



DANNY LAWSON/PA

Water colour David Murphy with Spear, his installation which reaches 30 metres across Semerwater in North Yorkshire

'Vampire' retailers target shoppers in middle of night

Danielle Sheridan

Insomniacs, late-night drinkers and those suffering from mental health issues are being targeted by online retailers encouraging them to spend when they are at their most vulnerable, a report suggests.

It found that retailers including Amazon, GAP and easyJet were sending out marketing emails in the middle of the night, when customers were more likely to make impulsive decisions they might go on to regret.

About 90 per cent of people with mental health problems said that they spend more money when they are unwell, the study by the Money and Mental Health Policy Institute found.

It added that within this group nearly half said it was particularly hard to resist shopping at night-time, with four in ten people most likely to go "crisis shopping" at that time.

Smartphones have made it easier to shop late at night and more people are using them for that than they are laptops or desktops. Seven out of ten late night online shoppers said that they did it because they could not sleep.

Members of the focus group that the institute worked with for its study had different reasons for their compulsive late-night shopping. Some said they would stay up late to shop online as a way of hiding their behaviour from their partners or family. Others said that late-night shopping was often a source of comfort when they were struggling to sleep.

Critics have described night-time online shopping as a "vampire economy" which draws in consumers by encouraging them to splurge on clothes and gadgets by accessing websites on

smartphones and laptops, often while they are still in bed.

Polly Mackenzie, director of the institute, said: "The retailers use an algorithm which tells them that some people respond really well to emails in the middle of the night.

"It seems to work for a group of customers. We know that there is a group of people who are trying to change their behaviour but find themselves bombarded by these emails that get them at their most vulnerable."

She added: "Compulsive shopping has long been recognised as a problem, in particular among those with mental health problems. But in the online environment, where the shops never close, consumers who struggle to control their spending find themselves at greater risk than ever before."

The institute is calling on retailers to allow people to put in place controls on their shopping behaviour, from allowing customers to opt out of late-night marketing emails to delaying the processing of night-time orders until confirmed in the morning.

Research by Barclays Bank found that online purchasing and browsing peaked between 10pm and midnight. One in ten consumers continues to buy items between midnight and 3am.

A spokesman for Quidco — a cash-back website on which customers can access a retailer's store through a link — said the company took steps to ensure all its promotional emails were dispatched between 6.30am and 8pm.

A spokesman for easyJet said while its promotional emails were generally sent to customers during the day there were "rare occasions" when customers could receive them in the early hours. Amazon and Lastminute.com declined to comment.