

Clicking 'add to cart' may spark joy for now. Don't expect it to last



Beyond pleasure, another factor that drives consumption is what psychologists call "transformation beliefs" – that is, owning a certain product will make us more attractive, more confident, better at something, and ultimately happier. Lazada seems to have tapped into this belief with its 2022 marketing campaign, which had the tagline "Add to cart. Add to Life". ST PHOTO: SHINTARO TAY

Year-end sales promise deals and delight, but often leave behind clutter, regret and environmental costs. It's time to shop with more intention.

Michelle Lee

It's that action-packed time of the year – not in terms of work, but of shopping. The end-of-year shopping season typically kicks off on Nov 11, popularly known as Singles Day – and is followed about two weeks later by Black Friday. And in case in-store shopping proves to be too much of a test of stamina, the hunt for online deals continues at Cyber Monday and 12/12 sale events.

And as people rush to stores online and off for their Christmas shopping, the frenzy carries on – all the way till Boxing Day, when stores traditionally slash prices after Christmas.

For years, retailers have had a knack for leaning into social phenomena and leveraging them for commercial gain. Black Friday, for instance, started out in the 1950s, when throngs of visitors to Philadelphia the day after Thanksgiving created policing and crowd control concerns.

Retailers quickly turned the presence of crowds into a marketing opportunity, and Black Friday has since become one of the biggest shopping events in the US.

And it seems that consumers have been lapping it up. According to Mastercard's SpendingPulse report, Black Friday sales online grew 14.6 per cent in 2024 from 2023.

While Shopee Singapore declined to disclose overall sales volumes or year-on-year comparisons for the 2024 Singles' Day event, it sold more than 100,000 items in the first 11 minutes of the sale. In Singapore, orders placed on Shopee Live – the e-commerce giant's livestream platform – were 20 times that of an average day.

While some of us might take advantage of these discounts to buy things we would have bought anyway, these events do more than just shift the timing of purchases.

The thrill of getting a good deal – fuelled by the nature of such sales events – often draws us into buying more than we necessarily need.

But why do we consume as much as we do?

SHOPPING FOR PLEASURE

Very simply, acquiring goods brings pleasure. In 2007, researchers from Stanford, Carnegie Mellon and MIT showed, using function MRI, that the pleasure centre of the brain lights up when one comes across a desirable item available for purchase.

The activation was even stronger when the item was perceived as value for money. It is the in-the-moment appraisal of the pleasure that a product will bring that often drives a purchase decision.

But there are at least two reasons why this is misguided.

First, the pleasure we feel from owning a product inevitably declines with time, owing to what psychologists call "hedonic adaptation". The purchase that got us so excited may quickly cease to "spark joy", as Marie Kondo would put it – often, even as soon as the new purchase arrives.

We may understand this intuitively – it's not called retail therapy for no reason. But the research shows that we do not factor this understanding when we decide to buy something. We buy as if the pleasure will last forever.

Second, it also turns out that we are pretty bad at predicting future emotional states and have a tendency to overestimate how intensely we will feel about something, as research on "affective forecasting" demonstrates.

The joy we get from owning the latest designer accoutrement will, in all likelihood, be smaller than what we imagined when we first purchased it.

Pleasure from consumption is thus a fleeting and unreliable companion, and pursuing it draws us into a constant cycle of purchase after purchase.

SHOPPING WILL MAKE ME A BETTER PERSON – OR NOT?

Beyond pleasure, another factor

that drives consumption is what psychologists call "transformation beliefs" – that is, owning a certain product will make us more attractive, more confident, better at something, and ultimately happier.

Lazada seems to have tapped into this belief with its 2022 marketing campaign, which had the tagline "Add to cart. Add to Life". Products were portrayed as having more than their functional value because they have the power to change us and make us better.

The allusion was that buying a frying pan can make us good cooks, buying clothes turns us into fashionistas, and buying yoga mats make yogis out of us.

It is this belief that products can transform us that leaves us hankering after the next thing. The void between who we are and who we want to be is filled with many products that do not quite get us there.

FANNING THE FLAMES OF CONSUMERISM

If these tendencies within us that drive us to buy may be likened to embers, then the end-of-year sale events certainly fan them into flames.

For one thing, the deep

Beyond enticing us to buy with discounts, these sale events also change our perceptions of the value of a product – by making it seem scarce. When retailers indicate that a particular item we want is selling fast, or that time for securing a good deal is running out, it creates this scarcity effect that triggers action and is likely to lead to an impulse purchase.

discounts dangled before us lower the stakes of a bad purchase.

There is less of a need to discern whether a product serves our purpose when it is priced low enough that we do not feel the pinch, even if we have to toss it out. This is what underlies the mantra of "It's so cheap, you can't go wrong" that some subscribe to.

Tiered discounts, where bigger discounts are given when we buy more, often spur us to buy more than we need. The same is true of the practice of shipping products for free when a certain minimum amount is purchased. Not taking advantage of these potential savings feels like we are leaving money on the table – and so, we cart out items we don't necessarily need.

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Very often, there is also the option of free returns, which makes us feel like we have nothing to lose should we regret an impulse purchase.

But then there is the cost to the environment.

The transportation of products contributes to carbon emissions, and not all returned goods go back into inventory waiting to be sold to the next customer.

Returned products are disposed of more often than retailers care to admit. In the US alone, it was estimated that 4.3 million tonnes of returns ended up in a landfill in 2022.

With growing consumption around the world – global retail sales is expected to grow from US\$29.3 trillion in 2023 to US\$32.8 trillion (S\$44 trillion) in 2026 – the issue of growing waste and its impact on our environment is likely to look grimmer.

CONSUMING MINDFULLY

So, how do we resist the siren song of good deals – especially with the urgency of limited-time sales and deep discounts?

It has been said that the

antidote to overconsumption is mindful consumption – and to buy on the basis of what we need, rather than what we want.

But our decisions are not just influenced by needs. We are drawn to art and good design, for instance, and it is hard to argue that these things should not be bought because we have no absolute need for them.

Another piece of advice beckons us to consider the impact of our consumption on the environment, in particular the strain on the natural resources used to make products and the waste generated from their disposal. This calls for us to trade off what we desire for the needs of the environment and may be a tall order particularly in individualistic cultures, where personal preference and self-interest are emphasised over the interest of broader society.

A better way is to ponder what a product truly does for us. We could ask ourselves if the pleasure we get from acquiring an item will last, or if its desirability will be quickly superseded by a bigger, better or brighter alternative. For example, it may be worth considering if we will continue to enjoy wearing, in six months, an outfit that we are itching to buy now, or if we will use that latest smart gadget a year down the road.

We could ask if the product adds to clutter and what it costs us in time and effort to get rid of it when it no longer sparks joy.

And of course, it helps to recognise the tactics that retailers use to get us to buy more. We could remind ourselves that the savings they entice us with will not materialise as savings, if the products we buy turn out to be of little use. Limiting our exposure to these temptations, such as by unsubscribing from mailing lists or unfollowing stores on Instagram, would help as well.

Consumption that is driven not by needs but by wants ought to bring lasting satisfaction. In the absence of that, adding to cart would not be adding to life. It would merely be adding to trash.

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