



# ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

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## **Experiential Gifts Foster Stronger Relationships Than Material Gifts**

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This research investigates what type of gifts best connects people — material gifts or experiential gifts. Experiments examining gift exchanges in real-life relationships reveal that recipients of experiential gifts consequently feel closer to their gift giver than do recipients of material gifts, regardless of whether the gift is consumed together.

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# Just Like Being There: The Good and the Bad of Sharing Experiences

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## Paper #1: Questioning the “I” in Experience: Experiential Purchases Foster Social Connection

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## Paper #2: Experiential Gifts Foster Stronger Relationships than Material Gifts

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## Paper #3: When Happiness Shared is Happiness Halved: How Taking Photos to Share with Others Affects Experiences and Memories

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## Paper #4: Material Words: How Sharing Material and Experiential Purchases with Others Influences Self-Esteem

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### SESSION OVERVIEW

People’s collected experiences form their life narratives and are intricately intertwined with their social relationships. Many of our social interactions involve sharing personal experiences or learning of others’ experiences. For example, people may engage in similar experiences at different points in time, receive an experience from another person as a gift, or document and communicate their experiences to others in the form of photos and word-of-mouth. How do these various forms of sharing affect people, both during the experience and afterwards?

Most relevant research has examined how the co-presence of others affects experiences (Raghunathan and Corfman 2006; Ramanathan and McGill 2007; Capriello and Reis 2013). There has been much less attention, however, to the broader effects of sharing experiences with others who were not present in the actual consumption experience. The four papers in this session illustrate how various forms of sharing experiences can influence social connections, self-esteem, and enjoyment and memory of experiences themselves.

The first two papers focus on the interpersonal consequences of sharing experiences. Building on work about the greater *personal* satisfaction people derive from experiences versus material goods, they show that experiences can also promote stronger *social* connections. **Kumar, Mann, and Gilovich** investigate how experiential purchases foster kinship with both others who have made similar purchases and people in general. Simply thinking about experiential purchases leads people to desire more social activities and to act more prosocially. **Chan and Mogilner** examine how receiving experiential gifts (compared to material gifts) can make recipients feel closer to the gift giver. These effects operate through the emotions evoked when an experiential gift is consumed, regardless of whether the gift is consumed together with the gift giver.

The final two papers concentrate on the intrapersonal consequences of sharing experiences. **Barasch, Diehl, and Zauberman** demonstrate that simply having the *goal* of sharing one’s experience with others while taking pictures (compared to documenting the experience for oneself) can reduce enjoyment during the experience. A sharing goal also results in photos that are perceived as less authentic and enjoyable when people relive the experience. Finally, **Moore**

shows that sharing stories about experiential versus material purchases can differentially affect social dimensions of self-esteem. In particular, sharing about negative experiential and positive material purchases decreases self-esteem, but the use of explanatory language (e.g., because) can reduce the stigma associated with sharing these stories and attenuate these effects.

Individual experience and social interaction are two central elements to human existence. Together, these papers highlight the diverse ways in which these constructs can intersect. All four projects are working papers with at least three studies completed. Given the widespread applicability of the issues discussed, we expect this session to attract researchers interested in experiential versus material consumption, social connection, well-being, word-of-mouth, gift giving, picture-taking, and prosocial behavior. In the spirit of the conference theme “Back to Fun,” we hope that the focus on the social aspects of experiences and the diverse approaches to studying this topic will generate a lively and fruitful discussion.

## Questioning the “I” in Experience: Experiential Purchases Foster Social Connection

### EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research on experiential and material purchases (that is, money spent on *doing* versus *having*; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003) has focused on the benefits of experiential consumption in terms of consumer satisfaction and the underlying mechanisms that produce this difference. Here, we present another downstream consequence of spending money on experiences as compared to possessions: fostering social connection. Such effects are important because of the human tendency for the need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

In Study 1 ( $N = 98$ ), we investigated whether consumers feel more connected to someone who has made the same experiential purchase as they have than to someone who has made the same material purchase. While people may feel some kinship with those who make the same purchases they do, we set out to determine whether this was especially true for experiential purchases. Participants listed a significant experiential or material purchase and then thought about another person who had made the same purchase as they had. We then asked how similar they would feel to this person and how much kinship they would feel toward the person initially. As expected, participants reported that they would feel more similar to someone who had made the same experiential purchase as they had, unequal variances  $t(82.22) = 3.90, p < 0.001$ . They also reported that they would feel more initial kinship toward the person who had purchased the same experience, unequal variances  $t(86.90) = 3.61, p < 0.001$ . Knowing that another person has made the same experiential purchase thus appears to have notable social benefits: it creates a level of closeness and kinship that shared material purchases can’t match.

In Study 2 ( $N = 97$ ), we extended these findings in two ways. Instead of having participants think about another person who had made the *same* purchase, they thought of someone who had made a similar, but “upgraded” purchase. We also added another dependent measure, one of longer-term kinship. Again, participants indicated that they would feel more similar to the other person in the experiential condition,  $t(95) = 2.47, p < 0.02$ , and that they would feel more initial kinship toward the other person,  $t(95) = 2.03, p < 0.05$ . Learning about someone who had made a similar, but better experiential purchase resulted in greater feelings of long-term kinship as

well, unequal variances  $t(87.90) = 2.44, p < 0.02$ . It seems, then, that even when a notable difference between oneself and another person making a similar purchase is made salient, experiential purchases foster more of a sense of social connection than possessions. Knowing that another person has a better version of what you have can be off-putting and can create a sense of social distance. The results of this study, however, indicate that this is less likely to be true when it comes to experiential purchases. When it comes to being “outdone” on a similar experiential purchase, the similarities appear to be more prominent or more important than the differences.

Study 3 ( $N = 197$ ) examined peoples’ more general feelings of connection that are aroused by the types of purchases they make (i.e., not just toward someone who has made a similar purchase). Because we asked about their sense of connection to other people in general, we thought that the predicted effect might be less strong than those documented in the aforementioned studies, and so we doubled our sample size. After participants thought about either experiential or material purchases, they filled out the Social Connectedness Scale (Lee & Robbins, 1995). In line with our hypothesis, participants reported higher levels of social connection when they reflected on their experiential purchases,  $t(195) = 2.05, p < 0.05$ .

When people feel connected to others, they may want to partake in other social activities and further their sense of connection. After thinking about one type of purchase or the other, participants in Study 4 ( $N = 80$ ) indicated their relative preference for a variety of activities, some social and some not, adapted from Vohs, Mead, and Goode (2006). Participants were given a series of nine pairs of activities and asked which they would prefer if offered a choice between them. In each pair, one activity was inherently social (e.g. “hanging out at a café with a friend”) and the other was not (e.g. “reading a favorite book alone”). Giving consumers an opportunity to think about their experiential purchases made the social activities more appealing,  $t(78) = 2.07, p < 0.05$ . Because we found a significant difference in purchase price between experiential and material purchases in this study, it is important to note that this difference in preference for social activities remains significant in an ANCOVA controlling for (log-transformed) average purchase price,  $F(1, 77) = 6.87, p = 0.01$ . While the previous studies showed that consumers feel more connected to others after thinking about their experiential purchases, this experiment demonstrated that there may be behavioral consequences that stem from this feeling. Experiences not only connect us to other people; they also provide a rich store of memories of such connection to draw on and revisit, and these memories may feed the inclination to engage even more in such activities.

By inspiring people to seek out the company of others, experiential purchases are likely to have benefits beyond the purchase itself. But do the secondary benefits of such purchases apply only to the experiencer, or do they flow outward to reach others as well, perhaps causing us to treat others better? In Study 5 ( $N = 48$ ), participants were asked to recall an experiential or material purchase and then assigned the role of allocator in a dictator game. Previous research (Charness & Gneezy, 2008) has found that as social distance decreases, allocators in the dictator game become more altruistic to receivers and give them a bigger portion of the endowment. As predicted, thinking about an experiential purchase led participants to be more generous thinking about a material purchase, unequal variances  $t(40.46) = 2.27, p < 0.03$ .

## Experiential Gifts Foster Stronger Relationships than Material Gifts

### EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Occasions to give gifts tie up each year. From birthdays to religious holidays, Valentine’s Day to Father’s Day, each occasion is fraught with the question: What to give?! To help inform gift givers of what to give and to gain insight into the interpersonal effects of gifts, this research investigates which type of gift causes recipients to feel closer to their gift giver—material gifts (objects for the recipients to keep) or experiential gifts (events for the recipients to live through)—and why.

People seem more inclined to give material gifts. In a survey we conducted among 219 gift givers, 78% reported having most recently given a gift that was material. Four subsequent experiments testing the effect of gift type on how close gift recipients feel to their gift giver, however, reveal this tendency may be misguided.

In Experiment 1A, gift givers were recruited through a university laboratory and were provided with \$10 to spend on a gift for a friend within three days. After identifying their gift recipient, gift givers were randomly assigned to purchase and give an experiential gift they jointly consumed with their recipient (shared experiential gift), an experiential gift not consumed with their recipient (non-shared experiential gift), or a material gift not consumed with their recipient (non-shared material gift). Three days later, recipients described the gift they had received and reported how receiving the gift affected their relationship with their gift giver. Recipients also rated the thoughtfulness of their gift and how much they liked the gift.

Results revealed that people who received either shared or non-shared experiential gifts consequently felt closer to their gift giver than people who received material gifts ( $ps < .05$ ). Furthermore, experiential and material gifts did not differ in thoughtfulness or liking ( $ps > .59$ ), suggesting that these factors do not explain the effect of gift type on closeness.

Experiment 1B extended 1A using a two-part design. We recruited pairs of friends and randomly assigned one friend to be the gift giver and the other to be the recipient. Gift givers were provided with \$15 and randomly assigned to purchase either an experiential or material gift over the next three days for their friend to consume on his/her own. Recipients completed an initial survey to measure the strength of their relationship with the gift giver. The following week, recipients completed a follow-up survey in which they described the gift they had received and rated the strength of their relationship with their gift giver, the thoughtfulness of the gift, and how much they liked the gift. Relationship change was measured as the difference between the pre- and post-gift relationship ratings.

Results showed that receiving an experiential gift made recipients feel closer to their gift giver, compared to receiving a material gift ( $t = 2.06, p < .05$ ). Gift type was again unrelated to thoughtfulness and liking ( $ps > .11$ ).

Experiment 2 explored the underlying role of emotion in the effect. Participants were randomly assigned to recall a gift they had received in a 2(material vs. experiential)  $\times$  2(shared vs. non-shared) between-subjects design. Participants rated the closeness of their relationship both before and after receiving the gift, and the differences between the measures served as our measure of relationship change. Participants also rated how intensely emotional they felt at the moment they felt the most emotional from both receiving and consuming the gift, and identified which emotions they were feeling. Finally, participants rated thoughtfulness and liking.

Results showed that receiving an experiential gift resulted in a greater change in connection than receiving a material gift ( $F = 6.83$ ,

$p=.009$ ). Moreover, a non-significant main effect of whether the gift was shared ( $p=.72$ ) and a non-significant interaction effect ( $p=.32$ ) suggest that the connecting effect of receiving an experiential gift occurred regardless of whether the recipient consumed the gift with the gift giver. Additional analyses showed that thoughtfulness and liking did not explain the effect of gift type on consumption, nor did the emotion felt during the gift exchange. However, an analysis of the emotions that were felt while consuming the gift revealed that experiential gifts evoked more emotion when consumed than did material gifts ( $F=15.55, p<.001$ ; the effect of sharing and the interaction effect were non-significant,  $ps>.89$ ). Furthermore, mediation analyses showed that the emotions felt during gift consumption mediated the effect of gift type on relationship change (95%CI=[.03,.12]).

Experiment 3 tested whether framing a gift of a book as more experiential would make it more connecting. We further tested the underlying role of consumption emotion by manipulating whether recipients thought about the emotion they would feel while consuming the gift. Experiment 3 thus followed a 2(material vs. experiential)  $\times$  2(control vs. emotion) between-subjects design. Participants identified a friend and rated their relationship with him/her. They next imagined receiving a book from that friend and wrote about the material or experiential aspects of the book; some participants were further instructed to write about the emotions the book would make them feel. They again rated their relationship with their friend and the difference between the pre- and post-gift measures served as our measure of relationship change.

Results in the control conditions showed that the gift of a book was more connecting when recipients were reminded of the experience of reading the book, rather than its material attributes. Furthermore, in support of the underlying role of emotion, when recipients were led to think about the emotion they would feel while consuming the book, they felt greater connection regardless of gift type framing ( $F=7.60, p=.006$ ).

In summary, this paper explores the effect of purchases on connections between people, finding that not all expenditures of money are equally beneficial. Indeed, people's tendency to give material gifts seems to do little to foster the relationship between a gift giver and recipient. Experiential gifts, in contrast, make recipients feel closer to the person who gave them the gift because of the emotion evoked when consuming the gift, regardless of whether the experience is consumed together. Thus, when deciding on a gift for a loved one, an experiential gift promises greater hope of connection.

### When Happiness Shared is Happiness Halved: How Taking Photos to Share with Others Hurts Experiences and Memories

#### EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Picture-taking has become ubiquitous with technological innovation and the availability of camera phones. From eating a meal to watching a concert to skiing a mountain, hardly a situation exists these days that individuals do not feel compelled to document with the snap of a camera. While precise numbers are difficult to obtain, researchers estimate that Americans alone took 53 billion pictures in 2006 and that this number has doubled in the past seven years (National Geographic, 2012).

Consumers have different motivations for taking these pictures. One goal is to document and preserve experiences for themselves, as people gain utility from their memories (e.g., Zauberaman, Ratner, & Kim, 2009). Another goal is to document and share experiences with others, as people also gain utility from connecting with others (e.g., Ramanathan & McGill, 2007). Indeed, of the billions of photos that

people take every year, millions of them are shared on social media websites each day (Facebook, 2013). Yet, prior literature has devoted little attention to understanding how one's goal for taking photos might influence their online experience and future memories. We address this question with two lab experiments and one field study.

On the one hand, it is possible that taking photos to share with others will increase enjoyment of the experience and retrospective evaluations. Sharing positive events with others provides both personal and interpersonal benefits (Reis et al., 2010; Lambert et al., 2012), and the ability to share experiences with others partially accounts for why people value experiential goods more than material goods (Caprariello & Reis, 2013). However, while people clearly gain utility from sharing experiences with others, we propose that pursuing this goal comes with a cost. People motivated to share their experience through photos become concerned with impression management and self-presentation (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Tetlock & Manstead, 1985), which have often been associated with increased anxiety and pressure to make a good impression (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). We propose and find that taking photos to share with others can reduce online enjoyment and immersion in the experience, while also reducing enjoyment of photos themselves by hampering people's ability to fully relive their experiences.

To initially examine how one's goal in taking pictures may affect online experience, we developed a unique computer interface that allows respondents to experience a simulated event in the lab by watching a first-person-perspective video of the event. In the first two studies, participants experienced a simulation of a 4-minute city bus tour. During the simulation, participants were able to take pictures like they would during an actual experience by clicking their mouse.

In **Study 1**, 131 participants from Mechanical Turk were randomly assigned either to take photos of the bus tour so that they could preserve the memories for themselves (self condition) or to take photos so they could share the memories with their friends (share condition). A manipulation check confirmed that participants were more focused on others (versus themselves) in the share condition than the self condition ( $F(1,129)=6.03, p=.02$ ). Importantly, we found that relative to the self condition, taking photos to share decreased participants' enjoyment ( $F(1,129)=6.21, p=.01$ ) and immersion in the experience ( $F(1,129)=7.86, p<.01$ ). Participants in the self condition also reported that their albums were better at capturing their overall tour experience ( $F(1,131)=5.51, p=.02$ ).

Because Study 1 involved hypothetical sharing, **Study 2** sought to replicate these findings when individuals had to actually share their photos with others. 169 participants were assigned to the same conditions as above, except that in the sharing condition they were instructed to share their photos with a partner in the lab. Confirming the results in Study 1, participants enjoyed the experience less ( $F(1,167)=3.11, p=.08$ ) and were less immersed ( $F(1,167)=6.10, p=.01$ ) in the share condition than the self condition. In addition, we found initial evidence for the mechanism underlying these effects: individuals were more anxious when they were taking photos to share ( $F(1,167)=5.93, p=.02$ ), which mediated the effects on immersion and enjoyment (95% CI=[-.321,-.080]).

In **Study 3**, we extended our findings from the lab into the field and also examined the effects of picture-taking goals on people's subsequent memories and evaluations of their photos. We recruited 107 students to participate in the study before they left for Christmas vacation. Half the participants were instructed to take pictures on Christmas so that they could make an album to post on Facebook, while half the participants were instructed to take pictures so that they could make an album to keep for themselves. Two days after

Christmas, participants were asked to fill out a short questionnaire and create an album based on their assigned goal (Time 1). To allow us to investigate longer-lasting consequences, they also completed an online follow-up survey one month later (Time 2; filled out by 102 out of 107 participants).

Consistent with the anxiety effects found in Study 2, participants in the share condition were more likely to report that they tried to take photos that made them look good at Time 1 ( $F(1,105)=5.25$ ,  $p=.02$ ). Interestingly, when asked to recall their Christmas experience and visualize the situation, participants in the share condition were more likely than those in the self condition to rate that image as being from the perspective of an observer (versus their own perspective) at both Time 1 ( $F(1,105)=4.41$ ,  $p=.03$ ) and Time 2 ( $F(1,102)=4.10$ ,  $p=.04$ ). Moreover, these effects were reflected in the photos people took: participants in the share condition were less able to relive their experience through their photos at Time 1 ( $F(1,105)=6.80$ ,  $p=.01$ ) and enjoyed looking at their photos less at both time points (T1:  $F(1,105)=6.79$ ,  $p=.01$ ; T2:  $F(1,102)=4.24$ ,  $p=.04$ ), compared to those in the self condition.

By demonstrating the impact of picture-taking goals on online experience and subsequent memory, the present research offers novel insights for psychology and consumer research. Given its contributions to literatures in picture-taking, sharing, and memory, we believe this research would be of interest to a wide audience at ACR.

### Material Words: How Sharing Material and Experiential Purchases with Others Influences Self-Esteem

#### EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers share word of mouth (WOM) about purchases, such as buying clothes or watching movies, daily (Carl, 2006). While sharing allows individuals to savor events (Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Dickerhoof, 2006) and build relationships (Sprecher & Hendrich, 2004), it can also subject them to stigma (Van Boven, Campbell, & Gilovich, 2010). Thus, we examine when sharing has positive or negative consequences for consumers.

Because sharing is inherently social and self-esteem indicates relational value (Leary & Baumeister, 2000), we explore how sharing impacts social state self-esteem—the extent to which individuals feel self-conscious about their public image (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). In general, self-esteem should be affected when individuals share purchases for which they may be stigmatized (Link & Phelan, 2001). Prior work on *material* (tangible objects) and *experiential* (intangible events) purchases shows that material purchases are stigmatized (Van Boven et al., 2010). Individuals who make material purchases are stereotyped as selfish and are evaluated unfavorably relative to those who make experiential purchases; material purchases are viewed as extrinsically motivated by factors such as status, while experiential purchases are viewed as related to the self and intrinsically motivated by factors such as personal growth and enjoyment; and conversations about material purchases are less enjoyable than conversations about experiential purchases (Caprariello & Reis, 2013; Van Boven et al., 2010).

Due to this stigma, self-esteem may decrease when sharing about material purchases, as individuals may fear being judged. Further, extending prior work, we hypothesize that purchase valence will interact with purchase type (experiential vs. material) to predict changes in self-esteem. Specifically, individuals may not fear judgment for sharing about unenjoyable, disliked material purchases, or enjoyable, liked, and fulfilling experiential purchases (Caprariello & Reis, 2013; Van Boven et al., 2010). Thus, sharing about negative material or positive experiential purchases should not influence self-

esteem. In contrast, individuals may fear judgment for sharing about enjoyable, liked material purchases or unenjoyable, disliked, and unfulfilling experiential purchases (Caprariello & Reis, 2013). Thus, sharing about positive material or negative experiential purchases may decrease self-esteem.

Importantly, we expect the language used while sharing to moderate this effect. Language influences behavior (Patrick & Hagvedt, 2012), attitudes (Moore, 2012), and emotions (Hart, 2013). One particularly impactful type of language is explaining language (Pennebaker, 1997). Explaining may protect self-esteem because justifying stigmatized purchases should reduce individuals' fear of being judged (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999). Thus, if positive material and negative experiential purchases are not explained when sharing, self-esteem should decrease; however, if these purchases *are* explained when sharing, self-esteem should not decrease. We test these predictions in three studies.

Study 1 examined material purchases. Undergraduates ( $N = 169$ ) participated in a 2 (audience: salient/not) by 2 (valence: positive/negative) by 3 (writing: control/explain/non-explain) design. They recalled an appropriate purchase (using instructions from Van Boven et al., 2010), and then wrote a review of their purchase. In the audience salient condition, participants were told their review would be shared with another participant. In the not-salient condition, participants were told their review would be stored anonymously. Control participants wrote only one or two words about their purchase, while explain and non-explain participants completed a fill-in-the-blank review (Moore, 2012). In the explain condition, half of the ten sentences contained explaining clauses (e.g., "I would \_\_\_ recommend this product to others, because \_\_\_."); the non-explain condition had similar sentences without explanation. After writing, participants completed the Social State Self-Esteem Scale (e.g., "I am worried about whether I am regarded as a success or failure," Heatherton & Polivy, 1991) and the short Material Values Scale (Richins, 2004); this was used as a covariate.

A three-way audience x valence x writing interaction predicted self-esteem ( $F(2, 156) = 4.03$ ,  $p = .02$ ). Self-esteem decreased only in the audience salient conditions, and only when individuals wrote about positive material purchases without explaining. Those who did not explain had lower self-esteem ( $M = 2.22$ ) than those in the explain ( $M = 2.83$ ,  $F(1, 77) = 6.77$ ,  $p = .01$ ) and control conditions ( $M = 2.79$ ,  $F(1, 77) = 3.77$ ,  $p = .05$ ), which did not differ ( $p = .58$ ).

Study 2 investigated how self-esteem was influenced by explaining (or not) material and experiential purchases, holding audience salience constant—all participants were informed that their review would be shared. We also measured global self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965) several weeks prior to the study to use as a covariate. For the study, undergraduates ( $N = 157$ ) participated in a 2 (type: material/experiential) by 2 (valence: positive/negative) by 3 (writing: control/explain/no explain) between-subjects design. The study proceeded similarly to study 1, except for the type of purchases recalled; state self-esteem and materialism were measured after writing.

Results revealed a type x valence x writing interaction on self-esteem ( $F(2, 143) = 3.27$ ,  $p = 0.04$ ). For positive experiential and negative material purchases, self-esteem was not influenced by writing ( $ps > .60$ ). However, for negative experiential and positive material purchases, compared to control ( $M_{NE} = 3.61$ ;  $M_{PM} = 3.87$ ), writing without explaining decreased self-esteem ( $M_{NE} = 2.85$ ,  $F(1, 142) = 5.37$ ,  $p = .02$ ;  $M_{PM} = 3.36$ ,  $F(1, 142) = 4.28$ ,  $p = .04$ ), while writing with explaining did not ( $M_{NE} = 3.51$ ,  $p = 0.76$ ;  $M_{PM} = 3.82$ ,  $p = 0.85$ ).

In study 3, undergraduates ( $N = 91$ ) wrote freehand about positive or negative material or experiential purchases; all were told their writing would be shared. We measured explaining word use (e.g.,

because) using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) program (Pennebaker et al., 2007). Negative material purchases were explained ( $M = 3.57\%$ ) more than any other type of purchase ( $M = 1.19\%$ ,  $F(1, 89) = 16.02$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

While consistent with prior work (Wong & Weiner, 1981), study 3 suggests that consumers do not naturally share WOM in a way that protects their self-esteem. However, studies 1 and 2 demonstrate that if consumers explain their positive material or negative experiential purchases when sharing WOM, they can overcome the negative impact of sharing on their self-esteem.

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