Autumn Lala

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Manipulate-Me-Not

Have you ever walked into a store, be it a department store or grocery store, with a thought-out list in hand, your mind buzzing with all of the items you need? But after making your way down each aisle, passed each tempting end-cap, when it comes time for check out, do you ever find yourself pulling out items from your cart that were not originally on your list? I do, *all the time*. Just last week, my boyfriend, Jordan, and I took a late-night visit to our local Wal-Mart Supercenter after catching a movie. As Jordan ventured off towards the stereo section, I lingered in the electronics area by the many racks of music. I was surrounded by CDs, new and old, their plastic casing reflecting the luminescence of the overhead lights and inevitably drawing me closer. I ended the evening by buying several CDs; my wallet be damned. When I spoke to the cashier about my unplanned purchase, she talked about how that happens to everyone, even herself sometimes. Her reply got me thinking.

It was clear that I was not the only one impulsively buying things that I did not need. But why? Could we chalk that up to mere coincidence? If this situation were applied to the field of medicine, we would see doctors asking questions, investigating, and *analyzing* what was in front of them and what had happened beforehand to cause an ailment. If ten cases of mild food poisoning, proven by severe nausea and continuous vomiting, all deriving from one restaurant, walked through the front door of a hospital and a doctor suggested coincidence for even a moment, do you think he would still have a job? No. So, this could not be coincidence either.

However, after a trip to my local Kroger and another failed attempt to stick to a pre-written list, another word came to mind: manipulation. Somehow these establishments were bending my will and influencing my choices. Furthermore, I was not the only one under the same spell. When I looked at the overall picture, the impact of this strange, shopping phenomena, I realized something. Although these impulse buys feel nice and seem like worthwhile purchases at first, in the long run, they benefit no one. But first, how have these grocers and department stores swindled their customers in the first place?

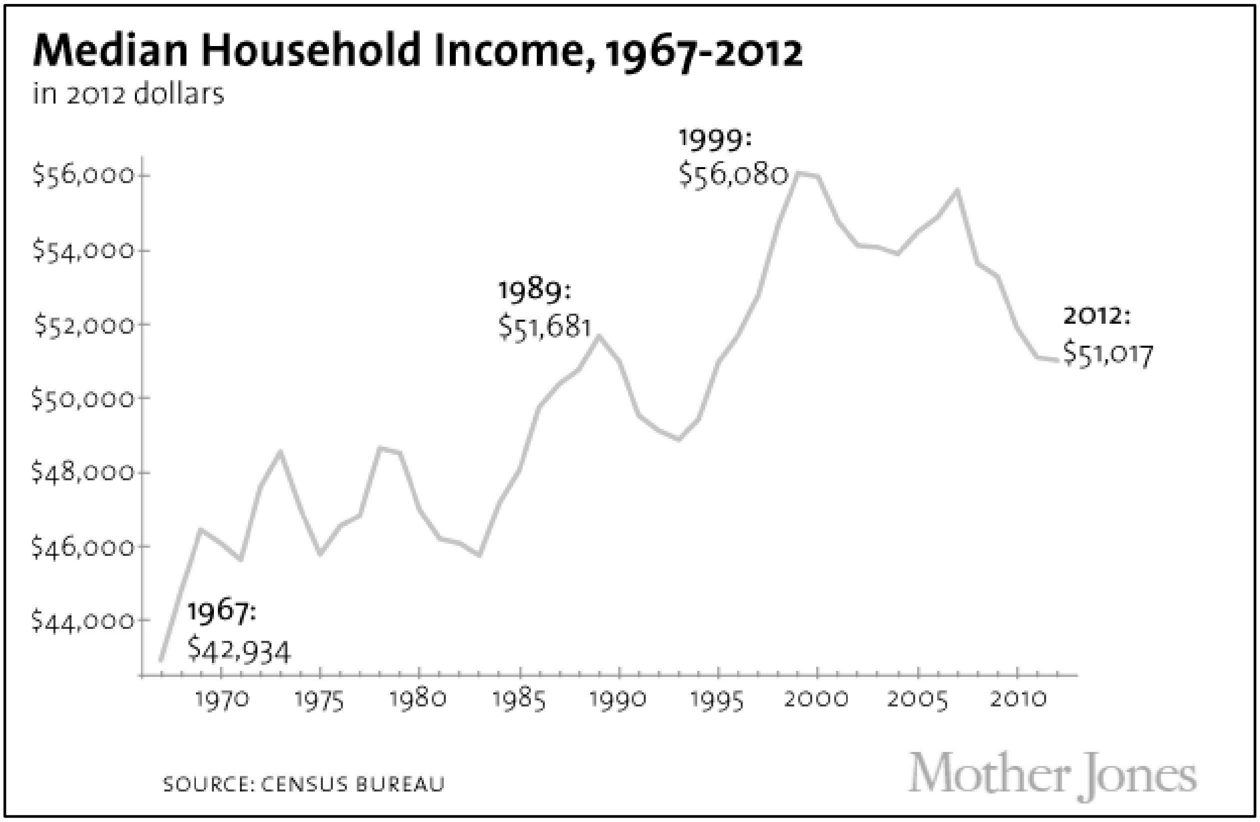
These retailers have manipulated their consumers through three broad pathways: sales, scents, and sounds. The sales that these establishments advertise vary from Buy-One-Get-One-Free products, to shelves marked 10 for $10, and to racks upon racks filled with clearance items. Out of all the shoppers that see these deals, a startling 88% of them opt into buying the product simply because it is on sale (Lombardo 1). However, these discounts are not as good as consumers are led to believe. Teri Gault, a grocery savings expert and the CEO of thegrocerygames.com, remarked that, "...a good sale is anything that's half price" (Crouch 9). Furthermore, she stated that every item's price is dropped to that amount eventually (Crouch 9). Despite this declaration, that 88% has not lowered. This can partly be attributed to the fact that sales is only one of three mediums by which retailers lure in their revenue. Scents and sounds play a large role in influencing customers.

As for the smells wafting through supermarkets and supercenters, they are inescapable. Not only is it virtually impossible for consumers to avoid them, but it is also a highly effective tactic. The smells that assault customers when they walk in, whether it is flowers, food, or perfume, activate the salivary glands (Griswold & Gus 4). Steven Semoff, co-president of Scent Marketing Institute, makes his living off of this fact. In an interview he did with *The Independent* newspaper in the United Kingdom, Semoff explained that the sense of smell is the most effective method to reach a customer because that sense in particular has a direct connection to the brain through the limbic system, which controls the emotions, unlike that of sight or sound. Because of this emotional tie, consumers are more likely to act on impulse and buy whatever product they are inhaling ("The smell of commerce: How companies use scents to sell their products" 1). However, if the scent of freshly-baked bread or straight-out-of-the-oven pastries do not convince customers to spend more money, there is another technique that retailers use.

Even if the sales and scents littering the store do not sway the choices of their consumers, the amount of time they parade through the aisles will. But how do these retailers influence their customers into spending more time in their stores? Simple: with sound. Not just any type of sound, though, with music. Music with a rhythm slower than a human's average heartbeat of 100 beats-per-minute has to be played in order for customers to stay in the store longer (Crouch 3). The music has to be at this pace because it affects the heart-rates of every shopper listening to it. If the tempo of a song is fast, the pulse of a customer quickens and so does their movements; so if the number of beats in a song is lower than the average heart-rate of a human, their movements will become slower ("21 tricks of the supermarket trade" 1). Therefore, they will spend more time in the store. But how does slow music and spending more time in a store benefit a retailer? Well, when a consumer strolls the aisles at a leisurely pace and elongates their stay, they buy 29% more merchandise (Crouch 3). At the end of the shopping trip, whether the sales strapped to the shelves are too good to pass up, whether the salivating scents wafting from the bakery entrap shoppers, or whether the latest slow song paces every shoppers' strides, there is no escape from the retailers' influence.

Because of these three marketing tricks, and many more unmentioned ones, the grocery industry alone compiles an annual revenue of ten billion dollars (Morton ep. 1). A large number in any survey. In Simon Morton's six-part series, *Why We Buy,* he reveals that 98% of all shoppers impulse buy and that 40% of all purchases are impulse buys as well. Following that logic, 40% of ten billion dollars is four billion dollars. Therefore, four billion dollars of the grocery industry's annual revenue is composed of nothing more than impulse purchases. Seventy five percent of people making these impulse purchases feel good about them (Gaille 1). But at what cost?

According to Eduardo Porter of the *New York Times*, "…either we define the middle class down a couple of notches or we acknowledge that the middle class isn't in the middle anymore." It is no secret that the gap between lower-class and middle-class in America has been steadily shrinking. More than two decades ago in 1989, the amount designated as median middle-class, $51,681, is higher than it was in 2012 at $51,071 (See Figure 1) (Kamp 1). It is also no secret that back then, across the board, the cost of living was cheaper, so the fact that our middle class makes less but has to pay more in order to live comfortably is an immediate indicator that something is not right. Because of this higher cost of living and faulty wage system, most Americans, particularly American families, are on a budget. However, with the insides of supermarkets and supercenters set up the way they are, with tempting sales, tantalizing scents and timeserving sounds, how easy is it to keep to that fixed budget? Apparently, it is not easy at all, for anyone. The Bank of Montreal in Canada conducted a survey and discovered that 43% of their pool of participants spent more than they made in a month (LaSalle 1). If a trend like that continues, debt is inevitable. As of May 2011, Americans have accumulated 2.43 trillion dollars of credit card debt alone ("Consumer Debt Statistics" 1). These ruthless retailers with their deceiving sales, sinful scents, and misleading music are manipulating every person that walks into their door. By playing these games, by practically laundering money out of the pockets of struggling citizens and families, they are ruining lives. What is a consumer to do? What *can* they do to prevent themselves from succumbing to the carefully crafted temptations in grocers and department stores?



In order to combat this issue, a consumer must first become aware of the money-sucking virus that stretches along the aisles and floats through the air of these establishments. Because of consumers' unawareness and nonresistant behavior towards the manipulation occurring in grocers and department stores, retailers are racking up ten billion dollars annually. Unawareness is their game. These retailers cannot swindle money out of their customers as easily if these people *know* that they're trying to do that. It's the same with door-to-door salesmen. After they ring the doorbell and a homeowner sees them with a clipboard and a too-wide smile, they instantly know that they want something from them. It's not like that in grocery stores or department stores. First, the consumers are going to the stores. They provide a service that people need, which therein lies the first sense of autonomy. As consumers walk the aisles, they think about what they need, what they want, which indicates the second stage of autonomy. Consumers are not actively thinking about what the CEO's of these establishments want. When customers only see a new, promising product that happens to be on sale, retailers see an extra million dollars in profit. However, it is not enough to just be aware. One's awareness of a problem does not equate to solving it.

Action must be taken. As already proven, parading around a store with a list is not enough. A carefully crafted compilation of items will not guard a consumer against sales, scents and sounds. But what would? Part of the problem is piling too much into the cart while the other part of the problem is over-spending. How would one curb the problem from the start? The answer: money. If a consumer is spending too much at the store, they should limit how much money they allow themselves to use. This is easier said than done in the age of debit and credit cards, though. Half of all impulse purchases are small purchases ("Here's a Scary Number:..." 1). According to the website FoolProof, when a shopper goes to the store intending to make a small purchase and plans to use a credit card, they spend $11 more on average. Planning to use a debit card for small purchases is no better, at $10 more on average ("Here's a Scary Number:..." 1). These numbers add up quickly. Then, on a larger scale with bigger intended purchases, the number spent would indefinitely rise because of how simple and mindless it is to swipe a small piece of plastic. Leaving the cards at home and only carrying cash solves this problem. A fixed budget forces shoppers to refocus their priorities. Once those are met, and if there is money leftover, they are able to succumb to a very small amount of tempting merchandise and splurge a little. If a consumer were to stick to this routine, then they would save potentially every time they entered a store. But why does it matter to begin with?

If consumers behaved the way that is stated above, the annual ten billion dollar industry that is groceries would take a hit. In a positive way, though. Even if only one billion was tapered off of that colossal number, for a moment, *imagine* what they billion could do and where it could go. In terms of strict financial stability, the money a household could potentially save could be funneled towards pre-existing credit card debt. As it is, Americans are suffocating under the $2.43 trillion dollars in credit card debt (“Consumer Debt Statistics” 1). A billion dollars a year can go a long way, and that is only if one fourth of shoppers opt to carry cash instead of cart credit each time they take a trip to the store. If more than 25% of people took that same action, then that debt would turn into a clean slate even quicker. However, there are many other places in which those dollars could travel. If the money was poured into other businesses, the education system, or any number of charities, the economy and general welfare of society would flourish. Then, if the money were to be spent at home, particularly on families through games, recreational activities, or vacations, the quality of life would rise substantially. All of these positive contributions would stir more happiness in someone than any CD or cute sweater ever could.

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