



# Damned if they do, damned if they don't: Material buyers are not happier from material or experiential consumption



Jia Wei Zhang<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Ryan T. Howell<sup>b</sup>, Peter A. Caprariello<sup>c</sup>, Darwin A. Guevarra<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Psychology, University of California, Berkeley, United States

<sup>b</sup> Department of Psychology, San Francisco State University, United States

<sup>c</sup> College of Business, Stony Brook University, United States

<sup>d</sup> Department of Psychology, University of Michigan, United States

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Available online 29 March 2014

### Keywords:

Experiential purchase

Materialism

Happiness

Relatedness satisfaction

Expression of true self

Experiential buying tendency

## ABSTRACT

Numerous studies have demonstrated that experiential purchases lead to more happiness than material purchases. However, prior research suggests that some characteristics of the purchase and person may moderate this experiential advantage. Our goal was to determine if the happiness gained from experiential purchases varies for individuals with different buying tendencies. The results of three studies ( $N = 675$ ) demonstrated that material buyers, unlike experiential buyers, report equal levels of happiness from experiential and material purchases. Two mediated moderation models showed this is because material buyers report the same level of identity expression from their experiential and material purchases. The discussion focuses on why material buyers' consumption appears inconsistent with predictions from various personality theories (e.g., self-concordance, authenticity, and overall congruence).

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## 1. Introduction

Happiness facilitates many positive outcomes (Frederickson, 2001; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005), and it is widely pursued (Myers, 2000). A common strategy believed to bring happiness is the acquisition of material possessions (Kasser, Cohn, Kanner, & Ryan, 2007). However, materialistic pursuits are associated with lower life satisfaction (Richins & Dawson, 1992), reduced happiness (Belk, 1985), decreased psychological need satisfaction (Kashdan & Breen, 2007), and increased levels of depression and anxiety (Kasser & Ryan, 1993). In light of these findings, philosophers and scientists have recommended experiential consumption, "spending money with the primary intention of acquiring a life experience" (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003, p. 1194), as an alternative consumer strategy to increase happiness.

### 1.1. The experience recommendation

The experience recommendation (i.e., if you want to be happier, buy life experiences instead of material items; see Nicolao, Irwin, & Goodman, 2009), can be traced back to philosophical adages. For example, Aristotle, in *The Politics*, wrote that leisure makes all

people happy (Aristotle, 1962). However, it was not until the seminal experiential consumption article by Van Boven and Gilovich (2003) that strong empirical support for the experience recommendation was demonstrated. They asked students and adults which made them happier—life experiences or material items (see Study 1 and 2); both samples reported that life experiences made them happier than material possessions.

Since Van Boven and Gilovich's (2003) article, a number of studies have adapted their spending recollection design and examined the hedonic differences between life experiences and material items. In short, these studies have produced remarkably consistent results—life experiences contribute more to happiness than material items (see Caprariello & Reis, 2013; Carter & Gilovich, 2010, 2012; Howell & Hill, 2009; Millar & Thomas, 2009; Nicolao et al., 2009). Nevertheless, two open questions remain: why do life experiences lead to more happiness and do personality characteristics moderate this effect?

### 1.2. Why do life experiences lead to more happiness?

A number of studies have used variations of the spending recollection design to examine the mechanisms of the experiential advantage. Of all potential mediators, two have received the most attention: the enhanced social value of experiences and the alignment of experiences with one's identity (Caprariello & Reis, 2013; Carter & Gilovich, 2012).

\* Corresponding author at: University of California, Berkeley, 4115 Tolman Hall, Berkeley, CA 94720, United States.

E-mail address: [jwzhang23@gmail.com](mailto:jwzhang23@gmail.com) (J.W. Zhang).

In terms of enhanced social value, life experiences increase happiness through satisfying the psychological need of relatedness (Howell & Hill, 2009; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). For example, Howell and Hill (2009) found that relatedness satisfaction (e.g., “I made new friends or strengthened existing friendships because of this purchase”) mediated the relationship between experiential purchases, compared to material purchases, and happiness. Moreover, life experiences, compared to material items, are more likely to be shared with others (Caprariello & Reis, 2013), people are more likely to use memories of experiential purchases, rather than memories of material items, when telling a life story (Carter & Gilovich, 2012), and experiential purchases promote higher quality social interactions through the facilitation of story-telling (Kumar, Mann, & Gilovich, 2014). Finally, people find conversations about material items to be less enjoyable than conversations about life experiences (Van Boven, Campbell, & Gilovich, 2010). These findings suggest that the facilitation of higher quality interpersonal connections helps explain why experiential purchases, compared to material purchases, lead to greater happiness.

Another mechanism that has received much attention is the closer alignment of life experiences to one's identity. Prior research has demonstrated that life experiences better reflect a person's true identity, whereas material purchases are often motivated by extrinsic goals (e.g., to improve one's self-image; see Ferraro, Escalas, & Bettman, 2011; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). For example, Carter and Gilovich (2012) demonstrated that people were more likely to mention their experiential purchases, rather than material purchases, when they were instructed to tell their life story. A follow up study showed that people cling more closely to the memories of their experiences than material purchases. Importantly, an unwillingness to exchange memories mediated the relationship between experiential purchases, compared to material purchases, and satisfaction. Also, Carter and Gilovich (2010) demonstrated that buying life experiences leads to more happiness because people are focused on the inherent pleasure derived from the experience itself, whereas seeking happiness through material consumption leads people to focus more on extrinsic factors (e.g., better options, lower prices, comparing to the purchases of other people). These results might explain why material consumption does not improve happiness in life—the pursuit of extrinsic goals are a robust predictor of decreased well-being (Niemi, Ryan, & Deci, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

### 1.3. Is the experiential recommendation universal?

On the basis of the consistent findings that life experiences, relative to material items, lead to greater happiness, researchers have generally advocated that people should consume more life experiences than material items in order to increase their well-being (Dunn, Gilbert, & Wilson, 2011). However, prior research has suggested that some characteristics of the purchase and person may moderate the degree to which life experiences result in more happiness than material possessions. These results indicated that the experiential recommendation may not lead to more happiness all the time.

#### 1.3.1. Purchase moderators of the experience recommendation

Three lines of research have discovered characteristics of the purchase that moderate the hedonic benefits of life experiences. First, Nicolao et al. (2009) showed that the valence of the purchase matters. For purchases that turn out well, life experiences made people happier than material items; however, there was no hedonic difference between purchases that turned out poorly. Second, Caprariello and Reis (2013) found that experiential purchases that involved others made people happier than solitary material and experiential purchases. Third, Bhattacharjee and

Mogilner (2014) found evidence that ordinary and extraordinary experiences have different effects on happiness, depending on age. For younger adults, extraordinary experiences made them happier than ordinary experiences, whereas both ordinary and extraordinary experiences led to happiness for older adults. Together, these studies demonstrate that certain characteristics of experiential purchases differentially impact the experiential advantage. Specifically, experiential purchases that turn out poorly, are solitary, and are ordinary (at least for younger adults) show minimal hedonic benefits.

#### 1.3.2. Personality moderators of the experience recommendation

On the other hand, the possible personality moderators of the experiential advantage are less clear. For example, researchers have tested valuing materialistic pursuits (Richins, 2004) as a potential personality moderator; however, the results have been inconsistent. In one study, materialism moderated the extent to which experiential purchases increased happiness, such that the happiness derived from experiential and material purchases did not differ for materialists (Millar & Thomas, 2009). However, this purchase type by materialism interaction did not replicate in two follow up studies (Thomas, 2010). Carter and Gilovich (2012) also only found weak evidence that materialistic values attenuated the benefits of experiential purchases. On the other hand, Nicolao et al. (2009) found that materialism moderated the hedonic benefits of experiential purchases; however, this effect depended on the valence of the purchase. Specifically, for individuals lower in materialism, life experiences that turned out well led to greater happiness than material items that turned out well. However, those higher on materialism experienced the same level of happiness from material and experiential purchases that turned out well. Thus, the inconsistency of these results leads to the question of why materialistic values attenuate the benefits of experiential purchases some times while other times they do not. We suggest a few rival hypotheses.

First, it may be that, regardless of one's materialistic values, life experiences lead to more happiness than material items. This pattern, which is predicted by the experience recommendation, would support the previous non-significant purchase type by materialism interaction from Thomas (2010) as well as Carter and Gilovich (2012). Second, the experiential advantage may reliably differ when comparing people with different materialistic values. Specifically, it could be that highly materialistic individuals enjoy no hedonic benefit from their experiential purchases whereas less materialistic individuals do (as demonstrated by Millar and Thomas (2009) and Nicolao et al. (2009)). Finally, a third hypothesis, which is consistent with a number of personality theories (e.g., self-concordance, authenticity, and overall congruence; see Sherman, Nave, & Funder, 2012), is that materialistic individuals enjoy their material purchases more than their life experiences, whereas less materialistic individuals enjoy their experiential purchases more than material items. However, a complete interaction between the purchase type and materialistic values is not expected due to the robust experiential advantage demonstrated in previous studies (Caprariello & Reis, 2013; Carter & Gilovich, 2010, 2012; Howell & Hill, 2009; Millar & Thomas, 2009; Nicolao et al., 2009). In sum, each of these hypotheses differ in the degree to which materialistic individuals will enjoy the hedonic benefits of life experiences. Specifically, based on past findings and various theories, it is possible that materialistic individuals enjoy the same (supporting the experiential recommendation), no (supporting Millar and Thomas (2009) and Nicolao et al. (2009)), or a reversal of (supporting overall congruence) hedonic benefits from their life experiences when compared to less materialistic individuals.

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