study, allowed participants to share thoughts and feelings without fear of embarrassment that might arise from a face-to-face interview (Sprague, 2005). Through journaling, the participants also can share anecdotes and details that may not occur to them during the interview. Van Manen (1990) states that phenomenological research is "an attentive practice of thoughtfulness ... [and] a poetizing activity, a thinking on original experience" (p. 13). To that end, journaling allows participants to consider their experiences thoughtfully and relate them in a manner that is more flexible than an interview.

Each participant was asked to log into an online web log (blog) created for the study. She could then record any feelings or thoughts relative to her experiences with shopping for home furnishings, particularly her experiences online, and any other pertinent information. Prompts were used to guide participants' involvement in the journals and loosely focus the entries specifically on their experiences in regard to major home furnishings purchases. A total of 10 prompts were given, and participants were asked to respond to all prompts within a four-week period. These prompts are included as Appendix D. The blog was open in format, such that participants could read postings of

other participants within a forum-type environment.

As part of the interview process, participants were asked to go online and demonstrate to me how they search for home furnishings items. Then participants were asked to navigate to specific websites and browse for home furnishings. I observed and recorded the participant's reactions, time spent on each site, and the thoughts and feelings expressed by the participant regarding her experiences with each site. This allowed me to better understand what the participant experiences during the online shopping process.

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

Once data collection was complete, the data were transcribed and subsequently interpreted for similarities and differences that emerged to describe the participants' experiences with home furnishings. Multiple exposures to the text before the actual analysis stage, as a result of transcribing and assessing meanings, facilitated in-depth understanding of the data. A phenomenological hermeneutic approach was used to interpret the meanings of the participants' lived experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1990; van Manen, 1990). This methodological framework allowed the significant issues to be gathered from the data through several levels of interpretation (Nelson, LaBat, & Williams, 2000). Each interview was analyzed individually and in constant relation to the whole data set. The stages of the analysis process were structured as suggested by Spiggle (1994), and topical areas were derived from this interpretation process. Each topical area consisted of several themes used to further explore in-depth the meanings of the experiences that surfaced within the interviews and other data (van Manen, 1990).

Three levels of interpretation were developed, beginning with personal narratives and ending with theoretical considerations. As van Manen writes, “it is always in the lifeworld in which you have to start” (van Manen, 1984, p. 4); therefore, I began my interpretation by describing the participants’ backgrounds through personal narratives. This aided in understanding the nature of their everyday lives as they actually experience it, rather than how I might conceptualize or theorize about it.

In the second level of interpretation, I reflected on the essential themes that categorized the experience of shopping for home furnishings. As participants’ experiences were explored, shared meanings emerged from the data, and connections between meanings were found within and across participants’ stories. This level of interpretation was developed based on those shared meanings and how the participants experience shopping for home furnishings in similar and different ways.

In the third and final level of interpretation, I described the experience of shopping for home furnishings by reflecting on what it is that renders this particular experience as significant (van Manen, 1984). This level of interpretation flows from and helped clarify the first two levels of interpretation, while also describing how the data in this study correlate with the existing body of literature. I examined the broader significance of the interpretation and its theoretical relevance for what is known about the home furnishings consumption experience.

### **Theoretical Contributions**

This study relies on a sociological framework to situate the topic within the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century American household. This context allows for a relevant

discussion about the meanings of products, changing consumer power (including online consumer power), and the decision-making process as experienced by women. As discussed, these issues are all relevant to the study of women's experiences while shopping for home furnishings.

As described in Chapter II, consumers often attach meaning to the products they buy, and these meanings are constructed through social interaction (Damhorst, 2005; Johnson, Yoo, Kim & Lennon, 2008; Kaiser, 1998; Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992). Furthermore, several researchers assert that men and women use the act of buying objects as a project of forming, and expressing, identity, both for the self and for the family (Belk, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Damhorst, 2005; Moynagh & Worsley, 2001; Nava, 1997; Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992; Zukin & Maguire, 2004). Selecting objects, whether to dress the self or the home, entails choosing objects that the consumer feels best reflects himself or herself within a specific culture or society.

These sociological concepts provide a framework for understanding the female home furnishings consumer by suggesting that home furnishings purchases are meaningful for consumers. Belk's (1988) conception of the term "extended self" helps to explain how, as consumers, we use objects as a reflection of our own identities. He suggests that these meanings are not static over the course of a person's life, and that the meanings change as the person ages and has various life experiences and memories. Objects also help to construct and reinforce our cultural or ethnic identity, both for the individual and in a community (Kim & Arthur, 2003; Mehta & Belk, 1991). Moreover, because objects hold much symbolic meaning, the process of shopping for home

furnishings also has meaning, which will be explored in this study. This process consequently provides a context for understanding of the role of home furnishings as an extension of self and/or the family. Data were ultimately examined for understanding how the participants use home furnishings to express their own personal and social identities, as well as the meanings they attach to the particular objects they purchase.

Alongside objects and identity, the notion of social power is a relevant concept to this study. In Chapter II, I explained how French and Raven's (1959) Social Power Theory suggests that different types of social power can be used to exert influence on others. Consumer power has been steadily increasing, particularly with the increased adoption of Internet access (Rezabakhsh et al., 2006). Internet technology has helped consumers to realize a higher level of market power and exercise influence over those businesses they do (and do not) want to support (Kucuk, 2008; Lindbeck & Wikstrom, 1999; Moynagh & Worsley, 2002; Pires, Stanton, & Rita, 2006; Pitt et al., 2002; Rezabakhsh et al., 2006; Zureik & Mowshowitz, 2005). Furthermore, the Internet provides a wealth of product information, which is a significant source of increased consumer power, and consumers are now able to trade product information and evaluations with each other as well (Lindbeck & Wikstrom, 1999; Pitt et al., 2002; Rezabakhsh et al., 2006). Because websites allow consumers to be better informed and more connected to fellow consumers at little cost, consumers are active market participants, rather than passive recipients or targets of company-driven marketing cycles.

Such changes have put more power in the hands of consumers than retailers. This concept is relevant to the interpretation of the data because it means that home

furnishings consumers now have more power during the shopping process, particularly in the form of access to information. Whereas in the past consumers had to rely on their local home furnishings store to regulate new products, trends, or price points, consumers can now shop for home furnishings virtually anywhere. Furthermore, this concept of consumer power suggests that home furnishings consumers use the Internet as a means of empowerment throughout the shopping experience and to aid in their decision-making process.

Finally, the concept of involvement was helpful in informing the theoretical contributions of the interpretation. As discussed in Chapter II, the extant literature suggests that the antecedents that predict the purchase of search goods are different from those that predict the purchase of experience goods, such as home furnishings. Experience goods cannot be evaluated until they are experienced directly, whereas search goods can be evaluated prior to purchase if information regarding dominant attributes can be obtained through an information search (Nelson, 1974). Furthermore, the concept of product involvement has been revealed in consumer tendencies to attach more importance to specific products and to have more knowledge about specific product attributes and brands (Zaichkowsky, 1985). When a product is perceived as high involvement, consumers will engage in a more active information search and will consider a greater variety of alternatives in their decision-making. Based on the literature, home furnishings can be considered a high involvement, experiential product, and consumer behavior relative to these products is not easy to predict. It is for this reason that a phenomenological approach was used to explore the home furnishings shopping

experience, and considering the complex nature of this experience, the concepts of high involvement/experiential goods helped to inform the interpretation.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I discussed the methodological framework that was used to address the research question: *What is it like to shop for home furnishings?* I discussed phenomenology as means of understanding the home furnishings shopping experience. In addition, the process of participant selection was explained, as were the methods used to collect data. Finally, I described the approach to data analysis and interpretation in light of the theoretical considerations relevant to understanding what it is like to shop for home furnishings. The next chapter provides the first level of interpretation of the data.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **PERSONAL NARRATIVES**

In this chapter, I present the first level of interpretation, which is comprised of personal narratives of each of the six participants. Based primarily on interview data, the narratives are composed through the life experiences of each participant. These experiences are examined for how they shape her meanings of “home” and how she shops for the home. The personal narratives are then used as the foundation for the second and third levels of the interpretation, or Chapters V and VI, respectively.

This chapter will aid in understanding the nature of participants’ everyday lived experience with the home and the things they buy for it. Each participant’s narrative begins with consideration of her personal background and current role in creating her own “home.” Family life, values, and daily activities are considered. The narrative describes the participant’s thoughts about home, how she views her personal style, and how she approaches the shopping process for home furnishings. Included in the narratives are typical shopping experiences shared by the participant, including any issues or concerns she faces throughout the process. All names have been changed for the sake of confidentiality.

#### **Caitlin Byerly**

Caitlin Byerly was born in Thomasville, North Carolina in 1987 and lived in nearby Denton until she graduated high school. She then moved to Greensboro, NC, to

attend the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG), where she earned a bachelor's degree in Communication Studies in 2009. Immediately after graduation, Caitlin began working at High Point University as an IT Services Coordinator, but left in 2010 to work for UNCG in a similar role, where she earns approximately \$30,000 a year.

Caitlin is the only child of her parents, who still live in Denton, and she says she still enjoys a “close relationship” with her family, talking and visiting with them often. As a young, single woman, Caitlin tries to balance her professional life with going out with friends, dating, watching and playing sports, and messing around with her new digital camera. Caitlin lives by herself in a one-bedroom apartment with a large, open kitchen and living room, and a small sunroom situated between the living room and outdoor balcony. She says this is the first place she can honestly call “home” in a long time.

Since 2005, I've moved nine times — for various reasons, like I had roommates who went through bankruptcy in the middle of a lease, or roommates who were supposed to re-lease [with me] and then with two weeks to go changed their minds... things like that.

Approximately three months prior to the interview, Caitlin moved from an apartment (where she lived by herself) to a new apartment complex across town. It is the most recent move to this place that has made a world of difference to her. That is, the new apartment is a place that she can finally call “home.”

I actually like coming home here. Whereas my old apartment, I hated going home. It never felt like home. I had boxes that weren't unpacked for the year I lived

there. I feel safer here, which is a big difference for me. I didn't feel safe in my old apartment, as it wasn't in the best part of town.

Caitlin's discomfort went beyond safety concerns, however. She described how the layout of her previous apartment made her anxious and unhappy.

The space was so much smaller than this, so it didn't feel like home. In my parents' house, there was always a division of rooms — there was a dining room, a bedroom, a living room... [but in the old apartment] as soon as I walked in the door, I was in my living room and kitchen and bedroom, and that's it. It was a huge transition that I never expected. I was used to having different elements and spaces ... it was just stifling to be in this one space all the time. There was always that feeling of the walls closing in for a whole year.

Caitlin does not feel anxious in her new apartment, and she likes finally having a space of her own. She recognizes a significant difference in how she wants her home to look now, as opposed to how she lived in college.

There's a certain look that every college student has in their room their junior/senior year, and it just kind of reminds you of still being a teenager to a point. The bubbly or plastic look. Francis, my [college] roommate, had everything pink. Everything was pink. There was nothing to split it up. All these bright colors everywhere. When you're older, your tastes change, and I like neutral and warm colors and more of a streamlined look. You can't really do that in student housing.

Now that Caitlin is out of college and working full-time, she is ready for her home to reflect a more mature attitude. She feels like her new life will allow her to create the space she most wants.

I can buy nicer things now, and I don't have roommates to contend with now, so there is no "Do you like this?" or figuring out who takes what when you leave.

It's mine, and I don't have to worry about packing up and offending anyone. It's mine. It's my personal space, and I can do what I want with it.

Because Caitlin now feels a degree of ownership of the space, she wants to spend money on decorating her home the way she likes, which is a combination of traditional and modern home furnishings in neutral, beige



*Figure 5: Caitlin's Living Room and Sunroom*

tones. In the living room, she has a small loveseat and there is a chaise lounge in the sunroom, but she would like to get a bigger sofa now that she has the space for it (Figure 5). In the bedroom is a recently purchased bed, dresser and mirror.

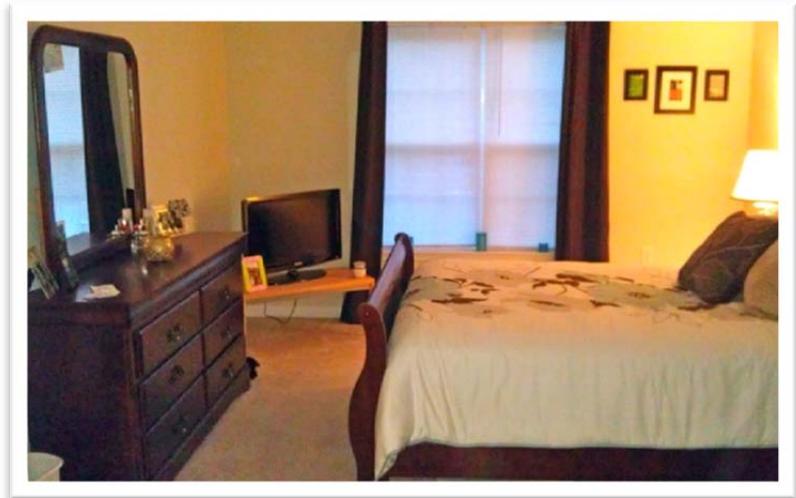
It was half a Christmas present from my parents, and then I am paying the other half. I've wanted furniture for so long, but I didn't want to buy it in college because I moved so much, and if I get nice furniture and I'm moving a lot it can get damaged.

It is the bedroom where Caitlin says she feels most comfortable, largely because of the new furnishings (Figure 6). She describes the difference that the furnishings make in the bedroom as compared to the living room.

My bedroom is a better reflection of me than the living room, which is still a work in progress due to financial reasons. For example, my bedroom finally looks how I want it... it looks like me. [But in the living room], my coffee table is a glass

coffee table. I would never buy a glass coffee table. My aunt gave it to me, but I want a wooden coffee table with a sturdy frame to it. The bedroom colors are much more me, too. There's an actual color scheme of teals, whites and browns. It's streamlined. You get a feel of those colors. In [the living room]... there's just no accent colors. I have white walls, just neutral.

Caitlin's first priority, however, has to be paying the bills. That means that buying home furnishings must be a well-planned process. In addition to sharing the cost of the bedroom furniture with



*Figure 6: Caitlin's Bedroom*

her parents, Caitlin signed up for the financing option with the store to spread her payments out interest-free for a year.

Financially I'm in a more stable place than I thought I would be after graduation. There's a flat screen in my bedroom that took me less than six months to pay off, and I couldn't do that in college. I'm in a place where I can buy nicer things now, and even if I have to do payments I can space it out and not feel so overwhelmed by it.

Consequently, she says her plans for new living room furniture are going to have to wait, at least until she finishes paying off Christmas bills and receives her tax return. After that, Caitlin plans to be ready to purchase a new sofa. In the meantime, she likes to get ideas

for what she wants by talking with friends and casually browsing products online and in local stores. For Caitlin, one source of shopping inspiration is Pinterest, an online social networking site. Pinterest allows users to post virtual photos, links, and videos to their account on “boards,” as one might pin actual photos to a bulletin board, and each user can design as many boards as they like, sorted by topic or theme. Many users post items to boards designed around the home and furnishings for design or product inspiration.

[Pinterest] is nice because you can go back and keep up with it and not have to write anything down. It’s nice having a place where all of your ideas are together.

Caitlin also says she likes “pre-shopping” online, so she can save money on gas by not having to visit stores until she is ready to buy. She likes to view images of different sofas to narrow down her options, check product dimensions, and compare prices between stores, as sometimes she sees deals online that are not available in the stores. However, even though Caitlin is very tech-savvy, she does not have much interest in purchasing home furnishings online. She is not interested in spending more money online for shipping and handling costs. Nor is she interested in buying furniture that has to be assembled, since she lives alone and admits she is “not mechanically inclined at all.” Perhaps most importantly, Caitlin says she has to see the item in person in order to judge its quality and determine if the item’s attributes will fit her needs.

It’s just kind of nice to actually see it because sometimes the pictures you see online... the resolution is different. Also, whenever I see things in person, I can imagine it more, how it would look in my home with everything else I already have.

She also questions whether the depiction of the item's scale, color, fabric, and wood tone are accurate online, so she needs to see it in person to make an evaluation. However, Caitlin submits that if she was familiar with the manufacturer's quality or had seen the item in person before, she would not mind ordering it online, as long as shipping and handling was not going to increase the cost.

Caitlin expects the shopping process for her new sofa will take several months because of the amount of money she is willing to invest. She compares home furnishings shopping to buying other household items and her new Nikon camera, stating that for her, the shopping process is product dependent. Whereas she only spent a few days looking for a washer and dryer, other products require more thought and time.

I just bought my Nikon in December, and it took me two years to [make that decision]. It was because it was such a large amount, but also because I wanted to make sure it was the right camera for me, so I did a lot of research for that camera. There are so many out there, and so many things that change about it. I just wanted to make sure that (a) I was going to get my money's worth out of it, and (b) I was going to use it for a long time. Buying a sofa is like that — I'll look around, go from store to store to see what I really like before I invest that money. If it's going to be an additional payment each month, I want to make sure that I really like it and I'm not settling.

In this stage in Caitlin's life, she realizes that price is still driving many of her decisions, but she also wants to avoid buying furnishings that have to be replaced after a year. The quality of the furnishings is more important to her now than the convenience of buying inexpensive goods, so even though she finds it frustrating to have to space out her home furnishings purchases, she is more satisfied when something "[doesn't] look cheap when you look at it, and it's very well put together and all the materials they use are

really good quality.”

It is important to note that Caitlin’s mother worked in the home furnishings industry for 25 years. As a result, Caitlin feels like she has an advantage that others might not, in that her mother is a useful guide with respect to reasonable prices for good quality items. As Caitlin states, “I can always have [her] perspective versus having a very naïve perspective ... because I don’t know anything about it.” Caitlin’s mother also helps her get good deals through professional connections or by helping Caitlin negotiate prices with the stores.

Overall, Caitlin says she enjoys shopping for home furnishings and finds it exciting, primarily “now that I have my own little home.” Even though she admits that she is still figuring out her style, once she purchases a major home furnishings item, she feels satisfied in the choice that she made.

I’m usually happy about it because it’s one step closer to having the look I want for my home! Especially if it’s a larger piece, it’s an accomplishment to finally have the piece(s) I wanted. If it’s a piece that I need to have a payment plan for, that of course brings on the “I can’t wait to have this paid off” thought, but once it’s paid for, I’m always glad I went through with the purchase.

### **Tara Burdick-Sandy**

Tara Burdick-Sandy was born in Elmira, New York, in 1973, but spent the majority of her childhood in Greensboro, NC. After graduating high school and working a few odd jobs, Tara earned her cosmetology license and now works as a hair stylist in a Greensboro salon. She lives with her husband of eight years, Gabe, a tattoo artist, and their seven-year-old pit bull mix, Lilith. Together, their annual household income is

approximately \$50,000.

Tara and Gabe live a very quiet life in their home in Kernersville, where they moved almost two years ago. Tara considers herself and her husband to be introverts, usually preferring to spend their free time at home with each other rather than with friends. Tara's job allows her to schedule clients at her own pace, so she generally works as much or as little as she pleases. Gabe's schedule is more consistent, but his job requires that he work until midnight several times a week. Consequently, Tara ends up spending a good amount of time at home alone. Perhaps for these reasons, Tara says that her home is her "sanctuary," the place where she can block out the rest of the world. She even has a quote stenciled on her office wall that reads, "And each heart is whispering, 'Home, home at last!'"

You know, I have a job where I have to go out and be what everybody else wants me to be. If I can't [come home] and completely be myself and sit around in pajamas all day long if I want to, what's the point? I live at home. I need for it to be home. I need to be able to curl up with a cup of tea and feel like nothing in the world can touch me.

Tara explained that when she married Gabe, she did not realize that marrying their style preferences would be such a challenge. While Gabe's preference is that "he wants everything in black," Tara says she constantly struggles to find a realistic balance between masculine and feminine décor. When they first got married, the blending of their two styles (and their furnishings) was not exactly seamless.

We didn't mesh — we crammed. Neither one of us was willing to get rid of anything, so we ended up with two of everything. It was a nightmare. We didn't get rid of anything.

It would not be until the couple moved to their current home that they started developing a joint style. Tara says it was just the opportunity they needed to “get rid of everything and start over.” When asked why they did not do that before, Tara replied that she never really felt like personalizing the rental house they lived in prior to buying their home because it never felt like “theirs.”

We didn't want to do anything there because it wasn't “ours.” You know, there was no point in really trying to decorate or get furniture or anything because we knew we weren't going to stay there.

In the house they now live in, which they own, Tara feels like she and Gabe are finally putting down some roots and can start the process of furnishing their home.

Now we're really able to start decorating. We can change things [in the house], and we know we're going to stay here a while. And I don't have to worry about getting screwed out of my security deposit. I'm looking for things with clean lines, a bit more colorful and fun, but something that he's not going to feel like, “Why'd you stick me with flowered curtains?”

Above all, Tara says her furnishings have to be comfortable.

I'm very much a pajama person, and if I wasn't comfortable on my furniture, then I wouldn't be home. I appreciate the look of all that hard, straight furniture... [minimalistic stuff]... I really love the way that looks, but as far as ever having it in my home? [shakes head] Not unless I have a second house, one that I can decorate and another I can live in. I *live* in my house. It's not for show.

Although Tara believes that she and Gabe are finally at a point in their lives where they can focus on buying new, nicer things for the home, they are still cautious about how they spend their money. She asserts that she does not look at things she cannot

afford, but when asked if she has a pre-determined budget when shopping for home furnishings, she says it is more of a “gut reaction” to various prices.

If it's too expensive and I can't make it, I don't look at it. There's no point in that. I'm not a window shopper... [Our purchases] aren't budgeted like that. It's more of a “Holy crap, I would never spend that much money on something like that,” that happens.

Tara prefers “to tackle [her] home one room at a time,” because as she says, they do not entertain a lot of company so she is not in any hurry. Most recently, she purchased a dresser and two end tables from IKEA for her bedroom, and she is still shopping for a headboard for their bed. Because of her introverted nature, Tara says she prefers to shop online as much as possible until she is ready to make the purchase. In addition to feeling more comfortable shopping in the privacy of her own home, Tara says shopping is more fun for her that way.

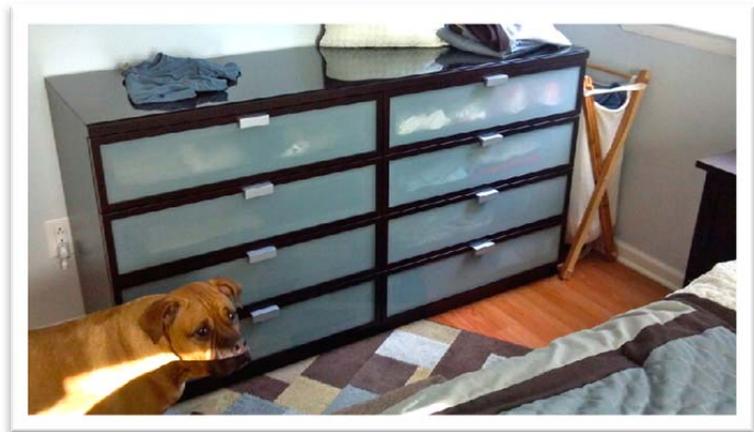
[Online], I feel that I can kind of spend more time and go the direction I want to go... If I go out to a store, then I'm limited to what they want to present, whereas if I'm online I can go look at blogs or stores or whatever. There's just a whole lot of other avenues. And I don't get bored, 'cause there's always Facebook to keep me entertained, so I can stop shopping and go back to it [whenever I feel like it].

Typically, Tara begins the home furnishings shopping process with a Google search of the item she is looking for, and then checks out the Google shopping results. She then visits the websites of a few of the local home furnishings retail stores. This provides the information she needs prior to going to the store, but it does not mean it is what she will buy. For example, she ultimately found the bedroom pieces she wanted on

IKEA's website. Interestingly, however, the dresser she initially liked online was not the one she ended up buying (Figure 7).

We ended up with a dresser that we never, ever would have chosen [based on the picture] online. Online, it was ugly! But when we went down [to IKEA in Charlotte], seeing all of them in person and looking at what was functional for us and in our room, it just ended up being perfect. It matches beautifully, and I love it.

Tara asserts that she was prepared to purchase the dresser that she originally found online, but because shipping costs “were outrageous,” she decided to go to the IKEA store in person. When asked if she would ever consider buying furniture online again, she says she learned a valuable lesson.



*Figure 7: Tara's New Bedroom Dresser*

Having gone through the experience with the dresser and it looking so different in person than it did online, I don't think that I would [buy furniture online]. I was prepared to, honestly. But I'm so glad that we went [in person] because I love the one that we have, and I would have just been ok with what we would have ordered. So no, given that, I don't think that I would anymore.

For Tara, those home furnishings pieces for which comfort is a primary factor, such as a sofa, make it even more unlikely that she will purchase online: “Absolutely not. I have to

be able to sit in it. I have to know it's going to be comfortable."

Tara said that even though she is working on one room at a time, she feels like she is "constantly shopping, because everything is a work in progress in this house." Shopping for Tara, however, includes finding out about how she might make something herself instead of purchasing it. For example, Tara thinks she might create her own headboard for the bed by "slapping a piece of fabric over some foam and wood and sticking it in front of the wall." Tara also wants to restore an old piece of furniture she has (Figure 8), rather than purchase something new, because it holds sentimental value for her.



*Figure 8: Tara's Deacon Bench*

You know, I've got a piece of furniture in the bedroom now that is a deacon's bench that opens ... It was an engagement gift for my parents when they got married, and I grew up playing in that thing. And [my mother] was going to get rid of it! I was like, "No, you're not! Are you kidding? I don't care if it's worth anything or not, I grew up playing in it and I want it." I'm sentimental, yes. I'm a sucker for that.

Unfortunately, the deacon's bench suffered flood damage, so Tara is thinking about either refinishing it or putting fabric along the sides to hide the damage. She reads online blogs and uses Pinterest to get ideas for it.

Although Tara says she is not especially close to her family, she likes the idea of keeping something that has been in her family a while, and particularly those things with a story behind them. Tara described how after her grandmother's funeral during the past year, everyone in the family was allowed to take something from her grandmother's home as a remembrance. Tara's memento of her grandmother was neither big nor expensive, but it held poignant meaning for her.

What I took were these salt shakers that my father had given her... like, the first Christmas gift that he ever gave to her was these salt and pepper shakers that are little, cheap snowmen. They're adorable, but they're cheap little... like they were given away with a bank statement or something stupid, I don't know. But that was what I wanted.

The next room Tara wants to purchase home furnishings for is her craft room, where she stores all of her yarns and tools for knitting and other crafts. Again, she started by looking at IKEA's website for various storage solutions, such as cabinets and shelves.

My greatest wish for my next life is to have some organizational skills. Apparently, this house has to hold all of our clutter, 'cause we can't put anything away. I want a wall of storage for the [craft] room, because my craft room is kind of the junk room at this point. I've got mountains of clutter and this tiny little space to work in. If I weren't a terrible housekeeper on top of that ... just shoot me now.

Even though she likes IKEA's products, Tara admits that the sheer number of products and configurations on the company's website can sometimes be too overwhelming.

I keep going and looking, and they have all of these great [configurations] and it looks so amazing and fantastic, but then it's like, "Yeah, but how in the hell did you *do* that? What? How? I don't know how to do that!" So yeah, I get overwhelmed pretty easily.

Although Tara asserts that she is not a "window shopper" and does not enjoy shopping in general, she admits that the process of buying furnishings for her home has been fun so far.

I enjoy it when I find stuff, you know? Like, *that's* exciting. The piecing it together has been a whole lot of fun. I've never had the money, or the inclination, or the space or whatever to really be able to make something my own like that. It's been fun just finding the *right* things, you know?

### **Renee Marino**

Renee Marino was born and raised in Lincolnton, NC. In 1990, Renee moved to Greensboro, NC, to attend UNCG, where she earned a bachelor's degree in music performance. Soon after graduation, Renee married her then-boyfriend, Ben, and the couple now has two small children, Lindsay, 3, and Paxon, 18 months. Ben works full-time at UNCG in web development, while Renee serves as the music and program director of a large non-denominational church in Greensboro. Together, the couple earns over \$100,000 per year. Last year, the family moved into a new home in nearby Summerfield to accommodate their growing need for more space.

For 39-year-old Renee, the concept of home is one that centers around her family, and when she is not at work, her biggest priority is spending time with them. Renee shared that she and Ben tried unsuccessfully for almost ten years to have children, so now that she has two little ones, she does not want to miss any moments with them. With that in mind, Renee says that her greatest hope for her home is that it is one filled with “warmth, living, and loving.”

When it comes to furnishing her home, Renee admits that she is primarily a collector. She enjoys browsing consignment stores or vintage shops to find a great deal, and she loves going to yard sales on the weekends and seeing what treasures she might find for her home. Although most of her furnishings are in neutral tones, Renee likes adding “pops” of color in her rooms, usually by painting a piece of wood furniture, such as the large turquoise armoire currently in her living room. She is proud that her home is full of unique items, many of which she purchased at very little cost.

I feel like I’ve collected pieces from all kinds of places — some free, yard sales, consignment stores, family stuff, and some from furniture stores. It’s just fun. And I feel like it’s coming together. I don’t like rooms that are matchy-matchy, everything came from the same store, and everything is all designed.

Renee sees her conservative, yet eclectic home furnishings style as a reflection of her personality and personal style.

I have a theory. Maybe it’s not my own, ‘cause maybe I heard it on HGTV, but the way you decorate is a lot of times like the way you dress yourself. So for me, I’m a little more clean-lined, I can dress classic, and I can be kind of funky sometimes. I’ll put little pops of color here and there. I don’t over-accessorize. If I wear a necklace, I rarely will wear earrings with it.

While she admits Ben is not very interested in home furnishings, he does have good taste in clothes, so Renee tends to trust his opinion when it comes to big purchase decisions. However, Ben's shopping style is to search online for everything and then go purchase something new either online or in a traditional brick and mortar store. While Renee does like the look of both modern and vintage furniture, she says she likes the challenge of finding pieces at a great price, which is what prompts her to check out second-hand furnishings first.

If I found something in a furniture store that really fit the bill [for what I'm looking for], I would be ok with that. But it costs more. See, I know if I find something like that at a yard sale or consignment store, I'm not going to pay much for it.

Hence, cost is a major consideration for Renee, but not because she is unable to afford to spend money on home furnishings. She just likes the challenge of discovering a home-made solution or significant discount for what she needs, and paying less gives her "permission" to change her mind sooner rather than later.

If it's something I can get on sale, at a really good deal, I will like it even better. I think I would rather put less money in something that might not last quite as long, but I don't feel bad a few years down the road if I want to change it. So I'm not stuck with a thousand-dollar little curio cabinet or whatever. If I paid \$50 for it at a yard sale, if I don't use it for very long, then it's ok.

This focus on value is made even more evident when Renee talked about how having small children affects the furnishings she chooses. When her daughter recently shattered a lamp while playing in the house, Renee remembered that she only spent \$3 on

the lamp at Good Will. Thus, she did not feel too badly. Likewise, she proudly described how her coffee table was free, and her end tables were only \$35, so “if the kids destroy it, I won’t feel too bad about it.” Ultimately, Renee wants all the furnishings in her home to be used, not just admired.

With furniture pieces like the front [formal] couch in there ... we had [it] recovered, so I won’t let them sit on that with food or anything like that, but they can climb on it. I want the furniture to be something that they can sit on and climb on and not feel like it’s off limits, ‘cause we’re not that kind of house.

Renee watches HGTV in her spare time to get decorating ideas and learn do-it-yourself techniques, “not that I have the *time* to do it myself,” she qualifies. Renee likes the idea of “repurposing” things she finds to fit with her home. She does not think she is particularly good at decorating the rooms in her home, but she enjoys occasionally browsing online articles or Craigslist while she is at work and thumbing through home furnishings catalogs at the house. She adds that she really likes catalogs, not because she intends to purchase from them, but because she can hold onto them for a while for inspiration.

You know, Pottery Barn, it’s expensive. I’m not ever really going to buy anything from there, but I like to look at the way they have things arranged. Sometimes it’s too much, but I think there are times in my decorating that I don’t do enough. I stay more on the simple side. At least until I find that perfect piece. Some day, when my kids are older and I have time, I will do more of that! But I like to flip through [the catalogs] bunches of times, and just kind of see... and it gives me ideas for things to look for at yard sales.

Even though Renee enjoys shopping in general, she admits that she is “very, very slow” when it comes to making purchase decisions, even for apparel. This process becomes even more measured when she is shopping for more expensive items such as home furnishings because “it’s a bigger piece that’s going to last a whole lot longer.” She also feels that there is a certain level of commitment that is involved in buying home furnishings, much greater than that of other purchases, such as apparel.

It’s harder to take back to the store if you don’t like [the furniture]. A piece of clothing ... it’s easy to transport. But to transport a sofa back to the store? I feel like when I make that decision it better be the right one.

While this commitment level makes Renee hesitant to make buying decisions, it also increases the amount of time she spends looking for information and options. Renee described how she enjoyed taking her time looking for furnishings before her first child was born.

I’m one that prefers to go and collect things. [For Lindsay’s room], we bought a crib, but we didn’t buy the whole matching set, ‘cause I don’t like matchy-matchy stuff. So I just collected things from yard sales and things that we got from family and whatever.

For the crib, Renee explained that she and Ben both checked out websites such as Babies ‘R’ Us and USA Baby as well, using the Internet to search for items and to cross-reference price information.

I did go look in person for a lot of stuff, but I knew that I didn’t want anything fancy and big and bulky, because that room was small. I was looking for something more narrow, not too girly looking ... something that would convert at

least to a toddler bed. So we did some Internet research to try and find something that was a little slimmer line.

However, when she was pregnant with her second child, she realized she did not have the time to search for home furnishings as frequently or as extensively as she once could.

Furnishing Paxon's room was a different kind of experience.

I just didn't have the time to go collect furniture or go looking at yard sales like I did before. Not even to shop online. For Paxon, we bought a crib, which converts to a double bed, the changing table and dresser. That was more Ben's doing... more of an impulse [purchase]. We went to Babies 'R' Us one night and we found that and I liked it, and I was like, "Ok, fine. Let's get it."

Because Renee sounded somewhat defeated with respect to the purchase, I asked her if she was not happy with the purchase decision. She responded,

No, it's not that. I liked it! But I am more frugal and won't purchase something if it's not on sale, or if I think I can find something similar at a consignment store or yard sale that I can "fix up." But if Ben's with me, he just says, "If you like it, get it. I don't care what the price is." I have a hard time with that, but he helps me along.

According to Renee, Ben balances her shopping style because he encourages her to buy things that she really likes, even though they may cost more than she would normally pay. She says she would not do that on her own, that she does not feel comfortable unless Ben is there to assure her that she can spend the money on it and that it is worth it. In fact, Renee felt the need to justify her "splurge" on Paxon's furniture by saying that they were able to put the purchase on a Babies 'R' Us credit card and "got all kinds of deals." Plus, Renee rationalizes it makes more sense in the long run to spend

more for Paxon's furnishings.

Really, as I think about it, Paxon's a boy, and he's going to be fine with the same furniture the rest of his life. He's not going to want a makeover in his room.

Lindsay probably will, so it was good to not spend much money on her stuff when she's so young and doesn't care, so when she gets older we can get rid of that old stuff and spend money on good stuff that she'll like. So that'll work out neat that way.

Ben sometimes contributes to Renee's search process by shopping online and comparing various products, but she maintains that she would rather see everything in person.

I'd rather just go to the store. If I see it in person, I can trust it. That that's what I'm getting ... that when I spend \$2,000 on whatever this is, I know exactly what I'm getting. When I've spent \$2,000 on something I've only seen a picture of, the color could be different, the size could not be exactly what I want ... who knows? You just don't know those things [online].

Renee says she enjoys the process of shopping for home furnishings, especially when she can take her time and collect things she just happens to find. She finds it stressful if there is a deadline for buying furniture, even though she admits a deadline helps her make decisions more quickly. Her favorite experiences are those where she felt she found "the perfect piece" and was able to get it at a deal. For example, on her birthday, Renee spent part of the day shopping around Greensboro with her husband, not looking for anything in particular but browsing various stores for fun. While walking through a thrift store, Renee found a large cabinet (sideboard and hutch combination) and instantly loved it (Figure 9). Although she was not even looking for a piece like it, she

immediately envisioned how it would work in her kitchen/dining area.

I liked the oldness, how it's distressed. I liked its practicality, 'cause I needed something that I could hide things in on the bottom, so I loved that it had a drawer. What I had there was an island from our old kitchen, which was wonderful in the old house, but it looked terrible in here ... I also loved that this has glass doors so you could see all of our pottery stuff. So I saw it and just loved it.

What really makes Renee light up when retelling the story is how she negotiated on the price with the seller and got it at a discounted rate. From her perspective, she feels like she “conquered” the process by getting something she liked so much at a great price.

It really wasn't very much. I'll say it was like \$169, which is still a good deal. I said, “Is that your final price on that?” because that kind of store, you can kind of negotiate a little bit, because it's different vendors that are set up in there. So they called the guy that this came from, and I got it down to \$140-something. So yeah, it was worth asking for a couple bucks, and it just makes me feel even better about that piece. I mean, it would have been fine at the \$169 price, but because I got it for \$30 less it felt even better!



*Figure 9: Renee's Kitchen Cabinet*

Because family is so important to Renee, there are pieces of furniture in her home that she wants to hang onto because they are tied to family. For example, an entertainment center in the guest room was made by her late stepfather, and she could not imagine letting go of that piece for any reason. She feels much the same way about an old rocking chair that belonged to her grandmother, as well as the entertainment center that husband Ben designed, her brother made, and a friend stained and finished. However, Renee says that if she did not like the style of the pieces or thought they did not match her style, she would not feel quite so attached to them: “I like those pieces, and I want to keep them not just because of where they came from. I mean, I like the shape and the lines, and I can repurpose it to fit what I need it for.” Additionally, Renee prefers to have furnishings that “are a little more special” at this point in her life, so items with some history behind them hold more value to her.

Even though she has small children running around, Renee says she does not want that to dictate how she furnishes her home, as long as it is not a safety issue.

Somebody Ben works with last year came over for dinner, [and] I have that blue vase ... that big, tall blue vase which was my mom's, and they couldn't believe that I would have that in a house with children. And someday I may move it... when they get to running around the house and are more rambunctious, I may have to move it for a season. But I don't intend to give up my style because I have kids. It's frustrating when you see mothers that give up everything about them after they have kids. I'm not like that, and I refuse to be that way. So I'm not going to give up that stuff. You know, if you have to move things around for a season, that's fine ... That little three-tiered table I was telling you about that I just got at Mom's? I won't put anything on that table probably for years, because they'll knock it over. But at least I have it and I like it.

Since Renee frequently mentioned the importance of price in her home furnishings purchases, the subject of IKEA home furnishings and IKEA's website came up. While Renee says she likes the low-cost home furnishings retailer, she prefers that her furnishings do not *look* cheap, and so needs to inspect items in person before buying anything. Furthermore, she finds the retailer's products a bit too modern for her. Conversely, while she likes the style of Pottery Barn and Pier One, she will not pay their retail prices. For example, Renee described how she has been looking for a piece of furniture for just inside the back door, a piece that is a combination bench and coat rack. She found a solution for that problem at Pier One, but she could not bring herself to buy it.

Pier One has this "hall tree" kind of thing that's the very same thing I'm looking for, except it's all one piece, and it's got the bench at the bottom, and it has pull-out baskets maybe, or drawers or something... And then I think it's got the mirror at the top and it's got the coat hooks. So it's something that would work really well there, and Ben showed it to me in the catalog and said, "Well why don't you just get this?" Well, it's \$300-something dollars! I KNOW I can go to a yard sale and find what I need! So I won't go to Pier One and buy it — and it's on sale even! And Ben said, "Why don't you just go look at it?" Well, I want something that's more eclectic there. You know, something that's found... Something that I've put together. I don't want something that looks like I bought it at Pier One, as much as I like Pier One!

When asked why she thinks that is, Renee is unsure, but she acknowledged that there is something about the hunt for the right solution that is very appealing to her.

I want something unique there. I just want something of interest ... which that [Pier One] hall tree would be! I mean, it's a nice looking piece. I love Pier One, and I've gotten furniture from there before. But I just know... there's a challenge, is what it is. I know that I can find it at a yard sale for a whole lot cheaper. I might

have to fix something, or I can put something together and make exactly what I want out of it.

Renee says finding the right solutions is part of what makes her home furnishings feel more personal and meaningful, but she realizes that she may not always be able to find the product to match the idea in her head.

[Finding pieces to put together] feels more “me.” And the Pier One piece would be me. I don’t know... I’m stubborn. And what will happen is, Pier One will sell out of those and they’ll be gone, and they’ll never have any more, and I’ll never find anything I want at a yard sale.

Because of Renee’s need for uniqueness at an inexpensive price, the shopping process is not a simple matter of finding a product that meets a functional need. Moreover, Renee’s sense of style for the home follows trends just as her apparel preferences do, and she does not look for long-term solutions. Consequently, Renee feels that the process of furnishing her home will never be complete, that it is constantly evolving as both she and her family change and grow.

Yeah, I’ve never felt like I’ve had a completed room, and I don’t know if I ever will. I’ll always go to yard sales, and I’ll always find this perfect piece that would look good there and there, and whatever...

### **Mariea Snyder**

Mariea Snyder was born in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, in 1976. After she graduated high school, Mariea decided college was not for her, so she began working full-time at the local martial arts training facility where she had earlier earned her black belt. While

competing in a Southern regional tournament, she met her future husband, Steve. After dating for a couple of years, the two married and in 1998 moved to High Point, NC, where Steve's parents live. Today, the couple own and operate a martial arts school together, earning around \$60,000 per year. They have two children, Deven, 12, and Elizabeth, 8.

Owning their own business is a fun yet challenging lifestyle for Mariea and Steve. Mariea says that either she or her husband can be at the school from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. or later during the week, either teaching classes, giving private lessons, doing paperwork, or cleaning. The business is also open Saturdays from 9 a.m. to noon. This kind of schedule does not leave a lot of time for relaxing, but Mariea says that her home is where she can unwind and recharge her energy for the next day. The time and stress involved in the day-to-day business also makes home a place that gives Mariea a measure of security that she does not feel anywhere else.

[My home] is a refuge where I can go to decompress and get away from everything. It's not just somewhere to go when you're done [working], though. It's somewhere I feel comfortable and I *like* to be. Plus, home is a place I know I'll be long-term. It makes me feel more secure, like I've got things together for a while.

When they are home, Mariea says she and her family spend much of their time on the sofa together, so she wants her furnishings to be comfortable. Other than that, her criteria for furnishings are very utilitarian – she is not overly concerned about style or aesthetics. In fact, she tends to wait until a piece of furniture stops being functional altogether before she will replace it. For example, the bottom rails of the sleigh bed frame

that she bought for her bedroom broke about six months ago, but Mariea feels no rush to replace it, even though it is now being supported with a stool. A similar example is the 50-year-old bedroom dresser that was handed down to Mariea by her grandmother when she was 18. The dresser drawers are falling apart, and Mariea admits she just glued one of them shut. However, she is not actively looking to replace the dresser any time soon.

We just don't spend a lot of time there. We don't spend time there. We just sleep there. For some people, that's their space and they spend time there [to relax], but for us, we don't spend time there. It's not our space. It's not our priority.

Mariea asserts that she is not holding onto her grandmother's dresser for any sentimental reasons, either: "I'm not really attached to it. It's not something I like. I have it because it was free and it was convenient. [If money weren't an issue,] I'd want something new." Mariea supposes she got this trait from her father, who would constantly fix things and keep them until they were no longer usable. However, another reason Mariea is not even browsing for new furnishings right now is because they do not have the money to spend, She will not look for furnishings until she knows they have the money and are ready to buy.

I probably should go look before [we need to buy something], because I don't know what I would need [budget-wise]. I don't know what the prices of stuff actually are. I haven't looked that deeply into it. There are other things I want to spend my money on, so it's not a priority.

Mariea thinks that her furnishings are important to making her house feel "homey," but she does not think that she needs to spend a lot of money to furnish her

home, either. She is just as happy to use furnishings that someone passed along to her as she is to buy something new, as long as she likes what was given to her. Furthermore, even when they have the money to purchase more expensive furniture, Mariea says she just does not *want* to spend her money that way: “I would rather spend money on kids’ stuff, fun stuff, vacations.”

Mariea says that she thinks her home reflects what is important to her, but not necessarily in the larger home furnishings pieces. Instead, there are pictures of her family around the house, mementos from trips taken together, a curio cabinet of Dreamsicles figurines, a calendar of pugs (which Mariea loves), and photos of their dogs, past and present (Figure 10). She says it is the little things in her home that really show her personality and what she values.



*Figure 10: Mariea’s Cabinet of Dreamsicles, Photos and Mementos*

I think it's the little things we put in — the color, the things on the wall, the pictures, the accessories, stuff from the kids ... I guess it depends on the person. [Decorating] is more important to some people than to other people, but I also think that would reflect the priorities in their life. It goes to either way, whether they put effort and energy into doing it or not, it shows where their priorities are so it really reflects them and what's important to them.

Last year, however, Mariea and Steve decided they needed a new sofa. Mariea first got her husband's input before starting the search. She said it is generally assumed that she will be the one who shops for and finds the home furnishings for the house, but because "Steve is very opinionated," she generally starts with him before looking elsewhere for ideas.

He gives me a list of [criteria], and I know the kind of stuff he likes and the stuff I like, and that's the first thing I do. I ask him what he wants. What style? Do something different [than last time]? For example, he likes dark colors on wood. That would be the first thing. Then, I'd go online first to see what's available or go to some stores just to look around.

The couple agreed that they wanted a leather sofa with reclining seats at each end (Figure 11). Leather was especially important because with two children and three dogs, Mariea said she definitely wanted something that could be cleaned easily. In addition, fabric sofas often retain odors, so leather was the better option.

Mariea says she typically starts with a Google search online to get ideas, and then clicks on the various pictures that come up. This is how she narrowed her sofa search.

I looked to see cost-wise what my price range would be for what I wanted, but not to actually buy anything. I did go online to look at shapes and sizes, to see what's out there.



*Figure 11: Mariea's Sofa*

Once she had a good idea of what she wanted, Mariea went to local retailers, including a small “Mom and Pop” store she had passed several times while driving around. Although there are a lot of large furniture retail chain stores in her area,

Mariea did not want to deal with the endless options and large square footage of those stores. Mariea explains that she also likes the smaller stores because she does not want to pay a lot for home furnishings, and “it seems like you can find odds and ends [at smaller stores] or something that is maybe not perfect, but still good. That way you can get a deal.” After she found a few styles and brands that she liked, Mariea said she actually went back online to see if she could get a better deal.

I like going online so I can see prices and what’s out there, but I don’t like that I can’t see it or touch it or sit in it. In person, I can see, get a better idea of how big something is, the size and feel of it. [For furniture,] the only reason to go online is to price things, and then after I found something [I want to buy], to try to find it for a better price online.

Although re-checking online seems like an extra step, Mariea described an instance in which this method saved her time and money. She went to a furniture store for two slate end tables, and when she asked about them she was told that it would take eight

weeks before the tables would be delivered. Mariea was not interested in waiting that long, so she decided to find something else. However, before she left the store she wrote down the name of the manufacturer and model number. Once back at home, Mariea looked online to see if she could find the same tables elsewhere.

I found them for half the price at a place called Lamps USA (lampsusa.com). Isn't that weird? And they shipped it in two days! When I got them, some of the slate pieces were broken, and they reshipped some slate pieces with no questions asked. That would be how the Internet helps. If I looked at them online, I probably wouldn't have gotten them because I couldn't see the size of them. Even with the dimensions online, it's hard to tell. I probably wouldn't have gotten them online unless I'd see them in the store.

However, Mariea does think that sometimes both her shopping style and desire to pay less, when combined, have led to issues of durability. She feels that she has not always made good choices or been satisfied in the long run with her purchases.

Our dining room table ... I thought that I loved it and I still love it, but it was not as good of a quality as I thought it was in the beginning, so now I'm not happy with it. I've become unhappy over time because it hasn't withstood time very well.

Mariea admits that she does not really know how long furniture should last. She is confident the new sofa should last roughly 10-15 years, but she does not consider durability when shopping: "I don't really think about keeping it that long when I get it. I want it to be good and to last, but I never really think about it having to last *this* [certain number of years] long. I don't put a number on it." Mariea reiterates that she is willing to live with something "not great" until it simply ceases to be functional.

With our kitchen chairs and the super old table ... it's the kid's table. We started with four chairs there, but the [support] bars on the bottom came out. We fixed them until finally ... it wasn't until Steve took them and threw them out that I quit fixing them. So yes, I'd try to fix them or deal with them until... [infinity implied]

Overall, Mariea does enjoy shopping for home furnishings. She says she likes to browse online and look around at local stores to find what she needs. Yet she focuses the shopping process on finding what she needs in a short amount of time.

As long as there isn't a weird deadline, I'd say it's fun. I like going and looking, but if I have a deadline that I have to have something in a certain amount of time, then it's stressful. Like with a dress I would need tonight, then it wouldn't be any fun [shopping for it] and I wouldn't find anything. I tend to be more compulsive when I know we need something. I'll spend a lot of time trying to find it even though I'm *not* on a deadline. I want to try to find it quickly. If I don't find it today, I'll go back tomorrow. I'm on a mission. If I had to do it in a certain amount of time, it wouldn't be fun. But if I'm in control of it, it's fun.

### **Maggie Whitaker**

Maggie Whitaker was born in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1962. She moved to Greensboro, N.C., in the 1980s to attend Guilford College, where she earned a bachelor's degree in business management. After graduation, Maggie began working at a variety of companies in finance and Internet technology positions. She got married and divorced a few years later, and then in 1993, she married her now-husband Tony. It was a second marriage for both, and while Tony has two children from a previous marriage, the two do not have any children together.

In 2008, the couple moved overseas to Switzerland for a job Maggie had as an IT specialist for Ciba, a chemical company. She and Tony lived there until June 2010, when

Maggie was laid off during the slow economy. The couple moved back to the United States and built a new home in High Point, NC. Maggie recently began a new job working as an IT specialist for a local health care system, where she analyzes financial data for trends and helps the company make future decisions based on that financial information. Maggie spends her free time reading at home, riding her horse, Jasper, or spending time with her mother, who recently moved to High Point as well. Tony is a retired chemist who spends his days reading, playing his guitars, and babysitting the couple's three cats. The couple makes approximately \$150,000 per year.

To Maggie, home is all about comfort: "It's a place where you can come and be completely yourself and comfortable ... and you feel safe and loved and happy." It is also free of obligations and pretenses — a place where she doesn't need to sit "all prim and proper" or worry about anyone else.

I don't worry about things here, you know? With my husband here, I feel safe with him and I enjoy being with him, sitting in the same room. If he's listening to his music and I'm reading, we're just as happy as if we were having a conversation or watching a movie. We don't have to *do* anything here to be comfortable.

Maggie explains that the furnishings have been a very important part of making her new house feel like "home." Maggie and Tony lived in an apartment in Switzerland. The rooms and space were much smaller there, so they did not need the same kind of furnishings there as in their new house in High Point. In fact, she and Tony sold most of the furnishings before moving to Switzerland, primarily because they knew the furnishings would not fit. Now that they are back in the United States, Maggie feels that

the bigger rooms and more space in the new house means that more furniture is needed to make the house feel “homey.”

To me, it’s more important to the person who lives there than it is someone who comes to visit. For instance, this did not feel like a home to me until we got that [new sofa in the living room]. Because all we had in there to sit on was this [small loveseat] ... and I was not comfortable and he was not comfortable, especially the way we both like to lay down on the couch, and we would fight, “Ok, it’s my turn on the loveseat,” “Now it’s your turn on the loveseat,” “No, it’s my turn on the loveseat!” To me, it didn’t feel like home until we actually got that sofa ... Until we had one that made it happy and comfortable, it didn’t really feel like a home. I felt like once we got that, we could have family over, ‘cause we’d have somewhere to sit! If the furniture’s at a level where you can’t feel comfortable on them, then you’re not going to want to be in that room. You’re just not going to want to go there.

Most importantly, Maggie wants her furnishings to be comfortable and offer good support so that she and Tony can lounge on them any way they like. She also does not want her furnishings to make visitors feel as though they cannot make themselves at home in her house, too.

I’m an easy-going person ... I’m not fussy. I’m just very casual and laid-back, and I want my furniture to look comfortable, and be comfortable, and for people to sit on it and not feel like they have to sit prim and proper, ‘cause I’m not a prim and proper person. I don’t feel comfortable in people’s houses where it doesn’t look like anyone sat on the furniture. When I sit on the furniture and I pull my legs up here, they’re going to know that it’s ok for them to do that, too. And the fact that my cats can come on the furniture ... it just helps to show that I’m a relaxed person. Relaxing furniture makes me *feel* like a relaxed person.

Maggie likes to browse magazines and online product photographs to get ideas on how to furnish her home. She also likes visiting friends’ homes to see how they put things together. Perhaps most importantly, the years that Maggie and Tony lived in

Switzerland proved to be pivotal for how Maggie feels about her home and how she wants it to look, particularly with respect to the use of color.

In my previous house, everything was (low, disgusted voice) beige and neutral... and boring. I think it helped because I lived in Switzerland, and over there, there is no ... beige. It's all colorful ... I mean, my friend there had yellow, red, orange, blue and green sheers on her windows, and it was *gorgeous*! You know? It looked really nice. And another family I [was] friends with had a red bathroom, and it was beautiful. Absolutely beautiful. Big, bold color everywhere. I just started liking it a lot, and was very comfortable with it. And when I moved into my apartment over there I was like, "We sure are boring! They can tell we're Americans!"

Maggie now prefers contemporary furnishings and bold colors, the opposite of what she calls "Americana," which she describes as "fussy."

I don't like the heavy wood look, the scrolls, the cut wood, the big ol' poofy pillows, overstuffed chairs, things like that.

Maggie says that her style was fairly conservative before she moved to Switzerland, but once she saw how other people incorporated color into their homes, she became much more comfortable with taking some risks.

I wasn't a bold color person before I went to Switzerland. We had a huge sectional and it was the beige weave. We had an oriental rug, so we had a *beige* rug, and we had a *beige* sofa ... I was too scared to put colors together. Until I moved over there, I was scared to do things with the house, 'cause I didn't think anyone would like it, and right now I don't really care what people think because this is what I want and what I like. And it turns out, luckily, that my husband likes the same stuff.

Maggie points out that color and style are important, but not at the expense of comfort.

Comfort is at the top of her list of considerations when buying home furnishings.

Comfort, mostly. Comfort and sturdiness ... you know, longevity. Because I don't, like I said, I'm not one to sit properly. So when you don't sit properly on furniture, it tends to ... squish and get reshaped, and that sort of thing. So I want to be able to sit and be very comfortable with the way I sit, and the way [Tony] sits. He always lays on the couch. I've never, ever seen him sit up in the couch, unless we've got, like, tons of people there and there's no room to lay down.

Looking around Maggie's house, one can easily surmise that she likes contemporary home furnishings and bright colors. Consequently, it is a little odd to see the old-fashioned Queen Anne chair in dark green fabric and a Queen Anne table in her sunroom. When asked about the two pieces, Maggie smiles and says that those pieces belonged to a very special person in her life.

Those pieces belonged to my grandmother, and I will not get rid of [them]. I'm very sentimental about them. We were extremely close. In fact, I got her whole living room set ... and then when we moved [to Switzerland], the pieces that belonged to my grandmother that I wasn't taking went back to somebody else in the family.

When I asked Maggie what makes her want to display these pieces since they are so different from the rest of her home, she says that the furnishings are a way to feel close to her grandmother, particularly since she has passed away.

Well, I miss my grandmother. I love her. And she was always very picky about her furniture, you know? Like, "Don't put that on there!" And she would never do this (throws her feet on coffee table). She was very much of a lady. I just love her and still miss her all of the time. So I'll always have a piece of her. And I have her dresser. It's just a tiny little thing that she kept by her bedside that I really, really

like. And I'm probably going to refinish it into something a little more colorful when I get a chance. But I just like having it because it's hers.

Soon after they moved into their home, Maggie wanted to find a sofa for her living room, and another sofa for a sitting area in her bedroom. She already had a rug in the living room that is full of bright colors, and she knew she wanted a sofa to complement the rug. She knew she wanted a microfiber, open weave fabric so that the cats' claws would not tear the fabric, and she prefers to own sofas with "bench seats," which Maggie says are similar in design to "a pickup truck's seat ... it's all one piece, so there are no seat cushions per se." She likes that bench seats tend to keep their shape better, and that the fabric does not slide around like it does on cushions. However, Maggie admits that finding sofas with bench seats is a little more difficult, so she first looked online to see what was available.

If you look at most Americana type stuff, it's BIG, and it's overstuffed, and it's fluffy and it's pillows, and cushions ... and [Tony and I] agreed that we really like this bench seat thing. I wanted non-American furniture. Not non-American made, but non-Americana. I don't want the big wood pieces, the big overstuffed things, and I wanted something different.

Although Maggie began her shopping process by looking online for ideas, she decided to hire a professional to help her.

I *did* hire a decorator, actually, when I first came in here, 'cause I'm not good at putting things together. And so we were looking at this, and we were looking at that, and she took me shopping here and over there, and I was like, "You know, none of it is just quite ... doing it for me." I wanted something that would go with the rug, and she says, "Well, maybe you need to go with a neutral color on the rug," and I'm like, "Pshhh!" You know? I just wasn't happy with her.

The decorator continued to take Maggie to various stores, but Maggie was not getting excited about what she saw. One day, the two of them visited a contemporary furniture store and the decorator enlisted the help of two salespeople. However, the experience turned Maggie off completely.

[The company] made modern things and modern furniture, and it's really gorgeous, and it's beautiful, but their colors are awful. They're not bright. They're not clean. They're muted. Muted purples, muted oranges, muted mustard, muted green ... not very exciting. And then that's when [the decorator] started talking to me about getting something neutral in here, and I'm like, "Grrrr..." But there were two ladies, they knew we were coming to look at this furniture, and they had all this new stuff that had come in. So I started looking at it, and they were all, "Ohhh... blah blah blah, and you need to do this and you need to do that and come here and do this and come here and do that and come look at this and you could have that and oh, this will work perfect for you!" And finally I had to just say, "WHOA." I said, "The three of y'all talking is too much for me. I can barely understand one of you much less three of you at the same time, so let's slow down. Let's talk about some of this furniture..."

Maggie explained that she felt very uncomfortable, and she was not enjoying the process at all. Maggie felt as though the decorator and salespeople were more interested in making a sale than in finding something that made her really happy.

They didn't ever mention price. None of them. The whole time there was *no* price mentioned whatsoever. And their website doesn't have the prices on it, either. . It was very complicated. It was... pressure. I felt a lot of pressure in there. Even though they were supposed to be just gabbing or whatever, I felt a lot of pressure in there. They were hoping that I would settle. This is my opinion, just my opinion. They were hoping that I — at least I thought they were working me so that I would settle for something that wasn't quite what I wanted. And I stood there thinking about it and I said, "I can't do anything right now. I need to think." So I just kind of backed off of that, and so for the longest time I didn't hear from her, so I just wrote her a little note and said, "I think I'm just going to go my own way and figure this out on my own..." Because here's the thing: we're not going

to settle for something. You're not going to make me spend money that I'm not ready to spend on something that I'm not ready to buy.

After that, Maggie began searching online for ideas once again. One day, Maggie was browsing through Craigslist, and she saw a sofa style that she really liked. However, the piece was in black leather, which she did not want.

[The seller] happened to mention the maker of the sofa, and I thought, "Well, I like that," so I went shopping online ... It's a company that's actually in California, and they have a couple showrooms in California, and they make very unusual furniture shapes and sizes and fabrics and stuff. They're one of the ones that make the "lips" sofa. So I was looking at it, and seriously considering ordering from them, but then I'm thinking ... I got really scared about it, because I couldn't sit on it. If they had just had something somewhere around here that I could sit on ... And because it's custom ordered and custom-made, you couldn't return it. But they had some fabulous colors ... oh, they had oranges and purples and reds and greens.

Maggie loved the styles of the pieces on the website, and the fabrics were exactly the bright colors she was looking for. The prices were listed online and she was not necessarily put off by shipping and handling costs, either. However, she just could not bring herself to make the purchase.

I couldn't sit on it. I couldn't experience it and whether or not I was going to be comfortable in it ... and I didn't know if MY terminology of bench seat was the same thing that they meant, and I didn't quite understand the fact that there's a fabric 10, a fabric 20, and a fabric 30. Grades of fabric or stuff like that. I called and actually talked to them about it, because I'm not sure that we were talking the same thing, and I don't want to order something that I can't make sure that's what I want. So, I got to looking at it, and of course, got to talking to Tony and he was not excited about purchasing something without being able to sit on it and test it out. I mean, he trusts my ... he didn't sit on that [living room sofa], but he trusts me 'cause I was there and I got to sit on it, so that's fine.

Frustrated but determined to find furnishings she loved, Maggie visited some local stores with her mother, who was shopping for an upholstered chair. Finally, Maggie found what she was looking for. That day, Maggie purchased not only one, but *four* sofas. After purchasing a grey sofa and ottoman for her bedroom and a white sofa for her living room at one store, Maggie went to another store and fell in love with another set of sofas.

I bought two sofas at the outlet center at FurnitureLand South, then we went across the street 'cause my mother's looking too, and I saw *that* (she says proudly, pointing to the purple sofas in her living room). We walked around this beautiful, gorgeous showroom, but everything was totally, totally *BEIGE*. We started off to the right, [and everything was] beige, beige, beige, beige, white! Beige, beige, beige, beige ... Wham! This great big purple set! And I'm like, "This is it." And my mother went, "Oh, this is it!" I was like, "This is absolutely gorgeous!" It was just beautiful. So I took a picture of it, sent it to my husband and said, "What do you think?" and he said, "It's purple, it's my favorite color, buy it."

The set is actually four separate pieces that can be hooked together or used separately, and it included a large, round ottoman in the same purple fabric. Maggie currently has them set up as two crescent-shaped sofas facing one another, forming a broken circle, with the ottoman in the middle (Figure 12).

When they *don't* hook together, they look separate, but you can't *tell* it on the ends. And that's one of the things that I want, 'cause I had a big sectional at my previous house that I specifically said, "Can I break this apart and will it look normal," and [the salesperson] said, "Oh yeah, yeah, yeah..." Nah. Wrong answer. No, [the old one] was not finished, and these are finished on the inside on both sides, and the little connectors fold underneath the sofa so you can't see them.

Because the sofas were a special order, Maggie found out that the set was originally priced at \$10,000. However, she could tell that the set did not fit the store's usual clientele and that "they wanted that thing off their floor," so she offered the store manager \$5,000 in cash, and he agreed. Maggie said she had been saving money for quite some time to buy furnishings for the new home, because she and Tony do not put purchases on credit cards and prefer to not have any outstanding debts.

Once Maggie bought the purple sofas, she immediately contacted the previous store to back out of one of the two sofas she had just purchased there. She decided to keep the grey sofa and ottoman for her bedroom and cancelled the purchase of the other sofa. As Maggie finalized the paperwork for her purple sofas, she asked the salesperson when the store would deliver them, thinking that it would be at least a week or more.

Check this out! This is awesome. He said, "Well, the guys get back from lunch in about an hour, so how about an hour and a half?" I went, "Are you serious?!" Usually when you order furniture it takes a week ... but he said, "Yeah, they can do it this afternoon." So we brought it home and Tony was like, "I can't believe you got it today!" And it's the exact same purple as one of the squares on the rug... And I'm like, "I'm in looooooveee with it!" In love. We both really, really like it. As you can tell, I've spruced it up a little bit with some lime, and orange, and blue colors, 'cause I like that... I like color!

Maggie says she loves the fact that the sofa set fosters conversation when she has guests. When they are alone, she can lay on one side and Tony on the other so they can both stretch out. The only thing Maggie does not like about her purple sofas is the fact that they are not bench seats, but she says "we settled on that because it's a once in a lifetime find." She is thinking about moving the ottoman into an adjoining room to bring

some of that purple color into more areas of the house, and she is browsing online for glass coffee tables to replace the ottoman and “allow more of the rug to show up.”

Having solved the sofa problem, Maggie is now in the process of shopping for a display cabinet to put in her formal living room.

I’m looking for ... I don’t know if I like the word “étagère” or some sort of collector’s cabinet to put all the beautiful things that we bought while we were overseas on display. But, I don’t want wood. It needs to be modern, clean lines, and glass, and it needs to have doors ‘cause I am NOT dusting all that crap. I mean, we’ve got china from France, we’ve got china from London, we’ve got china from Italy ... and we collected all this stuff in all the places we went, and I want to show it off. Plus, some of it you can use, and I want to be able to get to it to use it. So I’m looking for that, and I think that’s going to help define how that room’s going to turn out.



*Figure 12: Maggie’s Purple Sofas*

Shopping online is the easiest way for Maggie to find options, but rather than going to a specific website, she usually starts with Google and then begins a collection of her favorite options.

I'll go to Google and put in "contemporary étagère," and then hit the "Images." And it comes up with *all* these images, and I'll look at the images first before I go to a site. Because it's very difficult to weed down to what you need to see, and then it turns out to be a brass étagère with this and with that, and I'm like, that is NOT contemporary to me, that's not clean, that's not modern ... So I usually look for the images first. If I like one, I'll bookmark it, or screen-print it and put it on a piece of paper, or a Word document or something.

Maggie also likes to browse Craigslist, even just for ideas. Maggie states that she often goes online because she really does not know what she wants, and it gives her a starting point for the process.

I like shopping online because you get so much more ideas... so many more possibilities. For instance, while I was looking for the étagère, I would have never known that they make them the way they can make them. Then you get images and then you get more images. Then you can narrow down what you like and what you're looking for. Sometimes I like the ease that you can order it online and there's free shipping. I like that too.

According to Maggie, online shopping also has its drawbacks. Specifically with furnishings such as chairs and sofas, she wants to be certain that the pieces are going to fit her height and width: "If I bought that chair and brought it in here and realized my feet didn't touch the floor, then that's not good for me." She also wants to know that the colors she sees on the screen are going to be accurate. The differences in terminology from one website to another can also be confusing, because she is not familiar with the

difference between certain stains of wood or the difference between names of fabrics such as Eurosuède, microsuede, microfiber, and others. For Maggie, there is no substitute for being able to judge these things in person.

Because it's somewhere else, you can't really see it and touch it and feel it and sit on it. It could be anywhere in the world or it could just be in California or Dallas. Sometimes I'm like, "Let's just take a weekend and go out there. Just to look at furniture." We thought about it, but there's no need to, we're in the furniture capitol of the world! Surely we can find something here. I really liked some of the online stuff though, with lots of good reviews and good reviews from a business perspective. I just wish I could sit on it, especially if it's going to be a major purchase. If it's a lamp, I wouldn't hesitate to order it.

Maggie enjoys shopping in person, but is frustrated because she has yet to find a store that really "fits" her. There was a home furnishings store in Switzerland that she loved and considered her "go to" shopping spot. Unfortunately, they do not operate stores in the United States. Maggie likes to browse the selection at Crate & Barrel, Pottery Barn, World Market, and Pier One, but she finds that most of those selections are too "Americana" for her. She sometimes visits the outlet center at FurnitureLand South, where she can find "several modern pieces there that not very many people like ... They have it like back in the corner, so that's where I go!"

Because of her career and lifestyle, Maggie says that price is not too much of an issue. She does not necessarily go out looking for the most expensive thing, but "if that happens to fit the bill, then we'll check it out." As long as she has the cash saved up to pay for it, she feels confident in buying what she really wants. She takes her time to make sure that what she purchases is not just about "making do," but that it is something that

she genuinely loves. She says that a lot of this approach to shopping comes from her time in Switzerland. Whereas she used to enjoy browsing stores and shopping for all kinds of goods, life in Switzerland changed her priorities noticeably:

I only enjoy shopping if I know exactly what I'm looking for. I'm not really a window shopper anymore. I don't want to go just to putz around or go "handling" – my grandmother called it handling. She wanted to go handling, because she could handle everything but she wouldn't buy nothin'! But since I went to Switzerland ... I got out of the habit of going just to get out of the house and go. Now when I go to get out of the house, I go to the barn, I go to my mother's, something with a purpose or an experience, as opposed to just walking around a store and just looking. And before, I'd go shopping at the mall for eight hours and I could come out of there with nothing! I just don't have the desire, the need ... I lost a lot of desire for material things when I moved over there, 'cause (a) there's no space, and (b) it's extremely expensive. And over there, they only get what they need, and everything that they do get, it's very purposeful. And I like that idea. And the fact that I had to clean out my [previous] house after living in it for 15 years before we moved over there ... there was a bunch of shit! I'm like, "What is all this crap? Why do we have this? It's time to get rid of it." It makes me think twice about what I buy. But mostly, everything we buy has to have a purpose.

When she has a goal in mind, however, Maggie does enjoy shopping for her home. She admits it has been really tempting to buy the things that she likes, but will convince herself not to "because we haven't put out the things we have yet, and I'm not going to buy extraneous stuff when I have nowhere to put what I've got yet." She is happy with the furnishings that they have collected over the years and through their travels, so she is looking for particular furnishings, like the étagère, that will allow her to showcase those items instead of buying new and unnecessary objects.

Overall, Maggie says she wishes she had a "plan" for decorating her house, much like the decorators who perform home renovations on HGTV. She was disappointed that

the decorator she hired did not seem to have a plan, either. Yet she will continue to shop to furnish her house because it is an important place for her.

I thought she was too slow, too. 'Cause they fix people's houses up in 30 minutes on HGTV! And I know it takes three days, but still, they already have a plan. They come in, they look, and they have a plan. And I didn't feel like I was getting a plan. I still really don't have a plan. I think that our culture somewhat dictates that you're supposed to do things in a certain order... You get married, you buy the house, you furnish your house, you buy... Unlike just saying, "I'm going to stay in an apartment all my life," or whatever. I mean, I don't know. I just think it's part of the culture to have a home and have nice things in your home. So I'll keep looking.

### **Paige Casper**

Paige Casper, 61, was born and raised on a farm in Staunton, Virginia. After she graduated high school, Paige moved to High Point, NC, to attend Brants School of Business, where she earned an associate's degree in computerized accounting. After graduating, she starting working for the Department of Transportation, where she met and later married her husband, Johnny, who now owns his own business doing concrete and demolition work. Paige worked for almost 20 years managing an office, doing bookkeeping, and handling payroll for more than 600 drivers for a leasing company. She retired from the job several years ago. She and Johnny have two children, Ashley, 32, and Cory, 28, and four grandchildren. They also have an English bulldog, Angel, a Boston terrier, Taz, and a cat, Luci.

When Johnny's father died, he inherited about 10 acres of land, and the family moved into the house on the property. Also living on the property in separate houses are Johnny's mother, Ruth, his brother, Kenny, and both of Paige and Johnny's children,

their spouses and children. Paige said once she retired, she wanted to own and ride horses again, like she did when she was growing up on her grandparents' farm, so she and Johnny built a barn with several stables and a large, fenced in pasture. The couple now has approximately 30 horses on the property, most of which they own, but a few are boarded there by other owners.

For Paige, home is a place that is “comfortable, safe and full of love,” and she asserts that what makes her house a home is “not about what you have ... it’s about the people, the experiences.” Her home is filled with reminders of her love of horses, including artwork on the walls, horse figurines lined up along the mantle, and a sofa quilt that has a serene pasture scene stitched on it (Figure 13). There are also little plaques on the walls with sayings like, “Horses are like potato chips... You can’t have just one,” and “What happens at the barn, stays at the barn.” Clearly, horses have been a long-time passion for Paige.

I’ve always been around cows and horses. I’ve been riding since I was 4 or 5. It kills me to not be able to ride like I used to.



*Figure 13: Paige's Horse Decorations*

Years of riding and hard work have caught up to Paige and Johnny. Both suffer from back problems and other physical ailments. Paige says she has been thrown from horses and farm equipment “one too many times.” Paige and Johnny are tall, and according to Paige are both approximately 50 pounds overweight. For these reasons, Paige wants her furnishings to be both comfortable and supportive.

It has to really support us. Especially Johnny. He's real hard on [the furniture]. He sits a lot of different ways. He'll sit all cockeyed in it, so it's going to have to be really heavy duty.

For this reason, Paige talked about the Select Comfort Sleep Number mattress that they recently purchased and sees it as a particularly smart buy. They are looking to purchase a new sofa, even though they have only had their current sofa for about a year. In fact, Paige explained that they have had three different sofas within the last five years, and though they loved the reclining sectional sofa they had, they "wore it out." When asked how, she admits, "Well, we didn't really wear it out. I just got tired of it. We gave it away." She purchased another sofa, gave it away as well, and then purchased the one that they have now.

I'm getting ready to replace this. I'll want something else [soon]. I have neck problems, so when you're reclining back on this here, it pushes your neck forward. It's not something I could have known before living with it for a while, and even though this is real leather, it's just not comfortable. So I'm going to have to get some really good furniture.

Paige also wants a new entertainment center for the living room. She has only had the current one about a year, but she already wants something new. Again, she concedes that it is not so much that the furniture is not functional, but that she likes changing her furnishings frequently, even if she is just moving things from one room to another.

I liked it when I got it, but it's just too big and bulky. I want something that's half [the size of] that now. I like change ... I'll like it for a while, and then I'll probably end up putting that in the bedroom. Corey wants this [sofa], so he'll get this one here when we get a new one.

Paige admits that she does not know where this urge to frequently replace the furnishings stems from, but says she has been this way for a very long time. She described her previous home as “three times bigger” than her current one, so she used to rearrange her furnishings much more frequently. In her home now, however, the living room is much smaller, so she says “there’s not much to do with it.” In addition to buying new furnishings and frequently rearranging the existing ones, Paige says she also likes to mix up the decorative items.

About 10 years ago, I used to have a lot of brass in here. I change a lot. Now it’s mostly wood and the horses. Sometimes you really get into [one style], and sometimes you really want to get out of it, you know what I mean? So I got through that [brass] stage and now I’m just now back in this [wood and horses] one. I’ve had some of these things a long time, but it was maybe in my bedroom for a while and then I bring it back out here.

Although Johnny tells her she “buys too much stuff,” she ignores him for the most part because she views the home as her space. “This [the home] is my part. He doesn’t have a choice!” She looks disdainfully at a statue of a pig in a cowboy outfit and says, “*This* was his choice.” She says she is humoring him for the moment, and that she will eventually decide to make the pig disappear.

Paige likes to get ideas for furnishing her home by talking with friends and family, visiting other people’s homes, and browsing online. While she says she used to enjoy shopping in person for most things, she has discovered that as she has gotten older, she does not want to be bothered with pushy salespeople who rush her, or simply people in general.

I guess I still love shopping, but online. I don't like going out as much because of people and their attitudes and stuff. I can really be hateful, so I like doing it online and not having to deal with people.

Consequently, Paige shops online for many products, including home furnishings. She likes to use Google to search for options because of the number of selections available and because it makes the shopping process much simpler.

It's much easier to go online because you get to sample so much at your convenience. I like being able to compare things, and it's easier going from screen to screen rather than store to store. For me, it's a lot more comfortable to shop online ... I like that I have more time to think about stuff and get ideas without being rushed or distracted. Plus, you have to schedule your shopping around [the store's] schedules. But online, the doors are always wide open.

Although comfort and style are high on Paige's list of considerations, price is not a significant factor in her shopping process. When asked if she has a budget for home furnishings purchases, she jokingly asks, "What's that?" With no car notes, no house note, and no other outstanding debts, Paige feels free to spend their money on the things she likes and wants without worrying so much about price. Furthermore, she says her stepfather, who was an upholsterer, taught her the value of buying quality furniture, which typically costs more. She says she loved the furnishings at Rhodes Furniture in Greensboro for the selection and the quality, but the company went out of business several years ago. Paige has since been disappointed with the quality and selection available in other local stores, saying much of it is "just cheap furniture" that is not worth buying.

You can't buy cheap stuff, because if you do, you are getting what you pay for. You gotta have nice, well-built stuff. It has to be really nice quality.

Because quality is so important to her, Paige will not buy upholstered furnishings online. She asserts that the comfort factor is much too important to her and Johnny to trust the online representations of products.

You can't really see it and you can't tell comfort or quality of it. We need to sit in it for a little bit, get up, look around, sit in it again. Even when we do that we might not like how it feels in six months, but we've got to at least check it out to know that it's not crap.

However, Paige would be open to purchasing other kinds of furnishings online, such as coffee tables or items for which comfort is not an issue. For Paige, shipping and delivery costs are not a deterrent to online shopping, "if it's something I really want."

Because Paige does not feel especially attached to the new furnishings that she buys, she does not worry about making a mistake. This makes her somewhat different from the other participants. Paige reasons that if she does not end up liking it, she will just replace it with something new. As a result, she is not that hesitant in making purchase decisions for home furnishings.

Regardless of how much Paige likes change, there are some furnishings in her home that she will not get rid of. When asked if there were any furnishings that were particularly special to her, Paige mentioned the dining room table, which belonged to her mother, who passed away about 10 years ago.

It was made by someone she and my stepfather knew, so it was really special to them. I had a table [previously] that I loved — it sat six people, and it was really, really nice. When I got this, I sold that table to my brother-in-law. I can't seem to get rid of this one here, though.

It is clear that the table holds a lot of sentimental value for Paige. She got a little emotional when talking about the table and explained that she and her mother were very close. She feels that having the table with her is a way to keep her mother close to her, so she could not imagine disposing of it: "I guess I'll always have it with me, one way or another." Similarly, Paige has a headboard that belonged to her grandmother and great-grandmother before her that she wants to keep forever. She is not even using the piece; it just sits against the wall in an upstairs bedroom.

It's one of those real old, old ones, with a lion on the headboard. It's more than a hundred years old. It seems like I can't part with it. It just makes me happy to have it.

Paige says that because their home is 110 years old, it is falling apart and needs significant repairs. "It will be torn down after we leave. It's getting really bad," she says. She and Johnny are looking to sell their property and buy a bigger plot of land sometime in the near future. They plan to build a new home and have land not only for the horses but cattle, too. Additionally, Paige says the next property they own will have to have room for her children to build homes, because both are unable to support themselves yet. However, because Johnny's mother is too old to move, they intend to wait until she dies before making the move. In the meantime, Paige and Johnny are doing a lot of renovations to the house, such as rebuilding all the floors, and she says she'll keep herself

busy with that and “looking for new ways to spend our money.”

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I presented the personal narratives of each of the six participants. The narratives form the first level of interpretation of the participants’ experiences with home furnishings consumption and are based on the data. In the next chapter, I present the second level of interpretation, which is a thematic interpretation of the data. This level of interpretation explores the themes that emerged across participants’ experiences and examines the similarities and differences between these experiences relative to the goals of the study.

## CHAPTER V

### THEMATIC INTERPRETATION

In this chapter, I develop a thematic interpretation of participants' experiences while shopping for home furnishings based on the interview and journal data. Although each participant's experiences are unique, there are several themes that emerged from the data that indicate similarities and differences among the participants. These themes illustrate the importance of home furnishings in the consumption experience, as well as the complex nature of shopping for home furnishings. As the second level of interpretation of participants' experiences, the themes serve to connect each participant as part of a larger whole in a way that helps to address the question of what it is like to be a female home furnishings consumer.

To arrive at this level of interpretation, each participant's personal narrative was analyzed as one part in relation to the whole of all of the narratives. Three overall topical areas emerged, which are used to structure the interpretation and organize the emergent themes: *Lifestyle and Life Stage*, *Decision-Making Considerations*, and *The Role of the Retailer*. Several themes within these areas address the overall objective of the study by illustrating the issues that surface for participants while shopping for home furnishings. The role that the Internet plays within the process is demonstrated throughout all of the topical areas. Each topical area and its respective themes are used to further explore in depth the meanings of experiences that surfaced within the data.

## **Lifestyle and Life Stage**

For each of the participants in this study, the concept of “home,” and the importance she places on furnishing it depends on her lifestyle, as well as the life stage or life circumstances that she is experiencing. Lifestyle and life stage surfaced throughout the participants’ narratives, especially in regard to three issues or themes: the idea of “home,” how each addressed price considerations, and reconciling the ideal home with the real solutions each found to meet her needs.

### **The Idea of “Home”**

The home, as viewed by the participants in this study, is a sacred space — a place where, above all, they want to feel safe. The idea that a home should project a sense of “warmth” was mentioned by most participants in their online journals, indicating that this particular environment provides a sense of nurturing and solace.

Renee: [Home is]... warmth is the first word I would think of. Living, family, loving... It's where I can be happy with the ones I love.

Tara: What else is home? Sanctuary. In one word, sanctuary. You know, if I can't just completely be myself and sit around in pajamas all day long if I want to, then it's not home.

Maggie: It's a place where you can come and be completely yourself and comfortable. And you feel safe and loved and happy.

Mariea: Home is somewhere you are comfortable and you like to be ... a refuge to go when you want to decompress and get away from everything.

Home is a place where participants wanted to be as close to their true selves as possible. However, the participants expressed the belief that not just any place feels like

“home.” That is, their concept of home was closely tied to a sense of ownership of the space and a place where they had “put down roots.” Hence, ideas about home were closely tied to the point where each participant was in her life. As Caitlin mentioned in her personal narrative, the apartment she lives in now is the first place she can call “home,” because everywhere else seemed either too temporary, unsafe, or not comfortable enough. Tara and Mariea expressed similar ideas:

Tara: In the rental house, it was like, we didn’t want to do anything because it wasn’t “ours.” You know, there was no point in really trying to decorate or get furniture, or anything because we knew we weren’t going to stay there. [Now] we can. We can change it, and we know we’re going to stay here for a while. This is our home.

Mariea: I feel more at home in a place I know I’ll be long term versus somewhere else. If I were in an apartment, I don’t think that I would ever feel like that was home. I feel at home in our house because it’s where we’ve been for a long time, making memories, where our kids are growing up, that kind of thing.

According to the participants, creating a home means making it a personal space, filled with furnishings that suit their unique tastes and lifestyles, as well as items that convey personal interests and values. Paige and Maggie expressed this in their journals:

Paige: Home is where you have your personal touches and your tastes, and you’ve expressed yourself in things ... your furniture, pictures on the walls. It’s definitely a reflection of your tastes.

Maggie: What I have [in my home] is colorful and modern, which I believe reflects my cheerful, outgoing personality. I guess it is important to me from the perspective of *wanting* to use the furniture. I got my sense of style from living in Switzerland and traveling in Europe. People there make their life colorful and functional with minimalistic pieces. I sense their happiness being surrounded by bright and happy colors.

All of the participants felt that their home was a space that should (and does) reflect part of their individual identity, and/or the collective identity of the family, and that the furnishings helped to make their homes more meaningful to them.

Caitlin: Your home is a reflection of yourself so I would think that you are going to gravitate toward things that you actually like, which in turn is obviously a part of your personality. I think certain pieces do that, and I'm gradually purchasing pieces that express my personality. I don't really pay too much attention to what's "popular" but rather what I like and what I'm attracted to, aesthetically.

As mentioned briefly in her personal narrative, Renee explained in her journal that a home and its furnishings are similar to the ways people use dress to express themselves.

Renee: Your furniture pieces express your style – even for those [people who] don't think about it. I think the way a person dresses is directly related to the way they decorate. For example, someone who dresses modestly and wears few accessories will have a home that is more plain with a limited color palette and few "knick-knacks" sitting around. And on the flip side ... people that "over-accessorize" their bodies/wardrobe tend to over-accessorize their homes.

Although there is consensus that the home is a reflection of the self, the degree to which participants felt furnishings were important in reflecting their personalities varied based on lifestyle. As Mariea blogged, it was not so much the large pieces of furniture, but the accessories that truly show her personality and values.

Mariea: Furniture is a *part* of showing who we are, but along with all of the accessories in my home as well. I am usually not much into current styles and fads. I feel like I purchase what appeals to me and Steve because we are the ones living with it. I am not sure I have a sense of style, but I think that our tastes in things seem to blend well ... most of the time! The color, the things on the wall, the pictures ... that's more of a reflection of my personality. The accessories more

than the big pieces. I think it is the little things we put in. The cabinets and the pictures on the shelves, stuff from the kids.

Each participant's lifestyle and life stage revealed differences in terms of how she felt about "coming home," including perceptions of her home furnishings, decorating style, and the needs that her home fulfilled. For example, for 25-year-old Caitlin, the youngest participant, her home was a place where she could unwind at the end of a busy day, but it is also a place where she does not have to contend with anyone else, where she feels like she can relax and "doesn't have to be anyone but me." With no spouse, children, or roommates, Caitlin does not worry about making her home suitable for anyone but herself. Consequently, when shopping for home furnishings, she feels as though she can buy exactly what she wants and when. Caitlin recognizes the need for the inexpensive furnishings that were "appropriate" during her college days and the desire she now has for more "grown-up" furnishings. On the other hand, because Caitlin is still in the beginning stages of creating a home for herself, she revealed that she does not feel like she knows much about decorating and admitted that she is still trying to figure out what her personal style is. Hence, she feels as though she needs to stay with neutral colors in her home furnishings, at least until she feels more comfortable and settled into her new home.

Caitlin: For now, neutrals are safe bet, because I'm still figuring out specifically the look I want for my home. Because I moved so much ... like in my old place, I didn't really do anything with it so it was easy to match anything with [the brown sofa]. And I didn't really have any division between spaces in my old apartment ... the living room and kitchen areas were so blended that I almost had to plan the color schemes for the kitchen and the living room altogether, and it was

frustrating. So yeah, I got [that sofa] because I didn't know what I was going to get otherwise, so that would be easy to match. But my next couch or couches will be leather or suede of a different color entirely because now I'll be here longer and more settled, and I'll have more furniture pieces and won't be moving them as soon as I get them. I feel more comfortable adding color in smaller pieces now ... in pillows, artwork pieces, like ceramics, candles, or anything of that sort. For now, I'll just use smaller things to insert some color into the room.

Similarly, Tara, a self-described introvert, shared that she spends a lot of time in the house by herself, and that she and her husband Gabe hardly ever entertain guests, so she is content to take her time browsing online for home furnishings, focusing on decorating one room at a time, with no pressure about how others might view her home in the meantime. As she writes,

Tara: My home becomes a little more representative of myself with each new thing. I have no idea where my sense of style came from because I really feel like it's just developing now that we finally have a home.

The experiences of Renee, 39, and Mariea, 35, in particular show how participants' notion of home and the value of its furnishings have less to do with age than with how they live their lives. Mariea views her home as a place to relax comfortably after a hectic work day, and her view of furnishings is for the most part utilitarian. That is, she does not place a great deal of value on the furnishings she buys, and instead prefers to spend money on experiences shared with family. The only exception is the sofa. Mariea mentions that the sofa is where the family spends time together when home. Other than that, she is content to keep her furnishings until they (literally) fall apart, as in the case of the bed frame and kitchen chairs described in her narrative. When Mariea is

ready to replace something, she begins her furnishings search by consulting her husband Steve about what he wants and then uses the Internet to find what she wants at the lowest price. Mariea does not spend much time shopping before making a decision. Once she has purchased something, she is satisfied with it and she does not second-guess herself, because, as she says, “It’s just not important to me.”

Renee, on the other hand, says her home is closely tied to her role as a wife and a mother. She views her home as not just a special place for immediate family, but for entertaining extended family and friends, too. She and her husband Ben enjoy having parties at their house, and Renee’s mother and in-laws regularly stay overnight. In fact, every Monday night Renee’s mother-in-law stays over to babysit Lindsay and Paxon. This means Renee can avoid putting the children in daycare for the whole week. As a result, Renee places a high degree of importance on the furnishings in her home, as well as how it looks to others. Both are significant contributing factors in how much attention Renee devotes to the process of shopping for home furnishings. In fact, Renee feels the need to apologize for those furnishings that might appear to be out of place.

Renee: If it doesn’t work together, if the styles don’t work together I don’t ... it doesn’t feel good, and I mean, I’m ok with living with things [that I don’t really like] for a little while, because I want [what I buy] to be right, but at the same time, if someone were to walk into that bedroom looking at our house or whatever, I would have to explain, “Now this bed ... you know, we’re looking for new furniture here. We don’t like this bed...” I’d have to make sure they understood that this is not the final product!

As described in her personal narrative, Renee enjoys browsing for furnishings as a hobby of sorts, spending her spare time going to yard sales and consignment stores in the

hope of finding an inexpensive treasure. She likes the process of discovering “special things” to add to her home, and she views furnishing her home as an ever-evolving process. She writes,

Renee: I love finding cool things that look unique, not like you would see in everyone else’s home. It’s fun for me, especially with the smaller pieces like accents and stuff. Shopping for things like that is relaxing and fun, and it’s how I like to spend my “me” time. Actually, when I *have* to find something we need, like the sofa, I don’t like shopping at all. I’d much rather just stumble upon something great and fall in love with it when I’m not really even looking for it.

Like Mariaea, Renee does not spend a lot of time shopping. However, her reasons for doing so are somewhat different than Mariaea’s. Renee finds that with two young children, she does not have time to “shop-shop,” meaning she does not have the luxury of setting aside time each day or weekend to devote to shopping. Hence, in Renee’s current life stage, it is more convenient for her to browse for furnishings casually, as she is running other errands around town, and to gradually add furnishings to her home as she finds them. This is quite unlike Mariaea, whose life stage (having older children and owning a business with her spouse) allows her to be focused and mission-oriented when it comes to shopping, and she can buy what she needs in a matter of days.

Maggie, 50, and Paige, 61, further illustrate the roles that lifestyle and life stage play in how each woman shops for her home. Both Maggie and Paige are past the stages in life of single incomes and/or dependent children, and they recognized that they are at a point in their lives where they have more disposable income to spend on home furnishings. Beyond the increased purchasing power, both feel that they know themselves

pretty well at this point in life. In their journals, both women shared that they feel very secure about their homes, their personal style, and consequently, the purchases they make.

Maggie: Usually when I see it I know it's perfect for the spot I am looking to fill. I don't have any misgivings or second thoughts. Until I moved [to Switzerland], I was scared to do things with the house, because I didn't think anyone would like it, and right now I don't really care what people think because this is what I want and what I like.

Paige: I'm not trying to put together something that looks like it's out of a magazine. I'll want [my furnishings] not exactly the way I see it somewhere else ... I'll want to add a little something. I know what I like, and I'm happy with what I get, but I just happen to like a lot of things. Different types of things. So I change things up and show off different [styles] for a while.

Similarly, the differences between Maggie and Paige also stem from their respective lifestyles. Maggie chooses her purchases carefully and will not buy something unless she has the cash to pay for it, which is a result of her past experiences with credit card debt and her current career as a financial data analyst. Paige, on the other hand, is relatively nonchalant about her purchases, stating that whenever she tires of a piece of furniture, she will simply replace it, even if she has only used the item for a few months. This attitude similarly reflects Paige's lifestyle, in that while she is enjoying her retirement, as she explains in the interview, her home is the only place she has left to express herself through "things."

Paige: You know, it used to be that I could dress for work how I wanted and decorate my office with fun things and stuff like that, and you'd see a lot of people every day at work so you change things up a lot, like your clothes and hair and stuff. But now it's really just the house that I focus on, 'cause, I mean, I'm

outside and around horses all day so I don't put a whole lot of effort into how I look around the barn. There's no point in dressing up to go sling hay around! But my house is a place where I can still show off different sides of me and things I like, even if it's just for me and Johnny to see. It keeps things interesting.

For each participant, creating a place that feels like "home" is largely dependent on where she is in life. While "home" has different meanings for each participant, the consensus is that the home is a place where she can be her truest self. Consequently, the circumstances surrounding her daily activities and responsibilities shape not only the functions her furnishings must provide, but also how well those furnishings reflect her personality and/or interests. Shopping online streamlines the process by narrowing down the options that each feels best reflects her identity, yet it also gives participants important information to aid the decision-making process, and specifically information regarding price.

### **Considering Price**

When shopping for home furnishings, all of the participants cited price as a factor that played a role in the experience. However, the extent to which perceptions or concerns about price were a deciding factor depended on the participants' lifestyles and life stages. For Caitlin, living on a single income means having to plan major purchases ahead of time. Even though she is the participant who most needs new furnishings, since she is just beginning to furnish her home, she waits for sales, compares prices in store and online, saves money, and pays off outstanding bills before shopping in earnest for new items. As she writes in her journal, when she is ready to purchase, she looks for financing options that allow her to make payments with no interest for a year or more, so that she

does not have to spend a large amount of money at one time.

Caitlin: I can't say I have black and white budget, so to speak. Rather, I have to evaluate if I can afford to make the purchase at the time with whatever may be going on in life, financially. And if I choose a payment plan, will it be more of a burden the next six months or bearable? As for problems during the shopping process— a lot of it comes back to affordability for me since I live alone. That can often be frustrating if I find something I truly like that just isn't a necessity at the time.

Consequently, Caitlin explained how she takes her time throughout the shopping process to make sure that she is spending her money wisely.

Caitlin: I'll look around, go from store to store to see what I really like before I invest that money. I do enjoy that sometimes online you can find deals you otherwise may not find in the stores, as well as being able to save gas by not going to a store. And if it's going to be an additional payment each month, I make sure that I really like it and I'm not settling, and [that I'm buying it] because I really want it. I can and want to buy nicer things now [than when I was in college], but it is going to take me a while to do that. I can't actively look for a new sofa now as I'm still paying off Christmas bills, but tax return time is [right around the corner].

Although Tara and her husband Gabe have a dual-income household, both work largely commission-based jobs. That means that both have to continually seek out clients, as opposed to relying on a steady salary week after week. Consequently, Tara says she has to be careful about how they spend their money, and especially for large purchases. She does not even entertain stores or websites that she “knows” she cannot afford, but when pressed on this idea, in her blog she admits that she does not have a clear definition of what “too expensive” is.

Tara: I don't want to spend a fortune, but I definitely want my purchases to hold up to my husband and dog for a while. I usually go into a thing with an idea of what I want to spend. More often I suppose it's a "Holy crap, I'm not spending that much" feeling. I do look online before I really hit stores, so I do usually have ideas about budget. But if it's the perfect piece, it's the perfect piece, and I will usually go over budget for something really great.

Mariea revealed a similar perception about budget and describes how she adjusts it if she cannot find the "right" item within her original price range. She blogs,

Mariea: I guess I do [have a budget in mind], but it's not spelled out. I do have an idea of what I want to spend, and I'll shop online to see if what I am looking for fits that budget. I start with something in my head, probably around the \$500 range, but I know that if I look and see I'm not going to find anything in that range, I'll modify it as I need to. I just don't want to spend more than I have to. If I can find something that looks nice, even if it's not perfect, then that's great.

Mariea's experience illustrates the participants' use of the Internet to manage the price factor. If her preconceived notion of the price of an item does not match what is seen online, she will either adjust her definition of what is acceptable to spend or find other ways of furnishing her home. Tara, Maggie and Mariea will all modify their budget expectations based on what they see online. Although Renee says her husband is willing to spend money on more expensive furnishings, Renee typically uses the price information instead as a motivation for finding inexpensive solutions outside of retail stores.

Despite the fact that Mariea is willing to adjust her price limits, she points out that even if she had an unlimited budget, she would not want to spend more than was absolutely necessary. Although Mariea does not spend a lot of time shopping before

making a purchase decision, she likes the challenge of finding “a good deal” as a part of the overall shopping process. Renee, in contrast, *does* like to take her time shopping and collecting pieces over time, but shares Mariea’s enthusiasm about finding inexpensive solutions. However, while Mariea’s price considerations are primarily a way for her to spend more disposable income on other family activities, Renee’s motivations for saving money help her to feel better about any future purchases she may want to make.

Mariea: It’s hard to think [about money not being an issue] because I still think I would try to find a good deal. I’d go to a place where I would think the prices were cheaper. I wouldn’t go to FurnitureLand South, where the prices are high. I know that they have high quality stuff. I’d look there, but couldn’t see myself spending a crazy amount of money ... on something I could get similar somewhere else for a cheaper price.

Renee: My husband is the one that sets the budget, especially on the larger/more expensive items. However, he’s typically willing to spend more money than I am, so a lot of the time a budget is not adhered to if we find a piece that we both really like. He gives in easily. I, on the other hand, am more frugal and won’t purchase something if it costs more than I think it’s worth, or if I think I can find something similar at a consignment store or yard sale that I can “fix up.” So, a piece being on sale is a bonus for sure. And if I walk away from a particular piece – either for a few minutes or a few days – and the piece is all I can think about, I know it’s the right one and I have to have it. Overall, though, I just think I would just rather buy something cheaper that might not last quite as long, but I don’t feel bad a few years down the road if I want to change it.

Because home furnishings tend to be relatively expensive, some participants felt that the product category itself added a layer of stress to the shopping process. Renee, in particular, said that she does worry about making a mistake when it comes to more expensive pieces because she feels they need to last a long time, which is why she is uncomfortable paying for new, higher-quality pieces. Caitlin echoed Renee’s feelings

about expecting her purchases to last for several years, and explains that this is why financial concerns are quite important at this point in her life. Both write,

Renee: Knowing how long it takes me to shop and make a decision, I feel like I had better be happy with it! I will make myself like it, which usually happens after I live with it for a while, or my husband will make me like it. I will return accessories pretty quickly, but major/large furniture pieces usually stay. Because it's a bigger piece that's going to last a whole lot longer ... I feel like when I make that decision it better be the right one ... or I'm just going to have to live with it.

Caitlin: I'd like to be able to reuse it if I'm going to pay a considerable amount of money for it. When I say "considerable," I mean like \$800. I want to be able to see myself using it again later on when I get my own house versus an apartment, or maybe moving it from the living room to the bedroom or the dining room.

Maggie, on the other hand, was not opposed to or uncomfortable with the idea of spending more money on a home furnishings item, as long as she could evaluate quality and pay in full at the time of purchase. She blogs,

Maggie: Cost is somewhat a factor in my purchases. I have a budget in mind, but don't limit myself to it. I have realized over the years that a quality piece is worth the price. But my main focus and rule is pay cash! Even if I find the right piece, if we don't have the cash for it I will not purchase it. Online prices are a consideration for smaller pieces, chairs, desks, lamps, that kind of thing. But larger pieces I prefer to compare cost to quality, and you generally have to do that in person.

Paige was the participant with the fewest price reservations, most likely because she has a significant amount of disposable income in this stage of her life, but also because she believes that good quality furnishings are worth the higher price.

Paige: I don't have a budget, even though Johnny probably has one he'd like me to stick to! (laughs) He thinks I buy too much stuff ... but I don't buy things I don't like, and I don't buy crap. So whatever we get is going to be good stuff. Even if I don't like it after a while and want to get rid of it, I know that our kids or someone we know will need it and use it, so I don't really feel like I'm wasting money. I do *like* to change things up, but it's more than that. I'm not going to hold on to something that's not working for us comfort-wise or any "other"-wise!

The role that price plays in the home furnishings decision-making process varies according to the life stage and/or lifestyle of the participant. Whereas price is a significant issue for some, others are willing to pay more because they have more disposable income. That is not to say that availability of disposable income is the only reason why some are willing to pay more than others. Some participants, like Maggie and Paige, are willing to pay more for furnishings that best fit their lifestyle or life stage, regardless of price, while other participants, like Renee and Mariea, have the disposable income but prefer not to spend it on home furnishings. Participants often use the Internet to help them manage price concerns, and sometimes get a good deal not available offline. Even when the price is right, however, participants must discern between ideal home furnishings purchases and the real solutions that will fit a myriad of criteria, beyond just price.

### **Ideal versus Real**

The data revealed that, in many cases, the home furnishings that participants liked were not always what they ended up purchasing, thereby indicating the complexity of the home furnishings shopping process. They often talked about choosing between ideal furnishings and the reality of finding the solution that meets the most important need at a

particular time. Quite often these needs were discernibly different based on the participant's lifestyle and/or life stage.

In Tara's case, style-wise she admits that she loves the look of sleek, contemporary furnishings. However, she recognizes that this type of furniture does not satisfy her more pressing need to be comfortable in her home. She wants furnishings that make her feel nurtured and protected from the world, so she had to reconcile her style desires with the more important goal of comfort. She writes,

Tara: I need to *live* in my house. It can't just be for show. Who cares if it looks perfect but you can't feel comfortable enough to take a nap with your big ugly dog on it? I mean, let's be real. This is my life, and this is how I like to live it. It's way more important for me to love being here than for people to think I'm a great decorator.

Included in Tara's narrative was an experience that she had with shopping online for a bedroom dresser, which resulted in a different item than the one she chose from the online search. In this situation, Tara's online evaluation of the product did not correlate with the in-person evaluation, and a product that she discounted immediately online became the one she chose to buy. When prompted to explain what changed her mind, Tara responded that once she truly considered which piece was the most functional for their lifestyle and how they used that space in the room, the latter piece was the better solution.

Tara: We looked online and in stores, and we ended up with something that surprised us both as far as style went. Mainly we wanted something that was fairly gender neutral, small enough to fit into our room, but large enough to give

us some more storage. With all things considered, the dresser we got was the best one for us.

Caitlin, on the other hand, has to weigh her desire for quality furnishings against not only her price concerns, but the logistics of moving new furnishings into her apartment. She blogs,

Caitlin: I don't want to have to buy furniture that I'm going to have to buy again in another year, but on the flip side of that, I live by myself, so sometimes I need my family to commute to help me move furniture because I just can't do it by myself. All of my friends that were here when I was in college have moved. I have to think about how heavy the furniture is going to be, the cost to transfer it from the store and those kinds of things, so sometimes what I really like just isn't practical at this point in my life.

For Maggie, finding ideal furnishings has not been an easy task, even though she is financially able to buy what she wants. She wants contemporary furnishings, but often can *only* find pieces she really likes online, which equates to a significant amount of risk for her when it comes to such an expensive purchase. She writes,

Maggie: I have been looking online and in some stores. It's difficult to find modern sleek and functional in a world of "Americana"-type furniture. High Point (NC) may be the furniture capital of the world, but mostly what I like comes from the west coast and is extremely expensive to ship. So shipping/delivery is a consideration for those Internet purchases. Also I am tentative about buying something from a picture ... not actually seeing it live. There's too many variables there that I'm not entirely comfortable with.

In the case of the sofas she recently purchased, Maggie often went shopping locally but found that much of the contemporary furnishings in the area were only available in "muted" colors, or stores did not have what she was looking for in stock. Consequently,

she was faced with the decision of settling for either a color or design that was not her ideal, or spending significantly more money to custom order upholstered items. For this reason, Maggie feels that she “really lucked out” when she saw the purple sofa at a local store, and that it was a once-in-a-lifetime find. She states,

Maggie: I think what it was ... [the manager] wanted that thing *off their floor*. It's definitely a specialty piece. They were telling us they bought it for ... actually an interior decorator had bought the style and had that fabric put on it, *before* she showed it to the person that was ordering the furniture. It was supposed to be for a country club in Greensboro ... So when [the client] came in and saw the color, he said, “*No.*” I knew they were trying to get rid of it, and I'm like, “I'm your man ... or ... person.”

In contrast to Maggie, who had difficulty finding her ideal pieces, for Paige, the most frustrating part of the shopping process is *not* the actual purchase decision. Instead, it is the evaluation of the product once she has brought it home and lived with it for a few months. Due to the physical issues that Paige and her husband have, they cannot accurately determine how comfortable a sofa or chair will be by sitting in it for a few minutes in the store. She says they “just have to live with it and see” how the furnishings will support them in their daily lives. As a result, furnishings that at the time of purchase seem “ideal” become something quite different when integrated into daily life.

Mariea does not really concern herself with ideal furnishings, insofar as she is willing to overlook a broken dresser or bed frame because she would simply rather spend her money on other things.

Mariea: If money weren't an issue at all, I'd buy a new bed. It was always creaky and noisy. It was never sturdy. It was one you just put together, so it [shakes]. So

ideally I'd like something that is sturdy that is actually built together, not something where I'm hooking this little metal piece into a hole. The dresser that I have is probably 50 years old, and it's *old*. I've had it since I was 18, and it sat in storage until I needed it, so we've had it since we've been married. The drawers are falling apart and one of them I just glued shut. So it'd be nice to have a nice matching set. But it's not a goal in my near future, not while we have other things that ... are just more important to take care of.

Interestingly, participants whose lifestyles included pets in the home expressed that these "furry family members" were a significant influence in terms of the kinds of home furnishings they purchased. For Tara and Mariea, considerations of dog-friendly design, including hair-repelling fabric, were significant issues.

Tara: I imagine Lilith (the dog) comes into play a lot when we're looking at furniture and stuff. She really does. 'Cause it's like, a lot of the time it's like, "Well, Lilith won't fit on there." Or "Her dog hair will get all over that." That definitely is a huge factor.

Mariea: I wanted leather because of the three dogs and their dog hair. That way the dog hair can be wiped off. With cloth, you can't get it out of cloth. We always had cloth before, but now with *three* dogs ... Well, there's only so much you can clean a cloth sofa before it just smells like the dogs all the time. So that was a big reason we chose leather for the new sofa.

Maggie, a cat owner, takes potential claw damage into account.

Maggie: I've got to have microfiber on upholstery, because it's the only material these cats aren't going to rip up with their claws. I can't have leather. Kitty-cats don't like leather. And I can also show you a purchase that I made that was a *wrong* purchase ... it's out in the garage. It was a leather chair ... and Delilah got to it and on the side you can see where she sunk her claws into it. Plus, I wonder how good the construction [of the furnishings] is, because I know how wild these cats are, and they start running through the house, and they'll knock themselves right smack up against the wall and get up and keep going! And they've run over several things around here. So I definitely don't want furniture that is not sturdy and well-built for that reason, too.

Finding real solutions for home furnishings needs revolves around the participants' lifestyles and life stage. The participants explained how some considerations of home furnishings, such as fabric choices, styles, and durability, had to be measured in relation to how they live in their homes and how the furniture is used on a daily basis. Whether evaluating a product for its comfort or for its durability amidst children and/or pets, the participants discussed how they had to balance their ideal home furnishings options with the reality of the role the furnishings play in the home. The next topical area describes how participants' decision-making considerations reveal a process that is a complex, yet enjoyable part of their lives.

### **Decision-Making Considerations**

When it comes to the decision-making process, participants' experiences revealed that shopping for home furnishings is not necessarily a linear process, but instead is a multidimensional and sometimes orchestrated endeavor. Participants expressed the desire to strike a balance between what triggered the need for home furnishings with products that are both practical and accessible. Achieving this balance is not as easy as it may seem, largely due to the varied nature of the product category. Although the Internet helps the participants navigate the myriad of prospects available, as well as helps to focus their searches, there are also significant interpersonal dynamics that affect their decision-making. Overall, participants see the process of shopping for home furnishings as not entirely unpleasant, but also recognize that the many factors involved in making a decision often can increase the level of stress involved.

## Triggers versus Clinchers

As seen in the personal narratives, a participant's need for home furnishings often goes beyond the utilitarian. So what triggers a participant's "need" for new furnishings? Furthermore, what factors help her feel confident enough to actually make the purchase? Participants' experiences relative to these questions in part stem from their particular lifestyles and life stages, however, product assortment and variation also help to justify what to buy and when to buy it.

For Mariea, the "need" for new furnishings primarily surfaces when something ceases to be functional. For instance, it was not until she realized that her upholstered sofa was "full of holes and kinda smelly" that she began looking for a new living room sofa. Likewise, it was not until her husband Steve threw out the kitchen chairs that she began the search for new ones (she had been patching up the old ones to "make do" with what they already had). Mariea avoids long, drawn-out shopping processes. Although she thinks her furnishings are "piecemeal ... because I don't think that any of it goes together," she does not seem the least bit concerned about it. Instead, she looks for a style that she likes at a price she deems reasonable within a short period of time. Once she finds something "good enough," she is satisfied about making the final purchase decision.

Caitlin's mindset is similar to Mariea's when it comes to shopping, in that she knows in a short amount of time what she likes and when to make the buying decision. She states that she is "not a *huge* fan of shopping in the first place, as I never have been. When purchasing anything, I typically like to get what I have in mind and be done with it, versus browsing continually." However, even though she has many actual needs for

furnishings to fill her new home, the biggest deciding factors are all related to her current financial situation. She states,

Caitlin: The frustrating part [of shopping] for me is it's hard to buy all the pieces at once when you are a single household ... It's like, "Oh I have half of this, I just don't have the rest!" So I have to wait, even though technically I may have found exactly what I want already. And you are looking around and it's like my place is super sparse, so it's embarrassing to have people over because I'm thinking, "Well, do I want food or do I want decorations on my walls?"

In Caitlin's personal narrative, she shared how she recently acquired new bedroom furniture. She had seen the bedroom set several months ago while shopping with her mother and wanted to purchase it, but she did not have the money to do so at the time. When her parents surprised her at Christmas by telling her they would split the cost of the set with her, there was no need for Caitlin to do another search or compare items in other stores – once the financial requirement was met, she was content to make the decision to buy. Similarly, while Caitlin currently needs a new sofa for her living room, she is putting off the search process altogether until she knows she can afford to make the purchase.

Renee, on the other hand, has more evolving, continual "needs" to acquire new furnishings. She has a strong desire for her home to be unique, which leads her to be more of a casual collector of vintage goods rather than a focused shopper on a mission. Finding unique pieces that meet her needs, even if it is a low-priority need, clinches the deal for her, as long as the item is at the right price point. In fact, even if she finds a product she really likes, the need to "get a deal" on it and/or find something "special"

often stops her from making the purchase, even though she can usually afford retail prices. For example, Renee likes the style of Pottery Barn, “because it looks like ‘me,’ and it doesn’t look like everything matches. It’s a collection of stuff, even though it all came from the same place it doesn’t look like it all came ... you know, like JC Penney does. Some places just look too matchy.” However, she dismisses the idea of purchasing Pottery Barn furniture, stating, “It’s expensive. I’m not ever really going to buy anything from there.” Case in point is the recent search for a “hall tree” that Renee blogged about, which further illustrates her inability to make a purchase decision.

Renee: I am currently looking for something to hang coats on. I know that sounds boring, but I don’t want the same ol’ same ol’! I want to find a creative use for something unexpected. However, with that comes a long, drawn-out search for just the right thing. I’ve been on the hunt for months for this elusive coat rack or hall tree or whatever you want to call it. Pier One has a hall tree that’s the very same thing I’m looking for, [but] it’s \$300-plus dollars! But I want something that’s more unique. I don’t want something that looks like I bought it at Pier One. So I’ll just look at yard sales until I find something I like.

Renee admits that she is very slow to make buying decisions, and that shopping online does not help the process. Although she does use the Internet for gathering decorating ideas, she says that she is often overwhelmed by what is online. Renee needs to stumble upon a specific item that catches her eye in order to seriously consider it as an option, rather than directly searching for a particular item, because she does not think she can venture too far outside of what she knows. This includes her own furnishings style, her usual shopping places, and her buying habits.

Renee: I do at times have this vision of going this glam [style], you know, 'cause I like the mirrored tables and stuff that you see. I like when I see that on decorating shows and they put all the metal color, you know like that kind of shiny and the metals and the mirror ... It's just really cool. But I'm afraid I would tire of that stuff. And I would not know how to put that together. I don't even know what to look for or where to go. That's my thing. I don't know how to branch out of the style that I have into something else different. So I'll probably just stick with what I know works.

Tara's current needs for home furnishings are focused around finding a joint style that she and her husband both like, to move beyond mixing their individual furnishings together as they did when they were first married. It is important that Tara's furnishings are "gender neutral," so that both she and Gabe enjoy them. She does a lot of preliminary shopping online to narrow down her options, then she brings Gabe with her to the store to help her make the final decision. Although Tara likes the idea of finally being able to put together a more personalized home, she is still very apprehensive about making the right decorating decisions. Consequently, even though she does the majority of the shopping, it is Gabe's ultimate approval that helps her feel confident that she is purchasing the best option.

Tara: I'm not good at the whole decorating thing, really. I'm just not good at it, so it's all been a learning process. Well, truthfully, I've never been *able* to before ... I've not had any practice. You know, I've never had the money, and I've never had the means at all. I mean, even when I didn't have any money and I lived by myself, I still tried to personalize [my home] ... That little apartment that I had, I had a ton of plants, and it was just a tiny, tiny little ... like, one room. It was *tiny*! But, you know, I did stuff like ... I had bookshelves that sat underneath the windows and houseplants all along there, and I put scarves, you know, underneath the plants. I had girly artwork, and, you know, little stuff like that. But that was just for me. Once I added Gabe into the mix, all of a sudden it's like I don't know what to do at all.

Although Tara is not a very confident home furnishings shopper, she still wants her collection of furnishings to be unique in some way. She admits that while furniture stores such as Rooms To Go, which displays furnishings in already-designed room settings, help her to see how different elements can work together, she does not want to buy a pre-packaged room.

Tara: I mean, we ... the dresser that we got doesn't really match any other pieces, per se. It's not a part of a whole collection. It's one of the one or two pieces that they have that doesn't have a ton of other pieces that go with it, but we were able to match it with some other stuff that looked really nice. We did some mix and match with the Rooms To Go [living room furniture] we bought, 'cause I don't want ... It's like getting a tattoo off the wall! You know, the pictures that are up on the wall of every tattoo shop? I hate that. I mean, it's Rooms To Go furniture, and anybody who has it, knows it, but ... at least we've done *something* different. I think we got different tables or something like that. I don't remember exactly what it was, but at least it's not *the* room they had in there ... I want to have at least a little creativity involved.

Maggie's home furnishings needs revolve around filling her new home with furnishings, and she is highly focused on style. Although she emphasized comfort as the most important consideration, in reality, she will not sacrifice style for comfort alone. The two are almost equally important to her. As she mentioned, there are "plenty of comfortable sofas to sit on," but she held out on buying anything until she found one that wowed her with the contemporary style and color she loves. Once those two needs were met, the buying decision was very easy. Furthermore, she pointed out that she is willing to adjust her expectations about price, although "getting a good deal is always nice," to purchase the item she really wants. For Maggie, the clincher for buying home furnishings is simply finding the style she likes in a form that meshes with the need for comfort, as

well as practical considerations that stem from having three cats in the house.

Paige's primary trigger for buying home furnishings is the need for superior comfort and support, but she is also inspired to buy new furnishings simply for a change of scenery. Because she likes change, she is not boxed into looking for specific styles, colors, fabrics, and so on. She will try different things as long as she thinks the furnishings provide good quality and support. The clincher in her decision-making is primarily the functionality of large home furnishings pieces, but smaller accessories are almost impulse buys for Paige, as she changes her home's style seemingly on a whim. She blogs,

Paige: I don't really shop for the accessories like the signs on the wall or the frames or horse figures [like I shop for furniture]. I just pick those kinds of things up when I see them in stores or horse auctions, or friends will give me things because they know I love horses. So I'll bring out all my favorite horse things and have them out for a while, and then one day I'll just take them all down and decide to put up completely different artwork, pictures of the grandbabies, or whatever else strikes my fancy at the time.

What triggers a participant's need for new home furnishings varies according to how she feels about her home and the importance of the furnishings in it. Whether the need is for new furnishings to fill an empty space or to replace existing furnishings with updated pieces, participants see the shopping process for new furnishings as a way to ultimately make their homes more enjoyable. For most of the women, home furnishings are a way to express themselves, and that desire underscores all other triggers for buying new furnishings. Even for participants like Mariea, who indicates that she views her home furnishings as a necessity rather than as truly meaningful objects, the need for

uniqueness and personalization of the home is still a factor. If it was not a factor, then any table, chair, or sofa would be acceptable. However, Mariea wants furnishings that reflect her own style as well, even if it is not at the same level of need for uniqueness as participants like Renee. Regardless of the triggers that begin the shopping process, the factors that clinch the decisions for the participants often revolve around price, though for some participants like Maggie and Paige, the perfect amount of comfort and style are more important. Yet the process that occurs between recognizing the need for home furnishings and arriving at a decision involves several steps. The next section explores how participants sort through a multitude of prospects as they navigate the process of shopping for home furnishings.

### **Prospects and Process**

Finding the perfect home furnishings pieces can be an overwhelming experience, according to the participants. With so many options available in home furnishings stores, department stores, specialty boutiques, warehouse retailers and more, the participants often turn to the Internet to help them narrow down the options. Although it may seem counterintuitive to consider the Internet as a way to *limit* options, the participants revealed how shopping online saves them time by letting them skip over all the items for which they are not looking in a matter of seconds. Furthermore, shopping online makes the women feel more in control of the process. For example, in her blog, Tara writes how she likes shopping online because she can control the pace and direction of her search, without having to rely on any one particular source for ideas or information:

Tara: I feel that I can kind of spend more time and go the direction I want to go [online]. If I go out into a store, then, I'm limited to what *they* want to present, whereas if I'm online I can go look at blogs or stores, or whatever... there's just a whole lot of other avenues...

Similarly, Caitlin blogged about how she shops online to avoid feeling overwhelmed in crowded stores. She also uses online product previews to narrow down the options, which helps her feel more in control of the process.

Caitlin: In all honesty, there are stores I can't go into because there's so much stuff that it overwhelms me. There's so much stuff that I'm just like, "Oh God, where do I look first?" So I like to go online and look at the [product] previews ... so you know at least aesthetically what you'll be getting. So if [the store] is not within your town, a perfect example, you can actually preview it and get an idea of the dimensions on it so you don't have to go all the way to a store out of town, measure it and then find out it doesn't fit. So that's nice.

An added bonus for participants like Maggie is the ability to do this in the comfort of her own home, saving time and effort. Maggie writes,

Maggie: I get frustrated by having to go to so many different places to shop. Even if I call and ask if they carry a modern contemporary line, they usually lie to get me in the store. If all they have is wood type furniture, it is a waste of my time and gas. I know right away if there is anything worth looking at for my taste, so I want to be able to at least check out my options online before making a trip to the store.

Caitlin further explained that a store's website can allow her to reevaluate the options she has already seen in the store once she gets home.

Caitlin: I know with the furniture store that I just went to, they have a website, and they have all of their pieces online as well. So that's nice for the reason being that if you leave the store after seeing something you like, naturally nobody

carries a tape measure with them, so you can look at dimensions and what not online and get an idea of whether you have the space for it before driving all the way across town and waste gas and go back to the store and get frustrated.

For Maggie, shopping online helps her develop ideas about how to incorporate new furnishings with the existing furnishings she already has. As she does not consider herself to be particularly good at decorating, she likes having the option to view total room ideas that she would not be able to create on her own.

Maggie: I like shopping online to help give me ideas of what I can do with furniture differently. For instance, I don't want a headboard for my bed. I want a textured wall panel ... but I don't really know how to do that or where to even start. So the Internet lets me to see what is available and affordable. I can also see what is available without walking across a seven-mile warehouse, and I can save my place [by using bookmarks] and come back to it.

Renee is the least enthusiastic online shopper of all the participants, but admits that browsing online is a fun way to get ideas when she has some spare time, which is usually at work.

Renee: At home I'm rarely online. (gives a sheepish look) I do most of [my online shopping] at work... (whispers) I didn't say that! I do. I shouldn't, but I do. Just kind of as a break, you know, from things ... and it gives me ideas for things to look for at yard sales.

None of the participants cited a specific "go-to" home furnishings website when involved in home furnishings shopping. Instead, all mentioned using Google to list specific search criteria and get a broad array of search results from a variety of retailer and manufacturer websites. I observed while Tara, Mariea, and Paige demonstrated this

process during their interviews.

Tara: I don't really know how I shop online. I guess I just Google-search and go from there. It's ... I don't know... how does anyone do anything online? Google!

Mariea: I just go to Google. I might type in "leather sofa with recliner." Then I skip over the ad stuff and I go first to the [search results] that are showing me pictures, and if I like it, I'd click that one first. If I didn't like the picture, I'd skip it and go to the next one. I'd pick the pictures I liked first. If it's too expensive, I'm not even going to click that. Once I find something I like, I'd get the [manufacturer and product] information, then type that in directly on the Google search and try to find it other places [to compare prices].

Paige: There are thousands of pictures [on Google]. There's a lot of neat stuff you can see when you do this. And then even down here [at the end of the page] it says, "Show more results." So I can get through that whole thing, and then I'll see so much more. It's exciting, 'cause there's so much to look at. And when I get tired ... I can just come back whenever I have a few spare minutes.

Interestingly, part of the reason the women use Google as a primary online search tool is because they lack knowledge of specific furniture manufacturers or brand names.

Furthermore, even if they do know a retailer's website, they do not want to be limited solely to the brands that the retailer carries. As Mariea explained during her interview,

Mariea: I wouldn't go to a specific line of furniture [online], because I don't *know* specific lines of furniture. I have to look for general stuff. Even when you go on a store's website and you can view a whole collection that's made by the same company, all of it looks the same. So why would I want to look online at one manufacturer at a time who is showing all similar stuff when I can do a Google search and get a whole bunch of options in different styles and price ranges? I mean, the only exception would be if ... say I see a style of dresser I like, but I don't need a dresser. Say I need a bed instead. Well, if I know I like that style then I might want to look up that manufacturer to see if they have a bed in that style. But that's not how I usually find things ... I want to be able to go straight to what I'm looking for.

For participants, the most annoying part of shopping online is when a search results in items that have nothing to do with search criteria, or when a search result description seems promising, but the page it links to is not related to the search criteria they submitted. This means the individual has to navigate through the “bad” search results to find the “good” ones. I observed as both Mariea and Maggie demonstrated this problem during the online search process.

Mariea: If it's something that says leather, I'd check it out. But I have to look through all of these, and there are all these pages and I can't filter them! See, [points to photo] these are cloth ones, and they aren't what I'm looking for. I asked for leather, and it's not giving me that. That frustrates me, so I will just go to the next one or do another search and try to be more or less specific, just to see my other options.

Maggie: Well, I normally just go to Google, and then I'll go to “Images” and type in ... if I can spell it... “contemporary étagère.” Then I'll just go through and see what I like. For instance, I kind of like this one, so I'll click on it... And then it flicks me to that! I didn't ask to go there. Grrrr... So I'll go back. That's another thing that's aggravating sometimes... When it goes off on its own! Give me back my... did I lose all my stuff? There we go. When you click on it, a lot of times, like, see? You'll get the website or you'll get a link. So I'll open that in a new window so that I can keep this [original search results listing]. And then I'll go onto their website and continue looking.

Another frustration is that some home furnishings retailers' websites do not list the prices of the furnishings on the site. Some sites feature a price-rating system of dollar signs to represent a range of inexpensive (\$) to expensive (\$\$\$\$), but the site does not explain what the signs represent in dollar amounts. This was a strong turnoff for some participants, especially those who were most cognizant of price like Mariea, while others like Paige did not view it as a major issue at all. I observed Mariea in the following:

Mariea: I don't have any idea if this is even in my price range, so I'm not going to go to a store or even call if I can't see what it is, and I'm not going to waste my time or someone else's if it's not even in my price range. You might see 10 interesting pictures on the site, but you're not going to call the store for the price on 10 pictures, right? I just wouldn't go there at all. My thought on price: if they don't tell me how much it is, it's probably more than I want to spend, it's too expensive. I don't know if that's true, but it's my perception. If there's no price tag it's for someone that doesn't care about price.

In contrast, Paige writes,

Paige: Usually what I want to see online are the options ... the style of it, size, what fabrics or colors are available, stuff like that. Like I said, I'm willing to pay for quality, so I'm not going to let price be the deciding factor. I mean, I'm going to go to the store eventually anyway if I like what I see [online], so I can wait to deal with the price once I'm there.

Honesty was also called into question when a retailer does not list the price, as experienced by Maggie as I observed her search process.

Maggie: Sometimes they'll tell you prices of clearance items. But I'll be bull crap if that's a clearance price right there. It says it's on display in this particular showroom, and then it says special order only. So... that's confusing. And this showroom, I've seen these numbers in the showroom, and it's actually a big warehouse and they hang down from the ceiling with these numbers on them. So you have to write down the number, go to the store, figure out where that is ... All to see the price. And then that's not the price, 'cause when you go in there, which is what I did with all this sofa crap, is that somebody comes up to you and goes, "Chkchkchkchk... (calculator noises) Oh we can let you have that for this."

Maggie's comments bring up an interesting point about how shopping for home furnishings is different than shopping for other types of products, in that retail stores often have "soft" pricing structures. That is, it is typical for prices on home furnishings items to be either negotiable or heavily discounted, even for new items in the store.

Although large chain retailers such as Pottery Barn or Crate and Barrel do not negotiate price, it is common for locally-owned stores to do so, which is perhaps one of the reasons that many home furnishings retailers do not list prices on their websites. Consequently, if the store does not list a price, it suggests to the participants that the price is not firm but negotiable.

As one might imagine, pictures become extremely important when shopping for home furnishings online, because it is the primary way that the participants filter through the myriad of options. As a result, when a website's images are of poor quality or inadequate size, the participants generally become frustrated. These considerations surfaced as important when I observed Tara and Paige as they navigated websites:

Tara: I hate when I can't get a bigger picture of it! That annoys the shit out of me. Give me good pictures, for crying out loud. See, if I can't find what I'm looking for, and I have to go through a whole bunch of crap and guess, I'll move on. It's the Internet! There's tons of other sites for me to go look at.

Paige: This [sofa] looks kind of neat, but ... the picture is so friggin' small! And there's no zoom or anything? Ugh! I can't see any details! See, now I just totally am disinterested in that. That's a loss, 'cause I don't think I'd stay [on this site] or try to find out more about it. I'm not going to chase it. Screw it.

On the other hand, when the images are good, or even interactive, the website can be very helpful and inspiring.

Caitlin: I hate referencing IKEA, but a thing that I do like about the way they structure their site, is that they have all the pieces you can look at [individually], and on the other side of it, they have all these different layouts of rooms to give ideas of what you can do with those pieces. It's nice, because you might not do the same thing they do, but it gives you a starting point if you have no idea what you want. You don't see that frequently [on other websites]. And the thing that I

like about it is every piece you're able to find out what that piece is called, how much it is, the dimensions, just by scrolling over it. On other websites, they might have sample rooms set up, but it's just an image, and you can't do anything to it. I like how interactive [IKEA's site] is.

When asked if they would be more inclined to shop online at a particular retailer's site if it offered better search capabilities, several participants said they would still be suspicious about trusting one store's website.

Mariea: I'd still just use Google. If I search more stores, I get more options. If I could get 100 options instead of three on one site, then yeah. If there was a site that pulled in a lot of options like an Amazon site that had many manufacturers rolled into one, I'd like that.

Tara: In the perfect world, shopping online for furniture would be kind of like the Lowe's appliance [website], which I'm very familiar with right now. Like if you go to Lowe's appliances, it will... There's drop downs. Tons of drop-down menus, and you can pick, you know... it'll start with appliances and then you go to washers and dryers, and then dryers, and then how big your dryer is, and what color your dryer is, and... to be able to narrow down, piece by piece by piece. By color, by size, by whatever... cushiness factor! I really would love that.

When one considers that one sofa by one manufacturer can be customized with more than 300 different fabrics, leather, or other options, it is easy to understand why the participants sometimes feel overwhelmed by the process of shopping for home furnishings. There are countless options available for home furnishings products, and one way participants take control of the process is by shopping online. The Internet, and particularly Google, allows the women to view a world (literally) of prospects, conveniently culled by their own search criteria. Because the participants generally lack knowledge of most furniture brands, the process revolves around viewing products that

first meet their criteria, and then finding a retail store from which to buy the item. Not only does online shopping help participants focus their search, but it saves them the time and effort of going to multiple stores just to see what each one offers. Imperfect search results and a lack of information from retail stores are frustrating to participants, but overall, the Internet is seen as a key step in the process of shopping for home furnishings. Reaching the decision to buy, however, is not a step that the participants take lightly, and it often involves consulting others prior to purchase, as discussed in the next section.

### **Decision Dynamics**

For the most part, the women all took primary responsibility for decorating their homes and finding furnishings that best fit their needs and the needs of family members. This means that much of the shopping process is done by the women. However, when it comes to making buying decisions, several interpersonal dynamics surfaced, including between husband and wife, as well as between female family members.

Tara finds that because she is married, her choice of furnishings is often an exercise in “trying to balance masculine and feminine styles.” She jokes that Gabe’s major criteria is that he “wants everything in black,” but she says Gabe generally likes the things she chooses. However, it is clear that she still values his opinion when it comes to making final decisions about home furnishings purchases. She usually begins the process and narrows choices down prior to engaging him in the decision-making. She blogs,

Tara: Of course I take his opinion into consideration, and I would never put something in the house that I know he would hate. I do all of the Internet searches and look for things that I think we will both like. Usually I will narrow major decisions down to two choices, then ask his opinion. He gets overwhelmed at any

more than two options, but feels left out if I don't ask him. If he doesn't choose the one I want I then tell him why my choice is better and pretty much manipulate him into it. If I don't care all that much one way or the other I let him have the final say. We both know this is what I do, and it works for us.

Tara is not sure how she became the one in her family responsible for searching for home furnishings, meaning there was never an explicit discussion about who should take on the responsibility. Tara explained in her blog that it is an undertaking that is inherently more important to her than Gabe, in part because of the amount of time she spends at home, and because she places a higher priority on the home than Gabe.

Tara: The fact of the matter is, if it were up to Gabe, we'd probably still have our mattress on the floor and have nothing but Wal-Mart crap in here because he just wouldn't care about it. I mean, when we met, he had nothing but *crap* furniture. But now I think he really appreciates the nicer things we've gotten since we moved here, and he's even said to me, "You've made my life a lot nicer and more comfortable by what you've done with the place." And I like that he appreciates it, even if it's not a natural thing for him to focus on.

Tara feels like she needs to include Gabe in decisions about big purchases because of the amount of money being spent, but it is also indicative of how their relationship works. Although Tara feels responsible for furnishing the home, it is important to her that Gabe is just as comfortable in the home as she is. Furthermore, the couple makes important decisions together, and because Tara views home furnishings purchases as important, she wants Gabe's input and approval before making those purchases.

Tara: Like I said earlier, we are cautious about how we spend our money, even to the point of regulating how much we go out to eat and things like that. So if I find something for \$800 that I really want for the house, I damn sure want him to be on board with it! It would not feel right to me at all not to include him on buying

something that costs that much ... I mean, that's our deal. It's not like he's gonna go buy a motorcycle or something without asking me about it, either! Over the past decade I have just learned what works and what doesn't. How to do what needs to be done without making him feel like I am blowing money or leaving him out of decisions about his home.

Maggie shared similar opinions when discussing how she shops for her home.

Although Maggie usually shops by herself, she will often send Tony a picture via her cell phone to get his feedback before purchasing. However, she says it is not that he needs to see it in person himself. Rather, she likes to "keep him in the loop" as to what she is contemplating. Tony has similar reservations about buying online and trusts Maggie to make the necessary evaluations.

Maggie: He's really the one, even more than me, who didn't feel comfortable buying a sofa online. He was like, "I ain't buying anything I ain't sat on, or you ain't sat on!" (laughs) He was *not* excited about purchasing something without being able to sit on it and test it out. But as long as one of us has checked it out, that's ok. He trusts my ... he didn't sit on that [purple sofa], but he trusts me 'cause I was there and I got to sit on it, so that was fine.

Mariea prefers to get her husband Steve's input *before* she goes shopping, which helps to keep the search narrow and well defined. Once she has found what she thinks is the best option, she will send him a picture of the item via her cell phone or show him the item online to get his support for the purchase.

Mariea: I say, "Steve, what do you want?" He gives me a list of things and I know the kind of stuff he likes and the stuff I like and that's the first thing I do. I ask him what he wants. What style? Do something different? He likes dark colors on wood. That would be the first thing. Then, I'd go online first to see what's available or go to some stores just to look around.

Paige, the oldest participant, was the only exception, stating that her husband Johnny “doesn’t have a choice” in what she wants to do with their home furnishings. While that may be true when it comes to accessorizing or rearranging her home, she admits that he does have a say when comfort is a factor, such as when it comes to a new sofa. If she does not include him, she risks him buying something she knows would be a problem.

Paige: Well, I mean, it has to be comfortable for both of us. And I’ve got different [physical] issues than Johnny, so he does need to see how the sofa fits him, whether it pushes his neck forward or if he sinks too much in the seat. Knowing how he likes to sit on the sofa ... Lord, if I got something that he wasn’t comfortable in, *he’d* be the one trying to buy a new one in a few months!

Alongside husband and wife dynamics, the data also yielded quite a bit of information on another family dynamic – that between females of different generations. Specifically, I learned that a great deal of home furnishings knowledge, influence, and/or objects are passed down through the generations of the participants’ families, and primarily through the women. In fact, each of the participants related some aspect of home furnishings shopping back to a mother and/or grandmother.

Caitlin, for example, wrote about how she wants her style to be vastly different from that of her mother’s, yet she still relies on her mother for shopping advice.

Caitlin: As for my sense of style, I have no idea where it came from. I’m really still figuring out that myself, but I know that I’m *very* opposite of my mom, so that might be part of it – going the opposite direction of what she liked when I was growing up! My mom is currently redoing my childhood home. There’s a country style because of where I’m from. It’s not horrible ... I’ve seen a lot worse, but there’s things that my Mom picks up and I’m like, “Absolutely not!”

But I do have an advantage because of my mom's background with furniture, and I'm always calling her and asking her what's a reasonable amount to pay for furniture or where to go to find something I want. I trust her judgment on that kind of thing.

Tara also described wanting to have a very different style than her mother, even to the point that she painted one of her bedrooms a color she did not like because her original choice was too close to what her mother has on her walls.

Tara: [My style] is as different [from my mom's] as I can get it! There's a lot of, like, cherry colored wood, and ... because my mother loves it, there's a lot of "Hmm ... That looks like something my mother would do..." and I won't get it. I got all mad when we were painting upstairs because the color that I picked for the spare bedroom was actually the same color that I had picked out for her hallway. I painted her hallway the year before. And I'm the one that went to get the paint, so I'm the one that brought home the paint chips for her, and that was my favorite one, so of course she's like, "Ok, we'll do that one." And then a year later, when I was looking for colors for my house, I picked out that exact same color again 'cause I love that color... And as soon as I got it in here and looked at the paint chip, I was like, "This is the same color as my mother's hallway." So I ended up painting it another color that I now *hate*. And like the furniture she has in there now is leather, which I would never buy, I hate it. It's not very comfortable, but she's got grandkids that jump up and down on it all the time though, so I guess that was her motivation there ... I don't know! They're good for her. They're ok. I guess they're not pieces that I hate, necessarily, they're just pieces that I wouldn't buy.

Yet, Tara clearly shows a sentimental side when it comes to her furnishings, as she wants to hold onto things that have some history within her family. Stories related in her personal narrative about her mother's deacon's bench and the salt shakers of her late grandmother demonstrate not only the meaning that Tara has placed on these objects, but the fact that it stems in part from being passed down through the female line.

Maggie also said she wanted a style different from that of her mother's, but that the two of them often shop for their home furnishings together, giving each other feedback throughout the process. Moreover, as highlighted in Maggie's personal narrative, she has kept a few furnishings that were passed on to her by her grandmother, even though her grandmother's traditional style is the complete opposite of Maggie's contemporary furnishings.

In contrast to Caitlin, Tara, and Maggie, Mariea and Renee said they shared their style of furnishings with their mothers. Both also incorporated several home furnishings pieces into their homes that they received from their mothers or grandmothers. Mariea explains,

Mariea: My mom and I both like more traditional things than modern, but she's crafty and can make something out of nothing, too! I can't. I guess my grandmother was [traditional] too, 'cause I got a lot of my stuff from her. I got this little telephone table of hers that I really like ... it's really old, but it's unique and different, and I like that I have that of hers, 'cause I think it's special.

Similarly, Renee writes,

Renee: As for where I got my sense of style...definitely from my mom. She dresses nicely and tastefully – often sewing her own clothes, which allows her the freedom to create the exact look she wants ... so she has a creative bent, as do I. We can find pieces and repurpose them for our needs. But with furniture, I think Mom would rather invest money in a nice piece of furniture that she likes and that she'll keep for a long time, and I'd rather just find things

Interestingly, part of Renee's "finding things" includes going through her mother's furnishings to see what she can bring to her own house.

Renee: A lot of my furniture ... every time I go to Mom's house... (laughs) Ben doesn't like it when I go to Mom's house anymore 'cause I always come back with stuff. Like the red rocker in the front room that's in there now? It was my grandmother's, and it stayed down in her basement forever, and I had forgotten Mom had it. She had it in the basement covered up. Mom holds onto things. She likes antiques, and this is an old piece, and it was my grandmother's, and I always loved it ... So I brought it home. And I came back one time from Mom's house recently with that blue striped chair that sits over at the window, and now the last trip I came home with a round shelf table that now is sitting beside that blue chair... (laughs) All these... that blue chair came from my aunt, I think Mom had it in her house for some reason. But the colors were great in there!

Even Paige, the participant who most frequently replaces her furnishings in favor of something new or different, became very emotional when talking about keeping the furnishings that were passed down to her from her mother and grandmother. She writes,

Paige: I was raised on my grandparents' farm, so I was really close to my Nanny (grandmother) and my mom. There's not a lot of stuff [of theirs] that I want to hang on to, but I've got some of their jewelry too. I just want to keep some things that are special, that I've got memories with. The jewelry is pretty and it's a special thing, but the furniture is more stuff that I can remember growing up with, so it's kind of tied to all of us. I don't know if my daughter would want [Mom's dining room table] or not. I would hope so, but ... I just can't even think about giving it to her yet though. I still want to keep it with me.

Paige not only shows how home furnishings have been passed down to her through her female elders, but also demonstrates how home furnishings can hold a significant depth of meaning.

The participants feel that furnishing the home is their responsibility, yet the process is one that typically involves significant others along the way, particularly when it comes to buying decisions. Although the women seek objects that reflect their own tastes and personalities, they also consider the needs and wants of family members.

Consequently, positive feedback from a spouse or family member often gives the women the necessary confidence to make a final purchase decision, signifying the importance of these relationships for the women. Furthermore, home furnishings that were passed down by family members hold special meaning, as these furnishings serve as tangible reminders of the relationship between the participant and the family member, typically a mother or grandmother. Indeed, participants have much to consider throughout the decision-making process, but shopping for home furnishings is an activity that they all seem to like, regardless of its complexity.

### **The Fun of It**

Although there are a variety of factors that come into play during the home furnishings shopping process that make it complex, this does not necessarily mean that the participants do not *enjoy* this process. While some aspects of their shopping experiences can be frustrating, the participants generally agree that buying things for the home gives them a great sense of accomplishment. Furthermore, most of the participants agreed that shopping for home furnishings was fun, even exciting, though their reasons for thinking so varied.

Mariea and Caitlin were the most mission-oriented shoppers among the participants. Yet even though both want to find their furnishings quickly, they state that when the shopping is done on their terms, they enjoy the process. Mariea blogs,

Mariea: Most of the time I have a good idea of what I am looking for and know it when I see it. And most of the time I don't feel like I am rushed when it comes to big items, but when I am looking or in the shopping mode, I like to get it done. If I'm in control of it, it's fun. I am usually excited when I purchase an item. I don't

tend to second-guess myself either, so I am usually pretty satisfied afterward and enjoy what I have bought, and I'm excited to share it with friends and family.

Caitlin, in particular enjoys it as this is her first experience with furnishing a home.

Caitlin: It's actually kind of exciting to be able to buy furniture for myself now. Kind of like, "Oh, now I have my own little home!" It's a new experience, versus like buying clothes, which I've been able to do for years, obviously. So it's kind of enjoyable. Some days are better than others, especially if I'm spending weekends looking for things because I just can't find what I want. I mean, I don't want to waste my time. But it hasn't frustrated me yet. And actually, I *can't* [shop for everything I need] all at one time, even if I had the money. It's too overwhelming, and it would be an impulse purchase. And I don't want to buy something just to say I was done. I want to get it because I really like it. So I like spacing it out. It's more fun.

Interestingly, Tara's experience with buying a bedroom dresser has made her more distrustful of shopping online, which she generally enjoys very much. However, she is happy once she finds the "right" item, because it means she is one step closer to having a home that is her "perfectly comfortable space." I observed this during the interview with Tara:

Tara: I do a lot of pre-shopping online, and it was definitely inconvenient to discover that what things look like online are often nothing at all what they look like in person. And I can get overwhelmed really easily. Like, I look at pictures like this [on IKEA's website] and I'm like, "Ooo, this is so cool," and "That would be so convenient," but when it comes time to actually doing it, I'm like, "Arrgh...I dunno..." So ... if I am in a hurry to get something, then of course I get frustrated. But all too often I find the perfect item by pure accident when I am looking for something else, so I find it best to go into a project knowing that it's going to take a long time to piece it together. I would say that after the purchase, I feel satisfied just knowing that the purchase is done and over. Not relieved exactly ... There is a sense of pride for me in knowing that I am not only at a place in my life where I can make well thought-out purchases, but also in being able to claim my home a little bit more.

Tara's comments demonstrate again how her furnishings are not only functional but meaningful in her life. Her ownership of the place of "home" and her ability to make that space "hers" gives Tara a feeling of pride, making the home furnishings shopping process a kind of rite of passage into a new phase of her life: home ownership.

Because of the time constraints caused by having two small children, Renee has less freedom to take her time and collect pieces at her leisure. However, she said that even though this life change has required that she limit her searches to a few favorite places, she still views her home as an evolving space and likes the challenge of expressing herself through her home. Consequently, as she writes in her blog, she finds ways around her time limitations to acquire the "the next perfect thing."

Renee: Back in the day when I had time to go to store to store to store looking for just the right piece, I enjoyed it, and the process didn't frustrate me. But I don't have that luxury anymore, so I have found a few key stores whose style I typically like and will shop only at those stores. That takes the frustration factor of time out of it a bit. Also, if there's a piece I have in mind but I can't find the exact features I want, I do have access to my brother who is a wonderful carpenter, and I can usually sweet-talk him into making me something. If there are any problems with furniture shopping, it is usually with upholstered pieces – not finding the right color, design, etc. But if the piece is cheap enough, it can always be recovered! And a deadline does help me to make a decision, and usually it will be the right decision. If I have months to just look, I will look for months and I'll never find anything that I like. But if we said we need to find a couch by February, then I'll get on it and make a decision and I have no choice. That's what I've got to do, and I like it.

Paige and Maggie are the least conflicted about the home furnishings shopping process, largely because they feel the most satisfied with their ability to make the right decisions. However, the "fun" part of shopping for home furnishings, as both explain in

their blogs, is less about the shopping itself and more about living with the new items.

Paige: It's not that I really *love* the shopping part of buying new furniture. It's not like a retail therapy kind of thing. I just love the feeling in my house when things are different ... and fresh. It feels like a breath of fresh air. And sometimes all it takes is for me to rearrange what I've already got. But other times I just want something new to look at.

Maggie: I feel happy and content once I've found what I was looking for. I also feel relieved to put that process behind me. With the sofa I recently bought, I love both the color and design, but I also love the fact that we now have room for company to visit. I finally feel comfortable having friends and family over, and that is the best feeling of all.

Shopping for the home is a fun activity for most participants. However, the satisfaction they feel appears to be most often related to how the purchase improves some aspect of the home, rather than the actual shopping process itself. Some participants feel a sense of accomplishment when their home looks a little more "put together" for having guests, while others get excited about changing the style of their home for their own pleasure. Regardless, the "fun" of shopping for home furnishings is related to each participant's goal of creating a "home" that best reflects her and her family.

### **The Role of the Retailer**

According to the participants, purchasing home furnishings has very little to do with being loyal to specific home furnishings retailers. Instead, it has much more to do with finding a store that sells the product the participants have in mind to purchase. Online shopping helped each participant by generating ideas, narrowing down available options, and understanding price points, but those are not the only criteria that need to be met prior to purchase. Participants discussed the role that the retailer plays when they

take the final step in the decision-making process, including the differences between shopping brick and mortar retailers and online retailers, and how salespeople can either help or hinder the process.

### **Brick and Mortar versus Online Retailers**

As the participants have described, shopping online for home furnishings quite literally gives them a world of options from which to choose. But just because a participant may fall in love with a bedroom set from Paris does not mean she can just drive to her local home furnishings store and pick it up. So why not just skip the local retailer and buy directly from the online store?

A possible answer to this question is tied to one of the most commonly mentioned requirements for the participants' home furnishings: the need for comfort. Gone are the days of furnishing formal rooms "just for show" – the participants in this study made it clear that the furnishings in their homes were going to be well used. Regardless of how stylish or perfectly priced an item may appear online, the comfort factor is one that can only be evaluated in person.

Paige: Nobody else can tell me what's going to be comfortable. I mean, what's comfortable to you might not be for me, right? So you can't trust someone else's idea of that. You have to check it out yourself. And there's no point in buying it if it's uncomfortable and you don't even want to use it.

Maggie: There is the disadvantage of not being able to see the object in person. You can't "sit" on a virtual sofa or trust the actual color of something via computer. Like, I saw a picture online of a sofa and was like, "Ooo, I want that." I did, until we went to the store and my mother laid down on it and she said, "You can't lay down on this. It's not comfortable enough to lay down on ... it's all wonky."

Tara: It *has* to feel good to me ... I'm the same way with work stuff, with my shears and stuff like that. If I can't hold it in my hand, I don't want to buy it. I don't know how it's going to feel. And phones ... oh my gosh, don't try to give me a phone that I haven't been able to pick up ... I will go to the store and if I can't pick up the phone and hold it to my ear, I won't buy it! (laughs) I have to know it's going to be comfortable.

For furnishings in which comfort is not necessarily a factor, such as case goods (dressers, tables, entertainment centers, and so on), some of the participants were a little less adamant about having to buy in person, but most agreed that there were still elements that might not be evaluated completely accurately online, such as quality, color, and how the piece would "fit" in the home. As Mariea and Caitlin blogged:

Mariea: I don't like shopping online for large purchases because I like to see in person the item to get a better idea of the quality and size. We are now looking for a kitchen /dINETTE table. I am looking for something tall, with stools but a little unique-looking. I have just started looking online, but I know I will go looking at some stores in the next few weeks to see what I like in person.

Caitlin: I don't like that you can't *really* see the product you're purchasing, and you have no idea of the state of the product, whether it's damaged, intact, etc., until you receive it. That's why I often avoid online shopping for large purchases. I just kind of want to see it ... because a lot of pictures, you have dark wood furniture, and you see it online, and it looks dark, and it's actually a lot darker in person ... that's kind of frustrating to me.

In addition, though all used the Internet to narrow initial choices, some participants expressed the feeling of being overwhelmed with the sheer number of options online. This was demonstrated by the participants during the interviews, particularly regarding the number of options on one retailer's website.

Tara: Sometimes it can all be a little overwhelming for me. Like, I keep looking and looking... and there can be so many variations on something as simple as a headboard. And I know what I like, but there's always this thought like, "Maybe I could try that..." and break out of my shell a little bit. But then I start worrying about how everything else in the room will work with this "new" style and I get frustrated because I don't know what I'm doing.

Renee: I don't really want to shop Ikea's website ... it's too overwhelming for me and there's just too much ... Now, I might *go to* Ikea... because they're going to have a whole lot more than what I can see here, or at least it's going to *look* different in person. I can navigate the store better than I can this website.

According to participants, the problem is not necessarily buying an expensive item online. Caitlin, for example, was perfectly comfortable buying a \$1,200 camera online after she had done her research about the product and found a well-known, reputable online retailer. Instead, the issue has more to do with the kind of in-person evaluation needed for this particular product category. Once such an evaluation is made, some participants explained that they would not mind going back online to complete the purchase. This was particularly the case for Mariea, who starts online, goes to the store, and then goes back online to try to find a better deal.

Mariea: For my sofa, I looked [online] to see cost-wise what my price range would be for what I wanted, but not to actually buy anything. [Then] I went to the store to look at shapes and sizes. After I found the one I wanted, I went back online to try to find it cheaper. Once I knew the brand I liked and how it was made ... why not?

Caitlin takes a similar approach, as long as she can trust the online retailer.

Caitlin: If I knew the company, or I've already bought a piece from them ... if I knew they were reliable, and I knew that shipping-wise they handled their stuff with care, then absolutely [I would buy online]. I have no objections to it. If I was

able to go to the store and see how they handle their furniture, and how the furniture is built, and if I went online and saw something I liked, sure, why not? Because sometimes a store will have online sales they don't have in the store. So if I knew they took care of it and I knew it was good quality, I don't really know why I wouldn't, especially if it is going to save me money.

As part of their experiences with online and in-store shopping, participants mentioned that they sometimes feel "tricked" into having to go to the physical store to see what options are actually available. That is, the participants expressed suspicion that retailers do not show all of their merchandise online, which makes it necessary to go to the store to see more options. Caitlin and Maggie both voiced their frustration regarding retail stores' websites that do not thoroughly show the products they offer.

Caitlin: It's a lot trickier now, and a lot of websites don't show all of their inventory, so I kind of feel like you get cheated a little bit because you think, "Do they have what I want?" which I know is a marketing ploy, so it's a catch-22.

Maggie: Let me show you something. [Shows pictures of contemporary furnishings that she took on her cell phone within a retail store.] This is what I found in their clearance room when I *went over there*, but this was *not* on their website. And the only reason I went to that store is because I was taking my mother. I did not go for me. But this is what I found over there ... Now that's awesome! That's very modern, and I really liked it. But you don't see anything like that on here [store's website]. I would think that they'd put that on the website so that it would draw people in to see that more. But what you're seeing on the screen isn't always what you're seeing in the store. And because of that, because I don't see anything contemporary on the screen, I won't go to that store. I don't want to waste my time going if I'm going to walk through all that Americana stuff. So I was really shocked to see that, and all these other things that I saw. But am I going to go to every store just to see if they have contemporary stuff when it's not on their website? No.

Renee wrote that shopping a store's website typically disappoints her, particularly when she cannot find in the store what she saw online.

Renee: Most of the time I don't prefer to shop online because even if I find something I like at a particular site, when I get to the store they either don't have it in stock or it's not what I expected. My husband, however, would about prefer to buy everything online! The one advantage to online shopping, though, is that usually the price is cheaper.

Going to the store has the added advantage of giving the participants the confidence to buy. Participants cited the need to evaluate the furnishings in person as the most important step prior to purchase because it gives them a tangible reference for the items they are considering. In the store, the participant can properly evaluate issues of scale, product quality, dimensions, design details, comfort, and so on. Subsequently, if these evaluations are satisfactory, the decision to buy becomes easier.

Renee: I'd just rather go to the store... I just like to see it and sit in it and touch it, you know, all that stuff. If I see it in person, I can trust it. That that's what I'm getting ... That when I spend \$2,000 on whatever this is, I know exactly what I'm getting. When I've spent \$2,000 on something I've only seen a picture of, the color could be different, the size could not be exactly what I want ... who knows? You just don't know those things [online].

Tara blogged something similar:

Tara: I think the Internet is best for pre-shopping as far as major purchases go. I've purchased accessories online, but I don't think I would dare make a major purchase online. Too much risk that I'll hate it when it arrives! Once I see it in person, I can actually visualize what it will be like to live with it.

Furthermore, many brick and mortar stores waive shipping or delivery fees, and the participants did not want to have to pay shipping and handling if they purchased online.

Tara: You know, like, I was prepared to [buy online], honestly! But the shipping ... we *would* have, in fact, bought furniture from Ikea's website and had it delivered, but the shipping was outrageous. So we went [to the store], and I'm so glad that we did because I love the one that we have, and I would have just been ok with what we would have ordered.

In their blogs, Maggie and Caitlin pointed out that the difficulty in returning large home furnishings pieces is another problem not easily or inexpensively resolved in online shopping.

Caitlin: I really don't want to deal with shipping and handling, and I don't want to have to return it if something's wrong. It's just kind of a pain, and the hassle is more than it's worth to me.

Maggie: Most large items can't be returned if they aren't quite right for the space, or the shipping back fee is exorbitant.

### **Consumer to Salesperson Interface**

According to the participants, one of the benefits *and* drawbacks of shopping in a brick and mortar store is having to deal with salespeople. Most of the participants agreed that salespeople should generally be seen and not heard – available when needed, but otherwise keeping a good distance. Because home furnishings purchases involve so many different considerations, the participants said they need time to simply look at the options in the store and imagine using them in their homes. Because the women cannot always articulate the qualities they are looking for, questions from salespeople end up frustrating them and disrupting the process. Both Tara and Mariea mentioned this in their journal entries:

Tara: Some salespeople are fine. Others, not so much. I don't do pushy. If they can't leave me alone long enough to look in peace, I will leave. I want them to be available, but not following me around. It's definitely a good argument for the online pre-shop.

Mariea: I hate being followed around a store and not being left alone! But on the other hand, I don't like searching for someone when I do have a question. I guess that sounds kind of contradictory, but I just want time to *think* without anyone asking me what I'm looking for, what's my price range and all that. Most of the time, I'm still figuring it out until I'm actually walking up to the counter, so just leave me alone.

The participants said that another reason online shopping is useful is because it lets them avoid interfacing with salespeople until they are ready to do so. Interaction with salespeople affects some participants more than others. Caitlin and Paige feel pressure to talk to salespeople, and in turn can feel pressure to make buying decisions before they are ready. This perceived pressure prompts the participants to shop online first to have clearer ideas about what they are looking for prior to going to the store. As Caitlin and Paige write,

Caitlin: I like knowing that salespeople are available when I need them, but I hate having anyone follow me around the entire time I'm browsing. That's why I like online shopping, for the fact that I'm not pestered by anyone or feel like I *have* to talk to them.

Paige: The reason I like shopping online so much is ... I like that you have time to process a lot of stuff before you get to the store. There's no sales pressure or distraction when you're just trying to get ideas. I feel like salespeople think that if you're in the store, you are ready that day to make a decision, and that's just not always the case. Some stores handle it better than others, but it really gets on my last nerve. And if you want to go back and see [a particular item] again, you feel like the salespeople think you are going to buy it. And they start pestering you or following you around, trying to get you to answer all these questions, and I can get really pissy about that. So I like to be prepared for walking the store, and I don't want to deal with people before I absolutely have to.

Maggie, however, writes that she is adamant about not letting salespeople pressure her into making a decision before she is ready.

Maggie: I don't want to be confrontational, but if they're overwhelming, I'm just going to stop it in its tracks. 'Cause you're not going to make me spend money that I'm not ready to spend, on something that I'm not ready to buy.

Yet, good salespeople can assist the shopping process by helping customers navigate the store to find what they are looking for, writing up custom-order items that cannot be bought off the showroom floor, explaining product details, negotiating price, and setting up delivery. Moreover, the participants pointed out that a store's customer service after the sale can go a long way in making for a satisfied customer. For Maggie, negotiating price is a satisfying part of the purchase process, and dealing directly with the store manager for her recent sofa purchase allowed her to strike a deal. She blogs,

Maggie: One thing I like about working with a store is that you have the option to negotiate price. On a website, there's no one to bargain with! When I got my purple sofa, the manager definitely wanted to sell, and I had cash to pay, so we made a deal that I think we were both very happy with!

Working out delivery schedules is often a hassle, particularly for women who work full-time. For this reason, Caitlin appreciates the ability to talk with a salesperson and work out delivery details that are convenient for her. Similarly, Renee likes to talk to salespeople regarding product details, because the history or details of an item sometimes affects her overall interest in it. Renee explained that this is not an experience she can have online because local vintage furnishings stores typically do not have websites, due

to the constant variations in the products they offer. Caitlin and Renee write,

Caitlin: The part about online shopping I dislike the most is dealing with the fiasco that can occur when you're not home and a delivery comes. With being in the store, the salesperson can be right there to sell it to you, set up delivery when it's convenient, and there's no problems after that. I like having a person to talk to about that kind of stuff.

Renee: Since I like to shop a lot of consignment or vintage stores, I like to know where some of the pieces came from. I mean, you know, part of the fun of buying vintage stuff is sometimes getting a bit of a story behind it, whether it's the style or time period it came from, or who it belonged to, or whatever. That stuff is interesting to me. So I like talking to someone knowledgeable about those things.

Paige asserts that good customer service after the purchase is rare in an online venue. Therefore, knowing that there is a real person in the store she can talk to if she has problems with her purchase takes away some of the pre-purchase insecurities. She explained how she learned the importance of good customer service after the purchase of an entertainment center.

Paige: Actually, customer service is a big consideration, but most people don't think about that until they have a problem. I was thinking it was nice that the entertainment center we got was from a local store, and because they were local, when it was scratched, we just took it back and they took care of it.

Access to a home furnishings retail store is a necessary part of the participants' shopping experience. Although the Internet helps participants narrow down options and develop price expectations, the brick and mortar retailer gives participants the necessary in-person experience they need in order to make purchase decisions, such as a home furnishings item's level of comfort, quality, or durability. Furthermore, participants

explained that they do not trust online retailers to accurately list or describe all of the available inventory, thereby necessitating a trip to the store to verify the options. Dealing with home furnishings salespeople can be beneficial and problematic, as the participants want help when they need it but do not want to feel pressured to buy before they are ready. Overall, the brick and mortar store serves an important role in the participants' process of creating "home" through the objects with which they choose to furnish it.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I presented a thematic analysis of the participants' home furnishings shopping experiences. This analysis forms the second level of interpretation of the data collected through the interview and journal responses. Thematic areas used to structure this interpretation included *Lifestyle and Life Stage*, *Decision-Making Considerations*, and *The Role of the Retailer* in participants' home furnishings shopping experiences. In the next chapter, I present the third level of interpretation and consider the theoretical implications of participants' home furnishings shopping experiences.

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Investigating what it is like to shop for home furnishings reveals the meanings of this experience in the six participants' lives. In this chapter, I discuss participants' experiences with shopping for home furnishings by reflecting on what it is that renders such experiences significant. I focus on interpreting these experiences relative to existing research on searching and buying objects for the home, as well as that of the meanings that consumers give to objects. This third level of interpretation flows from and helps to clarify the first two levels of interpretation (Chapters IV and V), while also describing, from a more theoretical or conceptual point of view, how findings relate to the literature on home furnishings shopping.

This chapter provides a framework for defining and explaining how the six women's experiences shed light on the link between the home and the self, as well as that of the home, the self, and others. In the first part of this chapter, I explore the search process and buying decisions relative to the concept of home and the self, as well as how the objects themselves serve to reflect the participants' unique concept of self. In the second part of the chapter, I explore how others play a role in the creation of the home and how the women navigate the shopping process in relation to others. I also examine how others contribute to the search and buying process of shopping for home furnishings,

and the ways that objects in the home are reflective of relationships between the self and others.

### **Home and the Self**

The role of women in the home has been fairly consistent since some of the earliest forms of civilization (Rosaldo, 1974; Sanday, 1974), and even though women's presence outside of the home has significantly increased, they still tend to have primary responsibility for the home and household (Davis, 1976; Hochschild, 1989; White, 1999; Zhang & Farley, 1995). As women's rights in society have increased, so has their role as consumers, to the point where women have become the primary decision-makers for home-related purchases (Green & Cunningham, 1975; Shuptrine & Samuelson, 1976; Silverstein & Sayre, 2009).

Findings from this dissertation support this notion by revealing how each of the six women operate as primary consumer and decision-maker for home-related purchases. All six participants view the home and shopping for home furnishings as their responsibility, regardless of their particular lifestyle or life stage. What is interesting to note is that the women's acceptance of this role has little to do with an adherence to conservative social or religious beliefs regarding traditional gender roles, i.e., the husband as primary income earner and wife as stay-at-home mother and/or housekeeper. Instead, the women in this study are all employed full-time (except for Paige, who is retired), yet still feel that most responsibilities related to the household fell to them (except for Caitlin, who is single). This finding has emerged in other studies on women's roles and the home (Catalyst, 2011; Foroohar, 2010; Silverstein & Sayre, 2009;

Townsend & O'Neil, 1990; White, 1999; Wiersma, 1990; Zhang & Farley, 1995).

Yet, even though furnishing the home is an added responsibility, most participants take it on willingly, often because they *enjoy* the shopping process and the challenge of finding items that best represent the self through the home. As demonstrated in the previous two chapters, the process of creating a “home” is one that is steeped in meaning, and the acquisition of objects often reflects a person’s need to express his or her own identity (Belk, 1988). Through the narratives, each of the six women in this study reveal how her self is reflected in her home and particularly through the process of shopping for home furnishings. To better understand the broader significance of the self within the process of shopping for home furnishings, this section will focus on three major areas with respect to the home and the self: *objects and the self*, *the search process*, and *buying decisions*.

### **Objects and the Self**

Consumers construct meanings for the objects with which they choose to surround themselves, including apparel and home furnishings (Damhorst, 2005; Johnson, Yoo, Kim & Lennon, 2008; Kaiser, 1997; Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992). Furthermore, humans use consumption as a way of forming and expressing their identities (Belk, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Damhorst, 2005; Dichter, 2002; Moynagh & Worsley, 2002; Nava, 1997; Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992; Zukin & Maguire, 2004). Thus, the value of an object often goes beyond its inherent properties, with additional value created by the meaning we assign such objects in our lives (Simmel, 1978). The literature also asserts that objects are one way by which we define who we are to

ourselves as we communicate who we are to others. Consequently, possessions are a way to reinforce our identity, by creating an “extended self” through objects (Belk, 1988).

The participants in this study demonstrated how home furnishings often mean much more to them than the function they serve in the home, and that these objects are related to their identity or extended self. That is, participants talked about home furnishings objects as a parallel to how they see themselves. For example, Caitlin explained how her new bedroom furniture made her happy because it felt like it represented “her” – her style, her personality, the colors she loves, and the calm and peaceful mood she likes to create when she is at home. Similarly, Maggie said that her new home did not feel “right” until she personalized it with a bright, purple sofa, which she says is very reflective of her personality and tastes. The furnishings the participants choose represent unique aspects of themselves, and these aspects are articulated through their choices of color, style, design, scale, and quality. In as much as the furnishings serve as a kind of “mirror” that reflects their own personal identity, and because that identity is constantly evolving, the participants felt that furnishing their homes was an ongoing process. Many of the women said that they were continually on the lookout for new home furnishings to add to their homes, which reinforces Belk’s (1988) assertion that the meanings of possessions change over the course of a person’s life, encouraging the person to find new objects and new meanings to express his or her changing identity.

Just as Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992) suggest that the way in which people dress communicates something about age, gender, social class, and other characteristics, objects in the home serve to communicate something about the participants in this study.

In fact, several participants linked the decorating of their homes to the way they dress themselves. Specifically, Renee stated that the way she decorates her home is very similar to the way she dresses – she said her clothing style was conservative with simple accessories, and in comparison, her home featured a limited, conservative color palette, with only a few accessories in each room. In contrast, she said that in her experience, people who over-accessorize their dress or their bodies (with piercings, tattoos or other modifications), also tend to over-decorate their homes. Her statements echo the literature that suggests objects can convey symbolic messages about the self and identity (Belk, 1998; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Dichter, 2002; Mehta & Belk, 1991).

### **The Search Process**

Shopping in general is an activity that has been associated with women and has been posited to provide both practical and recreational benefits (Eisenberg, 2009; Jansen-Verbeke, 1987). However, women, perhaps now more than ever, feel constant pressure in regards to time devoted to work, home and family, leaving less time overall to devote to shopping as a leisurely pastime (Foroohar, 2010; Silverstein & Sayre, 2009). The participants' individual lifestyles clearly demonstrated this notion, and especially in the case of Renee, who works full-time and has two small children. Although she enjoys the process of searching for home furnishings, she feels like she has very little time to devote solely to that particular task. Instead, Renee's home furnishings purchases usually occur through multitasking, as she is running a variety of errands and happens upon a solution to her home furnishings needs.

For many consumers, including the six women in this study, the idea of “shopping” has come to take on different meanings as the Internet has provided a new space in which to interface with retailers. Even for those consumers who do not prefer to buy online, the Internet has become a powerful source of product information, giving consumers access to hundreds if not thousands of products, and offering a way to compare prices more efficiently and effectively (Burke, 2002; Zeng & Reinartz, 2003). Consumers may not have much time to spend going from store to store, yet they can justify spending a few minutes online to shop for items they want (Browne, Durrett, & Wetherbe, 2004; Horrigan, 2008; Jepsen, 2007; Kim & Lennon, 2008; Wolfinbarger & Gilly, 2001). Indeed, this approach was used by all six participants, each of whom relied on the Internet to browse for home furnishings and get ideas for their homes. Although the degree to which they used the Internet varied, all of the participants said that online shopping helped them to get a sense of what products were available and to ascertain the price points of those options.

One of the most advantageous aspects of online shopping is the ability to shop anywhere and at any time (Browne et al., 2004; Burke, 2002; Horrigan, 2008; Jepsen, 2007; Wolfinbarger & Gilly, 2001; Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Malhotra, 2000). Thus, it would seem that Renee, who most emphasized a lack of time to devote to shopping, would be the most likely to take advantage of the convenience of online shopping. However, of all the participants, she was the least enthusiastic about shopping for home furnishings online. This disconnect points to the importance of lifestyle in the home furnishings shopping experience. Renee is a “collector” – her shopping enjoyment comes

from being immersed in the experience of finding a hidden treasure or a one-of-a-kind keepsake. Ultimately, Renee's need to find something through "discovery" outweighs the practical consideration of convenience.

In contrast to Renee, the other participants were much more motivated to shop online for the convenience it offers. For example, the Internet gives Mariea the ability to shop in the most time-efficient manner, and to crosscheck in-store prices to make sure she is getting the best deal possible. Tara and Paige, however, enjoy shopping online because it permits them to browse at their own pace and avoid interacting with people as much as possible. This idea of the Internet as a tool for consumer power and independence emerged in support of several existing studies (Browne et al., 2004; Friend & Thompson, 2003; Jepsen, 2007). Moreover, participants talked about the benefits of accessing others' suggestions and opinions about products, whether through blogs, product reviews, or posts on Pinterest. This finding is in line with that of a study by Colley and Maltby (2008), which revealed that women have positive views of the Internet because of the popular social outlets it offers, such as networking sites, blogs, and sites for shopping advice.

Besides being a practical tool, shopping online can also be a fun experience for many consumers (Horrigan, 2008; Kim & Forsythe, 2007; Lee & Chen, 2010; Mathwick & Rigdon, 2004; Wolfinbarger & Gilly, 2001). Research suggests that women in particular enjoy shopping to fulfill personal and social needs, as well as to satisfy utilitarian motivations (Eisenberg, 2009; Jansen-Verbeke, 1987; Silverstein & Sayre, 2009). This was the case for some of the participants. For instance, while observing

Maggie as she shopped online, she voiced her excitement about having access to products that she had never even conceived of. Although they were not necessarily products that she wanted to purchase, she views the Internet shopping process as a way to explore other “worlds,” that is, viewing popular styles in different rooms or locations, enjoying the ingenuity of different designs, seeing how various rooms are decorated by others, and so on. Similarly, Mariea, Tara, and Caitlin enjoy searching online for home furnishings, but particularly because they feel that it gives them more control over the process.

Indeed, the widespread use of the Internet has increased consumer power, and particularly in the last decade (Kucuk, 2008; Lindbeck & Wikstrom, 1999; Moynagh & Worsley, 2002; Pires, Stanton, & Rita, 2006; Rezabakhsh, Bornemann, Hansen, & Schrader, 2006; Zureik & Mowshowitz, 2005), with the advent of online social networks for sharing information and ideas. Consumers are not only armed with more available information during the shopping process, but they are also able to communicate and trade information with fellow consumers on a global scale via social networking sites, blogs, and other online discussion forums. Moreover, due to the sheer number of product alternatives available online, consumers hold more power in the marketplace to lend success to high-quality products and push low-quality options out of the market (Lindbeck & Wikstrom, 1999). Increased consumer power provided by the Internet is evident with respect to the six participants of this study, as online resources not only help them feel more confident when they enter a home furnishings store to make a purchase, but they also are able to seek out options that best reflect the unique self, rather than settle for what the store chooses to display. Specifically, access to information online has

increased participants' "expert power" during the shopping experience (Chang, Cheung, & Lai, 2005; Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2004; Horrigan, 2008; Kohli, Davaraj, & Mahmood, 2004; Soopramanien, Fildes, & Robertson, 2007). Moreover, several of the women also demonstrated the use of reward and coercive power (French & Raven, 1959) by participating in discussion forums, blogs and product reviews to help them during the decision-making process.

It should be noted that, like other high context product categories, shopping for home furnishings is not a simple task. As discussed in Chapter II, the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) is often used to predict consumers' intent to buy (online and offline) based on attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1985). However, TPB may not necessarily account for differences in product category or how these differences impact actual behavior. For example, for a consumer like Tara, who loves to shop for most products online, application of TPB constructs (attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control) would suggest that she is very likely to buy home furnishings online, too. In addition to saving time and effort during the search phase of shopping for home furnishings, the participants also shared personal reasons for using the Internet, such as the desire to avoid interaction with others, the enjoyment of shopping in the comfort of her home, and the ability to control and set the pace of her search process. However, this study reveals that home furnishings necessitate a channel shift prior to purchase, as all six women preferred to make the final decision in-store. The nature of most home furnishings products and the needs they fulfill apparently move the decision-making process offline after the search phase is complete. This

suggests that the Theory of Planned Behavior alone is not sufficient to account for the process some consumers experience when shopping for home furnishings. Possible reasons for this difference will be discussed in depth in the next section.

In a similar vein, based on the experiences of the participants, the Online Prepurchase Intentions model (Shim, Eastlick, Lotz, & Warrington, 2001), which was developed to study predictors of intention to use the Internet for both information search and purchase of search goods, would not be sufficient in its current form to predict consumers' intentions to purchase home furnishings online. The OPI model would be helpful in predicting consumers' intentions to use the Internet to search for home furnishings, as the authors illustrated that attitudes, subjective norms and past behavior were significant indicators of the intention to use the Internet to search for information. However, the model suggests that the intention to search in turn significantly influences online purchase intention, which contradicts the findings of this dissertation. Moreover, the authors noted that predicting online purchases is largely dependent on the type of product (Shim, Eastlick, Lotz & Warrington, 2001). Similar studies have explored this idea by delineating between high and low involvement goods, or search versus experiential products (Goldsmith & Flynn, 2004; Lastovicka, 1979; Zaichkowsky, 1985). The experiences of the women in this study reinforce some of the existing findings by revealing home furnishings to be a high-involvement, experiential product that requires a detailed and sometimes lengthy information search. The women asserted that home furnishings also require specific information (e.g., tactile-based) before they could commit to a purchase, and all six said they needed to view the product in person in order

to evaluate characteristics such as quality, comfort, color, fabric, dimensions, and durability before making a buying decision. Furthermore, as home furnishings are often used to represent the self (Belk, 1988), the participants expressed how shopping for such objects requires more careful attention during the search and evaluation phases of the decision-making process in order to choose the objects that best represent who they are as individuals. Overall, their experiences suggest that shopping for home furnishings is a complex task that does not easily fit into existing theoretical models because of the multifaceted nature of the product category.

### **Buying Decisions**

Purchases are driven in part by how confident consumers feel about their decisions, and the information search phase of the decision-making process is a significant factor in developing this confidence (Loibl, Cho, Diekmann, & Batte, 2009). Although the Internet is a valuable tool in the information search step of the decision-making process, the participants did not feel it was sufficient for being able to evaluate the product, which is the next step in the process. The literature states that in evaluating alternatives, consumers' decisions often hinge on perceptions of quality (Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1995), and if product quality is difficult to determine, consumers perceive a higher risk in purchasing that particular item (Chen-Yu & Kincaid, 2001). The experiences of the women in this study strongly support this idea, insofar as even if they conducted extensive online research regarding home furnishings purchases, the risk of purchasing those products online was often too great because they could not fully assess product quality. Consequently, the women chose to get ideas, information, and to narrow

their options online, and then proceeded to a nearby brick and mortar store to continue the decision-making process. Indeed, as in Tara's case, one of the options she had selected online turned out to be unsatisfactory when she saw it in the store, and an item that she had dismissed online became the one she ultimately purchased. Even for Tara, who asserted that she preferred to shop online for the majority of purchases she makes, home furnishings purchases were the exception to this rule. Apparel purchases, which also require sensory evaluations, do not involve the amount of risk that is associated with home furnishings, primarily because of the ease of returns (Browne et al., 2004).

Whereas apparel products purchased online are fairly easy to return or exchange, home furnishings can be difficult and costly to transport. Although Paige, Maggie, Mariea and Caitlin said they would be willing to purchase smaller furnishings such as end tables or shelving online, all six participants talked about how any home furnishings that involve an evaluation of comfort (such as sofas and chairs) had to be evaluated in person prior to purchase.

Trust versus risk has been researched often in the context of online purchasing. The literature reveals that consumers who shop online, and especially women, negotiate issues of trust versus risk more carefully than for offline purchases because of the inability to interface with products prior to purchase, questions as to the security of the transaction, and the aforementioned level of difficulty involved in returning the product (Browne et al., 2004; Molesworth & Suortti, 2001; Smith & Rupp, 2003; Zeng & Reinartz, 2003). Although the six women in this study were clearly concerned with the inability to touch the actual products and the level of difficulty or cost in returning items,

online security did not surface as an issue. This suggests that as buying online has become more mainstream, the perceived financial risk found to be important in many of the previous studies may have diminished over time. In fact, Caitlin mentioned specifically that price was not a deterrent in making online purchases, as she recently purchased a camera online that cost approximately \$1,200. In Caitlin's opinion, information provided about the camera and her knowledge of the retailer were sufficient in making that purchase, while home furnishings purchases are different because of the additional steps necessary for evaluation.

Findings of this study suggest that while the Theory of Planned Behavior may be helpful in predicting online search behavior, it may not be very useful for predicting online home furnishings purchases. Although participants' attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control may suggest a tendency toward online purchasing, for each the nature of home furnishings products and the needs they fulfill shifted the decision-making process offline after the search phase was complete. Participants did not feel the Internet was sufficient for evaluating home furnishings items because quality is too difficult to determine online. Consequently, the participants mitigated the risk involved by switching channels to a brick and mortar store to make a purchase. This finding points to the idea that product involvement is important to consider when looking to predict consumers' home furnishings buying behavior. However, other findings from this dissertation suggest that past experience and brand awareness may potentially mediate the need for in-store product evaluation. Caitlin mentioned that if she had positive prior experience with a company or brand, she would consider skipping the in-

store evaluation for a future purchase and order an item online. Similarly, Mariea stated that if she discovered a home furnishings item she liked in a brick and mortar store, she would not have a problem with ordering the item online, particularly since her past experience has proven that she can sometimes find a better deal online.

As mentioned in the previous section, the Internet has increased consumer power during the search process, but this consumer power extends to the buying phase as well (Chang, Cheung, & Lai, 2005; Hennig-Thurau & Walsh, 2004; Horrihan, 2008; Kohli, Davaraj, & Mahmood, 2004; Soopramanien, Fildes, & Robertson, 2007). Findings from this dissertation suggest that the same is true for home furnishings buying decisions. Because the Internet arms consumers with a wealth of information regarding available styles, price points, and even others consumers' opinions, they are able to enter home furnishings stores with much greater confidence in their buying decisions. By lowering search costs, the Internet can increase the quality of consumers' purchase decisions (Burke, 2002; Zeng & Reinartz, 2003). Mariea's experiences confirm this concept relative to home furnishings, in that she used the Internet first to search for and narrow down the products she liked. She later went to a store, but it did not have the item she wanted in stock and so it would have to be special ordered. Mariea went back online and found the item she wanted and purchased it for half the price of what the store was going to charge. Without the Internet, Mariea would have either had to settle for what was available in the store or pay a much higher price (and wait several weeks) to own the product she wanted.

Regardless of the convenience offered by an online search, time has shown us that brick and mortar stores are still required by consumers. As the findings of this study illustrate, this is particularly true for high involvement, experiential goods such as home furnishings. Moreover, extant research suggests that the higher the price of an item, the greater the importance of an actual salesperson (Browne et al., 2004; Rajamma, Paswan, & Ganesh, 2007; Smith & Rupp, 2003). A similar result emerged in the present study, in that though the participants talked about being annoyed by salespeople who hover or try to pressure them into a sale, they still recognized the benefits of dealing with a person face-to-face in making expensive or significant home furnishings purchases. Caitlin talked about how scheduling delivery can be less of a hassle when dealing with a salesperson, and Renee explained how salespeople can provide details about the history of a particular item. Paige further stressed the value of good customer service and relationships with trusted retailers, because if there is a problem with the product, it is much easier and more effective to resolve in person. Going to the store to make a purchase also gave the participants the opportunity to negotiate price. Price negotiation is common in home furnishings buying, but not so with most other products or in the online channel. Mariea, Renee, Maggie, and Caitlin all mentioned occasions where they were able to negotiate the price of an item in a home furnishings store, which is not always an option when purchasing home furnishings online.

The variety of responsibilities and pressures that each participant feels as a woman – including, in most cases, her family role as wife and/or mother – has affected the ways in which she searches for and buys home furnishings in her attempt to create

“home.” For most of the women, the Internet provides a convenient and effective means of searching for home furnishings items, as shopping online allows the participants to browse a multitude of options, compare prices, and obtain other consumers’ opinions on home furnishings items. However, the participants did not feel that the information obtained online was sufficient to make buying decisions. The participants’ experiences illustrate that high-involvement, experiential goods such as home furnishings require a more tactile, in-store evaluation in order to judge characteristics such as quality, comfort, and durability. Once these evaluations are satisfied, the participants feel comfortable in making final purchase decisions.

Although the experiences of the women in this study reveal the home and its objects to be a reflection of their personal identities, inasmuch as the creation of “home” and the home furnishings shopping process is largely their responsibility, significant others were also found to play a role in the creation of the home and how the women navigate the shopping process. The next section examines how these significant others contribute to the participants’ experiences with shopping for home furnishings.

### **Home, the Self, and Others**

If we conceive of the home as a reflection of participants’ individual identities, then the idea of home can also be framed as a social construction, and particularly as identities are socially constructed (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992). Moynagh and Worsley (2002) describe how consumers are driven to create an identity for themselves in relation to others, in order to give themselves “a sense of belonging” with others. The process of shopping and buying products is thus an important part of constructing that

identity. Moreover, Douglas (1997) posited that social relationships are a determining factor in consumption preferences and behaviors.

Women's roles within the home are also socially constructed. A woman often shoulders the responsibility of not only meeting her own needs, but the needs of her family as well (Eisenberg, 2009; Herrmann, 1995). It is the female head of household that is typically responsible for choosing items for the home that best reflect the "family self" (Belk, 1988). Therefore, the act of shopping for the home is reflective of not just the self, but the self in relation to others. Indeed, as revealed in Chapters IV and V, the process of furnishing the home reflects the participants' relationships with others as much as it does their individual selves.

The interpretation of participants' experiences supports the central role that home plays in their family's daily lives. Participants' spouses, children, parents, and friends were found to contribute to the creation of the home and the process of furnishing it. To better understand the meaning behind the participants' experiences while shopping for home furnishings, this section examines how such relationships are revealed through the meanings given to objects and emerged as important to home furnishings decision-making.

### **Objects, the Self, and Others**

The sociological perspective suggests that the meanings of objects, including those in the home, are constructed through interaction with others (Damhorst, 2005; Johnson, Yoo, Kim & Lennon, 2008; Kaiser, 1997; Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992). Wooten (2006) states that things convey symbolic messages, particularly in regard to the

nature and status (real or desired) of relationships between people. Furthermore, several researchers have suggested that a person's dress is influenced by the culture or society in which he or she lives (Campbell, 1996; Damhorst, 2005; Roach-Higgins, Eichen, & Johnson, 1995), and that a person's home can be said to be influenced in the same way (Belk, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981).

The influence of culture on home furnishings is perhaps most obviously revealed through Maggie's experience, as her time living in Switzerland greatly changed how she conceived of her home, her furnishings, and even her lifestyle. Prior to living in Switzerland, Maggie said that her style was very conservative, and she was afraid to incorporate strong colors into her home. While living in Switzerland, she identified so strongly with the culture and its use of color that she began incorporating more and more color and contemporary furnishings into her home, taking cues from her Swiss friends and Swiss culture.

Other social identity factors, such as age, income and marital status, were also relevant in the meanings participants assigned to their home furnishings. Each participant's age revealed the factors that are important during this particular time in her life and which furnishings are currently important to her. For example, Caitlin (25 years old) stressed the importance of furnishings for showing her transition from student to career woman, as well as the use of furnishings for enjoying time with friends. Conversely, Paige (61 years old) discussed how her furnishings primarily need to be comfortable to support the physical issues she and her husband Johnny have due to a lifetime of horseback riding and farm work. Moreover, the meanings that Paige places on

her equine-themed accessories reflect her life-long passion for and experience with horses. Maggie's experience also demonstrates the relevance of age in home furnishings choices. Her experiences while traveling around the world, especially her time living in Switzerland, have impacted the importance she places on objects and the style choices she makes. It should also be noted that the greater the participant's age, the more meaningful some objects seemed to be. Whereas Caitlin did not mention any home furnishings that she was particularly sentimental about, Paige expressed a great deal of emotion regarding furnishings that were passed down to her by her mother and grandmother. As discussed in Chapter II, such experiences suggest that, like other kinds of objects (Belk, 1988), the meanings of home furnishings can change as an individual ages, experiences new things, develops new perspectives, and creates new memories.

Income level also influenced the objects that participants chose for their homes, in that the higher the income level, the more the participant was able to focus on those product considerations that were most important to her. Caitlin's single-income household demanded that price be one of the most important considerations during her home furnishings shopping experience, but Paige and Maggie, who both had high income levels, focused more on the properties of the furnishings (style and comfort), rather than price, when making their decisions. The exception to this is Renee, whose income level is high enough to afford expensive furnishings, yet her need for unique items and to "get a good deal" on these items take precedence. Thus, even though Renee is able to purchase new, high-quality items, she prefers to find inexpensive solutions to her home furnishings needs.

Marital status seemed to change the meanings of furnishings and home among the six women. Caitlin, who is single, described how she enjoyed being able to shop for furnishings she liked without having to consider anyone else's needs or preferences. Tara expressed the difficulty of merging her and her husband Gabe's styles once they married and bought a home together. Thus, Tara uses home furnishings as a way to strengthen the bond with her husband. Similarly, both Mariea and Maggie described how their furnishings reflect not just their own preferences but those of their husbands. As discussed in Chapter II, Belk (1988) posits that consumers use objects as a reflection of personal identity, but that objects can also be used within a family dynamic to represent a "family self," a notion clearly revealed by the experiences of participants in the present study. Similarly, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) illustrate how home furnishings objects in particular often take on special meaning within families. The participants in this study expressed how their home furnishings serve a purpose far beyond meeting just functional needs by helping them to create a space that not only reflects their tastes and personalities, but allows them to enjoy their lives with others.

Perhaps the most noteworthy examples of how objects are reflective of home, the self, and others are the items that are not purchased at all. Items that were handed down from one generation to the next, or that were specially made by other members of the women's families, held some of the most powerful meanings and sentimental attachments. Examples include Tara's mother's deacon bench, Maggie's grandmother's traditional furniture, the entertainment center made by Renee's step-father, and the table Paige got from her mother and the headboard from her grandmother. The women valued

these items for more than monetary or functional reasons. Such objects are clearly symbols of the women's relationships with family members in that they embody the emotional connections that reflect family ties.

As discussed in Chapter II, important aspects of the home include its meanings, history, the emotional responses it evokes, and the symbolism of its structure (Lawton, 1990). Accordingly, home furnishings serve as physical representations of such meanings, history, emotional responses and symbolism relative to life lived within the home. The six participants' experiences demonstrated that the value placed on home furnishings is linked to the memories those furnishings evoke of other people, occasions and relationships (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981). Consequently, as each participant pursues the goal of making her house a "home," the meanings of the objects she chooses evolve as she (and her family) evolve.

### **The Search Process and Others**

The literature suggests that women enjoy shopping for the social benefits it affords them, such as quality time with friends or family (Arnold & Reynolds, 2003; Babin, Darden, & Griffin, 1994; Jansen-Verbeke, 1987; Tauber, 1972). It is not surprising, then, that shopping for home furnishings would be similar for the women in this study. For example, Caitlin said that she and her mom often shop together, and that she typically relies on her mother's advice when considering various options in home furnishings. Similarly, Maggie said that even though she and her mother have vastly different style preferences, they typically shop for home furnishings together in order to spend time with one another and get each other's input about products. Consequently,

shopping for home furnishings is a social experience and a way to deepen relationships with others.

Although participants' significant others may not be involved in much of the search process, they admitted that friends and family do influence the direction that a search will take. Whether it is consulting others regarding the specifics of individual items or simply taking others' needs into consideration while shopping, the participants all incorporated others' ideas and opinions into the search process. For example, Caitlin stated that when she is shopping by herself, she still calls her mother to check whether the prices on items she likes are reasonable, the extent to which a certain brand is credible, or if she can get a better deal elsewhere. Even though she lives alone, Caitlin considers how her furnishings will not only be perceived by others, but whether they will be enjoyed by others who visit her home. For example, the sofa she currently has in her living room is more of a loveseat, but plenty of room for one person. However, Caitlin wants to buy an additional, bigger sofa to pair with the loveseat, for the primary purpose of sharing the space with others. This example reveals that though the women may purchase home furnishings that reflect their own personalities, they are at the same time considering how the use of these furnishings will foster their relationships with others.

Although the types of relationships differ among the women, all demonstrate their consideration of others during the search phase. Tara said that though she does the majority of the shopping for the home by herself, she always considers how the style will complement both her taste as well as that of her husband Gabe. Mariea seeks input from her husband Steve before she even begins the search process. Interestingly, though Paige

changes her furnishings frequently, she often includes her husband Johnny and considers his needs during the search process, particularly for furnishings in which comfort is a substantial factor. These experiences further indicate that though the women feel responsible for furnishing their homes, they do not do so without consulting or considering others (including pets) during the process. Perhaps because women's responsibilities, especially within a family dynamic, often include both the home and nurturing others (Herrmann, 1995), the six women in this study feel that their homes are a way to create a sense of family within the home. Thus, the women search for furnishings that will best serve the needs of the family as a whole.

Related to the concept of including others within the search process is that of the greater degree of consumer power afforded by the online search. Although the increase in consumer power is beneficial to the individual's own unique search process, the phenomenon largely stems from the consumers' ability to share information with others. In the "traditional," pre-Internet economy, it was a challenge to affect change in the marketplace without forming large consumer groups (Rezabakhsh et al., 2006). However, with the Internet has come the ability for one consumer to reach other consumers, and not just locally, but globally. Consumer-opinion platforms support the sharing of unfiltered information about products and the participation of electronic word-of-mouth communication with friends, family, as well as complete strangers (Denegri-Knott, Zwick, & Schroeder, 2006; Pitt et al., 2002; Rezabakhsh et al., 2006). Thus, though consumers may be shopping as individuals, the online search for products can often become a social process.

## **Buying Decisions and Others**

Beyond the search process, the decision to buy home furnishings can also be framed by relationships with others. As discussed earlier, consumer confidence is a significant factor regarding the decision to purchase a product (Loibl, Cho, Diekmann, & Batte, 2009), and satisfaction with a purchase can depend on who the consumer is shopping for, the type of product involved, price points, and level of concern about making a mistake (Thompson, Pollio, & Locander, 1994). Similarly, the six participants revealed that rationalizing the purchase of home furnishings often necessitated the help of others before making a final decision. That is, most of the women stated that they needed their significant other or mother to see (whether in person or by photograph) the item and/or endorse the purchase of the item before they would finalize the decision.

Renee stated that her husband Ben will sometimes search online for products they are looking for, and that he is also very helpful during the decision-making process. Because Renee is highly price-conscious, Ben often encourages her to spend money on home furnishings that he knows she really likes, particularly if it costs more than she wants to spend. His support helps Renee to justify the purchase, and she is subsequently more satisfied and confident that she has made a good decision.

Similarly, Tara brings Gabe to stores with her to see the items she likes best from her online searches and to get his support prior to purchase. Maggie stated that her husband Tony prefers to lie down on the sofa rather than sit, so comfort is a very important consideration when buying home furnishings. Maggie said that Tony fully trusts her to make the decisions on her own regarding style, comfort, and price, but at the

very least, she likes to take a picture with her camera phone and send it to him to get his opinion prior to buying. Although Paige declared that Johnny has no effect on how much she spends or the styles she selects, she still makes sure that an item will meet his needs for space and comfort before buying it.

Some participants cited their children as important influences during the home furnishings shopping experience. Renee admitted that one of the benefits of buying inexpensive, second-hand home furnishings is that she is not overly concerned about her children damaging them. Renee recalled an instance when her daughter Lindsey broke a lamp, but she was not very upset about it because it had only cost \$3 at a Goodwill store. Renee stated that she wants her children to be able to climb on and use the furnishings in her home, and that she does not want her family to feel that any furnishings in the home are off-limits. Consequently, one of the ways Renee makes buying decisions is by rationalizing that she is not wasting money on expensive objects that could be broken by her young children. Mariea, on the other hand, stated that spending money on home furnishings purchases was not a top priority, as she would rather use the family's disposable income on vacations or other activities in which her children are involved. Consequently, buying a new sofa was a high priority for Mariea because of the time she spends there with her family, but buying new bedroom furnishings, even though some pieces are falling apart, is not because "we don't spend time there."

The six women in this study clearly place a great deal of significance on certain home furnishings objects in the home. It is interesting to note the myriad of needs addressed by creating and furnishing the home, and how the participants decide which

items will not only meet their functional needs, but their personal and emotional needs as well. A sofa may be considered only for its functional purpose, but for each participant in this study, a sofa can satisfy the aesthetic needs she has for the home, the social needs she has in sharing time with others, or the psychosocial needs she has to enact her culturally prescribed role as a young professional, wife and/or mother.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I developed the third level of interpretation of the data by theorizing about the experiences of shopping for home furnishings shared by the six participants. I began with a discussion of how home furnishings objects serve to reflect the participants' unique concept of self, as well as the search process and buying decisions relative to the concept of home and the self. The second part of the chapter revealed how significant others play a role in the creation of the home and how the women navigate the shopping process in relation to others. I also explored how objects in the home are often reflective of relationships with others, as well as how others contribute to the search and buying process of shopping for home furnishings. In the next chapter, I will reflect on the research process, discuss the contributions of this study, and suggest avenues for future research.

## CHAPTER VII

### IMPLICATIONS AND REFLECTION

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the experiences of six women as home furnishings consumers, including the role of the Internet in the consumption process, by addressing the question: *What is it like to shop for home furnishings?* Women have had responsibility for creating and maintaining “home” for centuries, and as the women in this study demonstrate, this responsibility includes furnishing and decorating it in a manner that will serve the needs of those who dwell there. This study focused on women of various lifestyles and life stages, from a young single woman living alone to a grandmother living out her retirement with her husband. More specifically, the research focused on their experiences while shopping for home furnishings, and, in turn, how concepts of the self and the creation of “home” are articulated through their home furnishings purchases.

Yet the concept of home and what it means to each participant is not just a reflection of her life stage. “Home” reflects her personality, personal values, and what is important about time spent at home, whether alone or with family and friends. Consequently, this study considered how shopping, purchasing, and ultimately living with home furnishings can be seen as a way to express the self while at the same time build social relationships. Home furnishings are products that can tell us much about ourselves as human beings, as it represents who we think we are as individuals and as

family units. Similar concepts of dress and identity have been studied considerably in existing literature, but these studies often focus on how an individual creates an identity for himself or herself using dress. Moreover, home furnishings consumption is worthy of in-depth study because these products are often not only a reflection of one, but of others, of relationships between people caring for one another. Home furnishings are a daily reinforcement of who we are to ourselves, what we love, and what is important to us and to others. Such concepts have, for the most part, been overlooked within the existing literature on home furnishings consumption.

As this study has shown, shopping for home furnishings is a complex experience, and understanding the nature of the experience requires an understanding of experiences of the women involved. In this concluding chapter, I reflect on the process used to achieve this understanding. This chapter is comprised of three sections: *negotiating voice*, *articulating experience*, and *reflecting on the process and outcomes*. Negotiating voice addresses my goals for the research and how the methods I used to collect data helped me to achieve these goals. Articulating experience considers how data analysis and interpretation, specifically the development of the three levels of interpretation, helped me to relate the parts to the whole of the home furnishings shopping experience. In the third part of this chapter, reflecting on the process and outcomes, I address the overall findings and implications of this dissertation for the continued study of the home, home furnishings, and lived experience.

## **Negotiating Voice**

In this study, I used an interpretive methodology to develop a framework to explore the experiences of women as they shop for home furnishings. The usefulness of employing an interpretive methodology lies not in attempt to explain or control the phenomenon being studied, but rather in an attempt to develop a holistic understanding of human beings. As Gadamer (1975) explained, the only way we can understand human behavior is to look beyond what we do to the reasons behind those actions, and that interpretation is the explicit form of understanding. Consequently, the interpretive methodology used in this study is helpful in gaining “insightful descriptions of the way we experience the world ... which brings us in more direct contact with the world” (van Manen, 1984, p. 1).

The purpose of this study was not to generalize its findings to a broader population but to develop a deeper understanding of human existence as we experience it in everyday life. Thus, the phenomenological approach offered an opportunity to better understand the meaning of the home furnishings shopping experience for female consumers. Many researchers fail to understand the usefulness of studying small samples, such as the one for this study, because it is assumed that generalizability is the ultimate goal of all good research. However, an appropriate sample size for a qualitative study is one that adequately answers the research question, and in this case, the number of required subjects was based upon the data saturation point achieved in the preliminary study and the various life stages and perspectives required to address the research question. This limited sample size allowed for greater understanding of complex human

issues, which was the goal of this dissertation, rather than generalizability of results. The experiences of the six participants provides a rich understanding of the home furnishings shopping experience, which can inform many future research questions for qualitative and quantitative researchers alike.

The six participants' perspectives and experiences emerged through the telling of their individual stories, which is where I began the interpretation process. Personal narratives of the participants were created based on the interview data. These narratives served as a starting point for understanding the participants' experiences, as well as a basis for the second and third levels of interpretation. Participants' voices were thus central to the entire interpretation process.

At the same time, however, I sought to remain cognizant of my own role in shaping the ways their voices were heard. Because this study was designed with specific goals and objectives in mind, it must be acknowledged that my expectations as a researcher had an impact on the outcome. Specifically, the topics that I intended to cover and the interview questions that I prepared in advance influenced the nature of the data collected. However, an interpretive methodology was deliberately used in order to explore each participant's unique experiences, and to do so through her own words as much as possible.

Throughout the data collection and interpretation stages of this study, each participant's perspective presented unique challenges, necessitating a level of flexibility on my part. Moreover, because I had not established a relationship with several of the women prior to doing the research, they had to develop a degree of trust in me before

they felt comfortable enough to open up. This was easier to achieve in some cases than others. For example, Caitlin was quite enthusiastic about sharing her opinions and details about her personal life, even though we did not know each other prior to the study. However, Paige was rather guarded about sharing her experiences, so I shared some of my own personal stories to help her relate to me and to the process. In particular, I could tell that she was nervous about how she would be perceived by me as the researcher, and I needed to let her know that there were no right or wrong answers. I used some of my own experiences with home furnishings shopping as well as examples of other participants' experiences to prompt comparison with her own. Such an approach proved successful, as it seemed to help Paige feel that her perceptions and experiences were valid and important.

Because some participants were inclined to provide more detail than others, I rearranged and rephrased some of the interview questions to facilitate maximum interaction with each participant. I also asked different types of follow-up questions to get clarification on some of their responses. As a result, the interviews often followed different paths, sometimes jumping from one topic to the next, then circling back to a topic we had discussed previously. Again, this required that I be flexible in the interviews and allow the participants to tell their stories as the thoughts, emotions and memories surfaced. As I progressed deeper into the levels of interpretation, there were times when I had to email or call the participants for more details or clarification. This open relationship with the participants allowed me to fully develop and understand the interpretation as it unfolded.

Each participant contributed to an online journal specifically created for this study, and responded to pre-determined prompts that touched on some of the major themes that emerged from my preliminary research on the topic. The participants were given a month to address the prompts, with no space limit within the response field. None of the participants had issues accessing or writing in the blog, although Paige chose to email her responses to me directly rather than posting them on the blog. The blog responses provided a wealth of detail and insight that enriched the interview data, while confirming information already gathered from the interviews.

I kept in contact with each of the participants throughout the data collection process, and did so primarily through email, Facebook (a social networking website), and mobile phone. Because of the level of openness and regular contact I maintained, the participants were diligent about writing and responding to the prompts I provided. The blog was beneficial for me and for the participants, as it allowed each to write at her own pace, while it allowed me a way to check on the progress of data collection over the four-week period. As a result, I was able to prompt participants to complete the task, and clarification about responses could be sought by myself or the participants if needed. Participants told me that writing in the blog helped them to think more carefully about their responses, and that it allowed them to put their thoughts into the “right” words. Several participants mentioned that being able to read the other participants’ responses inspired them to share more of their experiences, as well as to agree with others’ assessments, or offer experiences that illustrated differences. For example, when Tara wrote in the blog about dealing with pushy salespeople, Mariea began her response by

agreeing with Tara's comments, then explained how her own experiences have provided similar reflections.

I found that observing the participants as they shopped online was the most challenging part of data collection as it seemed that participants were more self-conscious than during the rest of the interview. I wanted to see how they typically shop for home furnishings, and how they responded to some of the differences in retailers' websites. I began by asking the participant to show me how she goes about shopping for a new home furnishings item, and specifically one that she was currently looking to buy. As discussed in Chapters IV and V, for most participants, the search did not start at a specific retailer's website. Instead, it began with Google.com. From there, the participants talked aloud about what they were thinking as they navigated through the search results, while I asked them questions. In some cases, the process did not go much further than looking at pictures and making comments about whether she liked a product or not, or what qualities she looked for in a product. Once this reached a saturation point, I would then direct each participant to a specific site, depending on where she usually shops, such as Ikea.com, FurnitureLandSouth.com, or PotteryBarn.com. Observing how the participant navigated these sites allowed me to better understand how she actually uses a home furnishings website and the challenges of making a decision about a product, such as choosing fabric options, researching product details, exploring customization options, considering shipping/delivery issues, and so on.

Having completed the data collection, I can say with relative certainty that combining the methods of interviews with online journaling enhanced the overall quality

of the interpretation. Moreover, while the journal and the interview data both provided insights and details as to each participant's personal experiences, observing her search process online provided a demonstration of how her personal goals and preferences played out during the actual shopping process.

To arrive at an interpretation that best reflected the nature of participants' experiences, I relied on the process of participant confirmation. As mentioned previously, I kept in contact with the participants throughout the data collection and interpretation process, confirming the accuracy of the data in several different ways. First, I communicated with them often, usually through email or text messages. Once the personal narratives were written, I emailed each participant a copy of her narrative and asked her to provide feedback. None of the participants had any problems or disagreements with the narratives, but two of the participants did clarify some points that they felt needed further explanation. Once I developed a list of the themes that formed the second level of interpretation (Chapter V), I asked the participants to review the list and the quotes that I had grouped underneath each theme and subheading. The overall response was positive, in that none of the participants took issue with the themes as outlined.

As the researcher, my relationship with the participants bears mentioning, as it is possible that it played a role in their involvement with the interpretation process. I had no previous relationship with four of the participants, Paige, Maggie, Caitlin, and Tara, but I had known Renee and Mariea for quite some time. However, it was not obvious to me that my prior relationship with them influenced their level of involvement more than the

other participants. In fact, perhaps because of my relationship with Renee, she often felt it was unnecessary to explain her experiences in detail, so I had to follow up with her more often to clarify and draw out more information. For the most part, all of the participants were committed to providing quality, in-depth information throughout the data collection and interpretation process.

Most of the participants had no concerns about confidentiality regarding the topics discussed during the interviews, but Paige did feel uncomfortable sharing her annual income. Thus, to maintain her confidentiality and trust, I omitted discussion of income level from her personal narrative.

Paige and Tara were hesitant about being interviewed in their homes, particularly because they felt that they “were not good at decorating,” and thought I would be judging their home furnishings style and choices, rather than simply observing and asking questions. Similarly, several participants felt the need to apologize that their homes were not yet “finished” or decorated exactly how they wanted. These issues were usually resolved quickly once I explained the purpose of the research and that my role was to tell their stories, not to offer my opinions about their taste. Such interaction helped build trust between us. Indeed, being allowed into the participants’ homes provided a level of comfort and security for them while giving me a wealth of visual information to use to stimulate the interviews, thereby providing a richer representation of each participant’s life style, life stage, and meanings of home.

## Articulating Experience

In this dissertation, a phenomenological mode of inquiry places the experiences of the six women at the heart of the research process. I have demonstrated how this approach is useful in illustrating the connections between human experience and the social life of objects, and how the experiences of consumers must be central to our investigation into the meanings of objects within the home. Through the thematic interpretation of the narratives, I discussed the ways that the participants' process of home furnishings shopping reflected their lifestyles and life stages, the similarities and differences in their decision-making considerations, and the role that the retailer plays in taking the final step of the decision-making process and purchasing furnishings for the home. Although my primary research objective was to explore the home furnishings shopping experience for women and to understand the role that the Internet plays within the process, I was ultimately able to show how this experience is steeped in meaning that goes well beyond the decision-making process.

Through the personal narratives, I sought to illustrate the uniqueness of each participant's experience with shopping for home furnishings, yet I recognize that their experiences are also meaningful when considered as parts of a larger whole. Therefore, I considered the experiences across the six narratives in relation to the question: *In what ways do the participants share experiences with shopping for home furnishings?* As discussed in Chapter V, each woman felt responsible for creating and maintaining her home, but her life stage and lifestyle played a significant role in how she approached the shopping experience. Perhaps the most compelling similarities between the women had to

do with the concept of “home,” in particular, the importance of making it a reflection of her individual personality, preferences and priorities. Each believes that the home represents the self in some way, and the search for furnishings is highly dependent on the self relative to the needs of others. The process of shopping for home furnishings, as well as the role of the Internet and retailer within this process, subsequently revolve around the meaning that the home has within each woman’s life. Yet because the expression of identity through objects in the home is an ever-evolving process, the complexities involved in the home furnishings shopping process and in making decisions about home furnishings purchases make understanding these meanings even more important.

Building on the personal narratives as well as the thematic interpretation, I was able to further interpret the data for its theoretical relevance in Chapter VI. This level of interpretation allowed me to explore how the themes reflect the overall importance of the home and its furnishings in developing a sense of self, and as reflections of one’s relationship with others. The significance of the findings of this study for established theoretical frameworks, such as the Theory of Planned Behavior and online search and purchase intention, was examined and provides a foundation for further study. Considering the lack of academic research regarding the home and home furnishings consumption, this foundation helped to address a major gap in the existing literature.

### **Reflecting on the Process and Outcomes**

In this dissertation, I sought to understand the complex nature of shopping for home furnishings and how the participants experience the home furnishings decision-making process. While the six women have unique experiences and perspectives

regarding home furnishings shopping, all shared similar sentiments about how their homes are a reflection of their personalities and families. The idea of home as a sacred place was shared by all of the participants, even though all of the women did not necessarily equate “home” with “home furnishings.” As Mariea stated, she prefers to spend money on shared experiences with her family rather than furniture, but she acknowledges that she does place a higher value on those furnishings that facilitate such experiences, such as the family sofa.

The extent to which this idea of “home as a sacred place” is a culturally-specific phenomenon has yet to be fully explored in the literature. The participants in this study were all Caucasian, American women. Future research could address how ideas of home translate from one culture to another. Moreover, because American home furnishings retail stores offer a variety of styles, fabrics, colors, and a wealth of other options participants can “personalize” their furnishings to be a fairly accurate reflection of the self. If consumers in other cultures do not have access to a similar variety of styles, then how might they use home furnishings to express their personalities or unique self? Is the need to personalize one’s home a cultural value, reflecting the importance of individualism in the United States, or do collectivist cultures also view the home as a uniquely personal space?

Interestingly, none of the women suggested that home furnishings served to communicate status, which is a notion commonly associated with similarly big-ticket items such as cars or jewelry. Instead, the most important criteria for a home furnishings object was that it either (a) represented the participant’s identity, and/or (b) met her needs

and those of her family. Whether it was a quick and inexpensive solution or a high-quality, customized piece, furnishings were seen as important in the creation of a place where the participants could be their true selves, not the selves they have to be in the outside world. For this reason, the creation of “home” through the process of furnishing it is a topic that needs further attention.

It is interesting to note that the participants rarely mentioned brand names relative to home furnishings, and several indicated an overall lack of knowledge regarding home furnishings manufacturers or brands. Because consumers often use brands to negotiate issues of quality, and particularly with respect to apparel, automobiles, jewelry or other high price, high involvement items, the notion of how consumers judge quality in home furnishings is an area in need of further study. Moreover, what one consumer views as “good quality” in home furnishings (Tara’s view of Ikea products) is seen as poor quality by another (Caitlin). Thus, future research is needed on the role of brand – whether product, manufacturer, or store – as part of the home furnishings shopping experience.

As mentioned in Chapter VI, the Theory of Planned Behavior may not be helpful in predicting online home furnishings purchases, particularly because it does not necessarily account for differences in product category. Future research might modify TPB in regard to home furnishings consumers by adding a moderator of product involvement between the relationships of online search intention and online purchase intention. Moreover, if TPB constructs were modified, as in the Online Pre-purchase Intentions Model, to account for consumers’ past experiences, the model might become a stronger means of predicting online home furnishings purchases. The usefulness of such a

study lies in the fact that it would address how product involvement can greatly affect the decision-making process online, as demonstrated in the findings of this dissertation.

Whereas a consumer may thoroughly enjoy or even prefer online shopping, she may feel forced to leave this channel because of the level of involvement that a specific product — such as home furnishings — demands.

Home furnishings consumers' need for uniqueness is another area where further research would be beneficial. Several participants mentioned that one of the difficulties in shopping for home furnishings was finding individual pieces that accurately represented their own individual style and preferences, as opposed to purchasing pre-packaged room solutions or matching sets of furniture. The importance of home furnishings for expressing uniqueness was not shared to the same extent by all participants, but it surfaced enough and in different ways to suggest a need for further investigation. Renee in particular illustrated how the need for uniqueness influences (and slows down) her shopping process significantly. Similarly, Maggie's greatest frustration throughout the shopping experience is the inability to find a variety of options in the contemporary styles she likes. Not only does this issue slow down Maggie's shopping process, but at times it results in her having to "settle" for a home furnishings purchase, rather than being truly excited about it.

While this dissertation explored the individual experiences of the six women, it also revealed how women view their homes as a reflection of their relationships others. More research into the social forces that shape the home furnishings shopping process would be useful. For example, what is it that women connect with in individual home

furnishings items? What characteristics prompt them to view a home furnishings item as a representation of the self? Of relationships with others? That is, how do women translate style, color, fabric, and the other physical aspects of a home furnishings object into a social-psychological reflection of self and family? Moreover, additional research is needed to explore why women continue to willingly take on the role of “home”-maker, despite an increase in the number of other roles she has. Although the female head of household is typically responsible for the home, future research might also explore how single men or single fathers negotiate this role within their homes, and whether or not this role changes with the addition of a new female family member through marriage or re-marriage.

The participants in this study shared how home furnishings that held special meaning to them were often items that were handed down by mothers, grandmothers, or female kin. It is interesting to note the dominant role that females clearly play in creating “keepsakes” or attaching special meaning to these objects. This attachment often transcended monetary value or even the participant’s personal home furnishings “style.” Thus, future research might explore how and why women place meaning on home furnishings objects to reflect important relationships in their lives. Of the six participants, Paige was the only one who talked about giving furnishings to her children, whether they were casual items she no longer wanted or items from her mother and grandmother that she wanted to hand down to her daughter. For the most part, it seemed that the participants changed their home furnishings often, and therefore home furnishings were not viewed as items that needed to last more than a few years. Does this signal the end of

the cultural phenomenon of passing down valued, heirloom-quality furnishings to younger family members? Future research might explore whether or not we as a culture are transitioning out of this tradition of passing down well-made and well-loved home furnishings items that convey a sense of family history. Perhaps it is a tradition that is disappearing as consumers buy inexpensive and temporary home furnishings solutions to more easily update their homes to reflect their changing lifestyles and life stages. A useful research study might explore the specific items in the home to which consumers attach special meaning, and whether these items are viewed as “keepsakes” to be passed down to future generations. Furthermore, a study that examines how this phenomenon may be changing in the face of global consumer culture within different cultural contexts would be interesting.

Moreover, though this study reveals how lifestyle and life stage greatly influence the process of shopping for home furnishings, it is unclear how changes in lifestyle/life stage affect this process. Further research on this topic would shed light on how our homes change as we do.

Finally, this study offers several practical suggestions for home furnishings retailers seeking to better understand and meet the needs of their customers. The participants revealed a fairly constant underlying fear of making a mistake in their home furnishings purchase decisions. Whether it was a fear of paying too much, making a decorating faux pas, or not buying the “right” item, the participants all expressed a measure of anxiety about knowing where to go to buy home furnishings and what to buy once they get there. Retailers need to understand the anxiety involved in making this type

of purchase because, as this dissertation demonstrates, buying home furnishings is not simply a matter of knowing whether an item will fit in the space or if the color complements the existing décor. Retailers, particularly salespeople, need to recognize that the consumer's hesitancy in purchasing home furnishings has less to do with price and more to do with negotiating how those furnishings reflect her/her family's identity and the needs she is seeking to fulfill with that purchase. Perhaps retailers could develop specific training for salespeople designed to address the anxiety consumers experience about selecting the right item. Questions regarding how the furniture will be used, by whom, and considerations of children or pets would help the customer find more specific solutions to some of those needs.

In a similar vein, participants' experiences reveal the practical ways that retailers can bolster their websites to make it easier for consumers to shop for home furnishings online. Using specific key words and tags on images can help retailers' websites appear more prominently in Google search results, which in turn can drive more traffic to their websites. Images on websites should be good quality, ideally with the ability to zoom or make the photo larger so that the consumer can assess it more carefully. Retailers also should include prices of the items shown, as not doing so can sometimes keep consumers from shopping that retail operation altogether. Finally, websites that feature room design software have the added benefit of helping a consumer envision the item she is considering within her existing room's dimensions, colors and furnishings, helping her to visualize how the new furnishings will be used in her daily life.

Furthermore, the need for uniqueness expressed by the participants offers retailers insight into how to make home furnishings items more appealing to consumers. Having furniture collections that can be customized to the customer's preferences can be a useful and lucrative solution. For example, a retailer might have a standard sofa frame that is not only customizable by a large selection of fabrics or leathers, but also by arm, pillow, and leg design, wood stain, pillow stuffing material, and so on. Similarly, case goods – such as dressers, armoires, or bed frames – could be customized by wood stain, materials used, door style options, or various hardware choices.

In conclusion, the experience of shopping for home furnishings is not a simple one to understand. As illustrated by the interpretation of the six women's experiences presented here, home furnishings are more than just a reflection of the needs of the individuals who own them. The experience of shopping for home furnishings is linked to a woman's concept of home, her identity, and her relationships with significant others. The women of this study use home furnishings to express the self and to share this self with the ones they love through the creation of a home. By studying the home furnishings shopping experience, we have a better understanding of what home furnishings objects mean and how the process of acquiring them reveals common issues faced by consumers seeking to create their own concept of home. As a result of this dissertation, we have a better understanding of how shopping for home furnishings signifies more than just making a consumption decision. It provides insight into the human experience by telling the story of home.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

1. Describe your last home furnishings purchase. What did you buy? Where did you buy it?
2. What was the cost of your purchase?
3. Did you use Internet sources to shop for that purchase? Why or why not?
4. What do you currently like or dislike about the furnishings in your home?
5. What types of home furnishings are you currently shopping for (or have you recently shopped for)?
6. Do you think home furnishings should express your personal style or personality? Why or why not?
7. How do you get ideas for furnishing your home?
8. Is there a certain person's (or business) decorating style that you admire? Who? Why?
9. What are your main considerations in shopping for home furnishings? (Cost? Comfort? Style? Other?)
10. Describe how you define "home."
11. How important are furnishings in making a house a "home"?
12. Do you enjoy shopping in general? Is shopping for home furnishings enjoyable?
13. How do you prefer to shop (online, in person, a combination)? Why?
14. If you could shop anywhere for home furnishings, where would you go? Why?

15. Where do you typically buy your furniture? Why?
16. Have you shopped for and/or bought furniture online? If so, what do you like/dislike about shopping online for home furnishings?
17. Which websites would you or do you visit to get ideas or shop for furniture? What do you like or dislike about these sites?
18. What would the ideal home furnishings website look like?
19. Would you consider buying furniture online? Why or why not?
20. How important is the need to “touch and feel” different types of furniture before buying? Why?
21. How long do you usually spend shopping for home furnishings before making a purchase?
22. Why did you finally buy the last piece of furniture you bought? What factors led you to make that final decision?
23. Please describe for me the process of keeping the online journal. What did you like about it? What didn't you like?
24. Did keeping the journal change the way you feel about shopping for home furnishings? Please explain.
25. How satisfied are you with the purchasing process for furniture? How would you describe it?
26. Is there anything else that you would like to say about the process of buying home furnishings in that we did not talk about?

## APPENDIX B

### IRB CONSENT FORM



THE UNIVERSITY of NORTH CAROLINA  
**GREENSBORO**

**OFFICE OF RESEARCH COMPLIANCE**  
2718 Beverly Cooper Moore and Irene Mitchell Moore  
Humanities and Research Administration Bldg.  
PO Box 26170  
Greensboro, NC 27402-6170  
336.256.1482  
Web site: [www.uncg.edu/orc](http://www.uncg.edu/orc)  
Federalwide Assurance (FWA) #216

**To:** Nancy Hodges  
Consumer, Apparel, and Ret Stds  
213 Stone Building

**From:** UNCG IRB

**Date:** 9/29/2010

**RE:** Notice of IRB Exemption

**Exemption Category:** 2.Survey, interview, public observation

**Study #:** 10-0341

**Study Title:** Investigating the Role of the Internet in the Decision-Making Process of Female Home Furnishings Consumers

This submission has been reviewed by the above IRB and was determined to be exempt from further review according to the regulatory category cited above under 45 CFR 46.101(b).

#### **Study Description:**

The purpose of this study is to examine how the internet has influenced the decision-making process for buying home furnishings.

#### **Investigator's Responsibilities**

Please be aware that any changes to your protocol must be reviewed by the IRB prior to being implemented. The IRB will maintain records for this study for three years from the date of the original determination of exempt status.

CC:Trisha Kemerly, Chris Farris, (ORED), Non-IRB Review Contact, (ORC), Non-IRB Review Contact

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO

*CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT: LONG FORM*

Project Title: Investigating the Role of the Internet in the Decision-Making Process of Female Home Furnishings Consumers

Project Director: Dr. Nancy Hodges

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**What is the study about?**

This is a research project. The purpose of this study is to examine how the Internet has influenced the decision-making process for buying home furnishings.

**Why are you asking me?**

I am asking you to participate because as an adult female consumer, your perspectives on the decision-making process of buying home furnishings will provide unique insight into the topic.

**What will you ask me to do if I agree to be in the study?**

You will be asked to be interviewed regarding your perceptions of buying home furnishings and the role the Internet plays in that process. On agreement to be interviewed, the interview will last approximately 1-2 hours. I will also ask you to be available for a review of your interview transcript once complete. This review will take approximately 1 to 2 hours.

**Is there any audio/video recording?**

Digital audio recording will be used to ensure reliability of data collected and to capture your perspectives on the decision-making process of buying home furnishings. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the tape, confidentiality for things you say on the tape cannot be guaranteed, although the researcher will try to limit access to the tape as described below.

**What are the dangers to me?**

The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants. As stated above, there is a slight risk of a breach of confidentiality. Measures that will be implemented to minimize this risk are described in the confidentiality section below.

If you have any concerns about your rights or how you are being treated, please contact Eric Allen in the Office of Research and Compliance at UNCG at 336-256-1482. Questions, concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study can be answered by Dr. Nancy Hodges, who may be contacted at 336-256-0291 or njnelson@uncg.edu, or Trisha Kemerly at 336-869-8054 or twkemerl@uncg.edu.

**Are there any benefits to me for taking part in this research study?**

There are no direct benefits to participants of this study.

UNCG IRB  
Approved Consent Form

Valid 9/29/10 to 9/28/13

**Are there any benefits to society as a result of me taking part in this research?**

Your participation may help to shed light on what home furnishings consumers go through during the process of buying home furnishings and how the industry can adapt to better meet consumers' needs.

**Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?**

There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.

**How will you keep my information confidential?**

Consent forms will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the Principal Investigator's campus office, audio files will be password protected, and participants will not be identified by name when data are disseminated. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. Consent forms will be kept for three years after the close of the study and destroyed by shredding. Audio files will be kept password protected on the student researcher's home computer for a minimum of five to a maximum of seven years upon completion of the study, after which point the files will be erased. There will be a file linking participants' identities to pseudonyms that will be used in published materials. This file will be kept separate from the data and will be erased no more than seven years after the close of the study.

**What if I want to leave the study?**

You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state.

**What about new information/changes in the study?**

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

**Voluntary Consent by Participant:**

By signing this consent form you are agreeing that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly willing consent to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By signing this form, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate, or have the individual specified above as a participant participate, in this study described to you by Trisha Kemerly.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

UNCG IRB  
Approved Consent Form  
Valid 9/29/10 to 9/28/13

**Sample Email Recruitment Script (to be sent to potential participants by the student researcher):**

Subject Line: Volunteers needed for participation in home furnishings consumer study.

Hello my name is Trisha Kemerly, and I am a Ph.D student in the Department of Consumer, Apparel and Retail Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, USA. I am working on my dissertation, which is focused on understanding how the Internet has influenced the decision-making process for buying home furnishings. You are invited to participate in this research study because you are an adult female consumer (the primary buyers of furnishings for the home). If you are age 18 or older and agree to participate, you will be asked to take part in an interview that will last approximately 1-2 hours at a location that is convenient for you. There is no compensation for participation or penalty for refusing to participate. If you are interested in participating in the study, or have any questions about the study, please respond to this email, [twkemerl@uncg.edu](mailto:twkemerl@uncg.edu), or call me at 336-869-8054. If you know of anyone who may be interested in participating in the study, please forward this email to them. Thank you.

**APPROVED IRB**  
**SEP 29 2010**

**APPENDIX C**  
**DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Birth (Maiden) Name \_\_\_\_\_

Current Address \_\_\_\_\_

Phone/Email \_\_\_\_\_

Birth date \_\_\_\_\_

Birth place \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation \_\_\_\_\_

Education:

Highest Level \_\_\_\_\_

Institution Name \_\_\_\_\_

Emphasis/Specialty (if any) \_\_\_\_\_

Marital Status \_\_\_\_\_ Spouse's Occupation \_\_\_\_\_

Average Annual Household Income \_\_\_\_\_

Children:

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_ Gender \_\_\_\_\_ Now living in \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_ Gender \_\_\_\_\_ Now living in \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_ Gender \_\_\_\_\_ Now living in \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_ Gender \_\_\_\_\_ Now living in \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX D**  
**JOURNAL PROMPTS**

INSTRUCTIONS: During the next 30 days, visit [homefurnishingsstudy.wordpress.com](http://homefurnishingsstudy.wordpress.com) to record what you did as you shop for and/or buy home furnishings. Include in each entry your thoughts and feelings regarding the activity/experience.

PLEASE USE THE FOLLOWING PROMPTS TO GUIDE YOUR ENTRIES:

1. Describe what kind of furnishings you are currently shopping for. Where will you look for this item?
2. What do you like about shopping online? What don't you like? Please explain both in detail.
3. Describe your decision-making process for purchasing home furnishings and factors that influence your decision.
4. Explain the role of a budget as you shop. How do you set a budget for your purchase and do you usually stick to it?
5. Are you frustrated by the shopping process for home furnishings? Are you able to find what you want? What are some of the problems you encounter during the shopping process?
6. What circumstances make you feel comfortable enough to decide to purchase a new home furnishings item? Why?
7. Now that you've purchased a home furnishings item for your home, how do you feel? Are you satisfied with your purchase and the experience?