

# Holiday season consumerism



Each year, the most travel occurs during the winter holiday season when Americans fly home to reunite with family and friends or go on an end-of-year vacation. Long distance trips during the six-day Thanksgiving break increase by 54%, while the Christmas and New Year's period sees a rise of 23% compared to the rest of the year. Year-end travel volume has steadily increased since 2005, up 25% in 2017 from 2005, reported AAA. Road trips, flights and cruise ships are all popular means of transportation, yet the damage they do to the environment is dramatic. According to BBC News, aviation accounts for 2.4% of global carbon emissions. A trip from London to San Francisco produces two times more emission than a family car does in an entire year. Cruise ship engines release toxic chemicals that pollute the air and generate hazardous sewage that harms marine life. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates a 3,000-person cruise ship releases 150,000 gallons of sewage per week. Travelers' environmental footprints increase even after they arrive at their destination due to many hotels' excessive use of water and increased dining in restaurants. The year 2020, however, is deep in the COVID-19 pandemic and might instead expect a decrease in the number of travelers. In a survey of 1,200 Americans, 28% say they plan to travel this year, compared to 53% from 2019, according to Destination Analysts. Nevertheless, a single flight can generate more carbon per passenger than the amount some individuals produce annually. Opting to spend the holidays in other ways can largely reduce your carbon footprint.

Going home for the holidays



As the holidays approach, millions of Americans are revving up to decorate their homes with vibrant lights and prepare their tables with a plethora of festive foods. At the center of the season – consumerism.

Endless advertisements encouraging shoppers to buy in time for a sale reinforce the longstanding notion that gift giving is an expression of love. According to the Washington Post, thirty-seven percent of those they surveyed said they “wanted to find a gift that showed they cared.” In the pursuit of finding that perfect gift, shoppers will equate a gift's tangible value with its intrinsic value, leading them to dip into their wallets more than they can afford. According to the New York Times, despite holiday debt from the previous year, the average shopper will spend approximately \$1,000 this holiday season.

The social media era heightens the pressure to go above and beyond with gift giving to keep up with the rosy picture seen online. Large companies tactically play into the idea of conspicuous consumerism, or the practice of buying name brand items to signal wealth and status. TV screens and YouTube advertisements are brightly lit with the promise of high-end perfumes and overpriced iPhones.

Some validly criticize the holidays for being too heavily centered around consumerist practices rather than spirituality and the company of family. Every year still, Americans pull out their credit cards to shell out vast sums, fueling the economy and corporations that profit off of this holiday phenomenon.

Pardon your turkey

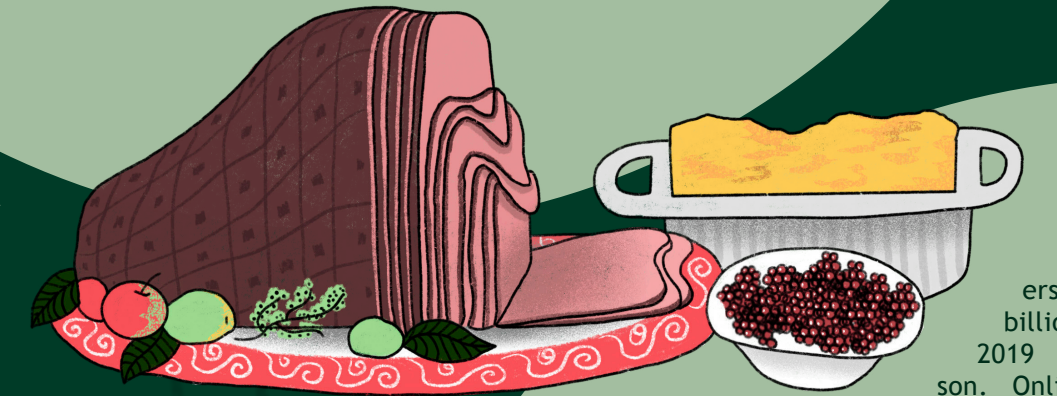


The most tangible representation of holiday indulgence is weight gain. According to a Stanford health magazine, Americans gain an average of one pound every holiday season, and there's no evidence that they lose that weight in subsequent months. Although a pound may not seem like much, the accumulation of weight gain can have serious consequences on one's health.

Not only do Americans consume food in excess during the holidays, but they also waste massive amounts of it. According to the Natural Resources Defense Council's report, nearly 40% of food is left uneaten in the U.S. yearly, translating to \$165 billion being thrown away. As we enter a time of family gatherings and festive dining during the winter months, food waste is inevitable. During Thanksgiving alone, Americans buy up to 581 million pounds of turkey meat. However, around 204 million pounds end up in the trash. Moreover, according to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 40 million pounds of mashed potatoes and 30 million pounds of stuffing are thrown away every Thanksgiving.

While food waste may not feel like a pressing issue, discarding food wreaks havoc on the environment since much of it goes into landfills. Decomposing organic matter comprises 16% of U.S. methane emissions, a greenhouse gas that contributes to global warming.

Fortunately, there are steps that the U.S. can take to diminish its food waste. Some important components include improving existing legislation, such as simplifying the meaning of date labels to prevent people from throwing food out due to misinterpretation or organizing initiatives to raise awareness on the harms of food waste. Businesses could adopt better practices and consider donating perishables rather than discarding them. Individually, as citizens, we can become more attentive to our consumption and our waste, store foods properly and conserve as much as possible. Think twice before dropping that half-eaten pecan pie in the garbage can; after all, eating leftovers in the morning will be just as filling (as long as they haven't gone bad, of course).



U.S. consumers spent \$730.2 billion during the 2019 holiday season. Online shopping made up \$167.8 billion to that total. Often, companies hire extra staff during the holidays which leads to higher employment rates. However, with the pandemic, it's almost certain that holiday shopping will change along with the amount of money people spend on holiday goods.

It's expected that about 53% of holiday shopping will be done online this season. This would be about a 33% increase from 2019 when online shopping was about 20.1% of all holiday sales. The extreme increase in expected online sales is largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. More shoppers have been leaning towards purchasing goods through the Internet to limit their exposure to others in an attempt to slow the spread of COVID-19. With this increase in online sales, it's predicted that the amount spent on the holiday season will stay fairly consistent.

Because of increased e-commerce this year, some companies are going to be hiring more employees to work in fulfillment and distribution centers. Last year, about 562,000 people were hired to fill holiday positions. Although it's uncertain exactly how many more employees will be hired this year during the holiday season, companies such as Michaels and 1-800-Flowers.com, Inc. said in September that they planned to hire more than 26,000 holiday employees in total. Their holiday employment rates contribute to an over 25% increase from 2019 in seasonal staff across the U.S.

Gifting in a digital age



Wasteful wrapping

Plenty of decorations are re-used and recycled every year during the holidays: ornaments, stockings, decorative dining sets and sometimes even ribbons. However, one major component of the festive season that never seems to last is gift wrapping material.

Between Thanksgiving and New Year's, about half of the 4.6 million pounds of wrapping paper made in the U.S. gets thrown away and put into landfills. On top of that, 38,000 miles of ribbon gets discarded during the holiday season along with more than \$12 billion worth of gift wrapping material. These are just some of the materials that contribute to the 7 million extra pounds of garbage produced in this time, which is about 25% more trash than produced outside of the holiday season.

Although many people attempt to recycle their used wrapping paper, most wrapping paper is made for only a single use. Textured, metallic and glitter wrapping paper, as well as bows, tissue paper and ribbons, are not recyclable and must be thrown away. If these papers get mixed with other recyclable materials, they can make a whole batch of eco-friendly objects non-recyclable. However, paper-based wrapping paper that is not laminated can be put in the recycling bin without a problem.

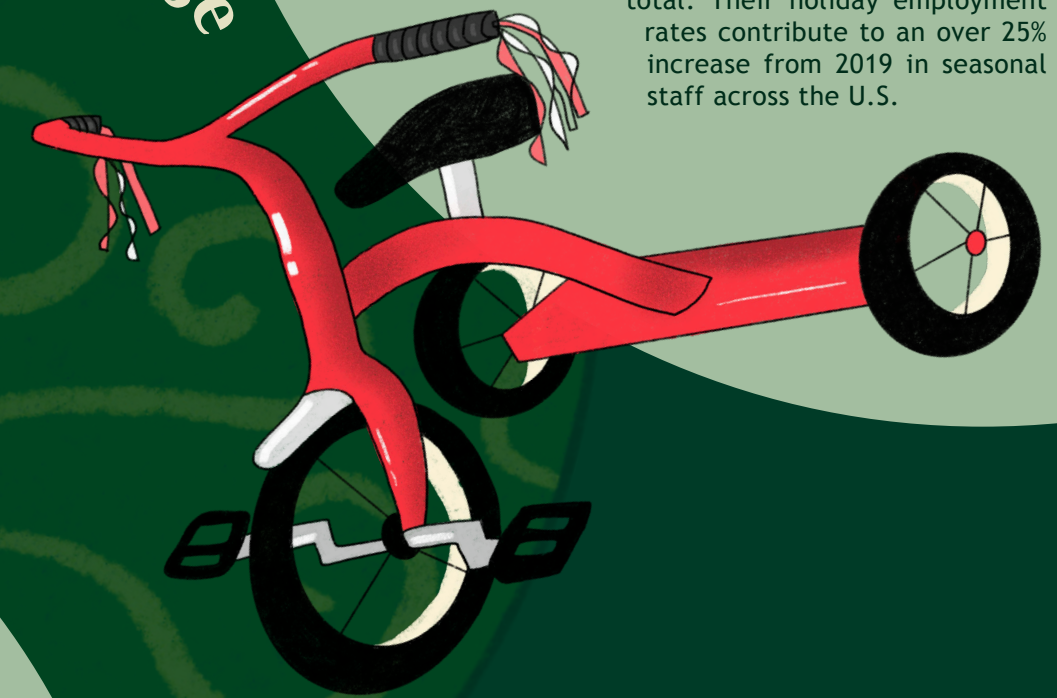
Luckily, there are plenty more environmentally friendly gift wrapping options. Brown paper, patterned magazine pages and newspapers are all alternatives for laminated wrapping paper. Painting or coloring these recyclable wrapping paper alternatives can make them more festive and personal. Reusable boxes, baskets and bags can also be used in gift exchanges. Simply saving ribbons, bags or bows to use for future gift exchanges can reduce the amount of garbage created during the holiday season.



A season of spending

The holidays are a time of significant spending. Companies like Macy's consistently have revenues that are 60% higher in the fourth quarter of the year. The pandemic has caused a large shift toward online shopping as Amazon slightly beat its quarter four earnings in quarter two and then by a great margin in quarter three. Holidays are a time that many businesses rely on for revenue which is why stocks like Macy's plummeted 75% and stayed low once it became clear that in-person shopping over the holidays was not going to happen. Contrarily, Amazon only dropped 20% and recovered in under two months.

Advertising is an extremely important piece of the holidays. It feels like Black Friday starts earlier every year. With the focus on gifts and spending, many businesses orient themselves toward the holidays by timing product releases, sales and saving money for larger advertising campaigns. With the pandemic and the rapid recovery of wages for high-wage workers, we will likely see a holiday season where traditional retail with large discounts like Macy's will struggle while premium brands flourish.



Layout: Madeline Cho  
Copy: Elizabeth van Blommestein, Grace Xia, Sophia Qin, Aidan Gerber, Anoush Torounian  
Graphics: Emily Feng