Ideal Affect As a Choice Criterion: the Role of Ideal Affect in Experiential and Material Purchases

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This research demonstrates that ideal affect, the positive affective states that people would like to feel, plays more crucial role as a choice criterion in experiential than in material purchases. Participants derive more happiness from purchases which are congruent with their ideal affect particularly when consuming experiences than material goods.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

A considerable number of research has shown that experiences make people happier than material possessions (Carter and Gilovich 2010, 2012; Rosenzweig and Gilovich 2012; Van Boven and Gilovich 2003; Nicolao, Irwin, and Goodman 2009). Then, why are experiences more satisfying? According to the previous findings, experiences tend to provide greater happiness to consumers because they are more open to positive reinterpretations over time and less comparative in evaluations than material possessions (Van Boven and Gilovich 2003). Also, experiences are more closely associated with the self and are more meaningful to one’s identity than possessions (Carter and Gilovich 2012). In the current research, we add an additional novel explanation for the enduring satisfaction that experiences might bring: the rich nature of affective experiences in experiential purchases. Specifically, we maintain that consumers derive greater happiness from experiences than from material goods because they are more likely to experience ideal affect, the affective states that they would ideally like to feel, when consuming experiential than in material purchases. The roots of this prediction lie in research on the emphasized role of emotional components in experiential consumption (Havlena and Holbrook 1986). Given that experiences are primarily consumed for the anticipated pleasures that they would evoke (MacInnis, Patrick, and Park 2006), the current research proposes that consumers are more likely to consider affective factors as a criterion and appropriately apply these criteria when choosing experiences than material products. Specifically, we argue that consumers are more likely to make choices in accordance with their ideal affect and this, in turn, makes people feel more enduring satisfaction with their choices in experiential than in material purchases.

According to Tsai, Knutson, and Fung (2006), ideal affect can be categorized in terms of two levels of arousal: high-arousal positive affect (HAP) and low-arousal positive affect (LAP) states. For instance, excitement, enthusiasm, and elation can be described as HAP and calm, peacefulness, and serenity can be described as LAP. In the current research, we argue that differences in valuation of HAP and LAP would yield different consumer choices. That is, consumers who value HAP (LAP) over LAP (HAP) would be more likely to make purchases that will enable them to experience HAP (LAP). More importantly, we propose that the difference in ideal affect would be more accountable in experiential purchases where affective experiences from purchases would be considered as more crucial concern than in material purchases. Thus, we maintain that consumers are more likely to make choices in accordance with their ideal affect when engaging in experiential purchases than in material purchases. Specifically, consumers who value HAP (LAP) over LAP (HAP) are more likely to make HAP (LAP) purchases in experiential than material purchases, and this, in turn, would make people feel happier by allowing them to have more opportunities to feel their ideal affect in experiential than material purchases.

In four studies, we tested the hypothesis whether people are more likely to pursue their ideal affect in experiential than in material purchases. As predicted, the findings demonstrate that ideal affect is more primarily considered as a choice criterion in experiential than in material purchases and it also has a greater influence on consumer satisfaction particularly in experiential purchases. Study 1 provided the initial evidence for our prediction by revealing that participants were more likely to consider affective factors in experiential than in material purchase. Also, the results showed that participants anticipated experiencing their ideal affect from the purchase when consuming experiences but not material goods. Study 2 showed more supporting evidence for the hypothesis, indicating that people made decisions that reflected their own ideal affect in experiential purchases but not in material purchases. Study 3 replicated the results of Study 1, demonstrating that participants who focused on the experiential aspects of a camera anticipated emotions in accordance with their ideal affect but this result was not observed for participants who focused on the material aspects of a camera. Also, Study 3 revealed the moderating role of mood awareness in the relationship between ideal affect and purchase types. Lastly, Study 4 with real-world data, demonstrated the importance of ideal affect on consumer actual satisfaction, revealing that congruence between individuals’ ideal affect and the ideal affect elicited by consumption have greater influence on consumer satisfaction in experiential than in material consumption.

The present research has important theoretical and managerial implications. From a theoretical perspective, this paper contributes to existing literature on experiential and material purchases by adding a novel explanation for enduring pleasure derived from experiences; namely, experiences of ideal affect. We replicated the previous findings by asking participants to recall their own past purchases (Study 1), to imagine a hypothetical purchase scenario (Study 2 and 3), and to make actual choices (Study 4). Particularly, Study 4 yields practical implications by revealing that people would derive more happiness especially when they have ideal affect-congruent experiential consumption. Taken together, our findings demonstrate that consuming experiences which are congruent with individuals’ ideal affect would be a key determinant for greater hedonic values that experiences might bring to consumers. From a managerial perspective, the current research provides insights for marketers who mainly promote experiences or leisure activities. Indeed, a considerable number of companies sell experiences. For example, LivingSocial, a deal-of-the-day website that offers a wide range of experiential purchases, has provided a platform for thousands of merchants who are promoting their experiential products. Since numerous merchants are competing to sell their products every day, consumers can easily find several deals for the same category of experiential products (e.g., massage). Then, how would companies appeal consumers effectively? The findings from this research suggest that they should be aware that fulfilling consumers’ ideal affect would be a key factor in promoting experiential products. Thus, for marketers who are selling experiences, it would be important to understand target consumers’ ideal affect and develop promotion plans emphasizing affective experiences that consumer can derive from their products in order to differentiate their products from other competitors.

REFERENCES


