

# Anticipating experience-based purchases more enjoyable than material ones, researchers show

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To get the most enjoyment out of our dollar, science tells us to focus our discretionary spending on trips over TVs, on concerts over clothing, since experiences tend to bring more enduring pleasure than do material goods. New research shows that the enjoyment we derive from experiential purchases may begin before we even buy.

The findings are published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

This research offers important information for individual consumers those who are trying to "decide on the right mix of material and experiential consumption for maximizing well-being," says psychology researcher and study author Thomas Gilovich of Cornell University.

Previously, Gilovich and colleagues had found that people get more retrospective enjoyment and satisfaction from their [experiential purchases](#) than their [material purchases](#). And other research has shown that people often hold off on experiences so that they can savor the thought of eventually having them.

Gilovich and co-authors Amit Kumar of Cornell University and Matthew Killingsworth of University of California, San Francisco wanted to bring these lines of research together and investigate whether the enjoyment we get from the anticipation of a [purchase](#) depends on what we're buying.

In the first study, the researchers assigned 97 college students to think of either an experiential purchase or a material purchase that they intended to make very soon. They then rated whether their anticipation of the purchase was more akin to impatience or excitement, and they also rated the overall pleasantness of their anticipation.

In general, students reported positive feelings about both types of purchases, but those who were assigned to think about their impending experiential purchases, such as ski passes or concert tickets, reported their [anticipation](#) as more pleasant than those who were assigned to think about impending material purchases, such as clothing and laptops.

Not only that, students who were thinking about spending money on an experience said that waiting made them feel more excited (and thereby less impatient) than those who anticipated spending money on things. Notably, these findings were unrelated to the cost of the anticipated

purchase.

Moment-to-moment data from a large-scale experience-sampling project suggest that these findings bear out in everyday life. The researchers signaled 2,266 adults at random times on their iPhones and found that, overall, participants seemed to be thinking about a future purchase in about 19% of the times they were signaled. Those who reported that they were thinking about making an experiential purchase reported higher levels of happiness at that moment and more pleasantness and excitement in relation to the purchase.

Comparing data from individual participants across different times, Gilovich and colleagues found that people were happier at times when they were thinking about a future experiential purchase than they were at times when they weren't thinking about a purchase at all. There was no relative increase or decrease in happiness when they were thinking about a future material purchase.

Two additional studies suggest that the act of actually waiting in line to make a purchase may be more pleasant for those intending to spend money on an experience. In one, an analysis of newspaper accounts of crowds of people waiting in line found that those waiting to purchase an experience were in better moods and were better behaved than those waiting to purchase [material goods](#).

The researchers speculate that there may be several factors that could explain these findings. People may think about future experiences in more abstract ways that can make them seem more significant and more gratifying, for example. It's also possible that waiting for an experience induces less competition than waiting for material goods. Finally, anticipating experiences may confer greater social benefits, making people feel more connected and happier overall.

The findings have clear implications for individual consumers, but they could also inform the way money is spent on a much broader scale:

"Our research is also important to society because it suggests that overall well-being can be advanced by providing an infrastructure that affords experiences – such as parks, trails, beaches – as much as it does material consumption," says Gilovich.

**More information:** *Psychological Science*,  
[pss.sagepub.com/content/early/.../97614546556.abstract](https://pss.sagepub.com/content/early/.../97614546556.abstract)

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