



## Future fantasies: A social change perspective of retailing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>☆</sup>

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### Abstract

Experts expect great retailing changes in the next ten years. What do consumers expect? With increasing innovation in retail technology and the large-scale implementation of e-commerce formats, shifts in consumer behavior can be categorized as *social change*. Sociologists have long studied the interaction of social change and technology, focusing on society members' characteristics to help predict the future. One characteristic of enduring influence is age. In this research note, we consider consumer expectations regarding the evolution of retailing, with an emphasis on expectations of social change and the variance of such expectations by age cohort. © 2002 by New York University. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Consumer expectations; Social change; Cohort effects

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### Introduction

The fantasies of the “common man” as harbingers of innovation are not without precedent. H.G. Wells, the popular science fiction writer of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, was well known for his prescient predictions of future technology. Under the guise of literary license (*The War in the Air*, 1908) and in nonfiction essays (*Anticipations*, 1902), Wells predicted such innovations as automotive transport, aviation, major home appliances, chemical cleansers, and suburban living. Trained as a draper and employed as a private school teacher after failing to finish a degree in biology, Wells had little real experience with the scientific technologies he imagined.

Scholars and practitioners agree that momentous change is in store for retailing. The responsibility for predicting and implementing such change falls not only to marketers, but also to scientists, engineers, programmers, financiers, lawyers, and managers of production and distribution. It is natural, in the face of a technological revolution, to focus on

the predictions, opinions, and actions of those, such as the aforementioned, who are responsible for creating the new world of retailing. Conversely, consumer inputs concerning major changes in retailing may be discounted or ignored based on a lack of technical understanding. However, in seeking to predict the future, one should consider several different drivers of change. Scientists, engineers, and programmers may drive what is possible. Financiers, lawyers, and managers may drive what is feasible. Consumers may also impact long-term change because they drive what change is *expected*, and ultimately, *accepted*. Thus, even in an arena where the technically proficient wield the greatest power of prediction and implementation, it may be helpful to step back and simply ask, “What do consumers expect from retailing in the future?”

#### *E-commerce as social change*

We can further validate an investigation of consumer expectations regarding the evolution of retailing when we consider the magnitude of the potential changes heralded by e-commerce. Can e-commerce be categorized then as *social change*? Social change, a fundamental concept in sociology, can be defined as a series of transformations in a society's patterns of thought, behavior, relationships, and institutions that occur within a discrete social system (Sztompka, 1993). The consumer marketplace, or retailing, can easily be considered a discrete social system with norms of thought,

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behavior, and relationships. Computer-oriented retail formats are expected to shift many marketplace patterns, such as norms for information search, guided decision heuristics, social interactions between buyer and seller (or *among* buyers), perceptions of time and money, and hedonic/utilitarian aspects of shopping. It is not unusual for technological innovations to trigger social shifts. As Oldham (1969) noted, science and technology play a causal role in social change, yet social change profoundly impacts technology itself. Evidence of new technological influences on consumers' behavior and thought patterns can be seen in recent work on consumer perceptions of paradoxes engendered by technology (Mick & Fournier, 1998).

If we consider e-commerce innovations within a framework of social change, we are motivated to examine the innovation process as would a sociologist or anthropologist, borrowing from these disciplines to identify influential factors that impact large-scale changes within a population. From sociology, we know that change is incontrovertibly a product of the social environment in which it occurs. Change can be a function of, most notably, characteristics of society members (Rogers, 1995). In this note, we consider one important characteristic, age, which represents the dual impact of life stage and cohort effects.

#### *Age and social change*

Marketers appreciate the influence of consumer age on responses to marketing stimuli (e.g., Pechmann & Ratneswar, 1994; Yoon, 1997). Both behaviorally influential and easily measurable, it is not surprising that age is a commonly used demographic variable in marketing. Sociologists also have a long history of interest in the impact of age and aging. Age is unique as a descriptive characteristic of an individual when compared to other common demographic or personality variables. Given a known birth date, one's age is quantifiable, irrefutable, and finite. It changes continually, yet at the same rate for all people. All known societies have measured age and created formal or informal "age strata" in their social systems. While one can change or modify other personal characteristics (income, weight, intelligence, etc.), age cannot be altered. Age has value, since it may confer benefits to the individual in terms of both money (such as consumer discounts, tax breaks, or other forms of community assistance) or in terms of power (such as voting rights, career seniority, or special interest groups)—yet it cannot be transferred or traded to others. Hazelrigg (1997) argued that, "Age is one of the least alienable properties a person 'has'... Anything so staunchly resistant to alienation, constantly 'there' as a property of a person yet constantly changing, must be, one easily imagines, among the most potent of explanatory variables in social science's toolkit. Surely, age explains a lot" (p. 95).

It would be surprising, then, if age effects did not play a role in consumers' beliefs about, opinions on, and adoption

of, e-commerce. Within a society, age (and, perhaps more importantly, cohort) is both a driver of, and a constraint on, the pace of social change or "progress." Comte, a French philosopher of the early nineteenth century, suggested that increasing life spans would slow the tempo of progress because the conservative "go-slow" influence of older generations would act for longer periods of time if they lived longer (as reported in Mannheim, 1952). Ryder (1965), on the other hand, countered the popular assumption that the emergence of new, young cohorts ensures progress. He argued that new societal members (or member cohorts) facilitate change, but that the direction of this change is not mandated. In other words, new cohorts may support new ideas or ways of doing things, but these changes are not necessarily more liberal or progressive. For Ryder, as a political analyst, this distinction between *new* and *liberal* is important. However, as marketers, we may be sufficiently interested in the concept of young age cohorts' facilitation of social innovation, irrespective of its direction.

Sociologists offer several reasons for the innovative influence of youth on societal change. The experience of older generations may hinder change because existing or "old" knowledge is most effective when applied to old problems or scenarios. Thus, new situations force older society members to "unlearn" their rules or modes of operation (Mannheim, 1952). Older society members are behaviorally efficient; younger members are behaviorally flexible (Ryder, 1965). This is consistent with research in cognitive psychology that describes the impact of past behavior on future behavior. Well-practiced past behaviors foster (1) automaticity in both information processing and action, and (2) ingrained intentions through the strength of habit (Ouellette & Wood, 1998). In a closely related domain, researchers have posited many ways that an individual's experience (or expertise) can impact his or her information processing and behavior (see Alba & Hutchinson, 1987 for a comprehensive review). Sociologists also suggest that individuals' identities strengthen with age, leading older individuals to perceive themselves and their behavior patterns as relatively static, even in a changing world (Alwin, 1997). Again, this hypothesis is echoed by cognitive psychologists who demonstrate that attitudes and beliefs can polarize over time with repeated expression (Tesser, 1978; Downing, Judd, & Brauer, 1992).

Some have argued that the two age cohorts that will most impact the growth of e-commerce are baby boomers and the baby boomlet (Raymond, 2000). Baby boomers (those consumers born between 1946 and 1965) have long been noted as an influential consumer group due in part to the sheer size of the cohort. Due both to their current life stage (age effects) and generational experiences (cohort effects), baby boomers are described as being content with the status quo (Russell, 1996), an attitude that could impact their willingness to adopt large-scale innovations. Baby boomlets (consumers born between 1977 and 1997 and also known as "Gen Y") have emerged as the next cohort since the baby

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