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Research Dialogue

The beach, the bikini, and the best buy: Replies to Dunn and Weidman, and to Schmitt, Brakus, and Zarantonello

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Abstract

We reply to commentaries on Gilovich, Kumar & Jampol (in this issue) by Dunn & Weidman (in this issue) and Schmitt, Brakus and Zarantonello (in this issue). We argue that the distinction between material and experiential purchases is meaningful and important, that experiences can be bought, and that our comparisons of the two have not been confounded by factors such as significance, importance, purchase price, or subjective appeal. We further discuss the potential limitations of populations from which we have sampled, and differences in consumer satisfaction across different time frames. We conclude by embracing the fact that our program of research has generated many open questions and by welcoming further empirical attempts to understand the psychological processes and hedonic consequences that attend these two types of purchases.

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Introduction

In a telling *New Yorker* cartoon, a man is on his deathbed with a loved one hovering nearby. The caption reads, “I should have bought more crap.” The cartoon summarizes the thrust of the argument we presented in our target article: that there are limits to the hedonic value people derive from material pursuits; hence people’s long-term well-being might be advanced by shifting their consumption elsewhere. The cartoon also implicitly raises questions that can be directed at the program of research we reviewed, some of which are raised in the commentaries of Dunn and Weidman and of Schmitt, Brakus, and Zarantonello. For example, if material consumption is not the way to go, how should a person’s precious disposable income be, well, disposed? What sorts of materialist impulses should be reined in, nearly everything or just that

which falls into the highly subjective category of “crap”? Do people’s assessments of the relative value of material and experiential consumption differ only in retrospect (such as on one’s deathbed), or do they differ in the here-and-now as well?

We take up these and other questions in our comments on the critiques offered by Dunn and Weidman (hereafter DW) and by Schmitt, Brakus, and Zarantonello (SBZ). Although these sorts of exchanges are often said to generate more heat than light, we don’t believe that is the case here. The commentators raise a number of important issues, some of which can be addressed, we believe, with existing data and some of which point the way to potentially informative future research. Our reply focuses on three issues: (1) What is the nature of the distinction between material and experiential consumption and is it a false dichotomy? (2) Are there as-yet-unspecified boundary conditions to our central findings involving different subject populations or different methods of investigation? (3) Do people derive the same sort of hedonic value from material and experiential consumption or does each type of purchase maximize a different type of utility?

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The material–experiential distinction

Regrettably, the distinction between material and experiential purchases is not as precise as that between, say, organic and inorganic compounds. That lack of precision almost stopped us from undertaking this program of research over a decade ago. We were concerned that our participants might not understand the distinction and hence not know how to proceed in our studies, that our colleagues might not have any idea of what to make of whatever results we obtained, or that the public might not be able to glean the implicit message of how to spend their money to maximize well-being. Thankfully, our hesitation did not prevent us from moving forward, as these concerns turned out to be largely unwarranted.

DW take a particularly sanguine approach to this question, arguing that we should “embrace the fuzziness” of the material–experiential dichotomy. We are not willing to go quite that far, simply because the job of investigating the hedonic return on material and experiential purchases would be easier if the distinction were more cut and dried. We would back off a step and say that although we can’t recommend that researchers *embrace* the fuzziness, we would urge them not to *fear* the fuzziness or not let it be a barrier to the conduct of research. “Representativeness,” “fluency,” and the “strength” and “weight” of evidence are all notoriously difficult to define with precision, but illuminating and important research has been conducted on all of them.

SBZ are much more troubled by the categorical fuzziness, going so far as to claim that experiences cannot be purchased. But we would respectfully ask them to tell that to someone whose dream is to see Springsteen live, go to mass at St. Peter’s Cathedral, or see what Seattle looks like at dawn from the top of Mt. Rainier. It might be possible to get complimentary tickets to a Springsteen concert, somehow get to the Vatican without shelling out any money, or summit Rainier without a guide, but most people don’t. Most people pay. And when you ask them what they paid for, they say “to see the Pope” rather than “a seat in coach on Alitalia” in the same way they say—they *meaningfully* say—“I’m locking up” or “I’m paying attention” rather than “I’m turning the key” or “I’m staring at you.”

We believe DW get it right here by urging researchers concerned about this issue to “talk to humans.” Our participants certainly have no problem reporting on experiences they have bought: the food they ate at Momofuku, their seats behind home plate, an hour-long massage, and so on. Note also the recent work by Jiang and Sood (in preparation) and Mverka, Walker, and Van Boven (in preparation) that compares the magnitude of the endowment effect for material and experiential purchases. Their participants are not stopped in their tracks when they are asked to sell experiential purchases, and are (interestingly) less willing to part with an experiential purchase they’d made than a material purchase they’d made. This contradicts SBZ’s contention that “If so-called material and experiential purchases were conceptually on equal footing, one should be able to change the direction of the exchange and be able to ask consumers to imagine selling their experiences (and their goods) at a flea market or online. Obviously, they can sell

their goods at a flea market or online, but not experiences.” In fact, people can and do sell experiences. A host of websites are devoted to selling tickets to concerts and other events, and reservations to some of the world’s best restaurants are bought and sold online everyday. Experiential purchases, furthermore, are often exchanged between consumers in the context of gift giving. Chan and Mogilner (submitted for publication) have explored the exchange of experiential and material gifts and found that experiential gifts—in line with a theme we have consistently observed in our own research (Kumar & Gilovich, under review-a, under review-b; Kumar, Mann, & Gilovich, in preparation)—tend to connect consumers to each other more than material gifts do.

SBZ further argue that much of the enjoyment people derive from their experiential purchases doesn’t come from the purchase *per se*, but from things associated with the purchase, such as a friend’s company on a trip or a conversation over dinner. Point granted. But if those ancillary elements (personal interaction and social connection in particular) are bigger and more likely components of experiential purchases than material purchases, that only reinforces our central thesis—that people derive more overall satisfaction from spending their money on doing things rather than acquiring things. Greater social connection is simply one reason they do so (Caprariello & Reis, 2013; Kumar, Mann, & Gilovich, in preparation). Dining out or going to a ballgame are occasions for people to connect. They not only make it easier to have conversations with dining companions and fellow sports fans (conversations that otherwise might not happen), but also they provide the raw material that enables *better* conversations (Kumar & Gilovich, under review-b; Van Boven, Campbell, & Gilovich, 2010).

SBZ also correctly note that what people get out of their experiences can have less to do with the purchase itself and more to do with what they put into it than is the case for their material purchases. But note that this difference in what people put into their experiential and material purchases is one reason that people’s experiences tend to become bigger parts of their identities than their material purchases—and hence a further reason why experiential purchases tend to contribute more to people’s well-being than material purchases (Carter & Gilovich, 2012).

Populations and methods

Every phenomenon has boundary conditions. Although we have examined some of them (Van Boven et al., 2010), most of our work has been devoted to whether and why experiential consumption tends to produce more enduring satisfaction than material consumption. But as both commentaries implicitly or explicitly suggest, the time has come for a more vigorous look at possible boundaries of the effects reported to date.

Generality across populations

We especially embrace DW’s call to include more diverse samples in studies of the hedonic benefits of experiential and material consumption. As they point out, the original work by

Van Boven and Gilovich (2003) found that participants at the lowest levels of income were less likely to report that experiences made them happier than material goods. Nevertheless, it is important to note that even the least well-off respondents did not say that material purchases made them happier than experiential purchases; that is, the general pattern was not reversed among the lowest earners. Van Boven and Gilovich argued that the pattern among those at the very low end of the income ladder may be because they are likely to be worried about meeting basic needs and thus are unlikely to have sufficient disposable income to spend on many experiential purchases. The availability of truly disposable income, then, may be a precondition for the tendency for people to derive greater hedonic benefits from experiential rather than material consumption.

Directly examining the impact of financial constraints, Tully, Hershfield, and Meyvis (submitted for publication) have recently found that prompting feelings of scarcity in participants leads them to shift discretionary spending toward material purchases and away from experiences. But note that although their preferences shift toward buying “things,” it is not clear that feeling financially limited leads consumers to actually obtain more satisfaction from their material possessions. Tully and colleagues show that the shift in spending patterns they observed is due to an increased concern about the relative longevity of material and experiential purchases. Although material goods are certainly more durable than experiences in a material sense, our research shows that that is not the case psychologically: experiential purchases tend to be less prone to adaptation and are thus associated with more psychological longevity (Carter & Gilovich, 2010; Kumar & Gilovich, under review-b; Nicolao, Irwin, & Goodman, 2009).

For those who are financially strapped, the good news is that the enjoyment that comes from an experiential purchase tends to be less strongly related to its cost than the enjoyment that comes from a material purchase (Mann & Gilovich, in preparation). People report getting nearly as much enjoyment from their more modest experiential purchases as they do from their more expensive purchases, something that is less true for the material goods they buy. And, as we noted in our target article, many gratifying experiences can be had for free, especially if society were to heed our call to invest more heavily in experiential infrastructure and build and maintain more parks, bike paths, hiking trails, and concert venues. Our research suggests that providing easier access to experiential pursuits is likely to enhance society’s overall well-being, but that is a possibility that remains to be put to empirical test. We believe it would be especially important to examine whether the Easterlin paradox (that is, increases in national wealth unaccompanied by increases in psychological well-being; Easterlin, 1974) might be overcome in countries that devote more of their increased wealth toward experiential rather than material consumption.

There is some existing research that has examined whether certain individual differences, beyond wealth or income, moderate the general tendency for people to derive more hedonic benefit from their experiential purchases. This work (see, for example, Carter & Gilovich, 2010; Pchelin & Howell, 2014) has focused on

participants’ responses on the Material Values Scale (Richins, 2004) and the Experiential Buying Tendency Scale (Howell, Pchelin, & Iyer, 2012). Recent work by Aknin et al. (2013) takes a different tack and provides a nice model of fruitful cross-cultural research on this subject.

One additional individual difference variable we would especially like to see investigated empirically is what might be called “the psychology of the connoisseur.” That is, in addition to examining a general materialistic orientation, we believe there is much to be learned by studying those consumers with an especially intense interest in—a passion for—a particular category of material good. For some people, it might be leather boots; for others, classic cars; for still others, it might be linens, pottery, or jewelry. For people who are true connoisseurs of these items, how they relate to the products in question may give them many of the hedonic benefits that most people derive from gratifying experiences. What these individuals put into collecting these products, and the detailed knowledge they have about them (Clarkson, Janiszewski, & Cinelli, 2013), might make them a bigger part of their identity. Their efforts to track down rare items in the category in question, furthermore, are likely to bring them a great many memories to cherish and stories to tell. And they are likely to bond with others who share their enthusiasm. If there is one type of person whom we would expect to get as much enduring satisfaction from their material purchases as their experiences, it is this sort of aficionado. We further suspect that SBZ would agree with us on this point.

That said, we also suspect that everyone, aficionados included, is likely to overestimate the amount of social connection their material purchases will provide. For example, when consumers are deciding whether or not to buy a TV, they may convince themselves that their purchase will make them happy because they anticipate family movie nights, having their friends over for the Oscars, or hosting a Super Bowl party. But more often than they anticipate, we suspect, they’ll end up watching their televisions alone, or with fewer people than they imagined. We further conjecture that aficionados will end up talking too much about their enthusiasms with people who don’t share them, thereby undermining rather than advancing social connection (Van Boven et al., 2010).

Generality across methods

Because our interest has been in the enduring value people derive from their purchases, most of the research in this area has involved having participants recall past material and experiential purchases and reporting on what they now think and feel about them. There are some exceptions, with some studies examining the experience of looking forward to these two different types of purchases (Jampol & Gilovich, in preparation; Kumar, Killingsworth, & Gilovich, in press) and others examining how participants think and feel about laboratory experiences or possessions they just received (Carter & Gilovich, 2010; Nicolao et al., 2009). But these studies are just that, exceptions. We agree with DW that they shouldn’t be. Although we see no reason why retrospective methods should be abandoned, they do need to be complemented by more studies using other paradigms.

Of course, even within a given paradigm, such as the retrospective methods used in so much of the research on experiential and material consumption, the results obtained can be tightly connected to the particular ways instructions are given, questions are asked, and dependent measures are administered. SBZ argue that our reported results are misleading because we use the term “life experience” when specifying what we mean by experiential purchases (taken from Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). They maintain that this wording subtly suggests to participants that they should try to recall especially significant purchases—a suggestion that is not conveyed to participants asked about material purchases.

That is not the case. We have been very careful about ensuring that our results are not due to these sorts of confounds. Participants are typically asked to think of a “significant” experiential or material purchase, so that all participants are led to think about non-trivial purchases. If anything, then, much of the existing work can be criticized not on the basis of unfair comparisons between experiential and material purchases, but rather that the brunt of the work has focused on a narrow range of experiences and possessions—those that are highly valued. Participants are *not*, as SBZ claim, comparing valued experiences and insignificant possessions.

Note also that most studies in this area have measured and controlled for purchase price. The experiential and material purchases that participants provide in our studies typically do not differ in how expensive they are and even when they do, and cost is included as a covariate in the analyses, all of the results we detailed in our target article still hold. In some studies, furthermore, we have coded purchases in terms of subjective appeal, and our results are also not an artifact of participants thinking of inherently more appealing experiences than possessions. Finally, many of the effects reported in this program of research—more satisfaction derived from experiences than from possessions, more regrets of inaction for experiences rather than possessions, fewer comparisons to other purchases when it comes to experiences rather than possessions—have been obtained when the very same purchase is framed in either material or experiential terms (Carter & Gilovich, 2010, 2012; Kumar & Gilovich, under review-c; Mann & Gilovich, in preparation; Rosenzweig & Gilovich, 2012). Participants are clearly not thinking of an extraordinary experience and a mundane material item in these studies.

Nonetheless, more research needs to be done on people’s reactions to truly mundane experiences and possessions. Most of the purchases that participants list in our studies cost more than \$50 or \$100 (not less, as SBZ assert) and participants most often come up with purchases such as laptops and furniture, and vacations and concert tickets, not new socks or lunch with co-workers. Indeed, we were pleased to see that some recent work has been directed at comparing people’s reactions to extraordinary and ordinary experiences and possessions (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014). This research has uncovered an impact of age on the hedonic benefits people derive from these two different types of purchases. Young people tend to derive more enjoyment from relatively extraordinary experiences whereas older individuals tend to get just as much enjoyment

from ordinary experiences as from unusually thrilling ones. This greater ability to enjoy the mundane pleasures, or “the little things,” in life is no doubt one reason why older individuals (up to the very elderly) tend to be happier than younger people (Frijters & Beaton, 2012; Lacey, Smith, & Ubel, 2006).

More work is also needed on how people react to disappointing material and experiential purchases. Research has documented a tendency for people to retroactively take a “rosy view” of problematic experiences (Mitchell, Thompson, Peterson, & Cronk, 1997; Sutton, 1992). It is likely that this tendency is less pronounced for material possessions because they remain in the owner’s possession and so their flaws are all too apparent and hard to ignore or romanticize. But this is minimally-informed speculation at this point and research that addresses this question would be welcome.

What do we talk about when we talk about valuing experiences and possessions?

Since Aristotle, scholars have distinguished between two types of happiness: *hedonia*, or feelings of moment-to-moment pleasure, and *eudaimonia*, or the broader sense of well-being that comes from feeling that one’s life is worthwhile, meaningful, and well-lived (Aristotle, 1962; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff, 1989). The research on the relative benefits of material and experiential consumption has largely ignored this distinction, letting participants define for themselves what they mean when they say they are “satisfied” with a given purchase, when they rate how “happy” a purchase made them, or when they say that what they paid for a purchase was “money well spent.” Pchelin and Howell’s (2014) recent investigation is one notable exception. They measured both types of happiness and found that participants reported receiving a greater sense of hedonic and eudaimonic well-being from their experiential purchases than their material purchases.

Still, as SBZ suggest, experiential and material consumption might tap into these two types of happiness to different degrees. When people report having a much rosier view of an experience after the fact than they reported having at the time (Mitchell et al., 1997; Sutton, 1992), they do so in part because the mental representation of a distant mosquito bite, hunger pang, or fear for their lives is simply not as strong as the actual experience of intense itchiness, all-consuming hunger, or outright terror (Loewenstein, O’Donoghue, & Rabin, 2003; Van Boven, Loewenstein, Welch, & Dunning, 2012). Experienced hedonia differs predictably from remembered hedonia, a fact that gives experiential purchases a considerable advantage. Material goods stay in a person’s possession longer and so one’s sense of how satisfying they are tends to be less memory-based. It’s much easier to romanticize an experience from long ago than an unreliable car in the garage, a slow computer on one’s desk, or an uncomfortable sofa in the living room.

But we suspect, along with DW and SBZ, that a big part of the hedonic return people get from their experiential purchases comes from the experiences’ contributions to eudaimonic well-being. As we have shown, much more of the enjoyment people get from their experiential purchases comes from the sense of identity they provide (Carter & Gilovich, 2012), the story-telling they afford

(Kumar & Gilovich, under review-b), and the social connections they facilitate (Kumar, Mann, & Gilovich, in preparation). Our experiences, then, are likely to be thought about in more abstract, higher-level terms than our possessions, which are likely to be thought about in more concrete, low-level terms (Trope & Liberman, 2003; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). And it is at the higher levels that eudaimonic well-being resides (see Pham, Hung, & Gorn, 2011, for related findings on construal level and consumer valuation).

At present, however, these are all just suspicions and semi-informed guesses that should be tested empirically. Beyond pursuing the relative contributions of material and experiential consumption to hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, it would also be informative to examine whether a person's consumption patterns—or a society's consumption patterns—impact other measures of well-being such as stress, health, absenteeism, workplace productivity, and so on. Doing so would provide a clearer, more comprehensive picture of the direct and indirect effects of material and experiential consumption on well-being.

The road ahead

We eagerly await the next wave of research on the hedonic benefits of material and experiential consumption. We hope that this exchange with DW and SBZ will help in shaping that wave. We trust that we, DW, and SBZ all agree it is important to delineate the edges of the general tendency for people to derive more enduring satisfaction from experiences than possessions, and that this can be accomplished by examining to whom it most strongly applies, what sort of happiness or satisfaction it most strongly reflects, and which possessions and experiences elicit the biggest differences in hedonic benefits. In doing so, we hope that this next wave of empirical work furthers our understanding of experiential marketing, consumer psychology, and, ultimately, the determinants of human happiness and well-being.

In the meantime, we believe that the existing research is sufficiently strong, broad-based, and unambiguous to warrant the claim that consumers would be wise to examine their mix of material and experiential consumption and think about whether they would be happier by tilting their expenditures a bit more toward the latter. There is surely some merit in SBZ's claim that "A good life in a consumerist society is... about shopping *and* going to the beaches, and, most importantly, feeling happy when wearing the right brand of swimsuit." Everyone has to be both a material and experiential consumer. But the research evidence is clear that the happiness that comes from wearing the right brand of swimsuit is fleeting at best. Consumers would therefore be well-advised to spend less on the swimsuit and more on enjoying the beach.

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