

Halloween spending hikes reveal our fascination with the macabre

October 9 2012, by Stephanie Skordas

In the gloom of the economy, with scary unemployment figures, you might expect consumers to be hiding from Halloween in their darkened homes with the porch lights off. But a recent National Retail Federation survey shows a record 170 million Americans plan to spend \$8 billion on Halloween, carving out extra cash to dress up as vampires, witches and zombies.

But why, during these tough times, are consumers willing to spend so much money on costumes they will use only one night? Wake Forest University English professor Eric Wilson, author of [Everyone Loves a Good Train Wreck](#), says it is because we have a natural fascination with the macabre. He says, aside from the obvious reasons that we just want a night of fun or love a big costume party, there are deeper reasons for the spending spree and our intense interest in vampires and zombies.

The harder the times, the more intense the desire to escape. "What is Halloween but a night we can pretend to be someone else, setting aside our worries or regrets," Wilson says. "But when we remove the mask the next day, reality shuffles back into our lives like a relentless zombie. That's true terror."

The perverse pleasure of celebrating death and destruction. "There is a true joy to Halloween, the ecstasy of transforming into another creature," Wilson says. "But in a time of financial crisis, when many are forced to face their limitations and mortality in unpleasant ways, it makes sense that Americans would be enchanted by dressing up as dead

things, zombies and vampires and such."

The permission to openly do what we usually keep secret: wear masks. Wilson says, "To get along in the world we constantly pretend to be nicer or happier than we really are, especially during a difficult economy when to get and keep jobs we are expected to put a good face on things. On Halloween, it's okay to come out as a mask-wearer and feel relief we no longer have to hide." He suggests Halloween dress-up is a reflection of life's hardest facts— we have to be phony to survive—and one of life's delights – we are clever enough to survive.

With AMC's popular series about zombies, *The Walking Dead* beginning a new season on October 14, and the final installment of the vampire-themed *The Twilight Saga* coming to theaters a month later, Americans seem more interested in the undead than ever. Wilson says we find kinship in monsters because they are possessed by an uncontrollable force – neither zombies in their quest for brains nor vampires in their quest for blood are able to stop or reason through their hunger. ""We can imagine the satisfaction of living without accountability, casting off humanity and turning into machines without morals," Wilson says. "Zombies overcome death, vampires rule time, ghosts vanquish space and [vampires](#) and other shape-shifters transcend a stable identity."

Plus, he adds, "They are simply scary and we like to be scared. It's the ultimate thrill ride."

Provided by Wake Forest University

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