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Black Friday 2020: It looks different, but shoppers will spend more than ever, experts say

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Black Friday shoppers at the Menlo Park Mall in search for discounts and deals in Edison on 11/23/18. Jeff Granit | For NJ Advance Media Jeff Granit | For NJ Advance Med

By [Sophie Nieto-Munoz | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](#)

This year's Black Friday doesn't include the typical long lines snaking around parking lots at midnight, stampedes of frenzied consumers running toward door busters, or driving around the parking lot desperately looking for someone packing up their car.

Instead, retailers are deterring customers from coming in stores. They've extended the deals through the month, some starting as early as October, and online. Major stores, like Walmart and Target, closed on Thanksgiving, an about-face from years prior amid [another wave of coronavirus cases](#).

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Yet, in a year of stress, turmoil and uncertainty, it's still expected to be the biggest holiday shopping year ever.

"I think consumers are at a point where there's so much sadness and death and misery that people are looking for any ray of hope to tell themselves the world is going to be a better place soon and start a 'normal' consumer

lifestyle,” said Ashwani Monga, marketing professor and executive vice chancellor of Rutgers University–Newark.

The weekend that’s typically the kick-off of the holiday shopping season is going to look very different, experts say. Health officials have been warning of [the rise in COVID-19 cases](#), urging residents to stay home for the holiday and beyond, and the [CDC has issued warnings](#) that shopping at crowded stores is a high-risk activity.

People still need their retail therapy, and on the heels of the good news of [a potential vaccine](#), shoppers will be opening up their wallets throughout the season. Who those people are and how they shop will be the biggest difference.

“We’re always going to the mall or Best Buy on Black Friday, but it’s not happening for us this year. It’s not going to happen for a good size of the population. But people are still going to want to ‘go’ shopping, and we’re going to see that online,” said Kristina Durante, marketing department vice chair at the Rutgers School of Business.

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Holiday online orders could grow as much as 20% to 30% to exceed a \$200 billion industry for the first time, [the National Retail Federation forecast](#) in a

media call on Monday. Holiday sales online and in store between Nov. 1 and Dec. 31 could grow as much as 5.2%, or an increase of \$766.7 billion across the country since the 2019 season.

E-commerce will inevitably see a spike because [malls and stores remain at 50% capacity](#), and there aren't deals in-store that aren't online, Durante pointed out. Those deals are also being dragged out to right before gift-giving season.

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“People get crazy when it comes to these deals, so maybe the internet will break instead of the door. It's still something that people still want to traditionally go out and do, they'll just be doing it online in their pajamas,” she said.

There's also fears as the second surge becomes clear — [57% are nervous about shopping in stores](#), according to a November study from Deloitte, up from 51% in September.

She also noted that most big retailers will win out because they've perfected seamless online shopping, like Amazon's one-click order, where smaller chains face technological hurdles. Small businesses don't have the margins

to dedicate to a new app, let alone maintain a website to handle dozens of shoppers at a time.

“If you can get awareness, small businesses might clinch this opportunity. We’re in the triple threat of a recession, disease uncertainty, and economic uncertainty, and people want to support their neighbors during these times. They just have to get out in front of Amazon,” Durante added.

And while there’s no way to know how much will be spent on Black Friday this year, shoppers will have roughly the same holiday budget of \$1,000, said Katherine Cullen, Senior Director of Industry and Consumer Insights with [National Retail Federation](#). Typically, a third of that is spent during the week of Thanksgiving, but that has been a changing trend as the holiday promotions start earlier.

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Still, there’s a level of financial uncertainty as residents are still reeling from the financial turmoil 2020 brought. New Jersey saw [unprecedented unemployment rates](#), and the state continues to be slammed by the [pandemic’s economic unrest](#).

Monga, the marketing professor at Rutgers University, said there’s going to be a stark divide on people who are shopping over the weekend.

There are residents who have kept their job, saved money by cutting out vacations and going out to eat, and saved their stimulus checks, that will want to reward themselves for making it through a difficult year, he said.

In the other box are residents who experienced unemployment, lost a family member to COVID-19, or are going into debt. They have bigger things on their minds than shopping, Monga said, like worrying about their health or financial stability.

It's going to follow the same divide of who [faced greater risk during the coronavirus pandemic](#): low-income workers, people of color and immigrants.

[“We see these inequities](#) in term of economy, health, schooling for kids, and we see all of these disproportionately affect people of color more than others,” he said. “That will be evident in shopping, not just because of the economic divide, but the intersection of the pandemic.”

Manveer Mann, Associate Professor of Marketing at Montclair State University, said while there's no specific data about the racial makeup of shoppers, minorities have been hurting more than others overall during the pandemic.

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“If you’re hurting and not as confident in your future, you’re going to spend less and make safe decisions and not splurge in that sense. Maybe you’ll be spending on small things to make a more festive environment while staying home,” said Mann.

She noted that home goods like Christmas decorations and tools for renovations are high on people’s lists because they are staying at home more. Electronics and comfort items are also in higher demand than previous years because the economy shifted from experiences to items.

“Pre-pandemic, we were spending out money on traveling, concerts, dining out. Now we’re buying things because there’s only so much you can do. Maybe you buy a Peloton versus buying dresses for work,” Mann said.

Monga agreed. People want to strike a balance, he said, and are justifying their consumer habits because they’ve been home for so long. The people who are vehemently against shopping at a mall might spend a little more online.

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“No one knows how consumers are going to act. We’ve never experienced this, a Black Friday during the pandemic. We’ve been living life so differently

these past eight months, we're completely different people than we were in February ... and people don't know how to manage this," Monga said, noting how quickly things can change.

Two weeks ago, he said, he would've thought the news of the second surge would've kept everyone home, but the vaccine has consumers acting like the problem has been solved, "even if it hasn't."

It concerns him to see people going out so confidently, and how those social cues could inspire their friends to go out by giving off that "this isn't so bad and I should do it too, but this is the world we live in now," he said.

"It's like going to a foreign country and not knowing how to behave and eat at a restaurant," he said. "Having a Black Friday during this pandemic is really like that."

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