

Postmodernism, Social Dynamics, and E-Commerce Evolution

Saqib K.^{1,*}

¹University of Florida, USA.

Corresponding authors: (e-mail: saqib.kha667@gmail.com).

Abstract Postmodernism has provided significant insights into the cultural importance of shopping and retail environments in developed societies. However, most postmodern research has focused on shopping in public areas like malls and high streets. This paper argues that these analyses should be broadened to encompass home shopping and the wider context of remote shopping. Recommendations for future research are also outlined.

Index Terms deconstruction, globalization, social networks, digital transformation, consumer behavior

I. Introduction

Postmodernism has gained significant popularity both in academia and beyond in recent years. Despite extensive discussion across various academic disciplines, there is no clear consensus on its definition. This ambiguity has sometimes led to misunderstandings and misuse of the term. However, a common thread in postmodern theories is the recognition of consumption’s central role in shaping the social world. In advanced societies, consumption is more symbolic than functional or price-driven. Consumers in the postmodern era differ fundamentally from those in modern times, whose behaviors could be predicted based on traditional variables like social class, income, and demographics. In postmodernity, products and services are detached from their original functions, similar to the separation of signifiers from their signs. Consumers are reflexive individuals who use consumption to create fluid, momentary self-images, challenging traditional marketing theories that rely on stable group categorizations.

The significant emphasis on the consumption of signs in these societies has drawn attention to the cultural importance of shopping and retail environments among social scientists and marketers. The shopping process is seen as integral to identity formation. Shopping involves moving through spaces like cities, malls, and shops, where the abundance of choices is fundamental. Consumers navigate these spaces, creating personal narratives. Shopping centers are not just retail spaces but also places where consumers play out fantasies and engage in social interactions, often making purchases incidental to the shopping experience. The shop window, in particular, serves as a crucial communicator of signs, reflecting a shared system of values [1].

Postmodern literature frequently highlights the social and cultural significance of shopping and retail environments as grand temples of consumption in advanced societies. However, much postmodern discourse overlooks the diverse ways and multiple sites where shopping occurs. This narrow focus has limited the understanding of consumer shopping behavior to activities in public spaces like malls, centers, and high streets. Consequently, postmodern accounts have provided only a partial view (Figure 1) [2].

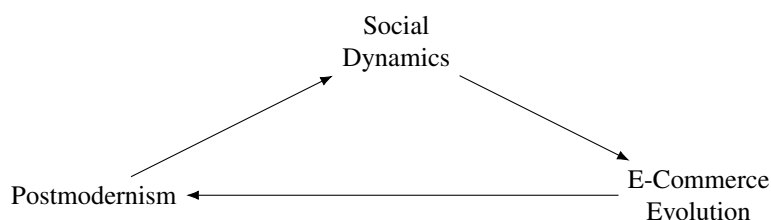


Figure 1: Postmodernism, social dynamics, and e-commerce evolution

This paper aims to use the postmodern framework to explore the social relationships inherent in remote shopping and identify areas needing further research. Remote shopping encompasses a variety of shopping opportunities outside high streets and malls, including mail order, party planning, home shopping programs, infomercials, CDs, interactive television, the Internet, and virtual shopping. The paper argues that discussions on postmodern consumer shopping behavior should be expanded to include the contexts of home shopping and broader remote shopping environments [3].

II. Social Dynamics in the Remote Shopping Process

Remote shopping is not a new concept, yet it has not garnered as much research interest as traditional in-store shopping, despite being a significant part of retail, accounting for a substantial percentage of sales in the UK. Home shopping began in the USA with mail order services aimed at reaching people in remote areas. In Britain, its history differs, with networks or clubs established in urban areas to enable credit purchases for goods otherwise unaffordable [4].

Mail order shopping is well-established across many European countries, though there are notable differences in the number and range of home shopping retailers, the variety of goods available, and the provision of credit facilities. Another popular form of remote shopping, party planning, also originated in the USA and constitutes a significant portion of direct sales in Europe and the USA, with organizations like Tupperware achieving global success.

The contemporary remote shopping landscape is significantly shaped by new information technologies, which have expanded shopping opportunities beyond traditional mail order and party plans. Consumers now have access to various home shopping channels, including (see Figure 2 and 3):

- 1) Home shopping programs
- 2) Infomercials
- 3) Interactive TV
- 4) The Internet
- 5) Virtual shopping

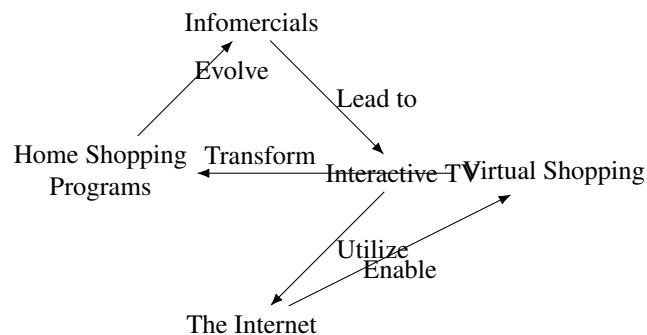


Figure 2: Evolution of shopping channels

These technologies have the potential to transform the shopping experience by compressing time and space, emphasizing the relative location of consumers. This transformation allows consumers to become global shoppers without leaving their homes, marking a distinct shift from the remote shopping methods of the past.

For many researchers, the advent of postmodernism signifies fundamental changes in social relations between producers and consumers, with power dynamics shifting in favor of consumers. This new marketing environment is reflected in how individuals are now perceived as "consumers" across various contexts. Despite significant interactions between consumers within the shopping environment, research has primarily focused on consumer-employee interactions [5]. Employees, now seen as relationship managers, engage in "emotional labor," a concept where service roles require a caring and understanding disposition. This shift has led to many positions becoming feminized, as qualities like caring and supportiveness are often associated with women.

Social relations between staff and consumers vary by service context. For instance, in banking, friendliness and helpfulness are crucial employee traits, while in betting shops, the line between selling service and selling sexuality can be thin. Retailers have employed atmospherics and developed "servicescapes" to attract consumers and enhance interactions [6].

Exploring social relations in remote shopping is complex due to the diverse locations of interactions, often occurring in the private sphere of the consumer's home rather than the stage-managed environments of retailers. With the rapid development of new shopping methods, retailers need to be aware of the social context in which their communication strategies are consumed. This section of the paper assesses the nature of social relations in traditional and new remote shopping methods, including mail order agencies, party plans, television-based distribution, and the use of personal computers [7].

III. Social Dynamics in Mail Order Shopping

Despite its long history in Britain and the USA, mail order shopping never achieved a prominent position in mainstream marketing discourse. Consequently, there is limited research on the social context surrounding mail order shopping, and much of the existing literature originates from social scientists rather than marketing academics. However, when directly examined, research indicates that many social interaction dynamics considered crucial in traditional shopping settings outside the home also apply to mail order shopping.

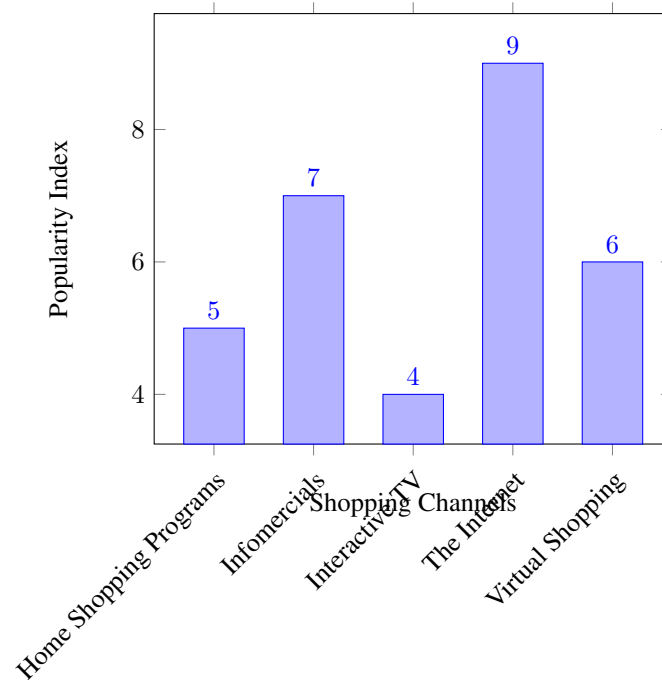


Figure 3: Popularity index of shopping channels

Within mail order agencies, the quality of interaction between consumers and agents is pivotal to service delivery, similar to interactions in physical stores. In Britain alone, there are currently between five to six million part-time mail order agents, predominantly women, who earn commission on sales. These agents play a significant role in bringing retail transactions into domestic spaces. According to research, the recruitment of female agents is deliberate, as women are perceived to possess superior social skills essential for agency work. This feminization of mail order agency work within the private sphere of customers' homes precedes similar trends observed in public-facing retail roles [8].

Another advantage of female agents is their ability to establish informal and relatable interactions with customers, which helps mitigate hierarchical distinctions, especially in credit-based transactions. Moreover, women agents often share common experiences with consumers, such as managing household budgets, further enhancing rapport. Some mail order companies even require agents to have been previous customers themselves, reinforcing a sense of shared understanding. When agents are local and share social connections with customers, interactions are further enriched, with agents encouraged to recruit friends, neighbors, or colleagues as potential clients. For many agents, this engagement is not just a job but also a social activity or hobby.

The informal nature of interactions between women agents and customers also aids in blurring the buyer-seller hierarchy, particularly in credit transactions. Additionally, female agents typically have better access to female consumers' homes, providing valuable insights into market research opportunities. These relationships are often sustained over long periods, reflecting the success of mail order companies' relationship management strategies [9].

In comparing other forms of remote shopping, the extent to which they are embedded in such close-knit social relations remains a subject of debate.

IV. Social Dynamics in Television and Digital Shopping Environments

Unlike traditional shopping methods, contemporary remote distribution occurs in social settings beyond the direct oversight of retailers or intermediaries. This includes platforms like television shopping channels, digital TV, and infomercials, which facilitate limited face-to-face interaction among consumers watching together. Yet, these methods often falter due to perceived lack of entertainment and social value. Recognizing this, some television shopping channels aim to foster parasocial relationships by presenting warm, spontaneous hosts who engage personally with viewers, downplaying their sales role.

When remote shopping happens within households, understanding social dynamics becomes crucial for marketers, a relatively unexplored area. Arguments against viewing viewers as purely rational consumers highlight the influence of familial contexts on viewing choices. For instance, television often mirrors power and gender dynamics within households, influencing viewing patterns and control over content.

Extended arguments suggest that gender dynamics alone are insufficient to explain television viewing habits, emphasizing the interplay of class, ethnicity, age, and household lifecycle stages. Moreover, prior experiences with catalog and online shopping do not reliably predict attitudes towards television shopping, underscoring the complex interrelations in domestic environments.

Understanding these dynamics is essential in comprehending consumer behavior in technology-driven remote shopping contexts, where social and familial influences play a critical role.

V. PC-based Shopping from Home

The rise of PC-based shopping methods, particularly online shopping, has sparked significant interest among marketing professionals and academics. While some predict a bright future for e-commerce, others argue that current adoption rates are low and that the potential for growth is vast. Despite extensive research on PC-based shopping, the social context in which it occurs has been largely overlooked, with most studies focusing on technical aspects and consumer behavior in virtual environments.

Unlike traditional remote shopping methods, PC-based shopping involves limited social interaction, with users interacting solely with the technology. This has led some to suggest that online shopping is a socially isolating experience, resulting in a "lonely crowd" phenomenon. However, others argue that virtual communities and cyber cafes are adding a social element to online transactions, "humanizing" the virtual shopping experience [8].

The application of relationship marketing techniques in IT-based remote shopping has also received little attention. While some argue that technology replaces face-to-face interaction, making relationship maintenance less necessary, others suggest that building and maintaining relationships with distant consumers is crucial for business success. Some retailers are attempting to incorporate relationship management functions into their online strategies, but the effectiveness of these initiatives remains unclear. Overall, further research is needed to understand the social relations and relationship management issues surrounding PC-based shopping.

VI. Remote Shopping

Some consumers are using remote shopping as a way to opt out of the consumer culture carefully constructed by retailers. This perspective suggests that shoppers are not free to explore their fantasies in shopping malls, but are instead monitored and controlled by security measures. The negative aspects of shopping, such as crowds and chaos, have been overlooked in favor of more desirable topics like layout and atmospherics.

The phenomenon of the "anti-shopper" or "apathetic shopper" is rarely discussed, despite the fact that a significant percentage of consumers dislike or loathe shopping. Research has shown that consumers are aware of the negative aspects of shopping and often make distinctions between "going shopping" as a pleasurable activity and "doing the shopping" as a necessary task.

Shopping is a highly gendered activity, with men often expressing negative attitudes towards shopping and women expressing positive attitudes. Men may use strategies like delegating shopping tasks to partners or using mail order to avoid being perceived as effeminate [3].

Not all consumers want intimate relationships with retailers, and some may see personalized service as insincere. Remote shopping may facilitate self-servicing behavior and intensify the privatization of consumption.

Personal safety during shopping is another issue relevant to the debate, with remote shopping offering a level of safety not always available in large city shopping outlets. However, there are also psychological barriers to consider, such as financial fraud and aggressive internet language [5].

Future research on remote shopping can be categorized into three main avenues: new areas for development, extending existing research, and the creative use of research methodology.

VII. Methodological Innovations in Remote Shopping Research

The creative use of research methodology is essential in understanding remote shopping. While postmodern discourse may not shed light on social relations, it can inform research approaches. Remote shopping often occurs in the privacy of consumers' homes, beyond retailers' control. To investigate domestic and gender relations in households, researchers may need alternative methods. The limitations of quantitative approaches have sparked debate, and postmodernism's emphasis on hermeneutics has opened up opportunities for interpretive research methods like personal introspection, ethnography, and in-depth interviewing. These methods have successfully contextualized the shopping experience outside the home and could be valuable for understanding remote shopping. Unobtrusive methods like video recording could provide insights into technology use in households, and analyzing visual texts like advertisements and video data could inform research on shopping behavior. Analyzing interaction within households is a new area for researchers to explore [4].

VIII. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper, "Postmodernism, Social Dynamics, and E-Commerce Evolution," has demonstrated that the evolution of e-commerce is deeply intertwined with the principles of postmodernism and the shifting landscape of social dynamics.

Through our analysis, we have revealed how e-commerce has not only transformed the way we shop, but also redefined the way we interact with each other and with technology. By exploring the intersections of postmodernism, social dynamics, and e-commerce, we have uncovered new insights into the ways in which technology is reshaping the fabric of our social world. As e-commerce continues to evolve, this paper serves as a foundation for understanding the complex interplay between technology, society, and human experience.

References

- [1] Morrison DE, Firmstone J. The social function of trust and implications for e-commerce. *International Journal of Advertising*. 2000 Jan 1;19(5):599-623.
- [2] Chua CE, Straub DW, Khoo HM, Kadiyala S. The evolution of e-commerce research: A stakeholder perspective. *Journal of Electronic Commerce Research*. 2005 Nov 1;6(4).
- [3] Ondondo RA, Kyongo JK. From Traditional to Digital: The Evolution of the Business Environment—A Case of Marketing Dynamics.
- [4] Sosale S. “Pre-Modern” online: Converging discourses of globalization and development. *Journalism & Communication Monographs*. 2007 Mar;9(1):1-52.
- [5] Cockayne D. Redefining B2B relationship marketing: Insight from postmodern Alibaba. *Journal of Customer Behaviour*. 2016 Jun 30;15(1):49-66.
- [6] Stahl BC. Evolution as Metaphor: A Critical Review of the Use of Evolutionary Concepts in Information Systems and e-Commerce. *Evolutionary Psychology and Information Systems Research: A New Approach to Studying the Effects of Modern Technologies on Human Behavior*. 2010:357-75.
- [7] Sheard S. Managers and the Heavenly City: How E-Commerce Metaphors Shape Management Thought. *Philosophy of Management*. 2005 Sep;5:91-102.
- [8] Sheard S. Managers and the Heavenly City: How E-Commerce Metaphors Shape Management Thought. *Philosophy of Management*. 2005 Sep;5:91-102.
- [9] Venkatesh A. Postmodernism perspectives for macromarketing: an inquiry into the global information and sign economy. *Journal of macromarketing*. 1999 Dec;19(2):153-69.

...