To Do With Others Or to Have (Or to Do Alone)? the Value of Experiences Over Material Possessions Depends on the Involvement of Others

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Van Boven and Gilovich (2003) reported that spending money on experiences made people happier than spending money on material objects. A series of three experiments demonstrated that experiences brought people more happiness than material goods, but to the extent that others were involved in the activities. When experiences were framed as solitary, people reported being less willing to acquire them and reported gaining less happiness from them than material possessions. Taking into account the relationship context of experiential purchases may be critical to predicting how they best lead to happiness.

[to cite]:
Peter Caprariello and Harry Reis (2010), "To Do With Others Or to Have (Or to Do Alone)? the Value of Experiences Over Material Possessions Depends on the Involvement of Others", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 37, eds. Margaret C. Campbell, Jeff Inman, and Rik Pieters, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 762-763.

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15464/volumes/v37/NA-37

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In this presentation we discuss early findings that explore how restraint behaviors, cognitive processing and a rich food environment interact to affect consumption. This research adds to our understanding of how product and marketplace cues influence consumption for restrained and unrestrained eaters. In addition, we hope our research provides information to empower consumers to use their cognitive and behavioral resources to facilitate healthy food choices. As public policy officials work to combat the obesity epidemic, understanding the influences on food consumption will inform decision-makers as they implement remedies designed to reduce over-consumption and promote healthy lifestyles.

References

Motivated Bias in Affective Forecasting
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Affective forecasters exhibit an impact bias, overestimating the intensity and duration of their emotional reaction to future events. We suggest that forecasters make extreme forecasts to motivate themselves to produce desirable outcomes. In two studies, affective forecasts were more extreme when outcomes were more important, and when forecasters could influence an outcome than when it was determined but unknown. Subsequent studies found that the extremity of forecasts determined the amount of mental and physical effort forecasters expended to produce desirable outcomes. Errors in affective forecasting may thus not be solely cognitive in origin, but have a motivated component as well.

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How does money promote happiness? Recent studies have addressed this question. People may intentionally buy hedonic goods to increase their happiness (Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000). Spending money on others makes people happier than spending money on themselves (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008). Finally, spending money on experiences makes people happier than spending money on material objects (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). The present research focuses on the distinction between experiences and material possessions, and their relative effects on happiness.

There are a number of possible reasons why experiential purchases might make people happier than material purchases, but one that has received little attention is the social nature of many experiences. It may be that experiences bring people more happiness than material goods to the extent that others are involved in the activity. Csikszentmihalyi (2000) noted the importance of consumption for satisfying desires for belongingness and connectedness, and recent research has verified that experiential purchases satisfy relatedness needs more
than material purchases (Howell & Hill, in press). We take these findings one step further by proposing that an experience by oneself may make people less happy than an experience in which others are included. The current research tests this hypothesis with experimental designs.

In the first study, 89 undergraduates were given a survey in which they were shown pairs of 9 experiences, each framed once as involving others and once as done alone. Participants were asked how happy the purchases would make them and how much money they would spend to acquire each. Results supported the hypothesis that experiential purchases are more valuable when framed as social than as solitary. Participants reported feeling happier with an experience when it involved others than when it was solitary, t(89)=18.55, p<.001, and were willing to spend more money to acquire it, t(87)=13.50, p<.001. These data suggest that an experience gains value—in terms of willingness to spend money to acquire it and happiness gained upon doing so—when it involves others.

A second study compared the value of social and solitary experiences to material objects. In this study, 84 participants were shown sets of three purchases—material, experiential with others, and the same experience alone—all matched for cost. For each set, participants were asked to indicate which of the three they would choose and which of the three would make them most happy. Partially replicating the results of Van Boven and Gilovich (2003), participants chose the social experience over the other purchases the majority of the time (M=8.75 times per 13 opportunities). Importantly, participants chose material objects significantly more (M=3.47) than solitary experiences (M=0.76). The same pattern was found for happiness ratings. These results suggest that the value of experiential purchases over material objects depends on others being included in the experience. When experiences are solitary, the relative value of material objects increases.

A final study addressed a methodological shortcoming in the second experiment. Namely, when participants pick one purchase from a set of three, the relative value of the two remaining purchases is not clear. Therefore, the final study broke down three purchase options into three between-subjects comparison conditions—material vs. social, material vs. solitary, and solitary vs. social purchases—and asked participants which they would choose and which would make them happier. The final study also included a fourth condition in which material purchases were presented alongside ambiguously social experiences (e.g., “taking a road trip” without specifying whether or not others were involved). Subjects in this condition provided an unprompted, open-ended description of the experience. If participants spontaneously describe the experiences as involving others, this adds support to the overarching hypothesis that the reason experiences promote happiness is because they involve others.

In the final study, 327 participants were randomly assigned to conditions in which they were presented 1 of 4 possible choices—between material objects and social experiences, material objects and solitary experiences, solitary and social experiences, and material objects and ambiguous experiences—and were asked to pick which one they would choose and which would make them happier. Results participants chose social experiences relatively more than material possessions (M=7.63 times per 12 opportunities). Participants chose material possessions relatively more than solitary experiences (M=7.53). Participants chose social experiences relatively more than solitary experiences (M=9.83). Finally, participants were no more likely to choose ambiguous experiences than material objects (M=6.16). However, participants reported that experiences would make them happier than material objects (M=7.20 times) and described the experiences in terms of people involved significantly more than would be expected by chance (63.3% of the time).

The results of three studies suggest that the value of experiential purchases, both in terms of willingness to consume and happiness after consumption, depends on others being involved. Consistent with Van Boven and Gilovich (2003), experiences with others are more desirable and make people happier than material possessions. Experiences without others, though, are less desirable and make people less happy than material possessions. These results are consistent with research by Rosenbaum (2006) suggesting that some consumers consistently patronize establishments that offer feelings of connectedness and social support. In addition, Russell, Norman, & Heckler (2004) demonstrate that television consumption represents an outlet for feeling connected to television characters. Taking into account the relationship context of experiential purchases may be critical to predicting how they best promote happiness.

References

Online and Offline Advertising Media: Exploring the Antecedents to Advertising Trust
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Abstract
Breaking through the clutter of advertising to reach consumers is no easy feat. Getting consumers to believe and act on the messages delivered is even harder. By understanding which specific media and channels consumers are more trusting of, marketers can more wisely choose where to place their messages for the highest levels of efficiency. This study looks to create a conceptual model outlining the predictors of advertising trust so that marketers can choose an advertising medium based on their target audience. By identifying which...