

Performative Consumption: How Seasonal Content, Social Media, and Buy Now, Pay Later Turn Display into Debt

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Abstract

Consumers increasingly buy seasonal goods to be seen with them: filmed hauls, staged seasonal setups, and themed gift baskets, some paid for with credit they cannot comfortably repay. This paper calls the pattern *performative consumption* and traces how short-form video, a year-round seasonal retail calendar, and buy now, pay later (BNPL) credit reinforce one another. Drawing on theory from Veblen, Goffman, Belk, and Festinger and on current government and industry data, we show that each link is documented separately: record Halloween spending, near-record credit card debt, and BNPL users who are increasingly late on payments and who use installment loans for groceries. The Halloween “boo basket,” which grew from a low-cost neighborhood custom into a status-priced gift format, illustrates how a ritual becomes a spending category. The evidence is circumstantial. No study yet tests the full chain from content to purchase to delinquency, and consumer pushback and evidence that BNPL poses limited systemic risk argue against alarm. We propose five testable hypotheses and close with practical guidance for consumers, creators, and retailers.

Keywords: performative consumption, conspicuous consumption, social media, TikTok, buy now pay later, household debt, seasonal retail, impulse buying

Key findings

- Halloween spending is projected at \$13.5 billion in 2026, up from a record \$13.1 billion in 2025 (National Retail Federation).
- U.S. credit card balances reached \$1.26 trillion in the second quarter of 2026, just under the record \$1.28 trillion set in late 2025 (Federal Reserve Bank of New York).
- In a 2026 LendingTree online survey, 47% of BNPL users had paid late in the past year and 29% had used BNPL for groceries. The survey is commissioned by a lender marketplace, so treat the figures as indicative.
- In an August 2023 Bankrate survey, 48% of social media users said they had ever made an impulse purchase of something they saw there, and 68% of those buyers regretted at least one purchase. Those who bought impulsively in the past year spent about \$754 on average.
- What is not known: no study measures the full chain from seasonal content to filmed purchase to financing to delinquency, and the CFPB found that many differences between BNPL borrowers and non-borrowers predate BNPL use, so causation is unresolved.

- What helps: waiting about a day before buying, listing reasons for and against, and paying from debit or cash for display categories. The evidence on short delays is mixed (Section 11).

1. Introduction

A recurring pattern is visible in consumer feeds each autumn. A shopper films a cart of seasonal merchandise, arranges a pumpkin-spice tableau at home, and posts it. Weeks later the tableau gives way to peppermint and pine. The goods change with the calendar, but the structure does not: acquire, stage, post, replace. For some households, these purchases are made on credit they are already struggling to repay.

This paper asks whether the behavior is a new form of consumption or an old one, conspicuous consumption, amplified by new infrastructure. We argue the latter, and we call it *performative consumption*: purchasing in which a main motive is to produce content or signal status to an audience. It differs from impulse buying and from ordinary seasonal shopping in three ways: its audience orientation, its content logic, and its relationship to financing (Section 2).

The topic matters for practitioners for three reasons. Seasonal categories are large and growing: the National Retail Federation (NRF) projects record Halloween spending of \$13.5 billion in 2026, up from \$13.1 billion in 2025 (NRF, 2026). Household balance sheets are under strain: credit card balances reached \$1.26 trillion in the second quarter of 2026, just below the record \$1.28 trillion of late 2025 (Federal Reserve Bank of New York, 2026). And point-of-sale credit is increasingly used for ordinary purchases: 29% of BNPL users in a 2026 LendingTree survey reported using it for groceries, up from 14% in 2024 (LendingTree, 2026).

Scope and evidentiary standard. Where possible, we rely on government statistical releases, peer-reviewed research, and industry bodies, and we identify vendor-sponsored or survey-based figures as such. Section 8 addresses what the evidence does and does not show. The paper moves from definition and theory (Sections 2 and 3) to the seasonal calendar and the boo basket (Sections 4 and 5), to financing and evidence (Sections 6 to 8), and ends with implications, warning signs, practical guidance, a research agenda, and a conclusion (Sections 9 to 13).

2. Defining Performative Consumption

We define performative consumption as **consumption in which a primary motive for the purchase, display, or staging of goods is to produce content or signal status to an audience, regardless of the consumer’s underlying need or ability to pay**. Four features distinguish it from adjacent concepts.

1. **Audience orientation.** The intended consumer of the display is a viewer, not the purchaser. This extends Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical account of self-presentation, in which people manage impressions for an audience, to purchasing itself.
2. **Content logic.** The goods are selected for how they look on camera and how well they fit a recognized format (the haul, the “shelfie,” the basket, the seasonal setup). Use value is secondary.

- 3. Financing beyond means.** Part of the spending is funded by revolving credit, BNPL, or anticipated future income, so that the performance is paid for after the audience has moved on.
- 4. Calendar cyclicity.** The performance recurs with seasonal and promotional cycles, which creates serial replacement purchasing.

It differs from Veblen's (1899) conspicuous consumption, whose audience was physically co-present or local, and from impulse buying (Rook, 1987), which is defined by the suddenness of the urge rather than the audience for the result. It overlaps with both.

3. Theoretical Foundations

3.1 Conspicuous consumption and positional goods

Veblen (1899) argued that people consume visibly to signal status. Later economists formalized the idea. Bagwell and Bernheim (1996) showed conditions under which status-signaling can make demand rise with price. Heffetz (2011) found that the more visible a good is to others, the more strongly spending on it responds to income. Charles, Hurst, and Roussanov (2009) showed that groups with lower average incomes spent a larger share on visible goods, which suggests status signaling is not confined to the wealthy.

3.2 Relative consumption and “keeping up with the Joneses”

Duesenberry (1949) proposed that consumption depends on a household's position relative to others, not only on absolute income. Frank (1999) described an upward spending spiral in which top-end consumption shifts reference points for everyone below it. Schor (1998) documented that people's reference groups had broadened beyond neighbors to include media representations of affluent lifestyles. Empirical work links these ideas to borrowing: Christen and Morgan (2005) found that higher local income inequality was associated with greater consumer borrowing, and Bertrand and Morse (2016) found that rising spending among higher-income households was associated with lower savings and greater financial strain among non-rich households in the same area. Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory supplies the psychological mechanism: people evaluate themselves against others when objective standards are absent. A social feed is an unusually dense source of comparison targets.

3.3 The extended self and the digital self

Belk (1988) argued that possessions are experienced as parts of the self. Belk (2013) extended this to digital settings, where display, sharing, and co-construction of identity occur online. Marwick (2015) described how luxury displays on social platforms function as attention-economy capital. In this literature, consumption does not just express identity; it manufactures a shareable identity.

3.4 Hedonic and experiential consumption

Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) distinguished hedonic consumption, which is driven by fantasy, feelings, and fun, from utilitarian consumption. Pine and Gilmore (1998) argued that firms increasingly sell experiences rather than goods. Seasonal “cozy” consumption sits squarely here: the product is a mood, and the staged photo is the proof.

3.5 Parasocial influence

Horton and Wohl (1956) described one-sided relationships between audiences and media figures. Research finds that parasocial attachment to influencers is related to followers’ purchase intention (for example, Farivar, Wang, and Yuan, 2021, found a stronger effect of parasocial relationship than of opinion leadership in a sample of 409 followers of two Instagram accounts). Haul content is a natural vehicle for this, since the creator appears to be a friend sharing a find.

3.6 Payment, debt, and mental accounting

Behavioral research shows that the form of payment changes spending. Thaler (1985) introduced mental accounting; Prelec and Loewenstein (1998) showed that people dislike the “pain of paying” and that deferring payment weakens its link to consumption; Soman (2001) found that payment mechanisms that make payment less salient are associated with higher spending; Meier and Sprenger (2010) found that present-biased individuals borrow more on credit cards. BNPL is a design that further decouples purchase from payment, which makes it a theoretically predictable amplifier of display purchasing.

4. The Seasonal Calendar as Content Calendar

4.1 Seasons are now scheduled for the camera

Retailers have long used seasons to drive traffic. What has changed is the cadence and the role of user-generated content. Starbucks brought its Pumpkin Spice Latte back on August 25, 2026, alongside new pumpkin drinks and a limited-time merchandise collection (FOX 2 Detroit, 2026), and NRF reports that about half of Halloween shoppers begin shopping in September or earlier (NRF, 2026; Talk Business & Politics, 2026). A trade analysis of the 2026 beauty market in Poland argued that the “boo basket” trend extends the autumn selling season and lifts sales of many small items that would not individually be classed as seasonal (Wiadomości Kosmetyczne, 2026). The extended season creates more content moments, and each content moment creates more purchase moments.

4.2 Hauls and the design of products for display

Haul videos are a major content format for shopping and a standard marketing objective. In a peer-reviewed mixed-methods study, Mahn et al. (2026, International Journal of Advertising) found that inspirational content was the dominant driver of purchase intention in sponsored fashion hauls, particularly for impulse-driven purchases, whereas discount codes had no significant effect and influencer attributes mattered comparatively little. Retailers act on this logic. A published case study of a Bath & Body Works TikTok LIVE event in December 2025 describes scent-layering demonstrations designed to turn single purchases into multi-product hauls (Razorfish, 2025). That is a retailer and agency describing haul creation as a design goal. The case study is promotional material and should be read as such.

Retail press reports that Bath & Body Works' signature candle sale, held on the first Saturday of December, offers deep discounts from a regular price in the high \$20s (Best Life, 2025). This point rests on consumer-media coverage rather than company filings.

4.3 The aggregate picture

NRF's 2026 survey (n = 7,889, fielded September 1 to 9, 2026) projects \$13.5 billion in Halloween spending, with 74% of consumers celebrating and average spending near \$115 per person; costumes (\$4.4 billion), decorations (\$4.3 billion), and candy (\$4.1 billion) are the largest categories (NRF, 2026; WDBO, 2026). Spending has risen more than 68% since 2019 on a nominal basis (Talk Business & Politics, 2026). NRF also reports that shoppers are approaching the season with affordability in mind, with 23% shopping early to spread out spending. This is consistent with a divided market: households that are budgeting carefully alongside a content-driven segment that spends heavily on display. The NRF data do not break out the second group.

5. Case Study: The Boo Basket

5.1 From neighborhood custom to gift category

The boo basket is commonly described as Halloween's answer to the Easter basket: a container of themed treats and small gifts (NBC Los Angeles, 2026). Reporting notes that the format has no identifiable inventor and that the older "You've Been Booed" neighborhood custom, in which small gifts are left anonymously at doors, preceded it (NBC Los Angeles, 2026). Social media then converted a low-cost, local gesture into a seasonal gifting category on TikTok, Instagram, and Pinterest. The format also traveled internationally: an Italian outlet reports it arrived in Italy via TikTok in late 2023 (Eroica Fenice, 2024).

5.2 Escalation and price dispersion

The format spans a wide price range. A UK discount grocer marketed a complete boo basket for under £25 (Retail Times, 2024), whereas trend coverage reports that creators use boo baskets to show off elaborate designs, prompting debate about overconsumption (YPulse, 2024). One student-press account cited an influencer basket whose woven container alone cost \$55 and argued that the trend had shifted attention from the holiday to the acquisition of goods (Spoon University, n.d.), and an opinion columnist described the format as a way to display wealth and status (The National, 2024). These are qualitative observations, not measurements, but they are consistent with how performative consumption should behave: content value rewards visible expense, and the visibly expensive version becomes the reference point.

5.3 Why the boo basket is analytically useful

The boo basket has all four features of performative consumption. It is audience-oriented (the unboxing and the gift reveal are filmed), content-logical (it is defined by visual composition), exposed to financing pressure (the cost is the sum of many small purchases, a pattern that is easy to put on a card or an installment plan), and cyclical (it recurs each October and has analogues in other seasons). It also illustrates *ritual commodification*: an exchange whose meaning was the gesture becomes one whose meaning is the display of the goods.

6. Financing the Performance

6.1 Revolving credit

The Federal Reserve Bank of New York's Q2 2026 report put credit card balances at \$1.26 trillion, up \$21 billion in the quarter, while total household debt stood at \$18.8 trillion (Federal Reserve Bank of New York, 2026). Media coverage of the report notes that the share of card balances more than 90 days delinquent rose from 7.6% to 12.8% between mid-2022 and early 2026, and that New York Fed researchers cautioned that the figure partly reflects a backlog of old charged-off debts on credit reports rather than a broad deterioration in current repayment behavior (ABC News, 2026; Gulf Daily News, 2026). Both points are important: the aggregate data show elevated stress, but they do not isolate discretionary or display spending as a cause.

6.2 Buy now, pay later

The 2026 LendingTree BNPL report (online survey of 2,049 U.S. adults, March 3 to 6, 2026) found that 47% of BNPL users had paid late in the past year (up from 41% in 2025 and 34% in 2024), that 54% said they could not make ends meet without BNPL, and that BNPL was used most often for clothing, shoes, and accessories (39%) and technology (34%), with groceries rising to 29% (LendingTree, 2026; Chain Store Age, 2026). The survey is commissioned by a lender marketplace and uses an online panel, so the percentages should be treated as indicative.

The CFPB (2023) analysis of the Making Ends Meet survey and credit bureau data found that BNPL borrowers were, on average, more likely than non-borrowers to be highly indebted, to revolve on credit cards, to hold delinquent accounts, and to use high-cost services such as payday and overdraft, and that

they had lower credit scores. The Bureau also noted that many of these differences predate BNPL use, so the data by themselves cannot show whether BNPL causes distress or attracts people already in distress. Many BNPL users showed no sign of financial stress.

A balanced reading, then, is that BNPL users as a group are more financially stretched, that use for everyday goods is increasing, and that causation is unresolved. A Richmond Fed economist concluded that, at current scale and observed default rates, the effect of BNPL on financial stability appears limited at present (Wang, as quoted in NewsNation, 2026).

6.3 Integration of credit into the content funnel

Analysts have noted that BNPL providers embedded themselves in the checkout flow, which reduces friction for impulse purchases, and that social platforms now allow purchase without leaving the app (Bankrate, 2024). In terms of the theory in Section 3.6, the content funnel (inspiration, shop link, installment checkout) minimizes the pain of paying at precisely the moment emotional arousal is highest.

7. Evidence on Social Media and Overspending

Survey and academic evidence converge on the claim that social media exposure is associated with unplanned and status-oriented buying, though most of it is correlational.

- A Bankrate survey fielded August 16 to 23, 2023, found that 48% of social media users had ever made an impulse purchase of a product they saw on social media and that 68% of those buyers regretted at least one purchase. Those who bought impulsively in the past year spent \$754 on average, and younger adults were the most likely to have done so (Bankrate, 2023). The same survey found that 57% of respondents believe people post things to appear more successful, while only 12% admitted doing so themselves; admission was higher among millennials (22%) and Gen Z (21%) (Bankrate, 2023; CPA Practice Advisor, 2023). Bankrate separately found that 38% of Americans would go into debt this year for a discretionary purchase such as travel, entertainment, or dining (Bankrate, 2024).
- A study in *Frontiers in Psychology* of 400 Thai social media users (a convenience sample) found that materialism predicted compulsive, conspicuous, and impulsive buying, and that the intensity of social media use was a strong predictor of all three (Pellegrino, Abe, & Shannon, 2022).
- A survey of 400 Generation Z respondents in East Java, Indonesia, who had bought fashion items inspired by a viral TikTok trend found that impulse buying and hedonic consumption together had a positive, significant association with overspending (Wulandari Agustin & Febri Eka Pradani, 2026). The sample was purposive, so the result is suggestive rather than generalizable.

- A WalletHub online survey of over 200 respondents found that 54% regretted purchases made through social media and 69% said social media is bad for their debt (WalletHub, 2025). The sample is small, so treat it as illustrative. A Credit One Bank survey, as reported by YPulse, found that more than half of Gen Z respondents admit to lying or exaggerating about their financial success online and that 38% said they had damaged their credit score to impress someone (YPulse, 2025).

Taken together, these sources support the plausibility of the performative mechanism, particularly the audience orientation and the link to unplanned spending. None of them measures the full chain from seasonal content, to filmed purchase, to financing, to delinquency.

8. Counter-Evidence, Limitations, and Alternative Explanations

1. **Consumer pushback exists.** A CouponFollow survey reported that three in five Gen Z respondents follow the “underconsumption core” trend on TikTok and that most of them say they have cut back on impulse buying, saving about \$250 a month on average. The analyst commentary on the finding warns that stated intentions and actual behavior often diverge (EMARKETER, 2025).
2. **Budget consciousness among seasonal shoppers.** NRF’s own commentary stresses affordability, and a substantial share of respondents shop early to spread costs (NRF, 2026).
3. **Inflation and necessity.** Rising prices for groceries and fuel are cited by economists as drivers of card balances (ABC News, 2026). Not all debt growth is discretionary.
4. **Selection and causality.** People who are already financially stretched may be more likely to use BNPL, and the CFPB found that many differences between BNPL borrowers and non-borrowers predate BNPL use (CFPB, 2023). The same logic could apply to people who post aspirational content: the observed correlations may reflect shared causes.
5. **Self-report bias.** Most of the cited evidence comes from surveys that rely on respondents’ recall and willingness to admit regret or debt, and several are sponsored by firms with a commercial interest in the findings.
6. **Measurement gap.** We found no peer-reviewed study that directly measures performative consumption as defined here. This paper’s contribution is conceptual synthesis and hypothesis generation, not causal identification.

9. Implications for Industry, Platforms, and Policy

Retailers and brands. Designing for the haul (layering, bundles, limited seasonal scents) raises basket size, but the evidence in Section 6 suggests part of that basket may be financed by customers who are already stretched. Brands face reputational and regulatory risk if they are seen to target the vulnerable. Retailers should show prices, offer value-tiered versions of popular formats (the discount-grocer boo basket shows what a basket under \$25 can look like), avoid creating reference prices that make modest participation feel inadequate, and avoid messaging that treats the size of a purchase as proof of care or belonging.

Platforms and creators. Disclosure of sponsored content, gifted products, and financing terms in shoppable video is a clear point of leverage. Creators who present aspirational hauls without disclosing sponsorship or financing may contribute to inflated reference points. In a small WalletHub survey, 69% of respondents said social media is bad for their debt (WalletHub, 2025).

Fintech and BNPL providers. The upward trend in late payments (LendingTree, 2026) and the inclusion of BNPL in credit reports (KSL, 2026) mean that a missed installment on a discretionary item can have lasting credit consequences. Clearer repayment reminders, stacking limits, and checkout disclosure of late-fee and credit-reporting consequences, not just the per-payment amount, are potential design responses.

Regulators. Oversight of BNPL has been in flux. One trade report states that the CFPB revoked an interpretive measure that had classified many BNPL services under credit-card-style rules, and that several state attorneys general have opened their own inquiries (Shopifreaks, 2026). Readers should verify the current regulatory position before relying on this.

Educators and consumer advocates. Literacy programs should address the specific mechanism: social comparison against curated displays, and the separation of pain of payment from purchase. Bankrate's analyst offered a useful observation that the households in the feed may themselves be in debt (6abc/Bankrate, 2023).

10. Warning Signs: When Display Spending Becomes Debt

Seasonal fun is not the problem; spending you cannot pay for is. The research above points to a short list of signals that a household has moved from celebrating to overextending.

- **You are financing something you could not pay off within the month.** The CFPB (2023) estimated that a majority of BNPL borrowers would face card interest rates of 19 to 23 percent had they charged the same purchases instead. An installment plan that looks free becomes expensive once payments are missed or a card balance is carried.
- **You hold several installment loans at once.** A trade summary of LendingTree's 2026 survey reports that about a quarter of BNPL users carry multiple loans simultaneously (Shopifreaks, 2026), and separate due dates are easy to lose track of.
- **Everyday needs are being financed.** In the same survey, 29% of BNPL users had used it for groceries and 54% said they could not make ends meet without it (LendingTree, 2026).

- **You regret purchases afterward.** In Bankrate's survey, 68% of social media impulse buyers reported at least one regret (Bankrate, 2023).
- **A missed payment can follow you.** BNPL loans now appear on credit reports, so a short-term loan for a decorative item can become a long-term credit problem (KSL, 2026).
- **The main reason for the purchase is how it will look posted.** This is our inference from the framework in Section 2, not a tested diagnostic, but it is the defining feature of performative consumption.

Keep in mind what the feed leaves out. In Bankrate's survey, 57% of respondents said people post to appear more successful, yet only 12% admitted doing so themselves (Bankrate, 2023), and Bankrate's analyst has pointed out that the households being imitated are sometimes in debt themselves (6abc/Bankrate, 2023).

11. How to Fight Overspending

The suggestions below combine research findings with practical steps. Where no study tests a tactic directly in this setting, we say so. This is general information, not personalized financial advice. Guidance aimed at creators, retailers, and platforms appears in Section 9.

11.1 For consumers

1. **Run the no-audience test.** Before buying, ask whether you would buy it if no one would ever see it. If the answer is no, you have identified a display purchase. This follows from the theory in Section 3 and has not been tested as an intervention.
2. **Wait a day, and write down reasons.** In online experiments from a University of Michigan dissertation (Moser, Schoenebeck, & Resnick, 2020), a delay of about 25 hours lowered the urge to buy impulsively and purchase intent, and spending about three and a half minutes listing reasons for and against a purchase did the same. A 10-minute delay in a lab test did not produce a statistically significant drop in impulse spending; the researchers noted that every participant kept shopping during the delay, and concluded that a short wait works best when it is spent reflecting on the purchase rather than browsing for more (Moser et al., 2020). A marketing professor at Washington University reported, from separate work, that shoppers who took a break of as little as 10 minutes before buying were less likely to give in (Washington University in St. Louis, 2015). The evidence on very short delays is mixed, so a longer wait is the safer choice. One popular rule of thumb, cited by a Bankrate analyst, is to wait a day for every \$100 the item costs (Bankrate, 2024).
3. **Make paying feel real.** The research in Section 3.6 suggests that less salient payment is linked to higher spending. For seasonal and display categories, set a fixed budget and pay from a debit card or cash envelope rather than credit or BNPL. This is an application of that research, not a tested program.
4. **Do not stack BNPL, and do not use it for groceries.** Keep to one plan at a time, set up automatic payments so a due date is not missed (a financial analyst's suggestion, quoted by WHIO, 2025), and treat financing essentials as a sign to review your budget.

5. **Set the seasonal budget before the season.** NRF found that 23% of Halloween shoppers shop early to spread out their spending (NRF, 2026). That strategy only helps if the early purchases are paid for as you go.
6. **Curate what you see.** Mute or unfollow haul and “shop with me” content, remove saved payment methods from shopping apps, and turn off in-app checkout. A CouponFollow survey found that Gen Z followers of the “underconsumption core” trend reported cutting impulse buying and saving about \$250 a month on average, though self-reports may overstate real change (EMARKETER, 2025).
7. **Keep the ritual, shrink the price.** The boo basket began as a small neighborly gesture (NBC Los Angeles, 2026). A basket assembled from items you already own or from low-cost stores, such as the under-£25 example from a UK discount grocer (Retail Times, 2024), delivers the gift without the debt.

11.2 If you are already in debt

Stop adding new card and BNPL balances. List every balance, its interest rate, and its due date, and pay down the most expensive debt first. If you are about to miss a payment, contact the lender early: a 2026 LendingTree survey found BNPL lenders are highly likely to waive a late fee when asked (LendingTree, 2026). A nonprofit credit counseling agency can help build a repayment plan. Struggling with debt is common, and it is a financial problem, not a character flaw.

12. Research Agenda

We propose the following testable hypotheses.

- **H1 (audience effect).** Consumers who intend to post a purchase will spend more, and prefer more visible items, than otherwise identical consumers who do not intend to post (an experiment building on Heffetz, 2011).
- **H2 (financing amplification).** Offering BNPL at checkout increases spending on seasonal display items more than on utilitarian items, controlling for income (building on Soman, 2001, and Prelec and Loewenstein, 1998).
- **H3 (reference-price escalation).** Exposure to high-priced boo basket or haul content raises the amount consumers consider adequate for a gift, and this effect is stronger for heavy social media users (building on Schor, 1998, and Festinger, 1954).
- **H4 (cyclical replacement).** Households with greater seasonal-content exposure show larger year-on-year spikes in discretionary card and BNPL activity around seasonal transitions, using transaction-level data.
- **H5 (delinquency).** After controlling for income and other debt, performative spending predicts later BNPL and card delinquency.

Methodologically, transaction-level data from card issuers or aggregators, linked to survey measures of posting behavior, would be a substantial improvement on stated-intention surveys.

13. Conclusion

Performative consumption is best understood as an old phenomenon, status display through goods, rebuilt on new infrastructure: a shared audience that is always present, a retail calendar that is also a content calendar, and credit products that make the cost feel remote. The boo basket illustrates how a low-cost custom can be converted into a spending category. The best available data show record seasonal spending, elevated household credit stress, and rising use of BNPL for everyday goods. They do not yet show that display-driven buying is a principal cause of that stress. The evidence supports serious concern, a careful research program, and design and disclosure standards from firms and platforms, but it does not justify treating the problem as proven in magnitude.

Note on Sources

Statistics were checked against the sources listed in the references as of October 25, 2026. Where outlets reported slightly different figures (for example, one trade outlet gave a Halloween projection of \$13.6 billion against NRF's own release of \$13.5 billion), this paper uses the primary-source figure. Several figures come from commercially sponsored or small online surveys, and these are flagged where they appear. The Razorfish item is agency promotional material, and the Wiadomości Kosmetyczne item is a Polish-language trade analysis. The Spoon University, The National, and YPulse items are student-press, opinion, and trend-newsletter sources, used only to illustrate how the boo basket is discussed, not to measure it. Items marked n.d. carried no publication date.

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