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Consumerism and Covid - 19 : A Neoliberal Analysis

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Fall 2020

Communication Studies

Consumerism and Covid -19 : A Neoliberal Analysis

Abstract

This paper attempts to draw a line between consumer culture and COVID -19, while finding how it has been influenced by social media and targeted advertisements. Through exploring Foucault's understanding of neoliberalism and the *homoeconomicus*, articles and media news, this paper will have assessed the changes of consumer culture due to the "shelter in place" orders. Additionally, it will attempt to redefine Foucault's *homoeconomicus* to fit this new model as well as observe how electronic surveillance through social media platforms and their targeted ads will or have changed the landscape of neoliberalism. In summarizing the notable differences in the use of individuals' online presence versus the older model of focus groups we will see that society is providing immeasurable numbers of free labor hours. By analysing all of these different avenues, this paper will attempt to create predictions for what this "new" neoliberalism will look like not only for the current climate but what this will imply for the neoliberal climate of the future - that is the world we will be living in when things go back to "normal".

Keywords: consumerism (a.k.a consumer culture), COVID-19, homoeconomicus, social media, shelter in place, electronic surveillance, targeted advertisements, neoliberalism, focus group

Through the exploration of Foucault's understanding of neoliberalism and the *homoeconomicus*, articles and media news, this paper will be assessing the changes of consumer culture due to the “shelter in place” orders. By doing so, we will also be redefining Foucault's *homoeconomicus* to fit this new model as well as observing how electronic surveillance through social media platforms and their targeted ads have changed the landscape of neoliberalism. This paper will also attempt to make notable differences in the use of individuals' online presence versus the older model of focus groups as well as to implicate predictions for what this “new” neoliberalism will look like for the future consumers.

Due to the influx of people to their homes, consumer culture is changing rapidly. For those of us who have the privilege during this time, many people are switching from in person shopping experiences to that of online shopping. Consumer culture by definition of Fuchs(2018)... “humans are confronted with ads everywhere, capitalist logic colonizes the social, public, and private world”, and in this new isolated world - we will focus on that of the private and “new” social worlds. With our worlds becoming smaller - advertisers are targeting our private spaces at a much more accurate rate than ever before. As society shifts to conducting our business, social “gatherings” and personal experiences through our phones and computers we expose ourselves more online. With people becoming more accustomed to virtual assistants helping us create grocery lists as well as more generalized online shopping - we become more susceptible to the subsequent ads that follow.

This shift requires us to reassess Foucault's meaning of the *homoeconomicus*. As we know, *homoeconomicus* can be broken down into the “economic man”, while Foucault(2010) defines this roughly as “a man of enterprise and production” - we will elaborate on this definition further by saying that this means an “individual who works to create capital to be spent and used back into general society”. In this regard, we can interpret this definition (loosely) as someone who creates and produces content. The reason we change this definition is so that it can fit to the more “modern” conception of

the “homoeconomicus”. Therefore let’s apply this to all who frequent the search engine Google, as well as those who spend any time on social media. This is because these people are “creating content” by their own wants, needs, and “likes” for products and then “producing” information that is compiled by their search engine, and social media platform. Foucault restates something similar to my interpretation later on, stating the economic man, “... produces his own satisfaction”(Foucault ,2010). Satisfaction in this regard, now means more than just income - but the satisfaction that comes with something as simple as a like on a picture. As mentioned before, this is extremely critical due to the large influx of people staying at home due to the “shelter in place” order, now more than ever are people creating this free content.

“Why is this content important?” you may ask. It essentially comes down to free labor. Before the age of the internet, businesses large and small depended on focus groups to give feedback on their products or services. By bypassing the need to collect a large enough group of people to be considered diverse enough to give critical information, businesses can now rely on social media platforms to do this for them. To summarize a key point in a study written by Rolland and Paramintier in the International Journal of Market Research, these online spaces provide a much larger, more diverse and quicker response. Take a moment to recall how many emails you may have received asking you to either take a survey or write a review for something you have purchased. While the argument can be made that most people look over the emails, the same argument can be made for the number of people who take their time to reply to them. However, with social media - there is no email, there is no survey, it is just a matter of a “like” or a “share” and the data gets compiled and quantified.

The more time people spend inside and online the more sophisticated and detailed individual peoples online presence become. The more sophisticated the user profile is the more targeted ads can be created down to what type of toilet paper you prefer. This may seem convenient for the time being, but what does this mean for the future of “in-person” shopping? The support of smaller local businesses? Why go to smaller websites when google will connect you to amazon for all of your wants and

needs? The longevity of the issues created in this time, as stated by Pasquareli (2020), will outlast the pandemic. This is due to the fact that people create new habits (without coercion) within sixty-six days. She goes on to state that more than forty percent of Americans have already begun the process of ordering their groceries online. And with these new habits, after the pandemic has passed - it has now changed the way people will conduct themselves back in the "outside" world.

Before we can get further into the social media aspect of this, it is important to reflect on the individual known as Edward Snowden. Edward Snowden is a former CIA officer and whistleblower of the NSA (National Security Agency), and in 2013 he leaked information regarding the United States' government's global electronic surveillance system and its monitoring of the American people as well as several of our allies without our knowledge (Tiainen, 2017). This is a critical part of this neoliberal story as it was a waving flag letting the people know that we, the people and our private information are the new "free market". And competition for our information is now obviously fair game. After this information came to light, for a brief moment, the people's privacy was in center stage and agencies were exposed for the collection and reselling of the people's personal data to large corporations. And for that moment, people saw the social implications associated with this information and became much more hesitant to share personal information on the internet.

However, when looking at social media as it is today, these concerns did not last long in the public eye. Our personal information is more available now than ever. Based on an article by Newberry(2019) just before COVID-19 - over one billion people use instagram every month, and one-third of those most viewed stories are from businesses. To reiterate, these were the numbers before the quarantine. With even more people flooding the site every day, Instagram has more free information to sell to third party companies. By selling our information to these companies, they are able to flex their corporate powers and push us to align with their own goals(Ball, 2017) - as in us buying things we don't need during a pandemic. Targeted advertisements are in my belief close to the pinical of neoliberal beliefs of the homoeconomicus. And by this it's

meant that people freely “give” their wants and needs to be exploited by social media platforms, which keeps the system moving because there is always something to sell.

Outside of Instagram, other websites and devices you use take what they hear and use that to skew your ads. In a Washington Post article by G.A. Fowler, he states that, “Many smart-speaker owners don’t realize it, but Amazon keeps a copy of everything Alexa records after it hears its name. Apple’s Siri, and until recently Google’s Assistant, by default also keep recordings to help train their artificial intelligences.”(May, 2019). This is marketed to consumers in ways that don’t seem very obvious. When these devices and virtual assistants first came out they were sold to the public as a means to keep things in order, but the question no one asked is when do they stop listening. Unless you individually go through each of your individual devices and assistant settings they are made to continue recording and even listen if they “think” they hear their name - which results in recordings of conversations that were not intended for them.

These overheard and recorded conversations have dire consequences. Calling back to the Washington Post article by Fowler (2019) he clearly outlines how separate systems all become integrated to one provider - Amazon. If your devices (such as your digital thermostat, phone controlled lights, smart refrigerator) are all connected to Alexa - so that you can tell them what to do, Amazon can make more specific and accurate targeted ads. Amazon would effectively know when you are leaving the house, when you are running low on milk or when it gets cold. This would then prompt Amazon to send you reminders to put items on your grocery list and when to buy next season's apparel.

While targeted ads should be a cause for concern, there are some platforms that are using this information to draw attention while devaluing that this is bad. In an article written by Moslien(2019) on Glamors’ online magazine, your “ad interests” are a new “Instagram game”. Made popular by another journalist on Twitter, the new #InstagramAds became a trend to show how “funny” and “outrageous” the things on this list could be. While it seems almost innocent, these people who decided to repost and

play along just gave instagram a whole slew of new information to make their ad algorithm better. The question that can be asked here is “How does this game make their algorithm better if they already have this information?”. Well, when people post their list, they either confirm or deny what is on the list which creates something of a cyclical information stream. Additionally, this algorithm can then compare your list to those of the lists of your “friends” or “followers”. Making this “game” a more sophisticated focus group.

Speaking of games, as Foucault(2010) describes it, neoliberalism is a game. And this game is a social contract of which one can never drop out. No one really planned to be a part of it, but the rules are held up by the state. In regards to this paper, I'd like to point out this is exactly what happens when you put your information into the internet. Once you are in - you are never able to get out. Now, even more so than before - people are putting all of their trust into what the internet has to offer such as job security, groceries, and entertainment. Not only that, this game includes those who lost their jobs. Whether they wanted to or not, the only way to find a job now is to apply to various sites online. By giving more of our information - that is our power - away to various agencies, the people are forced to put their trust in the state to regulate those agencies(Tiainen, 2017).

With all of this in mind, one is left to believe that once this pandemic is over, there will be no going back to “normal”. Society will have been changed, because by the time that everything “reopens” new habits and new ways of surviving will have been formed. With the adjustments having been made to push more of our everyday lives online, these new habits will be hard to break, and the adjustment period will be longer and more expensive than its worth. The impact that this virus will have just on consumer culture is astronomical mostly in part that small businesses will struggle to be found in the vastness of the internet and we will see monopolies like Amazon get even stronger.

To restate, this paper attempted to draw a line between consumer culture and COVID -19, while finding how it has been influenced by social media and targeted advertisements. Through exploring Foucault's understanding of neoliberalism and the

homoeconomicus, articles and media news, we have assessed the changes of consumer culture due to the “shelter in place” orders. We have also redefined Foucaults homoeconomicus to fit this new model as well as observed how electronic surveillance through social media platforms and their targeted ads have changed the landscape of neoliberalism. In summarizing the notable differences in the use of individuals' online presence versus the older model of focus groups we see that society is providing immeasurable numbers of free labor hours. Additionally, this paper created predictions for what this “new” neoliberalism will look like for the future consumers as well as what this will imply for the neoliberal climate that we will be living in when things go back to “normal”.

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