

# The Guardian View on Festive Marketing: Stop Spending Like There's No Tomorrow

By the editorial board, *The Guardian*, Nov 21, 2023

Late in November 1998, a British newspaper alerted its readers to a strange quirk of American culture. At 5am on the day after Thanksgiving, queues were forming at US shopping malls, and the roads were busy with more would-be shoppers. It was called “Black Friday”, explained the reporter, the day when retailers could expect to see their bottom lines magically go from red to black. And what was selling this year? Fluffy robots called Furby dolls. By 6.05am, the main toyshop inside one mall in Boston had sold out of its entire stock of Furby dolls. The Guardian’s librarians believe that this is the first mention of Black Friday in any British national newspaper. A quarter of a century later, your Furby may be a relic but Black Friday has gone global.

Marketing changes our norms, and the eight weeks of Christmas broadcasts are the industry’s yearly jamboree. It’s forecast that this month and next, a record £9.5bn will be blown on advertising, more than the UK government spends on prisons in a year. This is the philosophy of “spending like there’s no tomorrow” – literally, given the climate crisis. Once Christmas has passed, the adverts will offer up many alternative ways to fry the planet.

Clearly advertising shifts units, but at what cost? The Guardian reports that an award-winning 2018 campaign for Audi saw the marque gain 132,700 in extra car sales, which produced the equivalent annual greenhouse gas emissions of Uganda. Promoting a lifestyle of overconsumption – SUVs rather than hatchbacks, long-haul flights not rail travel – is good for business but bad for the planet.

Newspapers and TV channels could ban these ads; this newspaper refuses advertising from extractors of fossil fuels. But that remains an unusual stance in an industry that depends on marketing revenues. Another response would be for regulators to ensure the ads for, say, a luxury cruise do not mislead on its ecological costs. Yet the main regulator here, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), is funded by the industry it oversees and enforces a code that critics say goes rather easy on advertisers.

As a new book, *Badvertising* by Andrew Simms and Leo Murray, records, of the 503 complaints about misleading environmental ads made last year to the ASA, almost 90% were not investigated as they were outside the watchdog’s remit or not in violation of regulations. Of the rest, the vast majority were “informally resolved” by the advertiser withdrawing or amending a claim.

The book cites instances of questionable judgment by the ASA. In 2021, easyJet straplined posters “Destination Net Zero” for flights that would throw millions of tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent into the atmosphere. The ASA declined to investigate complaints as it was developing regulations around travel ads (for which it did use the easyJet campaign as research). While that same year the ASA was looking into objections to HSBC’s ads on its climate change record, it refused to consider complaints against other banks. The watchdog claims it did so because its investigation of HSBC served as a signal for all banks.

Britain’s economic model remains obsessed with consumption and fuelled by debt. Restructuring requires more than glib one-liners, and it is urgent in a country spending its way towards climate chaos. A small part of the job could be done by tightening up regulation in order to make the daily bombardment of ads bear more semblance to reality.