

The psychology of Christmas shopping—how marketers nudge you to buy

15 December 2017, by Paul Harrison



Don't think, just shop. Credit: Heidi Sandstrom

Many people see marketing as a form of manipulation, particularly around Christmas and the other retail bonanzas: Easter, Valentine's Day, Mothers' Day and Fathers' Day. But rather than simply trying to trick people, the masters of marketing know it's much easier to understand and work with innate human flaws.

By drawing on a plethora of psychological and sociological research, marketers subtly give us permission to buy and not to think too much, or too deeply, about why we're buying. Not thinking all the time is a very efficient way for us to get by. It conserves energy, and allows us to live relatively easily by responding to our psychological predispositions, [social norms](#), and general cognitive imperfections.

Here are some of our flaws marketers use to nudge us towards consumption.

The scarcity effect

Scarcity theory tells us that if we think something is scarce or only available for a short time, our mind will give it more weight. Christmas is a hard deadline, so we are limited in our freedom to delay the [purchase decision](#).

Scarcity [influences our ability](#) to think clearly when making decisions, and accelerates our perceived perishability of an offer. We feel that if we don't participate in the Christmas ritual, we will miss out on a significant social experience.

Melbourne City, for example, has its annual ["Shop the City" promotion](#) in the first week of December, where major retailers offer discounts available only on the day. Similarly, many shops are offering Christmas-only bundles or [gift sets](#), often at a "discount" (which "doubles" the scarcity effect). All of these tap into our willingness to respond to the scarcity effect and feel the need to buy things we would normally ignore.

Remember Christmas won't be your only opportunity to show others how much you love them, or to spend time with your family. It seems obvious, but you can buy people gifts at any time of the year! All marketers are doing is tapping into your predisposition to value experiential scarcity during socially validated moments to encourage you to behave in particular ways.

Overwhelming stimuli

By surrounding us with stimuli designed to overwhelm our cognitive processing, we are less likely to think through our decisions in any complete way. When we walk into a shopping mall filled with Christmas tinsel, Christmas music, lights and sounds, we are going to experience some form of [ego depletion](#).

Ego depletion doesn't mean you instantly become a humble, thoughtful person. In psychology, we use this term to describe how people don't always think through their decision-making in a rational and linear way when placed under situations of stress.

So, all that noise, colour and movement, isn't just the shopping centre or strip getting into the festive season. It's also a technique to get you to think a

little less completely, and respond to emotional cues, such as social norms, FOMO (fear of missing out), and rituals.

Our inability to forecast

Psychological research tells us humans aren't very good at [predicting the future](#). Or perhaps we just have an over-inflated sense of our accuracy in predicting the future – we rely on how we feel right now to predict how we might feel about something later. Psychologists call this affective forecasting.

So, in the moment, and just in that moment, we buy things we think we will need. But we discount all the other things that we have bought, and also discount how having all that stuff didn't necessarily make things great last time.

If we think about Christmas lunch or dinner, few of us can plan how much food we will actually need and we aren't very good at knowing how much we will end up eating (or need to eat). We pile our plate high, because we don't really know how much we need, but do know how much we want. Lots and lots. Just in case we miss out on something great.

It's the same with gifts. We often don't plan, and so we are more susceptible to the gentle nudges of the marketers when we are stressed, in a hurry, and trying to do ten things at once.

How to resist the temptation

Despite our belief that we are all individuals, making independent decisions and choosing what we want and when we want it, humans are [social, conforming and compliant creatures](#). If we see "our people" are doing something, we tend to assume this is something we should also do.

If we're looking around and our environment is signalling this is what we do at Christmas time, then it's easier to comply than to resist.

Christmas is a tough time to commit to reducing consumption, but it is possible. Resisting any natural response requires a commitment to the idea of resistance, a willingness to practise that resistance at all times (we know the more we do

something, the easier it becomes) and, importantly, surrounding ourselves with people who will help us to resist, or at least won't sabotage that resistance.

This doesn't mean cutting yourself off from society. But it does mean coming to terms with the idea you are open to manipulation, framing, priming and persuasion, and coming up with ways to avoid it.

Focus on the idea of Christmas – time with family and friends, treating ourselves to novel food, eating all the great fruit that's available this time of year – rather than succumbing to the commercial nudges that seem to have become imperative to Christmas.

Give gifts if you wish, but think about what is moving you toward buying those gifts. With this knowledge, you might make a few better choices.

This article was originally published on [The](#)

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Provided by The Conversation

APA citation: The psychology of Christmas shopping—how marketers nudge you to buy (2017, December 15) retrieved 19 June 2019 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-12-psychology-christmas-shoppinghow-nudge.html>

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