

Living happily in a material world: Material purchases can bring happiness

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With holiday shopping season in full swing, everyone's looking for the perfect gift. For those who like to shop, there's good news: Material things can bring happiness. In a recent study from the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, researchers have shown that material purchases, from sweaters to skateboards, provide more frequent happiness over time, whereas experiential purchases, like a trip to the zoo, provide more intense happiness on individual occasions.

The majority of previous studies examining material and [experiential purchases](#) and [happiness](#) focused on what people anticipated about

shopping or remembered about items and experiences. The University of British Columbia's Aaron Weidman and Elizabeth Dunn wanted to know how people felt in the moment, say the first weeks with a new sweater or tablet computer. To answer this question, they assessed the real-time, momentary happiness people got from material and experiential purchases, up to five times per day for two weeks. Material purchases consisted of items such as reindeer leggings, portable speakers, or coffee makers, and examples of experiential purchases were a weekend ski trip, tickets to a hockey game, or spa gift cards.

By having people record their thoughts in the weeks following their purchases, as well as one month after their purchases, the researchers showed that material and experiential purchases bring happiness in two distinct flavors. Material purchases bring repeated doses of happiness over time in the weeks after they are bought, whereas experiential purchases offer a more intense but fleeting dose of happiness. Additionally, when people looked back on their purchases 6 weeks after Christmas, they felt more satisfaction about experiential purchases.

"The decision of whether to buy a material thing or a life experience may therefore boil down to what kind of happiness one desires," says Mr. Weidman, "Consider a holiday shopper deciding between tickets to a concert or a new couch in the living room. The concert will provide an intense thrill for one spectacular night, but then it will end, and will no longer provide momentary happiness, aside from being a happy memory. In contrast, the new couch will never provide a thrilling moment to match the concert, but will keep the owner snug and comfortable each day throughout the winter months."

As you go forth in your holiday shopping this season, either for yourself or others, think about what form of happiness you want, before making a purchase.

Provided by Society for Personality and Social Psychology

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