

## Boosting self-expression online may limit impulsive purchases

December 11 2013, by Matthew Swayne

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(Medical Xpress)—Long online transactions can take a toll on a person's self-control, but adding more self-expression and personal identity to those processes can help restore control, according to Penn State researchers.

"Making a lot of choices leads to what researchers call ego-depletion and that can affect self-control," said S. Shyam Sundar, Distinguished Professor of Communications and co-director of the Media Effects Research Laboratory. "When a person makes a lot of choices, the ability to exert self-control begins to diminish with every choice."

Participants in an online study showed more self-control after they tailored a personal website that represented their own values and personality than a group that customized a site for other people, said Sundar. Creating the website required several decisions on what features to add and where to place the new features.

After people make too many choices, they tend to make more impulsive decisions, according to the researchers, who report their findings in the current issue of *Computers in Human Behavior*. For example, while making online purchases, customers may be more prone to buy upgraded, but unneeded features, toward the end of the sale.

Sundar, who worked with Hyunjin Kang, a doctoral student in mass communications, said that the study may help remind web users that they should exercise caution when they are making a lot of decisions during

ecommerce sessions, surveys and other [online transactions](#).

"People should become aware that if they are making a lot of choices—for example, during hotel or travel purchases—the activity can deplete their ability to control their actions," said Sundar. "They may want to take a break and step away from the computer for a while to recharge that self-control."

While some businesses may want users to be more impulsive during online purchases, Sundar said companies that want their customers to make reasoned decisions should incorporate self-affirming activities into the process.

"For instance, a customer who is environmentally conscious may be interested in personalizing their stay at a hotel with options that can help the environment and affirm their green identity," Sundar said.

The researchers asked 54 university students to either tailor or browse a customizable website. One group was asked to customize a site to best reflect their personality and values. Researchers asked another group to create a site that represented someone of a different gender. The control group did not create a site, but browsed a similar, but generic website.

Participants who tailored their own site worked significantly longer on a puzzle than those who customized the website for others. The puzzle, which is an unsolvable anagram task, is a standard way to measure ego-depletion and decision fatigue, according to the researchers. The length of time that subjects try to solve the problem indicates the level of self-control remaining after the assigned activity.

"This shows that choosing behaviors in the customization process can make you feel depleted and you'll persist less in an unsolvable task," said Kang. "The cure, then, seems to be tasks that improve self-expression

and help protect one's identity."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

Citation: Boosting self-expression online may limit impulsive purchases (2013, December 11)  
retrieved 30 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-12-boosting-self-expression-online-limit-impulsive.html>

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