

# HAPPINESS FOR SALE

What hard-earned lessons have turned this shopaholic into a recessionista

By SOPHIA CALIMA

I adore things of beauty, whether it's literature, music, art, furniture, or fashion. My work as an interior designer presupposes my love of good taste while my Milanese education meant a constant inundation for me with priceless experiences indispensable to my craft. The Milanese are famed for their style; nothing less could be expected from the denizens of Italy's fashion capital. During fashion week, fabulous people of all races, shapes, and sizes would saturate the city, and fabulous Hollywood moments, like sitting next to **Monica Bellucci**, are commonplace. Without a doubt, Milan offers one of the best shopping environments anyone could ever want. I personally liked going around its glorious Gothic Duomo cathedral, which is surrounded by shopping hubs like the lofty Galleria Vittorio Emanuele, a glass-vaulted arcade housing haute couture, books, jewelry, and historic bars.

## THE BEST BUYS

A few steps away is the city's designer hub, the Quadrilatero d'Oro or Golden Quadrilateral, much like Le Triangle d'Or in Paris. Nestled inside a few hundred Neoclassic, Baroque, Art Nouveau, Art Deco, and Medieval edifices are Missoni, Gianfranco Ferré, Boggi, Yves Saint-Laurent, Romeo Gigli, Krizia, Dolce & Gabbana, Giorgio Armani, Moschino, Chanel, Gucci, Valentino, Cavalli, among many other coveted brands. For more casual shopping, high street brands like Bershka, Lollipops, Zara, Mango, Massimo Dutti, H&M, Promod, and Diesel do not disappoint. For the budget savvy, there is a number of designer discount stores off-city center and the annual summer sale never disappoints! The scene is crazy, a sea of swish people on the hunt for the best bargains under the scorching Italian sun. I remember buying the peerless Chloé Paddington for half of its original price and feeling so overwhelmed with contentment.

It is in Milan that I personally discovered the Italians' unrivaled taste. No two sisters epitomize this notion better than **The Sozzanis**. **Franca** is the editor in chief of *Vogue Italia*, a position she has held for over twenty years. **Carla**, on the other hand, founded 10 Corso Como in Milan, one of the quintessential shopping complexes of the city. Handpicked music fills the serene courtyard and bar while a boutique hotel,



### MONEY CAN BUY HAPPINESS

Especially if, as research suggests, you spend it in pursuit of life experiences. In Louis Vuitton's holiday 2010 campaign, as in most of its campaigns, the finer points of life, particularly travel, but also art, culture, and sportsmanship, are incorporated into the presentation of its new product offerings, such as this new Damier collection.

a photography and design gallery, a design bookstore with selections from all over the world, and a boutique featuring hard-to-find imports and must-have luxury goods for men and women surround it. As *Vogue Italia* is one of the most revered magazines in fashion, most trends they highlight can be seen at 10 Corso Como. A trip to this store is essentially a curated shopping experience from contemporary Italian fashion's most respected sister act.

After completing my studies in Milan, I moved back to the Philippines. The high-end shopping culture here is very different because the selection is not as diverse, but bazaars and night markets are distinctively imbued with local charm. It is typical of Filipino fashionistas to go abroad just for shopping, for which popular destinations include Hong Kong, Bangkok, and Guam. When I get days off, I make sure to visit these cities to get a dose of that "super shopping" you don't always get in Manila. Sale period in Hong Kong is a great time to buy discounted items while the ubiquitous Milan Station is a previously

owned designer bag haven! In recent years, Bangkok has been home to several towering shopping malls in the area near Sukhumvit road while its street markets occupy blocks of urban space. Although both cities offer interesting options, Guam, a small nation in the vicinity of the nearby Mariana trench, is the perfect mix of city shopping and island life. From its traditional Chamorro markets to outlet malls and designer boutiques, prices here are much lower than many other places in the world because of the island's duty-free status. Stores are open till late, so mornings are best spent chilling at the beach! Here is where I spend what seems like a honeymoon with shopping. Luxury brands like Bulgari, Chopard, Damiani, Chaumet, Dior, Louis Vuitton, Bottega Veneta, Hermès, Chanel, Pucci, Chloé, Coach, Ralph Lauren, Burberry, and Tod's fill the halls of DFS Galleria and Tumon Sands Plaza. I say honeymoon because,

well, the shopping pleasure ends right after the bill arrives.

Shopping has been compared to so many things. Shopping is like a marathon, war, a drug. Sometimes I even feel like I'm falling in love. At the heart of it, at least from what I've learned, is the fact that consumer behavior and emotional consumption do become tools in managing one's emotions. I guess it's true for many women. For the longest time, and even to this day, a perfect bag, or a glorious pair of shoes, or an amazing dress is enough to make me feel so much better about everything else. Slipping on the right outfit works wonders and can just turn a horrible day around. In that single moment, it's almost as if nothing else matters. That is, until fifteen days later when the bill arrives. This usually sends shockwaves strong enough to knock my adorable merino wool socks off!

## HARD-EARNED LESSONS

Without a doubt, shopping is a widespread activity with its hefty share of contradictions. Pleasure is felt when faced with the possibility of acquiring something appealing while the contrary comes to mind when thinking of paying for it. Consumers like to have a number of choices but the complexity of the decision-making process takes a bit of fun out of shopping. Some people already have closets and luggage overflowing with clothes, yet they never seem to be enough. A far-reaching misconception is that shopping can make people happy. Recent scientific research indicate that it directly affects the brain's pleasure centers, a "shopping high" is consequent on this chemical reaction.

Though "happiness" and "pleasure" are oftentimes used loosely to signify one or the other, **Matthieu Ricard**, dubbed as "the world's happiest man," defines pleasure as something "contingent upon time, objects, and places; something which consumes itself as someone experiences it." Thus, its ability to give satisfaction diminishes over time. He believes that pleasure is something dependent on conditions, like acquiring or achieving something. On the other hand, Ricard says that happiness or well-being "is not just a fleeting sensation, it is a state of being which underlies all emotional states, like a deep sense of serenity and fulfillment. To be happy means not looking to the outside world, but to what's inside because it is the mind, which translates the outer conditions into happiness (or suffering)." While pleasure stays within oneself, happiness can be shared with other people. Ricard does not dispute that it is desirable to live a comfortable life, but argues that "these external conditions are not enough." So, if shopping doesn't make people happy, and if money can't buy happiness, what should people do instead? Ricard suggests "mind training." In popular terms, it is similar to meditation or prayer. He believes that people can train their mind to confront negative emotions instead of relying on material and external conditions. And, over

time, "the intensity and tendency of these emotions to arise will gradually diminish."

## THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

Alternatively, researchers from the University of Colorado at Boulder found that "people receive more enduring pleasure and satisfaction from investing in life experiences rather than material possessions." According to **Leaf Van Boven**, of these researchers and author of the case study "To Do or To Have, That Is the Question," "experiential" purchases are "more open to positive reinterpretation, because they tend to be associated with deeper personal meanings, they become a meaningful part of one's identity, and foster social relationships which are associated with feelings of happiness." Interestingly enough, **Thomas DeLeire** from the University of Wisconsin and **Ariel Kalil** of the University of Chicago discovered that the only category of consumption directly related to happiness was leisure. Vacations, entertainment (like concerts, plays), and sports are experiences, which allow people to reminisce together because stories like these are simply more fun to talk about, and its benefits are prolonged as they proffer countless opportunities for rumination. As **Sonja Lyubomirsky**, professor at the University of California, Riverside and author

**Our research suggests that individuals will live happier lives if they invest in experiences more than material possessions.**  
—**Van Boven and Gilovich, 'To Do or To Have, That Is the Question,' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2003**

of *The How to Happiness*, puts it, "trips aren't all perfect, but we remember them as such."

Recent studies of consumption also show that consumers are more satisfied when "they relish what they plan to buy long before they buy it," this means that the anticipation of something actually increases the positive emotion associated with it, as opposed to buying something out of whim or booking tickets at the last minute. With material purchases, however, Van Boven notes that there are no possibilities for reinterpretation because "they are what they are." Although reflective of one's status and taste, possessions will always be "separate from who we are." **Elizabeth W. Dunn**, one of the authors of *If Money Doesn't Make You Happy Then You Probably Aren't Spending It Right* says, "It's better to go on vacation than buy a new couch." That is, if you already have a couch, since there is no contention that money facilitates satisfaction because it enables people to meet their basic needs, like shelter, food, and clothing.

Yet for some people, clothes are more than just for protection and comfort. They signify status, function as a form of adornment,

means of self-expression, an art form, at times women even feel an emotional connection with clothes. Clothing is also a symbolic form of communication, which reflects identities and social relationships. This propensity to develop an emotional attachment to objects is not unheard of.

I like fashion but I'm never flamboyant. That is how I decide which things to buy, because this is who I want to be and this is how I want people to see me, low-key but quirky. Every piece in my closet starts to feel like a little piece of myself because what I wear is influenced by my self-image and concepts important to me. For my favorite pieces, the bond is actually stronger, because at times I associate them with people, feelings, or events. I remember what I wore the time I met a guy I ended up dating, and each time I would see him I would dress my best because I would feel more confident with myself. After we broke up, I had the urge to rid my closet of things which reminded me of him. Then again, I refuse to part with a tattered pair of jeans because I had brought it with me to numerous trips abroad and it started feeling like an old, dependable friend I could count on each time I found myself in a new place.

## APPETITE FOR CONSUMPTION

Some luxury goods also serve as heirlooms, such as my mom's vintage wedding dress or grandma's princess cut solitaire engagement ring. These material purchases shared with loved ones also provide constant glee because memories and experiences are passed down through generations. See, other items yield more or less satisfaction depending on how they are used. Proud parents would think twice before throwing away an old pair of shoes which junior wore for his first few steps, yet other shoes would remain as just shoes because there are no significant contextual references or personal meanings associated with them.

If anything, I think we should remain open to all choices, both material and experiential investments. In this argument, there are no absolutes, only compromise. Moderation is key. Some days you want to spend on cooking lessons, other days, you buy the shoes to get you to the cooking lessons. There is nothing wrong with buying oneself little rewards every now and then. Whether a purchase is big or small, it remains a case-to-case basis. It highly depends on what kind of person you are, how much money you have, and how you spend your money. Some purchases will make you happier than others, yet the same may not be true for the lady next to you. Although retail has become increasingly more complex throughout the years, from one-stop to one-click shopping, it can also be said that consumers have adapted and have become more discerning. Ultimately, shopping is a highly emotional process not for the faint of heart! ■