Why Online Shopping Makes You So Happy

Online shopping is more than a hobby for those who get a thrill out of traversing the biggest mall in the world: the internet. It's also a sport.

How else to explain Monica Corcoran Harel's reaction to the news that there's a flash sale at one of her favorite online stores? "I get very, very excited and incredibly competitive," she says, hitting refresh over and over to land the best deal. If a family member happens to enter the room while she's hovered over her computer, "I'm like, 'flash sale! I have a flash sale!'" In other words: do not disturb.

Corcoran Harel, 53, who lives in the Los Angeles area and runs Pretty Ripe, a lifestyle newsletter for women over 40, has been shopping online for years. She relishes the ability to visit dozens of shops at once, comparing prices before clicking "buy now," and the promise of quick delivery, all without stepping out of her house. Online shopping is "beyond intoxicating," she says. "I'm probably partially responsible for the downfall of brick-and-mortar stores."

But what exactly makes these orders feel so good? Experts explain the psychology behind online shopping—along with tips on how to show restraint if your virtual cart is overflowing.

Online shopping increased during the pandemic

Online shopping transformed from novelty to normality years ago: Amazon launched nearly three decades ago, in 1995, as an online bookseller, and now reports that customers buy around 7,400 products per minute from its U.S. sellers. But the pandemic shifted consumer habits in a way that favored buying even basic necessities like toilet paper online. According to the Annual Retail Trade Survey, e-commerce sales increased by $244 billion—or 43%—in 2020, jumping from $571 billion in 2019 to $815 billion in 2020.

That surge was at least partially driven by a desire to avoid indoor venues. But experts say it could also have to do with self-soothing behaviors. Research has long suggested that retail therapy can actually be therapeutic. A study published in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology* in 2014, for example, indicates that making purchases helps people feel instantly happier—and also fights lingering sadness. One reason, the study authors speculate, is that making purchase decisions confers a sense of personal control and autonomy.

Another study, published in *Psychology & Marketing* in 2011, found that going shopping leads to "lasting positive impacts on mood," and is not associated with feelings of regret or guilt about spontaneous purchases.

Shopping is, in many ways, motivated by emotion, says Jorge Barraza, program director and assistant professor in the online master of science in applied psychology program at the University of Southern California. "When we're sad, when we're stressed, we're more likely to engage in this kind of behavior," he says. In some cases, he notes, the spark of joy a fancy new dress or gadget triggers might not last, especially if the buyer knows they're mismanaging their money. "That boost in mood might be transitory, if you're spending more than you can afford, but at least temporarily it does appear to restore a sense of control, and reduce any residual sadness that people might be experiencing."

Why online shopping makes people so happy

In many ways, online shopping catapults the pleasure of in-person shopping to a different, almost overwhelming stratosphere. “It’s psychologically so powerful,” says Joshua Klapow, a psychologist and adjunct associate professor of public health at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. (He’s also the new owner of three inflatable pool floats, a collapsible whisk, two jars of almond butter, and 50 pounds of bird seed, all of which he ordered online.)

Compared to shopping in person, “it’s a much more gratifying experience overall, because there’s less friction, less barriers, less behavioral cost, more specificity, and more choice,” he says. Plus, “the shopping is totally tailored to us. We can shop quickly or slowly.”

Part of the reason why online shopping is so appealing is convenience. When we go shopping in-person, Klapow points out, we have to walk or drive or figure out some other way of getting there, and then we have to stride through aisle after aisle to locate what we’re looking for. Even at stores that offer contactless pay, there’s some effort required to make a transaction: swiping a credit card or Apple Pay on your phone, for example. Then, a shopper needs to travel back home. “For a lot of people, these incredibly minor inconveniences just start picking away at the overall perceived value of the purchase,” he says.

In addition to being easier, online shopping delivers the satisfaction of accuracy. If Klapow heads to a big-box store, he might not find the shirt he’s looking for in the right size or color. If he’s shopping online, he’s more likely to snag exactly what he wants with far less hassle.

Doing so is a form of immediate gratification, which we’re all wired to crave, says Joseph Kable, a cognitive neuroscience researcher at the University of Pennsylvania. “This is a tendency that’s universal among people and is shared across much of the animal world,” he says. “People and other animals tend to discount outcomes in the future, relative to outcomes that are immediate. This means we prefer to have good things as soon as possible, and to postpone bad things as far as possible in the future.”

Interestingly, online shopping is also associated with another, more delayed type of gratification: anticipation for the order’s arrival. Awaiting something exciting is “like Christmas every day,” Klapow says, likening the ability to track a package to monitoring Santa’s whereabouts on Christmas Eve.

That resonates with Corcoran Harel, who works from home and enjoys looking out the window to see if a package has arrived. “I’m vigilant about getting my packages,” she says. “I’m so excited to rip it open and try something on—and the knowledge that you can return something easily just makes it better.”

What to do if you think you have a problem

Researchers define compulsive buying as “a preoccupation with buying and shopping, frequent buying episodes, or overpowering urges to buy that are experienced as irresistible and senseless.” There’s no one-size-fits-all answer to whether your online shopping habit is problematic, Barraza says, but it’s generally a good idea to ask yourself if your purchases are interfering with your quality of life.

Compulsive buying disorder (or any other type of shopping addiction) is not included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). However, it’s been

recognized for more than a century: the German psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin is credited with first describing the disorder in 1915, calling it "oniomania"—the Greek word "onios" means "for sale," and "mania" was interpreted as "insanity." As the authors of a 2012 article in *Advances in Psychiatric Treatmen*t point out, experts continue to debate whether shopping addiction is "a valid mental illness or a leisure activity that individuals use to manage their emotions or express their self-identity."

In a study published in 2014 in the *Journal of Behavioral Addictions*, researchers presented several factors that might predispose someone to developing an online shopping addiction, including having low self-esteem, low self-control, a negative emotional state, a penchant for anonymity , and an internet diet that includes exposure to lots of graphics and pop-up messages.

Another research article, published in 2017 in *Frontiers in Psychology*, focused on developing a scale that could measure online shopping addiction. According to the authors, six elements are required to meet the definition of addictive behaviors, including salience (which means online shopping would be the most important activity in the person's life); mood modification, like feeling a buzz after placing an order; conflict, perhaps with family members; and relapse, or resuming the behavior after trying to stop. In those cases, a person addicted to online shopping might benefit from working with a professional and undergoing cognitive behavioral therapy, Klapow says.

Concerns about shopping addiction and over-spending are especially relevant now, as inflation hits its highest peak in the U.S. in four decades. Klapow recommends focusing on making intentional decisions about what to buy. "There's nothing wrong with saying, 'I want this, so I'm going to get it,' but we do need to be careful that we're not calling all our wants 'needs,'" he says.

Here are a few tips if you're concerned about over-spending online:

Before checking out, review each item in your online cart and ask yourself: "Do I want this, or do I need it?" Klapow instructs his clients to do this cognitive exercise, and it can be helpful, he says. "It forces you to kind of look in the mirror, and you'd be amazed at how many items you end up putting back or saving for later."

Attach a helpful Post-it note to your computer screen. This is one of Klapow's favorite ways of modifying the environment to resist the siren call of e-commerce. Write your monthly budget in big letters on the sticky note, or a message directing yourself to check the total cost before clicking "buy now." The visual reminder can help ground you when you're caught up in the excitement of a new find.

Don't store your credit card information online. Lots of people store information for multiple credit cards online, expediting the ability to make a purchase. Ideally, you wouldn't store even a single card, Klapow says—"not from a safety standpoint, but from an impulse standpoint." Having to manually input your payment details requires an extra minute to breathe and perhaps reevaluate the purchase.

From: Angela Haupt, "Why Online Shopping Makes You So Happy", *Time* (July 2022)
https://time.com/6200717/online-shopping-psychology-explained/