

The pros and cons of Black Friday

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A welcome new tradition

The culture of Thanksgiving has evolved over the years. Traditions have changed and today, Black Friday has become one of the busiest shopping days in America. Although the holiday has diverged from its simpler traditions, the Black Friday frenzy is just a step towards modern traditions.

Anyone familiar with Black Friday in America knows how crazy it can get. Barricades are put up, long lines of people crowd front doors and masses of people rush from store to store. Seeing a multitude of people out and about early in the morning is interesting, and I find a sense of appeal to the chaos.

With malls playing Christmas music, and the temperature nice and cool in the early Friday morning, there is a feeling of festivity in the atmosphere. But it's understandable how this might not be appealing to some. Being surrounded by a group of frenzied shoppers isn't for everyone.

Having worked in retail on Black Friday last year, I've experienced how it felt like to work on the most dreaded day for retail employees. I watched as people bumped against one another and the sales floor littered with hangers, shirt inserts and messy clothes.

The craze during the Thanksgiving holiday for sales and product discounts is a reflection of how profit-driven the holiday has become, and I'm not disagreeing with that. However, it shouldn't be seen as the death of old traditions. It's not challenging to replace the customs that Thanksgiving was built upon.

Furthermore, Black Friday shopping has a great impact on the economy. According to the National Retail Federation (NRF), about 20-40 percent of annual sales for retailers happen during the holiday seasons.

And although consumer spending on Black Friday has dropped in 2013 compared to 2012 by more than a billion dollars, it is still higher than it was three years ago with an increase of \$5 billion from around \$52 billion in 2011 to around \$57 billion in 2013, based on statistics from the NRF.

Today, the thought of Thanksgiving is not without the image of Black Friday shopping and how it is celebrated as a combination of old traditions with modern traditions. However, I'm not an advocate for lining in front of stores early Thursday evening to get the best deals on merchandise.

Thanksgiving is still about getting together with friends and family and having a traditional dinner. Going out should come early Friday morning – after the Thanksgiving dinner. Incorporating old traditions with newer traditions isn't complex. Let's not look at the unique frenzy that happens every day after Thanksgiving as forgetting and losing the old customs of Thanksgiving, but moving forward and embracing new traditions.

Pinnacle of American regression

Aside from the Fourth of July, you would be hard-pressed to find a holiday more emblematic of the United States than Thanksgiving, what with the hearty turkey dinner and football on T.V.

It's more than a little ironic, then, that it has come to share a weekend with Black Friday – a day that, while now rooted in national tradition, has come to represent America's economic and cultural regression.

While Thanksgiving has evolved into a day for appreciating the things one already has, Black Friday represents the pleasure of seeking more material possessions.

Even the evolution of the term "Black Friday" suggests this. Originally used by police officers in mid-20th century Philadelphia to describe the chaos caused by throngs of shoppers heading to stores the day after Thanksgiving, the term was later recycled by public relations representatives to refer to the sales, not the crowds.

By the 1980s, the association with shopping was well-established. Some companies even began to play off of a rumor that the Friday was so named because it was the first time in the year that retailers operated in the "black" – that is, made a profit. (If that were true, then neither the sales nor the companies that put them on would exist).

While the holiday shopping season has become a boon for American retailers, all that shopping contributes to some larger economic problems. Buying children's toys, discounted tablets and four-dollar crock pots helps tilt our trade balances with the countries that produce these goods, namely China, even more in their favor. Indeed, imports to the U.S. from China bulge by billions of dollars each year in the months leading up to Christmas.

As a result, all those Walmart, Target and Best Buy purchases contribute to an already gargantuan trade deficit with the People's Republic. Last year alone, the U.S. imported \$318 billion more in goods from China than it exported to it, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. That gap is worrying, since it means that more money is leaving the country as opposed to being spent domestically.

Bad trade practices aren't the only consequence of our Black Friday frenzies. Responding to the diehard shoppers who camp out for hours ahead of time – and in chilly temperatures, if you live on the mainland – many retailers have been starting their big sales earlier each year. This year, a variety of big names, including Best Buy, Macy's and RadioShack, are offering sale deals in-store as early as 8 a.m. on Thanksgiving Day.

That's bad news for their employees, many of whom would have been assured an uninterrupted Thanksgiving a decade or two ago. Instead, these workers will have to spend the holiday working in a degradation of blue-collar work.

Moreover, it signals that the Black Friday tradition is eclipsing Thanksgiving. After all, who has time to sit at home and eat when there are \$150 laptops at your nearest big box store?

This holiday, enjoy your trade-negative, Thanksgiving-killing shopping, if you want. Just remember: it's changing our country, and not for the better.