

A world without brick-and-mortar stores? Even avid online shoppers say, 'no, thanks'

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It has been dubbed the "retail apocalypse—the widespread shuttering of brick-and-mortar stores across America in the wake of online shopping's skyrocketing popularity. But how do consumers feel about this changing retail landscape?

University of Arizona researcher Sabrina Helm decided to find out in a new study published in the *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*.

Helm and her colleagues surveyed nearly 400 [consumers](#) about their [shopping](#) habits and perceptions of today's retail environment. While shoppers were largely split on whether they preferred doing their shopping online versus in person, most agreed on one thing: If physical stores were to disappear completely, it would have negative consequences for society, such as lost jobs, fewer opportunities for social interaction and perhaps even an increase in certain types of crime.

From 2016 to 2017, store closures in the U.S. more than tripled to about 7,000. While the rise of [online shopping](#) isn't entirely to blame, it's certainly a major factor, Helm said, with e-commerce sales

increasing 101 percent between 2011 and 2016. Consumers recognize this, and they see themselves as the ones driving change in retail, Helm and her colleagues found.

"We set out to figure out how consumers perceive and make sense of this change, and what they anticipate for the future—for themselves and for society—if this retail change is persistent," said Helm, an associate professor in the UA Norton School of Family and Consumer Sciences in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

To find out how consumers feel about the way retail is changing, Helm and her colleagues first analyzed more than 1,600 comments made on online news articles written about store closures or the evolving retail environment. They then went a step further by conducting an online survey, in which they asked a different group of people a variety of open-ended questions about their shopping preferences and perceptions.

Respondents who preferred online shopping cited many of the expected reasons: It's fast, convenient and offers a wide variety of options. For some older people and those with certain disabilities or mobility challenges, online shopping was the only way to make purchases. And some people even said they like online shopping because it allows them to avoid interacting with people.

Those who favored shopping in stores said they like the tactile experience. They want to be able to touch and handle products—especially clothing and food—before they buy them. Many also described going to the store as a pleasant social experience that they share with family and friends, and some, unlike their online shopping counterparts, said they enjoy interacting with strangers. Others even said that shopping was important to their physical health, as it was their primary form of exercise.

However, regardless of personal shopping

preferences, when participants were asked to imagine a world entirely devoid of physical stores, most said it would be bad for society.

"The majority said this would be terrible," Helm said. "There's a sense that brick-and-mortar stores are part of the social fabric of our society. If they disappear, many are concerned about the economy and what this will do for jobs and revenue for communities. Many people also said stores were vital to their quality of life. There are also fears that come from the closure of store spaces: What happens with all that empty space? Is crime going to increase because now we have all these empty areas? Crime rate was also a concern with regard to increased online shopping: Are there going to be more home invasions because there are all these packages on door fronts?"

Many also expressed concerns that people's social skills might worsen in a world devoid of face-to-face interactions in stores, Helm said.

Some study participants had a more favorable view of a world without stores, arguing that e-commerce is a better all-around option and that retail spaces could be repurposed as parks and green spaces that would encourage people to engage in activities other than shopping. But those people were in the minority, Helm said.

"Brick-and-mortar stores play an important role in consumers' lives and society, and in most consumers' minds, they should survive," she said.

More Power for the Consumer

The closing of physical stores isn't really an apocalypse as much as a transformation, Helm said. And, it's far from the first in retail—in the late 1800s came the dawn of modern-day department stores; malls started booming in the 1950s; and in the 1960s, big box retailers emerged on the scene.

Online shopping represents yet another shift in retail, but the difference this time is how much power consumers now have in affecting change through their choices and the feedback they're able to provide retailers online, Helm said.

"There's a recognition with the advent of the internet that consumers have more power in deciding how retail channels evolve," Helm said. "They have more impact now on how companies make decisions than they've ever had, and consumers also perceive themselves to have that power."

That's why Helm says it's important to understand what consumers are thinking, and why brick-and-mortar retailers, especially, should be paying attention.

Helm noted that some stores have turned to technology in an attempt to enhance the in-person shopping experience, adding features like virtual fitting rooms or elaborate digital displays. But Helm's findings suggest they might be better served by focusing more on fundamentals, since study participants' biggest complaints about physical stores were poor customer service, long lines and items being out of stock.

"It's up to retailers to increase consumer preference again for brick-and-mortar shopping," she said, "and keeping people in the [store](#) starts with the basics."

More information: Sabrina Helm et al, Navigating the 'retail apocalypse': A framework of consumer evaluations of the new retail landscape, *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jretconser.2018.09.015](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2018.09.015)

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