

Research Article

To have in order to do: Exploring the effects of consuming experiential products on well-being

Darwin A. Guevarra^a, Ryan T. Howell^{b,*}

^a Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

^b Department of Psychology, San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA, USA

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Abstract

The experience recommendation – if you want to be happier, buy life experiences instead of material items – is supported in empirical research. However, this evidence is primarily based on the dichotomous comparison of material items and life experiences. The goal of this article is to examine the effects of consuming experiential products – purchases that fall between material items and life experiences – on well-being. Study 1 and Study 2 demonstrate that experiential products provide similar levels of well-being compared to life experiences and more well-being than material items. Study 3 replicates this finding for purchases that turn out well. In addition, Study 3 shows experiential products, when compared to life experiences, lead to more feelings of competence but less feelings of relatedness, which explains why these two purchases result in similar levels of well-being. We discuss why experiential products and life experiences lead to psychological need satisfaction and how our results support the Positive-Activity Model, Self-Determination Theory, and Holbrook and Hirschman's hedonic consumption framework.

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Introduction

The improvement of well-being is associated with a host of individual and societal benefits (e.g., better health, longer life, and higher income; see Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). As a result, there has been a proliferation of research on activities that increase happiness (Boehm, Lyubomirsky, & Sheldon, 2011). Some successful strategies include counting one's blessings (Emmons & McCullough, 2003), expressing gratitude (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005), and meditating (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008). A number of different consumer activities have also been examined to determine which consumer behaviors increase happiness. Hedonic consumption – those purchases that focus

on enjoyment, fun, and pleasure – has been shown to improve happiness (Alba & Williams, 2012; Bigné, Mattila, & Andreu, 2008; Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002; Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000; Okada, 2005; Zhong & Mitchell, 2010). However, hedonic purchases provide different levels of well-being depending on whether the purchases are material items (i.e., tangible objects that are possessions) or life experiences (i.e., events that one lives through; see Carter & Gilovich, 2014, for a review). Overall, the consumption of life experiences, when compared to material items, provides greater well-being (see Caprariello & Reis, 2013; Carter & Gilovich, 2010, 2012; Howell & Hill, 2009; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). These studies provide support for the experience recommendation—if you want to be happier, buy life experiences instead of material items (Nicolao, Irwin, & Goodman, 2009).

However, most of the studies testing the experience recommendation focus on comparing the well-being provided by material items and life experiences. Although previous

* Corresponding author at: Quantitative Psychologist, San Francisco State University, 1600 Holloway Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94132.

E-mail address: rhowell@sfsu.edu (R.T. Howell).

research has conceptualized material items and life experiences as anchors on a material-experiential continuum (Carter & Gilovich, 2014; Nicolao et al., 2009; Van Boven, 2005), purchases that fall between these two anchors tend to be considered “ambiguous” and are often overlooked (see Carter & Gilovich, 2014; Howell & Guevarra, 2013). For example, purchases such as electronic devices, musical instruments, and sports equipment are often difficult to categorize as material items (i.e., purchases made in order “to have”) or life experiences (i.e., purchases made in order “to do”) because they share defining features of both (Hellén & Gummerus, 2013; Lovelock & Gummesson, 2004). These “material possessions that afford new life experiences,” or experiential products, may be a distinct category as they are neither terminal material items nor ephemeral life experiences (see Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003, p. 1201). More importantly, knowing the effect of these purchases that people make *to have in order to do* on well-being is critical to understanding the relationship between consumer activities and happiness as well as the accuracy and boundaries of the experience recommendation (Dunn, Gilbert, & Wilson, 2011; Lynch, Alba, Krishna, Morwitz, & Gürhan-Canli, 2012). Therefore, the goal of this article is to examine the effects of consuming experiential products on well-being.

Theoretical framework

The experiential advantage

Numerous studies demonstrate that buying and consuming life experiences, instead of material items, lead to greater well-being (Capriello & Reis, 2013; Dunn et al., 2011; Howell & Hill, 2009; Nicolao et al., 2009; Pchelin & Howell, 2014; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). Why is this the case? Lyubomirsky and Layous (2013) posits that any activity can make people happier if it leads to positive emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, and/or if it satisfies the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (also see Deci & Ryan, 2012). Autonomy is satisfied through engaging in behaviors that express one’s true identity and facilitate a feeling of being in charge of one’s own actions (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Competence is satisfied through engaging in activities that utilize one’s skills and abilities (Deci, 1975). Relatedness is satisfied by engaging in activities that lead to a sense of belonging with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Indeed, past research has theorized and demonstrated that one reason consuming life experiences, instead of material items, leads to greater well-being is through the satisfaction of relatedness and identity (i.e., a proxy for autonomy in the material-experiential buying literature) needs (Carter & Gilovich, 2012; Howell & Hill, 2009; Howell & Howell, 2008). For example, life experiences, compared to material items, are more likely to be shared with others and lead to greater feelings of relatedness (Capriello & Reis, 2013; Raghunathan & Corfman, 2006). In fact, some life experiences, such as whitewater rafting and gambling, are purchased with the goal to belong to a community and feel connected with others (Arnould & Price,

1993; Cotte, 1997). Furthermore, life experiences, compared to material items, better represent one’s true self (Carter & Gilovich, 2012), meaning that people tend to define themselves more in terms of their life experiences than their material items. In fact, certain life experiences, such as skydiving, are made with the intention to help construct one’s identity and express one’s self (Celsi, Rose, & Leigh, 1993).

Importantly, as predicted by the Positive-Activity Model, these results align with the tenants of Self-Determination Theory which theorizes that optimal well-being occurs when psychological needs are satisfied (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Consistent with the Positive-Activity Model, the satisfaction of psychological needs (e.g., fulfilling the need for relatedness by sharing life experiences with others) are some of the most consistently supported mediators between activities and happiness (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2001). Furthermore, the Positive-Activity Model complements Holbrook and Hirschman (1982), which suggests that hedonic purchases may increase well-being because they engage the consumer through multiple sensory modalities, facilitate fantasy-like and positive reinterpretations of consumer experiences, and produce positive emotional experiences. Additionally, marketing research has identified various consumer experience dimensions which parallel the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness through the consumer experience dimensions of acting (Schmitt, 2010), pragmatic/thinking (Gentile, Spiller, & Noci, 2007), and relations (Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013), respectively. Therefore, consistent with the psychological and consumer experience literature, the Positive-Activity Model, with a focus on psychological needs as mediators, provides a helpful framework to develop hypotheses regarding the effects of consuming experiential products on well-being.

To have in order to do: Experiential products

Although there is support that life experiences make people happier and are a better economic investment than material items, most studies have restricted the comparison to these two categories (see Carter & Gilovich, 2012, 2014; Howell & Guevarra, 2013). This purchase dichotomy seems reasonable as people can easily recognize this distinction, reliably classify their purchases as either material or experiential, and place their purchases on a material-experiential continuum scale (see Carter & Gilovich, 2014, for a review and justification). However, in many studies, researchers ensure that participants *only* recall material items or life experiences by highlighting that material items are purchases that people make in order “to have” while life experiences are purchases that people make in order “to do” (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). Further, when studies ask participants to rate their purchases on a material-experiential continuum, they tend to examine linear models (Nicolao et al., 2009 [Study 2]) or create two categories (i.e., material and experiential) from the material-experiential rating scale (Capriello & Reis, 2013). Unfortunately, by testing linear models or focusing on material items and life experiences, we know very little about the well-being effects of

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