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Anatomy of a Shopping Spree: Pretty Things Make Us Buy More

With the holidays fast approaching and consumers in full shopping mode, new research shows that a seemingly innocent luxury item purchase can lead to an unintended, budget-busting spending spree.

The problem starts with the purchase of a new item, particularly those among designer product lines, luxury branded items, or consumer goods of high-end design. Once home, these items -- graced with what researchers call salient design elements, such as a unique pattern or interesting color scheme -- can look out of place when compared to other possessions. The most obvious solution to this aesthetic mismatch would be to return the item to the store.

But instead of making a return, consumers who were surveyed said they would make more purchases in an effort to try to surround their designer purchase with other luxury items and restore aesthetic harmony, according to marketing professors Vanessa Patrick of the University of Houston and Henrik Hagtvedt of Boston College, whose study is forthcoming in the *Journal of Marketing Research*. In fact, this additional string of purchases may represent a far larger expenditure than the initial purchase.

What is driving these consumers? Emotions play a role in whether or not the buyer will return the item, Patrick and Hagtvedt found in a set of experiments and field studies involving hundreds of men and women.

When a new purchase fails to fit in with existing possessions, consumers regret the purchase and return it to the store. But when the mismatch involves a design item, consumers surveyed by Hagtvedt and Patrick said they experienced less regret and greater frustration. This led them to actively seek out ways to successfully incorporate

the new purchase among their other possessions, often by making a string of new, additional purchases to match the item, a phenomenon the researchers dub aesthetic incongruity resolution.

"When we buy something with unique design elements and it doesn't fit, it frustrates us," says Hagtvedt. "This is because design has intrinsic value. So rather than returning the item, we actively seek ways to make the item fit, often by making complementary purchases. This has financial implications that may have been entirely unforeseen when the consumer made the initial purchase."

"In talking to people, it turns out that this is a pretty common occurrence," says Patrick. "We buy something we really like -- after all what could be so wrong in purchasing a cute purple sweater or a unique little side table for the hallway? But, we take it home and that's when it happens...these items become really hard to give it up...so we buy more. And before we know it, we have purchased matching necklaces, shoes and bags, to go with the purple sweater or paintings, new wallpaper and new lighting to accommodate the unique side table."

For starry-eyed holiday shoppers, the researchers advise them to think twice. Ask yourself: Is it pretty? If yes, ask yourself: Does it match what I already own? Only then, consider buying.

Vanessa M. Patrick and Henrik Hagtvedt. Aesthetic Incongruity Resolution. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 2011