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Research Dialogue

From experiential psychology to consumer experience☆

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Abstract

We comment on Gilovich and colleagues' program of research on happiness resulting from experiential versus material purchases, and critique these authors' interpretation that people derive more happiness from experiences than from material possessions. Unlike goods, experiences cannot be purchased, and possessions versus experiences do not seem to form the endpoints of the same continuum. As an alternative, we present a consumer-experience model that views materialism and experientialism as two separate dimensions whose effects on consumer happiness, both in the form of pleasure and in the form of meaning, depend on the type of brand experiences evoked. Thus, a good life in a consumerist society means integrating material and experiential consumptions rather than shifting spending from material to experiential purchases.

Keywords: Experiential psychology; Consumer experience; Materialism; Experientialism

About 10 years ago, psychologist Tom Gilovich and one of his colleagues published an article titled "To do or to have? That is the question" in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, which marked the start of a research program comparing material and experiential purchases (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). Based on a review of this research and the consistent finding that people derive more satisfaction from experiential purchases than material purchases, Gilovich, Kumar, and Jampol (2015) have presented a broad based critique of consumerist society, recommending that consumers should shift their consumption from material goods toward experiences and that communities and governments should encourage experiential pursuits.

While the distinction between material and experiential purchases may seem to be novel in social psychology, the experiential and material aspects of purchase and consumption have been studied for decades in consumer psychology. Long before the work of Gilovich and his co-researchers, Hirschman and Holbrook wrote a series of classic and widely cited papers conceptualizing the "experiential aspects of consumption" (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Their work was followed up in the late 1990s by related theoretical work on experiential versus instrumental modes of consumer decision-making (Batra & Ahtola, 1990; Pham, 1998), and theoretical and applied work on "experiential marketing" and "the experience economy" (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 1999). Consumer psychology and marketing scholars have also studied "brand experiences" and related phenomena such as "brand attachment," "brand relationships," and "brand love" (Batra, Ahuvia, & Bagozzi, 2012; Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009; Fournier, 1998; Keller, 2003; Park, Eisingerich, & Park, 2013; Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005). In parallel, there has been significant research on consumer materialism (Belk, 1985; Richins & Dawson, 1992).

As *consumer* psychologists and experiential marketing scholars, we are no doubt delighted to see that psychologists

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have come to acknowledge the importance of experiences in people's daily lives. We welcome Gilovich et al.'s (2015) overall recommendation of experientializing various aspects of our personal lives and lives as consumers. However, we feel that the research program by Gilovich and his co-authors is misguided by a false dichotomy between material and experiential purchases, and promotes an ideology that equates material possessions with materialism. As a result, they recommend that consumers should forego the "fleeting joy" of material possessions for "more substantial contributions to well-being" (p. 3) because the benefits of "material abundance" in a "consumerist society" have come "at a significant psychological cost" (p. 2). Based on our own decade-long program of research on experiential consumption and experiential marketing (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zhang, 2014; Brakus et al., 2009; Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013; Zarantonello, Jedidi, & Schmitt, 2013), we have arrived at a different conclusion. Living a good life in a consumerist society is not about a contrast or trade-off between material possessions and experiences. Material possessions (commercial goods and services), and in particular brands, are inherently part of our lives and embracing them can create pleasurable and meaningful moments of happiness.

Material versus experiential purchases: A false dichotomy

The dichotomy between what Gilovich and his co-researchers have called "material purchases" versus "experiential purchases" is problematic in several ways. Conceptually, the two types of "purchases" are quite different; moreover, the two constructs do not seem to be at the opposite ends of the same continuum. Empirically, there seem to be confounding factors that cast doubt about the view that material possessions and experiences rather than some other constructs such as (in)tangibility or self-construal are the main driving force behind the results summarized in the Gilovich and colleagues' target article. Most importantly, the conceptual category that is most relevant for consumer psychologists and marketers—experiential products, while acknowledged, has been entirely left out of Gilovich and colleagues' empirical research. We offer some observations and clarifications below.

Material goods can be bought and sold; experiences cannot

Gilovich et al. (2015) argue that research participants readily understand the distinction between material and experiential purchases. The fact that research participants seem to understand the distinction does not mean that the distinction is conceptually and theoretically meaningful. When consumers engage in a "material purchase," they purchase and acquire a physical good and pays for its features and quality. In contrast, when consumers engage in so-called "experiential purchases," they do not purchase an experience per se. An experience may occur after the purchase as part of a self-generated, internal, psychological process. If Gilovich and colleagues' "material" and "experiential purchases" were conceptually on an 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, people can sell their goods at a flea market or on online, but not sell their experiences.

A phrase such as "acquiring a life experience" is a metaphor. When dining out—one frequently-used example of "experiential purchase" in this research—consumers buy food, drinks, and service from a service provider. They may also get the company of another person, a stimulating conversation—and perhaps a kiss. But they only buy and pay for the food, drink, and service, and perhaps dining in a particular "atmosphere." However, they do not pay for the company of a friend, the conversations with a business associate, or the intimacy of a date. For other experiences, too, that are frequently mentioned in this line of research, say a vacation, consumers also pay only for the tangible items (e.g., the airline ticket to be transported to a destination, the hotel to stay in, the tour guide to be shown around with, and food and beverage). They do not pay, for example, for viewing a sunset from the plane, or feeling energized during a bike ride, or seeing the Eiffel Tower from Trocadero (although they may pay for a view of Trocadero from the Eiffel Tower). Indeed it would be odd to say, "I am sorry, I did not enjoy the sunset, or the bike ride, or the view of the Eiffel Tower; and therefore I want my money back!" Consumers understand that, although they may play along with the experimenter's metaphorical instructions; but it is up to the researchers as scientist to sort out the conceptual ambiguity. To be sure, it is entirely legitimate, and valuable, to study the "psychological processes that tend to be invoked by experiences and material goods" (Gilovich et al., 2015, p. 4). But "experiences" and "material goods" are not comparable types of purchases, and thus it is not clear what is being examined, from a *consumer* psychology perspective, when "the psychological processes that tend to be induced more by one type of purchase than the other" (Gilovich et al., 2015, p. 4) are being studied.

Extraordinary experiences versus ordinary possessions

Another issue concerns the explanations provided to research participants for material and experiential purchases, and the potential biases that these instructions might induce. Experiential purchases have been described as "those made with the primary intention of acquiring a life experience: an event or series of events that one lives through" (Gilovich et al., 2015, p. 3). Despite the subsequent qualifier, the term "life experience" seems to imply, or at least prime, an experience that lasts in memory and is significant for the individual for personal development and growth. Such extraordinary experiences have been referred to as "peak experiences" (Maslow, 1964) or as "epiphanic experiences" (Denzin, 1992). They include reaching life milestones, travel and culture, romantic love, and social relationships (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014). Note that most of them are purely psychological and have nothing to do with commercial exchanges.

In contrast, when asked about "material purchases," participants were asked about spending money "with the primary intention of acquiring a material possession—a tangible object that you obtain and keep in your possession" (Van Boven &