A Study of Consumer Culture and Digital Markets

Castleton Square mall, the largest mall in Indiana, boasting four major department stores, a food court, play area, and 130 stores featuring a Macy's, AMC Theatre, and Build-A-Bear Workshop is one of the most popular shopping centers in Indianapolis. The mall, among with others, arguably has everything a shopper could ask for; entertainment, clothing, food, and more. Teens and adults can go to buy gifts, eat, socialize, and browse in a single convenient location, proving that the modern shopping mall can be much more than a warehouse - it is a place brimming with American culture.

One-Click shopping is a term referring to the ability to make an online purchase with the tap of a mouse button. Today, millions of people around the globe forgo the trip to the store and instead make many of their shopping decisions online. If a web surfer finds a stylish new outfit, a brand new video game, or an exorbitantly expensive iphone while browsing, they only have simply clicks the ‘add to cart’ button, and their selection can be shipped to their doorstep from across the world in less than 48 hours. The internet has allowed people from across the globe to communicate, collaborate, and most importantly, commerce with one another anytime of day, anywhere with a wifi signal. With such a powerful tool of trade, it might be understandable to leave antiquital means of shopping in the dust of a new age of technology at our fingertips.

The shift in buyer’s preferences from the mall to online shopping raises the question, why has consumer culture favored digital markets such as amazon rather than traditional shopping centers? American’s consumeristic choices have shifted to prefer digital markets in the past decade due to the rise of Amazon as a economic power, and the benefits of e-commerce to the consumer.
With the rise of digital market places such as Amazon, Ebay, Craigslist, and many others, the focus of consumer culture in America has shifted from a more traditional mall going experience into a digital age. Nick Wingfield reveals in his 2017 article “What Worries? Big Tech Companies Post Glowing Quarterly Profits” that Amazon is rapidly growing as a company. Wingfield gives statistics to back up his research; he asserts that “Amazon said its net income for the quarter that ended Sept. 30 was $256 million, compared with $252 million during the same period last year.” and that they had experienced “a 34 percent jump to $43.7 billion in revenue”. (Wingfield). Wingfield’s research demonstrates that Amazon is growing rapidly. Through offering mainstream wants such as digital storage space and low-priced, easy-access goods the digital marketplace of Amazon has proven to be a strong influencer of consumers decisions. Wingfield cites the growing stock of the company as an example of its increasing economic power. With basic economic principles, one can tell that by doing so well, Amazon is leading in the market of large scale consumer-bases which again proves that they are outstripping the malls.

Furthermore, Josh Sanburn addresses why and how the decline of the modern mall is happening and what factors are causing it’s downfall in “Why the Death of Malls is About More than Shopping”. In his article, Josh addresses the fact that malls are dying off due to a combination of factors that have taken place in the 21st century. Josh argues that although the increase of technology has had a role to play in the decline of America’s malls, it is not the sole reason for their decline - it is also because of economic troubles and a disinterested millennial generation. Macy's can be used as an example of how overcrowding and a drop in active consumers has lead to many malls being in risk of closing. He writes, “A growing number of Americans [...] don’t see the need to go to any Macy’s at all. Our digital lives are frictionless and
ruthlessly efficient, with retail and romance available at a click. Malls were designed for leisure, abundance, ambling. You parked and planned to spend some time. Today, much of that time has been given over to busier lives and second jobs and apps that let you swipe right instead of haunt the food court”. (Sanburn). Sanburn argues that malls are losing relevance in modern times. He claims that the American’s life is so streamlined that there is not enough room left in them for a leisurely stroll in a shopping center. He points out that one’s life is becoming more and more involved with technology, which also plays a critical role in our modern busy lifes. It is for these reasons, he argues, that malls no longer play as critical of a role to consumers as they once did. Because malls are no longer as lucrative to customers, other mediums of commerce are becoming more prevalent to consumers.

It is important to understand what the advantages of going to the mall are - that is, why Americans used to favor traditional shopping malls - so that one can better understand how Amazon has risen, while the shopping mall has declined in the past decade. In her article “A Social History of Shopping”, Laura Paquet emphasizes the significant evolution of the retail world from ancient to modern times, while highlighting several key factors in its transformation. Paquet first argues that malls evolved from places to shop to places that provide other services and social interactions, an example of which being the Greek marketplaces and the Paris Palace Mall. Furthermore, she claims malls are constantly changing to provide a more comfortable experience for their shoppers by moving the stores indoors and making it more easily accessible. Paquet makes note of how the automobile made a huge difference in the growth of malls, as it allowed for a much more easy time for suburban households to travel to nearby retail centers.
However, Paquet also argues that the growth of malls could not last forever, as they started to decline, which led to the creation of bigger malls rather than a rapid expansion of regular ones.

The idea that e-commerce can fill the shoes of traditional shopping centers demonstrates why online stores like Amazon are beginning to take the place of malls. Shopping centers in the past have appealed to consumers for three main reasons. As Parquet demonstrates in her article, malls are popular choices for consumers because they, 1) Provide a comfortable shopping experience, 2) Present many goods and services to be easily accessible, and 3) Deliver a form of social interaction. Therefore, it can be inferred that by providing the same services better, Amazon and other digital retailers have begun to take the market from the malls. Digital markets allow customers to browse and buy from the comforts of their own home, and contain nearly infinite lists of every item that could be sold. Therefore, digital markets are able to provide an extremely comfortable shopping experience as well as display a large selection of goods and services, which are as easy to purchase as clicking a button. These factors have solidified Amazon as a better alternative to the shopping mall. Therefore, consumer culture favored digital markets such as Amazon rather than traditional shopping centers due to e-commerce companies’ ability to provide an easily accessible and expansive selection of goods, along with allowing for the consumer to browse and purchase conveniently and comfortably.

Although Amazon is economically dominating shopping malls and their big retail stores, some argue that traditional shopping centers are not being made obsolete. James Farrel asserts that they are becoming more and more specialized and adaptive in today’s changing market in his article *Shopping for American Culture*. He claims that malls are an important aspect of society, due to their cultural value and influence on shoppers. He begins his article by claiming...
that the large quantity of malls in America offer the nation positive effects through giving economic benefits via the generation of taxes and jobs. He goes on to explain that malls are not just a place for shopping; they are also capable of inspiring thoughtful reflection through being cultural hubs where people can express themselves freely. Additionally, Farrel claims that shopping malls are important because they allow shoppers to interact with a wide range of experiences, both socially and commercially, and because so much consumerism happens at the mall, one may learn a lot from paying attention to the carefully crafted retail aspects of shopping centers. He uses contextual examples, such as a sports store and a Victoria’s Secret to demonstrate that malls are places where stories are told through a gathering of experiences, which leads to reflection upon American cultural values. In his article, Farrel argues that “... shopping is a complex act, or, more precisely, a complex interaction. It’s not just a matter of choosing items and paying for them, it’s an act of desire that is shaped individually and culturally, an interaction with shops and and with a complex infrastructure of production and distribution. It’s an act of conscience in which our own values interact with commercial and cultural values” (Farrell 250). Farrell asserts that shopping is more than just the purchasing of items, it is also a personal experience. He describes the connection between shopper and shopping center as an interaction between commercial and cultural values, which demonstrates that shopping centers allow one to be more of an individual at a mall, Farrell argues. Furthermore, he demonstrates that although Amazon might offer consumers certain benefits, the shopping mall gives individuals a cultural and personal experience which a website cannot offer.

Similarly, in the article published by ICSC Research ‘Shopping Centers: America’s First and Foremost Marketplace’, the argument that shopping centers are not in danger from websites
such as Amazon. ICSC research argues that through integrating with digital markets and finding niches, malls can still be an important aspect of one’s shopping experience. They assert that “By embracing the e-commerce channel, retailers are finding that the Internet is complementary to their brick-and-mortar establishments.”, citing a study that “found that for a particular department store, customers who shopped exclusively online browsed the website an average of three times per year while those who shopped exclusively in-store visited the store an average of 7.5 times per year. However, those individuals who used both channels were found to have shopped nine times a year (1.7 times online and 7.3 times in-store).” (ICSC Research). ICSC reveals that by integrating digital markets into their stores, traditional shopping retailers are gaining back more consumers than before. This demonstrates that traditional shopping centers are still relevant to the modern consumer, although they must make shifts in their business strategy to remain effective. James Farrell would most likely agree with ICSC Research, as both argue is that malls still have, and will continue to have, an important role in our society. Both writers would agree that through finding niche markets, and providing an experience to customers, malls have the power to maintain competitiveness in the digital age driven market.

Malls have been the epicenter of the American shopping experience for centuries. Therefore, it is not surprising that the change in buyer’s preferences has had a dramatic impact on the world of consumerism. Amazon has risen as a new digital mall and has outstripped the antiquital malls of the past. However, modern malls have found ways to adapt to these changes, which allows them to stay relevant in today’s markets. The increase of technology in one’s daily life has opened the door to countless possibilities for consumerism, many of which have yet to been explored.
Bibliography


*Shopping Centers: America’s First and Foremost Marketplace.*

