

Feeling out of control? Consumers find comfort in boundaries

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Consumers who feel a lack of control over circumstances seek boundaries—including physical borders, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

"People often turn to aesthetic [boundaries](#) in their environment to give them a [sense](#) that their world is ordered and structured as opposed to random and chaotic," writes author Keisha Cutright (University of Pennsylvania).

Cutright's research indicates that people who feel a lack of control seek tangible boundaries, such as frames around paintings, fences around yards, or prominent borders surrounding a firm's logo. "When individuals no longer feel in control of their lives, they seem to seek the sense of order and structure that boundaries provide—the sense that 'there's a place for everything and everything is in its place,'" Cutright explains.

In a series of experiments, Cutright induced participants to feel they had a great deal of control or little control. In one study, the researcher placed students in a room and asked them to listen to loud, obnoxious sounds, like sirens, bells, and alarms. Half the participants were able to control the chaos; the other half had no control. After a time, participants were offered a choice between two postcards for a gift. The only difference between the two postcards was a thick border. Participants who felt out of control were more likely to choose the postcard with the border. In further experiments, the pattern repeated

itself with product logos, products, and retail settings that could be characterized as "highly bounded."

The author also found that individuals who have other places to turn for a sense of structure had less need for physical boundaries. "Individuals who rely on God for a sense of order and structure were less likely to heighten their preference for boundaries in the face of low personal control than individuals who do not," Cutright writes.

In a world where [consumers](#) face natural disasters, terrorist attacks, and everyday chaos at home, they will seek whatever small comfort they can. "In other words, don't be alarmed if you find yourself craving thicker picture frames and a new fence for your yard. You may just need a little [control](#) in your life," Cutright concludes.

More information: Keisha M. Cutright. "The Beauty of Boundaries: When and Why We Seek Structure in Consumption." *Journal of Consumer Research* (published online July 19, 2011). ejcr.org/

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