

Black Friday frenzy goes global—and not everyone's happy

November 29 2019, by Angela Charlton and Sylvie Corbet



A demonstrator "plays dead" during climate change protest outside the Johannesburg Stock Exchange in Johannesburg Friday, Nov. 29, 2019. Environmentalists around the world are joining a global day of protests Friday, in a symbolic gesture to demand that all governments act against climate change. (AP Photo/Denis Farrell)

People don't celebrate Thanksgiving in France, or Russia, or South Africa - but they do shop on Black Friday.

The U.S. sales phenomenon has spread to retailers across the world in recent years with such force that it's prompting a backlash from some activists, politicians and even consumers.

Near Paris, climate demonstrators blocked a shopping mall and gathered in front of Amazon's headquarters to protest over-production they say is killing the planet. Workers at Amazon in Germany went on strike for better pay. Some French lawmakers want to ban Black Friday altogether.

Consumer rights groups in Britain and some other countries say retailers use Black Friday as a slogan to lure in shoppers, but it's not always clear how real or big the discounts are. Other critics say it hurts small businesses.

"The planet burns, oceans die, and we still want to consume, consume, and therefore produce, produce - until we eradicate all living things? ... We will not betray our children for a 30% discount!" reads a manifesto by groups holding "Block Friday" protests around Paris.

Globalized commerce has brought U.S. consumer tastes to shoppers around the world, from Halloween candy to breakfast cereal and peanut butter, sometimes even supplanting local traditions.



A shopper is seen during the opening of an Auchan general store, on Black Friday, Nov 29, 2019, in Englos, northern France. Some French lawmakers want to ban Black Friday, the post-Thanksgiving sales event that has morphed into a global phenomenon. (AP Photo/Michel Spingler)

To many activists, Black Friday is the epitome of this shift, a purely commercial event designed to boost U.S. retailers ahead of the Christmas holidays, the symbol of capitalism run amok.

In Britain, where the big winter sales have traditionally been held on the day after Christmas, companies have adopted Black Friday marketing campaigns since about 2010. After a rise in business on the day in the first years, the volume of shopping has leveled off, with most of it

happening online over multiple days.

Research by a U.K. consumer association found that 61% of goods advertised in Black Friday deals last year were cheaper or about the same price both before and after the event.

That echoes similar warnings in other countries. Russia's consumer watchdog published detailed tips on how to avoid getting fooled, like checking whether prices were raised before Friday to make deals look good or whether delivery costs are inflated.



A demonstrator "plays dead" during climate change protest outside the Johannesburg Stock Exchange in Johannesburg Friday, Nov. 29, 2019. Environmentalists around the world are joining a global day of protests Friday, in a symbolic gesture to demand that governments act against climate change. (AP Photo/Denis Farrell)

The Black Friday advertising push has extended beyond the one day to Cyber Monday, with retailers in several countries spreading them across what's often called "Black Week."

In the Czech Republic, one electronics chain encourages shoppers - in English, of course - to "Make Black Friday Great Again," in an ad featuring a suited man wearing the distinctive red cap used by U.S. President Donald Trump's election campaign.

Broadcasters in South Africa showed people waiting in line to shop in one of the world's most socially and economically unequal nations. The respected weekly Mail & Guardian newspaper decried in a scathing editorial how Black Friday is used to enrich big retailers.

"Like no other day, this Friday shows how broken the world we have built is," it said.

Black Friday has meanwhile had to adapt to cultural norms. Egyptians, for example, have taken on all aspects of the occasion - except the name, because Friday is a sacred day of worship for Muslims. Rather than scrap the event, many retailers decided to rename it White Friday or Yellow Friday.



A customer walks down the aisle of a shop in the Carrefour Shopping center at the eve of the Black Friday event, in Cesson, western France, Thursday, Nov. 28, 2019. Some French lawmakers are considering banning Black Friday, the post-Thanksgiving sales event that has morphed into a global phenomenon. A legislative committee passed an amendment Monday that proposes prohibiting Black Friday since it causes "resource waste" and "overconsumption." The amendment will be debated in the National Assembly next month. (AP Photo/David Vincent)

The term Black Friday comes from retailers' claim that it was the day when they went from being lossmaking for the year - in the red - to making a profit - in the black.

Among other concerns is that Black Friday could hurt small businesses

that do not have the vast marketing budgets and online sales presence of big retail chains or multinationals.

In Italy, for example, Black Friday falls outside the season's strictly defined schedule for when the winter shop sales can be held. This year, sales cannot be held from Dec. 5 until Jan. 4, when stores are allowed to clear out stock. The fashion industry has warned that can hurt smaller retailers in a country that relies heavily on them.

A French legislative committee passed an amendment Monday that proposes prohibiting Black Friday because it causes "resource waste" and "overconsumption." France's e-commerce union, whose members are aggressively marketing Black Friday sales throughout November, has condemned the measure.



A woman walks past a tram advertising the Black Friday in Prague, Czech Republic, Thursday, Nov. 28, 2019. (AP Photo/Petr David Josek)



A customer walks down the aisle of a shop in the Carrefour Shopping center at the eve of the Black Friday event, in Cesson, western France, Thursday, Nov. 28, 2019. Some French lawmakers are considering banning Black Friday, the post-Thanksgiving sales event that has morphed into a global phenomenon. A legislative committee passed an amendment Monday that proposes prohibiting Black Friday since it causes "resource waste" and "overconsumption." The amendment will be debated in the National Assembly next month. (AP Photo/David Vincent)



A shopper with large ticket goods is seen during the opening of an Auchan general store, on Black Friday, Nov 29, 2019, in Englos, northern France. Some French lawmakers want to ban the Black Friday sales, the post-Thanksgiving sales event that has morphed into a global phenomenon. (AP Photo/Michel Spingler)



A shopper is seen during the opening of an Auchan general store, on Black Friday, Nov 29, 2019, in Englos, northern France. Some French lawmakers want to ban Black Friday, the post-Thanksgiving sales event that has morphed into a global phenomenon. (AP Photo/Michel Spingler)



Shopper is seen during the opening of a Auchan general store, Friday, Nov 29, 2019 in Englos, northern France, during the Black Friday consumer sales event. Some French lawmakers want to ban Black Friday price reductions, the post-Thanksgiving sales event that has morphed into a global phenomenon. (AP Photo/Michel Spingler)



Customers line up in a Carrefour Shopping center at the eve of the Black Friday event, in Cesson, western France, Thursday, Nov. 28, 2019. Some French lawmakers are considering banning Black Friday, the post-Thanksgiving sales event that has morphed into a global phenomenon. A legislative committee passed an amendment Monday that proposes prohibiting Black Friday since it causes "resource waste" and "overconsumption." The amendment will be debated in the National Assembly next month. (AP Photo/David Vincent)

Dozens of French activists blocked the Amazon warehouse in Bretigny-sur Orge on Thursday, spreading hay and old refrigerators and microwaves on the driveway. On Friday, climate activists took aim at Black Friday, blocking shops and setting up heated exchanges with the people who had been hoping to find a good deal.

"We need to stop telling ourselves that, 'it's Christmas, I need to go shopping,'" says Théophile Pouillot-Chévara, a 17-year-old climate activist in Paris.

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