



# The changing nature of consumption and the intensification of McDonaldization in the digital age

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## Abstract

In this article, we re-examine the McDonaldization thesis in light of social changes that occurred since the 1990s and notably in light of the onset of digital forms of consumption. The argument is presented that while the theory of McDonaldization remains profoundly relevant to the consumption of bricks-and-mortar locales, it is even more applicable in the digital age, as well as “bricks-and-clicks” consumption sites. The ways in which McDonaldization is played out in three iconic companies, namely, McDonalds, Amazon, and Wal-Mart is critically interrogated. On this basis, the article seeks to understand what the intensification of McDonaldization means for our understanding of the contemporary consumption experience. Arguing that theories are routinely outpaced by the pace of social change, we contend that the digital speeds up processes of rationalization while intensifying levels of consumption. The article concludes by reflecting on what this might mean given that we now live in an age of networked individualism, for our understanding of the relationship between place and consumption: the degree to which digital platforms appear to consumers to be “natural” and thus ideologically powerful, being of particular concern. For this reason, we suggest that the McDonaldization thesis is, in fact, more relevant in the digital future than it was in the bricks-and-mortar past.

## Keywords

Consumption, McDonaldization, prosumption, digital consumption sites, bricks-and-mortar consumption sites

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The theory of McDonaldization has had a significant impact on our understanding of the changing nature of consumption in the age when material, bricks-and-mortar consumption sites reigned supreme. It was also a major focus of debate in social theory around the end of the 20th century (Miles, 2000). In this article, we re-examine the McDonaldization thesis in light of subsequent social changes. Especially important is the shift away from the hegemony of material, bricks-and-mortar consumption settings to digital consumption sites, as well as the ways in which the material and the digital sites are augmenting one another, in particular, in the realm of consumption (Jurgenson, 2012; Ritzer, 1983, 1993). The basic argument to be made here is that while the McDonaldization thesis remains profoundly relevant to still-important bricks-and-mortar consumption locales such as McDonald's, it is even more applicable to today's digital, as well as mixed "bricks-and-clicks," consumption sites (Belk, 2013). In fact, the process of McDonaldization in general, as well as of consumption in particular, has, in many ways, intensified in the digital context. This article thus critically interrogates the McDonaldization of three iconic companies: McDonald's (almost exclusively bricks-and-mortar), Amazon (still almost exclusively digital, despite recent moves in the material direction), and Wal-Mart (continuing to be almost wholly material, but moving strongly to become more of a digital presence). This in turn provides a means for assessing whether, and to what degree, McDonaldization has been intensified in the digital age. More generally, this allows us to analyze what this intensification might mean for our understanding of the nature of the contemporary – and future – consumption experience.

*The McDonaldization of Society*, first published in 1993, dealt at one level with the nature of contemporary consumer society, but at another addressed the fact that society is increasingly characterized by processes of rationalization as originally discussed in the work of Weber (1968 [1921]). The book represented an attempt to investigate the changing character of contemporary social life. McDonald's was presented as being symbolic of broader aspects of social change, the "paradigm case" if you will of "the process by which the principles of the fast food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world" (Ritzer, 1993: 1). The argument then was that the focus on McDonald's provided a metaphorical means of highlighting the change toward a more highly controlled, bureaucratic, and dehumanizing society.

The theory of McDonaldization has been the subject of considerable debate among scholars of consumption; a common criticism being that there has been something of conflation between an understanding of McDonald's as a fast food business and the broader consequences of McDonaldization as a complex social and economic process (Smart, 1999). More specifically, some critics have suggested that the thesis is objectivist in its approach and, as such, fails to articulate the subjective complexities of McDonaldization (Kellner, 1999). In fact, it may be most useful to think of McDonaldization as a theory of social change rather than as a theory of consumption per se. In this respect, it could certainly be argued that the shift to the digital age may require a closer inspection of how

the relationship between production and consumption is played out when the way in which forms of consumption are delivered to the consumer are being transformed. A key concern of many critics of McDonaldization is the extent to which McDonald's is, indeed, paradigmatic and if it is whether that paradigm is, as suggested by Ritzer, one characterized by a set of social relations in which individuality and diversity are being limited, if not destroyed (see Kellner, 1999). In light of what follows, we will go on to consider that the digital intensifies rather than undermines key characteristics of McDonaldization and in particular its tendency to control what, how, and why consumers consume.

Given the above introduction, we offer a brief reflection on the three giants (mentioned above) in the realm of consumption. This will provide a focal point for our understanding of the changing nature of McDonaldization and its relationship to consumption.

### **The major players**

Globally, McDonald's, a huge chain of bricks-and-mortar fast food restaurants, is undoubtedly the best-known of the three companies being discussed here. It is one of the world's most famous and familiar brands, trailing in fame only Coca Cola in the world of consumption and the digital hegemony – Apple, Microsoft, IBM, and Google ([www.uncover/discover.com](http://www.uncover/discover.com)). While not unknown in much of the world, Amazon and Wal-Mart are not as famous as brands as is McDonald's. This brand familiarity relates to the global reach of the three companies. McDonald's has the greatest global presence with almost 37,000 restaurants worldwide, about 23,000 of them outside the United States. Wal-Mart is a well-known brand in the United States and a few other countries worldwide. It is best-known for its large, hyper, super, and discount stores (such as Sam's Club), but it has also recently opened a number of smaller neighborhood markets. Wal-Mart operates almost 12,000 stores worldwide, over 6000 of them outside the United States. Its super- and discount stores are characterized by the many (120,000–150,000), competitively priced, products on offer in each large-scale locale. While not a negligible force globally, Wal-Mart is a much smaller player outside the United States than McDonald's. Its stores outside the United States are in relatively few countries, most notably Mexico. Reflective of its lesser global proliferation and lower brand recognition, Wal-Mart operates under several different names outside the United States (e.g. Wal-Mex in Mexico and ASDA in the United Kingdom). The nearly 400 million products for sale on Amazon.com (with 43% of all e-commerce (Wingfield, 2017)) dwarfs the number for sale at even the largest Wal-Mart. Meanwhile, Amazon faces significant global digital competition, for example, from Alibaba and Lozada in Asia. It is currently competing aggressively with Alibaba for the burgeoning Indian market. While it receives a great deal of global press, Amazon is perhaps less well known globally as a brand than McDonald's and even Wal-Mart.

McDonald's, Amazon, or Wal-Mart is not a manufacturer in the traditional sense; they produce little or nothing. Rather, they are very clearly in the business of

maximizing opportunities for consumption. As such, they constitute iconic brands of a post-industrial society intent on shifting the economic center of advanced societies from manufacturing to consumption. This is reflected in the fact that, for example, over 70% of the economy of the United States is traceable to consumption. From the point of view of total business done McDonald's is by far the least successful of the three entities being discussed here. However, this is an unfair comparison since the other two sell many different products, while McDonald's sells only food and, at that, only a very limited range of food. In consumption terms, Wal-Mart is now by far the biggest player. It did almost US\$500 billion in business in 2016, Amazon grossed US\$136 billion (US\$152 billion if we add the business done by Whole Foods acquired in 2016), and McDonald's trailed badly doing only about US\$25 billion in business. Wal-Mart had the most net income of almost US\$14 billion, McDonald's earnings were over US\$5 billion and Amazon, with enormous development costs, earned just over US\$3 billion. One of the huge money-makers for Amazon is its digital Amazon Web Services which already accounts for almost half of Amazon's profits. Of the three corporations being discussed here, Amazon has the greatest upside potential in terms of income because it is almost wholly digital. McDonald's has the least potential to grow both because it is locked into bricks-and-mortar sites and because its ability to operate digitally is highly limited. However, each of the three companies remain major players in the world of consumption but in a rapidly changing world of retail their ability to do so depends on the extent to which they are able to position themselves at the cutting edge of digital innovation. As such, as is the case with many largely online businesses, investors see a far brighter future for Amazon than Wal-Mart. In fact, Amazon's market capitalization is already more than the combined valuation of Wal-Mart and several other US-based bricks-and-mortar giants such as Target, Costco, Macy's, and Kohl's (Gandhi, 2017). It was revealed in mid-2018 that Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, is now the richest person in the world with a net worth of about US\$150 billion.

Unless it becomes a much more powerful digital player than it has been to this point, Wal-Mart's advantage in sales and earnings, and despite a dominant market position that has been established over a period of approaching 60 years, is likely to decline, and even disappear, in the coming years. While its strength on the Internet has been growing, e-commerce still accounts for less than 5% of Wal-Mart's total business. Wal-Mart's CEO pointed to the augmentation involved in this growth in concert with the expansion of bricks-and-mortar sales: "We can see that we're moving faster to combine our digital and physical assets to make shopping easier and more enjoyable for customers" (Sinclair, 2017). Wal-Mart is improving its bricks-and-mortar operations by, among other things, speeding up the checkout process and by providing customers with the option of app-based purchases. However, in spite of its efforts and resources, it will be very difficult for Wal-Mart to overtake Amazon online both because of the latter's big lead in sales and the fact that Amazon continues to innovate and to explore new options. For example, Amazon has been taking steps to enter the highly lucrative, US\$300-billion-a-year, pharmacy business (Farr, 2017).

In sum, while Wal-Mart is currently the most successful of the three businesses, it is likely that in the not-too-distant future it will be surpassed and increasingly out-distanced by Amazon. The more limited focus of McDonald's means it will fall further and further behind the other two. Thus, McDonald's, the paradigm of the McDonaldization process, is, and will continue to be, less economically successful than Amazon and Wal-Mart. In this context, a key question arises: can McDonald's still be seen as the paradigm of the McDonaldization process? Given the apparent limitations of Wal-Mart in a digital context, is Amazon, in fact, now more McDonaldized than McDonald's? In the next section, we will focus on a comparison of McDonaldization of these three companies. This will provide a means of addressing whether or not the value of the McDonaldization thesis needs to be reconsidered in a bricks-and-clicks, or more extremely, nearly fully digital world. On one pole, McDonald's represents an almost fully brick-and-mortar business, Amazon is on the other pole as it is (still) predominantly a digital business, while Wal-Mart is a more mixed case of a largely material business that is becoming more digital.

### **A comparison of McDonald's, Amazon, and Wal-Mart in the context of McDonaldization**

At its most basic level, Amazon offers a model of retail which makes obtaining a wide array of products highly *efficient* by, for example, eliminating lengthy, and perhaps fruitless, trips to department stores, big-box stores (such as Wal-Mart's), and the mall. What could be more efficient than sitting at home, ordering products online, and having one's order delivered in perhaps a day or two?

While McDonald's made obtaining a meal in a restaurant more efficient through, for example, the drive-through window, it still has the inefficiency of requiring consumers to drive (or walk) to the restaurant in order to get their food. Department stores, big-box stores, and malls have similar inefficiencies.

Meanwhile, shopping on Amazon involves a highly predictable series of online steps that lead to the completion of one's order. This process soon becomes very familiar to the regular Amazon customer so that the pleasures that consumption can bring are literally available at the click of a mouse. McDonald's brought great *predictability* to eating in a restaurant and as such provided an exemplar for the rationalized fast food market. There are well-defined steps in obtaining a meal there: join the queue, scan the marquee to know what to order when one (finally) gets to the counter, order, pay, take the tray of food to a table, eat it, and dispose of the debris on completion of the "meal." However, there are a series of unpredictabilities that might intervene during a visit to McDonald's, absent at Amazon, not least those associated with inattentive, surly, or incompetent counter-people and/or fellow customers.

There is great *calculability* involved in shopping on Amazon. Prices are clearly marked. There is also clarity on the extent of the discount the consumer will receive, say on the standard price of a book they could expect to pay elsewhere.

Consumers know exactly what the total cost of an order is projected to be. Before finalizing a purchase customers are able to delete items thereby reducing the final cost. The menu at McDonald's offers pre-set prices and similar calculability, although unless customers are able to do the sums in their heads, the final cost is not known until the purchase is completed. Prices are clearly displayed, especially those that are "slashed."

Shopping on Amazon is tightly *controlled* by the nature of the site and its reliance on non-human technologies. Consumers can only order what is on the site and cannot ask (there is no one to ask) for products to be modified. In addition, there are no crowds, to say nothing of unreliable and intrusive salespeople, on Amazon. Great control is exerted over customers at McDonald's, but they are able to request some modifications in at least some of the food they order. This is one of the reasons that lines can be long at counters and drive-throughs. Counter-people, as well as those who staff the drive-through windows, can adversely affect the process in various ways (e.g. food may not be modified as requested; it is not unusual to drive or walk some distance only to find that one's sack of food does not include exactly what was ordered). At Wal-Mart, the numerous and bewildering array of aisles offers far less control over consumers.

The main *irrationality of rationality* associated with Amazon is its tendency to lead to and promote hyperconsumption, the process by which the consumption of non-essential goods is supercharged so that consumers are encouraged to select items they did not know they needed or wanted. Much the same is true of Wal-Mart and its numerous products. This is less likely, and certainly less intense, at McDonald's given its limited menu and low prices. However, it certainly is possible, even likely, to consume too many calories, too much fat, too much sugar, and so on, at McDonald's (Spurlock, 2005). At McDonald's, the reality of having raw, fresh ingredients delivered, and in stock, as well as of cooking and serving food, and then dealing with the debris when diners are finished, are moreover all complex, time-consuming, labor-intensive processes in which much can go wrong. This is reflected, among other ways, in the health problems that have plagued a number of fast food chains. Most notable were the Salmonella outbreaks at Chipotle in 2015 which hampered, and even threatened the survival of, this once high-flying chain. Food is a relatively small component of Amazon's business (although it will grow with, among other things, the acquisition of Whole Foods).

Most of what both Wal-Mart and Amazon sell to customers flows through an admittedly highly complex trans-shipment process. However, many products never leave the boxes in which they are packaged by the manufacturers. Both Wal-Mart and Amazon, as well as McDonald's, have McDonaldized the shipping process to a high degree. However, Amazon has the huge advantage of cutting out the cumbersome steps at Wal-Mart of shipping to its stores, stocking products, having customers trek to its stores, having salespeople on duty to answer questions and complete sales, having cashiers at checkout counters to receive payment, and then in many cases shipping the products to consumers' homes. While this is not as

cumbersome as what transpires at McDonald's, it is far more cumbersome than similar transactions at Amazon.

These differences are reflected, among many other ways, by the number of employees in these three corporations. McDonald's needs 235,000 employees to do a comparatively minuscule amount of business (at least in comparison to Wal-Mart and Amazon; see above). Amazon does much more business than McDonald's and it does so with a little more than twice the number of employees. Wal-Mart does the most business, at least at the moment, but to do so it requires over a million employees.

One of the obvious lessons here is that mainly bricks-and-mortar businesses require many more workers than do largely digital businesses. That is a major factor in limiting the ability of the former to McDonaldize and therefore maximize profits in comparison with the latter. Also disadvantaging bricks-and-mortar businesses is the fact that it is much easier to transform online consumers into prosumers (Ritzer, 2015; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). That is, it is much easier to force consumers to work, to serve themselves rather than being served by paid employees (Dunkel and Kleeman, 2013; Rieder and Voss, 2010). The whole ethos of the digital naturalizes a situation in which consumers produce in order to consume (Dujarier, 2015). While consumers must produce in order to consume, consumption sites are increasingly seeking to make it necessary for consumers to devote more time and energy to production as they consume.

While it now lags behind online sites, McDonald's (and the fast food industry in general) was a pioneer in the restaurant business in putting customers to work. Instead of sitting passively at a table in a traditional restaurant, having one's order taken, being served by waitpersons, and having employees clear the debris after the meal was done, McDonald's customers do all of this work and unlike employees, they do it for no pay. As a result, McDonald's needs far fewer paid employees than do comparable full-service restaurants. This is one of the key ways in which McDonald's helped to McDonaldize the restaurant business. In spite of the fact that prosumers do much of the work at McDonald's, there are still workers present to serve them at the counter and at the drive-through window, to cook the burgers and fries, to clear debris from tables, to mop the floors during the day, and to clean up at closing time. The technology on Amazon's website does a lot of the work, and there are no human workers readily available to help consumers. This is designed to maximize profits. There are a vast number of people who do work behind the scenes for Amazon, such as "picking" warehouse items to be delivered. As some journalists have argued, those workers must put up with inhumane conditions (Bonazzo, 2018). Beyond what is accomplished mostly by the technology, the vast majority of the work that needs to be done on Amazon is accomplished by customers as prosumers. They scan an array of potential purchases, choose one (or more), order it, provide their credit card information, and pay for the product. They are literally forced to work (produce) as they consume; they have no choice if they wish to shop via Amazon. They are not traditional consumers who would formerly have done little or none of the work involved in the consumption process.

Indeed, if Internet businesses like Amazon and other digital sites are to operate successfully, *consumers must be transformed into prosumers*. Furthermore, the more prosumers do tasks, especially for no pay, formerly handled by workers, the less the need for paid employees.

People are not only costly, but they are the most important impediments to the McDonaldization process, especially since the greatest irrationalities of rationality can be traced to them. For example, as employees, people are prone to inefficiency, unpredictability, and operating in ways that are difficult to quantify. In fact, the control dimension in the McDonaldization process is mainly about creating non-human technologies to control, often not very successfully, human workers. Furthermore, the ultimate goal of these technologies (automation, robots, artificial intelligence (AI), etc.) is to replace human workers (Lee, 2017; Wakabayashi, 2017). In previous work-related revolutions (e.g. the industrial and computer revolutions), many new jobs were created to replace those that had been made obsolete. In the new technological revolution, both low- and high-paying jobs are being decimated by, for example, robots, and it is likely that fewer new jobs will be created in the future. Unlike human workers, robots will serve to greatly expedite the expansion of McDonaldization (although they have had a hard time making headway in fast food restaurants with a notable exception being Caliburger's "Flippy" which can grill 150 burgers an hour (Eltagouri, 2018)).

Human consumers, especially those who show up in bricks-and-mortar consumption settings, are also barriers to McDonaldization. They can and do adversely affect the degree to which workers are able to operate in a McDonaldized fashion. For example, they reduce the efficiency of those taking the orders by being inefficient in ordering their food. However, customers are far less easily dispensed with than workers, at least until some point far into the future when more advanced technologies replace them with their avatars. The fact is that, at least for the foreseeable future, the consumption system cannot function, or even make any sense, without consumers. Aware that consumers are barriers to McDonaldization, fast food restaurants have tried to have them spend as little time as possible in the restaurants. More extremely, they have increasingly kept them out of the restaurants completely by routing them through drive-throughs. Domino's and other food chains have gone further by, in the main, delivering food to customers at home or in their work settings, while McDonald's itself has introduced a McDelivery service. Companies set up to provide food delivery services have started to thrive.

Also limiting the degree of McDonaldization of bricks-and-mortar sites are all the material realities and impediments associated with them. Con(pro)sumers (and workers) must physically go to them in order to consume, goods (many perishable) must be delivered there, the goods must often be processed (sliced and diced, cooked, etc.) before they can be sold to consumers, consumers must often transport their purchases to their homes, and so on. All of these steps are reduced in the online consumption of goods and they are almost entirely eliminated in obtaining digital products such as e-books and e-music.



There are a variety of ironies that emerge from a comparison of the extent to which McDonald's, Wal-Mart, and Amazon are McDonaldized. Most importantly, from a production point of view, it is far more difficult to McDonaldize McDonald's tens-of-thousands (and Wal-Mart's nearly 12,000) mostly "solid" bricks-and-mortar businesses than it would be for largely digital businesses. Solid structures impose far more limitations on the process than do those in the more "liquid" digital world (Bauman, 2000; Ritzer and Rey, 2013). The ability of McDonald's to McDonaldize as much as it has is quite remarkable in light of the limitations of the bricks-and-mortar restaurant business. However, its capacity to take that process much further is highly circumscribed, especially in comparison with that of the highly liquid Amazon. Advances in McDonaldization are apt to be hampered when confronted with the physical limitations of solid bricks-and-mortar sites, especially when there are thousands of them and they are widely dispersed geographically across, as is the case with McDonald's, about 120 countries. Such advances flow far more easily to and across highly liquid digital sites largely unaffected by physical, geographic, and other material limitations.

Thus, McDonald's is in many ways less McDonaldized than Amazon, given the latter is almost totally digital (with the exception of the small, but projected to grow dramatically, number of Amazon brick-and-mortar stores (Weise, 2018)) and therefore encounters far fewer barriers to being ever-more efficient, predictable, calculable, and controllable. The question then is whether or not given the limitations of such bricks-and-mortar sites as Wal-Mart's superstores, and especially McDonald's restaurants, would we be justified in renaming the process of concern in this essay *Amazonization*? A strong argument can be made in support of such a relabeling of the process of McDonaldization. However, our contention is that the basic principles of McDonaldization apply as well, or even better, to digital sites such as Amazon than they do to bricks-and-mortar sites like McDonald's, not least given the nature of the consumption experience. Amazon and many other successful digital sites are arguably more McDonaldized than bricks-and-mortar sites; they are more McDonaldized (and McDonaldizable) than McDonald's precisely because they place so much of an onus on the consumer to be complicit in the rationalized processes, that is, contemporary consumption. The complicity of the consumer is reinforced by a platform which obliges consumers to produce their own consumption experience. As a result, the present, and even more the future, of consumption and its McDonaldization belong to the digital world in general, and Amazon in particular. And yet despite this, McDonald's remains the pioneer in the McDonaldization and rationalization (Weber, 1968 [1921]) of the production and sale of a wide array of goods and services. As a result, we will continue to use that term for this process, even as it increasingly better describes, and is epitomized by, sites in the digital world, especially Amazon.

### **Beyond Amazon: Other digital McDonaldized consumption sites**

Beyond their greater degree of McDonaldization, the rise of digital sites has served to heighten virtually all types of consumption and to further enshrine and

supercharge the process of “hyperconsumption” (Ritzer, 2012; Schulz, 2007). For example, debt has long been a reality in consumer society, consumers are even more likely on Internet sites than in bricks-and-mortar sites (such as McDonald’s, Wal-Mart, and shopping malls) to go into debt and to buy more than they need, buy more than they intend, and spend more than they can afford thereby, perhaps, finding themselves in hyperdebt. The latter is encouraged by the fact that credit card use is even more omnipresent, if not *de rigueur*, online. Credit cards make it easier not only to spend money but to overspend (Ritzer, 1995).

While Amazon is the most important and powerful example of largely digital McDonaldization, it is important to remember that there are many other protagonists including Etsy, Uber, and Airbnb that are gradually redefining, in some respects at least, what it means to be a consumer. While the latter are more limited consumption sites than, and very different from, Amazon, they all serve to ratchet up the level of consumption, to exacerbate hyperconsumption. More handmade goods can be purchased because of Etsy, more rides taken because of Uber, and more homes rented via Airbnb. These sites are all also much more highly McDonaldized than their alternatives. They all are based on the non-human technologies that greatly expedite McDonaldization, including increasing efficiency in various ways. An Uber can be gotten much more efficiently via a smartphone than hailing a taxicab on the streets of, say, New York City. It is far more efficient to find a domicile to rent on Airbnb than it is to seek one out in any other way (the argument that Airbnb provides a more unique personalized non-hotel experience is clouded by the fact that many Airbnb properties are presented to customers in a kind of neutral sanitized hotel-like kind of a way). Then there is the greater calculability associated with Uber since the fare is known in advance and is automatically charged to one’s credit card account. There is no fumbling for cash or trying to calculate the amount to tip since tipping is generally frowned on by Uber (although drivers generally welcome tips).

Most importantly, all of these digital sites are highly dependent on working consumers (prosumers) for their operation and success. eBay functions much like Amazon, although prosumers are also more likely to materially produce the products on offer there that are purchased by other prosumers. An even better example of this is Etsy, which is distinguished from other consumption sites by the sale of handmade products (i.e. goods produced by prosumers-as-producers (p-a-ps)). Uber relies on digital technology to link drivers, often of their own cars, and potential consumers of those rides. In this case, both drivers and consumers are prosumers: those who need a ride produce that ride via their smartphones and drivers consume messages, also via smartphone, from passengers, and when successfully linked, produce that ride. Similarly, on Airbnb those prosumers with rooms or houses produce attractive domiciles and online sets of images and then consume information on those looking for such domiciles. For their part, the latter consume information on an array of potential domiciles and then produce the messages and payment information needed to complete the process.

Among the many lesser-known of such digital, largely online, and American-run businesses are Farfetch (global marketplace for independent luxury boutiques), Hello Alfred (which dispatches contractors to do recurring household work), and Managed by Q (cleaning services and office maintenance). All serve to increase consumption. They also involve prosumers offering services and working consumers in search of those services. While these are largely digital businesses, we must not forget that such digital businesses rely on an elaborate material infrastructure including computer hardware, fiberoptic cable, and routing equipment, with all of it enabled by intertwined servers. This points to the lack of a clear dividing line between the material and the digital, as well as the ways in which they augment one another.

All of these digital sites, as well as Amazon, are part of what has been called “platform capitalism.” Platforms are “digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact” (Srnicek, 2017: 43). They constitute a significant portion of the infrastructure that digitally brings together, serves as an intermediary between, buyers and sellers (Herman, 2017). That is, they offer platforms that connect prosumers-as-consumers (p-a-cs) and p-a-ps. Amazon certainly offers the most successful platform for expediting consumption. As a seller, it offers an incredible array of products to its customers who can easily access and obtain them, while best exploiting algorithms designed to offer next best alternatives. It even connects those not employed by Amazon with products to sell (e.g. those with used books) with customers interested in making a purchase. Amazon continues to innovate in this regard. For instance, Amazon Go is a high-tech convenience store based on a platform that brings together shoppers in a bricks-and-mortar setting with the products of interest to them. Amazon is also installing electronic kiosks in its Whole Food supermarkets in order to allow in-store consumers to shop simultaneously on its website. Amazon effectively leads the way in offering consumers easy access to fulfilling their needs. Similarly, Uber’s controversial and yet market-leading platform, as well as those of other transportation network companies (e.g. Lyft, Didi Chuxing in China, among many others), matches up those who need transportation (p-a-cs) with those who have it to offer (p-a-ps). Airbnb’s platform links those looking for rentals (p-a-cs) with those (p-a-ps) offering them. TaskRabbit and Mechanical Turk are platforms that match those (p-a-cs) looking for work completing limited, discrete tasks with those (p-a-ps) offering such usually short-term, often poorly paid, piece-rate work. Through the use of proprietary algorithms Stitch Fix’s platform matches largely female consumers with clothing of various types (De la Merced and Benner, 2017). p-a-cs who have registered with the site are automatically sent five pieces of (returnable) clothing. “Stylists” (p-a-ps) select that clothing on the basis of consuming information provided online by customers. It is worth noting that in 2017, Amazon reached a significant milestone by surpassing bricks-and-mortar Macy’s as the largest seller of clothing in the United States and that possession of information about customers represents a major weapon in this regard. It comes as no surprise that Amazon is currently exploring the possibility of selling custom-fit clothing via the Internet and the

development of a camera which is capable of capturing and uploading customers' measurements.

Other web-based platforms such as Facebook and Google match people who want information (p-a-cs) with the sources (p-a-ps) of that information. While the above sites – and many others – do not sell anything directly to consumers, their billions of users allow the sites to make huge profits from advertisers anxious to gain access to their users and ultimately to sell them goods and services. In fact, a strong argument can be made that those sites should pay users, as the sources and providers (as the prosumers) of valuable information, a fee for that information (Porter, 2018).

Then there are the platforms – okCupid, Match.com, and Tinder – that are part of the “meet market” that allows people interested in dating – or just “hooking up” – to make contact with one another. Since it is analogous to “meat market,” the term “meet market” implies that in one way or another meeting people is a commodity to be offered (by p-a-ps), produced (e.g. through creating attractive profiles), and obtained (“consumed”?) as p-a-cs in that market. Meet markets have done much to McDonaldize the process of producing and consuming (prosuming) dates, romance, or simply sexual release. Indeed, the apparent commodification of relationships online is seen by many commentators to represent a means by which elements of social life previously unencumbered by the market can provide an efficient way of meeting consumers' needs (Ansari, 2016). The swipe left or right, depending on whether a potential partner is to your liking or not, is perhaps the ultimate expression of McDonaldized efficiency. Such efficiency could be said to be surface deep, given that if you are looking for a relationship, for example, the chances of a few photos leading you to the partner of your dreams are, to say the least, slim. While these platforms clearly have significant material components, they are reducing the need for other material realities such as taxicabs, hotels, and social clubs. These sites are continuing to transition from “transaction enablers” to “participation gatekeepers.” They will greatly increase their ability to control, and profit from, the transactions between p-a-ps and p-a-cs that take place in their domains. Platforms are an important substructure in a digital world that is revolutionizing capitalism (helping them to transform it into prosumer capitalism) and business as we have known them. They also help make possible a level and degree of McDonaldization of consumption that is far beyond that which was ever possible in the bricks-and-mortar world. They effectively serve to streamline the consumption process. Whether this is always in the best interests of the consumer is a matter for continued debate.

### **Bricks-and-clicks sites**

While there has been exponential growth in the number and frequency of utilization of digital consumption sites of all types (most notably Amazon), much the same is true of the “bricks-and-clicks” sites that integrate the digital and the material. Amazon itself (not to mention many other online sites) is

moving to become more of a bricks-and-clicks business by expanding its material presence with its acquisition of the supermarket chain Whole Foods, as well as expanding its high-tech convenience store, Amazon Go, and its bookstores. Bricks-and-clicks entities may be more McDonaldized than either bricks-and-mortar and digital consumption settings operating in isolation from one another. For example, Amazon can use the massive amount of data from its online business to further McDonaldize (e.g. make more calculable) Whole Foods' business operations. At the same time, data gleaned from Whole Foods has the potential to further increase the ability of Amazon to control its customers.

Some businesses will have a hard time integrating the digital and the bricks-and-mortar. McDonald's (and many other fast food restaurants) is clearly one of them. It remains, and will remain (at least until we can download hamburgers and fries on our home computers), an almost completely bricks-and-mortar business. However, even McDonald's has its digital elements such as online ordering and, in at least some of its restaurants, iPads to order food.

### **Conclusion: Some theoretical ruminations**

Social change is the perennial challenge that imperils the veracity of all social theories. For example, Max Weber (circa 1900) regarded bureaucracy (along with capitalism) as the ultimate step in the rationalization process. However, bureaucracy as Weber knew it can certainly be said to have declined markedly in importance in recent years.

As a social theory, McDonaldization has sought to situate Weber's (1968 [1921]) theories in a contemporary context. And yet, it is inevitable that the rapid nature of social change will outpace the ability of any theory to adapt to, let alone change, the world it seeks to understand. While it took close to a century for the fast food restaurant to supplant the bureaucracy as the paradigm of the rationalization process, it has taken less than a half century for online sites such as Amazon to supplant the fast food restaurant as such a model. As social change accelerates even more, it is likely that the next paradigm of the rationalization process will surface even more quickly. However, the argument being presented here is that whatever the paradigm, the rationalization process continues and it gains new momentum with each paradigmatic change. Bureaucratization, McDonaldization, even "Amazonization" should be seen as variants of, or stages in, a more general process of rationalization. While this is broadly true, it is important to recognize, as Weber himself recognized, that there are multiple rationalities and even conflicts among and between different rationalities and the systems informed by them. Weber famously distinguished among four types of rationality (practical, theoretical, substantive, and the one closest to McDonaldization, formal rationality). In his recent work on technology, Feenburg (2017) has made a similar argument about multiple rationalities and the conflicts among them. While there are different rationalities, it is also the case that what Weber called formal rationality continues to be the dominant form of

rationality and to inform many of the most important social changes, in this case in the realm of consumption.

It is clear that at least in societies that are advanced economically, the consumption process will become even more important and be enhanced in various ways, not least through the intensification of McDonaldization. Among other things, this means that consumption will take place in ever-more McDonaldized settings, especially those in the digital domain. In other words, the digital facilitates a kind of speeded-up rationalization in which consumers needs are handled in a much more efficient way than they were in the past. More rationalized forms of consumption have many implications, but especially in a capitalist society they mean, above all, ever-increasing consumption. As production continues to decline in importance in advanced capitalist societies, the economic system is reliant, more than ever, on doing whatever it can to ramp up and intensify the level of consumption. The question therefore arises as to the utility of McDonaldization as a means of best understanding what it currently means to consume. Indeed some authors have offered alternative ways of understanding such processes. For example, Turner (1999) points toward theories of risk and notably or what has otherwise been described as a world of eBayization, as better equipped to unpick the diversified, complex, and reflexive nature of contemporary consumer culture (Ahuvia and Izberk-Bilgin, 2011), a world in which individualization dominates and in which notions of class (and arguably rationalization) are fatally undermined (Atkinson, 2007). However, our argument is that the underlying principles of McDonaldization actually continue to undermine the prospect for individualization and by doing so reproduce a realm that appears on the surface to be freer and more democratic while simultaneously reinforcing the socially constraining role of the consumption experience. In this respect, McDonaldization is perhaps more powerful as an organizing principle of the consumer society today than it has ever been before. Despite, in some respects, appearing to undermine traditional forms of production–consumption (e.g. the decline of the compact disk and the rise of downloading and streaming (e.g. Spotify) and their disruption of traditional markets for recorded music), the digital can be said to provide a sense of self-directed de-territorialized exploration upon which the principles of consumer capitalism can be further buttressed. The decline of bricks-and-mortar sites is thus key in intensifying the value of individualized forms of consumption and hence in reinforcing the ability of McDonaldized forms of consumption to remain the “norm” in both physical and virtual guises.

Much of our discussion relates to the changing nature of the places (and non-places) of consumption. In these terms, the focus above has been on the change from largely bricks-and-mortar to digital places of consumption. Putting the issue in these terms brings us into the realm of social geography (Augé, 1995; Relph, 1976; Ritzer, 2007). Relph, for example, discusses a shift from place to placelessness, while both Augé and Ritzer discuss the change from places to non-places. Most important for our purposes here is Castells’ (1996) argument that we are moving from a social world characterized by “spaces of places” to one defined as

“spaces of flows.” While all sites of consumption involve both places and flows, they vary greatly on both. Bricks-and-mortar sites are perhaps better seen as spaces of places, but there are certainly flows (e.g. of customers, products) through them. Digital consumption sites might be better seen as spaces of flows, but they also can be seen as spaces of places (especially Amazon).

While many of today’s bricks-and-mortar consumption sites can still be seen as places, they are increasingly defined by their flows. This is clearest in the flow of cars through the drive-throughs of Starbucks. With a paucity of tables and chairs, even the insides of Starbucks are more spaces of flows as customers pick up coffee and, maybe a muffin, leave to consume them elsewhere. As the name suggest, Amazon Go shops are all about expediting the flow of customers and products through them as efficiently and quickly as possible. There is even a new shop in Seattle where customers can pick up (and return) products without entering the “place” (Weise, 2018). Even when customers can and do enter these settings, they are far from the “great good places” analyzed by Oldenburg (1997). They largely lack, among other things, ties to local geography and history; they are largely generic rather than local. While today’s bricks-and-mortar consumption settings differ greatly from those of old, they are still infinitely more like them than digital consumption sites.

We argue then that the understanding of the impacts of McDonaldization lies at a crossroads. The repositioning of McDonaldization in the digital realm may help us to reassess the impacts of rationalization insofar as it demonstrates how deeply embedded and accepted elements of rationalization are becoming in the world of consumption, albeit one that is apparently characterized by networked individualism (Elliott, 2015). In other words, processes of digitalization provide the foundations upon which heterogeneous forms of consumption become increasingly normalized. A cursory glance around the streets of a city and the number of people walking around gazing at the screens of their mobile phones is indicative of just that. But the irony here is that the more diverse the consumption experience becomes, the more the ideological power of consumer capitalism is reinforced. In this sense, heterogeneity brings with it conformity and homogeneity.

In the above context, McDonaldization may continue to provide us with a springboard upon which we can critique social change more proactively. McDonaldization may thus provide the means by which we usurp everyday assumptions about the liberating nature of digital forms of consumption to do precisely what Jeannot (1999) suggests while further leading us to rethink the relationship between, consumption, identity, and the body (Belk, 2013). The history of consumption is a history of increased intensification. It is highly likely that digitalization has served to intensify the process of McDonaldization and that the effects of this will become ever-more profound as the tentacles of digitalization spread ever wider. The beauty of digital platforms, at least as far as the producer is concerned, is that they appear “natural”; they are part of what our society, and in particular younger generations locating themselves in that society, deem to be “progress.” Highly McDonaldized digital consumption sites are therefore not likely to arouse the level of critique (Ewen, 2001) and opposition (Lasn, 2013)

that was stimulated by, for example, advertising in the past. The absence of opposition, given the relative invisibility of the McDonaldization of such sites, and indeed the ideological influence that this implies, is yet another reason to expect further acceleration in the extent to which our relationship to consumption defines our relationship to the society in which we live. In this context, the notion of McDonaldization will be even more relevant in the digital future than it ever was in the bricks-and-mortar past.

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