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Obsessions with Shopping in Chick Lit: A Study of Sophie Kinsella's Shopaholic Series

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Abstract: Shopping, which can be defined as an activity wherein a buyer browses the accessible products offered by a retailer, is a gratifying activity particularly for women. This concept of shopping along with the theme of fashion and consumerism has been celebrated as one of the prominent themes in Chick Lit, a contemporary genre of popular fiction. 'Chick' is an American slang for a young woman and 'Lit' is a shortened form of the word literature. It usually focuses on various concepts and issues in the lives of women such as love, marriage, fashion, beauty, relationship, friendship, roommates, weight control, consumerism and much more. It addresses such issues often humorously and lightheartedly. As a simple definition, it is literature by women, for women and about women. There is a huge list of writers who have penned their works in Chick Lit form. Sophie Kinsella is one of such writers along with Helen Fielding, Lauren Weisburger and many others. Her famous *The Shopaholic Series* which falls under the category of contemporary genre discusses the features of Chick Lit by laying stress on the theme of shopping in her novels. *The Shopaholic Series* focus on the misadventures of Becky Bloomwood, a fashionable woman in her 20s and financial journalist who is addicted to shopping and cannot manage her own finances. This research paper, however, attempts to discuss the concept of shopping in Sophie Kinsella's *Shopaholic Series* in the context of Chick Lit. Theories of Baudrillard and Freud will be taken into account in this paper.

Key words: Chick Lit, Shopping, Consumerism, Shopaholic Series, Sophie Kinsella.



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The word 'shopping' pertains to an activity in which a customer browses the available goods or services presented by one or more retailers determined to purchase a suitable selection of them. In some contexts it may be considered a leisure activity as well as an economic one. In ancient times, in Greece *the agora* served as a market place where the merchants used to keep stalls or shops to sell their goods. In ancient Rome, there was a market place known as the forum. Fairs and markets were established to facilitate the exchange of goods and services. People used to shop goods at a weekly market in nearby towns. With the passage of time, there was transition in shopping from 'single-function' shops selling one type of good, to the store where a large variety of goods were sold. Shopping hubs or shopping centers are collections of stores. Typical examples include shopping malls, markets, bazaars etc.

Shopping, consumption and consumerism are present in popular fiction just as they are in 'real life'. Within Chick Lit which is a genre of popular fiction, it is definitely a rejoicing theme. 'Chick' is an American slang for a young woman and 'Lit' is a shortened form of the word literature. As a simple definition, it is literature by women, for women and about women. The term 'Chick Lit' is often related to Chick Flick, a genre of film which appeals to young women. It was first used in English speaking circles by Princeton University students. Later the term was employed by American novelist and co-editor Cris Maza and Jeffery Deshell in their groundbreaking anthology *Chick Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* (1995). Chick Lit originated in mid-nineteenth century with its cornerstone novels Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) and Candance Bushnell's *Sex and the City* (1997). It typically portrays female protagonists in their late teens, their twenties and thirties who succeed in their lives and tackle the obstacles in their own way. It usually focuses on various concepts and issues in the lives of women such as love, marriage, fashion, beauty, relationship, friendship, roommates, weight control, consumerism and much more. It addresses such issues often humorously and lightheartedly. Moreover, recurring images such as a pair of heels, protagonists holding a shopping bag and women's red mouth with pearl necklace on its covers are the telling of Chick Lit genre. Throughout all Chick Lit novels a tremendous amount



of attention is paid to the labels of their clothing, whether it is a shopping bag or a grotesquely passé Laura Ashley dress. Chick Lit is a distinguishing genre from other literary genres because of its humorous effect. The personal and confiding tone which always contains humour differentiates it from regular women's fiction. It aims to entertain, thrill and comfort readers. Its deviation lies in its entertainment value. In such novels, women have to struggle but their struggle is for professional success in publishing advertising, fashion or in film industry. Chick Lit novels celebrate consumerism and protagonists preoccupation with shopping makes such novels different from other literary genres.

There is a huge list of writers who have taken Chick Lit themes and penned their own Chick Lit. Sophie Kinsella is one of such writers along with Helen Fielding, Candance Bushnell, Lauren Weisburger, Anuja Chauhan, Swati Kaushal, Rupa Gulab, Kavita Daswani, Advaita Kala, Terry McMillan, Gemma Burgess, Jennifer Weiner, Ally Carter, Meg Cabot and Melissa Bank. Sophie Kinsella is a British Chick Lit author who has written her standalone novels as Madeleine Sophie Wickham. Madeleine Sophie Wickham is best known for her works under her pen name Sophie Kinsella. She is famous for writing *The Shopaholic Series* which falls under the category of the genre of popular fiction most often referred to as Chick Lit and discusses the features of Chick Lit by emphasizing the theme of shopping in her novels. All her novels have been adapted in movies (the genre known as Chick Flick). Kinsella is the middle class woman who loves shopping. It can be shown from her videos (googlevideo.com), in which it is shown that Kinsella loves shopping and she possesses a few branded shoes that are saved in her shoeseum (the museum of shoes). Her novels significantly contribute to the socialization of women as shoppers and offer a positive representation not of regular, necessary spending but of compulsive, uncontrollable, pathologic extremes of said activity. Kinsella's novels put forth a positive image of women as addicted shoppers and over-spenders. In *Shopaholic*, over-spending is portrayed as something fun and enviable that does not have serious repercussions in life. *The Shopaholic Series* focuses on a heroine who never stops obsessing over shoes and starts attempting to change her world. She never leaves her job to do meaningful work or questions the nature of her relationships. The heroine



doesn't react to the problems in her world and neither does the book's reader; she never changes throughout her reading experience.

The Shopaholic Series focus on the misadventures of Becky Bloomwood, a fashionable woman in her 20s and financial journalist who is addicted to shopping and cannot manage her own finances. She is nearly always in debt because of her habit. The series focus on her obsession with shopping and its resulting complications for her life. Throughout the series, she makes a temporary move to New York City, marries her boyfriend Luke Brandon, finds out she has a sister, and even has a baby. However, her love for shopping never goes away, and continues to cause her problems. The first book in the series, *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (2000), has also been released under the title *The Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic*. The other books in the series include *Shopaholic Abroad* also published as *Shopaholic Takes Manhattan*, *Shopaholic Ties the Knot* (2002), *Shopaholic and Sister* (2004), *Shopaholic and Baby* (2007), *Mini Shopaholic* (2018), *Shopaholic to the Stars*(2015) an *shopaholic to the rescue* (2016). Her first two books *The Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic* and *Shopaholic Abroad* which in the United States were known as *Confessions of a Shopaholic* and *Shopaholic Takes Manhattan* respectively. All seven novels became bestsellers. The other novels by Sophie Kinsella include *The Domestic Goddess* (2005), *Can You Keep a Secret* (2003), *Remember Me?* (2008) and *Twenties Girl* (2009).

The first novel *Confessions of a Shopaholic* unravels the story of main character Rebecca Bloomwood, a financial journalist, who is in a serious amount of debt through her shopping addiction. The second novel *Shopaholic Abroad* (also Known as *Shopaholic Takes Manhattan* follows the story of Becky and her adventures when she's offered the chance to work in New York City. The third novel *Shopaholic Ties the Knot* focuses the story of Becky and her boyfriend (later fiancé) Luke Brandon as they become engaged and plan their wedding. The fourth book *Shopaholic and Sister* is the story of Becky and her husband Luke as they return from their ten-month long honeymoon. The Fifth novel *Shopaholic and Baby* is the story of Becky and her husband Luke as they navigate Becky's first pregnancy. The sixth book of Shopaholic Series *Mini Shopaholic*



focuses on the main character Rebecca, her husband Luke Brandon and their daughter Minnie. In *Shopaholic to the Stars* Becky sets her heart on a new career as she is going to be a stylist to the

stars. Choosing clutch bags and chasing celebrities, Becky loses touch with her family and her best friend. In *Shopaholic to the Rescue*, Becky is on a major rescue mission. She is on a road trip to Las Vegas to help her friends and family. She is determined to get to the bottom of why her dad has mysteriously disappeared, help her best friend Suze.

The Shopaholic Series, in fact, suggests shopping is an utterly enjoyable, even passionate experience for anybody and everybody. Arguably, though, Becky's devotion to shopping threatens the marginality looming in the background of the romance plot. While by definition a romance ends with a wedding, Becky's consumer driven tale readily includes the honeymoon, which offers tremendous shopping opportunities, and the first home, which opens up entirely new consumer avenues. Though she has a load of debts on her bank overdraft and credit card, nothing stops her from buying new clothes, shoes and other things which others may think as unnecessary.

The title of the book 'Shopaholic' refers to compulsive shopper. The term 'Shopaholic' implies addiction and pertains to buyers. Shopaholic is more likely to demonstrate compulsivity as a personality trait, has lower self-esteem, and is more prone to fantasy than the average consumer. A shopaholic fills his or her emptiness with objects he does not even need. The protagonist Rebecca Bloomwood is a shopaholic who is obsessed with shopping all throughout her life. She moves to New York and becomes a personal shopper, a career she enjoys and succeeds at. She has several credit cards, and a shopping addiction. She's a journalist for a gardening magazine but her dream is to join the fashion magazine *Alette*. Shopping enables her to invent a mainstream, ideal persona and, ultimately, realize an ideal life.

The cover pages of all books of this series by Sophie Kinsella are the pictures of women holding shopping bags and wearing sophisticated and feminine clothes. These cover pages depict women's obsession with shopping. Stephanie Harzewski in *Tradition and Displacement in the New*



Novel of Manners claims that Chick Lit's association with the color pink is no coincidence; the books participate in a "feedback loop with fashion trends, as pink for several seasons has been the new black" (35).

Lieberman and Lidner in their book *Unbalanced Accounts: Why Women Are Still Afraid of Money* illustrate women's attitude towards money as they say, "as they shop, the anxieties give way to pleasurable fanaticisms which offer a real, if brief sensation of relief" (162). Becky represents what Lieberman and Lindner denote. When Becky spends money it is not with the intention that this spending will lead to the overall improvements in her lifestyle. She hopes that these purchases will help her new appearance of affluent life style. Becky's view of money changes as emotional needs and anxieties change. Like most Chick Lit heroines, Becky enjoys the thrill of the new buy, and as is the case for most of them, her life deteriorates to a point where everything seems to be bleak, until she gives up her commodity worship to find happiness. Hence, while fashion allows her to keep up with the consumerist "Joneses" and briefly bask in the self-confidence it buys her, longer-lasting happiness is achieved only when capitalistic ambition is thwarted and the status quo is restored in the end. Becky Bloomwood is in a continual process of buying the trendiest thing on the market to create a newer, more improved version of herself. Shopping becomes a favorite sport of Becky. She becomes fond of buying new and branded dresses. As Becky denotes in *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, "I put on my new gray cardigan over a short black shirt, and my new Hobbs boots — dark gray suede — and I have to say, I look bloody good in them. God, I love new clothes. If everyone could just wear new clothes every day, I reckon depression wouldn't exist anymore." (171) When Becky shops, the world gets better for her. The female protagonist, Rebecca (Becky) Bloomwood exemplifies contemporary capitalistic society's acquisitive materialism. She is a consumer with a fashion fixation, enthralled by the Marxian mysterious powers of the high-fashion designer articles she purchases. Becky's obsessions with shopping reflect Jean Baudrillard's idea, elaborated in *The System of Objects* (1968), that advertisements teach consumers that they need to purchase commodities which will reflect their personalities. Becky is influenced by advertisements and addicted to shopping.



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The characters of Chick Lit believe that the proper clothing (for example, a stylish business suit) can transform them into something they're not (a savvy businesswoman). Why do they believe buying these products will transform their lives? And when the products don't, as in the case of the Jigsaw suits, why don't the characters question their faith in material goods? Why is there such an emphasis on shopping? Why do these women have the same attitude toward career advancement as children who pretend what they "want to be when they grow up"? why people become consumerist. Someone becomes consumerist because of many reasons but this series explain that Rebecca becomes consumerist because her environment. She feels ugly and many people will laugh her when she wears unique thing or antique thing. Rebecca always wears fancy brands to show off her fashion sense. Psychoanalytic critics connect this activity of shopping with identity. They argue shopping is used to define both individual and social identities through pursuing imaginary ideal consumer objects. This means consumers consume products not only to satisfy our biological needs but also to carry out an ego project of identity formation. According to them, desire is the motivational force behind consumer's everyday experiences of buying objects. In Lacan's *Seminar Twenty On Feminine Sexuality* (1972-73), he discusses 'jouissance, another important concept used to explain the excited state of desire that moves children and adults alike to want to buy, as it devotes specific attention to passionate desire for the sake of desire. Desire, according to Lacan is the powerful emotional motivational force behind consumer's everyday experiences of longing for and fantasizing about particular consumer objects. For Rebecca, shopping is a way of life, her desire, her pleasure, ego satisfaction and as an activity of escapism. Becky's emotional needs are temporarily fulfilled by the idea of shopping and act of shopping because both are pleasurable activities. Her shopping compulsion offers her an escape from her dejection and promises her to outfit her with a sense of success. She is so crazy to buy the scarf. She says in *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, "Everyone I know in the entire world aspires to owning a Denny and George scarf. I have to have this scarf. I have to have it. It makes my eyes look bigger, it makes my haircut look more expensive, it makes me look like a different person. I'll be able to wear it with everything."(3) That green scarf is the iconic item that Becky wears and gets her the name "Girl in The Green



Scarf". Thus the desire for Scarf becomes Becky's vehicle for creating self. She continuously creates looks for herself, describing herself by what she wears, such as "the Girl in the Denny and George Scarf." She is the only woman in this series who is absolutely obsessed and drunk with the desire to select and purchase. This becomes a dirty secret when she discovers she is in trouble for spending more than she makes, beginning the string of lies that ties this plot together. While on a date with wealthy Tarquin, he brings up the subject of shopping and how she must love it. Trying to impress, she tells him that she hates shopping. "Really?" says Tarquin in surprise. "I 40 thought all girls loved shopping." Rebecca replies, "I'd far rather be...out on the moors, riding along. With a couple of dogs running behind" (219). She does not want to be known as a stereotypically frivolous, superficial female shopaholic, but she and the reader understand that this is exactly what she is. It stays a dirty secret until the end of the book, when her shopping and financial troubles actually land her a well-paying television. Thus, Becky is the perfect example of a shopaholic who dresses above her means and for her dreams.

Rebecca becomes "the girl in Vera Wang gown" when she wears this dress. The Vera Wang Gown figures prominently in the pivotal scene in *Shopaholic Takes Manhattan*. When She tries this dress she thinks, "I Had to have it. I had to... I was not me anymore. I was Grace Kelly. I was Gwyneth Paltrow..." (251). The dress transforms Becky into a princess, a movie star. This dress allows becky to look like the woman of her fantancies. Becky and Luke's relationship revolves around shopping and visting posh hotels and restaurants on both sides of Atlantics, benefits of Luke's financial and social status. In *Shopaholic Ties The Knot*, Becky and Luke's marriage is the ultimate display of conspicuous consumption. Becky's never ending search for perfect wedding dress illustrates her varies identities and dreams. When she wears the dress designed by her designer friend Danny and later her mother, Becky fulfills some of her dreams.

Rebecca's excessive shopping and buying habits are pathological and should be approached as such, for even if she attempts to improve the status of her finances and tries to modify her behavior, she never succeeds. For example, in an outing to a craft fair she firmly declares "I'm



really just going to keep Mum company, and I'm certainly not planning to buy anything." Notwithstanding, she gives in and buys ten handmade cards. After all, they were "amazing" and "only £1.50 each!" A short time later, she adds "a gorgeous blue ceramic plant holder with little elephants going round it" to her bounty (49). Rebecca simply cannot resist the urge to buy. Her tendency to compulsively and obsessively buy material goods renders her unable to curb her spending. One of Rebecca's attempts to take control of her finances consists on listening to her father's advice to "C.B." (or Cut Back). In typical shopaholic fashion though, instead of cutting back, Rebecca starts the C.B. process by spending money. As a first step, she buys a self-help book called *Controlling Your Cash*. Thus, instead of cutting back and reducing her spending, she goes shopping and buys more. When Rebecca has 12 credits card, she is satisfied but in other side she is frightened because she has big obligation. Having lost her Saturday job at a boutique, encountering her childhood neighbor and his girlfriend, Becky instantly draws her attention to the power of her purse strings to lessen her woes: "Twenty quid. I'll buy myself a nice cappuccino and a chocolate brownie. And a couple of magazines. And maybe something from Accessorize. Or some boots... God, I deserve a treat, after today. And I need some new tights for work, and a nail file. And maybe a book to read on the tube" (135). This uneven stream of consciousness typifies Becky's habitual shopping, and careless lack of self-control. For Cinderella, the answer to her life of subservience appears in the form of a glass slipper; in case of Becky, salvation from financial damage comes to her in the form of a new job as a financial expert in *Morning Coffee*. Although she gracefully solves the financial problems of those who come to the show with their money troubles, yet she remains in a state of 'danger' owing to her own indebted state. Thus, Kinsella describes Becky's habit of spending as a form of safe consumerism, i.e., even though she is in an unstable state, she never confronts effects for her compulsive spending.

Becky is successful in spite of and, in part, because of her consumption. Becky is intellectually vacuous and willing to take advantage of people, but she has style and can laugh at what are, after all, only typical feminine foibles. She plays into the Western hegemonic stereotype of 'woman' as an uncontrollable shopper. But finally the shopping habits of Becky range from



delightful to terrible. She is addicted to shopping, and she uncontrollably buys everything she likes, particularly clothing. Unfortunately, she can't afford any of it. She is thousands of pounds in debt, and she receives bills every day from VISA and Endwich Bank. She often denies her overspending, or rationalizes her actions. She usually refers to purchasing items as an investment, or claims that they are future Christmas/birthday gifts for friends. She refuses to meet with her bank manager, Derek Smeath, nor does she read his letters of concern. Becky always provides an excuse to postpone a bank meeting (broken leg, dead dog, gangrene, etc.). Her efforts on trying to cut back on her debt always fail, and she does little to stop herself from shopping even more.

In *Shopaholic and Sister* Becky is very happy that she has got a sister companion who would her in shopping but later she comes to the realization that going shopping for unnecessary items can be boring, but she had never been able admit it. During a visit at supermarket, Becky wants to enjoy shopping but Jess is on her case to save money and not buy unnecessary things. As she continues to ignore Jess and collect more items in her shopping cart, she warns Becky that if she continues to behave the way she is in storing up problems for herself: Luke will leave her. After a shopping trip at a supermarket, they have a falling-out with each other. Jess thinks she lives in a fantasy world and is a spoiled brat. In the next books of same series she is presented as consumer who is ready to shop for her baby who is about to born. She is planning to buy a new home. Becky is also planning a surprise party for Luke. She faces the financial problem of throwing a grand party. Thus her expenditures never end.

The shopping activities mentioned in this *Series* are also found in the real life. The women wear and dress up their family with the branded famous products before they go outside. That activity done by women is influenced by some factors such as the fever of Hollywood actor and actress that becomes trend. Besides, the private pleasure given by the branded products in the form of advertisement brainwashes women to buy a lot of branded products. Possessing branded products continually as the effect of the advertisement cause the booming of consumer society. Consumer



society means a society that devotes a high proportion of its income to luxurious goods and undertakes little saving.

Thus, Sophie Kinsella's descriptions of Becky Bloomwood's shopping sprees actually encourage women readers to indulge, rather than curb, their spending. Becky struggles to control her compulsive shopping habit, encouraged by the glossy advertisements that grace the pages of her favorite magazines. Through their depictions of this exaggerated consumer behavior, Kinsella ridicules the advice given by these publications and comment ironically on both women characters as readers and consumers.

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