

We can't rely on rampant consumerism to get us out of this mess

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Hyperconsumption adds to environmental destruction that brings people into contact with animal viruses that can spark pandemics. We have to avoid the temptation to rely on it to get us out

WHEN I heard the news that Amazon is making sales of \$11,000 every second of the lockdown, my initial reaction was weary resignation. You probably don't eat bushmeat, but Western consumerism adds to the deforestation and habitat destruction that increasingly brings humans into contact with animal viruses. The world is in turmoil due to a virus unleashed in part by greed, and how do we respond? By going shopping.



There was a stab of guilt too: I don't think of myself as a materialist, but I've become a regular user of online retailers, buying things I don't really need to help ease the boredom.

Thankfully, it turns out that my initial reaction was wrong. In the US – where the spree has been likened to Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving when people go on an online retail bender – consumer spending is actually falling in almost every category.

The little money being spent is going on essentials such as food and household goods and, out of necessity, this is shifting online. Amazon's bounce is not a frenzy but a hunkering down. In that I find hope rather than dismay.

There has been much discussion of the environmental benefits of furloughing the world economy. Oil consumption has gone through the floor and there is increasing talk of a green economic recovery. I'm sceptical. Once we get the all-clear, I think the most likely response will be a rapid push to return to business as usual, encouraged by leaders whose electoral prospects hinge on an economic recovery.

But I also have hope, because the pandemic and its aftermath might permanently shift attitudes away from hyperconsumption.

Consider the enforced changes in my own family's habits. In the era now known as BC – Before Coronavirus – our food shopping worked like this: we decided what we wanted to eat, bought it and ate it. I know that I should have been buying local and seasonal, but habit, convenience and deliciousness won out.

This has been upended. I now avoid the supermarket. The shelves are well-stocked – we owe thanks to staff who keep them that way – but the hassle of queuing, of wearing a mask, of social distancing in the aisles, of lugging the stuff home and then wiping it down (I know the evidence for the necessity and effectiveness of doing this is weak, but better safe than sorry) are a big disincentive.

“One outcome of the lockdown may be to make us see that consumption isn’t a route to happiness.”

Instead, I now mostly buy food that I stumble across in shops and stalls near my house, and then decide what to cook with it. A couple of days ago, I came home with three aubergines, a bunch of beetroot and some wilted coriander. Not exactly a feast to write home about, but, supplemented by the dwindling contents of my cupboards, they became an excellent curry. It felt like a triumph of thrift and ingenuity. My sister later proudly told me that she fixed a pair of reading glasses with superglue.

I suspect that many people are similarly learning to make do and mend when they can. And if they are anything like me, they are enjoying it too. It turns out that when you are used to hyperabundance, scarcity can be a breath of fresh air.

You can understand why we have created a hyperabundant society. We naturally assume that more of any good thing will make us happier. This is true up to a point, but the psychology of happiness is very clear: humans quickly become satiated by abundance and have to consume ever more just to stand still. This is what economists call the “hedonic treadmill”.

Capitalist society has trapped us on a number of hedonic treadmills. Think of those entertainment services that are so welcome right now. Netflix, Spotify and so on are great, but when you can watch or listen to anything, anytime, you end up taking them for granted.

One unexpected outcome of the lockdown, then, is to forcibly knock us off some of our hedonic treadmills and, I hope, cause us to see that endless, unlimited consumption isn’t a route to happiness. And with the economic forecasts looking gloomy, this could continue long after lockdown is over. Many people who would have otherwise hyperconsumed their way back to unhappiness won’t be able to afford to do so.

I don’t think there is a precedent in recent history. The shutdown after the 9/11 terror attacks lasted just days and everything quickly bounced back in most places.

Perhaps instead we need to look to my grandparents’ generation, which lived through the second world war and the rationing that lasted until the 1950s. This led to thrifty lifestyles that persisted even in the booming 1980s.

I hope the covid-19 experience will be similarly formative for our generation, because going back to business as usual could condemn us to be the last.