

**It's Too Easy to Buy Stuff You Don't Want**  
By Amanda Mull, *The Atlantic*, November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2023

I've made many impulse purchases in my life, but the first one that I found unsettling was a pair of Nike VaporMax sneakers. It was July 2018, I was mindlessly tapping through Instagram updates while waiting for friends. That's where I saw the sneakers: futuristic, baby pink, and *a new arrival*, according to the ad. The order took 15 seconds. I put the shoes in my cart, and my phone automatically filled in my login credentials and added my new credit-card number. *You can always return them*, I thought to myself as I tapped the "Buy" button. As soon as I'd paid, I snapped out of the mania that had briefly overtaken me, \$190 poorer. It's always horrifying to realize that advertising has worked on you, but this felt more like when the velociraptor in Jurassic Park learn to use the doorknob. I had completed some version of the online checkout process a million times before, but never could I remember it being quite so spontaneous. *If it's going to be that easy all the time*, I thought to myself, *I'm cooked*.

That experience wasn't the result of any particular technology. Instead, a handful of small changes to the mechanics of online shopping had begun to accumulate into something meaningful: Advertisers were amassing personal data with which to tailor their ad targeting. Retailers were offering free shipping and free returns on everything—buy now, decide later. Browsers were urging users to save login credentials and financial details within their software. The expanded use of payment shortcuts such as Apple Pay was circumventing the need to create a new account or log in to an old one. "Buy now, pay later" services were beginning to pop up at more retailers to soften the blow of spending.

These changes have become the default infrastructure of online shopping, maximizing convenience to make buying as effortless as possible. Buying things online has never been so easy. So easy, in fact, that we might all be better off with a few more speed bumps.

In the consumer system, friction refers to anything that slows down a potential buyer on the path toward completing a purchase—wondering which size will fit, remembering their password, getting their credit card out of their wallet. An estimated 70% of online shopping carts are abandoned, which does suggest that potential purchasers are easy to derail.

Retailers regard friction as the enemy. The history of online shopping is that of tamping down friction at any cost. Free shipping and generous return policies are an expensive way to do business—an e-commerce return for a \$50 product costs retailers an average of \$33. But these policies became the default precisely because buyers accustomed to shopping in person looked at the internet and thought to themselves, *This seems like a bad way to buy shoes*.

Convenience, though, tends to be a hollow virtue on its own. When something is made convenient, it's because that convenience benefits the company, put in place in order to short-circuit your ability to act in your own best interests. Hence, my pastel-pink spaceship shoes.

Over the past year or so, exhausted by the tedious sameness of so much new clothing and disenchanted with its terrible quality, I've found myself buying most of my clothes through secondhand platforms. At first, this shift seemed risky to me. Buying pre-owned goods is full of the type of friction that makes buyers mistrustful: The photos vary widely in quality, return policies tend to be extremely restrictive. Everything about the buying process reminds you that you should read closely and choose carefully. Not everything I've purchased has been exactly what I'd hoped for, but I now wear my secondhand purchases far more frequently than I do the things I ordered brand new. These garments feel like things I actually chose instead of stuff that just happened to move through my field of vision in a weak moment.

In hindsight, that's not such a surprise. When buying something feels like making a real choice, you have more opportunities to slow down and consider whether it might be the wrong one. Secondhand markets are some of the best places to relearn what a better version of online shopping might feel like right now, if only because using them requires a conscious acceptance of a certain amount of risk. Frictionless shopping might be convenient, in a sense, but it's a bad system for making good decisions.