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China holds a lackluster 'Single's Day' shopping fest

Government crackdown on tech platforms takes the shine off annual event



BEIJING: Workers sort packages for delivery at a JD.com distribution center on "Singles' Day", also known as the Double 11, the biggest shopping day of the year, in Beijing yesterday. — AFP

BEIJING: China yesterday held a subdued version of its annual "Single's Day" shopping spree, shorn of the usual boasting on sales volume as the country's chastened e-commerce sector kept a lower profile amid a government crackdown on platforms such as those operated by Alibaba.

The world's biggest shopping festival has for years been accompanied by aggressive promotions and breathless hourly updates by industry leader Alibaba detailing ever-rising sales figures equal to the annual GDP of many nations. But there were no rolling tallies nor triumphant comments by executives from major platforms yesterday and the event was virtually ignored by state-controlled media, in an indication that feverish sales hype might be a thing of the past.

"Single's Day"—so-called for its 11.11 date—began more than a

decade ago and for years was a one-day, 24-hour event. But Alibaba and its rivals have expanded it to an extended promotion from November 1-11, and some retailers and platforms offer discounts, special offers and pre-sales as early as October.

"Single's Day" dwarfs the US "Black Friday" shopping rush and has become a barometer of consumer sentiment in the world's second-largest economy. Platforms operated by Alibaba and its closest competitor JD.com reported combined sales of \$115 billion last year. An Alibaba spokesperson said its sales figures would only be announced after the event's window closes late night.

Buzz kill

But with e-commerce under scrutiny, the usual buzz was muffled this year. The government has taken aim at alleged abuse of

user data and monopolistic business practices by online giants, with wider concerns that Chinese Big Tech had become too powerful and unregulated. A shopper in Shanghai who gave only her surname, Wu, said this year's retail fiesta was "not as lively".

But she echoed many Chinese consumers in welcoming moves to rein in platforms increasingly viewed as more focused on volume than delivering good products and service. "This is a better direction, better for the people, because no one can accept this kind of fraudulent behavior," Wu said after locating some "Single's Day" clothing bargains at a Shanghai mall. The government scrutiny has rattled big players like Alibaba, Tencent and JD, slicing billions of dollars off their equity values, but experts say the ruling Communist Party is not about to significantly hobble e-commerce. —AFP