Retail sales get a spring boost, see

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Retail sales bounced back strongly in April as shoppers finally opened their wallets in a sign the economy may pick up after a weak first quarter.

Overall sales jumped 1.3%, their biggest rise since March 2015, because of higher gasoline prices and a surge in auto sales, the Commerce Department said Friday. Economists expected a 0.8% rise.

Auto sales jumped 3.2%, reversing March's decline. And gasoline station sales rose 2.2% amid rising prices.

Excluding those two volatile categories, shopper purchases still increased 0.6%, more than the 0.3% economists expected.

The increase was broad-based, with sales rising 0.9% at food and beverage stores; 0.7% at furniture stores; 1% at clothing stores; 0.9% at health and personal care stores; 0.3% at bars and restaurants; and 2.1% online.

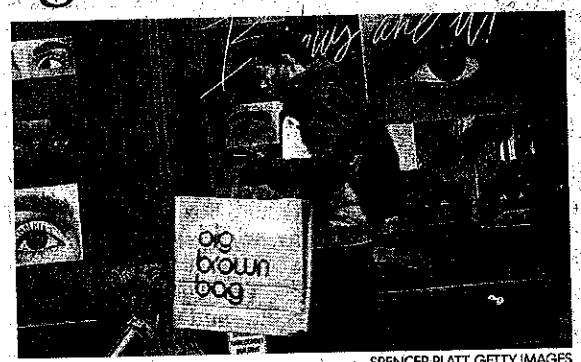
Sales were sluggish in the first quarter despite solid job and income growth, low gasoline prices and reduced household debt. Many Americans socked away their extra cash, pushing the savings rate to a 12-month high. Some economists blamed market volatility early in the year. But consumers were finally expected to splurge as the weather warmed in April.

With weak exports and sluggish business investment hampering the economy, analysts are looking to consumers to propel growth the rest of the year. Consumer spending makes up about 70% of economic activity.

Economist Steven Murphy of Capital Economics says he expects strong consumption to push economic growth to near 3% at an annual rate in the second quarter up from the first quarter's meager 0.6% rise.

"Recent claims of the demise of the U.S. consumer have been greatly exaggerated," he wrote in a note to clients.

largest rise in 13 months



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A shopper walks through lower Manhattan.