

Is Physical Retail a Relic of the Past?

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ENGL 1121: College Writing and Critical Reading

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March 9, 2025

Nowadays, store closures are as common as ever. Already in 2025, some huge retail companies are going bankrupt and closing all physical locations nationwide, such as Party City and Jo-Ann Fabrics. A factor these and other companies have in common? In one way or another, online retail had a notable effect on them. With this information, many wonder if the brick-and-mortar style should become a relic of the past, with a future dominated by online commerce.

Sarah Rudge of *Retail Merchandiser Magazine* mostly argues otherwise. In their article “The Resurgence of Brick-and-Mortar Stores: 7 Reasons Why Physical Retail Still Matters,” Rudge (2024) argues that “In an increasingly digital world, the relevance of brick-and-mortar stores might seem to be dwindling. However, physical retail spaces continue to play a crucial role in the retail ecosystem.” In their words, this is because of seven key reasons. For one, giving consumers the ability to purchase goods inside of a physical store allows the consumers to have a sensory experience with their surroundings. Also, Rudge (2024) believes that another benefit is in the sense of celerity, or how quickly consumers can receive products. Another deals with community engagement; interacting with local communities and their economies, in addition to the other reasons listed above, builds important customer dedication. Finally, they found that mingling digital aspects into retail shopping can help provide modern businesses with adaptations that will benefit them. I agree with the majority of Rudge’s argument and want to expand on it by speaking more in-depth about how in-store engagement can benefit a company and how retail stores impact return rates in relation to online shopping. However, there is another underlying point beneath their main seven reasons that deserves to be expanded upon: the ways that companies with physical storefronts increase brand identity and customer dedication that cannot be replicated with online shopping. While Rudge’s argument is largely valid, it includes a flaw in the case of the speed taken to put a product in a consumer’s hands.

In-store experiences are crucial to retail culture, as they can help consumers engage with products hands-on, which benefits both the consumer and the company. In their article, Rudge (2024) gives examples of luxury goods, clothing products, and electronics. This makes sense; if a consumer purchases a sweatshirt from Amazon, there is not a way to test how the sweatshirt fits on them exactly. Sure, they can choose the size of the sweatshirt, but from personal experience, a medium or a large from one brand or style of clothing does not mean the same size from another brand will fit the same. This is a key reason ordering online can be troublesome. If something arrives and does not fit correctly, consumers must go through the inconvenience of shipping it back to the company. However, in most physical stores, consumers can try on clothing before they purchase it, which will help to determine if they are satisfied enough to purchase the item. The company could have less of a chance of consumers returning the product, resulting in maintaining profits, whilst the consumers are able to keep what they buy because they know the item fits, as they viewed it in store. For example, *Appriss Retail* (2024) conducted a study of seven varied businesses, examining their return rates, both from in-store and online sales. In the article, the company reported its findings: “Across each type of retailer, the online return rate is much greater than the in-store return rate, ranging from a 30% difference for the least impacted retailer... to nearly three times higher for the most affected retailer.” For the majority of the time, my family shops for clothing in person, only occasionally buying clothing online. I find that when we do buy clothing online, it seldom fits perfectly, and it ends up being sent right back.

I believe that in Rudge’s argument, a theme that was hinted at but not explicitly mentioned would have to do with both general indirect branding and marketing. Marketing is everywhere, and it is most definitely inescapable, but a rarely talked about factor would come in the form of retail stores themselves and their appearances. Commercial hubs in cities provide retailers the opportunity to set up shop and expand their business to new areas, in turn giving

new consumers a chance to recognize the company's logo and style firsthand. This prompts companies to design storefronts that consumers recognize and can result in the company's identity strengthening. Take solely Target's exterior storefront design for example. One feature all locations have in common: they have red concrete balls across the building's front. These do serve a practical purpose, being bollards (building protection from potential vehicular accidents), however the color and shape are reminiscent of the company's logo, and help consumers familiarize the brand with the bollards. The familiarity generated from visuals of a company alone can create loyal consumers. Furthermore, loyal consumers of a brand can be made through face-to-face employee interactions that can only occur in physical retail. Peter Gratton (2025) provides an example of a smaller business implementing these strategies: "A local restaurant's consistent service style [and] interior design... can create loyal customers willing to pay premium prices, even in a crowded market." A few weeks ago I was mattress shopping, and a friendly salesman aided me in finding a new mattress. He provided his own personal experience with some of the mattresses, which ultimately helped me make my final decision. While this interaction did not make me a loyal customer of the company, it gave me a positive, memorable experience with the store that would not have been possible if I had chosen to shop online. Both customer service and building design together can create memorable experiences that cannot be created the same on shopping websites.

One of Rudge's (2024) main claims towards the necessity of retail corresponds to, as they wrote, 'instant gratification.' They refer to the relatability of having packages delayed and arriving late after ordering an item online. This is yet another flaw of online commerce but is solved by way of in-store sales, according to Rudge (2024), which would benefit both businesses and consumers alike. Consumers may end up returning to the company if they understand that they can rely on it, resulting in profit for the business. Rudge (2024) writes on to note that this is

most beneficial in relation to vital goods, such as soap or paper towels, as well as formal wear like dresses or tuxedos. While I do understand and agree with Rudge's point, it is the weakest Rudge makes in defense of their main argument. Retail stores typically do not get product shipments every day, resulting in limited supply. This could result in an unideal experience for consumers who desire the product, such as if a product happens to be sold out for the week in store. In that case, shopping online could be beneficial, as online storefronts usually have larger catalogues. For instance, my father will shop for technology at Best Buy on the occasion, but often the product he is searching for happens to only be at another store, and not the one he goes to. He would purchase it online instead through the Best Buy website and would either have it delivered to our family home or to our local store for convenient pickup. And while yes, it may take a few days, it would save time in the end because it allows him to spend less time purchasing the product in favor of giving him more time to do alternative activities.

Rudge's overall argument towards emphasizing the importance of physical retail was mostly well-put; however, there is an evident flaw in that both physical retail and online retail provide convenience to consumers that can benefit both parties. Besides that, there is no doubt that a physical presence is still important in the modern-day retail industry, because of factors such as physical store layouts, service, and the overall experience that is hard to be replicated by online shopping.

Writing this piece has taught me more about the importance of retailers having a physical presence and it makes me wonder what businesses society will still be able to waltz into in ten years, five years, even the coming year. The research I have done also makes me wonder about how, despite how I have argued of the importance of the presence of physical retail, many popular franchises are still shrinking, even with having online storefronts as well. A larger amount of information would be substantial to provide a more thorough analysis of the retail

industry and might answer holes in this argument. Hopefully, the retail industry can eventually be in equilibrium on maintaining both an online and physical presence. In the meantime, society will just have to wait to see which retail company loses its grip next on the mountain of the industry, resulting in them falling deep into the pits of bankruptcy.

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