



# PSYCHOLOGY OF CONSUMPTION

by Dan Shine

A photo of a diamond ring flashes on a computer screen. Want it? Then click on it. Want a new pen? Click. A new shirt or laptop? Click. Click. A hand-painted vase, video camera, or cell phone? Click, click, click.

But what about bubble wrap, broken toothpicks, a dog brush, computer parts, or an empty egg carton? Or maybe something with a high gross-out factor: dirty socks, moldy cheese, or rotten vegetables.

## CLICK? MORE LIKE "ICK."

In an East Hall basement lab, participants in a psychology experiment will choose 70, 80, 90, sometimes all 100 of the items in a survey called the Object Decision Task, which helps psychologists determine a person's level of consumption. After first indicating as many objects as they want, they are asked to keep only those items that fit into a shopping cart and, then, a paper shopping bag. This gradual process helps determine how acquisitive they are.



The study of consumption behaviors is a new field of research. And U-M professors are on the cutting edge in finding answers to why people need to consume.

"The people who start with 70 to 100 items are able to reduce their collections to 30 or so items, but they still have more than what I call 'spartans,' who only started with 30 and they got down to 10," says Stephanie Preston, assistant professor in the U-M Department of Psychology and creator of the Object Decision Task.

"So people vary, and we try to determine what predicts this variability." Anxiety and, to a lesser degree, depression are two reasons people are likely to take things, Preston has found. These themes run through her research. People who take a lot also tend to think that things are much more useful than their friends do; less often, they think things cost more.

The psychology of consumption is an emerging field of study at the University and around the world. It has also fascinated the public, thanks to rubbernecking reality TV shows on hoarding.

Marketing researchers have always been interested in the decisions people make to buy goods. But the work Preston and her U-M colleagues are doing also looks at the underlying neurobiology as well as the financial, emotional, and environmental costs associated with consumption.



Preston spearheaded a conference last May that reflected the interdisciplinary nature of this research. Colleagues from the Department of Psychology, Ross School of Business, School of Public Health, and School of Natural Resources and Environment, among others, participated along with experts from around the world. The conference familiarized U-M professors with each others' work and positioned the University as a thought leader in the field.

Following are summaries of the work some professors across campus are doing to learn more about why we consume.

### UNDERSTANDING THE PATHOLOGY

Preston studies aberrant forms of consumption, such as impulsive shopping and compulsive hoarding, as extreme forms of normal behavior. For example, people who see promotional pens or pencils at a store or office will take one, even if they don't necessarily want or need it.

"People kind of want to take this free stuff even though they have 100 pens or pencils at home," she says. "But this is a chance to get another one."

Or they might have possessions at home that are useless but that they still can't part with. "So we have to make these decisions, and we're all a little biased towards having and keeping, which in general we don't understand."

One Preston study uses a functional MRI scanner, a special device that detects neural activity in the brain. The study has shown that the reward region in the brains of people who like to acquire and keep things is activated when they get even common items, not just luxuries. "We intentionally use free, everyday goods to reflect the extent of someone's pathology."

She observes participants' pathology by tracking how low they'll go before saying no to an object. "So we look at the low range of stuff like a bar of soap, a bar of soap already opened, a bar of soap that somebody else has used," she says.



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"For a hoarder, even mundane stuff is turning on this reward center."

### THE EVOLUTION OF THE BEHAVIOR

"If you think about our past, our evolutionary ancestors, the very first piece of writing talks about how good it is to have an ax to subdue the land," Professor Bobbi Low says. "It always was so hard to get what you need out of the environment." For that reason, she adds, it's always been better to have more—more of everything.

A professor of resource ecology in the School of Natural Resources and Environment, Low is interested in how environmental conditions shape the behavior and life history of organisms, including humans.

In her cross-cultural studies, this "more is better" mantra is present. For example, in bride price societies, if you have more cows and goats, you get more and better brides. Even in 19th century Sweden, wealthier men were able to marry younger women, who bore an average of 1½ babies more than a woman married to a poorer man. The belief that you need more to be successful has been around for centuries.

"Nobody thought about it directly as a psychological drive; it's not always conscious," she says.

As for marketing and consumption, Low says it's simple—sex sells. She recalls an ad for sport coats, not an overtly sexy piece of clothing, with a woman gazing adoringly at a Robert Redford look-alike. "It's like, whoa, not too subtle," Low says with a laugh.

"We have the urge to consume things that will make us, compared to our parents and our neighbors, wealthier or look wealthier," she says. "We have the urge to consume things to make us sexy or that we think make us sexy."

THE PHOTOGRAPHS THAT APPEAR IN THIS ARTICLE ARE USED IN THE OBJECT DECISION TASK CREATED BY STEPHANIE PRESTON, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR IN THE U-M DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY.

Low says the relationship between more belongings and more success, however valued, is pretty much the same in every society.

“What’s gone haywire in the U.S. particularly, but also western Europe and Japan, is we’re doing just what we evolved to do—only entirely too well,” she says. This voracious appetite to consume concerns Low from an ecological standpoint. She wonders if we have the will to change our behaviors now to benefit society 100 years into the future.

“The longer term a problem is, the further in the future, the more it will help someone besides you and your neighbor, the harder it is to get us to act.”

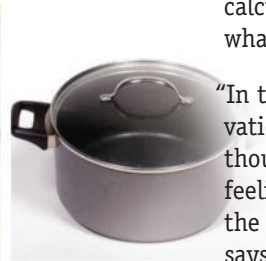
### STIMULUS AND RESPONSE

The extent to which cues in the environment—the aroma of baking bread, McDonald’s golden arches—acquire control over behavior varies greatly from person to person, says Terry Robinson, who studies this phenomenon as a professor in the Department of Psychology.

This is evident even in the rats Robinson uses in a classic Pavlovian conditioning experiment. He pairs a cue (such as the brief presentation of a lever into the cage) with food dropped into a cup in the cage. For some rats, the lever itself becomes irresistibly attractive, and with experience these rats quickly start to approach it and engage it. Through this learning process, the cue itself becomes desired, but only in some rats.

“That’s the fundamental process that governs a lot of individual behavior,” says Robinson, the Elliot S. Valenstein Collegiate Professor of Behavioral Neuroscience. “You tend to be attracted to, and work for, the cues first. Money’s the classic example. Money’s just this cue. It’s nothing inherent about a piece of paper that’s rewarding. It’s what it will get you.”

He adds that marketers and advertisers know this all too well. “All marketing has to do is manipulate the value that we attribute to cues that predict something



these actions—people see a price and think about what they’re giving up. But it’s too difficult for people to do this calculation, to weigh the benefits of what we want versus the costs.

“In the absence of the ability or motivation to do that kind of math, we thought that people might rely on bad feelings or distress as a substitute for the more calculative thinking,” Rick says. “I see the price and I decide whether to spend based on how much distress it generates in me. And if it makes me feel too bad or too distressed, I’ll just pass on the purchase.”

Concerned that people might not be able to report this “ouch” feeling in real time, says Rick, “we decided to ask the brain rather than the person.”

He and his partners put people in a functional MRI scanner and show them objects on a screen within the scanner. They click on a remote when they see an item they would purchase. Participants could see the product and price, and had four seconds to decide whether to buy or not.

The researchers found that the more activity in the insula—a part of the brain that, among several things, senses pain in the body—the less likely participants were to make the purchase.

“The spatial and temporal resolution of the technology is still somewhat imprecise,” he says, adding that researchers are still debating what these brain maps really mean. “The insula registers pain, but it also does a lot of other stuff. So the cutting-edge neuroscience people are just starting to be able to look at brain activity and tell whether people are shuffling cards or reading a book. So we’re far away from knowing precisely what a brain that’s willing to spend a lot on Gucci looks like.” 🇺🇸

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that is unconditionally rewarding—whether it be food, mates, water, or drugs.”

In his study, individual rats that attribute incentive value to food cues are also very susceptible to drug cues, Robinson says. They have great difficulty resisting these cues, which may contribute to addiction and relapse. Similarly, one person who sees the golden arches will pull off the road to eat and another will keep driving.

“The general idea is that the individual more prone to give cues inordinate value is, on average, more susceptible to over-consumption.”

### THE PAIN OF CONSUMPTION

Scott Rick, an assistant professor of marketing in the Ross School of Business, studies how people stop themselves from gathering belongings and how they make the decision to give up money to buy things.

Rick says economics seems to predict