Moments That Last: Meaningfulness Slows Happiness Decay

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The happiness experienced when recalling positive experiences decays rapidly over time—even after a single day. However, these happiness decay patterns are mitigated when moments are more meaningful. As a result, meaningful moments stay happier longer, which in turn predicts consumer choice.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1024808/volumes/v45/NA-45

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Improving Consumer Well-Being Through Meaning vs Happiness
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Paper #1: Meaningful Consumption Provides Long Lasting Benefits at a High Cost
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Paper #2: Buying Time Promotes Happiness
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Paper #3: Moments that Last: Meaningfulness Slows Happiness Decay
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Paper #4: Taking Vacation Increases Meaning at Work
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SESSION OVERVIEW
Much of consumer research assumes that the primary motivator in consumer choice is the pursuit of happiness. Yet, much of the consumer experience does not focus on maximizing for happiness alone. Parents opt to spend their time and money on their children, although child rearing generally decreases happiness (e.g. McGregor and Little, 1998), and individuals consistently try to find ways to improve their self-control despite its negative impacts on their happiness (Baumeister, 2002). Another important driver of choice and decision-making is the pursuit of meaning. Previous research provides insight into what actions and decisions are considered meaningful and how meaning differs from happiness (Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker and Garbinsky, 2013; Choi, Catapano and Choi 2016). However, several important questions have received less attention: How do consumers make trade-offs between happiness and happiness? How can consumers maximize happiness and meaning beyond the present moment?

Our session sheds light on these questions. Paper 1 (Carter and Williams) explores how consumers make trade-offs between happiness and meaning. Compared to more pleasure focused consumption, consumers expect the benefits of meaningful consumption to last longer and require greater knowledge to prove beneficial. These results have important implications for understanding when consumers choose to engage in meaningful versus happy consumption.

The next two papers examine how consumers can maximize their long-term happiness. Paper 2 (Whillans, Dunn, and Norton) demonstrates that individuals who spend money on time-saving services report greater life satisfaction. Providing causal evidence, working adults reported greater happiness after spending money on time-saving purchases as compared to material purchases. Paper 3 (Catapano, Hardisty, and Aaker) explores how meaning can promote long-lasting happiness from experiences. In a series of field and lab studies, more meaningful memories show less happiness decay, therefore making individuals happier for longer. In addition, this prolonging of happiness improves consumer brand attitudes and purchase intentions in response to meaningful advertising.

Finally, Paper 4 (West, Mogilner, and DeVoe) explores how individuals can increase their meaning experienced at work though a happy experience, taking a vacation. They find that taking vacation has a significant positive effect on meaning at work, which holds controlling for the effect of vacationing on meaning in life overall. This result suggests that sometimes, taking time away from a common activity may actually increase the meaning derived from future engagement with the activity.

Together, the four papers in this session enhance our understanding of how consumers can experience more happiness and meaning, and the downstream consequences of these experiences. They incorporate a variety of perspectives on an area of consumer behavior that has only just begun to be explored. We believe this session will attract a broad audience, and facilitate interesting discussions and collaborations that can generate valuable insights for researchers, marketers, and policy makers who aim to help consumers get off the hedonic treadmill. Ultimately, by considering how choices provide happiness as well as meaning, we may develop a stronger vision of the significance of consumer research.

Meaningful Consumption Provides Long-Lasting Benefits at a High Cost

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Consumer well-being is of increasing interest to consumer researchers. While the study of consumer well-being largely draws from a hedonic approach to the topic (Kahneman, Diener, and Schwarz 1999), a growing body of evidence finds that meaning is an important and distinct aspect of well-being (Baumeister et al. 2013; Deci and Ryan 2008; Waterman 1993). Following others, we define meaning-oriented consumption as consumption motivated by a desire for self-growth, social connectedness, and the pursuit of personal fulfillment in life requiring a more cognitive evaluation (eudaimonia; Baumeister et al. 2013; Deci and Ryan 2008), whereas pleasure-oriented consumption is motivated by a desire to maximize positive affect and minimize negative affect requiring more affective evaluations (hedonia; Bentham 1789/1948, Kahneman 2000).

We propose and demonstrate that consumers expect (1) the benefits of meaningful consumption to persist after the experience has ended, (2) the minimum time investment (MTI) necessary to benefit from a consumption experience is greater for meaningful consumption compared to pleasure-focused consumption, and (3) knowledge to benefit meaningful but not necessarily pleasurable consumption.

Lasting Benefits
In studies 1A and 1B, we ask participants to reflect on books, movies, or trips that they have not consumed but would like to and that they expect to be either particularly meaningful or particularly pleasurable. We then measure the extent to which participants believe consuming the product will be beneficial at four time points. We expect the benefits of meaningful consumption to persist to a greater degree at later time points.

Two studies confirmed our hypothesis. In study 1A (n=300), we manipulated condition and time point within subjects and order of the presentation and product category between subjects. A mixed effects analysis (Judd, Westfall, and Kenny 2012), revealed significant effects of condition (F(1, 3.04) = 24.18, p = .02) and time (F(3, 2084.18) = 57.35, p < .001) qualified by a significant condition x time point interaction (F(3, 2084.18) = 15.59, p < .001). In study 1B (n=148), we manipulated product category and time point within...
subject and condition between subjects. We again found that participants believed that the benefits of meaningful experiences would last longer than the benefits of pleasurable experiences ($F(3, 1618) = 4.84, p = .002$).

In study 2 ($n=404$), we tested this hypothesis with actual consumption experiences. We asked participants to reflect on the meaningful versus pleasurable (per condition) benefits they experienced while using streaming entertainment services (HBO, Netflix, Spotify, Sirius XM) and to indicate how successful the service was at providing meaning or pleasure (per condition). A mixed effects analysis revealed a two-way interaction between condition and the extent to which the service was deemed successful ($F(1, 331.82) = 12.9, p < .001$) in predicting enduring benefits, with successfully meaningful services perceived to provide longer lasting benefits. We also find that reflecting on how a service was meaningful made participants more likely to indicate that they would continue to subscribe in the future ($F(1, 374.04) = 3.03, p = .08$).

**Minimum Time Investments**

Analogous to studies 1a and 1b, here we examined consumers' expectations about the minimum time investment (MTI) for pursuing meaningful versus pleasurable consumption experiences. We again asked participants to consider self-generated stimuli drawn from three different product categories (movies, books, and trips). We instructed participants to think about consuming the product they had just identified and to indicate the minimum amount of time someone could spend consuming the product and still benefit from the consumption.

Both studies were mixed designs. In study 3A ($n=148$), we manipulated condition within subjects and product category between subjects. Using a mixed effects analysis, we found that overall, participants believed that the MTI necessary to benefit from meaningful experiences was greater than the MTI necessary to benefit from pleasurable experiences ($t(144) = -2.866, p = .005$). In study 3B ($n=147$), we manipulated product category within subject and condition between subjects and again found participants believe that the MTI necessary for meaningful experiences is greater than the MTI necessary for pleasurable experiences ($t(144.02) = -2.041, p = .04$).

In our next set of studies, we explore an implication of meaning-oriented consumption being associated with longer MTIs. Because the MTI necessary for meaning is greater than the MTI necessary for pleasure, it is reasonable to expect that longer experiences will lead to more satisfaction when those experiences are associated with meaning. However, this effect should only apply to the window of time starting at and immediately following the MTI for meaning; before or beyond that window, we expect that there will be no difference in expected satisfaction. Stated differently, we do not expect that more time is necessarily always better for meaning as compared to pleasure; we expect that having enough time is more important for meaning than for pleasure and that what qualifies as enough time is greater for meaning than for pleasure.

In the domains of sexual (4A, $n=588$), musical (4B, $n=680$), and dining experiences (4C, $n=508$), we find that people expect meaningful experiences to be more satisfying than pleasurable experiences when they expect them to be longer, but only within an appropriate time investment window. Importantly, both before and beyond this window the difference in satisfaction associated with meaningful versus pleasurable experiences is attenuated.

**Cognitive Effects**

Finally, in study 5 ($n=184$), we examine the role of knowledge and expertise in facilitating meaningful but not pleasurable consumption. In this study, we asked participants to watch a short film and to either find pleasure or meaning in the film. We also manipulated whether or not participants received supplementary information explaining the symbolism and message of the film prior to watching and measured baseline expertise with short films. We expected that among participants pursuing meaning, novice participants would benefit from the additional information, expert participants would have worsened experiences as a result of receiving the additional information, and that there would be no effects of expertise or additional information among participants pursuing pleasure. A significant three-way interaction of the condition, manipulated knowledge, and measured expertise supported this hypothesis.

**Buying Time Promotes Happiness**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

In a 2010 survey, respondents were asked if they often had time to spare. As Brigid Schulte explains in her book *Overwhelmed*, “exactly zero percent of mothers with children under six said yes.” Fathers and working adults without children express similar concerns about the time famine of modern life. One survey found that over 80% of adults—with and without children—reported wishing they had more time to spend with their families (Duxbury and Higgins 2001). Indeed, trying to keep up with the tasks of daily life can chip away at the time we might otherwise spend engaging in the kinds of activities that endow life with meaning.

Rising incomes could provide people with one way out of the “time famine” of modern life (Perlow 1999). Wealth offers the opportunity to have more free time, such as by paying to live closer to work or paying someone to run errands. Yet, some evidence suggests that wealthier people spend more time engaging in stressful activities, such as commuting (Kahneman et al. 2006). Because time and money are largely interchangeable in the modern economy, it is possible for people to spend money to buy free time. Exchanging discretionary income to buy free time should reduce the negative effects of the modern time famine, promoting well-being.

As an initial test of this hypothesis, we surveyed Mturk workers in the US ($N=366$), a representative sample of employed Americans in the US ($N=1,265$), adults in Denmark ($N=565$) and Canada ($N=325$), a nationally representative sample of individuals in the Netherlands ($N=1,231$), and a sample of Dutch millionaires ($N=818$). In all studies, respondents completed two questions about whether, and how much, money they spent each month to increase their free time by paying someone else to complete unenjoyable daily tasks. In addition, participants were asked to rate their satisfaction with life and to report their annual household income, the number of hours they work each week, age, marital status, and the number of children living at home.

Across samples ($N=4,570$), 28% of respondents spent money to buy time each month ($M_{mean} =$815.08 USD). Participants who spent money in this way reported greater life satisfaction, $d=0.24, p<.001$, 95% CI [0.17, 0.31]. This effect held controlling for our key set of covariates ($N=3,988$), $d=0.19, p<.001$, 95% CI [0.11, 0.26].

Across samples, there was also a significant interaction between time-saving purchases and time stress, $Z=3.87, p<.001$. Decomposing this interaction, time stress was associated with lower life satisfaction among people who did not spend money on time-saving purchases ($N=1,254$), $B=-0.12, Z=9.12, p<.001$, 95% CI [-0.22, -0.14]. In contrast, for people who spent money on time-saving purchases ($N=804$), the negative effect of time pressure on life satisfaction was relatively weak, $B=-0.04, Z=1.69, p=.091$, 95% CI [-0.08, 0.01].
By presenting all participants with the same spending questions, we could detect comparable results across diverse samples. A limitation of this approach is that our findings might depend on the specific question wording used. To overcome this limitation, we presented a new sample of working adults in the US (N=1,802) with a broader definition of time-saving purchases. Faced with this broader definition, 50% of participants reported spending money in this way each month (M_mean=$60-$79 USD). Again, participants who spent money on time-saving purchases reported greater life satisfaction, $b=0.24, p<.001$. These results were unchanged controlling for our pre-determined set of covariates, $b=0.22, p<.001$. These results also held after controlling for how much money participants spent on non-durable expenses (groceries), material goods, and experiential purchases, $b=0.15, p<.001$. There was a significant interaction between time-saving purchases and time stress, $b=0.24, p<.001$. Decomposing this interaction, time stress was associated with lower life satisfaction among people who did not spend money on time-saving purchases ($N=901$), $B=-0.17, p<.001$, 95% CI [-0.25, -0.10]. For people who spent money on time-saving purchases ($N=901$), the negative effect of time pressure on life satisfaction was non-significant, $B=0.05, p=.227$, 95% CI [-0.03, 0.12].

Across seven studies with over 6,000 participants, spending money on time-saving services was linked to greater life satisfaction. From our theoretical perspective, this broad link stems from the cumulative day-to-day mood benefits that are caused by the reduction in time stress that these purchases provide. To zoom in on this causal pathway, we conducted a two-week within-subjects experiment. In this experiment, we recruited working adults to spend two payments of $40 on two consecutive weekends ($N=60$). On one weekend, participants were randomly assigned to spend $40 on a purchase that would save them time. On the other weekend, we assigned participants to spend $40 on a material purchase. We chose this as a comparison because material purchases would be unlikely to save time. Our manipulation checks confirmed this assumption. We counterbalanced the order of the spending weeks: results did not differ by order. After making each purchase, participants received a phone call at 5:00pm and were asked to report on their positive affect, negative affect, and time stress. We hypothesized that people would report greater well-being after making a time-saving (vs. material) purchase. We further predicted that these benefits would be explained by reduced feelings of time-stress that day.

Consistent with our hypothesis, participants reported greater end-of-day positive affect after making a time-saving purchase ($M=4.00, SD=0.64$) than after making a material purchase ($M=3.71, SD=0.81$), $t(59)=2.57, p=.007$, 95% CI [0.10, 0.48], $d=0.33$. After making a time-saving (vs. material) purchase, participants also reported lower levels of negative affect, $t(59)=-2.45, p=.009$, 95% CI [-0.45, -0.08], $d=0.32$, greater affect balance, $t(59)=2.63, p=.006$, 95% CI [0.21, 0.92], $d=0.35$, and lower feelings of time stress, $t(59)=-2.76, p=.004$, 95% CI [-1.18, -0.29], $d=0.35$. These results could not be explained by differences between the purchase in social status, exceptionalness, or perceived usefulness. Across all indicators, time-saving vs. material purchases increased well-being by reducing end-of-day feelings of time stress.

Overall, buying time reduces feelings of time pressure on a given day and provides cumulative benefits by buffering against the deleterious effects of time pressure on life satisfaction—potentially enabling people to spend more time engaging in meaningful pursuits.

**Study 1 (n=85)**
Participants were asked to capture five moments throughout a single day of their life, using their iPhone, iPad, or iPod touch. After capturing a moment, they rated how happy and meaningful the moment was, and wrote a short description. A single-item self-report was chosen as preferred measure of happiness, based on previous work suggesting that even single item self-reports tend to correlate well with both longer scales and other non-self-report measures (Sandvik, Diener, and Seidlitz 1993). One day and one week later, participants completed follow-up surveys, where they looked at the pictures they had taken, and rated how happy they were currently, looking back on the moment.

We find that in general, happy moments decayed linearly with time, $b = -0.41, p < 0.001$. However, more meaningful moments tended to decay more slowly, such that greater meaningfulness predicted a smaller decrease in happiness after one week, $b = -0.18, p = .003$, and even after a single day, $b = .14, p = .03$.

**Study 2 (n=94)**
Next, we sought to expand happiness decay to a common consumer setting, advertising. To investigate the effect of slowed happiness decay on consumer preferences, in Study 3 (n=400), participants watched an excerpt from a video advertisement for a GoPro handheld video camera. They then completed surveys measuring the happiness and meaning experienced during the commercial.

One week later, participants completed a follow-up survey regarding their attitudes toward GoPro and the commercial including purchase intent, willingness to pay, and product interest, as well as current happiness and meaning upon reflecting on the commercial.

Consistent with previous studies, when the advertisement was initially rated as more meaningful, happiness decayed more slowly, $b = -0.15, p = 0.03$. Subsequently, those with less happiness decay responded more favorably on all consumer behavior measures used, $p<.001$. Further, a mediation analysis revealed that a mediating role of happiness decay, indirect effect = 0.06, 95% CI [0.01, 0.12]. In other words, more meaningful experiences show less happiness decay, relative to their less meaningful counterparts. In turn, this happiness decay influences consumer at-
titudes, such that those who experienced less happiness decay expressed greater purchase intent.

The studies so far show that for everyday life experiences, food, and video commercials, more meaningful experiences are less prone to happiness decay. However, in the preceding studies, meaning is never directly manipulated, but rather varies as a function of the experience captured (Study 1) or individual differences in meaning experienced (Studies 2 and 3). In Study 4 (n = 141), we directly manipulated the meaning experienced from the same action. Participants were recruited for an in-lab experiment where they spent 10 minutes on Facebook. In the manipulated condition, participants were asked to spend their time doing things that are happy, with a focus on activities that are meaningful by connecting them with others. In the control condition, participants were instructed to spend their time doing things that are happy, but not particularly meaningful. Immediately after their time on Facebook, and one week later, participants rated happiness and meaning as before.

To test the effect of the manipulation on happiness decay, we ran a mediation analysis, testing the hypothesis that focusing on meaningful actions increases happiness, which in turn decreases happiness decay. The analysis revealed a significant indirect effect for the meaning focus condition on happiness decay, indirect effect = -0.36; 95% CI [-0.67 to -0.13]. In addition, participants did not engage in different activities based on condition, and happiness did not differ by condition, ps > 0.10, suggesting that the focus on meaning was the primary distinction driving this effect.

Overall, then, happiness decays over time, such that the happiness experienced when reflecting on an experience a week later is significantly lower than the happiness during the experience itself. However, one way to mitigate this decline in happiness is through more meaningful experiences. Meaningful experiences slow happiness decay, thereby improving consumer attitudes.

**Taking Vacation Increases Meaning at Work**

**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Americans are not taking their allotted paid vacation days. Up to 42% of employees with paid time off do not use their full entitlement, foregoing an average of $2,226 in unused benefits per year (Oxford Economics, 2014). What are the implications? To answer this question, this research investigates the psychological consequences of taking vacation. Specifically, vacation may be important in fostering engagement and a sense of meaning at work.

When companies seek to cultivate a workplace that is engaging, they tend to focus on features and practices of the work itself. For instance, employers might make efforts to adjust the structure of their employees’ tasks, workflow, or communication channels in order to make the work more engaging and fulfilling. Many employers are also beginning to offer a wider array of ‘perks’ as part of employee wellness programs, including onsite daycares, workout spaces, and cafeterias. These practices are seen as especially important in attracting and retaining “millennial” employees in high-skill jobs. The aim is to improve the quality of experiences at work, often with the explicit goal of making grueling work schedules more pleasant and meaningful. Most employers – even those that are highly motivated to promote a more purpose-driven workplace – tend to neglect the influence of employees’ time away from work. We examine the possibility that vacation may help employees find a greater sense of meaning in their work. Breaks from the workplace may present an opportunity for people to step back and evaluate the broader purpose of their work and how it fits into their life. Two studies explore how taking vacation relates to meaning at work.

Study 1 used the 2008 National Study of the Changing Workforce (NSCW), a representative sample of the US labor force, to explore associations between utilization of paid leave and various measures of work engagement and fulfillment. Using a sample of 3,502 working adults, the 2008 NSCW captures a wide range of information on practices in the workplace, attitudes about work, and issues related to work-life balance. For our analysis, only fully-employed workers who received paid vacation were included, leaving a sample of n=1,898. Survey respondents provided information on the number of paid vacation days to which they were entitled in the previous calendar year and how many of these days they actually used, so a vacation utilization rate could be determined.

The results show that people who used a larger percentage of their allotted paid vacation reported a greater sense of meaning at work (r = 0.071, p < 0.01). This association held even after controlling for respondents’ overall life satisfaction (β = 0.087, p < 0.001).

Study 2 replicated and extended the findings from this national representatively representative sample through a study design using natural variation in vacation utilization. A sample of 689 fully-employed adults in the United States were recruited via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk. The study was conducted on Friday January 20, 2017, four days after Martin Luther King Day (MLK), a federal holiday. Since employers in the United States are not obligated to provide federal holidays as paid vacation, a significant portion of the fully-employed workforce continued to work on MLK day. Amongst the 689 working adults sampled for this study, 352 (51.1%) took MLK day off. This even split was found for people working in the majority of industries represented in the sample. The exceptions were government workers, nearly all of whom took MLK as a vacation, and workers in agriculture, manufacturing, and retail industries, in which roughly 35% took MLK day as a vacation.

Consistent with the results of Study 1, the results of a one-way ANOVA show that taking off MLK day as a vacation was associated with a higher sense of meaning at work, F(1, 688) = 10.56, p = 0.001. The relationship between taking this vacation day and meaning at work again held controlling for overall life satisfaction (β = 0.087, p < 0.014). This finding suggests that even a one-day vacation can lead people to find more meaning in their work. The effect is unlikely to be a result of simply feeling rested and rejuvenated following a vacation since meaning was measured four working days after the long weekend, and earlier studies have shown that temporary rejuvenation effects from vacation tend to wear off after approximately three days (Bloom et al., 2009).

The results of these two studies should be interpreted with caution as they are correlational, but they indicate what may be an important relationship between time away from work and finding meaning at work. We will soon begin conducting studies to establish causation and assess the underlying mechanism for the effect. The implications of the current results are meaningful: employers who are expending great effort and resources to cultivate a purpose-driven workplace may be neglecting the importance of employees’ experiences outside of work. These experiences are not only important for employees’ overall well-being; they may also be a critical part of developing meaning at work.

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