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Mobile shopping from home: Digitalization and the reconfiguration of domestic retailscapes

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Mobile shopping is becoming an increasingly widespread phenomenon and an emerging field of research (Groß, 2015). While much of the early research in this field has been focused on understanding what affects the acceptance of technology for mobile shopping and intentions and attitudes driving mobile shopping, there is a growing body of work that sets out to understand how mobile shopping is carried out in practice and what this entails (for an overview of this field, see Fuentes & Svingstedt, 2017).

Studies within this activity-based stream of research show that consumers are using mobile phones to for example search for product information, check store availability, compare prices, and purchase products online (Spaid & Flint, 2014). Consumers are also using mobile phones to chat about products with friends, to check blogs on the go, and to coordinate their shopping trips with friends and family (Fuentes & Svingstedt, 2017). Mobile phones, it would seem, are both used as practical and social shopping tools, offering consumers a broad range of possibilities (Spaid & Flint, 2014). The use therefore of mobile phones is having significant impact on shopping. Some studies even indicate that as mobile phones are becoming increasingly integrated into shopping practices, they are reconfiguring the practice of shopping.

While much can be said about what this means for the practice of shopping, one of the more significant changes is the temporal and spatial shift that comes as the result of the ubiquity of mobile phones. Because we carry these devices with us at all times (more or less) and because of the development of wifi and mobile internet, consumers today have access to retailscapes wherever and whenever they are. In addition to allowing consumers to shop on the go, as other studies have shown (Fuentes & Svingstedt, 2017), this also means that a considerable amount of shopping is today done digitally from home. Smartphones are central in this new home-shopping practice, enabling consumers access to multiple retail sites as well as a plethora of shopping tools (budget apps, shopping list apps) and third-party sites (such as price runner). While shopping from home has been possible ever since the advent of catalogue shopping, we propose that the introduction of the smartphone and other mobile digital devices is leading to the reconfiguration of mobile shopping from home, changing both how we shop at home but also how we approach and perform our homes.

The aim of this paper is therefore to examine and explain how and under what conditions mobile phones are reconfiguring both the practice of mobile shopping from home and the spatialities and temporalities of the home. This is important both to understand the developing practice of mobile shopping but also to be able to comment on the impact that digitally enabled commercialization is having on consumers everyday lives.

Theoretically we draw on the theoretical framework of practice theory and the geographically influenced concept of retailscape (Fuentes, Bäckström, & Svingstedt, 2017) to conceptualise home shopping as mode of practice both anchored in and capable of reconfiguring the spatial and temporal make-up of the home.

Empirically, the analysis draws on an on-going ethnographically inspired study of home shopping consumers. Participants are asked to document their at-home mobile shopping using a research app, taking photos and writing comments, for a period of two weeks. They are then interviewed using the collected material but also going beyond it about their home shopping and how/when/where it is performed, what other practices it is connected to/inhibits and how this practice has developed over time.

Preliminary results indicate that at home mobile shopping – defined in the broad sense to include – is a practice that has been increasing in intensity, particularly during the pandemic. While consumers approach and conduct mobile shopping from home in different ways, they all developed

more or less routinized forms of mobile shopping. In establishing these new modes of shopping, the practices “carved out” space for themselves, being often conducted in specific home place – in the kitchen/by the fridge, in bed or the sofa – depending on the practice. Moreover, mobile shopping from home required that the practice be “wedged-in” between other practices. Temporal ordering and synchronizing with other practices were crucial for the reconfiguring effects that mobile shopping had on everyday lives. It was thus clear that mobile shopping from home was a practice that had to be actively worked into the nexus of everyday practices and what once in place it reconfigured by the spatial and temporal organisation of the home.

This digitally enabled reconfiguration had both positive and negative outcomes for consumers. While mobile shopping from home often helped consumer juggle their busy lifestyles, they were also often worried that this practice was conducted at the expense of other social and work-related practices. Similarly, while mobile shopping from home made their home a more functional space, particularly so under the pandemic, it also connected their homes to multiple retailscapes, at times with perceived negative results.

To conclude, while we do not claim homes had previously been free of commercial influence, on the contrary the home has a long history as a retailscape (see for example catalogue shopping and the phenomenon of TV-shop), mobile phones lead to the enactment of new domestic retailscapes. Both the mechanisms involved in this process and the outcome of it warrants scholarly attention.

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