

Experiences make you happier than possessions—before and after

September 2 2014, by Melissa Osgood

To get the most enjoyment out of our dollar, science tells us to focus our discretionary spending on experiences such as travel over material goods. A new Cornell University study shows that the enjoyment we derive from experiential purchases may begin even before we buy.

This research offers important information for individual consumers who are trying to "decide on the right mix of material and experiential consumption for maximizing well-being," said 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 from 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.

The researchers discovered that people thinking about impending [experiential purchases](#), such as ski passes or concert tickets, have higher levels of happiness than those who anticipate spending money on things.

In addition, researchers found 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](#).

"You sometimes hear stories about people rioting, smashing windows, pepper-spraying one another, or otherwise treating others badly when they have to wait," said Kumar. "Our work shows that this kind of behavior is much more likely in instances where people are waiting to acquire a possession than when they're waiting for tickets to a performance or to taste the offerings at their city's newest food truck."

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.

Provided by Cornell University

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