

## Spectatorship and consumption: from the Department Store to the Shoppable TV

### Espectatorialidade e consumo: da Loja de Departamento à “Shoppable TV”

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**Resumo:** *Este estudo pretende refletir sobre a construção e ampliação das experiências de compras na televisão levando-se em conta mediações técnicas e subjetivas erigidas historicamente. A digitalização e informatização dos ambientes comunicacionais ampliou gradativamente as possibilidades espectatoriais, as dinâmicas produtivas do meio e, principalmente, ajudou a erigir uma plataforma para o consumo em um processo espiralado e contínuo, normatizado a partir de uma imensa reorganização de saberes e poderes. Nesse sentido, o artigo articula a reestruturação da vida social imposta pelo advento do consumo, principalmente a partir da experiência das Lojas de Departamento, com as transformações no estatuto do espectador, desde sua concepção como fruidor da vida cosmopolita até os processos interativos e imersivos das redes telemáticas.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Espectatorialidade; história do consumo; loja de departamento; shoppable TV.*

**Abstract:** *This study aims to reflect on the construction and expansion of television shopping experiences taking into account historically technical and subjective mediations. The digitalization and informatization of communication*

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*environments gradually expanded the spectatorial possibilities, the productive dynamics of the television and, above all, helped to create a platform for consumption in a spiral and continuous process standardized from an immense reorganization of knowledge and power. In this sense, the article articulates the restructuring of social life imposed by the advent of consumption, mainly from the experience of Department Stores, with the transformations in the statute of the spectator since its conception as a consumer of cosmopolitan life until the interactive and immersive processes of telematic networks.*

**Keywords:** *Spectatorship; history of consumption; department store; shoppable TV.*

## Introduction

Consumption, as a phenomenon of modern-contemporary culture, acquires an individualizing dimension due to a series of social transformations initiated in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and consolidated in the 19th century, which profoundly altered patterns of sensitivity and subjectivities. We must, therefore, understand consumption as a social process intertwined with the very concept of modernity. In present times, as Colin Campbell (2001) points out, consumption acquires a central place in people's lives by providing essential principles of being and knowing.

For Campbell, consumption is far from a simple economic activity that functions to meet everyday needs. Consumption experiences are self-reflexive and construct subjectivities. Dynamic, while also complex and emotional, shopping activities not just require searching for information, organizing, and memorizing them but also enable a universe of sensations when consumers visualize and try on objects and combinations. However, for these consumers to be able to experiment to the point of defining themselves through consumption, they had to learn what, how, and where to look.

Fashion, disseminated by a press that specializes in the area, was the first to contribute to an “explosion of consumption” (MCCRACKEN, 2003) by bringing consumers from previously un contemplated classes, that is, not belonging to the European nobility. With its illustrations and explanatory texts, the fashion press was fundamental for the pedagogy of good looks, presenting the public with possibilities for matching pieces and consumption (ROCHE, 2007). In the 19th century, space and time began to converge toward the centrality of the phenomenon. In this process, department stores were essential for inaugurating a new concept of shopping that allowed consumers to walk through the various sections, touch pieces of decoration and clothing, and learn lifestyles and codes of combination and good taste without feeling obligated to immediate purchase. This way of engaging attention, provoking immersion, and allowing consumers to experience new

sensations and desire objects they had not even imagined before forged the new logic of consumption.

In this article, the department store will be the guiding thread of a form of interacting, buying, and experiencing consumption inaugurated in the 19th century and which served as a matrix when shopping centers emerged in the 20th century. In the 21st century, internet-enabled devices have allowed television to become a new department store with scenarios that act as sales displays for a wide range of products. The binomial experience plus convenience continues to guide the logic of consumption. In the digital environment, convenience is detached from the physical space, enhancing its appeal in the shoppable TV environment and transforming shows, artists, and presenters into sellers. In this way, such technological innovations make products advertised in shows or commercial breaks acquirable in real-time without the need for transportation. The grand magazine is now on the screen. And this was only possible due to a long transformation in subjective experience and vision transformed into an “instrument of knowledge” (AUMONT, 2004).

This study starts from the premise that, more than describing new technologies, it is necessary to understand how the novel ways of seeing, perceiving, and feeling “framed” consumption experiences. The work unfolds in three parts. The first part seeks to locate modern consumption, from the emergence of department stores, within dimensions of the capitalist ethos. The second intends to understand the spectatorial transformations of the televisual medium. And the last part discusses shoppable TV.

The argument for choosing the essay form is that it is a style that allows more creativity to the author, opening space for the adventure of discovery by proposing various contents that, consequently, indicate questions from multiple perspectives and encourage autonomy of thought. We see the essay as a method, an attitude, a spiritual determination inherited from the “philosophical culture” that dares, takes risks, and rehearses by running through a plethora of phenomena in the apprehension

of how existence is crystallized more by questions that dilate than by the eventual answers (WAIZBORT, 2006). Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin adopted such a method as a way of thinking.

### **The department store as a modern culture experience**

The social history of capitalism is widely studied and discussed by different perspectives and fields of knowledge: economics, history, sociology, philosophy, etc. Karl Marx builds an analytical matrix that directs future theoretical approaches to the valorization of capital and labor as fundamental elements for producing wealth and surplus value. Later, Max Weber discusses, from a different angle, the genesis of Capitalism in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). For Weber, the understanding of the modern worldview should start from the cultural dimension. For him, human actions and relationships forged the spirit of capitalism based on the religious experience of the Protestant ethic, which valued work as an instrument of asceticism and considered wasting time the most serious of sins.

Werner Sombart also investigated the development of capitalism in the West, emphasizing the importance of the Jew for the construction of the modern economy. However, Sombart diverges from Weber concerning the hierarchy of values that sustains the capitalist worldview. If, for Weber, the ordering principle starts from profitability – from meticulous labor and the suppression of worldly pleasures in favor of accumulating wealth for the glory of God, for Sombart, in *Luxury and Capitalism* (1912), the origin of capitalism intertwines with enjoyment, luxury consumption, the pleasure of the senses, eroticism, and the role played by women courtesans.

Sombart presents a new lens for understanding the “great Western transformation”<sup>4</sup>: that consumption and luxury are a means to obtain

4 *The Great Transformation* is the title of the famous book by Karl Polanyi (1944), who studied the processes of political, social, and economic change that allowed the origin and consolidation of the market economy as autonomous and self-regulating, converting land, money, work, and consequently, humans, into commodities.

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pleasure, and one needs certain stimuli to experience them. In this way, the author paved the way for other researchers, notably Campbell in *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (1987) and McCracken in *Culture & Consumption* (1988), to show that such changes occurred strongly in the subjective sphere, in patterns of sensibility, of self-delusive hedonism, and of creative dreams that come from the desire to experiment disseminated by the logic of consumption, such as fashion aspirations previously restricted by sumptuary laws.

Factory times would not exist without an audience eager for new lifestyles and techniques and without practices that offered a pedagogy of taste so that bourgeois and aspirants could find themselves in a new context. Luxury boosts trade in the West, introduces new habits, and imports products from the East (spices, perfumes, porcelain, coffee, chocolate), making bourgeois life enjoyable by allowing it to spend the profits of its industry on satisfying its pleasures.

The new aesthetic, spatial, and bourgeois model of the city, introduced by Baron Haussmann, served as a matrix for urban reforms in European and South American cities. Wide avenues with gas lighting allowed the circulation of air, commodities, and people, eager to admire the large shop windows and experience the new dimensions of consumption, making Paris the capital of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The city of light was a pedagogical symbol of a new era, of the bourgeois enchantment with modernity and its communication systems (telegraph, telephone, railroad, submarine cables) that offered mobility and allowed interconnections, shortening space and time, placing products and information at within reach for those who could afford them.

As already mentioned, transformations engendered by consumption values consolidated throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, especially with the emergence of department stores. The windows of the new temples of consumption materialized lifestyles, aesthetic combinations of clothing and decoration, and introduced marketing techniques that taught the public how to enjoy their free time. In Paris, capital of the 19th century, department stores materialized new spaces for

consumer experimentation and inspired Émile Zola to publish a novel, *Au Bonheur des Dames*, on the theme in 1883. One of the first major department stores was *Le Bon Marché*, which opened in 1852, followed by the *Louvre* (1855), and *Printemps* (1865). In the English capital, *Harrods* emerged as a prominent department store after 1883 (ROCHA et al., 2016).

Like bazaars, department stores brought together various types of goods in one place. However, the stores displayed their products in a way consumers could appreciate them as works of art in a museum or, in the words of Émile Zola, a “cathedral of commerce”. These immense constructions recalled something consumers already knew: the figure of cathedrals. Designed in metal and glass and illuminated, department stores invited people to enter and circulate their interiors. The intention was to capture consumers “before the beauty of the combination” of goods on display. Pure “seduction” or “temptation” in an environment panoramically designed by architects to position objects for the “gluttony of the eye” (ORTIZ, 1991, p. 166).

Hence, there was an intersection between new ways of seeing originating from the visual arts, especially the paintings of panoramas in which subjects occupy a privileged position of observation and feel immersed in the canvas, conferring a sense of realism (GRAU, 2007). The department store and its immersive architecture produced a framing of the gaze (SICILIANO, 2014) and forms of cognition that modeled a subjective perception that organizes modern experience. Such a way of seeing stems from a new status of sight that, according to Jonathan Crary (2012), is the product of historical construction, intensified in the 19th century with the arrival of new optical devices that would enable the emergence of photography and the cinematographer. The encounter of these new technical artifacts with philosophical and scientific discourses led to the rise of a new type of observer, “the subjective observer.” In this constantly readjusting amalgam, a new visual regime and system of aesthetic and ethical conventions emerge where entertainment found fertile grounds to develop.

The Industrial Revolution created a separation between work time and free time, originating the notion of entertainment. The search for fun is a characteristic of modern-contemporary times. The idea of leisure as a counterpoint to productive work was unthinkable in the Ancien Régime, as the aristocracy did not engage in productive activity and attended soirées, balls, or concerts as part of courtly life. The peasants and the nascent bourgeoisie, on the other hand, used all their time in the production of material life; their respite came in collective events like fairs and parties dedicated to patron saints, when there was singing, drinking, and dancing.

Entertainment emerges as part of the modern leisure culture to eliminate free time, that is, to transform idleness into productive time or an object of mass consumption. Therefore, entertainment derives from this modern culture with urbanization, salaried work, progress in literacy, and workers' struggle for shorter days and better wages that would allow them to read feuilletons in newspapers and go to café-concerts, universal exhibitions, and revues. Entertainment was also a form of distinction that offered the bourgeoisie and the emerging middle class other more sophisticated products (ORTIZ, 1991) and the experience of enjoying department stores.

In this way, the department store – with its immersive atmosphere of luxurious decor, pleasant aromas, ample circulation space, and objects displayed within reach of eyes and hands – offered a magical environment that awakened the senses and emotions. It was simultaneously a spectacle, an entertainment, and an experience. As in a game, those who went to this “temple” allowed their imagination to flourish and their desire to lead them to dream worlds of consumption. Such a displacement of subjectivity is the translation of a new type of hedonism that emerges in modernity. The feeling provoked by the department store configures an “experience consumption,” linking purchases to a memory of involvement that goes beyond everyday consumption experiences (PEREIRA *et al.*, 2015).



The media, like department stores, exercised pedagogical and marketing functions to serve a plural public. In the 20th century, shopping malls began to explore the pairing of leisure and consumption, and electronic media, such as radio and television, became great disseminators of fashion primers.

## **Television and the platformization of consumption in Brazil**

Exploring the marketing capabilities of media began early in the history of commercial broadcasting and has motivated many attempts at interactive engineering and, more specifically, at transmedia systems. In the 1940s and 1950s, radio shows received the sponsorship of advertisers, and the vehicle depended on advertising to exist. Television, launched in Brazil in 1950, followed the same path. According to Assis Chateaubriand, the founder of the media group *Diários Associados*, such an undertaking was only possible with the union of all radio networks and newspapers and with subsidies from the major industries advertising in the country.

Television appears as a fascinating machine of images and sounds. Olavo Bilac, still in the early 20th century, predicts in his monthly chronicle in *Revista Kósmos*, in March 1904, the end of the book and the advent of news in a graphic-animated form. The immersive potential of television caused a blurring of boundaries that had a definite impact on the perception of reality, political action, and consumption practices. The ease of recording and editing images with the arrival of videotaping, from the 1960s onwards, combined the audiovisual with commercial narratives, definitively boosting the vehicle. Advertising agencies rushed to publicize the country's growth, adopting discursive constructions for selling comfort and well-being.

The digitization and computerization of communication environments gradually expanded viewing possibilities, the productive dynamics of television and, above all, helped to build a platform for consumption in a spiral and continuous process. The media gained

a continental dimension in the 1970s under the umbrella policy of “national integration,” a political-ideological premise of the military government. The setting up of a satellite infrastructure allowed Brazilian television, especially Rede Globo, to consolidate itself as the main communication vehicle that invented, borrowing Benedict Anderson’s expression (2008), the modernizing Brazilian “imagined community” of post-1970s.

The government’s effort made possible not only the establishment of a wide communicative circuit that carried a convergence between television, information technology, and telecommunications but also elaborated a hegemonic structure of circulation of representations, models of behavior, and consumption rituals quickly incorporated as a primer of customs in the country.

Due to its interactive polysemy, television made possible a plurality of scriptures that gradually transformed the processes of building citizenship and reading the social world. The representation effect associated with technologies, the global, and the acceleration of time determined a new regime of the visible and the emergence of a subjectivity whose political participation takes place through audiovisual and consumption modes. In this sense, the strategies of promotional industries shaped not only media texts but also the infrastructures and platforms that defined communication processes, schedule possibilities, the conception of formats, genres, applications, and viewer-consumer interaction.

In the 1990s, we witnessed robust media interactivity experiments on Brazilian television, an attempt the “owners of power” always desired while focusing their conglomerates on communication networks with different media. The show *Você Decide* on TV Globo delineated well such an idea, combining fiction with audience interactivity in real-time. Between 1992 and 2000, the show invited viewers to choose an ending for the episode by phone call. The *Intercine* film session on Globo was another format that bet on active interaction with the audience, who could choose the films on the following week’s schedule by voting over

the phone. The show ran from 1996 to 2010 (RICCO; VANNUCCI, 2017).

This quality of technical interaction, which incorporates the mediation of other electronic-digital devices, is considered by André Lemos as overcoming the “analog-mechanical” paradigm that marked traditional media. Digital technology enables the user to interact not just with the object (the machine or the tool) but with the information, that is, with the ‘content’ (LEMOS, 1997). The author divides the technical interaction of television into five levels since the first experiments of the media. Level 0 corresponds to black and white TV, where the interactive action is limited to turning the device on and off, changing channels, or adjusting volume and technical settings. Level 1 incorporates color television, remote control, and the appearance of a higher number of channels. Zapping here is considered an element that precedes computerized navigation on the internet. Level 2 observes peripheral equipment connected to the television, such as VCRs, portable cameras, and electronic games. Viewers begin detaching themselves from linear programming, appropriating the television device for other purposes and establishing different temporalities. On Level 3, the first movements of digital interactivity appear when viewers begin to interfere with the scheduled content via telephone, e-mail, or fax. Level 4 explains interactive television allows viewers to interact with broadcasts in real-time, taking charge of choices and interfering with content. Therefore, the level involves the development of inventive, collaborative, and interventionist actions, such as choosing the camera angle from which to watch a soccer game, producing and forwarding amateur videos for exhibition on a newscast, or talking live with the host of a show through videoconference.

Thus, for Lemos, digital interactivity occurs when the user begins to have technical-digital resources to intervene in the broadcast of content. With the evolution of interfaces and forms of interactivity triggered by the incorporation of digital technology in the television environment in the early decades of the 21st century, viewers become virtual interlocutors,

engaged agents, and active participants in the process of producing and circulating information.

In the 2000s, the advancement of the digitization process gradually changed the ways of watching and producing television in Brazil and around the world. Content on websites, social media, and cell phones became ever-expanding, composing the fragments of a transmedia narrative context in which television struggled to be the central element of this hub and contain the loss of audience to other media, especially streaming platforms. However, as Newton Cannito (2010, p. 15) states, “Digital is more than a medium; it is a technology – and mainly a culture – that contaminates other media.” Thus, television adapts itself, although no longer in a hegemonic way, to the other supports and channels of integrated communication platforms, which become content producers. However, digital services also resorted to the television media to gain capillarity and audience coverage and function as a lucrative association for business. “The triumph of old media in the digital age,” as Michael Wolff (2015) says, nears productive models and senses awakened by Shoppable TV.

### **Shoppable TV in Brazil**

Traditional television, which distinguished itself from other media by its single-frequency model, undergoes a process of decentralization driven by digital platforms and faces the need to reorganize its narratives given the possibilities of technical interaction of the “electronic-digital” type (LEMOS, 1997). A new video sphere disturbs the stability of the television concept, bringing together theoretical perspectives that speak of the *post-television* era (PISCITELLI, 1998; MISSIKA, 2006), following what Eco (1984) called the neo-television period. The semiologist used the prefixes paleo and neo to qualify the periodization of the medium through technical changes and spectator participation, like Lemos’ division by levels. *Paleo-television* is situated in the early years of the TV, when there were limited channels and little interference from the public. Differently, neo-television has a greater variety of channels, introduces

the remote control and the practice of zapping, and sees the arrival of pay TV. The increasing content offer and audience segmentation paved the way for the era of *Transtelevisión* (AUCAR, 2012), a neologism that expresses the expansion of the television experience – productive, reproductive, and interactive – in multiple devices and innovations aimed for consumption such as shoppable TV strategies.

With the explosion of screens in various domestic and social spaces, television must share viewers' attention, increasingly competing with parallel activities simultaneously on other screens. Attention is precisely the central target of the algorithmic logic that attracts and groups users and objects in certain times and spaces, directing tastes, options, and ways of seeing (LEVY, 1996). Consequently, brands are developing other forms of advertising and product presentation in a more systemic and algorithmic way. The promotional industries have sought to combine the reach and persuasion of television built in decades of communicative hegemony with the capillarity of digital media and the ability to generate revenue from electronic commerce (CAPPO, 2016).

Some post-covid-19 enhanced consumption habits also helped to develop sales techniques based on this platform economy. If, on the one hand, social media such as TikTok expanded, and viewers tend to pay ever-less attention to traditional television commercial breaks or even completely suppress them, on the other hand, there is increased confidence in online shopping systems. Brazilian e-commerce grew by 75% in 2020 compared to the previous year (VILELA, 2021). Social isolation also led to record video consumption, with significant audience rates in broadcasting and streaming services (VOGUEL, 2022).

In this context, the development of subliminal persuasion advertising techniques aims to insert messages subtly into entertainment television content and not just commercial breaks. Product placement merges advertisements with existing narratives, integrating brands, images, logos, sounds and objects in the same text. The strategy of associating objects with the plots of movies, series, or soap operas, including using characters the consumer is already familiar with or emotionally attached

to, awakens bonds of trust. In addition to increasing the exposure of consumer goods, the resource allows descriptions and visualizations of modes of use (LEHU, 2007). Such integration of products in the very structure of the television diegesis transforms the medium's production and financing models, as was the case of the partnership between Banco Itaú and TV Globo in the 2015 telenovela *A Regra do Jogo*. The network inserted an exclusive three-minute commercial within the soap opera's narrative, which connected to the previous scene of the plot, to promote the bank's reading incentive platform (DORES, 2015).

In the history of Brazilian television, we can find the first action of product placement in the telenovela *Beto Rockfeller*, which aired on TV Tupi in 1968. The character played by Luiz Gustavo pronounced the name of the effervescent tablet *Engov* every time he drank liquor in excess (RICCO; VANNUCCI, 2017). The red sandals and lurex socks worn by the character of Sônia Braga in *Dancin' Days* (TV Globo, 1979) are also examples of objects with dramatic functions in the plot that boosted the sales of the footwear brand *Azaleia*.

The fictional modeling agency, Fanny Models, from the telenovela *Verdades Secretas* (TV Globo, 2015), also promoted conversation with actual products. Underwear brand Hope and accessories brand *Chili Beans* participated as clients of the fictional agency to promote fashion shoots with their products. The telenovela *Sete Vidas* (TV Globo, 2015) featured scenes of children playing followed by images of Regina Duarte's character, Esther, using OMO laundry detergent to clean her grandson's dirty shirt (PROPMARK, 2015).

The promotional investment in narratives familiar to Brazilians, such as telenovelas, reinforces brand presence in the country's popular culture in an innovative way. However, in the context of multidimensional content production, the results are not always positive or predictable for promotional agents, as happened with TV Globo's telenovela *Império* in 2014. A *Coca-Cola* item placed in scenes with the plot's villain, played by actor Caio Blat, generated a lot of criticism on social media due to the association of the product with the antagonist (SENISE *et al.*, 2016).

In this prerogative, we can also consider the growth of branded content actions on television and videos on streaming platforms. The technique consists of creating exclusive content to insert a given product into the context of a show or narrative in an organic way. The *Big Brother Brazil* reality show uses this resource abundantly to create contests, parties, and segments based on the companies sponsoring the program, such as *Lojas Americanas*, *Samsung*, and *McDonald's*. When used in shows with large television audiences, the model produces broad repercussions on the internet, increasing searches for brands on online shops and engaging anonymous and famous consumers who rush to display the use of products on their social media (ZAKZUK, 2022).

The immersive and interactive possibilities of Shoppable TV also trigger even more immediate strategies in the advertising industry. Among them, there is the possibility of instant purchase of products through QR Codes. The use of two-dimensional barcodes became popular with the hygiene measures encouraged during the Covid-19 pandemic. Today, we often use this technology to access menus in restaurants and bars, airline tickets, and tickets to the most diverse attractions. On Brazilian television, since 2020, several shows have been displaying QR codes so that consumers can purchase products by simply pointing their smartphone cameras at the television screen. The strategy dispenses with traditional mediators of the shopping process – such as salespeople, stores, and even physical money – and increases the influence of television characters on the consumer experience (YANNA; WANG, 2017). The feature, symptomatic of multiscreen consumption and the new rhythms of everyday life, was widely used to sell products from the retail chain *Casas Bahia* on TV Globo's *The Masked Singer Brasil*, hosted by the famous singer Ivete Sangalo in 2021. Special discounts activate during the show's broadcast to stimulate sales and privilege this shopping channel. QR Codes allow direct purchases without interruptions in the television schedule or resizing for an exclusive authentication screen, synchronizing audiovisual consumption with that of material goods.

Interactivity buttons on smart TVs also facilitated instant purchase processes without intermediaries, providing extra information about any product shown on the program or the possibility of opening direct links to finalize purchases on the sellers' mobile websites. On these devices, users can use gestures or voice commands to simultaneously activate television and mobile devices in a kind of hybrid interaction.

In this way, new spectatorship practices, multiplatform navigation, changeable supports, and different languages have altered the ways of living with television. The medium, which has expanded and resized with digital platforms and algorithmic logics, continues to manage a considerable part of consumer experiences and the circulation of hegemonic representations in modernity, emphasizing the notion of participation, "co-construction," and "co-authorship" while, at the same time, indoctrinating sight, the desire, and even the imagination of humanities that asphyxiate themselves outside the realm of the image.

### **Final considerations**

We started from the birth of the department store in the 19th century to understand capitalism and its transformations in the process of building new regimes of sensibility and visibility. In the hierarchy of values that supported the capitalist worldview and the course of its changes, we looked to theorists who considered consumption and luxury as modes of obtaining pleasure.

Department stores modeled an intense consumer experience and produced new sensibilities and modes of interaction. These consumption temples simultaneously made it possible for people to learn the grammar of good taste and to imagine it in themselves and their environment. Such places set the concept of convenience, amalgamating the triad of consumption, sociability, and leisure. Ortiz (1991) highlights the spectacle side of the department store, which resorts to a circus matrix to attract attention and, in this way, make consumers feel part of the "mass." Catering to a broad audience, the department store played a pedagogical role by disseminating their new grammar of customs. And



with the emerging media, they promoted desirable conceptions of leisurely worlds. Later in the 20th century, the shopping center drew from the design of the department store and became the new temple of consumption, disseminating its fashion primers through electronic media. In the 21st century, internet-enabled devices altered the relationship between time and space and endowed a new function to television: shows with scenarios that operate as shop displays for a wide range of products. In the wake of streaming combined with new promotional techniques, shoppable TV emerged as an immersive possibility that allows consumers to purchase products through QR Codes while experiencing and enjoying their favorite program.

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