

# Can money buy happiness? For some, the answer is no

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Many shoppers, whether they buy material items or life experiences, are no happier following the purchase than they were before, according to a new study from San Francisco State University.

Although previous research has shown experiences create greater happiness for buyers, the study suggests that certain material buyers—those who tend to purchase material goods—may be an exception to this rule. The study is detailed in an article to be published in the June edition of the *Journal of Research in Personality*.

"Everyone has been told if you spend your money on life experiences, it will make you happier, but we found that isn't always the case," said Ryan Howell, an associate professor of psychology at SF State and co-author of the study. "Extremely material buyers, who represent about a third of the overall population, are sort of stuck. They're not really happy with either purchase."

Researchers found that when material buyers purchase life experiences, they are no happier because the purchase is likely out of line with their [personality](#) and values. But if they spend on

material items, they are not better off either, because others may criticize or look down upon their choices.

"I'm a baseball fan. If you tell me, 'Go spend money on a life experience,' and I buy tickets to a baseball game, that would be authentic to who I am, and it will probably make me happy," Howell said. "On the other hand, I'm not a big museum guy. If I bought tickets to an art museum, I would be spending money on a life experience that seems like it would be the right choice, but because it's not true to my personality, I'm not going to be any happier as a result."

Although the link between experiential purchases and happiness had been well demonstrated, Howell said few studies have examined the types of people who experience no benefits. To do so, he and his colleagues surveyed shoppers to find out if there were any factors that limited the happiness boost from experiential purchases. The researchers found that those who tend to spend money on material items reported no happiness boost from experiential purchases because those purchases did not give them an increased sense of "identity expression"—the belief that they bought something that reflected their personality.

"The results show it is not correct to say to everyone, 'If you spend money on life experiences you'll be happier,' because you need to take into account the values of the buyer," said Jia Wei Zhang, the lead author of the study and a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley who conducted the research with Howell while an undergraduate at SF State.

Reasons someone may buy a life experience that doesn't reflect his or her personality include a desire to fit in or spend time with others, according to Zhang. And researchers did find that material buyers feel closer to friends or family following an experiential purchase. That feeling of closeness,

however, was not enough to counter the lack of identity expression and therefore provide the happiness boost.

"There are a lot of reasons someone might buy something," Howell said, "but if the reason is to maximize happiness, the best thing for that person to do is purchase a [life experience](#) that is in line with their personality." He invites people to learn more about how their spending habits are affecting their [happiness](#) and contribute to further research by visiting his website, [BeyondThePurchase.org](#).

**More information:** "Damned if they do, damned if they don't: Material buyers are not happier from material or experiential consumption" by Jia Wei Zhang, Ryan Howell, Peter A. Caprariello and Darwin A. Guevarra  
[www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../ii/S0092656614000257](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../ii/S0092656614000257)

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