WITHOUT MY BAG MY WORLD WOULD TREMBLE –
Feminine Cultures Revealed by Bag Reading

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ABSTRACT
The handbag is the ultimate utensil providing access the very heart of the most important
economic powerhouse: female consumers. 95% of women in developed countries own at least a
handbag regardless of age, religion, profession, marital status or level of prosperity. Is the
handbag a symbol of the unification of needs and habits turning the world into a ‘global village’?
Colibri Research and fellow researchers have explored the unsought depth of women’s handbags.
We collected more than 150 Bag Stories from 17 cities on all continents around the world. This
article describes similarities and differences between women, their many roles, needs and worries,
dreams and desires from a bag perspective. Our journey will confirm some rumours and reveal
surprising news. By telling Bag Stories we hope to make the global perspective more personal,
more emotional and definitely more feminine.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG
Die Handtasche ist bestens geeignet, um das Herz der wichtigsten Wirtschaftsmacht zu erhalten:
Konsumentinnen. 95% aller Frauen in entwickelten Ländern – in allem Altersgruppen,
Glaubensgemeinschaften, Berufsgruppen, sozialen und Einkommensklassen – besitzen
mindestens eine Handtasche. Ist die Handtasche ein Symbol der Vereinheitlichung von
Bedürfnissen und Gewohnheiten im Zeitalter der Globalisierung?
Colibri Research hat zusammen mit Forschungskolleginnen die unerforschten Tiefen weiblicher
Taschen untersucht. Wir sammelten mehr als 150 ‘Taschengeschichten’ in 17 Ländern der Welt
auf allen Kontinenten. Dieser Artikel beschreibt Ähnlichkeiten und Unterschiede von Frauen, ihre
Rollenvielfalt, Wünsche und Sorge, Träume und Sehnsüchte. Unsere Reise bestätigt einige
Gerüchte und offenbart überraschende Neuigkeiten. Wir hoffen, durch unsere Taschengeschichten
die globale Perspektive persönlicher, emotionaler und unbedingt weiblicher zu machen.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ute Rademacher (Ph.D.) is business psychologist (Dipl.-Psych.) and holds a Ph.D. in Communication Sciences. She had been working in leading, international institutes for more than 15 years when she founded her own agency for research-based strategy development ‘Colibri Research’ in 2007, based in Hamburg/ Germany. Her creative research approaches provide guidance to her clients how to strategically develop their national and international products and brands. Ute is also working as text coach and creative business coach.

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The handbag is the exclusively feminine accessory since 95% of women in the world own a handbag (see Styring, 2007). And probably only 5% of men do. Most women carry a bag every day. No wonder that women throughout the world establish an intimate relationship with their bag. In the first, worldwide qualitative study on handbags we wanted to find out whether the handbag is a meaningful tool for connecting with the most influential, yet underestimated resource of economic power: female consumers (see Kreienkamp, 2007; Jaffé, 2005). We, an organic network of small agencies specialised on qualitative market research, conducted a global no budget project, sponsored only by our passion and enthusiasm for this topic. We have talked to women in all continents. From six to sixty. From homeless to affluent. We captured their stories in personal interviews, bag parties, focus groups, video clips, bag blogs and chatrooms.
Why bags? We chose handbags since they are utterly female and have the magic power to instantaneously create a female bond between women. Women love bags and love to talk about bags – even when most of them are hesitant to reveal the inside of their handbags. The interesting thing about bags is that the inside as well as the outside tells something about its owner. The outside can reveal a woman’s age, express her style, mark her social status and express what she is doing in life and what is important to her. The inside discloses what a woman cares about, needs to feel comfortable, wants to be protected against and requires to make it through her day. The 150 Bag Stories we have collected tell us that the handbag is a vehicle that allows you to dig deeper in the functional and emotional needs of women. Bag Stories are sometimes simple and straightforward, sometimes touching and surprising, but always authentic and fascinating. The question is: despite the fact that women all over the world share a special bond to their bags, is the meaning of the bag – outside and inside – the same in all cultures? Which stories about the ‘global village’ do bags in different villages and cities of the world tell us?

The emancipation of women has a huge influence on the handbag. Due to women’s increasing participation in the labour force, the number of practical demands on a bag has grown and still is. The differentiation of handbags has lead to different types of bags: briefcases for work, strolling and visiting bags for daytime, elegant evening bags (see Chenoue, 2005; Wilcox, 2002). On the other hand, there is the oversized ‘shopper’, the ‘one-bag-fits-all’-solution allowing women to be prepared for all occasions. But besides being a functional container, the bag has always been an emotional carrier: The briefcase was designed to carry love letters and other valuable papers and messages from your (secret) lover. Bags used to be a gift or a souvenir reflecting what is important in the world around you. And they still are. Do our curious looks into women’s bag reflect that unified access to information and communication results in universal emotional needs of women around the globe?

Bag Relationships

Almost all women in our study have a collection of bags. Germans and Americans have 2-6 bags actively in use on average and some more kept in reserve. And then we have found women suffering from what others called ‘bag fetishism’: Italian women owning between 12-20 bags on average. One signora surprised us by revealing that she currently owns 60 bags! The number of
bags depends on your attitude, passion and bag relationship. Women with the ‘one bag fits all’-approach use a rather neutral and versatile bag for a certain period of time. When the time has come the ‘bag monogamist’ will bury the bag in her bag cemetery, typically in the last corner of the cupboard or underneath the bed. And there are ‘bag polygamists’ cherishing their bag collection of bags for every occasion. Lots of lucky bags, lasting a lifetime – and sometimes longer – carefully looked after, and stored in soft protective covers. Many a bag like these has a true special meaning for the owner.

“My handbags are very, very important to me. I love them. I keep them at the top of the closet in my daughter's room. Most of them are designer bags. I keep them in their nice felt bags to keep them safe and protected. Each of them has a story.” (London)

From Girl to Woman to Lady

Bags are vehicles of transition and transformation in a woman’s life. They come and go with different life stages and passages in a woman’s lifeline, her locations and destinations. The first bag is for many ‘a rite de passage’ from childhood into womanhood. In cultures rich of rituals, the first bag is often a present by the mother or another important woman in the family.
“I have received my first bag from my mother. This was a very special moment to me like the first step of becoming a woman.” (Delhi)

In all countries, the first bag provides the young girl with emotional security replacing the teddy bear as mobile comfort zone. The bag helps the schoolgirl find her way by signalling to whom she wants to belong to and whom she wants to stay away from. When entering college or university, the university bag has to cater for different spheres for the first time: the ‘professional sphere’ of the university and at the same time the ‘private sphere’ when meeting her peers. The bag is an important ‘social marker’ in cultures in which social class and status are prominent:

“It is dangerous to wear the wrong satchel when coming to college because it needs to be the right one to be cool.” (Paris)

“My bag is a very important thing in my life. It indicates a person’s personality, occupation and status.” (Singapore)

But the bag is also a marker for changes in one’s personal life. A new stage in the journey - with new social and psychological roles - often goes along with a new (type of) bag. Equipped with the appropriate bag women start secondary school, the first ballet class, move to the city, start their first job, become a mother and reach maturity.

“I can’t figure myself wearing high heels when I am old, but I am sure I still will wear a good looking purse.” (London)

Survival Kit and Comfort Zone

Why can’t women live without bags? What we have learnt from Bag Stories around the globe is the importance of the increasing complexity of women’s roles. She is a professional, a mother, a commuter, a working woman, a lover, a daughter, a wife, a shopper, a friend. Which strongly is reflected by her bags – inside and outside. Bags in different countries might be made from different materials and have different looks. But whether made of African beads, Chinese silk or Italian leather, all bags fulfil the same psychological functions: the handbag is the metaphorical melting pot of women’s life, a feminine universe and the last resort of freedom for many a woman. The bag
is the indispensable weapon of the urban amazon – it helps her to find and fight her way in the modern jungle.

The bag is a mobile survival kit that helps to have control over things that will or might happen. A practical and multi-functional container. Making sure you’ve got everything you might need at hand. The magical accessory which helps you to transform from serious business woman to caring mother to party animal. The bag can also give you the look.

“The first day I have this new bag, makes me feel wonderful. Having all the looks from others – look at her with this gorgeous and expensive bag.” (Moscow)

“This bag is beautiful, it simply fits my body proportions.” (Stockholm)
It fits your silhouette and detracts from problem zones. The more femininity is signified by a seductive physical appearance in a specific culture, the more women use the bag to boost their sex appeal. You might choose an XXL bags to make you look smaller. You hide loads of make up, lipsticks, mascara, jewellery or even faked boobs in your mobile beauty parlour. In other cultures, personal hygiene products are kept in extra bags-within-the bag to protect them from curious eyes.

“In my bag there are my wet tissues and my deodorant and a small bag for everything a woman needs during the special days of the month.” (Istanbul)

“The bag is the last taboo where men don’t have access to. I am afraid this might be getting lost.” (Cape Town)

The bag shows your personal and social identity. The outside tells others how you want to be seen, where you want to fit in and where to stand out. A bag can show that you are a proud citizen of your hometown on the outside and carry your proof of identity inside: passport, allergy pass, handicapped sign, membership cards, business cards and your zodiac necklace. Your bag can make a political statement or be the proof that you have made it. Or it simply shows that you just don’t care about making a statement.

“For me a handbag is a woman’s status symbol. It communicates that we are successful and that we have money to spend on something we carry every day.” (London)

For some women one role will dominate most of the times, for others a bag has to fulfill all roles at the same time. Most women use a specific bag according to the predominant role. Others follow the one-bag-fits-all approach.

“I still want my ‘freedom bag’ with which I can feel encumbered and light. I would also have my ‘mother me’ bag which would be for me and my daughter, but it would also be a bit more fun and not too serious. And I want my ‘office bag’ which makes me look and feel professional.” (Auckland)
Tassen, Bourses, 包包, Bags, Tasche, Bolso…

You find handbags in hands of women in all cultures, climate zones and continents. What are their similarities and what is different – inside and outside? We have been impressed by the number of functions a bag has in the life of women of today across cultures:

- **Financial centre** providing you with the material power you need: whether Euros, US$ or Chinese Fen there will always be some single coins in the very bottom of the bag
- **Beauty parlour** to make you look, smell and feel beautiful: a universal female need reflected by many cosmetic items in pretty extra bags or as free floating objects.
- **Emergency kit** to be prepared for the small disasters of bad days: sewing kits for business travellers, spare underwear for party girls and loads of painkillers when having 'one of these days' no matter in which time zone you are.
- **Protection centre** to safeguard you: moisturiser and lip balm in cold or dry climates, wet tissues and deodorants in warm or humid climates.
- **House of spirits** to support your spiritual well-being: church membership cards in more formal communities, tarot cards and talismans for one’s personal believe system.
- **Communication assistant**: mobile phones, PDAs, SmartPhones, letters, notebooks, address books in electronic or paper version.
- **Snackbar** with a variety of food and drinks on-the-go: bottled water in many European countries, half-eaten chocolate bars for gourmets and home-made sandwiches to give you the taste of home when being out of home
- **Entertainment centre** to help you killing time when needed: Japanese mangas meet financial newspapers meet I-pods
- **External memory**: appointments scribbled down on a serviette or electronic diaries for you and your children.
- **Trash-bin**: the universal phenomenon of a certain layer of dust, crumps, coins and papers in the very bottom of the bag.
We have been surprised by Swiss cough sweets in a bag in Singapore and Chinese fortune cookies in a German rucksack. We have found mobile phones in bags of women who can’t read or write. But all in all, we found more similarities than differences across markets. It’s easier to find your way in the bag of a woman on the other side of the world than in her kitchen. However, here are a couple of interesting cultural observations:

- New Zealand women hardly have books, magazines, and spare shoes in their handbags. Travelling and commuting is done by car not public transport.
- Dutch women carry ‘bicycle keys’ and some of them ‘roll your own’ tobacco.
- Italian women own the highest number of handbags. Some even start the day with a bag and choose the rest of what they are going to wear accordingly.
- Turkish bags are filled with deodorants, fragrances and perfumed wipes.
- In France we found check-books, underwear and cigarette butts.
- South African women inherit bags that go from one generation to another.
- Latin women have more spiritual and religious items in their bag.
- Chinese bags overall look more organised than elsewhere in the world.

Life stage and roles you fulfil in life seem to be a better predictor of the content than culture. However, there are some systematic differences:
Urban commuters using public transport every day value control and protection more than the ladies from ‘car cultures’ whose vehicles are their second handbag.

Women in emerging markets such as Asia, Latin America and Africa use their bags more ostentatious for demonstrating social status and success.

Bags of women in individualised cultures in Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands or Germany make their owners rather feel good than important.

And when women become homeless – whether fleeing from war, natural disasters or forced by other strokes of fate – the bag is her means of survival.

In all cultures, the weight of a woman’s bag has increased dramatically. Because we are urban nomads carrying more stuff with us at all times. So we need bigger bags, and because we have bigger bags we carry more things. It’s a vicious cycle nobody knows how to stop. At the same time, we puzzled about the funny fact that all good things comes in threes: often we have found three mascaras, three lipsticks, three sets of keys or three mobile phones. A street map, a navigation system and a compass to avoid getting lost by all means.

“I have a double agenda, my PDA and my trusted planner on paper. I just feel more secure also writing it down. In case it all stops working.” (Amsterdam)

Three types of diaries showcase the lack of trust of women in ‘boys’ toys’ BlackBerry and Smartphone. Dear developers of consumer electronics, please invent an electronic diary, based on feminine insights that we trust and relieves us from this burden!

The Bag of The Future

Bags are the fastest growing sector in the high fashion market. Women spent on average 11,000 Euros on bags in a lifetime. This amount will increase because women around the world are spending more and more on their bags. Even if you are not into expensive designer bags, it’s likely your bag has increased in value because of its content. Our bags are worth a fortune in terms of actual and emotional worth. This is what makes women more vulnerable when it comes of their bag. Lots of women in our study stated that they always keep an eye on their handbag that goes with them everywhere – even to the bedroom. Being stolen of your bag hits hard, in terms of worth lost and emotionally – an offence against one’s intimacy.
“It’s as if they’ve stolen my memories, from that moment on I compulsively use to check my bag every time.” (Rome)

“I don’t want the strap too long because my purse hangs too low. I can’t hold it tightly to prevent anyone from reaching in. I just want to feel secure and not to worry about pick-pocketing.” (Chicago)

In line with growing tension between rich and poor in many cultures, the bag of the future will have features like hooks for safe bag storage in bars and restaurants (even the Queen is said to carry a mobile hook in her bag) and anti-theft devices. Intelligent materials and clever designs will hopefully make our bag loads lighter and our steps easier in future. Smart products for the on-the-go usage have huge potential if they manage to combine multiple functions that are relevant for us when on the move. Bag insurance might be an interesting product for financial service providers. Water bottles will not be needed anymore in bags if a system of communal water spenders will be up and running in all cultures facing the effect of global warming.

And what about technology in the bag of the future? First thought of most men. Most women in our study were rather critical about innovative in-bag technology. Nevertheless, there is potential for electronic devices that make the life of women easier or more fun. For instance, an in-bag charging system could help us to get rid of various chargers and batteries that currently live in bags around the globe. A tablet dispenser fitted in the inside of our bag would allow us to remind us of our medication and increase compliance. Intelligent materials could make the bag lighter, stylish and at the same time more robust than the accustomed leather bag. Extra bags and accessory to be clipped inside or outside the bag are welcome since they increase the versatility of our steady companion. But, integrated scanners who remind us of what is inside in our bag and what is still missing never got beyond the prototype stage. Why that? Our results suggest that women feel patronised when asked to bring their bags’ inside to perfection. In a life with many roles and challenges, chaos and a bit of mess should be allowed – and which area is more capable of being the last hideaway of the playful girl inside of every woman than her bag?
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