My Purchase, My Refuge: Experiential Versus Material Attachment As Predicted By Gender and Loneliness
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Just as individuals differ in material attachment tendencies, so to should they exhibit differential experiential purchase attachment propensities. Loneliness and gender are used as a framework for examining such differences: loneliness leads to attachment to purchases that affirm one’s social self, but men/women view material/experiential purchases’ social value differently.

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Experiential Versus Material Attachment as Predicted by Gender And Loneliness

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Most of the current research in our field has focused on pre-purchase, purchase, and immediate post-purchase processes. The meaning of purchases to consumers, though, does not end there. Items are often incorporated into the extended self when an individual is able to derive their own self-meaning or self-worth from them (Ferraro, Escalas, & Bettman, 2011). Although the definition of extended self is not limited to material possessions, the vast majority of research in the area has concentrated on object incorporation into the extended self (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1989, 1991; Ferraro et al., 2011; Ilmonen, 2004; Kleine & Baker, 2004; Kleine, Kleine, & Allen, 1995; Lastovicka & Sirrianni, 2011; Richins, 1994, Rosenblatt, Walsh, & Jackson, 1976). The current research seeks to expand our understanding of purchases and the extended self to include the role of experiential purchases. It also identifies loneliness and gender as predictors of the incorporation of material versus experiential purchases into the extended self.

Loneliness deals with social deficiency in the sense that an individual’s social network is smaller than desired or inadequate in nature or depth (Peplau & Perlman, 1979; Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980). Up to 25% of the population can suffer from this feeling of social deficiency at any point in time (Cacioppo & Patric, 2008; Cornblatt, 2009). It is important to note that loneliness is not objective in nature but rather deals with perceived social isolation (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010; Russell et al., 1980).

In the current research, gender is proposed as a moderator, based on differences in how men and women relate to their purchases. If men or women find themselves feeling lonely, they should reflect on purchases that best serve as symbols of their social self, and can help them cope with feelings of social deficiency through affirmation of their social self. Accumulating evidence suggests that men and women view and value their material purchases in terms of different criteria (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Kampartner, 1989, 1991; Kleine & Baker, 2004; Rudmin, 1994). Women (men) seem to view their material possessions more in terms of emotional affiliations or their representation of their relationships with others (utilitarian functions) (Wagner, Demick, & Redondo, 1990). This gender difference appears to be universal, and even adolescent girls and boys demonstrate the same patterns described above (Kampartner, 1995). Lonely men, in contrast, tend to have a more activity-centered (versus relationship-centered) identity construction (Dittmar, Beattie, & Friese, 1995) and see their relationships more in terms of shared activities/experiences (Caldwell & Peplau, 1982; Swain, 1989; Wright & Crawford, 1971). Therefore, when their self is threatened by feelings of loneliness, I propose that women (men) shift attachment towards their material (experiential) purchases, through which they can confirm their social selves and cope with threat.

Studies 1 & 2
Studies 1 & 2 manipulate feelings of loneliness through false feedback (Wildschut, Sedikides, Arndt, & Routledge, 2006). In study 1, participants were asked to list their five most self-defining purchases and rate each purchase as material versus experiential and how important it is to their self. To compute a weighted experiential attachment score, I multiplied the material-experiential classification by its assigned importance score and averaged across the 5 purchases. A gender by loneliness condition interaction predicts the weighted experiential score, F(1,83)=7.113, p=.009. Men (women) attached more to experiential (material) purchases in the high loneliness condition (t(41)=1.98, p .055). In study 2, after receiving the same loneliness prime, participants were asked to write about/share two of their most self-identifying purchases and to rate the purchases as material versus experiential (100 point scale). Results indicated a significant gender by loneliness interaction predicting the average of these experiential scores, F(1,114)=6.305, p=.013—lonely men (women) attach more to their experiential (material) purchases (t(56)=2.75, p=.008).

Studies 3 and 4
Studies 3 and 4 examine the mediating role of perceived social value of material versus experiential purchases. In study 3, participants were asked to recall their daily routine (control) or times when they felt lonely/isolated or companionship/connectedness. Next, participants were asked to list their most self-defining material and experiential purchases and indicated which of those was most self-defining. Participants then filled out a scale of perceived social value of experiences versus material purchases (based on Zhang et al., 2013). Moderated mediation analyses support our hypotheses, 95% CI [-0.2, .49], indicating that lonely women (men) view their material (experiential) purchases as having a higher social value and, therefore, choose that purchase type as being most self-defining for them. Study 4 used a new prime and measure of perceived social value—moderated mediation analyses again supported our hypotheses (same as study 3), 95% CI [-78.85, -10.63].

Study 5
Study 5 examines how the goal of affirming one’s social self (social motivation) drives the link between perceived social value and attachment to purchases. A 2 (material versus experiential social value prime) X 2 (social versus autonomy goals) design was used. Results indicate that being primed with the idea that material (experiential) purchases are better social tools only leads to material (experiential) attachment when social goals are activated (95% CI [-33.57, -2.03]) but not when autonomy goals are activated (95% CI [-11.36, 28.57]).

Study 6
Study 6 examines how purchase attachment impacts future purchase tendencies. Participants completed a measure of loneliness (Hughes, Waite, Hawkley, & Cacioppo, 2004). They listed the three purchases they felt were their most self-defining and rated their importance. Participants were then given the hypothetical scenario of being given a $50 gift card to spend on whatever they want. After listing how they would spend the gift-card, they were asked to rate their 3 purchases and the gift card purchase as material vs. experiential. Moderated mediation analysis was used to examine the role of attachment (experiential weighted score) as a possible mediator to purchase choice tendencies, 95% CI [-11.42, -37].

The idea that attachment to different purchase types can be predicted and differs across individuals has not previously been studied in the literature. These findings indicate not only that purchase type
is an important factor, but also that gender differences moderate differential attachment to material and experiential purchases.

REFERENCES


