

OF FUNERAL SHROUDS, MAIL ORDER SHOPPING, AND BRITISH RETAILING HISTORY

Margaret K. Hogg
University College Salford, England

ABSTRACT

This paper examines some of the theoretical and conceptual issues involved in studying retailing systems, with particular reference to investigating patterns of in-home shopping in Britain. Hollander (1986) called for more historical studies in retailing and especially for more conceptual and empirical research to test existing models of retailing such as the Wheel of Retailing and the Retail Life Cycle. Hirschman and Stampfl (1980) talked about "the conceptual isolationism" of retail research which had largely developed separately from research in marketing and consumer behavior. Savitt (1989) explored the themes and underlying theories in studies of retailing history. In surveying the literature from two areas, British business history and retailing, this paper will identify some of the problems of establishing the disciplinary context for model building in the area of historical retailing studies and will evaluate a series of models which might be useful in developing a conceptual framework within which to examine patterns of in-home shopping in Britain.

A study of retailing systems in Britain, notably an investigation of patterns of in-home shopping, could take a number of different starting points. The central focus could be either the retail institutions, or the customers/consumers, or the products available via in-home shopping methods in Britain. All of these subjects could produce insights into the development of systems of retailing Britain, and yet a single focus would not answer either Hollander's or Savitt's call for writing synthetic history. The main institutional actors in in-home shopping in Britain are mail order retailers. This paper begins by exploring theoretical frameworks for examining and explaining the development and evolution of British mail order firms. Secondly, this paper considers methods for incorporating consumer behavior research into analyzing patterns of consumer usage of mail order to explore the linkages between the mail order firm and the customer for in-home shopping. Thirdly, this paper very briefly considers the place of the product in in-home shopping (i.e., the funeral shrouds of the title). This paper argues that an approach which combines the "diffusion of innovations" with models drawn from consumer behavior could provide a theoretical framework within which to examine British mail order shopping.

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